EXCLUSIVE!

FUNK FIRM SAFFIRE II

 turntable

MUSICAL FIDELITY M1
digital convertor EXCLUSIVE!

Q ACOUSTICS 2050
loudspeakers EXCLUSIVE!

COMPETITION
£4,560 OF TELLURIUM Q
CABLES TO BE WON!
(UK ONLY)

PHONO STAGE SUPERTEST
LINN UPHORIK PHONO STAGE
INSPIRE APOLLO TURNTABLE
OLDE WORLDE: PIONEER SA9500
SAMSUNG BD-C7500 BLU RAY
SENHEISER HD800 'PHONES
MICROMEGA CD30 CD PLAYER
XTZ CD100 CD PLAYER

12 PAGES OF LETTERS - THE BEST WINS A PAIR OF KEF IQ30 LOUDSPEAKERS! (UK ONLY)
EXCEPTIONAL SOUND SHOULD BE PART OF THE FURNITURE

“Wonderfully articulate speakers”
Sonus Faber Liuto Monitor – BBC Music (September 2009)

“There is a graceful musicality about this speaker that marks it out as special”
Sonus Faber Liuto Monitor – Hi-Fi Choice (August 2009)

For such bijou speakers, the Toy's audio performance is immense”
Sonus Faber Toy – BBC Music, Best Loudspeaker of 2008

Sonus Faber has always believed that owning a pair of speakers should be a total aesthetic experience. Technology honed over decades to turn every piece of music into a special auditory occasion is part of the story. But equally important is the meticulous styling and natural materials chosen for the cabinets which house the drivers. Inspired by the craftsmanship of the original makers of classical instruments such as the lute and the violin, Sonus Faber’s blend of fine woods and leather adds up to the last word in aspirational Italian elegance.

And yet, thanks to Sonus Faber’s latest creations, such luxury costs less than you might think. The new Liuto loudspeaker collection reflects the smooth contours and classic joinery of the lute, delivering a sprightly musicality, as sensitive, rich and graceful to listen to as it is to look at. The lute shape is not just visually pleasing; its curves serve to stiffen the cabinet and dampen unwanted resonance, whilst the leather cladding stretched across the front baffle enhances dispersion. The result is a soaring, soulful sound.

Sitting alongside the Liuto range, Sonus Faber’s Toy series sets out to destroy the notion that small speakers can’t deliver wonderfully engaging sound. The warmth and responsiveness of their performance would challenge speakers three times their size, whilst never losing the sense of the fun and joy that the name evokes. Clad from head to toe in barred leather, these lovingly designed speakers are set to become style icons for the musical fashionista whilst simultaneously satisfying the audiophile.

Both collections have been specially selected for you by Absolute Sounds, the UK’s leading importer and distributor of the finest, most desirable audio equipment the world has to offer.

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Sonus Faber Toy – BBC Music, Best Loudspeaker of 2008

The Liuto collection

The Toy collection
Back in the early eighties, there was only one turntable to have - the Linn Sondek LP12. For many years everyone was talking about it, but the situation didn’t last forever though, as later in the decade a new name emerged from stage left, that of Pink Triangle… At the time, when most of this country’s hi-fi press had bestowed so much purple prose upon the Linn, it was hard to come down on the side of the Pink. But many did, and little by little the deck began winning friends.

It sounded so different to the LP12 because it did things so differently. At the time it was radical; now it seems less so because, ironically, so much of the Pink’s thinking has passed into common use. Modern materials, vibration paths and special motors were all put on the map, in the UK, by Pink Triangle.

So now it’s great to try its spiritual heir, the Funk Firm Saffire II. Designer Arthur Khoubessarian’s flourishes are all over it; like that classic first Pink Triangle, it’s unmistakably his. If “design is intelligence made visible”, as the saying goes, then this is a very smart vinyl spinner. The way it effortlessly unlocks so much of the enormous amount of information contained in a record groove is amazing; and it does this in such a distinct way. Whereas other superdecks muscle their way through the music, the Funk is so fleet of foot, supple and subtle. Read all about it on p.12.

This new issue of Hi-Fi World has also got some great digital news too; from XTZ’s top value budget CD spinner [p.36] to the superb HRT Technologies Streamer II+, which is the answer to many a computer audiophile’s prayers [p.66]. Musical Fidelity’s new M1 is one of the best affordable DACs we’ve ever heard and a veritable steal at under £400 [p.68], and Micromega’s CD30 is a mid-price silver disc spinner with buckets of gallic charm, that you’ve just got to taste [p.78].

In addition to our epic six-strong phono stage supertest on p.17, we’ve a treat for budget speaker fans in the shape of the brand new Q Acoustics 2050 on p.30; this £350 floorstander completely belies its humble price and makes a surprisingly expensive sound. And now that it’s the summer silly season, don’t forget our annual ‘Globies’ awards on p.112, where we take a slightly askance look at the products we’ve reviewed in the past twelve months. Enjoy!

David Price, editor

testing

To ensure the utmost accuracy in our product reviews, Hi-Fi World has extremely comprehensive in-house test facilities, and our test equipment - from big names like Rohde & Schwarz and Hewlett Packard - is amongst the most advanced in the world. Loudspeakers are measured using a calibrated Bruel & Kjaer microphone feeding a Clio-based computer analyser, using pulsed and gated sinewaves, in a large room to eliminate the room’s influence. Pickup arm vibration is measured with a Bruel & Kjaer accelerometer. No other UK hi-fi magazine has in-house testing, and none has access to such advanced tests across all types of equipment. That’s why you can depend on Hi-Fi World reviews.

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unremarkable
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Distributed by Seymour Distribution Ltd 66 Newman Street London, W1T 3EX Tel: +44 (0) 20 7396 8000 Printed by St.Ives, Plymouth Tel: +44 (0) 1752 345 411

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www.hi-fiworld.co.uk AUGUST 2010 HI-FI WORLD
HRT Music Streamer II+ - a great computer audio DAC.

Musical Fidelity M1 - a brilliant, affordable digital convertor.

Inspire Apollo - a very fine mid-price turntable.

Pioneer SA-9500 - classic Japanese amplifier bruise!

Linn Uphorik - the company's new flagship phono stage.

Q Acoustics 2050 - top value entry level floorstanders.
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AUDIO TECHNICA AT-F7 110
Tony Bolton tries this lively £300 moving coil cartridge.
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www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk
School of Rock
Cambridge Audio’s new NP30 network music player is designed to unleash the potential of digital music stored on computers and home networks, allowing premium quality 24bit playback anywhere in the home through any hi-fi or home entertainment system, the company says. In addition the NP30 offers fast and easy access to a wide range of streaming music services and over 15,000 Internet radio stations. Housed in a compact, low resonance all-metal chassis, the NP30 is intuitive to use with its clear four line LCD display and remote control. Cambridge Audio will simultaneously launch UuVol, a new online music service. UuVol simplifies set-up and use of the NP30 and future Cambridge Audio network music players by providing a unified online service, allowing users to customise their system to their own personal preferences. “Better than CD” 24bit/96kHz playback is standard, allowing the streaming of studio quality WAV, PCM and FLAC downloads. From launch, the NP30 will access a wide range of free and subscription based services (depending on their location). Price is to be confirmed, but should be affordable.

The company has also unveiled the new 350A integrated amplifier and 350C CD player, which “represent a new age in high performance, good value hi-fi separates”. Taking cues from the highly acclaimed 550 and 650 Series launched in 2009, the 350 duo feature redesigned casework with new displays and knobs, a more substantial brushed aluminium front panel, seamless wrap-over lid assembly and dual-layer damped feet. The £229.95 amplifier has 45W RMS into 8 Ohms, an audiophile grade toroidal transformer and substantial extruded heatsink, a new precision ALPs ‘black box’ volume pot, new low dissipation polypropylene signal capacitors and custom made electrolytic capacitors in critical positions. The identically priced CD player has a new proprietary Cambridge Audio S3 servo, Wolfson WM8728 DAC, all PCBs and DAC stages feature double-sided, surface mount technology, and there’s an accurate master clock oscillator and carefully designed impedance-matched clock buffering, an audiophile grade toroidal transformer and a new reverse black DFSN display with CD text. For details, call +44 (0)20 7551 5418 or click on www.cambridge-audio.com.

Audio Technics, A?
Looking spookily like a Technics SL1210, Audio Technica’s new AT-LP120-USB is described as “a professional-quality USB turntable and software package”. The new deck is said to be durable to meet the demands of professional use, yet provides consumers with the flexibility to enjoy top-quality vinyl playback and easily transfer records to digital media files and CDs. The AT-LP120-USB includes a turntable and phono cartridge, PC and Mac-compatible software, USB cable and other accessories. The turntable features a high-torque quartz locked direct-drive motor with selectable 33-1/3, 45 and 78 RPM operation. There’s a built-in switchable phono preamp, RCA output cables and adapter cables allow connection to a wide variety of music and home entertainment components and systems. The deck features a heavy-duty cast aluminium platter with slip mat, and a balanced pickup arm with soft damping control and adjustable tracking force, anti-skating and vertical tracking angle (VTA) for optimum playback performance. The AT-LP120-USB is supplied with a magnetic phono cartridge with replaceable stylus. The included USB cable enables plug-and-play connection to a computer. The PC and Mac-compatible Audacity software converts the audio on a record to MP3, WAV or other formats digital audio files, which can then be played back on portable audio players, computers, home media centres and car audio systems. The software includes a host of audio editing features including equalization and noise removal. Price is £255; for more details call +44 (0) 113 277 1441 or click on www.audiotechnica.co.uk.

Fritz Sennheiser
(9/5/1912 – 17/5/2010)
Few individuals have made their mark on one particular sector of the hi-fi market more than Professor Dr. Fritz Sennheiser, so it’s sad to have to announce his death in Wedemark, Germany on 17th May, 2010. Through his company Sennheiser, started in summer 1945, he had an important influence on the development of sound transmission technologies and was instrumental in forging many developments in electro-acoustics. In 1982 he retired from the management of the company, handing over to his son Jörg. For more information, click on www.sennheiser.com.
INTO TOMORROW

Munich's High-End Show saw the launch of a brand new Naim digital audio player and server called UnitiServe. Designed to provide secure CD ripping and storage, it offers local playback through its digital output, and provides multiple streams from the Naim written UPnP server. This would be ideally suitable to single- or multi-room systems using NaimUniti or UnitiQute, Naim says. Streams are at native bit rate unless the UnitiServe is configured to downsample the streams on the fly, should the UPnP renderer require it. There are up to six StreamNet streams of CD quality to supply a NaimNet multizoom system.

There are two versions of UnitiServe, a standard version including a 1TB Pipeline low-noise drive for local storage of up to around 1,200 CD rips. The SSD variant substitutes the 1TB drive for a 16GB Enterprise grade Single Level Cell (SLC) Solid State Drive (SSD). UnitiServe-SSD has no local storage and is designed to save to NAS giving almost infinite storage capability. UnitiServe can play most common audio formats from files stored on a network providing they are not subject to Digital Rights Management. WAV, FLAC, AIFF, ALAC and AAC together with MP3 and more are easily found, with Network Scanning, and played. This includes hi-res music files up to 24bit/192kHz, the current limit of SPDIF and TOSLINK standards. Ripping utilises the same Naim secure ripping engine that helped the Naim HDX gain its superb reputation. Rips should only be carried out once – they need to be the best rips possible. Ripped music is stored in Naim’s preferred WAV format which requires no further processing, thus reducing processor current draw and power supply pollution; hence improving sound quality.

There are many ways to control a UnitiServe. In its server mode it can be installed, set up and then fed CDs as desired. It will rip, catalogue and store the rips efficiently, serving them to the finest UPnP or StreamNet standards, the company says. As a player the UnitiServe can be controlled by a Naim Handset, an Apple iPod Touch or iPhone running the HDX app, or by a computer running an internet browser supporting Adobe Flash. PC users can also run the Naim Desktop Client, with its Explorer-style interface. UnitiServe can be a Server and Player simultaneously.

Meanwhile, the Naim HDX is now being offered with a 16GB Enterprise grade Solid State Drive. This totally silent drive will contain the operating system and includes space for future upgrades. The HDX-SSD also gets significant performance improvements with double the RAM to reduce paging and therefore reduce variable current draw and more importantly a new Naim designed low-profile PCI audio card. This new card is designed for a single stereo output, and is further optimised and consumes less current than the one it replaces. This delivers a twofold opportunity for a sound quality improvement, the company claims. Existing owners can upgrade their HDX with the new RAM and PCI card at their Naim retailer. The upgrade to the SSD drive is also possible but this would require a return to Naim or the local distributor. For more information, call +44 (0) 1722 426600 or click on www.naimaudio.com.

SILVER DREAM MACHINES

Artisan have introduced an enhanced version of their Ultimate Silver Dream interconnects, with superior quality locking RCA plugs. The new plugs are designed to be pushed onto the RCA socket, while the housing is loose. You then tighten the housing, at which point they grip tightly on to the RCA sockets, giving a very secure and low-loss connection, the company says. Inside the plugs, the pure silver wires connect directly to the silver-plated centre pin, in a solderless connection - reducing losses still further. The cables use 8 separate solid silver conductors, each sheathed in Teflon, with an air-gap, to provide a near-ideal dielectric. Prices start at £289 for a half metre pair. For more details, click on www.artisansilvercables.com.

MAKE IT BIG!

Exposure Electronics Ltd are pleased to announce that they're moving to a larger factory, and so their address has changed to: Exposure Electronics Ltd., Unit 1B, Winstone Business Centre, Chartwell Road, Lancing, West Sussex BN15 8TU. The phone number and email address remain the same as before, at +44 (0) 1273 423 877 and info@exposurehifi.com. For more details, click on www.exposurehifi.com.

TWO WHEELS GOOD!

The new Cy-Fi Wireless Sports Speaker is described as being an ideal companion for your cycling commute. It comes with a clamp for fixing it to the handlebars of your bike, and is said to have “very impressive sound quality too!” Buttons for changing the track and adjusting the volume mean that you don’t have to fiddle with the iPod in your pocket while you’re trundling along. Simply plug the audio transmitter into your iPod, press play and let the CD-quality CyFi do its thing. The speaker itself is light and small enough to pop in your coat pocket, and it has a range of 30 feet. You can sync up to 4 CyFi speakers for especially large groups of people, and then pack it all away in the next little carry pouch. Charging for 2 hours via USB gives over 6 hours of listening. Vital statistics are 122x100x290mm. See www.cyfi.co.uk.
TOTAL ECLIPSE
A six year research programme into the fundamentals of loudspeaker design, materials and technology, has allowed Fujitsu-Ten to deliver this new flagship Eclipse TD loudspeaker. The new TD712zMK2 Black (£5,300) is described as "a floorstanding Time Domain design with a huge 'power-to-weight' ratio". Every element of the design is focused on speed and accuracy, the company says. "The TD712zMK2 is built to deliver only the signal from the drive unit, with the cabinet itself adding nothing". It sports a more powerful motor system for the drive unit, new ultra-efficient high-power magnet structure, a redesigned damping system for the driver and tweeter additionally boasts SSC decoupling from the loudspeaker cabinet. This means that there is no way that resonances of the cabinet can impair the work of the tweeter, the company says. For details, see www.eclipse-td.net.

OUT OF TIME?
Owen Watters of Roberts Radio has challenged the timetable for DAB migration. Following the Enactment of the Digital Economy Bill in May, which sets out the critical path for digital television and radio in the UK, he has questioned entirely if the criteria for DAB migration was achievable by 2015. The BBC and Commercial broadcasters need to urgently agree a funding strategy to implement the Act’s requirements for a DAB network equivalent to current FM before migration can be implemented, he argues. "The BBC has already committed to increase the transmitter network to 230 by mid 2011 and this still only covers 90% of the UK. To match the current FM coverage (around 94%), between four to six hundred more transmitters are required and the BBC acknowledge this could take up to seven years to complete, even if funding were agreed today", he said.

Watters adds that, "the single biggest issue to address is the family car. Will consumers accept that they have to purchase an additional 'converter' to continue to listen to their favourite radio programme? With over thirty million cars on the road today, the vast majority of which have an analogue radio fitted, converting all these listeners to DAB for their cars is a mammoth task and consumers need a complete and simple solution. Current 'solutions' are far from ideal and frankly a hassle. Most of the current converters rely on FM re-broadcasting which is too patchy, and consumers are going to resent paying out to upgrade or convert their existing system, never mind buying or installing a new one, whatever the digital broadcast capability." Meanwhile car manufacturers continue to fit analogue radios to the majority of new cars, he points out.

Commenting on the ongoing investment that will be required to bring the country up to DAB capacity by 2015, Watters said that the target date was unrealistic, and highly dependent on a fully committed government. "If bearing in mind there will be at least another election taking place in this period, a lack of will, or a change of priority, in investing in the necessary infrastructure could become a major obstacle to the digital migration process... A more realistic target date for migration is likely to be 2020, but even this could be ambitious."

THIN'S IN
Advanced-Loudspeakers have been appointed exclusive UK agents for RAAL ribbon tweeters. For more details, call David Gammon on +44 (0)1773 783339 or write to: 48A New Street, South Normanton, Derbyshire DE5 2BS. You can also click on www.advanced-loudspeakers.co.uk.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 650BD BLU-RAY CORRECTION
It's standard procedure during Blu-ray player measurement to set loudspeaker size to Large in the set-up menus. However, this step was missed in our Cambridge Audio 650BD review, June 10 issue, and accounts for early bass roll off noted. We should have spotted this rather obvious mistake! Our apologies to readers and Cambridge Audio.
While many of our competitors have chosen to focus on home cinema and screens, at Audio T we’ve never lost sight of our roots... set down in 2 channel hi-fi over 44 years ago. That’s not to say we don’t sell home cinema, we do, but we also have a range of 2 channel brands that is second to none.

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*Subject to status. Ask instore for details. Not all brands are available in every shop so please check our website before traveling.

www.audio-t.co.uk
TALE OF THE UNEXPECTED

Leema's new Hydra II amplifier is said to offer "exceptional dynamic range, resolution of exquisitely fine detail and remarkable clarity", thanks to "two massive toroidal power transformers: one for each channel, and a third transformer for the control circuitry". There's also a "highly refined" output stage that features "an ultra-rigid birch-plywood enclosure, innovative baffle-decoupling technology and isolaric bass loading", plus twin EMI ribbon-type super-tweeters. The enclosure comprises five discrete internal volumes. The Bass and Mid/Bass volumes are large to suit the low frequency tuning while the HF cabinet is small to increase rigidity and to stop back pressure from the mid/bass driver, adversely affecting the rear chamber of the tweeter. The two EMI super-tweeters are similarly isolated. The drive unit baffles are constructed from a 45mm thick sandwich of Birch Plywood, polyethylene damping membrane and MDF. The two hidden isobarically loaded Neat 168mm bass drivers are flux optimised for the purpose and use dustcaps for rigidity. The main mid/bass driver is a special version of the Neat 168mm driver with an aluminium phase plug, loaded by a low Q reflex tuning. A sealed sub-volume contains the main HF drive unit; a modified SEAS XL Sonomex domed unit with additional damping. A separate sub-volume contains two super-tweeter drive units. There is a sealed volume in between the two units, and the main enclosure is reflex-tuned. The crossover is a minimalist five element type employing precise-tolerance, low-loss air-cored inductors and high tolerance polypropylene film and foil capacitors. Vital statistics are 765x160x200mm.

Also announced was Neat's new Ultimatum XL6. A floorstanding design, it sports "an ultra-rigid birch-plywood enclosure, innovative baffle-decoupling technology and isolaric bass loading", plus twin EMI ribbon-type super-tweeters. The enclosure comprises five discrete internal volumes. The Bass and Mid/Bass volumes are large to suit the low frequency tuning while the HF cabinet is small to increase rigidity and to stop back pressure from the mid/bass driver, adversely affecting the rear chamber of the tweeter. The two EMI super-tweeters are similarly isolated. The drive unit baffles are constructed from a 45mm thick sandwich of Birch Plywood, polyethylene damping membrane and MDF. The two hidden isobarically loaded Neat 168mm bass drivers are flux optimised for the purpose and use dustcaps for rigidity. The main mid/bass driver is a special version of the Neat 168mm driver with an aluminium phase plug, loaded by a low Q reflex tuning. A sealed sub-volume contains the main HF drive unit; a modified SEAS XL Sonomex domed unit with additional damping. A separate sub-volume contains two super-tweeter drive units. There is a sealed volume in between the two units, and the main enclosure is reflex-tuned. The crossover is a minimalist five element type employing precise-tolerance, low-loss air-cored inductors and high tolerance polypropylene film and foil capacitors. Vital statistics are 1000x220x370mm and 44kg apiece. Call +44 (0)1833 631021 or click on www.neat.co.uk.

HEAD CANDY

Musical Fidelity's new M1 HPA is a pure Class A headphone amp/preamp that's said to have "vanishingly low distortion, an ultra low output impedance line in/loop out, a USB input and superlative sound". The £499 M1 HPA's technical performance is said to be "outstanding", with distortion claimed at less than 0.0005% across the band, and frequency response is "ruler flat". The HPA's low output impedance means that it can drive any headphone with linearity and low distortion, says Musical Fidelity. The HPA has two inputs; line and USB. It has two headphone sockets on the front panel and a loop out facility, plus a variable line output so that it can be used as a high quality simple preamp. For more details, call +44(0)20 8900 2866 or click on www.musicalfidelity.com.
Adam Smith gets into the groove of the new Funk Firm Saffire II turntable...

The job of designing a turntable is often thought to be a simple one. After all, all it has to do is rotate at a steady 33 or 45rpm without any wow, flutter or rumble, and not pick up any vibration from external sources that could affect the sound. Seems pretty easy, really! Trouble is that, once you come up with a smooth and free-running bearing, you then need to consider your suspension and isolation options. Linn’s, Michell’s and the like go for the suspended method, where the springs isolate the deck to stop any unwanted vibrations making their way inside in the first place. This is a fair method but one that requires complex setup, careful positioning and the occasional tweak to keep everything on top form. A simpler method is the pure mass one, where a hefty plinth sinks any vibrations before they can do any damage but this one tends to be expensive and can be unwieldy. The third method is one that seems to be less popular, probably because it needs to be implemented very carefully to ensure it works, but is the idea of naturally absorbing any vibrations through the use of combinations of materials that are inherently dissipative. This is where the Funk Firm Saffire II comes in, as its chief design ethos is to ensure that the energy coming down the arm from the cartridge is dissipated so that it cannot reflect back to the stylus, and so the deck has a three-layer armboard incorporating constrained layer damping to assist in this.

The next big thorn in the side of the turntable designer is how to drive the platter, but it’s obvious then, really, isn’t it? A nice simple belt is the way to go. Take your motor; control it carefully and spin a decently weighty platter with a rubber belt and all your problems...
are solved. No idler-style rumble worries or direct drive cogging or torque concerns, just a simple system that offers its own level of noise isolation thanks to the belt itself. The problem is, there are downsides but, unfortunately, they are not as immediately obvious as with a direct or idler drive unit. Take the belt itself – few people realise just what sort of quality control has to go into the manufacture of a turntable belt as, if it does not stretch evenly or if the surface is not smooth, then you will very soon hear the results. Don’t believe me? Try swapping your deck’s belt with one of those red rubber bands that postmen are always dropping and you’ll see what I mean!

Another big issue with a drive belt is that it can put undue stress on the bearing and motor, and usually in one direction only. This is a problem that Arthur Khoubesserian of the Funk Firm identified several years ago, coming up with his Vector drive system as a result. This puts the belt around the motor, platter and two further freewheeling pulleys, all in a triangular configuration to equalise the pressure on the platter’s bearing. One motor means still only one potential source of noise and vibration, but the three pulleys mean an equalised drive around the platter, removing unwanted forces that can find their way into the stylus and obscure the music.

The new Saffire II is the latest turntable to incorporate this drive system and, as the name suggests, it has recently undergone a significant upgrade. The platter is now an acrylic item with a delightfully curved edge that matches the plinth perfectly, and incorporates an Achromat recessed into it. The lovely acrylic base has remained, along with the mad LED illumination,
which Arthur describes, as "fully revised; gone is the tedious industry blue. In now is a highly individual amethyst (okay, pink, if you must!)". The motor drive electronics of the 'Solus' power supply are housed in a very stylish nickel-plated cylindrical pod with the biggest and funkiest on/off switch I have seen for a long time, Krade, and a matching dust cover will be available later in the year.

**SOUND QUALITY**

With my Cardas-wired Alphason HR100S and Ortofon Kontrapunkt b loaded onto the deck, I began listening and realised that the Funk family traits were more than obvious, "where the deck really scores is across the midband, pulling the action into the room and spreading it beautifully wide..."

plus another small switch on the rear to turn off the LEDs if you find them all a bit much!

Two speeds can be selected by the main switch and trimpots underneath permit the speed to be fine-tuned. On this topic, setup of the Saffire II revealed something that may well explain the issues found by Noel when measuring the deck before it arrived with me. Quite simply, the motor securing bolt had worked loose in transit which, although not enough to make the motor obviously sloppy, did allow it to swivel on its axis once the belt was fitted and the turntable started. Straightening the motor pod, tightening the bolt, repositioning the belt and resetting the speed using the trimpots had the Saffire II spinning silently and smoothly at exactly the right speed without any hint of fluctuation during its stay in my listening room. Finally a new isolation platform, the Kinetic, which is definitely no bad thing at all.

The bass end of things from a turntable can often be something of a disappointment to those of us used to a Garrard 301 and I was pleased to note that the Saffire II had no difficulties in this area. Initially it seemed a little bass light but as I listened, I realised that this was the 'Achromat effect' taking hold! Basically, whenever I have listened to a deck with one of these fitted or, in the case of the Funk Firm, a deck with a platter designed around one, the initial experience does seem to be one that slightly lacks impact. However, as one listens further, it becomes obvious that this device does such a good job of cleaning up the low end that it is actually just removing a few artefacts - bass overhang in other words - that simply shouldn't be there.

Spinning Toots Hibbert's 'Spiritual Healing' on twelve inch single, followed by 'Sarah' from the 'Fur and Gold' LP by Bat for Lashes, was enough to convince me that this deck has no difficulties where bass

The fun of being able to follow the action so easily as it zipped around the room also highly praiseworthy was the way in which the Saffire II affected a disdainful sense of ease when asked to really capture the innate nature of the instruments playing. Brasses rasped satisfyingly, the double basses offered up a delightfully woody 'thrum' and the movement of bow across violin string struck the perfect balance. I could tell that the instrument was capable of a nasty screech if provoked, but the Funk Firm deck made sure that this never became a worry.

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is concerned, even if it does lack that very last hint of sheer idler drive power. With both tracks it dug nicely deep and yet there was no sense of overhang or wallow; each note started and stopped just as it should and rhythms were as taut as a bowstring. Following up with ‘Telegraph Road’ from Dire Straits showed that the Saffire II also has no trouble when it comes to dynamic impact. This is a well recorded track that, on the surface, shows almost any turntable off well, but it can actually sound a little bland and lacking in impact if the drive system of the unit in question is not up to scratch. I was very pleased to hear that, through the Saffire II, everything proceeded with vim and vigour.

Switching to Kari Bremnes and the track ‘A Lover in Berlin’ from her ‘Norwegian Mood’ LP, the Saffire II made the very best of the lady’s delightful vocals. This track is a huskily intoned, almost semi-whispered performance that picks up in volume and intensity towards the end of each verse and the deck really made a lovely job of it. The backing double bass line underpinned everything expertly, without ever intruding, and the percussion stepped out of the shadows in the back of the soundstage to make itself felt by just the right amount. I did feel that perhaps the Saffire II wasn’t quite offering the central image solidity that my usual Garrard 301 shows, but switching to The Eagles ‘Long Road out of Eden’ revealed that the presentations of the two turntables were just slightly different. The Garrard does indeed lock everything slightly more firmly into focus, but the Saffire II seemed to let everything ‘breathe’ a little better, imbuing the music with a better sense of organic flow and effortless by comparison, the 301 seemed a little rigid and over-controlled.

CONCLUSION

The Funk Firm Saffire II is a very capable record spinner indeed and mates a well designed motor and power supply to a very cleverly engineered platter drive system. I personally think the styling is fabulous and the big kid in me loves the illuminations! It has no complex requirements for setup and once this operation is performed, it is extremely user-friendly in action. All in all, it makes some of its competitors look over-fussy and clumsy. Sonically, Arthur Khoubesserian’s hard work on its design can be heard in the way in which the Saffire II approaches music-making with a languid sense of ease and pleasure — it actually seems to be enjoying itself as it plays and this, in turn, makes it an immensely enjoyable listening companion.

Sonicity: Arthur Khoubesserian’s hard work on its design can be heard in the way in which the Saffire II approaches music-making with a languid sense of ease and pleasure — it actually seems to be enjoying itself as it plays and this, in turn, makes it an immensely enjoyable listening companion.

**REVIEW**

**REFERENCE SYSTEM**

- Alphason HR-100S arm
- Ortofon Kontrapunkt b cartridge
- Naim Supernait amplifier
- Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers

**ARM VIBRATION**

The Saffire came supplied with an arm that uses a Rega RB300 arm pillar assembly, with a new arm tube grafted on. Comparison with the old tapered aluminium arm is interesting, even though the assemblies are a lot different. The lowest, primary arm tube vibrational mode is lower on the Saffire than the RB300, at around 150Hz. Our analysis shows, but it is well damped and of very low amplitude. This leaves the rest of the lower midband clear of unwanted vibrational behaviour, which bodes well for bass dynamics, image stability and general tidiness.

There is a small double hump just above 1kHz, and this is attributable to the Rega arm pillar assembly it appears because a similar effect can be seen in the RB300 and 301 arms. Above 2kHz the Saffire arm tube and headshell are unusually free of high frequency ringing, much of this being attributable to the inverted headshell saddle cartridge fixing; headshells, integral or not, always measure worse than clamps like this. So the Saffire measures surprisingly well for what is, visually, an unprepossessing design.

The turntable as supplied was idler pulleys, not an easy process. Then speed measured 3170Hz, compared to a target 3150Hz or 0.6% fast, which is too great an error. Unweighted wow and flutter hovered around 0.13% and most was low speed drift. Weighted wow and flutter was very low at 0.05%, so higher speed variations were well suppressed.

Our deck measured a little off the pace then, but we subsequently found this was down to a motor bolt that had worked loose in transit: see text. NK

**VERDICT**

An organic sense of purity and ease to its presentation is the Saffire’s trademark; it really shows vinyl at its best.

**FUNK FIRM SAFFIRE II**

£2,995

The Funk Firm
+44(0)1273 585042
www.thefunkfirm.co.uk

**FOR**

- expressive midrange
- capacious soundstaging
- effortless treble
- ease of setup
- styling/illuminations!

**AGAINST**

- stiff competition at the price

**WOW & FLUTTER**

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KEF
INNOVATORS IN SOUND
Several months ago I investigated six phono stages ranging in price from £300 to £2,000. I particularly enjoyed both the ANT Audio Kora 3T and the Icon Audio PS 3, and was interested to discover that both companies had produced new models to their range. ANT have produced an updated version of the 3T, now with a proper outboard power supply rather than a wall wart, and Icon Audio have made a 'Signature' version of their PS 1.2 unit. So for this test, both of these products were lined up with others in a similar price range for this, the latest in our ongoing exploration of the world of vinyl reproduction. Most of the contenders were new products to me, such as the Tom Evans Microgroove Plus, the Luxman E200 and the Astin Trew AT8000, whilst the Roksan DX2 is the latest version of a unit that I enjoyed when I reviewed it several years ago.

Each was given fifty hours running in before serious listening commenced and was fed with signals from the Ortofon Kontrapunkt a mounted on the Clearaudio Master Solution and my Sondek, using both a MusicMaker III moving iron cartridge and an Audio Technica AT F7 moving coil cartridge that is reviewed elsewhere in this magazine. The Sondek fed a Bent Audio Tap-X passive preamp into a pair of Quad 303s, bi-amping Kelly KT3 loudspeakers, whilst the Ortofon's signal went through a Leema Acoustics Tucana II amplifier, powering my Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers. After running in, each phono stage had an evening of rambling through my record collection.

Before going back to back with records including Jascha Heifetz playing the Bruch Violin Concerto, Banco De Gaia's LP 'Big Men Cry', 'Noel Coward At Las Vegas' and Janis Joplin's 'Cheap Thrills'.

The diversity of design approaches proved interesting, with both thermionic and solid state circuits in use, some having a simple plug in and play approach, whilst others came fitted with mono/stereo switches and alternative cartridge loading facilities. The sheer diversity of approaches in carrying out the task of amplifying the signal from a pick-up cartridge displayed the great deal of effort that has obviously gone into designing these products and bodies well for the medium in the twenty first century; vinyl is alive and kicking! So without further ado, and in no particular order, I started my listening.

**THE CONTENDERS:**

- **ASTIN TREW AT8000**: £880 p18
- **TOM EVANS MICROGROOVE PLUS**: £950 p19
- **LUXMAN E200**: £1,095 p21
- **ANT AUDIO KORA 3T LTD**: £995 p22
- **ROKSAN CASPIAN DX2**: £869 p23
- **ICON AUDIO PS1.2 SIGNATURE**: £999 p25

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Yes, it's that time again! The relentless procession of new, improved phono stages continues, and it's enough to get prospective purchasers in a spin. So we tasked vinyl virtuoso Tony Bolton to investigate six of the latest and greatest mid price designs...
ASTIN TREW AT8000 £880

Astin Trew have rapidly built themselves a reputation for making reasonably priced, well designed products. The casework, measuring 305x160x115mm, is a long and thin aluminium box, with just a blue LED at the front and input and output XLR sockets on the back, alongside the mains IEC input and an earthing post. There are a pair of silver plated XLR sockets alongside the unbalanced inputs. Adjustments for gain and cartridge loading are accessed through three holes in the bottom of the box, which are then plugged with rubber bungs to keep dust out. Internally the power comes via a large toroidal transformer feeding a dual mono circuit design which is mounted on a PCB that has gold plated copper tracks. High quality components populate the board and the RIAA and amplification circuits are shielded by a Faraday cage for RFI rejection.

SOUND QUALITY
I started using the AT8000 on my upstairs Linn Sondek-sourced system. Initial impressions were of a very smooth and rather sophisticated sound that occupied all of the space between the speakers, but which stayed resolutely within the cabinet boundaries. I started off with the Joplin LP and found that her vocals, which can be a little irritating through some systems had the characteristic gravelly tones, but with a little of the rawness smoothed out. She sounded less edgy and passionate than I am used to hearing her, as if she were on best behaviour. It was an enjoyable listen but not as gut-wrenching in its intensity as I would like.

Changing musical direction to the Bruch Violin Concerto and the Astin Trew seemed more comfortable. This record is a late fifties mono pressing on HMV that looks to be in near mint condition, but has unfortunately been played with a damaged stylus at sometime in its life and gets a little crunchy when the music crescendoes in a couple of places. Considering there was no mono switch I felt that the AT8000 coped well with this recording. Surface noise was reasonably well muted and the groove damage was displayed without too much fuss. The mono image itself was wide, nearly filling the space between the speakers, whilst not having quite as much depth as some of the other contenders here. Tonality was good, although again I felt that there was a tendency to focus on the smoothness of presentation. The rasp of a bow drawn across a violin string was not quite as cutting as I have heard it, but neither was it softened into the syrupy gloop that some overly smooth equipment produces. I would describe it as "honest reticence!"

Staying in the land of mono, the next musical stop was Noel Coward 'Live at the Desert Inn, Las Vegas' in 1955. There are two pressings generally available, one on Philips, and the other being this one on Columbia Masterworks. I prefer the latter, finding the former rather muted and lacking in impact. Here the more open nature of the Columbia pressing balanced the restrained sound of the Astin Trew to make for an enjoyable listen, although I still felt that I would have preferred more openness in the sound. Background detail, such as the audience response was there on display but still took a little listening into.

Reverting to stereo, and modern, full bandwidth recordings with the Banco De Gaia LP suited the Astin Trew better, with far more detail coming to the fore. Changing systems to use moving coil cartridges seemed to confirm the well mannered but somewhat restrained nature of this unit. I found it well behaved but a just a little too well mannered for my tastes, in either of my two systems.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

| Power Supply | 200VA transformer
| Size | 305x160x115mm
| Weight | 7kg
| Inputs | XLR sockets alongside the unbalanced inputs
| Outputs | XLR sockets
| Cartridge Loading | Switchable
| Gain | x1060 (60dB) at High, x600 (55dB) at Medium, x100 (50dB) at Low
| Overload | 20mV in / 7.5V out
| Noise (input noise, A wtd) | 0.3pV
| Distortion | 0.002%
| Separation | 68dB
| Frequency Response | 17Hz-25kHz
| Frequency Response (MC) | 17Hz-25kHz
| Output | 7.12mV in / 7.5V out
| Noise (input noise, A wtd) | 0.35µV
| Distortion | 0.002%
| Power Supply | 200VA transformer
| Size | 305x160x115mm
| Weight | 7kg
| Inputs | XLR sockets alongside the unbalanced inputs
| Outputs | XLR sockets
| Cartridge Loading | Switchable
| Gain | x1060 (60dB) at Low, x600 (55dB) at Medium, x100 (50dB) at High
| Overload | 20mV in / 7.5V out
| Noise (input noise, A wtd) | 0.3pV
| Distortion | 0.002%
| Frequency Response | 17Hz-25kHz
| Frequency Response (MC) | 17Hz-25kHz

At maximum gain (High) and 100 Ohm loading and fed from an MC like source, the AT8000 phono stage has a warp filter that introduces +18dB attenuation to warps at 5Hz, our analysis shows, and it inserts a +2dB hump in response at 60Hz, enough to provide subjectively obvious bass lift. Otherwise, equalisation is very accurate across the audio band and lacks the common trade lift in the 755S characteristic. As a result I would expect the AT8000 to sound smooth, but its low end delivery will likely have obvious added strength.

Gain varied from x1060 (51dB) at Low, to x600 (55dB) at Medium to x100 (60dB) at High. The lowest value is high for MM cartridges and input overload a little low at 20mV as a result, but this is still just acceptable. The High gain value is just enough for most MCs, although super low output types benefit from more gain.

Noise was low with MM, but not with MC due to the shared input stage, measuring 0.3mV. That makes the AT8000 +18dB hissier than an MC stage with 0.068µV input noise (typical), meaning the unit isn't suitable for top quality, low output types. The AT8000 measures well for MM but is best suited to MCs with strong output. NK
TOM EVANS MICROGROOVE+ £950

Tom Evans Audio design was founded in January 1990, its first product being the well respected ISO phono stage designed for Michell Engineering. In 1998 the Groove phono stage made its debut and now forms part of a range of four products ranging in price from £480 to £4,500. The Microgroove plus is the second up in the series and boasts a DC coupled circuit with two gain stages and a passive RIAA equalisation circuit in between them. The second gain stage contains an active servo which eliminates DC offset. The Plus differs from the standard Microgroove in having a discrete Class A regulated power supply. This is the Lithos 7 unit, as found in the company's amplifiers. (Lithos being the Greek for 'rock'). This is claimed by the manufacturer to produce a -132dB noise floor when fed with a 1kHz signal. All of this is housed in a 60x200x70mm black plastic box with just a name ornamenting the front, and well spaced gold plated phono sockets at the back for input and output. Power comes from an outboard PSU, its presence being indicated by a blue glow from the rear mounted LED on the phono stage. Various cartridge loadings can be set by rear panel mounted dip switches.

SOUND QUALITY

The inky blackness of the casework certainly matched the dark, almost impenetrable silence that greeted me as the stylus hit the run in groove of the Banco De Gaia record. The opening notes start with a drum beat that gradually builds to a pulsating rhythm that was very engaging. The spread of sound was quite wide but had more depth than I had found with the Astin Trew, and seemed to come forward into the room more, creating a more three dimensional space in front of me.

Staying in stereo with Joplin's 'Cheap Thrills' the Microgroove was in its element, delivering the grainy sound of her voice, along with the cutting edge of the accompanying guitars in a well defined, but not overly analytical way. I found that I was peering into the mix without much effort and finding superb definition, without over emphasis. If I had a complaint it would be a slight lack of weight in the lower bass regions, but based on my experience of listening to this device as it was running in, I would say that this process was not yet complete, and I would want to put in another hundred hours listening. Throughout the running in process the sound had very gradually been expanding in all directions, and although the higher frequencies were quite well explored after fifty plus hours of use, I felt that the bass still had a way to go before reaching its full capabilities.

Moving to the Bruch was interesting. Despite the quite open nature of the sound, and the lack of a mono/stereo switch, surface noise was very well controlled, making a fleeting and unremarkable appearance. Even the groove damage to this fifty-something year old record was noted, and then dismissed as irrelevant which impressed me given the potential this has for rendering the record unlistenable to. Ortofon's Kontrapunkt a cartridge has always been well mannered in this respect so I decided to try provoking a reaction by using the rather more forward sounding Audio Technica AT-F7. The Coward recording was played with aplomb, micro-details of his snatched breaths during a blisteringly fast delivery of 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen' were noticeable, but any wear acquired during a half century of use was minimised, I was left with the sensation of having listened to a particularly well thought out design whose only drawback seemed to be the inordinate amount of time required to get it bedded in.
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.

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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,
The Luxman name has always been synonymous with Japanese high end products. In the mid-eighties, the company was bought by Alpine, who focused on the home market for the next fifteen years. In 1999 the original owners bought the company back, returning to premium quality products. Export performance was weak however. Recently the Chinese IAG Group, owners of Quad, Castle, Wharfedale, etc, bought Lux. Now in their eighty fifth year, the brand has re-established itself selling products that are usually priced in the thousands of pounds, rather than the £1,095 for the phono stage reviewed here.

Despite its (by Luxman standards) modest price the E200 is well equipped, sporting two moving coil sensitivities as well as a moving magnet input, a mono switch, two inputs for use with multi-arm decks such as my Clearaudio, and, most unusually, a cartridge demagnetiser (labelled 'Articulator') and a low frequency filter for eliminating the resulting cone flap if playing less than flat records.

Housed in an aluminium case measuring 84x364x257mm, the front panel is furnished by a button for power, four small buttons for the previously mentioned filter, mode and input selection as well as the 'Articulator'. The choice of cartridge type is decided by turning a large rotary knob on the right hand side. The back panel houses the grounding post, and well spaced, gold plated phono sockets for the two inputs and the output. Mains input, via an IEC socket, resides on the right.

SOUND QUALITY

This time I started listening with the Bruch, and having briefly tried the unit in stereo, switched to mono and was rewarded with most of the surface noise disappearing. The damaged areas of the groove wall were negotiated with little audible comment, although I was still aware of their existence. I found the tonal balance to be quite good although I came to the conclusion that elderly classical records were not really this unit's forte. It played the music in a pleasant manner but seemed to lack some of the insight that I found with the Microgroove Plus. Moving to the Noel Coward pieces seemed to perk things up a bit. Coward, who was a stickler for clear diction, would probably have approved of the definition given to his vocals, but I still felt that it wasn’t totally at home with this sort of music.

Putting on the Joplin was a revelation. All of a sudden the E200 seemed to spring to life, the wall of Janis's opening vocal in 'Summertime' leaping out of the speakers, closely followed by the twangs of the electric guitars and the build up of the bass and rolling beats of the snare. I didn’t quite see the E200 head-banging to the more up tempo numbers, but it wasn’t far off it. I felt that this was the most satisfying rendition of this record yet in this review.

This liking for beats and big sounds suited 'Big Men Cry' as well. The almost tribal drum drive to the tracks 'Drippy' and 'Drunk As A Monk' propelled the tune along in a way that put a smile on my face. In fact it was so enjoyable that I digressed from the comparison playlist and ended up digging out an old 45 of the Rolling Stones 'Paint It Black' followed by a host of other 60s R&B classics, before returning to the job in hand!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Equalisation was accurate when set to High, but exhibited bass roll off at Low, likely due to interacting with our generator. As the generator has low impedance like a real cartridge, the Low setting of the Lux offers very low loading to a cartridge: we measured just 1.6 Ohms DCR. This compares to 4 Ohms at High, and 18 Ohms in the line out. So there are few turns on the transformer and using Low will slug the cartridge generator, damping it heavily.

This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but I wonder whether Lux appreciate this. A common rule of thumb here is to make the load at least 10 times greater than the generator sources impedance, meaning 10 Ohms.

Few turns also means ultra low (thermal) noise from the wire and at Low the Lux was predictably ultra quiet, possessing just 0.016uV input noise (e.i.n., A weighted). This makes it no less than 16dB quieter than most MC stages, so it truly exploits the intrinsic 'silence' of MC cartridges. Low also gives very high gain of x2366, or 67dB, just enough for the lowest output cartridges, providing the amplifier is reasonably sensitive (200mV or so).

This High setting offers very low gain of x620, or 56dB, barely enough for most MC cartridges, but again input noise was very low at just 0.2uV.

This setting will be useful with high sensitivity (gain) amplifiers and may subjectively offer stronger bass. The MM setting provides little gain of x68, or 37dB, only useful in conjunction with a sensitive amplifier.

Input noise was again low (as MM gains are), at 0.2uV. The switchable warp filter measured -3dB at 35Hz and attenuates low bass heavily, so will be effective in preventing cone flap.

The E-200's MC input transformers are a little extreme in their specs, but should give good results. This is an interesting phono stage but can only be validated by audition. NK

Disc MC
Frequency response 12Hz-22kHz
Separation 35/58dB
Noise (input noise, A wtd) 0.016uV
Distortion 0.001%
Gain x620 / x2366 / 56, 67dB
Overload 14 / 3.9mV in / 9V out

Disc MM
Frequency response 2Hz-40kHz
Separation 65/85dB
Noise (input noise, A wtd) 0.2uV
Distortion 0.001%
Gain x68 / 37dB
Overload 132mV in / 9V out

FREQUENCY RESPONSE
ANT AUDIO KORA 3T LTD £995

Regular readers will be becoming familiar with the unassuming little black boxes that bear the ANT Audio logo, as am I after reviewing the previous version of this limited edition model in my previous group test back in the July 2009 edition of this magazine. I enjoyed that version and recall that I was looking forward to this updated version with a proper PSU, instead of the previous version's wall wart. A couple of other 'under-the-bonnet' changes have gone into this, such as a tidying up of the circuitboard. The simplicity of the original design remains with just three transistors per channel, but the Black Gate capacitors have now been replaced with Elma Stargate items.

Such a simple circuit requires little room so the 70x35x135mm casework remains the same, as does the rather bright, green LED on the front panel. At the back are two pairs of phono sockets and the usual grounding post, alongside a small knob. This fine tunes the DC operating point of the circuit by slightly changing the DC bias and allowing adjustment of the circuit in use. The factory default position has the pointer at 12 o'clock, with adjustment between the 7.30 to 5.30 positions. When used with the Kontrapunkt a I found that the factory setting gave the best results. When tried with the Audio Technica I tweaked the setting to about the 2 o'clock position, finding this seemed to produce a feeling of a little more air and space in the sound.

SOUND QUALITY
Whatever setting is used, one thing about the Kora shone through; that being the near thermionic smoothness and depth to the sound, along with one of the biggest soundstages exhibited by any product in this review. I felt that the Microgroove actually had the edge on depth, but couldn't match the Kora for width of the image. The assembled drums and voices of 'Drunk As A Monk' seemed to occupy a fairly large chunk of my living room carpet, rising from a deep dark pit of rhythm. Here I felt that this version improved on the last with better stopping and starting of the bass notes, tightening the timing of the beat as a result.

The Noel Coward LP was rendered very well, despite the lack of a mono switch to subdue the occasional unwanted pops and crackles. Background detail was there, although not as well lit as either the Microgroove or the Luxman, but still allowing the listener insight into the events taking place in Nevada in June 1955. Staying in the fifties, found the LSO, with Sir Malcolm Sargent conducting, in their element accompanying Heifetz through the Bruch. The age of the recording seemed irrelevant as the Kora seemed to shed the years from the vinyl. I wouldn't say that it sounded modern, but it certainly had more life and energy in it when compared to listening through either the Astin Trew or the Luxman.

The only point where this unit failed to impress me was when playing 'Cheap Thrills'. I felt that the desire for smoothness had slightly overtaken the need for tonal accuracy and was left with the feeling that Janis had sucked a throat sweet during the interval. Her voice had a little less grit than I expected, and the searing edge of the guitars was slightly moderated, although seeming to have a bit more body in the lower frequencies. A good performance, but I didn't feel that rock music was really the Kora's genre of choice.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
Much like the MM 3T we measured November 06, the output swing was a little lower than normal at 6.4V. To get adequate input overload this means gain must be kept in check and the Kora 3T MC comes in at a low x1292, or 62dB. This is enough to convert 0.2mV to 258mV so providing any accompanying amplifier has reasonably high input sensitivity, matching will be satisfactory, even though volume will have to be turned right up. The Kora will not suit either low output MCs, or systems with 400mV input sensitivity, or both. It is best used with high-ish output Ortofon cartridges and suchlike.

Noise (equivalent input noise, IEC A weighted) was low, measuring 0.07uV, so the Kora is quiet, almost as good as the best.

Equalisation was very accurate our analysis shows, with a small lift at high frequencies plus a deliberate roll-off below 20Hz, to give -10dB attenuation at 5Hz, where warps are at their worst.

As before, distortion was a little higher than that from ICs, but at 0.08% mainly second harmonic for 1mV input it is not a problem. Like its MM brother the Kora 3T, MC is a clever, minimalist design quite different from the usual integrated circuit solution found in most solid-state phono stages. It measures very well and, as before, is likely to sound good as a result of its elegant simplicity. NK

Disc MC
Frequency response 22Hz-77kHz
Separation 70dB
Noise (input noise, A wtd) 0.07uV
Distortion 0.08%
Gain x1292 / 62dB
Overload 5mV/6.4V out

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

**GROUP TEST**

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

**FREQUENCY RESPONSE**
ROKSAN CASPIAN DX2 £869

Roksan make two versions of their phono stage, one being the DXPSE and the other the slightly cheaper standard DX2 version seen here. Both share the same full width bodywork of the Caspian range measuring 432 x 330 x 80mm and weighing up to 12kg, depending upon which power supply options are taken. The user manual lists a plethora of options that can be installed in this cabinet, depending whether the purchaser wants just a phono stage or wishes to include a power supply for the Artexes turntable in the same unit. In this case just the phono stage in standard form was specified so it came fitted with the DC powered Artaxterxes X reference phono amplifier module, powered by a 30VA low noise toroidal transformer via the DSU power supply module. User adjustable settings include gain settings for moving magnet and four different moving coil options. Capacitance and resistance can also be adjusted via the dip switches mounted underneath the unit. Given the size and weight of this product, it would have been more convenient to have these mounted in a more accessible place, but unlike a reviewer, most owners will probably set things up as required and then forget about them, so it shouldn’t be a problem.

SOUND QUALITY

After the unobtrusive sound of the A.N.T., the Roksan seemed to produce a sound as large and solid as the unit itself. I started off by playing the Joplin record and was greeted by a wall of sound that came halfway across the room to meet me. There was plenty of colour and life to the performance, grounded in a reassuringly sturdy and musical bassline. In some ways it was not too dissimilar to the way that the Luxman played the same pieces. There was plenty of power in the struck chords, an energy to the beat and a feeling of sheer scale which none of the other units so far managed to match.

Banco De Gaia was treated in the same way, with lots of energy flowing from the record grooves into the room, holding my attention, but in an unforced manner. Some big sounding equipment can get a bit tiring after a while - you end up feeling that you want a tea break from the intensity. Not so with this unit. The energy levels stayed just within acceptable boundaries, pumping the music along without leaving the listener feeling exhausted.

The two older recordings used here came across quite well, although I felt that the reproduction of classical music lost a little of the filigree detail and subtleties that I had enjoyed when listening through either the A.N.T. or the Microgroove. Both seemed to use a slightly finer paint brush when describing the sonic picture than the Roksan, although I would still categorise the latter’s performance as good. Whereas the Luxman tolerated classical, but seemed a little uninterested in it, the Caspian was interested, but just lacked a little of the finesse of the Kora and Microgroove.

The old bugbear of surface noise was quite well controlled, and the groove damage was handled quite well, although I was still aware of its presence. The Noel Coward disc seemed to gain a little body, without losing much in the way of background information. His voice had a slightly richer timbre than I had heard previously, which seemed to flesh out the bones a little more, seemingly defying the age of the record. Overall a very good performance but if you already have a full bodied sound then this unit might add just a little too much into the equation, leaving the listener a little overwhelmed.

This is another phono preamp that uses the same input stage for both MC and MM cartridges, like the Astin trew AT8000. However, Roksan have used a much quieter input device, the result being a low 0.06V input noise (A wtd) with both MC and MM cartridges. With MMs this will be swamped by thermal noise from the cartridge’s generator coils, but with MCs it will not, there are so few turns. The result will be very low hiss with MC cartridges. As gain is quite high at x2000 maximum, the Roksan will work well with most systems, if not between a very low output MC cartridge and an amplifier with low input sensitivity, where volume would have to be turned right up to almost maximum. Low noise means the Roksan will otherwise be a good match to low output MCs though.

Equalisation was accurate, as our analysis shows. There is some slight roll off in low frequencies putting the 1dB lower response limit at 20Hz. Warps at 5Hz were suppressed by a modest but useful -6dB.

Gain for MM cartridges was x100 (40dB), but x517 was also available, either for MMs or MCs.

The Roksan stage worked well all round. It has no foibles or weaknesses and will suit both high quality MC cartridges, as well as MMs. NK

### MC
- Frequency response: 20Hz-95kHz
- Separation: 85dB
- Noise (input noise, A wtd): 0.06μV
- Distortion: 0.0006%
- Gain: x2000, x517 / 66dB, 54dB
- Overload: 6.5mV, 25mV in / 13V out

### MM
- Frequency response: 20Hz-95kHz
- Separation: 85dB
- Noise (input noise, A wtd): 0.06μV
- Distortion: 0.0006%
- Gain: x100 / 40dB
- Overload: 130mV in / 13V out

**FREQUENCY RESPONSE**

![Frequency Response Graph](image-url)
OUR CURRENT PRE-OWNED STOCK LIST:

AMPLIFICATION
Quad 909 Power amp. One owner from new in silver, boxed, mint, only a few months old. (£1000) only £649
Quad 999 Power amp. Finished in black, mint, boxed, one owner. (£2000) £1349
Leema Tuscana integrated amp. One owner from new, boxed in excellent condition. (£3000) £1295
Ayre AX-7E integrated amp. Boxed in excellent condition, one owner from new, stunning reviews. (£2450) £1295
Cyrus 8 XP Integrated. Only a few weeks old, Quartz finish, mint, boxed. Stunning performance. Cost new £1300 bargain at £999
Cyrus Smart Power Plus (£349 mint) and Cyrus Hark? Tier stand (£205) also available.
Icon Audio Static 40 mk III. Only a few months old (Upgrade valve model) with a spare set of valves. Remote control, mint, boxed. (£1295) only £795
Quad II Eighty Valve mono blocks. One owner from new, unmarked condition, stunning performance and great reviews. Original box/packing. 5-year warranty for the new owner. (£6000) £3795
Chapter Audio Prefile and Costant prepower combination. Boxed with original tags in excellent condition. These cost new over £8K, so at less than half price they represent amazing value for money. £4955
Miyazay Mi Multi-Source System. Ex-demo unit, with the optional 'Blue Base' module, only 6 months old, immaculate condition. Original box, Packing, Manual and Remote Control. Outstanding performance from this 'all in one' solution. (£1295) only £895
Art Audio Daciva (ex Volume Control). Simply stunning in all respects and in outstanding original condition (boxed). Original Box and Packing, 18 months old and in immaculate condition. Includes Bruckparq Black Tuesday complete with spares and 'high tension' cables. (£2740) very good at £1295
Yamaha AS2000 Integrated amp. Current specification model, excellent condition with original box, packing, manual remote etc. Lightly used, 2 months old, in outstanding condition. (£2500) £1295
(Dig-CD200 SACD player also available)
Art Audio VPI Pre Amp (with MM Phono Stage). Finished in the highly desirable chrome, in spectacular condition with original boxes and packing. (New £2000) only £1295
Quad II Forty mono blocks. One owner from new with original box and packaging. Excellent condition and a 5-year warranty for the new owner. (£800) £1695
Bel Canto EV20 Gen ii amp. Great condition (one small mark on front lid). boxed, mintable, RCA and XLR inputs. Cost new £1900 a bargain at £995
MBL 5008A reference mono blocks (a2). Finished in black/gold. Original flight cases, one owner from new in excellent condition and a 5-year warranty. Cost new £14000. Amazing value for money at £16995
Deftech DP505 power amp. Complete with Deftech 500CShink speaker cables. Boxed, manual etc. (New £3500) Now only £495
Audio Analogue Patrec Settanta rev.2.0 integrated. Ex-demo, finished in black and is in as new condition. (£1449) £795

Eastern Electric MinimaX Prepower combination.
One owner, supplied new by ourselves in unmarked condition, 2 months old, 5-year warranty. Stunning performance and reviews. (£2195) £1295
Audio Analogue Verdi Cento integrated (current spec). Ex-demo, finished in black and in as new condition. (£1650) £995
Counterspeak SA-12 Hybrid Stereo Power Amp. This dual channel tube/mosfet power amplifier is one of those amplifiers that you forget how good it is until you hear it again! (£2155) Only £695

DIGITAL
Townshend TA565 CDSACD Player. Stunning one owner from new. Finished in black, great reviews and a rare opportunity. (£2000) only £1595
Marantz Ki Pearl SACD. Mint, as boxed, only a few months old. Great reviews on this special edition. (£2300) £1795
Vivaceital CD-5MK CD player. New model and only a few months old. Balanced and Single Ended Outputs. Ex-demo (finished in silver), immaculate condition with full warranty. (£1600) £1195
Yamaha CD-S2000 SACD player. One owner from new, mint, boxed, manual, light wood side cheeks (£1295) £995 with a 5-year warranty. (Matching amp also available)

LOUDSPEAKERS
Hyperion HPS 938 UK Speakers. Finished in high gloss black. Stunning condition, one owner from new, original boxes and packing. Cost new £1475 and a bargain at only £995
Dynaudio Focus 110 Speakers. Finished in cherry. One owner from new in as new condition. Original box/packing. These cost new £1295, so with a 5-year warranty £649 is a bargain.
Monitor Audio Platinum Series PL100 Loudspeaker system in classic black, months old, and in immaculate condition. Original boxes, packing, and manual. (£2500) Only £1495
Clarity "A Series" A Compact Loudspeakers. Finished in Chary, and in immaculate condition, with original packaging and boxes. (£695) only £295
Amphion Argon 6L Loudspeakers. Finished in Scandinavian Birch with original boxes, packing and accessory pack. Only 8 months old. HiFi Choice "Best Buy" and Group test Winner (issue 322). (£690) only £395
Audio Physic Scorpio II. Latest model, finished in cherry, ex-demo, unmarked condition. (£3773) £2750
Quad ESL 2905 Speakers. One owner, mint and boxed with very low hours. Amazing reviews (£7000) only £495 with a 5-year warranty
ATC SCM-11 Loudspeakers. Finished in cherry, and one owner from new. These acclaimed loudspeakers have for 4 years running won the What Hi-Fi Group Test for loudspeakers under £1000. (£699) Only £599
Audio Physic Tempo VI Loudspeakers. Finished in the maple. These are a one owner pair, 6 months old, completely unmarked with original packing, boxes and literature. (£2612) bargain at £1395
Ruark Prelude Speakers. Finished in yew, these are virtually in as new condition. One local owner, fantastic sound and a bargain at only £295 No boxes, so collection only

Audio Physic Sitarra Loudspeakers. Finished in rosewood. These are unmarked with original packing, boxes and literature. Recently Highly Commended by Hi-Fi News. These loudspeakers feature the new High Hyperlographic Drivers. (£2200) £1395
Audio Physic Scorpia. boxed in cherry, one owner from new, good (some very minor marks). condition. (£3800) £2195

ANALOGUE
ROTEL RQ706BX Phono Stage. Finished in black, with all original box and packing. (£195) Only £95
Tom Evans Micro Groove Phono Stage. Stunning performance, excellent condition. Cost new £485, our price only £260 with a 5-year warranty
Eastern Electric Minimax Phono Stage. This probably holds a record (no pun intended) for the most outstanding reviews of any product currently available. Boxed in unmarked condition. One owner from new, only months old. Simply sensational (£1495) £920
Quad QC 424P Phono Stage. This is at mint one owner example and is in as new. Great reviews. (£1200) £795
What! P202 complete with MM/MC. One owner from new, stunning 2-box phono stage in black, original box and packing. Incredible reviews. (£1299) £695

MAINS CONDITIONING
Vertex Silver Plus Jaya. One owner from new (raised badge current spec model) in excellent condition. The reviews speak for themselves. Grab yourself a bargain. (£550) £395
ISOBAL Substitution Vouage. One owner from new (One owner from new). Finished in black, good (some very minor marks) condition. Stunning performance flagship mains conditioning. (£2195) £1495
Vertex Silver Plus Jaya. One owner from new (the highest reference grade model) in excellent condition. The reviews speak for themselves. Grab yourself a bargain. (£560) £349
Vertex AQ Taca. 6-way distribution mains filter. Great reviews. One owner from new, unmarked. (£668) £169

CABLES
Kimber Select XLR3-3032 2.4m reference speaker cable. One owner from new in excellent condition. Boxed etc. Cost new a staggering £2737, so a bargain at less than half cost (£1415)
Vertex AQ Silver Silver XLR interconnects. One owner from new in excellent condition. New price £1592, so a bargain at £895
Vertex AQ Mini Monostrap Speaker Links. Set of four links with the 80 x 6 x 35mm acoustical absorption module. Simply sensational. (£545) £395
Chord Signature speaker cable. One owner from new, boxed, as new, 2.5m, amazing reviews. (£770) £425
Transparent MusicLink Super RCA. 1m, cost new £429 a steal at only £195

ACCESSORIES
Finite Element Segment X Rack. (£400) finished in black and silver. A few minor marks (very, very minor). Comes complete with the five piece dedicated spike set (£200). One owner, assembled once (only a few months old) £275
ICON AUDIO PS1.2 SIGNATURE £999

This is an upgraded version of the well received PS 1.2 phono stage, baby brother to the PS 3 which I looked at a year ago. The standard PS 1.2 retails at £750 for the MM/MC version (MM only costing £549). This Signature version features Jensen Caps, costing an additional £200 and gold pin valves (another £50). The casework is the standard Icon Audio unit measuring 88x310x134mm, with the slightly heavier power supply (4kg for the latter, 3kg for the former) measuring 82x165x80mm. On board are two ECC 83 valves and an ECC81. All components are hardwired with silver Teflon cable in the usual Icon manner and mounted on a polished stainless steel chassis. The RIAA equalisation is passive. The front features a volume control, allowing the unit to drive power amps directly, alongside a mono/stereo switch and a selector for MM or MC input. At the back is the umbilical lead the connects to the power supply, the usual two pairs of phono sockets for the signal in and out, the earthing post and a switch to lift the earth if an earth loop causes any hum problems.

SOUND QUALITY

As the only valve powered unit in this collection I was expecting certain things from the PS 1.2. I'd hoped for a full bodied and tuneful bass, good imaging and a seemingly endless liquid masculinity; and I was not disappointed. Starting with the Coward LP I found myself appreciating the subtext of the piano accompaniment to 'The Bar On The Piccolo Marina'. This tale of a recently widowed, rather stuffy English matron who discovers life is for living seemed to have a little more depth to the instrumentation than with any other unit looked at here. My focus altered a bit from the lyrics, to include more of what the orchestra were doing. Added to this was a perception that the audience's response was marginally more obvious and I found myself slightly more immersed in the performance than I had been before.

The Bruch was treated equally well from a musical point of view, although the damage to this record was more noticeable through the PS 1.2 Signature than it had been through either the Luxman or the A.N.T. Anyone who thinks valves gloss over issues should have a listen to this device! There were a couple of occasions where I almost wished for a slightly more rose-tinted view of the condition of this record. It wasn't unlistenable but there was certainly more honesty regarding the condition of the groove walls than I would necessarily have liked. Swapping to the Audio Technica from the Kontrapunkt a seemed to emphasise this, so I did not regard this as a good combination. Moving over to the MusicMaker III restored a little more decorum to proceedings and listening continued space...

Fed with modern records the Icon revealed in displaying colours and textures to sounds that some of the other phono stages had only hinted at. The depth and solidity of the bass was matched by an energetic pace to the timing of 'Drippy' that made it romp along in an uninhibited and pleasurable way. Taking advantage of the onboard volume control, I removed the Tap-X from the system and fed the Icon directly into the Quad. The result was sheer magic, moving me several layers closer to the music, and adding another layer of detail to an already complex picture. In comparison with this version I felt that the standard PS1.2 was a little euphonic in certain places. This one was a little more honest, but at times could be a little too much so. Match with a top quality front end and vinyl though, and it is dynamite.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Icon Audio PS1.2 offers great all round performance, masses of gain for any situation and the convenience of a volume control. NK

Disc MC
Frequency response 4Hz-20kHz
Separation 80dB
Noise (input noise, A wtd) 0.15uV
Distortion 0.001%
Gain x4000 / 72dB
Overload 7mV in / 27V out

Disc MM
Frequency response 4Hz-10kHz
Separation 80dB
Noise (input noise, A wtd) 0.8uV
Distortion 0.001%
Gain x421 / 52dB
Overload 66mV in / 27V out

FREQUENCY RESPONSE
Chord Indigo Plus Digital

Whilst most hi-fi and home cinema enthusiasts are happy to accept the influence that interconnects and speaker cable can have on the performance of a system, many people struggle to accept that a digital cable can be equally influential.

The common reaction is that since the cable is only carrying a digital signal, the design and quality of materials used in the cable will have far less influence. Listening tests however, show this is not necessarily the case. Repeated listening tests using high quality digital to analogue converters and home cinema receivers have shown that digital cables can and do have an effect on the sound quality of the system in which they are used. Digital cables are capable of affecting levels of detail, dynamics, sound staging and the rhythmic and tonal characteristics of a system.

The improvements that the Indigo Plus Digital can bring to a system should not be dismissed lightly.

THE CHORD COMPANY

“Hipness is not a state of mind, its a fact of life”
Cannonball Adderley

www.chord.co.uk

Get advice on all aspects of hi-fi and home cinema from the Cable Doctor and sign-up for our newsletter, keeping you in touch with the latest product development news, exclusive competitions and technical tips.
group tests are always interesting to do, because they spotlight the respective differences between a range of products which you don't normally get to sample. Although I'd heard several of these in isolation beforehand, or their precursors, there's nothing like putting them back to back to see how the land lies...

The first thing to say is that there is not a bad one here; as their high globe ratings show, each one reviewed has very real merits. Yet that doesn't mean they're the same; they come in different flavours and are purposed for different things. We also need to remember that each listener has different priorities, systems and musical tastes, so what's good for the goose won't be good for the gander. All of which makes ranking them a tricky process, but to my ears there was still a clear order of merit...

Firstly, the Astin Trew AT8000, which I found a touch too soft and inoffensive to my ears in both my systems. It's true to say that both of these err to the richer side of things, and I found the AT8000 didn't really get going with either. It's a consummate smoothie, with a very tidy, delicate presentation, and needs 'bringing out of itself' to really fly. Conversely, I can imagine it working brilliantly in a Roksan system, which sports a very finely judged mix of solid-state 'get up and go' with just a touch more finesse that you'd normally expect from transistors. It's an interesting one this, and well worth considering.

Tied in terms of rankings is the Luxman E200, which is a truly esoteric device. Whilst the three previous products have all been obviously built and finished to a price, shall we say, displaying decent if prosaic production values (although the Roksan is better than the AT or Tom Evans, it must be said), living with the Luxman is like winning the lottery. All lavish brushed aluminium and lovingly finished casework in the best Japanese tradition. It sounded a bit like it looked, in a way. It's swish and swelle, but it does have a very lucid midband which is just plain enjoyable. You don't get the bright light of the Tom Evans, or the inoffensive to my ears in both my systems. It's true to say that both of these err to the richer side of things, and I found the AT8000 didn't really get going with either. It's a consummate smoothie, with a very tidy, delicate presentation, and needs 'bringing out of itself' to really fly. Conversely, I can imagine it working brilliantly in a Roksan system, which sports a very finely judged mix of solid-state 'get up and go' with just a touch more finesse that you'd normally expect from transistors. It's an interesting one this, and well worth considering.

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of what it would sound like. Warm, full, expansive, musically lyrical and beautifully silky in the treble, there's nothing to criticise here and so much to celebrate, except to say that again, as per the Astin Trew, it won't help already over smooth systems or sources. In my main system it worked very well, because my Ortofon cartridge is very much a neutral performer, tonally speaking. But I can see it becoming too smooth with the wrong combination of ancillaries; conversely it's superb in a bright, dramatic system such as editor DP's.

For me, it was the Icon Audio PS 1.2 Signature that did more than any other phono stage to make my music magic. In its special 'tweaked' guise it is a truly special performer, possessed of a big heart like the Roksan, the smoothness of the ANT Audio and Astin Trew, and the lucid musicality of the Luxman and Tom Evans. But it's not a simple amalgam of the aforementioned; it's very much its own phono stage, with a lavish, expansive character that you can't fail to like...

Icon Audio PS 1.2 Signature - puts a tiger in your system's tank!

"the Icon Audio PS1.2 Signature has a lavish, expansive character that you can't fail to like..."
ACOUSTIC PREFERENCE

to see is to want - to hear is to believe

These products are available exclusively through the specialist dealers below.

**Bedfordshire**
www.acousticarts.co.uk
01582 485 316

**Hertfordshire**
www.angelsoundaudio.co.uk
01923 352 479

**Yorkshire**
www.mayflowersounds.co.uk
01302 711 528

**Northern Ireland**
www.kronosav.com
02887 753 606

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**Acoustic Preference**
Almarro
Cain & Cain
Dr Feickert
Emillé

**Marten**
ModWright
Raysonic
Tri
TELLURIUM Q
BLUE £16/M; BLACK £40/M; GREEN £148/M & ULTRA BLACK £249/M

Distortion has to be one of the most insidious aspects of sound interference currently infecting our hi-fi. It suffocates sound frequencies, choking them to such an extent that much of the available detail is masked from your ears. Distortion arrives in many flavours and is often only noticed once it is absent but, when that occurs, the difference can often be nothing short of sublime.

Tellurium Q, which only sprang into existence last year, decided to tackle distortion as a primary cause of sound inhibition, from the off, they tell me. In particular, they've concerned themselves with phase distortion which has the unfortunate effect of 'smearing' sound frequencies. The company launched its first low phase distortion speaker cable in January, as favourably reviewed by editor DP. Now expanded to a suite of four, stretching over an array of price points, this pasta pot of flat speaker cables was reviewed with my current reference, a pair of Chord Epic Twins, which retail for around £40/M.

Starting with the lowest priced Blue, a sort of linguine-sized, narrow, flat cable, the most noticeable aspect during playback, over a variety of musical genres and formats, was a welcome absence of muddle. When you have a low cost cable like this, you really have to get the very best out of it for the price point. Tellurium Q has done exactly that. Via the Epic Twins, vocals were slightly forward of neutral but, with the Blue cables a more neutral, focused, precise aura settled on the music. In fact the Blue cables exhibited a tremendous sense of control; something that I've never heard from any other cable at this price point. Okay, they might suffer in the bass extension department while mids are not exactly adventurous but, for the price, I found them charming and more relaxing than the Epic Twins whose lively upper frequencies grated a touch.

Moving onto the Black cables - same size, different colour - and these cables showed a more incisive nature than the Blue and one that is aurally similar to the Epic Twin in its tone and personality. On some systems, the Black might even be a touch clinical, hence a careful demo is recommended. There is excellent focus though, which means that the overall output is comfortably superior to the already excellent Chord Epic Twin cables. Strings contain texture, bass has a real heft and vocals sound more relaxed and secure in their presentation.

I then moved onto the first of two, tagliatelle-sized, broad, flat cables. The Green cables could be described as 'sweet'. That doesn't mean that I see them as cloying or that they throw any sort of veil over detail, far from it. These warm, very friendly cables broaden the soundstage and provide, for the first time, an onion skin array of musical detail. That is, bass exhibited a multi-tonal depth and vocals displayed a complexity unheard of by both the Blue and Black cables. What the Green cables do, however, is roll over the frequency extremes which makes them ideal for any slightly bright system.

The flagship broad, flat Ultra Blacks are intriguing. I was initially expecting a clinical version of the Green cables but was rather surprised by the Ultra Black's maturity as purveyors of detail. Yes, the Ultra Blacks are not as sweet or as warm as the Green examples and I wouldn't describe the Ultra Blacks as perfectly neutral either but what they do give you is neutrality with a slice of texture. So, vocals have an extra expressive quality, bass bounces along with cheerful abandon and wind instruments seem, well, full of air! Clinical systems may have a slight problem with the Ultra Blacks so a considered demo should be in order. Nevertheless, what the Ultra Blacks will do for your record collection is to both extract the fine detail from within and reveal its personality.

The entire cable range is defined by its superior sense of focus at the price. This means that each frequency does not have to do battle with every other, allowing the music to display its finer qualities. More shades of colour are made available within each track and more subtly is present too while detail is no longer veiled, so you get to hear 'hidden' information that has been lurking there all along.

This is a fine array of speaker cables from Tellurium Q that will fit just about any system out there. All warrant five globe ratings at their respective price points, so are well worth investigating.

[Contact: +44(0)1458 251997, www.telluriumq.com]
Q Trip

Noel Keywood goes on a journey of discovery with Q Acoustics' affordable new 2050 floorstanding loudspeaker...

What's wrong with this loudspeaker? The price. It is an implausible £350 or thereabouts. But for this you get a full size floorstander, finished in a nice deep, piano black lacquer. Surely, there's some mistake? Perhaps it has crappy little paper drive units, made in some unlovely corner of the Far East?

Well, on the contrary, it is designed in Germany by a respected industry figure who knows the UK market and understands the UK sound; it has excellent drive units and is produced in some anonymous corner of the Far East (well, yes, that had to come into it!) for Armour Home Electronics, a UK company who also handle Goldring and Myryad. What's wrong is that it wrecks standard expectations; I know what it costs to produce a loudspeaker as I've been there and suffered that with World Audio Design, including entering into price negotiations in some anonymous corner of the Far East when the temperature was 38 degrees Celsius and even the mosquitoes had packed in flying for the day. Prices did not go this low. So the 2050s are a mystery to me!

The cabinet follows the usual pattern of being around 1m high (3ft) or, to be precise in this case, 6mm more than one metre. With a width of 270mm and depth of 321mm the cabinet is not visually overpowering. Its even tone of finish - all black! – doesn't draw attention either.

I don't know what material is used in the two 165mm bass/midrange cones, but tapping it, it sounded like a well damped plastic, producing that rather dead 'thunk' of such plastics, reminding me of our Spendor S8es. I was speaking to the designer of the 2050s, Karl Heinz Fink, at the Munich High End Show this year and was impressed at the level at which he works. Drive unit design is one of his specialities with dedicated computer design for the magnetics and Finite Element Analysis used to assess cone behaviour. Designs are validated by measurement using a Polytec laser interferometer (see www.polytec.com). Driver production is then passed out to a factory in Germany, China or wherever; there are plenty of them. This is how the 2050
was created, for Armour in the UK. It's quite a background and shows what lies behind this budget floorstander.

The disposition of bass/midrange units above and below a centrally placed treble unit is known as a D'Apolito arrangement, after designer Joseph D'Apolito you won't be surprised to learn! The main benefit is vertical symmetry that, with good basic phase matching, leads to a consistent sound over a wide vertical arc in front of the speaker, and in reflections off ceiling and floor, which 'see' a similar image. It works well. In effect there are two drive units handling bass and midrange and this spreads the image vertically, very obvious when you listen alongside a coaxial KEF Uni-Q for example, which offers much more focus. If the drivers are too far apart you hear two loudspeakers when sitting close. However, the 2050 is well laid out in this respect and I only noticed how consistent it sounded when I walked around the room.

As usual, bass loading is imposed by a rear mounted port. And this is all that is visible on the rear panel, for Q Acoustics have placed the 2050 on a low, steel plinth that allows the bi-wire connecting terminals to be placed on the cabinet's bottom face, making them invisible. Cables pass in through an aperture, which means they stay on the floor and cannot be seen snaking up the rear of the cabinet. Conventional terminals able to accept 4mm banana plugs, spades or bare wires are used. Small drive unit cloth grilles are supplied too, plus floor spikes.

Visually, the 2050s are a simple, elegant package that attempt nothing radical; they just look smart and well finished. Quite obviously, attention has been paid to detail. The website shows what lies behind this budget Q Acoustics;

-Kick off as always with the emphasised walking bass lines found on Angelique Kidjo's 'Fifa' album to get a handle on bass performance, as well as basic balance and soundstaging, showed the 2050s have slightly inflated bass. Measurement suggested it would play well and this was the case but even with our tight dry control-freak of an amplifier, Musical Fidelity's superb AM550, the Q2050s sounded undamped and a little fulsome. Bass guitar lines were conspicuous and single drum strikes large, but I could not, hand on heart, call the 2050s 'tight'. They are not sloppy, being too well engineered for that, but for those who want 'taut bass' the new 2050 isn't ideal. For those who want plenty of bass, and who want to hear bass guitar play across its musical scale, the 2050 does a good job.

There was less difference than usual between our AMS50 and our Icon Audio MB845 valve power amplifiers; I expected bass to sound softer with the latter, and whilst it did, differences were small. Bass drum strikes rolled on a bit longer and seemed more strenuous, but the effect wasn't great. With their high sensitivity and even low frequency impedance the 2050s suit valve amps and can be used with them confidently. The MB845s were more forceful across the midband as usual but otherwise the AM550 carried the day in this instance and I continued the review with it, as well as using a Leema Pulse.

But as the track 'Fifa' started, I began to realise where these loudspeakers are very strong. Angelique Kidjo's voice was a little further back than usual, behind the plane of the loudspeakers, surrounded by a gloriously deep, warm acoustic. Decays from studio reverberation could be heard tailing away and backing singers surrounded her in what seemed a cavernous space. Kidjo's voice sounded rich, brimming with expression that came from a tapestry of fine detail accompanying her. Instead of the common forward and slightly strained presentation manufacturers are achieving by exploiting midrange peeking (oh the tricks they try!) the 2050s offer a more relaxing yet impressive alternative and here I could hear what their excellent drive units were doing. The D'Apolito drive unit arrangement gave an absolutely stable image no matter what my head height, and this helps consistency of sound in the room generally. The sound stage was wide and well supported at extremes, going just a little beyond the loudspeakers.

But my interest and admiration returned continually to the smooth, even and rich tonality of the loudspeakers. The drivers are colour-free and do not lay their own sound on top of instruments and vocalists, as metal cones in particular do. The result is a broad palette of texture within instruments and a lovely dark chocolate feeling to the delivery, brimming with activity. An absence of ringing from the well damped cone material led to a very tight timing in the midband; suddenly strummed guitars vigorously appeared and then were gone. This made dynamic shifts and sudden changes in tempo beautifully clear and explicit.

When I carried out a quick initial assessment to ensure both loudspeakers were in good alignment, I was surprised to learn! The main drivers are too far apart you hear two loudspeakers when sitting close. However, the 2050 is well laid out in this respect and I only noticed how consistent it sounded when I walked around the room.

As usual, bass loading is imposed by a rear mounted port. And this is all that is visible on the rear panel, for Q Acoustics have placed the 2050 on a low, steel plinth that allows the bi-wire connecting terminals to be placed on the cabinet's bottom face, making them invisible. Cables pass in through an aperture, which means they stay on the floor and cannot be seen snaking up the rear of the cabinet. Conventional terminals able to accept 4mm banana plugs, spades or bare wires are used. Small drive unit cloth grilles are supplied too, plus floor spikes.

Visually, the 2050s are a simple, elegant package that attempt nothing radical; they just look smart and well finished. Quite obviously, attention has been paid to detail. The website shows what lies behind this budget Q Acoustics;
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working order, before run in and measurement, they sounded warm, and this is caused by the midrange dip our measurements picked up. But in spite of this the 2050s have sweet and quite strong treble and swatches of detail; so whilst the 2050s will on a quick listen sound a little warm and perhaps dull, on longer acquaintance this impression passes.

As you might expect Nigel Kennedy's violin had more body and its timbre was better resolved than usual; I won't say the tweeter was so good there wasn't a little sharpness to higher notes, but whilst his bow moved across strings further down the scale the 2050s were an easy listen, convincing and gently impressive. Listening to backing strings swell behind him in Max Bruch's gorgeous 'Violin Concerto No. 1', I was happy to enjoy the music, as well as the playing of course, in a simple way, without having the performance forced at me in a "look at me, I'm hi-fi" display that's so common (and sadly isn't hi-fi, as anyone who has heard an electrostatic will know). Raising tweeter output to add detail is a simple trick in the book of loudspeaker engineering; with the 2050 I was glad to hear a loudspeaker where the designer has felt no need to use such contrivance, egged on by a sales team who demand something able to produce more powerful bass and zingier treble in the showroom.

The Chicago Symphony orchestra stretched wide across our listening room, playing Rimsky Korsakov's 'Scheherazade'. Positioning of the strings was pin-sharp and the solo violin hung clearly in front of me, horns were fruity and tubas grumbled nicely.

The loudspeaker's dark tonality kept individual instruments nicely separated and clear, but as strings rose the tweeter did add a little edge. Bass sounded nice and deep and gently rolled along behind Hugh Cornwell singing 'You Always Reap What You Sow' from the Stranglers' 'Dreamtime' album. The guitar's gentle, lilting theme rang out beautifully and drums rolled across a generously wide sound stage, left to right. I was aware of some upper treble sharpness again, that gave a little edge to sibilance and put a bit of hiss into instruments. With cymbals the tweeter sounds sweet, yet there is a peak in there that often made itself known. But as Hugh Cornwell spoke the lyrics in 'Ghost Train' I was more taken again by the lovely sense of stage depth, insight and vocal clarity that the 2050s possess. This gives them a big, wide open sound stage that layered Dave Greenfield's backing vocals nicely behind Hugh Cornwell; lovely stuff!

The big bass returned when I span Scissor Sisters 'Laura', so it is lurking there, waiting to step forward with an album containing strong lows. Sibilance spat at me a little; again the tweeter's sharp upper treble was letting itself be heard.

**CONCLUSION**

As budget floorstanders go the Q Acoustics 2050s are a very strong design. They are more characterful and distinctive than I remember the 1050s and also quite a lot different to the current norm, offering their own distinct take on a performance. I liked them a lot, finding they were insightful, atmospheric and convincing in the breadth of tonal palette they wielded. Okay, bass was just a tad over large and treble could be a little piercing at times, but their delicious midband and superb sound staging were thoroughly impressive. Couple this with excellent amplifier compatibility and you have a speaker for all situations. So a big thumbs up to Q Acoustics yet again, for bringing us another impressive loudspeaker at a great price. I don't know how they do it.

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The 2050 has reasonable general balance across its frequency response, treble being slightly up above 7kHz, just enough to give some liveliness without sharpness. Tweeter output is smooth, so quality should be good. Prominent in the response trace is a wide midrange dip at 3kHz, where the bass midrange units do not meet the tweeter well. The D'Apolito drive unit arrangement made this effect consistent across a wide vertical angle so the effect, which serves to soften and warm the sound of a loudspeaker, will be obvious to listeners wherever they sit, high or low, or however the cabinet is tilted.

Forward bass output from the drive units rolls down progressively below 200Hz, but port output is strong, measuring +6dB up at 80Hz, and the port is broadly tuned around 45Hz, so it has wide effect, even exciting our room strongly at 24Hz a third octave noise analysis (shot shown) revealed. It also damps the drive units effectively, the impedance trace shows, residual side peaks being small. However, the peak at 1.3kHz is both high and reactive, which isn't so good as amplifiers are concerned. If the midrange dip was removed, by drawing more current, this peak would be much smaller. Sensitivity was unusually high at 91dB, helped by the bass unit being 4.3 Ohms.

**VERDICT**

A warm balance with big bass give the 2050 a great sound. The ability to work with just about any amplifier makes for a fine all round package.

**Q ACOUSTICS 2050 £350.00**

Q Acoustics
+44 (0)1279 501111
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**FOR**
- smart appearance
- warm sound
- little power needed

**AGAINST**
- awkward cable entry
- conservative styling
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It's interesting how ye olde Compact Disc is refusing to be kicked out of the way by digital downloads. Although the silver Frisbee was never the ultimate sonic wonder that was billed upon its arrival, it has undoubtedly made an impression. The lure of convenience, the lack of fuss, the compactness and the apparently high-tech aspect of the format have ensured that pretty much everyone across the listening world has a machine capable of playing these devices, be it on their computer, in their car or sat in their hi-fi rack.

On the face of it, the digital download would seem to be even more convenient — no media to scratch, no hard format to store, lug around and lose, and no need for a clunky transport, but the CD isn't going without a fight. Even more surprising is that, whilst the likes of dCS, Meridian and Naim sell huge CD-spinning behemoths that take the format as far as it can go, one might have expected that, at the bottom end of the market, 2010 would seem a pretty pointless time to introduce a budget CD spinner. Well, the likes of Cambridge Audio would undoubtedly disagree and now XTZ have raised their voice and added it to the dissent.

A relatively new name to the UK, XTZ hail from Sweden and first made their mark with the Room Analyser package, but are gradually introducing a range of separates, such as the 99.25 loudspeakers that impressed editor DP back in the May issue. The company itself is a conglomeration of "engineers, technicians, manufacturers and producers" who collaborate with several companies across Europe and Asia for their design and manufacturing activities. They have

Adam Smith takes a listen to the new CD100 CD player from Sweden's XTZ...

Swede Dreams
"with an easy rhythmicality and a weighty and well ordered low end it will find many friends...:

also taken the seemingly increasingly common concept of selling directly to the customer, the main advantage of which is that the prospective purchaser can take advantage of a home trial period to check out the equipment in their own system and surroundings, which is never a bad thing.

The CD 100 is XTZ’s first CD player and I have to say that the weight of the box and the sturdiness of the machine contained therein are quite at odds with the selling price of £365. Even better is the truly delicious remote control handset sat in the top of the box. I’m sure many of you out there are as sick of reading about me moaning about plastic remotes as I am of writing about them, so suffice to say that the XTZ’s is a lovely thing and gets the Smith thumbs-up.

The player itself tips the scales at a healthy 9kg and some of the features found on it are, again, astonishing considering the price.

Class A output stage based around discrete components? Check. Balanced outputs via XLR sockets? Absolutely. Separate transformers for the digital and analogue sections? Certainly. All in all, the player is very well specified and a peek inside reveals a sprinkling of decent quality components plus three separate shielded chambers containing PSU, transport and output sections. Frankly, if you’d told me the price had an additional "1" on the front of it, I wouldn’t have batted an eyelid.

So, first impressions good but second impressions when I powered it up were more reserved. Firstly, I have a pathological hatred of any piece of equipment that flashes "Hello" in the display when you turn it on and the review sample CD100 compounded this by its drawer occasionally refusing to open properly; instead creeping out by an inch or two and then shooting straight back in again. Of course, the ultimate arbiter is, as always, sound quality and, as I was beginning to wonder if the word "Divine", which is bizarrely written on the front panel, was some strange subliminal message, it was time to start spinning some tunes...

SOUND QUALITY

With the XTZ thoroughly warmed up, the first thing that hit me as the music started was the bass, which did literally hit me – one of my first
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test tracks was the title track from Emiliana Torrini’s ‘Me and Armini’ album and I had the volume control set higher than I realised. The upshot was that the opening drum strikes and heavy bass line nearly blew me off my listening seat until I adjusted the level appropriately. Bass was full, perfectly rounded and incredibly tight – I have heard players costing many times that of the XTZ make a ham fist of this track and, so considered this to be a good start.

The CD100 certainly majors on rhythms, I found as I listened further. That healthy bass is not all just grunt and hump, but there is plenty of detail to be found as well, so bass guitar notes were easily distinguishable and well separated from their neighbours, double basses had their customary woody thrum present and correct, and the XTZ was able to focus the performance well in low end terms. I was also impressed by its abilities when it came to imaging; it does not set up a hugely wide or deep soundstage, nor would it be expected to at the price, but it really does spotlight the central action vividly and, as a result, helps to focus the main aspect of the performance, be this a solo instrument within an orchestra, or the singer at the front of a band. As a result of this, the XTZ’s overall presentation arranged performers well within their space, even if this space wasn’t all that extensive.

At the top end, treble is clean but as I listened more closely, I became aware of a lack of impact and insight in this area. Cymbal action from a good drum kit, for example, had a pleasantly metallic sheen to it but the XTZ seemed to be glossing over the initial strike itself. On one jazz track I played, which is underpinned by a softly brushed cymbal, the CD100 had a tendency to blur this into a soft, continuous hiss rather than allowing the shape and form of each stroke to come through.

An unfortunate side-effect was that this aspect seemed to carry over into the upper midrange as well, and the overall result was to make such performances a little recessed and rather ‘nasal’.

A perfect example was to be found back on the Emiliana Torrini CD with which I started the evaluation. The aforementioned title track came across very well indeed, being of a reggae-type nature and dominated by the impressive bass line. Skipping forward to the track ‘Gun’, however, changed things completely. This is a harsher track for a player to manage, featuring Miss Torrini’s vocals alternating between fairly soft and quite lacerating, and underpinned by an occasionally scything solo electric guitar. Here the CD100 almost seemed unnerved, it certainly soldiered on valiantly but the casualties were the guitar play, which started to lose its sense of focus and stridency, and the backing percussive effects that appear later in the track which lacked their customary impact.

Ultimately I found that the XTZ was quite material-dependent and turning up the wick to something demanding seemed to make it a little uncomfortable on occasions. Although retaining its puppy-dog eagerness to perform at all times, it did occasionally seem to trip over its feet every now and then. However, offer up something more languid and spacious in recording terms and you really can hear the strength of the machine in action and with this sort of material in mind it is an easy and enjoyable listen.

CONCLUSION

The CD100 is an impressive start to CD player manufacture for XTZ. Incredibly well built and specified and offering an astounding level of value for money, it has a great deal to recommend it, particularly at its eminently affordable price. With an easy rhythmicity and a weighty and well ordered low end it will find many friends. It is not quite up with the best at the price when it comes to sorting the minutiae from more densely layered recordings but, taking into account its very reasonable price, it deserves a warm recommendation.

---

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

Frequency response of the CD-100, shown in our convolved impulse analysis, measured flat right out to the usual 21.2kHz limit, with just the slightest loss at high frequencies imposed by anti-alias filtering. As this amounts to -0.35dB at 20kHz it isn’t enough to subjectively alter tonal balance but it should ensure the XTZ sounds neither hard nor sharp.

Distortion levels were lower throughout the player’s dynamic range, our analysis showing a low 0.18% at -50dB. Lack of quantisation noise hash helped toward a decent EIAJ Dynamic range value of 100dB, close to the best, but not significantly better, but then that is hard to achieve with the fixed performance of a digital system.

Jitter (random) on the digital output was high at around 100ps up to 500Hz, and 1ns below 100kHz. This is much higher than the 10-20ps achieved by good, modern players and is a mark against the XTZ.

The XTZ CD-100 measured well except for jitter on its digital output. If this also affects the internal data stream to the DACs, as is likely, then it will impact sound quality. UK

Frequency response (-1dB)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency (Hz)</th>
<th>Response (dB)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2Hz - 2.1kHz</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.1kHz - 21kHz</td>
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Distortion (%)

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<th>Distortion (%)</th>
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<td>-50dB</td>
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<td>-80dB</td>
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Separation (1kHz)

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Noise (IEC A)

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Dynamic range (EIAJ)

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Output

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<th>Output (V)</th>
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<tr>
<td>2.16kHz</td>
<td>0.18</td>
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**REFERENCE SYSTEM**

Marantz CD94/CDA94 CD player
Naim Supernait integrated amplifier
Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers (modified)

---

**VERDICT**

Superbly built and with an impressive sense of pace and weight, the CD100’s performance belies its affordable price tag.

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- image focus
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- build
- value

**AGAINST**

- recessed upper mid/treble
- “Hello!”
The Leveller

The Burson Audio Buffer AB-160 promises to help out hi-fis with impedance mismatch problems; Paul Rigby tries it for size...

One of the aspects of this hobby that never fails to amaze me is the sheer quantity of variables it kicks up, variables that all have to be addressed if you want to improve the sound of your hi-fi. Back when I used to act like a groupie around my local Laskys shop during my school dinner hour I thought that the be all and end all of hi-fi was a smooth door operation on a cassette deck. I didn't know the half of it!

Emerging from the darkness came questions on the shape of the listening room, choosing the right cables, selecting the right hi-fi shelving, mains electricity questions, distortion, record cleaning... and, of course, we haven't even begun to talk about the hi-fi itself yet! Yet, these associated variables are still very important. In fact, they can drastically affect the sound of your system. Each and every one deserves close attention. Why? Because the difference between a basic 'excellent' hi-fi system and a fine-tuned 'excellent' hi-fi system can be enormous.

This is where the Burson Audio Buffer AB-160, developed in Australia, comes into play. It's another method of fine tuning your hi-fi. In Burson's case, it is targeting impedance as the bug-bear. Well, not impedance itself, but the mismatching that can occur between components in the same system. The company claims that such impedance mismatching not only exists between hi-fi components of different manufacturers but also components in different ranges from the same manufacturer. It gets worse if you factor in iPod docks or if you push computer-based audio through your hi-fi. The result? According to the company, you only get to hear a proportion of what your hi-fi is capable of – around 70% is the quoted figure. The other 30% is 'lost' because of impedance mismatching.

In practical terms, Burson says that untreated music will lack dynamics and detail as well as attack. They say that sound is thin and lifeless in comparison.

All this fighting talk demands that Burson put its money where its mouth is, which is where the AB-160 comes into play. The AB-160 attempts to remove all mismatching by acting as a physical, mechanical isolation platform between your sources and amplification. At the same time, it also proposes to enhance the electrical match between the components themselves.

Arriving in a compact box (210x145x60mm) and weighing just 5kg, the AB-160 is presented in a silver livery. Inside it's a dual mono design to keep the noise down, and sports short signal pathways and decent components such as Elna Audio capacitors plus hand-soldered DALLE military grade resistors, power filtering and a short circuit protection network. The front of the box is very simple, offering a single, rotating input selector. The rear offers two inputs, an output, power cable socket and power switch. The inputs will receive your sources: phono amp, CD player and the like. I felt that offering only two sources was a bit mean and could be a problem in many systems out there. Connecting everything up was easily done but, before I began listening, I gave the AB-160 a full thirty minutes to warm up. You need to do this every time you use it.

**Sound Quality**

Listening to the AB-160 proved one of the most interesting and perplexing experiences I've ever had. It began with vinyl and Ella Fitzgerald's 'Sings The Cole Porter Song Book' (Speakers Corner/Verve), backed by the Buddy Bregman orchestra and 'I Love Paris'. Did the Burson change the sound at all? Yes it did – totally. In fact, my hi-fi experienced a complete personality transplant. The first, obvious, change was the increase in gain which meant that, during my A-B comparisons, the Burson required constant compensation. The next noticeable feature of the Burson was how much more prominent that orchestra now sounded. In fact, I now had the impression that Fitzgerald was singing in amongst the musicians. The results can swing two ways. There will be those who immediately cry foul and complain that the Burson suffocates the music, restricting space and actually decreasing dynamics while others will love it, talking up the Burson's ability to put you right in amongst the action. Some will worry about the slight reduction in scale of the stage while others will love the way the Burson's increased musical sensitivity adds detailed touches to both midrange and treble. I quickly realised that I had a Marmite accessory on my hands.

Switching musical genres and Yes's 'Yours Is No Disgrace' from 'The Yes Album' (Atlantic) proved illuminating. The organised chaos that is rock music seemed to emphasise the lifted midrange frequencies proffered by the Burson that, once again, closed down midrange frequencies proffered by the Burson that, once again, closed down amongst the action. Some will worry about the slight reduction in scale of the soundstage while others will love the way the Burson's increased musical sensitivity adds detailed touches to both midrange and treble. I quickly realised that I had a Marmite accessory on my hands.

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recognises, you receive a slightly unbalanced overall sound. This was emphasised by spotlighted midrange information which, while welcome, was often prioritised to the detriment of bass clarity.

Switching to CD and Boxcutter’s ‘Onesic’ (Planet Mu) a techno feast with drum’n’bass layers which responded very well to the Burson effect. An immense amount of energy spewed forth from this CD almost forcibly picking you up from your seat and onto the dance floor. What seemed to help the Burson, with this genre of music, is the fact that techno and electronica in general can be quite claustrophobic in nature in the first place. So what the Burson did was emphasise what was already there. Bass was almost enveloping, starting from somewhere deep inside your stomach and then moving outwards while midrange synth stabs were almost physical. What the Burson removed was the previously calm, relaxed soundstage that the music performed upon. What replaced it was a more upfront presentation bursting with extra life. This was music with punch and speed – it certainly took no prisoners.

My final CD spin was Maude Maggart – an odd name for a lady with a beautiful voice, a contemporary singer who seems to hark back to ‘the roaring twenties’, fragile and trilling. On her 2005 album, ‘Sings Irving Berlin’, ‘You Keep Coming Back Like A Song’ is performed with a piano and violin only. If the Burson enjoys the high energy, modern electronica arrangements it also takes a shine to the small group scenario because it lifted each instrument onto individual pedestals and shouted at the listener, “here, this is what they do – here is the truth for each!” So, for both piano and violin, you can hear all of the detail, all of the time. Of course, Maggart’s vocal performance was treated in exactly the same way – the Burson has no favourites – which means that this tiny trio performance had a real epic quality. Once more, you feel that you are sitting so close to each person that you could actually feel the fall of breath from Maggart’s mouth as she reached a crescendo.

What you lose – and, with the Burson, it seems that every performance consists of giving with one and hand and taking away with the other – is that intimate quality that many people enjoy with a small trio. The delicacy and subtlety is reduced along with elements that I can only describe as insinuation: things that musicians almost play or purposely don’t play, leaving you to fill in the gaps. What you gain however, is every nuance of the complex piano as a stringed instrument while the multi-tonal violin is given all the time and space it needs to breathe and pour out its heart. And that’s what the Burson is all about. This is a box full of passion – it’s just that passionate people can often act like bulls in china shops.

Further investigations on the small group theme lead to similarly successful listening tests with jazz trios and chamber quartets. With all these small ensembles never a note was missed or a detail ignored while the Burson was in full flow.

**CONCLUSION**

The Burson is a Curate’s Egg of an accessory. In some respects, it does its job too well. Everything – and I mean everything – is now on level terms. That includes every sonic element in every track that you play. Dynamics suffer, though. There is no light and shade, subtlety takes a back seat because, upon using the Burson, every detail can be heard equally and with full measure. Of course, there are good, even great things to come from this situation because previously hidden or low-key information is brought to the fore. With a large ensemble, this can be a cacophonous riot but, in a small group scenario, it can also be enlightening and informative. A niche product if ever I heard one but, for those occupying that niche, a demo is highly recommended.

**VERDICT**

An interesting product that puts the listener right at the heart of the performance.

**BURSON AUDIO BUFFER AB-160**

£325

Angelsound Audio

© +44 (0) 1923 352479

www.angelsoundaudio.co.uk

**FOR**
- enhanced detail
- energy
- passionate performance

**AGAINST**
- only two inputs
- reduced soundstage

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

This device is an impedance converter: it drives a line from a low output impedance and can be used, in theory, to lessen losses in long lines. That’s the engineering view; some say such converters improve sound quality, for reasons not fully understood.

I was unable to open the case to look inside, but a 9V maximum output figure before overload suggests that inside lurks a high performance audio silicon chip: there are plenty available from Burr Brown, Texas, TI and National Semiconductor, etc. The circuit was all but transparent with a bandwidth of d.c. to 77kHz, -1dB and minimal distortion (0.0009%). It passed a square wave perfectly and noise was minimal, but modern ‘mic preamp’ ICs and audio preamps are as good as this. Output impedance was on the high side at 1.2kOhms, however, not the 100 Ohms or thereabouts expected from a dedicated line driver chip, of which there are many, so the Burson isn’t for really long lines and heavy capacitative loads and it doesn’t use a dedicated line driver IC. Results are best judged by listening. UK
A pair of KEF iQ30 loudspeakers is on their way to **ROB NICHOLS**, Letter of the Month winner in our July 2010 issue.

**LETTER OF THE MONTH PRIZE**

**KEF iQ30 LOUDSPEAKERS**

**MUSEUM PIECES**

I did a search and found your 2002 review of the Nakamichi 600 cassette deck and found it impressive. I'm interested in getting a classic machine like that! My question is: your review says the deck offered 20Hz-20kHz in frequency response. I read a copy of the owners manual and it says the frequency response is 40Hz-18,000Hz. I guess it doesn't matter much if the deck impressed you so much, but I was just curious if it really makes a difference?

Brian Joyce

Such a small difference in frequency response makes no difference at all, even in an item as invariable as an amplifier. Frequency response of a cassette deck (when recording) varies quite substantially with the tape used, although Nakamichis can be tuned flat by altering bias. Replay response, relevant to prerecorded tapes, is also difficult to pin down to tight limits.

If you are going to buy an old cassette deck just be aware that if it has been heavily used then it may need quite a lot of service and if this includes new heads, the bill will be steep. B&W handle Nakamichi cassette deck service in the UK, as they have always done, and the bad news is that they say they have no spares left for the 600/60011. I suggest you check out B&W's Nakamichi site and perhaps even get some service and spares costs first, before buying an old Nakamichi. This advice applies to much old kit, which often use parts unavailable now. Consult relevant restoration specialists first or you may just end up with a non-working museum piece. **NK**

Noel is of course bang on about buying second-hand cassette decks, although it should be restated that it applies to any second-hand piece of hi-fi gear. We're 'classic hi-fi' lovers here at Hi-Fi World, and all use such kit, but we have to point out that you can't expect equipment that's decades old to work like new. Sometimes it does, but you're lucky. Usually it doesn't, so always do your homework about whether parts are still available before you assault your local car boot sale or the mighty eBay! As for frequency responses, there are several ways of measuring it; the key point is the response until it drops to -3dB. A deck that's 20Hz to 18kHz (-3dB) is very good indeed; most people's hearing rarely exceeds 15kHz. In my view, as far as cassette decks are concerned the wow and flutter figures are more important in practice. **DP**

**PICKY EARS**

I really looked forward to the March issue, eager to see your review of the Q Acoustics 2020. As my own ears had picked these out, I'm pleased they were given such a good report by an expert too. These speakers had been due in since early November, and they either keep coming in and are sold only to pre-orders, or they never actually arrive in the country. Their in-store-dealer date of 'early Jan' changed to 'due Feb' as soon as 'early Jan' came. Great speakers, but how to buy them? As it happened I had several tax codes

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Visit our website at www.hi-fiworld.co.uk or send your emails to letters@hi-fiworld.co.uk. Letter of the Month wins a pair of KEF iQ30 loudspeakers.
arrive, which reminded me of how much I was going to be robbed. In an effort to spend my own money I did something I said I'd never do, i.e. buy some speakers without hearing them first. Thus I'm running in some Monitor Audio BR5s. Fifty hours going by the book.

But there was so much more in the magazine this time too. The Sony TC-WE475S cassette deck went onto my shopping list. This could solve my problem of how to transfer some cassettes I made onto CD -- with my PC upstairs and the tape deck downstairs, supporting three other hi-fi units, so it means a lot of disturbance to get it out as it is. A second tape deck would sort that one nicely.

Not for the first time on seeing radio tuners reviewed, I compared their specs with my Sony JX2L. Some figures are hard to compare like for like, but the Sony has a frequency response of 40Hz--12.5kHz, a signal to noise ratio of 72dB, and separation of 45dB. These would suggest to me it's still able to hold its own with the current, much more expensive models. Listening to some stations via lifeJoys headphones at night, I can vouch for the fact that channel separation is excellent.

You reported on the Creek's high precision rotary encoder, the main control, going backwards instead of forwards, not incrementing properly. Yep, I've been there. I have similar on my Ferguson DAB/FM kitchen radio. This is a case where technology makes things harder. Enter the Sony again. Turn the tuning dial and the pointer moves such that I can whip between stations at either end of the scale in no time at all, and searching for others in between is easier than trying to increment a digital scale too. On my Ferguson, to manually tune from one end of the FM scale to the other, you takes hundreds of turns of the knob. And while I'm at it, I prefer volume controls to be knobs, not buttons. Whatever thinks changing volume by holding down one of two buttons is a good idea needs their head controls to be knobs, not buttons.

guitar in concert he's an outstanding musician. I'd settle for him alone.

Liked the Prog Rock article too. I'm not sure whether you class Be Bop Deluxe as Prog, but I do maintain you haven't lived till you've heard their 'Drastic Plastic' LP. Bill Nelson can write some witty lyrics too.

MELVYN DOVER.

Thanks for writing with your thoughts, Melvyn. It's nice to hear someone else's views on what is said in the magazine. I've noticed that some electronic volume controls must be turned slowly and deliberately if their 'shaft encoders' are to work at all. I am not yet convinced these things are better than an Alps Blue or Panasonic potentiometer. NK

I'm a huge Be Bop Deluxe fan too, Melvyn. It amazes me that they were never huge, considering what talent they had. For me, it's got to be 'Modern Music'; I have about five pressings of this, so worried I am about never again finding one! DP

...AND AGAIN

With the Monitor Audio BR5s still just short of their running in period, I noticed a website (www.speakerpoint.co.uk) with Q Acoustic 2020s on it. No mention of pre-ordering or expected dates. In other words they seem to have them in stock. A choice of graphite or walnut. I phoned to order some in walnut (there's always a second room for a second pair of speakers) and spoke to a very helpful man who told me the walnut was out of stock. He apologised, but added they only had them in gloss white or black. Glass white! Wasn't that what I was after way back when? So gloss whites were ordered and they arrived the next day (they even came with a pair of white gloves).

Then I decided I should have ordered gloss white 2000ST stands to match. I tried, but they're out of stock, expected mid-Feb. Doh!

The instruction book for the 2020s recommends: "In the EU it is against safety regulations to use 4mm loudspeaker plugs." Is this really the case?

Also I noted the sensitivity for the 2020s is 88dB and not 86dB, as your review stated.

These are great speakers, planking them on top of the BR5s for temporary convenience, I was able to switch A/B and there seemed very little difference between them at practical volumes.

All this was the catalyst to me biwiring the Monitor Audio BR5s, as their instruction book recommends. What a difference! Immediately they sounded clearer, and there was no longer a squawking parrot in the background, and for less midrange mush from the radio. It really brought them to life.

I've tried bi-wiring the 2020s too, but found I prefer them with standard. Perhaps that's because it's early days for them. In any event I'm now enjoying two pairs of speakers.

MELVYN DOVER.

No difference between a BR5 and 2020? Oh dear Melvyn! Methinks the 2020 is a sight more neutral and even in tone, even perhaps too much so to be exciting for some. But it is a super smoothie. Monitor Audios are nearly as accurate in basic tonal balance, but have a shallowness, sound and a certain zing that comes from metal cones. They are both nice loudspeakers though. Monitor Audios take quite a lot of running in and they recommend you use their (somewhat weird sounding) De-Tox disc. What you say about bi-wiring is interesting.

We understand one person in Europe managed to connect their loudspeakers to the mains through its 4mm socket inputs and their use has been discouraged ever since. It is common for them to come fitted with plastic stoppers that must be prised out to prevent this.

On sensitivity, our measured result is commonly lower than that of manufacturers by a few dB but since we use a calibrated Bruel & Kjaer microphone and a calibrated Clio microphone as backup, we are confident our result is accurate. Our measurement is made with pink
Oh my good gawd! There are a few grey hairs showing now, and my barnet’s a tad flippier, so to satisfy your obvious interest Alan, I shall duly arrange to update my column picture... It's something I've been meaning to do for the last five years, but never seem to have time. So what better reason could there be for you to place your order for September’s Hi-Fi World now? DP

LAGGING LINN
I hope you can advise. My setup is a Leak Troughline 3 + Onething stereo decoder, Linn LP12 turntable with ittok arm and Asaka moving coil cartridge, Cambridge Audio 640P MC phono stage, Cyrus DAD3 Q CD, stepped attenuator passive, Decware SE84C for low/medium volume, home built Tripath 2024 and 2020 amps for higher volume feeding Decware modified Fastex FE206e in large Lowther based horns.

The problem I have is noting sounds anywhere near as good as the Leak Troughline 3, especially the Linn — it sounds terrible. My i-pod playing FLACs sounds much better than the vinyl. The Troughline that I have tuned to BBC Radio 3 is not a modded one, not even fed with a very good aerial, but when I listen to it — the only source I think I have listened to that I consider high end — it simply blows everything else away. But I am at the mercy of the radio schedule and although this broadens my listening scope, it also limits me.

Could it be that my records are all worn out?

Christopher Bowen

It’s more likely that your Asaka cartridge is worn out, and the Cambridge Audio 640P is not an appropriate match, either in quality terms or its own bright balance. I’d recommend an Ortofon Cadenza Black moving coil cartridge, feeding an Icon Audio PS3 valve phono stage (with valve regulated power supply). This would provide a leap up in quality, whilst at the same time moving the presentation into that you are used to from the Troughline, spacious, atmospheric but easy going — and free of false emphases. Then your record deck will see into the recording on the LP, many of which are surprisingly engaging; you’ll be aware of the tape hiss, the studio ambience, the physicality of the performers, and the way they are working together in a real environment. Modern processed recordings lack all this; they are slick, but heavily contrived and lacking the pull of old, live studio performances. It’s one of those small but engaging wonders of listening to historic vinyl, a performance the Troughline matches with Radio 2 and 3 in particular I find, due to their high signal strength and good broadcast quality, especially when the programme content is live. NK

As Noel says, your Linn Asaka moving coil is surely well and truly cream-crackered by now - given that they were last made in the mid nineteen eighties! If the stylus hasn’t worn out (which is about as great a certainty that you can get in the world of hi-fi!) then the cartridge’s suspension has all but collapsed. So a swift change of pickup would work a treat; even an Audio Technica AT95E (£30) would be a good tester to see if the problem lies there or elsewhere. If a change of cartridge doesn’t help, then the set-up of the Linn is the next issue; take it to your friendly local Linn dealer and get it freshly fettled. If the deck hasn’t been done for a long time this will have a dramatic difference. Finally, the Cambridge Audio 640P is far below...
the capabilities of your front end; as Noel says you should be looking for something at least the quality of the Icon Audio. DP

HARD DISC DECISION
I've been in the market for a reasonably priced hard-disk player for a while to replace all the physical storage my CDs and DVDs take up.

I'll probably aim for the ITB category, but my biggest fear has been buying a decent unit but then not being able to browse CDs and DVDs by either album / DVD title, artist, or track, but only being able to browse in order of uploads. Put another way, I want to make sure, once all my CDs and DVDs have been uploaded, I want to be able to sort by various headers, as well as not being stuck with albums and DVDs that weren't uploaded without content details (titles etc).

I've been thinking about the Lacie IconStation, as an example of a complete media recorder. Then there's the log media player range as well as Western Digital product. See my predicament? So many options out there, but no real way to see how they all work before buying. And then there's your very positive review of the Brennan JB7.

Any advice of how I should approach this? I appreciate any tips or views you could give. thanking you in advance kindest regards Vincent Hibbert Dublin, Ireland

Saddly Vincent you're not very specific. What's your budget? Do you want a discrete player or a computer audio based system, or simply a Network Attached Storage hard disk drive?

How many discs do you have to encode? Do you have a wireless home network? Do you require better than 16bit/44.1kHz quality? Do you download any music? It's such a big subject that you first need to answer these key questions before I can advise you; please reply and I'll do my best to help. DP

ORACLE
I read your enthusiastic review of this CD player with great interest. The Oracle seems to be not quite analog sounding from your description, but not typically digital as well. Does this CDP require warm partnering equipment? I have a Moon i-7 integrated, Audio Note AN/E 6bit/44.1kHz quality. How many discs do you have to encode? Do you have a wireless home network? Do you require better than 16bit/44.1kHz quality? Do you download any music? It's such a big subject that you first need to answer these key questions before I can advise you; please reply and I'll do my best to help. Mike Ranfft Canada

The Oracle CD1500/II to which you refer, reviewed in the July 2009 issue of Hi-Fi World, isn’t exactly on the warm and sweet side, but it’s hardly particularly steely and hard either; overall it’s just on the bright side of neutral. I remember it as being an extremely powerful, high energy listen, one that lacks that last degree of scale and smoothness (that you’d get from the likes of a dCS Paganini DAC, for example), and one that doesn’t quite have such a fluid midband, but it does have massive dynamic articulation and incredible attack, making it a lovely listen. The Moon integrated and Audio Note speakers aren’t over rich in their tonality, the latter especially being a touch on the dry side, so I wouldn’t say it’s a dream combination; I’d be thinking along the lines of a pair of Icon Audio M8845 valve amps doing size! Another tricky question from someone who’s not keen to reveal all! My own preference would be Yamaha’s Soavo 1.1 (£3,000), which are tallish but slim floorstanders with an exquisite piano black lacquered finish; the same as that used in their concert grands. They’re super fast, clean, powerful and dynamically articulate, love serious front ends and should sound larger still with a decent subwoofer, or two. Oh, and the wife will love the fact that they don’t look like fridges. DP

DISAPPEARING RADIO
It now looks as though the BBC are trying to pretend FM radio doesn’t exist. If you look at the R3 homepage on the internet it only mentions “online, on DAB digital radio & digital tv”! best regards, David Turner

How to listen to Radio 3.
the power supplying duties to really get this set up to sing DP

FRIDGE FOLLY
I have used Linn Isobariks for some time, initially with a Naim system and more recently with a Krell 250A power amp. The overall sound with various sources and live recordings is faithful to the original. However, I have had adverse reactions from my wife and most female visitors about a ‘pair of fridges’ in the lounge. Large speakers are never attractive in a domestic setting and I need to find some smaller speakers. Can you recommend a suitable replacement to partner a REL subwoofer (which doubles as a side table). Have considered ATC but reluctant to lose the Krell. J Hodge

Hmmm... how much smaller? And what’s your budget? Could you take taller speakers, but one’s that are slimmer? Or does it have to be standmounters? Musical tastes? Room size? The website had no mention of reception methods on the Homepage when we looked, but the site places emphasis on web listening via podcasts and what have you. The help section mentions:VHF FM and provides a list of frequencies etc. NK

I think it’s daft that the BBC is still prattling on about DAB, when the cost of spreading it to 98% of the UK isn’t far off a billion pounds, and it’s already been superseded not just by DAB+ abroad but by the Beeb’s very own, and very good, iPlayer in the UK. I’m not privy to all the internal politics and machinations at Auntie, but I would love to find out why its love for this format is so entrenched with the high ups at the Corporation. The irony is that most people prefer PM (for sonic reasons, and/or the fact that it’s already in their car radios). If it’s convenience and digital content, then the iPlayer and/or Freeview is excellent. All of which leaves DAB very much in limbo. DP

www.bfiworld.co.uk AUGUST 2010 HI-FI WORLD 45
Unused and in the loft for 8 years - a Rega Planar 3. Dig it out and fit a Goldring cartridge, we say.

BAD DAYS
As an occasional purchaser of Hi-Fi World I note your penchant for all things vinyl. As someone with an interest stretching back to 1970 I started with things vinyl. As an occasional purchaser of Hi-Fi and fit a Goldring cartridge, we say. Unused and in the loft for 8 years - a Rega Planar 3. Dig it out and fit a Goldring cartridge, we say.

However, I remember only too clearly the bad days of vinyl. For the entire cast of my Saturday employment at a well known chain of chemists I could purchase a single chart album or LP. Often it was noisy, crackly, warped and even the hole was sometimes off centre. Long were the battles I had with discount record retailer DownTown records in Romford Market. I got through four copies of the Beatles Sgt Pepper's album and still settled with a dud. True, I have a superb copy of Tango in the night and my original pressings of Emerson Lake and Palmer and Black Sabbath are excellent.

But such was my frustration at the quality and fragility of the product that on occasions I purchased music sets. To my ears CD when I first heard it was a revelation. The silences between tracks or on soft passages was a pleasure.

Of course the market has now polarised. Vinyl is a premium product probably played on expensive gear with a matching price tag. I look at the reviews and wonder what if? I then note that for the price of one new vinyl album I can often buy 3 - 4 back catalogue CDs. I rarely pay more than £5 for a CD and always have one on order.

True, it's not as good as vinyl but my Linn Classic, Sennheiser HD600 and AVI Neutrons keep me reasonably happy. In the meantime I can furnish my hobby of exploring new artists and revisiting old ones. Music for me has never been cheaper and at the end of the day it is all about music.

My vinyl collection of some 220 albums and 300 singles lies forlorn in the spare room. My Rega Planar 3 also lies there unused for at least 8 years.

Perhaps one day I will bring my Suggest down from the loft and get it all working again.

In the meantime it is CD for me. And neither format can hold a candle to live music.

yours sincerely
David Morris

One need not exclude the other David. Just relax and use both, without getting too worried about which is best. I have plenty of crappy LPs, but thankfully so many good ones. Put a decent cartridge, like a Goldring 1012GX, into the Rega and enjoy the music you once enjoyed and still own. Your interest might be sufficiently reawakened to realise that vinyl still has a lot to offer; from bargains you can find in Charity shops and car boot sales, to the super expensive re-issue stuff that seeks to better re-create historic recordings in their original format.

NK

There's something very nice and self-contained about CD. It's easy, cheap (now, although it was not always the way), and there's a real diversity of music available on it. Kit yourself out with a great, compact way of playing it (and Linn's Classic music system is precisely that) and I can see why you're reluctant to clutter up your life with vinyl paraphernalia. So many people feel this way. However, those who have dug their vinyl out of the loft are often the first to write to us here at the mag about the wonder and awe of their experience; it's sometimes akin to a religious rebirth (the born-again vinylistas are the worst...)

So don't dismiss your black plastic; buy a basic phono stage (a Cambridge Audio 640P would suffice here) and get the Rega back on the road! DP

REMASTERED
With reference to Paul Rigby's column in the March issue, I recall that around 1980, EMI digitally remastered some of their recent classical recordings (e.g. Rachmaninov orchestral works with Previn and the LSO) and the mid-price LPs and subsequent CDs were criticised for their degraded sound quality.

With the launch of CD, classic older recordings which had remained at full price on LP (e.g. Elgar Cello Concerto with Du Pre, Strauss Four Last Songs with Schwarzkopf) were given ADD transfers which, in some cases, still sound better than subsequent ADD reissues.

Perhaps most important is ensuring that the analogue replay machine is correctly set up. yours faithfully,
R. Mark Hodgson
London

AND AGAIN...
Replying to a letter on the Beatles remasters, NK says he always prefers analogue recordings on LP. On my own modest equipment, I find it hard to tell the difference, although CDs are more fatiguing over time.

However Pye, who pioneered the stereo LP in the UK, had dreadful pressings, noisy and cramped; the PRT and EMI CDs, mostly remastered by Mike Dutton, are much better. Mercury, who engineered some Pye recordings, and often used 35mm film, avoided compression until the cutting stage (unlike most rivals), so only their CDs have the original dynamic range. Kind regards,
R. Mark Hodgson

*Technics SL 100 with Isopotenat, SME3009(r)l, Grado Prestige Gold; Arcam CD62, Audiolab 8000P (rewired by Musical Fidelity - thanks for the tip!); Quad 11s, rebuilt by GT, Rogers Studio 7s.

Indeed so, and the same goes for vinyl too. The originals with all-analogue recording and mastering, are invariably better than any subsequent releases, to my ears. DP

SMOOTH OPERATOR
I have a suggestion and a query. It seems that a number of manufacturers are now selling loudspeakers directly by mail order. Whilst this seems something of a heresy given the usual advice of get a dealer demonstration before you buy, I am aware of the substantial contribution which room acoustics make to the sound of music as it is perceived. The ability to try a product in the room in question with the option of returning it (usually at your own expense it has to be said) might seem an attractive and sensible strategy. I do feel that magazines might help here to give an indication of the sort of sound produced at least to narrow a short-list to a couple of contenders. My...
Tannoy DC8 – a finely honed loudspeaker with a warm sound.

suggestion is therefore a Hi-Fi World test of mail order standmounts. I am aware of two such from the Arcydis factory in Worcestershire, the DM1 and EB Acoustics EB1 as well as WAD WD25a of course, and I believe there are others. Such a review would make a novel and illuminating comparison.

My query is related to this. My system is a Cyrus 7 CD and amp driving Monitor Audio GR10 speakers. This has a rather forward and up-front sound which was tempered in my 4m x 4.5m x 2.5m by heavy Chesterfields and a thick carpet, despite its thick stone (but plastered) walls. This room, my study, was our haven in an extended period of restoration of the rest of the cottage and much enjoyment was derived. Eventually the Chesterfields went to other, prime locations and a form of antique minimalism has taken over with stripped pine floor and lighter furnishings. A Q upgrade for the CD and PSX-R power supplies for the CD and amp tempered things a little, but the upper mid band sounds too prominent and hard. I have tired of this sound and my first thought is to replace the speakers. I would like something that preserves the speed and detail of the Cyrus electronics, but which has a warmer tone, sweet upper midband and treble and a firm bass. I am aware that this is not the current recipe for speakers, but am willing to consider anything from £500 - £1500 which might fit the bill - larger standmounts or small floorstanders. Is this the best route or should I tackle the electronics (Naim seem to produce kit that is civilised and musical in the best sense these days and seems to cope with upfront speakers very well). My musical tastes are very wide, early and Baroque, chamber and orchestral, jazz from Bop onwards, world music, rock, some pop and contemporary music of all genres (Nyman through Westbrook to Mr Scruff).

I would be very grateful for your comments and suggestions.

John Hurley

As you note John, “a warmer tone is not the current recipe for speakers”, and rarely will be again, because it was usually caused by an engineering weakness, a dip in output between midrange and treble drive units. But having said that the new Q Acoustics 2050s floorstanders sound warm and fit your needs almost perfectly, so fate has smiled on you.

The only other loudspeaker with a warm balance, along with great all round ability is the Tannoy DC -8 and this would suit your home quite well I suspect, as well as your musical tastes. It’s a ‘mature’ sound from a mature company and impressive in its own way, as well as unique of course. The price isn’t right, but who knows, perhaps you won the Lottery just after posting your e-mail to us!

NK

You’re not exactly spoiled for choice looking for something to warm the somewhat dry and over-precise sound of your Cyrus 7-series components. My instinct would be to save up and spend £2,000 on a pair of Spendor S8e loudspeakers, which really do have a less ‘up front’ sound than most boxes, including your Monitor Audios, which are not an ideal sonic match. Also try Black Rhodium Tango speaker cable, which I’ve found to be a very smooth, soothing performer.

DP

BIG BAMBOO

I have just seen Paul’s letter detailing his turntable project. Congrats to him, it’s a lovely piece of work. I too have just finished a similar project, a sand box for my turntable and a raiser and tot box for my computer screen. When storing this job my wife suggested I use some left over bamboo flooring. This proved to be an inspired suggestion. I have attached some photos of the completed work for your perusal.

This material is great to work with as it does not chip or splinter and mitres can be cut very precisely. It comes in various shades and sizes. There is little finishing to do once the job is assembled. I chose to use bees wax, which can also be purchased in different shades.

A further advantage is that should you inadvertently dent it, all you need is some judicious use of damp blotting paper and a hot iron and the dents can be raised and then waxed again.

I can recommend this material to anyone, just Google bamboo products and get a wealth of info on uses and tech details. I hope this will be of use.

regards

John Lancaster

The bamboo finished, sandbox turntable plinth built by John Lancaster.
My Michell Orbe SE with SME IV arm, needs a warm budget cartridge, says Alan.

**SIMPLE TEST**

I have discovered a simple test as to whether music, or more specifically hi-fi, has become an unhealthy obsession. It's when you struggle to remember the names of your old girl friends but, without hesitation or deviation, can rattle off the names of each bit of kit you've ever owned for the last thirty five years, including the model number identifying which version it was. I recall starting with a Garrard SP25 Mk III, Triplestone amp and Solavox speakers from Comet, somewhere round about 1974. At this point I should mention, for the sake of marital harmony, that I can usually remember my wife's name. I've even been known to be really nice to her just before discussing a hi-fi upgrade.

The likes of Linn were way out of my reach in those days, although my last-after item at the time was an Armstrong 616 receiver. I meandered through a variety of stuff, including Pioneer PL12D and Dual CS505 turntables and various bits of stuff from Arcam, JVC, Monitor Audio and Heybrook. Finally I succumbed to the Linn disease and, after a brief flirtation with an Axis disc spinner, ended up with an LP12, which seemed like nirvana (sorry!) at the time. Like many others, I took the occasional wrong turn. In my case, it was a pair of Linn Tukan speakers which I came to dislike quite quickly.

Anyway, I suppose I had better come to my query before you lot fall into a deep coma reading this epistle. My beloved current turntable is a Michell Orbe SE with an SME IV arm, Dynavector DV10x3 cartridge and a Graham Slee Era Gold V phonostage. The rest of the system is a WAD Kit 34 amplifier (built for me), Arcam CD37 and Comete Triangle ES speakers.

Stylus wear means a new cartridge is needed and funds are tight, so an MM type seems the best solution — a low output MC would involve having to buy an Elevator for the Graham Slee (I accept that the turntable and arm would appreciate a high-end MC cartridge, but needs must at the moment). Although my Dynavector has been fine, I wonder whether a switch to an Ortofon 2M Black would be a good move, or do you have any other ideas? I like a warm sound without excessive treble and listen to a lot of acoustic jazz, where I like to be able to follow the double bass lines.

Also, in the medium term I might look to change amplifiers. I am firmly in the valve camp so perhaps the latest WAD integrated or something from Icon might fit the bill. Again, your opinions would be appreciated.

Finally, when is Adam going to open his Turntables `R' Us superstore? I don't think he would have too much of a problem stocking it.

regards

Alan Smeaton
Newcastle upon Tyne

The 2M Black offers a cool, correct sound; it is technically accurate rather than warm, with treble that is fine and 'obvious', but not emphasised. I am not sure this is what you are after. The only cartridge I know of now that is 'warm' is the Shure M97xe, which is an old design and sounds it. Resolution of detail isn't great by today's standards, but it tracks well and is warm sounding, due to classic 1970s generator droop. That makes it an easy listen and would suit your current absence of ready readies, as it were.

Hi Alan - well, mentioning no names, but there's one contributor to this august journal (not wishing to give the game away but he likes Sony Walkmans a lot) who once somewhat harshly observed to me that the majority of Adam's turntables are not, to borrow a phrase from the Sale of Goods Act 1979, "of merchantable quality". He might think that, but I couldn't possibly comment... DP

**BEOWHATSTIS**

I've seen the odd sideswipe at B&O equipment in your Letters pages so I thought I'd share this story with you.

Around the mid-80s a new neighbour came over to borrow some tool or other. As we walked through the lounge, he noticed my B&O system and said: "That's crap". As a long time B&O owner I was used to such comments so I let it pass, though I found it somewhat un-neighbourly.

Shortly after, the new neighbours invited us to dinner and he took the opportunity to demonstrate his "real" hi-fi. Composed of various separates, it sounded fantastic. Then, a few months later, we hosted a party for around 30 people. As was the habit, after all had eaten the music was cranked up and we danced the night away. In the early hours, as people were starting to leave, I found my neighbour on the couch, listening. I joined him with a nightcap and he said: "I'm sorry, I'd never heard one of these before - the sound is incredible."

I suspect, like most dogma, the audiophile one is followed blindly. I no longer have a B&O system (my ex-spouse inherited the last one) so I can't comment on their latest kit. What I can say is, for over 30 years the music played on various Beowhatsits enriched my life.

Peter Keene
Cape Town

A B&O product that received Five Globes in Hi-Fi World, the Beolab 9 loudspeaker (see June 07 issue).
That reminds me of the expression "I always remember what’s at; yes, Peter! In truth we have a B&O at Hi-Fi World, a certain Adam Smith, who is always willing to speak up for B&O. Their products are well styled and decently engineered under the skin, especially the loudspeakers, which we have been very impressed by. There is no doubt that B&O are serious producers of high fidelity and I’m glad you find their what’sits work so well! NK

I'm afraid the sideswipes at B&O are an inevitable part of the hi-fi industry, Peter, and it also seems to me that more than a few are made by people who have never heard any of the equipment! Still, here at Hi-Fi World we have a fellow contributor in Tim Jarman who runs a vintage B&O website and has written books on the subject, as well as my good self who has one B&O system in the dining room, another in the lounge and... or "one or two" more items under the bed in the loft room where my wife hasn't thought to check yet!

Add to this our esteemed Editor who is also gradually building up a small collection of Danish loveliness and you can see that we most definitely do take B&O seriously here, even if they have come out with a few duffers over the years.

My trip to their factory in Struer a few years back only reinforced my opinion that, love or loathe the results, the technological know how and sheer passion that goes into their designs is really quite something to behold. AS

**COST ISSUES**

I have to take exception to Adam's comment (Pro-ject Xperience 2, April 2010) that it "...makes a similarly priced CD player sound a little bit limp...".

I am committed to vinyl myself - Technics SP 15, custom plinth, Roksan Tabriz Zi, AT OC9 MLII, WhistTwo - but don't like to see this statement made without an effective comparison.

Were you talking about similar to:

- £820 (turntable and arm)
- £1100 (turntable and arm + £270 cartridge)
- £1175 (phono stage)

In terms of price - particularly in terms of CD players - that's a huge scale.

regards

Neil McKirdy

Well Neil, I am sorry to have offended your sensibilities but my comment was actually directed at the whole Pro-ject range in general! I have long been of the opinion that, from the storming budget Genie right up to the mighty RPM10, there isn't a deck in the range that is a duffer and that comparing any of them to a CD player of similar price will show that, for sheer musical enjoyment, the Pro-ject will most likely come out on top.

More specifically for the deck I reviewed, I see where you are coming from, regarding the ancillaries with which I partnered it but my aim, as always, was to see just what the deck was capable of when stretched to the maximum. £230 worth of cartridge and £730 worth of phono stage are not exactly common bedfellows for an £820 turntable and arm combo, but these were items that I chose to see what the deck could really do. It performed admirably but I do take your point that it would have a tough time up against one or two £1,700 CD spinners.

However, as part of the review I also loaded the Xperience 2 up with an Audio Technics AT 10E and spent a day or two listening to it through a Cambridge Audio Azur 640P phono stage, bringing the total package cost to around £920 and being far more representative of the items that might normally partner such a design. In this guise, it certainly wasn't quite as good as the fully loaded setup, but I'd still have taken it over a £1,000 CD player. AS

Throughout my reviewing career, I've always kept the Rega Planar 3 (now the P3-24) as something of a benchmark. The first one I bought back in the mid eighties cost £188 (plus £34 for a Rega R100), and it outperformed my Yamaha CDX2 by a clear margin.

The Gyro combination is very clear and analytical, but there are three Clock upgrades using valves instead of the solid-state devices. I hope that you have got it in its final form as then it becomes a Giant Killer of CD players at its price. I have long been surprised that more reviewers have not used this in their review systems, but maybe it would not match too many solid state systems (mine is an all-valve system.) Keep up the good work there in UK best regards

Alan Smith

**GYRO ADVICE**

Try as I may I cannot get my Michell Gyrodec / Technoarm "A" / Audio Technics OC 9 MLII / Tri-Chord Diablo to perform anything near my Leema Antila CD player in terms of, well, anything really. The Gyrodec is about 10 years old so has the AC motor and twin belts (replaced 12 months ago). The arm, cartridge and phono stage are now also about 12 months old. It's a good performance, please don't get me wrong.

I see in February 2010 Hi-Fi World that you have a Njoe Tjoeb 4000. I have owned one of these fine CD players since October 2002, when I purchased it from Upscale Audio in California (at that time there was no agent in N.Z.). It was purchased in 16bit 44.1k form. Since then there have been four Upgrades by Herman.

One is a 24 bit / 96k board And there are three Clock upgrades using valves instead of the solid-state devices. I hope that you have got it in its final form as then it becomes a Giant Killer of CD players at its price.

I am convinced by those who say CD offers great sound per pound; actually it doesn't. For me, if sound is the absolute priority, there's always only been one option... DP

**Dutch Njoe Tjoeb is a real tulip, says Alan Smith from New Zealand.**

(£600) CD spinner by a clear margin when properly sited and set up. Throughout the years I've periodically put it up against many sub £1,000 CD spinners and I've never ever felt the Rega turntable to be comprehensively outperformed; quite the reverse in fact. That's why I was never convinced by those who say CD offers great sound per pound; actually it doesn't. For me, if sound is the absolute priority, there's always only been one option... DP

**NIJOE TJIOB**

I see in February 2010 Hi-Fi World that you have a Njoe Tjoeb 4000. I have owned one of these fine CD players since October 2002, when I purchased it from Upscale Audio in California (at that time there was no agent in N.Z.). It was purchased in 16bit 44.1k form. Since then there have been four Upgrades by Herman.

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Alan Smith

**New Zealand**

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almost as though it's giving a clinical and sterile performance.

The turntable stands on top of a spiked Partington Minim rack, nicely weighed down by a Musical Fidelity ASCR pre amp and power amp so this is a heavyweight support. The deck is levelled and set up meticulously, 30 second bounce etc and the QC 9 tracks at 1.5 grammes. The Diablo is set to the cartridge parameters. Having tried different interconnects over the years I admit to being a cable sceptic and different interconnects over the years the cartridge parameters. Having tried at 1.5 grammes. The Diablo is set to the cartridge parameters. Having tried different interconnects over the years I admit to being a cable sceptic and different interconnects over the years the cartridge parameters.

I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies. I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies. I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies. I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies. I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies. I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies. I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies. I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies. I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies. I've tried swapping but can hear no difference and it would take the issue lies.

I wondered too much about Alnico and such like. There are fad materials like Alnico in the Far East and the basis of their popularity is well founded, but nothing to get too worried about. Black Gate loudspeakers are intended for the Japanese market where such boxes must be ticked. NK

Hi David - the SME Model 10 offers superior stage depth to the GyroDec, although to be fair the Gyro is more expansive left to right. The Linn LP12 has one of the most tuneful basses around, and fine stage depth, although again isn’t as wide left-to-right as a Gyro. DP

MODS

Over the years having had access to big Pioneer 9000 series stuff and Teac reel-to-reel (the owner used to get me into free concerts at the Cornwall Coliseum - The Cure, New Order, Motorhead hitting the 100dB level -ouch!) and also Rogers A100 and big Nightingale triple enclosure things - well I was hooked!

Notable equipment has been a Nakamichi deck, Quad 34 (the controls more than the sound), Spendor speakers, John Michell Gyrodec/QC/Technoarm (which 18 month Lucy is re-started, Black Gates will be getting rare by now, as stocks decline. Go down this path if you can, however.

A question for Noel. et all. Sorry about your loss of Tannoy Yorkminsters. Will heavily nodded WD Phono 3 (Black Gates etc), give me worthwhile benefits of instruments having own timbre and space over otherwise good Anatek to support what the Chutes is good at. We could well be floorstanders. Budget up to £6000. Tony Mates

I would suggest you audition Martin Logan hybrid electrostatics, such as the Purities I reviewed in our September 08 edition. They offer a beautiful sound with any music type but being so pure and crossover free not a real Prestige for not being Alnico like the Yorkshireman (couldn’t they have put a 15 in that cabinet), a political hot potato, I know but thoughts all the same please.

Hi-Fi World high points have included David after taking over from the Popemaster in Aug 07; SME, Sugden, Anatek and your expansion of vinyl section. I am currently listening to Goldfrap’s Seventh Tree, Heads Remain in light, Daniel Lanois, Dennis Wilson - Pacific Ocean Blue, Kraftwerk Min'Max, David Anthony Howey Cornwall

WD Phono 3, which uses valves, modded with special components like Black Gate capacitors, will sound quite substantially better than any commercially available phono stage. It consists of Naim Nat 03 tuner, Rega Saturn CD, Kreil FPB 250 watt monoblocks, Audio Research Reference 3 pre-amp and - at present - Gamut L3 standmounts. Transparent Super cabling throughout.

I listen to classical music, especially piano and string quartets, and acoustic jazz - no rock or pop. The Gamuts are airy soundstage. They could well be floorstanders. Budget up to £6000. Tony Mates

I would suggest you audition Martin Logan hybrid electrostatics, such as the Purities I reviewed in our September 08 edition. They offer a beautiful sound with any music type but being so pure and crossover free
and are especially strong with strings and classical instruments. Of all the loudspeakers I review Martin Logans stand out in my mind (excepting Tannoy’s vast Prestige loudspeakers), especially at their price, which under represents their relative quality I feel. The Martin Logan electrostatic panel really is a special experience and you will not hear a sound stage that comes close, from a cone ‘speaker. NK

Also consider the Eminent Technology LFT-8b. Substantially cheaper at around half your maximum budget, these planar magnetic hybrids are wonderfully seamless and expansive. DP

I came across, on the World Design Forum web site, an article about upgrading the KLS3 tweeter from the Audax Gold to the Seas 002 Millennium tweeter.

I built the original Mk II loudspeaker when it first came out. I have similar problems with the rippling on the surface of the tweeter but I didn’t realise that the gas leaked from this tweeter. Does this rippling mean that the gas has leaked from my tweeter also? Can you advise me on whether I can buy a similar Audax replacement? And can you give me details of the crossover mod to suit the Seas 002 Martin Logan Purity hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers.

Millennium tweeter and what companies would supply this tweeter?

Thanks for your time.

yours faithfully, Patrick Smith

Hi Patrick. This is a recurring tale as the Audax HD-3P piezo Gold Dome tweeter did leak, losing its inert pressurising gas. We ran a complete article on replacing the Gold Dome of KLS3 with a Seas Millennium in our June 2008 issue (p80). I cannot reprint it here, but it is available as a back issue from our e-editions. Just go to the web site www.hi-fiworld.co.uk and press the big red button at top right to go though to our on-line delivery system to buy the back issue. You can get Seas drive units from Madisound in the USA or Solen in Canada. Seas are Norwegian but do not sell direct. NK

Seas Millennium 002 tweeter, a top quality design able to replace the Audax HD-3P Gold Dome.

You say the problem was ‘solved’ but do not say how. Do you mean the realisation that a voltage difference existed? If so, I think not. Mains transformers buzz because they have loose windings or because the local supply is ‘dirty’ and full of harmonics and I see you live in or close to Exeter, where agricultural or industrial machinery might be a problem. This is one possibility.

Sometimes the transformer solve the problem when we thought a new transformer might be needed. The amplifier I bought is rated at 220 volts and the local repairer is sure that 240 volts is putting a strain on the amplifier, saying H.T. is rising beyond the safe limits of the capacitors and suggesting I have a separate transformer made up to reduce the mains to 220 volts.

He has regularly measured the local mains at 248 volts and is concerned for the safe future of the amplifier.

As experts is this area, I wondered if you would advise on this and whether other readers have experienced similar problems with valve products sourced from abroad.

Thanks very much for any advice and insights as I have been missing the amp a while, though a friend lent me an old NAB. Speakers are sensitive Audionote ANEs, usually suited to valve equipment.

regards

Mark Armitage
Exeter

Hi Mark. If the mains is running at 248V and the product is designed for 220V then there is 13% over voltage. This is a little higher than the 10% or so a designer might envisage, although Eastern Electric are based in Hong Kong (220V) and would be aware that their products may well see 240V overseas, as many territories use 240V.

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mountings need tightening or even the lamination clamp screws, as the lams. can buzz too. Transformers are varnish impregnated to prevent this but air pockets can result in dry areas. Over-voltage does not in itself cause buzzing; capacitors simply rupture if over run.

It is usual to use an autotransformer for step down and you need to consult Farnell or RS Components for this. I suspect it will not provide a cure however. If the buzz disappears late at night, then its the mains supply I would guess. If it is constant, the transformer. Either way, it does not need replacing unless the buzz is driving you mad.

**NK**

**SIMPLY NOT THE BEST**

Whilst I agree that thinking in terms of "the best" is unhelpful and reductive, I thought it a bit ironic that, close by, there are varnish impregnated to prevent lams. can buzz too. Transformers are varnish impregnated to prevent this but air pockets can result in dry areas. Over-voltage does not in itself cause buzzing; capacitors simply rupture if over run.

Anyway, I bought the edition because it included the Heresy speakers. I use a 1990s Heresy II model with considerable satisfaction and wondered if there were any real changes and what you thought (I can remember what Ken Kessler thought of the Heresy II). It turns out that the Heresy III is different in a variety of ways and I have a sneaking suspicion I would not want to swap over to them. But the Heresys are very bass-reflective, so not everything is different.

regards

Graham Elliott

Perhaps we should say "amongst the best", but somehow I'm not sure it matters that much. There are, in truth, lots of statements we make that should be qualified, but then you get into long, linguistically tortuous diversions that send our readers to sleep. And we do try not to do that!

The Heresys were nothing other than idiosyncratic, but imaginative and very good in many ways. Not the subtest package perhaps but definitely entertaining. Putting the bass unit close to the floor brought bass up, part of the design, and putting them close to rear walls would also help. High sensitivity means they are great for low powered valve amps. **NK**

**DAMPING FACTOR**

I became acutely aware of your inclusion of damping factor as a measurement in your extensive amplifier tests in the April issue. I find damping factor can be a meaningful spec but not as it is usually presented.

Simply giving a value is mainly useful to compare amplifiers measured across the bandwidth, particularly at high frequencies. This is rare but I find it useful in getting a sense of the basic linearity of the amplifier circuit before the application of corrective negative feedback. If the damping factor is basically the same at low frequencies, mid-frequencies and high frequencies, basically across the audible 20Hz to 20kHz bandwidth the amplifier circuit is probably quite linear and also quite stable and the amp is probably therefore quite good.

Your thoughts on this subject would interest me, given the experience shown in your reviews and particularly given the design experience of many of your writers.

Allen Edelstein
New Jersey, USA

Hi Allen. Thanks for writing and your interest. We measure damping factor by switching from 8 Ohms to 4 Ohms and noting the change in an amplifier's output voltage. Then D.F. is (m-n)/mn-m, where m is the factor by which the load changes (2 in our case) and n is the change in output voltage. You can find the derivation in Mannie Horowitz's book 'Measuring Hi-Fi Amplifiers', Library of Congress Catalogue No. 67-20987. We use 40Hz as the measuring frequency.

You could measure output impedance (inverse of damping factor) across the audio band to assess feedback, but we choose to measure the rise in distortion at high frequencies. This takes into account basic non-linearity as well as the amount of feedback used.

Our experience of using a wide variety of loudspeakers with an equally large number of amplifiers shows that damping factors above about 20 are sufficient to obviously apply control to under damped loudspeakers, whilst damping factors below about 5 have no affect. This, quite frankly, is in line with the general industry view. As Laurie Fincham of KEF pointed out to me long ago, loudspeakers are self damped acoustically and magnetically, as well as electrically by the amplifier. Highly damped loudspeakers do not need a high D.F. amp. However, under damped loudspeakers like our in-house Spendor SB6 boom and sound boxy with low D.F. valve amps, but are fine with high D.F. transistor amps. Our Spendors work wonderfully with Musical Fidelity's AM550 but they sound obviously 'tubbier' with our Icon Audio MB845 valve (sorry - tube!) amps and do not suit zero feedback valve amps at all.

When taking a view on all this, it's always useful to bear in mind that every bass unit has a big coil of...
wire, the low pass inductor, between it and the amplifier, and this will measure 0.5 Ohms or so, according to the core material, wire thickness etc., increasing output impedance and lowering damping factor. This being so it is surprising we hear any differences at all. NK

WELL CONNECTED
I thought I would write to tell you about something that occurred after upgrading to a valve amplifier.

I just received my Icon Audio Stereo 40 III (KT88 Version) and after assembling it and connecting up all the interconnects I sat back to listen. I can tell you I am very impressed; whether it's this amp or the fact that I am now using valves I can't tell you, but the sound is a magnitude better than my old transistor amp. All the instruments on my vinyl and CD now sound like instruments; it's hard to explain but everything just sounds more real!

Anyway, the point. When installing the new amp I had to move a couple of components around (to allow the amp to sit in a more spacious area, to give better cooling). While doing this I happened to swap a couple of my interconnects to other components. Once I'd finished, I sat back to listen and started with my CD.

Now, although it sounded good, as always, I felt it was not quite as clear and vivid as before. After checking I realised I had used my original CD interconnect (VDH the 1st ultimate) to connect up the tuner. Before I removed anything I swapped to listen to the tuner and after a while thought that was not as good as before also. So I set about swapping all the interconnects back to their original components. Now my CD player sounds great again and my tuner is also back to how I like it.

It seems to be some sort of synergy thing! CD (an original MF X-Ray) just sounds much better with the VDH interconnect, yet that interconnect does not make my tuner sound better, it seems to sound best with its Chord interconnect.

Up until purchasing the new amp I was as sceptical as the next hi-fi listener about the difference interconnects and speaker cables can make (it's all in the head of the listener etc). But I think as valves let you hear more of the feeling within the source being used, the cable differences are more apparent.

I suppose this may start another cables debate within the Letters page, but I'm only writing down what I have observed. Anyway, it will make a change from the Denon 103 debates!

Andrew Burtchaell

KEN DOD
Tonight I've been listening to 'Presenting Ken Dodd', his first album, a mono LP of romantic ballads from 1962. Once again I've enjoyed a lovely sounding mono recording and could hardly believe this one is 48 years old. I won't be around to see how my CDs fare in 48 years time but I do wonder.

The trip to the record shop in town was well worth it this week. First, I couldn't resist buying an LP featuring Kenny Ball, Chris Barber and Acker Bilk, the reason being the very same combination are due to appear at Yeovil's Octagon theatre soon - The Legendary 'Three B's'. It seemed a fitting buy.

Then I found the shop had some more 78s for sale. I picked up a few (couldn't manage to take more because of the weight) and they include three gems. Two Lonnie Donegans and wait for it - a Norman Wisdom recording. Being a fan of his I'm thrilled at owning a Norman Wisdom record on 78.

Well, sometimes you have to go backwards to move forwards...

best wishes,

Melvyn Dover
Weymouth, Dorset

Hi Melvyn, I'll swap my Lady Gaga album for your Ken Dodd album if you want! NK
Dancer Mini-2 diamond DMD
sensitivity: 90 dB @ 1 watt / 1m
nominal impedance: 4 ohms
frequency response (-3 dB): 28 Hz - 40 kHz
power handling: 100 watts
crossover frequencies: 2.7 kHz
weight: 57.5 kg (including base)
dimensions: 32 cm x 50 cm x 123.7 cm

The Diamond Revolution The new Usher Mini-2 Diamond DMD available now UK SRP £3700.

Oppo BD83SE NuForce Edition
Graham Slee Novo
NuForce V3 Amplifiers
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TELLURIUM Q LOUDSPEAKERS WORTH UP TO £4,560 TO WIN IN THIS MONTH’S GREAT COMPETITION!

Here’s your chance to win one of four pairs of superb Tellurium Q loudspeaker cables! There is one set of cables per winner, and four winners.

The first postcard to be drawn wins a set of Ultra Black, the second gets a set of Green, the third gets Black and the fourth gets Blue. The winners can specify a single monowire set of up to 10 metres (i.e. 5m maximum per stereo side). Tellurium Q will terminate any length pair from a 1m to a maximum of a 5m pair for each of the winners. The blue is available unterminated but they will terminate them with their Beryllium copper Z plugs, as normally fitted to their higher end cable. The maximum first prize value is £2,500, the second prize maximum value is £1,480, the third is £400 and the fourth £180. All in all, the total prize value in this superb competition is £4,560! Here’s what Paul Rigby said in his review:

"Tellurium Q have concerned themselves with phase distortion which has the effect of ‘smearing’ sound frequencies. The company launched its first low phase distortion speaker cable in January, and the range has now expanded to a suite of four. Starting with the lowest priced Blue, a narrow, flat cable, the most noticeable aspect was a welcome absence of muddle; there’s a more neutral, focused, precise aura to the music. In fact the Blue cables exhibited a tremendous sense of control. The Blacks showed a more incisive nature. The low distortion effects maintain the excellent focus. Strings contain texture, bass has a real heft and vocals sound more relaxed and secure in their presentation. The Green cables could be described as ‘sweet’—these warm, friendly cables broaden the soundstage and provide, for the first time, an onion skin array of musical detail. Top of the range, the broad, flat Ultra Blacks give you neutrality with a slice of texture. So, vocals have an extra expressive quality, bass seems to bounce along with cheerful abandon and wind instruments seem full of air. The Ultra Blacks will lay bare your music, getting under the skin of each recording.”

For a chance to win one of these four great prizes, just answer the following four easy questions. Send your entries on a postcard only by 31st July 2010 to: August 2010 Competition, Hi-Fi World magazine, Unit G4, Argo House, The Park Business Centre, Kilburn Park Road, London NW6 5LF.

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QUESTIONS

[1] When was the first Tellurium Q cable launched?
[a] last December
[b] this May
[c] last August
[d] this January

[2] How many cables are in the range now?
[a] 1
[b] 2
[c] 3
[d] 4

[3] What is the lowest priced cable in the range?
[a] the Orange
[b] the Pink
[c] the Vermillion
[d] the Blue

[4] What is the top cable in the range?
[a] the Uber Black
[b] the Big Black
[c] the Grand Black
[d] the Ultra Black

August Competition
Hi-Fi World Magazine
Unit G4 Argo House
The Park Business Centre
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London NW6 5LF
Can the smart new Samsung BD-C7500 Blu-ray player prevail in the AV fashion war, wonders Noel Keywood?

Look Sharp

Samsung's new BD-C7500 Blu-ray player certainly looks different; and can even be wall mounted alongside a flat panel TV. It's sassy in operation; touch its front panel and it slides sideways to reveal the disc tray. Having in my loft a BD-P1000 and 1400, and using a BD-P1600, I know Samsung Blu-ray players cost little and work well, even if they are not objects of beauty. So how would this natty new design stack up I wondered?

Cable entry is from the top of the machine when mounted vertically, because this is the rear when mounted horizontally, and this hardly suits wall mounting because routing and hiding top entry cables isn't the easiest task, as you have to chisel a groove in the wall or use a surface cable duct. So rear entry cable ducts mean precedence has been given to mounting horizontally, at least in this aspect of design. The displays, however, are positioned and visible for wall mounting, so difficult to see when surface mounting, so the precedence has changed here. Oh dear!

The cable compartment isn't very large but must cope with a slim power cable from an external power supply, an HDMI cable and an ethernet cable for connection to the internet. This is a minimum. Also fitted is a combined analogue audio plus composite video miniature jack socket that uses a special 3mm diameter four-pole jack. A lead fitted with a matching jack plug, terminated in phono sockets for audio and video is supplied with the player. Composite video is low quality though, so this is fitted simply for functionality. There is an S/PDIF optical digital output and HDMI of course. However, only my slim HDMI cable was flexible enough to thread through the cramped compartment. Samsung don't fit Component, S-video or Scart video outputs, so the socket set available is limited and HDMI is the best choice.

Player controls are limited to the basic power on/off, tray open, start and stop. There is no track skip or fast search, which sit on the remote control only, and most surprisingly no track number display, only elapsed time. However, turning the player on also switched on my Samsung TV through the HDMI line and this brings up a track and time display for CD. Switching my Marantz SR8002 receiver to Pure Direct blanked the TV, and of course it can always be switched off.

It is featherlight at 1.5kgs so easy to put into place and connect up. Unlike larger players, it has an outboard power supply, so no mains connection is made direct to the player. A wall wart power supply delivers 12V (2A) to the player via a slender black cable. Once connected I simply had to touch a 'power' logo on the top plate and the top plate slid left to reveal the disc tray. There is no disc clamp, or puck or suchlike; instead the disc clicks onto the hub and is held by spring loaded fingers. It's a novel system and quite easy to use.

SET UP

Samsungs have no problem connecting to the 'net in my experience, unlike so many players and internet savvy (supposedly) devices. The BD-C7500 was no exception. It saw my Netgear router via an ethernet cable, ran through a handshake routine and declared itself connected. It can be set manually too. The player declares its hardware MAC address, so it can be identified on a server client list. It is also able to connect to a wireless network, using an optional Samsung receiver.

My player, possibly because it was an early review sample, would
not update its software, but it did download 18 internet services, including YouTube. Some were available, like History Channel, in text form only. Once video titles are stored into the player’s library, recall is easy and fast. Unfortunately for me, turning the player over to remake connections caused all player settings and library-stored YouTube selections to be lost. I stored it all again then went through some brutal switch off and ‘yank the power supply out of its socket’ type routines, and found that the player does store data on-board (it has 1GB of memory), even when power is switched off. So what I did to erase everything I do not know, but it is possible, it seems!

The Samsung’s set up menus even have an Audiophile setting, which I thought promising. Choosing this stops all onboard conversion of audio, effectively turning the player into a Blu-ray transport that sends data out raw, for processing in a modern receiver, meaning one that can handle Dolby TrueHD and DTS HD Master Audio. But the player does of course have onboard processing for this and will send out PCM (basic digital) if set to do so. An interesting option was the recording of Blu-ray high definition sound into compressed (i.e. lower quality) surround-sound for transmission through the digital S/PDIF connection, allowing older non-HDMI receivers to play surround sound of decent quality. This is made more necessary by the absence of analogue surround sound outputs of course.

Samsung say all audio discs will be played except the hi-def DSD layer of SACD, but they don’t mention DVD-A. So I kicked off my use of the player with DVD-As and was pleased to find they were handled well, the player deftly omitting any mention of the high resolution 24/96 track, making only lower definition Dolby and DTS 5.1 Surround options available in the on-screen menus, at least with the discs I played. DTS surround sound offers good enough quality though, so I was happy enough, able to play Santana’s ‘Supernatural’ album for example, which sounds so much better on my home DVD-A even with DTS audio than the office CD. Many players will not recognise DVD-A discs at all, but the BD-C7500 had no such difficulty.

The CD layer of SACDs is played, but you only get stereo from this of course. Low resolution formats such MP3 and WMA are handled, from disc or USB memory stick, but not iTunes AAC.

On the video front, Blu-ray discs and DVOs are played, as well as AVCHD, a high definition camcorder format. I found the BD-C7500 had no trouble either with BDMV I have burnt to Verbatim BD-Rs and Panasonic BD-RE discs. So, much like other Samsungs I have used, this one was happily agnostic about the discs fed into it, playing them all, a nice result that allows it to be used without frustration.

Audio set up is fairly straightforward and on-screen guidance explains in short, simple terms what a setting is about.

SOUND QUALITY
Measurement suggested the analogue stereo output would provide a decent sound, and it did. Spinning Lady Gaga’s ‘The Fame Monster’ CD
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had 'Bad Romance' pounding out strongly from my Marantz SR8002 receiver, fed first by HDMI. Switching to analogue audio introduced a small sense of softness and muddle, but this is hardly surprising considering the low quality audio output cabling. Bass remained surprisingly powerful, helping generate a good sense of dynamic scale.

I was a little concerned that video noise might be heard on the analogue output, because Composite Video is wide bandwidth and can generate a buzz when sharing a connector with audio, as it does on this player, caused by signal leakage across the plug. At normal and high listening levels I heard no noise at all, my ear against the loudspeaker. However, at maximum volume a slight buzz appeared. I played a lot of music through the analogue connection and it gives good quality all the same, even if it is not an audiophile player.

Switching to the player's optical digital S/PDIF output the video buzz disappeared, but so does the on-screen track display as there is no video via S/PDIF. Sound quality was super considering its lowly position in life, sparkingly clean and clear, and with the firm bass that low jitter seems to provide (as well as stable imaging and a good sense of general cleanliness). The Eagles 'Somebody' was handled beautifully, cymbals having a sweet quality, the central kick drum providing a slow, solid beat. Switching over to HDMI digital showed all but no difference between this and S/PDIF with CD, albeit with video switched off at the Marantz SR8002 by running it in Pure Direct mode. I should point out that this is only available in Marantz receivers. It produces blank screened "why isn't this working?" moments that other receiver manufacturers prefer to avoid, I suspect. For music replay though it is important to remove video content, in both the analogue and digital domains, as it always degrades sound quality through one mechanism or another, the mechanism being video induced jitter via HDMI.

Spinning the 2L 'Divertimenti' Blu-ray from Trondheim Soloists of Norway showed the player was able to convert both 24/192 DTS HD Master Audio and Dolby TrueHD to PCM and provide good sound quality from both. As usual I found DTS HD Master Audio slightly richer and the preferable of the two encodings, but this may be due to original encode quality, rather than the player or compression scheme. There was little sign of the slight high frequency emphasis I have heard from some players; the Samsung sounded reasonably full bodied and free from subliminal screech when decoding to PCM. It also output 24/192 PCM from the disc to the receiver via HDMI and down converted it for transmission via the optical digital output and the analogue outputs. This meant the Samsung will play 24/192 surround-sound (5.1) at vast data rate (27Mbps) and downconvert it to lowly CD quality (1.2Mbps) and analogue, for compatibility with older receivers.

Load times were decent, but at 28 seconds for John Meyer's 'Where the Light Is' concert, with its Java menu, nothing special. Movies like 'Master and Commander; Far Side of the World', took an average 30 seconds, whilst a simple menu structure loaded in 15 seconds including the draw sliding shut.

**VIDEO QUALITY**

The BD-C7500 was good in its video quality but not the best I have seen to date, an accolade that belongs to Philips players. The player passed all HQV Blu-ray video tests and was especially smooth in tests for jaggies. However, the highest horizontal resolution panel of vertical lines was greyed out and this did not surprise me as I had already noticed my own HD test videos, shot with a tripod mounted camera in a local park to show grass and trees, suggested the player was good in this area, but not exceptional. Watching a Tiger Moth idling at Duxford, the slow rotating prop was captured without breakup as sometimes occurs, but a slight softening of detail and loss of depth made the picture just a trifle bland. I don't think this would be generally very noticeable, as the picture looked nice enough, with no obvious flaws. DVDs are upscaled.

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

Our analysis shows frequency response of the analogue output stretches from 5Hz up to 21.2kHz with little deviation from flatness, a result as good as any hi-fi CD player, so Samsung haven't scrimped here. The DAC used was linear over the player's entire dynamic range, returning a 0.22% distortion figure at -60dB, similar to that of dedicated CD players that nowadays get to 0.18% at best.

With normal output of 2V, low noise and very good EIAJ Dynamic Range the BD-C7500 works well as a CD player, via its stereo analogue output. Obviously, this output isn't purposed for high resolution audio and nor is the S/PDIF optical output. The HDMI output must be used.

Jitter from the optical digital output was low at around 10pS, except below 100Hz where jitter rose to around 300pS, a result worse than the BD-P1600, so here the BD-C7500 looked less impressive. However, with low jitter over most of the audio band the digital output should still work well with an external DAC, or via the optical input of a receiver.

The Samsung measured well as a CD player, and will provide good results from its analogue and digital (S/PDIF) outputs. NK

**CONCLUSION**

Like all Samsung players the BD-C7500 proved fine at both audio and video. The company hasn't quite managed to master 'style' like B&O and Apple, and come up with a convincing product, however. The sliding top plate was anything but slick in operation, and the onboard displays and cabling solutions were 'challenged', as if Samsung were unhappy about even trying to make technology subservient to style.

The remote control was legible, with its big buttons, but my fingers often hit the wrong grey one of the many. There was no data rate information either.

Yet the BD-C7500 played all audio discs and video discs with ease, providing very decent sound quality, although of course this is receiver-dependent too. I was more enamoured by its ability to put YouTube on the TV, not the most difficult thing to do but something I haven't bothered with all the same. Call me fickle, but listening to Sharon den Adel of Within Temptation singing 'Angels' on YouTube with her extraordinary coloratura soprano style recommended this player to me!
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What is the point of fretting about the quality of your current CD player if the CDs themselves are not playing to their true potential? Shouldn’t we be getting the software right first? If not, can we truly trust our ears when listening to any CD player? I’m not talking about the inherent ‘glass ceiling’ effect of the CD format per se, when compared to an analogue format such as vinyl, I’m talking about exploiting the currently unused sonic capabilities of the basic CD disc...

I managed to grab two pieces of gadget hardware which claim to get the most out of the common or garden CD. The first, the Audio Desk Systeme CD Improver, is a basic, manual lathe. Arriving in a shoe box-sized container, the CD Improver asks you to lift the hinged glass lid, remove the screw puck, lever up the protective metal disc and place your CD label downwards onto the mini-turntable. Once the plate, puck and glass lid are, once again, secured in place, you turn on the beast via a front fascia knob. This spins the platter at increasing speeds. You then carefully swing the spring-loaded blade, which is attached to a metal arm, towards the edge of the CD disc. A 30° bevelled edge is cut into the CD edge. Once completed, you take the supplied black marker pen and, rotating the platter by hand, coat the bevelled edge with the pen ink.

The point of the painted bevelled edge is to prevent light scatter across the CD as well as to stabilise the motion of the CD itself. After testing the system on a couple of throwaway CD discs I swallowed hard and tried it ‘live’. Cutting into precious CDs is a perfect method of honing your concentration.

After a couple of dry runs, though, the method quickly became second nature.

Testing the completed discs on my reference Cyrus CD8SE, I couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. After treatment via the Audio Desk Systeme, my test discs exhibited a greater sense of focus over all frequencies. Before, on standard play, each frequency tended to bleed into each other producing a fuzzy presentation. Post treatment, everything was tighter, meaning that notes started and stopped with more speed and moved with superior precision. Bass was tighter and more punchy, mids were as clear as a bell and treble produced extra air. Each frequency now enjoyed additional space and each was now able to portray subtle nuances — before, those details were often masked by the intrusive bleed from adjacent frequencies.

Joining the CD Improver is NespA’s Optical Disc Finalizer — I reviewed the more powerful Professional variant. This gadget proclaims to properly finish the CD’s manufacturing process, eliminating tiny elements of Argon gas that sit in between the CD layers, lowering the efficiency of the laser reflection. Similar in size to an external hard disk, the NespA asks you to lift the metal lid, place the CD on the spindle, close the lid, switch on and select one of three flash frequencies: thirty, sixty or 120 times. That is, the rotating CD is fired at by a 3 million lux flash bulb, for the stipulated number of occasions, which releases the gas, closing the gap between the layers and improving the efficiency of the CD playback. Once completed, you open the lid, take out the CD and play.

This time!
Both eyebrows were raised. While the Audio Desk focuses the general frequencies, the NespA brings structure and a real sense of maturity to the overall sound making it more ‘analogue’ in tone. There’s a real separation between each and every instrument, allowing you to focus on that instrument and measure its performance. Even complex electronica arrangements exhibited order where each, previously chaotic, synth run was now individually recognisable. The NespA induces a great sense of calm over the entire performance allowing you to focus on the music rather than being distracted by extraneous frequencies.

So which is best? Neither, and both! That is, to get the best out of your CD performance, I would recommend that you use both, almost as a team. Mainly because each box targets different elements of the CD performance. Losing one of the products would mean that a major element of the CD improvement would be missed.

As a combination, this pair of boxes are very impressive indeed. Of course, so they should be for the price. In fact, for the price, you’d expect an honest-to-goodness sound upgrade and, to be frank, that’s what the Audio Desk/NespA combo brings you. For the first time, I felt that my CD software was running at peak performance allowing my hardware to show me its capabilities. The price of both is formidable, but either would still provide good value to those with large Compact Disc collections and/or a group of like minded audiophile friends. PR
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**Head Teacher**

Sennheiser's new HD800 sets the standards by which all other headphones should be judged, says the company. David Price tests this new flagship design...

T

here's more than one way to make a high end headphone. Just like loudspeakers and moving coil cartridges, subtle variations on the same basic theme produce profoundly different sonic signatures. The basic dividing line is of course between dynamic headphones (as espoused by Sennheiser, Grado, Audio Technica, et al) and electrostatics (the most famous exponent of which is Stax). But even within the dynamic field, there are differences...

While the super-earbud winning Grado GS1000s we liked so much a couple of months ago are unarguably American, these HD800s are totally Teutonic; all Mercedes Benz silver, edgy lines, 'technical style' and firm, minimalist padding. And as to those quirky Japanese Stax electrostatic earspeakers, it's like comparing a 2010 Audi A8 to a 1978 Toyota Century limousine. So they're beautifully hewn, very much in their characteristically German way.

A lot of work has gone into the HD800's innards. A new 50mm 'ring radiator' driver is used, displayed behind a damped-steel mesh. It's mounted in an unusual way, with the diaphragm forward, firing back at the ears at an angle. The headband is laminated steel and plastic, the earcups a type of low resonance 'high tech' plastic and the earpad cushions are made from a very soft and smooth micro-fibre. Tap the headphones in all the usual places and there's still some resonance, although it's nowhere near as bad as most headphones. The HD800 has braided, Kevlar-reinforced OFC copper wire, covered with a fabric sheath; it is refreshingly acoustically 'dead'.

This headphone is not an ideal partner for the low quality output from your average iPod; someone who invests in headphones of such high quality should use a decent headphone amplifier such as a Musical Fidelity X-Can's V8. Weight is 330g, and I must say it feels lighter; the HD800 feels less like putting your head in vice than any other Sennheiser headphone I know. I'd say it's still not quite as accommodating as a Stax, but then again it's lighter and lacks the sweaty vinyl padding!

**SOUND QUALITY**

More so even than loudspeakers, each high end headphone has its own 'constituency' of audiophiles that swears it's the best thing ever. So it's important to remember how incredibly subjective headphone sound is. But anyone who hears the HD800 would have to say this; it is surely the most explicit, incisive dynamic headphone yet made. And yet it is certainly not the case that the HD800 is an ear-splitting, migraine inducing instrument of torture. Indeed as headphones of this type go, it's impressively smooth and svelte.

Imagine a vast, expansive, open soundstage with lots of sunlight shining in, with all the respective elements in the mix sparkling beautifully yet not blindingly, and that's the HD800. It's a truly large scale performer,locating everything with clinical precision and utter control. Bass stops and starts almost as swiftly as the best closed back design, and although it's not as prodigious, it's wonderfully tuneful. At the other frequency extreme, the Sennheiser is majestic, giving a supremely crisp yet delicate sound to a hi-hat cymbals.

Yet the big Sennheiser is not a cerebral listening experience; cue up The Ones 'Flawless' and it displays immense speed and pace. There's something almost supernaturally propulsive about these headphones; doubtless down to very light and rigid drivers, they invest even sedate sounding songs such as Glen Campbell's 'Wichita Lineman' with brio. It's this mix of crystalline clarity, pin-point image location, a wide open soundstage and a constant sense of the music having a trajectory that makes them so special.

By contrast, Audio Technica's ATH-W5000 is a more clinical sounding device, although possibly fractionally smoother and more polished in the treble, whereas Grado's GS1000i is an even more propulsive performer but lacks some of the HD800's low level resolving capabilities and atmosphere. In my experience, only when you get into the territory of something like Stax's SR-007/2 (with matching energiser) that the Sennheiser's limitations become apparent; the Stax has a more languid, relaxed sound but it's considerably more organic. A bit like Yamaha NS1000Ms versus Quad 2905s, they're both superb, but use different technology to do different things - and succeed.

**CONCLUSION**

Surely one of the best ever dynamic headphones, the Sennheiser HD800s are an engineering and sonic masterwork. The question then presents itself, are they right for you? Some I suspect will still prefer the rockier sound of the top Grados - even if it is, in absolute terms, a fraction less capable. Others will migrate to the natural warmth and musicality of pricier Staxes. Many I suspect will go for the skilful working compromise between the two that is the HD800. Whatever you decide, make sure you try before you buy, because headphones differ vastly.

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Once upon a time, there was a subculture in hi-fi that held ‘pace, rhythm and timing’ as the three gods to whom the audiophile should worship. It wasn’t a mainstream movement, but it still made an indelible impact on the hi-fi scene of the nineteen eighties, and catapulted a number of select British brands to prominence.

Onix was just such a company; founded in 1979 in Brighton by Tony Brady, it came to the enthusiast’s attention around 1985 with its lovely little OA20, and later OA21 integrated amplifiers. Along with the likes of Naim, Exposure, Incatech and Myst, they championed stripped down minimalist ‘black box’ amplifiers that lacked power, weight, bulk and buttons compared to their Japanese competition, but packed passion and precision aplenty.

Trouble was, that in focusing on the start and stop of every note, and the complex interrelation between them, you ended up with very nimble and sprightly sounding electronics which were often lacking in other respects. This breed of amplifiers wasn’t famous for its lush tonal colouring; most were as dry as a schoolboy’s flannel. Nor were they terribly three dimensional, or possessed of the last degree of smoothness; ‘flat earth’ (for that’s the name they were given) hi-fi was certainly not for all.
In 2000, Onix was acquired by Rogers and its first speakers were born, which have gone on to sell well in the Asia Pacific region, although it wasn't until 2008 that the Onix name surfaced in the UK. This time, two long term Onix fans resurrected some classic models, contacted some previous employees, and breathed new life in the company as we here in the UK once it.

The Concerto I loudspeakers are the result, voiced here but made in China by Shangling. Selling for £600 and sporting an excellent piano lacquer gloss finish, they're a two way ported design measuring 190x330x315mm, they have a claimed 90dB sensitivity [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE] courtesy of an innovative Vifa XT concentric ring radiator tweeter and an unusual 5.25 inch 'direct drive' magnet mid/bass driver. The quality of build and finish was generally good.

SOUND QUALITY

Back in the nineteen eighties, there was no small number of baby boxes designed to 'carry the tune, not the recording' as it were, (the Linn Kan springs to mind as an obvious example), but it's rare to hear speakers voiced so single-mindedly now. The Onix Concerto I is one such example, and it's quite an ear opener; if your ears are attuned to the generic sound of a modern standmounter. By normal considerations, it has very limited bass, an over prominent midband and a somewhat bright treble, along with a surprisingly two dimensional soundstage.

There's another way to read them, however. These are distinctive sounding standmounting loudspeakers, with a lively midband which can accentuate the grain of vocalists, but the presentation is never less than that of the pants. Whatever music you never the Concertos they just go out to find the rhythm within; matters of timbral accuracy, bass extension and depth perspective are relegated down the pecking order, with everything depending on the interplay between the snare drum and the hi-hat. This, as 4hero's 'Give In' showed, is the point of the Concerto I's; they're about driving the song's beat along relentlessly, as opposed to giving a complete, unreoked rendition of the mix. It's quite an ear-opening experience; you just don't get this sort of voicing anymore.

Switching to some classic rock in the shape of Cafe Jacques' Ain't No Love in The Heart', and again the Onix Concertos cut straight to the impactful drum kit opening, showing a crisp treble from its Vifa tweeter; When the vocals kicked in, again the accent was on the rhythmic phrasing rather than the timbre of the voice. Despite presenting a decently wide soundstage, these standmounters didn't quite capture the expansiveness of this lovely late nineteen seventies production. The lack of any useful low bass didn't help; I found pushing them back towards the rear wall, about 1.5cm away, helped but it's a tricky call because they can start to slow down if they're too close. This is doubtless helped by the bass; although the midband is fast and lucid, lower down things slow down slightly.

On classical music, whilst I could enjoy the zesty midband of the Onix speakers, and the engagingly explicit way that the violins were carried, the generally bass light tonal balance wasn't so much fun. The immaculately recorded Mozart Symphony No.29 in A major (Charles Mackerras, Scottish Chamber Orchestra) showed a slightly nasal tonality to acoustic instruments, a lack of low level detail and atmosphere, along with less than impressive image placement. For all their foibles however, the Concerto I did entertain, especially when aspirated by a World Audio Design K5801 power amplifier, which lent things much needed warmth.

CONCLUSION

An interesting loudspeaker this, and a charismatic one, but you could say it wears its character on its sleeve, where others try to hide theirs. The Onix Concerto I is nothing if not interesting, but won't be for everyone. The most impressive aspect of it for me is that in a risk-averse world, it certainly is not another 'me too' product.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Concerto I's performance is dominated by a steady roll off in output below 300Hz. Bass frequencies measure -10dB down and this is more than that used as compensation for wall placement, which usually amounts to -4dB or so. The port peaks sharply above 10kHz, so the Concerto appears to rely on its rear port to make up any bass shortfall. That still leaves the lower midband lacking deficient however, and only listening tests can sort out whether such dramatic departures from the norm in loudspeaker engineering have subjective merit. The ring dome tweeter, a Vifa/Scanspeak unit, offers smooth treble output to 20kHz with output strong above 10kHz, so the Concerto I will have a little top end sting.

The port's narrow tuning is unusual, seen in the red response trace and also as a strong peak in the impedance curve, Both suggest the small bass unit is underdamped and resonant. That it works hard was made obvious by high bass distortion levels, 8% from the driver at 40Hz and 6% from the port, distortion rising steeply below this frequency.

Sensitivity was good at 87dB sound pressure level from one nominal watt of input (2.8V), especially as overall impedance was high-ish at 7 Ohms. Onix don't trade sensitivity for bass in the Concerto I. The Concerto I is an unusual design that doesn't follow convention. Low frequency performance looks poor. NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEEDANCE

VERDICT

Musically explicit but tonally dry and limited at the frequency extremes.

ONIX CONCERTO 1 £600
Real Hi-Fi
0870 9996777
www.onix-audio.co.uk

FOR
- rhythmically explicit
- musically engaging
- high quality finish

AGAINST
- mid-forward tone
- unconvincing bass
- depth perspective
Streaming Out Loud!

Patrick Cleasby turns the volume up with the new HRT Technologies Streamer II+ USB DAC...

As time passes by, audiophiles the world over amass ever larger collections of 'digital music' on their hard drives, hopefully in the lossless compressed format that is FLAC, at the very least. Up to now, the general consensus seems to have been that this music is played out via a network device, such as a Squeezebox (or similar), but recently people have started to ask the obvious question, why bother to go wireless at all? For example, if you’ve purchased a lovely new FLAC ripping box such as Illustrate’s RipNAS, why don’t you just play it straight out of that, without recourse to routers and ethernet cables and the like? The latter makes sense if you want music (wirelessly) all around the house, but could be regarded as technological overkill if it’s just the one room you need to hear your tunes in...

For example, if you’ve purchased a lovely new FLAC ripping box such as Illustrate’s RipNAS, why don’t you just play it straight out of that, without recourse to routers and ethernet cables and the like? The latter makes sense if you want music (wirelessly) all around the house, but could be regarded as technological overkill if it’s just the one room you need to hear your tunes in...

Obviously you wouldn’t want to use a PC soundcard, as they’re generally spectacularly crummy, so surely a simple DAC would suffice, as it would for all those whose Mac Minis under the TV are not able to be hooked up digitally...

My previous practice for this purpose has been to use the very affordable E-Mu 0202 USB from the pro arm of Creative – a device intended for pro music use, but which did a nice job of getting up to 24/96 out of a Mac (24/192 out of a PC with fair luck and a following wind). The advantage it had over the Musical Fidelity V-DAC was that it was bus-powered over USB, and the advantage over the Pro-ject USB Box was that it wasn’t capped at 16bit audio, or quiet. Its only disadvantage was that on the Mac at least it required a somewhat flakey driver...

Now though, I have another solution before me, in the shape of this HRT Streamer II+ (£330); it’s part of a range which includes the balanced output Streamer Pro version (at around £475) which is the current flagship of a very small range. It seems that as HRT have realised that the 24/96 resolution is very much where it’s at for their potential clientele, as they have rapidly made obsolete its non-24/96-capable precursors! There’s also the humble ‘non-plus’ version of the Streamer II at less than half the price.

The key point about all three is they all use audiophile-friendly Asynchronous USB protocols; that and the fact that its creators include long-time hi-res Classic Records audio producer Michael Hobson. Now there’s provenance! So does HRT’s new delivery cut the mustard?

GETTING GOING

My first job on getting my hands on the Streamer II+ was to establish how nicely it played with a RipNAS. But of course the nearest thing to hand was a MacBook Air, so I had to have a simple ‘what’s on my computer’ test...

It is a commonplace for us to describe the unboxing of the product, but there is so little going on here it is silly. Almost all the money that you invest in your Streamer II+ goes into the little, sparsely-filled metal box itself. The cardboard box it comes in is plain white with an HRT sticker, contains the wrapped converter, some self-adhesive feet, PC and Mac postcard sized guides (basically ‘don’t fiddle with the levels on your computer’ advice), and that’s your lot. The little grey device is like a squat Toblerone with gold plated phonon at one end and B-type USB socket at the other.

It is down to you to source the requisite USB cable; in 99% of cases that will be the standard printer cable; USB A (flat blade) at one end, USB B (perversely D Shaped) at the other. The real joy is that no matter what you plug the A end into (Linux aside), the Streamer II+ is installed driverlessly and the key system panels also cleverly default to 24/96. (Remember the days when you had to faff about in the Mac MIDI settings? They’re still there, have...
just to check - defaulting to 24/96 in
Utilities - MIDI settings.

Once again it defaults to 24/96.

Although it might be good to prevent
system sounds going through....

Here's how to make
system sounds silent.

the real joy was my near-vinyl
experience with a 24/96 transfer of
a 'Wish You Were Here' LP....

the best I've ever heard
of disc-based DVD-Audio machine
playback, maybe even superior
- essential as a backup for when the
obsolete machines die!

CONCLUSION
The new HRT Technologies Streamer
II+ USB DAC is an extremely
impressive device, and one that
should find many friends amongst
FLAC fans. If all you want is the
best possible stereo output from a
standard computer-based system
(lossless 16/44.1 is a must) then this
is an unashamedly expansive joy, and
the only device you need. Even most
high-res needle-droppers or DVD-A
rippers are largely catered for. As for
me personally, having a number of
24/192 DVD-As, including many of
Mr. Hobson's HDAs, and keeping
my aspiration towards vinyl ripping
at that resolution or higher, I am
tempted to wait for the rumoured
24/192-capable Streamer HD. If it's
anywhere near as good as this, then
I'll be smiling.

HRT TECHNOLOGIES
STREAMER II+
E330
Audiofreaks
C +44 (0)208 9484153
www.audiofreaks.co.uk

VERDICT
- superlative sound quality
- trouble-free plug'n'play
- cross-platform compatibility

AGAINST
- understated looks
- 24/192 to come?
Musical Fidelity are on a roll at the moment. The company rarely puts out poor products, but the past year has seen it hit a purple patch. We've got an AMS50 stereo power amplifier ensconced in our reference system at Hi-Fi World, meanwhile at chez Price there's an AMS35i gleefully gobbling bucket-loads of Watts from the National Grid every day and every night, acting as my jobbing hack reference integrated amplifier - something it does with rare distinction.

Now it's round two, as Mr Michaelson's M series hits the streets, and the equipment shelves of reviewers worldwide. The M1 DAC is one of the cheapest in the range, and judging by what I'm hearing as I write this, it seems Musical Fidelity haven't yet lost their knack. The princely sum of £399 buys you an extremely well finished and packaged digital to analogue convertor, claiming 'true 192kHz upsampling' at a maximum of 24bit depth. Unlike many of its rivals at this lowly end of the market, it sports four digital inputs, and very usefully (in my book at least) has LED indication of the input sampling frequency, plus a little light to indicate 192kHz upsampling (although this isn't defeatable). It works at 32kHz, 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz.

The company says it sports "state-of-the-art circuit design and PCB layout, with the use of top quality digital components", plus a "high quality power supply" with choke filtration on the mains input. "This, effectively, is a mains signal conditioner which increases the performance", it is said. The result is excellent measured performance, according to the company, which is borne out by our own measurements [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE]. Coaxial (accepting 32 to 192kHz sampling frequencies), optical (up to 96kHz), USB (up to 48kHz) and XLR digital inputs appear on the back panel, along with RCA phono and balanced XLR outputs. For the purposes of the review, I used the latter into a Musical Fidelity AMS35i amplifier. Vital statistics are 220x100x300mm and 3.4kg.

SOUND QUALITY
Regular readers will have noticed I've ceased my inane polemising against CD of late, and this is no accident. dCS have - for the moment at least - forgotten to ask for their £10,000 Paganini DAC back and so I've dutifully decided to look after it for them. Knowing that under use can often be a form of abuse, I've solemnly found myself playing it more regularly than I normally use any digital product (this is someone who has gone for long and happy spells without any CD player, you understand). So going to a DAC that (I imagine) costs less than the dCS packaging box and connecting cables (well, there are a lot!) could have been a digital disaster of epic proportions. So sweet and silky is the Paganini that it still surprises me that it doesn't have a pointy diamond bit with Koetsu inscribed on one part of it, or a revolving platform big enough to hold a Dominos pizza on another. How then could I handle a £400 black box in lieu of my new found paramour? Well, it was easier than I thought, as it happened...

The single most impressive thing about the Musical Fidelity M1 is that, switching from the dCS, it didn't feel like someone had completely pulled the rug from under my system. No, it wasn't anywhere near as good as the aforementioned DAC at twenty times the M1's price, but nor was it anywhere as bad as I'd expected. Indeed, it wasn't bad in any sense of the word; actually it was very good and easily comparable with a number of DACs I've heard at over £1,000. The entirety of my listening session was spent with the uneasy feeling at the back of my mind; why was the M1 doing what it was doing, considering what it is?

It needs good ancillaries. A very
decend transport, such as Cyrus CD XT SE, is a must. As is an excellent, full bodied sounding amplifier (valves are a particularly synergistic mix). Open, dimensional and subtle loudspeakers are also essential, preferably with a smooth top end, as if there's any distinguishing mark to this DAC, it's a well lit top end. I certainly heard the M1's brightly illuminated treble through my system (the dCS sounds a tad smoother and duller), although that's not to say the Musical Fidelity is harsh. It is not; this I would suggest is down to its exceptionally low distortion. The result is a very vivid, spry sounding device, but underneath that 'headline' brightness there's actually real smoothness and sophistication. And it's this latter characteristic, plus a wonderful midband focus that just ekes right into the bowels of the mix, stripping out the fog, hash and mush, that is the party piece of this new digital to analogue convertor. I've never heard anything at its price that comes close in this respect.

4hero's 'Our Own Place' was a case in point. A beautiful, bang up to date slice of urban soul alloyed with gentle jazz, this breezy ballad is recorded to the very highest standards, and showcases a to-die-for list of classic electronic instrumentation allied to an angelic vocal line from Carina Andersson. This DAC cut right to the centre of the song, throwing out those sumptuous Fender Rhodes keyboard pads, soaring violins, silky vocal harmonies and gentle drum kit work with delicious ease. Tonaly, the M1 is superb at the price, giving every instrument a really natural timbre. Strings had 'wire' but didn't grate, cymbals came across with a sonorous metallic 'zing' but lacked harshness, female vocals were direct and expressive but silky almost to the point of being ethereal.

Matt Monroe's 'On Days Like These' is a sublime rendering of a brilliant song, but not the last word in state-of-the-art recording techniques. My transcription, from 'The Italian Job' soundtrack, comes over as a tad thin and scratchy (it's 'digitally remastered, don't ya know!'), yet the Musical Fidelity didn't blink. Although its brightly lit high treble gave the maracas a slightly summary quality, and horns rasped with just a little too much sparkle, Mr Monroe's voice was caught in all its sultry, smokey beauty. As Paul Rigby points out in "the M1 works through sheer grip and insight rather than trying to sugar the pill with an over exuberant bassline..."
Inspire Hi-Fi

"It's a combination of performance and emotion, and that's rare. A rare combination at any price."
Adam Smith from Hi-Fi World

the magic of the studio recording in your listening room.
listen to vinyl playback as you've never heard it before...

Now introducing the brand new Apollo turntable. Same cutting edge British engineering, delivering outstanding sound at a price that will astound.

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Classic Cuts (p130), his was a unique vocal talent, and the M1 shows why. Sublimely phrased, delicately expressive and dripping in nineteen sixties Mediterranean cool, his voice was captivating - and the Musical Fidelity did a great disappearing act, leaving the song to issue forth from the loudspeakers as if unassisted by 'high fidelity equipment' of any type. The song's instrumentation gently followed the vocal line, with a bouncy and supple undeterred nineteen sixties-style bass guitar pushing things along. Soundstaging was wide and deep, the M1 again seemingly imposing no limits on its scale.

By way of dramatic change, next in the disc tray was The Spice Girls' 'VWanne': anyone around in the nineties will know this to be a mind-numbingly compressed pop ditty designed to pour out of Vauxhall Astra vans tuned to Gold FM the world over. The M1 impressed again, in the way it scythed through a recording that wins no prize for audiophile best practice. I was impressed with the accuracy with which strands of the mix were located, the Musical Fidelity DAC showing an architectural rigour in the precise way it hung lead vocals in the background, the voice: they don't call it the 'timing machine for the audiophile' for nothing. It really is exceptional considering the retail price of the unit. The result was once again direct, fluent and engaging listen but one that was never less than clean and well respected.

Given its dexterity with recordings of questionable quality, I felt the time was right to feed the Musical Fidelity with a superlative classical production, released by Esoteric no less, Mozart's 'Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor' (English Chamber Orchestra/Clifford Curzon, Britten). The first movement of this breathtaking classic (1970) recording taxed the M1 not one jot. Presented with a massive, cowering bassline and razor-sharp details throughout, this DAC showed its mettle. Massed strings had vast body and breathtaking speed allied to incredible dynamics, while solo piano rang with a sonorous quality and a sublime rhythmic gait. This particular disc is an epic recording (and indeed a memorable performance), and the only thing that detracted was the M1's ability to spotlight the tape hiss; the sunshine that it casts upon source material can sometimes show its wrinkles. In this case, it didn't spoil things one jot (it was more obvious on the REM album, in fact), but potential purchasers should remember that, brilliant as the M1 is, it's not a flatterer of recordings or ancillaries.

**CONCLUSION**

Given good partnering equipment, in a system that's not exactly bass light, the Musical Fidelity M1 will amaze, considering its very modest retail price. Its abilities are so high considering the market sector it inhabits that it puts an awful lot of pressure on old favourites such as the Stelio DA-100 Signature at twice the price. Its combination of insight, clarity, precision and punch are formidable, and even at under £1,000 rarely seen. The only caveat is that for all its value, it's not a terribly good partner for budget hi-fi. Such is its incision that it could push already uncouth ancillaries into shrillness; so you've been warned. However, I suspect this will find favour with those already fairly well up the hi-fi tree, wanting an inexpensive way to convert their ones and noughts, so they can spend more money of their digital source or save up for that amplifier they've always wanted. Think of this as a piece of budget esoterica and you've captured the essence of this black beauty.

**REFERENCE SYSTEM**

Musical Fidelity M1S3Si integrated amplifier
MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplifier
World Audio K9881 power amplifier (modified)
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

Frequency response of the M1 rises toward high frequencies, our measurements showed. This is an unusual characteristic and commonly results in obvious treble sheen. The anti-alias filtering used is very sudden and fast in its roll off and this filtering is responsible for the lift. As the M1 had low levels of aliasing products under measurement, it may sound less hard and digital than is common. Only listening can sort this out.

Distortion levels were very low over the DAC's dynamic range and close to the noise floor. As a result EIAJ Dynamic Range was a little better than that of rivals, measuring 101dB. Fed a 2-bit signal distortion dropped to 0.016%, at 60dB and just 0.77% at -80dB, exceptional figures. Noise was 4dB lower in the right channel than the left, an unusual result, but at -115dB and -119dB still too low to be detectable.

The unbalanced phone socket outputs gave 2V and the balanced XLRs 4V. Apart from this, they gave identical results.

The M1 DAC measured well in every area and is very linear. Its tonal balance is likely to be brighter than that of others, though. NK

**VERDICT**

A brilliant value budget audiophile digital converter, but must be matched to superior quality, smooth sounding systems.

**MUSICAL FIDELITY M1 £399**

Dit, Dit, Dit, Dit

Of course audiophiles will have access to whatever as appropriate, but with one key question to ask: what's the source material like? The M1 is a brutally honest DAC, not afraid to cast a critical eye on any source, be it CD or streaming. The Musical Fidelity M1 is a DAC that will do wonders for under £400 and it is rarely seen.

**FOR**

- spacious, airy treble
- massive midband insight
- soundstage precision
- wide range of inputs
- build, finish, value

**AGAINST**

- well lit treble not ideal for budget systems
STANDARDS

WORLD STANDARDS

These are the best products we've heard that are currently on sale in the UK, complete with the date they were originally launched and their current retail prices.

TURNTABLES

PRO-JECT GENIE 2 2008 £175
A masterpiece of minimalism, this is well made for the money and includes a decent Ortofon OM3 moving magnet cartridge. Great sound per pound.

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

TECHNICS SL-1200/II 1973 £395
Stick build makes it a respectable performer, although the cheapo arm limits it - fit a Rega RB250 and it's suddenly a brilliant mid-price machine.

REGA P3-24 2008 £400
Sensational affordable audiophile deck with fine bundled tonearm. Tweezy and real brain, with optional £150 outboard power supply.

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

ROKSAN RADIUS 5.2 2010 £1,399
Effective, if expensive, update of the original formula. Highly musical, yet detailed and dimensional mid-price turntable with a naturally open and easy sound.

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

MICHELL TECNOARM A2 2003 £442
The late John Michell's clever reworking of the Rega theme, using blazing, drilling and revving! Surely the best overall performer under £500.

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

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

TONEARMS

REGA RB25I 2009 £136
Capable way past its price point, the new 3-point mount version of the classic RB250 serves up a taste and detailed sound. A little lean for some tastes, but responds very well to rewiring and counterweight modification.

MICHELL TECNOARM A2003 £642
Avid VOLVERE SEQUEL 2007 f4,600
Avid Diva II SP 2010 £2,000
New twin belt drive and power supply make this an even more commanding performer, although it's a substantial price hike. Its speed, dynamics and detail are hard to beat anywhere near the price.

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

SME MODEL 10A 1995 £4,556
Exquisitely engineered deck and SME V tonearm combo that's an extremely accomplished performer with classical music.

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

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

ACOUSTIC SOLID ONE 2007 £4,000
Huge turntable, both in terms of sheer mass and sonic dynamics. Fit up to three arms and play package at this price point.

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

SME SERIES IV 1988 £1,127
Balanced turntable, both in terms of sheer mass and sonic dynamics. Fit up to three arms and enjoy just don't damage your back moving it...

Linnsqueal 2007 £1,300
The classic Syrinx PU3 updated to spectacular effect. Hand made to order, with any mass, length and colour you care for: Fit, finish and sound truly impressive.

NAIM ARO 1987 £1,425
Charismatic unipivot is poor at frequency extremes but sublime in the midband; truly emotive and insightful.

MELIUS OMEGA 2008 £1,595
Stylish and solidly built arm with fabulous build quality, that turns in a dynamic and weighty performance.

SME SERIES V 1987 £1,614
Vice-like bass with incredible weight, ultra clear midband and treble astound, although some don't like its manner of factness!
LYRA DORIAN 2007 £595
Incisive and musical, this baby Lyra is one of the most powerful and revealing MCs at its price point. Beware the sharp treble, though.

ORTOFON RONDO BRONZE 2005 £500
Excellent mid-price moving coil with real rhythmic alacrity and a delicate deal of finesse.

ZYX K-100H 2005 £625
Exceptionally tight sounding and detailed cartridge with the musical skills to match, this is up with the very best at the price, with a presentation all of its own.

BENZ MICRO GLIDER L2 2008 £650
Crisp, clean and detailed MC; particularly impressive at both ends of the frequency spectrum

TRANSFIGURATION AXIA 2007 £890
Musically adept and highly resolving cartridge with impressive tracking abilities. Top end lift means careful matching required, however.

ORTOFON CADENZA BLUE 2009 £1,000
Musical, out of the box sound, allied to real finesse, makes this a great do-it-all high end moving coil.

ORTOFON MC WINDFELD 2008 £1,799
Ortofon's new flagship MC is a sophisticated and alluring performer that takes the vinyl experience to a new level.

KOETSU RED K SIGNATURE 2007 £2,399
The new K Signature adds a hefty dose of insight and finesse to the already Red and the results are fabulous.

DIGITAL SOURCES
MUSICAL FIDELITY V-DAC £170
Clear, concise, low distortion sound belies further on the original mid-price classic, offering super tight, grippy and musical sound.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DACMAGIC £229
An innovative and flexible new DAC, this is a svelte, rhythmic and impressive performer.

STELLO DA100 SIGNATURE £675
Superbly finessed sounding DAC at this price, with strong driving bass and plenty of air and space.

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

NAIM CD5s 2008 £895
Naim's new italic 'i' variant improves even further on the original mid-price classic, offering super tight, grippy and musical sound.

ROKSAN KANDY K3 CD 2010 £900
A charmingly musical performer at the price, this is a surprisingly sophisticated CD player for the money.

BENCHMARK DAC-15 2009 £930
Power, precision and poise – allied to real seal-of-the-pants musicality, this DAC justifies its premium price.

CYRUS CD8 2008 £1,200
Bespoke Evolution mech makes this the most musically engaging machine at the price, with super smooth tonality to boot. Optional PSU-X adds bass and dimensionality.

SIMAUDIO MOON 300D 2010 £1,290
Lovely fluid sounding DAC with a deep, dark, velvety tonality.

NAIM DAC £1,995
Painstaking design has yielded a brilliant 'affordable high end' performer that throws bright sunlight on the recording, yet remains unremittingly smooth and musically engaging.

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

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

ACCOUSTIC ARTS CDIIMK2 2007 £3,985
Styling not to everyone's taste but build quality is impeccable and the performance is stunningly musical.

ESOTERIC X-05 2010 £4,495
Superbly 'affordable high end' CD/SACD spinner with excellent build, massive detail and great poise.

NAIM CDX2-XP52 2003 £4,950
A fine high end machine, but add an XP52 and it becomes one of the most characteristically engaging hi-fi machines we've ever heard. Plays music with such passion!

NAIM CD5S 2003 £7,050
The most polished Naim CD to date, tremendously capable and musical, but lacks the Rottweiler quality of the cheaper CDX2-XP52.

ACCOUSTIC ARTS DRIVE 1 MK2/ TUBE DAC 2 2007 £7,980
Superbly built high end CD transport and DAC combo that shows just what the format can be capable of. Very tangible, musical sound with wonderful dynamics and glistening harmonics. Only curiously stylish and chunky build detracts from its brilliance!

GOLDRING G1042 1994 £135
One of the best MM's going, with sweet and extended treble and punchy, muscular bass.

DENON DL103R 2006 £200
Awkward to get working properly with a poor mounting arrangement, yet it rewards with a musical performance that makes similar priced cartridges sound cold.

DYNAVECTOR DV10XS-2003 £350
Distant descendent of the classic Ultimo 10X, this has warmth and sweetness in spades, allied to a punchy bass. Beats G1042 comfortably.

ORTOFON 2M BLACK 2007 £350
Staggeringly good high-end MM that uses a stylus from the MC Jubilee and easily rivals similarly-priced MCs.

DYNAVECTOR DV25X-H2003 £395
Deliciously sweet sound with fantastic get-up-and-go makes this a great value budget MC. High output version works a treat with valve phono stages too.

STANDARDS

LINN EKOS 1987 £1,700
Subtle mods over the years, including revised bearings and the recent new wiring has kept it a serious contender in the superarm stakes. Lacks the SME's slam, the OL's clarity or the ARO's emotion, but has a feisty musicality all of its own.

SME 3125 2010 £1,750
Twelve inch magnesium alloy armtube plus SMEV bearings makes an impressive transcription tool with a highly insightful yet composed sound. Superlative build completes the package.

GRAHAM PHANTOM 2006 £2,495
Sonically stunning arm with magnificent bass dexterity and soundstaging. Build quality up to SME standards, which is saying something...

TRI-PLANAR PRECISION 2006 £3,600
Stunning build, exquisite design and surely the most naturally musical and lucid sound around makes this a remarkable pickup arm.

OL ENTERPRISE 3C 2010 £4,500
Few if any pivoted arms come close to this arm's combination of liquid musicality and forensic grip.

CARTRIDGES
AUDIO TECHNICA AT-Q5MLIII 2010 £399
New stylus and cantilever breathe life into this feisty, punchy and detailed performer.

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DCS PAGANINI DAC £9,599
Digital, rare sound; digital C/D/D conversion. D/A part makes for a very good overall experience, justifiably so.

ASTIN TREW AT8000 £880
Expensive, detailed, powerful and musical sound makes this a surprise entry to the first class sub-£1,000 phono stage club.

LINN KLIMAX DS 2007 £9,600
Landmark network music player, offering brilliant sound at up to 24/192 resolution from hard discs/NAS. Expensive, but you can hear why.

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

NAIM MDX 2009 £4,405
Interesting one-box network enables high-end hard disk music systems to play to super sonic standards with impressive ease of use.

SONY TC-W475 2010 £130
Essential tackle for committed cassette users, this well-calibrated deck sounds way better than expected!

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

PHONO STAGES

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640P £99
Excellent entry level design that raises the bar for budget phono stages. Crisp, smooth yet bright for sound on both MM and MC; that's a vast improvement on most budget inboard designs.

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

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

ANATEK MCI 2007 £850
Excellent MC phono stage that offers serious insight, underpinned by powerful and tuneful bass.

QUAD Q24P 2007 £995
Dynamic performer that can be used on its own as a complete phono-level preamp.

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

ICON AUDIO PS5 2008 £1,500
Super sounding valve phono preamplifier, with an engaging, engaging and organic nature that makes vinyl seem joy.

EMILLE ALLURE 2010 £2,495
Just as the name suggests, this is a lovely way to play LP with an exceptionally open and lucid sound.

A.M.T. AUDIO KORA 3T LTD 2010 £995
Exceptionally musical and natural sounding all discrete transistor phono stage, with highly lucid, valve-like presentation.

AMPLIFIERS

SUGDEN MYSTRO 2010 £1,225
Sugden's first Class AB integrated in a long time surprises; rollingly good fun to listen to, it loses surprisingly little in smoothness to its Class AB siblings.

ICON AUDIO STEREO 25 2008 £500
Cracking entry-level valve integrated, with a warm and engaging sound. Limited power so needs careful partnering, though.

ROTEL RA-06 2008 £550
Vivacious sounding device that, whilst lacking the finer musical points, wears its heart on its sleeve and has plenty of power to match.

NAIM NAIT Si 2007 £775
The iconic 'I' version remains one of the most musically competent and dynamically engaging integrateds at its price.

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

JUNGSION JA-88D 2006 £899
Stunning value for money Class A monaural integrated; extreme power and clarity at a puzzlingly low price.

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

SUGDEN A21 AS 2007 £1,299
More power and greater transparency improve even further on the already impressive A21 to give truly impressive results.

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

ELECTROCOMPANIET PI-2 2008 £1,420
Powerful integrated with seriously solid bass and impressive dynamic abilities. Superbly musical.

SUGDEN A21 AS 2008 £1,469
Crystal clear, dizzying speed and forensic detailing makes this seminal design the most musical at the price, but power limited so needs sensitive speakers.

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

VINCENT SA-236MK 2010 £1,749
Big, powerful and expansive sounding hybrid transistor amplifier, with bright, spry and musical nature.

MOON i-3RS 2008 £1,890
Grimly and clean performer with fine soundstaging and build quality.

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

NAIM SUPERNAIT 2007 £2,475
Integrated tour de force from Naim that combines impressive functionality and connectivity with super sound.

LUXMAN L-550A 2007 £3,200
Monster Class A integrated with powerful and revealing sound and a whole host of useful features, including a highly competent MM/MC phono stage.

LEEMA TUCANA II 2010 £3,495
Polished high end integrated amp that combines power, detail and genuine musicality with a good range of facilities.

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

QUAD II CLASSIC 2010 £6,450
Beautiful retro styled integrated amplifier with a subtle, supple sound - although needs matching to speakers that are easy loads.

MUSICAL FIDELITY AMS351 2010 £6,600
Gorgeous, liquid sounding solid-state full Class A integrated with a supernaturally sumptuous bass; surely one of the very best integrateds ever made!
AV AMPLIFIERS

ARCAM AVR350 2006 £1,500
Superbly accomplished do-it-all AV receiver, package, with an uncommonly warm, natural and musical sound. A winner goes from strength to strength.

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS

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

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

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

PREAMPLIFIERS

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

MF AUDIO PASSIVE PRE2003 £1,500
Effective pre with switchable gain via a transformer, and balanced operation. Open and incise sound, yet makes most active rivals sound edgy by comparison. Silver version at the twice the price adds transparency.

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

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

MODWRIGHT 36.5 PRE/PSU 2010 £5,995
Exceptionally open and expansive, yet musically expressive sounding high end preamplifier.

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

POWER AMPLIFIERS

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

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

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

SUGDEN MUSIC MASTER 2003 £1,300
Quintessential Class A. Sugden sound is not warm as many expect, but extremely neutral and open with real tonal colour. Superb when partnered with efficient loudspeakers like Revolver R45s, but many will find it underpowered.

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

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

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

ICON AUDIO MB845 2009 £4,499
Creamy and seductive yet blisteringly fast and musically lucid, this pair of 845 tube monoblocks is staggering value for money.

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

ELECTROCOMPANIET NEMO 2009 £4,450 (EACH)
The Norwegian power station is as cool as a glacier tonally, yet impresses with its sheer physicality and fleetness of foot. 600W per channel makes for a massive bang per buck.

DPA SA-1 2010 £2,850
Pacy, engaging and rhythmic almost to a fault, this solid-state power amplifier isn't the world's most powerful but is none the worse for it.

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

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

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

MUSICAL FIDELITY AMS50 2010 £7,000
Wonderfully assured high end full Class A integrated proffering icy clarity allied to real musicality. Lacks the lucidity of the best tube amps but redeems with power and punch.

ACOUSTIC ENERGY NEO I 2010 £140
Great little standmounters with a friendly, fun yet surprisingly refined gait. Excellent value starter speakers.

Q ACOUSTICS 2020 2010 £140
Great little standmounters with a friendly, fun yet surprisingly refined gait. Excellent value starter speakers.

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

B&W 686 2007 £279
B&W's new baby standmounters offer a sophisticated and mature performance that belies both their dimensions and price tag.

KEF IQ30 2009 £330
Beautifully built, classy styled standmounters with exceptional image projection and a very clean, detailed sound.

B&W 686 2007 £279
B&W's new baby standmounters offer a sophisticated and mature performance that belies both their dimensions and price tag.

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STANDARDS

USHER S-520 2006 £350
Atmospherically capable budget standmounters that offer detail and dynamics well beyond their price and dimensions.

WARFEDALE DIAMOND 10.3 2010 £299
Great small standmounters for audiophiles on a budget; dry punchy sound with impressive soundstaging at the price.

XTZ 99.15 2010 £640
Dramatically open and refined at the price, these standmounters bring unexpected civility, refinement and insight to the price point. Exceptional value for money.

ACOUSTIC ENERGY AE1 CLASSIC £845
Brilliantly successful remake of an iconic design, not flawless, but surely one of the most musical loudspeakers ever made.

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

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

MAD MY clapton grand mm 2010 £3,400
Distinctive co-axial standmounters with wonderful soundstaging, bright, lucid midband excellent musical insight.

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

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

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

GURU QM-10P 2007 £1,595
Quirky but adorable standmounters that are way off the pace in respect of detail and power, but amazingly capable at playing a tune and pulling you in to the music.

USHER BE-718 2007 £2,600
Beryllium tweeters work superbly, allied to a fast and punchy bass driver. The result is subtle, smooth and emotive.

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

MONITOR AUDIO GS60 2008 £2,000
Still a great rock loudspeaker after all these years, with a vivid, lifelike and engaging sound.

SPENDOR SHE 2010 £1,895
Generously large, silky smooth delivery, this dynamic sounding floorstander is an excellent all-rounder.

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

YAMAHA SOAVO 1.1 2009 £3,000
Musical, transparent large floorstanders with impressive dynamics and cohesion. Excellent build and finish.

ISOPHON CASSIANO 2007 £12,900
Driver units featuring exotic materials allied to superlative build quality result in an immensely capable loudspeaker. Not an easy load to drive, however.

REVOLVER CYGNIS GOLD 2010 £10,500
Big banger with enormous scale and vast power, although requires the right room and doesn’t cohere as well as a panel.

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

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

SPENDOR ST 2010 £5,995
This classy sounding, superbly presented big floorstander will appeal to those seeking high end sonics with subtle looks.

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

USHER BE-10 2009 £10,500
Clever high and moving coil design with immense speed and dizzying clarity allied to epic punch. Needs the best ancillaries to fly, though.

B&W 801D 2006 £10,500
In many respects, the ultimate studio monitor; dazzling clarity and speed with commanding scale and dynamics.

ISOTEK AQUARIUS 2010 £795
Highly accomplished premium priced mains conditioner that delivers the sonic goods, unlike so many others.

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

HEADPHONES

Sennheiser MX-550 2005 £19
Our unqualiﬁed recommendation for those seeking a serious sounding pair of in-ear phones. Smooth, detailed and musical.
One of our favourites, these are musical, silky and self-effacing sound. Superb value.

Excellent mid-price design with a very neutral, clean and balanced sound. Superb value for money.

GOLDRING DR150 2006 £70

Excellent build and fine sound makes these budget cans competitive value for money.

SENHEISER HD-590 1998 £199

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

CRONECNS: 2004 £250

A super all round reference design with crisp, detailed and even sound allied to superbly build and comfort. Cable upgrade yields great results.

SENHEISER HD800 2010 £1,000

The ultimate expression of the Sennheiser philosophy offers massive speed, clarity and insight, although lacks some of the charm of the softer, more beguiling rival Staxes.

CRONECNS: 2006 £2,890

The ultimate open-back performance, with a repairing midband and wonderful perspective. A superlative performer.

PIONEER SE-725 2007 £199

Excellent build and fine sound makes these budget cans superlative value for money.

GOLDRING DR150 2006 £70

Excellent build and fine sound makes these budget cans competitive value for money.

STAX SR-007T OMEGA

11/SRM-007T 2006 £2,890

Simply the best headphones we've ever heard at any price, these sweetly transparent electrostatic earphones are like no other headphone, or loudspeaker for that matter...

INTERCONNECTS

TECHLINK WIRES XS 2007 £20

Highly accomplished interconnects at an absurdly low price. Stunning value for money.

WIREWORLD OASIS 2003 £99/M

Excellent mid-price design with a very neutral, silky and self-effacing sound. Superb value for money.

CHORD COMPANY

CHAMELEON 2 £90/M

One of our favourites, these are musical performers with a smooth yet open sound.

GOLDRING DR150 2006 £70

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CHORD COMPANY

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One of our favourites, these are musical performers with a smooth yet open sound.
David Price finds Micromega's diminutive CD30 CD player a most refreshing alternative to other mid-price machines...

Micromega's an old French name to seasoned hi-fi fans, although of late has undergone something of a rebirth. In 2007 it was acquired by motorsport ace Didier Hamdi, leaving the company's founder Daniel Schar to engineering duties. The new eleven-strong range has been making its way through our pages over the past year, and has consistently impressed. The £1,599 CD30 is the top CD player in the range, which starts at £799 for the CD10.

It's fair to say that the slimline (430x265x69mm, 4.5kg) CD30 isn't exactly from the Japanese battleship school as far as build is concerned. It's nicely and neatly finished with its aluminium-wrap case and metal chassis. Looking behind, there's simply an IEC input and RCA phono outs, plus a single coaxial digital socket. The back panel is pressed steel, and the casework doesn't quite seal, leaving panel gaps the like of which I've not seen since the Citroen 2CV. Doubtless in Japan people would be expected to commit seppuku for such, but perhaps in France there's merely a Gallic shrug?

The fascia is an altogether happier story; again it's hardly in the £1,500 Denon league, but looks crisp and original. The bright blue ten character dot matrix display is easy to read from a distance, and the buttons have a positive if clunky action. It's pleasingly simple and unfussy to use, but case tapping hi-fi hacks such as moi won't be giving Micromega any points for its resonant quality; a damping panel or two wouldn't go amiss. Nor will punters be impressed by a rather agricultural draw loader which hardly swishes in and out with effortless ease. This would be another sacking offence were this a Japanese engineering issue...

Inside, there's an R-core transformer taking care of digital duties, which is encouraging as they're well suited to low current applications, more so than a toroid. This feeds the drive mechanics, the servo and decoding circuits and user interface section, and gets linear regulators with high power noise rejection. The mech is either a Sony KHM313 or Sanyo SFH850 DVD-ROM unit, via a Philips SAA78247 and Micromega proprietary software running error correction optimised for sound quality rather than mobile use; the code drives the mech for optimum data retrieval in real time. Interestingly, upsampling is done to 132.3kHz (three times that of CD's 44.1kHz); the data word length is also upsampled to 24bit. This then goes to the Analogue Devices AD1853 DAC, an eight times oversampling multibit Delta Sigma design. Micromega also say special attention has been paid to the analogue output stage.
"a pleasant looking modern silver disc spinner that sings like Caruso in a romantic frame of mind..."

SOUND QUALITY
Nicely styled as the Micromega is, I must say its lightweight build didn't exactly fill me with great expectations for its sonic prowess. So it was with some surprise to find it serving up a sound that was altogether more robust. Indeed, musically the CD30 is actually rather authoritative; it has an extremely assured gait that you'd normally only expect from players approaching the £3,000 price point. Indeed, you could almost call it commanding, such was the power and poise it showed with Appaloosa's 'Travelling', a lovely slice of late-nineties jazz infused drum'n'bass from LTJ Bukem's 'Earth Volume One' compilation.

The Micromega's not a particularly warm or euphonic tool, although neither would you call it cool. Tonaly it's pretty neutral, but errs ever so slightly on the side of making CD palatable thanks to a very smooth and subtle treble that goes the extra mile. Whereas the top £1,200 machines of last month's group test have just the slightest hint of grain (or perhaps it's fairer to say they're smooth but lack real finesse), the Micromega is an altogether more sophisticated proposition, as the looped hi-hats of this track showed. It snapped these electronic cymbals into amazing focus, carried their super-subtle inflections and set them precisely into the wider sea of sound, like jewels in a crown.

Moving down the frequency spectrum the CD30 displayed similarly superb insight; it doesn't dramatise things too much, preferring to give a studied and exhaustive view of what's going on, rather than falling over itself to make things rollocking good fun. Yet this sort of intricacy and authority are just what's needed for this sort of music; it doesn't respond either to the emotionally overblown or the stripped down and deconstructed.

The Micromega is a thorough performer in the low frequencies, although not a remarkable one. There's not the sensation you get from the tweaked Astin Trew AT3500, at similar money, of being dipped in a writhing sea of bass. There's no gratuitous booming, banging and crashing going on, and yet it's very nicely articulated; it's tuneful and drives along the song in such a way as to make the excellent (but admittedly a bit cheaper) Cyrus CD8 SE sound a tad wooden. The acoustic bass work on Corduroy's...
PRIMO Pure Class A Tube Preamplifier

New from Musical Fidelity. 14 tubes. Triode. Class A.

www.musicalfidelity.com

+44 (0)20 8900 2866
A recent Linn recording of Mozart's Symphony 29 in A major (Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Sir Charles Mackerras) showed the Micromega in its element. We had a CD player that's not a million miles away from the budget brat pack sounding distinctly expensive in the way it projected a spacious, enveloping live acoustic, with wonderful atmosphere to the concert hall. Linn's superlative recording quality allowed the CD30 to shine, displaying a beautiful tonality and grace; massed strings were full bodied, dizzyingly fast and yet had a lovely tactile texture. The music bounded along with a sense of immovable flow; there was never a moment when attention was lost and you were left thinking about tomorrow's breakfast or Saturday's shopping. The Micromega seized the moment; so to do, and spelled out in no uncertain terms what the vessel's trajectory would be. The result was a first movement of exceptional poignancy and yet delicacy too; the CD30 doesn't use brute force for effect, rather it gets its musical insight from sheer efficacy.

CONCLUSION

An interesting one, this. Micromega's CD30 reminds me, if you'll pardon another automotive analogy, of the classic late seventies Renault 5 Gordini Turbo. Take a fine but inexpensive chassis, with a few rough edges here and there in terms of panel fit and detail finish, drop in an exceptionally able (at the price) motor and you have a recipe for inexpensive fun - or cheap thrills, call it what you will. The recipe worked for Renault, as it later returned to the Clio Williams, and so it should work for this French hi-fi manufacturer too. The result is a pleasant looking modern silver disc spinner that's slightly rough around the edges in terms of build and use, but that sings like Caruso in a romantic frame of mind...

The result is a confident and commanding performer, with an excellent rhythmic flow and superior dynamic articulation, as well as a wonderfully open and expressive midband. This is sealed with a treble performance that's truly exceptional at the price, I feel. There's a delicacy to high frequencies which you just can't buy from any of the slightly cheaper machines, and is rare with more expensive ones; I'd say this is the CD30's standout feature.

At the other end of the scale, bass is strong and articulate, but the Micromega has to defer here to the Astin Trew which seems to plough its own unique furrow in this respect. Overall then, this charming Gallic silver disc spinner proves itself worthy of serious auditioning, should you be in the market for a sub-£2,000 CD player.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplifier
World Audio KS581 power amplifier (modified)
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response shows a gentle roll off at high frequencies, measuring 0.34dB at 20kHz. This sort of roll off, although slight, is enough to ensure the player will not sound sharp or glassy.

Distortion levels were low throughout the player's dynamic range, measuring just 0.003% at 0dB down to 0.24% at -60dB. Although not quite class leading, this is a good result and largely accounts for a good, if not exceptional, EIAJ dynamic range value of 98dB. Output was a normal at 2.1V and noise level low too.

The CD 30 measures well all round. It has no weaknesses or peculiarities and should give good sound quality, NK.

Frequency response (-1dB)

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<tr>
<th>Frequency (Hz)</th>
<th>Response (dB)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20Hz</td>
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<tr>
<td>21.3kHz</td>
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Distortion (%)

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Separation (1kHz)

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Output

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VERDICT

Musically lucid and engaging performer with an exceptionally refined treble performance at the price, although construction quality isn't this machine's forte.

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Whenever I think of Elkie Brooks I immediately think of her performances on TV as the singer spot in the middle of some top TV show like The Two Ronnies or similar, often warbling 'Pearl's A Singer'. As such, it is - and was - very easy to dismiss Brooks as a serious artist. In fact, she is one of the most underrated female singers in the music business and produced a range of excellent albums during the seventies in particular. This value for money release is a good example featuring, as it does, two albums on one CD.

'Rich Man's Woman' was her debut. Released in 1975, it came soon after she left the group Vinegar Joe, co-fronted by Robert Palmer. Brooks herself wasn't very happy with her debut album because she felt that her basic soul-inflected style had been watered down. The front cover, showing a semi-naked Brooks, also caused undiluted indignation, incidentally. However, it's fascinating to hear how she coped as a solo artist after enjoying the dynamic of a group.

It's also interesting to see how she quickly matured to produce her follow-up, 'Two Days Away', in 1977. Incredibly, this release, apart from a very limited German reissue, is the first time that the album has appeared on CD. It also includes that hit single, her first of thirteen in total, 'Pearl's A Singer' and allowed her to voice her inner soul singer style.

Staying in the UK charts for twenty weeks, it also triggered her first major UK tour and the inclusion, on that tour for the first time, of her future hit 'Lilac Wine' - quite a year. Also look out for another 2-on-1 CD release 'Shooting Star'/Live And Learn'. Each CD includes an additional bonus track.

WIGWAM
Nuclear Nightclub
Esoteric Recordings

There are a selection of bands out there who undergo seismic shifts over the period of their existence resulting in multiple bands, in effect. Take The Beatles which, in their early days was a live beat group and, later on, a psychedelic studio band. More within Wigwam's context, take the Peter Gabriel prog rock version of the band Genesis, and compare that with the prog/pop band lead by Phil Collins. Wigwam, a prog outfit from Finland, underwent a similar transformation. It was initially formed with one English chap, Jim Pembroke, and a bunch of blokes from Finland; drummer Ronnie Osterberg, guitarist Nikkie Nikamo, bassist Mats Hulden and keyboardist Jukka Gustavson, with Pekka Pohjola joining later as the new bass player.

Wigwam started life as a pioneering prog rock outfit from their 1969 inception until 1974. From 1975 to around 1977 the outfit underwent a few personnel changes, like Genesis. But instead of losing Peter Gabriel and then Steve Hackett, Wigwam lost Pohjola and Gustavson and the outfit, lead effectively by the Brit Pembroke, went all Phil Collins and merged their prog sensibilities with their new-found commercial pop flavours. This album is the first venture into that pop world and was supposed to break them as a mainstream act, which is what happened to Genesis, of course.

However, Wigwam never found the same luck - despite 'Nuclear Nightclub' being an excellent album in its own right. Don't get me wrong, the album might not have that prog complexity but its pop-like nature is never shallow or irrelevant and there are plenty of worthy moments in the piece. Prog fans should still check it out as part of the wider Wigwam cannon. Also look out for two more Wigwam-related Esoteric releases: Pekka Pohjola's 'The Mathematician's Air Display' and 'B The Magpie'.
JOHNNY WINTER
Live Bootleg Series
Friday Music

Here's a little known series of discs that definitely deserve wider awareness. Basically, Johnny Winter has delved into his own personal selection of 'bootleg' tracks and, with the help of the label, placed his favourites on a series of limited edition CDs. There are currently six volumes - six single CD, jewelled cased, releases - on the roster with a promise of more to follow.

The concept of an artist undertaking this sort of project is an excellent one and a direct 'thank you' to the true fans who will always be the main customers for this sort of fare and will buy every single disc on offer, I'm sure. The quality is excellent for a live release taken from a soundboard feed, by the sound of it, but also well balanced and excellently mastered.

The only problem I have with this series is the lack of supporting information. Yes, you get a track listing, supporting musician info, songwriter information and the like but there is no indication as to when and where the tracks were played. These are live excursions, after all. I would have liked to have seen a venue and a date so that we could, at least, put these works into context.

Nevertheless, fans of the great blues/rock guitarist will be chuffed to hear these works. Especially as quite a few of them include rare gems such as the acoustic version of 'Rollin' And Tumblin' (Volume 4), a rare live take of Robert Johnson's 'Stones In My Pass Way' (Volume 3) performed in front of a small audience with a steel guitar plus another rarity, the B.B. King track 'It's My Own Fault', from the latest release, Volume 6, which has been extended to around fifteen minutes. Breathless stuff.

CLIVE GREGSON AND
CHRISTINE COLLISTER
BGO

I'll bet that many of you reading this won't have heard of this pair of British folk musicians but, if you haven't and have any interest in folk, then you really ought to get acquainted. Actually, for a pair of folkies, it might surprise you to learn that Clive Gregson's first label deal was with Stiff Records as the founder of Any Trouble, a new wave outfit. It wasn't until he heard Collister singing at a folk gig that he had his epiphany.

"I actually met Chris just after the last Any Trouble album came out. I had a night off and went to Poynton Folk Club and saw Chris sing," Collister had spent time backing Richard Thompson on his albums and tours but it wasn't until Gregson asked Collister to back him on a new solo album that he was planning that Gregson began to be known as a folk artist. "We figured out that we actually sounded pretty good singing together... We kind of started doing it as a bit of a laugh... We started off doing little folk clubs and then it started to snowball and people wanted a record", said Gregson. "We hadn't set out to do that at all, it had just crept up on us." The two continued to perform as a duo on the folk circuit thereafter releasing their first album, 'Mischief', in 1987 (also available via BGO).

This album, 'A Change In The Weather', was the pair's follow-up and was released in 1989. Stretching their talents, this album pushed the boundaries compared to their debut and, with complex harmonies, also increased the complexity and quality of their songwriting reaching into sensitive subjects such as wife abuse, mortality and the shallowness of celebrity culture.
Tim Jarman remembers that late great nineteen seventies integrated amplifier behemoth, the Pioneer SA-9500...

If, when you first set eyes on the Pioneer SA-9500 integrated amplifier, it was in its natural home, a huge and glittering stack of nineteen seventies hi-fi gear, you may not think much of it. It shows a conventional face to the world; big shiny knobs, lots of levers and switches and a big slab of brushed alloy, nothing out of the ordinary. For the golden years of Japanese electronics. Take it out however and it's a beauty; could you really buy something like this in 1975?

The SA-9500 looks amazing but it wasn't even the top of the range. For those with serious wedge to invest the Exclusive C3 preamp and Exclusive M3 power amp would be the models to be sniffing around when visiting the Pioneer dealer. Next down was the SA-9900 integrated amplifier and only then came the SA-9500, visually almost identical to the SA-9900 but costing about two thirds of the price. This did not make the SA-9500 a poor man's 'all show and no go' special, it made it a real bargain as all the really important bits were still there.

What you got was a genuine chunk of oriental exotica. The sculpted cabinet looked amazing but there were good reasons for laying things out the way they were. The various inputs along the right hand side were all connected directly into the printed circuit of the preamplifier; there was no need for trailing wires that could pick up hum and noise. Equally, holding the loudspeaker cables are quite the nicest push button bare wire grips I've ever used, grouped together on the left hand side close to the output of the protection circuit. This kept internal interconnections as short as possible. Placing the sockets at the side also meant that it was not necessary to lift the unit up or peer down the back to make the connections, all one had to do was to feed the wires through the guides at the back (don't mistake them for handles!) and plug them in, nice and easy. Of course horizontal RCA-type sockets are a natural dust trap so each one was originally supplied with a rubber cover to protect it, if it was not to be used - nice.

Most of the low signal level circuits were housed in the full width section at the front, the cover for this went right down inside and effectively screened these sensitive parts from heat and stray magnetic fields from the power sections. Component choices in the preamplifier were extravagant, a top quality Alps attenuator, with guaranteed tolerances for attenuation per step and channel balance, was used for the volume control, its range being extendable by a three position switch offering a further -15 or -30dB of attenuation.

Another high point in the preamplifier was the tone control. Of course the whole circuit could be defeated at the flick of a polished aluminium switch but this would have been a waste. Instead of using conventional variable resistors, the SA-9500 used high quality rotary switches that selected different values of precision fixed resistor into the filter circuit. Additional switches selected from three different corner frequencies for treble and bass, the whole setup being precise and repeatable, more akin to a piece of laboratory equipment than a hi-fi component.

All of the preamp circuit was powered from regulated positive and negative supplies of an unusually high voltage; this gave the transistors a wide linear operating region and made the extensive use of DC coupling a practical proposition. It also gave the surprisingly good phono stage plenty of headroom, an important factor for reducing the subjective annoyance of groove imperfections.

The power amplifier was of a more conservative design, this is where the SA-9900 buyer got their advantage. In the SA-9500 things were still far from shabby, the eight big metal cased NEC bipolar transistors (four per channel in parallel pairs, all DC coupled of course) could punch out over 100W (DIN) into 4 ohms with a high degree of reliability. Pioneer's power claims changed with the season, in 1975 the figure was 110W, by 1976 this had become 130W with no obvious other changes but around 100W seems a sensible figure for practical purposes. A power amplifier is only as good as its power supply and here again Pioneer hadn't scrimped, a massive mains transformer and two towering 18,000uF Elna capacitors (22,000uF in the SA-9900) took centre stage in the beautifully presented and completely matt black interior of the cabinet, so perfectly laid out that it seems a shame to put the lid back on.

An effective protection circuit prevented the destruction of one's loudspeakers in the unlikely event
that something went wrong; this used a four pole relay with two poles in parallel per channel to quickly disconnect the loudspeakers should an excessive DC level appear at the output. If you buy a used SA-9500 make sure this still works, the sound should be muted for the first second or so, appearing following a soft click from the inside. Investigate if this doesn't happen!

In 1977 the SA-9500 Mk II appeared alongside an unchanged SA-9900. This offered more knobs and marginally improved measured performance but to pay for this the overall component quality had begun to decline and the beautiful casework was gone, instead the regulation three-sided metal wrap was pressed into service, making the new model look like just any other big Japanese integrated amplifier. By 1979 the SA-9900 was gone too, replaced by the inferior SA-9800 with its bright blue fluorescent power meters. This new model produced 100W into 8 ohms, reflecting a trend for higher impedance loudspeakers that required more voltage and less current to produce their full output.

**SOUND QUALITY**

It was traditional to dismiss Japanese muscle-amps as large and soulless blocks of mathematically perfect gain and this is a fair description of the SA-9500. Owners of esoteric British gear may have sneered at what can sometimes be a rather black and white presentation but then the Pioneer had the advantage of a potential useful lifetime that could be measured in decades, not sides of an LP. The first thing that stuck me in my listening tests is that the treble isn't particularly extended or fast but I have no doubt that this made perfect sense when the amp was partnered with a pair of big Japanese loudspeakers with tizzy drivers, something that would have been highly likely when it was new. This is what the SA-9500 is all about; it is stable constant over which the characteristics of the source and loudspeakers are superimposed. Imaging is super-solid and bass is tight, with so much current on tap things never get anywhere in the region of wayward.

In this age of dainty valve amplification with single-figure damping factors and Class-D MOSFET designs whose output impedance can be just about anything, the sound of a big chunk of solid-state linear grunt is becoming a less common experience but in the same way that everyone should drive a V8-powered car at least once it is something that must be sampled, even if you at first think it will not be to your taste!

**CONCLUSION**

If you like your hi-fi big and beautifully built then these nineteen seventies Pioneer amplifiers are something that you will really enjoy. They are not the last word in subtlety but once brought back up to scratch they should be a reliable friend for long term musical enjoyment. Unfortunately for the budget conscious they are becoming fashionable again and are certainly not as cheap as they once were but even so still represent good value.

**FELTLING**

As should be clear, these are strong and well made products but with the earliest now thirty five years old one has to expect to do a little bit of work to restore the original performance. As ever, dirty switch contacts and dried up electrolytic capacitors are the main enemies; give all the switches a good dose of cleaner (not forgetting the pre-power amp switch at the side) but leave the two attenuators alone unless they are obviously malfunctioning (unlikely), they are precision components of the very highest quality.

The power supply regulator is in a perforated metal box on the right hand side; cast a sceptical eye over all the electrolytic capacitors inside. A meter will show which ones need replacing but often failed components will also be betrayed by crusty brown deposits around the pins that become visible once they are removed. The power amplifier circuit is difficult to work on but it all folds out in a reasonably logical manner; once you get the hang of it you'll discover that you don't even need to disconnect any of the wiring to effect simple repairs. There aren't many electrolytic capacitors here so check them all.

A recent experience with a faulty example that produced ear splitting noises from the loudspeakers at random intervals and caused the protection circuit to operate showed that the small transistors in the power amplifier can also be a source of bother, you won't get the original 2SA and 2SC types any more without a struggle but modern European alternatives which are still widely distributed make good replacements. Finally set the bias and offset controls up carefully using the procedure described in the service manual. This is critical if top quality is to be obtained and is also a good health check on the power stages as a whole.

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david price

If there was ever an anthem for the consumer electronics industry, it is “things can only get better”. You couldn’t have it any other way. Can you imagine the leading players - Sony, Philips, Matsushita - going on record to say in a doleful tone that things aren’t as good as they used to be? No, that’s not going to happen. Instead we’re treated to a constant narrative, in every public utterance, every press release and every television and magazine commercial, that their latest products are ‘great new’ devices designed to make your stressful modern life ever easier and more fulfilled. They’re hardly going to say ‘don’t buy our latest product, because it’s not a patch on our previous one’.

Of course, many things do get better. I don’t think Noel or I would take a late seventies moving coil cartridge if you paid us (well, maybe a classic Koetsu, but that’s the exception to the rule). Ditto most turntables and tonearms, transistor amplifiers and loudspeakers. So whilst it’s generally true that the great march of technological progress brings benefits, it’s not a fait accompli, and sometimes things happen to make you realise why...

In my case, planning for a summer holiday trip to China, I spent an evening filling a Sony NW-AB45 digital portable full of my favourite music, dragging and dropping it from my iTunes compressed music folder on my Mac. I managed to stuff its 16GB memory with a large amount of 320kbps AAC rips of my personal arrangements left a bit to be desired. Lacking a suitable cassette carrier (my Hong Kong sojourn involved a moulded to fit the dashboard. The option wasn’t there, for a stickler for originality like me, to rip ‘em out and fit a modern CD player. So it was back to tape whether I liked it or not.

It took just a few minutes to get back into the swing of WM-D6C life: a new set of batteries, a quick blast of isopropyl alcohol on the heads and capstan, and the deck was ready. I bought some TDK SA90s and a new set of batteries, a quick blast of isopropyl alcohol on the heads and capstan, and the deck was ready. I bought some TDK SA90s and the deck was ready. I bought some TDK SA90s and from Richer Sounds for a pound a tape head Tim Jarman to podcast playback. It would have been impossible to buy a USB cable, or configure my network settings at all. My only option wasn’t there, for a stickler for originality like me, to rip ‘em out and fit a modern CD player. So it was back to tape whether I liked it or not.

And so followed ten days of constant ‘cassette-ing’. I received a number of strange looks from passengers on the Air China flight out, packed with young trendies touting iPhones and Oppo MP3 players, they must have thought me some English peasant who couldn’t afford a modern music machine.

Before this, eyebrows were raised as my analogue tape equipment passed through the X-ray at Heathrow airport. The young lady whose job it was to look inside hand luggage might have momentarily thought it to be secret spying kit, or a strange device liable to self destruct, as per the beginning of the original Mission Impossible.

The trip went brilliantly, with only the need for two sets of AA batteries. I didn’t need a charger, or have to buy a USB cable, or configure my network settings at all. My only sadness was the Walkie Pro’s lack of podcast playback. It would have been too much for me to ask Hi-Fi World’s resident tape head Tim Jarman to record ‘The Week in Westminster’ on Radio 4, Saturdays at 11am, on his immaculately set up Bang and Olufsen Beocord 9000 and then post me the tape by express air mail, I conceded! Still, I did manage to listen to many of my old early eighties LP recordings, at a level of fidelity never possible from a modern iPod playing Apple Lossless. Listening all holiday long in magnificent fidelity was a joy.

As Tim says in our ‘Globies’ feature on p 112, imagine a format that makes incredibly easy and fine recordings, and that you can take anywhere and play at home, in your car and on the train, as well as buy prerecorded for pennies. Someone should invent one. Oh hang on, we already did! What a shame then, that we’ve forgotten about it, and moved on to fiddler, less universal and far inferior sounding systems. Well, I guess that’s progress!
MUSICAL FIDELITY

M6PRE
Fully balanced preamp. Inputs: Phono, USB, Balanced. 4 line.
Outstanding technical performance.

M6PRX
Outstanding technical performance.
Have you ever watched the TV programme 'Through The Keyhole'? You know the one, a watery-eyed David Frost infringes upon people's personal liberties by sending in his very own human CCTV camera, the pasta-sauce toting, rubber-band vocal chorded Loyd Grossman? The very same programme which ran out of recognisable celebrities after a few series resulting in the bewildered studio panel's continued puzzlement on the identity of the 'celebrity' even after they had been revealed?

Well, it got me wondering. What would happen if they took a gander in Satan's abode? "Who lives in a house liikkke thiiiiiss," the time distorted speech of Grossman would imbue. The camera would pan over Satan's personal effects and favourite items of torture and persecution; here a disembowelling instrument, there a rack; here a copy of Windows Vista, there the new edition of The Sun... but look, just there, on a pedestal of floor elevators releases in this series, the label's life, issuing four albums and a host of singles. Other acts included Red Krayola and the Golden Dawn.

Paul Drummond compiled, researched and produced the 13th Floor Elevators releases in this series (look out for his book, 'Eye Mind', on the group). "The label was taken over by a bunch of freaks who didn't know what they were doing but it produced some of the best and freakiest, psychedelic and punk music. It's a really strange but interesting label."

Despite the original masters disappearing, for the singles, remarkably, all of the original album masters have survived. Strangely, the entire batch was discovered in a warehouse in Rotterdam, Holland. "It was a bit like 'Raiders of the Lost Ark', where you walk into this huge room, ambling up ladders and so on. They weren't the multi-tracks but the mix-down, two-track tapes. And that after many people had believed them long lost."

In effect therefore, this series of CDs will be presenting each of these records for the first time because previous reissues were either dubbed from original vinyl or cack-handedly mastered without any understanding of the content. For example, the Elevators' LPs featured lots of echo/reverb which many contemporary engineers reduced or 'cleaned up', believing that the effect was a sign of the times. Not so, the overflowing echo/reverb was part of the band's philosophical psychedelic beliefs.

"It stems from the Perfect Fifth, the divine chord used by the Gregorian Monks based on Pythagoras' theory of music and scales," said Drummond. "The band were heavily into that... and acid, incidentally. The echo/reverb was integral to that, as their original producer advised us. The idea was to produce a 'third voice', via the distortion, which would appear in your mind - which was the psychedelic sound."

But it's the beautiful production values that hit you first. Each CD sits within a thick, book-like cover which maximises the CD-sized artwork, produces a thick spine and allows the inclusion of a fifteen-page record label booklet plus a fourteen-page book on the CD itself including rare photos and label images. "These packages have a desirable aspect to them, there's lots of information with them and there's lots of obvious work that's gone into them."

I know major record labels exist to make money, but if only someone had looked at this sort of production approach as the standard, looking at the business, not as a short-term profit sprint but as a marathon, seeing the long-term, long game approach then maybe, just maybe, the CD and the digital physical format would have had a longer life. That said, as the CD format turns itself into a niche format like vinyl, maybe that very day has now arrived.
Definition

Definition is an outstanding new range of audiophile loudspeakers from Tannoy. Designed to get the very best from stereo music in the home, Definition distils and refines Tannoy’s eight decades of loudspeaker expertise into a design of unrivalled performance value and stunning aesthetics.

Defining the art of sound

The three strong range features the very latest Tannoy Dual Concentric™ drivers with WideBand™ tweeter technology, innovative ply-wood cabinets and revolutionary Deep Cryogenically Treated crossovers. Capturing the fundamental dynamics of music yet majoring on the finest instrumental detail, Definition defines the art of sound.

tannoy.com
Some news has emerged recently about the BBC HD channel’s picture quality on satellite, which I wrote about in February’s issue. To briefly recap: the BBC slashed the bitrate of the BBC HD channel on satellite from 14Mbps down to just 9.7Mbps in August 2009 after it had installed new MPEG-4 H.264 video encoders. This incensed viewers who flooded BBC blogs with comments complaining that the quality was far worse than it had been before the change, and that the picture quality could no longer be described as being ‘high-definition’. In response, the BBC claimed that its “internal tests” had shown that the quality of the channel was no worse than it was before the bit rates were reduced.

Viewers were having none of the BBC’s spin though, and they carried on complaining; so the BBC graciously decided to invite a group of people – who’d made a formal complaint to the BBC about the HD picture quality – to visit the BBC. And the group were also invited to write about their visit in a series of three articles that were published on the BBC Internet blog (the blogs can be found here: http://tinyurl.com/377gkn8).

On their visit, BBC executives told the group that they had to take “platform neutrality” into consideration when deciding upon what bitrate/quality levels to use for the BBC HD channel on satellite. This is about as blatant an admission that the BBC did choose to degrade the quality of BBC HD on satellite as you could ever hope to come across. What the BBC will have been referring to here is that there’s a severe shortage of capacity for HD channels to use on Freeview, which means that Freeview HD channels will have to use relatively low bit rate levels, and the quality won’t be very good by HD standards. So the BBC has basically admitted here that it has chosen to reduce the quality of BBC HD on satellite so that it doesn’t outclass the quality delivered via Freeview.

In my opinion, the term “platform neutrality” as it applies to the BBC simply means that the BBC should not show bias towards one platform over another. But in no way would the BBC be showing bias towards satellite if it delivered the BBC HD channel at higher quality on satellite than it does via Freeview. The two platforms are characterised by the fact that there is an enormous amount of bandwidth available on satellite whereas bandwidth is in very short supply on Freeview, and transmission costs on Freeview are about ten times higher than they are on satellite.

The characteristics of the two platforms dictate that the BBC should deliver the BBC HD channel at higher quality on satellite than on Freeview. And not to do so is simply treating people who watch TV via satellite unfairly. People should have a right to expect the BBC to deliver its channels at as high a level of quality as possible (within reason), and the BBC certainly should not deliberately degrade the quality on satellite just because it favours the Freeview platform.

BBC executives also told the group that they have a duty to use satellite capacity as efficiently as possible. However, they obviously don’t practice what they preach, because the satellite transponder that carries the BBC HD channel has been half empty ever since the BBC reduced the bitrate of the BBC HD channel last August, so it was clearly dishonest of them to try and use this as a justification for reducing the bit rates...

The BBC also told the group that if they increased the bitrate of BBC HD now it would only lead to disappointment further down the line when bit rate levels would have to be reduced when new HD channels are launched, such as BBC1 HD. However, as the group noted in its blogs, this contradicted the BBC’s central (ridiculous) claim that bitrate only has a “minimal impact” on picture quality.

One interesting thing to note on this subject from the group’s visit was that the BBC chose not to allow the group to compare the picture quality of the old and new video encoders at the original, higher 14Mbps bit rate level – they were only allowed to compare the old encoders at 14Mbps with the new encoders at 9.7Mbps. So, the BBC clearly has no faith in its own main claim that bitrate only has a minimal impact on quality.

Furthermore, the claim that bitrates would have to be reduced to allow new HD services to launch doesn’t stand up to scrutiny either. The BBC has 231 Mbps of satellite capacity available, including room to allow three HD channels to be broadcast on the half-empty satellite transponder that the BBC HD channel is currently broadcast from. Basically, the BBC is swimming in capacity on satellite.

I look forward to reading the BBC Trust’s response to the group’s complaint. As you can probably guess by now, I don’t think the BBC has got a leg to stand on, but whether the BBC Trust will do the right thing or not is another matter entirely.

www.hi-fiworld.co.uk AUGUST 2010 HI-FI WORLD
Knight Series is the embodiment of Castle's legacy of delivering real-wood veneers and sumptuous sound quality – the essence of class and refinement. With all its component parts manufactured, assembled, and hand-crafted in-house, the Knight series combines traditional cabinet making with the finest in British engineering design.

Incorporating Castle's proprietary TPT (Twin Pipe Technology) bass loading system, the Knight series is able to deliver deep bass without the "boomy sound" that can result from most reflex-port loading loudspeaker designs.

The Knight series comes in a choice of eight real-wood veneers.
"a good product needs no handbook; operation should be self evident..."

noel keywood

W ell, who wouldn't want to ride a motorbike called a Road Rocket? Of all the many great names thought up for bikes and cars this must be the best. It's a wonderful 1950s invocation of power and speed, when rockets and rocketry seemed to represent the future. Cadillac tails were styled after rockets and BSA used it for one of their motorbikes. Having once ridden an A 10, as I knew it, uncoupled from its sidecar(!) I know the truth is a little more prosaic than the name might suggest, but peering longingly at bike ads recently I was taken aback to see that this old sidecar lugger, spruced up, now commands a £15k price tag. What? That's two Japanese super bikes, plus some.

The revival in interest of items from yesteryear still takes me by surprise. And in spite of the jibes, it isn't about old gits reliving their youth (I think most of us were glad to have survived riding such dangerous machinery and won't be going back). The Royal Enfield that regularly passes me is ridden by a young man, as are the many classic scooters putting arithmetically around my neighbourhood. Of all people I should hardly be surprised. I'm sure any biker thinking of the sinister M 15 building, Vauxhall, London, why people were buying rickety old bikes and scooters when his showroom was full of gleaming new wonders. His one word of explanation; accessibility. It's an interesting idea. The Garrard, once fettled and put into place, is very easy to use. I hardly need to consult a handbook to use it, operation is self evident. Its simple utility is reflected in equally straightforward styling, like early Land Rovers.

Using this as a criterion for acceptance and likely popularity produces some interesting results. Apple's iPod, in conjunction with iTunes is a fabulously easy way to buy and listen to music, on a tune-by-tune basis, or as an album download. It's addictively simple and provides great pleasure too; there are almost no barriers to enjoyment and it doesn't surprise me that it has become an icon of our times. Let's not talk about sound quality; perhaps people are just happy to have something they know how to use...

I still have great reservations about storing music this way. At the end of all such music chains lies either a disc drive or a volatile memory. And as I have said before in this column, some time or other it is going to fail and you are going to lose everything. I look to iTunes many moons ago, spent a small fortune very quickly then lost the lot when my computer disc drive failed. Okay, nowadays there are solutions for this. Apple retain details of the music their customers buy and will restore it all. Also, it was once difficult to back up your iTunes folder, but now it has been made easier.

But whilst my pile of dud computer drives continues to build, along with my dread of drive failure, and whilst I continue to pop falling drives out of computers and into caddies, I still have no faith in storing anything valuable on a drive, in perpetuity. I know iTunes fanatics who also see this potential problem but choose to ignore it. Accessibility is all with iTunes and it's a system that works wonderfully. It doesn't frighten anyone, and nor does it need a handbook of Biblical thickness to understand. You roll up, stand on the kick start and putter off. It's been made to seem that simple and unimmitating.

Ideally then, a good product needs no handbook; operation should be self evident. If it isn't then the manufacturer has a problem on their hands. Enter AV!

Yes, AV products, especially receivers, are all but dead in the water, if we use accessibility and handbook thickness as yardsticks by which success may be judged. I admit that as an engineer AV has become a perverse challenge to me and I have actually learnt to enjoy the chore of getting it to work. One reason is that there is reward to be had at the end; many surround-sound recordings really are very good and not easily heard elsewhere. Not only is there better instrument separation but sound quality can be pretty darn impressive too, albeit in a digital way. The Samsung BD-C7500 Blu-ray player I review this month sounded great, but only after I had spent fascinating hours curled up on the settee reading the Korean equivalent of 'War & Peace', just to turn it on!

It is beginning to look like the days of giant consumer electronics technologies are over. Apple are masters of ease of delivery and use; there's nothing especially clever about a device that plays AAC, but the world loves the iPod's simplicity and accessibility. If they'd called it Pocket Rocket then perhaps it could end up selling for double today's prices in future!
Until we come up with another radical set of electronics... vinyl replay doesn’t get better than this.

- 2 mono channels
- 8 master craftsmen
- 40 discrete regulators
- 48 hand matched transistors
- 80 high spec capacitors

1 whest audio
"we’re being bribed into accepting this crappy technology under the guise of progress..."

Adam Smith

Most people will no doubt recall the Government’s recent car scrappage scheme, the idea being to take the older, more polluting and less reliable cars off the road, by giving their owners a fiscal incentive to trade up to a new one. The side issue was that it would also give a much needed shot in the arm to the British car industry. Now this was all well and good, and I have no problem with assisting people to upgrade their cars. It can be none too difficult to get into a stalemate with an older car where it is not worth anything unless it is working, but the cost of repairs needed to get it working take up the funds that could otherwise have been allocated to replace it.

There were downsides to this marvellous idea, however. Firstly the British car industry was pretty much unaffected, as no-one used the scrappage scheme to buy a Bristol, Aston Martin, Lotus, Morgan, Caterham or Westfield, to the best of my knowledge. Okay, so a few budget Toyotas, Hondas and Nissans came from factories in the UK, so at least this boosted our manufacturing industry, but the chief recipient of the scheme was Korea as far as I can see, as cheap Hyundais, Kias and Chevrol-

...awaos seemed to be the vehicles of choice...

And now, the wonderful scheme is back, but this time it’s those dreadful old fashioned FM radio things that the BBC and commercial radio stations are targeting. And I have to say, I’m a bit confused. Yes, keeping an old banger going costs money [yes, especially your Range Rover! Ed.]; running an FM radio does not. Old cars can pollute more if not properly serviced, FM radios do not. In fact, FM radios are ‘greener’ than their DAB counterparts as they use far less power, so that seems to be completely going against the other bandwagon that the government have jumped on, namely energy efficiency and ‘carbon footprint’ reduction!

Trading in my old radio for something that uses more power, offers poorer reception most of the time and sounds worse, isn’t really high on my priority list. Maybe I’m the only person in the country who’s postcode still brings up, “We’re sorry, there are no digital radio stations available in your area at the moment” on the Digital Radio website, but somehow I doubt it.

My favourite part of the scheme however, is the way in which it is described as an ‘Analogue Radio Amnesty’. If you recall, other ‘Amnesties’ in the past have included guns and knives; both of which are offensive weapons used to injure and kill people, so it now appears that the poor old FM radio is considered to be in the same category! I know of a few people who could do with some sense being knocked into them and, frankly, a nice chunky 1970s tuner would do the job perfectly but unplug the power, signal and aerial leads and lugging the thing down from my listening room is just too much hassle to be honest, particularly when my golf clubs are in the shed.

And what of the fate of the traded-in radios? Apparently, these are going to be reconditioned and then sent to Africa and other similar places, to give people access to radio programmes which is, of course, an admirable sentiment but I remain resolutely cynical as to whether this will happen. Consider for a moment, the time and cost needed to strip down an old Roberts radio, clean and service it and then check its setup and alignment to make it fully ready for use. Now consider the cost of a bulk buy of modern portable FM radios made by our friends in the Far East; I don’t think it takes a genius to work out which will be more cost-effective. Sorry, but I think we’re being bribed into accepting this crappy technology under the guise of progress once again and I, for one, am not happy about it...

Finally, I hope no one minds if I just take a final few column inches to pay tribute to my uncle, Terry Clements, who sadly passed away recently. I have mentioned him on these pages before as, not only was he a very talented engineer who built most of his hi-fi himself, but he also had music piped into every room in his house years before anyone else thought of the concept — again, all self designed and built. Most importantly however, he was the gentleman who entrusted his Garrard 301 turntable to my care when he no longer used it. This is the very 301 that is back, but this time it’s those

Whilst it was certainly my father who sowed the seeds of my love for music, audio and hi-fi, it was Terry who helped them blossom into the full-blown obsession that I have today and I’m sure he’s largely responsible for the forty-six vinyl spinners currently residing at Smith Towers! So, Terry, if you’re reading this in a heavenly branch of W&H Smith’s, I’d just like to say thank you for everything and make sure you keep those celestial turntables spinning!
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**INSPIRE APOLLO 100**
Adam Smith audition a smart new mid-price turntable.

**SOUNDBITES 105**
Paul Rigby tries the Furutech DF-2 and Walker Audio Prelude Deluxe.

**LINN UPHORIK 106**
David Price hears Linn's brand new flagship phono stage.

**AUDIO TECHNICA AT-F7 110**
Tony Bolton tries this lively £300 moving coil cartridge.

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**VINILLISSIMO**
Two new 180gm albums from a company new to these pages. Vinillissimo, based in Spain, has released Los Brincos' 'Contrabando' (1968), the third album by the sixties pop band, a sort of Spanish version of The Who or Yardbirds, which was partly recorded in London at the Pye studios. Also watch out for Las Grecas' 'Gypsy Rock': a mixture of flamenco and rock. In fact, the album name was an attempt to describe this splintered genre. www.vinillisssimo.com.

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**NEW KICKS**
A host of new contemporary LPs have been released covering a variety of genres...

The Liars' 'Sisterworld' (Mute) takes the band's brand of danceable punk and injects a dose of fear and paranoia into the mix. This deluxe version includes the LP, a double CD, two booklets and a remix disc of the eleven tracks via luminaries such as Thom Yorke and Alan Vega (www.mute.com).

Solo project from Finnish symphonic metal outfit Nightwish, Tarja's 'The Seer' (Spinefarm) is described as an EP but features 13 tracks of live outings and remixes. Amazing vocals and noise from the lady herself (www.spinefarm.com).

Electronica man Lindstrom's been busy. The LP/CD package, '11' (Eskimo, www.eskimorecordings.com), which includes the CD version too, with Prins Thomas reveals an electronic disco beat with electro overtones while his collaboration with Christabelle ('Real Life Is No Cool') via Smalltown Supersound (www.smalltownsupersound.com) plugs into a downtempo indie vibe.

Direct from the Leaf label is the Polar Bears' 'Peepers' via a 24bit DMM cut plus a download code for a digital version of the album, plus a bonus track. Blending jazz with rock and electronica elements, this is a fresh look at jazz-rock with added turns, twists and filigree which keeps the ear interested (www.theleaflabel.com).

The latest Holly Golightly And The Brokeoffs album from Damaged Goods, 'Medicine County' mixes American blues, country and rockabilly with English overtones creating an attractive amalgam (www.damagedgoods.co.uk).

Electronica legend William Orbit's 'My Oracle Lives Uptown' (Linn) is his first solo project in four years - his eighth in total. It swings between nineties retro-dance and more considered, meaty fare (www.linnrecords.com).

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MUSIC ON VINYL
Recently arrived, this batch of Music On Vinyl releases covers a wide spectrum and starts with the Charles Mingus album, "Mingus Ah Um", his top quality Columbia debut from 1959. Both the original and unedited version are included and were mixed from the three-track masters via an original Presto valve tape recorder.

Onto Sade and 'Lovers Rock' (Sony) from 2000 which included more rock oriented moments into the normal soul/funk smoothness. Originally released a year later, Leonard Cohen's 'Ten New Songs' features co-written works from via former backing singer, Sharon Robinson. Typically poetic in style, the LP retains Cohen's musings and reflections.

'Enter The Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers' is rather less reflective: more like stripped and rather scary. A collaborative project via nine MCs, who later moved to solo fame and fortune, this album completely changed hip-hop forever.

Also look out for blues/rock guitarist Rory Gallagher's classic 'Live! In Europe' from 1972, Golden Earring's 1969 multi-genre rock release 'On The Double' and Rage Against The Machine's 1999 politico-attack on contemporary society 'The Battle Of Los Angeles'.

...AND MORE BLUES
The blues reissues continue but, this time, via Monk with lesser stars than Johnson but no lesser talents. Ex-work gang leader, Sleepy John Estes's 'I Ain't Gonna Be Worried No More' is a double album featuring works spanning 1929-1937. His expressive voice can be heard on twenty-four included tracks.

'That's No Way To Get Along' by Robert Wilkins takes old Victor recordings from 1928-1935. Any Rolling Stones fans out there need to hear this because Jagger and Richards were directly influenced by Wilkins.

Ishman Bracey's career was short – he later turned to the church and rejected his blues affiliations. 'Suitcase Full Of Blues: 1928-1929' contains his entire work.

Furry Lewis recorded many 78s in the twenties and found fame based upon them during the sixties. His guitar blues can be heard on 'I Will Turn Your Money Green' via recordings in Memphis and Chicago. Also look out for Tommy Johnson's 'Cool Drink of Water Blues' from 1928-1929 and The Beale Street Sheiks' 'Chicken You Can Roost Behind The Moon' from 1927-1929.

AT THE CROSSROADS
Of course, the legend is that Robert Johnson took his guitar to a crossroads near Dockery's plantation, in rural Mississippi, USA, one midnight. Meeting a large black man, who turned out to be the devil, Johnson traded his soul to be the king of the Delta blues. And since that time, his music has been played and continually reissued. However, not like this. Doxy has produced a superb 3LP box set called 'Robert Johnson – King Of The Delta Blues: the Complete Recordings'. Featuring a large poster and a six-page lyric book, this is Johnson at his most luxurious.

CURED
A new pressing of the Cure album 'Disintegration' has been announced via Universal, which will be spread over two LPs. The idea is to enhance the sound quality of the package and, judging by listening tests with an early test pressing, the company has successfully given each track room to breathe. Dynamics are increased and distortion reduced by maximising each side to only three tracks.
Space Race

Adam Smith checks out the earthly delights of Inspire's new Apollo turntable...

Everyone who was around at the time will be aware of the 'space race', and even those, like myself, who were born many years later, have read all about the shenanigans that occupied the greatest minds of those across the world to launch satellites, explore space and, ultimately, land a man on the moon. Of course, die-hard Trekkies like myself know that Captain Kirk and colleagues were out doing this much further afield at the time, but whenever I try to point out that 'Star Trek' was actually a documentary and not a work of fiction, I get funny looks, so I'd better not dwell on it...

Funnily enough, years later, it almost seems to me that the modern day is bringing a space race of its own, but this time the frontier is being 'vinyl' rather than 'final', as new turntables just keep cropping up and bringing a few jolly odd ideas along with them too. In the past year I have seen loudspeaker suspensions for motor supports, a monstrous acrylic beast involving water troughs and even a violin bow for an arm. Frankly, the normality and sense of reason shown by the like of Inspire Hi-Fi brings one back down to earth with a very pleasant bump...

Following the stormingly good Eclipse turntable that I reviewed last year, I was intrigued to see where Robert Isherwood and Inspire Hi-Fi would go next. After the pleasant budget surprise that was the i2, Inspire have now bridged the gap in between with the Apollo, and a rather funky thing it is too. Robert himself states that the idea behind the Apollo was to "produce an affordable turntable which was inspiring in sound and exhibit looks befitting any listening room; much like the philosophy surrounding the Eclipse" and to this end, the Apollo incorporates a number of features taken from its bigger brother. These include the use of a good quality synchronous AC motor and the layer of Sorbothane between the finely machined acrylic feet and the plinth. The small subplatter is topped by a clear acrylic main platter, superbly machined and immaculately finished. Arm-wise, Inspire have once again thrown caution to the wind, and the Apollo comes complete with no less than a Rega RB700 for its all-in price of £899, which really is very impressive given that the RB700 retails for around £450 on its own. Needless to say the RB700 can be substituted for any Rega-type arm up to and including the RB1000 if desired. As standard the motor is aspirated directly from the mains and the two speeds are selected by lifting off the platter and moving the belt. However, the Inspire Quartz Electronic PSU is available as an option and this offers 33 and 45rpm at the touch of a button. Normally this unit retails for £350 but is offered for the reduced price of £270 to Apollo purchasers. Handily, the PSU requires no rewiring; it simply plugs directly into the IEC mains...
socket on the turntable.

Other options available for the deck include the Inspire Isolation platform which sits on four thick Sorbothane feet and has depressions on its top surface to allow the Apollo's feet to locate directly onto it. This normally retails for £65 but is being offered free to the first forty buyers of an Apollo, so don't hang about if you fancy one! If this weren't incentive enough, those same forty people will also receive the Inspire 'Puka' record weight; the name of which I am assured is pronounced like Jamie Oliver's favourite expression of delight, rather than the less savoury alternative...

SOUND QUALITY
Starting off with the standard deck, complete with Ortofon 2M Black cartridge in the arm, but sans PSU and isolation platform, I cued up one of my favourite tracks of the last few years; the title track from The Eagles' 'Long Road Out of Eden' LP. This starts off with some gentle synthesiser action and the Apollo made these gently warbling notes shimmer across the front of my listening room beautifully. However, I was not prepared for the sheer dynamism and confidence with which it took on the guitar strum that heralds the arrival of the rest of the band in the track. This is one seriously poised, confident and discriminating turntable that made those guitar strings really stand out. It wasn't just someone waving his hand in the general direction of them; the guitarist was actually picking each one individually, and the Apollo separated them out beautifully.

What was even more impressive was the way in which the Apollo filled the listening space in front of me and pinpointed every performer with impeccable precision. Since my recent change of rack and the upgrades to my loudspeakers I have noticed a much stronger central imagery to my system in general, and moving to a supposedly 'lesser' turntable often takes a step backwards, but the Inspire was truly adept at focusing Don Henley's vocal smack bang in the centre of the action. Moving to the Divine Comedy's latest release, 'Bang Goes the Knighthood' and the track 'Down in the Street Below', Neil Hannon's voice was beautifully etched as he softly sang the opening lines but when the action picked up into a typical level of Divine Comedy daftness, the Apollo positively skipped along with things. Although not the best recorded album I have heard, the Inspire never once gave any hint of muddle or confusion, and made sure every part of the action was nicely etched within the soundstage.

Taking the tone of things down a little with the help of Mazzy Star and...
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dancing in no time (I was alone in the house, fortunately...) and the Apollo had no problems in giving my Ferrographs' B139s a workout. In ultimate terms I would say that the Avid Diva II digs a fraction deeper in pure extension terms, but the Apollo is no lightweight, and the sense of casual ease in which it deals with complex, deep or downright thunderous basslines had me grinning from ear to ear. Once again, it took everything in its stride and produced their 'Among my Swan' LP revealed that the Apollo is most capable across the mid and upper registers. It maintains a sweet sense of clarity and a liquid, organic midrange at all times, the result being that Hope Sandoval's voice came through with intimacy and feeling. The Apollo's top end is an inviting and engaging one, never displaying a hint of harshness or spit, even when provoked with some fairly nasty recordings, but never giving the feeling that it was masking any action. All in all, the deck seemed able to strike the perfect balance of smoothness and insight, no matter what I threw at it; even a very grubby car boot sale 7" single of Richard Harris singing 'MacArthur Park' came through unscathed!

At the low end, a blast of King Teddy presents 'The Roots of Dub' proved that the Apollo was not going to be caught out here either. This truly funkastic album had me up and the sort of low end detail, pace and snappy timing that usually bears a larger price tag. With things going so well, it was time to pimp the deck up a bit and first up was the Quartz PSU. This turned out to be a worthwhile change, adding a greater sense of focus to the midrange and buffing the final last hint of polish onto the treble, whilst pushing the soundstage a little wider still. Equally, the push button speed change is always welcome! The isolation base proved a little more mixed; with the deck originally sat atop an Atacama Equinox Celebration LE rack for auditioning, the stand seemed to make little difference. However transferring the deck to a cheaper table and observing the loss of low end focus, the isolation brought it back with gusto, so unless you have a particularly high end support available, I would recommend considering this item as well.

**CONCLUSION**

In case you hadn't realised by now, I was impressed by the Inspire Apollo. It is a detailed, focused and capable vinyl spinner that seems to favour no particular kind of music over another. Rather, it seems to have an innate enthusiasm for everything and takes whatever you pass under the stylus in its stride both effortlessly and spiritedly. As standard I would say it pretty much leads the turntable pack at its price level and adding in the optional power supply and isolation base make it good enough to worry decks at higher prices; All in all, a stellar performer.

**REFERENCE SYSTEM**

- Ortofon 2M Black cartridge
- Wessex Two phono stage
- Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers [modified]

Highly capable, well designed and super value, the Apollo is another very fine record player from Inspire.

**INSPIRE APOLLO**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inspire Hi-Fi</th>
<th>£899</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C: 44(0)1246 568770</td>
<td><a href="http://www.inspirehifi.co.uk">www.inspirehifi.co.uk</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FOR**

- midrange poise
- capacious soundstage
- effortless musicality
- ease of setup

**AGAINST**

- nothing at the price

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The Apollo came fitted with a Rega RB700 arm that measured much like earlier RB301s on which it is based. Excited by an Ortofon 2M Black cartridge, the main arm tube mode lies at a high 337Hz, suggesting a stiff / light structure, and it is very well damped our analysis shows, measuring just 0.2g, likely because of the tube's taper. Unusually, the arm has a related second order peak at 675Hz but it is narrow and of little consequence. As always the Rega headshell appears a little lively, contributing to the wider peak around 1350Hz and this does add a little 'flavour'. There are also plenty of higher order ringing modes down the arm and headshell.

The turntable ran at exactly the right speed and was very speed stable, exhibiting just 0.09% unweighted wow and flutter, and a miniscule 0.051% IEC weighted - a very good result. So it measures very well. NK
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that early work with the release of an improved model, the DF-2. It resembles a well built, heavy duty, sandwich toaster. When processing a warped LP, it acts in a similar fashion. In use, you position the DF-2 on a flat surface and lift the lid, which locks into place. Then position the vinyl onto the central spindle inside, close the lid, locking it into place with the external clips and press the button to start the process.

This is not a five minute job, however. Traditionally, warping tends to occur over a period of time - fixing it is tackled in the same manner. It takes one and a half hours to heat the vinyl (which can be increased to two and a half hours for severely warped discs). You then have to wait through a two hour cooling process. Once complete, you open the lid and take out the disc which, in tests, was stone cold again and, above all, as flat as a pancake, playing perfectly. This is the Mk. 2 version of the Flattener so 180gm audiophile discs can now be processed as well as discs without a groove guard (the normally thick lip on the outer rim of the record). On the downside, the Flattener can no longer be used in the vertical position - but I didn’t see this as a big problem.

Beware, however, that the DF-2 does not like flexi-discs, or very thin 1973-1974 oil crisis-era LPs, which weigh in at around 100-115g, or non-vinyl materials. It won't totally cure heat damaged vinyl, either (i.e. if you decide to cook your vinyl in the oven), although tests proved that it had a darned good try, bringing an oven-cooked write-off to 90% of its former glory! I highly recommend the DF-2, but the big problem is price. You can justify it if you have major warping issues within a large collection, or alternatively if you can split the cost as part of a group. PPR

Contact: www.soundfoundations.co.uk

---

FURUTECH DF-2 £1,695
Warped vinyl has to be one of the most frustrating problems to beset the blessed wax. It’s the ultimate tease; the music is so near, yet so far. There have been attempts to tackle this problem in a scientific manner. Both Clearaudio and Furutech released gadgets to tackle warps within a controlled environment some time ago. However, only Furutech has attempted to hone

Vinyl cleaning products come in all shapes and sizes, but those shapes and sizes don’t often arrive in a single box. Walker Audio has released a complex, new liquid-based product that arrives in either the three-step Prelude Deluxe system (£129.95) or the four-step Quartet system (£174.95). Opening the box for the first time shows an array of goodies:

- five separate bottles of liquid (for the Quartet, four for the Prelude), a jar of enzyme powder, four individual brushes (three for the Prelude) and a small ruler to act as a straight edge to clean off future brush fluff. Before you even think about buying this cleaning system, make sure you have a record cleaning machine, any will do, from the high-end Loricraft to the ‘budget’ models from the likes of Moth...

In use, the Walker system demands a series of repetitive steps. Firstly, you add a supplied scoop of enzyme powder to the supplied Ultra Pure Water, wet the record with it and apply Brush One (which has to be oriented in the correct direction). Your RCM then sucks up the liquid. Then add a pre-mixed cleaning solution to the same record, applying Brush Two to the surface to then vacuum. Step Three is a rinse cycle, with more liquid using Brush Three, while Step Four is a high resolution rinse with yet another brush. Future, less intensive, cleaning to maintain the cleansed condition requires only the reapplication of Step Four. CDs and DVDs can also be cleaned with this system. My conclusions are mixed. My issue is the complicated nature of the system and the cost. Going through this process for every vinyl side is a chore while the whole process is very fussy. Also, like a wet-shave razor or printer manufacturer, has Walker developed the system with a view to making a steady income on the replacement parts? Liquids will run out as will the enzyme powder, brush pads will wear out...

So does it work? Most definitely. In fact, I have tried many different non-alcoholic product in my time and this system beats everything out there while challenging my reference; L’Art du Son. Sound improved over all frequencies and the sheen of the original music was restored. The soundstage was also enhanced and extended which meant that additional information was subsequently revealed. PPR

Contact: www.soundfoundations.co.uk
From one of vinyl's foremost proponents comes a rare new analogue product. David Price takes off with Linn's brand new Uphorik phono stage...

Phono stages are in vogue, and have been for the best part of twenty years now. Funny I suppose, considering they're a mere addendum to a format that's supposedly been moribund for most of this time, but there you go. What you can't accuse Linn Products of though, is jumping on someone else's train, belatedly following the fashion started elsewhere...

Indeed, there's a good case to be made that Linn made the very first phono stage - certainly the first specialist single box British one - in the shape of the long lost Linn Linnk. Remember that? Trivia fans might know it as an accessory for the original Naim Nait back in about 1981, which didn't have an internal moving coil stage. In truth it was made a few furlongs south of Castlemilk, but Linn should surely get credit for the concept.

This is its distant descendent. The new Uphorik is a product with a slightly wider intended audience however, being a boxed and lightly revised version of their statement Urika which was designed to sit in situ, as it were, inside the LP12's plinth. The Uphorik however comes as a standard mid-level Linn box, painted metal with a high quality finish, although nothing exceptional. It weighs in at 4.4kg and measures 80x381x355mm, and comes in a choice of black or silver spray jobs.

Although the front fascia is an essay in eighties-style minimalism (there's nothing bar a blue power LED), the rear panel is decidedly busier, offering as it does connections for both MM and MC via different sockets, so you can of course plug two decks into it at the same time (providing they're running alternative types of cartridges). Also fitted are RCA phono outputs, and interestingly XLR inputs which aren't actually balanced internally; Linn has simply offered the option because they claim XLR plug connection sounds better; something which tallied with my own listening. Linn also offer a new XLR T-Kable with "superior shielding properties" as an option.

Underneath the Uphorik, things get more scintillating still. If ever there was a phono stage for anoraks with nothing better to do than to endlessly twiddle around with their loading options, this is it. A profusion of DIP switches are to be found, offering variously different gain, capacitance and resistance settings for both MM and MC pickups (sadly no ceramic option, but there are so many switches that you'd be forgiven for thinking there were!). Anyone wishing to get a better idea of all the possible tweakery should click on http://newslinn.co.uk/help/Uphorik/Uphorik-Online-Manual.htm. Suffice to say there are enough options to keep even the likes of our very own Tony Bolton happy, providing he's in a microgroove mood of course!

Those not wishing to fiddle with their undersides, as it were, can ask their Linn dealer to hard-solder these switches in place to bypass the contacts for optimal performance; obviously though there's no going back. Inside, Linn say the switches are positioned as close to the input stage...
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REGA PLANER-3/ARM/CARTRIDGE
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TEA TMR-100 TRANSMISSION LINE LOUDSPEAKERS
RUARK TALISMAN MKII WITH OFFBOARD X-OVERS
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LINN KARS AND DEDICATED STANDS
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LYNX STRATOS PRE AND 2 MONOBLOCS (TIMWARP STUFF!) MINT/BOXED
XTC PRE-1/POWER-1 COMBO (200 WATTS)
PAS LABS ALEPH P PRE AMP
DPA 50S PRE (C/W PHONO STAGE) AND POWER AMP INC.CABLES
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MIT MH-750 BI WIRE 3 METRE PAIR
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 ProCo Studio 130 Speakers Maple E/0 (URL).... £174.00 £74.00
with such easy confidence it was uncanny; its combination of detail, depth, dynamics and demeanour is a rare one, even at its price. All of which made some plaintive mid-nineties electronic pop a joy. The Linn turned Dubstar’s ‘Not So Manic Now’ on 12” single - a fairly average, compressed recording - into an epic, towering kitchen sink drama of a tune, with the Uphorik going for the rhythmic jugular and squeezing the song’s pathos right out at me through my loudspeakers. The result was about as intoxicating a listen as I’ve experienced from anything out of the Britpop era. And the clever thing is not just that this phono stage can distill down all the good things from the song and deliver them straight to you, but that it does so with such finesse. There’s no sense of the Uphorik getting its emotional purchase from a soaringly forward upper midband that pins you to your seat; rather it does it through unalloyed transparency and grip.

CONCLUSION
Don’t buy the new Linn Uphorik if you want your phono stage to embellish the music for you. While there are some brilliant valve phono stages, not least the Emille Allure reviewed last month, around at this price, there’s always a sense that they make things just a little larger than life, and a tad sweeter too. Conversely, there are unpteen solid-state designs around that harden the original sound, adding artificial edge disguised as pace and punch; these may impress your friends but won’t win your heart. The Uphorik is neither of the above; rather it’s a very open, even, smooth and transparent design than simply opens a wide window on to the music. These days, as I venture ever further into the thermionic camp, I wasn’t expecting a solid-state design such as this to come along and do what it did, which is to offer an astutely judged mix of both worlds. Indeed, you might even call it the missing Linnk!

**COMPATIBILITY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>MM Gain</th>
<th>MC Gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+44 dB/+48 dB @ 1kHz (measured using 20Ω source into 47kΩ)</td>
<td>51kΩ, 49kΩ, 47kΩ, 45kΩ</td>
<td>68 pf, 105 pf, 135 pf, 175 pf, 215 pf, 255 pf, 285 pf, 325 pf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input impedance</td>
<td>68 pf, 105 pf, 135 pf, 175 pf, 215 pf, 255 pf, 285 pf, 325 pf</td>
<td>MC Gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+54 dB/+64 dB @ 1kHz (measured using 20Ω source into 1kΩ)</td>
<td>31Ω, 37Ω, 42Ω, 53Ω, 70Ω, 100Ω, 170Ω</td>
<td>MC Resistance (low)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC Gain</td>
<td>580Ω, 670Ω, 810Ω, 1kΩ</td>
<td>MC Resistance (high)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC Gain</td>
<td>470 pf, 1 nF, 1.5 nF, 2 nF</td>
<td>MC Capacitance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

**Frequency response of the Uphorik** measured 12Hz-32kHz (-1dB) on both MM and MC and was consistent between unbalanced (RCA phono sockets) and balanced inputs (XLR), and unbalanced and balanced outputs. Equalisation was very accurate, so there wasn’t the slight treble lift seen in many stages due to error in the 75Ω time constant. Surprisingly, Linn include a fixed warp filter with a fast rate of roll off below 12kHz to produce -16dB attenuation at 5kHz, without affecting gain above 12Hz. This filter should suppress cone flap, whilst not affecting bass strength, and it has obviously been carefully engineered.

Gain was the same when using unbalanced or balanced inputs and shorting plugs showed the two are connected internally, meaning the balanced line is terminated internally to the unbalanced input, so the noise cancellation mechanism of balancing is lost and this is not a true balanced input. It just uses a balanced connector and a different screening/earthing arrangement!

The balanced output via XLR is truly balanced, and double output from the phono sockets. The gain settings as quoted were all correct for phone outputs, except MC 60dB, which measured 54dB (x500), a printing mistake Linn said. The other gain setting, 64dB, was correct. The range of gains available is wide, x154 and x250 with MM for example, both of which double if balanced output is used. Output overload was low, however, at 5V from the phone outputs (10V from XLR), where 10V is a more common figure. This resulted in lowish input overload figures (output volts divided by voltage gain), so MM 44dB had 32mV input overload, which is enough, but only just. The lowest gain possible should be used.

Input noise was very low on MC, measuring just 0.05µV (IEC A wtd.) with either phone or XLR shorted. This is very low as solid-state input devices go. Linn phono stages have traditionally excelled here, partly out of necessity because Linn MC cartridges deliver very low output. So the Uphorik suits low output MCs, as it has plenty of gain and low input noise. The XLR connects into the unbalanced input, and it is equally quiet.

The Uphorik offers much; it’s very accurate. Used fully balanced in and out it should give exceptional results, although the lack of true common-mode noise cancellation on the balanced input is disappointing. NK

**VERDICT**

- **FOR**
  - musically fluent
  - textural accuracy
  - transparency
  - super low noise

- **AGAINST**
  - non balanced XLR inputs

**LINN UPHORIK**
£1,950
Linn Products Ltd.
+44 (0) 141 307 7777
www.linn.co.uk

**Disc MM / MC**

**Frequency response (MM & MC)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>12Hz-32kHz</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>68dB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise (e.i.n.)</td>
<td>0.05 / 0.33µV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distortion</td>
<td>0.001%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain (MM / MC)</td>
<td>44 / 48dB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overload</td>
<td>9V out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**POWER CONSUMPTION II W ADEBOX**

- **COMPATIBILITY**
  - MM: +54 dB/+64 dB @ 1kHz (measured using 20Ω source into 1kΩ)
  - MC: +44 dB/+48 dB @ 1kHz (measured using 20Ω source into 47kΩ)

**FREQUENCY RESPONSE**

- **Frequency** 12Hz-32kHz (-1dB)
- **Gain** 68dB
- **Noise (e.i.n.)** 0.05 / 0.33µV
- **Distortion** 0.001%
- **Gain (MM / MC)** 44 / 48dB
- **Overload** 9V out

www.hi-fiworld.co.uk AUGUST 2010 HI-FI WORLD 109
Audio Technica has a new flagship for its entry level ‘F’ range of moving coil cartridges, the AT-F7. Tony Bolton wonders if it’s a more sophisticated performer than its high spirited siblings...

Since its foundation in 1962 Audio Technica have built for themselves a reputation for making fine quality microphones and headphones, as well as a distinguished line in moving magnet and moving coil pick-up cartridges. At the top of the UK range sits the AT-OC9 ML3, and now a new model, the AT-F7 has been launched based on the established but newly updated F3/III model. Think of the F series as the company’s entry-level moving coil range; they lack some of the whizz-bang technology of the OC series, but are still very conscientiously engineered pick-ups. Whilst the original AT-F3 (and hitherto the AT-F5) have been around since the late eighties, the 7 is a brand new model.

Its looks are unmistakably Audio Technica, with the body sharing the same high rigidity VC mould, which is combined with potassium titanate. The body structure is described as a ‘hard resin’ which is chosen for its resonance control properties. Inside there are dual moving coils around neodymium magnets with pure iron yokes. The cantilever is an aluminium tube, tipped with an elliptical stylus which measures 0.7 x 1.7 mil. The suspension is 0.07mm stainless steel wire. All of this weighs in at a reasonable 5g so most arms should have no problems in balancing out at the recommended 2g tracking weight. Recommended cartridge loading on the phono stage is 100 ohms, which seems to be a fairly standard figure that will not alter with time. One was the detailed and good sized image that have been wandering around my house for the last few weeks!

SOUND QUALITY

It visited at the same time as I was doing the phono stage group test elsewhere in this issue, so ended up as part of the procession of turntabular items that have been wandering around my house for the last few weeks!

The bass had got going and was beginning to stretch its legs a bit. After a couple of hours things had started to balance out and the tightness began to ease somewhat, to reveal a very crisp, spry and open performer.

Over the next week the F7 found itself plugged in to all of the phono stages discussed this month as well as the resident GSP Audio Revelation (Sondek) and the Leema Agena (Clearaudio deck). After, I would estimate, about forty hours use, the sound seemed to be stable enough, although I’ve found Audio Technica phono cartridges, rather like Honda motorcycle engines, can never have too much running in!

With such a variety of equipment around it became very easy to pinpoint its key characteristics that will not alter with time. One was the detailed and good sized image that the cartridge produced with both stereo and mono records. The two channel image was very precisely framed by the speakers, but seemed...
The fluid roll to the bassline came across during Massive Attack's 'Karmacoma' on the 'Protection' LP: it just ebbed easily, with a rolling gate that was very relaxing. Since the F7 seemed happier with rhythmic music I went for a wander through the pop collection and it found itself tracking various fifties and sixties singles and long players. The timing if the sound causing me to get into the 'just one more track before I go to bed' headspace, which I am sure all music lovers have experienced some time in their lives! There's no denying that the AT-F7 is a real fan of rhythms.

Tonally, this new cartridge is vintage Audio Technica moving coil, insomuch as it has a 'well lit' upper midband and treble. Obviously this suits some systems more than others; I felt that my attention was being drawn away from the mass of midrange information flowing towards me and being focused always to the upper frequencies. The spotlit effect could be quite interesting with some records, but it was a double edged sword, providing a bit too much detail about non musical sounds, such as the condition of the groove wall. Even the Loussouir LP, which is a mint condition record, bought new only about three years ago, displayed the odd bit of crackle which it certainly didn't do when played with either the Ortofon or the Musicmaker III. Both are quite honest transducers, but neither have the same detail in the top end that the Audio Technica possessed.

Trying different phono stages only partially ameliorated this. I found there was a better synergy between the softer sounds of the Asnet Trew AT8000 and the gentlemanly nature of the ANT Audio Kora 3T, than with the less forgiving Icon Audio PS 1.2 Signature or the Microgroove Plus. Trying different impedance settings on those stages so equipped, altered the tonality slightly, but not enough to win me over completely.

Such a detailed display of the groove contents will delight some and have others backing away, describing it as too bright. It's certainly ideal for those who feel that their vinyl front end is a little lacking in detail and projection, or tonally warm like a classic Linn Sondek. Others though may prefer the softer all round nature of Ortofon's Rondo Red, for example, which is ultimately less capable in terms of information retrieval and tracking ability, but an altogether more relaxing listen.

CONCLUSION
At its price point, this cartridge offers good performance, although I have little doubt that the more expensive OC9 ML3 offers a more sophisticated take on things, and would be worth the extra money if you regularly play Beethoven or Wagner. If your tastes are more towards guitar driven sounds then have a listen, but be a bit wary if your records are past the first flush of youth.

The sound of Audio Technica's new AT-F7 is a bit like Marmite: Those who like it will probably have an ongoing love affair with it, those who don't will find it a touch too spicy to take. In its own way, this is an exceptional cartridge at the price, but it's not for everyone all the same.

Thanks to Sound Hi-Fi for providing the review sample. See panel for contact details.

---

**Verdict**

Pacy, punchy, crisp and detailed performer but some may find it too explicit for their tastes.

**Audio Technica AT-F7**

£299

Sound Hi-Fi

C + 44(0) 1803 833366

www.soundhi-fi.com

**For**

- detail retrieval
- imaging precision
- tuneful bass
- secure tracking

**Against**

- well lit upper midband

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**Measured Performance**

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|                           | Output (5cms/sec rms) | 0.4%V

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**Frequency Response**

(Vinyl Section)

www.hi-fiworld.co.uk

August 2010 Hi-Fi World
In which David Price, Adam Smith and Tim Jarman take a slightly askance look at the wonderful world of hi-fi separates in the past year, and hand out the industry's most coveted awards. Well, sort of...

They just don't get it, do they? The whole idea of a turntable is, aside from the endless hours of listening pleasure it brings, to vex and perplex and frustrate the poor sod who’s got to set it up in the first place. That Brinkmann could deliberately engineer a high end direct drive that requires almost no serious spanner work before it’s up and running is unforgivable. Literally minutes after I’d prized its few component parts out of its box, the Bardo was spinning silently, making sweet music. No fiddly belts to hang around motor pulleys, no offboard motors to painstakingly site, no bouncy-wouncy suspension to spend hours fettling (adjusting for pitch, yaw, compression, rebound, etc.). Rather, the Brinkmann just, errr, worked out of the box. This will never catch on, I tell you!

March 2010's issue saw an amazing machine from Sony, the TC-WE475. It would seem that technology has now advanced to the point that sound recordings can be made at home without the use of digital encoding or compression; i.e. in their original analogue form! The Sony uses something called a 'Compact Cassette', apparently developed in secret by Philips, which contains about 130 metres of thin plastic tape coated with cobalt modified ferric oxide. In another brave move, the media has been made separate from the machine, raising fears that owners could swap music between one another completely out of the view of the internet police. Obviously, such a format could potentially cause problems for the recording industry and we did notice that if one attempted to make a copy of a copy using the 'high speed dubbing' function that the sound quality deteriorated slightly, doubtless due to some sophisticated ARM (Analogue Rights Management) system built into the machine. Rumour has it that if the TC-WE475 is a success other versions may follow, in particular an intriguing pocket-sized playback-only model... In all seriousness, the TC-WE475 was a great sounding recorder that made up for its basic construction with an immaculate factory setup. Outstanding value for money at £130.

We all know how it goes when setting up turntables. Arms need to match well with turntables and cartridge synergy with said arms is even more vital. Get all of this right, though, and you’re laughing. Aren’t you? Well, if my experience is anything to go by, not necessarily. You see, it was back in our November 2009 issue that I reviewed the Consonance T988 unipivot tonearm and I initially did not have to hand a suitable adaptor to fit it to the SME mount on my Garrard 301. No problem, thought I, as I had recently acquired a rather nice Ariston RD80 and was keen to try it out. What’s more, the Consonance dropped straight in to the RD80’s armboard and, with my ATOCMLII bolted in, I was ready to go... Result? Fabulous sound - the three gelled together really well and I was ready to enjoy a good listening session, but then I made the mistake of letting out a sigh of satisfaction for a job well done, and the swirl of air made the stylus jump. Then a wasp flew past and the arm jumped at least three grooves. I jumped up in concern and the arm bounced its way right into the centre of the label. Moral of the story? Unipivots, suspended subchassis turntables and wobbly floors don’t mix, no matter how good they sound! AS
Of all the world's great high end speakers, there's none that can compare with the mighty Revolver Cygnis Golds. Forget your little pea shooter packing, six inch wide floorstanders, their multiple miniature drive units shimmying all over the place in tandem with one another as they hopelessly try to shake the room - here's the real deal! With a thumping fifteen inches per side to emit rumbling sounds, the standmounter destroying sub-bass of LFO's 'LFO' is but a mere trifle. Even at massive volumes, the Revolvers sound like the loudspeaker equivalent of a Jaguar V12 breezing down the outside lane of the M4 at 100mph, barely off idle in top gear. Proof positive that more is more, and that less is less, ultimately in high-end super-speaker land, cubic capacity counts more than any number of 8 inch bass units in a 'three and a half way' configuration. Boom, shake the room! DP

The Adam Acceptance Factor Award

Whilst there are some who have wholeheartedly embraced both the world of digital downloads and the good old fashioned lure of vinyl, it has to be said that there is still something of a gulf between the two. With one of those computer thingies there is no need to worry about tracking force, anti-skating, wobbly floors and the like; you just click in the right place and sit back to enjoy your music for as long as the hard drive will run, rather than to the end of the side. Trouble is, I'm firmly on the vinyl side. I like a physical medium to hold and I love examining each latest piece of LP-related paraphernalia that arrives on the market. I find the whole digital thing soulless and rather lacking in grandeur and pomp. Or rather I did, until I set eyes upon Meridian's Sooloos. I want one desperately and have done so ever since I first clapped eyes on it. As it is the only piece of digital technology ever to have had this effect on me, I can only surmise that the dark lords of Huntingdon have cast some sort of foul hex in my direction. AS

The Big Bang Award

High-end hi-fi is fun. It's fun because, frankly, it's a bit silly. Most people asked to pay tens of thousands of pounds for anything that's a component part in an audio system would merely laugh, shrug or hurrumph. So to actually splash such cash you've got to be one Mars bar short of a picnic, or close to it. What then of those who manufacture such equipment? Well we think Klimo is the worthy winner of the most grandiose audiophile gesture we've seen this year, because its Tafelrunde turntable is surely one of the most over the top ways of dragging a piece of coal through a groove cut into carbonised plastic. It's magnificent, gorgeous, enormous and quite ridiculous. Who would live in a house with this in it? Those with lots of cash, even more space and a taste for epic aesthetic gestures. Klimo, we commend you for your vision! DP

Grandiose Gesture Award

Naim's newest NAIT XS tuner includes a hidden AM receiver section (a first for the company) that we only discovered by a very careful internal inspection! Indeed, no mention is made of what is clearly a fully developed circuit anywhere in the accompanying paperwork or in any of Naim's press releases, and would-be users would even have to drill a hole in the back of the tuner's cabinet to reach the extra aerial socket! Unfortunately we were unable to report on the sound quality of Naim's first AM tuner as the means of accessing it through the front panel controls were so well hidden that we were unable to work out how to get to it in time. It almost was if they were not there... TJ
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### REPLACEMENT STYLUS

- Swiss Quality Diamond Stylus
- ADC XLM MK III
- Akai AN 5, AN 80
- Alva AN11
- Dual DN 145 E, DN 165 E
- JVC DT 55, DT 80
- National EPS 24 CS, P 30 D, P 33 D
- Ortofon FF15/OS600 B, OS600/10/20
- Pioneer PN 210/220/240
- Shure N75C, N75S, SC3SC
- N75E/D J T2 N75-3, N95ED/EJ
- Sony ND 142/155 G, CN234
- ND 143/150/200 G
- Stanton D 681 EEE
- Blue Point Special £239
- Ex - Exchange price same make moving coil cartridge

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[www.audio-components.co.uk](http://www.audio-components.co.uk)
Along with the much vaunted "perfect sound forever" moniker, the great thing about CD was that it was supposed to be compact (as indeed its name suggested)! Can someone please explain then why it's possible to buy a vast four box Compact Disc player that's the size of a supercomputer, in 2010? The concept was silly enough in 1985 (as the late Cambridge CD1, complete with its error correction module) proved, but aren't things supposed to be getting smaller? Here we are marvelling at dCS's Paganini Transport, DAC, Upsampler and Master Clock, plus more cables than you'd see in Patrick Cleasby's bedroom, needed to connect them all - this in the second decade of the twenty first century! Still, the dCS may be huge, but we here at Hi-Fi World love it, even if our other halves do not.

When we reviewed Sony's latest iPod challenger, the X Series Walkman, in the September 2009 issue, it seemed a fun idea to pit what the manufacturers had claimed as "the best sounding Walkman ever" against a group of its mighty forerunners. And when it came to choosing the best of the Discman models only one could really be considered; the amazing D-Z555. Trouble was, our example was down on one channel because one of the dual Burr-Brown DAC chips had failed. As these are now difficult (if not impossible) to obtain, a plan was hatched to fit the single DAC chip that was used in Sony's next high-end design, the D-350. DAC transplants are difficult enough in full-sized machines where there is plenty of room and a good choice of power rails that can be drawn upon but inside the already small and well packed D-Z555 things soon took on a new level of awkwardness... As our picture shows though, everything was crammed into a relatively unused part of the Sony's circuit board and listening tests confirmed that the operation had been a success. Good as the X Series Walkman was, it couldn't match some of the older machines, not least the "HFW Signature" D-Z555!

My Audio Design are frankly in a gang of one when it comes to bonkers names. The acronym of the company's own handle (MAD) rather gives the game away, but further investigation of their product portfolio reveals such titular gems as My Queen, My Sweetie, My Cat, My Ox, My Fly High and My HRH. Yes, really. But my favourite appellation of all is the My Clapton Grand MM. As if naming (an admittedly highly capable) loudspeaker after an ex-Yardbird wasn't enough, adding the mysterious 'Grand MM' to its appellation is just plain, errr, mad. What could this 'Grand MM' be - an unfeasibly large candy coated chocolate sweet in a rainbow colour? Well, who can say? Answers on a postcard please... DP

The hi-fi industry is famously difficult for an unknown manufacturer to break into, because there are so many established names already. We here at Hi-Fi World love to stumble upon something new, but the excitement can be dampened rapidly when the item in question fails to garner any interest from the buying public and the manufacturer either sinks without trace or heads back home. We were very worried that this was going to be the case with Vincent. They arrived on our shores a few years back, wowed us with their very capable hybrid equipment and then promptly disappeared. Well, thanks to Mark Viveash at MV Audio they're back once more. We're going to exchange mobile numbers this time, so we don't lose touch again! AS
IRAN HARRISON HI -Fi TEL: 01283 702875

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Five amps of current ensuring a vice-like grip and precise control of the speakers. The dual mono designed Tucana II amplifier uses three heavy-duty toroidal transformers and is capable of swinging over forty-five line-level inputs along with a five line-level outputs. The CDX series has been upgraded with a suffix to indicate the addition of a new feature. The five new series are the impressive Beethoven Grand-range, the composer who is best known. Featuring a three-point suspension system for the main drivers and a newly designed DAC for digital sources. This happy successful Kandy series with the Kandy K2 amplifier and matching CD player. Roksan replaces its Kandy with the Kandy K2 amplifier and matching CD player. A Gyro SE can always be converted into a GyroDec by purchasing a plinth and dustcover.
**Purchasing any A/V or Hi-Fi Amplifier/Receiver at RRP and Claim Up To 30% Off**

**New products**

**Blu-ray Players**

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**Home Cinema Amplifiers and Receivers**

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**Hi-Fi Systems and Music Servers**

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**Special Offers**

**Amplifiers**

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</table>
email address: thecartridgeman@talktalk.net. UK Distributor: Hi Audio Distribution
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### Digital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Was</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accuphase DP65 CD Player S/H</td>
<td>2800</td>
<td>1399</td>
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<tr>
<td>Copland CDA823 Re boxed full warranty</td>
<td>2300</td>
<td>1399</td>
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<td>Krell Showcase DVD x-demo</td>
<td>3698</td>
<td>1799</td>
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<td>living Control Music Box 3 BNIB</td>
<td>2887</td>
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<tr>
<td>living Control Room Box 4 BNIB</td>
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### Analogue

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<tr>
<td>Koetsu MCR-1 Transformer S/H</td>
<td>3333</td>
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<td>Kuzma Stabi S/ Stogi S double arm version X-demo</td>
<td>2795</td>
<td>1750</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuzma Stogi Tonearm x-demo</td>
<td>1390</td>
<td>799</td>
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<td>Lehmann Black Cube Linear BNIB</td>
<td>1300</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Levinson No320s Phono Module x-demo</td>
<td>995</td>
<td>649</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roksan Xeres DX2/XPS/DSU Standard Power Supply</td>
<td>800</td>
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### Preamplifiers

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<tr>
<td>BAT VK 52-SE Remote Controlled/Balanced Preamplifier S/H</td>
<td>9350</td>
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<td>Audio Research SP17 Phono Preamplifier x-demo</td>
<td>2998</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graaf GM13.5 BI/II Valve Preamplifier S/H</td>
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### Amplifiers

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<td>47 lab 50 w Gain card x-demo</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1199</td>
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<tr>
<td>47 lab 50 Humpty PSU x-demo</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1199</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chord Electronics SPM1400 B mono Integra S/H</td>
<td>12000</td>
<td>5499</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electrocompaniet AW250R S/H</td>
<td>4999</td>
<td>2999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graaf GM100 Power amplifier re-valved S/H</td>
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<td>Prima Luna Prologue 2 Silver x-demo</td>
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### Loudspeakers

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<tr>
<td>Martin Logan Fresco pair inc stands S/H</td>
<td>1500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin Logan Purity x-demo</td>
<td>2700</td>
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<td>Martin Logan Vantage dark cherry x-demo</td>
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<td>3999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin Logan Summit Cherry S/H</td>
<td>8998</td>
<td>4750</td>
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<td>PenAudio Charisma x-demo</td>
<td>2715</td>
<td>1899</td>
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<tr>
<td>PenAudio Charm Sub modules x-demo</td>
<td>2175</td>
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<tr>
<td>PenAudio Serenade x-demo</td>
<td>7250</td>
<td>4999</td>
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<td>Sonus faber Cremona Elipsa Maple x-demo</td>
<td>12980</td>
<td>7999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sonus faber Toy Tower tower BNIB</td>
<td>1650</td>
<td>1499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson Audio System 8 Dessert Sand 2 yrs old S/H</td>
<td>23500</td>
<td>12500</td>
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### Cables and Accessories

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<td>47 lab Kishermon Speaker cables 2x 4m x-demo</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>399</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attacama Equinox 3 tier stand x-demo</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>199</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attacama Europa Reference 8 3 tier S/H</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>299</td>
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</table>

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We have a large record collection mainly Jazz and Classical from £3.00 up to £20 for some boxed sets. Please call for more details. Also we have a vast range of part worn valves mostly very high quality Telefunken, Siemens, Mullard, Brimar, Jan Phillips etc. Ring for prices and list.

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ARCALPHA 3 Amp. Rotel CD Player RCD856 Kef Calinda 3Way fixed front speakers Rega Planar 2. £185. Tel 01803 638889 (Devon).

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APPROX 100 magazines, mainly Hi-Fi World. £50. buyer to collect. 01772 632082.

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MICROMEGA STAGE 5, £2000, CDX512S MC Reference (€200) Also 7, PSX-R and FM 7.5 (£600, but can split) all boxed, and in mint condition. Also, Linn Kann stands (£50). Contact 0779 5551 142 or rahal lam4@hotmail.com

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AKAI AM-U03 amplifier vgc £60. Nakamichi DVD10s dvd player vgc with memory £120.00. Hitachi Turntable HT-405 vgc, £50.Sansui SX-99 Direct- Drive Turntable vgc £120. Teac MD-H500 Mini Disc recorder vgc with original box,manual,remote control, £15. Sony SCD-X680 cd player mint condition with original remote,manual,remote control, £15. Tel 0121 246 9522 (afternoons) Tel: 07772 107883 email: n.mogul@yahoo.com

SONY ST920 Tuner vgc with original box and manual, £60. Technics RS151 Center Deck mint condition, £35. Pioneer SA500 amplifier £60.Tec Ecstasy CD player vgc £20.00. Yamaha CDX-T CD Transport (Quartz-silver ) mint condition, little use,boxed, £350 (N.B, Transport forever £105). Excellent condition, boxed. £275, call 01483 271669 (Surrey)

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REGA RB300 complete with tungsten counterweight, Michelle locknut, two spacers, Neutrik Prok phono. £85 or exchange for VHD. The First cables. Contact Robin on 0208 670 6828.

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CYRUS VS2 pre amplifier, boxed with instructions £350. Cyrus CDX 8, box, little use, £45.Tel: 01798 865 699 (West Sussex)

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Well, get down to your friendly local newsagent and it will be better still, should you happen upon the September issue of Hi-Fi World magazine! We've our usual wide range of sizzling products for your delectation, as you sip your PG Tips and huddle under the brolly on Weston Super Mare beach. Vinylists will love the new EAT Forte S turntable, and digiphiles should enjoy Vincent's hybrid tube touting HDCD spinning C-60. Amplifier aficionados on a budget may be seduced by the lovely little Cambridge Audio 350A, and loudspeaker lovers will want to read about Waterfall's Victoria Evos (pictured). Here's just some of what we hope to bring you:

**Cambridge Audio 350A Integrated Amplifier**
**Acoustic Energy Neo V2 One Loudspeakers**
**Musical Fidelity M3 Integrated Amplifier**
**Marantz NA-7004 Network Music Player**
**Waterfall Victoria Evo Loudspeakers**
**Chord Chordette Dual Phono Stage**
**Amphion Helium 520 Loudspeakers**
**Magneplanar MG12 Loudspeakers**
**Audio Technica AT-F3/II Cartridge**
**XTZ A100 D3 Integrated Amplifier**
**Teac CR-H500 DNT-B Mini System**
**SuperTest: Blu-ray Players**
**Hisound Studio MP3 Player**
**Guru QM60 Loudspeakers**
**Avid Pulsus Phono Stage**
**Olde Worlde: Sony FH-7**
**Vincent C-60 CD Player**
**EAT Forte S Turntable**

**Pick up the September 2009 Issue of Hi-Fi World on Sale July 30th, or Subscribe and Get It Delivered to Your Door:** p82
TERMS AND CONDITIONS: Only one advert per reader. Maximum length per advert is 30 words. Adverts over 30 words will not be accepted. No Trade Adverts. This section is strictly for readers selling second-hand hi-fi equipment only. Telephone numbers and E-mail addresses are treated as one word. Model numbers are treated as one word i.e. Quad 303 = two words. Sorry, we cannot accept adverts over the telephone. The Publisher reserves the right to judge submissions.

You can email your advert to us at: classifieds@hi-fiworld.co.uk or write or type your advertisement copy in block capitals with one word per box and post it to us at:

Hi-Fi World Free Readers Ads,
Unit G4, Argo House, Kilburn Park Road,
London, NW6 5LF.

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Free Reader Classified Ads Copy Deadlines

September 2010 - 7th July 2010
October 2010 - 5th August
Matt Monro; 'the singing busman', 'the British Sinatra'; call him what you will, but also recognise his ability to coat any song with a sense of style and ease. The latter is most important for, if anyone could justify the term 'easy listening', Matt Monro would. His interpretations were notable for being unforced, that much he had in common with Bing Crosby. Monro never stood in the way of a song, he merely provided a platform for it which is the job of any good vocalist. There were no tricks with Monro, no Whitney Houston-type vocal calisthenics that, once completed, makes you wonder if she's singing a song or gurgling mouthwash before going to bed. Instead, Monro stood to one side and let the song have the spotlight. Fortunately, for struggling songwriters who sometimes presented Monro with inferior material, his delivery also lifted the tune to be shown in its best possible light.

A master of the ballad, Monro could swing, if necessary. Okay, he didn’t quite have the sexual danger of a Sinatra, the jazz chops of a Tormé or the ethereal vocal space produced by Nat ‘King’ Cole but, then, no sane prospective vocal singer would want to for fear of being dismissed as a copyist. Instead, Monro went for ’smooth’. An approach that enabled the song to speak for itself. In fact, he had a unique place in UK and European popular music. Here was a man who focused more on European culture, rather than the safe option of plundering, as too many vocalists do, the American Songbook. So, with Monro, we see Lionel Bart instead of Irving Berlin and John Barry instead of Harry Warren. This gave Monro an edge. Something the majority of his contemporaries lacked.

The best way to get to know Monro is via this superbly produced five CD box set, via EMI, that includes all of Monro’s A-sides and B-sides on Fontana, Decca, EMI, Parlophone and Capitol, including 22 tracks that appear on CD for the first time plus Spanish and French language singles. According to Richard Moore, who remastered this collection, collating the masters, via multiple sources, proved arduous yet rewarding. "The US-recorded Capitol material came from the original US mix-down tapes rather than UK dubs, allowing a number of tracks to be released in stereo for the first time. In one case ‘The Impossible Dream’ has been taken from a master tape for the first time since the sixties. In 1973, a dub from a vinyl copy of the song was used for a compilation — and has been used ever since until this set."

Spanning 130 tracks, the box set tracks Monro’s development from 1956 to 1984. All the hits are here: ‘Portrait Of My Love’ (1960), ‘From Russia With Love’ (1963) and ‘Born Free’ (1966). There are however, valuable enhancements to Monro’s currently available catalogue. "Some of the mixes were made in the sixties but never released,” said Moore. "‘How Do You Do’, for instance, was mixed at the same time as the single in 1966 and edited from two takes. The problem was that the stereo version was only pulled from the vaults for use in 1972 and then, according to the tape box, ‘edited as per common sense’. But this was not correct compared to the single. The multitrack has long since gone but, thankfully, whoever edited the original stereo mix left the offcuts of the other takes on the reel so I was able to reconstruct the single edit." During the remastering, microphone pops and bad edits have been digitally repaired. External processing has been kept to a bare minimum, however, which means that audiophiles will be pleased to hear that, apart from thirty seconds on one song, no noise reduction or hiss removal was utilised during the transfer or mastering process and no compression or limiting was used.

Anyone interested in this collection should also look out for the enhanced edition of the recently released biography penned by his daughter, Michele Monro, entitled ‘The Singer’s Singer’. This Special Reserve edition is a slipcased version complete with an additional, soft back, volume co-written by Michele Monro and Richard Moore. It details Monro’s complete record, TV and radio sessions, a worldwide discography and a key studio album overview. This volume also includes an additional CD featuring twenty-two, previously unreleased, rare tracks that are only available via the ‘Special Reserve’ edition. Search Amazon for a copy. PR
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Our aim when designing the ECI-5 MK II was to make the sound more modern, enhancing the details and dynamics. Feedback from our listening team tell us that we have succeeded – “this amplifier sounds much larger than the size and the price tag”

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