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welcome

For us, this was a particularly fascinating issue because of the problems we encountered with products under review. Looking back on the action I do worry slightly that we seem to be getting bogged down in digital issues so complex and obscure, none could understand them. Are we unwittingly learning to accept a degree of digital complexity that does not sit well with the real-world?

I can't help thinking about the rise and fall of the home computer here: in the end the complexities and unreliability became both absurd and intolerable. I knew of families who invested in a home computer for themselves and their children and ended up being unable to use it. Self-defeating technology no less: clever, but stupid too.

Being an engineer I tended to thrive on such stuff but normal people do not. Long discussions with Sony, in particular, but also Chord Electronics and Astell&Kern, gave me a twinge of unease. I just hope hi-fi isn’t going the way of home computers where there’s been a mass migration to the iPad, just because the thing works.

Downloading music files isn’t difficult and playing them on a portable player like the amazing Astell&Kern AK240 reviewed in this issue (see p54) is relatively straightforward. But here we encountered the novel issue of a plug the world knows nothing of.

The Sony HAP-Z1ES just would not work for us under test, for another reason so obscure it defies belief (see p42), and Chord Electronics Hugo DAC (see p16) had us puzzling over whether the volume control was white, or blue and whether the sample rate light was purple or light purple, and whether we were playing 176.4kHz PCM or DSD. A night out in Blackpool would have been less confusing!

Happily, they were all great products: progress seems to come at the price of complexity. But that is a trend that ought not to continue or we will all end up abandoning modern digital products in favour of wind-up gramophones. This’ll keep contributor Tony Bolton and reader Mario Kopke Tulio in Portugal eternally happy, as you’ll understand from our Letters this month (see p27). If, like them, you are interested in wind-ups, or DSD, please join the debate and write to us.

In the meantime, I do hope you both understand and enjoy our reviews.

Noel Keywood, editor.

testing (see www.hi-fiworld.co.uk for full explanations of all our tests)

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 best in the world.

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EXCELLENT
GOOD
MEDIOCRE
POOR
VALUE

amongst the best
extremely capable
worth auditioning
unremarkable
flawed
keenly priced

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“In short, I can honestly say the Tellurium Q Black Diamond interconnects and speaker cable are the very best leads that I have ever had in my system.”

Tony Bolton, Hi Fi World 2014

“I’ve talked a lot about Tellurium Q of late. I’ve also sung its praises constantly. To be honest, I wish I had something to grump about, it would make a change but when a company gets a series of products “this right” it is difficult to say anything negative.”

Paul Rigby, Hi Fi World 2012

“A certain magic when it comes to absolute sound quality”

Jimmy Hughes, Hi Fi Choice 2012

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NEWS

MCINTOSH HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

McIntosh Laboratory has launched a dedicated headphone amplifier for the first time in its history. The new MHA100 comes complete with four digital inputs and remote control and employs a new adaptation of McIntosh’s autoformer technology which offers three selectable headphone impedance ranges: 8-40, 40-150 and 150-600 ohms.

It also features McIntosh’s new Headphone Crossfeed Director (HXD) technology that, says the company, allows recordings played through headphones to image like conventional speakers.

The internal McIntosh Digital Engine offers four digital inputs (coaxial, optical, balanced digital AES/EBU and USB) allowing decoding at up to 32bit/192kHz. The MHA100 upsamples digital signals to 192kHz with 32bit resolution before the D/A process begins. Two analogue inputs (including balanced) have also been appointed.

Electronic input switching is also included. The preamplifier uses logic circuits controlling electromagnetic switches on all inputs and operating functions.

The MHA100 is more than just a headphone amplifier: 50W stereo speaker outputs are included for use with loudspeakers. The power amplifier uses ThermalTrak1 output transistors and McIntosh’s patented gold-plated output terminals. Loudspeaker listening is automatically switched off when headphones are connected.

The MHA100’s multifunction OLED display indicates source selection, volume levels, trim settings and set-up functions. Price is £4,995. For more information, call 01202 911886 or go to www.jordanacoustics.co.uk.

NAIM MUSO ALL-IN-ONE

Naim sprang a surprise when it took the wraps off its latest product at a launch event in central London. The Naim Muso is a one-box streamer/speaker system featuring six Naim-designed drivers powered by 450 Watts of digital amplification and priced at £895.

Measuring just under 63cm wide, 12cm tall and 25.6cm deep, the aluminium-clad all-in-one unit boasts Wi-Fi, UPnP, Bluetooth and Apple AirPlay compatibility as well as internet radio. It can handle file sizes up to 24-bit/192kHz via wired ethernet connection and up to 48kHz in wireless mode.

The on-board active speaker system uses a custom-designed tweeter, midrange driver and bass unit for each channel – each powered by their own dedicated 75 Watt amplifier.

Digital signal processing allows for boundary gain compensation when the unit is placed close to walls and a loudness function to boost bass and treble at low volumes. A large, circular aluminium volume control — derived from Naim’s top-of-the-range Statement amplifier – also includes touch-sensitive buttons for selecting inputs as well as pause play and track skip. As well as wireless connectivity the Muso also has a 3.5mm analogue input, optical digital and USB.

A dedicated control app for both Apple and Android mobile devices will also be available when the Muso hits the shops, including the John Lewis chain, in September. Watch out for a full review in Hi-Fi World shortly.


CANOR’S NEW CD/DAC

The new Canor CD1.10 combines a CD player and 24bit/192kHz DAC in one box along with a valve output stage feeding both XLR and RCA analogue outputs. The integrated CD drive features a disengagement bearing driving mechanism to decouple and minimize jitter.

Two separate Burr Brown PCM 1792 24bit/192kHz DACs are used, one for each channel. Switchable digital filtering allows fine-tuning. External digital sources can be connected by optical, coaxial or USB 2.0 interfaces.

Internally, the CD 1.10’s circuit boards feature Canor’s own patented PCB Milling Technology: the precision removal of specific areas of the circuit board enables low level of dielectric loss throughout the circuit. In addition, the CD 1.10’s power supply features valve rectification.

Supported formats include CD, CD-R, CD-RW and hybrid-SACD, PCM up to 24bit/192kHz and 2.8/5.6MHz DSD. The Canor CD1.10 is available in silver or black, priced at £3,295.

Go to www.canor-audio.com or call 0118 981 4238 for more information.
ONKYO ‘EMOTION DELIVERED’
Onkyo has launched its 2014 mid-range hi-fi/home cinema receivers.

Both Onkyo’s ‘Emotion Delivered’ TX-NR737 and TX-NR838 network AV receivers feature high-current power amplification with dual Digital Signal Processing (DSP) engines and 24bit/192kHz Burr-Brown D/A conversion. The TX-NR737 and TX-NR838 also both feature proprietary AccuEQ room calibration.

Both models allow you to hook up a record player. What’s more, TX-NR838 owners can select Pure Direct Analogue Path mode to physically shut down all digital circuitry in the receiver, eliminating electrical interference.

Built-in Wi-Fi and DLNA compatibility allows the streaming of high-resolution music libraries from PCs or media servers, with search, track selection and playback controls all enabled via the remote app. A variety of file formats are supported including 5.6MHz DSD, Dolby TrueHD and gapless 24bit/192kHz FLAC and WAV.

TX-NR737 is priced at £800 with the TX-NR838 fetching £1,000. Call 0871 2001996 or click on www.onkyo.co.uk for more information.

DYNAUDIO EVIDENCE PLATINUM
Dynaudio’s new flagship speakers are finished in wood grains, incorporating a four-centimetre thick mid-section milled from aluminium. Weighing 11.5kg each and measuring 194cm in height, the design includes Dynaudio Directivity Control technology which reportedly reduces sound reflections from the floor and ceiling of any room by at least 75% through the exact matching of the phase responses of the individual drive units, consequently achieving a sound radiation vertically focused towards the listener.

The crossover includes ceramic resistors, copper air coils and Solen capacitors. The glass-fibre reinforced circuit boards have copper traces connected to the drive units, with pure copper cables and pure copper, gold plated WBT NextGen terminals.

The diaphragms of the new Evidence Platinum bass and midrange drive units are manufactured from MSP (Magnesium Silicate Polymer), a composite material developed by Dynaudio. Ultra-lightweight aluminium voice-coils with powerful magnet structures drive the speaker cones.

The tweeter is an Esotec2 with Precision Coating featuring a coated fabric soft dome. The magnet assembly of the tweeter is aerodynamically shaped and internally damped to fully absorb the energy dissipated from the rear of the tweeter dome. Price is £58,500 per pair.

Call 01733 350878 or log on to www.analoguese-ducation.net for more information.

MUSIC STREAMER III
The HRT Music Streamer III is a digital to analogue converter (DAC) that connects a computer, tablet or smartphone to the analogue inputs of any audio system. With its asynchronous USB transceiver, differential mode conversion and a differential signal path, all power requirements for the Music Streamer III are supplied from the host.

The Firmware can be updated using HRT’s UpStream Utility, available for Windows computers and now Mac computers, using OS 10.9 (Mavericks). Price is £189.

Tel 020 8948 4153 or click on www.audiofreaks.co.uk for more information.

CHORD’S HDMI
The Chord Company has added to its audio cable range with a new high-speed HDMI cable in lengths of up to 20m.

Key to the new cable’s design is an improved conductor: the Active Resolution HDMI V2 now features heavier gauge conductors for all critical signal paths, employing silver-plated oxygen-free copper 26 AWG conductors. The Active Resolution HDMI V2 is fitted with a die-cast gold-plated HDMI plug with a metal body to improve shielding. Further features include low-loss gas-foamed polyethylene insulation with all critical signal conductors protected with high-frequency-effective shielding.

The original Active Resolution HDMI cable was designed to work in any situation that required a long HDMI cable, carrying a high-speed signal in lengths of up to 20m. Active Resolution HDMI V2 is now available in lengths of 0.75m; 1.5m; 2m; 3m; 5m; 8m; 10m; 15m and 20m. Prices start at £115 for the 0.75m version.

For further information call 01980 625700 or go to www.chord.co.uk

SONORO
New lifestyle music systems from Sonoro include GoLondon, a portable, durable, colourful and mess-resistant FM/DAB/DAB+ radio; the living room system, sonoroSTEROEO, a 2.1 channel stereo, Bluetooth streaming, CD, FM/DAB/DAB+ radio and bespoke bedroom systems in sonoroRADIO and sonoroCD. The former offers Bluetooth streaming, FM/DAB/DAB+ radio/clock/alarm while the sonoroCD adds a CD facility.

Prices are: GoLondon, £129; sonoroSTEROEO, £499; sonoroRADIO, £249 and sonoroCD, £329.

Call 0843 523 6344 or visit www.sounddesigndistribution.co.uk for more information.
YAMAHA SPOTIFIED
Yamaha says the CRX-N560D micro Hi-Fi and R-N500 networked amplifier have been updated to include Spotify Connect. This will allow anyone with a Spotify premium subscription to stream music to their chosen system at the touch of a button.

Using the R-N500, Yamaha offers access to Net Radio, Airplay, USB playback, iDevice USB connection, DLNA streaming, and Bluetooth streaming using the YBA-I1 adapter. The CRX-N560D micro Hi-Fi is equipped with two AUX inputs, subwoofer output, vTuner Internet radio, DAB radio, expandable to Bluetooth again with the YBA-I1 adapter. The CRX-N560D is also available as part of the MCR-560 package which contains the NSBP182 speakers.

Price of the RN-500 is £449.95 and the CRX-N560D retails for £399.95. The MCR-560 package is available for £499.95.

Click on uk.yamaha.com or call 0844 811 1116 for more information.

FURUTECH USB
Following on from the original GT2 USB cable, Furutech has introduced the GT2 Pro. Furutech's GT2 Pro USB cable is formed around Alpha OCC silver copper alloy conductors with high-density polyethylene insulation/dielectric. It features three-layer shielding and 24k gold-plated USB 2.0 connectors with a 24k gold-plated copper alloy EMI shield incorporated into the connector. Prices are: 0.3m, £135; 0.6m, £150; 1.2m, £180; 1.8m, £210; 3.6m, £300 & 5.0m, £370.

Click on www.furutech.com or call 0118 981 4238 for more information.

LINN AKURATE EXAKT
Scottish high-end audio manufacturer Linn has announced it has now implemented its Exakt digital loudspeaker technology in its Akurate range of products.

The new Akurate Exakt system — comprising an Akurate Exakt DSM digital streamer/pre-amp and a pair of Exakt Akubarik floorstanding speakers — is now on sale priced at £25,500.

Those who already own a pair of Akubarik Activ speakers can also upgrade to Exakt specification for £14,000.

Linn's Exakt design relies on music files being kept in the digital domain as long as possible. It means the Akurate Exakt DSM connects to its partnering Akubarik speakers via a CAT5 cable. Once signals reach the loudspeakers they are passed to Linn's proprietary Exact Engine digital sound processing engine which is said to eliminate the magnitude and phase distortion of analogue speaker crossovers and also corrects for the manufacturing tolerances of the individual drive units. Linn says this allows for the dealer/installer to optimise each system for the room they are used in and account for elements such as furnishings, wooden floors and boundary reflections.

The company also claims the reduction in the number of 'lossy' stages in the audio path and shortening of the analogue signal path gives dramatic sonic benefits.

Further details are available from Linn's website at www.linn.co.uk or from Linn dealers across the country.

CADENCE FOR ANDROID
Cyrus Audio’s bespoke control app has been released for use on Android with their all-in-one Lyric Series products.

Cadence allows you to control all of the inputs of the Cyrus streaming device. Full playback control allows you to completely replace a remote control with the app. Much like the screen of the Lyric itself, Cadence allows you to enjoy album artwork where available and the Android app will even take you straight to a Wikipedia entry relating to the music you're listening to.

Cadence allows you to save music in Favourites lists, providing a way to create playlists with a phone or tablet. Lyric Series products will need a small firmware update in order to work with the Android app. Customers can do this themselves.

Go to www.cyrusaudio.com or call 01480 410900 for more information.
When McIntosh announced a new luxury integrated amplifier in the shape of the £10,000 MA8000 we were keen to be the first to get our sweaty hands on it. And sweaty was indeed the operative word once we'd hauled it into our listening room. For this is a juggernaut of an amplifier — weighing in at over 45kg (60.3kg in its packaging) to be the very definition of a two-man lift.

Not only is it heavy it's also imposing in size, measuring some 44.5cm x 24cm x 55.8cm (W/H/D), making it amongst the biggest amplifiers out there, be they power or integrated. This McIntosh is purposed as a complete digital and analogue audiophile system hub.

As such, in addition to its conservatively-rated 300 Watts per channel of output power (our Measured Performance gave a 450 Watt figure into 8 Ohms), the MA8000 features a total of 15 inputs, a proprietary digital-to-analogue convertor (dubbed the McIntosh Digital Engine), high-quality headphone output and a fully-adjustable dedicated MM and MC phono stage. And, if so required, a Home Theatre pass-through allows for incorporation into a multi-channel domestic cinema system.

Digital connectivity comprises many pairs of assignable coaxial and optical inputs, plus asynchronous USB 2.0, capable of decoding files up to 32-bit/192kHz.

Additionally, there are six line level and two balanced analogue connections, while the MM and MC phono sections feature adjustable cartridge loading and impedance matching so they can be optimised to suit a wide range of turntable and cartridge configurations.

For headphone lovers there's a dedicated high-drive circuit able to handle almost any set of cans you choose from 20 to 600 Ohms and the MA8000A also sports a discrete analogue eight-band tone control to allow for manual adjustment of the sound — although this can be by-
Balanced analogue inputs and outputs through XLR sockets on the rear panel, massive loudspeaker terminals, and digital connectivity, including asynchronous USB.

passed for the purists out there.

In true McIntosh style the output transistors are autotransformer-coupled (see Measured Performance and Noel Keywood’s box out) meaning 2, 4 and 6 Ohm taps are available on the rear for accurate loudspeaker matching – unheard of in transistor amplifiers.

And, finally, two big, blue-lit power meters let you know just how many of those 300 Watts per channel you’re using.

It’s probably true to say the McIntosh design is a look that divides opinion – but, personally, I love it. There’s something about those big, blue meters and the illuminated green brand logo that just screams ‘serious hi-fi’ – perhaps the nearest any solid-state amplifier comes in looks to replicating the romance of valve equipment.

SOUND QUALITY

With those blue-tinted meters illuminating our listening room and connected to a pair of Spendor’s new D7 floorstanders (see review in this issue) it didn’t take the McIntosh long to reveal its prowess.

In short, it looks big – and it sounds big too. With all that power on tap the MA8000A has the muscle to drive almost any speaker you care to name and it gripped the Spendors like nothing else I’ve heard. What that translated to was an eminently lifelike and captivating sound.

Individual instruments are rich in timbre and bass especially rolls into the room with captivating force. Eleanor McEvoy’s ‘I’ve Got You To See Me Through’ is an exquisitely recorded track where the five-string bass underpins an upbeat piano/guitar refrain. Through the McIntosh the low notes were fabulously convincing.

the overall soundstage with the attack and decay of instruments beautifully nuanced.

Played through a pair of the new Magneplanar 1.7 loudspeakers (see review this issue) and the orchestra was portrayed in its full majesty – the sound swelling gloriously to fill the room.

Not surprisingly, those reserves and the overall soundstage with the attack and decay of instruments beautifully nuanced. The Minnesota Orchestra’s rendition of Ravel’s ‘Rapsodie Espagnole’ conducted by Stanislaw Skrowaczewski was crisp and atmospheric, individual musicians placed securely in their place within the soundstage with the attack and decay of instruments beautifully nuanced.

Instead it lets the music flow in a totally organic and refreshing manner. In this the MA8000 is more reminiscent of a good tube amp than a heavyweight solid-state.

The mid-band is lush, generous and totally satisfying. But it doesn’t do this at the expense of dynamic shading or detail retrieval.

The Minnesota Orchestra’s rendition of Ravel’s ‘Rapsodie Espagnole’ conducted by Stanislaw Skrowaczewski was crisp and atmospheric, individual musicians placed securely in their place within the soundstage with the attack and decay of instruments beautifully nuanced.

Importantly, the McIntosh has the resolution and timing to let you know this CD is not merely a sonic squall but a carefully-crafted piece of melodic invention allied to some fearsome, visceral guitar lines.

Impressively, the McIntosh manages to retain that sense of clarity and authority even when played at lower volumes. This is one amplifier that doesn’t have to flex its muscles to give of its best – something that those of you who indulge in late-night listening sessions will doubtless appreciate.

On top of that it is also adept at throwing out a wide soundstage as well as imparting realistic height and depth.

All this was with the eight-band tone control section in bypass mode. Dialling it in and trying various settings showed that the facility is effective at subtly altering the sound of some tracks – and was useful in taming the fizzy, digital-edged harshness of some modern pop and rock recordings.

Having said that, the MA8000 sounds just so naturally ‘right’ most of the time I can see many users simply leaving it alone.

Moving to high-res playback through the in-built DAC – sorry, McIntosh Digital Engine – and the MA8000 remained as sure-footed as
HEAR LIKE A PRO

"These are supremely musical mini-monitors with astounding bass punch and rhythmic ability allied to class-leading resolution."
Hi-Fi World, July 2013

To celebrate 50 years of groundbreaking innovation, our LS50 mini monitor applies KEF's latest acoustic technologies from Blade and beyond to deliver the uncompromised sonic purity, accuracy and transparency we originally pioneered with the legendary LS3/5a professional studio monitor for the BBC.

www.kef.com/LS50
with CD.

The crunching opening guitar chords of The Clash’s London Calling (24/96) crashed true and clear from the loudspeakers. And when Paul Simonon’s descending bass line cuts in, it is as full, clear and rounded as I have heard from any amplifier regardless of price.

Similarly a 24/96 download of Get The Blessing’s ‘OC DC’ revealed in, it is as full, clear and rounded as open or finely-etched as some other stand-alone units I’ve heard.

If there’s a criticism to be made it’s perhaps the fact that the McIntosh’s DAC section isn’t quite as open or finely-etched as some other stand-alone units I’ve heard.

It’s not bad or disappointing in any way but doesn’t quite hit the exemplary heights of the rest of the package.

That really is nit-picking though. Taken as a whole the MA8000 is a genuinely desirable and sweet-sounding piece of hi-fi exotica.

In short it’s just the right piece of equipment to have you dipping into your musical collection for hours on end whether it be on vinyl, CD or in digital download form. And that, after all, is what we buy hi-fi for.

**CONCLUSION**

No doubt about it, the MA8000A is a tour-de-force design. It has massive reserves of power making it capable of driving almost any loudspeaker on the planet yet a detail and subtlety to its presentation that is truly beguiling.

At first sight that £10,000 price tag might make you catch your breath – but putting together a comparable system of pre-amp, beefy power amp, DAC and adjustable phono stage at this level could well cost a lot more – especially when you factor in the cost of cables and interconnects.

Factor in its classic looks, bomb-proof build and sheer versatility and the MA8000 has everything it takes to form the heart of a seriously impressive high-end set-up.

---

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The MA8000 produced a massive 450 Watts into an 8 Ohm load, falling slightly to 440 Watts into a 4 Ohm load. The presence of output auto-transformers (a single winding with taps) accounts for power not doubling as usual; this amplifier is not a constant voltage source, but a generator requiring a matched load, like a valve amplifier. Its 2 Ohm tap can survive just about any load and is ideal for electrostatic loudspeakers, that commonly sink to 2 Ohms at 20kHz.

Distortion was unusually low at all output levels and all frequencies, measuring around 0.005%, even at 10kHz. There was no sign of crossover distortion, even at low levels, and the heat sinks got quite hot during test; the output stage is biased quite strongly into Class A.

Input sensitivity via CD was low at 400mV, but noise low too at -107dB. The MM phono stage had a 4mV sensitivity and the MC phono stage ten times less at 0.4mV, both normal enough values and satisfactory for a wide range of cartridges.

Both MM and MC phono stages have a fixed high pass warp filter that rolls off output below 20Hz. Equalisation was accurate across the audio band. Equivalent input noise levels were very low, MC managing 0.032uV, so the MC stage is very quiet and will suit low output cartridges. Although input sensitivity seems low, voltage gain available in the MA8000 is huge.

The DAC worked to 192kHz and frequency response extended to 43kHz. Distortion levels were high from the DAC however, measuring 0.33% with 48kHz 24bit resolution signal; most DACs manage 0.1% here or better, so the digital input isn’t distinguished. As a result EIAJ Dynamic Range was 97dB through the speaker output and 107dB through the XLR line outputs. These are exceptional figures (120dB is possible).

The MA8000 is enormously powerful, measurement shows, and has super low distortion, due to the use of output auto-transformers. It’s phono stages were very good. Only the DAC’s linearity could have and should have been better, in order to lift available dynamic range above mediocre, as hi-res goes. NK.

| Power | 450watts |
| CD/tuner/aux. | |
| Frequency response | Hz-kHz |
| Separation | dB |
| Noise | dB |
| Distortion | % |
| Sensitivity | mV |
| Disc | |
| Frequency response | Hz-kHz |
| Separation | dB |
| Noise | dB |
| Distortion | % |
| Sensitivity | mV |
| Overload | |

---

**NOEL SAYS -**

Output transformers in a transistor amplifier? Barking mad! They add to size, weight and cost — and transistor amps don’t need ‘em. Or do they?

An auto-transformer allows the transistors to drive a high load — the transformer. This minimises distortion, whilst also acting as protection for the output devices by shielding them from the loudspeaker, a low load.

Counter-intuitive it definitely is, but also very cunning. The MA8000 sounded fabulously strong-armed and powerful as a result, whilst having clear yet sweet treble. It drove every loudspeaker we had superbly, gaining full marks at Hi-Fi World towers. Brilliant.

---

**MCINTOSH**

**MA8000 £9,995.00**

**OUTSTANDING - amongst the best**

**VERDICT**

Power, poise and passion rolled into one — McIntosh’s MA8000 is a superb piece of engineering. It combines superb musicality with masses of detail and vast flexibility. Demands to be heard.

**FDR**

- power
- smooth and musical
- extended, controlled bass
- MM/MC phono stage
- eight-band tone control

**AGAINST**

- price
- DAC could be better

Jordan Acoustics
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Jordan Acoustics are the only Burmester Reference Specialist to offer up to 36 months 0% Finance***

Since 1977, Burmester has been manufacturing high-end audio components of unsurpassed quality. From a single product to a complete system, Burmester and Jordan Acoustics deliver incredible music solutions.
McIntosh MHA100 [NEW]
2-channel headphone amplifier I £4,995.00
20% deposit, then £133.20 x 30 months* **

McIntosh MAX70 [NEW]
integrated audio system I £5,995.00
20% deposit, then £153.87 x 30 months* **

McIntosh MT5 [NEW]
2-channel precision turntable I £7,495.00
20% deposit, then £199.87 x 30 months* **

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How to sell yet another headphone amplifier into a market saturated with them? Use a Rob Watts-designed DAC that shades all else, offering massive dynamic range.

Enter the Chord Electronics Hugo portable DAC/headphone amplifier, price £1700, designed by Rob Watts — including the central Digital-to-Analogue (DAC) converter chip inside, no less. Few people can do this; DACs almost always come from the design team of a large electronics company.

Rob Watts started Deltec Precision Audio way back in the early 1990s, building amplifiers and DACs. A digital audio designer beyond most, Rob well knows all the arguments against digital, and also the difficulties of pinning down what we are hearing. His long experience has been employed to produce Hugo, making it truly unique; our Rohde & Schwarz UPV audio analyser showed it has a massive 138dB dynamic range — no less than 20dB better than all else around it. So Hugo looked overwhelmingly impressive before I even listened to it.

In keeping with Chord Electronics styling, Hugo comes in a bullet-proof cast alloy case, sprayed matt silver. Measuring 132mm wide, 96mm high and 24mm deep it is compact, and weighs 400gms — not overly heavy, but not easily pocketable, except in the large pockets of cargo trousers or a coat. Chord Electronics label it “portable”.

Hugo is mains driven and/or internal-battery driven for use on the move. It uses an external wall wart power supply (12V, 0.5A), connected through a thin, two-core cable 6ft long (1.8m) to run tethered, whilst charging the on-board battery; the wart is unmarked and needs a Hugo label to identify it from the swarm we all have nowadays (and the mountain in our office!).

Hugo can be unplugged from its supply and will work from its internal battery (5 hours charge time) for 14 hours. In this role it is a super high-quality portable DAC and headphone amplifier which you would typically pair with a portable player having a digital output. This could well be a £150 FiiO X3 but I used an Astell&Kern AK240, reviewed in this issue, able to play DSD and DXD, both formats which Hugo can handle. You can plug in the digital output...
of a CD player of course, optical or electrical, Hugo will handle just about anything.

The other point about Hugo is that it swings enormous output into headphones, making it able to power even the most insensitive to high volumes. These days that means 2V minimum, the output of a CD player, and Hugo delivers 5V no less (typical portables deliver a weedy 0.3V).

So Hugo is designed for use in a hi-fi system as well as on the move with insensitive, high-quality headphones. And of course it works from a computer too, connected through USB.

Chord supply a wide range of connecting cables, comprising two Toslink-to-Toslink opticals (short and long), Toslink optical-to-headphone socket optical as used on Apple devices, and a phono-to-BNC adaptor for the S/PDIF electrical input so a BNC terminated cable can be used. Three white computer connection leads are provided, two microUSB-to-USB A (short and long), and microUSB-to-microUSB. A memory stick carries a pdf version of the paper instruction manual, and a PC executable (.exe) file for Microsoft Windows Vista 7 or 8 equipped PCs when HD input is used. Apple and Android do not require audio drivers and Mavericks (Apple) works up to 384kHz without difficulty.

For convenience Hugo accepts Bluetooth A2DP short range radio transmissions from portable phones and players, APTX is employed and Bluetooth quality is very good, due to an unusual compression algorithm (5:1) but bear in mind that Bluetooth transmits at CD quality, compressed, so it isn’t a high-definition connection.

Hugo’s HD USB connection accepts 384kHz PCM/DXD (DXD is PCM, being a mastering/processing format for DSD), using the DoP protocol. It also has electrical and optical S/PDIF digital inputs, specified to 192kHz, and three headphone outputs, two 3.5mm and one full size 1/4in (6.35mm). All three can be used at once. The headphone amp will work with loads as low as 4 Ohms, although most headphones are 40 Ohms to 300 Ohms. The Audeze LCD-XCs I reviewed in our last issue were a low 20 Ohms, so anyone able to afford it could use three pairs with Hugo.

The left and right phono socket line outputs share drive with the headphone outputs so what applies to headphones also applies to these line outs.

A tiny slide switch turns Hugo on and this switches on a little light show, Chord Electronics style. Little but intense coloured LEDs (light emitting diodes) on the circuit board shine through a circular window on Hugo’s top face and an unusual clear plastic roller-ball volume control also lights up, its colour showing status, so as I twiddled (rolled!) the ball, volume changed colour from red/yellow/green/blue/purple/white, each in three hues, giving 18 levels of resolution. The levels shown are critical and the instructions don’t explain them adequately; in essence you should not go into white — the top level (max volume) — because this can overload the output stages on peaks, but it improves sound quality until distortion becomes obvious.

Another colour light show inside the player indicates sample rate, from red for CD up to blue for 192kHz, light purple for 352kHz and Purple for 384kHz, Chord’s manual says.

**SOUND QUALITY**

I compared Hugo to my otherwise favourite DAC, Audiolab’s M-DAC. Initially, when first running-in the Hugo (our second sample after our first started losing lock, causing sporadic chattering) I used it over a weekend through to high-resolution material.

Matters changed when I started cranking up digital gain in Hugo and volume down in the MA8000. This way I was increasing Hugo’s dynamic range — and it sounded like it too! Hugo is lively and spacious at set gain (i.e. 3V out), but used like this it delivered massive dynamics. Treble was sharply-etched but precision clean — there’s no warmth — from all I played, from CD through to high-resolution material.

Life became even more fascinating when playing DSD128 and DXD versions of Mozart’s Violin Concerto in D, from 2L of Norway, via Astell&Kern’s AK240 player through Hugo, sent as 24/176.4 PCM over its optical link. These gave fabulously lively orchestral dynamics and a smooth, stable presentation, way beyond CD quality.

Again, Hugo was very dynamic and clear up top. DSD was richer and more convincing than DXD, but DXD was more tightly timed and a tad more dynamically forceful (and the source of the DSD version!)

**HOW TO GET HIGHEST DYNAMIC RANGE**

Turn Hugo volume up as far as possible, and turn amplifier volume down — this maximises dynamic range. Once the volume roller shines white, output overload on music peaks becomes possible, especially with music compressed upwards to maximum (0dB peak level). Increase until distortion becomes audible, then back off a little. You will find sound quality best at this setting: it gets the most out of Hugo.
"It knows few equals and in these value conscious days makes it a pearl almost beyond price" Roy Gregory

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Running via USB from a MacBook Pro, where it acts as a DAC and headphone amplifier, allowed me to stream native DSD to Hugo, using PureMusic player.

This added another step up altogether: running Blood Sweat & Tears’ ‘Spinning Wheel’, a DSD64 file sounded as sharply timed and Tears’ Spinning Wheel’, a DSD64 altogether: running Blood Sweat & native DSD to Hugo, using headphone amplifier, allowed me to Pro, where it acts as a DAC and dynamically forceful as a high-speed PureMusic player.

Tchaikovsky’s ‘Souvenir de Florence’ blows.

Soloists in a wide arc across my in the end, painting the Trondheim barely enough) but settled down (4GBs of MacBook Pro memory was around, so there’s an error here. Light colours shone dark and light fundamentalism were wonderfully magnetic headphones.

Violins sounded timbrally rich and dense and the various instrumental strands were wonderfully separated; I could almost have walked through the soundstage and touched each violin. Hugo ran the insensitive LCD-03 planar magnetic headphones.

The only small queries I had were its inability to play 192kHz via its S/PDIF optical input; Rob Watts says it does, but neither our audio analyser or two Astell&Kern players could trigger lock at 192k when using Chord’s own optical cable or our own, although Hugo worked at 176.4kHz.

The 352k and 384k sample rate light colours shone dark and light purple respectively on ours, and this is correct. Rob Watts told me, but the instructions say the other way around, so there’s an error here.

In overall balance Hugo did not have the weight of our Audiolab M-DAC. and Portable too, unlike the Sony and Audiolab products. Hugo is a tour-de-force of engineering and delivers fabulous sound quality with all files, even CD. It is also very easy to use. Playing DSD and DXD files natively was almost a shock, Hugo showing just how dramatic high-resolution digital can be.

HOW TO PLAY DSD
You need JRiver (PC only), Audirvana or PureMusic players on your computer to play DSD. Don’t try iTunes – it’ll not work.

Audiirvana is commonly quoted as the easiest to use, and PureMusic is hopelessly geeky and difficult, but sounds good.

These players can send DSD natively (i.e. not in PCM format) over USB to a DAC like Hugo.

Native DSD cannot be sent over digital audio S/PDIF links, there is no standard for it and data rate is too high for optical. In this situation it is common for DSD to be converted to high resolution 24/176.4kHz PCM so the link will work. This gives very good results, but it does dilute the original intent of DSD and isn’t as organic in its sound.

Hugo is a tour-de-force of engineering and delivers fabulous sound quality with all files, even CD. It is also very easy to use. Playing DSD and DXD files natively was almost a shock, Hugo showing just how dramatic high-resolution digital can be.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
The Rob Watts (ex-Deltac, DPA) designed DAC of the Hugo distinguishes it from all else. It has +18dB of digital gain "built into the digital volume control" I was told. This is very high and if volume is turned up to maximum with low level signals it enables Hugo to deliver a massive measured EIAJ Dynamic Range of 138dB — that’s no less than 20DB better than all other DACs (that we’ve measured to date).

However, if used in this condition the output may overload with peak level signals. However, it does show that Hugo is capable of astonishing results.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE
and that, as its designer says, has an “absence of any distortion at small signal levels, plus an absence of noise floor modulation”. Our Rohde&Schwarz UPV analyser confirmed this.

Fixing gain to give 3V out at peak signal level, (i.e.0dB FS), shown by the roller volume button illuminating white, EIAJ Dynamic Range measured 117dB, a little lower than an Audiolab M-DAC at 122dB. The DAC can output 5V before overload.

The extra gain within Hugo allowed a -60dB distortion value of 0.0026% to be measured, ten times lower than other DACs, but this rose to 0.03% with gain fixed for 3V maximum output, due to not to distortion but noise.

Frequency response was flat to 32kHz (-1dB) with a 192kHz sample rate signal through the co-ax input, rolling off slowly above this frequency, up to 96kHz our analysis showed. The optical input accepted 176.4kHz sample rate input maximum.

Hugo is capable of an exceptional measured performance, up with the best at fixed gain, or well above with advanced digital gain. NK.

Frequency response (-1dB)
CD 4Hz-32kHz
Distortion (%)
0dB 0.0003
-60dB 0.0028
Separation (1kHz) 112dB
Noise (IEC A) -136dB
Dynamic range (EIAJ) 136dB
Output

Don’t try iTunes – it’ll not work.

Audiirvana is commonly quoted as the easiest to use, and PureMusic is hopelessly geeky and difficult, but sounds good.

These players can send DSD natively (i.e. not in PCM format) over USB to a DAC like Hugo.

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Hugo is a tour-de-force of engineering and delivers fabulous sound quality with all files, even CD. It is also very easy to use. Playing DSD and DXD files natively was almost a shock, Hugo showing just how dramatic high-resolution digital can be.
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There's so much interest now in screening to keep electrical interference and noise out of a system — see our Letters pages this month for example — that we thought it a good idea to offer screened loudspeaker cables as a competition prize this month. Not any old cables, but Chord's impressive screened Signature Reference cables.

Read Chord's description of them below and answer the questions at right.

"With the development of our flagship Sarum speaker cable we learnt so much that we've been able to completely re-design our Signature speaker cable to produce the Signature Reference cable.

We've improved the shielding, made changes to the spacing between the conductors and the shield, and we've changed all the materials. The new Signature Reference features two 10AWG multi-strand silver-plated oxygen free copper conductors in combination with PTFE insulation.

The shield is dual layer, high density, high frequency effective braid with an overlapped foil.

Each set is made to order and the two conductors are held in place with a precision machined aluminium clamp and twisted along their length to improve flexibility.

The aluminium clamp is designed to hold the cable securely but avoid any compression on the cable itself. Signature Reference is available in red and black and also in all-black as well.

Terminations are Chord 24 karat gold-plated banana plugs, direct gold-plated copper spade connectors or BFA Camcon connectors”.

For a chance to win this great prize, just answer the four easy questions at right. Send your entries on a postcard only, by July 8th to:

July 2014 Competition,
Hi-Fi World magazine,
Studio 204,
Conlan Street,
Notting Hill,
London W10 5AP

QUESTIONS

[1] The conductors are plated with —
   [a] Titanium
   [b] Silver
   [c] Mercury
   [d] Goo

[2] How many layers does the shield have —
   [a] Triple
   [b] Dual
   [c] Mono
   [d] Quad

[3] The conductor insulation is —
   [a] PTFE
   [b] Paper
   [c] PVC
   [d] Old rope

[4] Available colours are —
   [a] Green
   [b] Pink
   [c] Black or red/black
   [d] Yellow
The Beatles: U.S. Albums Part 2

Paul Rigby concludes his review of The Beatles 'U.S. Albums' box set with a thorough sound test and a closer look at the unique Capitol mixes.

Listening to the music of the new 'U.S. Albums' box set, mastered by Sterling Sound in New York City, USA, is an enjoyable experience but attempting to come to definitive sonic conclusions, in the face of the other contemporary collections currently available for sale, is another matter.

To achieve this aim, the 'U.S. Albums' CD box set demands comparison with several other notable musical CD sources.

Firstly, there are the 2004/2006 editions of 'The Capitol Albums' box sets, ('Vol.1' and 'Vol.2' respectively) which represented the first time that the American albums were officially released onto CD and is the most obvious, direct, comparative source. As we have also learned, in Part 1 of this special examination of the 'U.S. Albums' box set, it makes heavy use of the 2009 stereo and mono masters that were also used in the UK editions of the 'Beatles In Stereo' and 'Beatles In Mono' box sets, respectively. Hence, we need to look at how both the stereo and mono tracks, within the 'U.S. Albums' box set, compare with both of these boxed UK sources.

I began the sound tests by spinning the mono version of 'Love Me Do', on the 'U.S. Albums' (USA) box set with the same version/track on the 'Capitol Albums' (CA) box set.

The dominant impression of the USA edition was one of clarity: each instrument and vocalist could clearly be discerned within the master. The CA version, in contrast, was dogged by blurring and blooming. The USA track also enjoyed a spacious and airy presentation while the bass drum and bass guitar were big standouts. Both were beautifully formed, simple but effective.

Further, on percussion the CA version allowed the tambourine to dominate whereas the USA mastered this secondary percussion back into the mix to allow the bass guitar to take a full part in the performance for the first time. This was especially noticeable within the instrumental break, where the bass acted more as a partner to John Lennon's harmonica solo while George Harrison's subtle rhythm guitar could be heard easily throughout for the first time.

Next, was the stereo version of 'Twist And Shout' on the USA box set compared with the same stereo track on the CA box set. This track provided a perfect A-B comparison because it allowed a rare glimpse of The Beatles as a flat-out, high-energy, rock band as heard in their pre-fame Hamburg style via an official, commercial release. This is the track that turned the Rolling Stones into the 'Strolling' Stones.

Writing in 'The Complete Beatles Sessions', Beatles' expert Mark Lewisohn commented that this track is, "...the most stunning rock and roll vocal and instrumental performance of all time: two and half minutes of Lennon shredding his vocal chords, to bits, audibly ending with a hefty sigh cum groan of relief". Lennon even sang the song stripped to the waist to get into the mood.

Listening to the CA original, it bristled with energy and passion. This is a raw cut made during the original session. Add the contemporary compression and limiting which added urgency and plenty of rough edges and you have a song bristling with sexual tension, aggressiveness and power.

Moving to the USA version, cleaned up and derived from the UK 2009 mono masters, I was initially confused. The track sounded bereft of drive and desire. Gone was the excitement. Then I realised that I had kept the same gain setting from the relatively compressed CA version. The USA clean master almost begged for volume, so up went the gain. Then everything made sense again. I was closer to the action, in amongst the band and almost able to
contribution whereas, in the UK master, he was a touch too polite. In addition, via Sterling’s stereo master, Lennon’s vocals lost that harsh edge, sounding more natural and flowing, while percussion offered increased delicacy, precision and fragility in its presentation. The same general result was present during other A-B tests between the Sterling and Abbey Road stereo masters.

So how did the Sterling and Abbey Road mono masters rate? By rights, there should have been no difference as Abbey Road didn’t add any limiting or compression to the mono masters within ‘The Beatles In Mono’ box set. In fact, the latter has always been seen as an audiophile edition box set. Nevertheless, I gave ‘Taxman’ a spin to hear for myself and was pleasantly surprised to hear subtle yet definite improvements in the Sterling edition. As in the stereo masters there was an element of warming in the overall presentation of this mono track, triggered by slight lifting of the bass frequencies. More surprisingly, however, was a slight calming of the upper frequencies within the Sterling master that actually improved the clarity slightly, making the Harrison guitar solo more palatable and less wearying to the ear.

Similarly, the Harrison lead vocal delivery was more direct and precise. While the mono masters were, basically, very similar, I did prefer the Sterling interpretation.

The final comparison focused on the George Martin remixes of both ‘Help!’ and ‘Rubber Soul’. The full story of these mixes can be found online in the Hi-Fi World website within my ‘Beatles On Vinyl’ review. Suffice to say that the relatively recent 1987 mixes have been criticised, by some Beatles audiophiles, as being a touch bright. I personally believe that the accusation of brightness, on these 1987 variants, is overstated. What the new Sterling master does, however, is create a slightly recessed vocal while easing forward both the Lennon guitar and Harrison sitar in the soundstage, adding clarity to the lyrics. The Sterling remaster also enriches the vocal, giving it body and bulk for a more articulate delivery as well as a wider, richer soundstage and a much enhanced suite of lower frequencies, providing welcome balance to the orchestration.

CONCLUSION

In short? The ‘U.S. Albums’ box set is an absolute triumph. Not only does the set trounce the original 2004/2006 ‘Capitol Albums’ box sets, relegating both sets to the status of ‘interesting curiosities’, it actually improves upon Abbey Road’s original, slightly flawed, ‘Beatles In Stereo’ box set and, incredibly, has the audacity to have the edge on the ‘Beatles In Mono’ box set! The ‘U.S. Albums’ is, therefore, an absolutely essential purchase for all Beatles fans, whether you are interested in the U.S. versions of the Beatles oeuvre or not. What we have here is a true audiophile edition of the Beatles works on the digital format.
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THE UNIQUE MIX LIST

One of the most confusing topics for any dedicated Beatles fan who is looking to buy the "U.S. Album" box set is just how much of the set features the original Capitol mixes? Browse the internet on this matter and you will find wildly different figures. No one agrees because the official list has, as far as we can tell, not been published before. Until now.

As the "U.S. Albums" box set coordinator and audio supervisor Steve Berkowitz explained, "This list was generated from production notes from the sessions of "The Beatles U.S. Albums" at Capitol when reviewing and gathering sources and work produced by (mastering engineer) Greg Calbi and myself at Sterling Sound in New York City. The source for the information comes from the notes and files of Michael Murphy (EMI/Universal A&R) who we worked with on this project and my production records and files. I believe this to be the most comprehensive and accurate list that reflects both sources and production".

THE BEATLES 2nd ALBUM MONO
1. 'Long Tall Sally'
2. 'I Call You Name'

A HARD DAY'S NIGHT STEREO
3. 'I Should Have Known Better' instrumental
4. 'And I Love Her' instrumental
5. 'Ringo's Theme (This Boy)' instrumental
6. 'A Hard Day's Night' instrumental

A HARD DAY'S NIGHT MONO
7. 'I Should Have Known Better' instrumental
8. 'And I Love Her' instrumental
9. 'And I Love Her' vocal
10. 'Ringo's Theme (This Boy)' instrumental
11. 'A Hard Day's Night' instrumental

SOMETHING NEW STEREO
12. 'If I Fell'

SOMETHING NEW MONO
13. 'I'll Cry Instead'
14. 'Any Time At All'
15. 'When I Get Home'
16. 'And I Love Her'

THE BEATLES STORY
17. Used the original U.S. analogue stereo 1/4" tape master - full album

BEATLES 65 MONO
18. 'She's A Woman'
19. 'I'll Be Back'
20. 'I Feel Fine'

HELP! STEREO
21. 'HELP!' (James Bond intro Music only) instrumental
22. 'From Me To You' instrumental
23. 'In The Tyrol' instrumental
24. 'Another Hard Days Night' instrumental
25. 'The Bitter End' instrumental
26. 'The Chase' instrumental

HELP! MONO
27. 'HELP!' (James Bond intro Music only) instrumental
28. 'From Me To You' instrumental
29. 'In The Tyrol' instrumental
30. 'Another Hard Days Night' instrumental
31. 'The Bitter End' instrumental
32. 'The Chase' instrumental

RUBBER SOUL STEREO
33. 'The Word'
34. 'I'm Looking Through You'

RUBBER SOUL MONO
35. 'Michelle'

YESTERDAY & TODAY STEREO
36. 'We Can Work It Out'
37. 'Day Tripper'

YESTERDAY & TODAY MONO
38. 'I'm Only Sleeping'
39. 'Dr. Robert'
40. 'And Your Bird Can Sing'
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RIPPING IT UP

I'm considering the purchase of a Cambridge Audio Stream Magic 6, this to be hard-wired to a Network Attached Storage (NAS) device as the data vault. I would be very open to the idea of downloading high-res music files, it's just that to date I have never downloaded music.

Initially at least, I anticipate that my focus would be on down-ripping (or is it ripping-up?) my many hundreds of CDs to the NAS for the greater retrieval convenience over stacks of discs which drive me to distraction. I imagine that it would be usual to copy the CDs, faster than real time, using a computer to speed up the process. But I see a problem here. I'm very alive to the fact that better CD replay equipment sounds significantly better than a computer drive.

For my current CD listening I use for the transport a Pioneer PD-S904 Stable Platter CD turntable incorporating a Trichord Superlock 4 and dedicated Trichord PSU. This runs into an Electrocompaniet ECD 1 upsampling 24bit/192kHz DAC, which has the bonus of a balanced XLR output connection to my Electrocompaniet ECI 3 amplifier. Although I remain true to my vinyl allegiances, I'm now rather happy with the near analogue sound quality of my CD replay.

But if I transfer my CDs to a NAS using a substandard computer drive, surely some of the quality of musical information which I currently enjoy will be lost. Will it not be a case of garbage in, garbage out? And perhaps something similar will happen over again when all my CD music data is stored on a NAS and when that is being used as a replay transport of questionable quality.

Putting to one side the obvious advantages of non-Red Book, high-res downloads, I suppose in essence I'm asking if all my CD music data stored and played via a network player streamer, will inevitably be inferior to individual compact discs played using a decent quality CD transport/DAC?

And if you're thinking I could improve matters by ripping many hundreds of CDs in real time, using my current replay equipment, I should perhaps add that not many of us have that much life remaining.

With best regards

Martin Burgess
Kent

Hi Martin. You can make bit-perfect copies that are checked on-line against the AccurateRip database, for example, to ensure fidelity. Check out XLD for Mac and dBpoweramp for PC, both are free. Rip speed is negotiated by the software. You'll get very high quality rips with these programs, for storage on a NAS drive. Replay over ethernet isn't, in my view, ideal, because long cable runs add jitter and electrical interference; I prefer 'sneakernet'.

However, replay quality is determined primarily by the DAC.
LETTERS & EMAILS

Audio/abs Q-DAC uses an ESS Sabre32 DAC chip and gives a great sound, especially at its low price.

and you could conceivably stream from NAS to a Cambridge Audio NP30 or Stream Magic 6 and pass their digital outputs through your Electrocompaniet ECD I to get a sound very similar to that you are already experiencing.

Will it sound better or worse? I can’t say. Re-clocking smoothes digital and makes CD rips sound better than the CD, but ethernet can degrade the sound. Whether the degradation will be audible depends upon network conditions, including cable quality (screening etc) and length and your local RF environment.

My preference, however, is to use a convertor like the Audiolab Q-DAC (or M-DAC) with its modern ESS Sabre convertor, with jitter reduction and seven filter options. You can connect this DAC to the S/PDIF digital output of the Cambridge players. Total cost will be around £600 in all — not a king’s ransom.

The smooth, full bodied sound of the Q-DAC I think you will find deeply satisfying. NK

and you could conceivably stream from NAS to a Cambridge Audio NP30 or Stream Magic 6 and pass their digital outputs through your Electrocompaniet ECD I to get a sound very similar to that you are already experiencing.

Will it sound better or worse? I can’t say. Re-clocking smoothes digital and makes CD rips sound better than the CD, but ethernet can degrade the sound. Whether the degradation will be audible depends upon network conditions, including cable quality (screening etc) and length and your local RF environment.

My preference, however, is to use a convertor like the Audiolab Q-DAC (or M-DAC) with its modern ESS Sabre convertor, with jitter reduction and seven filter options. You can connect this DAC to the S/PDIF digital output of the Cambridge players. Total cost will be around £600 in all — not a king’s ransom.

The smooth, full bodied sound of the Q-DAC I think you will find deeply satisfying. NK

I am currently going through the never-ending search through different specs and upgrade options on the lovely Linn LP12 turntable. I haven’t got an LP12 so I’m wanting to purchase one but not sure with a £2000 budget which one to go for. Do I go for the Transcription option or the Vivid upgrade package? These aren’t too well received on the Linn forum but I read with interest that you actually gave it a glowing review. So in short, Transcription or Vivid? My budget on the latter would give me a Rega arm and Ortofon Blue. Thanks for your help in advance.

Craig Evans

Hi Craig,

I am slightly confused by your term “the Transcription option”. I assume by this you mean a standard specification Sondek. Since you don’t currently own a Sondek I would suggest buying an unmodified one, getting it properly set up by a Linn agent and spending a month or two playing through your record collection to ensure that you are familiar with all the nuances of the LP12 sound.

You may well find that the sound that you are listening to satisfies your musical needs and your budget can then be devoted to perhaps a cartridge upgrade and increasing your record collection.

A wide choice of decks is usually available through the adverts in this magazine and on eBay, so take your time and get the best combination of specifi-cation and aesthetics that suits your needs and the furnishings of your listening room.

The looks are important since the deck is on display and needs to be visually appealing so that it is something that you are comfortable living with, and that ties in with, rather than clashes with, for instance, the finish of your loudspeakers. (Such considerations also help increase the “Wife Approval Factor”, something that must never be underestimated in importance).

If you find, after extended listening, that there are aspects of the sound that you feel could be improved upon then I would suggest booking an appointment with Inspire Hi-Fi (www.inspirehifi.co.uk) and listening to their Vivid upgrade package with a choice of records from your own collection. I would also suggest visiting brianandtrevors (www.brianandtrevors.com ) who stock all of the Linn options and also some after-market upgrades from other manufacturers.

With any upgrade option, I would always recommend listening to the standard item first, otherwise it is impossible to ascertain which aspects of the sound can be credited to the strengths of the original design and which are due to the upgrade path that you have chosen.

TB

Hi - Fi

I’m just reading April’s Hi-Fi World and am rather alarmed by the photo of the Ming Da 3008 MC300. I’m a huge valve amp fan, but exposed valves have always worried me because of the high (potentially greater than 200degC) surface temperatures and the fact that all that separates fingers from several hundred volts DC is half a millimetre of fragile glass.

Valve amps can’t legitimately carry a CE mark unless the valves are protected behind some kind of grille or cage. Many owners choose to take these off so that the valves are on show - this is of course at their own risk and
Ming Da 300B. "Ming Da has positioned the volume and selector controls under the cage, immediately adjacent to the 300Bs" says Roger Duerden. "Ouch!"

entirely up to them. But Ming Da has positioned the volume and selector controls under the cage, immediately adjacent to the 300Bs, which means that it can't, in practice, be operated with the cage in position.

Your reader may well enjoy the reduced heat production of the MC300, but I doubt he'll enjoy having the back of his hands burnt when he's reaching to turn up the volume. Ouch!

Roger Duerden

I can assure Mr Duerden that all our amplifiers have covers delivered with them, to protect the hot output valves from damage and being touched by accident.

Yes, I accept that it is slightly tricky to adjust the volume on the Duet 300 with the cover in place, but we do provide the remote control for that purpose. However, I can use both the volume and input selector with no problem, even though I do have quite thick fingers!

In addition, both the controls are not set close to any of the valves, so the risk of being burnt while touching either of the controls is minimal.

Better still the 300B does not run very hot, neither do the ECC82 and ECC82 input and driver valves!

Now in terms of CE, all the amplifiers do come with covers and yes they are designed to be used with the covers in place but as Mr Duerden correctly points out, users can remove the covers at their own discretion.

Lastly, if Mr Duerden would like to visit our extensive showroom in Great Malvern, I would be very happy to put his mind at rest and demonstrate to him that safety is very much at the top of our agenda!

Kind regards,

Mark Monwaring-White
Ming Da UK

SLATE MATE

Mark Richards ("Two Heads" - letters, April '14) considers changing from a modded RB300 to an Ill D 312. I took a similar route two years ago ("Track Issue" - letters, August 2012) and had to deal with the problem of drilling out a new slate arm board. Slate Audio may be able to help but if not, Aqua Dynamics of St Albans (run by Brian Hatch, a vinyl enthusiast himself) would be the place to go.

It is worth mentioning that the easy option of dropping in a 9" SME V will not work. The RB300 is a longer arm so the geometry doesn't work for the SME arm.

Best wishes,

Dave Clewlow

MORE FROM MARIO

Though I've been a keen music and audio reproduction systems enthusiast for over 40 years and a very interested reader of Hi-Fi World for, at least, 15 to 16 years, I keep dropping you a line whenever my omnipresent doubts arise and insist in taking a first row seat as I face any new or recurring audio problem.

That is how I got to write to you, recently, putting a lot of questions regarding the reproduction of 78 rpm records (very old and less old ones) and of mono LP. You gave me a very comprehensive set of answers and I've been thoroughly following your advice with top-notch results, namely in what respects the need of a proper phono pre-amp, with enough different settings to allow the system to follow the correct equalisation curve used by the different record factories and labels. I can't find words to adequately thank you for your invaluable help.

Having listened to the equipment items you suggested I ended up reaching a slightly different path as I better understand now some very important nuances of shellac and vinyl reproduction. When reproducing analogue discs one must bear in mind, for a start, some very simple things:

1. Avoiding surface noise and protecting record and needle from unnecessary wear. The discs must be thoroughly clean and you must use different cleaning products for vinyl and shellac. Never use alcohol-based products on shellac and always use the right needle for the right groove. After washing any record stick it into a new sleeve. If possible avoid all-paper sleeves.

2. Getting the best of your mono Shellac records. Use the correct equalisation curve for each label and historic period. Use the right needle for each record (there is no rule. You have to find out the right one, using your ears and subjective expectations). Have a few wands or shells pre-loaded with your option needles. Keep a record of the cartridge and needle you prefer to play each record with. Don't play damaged records. Get rid of them. Use the correct playing speed. Sometimes, for this purpose, you may refer to the record's label; most of the times you can only rely on your ears.

3. Getting the most off your vinyl records. Beware of equalisation curves for mono records prior to the late fifties. Use a modern mono cartridge with mono LPs. Do not use a stereo cartridge to play a mono record.

I told you above that I followed a slightly different path than the one you suggested. Instead of buying a different phono preamp I got myself a REK-O-KUT Re-equaliser II from eBay, at the pricey sum of U$80.00, plus...
LETTERS & EMAILS

US DECCA OLDER MATRIX

US Decca has a similar distinctive matrix identification. Also note the higher "Take Number," or "Stamper Number." Usually, smaller Take Numbers are associated with pre-RIAA records. The record on the left requires 800/-8 dB equalization in order to make it sound like the RIAA on the right.

US DECCA NEWER MATRIX

US Columbia follows similarly. Note that both matrix numbers are the same. The RIAA issue, however, has smaller Arial font, and also larger Take Numbers.

US COLUMBIA OLDER MATRIX

Sometimes font characterization is not enough. Above, only the take number and label are different.

US COLUMBIA NEWER MATRIX

Labels can tell a lot about a record's age. These US Decca labels are from the same recording of show music. On the left is the earlier, pre-RIAA version. On the right is the later, RIAA version. However, this is not a guarantee of a records age, but one of several indicators. It was the Matrix Numbers that confirmed this equalization choice.

The Operating Manual for Rek-O-Kut re-equaliser has detailed information on 78rpm shellac record equalisation curves. Go to http://www.esotericsound.com/Electronics/REQ2MAN.pdf.

customs taxes and postage. It ended up costing me something like $100.00! I also bought two Ortofon 2M cartridges (78 and mono). I'm looking forwards to buy the Technics RA fully equipped and a second SME M2 T2R to replace the old 3009.

I hope to purchase adequate new cartridges for mono LPs and 78rpm replay, including a set of stylus for 78rpm only and a couple of adequate Stanton cartridges. I'll give you feedback in a year's time.

Apart from the combination ASR Basis Exclusive-VTL 5.5, I currently use a second one that includes a JG Audio TS preamp! JG Audio phono stage C (on the side I keep a Graham Slee Elevator EXP just in case I'm in the mood to listen to the Dynavector 17D3). Of course, I forgot to tell you what cartridges I am currently using to play my modern LPs. It is time to give you the information, as I am using three turntables depending on the record I want to listen to:

With a Well Tempered Labs Amadeus GTA I am using a Dynavector DV XX2 Mk2.

With my father's Garrard 401 and the SME 3009 I use a Koetsu Rosewood Signature 3.

With my heavily modified Technics SL1210 Mk2, sporting a Funk Firm fxr II arm, I use an Ortofon 2M Black and have a Dynavector Karat 17D3 on standby, just in case.

Best regards,
Mario Kopke Tulio Portugal

Hi Mario,
it is good to hear from you again and thank-you for the updates. It is gratifying to know that our advice is followed with such positive results.

I would suggest using L'Art Du Son cleaning fluid for all of your records since it is highly effective on vinyl as well as shellac discs and using the same fluid for both types eliminates any risk of getting an alcohol-based fluid onto your 78s. There are also some who query using alcohol on any record whatsoever since it has been suggested that there can be a slow degradation of the vinyl record surface once it has been exposed to this substance.

I have not yet heard the REK-O-CUT Re-Equaliser but since you seem to find that it gives good results I shall do my best to get hold of one and have a listen. I am sure there are other readers who would be interested in such a review.

I do envy you having the space to allow you to have three turntables.
letters On-Line!

You can now read our Letters on-line, from the last issue back to March 2010. That's a treasure trove of information and advice to our readers, as well as a fascinating catalogue of reader's systems and views. There's mountains of buying information, all just a click away on your computer or i-Pad. Have fun!

You can reply to Letters using the e-mail link at the top of the page -

**World Mail** June 2011 issue

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Our experts are -
DP David Price, editor; KK Noel Keywood, publisher; PR Paul Rigby, reviewer; TB Tony Bolton, reviewer; RT Robert Todres, reviewer (Allegret String Quartet); AS Adam Smith, reviewer; DC Dave Cowley, Sound Hi-Fi, World Design, etc.

...or the reply pane at the bottom of the page. Replies will go on-line and in the magazine if suitable.

Just go to www.hi-fiworld.co.uk and click on Letters in the left hand menu list, under the FEATURES category. This will take you to the individual months of issue. To see the full list set the ‘Display’ drop-down list to ‘All’.
permanently set up and I think most people reading this letter will feel the same way. You also have a fine collection of decks and cartridges that each offer a different way of presenting sound. Providing you can get hold of the correct arm mountings then I would be tempted to have some fun by trying swapping the arms and cartridges around your collection of turntables. It is a very good way of isolating which sonic characteristics are due to the deck, arm and cartridge respectively and thus building yourself a better knowledge base from which to direct the course of your future purchases. Please let us know of the results if you try this.

I also look forward to hearing how you get on with the Timestep RA turntable and the SME M2-12R arm. TB

USB DACs
My query is straightforward (I hope). After much procrastination I have decided to dip a toe in the water of digital downloads; the way I would prefer to do it is by transferring digital files from my PC to a DAC via a USB memory stick as memory is relatively cheap and I like the idea of having separate memory sticks for different music genres for example. So I guess what I am asking for is a DAC with a USB socket that can play music directly from the memory stick and then to my Primare amp.

I was looking at an Audiolab DAC but as far as I can tell it does not offer this facility as it needs to be connected directly to a PC, something I am loathe to do as I don't wish to have a computer connected to my hi-fi system. Any advice will be gratefully received.

On another note my system comprises a Primare amp and CD player using Triangle Antal 30th Anniversary speakers and although I am happy with the sound I feel the bass is over-damped so I am considering swapping the Primare amp for a valve amp (your love of valves is compelling) or maybe a solid state amp which has a lower damping factor. There does not seem to be much information regarding damping factors in the manufacturers info so any advice you can give me will also be gratefully received. I should point out the listening room is 30sq m, lightly furnished with solid stone walls and carpet to the floors. I hope you can offer me some solutions and thank you in advance.

Best Regards
Gareth Williams
Cornwall

Hi Gareth. The solutions are easy enough. A Cambridge Audio Stream Magic 6 plays from front or rear panel USB sticks. I use rear for long-term storage and front for short-term. As you say, different sticks can hold different music sets. Just don't use the network connection to your computer, but you will need it to for the internet tuner should you use this.

Alternatively, and perhaps better still, you could get a Pro-ject Media Box S. This fascinating little device is inexpensive but does just what you want. As you say, a network connection to a computer is an unnecessary complication and playing from memory stick sounds better as well as being easier.

Naim amplifiers have a low damping factor, around the 17 mark, as well as plenty of bass punch, so any Naim would do. Alternatively, you might like to listen to — and look at — an Icon Audio Stereo 845 PP. NK

A valve amplifier like Icon Audio's Stereo 845 PP has a low damping factor and will pep up well-damped loudspeakers like Triangle's Antal 30th Anniversary. The Icon's sensitivity (feedback) switch gives two damping settings in effect.
"The song is called Effigy and the band are Creedence Clearwater Revival. The original is awesome" says Neil Porter. 'Effigy' comes from the band's Willy and The Poor Boys album, still available on vinyl today.

Not many people want or feel they need all the alternatives in real everyday life. I know it's an idea designed to generate business and maybe I'm just a bit staid but hey, if it works, I guess.

Finally, one of the artists involved in making a recording for Record Store Day 2014 produced a cover version of a song and, thanks to that, I have now discovered a band that I have never listened to before. That song is called Effigy and the band are Creedence Clearwater Revival. The original is awesome and the cover in 2014, I love it. Long live Record Store Day and all who sail in her.

Best,
Neil Porter.

Ah, Neil, a most opportune time for you to write. Allow me to direct you immediately to my feature on Record Store Day on page 91.

I seriously doubt that downloads or streams will ever build the same level of affection afforded to vinyl (and, increasingly, CD) because, by their very nature, downloads/streams have no physicality, no value for money and no re-saleability.

I disagree with your point about vinyl being 'cheapened', though. Although I favour vinyl, I use all formats in a typical day. In fact, the night before I wrote these words, I spent a couple of hours deep cleaning vinyl while listening to a hi-res download on my Astell & Kern AK 120! There is space for all formats in this multimedia age.

Glad you discovered CCR, a band that brought rock back to its roots when others were moving far (possibly too far) away from their own influences and who did so with both economy and power. On that same point, I know of music fans who, because of Record Store Day, have newly discovered artists such as the electronica-meister John Foxx (ex-Ultravox), innovator Captain Beefheart and one youngster who is now mad keen on T.Rex! Yes, Record Store Day is a wonderful thing.

You have never heard Creedence Clearwater Revival! Oh mother, pass the smelling salts! You remind me that I heard Creedence drifting out of Yamaha's room at the Bristol Sound & Vision Show, 2013, where a very affable young man was also enthsuing about hearing them for the first time.

Check out John Fogerty and be prepared for a tough dude. Their songs were socio-political and still resonate today. At the time Creedence were called the world's greatest rock-and-roll band, but they were more than just rock-and-roll. Johnny Rotten would have been proud: they didn't do love songs.

All their albums are strong and worth buying, and get their re-mastered LP box sets to hear them at their best. A brilliant band; rock at its greatest: simple, clever and forever captivating. NK

SCREENED CABLES

I see that several of the leading loudspeaker cable manufacturers are now beginning to see the advantages of shielding their cables from RF and mains-borne interference. The Chord Signature are a shielded version of the Epic, I believe. With this in mind, I wondered what would be the effect on my own speaker cables.

Normally I use Chord Company Chord Signature loudspeaker cables are screened to resist radio interference. Mike Bradbury says this makes a difference.
LETTERS & EMAILS

Carnival Silverscreen, but I had a set of Deltec DPA50 cables lying around somewhere, so I decided to experiment with these. Although once retailing somewhere in the region of £250 for a 4 metre pair, I found that although they gave areas of improvement over the Carnival Silverscreen cables (detailing, transient attack, more 3-D), they didn’t have the stage width I liked from the Carnivals.

I read up about cable shielding techniques, and subsequently purchased rolls of pure copper tape (20mm width) and pure aluminium tape (40mm) from the internet. Pure copper tape may also be found in garden centres as it is used as an anti-slug and snail device.

Starting with the copper tape, I wound and overlapped the whole length of the pair of DPA cables. I then repeated the process with the aluminium tape. I then covered the cables with a new skin of shrink-wrap PVC which is readily available in any colour you choose. I chose blue. The end result was a hosepipe sized cable somewhat stiffer than before, but I was keen to hear if I had made any improvement to the sound. I also earthed the copper tape at one end to the chassis of the amplifier to give a floating earth. Gone was the narrow soundstage of the standard DPA wire; it was now as wide as the room could accommodate. The sound was altogether more real, more 3-D. Images became more focussed. Suffice to say, the modified cables have remained in place ever since.

Many of the dedicated mains filter systems use shielded mains leads, some of which I had previously bought, such as the Tacima but my DIY method has allowed me to double shield my entire system for less than £20, although the procedure is time consuming on speaker cables. It took me an hour to do each five metre length, but only ten minutes to do a metre length mains wire. I await your comments, and hope that readers and DIY-ers find the my experiences interesting.

Mike Bradbury
Walsall.

Hi Mike. Noise of all sorts does seem to be crystallising as a deep stain on sound quality that perhaps has more influence than we understand. And RF (radio frequency) noise is being held up as a modern day culprit. It has been, for a long time, obviously influential in the way that radio waves from radio and TV transmitters could end up as speech or frame buzz coming from the hi-fi, and long loudspeaker cables were the biggest culprit. This suggests you are on the right path. In the past, radio would feed back to the first amplifying device, overload it and be ‘rectified’ then appear as speech or frame buzz over the loudspeakers. Modern RF is different from old-fashioned RF. Shorter wavelengths are used, the interference more random and less deterministic (i.e. digital). But it does seem to exert influence all the same, degrading sound quality. And of course nowadays we have wi-fi transmitters all around us, often scores of them. So pick-up in the loudspeaker leads may be considerable. Screening will help, but may be more effective in urban rather than rural areas (mains supplies are usually more sterility), so please write in.

NK

OUR BOO BOO

I refer to Hi-Fi World Vol.24, No.4, June 2014, and specifically to the review titled “Studio Sounds” of the JBL Studio 230 loudspeaker.

The frequency response and impedance plots published in the “Measured Performance” section on Page 57 are not of the loudspeaker, but are identical to the plots published on Page 43 for the YBA iA3 integrated amplifier. Please publish the correct frequency response and impedance plots for the JBL Studio 230 loudspeaker in an upcoming issue of the magazine because it will be very interesting to see the effect of the semi-horn loading of the tweeter, and also the port tuning, plus the degree of the lower midrange resonant energy through the port.

In addition to the usual two plots published in loudspeaker reviews,

Wi-fi transmitters now dot the domestic landscape, pumping out digital radio signals that can pollute your hi-fi with noise.
it would be useful to have also an impulse response plot published, so that technically knowledgeable readers can see the degree of time alignment of the drivers and whether one of the drivers is connected in the same or in the reverse polarity to the other driver(s).

Regardless of measured flat frequency response through the crossover region, same polarity and inverted polarity of one driver each causes distinctly different characteristic sounds which some types of listener brains allocate priority to over other audible phenomena.

Also, the vertical axis which causes closest to perfect time alignment for the drivers could be the one to publish the frequency response plot for.

My listening experience of many loudspeakers has resulted in hearing better coherence of the music for those loudspeakers where equal signal arrival time from the drivers has coincided with seeming close to flat frequency response through the crossover region, at least with classical music and various folk music and some jazz that has not been subject to large amounts of electronic production manipulation during preparation of the master tape. It is very audible with naturally recorded human voices that have not had pop production treatment during mixing of the recorded tracks.

Yours Sincerely,
Chris Logan,
Australia

Whoops! Sorry about that mistake. Please see the JBL Studio 230 plots here. You can see the tweeter is well matched to its physical surroundings by the shallow horn in the smoothness of its treble response. What you cannot see is that dispersion from the horn was excellent, this response being maintained a long way off lateral axis.

JBL's excellent value Studio 230 loudspeaker. Clean and punchy, we liked it — but published the wrong graphs in the June 2014 issue. See what we should have published below. Our apologies to all the eagle-eyed, technically savvy readers who spotted our deliberate (cough) error.

The port is narrow tuned, like so many are. This gives bouncy, or enthusiastic sounding bass. Broader port tuning is becoming preferred by designers these days because it plays a bass tune better, but such ports don't sound so lively. The JBL is what you'd expect it to be in this respect.

If the drivers were out-of-phase a sharp dip would appear between them, so time information is intrinsic to the frequency response plot.

There isn't enough space to publish any more than two graphs even though we run very interesting decay plots over 200mS.

The vertical position of the measuring microphone is invariably between the drivers of a two-way 'speaker, and on mid-range axis of a three way.

This is how they are designed, so no surprise it gives the best result when 'speakers are tested. Panels are a different ball game. The microphone is positioned at a sensible listening height, around 3ft from the floor, typical ear height when seated.

As you say, loudspeakers sound best when their drivers are well phase aligned, and the crossover is designed to give a net flat result.

The only observation I'd make here is that very flat loudspeakers can seemingly lack character on first listen. Removing the 'zing' or bounce of a resonant system is a true improvement, apparent in both time and frequency domains under measurement, but it doesn't always sound like it. Careful long term listening will tease out the agnostic nature of such loudspeakers however.

NK

At left is frequency response of the JBL Studio 230 using pink noise with the microphone between the two drive units. The red trace shows port behaviour and this correlates with the impedance curve (right), its peak coinciding with the frequency of the sharp dip in the latter.
Big Spendor

Spendor's new D7 floorstanders feature a host of new technologies and can go loud with little power. Jon Myles takes an extended listen and comes away suitably impressed.

Never judge a book by its cover. Nor, it must be said, a loudspeaker. Take these new Spendor D7s for example. At first glance they're a traditional slim two-and-half-way floorstander not too different from previous Spendor products or models from no end of other manufacturers. Look beneath the surface, though, and things get distinctly more interesting.

There's the specification for a start. Spendor quotes a dB sensitivity allied to an 8 Ohm impedance (our Measured Performance gave an overall 6 Ohm figure) — meaning the D7s could be just the thing for those who revel in the joys of low-powered valve or Class A transistor amplifiers.

Then there's the drive units — which is where things get even more interesting. For this is the first loudspeaker to use Spendor's new Linear Pressure Zone (LPZ) tweeter design, which has been several years in development.

Essentially this consists of a stainless steel mesh cover sitting in front of a 22mm polyamide fabric dome. This forms a damped acoustic chamber which equalizes the pressure on both sides of the tweeter, meaning the dome can operate in a completely balanced linear mode.

It's an interesting and innovative
design – and one that is likely to find its way into other of the company’s models over the next few years.

Below the tweeter sits a bespoke 180mm mid/bass driver using a new formulation of Spendor’s own engineering polymer called EP77 and said to possess high natural damping and rigidity. This is complemented by a similar-sized Kevlar bass driver which operates up to a relatively high 900Hz.

Spendor’s linear flow port exits at the base of the speaker and features a Venturi port to promote airflow speed and reduce turbulence.

A single pair of good-quality speaker terminals sit just above (Spendor are no great fans of bi-wiring) while the cabinet itself uses the company’s tried and tested dynamic damping whereby special polymers are employed in the construction to convert vibration into heat at key points inside the cabinet.

That cabinet, by the way, measures 950/192/320mm (H/W/D) so it’s not going to dominate the average living room.

In standard form the D7 costs £3495 and is available with black ash, cherry, light oak or dark walnut. An extra £500 buys you a premium finish model such as the ones under review here with a mirror-like gloss finish.

Whichever you choose, standard of fit and finish is up to Spendor’s traditionally high standards with neat touches such as reinforcing metal plates in the base to accept the coupling spikes, adding to the perceived value.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Unpretentious in looks they may be – but the D7s are anything but that when it comes to the crucial matter of sound quality.

First off, it’s obvious these loudspeakers can go loud from little power. Hooked up to Sugden’s Class A FPA-4 power amplifier – which barely touches 30Watts into an 8 Ohm load – and the Spendors manage to pump out Lady GaGa or Led Zeppelin to neighbour-bothering levels.

What’s more, they do so with a smooth authority and suppleness that eludes many rivals — managing to sound both fast and detailed yet without introducing any unnatural zing or edge to their presentation.

Sliding Get The Blessing’s latest ‘Lope and Antilope’ CD into our resident Cyrus transport/Audiolab M-Dac front-end, the D7s immediately latched onto the music’s rhythmic pulse – easily capturing all with shrill synthesizer lines. It can be a bit of a torture track for some loudspeakers – either sounding too plodding and dirge-like or alternatively a howl of screeching dissonance. Through the Spendors it was neither – the D7s treading a fine line between the two extremes to reveal the complexity and rhythmic propulsion of the track. It wasn’t harsh but nor was it overly laid back, displaying tremendous separation between instruments.

Playing Giuseppe Zinola and the New York Philharmonic’s ‘Thus Spake Zaustra’ showed the Spenders’ ability to go from almost near silence to bone-shaking crescendos without missing a beat.

The only criticism on offer here is that I’ve heard other loudspeakers with a wider soundstage. The D7s have height and depth but the sound doesn’t seem to extend much beyond the outside boundaries of the cabinets.

But that’s a small price to pay for the other benefits. Chief of which is the fact that there is no obvious artifice on offer here, bass, mid-band and treble seeming in perfect harmony.

It makes the D7 an extremely accurate loudspeaker at the price and means it is just at home playing rock, pop, jazz or classical. It also seem to possess a greater rhythmic ability than some previous Spendor models — which at times could sound just a little laid back.

But a slice of acoustic jazz in the shape of Charles Mingus’s ‘Mingus Ah
High End – Made in Germany

Master Innovation

The Clearaudio catalogue of high quality pressings inc. Deutsche Grammophon re-issues available now
different – but no less emotional – vocals of Sinead O'Connor on the 'Sean Nós Nua' CD and the rendition of Peggy Gordon' has all the delicacy and atmosphere to make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up.

This track showcases above all the excellence of Spendor's new treble unit — and it is very impressive.

Indeed, the LPZ tweeter is a bit of a revelation. In absolute terms it doesn't have the outright extension of some of the best ribbon designs on offer nowadays – but it makes up for it with a seamless integration with the accompanying drive units.

They hand over to each other like a well-drilled relay team and as such avoid that dreaded mid-band suck-out which can rob music of much of its vibrancy and detail.

Instead, it quickly becomes clear that these loudspeakers provide a wide, clear and open window on partnering equipment.

Switching to Naim's new Supernait 2 for amplification (watch this space for a review soon) proves to be a winning combination. Vocal performance is wonderful, with great clarity and detail. The midrange is open and smooth, with no hint of midband mid-freq boost or roll-off.

The treble unit has a smooth, open quality to it, never getting too bright or harsh. It resolves detail very well and has a wonderful transparency to it.

The Spendor D7s are a very musical pair of loudspeakers, with a well-integrated bass response that doesn't overpower the midrange. The bass is firm and well-controlled, without being too heavy or loose.
1SERIES

Acoustic Energy have always been associated with audio excellence. Since the original AE-1 monitor speaker was launched in 1988, their products have represented the best audio performance and product reliability available for the price. These principles continue with the new 1-Series. Consisting of a floor-standing speaker with angled front, compact book-shelf speakers, a centre speaker and a powered subwoofer. The 1-Series from Acoustic Energy offers unrivalled performance at a price you would not believe.

Stunning Hi-Fi speakers from £199.00

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World Radio History
Tony Bolton revisits Meridian's Prime Head Amp with the optional extra power supply unit.

In the February 2014 edition of this magazine I reviewed the Meridian Prime Headphone Amplifier. Unfortunately I was not able to try the matching outboard power supply unit at the time. So here I am revisiting the Prime but now with the PSU option.

Costing £800 (the Prime Head Amp is £1200) the Prime Power Supply is supplied in matching casework that displays the exemplary finish that should be expected at these price points but is not always attained. The front contains a power button that has a small LED in its centre that glows white when in standby mode and blue to match that of the Head Amp when switched on.

The back is well populated with five power outputs which allows it to energise Meridian’s Audio Core 200, Meridian Director and Media Source 200 as well as this unit. Above the power outputs are USB pass-through inputs and outputs. The mains input is via a C5 (otherwise known as a Cloverleaf or Mickey Mouse) connector. Some cable companies accommodate this design so if you wish to use an upgraded mains lead for this component I’d advise contacting your chosen cable supplier and making enquiries.

After reconnecting the Head Amp to the Leema Acoustics Tucana II amp and my MacBook Pro as per the original review, I refreshed my memory with the sound of the Prime running from the standard ‘wall wart’ power supply. I then plugged in the PSU and ran through the same songs from Morcheeba’s album ‘Big Calm’ and a selection of tracks on YouTube.

The difference in the sound quality was not subtle and I would not hesitate to describe the change as vast between “night and day”. Every aspect of the sound displayed an improvement. To me the most obvious was the vastly increased spaciousness of the soundstage that I was experiencing. It seemed to have grown in all dimensions. This was accompanied by a seemingly wider and more evenly presented bandwidth which provided more detailed shape to bass, midband and treble sounds.

Even though the soundstage seemed bigger, close detail, such as Skye’s voice in some of the more intimate moments of the music, felt closer to me and the details of her enunciation more obvious.

The ASP (Analogue Spatial Processing) controls which had previously won a guarded response from me, now seemed to be more effective. I still query the term “out of my head” listening that is used in the literature but the effect was certainly more spacious and seemed to project the music further forward and into a more conventional shape than is usually obtained through headphones.

Although £800 is a lot of money, the Prime Power unit is worth the investment. The increase in performance from the Head Amp is such that after hearing it once it would be impossible to listen with any satisfaction to the sound with the normal power supply.

The five power output sockets on the lower right can be used to energise a range of Meridian products as well as the Prime Headphone Amp. The USB pass-through offers easy computer connectivity when the PSU is in use.

The Meridian Prime headphone amp can be used with a ‘wall wart’ type power supply but benefits from being plugged into the Prime PSU.

**MERIDIAN PSU £800**

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

A useful and effective upgrade to the Prime Headphone Amp that will also supply power to several other Meridian products.

FOR
- spacious sound
- wider bandwidth
- better soundstaging

AGAINST
- nothing except price

Meridian Audio Ltd
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Sony’s HAP Z1ES hard disc player not only plays DSD but even remasters your files to the format. Noel Keywood investigates.

Sony have their own way of doing things, for better or for worse, and the HAP Z1ES high-resolution digital player reviewed here is an example that is - er - ‘interesting’. It’s strongly built, and sounds lovely, but why it does what it does I found puzzling at times.

The HAP Z1ES is a hard-drive based player for a hi-fi system: think of it as a CD player that stores music on-board. It must have an ethernet or wi-fi connection to a computer to load music files; it cannot be loaded any other way, notably not from a memory stick. It does not play from the download computer by streaming; instead it copies music files from any specified folder, the idea being that you download to a folder and the Sony automatically uploads from that, without any effort from the user. Songs sort-of magically appear on the player, after you’ve bought them. Working with the Gracenote on-line database, so do artist’s names, track info etc.

To achieve this a small HAP loader programme must be installed on the computer; Sony quote Windows XP through to 8 compatible, and Mac Snow Leopard (OS-X 10.6) and onward, compatible. However, HAP did not work with Snow Leopard in our tests, but was fine with Apple’s latest OS, Mavericks (10.9), as well as Windows 7, both in a multi-boot environment (Bootcamp) that Sony say is not compatible! Look at www.sony-europe.com/support/emanual/HAP Z1ES for compatibility data; Sony’s user manuals say little. Files can also be loaded manually from computer to player.

The HAP Z1ES cannot be used as a DAC; it has no S/PDIF or USB inputs, only ethernet for a network connection; it must see the internet in order to work with Gracenote.

Inside this player is a 1TB hard disc that stores up to 20,000 songs Sony say (methinks they mean MP3s; at 200MB a pop, 1TB will hold 5000 hi-res songs). An external USB drive can be added to boost storage.

Inside the HAP Z1ES lies a DSD re-mastering engine that converts PCM to DSD and thence out through a DSD DAC. There’s also optional DSEE to make compressed MP3s sound better, and an on-line tuner too, vTuner. Gapless playback is selectable.

Compatible music file formats are WAV and FLAC; Apple formats AIFF, ALAC, AAC; Sony’s own and outdated ATRAC and Windows Media Audio or WMA. And also both Direct Stream Digital (DSD as used on SACD) format extensions .diff and .dsf. Even lowly MP3 is supported.

The player is large, measuring 430mm wide, 130mm high and 390mm deep, and heavy at 14.5kgs. It comes with a small remote control that has volume and track skip.
functions etc, but there’s an App for smartphones and tablets. The rear panel carries unbalanced phono outputs and balanced XLRs for connection to the hi-fi.

The on-board screen is small for a £2k player and the control scheme awkward; best to use the App.

Our standard measurement files, compatible on all other devices, were rejected by the player as an ‘unsupported format’. It took Sony Japan to sort out this mystery: the HAP Z1ES cannot play single channel (mono) digital files; it only supports L&R (left and right). It will not play home recordings, if a mono recorder is used. It did play our in-house generated L&R test files.

In discussion about all this, Sony said, "The reason why we don’t process a single channel file is the need for some kind of device to effectively mix down the data. It was a design choice and we believe the circuit performance is optimised."

"The DAC is by Burr Brown - PCM 1795. There are effectively 4 DACs per channel in a one-clock delay arrangement — this allows us to create a moving average filter".

"Basically, if the DSD re-mastering is turned off, the PCM signal is processed directly to the IC and the on-chip multi-stage oversampling digital filter is bypassed (the DAC behaves as a multi-level type)."

"When DSD re-mastering is on, via use of an FPGA, we are able to convert a 32bit PCM signal to 128Fs DSD signal in this engine. Then, as with an original DSD signal, the DAC processes data as a analogue FIR type with current segmentation conversion. The design enables good attenuation of very high frequencies and improves linearity”.

I have included Sony’s techy explanation of the player's design topology to give buffs a better understanding of what goes on inside; the HAP Z1ES is a solid piece of digital technology.

**SOUND QUALITY**

The HAP Z1ES had a smooth yet forceful quality with all it played. Mostly I used it with ‘DSD Re-mastering’ switched on, as this gives a fuller bodied and slightly less sterile quality than unadulterated PCM; switching like this is an option on the App, so it can be done from the settee.

Drums and bass had a big, firm quality with Blood Sweat and Tears ‘Spinning Wheel’ and the cowbell

they use came out of our Quadral Aurum Wotan VIII speakers like a cannon shell.

We all know Santana's 'Black Magic Woman', a Peter Green number covered by all the greats, so hearing Santana's scorching version running in DSD2.8 was an experience, one also enjoyed by my neighbours! With a thundering bass line, rapid intense percussion and the man's blistering guitar work coming from our Wotans in a forceful wave, helped by a McIntosh MA8000 amplifier's push, I was more than impressed: this is exciting hi-fi.

Can digital ever be better than how you remember the LP? I thought whilst listening to this track — in my case Abraxus being played through Leak 3090s many moons ago; which brought me to thinking how I'd like to use headphones before the police arrive — but the Sony has no headphone socket. Oh shame; back to the AK120.

Bach’s 'Toccata and Fugue' (24/192, FLAC) shook our listening
During the 1970s, great strides were being made in the technology of loudspeakers. Among them were cutting-edge cone materials, rare-earth magnets, ferrofluid voice-coil cooling and the science of laser interferometry, which enabled the behaviour of the cone or diaphragm to be examined for nasties like 'breakup'.

Possibly most radical of all was the introduction of the computer, which enabled the designer of a speaker to 'model' its performance - even before the prototyping stage. A whole range of different approaches could thus be tried for nothing more than programming time.

This was before 'microcomputers' - the microprocessor-based forerunners of the desktop PCs - gained momentum. Speaker companies instead installed 'minicomputers' - which dwelt somewhere between the giant mainframes of big businesses and those early microcomputers.

One of the first speaker manufacturers to take the potential of computing under its wing was Bowers and Wilkins, B&W, as it is also known, started life as an electrical store. By 1966 it had started building its own speakers and by the mid-1970s the Sussex-based firm had gained an enviable reputation for its products both at home and overseas; indeed, it received a Queen's Export Award in 1973 (a second such award came B&W's way in 1976). Particularly popular was its Domestic Monitor ('DM') range of products. The most famous early member of this distinctive family, launched in 1970, incorporated an eleven-section electrostatic midrange/upper-frequency drive unit that curved around the top of the front panel. And to this date, the look of the DM70 remains unique.

Research and development were seen as instrumental to success and growth; with this in mind the company installed a PDP11/35 minicomputer - complete with interactive graphics terminal - in the mid-1970s, and immediately put it to work. These initial forays into computer-aided design culminated in the DM7 speaker which was released in the Queen's Silver Jubilee year of 1977. With its top-mounted tweeter visible through a hemispherical gauze, the £400-per-pair DM7 (approximately £2500 of today's money) was quite unlike any other speaker system of the time. It has to be said that the heavy 40-litre box still looks remarkably modern today. The isolated 'tweeter on top' found its way onto 1979's 801 (a popular early-80s choice for studio monitoring) and continues to be a feature of upmarket B&W speakers, including the Nautilus range.

As with other B&W speakers of the time, each pair of DM7s was supplied with calibration certificates (with anechoic-chamber frequency-response plots). You also got a sizeable instruction book that covered positioning and the listening room in some depth, and even included a list of recommended
The dome tweeter, which is usually protected by a hemispheric wire gauze, is mounted outside the cabinet - experiments showed that cabinet-mounted tweeters set up standing waves that impaired frequency-response and phase characteristics. The 30mm diaphragm of the tweeter weighs only 350mg to improve efficiency and transient response.

4mm sockets accept the output of your amplifier - no bi-wiring here. To protect the drive units, B&W specified fuses - and their holders (which can accept either 32mm or 20mm cartridges) can be seen here. Between these, and covered by tape since new, is a 2-pin DIN socket of the type that was a common sight on European equipment during the 1970s.

The latter were, hardly surprisingly, LPs - among them a Dennon (sic) disc that was praised for its PCM recording process amongst other things.

Nearly all of the records were classical, but that comes as no great surprise when you realise that such music was instrumental to B&W's birth; in 1966, the company's co-founder John Bowers was left £10,000 in the will of an elderly Miss Knight, who was impressed not only with the speakers he had made for her, but also his knowledge of classical music!

"Used stereophonically or quadrophonically", says the instruction manual, your new DM7s would "achieve the very highest standards of fidelity in the reproduction of original sound".

To meet this objective, B&W employed various design criteria. The DM7's TS26 dome tweeter was rotatable so that it could fire directly towards the listener. Also unusual at the time was the 145mm BM220 bass/midrange drive unit, which employed a cone fashioned from a matrix of Aramid (aromatic polyamide) fibres. This material is better known as Kevlar, the synthetic stuff that bulletproof vests, racing sails, wind-turbine blades and drumheads are made of. It combines an enormous tensile strength with minimal weight, properties that are beneficial for all of these very different applications.

The two drive units are driven by a complex 13-element crossover that incorporates a 'contour' control - visible on the rear-top of the aluminium-finished enclosure. This four-position rotary switch modifies the frequency response slightly so that room acoustics could be accommodated. In addition to the three modified curves (A, B and C - combinations of cuts below 150Hz or above 3kHz) is a neutral 'flat response' setting.

The crossover also has fuses to protect the drive units against amplifier failure - their holders are accessible from the rear panel which also incorporates 4mm and DIN sockets. The slightly-restyled Mk 2 version, which dispensed with the contour control, replaced the fuses with a relay-driven protection system. The DM7 isn't particularly efficient (95dB/1m with 10 volts RMS input) but it can handle large amounts of power - it's rated at 200W. During the 70s, we should remember, transistorised muscle-amps (notably models from Japan and the US) were in vogue; low-powered valve amps were about as fashionable as Garrard 401s.

Below the BM220 is an auxiliary bass radiator (the ADR220 'acoustic drive radiator'). Intended to augment the response below 100Hz, this type of system was at that time familiar to anyone who had listened to a Celestion Ditton 15 - a budget speaker that even organ-music enthusiasts could be proud of!

All of these goodies are built into a solid and reassuringly-inert 29kg cabinet built from high-density particle board with 12mm-thick bituminous panels to damp unwanted resonances. The baffle the drive units and ABR are securely screwed into with Allen-head bolts is itself made from a tough polystyrene structural-foam material.

Supplied with each DM7 was a matching stand that bolted to the base. It consists of an aluminium column of 100mm mounted on a substantial baseplate with plastic 'carpet gliders'.

My own pair of DM7s, which have been in my possession for nearly thirty years, did not alas arrive with the stands. In fact, the only hint to the existence of such a base were a number of threaded holes in the bottom of the speaker cabinet; it was only after a few years that I came across a copy of the DM7's owner's manual and its assembly instructions. I knocked up my own spiked stands, and although they didn't match B&W's lofty engineering standards they certainly did the job.

At the time, I was a student and was only too happy to have come across these particular DM7s at the local Saturday market. The trader was of the opinion that they were 'disco
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Gram Amp 2 SE phono preamp (top):
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speakers. But for £20, I certainly wasn’t going to argue — even though they were rather tatty.

Fortunately, the drive units were all in order, although both the tweeter (500mA quick-blow) and woofer (2A quick-blow) fuses needed replacement. Purists may scoff at such a primitive form of protection, and it should come as no surprise that some DM7 owners have internally-bypassed the fuseholders. Given that replacement drive units are almost certainly going to be, at the very least, difficult to obtain, though, I’m quite happy to sacrifice a (slight) sonic penalty for front-line defence.

The DM7’s polystyrene-framed front grilles were also handed to me by the market trader, the lugs clipping them to the baffles having all been broken. I got around this problem, which is apparently quite common, with the judicious use of Velcro strips. Unfortunately, the wire-mesh tweeter grilles were missing. Because the speakers were little more than a decade old, though, B&W was able to inexpensively sell me replacements.

Before the DM7s came my way, I had been using a variety of speakers, all of which had been obtained cheaply from various second-hand sources. What we find, Richard Allans and Rank Domuses had come and gone. By the time the DM7s were carried over the threshold, I had been using a pair of Celef Domestic Is for nearly two years. These were by far the most musically-satisfactory speakers I had heard at home, having a broad frequency response and smooth, uncoloured presentation.

The DM7s, however, were found to improve significantly on the Celefs. In particular, the stereo imaging was incredibly good. Even now, with the DM7s installed in my bedroom, I continue to be amazed at the realism of the soundstage and ambience that can be set up from suitable sources (notably Radio 3’s live classical fare).

The treble is, however, somewhat subdued leading to accusations of dullness — but back then the amplifier I was using (a high-end Pioneer integrated from the late 1970s) had tone controls to deal with such matters!

This particular amplifier was also something of a powerhouse, helping to compensate for the DM7s’ lowish efficiency. But as noted in a previous Olde Worlde, I have satisfactorily driven these speakers with a NAD 7020 — the receiver version of the low-powered 3020 integrated amplifier. Even at fairly high listening levels, this unexpected combination doesn’t sound strained. In other respects, the DM7s’ character is smooth and verges on the mellow; male speech can be tinged by a slight ‘plumminess’. Over the years I’ve noted this with different amplifiers, sources and listening rooms, suggesting that it is a trait of the speaker.

Lower bass is however taut and well-controlled, and although no substitute for a really large enclosure a commendable degree of slam and impact is evident. Indeed, a good few years ago I successfully used these DM7s as the front speakers of a ‘subwoofer-free’ home-cinema rig.

It may not be perfect, but this nearly 40-year old design can hold its own against modern counterparts. Expect to pay between £150 and £250 for a pair; and if possible, try before you buy. As noted, genuine DM7 spares are going to be almost unavailable; bear this in mind if you come across non-functional specimens (with intact fuses).

If your DM7s drive units have ‘blown’, you might be able to find ‘donor’ parts at Audiojumble-type events. An alternative is to adapt the speaker so close replacements can be accommodated. These must have the same electromechanical characteristics; remember that a speaker is a ‘system’ in which the cabinet and crossover are also important. For cabinet parts, you might need to be equally-creative. The DM7s are definitely worth holding onto; mine have been with me for well over half of my life. A sobering thought in this disposable age...

In 1977, computers hadn’t reached B&W’s drawing office - if this schematic of the DM7’s thirteen-element crossover is anything to go by. As can be seen here, its design is rather complex - thankfully B&W built it with high-quality components (polyester capacitors rather than electrolytics, for example!)

Proof of the computer’s role in the DM7’s development can be found in this graph, which is a plotted simulation of the speaker’s transient response. This, if the graph is to be believed, is excellent. The ‘spike’ on the left is the original stimulus impulse; there is little subsequent ‘hangover’.
Since 1948 Ortofon have introduced nearly 100 different moving coil pick-up cartridges to the hi-fi market. Their latest models in this long and proud heritage are the Quintet Series.

All Quintet cartridges use the same ABS thermoplastic bodies and neodymium magnets, but each model in the range has its own sonic expression that reflects its status. From the well-rounded Quintet Red, through the smooth Quintet Blue and spacious yet dynamic Quintet Bronze up to the pure audio excellence of the Quintet Black, this series offers something for every discerning listener at a very attractive price.

The Quintet Series also includes a true-mono cartridge, for accurate reproduction of older mono recordings.
SOUNDBITES

RESONANCE SCIENCE LABS HERUS DAC £299

One of the consequences of the explosion in computer-based audio has been the plethora of equipment purposed to help us get the best from our digitised files.

From DACs the size (and sometimes the cost) of a beefy power amplifier to devices little bigger than the size of your thumb, the options get seemingly larger by the month.

Falling firmly in the latter category is Resonance Labs £299 Herus portable digital-to-analogue convertor.

Fashioned out of a small yet chunky slab of aluminium, the Herus measures just 1.25 inches wide by 2.5 inches long and 0.75 inches high.

On one side is the USB input while the other sports a 1/4inch analogue headphone output. It may be small it has an impressive feature set - being able to process PCM files of up to 24-bit/352kHz resolution as well DSD 64 and 128.

Power is drawn directly from the USB port on your laptop although Resonessence doesn't include a connection cable so you'll have to supply your own.

But once that's done the little Herus is a revelation. Connected to a MacBook Pro and driving AKG headphones the sound was rich, crisp and detailed.

An AIFF file of The Killers 'Night And Day' had tremendous depth and three-dimensionality. It's a world away from the sound you'll get by simply plugging headphones into the Mac.

Drums have snap and power, cymbals no longer sting your ears but attain a shimmering presence while vocals are smoother.

Switch to some acoustic jazz and the Herus shows it has a firm grasp of rhythm - showcasing the interplay between bass/drums/piano and sax on John Coltrane's Africa/Brass with supreme confidence. If you spend any time listening to tracks from your computer then the Herus really has to be auditioned. JM

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SOUNDBITES

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DACMAGIC XS £99.95

The DacMagic XS is very much like the tiny Epiphany E-Dac I have enjoyed so much over the last two years, only it has an on-board volume control the E-Dac lacks. This cancels volume adjustment on the computer.

The Cambridge is even smaller though, measuring 54mm long, 30mm wide and 8mm deep. It weighs just 30gms, with its short microUSB-to-USB A lead - and that is light. The XS is typically meant to be used with a laptop or home computer to improve sound quality. Mini hi-fi DACs are very practical and a real boon.

Hooked up to my MacBook Pro running Mavericks (OS-X 10.9) the Cambridge worked up to 96kHz sample rate, like the Epiphany; my MacBook down sampled 192k material to 96k (as Macs do) to prevent a no-play situation. No advantage here then, but sample rate doesn't concern me much.

The Cambridge went very loud with my insensitive Philips Fidelio X1 headphones and this was good; it delivers 1.8V output.

In sound quality the Epiphany was a tad darker and deeper in its sound stage than the Cambridge I felt, just a little bit more svelte.

All the same, the Cambridge XS handled the classic rock of Tom Petty's Refugee (24/96) with drive and aplomb and still sounded better than the Mac direct. It was smooth and had good sound staging with classical too. I did not like having to lean across my desk to adjust volume on its Up and Down buttons though.

Critically, when I measured the Cambridge it had 5dB less noise and dynamic range than the Epiphany; the little XS works well but breaks no records.

The tiny DacMagic is magic - it is so small, light and easy to use. It also sounds very good, crisp and clean and punchy. It isn't quite the doggies though, if that's what you are looking for below £100. NK

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We are very pleased to announce a new partnership between The Clarity Alliance, the trade alliance for the UK's hi-fi industry and the National Audio Show. Bringing Clarity and its members to the Chester Group's flagship UK show is yet another step towards making NAS the best show in town. Both organisations agree that creating a true 'show' that appeals to you, our valued customers, and a broader audience is essential if we are to spread the word and share our collective passions for great sound.

Clarity has taken over the Luffield Suite, one of the largest suites at the show and inside you'll find Clarity manufacturer members showing off their latest products and technologies. Elsewhere at the show don't miss the Clarity seminars – we are bringing together some of the smartest innovators in the industry who will be sharing their knowledge of audio and hi-fi with you.

Look out also for the exhibition rooms where Clarity members will be demonstrating their newest offerings and you'll have the chance to buy from the Alliance's retail members too.

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Phil Hanson - Clarity Alliance

"Thanks for a great show, everything was well organised and very clear, staff were very helpful and looked after us."
Alan Clark - Kralk Audio

"My partner was completely bowled over at the systems available, having never truly seen or heard what excellent high end Audio could do."
John - Visitor
Astell&Kern’s new state-of-the-art top-end portable digital player runs fully-balanced right through to its headphone output. Noel Keywood listens in.

When I reviewed Astell&Kern’s AK 100 high-resolution digital portable player back in our March 2013 issue it cost a hefty £570. Then they brought out the AK 120 at a mere £1120, with dual DACs and “DSD support” — a euphemism for internal DSD-to-PCM conversion it seems. Now Astell&Kern have announced an even more fabulous player, the AK 240, at a more fabulous price — £2200 no less. Phew!

Here’s what you get.

Using an AK 120 almost daily, I was baffled as to how iRiver of Korea — owners of the Astell&Kern brand name — could possibly take a high-resolution player any further, and even why they need to take it further.

The first big difference is that the player now natively processes high-quality DSD music files, rather than turning DSD into PCM. It does this in conjunction with an XMOS DSD support chip feeding dual Cirrus Logic CS4398 DACs, one per channel.

The second difference is that the entire signal path from DACs onward and outward to the headphones is balanced in the AK 240. If you want to run headphones balanced, because it sounds better, then you have to re-cable them. A four-pole connector is needed so Astell&Kern use a tiny 2.5mm jack socket outlet. Alongside it is a standard 3.5mm jack socket for conventional unbalanced headphones.

There is now no separate DAC input as on the AK 100/120 but the player can be used as a DAC via USB from a computer.

The analogue headphone output can now be switched to become a (unbalanced) line output, with level at maximum and volume inoperative, to feed a hi-fi amplifier; this did not work using the slide button under Settings; it did work when using the quick LINE button in the volume control screen, a confusing issue iRiver noted but did not explain when I e-mailed them.

It is also possible to establish a 2.5mm-to-twin XLR balanced connection to a hi-fi amplifier having balanced inputs. Ouch — it all gets a tad complicated once you move into this territory.

Messy too, because a ground line is needed and this means a cable into the 3.5mm jack outlet, to establish ground (the 2.5mm balanced line has no ground). See what I mean?

I hope that explains in outline how the AK 240 differs from all else, including its stablemates. To exploit its potential you need high-quality ‘phones for which balanced cables with 2.5mm four-pole plugs are available.

Or you must solder up cables yourself. Any ‘phones with detachable cables from each earpiece can be so wired. The practical difficulty of this is that 2.5mm jacks are tiny and very weak — as well as rare. I found 3.5mm four-pole plugs and 2.5mm three-poles (stereo) but no 2.5mm four-poles, at Maplin, RS and Farnell. You’re more likely to find a live tortoise on the M4.

The AK 240 also has a standard 3.5mm headphone output, in which lies a Toslink digital optical SPDIF output, so the player can...
be connected to an external DAC through an adaptor. I do this frequently, connecting into an AudioLab M-DAC. This way my AK120 acts as a transport.

The AK240's tough case is machined from Duralumin and weighed 188 gms on our scales. It feels rock solid in the hand and, irrespective of whether you like its Lockheed Nighthawk stealth styling, it's going to be an equally good survivor in arduous conditions.

It is larger than the AK100 and 120, measuring 105mm high, 67mm wide and 20mm deep; it fits a trouser pocket but not a shirt pocket like the AK100.

Astell&Kern have equipped the '240 with 256GB of internal storage and a single slot accepts a microSD card up to 128GB, so you can slot in a different card every day for your commute.

Having said that, the AK240 charges from a computer's USB output and loads easily too, triggering an Android loader on my Apple OS-X Maverick desk top (unlike the AK120 that simply comes up as mass storage).

It will play whilst tethered to an external supply so can act as a mains-powered transport at home. A USB micro-B socket is situated on the player's base and a computer lead with micro-B to standard USB-A plug for computer connection is supplied.

The AK240 has a better touch screen than the AK100/120. This AMOLED screen has an active area 70mm high x 45mm wide, making song selection easy. There's an on-board clock and a high-resolution battery charge readout, for which you need good eyesight. And very usefully there is now a swipe-down menu. The menu system has been simplified, for the better I feel. And the Settings menu shows up other new additions. The player can connect via Wi-fi now, as well as playback through Bluetooth as before. Wi-fi connection allows music to be streamed from Mac or PC computers, as well as enabling automatic software upgrade.

The equaliser now has ten bands, stretching from 30Hz to 16kHz; it was fiddly to set, but there's a pre-tuned Pro option. Equalisation is useful to tame bass heavy phones like those from Dr Dre, or give open ear-phones like my travelling Jays V-Jays a bass boost.

There's also gapless playback and both repeat single song or repeat all, as well as shuffle, in the swipe-down menu.

And finally, measurement showed the main 3.5mm headphone socket delivers a hefty 2.1V output, the same as a CD player, +17dB above that from a typical portable or phone (0.3V).

The point here is that the headphone amplifier has plenty of power and punch, and can drive high-quality, insensitive 'phones like the Philips Fidelio X1s I use, or Audieze LCD-3s, to high volume, although it barely managed with Oppo's insensitive new PM-1 planar magnetics: I often had 70 showing (max 75) on the volume readout.

Set to repeat play, screen off, the battery lasted 10.5 hours. In real life, with the screen being used, life will be a bit shorter. Around 8 hours is enough for a long day, so battery life is adequate, if not the 16 hours or so of a computer lead.

To assess this player's potential I had to listen to its balanced output and this raised a slew of difficulties. Four-pole 2.5mm jack plugs are unavailable in the UK, except through e-Bay, so iRiver in Korea sent a batch to importers Computers Unlimited and they sent some on to me; I wired up a balanced cable for Oppo PM-1 planar magnetic headphones.

The plug contacts are so small a workbench solder station with clamp, magnifier and light are essential, and the plugs had cheap PVC insulation that melted with heat (PTFE does not do this), so I had to be quick. Two stereo cables barely fit the 3mm diameter cable entry.

This was no home soldering job; buyers wanting to use the AK240 balanced need to ensure they can get hold of professionally made-up cables first, I'd suggest. At the price Astell&Kern should at least provide a four-pole 2.5mm plug-to-3.5mm socket adaptor lead with the AK240, so it can connect to 3.5mm four-pole plugs that enable balanced wiring to be used with headphones, and are common.

I speculate that a stereo three-pole accidentally inserted into a
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VERDICT
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FOR
- open and precise
- plenty of emotion
- plays old mono records well
AGAINST
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Hi-Fi World July 2014

WORLD Radio History
four-pole outlet will short one channel and destroy it if a current limiting resistor is not used and because of forum paranoia about output impedance Astell&Kern are reluctant to do this – hence the 2.5mm socket. Otherwise its use makes little sense to me. 

Running in balanced mode cleaned up images across the stereo soundstage, making them firmer and better outlined. It also put extra air and space around them and – especially – bass became punchier and better defined too. This strengthened the solo drum intro to the Eagles 'I Don't Want To Hear Any More' (CD) and added heft to the bass line behind Tom Petty's 'Refugee' (24/96). Running balanced improved sound quality across the board, from CD (16/44.1) up to hi-res, by a useful if not major degree – at least through the Oppo PM-1s.

Through more revealing Audeze LCD-3 planar magnetic, differences may well be greater but I could not butcher our £1700 review samples to run balanced! This is the sort of quality and price level we are talking about – and note that phones able to run balanced have separate ear piece connections, usually made through 3.5mm mono jacks; fixed-lead and single-side entry phones are not easily adaptable to balanced working.

A 352.8kHz sample rate DXD file played through the AK240 – I thought it might glow hot at this sample rate, but it did not! This was from 2L of Norway, Mozart's 'Violin Concerto in D' (2L-038), a mere 1GB download. I also downloaded and played the DSD 128 version (581MB). Both were excellent but DSD was timbrally richer than DXD and more analogue-like, as usual. I could say DXD was a tad more insightfully concise and more tightly timed too.

So, balanced working gave best results from the AK240 as I expected, but I used it unbalanced, mostly with Audeze LCD-03s planar magnetic headphones.

This player has a tad more volume and slightly stronger dynamic contrasts than my AK100, noticeable in the range over which Amber Rubarth's voice rose and fell singing 'Storms are on the Ocean' (24/192). The AK240 has more puff, but it was every bit as clean and smooth, displaying the same counth sound that originally attracted me to Astell&Kern players.

The strength of the output amps was evident with rock like The Eagles 'Somebody' that opened with threatening strength from the swirling Hammond, underpinned by an enthusiastically strummed bass guitar and metronomic drumming.

Running a wide swath of rock I found it always sounded smooth but powerful, with delicately clear treble and firm bass.

These properties also helped make Bach's 'Concerto for Harpsichord Flute and Violin' (DSD 2.8) sound rich and intense in presentation, violin dancing with delightful agility as the bow made short but strong contact with the strings.

CONCLUSION
The AK240 is a wickedly advanced player, so much so it is difficult to exploit. Little music is available in DSD and DXD formats – yet all this technology sets the player's inevitably high price.

That does not detract from the fact that the AK240 also offers a dedicated balanced output that delivers focus, cleanliness and punch to whatever is played – and this is the 240's real advantage.

If you want a technological feat of modern audio engineering, the AK240 is it. Its balanced output from individual drive amps offers real-world benefit. But the balanced option isn't especially well thought through, even though it is fundamental to the player's design rationale.

The AK240 is a great player then, a lesson in modern digital engineering – and sound quality wise it is a whisker ahead of all other self-contained portables.

But it isn't quite a perfect blend of real world wants. A fully balanced player without the expense of DSD and with an available and practicable headphone connector would suit real world needs better I feel – but perhaps that's the next model.
This is a comprehensive directory of Hi-Fi Dealers throughout the UK and Ireland.

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Magneplanars — or Maggies as they are colloquially known in the hi-fi world — are an interesting loudspeaker. They sell in large numbers in their home territory of North America but have never had quite the same success in the UK.

Perhaps that's down to their physical size which doesn't fit as well in many of our smaller living rooms. Or maybe the fact that as they generate sound both from the front and back they need a fair degree of free space to sound at their best.

Whatever the reason, it's a shame as they offer a genuine alternative to the vast majority of cone and dome designs both in terms of looks and sound quality.

The new Magneplanar 1.7 is an updated version of the company's now 12-year-old 1.6 model. But rather than simply tinker with that design the new loudspeaker represents a radical overhaul.

For the first time in its 41-year history manufacturer Magnepan has departed from using magnetic planar drivers for the bass and midrange and employed quasi-ribbon technology throughout instead.

As the name suggests, quasi-ribbon refers to a fabrication technique that differs from a true ribbon in that the conductive metal is laminated to a thin sheet of Mylar film. Just as in an electrostatic 'speaker, the sound is produced by energising the Mylar film membrane to generate pressure waves.

But unlike an electrostatic the Magnepan does not require a hi-voltage charge to set the Mylar film in motion.

In the 1.7s there are three separate quasi-ribbons — a bass/midrange, tweeter and super-tweeter — the latter achieving its higher frequencies by bonding the conductive aluminium foil to a much thinner sheet of Mylar film.

Just as in an electrostatic the Magneplanars are dipole loudspeakers — meaning the sound radiates in equal measure from both the front and the back of the panels.

This means set-up is crucial. Too near a rear...
wall and reflections will muddle the sound, so time spent on positioning is crucial. The 1.7s are a 'handed' design (left and right speakers) and Magnepan advises siting them with the tweeter on the inside while angling them slightly towards the listening position.

Also supplied are a pair of 1.2 Ohm resistors which can be used to replace the tweeter jumpers on the rear of each panel to attenuate high-frequency response if the overall balance is deemed too bright.

Each speaker sits on a pair of T-shaped screw-on metallic feet. They provide admirable stability — but in truth look a touch utilitarian for what is, after all, a £2750 product.

On the plus side, though, while the Magneplanars may look large and a touch utilitarian for what is, after all, a £2750 product, they provide admirable stability — but in truth look a touch utilitarian for what is, after all, a £2750 product.

SOUND QUALITY

For anyone used to the sound of conventional box loudspeakers, then the Magneplanars may take a period of adjustment at first.

That's because the sound seems to flow from the panels in a totally natural, organic and colourful-free manner; there's no box boom.

Even more impressive is the sense of width, height and depth they convey, music swelling to fill the room.

As our Measured Performance shows, they do require plenty of power to go loud — and luckily we had the ideal amplifier on hand in the shape of the mighty McIntosh MA8000 and its 300-plus Watts per channel of pure muscle.

Play the Mahavishnu Orchestra’s ‘Birds Of Fire’ through this combination and it's as though the band are right there before you.

Most impressive is the air and space around individual instruments and a transient speed that opens up the soundstage to a remarkable degree.

In absolute terms the overall sound has a slight warmth to it — but not so much as to rob the music of any vitality. Instead, the Maggies are adept at throwing up minute details in recordings. Listen to something like Portishead’s ‘Dummy’ and every little studio embellishment can be heard loud and clear, while Beth Gibbons’ voice has an ethereal, haunting quality.

There is an intoxicating realism here that makes you believe you are listening to a living, breathing human being instead of a digital reproduction.

Most of that comes from the exceptionally smooth and silky mid-band and the exceptional image size thrown out by the big panels.

The big, thin panels and lack of any cabinet means the Magneplanars sound fast — with little obvious colouration to smear the sound. Play something with any sense of a beat and they charge into it with verve and tempo.

In absolute terms, hardened rock or dance fans may bemoan a certain lack of low-end attack on more up-tempo material. It's obvious the Maggies are never going to hit you in the stomach with quite the same force of a 12-inch cone in a big cabinet.

But spend some time with them and you quickly come to realise that the bass is actually completely natural and unforged.

And, importantly, once you start to turn the volume up the 1.7s simply soak up the power without any sign of undue strain.

CONCLUSION

The new Magneplanar 1.7s are innovative and impressive loudspeakers.

Yes, some may prefer the more up-front and punchier sound of dynamic box loudspeakers.

But few of those at this price can match the overall cohesiveness, lack of colouration and simply lifelike soundstage that the Maggies are capable of.

If you crave a loudspeaker that manages to make music sound as though it’s being played live in your listening room then the Magneplanars may be just your thing.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of Magnepan's Magneplanar MG 1.7 has a plateau lift of lows over highs, our analysis shows. This will give the loudspeaker a full-bodied or low-end attack on more up-tempo material. It’s obvious the MG 1.7 has unusually consistent output, right up to 18kHz.

Our response graph also shows it has very smooth output, especially across high frequencies and this suggests very low coloration.

Sure enough, our 200mS decay analysis backed this up, showing the panel to be especially uncoloured down to 500Hz or so. Below this the picture changes a little: at 30Hz and 60Hz there are some sharp resonances in the panel, likely 'drum head' resonances, that result in considerable overhang, and there is a little overhang at 300Hz, but this is small. Otherwise the MG 1.7 is impressively clean in its output.

As a load the speaker behaves like an almost perfect 4.5 Ohm resistor, our impedance graph shows. This means the panel stores no reactive energy — a good sign. The only downside is very low sensitivity of 82dB Sound Pressure Level from one nominal Watt of input (2.8V) so the 1.7s need a lot of power to go loud — and that’s real power, not just volts.

This could tax amplifiers if loud volume is maintained over a period. At least 100 Watts is needed.

The Magneplanar MG 1.7 measures unusually well in most areas, even if it shows a few obvious weak points. Measurement suggests, however, impressively smooth but warm sound, colouration free and likely with silky treble. NK

MAGNEPLANAR MG 1.7 £2750

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

Superb soundstaging allied to a smooth, detailed and lifelike musical presentation make for a thoroughly enjoyable loudspeaker.

FOR

- natural, open sound
- silky mid-band and treble
- room-filling sound

AGAINST

- not the most dynamic bass
- need plenty of power
- not for small rooms

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It's been quite a career. Spanning four decades, Paul Rodgers has fronted bands such as Free, Bad Company, the Firm, the Law and also found the time to become a temporary frontman for Queen and still have a flourishing solo career.

The Royal Sessions sees Rodgers celebrating his love for Southern soul. So, where better to indulge that than in Memphis with the musicians of Royal Studios? Opened in 1956, it has recorded greats such as Al Green and Chuck Berry.

"We had such a blast making the album", said Rodgers. "It was a dream come true. This was the music I listened to when I was a teenager and it really powerfully influenced me."

"In everything I've done, it's been the inspiration for it all. So, when I walked into that studio and met the guys and we started playing, it was really like coming home".

"Everything was analogue in the Royal Studios, so the sound was just that beautiful, deep, lovely spaced sound. Anything analogue is such a beautiful sound."

The songs featured on the album included tunes recorded at Stax and Muscle Shoals but Rodgers has made sure to retain the spirit and arrangements of the originals which is to his credit.

Even "Walk On By", which most people associate with Dionne Warwick, has plugged into the version sung by Isaac Hayes.

Rodgers also retains a vocal balance here. He never beats the life out of the songs, in a crude effort to prove his chops. He backs off, respects the songs but still gives the listener a reminder of the power of his delivery with that trademark rasp.

Rodgers clearly had a great time recording this album and I've no doubt you will have a great time listening to it too.

A fascinating figure, Kim Fowley was a true maverick, a cult figure and a talent that lay behind a wealth of the music that stemmed from the Los Angeles area of both the sixties and seventies.

On any given day you could find Fowley writing poetry, singing, writing songs for himself and for others, penning prose, producing music for others as well as managing groups and even keeping his hand in during a spell as a DJ.

He appeared on Frank Zappa and the Mothers Of Invention's 'Freak Out', wrote songs for The Byrds, Beach Boys, Soft Machine and Cat Stevens, produced Gene Vincent, Warren Zevon, the Runaways and Helen Reddy and produced several of his own albums including this from 1973.

Seen as the man's glam rock piece, it doesn't pigeon-hole itself into that genre because it also offers folk rock and 'Hunky Dory'-like Bowie interludes.

The lyrics are wonders to behold as they infuse an outwardly sleazy subject with plenty of wit, even if that wit is pushed to extremes during the likes of the Dylan-esque 'World Wide Love', along with broader subjects such as statements about the media on 'Ugly Stories About Rock Stars and the War'.

The essence of the LP is one of introspection – despite the rock'n'roll flavouring on tracks like 'Dancing All Night'. The album is proficient with a tight, sharp studio backing outfit and highly imaginative arrangements.

Also look out for another Fowley release on the same label, 'I'm Bad', which sees the barking mad turn into Howlin' Wolf, such is his fuzz-lead guitar-infested proto-punk.

You're never too sure if the eccentric Fowley is serious or not on this one.
The ECM label has been the home of important, influential and significant artists and albums for many years (as you can see at the end of this review).

Ibrahim (previously Dollar Brand, before he converted to Islam) is certainly one of those important artists. If you are unaware of him, then you need to get to know the guy. Having played in numerous jazz outfits in Africa, accompanying Hugh Masekela amongst others, he ventured forth and was 'discovered' by Duke Ellington in 1962, later working with bands headed by Elvin Jones, Gato Barbieri and Don Cherry.

Many jazz musicians are noticed and their talent blazes briefly. They then mooch around for many years, their significance as an artist severely diminished. Not Ibrahim. He is what's known as a slow burner. His talent steadily intensified from those early sixties beginnings, hitting the true heights in the mid-eighties with several peaks in the nineties and noughties.

This 1973 release from a 1969 session is important to know the man and appreciate what is to come. A continuous live performance, the LP explores eight of Ibrahim's originals. You can tell that he hasn't quite found his own voice here, his own sound and direction. That said, you share his adventure, especially via improvisations that feature effective repetitions.

Other ECM releases worth looking out for are: tenor saxophonist Sam Rivers' 'Contrasts' (1979), offering complex yet logical melodic constructions; bass fusion pioneer Miroslav Vitous's 'Miroslav Vitous Group' (1980) offers a patchy release, although John Surman provides highlights; Keith Jarrett's 'Arbour Zena' (1975) is a jazz/neo-classical outing that is rambling but idyllic while Ralph Towner and John Abercrombie's 'Five Years Later' provide a subtle brand of passion.

A highly significant hip-hop 'band' and a significant album from 1999. The Roots might not be megastars in their field but they certainly entertain lots of respect for what they do and how they do it.

Featuring live instrumentation, unusual for any hip-hop outfit to begin with, The Roots have sometimes struggled to maintain consistency when producing albums, enjoying more the live stage on which they are powerful and something to behold. That live music began in 1987 as a duo but grew to a four piece and now features seven members. Their drive for purity and direction was sealed on the major label release 'Do You Want More?!!!?!' (1995) in which the music eschewed samples or previously recorded material. This made for a comparatively difficult listen and the band was ignored by mainstream rap.

This album, the band’s fourth, was their most successful to date. It was where the band’s vision and implementation was finally organised into a coherent whole. Taking its title from the Chinua Achebe novel credited with revitalising African fiction, the album rests on the assertion that hip-hop records are treated as disposable, that they aren’t maximised as product or as art. This forthright philosophy gained the outfit a new audience. Meanwhile, the backing is rather jazzy in tone with a certain neo-soul vibe running through the album. They, in fact, helped to start the movement, working closely with Erykah Badu. In fact, Badu appears on this LP on the single, ‘You Got Me’, with co-writing from Jill Scott.

Also listen out for Mos Def on ‘Double Trouble’, a real rhymefest, Jay Dee appears on ‘Dynamite!’ and DJ Jazzy Jeff pops up on ‘The Next Movement’.

ADULLAH IBRAHIM
African Piano
ECM

THE ROOTS
Things Fall Apart
Music On Vinyl

JULY 2014
Oppo recently released their first planar magnetic headphone, the luxurious PM-1. They are different — but make a lot of sense, Noel Keywood thinks.

was excited by Oppo’s launch of their new PM-1 headphones, because they use planar magnetic drivers like Audeze headphones, but cost half as much — well almost. That still means £1000, but as Audezes shade other ‘phones and are my personal favourites (ignoring Stax electrostatics) the Oppos still looked like a sort-of bargain. But are they?

Disappointingly, I think not. I have Audeze LCD-3s beside me as a type, as well as Oppo PM-1s running from an Astell&Kern AK240 high-resolution digital player and the LCD-3s have it. But the Oppos are still very, very good.

The PM-1s weighed 395gms on our scales, without cables, exactly as their manufacturer’s quote. A short 1m lightweight cable is supplied for use on the move terminated by a three-pole 3.5mm stereo jack plug at the player end and 2.5mm two-pole plugs to each earpiece, the lead splitting into a Y; it is not single-sided. This allows individual cables to run to each earpiece in balanced mode.

Oppo also supply a 2m cable terminated with a 1/4in (6.35mm) three-pole jack plug, for domestic use. The 2.5mm sockets on the earpieces sit in a small diameter recess that prevents the use of normal 2.5mm mono jack plugs I found; Oppo’s

earpiece plugs have a small 6mm diameter body that fits the recess whilst standard 9mm plugs do not, a point to note if re-cabling.

Both soft lambskin and velour ear pads are supplied and velours measure better (see Measured Performance), believe it or not. You also get a re-cycled denim carrying case that is 220mm long and has a carrying handle, something I found handy.

Planar magnetic drive units have a thin, flat conductor attached to a tough, lightweight Mylar film, with

magnets either side.

Running a signal through the conductor creates a magnetic field that interacts with the static field of the magnets, causing the film to vibrate in sympathy with the music.

It’s been done before, by Wharfedale (UK) and Magnepan (USA) in the 1970s, and shortly after by Yamaha (Japan). It works well, but in linear push-pull form, front magnets shield the film and affect treble. HiFiMan of China use magnets on one side to avoid this, but the motor is less linear.

And this brings me to sound quality. The PM-1s have a decidedly warm balance, even against the mild mannered Audeze LCD-3s and after
REVIEW

long use I had reservations about this. Most dynamic headphones, like the Philips Fidelio X1s I also use are obviously brighter and even Audeze have modified the LCD-3 motor front magnet assembly ('Fazor' technology) for a brighter balance, tacitly acknowledging the LCD-3 hasn't got enough top end bite for some listeners, especially those used to lightweight on-ear phones like Jays V-jays.

However, planar magnetics have a smooth, cohesive quality dynamic headphones lack, as well as firm, punchy bass — and here the Oppos scored; my Fidelio X1s were more revealing and a tad more insightful, but they were not as smooth and all-of-a-piece, sounding slightly coarse by way of contrast.

Soundstaging was very good, but I noted it had limited lateral extension, much like Audeze's closed-back LCD-XC headphones and, sure enough, even though the backs are perforated, placing my hands over the PM-I backs did not affect the sound stage, whereas it did with the open-backed LCD-3s. So acoustically, they are more closed-back than open-back.

Using balanced mode with the Astell&Kern AK240 high-resolution digital player I got a cleaner sound and massively fast bass impact from kick drums.

Our Audiolab M-DAC also gave the Oppos a stronger kick and more apparent dynamic range, whilst a Chord Hugo added a smidgen of welcome brightness.

Note that the PM-Is are insensitive and need at least 1V to go loud, more than the 0.3V most portables deliver. An Apple iPad delivers 1V and portable hi-res players around 2V.

Oppo's PM-1s have all the smoothness and cohesiveness of magnetic planar transducers.

Put them on after conventional phones and you'll coo at this; but you might wonder why they're so warm sounding. They also lack the resolution of low-level detail that distinguishes the more expensive Audezes.

All the same, whilst they are not quite top of the class, Oppo's new PM-1s are still impressive in their own way and — if their balance appeals — worth their asking price.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the PM-1 was smooth, our response analysis shows, with upper treble in particular very flat (no HRTF), if low in level. This is the best result, achieved with the velour covered ear pads. Treble dropped with the lambskin leather pads and was bumpier, so they will sound a tad warmer in balance.

By any standard the PM-1s were smooth, and by headphone standards very smooth, although treble is not strong.

As a load the PM-1s were purely resistive, all the way to 20kHz, measuring 31 Ohms - a low value. Sensitivity measured 85dB with a true 1mW input (0.18V), which is relatively low and inadequate for a typical portable player or phone with 0.3V out maximum. With dedicated headphone amps that produce 2V, the PM-1s will produce 22dB more sound pressure, making 107dB SPL possible — very loud.

The Oppo PM-1s measured very well, but they are insensitive and best suit high-quality headphone amplifiers and hi-res players that produce 2V.


OPPO PM-1 HEADPHONES £1000

EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VERDICT

Smooth, warm sounding phones that have charms.

FDR
- cohesive and smooth
- good bass
- changeable earpads

AGAINST
- warm sound
- recessed 2.5mm sockets
- in-head sound stage

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Velour (front) and lambskin earpieces are provided, that push-fit to the earpiece body, help by four spigots.
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"An artist with life experience is always worth listening to"

Paul Rigby

How can you bring anything to a vocation if you haven’t lived or been affected by life? I use the word ‘vocation’ advisedly, I don’t mean ‘job’. Being a vicar is a vocation. I would also class politics in the same mould. When Winston Churchill, a privileged individual there is no doubt, became a politician he had certainly lived life, including being shot at in Cuba and escaping as a POW from a Boer prison in South Africa.

On the opposite benches, Nye Bevan worked in a colliery, knew what it was to be unemployed and learnt how to generate food supplies for striking miners. Both men had seen life before entering politics.

Many current politicians leave university and then immediately enter politics and then dare...dare, to preach to you and me about how sacrifices. It's like being told off by a teacher. Such scholastic tomes and constructed from politically-biased textbooks. That includes what I mean. Just listen to ‘Rhythm’n’Bluesin by the Bayou: Rompin’ & Stompin’, for example. This compilation is full of people with something to say. Take James 'Sugar Boy' Crawford, singing the song ‘Round And Round’. Sugar Boy and his band were on their way to a job in North Louisiana in 1963, when state troopers pulled him over for the then-crime of being a black man in a flashy brand new automobile.

One of Louisiana’s “finest” took exception to Sugar Boy’s attitude and proceeded to pistol-whip him by the side of the road. Sugar Boy spent three weeks in the hospital and was incapacitated for two years. He had pain enough to sing his blues.

Another compilation, ‘You Talk To Much: the Ric & Ron Story Volume I’ features the turbaned Eddie Bo, an adept singer and pianist, singing “You’ve Got Your Mojo Working”. He began life as a bricklayer. More recently, his house in New Orleans was hit by Hurricane Katrina. Bo’s house needed a new roof and wall repairs. You know what? He did the repairs himself!

Imagine a politician being afflicted in the same way. They would be crying to their insurance company, a local builder and their mother. although not necessarily in that order, before waving their arms above their heads in bemused helplessness and then flipping open a credit card and heading to the nearest five-star hotel.

Ok, let's move away from poor black families to a relatively wealthy middle class white guy: Lou Adler — superstar producer and/or manager for the likes of Johnny Rivers, Sam Cooke, Carole King, the Mamas & the Papas and Jimi Hendrix — who appears on a new collection called ‘Lou Adler: A Musical History’.

Adler started out managing a clothes store and even sold insurance policies. “I think I sold one to (famed trumpet player and song writer) Herb Albert at one point”, he says.


Lucien Ginsburg, his given name, was the son of Jewish immigrants, his father was a talented pianist in theatres and clubs in Paris. Gainsbourg was eleven years old when the Nazis occupied Paris, forcing him and his family to wear the yellow star with the word ‘Jew’ written on it. An experience that hurt and scarred him.

“It was like you were a bull, branded with a red-hot iron”, he said. “Even at thirteen, fourteen years old, I had already become an outsider, because the tough guy thing wasn’t me”.

Gainsbourg’s life education arrived at an early age. Too early, some might say.

I’m always suspicious when listening to rhetoric from individuals with no life experience but when a person with knowledge of life speaks out then I’m all ears.

Such people tend to want to talk about matters that they believe in and are, hence, passionate about their topic.

There is nothing finer than listening to a passionate person spout about a subject they love. Why? Because then I learn from them.
"Is there part of our anatomy through which we detect hypersonic sound?"
The Xpression Carbon is the latest version of Pro-Ject Audio Systems' original turntable, the Pro-Ject 1. This new model employs a brand new carbon fibre tonearm with an Evolution-inspired support structure. The superior motor, with isolation blobs designed by Ortofon, drives a high-quality platter that can be fitted with either a Cork or Felt mat. The plinth is available in three stunning finishes*, and the arm is rounded off with an Ortofon 2M Silver cartridge to create a comprehensive package that would suit any system.

A Classic Made New...

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"how could Sony grab a slice of the iTunes action?  
By promoting DSD"

Just when I thought digital was becoming easy – easy to use that is – along comes DSD. It is not easy to use and there are not even agreed standards for its transmission. Yet already we have DSD2.8 and double speed DSD5.6, in both .dff and .dsf file formats.

I suspect most people would like to step up to ordinary, everyday, mundane hi-res digital, namely 24/96, first, without being faced by yet another confusing format. Has the industry gone mad? Or is there a subtle reason for this, I'm wondering?

DSD is Direct Stream Digital, an unusual form of digital that is totally different to your everyday stuff, otherwise known as PCM which is short for Pulse Code Modulation (e.g. WAV files). Sony started using it for archiving music some time ago, giving it cache as a high-quality medium.

At the same time, music was issued in DSD form on SACD discs – and we all know where that went. Or perhaps most people don’t, because they never heard of SACD nor understood its benefit.

Sony never got behind it, likely because an AV disc able to compete with DVD looked a better option commercially, so Blu-ray became the focus of Sony’s attention. Lest we forget, AV was the big thing not so long ago, music without pictures making little apparent sense.

Then along came Apple with iTunes, downloads and a whole new world of stereo – and should I say a revived world of musical appreciation, a world quite different to AV, that in reality was about selling Hollywood films, which suited Sony Pictures.

It was Apple who brought back music. Steve Jobs famously loved music, had a serious hi-fi system and judiciously named his company after the Beatles 'Apple Corp' it was once said (now heavily denied!).

In this new firmament, dominated by iTunes, sound quality was worse than Steve Jobs had enjoyed from his LPs back in the 1970s so quality was always going to be an issue – a weak point Sony now seek to exploit I suspect.

How could Sony – who have a music download site remember – grab a slice of the iTunes action? Well, by promoting and using DSD, their own format. Guess what, the licence for use is now free!

To this day, Apple portable products don’t play hi-res. You won’t get 24/96 into an iPhone, or an iPad. You will into Samsung Android-based products. But none of them play DSD and it isn’t easy to do so.

Firstly, you need a dedicated DSD player, meaning software that can select and play the file, sending it (preferably) to a DSD digital-to-analogue convertor. Forget iTunes or Windows Media Centre: think Audirvana, J River (PC only) and PureMusic.

I use Pure Music at present. Yes, it is quirky and unstable, as people say, but it plays DSD from memory and sounds good. Initially, I found re-booting to purge memory (4GB) got a track playing on my Mac Mini, after Activity Monitor (in the Utilities folder) showed the memory was jammed. Subsequently, this issue has receded; perhaps the Mac re-allocates between static and dynamic memory.

There are other issues. No agreed transmission protocol exists for DSD. It cannot be sent over digital audio SPDIF links, electrical or optical, since there is no agreed way of doing this via SPDIF. The same situation exists via USB where audio is packetised and transmitted at 1kHz intervals, although DSD-over-PCM (DoP) is what everyone is using and works fine in my experience.

Then there is the peculiar issue of the digital-to-analogue convertor.

If DSD is to be fully exploited it must pass through a DSD DAC, which is basically a low pass filter. And this is why DSD looks so good to engineers; PCM DACs needed a resistive ladder network that introduced errors and distortion (digital never was ‘perfect’); DSD DACs need no such thing. In fact, in that DSD data does not have a numeric value, it is as much analogue as digital!

A DSD DAC is basically simple and pure and imposes no errors in the conversion process. All the same, to avoid hardware complexity manufacturers commonly convert DSD to PCM and then send it through a PCM DAC - advantage lost!

Nowadays most PCM DAC chips, like those from Wolfson or ESS, have native DSD conversion on board, but still manufacturers prefer to convert to PCM to avoid external circuit complexity.

So DSD is complicated, yet we seem to be careering into it.

There are other issues to be aware of. I said DSD cannot be sent via SPDIF – but it often is! To do this it is converted, in most cases, to 176.4kHz sample rate PCM. This isn’t to deceive users, but to avoid a no-play scenario. In my experience it is no sonic disaster so I’m not a critic of this.

So DSD is complicated, yet we seem to be careering into it.

Why? Well, it always sounded good and it can be downloaded and Sony have a big interest in it they can use against Apple.

Do I sense a hidden agenda here? I do! DSD will likely be coming to a device near you soon, with the hand of Sony behind! •
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The Greats Of Roth

Roth OLi RA2 loudspeakers won’t break the bank — but they will give you a refined listening experience. Jon Myles hails the birth of a budget bargain.

Here’s a question: exactly how much do you expect to pay for a pair of decent loudspeakers? Perhaps start from the £300 mark for standmounts. Maybe double that amount for floorstanders due to the extra cost associated with the bigger cabinets.

If so, then the chances are you won’t take a second glance at the Roth OLi RA2s. After all, they cost just £150 and — if you turn to a certain volume retailer — can be had for a penny less than £100 at the moment.

Surely no manufacturer can produce a musically-coherent, thoroughly satisfying and well-tuned transducer at that price?

Well, it seems Roth think they can with this model. And you know what? They’ve managed it.

What you get is a standard two-way standmount comprising a 1in silk dome tweeter allied to a 5.25in woven fibreglass hybrid mid-bass.

Both drivers are contained in custom waveguides — which are said to aid dispersion and give a wider soundstage.

All this is housed in a 290mm/180mm/205mm (H/W/D) cabinet that has subtly rounded corners to add a touch of class to the look.

The rear panel contains a small bass port and a single pair of speaker binding posts. Roth also supplies a pair of brackets to allow wall mounting if desired.

Fit and finish is good with no obvious seams or joints while the
grilles attach magnetically so there's no unsightly attachement points to spoil the clean lines if you choose to leave them off.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Refined is not normally the word you use when reviewing a pair of £150 loudspeakers. But in the case of the Roths it's fully justified.

They have an ease and assurance to their sound which could shame some more expensive competitors.

Most importantly they are all of a piece — meaning they don't try to exaggerate any element of the sonic spectrum to the detriment of others.

With Charles Gayle's 'Touchin' On Trane' CD — which is not the easiest task for a loudspeaker with its honking saxophone, syncopated bass and complex drums — the Roths did a commendable job of separating the instruments whilst allowing them to meld together into an easy flow.

With something even more difficult, in the shape of James Blake's bass-heavy 'Limit To Your Love', they continued to shine. The little RA2s cannot achieve the earth-shaking low-end this track is capable of producing on bigger loudspeakers, but they don't shirk from trying.

Here, the Roth's bass had both texture as well as dynamic punch, with no obvious boominess from the port.

The real highlight, though, is through the mid-band and treble where they are open and clear without any hint of harshness or top-end shriek.

ABC's 'The Look Of Love' was as smooth as silk and replete with detail while the Roths also managed to capture the edge and urgency of Jacques Brel's 'Dans Le Port D'Amsterdam' without missing a beat.

The soundstage is exemplary — with both width and depth while vocals, piano and acoustic guitar hang in the air right in front of you.

Impressively, they also seem to thrive on a good dose of power. Hooked up to my resident Naim Supernait 2 (which at £2,750 would at first would seem a bit of a mismatch) and turning the volume control up to the 12 O'clock position elicited absolutely no hint of rattle or strain from the cabinet.

And the chances are you will be tempted to turn the volume up once you have the Roths in place because they reproduce music with such fun and bounce that they quickly become addictive.

The highest praise I can give them is to say I moved from a considerably more expensive pair of loudspeakers to the Roths and didn't feel I was losing too much.

Absolute detail, total low-end punch and ultimate volume were not quite to notch, of course — but in terms of musical communication and enjoyment, they give away very little.

**CONCLUSION**

Sound-per-pound these loudspeakers must rank as one of the biggest bargains out there at the moment. They are unerringly smooth yet have a dynamic punch and musicality capable of shaming some competitors costing at least twice as much.

Anyone looking to build a thoroughly musical system without breaking the bank really should audition the RA2s. They are a real revelation.

**MEASUREMENTS**

---

**IMPEDANCE**

---

**FREQUENCY RESPONSE**

**Red - port output**

---

**Value**

- keenly priced

**Verdict**

Superb loudspeaker at a bargain price. These Roths really do have to be heard to be believed. A true bargain.

**FOR**

- smooth, detailed sound
- impressive bass for their size
- price

**AGAINST**

- absolutely nothing

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JULY 2014 HI FI WORLD 79
EAT E GLO PHONOSTAGE 83
EAT's new all-valve phono stage has Tony Bolton ransacking his record collection.

ORIGIN LIVE TURNTABLE BELT/ORTOFON LW-7N LEAD WIRES 89
Tony Bolton tries out two accessories to fine tune your turntable.

RECORD STORE DAY 91
Paul Rigby checks out the vinyl exclusives at the annual event.

MOV LATEST
Licensed from Bear Family is Jerry Lee Lewis’s ‘Up Through the Years’ collecting twenty-four tracks from the 1958-1963 catalogue. A great introduction to his work.

Unfairly ignored, Bill Withers’ +Justments+ features melancholy musings but, more importantly, it’s the last album where he is out front, free of over-production. Finally, The Meters’ ‘Fire In The Bayou’, was their best funk outing for Reprise (1975): focused performances, classy songs and a gritty presentation.

JUMPING JAZZ FEVER
New from Music On Vinyl’s jazz section (www.musiconvinyl.com) is Thelonious Monk’s ‘Solo Monk’ (1965), a collection of originals and covers of angular beauty, sometimes highly complex, but always emotional.

New from Impex (www.impexrecords.com) is a beautifully produced, well mastered edition of Miles Davis’ ‘E.S.P.’ (1965), that helped define modern jazz. Hard bop with elastic tonality.

Over to Pure Pleasure (www.purepleasurerecords.com) and bassist Oscar Pettiford’s ‘Volume 2’ or ‘Another One’ who, as band leader, provides bebop, calypso and a little Duke Ellington. Lyrical sounds and lyrical bass playing.

On Waxtime (www.discovery-records.com) are Chet Baker and Bill Evans’ ‘Alone Together’. A re-badged ‘Chet’ (1959) but replacing ‘Early Morning Mood’ with ‘I Could Have Danced All Night’ plus John Coltrane & Kenny Burrell’s self-titled piece (Coltrane’s last as a sideman for Prestige) from 1963 on sax and guitar respectively. A one-off partnership offering intimacy and focus.

MOBILE FIDELITY
A selection of high-quality releases from this US-based outfit starts with Bob Dylan’s ‘Desire’ (1976), messy in concept covering topical subjects and folk tales but that has a charm of its own. An intriguing LP.

Mo-Fi has released another Pixies LP; this time the final band release ‘Trompe Le Monde’ (1991), essentially Black Francis’ solo debut, adding a lot of SF and removing a lot of Kim Deal. It is a rousing swan song, however.

Also check out Carol King’s classic ‘Tapestry’ (1971), a crafted album of superior pop including ‘Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow’ and ‘(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman’ plus Foreigner’s ‘Head Games’ (1979), an arena rock classic, slick and non-threatening.
R-R-R-ROCK!

Two classic rock outings from Polydor’s Wax Cathedral. Firstly, Rainbow’s ‘Rising’ (1976) is the band’s best album, offering quality songs and execution: tight and colourful. Rainbow’s live double album, ‘On Stage’ (1977) might feature excellent material but the performance is somewhat lacking.

Hammercult is an Israeli thrash metal band. ‘Steelcrusher’ (SPV; www.spv.de) is a vulgar, no holds barred, throat vocalled, brutal outing with blast beats.

If ever a band could tackle greasy, dirty rock’n’roll it’s Nashville Pussy. In the new LP ‘Up The Dosage (SPV), they turn it up to eleven and threaten your daughters (plus everyone else in your family, incidentally).

Also look out for Stryker’s ‘No More Hell To Pay (SPV; 2013), Christian metal rock (oh, yes). Heavy with minor chords and oh so reverent; Alex Rudi Pell’s ‘Into The Storm’ (SPV) is a strong release offering solid vocals, top-quality guitar playing, mystical metal and haunting ballads; Pestilence’s ‘Obsideo’ (2013; Back On Black, www.backonblack.com) shows a death metal band struggling with match fitness since they reformed in 2008. Interesting components but no real direction.

...AND FINALLY

Icelandic chappie Asgeir produced a wildly successful debut album in his home country. ‘In The Silence’ (One Little Indian; www.indian.co.uk) should repeat that success here. It is a devastatingly beautiful new LP, full of heart-wrenching minor chords and Coldplay-like uplifting songs.

Fanfario’s new ‘Let’s Go Extinct’ (New World; www.newworldrecords.org) has a distinct Simple Minds-like vibe. Bouncy, up-tempo although a bit too eighties pop.

Nicolas Jaar and Dave Harrington’s new Darkside project has produced ‘Psychic’ (Matador; matadorrecords.com), a moody electronic dance LP with prog infusions that leans towards pop semantics.

On Groovie (www.groovierecords.com) is ‘Black, Lonely & Blue’, a new release by The Skeptics, a straight-ahead garage band oozing punk aggression and in-your-face, treated vocals.

Also on Groovie is ‘Psicodelico 1966-1975’ from Serguei (a frustrated Russian flight attendant turned hippie). Offering fuzz, tropicalia, garage and psych this eccentric, obscure rarity is a total freak-fest.

New release from Eternal Elysium, the Japanese stoner metal band. ‘Highflyer’ (Headspin; www.clearspot.nl) is a mini-LP of intense rock set at a good pace with vocal variation. Classy doom.

Over to Eyes & No Eyes latest self-titled LP (Willkommen; www.willkommenrecords.co.uk) offering pastoral indie rock, a sort of folk-rock amongst the daisies fronted by a lazy, fragile vocal.

From Max Richter comes ‘Memoryhouse’ (2002), his then debut, a superb piece of neoclassicism from Fat Cat (www.fat-cat.co.uk). An elegant journal of soundscapes plus some restrained post rock.


Also on Premier Sang and more strangeness from no wave/experimental outfit Sister Iodine and their new album ‘Blame’. A collision of electronic static and screaming industrial pain.

Finally, take a peek at Ninja Tune (www.ninjatune.net) artist Machinedrum’s ‘Vapor City’ offering atmospheric beats and playing with frequency patterns over dry bass percussion.
SPEAKERS
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PRE-AMPS
Audio Note Zero R (NOS) pre amp £350
Gamma ERA Reference pre amp, mint cond' £395
Toff pre amp, balanced and s/e on every input/output £295

CD PLAYERS & TRANSPORTS
Rega ISIS CD player with USB input, SE and balanced output mint in original crate cost new £6150 offered £2995
CEC TL5100 CD transport, top loader/black £495
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TURNABLES, CARTRIDGES & TONEARMS
Rega Elys 2 Cartridge, MINT £65

MISCELLANEOUS
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Studer A-807 pro' stereo tape recorder £2495
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Yamaha TX-761 DAB/FM Tuner £195
Okutsu Denko 1.5 metre mains cable (US plugs) £1195

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Good enough to EAT...

Tony Bolton finds himself seduced by an elegantly styled phonostage from the Czech Republic.

Based in Prague in the Czech Republic, the European Audio Team (EAT) have built up a business manufacturing high-quality turntables, an arm and a cartridge as well as valves. At last year’s High End Show in Munich they introduced the E-Glo phonostage, which we now have for this review.

As befits a product that retails at £5300, the visual first impressions of this two-box phonostage are commensurate with that price point. The power supply is housed in a brushed alloy case that measures 435 x 85 x 280mm (hxwxd). At the back is the IEC mains input, alongside the power switch and a tethered lead that connects it to the phonostage.

The front contains two nicely subdued LEDs, one of which indicates that power is present, the other glowing when current is flowing into the phonostage.

Inside the PSU is a custom made toroidal transformer which features double shielding between the primary and secondary windings. This is claimed to stop the intrusion of RTI and to act as a mains filter. EAT have fitted special diodes with noise suppressing resistors to the rectifying circuitry, along with high-quality electrolytic capacitors, followed by a voltage regulator with capacitor multiplier. The power component is an FET transistor. Separate power supplies for each channel then feed into the phonostage.

This is housed in a case of similar dimensions that has some striking styling touches. The ends are covered in highly-polished wooden fillets that have a pleasingly retro appearance to them, while the top contains two large, round, layered discs mounted to resemble the reels on an open reel tape recorder. These are the heat sinks for the two ECC83 and one ECC88 valves on each channel that provide the amplification. The valves are encased in valve coolers which
**AMPLIFIERS**

Ayer WS 99 power amp £995
Ayer D 980 integrator £395

Audio Analogue 803A integrator £345
Audio Innovations classic 25 integrator £295

Hermetically sealed £795
Hermetically sealed £95

Audio Research 75 integrator £495


**TONEARMS/ TURNTABLES/TONEARMS**

Harman Kardon 201T integrator £395

Nakamichi 1000 power amp £295


**HEADPHONES**


**HEADPHONES AMPS**


**ACCESSORIES**


**LIGHTING** (Contact us for details)


**REPAIRS**


**RESEARCH** (Contact us for details)
The red rings around the valves are valve coolers which also help reduce any tendency for the valves to pick up and amplify spurious vibrations.

should also stop any microphonic intrusions into the audio spectrum.

Internally there is a fully balanced input stage fitted with a Lundahl step up transformer with an amorphous core. The unit's gain is 45dB plus the voltage gain of the step up transformer. The equalisation section of the stage is fully passive without any global negative feedback loop.

The output capacitor is a Mundorf and all others are supplied by WIMA. The connectors are also by Mundorf and Teflon insulation is specified throughout.

The front of the phonostage contains rows of LEDs that display impedance settings. These are chosen by the rotary switch on the top of the casework. Beside this is another, matching dial which controls the capacitance settings for use with MM cartridges.

The selection between MM and MC is carried out by a switch on the top right of the case, which sits alongside the subsonic filter control and a muting switch. The back contains dip switches to set the choice of gain and a selection of phono sockets for MM and MC input and line level output.

Having connected it up to my downstairs system I started listening with the classic Stone Roses 1989 eponymously named LP My first reaction was to lower the volume control a couple of notches from its customary position since the music barreled out of the loudspeakers at a considerably louder volume than I was expecting.

The second thing that I noticed was the punch of the drums. The attack was lightning fast and the introduction of the guitars seemed to have a quite vivid energy about the way in which they were portrayed. Ian Brown's laid back vocal style stood in contrast to this, making for a very involving listening experience.

Having discovered that the E-Glo seemed to transmit rhythmic energy in a powerful way I moved onto Massive Attack's 1994 opus 'Protection'. The loping flow of 'Karmacoma' was a delight to listen to, and impossible not to find involving. Tricky's voice held centre stage some way in front of the speakers and I found myself listening to a performance taking place on a quite expansively deep soundstage. This mixture of electronica, guitars and drums seemed to have a naturally rolling gait that was both relaxing and totally involving and instead of wandering on to other tracks I found myself settling in for the entire LP.

This turned out to be a regular feature of my listening with this phonostage. LPs that I would normally cherry pick one or two favourite tracks from were played in their entirety. The sound was so enjoyable that it almost seemed discourteous to the music being played to do anything else.

A day or two later, with my listening schedule thrown out of the window, I had got to the classical section of my record collection and got lost in 'Scheherazade'. I like this 1958 Beecham recording of it. He conducted the RPO with a focus on the rhythm that helped the music conjure up images of Eastern promise. The tonality of the various strands of the orchestra seemed to me to sound correct. Although this phonostage has excellent sonic manners it avoided the traps that so many phonostages fall into of smoothing out the sounds of violins and brass. They still had a defined edge to them and a bite when required.

I tested out the E-Glo's manners by playing Edith Piaf, a singer whose

The power supply has a toroidal transformer with double shielding between primary and secondary windings. This helps prevent RFI and acts as a mains filter.
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vocal style can be very difficult to reproduce without sounding as though she is gargling glass. The phonostage stepped up to challenge and passed with flying colours. I was presented with an almost holographic image of a little figure in her trademark black dress (I could hear the odd rustle of material as she moved within it) against an absolutely inky black background. Despite the focus of the recording being on her vocals, I was still aware of the shape of the inside of the hall) and almost felt that I could have described the shape of the inside of the building from the sound of it.

I finished my listening a couple of days later with Dinah Washington singing her way through 'You're Nobody 'Til Somebody Loves You'. Nobody 'Til Somebody Loves You'. The E-Glo has enough gain and choice of settings to accommodate most cartridges, it looks good and sounds wonderful. I think I may have just fallen in love with that natural gait that only time during a very extended class performance and the E-Glo did not disappoint at any price I expect absolutely first class performance and the E-Glo did not disappoint at any time during a very extended listening period. Rhythms flowed with that natural gait that only those valves can accurately reproduce and all aspects of the tonality of everything that I played, from electronica to orchestral sounds, were just right. It made music seem natural rather than being reproduced with the accurate but unspringing air of 'high fidelity' that can sound technically correct, but is uninvolving.

The E-Glo has enough gain and choice of settings to accommodate most cartridges, it looks good and sounds wonderful. I think I may have just fallen in love with

assertive and made for mesmerising listening.

I am thoroughly impressed with this phonostage. At this price I expect absolutely first class performance and the E-Glo did not disappoint at any time during a very extended listening period. Rhythms flowed with that natural gait that only those valves can accurately reproduce and all aspects of the tonality of everything that I played, from electronica to orchestral sounds, were just right. It made music seem natural rather than being reproduced with the accurate but unspringing air of 'high fidelity' that can sound technically correct, but is uninvolving.

The E-Glo has enough gain and choice of settings to accommodate most cartridges, it looks good and sounds wonderful. I think I may have just fallen in love with

The fully balanced circuit uses Mundorf capacitors in the output stage. All other capacitors are made by Wima. Each channel boasts two ECC83 and one ECC88 valve, seen here with their valve coolers fitted.

Each channel is equipped with dip switches to set G1 or G2 levels of gain.

The E-Glo E-GLO PHONOSTAGE £5300

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

expensive but offering truly first class performance, this valve powered two box phonostage is worth every penny.

FOR
- accurate and tight rhythms
- natural tonality
- excellent imaging

AGAINST
- price

MUSIC USED


Massive Attack. 'Protection'. Circa records. 7243 8 39883 1 0. 1994.

SYSTEM USED

Clearaudio Master Solution turntable/ Magnify arm/ Benz Micro Wood SL cartridge.

Leema Acoustics Tucana II amplifier, Chario Unica Major loudspeakers.

Each channel is equipped with dip switches to set G1 or G2 levels of gain.

Where this did not seem to make an audible difference. The image was wide and deep and totally believable in creating the impression of watching a singer strut her stuff to the beats of a jazz band. Although Dinah has a determined vocal style, it did not sound forced, merely

where this did not seem to make an audible difference. The image was wide and deep and totally believable in creating the impression of watching a singer strut her stuff to the beats of a jazz band. Although Dinah has a determined vocal style, it did not sound forced, merely

DISTORTION

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Gain through MM measured x200 (46dB), a-usefully high value for low output MM's, and with 27V output swing overload is not a problem with high output MM's. With 35mV in, about the maximum from an MM, the EAT E-Glo will give 7.3V out.

Very high gain was available from MC too, measuring x 3471 (71dB) at the low gain G2 setting, and a-massive x6734 (77dB) at the high gain G1 setting. If an MC was to give 4mV out, around the maximum possible, then this stage will swing its maximum output of a massive 27V. It seems a bit extreme, but

GSM 100kHz and with MC at high gain (0.08pV).

IEC A wtd — good if not quite as low as possible with input transformers (0.08pV).

The EAT E-Glo works well. It has enormous gain and can deal with very low output MC's, for which it is designed. Noise is low, frequency response wide, distortion low (0.1%) and the warp filter is very effective. NK

Frequency response 12Hz-100kHz

Separation 66dB

Noise (MM/MC) -84/-75dB

Distortion 0.1%

Gain (MM/MC) 46dB: 71, 77dB

Overload 27V out

VERDICT

expensive but offering truly first class performance, this valve powered two box phonostage is worth every penny.

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- accurate and tight rhythms
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Clearaudio Master Solution turntable/ Magnify arm/ Benz Micro Wood SL cartridge.

Leema Acoustics Tucana II amplifier, Chario Unica Major loudspeakers.
Statement. The London Debut.

28 - 29 May 2014

Naim’s flagship amplification system arrives in London for the first time, exclusively at KJ West One. This is your chance to hear the pinnacle of performance in hi-fi through the Statement NAC S1 preamplifier and NAP S1 mono power amplifiers driving Focal Grande Utopia loudspeakers. There will also be a range of accessible systems from both Naim and Focal on demonstration for you to enjoy.

Places are limited so make sure you book early by email or telephone to avoid disappointment.
ORIGIN LIVE UPGRADE BELT
£29.60
The drive belt on a turntable is one of those components that is generally forgotten about until it needs replacement due to stretching or degradation through age.

However, that innocuous looking piece of rubber has a far greater effect upon the sound of a turntable than most of us realise. After all, a drive belt is just a drive belt right?

Well, unfortunately, the answer is no they are not.

Origin Live have recently introduced a new range of upgrade belts to fit their own series of decks and a lot of other designs as well. After a great deal of research they are understandably tight-lipped about the choice of material for their new product — only saying that it is a special rubber not normally found in drive belts.

When I took it out of the box I was aware of a different texture to that of my standard Linn belt but could not identify any other difference.

I fitted it to my Sondek and started listening. My first impression was that the sound was smoother but it seemed lacking a little in dynamic range so I left it running for an hour and came back.

This time I found that the sound had noticeably changed with a more expansive bass, more spacious mid-band and smoother treble. Imaging seemed improved with a larger and more defined soundstage and surface noise seemed reduced. I assume that this is due to the lack of snatch from a belt that doesn’t stretch and flex as much as a standard one meaning the platter rotates more smoothly.

The Upgrade Belt costs £29.60 and is one of the most cost effective changes that I have made to this deck. Changing back to the original belt left me with a sound that felt jagged and almost uncouth in comparison. I suggest you buy one and try it. I am both amazed and impressed at the improvement it makes to the sound of my Sondek.

TB

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ORTOFON LW-7N HEADSHELL CABLES £45.00
Although it is generally accepted that better quality interconnects, speaker cable and mains leads all play their part in improving the sound from our hi-fis, the short cables that connect the cartridge to the headshell pins in a pick-up arm are rarely given much consideration.

Since this is the first wire that the very delicate signal from a cartridge passes through it is something of an oversight to spend money on good leads from the base of the arm and not to include the headshell leads in this upgrade process.

Ortofon have recognised this and offer a range of three headshell leads priced from £35 to £85 a set.

The £45 LW-7N leads under review here are a hybrid design consisting of ultra high purity copper wire of both 6N and 7N purity (99.99999% purity for the 7N).

The blend is made up of 3 x 0.26mm strands of 7N and 16 x 0.10mm of 6N copper. The end of the wire is fastened by a rhodium-plated terminal.

I tried these out on my Linn Ltoke LVV arm. Replacing the original components took a matter of moments with a pair of small pliers.

Once in place the initial sound was a definite improvement over that provided by the original leads and improved quite drastically over the next few hours of use.

I felt that all aspects of the sound improved, with the blackness between sounds being darker and more consistent.

Singers seemed to be more of a three dimensional entity and the micro-detailing that fleshes out a sonic image was improved.

If you have an arm with headshell leads then it is a very worthwhile and cost effective exercise to upgrade them.

I am now sitting here wondering why I never thought to do something as simple as this before.

TB

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Record Store Day

Beleaguered High Street record shops are striking back with the help, says Paul Rigby, of Record Store Day which offers vinyl rarities and live performances.

Created in 2007, Record Store Day (RSD) initially saw the coming together of hundreds of independent stores in the USA and almost as many in the UK and Europe to celebrate...well, partly that they still existed in this internet-dominated retail sector, but also to commemorate their status and history.

They do this by working with artists to rejoice in the art of music. On a single designated day every year you can buy limited edition, special vinyl and CD releases and various promotional products made exclusively for the day and for High Street retailers only (internet retailers are not supposed to sell them on the day – many try, though)

Meanwhile, hundreds of artists appear and perform at stores to aid the shops in drumming up a bit of extra business.

Many shops see long queues trailing from their door before opening time as eager record collectors aim to purchase their particular rarity of choice.

The atmosphere is often one of a rather desperate January sale, as the opening of the shop signals the frantic scramble to the RSD goodies. The value for many of these rarities can grow immeasurably.

So what sort of goodies do these collectors go for?

There are dozens to choose from. We decided to wait until after the event in order to show you a small, vinyl-related, selection because there tends to be little information available before the actual day.

This year, RSD (www.recordstoreday.co.uk) took place on April 19. Book your place in the queue for next year’s event!

**Record Store Day Rarities**

**The Action! The Singles Box Set (Demon)**
Current value: £140
A box set featuring eight 7” singles within picture sleeves, a 28-page booklet including previously unseen photographs and memorabilia, an A2 poster and sticker and download card. British Mod band of the 1960s, they enjoyed little success but influenced many.

**Tim Paris’ Dance (My Favourite Robot)**
Current value: £25
Contemporary DJ, producer, musician, Paris populates this white vinyl release with electronically-infused dance grooves.

Current Value: £55

**Sex Pistols Never Mind The Bollocks Alternative Takes (Universal)**
Current Value: £100
A numbered box set, including seven 7” singles sporting rare sleeve art and featuring alternative album takes, plus two 1977 studio mixes of Belsen Was A Gas, including an unreleased version.

**Placebo 1973 (Music On Vinyl)**
Current value: £20
Not the nineties rock band but a Belgian seventies jazz fusion outfit signed to Harvest and CBS. Lead by Marc Moulin (the first in his country to own a Moog synthesiser) Think Herbie Hancock and Miles Davis.
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- Castle Chester Speakers
- Charcoal Academy Millenium 2 Speakers, BOXED, WITH HAY GRANITE STANDS
- Charcoal Constellation Delphini Speakers, BOXED, WITH STANDS
- Epos ESL 323 BLACK BLACKS
- Epos MU6 IN CHERRY, BA-DX BOXED
- Epos M2 BOXED AVAILABLE IN MAVER, RED CHERRY AND BLACK OAK
- Epos MU6 SPEAKERS, CHERRY, BA-DX BOXED
- Imp Professional Monitors MK 1 Transmission LINE Loudspeakers
- Kef PSV 6500 Active Subwoofer
- Kef Reference 205 Speakers, BOXED WITH STANDS
- Kingsound HammondRio ELECTROSTATIC SUPER TWEETERS
- Lake Audio Model 210CD With 2, With RIBBON TWEETERS
- Lsa Audio Group LSA 2 Loudspeakers (USA) BLACK ASH
- Lovington Horn Speakers With Fostex Drivers
- Meridian MD 5050 Speakers, PTAIR
- Miller & Kralen SMS 150 M2 TRIPLE TUBE X Speakers
- Nightingale Concentus Clr I Loudspeakers
- Qua QL2112 AVAILABLE IN AMERICAN MAPLE OR BLACK
- Qua QL212L Loudspeakers
- Qua QL6 Active Speakers IN PURPLE, NEW, UNUSED
- Qua QL6 82 ELECTROSTATIC Loudspeakers - SERVICED
- Rel Stentor II Sub
- Rosen Craig 34 Speakers & 35 Sub
- Ruark Talisman Loudspeakers
- Spendor 801 Speakers WITH STANDS
- Sumeire CMA 2 Loudspeakers Cherry
- Tag McLaren Calliope Centre Speaker
- Tannoy Brikelley Speakers, PM With HIFI 385 15 DUAL CENTRIC DRIVERS
- Tannoy 380 HORN LOUDSPEAKERS
- Wilson Cub Speakers - Come With CRATES
- Waldo QL 15 PASSIVE SUBWOOFER

RECORDS, TONEARMS, CARTRIDGES
- Acoustic Solid Wood Turntable, TONEARM
- Acoustic Solid Wood M5X Turntable With Audionote Tonearm
- Astini Trew ATB003 Phono Stage
- Cartridge Man Music Maker II Cartridge
- Clearaudio Union 12 Carbon TONEARM
- Coda 505 Mk XM0 Phono Stage, BOXED
- Decca London Gold - Garrard Brothers Re-Tipped Cartridge
- Decca London - Garrard Brother MicroScanning Cartridge
- Funk FPR 3/6 (Sme Silver Wired) TONEARM
- Funk FPR 2/6 TONEARM
- Inspire Apollo Tourtable With Custom Made Lid And Upgrade (External PSU)
- Inspire Hifi Lp12 V1D Live upgrade
- Linn Lp12 With Mission 774 Arm - With New Link Packing
- Linn Lp12 ITTOK - Cirkus, Tourtable, All BOXED
- Michel Gyrodec
- Oracle Delphi IIH With SME M2 And Pickering MM Cartridge
- Oracle Delphi IV With Turbo PSU
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- SME 3020 TONEARM
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- Supercap 900 Mk IV Moving Coil Cartridge
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WANTED: WORLD Audio Kel 80 amp, working or not. For sale or Ex. N.O.S. boxed, tested power valves. 3 unused 6C33C/B, £20 each. 2 pairs 6C33C/B used, £25 the pair. Pair N.O.S. GE6AS7GA triodes, £30 pair. 2 Quads N.O.S. 7T.C. 12E1, £40 Quad. 2 pairs N.O.S. S.T.C. 12E14, boxes, £25 pair. 4 Mullard N.O.S. PZ30 EWH new rectifiers, £7 each (boxes). The STC replace Mullard EL34, 15% more power, adjust bias to suit. (Ruggedised) Might P/Ex for valve amp parts, W.H.Y? Any transformers pair? Monoblocks chassis? Amp mad Stan: Please Tel: 020 8451 0353 (London)

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AKG Q701 Quincy Jones Signature Line headphones in white. 1 1/2 years old. Mint condition. Boxed. (£340) New. £170. Tel: 07905 348 812 (Wadford)


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WANTED: DENON remote RC-646, Pioneer remote ADX 7456. Remote for tele mini system CR-H227L. Tel: 01708 457 691

MUSICAL FIDELITY A3.2 RDS Tuner £295: As new (except the price!) Attractive all silver appearance. These were £2000 when new. Owned by me from new, less than 100 hours use, still pristine, unmarked (kept covered by a dust sheet) as new, with original box, remote and instructions. Protected in an audio rack in my smoke and pet free home. Very happy to demonstrate. Mike (Cheshire) 07500 804700 michael.yates7@ntlworld.com
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NAKAMICHI CR2E cassette deck £110 ono, everything works as it should. Lovely sound. Phone John on 077881 74437 after 7pm. Kettering, Northants. buyer collects, can be demonstrated before sale.

AUDIOsmILE KENSAI speakers for sale. Immaculate and in beech. They are a matched pair have had these from new, in perfect working order. Can demonstrate. Buyer collects. Mike (Cheshire) 07500 804700 Email: michael.yates7@ntlworld.com

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MUSICAL FIDELITY F15 100W Class A power amp £550, ASCR pre £450. In full working order with remote, interconnects boxes & manuals. can demo. Buyer collects. Tel 07712718973 (Epsom Surrey)

REGA P7 Turntable with Rega RB700 arm Rega power supply and Reson Mica cartridge. Original packaging £575.00 Telephone Mark 01392 420316

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ARCAM CD37 CD/SACD player (black) £699. Roksan Kandy K2 integrated amplifier (silver) £550 and K2 CD player (silver) £550. Both only months old with latest remote control RMX-111. Denon TU1800 DB/FM tuner (silver) £175. All items in immaculate condition with original boxes. Tel: 023 8073 8935 or Email: golf3385@hotmail.co.uk

NAIM NAIT 5si bought 30/8/13 for use in second system Hardly used as new Boxed instructions Remote 600-00 Marantz 331 professional CD player good condition and working order instructions remote 150.00 0772 962 0621.

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EAR 509, Mk2. Pair of mono valve amps, 100W per channel. Very good condition, late 1980's, little use. Can demonstrate. Buyer to pay postage or collect from Berkshire. £2000, Tel: 07527567829 Email: abaird2011 @btinternet.com. CYRUS CD8X. Mint condition and it is in perfect working order. Smoke, children and pet free environ. Quartz / Silver. Boxed in manufacturer's original carton and packaging. Power lead and Phono leads unused. Remote control. In the late 00s this CD player won successive 5* accolades and Best CD Player award from What HiFi, and was an enhanced version of the CD8. Nottingham. 07783 327 689 & 01159 877 567. £290 ono (P&P £20). Email: rapspink @supanet.com.

WANTED FAULTY or non working Quad 34 and 44 preamps, Denon MC transformers AU310 or AU320. Contact Mike 01758 613790.

QUAD 405 II refurbished & up-graded by DaDa Electronics £350 ono. Musical Fidelity A1 good condition new volume pot and re-capped £175 ono ring Andrew on 07791529128 or 020 72528122.

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MUSICAL FIDELITY A308CR Pre-amplifier £695: As new (except the price). Extremely well reviewed. Attractive all silver appearance and was excellent value even when new at £1500. Owned by me from new, less than 100 hours use, still pristine, unmarked (kept covered by a dust sheet) as new, with original box, remote and instructions. Protected in an audio rack in my smoke and pet free home. Very happy to demonstrate. Mike (Cheshire) 07500 804700 Email: michael.yates7@ntlworld.com

IX QUAD 303 capacitor set. 4xQuad gold speaker banana sockets. 1xQuad main psp upgraded board. all unused and mint condition. £50 including postage. 1xRega R200 arm excellent condition needs re-wire plus 1 R200 for spares inc 4 headshells. £65 including postage. Tel:Will 01382 644815 Dundee

REGA P7 Turntable with Rega RB700 arm Rega power supply and Reson Mica cartridge. Original packaging £575.00 Telephone Mark 01392 420316

VPI SCOUT 2/WM9 97/100 Linn Kydle. £1,750 o.n.o. 02084649055 Telephone Mark 01392 420316

SEPARATES SYSTEM. Pro-ject turntable, Yamaha TX590RDS tuner; Onkyo DX733 CD player; Yamaha KX392 cassette player, Rotel amp RB971 and 2 Quad 77-111 speakers. £600 01380 830463 (Wiltshire)

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STILETTO speakers (pair), slim floorstanders, the ultimate setup come with Something Solid stands, the ultimate setup for P3'S. Sonically perfect and aesthetically stunning. £1000 ono Contact Mike 01597823624

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Also, we hope to bring you —

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- JADIS I-35 VALVE INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
- NAIM SUPERNAIT 2 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
- AUDIOLAB Q DAC/MCRU LDA LINEAR POWER SUPPLY
- CENTRANCE MASTERCLASS 2504 LOUDSPEAKERS/DACMINI PX DESKTOP SYSTEM

...and much more.
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- **August 2014 Issue - 4th June**
- **September 2014 - 8th July 2014**
used to be asked”, recalled Roy Orbison, “how would you like to be remembered? My answer was I'd just like to be remembered.” He needn’t have had any fear on that score, need he?

You couldn’t really call Orbison a heart-throb. Not in the photogenic sense, at any rate. His appeal stemmed more from his operatic-like voice and his own blend of country/pop mixed with rock’n’roll that talked of the romantic loser, the underdog...in short, most of the frustrated young men who were listening to his music.

“I always wanted to be a singer” said Orbison of his wish for vocal success. “My father asked me when I was about six or seven, ‘Do you know what you’re going to be when you grow up?’ I said I’m going to be a singer. It’s something that gets inside of you and you don’t have a lot of choice after that”.

This sense of destiny lead, after a failed stint as a rockabilly singer for Sun, to Monument where he hit pay dirt with the brooding ‘Only The Lonely’ (1960) — where his vocal trills immediately set him apart from his competition.

“I didn’t create the voice”, said Orbison. “God gave me the voice, I didn’t have a lot to do with that. It was just a nice gift. A very nice gift. I thank him quite often”.

Monument was a large part in Orbison’s success. Its large-scale, string-surging production techniques provided an ideal base for Orbison to hit you with a tear-jerking ballad or a bluesy, up-tempo number.

Of course, his moody, shades wearing, image helped to market such songs well. That image was accidental, however.

As Orbison explained, “I was on my way to Delphin, Alabama, to play a concert and the sun was very bright. So I put on my sun shades and put the clear pair to the side. When I got to Delphin, I got off the plane and left the clear pair on the aeroplane and didn’t realise it until the sun went down.

I was busy rehearsing. All of a sudden, there I was, going to perform at night in sunglasses and I felt very embarrassed. I got through the night and then, the next day, flew to Atlanta, New York and London and opened the Beatles tour (in 1963) that evening with the same pair of sunglasses. I was still worried about that. But no-one sort of minded. That tour made The Beatles and myself in Europe and internationally, I guess. It was a really important tour. With all of these photographs, around the world, with the sun shades I was sort of stuck with an instant image”.

It was while bearing the full-blown image that Orbison recorded his best known single, ‘Oh Pretty Woman’ (1964), written by Orbison and Bill Dees (apparently that growl, mid-song, was inspired by Bob Hope!).

This iconic track has now been utilised in the title track to an LP that has been recently curated by Orbison’s sons, using old Monument-era tracks, to form the twelve song content.

It’s an excellent choice of songs. ‘The Crowd’ (1961) and ‘Leah’ (1962) sees Orbison’s famous singing style blossom while other tracks such as ‘Bore On The Wind’ (1963) and ‘Evergreen’ (1962) are comparatively rare as they were targeted for ‘foreign’ issue in markets such as the UK and Australia.

Other rarities that are also present within the package includes ‘Yo Te Amo Maria’ which was the original B-side to ‘Oh Pretty Woman’.

The album itself, ‘Oh Pretty Woman’ can be found as part of a four-disc box set produced by Music On Vinyl (www.musiconvinyl.com) which was part of the Black Friday, independent record retailer day in the USA.

Despite that, copies have appeared in not quite so independent outlets such as Amazon. The slip-cased set also contains classic Orbison original LPs. ‘Lonely And Blue’ (1960) was, in its time, a significant LP release as it was one of the pioneers of the LP format. Here was a white rock’n’roll artist combining that basic beat with a Nashville sound and that unique voice. It demanded attention.

‘Crying’ (1962) is sentimental in tone, featuring a host of quality cuts from ‘Love Hurts to ‘Let’s Make A Memory’. Finally, ‘In Dreams’ (1963) is a brilliant compilation. Orbison is in great form and the track selection is superb.

A perfect combination of classic albums and limited and rare tracks, this numbered, limited edition is an instant classic collection.

PR
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Behind the scenes
Dr. Joseph D'Appolito, a world renowned authority in audio and acoustics designs the crossover and performs prototype testing/final fine tuning for Usher Audio. Consisting of a couple of famous audio companies, he always finds the tremendous value Usher Audio products represent a delightful surprise in today's high end audio world.

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When Herman van de Dungen founded PrimaLuna, his mission was to create affordable valve amplifiers and CD players that not only harnessed the sheer, sensual musicality of valve technology, but also defied the issues of reliability that sometimes accompany it.

PrimaLuna's Prologue and Dialogue ranges continue to expand, featuring ground-breaking advances such as the unique Adaptive AutoBias™ circuit that allows easy switching between valve types and the jitter-reducing SuperTubeClock™, exclusively incorporated into PrimaLuna's CD players. These innovations help create a benchmark-setting suite of products that builds on the marque's past triumphs, combining excellent sonic definition with a beautifully balanced tonality.

Aesthetically stunning to look at, with a hand-polished black or silver faceplate, PrimaLuna consistently fulfils Herman's original promise of creating the best you can get for the least you can pay.