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hybrid cd player

AUDIOLAB 6000A
integrated amplifier

McINTOSH MT2
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AUDIOLAB 8000A FEATURE

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Hi-Fi World Dec 2015

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Chord Sarum T Speaker Cable
Hi-Fi World Dec 2017
Everything from nothing – or so it seems. We expect a hi-fi system to be big, something with a few decent control knobs fit for a human hand and a bit of biological intervention! FiO’s M9 portable player I review this month – see p23 –starts to call this into question. It does most things except replay LP. You might think it won’t drive loudspeakers, but it will drive powered Bluetooth loudspeakers.

The tiny M9 and other Digital Audio Players like it flooding out of China and Korea are increasingly able to do much of what a full size system does – but are a fiddle to use. Being small, their touch screens have tiny text and touch-areas purposed for ‘pixies’ – no good for fingers like mine. But in News this month – see p7 – we reveal a voice activated loudspeaker from Klipsch and this raises the subject of Apple’s voice activated loudspeaker that, with its microphones, tunes itself to your room, accepts voice commands and can speak back via Siri.

Will we see speech control like this brought to portables; could we soon see a mini hi-fi little larger than the M9, one that is speech controlled? Feeding self powered loudspeakers via Bluetooth, such a system is possible right now. FiO’s tiny M9 can be seen as a forerunner in effect.

In future full size audio systems of the sort you can interact with may be increasingly challenged by portable, battery powered and Bluetooth connected mini-players. Feats of micro-miniaturisation, they will be mass produced in the Far East by machines, cost little, and be unrepairable – just like a mobile ‘phone. It’s an interesting – perhaps depressing – prospect.

But then again Audiolab’s new 6000A amplifier, reviewed on p14 by Jon Myles, represents the other side of the coin. A full size hi-fi unit with digital ability including Bluetooth on board, at a price little higher than a portable.

Keeping power down to a more than adequate 65 watts (6 Ohms) keeps both cost and size in check, whilst providing full hi-fi quality from a traditional Class A/B amplifier and linear power supply.

Audiolab again – this time the one once made in Britain. I’m talking about the ubiquitous 8000A. It’s still available second-hand, it’s repairable – and Martin Pipe tells you so much more about it on p59. Oh yes, and it costs less than any portable player!

As always we cover the expensive to the cheap in another great issue. I hope you enjoy it.

Noel Keywood
Editor

selling (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 Rotel & Schwarz and Hewlett Packard - is amongst the most advanced in the world.

Loudspeakers are measured using a calibrated Brüel & Kjær microphone feeding a Cio based computer analyzer, using pulsed and gated sinewaves, in a large room to eliminate the room’s influence. Pickup arm vibration is measured with a Brüel & Kjær accelerometer.

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EXCELLENT
GOOD
MEDIOCRE
POOR
FLAWED
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extremely capable
worth auditioning
unremarkable
flawed
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AYRE CHECK
Colorado-based Ayre Acoustics’ ‘8 series’ of hi-fi components, seen by many for the first time at Germany’s Munich High-End show, have now arrived in the UK courtesy of a new distribution agreement with Decent Audio. The first product in this ‘entry-level’ range, the EX-8 is a 100 Watt per channel (8 ohms) ‘Double Diamond’ integrated amp with dedicated headphone output, ‘pure linear’ power supplies and numerous input options. A ‘scalable, flexible system’ can be built around the modular EX-8 ‘as space and money allow’ – hence Ayre’s term ‘integrated hub’. There are three analogue inputs (one balanced), with facilities for up to six digital inputs (Ethernet, USB, AES/EBU, S/PDIF and two TOSlink). With the Roon-ready Ethernet module installed, you can stream from Spotify, Qobuz and Tidal. Prices range from £5,850 (analogue only) to £7,750 (analogue, digital and streaming). Contact: Decent Audio, +44 (0)1235 511166 www.decentaudio.co.uk

70 YEARS OF THE ‘BIG MAC’
Iconic US brand McIntosh celebrates the dawn of its eighth decade with a ‘Limited Edition Commemorative System’, only 70 of which will be built. For each sold, McIntosh will donate $1,000 to the international Save the Children charity. The Commemorative System is comprised of two new tube audio products. First is the C70 70th Anniversary Vacuum Tube Preamplifier, which features seven inputs (two balanced, three unbalanced and a highly-configurable phono stage, catering for MM and MC cartridges), front-panel bass/treble tone controls and a High Drive headphone amp. It feeds the MC2152 70th Anniversary Vacuum Tube Amplifier, a striking 150 Watts per-channel design featuring eight KT88s and McIntosh’s patented ‘Unity Coupled Circuit’ output transformer technology. Purchasers will also get a McIntosh Anniversary Book and a certificate authenticating the entire system. But be warned: only one of these systems will (officially at least!) be coming to the UK...
Visit www.mcintoshlabs.com

ASSIST ME!
American speaker brand Klipsch is the latest to embrace the ubiquitous Google Assistant hands-free voice control tech. The product in question is a new £450 version of ‘The Three’ Heritage Wireless table-top speaker, the walnut-veneer cabinet and heather-grey grille cloth of which give it a distinctively ‘retro’ appearance. Inside, though, is 21st-century tech that endows ‘The Three with Google Assistant’ with “award-winning acoustics and robust connectivity” as well as the ability to make “daily tasks faster and easier”. Amongst other things, you can ask questions and get information, stream music, hear the news, weather and traffic, add to shopping lists, control smart-home devices, make a phone call, and much more”. And playing music? Soundwise, there’s Bluetooth wireless technology to play smartphone libraries and an integrated subwoofer for enhanced bass.
Contact: Henley Audio, +44 (0)1235 511166 www.henleyaudio.co.uk
CLeared for take-off!

Pro-ject turntables often ship with Ortofon cartridges, but this relationship has just entered a new phase. As part of its ongoing collaboration with Ortofon, the European turntable giant is now introducing its very own cartridge range – made in Denmark, to Pro-ject’s exact designs. The £135 Concorde Pick-IT S2 with integrated headshell is pitched towards the many vinyl lovers using DJ-style turntables with SME-type bayonet fitting. Features of the 18.5g Pick-IT S2 include a 6mV output and an elliptical stylus intended to track at 3 grams. Higher up the scale is the £325 Pick-IT DS2, which is described as an “easy to fit, high-fidelity moving-coil option”. The 9-gram device features a nude 8/18µm elliptical stylus, recommended tracking force of 2.2g and 0.5mV output. In the words of UK distributor Henley Audio, they “boast the sonic signature and price/performance ratio you’d expect from Pro-ject products.”

Contact: Henley Audio, +44 (0)1235 511166 www.henleyaudio.co.uk

GETting the roon ready

German audio brand T+A tell us that many of its products are now compatible with the Roon user-interface, which aims to make streaming music a more worthwhile experience by finding “photos, biographies, reviews, lyrics and concert dates” and making “connections between artists, composers, performers, conductors, and producers”. Among the T+A products to benefit are the MP 1000 E, R 1000 E, MP 2000 R MKII, CALA CDR and CALA SR ‘multi-source’ devices - all of which feature a high-performance FM/DAB+ digital tuner, Bluetooth, Wi-Fi/Ethernet streaming client and, bar the CALA SR, CD playback. The MP 2000 R MKII, meanwhile, features T+A’s proprietary ‘True 1-Bit Converters’. If you already have one of these units, it can be made ‘Roon Ready’ – to the “highest level of certification and integration into the Roon ecosystem”, according to T+A - via a firmware update. Further T+A streaming devices are “currently undergoing the certification process” and will follow in due course.

Contact: Kog Audio, +44 (0)2477 220650 www.kogaudio.com

Welsh Stream

Leema Acoustics, the Powys-based operation (Wales) started by a couple of ex-BBC engineers, has launched a compact streaming music client as part of its ‘Elements’ range. The hand-built £1,295 Elements Streamer – a prototype of which was shown at last year’s Bristol Show – features tidal integration, a high-quality ESS Sabre 32-bit DAC with proprietary ‘Time Domain jitter Eliminator technology’ and USB playback. Concepted by Leema co-founder Lee Taylor, who has overseen the project from initiation to final assembly, it’s based on the same high-performance streaming module that you’ll find in Leema’s £360 Quasar amplifier. The Elements Streamer can both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ music to and from suitable DLNA/UHiP devices on the same network – smartphones, tablets, laptops, computers, NAS drives and streaming music servers like their Sirius. Control is via a free ConvertDigital app, available for Android and iOS.

Contact: MIA+ Audio, Distribution: +44 (0)1223 782474. www.leema-acoustics.com

EvolKative SpeAKers

Dynaudio’s five-strong Evoke series features ideas and concepts from the Danish company’s existing ranges. Evoke, according to Dynaudio, aims to bring “true high-end technology, build-quality and luxurious finishes to every kind of lifestyle”. The new range consists of two stand-mounters (Evoke 10 and Evoke 20), two floorstanders (Evoke 30 and Evoke 50) and a dedicated centre speaker (Evoke 2SC) for home-cinema applications. Developed at Dynaudio’s R&D facility alongside “hours of old-fashioned listening”, these speakers are the first to employ the firm’s Cerotar 28mm tweeter with Hexis inner-dome. Looking after the lower frequencies, meanwhile, are new Esotec+ woofers that feature MSP (Magnesium Silicate Polymer) diaphragms - 14cm for the Evoke 10 (£1,250), 20 (£1,800), 30 (£2,900) and 2SC (£1,100); the £1,800 Evoke 20 has a 18cm MSP driver. The £3,900 Evoke 50 also has a midrange driver, which is directly-derived from the acclaimed Contour 60’s. All Evoke speakers feature high-grade crossovers and cabinets available a choice of four finishes - Black High Gloss, White High Gloss, Walnut Wood and Blonde Wood.

Contact: Dynaudio, www.dynaudio.com
**HORSE TRADING**

Tuscan manufacturer Audio Analogue has launched the sister brand Pegaso – named after the mythological winged-horse – to make its move into tubes. Pegaso will focus “purely on valve-based electronics”, leaving Audio Analogue to concentrate on the solid-state equipment it has been producing since the mid-1990s. The first Pegaso product, which was developed “in collaboration with a team of specialized valve electronics designers”, is the £5,750 P50A integrated amplifier. The fully-balanced P50A’s microprocessor-controlled preamplifier section, which is limited to input selection (two XLR, four phono) and volume control, drives a 50W Class-A power amplifier stage made up of four 6H22s and four KT88s in a push-pull configuration. It allegedly “represents a perfect union between tradition and progress...the warm and involving sound of valves, married with the highly technical and sophisticated design philosophy of decades of solid state experience”.

Contact: Decent Audio +44 (0)5602 056669 www.decentaudio.co.uk

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**BACK IN BLACK**

Specialist high-end distributor Padood has joined forces with SME to produce the £6,196 Model 10A Black Edition turntable. Featuring ‘all-new total-black detailing’ and matched with the SME M10 tonearm, the Model 10A Black Edition is pre-fitted with an Ortofon Cadenza Black moving-coil cartridge. An exclusively-UK product, only 30 of these tables will be built. The turntable at its core, the Model 10, has been an SME mainstay since 2010. This distinctive deck features damped three-point suspension, and a heavy 12in. platter belt-driven from a 3-phase motor under microprocessor control. Padood’s Black Edition is however the first to be packaged with a suitable cartridge, enabling customers to experience vinyl with minimal fuss; the Cadenza Black was chosen after many hours of listening tests. Each Model 10A Black Edition will feature a special laser-etched serial-number plate and a certificate bearing the name and signature of the technician who assembled it.

Contact Padood, +44 (0)1223 653199 www.padood.com

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**PICTURE-PERFECT POWER?**

Among the latest offerings from Japanese hi-fi infrastructure specialist Furutech are Empire and Roxy, two new high-performance power cables that are “designed for the demanding listeners...in the professional studio or the home listening room”. Furutech tells us it has relied on “extensive feedback from musicians and recording professionals” when developing these cables. The £327 (1.5m) Empire features three proprietary PC-Triple 45-strand conductors enclosed within a complex construction of lead-free PVC sheath, low-capacitance PVC dielectric surround, multi-strand OFC wire braid and woven nylon yarn. At either end are Furutech’s renowned gold-plated power connectors. The cheaper Roxy (£233 for 1.5m) has 37-strand OFC conductors, five distinct layers of insulation and Furutech’s high quality connectors. The metal parts of both cables are treated with a ‘trademark two-stage cryogenic and demagnetization process’, to render them “stress-free, stable and highly electrically conductive”.

Contact Sound Fowndations, +44 (0)1189 814238, www.soundfowndations.co.uk

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**QR-CODE**

A couple of years ago Danish loudspeaker specialist, Audiovector, replaced its popular entry-level Ki lineup with the QR series. The QR brief was to offer “the most advanced technology in a perfectly finished compact high-end package”; particularly noteworthy was its use of ribbon tweeters. The QR series is now bigger by one model, with the launch of the range-topping QR5 floorstander – designed to “fit nicely into any home environment, regardless of style”. Its Gold Leaf AMT 2 ribbon tweeter will deliver usable highs up to 45kHz, while a pair of six-inch bass drivers (in conjunction with a ‘Q-port’ down-firing bass-reflex arrangement) look after the low end. Responsible for the presence region, meanwhile, is a 6in. ‘Pure Piston Mid’ driver. The resulting sound, reckons Audiovector, is “big and bold, dynamic, pleasant and detailed – excellent for all types of music”. Priced at £2750.

Visit: www.audiovector.com
Clear Difference

B&W’s new 603 floorstanding loudspeaker has vivid clarity says Noel Keywood.

The Festival of Sound show, held at London’s Novotel hotel end of September 2018, saw British loudspeaker manufacturer out in force. Amongst them were B&W with a lavish display of their high end loudspeakers. But when I crept in with my camera hoping to sneak some pics without getting accosted, I was accosted! My afro wig and shades didn’t work. What B&W were keen to show me was their new 600 Series loudspeakers, premiere amongst them the 603 floorstander I am reviewing here. Price £1250.

In the new 603 B&W offer an exciting sound – relaxing open yet vivid and punchy. I can’t say I was ever unhappy with the outgoing 600s with their distinctive yellow Kevlar cones, other than they needed a very long run in of circa 150 hours (paper cones need 40 hours or so).

Kevlar has gone however. Instead the new 603s use a silver hued Continuum cone that is also a weave of synthetic material it appears. In this loudspeaker it takes the form of a relatively large 150mm (6in) “midrange unit” as B&W label it, sitting just below the tweeter at top.

Being large I suspect the new drive unit it goes low – to around 300Hz. Below this two 165mm paper/Kevlar bass units take over to handle bass, working together into a chamber damped by a reflex port at rear. Concentric foam bungs are supplied to restrict or seal the port, should there be too much bass in a room. However, with bungs absent the bass units are strongly damped acoustically in any case (see Measured Performance) so only when room boom occurs are these bungs likely to be necessary.

At top sits an aluminium Double Dome (Ring dome?) tweeter of conventional 25mm (1in) diameter. It works from 3kHz upward as usual, our impedance analysis shows.

The cabinet stands 1055mm (41.5in) high on its plinth, is 190mm (7.5in) wide and 340mm (13.4in) deep. The plinth extends outwards slightly, being 320mm wide and 370mm deep. It comes with carpet piercing spikes or rubber feet for hard floors, both height adjustable for stability.

Cabinet finish was a lacklustre matt black on our review samples, the plinths looking prosaically simple. But as budget floorstanders go the 603s are heavy at 24.1ks (53 lbs) and were solid, a rap of the knuckles producing no comeback.

Rear connection is via a bi-wire panel with removable straps between high and low inputs. Large gold plated terminals accept bare wire, spade connectors and 4mm banana plugs.

SOUND QUALITY

I connected the 603s to our Creek Evolution 100A amplifier through Chord Signature Reference cables. Music came from an Oppo BDP-205D Universal player spinning CD and accepting hi-res from our Astell&Kern AK120 player. The ‘speakers had a long run-in.

The new 603 has more mid-range sheen than its predecessor – a less dark sound – but also less upper treble if I recall rightly – the tweeter isn’t sonically obvious. Couple this with tigt but deep bass and you come up with quite a distinctive sound.

Most immediately noticeable was the sheen of the new Continuum drive unit that pushed vocals and detail forward: Willy DeVille singing Spanish Harlem (CD) almost cracked in front of me, projecting out with vivid definition. This made every nuance in his voice obvious. The new Continuum unit is midband projected, giving the 603 very high resolution of detail.

Interestingly, where most loudspeakers today have raised treble from the tweeter and an often sharp sound, B&W have turned away from this in the 603.

Instead my attention wasn’t drawn to treble spit or such like, making the 603 mild up top. It’s also neutral here, high treble having little obvious character; it’s there but makes no imposition, I like.

B&Ws have always had solid, powerful bass – not overblown – and the 603s capitalise on this quality well. They are very tight,
“Tellurium Q Statements are no usual cable affair and if I’ve called the Silver Diamonds an Emotional Tour de Force what are then the Tellurium Q Statements!? Well, they certainly transcend any typical labeling and this time I’m elevating them on the throne, that they clearly deserve. Their stand out, extraordinary performance can only be recognized with the 2018 Editor Choice Award!”

-Matej Isak, Mono & Stereo

“...you have managed to surpass them [Silver Diamonds] in a truly grand way.”

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super clean and controlled in bass delivery, made obvious by Toto’s ‘I Will Remember (CD)’ where the opening percussive sequence was fiercely gripped and dynamically dramatic, spreading wide across the room in front of me, with a nice sense of depth too.

The 603s excelled here, as they did with Loreena McKennitt’s Gates of Istanbul where the deep background underpin from a regularly plucked Bazouki had visceral power – dryly delivered. There was obvious deep bass – subsonics – from this track, making for a powerful presence in our room, a large 6500cu ft. Perhaps this is why those bungs are needed; smaller rooms may get a tad over-excited by such low bass power.

Nigel Kennedy’s Stradivarius was highlighted by the 603s, seemingly picked out by a bright white light. Listening intently to Massenet’s Meditation the instrument was clearly outlined in front of me and well detailed too. I did notice here that the big cone of the midrange unit has a little ‘cuppiness’ – sending violin out from a slightly enclosed space. This effect is subjectively mid in impact; musicians hear it, most of us don’t.

With large orchestral works, such as Host’s Planets, kettle drums in Mars, Bringer of War (Hi-res 24/48) had room moving impact – and their character was well conveyed too. I heard an acoustical instrument of richness and power, not a marshmallow like impersonation.

CONCLUSION

B&W do a lot different in their new 603, coming up with a sound that’s both distinctive and impressive. The new Continuum midrange unit is forward, having an LED sheen to its sound; think those bright car headlights. You get to see it all, as it were. Yet there’s no stinging treble nor occasional harshness from CD that results from it. Instead this loudspeaker has an easy, mild and natural quality to high treble. But with deep and powerful bass the 603 brings speed and punch to Rock whilst laying out Classical instruments clearly across a wide sound stage. All round a great performer then and also one that needs little power to rock the room – even make it shudder.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our measurement of frequency response, a third-octave analysis of pink noise, shows a basically flat characteristic over a very wide band, stretching from 40Hz up to 20kHz within 3dB limits. Whilst the 603 isn’t as smooth as some, with shallow loss around 2kHz likely due to crossover mis-match, there is no trelle peaking so the 603 will not come across as bright, so much as smooth and easy going, yet natural. B&W have kept away from the treble emphasis common in current designs, meaning in a showroom demo the 603 will likely sound less bright in high treble than others, but it is more accurate and truthful.

Interesting that the 603 lacks raised output below 500Hz to add body to the sound, and it also has unusually flat and extended bass output – all the way down to 40Hz. There is a slight roll-off below 80Hz showing a well damped time-domain response that will lack boom or waffle. This suits near-wall positioning, giving quite dry and controlled bass behaviour, one that will less excite room boom.

The B&W 603s will give a smooth and accurate sound that lacks obvious treble – but they are accurate in doing so. Bass runs very deep but is unemphatised. Near wall placement is ideal. This is a well engineered loudspeaker. NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDEANCE

B&W 603 £1250

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

Visibly forward and detailed sound, with deep powerful bass. Any amplifier suits.

FOR

- intensely detailed
- very deep bass
- tight and controlled

AGAINST

- lacklustre finish
- prosaic plinth

B&W

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www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk
Awesome Audiolab

A combined integrated amplifier/DAC from Audiolab sets a new standard at its price, says Jon Myles.

Audiolab has forged an impressive reputation for its range of M-DAC digital to analogue converters in recent years. So much so that some of its other products have flown a little under the radar.

But the new 6000A is designed to change that. It’s a stereo amplifier with a claimed power output of 50 Watts per channel (see Measured Performance for full details) that costs just £599.

It is also slim and trim – measuring 6.5cm x 44.5cm x 30cm (H/W/D). But there’s more to it than that. The 6000A also features digital inputs (two optical, two co-axial) trickled down from the M-DAC range with an ESS Sabre DAC at the core. There is also a pair of moving magnet phono inputs plus three line-level analogue inputs. Add in Bluetooth capability and I couldn’t help but be impressed with this amplifier’s range of features.

Also, if you are using the digital inputs there are three digital filters (slow roll-off, fast roll-off and minimum phase). Personally, I preferred the slow roll-off which seemed slightly more detailed but it’s worth experimenting with all three to find which works best with your partnering equipment and own tastes.

Design-wise it is typical Audiolab – nothing too flashy or over the top but a minimalist style where form follows function. Three rotary controls on the front allow you to control mode, input and volume - which can all be replicated via the supplied remote control – while a slim LED screen brings up basic information.
such as which input is being used. It is well-constructed with an aluminium front panel and sturdy metal casework behind. In all it looks more expensive than its £599 price tag.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Connecting the 6000A to a pair of standmount Spendor AIs and playing CDs it was clear to me just how confident this amplifier sounds. Neil Young’s ‘After The Goldrush’ saw his vocals pushed well to the fore with a lovely sense of presence. However, beneath that the backing drums and guitars were excellently laid out – giving the whole album a sense of vibrancy. Edges of notes were crisp while bass was taut and tight without being overblown. There was an organic, flowing nature to the sound that not all amplifiers at this price can manage.

Switching to high resolution through an Astell&Kern player the Audiolab had the ability to bring out the extra information on hand. For example, the piano notes on Keith Jarrett’s live ‘Paris/London Testament’ (24/96) felt realistic and the leading edges were superbly rendered. Better still, the decay in the notes gave an atmosphere to his playing.

It was similar with Robert Wyatt’s version of Elvis Costello’s classic ‘Shipbuilding’ where his plaintive, high-pitched vocals were excellently relayed and the piano backing had timbre and body.

But while the Audiolab does delicacy well it is also able to handle more upbeat tracks with aplomb. Loading up The Jesus And Mary Chain’s ‘Upside Down’ there was tremendous propulsive thrust on offer. Pace was snappy, instrumentation clear and there was no pause for breath as the track charged along.

All this was more than enough for me to try a slice of Led Zeppelin with ‘Immigrant Song’. Again I could hear every single element of the track - John Bonham’s drums cracked sharp, John Paul Jones’s bass line was distinct but not too intrusive while
The 2M Series, named after the abbreviation of Moving Magnet (MM) technology, is an affordable range of pick-up cartridges with first-class audio design principles throughout. Featuring Ortofon’s trademarked split-pole pin technology for a flat frequency response, all 2M cartridges have a high output for easy integration into any turntable system.

Designed in conjunction with celebrated design house Moller-Jensen Innovation Design, the 2M Series body represents the shape of a diamond, whose contours gracefully trace the grooves on a record’s surface.

**Red.Cartridges**
A hugely popular all-purpose cartridge with a Tipped Elliptical stylus that delivers an open, dynamic sound with a slight touch of warmth.

**Blue.Cartridges**
An affordable step up in the range, which adds a greater resolution, dynamics, and detailed sound thanks to the Nude Elliptical stylus.

**Bronze.Cartridges**
Featuring a superior body, the Bronze picks up even the highest frequency information for a rich, detailed and deep soundstage, and can be further upgraded with ease.

**Black.Cartridges.**
The musician’s choice and flagship of the range, the 2M Black features a Nude Shibata stylus which guarantees a true-to-life sound performance.

Distributed by Henley Audio
T: +44 (0) 1235 511 166  |  E: sales@henleyaudio.co.uk  |  W: www.henleyaudio.co.uk
The rear includes both digital and analogue inputs as well as an antenna for Bluetooth reception.

"Loading up The Jesus And Mary Chain's 'Upside Down' there is a tremendous propulsive thrust on offer"
A gorgeous OLED displays a wealth of information, and with full remote control, high drive headphone amplifier, four user-nameable inputs and bass/treble tone controls, the McIntosh MA252 is all about incredible flexibility and versatility.

A beautiful polished stainless steel chassis compliments the stylish protective cages for the valves and custom McIntosh Monogrammed Heatsinks. From any angle, the McIntosh MA252 is a work of art.

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**The McIntosh MA252 offers an alluring combination of tube romanticism and solid-state resolution and authority... The ability to connect the listener to the music makes this tube-solid state integrated a special component by any standard. I could happily listen to the MA252 for a long, long time.**
— PartTimeAudiophile

"The MA252 is a component worthy of consideration as the core to an audio system that will allow the user to listen for hours without fatigue. And, based on McIntosh’s reputation for long-term reliability and service, possibly listen for decades."
— Stereo Times

"Once again, McIntosh presented us a high quality product, embracing the wonderful philosophy of the brand. The expectations were big on our end and from what I heard during these listening sessions, I can, without a doubt, affirm that McIntosh succeeded the test on all points."
— TED Magazine

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Hot CD

Vincent’s CD-S7 CD player glows hot at switch-on. Noel Keywood thinks it has a sound to match.

A CD player with valves. Even better with Vincent’s CD-S7 you get a valve in a window. It excites audio enthusiasts attracted by the warm sound and warm glow of a thermionic device from yesteryear. In case you are wondering, the idea here is to get the spacious sound stage and easy going smoothness that valves typically provide, as a balm to the at-times harsh sound of CD. Hot things in windows are not the point!

I carefully said “with valves” because the CD-S7 is not an all-valve CD player; no such thing is possible nor exists. It is, like other valve CD players, a normal chip-based player with a valve output stage. All the same Vincent capitalise on its inclusion of valves by putting one in a window, stark centre, as you can see from our shots. As usual, there’s an orange LED backlight to provide faux-glow just to make the point this player is different to most, and also to make it stand out, unlike bland black-box CD players. Small-signal valves like the 12AX7 have a life of around 10,000 hours and are cheap to replace – around £10 apiece.

I’m very happy with valve output CD players as a concept, but the digital front-end feeding the valves must work well in itself, in order to feed the valves a clean signal they can work with. Often the valves do little, being used as line drivers with no gain. Here the CD-S7 looks different, even very different, because two 12AX7 (6922) double-triodes are used, one per channel, suggesting the valves provide both gain and impedance conversion (cathode follower) to drive an external cable effectively.

Even more surprising was Vincent also use a valve mains supply via a 6Z4 rectifier – the one in the window. So the valve stages of this player have been extensively crafted in true audiophile fashion to give purist valve sound quality. I was impressed to being taken-aback by the complexity, something seen in the player’s circuit board that is both very large and very complex. It’s easy to cram in one 12AX7 to provide line drive on each channel, but Vincent have gone much further.

On review here is the CD-S7 player, not the CD-S7 DAC. Vincent don’t identify the DAC chip in this player but peering inside I found it’s a top quality Burr Brown PCM1796.

Size wise the unit is large, 430mm wide, 356mm deep and 132mm high. With so much inside, including valve power supply, it is also weighty at 9kgs. But some of the weight is down to sturdy build, with a thick extruded alloy front panel, anodised black in our sample; silver is an option. Behind it lies a strong sheet steel chassis and cover.

The front panel carries transport controls: Play/pause, Track skip forward and backward, Draw open, Stop, a Repeat button that will repeat one track or the entire disc. At right lies a 1/4in (6.3mm) headphone jack socket and a small, manual rotary volume control – unusual. The remote volume control varies...
output to the rear sockets whilst the headphone rotary control attenuates this to a headphone amplifier feeding the headphone socket. It delivers a massive 7V (max) to headphones measurement showed, way more than the rear outputs. It’s a comprehensive arrangement giving remote control of both line output and headphones. Vincent specify suitable headphones as 32 Ohms minimum, which accommodates most headphones, 40 Ohms being a common minimum.

At left lies the power button and a blue LED that flashes for 25 seconds until the valves have warmed up, creating a short start delay.

The rear panel has only unbalanced phono-socket analogue audio outputs, even though the handbook states (p28) there are balanced XLR sockets, but this applies to the CD-S7 DAC – the player lacks XLR outputs. There is a single S/PDIF digital output through ‘coaxial’ electrical output (RCA phono socket), allowing connection of an external DAC. Vincent fit a lamp brightness slide switch with three brightness positions and Off, plus a 12V trigger input for on/off control from other items. Power is via an IEC socket for a mains connector.

The player’s remote control is large, weighty and comes with a wealth of options, including remote control of volume. This allows it to be connected direct to a power amplifier, forming a simple but pure system. The remote has a full array of controls including track programming, a numeric keypad, fast forward and reverse, a dimmer (no less!), plus much else not commonly seen nowadays, like A-B play and Intro play. All a bit yesterday, but useful to some perhaps. For me, its the inclusion of volume control that’s important – a real convenience factor.

The player was nice to use. It sits firmly and feels solid. The CD mechanism has the traditional flimsy sliding plastic draw – it isn’t a slot loader. The remote is button-heavy and has small legends – not so easy in a dimly lit room. Rear outputs are Spartan. All the same, the CD-S7 remains a complex player internally and can do a lot externally, so although in some ways it appears simple, it is not.

**SOUND QUALITY**

I teamed this player with our Creek Evolution 100A amplifier, and, alternatively, McIntosh MC152 power amplifier, driving Martin Logan ESL-X hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers. Mains conditioning courtesy of an Isotek Evo3 Mosaic Genesis re-generator to eliminate mains distortion and noise.

Vincent’s purist approach to its valve stages more than paid off in sound quality – it was nothing short of eye poppingly dramatic in visceral power. The player had subterranean bass with Lady GaGa’s Bad Romance and the slowly plucked bouzouki in Loreena McKennitt’s Gates of Istanbul permeated our large listing room in eerie fashion. Whatever I span the CD-S7 had a full and rich low end that was not only spacious but powerful and embracing beyond any CD player I recall reviewing. It was sort of like listening to a 16bit steamroller, normal players being bicycles. In this respect the Vincent stands out clearly from all else.
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around, including other valve output CD player’s I’ve heard that, whilst sounding very nice were not so conspicuously dramatic.

Generally, the sound was easy going, although I wouldn’t say mellow. The guitar of Antonio Forcione playing Tears of joy overwhelmed me with its vivid and full bodied presence, but there was no laceration to the strings – not the hard edge I am used to from this wide dynamic range test track. It sounded like an acoustic guitar, rather than a ‘hi-fi version’. This encompasses the rich resonant sound of the instrument, so commonly and carelessly bleached by CD players.

A hugely spacious sound stage and feeling of deep power pushed Josefine Cronholm’s In Your Wild Garden out at me, her voice hauntingly powerful.

The Vincent’s panoramic sound stage and glorious dynamics suited Classical, orchestras like the Royal Philharmonic playing Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No6 all but burst from our speakers. Instrumental strands such as violins were freely separated and easy to follow, whilst large percussion, tubas and bassoons had lifelike presence in front of me.

CONCLUSION
Vincent’s CD-S7 hybrid CD player is, behind its simple physical interface, a complex machine well thought out and executed in design terms.

The two 12AX7 (6922) double-triode amplifier / line driver valves – big polyprop. and electrolytic capacitors close by.

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

Frequency response of the CD-S7 measured flat to 21kHz or our convolved impulse response analysis shows, a fairly normal result with – in this player – no influence from the use of valves. There are no filters to change this result.

Whilst valves can just accommodate the dynamic range of CD there is always some distortion at peak level (0dB), in this player measuring a small 0.17% – above the usual 0dB level of around 0.003% but still low enough not to be an issue.

At -60dB distortion measured 0.27%, as our analysis shows. Again it’s close to the usual figure of 0.22% that is set by 16bit quantisation noise and harmonic distortion from CD. This resulted in an EIAJ dynamic range value of 98dB – a tad low by current standards where 102dB is possible. Although quoted noise looks low at -107dB this is due to muting; the dynamic range figure is a measure of the noise floor (+thr) without muting.

Output measured 2.5V, a little above the usual 2V standard. There are no balanced XLR-socket outputs. The headphone output with volume control gave 7V out at full volume.

Vincent have balanced this player well to avoid distortion at high output and noise at low output, giving a good all round set of performance figures from CD, when using valves. NK

**FREQUENCY RESPONSE**

**DISTORTION**

**Headphone output 7V**

**VINCENT CD-S7 £1,800 OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.**

**VERDICT**
Mighty sound of enormous presence from CD. Quite different from most else. Deeply impressive.

**FOR**
- spacious powerful sound
- volume control
- headphone output

**AGAINST**
- no balanced output

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A portable player that does it all. Noel Keywood reviews FiiO’s affordable M9 that’s packed with ability.

The FiiO M9 is a massively capable portable player that in FiiO’s words “combines all of the functions people want”. Understandable to want it all – but inevitably this adds complexity where arrays of facilities must be selected from multiple menu layers by peering at tiny text on a small screen. I’m trying to get the M9 into context here. It has massive ability – even able to play DSD via DoP, making this a player that will perform even the most obscure functions – ones of appeal to audio enthusiasts.

Size wise the M9 is pocketable at 60mm wide, 107mm high and 13.3mm deep, if a bit heavy for a shirt top pocket, weighing 139gms. However, in spite of one swathe of complex circuitry inside that includes balanced headphone amplifiers and output, plus two new Asahi Kasei Microdevices (AKM, Japan) AK4490 DACs from the silky smooth sounding Verita Series, there is a long claimed 10 hour life from the li-polymer 2350mAh re-chargeable internal batteries. Play hi-res and life will go down slightly, by the way – as usual. The unit charges from a USB 5V (2A) supply / USB computer output as usual, charge time 2hrs.

FiiO claim fast performance from the Samsung Exynos 7270 CPU running a customised Android operating system but start-up was slow at 40 seconds, touch-screen response was tardy due to very small and insensitive active areas, whilst numerous swipes to transit from Home to Play also slowed things down. I had to be patient to get through all the many menus, especially the numerous Settings menus flagged by the same gearwheel icon but different in content.

With Android you must load music files into a Music folder using an Android loader window that appears automatically on a Mac, but it is
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seen natively on a PC. However, this player uses a USB Type C socket and USB 2.0 that my USB2 Mac hub was snifty about; I had to plug in direct for a stable link, so data rate appears to be high. No problem here with the PC though.

There’s a nice, if slow, edge-style volume control wheel with big on-screen colour readout (0-120). Play/Pause and Track Skip buttons plus a card slot to expand the onboard 2GB of storage (1000 CD tracks / 20 DSD tracks) to up to 1TB. The real use of a card slot is, I find, to carry a small curated collection around. Note that DSD tracks are vast at around 100MB so demand a large capacity card.

In addition to both unbalanced (3.5mm jack) and balanced (2.5mm jack) headphone outputs the M9 can also transmit music to a hi-fi or ‘phones via Bluetooth, using aptX and aptX HD codecs, as well as LDAC (Sony ‘phones) and HWA formats (SBC and LHD). Standard aptX is pretty darn good, applying little compression (5:1) and giving about 98dB dynamic range so no need to go too worried about all this.

There’s wi-fi for downloading files from a PC or for playing them via DLNA when Windows Media Server has it activated (Windows 10). Macs don’t have DLNA as standard but it can be loaded as paidfree option. The M9 found my PC without trouble, with an amusing message ‘I Servers Founded’ and played music files without problem.

There’s streaming from the ‘net via pre-installed tidal, NetEase Music, KKBox and Moov installed, with Qobuz, Spotify and other services compatible options.

Although Chinese players can rarely be software updated from Mac (due to hidden descti80 files), when set to act as a USB DAC my Mac saw the M9 immediately. However, Fiio’s USB DAC graphic said ‘48KHz 24bits’ no matter what output sample rate was set in the Mac and appears a static graphic, not a genuine sample rate readout. All the same, the M9 worked all the way up to 192kHz sample rate. The player accepts DoP over USB in order to read DSD files played on a computer, but with Mac you need a paid-for Audirvana + for this. PCs just need a suitable Steinberg based driver. DSD files loaded into the player’s memory played perfectly I found, in iso, dsf and diff file format, up to DSD128 (double rate DSD).

Good news is inclusion of an S/PDIF digital output (electrical, not optical) through the 3.5mm headphone jack using a short adaptor lead (supplied), so a high quality external hi-fi DAC can be used, allowing me to hook up a mains powered Audiolab M-DAC+. The adaptor plug is a 4 pole 3.5mm – rare – and an ordinary 3-pole 3.5mm adaptor doesn’t work properly here.

The player will run from external power whilst playing so it can be used as a transport in effect. The same 3.5mm socket can be switched to Line Out also, that cuts out the volume control and sets analogue output to 2V – the same as a CD player, so the M9 can act as a CD player, one able to additionally plug hi-res and DSD.

To use the balanced output you need ‘balanced’ headhones, meaning independent headphone leads with no shared earth, terminated in a tiny

The headphone outputs – 3.5mm and 2.5mm jacks – sit on the bottom face, with symmetrical USB C connector alongside.

The M9 has a gold-hue rotary volume control, transport buttons and micro-SD card slot on its left face. At top sits the on/off switch.

2.5mm plug that I find snaps too easily to be practicable for use on the move.

The player arrived with 1.0.0 software. I updated over wi-fi to latest 1.0.2 (two successive downloads) via the ‘net without problem but a ‘TF card’ is requested and must be inserted (SD card). I had no luck trying to understand Fiio’s instructions on loading a zip file to the player direct, tried a few common methods (load zip to root etc) but none worked. This left a USB DAC driver update V4.47.0 unloaded, as no loading instructions accompany it.

SOUND QUALITY

The M9 had the speed and sound balance I heard from the M7, even though they use different DACs. Selecting Fleetwood Mac’s Dreams (24/96 WAV) the sound sped off the mark with vivid pace and strong cymbal crashes from Mick Fleetwood’s drum kit, even though I used Slow filter. His drums had firm impact too. It was an immediately impressive sound, if not as subtle and silky as I know AKM’s Verita Series from mains powered DACs. The player has strong insight and it nicely sorted tracks like Tom Petty’s Refugee (24/96 FLAC) that can come over as muddled and harsh through some players.

Similarly with The Eagles Somebody, a terribly upward
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compressed CD track – but it came out well here, again with grippy sense of pace from the energetic bass line, Glen Frey’s vocals clear centre stage whilst Hammond organ swirled menacingly left and right. The Audiolab M-DAC+ got more depth out of this track but the M9 made it exciting.

When lowering pace to the softer and slower Narrow Daylight from Diana Krall (24/96) the M9 player imposed hard outline on images and added firm grip to the slow plucked bass line. Swapping over to our Audiolab M-DAC+ gave an easier, more laconic presentation, the one I am used to from this track in my review suite on SD card; there was a greater smoothness and depth too.

However, I then loaded a DSD version (correctly flagged as 2822kHz meaning single rate DSD at 2.8MHz) and heard an easier and more open rendition with plucked bass sounding fulsome rather than ‘fast’. This was really impressive, moving quality right up.

Double rate DSD (5.6MHz) was also played without problem. DSD came out as more open and natural than PCM but the files are huge at 100s of MBs.

With the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Mahler’s Symphony No7 ‘Veni Creator Spiritus’ (24/96 FLAC) the choirs stretched wide and individual sections, such as male counterpoints, could be easily picked out. As with Rock I found the M9 able to avoid muddle, even with volume right up. There was more air and space with a DSD recording of The Trondheim Soloists playing Divertimento, strings texturally rich yet free from harshness.

There are two – different – settings menus and both carry audio functions. Confusing.

**CONCLUSION**

FiiO’s M9 is a complex and capable player. It’s ability to stream from on-line music services will be a key feature for many I suspect. Add in Bluetooth headphone connection and USB DAC capability and the M9 looks very attractive. It has a fast, punchy sound that will appeal to many – but at the expense of space and subtlety. So very good, if not an ultimate audiophile machine, except with DSD.

### MEASURED PERFORMANCE

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<tr>
<td>Line output</td>
<td>2V</td>
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**FREQUENCY RESPONSE**

- Output measured 2.4V from the 3.5mm headphone jack (unbalanced) – enough to drive all headphones, rising to 2.7V from the 2.5mm jack (balanced).
- Line output delivered 2V – the same as a CD player – with the same dynamic range and distortion values as Headphone output.
- FiiO quote the 3.5mm unbalanced output in terms of power – 125mW into a low 16 Ohms (most headphones are either 40 Ohms or 300 Ohms) – the M9 just managed this. Into 40 Ohms it delivered full output (2.4V / 144mW).

The M9 has limited dynamic range with hi-res files, like the M7 tested previously, even though different DACs are used. Otherwise, it worked well. NK

- Frequency response 8Hz- 50kHz
- Distortion (24bit, -60dB) 0.13%
- Separation 102dB
- Dynamic range 104dB

---

*Fiio M9 £229.99*

**EXCELLENT** - extremely capable

**VALUE** - keenly priced

**VERDICT**

An affordable player with ‘everything’ on-board, including streaming. Exciting sound, but not svelte.

**FOR**
- small-ish and light-ish
- streaming
- S/PDIF out

**AGAINST**
- measured distortion
- low dynamic range
- sound lacks subtlety

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WIN

Here’s your chance to win a pair of Acoustic Energy AE109 floorstanding loudspeakers we reviewed in the March 2018 issue. Read the review excerpt below and answer the questions.

“The AE109s are a two-and-a-half way design using a pair of 4-inch (100mm) mid/bass paper cone units similar to that used in the AE100 with the lower one augmenting lower bass response before rolling off. These are allied to a 1-inch (25mm) soft dome tweeter mounted in what Acoustic Energy calls a Wide Dispersion Technology waveguide to project sound further into the room. These drivers are housed in a relatively slim mass-loaded MDF cabinet measuring 800mm x 160mm x 240mm (HxWxD) with cone shaped spikes at the base. A pair of full-length magnetically-attached grilles are also supplied (although, as ever, I kept these off for reviewing) while finishes are Satin Black or Walnut vinyl veneer.

At the back is a single pair of speaker cable binding posts as well as a slot-shaped reflex port to reinforce the bass. While not overly-flashy the AE109s are certainly well put together, weighing in at 17.5kg each and feeling solid and sturdy. A solid rap with the knuckles on the side of the cabinet produced no unwanted resonances.

Acoustic Energy claim a frequency range of 40Hz to 35kHz (see Measured Performance for full details) with an 89dB sensitivity – meaning they should be able to go loud with moderately-powered transistor amplifiers or even valves”.

For a chance to win this great prize, just answer the four easy questions at right. Send your entries on a postcard only, by 8th February 2019 to:

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NOVEMBER 2019 WINNER: ISOTEK EVO 2 CORVUS MAINS DISTRIBUTION BLOCK
Danielle Frowde of Penryn, Cornwall

QUESTIONS

[1] The mid/bass cones are made of –
(a) plastic
(b) paper
(c) steel
(d) wood

[2] is the tweeter –
(a) electrostatic
(b) ribbon
(c) soft dome
(d) plasma

[3] The grilles are attached by –
(a) chewing gum
(b) screws
(c) nails
(d) magnets

[4] The reflex port is –
(a) tubular
(b) slot shaped
(c) triangular
(d) variable geometry
Transfiguration

KRONOS
TIME FOR MUSIC

DECENT AUDIO
SOUND DISTRIBUTION

ANSONIC - TRANSFIGURATION - USHER - VAN DEN HUL - VELA AUDIO
American wood

Want headphones that look and sound a little different? The ZMF Atticus is Martin Pipe's suggestion...

This particular story begins with the Fostex TS0RP professional studio headphones, the performance of which transcends their modest pricing. They can be made to sound even better with tweaks, though, as Chicago resident Zach Mehrbach discovered. Several years ago he started modifying TS0RPs for friends and family, and the work occupied ever-greater slices of his time. Saddled by student debt, he decided to turn these efforts into a commercial venture known as ZMF (Zach Mehrbach Films, apparently).

Aspiring guitar-maker Mehrbach, having exploited the potential of the TS0RP as far as it would go, saw his own headphone designs as the way forward for ZMF. Among the results are the £1,100 Atticus featured here. As with the other ‘ear-gear’ born in ZMF’s workshop, the cups of the 490g Atticus are made of wood – specifically camphor – which makes them distinctive both visually and aurally. Mehrbach “loves” camphor, which he describes as “a medium-density wood that machines and finishes well, with the added bonus of smelling great”.

That said, ZMF offers its headphones in “limited-edition” woods too. Acorn Audio’s Aamer Qureshi, who imports and sells ZMF here, told me that he can also supply an Atticus in Manchurian Ash (£1,200) or Cocobolo (£1,300). The choice of wood influences how the headphones reproduce music, as Mehrbach points out; softer woods will have “more decay and more sense of roundness to notes”, while harder woods will be “slightly more precise, with harder edges”.

Both of the aforementioned woods are notably harder than camphor, but soft when compared to teak - which ZMF uses for another model, the Auteur. It’s important to make the right choice from the outset, though, as ZMF doesn’t “offer a cup change service...they’re not user replaceable...changing them necessitates a complete rebuild of the headphone”. Even in standard camphor form, the Atticus – supplied in a rugged plastic ‘seahorse’ case with two sets of cables (balanced 4-pin XLR and unbalanced 6.3mm, with 3-pin mini XLRs at the headphone end) - is indeed a joy to behold.

Interestingly, the earpads - only “regular, non-perforated” types are recommended – can be upgraded, although replacement is an option too. The Atticus comes with lambkin/suede ‘Or’ pads, which are claimed to “add soundstage and treble”. They are slightly smaller in diameter than ZMF’s higher-end Eikon pads and keep ears “farther from the driver, for a touch more stage and linearity”. The Eikons are available in ‘protein’ finish, as well as lambkin and suede.

Naturally, the pads visually-complement the cups – which don’t just look good. According to Mehrbach, they are “highly-engineered acoustic designs” with damping and airflow characteristics that help to make “frequency response and tonal characteristics” meet expectations. All ZMF headphones go “through months or years of testing to get the specific sound” that Mehrbach is after. The Atticus is a closed-back design, but according to Qureshi “there now exists an open-back version called the Aeolus”.

What of the (proprietary) dynamic drivers that live in the cups? Their diaphragms are made of TPE (thermo-polyethylene), an “extremely flexible yet durable plastic” that can remain “ridged and provide impact, while still being flexible enough to have clear treble and very engaging midrange”. The electromagnetic circuit that pushes them has a 300-ohm impedance, and a sensitivity of 99dB/mW ZMF reckons that “tube amps are a good match...as they match our drivers’ damping factor well, but solid state amps can work great as well”.

SOUND QUALITY

I used Atticus with the excellent Benchmark HPA4 headphone amplifier (also made in the USA) in balanced mode, my primary source being a Cambridge CXN v2 and Chord Qutest DAC playing music held on a NAS. My focal Utopia ‘phones were used as a reference. On the whole, the earpieces of the Atticus are – despite their bulk and weight – comfortable to wear. When lying down, though, I did note a tendency to slip off. Adjusted properly, they are a snug fit and as a result you’re isolated from external noise that can spoil your enjoyment of the music.

They may slip off in bed, but to be honest these would be the last headphones to choose if getting sleep is on the agenda! In short, they place excitement and sheer energy over any pretence towards neutrality. The ZMF ‘house sound’ has been described by Mehrbach as “a synergy between analytical and musical...the uncanny ability to present detail without losing organic enjoyable attributes”. That is, if my experience...
is anything to go by, a fairly accurate summation. You won’t miss any significant musical detail in decent 24-bit recordings (like the LSO/ Naseda recording of Britten’s War Requiem I frequently turn to); indeed, it’s probably a little too prominent!

An advantage of the closed-back approach is a decent bass response. And tonally, I do indeed note a bias towards the low-end. It’s not as ‘in your face’ in this regard as some of the ‘phones selling in large quantities to certain sectors of the market, but there’s a definite ‘punch’ that brings the sheer scale of big basslines (like the synth of Kraftwerk’s Man- Machine album) to the fore. This extends into the lower midrange, with obvious repercussions for male vocals. In terms of presentation, the difference between the Atticus and Utopia – where a complete lack of character is its character – is obvious.

The Atticus immediately grips you by being more exciting to listen to than the more expensive French design – house music and searing guitar-driven rock benefit more than, say, orchestral works – but what, exactly, is h-fi about? Ultimately, that’s your choice.

Also ‘bog’ and immersive is the soundstage; in terms of imaging, you’re left in no doubt as to the spaces occupied by the players. There is however a smidgen of recency when it comes to the treble. Percussion at the other end of the rhythmic scale to the big bass drums – cymbals, triangles and the like – seem a little held back in the mix. Yet for all these traits, listening fatigue was never a problem. I found that the biggest surprise of all...

CONCLUSION

The ‘meaty and beaty’ Atticus, hardly the most neutral transducer on the planet, nevertheless engages musically. Listening to a wide variety of material, it’s evident that the Atticus suits some genres (energetic ones!) more than others. Although these headphones spent most of their time here being fed by the HP4A, they also proved to be compatible with other gear at my disposal. I was thus able to enjoy the Atticus distinctive presentation with my F-10 X3 portable player, no drive issues (like audible strain) being evident.

ZMF ATTICUS
£1,100 (STOCK CAMPHOR WOOD VERSION)

EXCELLENT – extremely capable

VALUE – keenly priced

VERDICT

The Atticus is not a natural transducer but it is nevertheless enjoyable to listen to

FOR

- visually and aurally arresting
- comprehensive package

AGAINST

- presentation not tonally neutral
- can slip off under some circumstances

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Answers by: NK - Noel Keywood; JM - Jon Myles; PR - Paul Rigby; MP - Martin Pipe.

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A KEF EGG WIRELESS DIGITAL MUSIC SYSTEM is on its way to DR. R J SIMMONDS, Letter of the Month winner in our January 2019 issue.

Letter of the Month

THE MOVE TO MC

I will have a budget of £10k by late October but am conflicted what to do. My system is an ageing Linn Sondek/ Akito (generally looked after by Andrew at Doug Brady or Brian/Trevor at House of Linn) with Ortofon 2M Blue N/M cartridge, Icon Audio MB90 MKII monoblocks and PS1 MKII phono stage, and Kipsch Lo Scallo II speakers with Townshend Super-tweeters attached.

My thoughts are either blow the lot on a much coveted SME 303 with appropriate arm and moving coil cartridge, or think of an SME V and Ortofon Cadenza Block. This will be a bit over budget, but who says the kids need food?

Or revamp the existing system. Perhaps add a Baopith, plus some further upgrades such as new chassis, arm-board etc, new cartridge such as Linn Adikt or Ortofon Cadenza Blue/Bronze, and a decent mains cable block such as the Isotek EVO 3 Aquarius.

This option should leave some money to appease Mrs P and buy a Naim Core so she can listen to the CDs that are sat doing nothing (we all have to compromise) – and perhaps do a bit of tube rolling with the valve amps. What with other phrases such as the Technics SL-1200G. The latest Direct Drive from Technics. Buy it as-is with Technics arm or consider a Timestep modified version for a turntable that is deeply impressive in sound quality.

B-Type Plug, Breath Controller, Clipping and Double-ended Noise Reduction. I think there might be a lot of BDSM types working in the hi-fi industry! What would you do? And, speaking of compromises, my room is far from perfect. I get great soundstage, and the positioning of the large settee near the left speaker doesn’t seem to affect it at all. However, I sometimes wonder if adding a subwoofer might help. What do you think?

I have included some pictures so that you can see what I mean about the room.

Regards,

Dr. Mark Pitchford.

Hi Mark. You are running LP and want good quality from it – but you use an Ortofon 2M Blue moving
GutWire Audio Grounding Cables

An extremely effective and simple way to improve the sound of any audio system. A single cable to enable the proper grounding of electronic components.

Simply attach the RCA (or XLR) connector end to any spare input socket on your integrated amplifier or pre-amplifier. The mains plug end goes into any spare wall socket, or into a mains distributor. This creates the shortest route to ground from the circuit boards and introduces a different ground potential into the system.

It takes moments to hear the sound stage increase in size, both depth and width, that the tonal balance has more weight to it and the sound is more natural, less “hifi”. Increased transparency provides more resolution of detail and a sharper focus of images.

Far more effective than passive grounding boxes, wooden or metal, which also require the use of multiple additional cables. No compression of dynamics, or added colouration, which can occur with alternative systems.

An elegant and simple solution; a single cable does it all.

These ground cables only use the earth pin within the mains plug. The live and neutral pins are not used and are safely insulated inside the plug.

Two models available:

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- Ultimate Ground – Schuko plug £650
- Ultimate Ground – Furutech UK plug £699

Audition a cable in your own system; full refund if not completely satisfied.

UK exclusive from The Audio Consultants.
magnet (MM) cartridge. This is a budget MM!

Move out of yesterday with a modern turntable. Either get a Timestep modified Technics SL-1200G with Rega or SME arm for rock steady speed stability, or perhaps get a Rega P9 for its simplicity and Rega arm. Experiment with platter mats with both of them. Ask Mrs P about the visuals! Both are good looking turntables. Don’t avoid the issue of location: they do not have suspended sub-chassis like the Linn so need a very firm base.

If you don’t mind a bit of DIY then the Sheu Analog’s Cello

Collecting Memories

Looking at my system now I see all the keepers I’ve collected over the last 24 years. Sansui 1000a, Leak Stereo 20, Townshend Elite Rock turntable, Technics SP10 Mk I I with TTWEIGHTS copper matt and Nagasaki crystal record weight, Thorens TD160 Super, Vacuum State Electronics FVP, Audiosphere full range speakers.

All of these pieces of kit have been modified and improved by my father with too much work to list here. Alongside them are the Chinese bits of kit I’ve collected over the past 18 months. A ten Watt single ended Class A solid-state amplifier based off the John Linsley Hood design of 1969, an 8 Watt EL34 single-ended tube amp, and a DAC with an input for CD and USB and a tube buffer in the output.

Interestingly, I substituted the original Chinese tube of the DAC with a NOS American military tube and was really underwhelmed with the sound. A twenty four hour burn in yielded little improvement. Listening to a Moby track that I’m very familiar with I noticed that during the vintage vinyl samples in the track the surface noise recorded from the original record was noticeably muted when compared with the Chinese tube, indicating to me that the Chinese tube was superior when it comes to detail retrieval.

The NOS tube stayed however as the case was a pain to get on and off. These Chinese bits of kit were carefully selected You can do well with some good Chinese equipment but you really need to know what you are looking for. I was only burnt once, with a cheap Chinese B45 amplifier. It ran super-hot and ended up dying. I can sum up my experience with it in two words: I survived.

Listening to my system now I’m happy with the sound, but to be honest, I’m not sure I’m having any more fun than I did when listening to my original system, a Sony Playstation hooked up to a vintage Akai receiver and a pair of no name paper cone ‘speakers. That system really impressed me and started my interest in hi-fi.

I’ve found the developments in audio recently interesting. People’s tolerance for audio jumbles seems to be further reducing, with the rise of the sound bar as evidence. Vinyl seems to be racing ahead, with the unfortunate popularity of the Crosley turntables tracking with a ceramic stylus at 5 grams. I’ve seen a few Youtube videos.

A classic old Leak Stereo 20 amplifier, one of the ‘keepers’ in Ben North’s collection of classic hi-fi products, renovated by his dad!
Spendor A-Line loudspeakers deliver sound with projection, character and sheer entertainment far beyond their modest dimensions. With their clear, open sound, they’re outgoing, friendly and expressive, bringing a natural sense of life and articulation to your favourite music.
with self-proclaimed vinyl enthusiasts grabbing their records by the playing surface and offering them up to the dark god Crosley.

While having way too much fun I decided to dust off my Thorens TD 160 Super with Michelle counterweight and rewired arm tube and lead outs, tracking with a modified Denon DL103 cartridge in machined metal body. My sleeve caught the tip of the stylus and bent it to a 90 degree angle! Oh well.

I was so impressed with the sound that I've since bought a new Denon, now awaiting mounting. I've only killed two cartridges over the past 24 years, I was having too much fun both times.

Now is a great time to pick up CDs for a good price. My brother has recently gotten into audio and has collected 130 CDs from op shops over the last few months, all for a dollar each.

I'm old enough to remember when CDs were 30 dollars each. I think we will see a repeat of what happened with vinyl, with the market crashing and the wise picking up some bargains.

I was without a turntable for a few months until I bought a replacement belt for my Elite Rock table. During this time I was listening mainly to music on YouTube. It made me realise how fortunate this generation is, with music and videos playing for free. We really do live in an audio/video world. Would Kinn J Collin’s song ‘Way to War’ be complete without visuals by auteur expat Australian director Kris Moyes? Keep up the good work fellas!

Ben North
Australia

Hi Ben. YouTube drives me a bit mad at times too because it can be addictive and a voice tells me I am being subverted. But then again you get to see great performances from real live musicians. Listening to Led Zeppelin’s ‘When the Levee Breaks’ then watching Zepparella actually play it (ignore the cheesy outfits!) and finally hearing the extraordinary finger picking of it’s originator Kansas Joe McCoy – all conveniently lined up on YouTube – is a delight not so easily managed on a normal hi-fi.

NK

TANNOY CHOICE

I’m toying with the idea of purchasing a pair of Tannoy Mercury 7.4s at a decent price of £330 new, but what I don’t know is are they going to suit my system and was wondering if you could steer me in the right direction – or even to look elsewhere.

My hi-fi is Rega P3-24 fitted with a Nagaoka MP10 with full reference upgrade from Groovetech, Icon Audio PS1.2 and Icon Audio Stereo 25 MKII. Listening room is 20 foot by 12 foot and I have a Cambridge Audio CD player 650c. After using my faithful old Royd Eden Speakers for 30 years I’m aware that I haven’t heard the best from my system. I’m a regular buyer of your magazine so please if you can help.

All the best,
John Sme.

Hi John. That is a lovely simple LP system, complete with valve amplifiers playing into a large room. I sense potential! But I won’t recommend big Martin Logans (a fine match). Tannoy’s Mercury 7.4s will suit your system in terms of affordability and sound balance and I suggest you buy them. You will find more treble and a brighter sound but Tannoy keep this in check and it nicely balances vinyl warmth, so you won’t be disappointed I believe. Be aware that like all loudspeakers they need a run in period of at least 40 hours.

Regards,
Mike Bickley.

Tannoy Mercury 7.4 loudspeaker. “Are they going to suit my system?” asks John Sme.

YouTube carries unique music videos where you get to see the artist at work. Here’s Sina, who now has her own channel “dedicated to the Sound of Classic Rock”. Lightning fast drumming and great accompaniment, all in pro sound quality. Worth seeing.

Hi Mike. Yes, a lot of old recordings were almost shockingly good. One reason is the circumstances under which they were made. No complex mixing desks with arrays of cheap chips, just a simple but good microphone straight into quality valve amplifiers then onto tape. Artists that achieved early fame, such as Elvis Presley, went into well equipped studios – in his case by Westrex I recall. So we now hear Fever – recorded nearly fifty years ago – as a demonstrator at hi-fi shows.

In a similar vein I heard amazing sound at a show demo – and was
Klipsch's exclusive Tractrix® horn technology delivers the power, detail and emotion of the live music experience with the cleanest, most natural sound possible.

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The Reference Base range features a beautiful durable build, including scratch-resistant ebony wood grain vinyl, reinforced MDF and exposed fasteners for an industrial aesthetic.
confronted with an LP of The Shadows Greatest Hits. Don’t laugh! It made me re-appraise the Shads, realising how good they really were, in spite of their easily digestible demeanour at a time when The Rolling Stones were shocking Britain. As experienced musicians they played live with an easy perfection and were well recorded in good studios, paid for by mums around Britain.

Like you I try as hard as possible nowadays to attain a natural sound. If we expect a “better” system to enhance music we already know by providing stronger bass, more detail and such like it leads inevitably to a sound that is artificially dramatic – to the point of obvious disconnect with reality.

Example? Loudspeakers. Manufacturers just cannot resist raising upper midband and treble to heighten detail, improve intelligibility etc – a problem our measurements make clear. But this also makes for a bright sound that moves toward obviously unnatural, as well as emphasising distortion harmonics that bring a harsh edge – especially to imperfect sources such as old CDs. This is “enhanced” fidelity.

The natural sound you strive for is also my primary requirement. And it is possible for natural to be dramatic, as those old recordings in their purity show.

NK

CHOOSING A ‘SPEAKER’

How on earth do you go about the business of buying a pair of speakers today? At present my speakers are Wharfedale Atenion which were imported by the great Tom Fletcher of Nottingham Analogue. They were purchased in 1994 for a room sized 22 x 12 ft. They are now in a smaller room, 17 x 12 ft.

They are fed by a Marantz PM 10 reference amp and a Marantz SA 10 reference SACD player.

I have thought for a while of replacing the speakers but that is where the dilemma starts. Let’s assume I have a budget of up to £10,000. There are a lot of speakers out there up to that price. It is the room size which is the main problem. Is there any point in buying a pair of Sonus Faber at £10k which would simply overpower the room? How do you listen to a set of speakers anyhow? You may have to travel many miles to hear a certain speaker and then it would probably not be in a room the same size as mine – nor have the same partnering equipment.

You decide to buy a pair and get them home and they sound rubbish in your room. Get a home demo you say. The dealer of the said speaker is probably a hundred miles away and cannot provide this service.

In your review of the Focal Kanta No2 you say it works better in smaller rooms eg 350 sq ft. That equates to a room size of 25 x 14 ft. Is that what you call a small room? That makes mine tiny.

I despair when reviewers talk about small, medium and large rooms – it is meaningless. Does a smaller cheaper speaker sound better in a “small” room than a more expensive one, or do you go for a small expensive one?

How much better does a speaker at £10k sound than one at £5k? Let’s face it, £5k isn’t cheap! But what is the point of spending £10k when £5k would do?

Some of the speakers reviewed in a rival mag look amazing but what good are they if they simply overpower a room? How many people in this country have rooms which are capable of doing justice to these speakers? I think there are probably a lot of people who would give their eye teeth for a modest room like mine, which is a dedicated music room in which I can blow my brains out because it is away from the main house.

You read reviews of a certain speaker, say a Martin Logan which gets rave reviews, and wonder whether it would be any good for you. The reviewer says it need plenty of room — back to that old question again. What is plenty of room?

Perhaps every speaker manufacturer should specify just what size of room is suitable for a particular speaker. At least it would give you somewhere to start from — and not ‘small’, ‘medium’ or ‘large’ which is meaningless.

There is probably a speaker out which would be the perfect partner for my equipment and room. I would suggest that trying to find that speaker is virtually impossible. I am coming up to my 74th birthday, so if I started looking now I reckon by the time I am 80 I might have a chance. But by then everything would have moved on so I would need to start again.

What would you do? If you had my room and my equipment and £10k to spend on a pair of speakers. What would you buy? The Vivid Audio Kaya range look very interesting but does the Kaya 25 in a ‘smaller’ room sound as good as a Kaya 90 in a ‘large’ room?

Again that question — what is small, medium or large?

One of the ‘old classic’ LPs we play when reviewing. In fact it is a re-pressing from Pro-Ject, available from UK importer Henley, so on modern vinyl and in perfect condition.
“Can you please develop a phono stage?”

PH1
Blackline

We listen to our customers

The perfect partner for v40...or other amplifiers

With moving coil and moving magnet options, the new PH1 phono stage provides a sound upgrade for turntable and amplifier systems where a pre-amplifier is required.

Hi-Fi World “Excellent”

blueaura.co.uk
large land area justifies Focal’s view that 350 sq ft is a “smaller space”. Best to ignore that.

Here’s the interesting bit. Musical instruments reach down to 40Hz, ignoring organs and synths. To reproduce that you need a room at least 14ft long, if you sit at one end and the speakers are at the other. That’s 147 sq ft and a medium room. It conveniently turns out that ‘medium’ rooms are just acceptable for music reproduction. Your 17ft x 12ft is 204 sq ft and large by this metric. So typical UK room sizes work reasonably well in basic acoustic terms, meaning the lowest notes they can fully support. Large stand-mounting loudspeakers work down to 40Hz and drive a medium room well.

There’s far more to this issue than just the lowest note a room can support, but as room volume (size) increases generally you get a better sound. Your 17ft x 12ft suits a wide range of loudspeakers and so you really need not worry too much. Even Martin Logans, with their open panels will suit; they ideally need 2-3 feet behind.

If you live far from a dealer check out the cost of delivery services – not a lot nowadays – and discuss this with a dealer. I suspect most have this issue covered however.

Loudspeakers vary, and listeners tastes and expectations vary, making it impossible for us to be definitive about what you may or may not like. But you need not worry too much in that room. I hope all this helps. NK

**OBSCURE SACD?**

Perhaps Noel you would like to inform Channel Classics, Chandos, Bis, Alia Vox, and Harmonia Mundi to name a few companies, that their brilliant quality SACD DSD recordings are obsolete. Every month in the Gramophone magazine there is a good amount of SACDs released. Containing superb new DSD recordings. They may not be around in the popular music scene, but they are certainly buoyant on the classical scene.

“Human interface? it doesn’t bother me. Morantz manufactures excellent machines along with quite a few others. So, please Noel don’t spoil it for us by spreading ‘rumours’ about things being obsolete, they are not. This month I bought ten of them with brilliant notes and illustrations – in some cases in lavish booklets. Ease it out, pop it in and play. Now that’s what I call human interface.”

**Stephen Flower**

Whoops! Sorry to upset you Stephen. Good to remind us that Classical SACDs are still being made and provide enjoyment. All the same, I believe I am right in saying SACD is effectively obsolete (obsolete perhaps), in that few players are made and few discs produced. The days of the silver disc are over – and SACD never really caught on whilst CD reigned. Not a rumour methinks!

I regularly listen to DSD recordings and both understand and agree that it offers superb sound quality, especially for classical music. You may like to consider also DSD downloads and their replay. There is increasing interest because of superb quality. NK

---

**An open panel loudspeaker like a Martin Logan needs space behind – around 3ft will do. Soft wall hangings or a bookcase behind both help, providing absorption and diffusion respectively. Experiment!**

And to hear them I would have to travel probably 200 miles and listen in a room nothing like mine. You would probably end up paying the cost of a decent set of speakers just trying to hear all the possibilities!

Help!!

Regards

**Nicholas Hodgson**

Hi Nick. Lots of good strong questions in there. I will try to answer them simply.

On the matter of small, medium and large rooms, in the UK I would suggest small is below 12ft longest dimension, medium is below 16ft longest dimension and large is anything above 16ft longest dimension. This is based on common convention in architectural practice rather than acoustic properties. Their floor area is determined by width as well as length of course and that’s commonly less, around 75% let’s say, a 16ft long room being 12ft wide.

This gives us some convenient break-point figures in floor area. Small is less than 100 sq ft, large more than 200 sq ft and medium anything in-between. This is UK-centric, imposed by high population density – Australians and Americans may laugh! Perhaps France with its
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- Fidelity Sound and Vision, Doncaster
- Harrow Audio, Harrow
- HBH Woollacotts, Plymouth
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- Hifi Corner, Edinburgh
- Hifi Excellence, Coventry
- Hifi Hut, Dublin
- HifiX, Ashby de la Zouch
- Igallo Audio, Tunbridge Wells
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The little xDSD from iFi is a small but complex portable headphone amplifier, battery powered and purposed for the pocket. It’s able to work with all headphones via cable connection, but not Bluetooth. It can however accept Bluetooth wireless communication from sources such as a mobile phone. And yes it accepts DSD via its USB input, hence the model name. That’s the outline.

Being pocketable the xDSD is small, measuring 67mm wide, 19mm high and 96mm deep. The case is hard plastic to facilitate Bluetooth (a metal case screens radio waves), but it has a shiny chrome finish and feels every bit as solid as metal. Weight was 138gm on our scales and this includes internal re-chargeable 2200mAh batteries that provide 6-10 hours life between charges (low res MP3 etc draws less current than hi-res). A charger is not supplied, the assumption is everyone already has one (5V USB out) to charge their phone. A short 150mm charge lead is also supplied and the rear micro-USB socket to which it connects is for charging only.

Now to headphones, since this is a little complicated. iFi make much of the fully balanced topology of the player but I commonly use fully balanced Oppo PM1s when reviewing Digital Audio Player’s such as the FiiO M9 this month and don’t find the benefit very great; generalising, there’s a slightly cleaner outline to images and a tad more focus.

Where most Far Eastern players use the impractically small 2.5mm four-pole socket, iFi fit a 3.5mm four-pole socket that accepts a normal stereo three-pole plug correctly (which common the earths) or four-pole for balanced phones – and this is rare. CPC Farnell stock many 4-pole 3.5mm plug variants including gold plated, as do Canford. You need to be dextrous and have good eyesight to solder these things (plus the right tools) so be aware of the realities of going balanced here; best to seek out proprietary cables.

Whether the xDSD is used conventionally with unbalanced ‘phones or with balanced ‘phones it is able to deliver massive output of 3.4V measurement showed – more than enough for all types, so iFi’s enthusiastic claims are all met. And Line output is an option (fixed volume, 2V) to feed a hi-fi.

The big central On button glows brightly when on, colour changing to indicate volume level, set by a concentric knurled wheel – very natty. This is an analogue control iFi say; it’s also well designed, not affecting frequency response with position, as some do.

Two tiny pinpoint LEDs at left of the volume control serve to show input sample rate and format (DSD, PCM, MQA) and input (S/PDIF USB, Bluetooth). At right is an Option button that selects 3D+, XBass+ (or both) for out-of-head stereo and bass boost respectively.

Unusually, iFi have fitted a rear 3.5mm jack socket to accept an S/PDIF digital input in either electrical or optical form, supplying an optical TOSLINK adaptor. To use the input electrically a 3.5m plug to phone socket adaptor is required, or suitable lead, neither of which is supplied. Optical worked up to 192kHz sample rate. This input suits old CD players with a digital output, the xDSD acting as an upgrade.

For use as a headphone DAC/amplifier for a computer there’s a USB A male plug and two converters to USB B (printer) socket cable, plus a USB extension lead – unusually comprehensive. Most people will use USB for computer connection and it’s the only way to get DSD in, using DoP protocol. To do this with Macs means buying Audirvana+ and with a PC the driver must be updated. iFi give instructions for using Audirvana on their website, and also provide (free) a PC driver update to send PCM higher than 96kHz sample rate, or DSD.

You can also transmit (stream) audio from a home computer or laptop via Bluetooth which allows online subscription music services to be sent to headphones (Spotify, Tidal, iTunes etc). The xDSD worked perfectly with my Mac, correctly identifying its output sample rate all the way up.
“WOW this cable is awesome - congrats!! Great skills. Mega impressed
Sonicly I enjoyed a tighter more focused vocal, with fine details becoming easier to hear as part of a extremely well defined soundstage. Chord Electronics DAVE owners should give the WAVE STORM Reference cable serious consideration.”

www.pursuitperfectsystem.com
to 768kHz. It played PCM and DSD flawlessly and also worked perfectly with an iPhone.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Using the xDSD as a DAC linked to the computer (Mac running Sierra), connected via USB, it came across as neutrally clean and punchy. I found it immediately engaging with Jackie in Dvorak's Serenade For Strings (DSO64). The xDSD had a warm balance with DSD; whatever I played, but the huge scale and easy flow was magnificent. This was an altogether different sound.

**CONCLUSION**

The xDSD from iFi is a battery powered headphone amplifier with broad ability. Bluetooth input allows connection to a mobile phone, portable player or computer, providing they have Bluetooth output of course – most now do. As a digital-to-analogue convertor (DAC) it’s good, if lacking the svelte depth of higher dynamic range units (e.g. FiiO Q5), but this only matters when used in a hifi, rather than on the move. Headphone compatibility is superb: it can cope with them all – even balanced phones. And Xbass+ (but not 3D+) offers useful sonic enhancement appreciable on the move.

The rear carries a USB input, filter slide switch, micro-USB charger input (right) and S/PDIF digital 3.5mm jack socket input at left, optical and electrical.

end light. To ameliorate this however there is Xbass that added obvious heft to the sound due to its strong bass lift. Whilst Xbass+ had obvious effect, 3D+ did not: I could hear no difference with it in or out.

Connected to my iPhone through Bluetooth the xDSD again came over as clear and forthright with David Bowie's Suffragette City (DSO converted to CD by an Onkyo hi-res player on the phone). Used like this, quality is set by Bluetooth and aptX but it’s still good.

With DSD from Audirvana+ on Mac there was a huge step up, the soundstage broadening and gaining space, having a less forced and more fluid feel to musical flow. Bob Dylan’s When You Gonna Wake Us (DSO64) had a fulsome bass line and firm drum strikes within intro, plus a silky smooth rendition of his voice. Classical also benefited from the sense of space and scale, the Amsterdam Sinfonietta filling what seemed like a huge space around my head, strings lustrous and smooth.

"the iFi xDSD came across as neutrally clean and punchy."
A P E R F E C T  N E W

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WORLD STANDARDS

Your guide to the best products we’ve heard that are currently on sale in the UK...

TURNTABLES

AVOID INGENIUM £800
Great bass response and upper mid-range detail, aligned to clarity makes this a must-hear at its price point.

CLEARAUDIO INNOVATION £8400
Expensive, but offers great results from a finely honed and beautifully finished belt drive turntable, with servos control on the platter to keep a grip on tempo like few others. Can be fitted with a Clearaudio tangential arm, or any conventional design. Awesome.

INSPIRE MONARCH £4,350
A rebuild from the ground up Technics Direct Drive, having blistering pace and dynamics allied with smoothness, sophistication and purity of tone. A true reference.

LINN LP12SE £3,600
The UK’s most conc turntable, the legendary Sondex goes from strength to strength. New Keel sub-chassis and Radical DC motor add precision and grip to one of the world’s most musical tonearms. Expensive though.

MICHELL GYRO GEC £1700
Wonderful styling, coupled with great build and finish make this turntable a delight for friends and family. It has an attractive clear acrylic dust cover, and you can mount just about any arm. A current design standard.

PRO-JECT ESSENTIAL DIGITAL £300
A budget turntable that turns in a great analogue performance, but also has a hi-res digital output. Send 24/192 across your lounge via optical cable to a DAC and get great audio quality. Or record LP to your laptop.

REGA RP3 £550
The first of the super quality Regas, little compromised by price and featuring Rega’s outstanding RB303 tonearm, suitable for MM and MC cartridges. A standard at the price point.

TIMESTEP EVO £2100
The famous Technics SL-1210 MkII Direct Drive, but with improved plinth, isolation, main bearing and power supply, plus an SME arm (add £1500). DD convenience, rock steady pitch and fab sound at a great price. Our ‘in house reference.

LIVING TRUE £4,350
A rebuild from the ground up Technics Direct Drive, having blistering pace and dynamics allied with smoothness, sophistication and purity of tone. A true reference.

BOARDMARK £3,800
The UK’s most conc turntable, the legendary Sondex goes from strength to strength. New Keel sub-chassis and Radical DC motor add precision and grip to one of the world’s most musical tonearms. Expensive though.

MICHELL GYRO GEC £1700
Wonderful styling, coupled with great build and finish make this turntable a delight for friends and family. It has an attractive clear acrylic dust cover, and you can mount just about any arm. A current design standard.

REGA RB303 £300
A one piece tapered casting makes this arm’s structure almost unrivalled. Great dynamics and superb imaging, for MM and MC. Reference quality for peanuts.

SME 312S £1,600
Twelve-inch magnesium alloy tapered arm tube plus SME V bearings. An insightful, yet smooth and relaxed sound. Superlative build completes the package. Our Editor’s steed.

SME 309 £1500
A one-piece tapered 9in arm finished like a camera and slick to use. Superlative SME quality and sound at affordable price.

SME V £3000
Offers rapid fire timing and a sense of precision, plus rock solid dynamics. Top dollar for deep pockets.

CARTRIDGES

AUDIO TECHNICA AT-OC9 ML III MC £420
A fine sounding MC with strong bass and superb treble from a great stylus – yet inexpensive.

AUDIO TECHNICA AT-F2/M MC £150
Great value entry level moving coil with detailed and grip you just can’t get from similarly priced moving magnets.

BENZ MICRO ACE SL MC £595
Smooth, fast and full loaded, award winning, hand made cartridge from Switzerland.

BENZ MICRO WOOD SL MC £945
Highly finessed Swiss moving coil that plays music with lifelike precision.

DENON DL-103 £180
A popular and much loved budget MC with big bass, smooth treble and deep sound stage. Fantastic value.
LYRA TITAN I MC £3,500
Breathtaking speed and dynamics from LP, helped by diamond coated, boron rod cantilever.

ORTOFON 2M MONO SE MM £380
A mono cartridge purposed for The Beatles in Mono microgroove LPs. Fitted with a top quality Shibata tip. Fab for the four.

ORTOFON 2M BLACK MM £400
As good as it gets from MM. Fabulous detail and insight from a Shibata stylus, good bass and excellent tracking.

ORTOFON Cadenza Bronze MC £1,400
A mid-price MC with a slightly lower presentation than the superb smooth Cadenza Black. High-end sound at midband price – great value.

ORTOFON Cadenza Black MC £1,800
Ultra smooth and dimensional moving coil with bass and punch aplenty. Lovely stylus.

ORTOFON A95 MC £3,750
Fast and extremely detailed, this is an MC cartridge that sets standards.

REGA CARBON MM £35
Budget price for a competent cartridge with a fairly unflappable nature. Ideal for beginners.

GOLDRING 1012GX MM £250
A glorious sounding cartridge with solid bass and strong dynamic punch, plus excellent treble from its Fritz Goger stylus. Fun and affordable.

SHURE M97XE £80
Big warm sound, but great tracking and bullet-proof stylus protection from damper guard. A survivor.

VAN DEN HUL DDT-II SPECIAL MC £995
Long-lasting shed cartridge from Holland with an open and dynamic sound.

PHONO PREAMPS

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 651P £200
Clean, concise sound from MM and MC cartridges at a very low price. A real bargain.

ICON AUDIO PS3 MKII £2,500
A valve MM phono stage with a MC transformer option, graced by big, spacious and relaxed sound.

SHURE PREAMPS

LUXMAN EQ-500 PHONOSTAGE £4,495
A fully-equipped phono stage from Japanese manufacturer Luxman that offers comprehensive cartridge matching allied to superb sound.

LEEMA ACOUSTICS ELEMENTS ULTRA £1,199
Smooth and detailed sound with the ability to accommodate most modern cartridges. Exceptional value for money.

ORCHARDS Phono Box DS £425
Compact MM and MC phono stage with valve output circuit and a big sound.

PRE-AMPS

PRO-JECT TUBE BOX DS £995

QUAD Q24P £995

TIMESTEP T-01MC £995

PREAMPLIFIERS

ICON AUDIO LA-4 MKIII £1,400
Uses early 6SN7 triodes for liquid sound. Has plenty of gain and a remote control into the bargain.

MF Audio Classic Silver £4,500
One of the best preamplifiers we’ve heard at any price, this transformer-coupled marvel does very little wrong. It’s powerful, clean and open, yet delicate. Its sound is unmatched at or near the price.

MING DA MD7-SE £1,520
A valve preamplifier with an open, effortless sound and a big stage. It has plenty of gain so will accept any source and drive any power amp. A real beauty.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

ARIA PRO845SE £1,499
Pure single-ended valve magic. Low-powered but immediately gorgeous, easy-going yet forest-living dynamic at the same time.

AUDIOPHILE RESEARCH VS160 £3,500
Row of house sound with enormous pace and punch from traditional U.S. muscle master Audio Research. Breathtaking, but expensive.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO Azur 661A £350
Dual-mono construction and hefty toroidal power supply combine to produce a solid and sharp sound with sonics far beyond its price point.

CREEK EVOLUTION 100A £1,500
Superb build and smooth confident sound make this powerful amplifier a benchmark.

CYRUS 80AC £1,400
Trademark shoestring-priced Cyrus integrated now offering 880 watts per channel, plus DAC. Swite delivery from a dainty case that fits in anywhere – and isn’t Class D!

EXPOSURE 1010 £495
Entry-level integrated from Exposure has excellent upper mid-performance with an almost valve-like sound.
WORLD STANDARDS

ICON AUDIO STEREO 60 MKIII £2,800
Excellent tube integrated with plenty of power and an expansive soundstage, plus RT150 tube option and bass meter for easy adjustment.

QUAD II-EIGHTY MONOBLOCKS £6,000 PR
Powerful and expansive sound from modern design monoblocks that also look lovely. Superb — used by us as a reference.

NAIM NAIT 5SI £925
Naim’s fabled entry level integrated amplifier is updated to status. Denos Naim’s superbly muscular sound at entry level.

SUGDEN A215 £2,480
Class A amp with fantastic sound quality producing hard, sculpted images, deep detail and tight bass. Just don’t expect disco-like sound levels!

POWER AMPLIFIERS

AUDIO RESEARCH VS175 £7,498
Powerful, fast valve sound that makes everything else look weak at times. Needs careful matching but well worth the effort.

AUDIO RESEARCH VS115 £5,000
Gods of power with enormous punch. Rafael Todes said it provided “stomp and awe” while retaining incredible smoothness and texture.

ICON AUDIO MB845 MKII £7,600
With 160W from big 845 valves right down to low frequencies, this power amplifier has massive dynamics and bass swing, yet is easy on the ear.

EMINENT TECHNOLOGY LFT-88 £2,500
Excellent U.S. planar magnetic loudspeaker at bargain price. Utterly superb — must hear.

FOCAL ARIA 926 £1,400
Simple, clean, neutral sound — easy going but well engineered and affordable.

MARTIN LOGAN SUMMIT X £16,698
Matches Martin Logan’s KSLsat electrostatic panel to a powerful subwoofer to provide extended, powerful bass. Dramatic sonic purity — awesome. — all but unmatched.

MARTIN LOGAN ELEKTROMOTION £2,500
Martin Logan’s budget baby KSLsat hybrid electrostatic. Fits into any lounge to give electrostatic levels of clarity and imaging.

LOUDSPEAKERS STANDMOUNT

ACOUSTIC ENERGY NEO 1 V2 £225
Crisp, sounding speaker with fast and tuneful bass.

ACOUSTIC ENERGY AE1 CLASSIC £845
Brilliantly successful remake of an iconic design, not flawless but surely one of the most musical loudspeakers ever made.
ELAC BS243 £1,000
More transparent and spacious than they've a right to be at this price, these refined mid-price standmounters represent top value.

EMINENT TECHNOLOGY L16A £1,200
U.S. planar magnetic bookshelf loudspeaker with unrivalled mid-band and treble. Hear it before you buy.

WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 220 £200
Builds on the success of previous Diamond ranges with better bass, more detail and a greater sense of scale.

KEF LS50 £800
Supremely musical mini-monitors which sound much bigger than they look.

MARTIN LOGAN MOTION 35 £1,300
Folded Air-Motion tweeter gives a taste of Martin Logan's electrostatic sound in a standmount. Different from the standard mini-monitors and all the better for it.

PMC TWENTY.21 £1,575
Transmission line loaded standmount with a big box sound from a compact cabinet. Punches well above its weight.

Q ACOUSTICS 2020i £165
Great little bargain-priced stand-mounts with a friendly, fun yet surprisingly refined sound. Hard to better for a pair of starter loudspeakers.

WHARFEDALE DENTON £500
A beguiling mixture of retro looks with modern, high-technology drive units. The Denton has an easy-going, big-hearted sound with a touch of trad warmth that should appeal to many.

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS

CREEK OBH11 £150
Designed specifically for low to medium impedance (30 Ohm – 300 Ohm) headphones this little Creek has a marvellously well-judged sound.

EPHANY EHP-02 £99
PP3 battery-powered portable gives great sound quality at an almost giveaway price. Happy with the output from an iPod or CD player, the littleephane is a true bargain.

ICON AUDIO HPA-MKII £850
The HPA MkII valve-based headphone amplifier brings the spacious sound of valves to headphones. And it matches 'em all.

CD PLAYERS

AUDIOLAB 8200CDQ £395
Superb high-end CD player. Cracking audiophile entry point for any digital fan.

CHORD RE3 REFERENCE MKIII £18,900
A unique and massive engineering exercise that could well be the best CD player available. Chord's Para-Array DAC technology produces a musical experience like few others. A true reference player.

ESOTERIC K-03 £9,495
Dedicated player with fan zrobić of timing should be an automatic entry on any demo list at this price.
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<td>Chord DX1100</td>
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<td>in their top-of-the-range streamer.</td>
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<td><strong>Convert Technologies Plato</strong></td>
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<td>digital music. New control app makes</td>
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<td>Naim NoX</td>
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<td>Clean, resolve and very detailed sound</td>
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<td>with Naim’s traditional pace and timing.</td>
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<td>Naim ND5XE</td>
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<td>Great sound quality with traditional</td>
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<td>Naim’s feel. A wonderful DAC with full</td>
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<td>24/192 handling. Only the display could</td>
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Epic in scale, lavish in tone and exuberant in its musicality - this is a memorable SACD spinner. Quirky in operation and modest in finish, though.

Universal player and DAC that makes CD and Blu-ray (+DVD) sound deep, spacious and full bodied. Reference quality that’s affordable.

A charmingly musical performer at the price - this is a surprisingly sophisticated CD player for the money.

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Exceptionally able, but commensurately priced, audiophile tuner that cannot fail to charm.

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Chord’s proprietary DAC circuit shines in their top-of-the-range streamer. Near-through clarity with a sound rich in detail, dynamics and soundstage.

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Wonderful little budget over-ear portable phones with a clean, clear sound to boast the best of the rest at the price.

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Cambridge tales

Martin Pipe revisits the Audiolab 8000A – once the default choice, when it came to mid-range amplification.

Audiolab was formed in the early 1980s by engineers Philip Swift and Derek Scotland, who originally met at Imperial College. Whilst in London, they worked part-time for Audio T – the retailer had a tendency to employ students who were mad about hi-fi.

Physics graduate Swift looked after repairs for the store.

Working at Audio T gained the duo valuable experience with the hi-fi that audiophiles could buy – and its failings. Existing products were in their view expensive, user-unfriendly and – as Swift recalls – “very sensitive to the loudspeakers they were used with”. Like others of entrepreneurial zeal, they had a hunch that they could do better.

Swift stated that the goal of his new company was to “create well-engineered products that offered a high order of sound quality and were good value...they had to be attractive and reliable”. The Huntingdon-based firm’s first product was the slimline 8000A integrated amplifier featured here. “Put together over a number of years”, according to Swift, the 8000A was finally launched in October 1983 – and became a hit, notably among those looking to upgrade from their budget NADs, Marantz, Nytech and so on; “in terms of quality and price”, observes Swift, “we were always more BMW than Rolls Royce”.

Pitched at a sensible midrange price-point – it sold for £250 when launched – the well-designed 8000A boasted a great spec and plenty of features, coupled with fine subjective performance. Your money bought two tape loops (with separate record and listen selectors), defeatable tone controls, a phono stage with provision for moving-coil cartridges and two channels of Class AB solid-state amplification - each capable of delivering a genuine 60 Watts of power to whatever speakers took your fancy.

Following Japanese amplifiers of the time, the 8000A’s ‘pre’ and ‘power’ sections were separable for upgrade flexibility. And probably most of all, the 8000A proved to be exceptionally-reliable - at a time when home-grown fare was being seen as inferior in this regard to the gear flooding in from Japan.

The 8000A’s success meant that, in time, Audiolab “went from a bedroom” in Swift’s Cambridge house “to a small unit, and then a 17,500 square-foot facility in Huntingdon”. Flush with success, the brand then followed with other 8000-series components – the 8000C preamplifier, the 8000P stereo power amplifier and 8000M monoblocks.

A highly-regarded tuner was then launched - as were CD players, transports and DACs. Audiolab was acquired in 1998 by TAG McLaren, and the resultant was a range of technologically-advanced and visually-striking hi-fi and AV products that are still sought after today.

Unfortunately, the TAG McLaren Audio venture wasn’t a success and the parent company called time in 2003. Audiolab’s assets were sold to the Chinese International Audio Group (IAG), where it joined other

Heat-generating components, like the heatsinked Japanese power output transistors, are kept away from devices like electrolytic capacitors. Note too the large toroidal mains transformer, which allows the amplifier to achieve its distinctive low profile.
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Today, most affordable phono stages are built around op-amp chips; the 8000A used discrete transistors - in conjunction with passive components of a high standard.

8000A fares well in the rhythm and timing departments (albeit not quite up to Naim NAIT standards), creates an enveloping soundstage and is very clean in its presentation of your music - congestion is rare, although traces of dryness are perceptible on occasions. High-end treble – notably percussion - can sound a little recessed; in contrast, the 8000A’s unnaturally good treatment of vocals suggests a slight midrange prominence. I am also impressed with this amp’s ability when it comes to basslines - they’re solid, taut and well-defined.

More praise can be heaped on the phono stage, which is revealing yet musical. It’s more than a match for some modern designs; indeed, I’ve heard that some use their old 8000As as phono preamps with other gear.

The tone controls, should you choose to engage them, are far subtler in their effect than most. A clockwise twist of the relevant knob increases bass; however turning the treble control in that direction effects a cut.

The 8000A may be built to last, but some have complained that phono sockets are starting to fall apart due to plastic decay. Furthermore, electrolytic capacitors will probably need renewing - especially if the amp was left permanently switched on, a daft practice that was frequently-advised in the 1990s.

Because so many 8000As were sold, they are common buys. I was lucky to find mine for £10 at a car-boot sale. More typical prices? Expect to pay £50 for one sold ‘as is’; £400, on the other hand, will get you a fully-restored (and recapped) 8000A that will be good for another thirty years or so. Many believe that the 8000A is a work of art, and appreciate the transparency and open, articulate sound.

There are many parts that can be replaced or upgrade, such as the op-amp, transformers, and capacitors. The 8000A is a project for the modeller, and can be made to sound even better with bespoke tweaking and modifications. This is a phono stage that can be improved indefinitely, and is a true testament to the design and construction of audiophile components.

The 8000A is a classic, a benchmark, a phono stage that has stood the test of time and is still relevant today. It is a true piece of audio history, and is a must-have for any serious audiophile.

There are no direct replacements for the 8000A, as it is a unique and iconic design. However, there are many phono stages that offer similar features and capabilities. Some examples include the Rega P25, the Michell Gyrodrive, and the Naim NAIT.

The 8000A is a true labour of love, a testament to the art of audio engineering. It is a phono stage that is both practical and artistic, and is a true piece of audio history. It is a must-have for any serious audiophile, and is a true classic.
If you ever see one of those TV documentaries on the history of punk you’re bound to have a brief introduction of the range of pub rock bands that laid the foundation. People like Ducks Deluxe and Brinsley Schwarz reigned supreme. Then you had those bands who infused the genre with ambition, reaching out but possibly not quite entering the punk fold. Dr Feelgood were one such outfit, Eddie & The Hot Rods were another.

Released in 1976, the music packing this disc is loud and disrespectful, it offers high energy, rage and frustration and is a testament to youth and youth culture. It even connects strands of earlier youth movements with its inclusion of a few covers: Pete Townshend’s ‘The Kids Are Alright’ (a live cut), Joe Tex’s ‘Show Me’ and a frantic version of Sam Cooke’s ‘Shake’. The essence of the covers is to link the sixties ethic with contemporary punk.

The original LP was released before much of the classic punk output hit the streets. It provided a call to arms and a sense of what was on the horizon.

The album can be found on a new clamshell-type CD box set that covers the band’s Island years and also includes ‘Thriller’ (1977), ‘Life on the Line’ (1977) plus BBC sessions, and an ‘in Concert’ disc and a ‘Fan Club LP’. It’s a brilliant collection, packed with value.

For a ‘mere’ value pack, I was impressed by the structured 3D soundstage, the drum roll of the first track placed way back at the rear of the soundstage, before the guitars began front left and right. Mastering is good, relatively low noise providing a spacious, airy feel to the midrange with a well-behaved bass that never swamps or blooms.

For those who may not be aware, Anthony Phillips was one of the founders of the then prog group, Genesis. The Genesis fronted by Peter Gabriel. When Phil Collins’ backside was stuck to the drum stool and he contributed a few high pitched backing vocals, Phillips added cultured guitar and a sense of the subtle and introspective. He was there on the LPs ‘Trespass’ (although he would leave the band after suffering from stage fright) but his work is all over the following LP: ‘Nursery Cryme’.

Phillips’ subsequent solo career mirrors the early Genesis style, infused with classical tones, spanning a range of thoughtful albums as well as a host of work for TV and film. This double CD album pack (plus an accompanying DVD disc) sprawls across sixty one tracks. Initially issued in 2006, the release proved to be Phillips’ first solo guitar album since Private Parts & Pieces, Vol. 5: Twelve (1987). Quite a gap, then.

As such, the man plays a range of acoustic guitars, often integrating them into imaginative arrangements with background synths. The first track, the ‘Voyage Out’ is a case in point.

Other than these occasions much of the work here sees Phillips finger picking – and very nicely indeed. Fans of Leo Kottke, for example, will have smiles all over their faces. The Phillips’ style is gentle, flowing, technically impressive yet thoughtful and emotive. The brash and the bold are not often heard here.

Sound quality from this CD set is good with no indiscipline to be heard from any included frequencies. Everything is where it should be. Perhaps there is a slight glow in the upper mids during the acoustic guitar pieces but nothing more. Detail is abundant, whilst the broadly neutral presentation allows the music to speak for itself.
Like his cultural com-patriot, Syd Barrett, Alexander Spence - at least in those quarters unfamiliar with his brief creative output - is best known for his spectacular crash and burn at the hands of drugs – triggering mental illness.

In terms of his day job, Spence was the original drummer in the first lineup of Jefferson Airplane, even though he was really a guitarist. When he left that group his string playing skills were better applied, along with his singing and writing duties for the band, Moby Grape. He left MG in 1968 and headed off into an uncertain solo career. The now cult favourite result of that was the 1969 LP ‘Oar’. It is that album that this three disc set is based upon.

What you get here is the original album, bonus tracks found on a 1999 issue and two further hours of unreleased material presented in a nice hardback book.

Oar is a stripped back, sparse, to the point album. The content has emerged from Spence and has been slapped onto disc directly - without any filtering. This is an emotionally direct album which means that, when listening, you take its rough edges along with the smooth.

The extra material is valuable as context but don’t seek out the extras in an effort to find clarifications or reasons. They just provide more soup. It’s rich tasting fare, though.

The mastering on this disc is restrained when necessary, detail cutting through. The master never springs nasty surprises upon the ear – a testament of the sonic improvements enjoyed by the CD format in more recent times. This CD is also a reminder why we shouldn’t give up on the format just yet.

Presented as a slip-case CD box set, this package from R.E.M. squeezes in eight CDs and a single DVD. It features a host of rare and unreleased live and studio recordings culled from the BBC and band archives.

The sort of thing you can expect to hear is a John Peel Session (1998), Drivetime and Mark and Lord appearances (2003) and a Radio 1 Live Lounge performance (2008). Live broadcasts include a show from 1995’s Milton Keynes Monster Tour (their first after a six-year break) and an invitation-only 2004 show at London’s St James’s Church.

And the DVD? You’ll find a sixty-minute retrospective of the band’s performances at the BBC in the ‘Accelerating Backwards’ film – previously broadcast only in the UK and available commercially for the first time here. ‘Accelerating Backwards’ also includes interviews with Peter Buck, Mike Mills and Michael Stipe. The DVD additionally offers a complete 1998 ‘Later...’ With Jools Holland’ episode, TV appearances on Top of the Pops and more.

Despite the BBC name attracting a reputation for excellence, I have often been let down by the sonic qualities of other released sessions, heard in numerous boxed sets or as disc extras. The BBC sessions presented in the recent large Emerson Lake & Palmer box, for example, is a case in point. Many BBC Radio sessions are so bright they could illuminate the Royal Albert Hall. This set is a pleasant exception, though. They’re not perfect, the John Peel Sessions (1998) sound a little flat and lifeless with a reasonable sound balance while the Nicky Campbell Sessions (1991) do offer more complexity in sonic terms. There remains a slight midband edge but the final output is pretty good.

ALEXANDER SPENCE
AndOarAgain
Sundazed

R.E.M.
At The BBC
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"The Far East leads in electronics because of vast investment"

This month’s column is sort of about trains. No, I am not a train enthusiast; I don’t stand on windswept platforms to spot a rare one – if that happens anymore. Trains that prompted this column – linked to hi-fi as I will explain! – are Crossrail and HS2, the investment they require and whether that money might be better spent on UK industry in order to provide jobs in the industry of today – electronics. And where they needed – in the north of Britain that once was our industrial powerhouse.

We must catch up with the Far East in this field, who are now so far ahead it is worrying. Britain seems to be sinking back to a place where we are unable to create jobs in electronics for the future, which includes the design and manufacture of audio products, as well as the objects everyone recognises but come magically ‘from somewhere else’ – mobile ‘phones.

Martin Pipe lists all the illustrious hi-fi brand names now being built in China in his Old Worcie feature on Audiolab. Ironically, Philip Swift, who started Audiolab and now runs Spendor, is backed by an Indian company in the same way as Jaguar Land Rover. The pattern here is that basic commercial concept and product design can be both British and successful – but forget the rest. Manufacturing is conveniently done by others.

The idea that cheap labour somewhere else is something we can afford to overlook is simplistic and misleading: The Far East leads in electronics because of vast investment in skills and industrial infrastructure; I’ve been there and seen it. The products I review every month from China and Korea, Britain is now incapable of either understanding or making. Which brings me back to trains.

I am not a train fan but I do admit to watching YouTube offerings on Crossrail and being suitably impressed by the scale and audacity of the thing. Reminiscent of Brunel’s vision to connect London to New York with a regular train and boat service – back in 1845 no less – Crossrail has seemed wondrous. Not only was the civil engineering – fascinating in its scope, but all the confident claims for being on-budget and on-schedule satisfying to hear. So we can still get it right in some areas of engineering in the UK I thought.

Then, as I’m sure you are aware, it all went pear shaped. Those claims were incorrect and totally misleading. The project wasn’t close to meeting its targets and now needs an extra £1.5bn of investment. A few months ago we were told opening had been postponed one year, from late 2018 to late 2019, to allow for “testing” and now that has gone out of the window too. Now, no date is offered for the line’s opening; it could never open – absurd.

Whilst this farrago is taking place it seems that London has been given the go-ahead for Crossrail 2. What? The scale of investment in these projects is enormous and from where I sit the benefits of Crossrail 2 elude me.

And, whilst on the subject of trains, London will get a high speed link to Manchester in the form of HS2 at another £15bn. Perhaps this will benefit other areas of Britain, but I believe there are better ways of spending such vast sums.

London is a powerhouse; I know because I live and work in its centre. But what about the rest of the UK? Surely there’s enormous potential across the swathe of industrial Britain stretching from Liverpool through Manchester and all the other towns and cities that supported traditional manufacturing and ‘smoke stack’ industries? A BBC report quotes both the Mayor of Manchester and the Mayor of Liverpool calling these London-centric projects “outrageous”. I agree.

Apparently, 60% of the funding for Crossrail was provided by London, so as not to be a burden on the rest of the UK. Sounds good. But that statement on Crossrail’s website draws our attention away from the fact that the other 40% – a mere £6bn – came from taxpayers across Britain. If Crossrail 2 goes ahead make this another £10bn on top. It makes me uncomfortable: London should pay its own way and can afford to do so.

Taxpayers across Britain should not be expected to further fund London’s continued expansion. Investment is needed elsewhere – investment in jobs fit for both today and the future. And that means highly skilled jobs in electronics with associated software programming skills that are now not just integral part of electronics but an overwhelming part of it. Even today’s hi-fi needs to be programmed up in serious fashion; the control systems are challenging to understand. I believe we should be investing the huge sums being spent on prestige trains on industrial regeneration and – ultimately – jobs. But there’s little will.

The will and the skill now exist elsewhere – think Germany and the Far East. They have implemented successful strategies that promote modern skills. Britain needs to be looking closely at those strategies and their implementation to bring back highly skilled jobs in electronics. That would be a better way to provide for Britain than ever more complex and expensive trains for Londoners. And of course provide us with better hi-fi.!
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Technics SP-10R & SL-1000R. Many combinations available. Hi-Fi World said: This is a spinner of vinyl for the serious, where you just want to punch a button and get on with it. It offers a degree of unarguable perfection for professional studios and anyone working with vinyl. If you want such uneasing focus on the basics of playing LP it’s time to check the piggy bank.

Hi-Fi News said: Any great turntable gives you a certain frisson when you hear it. It’s that old shivers down the spine feeling, a sense of being let into a world to which you had previously not been privy. This is a remarkable turntable, and arguably the apex of vinyl playback. It’s difficult to see how the SP-10R motor unit can be improved upon. It is a definitive statement of engineering prowess, and marks the return of direct drive to the top tier of turntables.

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"If a solo artist gets things badly wrong they can crash and burn"

Paul Rigby

I've been examining the concept of the band and the 'solo artist' of late and I've been wondering about the idea of success. Success can mean many things to many people. To some it is fame, riches, fast cars and faster women/men. To others it's an artistic goal, or just a living and no more – to live their hobby, as it were. Once those respective goals have been reached or crossed, happiness ensues for the creative artist.

Let me look around at the history of music and at the solo artist first. If a solo artist gets things badly wrong, if he or she doesn't make it as far as wanted, they can crash and burn – perhaps getting stuck in a creative cul-de-sac that few people either understand or appreciate, or entering a 'middle of the road' area of quality and content. A place full of others. If any or all of that happens then, in broad terms - and there are exceptions, yes - it's that solo artist's fault.

They've either done or said something that has not been good enough. Made the wrong choices. Outside demands have forced them into the situation. Their ambitions have not been up to seeing this and finding a solution. And so on.

You can't say the same for most bands. I'd say many more band members, in percentage terms, have lost control of their future and their career than solo artists. Again, there are exceptions, it's true but, in broad terms, when a band doesn't make it (whatever that term might mean for them) then many band members are more than justified to point the finger elsewhere.

As I was writing these very words, Toronto metal band Witchrot (I'm not too familiar with their music, I must admit) posted a heartfelt message on Facebook. Bassist Peter Turik stated that, "Due to the unfortunate reality of our guitarist F*** my girlfriend of almost 7 years WITCHROT will be taking an extended hiatus". He posted this message with an image of his broken bass guitar. He then added, "Also our drummer died...".

None of this is Mr Turik's fault, of course. But it has surely put a cramp in his career ambitions. When you involve yourself with people, you are forced to trust and rely upon for the many critical elements that go to make up a career, the chances of it 'going Turik' are high!

I've just received a very nice box set from Universal. Based on the early career of Mott the Hoople. "Mental Train - The Island Years 1969-71" contains four commercial albums (three of them absolutely brilliant, the fourth still being pretty good) plus lots of rarities over six CDs. It's a top notch box set. After listening to it, you may very well ask yourself, why didn't this band achieve superstar status? My goodness, they gave it a go. They even collaborated with David Bowie on the (albeit later) hit 'All the Young Dudes'. So why isn't their status up there with Bowie?

Bowie was a man in control. Mott the Hoople were not.

So it was intriguing that it was Bowie who offered to talk to his own manager to lever them out of their record deal with Island and away from the influence of their manager ("...who we managed more than he managed" said Mott the Hoople lead singer Ian Hunter, in his book, "Diary of a Rock'n'Roll Star") and produce their next album. Perhaps even more crucially Bowie encouraged Hunter to take sole control over the direction of Mott the Hoople.

"We were looking at people like Roxy who had steady management – there was a plan" said Hunter. "There was no plan with us. It was chaos. And we didn't know what to do about it. It wasn't cohesive".

Bowie said "You've got to lead because it's not working. You're not getting any answers to questions". The thing is, any decision had to be 5-0 in Mott the Hoople. It couldn't be 3-2. And there was always one guy who was pissed off, so nothing ever really got done".

So friend Bowie moved onwards and upwards. Mott the Hoople stuttered.

But let's get back to the notion of success. I can see why people split from a band. I understand the reasoning. Part of it is because the band can - as you've learnt above - stand in the way. You have no choice but to remove the barrier, the band itself. Then success, in whatever terms, becomes a possibility.

I, for example, am successful. Not in monetary terms but that doesn't matter. But because, for the past 30 years or more, I've enjoyed what I do for work. Mott's Ian Hunter echoed the thought in a recent interview with The Guardian. "If you're lucky enough to have a passion – most people aren't – grab it. And that's what you do for the rest of your life. It might take a while and it might not be easy. But grab it and you'll be happy. P**k the money. That'll come or it won't. But you'll be doing what you want to do and that's what life is supposed to be". Fame, riches, fast cars and faster friends may not be the point; a happy life as an artist may be.
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As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, decent quarter-inch reel-to-reel tape machines could be picked up for very modest sums. A Music and Video Exchange (MVE) shop, not far from London’s Notting Hill Gate tube station, was jam-packed with large quantities of musical instruments and hi-fi equipment in various states of disrepair. It was a Mecca for students, with big imaginations and little disposable income – if they lived within practical travelling distance!

Among the goodies I found there were the Kenwood KD600 quartz-locked Direct-Drive turntable featured in Hi-Fi World in 2012. It was collected in an elderly Ford Escort van, the gearbox of which disintegrated during the trip home. My reel-to-reel acquisitions ranged from a Sony TC630 (designed to be the hub of a hi-fi system, with integral 25W amps) to a Tandberg TD20A. I came across a wide range of machines, including Akai 4000s, Sony TC377s and Revox A77s.

DAT was an expensive luxury at the time, certainly as regards home listening, while new compressed-digital formats like DCC and Minidisc were still in development.

Reel-to-reel hardware and software was bulky and costly: a plethora of different tape speeds and track formats caused confusion and compatibility issues. Lacing up tape wasn’t a particularly consumer-friendly activity, either; no wonder the majority of ‘regular’ listeners had migrated to analogue cassettes by this time.

For consumers, analogue cassettes and decks sufficed. They may have lacked the fidelity of quarter-inch tape running at four times the speed, but cassettes were cheap – and could be played ‘on the move’.

Cassette decks were at MVE too. I remember once seeing in the shop window a Marantz ‘Compudeck’, a gloriously 3-head affair with additional ‘double-speed’ recording mode, finished in champagne-gold. In the chaotic bowels of the store, meanwhile, lurked an Akai 3-head front-loader that looked as if someone had taken a pick-axe to its front panel.

How did the latter end up there? MVE had a policy of not refusing ‘anything legal’ from sellers who carried their once-cherished items to Notting Hill. That seemed incredible today, given how valuable space in London is. A fast turnover was essential, and low prices helped ensure this. I paid a mere £45 for the Kenwood KD600 turntable and the Sony TC630 was mine for a mere tenner, while on another occasion I got the Tandberg TD20A – a big logic-controlled deck with 10.5in spool capacity, working but tatty – for £25. It certainly helped back then that analogue was unfashionable.

CDs had become the format of choice, thanks to the machinations of the music industry making a killing out of reissuing albums we loved (and already owned!) in the new format, and vinyl suffered accordingly. Dual and Thorens turntables were cheap second-hand buys from Loot, Exchange and Mart and weekend car boot sales, although Technics SL-1200s held their value thanks to the burgeoning DJ culture. Garrard 301s and 401s, then cheap and unloved, were being shipped en masse to canny Japanese audophiles. Today, such hardware fetches high prices; oh, how things change!

It follows that MVE paid sellers little for their space-consuming gear. I can remember staff – often students and part-time musos – telling me that they were paid poorly too!

The store’s long gone, as is its pioneering computer equivalent on the other side of the street. During a recent cycle ride through that perma-scaffolded part of the world, I could find no sign that either shop existed; London seems to be in a permanent state of change nowadays. The clothing, comics and record shop interests of MVE (registered in Nevada, for some reason) are thankfully still around. When I used to visit, the record shop was a good source of radio station cast-offs – LPs, angles and reel-to-reel tape that could be reused.

Now it’s time to get the recordings I made on those second-hand tapes into the digital domain. The majority are of live material, typically from Radios 1 and 3. BBC programmes like ‘In Concert’ were worth capturing. Featuring an hour’s worth of live performance from well-known acts (or two half-hours from lesser-known performers) this was a Saturday-afternoon Radio 1 staple. Some of them have been rebroadcast late on Friday nights as part of 6 Music’s ‘Classic Concert’ series – but most haven’t. Performances were frequently excellent, and in some cases even preferable to official album versions. BBC engineers did a damn fine job recording these gigs. My transfers from broadcast to tape have raised a number of issues, ranging from the tape itself (some suffering from sticky-sanded syndrome) to issues like track configuration, recording level, azimuths and what have you.

Reel-to-reel tape is a subject I hope to explore more in future columns.
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"Swing arm CD players are not worth anything; the laser and its mechanism cost well over £120"

One of my customers arrived with his entire system that had been stored away for some time. He had Technics, Philips and Acoustic Research products from the early 1980s that had suffered some decay not only from use but also from storage. The biggest loser were the Acoustic Research 'speakers. The foam surrounds on these 'speakers always end up in the cabinet or behind the grill – after almost 40 years you have to expect that.

New drive units, LS04695 types, seemed suitable. The original drivers are close to 6 Ohm but also not quite 4 Ohm either so it's a judgement call as to which to fit. I chose the 4 Ohm version which sounded somewhat better in the box, having earlier tried the 8 Ohm version LS04690 and found the result less than suitable. The 8 Ohm unit would have required adjustment to tweeter level to match, as it was then rather a bright sounding speaker and in need of the system's tone controls.

The complete system came with the SH-8018 graphic equaliser which I am always rather loath to use. They have to be put in one of the tape loops of an amplifier – which is not ideal. More advanced amplifiers than Technics SU-V3 here have pre-power split points that make inclusion of a graphic equaliser more viable.

With the new drive units in place there was no lack of clarity or bass for that matter from the loudspeakers. The graphic equaliser worked but didn’t really help a whole lot as you would expect.

The turntable, a Technics SL-D202 is a Direct Drive type and well worth investigating if you want to try Direct Drive. This particular unit was bound up by hardened grease. The hard wired phono leads were nasty and broken too so they came out and were replaced with some OFC types with nice new plugs.

Why is it that none of the manufacturers at that time owned an alignment protractor? All of these turntables, no matter who makes them, put the cartridge in pushed to the back or the front of the headshell – when neither is correct!

With errors corrected, playing Gallagher and Lyle's Breakaway proved the Technics was working nicely. I have seen these units priced at between £75 and £200 so they are probably not going to be around long. A bargain, one worth more.

The cassette deck, an RS-M225, is not exactly one of Technics best but it worked fine once the switches had been cleaned. All switches fail, especially when not used. A liberal dose of switch cleaner and repeated operation got them working, sound then coming out of the machine.

The main mode switch of an RS-M225 is always a prime candidate for producing problems, as it is a complex device carrying low level signals. It is also only used when making a recording so it never gets its contacts wiped until then. It is ripe for corrosion and decay – and this is the same for any cassette deck no matter who makes it. It is quite often the only cause of cassette deck failure on the electronic side.

The Technics is not a powerful recorder. With a standard 0dB maximum recording level for music the sound was less than dynamic. Compared to that made on my JVC or Akai machines it seemed soft and quiet. In fact running an Akai recording on this machine overloaded the head preamps, resulting in distortion which just isn’t there using the Akai for playback. But again there isn’t really anything wrong with the Technics with its own recordings, just as it was designed. No amount of internal adjustment helped here – so leave it alone Dave!

The amplifier, an SU-V3, is something of a Technics stalwart. The basic design is fine, the tape switching, with dubbing for two machines, is probably unique for its age. Noisy pots aside (volume control etc) this thing just worked. No signs of age at all. Impressive! Probably with the turntable these two items would suit a new audiophile well.

The only non-Technics piece of electronics in this system was a Philips CD303 which is an early swing arm CDM4 mechanism that, like most of these things, was dead. Much as I would like to say they are repairable, swing arm CD players are not worth anything as the laser and its mechanism cost well over £120. There are a few refurbished ones which mostly end up as part of CD Juke boxes as renovation projects but availability and life is an unknown – and forget the salvaged e-Bay ones. Sadly the Philips was scrap.

Want to know if your CD is a swing arm type? Look at the tray. If the laser slot in the tray is curved you have a CD player with a laser that's no longer available as a spare. Marantz CDS2 and 60 are typical examples. Of course the fact that they have lasted 25 years or more shows just how good they were to start with. Current linear-running lasers do not need a curved slot for clearance and since they cost less than £10 you can really justify the parts cost of a swing-arm. A new CD player is less expensive nowadays! @

Dave Tutt
We do not sell these products. It is for your information only.

WORLD CLASSICS

Here is our list of the great and good from audio's glorious past, products that have earned their place in hi-fi history. You'll also see some oddities which aren't classic as such, but are great used buys. The year of introduction is given, alongside the original UK launch price.

TURN TABLES

EAT FORTE 2009 £12,500

Lavishly finished box, two motor turntable with gorgeous kidney 407 tonearm bundled. Exceptionally stable and unfussy performer with a relaxed but highly enjoyable gait.

FUNK FIRM VECTOR II 2009 £860

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

REGA P2 2008 £300

Excellent value for money engineering; easy set up and fine sound.

MCINTOSH MT10 2008 £8,995

Big, expensive, controversially styled and grows more than some might consider necessary, but an astonishingly good performer.

REGA P3-24 2008 £405

Seminar affordable audiophile deck with fine bundled tonearm: Tweakable, and really sings with optional £1500 outboard power supply.

ACOUSTIC SOLID ONE 2007 £4,050

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

AVIO VOLVERE SEQUEL 2007 £4,600

Stylish high end vinyl spinner with industrial strength build quality and a sound to match. Sound is edge of the seat stuff.

MICHELL GYRODEC SE 2005 £1,115

Design icon with superlative build. Sound is beautifully smooth, effortless and exceptionally expansive.

MARANTZ TT-1551 2005 £1,299

Cracking all-in-one deck/arm/cartridge combination, this must surely be the best sound/pug and play package at this price point.

MICHELL TECNODEC 2003 £579

Superb introduction to Michell turntables - on a budget. Top quality build and elegant design mean it's still the class of the mid-price field.

MICHELL ORBIE 1995 £2,500

The top Michell disc spinner remains a superbly capable all rounder with powerful, spacious sound that's delicate and beguiling.

SME MODEL 10A 1995 £4,700

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

LINN AXIS 1987 £253

Cut-price version of the Sondek with UK arm. Elegant and discreetly performing package. Later version with Akko tonearm better.

ROKSAK XERIES 1984 £550

Super tight and clean sound, with excellent transients. Less musical than the Sondek, but more neutral. Sagging plinth with top-plates make them a dubious used buy.

DUAL CS505 1982 £75

Simple high quality engineering and a respectable low mass tonearm made for a brilliant budget buy. Polished, smooth and slightly bland sound.

MICHELL GYRODEC 1981 £999

Thanks to its stunning visuals, this bold design wasn't accorded the respect it deserved. Clean, solid and architectural sound.

TOWNSHEND ROCK 1979 £250

Novel machine has extremely clean and excellent sound. Substantially modified through the years, and capable of super results even today.

MARANTZ TT1003 1978 £850

Stunningly beautiful high end belt drive with smooth and clean sound. Rare in Europe, but big in Japan.

REGA PLANAR 3 1978 £70

Brilliantly simple but clean and musical performer, complete with Aztec derived S shaped tonearm. 1983 saw the arrival of the REGA, which added dete at the expense of warmth. Superb budget buy.

SONY PS-880 1978 £800

First outing for Sony's immensely impressive classic electronic tonearm. Built like a tank with a clean and tidy sound, albeit lacking involvement. Scarily complicated and with no spare support - buy with caution.

TRIO 1D-70 1978 £650

The best 'all-in-one' turntable package ever made. Clean, powerful and three dimensional sound, ultimately limited by the tonearm.

ADC ACCUTRAC 4000 1976 £300

Bowers 1970s direct drive that uses an infra red beam to allow track selection and programming. More of a visual and operational delight than a sonic stunner.

PIONEER PL-590 1976 £600

Sturdy and competent motor unit that performs well with a wide range of tonearms. Check very thoroughly before buying due to electronic complexity and use of some now obsolete ICs.

PIONEER PL120D 1973 £36

When was the leading source, this brought new standards of noise performance and stability to the class, plus a low friction S-shaped tonearm. Later PL1120 was off the price compared to rivals.

TECHNICS SP10 1973 £400

Seminal Japanese engineering. Sonics depend on platters, but a well mounted SP10/R will give any modern a hard time, especially in respect of bass power and midband accuracy.

LINN 3301/K LP12 1973 £160

For many, the best superdeck: constant mods meant that early ones sound warmer and more natural than modern versions. Recent SE mods have brought it into the 21st century, albeit at a price.

ARISTON R011S 1972 £94

Modern evolution of Thorens' original belt drive paradigm. Scotland's original super-deck was warm and musical, albeit sold. Still capable of fine results today.

GOLDRING Lenco GL15 1970 £15.65

Simple, well engineered motor unit with soft, sweet sound and reasonable tonearm. Good sound and servicing support even today.

GARRARD 301/401 1953 £19

Tremendously strong and articulate with only a veiled edge to tell it down.

THORENS TD124 1959 £114

The template for virtually every 1970s 'superdeck', this iconic design was the only real competition for Garrard's 301. It was sweeter and more lyrical, yet lighter and less impactful in the bass.
**TONEARMS**

**REGA RB251**  2009  £136

Capable way cast its price point, the new 3-point mount version of the classic RB250 serves up a full and detailed sound. A little lean for some tastes, but responds well to rewiring and counter-weight modification.

**HELIOS OMEGA**  2008  £1,595

Sleek and slim line of arm with fabulous build quality that turns in a dynamic and weighty performance.

**AUDIO ORIGAMI P7**  2007  £1,300

The classic Syringa P2 updated to spectacular effect. Hand made to order, with any mass, length and colour you care for. Fit, finish and sound truly impressive.

**GRANAM PHANTOM**  2006  £3,160

Sophisticated arm with magnificent bass texture and烫outaging. Build quality up to SME standards, which is really saying something!

**TRI-PHALAR PRECISION**  2006  £3,600

Immaculate build, exquisite design and one of the most naturally musical and ACOUSTIC sounds around.

**MICHELL TECHNOARM A**  2003  £442

Clever reworking of the Rega theme, using blasting, crillling and rewiring!

**SME 309**  1989  £767

Mid-priced SME comes complete with cost-cut aluminum arm and detachable headshell. Tight, neutral sound with good tonality, but lacks the SME pace and precision.

**NAIM ARG**  1987  £1,425

Chromatic unpivot is poor at frequency extremes but sublime in the mid-band, truly endearing and insightful.

**SME SERIES V**  1987  £2,390

Vice like bass with incredible weight, ultra clear midband and treble astound, although some don’t like its matter of factness.

**NAIM ARD**  1986  £875

Truly exceptional and charismatic performer. Wonderfully engaging midband makes up for softness frequency extremes.

**TECHNICS EPA-501**  1979  £N/A

Popular partner for labo seventies Technics motor units. Nice build and Titanium Nitride tube can’t compensate for muddying sound.

**LINN ITTOK LVII**  1978  £253

Japanese design to Linn specs made for a musical, rhythmic sound with real dynamics. The final LVII version worth seeking out.

**AUDIO TECHNICA AT 1120**  1978  £75

Fine finish can’t compensate for this ultra low mass arm’s limited sonics - a starter arm if you’ve already got a few cuts to spend.

**HADDON GSH28**  1976  £46

Evergreen unpivot with lovely sweet, fluid sound. Excellent service backup.

**ACOS LUSTRE GST-1**  1975  £46

The archetypal S-shaped seventies arm; good, propulsive and engaging sound in its day, but dragged and undynamic now.

**SME 3009**  1959  £18

Once state of the art, but long since bettered. Musically correct, but weak at frequency extremes and veiled in the midband. Legendary serviceability and stunning build but has made it a cut, used prices unjustifiably high.

**PHANTOM STAGES**

**CREEK OBH-8 SE**  1996  £180

Punchy, rhythmic character with oodles of detail makes this a great budget audioophile classic partner with a Goring G1042 for an unbeatable budget combination.

**MICHELL ISO**  1988  £N/A

This Tom Evans designed black box started the trend for high performance offboard phono stages. Charismatic, musical and punchy - if lacking in finesse.

**LINN LINNK**  1984  £149

Nam designed MC phono stage built to partner the original Naim NAIT - yes, really! Fine sound, although off the pace these days.

**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS**

**NAIM NAIT XS**  2009  £1,250

With much of the sound of the Supernait at half the price, this is powerful, articulate and smooth beyond class expectations.

**MUSICAL FIDELITY PRIMO**  2007  £9,900

Seriously expensive, but one listen explains why. Wonderfully exuberant sound that can only come from a top quality tube design.

**SUGDEN A21A S2**  2008  £1,469

Crystalline clarity, dizzying speed and forensic detailing. Power limited so needs sensitive speakers.

**CREEK OBH-22**  2008  £350

Brilliant value broadband passive, with remote control, mute and input switching; plus an easy, neutral sound.

**CAMBRIDGE 840A V2**  2007  £750

Version 2 addresses version 1's weaknesses to turn in a mighty accomplished performance, offering power, finesse and detail.

**SUGDEN IA4**  2007  £3,650

Goodly amount of Class A power, icy clarity and a breathtaking fast, musical sound make this one of the very best super-integrations.

**NURFORD P-9**  2007  £2,200

Impressive two box preamplifier with superb resolution and an engaging sound.

**MELODY PURE BLACK 101D**  2007  £3,295

The clarity and openness of valves plus firm grip and fine detail makes this a preamplifier for all time.

**AUDIOLAB 8000S**  2006  £400

In another life, this sold for three times the price, making it a stand-out bargain now. Very clean, powerful and tidy sound.

**MINTCLOS MA6600**  1995  £375

Effortlessly sweet, strong and powerful with semi-stylish to match.

**DEUTZ**  1987  £1,900

Fast, dry and with excellent transients, this first EPA-integrated is the real deal for eighties obsessives. Reluctantly punchy 90W per channel from a tiny half-size box. Radical, cool and more than a little strange.

**EXPOSURE V/VIII**  1983  £673

Seminal pre-power, offering most of what Naim amps did with just a little bit extra smoothness. Lean, punchy and musical.

**AUDIOLAB 8000A**  1985  £495

Smooth integrated with clean NAIM phono stage and huge feature count. Extremely reliable, too. Post '93 versions a top used buy.

**VTI MINIMAL/50W MONOBLOCK**  1985  £1,300

Rugged, professional build and finish allied to a lively and punchy sound (albeit with limited power) make them an excellent used buy.

**MUSICAL FIDELITY A1**  1985  £350

Beguiling Class A integrated with exquisite styling. Questionable reliability.

**MISSION CYRUS 2**  1984  £299

Classic 1980s minimimism combines arresting styling with clean, open, lively sound. Further upgradeable with PSX power supply.

**NAIM NAIT**  1984  £350

Superb rhythms and dynamics make it truly musical, but tonally monochromatic. Fine phono stage, very low power.

**CREEK CAS4040**  1984  £130

More musical than any budget amp before it; CAS4140 loses tone controls, gains grip.

**MYST TMA3**  1983  £300

Maddap eighties minimalism, but a strong and tight performer all the same.
ROTEL RA-820BX 
1983 £139
Lively and clean budget integrated that arguably started the move to minimalism.

NAD 3020 
1979 £69
Brilliantly smooth, sweet and punchy at the price and even has a better phono stage than you'd expect. The archetypal budget super-amp.

ROGERS A75 
1978 £22
Lots of sensible facilities, a goody power output and nice sound in one box. The later APSi and A1000 versions offered improved sonics and were seriously sweet.

MARantz MODEL II 
1997 £800
Authentic reproduction mannequins still more than cut the sonic mustard. Highly expensive and highly sought after.

MICHELL ELECTRO 
1997 £1089
Chop, clean and beautifully cooled with gorgeous styling. Partnered with the £1650 Orca this sounds delicious!

MUSICAL FIDELITY AX200 
1996 £1000
200W of sweet smooth transistor amp in a grooved tube. Under-rated oddity.

PIONEER M-73 
1988 £1,200
Monster stomper from this seminal Japanese power amplifier, complete with switchable Class A and Class B operation. Clean, cool and issued sounding, it's still a bad behind the price on high speed dance music. Reviewed seat side cheeks and black brushed aluminium composites the experience.

Krell KMA100 II 
1987 £5,750
Monoblock version of the giant KSA-100 is one of the seminal 80's transistor/pentode amplifier. Massive, wally lipped to clean and cool. Class A sound makes this one of the best amplifiers of its type.

RADFORD STA25 RENAISSANCE 
1986 £977
This reworking of Radford's original late sixties design was possessed of a wonderfully rich, rich school valve sound with enough power (25W) and lots of subtlety.

QUAD 405 
1978 £115
The first of the current dumpers is a credible design with smooth, effortless power and a decently musical sound. 606 and 707 continue the theme with greater detail and accuracy.

LR ELECTRONICS TPA-500 AMPLIFIERS
1973 £110
Simple design with easily available components, solid build quality and fine sound made for a surprisingly overlooked bargain.

LEAK STEREO 20 
1958 £31
Excellent workaday classic valve amplifier with decent power and drive. Slightly modern sounding if rebutted sympathetically. Impressively musical and fluid.

LEAK STEREO 60 
1958 £/N/A
Leak's biggest valve power amp offers 35 Watts per channel and more lavishly was the smaller Stereo 20. Despite claims over relatively rare value means high price.

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

LEAK POINT ONE, TL10, TL12 PLUS 
1949 £28
Early classics that are getting elusive. Overhauling is doable before use. Ragged original parts if possible. Surprisingly crisp and musical. Deeply impressive in fine tette.

PRE AMPLIFIERS

Audiola 8000C 
1991 £499
Totally grey but fine phono input and great facilities make it an excellent general purpose tool.

CROFT MICRO 
1986 £150
Budget valve pre-amplifier with excellently transparent performance.

CONRAD-JOHNSON MOTIV MC-8
1986 £2,500
Minimalist FET-based preamplifier is brilliantly neutral and smooth with a 137,igt plate stage at the modest of Sugden. Some of the finest in a long time.

AUDIOMATIC SP-8 
1987 £1,400
Beautifully designed and built high end tube pre-amplifier with deliciously musical and smooth sound. Not the last word in traditionalism.

LINN LK-1 
1986 £499
A brave attempt to bring remote controlled user-friendliness to hi-fi and audiohi-fi. Didn't quite work, but not bad for under £100.

NAIM NAC 325 
1978 £N/A
Classic high end pre. Silently fast and massive sound that is a joy with vinyl but a tad forward for digital.

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

LEAK 33 
1986 £43
Better than the 22, but Quad's first tranny pre isn't outstanding. Responds well to tweaking/ rebuilding though.

LEAK POINT ONE STEREO 
1958 £N/A
Good for their time, but way out of pace these days. Use of CBSseadite valve for high gain hạn ultra performance. Not the highest-fii

QUAD 22 
1958 £25
The partner to the much vaunted Quad 20 monoblocks - cloudy and vague sound means it's for anachronisms only.

POWER AMPLIFIERS

Electrocompaniet Nemo 
2009 £9,450 (each) 
 Norwegian power station as cool as a glacier formally, yet impresses with sheer physicality and fleetness of foot. 600W per channel.

NUFORCE REFERENCE GSE V2 
2368 £1,750
Brilliant value for money monoblocks with massive power and super-clean, three dimensions sound.

QUAD II-80 
2005 £6,000 PER PAIR
Quad's best ever power amplifier. Dramatic performer with silky but dark tonality, brightening dynamics, serious power and compellingly musical sound.

QUAD 999 
2001 £900
Current dumper has a smooth and expansive character with enough wallop to drive most loads. Not the most musical, but superb value at the same.

NAIM MAP 500 
2000 £17,950
Flagship amplifier will drive just about any speaker with ease. Factor in the company's trademark pace, rhythm and timing and it all adds up to one effortlessly musical package.
LOUDSPEAKERS

WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 10.3 2010 £290
Great small standmounters for audiophiles on a budget; dry, punchy sound with impressive soundstaging at the price.

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

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

SPENDOR A5 2009 £1,695
Multi-talented floorstanders with generous scale and punch and Spendor’s classic mid-range detail. Deliver a sound that thoroughly engages whatever you care to play.

MONITOR AUDIO PL110 2008 £2,300
The flagship ‘Platinum’ series standmounter has a lovely warm and delicate sound with superb treble.

MARTIN LOGAN SOURCE 2008 £1,600
Brilliant entry-level electrostatics, giving a taste of loudspeaker excellence for the price of most moving coil boxes. Tremendous clarity, eveness and delicacy, although not the world’s most powerful sound.

PMC OB11 2008 £2,950
Cleverly updated floorstanders give scale and solidity in spades and well finished package.

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

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

MOWGIAN AUDIO MARION 2007 £3,995
Massively capable loudspeakers that offer dynamics, scale and clarity in an elegantly simple package. Wide range of finishes, too.

B&W 886 2007 £299
Baby standmounters offer a soul-stirring and mature performance that belies both their dimensions and price tag.

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

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

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

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

REVERCYN CYGNUS 2006 £3,999
Revolver pull out all the stops and show what they can do with this magnificent flagship loudspeaker. A superb monitor that is like a mis $801D in many ways.

USHER BE-718 2007 £1,600
Beryllium tweeters work superbly aided by a fast and punchy bass driver. The result is sublime: smooth and enameled.

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

ACOUSTIC ENERGY AE1 CLASSIC 2006 £945
Brilliantly successful remake of an iconic design; not flawless, but surely one of the most musical loudspeakers ever made.

MISSAN 770 1993 £375
Back in the day, it was an innovative product and one of the first of the piano-type designs warm, smooth, clean and powerful sound.

ACOUSTIC RESEARCH AR18S 1978 £125
York designed, British built loudspeaker became a budget staple for many rock fans, thanks to the great sound of the paper drivers, although the latter was most definitely not the forte...

YAMAHA NS1000 1980 £532
High tech beryllium midrange and tweeter domes and bluish 12” woofers in massive sealed mirror image cabs equals stunning transients, speed and woofers aimed at audio’s transparency and ultra low distortion. Parker carefully!

QUAD ESL63 2009 £1,200
An update of the ESL57, with stiffer cabinets. Until the 989, the best of the Quad electrostatics.

KEF T105 2017 £120
Cylindrical speaker was ignored for decades but now back in fashion! Based on classic KEF T27/ T110 combo as seen in the BBC LS3/5a. Doesn’t play tout needs a powerful transistor amplifier but has clarity and imaging.

JR149 2017 £120
Three way electro-magnetic crossover gives a truly wideband sound and massive (500W) power handling. A very neutral, spacious and polite sounding design, but rhythmically well off the pace.

KEF R105 2017 £785
Warm and powerful 1970s behemoth with transmission loading and a mixture of KEF and Celestion drive units. Impressively physical wideband sound but rhythms not a forte.

IMF T200 1976 £550

www.hi-fiworld.co.uk  FEBRUARY 2019 HI-FI WORLD 77
SPENDOR BC1 1976 £240
Celestion HF1300 tweeter meets bespoke Spendor Bestrone mid-bass unit. The result is a beautifully warm yet focussed sound. A little bass bloom necessitates careful low-end mounting.

SHANLING MC-30 2007 £650
Quite possibly the cutest all-in-one around with fine performance from the CD player, tuner and MP3 player input. Very low power though.

QUAD FM4 1983 £240
Supreme ergonomics allied to a pleasingly lyrical sound with plenty of sweetness and detail made this one of the best tuners around below its launch price.

HI ELECTRONICS TPA-500 AMPLIFIERS
1973 £110
Single design with easily available components, solid build quality and fine sound make for a surprisingly overclocked bargain. Not exactly stylish, however.

BBC LS3/5A 1972 £88
Extremely low colouration design is amazing in some respects – articulation, stage depth, clarity – and useless in others (both frequency extremes). Came in a wide variety of guise from various manufacturers building it under licence.

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

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

SYSTEMS
MERIDIAN SNOODOS 2.1 2010 £6,990
Crisp, stylish, bright, colourful touchscreen, plus excellent search facilities. This is one hand desk music system with a difference. Best partnered to Meridian active loudspeakers.

NAIM UNITQUTE 2010 £955
Great little half width one-box system with truly impressive sound allied to a wealth of source options.

ARGAM SOLO NEO 2006 £1,100
Excellent all-in-one system, with a warm, smooth and balanced sound to match the features and style.

ARCAM FMJ T12 2009 £600
Excellent hybrid FM/DAB+ tuner with a smooth, engaging sound, factor in its fine build and it's a very fair value package.

AURA NOTE PREMIER 2007 £1,500
Lovely shiny CD/tuner/amplifier with fine sound quality and dynamic abilities.

YAMAHA CT7000 1977 £444
Combines sleek ergonomics, high sensitivity and an excellent, detailed sound.

ROGERS T75 1977 £125
Superb mid-size 3-way audiophile design, complete with understated back panels. Smooth and sweet with fine dimensionality.

SEQUERRA MODEL I 1973 £1,300
Possibly the ultimate FM tuner. Massive in terms of technology, size and features dedicated to extracting every ounce of performance from radio, including impressive multi-purpose oscilloscope display.

LEAK TROUGHLINE 1956 £25
Series 1a interesting ornament but limited to 88-100MHz only. II and III are arguably the best sounding tuners ever. Additional features may be added later and they have a multiplex socket. Definitely used with fine dimensionality.

SONY ST-950 1979 £79
Tremendously smooth and natural sound allied to low prices and good availability make this budget analogue stereo.

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

YAMAHA CT7000 1977 £444
Combines sleek ergonomics, high sensitivity and an excellent, detailed sound.

SANDWICH UNITIQUTE 1979 £350
Superb mid-size 3-way audiophile design, complete with understated back panels. Smooth and sweet with fine dimensionality.

SA/JSU TU-9900 1976 £300
A flagship Japanese tuner. It boasts superb RF performance and an extremely smooth and balanced sound.

SEQUERRA MODEL I 1973 £1,300
Possibly the ultimate FM tuner. Massive in terms of technology, size and features dedicated to extracting every ounce of performance from radio, including impressive multi-purpose oscilloscope display.

LEAK TROUGHLINE 1956 £25
Series 1a interesting ornament but limited to 88-100MHz only. II and III are arguably the best sounding tuners ever. Additional features may be added later and they have a multiplex socket. Definitely used with fine dimensionality.
HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS
GRAHAM SLEE NOVO 2009 £255
Dynamic headphone amplifier with a great sense of timing. Crisp, clear treble and warm midrange gives an involving sound.

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-CAN V6 2008 £350
Open and exactly detailed sound plus serious bass wallops. A great partner for most mid-to-hi-fi headphones.

CD PLAYER/RECORDERS
MUSICAL FIDELITY TRIVISTA 2002 £4600
When playing SACDs, the sweetest, most lucid and lyrical digital disc spinner we’ve ever heard. CD’s school stereo, pure DDS design; CD sound is up in the £1000 class; look forward.

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

SONY MDS-JE555ES 2000 £900
The best sounding MD deck ever; thanks to a wave- and pulse-echo ATRAC DSP Type R coding.

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

MARANTZ DR-17 1999 £1,100
Probably the best sounding CD recorder made; built like a brick with a true audiophile sound and HCD compatibility.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO CD4SE 1998 £200
A touch soft in the treble and tonally right, but outstanding in every other respect.

SONY TCD-8 DATMAN 1995 £599
Super clean sound makes this an amazing portable, but fragile.

LINN KARL II 1995 £1755
The first Karl was a gem. Superb transport/processor/cables. Very dark and slightly over-romantic.

NAIAM CDS 1990 £N/A
Classic Philips 16x4 chipset with serious attention to power supplies elevates grade-including sound.

TECHNICS SL-P1200 1987 £800
CD version of the Technics SL-1200 turntable. Massively built to withstand the rigours of pro use and laden with facilities - a great eighties icon.

SONY CDP-R1/DAC-R1 1987 £3,000
Sony’s first true box was right first-time. Toned down but probably the most detailed and architectural sounding machine of the eighties.

MARANTZ CD73 1983 £700
A not too boxy brushed aluminium and LEDs, this distinctive machine squeezed every last ounce from its 14x4 DAC, superb music.

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

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO CD1 1986 £1500
Inspired Stan Charis re-design of Philips CD104, complete with switchable digital filter. Lean but tight and musical performer.

MERIDIAN MCD 1994 £800
The first British ‘audiophile’ machine was a sweeter, more detailed Philips CD104. 14x4 never sounded so good, until the MCD Pro arrived a year later.

SONY CDP-701ES 1984 £890
Sony’s first bespoke audiophile machine used a 16x2 DAC to provide a clinically incisive sound; superb build quality allied to the pure unadulterated luxury of a paperback-sized remote control.

YAMAHA CD-X1 1983 £340
Nicely built 16x2 machine with very sharp and clean disc sound, sometimes too much so. Excellent ergonomics, unlike almost every other rival of the time.

SONY CDP-101 1982 £800
The first Japanese CD spinner was powerful and involving. Brilliant transport more than compensated for 16x2 DAC, and you even got remote control!

ANALOGUE RECORDERS
AWA XD-909 1969 £600
Awa’s Nakamichi d-cinch, but it wasn’t half bad nonetheless. Massive spec even included a 16x4 DAC.

NAKAMICHI DR-7E 1987 £800
The very best sounding Nakamichi ever, but lacks the visual drama of a Dragon.

SONY WM-8IC 1985 £299
Single Capital transport on a par with a Swiss watch, single rec/play head better than most Naks. Result: sublime.

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

YAMAHA TC-800GL 1977 £179
Early classic with six-slope styling. Modestly sonics by modern standards, but cool nonetheless.

SONY TC-377 1972 £N/A
A competitor to the Akai 4000D open reel machine, the Sony offered better sound quality and is still no souchy by modern standards.

REVOX A77 1968 £145
The first domestic open reel that the pros used at home. Superbly made, but sonically off the pace these days.

COMPACT DISC TRANSPORTS
ESOTERIC P0 1997 £8,000
The best CD drive bar none. Brillantly incisive, ridiculously over engineered.

TEAC VRDS-71 1994 £800
Warm and BC sound made this a mid price hit. Well built, with a sick mech.

KENWOOD 9010 1986 £600
The first discrete Jap transport was beautifully done and responds well to re-clocking.

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

UPA LITTLE BIT 3 1996 £299
Rich, clean, rhythmical and punchy sound transforms budget CD players.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DAC MAGIC 1995 £99
Good value upgrade for budget CD players with extensive facilities and detailed sound.

PINK TRINGLE DACAPPO 1993 £N/A
Exquisite, the warmest and most lyrical 16bit digital audio we have ever heard.

QED DIGIT 1991 £90
Budget bitstream performer with tweaks aplenty. Rosinon PSU upgrade makes it smooth, but now past it.

CABLES
MISSING LINK CRYO REFERENCE 2008 £495/0.5M
High end interconnects, with deliciously smooth, open and subtle sound without a hint of edge.

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

VON ULTIMATE THE FIRST 2004 £250
Carbon interconnects that help you forget the electronics and concentrate on the music. Miraculous transparency. Tight and funkeful bass mixed with air and space.

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

TCI CONSTRUCTOR 13A-6 BLOCK 2003 £120
Top guns ‘affordable’ mains outfit block, with fine build and good sonics. Well worth the extra over standard high street specials, which sound coarse and two-dimensional by comparison.
vinyl section

FEBRUARY 2019

MCINTOSH MT2 TURNTABLE 83
An attractive belt drive turntable from McIntosh, reviewed by Noel Keywood.

DS AUDIO STYLUS CLEANER 89
A pretty and sticky stylus cleaner, Paul Rigby finds.

SOUNDBITES ALTO-EXTREMO LYD II ISOLATION FEET/VOODOO ISO-POD ISOLATION FEET 91
Paul Rigby explains the value of feet (beneath your hi-fi!).

AUDIOPHILE BOOK 93
Ripped & Torn, a punk magazine compilation reviewed by Paul Rigby.

PURE PLEASURE
From the UK-based audiophile outfit (www.purepleasurerecords.com) come two releases.

Music Inc’s self titled 1970 hard bop release featured new works from Charles Tolliver, Stanley Cowell plus thirteen others in the supporting orchestra. It’s a bold, energetic, free flowing jazz excursion that moves Ellington to the next level.

Doug Hammond’s ‘Reflections in the Sea of Nurnern’ (1975) takes a Tolkein reference (Nurnern is a large inland body of water in Mordor, Middle Earth fans) and mixes analogue and electronic instrumentation plus Afro jazz influences. Highlights? I love the quietly introspective pieces balancing Hammond organ and drums.

MUSIC ON VINYL

For ‘Bless Its Pointed Little Head’ (1969), Jefferson Airplane issued their first live album, offering densely arranged and harder versions of former album classics, adding new colours to the band’s output.

The Faces’ ‘A Nod is as Good as a Wink’ (1971), featuring ‘Stay With Me’, is both honed to perfection while displaying superb song-writing skills and keeping the party going.

The Ethiopians made an impact on reggae’s first important infusion and their superb debut, ‘Engine ‘54: Let’s Ska and Rock Steady’ (1968) was part of that – although it was rather more rocksteady in tone.

‘Headless Heroes Of The Apocalypse’ (1971) from American soul artist Eugene McDaniels adds folk and funk – plus jazz – and remains a sampling favourite for contemporary hip hop acts.

First time on vinyl for Fear Factory’s outing, ‘Obsolete’ (1998). Including a 4-page booklet, the album offered industrial metal – look out for a guest voice from Gary Numan!

MODERN HARMONIC

'Oakland Elementary School Arkestra – The Saga Of Padani' is the elaborate title for a collection of avant-jazz music from a rare 1994 CD ('Big Music, Little Musicians') and limited tape release ('The Thornhill Sound') via Marshall Allen, Fred Frith, Terry Riley and, erm, schoolkids. A remarkable collection that challenges the great Sun Ra himself!!

AT THE MOVIES

Three contrasting soundtracks from the Music on Vinyl imprint include Donny Hathaway’s 'Come Back Charleston Blue'. Shot in Harlem, it features jazz, soul and blues.

Limited to 500 copies on red vinyl with a booklet are two releases. Firstly ‘Gotti’ includes music from Pitbull and Jorge Gomez ‘Chicago’ (1998), presented in a gatefold sleeve and on vinyl for the first time, is based upon the London cast recording (including Ute Lemper, Ruthie Henshall, Henry Goodman and Nigel Planer).

BANDCAMP GOODIES

A fond look backwards at black music can be found on Joseph Malik’s ‘Diverse Part 2’ (ramrock.bandcamp.com). From classic soul to Motown-inflected vibes... it’s all here.

Ah! Kosmos’ ‘Beautiful Swamp’ (akahkosmos.bandcamp.com) sees the Turkish-born electronics artist moving towards a Bjork-style of commercial, ethno-electro but with a different vocal style, of course.

Szun Waves’ ‘New Hymn to Freedom’ (https://szunwaves.bandcamp.com) is a new avant-jazz outing offering experimental tones spanning long tracks that fully explore the complex moods.

Roosevelt’s ‘Young Romance’ (iamroosevelt.bandcamp.com) offers guitar and synth-pop. Despite the vacuity of much of the genre, this one ain’t half bad. As your coat might be trapped in the door of a speeding car, you’re dragged along by the hooks.

...AND FINALLY

From Groundation is ‘The Next Generation’ (Baco, groundation.com) a new reggae/jazz fusion complete with that slight Roger Chapman-esque vocal style.

Paradise Lost’s ‘Believe in Nothing’ (2001). Quality metal with hooks a-plenty and a tight production.

Erdenreich’s ‘Tai Chi Tu’ (Sireena, www.sireena.de) combines diverse and wide-ranging rock styles with varying cultural and genre notes to form a mélange of tones Worth investigating.

From the same label, look out for Snafa’s ‘Live Nottingham 1976’. The rocking supergroup were on the verge of splitting when around the time of this concert.

Black Roots’ ‘Take It’ (Khanb, blockrootsreggae.net) takes a reggae look at the human condition and how we got here. They pull no punches and, for that (and the meaty grooves), God bless ‘em!

The John Butler Trio’s new release, ‘Home’ (Because, www.johnbutlertrio.com) takes its roots/rock and turns it into a relatively introspective affair. With noisy add-ons, of course.
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The VINYL ADVENTURE

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The recently introduced MT2 turntable from McIntosh (New York) is a ‘budget model’ in their range, priced below the MT3 I reviewed and was impressed by in our October 2016 issue – but still a hefty £5000. It is a two-speed design (33rpm and 45rpm) with fitted cartridge – a Sumiko Blue Point No.2 moving coil – that comes as a package, styled to suit a McIntosh system. That means an elegant glass top with green lighting of the McIntosh name and plinth edges. Coupled with a classic rotary speed selector on/off switch it’s a visually arresting unit that catches the eye.

Superficially, the MT2 looks pretty straightforward but measurement suggested it’s subtly well honed; the arm in particular was an intriguing blend of simple but effective, something I will get to later.

Dimensionally the MT2 is in with most others, measuring 45.2cms wide and 43.2cms deep. The problem with turntables is where to put them and this one, like most, needs a 16in (41cm) wall shelf or a 12in top with clearance for overhang, to accommodate feet. 11in (28 cms) apart. I’m using Imperial here because shelves still come in this measure and because this is a US product. A weight of 13.2 kgs is no challenge and rear clearance isn’t needed for a hinged dust cover because there isn’t one; you get a formed clear acrylic sheet that is lifted on and off, needing space nearby to accommodate it when off. Not ideal and misery at the price.

Where the MTS had a massive clear acrylic platter that had big impact on sound quality, here McIntosh use a 1.18in thick unit made of polyoxymethylene they say, weighing a substantial 2.3kgs (5lbs) that sits on a belt driven aluminium hub. There’s a thin, light felt platter mat that slipped easily on the hard platter top face but a supplied puck holds the LP and mat down to prevent such slippage. All the same I secured the mat with double-sided tape to avoid any possibility of slippage – a problem that’s affected turntable speed stability measurement in the past.

The hub is driven by a d.c. servo-motor that provides convenient electronic speed change: no need to move the belt physically to another pulley diameter, simply use the front rotary switch. Speed is adjustable at the rear of the plinth, using either a stroboscope or test record with frequency counter.

The arm is height adjustable but comes set for the Sumiko cartridge fitted. McIntosh supply comprehensive set up instructions in their manual but advise that the unit is best installed and set up by a dealer – wise advice it turned out. Our review sample came with the thread of the anti-skate system wrongly

The green glow of a McIntosh MT2 turntable attracts Noel Keywood.
Criterion Audio is a premium hi-fi dealer in Cambridge. From vinyl and valves to the latest in streaming and headphones, we can help you find the perfect audio system to suit your budget and needs. Call us on 01223 237370 to arrange a demo.

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hear the music . . . not the equipment

- WDK17B 32 watts per channel ultralinear push pull stereo amplifier. Single input power amp or integrated with multi-input relay switching.
- WDK16B 15 watts per channel ultralinear push pull stereo amplifier. Single input power amp or integrated with multi-input relay switching.
- WDPHono3 All tube passive equalization valve phono-stage.
- Dual input option. MC step-up transformers available. Requires WDKU1 power supply.
- WDPPre3 Transformer coupled single ended valve pre-amplifier. Low output impedance. Multiple inputs uniting relay switching. Requires WDKU1 power supply.
- WDP503 High performance choke power supply.
- WDHQ35 Transformer coupled single ended valve headphone amplifier. Multiple settings for headphone impedance matching.

Kits and Components for the Audiophile Community
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www.world-designs.co.uk
An unusual version of falling weight anti-skate, where a loop of fine nylon passes around a pulley, a small adjustable weight applying outward bias. Also seen here is a standard damped lift/lower platform, and counterweight secured by rubber friction collar – it’s pushed forward or backward to adjust tracking force.

located so it did not work, and tracking force was mis-set to 3gms when it is 2gms – and the counter-weight should not have been on the arm during carriage. Since the unit is assembled in Germany from parts made in China I assume it was the German part of the operation that erred. I corrected downforce, put the bias thread (a loop) around its little pulley and also adjusted speed that was 1% slow as delivered. Our sample was not in a good state; it may have been a demonstrator or review mule.

Power comes from a small external unit that delivers 12V d.c. from 120V-240V mains, through a slim lead 1 ft long overall. There’s no mains earth so no possibility of hum from a hum loop – or so I thought.

**SOUND QUALITY**

The MT2 was connected to our Icon Audio PS3 Mk2 valve phono stage (with volume control) and thence to our McIntosh MC152 power amplifier driving Martin Logan ESL-X hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers. There was a slight buzz at high volume I could not eradicate by changing earth arrangements, where I knew the system should be and normally is totally silent. I tracked this down to the steel bottom plate being unbonded to earth. With bonding link installed externally (a piece of wire!) silence reigned. This could be a fundamental design problem or a build issue, where an internal bonding link was not connected during assembly.

The Sumiko Blue Point is a competent but lack lustre budget cartridge, ours sounding easy going but rather blurred and at times congested with massed strings of the Trondheim So iists behind Marianne Thorsen playing Mozart violin concertos (2L, 180g). It was all too vague for me; modern cartridges have improved way past this sort of presentation. I installed an Audio Technica VM730SH and was finally up and running, able to hear what the turntable really could do. And it was good.

Playing an array of LPs showed the general character was a sound of basic solidity, meaning firm bass, not over-emphasised but strong and tuneful. Jackie Leven’s Birds Leave No Shadow gave me a clear example, bass guitar laying down a solid foundation, driving the song along with controlled strength.

The extra stress from a 12-in single running at 45rpm, Amy Winehouse and Tears Dry On Their Own, nailed the underlying ability of the MT2. With the track’s extended synth intro, the McIntosh had strong grip on timing, almost violent dynamics (CD eat your heart out) and a sense of clean order to the overall arrangement. What I was hearing here was the well damped arm coupled with good speed stability from the pasters.

More succinctly I wasn’t hearing the arm. Instead I heard nicely defined temporal progression free from zing and graced by apparently natural clarity. This is a quality of nothingness, no added flavour – it

The thick but rigid headshell platform was remarkably effective – and the arm tube well damped too. Fitted as standard is a Sumiko Blue Point No 2 cartridge.
K3:

**Specifications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specification</th>
<th>Headphone Out 1</th>
<th>Headphone Out 2</th>
<th>Coaxial Out</th>
<th>Optical Out</th>
<th>RCA for 192kHz up to 150Ω</th>
<th>Optical Out</th>
<th>Native DSD 256</th>
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**Price**: £89.99  
**Discover more**: [www.fiio.com/k3](http://www.fiio.com/k3)
Giving the MT2 a firm lower midband in dynamics and stability of imaging whilst also making it clean and clear. The turntable is less spacious than the MT5, more confined, but punchy and powerful all the same. So not a romantic turntable, so much as controlled and powerful. A modern sound from LP but a dramatic one.

Going back to our challenging 2L LP of the Trondheim Solistene with Marianne Thorsen the whole performance was confidently sorted into individual strands clearly laid out across the sound stage by Audio Technica’s VM75SH in this arm. Tonally neutral in itself, it relays the slightly bright balance of both the LP and the cartridge with brutal frankness. The MT2 lets through what is going on elsewhere in the system. Again at 45rpm, Moonlight Sessions from Lyn Stanley came across almost as live performance it was so good; this is a specially produced LP but the MT2 did it justice.

CONCLUSION

Our sample of McIntosh’s MT2 needed a lot of sorting before its designed-in abilities could be appreciated. I don’t know whether this was confined to our sample or is an assembly issue. Hum from a missing earth strap and mis-assembled anti-skate were serious problems. Once sorted however – and with a cartridge more advanced than the Sumiko fitted – the MT2 delivers fine sound quality in keeping with McIntosh standards.

£5000! Hmm... it’s a big price tag. I think the turntable is for those with a McIntosh system that want consistent style. And a McIntosh dealer able to ensure it is working properly. Fine sound quality when sorted.

Use of a 12 d.c. servo-motor allows electronic speed control to be employed, so the belt runs on a single pulley diameter.

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The MT2 ran 1% slow as delivered — just about perceptible to someone with a good sense of pitch (musician, music teacher etc). Pitch error of 0.2% is possible and commensurate with price and quality here. There are speed adjusters at rear so it was brought to nominal for listening.

Low fluctuation of speed around nominal resulted in low wow, the unweighted DIN peak value being 0.13% and the DIN weighted value 0.07% — both good results. There will be no obvious change of pitch here, and sense of pitch will be firm rather than vague, if not as pin sharp as a Direct Drive.

Measurement of arm vibration with a B&K accelerometer showed an unusually well damped arm and headshell, likely because the latter is very thick. The main bending mode around 200Hz is hardly visible in our analysis, suggesting firm dynamics and good lower mid-band separation across the soundstage of instruments.

The MT2 gave good results all round, if not exceptional. Speed adjustment was poor however. NK

**SPEED STABILITY**

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<tr>
<th>Speed variations</th>
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<th>Flutter</th>
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<td>-1%</td>
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**ARM VIBRATION**

**MCINTOSH MT2**

£4,995

**EXCELLENT - extremely capable**

**VERDICT**

Very good sound quality in essence, ignoring the fitted cartridge. But hugely expensive.

**FOR**

- ease of use
- sound quality
- appearance

**AGAINST**

- unringed dust cover
- needs expert set-up
- no auto arm lift
- hum

Jordan Acoustics
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To celebrate the 25th anniversary of Pro-Ject Audio Systems, we decided to combine traditional design with modern technology in a brand new turntable model. This resulted in ‘The Classic’, which uses a frame design inspired by turntables from the 1950’s and 60’s, but implemented with our innovative technologies inside.

The award-winning turntable has astounded audiophiles worldwide, and is the perfect addition to any modern home. The Classic’s wooden chassis is available in three matte finishes; walnut, rosenut and eucalyptus.
A Swell Gel

You need to keep your turntable’s stylus as clean as possible. Paul Rigby reviews one tool to help you do just that, DS Audio’s ST-50.

K

eeping your stylus tip clean is not only important, it is critical to maintaining and enhancing the sound quality from your vinyl, in addition to the well being of the same and the stylus itself. My preferred tool is the sticky pad option. This ensures that you place the said pad on the platter, then you lower the cartridge and stylus onto the pad. The stylus tip enters the pad. You lift the tonearm once more, the stylus leaves the pad – and leaves behind the muck!

DESIGN

There are plenty of budget sticky pads on the market which are fine and work well, but DS Audio’s ST-50 is a high-end, relatively expensive option. Some see it as a crazy luxury. I see it as the best design of its type currently on the market. Here’s why.

Firstly, I can see the stylus tip moving further into the gel than competing pads. More than this, the gel pad is perfectly flat and stays flat over time. Budget pads are either not flat or can become concave over time and use. The result? Most but not all of the tip is cleaned. In tests, I found that the ST-50 also removes more grime too.

Secondly, the lid of the ST-50 is loosely applied. For most other competitors, you need two hands to open them up. I tend to realise that my stylus tip is dirty when I’m holding the tonearm. The last thing I want to do is put the arm back in its rest to reach for the sticky pad. The ST-50 allows you to hold the pad with one hand and remove the loose lid there and then, for immediate use. You pick up the wide lower chassis area, not the lid part. So you never accidentally drop the thing.

Also, unlike some competitors, there’s no hard container rim around the gel edge to cause possible stylus damage if an unfortunate slip occurs.

The ST-50 also forgives laziness. If you’re in a rush and you decide to put the ST-50 on a record, not the platter, it’s lower soft leather area prevents vinyl scratches.

Next, you can pull the entire gel pad away from the chassis for a thorough clean. You can then stand the gel pad on its flat end for air drying. It’s very easily replaced back into its chassis.

Finally, its elegant little metal container, aluminium with nickel plating, looks beautiful. It’s aesthetically pleasing.

As for the sound? Well, this little unit cleans perfectly, restoring the stylus to its former clean glory – maximising sound quality.

CONCLUSION

There are other sticky pad stylus cleaners on the market and they are good performers at a value price but like anything in life, if you want the best, you pay for it. There’s plenty of reasons why the ST-50 costs a lot but also plenty of reason why it’s the best at its job.

REFERENCE

Origin Live Sovereign turntable
Origin Live Enterprise 12 arm
Van Den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius cartridge
Icon Audio PS3 phone amplifier
Aesthetix Calypso pre-amp
Icon Audio MB845 Mk II monoblock amplifiers
Quad ESL-57 speakers with One Thing upgrade
Vertex AQ & Tellurium Q cable
Blue Horizon Professional Rack System
Harmonic Resolution Systems Noise Reduction Components
Audio Desk’s Ultrasonic Pro Vinyl Cleaner

DS AUDIO ST-50

£75

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VERDICT

Easy to use, does the job brilliantly and looks the part – what’s not to like?

FOR
- design
- cleaning performance
- easy to clean
- one-hand cleaning

AGAINST
- nothing
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ALTO-EXTREMO LYD II ISOLATION FEET £425 (FOR A PACK OF 3 OR £560 FOR 4)

You'd be surprised at the amount of people on social media that look upon isolation feet as a con. Took me aback when I saw comments of that ilk, let me tell you. Patently, that's not so, and you will know too if you try them for yourself. They lower intrusive vibrations, they lower noise and they do nice things to the sound. Simple as that, really.

These examples are stuffed with technology and they're very well made. They are aluminium pucks weighing 100g each, pretty substantial at 42mm in height and 64mm in diameter. At one end there is a damping ring. At the other end is an M8 thread (about 8mm in diameter). If you have the right thread size then, you can replace your original component feet with the Lyd IIIs.

Inside is a self-adjusting construction made from a piece of shaped stainless steel that sits on a brass ball. This means that the feet can tilt to the side - at least a bit. Useful for use on uneven surfaces.

In use, you have two options. You can try the feet with the damping ring side uppermost or you can flip them over with the damping ring at the bottom, in contact with the shelving surface.

I played a mixture of David Bowie and Sonny Rollins during the sound tests. In place, the feet enhanced detail, lowered noise and improved instrumental separation with subtle effects becoming very noticeable when the feet were placed underneath my phono amplifier. I found the sound improved further with the damping ring uppermost but experimentation is worthwhile here.

Enhancing accuracy and precision, these isolation feet are essential to get the best from your hi-fi. PR

[+44 (0) 203 542338
www.alto-extremo.com]

VOODOO ISO-POD ISOLATION FEET £300 FOR A SET OF 3 FEET, £400 FOR 4 FEET

Tackling noise in its varying forms is an important task when tweaking your hi-fi. It can make all of the difference when you're looking to make the most from your important and often expensive component investments. These isolation feet are designed to be part of that toolkit. Arriving in anodised silver or black and made in the USA, they are designed to sit underneath a component such as an amplifier, CD player and the like.

CNC machining is behind the construction of the core chassis for each foot. The company has used aerospace alloy as part of the process. Inside are three zirconium ball bearings. What you get, therefore, is upper and lower alloy casing sandwich, with the bearings acting as filler. The whole thing is secured by magnets which can be pulled apart. So be careful. Mr Curiosity here pulled the whole thing apart and promptly lost one of the bearings which bounced off into another dimension, which was kindly replaced by the company.

“Industrial-grade felt pads” sit at the base to protect the chosen surface. Each Iso-Pod supports up to 113kg. I placed them under varying pieces of my reference chain.

I used David Bowie and jazz from Sonny Rollins during sound tests and heard an enlargement in the size of the soundstage with the feet in place which, by that action, opened up the midrange, inserted more air and space into and around the instruments, enhancing their separation.

The low noise response coupled with the enhanced focus and precision across all frequencies benefitted every single hi-fi component they worked under, adding a sense of sonic discipline to each. Easy to use, easy to fit, the Voodoo isolation feet are effective performers. PR

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Punk's past

Paul Rigby looks at a compilation of Punk magazine Ripped & Torn, charting its short but illustrious life.

RIPPED & TORN
Author: Tony Drayton
Publisher: Ecstatic Peace Library
Price: £25

Spanning 326 pages, this book...isn't. At least, not in the classic sense. It's more of a bound compilation from the original punk fanzine of the same name. That is, every page of the seventeen issue run of Ripped & Torn from October 1976 to March 1979.

Because of that, the tome serves three distinct purposes. Firstly, and possibly most importantly, it provides a social history overview of the punk music scene across the published period from fashion, language and politics all the way to the big one, attitude.

This series of DIY fanzines might, like much of its competition, have looked amateurish (it was, by default), scrappy (yes) and naive (indeed) but it also tried to make readers aware of what was going on around them. Very important that. It tried to wake up its readers to the exploitative nature of business and politicians, "The Enemies of Liberation shackle your imagination in gloomy colours of doubt, taste, uncertainty, stifle your individuality with restricted choice... and lock up your freedom in their rule books and non-information centres" railed the text from Issue 16.

This reflection of social frustration was as much to do with the origins of punk as its reaction to established and, in punk's view, bloated studio bands.

Secondly, this collection does what other primary documents do wonderfully - it removes any sense of hindsight while providing opinion, not from professional journalists immersed in the music scene and surrounded by contemporaries who supplied bias and influence, but from music fans on the street.

So the debut album from The Buzzcocks was given a lukewarm review as was 'Plastic Letters', Blondie's second album. While the classic Blondie album, 'Parallel Lines' is given short shrift. Despite offering music that is, in parts, "quite good", the magazine points an accusing sell-out finger at the band, comaroing Debbie Harry to a "clean and refined Linda Ronstadt surrogate". Speaking as a Blondie fan myself, I winced at the harshness of these lines but I can't complain as Ripped & Torn dismissed the band as,...not being punk related anymore... "The wonderful 'Heart of Glass' would have been Exhibit A, I suppose.

Which was fair enough. It was good to see hard critique, undaunted and unfettered by retrospective warming nostalgia.

Inarticulate those fans often were, you could accuse them of lacking grammatical skills and also of being ignorant to the finer elements of composition but there was a directness, energy and inherent flair in what they said and how they said it.

There was also plenty of insight. For example, the perils of being in a punk band, especially in the early days, could be bad for your health - as an interview with lead singer of Siouxsie and the Banshees, Siouxsie Sioux plus bassist, Steve Severin showed. The interviewer noted Siouxs's use of an eye-patch, worn because she was suffering from conjunctivitis and contracted via "Gob I think! When we were up north we were just getting showered in it. Joe Strummer got hepatitis when somebody gobbed in his mouth. You never know what you're going to get (so if you trendy punks must gob, make sure you have approval from your doctor)"

Thirdly, it showed what was possible if you put your mind to it. That you didn't have to have professional printing/publishing equipment to make a point and that the very nature of the minimalist production was art in itself.

Drayton (then aged eighteen) started the magazine in Cumbernauld, a town just outside Glasgow. He took a week to write Issue 1 and another week to sneakily photocopy the pages at work. Later issues were created in a squat in London. The book features an introduction and a measure of context from Drayton. The book is largely untouched and unaltered from that point onwards. It isn't even bothered by page numbers. Very punk.
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**Accessories & Cables**

- Analysis Plus Oval Digital 2m BNC digital
- Atlas Asimi balanced 1.5m pr
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- Atlas Asimi Speaker cables 2x2m S/H
- Atlas EOS 4SQ MM 2.0m power cable
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- Audioquest Leopard 1.2 arm cable BNIB
- Entreq Apollo eartha SS 1.65 ground
- Entreq Apollo eartha SS 1.65 ground
- Entreq Challenger eartha SS1.65 ground
- Entreq Challenger eartha XLR1.65 ground
- Finite Elemente Pagode signature xdemo
- Furutech TP60e 6 W at Shucko xdemo
- Magnum Dynalab MD108 mk1 S/H
- MIT shotgun online S3.3iC 1m pair RCA
- Musical Fidelity Stable 1 platform BNIB
- Nordost Tyr 2 1m RCA interconnect
- Revalation Audio Labs Prophecy Firewire
- Transparent audio Reference power
- Transparent Music Link Plus 2m RCA
- Van den Hul AES/EBU 110 Pro 1m
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h, I agonised over this one. The obvious classic Police LP is 'Regatta de Blanc'. With the latter LP, the group emerged out of their raw 'Outlandos d'Armour' period. That semi-punk release was a superb debut with the likes of 'Can't Stand Losing You' and ' Roxanne' serving as a testament to the band's (well, Sting's) songwriting prowess. Yet it also showed rough edges and never provided the space for the band's growing confidence and more complex arrangements that would emerge later on.

That ambition was mostly realised within 'Regatta de Blanc' and classic ditties such as 'Message in the Bottle' and 'Walking on the Moon', inventive instrumentals such as the title track and songs with growing reputations such as 'Bring on the Night' and 'The Bed's Too Big Without You'.

And yet. And yet, there was something more to 'Zenyatta Mondatta'. It isn't my favourite Police album, oddly enough, but I feel that it reaches a peak in terms of the band's creative powers. There are a couple of tracks on this LP that do irritate the hell out of me. The single, 'De Do Do Da, De Da Da Da' is a waste of space and is the equivalent of space-filling waffle while 'Canary in a Coalmine' seems to have been created as a technical exercise to see if a song can be made entirely in the upper registers.

The other single from the album is decent, 'Don't Stand So Close to Me' features a narrative and a sense of flow.

Get past that lot and you get to the meat of the LP. You're faced with the innovative and even slightly avant-garde application of musical composition. There's a superb sense of rhythm, repetitive beats, looping sequences and experimental constructions that transcend the commercial inserts that were a sop to commerciality.

'When the World Is Running Down, You Make the Best of What's Still Around' offers a lengthy title to a wonderful underlying rhythmic track that impresses more than the lyric and shows how much The Police can really groove.

'Behind my Camel' is an instrumental excursion full of drama and big chords that conflict with Stewart Copeland's lively percussive style. 'Shadows in the Rain' is a dark tale taking the notion of a white man's reggae to the nth degree, pushing the beat to almost scary levels with a frantic Andy Summers' guitar flying across the whole thing like a psychotic bee. Similarly, 'The Other Way of Stopping', steps on the reverb button to enhance and extend the percussive power of Copeland (and why not, he wrote the thing).

What really gets me is the long intro sequence of the track, 'Voices in My Head'. This sequence is quite possibly the best crafted piece of art the Police ever issued on LP. Simple yet layered. Repetitive yet evolving. Meditative yet groove inducing. Even when the non-intrusive vocals are introduced, thematic is still at the forefront. Then the jarring 'Cha' chant attempts to ruin everything but the middle eight reconstructs the entire arrangement while entering into an improv format.

I remember this track being used to back a TV documentary on a US-based Marathon event, not long after the LP was issued. The film began with the camera pointing at a road on a bridge. The camera pointed at the top of the curve of the bridge. It was a hot, sunny day and the heat shimmered off the surface. The song began at this point and just rolled for a while until the volume started to increase and the fractured images of the bobbing heads of the approaching runners began to emerge through the heat haze. It was an amazing piece of documentary tension in which The Police played a full part. It also showed how their music could be used effectively and dramatically in related cultural arts. In this case film making.

This LP has now been reissued as part of a recommended new vinyl box set. 'Every Move You Make: The Studio Recordings' is a six vinyl LP box set that brings together all the Police's recorded studio albums, as well as a 12-track sixth disc entitled 'Flexible Strategies' that contains exclusive bonus material of non-album recordings and B-sides.

The collection has been re-mastered at Abbey Road Studios by Miles Showell, using half-speed mastering. It also contains a twenty-four page, photo book featuring rare and unseen images from the band's personal archives. PR
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