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Great to see the brand name of Leak re-launched. In this issue on p10 you can read about the new Leak Stereo 130 amplifier, an update on the original Stereo 30 transistor amplifier launched in 1963 – 57 years ago no less. Reviewer John Pickford is new to Hi-Fi World, but as a long term Leak owner better placed to understand how the new Stereo 130 compares with its predecessors.

A lot has changed over the years between these amplifiers, but a lot has not. We still have transistors and casework of similar dimensions – with knobs on front that humans can twiddle. It’s easier and more direct than using an app – and future proof too. Interesting to see what has changed and what has not.

We’ve covered the wonders of Leak products in the past, as well as publishing a researched history in our October 1996 edition. In this issue we have updated that history to include Leak products launched by Rank Leak Wharfedale – see p18. This takes Leak history to its true end point.

I see a connection between the ornate 1960s styling of the Stereo 130 and Chord Electronics’ Ultima 6 stereo power amplifier that you can find on p46. Both style-tically fight against the visual boredom of a black box. Chord Electronics actually put more into their styling and construction than Leak ever did – or most other manufacturers. Heavily machined casework, luminous light displays and custom transistors mark out the Ultima 6 as an amplifier like few others – today or yesterday.

OK, the price is higher after taking into account inflation from 1963, but all the same this is an eye-popping product.

How on earth can you get surround sound from headphones? Back in the wacky 1970s they tried to do it and Martin Pipe explains all on p43. This is another smile inducing article, like Dave Tutt’s ribald column about the BBC’s female DJs on P73.

I hope you enjoy what we bring you this month in another ‘interesting’ issue!

Noel Keywood
Editor

testing [see www.hi-fiworl.co.uk for full explanations of all our tests]

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

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amongst the best
extremely capable
worth auditioning
unremarkable
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A LESS-LIMITED EDITION

The Technics SL-1200 (silver)/SL-1210 (black) series is an institution, having started life in 1972 as a direct-drive hi-fi turntable before being appropriated by the DJ community. It’s one of the few decks that non-audiophiles will know by name, and ten years ago there was an outcry when Technics announced its intention to stop making them. The vinyl revival changed its corporate mind, and production resumed in 2016 with the radically re-engineered SL-1200GA. The iconic status of the turntable was raised further when Technics chose to mark its 55th anniversary in May with a luxurious limited-edition black version. Only 1000 of these £3,999 SL-1210GAes were released, and they sold out quickly. Technics has however responded to demand by making another 210 (geddit?) available. They feature a badge with inscribed serial number; switchable strobe-light and a specially-tuned Nagaoka JT-1210 MM cartridge. Not so obvious is the internal use of a newly developed gel material, as found in Technics’ flagship £14,000 SL-1000R, to isolate the turntable from external vibrations. If you want one of these legends, you’d better move fast...

Further details: www.technics.com

HEARING AID

Many of us will be aware of American recording engineer Cookie Marenco’s Blue Coast Records (California). The label offers a comprehensive selection of music, which is exceptionally well-recorded using a proprietary “no-compromise” process known as ESE (Extended Sound Environment). Said music is made available on its webstore for download in a multiplicity of formats - the higher the res, the more you pay! You can preview tracks and albums before buying them.

The availability of these formats has raised questions: Which is better - PCM or DSD? Does lossless-encoding impair the music? To help you determine which sounds best on your equipment, Blue Coast has made available for free download the same track in eight different formats. The track, Close To The Soul by Keith Greeninger, Chris Kee and Brain, is described as “folk singer-songwriter, accompanied by upright bass and light drums”. It was “recorded on 2in. analogue tape and DSD64, mixed through an analogue console to DSD128 and remastered in DSD256”.

The 1.7GB download is a ZIP archive containing this track in 44.1kHz/16-bit WAV (CD), 96kHz/24-bit WAV, 96kHz/24-bit FLAC, 192kHz/24-bit WAV, 192kHz/24-bit FLAC, DSD64, DSD128 and DSD256 formats. You’ll find it here: https://bit.ly/2PAqecG. Worth downloading if you want to hear the differences between file formats, derived from superb live source recording.


Further details: https://bluecoastrecords.com
PLAYING WITH THE BIG BOYS
To find speakers resembling these 4349s from JBL you would have, until recently, needed to visit a recording studio. But now, you can buy these imposing beasts for use at home. They aim - in JBL’s words - for the “kind of dynamics and precision enjoyed by music producers and sound engineers”.

To achieve these qualities the £7000 per pair 4349 studio monitors feature 12in. pure-pulp woofers with long-throw 3in. voice coils and “dual-opposing spider dampers” to minimise distortion at high listening levels.

In order to provide similar benefits to anything above 1.5kHz, JBL has specified D241SK compression drivers with lightweight 1.5in Teonex diaphragms coupled to “high-definition imaging” horns. These are built into dual-ported cabinets made with inch-thick material for rigidity.

The 4349s feature front-mounted treble and super-treble attenuators, enabling the listener to achieve a good tonal balance with their room and equipment. JBL’s spec claims 8 Ohm nominal impedance, 91dB sensitivity (2.83V/1m), 200W power handling and a -6dB frequency response of 32Hz-25kHz. The 4349s are available in Walnut or Black Walnut veneers, with complementary grille materials. Matching J5-120 floor stands, costing £325, can also be supplied.

Further details: www.jblsynthesis.com

ZEN AND THE ART OF HEADPHONE SUSTENANCE
What we’ve seen so far of iFi’s sub-£200 Zen range - a Bluetooth adaptor and a DAC - has impressed us. iFi has now added a third product to the lineup, the analogue (but digitally-controlled) Zen Can headphone amp (£149). There is impressive headphone drive capability - 1.6W per channel into 16 Ohms ‘phones. It should be compatible with practically any headphones you care to plug in to the front-panel 6.3mm (unbalanced) or Pentacon 4.4mm (balanced) jacks.

Other features include three analogue inputs (4.4mm balanced, 3.5mm and phono unbalanced), switchable 3D-surround-effect and bass-boost, a 4-position (0/6/12/18dB) gain control to accommodate different headphone sensitivities and high-grade components.

It’s compatible with pretty much any analogue source, but you’ll need a digital-to-analogue converter (like the Zen DAC) for digital sources or a phono stage for vinyl.

The Zen Can is powered via a 5V wall-wart or, with appropriate cabling, the USB socket of a computer.

Further details: www.ifiaudio.com

SPECIAL BREW
Marantz has just announced ‘Special Edition’ versions of its PM-12 integrated amplifier and SA-12 SACD player/DAC. Marantz engineers have lavished “extraordinary attention to detail” on the tweaked variants - the careful selection of components for key sections of the circuitry and tuning over “countless” listening sessions.

Described as a “discrete two-stage design” with the “cleanest signal path” the £2,999 PM-12SE has separate power supplies for the pre and power-amp sections. The latter is claimed to deliver 100W per channel into 8 Ohm ‘speakers (200W into 4 ohms).

Other features include the use of Marantz’s latest HDAM devices in the amps, current-feedback techniques, high-grade socketry, electronically-controlled volume and a discrete MM/MC phono stage.

Its partner, the SA-12SE (£2,999), plays SACDs and CDs and features an asynchronous USB input for PC use. This supports hi-res all the way to 384kHz/32bit PCM and 11.2MHz DSD. Lesser material can be treated with the “innovative” Marantz Musical Mastering system, which upsamples to DSD. Also on board the SA-12SE are conventional optical/digital inputs and a headphone amp. Both units are available in black or silver/gold finish.

Further details: www.marantz.co.uk
BURNDY BUNCH

Naim adopted the obscure Burndy multiway connector for proprietary signal/power interconnects, making it difficult for owners of high-end Naim gear to upgrade.

Recognising their plight, the Chord Company - that uses Naim products in its listening room - has now introduced a range of Burndy-terminated cables. Built with the same “high-performance materials and unique construction techniques for which the Wiltshire company has become famous”, the handmade-to-order interconnects are claimed to “bring performance benefits where it counts”. All feature “silver-plated copper conductors, the proprietary flagship ‘Taylon’ insulation, an acoustic braid and an anti-EMF braid, all protected by a black nylon outer jacket”. Naim products catered for include the SS2, SS5, XPS, CDS, NAC 252, NAC 52, NAP 300, NAP 500 and SNAXO.

Prices - which are dependent on the number of internal cores (up to nineteen), the length required and the associated build time - start at a sobering £1,600.

Further details: Chord Company, (01980) 625700. www.chord.co.uk.

CULT RETURN

Cult hi-fi brand NVA is back with a vengeance! Nene Valley Audio was founded in 1982 and run by Richard Dunn, who used to design amplification for rock bands under the guise of Tresham Audio.

NVA’s solid-state amplifiers were cast in acrylic rather than metal, to eliminate eddy-currents, which were claimed to affect reproduction.

Hi-fi Subjectivist Audio Ltd aims to “resurrect the NVA brand”. Currently, the NVA lineup includes the $50 Mk.III passive preamp (£375, or £425 with a stepped-attenuator volume control), a range of mono and stereo power amps (ranging from the £495 stereo ‘Model Worker’ S80 to the £2,250 Artisan M600s), a 15 Watt per channel ‘personal integrated amplifier’ (£500), the special low-capacitance cable needed to connect them to your speakers, a £475 headphone amp and various interconnects. All such items are available on 30-day trial and can be ordered from the Durham-based company’s website. Further details: www.nvahifi.co.uk.

NAD’S M33 – WORTH THE WAIT?

After a half-year wait, courtesy of the pandemic, the NAD Masters M33 integrated amp/streamer/DAC is now shipping to retailers. So why the interest? Simply put, NAD has packed this touchscreen-fronted beast to the gunnels with techno-trickery that will appeal to analogue and digital music lovers alike.

Based around NAD’s smartphone controllable BluOS streaming platform, the multi-room friendly M33, caters for numerous standard and hi-res formats including MQA, WAV and FLAC. Dirac room-correction, HDMI for TV sound, playback from USB storage devices, a 32-bit/384 kHz ESS Sabre DAC and HD 5.0 Bluetooth feature too.

The amp section uses something called “HybridDigital Purifi Eigentakt” (try saying that after a pint or two!) to deliver as much as 200W power to each channel. It boasts an MM phono stage and numerous inputs, including XLR balanced (both analogue and AES/EBU digital). Two MDC upgrade-module slots ensure that your £3999 investment won’t go obsolete quickly. However, unlike cheaper NAD models there’s no Chromecast support – and NAD fails to mention the existence of DSD.

Further details: https://nadelectronics.com/

HEAVY METAL FROM CYPRUS

New from Cypriot manufacturer Aries Cerat are the Essentia and Geminae monoblock “super-amps”. The pair is collectively known as the “lanus Series”, named after a “two-faced Roman god.”

According to Aries Cerat, is a “new way of using hollow and solid state devices”. It is described as offering the linearity of a triode, while being able to source enough current to drive low-impedance loads directly.

In plain English, this means speakers can be driven by its circuitry directly from FET transistors with the quality of sound associated with triode amplification. TriodeFet is also allegedly maintenance-free; the un unstressed “internal tubes used for curve creation are rated at 100,000 hours lifespan”.

The TriodeFet used in the new models is actually a refined version of a technology used in Aries Cerat’s original lanus monoblock, launched in 2012.

Naturally, stuff of this esoteric nature ain’t cheap. Selling for 110,000 euros, the Geminae - all 200kg of it! - is, we’re told, “a two stage Class A amplifier, using a floating circuitron with TriodeFets in the output stage to deliver 130W into 8 ohms (260W into 4 ohms) while never leaving true Class A operation.”

The 70cm-tall Geminae may not have an output transformer, but its input stage is “a transformer-coupled small SET amplifier”. At a mere 39,000 euros, the Essentia - due later in the year - is a “smaller single-ended, single-stage mono amplifier” without driver or input stage. Its single TriodeFet output stage is said to be capable of 40W into 8 ohms.

Further details: www.aries-cerat.eu
Great Return

John Pickford on the return of a great name — Leak — with their new Stereo 130 amplifier.

Leak branded equipment last appeared in showroom over 40 years ago. Now they are back with two new models styled upon their classic 1960s designs. A comprehensive history of the original company can be read elsewhere in this issue so I’ll spare you the long lesson here. Those who know and are interested will notice the new Stereo 130 integrated amplifier bears a striking resemblance to the original Stereo 30, launched in 1963 as the world’s first domestic transistor amplifier, as our original Leak advertisement picture shows.

Like its spiritual predecessor, the new Stereo 130 is a solid-state design incorporating latest digital
Comprehensive connectivity including Pre-Out to feed an external power amplifier. Plenty of digital inputs; no XLR balanced inputs. Note the DSD logo at top left: DSD can be played from a computer via USB connection.

wireless playback and it connected with my phone in less than a minute.

Power from the Stereo 130 is aplenty, easily driving my insensitive (82dB/W/m) Rogers LS3/5a loudspeakers, even though the 3050s.

As many potential users of this vintage styled equipment will want to spin vinyl – or so I guess – I plugged in my 1970 Goldring Lenco GL75 turntable, fitted with a period-correct G800 cartridge with

"it reveals excellent depth of image and better my ancient TL/12s in the way it fleshes out lower registers"

volume control needed to be at the 12 o'clock position to produce similar levels the 10 o'clock spot produced through Q Acoustics Super E stylus. Feeding the LS3/5a speakers, I couldn't resist playing a recording from 1963, in honour of the Stereo 130's heritage.

Under the hood of the CDT CD disc player. At left the slot-loading CD transport mechanism. Near top is the circular toroidal transformer of a linear power supply. The historic Leak logo (right) now adorns a modern electronic circuit board.
of Come Together improves on the original, especially in its stereo separation. I swapped out my little BBC monitors for some Q Acoustics 3050i floorstanders at this point to get a better insight into bass response.

McCartney’s swampy bass line was as deep and weighty as it should be, but more importantly the Stereo 130 got into the groove and played the tune. And subtle nuances such as the odd bit of fret squeak and off-mic vocalisations that inferior components mask were presented in clear focus. This impressed me enormously.

Both of these tracks were, of course, recorded at EMI’s studios in Abbey Road, which is apt as throughout the 1960s Leak amplifiers were used exclusively to power the studios’ monitors.

Adding the CDT to the set-up I played Moving by Kate Bush, from the 2018 CD remaster of The Kick Inside. Kate’s icy vocals can sound unbearably shrill through treble-hyped systems yet the Leaks produce the holographic soundstage of the valve powered Leaks, it reveals excellent depth of image and betters the ancient TL/12s in the way it flushes out the lower registers.

The new Stereo 130 also comprehensively outperforms my old drab-sounding Stereo 30, which, with its aged electrical components, is becoming to me nothing more than a chic Sixties ornament.

I listened to digital audio through the amp with similarly impressive results. My own hi-res studio masters in Logic Pro replayed accurately through the internal ESS ES9018 DAC, and the even-handed nature of the Stereo 130 even made Spotify an enjoyable background listen. The USB input will accept 32/394 PCM and DSD256 Leak says.

If you’re eyeing up the CDT to slot into an existing analogue set-up, be aware there is no analogue RCA output — you will need an external

The 12V Trigger connector enables CDT and Stereo 130 to be controlled by a single remote control. There are no analogue outputs, only electrical and optical S/PDIF digital outputs.
Delt in, it will only play files up to CD quality (WAV, 16/44.1 or 48) from the flash drive. Higher resolution files were not accepted. Whilst you can’t play hi-res from CDT’s flash drive, nor DSD, for most users CD, MP3, WMV and such like will be enough.

As a pair, this is a winning combination offering outstanding analogue and digital performance at an attractive price. Had Leak not got these products spot-on, it would have been difficult to disguise my disappointment. I’m delighted with them.

Welcome back Leak – you’ve been a long time coming.

NOEL SAYS -

Great to see the Leak name finally resurrected. I say “finally” because it has been on the cards for some time but IAG, who own an array of respected UK brand names – Quad, Wharfedale, Mission, Castle and Audiolab – likely did not want yet another model range. But the recent success of Wharfedale’s Dentons and Lintons, built for trad appearance and sound, has seemingly changed their mind. Unsurprisingly, that because the audience for hi-fi is an old one (50+?) but an affluent one. Add in the desire for traditional British hi-fi in overseas markets and you end up with these near-replicas of yesteryear.

I’ve used a succession of Leak products in the past and am a dyed-in-the-wool Leak man! The TL/12 Plus was just gorgeous to hear – liquid beauty. My Troughline VHF/FM tuner is untouched for sound quality – it puts me right in the studio. And as for Leak loudspeakers – can’t even go there.

All of which is to suggest the Leak brand name has value and potentially a great future. I enjoyed using these products briefly after testing them, but then I know the Quad Vena II well, upon which the Stereo 130 is based. It’s a tried and tested design, replete with OSS ES9018 digital-to-analogue converter (DAC) that’s wholly appropriate sound wise, making for what I see as a piece of magical retro at astonishingly low price. Bear in mind that 45 Watts will blow you across the room if you use sensitive loudspeakers (90dB from one Watt). Think Wharfedale Lintons or Q Acoustics 1050is, but there are plenty more modern floorstanders that would suit if you want to go head-bangingly loud – 1960s style. NK

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Leak 130 produced 55 Watts into 8 Ohms and 64 Watts into 4 Ohms, similar results to Quad Vena II (June 19 issue). This is sufficient power to go very loud in most systems. Distortion was low at all frequencies and outputs – and I noted that the output stage was very linear with signals below 1 Watt, helped partly by low output noise.

I suspect excellent low level linearity, low noise and rolled off treble all contribute to its smooth sound.

Output rolled down slowly above 20kHz (1dB at 38kHz) ensuring easy treble. Low frequency output rolled down below 10Hz too, especially with tone controls engaged, to limit subsonic gain when bass lift is applied.

The tone controls were neatly engineered to give a useful but not excessive +7dB maximum bass lift around 40Hz, but more importantly there was good low level resolution, allowing just +1dB to be dialled in.

Similarly the treble control gave +7dB lift maximum (20kHz) but could be set to give fine treble cut of -1dB at 10kHz to reduce the excessive treble of current loudspeakers.

The optical SPDIF digital input worked to 192kHz sample rate, but frequency response rolled down fast, extending to 26kHz (-1dB). The electrical input gave identical results.

Inside there is an ESS ES9018 Sabre 32 Series digital-to-analogue converter (DAC) that gave a very high 117dB EAJ Dynamic Range value from the loudspeaker outputs (and 118dB from Pre-out), a very good result able to convey the benefits of hi-res digital but there will be no brightness in the sound.

Distortion at -60dB came in at a low 0.03% with 24bit digital (0.22% with CD).

The MM phone stage needed a normal 4.5mV for full output and overload was high at 50mV. There is no warp filter as such but switching in the tone controls helps. Noise was low at -80dB. Frequency response measured flat from 10Hz-20kHz, with just a smidgeon (0.3dB or so) of bass lift to ensure a sound with some body.

The CDT delivers only CD quality, being unable to play hi-res from the USB drive. It gave flat frequency response to 21kHz and standard CD performance figures of 0.22% distortion and 101dB EAJ Dynamic Range. With no internal DAC it is a transport, not a player.

The new Leak Stereo 130 measured very well in all areas. It is very linear (no distortion), has low noise and frequency response has been rolled off above 20kHz on all inputs to help toward an easy sound lacking sharpness. NK

Power 55W

Frequency response (-1dB) 10Hz-38kHz

Distortion (10kHz, 1W) 0.02%

Separation (1kHz) 91dB

Noise (IEC A) -111dB

Sensitivity 600mV

DIGITAL

Frequency response (-1dB) 10Hz-26kHz

Distortion (-60dB, 24bit) 0.03%

Dynamic range 117dB

PHONO (MM)

Frequency response (-1dB) 10Hz-20kHz

Distortion (1kHz, 5mV in) 0.01%

LEAK STEREO 130 £699 (£799 WALNUT)

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced.

VERDICT

Warm yet detailed sound from vinyl and digital sources with vintage style and modern features. Superb.

FOR

- smooth, full-bodied character
- lovely inlaid remote control
- retro good looks

AGAINST

- no mono switch

LEAK CDT £449 (£549 WALNUT)

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced.

VERDICT

A CD transport that can also play digital files from flash drive.

FOR

- easy to use
- plays from a flash drive
- remote control

AGAINST

- no hi-res from flash drive
- poor display

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QUESTIONS

1. The grilles are held by –
   a) nails
   b) glue
   c) adhesive tape
   d) magnets

2. The bass/mid unit has an –
   a) aluminium cone
   b) coated paper cone
   c) steel cone
   d) wooden cone

3. Our samples were –
   a) Zebra striped
   b) Polka
   c) Graphite Grey
   d) Polka dot

4. The cabinet is –
   a) sturdy
   b) floppy
   c) featherweight
   d) buoyant in air

ENTRIES WILL BE ACCEPTED ON A POSTCARD ONLY.
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Leak History

A history like few others. Harold Joseph Leak started one of the world’s first hi-fi companies in 1934, bringing superb sound into homes around the world.

NOW

ANOTHER MILESTONE IN AUDIO ENGINEERING

BY

LEAK

Harold Leak holding the company’s first transistor amplifier, the Stereo 30, launched in 1963. After a range of highly regarded valve amplifiers it met a mixed reception. Early transistors suffered distortion and were unreliable, but Leak persevered – soon after launching an improved Stereo 30+

0f all the names in high fidelity sound reproduction, that of H. J. Leak and Co (Leak) is arguably the most influential. Leak hi-fi products are well known collectors items today, yet Harold Leak started the company in 1926 with £22 and a handcart; it was officially registered in September 1934. Here’s the company’s history, compiled from information provided to us in 1996 by Chief Engineer, Ted Ashley, as well as our own researches.

In the 1920s and ’30s the idea of domestic hi-fi did not exist. Valve radios brought entertainment into the home and listening was through headphones. But public spaces such as theatres, music halls and cinemas started broadcasting sound through loudspeakers driven by valve powered Public Address (PA) amplifiers.

Sound quality became an issue and Harold Leak addressed this by producing, in 1936, an amplifier with 13W output, a frequency response of 40-14kHz and the ability to “fill a 2000 seat theatre”. One was installed in the Palace Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, in London’s West End entertainment district. This amplifier “is equally suitable for radio and gramophone reproduction” Harold claimed, showing where his gaze was focussed – hi-fi in the home.

No examples exist as far as we are aware. Ted Ashley provided the advertisement for it we publish here.

It was in 1945, after the Second World War, that Leak produced their first domestic hi-fi amplifier, the Point One Type 15, that, they claimed, was “the first in the world” to produce just 0.1% distortion. This was at a time when 5% was the norm and 2% laboratory standard. In post
Leak’s successful TL/12 amplifier, launched 1948. It used GEC KT66 output valves – popular in their day and used by Quad in the Quad II power amplifier. Output just 12 Watts – but with gorgeous sound.

Leak’s successful TL/12 amplifier, launched 1948. It used GEC KT66 output valves – popular in their day and used by Quad in the Quad II power amplifier. Output just 12 Watts – but with gorgeous sound.

Leak electrostatic panel, 1956. A prototype, never used in a commercial loudspeaker.

Leak TL/12 Plus – an update of the TL/12 – released 1956. It used smaller EL84 output valves in place of KT66s.
NEW MODEL ARMY

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already owned Wharfedale, their engineers took on Leak loudspeaker development at Wharfedale’s Bradford factory, West Yorkshire. As a result the Leak Sandwich loudspeaker and later variants were superseded in 1974 by the Leak 2000 series comprising Leak 2020, 2030, 2060 and 2075, all with unique drive units in-house designed with the aid of new-tech laser interferometry.

Dr Alex Garner (later to run Tannoy) headed up the Rank Leak Wharfedale design team for this range, using Leak’s Sandwich bass units, a plastic cone midrange perforated with wave breaks and backed by a clear plastic damping layer, and purple Mylar dome tweeter. He was aided by Dr Don Barlow who worked on the Sandwich with Harold Leak.

The massive 2075, pinnacle of the range, was later upgraded to the 3090, with Isodynamic tweeter and flat aluminium strip bass inductor—a monster of a loudspeaker replete with Leak Sandwich style cones for bass and lower mid-range. The upper mid-range unit came from the 2000 series and a unique Isodynamic planar-magnetic treble unit was.

In the end, Leak faded away, overwhelmed by an outside world that could produce good amplifiers more cheaply. All the same, with £22 and a handcart Harold Joseph Leak had done well to bring high quality audio to an appreciative audience around the world—and Leak is remembered for that today.

The 3090 was a high-technology statement product launched to kick off a Leak 3000 series—but this series never followed. It was the end of Leak as a brand name, one representing cutting-edge technology product in its time.

At that time—the late 1970s—amplifiers were produced more effectively outside Britain, the last Leak branded electronic products being the Leak 2000 and 2200 receivers, bought in from overseas.

Leak moving coil cartridges, introduced 1954. For microgroove at left and 78 shellac at right. Their first cartridge was introduced 1948.

Leak’s first loudspeaker, the Sandwich—so called because the bass cone sandwiched polystyrene between aluminium foil membranes, for light weight and strength. Introduced 1961. All succeeding Leak bass units used this unique construction. Harold Leak demonstrated its strength by standing on it!

Leak’s last loudspeaker, the massive 3090. It had a Sandwich construction (13in) bass unit and lower midrange driver. The upper midrange unit was perfected by laser interferometry. The Isodynamic tweeter was a unique magnetic-planar design. (Picture: Adam Smith)
Martin Pipe plugs his lugs with the Rai Penta In-Ear Monitor Earphones from Meze Audio.

On a Musical Adventure
N ot so long ago, the idea of a tiny ear-insert containing five (or more!) transducers and able to match or even better the performance of many full-sized headphones would have seemed plain daft. But here we are with devices like the Rai Penta, which tops the range of IEMs (In-Ear Monitors) currently available from Romanian headphone specialist Meze Audio. The device gets its name from the Romanian word for ‘heaven’ (Rai), and an allusion to the number of transducers (Penta). These devices are a symbol not only of advanced micro-engineering, but - maybe reflecting their not-insignificant £999 asking price - thoughtful packaging too. Meze has provided everything most users will need to make the most of their devices. As well as the ‘phones, you get several ear-tips of differing shapes and sizes (4 soft-silicone pairs, one double-flanged pair, a ‘Comply’ foam pair and two deep-insertion double-flanged pairs), a nondescript 3.5mm to 6.3mm adapter and even a 2-pin adapter that will allow you to judge for yourself how bad the average in-flight entertainment system sounds. There’s also supposed to be a cleaning tool, although it was missing from the review sample.

As with all decent earwear, the Rai Penta’s cables are detachable – here, courtesy of MMCX connectors. Supplied is a braided cable made of silver-plated copper Litz wires terminated in a rhodium-plated 3.5mm TRS plug. A quality item, albeit rather short at 1m, it will - with or without adaptors - be compatible with the majority of sources you’ll encounter. Note however that balanced upgrades are available from the Meze website.

To safely-transport such goodies, Meze includes an unusually-styled ethylene-vinyl acetate (EVA) zip-up case that looks suspiciously similar to the one accompanying the much cheaper single-transducer Rai Solo model. The Rai Penta may be at the cutting edge of transducer tech, but ironically there’s a throwback to the very earliest days of radio loudspeakers. Four of the internal drivers use a principle known as ‘balanced armature’ (BA). In their original form, moving-iron BA speakers sounded terrible but had the advantage of efficiency - important, given the restricted power of valve amps at the time. As these improved in the late 1920s, moving-coil (MC) speakers - less-efficient, but audibly better - began to take over and now pretty much rule the roost.

The BA concept has been revived to improve efficiency. This increased efficiency is quite startling: after switching from my reference ‘phones (Focal Utopias, with beryllium-diaphragm MC drivers) to the Rai Pentas, I had to turn down the volume of my headphone amp sharpish - lest hearing damage result! The numbers tell the story; Meze claim a sensitivity of “112dB” (presumably 1mW/1kHz) while the full-sized circumaural Utopias weigh in at a comparatively-paltry 104dB.

The downside to BAs is that while they can be made to sound fantastically good, they do so over a relatively-narrow frequency range; in contrast, MC headphone drivers are almost without exception full-range. Hence the inclusion of four BA drivers in the Rai Penta IEM - and as they’re not cheap, a product of this nature is always going to be expensive.

Another problem with BAs is that they are not really suitable for use at low frequencies. Consequently, Meze has adopted a ‘hybrid’ approach. The fifth driver is of conventional MC design - such transducers have a great track record when it comes to delivering bass. The BAs look after the mids (two drivers) and the highs (the remaining two drivers).

As this is a flagship product, Meze has gone to town with the enclosure, which is precision-milled - right down to the channel-identification markings - by CNC machinery from a block of solid aluminium. Its external shape is the culmination of “3 years research” by Meze, and is intended to fit snugly into your ear so that it’s comfortable to wear for long periods. After all, you’ll listen to more music if wearing your headphones is a pleasant experience. The Rai Pentas also address a long-term IEM annoyance; using the appropriate ear-tips, the Rai Pentas always ‘stayed put’ - even during sweaty visits to my (recently-reopened) gym.

Comfortable they certainly are; my only complaint is that the anodised layer came off the edges of one of the pair. But these are intricate shapes - internally, as well as externally. With five transducers to accommodate, the interior of this IEM is complex. Connecting the drivers to the ear tipped nozzle is a network of sound tubes, which are of “very specific and precise length...they basically determine the air volume in front of each driver”. Meze precision-mills them from aluminium, thereby “eliminating imperfections that you can find in the plastic tube and dampener systems” of rival multi-driver IEMs.

**SOUND QUALITY**

The nominally 20 Ohm Rai Pentas were partnered with a number of devices - all of which easily drove these IEMs. Most of my listening involved hi-res and CD-quality material, experienced on a Prism Callia (driven by a Cambridge CXN v2 streamer) and my X3 FiO player. The starting efficiency of the Rai Pentas certainly benefitted the latter (and, for that matter, a Google Pixel 3a smartphone). Among the first qualities you notice during serious listening - you need a few hours to ‘break them in’ - is their resolution and speed. Usually, these are the first casualties of multiple-driver complexity. Percussion makes transient demands that are met easily here.

The electronic sample-rich rhythms of Disclosure’s uptempo house track Tenderly, which you’ll find on the deluxe edition of Settle, are a case in point. They stop and start with utter precision and an absence
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A close-up view of a Rai Penta IEM. Its specially-shaped body ensures a good anatomic fit and thus long-term comfort. Note the 'port-holes'; according to Meze these help to "regulate internal-chamber pressure through a finely tuned PES - Pressure Equalisation System - in front of and behind the driver assembly".

The letters ‘L’ and ‘R’ have been machined onto the enclosures, for channel-identification purposes.

Tenderly's bassline is deep and bouncy but it didn't dominate; treble content (mostly percussive) was both clean and finely-etched. Vocals and synth leads retained their proportion and place within the mix. Other material indicated slight midband emphasis – in particular, vocals and speech (announcers on BBCs Radio and 4) were given a tad more presence and intelligibility. Might this have something to do with the hearing-aid heritage of recent BA implementations?

But they sure as hell do a good job with music. Every element of the military percussion forming part of Britten's War Requiem (LSO/Noseda, 24/48) could be made out, even against the massed choral and orchestral forces that the Rai Pentas manage, despite the complexity, to place accurately within the soundstage. The bass drum, which eludes many IEM-type devices I've tried, fared better with the Rai Pentas.

I was also impressed with the detail and insight they impart to vocal soloists and choirs. Conveyed with every heartbreaking nuance intact was Portishead singer Beth Gibbons contribution to Gorecki's Third Symphony (Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra/Pendarcki, CD FLAC rip). This is a live recording and the 'noises off' were sufficiently resolved to make it convince.

Simpler recordings benefit too. When playing Gdansk-born pianist Hania Ran's beautifully-atmospheric Esja album (CD FLAC rip), the Rai Pentas allow the notes and chords of her instrument to decay gracefully and naturally within the performance space. It was also easy to make out the sounds of her fingers hitting the keys as she plays – and even some breathing – adding to the uncanny realism of what was being projected into my ears.

Sufficient room was given to the bass that accompanies some of Ran's music; it complements the piano, rather than overpowers. The extraordinary resolution of these IEMs did however draw my attention to limitations in the recording chain – noise in the Gorecki piece, as well as the muddy low-end of some of the tracks that make up Bowie's Blackstar album (24/46), among them 'Tis A Pity She Was A Whore.

**CONCLUSION**

Yes, Meze could have provided a longer lead. Furthermore, the anodised finish of one review sample began to lose its edge colouring during the review period. Such matters apart, it's difficult to fault the Rai Pentas, their incredible efficiency not compromising the ability to reproduce music. The micro-details laid bare by these IEMs was at times revelatory. They bring recordings closer to what one would expect from a live performance; indeed, given that the acoustics and PA systems of performance venues often leave much to be desired the results here were often more satisfying...

Meze's package is fairly comprehensive - as well it might be, for a grand. You get eight pairs of tips to suit different ears, a detachable 1m unbalanced cable with 3.5mm stereo plug, a rather cheap 6.3mm adaptor and a distinctively-styled zip-up carrying case. Thanks to the use of standard MMXIC socksentry, the Rai Pentas can easily be upgraded to balanced operation with an 'after-market' cable - Meze can supply these.

**MEZE RAI PENTA**

£999

**OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.**

**VERDICT**

Incredibly fast, revealing and musical. These are IEMs worthy of the name. 4

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Visit our website at www.hi-fiworld.co.uk or send your emails to letters@hi-fiworld.co.uk. Letter of the month wins a pair of KEF Q150 bookshelf speaker

Answers by: NK - Noel Keywood; DT - Dave Tutt; PR - Paul Rigby; MP - Martin Pipe.

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https://uk.kef.com/products/q150-bookshelf-speaker
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A PAIR KEF Q150 LOUDSPEAKERS are on their way to COLIN TOPPING, Letter of the Month winner in our September 2020 issue.

Letter of the Month

BIG BAND BREAKDOWN
Over the last several months you have made reference to the Syd Lawrence Orchestra’s “Big Band Spectacular”, recorded at Air Studios, mastered at Abbey Road and issued on the Chasing the Dragon label.

This is indeed a spectacular “you are there” recording, especially in the direct-to-disc version, and a very good introduction to big band jazz (and recommended as such).

I had the honour to be the deejay at the sadly now defunct Big Bands Windsor (BBW), which meant I played the music for distinguished presenters, including Chris Dean, our president, and leader of the Syd Lawrence Orchestra.

At Big Bands Windsor he played a track, pre-release, from “Big Band Spectacular”. The record is not particularly new; there is no date on the sleeve or either of the discs but I would suggest it was released in 2015 or maybe 2016.

There was a later “Chasing the Dragon” LP featuring the singer Clare Teal and the Syd Lawrence Orchestra in celebration of Ella Fitzgerald’s centenary on 25th April 2017 – also well worth having.

For those who might be interested in exploring big band jazz, I recommend a great CD box set of the “Second Testament” Count Basie Band “Live at the Crescendo” which is still available from Amazon. The sleeve notes are say about the recording engineer but it was Wally Heider, which is a recommendation in itself.

Great band in full flow.

Another great international band was the (British) Ted Heath Orchestra and my best intro recommendation is the double CD of “The Final Concert”, from 2000 it isn’t available new anymore but I see there are quite a number of used copies on eBay just now. The concert was introduced by the late Malcolm Laycock, a member of Big Band Windsor and Chris Dean’s predecessor as our President. I had the great pleasure of working with Malcolm and former members of the Ted Heath Orchestra when BBW still had a large membership.

A TRIBUTE TO Ella Fitzgerald
PERFORMED BY Clare Teal

Another Big Band LP from Chasing the Dragon “featuring the singer, Clare Teal and the Syd Lawrence Orchestra in celebration of Ella Fitzgerald’s centenary – also well worth having” says Robert Parsons.

Produced by Milo & François Valentine
Pinner Big Band Club continues (although not at the moment of course) and I am deejay there, as well as being one of the presenters. Happy to spread the word and deal with questions.

I can also recommend the “Proper Box” of the early Woody Herman Bands (or “Herds”), and Duke Ellington at Newport 1956 on LP. The landmark Benny Goodman 1938 concert at Carnegie Hall is also a must have, in particular a 1987 Columbia reissue, intended as a 50th anniversary celebration but released when Goodman died in 1987. The original was released in the autumn of 1950 (the story of how this famous recording came about is for another time, but as I say above “happy to deal with questions”).

Curiously no attempt was made by Columbia to convert from the American Columbia EQ curve to RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America), so when I listen to this double album I am pleased to be able to use the appropriate setting on my GSP Revelation phono stage, which seems not to feature in your recommendations.

The review of the iFi Black Label ‘stage’ has some relevance here, although the GSP is a great sounding ‘stage’, with twelve EQ curves including a specific American Columbia setting. The Revelation is still on the GSP website, although it has been largely superseded by GSP’s Accession which also has selectable EQ curves, but not as many, dispensing with the eight 78 rpm curves. This is in the same price area as the iFi phono stage and my own recommendation for those who can’t afford Zanden prices, and indeed those who can.

Thanks Noel for continuing to publish during these difficult times, and I quite understand that you were unable to publish for two issues. Power to your elbow, and keep well.

Regards

Robert Parsons

Hi Robert. Thanks for all your helpful info, including more on B&G Bands. I think it is the sense of spontaneous ability in this recording that is so engaging: great to hear practiced musicians playing live in a one-off – and what sound quality. Atmosphere and totally engaging. As you say, recorded 2015.

 Foolishly I now understand I’ve never really ‘got’ B&G Bands, but I have after hearing this LP (which we all love at HFW Towers) and must try to catch one of their concerts.

When reviewing the iFi I wondered whether alternative EQ curves would be of interest – now I know! Consider contacting Dave Cawley at Sound Hi-Fi (Time-step), based in Devon, for in-depth info on all this. He lectures in the US about archiving technology and also produces archiving products, including a Direct Drive turntable that can be programmed to spin in Hz quartz-locked intervals from 16rpm to 99rpm. All about capturing those old recordings perfectly, but from LP of course.

There was no option but to cease publishing. It made logical sense and I discuss matters like this with our distributor and subscription house of course, to take in other (expert) views. There was total shut down of High Street, stations and airports around the world – and we sell around the world. Also, manufacturers were unable to supply product for review. No point in even trying to publish at the time, even though we were fit, able and willing to do so.

NK

THANKS FOR NOTHING
Hello. I am writing to thank you for pausing production of the magazine over the worst of the lockdown. Wait – what?

Well yes. Another well known magazine that I subscribed to continued to produce magazines by ham-fistedly cobbling together previous reviews into system reviews and upgrade ideas by means of a lot of copy and paste and a bit of connecting text. How many times do they expect me to read the same reviews?

I must have cost you dearly to have to pause production but you have maintained quality. I rationed myself to a page or so a day to keep me going and now we’re back in full swing. And a very well known magazine has lost a subscriber. Thanks again.

Andy Rawlins

Hi Andy. Thanks for your kind comments. See what I say in answer to the previous letter about why we stopped for two issues. However, we got back to work as soon as possible.

Pinner Big Band Club continues and I am deejay there, as well as being one of the presenters” Robert Parsons tells us. Pinner is in Middlesex (N.W. London) – easy access if you’d like to visit them.
As I explained in my column (Aug 20) we all caught the infernal bug early in the year and worked through it, not knowing at the time what it was (the symptoms are quite specific). So when shutdown occurred it was unwelcome to us. However, there really was no other sensible alternative to shut-down at the time and re-publishing old material refreshed by a small re-jig is an old trick I would not consider.

Shutdown cost less than expected. We received a grant from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. And of course we were furloughed, like everyone else. This made all the difference; there was no need to publish junk.

Happily, the hi-fi business is cracking back up pretty fast, even if the news trade is not because retail magazine sales are 40% down on the High Street and 80% down (gulp) at stations and airports. However, there is a slow but steady increase in these locations, as there sort-of has to be if planes are to keep flying and trains keep running. The world is slowly returning to normal, if a new ‘normal’ after the damage that has been caused. 

**CHOOSING A CARTRIDGE**

Andrew Burchaell's letter in the September issue, reminded me of a dealership in Birmingham some years ago. I was shopping around for a new MM cartridge at the time, more or less deciding on the Ortofon VMS 20, which was upgradeable to the VMS 30 – remember those?

I went into Norman H. Field in Hurst Street, Birmingham to discuss my choice. To my amazement, providing that I paid in full, I could return the cartridge and try something else, if not happy. What a service. Needless to say I developed a great rapport with this dealer. I have often wondered if dealers still do this?

*Mike Bickley*

Hi Mike. Yes that does seem to be unusual. The product when used becomes second hand and worth little, even if in perfect condition, so a risky offer from the dealer as far as they were concerned. But it worked out well it seems.

Dealer offers change regularly so we cannot identify such offers, but readers should at least phone and ask. The issue of pickup cartridge sound and non-returnability comes up often as a source of buyer frustration. Seems like Norman H. Field in Birmingham made a bold attempt to overcome this issue. So I guess readers could ‘phone them to see whether this deal is still available.

Another way is to ‘phone importers, since they are usually in close contact with dealers. For Ortofon this is Henley Audio, Didcot, UK. 

**TONEARM REVIEW?**

With the resurgence of vinyl over the last decade, and record companies now seemingly making available on the format their least dynamically compressed versions of popular recordings, I decided that it might be time for me to upgrade/update my vinyl rig.

I run a Michell Gyrodec turntable (upgraded fully to near Orbe spec), Origin Live Silver Mk3c arm (much preferred to my previous Mk1), Ortofon Cadenzza Black cartridge (purchased 2010) and Tom Evans Microgroove+ needle.

I am particularly interested in the differences between the Mk4 Illustrious and Conqueror arms" says Chris Lloyd.

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I run a Michell Gyrodec turntable (upgraded fully to near Orbe spec), Origin Live Silver Mk3c arm (much preferred to my previous Mk1), Ortofon Cadenzza Black cartridge (purchased 2010) and Tom Evans Microgroove+ needle.

“This will provide huge sonic dividends, and I am renewing my cartridge with the same model in the near future.

I have been looking at arm upgrades (to undertake at the same time as the cartridge exchange) and favour sticking with Origin Live as a direct upgrade, but find that many of the Hi-Fi World OL tonearm reviews are out of date (being from 2003-2007), reviewing older versions of much of the OL tonearm range. Might these reviews be updated soon? I am particularly interested in the differences between the Mk4 Illustrious and Conqueror arms, and how they compare to the Silver – as well as other arms from other manufacturers.

Also a (comprehensive) review of the latest Tom Evans phono stage range would also be useful in terms of future upgrades – and I’m sure would delight readers of the magazine.

It would also be lovely to see Hi-Fi World explore possible replacements for the now defunct Oppo BDP-205 player. Which similar players equal or exceed the audio performance of this benchmark?
Finally (on my wish list, apologies!) I am a long term user of the AVI hi-fi brand. They mothballed production of their range of active loudspeakers over the last year - I understand for both personal and business reasons, not least due to global market geopolitical issues. But it now seems that they might be putting their final (?) long anticipated floor standing loudspeaker design into production in the near future, although details are scant. When they do, might Hi-Fi World be able to acquire a pair for review? It would be great to see comparison with the ATC SCM40A, which look to be the new speaker’s main competitor and which I heard at this year's Bristol Hi-Fi Show and was impressed by.

Many thanks for continued excellence with the magazine, particularly with regard to the technical content of the reviews.

Best wishes,

Chris Lloyd

Hi Chris. We must indeed speak to Mark Baker at Origin Live and review his latest arms. With SME out of the picture, Origin Live’s excellent arms have greater prominence – and as you have found they give fine results.

Much the same can be said for Tom Evans phono stages. We have a regular stream of phono stages passing through our doors but have heard nothing from Tom Evans on his latest products, so time for us to get in touch methinks.

Oppo’s BDP-205D Universal player was a one-off. Complex in its video ability and supreme in audio quality – it was too good to be true. So now not true. There will be no follow up. Best to consider a CD transport like the Audiolab 6000CDT coupled to their M-DAC+ that has the same basic set-up of ESS DAC with linear power supply as the Oppo.

In fact, just about everybody now offers Oppo type sound by using the same ESS ES9018 DAC fed by a linear power supply – even the Leak combo we reviewed this month, comprising a CD transport hooked up to ES9018 equipped amplifier.

I’ll say more about this prominence of the ESS ES9018 next month in my column, with suggested alternatives. It’s a safe option and a great option – but not the only option.

Powersupplies

I am not an electronics expert by any means, but I have been wielding a soldering iron on electronic projects and hi-fi equipment for many years. I just felt I wanted to write to you to express my thanks for the very interesting articles published in Hi-Fi World concerning changes in technology and their impact on our hobby. I have found Dave Tutt’s advice regarding SMPS, improved electrolytic capacitor technology and dodgy technical solutions particularly helpful.

I have acquired three integrated amplifiers from the famous online auction site during the past 12 months, one of which was an Arcam Alpha 3. Arcam's technical department's advice to me was to make sure I replaced capacitors like with like, but thank goodness I didn’t as the pre-amp voltage regulators could hardly cope with the increased voltage created by using modern capacitors of lower capacitance and higher working voltage in place of the original 10,000 µfd smoothing capacitors. In all three amps, needless to say the PSU caps were 85 degree rated (not 105).

A Cambridge Audio A1 amplifier using Philips TDA1514 was particularly interesting. It has a reasonable sound to it, but again PSU smoothing caps of low voltage headroom. But the real worry was for me that it to rely on the audio interconnects to keep the user safe! Needless to say, it now has a mains earth connection with a 100 ohm lift wire wound resistor to chassis and works fine with no hum problems at all.

As Dave has commented, I dread to think what problems will be experienced over the next few years when SMPS power supplies become the norm and then start failing. It seems to me that manufacturers have been able to produce stable amplification technology, but haven’t yet quite managed to sort out stable and robust power supplies and mains power connections.

Best regards,

Russell Hawkins
West Sussex

Hi Russell. Many thanks for your comments. I have to say that much of the equipment that we see, be it hi-fi or computers or most domestic equipment is compromised by the price profit motive of the manufacturers so we have to assume then that all this equipment could be better – if only by changing a few fundamental parts.

Of course availability of those parts is not always an easy question to solve but sometimes, with some
slight increase in current can cause a 5 degree increase in the core and enough to blow the thermal fuse rendering the transformer and probably the entire amplifier useless for want of a 60p fuse.

I am reminded of when Fender valve guitar amplifiers first came into the UK their transformers were tested across two American phases of a three-phase supply; at 60Hz and around 220V they ran fine. In the UK 230-240volts at 50Hz is an entirely different question and they ran too hot to touch (but have lasted in most cases 40-50 years).

As you can imagine there have been some changes that I have made which I have had to return to stock as they were causing stress in other parts of the equipment but at the same time the combination of repairs and modification is something that has been my work for best part of 46 years or more. I started when I was still at school.

On the point of earthing, the EU and IEE made some changes to the standards and therefore the way equipment was built some time ago. It was assumed I think that everything should be double insulated and therefore would not need to be earthed. After all how could we also trust the other half of the IEE standards – house wiring – to give us an earth that we required for our equipment?

There is no doubt that hi-fi with earthed chasis either with earth lifting by resistor or as in FA amps with parallel resistors and 0.1µF capacitors does have a sonic advantage. Indeed any tuner, no matter how good the tuning, will be better with a proper earth. Ask any ham radio person how deep and widespread his earth wire is buried in the garden! Pity the IEE didn’t stop the stupidity of captive power leads which cut through the cable and render equipment significantly more dangerous, be they earthed or not!

I deal with SMPSU just about every day because they are already in everything and falling in every thing! Your microwave oven, programmer on your washing machine, computer, phone, everything has them: it is just the scale of their output that is a factor. It is obvious that those that have tried mixing SMPSU with class D amplification have failed miserably to make these things reliable. Ampeg and Peavey Bass head amplifiers are typical examples of computer aided design and manufacture that is so far away from creating reliable products that they should never have been released! I hope Yamaha with their current range of FA equipment have cracked it as they are now offering a 7 year return to base warranty on some of their products!

Regards,
DT

VINYL TO FLAC
For the past twenty years I have been enjoying the convenience of music in the digital realm either on CD or latterly as FLAC files. I now find myself in a predicament as the age of the CD is drawing to an end and more and more record labels are releasing music as either MP3 file or physically on vinyl.

I am looking to invest in a record player for the express purposes of converting new vinyl releases to FLAC files. I presently own a Novafidelity X40 which has a built in phono stage and can record to FLAC but it also has line inputs for recording if you feel the phono stage needs upgrading.

I also possess a decent PC so I am open to buying a decent phono stage, and if required, an ADC and using the computer for conversion. I have a budget of around £1,000 to £2,000 but I can be flexible.

What I want is the best possible reproduction of what is in the vinyl groove to convert into a FLAC file and I ideally only want to go through the process of recording once. Thank you in advance for whatever advice you can supply.

John Buxton
Sheffield

Furutech ADL GT-40a phono preamp with high-res 24bit digital converter. It provides great digital sound from LP.

Hi John, this is an issue that comes up often in our pages. The simplest, most straightforward and affordable solution that gives top sound quality by producing high resolution 24bit digital files is offered by the Furutech ADL GT-40a phono stage (MM) with super high quality (24bit) digital converter (ADC) on-board, price a reasonable £550 or so. Feed its USB output to your PC and rip vinyl using either VinylStudio or the more complex but free Audacity editor.

I’d suggest you avoid budget turntables with optional digital output because most are 16bit (CD quality) and they are incapable of capturing the vinyl sound without adding in a coarse ‘grey’ character due to the quantisation noise that budget 16bit ADC’s produce. Audacity will produce a FLAC file for you, or any other format as you so wish.

NK

LOUDSPEAKER ISOLATION
Looking at my Leno Xone floor standers, I had always thought the floor spikes were of poor quality/assembly as the ‘speakers were prone to wobble. Also the floor boards in my listening room resonated.

I needed speaker isolation platforms. Good ones are very expensive so I pulled out all eight spikes and assembled this… a 600mm x300mm x50mm slab sitting on six half (cut) squash balls. The speaker sitting on 4 Sorbothane hemispheres which are on top of the slab.

Great isolation. Sound has now snapped into focus, no resonance in floor and clean bass. all for a total cost of £60.

Martyn Goodacre.
High Fives

Klipsch The Fives loudspeakers offer the lot for under £1k, impressing Noel Keywood.

With these little loudspeakers you get a whole hi-fi system, albeit without source, for £830. Klipsch The Fives pack a massive amount of technology into a small space and I could barely find anything to fault, they are so carefully engineered. “The most versatile loudspeakers on earth” Klipsch say – and I agree.

What you get here is one active loudspeaker (right) carrying all the electronics, so it’s connected to mains power via a lead with small two-pin ‘calculator’ connector, easily replaced if the 3m long one supplied is too short. The other loudspeaker is passive, driven though a 4m (12ft) long connecting cable. The right loudspeaker can be placed at left if this is nearer a mains socket, but then the stereo sound stage is reversed, not a big issue for most potential users I suspect.

The main loudspeaker comes packed with ability. It has a 60 Watt stereo low frequency amplifier feeding left and right bass units, and 20 Watt stereo high frequency amplifiers feeding left and right treble horns, giving 80 Watts total per channel – enough for very high volume.

There are so many input options it was almost bewildering. There are S/PDIF digital inputs, optical and electrical, plus a USB input for computer connection. The S/PDIFs can, for example accept the digital output of a CD player. Klipsch note that the optical input works up to 192kHz sample rate – and it does I found.

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OCTOBER 2020 HI-FI WORLD 33
Large thumb wheels atop the right loudspeaker control volume and select input. The input LED display doubles as a volume level display.

Then there are analogue inputs, comprising a pair of Line level phono sockets that can be switched to accept the output of a turntable fitted with moving magnet (MM) cartridge. For convenience there is also a 3.5mm stereo jack input, using a socket found on mobile phones and portable players to allow use of a simple 3.5mm connecting lead, rather than a 3.5mm-phono adaptor lead. No probes with getting high volume since our measurements showed both are very sensitive.

But that is far from all. This loudspeaker accepts the Bluetooth output of a mobile ‘phone as well, for wireless connection.

And finally it has an HDMI input to accept audio from the ARC return channel of a video player or TV with HDMI ARC equipped connector. The latter is to make for easy connection into any A/V system, allowing these little wonders to replace a sound bar. Sound bars are a convenience but they should sit under the screen whereas independent loudspeakers can be placed at left and right, possibly either side of a chimney breast if you live in an old building with such things, as I do.

Klipsch have covered just about all angles here. At the price and small size you have to accept Class D amps driven by a switch-mode power supply (I would guess) and a digital convertor that is low cost, as I was to find out.

In spite of this huge range of options and the background technical complexity, including active crossover and twin power amps, The Fives were quick and easy to set up and use; even the manual (downloadable from Klipsch website) has been shorn down to simple diagrams that I found clear and succinct. It’s a plug ‘n play job in effect and all worked perfectly, straight out of the box. Select input from one thumb wheel atop the right active speaker and control volume with the other. But there is a remote control to do all this, including turning power on and off.

Klipsch build in a dynamic EQ system as they call it, in effect what was once termed a ‘loudness control’. At low volume it increases bass output to compensate for the ear’s lack of low frequency sensitivity at low volume. Measurement revealed +5dB maximum bass lift at low volume and if this doesn’t please, possibly when listening close up at low volume in a small bass-heavy room, it can be switched out on the remote control. As volume goes up bass boost comes down progressively with these systems. There are no tone controls.

The cabinets are 305mm high, 166mm wide and 235mm deep, weighing 5.33kg / 4.85kg apiece. Bass comes from a small 4.5in (120mm) paper cone woofer and treble from a 1in (25mm) titanium dome tweeter loaded by a large Tractrix profile horn. At rear there is a Tractrix port.

**SOUND QUALITY**

The Fives have vivid dynamics making them sound lively and bold – meant in the best sense. There was no shortage of bass even with Bass EQ switched out. In fact, I checked a few times just to make sure because bass was on the heavy side for my taste, even in our large (6550 cu ft) listening room where small loudspeakers can sound lost. The trombone behind Hans
American Audio

They are brought in a CD digital by using a QED Quartz glass fibre optical cable from our Oppo BDP-205D Universal player acting as a transport. Reviewing The

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the small Klipsch

The Fives ran impressively flat from 35Hz to 18kHz. The horn loaded tweeter was very smooth on and off axis under measurement, unlike most budget loudspeakers.

Bass output was strong and well maintained down to 50Hz, the rear port peaking sharply at 50Hz (red trace) to augment output. So, strong bass that goes low, the port adding to ‘bass speed’. An analysis of bass amp response showed peaking at 40Hz so the sound has been tailored for strong low bass.

In frequency response terms this is a very accurate loudspeaker with wide dispersion of sound, suggesting good insight from a present midrange and plenty of detail, not over emphasised.

Sensitivity through the analogue Line input was high at 80mV for a loud 90dB sound pressure level at one metre, sufficient to accept the headphone output of a phone – typically 1000mV – with plenty of leeway on the volume control.

A full level digital input gave 90dB again with volume to spare, so no problems here in terms of volume matching. Frequency response was identical to the analogue inputs, meaning there are no fundamental response issues with the DAC used. But highish noise and distortion levels, plus the presence of a huge out-of-band alias signal point to cost-cut digital processing.

The Phono stage drove the Fives to a loud 90dB from a 5mV input with plenty to spare on the volume control and frequency response was identical to the Line input (with an inverse RI/A equalised pink noise input), so an accurate phono stage.

The Fives measured well through analogue and not so well through digital inputs. They have been engineered to give an almost unusually accurate response though, that will come over as smooth and natural – good for long term enjoyment. NK

A 1 inch (25mm) titanium dome tweeter with phase cap and Tractrix horn loading that gives it wide dispersion and optimal acoustic coupling.

Wide dispersion gives big sound staging and there’s plentiful bass. With more inputs than “all others on earth” Klipsch say, they are massively capable too. The digital section isn’t distinguished, but this apart The Fives are a thoroughly superb set of active loudspeakers.

WHAT YOU GET WITH THESE ‘SPEAKERS IS A BIG, GUTSY AMERICAN SOUND”

Sixes (February 2020 issue) Jon Myles preferred analogue. When I connected up the Oppo’s analogue outputs, bringing into play it’s ESS DAC, this smoothed the sound. So did analogue from our Timestep Evo Technics SL-1210 Mk2, SME309 arm, Audio Technica VM-750SH Shibata tipped moving magnet cartridge.

Conclusion: a not brilliant digital section – as is to be expected at the price, analogue sounding best.

Difficult to explain this, but digital sounded more lively – sharper and faster – than analogue, yet more unsettling in the long run. Analogue was a smoother and easier listen.

Although my words may seem a little critical, at the same time I enjoyed what I heard after spinning through a wide range of CDs. What you get with these ‘speakers is a big, gutsy American sound shall I say, not for wimps!

Yet at the same time there was none of the obvious tonal imbalance – especially from raised treble – that pollutes so many UK loudspeakers nowadays. Klipsch don’t do that. They keep it clean and accurate,

KLIPSCH THE FIVES £830

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced.

VERDICT Impressive little loudspeakers with big sound and massive ability.

FOR - powerful sound
- smooth
- big bass

AGAINST - mediocre digital quality
- no tone controls

Henley Audio
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American Beauty

The beautifully made Bricasti M3H DAC and headphone amp from America may be easy on the eye, but is its beauty more than skin deep? Chris Frankland finds out.

I admit to not knowing much about Bricasti before laying hands on its M3H DAC with headphone amp. Yet, this American company’s musical credentials are impressive. Bricasti was founded in 2004 by Brian Zolner and DSP software engineer Casey Dowdell – a pro-audio company once described as “the godfather of digital reverb”. The M7 reverb processor was Bricasti’s first studio product and importer SCV has been slowly building Bricasti’s presence in the UK hi-fi market since the M3 joined the flagship M1 at the Canjam show last July.

The standard M3 DAC sells for £5,399, but the M3H is fitted with the optional headphone amp, adding £679 to the price. The M3H is well constructed. Weighing around 4.5kg, the 64mm high by 356mm wide by 287mm deep case is machined from solid aluminium sections. It uses two fully
differential conversion channels, each with its own Analogue Devices AD1955 chip in a mono configuration with clocking achieved by DDS (direct digital synthesis) to ensure a “pure digital signal path” without the use of sample rate converters, to help it achieve “extremely low” levels of jitter.

Independent power supplies have been fitted for analogue and digital processing sections to help prevent digital noise from entering the analogue chain. There is native DSD playback through AES or SPDIF inputs using its own proprietary one-bit analogue converter. The USB interface supports sample rates up to 384kHz/24bit PCM and DSD256 via DoP.

To replay DSD files from a computer, you will need to use a media player such as JRiver or Audirvana. In my case, I simply plugged a USB drive containing my DSD files into a Pro-Ject Stream Box S2 Ultra (see review in September issue) and used that for playback.

The front panel sports a volume control, display and six buttons to select input, level, status, balance and mute. A ‘reference’ option allows you to store your settings. On the far left there are balanced (XLR) and unbalanced headphone outputs.

The rear panel provides analogue outputs – balanced via XLR and unbalanced via phono – and digital inputs via SPDIF: electrical (phono), AES/EBU (XLR), Toslink optical, and also USB. There is also an RJ45 network socket. The volume control allows the M3H to drive an external power amplifier.

Bricasti say their headphone circuit operates in true balanced mode, with four drivers, one for each positive and negative leg of the left and right signal, and is said to provide a “balanced path from the output of the DAC to the headphones”.

**SOUND QUALITY**

I fed the M3H from an Audio Note CD4.1x CD player. The Bricasti then fed an Audio Note Tonmeister integrated valve amp driving Audio Note AN-J LX Hemp speakers and alternatively Focal Chora 816s (review September 2020 issue).

The M3H offers two digital filters for PCM (CD) playback. Differences were small, but I marginally preferred Linear to Minimum Phase.

First impressions of the M3H were good. On Van Morrison’s Perfect Fit from the Days Like This CD, his challenging vocals were well presented and articulate, backing singers were well separated and the horn section had plenty of pizzazz. The bass line could have been a little fuller, but on balance the M3H sounded very good.

On Ben Sidran’s Sunny Side of the Street, the weighty bass line of this excellent recording was well conveyed with a good ‘walk’, while his stylish, pizzy vocals were articulate and detailed. All in all, the M3H appeared free from any major flaws.

Next I tried a couple of DSD files. On Stevie Wonder’s Master Blaster from Hotter than July the M3H captured his unique vocal style well and got a firm grip on the track’s solid, pumping rhythms, with a good snap to drums and percussion.

On It’s Too Late from Carol King’s Tapestry, the M3H imbued her vocals and piano with great presence and delicacy, while the bass line was tuneful and percussion well defined and separated.

So how was it on headphones?
Sonus faber

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MEASURED PERFORMANCE
With output Level set to reference 0dB, giving 2V from the RCA phono socket analogue outputs and 4V from the balanced XLR socket outputs, Dynamic Range (EIAJ) measured 120dB from the former and a high 123dB from XLR. The AES/EBU digital S/PDIF input also measured 123dB. These are high values, putting the M3 up with the best, if not ahead. It uses an Analogue Devices AD1955 DAC (2002) whose spec quotes 123dB dynamic range, so it meets spec.

Output can be doubled by turning the level control to +6dB but doing this degrades dynamic range slightly, rather than increasing it as in Chord Electronics DACs. Best to use 0dB with the M3.

The headphone output delivers 8V maximum, way above 1V or so needed for most headphones (for shattering volume), so plenty of leeway here. Dynamic Range measured 122dB – excellent for headphones.

Distortion and noise levels were very low. With 24/96 distortion came in at 0.015%-60dB) – up with the best. As always, distortion from CD (16/44.1) was 0.2%, due to 16bit quantisation noise.

Frequency response extended to 43kHz with 192k sample rate digital (fed in via the S/PDIF electrical connector) our analysis shows, rolling off slowly to the 96kHz theoretical upper limit. The filters did not alter this. The S/PDIF optical input (Toslink) connector managed 96kHz maximum; with 176.4kHz and 192kHz sample rates it fell silent, where most DACs have Toslink connectors and receivers able to handle these rates.

The Bryston measured well in all areas, but inability to process no higher than 96kHz sample rate via optical input is a drawback. NK

<table>
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<tr>
<th>FREQUENCY RESPONSE</th>
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<td>Frequency response (192kHz, 1dB)</td>
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<td>Distortion (-60dB, 24bit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>0.015%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dynamic Range (EIAJ)</td>
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<td>123dB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Output (phono, XLR)</td>
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<td>4V / 8V</td>
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Digital S/PDIF inputs (at left) are AES/EBU (XLR), electrical (phono), optical (Foslink). There is also USB for computer.

Balanced (XLR) and unbalanced analogue outputs are provided (at right).

his vocals were excellent, drums were dynamic and the backing vocals from David Crosby and Graham Nash were nicely defined.

Sax ace Kenny G’s G Bop meanwhile moved along nicely with good weight to its bouncy bass line, great definition to his mellow, yet incisive, soprano sax and a fluid syncopation to the percussion line.

CONCLUSION
The Bryston M3H impressed me greatly. CD and DSD playback were excellent and it gave a strong performance both on its analogue line output and through headphones. It is a very capable performer.

**BRICASTI M3H**
£6,078

**OUTSTANDING - amongst the best**

**VERDICT**
Performed well on CD and DSD playback and offered excellent sound quality on headphones too.

**FOR**
- great-sounding DAC
- drives headphones effortlessly
- great sound on DSD playback
- can be used as a preamp

**AGAINST**
- no remote control as standard
- optical input can only process 96kHz

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Uniti Star

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“In terms of build quality and sound, this is absolutely exemplary stuff from Naim”

“Pretty perfect. Cements Naim’s reputation as the Aston Martin of the audio world”

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Forbes

Step up to Uniti Star to add CD playing and ripping, plus a power boost, to your music-streaming experience. Bring your treasured CDs to life with exceptional audio performance, while still enjoying the convenience of streaming, in all or any room of your house.
Back in the wacky 1970s, the audio industry tried to impose quadraphonics – four-channel surround-sound – on an unsuspecting world. The idea is that, thanks to speakers positioned behind as well as front of you, there would be depth in addition to breadth of sound. It would take you closer to the concert hall, and studio wizards mixing pop and rock music would also be able to put those four channels to good creative use.

Quadraphonics failed for a number of reasons. Among these were incompatible standards, poor software availability, the expense and inconvenience of four speakers and the fact that – due mostly to limitations in the era’s analogue technology – it simply didn’t work well enough to justify the additional outlay, as far as most listeners were concerned.

Its essential need for four speakers meant that listening on headphones – by their very nature, two-channel devices – was out of the question until some bright spark came up with the idea of ‘quadraphonic headphones’. Several different models were produced, and equipment manufacturers accommodated them by putting both ‘front’ and ‘rear’ headphone jacks on the front panels of their quad amps and receivers.

All of the quadraphonic headphones available during the 1970s had two transducers in each earcup. One reproduced the front, while the other handled the rear. In most ‘70s-era specimens they were merely angled relative to each other on a baffle behind the earcup, and spaced to provide a degree of separation that allowed the ear to discriminate between the two channels and thus perceive depth.

By their very nature, quadraphonic headphones were ungainly contraptions and listeners had trouble distinguishing front from rear. They switched back to lighter stereo headphones for personal listening, quad being once again a speaker-only experience. But AKG came back to this idea with the K290s I’m talking about here, for reasons I will explain later.

Other varieties of headphone fared better in sound field terms. One such design was conceived by John Fixler and licensed to headphone manufacturers. It differed from most insofar that the transducers were internally-enclosed at opposite ends of the cup. The longer distance between them allowed a good ‘quad effect’ to be achieved – although bass response was restricted.

AKG, an Austrian company well-known for its excellent headphones and microphones, tried to re-invent quadraphonic headphones with the K290. Basically, they took a proven headphone design, complete with self-adjusting headband, squeezing two transducers into each headshell.

Each K290 earcup contains a pair of transducers – one front, and one rear. AKG angled them relative to each other on a baffle behind the earcup.
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*Reviews of the original Nucleus+, which has the same technical performance of the 2019 revision but a different look.

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The leads – with twice as many internal cores than two-channel stereo headphones – are fixed so cannot easily be upgraded.

along the lines of the non-Fixler quadrophonic headphones described earlier.

Transducers had become smaller so AKG could use a proven ‘form factor’ instead of forcing the user to wear something heavy, ugly and ungainly.

The result – their 270g semi-open circumaural K290s marketed as ‘surround headphones’ in 1996/7. Their long 6m cable was terminated in an 8-pin mini-DIN plug that you can’t plug directly into any standard stereo headphone socket; thankfully, AKG supplied an adaptor that allowed use of the K290s as ‘parabolic’ stereo headphones.

But there was also the thorny issue of connecting the K290s to home-cinema receivers. If they had headphone sockets, they were stereo-only.

I’m sure AKG would have liked the industry to standardise on its 8-pin connector, but it wasn’t to be. Instead, AKG supplied a trailing socket terminated in eight wires – two per transducer – to which you could fit connectors of your own choosing, possibly 6.3mm ‘front’ and ‘rear’ jack plugs – not a simple solution most users could deal with.

An attempt to solve this problem, AKG also sold the K290 ‘Surround Switchbox’. Its main job was to attenuate speaker-level signals so that they could safely-drive headphones. Two pairs of K290s can be plugged into the front panel of this box, with a control to switch between the two.

The K290s were intrinsically better-suited to old four-channel quad operation than later five-channel home cinema, since they cannot accommodate a centre channel transducer. To compensate for this, AKG’s box will – with a rear-panel switch – apply any signal connected to its ‘centre’ input equally to the front left and right channels in what is known as ‘phantom’ centre channel operation.

When launched the K290s sold for a substantial £150 – at a time long before expensive headphones became widespread. The switchbox was £100 on top of that.

I didn’t pay anything for mine, being review samples never collected by AKG’s PR company. To be honest, I don’t recall being particularly impressed by their performance as surround-sound ‘phones when I first reviewed them long ago.

Since 1997, there has been renewed interest in quadrophonics, so for this retro appraisal I fitted front and rear jackplugs to the K290’s unterminated wires. They were then plugged into my vintage Pioneer QX-949 receiver, its discrete inputs being fed by a universal disc player. Discrete quad material, including a channel-identification test disc and a transfer of Alan Parson’s Dark Side of the Moon four-channel mix, were played.

Nothing has changed my opinion; rear and front channels mostly ‘blend’ into each other so it’s difficult to pinpoint instruments, effects and vocals within the soundfield. And I know where they should be, from speaker listening! This lack of expected depth is a disappointment.

The front and rear transducers of each earcup are, I suspect, simply too close to each other – had AKG made the K290s longer to increase the distance between them, or used a Fixler arrangement, I’m sure they would have performed more convincingly with surround material. But then they wouldn’t have been light and compact, able to be worn for long periods – a significant plus point of their design.

But they do please in other ways: with the stereo adaptor, the K290s proved to be capable musical performers with hi-res digital material, as played through a Cambridge CXN and Prism Callia DAC/headphone amp. They image reasonably well and have a sensible tonal balance. There’s a solid low end (which is more than can be said of vintage Fixlers!) and no unpleasant colouration to speak of.

I’ll say that modern designs costing £300 (the K290s’ equivalent selling price today) are more revealing, though. I can appreciate why the K290s didn’t go down well with the home-cinema crowd, who appreciate the visceral thrills of ‘big’ soundscapes – and subwoofer bass you can feel, as well as hear. These quad phones, although light, don’t convey such effects well.

Needless to say, the K290s didn’t last for long and AKG didn’t make a follow-up. They do crop up on eBay from time to time, typically selling for between £50 and £150 (occasionally with switchbox included). Replacement earpads are rather more common.

All the same, AKG’s K290s were an interesting attempt at providing surround sound through wearable headphones and provide a fascinating look at what has been marketed in the past to keep us entertained.

An exploded view of the K290’s from AKG’s service manual. Around centre of the diagram you can see the small twin drive units that were supposed to give surround-sound from headphones.

The AKG K290s needed an optional Surround Switchbox. This was connected, via spring-clip terminals, between amplifier and ‘speakers.'
Chord Electronics use their own custom output devices in the new Ultima 6 power amplifier. Noel Keywood listens.
I’ve just been reading – well re-reading – Chord Electronics’s lengthy and intense explanation about why their new Ultima 6 stereo power amplifier is the first! – is different to most else.

Known for their high technology digital-to-analogue convertors (DACs) designed in-house, Ultima follows Chord Electronics tradition. With its own custom output transistors this power amplifier is, by definition, different and unique. See what I was reading in our box out – but have a strong cup of coffee first!

In outline Ultima 6 is simple. There are no fripperies. Plug an analogue cable into one end, press the large illuminated power button, make sure loudspeakers are attached – and that’s just about it. At your disposal is huge power, spec’d at 180W per channel (but we measured 300W) from a package weighing a substantial 22.4kg and measuring 420mm wide, 360mm deep and 150mm high. It’s a difficult lift, even though no big mains transformer lurks inside; amusingly the company say keep it away from toroids (anathema to Chord Electronics).

A classic 19in (482mm) wide rack shelf accepts it. Limited height and depth make Ultima 6 able to fit the bottom shelf of most hi-fi racks, or of course it can be placed on the floor.

Lack of fripperies means there’s nothing at rear that needs setting or adjusting. Nor at front either. No volume control for example, so any source – such as a phono stage – must have its own volume control. There is a small hidden slide switch to change internal light level: high or low.

In Chord Electronics fashion, pressing the large frontal power button that glows dull red when off, causes it to light up bright green. Internally, and visible through the top air vents, a blaze of “teal” coloured LEDs light up to show electronic activity. What you don’t get are power output LEDs, a headphone output or remote control. The latter functions must lie in an accompanying preamplifier, or DAC. Since most DACs have volume control this should not be an issue and I reviewed the Ultima in as simple a set-up as possible, without preamplifier.

The Ultima 6 is massively built, having substantial aluminium heatsinks to keep the output transistors cool. This is an analogue amplifier – not Class D – but it has the company’s own switch-mode power supply. Much of the technical data I read was devoted to why this
The top view shows the switch-mode power supply, with its many transformers and capacitors, is situated at front. Although switch-modes have transformers, they are not big and weighty like traditional types, because the conversion process works at high frequency.

SOUND QUALITY
I used the Ultima 6 to drive our Martin Logan ESL-X hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers, through Chord Company (unrelated to Chord Electronics) Signature Reference cables. Primary source was a Chord Electronics Dave DAC fed by an Oppo BDP-205D Universal player acting as a transport, connected by a QED Quartz glass optical digital cable.

Underneath, a heavy duty cable runs from the 16A power input to the front power supply. At rear are the amplifier’s audio circuits.

There was also impressive disconnect between instruments and the pounding bass synth of Sam Adagio: no matter what the bass synth was doing, the other synth lines remained steady on the sound stage; no instrumental line was bumping into another.
This translated over when winning volume up with the London Symphony Orchestra, playing HiATT's Mars, from The Planets: horns and violins stayed firmly in position when bg kettle drum strikes appeared.

Thunderous pieces like this were a delight for the Ultima: it threw them out with scale, yet also with a tight sense of orchestral order, as if the musicians had been nailed down.

I fancy Ultima 6 was a tad more embodied and empathetically engaging than Chord Electronics power amps I have heard in the past. Even our slightly wice CD of Nigel Kennedy had his Strad sounding smooth and amenable.

For deep insight and the ability to sustain a powerful sound Ultima 6 was weryingly good. It was a more sympathetic match with Chord Electronics own Dave DAC, than the ESS E9018 in our Oppo player. The were times when the analysis of Ultima and our electronics suggested the Oppo’s ESS DAC was slurring high frequencies, where Dave was delineating fast events and sending them in with cutting weight.

Ultima has the ability to receive fast data and resolve it, being symbiotically related to Chord.

### ULTIMA 6 TECHNOLOGY

Chord Electronics say - The first truly high volume, high power bipolar transistor, the ubiquitous Z8055, was developed as a triggering device for an atomic bomb, acting as a switch – as all bipolar transistors are. These devices are not good in their transition period between on and off which, unfortunately for bipolar - is where they are used in audio amplifiers.

The Chord Electronics output stages in Ultima are designed around metal-oxi-
diconductor MOSFET devices developed exclusively for Chord electronics by a UK semiconductor fabrication house formerly involved heavily in the aerospace sector. Chord Electronics approached them to produce a 200 Volt / 300 Watt device that has been realised by use of a novel packaging technique, which places two silicon chips in parallel in the same TO3 style case.

This technique has the significant advantage of ensuring perfect thermal matching of the devices, eliminating the need for temperature balancing resistors in the output stage, thereby substantially improving both efficiency and the overall stability of the amplifier.

Our MOSFET design has been refined over time and is now in its fifth generation. Even our smallest amplifiers benefit from using our own bespoke silicon.

John Franks, MD, Chord Electronics.

### MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Power of Ultima 6 measured 312 Watts into an 8 Ohm load and 484 Watts into 4 Ohms, making it massively powerful. No noise at full power (no fan) and the heatsinks stayed cool, although full power is applied only briefly, around one minute, when testing. No overload indicators.

Distortion levels were very low, 0.005% in the midband (468Hz), and just 0.03% at high frequencies (1W, 10kHz, 42), as shown in our distortion analysis, worst case being full output at 10kHz where just 0.07% was recorded. These are very low values.

Gain measured x30 (30dB), 1.6V in giving near full output (48V), from both the unbalanced RCA phone socket inputs and the balanced XLR inputs. However, most power amps need 1V for full output; with the Ultima 6 a preamp will be needed for full power, but 1V from a normal preamp still gives 100W output and DAC outputs are usually greater than 2V so can fully drive Ultima 6.

Frequency response via XLR measured 4Hz-66kHz, our response analysis showing the audio band from 2Hz-20kHz. Via the phono inputs treble rolled off, measuring -1dB down at 10kHz, from our generators, as well as Dave and an Audiolab M-DAC+.

Presumably production samples will not have this response but XLR is best used in any case.

There was minimal output noise, with a noise figure of -102dB ref. full output of 50V/312W. NK

Power (8Ω) 312W
Frequency response (-1dB) 4Hz-66kHz
Distortion (1W, 10kHz) 0.03%
Noise -102dB
Sensitivity (for full output) 1.6V

### CONCLUSION

Ultima 6 is a very interesting amplifier, technologically and sonically Vastly powerful at 300W per channel; our measurements revealed, it has a sense of unstrained power of the ultra-clean variety. With deep insight giving fantastic detail it demands use with the company’s Dave DAC to show its mettle. Not a cheap combo but certainly amongst the best at any price.
WORLD STANDARDS

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

**TURNTABLES**

**AVIO INGENIUM** £800
Great bass response and upper midrange detail allied 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 servo control from the platter to keep a grip on tempos 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 iconic turntable, the legendary SLD982s from the strength to strength. New Kent sub chassis and Advanced DC motor add precision and grip to one of the world's most musical disc spinners. Expensive though.

**MICHELLE GYRO SGC** £1,700
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.

**PROJECT ESSENTIAL DIGITAL** £300
A budget turntable that turns in a great analogue performance, but also has a hi-res digital output. Send 24/16 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 RB333 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 pinhead, isolation, main bearing and power supply. Plus an SME arm (add £1600) ED convenience, rack steady pitch and fab sound at a great price. Our in-house reference.

**TONEARMS**

**ORIGIN LIVE ENCOUNTER MK3C** £1,745
Origin Live combines carbon fibre and ebony to a miraculous effect in its new 12-inch arm. Creathy and rich in presentation, the Encounter drives deep into the mix for a satisfying listen.

**RADDICHT GH 242 EXPORT** £810
Concentratively musical, lyrical sounding forward, but needs the right turntable.

**ORIGIN LIVE OXYX** £450
Easy, smooth, a very nice arm that widens your horizons as you listen to vinyl in the first place. Essential audition at the price.

**CARTRIDGES**

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

**REGA RB303** £300
A one piece tapered casting makes the arm 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 integral yet smooth and related sound. Superb build completes the package. Our Editor's steal.

**SME 300** £1,500
A one-piece tapered 9in arm finished like a camera and stick to use. Superb 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.

**DENON DL-103** £180
A popular and much loved budget MC with Big Bass, smooth treble and all deep sound stage. Fantastic value.
PHONO PREAMPS
CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 651F £200
Clean, concise sound from MM and MC cartridges at a very low price. A real bargain.

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

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

LEXIBA ACOUSTICS ELEMENTS ULTRA £1,190
Smooth and detailed sound with the ability to accommodate most modern cartridges. Exceptional value for money.

PREAMPLIFIERS
ICON AUDIO LA-4 MKII £1,400
Uses early 6SN7 tubes 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 MID-SE £1,520
A valve preamplifier with an open, effortless sound and a big soundstage. It has plenty of gain so will accept any source and drive any power amp. A real beauty.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS
ARIANO PRO84SE £1,499
Pure single-ended valve magic. Low-powered but immediately gorgeous, easy-going yet forcefully dynamic at the same time.

AVAYA RESEARCH VR60 £3,500
Four valve house sound with enormous pace and punch from traditional US muscle master Audio Research. Breathtaking, but expensive.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 661A £350
Dual mono construction and hearty 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 shoebox-sized Cyrus integrated now offering 80 Watts per channel, plus DAC. Swivel delivery from a safety case that fits in anywhere – and isn’t Class D!

EXPOURE 1010 £795
Entry level integrated Exposure has excellent upper midrange music with an almost valve-like sound.
**ICON AUDIO STEREO 60 MKII** £2,800
Excellent tube integrated with plenty of power and an expansive soundstage, plus K115 tube option and bass meter for easy adjustment.

**LOUDSPEAKER FLOORSTANDER**

**B&W 803 D3** £12,500
B&W's updated statement floorstanders deliver depth and definition with breathtaking speed and authority, aided by a diamond coated tweeter. Expensive – but enormously impressive.

**CASTLE AVON V** £1,600
A big floorstander at a modest price that suits the average room. Refined ribbon treble and deep bass give it a great delivery.

**ICON Audio MB845 MKII** £7,600
With 120W 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 - a must hear.

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

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

**QUADRAI ORIKAN VIII AKTIVS** £8,200
Active loudspeaker with tight, powerful bass, perfect accuracy and detailed treble from a ribbon tweeter.

**OACoustics 2050i** £480
A large floorstander at a budget price. Offers high sensitivity and big sound and has very few flaws for the price.

**SPENDOR SPIEGE R2** £6,495
Retro looks but a sound that’s hard to match. Spendor’s 12” bass unit provides massive low-end grunt with a room-filling sound.

**SPENDOR A3** £1,360
Fine little floorstander with a smooth, natural midband and even tonal balance. Ideal for smaller rooms.

**TANNOY Definition DC10 Ti** £6,000
Enormous power with great projection. Glorious subsonics too. Need little power to go very loud and have superb finish into the bargain.

**TANNOY KENSINGTON** £9,950
Big but not overpowering, punchy modern sound from classic cabinetry. Need a lot of power to go very loud and suit a traditional home, or castle.

**LOUDSPEAKERS STANDMOUNT**

**ACoustic ENERGY Neo V2** £225
Cleverly designed speaker with fast and tuneful bass.

**ACoustic ENERGY Ae1 Classic** £80
Brilliantly successful remake of an iconic design; not flawless, but surely one of the most musical loudspeakers ever made.

**MCINTOSH MC-152** £4,995
Stunningly insightful sound with enormous bass punch from a uniquely designed transistor amp. Amazing audio, a league up, if expensive.

**MARTIN LOGAN ELEKTRA** £3,500
Martin Logan’s budget baby. XStat hybrid electrostatic. Fits into any lounge to give electrostatic levels of clarity and imaging.

**MARTIN LOGAN ELECTROMOTION** £1,200
Martin Logan’s affordable baby. XStat hybrid electrostatic. Fits into any lounge to give electrostatic levels of clarity and imaging.

**QUADRAI ELITE G MP MONOBLOCKS** £2400 PR
The power of this monoblock is felt in a velvet glove. Plenty of power but delivered with an assured and confident nature. Smooth on top and easy on the ear but can rock out when needed.

**QUADRAI CHROMIUM STYLE 8** £1,700
A supremely smooth yet open sounding loudspeaker.公司 Split and detailed treble from a fine ribbon tweeter. Accurate yet informative and enjoyable Hi-Fi class.
ELAC BS243 £1,000
More transparent and spacious than they’ve a right to be at this price, these refined mid-price stands represent value.

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.

EMINENT TECHNOLOGY LFT-16A £1,200
U.S. planar magnetic bookshelf loudspeaker with unrivalled mid-band treble. Hear it before all else.

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
Supreme 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-monitor 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.

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS

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

CHORD MOJO £399
Class leading portable DAC and headphone amp with ability beyond all else. Big, open spacious sound.

EPHANY EHP-02 £90
PPA battery-powered portable gives great sound quality at an almost giveaway price. Happy with the output from an iPad or CD player, the little epiphany is a true bargain.

ICON AUDIO HP8 MKII £850
The HP8 MKII valve-based headphone amplifier brings the spacey sound of valves to headphones. And it matches ’em all.

FIDELITY AUDIO HPA 100 £350
Great little headphone amplifier with a lively yet refined and open sound.

MUSIC FIRST PHONE BOX £276
Brings a big stage, plenty of detail and rich, deep colours to the sonic spectrum.

OPPO HA-2 £250
Remarkable performance and sound from ESS Sabre32 DAC in a slim portable package.

CD PLAYERS

AMDIO LAB R200C/10 £949
Inspired CD player and DAC with price-performance ratio like no other. Capable of matching designs costing much more.

CANON CD2+ £3,100
Musically coherent and tuneful valve-driven CD player from Slovakia. Lovely liquid sound.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 651C £410
Snappy modern presentation from this budget CD player. Cracking audiophile entry point for any digital fan.

CHORD REFERENCE MKIII £16,000
A unique and massive engineering exercise that could well be the best CD player available. Chord’s Pulse Array DAC technology produces a musical experience like few others. A true reference player.

ESOTERIC K-03 £9,495
Superb high-end silver disc spinner that is beyond criticism. Devoted to its own character but has a flawless presentation.

EXPOSURE 101 £305
A20er player with fine sense of timing should be an automatic entry on any demo list at this price.

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.
WORLD STANDARDS

ELECTROCOMPANET EMP-1/S £4,650
Epic in scale, lavish in tone and exuberant in its musicality - this is a memorable SACD/CD player. Quirky in operation and modest in finish, though.

OPPO BDP-1050 £1,320
Universal player and DAC that makes CD and Blu-ray (+DVD) sound deep, spacious and full bodied. Reference quality that's affordable.

REGA APOLLO-R £550
Rega comes up with a fine CD player again. Tremendous detail and an easy, unforced sound at all times. Few bells and whistles but made up for by its superb sonic ability.

ROKSAN KANDY K2 £900
A charmingly musical performer at the price - this is a surgically sophisticated CD player for the money.

TUNERS

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 651T £2,999
Value-packed AM/FM/DAB and DAB+ ready tuner. Precise and detailed with excellent resolution of spoken word.

CREEK DESTINY 2 £550
Creek’s tuner expertise shines through in the Destiny 2. This AM/FM receiver is wonderfully three-dimensional and smooth.

MAGNUM DYNALAB MD-90T £1,900
Exceptionally able, but commensurately priced, audiophile tuner that cannot fail to charm.

DACS

AUDIOLAB M-DAC £600
Excellent sound from ESS Sabre32 DAC and impressive flexibility with a unique range of filter options make this a stand-out product. Low price is the icing on the cake.

AUDIOLAB Q-DAC £250
Striped-down version of Audiola’s M-DAC loses some features but retains much of the sound, making it a veritable bargain.

ANTELOPE ZODIAC GOLD/VOLTIKUS £3,095
DAC/preamp/power supply combination majors on detail but has a remarkable un-digital sound. One of the best at its price.

CHORD 2QUTE HD £990
Superb build quality and exceptional sound from this compact unit. Boasts the ability to handle SACD direct via USB and has an exceptional soundstage. One of the best DACs you can buy.

DCS DEBussy £8,000
DCS’s bespoke ‘Ring DAC’ circuit gives a beautifully fluid, almost analog-like sound that encourages long listening sessions. Not cheap but worth every penny.

NORTHERN FIDELITY DAC £650
Packed full of features, including Bluetooth and USB, this ESS Sabre32 equipped DAC offers crisp, insightful sound at low price.

METRUM OCTAVE £729
Unique two-box digital-to-analog converter with great sound at a very low price. Cuts upper treble, though.

NAIM DAC £2,400
Superb high-end digital converter with a probing, punchy and unerringly detailed sound.

TEAC UD-501 £899
Feature-packed DAC with benefit of DSD playback. Superb sound means little to touch it at the price.

RESONESSENCE INVICTA MIRUS £4,499
One of the most highly spec’d DACs available, with a smooth yet enthralling presentation. Few approach it.

NETWORK PLAYERS

CHORD DSX100 £7,500
Chord’s proprietary DAC circuit shines in their top-of-the-range streamer. Hear-through clarity with a sound rich in detail, dynamics and soundstage.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO NM50 £399
Budget offering from Cambridge offers a great introduction to network streaming.

CYRUS STREAM X £1,400
Gorgeous sound quality even from compressed digital music. New control app makes everyday operation a delight.

CONVERT TECHNOLOGIES PLATO £2,999
A network player with amplifier that does it all, including turn LP to hi-resolution digital, and add cover artwork from the 'net.

NAIM NO5X £2,995
Clean, reveal and very detailed sound with Naim’s 5th generation line and timing makes this one of the best network music players around.

NAIM NO5Xs £2,175
Clear sound quality with 1 st Mirus Naim port. A wonderful DAC with full 24/192 handling. Only the display could be better.
PORTABLE SPEAKERS

BAYAN SOUNDBOOK

£149.99

Superb design and great sound make for one of the best portable Bluetooth speaker/radios on the market. Not the cheapest – but worth every penny.

HEADPHONES

AUDEZE LCD-3

£1,725

A planar magnetic 'phone that offers monitor quality. Strong sound with silky, dark quality that others struggle to match.

DIGITAL SOURCES

ASTERIAE KERN AX100 MKII

£569

Portable high definition digital player with superb sound quality. Punchy and fast.

NAIM NAC-N172 XS

£1,650

A pre-amp/DAC/streamer package provides a taught, rock-solid presentation with a tonally rich midband and a superior sense of rhythm.

PRO-JECT STREAM BOX RS

£1,095

Unusual valve-based streamer/preamplifier with variety of inputs and a lovely liquid sound. Not the most detailed but compensates with sheer musical verve.

QUAD PLATINUM DMP

£2,500

Combined CD/network player has all the usual Quad elements but with added zest and detail that brings life to everything you care to play.

FIO X3

£150

Fabulous value player with nice easy sound and full range of abilities. Small and light. For review.

LOTTO PAW GOLD

£1,500

Reference quality sound; it’s like carrying your hi-fi in your pocket. Equally large too, but shaming headphone quality.

NAIM HDX

£4,405

Interesting one-box network-enabled hard-disk music system that gives superb sonics together with impressive ease of use.

NAIM UNITITE

£1,995

A 50W amplifier with traditional Naim heft, a CD player and vhf/fm radio, plus network input and Bluetooth make this a great all-in-one.

CABLES

BLACK RHODIUM TWIST

£71/3M

Twisted to fight off radio frequency, the Black Rhodium speaker cable is easy on the ear with a fine sense of clarity and focus. A remarkable performer at the price.

MAINS CABLES R US NO.27

£95

Offers a sprightly pace with a precise nature. Fast performance enhance frequencies and beautifully etched detail.

TELLURIUM Q BLACK

280/3M

A deep, dark, velvety performer that’s nevertheless highly musical, it represents excellent value as mid-price cables go.

TELLURIUM Q SILVER DIAMOND

£804/M

An open, natural and transparent sound that is difficult to beat, from these great loudspeaker cables.

HEADPHONES

B&W P3

£170

Beautifully presented headphones from the loudspeaker specialists. Feed them a good quality source signal and they reward with excellent sound.

JAYS V-JAYS

£49

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

NAIM HDX

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£49

Wonderful little budget over-ear portable ‘phones with a clean, clear sound to beat the best of the rest at the price.
**Solid State Preamplifier**

**McIntosh C47**
- 7 analogue & 5 digital inputs
- Decode & play back high fidelity DSD files via USB
- Limited stock at this price

**£19,995**

**SAVE 40%**

**£4,995**

**£2,995**

**Warranty**
- 36 Months

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**Integrated Turntable System**

**McIntosh MT100**
- Turntable, vacuum tube preamplifier and amplifier all in one
- Includes Bluetooth and auxiliary inputs
- Just add speakers

**£7,495**

**36 Months Warranty**

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**Stereo Integrated Amplifier**

**McIntosh MA252**
- 160 watts per channel
- Hybrid design: vacuum tube preamp and solid state power amp

**£4,500**

**36 Months Warranty**

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**Solid State Preamplifier**

**McIntosh C53**
- DA2 digital audio module
- Supports up to DSD512 files
- 8 band analog equalizer
- 9 analogue & 7 digital inputs

**£9,995**

**36 Months Warranty**

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**Monoblock Solid State Amplifier**

**McIntosh MC611**
- 600 watt quad balanced
- Eco-friendly power management
- 2, 4 and 8 Ω outputs
- 55% increase in dynamic headroom compared to previous model

**£19,995/pair**

**36 Months Warranty**

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**SME Tonearms**

**Series 309**

**Series IV**

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**AT-6006R**
- Automatically lifts tonearm before runout extending the life of your stylus
- Works on any turntable

**£112.90**

**24 Months Warranty**

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**Stereo Integrated Amplifier**

**McIntosh MA352**
- 200 watts per channel
- Retro all analogue design
- 5 Band tone control
- Includes Sentry Monitor™

**£8,495**

**36 Months Warranty**

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**7-Channel Solid State Amplifier**

**McIntosh MC257**
- 200 Watt per channel
- 94% increase in dynamic headroom
- Quiet fanless design
- Can be used in 5.1 home theaters

**£12,995**

**36 Months Warranty**

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**Stereo Integrated Amplifier**

**McIntosh MA9000**
- 300 watts per channel
- 8-band tone control
- DA1 digital audio module
- MA7200 also available

**£12,995**

**36 Months Warranty**

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**2-Channel Vacuum Tube Amplifier**

**McIntosh MC2152**
- 150 watts x 2 channels
- 8 KT88, 4 12AX7A and 4 12AT7 vacuum tubes
- MM & MC phono inputs
- All analog design and a retro look
- Standard editions also available

**£25,000**

**36 Months Warranty**

**Includes McIntosh History Book that contains a certificate of authentication**

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### Technics Direct Drive Turntable
- SL-1000R / SP-10R
  - Coreless direct drive
  - Separate control unit
  - Probably the best DD turntables in the world

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<th>Item</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>SP-10R</td>
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### SME Turntable
- Synergy + Series IV Arm
  - Built-in NAGRA phono stage
  - Ortofon’s ‘exclusive series’ MC Windfield Ti cartridge
  - Internal crystal cables

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### JBL Passive Loudspeakers
- L100 Classic
  - Classic 70s look
  - Frequency response 40Hz – 40kHz
  - Vintage Quadrex foam grille
  - JBL JS-120 floor stands available at £325.00

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### Audio-Technica Cartridges
- AT-OC9X Series
  - Moving coil

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<td>AT-OC9X</td>
<td>£209</td>
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### Phono Stage
- PH-10
  - 2 separate inputs
  - 6 EQ curves
  - 4 GAIN options
  - For use with MM & MC cartridges

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<td>PH-10</td>
<td>£1,264</td>
<td>24 Months</td>
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### Power Supply
- PSU-10
  - Worldwide voltage
  - Optional external power supply for Gold Note PH-10

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<td>PSU-10</td>
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### Belt Drive Turntable
- Valore 425 Plus
  - 9" tonearm derived from B-5.1 model
  - Available in acrylic, black, white, walnut or black leather

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### Mytek Brooklyn Bridge
- WiFi Streamer / DAC / Preamp all-in-one
- Reference headphone & phono stage
- Includes remote control
- Also available in silver

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### Manhattan & Brooklyn DACs
In our opinion, the best digital-to-analogue converters on the market

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### Avantgarde Speakers
- UNO XD
  - 2-way hornsystem speakers
  - 18 Ohm high-impedance voice coil design, efficiency of 107 dB
  - Active crossover programmable by built-in DSP

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<tr>
<td>UNO XD</td>
<td>£25,000/pair</td>
<td>36 Months</td>
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### DUO XD
  - 2-way hornsystem speakers
  - Powerful SUB231 XD subwoofer module
  - Various colour combinations available
  - Why not book an in-store demo today?

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The new and slightly-swish SE200 portable player from Astell&Kern I’m reviewing here comes in at a massive £1799 – breathtaking by digital audio player (DAP) standards, where FiO will do you a nice one for one-third the price, or less. So what is it that makes this player so expensive? It has two DACs inside, so you can choose which you feel sounds best.

I admit to being initially baffled. The literature makes much of two DAC chips, one from Japanese manufacturers AKM, the other from American manufacturer ESS, but beyond that it says nothing about how a potential user can hear them, what the benefits are, etc. Since the output of DACs can be integrated, I wondered whether this was happening. After searching around I came across a small diagram on p03 of the pdf manual that reveals all: there are separate outputs from each DAC, having both conventional 3.5mm stereo jack plug and a not-so-nice 2.5mm four-pole jack plug delivering balanced output. To listen to AKM plug in at left, to listen to ESS plug in at right.

It would be good if A&K somewhere explained to a new user, in text form, how the system works. Also, the different outputs are unidentified on the player. Plugging into AKM lights the volume control surround orange, and plugging into the ESS output invokes “mint” (as the manual puts it) so a simple sticker is supplied that bearing these colours with ESS and AKM text. I suspect A&K have not clearly identified the sockets for their own production conveniences, leaving this a confusion for users when the sticker comes adrift. See our pics that illustrate the situation more clearly.

For the money you get a finely crafted, solid and rigid player weighing 276gm and measuring 77mm wide, 132.2mm high and 16mm deep. That makes it not so small, but not big either. Won’t go into a shirt pocket like Astell&Kern’s AK100, but will go into a

Astell&Kern’s SE200 player has two DACs. Noel Keywood listens in.
A top face user stick-on label identifies the ESS and AKM outputs.

Both AKM and ESS DAC chips are advanced and can process all modern digital, including DSD. The unit can play DSD from internal memory or a plug-in microSD card. Our review sample had a quoted 256GB memory of which 230GB was available on-board it said and the Android file loader confirmed - a massive amount. Additionally, the supplied lead (USB C to IEC A plugs) produced no response – as Astell&Kern warn in their manual. A USB2 socket did work however. A&K recommend using Type C - Type C cable for Mac but again with USB 3 protocol on a Thunderbolt hub, this did not work. USB2 only it appears. Plugging into my PC running latest Windows 10 with USB2 the player was seen without problem. The spec says SE200 has a Type C socket running USB3 but my Mac Mini running Mojave did not think so.

As you'd expect at the price, there is Bluetooth transmission and Wi-Fi connection to a router, by which means the SE200 can access the net to play music from commercial music services, with Tidal and Deezer on our player, plus V-Link.

Charging time is around 4hrs from a standard 5V phone charger, but 2hrs from a 9V 1.5A fast charger. 12V from car battery is not recommended.

The DACs used are an AKM AK4499EQ and ESS ES9068AS. Start up time was a reasonable 20 seconds and battery life quoted as 10hrs AKM and 14hrs ESS. As you would hope and expect, all file formats can be played including quad-DSD (DSD256 – don’t ask about file size) and MQA files. The unit can be used as a DAC running from a computer via USB connection, in which case it accepts DSD over USB as DoP (check out the excellent Audirvana player for this).

The undersides has a USB C style socket for charging/file loading and (right) a single microSD card slot.

SOUND QUALITY
I used the SE200 with Oppo PM1 planar magnetic headphones. With fast tempo Rock like Fleetwood Mac’s Go Your Own Way (24/96) the AKM 3.5mm (unbalanced) output was the faster and sharper of the two, hard in its dynamic and punchy: visceral Rock. Mick Fleetwood’s drumming almost exploded through...
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**Quintet cartridge design**

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**WHAT HI-FI?**

**Quintet Black S**
May 2014

**Quintet Blue**
December 2014

**Quintet Black S**
July 2017

**Quintet Blue**
July 2019
The ESS DAC was more insightful and delicate, almost gentle – but less propulsive. Yet at the same time it teased out more detail from plucked guitar strings. Very difficult call!

The differences in sound transferred over to classical. With Vivaldi Concerto Opus 4 No8 (DSD) strings were rich and smooth via FSS, but better differentiated via AKM! Confusing. After lengthy listening I went for ESS for a broader sound stage and generally more atmospheric presentation, with greater insight into the timbral richness and tapestry of the strings.

The ESS balanced output was a tad cleaner and better defined when using the Oppos with a balanced cable (separate earths) but the AKM sounded a little uncouth. Because 2.5mm four-pole balanced plugs are so small and easy to break, they’re impractical except for home use so I don’t take them seriously.

Overall, the SE200 gave a rich and full bodied sound, if with the soft bass definition that all battery powered portable players exhibit.

**CONCLUSION**

Astell&Kern’s new SE200 player is distinguished by the presence of two high performance DAC chips, allowing users to choose the sound they find most engaging. It’s a very nice player overall but with questionable results under measurement from the AKM section and at a price that is stratospheric in portable player terms. I can’t see that it will appeal to many.

---

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

Frequency response of both chips was identical, running flat to 90kHz with 192kHz sample rate PCM (ESS shown).

As quoted in the spec, output from AKM was 3V and ESS 2V via the 3.5mm unbalanced headphone jack, and double balanced.

**FREQUENCY RESPONSE ESS**

\[ \text{Response} = \frac{1}{2\pi f} \]

**DISTORTION ESS**

\[ \text{Distortion} = \frac{|I_2|}{|I_1|} \]

---

**ASTELL & KERN SE200 £1799**

**GOOD** - worth auditioning

**VERDICT**

Rich smooth sound with two presentational options. But very expensive.

**FOR**

- choice of sound
- build quality

**AGAINST**

- unnecessarily complicated
- heavy
- poor AKM performance
- unmarked outputs

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Presented as a clamshell box with suitably distressed, make-shift, slightly eggy and 'street' box art, the contents feature six CDs of musical delights plus a fold-out booklet sheet that serves as a poster on one side and a tracklist/catalogue on the flip.

The CDs themselves reveal a rather disparate spread of concerts. What I mean by that is, you see the title of the box set and you immediately imagine an even spread of concerts ranging over that time period to rest gently upon 2010 after an exhausting build up.

Not so. In fact, what you have here is Hughes showing us how earned busy he was in 1995. Then he apparently collapsed into bed in time for Christmas of 1995 and didn't wake up, Sleeping Beauty-like, until 2008 whereupon he caved back into gigging, spreading that energy to 2010. Whereupon he rested, in a god-like fashion presumably and saw that it was good.

Specifically therefore, CD1 and CD2 features a 1995 show to support his then latest album 'Feel' plus the previous year's 'From Now On'...

The following day, supposedly full of energy and life, Hughes was back but this time in the LA2 in London, with a similar list of songs from his solo years: 'Trapeze' and 'Deep Purple'.

Escures in Bedford on 3 May 2008 occupies CD4 that includes a similar mix plus a rare airing of his debut solo single 'I Found A Woman' and The Moody Blues' 'Nights In White Satin'.

The final two discs feature a show recorded at the Spring & Airbrace, Belfast on 9 October 2010 (CD5 & CD6).

Offering great value plus lots of high-energy performances and fair master quality, this is a valuable archive document on the Glenn Hughes career.

Always in Ireland saw the birth of our Mary in 1956. And then it went downhill from there. Drugs and alcohol didn't help and the lady found herself in a mental hospital. There she tooted off to London and checked into a hippy squat at 19 years of age. Waitressing here, sweeping streets there.

She turned to singing after meeting, of all people, Dutch music legend Erik Visser.

Visser also remained musically active in Ireland and after meeting Coughlan he co-wrote, arranged and produced her 1985 debut album 'Tired and Emotional'. Which was, it has to be said, a rearing success. It went platinum in 1986. Visser's collaboration with Mary Coughlan resulted in eight albums.

This new album has been beautifully mastered and bathed in a delicate wash of space and air that allows reverb from the vocal all the way down to cymbal taps. In bass terms, there's an organic confidence here and a tonal balance that bookends the sound nicely with the reverb piano.

I've heard Coughlan's voice described as 'smoky' but it isn't. It really isn't. That's a lazy label. Instead, Coughlan has a voice chiseled by years of experiences. It emerges through a brain filter of memories.

You're hearing here is a series of conclusions. That is, she's settled into a way of living here. I may have this horribly wrong I know, but Coughlan sounds like she's come to terms with herself and she's done. And from that position, she's now telling her story from that point onwards. So her lyrics are thus delivered with great weight and a knowledge of what goes on out there.

Her music is full of lazy swing combined with blues/folk/italian as well as an irreverence of independence. Her voice is heavy with time.
This CD box set is backwards in terms of how it emerged and where it came from. That is, this was a TV and DVD based project. The CDs and the music within, emerged from that. As Wyman himself said “When I first began my Blues Odyssey project I concentrated on making a television series that would introduce people to the Blues”.

So it comes as no surprise that the DVD itself has been included inside the clamshell box set, along with two CDs packed with a compilation of blues songs and artists and a glossy booklet detailing the same.

The DVD includes interviews with the likes of B.B. King, Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, Mick Fleetwood, Mike Love, Albert Lee and also related figures like Rosetta Patton - Charley’s daughter - and Big Bill Morganfield (the son of Muddy Waters).

The CDs are packed with legendary figures too but the 46 tracks included in total here don’t just feature the more generally well known names. There’s Bumble Bee Slim’s ‘Ramblin’ With That Woman’, Casey Bill Weldon’s ‘WFA Blues’ and ‘Cow Cow’ Davenport’s ‘Railroad Blues’.

The accompanying booklet does a good job of squeezing as much essential information into the limited page count as possible. For example, let’s take Mr. Davenport here and we find that he was the first piano blues player to achieve a breakthrough “in his own right”, accompanying Dora Carr back in 1924 when he called himself Charles. It was only later the train-infused ‘Cow Cow Blues’ gave him his nickname.

As you might expect, dynamic reach on a lot of these tracks is limited along with a bright edge to the presentation. Saying that though, Edsel has done a fine job to round off the aggressive sonic nature of much of this work to present a fine archival line up.

Last year, the Floating World label resurrected three albums from the band that were originally released on Universal. This 3CD collection appears in a jewel case (and the use of the multi-winged case variant is a relatively rare occurrence nowadays, it has to be said).

The record label has worked with Fairies guitarist Andy Colquhoun (ex-Warsaw Pakt and Tanz Der Youth) who joined the Fairies for their pleasantly monikered 1987 album ‘Kill, Em And Eat ’Em’.

Actually, it’s Colquhoun who is the focus of this release. The entire set revolves around the man. This is why the ‘and Friends’ part of the title exists because the Fairies are only a part of this box set story. Andy Colquhoun and Friends would have been a more honest, though possibly less saleable, title.

This compilation of three albums includes the live recording ‘Pink Fairies - Chinese Cowboys’ that was taken from two dates on their 1987 tour. The sound is typically bright and thin in lower frequencies.

Next in line and similar in musical style is ‘Dr. Crow’ by the Pink Fairies’ forerunner The Deviants featuring Mick Farren and Andy Colquhoun. That’s not all though. Witness the talents of Blackyn Pig’s Jack Lancaster, and Phil Taylor from Motorhead plus members of Wayne Kramer’s band. Sound is esky with rather clinical mids and jabbing bass.

And finally Andy Colquhoun’s later solo outing ‘Pick Up The Phone America’ which features some fine solo lead guitar work and has a slightly new wave crunch. Sound is slightly more open around the soundstage but also retains the clinical approach.

Check out the included glossy booklet penned by Alan Robinson who does his usual fine job on providing a blend of information and entertainment.
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"Nightwish band members are seemingly diminished by her massive presence"

I had to laugh when reading Dave Tutt’s column this month about his exasperation with wittering wimin on BBC Radio. And how they drove him mad.

The BBC drove me mad long ago and I pressed the off button — permanently. So I can’t pass an opinion on the BBC’s female DJs and their undies — thankfully.

But I can think of a counter view that might make Dave Tutt happy, and many others perhaps. I was going to say “many other males” but don’t need to, because this is about women, if not as the BBC portray them.

Long ago, as a student in the British Aircraft Corporation, Bristol, studying electrical engineering whilst working on Concorde, I was miserably poor. To make ends meet joined the Royal Naval Reserve — and found myself at sea on HMS Venturer, a coastal minesweeper. Not so good to get seasick in a Force 7 but I got a brown envelope at the end with a few quid in it, covering the cost of chips for the next few days.

The name HMS Venturer has stuck in my mind ever since and not so long ago I went to YouTube to see what might pop up. What I came across was an eerie video of a submarine chase that transfixed me. I could not stop watching it and soon realised that although the submarine chase was frightening, the music was haunting. It was Sleeping Sun by Nightwish.

I’m no heavy metal fan but the woman singing this had a voice I wanted to know more about. I found myself pursuing female vocalists on YouTube that are little talked about in (my) everyday life and an antidote to the whole simpering female vocal genre we are served up in the UK.

Who was I listening to as the submarine HMS Venturer silently stalked a German submarine? It was Tarja Turunen, but could have been Floor Jansen.

Familiar names! Likely not. Forgive me for my ignorance but feel they have universal acclaim and should know better! But if you want to hear non-wittering wimin try these two: they’ll blow your socks off. Pixies be gone.

Nightwish — a Finnish heavy metal band — have had both Tarja Turunen or Floor Jansen sing Sleeping Sun — and here life gets interesting. As a song it is what it is; what these women bring to it I find transfixed. Both are singers of great if slightly different ability: what they have to do however — as one explains — is sing over the cacophony of thrashing guitars and pounding drums all around them — which means project. And boy do they do that!

Not since I heard Janis Joplin singing Ball and Chain have I ever come across a woman who could get close — but Floor Jansen takes the roof off then goes getting physically this Dutch woman is big — 6ft (183cm) and strongly built. Point being she has lung capacity and physical strength to blow a stadium down — I’ve not heard anything like it since Janis. Nightwish band members are seemingly diminished by her massive presence; their Marshall amps haven’t got cabinets big enough and there aren’t enough Watts to compete.

Needless to say there’s the usual heavy metal garb — black leather corset and all that — attempting to cover her body, and this can be a bit misleading. In studio discussions you can find on YouTube this woman has a massive voice and is a massive talent worth checking out to hear from her how she sings — her technique — and what it’s like to be on stage.

Then there’s Tarja Turunen. Heard of her? Another heavy metal goddess it appears, but again look her up on YouTube and this Finn is classically trained, having great voice control and projection as a result. She doesn’t quite have the bellowing power of Floor Jansen, being of more ladylike dimensions — 5ft 5in (65cm). But a very interesting and impressive singer all the same who also explains her technique, perfected at a German academy. It was I believe Tarja who first caught my attention singing Sleeping Sun because he voice borders on operatic.

I have to mention Dutch symphonic metal band Within Temptation here of course, fronted up by singer/songwriter Sharon den Adel — who surely is the queen of this genre and an inspiration, contributing to Within Temptation’s string of hits and lasting popularity.

Since I’ve gone on about physique — opera singers and Adele testifying to the need for it — I’d better talk ScA. She is 5ft 6in (170cm), so down the centre line as it were. What this woman has is great frequency range, she is noted for reaching very high — and there is great fluency of expression too. Sharon den Adel is an enormous talent and deserves her success.

Intriguing to think that these three women have at various times sung together on-stage (see YouTube). What we appear to have here then is an European symphonic/heavy metal genre fronted up by women — women who can not only belt it out, but are talented singers and song writers too! Whilst the heavy metal genre can get tedious after a while — there’s only so much head banging any human can do and I did mine long ago — there is fine singing.

So my remedy for poor Dave Tutt suffering Pixies in his workshop is to get in some heavy metalwork!
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Technics SP-10R & SL-1000R Many combinations available
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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
unerring focus on the basics of playing LP it's time to check the piggy bank.

Hi Fi News said:
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'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.

Miyajima - Stereo - Mono - Denon DL-103 - Audio Technica AT33 & OC9
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In last month’s column I may have come over all Luddite and anti new technology and, let’s be frank here, a big part of me is just that. After all, if old things work well and continue to work well then why dump them? I’m talking about hi-fi here, not the Hi-Fi World staff!

Then again, another big part of me embraces new technologies and the possibilities of the future and the need to know what’s over the next hill.

What bugs me I suppose, is not the emergence of new technologies per se but how they are often implemented and exploited for financial reasons – and only for financial reasons – and how that often dilutes and sometimes mutates the new medium. Not only that, what that does to us and the older, familiar technologies we also enjoy revere and are prematurely retired. Again purely for financial reasons. Not technology reasons.

So what really bugs me isn’t so much the new technologies, it’s the people who wish to exploit them and, in their quest to exploit, the damage they do.

Yet, I don’t see myself as a curmudgeon – despite what the wife says. I realise that there is much out there that has proven useful and valuable to myself and other lovers of music. Much that I find useful and now essential and couldn’t imagine doing without.

Let’s take Internet upload as one example. One of the most essential music-related tools out there is the ability to preview music at will.

When I was a lad, the only way to get a rough idea how a piece of music sounded before purchase was to borrow/tape a copy from a friend or you might stumble over the piece on the radio. Before Internet Surfing, Radio Surfing was one of my main tools to expose myself to new and interesting music.

Now! The Internet is packed to the gills with streaming facilities or play-on-demand services. Just as important as Tidal and Spotify et al is a critical service that often goes unreported and is never talked about in any national magazine that I’m aware of; retail services. Shops.

If I hear of an intriguing band, artist or album, I fire up YouTube and search for it to have a listen. Failing that, I check out Bandcamp to do the same. Failing that, and this hits my last point, there’s a batch of busy retailers that can do the same. This service is often super-or because the access is easier and there’s a ‘buy’ option right alongside. Juno (www.juno.co.uk) is one good example. They sell physical product (vinyl and CDs) but also offer track-by-track play of the same on their website, enabling you to have a quick listen before you buy.

This preview idea is not new, of course. I remember Listening Shorts in places like Andy’s Records and Our Price in which you could listen to a limited amount of CDs as part of their preview facilities. Those Listening Posts seemed advanced and hot stuff at the time but they quickly palled as their inadequacies were revealed. Now! The online variants of the same are easier to use and more efficient.

Buying music is another revolution that the Internet has opened up. The High St record shop may have taken a battering (but they’re surviving and I hesitate to say this, hanging on in there, which is rather lovely) but the fact that you can buy just about any rarity you might care to mention via the Internet has meant that we cannot only access more music but access the music we want – and at the time we want it.

Gone is the prospect of having to contact some obscure record shop through a hard-to-find music fanzine’s classified Ad, resident in a country 1,000 miles away, who charge three times the value of the LP and then whack on a king’s fortune in P&P.

Competition (eBay and Discogs, etc) has opened up sales, regulated prices (OK, charity shop bargains and useful public ignorance have taken a hit so there’s swings and roundabouts on this one) but it’s easier to access much more music now.

Finally, I love the fact that more and more specialist music is available (if the artist is on the ball) directly from an artist’s website. Limited editions and archival releases can be bought from the same by true fans. Music, let’s not forget, that major record labels wouldn’t have touched with a barge pole.

And that’s my final point. New technologies have removed the dictatorial nature of the music industry where artists were merely well-paid thralls and we were spoon-fed measly music morsels just enough food to keep a starving man alive, eh!

We should all thank those fighting pioneers, the guys who ‘took it to the man’, to change that situation for the benefit of us fans. Hats off to Neil Young, the late, great Prince and others who struggled to set music free.

"Hats off to Neil Young, Prince and others who struggled to set music free"
MUSICAL FIDELITY

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"This piece of waste fitted into a pannier bag on my bike – and sprang into life too"

Now the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic seems to be past us, there is talk of fundamental change. Might we, as consumers, even be persuaded to buy fewer goods of higher-quality less frequently? Sure, such items would be more expensive initially – but they would be designed for upgradability, and furthermore their repair would be economically viable. Rather than chasing the lowest price we would receive service and support as part of an overall package, as once we did. Local hi-fi shops would play a key role in this.

These clearer, but better thought-out products would also retain their value on the second-hand market. When I was a lad, growing up in the early 1980s, new hi-fi equipment was expensive; furthermore, there was little of the easy credit and low interest rates we have today. Records were expensive too. LPs selling for £4.99 (nearly £20 today) That meant scrimping and saving and working holiday jobs to buy new gear and music – or taking the ‘pre-owned’ route.

My first decent amp, a Goodmans Maxamp 30, was pre-owned and cost me £2.50 – plus another 50p for a 2N305S output transistor to fix it. The solid-state Maxamp 30, which enjoyed a long production run, was beautifully constructed; the power-amps lived on panels that swung out for serviceability. Although modest by the standards of the day (a mere 15 Watts per channel) it was an expensive proposition – £54 in 1969, approaching £1,000 of today’s money.

Today’s kit is far more complex than my Goodmans mid-1960s marvel, its design being optimised for automated-manufacture rather than repair. Thus the prevalence of surface-mounted components and chips bonded to the circuit board. Repairing such boards is at best very difficult, requiring specialist tools and the skills to use them. However, if such modern boards develop a fault they could be swapped locally; The faulty board could then be sent back to the manufacturer, perhaps to be re-cycled.

And if the industry was to work to common standards, as is the case in the world of IT, then the consumer could choose electronics (a board) from alternative sources. Standards would define, amongst other things, board size, the location of connectors and fixing points, power-supply requirements and control protocols.

Since power supply and casework are the most expensive elements of a product, why throw them away when they have life ahead? Admittedly fashions change, but so too could front-panel trim to change appearance.

Recent personal experience shows that we haven’t shrugged off our unforgivably wasteful consumerist excesses; this needs to change, for all our sakes. Throwing away broken items is bad enough, but discarding items that are still of use is, in my view, criminal. On the very day I am writing this, I witnessed refuse collectors chuck a three-seat leather sofa into the destruct-ive jaws of their dust bin lorry. Earlier, I passed said sofa – not a mark on it.

Another example. On the way home the other day from my recently-reopened gym, I encountered a JVC-branded 40in full-HD LCD smart TV on the pavement. Lying next to it was the essential remote control JVC used to be an innovative concern. As well as developing the VHS home-video format, it conceived CD-4 quadr-aphonics, quartz-locked turntables and the ANRS ‘Dolby-soundlike’ for cassette-decks. And JVC made some pretty tasty hi-fi gear.

How the mighty have fallen. modern JVC TVs are manufactured in Turkey, by a firm called Vestel. Sae to see a JVC TV on the pavement.

Funnily enough, I already had a near-identical 40in LCD TV with a ‘Bush’ badge. This has an intermit-tently-dicky LED backlights, and so I carted the JVC home with the intention of using it for spare-part surgery. It must surely have been broken, or it wouldn’t have been left out for rubbish collection. Back home, though, I could see none of the jagged dark patches that point to a damaged LCD panel. So I powered it up – and behold, the thing worked!

Even the slot-loading DVD player tucked into the side behaved; a movie disc was in it. No uneven backlighting and, after turning it in, I was rewarred with decent pictures from the set’s integrated Freesview HD tuner. So no probs with JVC then, just the laziness of its owner who consigned it to waste. This should not be happening.

A couple of days earlier I came across a Sony 5.1 AV receiver by the side of the road. No remote this time, but the instruction book was taped to the top of its cabinet. For an amplifier with a front-panel sticker proudly-shouting its ability to deliver ‘1000W’ it was surprisingly light. Yet it was nowhere near light enough for a switch-mode power supply, implying that conventional transformer-base circuitry lay inside. This piece of waste fitted into a pannier bag on my bike. And guess what? It sprang into life too!

Why weren’t these items advertised on Freecycle, listed on eBay or offered to charity shops? Even a handwritten note saying “working, please take!” would have been better than nothing. The astonishing amount of electrical waste we are now needlessly producing borders on criminal. Fundamental change to reduce this torrent of waste is needed.
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"It can be done intelligently; we don't have to hear about undies"

Dave Tutt

My workshop is yet to be fully working which means my normal sources of music are missing for daytime entertainment. I've been listening to radio and one thing that has wound me up is the uttering of the current crop of radio DJs who are a serious blot on the output of our National broadcaster.

The BBC's need to litter every program with banal verbiage and stupid games and quizzes is to me a thorough irritant that I feel Radio 2 would be so much better without.

With Radio 2 employing so many women I can't understand why they think I need to know about one of them answering the door to the postman in her undies. Nor do I care about Zoe or Vanessa or - worst of all - Elaine Paige on a Sunday!

Jo Whiley wittered incessantly about the Pixies for her entire show and then proceeded to carry on the following day about them. Correct me if you think I am wrong, but I have heard guitarists who arrive at my workshop who play with more talent than the Pixies will ever manage!

Radio 1 not only has more of the same DJs but its music lacks any form of attraction to me. I am sure people have similar thoughts about their radio stations.

Thing is, dial through the FM band and I don't really find anything that is better - and despite now having DAB there isn't anything there that has made me get excited either.

Arghh! All I want is music, not idiots who love the sound of their own voices and are paid more in a year than I see in twenty!

I complained about it to my ex employer but the BBC, being so even handed, politically correct and diverse to the extreme cannot possibly do anything about it and cannot be bothered to reply to me. Well you wouldn't want you!

I know, I am just a grumpy, miserable old man. Worse, I am a sexist miserable old man as I do not appreciate having my radio littered with wittering women!

But as all those things I am still significant - and I would like to hear talk and music that appeals to me. Since what the BBC are now peddling does not, its services have ceased to be of interest and I would like my money back.

Mind you the likes of Vine and Madeley drive me nuts too so its not just the women! Radio talk shows I can get on any number of stations - again with opinionated idiots in charge. I'm an opinionated idiot so I can do it myself! So Jeremy Vine can go to his TV show and I'll have someone else thanks.

Only a few DJs have presented me with a worthwhile background. Trevor Nelson, Bob Harris (of course) and even Gary Davies and Tony Blackburn. It can be done intelligently; we don't have to hear about undies.

On another point this month I was interested in Noel's comments on PC and Mac issues and programmed redundancy. In the music world, as in the IT world, it is actually the data - be that music, written word, pictures, databases or any other human input - that is important.

Microsoft would have you believe that their operating systems are far more important than any data you might have created, hence their view that we should always update our machines with the latest fixes for problems in their software we are very unlikely to see, but that may kill our machines and render our data inaccessible.

Aside from the fact that if we have a good internet security package and are aware of how it works and act on its alerts, many of the updates are likely to be only marginally effective and many may well be unnecessary. Even worse they commonly make the machine slow to respond to the point where you will throw it in the bin and buy another one.

To this end I have spent the last six years at least trying to avoid anything that has Microsoft on it - or for that matter Adobe or Apple.

I use a Win7 PC that was made by Dell in June 2011. I am not the original owner and have been using it since it came to me as being unusable due to speed issues.

First thing I did was to dump Windows 7 for Ubuntu Studio 16.10 and this has to be the most stable PC software I have ever owned. It is fast, reliable, predictable and totally free.

As an ex-IT specialist I have to say that chasing issues with Microsoft products - be it with servers or desktop machines - was the most wasteful way to spend the best part of 22 years of my life - and I have no intention of going back to it.

Ubuntu is far better than chasing and - worse - paying for software to do things reliably.

My workshop got a boost in the right direction this week as I mounted Celestion Series 1s on the ceiling, home built cabs with 8 inch bass drivers on speaker stands and Mission 700s with new bass drivers on top of the home built ones. I'll explain this another time.

My computer systems have either been scrapped or rebuilt and my workshop amps and CD players are stacked and wired. More soon I hope!
**WORLD CLASSICS**

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

**TURNTABLES**

**EAT FORCE**

2000 £12,500

Lawfully finished two-box, two-motor turntable with gorgeous black 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, pacy, 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

Seminal, affordable audio ribs deck with fine-bundled tonearm. Tweakable, and really sings with optional £150 outboard power supply.

**ACUSTIC SOLID ONE**

2007 £4,050

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

**AVID VOLVERE SEQUEL**

2007 £4,800

Stylish high end vinyl spin, practical industrial strength build quality and a sound to match. Sound is edge of the world stuff.

**MICHELL CYRUSIII SE**

2005 £1,115

Designs are with superlatively built. Sound is breath-takingly smooth, effortless and exceptionally expensive.

**MARANTZ TT-1551**

2005 £1,299

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

**MICHELL TECNODEC**

2003 £279

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

**REGA PLANAR 3**

1978 £79

Brilliant simple but clean and musical performer complete with Auto-Lifted 5-shaped tonearm. 1985 saw the arrival of the RB300. Which added detail to the experience of warmth. Superb budget buy.

**SONY PS-880**

1978 £800

First outing for Sony’s impressive ‘uni-matic’ electronic tonearm. Doesn’t feel like a commercial 5-shaped tonearm – a well polished and fine sound, albeit lacking involvement. Slightly compromised and with no spare support – buy with caution.

**THORENS TD-160**

1978 £800

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

**TECHNICS SP10**

1973 £400

Semi-pro Japanese engineering. Sonic perfection on par with the best models, but with a well mounted SP10/1 i will give any modern a hard time, especially in respect of bass power and midrange accuracy.

**LINN SONDEK LF12**

1973 £386

For many, the 81 st superdek constant mads meant that early ones sound warmer and more lyrical than modern versions. Recent SE models have brought it into the 21st century, albeit at a price.

**ARISTON ROYAL**

1972 £94

Modern evolution of Thorens’ original belt drive paradigm, Scotland’s original super-deck with warm and musical, aed soft, all-inclusive tonearm.

**COLORING LENDO CL35**

1970 £13.65

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

**GARRARD 301/401**

1959 £19

Remarkably strong and attractive with only a slight huddle to let it down.

**POINTER PCL-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 component and use of some now absolute ICs.

**POINTER PLA120**

1973 £36

When vinyl was the leading source, this bought new standards for performance and stability to the class, plus a low friction 9-shaped tonearm. Later FL110 was the one to move towards.
TONEARMS

REGA RB251 2006 £136
Capable way past its price point, the new 3 point mount version of the classic RB251 serves up a taut and defined sound. A little lean for some tastes, but responds well to reworking and counter-weight modification.

HELIUS OMGEA 2008 £1,595
Stylish and solid lump of arm with fabulous build quality that turns in a dynamic and weighty performance.

AUDIO ORIGAMI P17 2007 £1,300
The classic Synth PRS updated to spectacular effect. Hand made to order, with any mass, length and colour you care for. Fit, finish and sound truly impressive.

GRAHAM PHANTOM 2006 £3,160
Sonically stunning arm with magnificent bass, crotchet and soudalising. Build quality up to SME standards, which is really saying something!

TRI-PLANAR PRECISION 2006 £3,600
Immaculate build, exquisite design and one of the most naturally musical and lucid sounds around.

MICHELL TECKTARM A 2003 £442
Clever reworking of the Rega theme, using blasting, bending and reworking!

SME 309 1987 £767
Mid-price SME comes complete with cost-cut aluminium arm and detachable Rearth. Tight, neutral sound with good tonal balance, but lacks the V's pace and precision.

NAIM ARC 1987 £1,425
Chromatic unpivot is poor at frequency extremes but sublime in the midband; truly emotive and insightful.

SME SERIES V 1987 £2,390
Very nice bass with incredible weight, ultra clean midband and treble astound, although some don't like its matter of factness!

NAIM ARD 1986 £875
Truly endearing and charismatic performer - wonderfully engaging mid band makes up for softened frequency extremes.

TECHNICS EPA-501 1978 £N/A
Popular partner for late seventies Technics motors. Nice build and Titanium Nitride tube can't compensate for muddling sound.

LINN ITTOK I.V. 1978 £253
Japanese design to Linn specs made for a muscular, rhythmic sound with real dynamics. The final I.V 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 good starter arm if you've only got a few quid to spend.

HADDOW GH-228 1976 £46
Evergreen unpivot with lovely sweet, fluid sound. Excellent service backup.

ACOS LUSTRE EST-1 1975 £46
The archetype S shaped seventies arm; good, profligate and involving sound in its day, but lagged and undynamic now.

SME 3085 1988 £118
Once state of the art, but long since bettered by many. Muscular enough, but weak at frequency extremes and veiled in the midband. Legendary servicability and stunning build has made it a cult, used price unfeasibly high.

PHONO STAGES

CREEK OBI-8 SE 1996 £180
Punchy, rhythmic character with loads of detail makes this a great budget audiofile classic.

CREEK GG-8 1996 £139
Tom Evans-designed black box started the trend for high performance offboard phono stages.

CREEK LVIII 1994 £249
Effortlessly sweet, strong and powerful with semi-rare styling to match.

MUSICAL FIDELITY A1 1985 £350
Brilliantly designed black box that partner the original Naim NAIT - yes, really! Fine sound, although off the pace these days.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

NAIM NAIT X5 2009 £1,250
With much of the sound of the SuperNAAT at half the price, this is a powerful, articulate and smooth beyond class expectations.

MUSICAL FIDELITY PRIMO 2008 £2,995
Brilliantly built, but one listen explains why. Wonderfully expressive sound that can only come from a top quality tube design.

SUDDEN A21A SL 2008 £1,400
Crystalline clarity, dizzying speed and forensic detailing. Power limited so needs sensitive speakers.

SUDDEN AR101S 2007 £750
Version 2 addresses version 1's weaknesses but turns in a mightily accomplished performance, offering power, finesse and detail.

SUDDEN IA 2007 £3,650
Costly amount of Class A power. Cy, clarity and a breathtakingly fast, musical sound make this one of the very best super-integrates.

NUFORCE P-8 2007 £2,200
Impressive two box preamp with superb resolution and an engaging sound.

MELODY PURE BLACK 101D 2007 £2,705
The clarity and openness of valve plus firm grip and fine detail make this a preamplifier masterpiece.

AUDIOLAB 8005S 2006 £400
In another life, this was the stereo of choice, making it a stand-out bargain now. Very clean and powerful.

MCDONTOSH NA4600S 1995 £735
Effortlessly sweet, strong and powerful with a semi-rare styling to match.

DELTEC 1987 £160
Fast, dry and with excellent transients, this first EPA integrated is the real deal for eighties obsessives. Radically punchy 80W per channel from a tiny, half-size box. Radical, cool and more than a little strange.

EXPOSURE IV/VIII 1985 £625
Semi-prime 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 MM/MC phono stage and huge feature count. Extremely relatable, too.

VTL MINIMAL/50W MONOBLOCK 1985 £1,300
Rugged, professional build and finish allied to a very punchy sound (albeit with limited power) make them an excellent used buy.

MUSICAL FIDELITY A1 1985 £350
Brilliantly designed black box that partner the original Naim NAIT - yes, really! Fine sound, although off the pace these days.

MISSION CYRUS 2 1984 £299
Classic. 1600W mono-blocks combine arresting styling with clean, open, lively sound. Further upgradeable with PSX power supply.

Alphason FH1005 1981 £150
First class arm, practically up to present day standards.Used carefully, though, as there is no service available now. Totally under priced when new.

SME SERIES III 1978 £133
Clever variable mass design complete with Titanium Nitride tube tried to be all things to all men, and failed. Charming nonetheless, with a warm and fluffy sound.

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**POWER AMPLIFIERS**

**ELECTROCOMPANY NEMO**

2009 £4,995 (each)  
Norwegian power station as cool as a glacier tonally, yet impresses with sheer physicality and fleetness of foot. 600W per channel.

**NORFORCE REFERENCE SSE V2** 2006 £1,750  
Brilliant value for money monoblocks with massive power and superb clean three-dimensional sound.

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

**ROTEL RA-820BX** 1983 £129  
Lively and clean budget integrated that arguably started the move to minimalism.

**NAD 3020** 1979 £99  
Brilliantly smooth, sweet and punchy at the price and even has a better phone stage than you’d expect. The archetypal budget super-amp.

**ROGERS A75** 1978 £220  
Lots of sensible facilities, a goodly power output and nice sound in one box. The later A75II and A100 versions offered improved sonic and were seriously sweet.

**AAK A60** 1977 £115  
Sweet and musical feature-packed integrated, the Audiolab 8000A remains a classic.

**MARantz Model 9** 1997 £800  
Excellent reproduction monoblock still more than cut the sonic mustard. Highly expensive and highly sought after.

**MICHell ALECTO** 1997 £1899  
Crisp, clean and beautifully controlled with gorgeous styling. Partnered with the £1650 Orca this sounds delicious!

**MUSICAL FIDELITY XA200** 1996 £1000  
200W of smooth sweet transistor amp in a grooved tub! Under-rated oddly.

**PIONEER M-73** 1988 £1,200  
Monster stomper from this seminal Japanese power amplifier, complete with switchable Class-A and Class-B operation. Clean, open and assured sounding, albeit a tad behind the pace on high speed dance music. Rosewood side panels and black brushed aluminium completes the experience.

**Krell KMA100 II** 1987 £5,750  
Monoblock version of the giant KSA-100 is one of the seminal 80’s transistor power amplifiers. Massive wallapalooza to clean and open Class-A sound makes this one of the best amplifiers of its type.

**RADford ST25 Renaissance**

1986 £977  
This reworking of Radford’s original late 70’s design was possessed of a wonderfully rich, warm, earthy sound with enough power (25W) and lots of subtlety.

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

**MM ELECTRONICS TPA-50D AMPLIFIERS**

1973 £110  
Simple design with easily available components, but little build quality and live sound made for a surprisingly overpriced bargain.

**LEscO AP**

1973 £110  
Modmac cylindrical styling alluded to its ‘power of power’ pretensions. But it wasn’t too hot but decently clean sounding when working.

**QUAD 303**

1968 £30  
Bullish build, but woolly sound. Off the pace, but endearing nonetheless. Some say smoking super-wearers is why they are.

**LEAK STEREO 20**

1958 £31  
Excellent workaday classic valve amplifier with decent power and drive. Surprisingly modern sounding if rebuilt sympathetically. Impressively musical and full.

**LEAK STEREO 60**

1958 £139  
Leak’s biggest valve power amp offers 35 Watts per channel and uses low and mid watts from the smaller Stereo 20. Despite concerns over reliability, rarity value means high price.

**QUAD II**

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

**LEAK POINT ONE, TL10, TL12, TL12 PLUS**

1949 £28  
Early classics that are getting expensive. Overhauling is de rigueur before use, using original parts if possible. Surprisingly crisp and musical. Deeply impressive in live feel.

**PRE AMPLIFIERS**

**AUDIOLAB 8000C**

1991 £499  
Totally grey but fine phone input and great facilities make it an excellent general purpose tool.

**CROFT MICRO**

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

**CONRAD JOHNSON MOTIV MC-8**

1986 £2,500  
Minimalist FET-based preamplifier is brilliantly neutral and smooth with a sonorous middle ground in the mould of Sugden. Something of a curio, but worthwhile nonetheless.

**AUDIO RESEARCH SP-8**

1982 £1,400  
Beautifully designed and built high end tube pre-amplifier with deliciously smooth and sweet sound. Not the last word in Gratis but well worth a look.

**LINN LK-1**

1986 £499  
A brave attempt to bring remote controlled user-friendlyness to high-end audiophile hi-fi. Didn’t quite work, but not bad for under £100.

**NAIM DAC 32.5**

1978 £1,300  
Classic high end prep. Brilliantly fast and incisive sound that is a joy with vinyl but a tad forward for digital.

**LEscO AC-1**

1973 £110  
Amazing styling courtesy of Alan Boothroyd can’t disguise its rather cloudy sound, but a design classic nonetheless.

**QUAD 33**

1958 £84  
Better than the 22, but Quad’s first tranny pre isn’t outstanding. Responds well to tweaking/ rebuilding though.

**LEAK STEREO ONE STEREO**

1958 £N/A  
Good for their time, but way off the pace these days. Use of £80 pengrade valve for high gain rather cut their performance, Not the highest end.

**QUAD 22**

1958 £25  
The partner to the much vaunted Quad 11 monoblocks - cloudy and vague sound means it’s for anachronisms only.
LOUDSPEAKERS

WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 10.3 2010 £290
Great entry level electrostatics, giving a taste of loudspeaker excellence for the price of most moving coil boxes. Tremendous clarity, eveness and delicacy, all without the world’s most powerful sound.

YAMAHA NS-4001 2009 £3,000
Musical, transparent with impressive dynamics and coherency. Excellent build and finish.

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

MONITOR AUDIO PL100 2009 £2,300
The flagship 'Platnum' series standmounter has a lovely warm and detailed sound with something special.

SPENDOR AS 2008 £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.

MARTIN LOGAN SOURCE 2008 £1,600
Brilliant entry level electrostatics, giving a taste of loudspeaker excellence at the price of most moving coil boxes. Tremendous clarity, eveness and delicacy, all without the world’s most powerful sound.

PMC CB1 2008 £2,950
Cleverly designed floorstanders with scale and punch and Spendor’s classic mid-range detail. Deliver a sound that thoroughly engages whatever you care to play.

ISOPHON CASSIANO 2007 £12,000
Drive units featuring exotic materials allied to superb build quality result in an immensely capable loudspeaker. Not an easy load to drive, however.

QUAD ESL-2905 2006 £5,995
The old 699 with all the bugs taken out, this gives a brilliantly neutral and open sound like only a top electrostatic can. Still not a natural rock loudspeaker, though.

USHER BE-718 2007 £1,600
Beryllium tweeters work superbly, allied to a fast and punchy bass driver. The result is sublime, smooth and emotive.

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 £845
Brilliantly successful remake of an old, classic design, but flawless, but surely one of the most musical loudspeakers ever made.

MISSON X SPACE 1999 £499
The first mass produced retail and sub system using NEXT panels is a sure-fire future classic - not flawless, but a tantalisingly unobx box sound nevertheless!

MISSION 752 1995 £495
Cracking Henry Kozma-designed floorstanders combine HDA drive units and metal dome tweeters with surprising warm results. Beryllium has characteristic makes them great for older.

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

TANNAY WESTMINSTER 1985 £4,950
Folded horn monsters which sound good if you have the space. Not the last word in naughtness, but can drive large rooms and image like few others.

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

HEYBROOK HB1 1982 £130
Peter Comeau designed standmounters with an amazingly lyrical yet decently refined sound. Good enough to partner with very high end ancillaries, yet great with budget kit too. A classic.

QUAD ESL63 1989 £1,200
An update of the ESL57, with slimmer cabinets. Still the best of the Quad electrostatic.

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

ACOUSTIC RESEARCH AR18S 1978 £125
Yank designed, British built loudspeaker became a budget staple for many rock fans, thanks to the proof saved from the pioneer drivers, although fiesmest was most definitely not their forte.

YAMAHA NS1000 1977 £532
High tech beryllium midbass and tweeter drivers and brislsh 12" woofers in massive sealed mirror image cabs with stunning transients, speed and wallop allied to superb transparency and ultra low distortion Partner carefully!

JR 149 1977 £120
Cylindrical speaker was ignored for decades but now back in fashion! Based on classic KDF12/110 combo as seen in the BBC LS5/5e. Doesn’t play loud, needs a powerful transistor amplifier, but has clarity and imaging.

KEF R105 1977 £785
Three way Butterworth-based crossover gave a truly wideband (den and massive (500W) power handling. A very neutral, spacious and purrful sounding design, but rhythmically well off the pace.

IMF TLS80 1976 £550
Warm and powerful 1970s behemoth with transmission loading and a mixture of KEF and Celestion drive units. Impressively physical wideband sound but rhythm not a forte.

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SANDWICH ES-L57 1956 £45 EACH
Wonderfully open and neutral sound puts box loudspeakers to shame. Properly finished, they give superb midrange performance, although frequency extremes less impressive. Ideal, use in stacked cars or with subwoofers and super-tweeters.

PASSENGER ACOUSTIC 2.1 2010 £6,990
Crisp, stylish, bright, colourful touchscreen, plus excellent search facilities. This is one hard disk music system with a difference. Perfect partner to Meridian active loudspeakers.

NAIM UNITIQUE 2010 £995
Great little half-width one-box system with truly linear sound. Fitted to a wealth of source options.

ARCAM SOLO MINI 2008 £850
Half the size and two-thirds the price of a full-sized Solo, the Mini gives you less of a sense of performance to a bigger brother.

MERIDIAN F80 2007 £1,500
Fantastically built and versatile DVD/CD/DAB/FM/AM, unit. Designed in conjunction with Ferrari. Ignore naysayers who sneer that it isn’t a ‘proper’ hi-fi product. Just listen.

MARANTZ ‘LEGEND’ 2007 £22,000
The combination of SA-751 disc player, SC-752 preamp and MA-952 monoblocks delivers jaw-dropping performance.

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.

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

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

PEACHTREE AUDIO IDECCO £1,000
Excellent sounding iPod dock, impressive DAC and fine amplifier section make this an excellent one box stereo system.

ARCAM FMJ T32 2009 £830
Excellent hybrid FM/DAB+ tuner with a smooth, engaging sound. Factor in its fine build and it’s a super value package.

MAGNUM DYNALAB MD-100T 2006 £1,895
One of the best ways to hear FM that we know; superbly open and musical sound in a quirky but characterful package.

MYRAD MX4000 2005 £1,000
Superbly built and versatile Hi-Fi, build quality reliable for a budget A/V rack component. Warm and nutty, very detailed on good-quality music broadcasts.

NAIM NAT51 1993 £98
Cools atmospheric sound is further proof of Naim’s proficiency with tuners.

GREEN CAS690 1986 £199
Excellent detail, separation and dynamics - brantly musical at the price. T40 continued the theme.

NAD 4040 1979 £79
Tremendously smooth and natural sound allied to low prices and good availability make this budget analogue cassette player a must.

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 explicit, detailed sound.

SONY ST-5950 1977 £222
One of the first Dolby FM-equipped tuners, a format that came to nothing. Still, it was Sony’s most expensive tuner to date, and boasted good sound quality with brilliant ergonomics.
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 V8 2008 £300
Open and explicitly detailed sound plus serious bass wallop. A great partner for most mid to high-end headphones.

CD PLAYER/RECORDERS

MUSICAL FIDELITY TRI-FiSTA 2002 £4000
When playing SACDs, the sweetest, most lucid and lyrical digital disc spinner we’ve heard. Old school stereo, pure ESI design. CD sound is up in the £1000 class, too! Future classic.

MARantz SA-1 2000 £5000
The greatest argument for SACD. This sublime Ken Ishiwata design is utterly musically convincing with both CD and SACD, boasting most audiophile CD spinners hands down.

SONY MDS-J555ES 2000 £900
The best sounding MD deck ever. Thanks to awesome built and heroic ATAC ESI Type II coding.

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

MARantz DR-17 1999 £1100
Probably the best sounding CD recorder made, built like a brick with a true audiophile sound and HCD compatibility.

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-Can V8 2008 £300
Open and explicitly detailed sound plus serious bass wallop. A great partner for most mid to high-end headphones.

Compact Disc Transports

ESOTERIC PD 1997 £8000
The best CD drive bar none. Brilliantly incisive, ridiculously over engineered.

TEAC VRDS-T1 1994 £600
Warm and expansive sound made this a mid ’90s fave. Well built, with a slick mech.

KENWOOD 9010 1986 £800
The first discrete Jap transport was beautifully cone and responds well to re-clocking.

DACs

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

DPA LITTLE BIT 3 1999 £299
Rich, clean, rhythmic 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 TRIANGLE DACAPO 1993 £N/A
Exquisite, the warmest and most lyrical 16-bit digital audio we have ever heard.

QED DIGIT 1991 £190
Budget to hi-fi performer with tweaks aplenty. Post-PSPU 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.

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

Wireworld Oasis 5 2003 £199/M
Excellent mid price design with a very neutral, silky and self-effacing sound. Superb value for money.

Metrics 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 R10AC R1 1987 £3000
Sony’s first two boxers was right first time. Tastefully clean, but probably the most detailed and architectural sounding machine of the eighties.

SONY WM-26C 1985 £290
Single cassette transport on a par with a Boston watch. Single re-encode head better than most 40ks. Hsuft sublime.

PIONEER CT-950 1978 £400
Hot up to modern standards sonically, but a great symbol of the cassette deck era nonetheless.

YAMAHA TC 800G 1977 £175
Early classics with sk-sk-style styling. middling sound 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 touch by modern standards.

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

Classics

Grave and a gripping CAIRMON 1998 £600
The first British audiophile machine was a sweetest, more detailed Philips CD100. 14x4 never sounded so good, until the MCD Pro arrived a year later.

SONY CDP-701ES 1994 £980
Sony’s first bespoke audiophile machine used a single DAC to provide a incredibly incisive sound. supreme build quality allied to the pure unadulterated luxury of a paperback-sized remote control.

YAMAHA CDX-1 1983 £340
Nicely built 15X2 machine with a very sharp and detailed sound. sometimes too much so. Excellent engineeers, 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 15X2 DAC, and you even get remote control.

Analogue Recorders

AIAWA XD-009 1989 £600
Awa’s first cassette player. didn’t, but it wasn’t half bad nonetheless. Massive spec even included a 16X4 DAC.

KAKAMICHI CR-R 1987 £800
The very best sounding Nakamichi ever, but lacks the visual drama of a Dragon.

SONY WM-10C 1985 £290
Single cassette transport on a par with a Boston watch. Single re-encode head better than most 40ks. Hsuft sublime.

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Paul Rigby rounds up the latest audiophile vinyl releases

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PEGGY LEE
On the ‘Ultimate’ (Capitol) this release exposes one of the great song stylists of modern times. Her version of the songs, ‘Is That All There Is’ and ‘Fever’ were and are classics and both appear on this excellent double album retrospective, released as a gatefold and including other tracks like ‘He’s a Tramp’ and her first Benny Goodman hit, ‘Why Don’t You Do Right’.

One nice surprise is the previously unissued track, ‘Try a Little Tenderness’.

SPEAKERS CORNER
Yusef Lateef’s ‘The Blue Yusef Lateef’ (1969) is a sort of concept piece that looks at the blues from different angles and points of view and, something that might not be as expected, different cultures. This record exposes Lateef, the experimenter, Lateef distilling blues into a shared human condition.

JACK ELLISTER
His ‘Lichtpyramide’ (Tonzonen) mixes synths and the organic while infusing calming, meditative, Germanic spoken word over a combination of pastoral guitar and introverted synth noodles.

MUSIC ON VINYL
From The Soundtrack Of Our Lives ‘Welcome to the Infant Freebase’ (1996), this alt-rock outfit from Sweden provides a 60s/70s vibe and Britpop, psychedelia-infusions. This is a limited, numbered edition pressed on gold vinyl.

From The Edgar Winter Group, ‘They Only Come Out at Night’ features one of the most unsettling examples of sleeve art that I’ve ever seen. Originally released on Epic in 1972, this vinyl remains a classic exponent of blues-infused rock that featured the magnificent singles: Frankensteins and Free Ride.

From The Upsetters and ‘Return of Django’, the album’s title reflects the spaghetti western genre that had already emerged during the mid-60s. This is music of its time and for its time and this is what late 60s reggae sounded like; raw and a bit ragged.

JACKSON BROWNE
A 12” single this time, ‘Downhill from Everywhere’ from an LP due early October. It’s a little unusual to see a 33rpm 12” like this from a major artist. Inside is a heartfelt cry and attempt at eco-awareness and an accusing finger stab in your chest. Strong stuff.
DEMON

From the UK audiophile label comes a bunch of Leo Sayer including the hits package ‘Have You Ever Been In Love’ (1983) which has one of the best A-sides I’ve heard in a while. ‘Here’ (1979) had Sayer reunited with David Courtine to produce this underrated LP. Finally, ‘World Radio’ (1982) was produced by Arif Mardin, features a slice of Bee Gee song writing and should have done better than it did.

Two from the Hot Wax imprint includes Honey Cone’s ‘Love Peace & Soul’, the trio’s fourth and final soul LP a heartfelt release.

100 Proof’s (Aged in Soul)’s ‘100 Proof’ combines mellow soul and harder funk resulting in a too-often ignored release from this Holland-Dozier-Holland production.

There’s also two from the Average White Band here. ‘Benny and Us’ (1977) teamed the band with Ben E. King for a hit-drenched LP including ‘Get It Up For Love’ and ‘A Star in the Ghetto’. ‘Warmer Communications’ (1978) included the single ‘Your Love is a Miracle’ and was the group’s final gold status LP release. Easy on the ear, it offers quality throughout.

Also check out Jackie Wilson’s ‘Whispers’ (1966) that’s reissued with an illustrated inner sleeve.

KURT ELLING

New out is ‘Secrets are the Best Stories’ (Edition), Elling does an Anta O’Day, using the vocal as a jazz instrument. Bending the lyrics, adding dissonance, mixing tempos sometimes mid line and bending words around corners.

THIRD MAN

From Jonathan Fire*Eater ‘Wolf Songs for Lambs’ (1996) produced a typically primitive blues-rock sound but with the energy and a lead singer that was Rolling Stones in style and presentation. A pre-Strokes band, you might say. A should-a-could-a band who split too early.

...AND FINALLY

Letme offer ‘Resonate’ (Round Hill), a slice of jazz funk from the band’s seventh album, a sequel to the 2019 release, Elevate. I love the retro colours here but it’s too safe.

Jon Balke’s ‘Discourses’ (ECM) shows this jazz man has obvious creative talent. He’s playful, cheeky, funny and adventurous.

From Darren Hayman ‘Home Time’ (Fika) offers a lo-fi approach to rock. It has a stripped, folkish quality.

Kutiman’s ‘Wachaga’ (Siyal) is an Israeli multi-instrumentalist who sought and grabbed some musical collaboration from a Tanzanian village. This ‘World’ funky mix is the result.

‘Undress and Dive After’ from singer-songwriter, Martha Rose (Treibender Teppich) could be described as considered, sensitive, indie folk but there’s also elements of classic 80s indie in there.

From Hedvig Mollestad, ‘Ekhidna’ (Rune Grammofon) comes axeman - well, axewoman - monster jazz rock guitar! High energy, guitar solos, complex guitar riffs and in yer face performances. Plus calming jazzy bits.

Come Stay with Me is a compilation to support artists impacted by COVID-19. There’s thirteen Leeds-based acts here including Team Picture, Jasmine, English Teether and Magic Mountain.
THE FIVES are the first powered monitors on the market with HDMI-ARC to connect directly to a TV for high resolution, discrete 2-channel TV sound. Immensely improve your TV’s sound with THE FIVES - easy-to-use, powered, high def speakers that connect directly to your TV - and virtually anything
Rega’s Aphelion 2 is their top moving coil cartridge. Noel Keywood listens.

This is not a Rega cartridge as I know them; I was taken aback. The Rega sound is distinctively mild – but not so here. This £3200 cartridge is a small change of tack, to use a nautical term. Not so big as to threaten the boat: “a course correction” so as to say.

I’ll get straight to the point: the Aphelion 2 doesn’t display the Rega sound as I know it – or have known it. Which is a bit of a surprise because Aphelion 2 has plenty of competition in this price band and needs a unique selling point, but I found it similar in balance to others. It is less expensive than our reference Ortofon A95 (£3900) but a tad more expensive than Cadence Black (£1825) both technically similar to Aphelion 2 in the use of a boron rod cantilever.

However, there is a wild card in all this: Rega’s three-point fixing arm, to which the Aphelion 2 is ideally suited of course (unlike rivals). If you already have a Rega arm or are thinking of getting one then Aphelion 2 awaits, assuming you are willing to spend so much on a pickup cartridge.

I have always been a Rega arm man since owning and using an RB300 – and remain so after reviewing their Planar 10 turntable (March 20 issue). Use in a Rega arm is a strong pull toward Aphelion 2.

What is Aphelion 2? It is Rega’s own in-house designed and assembled high flyer that comes with a light, stiff and strong boron rod cantilever fitted with a Linea contact diamond stylus. This is right on current technological trend, boron cantilevers coming from an outside global supplier (who I have yet to identify) that I suspect supplies all cartridge manufacturers, since manufacturing such a specialised miniature part is all but a weird thing to do. But the point is these cantilevers are popular with manufacturers, they have significant strengths and Aphelion 2 uses one. I regularly hear one in the Audio Technica OC9X SH I use frequently for review purposes.

The light weight of boron helps keep tip mass in check which in turn improves high frequency tracking. That said, top level torture tracks induced slight mis-tracking with Aphelion 2 (see Measured Performance), where others clear them. But to put this into perspective, these test tracks are above what you’ll find on any commercial LP, especially nowadays as modern cutting lathes are held in check by sophisticated electronics to avoid such modulation levels.

Boron then helps Aphelion 2 track well in the mid-band and at high frequencies, bringing a sense of steady confidence to high level vocals with sibilance in particular.

Whether a boron rod cantilever is strong enough not to bend or snap I do not know! Luckily I have not had that experience in all the many cartridges I have reviewed. Guess there’s a limit somewhere but likely a boron rod will be more durable than an aluminium tube.

The Aphelion 2 body is machined from aluminium and as our pictures show there are three threaded fixing holes. Two are set half an inch (12.7mm) apart as usual, allowing the cartridge to fit any arm, the third can be used only with Rega arms that have three-point fixing. The idea here is not just to clamp the cartridge more securely, but also to make rigid the whole headshell assembly, reducing the vibration headshells exhibit, so improving sound quality.

Rega supply three short hex head bolts and – unusually – a small torque wrench to tighten them, possibly to avoid the alloy threads being stripped by those who over-tighten.

Weighing just 6gms, this is a very low mass cartridge – at the limit of what most arms can balance out. Most should just manage it.

Rega do not supply accessories such as tracking force gauge, stylus brush or a range of screws. Screws supplied are short M2.5s suitable only for their own arm; custom headshells that come thicker – especially when made of hardwood – will need longer screws.

SOUND QUALITY

I used the Aphelion 2 in our SME309 arm, mounted on a Timestep Evo modified Technics SL-1210 Mk2 Direct Drive turntable. Phono stage was an Icon Audio PS3 MkII (valve) with MC input transformers to eliminate hiss. Power amplifiers were a Creek Evolution 100A and, alternatively, an Icon Audio Stereol 30 SE single-ended valve amplifier, feeding Martin Logan ESL-X hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers through Chord
“Tellurium Q’s Ultra Black II’s can be seen as one of the best loudspeaker cables on the market at their price”

- John Moyles, HiFi World

“The differences were stunning.....What I can state is that the Ultra Black II cables are currently the best I have heard in my system”

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manufacturers.
So there you are: forget romance
here, we are talking about cutting
torque speed in the sound, or put
another way excellent time domain
definition. However, materials
have signature resonant
properties that are easily
identified by the ear and
the hand drums had not
only hard edged transients
that I knew came from boron,
but there was a coolness in
the sound I also know from
A95 and OC9X SH. Being an
engineer I should enjoy this
togetherness – but a bit
of romance in the sound always
helps me know.
In the case of Aphelion 2, that
runs flat to 20kHz and peaks a little,
there was vast insight and detail, with
a smidgeon of treble brightness on
outer grooves. Bear in mind here our
cartridge was new. As a stylus wears
it gets progressively duller, so raised
treble gives longest
effective stylus life in subjective terms.
Making Aphelion 2 well balanced in
original form, before wear sets in.
From Uptownship the striding
bass line was firm and solid in our
SME309 arm – and doubtless better
in a three-point fixing Rega arm since
this fixing method improves definition
all-round. The Aphelion has an icily
clear mid-range that made Masekela’s
vocals shine out and cymbals were
conspicuous, yet they had a lovely
sonorous quality. I was pinned to the
seat, blasted backwards! Well, when
volume went up. Think speed and
dynamics, with a sense of solid, well
defined bass that we all like to hear
shaking the room.
This is no sonic wimp of a
cartridge, yet it is well controlled in
its behaviour. There is no warmth; it
is brutally honest about what is in
the groove: technically correct. Forget
about the easy tone of yesteryear.
Introducing yesteryear! I’d noticed
ticks and pops came out like rifle
shots, as they do from modern MCs,
so wondered how a cartridge like

"we are talking about cutting
torque speed in the sound, or
put another way excellent time
domain definition"

Company Signature Reference cables.
It did not take long when listening
to Hugh Masekela’s Uptownship, on
Hope (180gm), for my listening notes
to remark on speed of hand drums
and general rigid clarity, with fine bass
definition. As the hand drums kept
going I could detect this cartridge
has a boron cantilever. There was a
hard edge to each transient and a
Rega’s unique three point fixing
top plate, with threaded holes
for ease of attachment. This
strengthens the whole
headshell assembly.
slightly mechanical sound. When I
told Ortofon I preferred the tapered
aluminium cantilever of Cadenza
Bronze to the boron rod of A95 they
were:”chuckled and said I liked a ‘romantic
sound”. Boron is preferred by
manufacturers.

Aphelion 2 comes in a sturdy machined alloy case, complete
with torque wrench to ensure the attachment screws are
tightened by the correct amount.
The X2 is fine-tuned to focus on audio excellence. It has all the features needed for convenient day-to-day use, but no superfluous add-ons that start to negatively impact the sonic character. The end result is a highly engaging, musical turntable that delivers deep, detailed lows, crisp high frequencies and an engaging well-presented midrange. Thanks to Pro-Ject’s advanced manufacturing experience, while delivering great sound the X2 is also a beautiful piece of engineering that can stand proud as the focal point in any home environment.

The X2 is available in four finishes; a premium walnut wood veneer, a luxurious black 8-layer high gloss paint, or black or white eight-layer hand-polished satin paint.
this would play old records. On went, All Your Love, from Blues Breakers (Decca, 1966) and no problem: I just heard all the restrictions of a recording of that time: pinched and coarse midrange mainly Clapton’s guitar was vivid and John Mayall’s distant vocals discernible.

Noise was more evident in a heavily played track. Out of Reach, from World of Blues Power (Decca, 1969) where the glorious atmospheric vocals of Peter Green and his beautiful guitar work – second after Hendrix in my view – came over clearly. R疏 groove noise from heavy playing not being made intrusive. RIP Peter Green.

Bringing me naturally to classical on LP where noise is a major point of complaint. Spinning the lovely 2L (Norway) LP of Marianne Thorsen playing Mozart violin concertos I was taken more by insight into the Trondheim Soloists behind her than ticks or pops. Opening lower strings sounded fruity on track one and when Marianne Thorsen’s violin suddenly entered proceedings it was startlingly clear and forward A tad cool perhaps, but vivid.

The term “cool” that I kept writing in my notes became more defined with Mark Knopfler’s True Love Will Never Fade, from Kill to Get Crimson (180gm). This is a full bodied recording Aphelion 2 cooled by removing its sense of warmth (OK, a logical inevitability!). I got to hear Knopfler’s fluid fingers, strummed and plucked strings ringing out sharply and clearly; you get to hear it all with Aphelion 2.

On to the subject of inner grooves. Playing Time to Say Goodbye, from Two Countries One Heart (180gm), a fine audiophile recording from Hi-Fi Direct of Italy, Rosella Caporale’s sustained crescendo, almost in the run-out groove, was piercingly clear and stable; no sign of mistracking and good insight too.

Of course, I had to spin The Big Band Sound, from the Sydney Lawrence Orchestra – an extraordinary recording – and Sing Sing Sing showed just how fast and controlled Aphelion 2 is. Trumpets were vivid and with hard edge, the brass section generally dominating. The glorious drum solos were solid and clear too, but I wished for a bit less top-end emphasis to better hear this drum work.

CONCLUSION

With its machined aluminium body and three-point fixing Aphelion 2 should be used in a Rega arm with three-point fixing head shell, to heighten the intentional drama within its design. It is fast, hard of tonality but desperately insightful, firing music out like precision bullets. Certainly a cartridge to be auditioned, it is coolly capable and dramatic in revelation.

The body is compact in shape and light in weight – just 6gms.

The boron rod cantilever carries a line contact stylus. Above is a guard. From above it can be seen clearly when cueing.
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Cosmo’s Factory
Craft

Fronted by John Fogerty, these twangy rockers offered slices of blues and country in the mix to provide an essence of Americana and hit a vein of brilliant form during the final years of the sixties.

You could - possibly arguabaly - say that this album was the group’s last hurrah but it also showed that the group’s musical ambition was expanding and maturing. The first single from this album, ‘Travelin’ Band’, was testament to that.

At the same time, you could also sense that they were running out of steam, as good as this album was and remains. That is, the best tracks on the album appear as A- and B-sides, orbiting the three singles. I’ve mentioned one of those tracks above. The rocking ‘Up Around the Bend’ was a high-energy feast while the track ‘Who’ll Stop the Rain’ plugged into the darker side of Fogerty, a side he was not avert to exposing to his listeners.

The rest of the album was packed with covers such as ‘I Heard It Through the Grapevine’ plus old Sun tracks like ‘Ooby Dooby’.

This new edition of the classic album emerges as the LP hits its 50th anniversary. As such, it has been provided with high-quality attention, with mastering completed at Abbey Road by one of the best mastering engineers in the business, Miles Showell. Now, anyone who knows or at least knows of Showell will also understand that he’s the industry’s principle expert in half-speed mastering and this vinyl has been treated thus. Half-speed mastering is a protracted and long-winded process but does result in a highly detailed soundstage, great focus, airy mids and organic bass in general terms. And that’s what you get here.

CARLA BLEY, ANDY SHEPPARD & STEVE SWALLOW

Look at the line up here and you might assume this is another one of those wife-swaying type jazz ensembles. Free-form trios that come and go, suit and reform with new members – while the older members run off to hook up with other trios and quartets or more.

But not this bunch. Of course pianist Bley and bassist Swallow are partners in crime and life which helps the bonds that tie, while sax man Sheppard had tied his star to those folks for some time. In fact, this is the trio’s fourth album outing, an easy-going tour years after the LP ‘Andando el Tiempo’.

There are three multi-part works here: the title track, Beautiful Telephone and Copycat. Each one features vaguely thematic musical ideas but all focus on modern or relatively modern jazz time and chordal structures. There’s complexity here amongst the relaxed and laid-back atmosphere.

This vinyl edition is a fine release and has been mastered well – often the case from this German label.

And that’s fortunate because, on this production, the trio are taking it easy, taking things slowly and using more space than might normally be the case. Hence, there’s more chance for you to notice small details. The slow deliberate piano chords rambling up and down the scales with gay abandon, the considered bass plucks and the heavy resonance of the body of the thing, while the breathy and textured sax is more than humanitarian in both approach and tone.

The music here can be complex and intricate but it can also be playful – performed with a smile and a smile. The trio obviously enjoy each other’s company and, more than that, working together. So, why not join in the party?

TWO OTHER SINGLES FOLLOWED: ‘(YOU’VE GOT ME) DANCING ON A STRING’ AND ‘EVERYTHING’S TUESDAY’ BUT THEY LANGLAUGHED AS TOP 40 CONTENDERS, FAILING TO HAVE MUCH IMPACT. THEN THEY BROKE UP IN 1971, GOT BACK TOGETHER, HAD SOME REGIONAL US HITS AND THEN BROKE UP IN 1976, WHILE TWO GROUP MEMBERS, GENERAL NORMAN JOHNSON AND SHOWMAN DANNY WOODS MOVED ONTO SOLO CAREERS.

SO WHERE DOES THIS LP FIT THEN?

WELL IT SLOTS EASILY INTO THE GROUP’S MASSIVE EGO, IF THE LYRICS ARE ANYTHING TO GO BY. WOMEN WEREN’T SAFE IN THEIR PRESENCE, IT APPEARS. DON’T DAMN THEM FOR THEIR BOASTING AND BLUFF, THOUGH, BECAUSE THERE’S A LOT OF GOOD SONGS ON THIS 1970 RELEASE THAT ORIGINALLY APPEARED ON HOLLAND-DOZIER-HOLLAND’S INVICTUS LABEL AND FOLLOWED THEIR WELL-RECEIVED, SELF-TITLED DEBUT OF THE SAME YEAR.

AS YOU WILL READ IN THE DYLAN REVIEW ELSEWHERE, THERE WAS A DISTINCT FEEL TO THE MASTERING FROM THAT SEVENTIES RELEASE AND THAT HELD TRUE HERE TOO. THERE IS A WARMING TONAL DIRECTION IN THE MIDS WITH A SENSE OF CUFFYET STRONG BASS THAT WRAPS THE MUSIC IN COTTON WOOL. THIS MEANS THAT CLARITY IS NOT A PRIMARY INGREDIENT OF THE STAGE, NOT COMPARED TO MORE CONTEMPORARY RELEASES. THAT DOESN’T MATTER, THOUGH, BECAUSE THE MASTERING SETS THIS MUSIC IN ITS PLACE IN HISTORY.

AND THAT MUSIC IS A CONFIDENT, SWINGING SLICE OF FUNK AND SOUL. HEAD-NODDING, FOOT-TAPPING SOUL THAT COMBINES JOHNSON’S UNIQUE DELIVERY, WOODS’ STRONG APPROACH AND A CLASSIC SOUL, FINGER-CIICKING THAT WILL HAVE THE HIPS A-SWINGING.

BIT OF A WEIRD ONE THIS, BUT A WEIRD ONE ALL DYLAN FANS NEED TO INVESTIGATE.

FIRSTLY BECAUSE THIS RELEASE WAS NOT A STANDARD DYLAN ALBUM BUT A SOUNDTRACK FOR SAM ‘BLOOD EVERYWHERE’ PUCKINNAH’S MOVIE OF THE SAME NAME.

ALSO, IT WAS THE FIRST LP HE HAD RELEASED SINCE 1970’S ‘NEW MORNING’. APART FROM A SPOT IN THE EARLIER BANGLADESH BENEFIT CONCERT IN 1971, DYLAN HAD GONE AWOL.

ON THIS RELEASE, DYLAN REACQUAINTED HIMSELF WITH A FORMER COLLEAGUE, GUITARIST BRUCE LANGHORNE, WHO HAD APPEARED ON THE LP ‘BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME’ AND OTHERS BEFORE THAT.

UNLIKE SOME NAMED ARTISTS OF CERTAIN SOUND TRACKS, DYLAN TOOK A STRONG HOLD OF THIS ONE, COMPOSING AND PLAYING UPON IT. IT WAS ALSO REMARKABLY SIMPLE IN APPROACH AND MUSICAL STRUCTURES WITH A FOLKISH AND COUNTRYISH FLAVOUR TO ADD FORM AND COLOUR.

AS TO EMPHASISE THE SERIOUS NATURE OF THE PROJECT, DYLAN ALSO BROUGHT IN OTHER NAMERS SUCH AS BOOKER T JONES, ROGER McGUINN AND TRAY FIDDLE PLAYER BYRNS BERNIE.

THE ALBUM REPAID DYLAN FOR HIS HARD WORK BECAUSE IT PRODUCED A KILLER SINGLE, THE ONE AND ONLY ‘KNOCKIN’ ON HEAVEN’S DOOR’. THERE’S A LOT OF OTHER EXCELLENT ADDITIONS TO THAT HIT, INCLUDING THE THREE ‘BILLY’ SONGS, WHILE THE INSTRUMENTALS WERE ALL WORTHY.

OFTEN NEGLECTED, THIS ALBUM STANDS ON ITS OWN TWO FEET AS A QUALITY RELEASE, ENHANCED BECAUSE MOBILE FIDELITY HAS ADDED EXCELLENT MASTERING TO THIS 33 RPM. THERE’S A SLIGHT WARMING NATURE TO THE MIDS ON THIS ISSUENCE WHICH GIVES THE MUSIC THAT CLASSIC 70S TONE. THE MASTERING COLOURS USED HERE WERE ALSO ALL OVER OTHER 70S RELEASES OF THE TIME. IT’S A SORT OF TUSK TUNAL SIGNATURE BUT ONE THAT STILLS TELLS HUNDREDS OF INFORMATIVE AND FOCUSED DETAIL.
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Sharp shock

Paul Rigby looks at a compendium of edgy music from 1976-1986 – music that was a shock.

A SHARP SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM
Author: Vernon Joynson
Publisher: Borderline Productions
Price: £75

You know, I’ve been doing journalism for a few decades now. If you asked me to run off 1,000 words or so on any given subject, it wouldn’t take me too long to sort that out for you. As for our Vernon? Blimey. I stand in awe at the man’s textual accomplishments. Mr Joynson rattles off a 1,000 pages before tea, never mind 1,000 words. This book is no exception. It’s also a staggering achievement.


This new paper-based phenomenon is sold as a numbered, limited edition. Numbered? Indeed yes, you’ll find a neat little number added to the inside front cover, in case you can’t find it. There are 1,000 copies now out there.

If you do grab one then you’ll find 1,682 entries plus twelve pages of full colour illustrations featuring bands, artists, LPs, 45 singles, EPs and, let’s not forget, cassettes and where artists continued beyond 1986, Biographies continue until the present or until the artist ceased performing and/or recording.

And those artists actually roam further than the large subtitle suggests because you’ll also find synth-pop, indie-pop, indie-rock and alternative rock, plus industrial acts.

The book also looks at sub-genres including cassette culture, power pop, punk variants, the mod revival and more. There’s also Irish artists added in for good measure, plus the odd item from outside the boundaries such as Australia’s The Saints and France’s Sterky Toys – because they were based in the UK and/or found success here and were part of the scene.

I like that flexibility in this book.

That is, the book runs with the music and the passion and doesn’t knock itself out with too many boundaries.

That said, even with a book of this size, Joynson has made some editorial decisions by giving biographical but not full discography information on larger eighties artists that fit within the Ska, 2-tone, disco, soul and reggae domains.

One interesting facet is the rarity scale code and its accompanying price range which might help in terms of pricing, if you’re buying selling any of the included releases. Hence, the code SC is ‘Scarce’ and valued at £18-£35, while R1 is ‘Rare’ and valued at £35-£60 and R7 says that ‘Only a Handful Exist’ with a price at £1,500+.

The layout of the book is classic Vernon but, in case you’ve never grabbed one of his books before (and you should), here’s how these things roll.

Let’s pick someone at random. I’ll go for Ian Dury & The Blockheads. You get a band-member run down, what they did in the band and what line-up they belonged to. There’s an album run down including label, catalogue number and year of release. A host of release notes on each including value, different territories, format and limited-edition versions, compilations and live releases, EPs and single releases, reissues, plus a full biography and information on the band since Dury’s death. About six pages of closely-printed, A4-packed information in small type!

The detail is wonderful but there’s also emotive inserts here from Joynson. This is not a robotic academic tome. For example, Joynson disapproves of the departure of Chas Jankel from The Blockheads and the inclusion of replacement, Wilko Johnson in 1980, the band’s “... material was seldom as strong again,” he says.

This book offers years of reading enjoyment, serving as an enormously valuable reference for fans, collectors, buyers and sellers, ‘A Sharp Shock to the System’ is a triumph and easily worth the asking price. PR
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This is a selection of what we hope to bring you, not a complete list. We regret that due to a wide range of issues, we cannot guarantee that all products listed above will appear.

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FREE READER CLASSIFIED ADVERT COPY DEADLINE FOR NOVEMBER 2020 ISSUE 14TH SEPTEMBER 2020
it took Morissette all of two months to do and here we are, twenty-five years later.

Although she didn’t do that while walking the full length of Route 66 or living in the woods or even up in the proverbial, poverty-stricken garret. No, she did it while holed up in an LA studio with producer Glen Ballard, in 1994.

A grand total of 33 million sales later and Morissette knows she’s ‘done good’. There’s even a related musical, would you believe. Would you? I wouldn’t. But there is.

For all of the emotion, the hardcore lyrics, the explicit nature of the passion exposed to all, you have to remember this. She released this LP when she was nineteen. A time when she hadn’t even been in a long term relationship, when she felt independent in extremis and frankly, it shows. She sometimes sounds like a spoiled brat. A selfish kid. An unfeeling, self-centred, self-preservationist egocentric.

She knows this too. She recently commented in an interview with The Independent “At one point I was hyper autonomous, thinking that was the way, I’ll just do this all myself, I don’t need anybody, and then now having been married 10 years I realise that there’s some lyrics in that song that I would update. As in, I’m actually participating in your healing, I’m not just sitting over here going ‘Hey, you’re on your own, call me when you’re done!’”

But you know what? That’s OK because it talks to other teeny teens. This is the stuff many of them think about. This is the attitude a lot of girls of a similar age have. This is the narrow existence particular young ladies (and lads let’s not forget those shall we?) occupy.

It also brought Morissette fame and rather unwanted attention “...as soon as the video for ‘Hand in my Pocket’ came out, I remember walking down the street in New York and people started running up to me and I thought ‘Oh, okay this is different’. As a Canadian with my particular temperament, I just love people watching and then all of a sudden I became the one that was watched, and it was very odd”.

Oddly enough, after the release of this album, things took a turn for the worse as her so-called protectors became exploitative in rather nasty ways.

Talking, a few years ago now, to www.interviewmagazine.com “When I was younger, my survival strategy was to be super people-pleaser, to tend and befriend. And then I realised that wasn’t working. I was getting my heart broken at every turn. And then after fame, my survival strategy went to just being aloof. What saved me was a third option: to focus on my relationships...the really basic ones, like with my husband and my best friends and my therapist. Growing up has helped”.

The album has re-emerged as an anniversary issue that’s been cut from the analogue master but I’m not impressed with the pressing itself which, at least on my sample, was warped. Not badly enough to prevent play or overly affect the sonics but it was disappointing to see.

It’s funny to hear this one again. Alanis reminds me, especially on this LP, as a wilful, rather petulant teen-age daughter, entering puberty and testing her boundaries.

Someone whose moods and hormones you really don’t have time for just now. And you just want to send her to her room. With no phone. And the plug removed from her hair. And then you shut up stairs to turn down the volume on that TV.

And then you mumble “bloody kids” to yourself as you put on the kettle for a cuppa and try to calm down.

Saying that, Morissette does bring a big bucket of delicious anger to this LP and it works very well. Especially on a track like ‘You Oughta Know’. She almost spits the lyrics out and you really wonder if the microphone had to be sponged down after this particular song.

And then she can get melancholy on tracks like Perfect. But you know, really, that its the hormones again and yes, she’s about to burst into tears and eat a tub of ice cream in front of a romcom – and tomorrow she’ll be saying she hates you again. It’s a feisty LP that inspires such reactions. PR
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