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**absolute sounds ltd**  
58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW  
T: +44 (0)20 89 71 39 09 F: +44 (0)20 88 79 79 62  
[www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com) [info@absolutesounds.com](mailto:info@absolutesounds.com)



**EDITOR**

Alan Sircom

Email: editor@hifiplus.com

**CONTRIBUTORS THIS ISSUE INCLUDE:**

Richard Clews, Dennis D. Davis,  
Roy Gregory, Jimmy Hughes,  
Jason Kennedy, Chris Martens,  
Paul Messenger, Chris Thomas,  
Pete Trewin

**GRAPHIC DESIGNER**

Alison Cutler

Fonthill Creative, Salisbury

**PHOTOGRAPHY**

Simon Marsh

The Hi-Fi Plus Team

**ADVERTISING**

Tom Hackforth

Tel: +44 (0)1425 655255

Email: tom@hifiplus.com

**ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER:**

Pete Trewin

Tel: +44 (0)1425 655699

Email: pete@hifiplus.com

**PUBLISHER**

Chris Martens

**THE EDITORIAL OFFICE CAN BE CONTACTED AT:**

Hi-Fi Plus Editorial

Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd  
Unit 3, Sandehead Industrial Estate,  
Sandehead, Hampshire  
SP6 1PA

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1425 655255

Fax: +44 (0)1425 655477

Net: www.hifiplus.com

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subsidiary of Nextscreen, LLC, Inc.  
8868 Research Blvd., Ste. 108  
Austin, Texas 78758, USA  
Net: www.avguide.com  
CHAIRMAN AND CEO  
Thomas B. Martin, Jr.

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# editorial

In the run-up to the 100th edition of the magazine, it's worth looking forward as well as back. It's interesting to view the hi-fi landscape back in 1999 compared to today, and speculate just what the map will look like in 2026. Curiously, back just before the turn of the century, people were often talking about their 'final vinyl' systems, but instead we've seen something close to a renaissance in sales of all things LP, even if the term 'LP' has been replaced by 'vinyls' now.

Judging by the last 99 issues, it's hard (make that impossible) to predict what changes will occur in audio over the next few years, although I think we have reached a plateau. The ways we will acquire music might change, but I suspect the methods of acquisition of that music are already in place. From the hardware side, we already have equipment that can read music off a network or play music fed from a computer, those who abandoned loudspeakers for headphones now have provision to buy some exceptional quality headphone-related material (suggesting the high-end is alive and well and living between the ears of a new generation), and the musical world has tried – and seemingly swiftly rejected – a number of putative next-generation concepts like multichannel music.

Yes, the names will change, yes prices may go up, down or sideways and there's always a chance of new revolutions blindsiding this continuum (although if you are holding out for 8-track's return, good luck with that), but I can't help feeling the more things change, the more they stay the same.

In the meantime, we are still very keen to read your views on the audio

world since our issue one, and we'll print the best of them in our 100th issue next month. What's changed, and what's stayed the same in your audio world since the last century? Have you embraced a downloaded future, or have you set your watch back with vinyl and valves? And where do you think audio will be in 15 years time? Will you be beaming music right into your own head, or will you be shouting 'from my cold, dead hands' while clutching your vinyl? Let us know – editor@hifiplus.com.

*Hi-Fi Plus* was saddened to learn of the passing of Franco Serblin. Serblin's designs from both his original Sonus Faber and later his own Franco Serblin brands demonstrated that a commitment to sound quality did not have to come in drab loudspeaker boxes. Sadly, this month also saw the passing of Peter Brem, head of the Swiss maker of the highest of high-end turntables, DaVinci Audio Labs.

Alan Sircom  
editor@hifiplus.com

ISSUE 100 ON SALE: UK JUNE 6, 2013 ... US JULY 11, 2013

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The new MC Anna from Ortofon sits at the highest echelon of Moving Coil cartridges. This state-of-the-art product is representative of numerous design elements and ideals pioneered by one of the world-leaders in analogue technologies. As a result, the MC Anna is truly capable of the highest degree of performance possible, and will provide a sound which is literally unsurpassed. The MC Anna is named after and inspired by the world-renowned operatic soprano, Anna Netrebko.

The stylish Xpression cartridge from Ortofon bridges the gap between SPU-type designs and High-End models like the MC Windfeld and MC Anna, which are designed for headshell mounting. The result is a high-performance moving coil cartridge with the convenience of a standard headshell connector. By using some of the best technologies available to them, Ortofon have made the Xpression into not just a convenient and attractive design, but also one of the finest sounding cartridges available on the market.

## Cadenza Series



The Cadenza series represents another example of Ortofon's constant push toward technological perfection. By taking various design characteristics acquired through market leaders, such as the MC Jubilee and Kontrapunkt series, Ortofon have developed Cadenza to elevate any decent Hi-Fi system to a whole new level. The range consists of 5 different models, including a Mono version, but they all adhere to Ortofon's core principles of accurate information retrieval and phenomenal sound performance.

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Please send your letters to Hi-Fi Plus, Unit 3, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire, SP6 1PA, United Kingdom.  
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# incoming!

## On Tubes and Time

The long tirade against everything that wasn't a Lavardin amplifier in a recent letters pages ("There's Only wannabe hi-fi", issue 97) focused on the unreliability of tubes. How long can tubes last? The valves in my Audio Research SP-8 Mk II have been in place since it was last serviced in the early 1990s. It's probably time they were changed, but it still sounds fine to me. That means I've gotten about 20 years of regular use out of them. Is this a record?

**Marco Ferriola, via email**

*It's possible to get 10,000 hours out of a set of valves (tubes); sometimes more, sometimes less. But 20 years on the same set of preamp valves does sound like its time for a new set of valves. I'm not sure if this is a record – I'm sure there is probably some Golden Age valve amp from the 1950s still running on the set of valves it came with, somewhere – but it certainly could be. Let's just see... – Ed.*

## EQ curves – who's right, who's wrong?

Roy Gregory still knows nothing about LP equalisation curves. In his article on the Zanden phono preamp he writes: "The mechanics of record replay demand that bass and treble signals are both rolled off when cutting discs, those roll-offs reversed on replay." This is quite wrong. High frequencies are increased and bass frequencies are reduced for cutting and an inverse curve is used for playback. This has the advantages of reducing surface noise when the treble is reduced on replay and of facilitating the reproduction of bass frequencies. The RIAA standard was introduced in 1955, not 1956 and the idea that American Columbia was still using pre-RIAA equalization in 1965 for Bob Dylan LPs is ludicrous. I doubt if it is even true of *Kind of Blue*. I suggest that Roy download a copy of Peter Copeland's "Manual of analogue restoration" which is freely available on the internet and study it carefully. All the major British labels were using RIAA by the 60s.

**David Mansell, via email**

*The part of the text you mention comes down to poor editing rather than errors on Roy's part. The feature came out over-written on page and even after several passes it was still over and with hours before deadline, I went for a spot of slash and burn editing; any errors are introduced at that point.*

*With regard to the year of introduction of RIAA, there remains some controversy over this. I believe, anything between the date the RCA Victor New Orthographic curve was renamed in 1954, to the date when RIAA was adopted by the ISO on Jan 1, 1956. The widest interpretation is to take the 1956 as a de facto start point, because at that time the 'close enough' EQ curves were effectively inducted into the one RIAA curve. The question then becomes one of did the engineers at the time adjust those EQ curves to be brought into lock-step with RIAA, or if they were considered 'close enough',*

*were these curves just left as a given while they spent their time developing stereo LP?*

*The difficulty is there are conflicting reports from the time, depending on whether you speak to those mastering (everything was RIAA by the time of the first commercial stereo pressings) or those at the cutting lathes (they were having to kludge things until the old machines were phased out). It may well be that the standardisation situation is akin to the so-called 'harmonisation' of mains voltages across Europe. Technically, we are all use 230V now, but all that's happened is companies need to make their products capable of coping with a wider variation in mains voltage, to contend with 220V countries running as low as 207V and the UK running as high as 252V.*

*I don't have a substantial collection of 'made in the 1960s, pressed in the 1960s' recordings, but it seems the physical evidence contradicts the official story. I too have heard the effect of switching between Columbia and RIAA EQ curves on early-pressing Dylan LPs. By playing it through a Columbia curve, the tonality is restored to the Bob Dylan sound we have come to associate through listening via later LP pressings or CD.*

*A study of Copland's excellent manual does reveal some of the frustration found in the process of restoration "practically everything which could go wrong did go wrong, and it isn't anybody's fault. But much worse is everyone's apparent attempts to hide what happened."*

*Ultimately, I don't think the situation is anything like as clear cut as you paint. – Ed. ►*

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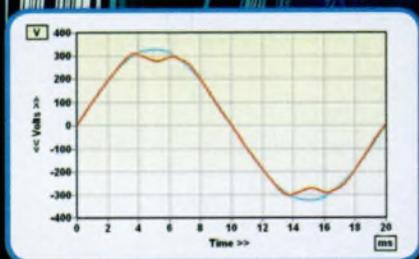
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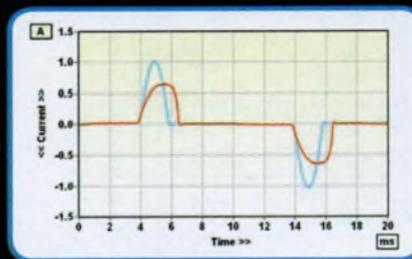
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**ISOTEK EV03 GENESIS**  
DUAL-CELL MAINS SINE WAVE GENERATOR



HI-FI NEWS MAGAZINE OFFICIAL LAB REPORT.  
ABOVE: Mains voltage waveform, from wall socket [red] versus IsoTek EV03 Genesis [blue]



ABOVE: Distorted mains [changing] current waveform [red] versus significantly more linear waveform delivered by the IsoTek EV03 Genesis [blue]



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### ► How much is too much?

When I first got into audio, I used to read about expensive hi-fi, there was always a sense of 'near affordability'. I liked to read about Linn LP12s and Naim 250s because although I couldn't afford them at the time, they were within reach of mortal man and I could at least dream of one day owning what I read about in the magazines. Even the exotic high-end devices from Audio Research and Krell (which really were expensive) were the kind of things that you knew that if you became really successful, you could play in this market.

That's all changed now. A good system might cost tens of thousands of pounds and really good systems can cost hundreds of thousands (or more). Such things are beyond the aspirations of normal people. Is hi-fi's future really viable if the only people who can realistically dream of owning good systems are those few surviving hedge fund managers, oil barons and investment bankers? Perhaps it's no wonder hi-fi is almost forgotten today, if £10,000 mains cables are the norm?

**Dennis Bronson, via email**

*Rather than hi-fi being almost forgotten as a result of high prices, I'd argue that high prices are a result of hi-fi being almost forgotten. With the relative absence of newcomers buying products for hundreds of pounds and fewer upgraders buying systems costing thousands, hi-fi manufacturers have to raise their prices – and hopefully, their games – to create products for the lucky few.*

*The situation is not as bleak as it first seems, though. There are new buyers, and there are better than ever products at a range of realistic (and not-so-realistic) prices, but many of the low-to-medium priced products are purchased on price rather than on the basis of review today, so our input in the process is limited and if you judge the hi-fi industry by its magazines, that creates an unfortunate skew in priorities.*

*There are also significant changes in hi-fi today, including the major shift toward headphones and in-ear monitors. A little less than decade and a half ago, Napster and MP3 players began to significantly erode interest in home audio systems. But, instead of wiping out the audio industry altogether, that generation of listeners are now investing in very high quality headphone systems and headphone amplifiers, and we see no sign of that changing. Ultimately, it seems the pursuit of good sound is harder to get rid of than anyone expected – Ed.*

### Buzzword Bingo

I have subscribed to *Hi-Fi+* for some years. I am 64, addicted to music but not to hi-fi. I have a Marantz Signature CD and amp, ART speakers, Nordost cables, and IsoTek mains filter, and I am happy.

There are so many articles, abbreviations etc, that I have no understanding of that I have to stop subscribing. Perhaps I am too old?

Here are a few things: Phono stage, DAC, Digital streamer, phono preamp, high accuracy clock for my CD player, cable burn in, HRT Streamer (as a doctor, this really doesn't make musical sense), DAC2 D/A converter.

Oh dear... I could go on, and on, and on  
Good bye thanks

**Ian Smith, via email**

*I sympathise, but a technical subject does have its terminology. And like any branch of consumer electronics, the rate of change has increased substantially in recent years, and alongside those changes come changes in terminology. With CD's popularity on the wane, manufacturers and consumers alike are looking for the replacement, and with that comes a variety of different ways of playing music, each with its own buzzwords, acronyms and jargon. This can be exceptionally confusing. In addition, many new amplifiers do not come with the RIAA equalization circuit required for playing a turntable and some kind of phono stage is required. The terms 'phono stage' and 'phono preamp' are not entirely interchangeable (technically, a 'phono stage' is a simple repeat of the moving coil/moving magnet equaliser found in older amplifiers, while a 'phono preamp' generally includes adjustments of equalization curve or cartridge loading).*

*The datastream of any CD player requires cross-referencing against a internal timing chip, and the logic of using a higher precision clock chip is that the tighter the tolerance of that chip, the better the performance of the CD player. With a range of aftermarket clocks from hot-rodged in-player replacements from the likes of Trichord up to basically an atomic clock from dCS, Esoteric or Antelope, it's a common upgrade for existing CD players. And as to cable burn-in, there's always playing music instead... – Ed.*

# The show with no Naim: Audio World, Manchester Airport, March 2013

By Steve Dickinson

**T**he weekend of 23-24 March saw large swathes of the UK struggling with some unseasonably severe late snow except, curiously, for a ten-mile radius around Manchester. This particular Manchester show was not the city centre event, but the one out at the airport, which usually has a wider variety of exhibitors – and rather fewer whizz-bang AV rigs competing to see who could inflict the most structural damage on the building before tear-down on Sunday.

The weather may well have affected attendance at what was, by any standards, a fairly low-key event. Exhibitors were busy swapping travellers' tales of fighting the elements in full-on Ranulph Fiennes mode – because The Show Must Go On; or perhaps more likely, because The Bar Must Be Open By Now. Nevertheless, after a gap of three or four years, I was happy to see this show back in the calendar.

Spread across two levels of the Radisson BLU airport hotel, visitors were greeted by familiar faces from Diverse Vinyl and Stamford Audio, vinyl and SACD hog heaven. If it was vinyl you were buying, Timestep and Claro Audio also had some interesting turntable designs on show in the foyer, but static on display only. The ground floor had a handful of decent sized rooms, and a couple of smaller ones. First up, local dealer The Audio Counsel showed the new Zu Druid 5 loudspeakers with an Audion Silver Knight integrated amp. Fronted by a Densen 440 CD or Well-Tempered Versalex turntable, this turned out to be a fairly decent way to spend £17k, or thereabouts.

Music First Audio was showing its latest £6k Baby Reference pre-amp, which looks a lot like its Classic pre-amp unless you ask, when you find out that it's a fair bit better, and pricier. PIXLL, despite the name, had no hint of any AV-ness, but two decent-sounding rooms. One had the new DALI Helicon 400 (£5.5k) with a Renaissance CD transport and a very handsome AstinTrew Concord DAC and Belles pre-power combo doing the upstream honours. The other room was playing a simple system, rather well: AstinTrew 3500 CD player and 2000 amp through Acoustic Energy Reference 1 standmounters.

Née Bösendorfer, Brodmann Acoustics emerged as a separate company when Yamaha bought the Viennese piano-maker and decided it didn't want or need a second loudspeaker brand. Herr Brodmann apparently started making pianos some time in the late 18th century, passing the mantle to his protégé, Herr Bösendorfer, some years later. I don't think he had all that much to do with the loudspeakers, but the elegant FS bookshelf model was sounding bigger and richer than its modest dimensions and £2,500 price would imply, helped by an Electrocompaniet CD and integrated amp. Lavish in all but price.

Then we entered the twilight zone, and not just due to the subdued mood lighting. Vivid Audio had two systems set up to show off the Giya models. One had the big G1s in active mode, driven by Devialet D-Premier power amps and active digital crossovers, the other used an Oracle CD player and single Devialet amp into the smaller Giya G3. These are extraordinary loudspeakers in all sorts of ways, whether you're a fan of the Teletubbies or not.

Memo to self – get back into vinyl...

Inspire Hi-Fi had a tempting array of turntables, with the Enigma, Eclipse and Monarch TTs on dem when I visited. The Enigma is pretty much a re-branded Lenco idler-drive model and takes a nine inch arm, where the others will accept 12" arms. Upstairs, Avid was showing its new Ingenium turntable. Using parts from the bigger Diva but with a skeletal, machined aluminium solid subchassis, this is one cool-looking turntable, whether you opt for the single, or double-arm variant.

There were a decent handful of dealer systems: Dooley's had an MF and B&W system; Rega, via Audio T, was showing its RP8 turntable with new Aria phono stage and Elicit integrated amp, through a pair of PMC FACT3s. This room was sounding great, particularly when the neighbour wasn't joining in. The noisy neighbours in question was Burmester, which appeared to have miscalculated the size of the room it had booked. Small room + big system = some very angry neighbours indeed. That said, the Bergmann turntable did look and sound every bit as gorgeous as the rest of the system. ▶



▶ Albany made great music with its AP11 preamp and new M1108 monoblocs, fronted by the new Accuphase 510 CD player. Next door, MusicWorks had its new modular version of the ReVo table replete with dCS Puccini, Antelope DAC, with Antelope clock and Rubidium atomic master clock, Green Mountain Rio loudspeakers powered by the new Accuphase e360 integrated amp, and all connected by Audiomica cables. The Green Mountains are an acquired taste, so something of a brave choice for a show. But I liked it a lot!

Fidelity Art had some new support platforms from Pro Audio Bono, and new Alter loudspeakers from Ardeno that managed to look like panels, but were in fact three-way open baffle designs. ART Loudspeakers was showing its Alnico range, topped by the impressive and beautifully finished £42k Alnico Reference, a sumptuous and very musical effort with McIntosh amplification, not to mention the Systemdek Reference turntable, bedecked with Audio Origami 12" arm and Transfiguration Proteus cartridge.

Renaissance Audio showed its Unity pre and RA01 valve power amps, with the elegantly simple and simply beautiful

Oracle Paris turntable. Meanwhile, BrianandTrevors had a Linn-based system into Linn's own speakers, or a monstrous pair of Adam Tensor Alphas. Hard to ignore, as is the (£20k) Light Harmonic DAC which I didn't get to hear, but on looks alone, would love to take home to play with.

MCRU is escaping from the Mains Cables 'R' Us rubric, and brought a decent system using a mixture of home-grown music server and DAC, Canor Electronics and Amphion loudspeakers, with oodles of Isotek. Tucked away at the end of the back corridor was ICON Audio, that had a pair of very cute looking MB30M monoblocs on show. Apart from Hart Audio, whose door seemed always locked, and a room operating in stealth mode, showing Luxman to (by all accounts) very good effect, that's about your lot.

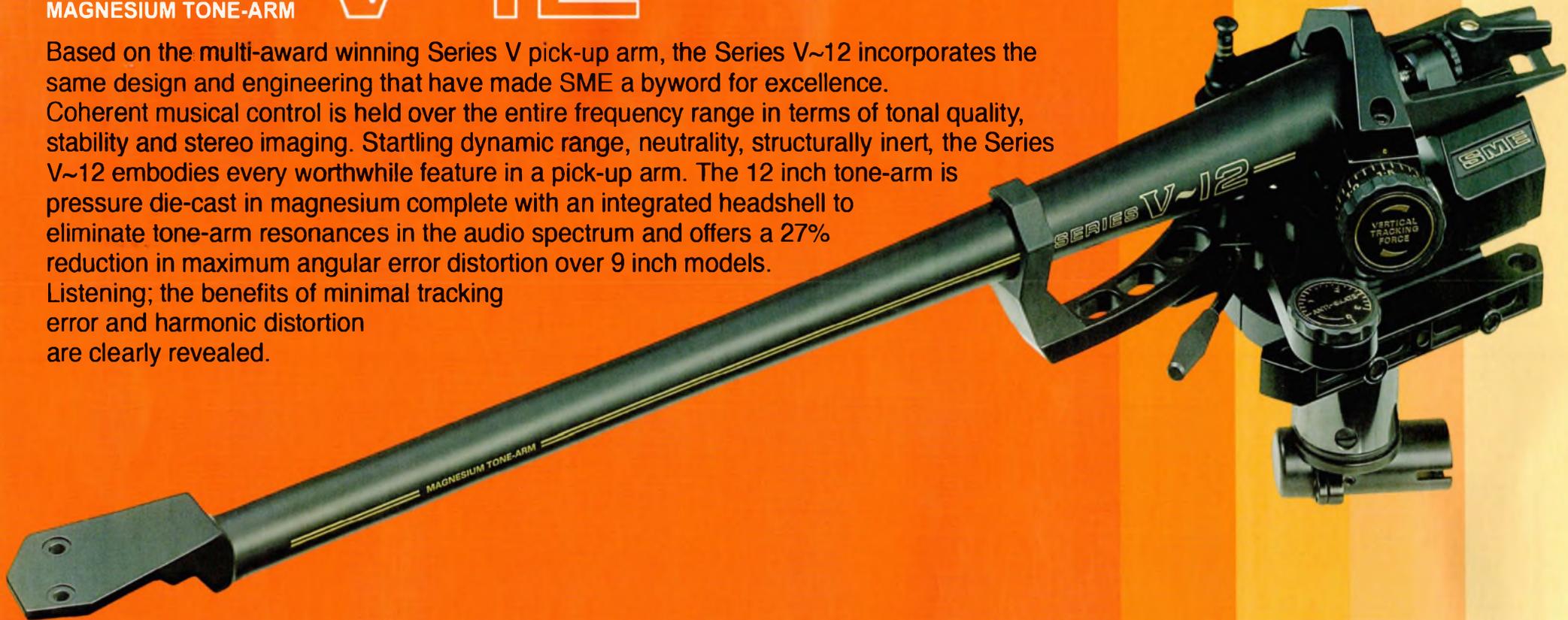
So, a small show but a fair mix of the exotic and not so exotic; dealer systems and manufacturers. Plenty of new, some familiar, and not one piece of Naim. Not even in a dealer system. That alone has to be a first in the UK. I really hope the attendance levels make a bigger and bolder show worth everybody's while, next year. +



# SERIES V~12

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# SME

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# Stillpoints (Part One)

By Chris Thomas.

Photography by Simon Marsh

Sometimes, late at night, I sit alone and quiet in the house with the loudness of the day behind me and pick away at my acoustic guitar. It's a wonderful vintage instrument, built during the 2nd World War and at least 70 years old now. Often I play nothing specific, but just experiment with different sounds. Strike the string half way between the bridge and the fretted note for the richest, strongest and most harmonically colourful sound as the aged Adirondack Spruce top sings with resonance. Change the fingerpicking position or the plectrum angle of attack to let the tonewood fill with energy and open its throat so wide that you can feel the sound as its reassuring warmth vibrates through your body. I am endlessly fascinated at the way the notes decay. The rich harmonies as the undamped strings add their sympathetic chorus grow amazingly complex but, like snowflakes, they are never quite the same twice.

Ever since I began listening to music I have always wanted to be this close to its source. I used to sit with my ear wedged next to the speaker of my Dad's primitive sound system, marvelling at what I could hear. Nothing much has changed. When I go to a concert I want to be as near to the stage as possible. I know this is not the best place for pure sound quality but I like to see the musicians up close and watch how they play. I'll gladly forgo the sonic integration for a view of their hands and to see how they interact physically with their instruments. My time in audio has been very much the same. I have a smallish room but love the intimacy of the near-field experience. Even if I had a large room I think I would still sit close to the speakers. I am not interested in creating the live event in my living room and don't see the comparison as relevant for me. I want to feel emotionally connected and spiritually moved by musical artistry and whether it makes me sad or sit in wonder, I really need to feel as if it means something. I want to feel as close to it as I do to my guitar. Hardly surprising then that I have a weakness for anything 'audio' that takes me to that place.

## Musical or Monetary Upgrades?

There comes a time in the life of every audiophile when he sits back and asks where all this upgrading is taking him and if he truly still enjoys listening to music through his home system. It takes a lot of honesty to answer that question and it is one that I have thought about many times. For as long as I can remember, the whole process of moving the system

forward musically has been somewhat historic. The dealer's answer has always been "Trade in your old box, add some money and I'll give you a new and better one". Cash changed hands and the industry was nourished. For those who have been around audio for many years and have invested time and lots and lots of money in their love, hobby, obsession, or whatever it has become, there will always come that brick-wall moment. The simple question remains. What should a system upgrade really achieve?

## Floating The System

Ever since Paul Wakeen of Stillpoints first visited these shores over four years ago I have been lucky enough to use his products to bring the music closer to me. Back then Paul told me that to really hear what resonance control could do I needed to treat the whole system. The only problem, as the box-count of my system grew, was getting enough products to achieve this. At that time Paul was making the original (cone-shaped) Stillpoints, the Component Stand and the ESS rack at several performance levels. But last year he replaced the original devices by introducing the Ultra SS and what followed was a complete renewal of his catalogue. The Component Stand is no more and there are now essentially three levels of freestanding isolation available. First and smallest is the Ultra Mini. This is a development of the circuit board standoff that is directly available in various sizes to component manufacturers who have incorporated the unique benefits of internal isolation. You will find those and Stillpoints feet fitted to a growing number of audio electronics, including the Berning QZ amplifiers that I use, where they are available as an option but the feet are standard. As an Ultra Mini it is shrouded within a smart stainless steel body with a threaded hole at the base enabling it, like all of the filters, to be mounted on the round 3-inch diameter, machined steel plate that is the Ultra Base. This itself has a significant role to play in both levelling and sound quality. Internally the Mini utilises Paul's unique design of ceramic balls and steel races, though the latest four-tiered construction is radically different to the

► original design. In fact there are no bending parts within any of the new range of Stillpoints resonance control filters.

The next in size, price and with a much higher mass is the Ultra SS. It is a two-piece design where the top section, known as the hard hat, comes screwed directly into the technology pocket itself. Or it can be left off altogether if the Ultra is to be directly coupled in either direction, as between a stand and speaker or electronics and rack for instance. The Hard Hat also allows for a degree of independent levelling of the Ultra (though I still believe this is best achieved through utilising a Base). I suspect most people will sit their electronics straight on top of their Stillpoints but, if you wanted to attach an Ultra SS directly to a component in place of screwed on feet, you could source a threaded convertor from your Stillpoints dealer. They carry a whole range for just this purpose. You will see as the review progresses, Stillpoints products are extraordinarily versatile and you can deploy them in many configurations and I would urge you to spend serious time exploring this as each individual system and installation will be different.

The final resonance control support is the Ultra Five. This chunky and very heavy filter system is a three-inch diameter two-piece, solid stainless steel puck that houses five technology pockets, like those found in the Ultra SS. You wouldn't want to drop this one on your foot, believe me. Again it can be used beneath components or speakers but cannot be independently levelled except when coupled with a Base. Stillpoints also manufacture the LPI record clamp, equipped with five technology pockets. I have also found it to be a very useful freestanding resonance control filter that can be employed in limitless ways when not in use on the turntable. Sitting atop a CD player or an amplifier for instance or employing a pair of them with loudspeakers to drain energy from the cabinets. Again, experimentation with positioning is absolutely essential. I should add that the current LPI is unsuitable for sprung sub-chassis turntables like the Linn LP12 as it is just too heavy and throws the suspension way out of balance.

All Stillpoints products are beautifully made, finished, packaged and laser etched with the company's logo. The grade of stainless steel has been specifically chosen for purpose and every single metal part that Stillpoints use has been cryogenically treated at the factory. The beautiful and rather exotic ESS rack is still in full production but I decided I would discuss that and how it can be used to interact with the individual technologies in the next instalment of the review when I will bring everything together in system-wide context.

If you are thinking that these are just audio accessories to stick under your CD player then you are really going to have to think again. Even a brief exposure to them will leave you in no doubt that the importance of equipment supports has been

seriously undervalued for years. My own lengthy Stillpoints experience changed when last summer I received enough products to float my entire system. This left me in no doubt as to just how limited those early but lengthy listening experiments really were and how I had previously only really scratched the surface of what could be achieved musically - without changing a single component. I think this is both the critical point and the very essence of the whole Stillpoints equation. Having virtually unlimited access to the whole range of Paul's devices has certainly resulted in me enjoying the best music I have ever heard from an audio system, but it also threw up any number of questions and as we know, where hi-fi is concerned, there are as many of those as there are opinions.

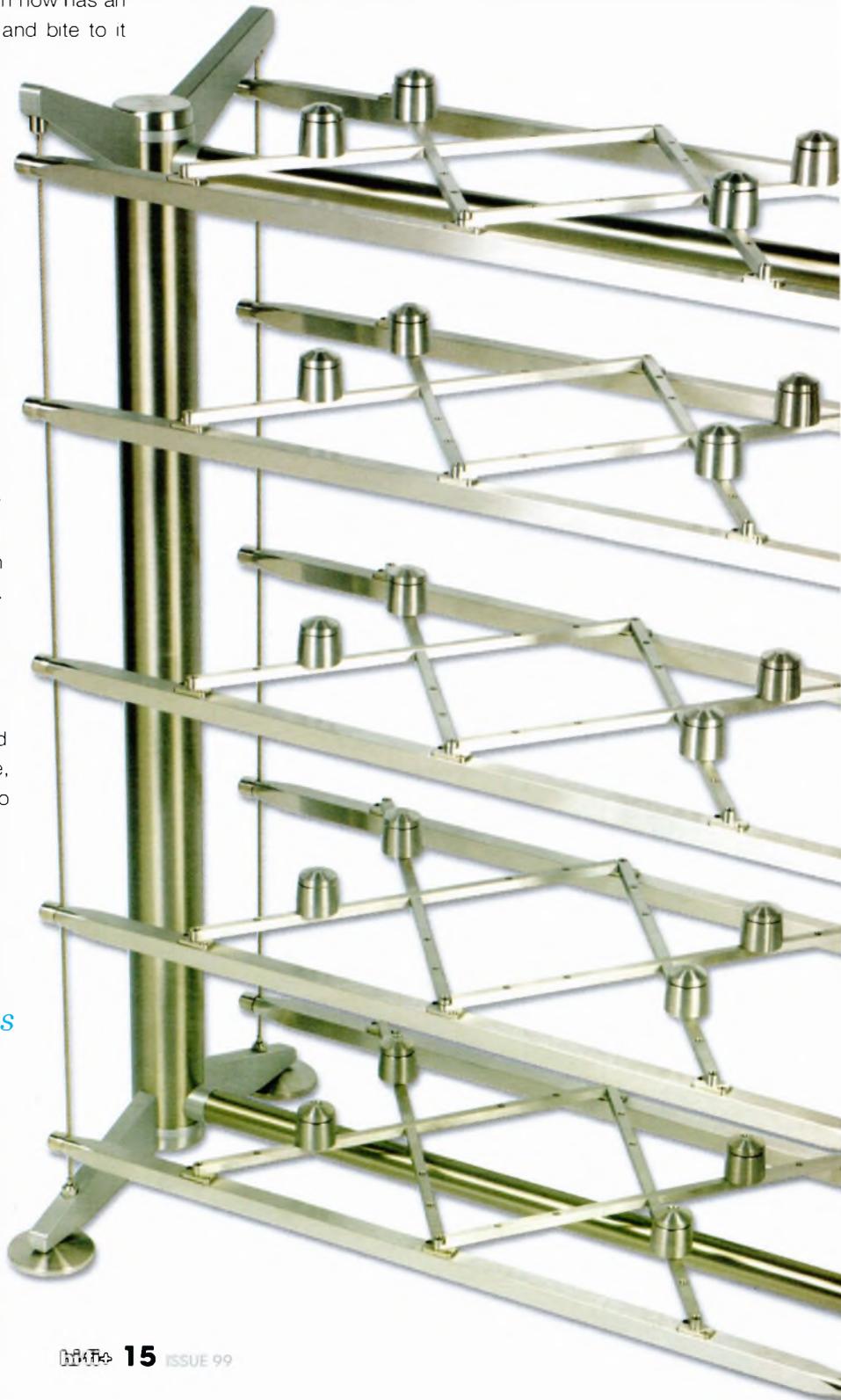
So, what is actually happening here that yields such startling results? I think it is easy to rationalise explanations that fit different theories and viewpoints. There is no Stillpoints white paper and to do the detailed science would be a huge and costly undertaking, but what seems certain is that the products are able to drain resonances from equipment to differing levels of efficiency, leaving a more pristine, less polluted signal, depending on exactly which of them you employ and exactly how and where you couple them. By far the most important thing though is the truly significant musical benefits that they bring.

This review grew and grew as the scale and depth of the products themselves and the implications of their worth as a system-building tool has become more and more apparent to me. So let me start the listening experiences with a simple four-box system comprising of the Moon 260D CD player and the 250i integrated amplifier. These are a pair of very reasonably priced components that are clean and quite explicit in their character without any performance foibles. I chose to use a pair of Focal Diablo speakers to provide an open window and used a loom of Crystal Piccolo cable for the same reason while the electronics were sat on an Atacama Eris Eco Bamboo rack.

Herbie Hancock's *The New Standard* and the Peter Gabriel song 'Mercy Street' starts with a tight percussive burst before Dave Holland's wonderful bass line enters and sits underneath the rolling sequence to invite us in. Without resonance control it slips by almost unnoticed, and the timing is hard to pick up on as if it is tripping forward and over itself. But slip four Mini Ultras on bases beneath both the CD player and the amplifier and the difference is incredible. Now the percussion has shape and the tabla and bongo patterns and pushes emphasise and establish the coming tempo and rhythmic feel before the bass, so murky before, now weights the tune superbly. As the piece gets into full flow the gains in musical structure are not just different, they are vital as the precision and freshness of the time signature

is established and forces its way into your head. The energy of the piece is transformed into a much deeper, faster and involving view of the song and when the subtle horn section begin their work, the possibilities of where this may go are starting to become apparent. Slide four Ultra SS filters, with no Bases under each speaker (four is better than three) and the music becomes liberated as the percussion now has an even greater sense of dynamic shape, snap and bite to it and the bass bounces further into focus and moves outside the confines of the cabinets and sits in the room, anchoring the whole harmonic route of the tune. The horn section that sounded so morphed together without resonance control gains a level of resolution and independence that makes identifying each instrument much easier and the sliding arrangement that the players use as they slip rolling waves of brass colour through the piece are a thing of beauty. There is more space and air too as the soundstage has expanded. The essence and direction of the piece is the expression of Hancock's playing and his extraordinary touch eloquently shows that piano keys are not on/off switches. They are highly pressure-sensitive links to controlling the string hammers and the way that he can "shape" a note is pure feel and sensitivity. Without resonance control it sounds decent but flat and lacking in character. But if you want to hear the harmonic possibilities he can create and gain insight to the genius of a musician who can change the direction and flavour of a whole tune with a single phrase, then the articulation that the Stillpoints bring to each note and chord is a must.

*“Without the resonance control it slips by almost unnoticed, and the timing is hard to pick up on as it is tripping forward and over itself. But slip four Mini Ultras on bases beneath both the CD player and the amplifier and the difference is incredible.”*



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(Jonathon Valin, The Absolute Sound, April 2013)

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▶ Sit the electronics on Ultras instead of Minis and the rewards are instantaneous. They knit the music together even more powerfully. The Moon components that always sounded like they were punching above their weight now seem a more suitable match. That Focal Beryllium tweeter is one of the best available, but it can be an unforgiving taskmaster. It demands quality and punishes harshness ruthlessly whether it is from inadequate electronics, cabling or bad system installation. It needs to be, as Hancock's memorable interpretation of The Beatles' 'Norwegian Wood' is a masterpiece of exquisite piano phrasing and milky guitar textures all arranged around Jack DeJohnette's delicate but busy drum kit. As he works the skin with the brush the system now maintains the sort of perspectives, with an energised solidarity and depth of image intensity, that is classic resonance control territory. The cymbals have a lustrous ring with full of wood-on-metal attack and impact as he uses them for shade and highlight. They are detached from the body of the music, above the drums and hang in the air somewhere outside the speakers as if by magic. It is a musical tour de force and a huge step up in quality, yet without a single component change and a great example of the way in which Stillpoints can liberate an existing system to another performance level completely. Adding the Ultras frees the speaker from the energy-conserving constraints of its own rather cumbersome stand and gives it low frequency speed and dynamic attack making it a more evenly-balanced speaker with an organic tonality and lack of high frequency emphasis that I don't hear from the standard fixed-mount package.

I could finely tune the electronics by moving the Stillpoints around to where they sounded best. Forget symmetrical spacing. As a starting point, find where the transformer is and sit your first device there then perhaps, for the CD player, locate the next beneath the transport and then use the other two to balance the component. But remember that is just a start. Hard coupling of the steel of the Stillpoints to the case (not under the feet)

means you will in effect be altering the vibrational characteristics of the whole structure, depending on where you locate them. You may be surprised at where they are at their most effective. But this isn't really about achieving a tighter and more focussed bass or projected midband or indeed any of the classic hi-fi improvements. Yes, the energy levels of the music are certainly better, as is the resolution right across the bandwidth but a fully floated system is so much more communicative and engaging. The small details may be enough to catch the ear, but it's being able to hear 'how' the instruments are being played that is so endlessly interesting. Stillpoints strip the music of electronic artefacts leaving it more natural and less processed and I hear the music as being freer and less constrained and inhibited and of course the lower noise floor certainly helps the improved dynamics as well.

So, this is an introduction to the Stillpoints products, how they can be incorporated into your system and what musical benefits they can bring. So far though I have just scratched the surface as there is much more and in the final instalment (in issue 101) I will consider the ESS rack and its role plus the truly remarkable Ultra 5's in greater detail. I will also bring Paul Wakeen's philosophy together by floating an entire high-end system and closing the circle, and in doing so I hope to show you just how large that circle can be. +

## CONTACT DETAILS

**Manufacturer:** Stillpoints  
**URL:** [www.stillpoints.us](http://www.stillpoints.us)

**UK Distributors:** Kog Audio  
**Tel:** +44 (0) 24 7722 0650  
**URL:** [kogaudio.com](http://kogaudio.com)



# Krell Phantom II preamp and Evolution 402e power amplifier

*By Alan Sircom*

In gearing up for our 100th issue, there was an inevitable look back at past issues. In the process, I found that we last reviewed the Krell Evolution 402 precisely 50 issues ago. Now in its 'evo' guise and with a new preamp in tow, what's changed and what's changed in the last six and a half years?

In some respects, it's hard to extract Krell from its own legend. Back in the 1980s, Krell was the high-end power amplifier to own. The original KSA-50, a 50W pure Class A model might not have been a thing of beauty, but it was a thing of power. Designed to drive practically anything, those original Krell amps had power supplies so forceful, they would just keep delivering the juice.

It's a different world from the 1980s, but you know you are still in the presence of amplifier royalty whenever you unbox a big Krell amplifier. The childcatcher heatsinks might have gone, and the days of high-current, low-wattage Class A designs from the brand are long passed, but there's still something about Krell. Even after the well-documented falling out with Dan D'Agostino, the Krell cachet remains (I might be in the minority for saying this, but the net result of that falling out has been of benefit for the audiophile; where once we had just Krell, we now have the choice of Krell, D'Agostino and even the Bully Sound Company from Dan's son Bret. It's all good).



The Evolution 402e differs from its 402 predecessor in a number of key ways. Physically, it's almost identical, with just the front panel sporting a little 'e'. Inside though, things are different. The original 402 was one of the first to feature Krell's Active Cascode Topology, where the rail voltages are apportioned across a number of rows of individual output devices, each with different values for different voltage handling tasks. The latest version, which still uses seven quartet sets of Active Cascode output devices, refines this balancing act with still greater precision. It also means less global feedback is needed to deliver accurate power. The power supply has been improved too, with 170,000µF of reservoir capacitance and an additional 10VA toroidal transformer for the digital control circuitry, alongside the pair of 2200VA toroids used for the main power amp.

Why does a big power amp need digital control? Because the 'e' in the name stands for 'economy'. Yes, it still delivers a mighty 400W into eight ohms, which doubles down perfectly into four and two ohms (meaning it's a 1.6kW amp at low impedances), but can also be configured to run at a meagre two watts in 'green' standby mode. Or, you can run it in 'red' mode, where it sleeps at a more environment-baiting 370W (as in the original 402 model) for faster cold-starts to good sound. Press and hold the power off button on the front panel to switch between 'envirochummy' and 'polar-bear murderer' modes. In truth, 20 minutes in even a cold room, the amp sounds as good as it's going to get, even in green mode. My advice, save your fuel bills, save the planet and go green. That's a statement I never thought I'd be able to say about a Krell amp!

The back panel sports a 20A power socket and white plastic power throw switch, as well as balanced, single-ended and CAST connectors. It also features large screw-thread speaker terminals that only take spade lugs (or bare wire). It still retains the mid-engine heatsinks, which channel air through the amplifier's core, but do get extremely hot.

The Phantom II preamp is a relative newcomer, the Phantoms replacing the Evo 200 series preamps. The style is absolutely identical to its predecessor, the Phantom II being the middle of three models in the range. Appearances can be deceptive though, because – casework aside – the one chassis Phantom II has little in common with the Evo 222 it replaces. It's a dual mono product, each channel with its own power supply. Yes, it still goes for a resistor ladder volume control, a 1.5MHz open-loop bandwidth and a zero feedback design (yet, surprisingly given this ultra-wide approach, it isn't plagued by cellular telephone polling signals making that unique 'papada papada' sound through the speakers). Like the Evo 402e, it can run balanced, single-ended or CAST. In the absence of an all-CAST connected system, I found myself

preferring the balanced connection very slightly; the single-ended is less 'statuesque' than balanced and some might find that more ponderous, however I far preferred the overall, er, balance of balance in terms of detail retrieval and stereo imaging. It's worth trying both.

Of course, once you get some hot Krell-on-Krell action, you can also go CAST, Krell's own Current Audio Signal Transmission system. Unlike the majority of amplifiers (which are voltage amplifiers), Krell designs run in current mode (more commonly seen in video and microwave amplifiers, because of the inherently wide bandwidth required). CAST means the devices don't need to make current-to-voltage conversions backwards and forwards just for the interconnections and the Krell signal can remain in current mode throughout. Unfortunately, both a CAST source, and a full set of CAST connectors were not available for the review, but CAST is thought of as the greatest thing since sliced coax by many Krell users, although there are a few who are 'meh!' on the whole deal. Either way, it's not a deal-breaker – try it, if you like it... great, if you don't, there's always balanced or single-ended on tap.

There's an odd and uniquely British stance on big power amps that wanders in and out of fashion, and right now it's very *en vogue*. We Brits can be dismissive of high power. In fairness, there can be good reason for this – a good 50W amplifier will often sound more integrated and more natural sounding than a similarly priced but more powerful amplifier. In addition, the size and construction of our rooms lend support to the argument, because you rarely need a powerhouse to drive a pair of loudspeakers in a small room made of bricks and mortar. However, the other side of the argument is not without its merits, as long as the power amp delivering the goods is up to the task. Ultimately, the small power amp ►

*“Yes, it still delivers a mighty 400W into eight ohms, which doubles down perfectly into two and four ohms, but can also be configured to run at a meagre two watts in ‘green’ standby mode. Or, you can run it in ‘red’ mode, where it sleeps at a more environment-baiting 370W (as in the original 402 model).”*

▶ argument could be viewed as a justification for parsimony, because making a good 400W power amp is always going to cost more than making a good 40W power amplifier, all other things being equal.

The irony to all this is the best argument for big power is their use with power hungry loudspeakers, and one of the doyens of the UK hi-fi scene – Bowers & Wilkins – makes some extremely power hungry loudspeakers. Hook this Krell combo to a pair of 800 Diamond speakers and you get to understand why Abbey Road swears by the B&W designs. We've sort of convinced ourselves that big power amplifiers are over-engineering the system today, because loudspeakers are more efficient and less demanding than they were 25 years ago. Not only is this patently untrue (alongside the 800 Diamond series, designs like the Wilson Sasha W/P can swing impedance down to 1.8 ohm, necessitating a powerful amplifier if any kind of decent listening level is required) but it masks what that power can do for almost any loudspeaker.

It's that part that brings on the shock and awe. And to listen to a big Krell amp in 2013 is to reacquaint yourself with the shock you had when you first heard what a big Krell can do. I used the Krell duo on the end of several pairs of loudspeakers, but none made so deep an impression as what they did to a pair of first generation ProAc Studio 140. These loudspeakers are very easy on the ear, but can waffle a bit in the bottom end. They often end up being used with nice, soft-sounding low power Class A amps (I routinely use them with a Sugden A21 se). But hooking them to a Krell 402 was like changing the speakers for bigger, better models. The bass was far deeper, far better controlled, the dynamic range seemed wide, the sound just hung together better. I could go back, but I'm not sure I'd want to.

It would be easy to just fall back on audiophile recordings to highlight this, but it's something that transcends those sensibilities. Play something a bit more gritty – some live Rory

Gallagher for example – and the loudspeakers 'nice' reputation goes out of the window. Play the dark and brooding HDTA\_ *welcome oblivion* album and the world is a claustrophobic place with an underlying air of brooding malevolence. They do the same with bookshelves too; the control it bestows on the bottom end is prodigious, whether that bottom end is full range or stops well into the 80Hz region. I don't think anyone in their right mind is going to partner these babies with a pair of the excellent B&W PM1 top-end standmounters, but if they did, the level of bottom end they could muster would be something close to scary. Of course, when in its natural home of full-range loudspeakers needing a bit of poke to drive them, it really comes into its own.

It's not just about power and control. Spiderman's Uncle Ben once said "with great power comes great responsibility" (OK, it was actually Voltaire, but he wasn't played by Martin Sheen in the movie version) and the Krell delivers both in equal measure. What surprises most people about the Phantom II/ Evo 402e combination is just how un-Krell it sounds. There is a perception that big solid-state (as in Krell) means steely sounding, but this has the opposite effect; it's inviting, almost analogue-like in its presentation, with a top end that goes on forever and sounds lovely doing just that. It's the ideal foil for ribbon tweeters and can even pull back raspy metal dome tweeters from the brink; neither rolled off nor blunted, this presentation just extends naturally to the upper limits of both ears and speakers. Yes, it's an analytical sound, but not in the clinical way, and not necessarily so analytical that it's in constant search of the right components; it's analytical of musical content, rather than component content. A good recording (HDTA\_ again) sounds remarkable, a bad one (Gary Clark Jr) sounds execrable. Honesty does take its toll when playing the worst excesses of the Loudness War. The Krells also exhibit some of that hard-to-pin down 'musicality', in that good pieces of music are fun to bop around to. If there's a ▶



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► bet, it won't accent it, but neither will it shy away from it. The accent is on detail retrieval, frequency extension and soundstage, but there's no major absence of enjoyment in the process, despite the entreaties of some of the low power set.

In fact, the downsides for the power amp are not musical ones; it's a heavy and hot thing. Fully packed, it weighs as much as Oscar de la Hoya did when he won Olympic gold, and pumps out a whopping 6,400BTU/hr at full tilt, concentrated into a box only slightly larger than carry-on luggage. That means you need a team of people to lift it, and extended listening sessions can be seen on your fuel bills. However, it's great for winter listening though, as your family can huddle round the amplifier while you hear fabulous sounds.

Most of this review has focused on the power amplifier, because it's the stronger of the two products. But let's not paint the Phantom II in a bad light; it's an excellent preamp, exceedingly quiet and exquisitely detailed to boot. And the two work really well together. However, I maintain the Phantom II is icing, while the 402e power amp is the cake. Put another way, I can envisage more people using the power amp with another company's preamplifier than I can seeing the Phantom II with another brand of power amp. But I can also see many people taking the whole system option... and absolutely loving it! As a pairing, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Fifty issues ago, RG was distinctly cool on the original 402 and its 202 preamp partner. Whether it's another set of ears, the changes to the Krell amps or just the way the world has changed since 2006, but I'm happy to report the Phantom II and Evo 402e report a far cleaner bill of health. The power amp in particular is a real star, but both come strongly recommended. +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Krell Phantom II preamp

**Inputs:** 3x single-ended RCA (+tape in/out), 2x balanced XLR, 2x CAST

**Outputs:** 1x single-ended RCA, 1x balanced XLR, 1x CAST

**Control inputs:** 1x RS232, 1x RJ45, 1x 3.5mm remote IR, 1x 3.5mm 12V trigger

**Volume Control:** Balanced, current-mode, 16-bit, discrete resistor ladder

**Frequency Response:** 20Hz-20kHz  $\pm 0.02$ dB (0.1Hz-1.5MHz +0dB, -3dB)

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 43.8x9.7x46.4cm

**Weight:** 14.5kg

**Price:** £11,998

### Krell Evolution 402e

**Inputs:** single-ended RCA, balanced XLR, CAST stereo pairs

**Outputs:** 2x Krell binding posts

**Power output:** 400W RMS at eight ohms, both channels driven, 800W RMS at four ohms both channels driven

**Output voltage:** 160V peak-to-peak, 57V RMS

**Peak output current:** 37A

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 43.8x24.8x56cm

**Weight:** 67.9kg

**Price:** £18,500

**Manufactured by:** Krell Industries Inc

**URL:** [www.krellonline.com](http://www.krellonline.com)

**Distributed by:** Absolute Sounds

**URL:** [www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com)

**Tel:** +44(0)208 971 3909

# conrad-johnson LP125sa Power Amplifier

By Roy Gregory

**B**ack in Issue 95, AS reviewed cj's ARTsa power amplifier, a 140 W/ch stereo chassis, loaded with eight KT120 output tubes and enough planes and angles on its casework to qualify as modern architecture. He was mightily impressed by both its technical and its musical performance – as well he might be; the ARTsa costs a sobering £19K (all but a fiver) so it damn well should be good! Sadly, it's a price that places it well beyond the means of most of us. We can enjoy the read and dream the dream but few if any will get to own this undeniably special amplifier...

Which makes the LP125sa a fascinating prospect. Far more than just the next amp down the range or the ARTsa's little brother, this really is a Real World version of the flagship. You'll notice that I hesitate to use the term "poor man's", partly out of deference to the amplifier's performance (there's nothing poor about it) and partly because, even though it costs less than half the price of the ARTsa,

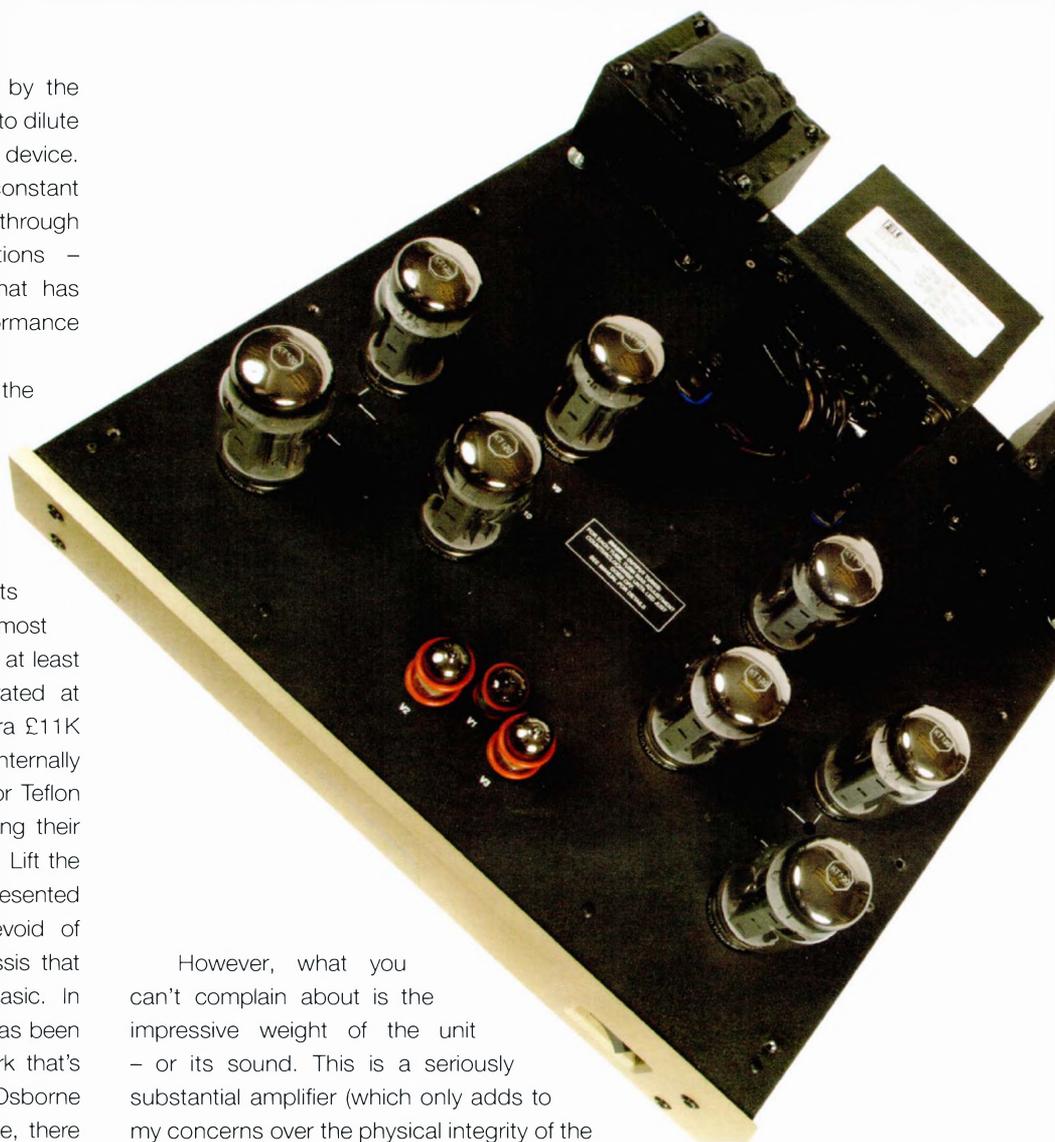
eight grand is hardly beer budget. Having said that, as a cost-cutting operation that's pretty savage, making one wonder about the state of the patient coming out of the other end. If history tells us anything about what happens as you move down a range of valve amplifiers, it is that you need at least 100 Watts for that amp to be a keeper and that the first casualty of cost savings is generally output power. In fact, the standard way to structure a range of tube amps is to double the number of output devices at each step. We saw it with Jadis, but perhaps the classic example was the ARC D70, D115, D250 series, mirrored in the current Reference series to this day, albeit with a graduation to mono-blocs at the top of the line. Back in the day, the D115 was always the sweet-spot in that particular family, easily eclipsing the D70 and avoiding the reliability and sonic pitfalls that bedeviled the D250. No coincidence that this was the 100Watt stereo chassis in the range; no coincidence that it remains one of ARC's most warmly remembered products.

We first saw cj's revised approach in the guise of the TEA-2 phono-stage, reviewed in Issue 89. Available in three different, outwardly identical versions, with identical facilities and circuit topology, they were differentiated by component quality – and a substantial increase in performance with price. Now we see the same logic applied to power amps. Once you've defined



the technical specification required by the amplifier to do its job, it seems crazy to dilute that to achieve a more affordable device. Instead, keep the paper specs constant and implement qualitative increases through better components in key locations – especially if that’s the approach that has underpinned your products’ performance over the years anyway.

So, compare the ARTsa to the LP125sa and you discover the same tube complement, circuit topology, simple manual bias system and a remarkably similar paper spec: not quite as quiet and not quite as powerful (125Watts plays 140Watts for the ARTsa) but in most other regards, these two amps are – at least electrically speaking – twins separated at birth. So what happened to the extra £11K invested in the flagship version? Well, internally you won’t find any Vishay resistors or Teflon caps, not that the Polystyrenes taking their place are something to be sniffed at. Lift the lid on the casework and you are presented with un-shrouded transformers, devoid of cosmetic niceties built on to a chassis that is most charitably described as basic. In fact, the most obvious cost cutting has been applied to the exterior, with casework that’s fully compliant with the George Osborne school of austerity – and like George, there are those who will question if this is a cut too far. Frankly, this is quite the flimsiest bit of bent metalwork I’ve seen in quite a while. The amp cannot – and I really do mean can not – and isn’t intended to be used without its cover. The latter item is not only so devoid of structural integrity that it bends in the breeze, it’s fixed in place by six of the long despised, sprung-loaded machine screws, two of which are placed next to the transformers and are almost impossible to fasten, especially as the flapping cover itself offers no guide to location. The unreinforced rear edges are alarmingly flexible and I’d complain about this chassis if it were wrapped around a £1,000 amplifier, let alone one costing eight times that. I’d also like some indication of status on the on/off switch, which isn’t actually labelled, even if an illumination is out of the financial question.



However, what you can’t complain about is the impressive weight of the unit – or its sound. This is a seriously substantial amplifier (which only adds to my concerns over the physical integrity of the chassis) and it delivers a suitably authoritative musical performance. Sonically speaking, the corners that have been cut pass all but unnoticed. Compare the LP125sa to the ARTsa and they become obvious enough, but as funds and opportunity exclude that option, in reality the question ceases to be “what’s missing?” and becomes quite properly, “What does it deliver?” The short version is, “An awful lot!” but as usual, the devil is in the detail.

One thing that cj haven’t skimped on is the rubber damping rings for the driver and phase-splitter tubes, or the isolation grommets under the power transformer; small things but they matter. AS commented on just how ghostly quiet the ARTsa is; well, the LP125sa comes from the same school – the one where a product should be neither seen nor heard, unless it’s making music that is.

This amplifier is all about substance. Whilst 125Watts isn’t exactly a massive power output, what the LP125sa has in spades is the power to satisfy. If 100Watts of push-pull tube power is an essential ingredient of a great all rounder, this cj takes that to a whole new level. It’s not just about how many Watts but how those Watts arrive and in the case of the LP125sa, the answer is pretty much on demand. For an old rocker, Neil Young manages to ▶

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► 'out-heavy' the young pretenders with ease – partly because he cares about his recordings and partly because he understands both musical substance and music of substance. Listen to 'Driveby' (from *Sleeps With Angels*) on the LP125sa and the solid presence and impact of the drum, the almost physical presence of the characteristically nasal vocal and attack on the guitar place the band right in the room. Despite the sparse arrangement there's no escaping the bleak menace and desolation of the song, a feeling that's only enhanced by the cavernous, empty space around the chorus vocals. This combination of musical impact and delicacy, the effortless ability to fasten on the sense of the song and deliver it makes this a special amplifier.

So, turning to the Reiner/Chicago performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, the massive scale and impact of the opening should come as no surprise, the ability to locate the solo violin and harp so precisely in space, to track the warm, rising swell of the strings. What is surprising is the bottomless quality to the amplifier doing the driving. Musical demands, no matter how seemingly outrageous, are met with an unflustered aplomb, a lack of apparent effort or strain that keeps the system firmly in the background, preventing its intrusion into the music.

One thing that might surprise listeners whose experience is limited to older cj products is the lack of the traditional golden glow. It's been slowly but steadily eradicated from the marque's flagship products, but that absence is apparent in the LP125sa too. There is a slight darkness to the overall tonality, but this has more to do with a (very) subtle grain that underlies the sound. What do you get with the ARTsa? A lower noise floor: greater harmonic, spatial and dynamic resolution; a richer tonal palette and more immediacy. A bargain at only an extra £11K! Now turn that equation on its head. What the LP125sa does (and with considerable effect) is give you the structure, scale and impact of the music and considerably more colour, separation and dimensionality than most amps at or near its price. Yes, you can find an amp with more resolution and one that offers more extension, but none that I have heard can match the sheer substance and impact, or match the musical authority of the cj.

In part, the exemplary musical performance/price balance of the LP125sa is both a function of and must be weighed against the corners cut in its construction – particularly that flimsy cage. But it is hard to argue with the effectiveness of the unit in use and, once installed, I'm guessing that out of sight may well be out of mind. With a performance that manages to combine the muscular with the delicate, solidity and purpose with agility, it really could be all things to all men. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Push-pull valve amplifier

**Tube Complement:** 2x 6N30P, 1x 6189, 8x KT120

**Inputs:** 1pr RCA/phono

**Input Impedance:** 100 kOhms

**Sensitivity:** 1.1Volt to rated output

**Outputs:** 1pr 5-way binding posts/ch

**Rated Output:** 125 Watts into 8 Ohms

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 482 x 205 x 482mm

**Weight:** 37kg

**Price:** £7,995

**Manufactured by:** conrad johnson

**URL:** conradjohnson.com

**Distributed by:** Audiofreaks

**URL:** www.audiofreaks.co.uk

**Tel:** +44(0)208 948 4153

## ELAC FS407 loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom

**E**LAC's new 400 series models are designed from the outset to tick the boxes. They are elegant, slimline floorstanders in rich, modern finishes, the kind of thing that wouldn't send an interior designer into apoplexy. But more importantly for us, they manage to create a sound bigger, better and cleaner than you might expect.

It's not an easy job, being a good loudspeaker in 2013. The loudspeaker needs to be bright enough to punch through the tweaked-up competition, but not so bright that it has a peaky treble in its own right. It needs to sound forward, lest it fail to make its presence felt in demonstration, but not so forward that it only shines in demonstration and two weeks later, it's Audiogon fodder. In addition, with fewer people intelligently system building today (the downturn in dealers combined with unpredictable advice from elsewhere has all made the idea of mixing the right products something of a crap shoot) means the loudspeaker needs to have broad enough shoulders to cope with anything from a low-powered single-ended triode design to kilowatt behemoths. That's one heck of a balancing act.

It's also a balancing act the FS407 excels at.

The two and a half-way bass reflex design uses ELAC's state of the art drivers, including the excellent JET 5 tweeter, based around Dr Oskar Heil's Air Motion Transformer tweeter, which uses a folded polymer strip and aluminium struts in a high-power magnetic field. The AMT design dates back to the 1970s, but has really come into its own in a post-CRT televisual world, because the strength of the magnets in the tweeter could really tear apart a CRT picture screen.

The JET tweeter is coupled to a pair of 150mm AS-XR cones, also from ELAC. These use an aluminium-paper sandwich design for the woofer cone, with the distinctive 'crystal' pattern across the cone itself. That takes care of the 'AS' part of the name; the 'XR' or 'extended range' is there because of an additional strut at the centre of the coil former attaches to the rear of the cone in addition to the usual voice coil connection.

The downward firing port is housed in a very elegant plinth arrangement, which means instead of firing into the floor, it fires into a more predictable baseplate, so the character of the bass reflex will not change subtly if you move from wood flooring to stone or concrete or even carpet. The M8 screw threads in the outriggers from this bass can house spikes or rubber inserts depending on your floor. This whole arrangement not only looks good, but it makes the loudspeaker all but independent of placement. It can go close to the rear and side walls in small rooms and out in free space in bigger ones. A single pair of high-quality WBT connectors in the back plate – and a magnetic grille that's best not used for critical use – complete the deal.



The AMT also bestows upon the speaker another slight bonus. It seems to make it less sensitive to room furnishing. In fact, if anything unlike almost all loudspeakers, that tweeter fares better in more live environments than the normal recommendations of a room with a lot of diffracted surfaces and absorption. So for once, here's a design that can actually sound good in those huge, open plan minimalist steel and glass rooms brochure designers seem to think best to show off loudspeakers.

The FS407's one trade-off is it's harder to drive than the specs would have you believe. On paper, this is an 88dB design with an easy four ohm nominal, 3.5 ohm minimum impedance and comfortable with anything from a 40-300W amplifier design. The reality is it's more demanding than those specs imply, and I'd recommend an amplifier that can deliver goodly amounts of voltage and current without straining. The good news is it's not that fussy a design, and far from being a loudspeaker in search of an amplifier, crushing lesser mortals in its path. We found it worked exceptionally well with the Electrocompaniet integrated's kind of power delivery. Halve that and while on paper you still have a match, only if you are playing quietly in a matchbox. This is no big stumbling block, given the price tag of the FS407, but anyone contemplating using the loudspeaker with a smaller solid-state design (like a 47 Labs Gaincard, for example) might be best served thinking again.

If you were to sum up the FS407 in a single word, it would be "professional". Not in the cynical "...like a slick used car salesman" way; more in the fact that every aspect of the FS407 bespeaks a highly dedicated, professional approach to loudspeaker making. Audio has a new and frankly terrible reputation of producing shed-fi; enthusiastic near amateurs knocking out products that might (or might not) sound any good, but look as if they are held together by gaffer's tape and each product is materially different to the next. While such things should be praised when appropriate, we also need the professionally made products, built in an environment of engineering prowess and technological development; a quick glance at the FS407 shows that's precisely the world it came from. Fortunately, it backs up that fertile science background with damn good sound.

If you were to sum up the sound of the FS407 in a single word though, it would be 'agile'. There's no bloom, no overhang, no softly softly approach to the sound. It's not all about the transients, but the attack and decay of individual notes are extremely rapid fire. One thing that sets the FS407 apart from a lot of its peers is its ability to deliver the sound it makes at low, medium and – depending on amplifier – high levels without a problem. This is a rarity; there are loudspeakers

*“If you were to sum up the FS407 in a single word, it would be “professional.” Not in the cynical “...like a slick used car salesman” way; more in the fact that every aspect of the FS407 bespeaks a highly dedicated, professional approach to loudspeaker making.”*



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▶ that sound great at low levels, but have a distinct price ceiling, and there are those that only come into their own when the volume levels are cranked. The FS407 is the rare alternative that holds its own across the board. As someone who enjoys both late night listening at whisper levels and the occasional air guitar session at a fair lick and all points in between, the FS407's rare gift of not falling apart sonically across a wide range of volumes is entrancing.

The overall balance is pitched clean and clear across the board, with an extended top end that – thanks to the AMT design – manages to combine a lot of high frequency insight and clarity without becoming bright or lean sounding, although those who think the audio world took a wrong turn by moving on from fabric dome tweeters and doped paper woofers will invariably find this design – and practically every other loudspeaker made in the last two decades – too bright.

How this comes across is the FS407 make a heck of a lot of sense of Elizabeth Fraser's dreamy vocals on 'Teardrop' by Massive Attack; unlike her random vocal sounds in her Cocteau Twins days, the lyrics to this track are in coherent English, but as she uses her voice more like a musical instrument and less like a series of sung words, it's sometimes to make sense of that prose. Through the FS407, however, you could clearly hear each articulated word, stand out from the trippy, electronica-derived background. This wasn't a cold, eviscerating analysis of the recording, just that the music made that bit more sense when played through the 407s because the detail was up and the distortion was down. In this respect, the 407 shares the winner's podium with some very expensive company, even including top notch speakers like Magicos and Raidhos.

Where those first-class transducers have over the 407s is generally a broader sense of dynamic range and an ability to increase that unchanging sound from quiet to loud to extremely loud levels, and – in the case of some of the bigger floorstanders in big rooms, reaching further into the bottom octaves. However, as we are talking anywhere between a three-fold and eight-fold increase in price, you have to admire ELAC for delivering the goods at a very keen price.

There's an old inverted snobbery about elegance in audio; the better something looks, the worse it sounds. The FS407 debunks that particular audio myth extremely effectively. It looks svelte and elegant in a cool modern European style, but equally it's efficient, easy to drive, goes well in a wide variety of less than perfect rooms and sounds great on really good equipment. It would be wrong not to give it high praise. +

*“The FS407 debunks that myth extremely effectively. It looks svelte and elegant in a cool modern European style, but equally it's efficient, easy to drive, goes well in a wide variety of less than perfect rooms and sounds great on really good equipment.”*



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** 2.5 way bass reflex floorstanding loudspeaker

**Tweeter:** 1x JET 5 AMT

**Woofers:** 2x 150mm AS-XR cone

**Frequency response:** 30Hz-50kHz

**Sensitivity:** 88dB/2.83V/m

**Nominal Impedance:** four ohms

**Minimum impedance:** 3.5 ohms (at 200Hz)

**Nominal/Peak power handling:** 130/170W

**Crossover frequencies:** 450Hz, 2.5kHz

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 26x103.8x31.4cm

**Weight:** 20.4kg

**Finishes:** Black Gloss, White Gloss, walnut Gloss, Tobacco Gloss

**Price:** £3,239 per pair

**Manufactured by:** ELAC  
Electroacoustic GmbH  
URL: [www.elac.com](http://www.elac.com)

**Distributed by:** Hi-Fi Network Ltd  
URL: [www.hifi-network.com](http://www.hifi-network.com)  
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# Electrocompaniet ECI-6DS integrated digital streaming amplifier

By Alan Sircom

**T**he last few years have been something of a torrid time for hi-fi makers. Everything's changed, and then changed again, as people tried to get their respective heads around what's the next big thing in audio. But a winner is beginning to emerge; the integrated audio platform – an amplifier that combines analogue inputs for traditional sources, a digital converter for the latest audio components and even some kind of networking solution for the future.

In other words, the Electrocompaniet ECI-6DS. The easiest way of viewing the ECI-6DS is to list it in terms of the bunch of big black boxes it replaces. It's a 24bit, 192kHz capable digital converter, with coaxial, USB and two optical digital inputs, a DLNA/UPnP compatible digital media renderer; a remote controlled line preamplifier and a 125W per channel power amplifier, all in the same AV receiver sized, 20kg box. Short of running a phono stage in the box, this one

chassis can be the transition point from playing CD to playing CD files through a laptop right out to running audio files from an extended home computer network. The latter need not be a compromise, either, as the amp will support 24bit, 192kHz files downloaded from hi-res music sites online and stored on a networked computer or network attached storage device.

Some definitions are in order. The ECI-6DS supports Universal Plug and Play (UPnP), which means it should recognise and join any home computer network with the minimum of fuss and bother. It is also a part of the Digital Living Network Alliance, a trade organisation with a goal of making digital media easier to share between devices. This divides things into home network and mobile devices, each adopting a specific role in the process of storing, finding or playing digital data files. In this case, the network connected part of the ECI-6DS is known as a 'digital media renderer' (it plays relevant content from across the network).



However, what's missing from that line-up is the means whereby those digital audio files are lined up for the digital media renderer. This requires a device known as a digital media controller, and in Electrocompaniet speak, that's the supplied ECT-4 handset. Looking *remarkably* similar to the Cyrus n-Remote, this 'pulls' files from the network for the ECI-6DS to use, and is a vital aspect of the ECI-6DS's performance. It also acts as a handy learning remote control, so any TV sets, Blu-ray players and the rest can be controlled from the one handset, making the ECI-6DS something close to an entertainment hub (HDMI switching for players, games consoles and the rest would make it a true AV hub, but whether there's a market for such things without surround sound processing remains unclear).

Accessing this 'hub' is relatively straightforward, although that might presume a level of basic wifi network understanding that might be beyond the ken of those not fully computer network literate. Essentially the ECI needs to be connected to your home network (if it is to access music files on that network); either through wired Ethernet (recommended) or through wifi (in which case, you will need to scan and rescan the local wireless world and enter your router's ID and password will be needed), and then you need to pair the ECT-4 handset to the ECI-6DS. The straightforward part is if you understood this paragraph, the process is fairly automated (especially as the devices will search the network for playable music files, and even display album covers on the ECT-4 screen). On the other hand, if this paragraph seems packed full of jargon and gobbledegook, you'll need some help in putting the networking aspect of the system together, and as that represents the prime rationale for buying the ECI-6DS over other integrated amplifiers, that is fundamental to the case for the Electrocompaniet.

Fortunately, an ever-increasing body of techno-savvy people exist, who – at most armed with the manual, but some simply from a thorough understanding of the core technologies underlying the process – can put together a robust and fully functioning next-gen system quickly. Part of this 'ever-increasing body' is the new generation of dealers, who are fast becoming experts in the field; another is practically anyone under the age of about 40. As Marx said, "Why a four-year-old child could understand this. Run out and find me a four-year-old child. I can't make head nor tail out of it." And also, think on this; without those DLNA and UPnP acronyms, wiring this into a network would involve a lot of laptoppery and an understanding of TCP/IP coding



that would make this a very specialised, highly complicated device. Such is the change in networked audio systems of the last few years that this doesn't need to come with a trained cable guy to wire it up shows just how far, and how fast we have all come.

In fairness, there's more than just a handset in common with the Cyrus system. In listening to the sound of the ECI-6DS playing music files from a NAS and comparing that sound with the one reported by Jason Kennedy in his recent review of the Cyrus Stream X2, there is a lot in common. It's a sound that is defined by its leading edges, with the sort of detail and temporal precision found in good digital audio and yet without the harsh edges typified by CD replay. Clean without being cold is a fine summation of the overall presentation through its network, and while this has limits when it comes to its vTuner network radio stations (you are limited by the station's output bitstream), when you get a good station at a high bitrate (such as Positively Baroque, Radio Arizona, University of Kansas campus radio and the Linn stations), the same 'clean, not cold' presentation applies.

But it's more than just a streamer. The DAC section is good too (although it's not a patch on the brand's own ►



▶ standalone model), in that it's extremely detailed and once again clean sounding, but a trifle coarse-grained and slightly soft sounding. And the amplifier delivers one of the biggest sounds you'll get from an integrated amplifier, with absolutely huge, deep powerful bass and a wide, deep soundstage. It's not the tautest, most rhythmically intent amplifier on the market, but nevertheless its painting in broad strokes gives it plenty of appeal. In use, it's perhaps more geared toward the orchestral and the anthemic, rather than small scale jazz combos or fey folksy singers. On the whole though, it's a thoughtful and intelligent presentation, and one that's especially pleasing given the amount of shouting that seems to be going on from its rivals.

The ECI-6DS does have to face some very stiff opposition though, and the price of the Electrocompaniet comes in at the top of the one-box solutions for streaming. The ECI-6DS justifies its place by virtue of being a more powerful device, one that is considerably more relaxed sounding device than the competition and offers a more open-ended approach to using apps (Electrocompaniet currently doesn't have its own app, but can use a variety of third-party UPnP options – such as PlugPlayer – to act as media controller). If you think all streaming begins and ends with 'thin, fast' sound, the ECI-6DS might surprise you and show you that the future is not as bleak as the nay-sayers sometimes proclaim.

Electrocompaniet's products are the intelligent choice for audiophiles. They don't shout 'buy me' with a brightly lit performance; instead they make for a valve amp like, satisfying long-term investment. With the ECI-6DS, it's clear the brand is extending that sophisticated demeanour to the next generation of audio. It may be at the top end of the price of admission for digital streaming amplifiers, but it still has a lot to offer, and should definitely be on the shortlist. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Digital section

**D/A conversion:** 24bit, 192kHz

**Wifi:** 802.11b/g/n, SGA external antenna supplied

**LAN:** 10/100Mbits/s, DHCP and Auto IP support

**Standards supported:** UPnP, DLNA, vTuner

**Supported audio formats:** MP3 (up to 320kbps), WAV, AIFF, PCM up to 24/192, FLAC 24/192, OGGVorbis, WMA standard (AAC/M4A)

### amplifier section

**Input impedance:** 47kohm (balanced)

**Max input level:** 10v RMS

**Noise floor (Balanced):** -135dB

**THD+N (balanced):** <0.004%

**Gain (balanced):** 0dB

**Frequency response:** 1Hz-150kHz

**Channel separation:** >120dB

**THD+N (20Hz-20kHz):** <0.004%

**Max peak current:** >100A

**Rated power:** 2x 125W (eight ohms), 2x 200W (4 ohms)  
2x 370W (2 ohms)

**Dimensions (WxDxH):** 46.5x40.5x13.5cm

**Weight:** 20kg

**Price:** £4,550

**Manufacturer:** Electrocompaniet AS

**URL:** www.electrocompaniet.no

**Distributed by:** EC Distribution Ltd

**Tel:** +44(0)20 8893 5835

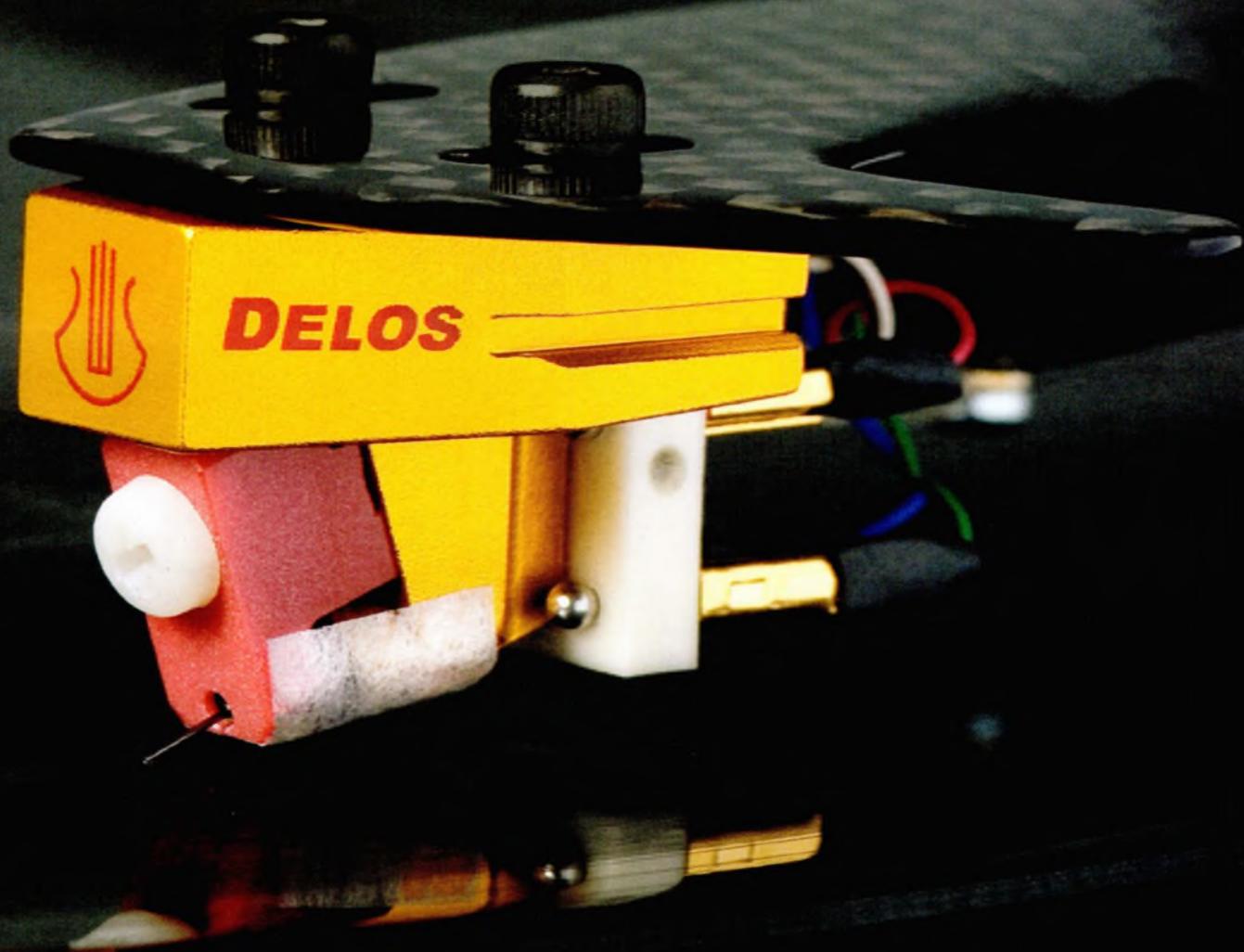


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# Snake River Audio Cables

By Jimmy Hughes

**B**ased in Riggins, a town in the Pacific Northwest region of the USA, Snake River Audio is a

small specialist company, hand-crafting high quality audio cables. It is near Hells Canyon, the deepest gorge in the whole of North America; an area famed for its wild natural beauty. Its product categories are named after venomous snakes. Nice!

The range includes Interconnects (analogue/digital), Speaker cables, Power chords, and falls into four price/performance categories; the Adder Silver series, the Cottonmouth Gold series, the Mamushi Magnetic series, and the recently introduced Signature series. The latter are available in 'Cottonmouth' or 'Mamushi' formats.

The Adder series features high-purity (0.999%) silver wire, while Cottonmouth employs 24ct gold-plated OFHC copper. The Mamushi option is available in a choice of silver or 24ct gold-plated OFHC copper, and features a capacitive woven design with magnetic shielding to reduce RFI. There's a choice of balanced/unbalanced configurations.

Snake River's flagship Signature series is available in either Cottonmouth or Mamushi formats, and combines pure silver with 24ct oxygen-free high-density copper in a hybrid cable designed to give the best features of both. A new range of Boomslang digital cables was recently announced.

All Snake River Audio cables are now cryogenically frozen to improve performance, and subjected to a minimum of 200 hours 'burn in' before being shipped. This should minimise running-in times – though the company still recommend allowing a certain amount of time for the cables to fully settle.

We were sent three cables to test; a 3m long Cottonmouth AMP series power cord



(£1,396.90) – a pair of 3m Cottonmouth Signature bi-wire speaker cables (£1,591.90) – and a pair of Mamushi Signature Interconnects (£1,202). At these sorts of prices, you'd expect top performance, and I wasn't disappointed!

I started with the power cable. Snake River Audio offer two variants; the standard version has 15amp capacity and consists of six cross-woven strands. But there's also a 20amp 10 strand AMP version for big power amps. A 1m length AMP cable retails for £1,006.90, but add £195 for each extra metre.

Given the number of things I have to improve the quality of my mains supply – specialist cabling, and purification devices from IsoTek and PS Audio – I'm always mildly surprised when a cable comes along and single-handedly makes an audible improvement. But that's just what the Snake River Audio's AMP did. Using the cable to power a Musical Fidelity AMS CD player (my power amp takes a 20A flat pin plug, so couldn't be used) I noticed an improvement in terms of clarity and focus. The music seemed to sound 'firmer' and more solidly projected. The background seemed slightly quieter, and overall the sound was cleaner.

Okay, it wasn't a massive difference, and I'm not sure I'd want to pay nearly £1,400 to get it. But, considering how many widgets I have installed to improve mains quality, and the fact that my mains is pretty clean to start with, ►

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world class sound...

▶ it's amazing the cable made any difference at all. Physical construction is first-rate; SRA's AMP cable feels built to last.

Next I tried the Mamushi interconnect, using it between the AMS CD player and a Classe CP-800 preamp. The Classe has an excellent in-built DAC, and overall I've chosen to listen via this rather than the AMS' own DAC and analogue output stage. Using the Classe's DAC provides a shorter, simpler signal path – and improves sound quality.

But, such was the improvement wrought by the Mamushi Signature interconnect, I now preferred to listen via the AMS' analogue output to the Classe's DAC! The Mamushi Signature delivers greater tonal range and body, and increased naturalness. There's an amazing 'rightness' about the sound. The musical presentation is solidly-focused yet pure.

The Mamushi cable is very thick and chunky – more like a speaker cable than an interconnect – and it's not very flexible. You need around 15-20cm gap between component and rear wall to give the cable space to gently curve in the required direction. And, as if sounding great wasn't

enough, the Mamushi looks beautiful too. The covering has a shimmering red/blue metallic hue that really catches the eye. The build quality of these cables is excellent, and the presentation – Box, Bags, Ser No Certificate – is good. Like the sonic performance of the cables, it's quietly impressive without being excessive. Your money goes on the cable, rather than fancy packaging.

Finally, I hooked up the Cottonmouth Signature speaker cables, and once again noticed an immediate improvement in clarity and coherence. As before, the music seemed to sound smoother and better integrated, with an inner-clarity that enabled the ear to follow delicate backing vocals and instruments more easily.

Bass sounded very solid and powerful, while middle frequencies were liquid and precise. The upper frequencies were clean and beautifully smooth, yet incisive and detailed. The music seemed more unified and integrated – a coherent whole working towards a common aim, rather than a collection of individual instruments and voices.

For over 15 years, I've used Townshend Isolde cables, and not found anything I liked better. But these Snake River Audio Cottonmouth Signature speaker cables gave an unforced clarity and integrity my regular cables lacked; creating a sense of the music 'happening' effortlessly and coherently in a manner that sounded natural and real.

Snake River Audio cables are sold in pairs (except for power cords and digital interconnects) with matching serial numbers, but can be ordered in custom lengths according to individual requirements. UK buyers can audition SRA cables at distributor Mackenzie Hi-Fi's demonstration studios in Wellingborough.

Since some buyers may end up purchasing without actually having listened beforehand, the UK distributors offer a two week money-back guarantee on cables held in stock. For cables custom-ordered, the returns period is seven days and there may be a re-stocking charge. Of course, cable choice is a very personal thing, and every room/system is different.

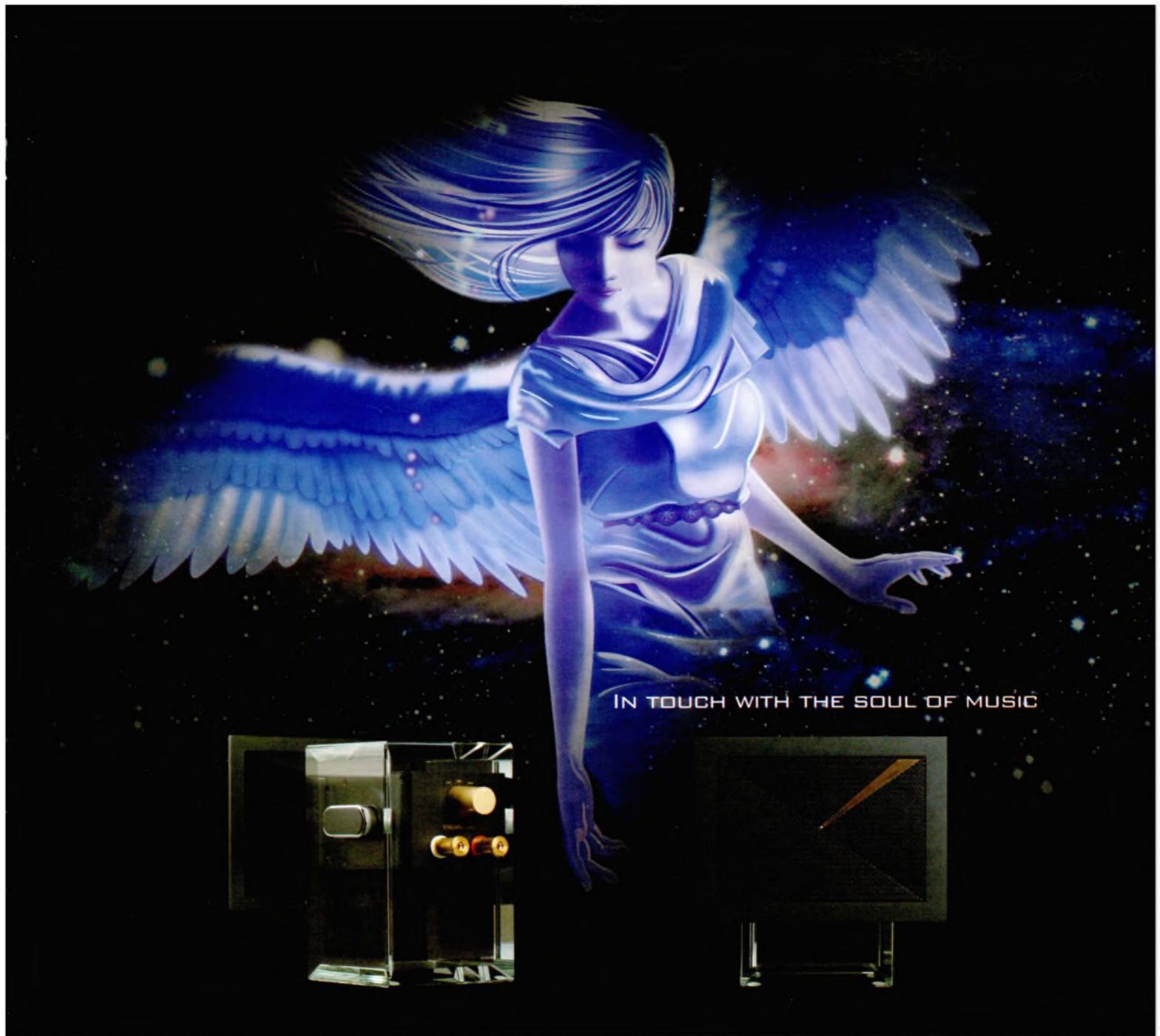
All I can say is that I'm deeply impressed with these Signature SRA cables, and would certainly use them myself. They're among the most natural-sounding and 'musical' cables I've ever listened to, so I'd be very surprised if you bought some and were hugely disappointed with the results. +

## CONTACT DETAILS

**Manufacturer:** Snake River Audio  
1342 Chukar Lane, Riggins, ID 83549, USA  
**URL:** [www.SnakeRiverAudio.com](http://www.SnakeRiverAudio.com)

**UK Distributor:** Mackenzie Hi-Fi  
**Tel:** 07905 362545  
**URL:** [www.mackenziehifi.com](http://www.mackenziehifi.com)





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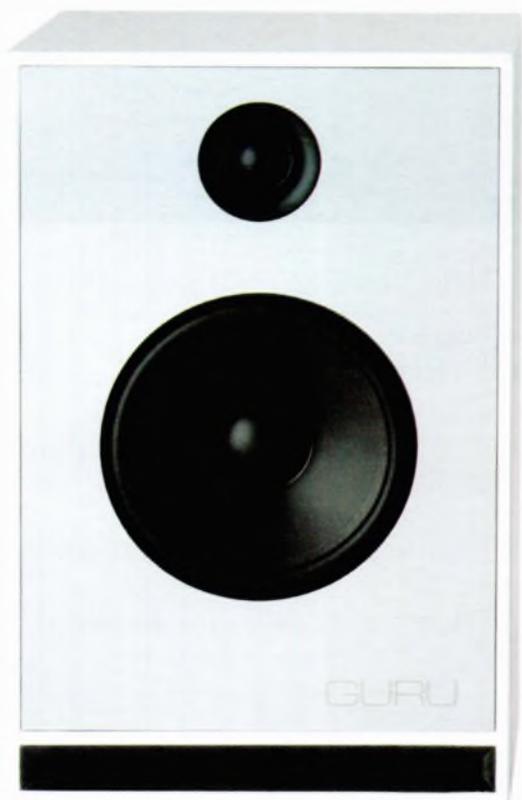
## Guru Junior

By Jason Kennedy

**A**t the Bristol show in February the Guru distributor had pictures of a girl 'chillaxing' with a pair of Guru Junior speakers under the slogan 'Swedes have more fun'. I guess if Ingmar Bergman had had these speakers at home he might have made less miserable movies; somebody should get some for Lars von Trier and see if that helps! However the Swedes at Guru clearly do have more fun if these little boxes of audio dynamite are anything to go by, because they sounded good in the room at Bristol and a whole lot better in my room.

The original Guru QM10 and current QM10two are extremely appealing and entertaining speakers that combine remarkable bandwidth, image scale and timing in a way that few other standmount speakers match. But the QM10 requires a special stand or top plate to support its widely spaced foam feet and it sounds best with carefully selected amplifiers and source components, and the current QM10two is also out of reach for music lovers who have a limited budget. The Guru Junior offers a lot of what the QM10 does in a considerably more affordable and easier to accommodate package. It also has more classically Scandinavian style than its big brother; the combination of clean, straight lines with gloss lacquer or real wood veneer and anodised aluminium place it in a very select group of aesthetically desirable contemporary stand mounts.

Junior has a reflex port that is slot shaped on the front much like the QM10two. This efficient use of space means that you can fit two drivers and a port on the front baffle which allows the speaker to sit close to the wall, in fact



that's the way it's intended to be used. The drivers are very similar to those of the QM10two, in fact the tweeter is the same 20.5mm unit soft dome but the main mid/bass unit is the one used on the original QM10 with a coated paper cone.

Controversially Guru recommends that you try to decouple the speaker from the stand; the polar opposite of what most speaker makers suggest, which is usually spikes or Blu-tack. The Junior is supplied with foam feet that you stick onto the base of the cabinet for this specific purpose. However this does mean you need a stand with a bigger support area than average (Junior's footprint is 18cm by 23cm). But having separate feet means you can attach them to the top of a stand that's smaller than the speaker and achieve the same decoupled result, so that's what I did.

The cabinet is extremely well finished, I had a white lacquered example with white anodised aluminium on front and rear baffles that went down very well with visitors and co-habitees alike. There are no grilles with this speaker, it's pretty enough not to need them but the parents among us may find this less relaxing! Cable connections are via 4mm plugs only because the rear panel features a pair of sockets only so no bare wire or spade connectors. Junior is also available in black with gun metal grey metalwork and the same thing with walnut veneer. Somewhere between Junior's pre-production debut last autumn and the finished thing the silver aluminium and walnut option has been dropped which is a pity.

## Sound quality

I set up the Juniors close to the rear wall and toed them in so that the outside edges of both were just visible from the listening position, this makes for a tighter toe-in than many speakers but it works for Gurus.

Despite the smaller size and smaller price, there are a lot of similarities between Junior and QM10two; this presumably is how it got its name! I started out listening with a Naim SuperUniti amplifier/streamer and a UnitiServe media server, a combo which while a little OTT gives any speaker a good chance of showing what it can do. And what Junior does is deliver a remarkable sense of scale and bottom end welly for such a compact design. In my experience, the latter is harder for small speakers than the former. But it's lovely to have both, especially in the context of a great sense of timing, this is achieved because it's fast, there is no discernible time smear to blur the leading edges. In some speakers this means a forward or lean balance, but when you have bottom end to back it up like Junior does it produces a tremendous sense of engagement and a whole heap of fun.

You can't help loving a speaker that lets you hear the playing and songwriting skills of your favourite artists as well as the Junior does. The more you listen the more it gets under your skin, I got totally carried away with one album even though there was work to do and deadlines to meet. But sometimes such details have to be cast aside so that you can get back to what living is all about.

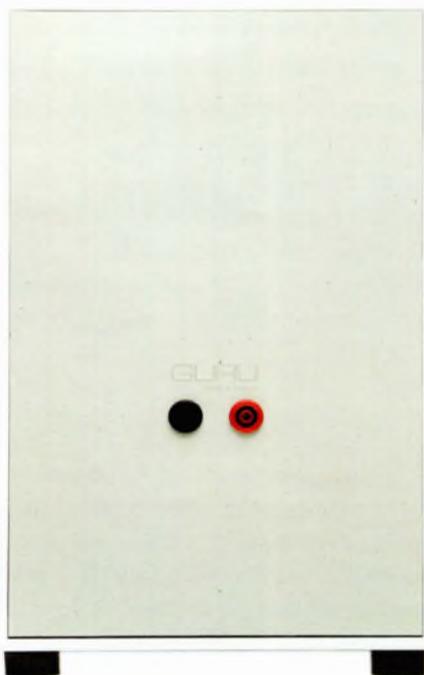
This stylish little speaker is good enough to let you realise that this is the best way of spending your leisure time, that all other pursuits are mere diversions. But I may be getting carried away, that's the problem with good products, you stop listening to the speaker and get distracted by the music. Being a professional however I knuckled down and tried a different amp, the Rega Brio-R to be specific. This has less muscle than the SuperUniti but very similar skills in the timing and engagement departments to the Junior. The

*“Guru recommends that you try to decouple the speaker from the stand; the polar opposite of what most speaker makers suggest, which is usually spikes or Blu-tack. The Junior is supplied with foam feet that stick onto the base of the cabinet for this specific purpose.”*

result wasn't quite so well articulated in the bass but there is still plenty of weight. In fact, the imaging is palpably solid in the room, instruments and musicians are placed in the soundstage in a remarkably realistic fashion. This is not merely a musical speaker it's also a precise and particularly coherent one.

In an attempt to produce a well rounded review, and an excuse to listen to the speaker some more I pulled out a third amplifier option in the Leema Tucana. This is the most powerful of the three and delivered the most low frequency weight, surprising amounts of it to be honest. Junior made me double take more than once by producing bass that was way too low for its size, I played a CD single of Massive Attack's 'Teardrop' which has a Mad Professor mix on it and discovered that this speaker is truly dubworthy. You have to hear it to believe it, but I ain't making it up; the scale that all that reverb produces is astonishing, and this from a wall mount speaker.

I also tried more subtle material including Andras Schiff's take on Schubert's 'The Impromptus' (*Moments Musicaux*, Decca). This is a slightly thin recording which doesn't play to the speaker's strengths, but the music is a delight because the timing is so good. ▶



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Dimensions (H x W x D):** 290 x 180 x 230mm

**Weight:** 4kg

**Crossover:** 2-7kHz non-textbook function

**Sensitivity** 87 dB (@2.83V, 1m)

**Nominal impedance:** 8 ohms

**Enclosure material:** MDF / aluminium

**HF driver:** 20.5 mm soft dome

**LF driver:** 102 mm coated paper cone

**Finish:** anodised aluminium with black lacquer, white lacquer or oiled walnut

**Price:** £799

**Distributor:** Guru Audio UK

**Tel:** 01727 858989

**URL:** [www.guruaudio.co.uk](http://www.guruaudio.co.uk)

**Manufacturer:** Guru Audio

**URL:** [guruaudio.com](http://guruaudio.com)

*“There must be something in those foam feet; I’ve heard a lot of compact two-ways in my time, but none that have this much low-end power and scale. The wall mounting plays its part to be sure, but the fact that this is a similar result to that achieved with highly isolating equipment supports.”*

There is a slight emphasis on the voice band which makes lyrics more intelligible than usual and plucks out details that are not always obvious, this combined with the prodigious bass quality makes for a result that stirs both the loins and the soul. It’s just not natural!

Matters only get more engaging when vinyl is brought into the picture, I hooked up a Rega RP6 turntable with Dynavector DV-20X2H cartridge and a P75 MkIII phono stage and plugged it into the Leema. Playing Leo Kottke’s ‘Great Big Boy’ proved a wholly involving and revealing experience despite the repeat playing that I give this LP. The zing of the new strings and the subtle fretless bass work were presented with clarity and cohesion but it is the timing that keeps you welded to the listening seat.

There must be something in these foam feet; I’ve heard a lot of compact two-ways in my time, but none that have this much low-end power and scale. The wall mounting plays its part to be sure, but the fact that this is a similar result to that achieved with highly isolating equipment supports like the Townshend Seismic Stand makes me think that I should try these feet under other speaker to see what happens.

To get back to the subject in question however it occurs to me that what makes the Guru Junior impossible to resist is its musical honesty, some speakers have a particularly charming tonal character that lures you toward beautiful sounding recordings. This speaker cannot be so easily fooled, if the music isn’t good enough you know all about it, and if it is then this is doubly the case. There is no danger of being diverted from the musical truth, that is where the beauty of this art form is to be found and this modest speaker delivers it in spades. It would be hard not to recommend the loudspeaker, but as it doesn’t cost a small fortune to achieve all this, it should be at the top of your ‘must hear’ list! +



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# Roksan Xerxes.20Plus turntable system

By Alan Sircom

**A**lthough our reviews are existential in nature ("I feel..." rather than "it does..."), we do try to take the personal element out of the story behind the product, but this time, it's difficult. You see, I've been at this audio reviewing lark for getting on for a quarter of a century and in that time there has been many a turntable gracing the Sircom shelves. And yet, despite its considerable importance over the last 25 years, simply due to the way the cards fell, I have never once spied a product from the turntable maker closest to me geographically – Roksan.

The Xerxes sits somewhere between suspended and solid turntables; its subchassis uses a series of blobs between it and the plinth and the plinth is decoupled from the sub-plinth by a series of anti-vibration mounts. In other words, rather than accepting the limitations of one of the two usual ways of making a turntable, Roksan did the lateral-thinking thing and side-step the whole issue by going for decoupling and isolation.

Roksan has traditionally made some very smart decisions when it comes to sharing components across the line. So, while the Xerxes.20plus models look very different to the original Xerxes, Xerxes.10 or even Xerxes.20, there are a lot of common parts allowing both repairs and upgrades to be performed throughout the line. No, it's not possible to take a 1985 turntable and end up with a 2013 turntable, but the unsullied Xerxes from 28 years ago is still a contender and with a few judicious tweaks can get very close to the 20plus performance.

Similarly, the power supply and phono stage are in common 'Caspian' cases, so

there is no need for extra tooling for one case over another. This does mean the rear panel might have sections blanked out socket holes though. There is also a cheaper XPS 7 power supply

When it comes to the .20plus, the most obvious upgrade came from trickling down the developments that went into the company's former flagship turntable, the TMS3. After Touraj Moghaddam left (in what must be the least acrimonious company partner split in history), rising costs of making a limited run high-end deck and having a flagship named after the founder of a cable brand was not the most forward-thinking option, so the .20plus incorporated key elements from the TMS3, including the tungsten carbide bearing ball, inner and outer platter, mat and decoupler blobs. In the process, Roksan created a turntable that is said to get attain virtually all the TMS3 performance without the 'should we remortgage the house?' price tag. Roksan recommends the bearing ball, decouplers and mat as useful upgrades to existing .10 and .20 owners (the platter change is not recommended).

I got the complete package deal, latest version of the Xerxes deck with off-board Reference power supply, the Tabriz Zi arm (second in command to the Artemiz 2, but both share the same intelligent – underslung – counterweight concept) and Shiraz moving coil cartridge, the add-on upgrade plinth, even the Reference DXP SE phono preamp. This last has a set of DIP switches on its underside to adjust cartridge loading and gain, and as the Shiraz is a relatively low output moving coil, take this step seriously.

The first thing that grabs you about the Roksan is the speed precision. There's a school of thought saying that if you can nail 33 1/3 rpm within tolerable levels, all speed variation is just an elaborate fantasy. But for the rest of us, the Roksan sounds more 'in the pocket' than most. Its precise, tight pitch control led it to being dubbed as 'CD like' by its detractors in the past, but in hindsight, that's more of a complement than an insult. This doesn't just come over in strict 4/4 time, but actually highlights the temporal precision needed to play more challenging time signatures (such as on the inevitable *DSOTM* and *Time Out* albums) and even imposes strict control over the wibbly-wobbly sense of tempo on those early 1990s ambient albums from bands like The Orb.

*“After Touraj Moghaddam left (in what must be the least acrimonious company partner split in history), rising costs of making a limited run high-end deck and having a flagship named after the founder of a cable brand was not the most forward thinking option, so the .20plus incorporated key elements from the previous TMS3.”*





▶ Roksan's big claim has always been detail retrieval, for good reason; this turntable gets an amazing amount of detail off the record. This could be a double-edged sword, but the Roksan presents that detail in an orderly fashion too. I've found with some decks, there's a point where you feel like you are being overloaded by information, but the Xerxes' ability to make sense of the data presented just makes you hungry for more.

This detail retrieval touches almost every aspect of the musical performance. It means that playing the 1958 Duke Ellington concert at Newport (Speakers Corner, 180g) both the size (as in imagery) and scale (as in dynamics) of the band was fully realised. It also has that sense of microdynamic subtlety often overlooked when things get loud. It might sound strange, but alongside piano and vocals, the sound of applause is often a fine arbiter of performance, especially as the applause decays. If it sounds like pink noise slowly breaking down into crackle, then something's amiss, but here it sounded like an audience, then a handful of appreciative listeners, putting their hands together.

Arguably, the sound of the Roksan is more in line with high-end values than many UK-based rivals. A good high-end system is all about detail retrieval, a 'walk-in' soundstage, tonal accuracy, dynamic range and frequency extension. Reading back the findings of this review puts the Xerxes in lock step with many of those values.

There is a mild observation. The removable spindle now acts as a form of hold-down device for the mat. This works well, but occasionally, you do end up taking the spindle with the LP off the platter, which then almost inevitably sends the mat flying.

There's an interesting aside to close on. Back in the Jurassic era of the 1980s, the Linn may have won the battle (more LP12s were sold in the UK than any of its similarly priced rivals), but possibly Roksan won the war. It's been a long time since I owned a LP12, but not so long since I've heard the latest spec models. Over the years, the sound of the Linn has changed; it's less strongly-characterful and arguably more neutral today, with less of a bottom end bloom. In other words, it is more Roksan-sounding. The comparison doesn't happen often today, in part because the price differential is so steep now, but I think the two are closer than ever today.

We are in a novelty-obsessed world; a computer industry-driven time, where anything more than six months old is viewed as painfully outdated. But it shouldn't be that way; the Roksan Xerxes.20plus is the perfect example of why good things stay good. It traces a line back to the mid-1980s and has only matured with age. Had I reviewed one when I started this lark, I'd have been impressed. And I'm more than impressed now! +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Roksan Xerxes.20plus

**Spindle:** Hardened tool steel  
**Main Bearing Ball:** 2mm tungsten carbide  
**Bearing Housing:** Solid Phosphor Bronze  
**Platter:** Two Piece Solid Aluminium alloy  
**Structure:** Three Plinth Design  
**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 45x11.5x370cm  
**Weight:** 12 Kg  
**Price:** £2,600 (Piano Black),  
 £2,800 (Rosewood/Maple)

### Tabriz Zi tonarm

**Effective length:** 240mm  
**Overhang:** 17.5mm  
**Headshell offset angle:** 22.9 degrees  
**Effective mass:** < 11g  
**Recommended cartridge weight:** 5-12g  
**Recommended tracking force:** 1.2-3g  
**Price:** £850

### Shiraz cartridge

**Cartridge weight:** 8.2 g  
**Tracking force:** 2.2g-2.5g (2.3 nominal)  
**Load resistance:** 100 Ohms  
**Coil impedance:** 24 Ohms  
**Stylus profile:** Gyger II (super fineline)  
**Price:** £2,600

### DXP SE Reference phono amp/PSU speed control

**Dimensions:** 432 x 330 x 80  
**Weight:** 12 Kg max. Fully loaded  
**Price:** £1,530/£1,300

### Manufactured by: Roksan Ltd

**Tel:** +44(0)208 900 6801  
**URL:** www.roksan.co.uk



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# Morgan Audio RMS11 active loudspeaker

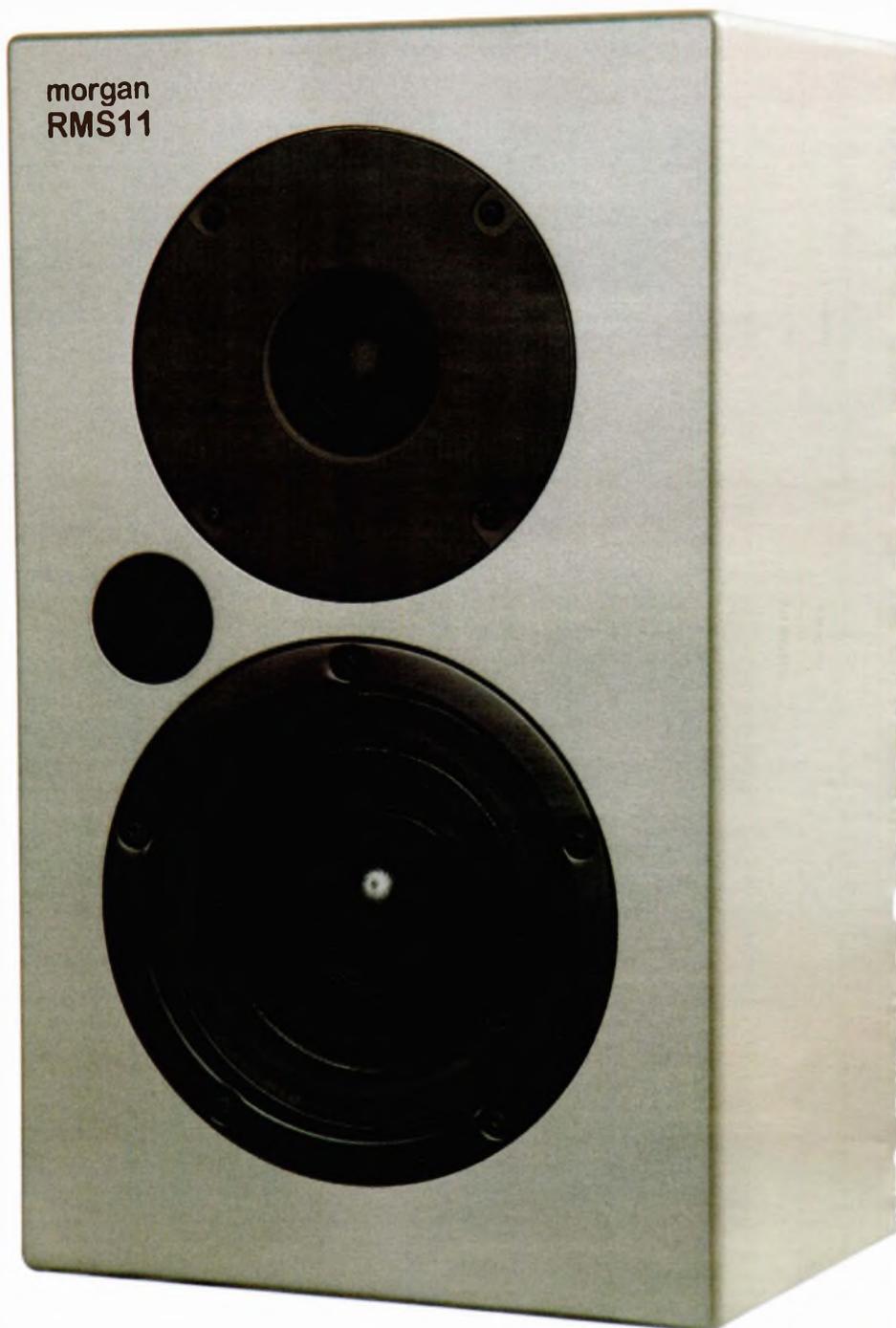
By Paul Messenger

**T**he Morgan Audio RMS11 is a compact stand-mount loudspeaker. More important is the fact that it's also an active loudspeaker, and that simple adjective separates it out from the overwhelming majority.

Active drive is a technique commonly found in the Pro industry, but is a comparative rarity in the domestic hi-fi arena. Meridian and B&O both use it as a matter of course, while Linn and Naim make it available as options, as do Pro-crossover speaker brands like ATC and PMC. But all those tend to be well upmarket examples, which is not at all the case with this little speaker from Morgan Audio. As I understand it, this little RMS11 is only available direct from the manufacturer at £499/pair, a figure that seems hugely competitive in view of the fact that each speaker also contains a power supply, an electronic crossover and a couple of MOSFET power amps.

As a hi-fi company founded in Liverpool nearly 20 years ago, Morgan Audio has had very little recognition here in Britain. Not that Hi-Fi+ can be blamed for this: Issue 6 (Apr/May 2000) carried a review of Morgan's complete Deva system, which went on to receive a 'Product of the Year' award in Issue 10. Morgan's problem seemed to lie more in the difficulty of finding dealers willing to stock and sell its relatively inexpensive products in a tough and very competitive UK marketplace.

However, success in overseas territories like Germany and Taiwan helped keep this modest operation going, and it has also been diversifying into multi-room systems and the like. Today the company website shows a ▶





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► *“The website suggests that the RMS11 isn’t really expected to be used at the end of a full hi-fi system. However, it lists a wide variety of possible sources.”*

product line that consists of just two active loudspeakers – this tiny RMS11 and a larger model dubbed rms15 that has still to be finalised. That might bring to mind cautionary proverbs about eggs and baskets, but I suspect Morgan Audio knows what it’s doing.

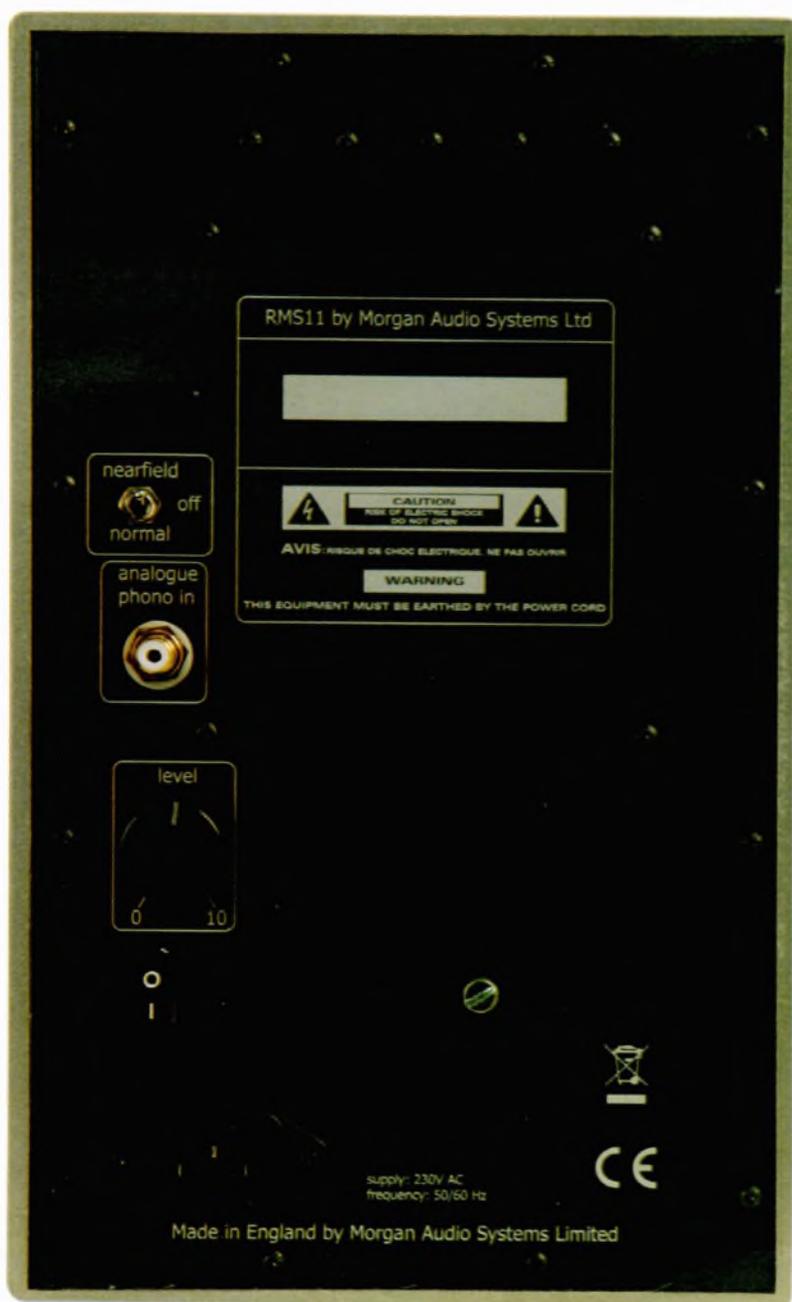
The website suggests that the RMS11 isn’t really expected to be used at the end of a full hi-fi system. However, it lists a wide variety of possible sources, indicating the expectation that the speakers will be driven from the analogue (eg headphone) outputs of specific components, a little like a B&W Zeppelin perhaps, albeit in a more traditional two-box, wire-connected form.

Each speaker’s black-painted metal rear panel will act as an effective heatsink, and comes equipped with an IEC mains socket, a gain control, and an RCA/phono input socket. (Morgan Audio can also supply a digital input version, though this is not described or discussed in any detail.) A couple of toggle switches are fitted: one simply switches on/off; the other has two positions labelled ‘nearfield’ and ‘normal’, the former dropping the treble by about 3dB to compensate for close-up listening.

The rest of the enclosure is MDF, neatly finished in black, white or graphite, while the mirror-imaged front panel accommodates a tiny (nominally 4in, 100mm) bass/mid driver, a 25mm soft dome tweeter and a very small port. The diaphragm of that little main driver is just 75mm in diameter, so one can anticipate fine crossover region integrity alongside rather limited bass delivery and power handling.

Since I’m not of the iPod generation, iTunes remains a foreign country, and I like to change between a number of different sources, I began by connecting my regular Naim NAC552 pre-amp directly to the speakers, by-passing the usual power amplification. Since the huge price differential suggests such an arrangement is unlikely in practice, a very inexpensive Creek OBH-22 passive pre-amp was also pressed into service as an alternative.

The down side of active drive, and the main reason for its poor acceptance in the hi-fi sector, seems to lie purely in the inability to choose one’s power amplification. Whether that is really important, however, must be a matter for debate. Active drive also has a number of significant and positive implications, the most important of these ►



► are perhaps the elimination of a passive crossover network and speaker cables, and the direct connection of power amplifiers to drive units. Some active speaker systems go much further, especially those with digital connection facilities, but the RMS11 is simple and straightforward in this regard.

As soon as these little speakers were connected up, there was no avoiding both the advantage of a small loudspeaker, and the benefits that active drive was bringing to the party. Small speakers tend to be relatively free from boxiness, in part because the box itself is so very little. However, position a pair of seven litre miniatures quite close to a wall and they'll deliver a modest but respectable amount of in-room bass in the far field down to around 50Hz. It might not be all that clean or deep, or indeed go all that loud, but it does at least exist. While close-to-wall positioning will boost the mid-bass octave (50-100Hz) by some 6dB, a down side is usually some extra midband unevenness

Even with the help of wall proximity, the RMS11 is a bit of a lightweight affair, but that's partly because the real strength of this speaker lies in its outstanding midband coherence, marred only by a degree of forwardness in the upper midband.

This is all happily confirmed by some fairly simple measurements. Sensitivity and impedance are not appropriate with active speaker systems, but the frequency balance remains entirely relevant. This demonstrates the RMS11's suitability to wall reinforcement, and also indicates an impressively smooth if rather lightweight overall tonal balance. It's essentially neutral, but characterised by a measure of upper-mid forwardness, 800Hz-1.6kHz.

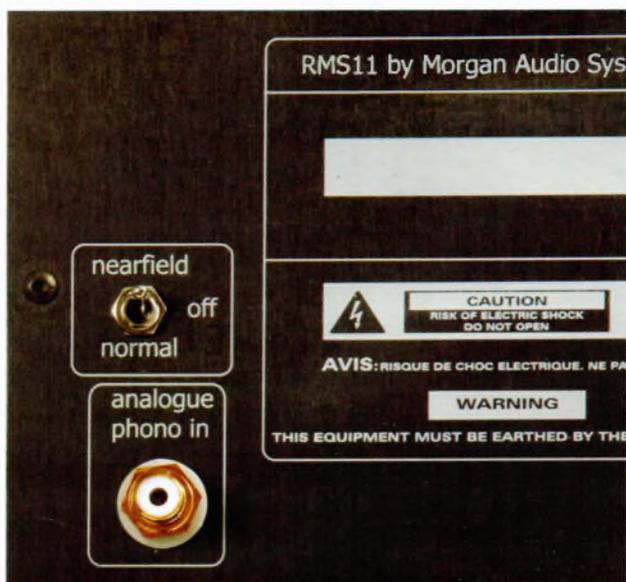
A number of key factors immediately draw the attention. First, this little loudspeaker's freedom from boxiness is quite splendid, and that alone does much to promote fine central focus and impressive stereo imagery, even though depth is somewhat (probably inevitably) inhibited by wall proximity.

The surprise element was that this speaker sounds rather more dynamically vigorous than one has come to anticipate from such a small loudspeaker. This observation I'm inclined to attribute to the avoidance of any form of passive crossover network. Such devices don't necessarily cramp dynamics, but often tend to do so, and the quality of the network components seems to have become a key element in modern speaker design.

The third major strength of this speaker lies in its superior time coherence through the crossover region. This is sometimes (though not necessarily) where passive speakers suffer from a degree of timesmear, due to the phase shifts introduced by passive filters. Once again, active filtering affords greater flexibility, and careful design has been applied to minimise timesmear through the crossover region. The

result doesn't match the total coherence of a single full range driver system. But it gets close, with fine voice-band reproduction, delivering speech and lyrics with unusual clarity and intelligibility.

I came to these loudspeakers with no preconceptions, apart from the knowledge that the pricetag was surprisingly modest. They've completely won me over. They're too small to represent perfection, but within that constraint are very good indeed. The overall character tends to be somewhat lightweight and forward, and although the fine coherence delivers superior detail projection and intelligibility, it also tends to reveal any inadequacies in the source, which is arguably the only real down side. Find the right system context, however, and the RMS11 is a steal. +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Drivers:** 100mm bass/mid with doped paper cone 25mm fabric dome tweeter

**Amplification:** 30W bass + 25W treble

**Inputs:** 1x RCA/phono (digital also available)

**Features:** volume, normal/nearfield EQ

**Finishes:** black, white or graphite

**Size (wxhxd):** 167x282x180mm

**Weight:** 4.6kg

**Price:** £499/pair

**Manufactured by:** Morgan Audio Systems

**URL:** [morgan-audio.co.uk](http://morgan-audio.co.uk)

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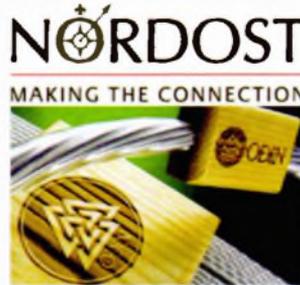
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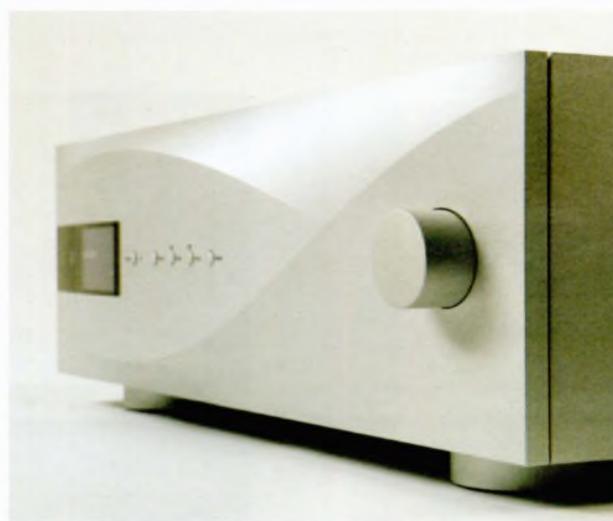


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## Isotek EVO3 Genesis

By Jason Kennedy

**P**ower conditioning has got itself something of a bad rap in the UK. It seems to be big in the US, because they only have 110 volts to work with and the flimsiest looking plugs and sockets to connect to it. The mains grid in the UK delivers 230 volts of rock solid power (say the naysayers), and you connect to it with a fairly beefy three pin plug that can cope with rather more than the 13 amps it's rated for. So why do we need anything to improve the power that goes into our kit? The answer is that the increasing amounts of pollution that the computer, wi-fi and general electronica that fills our homes all produces noise that feeds back into the mains. Unless you live up a mountain with 300 solar panels and as many batteries to store the energy, your mains supply is a carrier for alarming amounts of RFI and EMI, detritus, which if the results I got with the Genesis are anything to go by, have a marked negative effect on the potential of hi-fi components.

The Genesis is not a filter, a lot of mains conditioners are just that and this is not a bad thing if it's done well, in fact it's just about the only way to get enough juice to a big

power amp without cramping its style. Instead Genesis is a re-generator, a device that takes the power coming out of the wall and uses it to build an 'optimised' mains sine wave which is fed to the output sockets. Genesis can deliver up to 600 watts, which is enough to run four source components and/or a preamp; possibly some low power amps as well, but it's designed for front end stuff first and foremost.

Inside the substantial and elaborately isolated case, which many mistake for a power amplifier, lies about as much copper and heatsinking as you find in a power amp. This is a substantial device because it runs two independent generation cells as Isotek likes to call them. These create a cleaned up version of the incoming sine wave, which is then amplified by a 300 watt 'generation engine', effectively a class A/B amplifier. Isotek is keen to point out that Genesis works in a different way to most AC regenerators, because it doesn't synthesise the ▶



► mains by imposing a template frequency on it (50Hz in the UK) as that approach doesn't remove distortion. Instead it builds a completely new sine wave at the desired frequency, which is then amplified and delivered via transformers with copper foil between primary and secondary outputs to stop any noise and distortion getting through. It's designed to dramatically cut harmonic distortion (THD) on the mains.

I put it to Isotek founder and chief proselytiser Keith Martin that the makers of serious audio equipment go to great lengths to design and build regulated power supplies that deal with the problems inherent in the mains supply, and asked him why Genesis should be able to do a better job. His response was: "We specialise in understanding power and what's going on and that makes a big difference. If you're designing an audio component there are always compromises and it's usually the areas that most people won't notice that are compromised rather than the features or casework, and power conditioning is one of those areas." He went on to say that he spends a great deal of time demonstrating his equipment to audiophiles around the world and has never found a system that doesn't benefit. But he would say that; the irritating thing is that results I got back this up.

Build quality is extremely high on the Genesis. The case is made from aluminium extrusions with an anodised finish that ensures resistance to knocks and looks great. It's a substantial beast too, thanks to the massive output transformers, extensive heatsinking and ISIS or independent system isolation support frame that sits like an exoskeleton around the body of the unit. It consists of aluminium uprights that are spanned by damped acrylic plates top and bottom which are shaped to minimise vibration. It's an elaborate arrangement that increases the units footprint and height quite considerably but does allow it to be stacked atop Isotek's conditioner for power amps the Super Titan.

On the connection front Genesis has a single input for the IEC input cable, an Isotek Extreme power cable is supplied to make the connection to the wall, and four independently connected output sockets, in this case 13A three pin types. The sockets themselves are silver (24k gold in the US) and internal cabling is silver plated, six nines OFC with PTFE dielectric. A proper job in other words which is probably why it works so well.

The improvements that can be wrought with Genesis vary from component to component but there are a few underlying qualities that are always apparent when switching from a decent extension block. The key one is an obvious drop in noise floor which makes low level resolution significantly better. Indistinct sounds are now fully formed, quieter instruments are far easier to identify and follow and reverb and decay extend

*"Build quality is extremely high on the Genesis. The case is made from aluminium extrusions with an anodised finish that ensures resistance to knocks and looks great. It's a substantial beast too, thanks to the massive output transformers, extensive heatsinking and independent system isolation support frame."*

for considerably longer. This brings significant amounts of the recording's character with it, acoustic spaces are precisely defined and soundstages expand in all directions, it's not at all subtle and very moreish. You have to play familiar albums again just to hear what's been hidden in the noise, it really does revitalise your record collection and I use the term in the broadest sense.

I put the Metrum Acoustics Hex DAC on first and revelled in the clarity of leading edges, this meant that timing improved – which it seems to with a lot of components. Subtleties of phrasing and character came out in John Lurie's voice (*The Legendary Marvin Pontiac – Greatest Hits*) which sounds richer and at the same time cooler than usual, and it always sounds cool. I also tried it with a Canary Audio CD300, a big tube powered CD player that already sounded pretty special but suddenly unearthed loads more space and delivered a far wider image. This was pretty dramatic. It sounded like the noise floor had literally disappeared below the threshold of audibility.

Going back to the Hex and then moving the Naim UnitiServe from standard to Genesis supply was also pretty dramatic, I didn't expect that the server would benefit as much as devices that process analogue signals but I was wrong. Again there was acres more space and far more depth of tone, high notes had real shine and vibrancy because so much grunge had been removed. Now there was a radiance to the sound of Michael Hedges 'Aerial Boundaries' that you usually have to spend a fortune on a vinyl front end to achieve.

Which reminds me, when you switch on Genesis its display tells you how many volts its receiving and how much THD is coming in and how much going to the output. The display turns off after about 10 seconds because it needs to connect in and outputs in order to display the information. It runs quite hot, much as you would expect of a 300 watt amp ►

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On the other side, it has 5 digital inputs and this is where the alchemy comes in. Hegel's digital inputs are designed with unique technology that can make your computer, streamer or other digital device sound extremely good. You can take some of the most affordable digital music players on the market, connect them to the H300's digital inputs, and get fantastic musical and dynamic sound.



MUSIC SYSTEMS

[www.hegel.com](http://www.hegel.com)

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Number of outlets: 4

Type of outlets: UK, EU, US, CH, AU, ZA

Mains inlet: C20 IEC High Current

Mains voltage: 230V 50Hz

Maximum current: 16Amps

Total power: 600W continuous

THD: between 0.05% and 0.17% (typical).

RFI reduction: +85dB extending down to zero Hz

Voltage stabilisation: 230V +/- 1%

Dimensions (WxHxD): 500 x 300 x 500mm

Weight: 45Kg

Price: £12,950

Manufacturer: Isotek Systems

URL: [www.isoteksystems.com](http://www.isoteksystems.com)

Tel: 01276 501392

and has a near quiet onboard fan that comes on when a lot of power is required. I can't say that I heard them once.

Back with the music I dropped Fleetwood Mac's 'Never Going Back' (the highlight of *Rumours* in my opinion) and discovered the way that echo and reverb was used to create the impression of a wall of acoustic guitars from only two. It sounded superb that was for sure. There is always a danger with extra transparency that detail can take centre stage and usurp the music but because the Genesis merely improves the hardware you have its musical capabilities remain as strong if not more so than ever. There were a number of occasions when timing became clearly stronger. Power and dynamics are likewise reinforced, there is less hash so the power is cleaner and this had an unexpected side effect. I started playing at higher levels than usual, not significantly nor deliberately but it became clear at the end of the session that the volume was quite a bit higher than usual. Of course the source material needs to be clean enough to encourage this but with a hi-res file of Samuel Yirga's superb new release Guzo (24/48 on Society of Sound) that is very much the case and I revelled in the sound of his piano and a great sounding rendition of Black Gold of the Sun at pretty serious levels without discomfort.

I tried the Genesis on all the source products that came through the listening room and in every instance it allowed them to produce significantly superior results. If

I had an active preamp rather than the Townshend Allegri I have no doubt that it would have benefited to the same extent if not more. Genesis is extremely expensive for a

power conditioner but the fact

that it can do so much for a system means that you really don't know what any component is capable of if you are just plugging it into the wall.

It's also a lot cheaper than a self powered mountain top listening room, and easier to install. +





"...landmark products that only an audiofool would dismiss..." SG1.1 and Centroid arm review - *Stereophile*, November 2012



"Frankly ? These are the best speaker cables I've ever heard."  
Tellurium Q Graphite review - *HiFi World*, March 2012



### True beauty is from within...

...or, it's what you can't see that makes the difference!



There are outwardly 'flashier' decks than the **Spiral Groove** SG1.1, but none that have balanced the engineering challenges to reach this pinnacle of performance in such an elegant and apparently simple form. **Tellurium Q** cables are specifically designed to combat Phase Distortion (the correlation between frequency and time), preserving the inherent reality of the recording. You can't see how the combination of cable geometry and materials achieve this, but you can hear it as soon as the music starts.

**Stillpoints** devices use internal technology to isolate your components from the room and from each other. What you actually hear is your music isolated from the effects of your system, so the experience is simply more lifelike, insightful and enjoyable.  
*Close your eyes, listen, and you will see...*

"Whatever the music, the change was always the same - hearing more music, more realistically presented, and with drastically greater involvement. There's simply no going back." -  
*Stillpoints system review - The Absolute Sound, September 2012*



# Pro Audio Bono Anti-Vibration Equipment Support Stand

By Jimmy Hughes

**H**aving enthusiastically reviewed FAB's support platform (see issue 90) I couldn't wait to try one of their equipment stands. There are two versions. The standard one has a pair of suspended shelves, plus space on top for a FAB support platform. But there's also a version with three suspended shelves.

Mine was the standard version, and when it arrived I had quite a shock! It's Big... 73cm wide, 51cm deep, and 71cm tall. Without giving it much thought, I kind of expected something in kit form – what Alexei Sayle humorously referred to as "Flat Pack and Throw Up". But it actually comes fully assembled and more or less ready to use.

Fortunately, it's not massively heavy, so I eventually heaved it down my stairs and into the living room. Installation took quite a while. I had to take my entire system apart, remove the original stand, and then put everything back on the FAB. It was a lengthy process, but eventually the deed was done and I started to listen.

The sonic difference is hard to describe, but as a broad generalisation, the music seemed to sound more flowing and liquid. If you imagine complex music as a machine with lots of gears and cogs, it suddenly felt as though everything was running more easily and effortlessly. The various parts were better synchronised.

Tone colours and dynamics seemed more separate, with less sense of things bunching up during complex passages. Rather than the loudest thing dominating, background details were suddenly easier to follow. There seemed to be a degree of space around individual voices and instruments that hadn't been apparent before.



### The Look of Love...

Initially, I spent time listening to technically good modern recordings in the hope that something well-recorded might highlight differences. But unexpectedly, it was a compilation CD of old Dusty Springfield songs that really crystallised the nature of the changes the PAB stand had wrought.

Temporarily 'off duty', I put on the CD in question simply because I fancied listening to it. None of the songs was especially well-recorded in hi-fi terms, yet – and forgive me for putting it this way – there seemed to be a kind of magic about each one. I kept noticing how 'individual' each track sounded. ▶



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▶ The general sonic ambience of each song was subtly different, and there were some amazing soundstaging effects. Backing vocals would seem to hover, as if suspended in the air above the speakers, while massed violins created a rich cushion of sound that appeared to float free of the speaker boundaries.

The whole experience took me back to the mid 1970s, when I first encountered the Linn Sondek turntable, and heard the way it could make otherwise ordinary LPs see interesting and (that word again) magical. Essentially, the FAB stand had my system doing stuff it wouldn't normally be able to do.

On the one hand, the musical presentation was definitely more listenable – more relaxed and enjoyable; more coherent and integrated. Yet at the same time, the sound was definitely more focused and solid. I was able to hear all sorts of subtle detail that hadn't been evident before.

Because it took hours before the FAB stand up and running, I wasn't really able to do a quick immediate before-and-after comparison as such. The sound definitely seemed better on the new stand, but I never made a direct comparison. Alas - putting everything back on my original stand was out of the question.

### Three Little Words

So, I was extremely pleased when my wife – unprompted – said those three little words every audiophile husband wants to hear; “sounds good tonight!” Indeed, she actually remarked on how good things were sounding on three separate occasions. This helped confirm that the differences were real, and not just imagination or wishful thinking.

When I told her the improvement was down to the new stand, she looked at me mystified – as if to say ‘how can a stand make so much difference?’ Therein lies a tale, darling! But her spontaneous comments underlined what I myself felt about the effect the FAB stand seemed to be having.

While setting up the FAB stand is fairly simple and straightforward, you may need to adjust the suspended shelves so they're level and free moving. Dress your interconnect cables so they don't interfere with the free movement of the shelf. If your cables are thick and stiff, and they touch the rear wall, you'll lose some decoupling.

It's very easy to not take equipment support stands seriously. After all, most equipment seems to work fine, regardless of what it's placed on. For me, the value of these FAB support platforms and stands is the way they deliver sonic improvements of a kind that are difficult to achieve by other means.

Of course, decoupled support platforms and stands are nothing new, but FAB's approach – suspending the shelf on an adjustable string – is different and unusual. It seems to work more effectively than (say) using feet made from lossy absorptive material. Just trying one FAB platform was enough to convince me, but adding the stand is even better.

Suddenly, I could hear all kinds of subtle things – soundstaging depth and expressive vocal/instrumental inflections – that make the experience of listening to recorded music deeper and more satisfying. At the same time, the overall musical presentation seemed smoother and more relaxed – more engaging and listenable.

Neither the platform or stand is inexpensive, but the sonic improvements delivered justify the cost. Indeed, I'd challenge anyone to get the same level

of improvement by spending a comparable sum of money on a conventional upgrade – ie, replacing a component. The FAB difference goes beyond such things. +

*“So, I was extremely pleased when my wife – unprompted – said those three little words every audiophile husband wants to hear; “sounds good tonight!” Indeed, she actually remarked on how good things were sounding on three separate occasions.”*

### PRODUCT DETAILS

Three Tier Stand (black, brown, oak, cherry, birch): £1395

Four Tier Stand (black, brown, oak, cherry, birch): £1595

Basic Support Platform (black, brown, oak, cherry, birch): £499

Distributor: Fidelity Art

URL: [www.fidelityart.co.uk](http://www.fidelityart.co.uk)



# “Born in the USA...”

The “one cable does it all” approach of HDMI might seem like simplicity itself – until you look inside that cable. With no fewer than 19 individual conductors, each with critical termination and transmission requirements, it should come as no surprise that not all HDMI cables are created equal.

With wide-bandwidth data, analog signals and even DC all running through the same connection, balancing those conflicting requirements and preventing interference is no simple task. The Blue Heaven HDMI cable uses Nordost’s proprietary Micro Mono-Filament, virtual air dielectric technology to create a precision wound cable with exceptional geometrical accuracy and consistency, electrical and mechanical characteristics.

**Designed, manufactured and hand-terminated in the USA,** the cable is double shielded and uses gold-plated, fully shielded, metal jacketed connectors to guarantee signal quality and connection integrity. This combination of superior technology and parts quality with painstaking attention to detail is what makes the difference. The result is clearly superior performance

that easily exceeds the HDMI standard and has gained the demanding DPL Seal Of Approval.

You want the best picture, the best sound and you need complete reliability. You want it all in one cable – a fit and forget solution. Well, now you can have it, because we have sweated the details. Nordost’s Blue Heaven isn’t like other HDMI cables – that is why it sets the gold-standard for audio and AV performance.

**Nordost Blue Heaven HDMI –  
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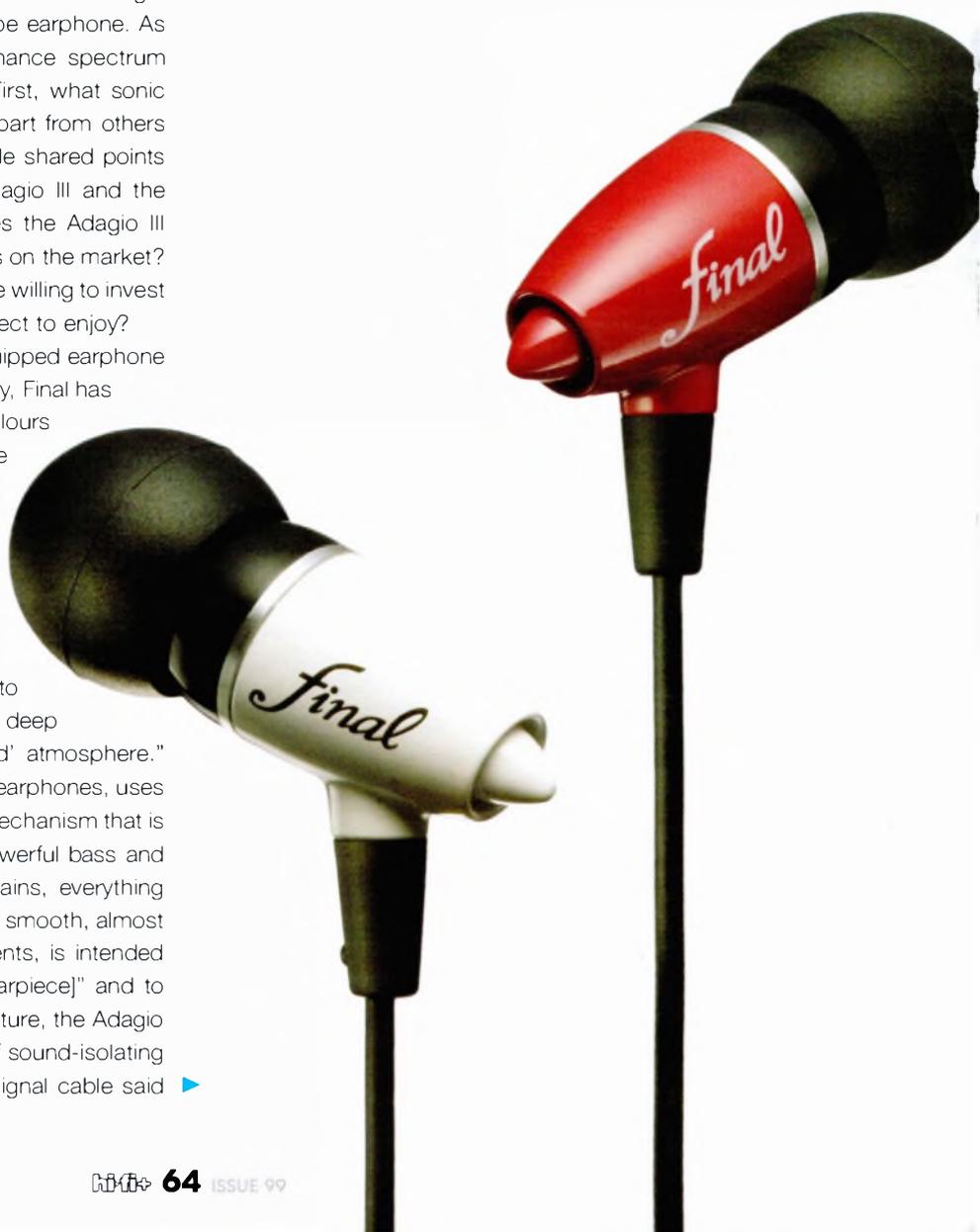
# Final Audio Design Adagio III and FI-BA-SS Earphones

By Chris Martens

**F**inal Audio Design is a Japanese firm that has been creating high-end audio products since 1974, and has—for the past two decades—been actively working to produce and perfect very high-performance earphones. For this review, we will look primarily at one of Final's more affordable offerings: namely, the £69.99 Adagio III earphone. But, we will also briefly explore a model from the upper end of the Final range: the £1,000 FI-BA-SS balanced armature-type earphone. As we look at both ends of the price/performance spectrum we will focus on a number of questions. First, what sonic characteristics set Final Audio earphones apart from others on the market? Second, are there identifiable shared points of performance between the affordable Adagio III and the premium-priced FI-BA-SS? Third, how does the Adagio III fare in comparison to like-priced competitors on the market? Finally, what kinds of sonic benefits can those willing to invest in top-tier models such as the FI-BA-SS expect to enjoy?

Final's Adagio III is a dynamic driver-equipped earphone featuring vented earpiece enclosures. Cleverly, Final has molded the Adagio III's earpieces in two colours of ABS material—red for the right earpiece and white for the left. This channel-identification solution is so simple and effective that I couldn't help but wonder why more manufacturers haven't used it before now. In keeping with a growing trend, the Adagio IIIs use compact, relatively small-diameter 8mm dynamic drivers said to provide "a powerfully vibrant sound, delivering deep spatial expression and a vibrant 'live sound' atmosphere." Moreover, the Adagio III, like many of Final's earphones, uses a so-called Balanced Air Movement (BAM) mechanism that is claimed to help the earphones produce "powerful bass and deep 3D spatial expression." As Final explains, everything about the earpiece enclosure design, from its smooth, almost teardrop-like shape to its rear-firing BAM vents, is intended to "optimize highly efficient airflow in the [earpiece]" and to prevent "sound leakage." Completing the picture, the Adagio IIIs come with three pairs (size S, M, and L) of sound-isolating rubber ear tips and come fitted an elastic signal cable said

*"Cleverly, Final has molded the Adagio III's earpieces in two colours of ABS material – red for the right earpiece and white for the left."*



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▶ to eliminate “touch noise.” While the Adagio III is modestly priced, it is plain to see that some careful thought has gone into its design—thought that, as you will learn in a moment, pays significant sonic dividends.

From the outset, I was struck by how open, transparent, lively, and generally well balanced the Adagio IIIs sounded—especially so in light of their moderate price. Candidly, many earphones in this price range are afflicted with regrettable sonic compromises. It is not unusual to find models, for example, that produce way too much bass (a popular but ultimately fatiguing colouration) or that offer dramatically elevated upper mids and highs (an aberration that, I suppose, is meant to suggest the earphones are “detailed”). Happily, the Adagio III suffers from none of these maladies, at least not to any significant extent, and thus sounds far more sophisticated and refined than it has any right to for the price.

The Adagio III’s essential sonic character hinges on a revealing and generally smooth mid-band response curve (where the heart of most music resides). After a few hours of run-in time, bass also proves to be nicely fleshed out, but never loose, bombastic, or overblown. Instead, the Adagio III’s low-end response sounds pleasingly taut and punchy with surprisingly deep extension when the musical material so warrants. Highs are reasonably extended with much better than average clarity for the price class, but with a trace of top-end roll-off (at least as compared to true, premium-priced top-tier earphones). My one critique is that the Adagio IIIs can sound a little too energetic on certain hard-edged midrange transients. Still, the Adagio IIIs sound so good that one is instinctively tempted to judge them using criteria normally reserved for much more costly ‘phones. Relative to their like-priced competitors, however, the Adagio III’s are unequivocal slam-dunk winners—easily among the finest, if not the finest, affordable earphones I’ve heard to date.

To experience the Adagio III’s virtues in play, let me suggest a track such as “Split Window” from bluegrass/jazz bassist Viktor Krauss’ album *Far From Enough* [Nonesuch CD]. Not only does this track feature the deep and richly textured sonorities of Krauss’ acoustic bass, but it also features a panoply of evocative midrange and treble instruments, with delicate treble “atmospheric” touches reminiscent of those one might hear on recordings from the eclectic guitarist Bill Frisell. When reproducing this track, many affordable earphones provide a workable rendition of the basic structure of the music, but with many of the subtle textural details planed off—as if the listener were hearing the music through a pair of wet socks. But with the Adagio III, most of those delicious subliminal subtleties are present and accounted for. In short, if you know how costly upper-



tier earphones are supposed to sound, you’ll be pleasantly surprised to see how close the Adagio III can get to that lofty level of performance. While true top-tier models can do a few things the Adagio IIIs cannot, the fact is that these ‘phones give you a generous taste of upper level performance at a very sensible price.

In sharp contrast to the Adagio III (a product built with an eye toward delivering high levels of performance for not too much money), Final’s FI-BA-SS is a handmade, flagship product plainly put forward as a cost-no-object design. Accordingly, the FI-BA-SS sports a custom designed balanced armature-type driver created expressly for this model. Where some earphone designers equip top models with multiple sets of balanced armature drivers (sometimes grouped as miniature sets of woofers, mid-band drivers, and tweeters), the Final Audio Design team has—in the interest of superior top-to-bottom coherency—instead opted for a design featuring one single, full-range balanced armature driver. By eliminating crossover networks and unnecessary complexity, so the theory goes, sonic purity is maximised. Final promises the FI-BA-SS, unlike some competing designs, ▶

► is fully able “to produce deep bass without the distortion and muddiness normally reproduced by [other, single-driver] BA unit earphones.”

Like the Adagio III, the FI-BA-SS uses the firm's signature Balanced Air Movement (BAM) earpiece enclosure technology. Accordingly, the FI-BA-SS features a “highly-rigid stainless steel [earpiece] housing” equipped with rear firing “BAM vents”. Like its lower-priced sibling, the Adagio III, the FI-BA-SS comes with three sets of rubber ear tips and is fitted with a noise suppressing elastic signal cable. As befits its status as a flagship model, however, the FI-BA-SS also comes with a semi-hard-shell case large enough to accommodate the earphones plus a portable digital music player.

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Adagio III

**Type:** Dynamic driver-equipped earphone.

**Driver complement:** 8mm dynamic driver in Balanced Air Movement (BAM) earpiece/enclosure.

**Maximum SPL:** 100dB

**Impedance:** 16 Ohms

**Frequency response:** Not specified.

**Weight:** 10g

**Price:** £69.99

### FI-BA-SS

**Type:** Balanced armature driver-equipped earphone

**Driver complement:** Custom-made balanced armature-type driver in vented stainless steel earpiece/enclosure.

**Maximum SPL:** 112dB

**Impedance:** 16 Ohms

**Frequency response:** Not specified.

**Weight:** 20g

**Price:** £1,000

**Manufacturer:** Final Audio Design Co., Ltd.

2-7-5 Kamiosaki, Shinagawa, Tokyo 141-0021, Japan

**Tel:** 81 3 6459 3122

**URL:** [www.final-audio-design.com](http://www.final-audio-design.com)

**Distributor:** KS Distributor

**URL:** [www.ksdistribution.co.uk](http://www.ksdistribution.co.uk)

**Dealer:** HiFiHeadphones

**Tel:** 01903 768910

**URL:** [www.hifiheadphones.com](http://www.hifiheadphones.com)

How does the FI-BA-SS sound? These remarkable earphones are so sophisticated that I am concerned a capsule description of their sonic character might not do them justice. Nevertheless, let me make an attempt. In shorthand terms, the FI-BA-SS offers everything we liked about its inexpensive little brother, but with even greater extension at both frequency extremes (especially in the treble range) and with its imaginary “refinement,” “resolution,” and “sophistication” knobs turned up to 15. If the Adagio III earphone is a gifted child, then the FI-BA-SS is the stunningly accomplished adult it might grow up to be—an earphone that is at once suave and very, very revealing.

It is instructive to see how the FI-BA-SS performs on the Viktor Krauss track mentioned above, as compared to the Adagio III. Where the Adagio III captured many of the delicate textural subtleties of the track, the FI-BA-SS captures absolutely all of them (or as near as makes no difference) and does so with ultra-fine-grained resolution. The Adagio III sounds quite good in its own right, but with the FI-BA-SS one quickly finds that many sonic “veils” have suddenly been lifted. Like the Adagio IIIs, the FI-BA-SS can sound slightly too energetic on hard-edged midrange transients, though I suspect extended run-in might mitigate (or even eliminate) this minor drawback. More importantly, the FI-BA-SS offers a truly impressive degree of you-are-there clarity, plus an uncanny quality of effortless, top-to-bottom coherency. In fact, I suspect Final's flagship ‘phones may well be the class leaders in terms of delivering cut-from-whole-cloth sonic integrity. Then, add in the FI-BA-SS' superior frequency extension and surprisingly robust dynamics and you've got a top-tier contender that is formidable indeed.

To sum up, we consider Final Audio's Adagio III one of the best moderately-priced earphones we've yet found—a no-brainer recommendation at their price point. The much more costly FI-BA-SSs are, as you would expect, superior earphones in every way (though you can certainly hear FI-BA-SS “design DNA” in the Adagio III). The Adagio III gives you a view of the sonic mountaintop at moderate cost, while the FI-BA-SS actually resides at the mountaintop, inviting comparison with all comers. +



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# Sennheiser HD700 headphones

*By Alan Sircom*

**T**he Sennheiser HD800 is one of the best headphones money can buy, but it's not without its detractors. It's not cheap, is demanding of headphone amplifier (Sennheiser has recently re-entered the headphone amplifier game as a result) and has so much HF detail in tow, some find it too much of a good thing. The HD700 is the response.

There is a strong family resemblance, both physically and sonically. In essence, the HD700 is an example of both 'trickle up' and 'trickle down' technological development, mixing up aspects found across the home Sennheiser range. So the basic design of the 700 takes much of the band and ear cup development produced for the 800 and makes it a little less flexible, and replaces a lot of the metal with plastic; making a lighter feeling, cheaper headphone with almost no sacrifices to the comfort gods. It also uses a smaller diaphragm than the 800, something closer to the HD650 in construction.

It still features a pair of detachable, replaceable cloth-wrapped cables, joined in a plastic Y-piece at about the third shirt-button. Unlike the screw-in terminals at the ear-cups of

the HD800, these are recessed mini-jacks, but ones that are extremely hard to remove.

The performance of the HD700 sits midway between the company's evergreen HD600 or HD650 and top HD800, albeit with a slight accent toward the HD800. It has a warmer overall presentation than the HD800 and a far less laid back and none of the 'plummy' bass found in the HD650. Depending on your viewpoint, this either represents the best of both worlds; a 'better' stepping stone that gets you from 'good' to 'best', or a headphone that falls between two particularly well-respected stools. Certainly, in the clarity and tonal balance stakes, it falls smack in between the two legendary designs. ▶



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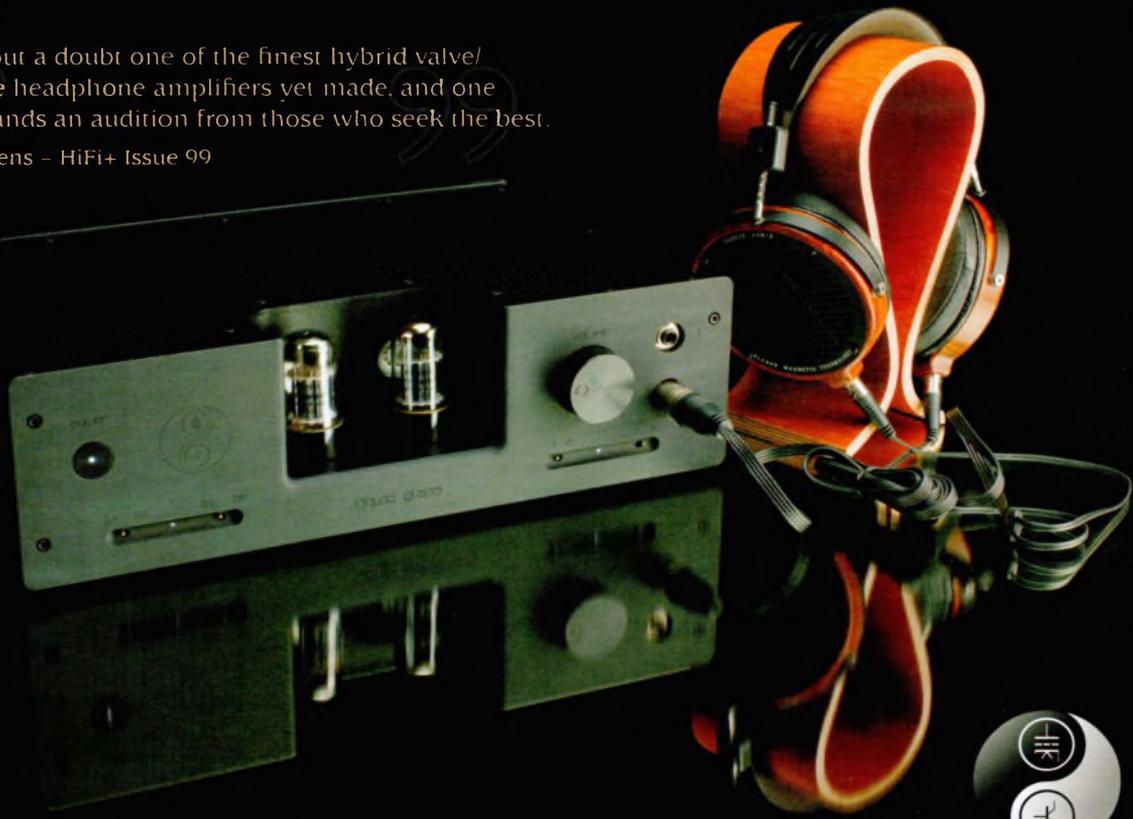
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It is without a doubt one of the finest hybrid valve/solid-state headphone amplifiers yet made, and one that demands an audition from those who seek the best.

Chris Martens – HiFi+ Issue 99



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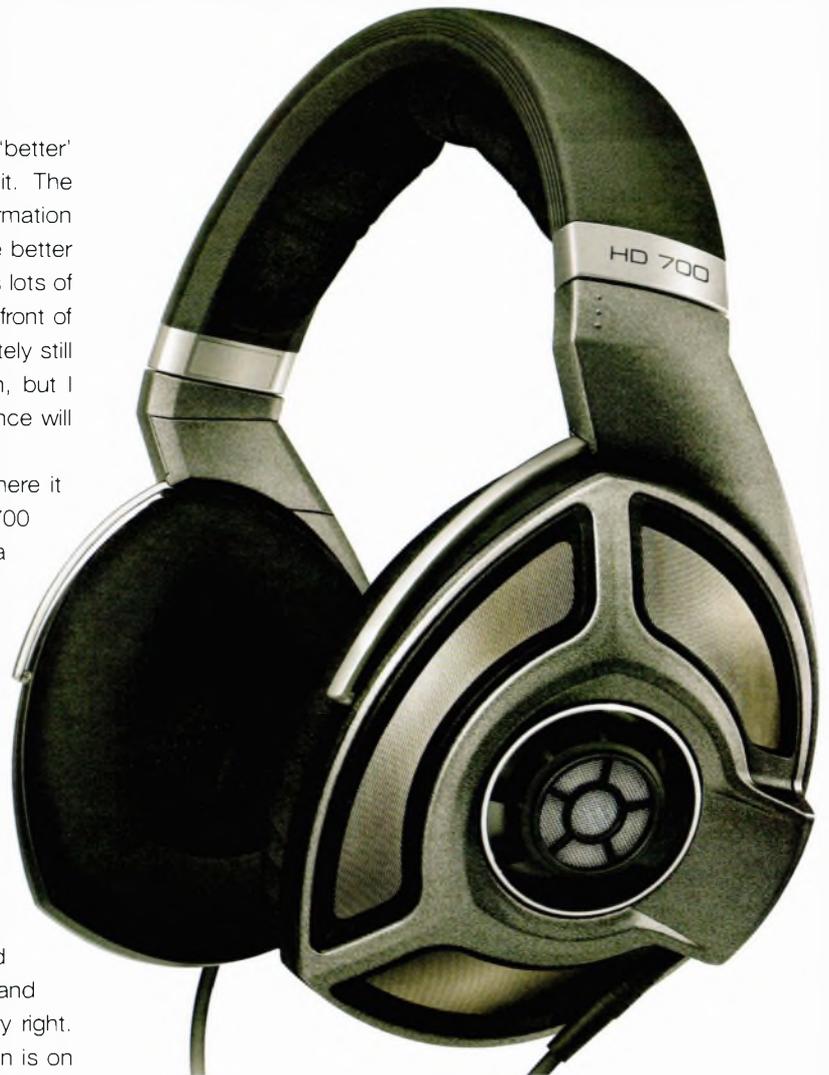
► For my part, I felt the HD700 takes the whole 'better' part of the Sennheiser continuum and runs with it. The HD700 backs away from the sheer amounts of information supplied by the HD800, and for many will sound the better for that. Treble in particular is kept in check; it still has lots of detail – and sounds detailed – but not in the stark 'in front of the desk' way of the HD800. For the record, I ultimately still prefer the HD800's unalloyed, analytical presentation, but I can see why this more comfortable listening experience will gain a good many supporters.

It's not tonally neutral, though. To the extent where it doesn't appear neutrality was a stated aim of the HD700 design team. In a way, this is akin to the 'more like a piano than a piano' sound of something like a LS3/5a loudspeaker, and it's little wonder the HD700 is causing a stir. In most cases, this characterful nature will come over as the perfect mix of HD800 insight without HD800 brightness.

A shift away from neutrality is absolutely fine if it doesn't mean you end up editorialising your music collection. I've been through practically every musical genre I could find in order to fox the headphones and I failed. If it makes Tragic Songs of Life by the Louvin Brothers sound even more redemptive, Bach's Goldberg Variations sound more cerebral, Mastodon sound more graunchy and Skrillex sound just more odd, something's going very right. The nearest the HD700 gets to letting its guard down is on the latter; playing dubstep with its over-engineered überbass can sometimes be more about the midrange than the deep, OTT bottom end. This is more about bass refinement and precision than intensity.

The big difference between this and the HD800 is it lacks the ability to play clean at stupidly loud levels with the right headphone amplifier. Having experienced precisely how people use the HD800 in the flesh, this might not be a bad thing – the temptation to drive the HD800 past safe listening levels is almost irresistible. We all do it. The HD700 has a lower ceiling and consequently, you play at lower typical volumes than the HD800.

I admit some trepidation here. If the HD800 is too rich for some people's blood, then the worry was the HD700 could end up being its anaemic little brother. In fact, it's as much a destination in its own right, rather than a stop-off on the journey. The combination of its more enticing presentation, a treble that goes for insight over analysis and a less demanding headphone amp load makes the HD700 a true force to be reckoned with in the headphone world. Highly recommended! +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Circumaural, dynamic, open headphones

**Frequency Response:** 15Hz-40kHz (-3dB)

**Nominal impedance:** 150 ohms

**Maximum SPL (105dB @ 1kHz, 1Vrms)**

**THD:** ≤ 0.03 % (1kHz, 1Vrms)

**Plug type:** 6.3mm (1/4") stereo on 3m silver-plated OFC symmetrical detachable cable

**Weight (w/o cable):** 270g

**Price:** £600

**Manufactured by:** Sennheiser

**URL:** [www.sennheiser.com](http://www.sennheiser.com)

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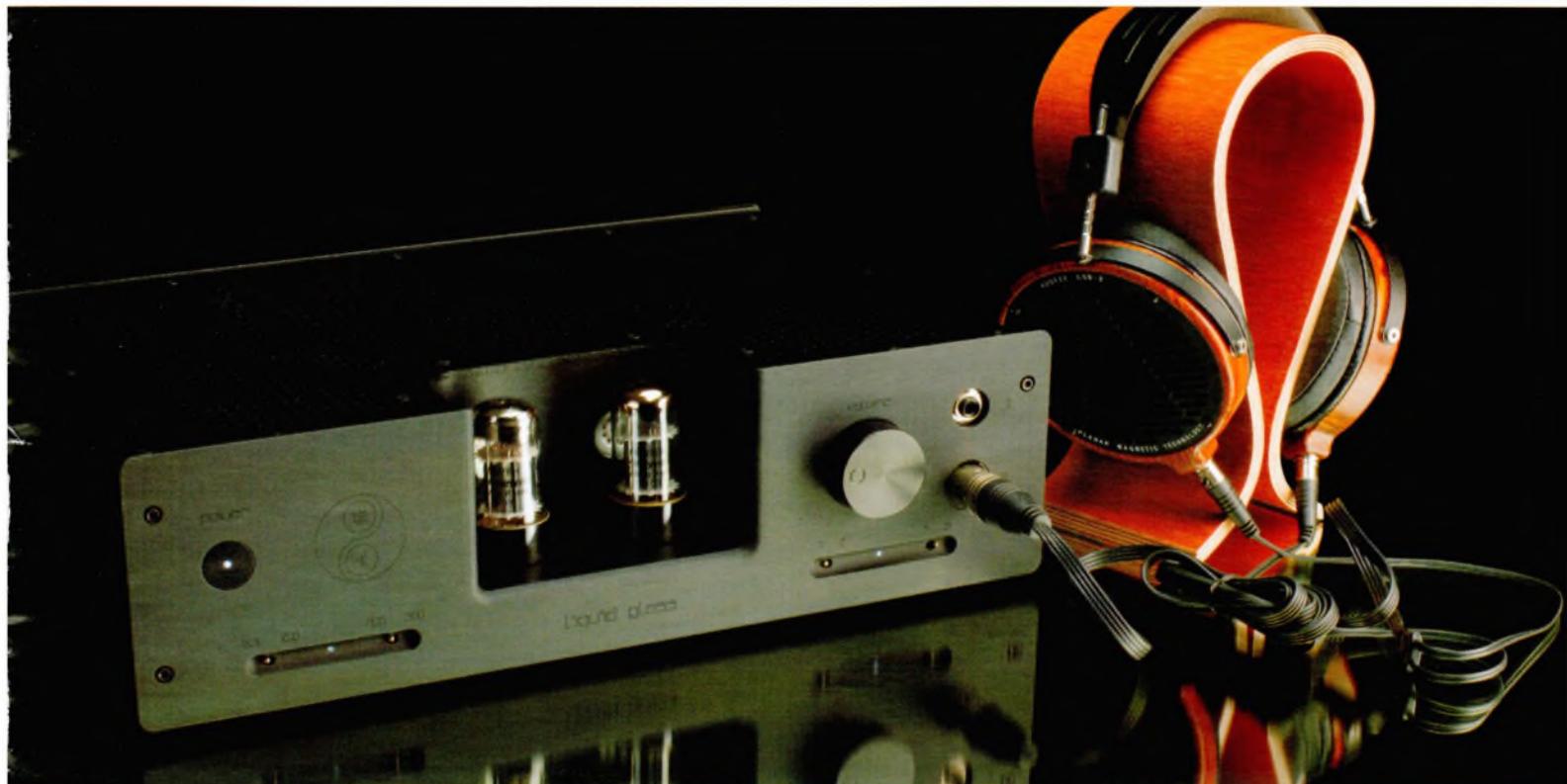
# Cavalli Audio Liquid Glass Hybrid Valve/Solid-State Headphone Amplifier/Preamplifier

By Chris Martens

**C**avalli Audio is a USA-based manufacturer of world-class headphone amplifiers. They are 'bespoke' products, since the amps typically allow at least some degree of customisation to meet buyers' requirements. But the underlying qualities that typify all Cavalli designs involve company founder Dr. Alex Cavalli's commitment to sound quality and to the sort of rigorous and conservative engineering that makes for long-term reliability. Where some designers proudly tout 'edge of the envelope designs', Dr. Cavalli rejects the idea of pushing circuit parameters 'to the edge' as ill-advised posturing at best and shoddy engineering at the worst. As Dr. Cavalli once said to *Hi-Fi+*, "if you have to use ultra-exotic parts or stress your circuitry to the limits

to get the performance you need, then you probably do not have an adequate design in the first place."

Cavalli's first two headphone amplifiers, the Liquid Fire, an amplifier geared for use with conventional (that is, dynamic or planar magnetic driver-equipped) headphones, and the Liquid Lightning, geared specifically for use with electrostatic headphones, have both received considerable critical acclaim (some writers consider the Liquid Fire and ▶





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► Liquid Lightning as true, state-of-the-art designs). But now Cavalli's third amplifier, called the Liquid Glass (\$3,500 in the US, or £2,325 in the UK), has entered production.

Before we start, it might be useful to talk about the nature of the sound Cavalli is pursuing. Cavalli Audio, I would say, does its level best to pursue tonal neutrality, high levels of resolution, and extreme faithfulness to the incoming audio signal. But unlike some competing accuracy-seeking amps, which can at times sound sterile and antiseptic, Cavalli amplifiers strive to capture the unforced, "liquid" character of live music itself, which is why Dr. Cavalli often uses the word "Liquid" in his amplifier names.

Cavalli's Liquid Glass amplifier, however, offers a fresh take on the case for a 'neutrality-über-alles' sound, in that it is a hybrid valve/solid-state amplifier created specifically for those known as 'tube rollers' (that is, enthusiasts who experiment with various valve substitutions in search of ever higher levels of sound quality). As Cavalli says, the

Liquid Glass "is especially designed to reflect exactly what the tube [valve] does and sounds like." Accordingly, the Liquid Glass provides a tube-powered front-end section backed by a high-input-impedance (and thus easy-to-drive), ultra high-resolution, ultra-low-noise solid-state output buffer section. In the interest of even greater sonic purity, Cavalli notes that, "there is intentionally no global negative feedback, which is normally used [in other manufacturer's designs] to reduce THD and increase bandwidth." But, as the amplifier's specifications demonstrate, the Liquid Glass delivers exemplary bandwidth and low distortion, even without global negative feedback.

Moreover, the tube section is extremely versatile, providing pairs of both octal (that is, eight-pin) and nonal (that is, nine-pin) valve sockets, with separate user selectable controls for setting valve heater and plate voltages. For my tests I tried sets of 6SN7, 6GU7, 12AU7, CV181, 8416, and 6922 valves, but there are many more types of valves the Liquid Glass can support (see Technical Specifications, below, for a complete list). As a general rule, if a desired valve type fits the Cavalli's valve sockets (and, Dr. Cavalli advises, "conforms to either 6SN7 or 12AU7 pin-out arrangements..."), then the valve can be made to work in the Liquid Glass. The point is that users can choose from amongst hundreds of types and brands of valves, each offering their own distinctive take on the sonic truth.

Now many amplifiers that claim to pursue sonic truth take what might, tongue-in-cheek, be called the Highlander approach to high-end audio, as if amplifiers were fiercely declaring, "In the end there can be only one (true sound, that is)..." In contrast, Cavalli's Liquid Glass opens the door to the ►

▶ possibility that while the sound of live music may be a constant there can be many viable paths toward realizing that ideal sound as perceived by critical listeners of varying listening habits, musical tastes, and so forth.

*Hi-Fi+* reviews are, of course, supposed to give you some idea of how the product under review actually sounds, which for obvious reasons becomes a tricky proposition with the Liquid Glass. Let me start by saying that the Glass' solid-state, unity gain buffer stage is exceedingly quiet, offers an exceptional degree of tonal neutrality, excellent transient speed, and pleasing freedom from edge or glare. Importantly, the buffer stage can also drive most any headphone (even very power hungry models), meaning that the buffer stage does virtually all of the heavy lifting in terms of actual power output. As a result, you hear each valve set under nearly ideal circumstances, the valves providing voltage amplification as best they can, while taking responsibility only for powering the Liquid Glass' easy-to-drive buffer stage.

After considerable comparison listening I identified a handful of valve sets that, for me, yielded the most accurate and neutral presentation overall. My preferences included a Cavalli-supplied set of Electro Harmonix 6SN7s (the default valves that ship with each Liquid Glass), a pair of NOS (new old stock) Sylvania 6SN7s, and a gorgeous set of Shuguang 50 Years Treasure CV181 valves. These were my preferences, but yours might well vary. The beauty of the Liquid Glass is that it invites (and enables) listeners to do their own research and then to choose valves that best fit their own tastes and perceptions of the musical ideal.

For me, the Liquid Glass + 6SN7 pairing gave a great combination of gain, relatively low noise, excellent detail and definition, and a certain desirable quality of top-to-bottom consistency and evenness of timbre that not many other valve sets could match. The Electro Harmonix 6SN7 valves gave a powerful, clean-edged presentation that tended to emphasize the leading edges of transient sounds just a hair (much as certain high-end solid-state amplifiers tend to do). By comparison, the Sylvania offered slightly less gain than their Electro Harmonix counterparts, with plenty of detail but somewhat less emphasis on transient edges for a sound that was a bit softer, rounder, and more full-bodied than the Electro Harmonix presentation.

By comparison, the Shuguang CV181s offered many of the virtues of the 6SN7 valves, but with even higher gain, a still quite low noise floor, and a certain quality of expansiveness and spaciousness that made the most of low-level reverberant details in the music. The result was a headphone listening experience that, while not quite loudspeaker-like in its presentation,

*“In the end, the Liquid Glass is all about giving listeners sonic options. During my listening tests, I tried six valve types and the honest truth is that, through the Liquid Glass each had sonic benefits to offer, meaning there really was no sonically ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ choice.”*

nevertheless pulled the music outside of the listener's head, allowing the music to fill a giant acoustic space.

In the end, the Liquid Glass is all about giving listeners sonic options. During my listening tests I tried the six valve types cited above and the honest truth is that, through the Liquid Glass, each had certain distinctive sonic benefits to offer, meaning there really was no sonically 'right' or 'wrong' choice. Like a fair and impartial judge, the amp effortlessly revealed different aspects of the music that one valve type (or brand) might handle better than another. This ability to look honestly and deeply into the mysteries of musical textures, timbres, transient sounds, and dynamics is what makes the Liquid Glass so special and, frankly, so endlessly entertaining.

Let me provide some illustrations to show how the sound of the Liquid Glass played out on real world music. One track I found useful as a bellwether piece of music for purposes of evaluating subtle textures and low-level details was singer Anne Bisson's inventive cover of Pink Floyd's 'Us and Them', from Bisson's *Portraits and Perfumes* [Fidelio CD]. This very well-recorded track can sound good to very good through many different amplifiers, but it also provides extremely delicate textural and transient details that can, through truly great amplifiers, give the track a striking, otherworldly, 'Alice-through-the-looking-glass'-like presentation that inexorably draws you into an alternate sonic reality.

That alternate reality might best be described as Anne-Bisson-channeling-Edith-Piaf-channeling-Roger-Waters as captured in an incredibly intimate French-Canadian jazz club-like setting. Every small instrumental texture and point of emphasis is heard in almost shocking clarity and detail, as are even the most delicate of inflections from Bisson's voice. The result, through the Liquid Glass, is a mesmerising presentation that has a nearly dreamlike quality. On an intellectual level, you realise you are hearing more intimate levels of detail than you could or would hear from most live musical events. But on an emotional level, the sound is so sumptuous, so lavish, and so beautiful that ▶

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## ► TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Hybrid Valve/Solid-State Headphone Amplifier/Preamplifier.

**Valve Complement:**

- **8-Pin valves:** 6SN7, 12SN7, VT231, CV1986, CV1988, B65, B63, ECC32, and CV181.
- **9-Pin valves:** 12AU7, ECC82, 5963, 6680, 5814, 12AT7, ECC81, 6DJ8, ECC88, 8416, 6H30, 6189, 6N1EB, 6H23EB, 7730, ECC802, 6CG7, 12BH7, 6FQ7, and 6GU7.

**Valve heater voltages:** 6.3V (2A) or 12.6V (1A), switch selectable.

**Valve plate (or B+) voltages:** 200V or 300V (at maximum of 40mA for both valves), switch selectable.

**Inputs:** Two single-ended stereo (RCA)

**Outputs:** One variable-level stereo preamp output (RCA), one fixed line-level stereo output serving as an output loop for Input 1 (RCA), two headphone outputs (one via 1/4-inch TRS jack, one via 4-pin XLR-type connector). Output is switch selectable between Preamp and Headphone Amp modes.

**Gain:** Varies with valve type (gain =  $\frac{1}{2}$  the  $\mu$  of the triodes in use).

**Power output:** Up to 6Wpc @ 50 Ohms

**Frequency response:** +/-0.1dB, 5Hz – 60kHz; +0/-1dB, 3.3Hz – 190kHz; +0/-3dB 3.3Hz – 370kHz.

**Distortion + Noise @ 1kHz:** 0.035%

THD+Noise @ 1Vrms output; 0.1% @ 2.5Vrms output; 0.5% at 12.75Vrms

**Faceplate:** Matte silver or "stealth" black.

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 11.75 x 40 x 27cm

**Weight:** 10kg

**Price:** £2,325

**Manufactured by:** Cavalli Audio

**Tel:** +01 512 413 8765

**URL:** [www.cavalliaudio.com](http://www.cavalliaudio.com)

you may set considerations of 'realism' aside for the moment to simply savour the experience for what it is. At its best, the Liquid Glass can show you beautiful things in recorded music you may never have experienced before and to hear them is to want to hear more.

Another track that shows off the Liquid Glass' capabilities is 'Sarasvati', which is the first movement of Robert Paterson's nine-part composition *The Book of Goddesses* [American Modern Recordings CD]. This piece was written for the Maya trio, which consists of flute, harp, and percussion—instruments captured, in the AMR recording, in a mid-sized and highly reverberant acoustic space. Sarasvati is the Hindu goddess of knowledge and for this reason the movement is given a distinct Indian feel, with the harp playing lines reminiscent of those that might be produced by traditional Indian stringed instruments such as the veena. In turn, the trio's percussionist primarily plays an expressive Indian clay pot drum called a ghatam. Two aspects of the performance caught my attention. First, I was struck by the incredible purity of timbre the Liquid Glass affords—a quality that listeners can of course fine-tune and enhance to taste through experimentation with various valve sets. Second, I was impressed by the amp's clear, surefooted retrieval of reverberant information. The Liquid Glass conveyed layer upon layer of low-level details, in the process vividly conveying the acoustic characteristics of the recording venue. What is more, the amp's soundstaging was likewise special; rather than leaving music trapped inside the listener's head, the Liquid Glass cast exceptionally wide, well-detailed sound fields replete with wonderfully precise lateral imaging cues.

I consider the Liquid Glass an exceptional headphone amplifier, though one that may not be for everyone. Listeners who require reassurance that there is only one possible 'right' sound may find Cavalli's Liquid Glass too flexible for its own good. It is, after all, a terrifically open-minded product, which offers as many uniquely beautiful sonic 'realities; as there are valve sets to audition. But, for listeners who value the musical quest as much as the ultimate destination, the Liquid Glass stands as an open invitation to explore and to savour. It is without a doubt one of the finest hybrid headphone amplifiers yet made, and one that demands an audition from those who seek the best. +

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# record reviews

## How To Read Them

The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

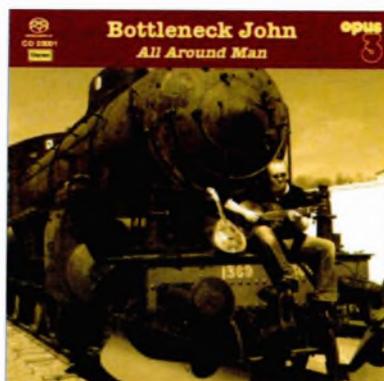
*This issue's featured reviewers are:*

**DD** – Dennis D Davis

**AS** – Alan Sircom

**PT** – Pete Trewin

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	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		45 RPM
	Multi-Channel		



### Bottleneck John

All Around Man

Opus 3



Bottleneck John (real name, Johan Eliasson) is the real deal. He plays a mean bottleneck on a diverse range of vintage (and some modern) instruments. He also has a fine, big voice for the blues (somewhere between an edgier Big Bill Broonzy and a softer Howlin' Wolf – cor!).

This is very much an all-round labour of love. Eliasson was drawn to the Opus 3 label after hearing the fine work done on an early Eric Bibb album, Opus 3 love making recordings like this, of mostly acoustic instruments in an appropriate environment with no processing or overdubs, and the SACD (and the accompanying booklet) make it an album any blues enthusiast should own. From an audiophile perspective, the whole thing is pant-wettingly good too; this is like you moved your living room into the venue and the musicians are right there in the TARDIS with you. If you want to show off what a good hi-fi is capable of, this is the album to buy.

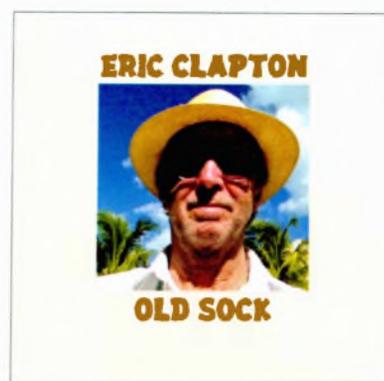
Eleven of the 14 tracks are covers, some classics ('How Long, How Long Blues', 'Come On In My Kitchen'), some modern classics (Tom Waits' 'Jesus Gonna Be Here') but all well chosen and Eliasson's own compositions fit well in here.

Highly recommended, from both a blues and an audio standing. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



### Eric Clapton

Old Sock

Bushbranch/Surfdog



This album, Clapton's 20th studio cut and his first in three years isn't that bad, despite the excoriating press it has received. It's him and a bunch of musician friends (such as JJ Cale and Steve Winwood, of course, but also Taj Mahal, Chaka Khan and Macca) turning out slick covers of jazz and blues standards (as well as two new compositions) that influenced his career.

As with any recent output from Slowhand, it's in low gear. Everything is very polished, nice, well-recorded and going through the motions. For the most part though, this seems more an album by Clapton, for Clapton. Those who have remained true believers over the years will still buy it of course, but on most of the tracks, he's so by the numbers that it sounds almost like someone who studied the 'How to play like Eric Clapton' Hot Licks DVD is doing his playing for him. It's not lazy musicianship; he's just in a very comfortable place. To be perfectly fair, I don't think even Clapton made this album with a mind to his career path. This is someone in their late 60s in distinctly retrospective mode.

Well recorded yes, but with a couple of notable exceptions, this is the musical equivalent of a nice afternoon nap. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



### Gary Clark Jr

**Blak and Blu**

Warner



Gary Clark Jr is on a one-man mission to bring the blues to more than just an audience of white middle-class fiftysomethings. Which means *Blak and Blu* pulls together a number of diverse styles, including funk, house, pop and urban. Yes, you get solid delta blues on 'Next Door Neighbour Blues', but you also get a more poppy take on the genre on the heavily produced 'Ain't Messin' Around', smooth almost urban soul funk of the title track and nu-doo-wop on 'Please Come Home'. Experimentation, or genre hopping? Everything is cut hot, but some of the more raw blues-rock tracks have this lush Black Keys raw edge to them, otherwise it's a wall of over-production.

The album – made up of final remixes of his *Bright Lights* EP, new material and a handy homage to Hendrix – shows Clark has considerable skills as a singer and especially as a guitarist. What he needs is a manager, or possibly a curator; someone to hold his need to diversify in check and cut a consistent, good album.

Gary Clark Jr has had the most hyped hype it's possible to hype, with none other than President Obama describing him as 'the future'. But Clark needs to live up to that hype by not just showing off how many styles he can throw at one album. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



### Martin Harley

**Mojo Fix**

60/20 Records

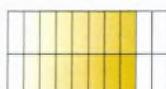


Normally with his UK-based trio, Martin Harley's new album *Mojo Fix* sees the man recording in Texas under the watchful faders of Bob Parr (best known for his work with the Brian Seltzer Orchestra). He's not abandoned the acoustic trio; this is a solo project of works that don't quite fit the immediacy of a trio setting.

A wry blend of core blues (Harley plays slide guitar, lap-style, with a healthy dose of Ry Cooder influences) and more approachable and eclectic ballad-driven rock, pop and folk, this makes for wider appeal and slicker production values than the acoustic driven work performed with the trio. This is an album of assorted ideas, expanded notes and random musical musings from Harley, and yet it stays clear of sounding like someone in search of a musical style. Instead, it's more like someone with a lot of musical mojo, and spreading it around.

As a consequence, finding a stand-out track is difficult, because each person will like at least two or three different tracks out of the ten on offer. My personal faves are 'Cardboard King' and 'Treading Water' (I think he's strongest in ballad mode here), but others prefer the rocky 'Working for the Man' and the bluesy title track. End result – there's something for everyone here. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



### The Strokes

**Comedown Machine**

RCA

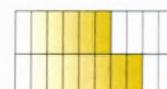


A dozen years after the remarkable *This It*, *Comedown Machine* marks a major direction shift for The Strokes. It's a far more poppy, more 1980s sound than before. This massively grates with those who will always compare the band's output (unfavourably) against its first days, but this is a grower. In a very real sense – like all good indie music, the surface appreciation of the first play is very different from the more considered response having played the album through two or three times.

The opener 'Tap Out' is a perfect example of this change. It's an outstanding pop song, but for someone wanting to hear a variation on the theme of 'Last Nite' this has something closer to the drum and guitar parts from 'Doctor Beat' from Miami Sound Machine, but another way of looking at it is those first four tracks (including the two singles 'All The Time' and 'One Way Trigger') are all classics, and I'd put at least three of the remaining eight on the right side of excellent.

OK, so the Strokes are more riding the 1980s wave than making waves, but beneath the surface they aren't treading water anymore. And no-one around cuts a more perfect three-minute poppy rock song. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC

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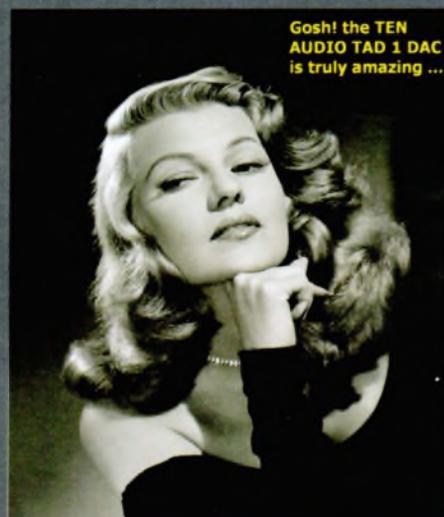
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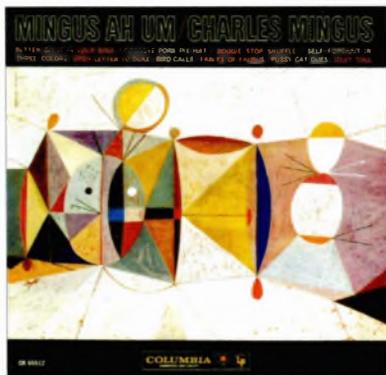
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**Charles Mingus**

45 RPM 180g

**Mingus Ah Um**

Columbia/ORG CS 8171/ORG 130

Ah . . . this one's been done before (I can hear you thinking). One Mingus' most celebrated recordings for both music and sound, it has always been in circulation by Columbia. This time around, it's ORG entering a tightly packed marathon for the best sounding *Ah Um* prize. Mingus' Atlantic, Columbia and Impulse sides are virtually all 10 for 10 successes on the musical scale, but if a case can be made for 11, this would be in the running. If my house were burning down and I had to choose between *Kind of Blue*, *Take Five* and *Ah Um*, I wouldn't hesitate for a moment—the Mingus would survive the conflagration.

The septet is filled with Mingus stalwarts who sound like they were born playing Mingus music and the album is filled with classics. So it really boils down to whether the sound of this new package is worth the not insignificant price. Compared to the Classic versions, this one does a better job with accurate timbre. The original six-eye comes off sounding a bit muffled compared to this new issue, which has greater extension and a much deeper soundstage. Bernie Grundman mastered this release and the improvements in his mastering studio are obvious on this outstanding new release. **DD**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Charley Patton**

33 RPM 180g

**Complete Recorded Works Volume 1**

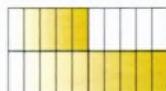
**Works Volume 1**

Third Man Records TMR 154

Who would have expected to see a new vinyl release of Charley Patton sides on audiophile vinyl in 2013? Document Records is a UK based label that has a deep catalog of CDs and downloads of vintage jazz and blues music, as well as a fascinating collection of posters. They have now jumped into the vinyl world by teaming up with Jack White's (of The White Stripes) Nashville record label Third Man Records. This is Volume 1 of a contemplated series of 4 LPs.

Patton is one of the founding fathers of the blues and recorded these sixteen songs in 1929. His total recorded output consists of 68 songs recorded between 1929 and 1934. But it is no exaggeration to say that much of the succeeding history of blues, jazz and rock grew from these early Mississippi Delta sessions. Much of what most of us know of this music comes from Yazoo Records' 4 sides of Patton. Document appears to have become the Yazoo of the twenty first century. Although little information is provided about the manner of restoration, the proof is in the listening and Patton sounds fuller and more vibrant on this LP than ever before. The United Record pressing is beautiful and priced reasonably. This is a no brainer—don't miss it. **DD**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Chuck Mangione**

33 RPM 180g

**The Chuck Mangione Quartet**

Mercury/Speakers Corner SRM 1 631

For me, soft jazz is as grating to my ears as free jazz to some others. So let me say right off that I really like this record, despite the fact that Mangione churned out quite a bit of soft jazz over the years. Mangione attended the Eastman School of Music, recorded three LPs for Riverside, and was a member of the Jazz Messengers. However, he became a crossover celebrity recording rather lightweight music that sold in large numbers, and his song 'Feels So Good' became a staple of smooth jazz radio stations. At the same time, he continued to also record with his jazz quartet, the best version of which included Gerry Niewood, Joel Bartolo and Ron Davis.

But don't let Mangione's funny hats, wild shirts and celebrity get in the way—this is real jazz with only minimalist smoothing. In addition to self-composed tunes, he includes Freddie Hubbard's *Little Sunflower* and Bonfa's *Manha De Carnival*. Multi-instrumentalist Niewood provides excellent turns on soprano sax and flute. The album was remastered by Ryan Smith of Sterling Sound, and the excellent sounding original recording sounds as fresh today as it did in 1971 when the session was taped at the Mercury Sound Studio in New York. **DD**

RECORDING  
MUSIC





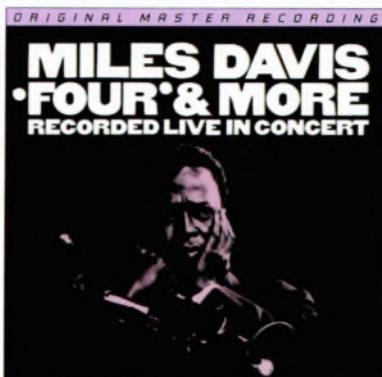
**Jascha Heifetz and Emanuel Bay**

33rpm 180g

**Beethoven Sonatas 8 and 10**  
Impex/Sony IMP 6013/LM-1914

Today's audiophile record market was jump started by a series of classical music series, from Classic Records' RCA Living Stereo, to Speakers Corners' Decca and Mercury releases. Since then, the market has shifted heavily to jazz and pop releases, with new audiophile classical popping up as mere accents. Impex Records has strived to keep classical music in its rotation, and its latest release is an absolute gem.

This 1952 mono recording of two Beethoven violin sonatas was available as a single record or part of a box set. Heifetz was 51 at the time, nearing the end of his active public performance career, yet a 'young' man compared to the later Living Stereo releases best known to audiophiles. Sonata 8 is a pleasant middle period piece, but number 10 dates from 1812, the year of Beethoven's serious illness, and it is a far more complex and interesting piece. While there is considerable competition for performances of these pieces, this lovely performance wins hands down on vinyl. Although the recording itself does not have the extension of RCA's work in the late 50's, it is still a beautiful recording and Kevin Gray and Robert Pincus have restored it to gorgeous sound. **DD**



**Miles Davis**

33rpm 180g

**'Four' & More**  
Columbia/Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-376

Mobile Fidelity is engaged in three super-hero projects – they Bob Dylan, Frank Sinatra and Miles Davis series – and the results to date have been scary good. Four other Davis titles have been released on SACD, and Mobile Fidelity will eventually release them on vinyl, but 'Four' is the first vinyl entry in its Miles Davis catalog. The songs come from a live 1964 concert series at the Lincoln Center in New York. Those tapes were released as two albums, with the more balladic material on *My Funny Valentine* and the hotter tunes on this reissue. Right out of the gate with 'So What', best known from *Kind of Blue*, you know you are getting fast-paced live cuts.

The exhilarating pace works splendidly. Herbie Hancock, George Coleman, Ron Carter and Tony Williams backed Miles in a program of standards, with the young Tony Williams on drums igniting an exciting performance throughout. While this may not have the recorded polish of the best of the Columbia studio albums, the recording has excellent instrumental timbre and dynamic range, lacking only some depth and a bit more left/right/center sound than with the best Columbia recordings. Keith Wunderlich has done a wonderful job of remastering this gem. **DD**



**Zoot Sims**

33rpm 180g

**Down Home**  
Bethlehem/Pure Pleasure BDP 6051

Bethlehem Records was one of a number of small jazz labels in the 1950s that managed to assemble an important catalog of material. After the 1960's the label was sold many times over without causing much of a stir, but in 2010 Verve began to license the catalog making it easier for small independents like Pure Pleasure to cut deals for vinyl rights. Sims played tenor saxophone (and in later years alto and soprano), coming out of the big band tradition, and is best known for his partnership with Al Cohn. Down Home teams Sims with Dave McKenna, George Tucker and Dannie Richmond. This was recorded in 1960 and is a collection of swing era music.

Sims never made a bad album and his consistency is much higher than most, but the playing on this record is particularly infectious. These sessions were recorded by jazz bassist Peter Ind who frequently recorded with Konitz and Bley, worked in record production and recording and authored a book about Tristano. He captured a well-balanced sound, which was nicely re-mastered for Pure Pleasure by Ray Staff at Air Mastering. To round out the package the cover art and photo are standouts. A very nice choice for reissue. **DD**



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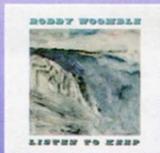
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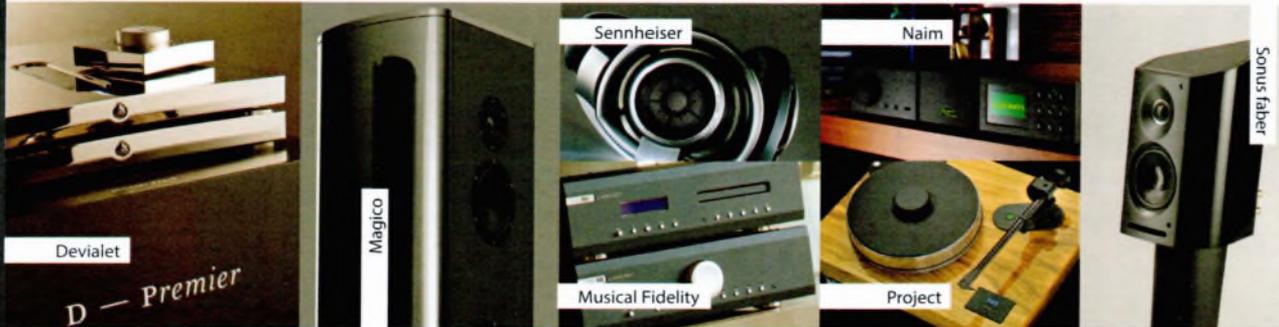
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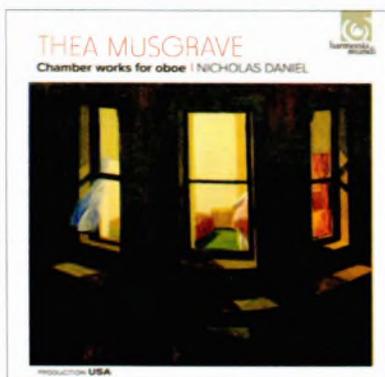
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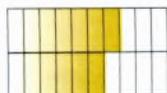
**Thea Musgrave**  
**Chamber Works for Oboe,**  
**Nicholas Daniel – Oboe**  
**Huw Watkins – Piano**  
 Harmonia Mundi: HMU907568

Thea Musgrave is a Scottish-born composer and conductor. She is known for pushing boundaries, and the drama that she like to incorporate within her music has led to compose a number of operas, although these chamber works highlight her versatility.

This album opens with 'Night Windows' a work of five movements: Loneliness, Anger, Nostalgia, Despair and Frenzy. The music could be described as contemporary, constantly pushing the boundaries not only of the instruments but also the musical boundaries of the listener. At times it is difficult to understand the intricacies and intentions of Musgrave, and even more difficult to keep up with each instrument and comprehend where they are going.

Nicholas Daniel began his career by winning BBC Young Musician of the Year aged eighteen. He is an ambassador for new music and works very closely with some of the current composers developing contemporary music. In addition to this he has a wealth of experience in 19th century and baroque music. He was received a number of awards for his performances including the Queen's Medal for Music in 2011, which is a most prestigious award to receive. **PT**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**



**Mozart Keyboard Music Volume 4**  
**Kristian Bezuidenhout –fortepiano**  
 Harmonia Mundi – HMU 907528

Kristian Bezuidenhout is a South African born pianist. He trained in both Australia and the USA, but currently resides in London. He has performed in many of the great concert halls across the globe, and is a passionate player; he is not scared of long elongated pauses of silence, those that make the listener feel uncomfortable!

This album contains five of Mozart's works; the opening number K.397 Fantasia in D minor is repeated as the last track with an edited ending by Muller. This piece contains some very quick scales, some chromatic and some not which Bezuidenhout plays with great ease. He also adds some of his own additional trills to the music.

The second track moves straight on from the first, even though they are two pieces, track two is K.311 Sonata in D Major. Whilst it may seem an awkward transition to move straight from D minor to D major, it is worth noting that at the end of K.397 the key is in D major. The Sonata is a beautiful piece which requires great skill from Bezuidenhout, he easily picks out the tune, in whichever hand it is written for and the balance is terrific. The second movement of K.311 is Andante con Expressione, and it is with great expression that this is performed. It is heartfelt articulation and passion that comes across in this track. The final movement in this track is the Rondeau Allegro, which is light

and playful as would be expected.

K.394 Prelude and Fugue in C Major follows next. These pieces require great dexterity, as the performer is expected to cross hands, stretch octaves and play somewhat strange chord changes. This is said to be a somewhat experimental phase in Mozart's composing as he when he sent a copy of this score to his sister he wrote about his excitement in discovering Bach and Handel's works, particularly those of fugues.

K.354 is twelve variations on Baudron's Le Barbier de Seville. They are short pieces, the shortest being thirty-four seconds. Each follows an original theme, and Mozart cleverly uses his musicianship to develop and extend the theme, thus creating an extremely interesting collection of pieces.

K.283 Sonata in G Major is an exquisite work which is full of dynamic and expressive markings, which suggests that this piece was written especially for the fortepiano which, unlike the harpsichord is touch-sensitive. Bezuidenhout light touch is especially well suited to this piece. The closing movement of this work is the Presto, which is indeed very fast at times requiring complete accuracy and dexterity.

The final work is the repeated version of K.397 (the opening track), however this rendition was completed by Muller, and contains a somewhat gruff small coda. It is unlikely this is what Mozart would have planned given analysis of other of his Fantasia's.

All these pieces are played on the fortepiano – a fascinating instrument. Lacking the fullness of a grand piano, it produces a sound which is akin to that of the era when Mozart was composing, which is highly inspiring to both musician and listener.

As this is volume four, I will certainly be seeking out the initial three volumes! **PT**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**



Every Home Should Have One

# Philips Original Jackets Collection

By Richard Clews

**B**ox set fatigue must be a common problem for the serious music lover. Every month seems to bring another salvo of 'must have' collections clamouring for any spare cash that listeners might have left.

The trouble is, most of these box sets really are worth getting, and getting soon, because it is impossible to guarantee the long term availability of their contents as separate discs, or the likelihood of their release as high-res downloads.

The Philips box set presents a quandary; as a physical object it does not inspire lust. Although titled *Original Jackets Collection*, only the front covers are reproduced, not the rears or gatefolds. The 55 discs (51 albums in total) are packed in simple card sleeves without the kind of inner dust jackets you find in special collections, such as *The Beatles In Mono*.

However, despite the basic presentation, the box still represents good value as an overview of the Philips label's output. While the master pianist Alfred Brendel springs to mind as the 'face' of Philips - especially on the serried ranks of smart grey and burgundy Philips CDs to be found in most classical stores - he is represented in the set by only two selections, one from 1979 (Liszt) and another from 1998 (Beethoven).

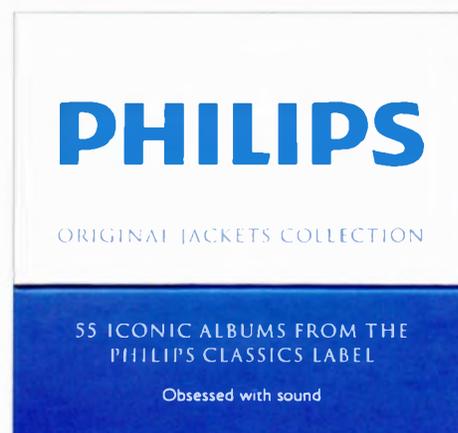
This serves as a sharp reminder that Philips released a wide range of repertoire. Highlights amongst the collection range from the sublime (Pepe Romero accompanying The Academy of St Martin in the Fields on works by Villa-Lobos and Rodrigo) to the truly terrifying (Valery Gergiev and the Orchestra of the Mariinsky Theatre's recording of *The Rite of Spring*).

Two of the most impressive discs bear the 'Hi-Fi Stereo' logo, and in their original vinyl form are highly collectable. Clara Haskil's 1960 recording of Mozart and Sviatoslav Richter's 1961/63 recordings of Liszt and Beethoven boast astonishing sound quality regardless of their vintage. They also testify to Philips' success in capturing the sound of the grand piano, and this became something of a hallmark for the label.

The early days of digital recording were perhaps not the most fruitful in terms of 'awesome sonics'. As Classic FM Hall-of-Famer Robert John Godfrey once memorably put it, 'On digital suddenly half the reverb f\*cks off'. Philips had the good fortune to secure equipment from the Decca Recording Centre, which had made great progress with digital recording before CDs became mainstream. As a result their titles from the early 1980s, while not perhaps as spectacular as some from the 1960s, are benign examples of the binary breed.

In terms of added value, the booklet features a comprehensive account of the label's establishment and achievements from Philips engineer Frans van Dongen. Frank Pynenburg from the Consumer Lifestyle division explains the label's role in the wider Philips universe, though sadly he omits any mention of the TDA1541 DAC chip. Costa Pilavachi, A&R Senior Vice President in Universal's Classical Division, draws on his experience as President at Philips Music Group for a personal account of working with such titans as Gergiev, Marriner, Eliot and Haitink. How Philips came to be part of the Universal Music Group (and hence cease operation) is also covered in detail.

Some 23 of the discs have been mastered for this set by the Audio Archiving Company, set up by former Decca employee Paschal Byrne. Brickwall limiting and heavy-handed noise reduction are thankfully off the menu. Overall the set is easy to recommend for the breadth of music and laudable sound quality. +



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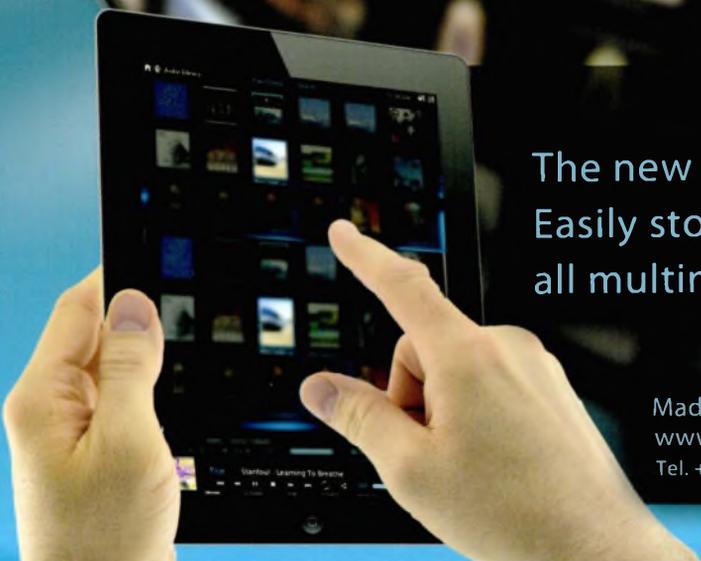
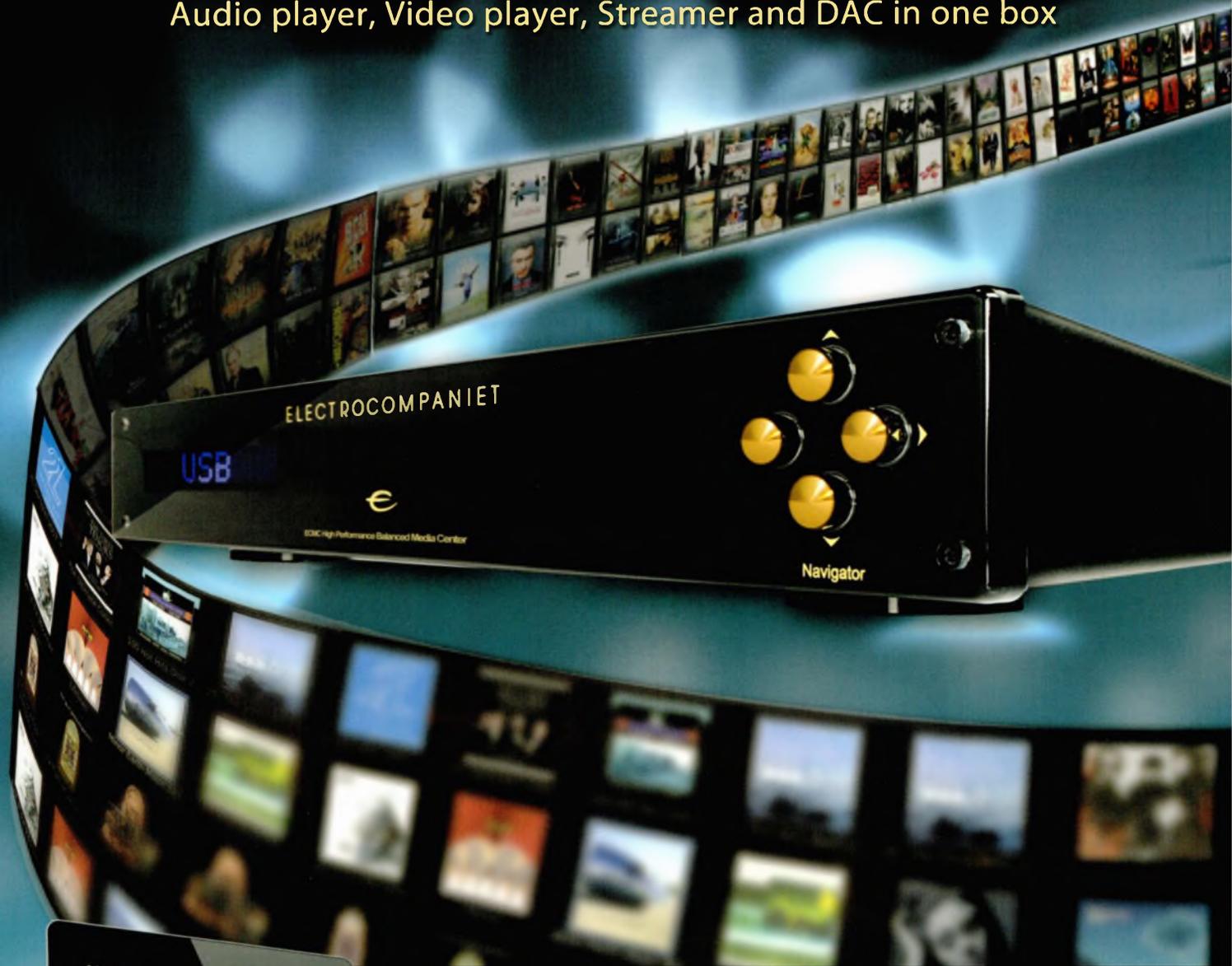


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