



Handsome headphones:
T+A Solitaire P-SE, Philips
Fidelio L3, Focal Celestee

Top gear: Sensational
streamers, cartridges,
phono stages & more...



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **484**

Yearbook 2021

90+
SUPERB
PRODUCTS
REVIEWED

+ MUSIC
REVIEWS:
Critics' choice starring
St. Vincent, Foo Fighters,
Lana Del Rey...



164-PAGE SPECIAL

BEST HI-FI OF THE YEAR!

All tried and tested! Your expert buying guide to the hottest new audio separates



STUNNING SPEAKERS

Bowers & Wilkins 603 S2 Anniversary Edition,
Sonus faber Lumina V, Fyne Audio F1-8 & more

TERRIFIC TURNTABLES

Audio-Technica AT-LP5X, Edwards Audio TT4,
Technics SL-1200G, Thorens TD 1601 & more

ADMIRABLE AMPLIFIERS

Copland CSA150, Marantz PM6007, Rotel
Michi X3, NAD D 3020 V2 & more

DYNAMITE DACS

iFi Audio Zen Neo iDSB, Pro-Ject Pre Box S2
Digital, Matrix Audio Mini-i Pro 3 & more



Wireless Fidelity Has a New Champion

The Expert Imaging & Sound Association of as many as sixty specialist magazines from around the world has honoured System Audio with its Best Wireless Speaker Award two years running! Located at Roskilde, the music city of Denmark, System Audio has received more than 150 awards for sound, design and innovation since 1984.



background image by Markus Spiske on Unsplash



karma
audio - visual

01423 358 846 karma-av.co.uk



83
VAC
Sigma 170i



130
Chord Company
Clearway XLR Cable

Musicreviews



132
The Specials
Protest Songs

BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS



EDITOR'S CHOICE:
Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance



RECOMMENDED:
Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance



GROUP TEST WINNER:
Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!



Considering the mag you hold in your hands is our *2021 Yearbook* comprising of all the most highly recommended new hi-fi kit we've come across in the last 12 months, it came as some surprise to discover that in all the 164 pages of this bumper issue, there was

only one product described as a "masterpiece".

Fear not, though, because on further investigation I quickly unearthed a tsunami of "class act"s, "talented"s, "wonderful"s and "as good as it gets".

In fact, as I get paid to do this kind of stuff and it's such a lot of fun, I scoured each *Our Verdict* at the end of every review and have compiled, for your delectation, a league table of *HFC Yearbook* superlatives. Tied at number six we have "terrific", "impressive", "brilliant", "refined", "compelling" and "seductive". At five, say hello to "outstanding" and "supreme". At four take a bow "engaging". Sharing the honours at three are those two best buddies "excellent" and "exceptional". Runner-up is our good old pal "great". And the winner by several leagues is – ta da – "superb".

As I said, each and every loudspeaker, amplifier, turntable, cartridge, DAC and cable in this issue comes with the very highest *HFC* recommendation, so please do dive in and indulge.

Cheers!

Steve Sutherland Editor

Follow us:



twitter.com/HiFiChoiceMag
facebook.com/hifichoice.co.uk
hifichoice.co.uk



SUITE 6G, EDEN HOUSE, ENTERPRISE WAY,
EDENBRIDGE, KENT TN8 6HF

Hi-FiChoice Contents

hifichoice.com Issue No. **484** Yearbook 2021

90+
SUPERB
PRODUCTS
REVIEWED

BEST ON TEST 2021



8
B&W 603 S2
Anniversary Edition



54
Rega Planar 10



35
KEF LS50 Wireless II



68
Marantz PM6007



87
Arcam ST60



109
iFi Audio Zen DAC V2

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

- 7 Acoustic Energy** AE120
- 8 Bowers & Wilkins** 603 S2 Anniversary Edition
- 11 DALI** Spektor 6
- 12 Falcon Acoustics** IMF200
- 14 Fyne Audio** F502SP
- 16 Neat Acoustics** Orchestra
- 17 PMC** twenty5.23i
- 18 Sonus faber** Lumina V
- 20 Spendor** D7.2
- 21 Triangle** Borea BRO8

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS

- 22 Bowers & Wilkins** 607 S2 Anniversary Edition
- 27 Bowers & Wilkins** 606 S2 Anniversary Edition
- 28 Falcon Acoustics** LS3/5a Gold Badge
- 32 Fyne Audio** F1-8
- 34 JBL** L82 Classic
- 35 KEF** LS50 Wireless II
- 36 Kudos** Cardea C10

- 37 Mission** QX-2 MkII
- 38 PMC** twenty5.21i
- 39 Q Acoustics** M20
- 40 Sonus faber** Lumina II
- 43 Spendor** Classic 3/1
- 44 System Audio** Legend 5.2 Silverback

TURNTABLES

- 47 Audio-Technica** AT-LP5X
- 48 AVID** Volvere SP
- 51 Edwards Audio** TT4
- 52 Mark Levinson** N°5105
- 53 Origin Live** Calypso
- 54 Rega** Planar 10
- 56 Technics** SL-1200G
- 58 Thorens** TD 1601
- 60 VPI** Prime 21+

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

- 62 Balanced Audio Technology** VK-3500
- 63 Copland** CSA150
- 64 Electrocompaniet** ECI 80D
- 68 Marantz** PM6007
- 70 NAD** D 3020 V2
- 72 Pass Labs** INT-25
- 76 Rega** io
- 78 Rotel** A14MkII
- 80 Rotel** Michi X3
- 81 Technics** SU-R1000
- 83 VAC** Sigma 170i

POWER AMPLIFIERS

- 84 XTZ** Edge A2-300/Edge A2-400

STREAMING

- 87 Arcam** ST60
- 88 Auralic** Vega G2.1
- 90 Auralic** Altair G2.1
- 93 Bluesound** Node (3rd Generation)
- 94 HiFi Rose** RS150
- 96 Matrix Audio** Element X
- 98 Novafidelity** N25



124
Focal Celestee

132 Music Reviews



CONTENTS YEARBOOK 2021

"The sheer technical accomplishment on display is impressive at this price point"

Beautiful Systems p152

STREAMING SERVICES

102 Qobuz Studio Premier

104 Tidal HiFi

DACS

107 iFi Audio Neo iDSD

109 iFi Audio Zen DAC V2

110 Matrix Audio Mini-i Pro 3

111 Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital

PHONO STAGES

112 Hegel V10

113 iFi Audio Zen Phono

114 Musical Fidelity

M6x Vinyl

115 Manley Chinook

116 Pro-Ject Phono Box RS2

117 Tom Evans Audio Design

Groove + SRX Mk 2.5

CARTRIDGES

118 DS Audio DS 003

118 Michell Cusis S

119 Ortofon 2M Black LVB 250

119 Sumiko Songbird Low

DIGITAL AUDIO PLAYERS

120 Astell&Kern KANN Alpha

121 Astell&Kern A&futura SE180

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

123 Naim Audio Uniti Atom

Headphone Edition

HEADPHONES

124 Denon AH-D9200

124 Focal Celestee

125 Grado GS3000e

125 Philips Fidelio L3

126 T+A Solitaire P-SE

126 Yamaha YH-E700A

IN-EAR HEADPHONES

127 Audeze LCDi3

127 Bowers & Wilkins PI7

128 Grado GT220

128 Meze Rai Penta

CABLES

130 Chord Company

Clearway XLR cable

130 Nordost Blue Heaven

Power Cord

131 Russ Andrews Kimber

Carbon Phono tonearm cable

131 QED Performance Audio 40i

RCA interconnect

MUSIC REVIEWS

132 The best releases from the last year to put your hi-fi system through its paces

OPINIONS

145 The HFC team say it as they see it on the hottest hi-fi topics

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEMS

146 Incredible setups that sound every bit as good as they look. Including systems from: PrimaLuna, Franco Serblin, Naim Audio and Focal

BACK ISSUES

159 Missed a past copy of HFC? Complete your collection here

NEXT ISSUE

162 The sonic treats to look out for in next month's review-packed HFC



131
QED Performance Audio 40i
RCA interconnect



146
Beautiful System PrimaLuna/Franco Serblin



152
Beautiful System Naim/Focal

Never miss an issue – turn to p100 for our latest subs offer



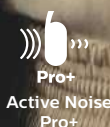
PHILIPS

Fidelio

L3

Get inside the music. Everywhere.

What if you could always be in the perfect place to listen to the music you love? Exquisitely tuned drivers, excellent Active Noise Canceling, and the right fit combine to create the perfect listening environment. Wherever you are.



philips.com/fidelio



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AE120

PRICE
£800

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
19kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 900 x 300mm

FEATURES
• 25mm gold
dome tweeter
• 110mm
mid/bass driver
• 2x 110mm
bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Acoustic Energy

TELEPHONE
01285 654432

WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 473

Propaganda's *p:Machinery* was always going to be immense fun, but it actually highlights another trait of the AE120. Despite its relatively small stature it doesn't tend to sit on dynamics and/or make things seem compressed. It catches all the drama of those fat synthesiser stabs in the chorus and lets them stand out more from the wider mix. As a result it brings an intensity to the sound that makes even the most capable rivals seem slightly sat upon.

Conclusion

Other impressive facets include its midband detailing; it gives a decent timbre to vocals in the Byrds' *Draft Morning* and a natural sense of the instruments. There is little indication of it being synthetic or nasal in any way. This is no less satisfying in Vaughan Williams' *A London Symphony*, where it is able to eke out the natural vibrancy and emotion in the playing and then communicate it right back to the listener. All in all, it offers up a feisty and fun sound from a small but neat cabinet. **DP**



Acoustic Energy AE120

A true three-way design, the AE120 marries a 25mm soft dome tweeter to a wide dispersion waveguide. A single 110mm doped paper cone midrange driver is fitted beneath this, with twin 110mm bass units placed further below. The former drive unit gets its own dedicated enclosure inside the cabinet; this is expensive to do, but mitigates against the harmful effects of rear wave reflections.

The MDF cabinet has 18mm-thick walls and is mass loaded and internally braced. A satin black plinth further aids stability. The rear slot ports complete what is a well-made and finished, attractive-looking speaker available in a choice of satin black or walnut vinyl wraps.

The manufacturer quotes a frequency response of 40Hz–35kHz, with no cut-off points listed. Nominal impedance is said to be a slightly

lower than average 6ohm and sensitivity is put at a healthy 90dB.

Sound quality

The AE120 is an extremely able floorstander that more than justifies its price. From the off, it's clear that it sounds a little brighter than many of its rivals, although it never screams out at you. Instead, it injects some extra vim into hard electronic percussion for example, such as that of Manix's *Living In The Past* EP. This gives it real extra impetus, it's not just the brightness but the tightness of the speaker that makes itself heard here. There's little in the way of cabinet interference and the drivers are obviously pretty light; the result being that it steams along, really getting into the groove. It also sounds like the music has been sped up; from top to bottom the Acoustic Energy celebrates the rhythm divine!

HI-FIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Articulate, involving sound; finish

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Lacks thump of larger designs

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: A class act nonetheless

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins

603 S2 Anniversary Edition



Celebrating 25 years as the entry point to B&W's speaker range, this floorstander has a suitably commendable sense of occasion

Twenty five years is a long time in the world of hi-fi. It's sufficient to see off many rivals altogether, so it's impressive that Bowers & Wilkins has now been producing the 600 Series for a quarter of a century. In that time every part has changed, but the job of the range has remained the same: to give an affordable flavour of what the more expensive models the company offers can do. Also during this time, the series has spent an impressive amount of time being seen as the benchmark at the price too.

The latest range of loudspeakers to be described as Anniversary products comprise four models, two standmounts, a centre for AV duties (subwoofers continue in a parallel in

The effortless all-rounder you chose to do justice to a diverse music collection

their own range) and the range-topping 603 S2 floorstander before you. This is the seventh generation of the 600 Series that builds on the developments introduced in the preceding sixth iteration from 2018. That was the first 600 Series to move from the long-running Kevlar drivers to the new 'Continuum' cone material that's now employed across the entire Bowers & Wilkins range.

In the 603 S2 Anniversary Edition, this is partnered with a version of the 25mm Double Dome tweeter in a decoupled mount that is used by the company at all points below Diamond. This has a claimed upper frequency response of 38kHz and is home to the only visible 'Anniversary' branding. It's partnered with a 150mm Continuum midrange dome that's similar to the one used in the 700 Series.

The 603 is then augmented by a pair of 165mm paper bass drivers

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins
603 S2 Anniversary
Edition

PRICE
£1,500

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
21.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
190 x 1,055 x 370mm

FEATURES
• 25mm aluminium
dome tweeter
• 2x 165mm paper
bass drivers
• 150mm Continuum
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
88.5dB/1W/1m
(8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Bowers & Wilkins

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowerswilkins.com

REVIEWED
HFC 474



operating together via a three-way crossover. The crossover is the area that has seen the most work for the Anniversary Edition models and borrows from some of the development undertaken for the 700 Signatures. New bypass capacitors fine tuned in collaboration with Mundorf are partnered with new high-frequency and midrange frequency units. B&W claims much improved transparency and resolution across the frequency response.

Frequency response is quoted as 48Hz-28kHz at +/- 3dB and sensitivity at a benign 88dB/W (albeit with a minimum quoted impedance

of 3ohm). The most noteworthy detail in the specifications, however, is that, if you measure the 603 at the less demanding +/- 6dB figure, the low-frequency extension drops to a healthy 28Hz, which is fairly impressive at the price.

Aesthetically, the Anniversary Edition is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Script around the tweeter aside, it is fairly similar to its predecessor although a wood finish (oak in some markets, cherry in others) has been added for all models. Given there wasn't a great deal wrong with how the 600 Series looked, this is far from the end of the

world. The appearance is clean and reasonably appealing and a hefty plinth is supplied that would probably impart enough stability to allow for use on a North Sea trawler. You can attach spikes or domes directly to the underside if you don't want to use it at the cost of reduced stability.

The large rear bass port can be adjusted via a two-piece foam bung and there are full-length grilles if you want to use them. Relatively unusually, you can bi-wire the 603 if you wish.

Sound Quality

The most immediately noticeable aspect of the 603 isn't so much sonic as it is practical. This is an easy speaker to drive to any domestically acceptable level. Running with a Cyrus i7-XR (HFC 473) makes for a satisfying and capable partnership regardless of the almost comedic disparity in size between the two devices.

Beyond the practical aspects, the 603 S2 Anniversary Edition manages to do an awful lot right. The work that has been undertaken on the crossovers really pays dividends. *Ignorance* by The Weather Station shows this to excellent effect. The magnificent opening track *Robber* is understated but complex and the B&W does a fine job of pulling it together in a cohesive but believable way. At no stage is there any perception

Cosmetically, little has changed from the previous generation

of four drivers at work and it's extremely tricky to judge the crossover points between them. It's key to the suspension of disbelief when listening.

With the mechanics of the speaker less present in its performance, the other positive qualities of the design are easier to appreciate. Tamara Lindeman's vocals are beautifully reproduced with presence and detail that makes them the centre of attention without sacrificing anything else. The combination of Continuum cone and the Double Dome tweeter results in a speaker that, even in partnership with the fairly well-lit Cyrus, is detailed and lively without tipping over into brightness even under serious provocation.

If you do keep up in your efforts to unsettle the 603 S2 Anniversary Edition, the issues – such as they are – become more apparent at the bottom end. As the specs suggest, it has prodigious low end; in room, the roll-off in output below 40Hz is barely noticeable. However, even when used in free space, there is a fractional sluggishness to the bass output that robs Hayley Williams' *Simmer* of some of its edge. I find the best results come from running it with the bung in place, which sacrifices a tiny fraction of bottom end but speeds its delivery up rather effectively.

The 603 S2 AE is an easy speaker to drive to any domestically acceptable level

With the bungs in place, the 603 S2 Anniversary Edition is impressively close in its overall presentation and character to the considerably more expensive 702 Signature. This is never a cossetting or gentle listen, but it's consistently able to create a tangible sense of what you are playing and it is transparent enough to deliver the character of the source and amplification. Something that helps this is that the 603 S2 Anniversary Edition is able to deliver more intimate material without imparting a scale that it really doesn't warrant. That it can do this while effortlessly sounding very large indeed when required makes it a highly flexible partner across a wide spread of different musical material.



Conclusion

This is fitting because this has been the stated design intention of the 600 Series ever since the original appeared 25 years ago. This has long been the effortless all-rounder you chose to do justice to a diverse music collection. While the 603 S2 Anniversary Edition doesn't seek to re-write this mission statement or try to do anything truly new, it doubles down and does a better job than ever before. There are still some fine rivals at the price, but this is a polished and capable performer that will work with a wide selection of partnering equipment and sound extremely compelling as it does so. **ES**

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Big confident sound with plenty of detail; well made
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Slightly congested bass; size
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: A capable and user-friendly device in the grand tradition of the 600 Series that should win some new friends
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

OVERALL





THE BEAUTY OF SOUND

INTRODUCING
THE NEW ZEPPELIN

Bowers & Wilkins

BOWERSWILKINS.COM



DALI Spektor 6

Sounding like something from an Ian Fleming novel, the Spektor 6 is the Danish company's most affordable floorstander. Despite this, few of the company's design flourishes seem to have been omitted on what sounds like a speaker that's more expensive than its sticker price.

It has a pair of 165mm mid/bass drivers and a 25mm tweeter, the former using paper cones reinforced with wood fibre, said to minimise resonance. The tweeter is a woven fabric soft-dome design claimed to weigh half the average of its market rivals, at 0.056mg/mm²; this should bring faster transients and higher efficiency. The drivers are carefully matched so the crossover doesn't need to be as complex as it would otherwise be, the maker explains.

A fairly easy-to-drive design with a quoted sensitivity of 88.5dB, DALI

puts its nominal impedance at 6ohm, which is a little lower than some here. Frequency response is quoted at 43Hz – 26kHz (+/-3 dB). The bass reflex loaded cabinet is reasonably well made and finished, although not the sleekest looking here; a choice of three vinyl wrap finishes are offered – black ash, walnut and white.

Sound quality

The Spektor 6 combines finesse with musicality – an almost perfect mix of talents at this price. Listening to Propaganda's *p:Machinery* is fascinating as it unearths a whole extra layer of detail without losing any of the music's rhythmic impetus. I enjoy hearing singer Claudia Brucken alternating between single and double-tracked vocals in different parts of the song, something that rivals struggle to do. I can also hear the drum machine hi-hat cymbal

DETAILS

PRODUCT
DALI Spektor 6

PRICE
£500

ORIGIN
Denmark/China

TYPE
2-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
13.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
195 x 972 x 313mm

FEATURES
● 25mm woven
fabric dome tweeter
● 2x 165mm
wood fibre
mid/ bass drivers
● Quoted sensitivity:
88.5dB/1W/1m
(6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
DALI UK Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0845 6443537

WEBSITE
dali-speakers.com/uk

REVIEWED
HFC 473

work much better and place it in the stereo soundstage more accurately. There is a shimmer to the keyboards; where they've previously sounded dry, they now have ringing harmonics.

The snare drum and rim shots on Manix's *Living In The Past* sound tight and fast, while bass is taut and bouncy. There's a really energetic drive to the mix, and when the sub-bass kicks in I can hear its every note stretching down seriously low. It is more tuneful than most rivals yet self contained, never bleeding over into the midband.

The DALI has an insatiable appetite for rhythm, which makes Vaughan Williams' *A London Symphony* sound much more brooding and intense. At the same time, I really like its natural and agreeable tonality.

Conclusion

It's not totally blameless, however; there's a slight upper-mid hardness on female vocals and low bass can set off the cabinet. Overall, though, the Spektor 6 proves a very nice surprise, setting a very high bar at its price. **DP**



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Musicality; power; tonality

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: It's no oil painting to look at

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: A seriously capable budget box

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Falcon Acoustics

IMF200

Hearing a transmission line speaker for the first time can be a dazzling experience, even if you have to put it together yourself to do so

My first ever experience of transmission line speakers was in the mid-Seventies when a friend invited me over to hear his newly purchased IMF TLS80. I was impressed by the tight, punchy, extended and well-controlled bass coming from the legendary KEF B139 bass driver. This doesn't have a conventional paper cone, but rather an expanded polystyrene piston laminated with a thin aluminium sheet. As the piston is solid, it doesn't suffer from break-up associated with paper cones when operating at low frequencies and being driven hard. Consequently, it can move large volumes of air.

Falcon was founded in 1972 by Malcolm Jones, who had previously worked at KEF as Senior Development

The organ note makes my trouser legs flap if I stand close to the exit port

Engineer. While there, Jones was responsible for designing many drivers and systems, including the B139 woofer, the B110 midrange driver and the T27 tweeter unit. He left KEF in 1974 to work full time at Falcon Acoustics and when he retired in 2009 transferred the company to Jerry Bloomfield, who himself has decades of knowledge of loudspeaker design, including the IMF range of loudspeakers. IMF was the brainchild of Irving M Fried. In 1968, a British branch of the US company was opened and it was this combined Anglo-American setup that produced the IMF TLS80. The four-way design of this speaker originally used the Celestion HF1300 and HF2000 as a tweeter and supertweeter, a KEF B110A midrange and a KEF B139 bass unit housed in a quarter-wave tapered transmission line. Now, in 2021, Falcon is making brand-new

DETAILS
PRODUCT Falcon Acoustics IMF200
PRICE £2,900-£3,300
ORIGIN UK
TYPE 3-way floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT 34kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD) 270 x 1,189 x 408mm
FEATURES • 19mm Mylar dome tweeter • 127mm Bextrene midrange driver • B139 bass driver • Quoted sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m (8ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR Falcon Acoustics
TELEPHONE 01865 358001
WEBSITE falconacoustics. co.uk
REVIEWED HFC 482



B139s, B110s and T27s, all with the same specifications as the original speakers designed by Malcolm Jones.

A second IMF transmission line loudspeaker kit, the IMF200 quarter wave, has recently been released to sit alongside its baby brother, the IMF100 eighth wave bookshelf speaker. Like the IMF100, the 200 has a modern look and feel with smooth curved front edges. It has a detachable Tygan cloth grille, which is held in place magnetically. It boasts a three-way design, using a Falcon T27 19mm Mylar dome tweeter, a B110 127mm Bextrene cone midrange unit and a B139 bass driver. The cabinets are available in real-wood veneer finishes including walnut, rosewood (an extra £400) and light oak. They are supplied pre-built and made of high-quality Italian Baltic birch plywood, which results in a void-free core with excellent acoustic properties.

The crossover uses Falcon's polypropylene capacitors in both the mid and high-frequency sections.

As with the IMF100, the cabinets, wood veneer and crossovers are all of superb quality. The crossover unit is factory assembled and all the connections for the internal wiring are made using push-on spade connectors, so no soldering is necessary. A pair of Allen keys is provided, along with all the necessary hardware, and an online instruction manual and video are available to help with the construction process – yep, that's right, you'll need to build the IMF200 yourself or pay £400 for Falcon to do it for you. The instructions guide you through each stage with photographs and clear descriptions, and are very easy to follow. I build both speakers in less than two hours and connect them up to my 300BPSE valve monoblocks.

Before commencing any critical appraisal, Falcon recommends a period of 24 hours of running-in at listening levels to allow the drive units and components in the crossover to settle down. In my experience, the greatest sonic improvements occur after an initial four hours: the bass is much tighter, punchier and well controlled, the midrange is clearer with a significant improvement in imaging and the top end is more refined.

Sound quality

I kick off listening with a superb Chasing The Dragon direct-cut vinyl recording of Rimsky Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol* played by the National Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Debbie Wiseman. I am instantly very impressed by the opening bars of the first movement. The music is spacious and open and the IMF200 delights with a full and uncluttered sound, even during the crescendos. Back in 2017, I was lucky enough to attend this recording and listening back now I get a real sense of what it was like being there in front of the orchestra. The powerful finale has a real impact and the reality of the performance is spectacular. The sharp imaging of soloist players is clearly identifiable and there is no overlap of sound from adjacent instruments. In particular, the bass drum at the back of the orchestra is powerful, punchy and tight – a real testament to the B139 and that transmission line design.

The T27, B110 and B139 drivers are all still produced to the original spec



Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony No.3* played by The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra conducted by Louis Fremaux is known for some really deep 16Hz organ notes during the first movement (I've measured them). During the first movement, the organ playing is full, deep and refined, and portrays incredible power and emotion. The organ note causes my trouser legs to flap if I stand close to the exit ports of the cabinet. This leads nicely into the sprightly second movement, where the drum rolls at the beginning really grab my attention. The violins are bright and cheerful and all the sections of the orchestra are perfectly positioned within the soundstage.

Moving to some classic jazz and the 1960 CBS stereo issue of Miles Davis' legendary *Kind Of Blue*. Although this stereo release is a little 'sax on the left, trumpet in the middle and drums on the right' it is nevertheless a fantastic analogue recording that has huge presence and dynamics. All of the innate beauty of this recording is well conveyed by the IMF200. In particular, the hi-hat on *All Blues* is extremely clear and crisp. Overall, the top end is superb and the bass is tight and in perfect proportion to the rest of the instruments.

To check out the IMF200's handling of vocals, I turn to a recording of Barbra Streisand singing *Tomorrow*. The vocals certainly stand out in front of the orchestral backing, which is sparkling and clear. Streisand's voice is in sharp focus and there is a very natural depth to the recording, with her voice being positioned well in front of the orchestral backing.

I finish off with some swing and a superb Capitol recording tape from 1958 entitled *Jackie Gleason Presents Velvet Brass*. This is a stereo 7.5IPS two-track reel-to-reel tape for in-line

heads, which is the professional tape standard and pre-dates the commercial standard of four-track for domestic stereo pre-recorded tapes. Unlike the later 1960 Miles Davis *Kind Of Blue* stereo LP recording, this tape has a realistic soundstage with the instruments distributed evenly across the width. Although vinyl versions of this recording are available, this early example of a commercially produced stereo tape wins over the vinyl version in terms of a huge dynamic range and excellent instrument positioning. In particular, the saxophone on the right-hand side in *Skyliner* has a real presence.

Conclusion

The superb-sounding IMF200 gives a modern look to the traditional transmission line designs of old and will certainly be at home in many different environments. The kit itself is a cinch to construct for anyone who can turn a screwdriver. The quality of the components and the finish of the wooden cabinets is extremely high, especially for the price. The IMF200 is an authoritative, refined and elegant loudspeaker that will certainly be at home in many high-end systems. **NR**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Superb sound; easy construction
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Nothing at the price
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Exceptional-sounding, high-quality floorstanders for an extremely reasonable price, even for the factory-built version
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

OVERALL



FLOORSTANDING LOUSPEAKERS



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Fyne Audio F502SP

PRICE
£3,500

ORIGIN
Scotland

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
30.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
338 x 1,111 x 380mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm
magnesium dome
compression tweeter
• 2x 200mm
multi-fibre mid/
bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
92dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Fyne Audio Ltd.

WEBSITE
fyneaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 472



SP stands for Special Production and, if you haven't guessed already, it predictably involves 'trickle-down' tech and tweaks. I'll get back to that. In its fundamentals, the F502 is essentially unchanged. It's a large but not obtrusively bulky floorstander with what initially appears to be just two drivers. Look closer and you'll see the 502's 25mm magnesium dome compression tweeter sits in the throat of the 200mm multi-fibre coned IsoFlare point source driver, joined below by an all but identical 200mm multi-fibre mid/bass driver (sans tweeter). Both main drivers use the FyneFlute variable geometry rubber roll surround to provide a more effective barrier for the cone's energy, and a cleaner, more precise sound.

The idea behind the SP treatment is to ship much of the next-tier F702's (HFC 450) sonic talent downstream to the less expensive F502. In essence, this means the SP gets the F702's rigid multi-fibre drivers, tweeter and advanced crossover as well as its heavily engineered aluminium, split level plinth that works in conjunction with the BassTrax tractrix profile bass diffuser. The drivers and crossover are connected with upgraded silver-

From start to finish the F502SP sounds beautifully open, expressive and lucid

plated Van den Hul wiring while the cabinet panels use denser MDF and are lined with three damping materials to control resonances.

The object of the IsoFlare driver is to get as close as possible to a point source where the mid/bass driver shares a common centre with the tweeter. This should enable superior stereo imaging, especially off axis. The targeted ideal outcome is that sound is produced as if emanating from a single point in space.

The driver's moving parts are built around a rigid cast aluminium chassis, which is good for damping out unwanted vibration and resonance, while the vented rear chamber in the tweeter's Neodymium magnet is said to place low-frequency resonance well below the crossover region. Addressing potential distortion higher up the frequency range is the tweeter's rigid magnesium dome, claimed to push the initial break-up mode well beyond audibility. The tweeter has a wave guide pole piece claimed to deliver an: "incredibly even, full-range frequency response"

Fyne Audio F502SP

Will this hot-rodded version of Fyne Audio's original floorstander have the required sonic change of gear to impress?

A young loudspeaker company can dream of endless innovation, but it can't hope to roll out freshly designed new product forever. With proprietary tech, model span and price boundaries established, there comes a point where the potentially open-ended process of evolution begins. For Fyne Audio, the launch in 2020 of the F502SP we're reviewing here was its very own 'return to go' moment.

From a standing start in 2017, the fledgling operation, formed by key personnel from a recently bought-out Tannoy, hit the ground running and extended its portfolio to seven model

lines in under two years – remarkable, and certainly enough 'all pockets' breadth to stand comparison with veteran British rivals like B&W, KEF and Monitor Audio.

Echoes of Tannoy were, perhaps, inevitable and nowhere better illustrated than the point-source IsoFlare driver that has been utilised in the F500-series from the beginning. The series designs also showcased an advanced type of downward-firing BassTrax 'tractrix' bass reflex port, the name referencing a mathematically derived, cone-shaped diffuser that outputs more evenly than a conventional port and is less fussy about speaker positioning.

and outstanding, pin-point imaging waveguide that has been designed to deliver a flat frequency response.

The BassTrax Tractrix system uses a downward-firing port in conjunction with a cone-shaped diffuser, the aim being to achieve full 360° dispersion of the wavefront and, with it, better room integration and more placement options. This is good news for those with small rooms, as the sound is less influenced by boundary proximity than rivals with rear-firing ports. The SP benefits from the full aluminium sandwich plinth Tractrix profile bass diffuser developed for the premium F1 series re-engineered to precisely tune the F502SP cabinet.

The cabinet is finished in high-gloss black or white as standard, with the option of a deep gloss lacquered walnut veneer. But all F502SPs get a diamond machine-cut finish on their aluminium driver chassis.

Sound quality

Though close-to-wall placement in a small room isn't out of the question, the F502SP is a substantial tower that prefers some air to breathe properly and so it's a fair bit of free space and my larger room that get the gig, supporting cast including Pro-Ject's The Classic Evo turntable (HFC 462), Chord Electronics' Huei phono stage (HFC 459), Audiolab's 6000CDT CD transport (HFC 447) Chord Electronics' Hugo TT2 DAC (HFC 459) and Hegel's H120 integrated (HFC 460).

I've had a number of big-sounding floorstanders in here of late. My resident Falcon Acoustics RAM Studio 30 (HFC 442) – about the same size and price as the F502SP – gets the job done with majestic authority, effortless

The elegant cabinet is large but unobtrusive



poise and an abundance of couth. Audiovector's elegant QR-5 brought an airy soundstage, plenty of bass and refined treble extension to the party and Monitor Audio's more affordable Bronze 500 (both HFC 468) impressed with sheer sonic bang for buck and a canny ability to entertain.

Perhaps the Monitor Audio is the most appropriate warm-up act as the F502SP takes that crowd-pleasing energy, ramps up the colour, luxury, clarity, spirit and sense of fun, and runs with it. As I've found with more modestly priced Fynes, neutrality isn't necessarily a guiding principle, whereas distilling the music seems to be a natural gift. The SP is cut from the same cloth, but with the advantages of big-boy bandwidth and resolution, not to mention arguably the most solid and precise imaging I've heard in the room – a convincing vindication of the isotropic driver topology, I guess.

Hankering for some 'cosmic' funk as only Edgar Winter can deliver, *Jasmine Nightdreams*' *Sky Train* streamed from

Tidal sounds fresh, incisive and dazzlingly clear with oodles of inner detail and solid, well-shaped bass. My favourite Jools Holland collaboration – with Taj Mahal singing *Outskirts Of Town* – builds superbly to its balls-out climax, TM beseeching any future offspring to all: "Look-look-look like him". This can often be a little overwhelming for some smaller speakers that struggle to separate out the competing elements and allow enough dynamic headroom for the song to swell. No problem here. From start to finish, the F502SP sounds beautifully open, expressive and lucid with clean, extended upper frequencies that are naturally textured and free from grain, intricately detailed yet gloriously unforced, the Fyne drawing colour, emotion and 'substance' out of the slightly grey recording.

Conclusion

Clearly, Fyne Audio continues to go from strength to strength. The F502SP is a tremendously talented floorstander with a huge sound and formidable powers of musical communication. If you're scratching your head about the big price hike over the regular F502, try to arrange an audition of both. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. **DV**



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Mixes richness, clarity, imaging and dynamics like few others; build and finish
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Nothing at the price
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: As engaging and entertaining a floorstander as we've encountered for the money
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

OVERALL



FLOORSTANDING LOUSPEAKERS



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Neat Acoustics
Orkestra

PRICE
£5,485

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
21kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 1,030 x
240mm

FEATURES
• 75mm true
ribbon tweeter
• 170mm
midrange driver
• 2x 170mm
bass drivers in
an isobaric pair
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Neat Acoustics

TELEPHONE
01833 631021

WEBSITE
neatacoustics.com

REVIEWED
HFC 473

Lloyd Miller is a demonstration of its truly outstanding tonality. Every instrument, every nuance and action of the band sounds wholly convincing. The crossover between the ribbon and midrange is a comparatively high 3.5kHz, but you'd be very hard pressed to tell from listening alone and it has a balance of refinement and high-frequency energy that can leave even talented alternatives sounding a little flat in comparison.

The biggest change, however, is how free of cabinet colouration this bigger speaker feels. For the avoidance of doubt, neither the Ministra nor the Ekstra is anything other than good, but the Orkestra performs in a manner that is a step change again. So long as a little care is taken with toe-in, it has the ability to disappear into a convincing stereo image that works superbly across a huge selection of music. Much of this is down to the smart decision to use a downward-firing driver. This seems to effectively reduce the audible cues of where the bass is coming from, which – combined with the lower drivers not doing anything at all above 80Hz – is enough to give them a useful omni directionality.

Conclusion

This is more than just a 'big Ekstra'. The Orkestra takes everything that the slimmer floorstander does so effectively and adds a level of scale and effortlessness that ensures it will tackle pretty much anything you care to throw at it with assurance and genuine talent. You can buy prettier speakers for the asking price and they will need to be driven rather than powered, but so long as you can meet these two requirements you have a speaker that is capable of truly extraordinary performance that is hard to rival at the money. Neat's evolutionary journey continues to deliver the goods and it's fascinating to see where it takes us next. **ES**

Neat Acoustics Orkestra

Neat's Orkestra is effectively an enlarged Ekstra, but this rather underplays the changes that have taken place in scaling up the smaller floorstander. The fundamental layout is the same, however. An upper section contains a ribbon tweeter; now 75mm in size instead of the 50mm in the smaller speaker, combined with a 170mm polypropylene mid/bass driver. The upper section is not sealed – instead going with a small rear port, which has a foam cap in it.

These drivers sit atop a sealed section that contains another pair of 170mm drivers – this time arranged in a downward-firing isobaric pair – which act like a passive subwoofer for the drivers above. The Orkestra has tremendous low-end heft – 20Hz is quoted – and as the drivers point down, it is unfussy about placement.

Sound quality

The increase in cabinet size and radiating area over the Ekstra takes a loudspeaker that was already capable of impressive low-end and ups the ante. Late Night Final's *Thank You* is underpinned by serious bass and is reproduced with effortless heft that has no trouble bridging the threshold where you feel as much as hear it.

Crucially, it deploys this extra clout with the same finesse as the smaller models in the range. Ask the Orkestra to deliver the joyously ballistic *Be My Guest* by Working Men's Club and the heavyweight synth and percussion have room-loading impact, but there's not a hint of the overhang or sluggishness that can come as part and parcel of bass like this. Instead, you have sledgehammer force wielded with scalpel-like precision.

The gorgeous collaboration between the Heliocentrics and jazz legend

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Exceptional drive; soundstaging; tonal realism

DISLIKE: Not the prettiest; needs a fair bit of power

WE SAY: A joyous speaker that shows fun need not come at the expense of technical attributes



PMC twenty5.23i

PMC's twenty5i range is, as the 'i' suggests, an improved version of the preceding twenty5 series. The 23i is the smallest of three floorstanders and the cabinet is mounted on a pair of decoupled plinth bars with adjustable spikes. Another significant but tricky to spot difference concerns the tweeter and crossover. The former has been changed to a 19mm dome derived from the one used in the fact range. This is complemented by a 34mm rolled surround so the inner dome generates high frequencies while the surround fills in below it. The mid/bass driver is largely unchanged from previous twenty5 models and there's a single 140mm woven cone that works with a 7.8 foot-long transmission line that exits the speaker via a pair of 'laminair' ports designed to control the flow of air exiting the cabinet, preventing eddies in the process.

Sound quality

The PMC opens up the 24/96 Qobuz stream of Ray LaMontagne's *Monovision* into a wonderfully immersive and three-dimensional space that extends outward from the cabinet and has an uncanny perception of front-to-back depth to it. This creation of space is something it effortlessly does almost regardless of musical choice and largely independent of partnering equipment. No less importantly, it manages to do this even at very low volume levels.

The 23i wields its transmission line-induced heft with an immediacy and precision while the effects on the speed and precision of the low end that results is truly impressive. You can really lean on the 23i, playing something like Sturgill Simpson's ballistic *Sing Along* it delivers the drive and impact with all the urgency it needs to sound wholly convincing.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
PMC twenty5.23i

PRICE
£3,850

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
15kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
162 x 907 x 330mm

FEATURES
• 19mm soft dome
tweeter with
34mm surround
• 140mm mid/bass
driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
86.5dB/1W/1m
(8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
PMC Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01767 686300

WEBSITE
pmc-speakers.com

REVIEWED
HFC 473

This somewhat edgy recording does demonstrate that at the other end of the frequency spectrum this is still not the most forgiving speaker in its category, but it isn't too surprising that at heart it behaves like a monitor.

This also means tonal realism is extremely good. The beautiful *Turning Presents...* *Dead Club* is a feast of beautiful instrumentation and delicate harmonies, and the PMC is absolutely in its element from the opening chords of *Eating The Dead*. There is an understated competence to everything that the 23i does that takes a little time to appreciate and really only makes itself felt when you switch back to something that isn't quite so assured. It's admirably transparent too. Moving the PMC over to a Cambridge Edge A, working as both amp and decoding, it reproduces the warmer, fuller and more relaxed presentation of the Edge very effectively. This serves to ameliorate some of that slightly unforgiving element in the upper registers as well, suggesting that a little care in partnering will make a useful difference to how it performs.

Conclusion

This is a speaker that looks and feels very similar to its predecessor and loses absolutely nothing of the positive qualities it possessed. Instead, it works in new talents that broaden its appeal still further. It isn't cheap and you can point to rivals that will challenge it in relatively straightforward rooms. Where the 23i starts to make its worth felt is as these locations become more challenging. Thanks to the care extended on the decoupling, the ability to create a consistent and believable stereo image and the clout it can wield from a comparatively small cabinet, the PMC can continue to deliver its many virtues as rivals start to struggle. The twenty5.23i looks like business as usual, but in fact marks an impressive step forward for the company. It isn't very big, but it is rather clever. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Spacious, detailed and powerful sound; easy to place

DISLIKE: Can be unforgiving; expensive

WESAY: A handsome and highly effective speaker that delivers performance beyond its size in locations that rivals will struggle with

Sonus faber

Lumina V



The largest member of the Lumina range is an imposing-looking speaker. Having met the rest of the family, it's time for big brother

When first launched, the Lumina range represented a bit of a gamble for Sonus faber but it seems it seems to have paid off. The original small range of speakers was something of a departure for the company with their flat-sided cabinets and different finish, but the arrival of additional models suggests there's a commercial appetite for them. We take a look at the Lumina II standmount over on p40, but right now it is the turn of the flagship Lumina V.

At first glance, it looks identical to the Lumina III, which we reviewed back in *HFC* 469. Both are three-way floorstanders, where bass duties are shared between a pair of drivers. The key difference is one of scale. The

The big crunching bass has a heft that makes it a much more visceral experience

Lumina V uses a pair of 165mm mid/bass drivers rather than the 150mm units that the smaller speaker opts for. These are mounted in a cabinet proportionally identical to the Lumina III, but a fair bit larger. The Lumina V is over a metre tall before the spikes are fitted and beyond the numbers, this feels like a much more imposing proposition than the III.

The two higher-frequency drivers remain the same as before. The tweeter is a 29mm soft dome making use of Sonus faber's trademark 'Damped Apex Dome' system, while the midrange is a 150mm paper cone, identified by its 'SF' branded phase plug. What's interesting is that in the Lumina V these identical drivers have different crossover points to the III. This isn't too surprising at the lower end given the larger bass drivers and the Lumina V moves to a 260Hz crossover point from the 350Hz of the Lumina III. The handover to the tweeter is also dropped, though, now happening at 2.6kHz; a full 900Hz lower than the smaller III.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sonus faber
Lumina V

PRICE
£2,500

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
22.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
280 x 1,049 x 373mm

FEATURES
• 29mm silk
dome tweeter
• 150mm
pulped paper
midrange driver
• 2x 165mm pulp
paper bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
89dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Fine Sounds UK

WEBSITE
sonusfaber.com/en

REVIEWED
HFC 481



The reason for this is that the mounting arrangement of the midrange driver in the Lumina V, while externally identical to the III, is rather different internally. An enclosure within the cabinet modelled on a lute houses the midrange driver and tweeter. Sonus faber has employed this process on more expensive models and says that it helps to control standing waves within the cabinet while ensuring that overall rigidity is increased.

As well as working at revised frequencies, the crossover borrows from more expensive models from other ranges. The layout features a process called 'Paracross Technology' where reactive components in the circuit are connected to the negative rail, which Sf says lowers the electro motive force of the drivers – helping them work in a more organic way. This first appeared in the rather more costly Maxima Amator and, together with another crossover process that the company calls Interactive Fusion Filtering, means the Lumina V has substantially more going on under the skin than the superficially similar III.

Some aspects are entirely in keeping with the rest of the range, however. The bass port vents through the substantial integrated plinth, which helps to make this a fairly easy speaker to place. The quoted 4ohm impedance and 89dB/W sensitivity are the same as the Lumina III and means this isn't a terribly hard speaker to drive. The beefed-up crossover still accepts bi-wiring if you wish and magnetically tabbed grilles are also provided. The same three

Finishes come in a choice of Piano Black, Wenge or Walnut



finishes; two wood and one Piano Black, are offered as in the smaller models. Our review sample comes with the lighter Walnut finish and, with a large cabinet like this, it's an appealing colour that avoids coming across as too monolithic.

At the same time, this larger speaker probably represents the biggest cabinet where the split of wooden front baffle and leather-wrapped sides can be called upon to look good. The slight tendency of the leather sections to absorb light can leave the Lumina V feeling bigger than it actually is. The build quality is very good, though. There are more flamboyantly finished speakers available for the price, but this is a solid and confidence-inspiring design.

Sound quality

Connected to the same Cambridge Audio Edge A integrated that was on hand for testing the Lumina III, the larger speaker demonstrates some attributes that belie its very similar measurements. Sonus faber claims a frequency response a princely 2Hz greater than the smaller Lumina III (38 vs 40Hz), but in this space it feels like considerably more. Where the Lumina III sometimes felt a little on the lean side, the V never has the same issue. The big crunching bass riff of Royal Blood's *Trouble's Coming* has a heft that makes it a much more visceral experience.

Neither is this limited to heavy lower frequencies. The plucked bass at the beginning of the Alba Griot Ensemble's *Shadow Queen* is gorgeously weighty, rich and tonally believable. The Lumina V is extremely accomplished at the creation of scale in a way that isn't always a given, even with a speaker as large as this. This is partly down to smaller instruments and voices not having any feeling of artificial scale to them. Midway through the gorgeous *Manhatta* by The Cinematic Orchestra, there is a flute solo and the Sonus faber does a wonderful job of reproducing it without losing the delicacy of the single instrument.

The impact of that lute-shaped chamber is a little harder to discern, but this is as much a reflection that there's precious little wrong with the smaller Lumina in this regard. The intrinsic Sonus faber ability to place a degree of emphasis on the midrange without it feeling forced or unnatural is present and correct here. Sean Rowe's striking baritone in *To Leave Something Behind* is the absolute focus of the track and the Lumina V makes him a tangible presence in the room, stood between the two cabinets in a wholly convincing manner. Where it

truly shines, however, is the way that it is able to effortlessly deliver more impact and scale than the Lumina III but maintain the same speed and cohesion that made it such a surprising listening experience. Wind the level up and select the determinedly lo-fi *Dead Funny* by the Archie Bronson Outfit and the Lumina V is a genuinely entertaining listen. It pounds its way through the track, placing the relentless energy of the band at the forefront while managing to keep the (very) rough edges of the recording at bay. There are a few people who still find the idea of using a speaker with such a strong tradition of craftsmanship and musical instrument-related construction to hammer out big slabs of electronica bizarre, but the Lumina V is exceptionally good at it.

The slight caveat is that this balance is fractionally stacked in terms of helping poorer-quality recordings stay listenable than it is helping really top quality ones shine – possibly more so than the Lumina III. As someone with more than their fair share of 'loudness war' albums, it is not something I'd be overly concerned by. If you have a library of truly wonderful recordings, however, you might feel a little differently. As always, an audition should assuage any concerns here.

Conclusion

There's no doubt that the Lumina V is a compelling proposition. It effectively takes the slight weak points of the smaller floorstander and addresses them while keeping everything that Sonus faber got right with it. Having reviewed every stereo member of the Lumina family, the Lumina II is possibly the sweet spot of the range and the improbable clout of the tiny Lumina I (*HFC 477*) is also notable. What the Lumina V does brilliantly is introduce more Sonus faber virtues without compromising the qualities of the range. This fine speaker should win more people over to the brand. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Refined performance; well made; usefully forgiving
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Black sides look a little overbearing
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Compelling balance of scale and cohesion with a little fun stitched in; a worthy flagship to the Lumina range
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

OVERALL



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Spendor D7.2

PRICE
£4,730

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
192 x 980 x 333mm

WEIGHT
31kg

FEATURES
● 1x 22mm
dome tweeter
● 2x 180mm
bass drivers
● Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m
(8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Spendor Audio
Systems Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01323 843474

WEBSITE
spendoraudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 480

tidy, precise and contained, and yet makes music easy to assimilate and enjoy. It's also surprisingly good at eking out natural rhythms and subtle dynamic accents, which makes for a vibrant and engaging presentation without being an imposing one.

While Simple Minds' *New Gold Dream* doesn't exactly blast me from one end of the room to the other, it still proves most beguiling. The bass drum isn't the tightest, but it times decently and is well aligned with the clean, detailed midband. Everything coheres well, allowing the speaker to get out of the way.

Despite being a completely different musical genre, Ralph Vaughn Williams' *London Symphony* works in much the same way. It doesn't have

Tidy and precise, the Spendor D7.2 makes music easy to assimilate and enjoy

the scale of, say, ATC's SCM40 or Monitor Audio's Gold 300 (HFC 480), but the recorded acoustic comes across in a natural and unsullied way. It lacks the air and space of the best, but is still more than spacious enough to enjoy. Instrumental timbre is very good, albeit slightly on the soft side.

Conclusion

It's only Goldie's *Inner City Life* that throws up anything in the way of hurdles for the Spendor. This is a veritable audio assault course and while this speaker stoically takes the punishment, it doesn't relish high volumes with thumping sub-bass. Nor does it love the swingeing dynamic crescendos and machine gun-speed percussion work. It still makes a decent stab of things and keeps its composure, but I hardly think it was designed for hardcore electronic dance. Overall then, a class act. **ES**

Spendor D7.2

Scoring early respectability by being one of the few companies allowed to manufacture the classic BBC LS3/5a mini-monitor under licence, Spendor has undergone many changes since those heady days but has retained its characteristically 'small c' conservative design values. You won't find fancy ribbon tweeters, strange flavours of mid/bass driver or crazy cabinets; quite the reverse, as it's all about consistency and timelessness.

It's interesting Spendor didn't follow the fashion for curved cabinets, which was raging 10 years ago. As a result its speakers looked – back then – quite old school – but now look clean, crisp and modern again, as fashion changed. That's certainly a good description of the D7.2, which is the smaller of the D Line premium range designs. It sports a very solid cabinet – built at its very own cabinet factory

production facility in Sussex – with Spendor's Dynamic damping cabinet technology to reduce resonances within. Finishes comprise: Black Oak, Oak, Cherry, Satin White and Walnut.

The D7.2 uses bespoke Spendor drivers working in what's effectively a 2.5-way configuration; crossover frequencies are 3.2kHz and 900Hz respectively. The cabinet is loaded by Spendor's fifth-generation twin-venturi Linear-Flow port. I find this to be very user-friendly; it doesn't set off resonant modes in rooms as easily as rear-firing reflex ports and is easy to match to most amplifiers.

Sound quality

This has a polite sound, but in a wholly good way. It won't blow the bloody doors off your listening room with its subterranean bass and nor will it knock the windows out with a vast soundstage. Instead it sounds

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

LIKE: Subtlety; tonality; musicality

DISLIKE: Lacks ultimate power

WE SAY: Swish, suave and seductive

OVERALL

★★★★★



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Triangle Borea BR08

PRICE
£900

ORIGIN
France/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
206 x 1,020 x 314mm

FEATURES
• 25mm partially
horn loaded soft
dome tweeter
• 160mm untreated
cellulose midrange
driver
• 2x 160mm
fibreglass
bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
92dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Exertis Unlimited

WEBSITE
trianglehifi.com

REVIEWED
HFC 478

My BR03 review sample has long since departed, but looking at my notes it's interesting to note the differences of the behaviour of this midrange-optimised unit over the more conventional one in the standmount. Here, in the BR08, there's a slightly warmer and fuller quantity that ensures that Sarah Jarosz's beautiful *Blue Heron Suite* is rich, full and compelling. The simple arrangements are presented in an effortlessly three-dimensional way meaning there's a convincing sense of the performance as a whole rather than a simple reproduction of it.

The upper registers of the BR08 are also worthy of enthusiastic praise. A fair amount of listening to this floorstander is done hooked up to Rega's Brio (HFC 446) integrated amplifier and the tonal balance that the two devices achieve together is almost perfectly judged.

No less importantly, it demonstrates that the Triangle is usefully sensitive as the 50W of the Brio is more than enough to drive it to any level you might want to achieve in a normal room. The rest of testing takes place on the considerably more powerful (and expensive) Cambridge Audio Edge A, which delivers some commensurate gains to the performance, but the fundamental positive qualities of the Triangle remain unchanged throughout.

You can take this to mean that the BR08 won't necessarily elevate every single system it's connected to, but a rather more positive view would be to see this as a fine speaker to upgrade a relatively affordable existing system.

Conclusion

The BR08 is a fine speaker full stop. It takes all of the positive qualities of the BR03 and adds drive, immediacy and excitement in keeping with the company's historic offerings. Vivid, fast and endless good fun, it deserves to be on any shortlist at the price. **ES**

Triangle Borea BR08

The upper and midrange frequencies of the BR08 closely mirror the arrangements of the smaller BR03 standmount (HFC 466). A 25mm soft dome tweeter makes use of the distinctive EFS (Efficient Flow System) phase plug, which comprises a metal section that surrounds the tweeter and places two intersecting bars as a phase plug. This hands off at a relatively high 3.5kHz crossover point to a 16cm midrange driver made of untreated cellulose, which in turn hands over to a linked pair of 16cm fibreglass bass drivers. The cabinet is front ported, which might notionally suggest that it's happier near walls than some rivals but the BR08 does its best work in free space, away from both rear and side walls and Triangle states it will be at its peak in a room between 20 and 40 square metres.

Sound quality

Simmer by Hayley Williams responds with a wholly compelling urgency. There are speakers of a similar stature to the Triangle that can hit harder, but the speed and fluency of the low end is exceptional. The broken percussive line that the track is built upon starts and stops with perfect precision.

Crucially, while there might be rivals with more bass, the Triangle has enough to be convincing. Hayden Thorpe's piano in *Diviner* has a believable weight and scale that ensures the piece sounds just right.

Even under provocation, the large front port stays inaudible and the control and agility never suffers. The handover from the fibreglass bass drivers to the paper midrange is also performed seamlessly. There are four drivers at work in each cabinet but, crucially, you can't hear them individually.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Fast, articulate and engaging sound

DISLIKE: Some care needs to be taken with placement; it looks a little subdued

WE SAY: A fine mix of historical strengths with some new talent produces a very fine speaker indeed

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS



DETAILS

PRODUCT
B&W 607 S2
Anniversary Edition

PRICE
£450

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
4.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
207 x 300 x 165mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm Carbon
Dome tweeter
• 1x 130mm
Continuum
mid/bass cone
• Quoted sensitivity:
84dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
B&W Group Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowers-wilkins.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 470

Electrified 101's *You're Walking* is surprisingly smooth with a decently warm and propulsive bottom end and subtle and etched drum machine hi-hat sound. Its midband has an expansive soundstage and surprisingly mature treatment of female vocals. Moving to some heavier rock courtesy of Neil Young's *Like A Hurricane*, it doesn't put a foot wrong handling the close-miked, edgy and shrill vocals with surprising elan. The result is a big, powerful and engaging sound with plenty of nice details.

More surprising – given the price – is the emotion coming off the record. It really catches the windswept feel of the song, with those plaintive vocals and big rock riffs. It also proves more able to reach inside a recording than

It has a clean, lively, upbeat character that enjoys music with a strong beat

expected. I find myself listening to some rather dour new-wave from Japan (the band not the country), and really get into its enveloping and atmospheric sound. *Swing* isn't a rousing number at the best of times and I'm normally only able to enjoy it through higher resolution speakers, costing three or four times the price.

Conclusion

More than just a range refresh, B&W's baby box has had new life breathed into it, in a rather skilful and expert way. The new 607 S2 Anniversary seems more than the sum of its parts, when budget standmounters are so often less. It's enjoyable and highly engaging across all types of music, communicating just enough of what's really important to remind us why we love music. At this modest price you can't say fairer than that, so it comes heartily recommended. **DP**

Bowers & Wilkins

607 S2 Anniversary Edition

This entry-level standmount is a conventional two-way design with a rear-firing bass reflex port. Most visible are the new finishes; the existing matte white and black are joined by cherry and oak – the former for Asia and the latter for the rest of the world.

Starting with the tweeter, the 607 S2 Anniversary uses its predecessor's 25mm aluminium dome high-frequency unit, that's decoupled from the main cabinet. Moving down, and the 130mm mid/bass Continuum cone – first introduced on the 800 Series Diamond and subsequent 700 Series – appears here in a less expensive form, but still features its main benefits. It crosses over with the tweeter at 4kHz, and uses the same chassis, motor and anti-resonance plug as that of the 700 Series. A set of bi-wireable binding posts and Flowport reflex port complete the picture.

Sound quality

Considering its price tag, the 607 S2 does more than expected – and better than any previous entry-level B&W standmount. It has a clean, lively, upbeat character that enjoys music with a strong beat, yet there's enough delicacy to enrapture the listener with more subtle and/or cerebral music. Compared with the company's budget boxes of five to 10 years ago, it's far less coloured too – letting you hear more into the mix.

Let's address the basics first. Its bass is decent; taut and tuneful. The bottom end never draws attention to itself, letting you focus on its capable midband and treble. High frequencies are about as crisp and smooth as it's possible to get from a budget metal dome. Hi-hat cymbals for example, sound more lustrous and sparkly than all its price rivals – yet there's never any harshness to speak of.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Enjoyable, engaging sound; classy treble

DISLIKE: Needs plenty of power to give its best

WE SAY: Lots of sound per pound with some impressive fine details thrown in for good measure



BAT

“OUTSTANDING!”



“...an imperious blend of lush looks, audiophile engineering and stellar performance across all musical flavours.”

VK-3500 amp, Hi Fi News September 2021



“more delicacy than my ears could process...Musical? Naturalistic? Intimate? Take your pick.”

VK-80i amp, Hi Fi News December 2021



“this unashamedly expensive converter gets you closer to the music without you even realising it’s doing it. Just let it weave its magic...”

REX 3 DAC, Hi Fi News May 2020

Balanced Audio Technology
balanced.com

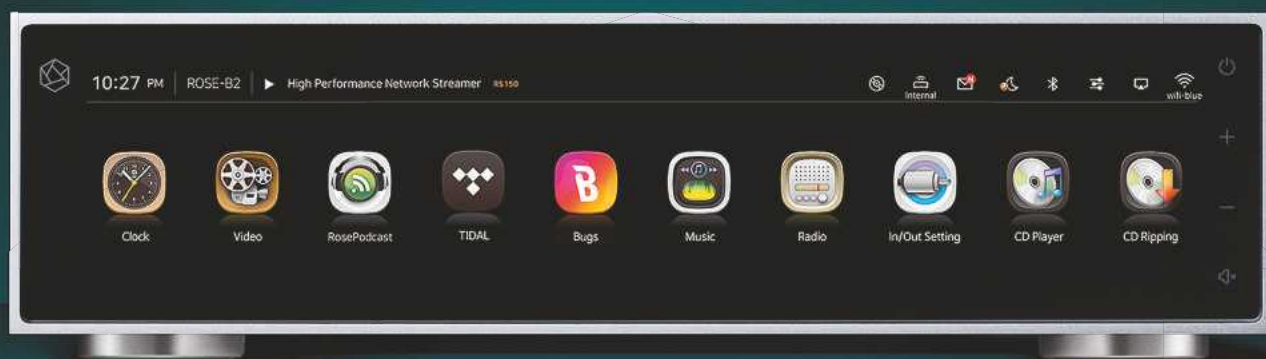
karma
audio - visual

The Dream Stream.

Meet the HiFi Rose RS150

Network Streamer £3899

various multimedia services with high-quality sound and ultra-high-resolution video
available now from Elite Audio UK



HiFi Rose RS150 Network Streamer £3899

(available from Elite Audio UK)

But don't just take OUR word for it...

"This is an accomplished player / DAC... a decidedly impressive debut for the Korean brand."

HiFi News



"...more than just a beautifully designed component ...the RS150 back ups the stunning aesthetics with a performance to match."

HiFi Choice



"...an accomplished—and extremely flexible—player/DAC that will play everything from Bluetooth streams to hi-res content"

EISA Awards



Subscribe to our email newsletters

for real, monthly **EXCLUSIVE OFFERS**—plus latest news and reviews of our products...



Exclusively Yours.

You won't find these anywhere else...

"In a word: wow!"

Ken Kessler | **HiFi News**



Manley CHINOOK Phono Stage £2699
(available exclusively in UK from Elite Audio UK)



Electrocompaniet ECi80D Integrated Amplifier £2899
(available exclusively in UK from Elite Audio UK)

"...if you get it, little else will do!"

David Vivian | **HiFi Choice**

ask about our unique **risk-free** 30 Day Home Trial

info@eliteaudiouk.com
eliteaudiouk.com | 0800 464 7274

OOR by **Ferrum** a star is born



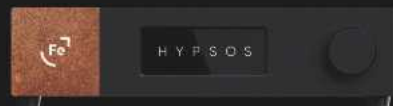
Ferrum **OOR**, the only headphone amplifier with a soul

We tasked our most talented engineer with an impossible goal: create the perfect headphone amplifier. The result is an alchemical masterstroke with part of his soul forged right into it, and it blew us away. OOR is a ground-up design without precedent, created from a profound exploration of analogue audio in its purest form. In true Ferrum style, OOR marries understated looks with sophisticated power delivery and amplifier technologies, delivering ultra-low distortion, huge dynamics and unrivaled detail. For those who want to go even further in unleashing unheard musicality, OOR is, of course, designed to pair perfectly with our recently awarded HYPPOS Hybrid Power System.



Ferrum **OOR** Headphone Amplifier

- Truly balanced design • > 8W into 60Ω (bal. mode) output power •
- headphone output impedance < 0,3 Ω • 21,7 x 20,6 x 5,0 cm •



Ferrum **HYPPOS** Hybrid Power System

- Linear/switching PSU design • 110 ~ 240V AC in •
- 5 ~ 30V DC out • 6A/80W • 21,7 x 20,6 x 5,0 cm •

AUDIO

hi-fi news
EDITORS
CHOICE

hvt
HiFi Video Test
★★★★★

6
six magazine
AWARD

HIFI STATEMENT
NETMAGAZINE

HIFI PIG
MAGAZINE

STEREOD

30-day Free Trial • Free Support • Free Extended 3-year Warranty

More info on www.ferrum.audio



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins
606 S2 Anniversary
Edition

PRICE
£600

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
190 x 345 x 300mm

FEATURES
• 25mm aluminium
dome tweeter
• 165mm
Continuum cone
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
B&W Group Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowers-wilkins.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 475

the great man's Fender Jazz Bass threaten to overwhelm the B&W.

Poogie Bell's muscular drumming comes across as fast, potent and unfettered throughout. Rhythmically fluent and surefooted, this is a speaker that lets the music flow and, more importantly, locks you into the experience. It's just as skilled at painting a stereo image of palpable solidity in a space curtailed in neither width nor depth and with excellent separation of instruments, performers and studio effects, however dense and busy the mix becomes.

Treble is open and detailed, neither too forward nor reticent and gifted a well-judged sense of energy and air and good tonal colour and shading. Joni Mitchell's voice portrays all its smoky, wistful splendour on *A Case Of You*, the sympathetically warm and expressive production generously rendered, not least in the handling of the achingly lush backdrop of strings. Long-term listenability, the knack of keeping you involved and invested in whatever is playing, is a huge plus that wasn't perhaps always nailed by its more ebullient predecessor. Overall, the S2 Anniversary Edition's sound is transparent, even-handed and gifted a dynamic dexterity that's every bit as impressive as it is likable.

Conclusion

Something of an education in demonstrating what a few, well-targeted tweaks can do, until listening to the 606 S2 Anniversary Edition I'd have happily recommended the previous 606 to anyone looking to spend £500 to £600. This update, with apparently the mildest of running mods, changes the game entirely. It's a smoother, more refined and resolute operator that sounds still more assured and expensive. With a commensurately mild running mod, I revise my recommendation thus: right now, I can't think of a better way to spend up to £800 on a standmount speaker. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: The already terrific 606 refined and elevated; better finish; generous price

DISLIKE: Nothing of note at the price

WE SAY: As good as it gets at £600 and some way above



Bowers & Wilkins

606 S2 Anniversary Edition

Just two years after launching its 606 standmount, B&W hits us with the S2 Anniversary Edition. There are changes to the cosmetics and inside, but the 165mm Continuum cone mid/bass driver has been carried over from the 606 unchanged. The 25mm 'Decoupled Double Dome' reinforced aluminium dome tweeter is said to have been "refined and upgraded" while the crossover sees some action with components such as inductors and bypass capacitors swapped for superior items inherited from the 700 series Signature range, one tier up. The mid/bass driver's motor system and chassis is slimmed down from the one serving the 706 and doesn't have its neodymium magnet. Similarly, the tweeter's aluminium dome lacks the 700 series' rigidity-enhancing carbon coating and the special housing that incorporates heat-sinks behind the dome. But it does use a neodymium magnet and wears a new grille mesh from the 700 series.

Sound quality

If I had a qualm with the 606 when I reviewed it in 2018 it was that its tweeter, while super clear, fast and detailed, could sometimes sound a little 'obvious'. For example, on Christine And The Queens' *Girlfriend* from the album *Chris*, the 606 would push into mild sibilance (a lot of 'sss' going on, admittedly) while the S2 Anniversary stays silky smooth. It's amazing the difference a few ostensibly modest tweaks can make. As the listening session winds on, it dawns that the new 606 iteration is a subtly more refined, couth and discriminating performer than its predecessor ever was.

As before, bass is a class act – supple and plausibly weighted, nicely textured and agile. It smoothly extends in an unforced, easy-breathing way, without sounding as if the low notes are being squeezed from a tube. Marcus Miller's deep groove fret runs on *Power* are crisply articulated and controlled and not even the deepest of deep brown, visceral twangs from



Falcon Acoustics LS3/5a Gold Badge

As legendary speakers go, the BBC-developed LS3/5a has to be right near the top of the list, and Falcon isn't the first company to draw upon it for inspiration. It helps, of course, if your new/retro BBC-spec mini monitor is the product of a company founded by Malcolm Jones, the man responsible for designing, developing and engineering the original LS3/5a's KEF B110 woofer and T27 tweeter.

The imperative to stick to the original recipe saw Falcon source some of the remaining Tygan grille cloth from Denmark while the Baltic ply with Beech fillets for the cabinets was a little easier to locate in the UK. But these were just peripheral considerations. For true authenticity and building on its unique use of newly manufactured B110 and T27 drivers, Falcon completed its Silver Badge LS3/5a with the original 15ohm crossover.

But it couldn't leave it at that and, as a running upgrade to its LS3/5a production, elected to include a few material substitutes, in particular polypropylene film capacitors standing in for the now unavailable polycarbonate items. Along with ultra-low inductance resistors, the

revised components are mounted on a new multi-layer FL6/23 printed circuit board hand made to BBC/Falcon specs in the UK/EU and hand assembled by Falcon. Thus installed from January 2020, the Silver Badge became the Gold you see before you.

Sound quality

I initially wonder if I should try to choose a front-end system to stoke some synergy with what I've read about the baby BBC monitor's strengths and weaknesses. But in the end I decide it's far more relevant to see what it makes of the modern digital and solid-state components I usually listen to. Currently that's an Audiolab 6000 CDT (HFC 447) CD transport, Chord Electronics Hugo TT2 (HFC 468) DAC and Hegel H120 (HFC 460) amp, all connected together with Nordost cables.

To dial myself in, I dig out DALI's Spektr 2 (HFC 441), a brilliant budget box that is fast, fun and entertaining with very decent detail and good bass for its size – about the same height, but a little deeper than the LS3/5a. It'll get me in the ballpark, I reason, and possibly embarrass the Falcon in some areas as over achieving cheapies are sometimes wont to do.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Falcon Acoustics
LS3/5a Gold Badge

PRICE
£2,475

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
5.35kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
190 x 305 x 165mm

FEATURES
• 19mm Falcon
T27 dome tweeter
• 138mm Falcon
B110 mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity
83dB/1W/1m
(15ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Falcon Acoustics

TELEPHONE
01865 358001

WEBSITE
falconloudspeakers.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 470

Almost unbelievably, my first impression is of sonics approaching the best I've heard in the room, irrespective of speaker size, with exquisite tonal balance, low distortion and a soundstage that, avoiding the common trick of being aggressively projected, has startling in-room presence, falling back behind the plane of the speaker with a depth and breadth that extends far beyond the walls. Playing Queen's *Invisible Man* – maybe not the most flattering opener for a speaker praised for its handling of small ensembles and chamber music – the sound is anything but scaled down to suit, making immediate musical connection through a combination of transparency, extraordinary precision, focus and a phenomenally open and resolute midband. All right, stadium loudness isn't a starter, but the song's signature shrieking synth stabs arrive with so much bite and dynamic intent, they make me jump. True, there isn't much bass weight, but it doesn't seem to matter, so good is the drive, speed, texture, articulation and tunefulness of the lower registers. If it were Kate Bush or Sarah Bareilles sounding so astoundingly, seductively intimate, I wouldn't really be all that surprised. The sheer enjoyability of a clearer, leaner, lighter take on Queen, however, comes as a genuine shock.

Conclusion

The Gold Badge can sometimes seem a little bright and hard edged with certain electronics and material. I'm sure more sympathetic matching will fix that without detracting from its midband magic and ability to sprinkle a little stardust on all kinds of music. Contrary to expectations, this take on the LS3/5a is a very relevant and contemporary-sounding speaker. It may have its limitations, but more importantly it's capable of exquisite results and, as such, comes very highly recommended indeed. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: An LS3/5a on top of its game, utterly engaging and rewarding

DISLIKE: Lacks the loudness and bass of a more modern design

WE SAY: Very far from a one-trick pony, arguably the ultimate small-room speaker



SEVENoaks
SOUND & VISION

SALE

The Sevenoaks SALE is now on with great savings instore and online.
For all the SALE offers and the latest prices call our sales line on 0333 016 4775
seven days a week, contact your local store or visit www.ssav.com



FREE

**SENNHEISER
CX TRUE WIRELESS**

**BLUETOOTH IN-EAR
HEADPHONES
WORTH £119.00 WITH
SELECTED HI-FI
AND HOME CINEMA
PURCHASES OVER £300**

Put sound first, the Sennheiser CX True Wireless Bluetooth in-ear headphones.

Sennheiser have put 75 years of leading audio technology into the new CX True Wireless earbuds. They deliver crystal-clear sound with deep bass you can easily adjust to your personal taste.

While stocks last. Not in conjunction with any other offer.
Ask instore or visit www.ssav.com for details.

SOME BRANDS/PRODUCTS ARE NOT AVAILABLE AT ALL STORES. SPECIAL OFFERS ARE NOT IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANY OTHER OFFER (NICWAOO).

ADVERT VALID UNTIL 31/01/2022. E&OE

click &
collect

Pay by Finance

www.ssav.com

£279



£299

NAD • C 538 / C 316BEE V2 • CD / AMPLIFIER

This combination has everything necessary for musical enjoyment. Includes six inputs (including a MM phono input), one set of speakers, a headphone jack, and remote control.

ESSAV .COM




WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST CD PLAYER
Marantz CD6007
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
Marantz PM6007

MARANTZ • CD6007 / PM6007 • CD / AMPLIFIER

This combination is an ideal choice for those ready to take the next step in their 2-channel Hi-Fi system. Includes digital and analogue inputs (including a MM phono input).

ESSAV .COM




WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST Hi-Fi SYSTEM
Marantz PM7000N

MARANTZ • PM7000N • STREAMING AMPLIFIER

Discover the PM7000N, the first Marantz Current Feedback integrated Hi-Fi amplifier with HEOS Built-in technology.

£2499




WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
£7000-£8000
Naim NAIT XS3

NAIM • NAIT XS 3 • AMPLIFIER

Offers much of the performance of Naim's reference quality SUPERNAIT 3 in a simpler, slimmer package combining a 70W power amplifier with five analogue inputs plus a phono stage.

£2499



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST MUSIC STREAMER
OVER £1000
Naim ND5 XS 2

NAIM • ND5 XS 2 • STREAMER

Uses Naim's innovative streaming platform with an expanded feature set including Roon compatibility and multiroom streaming.

NEW **£1495**



ROKSAN • ATTESSA BLUOS STREAMING AMPLIFIER

All the power of the Atessa integrated amp, with the control of BluOS multi-room audio technology giving easy access to all your devices, from TVs to turntables, from consoles to CD transports.

£1299



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST MUSIC STREAMER
£1000-£2000
Arcam ST60

ARCAM • ST60 • MUSIC STREAMER

Enables audio streaming from all of the major services and works with Air Play 2, Google Cast, fully decodes MQA and is Roon ready.

£2699



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST Hi-Fi SYSTEM
OVER £1000
Naim Uniti Atom

NAIM • UNITI ATOM HDMI • STREAMING SYSTEM

Naim Uniti Atom is perfect as a high-end main system or even for use in the kitchen or study, where space is at a premium.

NEW **£1299**



NAD • C 700 • BLUOS STREAMING SYSTEM

An ideal all-in-one solution for the streaming age. Just connect your speakers, then select the music you want to hear using the intuitive BluOS app on your smartphone, tablet, PC, or Mac.


NEW **£2199**



NAD • M10 V2 • BLUOS STREAMING SYSTEM

The new NAD Masters M10 V2 combines hi-res music streaming with state-of-the-art amplification to make it an all-in-one solution that will transport you to your favourite musical destination.

£3999



EISA AWARDS 2020-2021
Best Product
SMART AMPLIFIER
NAD Masters M33

NAD • M33 • BLUOS STREAMING AMPLIFIER

This 200W streaming amplifier features Purifi's Ultra-Quiet Amplification Technology, BluOS multi-room streaming, a 32-bit DAC, full MQA decoding and Dirac room correction.

£189



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST TURNTABLE UNDER £200
Pro-Ject Primary E

PRO-JECT • PRIMARY E • TURNTABLE

A Plug & Play design with pre-adjusted tracking force and anti-skating for the included Ortofon OM cartridge.

NEW **£995**



ROKSAN • ATTESSA TURNTABLE

Roksan's newest spin on one of the oldest Hi-Fi technologies featuring a uni-pivot tonearm and switchable phono stage.

£899



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST TURNTABLE £700-£1000
Technics SL-1500C

TECHNICS • SL-1500C • TURNTABLE

Direct drive turntable with integrated MM phono amp for easy connectivity. Highly acclaimed Ortofon 2M Red cartridge fitted.

SALE

The Sevenoaks SALE is now on with great savings instore and online.

For all the SALE offers and the latest prices call our sales line on 0333 016 4775 seven days a week, contact your local store or visit

www.ssav.com

BEYERDYNAMIC AMIRON HOME HEADPHONES

ESSAV .COM



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST WIRELESS OVER-EAR HEADPHONES OVER £500
Beyerdynamic Amiron

SONY WH-1000XM4 WIRELESS HEADPHONES

£259



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST WIRELESS OVER-EAR HEADPHONES
£200-£500
Sony WH-1000XM4

GRADO SR325X HEADPHONES

NEW **ESSAV .COM**



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST WIRELESS OVER-EAR HEADPHONES
£500-£1000
Grado SR325X

SONY WF-1000XM4 IN-EAR HEADPHONES

NEW **£249**



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST WIRELESS IN-EAR HEADPHONES
£100-£200
Sony WF-1000XM4



**MONITOR AUDIO
SILVER 200 7G**
The Monitor Audio Silver 200 7G are perfectly suited to most living rooms, these speakers are designed to make extraordinary sound part of your everyday world.

NEW £1149



**BOWERS & WILKINS
606 S2 ANNIVERSARY EDITION**
Takes the award-winning 606 formula and improves upon it with an enhanced crossover design and a beautiful new finish. 606 is now even more appealing to even more music lovers.

£649 **WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021**
BEST FLOORSTANDING SPEAKER £1000-£1500
Bowers & Wilkins 606 S2

Price excludes speaker stands



PMC • TWENTY5.23i
Discreet and elegant floorstanding speaker, perfect for filling medium-sized rooms with transparent, authentic dynamics and effortlessly extended bass. It will make the best of both affordable and high-end electronics and amplification.

£3995



**BOWERS & WILKINS
805 D4**
The most compact model in the 800 Series Diamond™ range, but it's still packed with advanced technologies, including the Diamond dome tweeter and the Solid Body Tweeter-on-Top.

NEW £7000

Price excludes speaker stands



**WHARFEDALE
DIAMOND 12.3**
With enhanced presence and power, the DIAMOND 12.3 is refined and the perfect, affordable floorstanding speaker for 2-channel hi-fi systems, or part of a seriously impressive home theatre system.

NEW £499

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
FLOORSTANDING SPEAKER
Wharfedale Diamond 12.3
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



WHARFEDALE • EVO4.4
Wharfedale's new EVO4.4 has grown out of the extensive research and development that produced the ELYSIAN flagship loudspeakers and borrows much of the technology involved in ELYSIAN.

NEW £1199

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
BEST FLOORSTANDING SPEAKER £1000-£1500
Wharfedale EVO 4.4



Q ACOUSTICS • 3030i
Engineered to offer a wonderfully balanced sound from a light-weight, discreet and gorgeously built cabinet, packed with the latest technological advances from Q Acoustics.

ESSAV .COM



**BOWERS & WILKINS
607 S2 ANNIVERSARY EDITION**
Offering power and scale that belies its compact form, the 607 delivers exceptional resolution and musicality and is ideal for stereo or surround sound use.

£499 **WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021**
BEST FLOORSTANDING SPEAKER £1000-£1500
Bowers & Wilkins 607 S2



KEF • LS50 META
The first loudspeaker to employ Metamaterial Absorption Technology. Once again demonstrating KEF's unrelenting passion for developing new technologies to improve your listening experience.

£1099 **WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021**
STANDOUT SPEAKERS
KEF LS50 Meta
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



LS50 Wireless II
Wireless Speakers
£2499

The result of three years intensive research and development, the new KEF LS50 Wireless II is a fully active wireless stereo speaker system that delivers pristine, KEF signature sound coupled with great usability and high-performance wireless capability.



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
SYSTEMS
KEF LS50 Wireless II
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



MU-SO Qb (2ND GEN)
Wireless Speaker
£899

Mu-so Qb 2nd Generation features a totally new streaming platform, as seen in Naim's flagship network-connected products, to deliver the latest music streaming technology plus true hi-fi performance.



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
WIRELESS SPEAKERS
Naim Mu-so Qb 2nd Generation
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

BLUESOUND

Bluesound is an award-winning wireless hi-res sound ecosystem that lets you play music in any and every room throughout your home.

NEW NODE £549
Hi-Res Wireless Music Streamer

NEW POWERNODE £849
Hi-Res Music Streamer / Amplifier

VAULT 2i £1199
Hi-Res Music Server / CD Ripper

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
MUSIC STREAMERS
Bluesound Node
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



NEW

SONOS

The Sonos smart home sound system delivers all the music on earth, in every room, with warm, full-bodied sound that's crystal clear at any volume. Sonos can fill your home with music by combining Hi-Fi sound and rock-solid wireless in a smart system that is easy to set-up, control and expand.

PRICES FROM £179



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021
MULTI-ROOM SYSTEM
Sonos
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

FOR THE LATEST PRICES AND OFFERS VISIT WWW.SSAV.COM OR CONTACT YOUR LOCAL STORE

Brighton 01273 733338
Bristol 0117 974 3727
Bromley 020 8290 1988
Cambridge 01223 304770
Chalfont St Peter 01753 255110
Chelsea 020 7352 9466
Cheltenham 01242 241171
Epsom 01372 720720

Guildford 01483 536666
Holborn 020 7837 7540
Kingston 020 8547 0717
Loughton 020 8532 0770
Maidstone 01622 686366
Manchester 0161 834 0267
Nottingham 0115 988 1703
Oxford 01865 241773

Reading 01189 477093
Sevenoaks 01732 459555
Solihull 0121 709 0606
Swiss Cottage 020 7722 9560
Tunbridge Wells 01892 531543
Wetherby 01937 586886
Witham (Essex) 01376 501733
Yeovil 01935 700078

*THESE STORES ARE FRANCHISED AND OPERATE UNDER A LICENCE AGREEMENT TO SEVENOAKS SOUND & VISION. VISIT WWW.SSAV.COM FOR STORE ADDRESSES, OPENING HOURS AND BRANDS STOCKED.

Read the bumper awards issue of

**SEVENOAKS
SELECT**

digital interactive magazine today!

www.ssav.com/select



Please Note: Some brands/products are not available at all stores. Special/added value offers are not in conjunction with any other offer (NICWAOO).

ADVERT VALID UNTIL 31/01/2022. E&OE

SEVENOAKS
SOUND & VISION



Fyne Audio F1-8

You might need to move a few things around to accommodate this giant standmount, but it's well worth the effort

You might well wonder why the F1-8 speaker exists. There is, after all, the £3,000 F1-5 which represents such a natural sweet spot for Fyne's best-game standmount, it would be easy to accuse the technically identical but considerably larger and bulkier F1-8 of gratuitous overkill, especially if you'd just bear-hugged its 15.2kg barrel-shaped form onto its almost equally weighty FS8 stand. There are chunky standmounts that wing it – say, JBE's L82 Classic (overleaf) or Q Acoustics' freakishly deep 3030i (HFC 472) – but this is a giant, look-at-me statement and the most imposing, daylight-obscuring, aesthetically challenging standmount I've ever had in my listening room.

After some precursory chin rubbing, I grow to like its unique shades of monocular Minion look and feel more comfortable with its conspicuous

presence – perhaps the better to admire the fabulous standard of build and the only finish on offer, a gorgeous mélange of walnut, burr walnut and leather. The visible and tactile luxury stands comparison with high-end rivals costing multiples of its £6,000 price tag.

Of course, Fyne Audio had already revealed the technical content of its top drawer with its F1-10 and F1-12 floorstanding flagships, the latter costing a properly grown-up £28,000. The good news is that the F1 message is the same across the range. For Fyne the line incorporates the best versions of its patented tech, including IsoFlare point source drivers, twin cavity reflex loading and BassTrax Tractrix profile LF diffuser system, heavyweight machined aluminium plinth and an extensively braced, high-density pressed birch plywood cabinet.

A 25mm magnesium dome compression tweeter sits in the throat of a 200mm multi-fibre mid/bass driver. This arrangement forms the coaxial IsoFlare unit. The driver's moving parts are built around a rigid cast aluminium chassis, which is good for damping out unwanted vibration and resonance, while the vented rear chamber in the centrally mounted tweeter's Neodymium magnet is said to place low-frequency resonance well below the crossover region. Addressing potential distortion higher up the frequency range is the tweeter's rigid magnesium dome, which is claimed to push the initial break-up mode well beyond audibility.

As well as looking neat, sonic advantages include much more precise time alignment between the drivers and more even dispersion, widening the listening sweet spot without squandering stereo focus and precision. Energy is radiated 'isotropically' with constant directivity, consistent with the flared surface of the main driver's multi-fibre cone. The targeted ideal outcome is that sound is produced as if emanating from a single point in space.

As with the Fyne F502SP floorstander (p14), the main driver's

It conjures scale and dynamic freedom that'd be remarkable from a floorstander

distinctively contoured 'FyneFlute' rubber surround aims to nullify unwanted mechanical energy in the cone, leading to a more cleanly detailed delivery.

The F1-8's curved cabinet is an exceptional thing. Made from a composite of hardwoods and dressed in a classy walnut veneer with a burr walnut inlay running from front to top, a deep and incredibly smooth high-gloss varnish seals the deal. The fillet of soft leather garlanding the driver is an extra feel-good touch. At the base, the substantial machined aluminium sandwich plinth houses Fyne's BassTrax system, which comprises a downward-firing port and cone-shaped Tractrix diffuser – the aim being full 360° dispersion of the wavefront for better room integration and more flexible placement. Round the back, the bi-wire speaker panel features a fifth terminal to ground the driver chassis and reduce the influence of RF interference in the circuit. The knob just below the driver on the front

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Fyne Audio F1-8

PRICE
£6,000

ORIGIN
Scotland

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
15.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
280 x 470 x 441mm

FEATURES
• 25mm magnesium
dome tweeter
• 200mm multi-fibre
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
91dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Fyne Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0141 4284008

WEBSITE
fyneaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 473

panel is called the Presence Control and let's you adjust output in the 2.5kHz – 5kHz 'presence' region – useful for tailoring the frequency response to your room. For my larger listening room the '0' flat setting produces best results.

Fyne's all-metal £1,000 FS8 stand doesn't just look the part, it bolts the speaker to its top plate, making a seriously stable – and aesthetically harmonised – structure.

Sound quality

When it comes to speakers, I suppose the holy grail is to have your cake and eat it. There are two possibilities. One is a large, broad bandwidth floorstander with the agility, focus and coherence of a tautly built, monitor-class standmount. Not an easy thing. The other is a meticulously on-point standmount with the scale, authority, dynamic reach and a strong hint of the former's bass extension. No easier. But the F1-8 gets as close to pulling it off as any standmount I've heard.

Sensitivity of 91dB and a nominal 8ohm impedance suggest an easy drive, but the F1-8 naturally cries out for a quality system. Assembling the best supporting cast at my disposal, digital feeds are handled by Chord Electronics' Hugo TT2 DAC (HFC 468) while amplification duties are shared between Hegel's Class A/B H120 (HFC 460) and Primare's Class D I25 Prisma (HFC 461) integrated

Bi-wiring and a terminal to ground the driver chassis feature around the back



amps. Not high-end enough to require oxygen, but a great fit as it transpires.

What's clear from the start, music has that 'natural fibre that breathes' quality – nothing seems contrived or dialled-up to impress. The speaker conjures scale and dynamic freedom that would be remarkable in a strapping tower, but also incorporates an ability to unearth detail right down to the noise floor and project solid, full-blooded images into the room with almost tangible dimensionality and exacting precision. On Chick Corea's compilation of jazz/classical

The fillet of soft leather garlanding the driver is an extra feel-good touch

live performances, *Play*, the grand piano simply sounds real with thrilling attack, harmonic colour and texture and lower octave power – a quite stunning achievement for a standmount, even one as rotund as the F1-8.

It doesn't end there. Fire up the LSO playing *Mahler 5*, and the thunderous climaxes never sound constrained, but are delivered with a compelling sense of might and impetus. The speaker's outstanding low-frequency chops play a part here. The bass is deep and weighty with a sumptuous quality missing from most standmount rivals. Yet it's also remarkably spry and supple, incapable of dragging a beat.

If the F1-8 must give ground anywhere it's in the high treble, which isn't quite as silky and airy as the best circa-£6k standmounts (those equipped with a ribbon tweeter). That said, the upper octaves are transparent enough to give instruments a convincing leading-edge incisiveness and realistic timbral sheen.

I'm reminded of those sci-fi film DVD extras that show how the CGI special effects are created from initial wire renderings that establish the structure and action to the final layers that complete the colour palate, surface textures, lighting and shadows. Listening to the F1-8 after smaller standmounts – however sonically gifted – is like going from a prior rendering to that final, as seen on the big screen, result. Result indeed.

Conclusion

So there it is, size really does matter – the more so, it seems, if you're a standmount. Space saving isn't an option in this case. Mated to its all-but-essential dedicated stand, the F1-8 has a footprint and height every bit the equal of a large floorstander, and you'd better love the look because it isn't going to melt into the background.

But if you hanker after the best of both worlds – one design that successfully merges the specific strengths of top-drawer standmounts and floorstanders – then you really should try to hear Fyne's flagship standmount. It isn't perfect, but it is dynamic, dextrous and deeply satisfying with all types of music. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Superb attempt at best-of-all-worlds sound quality, build and finish
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Size and appearance might be a problem for some
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: If your dream loudspeaker is a floorstander, this might change your mind
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

OVERALL



STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS



JBL L82 Classic

JBL must have felt it couldn't go wrong with the second coming of its L100, a reworking of arguably one of its most iconic designs. Although fluent in all the key hi-fi metrics, the new L100 Classic retains some of the original's confidence, warmth and fun.

At £2,000, the L82 Classic before you is half the price of the L100 Classic and, if not quite half the speaker, is notably more compact and so easier to accommodate. It teams the L100's 25mm titanium dome tweeter and waveguide with a 200mm white paper pulp cone mid/bass driver. It might be a driver shy, but the distinctive wide baffle layout is much the same, incorporating a panel and dial that can be used to adjust the tweeter's output level while the tweeter itself is offset (to the inside or outside depending on which way round you position the speakers).

With the crossover point set at 1.7kHz, the tweeter takes on more of the workload than in the three-way L100 Classic where it isn't required until 3.5kHz. Unchanged between the models, however, the waveguide surrounding the dome is there to improve dispersion and slacken off the rigidity of the listening sweet spot.

Sound quality

Whatever its surroundings and partnering kit, the L82 Classic seems suffused with the performance of the music, even when aspects of reproduction are pulled in one direction or another. This is not something you can say of many speakers in my experience.

I settle on my smaller listening room, JBL's low-slung, upward tilted JS-80 stand (offset tweeters to the inside) and the warm tonal tilt of Electrocompaniet's ECI 80D Class A/B integrated amp (p64) with digital sources routed through Chord Electronics' Hugo TT2 DAC (HFC 468) and MoFi's StudioDeck+ turntable (HFC 466) teaming up with Chord's Huei phono stage (HFC 459) for vinyl. I reacquaint myself with everything from Lenny Kravitz to Diana Krall, not least because, in addition to its ability to play very loud without strain or harshness, the JBL doesn't shed its musical mojo at low-to-moderate volume levels – a much undervalued real-world asset.

Some speakers are world class in one or two areas and it's possible to derive huge pleasure from indulging their 'superpowers' while forgiving their shortcomings and the odd

omission. One such example is Falcon Acoustics' LS3/5a Gold Badge (p28), which all but mesmerised me prior to installing the L82 Classic. That it's able to make me smile following so much exposure to the Falcon's sheer sonic luminosity through the midband and treble speaks volumes, not because it's an LS3/5a kind of speaker, but precisely because it isn't.

No superpowers on show here except, perhaps, one. Charisma. The L82 Classic is a poor monitor. By the strictest definition of the term, its sound is a tad coloured. Resolution of fine detail isn't its calling card, either. If you want to hear how Trevor Horn sewed *Yes* and *Owner of A Lonely Heart* together at the mixing desk, look elsewhere. If, on the other hand, you want to know why he bothered, the JBL will take you on a stereo ride filled with energy, purpose, surprising subtlety, satisfying dynamic contrasts, a big and deep soundstage and truly great bass. You might even experience pangs of nostalgia for the way hi-fi sounded in the Seventies. But experience it better.

The bottom line is the L82 Classic won't unearth everything there is to know about a recording, but if there's anything good about it it will share it with spirit, elan and a generosity defined by its own character and not some notional ideal. A bit like Clint Eastwood, it's unchanging and transcends whatever it's playing.

Conclusion

The L82 Classic is not, I suspect, a speaker that will hit it off with the most demanding of audiophiles. It simply isn't transparent enough. And that's fine. There are plenty £2k alternatives with X-ray vision. As a speaker that does its thing with attitude and style – essentially amplifying the musical goodness in whatever it's fed and to hell with ultimate fidelity – it emphatically hits the spot and I applaud it for that. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
JBL L82 Classic
PRICE
£2,000
ORIGIN
China
TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker
WEIGHT
12.7kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
281 x 472 x 316mm
FEATURES
● 25mm titanium
dome tweeter
● 200mm paper
pulp mid/bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR
Harman
International
TELEPHONE
0161 2223325
WEBSITE
harman.com
REVIEWED
HFC 473

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Consistently rewarding sound; great bass; retro style

DISLIKE: Not a detail junkie; quite bulky

WE SAY: Think retro is a marketing gimmick? The L82 Classic will change your mind



KEF LS50 Wireless II

KEF has traditionally focused on more conventional passive speakers for the bulk of its product lines. Its decision to create an active version of the LS50 was shaped not so much as a challenger to more conventional active rivals, but to create a self-contained system built around one of its most successful recent designs.

The Wireless II takes the same raw ingredients as the passive LS50 Meta. It uses a single 150mm Uni-Q driver in each cabinet. Now in its 12th generation, the process of mounting a 25mm tweeter in the centre of the mid/bass driver improves the dispersion, imaging and phase characteristics of both drivers. To make the LS50 active, KEF fits 380W of amplification per speaker, with 100W allocated to the tweeter and 280W to the mid/bass driver. The design is a true active, with a DSP-based crossover called a Music Integrity Engine that allows for user adjustment to fit the space and position that the speaker is used in.

It has a 3.5mm input and is fitted with a 24-bit/384kHz-capable UPnP streamer combined with a coaxial digital, optical and HDMI ARC inputs.

You can also wirelessly stream via AirPlay 2, Google Cast and Bluetooth 4.2, and it's Roon Ready.

Sound quality

With the cabinets running wired both to my network and to each other and making use of Roon as a control point, the most obviously immediate impression is one of effortlessness. Pushed very hard indeed, the KEF can harden up a little but any volume levels you'll be hitting at this point will be seriously anti-social anyway.

Used within its considerable operating envelope, the LS50 Wireless II delivers on the design premise of both the driver and mounting. So long as your position relative to it forms a rough triangle, it images in a way that is beyond many rival stereo systems and leaves any one-box rival standing. The 24-bit/96kHz Qobuz stream of *Dead Sea* by Paris Jackson sees her vocals pushed forward and to the centre while the supporting instrumentation is arrayed around her in a space that extends both up and out from the cabinets.

The sumptuous 24-bit/96kHz download of Star's *Losing To You* is well controlled and believable and leaves Torquil Campbell's lovely vocal

turn sounding rich and emotional. But even when you change tack entirely and move to the crunching aggression of Royal Blood's *Boilermaker*, things remain civilised without losing the all-important boisterous energy of the track.

Something else that Royal Blood demonstrates is that the LS50 has phenomenal bass extension for a relatively small cabinet. The grunt of that on-board amplification is enough to ensure that it never fails to deliver bass you can feel as much as hear. No less importantly, this is fast, controlled and detailed. I have best results telling the Music Integrity engine the speakers are closer to the wall than they actually are. This sees a fractional drop in low-end extension, but tightens things up to the point where no time signature I listen to throws it off. Something else the KEF does very well is to ensure that all its features feel usable and usefully equivalent in performance terms. Sure, streaming Deezer over AirPlay lacks some of the definition and richness of Qobuz over UPnP, but the experience is more than listenable. The only real note of caution I'd extend with the wired functionality is practical rather than performative. With the inputs on the back of the speaker, some thought will need to be given to ensure your sources can reach it in a tidy fashion.

Conclusion

It's this strength in depth that makes the KEF so convincing. Maybe a few tweaks to the software would reap benefits, but I can't argue with the way it combines an extensive and practical spec that makes it an ideal one-stop shop with a level of overall performance that is outstanding. When you listen to the LS50 Wireless II it's easy to forget about the convenience angle and concentrate instead on the sensational sonic performance. It isn't cheap, but it's unquestionably a superb all-in-one system. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
KEF LS50 Wireless II

PRICE
£2,250

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Wireless active
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
20kg (boxed)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 305 x 311mm

FEATURES
• 380W internal
amplification
• 24-bit/384kHz and
DSD128 compatible
• Inputs: coaxial;
optical; analogue
• AirPlay 2, Google
Cast and Bluetooth
• Roon Ready

DISTRIBUTOR
KEF

WEBSITE
uk.kef.com

REVIEWED
HFC 479

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Superb sonic performance; build; practical and flexible

DISLIKE: Some minor control foibles

WESAY: A talented and impressively flexible system that delivers superb performance across its many features

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Kudos Cardea C10

PRICE
£3,500

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 350 x 270mm

FEATURES
• 29mm soft
dome tweeter
• 180mm doped
paper mid/bass
driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
87dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Kudos Audio

TELEPHONE
0138 8417177

WEBSITE
kudosaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 479

a performance when you close your eyes. The C10 finds order without losing the boisterousness.

This useful attribute is further aided by the performance of that customised tweeter. It has the perfectly judged ability to sound detailed – at times almost forensically so – airy and tonally believable, but without ever being hard or forward. The Cyrus amp takes few prisoners in this regard, but even with this as the source and playing the deliberately hard-edged *Tascam Tapes* by DeWolff, it's civilised without compromising on the 'raw and real' feeling of *Blood Meridian I*.

Give it something with high production values, like Sarah Jarosz's *Blue Heron Sessions*, and there's a liquid quality to the upper registers that even

The Kudos Cardea C10 sounds weighty, controlled and highly engaging

similarly priced rivals can struggle to recreate. Jarosz's delicate voice is the star of the show and something that is clearly the centre of attention. What's so joyous about the Cardea C10 is that all the other fine details are easy to discern, but never a distraction.

Substituting the Cyrus for a Naim Supernait 3 (HFC 456) – which is over a grand more – further demonstrates that it responds positively to being driven. When listening to large-scale material, the soundstage sits within the confines of the cabinet rather than extending out beyond it.

Conclusion

The C10 is a straightforward design executed with the highest quality materials so it combines clarity, detail and tonal realism with a sense of fun that then goes on to have an impressively forgiving edge. The latest upgrades make it even better still ●

Kudos Cardea C10

Kudos has been making the Cardea C10 since it was founded in 2006. As a testimony to how happy it is with the basic design, it is only now that it has seen some revisions. The fundamental layout remains the same. It's a two-way standmount with a 29mm soft dome tweeter and a 180mm doped paper mid/bass driver. A single rear port assists air management.

The major point of revision is the crossover. Operating with a 2.6kHz handover point between the two drivers, it's intended to be as simple as possible. Low frequencies are controlled by a first-order arrangement using a zero-distortion low-resistance Mundorf air-core inductor. The high-frequency section is filtered by a second-order electrical circuit using an ICW capacitor and another Mundorf air-core inductor and a Mundorf MOX resistor.

Sound quality

The claimed sensitivity feels attainable in practise, ensuring this is not terribly demanding to use. It does respond positively to being driven, however. The Cyrus i7 XR (HFC 473) is not a hugely powerful amp, but its ability to supply current is impressive. It ensures that the Kudos sounds weighty, controlled and highly engaging. The claimed in-room low-frequency response of 40Hz is achievable, even with the C10 used in something approaching free space.

There is also a wholly welcome turn of speed to the performance. The way that it gets stuck into the crunching riffs of Royal Blood's *Trouble's Coming* is pure and simple good fun. This is a speaker that works hard to never be the story in itself. In a matter of minutes, you are listening through it to the music rather than the hardware. This means that this dense and potent recording is unpicked into something that becomes

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Wonderful balance between impact, realism and tonal sweetness

DISLIKE: Slight lack of large-scale space

WE SAY: The C10 remains a superbly capable and flexible speaker that will delight many owners



Mission QX-2 MkII

As the larger of two standmounts the QX-2 MkII combines a 38mm ring dome tweeter with a 165mm 'long fibre composite' mid/bass driver, in the traditional Mission arrangement of the tweeter being the lower of the two.

The tweeter is largely unchanged from the original, although there is now a chamber at the back of it to capture rearward reflections, further improving performance. The mid/bass driver sees some more significant revisions. The continuous profile cone is now infused with long acrylic fibres intended to increase the stiffness of the diaphragm without significantly increasing the mass. As one of Mission's 'Dia Drive' units, there is a complete secondary diaphragm behind the visible one to which the voice coil and motor are connected. This now incorporates vents to prevent air build up and resonance. The distinctive 'Comb Tooth' surround designed to prevent reflections is retained and mimicked on the rear port, too.

The crossover that ties the drivers together has been tweaked, but retains its distinctive varying length signal path that further helps the time alignment of the two drivers.

Sound quality

Initially connecting the QX-2 MkII to a Cambridge Audio Edge A – an amp significantly more expensive than the speaker that is sufficiently transparent to get out of the way and reveal any of its traits – the good news is that there is little sign of regression over what went before. Where this is most notable is in terms of the cabinet colouration that is present in the performance. Martina Topley-Bird's striking vocal in *Pure Heart* is never beamed at the listener. Instead she is directly between the speakers, a perceivable presence in a well-formed soundstage.

The tonal realism is worthy of note too. The distinctive tweeter might have a point in the middle of it, but the treble response that it produces is impressively rich and free of any aural barbs. In contrast with some Mission designs of yesteryear, the balance on offer here ultimately favours a dose of refinement over the urgency that was once the case. This means that even hard-edged recordings like Placebo's *Infra-Red* are handled with impressive civility.

If you dig a little deeper, though, the QX-2 MkII reveals itself to still have some of the effortless get up and go of

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mission QX-2 MkII

PRICE
£400

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 320 x 300mm

FEATURES
• 38mm textile ring
dome tweeter
• 165mm acrylic
fibre mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG

WEBSITE
mission.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 482

Mission designs of old. Listening to the gloriously energetic *Mettavolution* by Rodrigo and Gabriella, it positively flows, latching onto rhythms and time signatures but stitching them into a performance that is refined, detailed and impressively three dimensional.

The only slight weakness concerns the bass. This is entirely in keeping with Mission's quoted figures, making this an impressively hard-hitting speaker given its size and price. The limitation such as it is comes with the very deepest notes. Some of the admirable control and speed that the speaker shows throughout the rest of the frequency response can be fractionally less apparent here. This means the pounding low end of *Galvanize* by The Chemical Brothers has a slight 'whoomp' to the lowest notes rather than a single tight strike.

This is less apparent if you pair the Mission with more affordable equipment that doesn't have quite the same low-end extension as the burly Cambridge Audio. Switching to a Rega Brio (HFC 446) and iFi Zen DAC Mk2 (HFC 480), pretty much every positive aspect of the performance is present in the same way as it was on the more expensive amp – suggesting that Mission has – entirely reasonably – striven to ensure its loudspeaker does its best work with more price-comparative electronics.

Conclusion

And, given this is far more likely to be the sort of partnering equipment it's used with, this helps the revised QX-2 to feel like a supremely well-adapted option. The performance it offers displays a fine balance of refinement, realism and excitement that is contained within a well-made, room-friendly cabinet. Mission's tune up of the QX Series isn't ground breaking, but there wasn't much wrong to begin with. This is a very fine speaker and one of the strongest sub-£500 options available. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Spacious, energetic sound; easy to drive; well made

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Fractionally sluggish low end; austere black finish

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: A fabulous affordable speaker that combines forgiving characteristics with excellent sonics

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS



PMC

twenty5.21i

As the smallest speaker in the twenty5i range that replaced the earlier twenty5 models in 2020, the 21i features an all-new tweeter using a combination of a small inner dome to deliver high frequencies with an outer ring surround that improves both dispersion and midrange performance. This means that the crossover to the 140mm mid/bass driver happens at 1.7kHz, which is extremely low. This is carried out via a revised crossover that features an upgraded PCB.

Key to the 21i (and every other PMC speaker) is the inclusion of a transmission line behind the mid/bass driver. 168cm long, it terminates in a forward-firing 'Laminair' port designed so that air leaves the transmission line in a linear way, avoiding eddies and vortices that can conspire to leave rivals sounding fractionally sluggish. This contributes to a claimed low-frequency roll-off of 46Hz. The port itself is not the most attractive piece of design going, but its location

on the front of the speaker cabinet makes the 21i commendably easy to place near a wall.

The rest of the design and aesthetics of the PMC are understated, but smart. The slim, angled cabinet is extremely well made and the rear section with its brushed metal plate and bespoke speaker terminals (that are extremely easy to use with a wide selection of cables) helps to impart a feeling of quality. You can reasonably contend that some other similarly priced designs are a little more showy than the 21i, but it's rather harder to argue that any of them are significantly better made.

Sound Quality

If you're expecting the transmission line of the twenty5.21i to impart significantly lower bass than its rivals, you are likely to wind up rather disappointed. Instead, what the PMC does very effectively is fill out the lower midrange and down in a way that ensures that the bass in Labi Siffre's *The Vulture* has some weight

and presence to it. That low crossover point is impossible to discern too. The tweeter might be working harder than some, but it is consistently refined without sounding dull.

Also worthy of note is just how effectively the 21i manages to create a compelling stereo image. Some older PMC designs require a fair amount of care with their positioning to do this, but here the standmount manages to place Agnes Obel and the piano between the two speakers rather than perceivably coming from them in *Fuel To Fire*. Something else it does extremely effectively is stitch micro details into the overall mix without ever being a distraction from the wider piece. Little sounds like Obel's keystrokes on the piano

Key to the 21i is the transmission line that's behind the mid/bass driver

and her breathwork are readily apparent and extremely impressive as a result.

With the brighter and more forward mastering of Gregory Porter's *Revival*, the PMC shows that it's more refined than older designs, but there's still a slightly hard edge to Porter's vocals that suggests a little care ought to be taken with partnering electronics.

Conclusion

The 21i is on much firmer ground in the way that it delivers the energy and life of Hayley Williams' *Simmer*. The complex bass sequence stops and starts with impressive immediacy that draws you into the performance. The PMC then goes on to do a fine job with Williams herself, using the excellent detail retrieval to ensure that she remain the centre of attention and possesses convincing presence and scale throughout. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
PMC twenty5.21i

PRICE
£2,200

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
162 x 340 x 284mm

FEATURES
● 19mm soft dome
tweeter with 34mm
rolled surround
● 140mm Woven
'G weave'
mid/bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity:
86.5dB/1W/1m
(8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
PMC Ltd.

WEBSITE
pmc-speakers.com

REVIEWED
HFC 476

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Detailed and rhythmically engaging; easy to place

DISLIKE: Has a fractionally hard edge; looks a little prosaic

WE SAY: A talented and entertaining performer across a wide selection of different material



Q Acoustics M20

Back in 2021, Q Acoustics unveiled its Q Active range of speakers, packed with wi-fi, voice control and other zeitgeist-surfing digital features. The speakers were pretty expensive, starting at £1,500 for the entry-level Active 200, so the company has produced a more affordable alternative in the shape of the M20, costing barely a quarter of the price.

Each speaker includes a 22mm decoupled tweeter, 125mm midrange driver and a passive bass radiator, providing a claimed 65W output (per cabinet) and frequency response of 55Hz-22kHz. The entire system is controlled and driven by the primary, powered speaker, which houses the 130W amp and provides pass-through power for its matching passive partner.

The M20 provides an impressive set of connectivity features for a system at this price, with RCA stereo input and 3.5mm aux-in. Digital connections include USB-B and optical, both of which support 24-bit/192kHz. Wireless connectivity comes in the shape of Bluetooth aptX HD with support for 24-bit/48kHz audio via Bluetooth, but not wi-fi. Q Acoustics explains that this is to keep the price down.

Sound quality

The M20 starts impressively, as I use the USB connection to play the MQA Master version of Max Richter's *The Waves* from Tidal on my laptop. A dramatic crash of waves immediately sets the scene, panning from speaker to speaker and laying claim to a wide, open soundstage that fills the room. The waves murmur all around, but Gillian Anderson's voice is planted firmly centre stage. There's an almost crystalline clarity to the electronic chimes that fade in behind Anderson's reading, but there's a sharp edge to them too, creating a sense of unease.

The M20 handles the languid introduction of the strings with great restraint, the sound swelling so gently that it almost merges with the whisper of the waves. But it can also flex its muscles and for the next 15 minutes displays a fine balance of power and restraint as the entire Deutsches Filmorchester and the piercing cries of soprano Grace Davidson slowly build to a dramatic climax. The sound quality is excellent, but it's the sense of balance and tension between all the sonic elements that really makes an impact.

The speaker adopts a more intimate tone as I switch to Damien Rice's

Eskimo. The M20 kicks back as Rice begins the gentle acoustic strumming, catching all the little finger scratches and breathy whisper of his vocals. It's a relaxed, warm sound, but when the bittersweet tones of the cello and violin enter on the chorus the M20 is easily able to fill the room and make it feel like a laid-back live performance. And, of course, there's the song's gonzo operatic finale, with soprano Doreen Curren belting away in Finnish. The speaker reveals its power here, unleashing Curren's roof-rattling vibrato in all its glory, and even at 50 percent volume I leap for the mute button – cursing the sluggish volume control. The operatic bombast does get a little fuzzy around the edges when I switch to Bluetooth, but that's more due to the low-fi, home-studio recording of the album than anything else. And, when I return to Richter's more slickly produced *The Waves* again, I struggle to spot any real loss in quality via the wireless connection.

The opening cymbal crash and the pace-setting drum beat of Blondie's *Rapture* are delivered with a crisp brevity that immediately draws you in, but the M20 can still relax enough to leave room for the jangling rhythm guitar that chugs away in the background. The detail is impressive, catching the light hand claps and rattling cowbell that accompany Debbie Harry's proto-rap towards the end.

Conclusion

I'm pleased to find the M20 lands a decent punch with the bouncing electronic bass that opens Billy Eilish's *Bad Guy*. However, the slower, more menacing bass effects that close the song feel a little weak, while the really deep electronic effects of *Prime Evil* by The Orb sound decidedly unthreatening and remind me that the subwoofer output on the back is there for a reason. Even so, the sheer precision and balance are impressive for such an affordable system. **CJ**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics M20

PRICE
£400

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Bluetooth
standmount
loudspeakers

WEIGHT
Powered
speaker: 5.5kg
Passive
speaker 5.1kg:

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
170 x 279 x 296mm

FEATURES
• 1x 22mm tweeter
• 1x 125mm
mid/bass driver
• Inputs: RCA;
3.5mm aux;
USB-B; optical
• Bluetooth 5.0;
aptX HD/Low
Latency; AAC

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 482

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

LIKE: Precise, balanced sound; wide range of inputs

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

DISLIKE: Bass could be stronger; no wi-fi; slow remote control

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

WE SAY: Even without wi-fi, the M20 still provides attractive sound quality and good value for money

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL





Sonus faber Lumina II

Sonus faber has already impressed with its Lumina V floorstander, but can the smaller Lumina II bottle the same magic?

When the Lumina range launched last year, it was a fairly compact affair, comprising the Lumina III floorstander (HFC 469) and the Lumina I standmount (HFC 479) together with a matching centre speaker. The missing numeral between the two speakers suggested that there might be more members of the family in the works and, sure enough, here is the Lumina II to fill that numerical gap and broaden the range.

The Lumina II is a two-way standmount that shares a fair amount of design thinking with the Lumina I. This is no bad thing as its shown itself to be a very entertaining little speaker with a great deal more shove and extension than you might reasonably expect from a cabinet that small. The Lumina II effectively takes the same basic ingredients, but makes them

more conventionally sized. At the same time, the price only rises by £200 which makes the bigger speaker look rather better value; although admittedly priced at the same point as some very talented opposition.

This means that it uses the same 29mm soft dome tweeter as the rest of the family and indeed the Sonetto range above it. Key to how this functions is the framework that Sonus faber calls Damped Apex Dome (DAD) that extends over the dome itself. The company says that this helps to control the break-up characteristics of the dome and improves dispersion. The tweeter itself is mounted in a shallow waveguide to further help with distortion. As with many modern designs, this tweeter is responsible for a huge proportion of the frequency response, with the crossover being set at 1.8kHz.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sonus faber
Lumina II

PRICE
£800

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
5.65kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
180 x 304 x 263mm

FEATURES
• 29mm silk
dome tweeter
• 1x 150mm
pulped paper
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Fine Sounds UK

WEBSITE
sonusfaber.com

REVIEWED
HFC 478

This hands over to a 150mm mid/bass driver, which looks to have more in common with the bass drivers of the Lumina III – which are bespoke to the Lumina – than the midrange unit, which is also shared with the Sonetto. This means it's doped paper with a conventional dust cap that works on the same principles as the Lumina I in that it's aided in its operation by a large, front-mounted slot port sited in the integrated plinth at the base of the cabinet. Being front-firing, it means that the Lumina II is less affected by proximity to walls, while the relatively large port aperture should keep noise

Across a spread of instrumental and vocal styles it doesn't put a foot wrong

levels low. Like other members of the Lumina range and relatively unusually at the moment, the Lumina has two sets of terminals for bi-wiring should you wish.

Aesthetically, the Lumina II uses the same design principles as the rest of the range and the manner in which the company has worked to make a speaker with flat sides so it still feels like a Sonus faber is something that continues to impress me. The decision not to use a veneer on the bulk of the cabinet and go for a leather wrap makes this change feel more deliberate

and less like a (completely necessary) need to reduce the complexity and cost of the most affordable range. In turn, the concentration of attention on the front panel helps it feel a little more special at the same time.

Something I didn't expect is that, unlike the previous Lumina I and III, the review sample has the gloss black front panel. I'd assumed this to be the poor relation of the three finishes available (the others being wenge and walnut), but that's really not the case. It leaves the Lumina II looking understated but handsome and, thanks to the same thin chrome strips around the mid/bass driver and tweeter mounts, it avoids looking dull too. Build quality is extremely good, with both the mechanical and aesthetic areas feeling solid and carefully assembled.

Sound quality

On paper, the Lumina II doesn't look like a massive step forward over the Lumina I. Sonus faber claims an extra 10Hz of low-end response and marginally improved sensitivity – which does seem to be the case in practise – and the same 40hm impedance as the rest of the range. Such is the wholly unexpected clout that the Lumina I possesses, the Lumina II doesn't feel significantly more weighty in general listening but there's meaningful extension below 50Hz in my room, which goes a long way to creating a believable weight and scale to the performance. It's not significantly more than its little brother but it is noticeable.

Where the big differences really make themselves felt is further up the frequency response. Enjoying the

24-bit/48kHz Qobuz stream of Moby's *Reprise*, the Lumina II creates a soundstage that gives the stunning rework of *Extreme Ways* the space it needs to become a believable performance. With Moby's vocals never being anything other than the focus of attention, there is space for the orchestration behind him to open up and fill the soundstage. This is a beautifully three-dimensional speaker as there is very little perception of cabinet colouration or even cabinet presence.

It's still very much a Sonus faber too. The tonal realism and richness is in keeping with the other Luminas and the brand as a whole. The magnificent 24-bit/96kHz FLAC of *Disappear* by Emily Barker And The Red Clay Halo

A £1,000 all-rounder likely to win many converts to the Sonus faber brand

is a deliberately congested recording, but the Lumina II does a fine job of unpicking it and ensuring that the supporting strings and harmonica all have an accurate and compelling voice of their own. Over the top of all it, Barker herself sounds glorious, the emotion and at times fury of her lyrics framed perfectly within this tonal richness. Across a wide spread of vocal and instrumental styles, the Lumina II doesn't put a foot wrong.

No less welcome is that, like the other members of the Lumina range, this is a more propulsive and entertaining speaker than you might

expect (although, not for the first time, I'm compelled to point out that Sonus faber's reputation for being 'a bit pipe and slippers' is more to do with people looking at its products and assuming they sound like they look). In part this is down to that clever porting arrangement. The Lumina II moves a surprising amount of air very quietly, which means that a nostalgic blast through Leftfield's *Open Up* is an energetic, head-nodding and thoroughly engaging experience. There are similarly priced rivals that go deeper and hit harder, but the Lumina II manages to hold its own.

In fact, the biggest challenger to the Sonus faber isn't from other companies but from its own ridiculously precocious little brother. The Lumina I subverts expectations so effectively as to what you think it's going to do that, when you get to the Lumina II – which behaves perhaps more in keeping with what you might expect from a speaker this size and shape – it can momentarily feel a little 'normal.' I think it's only fair to point out that the Lumina I I'd previously reviewed had departed before the Lumina II turned up and comparison was only possible revisiting material and looking through my listening notes. I suspect that a more rigorous side by side would see the bigger speaker start to eke out advantages that audio memory alone doesn't note.

Conclusion

And the longer you listen, the more sense the Lumina II makes. Where specific rivals will best it in specific areas, when you judge the Sonus faber across a really varied selection of different music, it quite literally doesn't miss a beat. It might lack the joy that the sheer improbability of the Lumina I's performance can deliver but, as a £1,000 all-rounder, the Lumina II is a hugely compelling speaker likely to win many converts to the Sonus faber brand. **ES**

Shared design thinking with the Lumina I



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Spacious, tonally believable and fun performance; well-made; good-looking; overall performance

DISLIKE: Isn't quite as entertaining as its little brother

WE SAY: Feels like the sweet spot of the Lumina range

marantz



Timeless Passion. Now Awarded.

Our latest creation is celebrated by the EISA jury and named Best Stereo System 2021-2022: "The Model 30 amplifier and its matching SACD 30n player are a triumph". Experience this iconic combination at a premium retailer near you.



Spendor Classic 3/1

Introducing the second smallest member of the Classic range, which runs alongside the more contemporary D Series. As the name suggests, Classic models are designed to utilise some of the thinking and materials that Spendor has employed since day one. The most significant area for this is the cabinet. Where most other speakers have gone to rigorous lengths to make the cabinet as rigid as possible, the 3/1 allows for a degree of movement you can physically feel when it's running hard.

The tweeter is the same 22mm-wide surround unit used in the Classic 4/5 (HFC 470) and the rest of the range. It's partnered with a 180mm mid/bass driver made from the 'EP77' polymer that Spendor is particularly fond of, crossing over between the two at a relatively high 3.7kHz. This is further augmented by a fairly large rear bass port. This makes the claimed frequency response of 40Hz-25kHz feel believable in use as does the relatively benign 88dB sensitivity.

The Classic 3/1 supports bi-wiring via two pairs of sturdy terminals. Sturdy is a useful word in general when describing the Spendor. It isn't as showy as some, but it is as well made as any at the price. The appearance is entirely traditional and does little to hide its large dimensions, but there's something in the Spendor's absolute lack of artifice that is either extremely cool or heroically uncool depending on your outlook. Brief mention must also be made of the matching stand, which isn't used for critical listening but complements the 3/1 brilliantly.

Sound Quality

A significant positive aspect of the Spendor's performance is the simple expedient of having a large driver and cabinet and using them to reveal a heft that other speakers at this price point struggle to match. The opening drumming of Labi Siffre's *The Vulture* has a weight and force that is genuinely impressive and it underpins a midrange that manages to balance

refinement, accuracy and engagement to excellent effect.

What is notable is that this same engagement is still present with the very different requirements of Agnes Obel's *Fuel To Fire* as well. Beyond the superb presentation of the piano – again leveraging tonality and weight to excellent effect – there's an emotional content to Obel's performance that's something a little more than the sum of its parts. The haunting quality to her vocal is well expressed and helps to maintain the suspension of disbelief. This is underpinned by a consistently well-rendered soundstage that extends well beyond the cabinets. It's slightly easier to perceive the location of each

It reveals a heft that other speakers at this price point struggle to match

speaker than some rivals at the price, but it's still usefully cohesive.

Conclusion

No less impressive is the amount of fine detail that is woven into the performance. It never distracts from the main musical message, but the Spendor finds little fragments of information that other speakers tend to miss. This means that Gregory Porter's *Revival* crackles with energy and captures the vigour of Porter and the supporting musicians in a way that is enormously entertaining. His vocal is free of any top-end hardness and it seems to be extremely hard to provoke the 3/1 under any circumstances. These qualities mean Hayley Williams' *Simmer* is very well handled with her voice sounding rich and detailed as the little breaths and intonations she makes leap out of the presentation so it manages to hit that bit harder than rivals. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Spendor Classic 3/1

PRICE
£2,730

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
10kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 395 x 285mm

FEATURES
• 22mm polyamide
dome tweeter
• 180mm polymer
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Spendor Audio
Systems Ltd.

REVIEWED
HFC 476

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Superb combination of impact, detail and emotional engagement

DISLIKE: Slight limit to soundstage

WE SAY: Benign and easy to use, it delivers a consistently brilliant performance across a wide range of music



System Audio

Legend 5.2

Silverback

System Audio has hard-bitten audiophiles in its sights with its box-reducing wireless speakers, but can they hit the spot?

What is it to be an audiophile? The emergence of System Audio's Legend 5.2 Silverback digital wireless streaming system once again poses a seemingly innocent but actually rather intimate question. Do you find deep satisfaction in the audible alchemy of putting together and incrementally modifying a separates hi-fi system – the open-ended, ever-evolving, never-ending process often referred to as 'the journey'?

And what if 'the journey' could end right here? According to SA's founder and boss, Ole Witthøft, it could, indeed should for the truly 'modern

audiophile'. The 'future-fi', streamer-centric proposition posited by SA and other wireless, active speaker proponents such as KEF, Dynaudio, Kii and Buchardt among others is hard to rationally refute. The pitch goes like this: what matters most – the very *raison d'être* of owning a hi-fi system – is high fidelity itself. And if something approaching an end-game standard can be achieved with just two active speakers, two mains cables, possibly a small, plainly styled stereo wireless control hub that can be hidden away in a cupboard (SA's preference) and a smartphone or tablet, surely that makes messing around with multiple components, cables, dedicated

equipment racks and a whole lot of what-not a superfluous legacy activity and debilitating waste of time.

Brutal and, frankly, an affront to those of us who regard messing around as a calling. But I get it. Not every music lover is a die-hard, old school audiophile and the idea of short-circuiting the 'never-ending process' by shrinking component clutter and moving straight to the pay-off undoubtedly has legs. In SA's case, this comprises hub-based WiSA wireless connectivity, an evolving suite of downloadable DSP-implemented speaker voicings to tailor personal preference and room type, plus a room acoustic correction app to use with your iPhone.

The company launched its Silverback range of active designs (retro-fittable for owners of passive Legend line speakers) in 2018 with the latest 'digital upgrades' introduced in January 2021, along with an aluminium casing for the remote to replace the previous plastic affair.

With its HQ and factory in Roskilde – once Denmark's capital, but still the country's main music city according to Ole – SA has spent the last 37 years

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
System Audio
Legend 5.2
Silverback

PRICE
£2,800

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
2-way active
wireless
standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
190 x 320 x 265mm

FEATURES
• 25mm soft dome
tweeter with DXT
acoustic lens
• 114mm carbon-
coned, long-throw
mid/bass driver
• 150W Class D
amplification

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma-AV

TELEPHONE
01423 358846

WEBSITE
karma-av.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 474

**It delivers a melding
of bandwidth,
resolution and attack
that beggars belief**

moving towards its current portfolio of passive and active speakers. Ole says that a great digital speaker begins as a great analogue one and, unsurprisingly, nominates the well-established passive Legend 5 that forms the basis for the active Legend Silverback 5.2 we're looking at here.

A two-way rear-ported speaker, it has a 114mm long-throw mid/bass driver, crossed over in DSP to a 25mm soft-dome tweeter. Each driver has its own DAC and dedicated Class D amplifier using the same digital tech as Steinway Lyngdorf, with a total of 150W a side. As well as performing crossover duties, DSP is used to smooth the amplitude and phase characteristics, extend bass response and adjust dynamic equalisation so the bass doesn't fade away at low listening levels.

The main driver's unusually long voice coil is claimed to allow excursions 40 percent greater than those of a similarly sized woofer, for greater bass output. The cone is made from woven carbon fibre, claimed to provide high internal damping, and the rubber surround

has built-in resonance-control rings for smoother response.

The tweeter's coated silk dome is surrounded by a DXT acoustic lens which, according to SA, results in smoother off-axis response, a wider sweet spot, better integration with the mid/bass driver's output and eliminates off-cabinet diffraction effects. Talking of which, the enclosure has gently curved side panels and a thick (29mm) baffle separated from the rest of the enclosure by a 5mm groove inlaid with walnut. It's the only aesthetic flourish, but – like the rest of the speaker – is beautifully finished in a choice of black or white satin.

Using appropriately long interconnect cables, the speakers can be hooked-up directly to a preamp or DAC/preamp equipped with analogue XLR sockets, though if you go fully wireless with the WiSA preamp/transmitter stereo hub you can add analogue and digital sources such as a turntable and CD player physically. The hub's resolution ceiling via coaxial, optical and USB is 24-bit/192kHz. Built-in Bluetooth is joined by Chromecast (accessed via Google Home), Apple AirPlay (streaming limited to 16-bit/44.1kHz) and Spotify Connect.

The latest version of the Legend 5 Silverback, the 5.2 has extended bass response down to a claimed 25Hz at moderate listening levels, updated protection and a lower crossover point with adjusted slope. "We've corrected the delay of the drive units at various frequencies and basically cleaned up the midrange and high-frequency performance," explains Ole. And all accomplished with an update of the internal DSP parameters, now free to download for owners of pre-January Legend 5 Silverbacks. "The DSP is a much more accurate tool than a passive crossover," Ole continues. "Without any loss of quality or problems with phase, delay etc, we can shape the speakers' response at any given volume." Working with the DSP settings and new digital tools, Ole and his team went further and developed SA's so-called RAM tweaks – downloaded DSP implemented 'sound optimisations' for people with acoustically challenged rooms (overly live or dull) or who simply want to change up the sound of their system.

There's also SA Room Service, the remarkably easy app that cunningly uses your iPhone as a measuring device. Generating a pink noise feed from the speakers, it maps the acoustics of your room as you walk



Despite looking unassuming, the finish is superb

around it, scanning from floor to ceiling. That done, it then displays a graph with the peaks and troughs corrected and the option to implement the corrections or, indeed, toggle between before and after.

Sound quality

It turns out my smaller listening room doesn't need much correction, but the changes are still subtly audible and appear to work. Much bigger differences arise trying out the five RAM tweaks, perhaps most markedly going from the fully-lit RT300 ("analytical sound and extended bass for rooms with controlled acoustics") to the calmer, darker and more nuanced presentation of RT200x that Legend 5.2 Silverback now ships with.

The upshot is a re-writing of the rules, not simply highlighting the ability to enact digitally acute contrasts between the two RAM voicings, but for the nonchalant way that in either guise the Silverback appears to be trolling far bigger and more costly passive high-end speakers by daring to do a better job.

Streaming in MQA from Tidal, Yello's *The Vanishing Of Peter Strong* delivers a melding of bandwidth, resolution and attack that, coming from such modestly dimensioned boxes, frankly beggars belief. Yet key standmount strengths are also exploited to telling effect, manifested as pin-point timing, an expansive, 3D soundstage, superb separation and the kind of intelligibility and articulation that renders every detail, intonation and microdynamic shift as clear as Perrier in a cut-crystal glass. It's all so effortlessly easy to hear and

understand – tactile, full of texture, colour and energy.

Visceral intensity is one thing. *Quality Of Mercy* sung by Michelle Shocked on CD oozes heart-felt attitude and beautifully finessed fragility in equal measure, the midrange and higher octaves fabulously smooth and transparent, lending instruments a delicious sense of timbral integrity and harmonic richness, loading the vocal with potent plaintive angst.

Conclusion

This is a new paradigm that shatters the notion you need a strapping floorstander trailing big-bore speaker cables for deep, powerful bass while, at the same time, ordaining strategically flavoured and contoured versions of high-end sound quality that, in all but ultimate scale and power, are as coherent, palpable, tonally true and rhythmically compelling as the very best available at multiples of the Legend 5.2 Silverback's price. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

LIKE: Clutter-free ease of use; build and design; sublime sound; RAM DSP profiles

DISLIKE: Trad system tweakers will have to look to their laurels

WE SAY: If you want terrific sound without the shenanigans, look no further

OVERALL

★★★★★



State-of-the-art power-cleaning systems.

Crafted from a single block of aluminium, the new V5 Aquarius from IsoTek harnesses the latest technical innovations from the leading brand in power optimisation devices for AV systems.

Delivering absolute power, the V5 Aquarius provides six outlets: two high-current outlets for amplifiers and four medium-current sockets for preamps, source and network components.

With each outlet using its own dedicated power-cleaning network, there are six power-cleaners in just one compact chassis.

isoteksystems.com

To find your nearest dealer, please visit:
finesounds.uk/dealers



Distributors of the finest high-fidelity audio components

t. 01592 744 710 | www.finesounds.uk | info@finesounds.uk

Fine Sounds UK is a McIntosh Group Company



Audio-Technica

AT-LP5X

Audio-Technica enjoyed enormous success with the original AT-LP5 (*HFC* 405) and five years later has updated it to the LP5X that you see before you. This is still a direct-drive turntable with a J-shaped tonearm that is fitted for use with a detachable headshell, but the bearing and platter have been revised and the motor that acts on it can now also rotate at 78rpm. The power supply has been changed and no longer performs DC conversion on board, instead using an external wall-wart PSU with the on/off button of the original being changed to auto standby.

There is still an internal phono stage that can be switched in and out of the circuit, but it now also has a gain setting for moving-coil designs. As before, a USB is fitted for digitising records. There is now a VM-95E (*HFC* 444) cartridge in a new headshell. This means that the full selection of 95 series styli are available as a snap on upgrade without any adjustments.

The basic appearance of the LP5X is little changed from its predecessor, but the darker finish for the top plate and new logo look smarter than before and the lid is now supplied as standard. Crucially, it's still one of the easiest models at the price to set up, with no belt to fit and a generally logical assembly process. As first turntables go, this is a design that won't spring any unwelcome surprises.

Sound Quality

It's been several years since I listened to the original LP5, but the LP5X running into a Cambridge Audio Edge A and Focal Kanta No1 speaker (*HFC* 454) brings back some memories – with some new discoveries too. This is still an impressively pitch-stable turntable. The lack of waver to the sustained piano of Sarah Jarosz's *World On The Ground* ensures that everything else sounds believable. The noise floor is usefully low and, while it isn't capable of Technics-style subterranean bass, the low end is well controlled and detailed.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audio-Technica
AT-LP5X

PRICE
£350

ORIGIN
Japan/China

TYPE
Direct-drive
turntable

WEIGHT
7.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 157 x 352mm

FEATURES
● 33, 45 and 78rpm
● J-shaped tonearm
● VM-95E cartridge
● On board MM/MC
phono stage

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio-Technica

WEBSITE
audio-technica.com

REVIEWED
HFC 475

The biggest step forward is thanks to the VM-95E. Where the original LP5 could be a little hard at the top end, the LP5X is able to stay smooth and refined even with less than stellar pressings. The tonal realism of voices and instruments is improved too. Annie Lennox's *Diva* has a wholly convincing presentation – a well-judged combination of soundstage, tonality and dynamics that ensures that you stop listening to the record player and concentrate on the music.

No less importantly, all the fun of the original remains present. The Audio-Technica tears into the ballistic silliness of Sturgill Simpson's *Sound & Fury* with genuine enthusiasm. Without tipping over into sounding forced or unnatural, the LP5X reveals itself to be a dab hand at latching onto the time signature of the music in question and making it integral to the performance. With very gentle pieces, some of this turntable's rivals might still offer a better feeling of flow, but there isn't much in it.

The final very welcome attribute of the Audio-Technica is the ease of upgrading it. Putting a VM-95SH stylus on the body takes 20 seconds and brings immediate gains to the fine detail, particularly towards the inner edge of the record. Adding an external phono stage – in this case an iFi Zen Phono (p113) suggests that the internal one, while perfectly capable, might be the limiting factor in the overall performance, but it is still decent enough for the cost.

Conclusion

Judged at the £350 asking price, there's very little that this turntable gets wrong. The useful combination of foolproof setup and strong performance that the original did so well are retained here and augmented by a better specification and further improved sonics. The result is a very fine proposition that should be on any serious shortlist at the price. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Enjoyably propulsive and engaging presentation; comprehensive spec

DISLIKE: Internal phono stage is good rather than great

WE SAY: A great upgrade to the original LP5 that delivers a very strong performance

OVERALL





AVID Volvere SP

AVID's philosophy of high-mass platter, suspended sub-chassis and torque motor continues, and is mightily impressive

Launched back in 2000, the original Volvere was AVID main man Conrad Mas' third turntable release, and this new SP iteration is so named because of the fine speed control provided by the DSP-governed PSU.

The cast alloy sub-chassis employs carefully machined ridges in order to minimise unwanted vibrations. It has three legs, each of which is positioned on a spring in the lower base. The result is a much more stable platform than that offered by compressed springs and, better still, one that requires less tweaking. Lateral movement is provided by the inclusion of three robust O-rings positioned around each suspension turret onto pegs on the sub-chassis.

Available in a choice of silver or black finishes, the sub-chassis hosts the bearing and outrigger onto which a tonearm is mounted. Consequently,

the option of interchangeable armboards is not available, although it does come pre-drilled for a standard 9in SME fitting. AVID offers a range of adaptors for those that have other ideas.

The sub-chassis sits securely on its mounting legs prior to fitment into the springs. This helps setup enormously as it means that the arm and cartridge can be easily fitted and aligned before lowering the whole caboodle onto the base.

The outboard power supply from which the SP appellation derives features controls for main power on/off, rotation start/stop and speed change. A high-quality toroidal transformer is employed internally to provide the mains supply, neatly eschewing the cheaper wall-wart option that lesser rivals so often plump for. The AC motor's frequency can be adjusted to not only provide

DETAILS

PRODUCT
AVID Volvere SP

PRICE
£5,500

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
12.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
460 x 210 x 480 mm

FEATURES
• 33 and 45rpm
• Optional AVID TA-3 tonearm
• Separate PSU

DISTRIBUTOR
AVID Hi-Fi Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01480 869900

WEBSITE
avidhifi.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 472

push-button speed change of 33 and 45rpm, but also allows fine tuning should you require it. The basic Volvere SP package comes sans tonearm and cartridge, but for the purposes of today's test we've gone for the £5,990 option, which comes bundled with an AVID TA-3 – a Rega RB330 by any other name. This is easily mounted, thanks to a three-point Rega-to-SME adapter plate. We partner this with Audio-Technica's AT-OC9MLII cartridge.

Sound quality

From the moment the needle is lowered into the groove of our first test record, it immediately becomes clear that this is one hell of a belt-drive offering. In short, the Volvere SP combines the sheer fluidity and atmosphere that only a top-notch belt-drive can deliver and then goes one step further by adding to the mix the sort of solidity and precision that are normally the domain of the very best direct-drives. The outcome is a terrific sense of focus and stability regardless of what is slapped onto the platter. Rhythms are locked down tighter than the strictest global pandemic scenario, performers are placed in the soundstage with unwavering precision and there's more detail on show than you've any right to expect at the price. If you're after a vinyl spinner that effortlessly hunts down and retrieves all the excitement and subtlety that are

hidden within the grooves of your record collection, the Volvere SP should be right near the top of a list that also includes the Volvere SP, the Volvere SP and the Volvere SP..

Impressive though this admittedly is, the real revelation is the low-end performance. Whether Massive Attack, Mahler, Mose Allison or MC Hammer are your bag, when it comes to basslines few turntables are better at keeping things simple and unflustered. Suddenly all the pressure of hooking up those twin belts seems worth every painful second.

As if to highlight this very fact, the picked bass notes at the start of Chris Rea's *Loving You*, taken from his 1999 cut *One Fine Day*, effortlessly carry the track along thanks to their deep, fruity and sinuous qualities. As those unmistakably gravelly vocals get in on the act, the Volvere SP ensures that they remain emotive and lifelike before slipping into their more characteristic gruffness. Admittedly, we've experienced richer takes of this track on rival turntables, but the slight greyiness that can be heard is more than likely as a result of that TA-3 tonearm than the turntable itself. In all other respects, it's hard to find fault with the midrange detailing and atmosphere.

Switching to something a little simpler like the soothing sounds of Dylan LeBlanc's *Pauper's Field* long player is hairs-on-the-back-of-the-neck stuff. The Volvere SP projects those distinctive vocals with clarity and emotion, while the soundstage opens up to reveal the sort of extraordinary width and depth that is rare at the price. More impressive still, there's never any impression that the AVID is trying too hard or adding any artificial widening effects of its own, instead just laying out the atmospheric recording precisely as

it was captured to the vinyl. Moving on to some more densely recorded material does little to change the overall impression that this is a magnificent turntable, pure and simple. The jangling guitar, delicate mandolin and boisterous kick drum that feel like they're fighting for supremacy in the mix on lesser offerings are gently corralled into position here with each retaining their character without muddying proceedings so that the delicacy of the mandolin hits home just as

The soundstage reveals the sort of width and depth that is rare at the price

effectively as the whack to the chest of those kick drum strikes.

Of course, it's all too easy to extract sparkling results from perfectly recorded vinyl, but it's the ability to find beauty in those discs that are poorly mastered or mixed that really marks the big boys out from the also-rans and, once again, the AVID is not found wanting in this regard. Take Gary US Bonds' 1981 album *Dedication*, which though a great record is very much a victim of the era in which it was mastered and so consequently left at the bottom of most record piles due to its lacklustre engineering. The Volvere SP cares not for such fripperies and effortlessly resuscitates the recording with all the majesty of a modern-day deity. Suddenly the underlying rhythm of *Jole Blon* is able to emerge from the surrounding muddiness of the mix to bound infectiously back into life like the recipient of much-needed CPR, returning a welcome feeling of swagger to the track.

Substantial feet form part of the deck's isolation system, but are not adjustable

Finally, impressive higher frequencies complete the picture. Our decision to partner the AT-OC9MLII with the TA-3 tonearm was no happy accident. Hard-won experience has taught us that the treble sparkle of the Audio-Technica cartridge can help to cancel out the over smooth top end of Rega tonearms, and so it proves here. The combination balances out perfectly so that there's no artificial sheen to the treble and if a recording is opaque the turntable certainly lets you know. However, cymbal strikes remain dynamic and clean throughout while hi-hats are crisp and snappy and subtle background effects are clear to hear. Should you decide, however, to explore different tonearm options you won't be disappointed. Substituting in an SME 309, the results are sublime, suggesting that if you have the desire (and funds) to upgrade, the Volvere SP certainly has more to give. Considering that AVID is working on its own range of tonearms, this might also be an avenue worth exploring further down the line.

Conclusion

The only potential banana skin is that the Volvere SP demands you don't get overly flustered during setup. But with a bit of patience and a can-do attitude the rewards by far outweigh the effort that's required. There's an inherent rightness to the way the AVID makes music that ensures that all that hard work pays off in spades. With its dynamic, detailed and confident presentation, this is a vinyl spinner that delivers all of the thrills and spills that are hidden in your vinyl collection's grooves and adds a few more just for good measure. Rock solid, unerringly precise and gloriously natural, it's a magnificent triumph of a turntable that combines the joys of a belt-drive (fitting aside) with the precision of direct drive. Ignore it at your peril. **HFC**



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Dynamic, detailed performance; rock-solid build
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Fitting those belts requires a steady hand and oodles of patience
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Solid, clear and precise, this should go right to the top of your audition list
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Old's cool.

The new Dynaudio Heritage Special.
Classic premium hi-fi, handmade with love in Denmark.



Listen to craftsmanship. Listen to real wood. Listen to true, state-of-the-art, hand-built tweeters and woofers. To more than 2000 hours of devoted R&D. To the depths of your record collection. Listen to what you love.

'Heritage Special' isn't just a name. It's a salute to traditional high-performance Danish audio design, featuring Dynaudio's now-legendary materials, technologies and performance.

Each of the 2500 limited-edition pairs is unique. And they're brimming with the spirit (and flødebolle-fuelled boldness) that made the Dynaudio name. Run your fingers over the hand-finished American Walnut veneer. Pause at the groove around the baffle (you'll remember it from our speakers that you coveted years ago). Then play some music and rock your socks off.

It isn't for everyone. But that's OK. We made it for you.

DYNAUDIO Heritage Special

www.dynaudio.com/heritage



Edwards Audio

TT4

Arguably the toughest ask in the vinyl spinner retail arena is to sell a turntable for around £400 that isn't a Rega Planar 2 or a Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Evo. Hats off to Edwards Audio, then, because that's exactly what it's doing here. Unlike those that have unsuccessfully come before it, this is a product capable of stress testing its estimable opponents with some tantalising tech and points of difference more usually found at considerably loftier prices.

Perhaps most obvious, it simply looks more expensive than it is, rocking an aesthetic arguably closer to that of the extraordinary Vertere DG-1 (HFC 463) than anything remotely close to the price. Also like the Vertere, the tonearm eschews the gimbal bearing assemblies common to the vast majority of tonearms in search of lower friction values. This is factory fitted with a pre-aligned Audio-Technica AT95E moving-magnet cartridge (re-badged C100).

Though the glass platter is more Planar 2, on the whole the TT4 offers some fresh thinking to the usual suspects. To emphasise the point, the Z-shaped dust cover that slips over the spindle and rests on the platter is a departure from the hinged-lid norm. Three large non-adjustable, anti-vibration feet are fixed to the underside of the plinth and provide a reassuringly firm footing.

Sound quality

Unfortunately, I don't have the slightly more expensive Rega Planar 2 and Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Evo to hand for comparison, but by pitching the TT4 against the considerably more costly Rega Planar 6 (HFC 427) with Ania moving-coil cartridge (HFC 452) and Neo PSU as well as MoFi's terrific StudioDeck + (HFC 466), we should get a reasonable idea how that contest might have turned out.

Exposing the TT4 to the revealing insights of Chord's Huei phono stage (HFC 459), Hegel's H120 integrated (HFC 460) and Dynaudio's Evoke 30 floorstander (HFC 460) uncovers no fundamental flaws. On the contrary, it is a quiet performer: zero hum, barely detectable surface noise, no woofer flutter and, even with an old pressing of The Oscar Peterson Trio's *Hello Herbie*, vanishing low 'groove rush'.

Actually, Peterson's phenomenal speed, technique and mixing of styles is a great test for sifting the hi-fi pretenders from the real practitioners and, with all three decks having hosted the album's fully lit opening track, Wes Montgomery's *Naptown Blues*, the TT4 is clearly on the pace, in control and firmly a member of the latter camp along with the Planar 6 and MoFi – if not killing any giants, then at least holding its own.

I've come to notice when a turntable is getting the important things right if it can make Audio-Technica's budget MM

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Edwards Audio TT4

PRICE
£400

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
5.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
465 x 113 x 370mm

FEATURES
• 33 and 45rpm
• 9in aluminium captive uni-pivot tonearm
• Zephyr C100 (AT95E) MM cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR
Talk Electronics Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01344 844204

WEBSITE
talkelectronics.com

REVIEWED
HFC 477

AT95E, sing sweetly. And the TT4 does that – no rough edges at all. Moreover, the combo is refined in a broader sense. It might lack the precision, openness and ultimate resolving power of the Rega or the tonal richness, body and 'soul' and lyrical flow of the MoFi, but it doesn't fall that far short and, more importantly, the presentation has an exquisite order, coherence and balance that never grates or fails to find the musical pulse, whatever you play. From Leonard Cohen to The Clash, you will be engaged and uplifted.

Conclusion

So, what of the notional TT4 versus Planar 2 versus Debut Carbon Evo match-up? A potential slam dunk for Edwards Audio's talented newbie? In the absence of its actual price zone rivals, that must remain moot. But I am inclined towards a definite maybe. Measured against its supposed betters, it's clear the TT4 has an awful lot going for it, not least that ever-desirable fusion of seductive style and transcendent sonic chops. I'd simply say this: don't buy a £400 turntable without auditioning the TT4 first. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Design, style, build and performance

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WESAY: Even with its modest fitted cartridge, the TT4 sounds exceptionally fine



Mark Levinson

N°5105

The follow up to Mark Levinson's deeply impressive N°515 debut turntable, the N°5105 comes in at just under half the price – available sans cartridge for £5,800 or bundled with Ortofon's Quintet Black S MC pick-up (HFC 425) for £6,500. But where the N°515 took its lead from VPI's turntables (no surprise given it was built by it), the N°5105 is a clean-sheet offering with no components picked up off-the-shelf. Though setup has so much in common with beginner decks, that's where the similarities end.

Machined, bead blasted and anodised alloy structures feature throughout the chassis, which incorporates two black, 25mm-thick front panels and a naturally anodised (clear) bezel at the centre of the frontispiece – the latter additionally hosting a solid glass setting for the alloy speed and standby buttons.

The 10in carbon fibre tonearm is fixed, so you won't be able to upgrade, but thankfully, it's a gem, especially with low-compliance MC carts.

The tools supplied to aid set up are among the best we've seen, while the manual – supplied with the mat in a sleeve – walks the user through setup in a logical and easy to understand way. The mat is a thin, almost papery type, meaning it's worth exploring as a potential upgrade avenue further down the line.

Sound quality

Though vinyl can never really hope to match the near-perfect silence of digital sources, what's on show here with a Mobile Fidelity pressing of Charlie Mingus' *Ah Um* comes pretty damn close. For reproducing a live performance, the atmosphere of an intimate club or the spontaneity of a small ensemble, the background silence is a peerless positive. There's an airiness and sense of space that creates a imposingly large soundstage, providing the music an impressive sense of freedom from the speakers.

Detail obsessives will be left dumbstruck by the way it drags every tiny nuance out of Carly Simon's *The Carter Family* while swatting away any suggestion of sibilance. Similarly, the myriad of sounds are reproduced with unerring accuracy.

A complete change in pace comes courtesy of Whitesnake's *Love Songs*, which offers up a direct contrast to the finesse of Simon and the intimacy of Mingus in its far from subtle blend of stadium rock. Impressively, it displays the same characteristics as before, with the opening notes of *Love Will Set You Free* filling the room with the sound of hair rock, while keeping a firm control of the subtler aspects of the performance – few and far between though they may be. As impressive as the lack of noise and openness are, what really impresses here is the deft handling of lower

frequencies – underlining if nothing else that the N°515 is genre agnostic.

A final test highlights a possible upgrade path by swapping out the Ortofon in favour of a selection of other moving-coil mainstays from the likes of Koetsu and Denon. The performance retains that same consistent neutrality throughout the midband, coupled with impressive lower frequencies and a deft handling of power. Regardless of the cartridge, the Mark Levinson holds things together with seeming indifference to what ever we throw at it.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that simplicity of setup is not the be all and end all when it comes to turntables, it does matter. That the N°515 combines such entry-level appeal with precision engineering and exactly built components very much from the high-end end seals the deal. The result is a devastating combination of inky black silence, generous spaciousness, neighbour-worrying low ends and the subtlety to pick out nuanced details and effects with ease. **HFC**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mark Levinson N°5105
PRICE
From £5,800
ORIGIN
USA
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
34kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
438 x 154 x 395mm
FEATURES
• 33 and 45rpm
• Optional Ortofon Quintet Black S cartridge
• 10in carbon fibre tonearm
DISTRIBUTOR
Harman Luxury Audio Group
TELEPHONE
01223 203200
WEBSITE
marklevinson.com
REVIEWED
HFC 473

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Simple setup; elegant build; fine details; spaciousness; low-frequencies

DISLIKE: 'Square' belt; fiddly anti-skate weight

WE SAY: A dazzling turntable that does everything you'd expect at the price and so much more





Origin Live Calypso

Operating since the late Eighties, at the turn of the century Origin Live began fielding some impressive-sounding vinyl spinners. Mark Baker now has a dizzying range of turntables and tonearms, all of which are fastidiously designed and built. They tend to be aimed more at hobbyist buyers, because setting them up is a little more involved a process. This is the case with the Origin Live Calypso deck, Multilayer platter and Silver tonearm featured here – at £2,290, £650 and £720 respectively.

The combo takes a good hour to properly build up and there are plenty

A big, spacious sound that's strong on tonal purity, dynamics and involvement

of adjustments. The perspex sub-chassis has to be perfectly height adjusted to get the offboard DC motor to sit right, for example. Don't be deceived by the lack of shiny, brushed metal or other such exotic finishes; general quality of build is very high.

Almost everything has a precise feel; the ultra-thick main bearing is quite a thing to behold and the tonearm feels silkier to hand cue than it looks. The arm lacks convenience touches like spring-adjusted tracking force and

bias, but this saves money to be spent elsewhere. The motor switch looks a bit low rent, but then again the spun aluminium cueing lever is classier than Technics SL-1200G (p56). Once carefully fettled on a level surface, this combination runs faultlessly and looks elegant with a rather sculptural aspect to its design. Only the packaging lets the side down; it does its job but is unlikely to be the subject of an unboxing video! The instructions are superbly written but could be presented better, too.

Sound quality

The Calypso Multilayer/Silver combination proves a really impressive performer. It has a big, spacious sound that's strong on dynamics, involvement and tonal purity, with excellent detail retrieval. In fact, it doesn't sound like how many perceive a traditional belt-drive deck to be at all. It's not soft, recessed and warm in the least; rather, it's just on the smooth side of neutral with a highly transparent feel.

It's the combination of this tonally pure character, allied to impressive stereo soundstaging, that makes it such a strong performer. Wings' *Maybe I'm Amazed* is commanding with instruments running far stage left and right and vocals set precisely in the middle. Stage depth is strong too, and the result is an immersive sound. Pitch stability is very good, the

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Origin Live
Calypso
Multilayer/Silver

PRICE
£3,660

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
15.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
465 x 133 x 393mm

FEATURES
● 33 & 45rpm
● Origin Live Silver
tonearm

DISTRIBUTOR
Origin Live

WEBSITE
originlive.com

REVIEWED
HFC 477

deck timing really nicely. Manix's *Your Dreaming* is also lots of fun, with plenty of scale and grip. However, while the Technics SL-1200G tends to lock onto the percussion, the Calypso focuses more onto the backing synthesiser pads. This makes for a more beguiling, immersive sound that is less impressive on a superficial level. Still it is more involving than Rega's Planar 10 (overleaf). The track also gives it the chance to show off its fine bass. Not quite equal to the Technics, it is still impressive with a crisp, dry and tuneful bottom end, with a lot of power.

Conclusion

For all these reasons, the Origin Live fares particularly well on Lou Donaldson's *Alligator Bogaloo*, too. It sets up an intricate organ and drum groove, with lots of body to the Hammond and an earthy timbre. It is also very capable dynamically, working better at highlighting the player's accenting in a way that few rivals can equal. It might be too tweaky for some, but nonetheless remains a great all-rounder. **DP**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Clean; open; vivid; engaging sound

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Involved set-up process

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: A superb enthusiast's turntable

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Rega Planar 10

This radical British high-end vinyl spinner is an essay in minimalism and channels Lotus founder Colin Chapman's maxim: "add lightness". Designer Roy Gandy deliberately chose not to make this deck heavy, unlike most other designs at this price. Rather, its base is made from an ultra-light Tancast 8 polyurethane foam core, sandwiched between two layers of high-pressure laminate, which is thin but rigid. The idea is that mass stores energy like a mechanical

The Rega has a clear, clean and crisp sound that's never less than fun to listen to

capacitor, so the lighter the better. The skeletal, unsprung plinth sports ceramic top and phenolic resin bottom braces, located between the tonearm mounting and main hub bearing.

As with all Regas, it's a belt-drive design but comes supplied with the company's most advanced electronic power supply, housed in a custom metal case. It spins a handsome ceramic oxide platter, said to have improved coupling to the sub-platter. The latter is machined aluminium and sits on a hardened tool steel spindle run inside a brass housing. This is driven by a special rubber

compound belt. Despite the relative lack of weight of the components, the finish is excellent and the choice of materials is innovative to say the least.

The Planar 10 comes with a Rega RB3000 tonearm fitted as standard. It's said to have ultra-tight tolerances with a low-mass, vertical bearing assembly adjusted to one thousandth of a millimetre. The aluminium armature has few joints and comes highly polished. This arm certainly has a legitimate claim to being the best at this price point, such is its design and build. The deck can come factory fitted with Rega's £1,250 Apheta 3 moving-coil cartridge, which is sold as part of a discounted package of £4,500 for the deck, arm and cartridge. Ortofon's 2M Black LVB 250 (p119) is used throughout testing.

Sound quality

The Rega has a clear, clean and crisp sound that's never less than fun to listen to. It seems to be able to scythe its way straight to the heart of the recording, deftly sidestepping things that leave some rivals sounding a bit muddled in comparison. In addition to this, it's very good from a timing point of view, getting right to the heart of the music's rhythm.

Manix's *Your Dreaming* highlights this well; the Rega tackles its dizzying attack transients with great resolve, serving up a super fast sound that is smeared slightly on lesser rivals. At

the same time, bass is very tight. Yet it is a little thinner in the bass than many; it's supple and tuneful, but doesn't have the weight of Technics SL-1200G (overleaf), for example.

This makes for an enjoyable listen, but some might think it a little too analytical. Wings's *Maybe I'm Amazed* is a real pleasure to hear, the Planar 10 turning its attention to the location of the instruments in the recorded acoustic and giving a great account of the ambience. Yet tonally it is slightly thinner than some or less coloured as the case may be. It's not a turntable that makes everything sound fat, sweet and warm – that's for sure.

Conclusion

This results in both good and bad consequences; Elgar's *Cello Concerto Op.85* is a vibrant listen with lots of lovely spatial and timing information. It gives an intricate and quite intense rendition. Yet with Lou Donaldson's *Alligator Bogaloo*, it doesn't groove quite as well as the, Origin Live (p53) and Technics. For better or for worse, it is all about detail and insight, rather than richness and warmth. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega Planar 10
PRICE
£3,600
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
4.7kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
420 x 125 x 15mm
FEATURES
● 33 & 45rpm
● Rega RB3000 tonearm
DISTRIBUTOR
Rega Research Ltd.
WEBSITE
rega.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 477

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Crisp, detailed, musical sound; build
DISLIKE: Lacks bass compared with some

WE SAY: A highly desirable, compact turntable package

Bring all your
digital sources
to **life**

AURALiC
G2.1



UNPARALLELED QUALITY

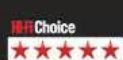
LIMITLESS CAPABILITY

ALTAIR G2.1 DIGITAL AUDIO STREAMER

- HIGH-PERFORMANCE DAC
- PHONO STAGE
- QOBUZ, TIDAL,
- 32/384 PCM
- ANALOGUE VOLUME CONTROL
- AIRPLAY
- HOME THEATRE BYPASS
- USB DRIVE CONNECT
- SELECTABLE DIGITAL FILTERS
- NETWORK STREAMING
- WI-FI
- SPOTIFY CONNECT, HRA
- UNITY CHASSIS II
- LIGHTNING SERVER
- BLUETOOTH
- DUAL FEMTO-SECOND CLOCKS
- XLR (BALANCED) AND RCA OUTPUTS
- GAPLESS PLAYBACK
- ONBOARD SSD STORAGE OPTIONS
- ETHERNET
- DSD512 OVER WIFI
- LINE-LEVEL ANALOGUE INPUT
- IOS-COMPATIBLE LIGHTNING DS
- CLASS A ORFEO ANALOGUE OUTPUTS
- PURER-POWER POWER SUPPLY
- MULTI-ROOM AUDIO
- ROOM ENDPOINT

For more information please contact your local specialist retailer or visit auralic.com

AURALIC PRESS AWARDS





Technics SL-1200G

Surely the most iconic turntable ever made, this is what most people think of when you mention the word “vinyl”. It’s the latest in a long line of SL-1200s that date back to 1973; originally launched as a domestic hi-fi deck, it was soon adopted by the DJ community and the SL-1200mk2 became the gold standard.

Sniffy audiophiles look down on it due to its nightclubbing connotations, but if you see one in the flesh you’ll soon see why it has been enduringly

A crisp sound with effortless ease allied to power, punch and great detail retrieval

popular. Build quality is superb and has got even better on the latest SL-1200G version. The deck feels close to bulletproof. The fact that its predecessor was hauled around gigs by literally hundreds of thousands of DJs over the years, says it all. A solid plinth, non-sprung design, it features the latest quartz-locked, direct-drive motor – which puts out 3.3kg/cm of torque, up from the SL-1210mk5’s 1.5kg/cm) – and servo speed controller. The upper section is aluminium, now with an additional brushed alloy layer; the base a rubbery resin material. There’s a speed control

slider with a bypass button beside. The new matt-finished aluminium tonearm has a classic SME-type headshell made from the same material. Tracking proves excellent, as is the deck’s resistance to footfall.

My only gripes are the plastic end tip to the tonearm’s cueing lever – metal would have been nicer – and the fact that the rear socketry is hard to get at. Overall though, from setting up to listening, the deck is a joy to use and makes most other similarly priced designs look rather homemade.

Sound quality

This latest G version is like the mature, sophisticated big brother of the ubiquitous SL-1200mk2. It shows all the fine attributes of the golden oldie, but augments them while removing all the objectionable issues. The result is a really enjoyable and crisp sound, with effortless ease allied to power and punch, plus great fine detail retrieval. All of this is set in the context of a sound that’s as musical as anything currently available. Surface noise on Wings’ *Maybe I’m Amazed* seems to all but disappear, leaving in its place an almost translucent clarity that sees the recorded acoustic pour out of my speaker. There is a fine sense of space, decent tonality and most of all, a divine sense of timing. I really enjoy listening to McCartney’s voice and the lovely guitar sound, but it is tonally thinner than some. Yet this seems

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Technics SL-1200G

PRICE
£3,500

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
Direct-drive turntable

WEIGHT
18kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
453 x 173 x 372mm

FEATURES
● 33, 45 & 78rpm
● Statically balanced S-shaped tonearm

DISTRIBUTOR
Technics UK

WEBSITE
technics.com

REVIEWED
HFC 477

irrelevant as the music gains a sense of rhythmic flow that is very special.

The Technics has the ability to give an almost analogue master tape sense of ease to proceedings, with vast gaps between the beats, yet these are knitted together in a wonderfully dextrous way. The *Adagio* to Elgar’s *Cello Concerto* washes around me with a sense of rhythmic ease that’s enough to convert even the most ardent digital audio fan to the joys of the black stuff. This all-analogue recording glistens before my very ears, the SL-1200G reminding me how special classical LPs can be.

Conclusion

Moving to programme material closer to this deck’s past life, Manix’s *Your Dreaming* is quite an event to behold. This powerful hardcore dance track has dizzying punch and speed, great detail resolution and gut-thumping bass. A mix like this, full of blistering attack transients, sees the Technics in its element. The bass drum sound, rim shot drums and frenetic looped hi-hats are mesmeric. This modern classic is quite a thing to hear. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

LIKE: Pace; rhythm; timing; punch; detail

DISLIKE: Plastic finger lift tip; fiddly sockets

WE SAY: Quite simply a superb all-round turntable package



Elegant Design Inside and Out

Primare is known for the elegant exterior design of its products, which reflects the artfully crafted electrical designs based on our practical design approach allowing every component to work sympathetically together as a cohesive whole.

Power supply designs are custom crafted to best serve the unique needs of each component, whether it be switching or linear, based on toroidal or laminated core transformers, so that all elements of any design operate effortlessly.



Signal paths are kept as short and as simple as possible, with gain preferably in one device, and utilizing four-layer circuit boards to more easily and effectively design circuitry with the most direct connection of components to reduce distortion and eliminate noise.

Non-essential signal carrying wires are eliminated, exemplified by the use of surface mount components when possible and by directly connecting the output stage to the speaker binding posts free of wires or solder to interfere with power delivery.



► For more details, go to Primare.net



Thorens TD 1601

One of the oldest names in hi-fi returns with a classic sub-chassis turntable from the seventies with 20th-century sensibilities

In the world of hi-fi, legacy is something that carries more weight than perhaps any other industry. If you have a component that derives in part from a product that was originally developed more than 20 years ago, chances are you've got a captive audience from the off. So it helps if you're able to draw upon a rich tradition stretching back over 20, 30 or even 50 years. Thorens is not only one of the oldest turntable manufacturers, but one of the longest serving producers of hi-fi full stop.

To put it into context, Thorens started out seven years after the first phone call was made and more than 40 before TV was widely available. But enough history, the point is it has a better claim to heritage than most.

The original TD 160 was released in 1972 and is widely considered to be one of the best early sub-chassis designs of its kind, so it seems only fitting that this is the monicker the company acknowledges with its new

range: the fully manual TD 1600 (£2,500), the semi-automatic TD 1601 on review here and the TAS 1600 moving-coil cartridge. While the infamous three-point suspension of yesteryear remains present and correct, its implementation is rather different to what's come before.

Now produced from MDF, the sub-chassis no longer hangs from the top plate, instead sitting on a trio of foam-damped conical springs, which are in turn mounted to a heavy, damped baseplate. This sits upon three adjustable feet to ensure it remains both level and stable.

The top plate is made from a product called Alucobond, which features an aerospace-grade honeycomb material sandwiched between two sheets of aluminium. The plinth, meanwhile, is housed in a choice of stylish wood surrounds of high gloss black or walnut.

As anyone that's ever experienced a suspended turntable will tell you, the chassis has a tendency to wobble from side to side like a gaggle of

women in high heels leaving a nightclub, six sheets to the wind. Thankfully, Thorens has a neat two-fold solution to this unique phenomenon. The first involves an alloy strengthening plate connecting the bearing to the tonearm mount. Meanwhile, a braced steel thread is connected between the bearing housing and a steel pin mounted to the baseboard. This acts in the same direction as the motor pulley and bearing, effectively encouraging the sub-chassis to remain in this axis, but leaving it free to float up and down while limiting its lateral movement. It's almost as though those inebriated clubbers have suddenly sobered up and slipped into some more sensible and stable footwear.

The TD 1601 comes with a TP92 9in tonearm supplied as standard. Used in the past with Thorens' TD 309, it has been designed in conjunction with fellow German specialist Fink Audio Consulting. It has a damped main tube with a resonance-controlled ring at the centre and – new to both the TD 1600 and 1601 – it can dial up tracking force directly, thanks to its calibrated and labelled counterweight. Bias is still altered magnetically using an adjustment control beside the arm pillar, while the tonearm leads terminate in sockets at the rear of the plinth in the form of balanced XLRs and unbalanced phono sockets. An earthing post is also onhand.

Fitting a cartridge is simply a case of screwing your chosen option into the end of the armtube, whereupon

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Thorens TD 1601

PRICE
£3,000

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
11kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 180 x 370mm

FEATURES
● 33/45rpm
● TP92 9.1in tonearm

DISTRIBUTOR
Signature Audio Systems

TELEPHONE
07738 007776

WEBSITE
signaturesystems.co.uk; thorens.com

REVIEWED
HFC 470

it can then be adjusted front and back for correct tracking alignment or rotated laterally.

There are three buttons for selecting 33rpm, 45rpm or the motor turned off, while trimpots at the back allow fine tuning of speed over a ± 6 percent range. While the fully manual TD 1600 has a conventional cueing lever on the tonearm, the automatic TD 1601 has a neat photoelectric auto-stop system whereby a button on the plinth activates a tiny motor under the platform to lift and lower the arm as required. The surround of the button handily lights up green when the arm is up and red when it's down. And, of course, when the end of the record is reached the arm lifts up and returns to its resting place. All very neat, albeit not quite whisper quiet in operation.

Finally, the 12V AC synchronous motor is secured to the baseplate in a non-resonant housing that is damped with a silicone ring. Power is applied to the drive circuitry via an off-board supply that's home to a chunky toroidal transformer. The motor drives the sub-platter using a precision-cut belt with the Thorens logo printed on it. The sub-platter in turn supports a 2.2kg aluminium outer platter that

The 1601 ticks all the boxes and performs just as we'd hope given the price

is topped with a mat. A rubber one comes supplied, while a suede option serves as an upgrade at £75.

Beautifully built, the TD 1601 is an absolute breeze to correctly setup while operation proves to be a pleasure throughout testing, thanks to the solid and well-made components.

Sound quality

We opt to pair up the TD 1601 with an Anatek MC-1 phono stage, connected to a Naim Supernait amp and PMC twenty5.24 speaker, while a Clearaudio MC Essence cartridge is loaded into the tonearm. It quickly becomes clear that the performance has a crispness and verve to it that means it can capture the essential dynamics of a recording with ease – something that is further aided by the way that when the music starts it comes from a clean, silent background.

Kicking things off with Mark Ronson's *Somebody To Love Me* underlines the TD 1601's ability to carry a tune. It picks up the bassline with ease and while it isn't the deepest, it never feels lightweight or lacking in body. Instead, the underlying

beat is solid and taut, while the upper bass has an impressive liveness that's free from the sort of bloat that often blights suspended turntable designs. But it's the upper registers where things really impress as the presentation displays the sort of detail and openness more commonly associated with far more expensive rivals.

While the original TD 160 could be accused of being a rather woolly performer that could sound a touch soft at times, the same criticism certainly doesn't apply here. The Cinematic Orchestra's *The Dance* from *The Crimson Wing* sees percussion leaping enthusiastically from the speaker. Behind this the double bass is fruity and fullsome, while the higher strings magnificently soar across the soundstage. The TD 1601 has a glorious sense of depth and scale, that while not quite as adept as pulling the performers out into the room like some rivals, conveys a great atmosphere that fills the space both in front of and behind the speakers.

Moving on to something with a bit more get up and go, Koop's *Come To Me* from its *Koop Islands* long player is a blast. The TD 1601 appears to lap up everything that this slice of upbeat jazz has to throw its way. Yukimi Nagano's vocals are breathy and vivid, underpinned by an infectious walking bassline all topped off by crisp sprightly percussion that drives the track along with upbeat glee.

Conclusion

In the TD 1601 Thorens has dragged a classic of yesteryear kicking and screaming into the current day,

managing to leave behind the slightly soft nature of the original. The result is a thoroughly modern turntable that ticks all the boxes and performs every bit as we'd hope a model at this price point would. It maintains an air of quiet sophistication and confidence, regardless of material being played, and its handling of treble frequencies is a real bonus. Meanwhile, the 9.1in TP92 tonearm ensures that the stylus remains securely locked into the groove so that there is no hint of mistracking and consequently, no top-end misbehaviour. Lower frequencies may not be the deepest and whether or not it's worth paying out the extra £500 for the automatic tonearm offered by the TD 1601 is something that only you can decide. But we would note that regardless of if you opt for the TD 1600 or the automatic 1601, splashing out the extra £75 for the additional clarity that's afforded by the suede mat is much more of a no-brainer. Highly recommended. **HFC**



HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Supreme treble; impressive detail and openness

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: The supplied rubber mat isn't as controlled or smooth as the suede option

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: A classic turntable from the past becomes a potential classic for the future

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



VPI Prime 21+

Costing £4,500 and £6,500 respectively, the Prime 21 and Prime 21+ come fitted with a gimbal-bearing tonearm in place of the uni-pivot that's found on the original Prime. The + throws in an Audio-Technica Shyla moving-coil pick-up and custom Nordost RCA tonearm lead.

The main chassis is still constructed from MDF, but where the original had a steel plate connected to the underside, the 21+ plumps for a 3mm-thick aluminium option bonded to the top for claimed improved strength and control of resonances. The four isolation feet boast integral elastomer pads for added cushioning and are adjustable to make levelling the deck a breeze.

As with the original Prime, there's a single belt to drive the 9kg aluminium platter, which comes with a thick felt mat. A precision-built, screw-on steel/Delrin record clamp is provided for extra stability during playback. The motor pod has additionally been beefed up – in an effort to further dampen any unwanted vibrations – and coated with a fancy shiny aluminium outer shell.

The Shyla MC cartridge has been built to VPI's exacting spec and is a line contact-type pick-up mounted on a 0.26mm-diameter boron cantilever. VPI says that the deck's simple setup procedure means it should take around 20 minutes to get up and running.

Sound quality

The VPI immediately underlines its status as a VIP with a performance that is confident without ever feeling hurried or flustered. Regardless of the vinyl you place on the platter, it's never heavy-footed in its unaffected sense of ease and solidity. The foundation to this performance is a rock-solid bass that is typically deep, robust and rich. While the Prime 21+ is an undoubted window rattler when it comes to those low frequencies, it is just as adept when more intricacy is required – resolving fine low-end details with effortless precision.

As if to prove the point, the big bass notes that emanate from *Roulette* by Night Flight are warm and fulsome, while the twinkling piano that makes up the track's intro possesses an enticing sense of realism. Meanwhile, Samuel Homes' vocals sound every bit as compelling as they should, placed as they are in their own space with a highly realistic acoustic. As the track builds to the guitar solo, the soundstage becomes increasingly crowded to a point where many lesser turntables lose control. Not so the Prime 21+, which manages to deftly maintain the prevailing atmosphere while simultaneously underlining the limitations of the recording.

On the flipside, however, this track (along with a number of others) highlights the VPI's habit of sounding a touch overly rich. There's a subtle

upper bass bloom that persists regardless of whether the felt mat is exchanged for alternatives or if the clamp is employed or put to one side. To suggest it intrudes upon the musical performance is unfair. It's perhaps better to think of it as a touch of character rather than an imposition.

This aside, the Prime 21+'s knack of bringing out the very best from less than stellar recordings is a major plus. But when it is given a high-quality recording, it really comes into its own. Melody Gardot's *My One And Only Thrill* is a case in point with Gardot's vocals sounding as intimate as they do husky as the double bass displays a firmness and resonance that conjures up the impression it is actually in the room with you.

Conclusion

While you could argue that the setup procedure is not as swift as VPI suggests, this is nonetheless a magnificent-sounding turntable that gives less than pristine recordings a healthy dose of spit and polish while revealing new-found details from well-produced vinyl. **HFC**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
VPI Prime 21+
PRICE
£6,500
ORIGIN
USA
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
17.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
535 x 190 x 400mm
FEATURES
• 33 and 45rpm
• Audio-Technica
Shyla MC cartridge
• 10.5in tonearm
DISTRIBUTOR
Renaissance Audio
TELEPHONE
0131 5553922
WEBSITE
renaissanceaudio.
co.uk
vpiindustries.com
REVIEWED
HFC 474

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Supreme bass; fine detail; stability; very deep soundstage

DISLIKE: Slight richness and upper bass bloom

WE SAY: Gets the best from poor recordings and makes high-quality ones really soar

ifi



ZEN Stream

Wi-Fi audio transport

ZEN CAN

Headphone amp

ZEN DAC V2

USB DAC and
headphone amp

ZEN Phono

MM/MC phono stage

ZEN Blue V2

Bluetooth DAC





Balanced Audio Technology VK-3500

As the only hybrid model in the Wilmington, Delaware company's stable, the VK-3500's claimed 150W into 8ohm power output matches BAT's solid-state VK-255SE power amplifier, and comfortably exceeds the specification of its all-tube power amps and integrations. BAT has called upon the 'Unistage' topology of its flagship REX hardware – a single-gain/single-stage 6H30 triode circuit – and married it with a 'wide bandwidth' complementary bipolar output stage derived from its reference VK-6200 power amp. Also previously featured in the company's products are the Mundorf silver/gold oil capacitors used in the preamp circuit that are claimed to offer better damping of 'ringing artefacts'.

The VK-3500 eschews all-in-one hi-fi convenience and networked audio, as a strictly analogue design. Therefore, the back view is uncluttered. Located between its gold-plated speaker binding posts are two balanced XLR and three single-ended RCA inputs, joined by a balanced preamp output for direct or second zone use, plus an RCA tape loop. The only concession made to further decluttering a hi-fi rack is the inclusion of an MM/MC phono stage to the third line input.

Sound quality

Overall, the VK-3500's sound mixes crisp, sparky treble and fast, precise bass with a deliciously dynamic delivery and confident, detailed soundstaging. It gives a mostly transparent view of recordings without descending into clinical indifference while treble is typically more wholegrain mustard than buttery smooth.

During Queen's *Death On Two Legs*, each note of Freddie Mercury's piano intro sounds cleanly struck, and then, as if snapping its fingers, the VK-3500 launches into the guitar riff, bringing bite and edge to Brian May's tone. Musical flourishes sparkle left and right while the drums sound weighty and intense from start to finish.

A particularly notable trait is the fun it has with deep bass. Low-end transients come and go like momentary explosions, as exemplified by the one-note bassline progressions in Eminem's *My Name Is*. This is a track that the BAT really gets itself into and it also has something of a ball when playing with the bouncy kick drums of Regina Spektor's *Fidelity*. In both instances the listening experience takes on a physical dimension. The latter track's title proves apt here, too, as the amplifier

relishes Spektor's lilting, articulate vocal and the plucked string accompaniment, expressing them with verve and remarkable clarity.

So the VK-3500 sounds detailed and alive, speedy and rhythmic. Some might prefer more warmth to its presentation and a softer edge to its upper registers – a weekend filled with high-volume listening to the likes of Aerosmith, The Rolling Stones and AC/DC does throw up the occasional shrill moment. Never enough, however, to be seriously detrimental to our enjoyment.

Conclusion

With a track where the lower frequencies are less prominent, the VK-3500 is able to shift gear just as effortlessly. Hooked up to a mighty Paradigm Founder 100F floorstander, the sustained organ notes, soft strings and falsetto vocals of a 24-bit/88.2kHz stream of *Pause*, by multi-instrumental outfit Emily Barker & The Red Clay Halo, are painted in varying subtle shades. The recording sounding utterly spine-tingling throughout. **HFC**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Balanced Audio
Technology
VK-3500

PRICE
£13,000

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Hybrid integrated
amplifier

WEIGHT
22.7 kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
483 x 146 x 394mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power
output: 2x 150W
(8ohm)
• Connections: 2x
RCA; 1x MM/MC
phono stage; 2x
XLR; RCA tape loop

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma-AV

WEBSITE
balanced.com
karma-av.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 481

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Luscious looks;
speed; crispness;
transparency

DISLIKE: Complicated
to set up

WE SAY: Brings even
familiar music back to
life. Stellar performer.



Copland CSA150

As hybrids go, the CSA150 attempts to be a bit of everything. Inside, a single 6922 double triode acts as the voltage driver for the line stage, after which chunky MOSFETs take over to deliver a claimed 150W RMS per channel of Class AB power.

As well as touching both valve and solid-state bases, it offers a bit of analogue and a bit of digital too. Inside is an ESS Sabre 9018 DAC in quad mode mono configuration, offering PCM decoding up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD. It has standard optical and coaxial inputs, plus a USB in and aptX Bluetooth – although there's no streaming. You also get four analogue inputs, a moving-magnet phono stage, tape loop and a Bluetooth aerial socket. There's a pair of balanced XLR inputs, plus fixed and variable RCA line outs. Up front is a full-size headphone jack that works with the built-in headphone amp.

Sound quality

Pretty much from switch-on, the CSA150 is everything I want from an amplifier. It sounds big, powerful, clean and open, and is totally devoid of any conspicuous faults. Unlike some solely solid-state stuff I've heard, it doesn't have any sense of grain or 'chrome plating' to its tonality. However, in no way does this mean it's soft, dull or lifeless. Rather, it hits the sonic sweet spot and offers much

of the best of both worlds. It would be wrong to call it tonally warm outright and it's certainly not 'valve-like' in its character. Yet, as befitting its hybrid design, nor is it obviously transistor-y. *Lido Shuffle* by Boz Scaggs is a little soft around the edges, with smidges of colour, but the recording is essentially quite dry. It sounded modern at that time, tighter and tauter than pop stuff coming out just a few years earlier – and the Copland's fundamental neutrality and transparency reproduce this perfectly.

Along with its fine tonality, another instantly recognisable facet of this integrated is its power and punch. The bassline is firm and solid yet wonderfully propulsive. It doesn't have any obvious overhang, yet there is muscle aplenty. The same goes for some thumping techno from Manix; *You Held My Hand* absolutely blasts my room with vast tracts of sub bass.

The CSA150's general demeanour of not being scared of hard work extends to its stereo imaging abilities. Lesser amplifiers make Kate Bush's *Running Up That Hill* an underwhelming experience. Yet the Copland takes it on with the confidence of a stadium rock band. The percussive beat thunders out, underpinning a vast recorded acoustic. On rivals this can sound dowdy and leaden, but here it is vast and visceral with images pushing far left and right, and there is decent depth perspective too.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Copland CSA150

PRICE
£4,988

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
15kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 165 x 370mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 150W RMS (8ohm)
• 6922 double triode line stage voltage driver
• ESS Sabre 9018 DAC
• Moving-magnet phono stage

DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds

TELEPHONE
0208 9713909

WEBSITE
copland.dk

REVIEWED
HFC 479

The analogue inputs are superb, and the RCAs are excellent. The digital ins are hugely convenient, but don't quite do the rest of the amp justice; you'll get an even better sound if you invest a couple of grand in a good standalone DAC. Still, it's perfectly good and a major improvement on the sort of thing you're likely to encounter in a £1,000 streamer.

The built-in moving-magnet phono stage is better than expected. It plays to the amp's aforementioned strengths to serve up an expansive, punchy and engaging sound. AC/DC's *Back In Black* is a riot, the Copland reproducing the guitar riffs with a singular enthusiasm. It harnesses the recording's great power and drama to create something suitably monumental.

Conclusion

Copland's CSA150 is not just a fine all-rounder; it excels sonically with a big, strong, engaging and musical performance that's also surprisingly subtle and detailed for such a muscular thing. Well worth an audition, it's a bargain at its price considering all that it does. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Superb sound; fine build; impressive feature count

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: A highly capable high-end integrated amplifier

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Electrocompaniet ECI 80D

This new entry-level integrated promises more fans for the iconic Norwegian brand. Will you be among them?

Is it possible to get hooked on a look? Absolutely. And, as you might expect, Scandi designers have the knack of tempting us with eye appeal alone. Take integrated amplifiers. Whether it's Hegel's stone-cold sober industrial functionalism or the surgically clean lab chic favoured by Primare and Copland, they're all riffing on a less-is-more theme – spare, cool and tasteful.

But it's remarkable what subtly tweaked proportions and a sprinkle of bling can do to raise the aesthetic ante. Proof? Norwegian high-end practitioner Electrocompaniet has been stealing the scene for nearly five decades, its fusion of black, gold and a billboard-sized logo serving as an iconic visual constant through a

history encompassing massive initial critical acclaim, a reputation for top-drawer sonics bolstered by a thumbs-up from Michael Jackson's studio engineers, an arguably risky shift of emphasis towards multi-room lifestyle speakers and, latterly, a return to its purist roots as evinced by its current core lineup of 'Classic Line' amps, CD players and streamers.

Smitten audiophiles, perhaps hitherto put off by the lofty price tags, will be interested in the company's new entry-level integrated, the ECI 80D. At £2,990, it sits comfortably outside the budget sector but the promise of a genuine high-end EC goodness, including on-board DAC, in a slimmed down and less expensively pitched package is certainly enticing and hot competition for Scandi rivals

Hegel's H190 (£3,200), Primare's I25 Prisma (£3,200, *HFC* 461) and Copland's CSA 100 (£3,500 *HFC* 465).

Quantitatively, the headline specs are more or less par for the course – 80 Class A/B Watts per channel into 8ohm (2x 150W into 4ohm) – but Electrocompaniet has chosen to forego the full wi-fi network support you'd get with the Hegel and Primare for basic Bluetooth aptX HD streaming from iOS, Android and PC. On the other hand, it incorporates a high-quality MM phono stage and headphone amp, much like the Copland, but with both 3.5mm and 6.35mm jacks located on the rear.

Digital inputs run to a pair of coaxial and three optical. These are joined by two RCA line-level inputs and, if you want to use the ECI 80D purely as a preamp, there's also an RCA pre-out pair. Disappointingly, the sole USB socket is a service port and not for hooking up a laptop. While we're on the niggles, the supplied remote isn't up to much and I have to squeeze the button battery cover to get any of its basic functions to work. Whether it's a ploy to get you up close and personal with the amplifier's quartet of rather gorgeous gold navigation/volume buttons on the right-hand portion of the fascia or a means to allocate more of the development budget to the electronics I wouldn't like to speculate,

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Electrocompaniet
ECI 80D

PRICE
£2,990

ORIGIN
Norway

TYPE
Integrated
amplifier/DAC

WEIGHT
8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
470 x 90 x 262mm

FEATURES
• 2x RCA line inputs
• Digital inputs: 2x
coaxial; 3x optical
• Moving-magnet
phono stage
• Quoted power
output: 2x 80W
(8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Electrocompaniet

TELEPHONE
+47 51 741033

WEBSITE
electrocompaniet.
com

REVIEWED
HFC 473

but it is a disconnect with the quality and style of the rest of the amp.

That said, the ECI 80D is properly, seductively handsome, its slim profile accentuated by the fact that it's 36mm wider than the full-width separates norm. Far from bulky, it's almost half the depth of Primare's I25 Prisma. It's hard to single out the most distinctive aspect of the look, but the 10mm-thick acrylic panel that covers the facia has to be a contender, likewise the large, super-legible, fluorescent blue-over-black graphics of the display on the left – which show volume level and, where selected, the sampling rate of an incoming digital signal. Judging by the photos, it looks just as special with the recently introduced optional white finish. The white variation carries a £200 surcharge; that comes with silver buttons as standard, gold available on request.

Whereas many audiophile savvy manufacturers source their off-the-shelf Delta Sigma DAC chips from ESS, AKM or Cirrus Logic, the ECI 80D gets the somewhat less trendy PCM1789 from Texas Instruments – good for up to 24-bit/192kHz, but not the heady multiples toted by the aforementioned alternatives. Fear not, says Electrocompaniet's Sales Director, Lasse Danielsen, what really matters is the implementation and analogue circuitry – a familiar refrain we've no quarrel with.

Sound quality

When Electrocompaniet hit the scene in the early Seventies, its mission was to show that a transistor-based amplifier could not only match the warmth and naturalness of the best valve designs but also better them for tonal accuracy. The company believes its brand of Class A/B amplification is a timely foil for the increasing number of Class D designs, offering a warmer and more refined balance.

Naturally curious, I've lined-up a Primare I25 Prisma (classy Class D) and Hegel H120 (HFC 460) (exemplary Class A/B) as benchmarks with Audiolab's 6000 CDT CD transport (HFC 447), an Apple iPad Mini, Chord Electronics Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428) and JBL's L82 Classic (p34) standmount completing the system.

The one asset you can't measure with hi-fi is likeability, yet it's obvious listening to *Dream* from Shawn Mendes' *Wonder* on CD, that the ECI 80D has it in spades using its own on-board DAC. If it isn't conspicuously fast or especially grippy, you're barely aware without reference to the Hegel and Primare, both of which exhibit a strong temporal character. But the EC



Those gold highlights bring a touch of bling to the design

is tonally and harmonically richer as well as sounding deliciously fluid and supple, and such things tend to connect just as easily and powerfully with all kinds of music. The densely layered and slickly produced Mendes cut is delivered with detail deftly integrated into the larger musical picture rather than acutely analysed and an elusive sense of body and inner texture – tellingly apparent

The promise of high end EC goodness in a slimmed-down package is enticing

in the vocal – that leaner and more agile sounding amps often diminish. Perhaps predictably, routing in the Hugo 2 for decoding duties sharpens up timing and micro-dynamic acuity but the easy comfort and colour still remain intact.

Pitting the ECI 80D against the Hegel H120 (both amps' internal DACs engaged) folds down to the EC sounding equally muscular and dynamic but rosier and more romantic and the Hegel marginally cleaner, tighter and more athletic. The Primare is a different animal again, further ramping up the energy, articulation, insight and control – especially in the bass – but with an altogether cooler and drier tonal balance that is nonetheless capable of greater discrimination and contrasts. Both the Hegel and the Primare can sound more urgent

and exciting in extremis. In the end, though, the EC has a certain ease and low fatigue livability on its side that gets under the skin. Teamed with the potently expressive but un-finnicky JBLs, there's airy soundstage expanse and an easy-going generosity to the sound that gifts the charged live ambience of The Clark Sisters' soulful gospel (*Blessed And Highly Favoured* from *Live – One Last Time*, streamed from Tidal) huge presence and tingle factor without ever lapsing into ragged excess.

Conclusion

Including Bluetooth, a phono stage and headphone output that, again, seamlessly dovetail with the cosy tonal temperature of the amp, the ECI 80D presents a very particular, but coherently resolved idea of solid-state amplification to the world that should win it many friends. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: High style; come hither sound quality
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Under par remote; no wi-fi
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Not an amp to float everyone's boat, but if you get it little else will do
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Kronos

AUDIO VISUAL



GOLD NOTE

McIntosh®



hana

Sonus faber



AUDIOVECTOR

QUAD



PrimaLuna®

ORIGIN
LIVE

vitus VA audio

Technics®



MARTEN

puresound



TITAN
AUDIO

PaybyFinance

Up to 36 months



8-9 SCOTCH STREET CENTER, DUNGANNON, BT701AR



Subscribe
to our YouTube channel!
now!



Call Us: 03435236169

HUGE STOCK HOLDINGS - NI & UK WAREHOUSES

FAST DISPATCH - 24/7 PHONE SUPPORT

Free Parking — One to One Demonstrations — Free Refreshments

REFERENCE STORE

NEW

WEST SUSSEX



STORE MANAGER

Richard Allan

SALES MANAGER

Andy Sinden

www.kronosav.com

UNIT 2, STANBRIDGE PARK, WEST SUSSEX, RH17 6AS





Marantz PM6007

Assiduously evolved and improved over the years, the basic design is little changed from that of 2007's PM6002 and, just like all the successors, the PM6007's prime objective is to keep its price competitors eating dust in the rear-view mirror. Judging by past efforts, the success rate hasn't been too shabby at all.

Were physical presence and the number of twirly knobs determining factors for buying integrateds, this Japanese amp would already have its rivals firmly beaten. Compared with the super-svelte NAD 3020 V2 (overleaf) and the diminutive Rega io (p76), the PM6007 is a battleship. Just to look at it, you know you're getting your £500's worth in sheer surface area alone.

It's really well made too, right down to the copper screws. All right, the 14-year-old styling may grate with some and a series of blue LEDs stand in for a proper display, but there's no arguing with the way it's put together. There's also a digital-to-analogue converter on board. It uses the highly

regarded AKM AK4490 chipset trickled down from the company's SA series and even has two filter settings – slow roll-off and sharp roll-off.

On the digital side, there are two optical inputs and a single coaxial. These sit alongside the four line-level analogue ins and MM phono stage. The power amp and phono stage get new components and the latter upgraded FET circuitry is derived from that in the more expensive PM7000N's phono stage.

Sound quality

My first note is: "sounds like Cambridge Audio's AXA35 (HFC 475) with more chutzpah, drive and refinement". I think it's a fair first impression. The Marantz is comparably open, clean and resolute, but also weightier and more dynamic without the occasionally acerbic edge. The latter virtue is no surprise, although the step up in pace and punch is. The PM6007's many predecessors have all shared a presentation that has been notably smooth, just the warm side of neutral and forgiving. Part of the appeal. That's changed with a shift in balance

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Marantz PM6007

PRICE
£500

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
7.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 105 x 370mm

FEATURES
● Quoted power output: 2x 45W (8ohm)
● Inputs: 4x RCA; 1x MM phono stage; 1x coaxial; 2x optical
● AKM AK4490 DAC

DISTRIBUTOR
D&M Audiovisual Ltd.

WEBSITE
marantz.com

REVIEWED
HFC 475

to the front foot and dialled up rhythmic emphasis. A slight loss of silkiness and midband body results, but the livelier, assertive demeanour certainly pulls the design closer to that of temporally on-point rivals.

Streaming via Chord's Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 426) and listening to Elvis Costello's *Painted From Memory* pillowed by Burt Bacharach's lush, Sixties-infused arrangements, the PM6007 sounds a keenly transparent budget design that's been honed, re-zoned and fine-tooth combed to within an inch of its life. The upshot is easy to admire, but perhaps a little harder to love. Swapping to the amp's own on-board DAC is the way to go in this instance, sacrificing a little definition and acuity for a relaxed and warmer balance that's clearly been engineered in from the start.

Conclusion

Just as expertly judged, the phono stage does a fine job with Joni Mitchell's *Edith And The Kingpin*, conveying the purity in her voice, imaging solidly and with precise separation but not quite able to convey the dreamy balm washing over the track that's better rendered by NAD's D3020 V2 or Rega's io. **DV**



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

LIKE: Covers-all-bases sound; excellent DAC and phono stage; build

DISLIKE: Old-fashioned ergonomics; no USB input or Bluetooth

WE SAY: A formidable skill set that has bags of appeal

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

ROKSAN

Music that touches you.
Just a touch away.



Connecting made simple.
Attessa Turntable



roksan.com/attessa





DETAILS

PRODUCT
NAD D 3020 V2

PRICE
£400

ORIGIN
Canada/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
1.38kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
58 x 186 x 219mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 30W (8ohm)
- Inputs: 1x RCA; 1x MM phono stage; 1x coaxial; 1x optical; 1x asynchronous USB
- AptX Bluetooth

DISTRIBUTOR
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision

WEBSITE
nadelectronics.com

REVIEWED
HFC 475

NAD D 3020 V2

While Marantz can be proud of the PM6007's lineage, for true iconic clout it's hard to beat the 3020, which made such a splash at its launch in 1978, the ripples can still be felt today after it clocked up more sales than any amp in history.

It helps, of course, that the core nomenclature lives on in NAD's current range of integrals. Physically and technically, the D 3020 V2 is a very different animal to its famous forbear being Class D, much smaller and possessing a form factor that can be stood upright as well as laid on its side, but the sonic ambition is the same: setting a high bar for sound and value.

Just as the original 3020 underwent several iterations, the D 3020 V2 ushers in the first round of upgrades for its digital hybrid namesake. It looks a bit classier – still a lightweight baby monolith with a rounded-off

leading corner, glossy casing and a chunky volume knob – but is now equipped with the seemingly mandatory MM phono stage. This was, of course, an outstanding feature of the original 3020. Power is rated at a modest 30W per channel but, like the old-timer, this is a poor guide to its real-world driving ability thanks to its 'precision soft-clipping circuit'.

There isn't very much room for manoeuvre on the rear panel. Joining the phono stage input and grounding terminal are a single RCA line-level input, one coaxial and one optical linking digital components to the 24-bit/192kHz on-board DAC, a USB service port and a row of three 3.5mm jacks labelled sub-out, 12V trigger and pre-out. The rest of the space is taken up with close-coupled loudspeaker binding posts and mains socket. At least aptX Bluetooth lives on the inside.

Sound quality

Class D or not, the D 3020 V2's voicing faithfully honours its sonic heritage, retaining the inviting, low fatigue tonal balance and supple, real-world potency of its ancestor, but bringing it right up to date with greater resolving power, dynamic reach and rhythmic acuity.

In some ways, this represents a deeply rewarding mix of attributes. Whether it's Elvis or Vangelis' *Blade Runner* soundtrack, the musical outcomes are as comfortable and easy to relax into as a favourite armchair with a plump, strategically placed cushion. In these respects, the NAD is pretty much best in class and, if you want to go for an even warmer hug, there's a button on the credit card remote that gives you even more of the already fulsome bass. I find that a little too much, but for speakers with a less well-nourished bottom end than the reference system's Mission QX2 (HFC 436), it could be ideal.

Michael McDonald's revved up *Motown II* proves to be a little more

Technically, NAD's D 3020 V2 is a very different animal to its famous forbear

troublesome. There's no shortage of muscle or momentum, but some of the leading-edge energy and excitement has gone west. The D 3020 V2 is smooth and warm, but just occasionally its velvety virtuosity lapses into a kind of mugginess that can sap a recording of air and vitality. Surprisingly, even Joni Mitchell's lounge jazz-marinated tale of a gangster's new moll *Edith And The Kingpin* doesn't get off scot free, Joni sounding so slick, her vocal cords seem to have been sprayed with a gossamer film of silicon. Quite something, but not quite right. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

LIKE: Covers-all-bases sound; excellent DAC and phono stage; build

DISLIKE: Decidedly old-fashioned ergonomics; lacks a USB input

WE SAY: A formidable skill set that has bags of appeal

OVERALL

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★





ROTEL®

Sit back, relax,
enjoy the music



Discover more at rotel.com/60years





Pass Labs INT-25

As a microcosm, the hi-fi industry more than any other is littered with examples of people that thought: “Yeah, I could do that” and then set about producing their own version of commercially produced components on their kitchen table. If only car manufacturers or the consumer electronics market followed suit, the world might be full of more interesting products, able to specialise in ever more imaginative ways.

Take US-based amplifier specialist Pass Labs for example. The brainchild of electronics whiz Nelson Pass and his mate Mike Burley, the company based in Auburn, California, first came into being in 1991 when the pair combined three home-constructed CNC machines with a hunger to produce their own single-ended Class A amplifier design. The resulting mono-block Aleph O was rated at 70W into 8ohm, and was unique at the time for using three gain stages of power Mosfets, including a push-pull output stage biased by a big constant current source. The amp quickly became popular and in a typical ‘mom-and-pops’-type business model, Pass found himself having to employ neighbour Elena Tong to help run the business side of things.

Jump forward 30 years and little has changed. Though production has moved from Pass’ garage to a

dedicated factory, Tong still runs things behind the scenes, leaving Nelson to concentrate on producing amplifiers with his own uniquely singular vision.

Known affectionately as ‘Papa’ within the online DIY community in which he started out, Pass had shown an interest in innovating amplifier design some 15 years before Pass Labs came into being. Describing himself as primarily a circuit topologist, he explains: “I like very simple topologies, so the simpler you can make an amplifier, the more likely there is to be good correspondence between the sonic performance and what you measure on a bench”.

Coming back to the current day, Pass’ dedication to doing things his own way remains as undimmed as ever and in the INT-25 you see before you we have an integrated that keeps things incredibly simple. Consequently, fripperies such as digital inputs, network functionality and even an onboard phono stage are completely eschewed. Instead we have a line-only integrated that sticks to the basics: a Class A power amplifier, an FET-based preamp and... well, that’s it. This is a conduit that slots in rather neatly between your sources and speaker, pure and simple. Those of you asking why such a simple product demands such a high price are advised to skip to the Sound quality section. Otherwise, read on...

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pass Labs INT-25
PRICE
£7,200
ORIGIN
USA
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
22.2kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 153 x 454mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 25W (8ohm)
• 3x RCA line-level inputs
DISTRIBUTOR
Select Audio
TELEPHONE
01900 601954
WEBSITE
selectaudio.co.uk;
passlabs.com
REVIEWED
HFC 472

As the entry-level offering from the INT series, the INT-25 is rated at 2x 25W power output into 8ohm loads, although in reality it vastly exceeds this to the tune of 2x 65W/8ohm and 2x 120W/4ohm – with headroom to accommodate 75W, 147W and 281W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads. Other members of the Class AB range include the more powerful INT-60 (£8,750, 2x 60W) and INT-250 (£11,500, 2x 250W). All three models come in a stylish silver finish, and though the INT-25 lacks the distinctive circular, blue-lit meter of its siblings, it is nonetheless still a very attractive proposition indeed.

Controls are pleasingly minimal with just a 63-step volume dial, a trio of input selectors and mute and power buttons visible on the front fascia. A blue LED panel provides a numerical volume indicator, while smaller LEDs highlight which input has been selected. Around the back, socketry is equally sparse. And when we say sparse, we really do mean it. Chunky loudspeaker binding posts equipped to handle spade, banana plugs and bare-wire connection are partnered by a trio of line-level RCA inputs and that’s about your lot.

Sitting on four feet, the chassis is reasonably large with two side-mounted heatsinks conferring a slightly industrial feel to an otherwise sophisticated design. Bevelled edges on the thick brushed aluminium front plate frame hint at the design purity that’s continued under the hood. The preamp is a simplified single-ended version of the balanced JFET circuit that’s employed in the pricier INT-60, while the elegant two-transistor Class A FET power amp has been passed on from Pass Labs’ XA-25.

Sonus faber

LUMINA



Affordable luxury: Lumina rewrites the rules.

Lumina distils Sonus faber's 35+ years of knowledge and expert craftsmanship, creating a collection that exceeds even the highest of expectations.

New models added

Lumina has expanded to include the new (larger) Lumina II stand-mount and Lumina V floorstander, complementing the award-winning Lumina I, III and CI models.

Speakers you want to see and hear

Whether stereo or a multi-channel, Lumina pushes the performance envelope to new heights and beyond.

sonusfaber.com

To find your nearest dealer, please visit:
finesounds.uk/dealers





Parsimonious though the quoted power rating appears, owners of sensitive speakers need not be concerned: the conservative spec merely denotes the amp's Class A reach, determined by its standing bias current. In reality, and ably assisted by a substantial power supply, it'll deliver plenty more grunt as it stretches its legs into Class AB territory.

As you might expect from an amp that's so seemingly light on features, setup is an absolute breeze. An equally minimalist remote control is bundled. As it's the same one you'll find with higher-specced models further up the range, it has a number of buttons – balance and passthrough for example – for features that don't actually appear on the INT-25. It's also worth noting, that this is a particularly warm-running integrated and so consequently will need to be placed somewhere with sufficient ventilation. Pass Labs recommends minimum clearance of at least 6in.

Sound quality

The INT-25 is an effortless, unfatiguing listen. There's no feeling of details being glossed over or eschewed in favour of creating an unnatural impression of warmth. Regardless of music type, source or format, the sound reflects the look of the chassis: succinct and clean, resolving musical minutiae with finesse. Hyperbolic claims from hi-fi manufacturers are two a penny and usually to be taken with a sizable handful of salt, but in the INT-25's case, Pass Labs' assertion that it: "breathes new life into music" almost sells this integrated short. Any concerns about that 25W power output not being enough are quickly allayed as it powers through percussion and replicates basslines

with bombast like something offering two or three times the heft. In fact, there's a rich, velvet quality to the low end that's every bit as appetising as the treble is acrobatic and full of nuance. In case you haven't already guessed, we rather like it.

Johannes Pramsohler and Ensemble Diderot's recording of Montanari's *Violin Concertos* exhibits a seductive liveliness that helps emphasise the composition's overall jollity as the harpsichord and violin positively

The INT-25's even handedness ensures impeccable levels of cool, calm control

dance from the speakers. A piece of music such as this demands deft handling and transient ability when it comes to dynamic peaks and that's precisely what is dished up. While the performance could never be considered rowdy in any way, neither is it shy and retiring. Instead its even handedness ensures impeccable levels of cool, calm control.

Switching to an MQA stream of Moby's *God Moving Over The Face Of The Waters* from Tidal, the INT-25 remains firmly in control throughout. Though there's nothing especially inventive about Moby's mix, with the integrated feeding our three-way

It may lack the blue meters of its siblings, but the INT-25 is a looker



floorstander, the conflicting light and dark as the sweet-sounding strings face off against the deep, surging bass, things still manage to sound layered and involving.

Pantera's *Domination* highlights just how impressive the scale is that it is able to unleash. The pounding kick drums hit hard and sound huge, while the reverb-heavy mix grips the loudspeaker's woofers with authority dragging the low-frequencies ever deeper to unveil the sub-bass that lies beneath the bass.

Starting with a walking blues bassline, gently brushed hi-hats and a vibrato guitar solo, Al Kooper and Mike Bloomfield's *Albert's Shuffle* is a revelation. The tone of the guitar is startling, with the picked notes given a piercing leading edge combined with textured highs. Then as the Hammond organ, ondioline and horns get in on the act, it quickly becomes clear that each is afforded their own distinct sound and space, precisely located within a pleasingly deep and wide soundstage. There's no mistaking the natural groove of a pack of musicians locked into the moment having a thoroughly good time and we can't help but feel the same.

Conclusion

There's an obvious and quite sizable elephant in the room when it comes to the price of the INT-25 and while it's certainly not exactly cheap, those that can afford to stretch their purse strings far enough will not be disappointed in their investment. It has the required power to both comfortably feed larger floorstanders or make standmounts sound considerably bigger than they actually are. Admittedly, there are no digital inputs and many of the features you'll find on far cheaper amps as a matter of course have been neatly side stepped. If the result of keeping things simple is as stunning as this, we can't help wonder why anyone would consider looking elsewhere. **HFC**

HI-FIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Extremely musical; no lack of muscle; sublime sound

DISLIKE: Limited features and connectivity; price

WE SAY: If a back-to-basics approach sounds this good, count us as convinced

★★★★★

PMC®

twenty5



ATL™
FEATURING Laminair™

20
YEARS

UNRIVALLED
twenty year warranty

THE BEST, *i*MPROVED

Everything that made the **twenty5** series legendary, with even greater realism, transparency and musicality.

Find a local retailer to hear more at
www.pmc-speakers.com



twenty5i series - Oct 20



twenty5.21i - May 20



twenty5.21i - May 21



twenty5.22i - June 20



twenty5.23i - March 21



twenty5.26i - Oct 20



twenty5.26i - Nov 20



twenty5.26i - Dec 20



Rega io

If you're tempted to infer from the io's name that the little amp is half a Brio (HFC 422), the model one tier higher up the range, that would be selling it somewhat short. Sure, it's quite a bit smaller and some £220 cheaper but, truth is, it's a Brio with a few strategic cost-saving revisions in a smaller, cheaper chassis. Arguably, this makes it even more cost effective than its thoroughly excellent sibling, and that's saying something.

The io made its debut as part of Rega's System One, three components in a synergistic alliance – a Planar 1 turntable, a pair of Kyte speakers and the io – for just £999. But it can also be purchased separately.

Power is limited to 30 Class A/B Watts, down from the Brio's 50W, because of changes to the power supply, a simpler power transformer without isolated windings and more affordable op amps. The lower power permits smaller, simpler casework which, realistically, necessitated fewer inputs, too: MM phono, two line-level and a 3.5mm jack on the front is your lot, but it's enough to build a perfectly respectable system around.

The front panel is pleasingly straightforward and neat, but obviously built to a price. Both the volume knob and input selection button are plastic, as is the fascia border. But the red backlit graphics are clear and smart while the metal

casework feels solid and both the inputs and the speaker terminals on the admittedly rather cramped rear panel are of good quality. What's more, Rega hasn't stinted on the remote, which is mid-sized, clearly laid out and covers just about everything – so there's no need to get up close and personal with the fascia's not-so-pleasingly tactile controls.

Sound quality

There's a whole list of things the Rega io isn't. It isn't the cleanest-sounding amp around or, indeed, the smoothest. It doesn't have the most expansive soundstage or the kind of detail retrieval that makes you wake up in the middle of the night and shout: "Wow!" It's neither conspicuously fast nor cosily warm. And while it goes loud enough to annoy the neighbours, there are other amps available that go louder still. Yep, even taking its digital feed from Chord Electronics' on-it Hugo 2 (HFC 428), none of the above applies.



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega io
PRICE
£380
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
2.9kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
180 x 68 x 290mm
FEATURES
● Quoted power output: 2x 30W (8ohm)
● Inputs: 2x RCA; 1x MM phono stage
DISTRIBUTOR
Rega Research Ltd.
WEBSITE
rega.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 475

Perhaps its greatest attribute is that when you listen to it you couldn't give a flying donut. It's because – like the Brio it's based on and all Rega amps for that matter – the io is almost spookily at one with the music and seems much less concerned with ticking boxes assigned to specific hi-fi metrics.

A supple fluency and rhythmical literacy informs everything it plays. Michael McDonald's *Motown II* workout is less obviously taut and strictly metered than it is with Marantz's PM6007 (p68), but it has more musical mojo and juice, sounding bouncier, looser and more fun from beginning to end. In the same vein, Elvis Costello's *Painted From Memory* is more in the room, more palpable, more intimate, more affecting. As you'd hope, the phono stage is very good indeed, releasing Joni Mitchell's voice in *Edith And The Kingpin* and allowing it to regain its natural edge and purity. Once again, it's the subtle intricacy of the musical message that hits home. The io might not have the weight and colour of some rivals, but it is a little lighter on its feet. Rega's ability of putting musical literacy before stereo effects continues to make it count. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Outrageous musicality for the money; size and simplicity

DISLIKE: Nothing of note at the price

WE SAY: If it's musical communication you value above all else, look no further



BLUETOOTH
5.0



WI-FI
High Res
24 bits / 192 KHz



MULTIROOM



RCA / PHONO MM
INPUT



S/PDIF OPTICAL
INPUT



SUBWOOFER
OUTPUT



TRIANGLE

MANUFACTURE ELECTROACOUSTIQUE



AN ALL-IN-ONE, MODERN HI-FI SYSTEM

The AIO TWIN active speakers are packed with technologies and TRIANGLE know-how. Versatile and in a sleek design, they are a state-of-the-art product.

With all the features and performance of a modern Hi-Fi system, AIO TWIN offers a rich, precise, and detailed sound.

AIO TWIN



Finishes in multiple colours - matching turntable also available



Distributed exclusively in the UK & Ireland by SCV Distribution
For your nearest dealer call 03301 222500 | www.scvdistribution.co.uk



Rotel A14MkII

Reviewed with matching CD player in *HFC 421*, there was a nod to modernity on the original A14 amp due to its combination of analogue and digital inputs. The Japanese company has now taken the opportunity to update the amp to MkII status. The main change is the new digital board. This has five wired inputs; one USB-B, two coaxial and two optical, supported by aptX Bluetooth and all decoded by a Texas Instruments DAC. Sample rate handling on the USB input is 24-bit/384kHz and MQA is now supported, something that Rotel has hitherto not offered. The A14MkII also arrives with Roon certification that ensures that the correct settings are applied if you use it connected via USB to a Roon Core.

This is partnered by a comprehensive analogue section. Four RCA line inputs are supported by a moving-magnet phono stage and a pre out. This feeds a Class AB amplifier stage with a claimed 80W into 8ohm rising to 150W into 4ohm.

Sound quality

Initially connecting the analogue inputs to a Chord Electronics Qutest (*HFC 436*) and outputting to Spondor's A1 speaker (*HFC 460*) sees some of the same practicality make itself felt in how the A14MkII sounds. The Spondor reveals the integrated to have an effortless feeling of power and drive. Beyond the bald numbers the A14MkII feels like it has the headroom to handle any remotely

sane domestic volume requirement. This effortlessness sets the stage for it to deliver a consistently compelling presentation with an encouraging amount of space and depth. Amadou And Mariam's *Moukou Moukou* is delivered with a real feeling of the space it was recorded in. Tonally, it is a strong performer as well. It sits fractionally on the forward side of neutral and with the Spondor has a very likeable energy with voices.

Moving to its own digital board fractionally pulls the presentation back toward neutral, but it manages to keep the Qutest honest. The superb 24-bit/96kHz remaster of Led Zeppelin's *Presence* hammers along pulsing with drive and energy. Some of this is from the bass extension not being quite as deep as I know this recording to be, but the detail and definition on display is very good. Slow things down with the bleakly beautiful *The Greener Pasture* by Peter Oren and this perception of immediacy and agility is maintained without forcing the tempo.

The headphone amp is up to the job of driving Focal's Clear MG headphone to a perfectly respectable listening level and while it isn't the sweetest or richest presentation going, it's more than good enough for occasional late night use. The phono stage is rather more capable. Gain is lower than via the digital inputs, but it faithfully maintains the tonal balance of the other inputs and does so while generating little in the way of

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rotel A14MkII

PRICE
£1,200

ORIGIN
Japan/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
8.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 93 x 345mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 80W per channel (8ohm)
• 4x RCA line inputs
• Moving-magnet phono stage
• Digital board with: 1x USB; 2x coaxial; 2x optical
• AptX Bluetooth
• Headphone amplifier
WEBSITE
rotel.com
REVIEWED
HFC 480

unwanted excess noise. It's more than up to the job of supporting a sensibly priced turntable and Rotel's decision to leave you with plenty of inputs means you can easily move to an external phono stage too.

The real star of the show, though, is the Bluetooth implementation. What is supposed to be a quick check of functionality with Eliza Shaddad's *The Woman You Want* streamed via Android phone from Qobuz becomes a complete listen through. The presentation is impressively close to the USB stream with no unwanted noise and the same vibrant and engaging tonal balance. It feels a little odd beaming audio from a phone into a £1,200 amp, but there's no escaping the fact it sounds extremely musical.

Conclusion

As pride of ownership is a very real aspect of choosing hi-fi equipment, it's highly possible that this slightly prosaic-looking device will lose out to more visually dramatic rivals in hi-fi dealer showrooms. Which would be a real shame. Rotel has clearly lavished the bulk of its attention on the oily bits of the A14MkII and the result is an amplifier that manages to do a great deal and do most of it very well. This might be a head rather than heart-driven purchase, but this amp has what it takes once you've done the deed. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

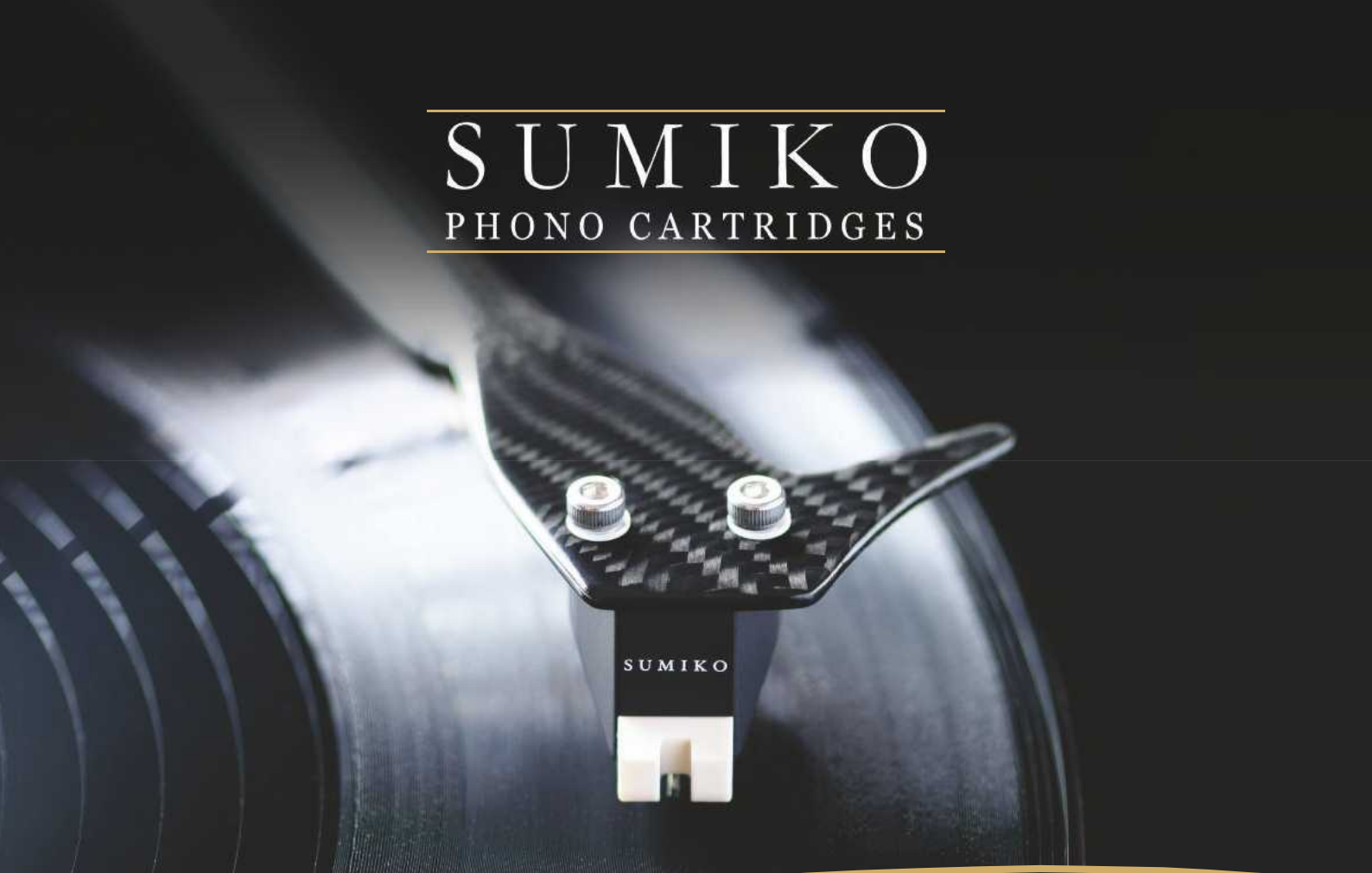
★★★★★

LIKE: Lively and engaging sound; comprehensive specification; solid build
DISLIKE: Slight lack of bass extension; rather staid appearance
WE SAY: It's certainly no looker, but the A14MkII is a seriously talented all-rounder

★★★★★

SUMIKO

PHONO CARTRIDGES



OYSTER SERIES

The newest additions to SUMIKO's coveted line of moving magnet cartridges are premium solutions with matching aesthetics. Drawing their names from different types of Oysters the first three models in the range **RAINIER**, **OLYMPIA** & **MOONSTONE** all utilise a common housing and generator assembly allowing for easy stylus upgrades as your listening system progresses. The top-of-the-line **AMETHYST** benefits from its own unique cartridge body, allowing its Nude Line-Contact stylus to perform to the highest possible standard.

RAINIER



OLYMPIA



MOONSTONE



AMETHYST



Rotel Michi X3

Like its predecessors, Rotel's Michi X3 is substantial, beautifully designed and pretty damn powerful (rated at 350W into 4ohm loads). Of course, bucketloads of power isn't everything, so the fully populated rear panel suggests that it will also operate as a complex multi-source system if required. It incorporates four sets of line inputs – one of which is balanced XLRs – a decent moving-magnet phono stage and a fairly comprehensive selection of digital inputs that feed its built-in 32-bit/768kHz AKM DAC. These include a trio of 24-bit/192kHz-friendly optical and coaxial inputs and a USB-B port to feed audio from a computer in the shape of PCM files up to 24-bit/384kHz or DSD128. An Ethernet input is on hand for networking, while a USB-A is available for firmware updates. Wireless operation completes the picture in the form of aptX Bluetooth.

Lesser used but nonetheless useful options include a pair of mono sub outs, a brace of pre-outs – one of which can be used to add a second amplifier in order to bi-amp suitably equipped speakers – and a 6.35mm headphone jack on the front panel.

Sound quality

While the X3's massive power output – both continuous and dynamic – makes it ideal for speakers with lower sensitivity or challenging impedance, its even more impressive ruthless

control, unfettered dynamics and crisp cleanliness make it a perfect match for just about any loudspeaker.

All of which results in a sound where clout and sparkle come together in a perfect balance to highlight open and detailed soundstaging alongside impeccable sharp focus and clarity. And while the X3 saves its very best for high-quality recordings, it's not afraid to mix it with less pristine material too.

Take for example Pete & Diesel's *Live At Barrowlands*. Taking a Bandcamp download and playing it via Roon from a Mac mini, the X3 is able to recapture all the excitement of this gig as the audience sings along. Triumphant and thrilling are the key takeaways here as the massive sound captures the rush of the experience.

As it to prove it can do the silk glove stuff just as well, the more gentle sound of Heron Valley's *Erie Storm* really plays to the X3's deft touch and agility. The definition of both vocals and the different instruments are every bit as notable as the way the rhythms drive along with a slick combination of delicacy of touch and outright slam. *Take You There* builds from its gentle middle section interlude towards its fiery end like a horse racing commentator slowly ramping himself up as a backrunner threads its way through the field to win. Meanwhile, the sheer brio of second track *Anna's* and delicacy of its pipes is enough to bring a smile to even the most downcast listener.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rotel Michi X3
PRICE
£4,300
ORIGIN
Japan
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
28.9kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
485 x 150 x 452mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 350W (4ohm)
• Inputs: 4x RCA; balanced XLR; MM phono stage; 3x optical; 3x coaxial; USB-B
• AptX/AAC Bluetooth
• 32-bit/768kHz DAC
DISTRIBUTOR
Rotel Europe
TELEPHONE
01903 221710
WEBSITE
rotel.com
REVIEWED
HFC 475

The same lightness of touch comes to the fore as Belgian soprano Jodie Devos tries his hand at Queen's *You Take My Breath Away*. With his unmistakable vocal accompanied by simple piano, the breath-taking acoustic sees the notes hang in the air in a wonderfully affecting way.

As impressive as this is, when there's as much power under the hood as the Michi has, it'd be remiss of us not to turn the wick up. Enter Dire Straits and *Sultans Of Swing*. Suddenly the flat-out drive of the bass and percussion with the ultra-fine detail of Mark Knopfler's guitar work sound totally reinvigorated, like hearing the track for the first time.

Conclusion

Clearly, then, the Michi X3 can play piledriver when required. But power is nothing without control and finesse and it's here that it earns its stripes. While speed, agility and warmth are among its attributes, what really impresses is its lightness of touch. Suddenly all that power is thrown into sharp relief, becoming more rewarding in the process. Throw in top-notch build quality, flexibility and supreme styling, and you have a winner. **HFC**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Supreme power, agility and control; lightness of touch

DISLIKE: The built-in DAC is good rather than great

WE SAY: Turning on the power is almost a given, but it's the deftness of touch that really impresses here





Technics SU-R1000

As well as its headline-grabbing vinyl spinners, Technics has created a stir with its flagship Reference Class of components, of which the SU-R1000 is the integrated option. In essence, it's a digital amplifier that uses pulse width modulation (although Technics is not keen to describe this as Class D) through a completely bespoke module. This is coupled to the output via FETs and generates a solid if not spectacular 150W into 8ohm, doubling into four.

This is fed by an analogue-to-digital system designed to ensure that the signal is both clock synced and free from jitter. JENO Engine works to strip jitter from the signal, ensuring it is not amplified (and thus exacerbated). This runs alongside ADCT (Active Distortion Cancelling Technology), which examines the signal before it enters the module and again after, so that anything erroneous is removed while applying the gain control to the amplified signal.

The phono stage supports moving magnet and coil, while a DSP used as part of the digitising process compares the output of your cartridge against a notional ideal. The phono stage is joined by two RCA inputs and another XLR. There is then a digital board featuring two optical, two coaxial and two USB inputs. Sample rate handling for the USBs is quoted as being 384kHz PCM and DSD256 with the coaxial and optical offering being correspondingly lower.

Sound quality

Connecting the Technics to Kudos' Titan 505 standmount (HFC 451) and a Roon Nucleus (HFC 439) via USB, *The Woman You Want* by Eliza Shaddad is utterly effortless in how it's presented. Shaddad sounds confident, believably proportioned and gloriously vivid. The album is mastered to show off her considerable vocal talent and the Technics delivers the intent with real assurance. Absolutely integral to everything it does is that it never sounds forced or strained. Even during the crescendo of *In the Morning* (Grandmother Song) it feels utterly unburstable.

The Cinematic Orchestra's *A Caged Bird/Imitations Of Life* becomes a vast and immersive performance combining seismic levels of low end with an open and airy treble performance. Within this space, instrumental tonality and Roots Manuva's vocals sound utterly believable. No less usefully, it's hard to provoke, delivering the benefits of higher quality recordings without ruining less than pristine ones.

The caveat to this is that 'sounding like a Technics' means the SU-R1000 never feels like the liveliest amp going. *Remind Me* by Emily King is tonally superb, suitably potent and gloriously open, but where some take that rich synth line and really groove with it, the Technics is a little more relaxed.

However, it has some virtues that are not only beyond most integrated phono stages, but also many standalone ones as well. Using the AVID Ingenium

(HFC 379) and SME M2-9 arm together with the Sumiko Songbird (HFC 465), this is a seriously capable performer. Even before the calibration is run, it delivers the same excellent tonality and deep controlled bass as the other inputs coupled to a negligible noise floor. This is complemented by an outstanding perception of stereo image and three dimensionality.

What's important about this is that none of the tremendous sophistication that goes into the phono stage working in this manner is an audible part of what it does. If you can bring yourself to relax about the fact that what you are hearing has been converted from analogue to digital, studied for its jitter quotient and compared in amplified and unamplified form, it's hard to argue that it's an uncanny take on the constituent parts of the turntable itself.

Conclusion

The SU-R1000 is not a shock-and-awe style device which may confuse a few people looking at the panoply of technology that it clearly incorporates. If you're looking for an immensely talented integrated all-rounder, this is a very good place to start. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Technics SU-R1000

PRICE
£7,000

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
22.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 191 x 459mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 150W (8ohm)
• Analogue inputs: 2x RCA; balanced XLR; RCA MM/MC phono; balanced XLR MC phono
• Digital inputs: 2x optical; 2x coaxial; 2x USB-B

DISTRIBUTOR
Panasonic UK

TELEPHONE
0333 2228777

WEBSITE
technics.com/uk

REVIEWED
HFC 480

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Open, effortless sound; connectivity; superb build

DISLIKE: Not the most ballistic amp; fiddly interface for setup

WESAY: A technical masterpiece that delivers Technics' virtues of impressive richness and refinement

nucleus

by

roon



SIMPLY THE BEST WAY TO EXPERIENCE ROON

Nucleus is the center of your Roon music system. It's the housekeeper, the traffic cop, and the brain that takes care of the music in your life. Using Nucleus, Roon manages all your music – on hard drives, NAS, and streaming content – and allows you to play it on all the audio devices around your home. Nucleus is the best way to run Roon, at any price. For a more advanced solution, the Nucleus+ is perfect for complex or high-end environments and for lightning-fast handling of larger music libraries.

*Reviews of the original Nucleus+, which has the same technical performance of the 2019 revision but with a different look.



NOW INCLUDES 1 YEAR FREE ROON SUBSCRIPTION



VAC

Sigma 170i

This compact unit defies the potential of its valve complement, a 'mere' quartet of KT88s. Not quite a 'beast', perhaps, but the cautious quoted factory rating of 85W per channel is more than met. Our review sample comes fully loaded, allowing us to exploit a couple of sources in balanced mode. The optional extras add an extra £3,700 to the price tag; they include the balanced XLR input for £800, the MM/MC £1,500 phono stage and the cool protective glass/metal cage – a snip at £1,400.

The iQ Continuous Automatic Bias System operates at all times, keeping an eye on the valves with one LED per tube. The lights glow green for a weak tube, red for a failed one or if it detects any potentially terminal issue, operating in advance to protect the unit. Green merely suggests you replace the valve at your convenience; red calls for turning off the Sigma 170i and replacing the duff tube when it cools down completely.

Around the back are toggles to select MM or MC, (the latter with three settings of 100, 200 and 470ohm), 'cine' throughput sockets and preamp output RCAs next to the XLR balanced inputs. Multiple taps for speakers are also provided.

Sound quality

Even before any lengthy warm-up, the VAC Sigma 170i reveals itself to be a thoroughbred of classic valve

sound. With feeds from various open-reel tape decks, we wallow in the assorted tracks from *Tchaikovsky's Greatest Hits* and even at 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ ips, the sound is gorgeous. The delivery is lush and cossetting even compared with other amps in triode mode.

Strings are extended, detailed and fast as lightning, and also utterly free of any 'screech' or unwanted edginess. But probably the most telling element is the incredible sense of space and air.

Handel's *Messiah*, with Stokowski conducting the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, is beautifully captured and the vocal elements perfectly defined while the recreation of a concert hall defies the constraints of our listening room.

Switching to vinyl, VAC's optional phono stage is exceptional. Not that one should expect anything less from the 47kohm MM stage, which is perfectly accommodating of an Ortofon 2M Red cartridge. But what proves a blessed relief is how the three MC settings handle a variety of different pick-ups.

Tony Joe White's *Homemade Ice Cream* proves revelatory in the truest sense of the word, in that it exposes something previously unseen (or heard). It is to be expected that the Wilson Audio Sasha DAW speaker that we're using provides prodigious bass, but the VAC mates so well with it that from the opening cut, *Saturday Night, In Grove, Louisiana*, the experience takes on a new dimension.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
VAC Sigma 170i
PRICE
£10,000
ORIGIN
USA
TYPE
Integrated tube amplifier
WEIGHT
32kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
457 x 203 x 440mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 85W
• 4 line level inputs with an option for one to be an MM/MC phono input
• Speaker outputs for 2-4, 4-8 and 8-16ohm
• 3x 12AX7 (inc phono stage), 5x 12AU7 triodes and 4x KT88 o/p tubes
DISTRIBUTOR
Signature Audio Systems, UK
WEBSITE
vac-amps.com
signatureaudio.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 479

Any who harbour the notion that no tube amp can provide lowest-octave solidity like a transistor amp need to hear this via VAC's 170i.

Whether it's the bass guitar lines or the percussion work, the foundation this amplifier creates is one of weight, presence and almost-scary realism. Better still is the handling of White's distinctive, rich, swampy vocals.

Conclusion

This prowess, however, isn't entirely dependent on superior pressings. With the slightly iffy 2014 reissue of Etta James' sublime *Tell Mama* on Bear Family, (not exactly known as a label of the audiophile tendency), the otherwise average recording does nothing to hold back one iota of James' peerless, powerful vocals on this milestone LP.

You want emotion? Here James rips out your heart, and the Sigma 170i ensures that every dynamic moment is treated with the respect it so thoroughly deserves.

With performers like this, even when recordings are not necessarily of the highest merit, the Sigma 170i does the business beautifully. Damn, this is one fine integrated. **HFC**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Compact; convenient; uncomplicated

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing of any real note

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Absolutely splendid all-rounder

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



XTZ

Edge A2-300

Edge A2-400

If you're looking for a great deal of power from boxes that won't take up too much room, these might just have the edge

Sometimes, a logical area of development in one product category is slightly undermined by other areas not necessarily producing the kit to make use of them. The recent DAC Group Test (HFC 482) is a case in point. Five of the six models can be used as preamps to streamline your system if you have no need for analogue inputs. The catch is that affordable power amplifiers remain a fairly rare beast.

Into this gap steps XTZ. The Swedish company is best known for its speakers, but also produces a small selection of standalone amps. One of these is designed to power a subwoofer, but the other two are stereo power amplifiers ideal for the task of being run with a DAC preamp to form a compact but very capable system. When you think about a small amp, you'd be forgiven for assuming

the power on offer will be limited. This would be a mistake.

In both cases, the Edge A2-300 and larger Edge A2-400 are named for their core specification. The smaller of the two amps can produce 300W into 4ohm into two channels and this rises to 400W in the A2-400 (this halves into an 8ohm load). In both cases, the figure quoted is at one percent THD, but should mean that even without going anywhere near the maximum of either you have enough power to drive any price-comparative speaker to a room-filling level.

As you might expect, they do this by using Class D. Both are built around ICEPower modules and a switch mode-type PSU that allows them to run on any voltage between 100 and 240W with connection via IEC socket. Like many Class D designs, the quoted signal-to-noise measurements are

extremely good as are the distortion figures when not running flat out.

Where the two differ is in some of their functionality. The A2-300 is equipped with RCA inputs only (usefully, these have the facility to adjust the input gain – ensuring they'll work with a wide selection of would-be preamps) and it has the ability to run in dual mono mode. This switches both channels to output the same signal, which simplifies bi-amping, but it can't be bridged; both channels remain active but separate.

The Edge A2-400 is able to drive just about any speaker with great ability

The A2-400 adds XLR connections to your input choices (both featuring input trim) and you have the option of bridging them too. When set in bridged mono mode, power climbs to a decidedly hefty 800W into 8ohm. This is thanks to a higher specification module than the one in the smaller amp, together with a revised PSU.

The amps are visually very similar, differing mainly in size. Both are 200mm wide, which allows a pair to be mounted side by side on a standard rack. The A2-400 is taller and deeper and more visually imposing than its smaller sibling. Both use all-metal casework with vented sides rather than the top plate and the information is on the front panel LED, which shows status and in the case of the A2-400, if it is clipping. Build quality is very good and a nice touch is the very high-quality

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
XTZ Edge A2-400

PRICE
€952

ORIGIN
Sweden/Thailand

TYPE
Power amplifier

WEIGHT
3.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 69 x 352mm

FEATURES
• 400W per channel into 4ohm
• 200W per channel into 8ohm
• 800W into one channel (8ohm bridged)
• Inputs: RCA (with trim pot); XLR; 12V trigger

DISTRIBUTOR
XTZ

WEBSITE
xtzsound.eu

REVIEWED
HFC 483



speaker terminals, which is up to the job of handling an absolute hosepipe should the requirement arise. The A2-400 also benefits from a five-year warranty over the smaller amp's two.

Sound quality

Testing both models side by side reveals some intriguing differences to what are notionally very similar designs, and it's fair to say that the A2-400 is not simply 'the same but bigger'. With the Matrix Audio Mini-i Pro 3 (HFC 482) acting as source and preamp for both devices and Focal's Kanta No1 standmount (HFC 454) connected up, the A2-300 goes first and, out of the blocks does some impressive things. This lower powered amp still has huge and effortless headroom that lends even large-scale music the space it needs to sound convincing.

Within this impressively worked three-dimensionality, however, the A2-300 does reveal some limitations. Even with the full-bodied and refined Matrix Audio providing the signal, there's still something of a 'Class D fingerprint' to the way it sounds. Enjoying Poppy Ackroyd's *Resolve* through the A2-300 has her piano sounding fractionally hard and brittle. Substituting the more forgiving Spendor A1 (HFC 460) is a little more refined, but there are rival amplifiers – considerably less powerful, but rivals nonetheless – that are more natural and full-bodied in their presentation. It isn't all bad news, though. The bass response is both deep and extremely well controlled, lending a useful sense of urgency to proceedings.

It's most likely you can partner the A2-300 to obviate the more significant

DETAILS

PRODUCT
XTZ Edge A2-300

PRICE
€416

ORIGIN
Sweden/Thailand

TYPE
Power amplifier

WEIGHT
2.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 58 x 285mm

FEATURES
• 300W per channel into 4ohm
• 150W per channel into 8ohm
• RCA input with trim pot

DISTRIBUTOR
XTZ

WEBSITE
xtzsound.eu

TESTED
HFC 483

issues, but if the cost difference of doing so is more than it would be to spring for the A2-400, it might make more sense to go for that instead. The larger amp makes no retrograde steps over the smaller one but, even with absolutely everything else kept unchanged around it, the midrange and tonal realism of the A2-400 is a considerable step forward. Ackroyd's piano becomes something altogether more tangible and lifelike. There is a greater feeling of warmth and presence to struck notes and this is apparent on vocals too. What is particularly impressive about this is that there's no detrimental effect when you lean on the A2-400 and ask it for something more ballistic.

A spirited blast through Public Service Broadcasting's *Der Rhythmus Der Maschinen* shows that the A2-400 has an effortlessness that very little at the price can get near. When you look at amps with outsize power outputs, it can be easy to lose sight of the point of such a thing. The idea isn't to put a tweeter into a low Earth orbit, but to ensure that – used within their vast operating envelope – there isn't a moment of strain or congestion. I would hesitate to describe this as a 'sweet'-sounding amplifier, but it is markedly more full-bodied than the A2-300.

If you have a projected requirement for 800W per channel, there's no arguing that the bridged mode works extremely well too. Even when bolted to Kudos' Titan 505 standmount (HFC 451) – the most demanding speaker I have to hand, but still something that generally works fine on a tenth of that output – there is an imperiousness to what the XTZ does that has little direct comparison anywhere near the same

price point. You don't need (such a strong word when talking about all forms of hi-fi if we're honest) a power output this large for most domestic purposes, but it doesn't hurt either. No less importantly, the behaviour of the amps in bridged mode is exemplary, with no unwanted pops or thuds during startup or powering down, as such a thing can have significant consequences at this power output.

Conclusion

What this adds up to is a pair of power amplifiers that occupy a niche position in the market very effectively. The Edge A2-300 is capable, but does perhaps need a little more thought put into the supporting equipment around it to get the best from it. The Edge A2-400, on the other hand, is a much more enticing proposition, able to drive just about anything it encounters with great ability. If you're looking to streamline a digital preamp-fronted system, this is a very good place to start. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Big, rich, involving sound with plenty of drive and energy

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Still not the sweetest-sounding amplifier going

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: A solution to drive any speaker to any level it can withstand at a very competitive price

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Chord Electronics Ltd.

Anni



ULTIMATE DESKTOP AUDIO

Anni offers the ultimate desktop audio experience. A compact integrated amplifier, Anni introduces our next-generation ULTIMA technology to both headphones *and* compact loudspeakers for the first time. Anni: class-leading amplification for desktops everywhere.



chordelectronics.co.uk



Arcam

ST60

It's surprising that Arcam has waited until 2021 to make its first dedicated network streamer. Easily identified by its sober styling and dark grey hue, it's the newest addition the company's HDA family of components.

The ST60 prioritises ease of use, connectivity and sound quality, along with the ability to act as a preamp to team with a power amp or active speakers. For those keen to get going straight out of the box there's Apple AirPlay 2, Google Chromecast built-in and Spotify Connect. Download the MusicLife smartphone app and access opens up to UPnP, Tidal, Qobuz, Deezer and Napster. It's also Roon ready.

Around the back, in addition to Ethernet and USB 2 (for local media storage), there are widely spaced wi-fi antennae sockets, balanced XLR and single-ended RCA analogue outputs, plus coaxial and optical digital outputs should you want to hook up an external DAC. The usual formats are supported and full MQA rendering and decoding is provided. Arcam hasn't stinted on decoding horsepower either, employing ESS Technology's A-game ESS Sabre ES9038K2M, which handles PCM up to 32-bit/192kHz as well as DSD.

Sound quality

With the equipment rack still warm from Cambridge Audio's Evo 150 'just-add-speakers' streaming system and the CXN v2/CXA 61 streamer/integrated amp I used for comparison (HFC 437/459), the Arcam is in the

right place at the right time to show just what it's made of as all the Cambridge components set cracking standards for both usability and sound quality.

To put it mildly, the ST60 doesn't hit the ground running on the former front. Compared with Cambridge Audio's slick and spry StreamMagic app, MusicLife feels a little clunky, graphically malnourished and, unless it's playing from a queue, slow to respond. Track hopping with StreamMagic and the CXN v2 is essentially gapless, music and artwork up and running in just over a second. Try the same thing with MusicLife and you'll be waiting in the region of 8 seconds while interaction with the ST60 sorts itself out. However, I'm assured by Arcam that it's working on making MusicLife a slicker and faster, experience – so hopefully this will be fixed by the time you come to it.

For now, there's redemption in the sound. If you want to make the already superb Evo 150 sound even better, simply let the ST60 take over the decoding and streaming duties. No one realistically would, of course, as it trashes the point of Evo's neat and convenient one-box initiative completely. But round robin mixing and matching with the CXA 61, CXN v2 and the Evo 150, it's clear that for sonic excellence as a source provider, the ST60 has the edge.

With a recording as meticulously sewn together and polished as Steely Dan's *Things I Miss The Most* from *Everything Must Go*, the Arcam

defines images more precisely in a soundstage of notably greater depth. It also wrings a little more tonal colour, texture and sheer tunefulness from the material. This doesn't make it sound ostensibly richer and warmer than the CXN v2, but it is airier, more lucid and relaxed.

Michael McDonald's *I Was Made To Love Her* streamed via FLAC has the knack of sounding good on modest kit, but in the hands of the ST60 it's scintillating. Stevie Wonder's harmonica is rendered with more cut and urgency, but also a truer sense of harmonic complexity while the honeyed voices of the female backing singers mesh more coherently in the soundstage, seeming to form an arc behind McDonald instead of being spotlighted, flattened in perspective and pushed artificially out to the far left as can happen with lesser components.

Conclusion

OK, so the MusicLife app isn't the swiftest or most elegant control option we've ever used, but it's stable, works and is due to be updated. Not quite the smoothest operator, then, but if you really want to hear how good streaming can sound, the ST60 hits the spot with full force. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Arcam ST60

PRICE
£1,200

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Network music player/DAC/digital preamp

WEIGHT
5.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
433 x 102 x 306mm

FEATURES
• Apple AirPlay 2;
• Google Chromecast;
• Spotify Connect
• ESS9038
32-bit/192kHz
Delta-Sigma DAC
• MQA supported
• Roon ready

DISTRIBUTOR
Arcam UK

TELEPHONE
01223 203200

WEBSITE
arcam.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 477

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Superb sound, design and build

DISLIKE: No Tidal Connect; sleepy MusicLife control app

WESAY: If you don't believe affordable streaming can hit the sonic heights, take a listen to the ST60



Auralic Vega G2.1

Auralic's Vega G2.1 is a highly capable single-box streaming DAC preamp that will leave you suitably impressed

Hi-fi is nothing if not fluid. A decade ago, few would have imagined we'd have abandoned physical media so quickly. CD sales are plummeting in most major western markets, especially the USA and UK – and the world is moving to streamed media. That's perfectly understandable as it's so convenient – in theory at least – and brings a huge choice of content.

The result is we now have a brave new world of streaming DACs, which form the heart of modern-day systems. To this esteemed company we should now add Auralic's latest DAC.

The Vega G2.1 is particularly interesting for two reasons. First, the company was very early to streaming – and has watched the hi-fi world move towards it, rather than others that have belatedly decided to 'do a streamer'. This means it has its own streaming platform and technology; it hasn't bought in someone else's.

Secondly, the Vega G2.1 is but one member of a family that together forms a full high-end streaming DAC preamplifier solution. This means you

can start off with this box and your existing CD player and NAS drive to get going, and then add the matching £4,200 Aries G2.1 transport (HFC 469) for better disc-based digital sound. Then there's the £8,000 Leo GX.1 reference clock and £6,000 Sirius G2.1 upsampling processor. You end up with an expensive dCS Rossini-level digital front end, but you don't have to shell out for all the bits at once. As a prospective purchasing proposition, that's hard to argue against if you're serious about high-end digital.

The first thing that strikes any newcomer to the brand is the compactness and neatness of the product. It doesn't need to be full width, so it isn't. That's not to say that build quality has been skimped on; it has the feel of a solid aluminium and copper ingot, rather than a pressed steel box with a brushed aluminium fascia added for visual effect. It's heavy for its size and very nicely finished.

Then there's the ease of use. It's easy to get up and running, and works seamlessly via its Ethernet port.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Vega G2.1

PRICE
£6,000

ORIGIN
US/China

TYPE
Streaming DAC

WEIGHT
9.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 96 x 320mm

FEATURES
● Streaming, preamp functionality
● AES; USB; optical; coaxial digital inputs
● RCA phono line input; unbalanced RCA; balanced XLR outputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic

WEBSITE
auralic.com

REVIEWED
HFC 476

Auralic's own Lightning streaming hardware and software platform is very good; the app doesn't look quite as swish as some, but does the job without any drama. It has multi-room, gapless playback, on-device playlists and memory caching to make the user experience smoother.

The Vega G2.1 DAC crunches all the numbers it needs to – up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD512. At its heart is a specially modified version of the latest ESS Sabre DAC; this isn't as exotic as the custom silicon in some rivals, but certainly isn't shabby.

Soundstaging is big, wide and bold, there's sweet treble and a crisp, fluid bass

Jitter gets a good seeing to from Auralic's dual 72fs Femto clock, and galvanic isolation is used between digital and analogue sections to keep noise down. The Vega hooks up to the matching Aries G2.1 transport via Auralic's Lightning Link, with a two-way communication protocol for high-speed data transfer.

As befits a thoroughly modern preamplifier, care has been taken to shield the electronics by fitting a copper sub-enclosure. A large toroidal transformer is used, kept well away from the Orfeo passive volume controls. This all sits on Auralic's so-called Unity chassis; a heavy metal base anchored by four tuned sprung feet. Round the back you get a choice of RCA phono or balanced XLR analogue outputs and a single RCA stereo analogue input alongside AES



(XLR), optical, coaxial and USB digital inputs.

Sound quality

With its precise, cultured feel to the way it goes about making music, the Vega G2.1 sounds closer to DACs at twice the price than it does to those at half. There's an alluring mix of smoothness and insight that makes for real listening pleasure. Yet it's not overly soft and has real speed, which animates everything you play.

I kick off with a silver disc of Maximum Style & JB Rose's *Wake Up* going into the coaxial digital input from my Cyrus CD Xt Signature CD transport (HFC 386). It's a lovely piece of modern dance and the Vega G2.1 delivers an engaging and enjoyable sound with lots of insight into the mix, plus plenty of life. I am struck by the power

of the bottom end, combined with its speed and tunefulness, and how it ties into the fluid and supple midband. At the same time, the closed-miked female vocals sound earthy yet smooth; there's no artificial gloss or lack of insight. The overall effect is really satisfying.

The DAC proves highly impressive across a number of digital sources and genres; my 24-bit/96kHz DVD Audio disc of Rush's *Subdivisions* via a Sony Blu-ray spinner sounds great. The Vega G2.1 really getting into the groove, eking out copious amounts of low-level detail in a forensic sweep operation of the recording. Yet it doesn't sacrifice this for the bigger picture, managing to dig deep but keep the sense of a powerful music event unfolding. This is an unusually dense mix that needs a top-flight DAC to 'unpack', and the Auralic does precisely that with grace.

It's a great streamer too; a range of my favourite tunes find themselves rendered in a very similar way to the digital inputs. The Who's *Baba O'Reilly* is a *tour de force*, with much drama and emotion, while Sade's *When Am I Going to Make A Living* is sultry and brooding. Jazz music shows off the spry and clean tonality; it's not as arid as some ESS-based designs, but doesn't colour the musical picture to make things sound artificially warm. Dave Brubeck's *Take Five* is accurately conveyed, with a brisk musical gait and a faithful rendering of the tonal palette.

The analogue input is a super feature, and lets me connect up my Michell GyroDec/TecnoArm/Lyra Dorian via my ANT Audio Kora 3T phono stage. Spinning my Wings

London Town LP shows it is very capable as a preamp too.

I adore the big, wide, bold soundstaging, sweet treble and crisp, fluid bass. There's just a subtle softening of the central image and loss of depth perspective in absolute terms. You'd have to pay a lot for a purpose-designed preamp to better it.

Conclusion

Less of a lowly DAC preamp and more of musical Swiss army knife, Auralic's Vega G2.1 is a seriously classy product. It does an awful lot very well indeed and offers a painless upgrade route out from the £2,500 DACs that many folk run – all the way up to the high-end where five-figure sums tend to change hands. It does so much so very well that it offers up seriously stiff competition for those, mostly British companies who have made this section of the market their own. As such, an audition is strongly recommended if you're in the market for updating your system. **DP**



An inner copper sub-enclosure is used to shield all the electronics

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Functionality; build; sonics; upgradeability
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Nothing at the price
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A digital Swiss army knife with superb sound
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





Auralic Altair G2.1

Auralic's Altair G2.1 comes with onboard DAC, a preamp that allows it to drive a power amplifier or a pair of active speakers directly, and there are even analogue inputs – a line-level and moving-magnet phono – to further reinforce its role as a complete system hub.

You can go even further with the option of an internal hard drive to allow it to function as a network music store as well as accessing external storage should you wish.

Music can be played into it via optical, coaxial and AES/EBU inputs; you can connect up a PC via its asynchronous USB-B port or an external USB storage device using the USB-A; or stream to it over a home network using wi-fi or Ethernet. It additionally has both Bluetooth and AirPlay, and is also Roon ready.

The Altair G2.1 can handle digital datastreams at up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD512 via both network and USB connection from a computer or USB storage. Optical, coaxial and AES/EBU – top out at 24-bit/192kHz, but can accept DSD64 via DoP. A 6.35mm headphone output can be found on the front panel.

There's a built-in – and very flexible – parametric equaliser, and you can even tailor the sound to suit the positions of your loudspeakers, with adjustable gain and distance parameters. It's no substitute for getting your speakers placed correctly, of course, but in the real world it could prove very handy indeed.

Sound quality

Regardless of which setup it is placed in, the Altair G2.1 proves to be a neutral and extremely clean source, presenting high levels of detail while never sounding mechanical or artificial. It delivers excellent levels of musical involvement across a wide range of different musical genres, again, regardless of input.

Whether with streams from online services, low-res internet radio or hi-res music served up from the NAS, the components into which you play it are going to have much more of an effect on the sound than this unit. Above all, the Auralic 'communicates'. Play a demanding recording such as the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra set of *Kleiberg Concertos*, and the focus of the sound and natural balance of the soloist against the rich weight of the orchestra is breathtaking. As is the sense of presence and space in the soundstage, and the speed and rhythmic drive on offer.

The same goes for Charlie Haden, Jan Garbarek and Egberto Gismonti's 1980 *Magico* album. Here the Altair G2.1 really gets its teeth into the production, allowing the sax to soar above the deep, superbly resolved bass, while the guitar and piano are given full licence to be heard to thrilling effect. Best of all, recordings don't have to be state of the art for this player to work its magic.

Even with the Bill Evans take on *Alfie* the sound brims with the easy going interplay between Evans, Eddie Gomez and Jack DeJohnette in front

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Altair G2.1

PRICE
£4,600

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Network-attached streamer/DAC

WEIGHT
9.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 80 x 320mm

FEATURES
• Supports sample rates up to: 32-bit/384kHz and DSD512
• Wired and wireless networking
• Inputs: line-level RCA; MM phono stage; optical; coaxial; AES/EBU; asynchronous USB-B; USB-A; Ethernet
• Bluetooth; AirPlay; Roon ready

DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic Europe

WEBSITE
auralic.com

REVIEWED
HFC 482

of a small audience. It's a joyous experience via the Altair G2.1.

The timbres of real voices and instruments are a major strength here too. Give it something like *Little Black Dress* by Sara Bareilles, and it punches out every line of the vocal and the gutsy accompaniment.

It's also as adept when growling out some hard driving rock as it is when playing more refined, hi-fi-show-friendly music. This review period coincides with the sad demise of ZZ Top bassist Dusty Hill and a couple of evenings are spent immersed in the slow-burn blues of *Just Got Back From Baby's* all the way through to *Cheap Sunglasses* and the Altair does the exhaustive *Goin' 50 Best Of...* compilation proud.

Conclusion

The Altair G2.1's analogue output happily drives the amplification, and thus the speakers, to suitably raucous effect while still keeping those good-time rhythms rolling as the trio powers on. We even play the odd track – well all right then, a lot of them – several times, just to immerse ourselves in the majestic thunder and gutbucket snarl. And it proves deeply impressive every time. **HFC**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Flexibility; features; clean sound

DISLIKE: Absolutely nothing of note

WE SAY: Quite simply a technical tour de force



Klipsch®

REFERENCE
PREMIERE



RP-600M

NO-NONSENSE GREAT SOUND

KEY FEATURES

- 1" Titanium LTS Vented Tweeter with Hybrid Tractrix® Horn
- 6.5" Spun Copper Cerametallic™ Woofers
- Bass-Reflex via Rear-Firing Tractrix® port
- Dual binding posts for bi-wire/bi-amp
- Strong, Flexible Removable Magnetic Grill

Leveraging a 1" titanium tweeter Mated to Klipsch's proprietary hybrid Tractrix® horn - the RP-600M bookshelf speaker delivers incredible acoustics to fill your home with loud, crystal-clear sound and robust bass that no ordinary bookshelf speaker can.

Copper anodized trim rings, satin painted baffles and a laser etched logo treatment give the Reference Premiere series a modern, premium feel.

Hey, bargain hunter!

Our BEST pre-loved items are now all available on our own website.

EG: **AKAI GX620 Reel-to-Reel Stereo Tape Deck**

Cost for this great condition pre-loved vintage (1983) unit = **£1995**



available at time of going to print from EliteAudioUK.com/pre-loved

...and many more bargains besides!

Check out our new **PRE-LOVED** section at eliteaudiouk.com/pre-loved



info@eliteaudiouk.com

eliteaudiouk.com | **0800 464 7274**



Bluesound Node (3rd Generation)

Bluesound's extensive range of standalone components, augmented by the growing number that use its BluOS operating system, occupies a key position in the market as its strength in depth is something most rivals can't get near. The Node is a line-level streamer designed to attach to an existing amp. The matching Pownode offers the same front end with an amplifier on board for standalone use.

The latest version of the Node is similar to its predecessors. A Texas Instruments PCM 5242 DAC supports PCM to 24-bit/192kHz (as before, it will not process DSD but can convert it to PCM if you wish). This is made available to a pair of RCA, optical or coaxial outputs for connection to a DAC. The biggest change is the addition of an HDMI ARC that allows the Node to take a feed from a TV, decode it and send it on to your amp. A combined 3.5mm analogue and optical input is also available. You can additionally send audio to the Node via AirPlay 2 and Bluetooth.

The BluOS operating system is largely unchanged, which is a good thing. It remains a superlative interface that combines nigh-on total stability with pretty much untouchable streaming service integration (the only major player missing here is Apple Music) and the ability to scale effectively into controlling a whole house of BluOS devices.

The big aesthetic change is the addition of a more comprehensive touch panel suite of controls on the top plate that makes quick commands a little easier to apply without having to fire the app up. Black and white finishes are available.

Sound quality

Bluesound hasn't significantly altered the internals of the Node and there are some very compelling reasons for this. Connected to a Chord Electronics CPM2800 MkII integrated amp and Kudos Titan 505 standmount (HFC 451), the Node has a character reminiscent of old Naim streamers. There is a slight tonal darkness that lends it a force and urgency I find tremendously appealing. The 2005 live Dead Can Dance performance at Théâtre Saint-Denis responds beautifully to this. Without losing any of the space or three dimensionality of the performance, the Node delivers a force and urgency that suits the material beautifully.

No less impressive is the balance of tonal realism and detail traded off against ensuring that even rough and ready material sounds decent. The slightly hard-edged *Screen Violence* by Chvrches draws you into their darker work without paying too much attention to the slightly brittle quality it possesses. Give it something that is genuinely well recorded like Fink's *IIUIII* and it responds well, ensuring

Finian Greenall's distinctive vocals sound correct and are the focus of attention. The carefully arranged supporting instrumentation also sounds convincing and has a pleasing level of three dimensionality to it.

Switching to the coaxial output reveals some limitations to the bass impact it offers via analogue, although it has plenty of fine detail and control. It does show that using the Node simply as a streaming front end for external decoding is a very satisfying experience. Using both wired and wireless connections, it shows no signs of instability or sluggishness and its performance as a Roon endpoint is seamless.

Conclusion

The Node might not be the most radical step forward over its predecessor, but the result is still a supremely capable piece of equipment for a wholly sensible outlay. This is still the best self-contained streamer you can buy for the price and it is something that should be on the shortlist for anyone that's on a tight budget. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bluesound Node
(3rd Generation)

PRICE
£550

ORIGIN
Canada/China

TYPE
Plug-and-play
streamer

WEIGHT
1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 46 x 146mm

FEATURES
• Supports sample rates up to 24-bit/192kHz
• Internet radio
• AirPlay 2; aptX HD Bluetooth

DISTRIBUTOR
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision

WEBSITE
bluesound.com

REVIEWED
HFC 482

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Energetic and engaging sound; excellent spec and control interface

DISLIKE: No DSD; some minor app quirks

WE SAY: A quite exceptional affordable streamer that combines a comprehensive spec with sparkling sonics



HiFi Rose

RS150

With a design that rivals would be smart to emulate, this South Korean network-attached music player looks set to impress

Choice, it's a wonderful thing. And while once upon time what you listened to was limited to the records, compact discs or even tapes that you had on your shelves, now it's more a case of choosing the streaming service that best suits your taste – offering you more music than your shelves could ever hope to hold. And while streaming has seen the options of what you listen to increase beyond all imagination, how you choose to do so has followed suit. Do you go down the all-in-one route, opt for an integrated amplifier with streaming built-in or take your pick from the multitude of standalone components that include network players and DACs? From the early days of a format that were niche and expensive, network audio devices have grown to be a huge part of the market, with every hi-fi manufacturer worth its salt offering a solution or three in varying forms. The latest to get in on the network audio action is

South Korean concern HiFi Rose, an off-shoot of Citech – which has a solid reputation out East for producing everything from interactive kiosks to set-top boxes. Distributed by Henley Audio, the brand hopes to make a splash in the UK by debuting two network audio solutions, the RS150 being the flagship release. And boasting compatibility with a huge range of file formats, it's more than

The RS150 serves up a performance that is big and bold, but packed with detail

worthy of the role. Airplay, Tidal with MQA, Qobuz and Roon cover the basics, while it can additionally act as either a source component or a streaming/digital preamp thanks to the inclusion of variable-level outputs in the shape of unbalanced RCA's and balanced XLRs. There's even the

option to become both a player and a streamer – by removing a panel on the underside and installing an SSD drive for storage to complement the USB-A host ports, plus there is a slot that accepts Micro SD cards.

Connectivity incorporates digital in and outputs in the form of optical, coaxial and AES/EBU sockets, USB-B for hook-up to a computer and I²S via RJ45 or DVI ports. The RS150 can also accept audio from a video device using the ARC (Audio Return Channel) protocol on a separate HDMI input and the USB ports can output audio to a suitable DAC. Completing the picture is a single set of RCA analogue inputs. Networking is of course via wired or wireless connection, with the later thanks to a plug-in USB dongle that supports aptX Bluetooth.

Machined from solid aluminium, the chassis is certainly eye catching and dominated by the 378mm-wide, IPS touchscreen panel, which stretches across the entire length of the front fascia. One of the sharpest displays we've seen on such a product, this is the real clincher for the RS150 – transforming it from bulk-standard streamer into the sort of modernist slice of future tech you're more likely to see in *Blade Runner*.

Not content to simply display album artwork and act as a menu for all the random features to hide away in, it offers more formats of clock display than you could ever have a use for (from retro mechanical flip-digits to a plain analogue face), VU meters and can even display 4K

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
HiFi Rose RS150

PRICE
£3,900

ORIGIN
South Korea

TYPE
Network-attached
player/DAC

WEIGHT
13kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 123 x 316mm

FEATURES
• Streaming preamp
functionality
• In/outputs:
optical; coaxial;
AES/EBU
• RCA inputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
eng.hifirose.com

REVIEWED
HFC 477

HD video (which it can also output to a screen connected via HDMI).

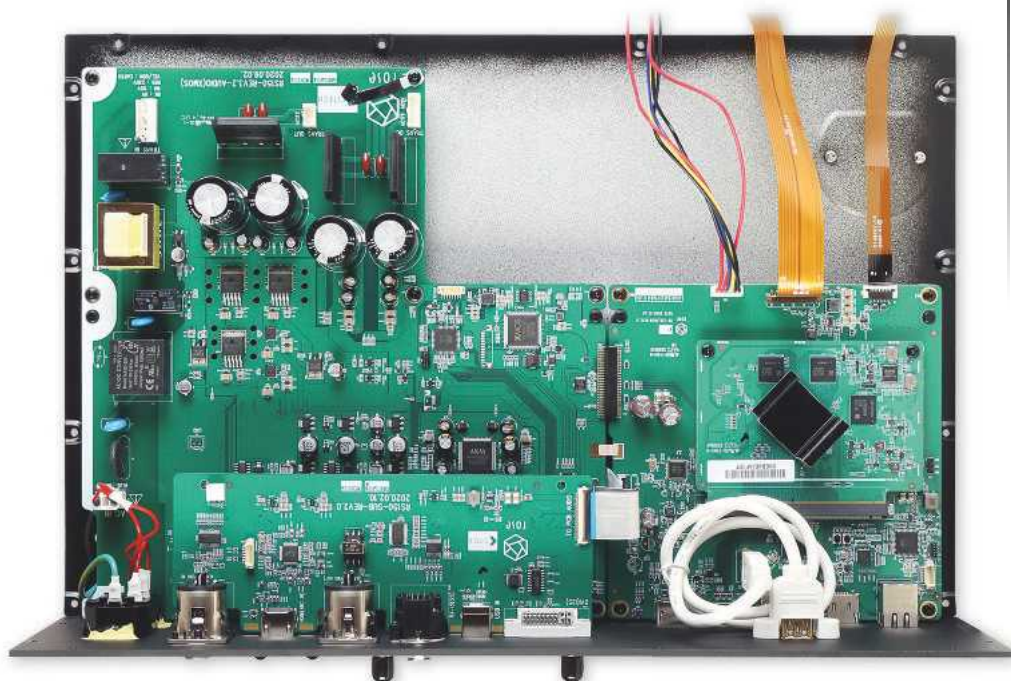
Keeping everything ticking away under the hood, the RS150 runs a customised Android 7.1-based architecture alongside the company's own Rose operating system. This interfaces with the proprietary Rose Connect app (available for both Android and iOS tablets and smartphones), which is better suited to day-to-day operation and some elements of setup – although for more-indepth settings you'll have to navigate the multiple layers of the on-screen menu on the front panel. Alternatively, basic operation can be carried out using the Bluetooth remote control. Digital conversion is handled by Asahi Kasei's Verita AK4499EQ, compatible with LPCM up to 32-bit/768kHz and up to DSD512.

Sound quality

Unfortunately, setting up the RS150 is severely hindered by the absence of a full instruction manual in English – a problem that will hopefully be ironed out by the time you read this – and so we have to make do with the light-on-detail fast setup guide. It also takes quite a while to index and find the artwork of our admittedly hefty NAS-based music library. To save time, we instead opt to copy selected files onto a USB stick and listen via the 'computer' USB port. Admittedly, this results in the RS150 being used purely as a DAC and so not fully maximising its full potential.

Perhaps the first observation of note is the hefty amount of volume it's able to kick out – making it worthwhile taking the time to go into the menu and fixing it to a more comfortable level if you plan to use the RS150 as an integrated amp or preamp. That done, there's no denying the HiFi Rose serves up a performance that is big and bold, but packed with detail. Even when listening to a simple recording such as Javier Laso's set of Schubert and Schumann Sonatas (a pure DSD256 file played at its native resolution) there are plenty of fine details to pick out of the mix. If forced to be ultra critical we might be inclined to point to the slight lack of space and atmosphere. However, the close focus on the solo piano, the fine impact of the playing, the weight to the instrument and the unmistakable lightness of touch of the pianist go some way towards making up for this slight shortcoming.

Switching to Vaughan Williams' *Fourth* and *Sixth Symphonies* sees the same sense of powerful sound under pinning the presentation. Sure,



it might not be as absolutely resolved as perhaps it should, but there's certainly no denying the scale and detail of the overall effect, even if a touch of the live nature of the performance is lost in the slight bloom that's clearly audible.

Turning the wick up a touch, the thrill of the orchestra at full speed in the *Scherzo* of the *Fourth Symphony* sees the RS150 start to let its hair down and party. Similarly, switching

and simply miked jazz in reverberant studio acoustics.

Finally, for the sheer hell of it, a high-quality recording of Taylor Swift's *Fearless* reveals all the intricacies of the instrumentation as the exuberance of Swift's vocals is effortlessly reproduced with just the right amount of class and vivacity. If music sounds this good, maybe the sins of omission are easier to ignore.

The touchscreen display is one of the sharpest we've seen on such a product

to something a little different in the shape of Tame Impala's *Lonerism* album sees the hard-driving pop shown in the best possible light. From the thumping percussion of the intro to *Be Above It*, the music surges out with supreme thump and punch, carving persuasive instrumental textures without overly deconstructing the wash of sound. Pleasingly, the results appear to remain broadly the same regardless of whether music is streamed via the network, the internal drive, the digital inputs or as a Roon endpoint. The performance remains consistently rich, dynamic and rewarding with only that slightly soft soundstage focus holding it back in any way – and this only seems to be in evidence on particularly atmospheric recordings such as church-recorded choral (which can sound a tad dry)

Conclusion

So much more than just a beautifully designed component showing others the way to go, the RS150 backs up the stunning aesthetics with a performance to match. Regardless of whether it's used as a player or DAC the levels of richness and detail not only make the slight softness on some material easier to over look, but also underline this as a supreme debut. We look forward to hearing what else the South Korean brand has up its sleeve in the future. **HFC**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Build quality; design; supreme sharpness; big, bold performance
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Content-dependent slight softness
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A superb debut that sounds every bit as good as it looks
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





Matrix Audio Element X

Forget the movie, this Matrix offers a vision of functionality, where DACs, headphone amps and preamps live in perfect harmony

Forget about Keanu Reeves and his shades-wearing gang of mercenaries fighting back against machines in a simulated reality, this Matrix refers to the mathematical concept of portrait and landscape, the balance of two dimensions – neither of which involves wearing black or practicing mind-bending kung-fu. The passion project of three friends fresh out of college in the city of Xi'an, Matrix Audio's goal is to find a perfect balance between excellent sound performance and a great design that can be "integrated into the home environment", although if the functionality and affordability boxes can be given a tick along the way that's no bad thing.

With its svelte dimensions, the Element X packs a lot into its neat chassis. It's not only able to operate as a DAC/preamp supporting everything from network streaming to 768kHz PCM, DSD1024, MQA and Roon, it can also earn its keep as a source for conventional amplification or drive a variety of headphones. Oh and it boasts a variable output with the option of a 10dB boost if required. To suggest it's

future-proof (dystopian or otherwise) is very much an understatement.

Simplicity itself, the Element X's front panel is limited to a power button, what looks like a volume control and two smaller buttons next to it (more on these later). A combination of pushing and twisting the larger dial and its two smaller cohorts enables the user to work their way through the array of features with relative ease.

Operationally it proves pretty much impossible to throw the Matrix off course

Alternatively, you can use the company's Remote app – no shonky third-party adoption here. Available for both iOS and Android, it holds your hand through the setup process from switch on and is a joy to use. Easier still, you could always opt for a computer running Roon Core and use the Element X as a Roon endpoint. You will, of course, require a subscription to Roon (\$6.99 a

month or \$699 for the lifetime option), but give the 14-day free trial a spin and you'll wonder how you ever managed to live without it.

Headphone outputs stretch to a brace of XLR/6.35mm combination sockets and a four-pin balanced XLR. Alternatively you can output analogue audio via the RCA phono or XLR sockets around the back. While we're on the subject, additional socketry options include two coaxial, two optical, a USB-A for storage devices, USB-B for connection to a computer, LVDS/I²S HDMI digital input and a so-small-you'd-be-forgiven-for-missing-it MicroSD card slot. The amplification uses four discrete channels to deliver true balanced working when called upon.

All of these options (and many, many more) can be accessed or disabled in the seemingly endless menu system – a deeper dive into which reveals everything from seven digital filters, a choice of DSDS low-pass settings and jitter elimination to DPLL bandwidth for reigning in shaky digital feeds. In a further effort to make finding all this stuff easily, the aforementioned smaller button marked O can be assigned any one of these functions for speedy access. Last, but by no means least, a slim remote control is provided for the main basic features including input selection and volume level.

Sound quality

Our extensive test programme sees the Element X partnered with a wide variety of balanced and single-ended headphones including (but not limited to) Focal's Spirit Pro, Bowers and Wilkins' P9 Signature (HFC 421), Oppo's PM-1 and Philips' Fidelio X3

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Matrix Audio
Element X

PRICE
£2,800

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Network attached
DAC/streamer/
headphone amp

WEIGHT
4.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 60 x 281mm

FEATURES
• Digital inputs: 2x
coaxial; 2x optical;
USB-A; USB-B;
Ethernet; I²S HDMI;
Micro SD slot
• Analogue outputs:
RCA; XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
Signature Audio
Systems UK

TELEPHONE
07738 007776

WEBSITE
signaturesystems.
co.uk
matrix-digi.com

REVIEWED
HFC 473



(HFC 469). It is also hooked up with integrated and power amplifiers including Denon's PMA-A110, so that both the Element X's fixed and variable outputs can be assessed. The good news is that operationally it proves pretty much impossible to throw off course, with the Matrix proving smooth, yet elegantly simple to use throughout testing.

In direct contrast, the sound is anything but. Direct, superbly scaled and never less than thrilling are the headlines here, regardless of whether it's called into action with headphones or as a source/preamp. Playing with the digital filters is perhaps something that you'll enjoy exploring more on your own than reading about here, so for the purposes of testing we opt to stick with the MOD1 filter with its fast roll-off and minimum phase. Its snappy, tight and punchy sound is to be applauded, while the exemplary bass warmth and detail retrieval are highly impressive.

The Dub Pistols' *Addict* and its unrelentingly pounding beats are first up on the playlist, perfectly highlighting the Element X's weight, slam and speed to such good effect it's as though the Matrix chose the music itself. The sometimes chaotic mix is suddenly thrown into ultra sharp relief with every thumping beat and piercing lyric delivered with glass-like clarity. There's more than enough power here for even the most volume-hungry listener and

regardless of how loud you want to push things the level of grip, control and drive remains undaunted. The sound is open and airy with no sense of claustrophobia (even with closed-back cans). In fact the only complaint – if you can really call it that – is that you can play your music too loud without any discernible drop in any of the aforementioned qualities.

Stokowski's gloriously lush and overblown *Rhapsodies* could never be described as subtle, with RCA's in-house orchestra hammering out the music more like a rock band. The Element X brings out all the fabulously over the top dynamics with apparent ease.

The exemplary bass warmth and detail retrieval are highly impressive

A change of pace in the shape of Martha Argerich's 1965 take on Chopin's *Scherzo* sees all the freshness and detail of the piece brought to the fore along with a wonderful sense of the studio acoustic wrapped around the stunning performances. Every ounce of the passion, dexterity and lightness of touch is there in all its glory. The warmth and spirit of the sessions comes through beautifully and the sheer levels of detail shows

that even pre-hi-res recordings from the Sixties still have the power to take the breath away.

Regardless of whether you require its services for playing from a computer, USB storage, a NAS drive or simply streaming from your service of choice, the results are always the same: it gets right to the heart of the performance, juggling picking out subtleties or throwing bombast at you with equal aplomb. Admittedly, less pristine recordings tend to have their failings revealed more than is perhaps ideal, but then some judicious experimentation with those digital filters can be employed here to help tidy things up.

Conclusion

Whoever it was that said that the very best DACs need to come in a hefty, full-width heavyweight chassis will need to check themselves. Tardis-like the Element X hides a multitude of features within its svelte shell and – like the mouse that roared – is a headphone amp that goes far louder than it really has any right to. Plug in, switch on and prepare yourself for one hell of a ride. But be warned, it most certainly will get loud. **HFC**



Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Superb speed, drive and precision

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: It won't polish up lower quality recordings

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Flexible and laden with features, this is a superb performer with a wide variety of headphones and sources

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★





Novafidelity N25

At its most basic level, the N25 is a network audio streamer able to replay audio stored on a network drive or connected directly by USB. It can handle sample rates up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256 and natively supports, Qobuz, Tidal (with MQA included), High Res Audio, Amazon Music, Deezer and Napster as well as Spotify Connect.

There are digital inputs in the form of coaxial, optical and USB ports – the latter mimicking the format handling of the streaming section – plus a pair of USB 3.0s for storage. As well as an RCA out, the N25 has coaxial and optical outputs and a USB that enables it to run as the streaming front end for an external DAC.

Bluetooth is included with pretty much every format of note supported and you can also specify an optional Bluetooth transmitter to stream wirelessly to nearby receivers. There is AirPlay despite no mention of it in the specs. Then, even though there is full internet radio support, a DAB/FM tuner is additionally included.

If you choose to use the N25 via the RCA outputs, decoding is impressive. It employs an ESS Sabre ES9018K2M DAC that outputs at a fixed level into an amp or you can engage a variable output so that it can be used into a power amp or active speakers.

Sound quality

Initially using the N25 in what probably constitutes its simplest form – streaming from a Melco N1A NAS drive (HFC 394) to Chord Electronics'

CPM 2800MkII amp via the RCA in fixed line out mode – reveals that its core ability is considerable. A 24-bit/48kHz Qobuz purchase of Manchester Orchestra's *The Million Masks Of God* is a vast and complex recording and the Novafidelity does a fine job of delivering its scale and impact. The beautiful *Obstacle* begins with a simple guitar refrain and Robert McDowell's haunting vocals. As the track builds, the N25 delivers detailed and weighty low end and enough space around the increasing scale of the song that it doesn't sound congested or confused.

There's an agility and propulsive force that benefits all music regardless of tempo. It gives an immediacy to the presentation that is consistently appealing and this is delivered without sounding forced or harsh. Compared with the very best standalone decoding at the price, some of the fine detail that the standalone DAC finds in the mix is harder to perceive, but the presentation is unfailingly entertaining. This is consistently reproduced across the various digital inputs and special mention has to go to that Bluetooth implementation which sounds great.

Switching to using the N25 as a preamp is a little more of a mixed bag. Connected to an XTZ A2-300 power amp (p84), it works well enough but the volume ramp is a little slow in use. While slightly reluctant at times, it doesn't do anything untoward or deliver unwanted volume levels. As a feed for a USB DAC, however, it works like a charm. I

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Novafidelity N25

PRICE
£1,100

ORIGIN
Korea

TYPE
Network audio
Streamer/preamp

WEIGHT
2.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 73 x 260mm

FEATURES
• Supports
sample rates up
to 32-bit/384kHz
and DSD256
• Apt-X HD and
LDAC Bluetooth;
AirPlay
• Inputs: coaxial;
optical; USB; HDMI

DISTRIBUTOR
SCV Distribution
WEBSITE
cocktailaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 477

connect it to a variety of USB inputs and it just works with all of them, imparting no character and simply providing a streaming interface.

The wonderful reinterpretation of *Catch Me When I Fall* on the *Rōnin I* mix by UNKLE shows off the qualities of the N25 to fine effect. Despite the indisputable complexity of the device itself, none of that makes itself felt in the music. Instead Callum Finn's vocals are the star of the show, locked centre stage and with a richness and tonal realism that helps them sound unfailingly believable. Change tack completely and go for the pared-back and hauntingly lovely *Tribulations* by My Baby and the Novafidelity ensures that the intimacy is delivered without any embellishment whatsoever.

Conclusion

There is a slight irony here in that, if Novafidelity had concentrated on doing a little less, thereby simplifying the control interface a little, I might be more positively inclined towards it. This is an extremely good digital front-end that is effectively source and format agnostic. However you deliver the signal to the N25, it will handle it in a compelling way. The only real limitation is that the interface has room for improvement. **ES**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Exceptional spec; lively but refined sound; well made

DISLIKE: Clunky interface; sluggish volume control

WE SAY: A feature-packed device that sounds uniformly excellent with a wide spread of material

★★★★★



THE NEW AVM 30.3 Series

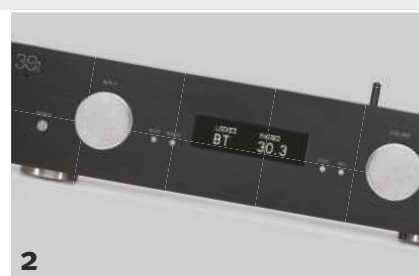
A new entry level range of products which have been completely redesigned using AVM's new AI software. Consisting of a new state of the art range of amplification, CD player and phono stage, and incorporating trickle down technology from the Evolution and Ovation series.

The range centres on an integrated amplifier and a pre-amp/dual mono amplifier combination. The mono amplifiers are a compact, half size module. All amplifiers are dual mono designed with two transformers. DACs are included in the integrated and pre-amplifier to support streaming.

The CD player includes a digital interface; the small Phono Stage comes with separate MC cartridge loading modules.

All are housed in exquisite quality casework and manufactured entirely in Germany.

The sound quality is way above that expected for the price. Familiar AVM sound: high Class A content from a Class AB design, large and holographic sound stage, high current delivery for fast dynamics and a rich and authoritative tone.



- 1 A 30.3 Integrated Amplifier including DAC £3000
- 2 PA 30.3 Pre-Amplifier including DAC and phono stage £2000
- 3 PH 30.3 Phono Stage MM/MC with loading modules £700
- 4 MA 30.3 Mono Amplifier 300wpc/4 ohms £3600 pair
- 5 CD 30.3 CD Player with digital interface £2000

Hi-FiChoice SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM

DIRECT DEBIT SUBSCRIPTIONS UK ONLY

Yes, I would like to subscribe to Hi-Fi Choice

☐ Print + Digital: £13.51 every 3 months

☐ Print subscription: £11.45 every 3 months

YOUR DETAILS MUST BE COMPLETED

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms..... Initial..... Surname.....

Address

Postcode Country

Tel Mobile.....

Email D.O.B

I WOULD LIKE TO SEND A GIFT TO:

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms..... Initial..... Surname.....

Address

Postcode Country

INSTRUCTIONS TO YOUR BANK/BUILDING SOCIETY

Originator's reference 422562



Name of bank.....

Address of bank.....

Postcode

Account holder.....

Signature..... Date

Sort code Account number

Instructions to your bank or building society: Please pay MyTimeMedia Ltd. Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with MyTimeMedia Ltd and if so, details will be passed electronically to my bank/building society.

Reference Number (official use only)

Please note that banks and building societies may not accept Direct Debit instructions from some types of account.

CARD PAYMENTS & OVERSEAS

Yes, I would like to subscribe to Hi-Fi Choice, for one year (13 issues) with a one-off payment

UK ONLY:

☐ Print + Digital: £56.05

☐ Print: £47.75

EUROPE & ROW:

☐ EU Print + Digital: £77.29

☐ EU Print: £68.99

☐ ROW Print + Digital: £77.29

☐ ROW Print: £68.99

PAYMENT DETAILS

☐ Postal Order/Cheque ☐ Visa/MasterCard ☐ Maestro

Please make cheques payable to MyTimeMedia Ltd and write code HFC2022 on the back

Cardholder's name.....

Card no: (Maestro)

Valid from..... Expiry date..... Maestro issue no.....

Signature..... Date.....

Offer ends 31st December 2022. Current subscription year equates to 13 issues. AVTech Media collects your data so that we can fulfil your subscription. We may also, from time to time, send you details of AVTech Media offers, events and competitions but you always have a choice and can opt out by emailing us at unsubscribe@hifichoice.co.uk. Please select here if you are happy to receive such offers by email ☐ by post ☐ by phone ☐. We do not share or sell your data with/to third parties. Details you share with us will be managed as outlined in our Privacy Policy here www.mytimemedia.co.uk/privacy-policy.

POST THIS FORM TO: HI-FI CHOICE SUBSCRIPTIONS, MY TIME MEDIA LTD, 3 QUEENSBIDGE, THE LAKES, NORTHAMPTON, NN4 7BF.

**HURRY
OFFER
CLOSES
31ST DECEMBER
2022**



PRINT + DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION

One year's worth **delivered to your door**

Great savings on the shop price

Download each new issue to your device

A **75% discount** on your Digital subscription

Access your subscription on **multiple devices**



PRINT SUBSCRIPTION

One year's worth **delivered to your door**

Great savings on the shop price

Never miss an issue

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

Great savings

when you subscribe to *Hi-Fi Choice* today

DIGITAL
SUBSCRIPTIONS
AVAILABLE ONLINE!



Handsome headphones: T+A Solitaire P-SE, Philips Fidelio L3, Focal Celestee

Top gear: Sensational streamers, cartridges, phono stages & more...

Hi-Fi Choice
PASSION FOR SOUND
Issue No. 484
Yearbook 2021

90+ SUPERB PRODUCTS REVIEWED

MUSIC REVIEWS: Critics' choice starring St. Vincent, Foo Fighters, Lana Del Rey...

164-PAGE SPECIAL

BEST HI-FI OF THE YEAR!

All tried and tested! Your expert buying guide to the hottest new audio separates

STUNNING SPEAKERS
Bowers & Wilkins 603 S2 Anniversary Edition, Sonus faber Lumina V, Fyne Audio F1-8 & more

TERRIFIC TURNTABLES
Audio-Technica AT-LP5X, Edwards Audio TT4, Technics SL-1200G, Thorens TD 1601 & more

ADMIRABLE AMPLIFIERS
Copland CSA150, Marantz PM6007, Rotel Michi X3, NAD D 3020 V2 & more

DYNAMITE DACS
iFi Audio Zen Neo iDSD, Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital, Matrix Audio Mini-i Pro 3 & more



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
Naim/Focal

Harnessing the Atom
A big speaker needs a commensurately big amplifier to properly run it, right? Not necessarily...



TURNTABLES

Thorens TD 1601
One of the oldest names in hi-fi returns with a classic sub-chassis turntable from the 1960s with 20th-century stylus.



SAVE
75% ON
YOUR DIGITAL
SUBSCRIPTION*

IN EVERY ISSUE:

Reviews of all the latest turntables, amplifiers, loudspeakers, DACs, CD players, streamers and hi-fi accessories. Plus: group tests, music reviews, opinions, news and all your hi-fi woes answered


TERMS & CONDITIONS: Offer ends 31st December 2022. *This digital discount is only available when you subscribe to the 'Print + Digital' package. You still get a great discount on the digital package, please visit the URL stated below for more information. Hi-Fi Choice currently produces 13 issues a year. The publisher reserves the right to amend this. Please see www.hifichoice.com/terms for full terms & conditions.

SUBSCRIBE SECURELY ONLINE

 <https://hfc.secureorder.co.uk/HFC/HFC2022>

CALL OUR ORDER LINE

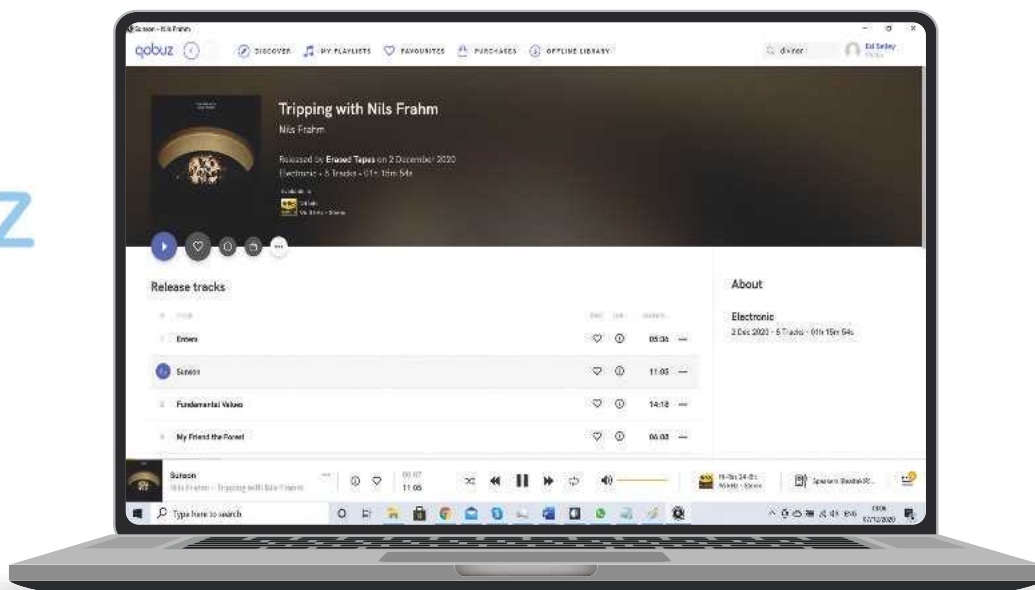
Quote ref: HFC2022

 0344 243 9023

Lines open Mon-Fri 8.00am - 8.00pm & Saturday 9.30am - 3.30pm

Calls are charged at the same rate as standard UK landlines and are included as part of any inclusive or free minutes allowances. There are no additional charges with this number. Overseas calls will cost more.

qobuz



Qobuz Studio Premier

Hailing from France, Qobuz originally launched as a lossless service before adding hi-res content more recently. The library of “over 50 million” tracks has been bolstered since the last time we tested it. In specialised areas, Qobuz still comes up short against the likes of Tidal (overleaf) and Deezer (HFC 472), but the gap is narrowing. The library is 16/44.1 as a baseline with material up to 24/192 available too.

The desktop app is little changed, but that’s no bad thing. The sample rate is always clearly marked and there is USB audio management that allows for a direct connection to be

The bass extension is noteworthy and achieves very impressive depth

set on the output device. The mobile apps are also very good and have the ability to run anything between full hi-res and compressed audio depending on your needs and data. Third-party integration is extremely comprehensive too, with Qobuz now natively supported on a good spread of different equipment – most notably Roon where it’s one of only two services supported for library integration.

Perhaps the biggest boost isn’t performance related. Since this test was last run, the price has dropped, making it look much stronger value than before. There is still the option of the ‘Studio Sublime’ tier subscription too at £15 a month or £180 a year. This ties in streaming with reduced purchasing costs from the (excellent) download site that runs alongside and might be useful for people using the ‘try before you buy’ model.

Sound Quality

We kick off with a 24/96 version of Brahms’ *Academic Festival Overture*. With levels carefully set and all other variables eliminated as best as possible, it is still very hard to discern much difference between this and the 192 version. The orchestra is laid out in a way that is easy to follow and the interplay of different sections is effortlessly worked into the presentation. Qobuz does a fine job of taking the technical attributes of its hi-res content and ensuring that it makes the listening experience better and not simply just a technical exercise.

With Bruno Ducol’s *Adonais* the presentation focuses on Laura Holm’s vocals. She sounds tangibly real and well defined and the effort that goes into her performance is easy to discern. Qobuz is very accomplished at presenting this minimalist work in a way that draws you into the music.

DETAILS

PROVIDER
Qobuz
PRICE
£13 per month
ORIGIN
France
TYPE
Desktop/mobile app streaming service
FEATURES
• Library claims: 50-million+ tracks
• Web browser and mobile apps available
• Format: 16/44.1 to 24/192 FLAC
WEBSITE
qobuz.com
REVIEWED
HFC 472

With more contemporary recordings Qobuz keeps up the high standards. Lunatic Soul’s *Navvie* is delivered with a convincing level of punch and the low-level drumming is deep and well defined without interfering with the upper registers. The music feels propulsive and engrossing without losing any of the technical accuracy to achieve it, which avoids any thoughts that what you’re hearing isn’t ‘right.’ The 24/48 version of Yello’s *Hot Pan* is also extremely enjoyable. The bass extension is noteworthy and achieves impressive depth without coming across as lacking in control or definition at the same time. Dieter Meier’s vocals are suitably gravelly and there is enough perception of space around the recording to ensure the music is easy to follow and listen to at length.

Conclusion

As in our 2020 roundup of streaming services, Qobuz’s combination of decent app and third-party integration and supreme sound quality seal the deal. Throw in the drop in price and it looks to be leaving the rest behind. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

INTEGRATION

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Sounds great; apps; integration; lower price

DISLIKE: Still one or two gaps in the library

WE SAY: A lower price simply helps to reaffirm that Qobuz is the class of the streaming field

ECOSSE

It's all about the music

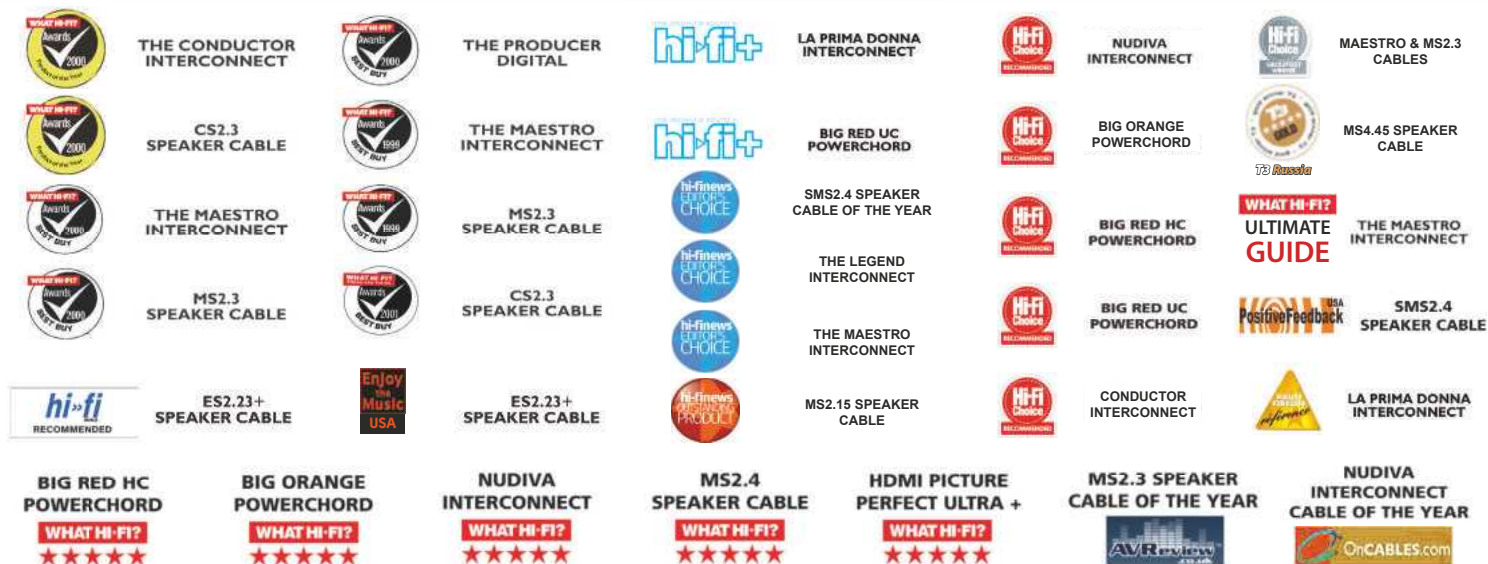
The Name on the World's Finest Cables

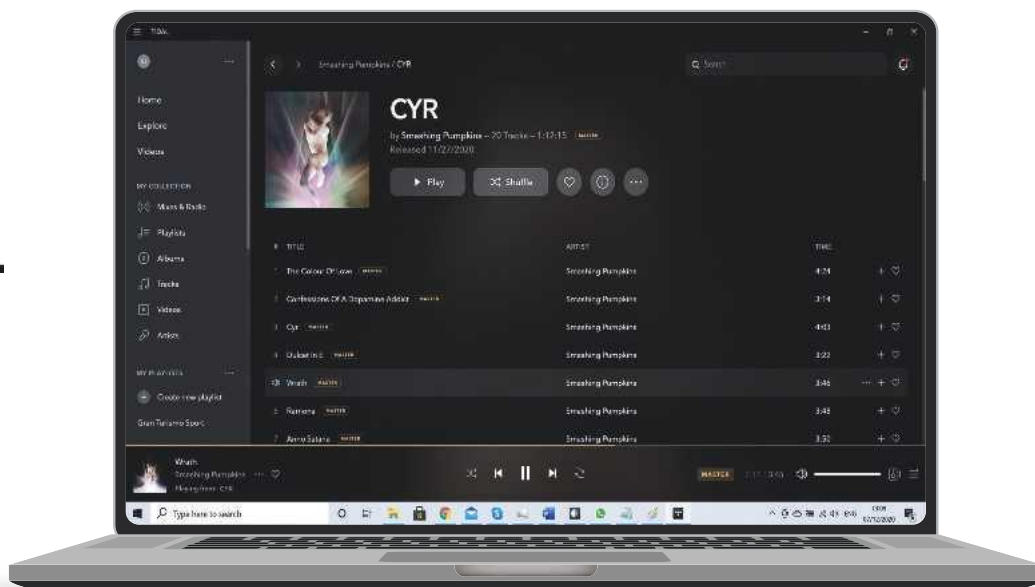


Maestro Interconnects | MS2.3 Speaker Cable
Featuring our patented Monocrystal™ Technology

"Ecosse Cables' loom is a great performer that stamps its authority on the music, giving a powerful and engaging sound with a barrel-chested style and a cheery demeanour. Others come close, but this sings like no others."

Hi-Fi Choice - Cable Looms Group Test Winner





Tidal HiFi

As the first lossless service to launch in the UK and a regular winner of this test, Tidal has been one of the most consistent options in terms of its offering. Your £20 a month originally secured access to a library of 16/44.1 material, but in 2017 it announced that high-resolution content would be made available at no extra cost.

Hi-res content is encoded with MQA. A partial 'unpack' can be done by the app, but you'll need an MQA-capable device to completely unlock it. Since we last ran the test, MQA content has increased considerably to the point where it would be positively advantageous to

The presentation is more forward, with the vocals more prominent

have hardware support for it if you are a subscriber. There is much more hi-res content available as a result. Multi-channel fans will also be interested in the library of Dolby Atmos content too.

Tidal's apps have always been good and across web browser, desktop and the mobile apps, it presents a slick and generally pleasant browsing experience. The desktop app has USB

audio management, but doesn't state explicitly what the sample rate of a file is (possibly as a result of different outcomes for full MQA and non-MQA devices). The third-party integration is excellent, realistically second only to convenience champion Spotify, and this has recently been bolstered further by Tidal Connect for easier access. It is also, along with Qobuz, able to integrate with Roon – adding your favourites into your music library. The only limitation (when originally tested) was the price, however, this has since halved – putting Tidal in the potential driving seat for 2022's streaming service *Group Test*.

Sound Quality

Possibly as a result of how it goes about implementing its hi-res content, Tidal has the greatest tendency to sound different to its rivals, and whether that appeals will very much depend on your personal preferences. With Chord Electronics' Hugo TT2 (HFC 468) connected directly to the laptop, Brahms' *Academic Festival Overture* is available as a 24/96 stream, but sounds a little louder than Qobuz. This means the range between the quietest and loudest sections seems a little reduced. The orchestra is well defined and it's possible to determine individual instruments.

For both Bruno Ducol's *Adonai's* and Lunatic Soul's *Navvie*, Tidal offers

DETAILS

PROVIDER
Tidal

PRICE
£10 per month

ORIGIN
Norway

TYPE
Desktop/mobile app streaming service

FEATURES
• Library claims: 55-million tracks
• Web browser and mobile apps available
• Format: 16/44.1 to 24/96 FLAC and MQA

WEBSITE
tidal.com

REVIEWED
HFC 472

16/44.1 versions. In neither case does this seriously impinge on performance, but it is more noticeable on the classical piece. Some of the decay and room interaction that can be discerned elsewhere are absent. The tonal accuracy and detail, however, is largely unaffected and the attention lavished on Holm is enough to do her performance justice. With *Navvie*, the results are sufficiently similar to the 24-bit version as to be something I'd be reluctant to call under blind listening conditions. There is the slightest perception that absolute bass depth is diminished, but the overall presentation is still lively.

Conclusion

Yello's *Hot Pan* is the most interesting. Tidal performs an 'unpack' to 24/96 and the result is different – not better – to the 24/48 versions from rivals. The presentation is more forward, with the vocals more prominent, easier to discern and a greater feeling of immediacy. However, the bass depth seems a little reduced and the top end isn't quite as refined. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

INTEGRATION

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Great apps; integration and library; sounds good

DISLIKE: Really needs MQA-compatible hardware;

WE SAY: Tremendous strength in depth, but in some key regards is less flexible than rivals





We make the best audio components

Handmade Sonic Perfection

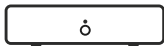


The VAC Master Preamplifier outperforms every other preamplifier, with the exception of the VAC Statement models that inspired it.

Signature
AUDIO SYSTEMS

Distributed by Signature Audio Systems, **call: 07738 – 007776**

or by e-mail to: **info@signaturesystems.co.uk** Web: **www.vac-amps.com**



into — the — groove



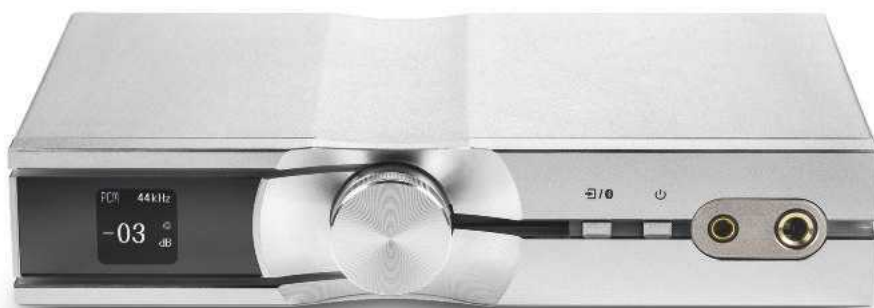
The Hegel V10 is a brand-new take on an old technology. With 30 years' experience designing state-of-the-art discrete transistor circuits, we have built a phono preamplifier like no other. It is neutral, dynamic, and exceptionally revealing. We have used all our knowledge

in amplification and applied it to one goal
- To reach down into the record and reveal every bit of information.

The V10 is designed to capture the sound
To get you closer to the music
To get you into the groove



MM and MC || Subsonic Filter || System matching
Auto standby || Balanced (XLR) output



iFi Audio Neo iDSD

Positioned towards the upper end of iFi's extensive range of digital products, the Neo iDSD is relatively unusual in the company's roster because it's not designed with a view to being portable. But it has a usefully comprehensive specification. Four inputs are fitted: one coaxial, one optical, one USB and Bluetooth. The sample rate is extremely good with PCM handled all the way up to 32-bit/768kHz, DSD to 512 and DXDx2 along with MQA support. The Bluetooth plays nice with absolutely every version possible into the bargain.

It is fully balanced with a Burr-Brown chipset performing decoding and supported by the now traditional selection of high-quality components in the signal path. There's a choice of RCA and XLR outputs on the rear, but also balanced and unbalanced headphone outputs, with 6.35mm and 4.4mm sockets on the front panel. As is

becoming increasingly popular, the iFi can be used as a preamp, thanks to a variable output around the back. Where it additionally trumps some rivals is the inclusion of a remote control handset that makes all of this functionality rather more practical to use.

Also useful is that it can be powered via the USB socket using a special cable or the supplied 5V wall-wart PSU. You can then boost this further with the optional aftermarket step-up that iFi supplies separately. The unit itself is well made and easy to use, thanks to the remote and a small but legible display showing volume, input and sample rate. I don't think it's the best-looking DAC going, but it is easy to use and the supplied plate for mounting it vertically is handy too.

Sound quality

The Neo iDSD takes some of the qualities of the ZEN DAC V2 (overleaf) and builds on them very

effectively. Public Service Broadcasting's *Blue Heaven* is a very well-judged balance of energy and refinement that effectively draws the listener in to what it is doing. The presentation is spacious and avoids the congestion as the track builds that affects some lesser rivals. The tonal realism is also exceptionally good. Martina Topley-Bird is the focus of the performance in *Hunt* and she sounds glorious, with a scale, presence and tangibility to her singing that is impressive. The bass that underpins her performance is extremely convincing too.

The performance is more about speed and control than low end so there are some DACs that might hit a little harder, but few integrate their bass as well or sound quite as detailed. This detail is also a significant aspect of Chopin's *Piano Sonata No.3*. Without sounding sterile or artificial, the iFi digs out little fragments of information that can be easily missed elsewhere. There is more sense of individual notes being played while Martha Argerich is a more tangible presence than is the case with some rivals.

Conclusion

Switching over to DSD doesn't significantly alter what the iFi is doing, but its performance of Steeley Dan's *Home At Last* is very entertaining. Its grasp of timing and the propulsive energy it displays makes for a fine listening experience while the refinement and quality of the recording as a whole is beautifully conveyed. The additional functionality is also very capable. It's an excellent headphone amplifier, with little in the way of background noise and plenty of gain; the Bluetooth is exceptionally good too. This is a well-made and confident all-rounder that has clearly had a lot of thought put into its features. Whether you need a DAC headphone amp or preamp, the Neo iDSD is well suited to the task. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
iFi Audio Neo iDSD

PRICE
£800

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
DAC/preamp

WEIGHT
970g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
214 x 41 x 146mm

FEATURES
• Supports: PCM to 768kHz and DSD512
• 6.35 and 4.4mm headphone out
• Outputs: RCA; XLR
• Inputs: optical; coaxial; USB

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

WEBSITE
ifi-audio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 482



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Balance of refinement and excitement; great spec; solid build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Doesn't hit as hard as some

BUILD QUALITY



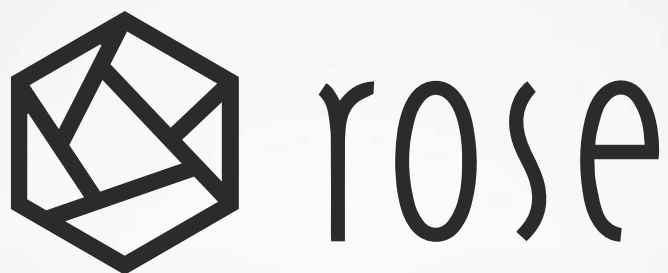
WESAY: An extremely capable all-rounder that balances a decent spec with great sonics across all outputs

FEATURES



OVERALL





The impression of sound with eyes and ears

ON DEMO
NOW



RS-250

COMPLETE HI-FI NETWORK STREAMER

The RS-250 from HiFi Rose is a true high-end device. From its elegant, sturdy aluminium construction through its extensive DAC functions and on to its bespoke transformer design – no element of this prestigious product is left to chance.

RSA-780

LOW NOISE CD DRIVE

RSA-780 is a low noise, isolated CD drive enabling you to import and playback CDs on your HiFi Rose player in just one touch with Rose OS.



Distributed by Henley Audio

T: +44 (0) 1235 511 166 | E: sales@henleyaudio.co.uk | W: www.henleyaudio.co.uk | f: HenleyAudioUK | y: HenleyAudio



iFi Audio Zen DAC V2

Hailing from the same family as the Zen Blue (HFC 460), instead of Bluetooth the Zen DAC V2 is designed as a single-input USB digital-to-analogue converter. The port in question is a USB-B located on the rear, while the XMOS controller is 16 rather than 8-core. The USB connection supports PCM up to 384kHz and DSD256 along with MQA support decoded via its Burr-Brown DAC.

Connections are comprehensive for the price, including an RCA output that can be used as a fixed-level hook-up or variable preamp output – offering great potential for using it with a pair of active speakers lacking volume control. Meanwhile, a 4.4mm connection on the rear offers a balanced output. On the front is another 4.4mm jack alongside a 6.35mm output. These allow the Zen to be used as a headphone amp and explains why the chassis is also fitted with a 5V DC PSU connection. In order to achieve the maximum quoted power output of these sockets you will need to switch over to an external PSU, which is not included but available for around £10 online. A dedicated cable that also serves as the power feed for the DAC as well as the signal input completes the picture.

Internally, the Zen DAC features a number of design details that have trickled down from more expensive models. This includes the use of TDK

capacitors and an analogue ‘TrueBass’ circuit to augment the low-frequency response without recourse to a DSP. Externally, the Zen DAC V2 is similar to its Bluetooth and Phono stablemates with an all-metal chassis.

Sound quality

Connecting the Zen DAC V2 to a Rega io (p76) and Wharfedale’s Diamond 12.2 (HFC 479) creates a cost effective but absurdly talented system in which the iFi shines. Even without the TrueBass option selected, it reveals real weight and texture to its presentation. The deep drum that underpins *Times Won’t Change Me Now* by Circa Waves is reproduced with commendable heft that helps the piece sound big and convincing. There have been times when I’ve found some older iFi designs to be initially very attention grabbing, but a little fatiguing over time. This is a sound that’s less arresting initially, but one you can enjoy for hours.

This hasn’t been achieved at the expense of drive and excitement, though. The Zen DAC powers its way through The Cinematic Orchestra’s *A Caged Bird/Imitations Of Life* with finesse and a feeling of energy that compels you to keep listening. As Roots Manuva’s vocals reach the soaring chorus, it does a fine job of capturing the scale of the performance without sounding compressed or congested. Compare it with a more expensive DAC, and strings don’t

DETAILS

PRODUCT
iFi Audio
Zen DAC V2

PRICE
£160

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
USB DAC

WEIGHT
800g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
160 x 35 x 117mm

FEATURES
● Supports PCM
up to 384kHz
and DSD256
● 6.35 and 4.4mm
headphone out
● RCA output
● 4.4mm balanced
output

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home
Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
ifi-audio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 480

sound as rich or vivid and the stereo image sits between your speakers rather than extending beyond, but I am consistently surprised at how close it gets to rather pricier alternatives.

The headphone amp works rather well, too. With Audio-Technica’s MSR7b headphone (HFC 451), the USB power is sufficient to hit any level I can comfortably listen to. The same well-judged sonic balance of refinement and drive is present via the headphone socket and, while it hardens up a little when you run it very hard, most headphones of a price you’d habitually connect to the iFi will work on USB power alone. You can also power the Zen DAC V2 via an OTG connection from an Android phone making it portable in a technical sense if not a practical one.

Conclusion

Criticism of the Zen DAC V2 has to be seen in the context of its price. This is an absurdly talented device for the money. Connected to a digital source capable of delivering a lossless signal or better, it is consistently capable of a sound far in excess of the asking price making it an absolute bargain. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Outstanding audio performance; comprehensive spec

DISLIKE: Might need an external PSU for rigorous headphone use

WE SAY: An absolute bargain that offers performance well in advance of its lowly price point



Matrix Audio

Mini-i Pro 3

As the most affordable member of Matrix Audio's range, the Mini-i Pro 3 goes further than most in blurring the margin of operating as a DAC and something else entirely. Judged as a DAC, it's competitive with most as you get a USB-C, one optical, and one coaxial inputs plus a Bluetooth receiver that supports everything bar the Huawei-specific HWA format. It has I2S connection via an HDMI-type socket and comes with an IEC mains socket for power.

And it's only getting stated. You also get Ethernet and wireless connection that allows for network audio access including Roon compatibility and AirPlay. There is also an analogue input. The Mini-i Pro 3 works as a preamp via the RCA and XLR outputs and as a headphone amp via 6.35 and 4.4mm jacks. Sample rate handling extends to 768kHz for PCM and DSD512 with MQA. Decoding is

undertaken via an ESS ES9038Q2M chip supported by NXP i.MX 6UL Cortex-A7 processor and Crystek CCHD-950 clock.

All this is condensed into a chassis that is extremely well finished and attractively designed. The Matrix is convenient to use too, as it has a compact but legible full-colour display, remote handset and control app. Perhaps the only real critique is that the sheer amount of functionality it offers can be a little daunting to configure initially, but this is as much a reflection of how much it does as anything being particularly confusing.

Sound quality

During testing it does a consistently good job of converting technical potential into real-world ability. It delivers Public Service Broadcasting's *Blue Heaven* with an energy and liveliness that really benefits Andrey Casablanca's vocals and helps get the

head nodding in a way that feels effortless and entirely free from any digital processing. It also effectively avoids any feeling of congestion during busier passages. Helping things further is an impressive bass performance as it delivers Martina Topley-Bird's *Hunt* with a level of heft, but partners it with a control, tone and definition that is simply superb. Power is nothing without control and the Pro 3 has plenty of both to hand.

With the older recording of Chopin's *Piano Sonata No.3*, the detail and space created are impressive. The piano is faithfully recreated and it has a scale and weight that doesn't always come through on some other models. The decay of notes is entirely convincing too, adding a little realism to an already convincing presentation. Switching over to DSD doesn't do

It does a great job of converting technical potential into real-world ability

anything to unsettle things. This isn't the lushest performance of Steely Dan's *Home At Last*, but it is energetic without losing the refinement that its mastering provides. The tonal realism is nigh-on exemplary, balancing emphasis without any sense of it being unnatural.

Conclusion

This has to be taken in the context of everything else that the Matrix Audio Mini-i Pro 3 does. It's a fine headphone amplifier, keeping its rivals honest, but it's the streaming that truly impresses, allowing it to work in situations where more traditional DACs would require a source. Controlled via Roon in particular, it offers a user experience that nothing else can match. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Matrix Audio Mini-i Pro 3
PRICE
£900
ORIGIN
China
TYPE
DAC/preamp/ streamer
WEIGHT
1.7kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
223 x 48 x 205mm
FEATURES
● Supports: PCM to 768kHz and DSD512
● 6.35 and 4.4mm headphone out
● Outputs: RCA; XLR
● Inputs: optical; coaxial; I2S; USB
DISTRIBUTOR
Signature Audio Systems
WEBSITE
matrix-digi.com/en
REVIEWED
HFC 482



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Sounds superb; does a vast array of things; very well made

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Slightly more involved to set up

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: A simply outstanding DAC that brings comprehensive extra functionality along and sounds great while it does so

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Pro-Ject

Pre Box S2 Digital

It seems like a very long time ago that Pro-Ject took its first tentative steps into digital, and from those early experiments the range has grown into a comprehensive and flexible selection of products. The Pre Box S2 Digital is a compact digital-to-analogue converter and yet it doesn't give much away in spec. It has single USB, coaxial and optical inputs and – should USB be the connection you intend to make use of, it's also possible to power the DAC from this socket too. Alternatively, a 5V wall-wart plug with USB micro A port comes supplied.

As the 'Pre' name suggests, the Pro-Ject is also equipped with a volume control that alters the level on both the RCA output and a single 6.35mm headphone socket. There is no balanced circuitry, but at the price that's forgivable as is the absence of Bluetooth. On the plus side, you also

get a remote to make that preamp functionality more accessible too. A pair of ESS9038Q2M chips allow PCM to 32-bit/768kHz to be handled as well as DSD512 and MQA. The Pro-Ject also has a Roon profile, making it easier to configure. The small chassis is well finished, although it's compact enough to risk being moved around by stiffer cables on lower friction surfaces. On the front panel there is a display that, while small, is able to show level, input and sample rate.

Sound quality

The Pre Box S2 Digital manages the crucial task of doing nothing that has you pointing a finger and shouting: "That's the affordable one!" In fact, some of its attributes are enviable in the context of rivals at the same price. It delivers Public Service Broadcasting's *Blue Heaven* with a top-end refinement that ensures that

everything sounds sweet without ever feeling soft or curtailed. Vocals are extremely vivid and attention grabbing and this helps Andrey Casablanca to sound truly engaging. There are some traces of congestion as the track gets busier, but these are comparatively minor.

Much more noticeable is a fractional lack of bass heft when the deep underpinning of Martina Topley-Bird's *Hunt* is played. The Pro-Ject is impressively articulate and there's both a useful amount of fine detail and overall control to the bass it produces, but some rivals deliver more clout. The manner in which it sets about Topley-Bird's vocals is once again extremely impressive. It lends her a presence and sense of realism that really ties the performance together. It's barely less effective with the piano too. There's a decent

The Pro-Ject's top end sounds sweet without ever feeling soft or curtailed

perception of individual notes and there's no trace of that hardness to the upper registers that can sometimes be present on this much older recording.

Conclusion

Given how sweetly it runs on PCM, the Pro-Ject is positively verdant with DSD, ensuring every aspect of the immaculate mastering of Steely Dan's *At Last* is delivered as it should be. Compared with some presentation is a little narrow, but this seems to occur without undue congestion to the performers themselves. When it comes to headphone functionality it's best when running on the external power supply and it doesn't feel as powerful as some. Still, there's plenty of gain and little unwanted noise. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital

PRICE
£350

ORIGIN
Austria/Slovakia

TYPE
DAC/headphone amp

WEIGHT
600g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
103 x 37 x 122mm

FEATURES
● Supports: PCM to 768kHz and DSD512
● RCA and 6.35mm headphone outputs
● Inputs: optical; coaxial; USB

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

WEBSITE
project-audio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 482



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Refined, detailed and compelling sound; well made; excellent value for money

DISLIKE: Slight lack of bass heft; limits to the headphone section

WE SAY: It isn't perfect, but this is a bargain in terms of performance and specifications



Hegel V10

Hegel's maiden phono stage caters for both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, offers unbalanced inputs alongside unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR outputs. Power comes courtesy of an external PSU that's been custom designed for the preamp.

There are two rows of DIP switches – ten per channel no less – for matching the gain and loading requirements of your cartridge of choice. These are supplemented by a series of internal controls and links that can be used to add an additional 6dB gain boost to both MM and MC sections as well as extending MC loading options from 50 to 500ohm. This is the point where the expertise of your hi-fi dealer is probably best utilised for help setting up, unless you really know what you're doing.

Sound quality

The V10 is impressively quiet with background noise and hum notable only by their absence, and vinyl roar and surface noise subtly suppressed leaving fine detail to blossom. Even though the overall balance is on the smooth side, it is not short of transparency. This means that while cymbals and percussion steer clear of any sense of hardness or sibilance, they come across as clean and distinct. It's difficult to think of any rival offerings at this price able to so

deftly juggle smooth presentation with such precise insight.

Equally impressive is the sense of space and ambience that's so gracefully revealed from familiar recordings. Front-to-back depth is very good and regardless of whether performances are live or studio based, each instrument, performer and backing vocalist is clearly pinpointed within the soundstage while remaining easy to focus on.

The only real downside in this respect is that there could be a little more solidity centre stage as some more potent vocalists tend to sound edgy and come across as a little bit more diffuse. Malia and Boris Blank's *Raising Venus* sees Malia pushed a little further back into the soundstage than we're used to.

The bass guitar on Tal Wilkenfeld's *Haunted Love* displays an appealing ease and fluidity to underpin the vocals. This can sound too stark and uninvolved elsewhere, but the V10 appears to knit the two together perfectly. Moving to the lower frequencies shows it is more than capable of going deep while remaining tuneful. The backing synth bass of Ava Max's *Who's Laughing Now* bounds along with pace and impact, with each note clearly delineated from the next.

Moving on to something altogether more raucous, Corey Taylor's *CMFT Must Be Stopped* is a riotous explosion

of guitars and primal shouting. The V10 separates all the disparate layers of noise, but somehow remains over polite in doing so. Similarly, noisy material continues the theme, with the Hegel rarely being caught out and revealing mastery of separation and detail retrieval, but a reluctance to let its hair down and really have fun.

This see-through smoothness is broadly continued across both MM and MC inputs, meaning that whether highlighting the top-end clarity of Ortofon's 2M Black (*HFC* 434) or the extra depth and imaging ability of Clearaudio's MC Essence, it's a very impressive performer across the board.

Conclusion

Yes, it's fiddly to set up and ensuring you select the right combination of DIP switches isn't the most intuitive of procedures, but that's more to do with the generosity of features than anything else. With a wide range of different cartridges the results are consistently impressive. Effortlessly smooth, insightful and impeccably voiced for a crystal-clear performance, the V10 is an absolute triumph. **HFC**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Hegel V10

PRICE
£1,350

ORIGIN
Norway

TYPE
MM/MC phono preamplifier

WEIGHT
2.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
210 x 60 x 280mm

FEATURES
• MM/MC input
• Adjustable DIP switches
• Inputs: unbalanced RCA; balanced XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
Hegel Music Systems AS

TELEPHONE
07917 685759

WEBSITE
hegel.com

REVIEWED
HFC 474

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth, transparent precision

DISLIKE: It can be a touch reserved

WE SAY: Looking for a phono preamp that will reveal previously undiscovered details from your vinyl? Look no further



iFi Audio Zen Phono

Supporting both moving-magnet and coil cartridges and able to generate up to 72dB of gain for low output MC designs, the Zen Phono sits towards the more affordable end of iFi Audio's range. It has a 50dB setting that caters for high-output moving-coil designs, but the really noteworthy figure in the Zen Phono's spec is the claimed equivalent input noise of -151dBv. This is good going for anything under £1,000, let alone something costing £150 – suggesting it should be exceptionally quiet, regardless of the cartridge you use. An unusual fitment that may help even further is the 4.4mm Pentaconn balanced connector on the rear. iFi now sells a cable to connect this to an XLR input and, if you have such a thing, it leaves the Zen Phono with a suite of features beyond most rivals.

Power is supplied via a 12V wall-wart, but this runs into a 1.2MHz circuit with noise filtration. The EQ circuit uses TDK C0G capacitors in parallel to naturally pair match the channels in the manner that hand pairing devices can do, but with less component wastage or time lost. There is no adjustment for impedance or capacitance as there are on more expensive iFi phono stages, but this is hardly unusual at the price.

The Zen Phono is relatively conventional with RCA connections for input and outputs, a solid grounding

post and a rear panel switch for selecting gain. The front has buttons for power and a subsonic filter, plus LEDs to display gain settings.

Sound quality

The Zen Phono is silent at idle and remains so even with the volume of a Cyrus i7 XR (HFC 473) at a firmly antisocial level. Connected to an AVID Ingenium Twin (HFC 379), Rega RB330 and Goldring 2500 (HFC 434), the most notable result is that fine detail that can be hard to place through the perfectly respectable phono stage of the Cyrus is suddenly apparent. Switch cartridges to a Rega Ania Pro (HFC 460) – considerably more expensive than the iFi – and the silence is maintained. Even at the 72dB gain setting, unless your ear is right up to the speaker, noise is minimal.

With the wonderful pressing of Hayden Thorpe's *Diviner*, there is much more information about the movement of Thorpe behind the piano evident. This effortless addition of nuance lifts the presentation, while those distinctive vocals are handled with authority and realism. The supporting piano is tonally believable and has the weight and presence needed to be a tangible instrument rather than canned effect. The bass extension that the Zen Phono offers is consistently impressive too. The huge low note in the middle of the live performance of Kraftwerk's

Aerodynamik is beautifully reproduced and exceptionally deep.

Something also worth noting is that, while the Zen Phono might lack some of the absolute technical mastery of iFi's more expensive designs, it is arguably more fun. The unabashed bluegrass joy of Sturgill Simpson's *Cuttin' Grass Vol 1* fizzles with energy and the simple joy of great musicians delivering a fine performance. Via the Zen Phono this enthusiasm radiates out of every note and it does a better job of the suspension of disbelief than any affordable rival I can think of.

Conclusion

This means that the Zen Phono has to be seen as a remarkable bargain. Until you find yourself at the price point where features like adjustable loading and capacitance are possible, the specification it offers at £150 is truly outstanding. It's one of a tiny number of designs anywhere near this price that can do justice to pretty much any cartridge under £500 (and realistically more) and for this reason it has to be on any shortlist anywhere near the price point. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
iFi Audio Zen Phono

PRICE
£150

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
MM/MC
phono stage

WEIGHT
515g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
113 x 35 x 160mm

FEATURES
• Moving-magnet and moving-coil input
• 12V power supply with 1.2MHz circuit
• Four adjustable gain settings

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
ifi-audio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 476

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Astonishing performance for the money; well made; superbly flexible

DISLIKE: Nothing of note at the price

WE SAY: An absolutely outstanding affordable phono stage that delivers a performance far in advance of its cost



Musical Fidelity

M6x Vinyl

This phono stage recognises that some users have multiple turntables, and/or turntables with more than one tonearm, and/or tonearms with balanced outputs. Most integrated amplifiers come with a phono input, but I can't help feeling it's often tokenism. Their gain and switching options are usually poor and you rarely see two inputs being offered or a balanced option, which is where the M6x Vinyl comes in.

It's a full-size phono stage with three separate, independently selectable cartridge inputs. The beauty of these is they're under microprocessor control, so you can toggle between them and the system will remember your choice of load and gain settings for each one. You can choose between moving magnet (47kohm, 50-400pF) or moving coil (25-1.2kohm, 470pF), with +6dB gain on or off. You get two unbalanced RCA inputs and one balanced XLR, so the M6x Vinyl can be an integrated connection hub for a trio of different turntables.

The company has opted for a discrete transistor gain stage rather than entrusting the amplification of your cartridge's low-level signals to op-amps. This is more expensive and complex to implement, but there's a school of thought that says discrete transistors sound much better than op-amps in this application.

Sound quality

With a range of cartridges spanning an Audio-Technica VM-95 moving magnet to a Lyra Dorian moving coil, I find the M6x Vinyl an impressive performer – and a clear step up from my Rega Aria Mk3 reference (HFC 469). The latter has bettered many designs well above its £900 price, so I'm surprised the Musical Fidelity is so clearly ahead. It has a crisp, clean and spacious tone that's less euphonic than some might wish, but fun to listen to.

Tonally it's very neutral, if perhaps just a fraction on the dry and clean side. There's no sense of plumpness in the bass and nor does it have an especially silky treble. It's more matter of fact than that, but don't confuse this for forwardness or sterility; that's simply not accurate. Play a rich Seventies recording such as Kate Bush's *Wow* and you get a clean, detailed and direct rendition of the track without a load of extra, add-on analogue baggage. It doesn't sugar the pill so to speak, but nor does it make it bitterer than it really is. The result is a lovely, smooth, expansive sound, with lots of production effects making their way to the fore where lesser phono stages might obscure them.

Bass is taut and powerful, but not fat or overblown. Beatmasters' *Who's In The House?* is great fun; its Eighties synth bassline is a joy to hear as it steamrollers my room with low frequencies. At the same time, the

low-frequency theatrics don't detract from the oodles of detail in the midband and a really expressive handling of dynamics. The way the crescendos build up is visceral, causing me to marvel at the sound of a record made 32 years ago that still feels fresh.

There is a slight edge to percussive detail; drum machine rim shots have real bite, but the female vocal line isn't unduly hard. This shows it's a pretty natural-sounding design, a fact that really shines through with Donald Byrd's *Street Lady*. The acoustic instruments on this Blue Note recording are a pleasure to hear and I love the urgent rhythmic gait. The music consequently sashays along in a wonderfully uplifting way.

Conclusion

This multi-talented design offers a combination of excellent connectivity, versatile loading and gain options, a great user interface and excellent sound. I don't know of other products anywhere near its price that do so much so well. It's not the best phono stage that money can buy of course, but it sure is cracking value. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity
M6x Vinyl

PRICE
£1,700

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
MM/MC
phono stage

WEIGHT
5.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 100 x 385mm

FEATURES
• Outputs:
unbalanced RCAs;
balanced XLRs
• Three selectable
cartridge inputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk
musicalfidelity.com

REVIEWED
HFC 475

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Connectivity;
user interface; sound

DISLIKE: Nothing at
the price

WE SAY: The M6x Vinyl
is a fine-sounding,
versatile vinyl hub



Manley Chinook

A valve offering from the States, the Chinook very much favours the 'it might not look much but...' approach to style versus sound. As you can see, it is just about as plain and functional as they come. Oh, the logo recessed into the thick, grey aluminium front panel lights up when you switch it on. Otherwise, all the action takes place round the back, including banks of DIP switches. Unusually, but thoughtfully, these are accompanied by helpful hints about ohms and capacitance printed on the back panel – a kind of crib sheet to set you on your way without having to thumb laboriously through the instruction manual.

The Chinook might not necessarily have the design appeal of a £2,700 component and it's considerably lighter than many of its rivals. All of which is fine if it sounds darn good.

With much trickled-down technology from the company's esteemed Steelhead phono preamp flagship offering, it certainly should. Like the Steelhead, each channel employs the two triode sections of a 6922 tube for amplifying in league with passive RIAA equalisation networks. The signal is then directly coupled to another 6922 dual triode serving as the output driver, the upshot being low-output impedance and robust current-driving capabilities to bring difficult loads to heel.

There are two internal settings for optimal gain and the aforementioned DIP switches around the back offer a dizzying combination of 31 different possible resistance settings and an additional seven capacitive loading choices – plenty there to experiment with whatever the cartridge, moving magnet or coil. Manley states that audiophile-grade and time-proven componentry is used throughout, further underlining its: "dedication to seductive sonics".

Sound quality

Seductive would certainly seem to be an appropriate adjective. There's an immediately inviting warmth, lyricism and intimacy to the Chinook's sound that clearly marks it out as a fine modern valve design. Here's the opposite of edge-of-the-seat listening, a liquid delivery with a wide-open midrange that comes across as effortlessly charming as a George Clooney chat-up line.

Oscar Peterson and his jazz compadres might not be quite as locked in space during *Naptown Blues* as they are with Leema Acoustics' Agena or Rega's Aura (HFC 481), but there's certainly greater fluency, flow and timbral subtlety. Sam Jones' bass has an infectious bounce and tunefulness and while Peterson's piano is spread a smidge too far across the soundstage, the harmonic structure and decay of notes are

easier to appreciate. Crucially, the Chinook dials into the performance aspect of the piece. Temporally fluent, supple and smooth, the presentation gets pampered with just a hint of traditional tube warmth. It means my attention isn't drawn to how much detail there is. It's not so much that it isn't there, but more because of the traceless way that it dissolves into the larger musical picture.

Despite an expansive soundstage, I'm not treated to laser-cut imaging or the tightest focus with Amy Winehouse's *You Sent Me Flying (Cherry)*, but there's a wonderfully pellucid quality merging strolling, smoky jazz and true expressive range and colour from a languid and particularly sassy Winehouse vocal.

Conclusion

Equally immersive and intimate is the Lunatraktors' take on Leonard Cohen's *Lover, Lover, Lover* – full of tonal colour and texture, rhythmically loose and lucid, it's an absolute joy. Want to know what the fuss is about when it comes to valves? The Chinook is here to educate you. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Manley Chinook

PRICE
£2,700

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
MM/MC
phono preamp

WEIGHT
6.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
483 x 89 x 279mm

FEATURES
● MM/MC input
● RCA input/output
● Automatic
mute timer

DISTRIBUTOR
Elite Audio

WEBSITE
manley.com

REVIEWED
HFC 481

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Seductive sound quality; light weight; decent flexibility

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** DIP switches (despite crib sheet)

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Valves doing what valves do best, a satisfying compliment to top-drawer analogue

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Pro-Ject Phono Box RS2

We tested the original RS Phono stage back in *HFC* 368 and it's an indication of how good it was that it still remains part of the Pro-Ject range. The RS2 arrives not to replace it, but to supplement it. This is a single-input design, but has been constructed as fully dual mono from front to back. Input and output are via RCA and XLR and the RS2 builds on the original by moving to a discrete output stage with no op amps in the circuit. This is combined with passive equalisation – something more commonly seen in valve-based designs – which Pro-Ject says increases the accuracy of the EQ curve. As the RS2 also has a Decca EQ setting built in, there are two separate circuits to allow this.

Befitting a flagship, user adjustability is broad. Options include continuously variable impedance adjustment as well as multiple capacitance and gain settings – allowing for use with some more unusual cartridge outputs. It's an impressive degree of functionality, but does leave the RS2 looking somewhat fussy. The front panel has multiple controls, all marked by blue LEDs. It's logical enough to use and build quality is exceptionally good.

The RS2 can be upgraded by adding the £400 Power Box RS Phono power supply. As well as the 20V output required for the Phono Box, it also offers a 15V option that can be used on a number of Pro-Ject's turntables, so

you can upgrade two devices and reduce the mains plugs in use.

Sound quality

Connected to a Michell GyroDec, Vertere SG-1 arm (*HFC* 465) and Vertere Mystic cartridge, the RS2 very quickly reveals where the extra money has gone. Listening to Poppy Ackroyd's *Resolve*, it does a fabulous job of not being the story. Pretty much any definable element of 'personality' can be attributed to the equipment around it rather than the phono stage itself. Even at the standards of the price point, this is an admirably transparent device.

Such fragments of definable character that it does possess are positive ones too. The extremely deep note at the start of Dead Can Dance's *Song Of The Stars* has immense weight and scale here and there is a convincing three dimensionality to the presentation that is not tied to simple scale. It makes as much sense of Hayden Thorpe's intimate *Diviner* as it does the bigger and more expansive *Fink Meets The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra*. There are points where you can subjectively say it doesn't feel as lively as, say, Cyrus' Phono Signature (*HFC* 405), but this can as easily be ascribed to the latter showing a personality that the Pro-Ject is quite deliberately working to avoid.

Adding the external power supply the difference isn't night and day, but there are improvements. Fine detail

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Phono Box RS2
PRICE
£1,300
ORIGIN
Austria/Slovakia
TYPE
MM/MC phono stage
WEIGHT
1.6kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
206 x 72 x 200mm
FEATURES
• Moving-magnet and coil input
• Balanced and unbalanced connections
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
project-audio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 481

retrieval is better and where something like Sleater Kinney's *The Centre Won't Hold* feels slightly 'hot' running on the stock PSU, it becomes a little sweeter and more refined across the top end. Even if you don't have a Pro-Ject turntable to benefit from the second output, this is still likely to be a worthwhile upgrade and it has the advantage of being something you can select as and when you need it.

Conclusion

The Phono Box RS2 faces a stiffer challenge than the original RS because it occupies a significantly higher price point and goes up against rivals with similarly impressive specs. Even with these provisos, however, it can more than hold its own. Its transparency is genuinely impressive, even judged at the price and it's lack of colouration is potentially very useful indeed. This is the product you buy when you're already satisfied with the tonal balance of your system and simply need a well-specified phono stage to complete it. The RS2 makes good on its promise and delivers a quite superlative performance. **ES**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Superbly refined and accurate sonics; features; solid build
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Fussy controls; can sound a little sterile
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A reference-level phono stage that offers an exceptional level of performance and very flexible spec
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





Tom Evans Audio Design Groove + SRX Mk 2.5

Want a truism you can stake the house on? 'Nothing's perfect' fits the bill. For some designers of hi-fi, it's a comforting backstop: you gave it your best shot, it's great but, of course, nothing's perfect.

For Tom Evans it's an irritation he can't stop scratching. These might be challenging economic times for small, specialist operations, but the process that inches ever forwards towards the unreachable destination never ends.

Which is why the Groove + SRX Mk 2 is now the Groove + SRX Mk 2.5. Though this hasn't been the subject of a global advertising campaign, there is a small sticker on the underside of the main unit that says L7.5A. It namechecks the latest version of Evans' ever-evolving Lithos local regulator printed circuit board that's used to radically cut noise, in this case duplicated for each mono signal channel of the Groove + SRX as it's a dual mono design. The Mk 1 Groove + SRX was back on L7.4s, but the Mk 2 saw the adoption of the 7.5.

As with successive generations of Intel computer processor chips, the later your Lithos the better the performance. And, for Tom Evans, improving performance is as nitty gritty as it gets. It necessitates dropping the noise floor, widening dynamic range and extracting maximum resolution. Get that right in

the domain of the uber-miniscule – the beauty contained in a low-output MC cartridge is delivered at vanishingly low voltage levels – and the results will startle and seduce, even if your chosen cart doesn't force you to re-mortgage the mansion. On-side in ridding distortion and hitting a dynamic range to rival and possibly exceed the best of digital, there's an external power supply employing the latest high-current 6.1 Lithos PCB.

There are phono preamps around this price with the size, weight and extrovert style of a statement integrated amp; a few graced our recent *Group Test* (HFC 481). The Groove + SRX, conversely, couldn't be a purer evocation of form follows function – a plain, light, modestly sized black acrylic box connected to its chunky outboard PSU via a long cable with XLR connectors. Controls are confined to the on-off switch on the PSU and a bank of DIP switches for setting impedance (112 to 1,000ohm) and choosing between five capacitance values. Gain is fixed but optimised to suit cartridges with outputs between 0.2mV and 0.6mV but, as with the loadings, custom values can be accommodated on request.

Sound quality

I try the Groove + SRX Mk 2.5 with a Rega Planar 6/Ania (HFC 453/426) as well as a more expensive Acoustic

Signature Double X Neo/MCX-3. In both cases the sonic upshot is quite simply revelatory, and that's mere days after wrapping up the high-end phono preamp *Group Test* containing big hitters from ModWright and Rega that appeared in HFC 481. They were hugely impressive, but the Mk 2.5 sounds like a reset across the board. Focus, resolution, solidity, transient accuracy, timing, imaging and dynamic freedom are phenomenal. The best ground-based telescopes versus Hubble is the most fitting analogy I can come up with.

There's the same sense of removing veils, minimising noise and distortion, maximising resolution. Vangelis' *Out In Space* from *Juno To Jupiter* inspires shock and awe. Shock at the separation and detail, awe at the space and scale. Sure, it's not quite perfect, but then nothing is. Just how picky do you want to get?

Conclusion

The Groove + SRX Mk 2.5 won't add an extra veneer of warm and cuddly to your vinyl, but if you're curious to discover just how believable and addictive it can sound, this comes highly recommended. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Tom Evans Audio Design Groove + SRX Mk 2.5

PRICE
£5,000

ORIGIN
Wales

TYPE
MC phono stage

WEIGHT
2.2kg
4.3kg (PSU)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
330 x 85 x 195mm
153 x 95 x 110mm
(PSU)

FEATURES
• Moving-coil input
• Capacitance settings
• External PSU

DISTRIBUTOR
Tom Evans Audio Design

TELEPHONE
01443 833570

WEBSITE
audiodesign.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 482

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Stunning sound quality, size and simplicity of use

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing of note at the price

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WESAY:** It might not look like a £5,000 phono preamp, but don't be deceived

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

DS Audio DS 003

REPLACING THE DS 002, this optical cartridge is a new model rather than just a refinement. It represents the third generation of DS Audio's optical technology and employs the main cartridge mechanism from the company's flagship Grand Master.

The DS 003 employs an aluminium cantilever and line-contact stylus, with aluminium body. Inside is a re-designed optical system with independent LEDs and photo-detectors for the left and right channels, providing a claimed increase in output voltage from 40mV to 70mV.

Sound quality

This cartridge delivers massive amounts of lower octave action from the start. Playing Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Child*, from little fills to cavernous thunder the DS 003

extracts all the bass energy and percussive slam with richness and control, sounding like a cross between a classic Japanese moving-coil and a Decca. It expands the soundstage and enhances the front-to-back depth.

Yusuf Islam's re-worked *Tea For The Tillerman 2* with its simpler arrangements demonstrates impeccable background silences, supreme openness and freedom from fatigue and anything else that could mar such crystalline sound. Meanwhile the instruments' harmonics are breathtakingly convincing.

If one is lucky enough to listen to a world-class component, there's usually a watershed moment – one of a revelatory nature – that tells you when something is truly special. In the case of the DS Audio DS 003, it arrives with the discoveries found on the gloriously remastered *Ladies Of The Canyon* from the Rhino boxset,

Joni Mitchell – *The Reprise Albums 1968-1971*. Throughout, Ms. Mitchell possesses a voice of such unique clarity and fragility that it's immediately recognisable. While *Big Yellow Taxi* is a song that's been heard so many times over the years that you'd be forgiven for thinking you know every millisecond, the DS 003 performs an absolute miracle and somehow makes the familiar track sound so new and fresh it is just like hearing it for the very first time. An amazing feat! **HFC**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
DS Audio DS 003
PRICE
£5,000
WEBSITE
ds-audio-w.biz
soundfoundations.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 481

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Michell Cusis S

THIS IS THE middle offering of three cartridges from Michell – a moving-coil design with quoted output of 0.4mV. It employs a boron cantilever mounting a Shibata-type tip. The body is made from acetyl, which keeps it light at 8.9g and it's a simple cartridge to fit and balance in most tonearms. The flat front is also a bonus when it comes to the often fiddly process of alignment.

Sound quality

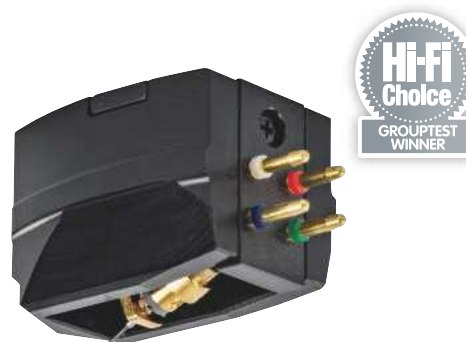
The packaging proudly informs its would-be owner that a cartridge should sound neutral; nothing more, nothing less. The Cusis S does abide by this mantra, but does so without being dull or matter of fact at any stage. It also manages this while being incredibly quiet. The first attribute of real note, however, is that it has sensational bass extension. It's able to reveal a weight

and potency from *Talk Talk's Talk Talk* that is stunning. It does this while ensuring that the upper registers remain rich and detailed throughout. The top end in particular combines exceptional detail retrieval with overall refinement that ensures nothing ever comes across as especially hard edged.

This ability to extract fine detail is something that really benefits Fink's *Berlin Sunrise*. There are nuances to the orchestral performance that are deeply impressive and the way in which it stitches this detail into the overall performance makes it part of a natural and engaging sound. Greenall is positioned right at the centre of attention once he begins singing, but he's never artificially detached from the supporting musicians. The Michell highlights the subtle difference between scale and width in that, while it doesn't push information as

wide as some, it's hard to argue that the weight and presence it gives the Royal Concertgebouw orchestra sounds in any way small.

With Bill Fay's *Human Hands*, little details from both the piano and Fay's playing are woven into a presentation that sounds gloriously real and avoids any trace of hardness. It completes an emphatic demonstration with a rendition of Emily King's *Forgiveness* that makes full use of the superb low-end extension to sound rich and vivid in a way that has you ignoring the mechanics of how the performance is created and simply focussing on the music itself. **ES**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Michell Cusis S
PRICE
£1,275
WEBSITE
michell-engineering.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 479

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Ortofon 2M Black LVB 250

ANNOUNCED IN 2020 to honour the 250th anniversary of the birth of Ludwig van Beethoven, the LVB 250 sports a highly polished Shibata stylus for deep groove tracing, a boron cantilever for high strength and low weight, plus a new suspension system using a special Multi Wall Carbon Nano Tubes nano filler rubber compound.

It weighs 7.2g and has a quoted dynamic compliance of $22\mu\text{m/mN}$, so should work with most tonearms. Output voltage is a decent 5mV and a ruler-flat frequency response is quoted of 20Hz to 20kHz, $\pm 1\text{dB}$. Recommended load impedance is 47kohm and load capacitance 150 to 300pF. Tracking force is said to be 1.6g, $\pm 0.1\text{g}$.

Sound quality

As a breed, moving-magnet cartridges tend to sound a bit

opaque, cloudy and unresolved. Due to their design compromises, they're good at giving big, broad, brushstrokes but can't drill down into the detail. The 2M Black LVB 250 sideskirts all of these issues, to give a lithe, vibrant, insightful sound that's far less flat and vague than most MMs.

Feed it a well-recorded classic rock track like Peter Gabriel's *Modern Love*, and the music shimmers with detail. It's as if it's tracing the groove far better, fully getting to grips with what's going on. There's more texture, atmosphere and perspective; you get a better sense of the dry-sounding recording studio, and a more intricate feel for the great man's grainy vocals.

Kate Bush's *Breathing* sounds more animated than any other moving-magnet cartridge I've heard it with. It's hard to believe it isn't a £2,000 moving-coil I'm hearing. I also love

the 'walk around' soundstage, as some hi-fi hacks once called this sort of widescreen recording.

The bass is dry and taut but tuneful, which makes this cartridge a blast with banging dance music; I have Goldie's *Timeless* turned up to eleven – or so it seems – and the 2M Black LVB 250 sounds super-stable and planted, yet fiercely fast and dynamic from start to finish.

The Ortofon 2M Black LVB 250 offers amazing insight, detail and grip, making it an absolute must-audition cartridge. **DP**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Ortofon 2M Black LVB 250
PRICE
£830
WEBSITE
ortofon.com
REVIEWED
HFC 478

OUR VERDICT



Sumiko Songbird Low

AVAILABLE IN BOTH high and low-output versions (we tested the high-output option in HFC 465), the Songbird Low produces 0.5mV, making it a reasonably benign partner for most MC phono stages.

The Songbird uses an elliptical stylus mounted in an aluminium cantilever. This is attached to the generator via a newly developed synthetic rubber suspension system. A word of warning: the generator assembly is completely exposed, but Sumiko supplies an excellent guard that encases the vulnerable section and makes it fairly stress free to get up and running.

Sound quality

A word that appears frequently in my listening notes is 'balance'. From the top to the bottom of Talk Talk's *Talk Talk*, it feels very even handed. The company's promotional material

states the Songbird: "excels at delivering rich vocals" and Hollis is indeed in fine voice here. Something else worthy of note is the bass response. There's an impressively deep and controlled low end that never loses its speed or urgency.

This weight and refinement ensures that its take on Fink's *Berlin Sunrise* is very compelling. This is not the most detailed performance, but the orchestra sounds weighty and real with a wonderful tonal richness. Meanwhile, Fink feels like an organic part of the presentation and the Songbird does a fine job of making sense of the track as a whole. There are some limits to the overall amount of perceived space, but it never sounds congested.

This more intimate presentation ensures that Bill Fay's *Human Hands* sounds fabulous. The relationship between Fay and his piano is utterly

self-explanatory and the Sumiko captures the emotion beautifully. The hard edge that this record can present is dealt with effectively too.

With Emily King's *Forgiveness*, the low electronic notes are deep and controlled and beautifully integrated into the wider performance. The track flows with a compelling energy and drive, drawing the listener into the music and ensuring you listen to that rather than the hardware. King sounds sublime and the Songbird does a fine job of handling the building scale, making sense of the supporting vocals and keeping everything sounding engaging. **ES**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sumiko Songbird Low
PRICE
£900
WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 479

OUR VERDICT





Astell&Kern KANN Alpha

Apple's iPod is most people's idea of a digital audio player, but the computer company from Cupertino was actually a little late to the party. Some may remember Diamond Multimedia's Rio as the MP3 player that started it all, just before the turn of the new millennium. A year or two later, Creative Labs wowed the world with its digital Jukebox. Only when Apple arrived with a lovely interface, did it make the market its own.

Another company still going from the early days is South Korean-based iRiver, formed in 1999 by seven former Samsung employees. It has lasted the distance in this very tough market and even launched its own high-end brand – Astell&Kern – in 2013. This was a real market disruptor, giving products that audiophiles had previously turned their noses up at something to crave.

The KANN Alpha is the company's latest DAP and feels every penny of its weighty price tag. Its solid aluminium body is unexpectedly large and is exquisitely smooth to the touch. At 316g it's also a lot heavier than you might expect. The top of its case sports three different headphone sockets, including a

4.4mm Pentaconn balanced type – plus the on/off switch. On the left-hand side are the transport controls, and underneath is a micro SD memory card slot; 64GB of onboard memory is built-in. The volume knob is on the right.

Inside, the KANN Alpha sports twin ESS ES9068AS DACs, and there's also hardware MQA support and an optical digital output. An LED ring around the volume control tells you

It has a light, bright, open and detailed sound with a pleasing lack of digital hash

the digital word length of the track being played – red for 16-bits and yellow for 24 – but it would have been nice to have sampling frequency indication, *a la* Chord's Mojo (HFC 461) for example. The unit supports up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256. Claimed playback time is 14.5 hours, with 3.5 hours for a charge; juicing up is done via the USB-C socket; a chunky charging cable is supplied. This DAP runs a customised version of Android 9.0,

and supports Amazon Music, Apple Music, Tidal, Qobuz *etc.*

Touchscreen operation enables you to sort through artists, songs, genres, *etc.* very easily and access all the settings through the main menu. My only gripe is that the interface is a bit laggy. Still, the 720 x 1,280 screen is a major asset and makes it a welcoming thing to use. There's a welter of facilities, from Bluetooth (24-bit LDAC and aptX HD) and wi-fi.

Sound quality

With its (claimed) 12V RMS headphone output stage, you'd expect this DAP to go loud, and so it proves. That's not to say it's raucous, though – it has a light, bright, open and detailed sound with a pleasing lack of digital hash or grit. It's a real top-tier player that drives pretty much any headphone with gusto. As soon as you press play, you find yourself forgetting about the hardware and getting into the music – which isn't my experience of most portables.

Cue up some hi-res Dire Straits, and *Sultans Of Swing* comes over in a vibrant and engaging way; there's lots of detail, but it's not presented in an analytical fashion. Feed it some glass-clear electro, and Kraftwerk's *Techno Pop* is beautifully pure with oodles of drive in the bass and midband insight, yet it doesn't grate or have you reaching to turn it down. Soundstaging, such as it is through headphones, is quite superb.

Conclusion

During my time with it, I try a range of headphones from Oppo's PM-1 to Sennheiser's PX-100, and the KANN Alpha drives them all valiantly. Not only that, but it sounds fresh as a daisy and bouncy as a ball; it's a truly enjoyable portable. This is a great new product from Astell&Kern then – although expensive, it certainly makes a convincing case for itself. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Astell&Kern
KANN Alpha

PRICE
£1,100

ORIGIN
South Korea

TYPE
Digital Audio Player

WEIGHT
316g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
68 x 117 x 25mm

FEATURES
• 720 x 1,280 backlit colour touchscreen
• 2x ESS ES9068AS DACs; MQA
• Optical digital output

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

WEBSITE
astellnkern.com

REVIEWED
HFC 473

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Fine sound; easy to use; great build

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly laggy user interface

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Top-tier performance justifies the price tag

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL





Astell&Kern

A&futura SE180

Recent efforts have seen Astell&Kern giving owners a choice of digital decoding options. The SE180 goes about offering this choice in a slightly different way to A&K's SE200 (HFC 467). It only has a single ESS 9038PRO DAC, which can handle PCM files up to 24-bit/384kHz and DSD natively to 256. Connections include a conventional 3.5mm, four pole 2.5mm balanced connector and a 4.4mm Pentacomm output; both of which can output to XLR as well.

The flexibility comes in the form of two small catches at the top of the chassis. Depress them both and pull firmly, and the top part of SE180 comes away, taking the DAC with it. You can then – so long as you have parted with the prerequisite £319 – replace it with the SEM 2 module. This contains two AKM AK4497EQ DACs that have PCM handling to 768kHz and DSD512 capability available to the same connections.

Sound quality

Initially using the SE180 with the supplied ESS module and partnering it with a Focal Clear MG headphone, it has some similarities to the SE200. The most immediate impression it

gives is of effortless power. It has no trouble driving the Focal to any level and there's never any perceivable strain to any aspect of the performance. Instead, the vast and brooding presentation of Massive Attack's *Angel* is delivered without any sense of the scale being impinged on in any way.

The 'hard hitting' element is something that crops up repeatedly in my notes, the SE180 demonstrating exceptional percussive bass. It thunders its way through *Telephasic Workshop* by Boards Of Canada with authority; landing the flurry of low drum strikes with speed and precision. At the other end of the frequency spectrum it is assured, but perhaps a little sterile. The rough and ready *Swamp Dog* on Seasick Steve's *Sonic Soul Surfer* is immaculately presented, but lacks some of the emotion it can possess elsewhere.

There's a solution for this if you find the money to buy the SEM 2 module and enjoy the SE180 with the AKM DACs doing the heavy lifting. Doing so yields a greater performance advantage than the AKM 'side' of the SE200 and I prefer it across pretty much every piece of music I play. Without losing any of the punch and rhythmic accuracy that the ESS

module possesses, the AKM delivers a sweeter, more emotionally involved presentation that is less fatiguing and hence the most complete listening experience of any Astell&Kern player that I can recall testing.

Something that applies to both modules, though, is that the SE180 does its best work with balanced headphones. Using Rosson Audio Design's RAD-0 (HFC 481) via the 4.4mm connector brings about a consistent and deeply impressive sense of space and soundstage that allows for even very large-scale music to be presented in a manner that goes beyond the left/right of traditional headphone listening. Given that headphones and earphones that offer this connection are becoming more common, it would make sense to prioritise the use of them here to achieve the best results. What's also worth noting is that Bluetooth is excellent. It may seem odd to want to use a player with such a good wired output in this manner, but it adds a welcome convenience when you want untethered audio on the move.

Conclusion

The strength in depth of the SE180, with its superior interface and screen, arguably allows it to outperform the SE200 in some key areas. It does have two issues at present that make this contest a little harder to call, however. The first is that the module possessing the higher performance is (perhaps deliberately) a cost option where the expense of adding it takes the SE180 to the same price as the SE200, which also possesses both options. Beyond the – admittedly very useful – addition of the 4.4mm connection, the advantage of the interchangeable DACs will only be realised as and when additional options hit the market, giving greater flexibility to owners. In the meantime, this slick and well-executed player offers considerable promise. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Astell&Kern
A&futura SE180

PRICE
£1,400

ORIGIN
South Korea

TYPE
Digital Audio Player

WEIGHT
380g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
77 x 137 x 20mm

FEATURES
● 32-bit/384kHz & DSD-capable
● ESS DAC with add-on AKG Module
● Quoted battery life: 10.5 hours
● 256GB internal storage

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

WEBSITE
astellinkern.com

REVIEWED
HFC 481

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Excellent performance via AKM module; new screen and interface

DISLIKE: Additional cost of module; not as slick as phone interface

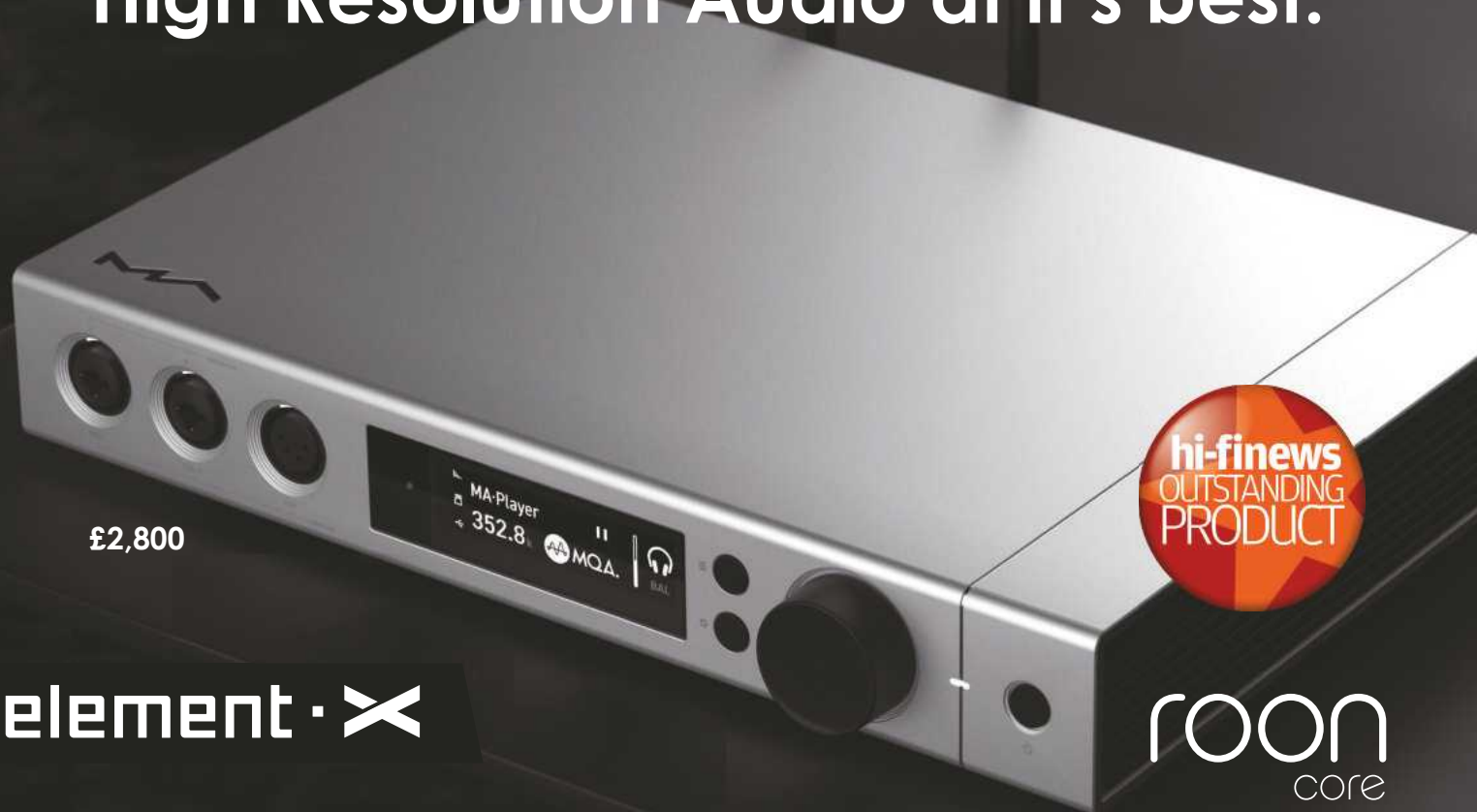
WE SAY: A unique concept with great potential if new modules hit the market

Audio Science: I am going to give my highest recommendation for Matrix Audio Element X. Congratulations and thanks for putting engineering and quality first.
Amir – Founder



Audio Science: You will have the comfort of knowing that you have a state-of-the-art DAC, streamer and headphone amplifier that puts countless high-end products to shame.
Amir - Founder

High Resolution Audio at it's best.

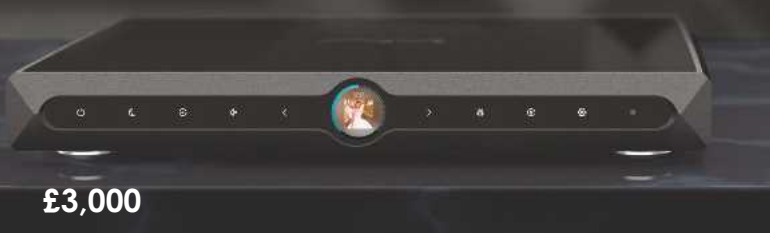


£2,800

element · X

roon
core

X-SABRE 3 Streamer & Dac



£3,000

mini-i Pro 3



£900

Matrix Audio has created a highly affordable range of high end music streamers, dacs, headphone amps and accessory products. Matrix Audio is enjoying glowing reviews, advocates within the industry and some very happy product owners .
Isn't it time that you took a look at www.matrix-digi.com

Signature
AUDIO SYSTEMS

Distributed by Signature Audio Systems, **call: 07738 – 007776**
or by e-mail to: info@signaturesystems.co.uk web: www.matrix-digi.com



Naim Audio Uniti Atom HE

It's been 12 years since Naim launched its Uniti Atom network audio all-in-one, to which the buyer need only add speakers. This version sheds the power amplification in favour of the headphone variety.

With the inclusion of Chromecast built-in, Bluetooth and Apple AirPlay 2, just about anything you want to stream from your computer, phone or tablet is accommodated here, along with a hi-res UPnP/DLNA interface able to handle files up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD128. There's also Roon ready capability. In addition there are optical and coaxial digital inputs, plus a single set of analogue ins, digitised at 48kHz.

Headphone connections include 6.35mm unbalanced and 4.3mm Pentacore balanced sockets on the front, plus a four-pin XLR balanced headphone output to the rear, but it can also be used as a preamp – thanks to RCAs and XLRs round the back.

Sound quality

Most of the session listening is carried out using a variety of headphones, but it is also tested running as a preamp into a main system. As it turns out, the Atom HE acquits itself

well in both roles. It's worth noting that Naim says all three headphone outputs can be connected at once, which could be handy given that rear-panel XLR output, but for optimum performance it proves best to use just the one output at a time.

While the Atom HE doesn't sound laboured if you use all the outputs simultaneously, there's a useful gain in impact and clarity to be had, whether or not balanced cans are being used. And that 'useful gain' in quality is sufficient to take the Atom HE from excellent to superb.

Whichever kind of headphone output you use, this is a device able to bring out the very best in a wide range of accompanying models, from easy-going moving-coil types to demanding planar magnetic designs.

But whichever you opt for, the essence of the Atom Headphone Edition is that it manages to drive headphones with both ease and conviction, while at the same time maintaining those Naim-esque qualities of detail and rhythmic acuity.

Even relatively lush headphones such as the B&W P9 Signature (HFC 421) are kept under strict control and made to work for their living, while more obvious 'monitor' designs

sound fast, wide open and thrilling, never straying into harshness.

Naim has managed to design a headphone amp all about the most important sonic trait – the direct communication of music. And that means just about every style of music you choose to throw at it, including raw recordings like Motörhead's *No Sleep 'Til Hammersmith* sound suitably driving and thrilling, for all its abrasive edge. Similarly, a characterful vocal such as Sonja Kristina's cover of Emerson Lake & Palmer's *Still... You Turn Me On* is beautifully resolved and has superb character throughout.

The sound here is never less than entirely focused on the performance, as is clear with *American Quilt*, the rootsy Paula Cole set of standards across a variety of genres. The singer's voice is revealed with all its textures intact to glowing effect, while the accompanying musicians are perfectly placed on *Black Mountain Blues*.

Conclusion

Without any obvious signal manipulation, the Uniti Atom HE does a fine job of dispelling that 'shut-in' effect that sometimes afflicts headphone listening, even when powering closed-back designs such as the Focal Stellia (HFC 452).

And it puts in a good showing with the scale and drama of classical music, too. The gentle, small-scale scoring of Michala Petri, Marilyn Mazur and Daniel Murray's *Brazilian Landscapes* album is lucid and beautifully measured. It doesn't shy away from the majestic weight of the Budapest Festival Orchestra/Iván Fischer recording of *Brahms' Third Symphony* either. The Atom HE, driving Oppo's PM-1 in this case, delivers a performance of drama and impact, with a delicious sense of the orchestra ranged before the listener. In short, the wide-ranging ability of this compact streaming headphone amplifier is never in any doubt. **HFC**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim Audio
Uniti Atom
Headphone Edition

PRICE
£2,400

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Headphone amp

WEIGHT
7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
245 x 95 x 265mm

FEATURES
• Rated headphone output: 1,500mW (16ohm)
• Chromecast built-in; Apple Airplay 2; Tidal; Spotify Connect; Bluetooth aptX HD; internet radio; Roon ready

DISTRIBUTOR
Naim Audio

WEBSITE
naimaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 479

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

LIKE: Compact chassis; easy to use; supremely convincing delivery

DISLIKE: Nothing of any note

WESAY: Brilliant focus on delivering the music

OVERALL

★★★★★

Denon AH-D9200

DENON'S FLAGSHIP OFFERING is a closed-back design – making it better suited for use on the move – with 50mm dynamic drivers made from an unspecified 'nanofibre' and mounted in a special energy absorbing resin baffle designed to keep the driver rigid.

The enclosures are backed with a processed bamboo that Denon says has natural damping properties. These are mounted to an aluminium frame that integrates the headband, which like the earpads is finished in leather. The result is comfortable, although the pressure it exerts on the sides of the head is high.

As one of the less expensive designs in its market sector, it is as well-made as its rivals although the finish doesn't feel quite as good. The bamboo looks better in photos than it does in reality and some of the detailing is rather prosaic.

Sound quality

The AH-D9200 delivers a consistently entertaining performance. There is an energy that underpins everything it does that means Woodes' *How Long I'd Wait* positively crackles with excitement. Helping this is a level of bass heft that ensures everything has a force and scale to suit.

As you might expect from a closed-back design, the area where the Denon has little choice but to concede ground to its open-back rivals is in its ability to create the feeling of air and space around the performance. Poppy Ackroyd's *Quail* feels smaller and more constrained as a result. Tonal realism is extremely good, with both the piano and cello sounding convincing and being helped by that low-end heft.

It is on much happier ground with Fleetwood Mac's more rhythm-focused *Seven Wonders* and delivers



a rendition that is unapologetically good fun. Without getting any of the basics wrong or sounding perceptibly coloured, it is able to deliver the joy that is stitched throughout the track. Some of the fine detail that it finds is harder to pick out, but this doesn't detract from the entertainment it delivers. In the end, the AH-D9200's well-considered balance of home performance and out-and-about portability win the day. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Denon AH-D9200
PRICE
£1,400
TELEPHONE
0208 1034770
WEBSITE
denon.com
REVIEWED
HFC 474

OUR VERDICT



Focal Celestee

REPLACING FOCAL'S ELEGIA (HFC 447), the Celestee is designed to offer the same ability to work effectively as a home headphone while being practical in a portable context too. It's built around a pair of 40mm drivers made from aluminium and magnesium and uses the M-shaped cross section that Focal says produces the highest level of stiffness for the minimum amount of mass. The company quotes a frequency response of 5Hz-23kHz, 105dB SPL/1m/1W sensitivity and 35ohm impedance.

Sound quality

The Celestee is a consistently entertaining headphone to listen to, not because of any emphasis or deviation from a truly accurate presentation, but because the speed and cohesion it brings to everything it plays is consistently invigorating.

Hurt by Arlo Parks positively grooves with effortless snap and timing. The Celestee manages the key attribute of any closed-back headphone in that Parks never suffers from any sort of 'cupped' quality and there is a commendable perception of her being in front of you rather than to the sides.

Detail retrieval is outstanding, not simply because it can find tiny fragments of information in material that even very revealing speakers can miss, but because that information is never artificially enhanced. Instead it is stitched into a performance that feels entirely natural and unforced. Some of this is down to the extremely linear performance across the frequency response that ensures no specific area of the music feels like the focus of attention. Driven loud with poorer recordings, it can demonstrate a fractionally hard edge to the upper registers, but you need to be pushing



fairly enthusiastically for this to be a problem. I've no complaints about the bass, though. The Celestee delivers the crunching lower frequencies of Mark Lanegan's *Dark Disco Jag* with a force you can feel, without losing that speed and cohesion.

While it might be a little bit on the large side to be considered truly portable, there is no doubt its design gives it some valuable attributes that will appeal to a wide selection of different headphone users. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Focal Celestee
PRICE
£1,000
TELEPHONE
01722 426600
WEBSITE
focal.com
REVIEWED
HFC 475

OUR VERDICT



Grado GS3000e

TOP DOG IN Grado's Statement Series – one rung down from the flagship Professional models – the GS3000e replaces the 2000e (HFC 439). The major change is the use of Cocobolo wood, chosen for its resonance qualities. The housings contain a pair of 50mm drivers that Grado remains tight-lipped about.

Depending on how you like your engineering, the look is either a minimalist masterpiece or absurdly crude. Though it is carefully assembled, the design doesn't feel as solid as rivals. The single sliding pin that attaches the driver housing to the headband gives an excellent range of movement and the headband distributes weight well, making this one of the more comfortable Grados in recent memory. This is undone by the fixed 5ft cable that is too long to be used with equipment next to you, but not

long enough to reach more distant setups (an extension is provided).

Sound Quality

Where other headphones are open-back, the Grado is described as 'open air', which means it's able to disappear from the performance in a way that is exceptional. Woodes' *How Long I'd Walk* has precious little sense of mechanical transmission. She has a vibrancy and presence that holds the attention. It is slightly more forward than some and that can be an issue for brighter sources, but here it's extremely effective.

This effortless ability to create space gives a great rendition of Poppy Ackroyd's *Quail*. The instruments' positioning is effortlessly natural and entirely convincing, and there is a wonderful immediacy to how they're presented. The low end might not be as deep as some, but it is fast and



extremely well integrated into the rest of the frequency response.

The speed and fluency means that on more up-tempo tracks, there is enough energy and rhythmic engagement to ensure you are emotionally involved in the performance and not simply a bystander. This is achieved without any compromises on tonal realism or the effortless ability to generate a believable soundstage. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Grado GS3000e
PRICE
£1,800
TELEPHONE
01279 501111
WEBSITE
grado.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 474

OUR VERDICT



Philips Fidelio L3

FOLLOWING ON FROM the open-back Fidelio X3 (HFC 469), the L3 is a wireless, noise-cancelling offering. Assets include a healthy battery life of 38 hours, which falls to a still generous 32 hours if you keep the active noise cancellation (ANC) switched on. And there's also a quick charge option – 15 minutes plugged in scores you six hours of playback. Wireless connectivity sees support for both Bluetooth 5.0 and aptX HD. The dedicated app lets you adjust noise cancellation by switching between pre-set modes. Also present is a dedicated equaliser.

Sound quality

The L3 is supremely comfortable and possesses ear-defender levels of isolation even without the ANC switched on. Controlling things by essentially fingering the sides of your head is initially a little tricky, but you

soon get used to it. Even in wired guise, listening to hi-res Sting belting out *Brand New Day*, the inevitable softening effects of a Bluetooth/Tidal streaming collaboration removed from the equation, the tonal balance is comfortably the warm side of neutral and smooth as polished amber.

Bass is rich, plump and possesses proper timbral texture, power and extension. There's an underlying, easy-going nature at large here that maybe doesn't dig down with forensic intent, but is good at keeping complex elements in harmony – not least the gloriously warm, expansive and lushly layered orchestrations delivered by Prefab Sprout's magnificent *I Trawl The Megahertz*. The simple truth is, the L3 might not unveil the micro-detail, but it certainly carries the musical message effortlessly with a grasp of flow and tempo that never defaults to a bland,



mechanical rendition. In short, it sounds lovely – slow-burning and seductive rather than analytical.

And don't take for granted the spacious, precisely delineated, pleasingly un-bonce-centric soundstage and a dynamic compass that captures the loud and soft, highs and lows with such calm confidence. Oh, and the noise cancelling bit? It passes the loo-flushing test with flying colours. Couldn't hear a thing! **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Philips Fidelio L3
PRICE
£300
DISTRIBUTOR
Philips UK
WEBSITE
philips.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 476

OUR VERDICT



T+A Solitaire P-SE

AN OPEN-BACK, PLANAR

magnetic design, the P-SE closely matches the design of the original Solitaire P. The biggest difference is the TPM2500 driver, which is the same size as that used in the flagship but it only has magnets on one side and the material used for the diaphragm and the process by which a conductive surface is applied has been slightly revised.

The exquisite but extremely expensive aluminium sections of the P are now plastic. Impressively, it still feels solid and effortlessly engineered in a way that many rivals cannot easily match.

The Solitaire P-SE is supplied with two detachable cables, both 3m long. The first is fitted with a conventional 6.35mm jack, while the other has a 4.4mm Pentaconn balanced connector – as supported by T+A's headphone products.

Sound quality

Listening to the 24-bit/96kHz Qobuz stream of Paris Jackson's *Dead Sea* reveals all of the speed and fluidity of an electrostatic, but there is a heft to the underpinning bass quite unlike any electrostatic – and indeed most planar magnetic headphones – I've ever used. The T+A creates a space and scale that's truly extraordinary.

With everything afforded believable dimensions, the tonal realism and immediacy ensures it readily achieves the suspension of disbelief that can elude some rivals. Its ability to push information in front of you and to extend the soundstage beyond the confines of the enclosures is consistently effective and not tied to the scale of the music. The stripped-back and intimate *Mokou Mokou* by Amadou and Mariam is as much of a beneficiary as the more boisterous live *Shibuya 357* by Brand New Heavies.



The latter recording does suggest that the Solitaire P-SE doesn't have quite the same level of urgency as some dynamic driver rivals, but it never sounds slow or confused.

The most impressive attribute is it never struggles to achieve near forensic levels of detail and with high-quality recordings delivers a performance that you would have to spend many times more on conventional speakers to get near. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
T+A Solitaire P-SE

PRICE
£3,000

TELEPHONE
01249 704669

WEBSITE
ta-hifi.de

REVIEWED
HFC 477

OUR VERDICT



Yamaha YH-E700A

AN OVER-EAR, CLOSED-BACK

design, the YH-E700A is built around a pair of 40mm dynamic drivers. You can plug in a cable with a 3.5mm jack for wired use, but Yamaha is expecting you to use it wirelessly – thanks to Bluetooth supporting both AAC and aptX extended codecs. This is partnered with active noise cancelling that combines the data from microphones in and outside the housing and constantly adjusts the processing applied. There is no sliding scale of user adjustment nor is there a voice passthrough option.

There's also Listening Optimizer, which continuously monitors the performance and adjusts the output to better handle external sources of noise. Battery life is quoted at 35 hours with noise cancelling engaged. The 3.5-hour charge time is brief and there is a Bluetooth control app.

Sound Quality

Using the YH-E700A via Bluetooth the noise cancelling is effective but almost over zealous. Such is the natural isolation of the design that, listening to Steven Wilson's *The Future Bites* is most effective with it switched off.

The Listening Optimizer also feels like overkill in quieter situations. It undoubtedly does something, but the corrections feel over done and obvious. If you find a noisy environment, however, it starts to make much more sense. With both sustained levels and brief dynamic bursts of noise, it does a fine job of keeping music sounding good. The Listening Optimizer also comes into its own too. This will never be the most delicate-sounding software, but it helps to keep Late Night Final's *A Wonderful Hope* sounding potent and invigorating even when there's a



great deal of disturbance going on around you.

This results in an accomplished travel headphone that has the slight misfortune of hitting the market at a point where the vast majority of us can't go anywhere. Obviously, this won't be forever and when long haul flights or noisy commutes feature in your life again there is very little that can get near the Yamaha's combination of processing horsepower, very long battery life and excellent comfort levels. It might not be ideal for home-use, but it's a superlative travel option. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Yamaha YH-E700A

PRICE
£370

TELEPHONE
01908 366700

WEBSITE
uk.yamaha.com

REVIEWED
HFC 474

OUR VERDICT



Audeze LCDi3

AT FIRST GLANCE, it's obvious the Audeze is reading from a different script to most other in-ears. An IEM with a squidgy tip securing the seal, yes, but what's going on with the miniature *Star Wars* Tie Fighter hooked over and covering most of the ear? The LCDi3, has a cast magnesium housing with a semi-open backed grille to suppress resonance that contains a planar magnetic driver, a configuration that has been borrowed from the company's LCDi4 IEM flagship.

The LCDi3 can be wireless, using the supplied Cipher Bluetooth 5.0 module with integrated support for aptX and 24-bit-compatible aptX HD.

Also included, alongside the regular 3.5mm cable, is a Cipher Lightning iOS cable for direct Apple device connectivity. All Cipher components are preloaded with proprietary DSP to deliver 'an

optimised audiophile listening experience' whether wired or wireless, according to Audeze.

Sound quality

New Radicals' playfully Springsteen-esque *You Get What You Give* is a stiff test. Fizzing with youthful, energy and drive, the recording can often sound thin, bright and brash. The real trick here is to gift the verve and excitement more body while taming the insistence of the aggressive mids and brightly lit top end. And this the LCDi3 does brilliantly, both via the standard 3.5mm cable and, sounding warmer and more full-blooded still, with the DSP afforded by the Cipher Lightning cable doing its thing.

Consistency is another major asset. The Audeze exhibits great poise and even-handedness and never gives the impression of having to try too hard. If, as I suspect, the on-board DSP is



giving its own, slightly buttered-up version of neutrality, it's wholly seductive, rendering the multi-layered complexities and contrasting textures of St Vincent's *Down And Out Downtown* easy to separate and analyse yet retaining a musically deft touch with considerable powers of discrimination and micro-dynamic finesse. Even with the wick advanced, the vanishingly low distortion holds true. Clarity, subtlety and coherence meet scale, air and a compelling sense of dynamic freedom. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audeze LCDi3
PRICE
£900
WEBSITE
audeze.com
REVIEWED
HFC 478

OUR VERDICT



Bowers & Wilkins PI7

THE ARRIVAL OF the PI7 took a little longer than expected as B&W wanted to ensure its wireless stability met its requirements. It would appear the wait was worth it as all variants of aptX are supported alongside AAC for Apple devices and the PI7 is technically capable of passing a 24-bit/48kHz signal.

The earbuds are fitted with a 9.2mm dynamic driver and a balanced armature for the upper frequencies. Each driver has its own amplifier and the frequency response is a claimed 10Hz-20kHz. Adaptive noise cancelling is onhand, while the battery life is relatively low at four hours –, but the case can charge the buds four times with a 15-minute burst giving two more hours of use.

As well as offering charge and storage for the earbuds, the case can be used as a wireless base station. B&W supplies both a USB-to-USB

and 3.5mm-to-USB cable that can be connected to the case and send audio to it. The case then pairs with the earbuds and sends audio via aptX LL.

Sound Quality

I use an Oppo Find X2 Neo smartphone for the bulk of testing as it has aptX LL as part of its Bluetooth fitment. Pairing is straightforward and stability is good, but devices like supermarket security barriers upset it a bit.

This minor quibble aside, the PI7 doesn't disappoint. The spellbinding *Blue Heron* by Sarah Jarosz positively crackles with energy and the B&W does an excellent job of capturing the fine details scattered through the piece and stitching them into the wider whole. Picking up the pace with Royal Blood's *Boilermaker*, bass extension is usefully deep but not at the expense of the speed and articulation required for head-banging.



The PI7's noise cancelling is effective in the reduction of external disturbance without any perceivable effect on the tonal balance of the music itself and the app-controlled adjustment works like a charm too. Sending audio via the case also works well. The 3.5mm-to-USB connection is noisier than the standard Bluetooth hookup, but it operates without any dropouts and provides a genuinely interesting unique selling point. Some brief testing over AAC Bluetooth via an iPad Pro is listenable, but less capable than the higher bandwidth Bluetooth options – but this isn't really the PI7's fault.

It's been a while coming and it isn't exactly cheap, but the PI7 is a deeply impressive true wireless debut. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins PI7
PRICE
£350
TELEPHONE
0800 2321513
WEBSITE
bowerswilkins.com
REVIEWED
HFC 478

OUR VERDICT



Grado GT220

MARKING GRADO'S FIRST foray into true-wireless earbuds, the compact GT220 is barely noticeable when sat inside the ear and weighs only 5g. Grado provides three sizes of ear-tips and the buds are designed so that you can give them a little twist once they're in place to ensure a firm fit and a decent seal. The GT220 supports both aptX and AAC codecs for Bluetooth and offers a claimed six hours of battery life. The charging case allows you to charge them five more times, for a total of 36 hours of listening. The case can then be fully powered up using a standard USB cable – bundled – but also supports Qi wireless charging.

Sound quality

Low's chilling *See-Through*, streamed in MQA Master format from Tidal, takes more than four minutes for vocalist Mimi Parker to intone five

lines of lyrics, but the GT220 has the insight to simply step back and allow each note of the typically sparse arrangement to resonate.

Meanwhile, Zak Sally's slow bass intro has a melancholy rumble that sets the scene perfectly. As the sharper guitar gets in on the act, there's a sense of menace with the GT220 capturing the icy tone with unusual clarity for Bluetooth in-ears. Against this sparse backdrop the arrival of the percussion seems like a dramatic crescendo, yet the Grado seems to cope well with Low's 'less is more' approach and allows Parker's haunting vocal to slowly fade away.

With the more upbeat version of *Vampire Money* by My Chemical Romance, the GT220 delivers the thumping drum intro with gusto while on the final chorus that can go off the rails and become mere noise on lesser rivals, it balances the sound



and lets the taut drums set the pace and hold everything together.

While the GT220 would benefit from an app for EQ adjustment and additional customisation to compete with similarly priced rivals, if you're in the market for Bluetooth earbuds that provide a clear, detailed sound for a variety of different musical genres, then the good-looking Grado certainly merits a listen. **CJ**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Grado GT220

PRICE
£250

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
grado.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 473

OUR VERDICT



Meze Rai Penta

A HYBRID DESIGN, the Rai Penta has five drivers – two pairs of balanced armatures take care of the midrange and treble frequencies while a single dynamic driver handles the bass.

Meze quotes a super-wide frequency range of 4Hz–45kHz and more benign 20ohm impedance and claimed 100dB sensitivity.

The housing is CNC-sculpted from solid aluminium and all soft angles. The cobalt blue textured finish looks great and shouts premium, while the cable – a slim and flexible crystal-hued four-way braid of silver-plated copper wires with rhodium-plated MMCX connectors – is most attractive. Balanced 2.5mm-terminated cables are sold separately.

Without trying too hard to seduce, the packing has a confident air and as is Meze's wont, a hard-shell case is provided to protect the main

event. Accessories are adequate rather than wilfully OTT and consist of four pairs of silicone eartips, one double-flanged eartip, two deep-insertion double-flanged eartips, a cleaning tool and the usual adapters.

Sound quality

It only takes a few minutes to twig there is something ineffably right about the way these earphones sound. The balance thing is nailed and not just tonally. It seems to be an unbreakable tryst of sonic temperaments and temperatures that allows full, unfettered expression but equally prevents any style dominating for effect.

Try to picture a kind of ease and largess that promotes listenability and, in so doing, doesn't favour one musical genre over another. Everything sounds involving and



enjoyable without being gratuitously rose-tinted or hyped and, if that means sacrificing a little forensic analysis, then so be it. Crucial bass elements are properly deep, tuneful and agile. Midrange imaging hangs a hair back from the usually pushed forward plane, which does wonders for soundstage believability while reducing listening fatigue. And treble is rolled off just enough to quell edginess and pronounced sibilance.

The Rai Penta isn't out to grab your attention with a sonic firework display but the more you listen, the more it lets the music flow. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Meze Rai Penta

PRICE
£1,000

WEBSITE
mezeaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 478

OUR VERDICT



THORENS[®]

Introducing **Thorens** new range of turntables.

Thorens has always been a pioneer of Turntable technology. Our new range has been 2 years in development. Remembering and paying homage to the history and tradition of our most famous turntables, we are proud to bring you the new Thorens TD range.

TD1601

Thorens new TD 1601 combines all the benefits of the TD1600 and an electric tonearm lift and a contactless auto shut off.

Special features include:

- Stabilised sub chassis on three conical springs
- Balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) output
- Polished precision belt
- Two part platter
- Adjustable belt tension
- Electrical controlled motor
- Electrical lift
- Contactless shut off
- Thorens precision tonearm TP 92 (9")



TD 201



TD 202



TD402DD



TD103A



TD148A



TD1600

Distributed by Signature Audio Systems,

T: 01959 569842 M: 07738 – 007776

or by e-mail to: info@signaturesystems.co.uk

web: www.thorens.com

AUDIO SYSTEMS
Signature

Chord Company Clearway XLR cable

WITH THE GROWING use of XLR balanced audio connections offered on domestic audio equipment, Chord Company has introduced an XLR analogue interconnect option to its Clearway range. Like the Chord C-line series, this employs the company's ARAY conductor geometry but with upgraded materials. The ARAY geometry conductors use heavier gauge oxygen-free copper and are insulated with an FEP dielectric. The design uses identical conductors for the hot, cold and earth connections, is screened by a dual-layer, counter-wound, heavy gauge foil design and finished off in a dark blue sheath.

Sound quality

Connecting the Clearway between my Studer A810 pro tape machine and preamp, I play a 15IPS copy-master tape of Rosie Middleton

singing *Habanera* from Bizet's *Carmen*. Her effortless vocals really stand out with superb clarity, and the crescendos from the percussion are commanding and strident.

Switching reels to The Yuko Mabuchi Trio playing live, Mabuchi's piano on *What Is This Thing Called Love* sparkles with energy right from the outset and the crisp clarity of the drums draws me into the music. When it comes to the solo spots, the precise fingering of the double bass is tight, deep and powerful. This recording highlights the excellent imaging capabilities of the Clearway XLR with the double bass on the left, piano in the centre and drums on the right of the soundstage.

Another excellent copy-master tape of Haydn's *Concerto No.1 in C Major* played by I Solisti di Pavia from Open Reel Records is incredibly clear. The dynamics, realism and energy of this



recording are absolutely first rate and the strings in particular display beautiful clarity without any edginess. The imaging and depth are superb and the music never seems to emanate from the speaker cabinets but, rather, from 'virtual instruments' within my room. In summary, this reasonably priced XLR interconnect offers a really refined presentation across a wide range of music. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£150 for 1m
WEBSITE
chord.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 481

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Nordost Blue Heaven Power Cord

WHEN YOU CONSIDER that the power supply of a Class A amplifier is effectively in series with the audio signal, it's not difficult to appreciate the importance of the quality of the mains power cable that supplies the power. This issue is not lost on Nordost and it has duly produced a range of good-quality power leads to suit most budgets.

Nordost's Blue Heaven Power Cord is part of the company's Leif family entry-level range, which aims to offer quality cables at an affordable price. Although it seems like a conventional three-core AC lead, it employs technology derived from the development of its premium Valhalla and Odin ranges. The cable uses proprietary high-speed, low-loss mechanically tuned lay, Micro Mono-Filament construction, and FEP insulation. Each of the three conductors are 16 AWG and

are constructed from 65 strands of 99.9999 percent OFC. The power cable is well made and comes fitted with high-quality connectors.

Sound quality

Using the Blue Heaven cable to power my valve preamp power supply, I'm immediately aware of an improvement in sound compared with a standard 'kettle' lead. During the opening sequence of Stravinsky's *The Firebird Suite* by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, there's a very low-frequency and extended drum roll, which is very deep, full and powerful and most noticeable when it pauses for a few bars before starting again. As the piece progresses, the twittering of the strings sounds wonderfully delicate and open.

For something a bit more delicate, I turn to a lovely LP that contains a romantic piece by Anthony Mawer



entitled *Poem Once Remembered* played on acoustic guitar and flute. The mournful opening section with the unaccompanied guitar flows gracefully into the flute, which then takes over the melody from the guitar. The overall performance is clear and refined with a very low noise floor. The Blue Heaven is certainly a very good value-for-money, high-quality power cable option. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£200 for 1m cable
WEBSITE
renaissanceaudio.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 470

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

QED Performance Audio 40i RCA interconnect

A RECENTLY RELEASED

upgrade to QED's established Performance Audio 40, this RCA interconnect employs the company's Solid Core Complementary Conductors to reduce capacitance by a quarter – compared with the original design – to enlarge the soundstage. The new cable has one OFC conductor and a silver-plated OFC conductor to carry the audio signal to reduce smearing and improve rhythm, clarity and bass control. The interconnect retains the company's ferrite insulation and Anamate low eddy current RCA plugs.

Sound quality

When I reviewed the original Performance Audio 40 (HFC 403), I found it had a great top end and

excellent timing, but the bass was a tad restrained. Connecting the 40i between my preamp and monoblocks, Khachaturian's *Spartacus* sees a vast improvement to the bass drums. This time, they don't pull any punches and the performance is big, full and powerful – so the bass has certainly improved. The brass instruments are commanding and the strings are clear without being over bright or harsh.

Listening to a solo instrument is an excellent way to check out detail and a lovely LP of JS Bach's *Partita No.2* played on the harpsichord by Trevor Pinnock has superb detail and a real presence in my listening room. There is no hint of muddiness in the

harmonics of each individual note during the louder crescendos. Finally, for some vocals, I turn to a copy-master tape from Chasing The Dragon with Clare Teal singing Cole Porter's *I've Got You Under My Skin* accompanied by the fabulous Syd Lawrence Orchestra. The timing and pace of this swinging piece are superb and once again the realism of the performance is excellent while Teal's vocals – along with each instrument in the orchestra – have a clearly defined position within the soundstage. Overall, the Performance Audio 40 is an excellent interconnect and offers great value for money. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE
£50 for 1m
WEBSITE
qed.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 481

OUR VERDICT



Russ Andrews Kimber Carbon Phono tonearm cable

BASED ON KIMBER'S Carbon range of interconnects and speaker cables, Russ Andrews has now added the Carbon Phono tonearm cable. This employs the same carbon polymer-infused conductors as used elsewhere in the range.

The Carbon Phono consists of eight VariStrand copper conductors braided together using the Kimber weave. Each copper conductor is coated in a carbon polymer, which effectively fills the spaces between the strands to hold them in place and increase conductivity. These are insulated with Teflon. The cable is a single, shielded wire along its length from where it exits the phono DIN connector until it splits into two for the phono connections. The shielding is tin-plated copper that's handwoven around the conductors to ensure complete coverage. On top of this screening is a carbon-doped nylon

sleeve and the whole cable is sheathed in a protective case with Techflex covering. There's a separate earth wire.

The Carbon Phono is available with two termination options – both ends fitted with WBT 0114 Cu RCA (phono) connectors or a straight DIN for plugging into the tonearm and WBT 0114 Cu phono connections for the phono stage end. I use the DIN-to-phono for connecting my valve phono stage to my Jelco SA-750 tonearm, fitted with a Miyajima Kansui MC cart.

Sound quality

Auditioning an LP of Vivaldi's *Opus 7* performed by I Musici, the solo oboe playing by Heinz Holliger in the first movement of *Concerto No. 7* is sparkling, clear and energetic. The string playing is effortless and delightfully delicate, while the instrument imaging is very clear and well focussed throughout.

For some jazz, I spin a direct-cut LP of the Syd Lawrence Orchestra playing Benny Goodman's *Sing Sing Sing*. The energy and excitement of this incredibly exuberant recording really grabs my attention. The drums that resound throughout the entire piece are punchy and tight. In summary, this is a cracking high-spec tonearm cable which competes well with other rivals at this price point. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE
£976 for 1m
WEBSITE
russandrews.com
REVIEWED
HFC 480

OUR VERDICT



Musicreviews



The Specials Protest Songs 1924-2012

★★★★★

CD Island

THE SPECIALS HAVE always made music with a message. From *Ghost Town*, which captured the urban blight and despair under Thatcherism, to the urgent anti-apartheid demand of *Free Nelson Mandela*, the group has embodied the ideals of inclusivity and solidarity

These days only three of the original lineup remain – lead singer Terry Hall, guitarist Lynval Golding and bassist/singer Horace Panter – but the flame still burns. Two years ago they released *Encore*, their first album of original material since 1998, and it included the song *BLM* in which Golding outlined the daily indignities he was forced to suffer because of the colour of his skin. It showed that the ability of The Specials to bottle the moment was still extant and that, as Golding says, “injustice is timeless”.

In February 2020 the three of them got together to begin work on the follow up to *Encore*. In

keeping with the group's ska roots and 2-Tone spirit, they planned on making a reggae album.

Coronavirus put the project on hold as both Golding and Panter tested positive and Hall went into isolation. As the summer of 2020 dragged on and the BLM protests and the climate emergency insurgency grew, Hall suggested that they make a different kind of record. Locked down in Islington, Seattle and Warwickshire, the trio began collecting protest songs and emailing them to each other until they came up with a list of 50 favourites.

Finally, in April 2021, they were able to book four weeks in a London studio and emerged with a dozen covers of favourite protest songs drawn from different times and reflecting different injustices, but all of them with something to say about the world today.

The songs range from the obvious, such as The Staple Singers' *Freedom Highway* and The Wailers'

Get Up Stand Up to the unexpected. Who thought The Specials would ever cover Leonard Cohen (*Everybody Knows*) or Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention (*Trouble Every Day*)? But then this is The Specials as you've never heard them before and a ska record it is not. Backed by Nikolai Torp Larsen on keyboards, Kenrick Rowe on drums and Steve Cradock on guitar, the songs range from classic indie-rock to stripped-down acoustics. Hall is perfect for the material, given that he has one of those voices that would sound thoroughly disgruntled if he was singing *Happy Birthday* while Golding pours every ounce of his racial heritage into singing *Get Up Stand Up* and Big Bill Broonzy's *Black, Brown And White*.

The politics may be heavy and the strut is serious, but this is an album that is both righteous and rewarding. For ultimately its message is one of resilience in the face of adversity. **NW**



Prokofiev

Complete Symphonies
Sao Paulo Symphony Orchestra
Marin Alsop

★★★★★

6x CDs

Naxos

ORIGINALLY ISSUED BETWEEN 2012 and 2017, Marin Alsop's recordings of Prokofiev's seven symphonies are now gathered together at a special low price. The performances are by turns feisty and thoughtful, exuberant and intimate, and the Sao Paulo orchestra plays with keen brilliance and rapt sensitivity. The revised 1947 version of the *Fourth Symphony* is included, but not the shorter 1931 original score. Interesting fillers include the complete

The performances are by turns feisty and thoughtful, exuberant and intimate

Prodigal Son ballet, a terrific *Scythian* suite, and *Lieutenant Kije* suite. The Naxos recordings by producer/engineer Ulrich Schneider are absolutely first rate. The sound has clarity and plenty of detail, yet always remains smooth, natural and open, with good definition and no hint of microphone spotlighting. There's some deep powerful bass, too – always necessary with this composer's orchestral works. **JH**



Lyn Stanley
Live at Studio A

★★★★★

SACD

AT Music

STANLEY BROKE ONTO the audiophile scene a few years back with a very nicely recorded vinyl release. Now she's back with a live recording made at Capitol Studios, available as both a Blu-ray and SACD with multi-channel options available on download. The sound is pretty spectacular, the nimble playing of guitar, drums and bass with occasional piano providing some sharp backing to Stanley's dulcet tones, which have a presence that's very real indeed. She sticks to jazz standards for the most part, but drops in *Pink Cadillac* and *Route 66* for a bit of variety. Very slick. **JK**



Lost Horizons
In Quiet Moments

★★★★★

CD

Bella Union

TENSE, NERVOUS, HEADACHE? *Lost Horizons* is rolling out a remedy for all those craving something melodic, heartfelt and healing. "These days, we need hope more than ever" says Richie Thomas who with former Cocteau Twin Simon Raymonde and a queue of guest vocalists are doing their bit for global serenity. It hits the ground ambling, if not quite running, with the trip-hoppy beauty *In Quiet Moments*. Then things go a bit Alan Parson's Project with *Grey Tower* which is lovely, while John Grant's vocal on the spacious *Cordelia* will lift you out of this world and into the cosmos. A warm blanket of an album in every way. **PSH**



Vaughan Williams

Hallé
Job; Songs Of Travel
Sir Mark Elder
Neal Davis

★★★★★

CD

Halle Concerts Society

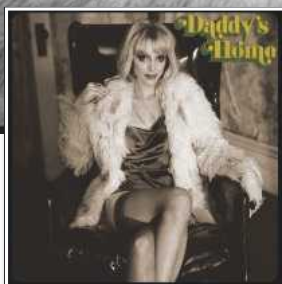
WILLIAMS' SONGS OF *Travel* to poems by Robert Louis Stevenson are heard in the orchestral version. Soloist Davies' rich bass-baritone gives the words a strong edge and both text and music are moving and highly evocative. *Job* finds VW at his strongest and most uncompromising, and Elder takes an Olympian view of the work. There are some impressive moments, but the performance hangs fire a little at times. Vernon Handley's 1983 recording is still the one to beat, being more forward-moving and danceable. The recording is clear and powerful, with a wide dynamic range and a dramatic organ that blows your socks off. **JH**

Rocket, Man ...



Even if Elton John isn't your thing, the new AudioQuest Rocket 11, like all AudioQuest products is designed to let your music take centre stage, our attention to detail means that your favourite music is simply given the chance to shine.

audioquest®



St. Vincent Daddy's Home

★★★★★

CD Loma Vista

ST. VINCENT'S FATHER was released from prison last year after serving nine years for his part in a \$43 million corporate tax fraud. While he was away the daughter he knew as Annie Clark grew from an indie cult figure who had begun her musical career in The Polyphonic Spree into a bona fide solo star. Her 2014 album *St Vincent* won her a Grammy award as Best Alternative Music Album and the title track of 2019's *Masseduction* won her another Grammy for Best Rock Song. Along the way she also outgrew her indie-rock origins to become a fully fledged celebrity, working with Taylor Swift and Dua Lipa, dating model Cara Delevingne and appearing in ads for the luxury jewellers Tiffany.

Meanwhile back in the jailhouse, her father was following the soaring arc of his daughter's career via press clippings. In turn, as his release date approached, Clark, who takes her stage name from a Nick Cave song, found herself anticipating their

reunion by writing the songs that would go on to become *Daddy's Home*.

Unsurprisingly there are some fascinating psychological undercurrents going on in these songs. "Hell, where can you run when the outlaw's inside you?" she sings at one point. But along with the family psychodrama, what's equally interesting is that, consciously or not, the circumstances surrounding the recording of her sixth solo album led her back to her father's collection of Seventies vinyl, which formed the soundtrack of her childhood. We're talking Sly and the Family Stone, Stevie Wonder, Steely Dan and Joni Mitchell in her jazz phase, and as a set of influences they're about as rich as any you could mine. There's even an electric sitar on one track.

Co-produced by Jack Antonoff, the result is a collection that is soulful and tender and yet at the same time full of unexpected twists and turns.

At 38 Clark is no longer Daddy's little girl, but a mature woman singing through hard-earned experience about: "flawed people just doing our best to get by". The lyrics of the title track find her signing autographs for her father's fellow prisoners in the visiting room and singing: "Yeah, you did some time, well I did some time, too" over some off-kilter syncopation reminiscent of Steely Dan's *Haitian Divorce*.

Pay Your Way In Pain is a sweat-soaked dose of funk with a touch of *Young Americans*-era Bowie and a hint of Kate Bush in the vocals. There are louche ballads (*Live In The Dream* and *Candy Darling*) and twisted love songs with synth strings and weeping steel guitars (*Somebody Like Me*). The raw confessional of the throbbing *My Baby Wants A Baby* is positively cathartic and *At The Holiday Party* sounds like Joni Mitchell fronting the Pointer Sisters. Quite some homecoming. **NW**



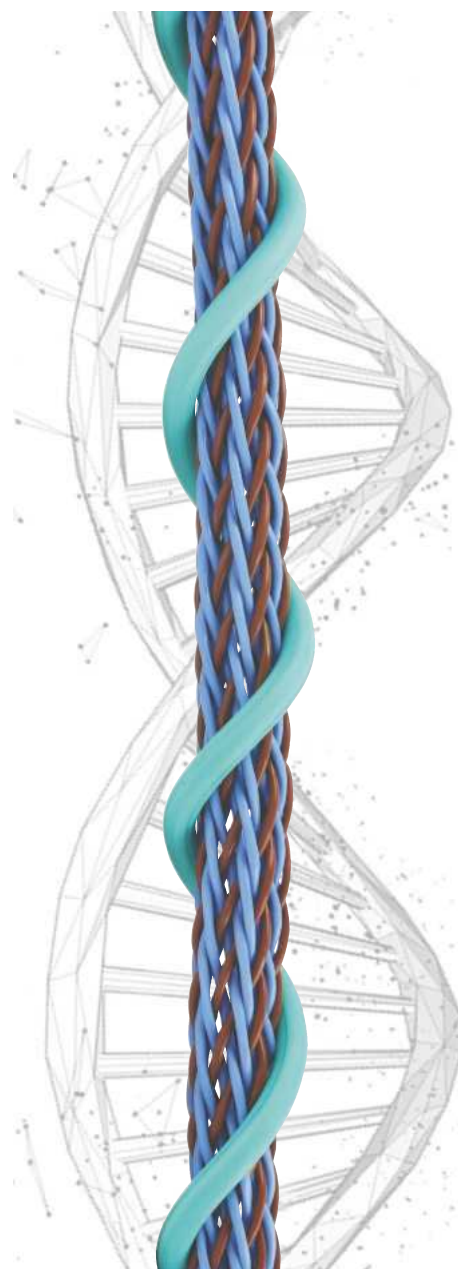
Russ Andrews®

POWER

EVOLUTION
IN ITS DNA



★★★★★



To find out more about Evolution PowerKords™ call 01539 797300 or visit WWW.RUSSANDREWS.COM/EVOPK



60 DAY MONEY
BACK GUARANTEE



UPGRADE
SCHEME



25 YEAR
WARRANTY



Lara Melda
Chopin

★★★★★

CD **Champs Hill Records**

FORMER BBC YOUNG musician of the year winner Melda selects an all-Chopin programme for her debut recording that includes the four *Ballades* and a selection of *Nocturnes*. The disc starts quietly and reflectively, but the *Ballades* feature plenty of assertive heroic moments to add contrast; likewise the *Nocturne* Op 48/1. Melda's playing is poetic, sensitive and atmospheric. She projects a warm luminous singing tone and meets the demands of more tempestuous passages. The recording is warm, transparent and nicely distanced. Clarity is good, and there's a palpable sense of the instrument in a clear ambient acoustic. **JH**



Heritage Orchestra
Jules Buckley
Ghost-Note
The Breaks

★★★★★

CD **Decca**

AGING B-BOYS AND fly girls with bones too creaky to get the lino out for an impromptu headspin will delight in these re-workings of oldschool hip-hop big hitters. Bringing together the Heritage Orchestra, Ghost-Note percussion collective and producer Chris Wheeler, Grammy-award winning writer, composer and conductor Jules Buckley has painstakingly re-worked classics from the era including *Theme From SWAT*, *Get On The Good Foot* and *The Mexican*. Hearing an orchestra play music usually created by a DJ cutting between breaks is a joyous experience and none more so than on *Apache*. Phenomenal fun. **JDW**



Greentea Peng
Man Made

★★★★★

CD **AMF**

ARIA WELLS FULFILLS her immense potential with her debut LP. *Man Made* is a mellow affair fizzing with ideas that sees her effortlessly glide from genre to genre. Everything from hip-hop and jazz to nu-soul, dub and even drum and bass is covered here. Wells collaborates with a long list of producers and there's a pleasingly gauzy, drowsy feel to the album, not least because she recorded it all at 432Hz, a semitone below the industry standard. It's easy to see why Wells has been compared to everyone from Lauren Hill to Miss Dynamite. **PH**



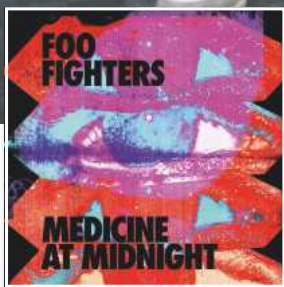
Bicep
Isles

★★★★★

CD **Ninja Tune**

IF FORCED TO pick just one tune to sum up the experience of listening to the Irish duo's sophomore album, it would have to be the belter that is *Apricots*. Released late in 2020, it would have been a floor filler across the country if music venues were actually open. Mixing an irresistibly catchy sample of traditional Malawian singers with swathes of blooming synth and a hypnotic glitchy bassline that demands you stomp your feet, it perfectly captures the coming together of organic warm sounds with banging beats and snappy melodies that Bicep specialise at. Stunning. **JDW**





Foo Fighters Medicine at Midnight

★★★★★

CD RCA/Roswell

BY HIS OWN admission, Dave Grohl's contribution to rock and roll in his first band consisted of: "hiding behind a huge set of drums with my head down, just there to make a f***ing racket". It has been fascinating in the years since to follow his transition from Nirvana's drummer and Kurt Cobain's barely noticed sidekick to charismatic front man in his own right with Foo Fighters.

Medicine At Midnight marks the band's tenth studio album and was ready for release a year ago, before the first lockdown. The itinerary of the group's 25th anniversary world tour was in place, the merchandise had been manufactured and the pantechnicons were loaded and ready to roll.

Then the world changed and Grohl found himself stranded at home in Hawaii. Months passed as he sat waiting to get back on the road and promote the new songs in the time-honoured fashion.

A year on with that possibility seemingly as remote as ever, it dawned on Grohl: "These songs were made to be heard so it's time to uncage the beast," while the tour to celebrate the 26th anniversary of the band won't be arriving on these shores until the summer.

Meanwhile we have nine new songs on an album that clocks in at a crisp if slightly parsimonious 37 minutes, like an old-fashioned vinyl LP back in the days when rock was still young.

One of the glories of the Foos over the years is that musically they have refused to be confined. They've been called post-grunge and alt-rock, but they've also recorded everything from dissonant heavy thrash to orchestrated acoustic balladry and mid-tempo roots-rock.

Different again, Grohl reckons *Medicine At Midnight* is the band's dance or party record. In

truth, it's more like the Foos' pop album – full of anthemic songs with up-tempo grooves and sing-along choruses.

The title track evokes *Let's Dance*-era Bowie and there's a touch of Queen to *No Son Of Mine*, although the riff also contains an echo of Led Zep's *Immigrant Song*. *Chasing Birds* finds Grohl with his "head in the clouds" and his inner hippie emerges on *Waiting On A War*, all chiming REM guitars as he tells us he: "never wanted to be number one, just wanted to love everyone."

Making A Fire marries a jagged funk riff to a catchy 'na na na'-style pop chorus and it would not be too much of a stretch to hear *Cloudspotter* as a cross between T Rex and Motörhead.

The Foo Fighters' greatest asset is that they've never lost the ability to surprise. On *Medicine At Midnight* they've only gone and done it again. **NW**



Russ Andrews®
TORLYTE®

RACKS & SUPPORTS

LIGHTWEIGHT
RIGID
CUSTOMISABLE



*"I am drawn into the
performance right
from the beginning...
The music has
improved realism
and depth"*

Torlyte Platform



60 DAY MONEY
BACK GUARANTEE



25 YEAR
WARRANTY

ORDER DIRECT AT
WWW.TORLYTE.COM



Spiritualized

Lazer Guided Melodies



180g vinyl

Fat Possum

SPACEMEN 3'S BREAKUP album *Recurring* showcased the sketches. *Lazer Guided Melodies* – Spiritualized's 1992 debut – unveiled the masterpiece. Intimate and immense, it's one of the cornerstones of Nineties psychedelia – a perfect prescription of garage rock, heavenly strings, narcotic blues and studio wizardry – now getting a welcome 21st-century reissue. Curated by Jason Pierce, The Spaceman Reissue Program aims to give those classic recordings the fullest spectrum audio treatment and absolutely comes up trumps here. **SB**



Jo Harrop

The Heart Wants



CD

Lateralize Records

ACCORDING TO IGGY Pop, Harrop is "a very fine jazz singer" and he's not wrong. With 10 of the 13 tracks self-penned, Iggy could have added decent writer of intimate jazz to the mix, too. *All Too Soon* is a thing of beauty recalling Crystal Gayle and Tom Waits' *One From The Heart* soundtrack. Then things go poppy with the pretty *Everything's Changing* maintaining the clean arrangements, but adding Hammond organ to swoosh under those incredible vocals. Then strings descend on *If I Knew*, setting you off on your own bittersweet reverie. Simply sublime. **PSH**



Jon Hopkins

Music For Psychedelic Therapy



CD

Domino

FOR HIS SIXTH album Hopkins goes full beatless, something that makes sense for a musician who has worked with Brian Eno before, and the tracks here reference some of Eno's more famous work but imbued with Hopkins' layering techniques. It's just gorgeous, spangled dynamic electronica – some, like *Tayos Caves*, *Ecuador i*, use found sounds to really recreate a womb-like envelopment, while others gently drift and build in seamless ebbs and flows. Yes, it's all very ambient, but it will send you on a delightful, bejewelled aural journey. **PH**



FURNITURE TO MAKE YOUR HIFI SOUND EVEN BETTER



BETTER SOUND – MODULAR DESIGN – SIMPLE TO BUILD



Tune-Yards sketchy

★★★★★

CD

4AD

NEVER ONES TO toe the line, over the course of five albums Tune-Yards have created music that is strange yet accessible, as well as rhythmically dexterous and tonally bright and energetic. For sixth album *sketchy*, recorded during lockdown, Merrill Garbus says they wanted to strip everything down to capture a live feel. What they've come up with is nothing short of miraculous – yes, there's the band's patented quirkiness, but on tracks like *Hypnotized* and *Under Your Lip* they're downright soulful and turn-your-stereo-up-loud brilliant. **PH**



Damon Albarn

The Nearer The Fountain, More Pure The Stream Flows

★★★★★

CD

Transgressive

CREATED DURING LOCKDOWN, Albarn's second 'true' solo album features an extraordinary panorama of songs about fragility and loss, hope and rebirth. The experimental soundscapes of the title track and *Esja* have something of the glacial majesty of Sigur Rós about them. Elsewhere riotous dissonance (*Combustion*) mingles with intimate, bittersweet melodies (*Royal Morning Blue* and *Daft Wader*) while as a vocalist Albarn's voice seems to become a more hauntingly expressive instrument with every release. **NW**



AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

The Butterfield Blues Band East West

180g vinyl

Speakers Corner



THE SECOND ALBUM

by Paul Butterfield, Mike Bloomfield and his racially mixed band sounds as though it should have come out a few years before its actual 1966 release

date, but such thinking would be to forget that the blues had all but disappeared from the mainstream until the likes of The Rolling Stones, John Mayall and others brought it kicking and screaming back from obscurity.

Butterfield was one of the first US acts to jump on the revival and it's not hard to hear why. With

two strong guitarists, a great rhythm section and his own vocals and blues harp, they were a class act. The material is varied, but mostly in the classic delta style, albeit there are stirrings of rock in the 13-minute title track – which is by far the strongest number here.

The sound is pure Sixties: it has the redline-pushing, mid-forward, naturally compressed high energy that Jack White would probably kill for yet is almost impossible to replicate in the digital age. There is a decent use of stereo for the time and while the guitars and harp scream at times, this only gets uncomfortable on the rare crescendos. Speaker's Corner has once again done an excellent job with the transfer and pressing. **JK**

Hand crafted in Ogden, Utah since 1979

Good design lasts...



Kimber don't believe in change for change's sake; design and build a product well and it will last for years.

Take Kimber's Hero Cu analogue interconnect - launched back in 1998, it's still winning awards 23 years later!



Try it in your own system
with FREE UK mainland delivery
and 60 Day Money Back Guarantee
Visit russandrews.com/hero
for more information



60 DAY MONEY BACK
GUARANTEE

25 YEAR
WARRANTY

SOLD EXCLUSIVELY IN THE UK
BY RUSS ANDREWS



Wolf Alice Blue Weekend

★★★★★

CD **Dirty Hit**

WHO SAYS GUITAR bands are dead? Ever since 1962 when Decca rejected The Beatles on the grounds that: "guitar groups are on the way out", their demise has been predicted with an astonishing regularity. Over recent decades house, hip-hop, sampling and electronic dance music were all meant to finish off the antiquated phenomenon of the guitar band, and yet they have continued to roll off the production line in a limitless supply. Indeed, the closest brush with extinction probably came during the saturation of the mid-Noughties when there were so many gormless examples lacking in originality and sucking the oxygen out of the genre that some wag coined the term 'landfill indie'. Yet guitar-rock has survived even landfill and each generation continues to refresh the format with life-affirming new acts joyously reclaiming the electric guitar as the world's most potent cultural weapon.

The current champions are undoubtedly Wolf Alice and already *The Sunday Times* has revived the perennial "guitar groups are doomed" prediction suggesting that the London quartet: "might end up being Britain's last big band." Absolute tosh, of course – although there's no denying that Wolf Alice are not only big but that their third album is sure to make them even bigger.

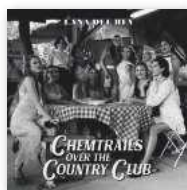
Their 2015 debut *My Love Is Cool* included *Moaning Lisa Smile*, which earned a Grammy nomination for Best Rock Performance. Two years later second album *Visions Of A Life* won the Mercury Music Prize and was followed by a triumphant Glasto performance and 187-date world tour.

Wolf Alice's ace in the pack is lead singer, songwriter and guitarist Ellie Rowsell. Like all the best women who have fronted classic rock bands, she strikes an exquisitely nuanced balance between sassy self-assurance and vulnerability.

"Did you think I was a puppet on strings? Wind her up and this honey bee stings!", she sings on the lacerating *Smile*. Then she comes over all confessional on the lovely *How Can I Make It OK*, sounding like a cross between Cyndi Lauper's *Time After Time* and Tanita Tikaram's *Twist In My Sobriety*.

Delicious Things has a dreamy girl-pop feel that swells into a soaring guitar climax. *Play The Greatest Hits* is a shouty, punk-fuelled thrash full of sly wit, which finds Rowsell turning the radio up as she dances round the kitchen. Best of all is *The Last Man On Earth*, which starts out with plaintive Coldplay-style piano chords and Rowsell back in vulnerable mode before the song builds into an epic, multi-layered *Let It Shine On You* lighter-waving chorus.

Not that they ever really went away, but guitar bands are back and sounding as vibrant and invigorating as they ever did. **NW**



Lana Del Rey

Chemtrails Over
The Country Club

★★★★★

CD

Polydor

IT'S A MAJOR dread when a favourite artist decides to go all woe-is-me about how tough life is at the top. So, it's testament to Del Rey's brilliance that though *Chemtrails* is thematically one protracted rich-bitch bitch, it's still a stunner. Not quite as sonically adventurous as her career zenith, last year's *Norman F***ing Rockwell*, it's still several cuts above anything else released this year. The whispered nostalgia of *White Dress* finds her jazzily reminiscing about more innocent times, while the faithful cover of Joni's *For Free* rounds off all the what's-it-all-really-worth pondering perfectly. **SS**



Nightmares On Wax

Shout Out! To Freedom...

★★★★★

CD

Warp

OVER THE SPACE of 30 years and nine albums, Nightmare On Wax's George Evelyn has effortlessly drifted between genres to formulate his own unique sound that rather neatly slots in somewhere between the cracks of electronica, hip-hop, R&B, jazz, funk and dub. More of a collaborative effort than past excursions (featuring Greentea Peng, Haile Supreme, Sabrina Mahfouz and Shabaka Hutchings on sax among others), this is a glorious mix of blissed-out soul (*Breathe In and Wonder*), haunting movie soundtrack (*3D Warrior*) and breezy summertime vibes (*Wikid Satellites* and *Imagineering*). Stunning. **JDW**



Tchaikovsky

Piano Concerto No.1
Martha Argerich
Royal Philharmonic
Orchestra
Charles Dutoit

★★★★★

180g vinyl

Deutsche Grammophon

MARTHA ARGERICH WAS 29, and still regarded as something of a young firebrand, when she recorded this performance with then-husband Charles Dutoit. It's a performance of great passion and daring extremes and it caused lots of interest when released in 1971. A top recommendation at the time, it still impresses 50 years later. The sound is very good for the period – crisp, forward and clear. I still have my 1971 vinyl pressing, but this new 180g LP sounds much better, with a smoother more natural tonality, much cleaner side-ends and very quiet surfaces. **JH**

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Floating Points, Pharoah Sanders & The London Symphony Orchestra Promises

180g vinyl

Luaka Bop



SAM 'FLOATING POINTS'

Shepherd is best known for a sophisticated take on electronica, 2019's *Crush* uses strings, synths and beats but doesn't hint at the soul and drama that's

brought to *Promises*. Legendary tenor player Pharoah Sanders delivers an intimacy and feeling to this release while the LSO give it emotional impact on a scale that's rare. The album is made up of nine movements segued together to form a 40-minute plus journey that goes from the sublime to the momentous. Continuity is

provided by an arpeggio that Shepherd created on an old, creaky harpsichord overlaid with piano and celeste, this gives it a tonal depth you can't achieve with synths alone. There are plenty of those, though, and they are often very beautiful, as are the sparkling droplets from vibraphone. Masterpiece is a frequently over used term, but here it seems appropriate. Few musicians of Shepherd's peers have delivered a work that's this powerful and affecting.

The sound on vinyl is full scale and overflowing with texture and fine detail, making the download sound like a simplified version. The latter is good, but if you want the full effect and the lovely artwork, the black stuff is where it's at. **JK**

Was there a favourite release that didn't get a mention, an album that deserved more recognition or you simply disagree with our music selections? Let us know what you've been listening to over at facebook.com/hifichoice.co.uk or twitter.com/HiFiChoiceMag

DRAGONFLY COBALT

DAC + PREAMP + HEADPHONE AMP

The award-winning DragonFly Cobalt has the robust 2.1-volt output to drive almost any headphone, uses a bit-perfect digital volume control for outstanding signal-to-noise ratio, enables seamless compatibility with Apple and Android devices, and is an exceptionally competent and affordable MQA Renderer.

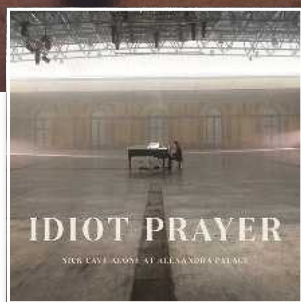
Cobalt's precedent-setting performance is made possible by:

- New ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip with a minimum-phase slow roll-off filter for more natural sound.
- New Microchip PIC32MX274 microprocessor reduces current draw and increases processing speed by 33%.
- Improved power-supply filtering, specifically designed to reduce WiFi, Bluetooth, and cellular noise.
- Includes a form-fitting Carbon-level DragonTail USB-A to USB-C adaptor.

From MP3 to MQA and Hi-Res, DragonFly Cobalt preserves the body, warmth, and natural color in all your music. Experience more beauty at home and everywhere you listen.



audioquest



Nick Cave

Idiot Prayer: Nick Cave Alone At Alexandra Palace

★★★★★

CD **Bad Seed**

WHEN THE DUST has settled and we've re-emerged into whatever the 'new normal' turns out to be, it will be fascinating to look back and see what great art has emerged from the confinement and uncertainty of our pandemic and the eerie, self-reflection and isolation that came with it. Prominent on any list of lockdown labours is certain to be this beautiful two-disc live album and film.

Cave should have spent 2020 on a world tour with The Bad Seeds and an extravagantly populated show including a full gospel choir. Instead, he ended up hiring an empty Alexandra Palace, where to an audience that consisted solely of "Covid officers with tape measures and thermometers, masked-up camera operators, nervous looking technicians and buckets of hand gel", he sat at a grand piano and sang deconstructed versions of 22 songs drawn from his storied back catalogue.

Cave's idea of an isolation performance was never going to glow with the cosy spontaneity of Neil Young's streamed fireside sessions or the rootsy intimacy of Laura Marling's lockdown show, of course. Theatrical gravitas and meticulous artistic control have always been his currency and so it is here. Watch the film directed by Robert Ryan and it is evident that this is grand performance art with nothing left to chance, down to the tailor-made Gucci suit and the five gold rings we see adorning Cave's left hand as he picks out a sequence of mournful piano chords.

Yet for this reviewer the performance works better on CD than DVD, the sombre power heightened without the visual distractions as Cave distils his songs down to their essential core. Unintended references to the calamity of pandemic are found everywhere. "Hang on to me

people, we're going down," he sings dolefully on *Man In The Moon* from 2007's *Grinderman* album. It's one of many songs which in their starkly reimagined state reveal nuances not evident in their original versions. Nowhere is this more evident than on *The Mercy Seat*, perhaps Cave's greatest song. The version with The Bad Seeds on 1988's *Tender Prey* was an epic of violent noise. Here its subtle intensity rivals the genius of Johnny Cash's heroically philosophical version.

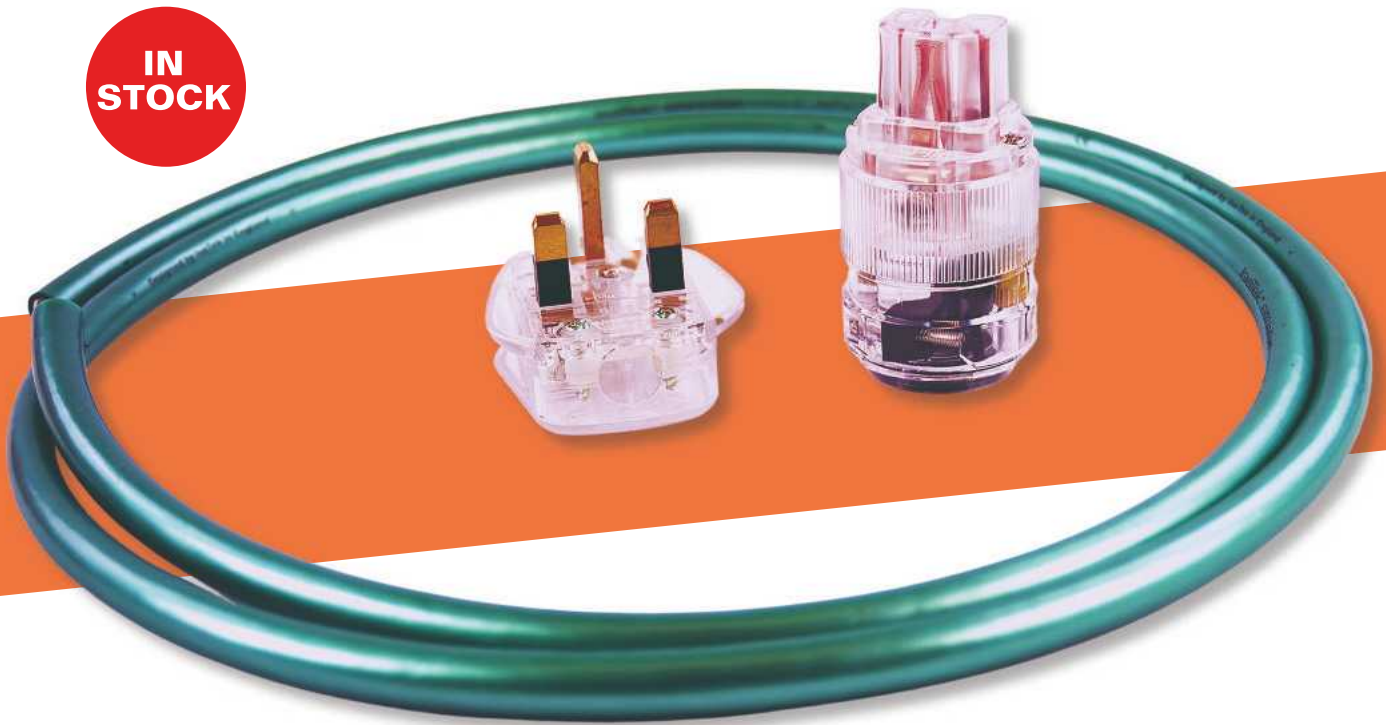
At times Cave sounds close to tears as great songs pile upon each other, creating a drama that is haunting and transfixing. Elegiac, stoical, tender and chilling by turn, Cave has described the performance as: "a prayer into the void". He may be singing into an empty room, but this is performance art that penetrates to the very heart of the human experience. **NW**

mcru

FROM
MAINS TO
MUSIC

MCRU NO. 24 **DIY MAINS LEAD SET**

**IN
STOCK**



Includes

- IsoTek Systems Initium Mains Cable x 1.5 Mtr
- MCRU Ref. Copper IEC Connector
- UK Mains Plug Silver Plated 13A Fuse

OUR PRICE

£34^{.99}

david@mcru.co.uk | 01422 250590
WWW.MCRU.CO.UK

NEWCASTLE & CARLISLE SHOWROOMS



B&W 800 Series / Nautilus Dealers • Naim Statement
Linn Klimax / LP12 experts • KEF Blade and Reference centre
Chord Music Cables

Interest free credit • Parking • Atmos home theatres
Part exchange considered • Ex demonstration deals available
Lovely coffee, real people and great advice

naim



LINN

Bowers & Wilkins

KEF



Carlisle

The Maltings,
Shaddongate, CA2 5TE

E: sales@petertyson.co.uk
Mon - Sat: 9am - 5:00pm

01228 546 756



Newcastle

Unit 6 Kingston Court,
Kingston Park, NE3 2FP

E: sales@petertyson.co.uk
Mon - Sat: 9am - 5:00pm

0191 285 7179

The skip hits the fan

As he realises the importance of grabbing the listener's attention in the first 30 seconds, **Steve Sutherland** bemoans how stats are stifling musical creativity

A few weeks ago I was collecting together a bunch of songs to playlist a community internet radio show I do every Sunday. The show's themed each week, a bit like that one that Bob Dylan used to do – y'know, one week songs about roads, the next songs about war *etc.* Anyway, I've been doing this for upwards of a decade now so it's incumbent upon me to freshen it up every once in a while and compile a couple of hours of totally brand new stuff.

On occasions like this, I tend to seek out different recommendations from trusted resources such as NME.com, Pitchfork *etc.*, scribble down a list and then check them out on Spotify to see if they pass muster. And it was while engaged in this pursuit that I noticed something odd – on just about every album I was encouraged to check out, the first track was the banger. This happened over and over, too often to be sheer coincidence. And that's when I discovered the somewhat sinister power of 'skip rate'.

Skip rate, it seems, is the metric logged by the likes of Youtube and Spotify and used by record companies and publishers to discover whether listeners hang around listening to a song via a streaming service long enough to trigger a royalty payment. The make or break measure is 30 seconds. What this means is that every song recorded nowadays has to attract and hold the listener's attention pretty much right from the get-go, which naturally gears

Some artists have core fans that will continue to listen no matter what

the writing and recording process, and, beyond that, the sequencing of an album, towards instantaneity. Denied such feedback in the past, artists were free to do their own thing. Nobody bawled out Led Zeppelin, for example, because discerning fans tended to lift the needle on *Led Zep IV* as soon as it got to *Four Sticks*. These days, though, you either front load or you die.

Flash back a mere decade ago and what we're talking about here was barely conceivable, like something out of a sci-fi movie or something. Back then, in March 2010, Sir Andrew Morritt, a judge serving in London's High Court, ruled in favour of Pink Floyd who were fighting EMI over the company's desire to sell their tracks on iTunes and other similar internet-based music retail sites.

The group's argument went along the lines that albums such as *Dark Side Of The Moon* were originally conceived as such – as albums, specifically created and sequenced to be a whole unified concept, including what they referred to as their "song suites".



How would this lot fare if their music was judged by its ability to impress in the first 30 seconds?

The good judge's ruling found the band had the right to, "preserve the artistic integrity of the albums," while Jon Webster, the chief executive of something called the Music Managers' Forum, applauded the verdict, saying it was: "an absolute moral right for artists to decide how they want their music sold. But those in the creative field are increasingly challenged by the desire of consumers to break everything into their constituent parts and choose only what they want." I guess if he's still knocking around he'll be having a heart attack over skip-rate!

Under pressure

Additional pressure is brought to bear now by surveys indicating that playlist-listening is outperforming album-listening, so today's artists are compelled to make their albums behave like... yup... playlists.

It's not just the music itself under the cosh either. According to Youtube, videos that have cinema-esque intros of longer than 20 seconds tend to get flipped over, so groovy scene-setting's a no-no from now on as well.

There are those who are determined to buck the trend, of course. "Some artists have core fans that are going to listen no matter what. Those are the people that you should care about," says Danny Rukasin, who co-manages Billie Eilish. But what of new acts who are trying to build a fan base? Are their artistic ambitions to be governed solely by the majority's short attention span? And going forward, will it be the sole preserve of rich, established acts to be afforded the luxury of unadulterated creativity?

If that's the case, there'll be no more *Careful With That Axe, Eugene's* if anyone actually wants to get paid.

The Theme Time Radio Show goes out every Sunday at 5pm on www.nccr.co.uk ●



STEVE SUTHERLAND
Gone in 60 seconds

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM

PRIMALUNA/FRANCO SERBLIN



COMPONENTS

PRIMALUNA EVO 100 DAC **£2,888**

Built around a Burr-Brown DAC and upsampler partnered with a unique valve oscillator, the Evo 100 combines a useful selection of inputs, comprehensive sample rate support and sturdy build with a unique sonic performance.

PRIMALUNA EVO 300 **INTEGRATED AMP £3,798**

The Evo 300 makes use of four EL34 valves in an over-specified circuit that can be run in both triode and ultra linear outputs. It can then also run a huge selection of other output valves and the on-board software will automatically adjust for it.

FRANCO SERBLIN **ACCORDO £7,498**

A two-way standmount that makes use of the stand as an integral part of the speaker, thanks to mounting the crossover outside the cabinet to improve performance. The cabinet itself is made from sections of seasoned timber.



Modern Classical

A partnership between a legendary loudspeaker designer and a company that specialises in valves should sound sweet, right? Yes, but not quite how you might expect...

I would never dare to accuse the readers of *HFC* of making their minds up about something before they've read the article but... I know that you think you know how this one is going to go. I mean look at it; a duo of valve-based components and a pair of speakers that would have Da Vinci giving a nod of approval. This is one where I talk about art, tradition and soul, cite some female vocalists and everyone goes on their way rejoicing, yes?

To do that would be to sell this trio rather short. Both PrimaLuna and Franco Serblin observe some traditions in the manner in which their products are designed, but they're not defined by them. Indeed, in the case of Franco Serblin, the *Accordo* exists because he felt there were still areas of development he could not pursue while at Sonus faber; the company he set up in 1983. His unfortunate



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM PRIMALUNA/FRANCO SERBLIN



**You can spend more
and not find anything
better made**



**The lovely cages
can be removed
if you wish**

passing in 2013 means that we don't know just how far these ideas might have gone, but the Accordo is the distillation of his thinking.

Beauty and functionality

This means that the Accordo is at once familiar and rather radical. It's formed from sections of seasoned timber and has a silk dome tweeter and paper mid/bass driver. It then goes on to throw some more unusual elements into the mix. That cabinet mixes aluminium and magnesium sections in with the wood to aid rigidity. The stand may look elegant, but it's also critical to the operation of the speaker as it contains the crossover so that interference from the drivers on its operation is reduced. In short, this is rather more than a classically attractive box.

The PrimaLuna Evo100 DAC and Evo300 power amplifier can also be taken at different levels. In the case of the Evo 300 in particular, there's nothing about the basics of the circuit that would have been alarming to my precursors in 1961, as it makes use of a quartet of EL34 valves with a preamp section of six 12AU7s. What PrimaLuna does so effectively is harness the potential of this venerable circuit and make it suitable for life in the 21st century. Carefully designed power supplies and output transformers keep noise levels low and coax the best measurements possible from those tubes. Then, the really clever stuff starts to happen.

Thanks to auto biasing, the Evo 300 can run a huge variety of valves with the bias correcting automatically. It monitors the health of the valves and can run them in triode or ultralinear mode. The Evo 100 DAC takes this idea and runs with it. It looks archaic with its valve-based oscillator, but with 24/192 PCM and DSD128 support, together with a decent spread of inputs, it's no more taxing

This system feels dextrous and detailed even when all hell is breaking loose

to live with than any more conventional rival. PrimaLuna is an ongoing project to deliver the benefits of valves with none of the downsides and this duo demonstrates that perfectly.

It means that this system sits in-room a little differently to how you might envisage it. By rights, the Accordo should 'feel' similar to a Sonus faber, but it doesn't. It feels modern and sophisticated in a way something made from wood by artisans probably shouldn't and it wears its beauty as a by-product rather than the focus of its existence. The PrimaLunas, if anything, take this idea and run with it. The Evo 100 and Evo 300 are almost completely free of anything you might describe as adornment. Even their lovely valve



cages serve a useful function (and can be removed if you wish). They have beauty through their functionality rather than because PrimaLuna wanted to make them beautiful. There is no doubting the quality of both brand's work, though. This is not a cheap system, but you can spend considerably more and not find anything better made than this trio.

However surprising this system might feel, it's but an *hors d'oeuvre* to what happens when you start listening to it. Engage triode mode, select the beautiful recording of your choice and it will delight in the way you would hope and expect something like this to do. It's tonally superb, combined with such a fluency and fundamental rightness that it can have you listening for hours longer than you intended.

Goes like the clappers

What I find more interesting, though, is what else it can do. The first clue to this is in the sheer speed and cohesion that the Accordo possesses. When you combine this with the over-specified internals of the Evo 300 and the resolving power of the Evo 100, you have a system that – for want of a better phrase – can go like the clappers when you want it to. This means, you can put away your elegant singer songwriter recordings and instead make a beeline for System Of A Down's *Toxicity* and if the sheer incongruity of how unbelievably good the title track

sounds doesn't make you blurt out a surprised and delighted laugh, I'm not sure what will.

So, why does it work? The main reason is that aforementioned speed. The Accordo on the end of the PrimaLuna duo has the means to handle the sudden changes in tempo in a manner that's completely and utterly effortless. It also hits far harder than you might expect. Some 42W into a 150mm driver mounted in a small slender cabinet doesn't sound

The Evo 300 runs a variety of valves with the bias correcting automatically

like a recipe for gut-rattling bass, but crucially there's enough to convince. The decision to place the crossover in the stand pays dividends here because all the internal volume can be given over to air management. Neither is this a blunt instrument. This is a system that feels dextrous and detailed even when all hell is breaking loose.

The really clever bit is that the virtues you'd expect this system to have play their role too. With the barely less frenetic *Conqueror* by Aurora, the manner in which it handles the delicate vocals of Aurora Aksnes is a thing of unbridled joy. She is suspended above the electronic fury that underpins her, never



WEBSITES
absolutesounds.com
francoserblin.it
primaluna-usa.com

detached from it but never subsumed by it either. Without ever feeling soft or veiled, the manner in which this trio can create refinement where rivals may find only harshness is something that comes in handy when you want to keep pushing the more ragged boundaries of your music collection. In the time this system is running, Roon solemnly informs me that I have consumed everything from Enya to Cabaret Voltaire and not once do I feel for a second that it is out of its depth.

Unbridled joy

In so many ways this is a fitting testament to what drives these two companies to do what they do. It does absolutely everything you would expect of it. It looks beautiful even when it's switched off and not doing anything. It's superbly made and a joy to use, thanks to the care that has gone into its design and construction.

But make no mistake, what Franco Serblin and PrimaLuna have done here is more than you might ever anticipate from electronics of this nature. When you're in the mood to get down rather than sit back, it has an effortless ability to change gear and keep on delivering. Without losing any of the traditional hallmarks of greatness, it goes on to offer more and do so in a way that never feels forced, strained or unnatural. This is a both a nod to tradition and a salute to the desire to keep pushing what you believe to be possible and it is unquestionably magnificent. **ES**

THE UK hi-fi SHOW

The ultimate high-end hi-fi experience

Live

Tickets
on sale
Spring
22

SAVE THE DATE: SEPTEMBER 10-11th 2022

ASCOT RACECOURSE GRANDSTAND • ASCOT • BERKSHIRE

EXCLUSIVE HIGH-END AUDIO

ON DEMONSTRATION • LIVE MUSIC

- VINYL & HI-RES MUSIC SALES • SYSTEM TUNING
- HI-FI WORKSHOPS • PANORAMIC HEADPHONE ZONE
- MEET WORLD-CLASS DESIGNERS & HI-FI PERSONALITIES
- FREE CAR PARKING • FULL BAR SERVICE • HOT & COLD FOOD ALL DAY

For more information, updates & ticket sales:
www.hifishowlive.com



The MM vs MC debate

Both moving-magnet and moving-coil phono cartridges have their pros and cons, but which is best for your budget? **Neville Roberts** weighs up the relative issues

One school of thought when it comes to phono cartridges is that moving coils are a step up from moving-magnet options. However, as ever in hi-fi, it really isn't quite as simple as that.

In an MM cartridge, the coils of wire are fixed in the body and a tiny magnet is attached to the cantilever. When the stylus plays a record, the cantilever moves the magnet close to the coils and induces voltage in them. This type of cartridge has a number of advantages. It is relatively easy to manufacture and so the cost is lower than a moving coil. Also, the stylus/magnet assembly is usually removable, which allows for the stylus to be easily replaced when it gets worn out or damaged.

A variation of an MM cartridge is the variable reluctance, or moving iron. This is where both coils and magnet are housed in the body and the cantilever has a very light, hollow piece of iron attached to the cantilever instead of a heavier permanent magnet. The moving-iron cartridge was popular before the advent of small and powerful magnets.

The coils of an MC cartridge are attached to the cantilever and the cartridge body houses the magnet. The main advantage is that the magnet can be much larger and more powerful than with a moving magnet, and this produces a more uniform and greater magnetic flux density within which the coils move. The downside is that the stylus/cantilever assembly is not removable as it has

When you move into the realm of pricy high-end cartridges moving coils rule

the coils attached to it with the fine wires going to the rear of the cartridge connection block. Also, the output level and impedance are much lower than a moving magnet, so an MC requires either an impedance-matching transformer or a special preamp. Many would argue that the sonic benefits of an MC cartridge more than outweigh the disadvantages.

In the latter half of the 20th century Shure was one of the leading manufacturers of moving-magnet cartridges. The budget end of its range was often chosen as the first step away from a ceramic or crystal cartridge for those venturing into the wonderful world of hi-fi. A ceramic cartridge, which often sported a 'turnover stylus' for playing either modern microgroove records or 78s, relied on the piezo-electric effect to produce a relatively high output that could be fed straight into a line-level input of an amplifier. Producing a voltage output that was proportional to the displacement of the stylus rather than the velocity of the stylus, it relied on the natural drop-off



Shure's M97x moving magnet and Hana's SL moving coil



of the output at higher frequencies as it was an extremely crude approximation to the RIAA curve, so no RIAA filter or additional amplification was used before the line input. Providing it was up to the job, fitting the record deck with a Shure M75ED MM cartridge and connecting it to a phono stage was, for many people, their first step into real audio. I started out with a Garrard SP25 fitted with a Shure M95ED MM cartridge. After a while, I upgraded to a V15 III, Shure's top-of-the-range cartridge at the time.

Cart exchange

At the time, the V15 was for me about as good as it got, even after a turntable upgrade. This was until a friend introduced me to a Fidelity Research FR-1 Mk3 moving coil, which I partnered with the FRT-3 step-up transformer. This introduced me to a new world of sonic sophistication. OK, it didn't quite track the live cannon cracks on my Tchaikovsky 1812 as well as the V15, but that was a small price to pay for the tremendous step-up in sound quality.

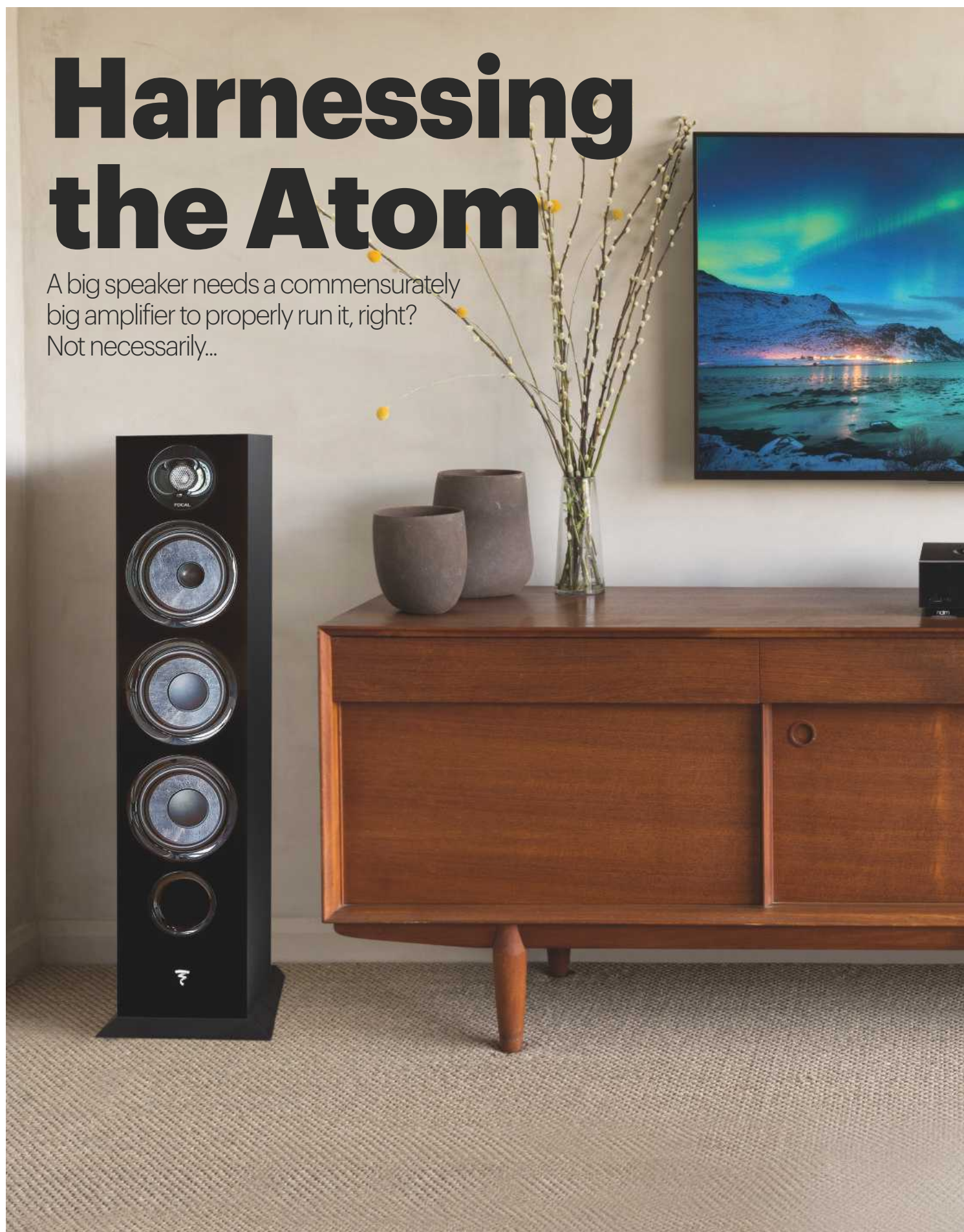
When you look at the physical arrangements of a moving-coil cartridge, it's fundamentally more linear over its movement range. That's not to say a good MM cartridge won't sound great (I am a particular fan of the modern Ortofon MM cartridges), but when you start moving into pricy high-end cartridges, MCs really rule. What you get from an MC with a good preamp or step-up transformer is a lot more refinement, clearer imaging and a crisper and cleaner top end. Of course, you also need a good tonearm and turntable to handle all the energy. So, when it comes to a high-end system, an MC cartridge is de facto. It's in the middle ground that it can be difficult to decide on whether MM or MC is the right choice for a system. As always, it's down to your ears to decide ●



NEVILLE ROBERTS
Needle craft

Harnessing the Atom

A big speaker needs a commensurately
big amplifier to properly run it, right?
Not necessarily...





There is an old but not entirely inaccurate adage that states: “If it looks right it is right”, which basically means if something is sound this will be apparent even before you turn it on. While almost certainly valid, it does put this particular system at a slight disadvantage. The Focal Chora 826 is a pretty big loudspeaker and the Naim Uniti Atom in direct contrast is a fairly compact all-in-one. You’d be forgiven for wondering if this bijou system can really do the business when paired with those rather hefty towers.

I’m pleased to say these concerns prove groundless. This is a pair that not only works, but actively thrives. After nearly a decade of collaboration, Naim and Focal have clearly learned from one another and it means that whatever proportional incongruity there might be, this is a very effective system indeed.

Key to this is the fact that both companies have retained some of the characteristics that have long defined them. The Chora 826 is a big, three-way floorstander but thanks to Focal’s attention to detail and the use of its clever composite cones – now including ▶



COMPONENTS

NAIM UNITI ATOM £2,400

The smallest member of the Uniti family, the Atom is an exceptionally well-specified and implemented all-in-one with a 40W amp powering a UPnP board with AirPlay, Bluetooth and Chromecast as well as a selection of digital and analogue inputs, all combined in a very handsome chassis.

FOCAL CHORA 826 £1,300

The largest member of the Chora family is a three-way design that uses the latest ‘Slatefiber’ technology for the midrange and bass drivers, partnered with an aluminium tweeter. These are placed in a carefully braced, front-ported cabinet available in a selection of finishes.

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM NAIM/FOCAL



recycled, non-woven carbon fibres to create the distinctive finish that Focal calls 'Slatefiber' – they are highly sensitive. With the 826, it would appear, a little goes a long way.

This dovetails neatly with Naim's habit of producing amps that have a bit more welly than the numbers suggest. The Atom is rated at 40W, but these seem to be bigger, harder watts than those found elsewhere. It means the Atom doesn't simply run the Choras, it drives them and exerts a palpable grip over proceedings. What this translates to is a system that has effortless amounts of welly even in fairly large rooms.

The force awakens

There's more than brute force at work here, though. The Chora series is firmly in the foothills of Focal's range, but the expertise that has been gained in the creation of the flagship models is present here too. Everything from the driver surrounds to the cabinet bracing is a distillation of what Focal has learned elsewhere. It is also less demanding about placement than Focal models of old, helping to make the business of accommodating it easier than before.

The Naim also benefits from decades of experience. Like everything else the company makes, the internals of the Atom are fastidiously arranged to keep noise and interference to a minimum and are dominated by a hefty power supply. Things have been successfully fired into space that don't look as neat as the Atom does internally. It also uses the same

The sheer technical accomplishment on display is impressive at this price point

streaming platform as everything else in Naim's arsenal (making multi-room a breeze). Not only is it one of the best of its kind, it does pretty much everything you might reasonably expect a streamer to do. It might be small, but it's absurdly talented.

It is also one of the best-looking pieces of equipment you can buy from any manufacturer at any price. The Atom is proportionally perfect and peppered with detailing that makes it look and feel more expensive than it actually is. Details like the way the

Above left: The Naim boasts a comprehensive spec in its compact chassis

Above right: Clever design allows the Chora to be usefully sensitive

vibrant display instantly switches to a volume figure when you twist that beautifully weighted volume control before seamlessly switching back to the album cover is an effortless blend of hardware and software that helps it feel special. The Chora is necessarily more business like, but it leverages its classic proportions to come across as both handsome and elegant. Focal says that the rearward lean imparted by the plinth is for time alignment so I'm sure it's just a happy coincidence that it does a brilliant job of reducing the perceived bulk of the cabinet too.

Recipe for success

In truth, the Atom could be packaged in a recycled biscuit tin and the Chora possessed of no mass-reducing visual tricks and the way they sound together would still be worthy of note. When Naim and Focal joined forces nearly a decade ago, there were quite a few people who questioned how they would work together. In culinary terms, it felt like mixing chocolate with horseradish; individually fine ingredients, but not necessarily the path to a great recipe.

Here we are at the end of 2021, though, and without either company



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
NAIM/FOCAL

compromising their identity, this system absolutely sings. The opening bars of Marina's *Soft To Be Strong* are, in microcosm, a demonstration of everything this system can do. All the technical attributes are present and correct. Diamandis is locked to the centre of a soundstage that's expansive but never diffuse. The piano has a weight to it and notes decay naturally. The tonality of both is totally convincing too. The technical accomplishment is mighty impressive at this price. It's the sort of effortless, unshowy brilliance that only becomes apparent when you listen to something not so supernaturally talented.

Getting better all the time

But there's so much more to what this system does, too. Every ounce of the emotional content this track has is stitched into the presentation. It never impinges on the rightness of what you hear, but it's the difference between a capable rendition and a living, breathing performance. And as the tempo increases, things only get better. Mark Lanegan's ballistic *Disbelief Suspension* is a visceral whirlwind of guitar noise and pounding drums with Lanegan's



WEBSITES
naimaudio.com
focal.com

leathery vocals leading the charge. The Focal hits hard, but lands each beat with millimetric precision.

This is also down to the Atom. It couldn't wear the Naim badge if it didn't take any time signature you can imagine and deliver it as if it had been built to play that piece and that piece alone, but even with this knowledge it manages to delight. It's as slick as anything in the inventory

This is a system that has effortless amounts of welly even in large rooms

of a multi-national, but at its heart it simply wants to deliver the musical message; via pretty much any digital medium you can imagine. Where the progress has really been made over recent years is in the decoding. The Atom is a device that, without ever losing the bite and excitement in a recording, manages to be utterly forgiving at the same time. Want to listen to the Prodigy's *Their Law* at levels you feel as well as hear? It's got you covered.

This perfect balance is delivered to the Chora 826 and it certainly doesn't let the side down. This is still every inch a Focal. The detail retrieval is exceptional and the ability to create space makes music a near holographic experience for the listener. What there also is, is a demonstrable joy to the way that it makes music. It's the difference between putting some tunes on to accompany another task and sitting down and actually listening, rapt for an evening, ploughing through every corner of your collection (and remember, as the Atom now supports Spotify, Tidal and Qobuz, you don't need to stop at music you own either), and loving every second of it.

The right stuff

As a combo then, this is no longer chocolate and horseradish (if indeed it ever was). It's duck and orange when you're feeling highbrow and cheese and onion when you aren't. This is a stupendously clever, exactly well made and exceptionally flexible combination. It might take a moment to believe that this system looks right. Trust me when I say it absolutely is. **ES**

Rothwell

Phonostage & step-up transformer specialists for over 30 years

The first phonostage from Rothwell was unveiled back in 1990. In those days even the concept of an outboard phonostage was unknown to most audiophiles, though of course it's commonplace now. There were very few, if any, on the market then, and the first Rothwell phonostage was well ahead of its time. It was a valve design with a separate and substantial power supply, and it had adjustable load resistance and capacitance – ideas which were adopted only years later by others. 30 years on, Rothwell phonostages are still different from the many me-too offerings. All the designs, from entry-level to the top-of-the-range, are totally discrete transistor circuits without any op-amps at all, and they're all still made in the UK. The Signature One even features onboard step-up transformers, which is pretty rare amongst even the most expensive phonostages in the world.

Rothwell

Signature One
transformer coupled mc phono stage

And step-up transformers for low output moving coil cartridges have been a speciality for over 30 years too.

When the world seemed to have turned its back on the transformer, we kept the faith. Now many vinyl aficionados believe that a good step-up transformer is the only way to get the best performance from a LOMC cartridge. If you don't agree, we even make a moving coil headamp (aka a pre-preamp) which can be battery or mains powered. You won't find many of those anywhere else in the world. We even offer step-up transformer for high output moving coil cartridges. You won't find many of those anywhere else either.

www.rothwellaudioproducts.co.uk

Thanks to Doug Brady Hi-fi for their continuing support and for the use of their dem room featured in the picture.

Bands on the run

Nigel Williamson mourns the lack of camaraderie in this year's charts as he asks: where have all the bands gone?

It's not so long ago that my post bag would include so many debut albums by young unknown guitar groups that I used to joke there were more kids forming bands than there were fans buying their records. So I was struck by a comment by Maroon 5's Adam Levine who claimed in an interview with Apple Music's Zane Low that there: "aren't any bands any more" and that groups of young men and women with guitars and a mission to make a racket and save the world are: "a dying breed".

His comments created something of a Twitter storm with some telling him he needed to get out more and others seeking to prove him wrong by shouting out the names of their favourites such as Fontaines DC and Big Thief.

To be fair to Levine, his comments were a little more nuanced than the quote might suggest. He went on to concede that there are still bands out there – it's just that they aren't: "in the limelight" so much any more.

Past issues of *HFC* have seen Foo Fighters and Kings Of Leon take album of the month and the Wolf Alice album that came out in June generated considerable excitement, so there are clearly still great bands out there.

Yet Levine surely has a point. It's hard to imagine two new bands enjoying front-page national newspaper

Technology has enabled creatives to make their music in isolation

coverage in the way Blur and Oasis did at the height of Britpop a quarter of a century ago. And as a music critic it is undeniable that fewer new albums by bands are being sent my way for review than ever before and there has been a concomitant increase in albums by solo artists.

Nor is Levine the first to notice the apparent decline. "What happened to all the bands?" Rostam Batmanglij asked five years ago when he quit Vampire Weekend. "Is it just that bands are corny now?"

I was about to test the thesis by analysing the charts when fortunately *The Guardian* did the maths for me. The paper found only nine groups in the UK Top 100 singles – The Killers, Fleetwood Mac, Glass Animals, Kings Of Leon, Little Mix, the dance groups Rudimental and Clean Bandit and the rap units D-Block Europe and Bad Boy Chiller Crew. If that's too parochial a snapshot, in Spotify's Top 50 most globally played songs, there were only three groups – the K-pop boy band BTS, alt-rockers The Neighbourhood and the Internet Money rap collective.

One of the most reliable barometers of musical trends is the BBC's annual longlist of new names tipped for the top.



Wolf Alice epitomise all that's good about being in a band

The 'Sounds Of 2021' list includes nine solo artists with the Wigan quartet The Lathums the only exception. The last time bands dominated the list was eight years ago.

So why are bands on the back foot? Some argue that the music industry has grown increasingly risk averse and labels prefer signing solo artists because searching for the next Ed Sheeran or Adele is cheaper and easier.

We also live in an age of individualism in which personal expression may seem more attractive than pooling resources in a band, with the confusing mix of camaraderie and friction that can entail. Social media has enhanced this atomisation and the technology has also enabled creative young minds to make their music in isolation. Who needs to put up with a flatulent drummer and a spotty bass player when you can download the production software and do it yourself?

Band of hope

At the height of Britpop, there were new bands emerging by the week, while in the Noughties the success of The White Stripes and The Strokes created such a glut of identikit groups with guitars that some wag invented the term 'landfill indie' for the likes of Snow Patrol and Keane.

It would be a fair assumption that fewer new bands were formed in 2021 than in any year since the Fifties. Perhaps the fact we are now out of lockdown will change this and bands will once again be a source of collective creativity.

For me bands will always be what music is about, so let us end on a note of optimism from Wolf Alice guitarist Joff Oddie. "A good band creates a community," he says. "They have an ecosystem that, as a fan, you want to be part of. Despite all that's been said about individualism, there is still a hunger for that collective feeling." I hope he's right ●



VICKERS HI-FI

High Fidelity Specialists

Since 1967



► Visit our Stylish New 7,500 sq ft. Store at...

► **Unit 8 Concorde Park,**

Amy Johnson Way, Kettlestring Lane,

Clifton Moor, York

SatNav: YO30 4WT

Tel: 01904 - 691600

- Free Customer Car Park ► Wheelchair Friendly
- Superb Air Conditioned Demonstration Rooms
- Loaded with Quality Hi-Fi Equipment at all price levels
- Awesome amplifiers, Gorgeous speakers, Classy furniture
- Independent Advice, Qualified Staff, Great Offers
- Easy Online Ordering from... www.VickersHiFi.com

✓ TRUSTPILOT ★★★★★ "Excellent"

► Open by Appointment 11am - 5pm 6 days: Mon. to Sat.

0% FINANCE AVAILABLE



audiolab ARCAM CYRUS DALI marantz ROKSAN

JBL AURALiC clearaudio MONITOR AUDIO PATHOS mark levinson.

ProAc Pro-Ject UNISON RESEARCH QUAD MUSICAL FIDELITY REL ACOUSTICS LTD

Audio Design by Tom Evans Invisibility by The Groove+ Phono Stage.

The very best audio devices don't colour,
don't offer a character, they don't even improve.
By being invisible, they only reveal.

The Audio Design range of products
reveal more by giving you less.
Less distortion, less noise, indeed, so much less
that reviewers in the past have found it
almost impossible to measure.



Find out for yourselves why so many reviewers use
us as the benchmark.

Less has never be so appealing.
Audiodesign.co.uk 01443 833570



Subscribe to our e-newsletters

for real, monthly **EXCLUSIVE OFFERS**—plus
latest news & reviews of our products...

(+ easy to unsubscribe at any time!)



eliteaudiouk

0800 464 7274
eliteaudiouk.com

Missed an issue?

Have you missed a copy of your favourite hi-fi magazine? You can now order *Hi-Fi Choice* back issues online.



475 May 2021



476 June 2021



477 July 2021



478 August 2021



479 Sept 2021



480 Oct 2021



481 Nov 2021



482 Dec 2021



483 Jan 2022

Order online:
www.mags-uk.com

*Please note that we cannot guarantee the availability of all issues displayed above.



Element

DESIGNED &
HANDMADE
IN SCOTLAND



Our high-precision Achromatic RCA and Z plugs are designed to have minimal impact on the signal – with virtually nothing added, nothing taken away – resulting in improved sound quality. Now standard on Element, Equator, Hyper & our new Ailsa cables.

Element
Achromatic
RCA
S/PDIF

ACHROMATIC

LOW - MASS
NON-MAGNETIC
COLD - WELD
CONNECTOR

ATLAS
the performance connection
atlas cables.com





HiFi Addiction

QUALITY USED HIFI
BOUGHT & SOLD



CASH FOR YOUR HIFI

FROM A SINGLE COMPONENT
TO A COMPLETE COLLECTION

Hifi Addiction offers a simple and quick
solution to selling your hifi

IT'S AS EASY AS 1, 2, 3...

1. Phone or email for a quick quote
2. Payment via cash or bank transfer
3. Safe collection arranged *

NATIONWIDE COLLECTION

*For larger collections we can collect nationwide.
For single items we arrange courier collection using your original boxes
or we can supply boxes and packaging materials.

Contact us now for a fast quote

07595 021922 ian@hifiaddiction.co.uk

Online quote form - www.hifiaddiction.co.uk



COVID-19
Safe collection possible
while meeting social
distancing guidelines

REVOX SERVICE

THE MANUFACTURERS'
APPOINTED SERVICE COMPANY

REVOX SERVICE

Correct Revox Spare Parts Pricing
24 Hour Estimation procedure
Manufacturer Upgrades and Advice
Delivery and Collection Service
Comprehensive Guarantees

Factory Trained Engineers
Rapid Response Turnaround
Full Revox range serviced
Written Technical Reports
Late Evening Opening

THE AR TECHNOLOGY LIMITED

TTL House, Sheeptick End, Near Lidlington, Bedfordshire, MK43 0SF
Telephone 01525 841999 Facsimile 01525 841009



37 High Street, Aldridge
01922 457926

EXPOSURE • HEED • KUDOS
LEHMANN • LINN • LUMIN • MELCO • MICHELL
MONITOR AUDIO • NAIM • NEAT
OKKI NOKKI • ORTOFON • PROJECT • REGA • ROKSAN

Ample parking Tue-Sat 10-5pm
www.soundcinergy.co.uk



Refreshingly
different!

01865 790 879

www.oxfordaudio.co.uk

IAN HARRISON HIFI

SALE! UP TO 40% OFF!

TEL: 01283 702875 ian.harrison@mercian.myzen.co.uk

ACAPPELLA
ACOUSTIC
SIGNATURE
ACOUSTIC SOLID
AIR TIGHT
ALPHASON
AMAZON AUDIO
AMG
ATACAMA
AUDEZE
BENZ MICRO
BEYER
BLACK RHODIUM
BLUESOUND
CABASSE
CARTRIDGE MAN
CREEK
CUSTOM DESIGN
DECCA LONDON
EAR YOSHINO
EMT
EPOS
ERGO
FIDELITY
GOLDRING
GRADO
GRAHAM
GRAHAM SLEE
HANA
HARBETH
HELIUS
HIFI RACKS
ICON AUDIO
IKEDA
INSPIRE
IXOS
KUBALA-SOSNA
LEHMANN
LUXMAN
MICHELL
MOERCH
MOTH

MUNARI
MUSIC HALL
MUSIC TOOLS
MY SONIC LAB
NAGAOKA
NORSTONE
OPERA AUDIO
ORIGIN LIVE
ORTOFON
PARASOUND
PEERLESS
PROJECT
PSB
PURE SOUND
Q ACOUSTICS
QED
QUADRASPIRE
REED
ROKSAN
ROTHWELL
SENNHEISER
SOUNDSMITH
SOUNDSTYLE
SRM TECH
SUGDEN
SUMIKO
SUPRA
T+A
TAYLOR ACOUSTICS
TECHDAS
THORENS
TOM EVANS
TRACK AUDIO
TRICHORD
ULTRASONE
VALVET
VAN DEN HUL
WHEST AUDIO
WIREWORLD
ZENSAI
ZYX

SPECIAL OFFERS!!

VAN DEN HUL MC10 SPECIAL £775
ORTOFON CADENZA BLUE £950
ORTOFON 2M BLACK £445
ORTOFON 2M BLUE £160
ORTOFON QUINTET BLUE £299
ORTOFON QUINTET RED £210
MICHEL ORBE £POA
MICHEL ORBE SE £POA
WHEST AUDIO TWO.2 £POA
WHEST AUDIO THREE SIGNATURE £POA
WHEST PS40RDT £POA
EAR/YOSHINO £POA
BLACK RHODIUM £POA
PROJECT £POA
GOLDRING £POA
BEYER £POA
LEHMANN AUDIO £POA
SENNHEISER £POA

PLEASE PHONE TO CONFIRM PRICE & AVAILABILITY PRIOR TO ORDERING.
ALL GOODS ARE BRANDNEW & BOXED WITH FULL U.K. GUARANTEES.
NO EX-DEM OR EX-DISPLAY GOODS. NO GREY IMPORTS. GOODS ARE NOT
SUPPLIED ON APPROVAL. SORRY NO GENERAL CATALOGUES.
PLEASE PHONE OR WRITE FOR SPECIFIC REVIEWS, BROCHURES OR PRICES.
*CALL FOR DETAILS ESTABLISHED 1986.

MAIL ORDER ONLY FROM: IAN HARRISON, 7 MILL HILL, REPTON, DERBY,
DE65 6GQ TEL: 01283 702875 9AM-9PM INCLUDING SUNDAYS.

AUDIO DESTINATION

Where Music Matters

Moon | VPI | Norma Audio | Entreq
IsoAcoustics | REL | Audioquest | Totem
Auralic | Hegel | T+A | Lindemann Audio
and more....



01884 243584

info@audiodeestination.co.uk
www.audiodeestination.co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

EDITORIAL TEAM

Editor Steve Sutherland
Production Editor Jake Day-Williams
Art Editor Emily Hammond

CONTRIBUTORS

Simon Berkovitch, Paul Hiron, Paul Hocker,
James Hughes, Cliff Joseph, Jason Kennedy,
David Price, Neville Roberts, Ed Selley,
David Vivian, Chris Ward, Nigel Williamson

PHOTOGRAPHY

Mike Prior

ADVERTISING

Sales Sonia Smart **Tel:** 020 4522 8220

Mobile: 07972 117331

Email: sonia.smart@hifinews.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS

UK - New, Renewals & Enquiries
Tel: 0344 243 9023

Email: help@hfc.secureorder.co.uk
USA/CANADA - New, Renewals & Enquiries

US Toll Free: 001 866 647 9191

REST OF WORLD - New, Renewals & Enquiries

Tel: +44 (0) 1604 828 748

BACK ISSUES

Website: mags-uk.com

Contact: mags-uk.com/contacts/

MANAGEMENT TEAM

Group Editor Paul Miller
Group Art Editor John Rook
Chief Executive Owen Davies

Published by AVTech Media Ltd.,
Suite 6G, Eden House, Enterprise Way,
Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF

Phone: +44 (0) 203 856105

www.hifichoice.com

Distributed in the UK by Seymour
Distribution Ltd.



Published by AVTech Media Ltd. All rights reserved. 2015. ISSN 0955-1115. The Publisher's written consent must be obtained before any part of this publication may be reproduced in any form whatsoever, including photocopies, and information retrieval systems. All reasonable care is taken in the preparation of the magazine contents, but the publishers cannot be held legally responsible for errors in the contents of this magazine or for any loss however arising from such errors, including loss resulting from negligence of our staff. Balance placed upon the contents of this magazine is at reader's own risk.

Hi-Fi Choice, ISSN 0955-1115, is published monthly with an additional issue in July by AVTech Media Ltd, a division of MYTIME MEDIA Ltd, Suite 25 Eden House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, UK. The US annual subscription price is \$75 (equivalent to approximately \$95USD). Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11434, USA. Postmaster: Send address changes to Hi-Fi Choice, Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at gdn.net Ltd, 3 Queensbridge The Lakes Northampton NN4 7BF. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.



When you have finished with
this magazine please recycle it.



If you don't want
to miss an issue



Please reserve/deliver my copy of **Hi-Fi Choice** on a regular basis, starting with issue:

Title _____ First name _____

Surname _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

Telephone number _____

If you can't always find a copy of this magazine, help is at hand! Complete this form and hand in at your local store, they'll arrange for a copy of each issue to be reserved for you. Some stores may even be able to arrange for it to be delivered to your home. Just ask!

Next Month



JBL L52 CLASSIC STANDMOUNT

"The combination of those time capsule looks and unburstable energy are just too compelling to ignore..." That's just a taster of our forthcoming review of this new cute and colourful addition to JBL's Classic range

ALSO:

REVIEWS B&W 804 D4 floorstanders, Copland CSA70 amplifier, Audio-Technica ATH-M50xBT2 wireless headphones, Orchard Audio PecanPi streamer, iFi Audio ZEN Stream streamer, Apple AirPods (3rd generation) and an analogue interconnect *Group Test*

FEATURES Music Legends, Music Reviews, Reasons To Be Cheerful, our comprehensive Buyer's Guide and sharp-as-nails Opinions pieces, and all your hi-fi questions answered by our experts, plus Audiofile News on all the latest product launches

FEBRUARY ISSUE ON SALE 27 JANUARY



P S A U D I O

Pioneering world class audio products

It's a new dawn.



Hand made in Boulder, Colorado | 2000va output | 13 outlets (4 high current)

PS Audio's DirectStream P20. The finest mains regenerator in the world.

20 years ago PS Audio invented the mains regenerator. In pursuit of perfection, the DirectStream P20 combines patented architecture with a DSD engine. This delivers the cleanest, lowest-noise sine wave of any regenerator in the world.

For an exclusive home demonstration...

please contact your nearest PS Audio dealer at www.signaturesystems.co.uk/dealers.

Distributed by Signature Audio Systems | 07738 007776 | www.psaudio.com

ENOUGH SAID

"Setting a new standard for tube amplification."

Jeff Dorgay - TONEAudio

EVO 400 Tube Preamplifier & EVO 400 Tube Poweramplifier

"Tube Magic."

Vade Forrester - The Absolute Sound

EVO 100 Tube Digital Analogue Converter

"It is in combination that the PrimaLuna Evo 300 duo shine. This isn't magic synergy or tweaking the response of one to suit the other."

Alan Sircom - HiFi Plus

EVO 300 Tube Preamplifier & EVO 300 Tube Poweramplifier

"The PrimaLuna EVO 400 Integrated surpasses its predecessor, the DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated, thereby inheriting the throne of the best integrated tube amplifier in the world"

Max Delissen - Music Emotion Magazine

EVO 400 Tube Integrated Amplifier



 **absolute sounds ltd.**

International Distributors & Consultants of Specialised Hi-End Audio & Video Systems

58 Durham Road, London, SW20 0TW

T: +44 (0)20 89 71 39 09

absolutesounds.com info@absolutesounds.com

 **PrimaLuna®**

For Your Nearest Dealer Please Visit

The **Absolute Sounds** Website