



## Stream lover

Why Yamaha's all-in-one network receiver is out of this world **p58**

## Walk this way

Sony ups capacity for more 24/192 music on the move



# Hi-Fi Choice

**PASSION FOR SOUND**

Issue No. **384**

May 2014

# Small wonders

Six of the greatest standmount loudspeakers under £800

## Positive spin

Turntable setup made easy

**LABELLED WITH LOVE**  
A tribute to Factory Records



**BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM**

A striking combo from Canor & Magnepan



# 30

**PRODUCTS ON TEST:**

**ATC, Dali, Focal, KEF, Ruark, Musical Fidelity and NAD**



## One for all

Single-box music system from hi-fi guru Cyrus

MAY 2014  
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Q SERIES

**KEF**  
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Q300 5.1 System, What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision, August 2011

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KEF Audio UK 





**110**  
**Musical Fidelity**  
MF-100



**50**  
**Ruark R7**

**Music reviews**



**99**  
**Oasis** *Definitely Maybe*

**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!



I've been lucky enough to pick up a free trial to the Qobuz Hi-Fi music streaming service, and have spent a few weeks trying it out at home. For anyone that doesn't know, Qobuz is a French-based service that despite launching in 2007 was relatively unknown in the UK until last year.

Qobuz differs from the competition in that it offers true CD-quality 16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC streams to a computer, and 320kbps streaming to app-based devices. I live in a fairly rural area and have mediocre broadband speed at best – superfast fibre optic services have yet to reach this part of Oxfordshire – but even so, I get a glitch-free music streaming service and superior sound quality that's noticeably above any other I have tried. The back catalogue is improving all the time, and already extends to some 14million tracks and continues to grow daily. It is perhaps biased to classical material and unsurprisingly has a leaning towards French musical tastes, but I've had plenty of fun navigating my way through the genres discovering new music, and have even managed to rediscover some long-forgotten gems that hit the nostalgia button big time. Yes there are some omissions, but it's plain to hear the service's superior sound quality through my hi-fi, and aside from some minor hiccups navigating the system menus, it's likely to be the reason that will see me happily take on a subscription to the full Qobuz Hi-Fi service when the trial comes to an end. I recommend you give it a try at [www.qobuz.com](http://www.qobuz.com).

**Lee Dunkley** Editor

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# Hi-FiChoice Contents

hifichoice.co.uk Issue No. **384** May 2014

## NEWS & OPINION

### 6 Audiofile

The latest news on the hottest products from the world of hi-fi coming your way

### 14 Webwatch

Essential websites to direct your browser towards for all your hi-fi requirements

### 66 Letters

Put your points of view and queries on audio matters to our team of experts

### 77 Opinion

The *Hi-Fi Choice* team say it as they see it as they discuss the issues of the day

### 99 Music Reviews

The month's essential new CD, vinyl and hi-res releases given a work out

### 130 Back Chat

A look back in time, news snippets and an industry insider picks their top albums

## READER SERVICES

### 102 Reader Classifieds

Sell your unwanted hi-fi for FREE here

### 124 Next Issue

The sonic treats to look out for next month



62

## FEATURES

### 62 Insider Feature

How a father and son team made Ruark so much more than just a household name

### 90 Beautiful System

Canor and Magnepan come together for a system that looks and sounds like no other

### 94 Labelled With Love

Few record labels have come to define their locale quite like Manchester's Factory

### 118 Guide To...

Setting up a record deck. Everything you need to know to make your turntable sing

## GROUP TEST

24

It might get loud... Six stunning standmounting speakers put to the test



6 **Audiofile:** Vieta launches hi-fi range



100 **Music reviews:** Elton John



**118** **Guide to:** Setting up a record deck

“Before contemplating any adjustments it is important to set the record straight – literally!”

**TESTED THIS MONTH**



**16**  
**Cyrus** Lyric 09 one-box system



**46**  
**Rega** Saturn-R CD player/DAC



**52**  
**Nytek Audio** CPA132/CPS102/CPA401



**58**  
**Yamaha** R-N500 network receiver

**REVIEWS**

Kit testing

- 16 Cyrus**  
Lyric 09 one-box system
- 42 Acoustic Insight**  
Focastage floorstanding loudspeaker (Exotica)
- 46 Rega**  
Saturn-R CD player/DAC
- 50 Ruark**  
R7 All-in-one style system
- 52 Nytek Audio**  
CP132/CPS102/CPA401 pre-power amplifier
- 56 Sony**  
NWZ-ZX1 digital audio player
- 58 Yamaha**  
R-N500 network receiver
- 88 Mission**  
Cyrus One and Two integrated amplifiers (Retro)

**GROUP TEST**

Standmount loudspeakers £639-£810

- 27 ATC** SCM7
- 29 Dali** Ikon 2 Mk2
- 31 Focal** Aria 906
- 33 KEF** LS50
- 35 Mission** SX2
- 37 Monitor Audio** Silver 2

**MINI TEST**

Mains distribution blocks cables £100-£176

- 84 Russ Andrews**  
PowerBar
- 84 Merlin Cables**  
Tarantula
- 85 TCI Cables**  
Constrictor
- 85 Supra Cables**  
LoRad



**42**  
**Acoustic Insight**  
Focastage floorstanding loudspeaker (Exotica)

**CHOICE EXTRAS**

- 105 NAD**  
DAC 2 Wireless DAC
- 106 Townshend Audio**  
Seismic Isolation Pods
- 106 Russ Andrews**  
Kimber OPT-1 Toslink cable
- 109 RipNAS**  
Solid V3 CD ripper
- 110 Musical Fidelity**  
MF-100 headphones
- 113 Vieta Audio**  
One active Bluetooth speaker
- 114 Perfecting Sound Forever**  
By Greg Milner
- 116 Analogue Studio**  
Mirrored Cartridge Alignment Protractor
- 116 Mark Grant Cables**  
Brush Swab and Cloth set

**Never miss an issue – turn to p20 for our latest subs offer**

## Viva Vieta!

Spanish brand Vieta Audio is back in the UK with a range of products tailored towards hi-fi enthusiasts and Bluetooth music fans alike

**PRICE:** £90-£350 **AVAILABLE:** MAY **CONTACT:** 0800 0857174 **WEB:** AQSOUND.COM

**ELECTRONICS BRAND VIETA** had a brief flurry of activity in the UK 10 years ago with the introduction of a home cinema system that sold exclusively through Alders stores (remember them?). Several other systems followed later in 2004 and 2005, but the brand struggled to get a foothold on the UK's competitive home cinema systems market at the time, and withdrew to concentrate on its home turf in Spain where it has successfully managed to establish itself as something of a household name due to an extremely comprehensive range of audio products, a strong reputation and loyal followers.

The name may be fairly new to us, but Vieta Audio's proud Spanish

heritage spans some 60 years. The passionate company based in Barcelona says it has something to show a UK audience, and will introduce a range of traditional hi-fi separates along with a comprehensive line of colourful Bluetooth-equipped speaker systems through its UK distributor AQ Sound. See our Vieta One speaker review on p113.

We first heard of the brand's return to the UK at the Bristol Sound & Vision Show back in late February, and we'll have the first full UK review of its hi-fi separates in our June issue. Its Home range of components features three integrated stereo amplifiers rated at a claimed 50, 75 and 100W power output per channel. Each model is equipped with four

stereo RCA line-level inputs plus a phono stage input for MM cartridges. Prices are set to be between £200 and £350. Two matching CD players are available – one with a USB input on the front to playback music files, and the other fitted with a PCM-176 DAC and optical and coaxial S/PDIFs. Prices are £190 and £350 respectively.

Two 'receiver' models combining amplification and radio tuner duties are also set to be introduced, including one fitted with DAB/FM priced at £270 and an FM-only model priced at £300. There will also be a separate AM/FM radio tuner for those wanting to add to an existing amplifier, which will cost £180. All models are available in black and silver finishes.



**The name may be fairly new to us,  
but Vieta Audio's proud Spanish  
heritage spans some 60 years**



## COMMENT

### HI-RES HERO?

What have the following group of disparate musicians got in common: Norah Jones, Tom Petty, Sting, Elton John, Duane Eddy, Arcade Fire, James Taylor, Elvis Costello, Bruce Springsteen, Emmylou Harris, Patti Smith, The Beastie Boys' Mike D, David Crosby and Stephen Stills. Any ideas? Well, you'll be forgiven for not knowing that they all appear in the latest internet-based advertisement for Pono – the dreamchild of a certain Mr Neil 'Crazy Horse' Young, which makes the inclusion of the last two musos more understandable.

For those of you that haven't been paying attention, Neil is fed up with us all having to listen to the duff, super-compressed sound of MP3 and so has got together with some of his buddies and invented PonoMusic. As the website explains: "Pono's mission is to provide the best possible listening experience of your favourite music. We want to be very clear that PonoMusic is not a new audio file format or standard. PonoMusic is an end-to-end ecosystem for music lovers to get access to and enjoy their favourite music exactly as the artist created it, at the recording resolution they chose in the studio."

The video featuring the aforementioned stars of music appears on the kickstarter website (where people that don't have enough money to get a project funded ask members of the public to pitch in – quite why Young can't afford to do this on his own is another matter for another day), and shows their reactions having just heard some tunes on a Pono player. To a man/woman they all seem to be saying: "Pono lets you hear music the way we hear it in the studio when it's originally recorded, not the way it sounds on an MP3 player. And it sounds really rather good, don't you know?"

In truth, the lossless audio device that looks more like a garish yellow Toblerone than an audio game changer is rumoured to be extra bulky with a battery life of only 8 hours (compared with the 40 hours of an iPod Touch), will have 128GB of storage and will retail for around \$400 – about £240.

It remains to be seen if the general public will feel the same way as Neil's mates, but we can only hope that this new dawn for hi-res audio proves to be a success.





# Wireless Living range

Audio Pro extends wireless range with audio hub and new speaker models

**PRICE:** £250-£1,300 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 01908 282498 **WEB:** AUDIOPRODIRECT.CO.UK

**SWEDISH LOUDSPEAKER BRAND** Audio Pro has announced several new products to join its Living wireless audio range. First up is the LVHUB (shown above) – a multi-input audio hub that connects wirelessly with compatible Audio Pro Living speakers like the new LV33 floorstanding speakers, priced at £1,300. The LVHUB has four inputs, including a USB, a 3.5mm stereo analogue and 2x Toslink digital inputs for connecting to music sources, and is capable of transmitting at CD-quality levels over the dedicated network, the maker says. It costs £250.

Next up is the LVSUB Flat subwoofer, which can be fixed to a wall using universal mounting options. The £450 unit is fitted with a 205mm long-throw bass driver powered by a 200W Class D amplifier, Audio Pro claims. It is available in black and white to fit with other Living speaker models.



## IN BRIEF

### ARCAM'S VERSATILE DOCK



● The rDock-uni is a Lightning dock for iPad (including Mini, Air and 4 variants), iPhone and iPod. The new dock is cast from aluminium and fitted with a genuine Apple-certified Lightning connector and a built-in Burr-Brown/TI PCM1502 DAC, it claims. There's no wi-fi or Bluetooth connectivity as audio is output directly to a hi-fi amp via S/PDIF coaxial or stereo RCA line output connections. iDevices are charged while in situ and a USB port provides hookup for older iDevices. It comes with its own handset and costs £200. **ARCAM.CO.UK**

# Cyrus Stream X Signature

**PRICE:** £1,250-£1,450 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 01480 435577 **WEB:** CYRUSAUDIO.COM

Cambridge-based hi-fi manufacturer Cyrus Audio announces a new music streaming component to join its flagship Signature Series range. The Stream X Signature is a premium music streamer, which Cyrus Audio's technical director Peter Bartlett claims will deliver "unparalleled sonic performance".

Priced at £1,250 or £1,450 including n-remote, the Stream X Signature claims support for WAV, FLAC, ALAC, AAC, MP3, WMA, AIFF audio formats, and is compatible with high-resolution formats up to 24 bit/192 kHz. It allows wired or wireless connection to UPnP and DLNA devices, and carries a USB port and coaxial SPDIF connections. Tuneln Radio is also onboard, giving access to over 100,000 radio stations and podcasts, the maker tells us.

Following the celebratory 30th Anniversary System launched last

year, Cyrus claims that the Signature Series takes much of the engineering developed for the limited edition, no expense spared the system and houses it in a more affordable classic Cyrus die-cast aluminium chassis.

The Stream X Signature joins the DAC X, DAC XP, Mono X 200 and Mono X 300 Signature models already in the range. Cyrus says all of the products in its flagship Signature range are designed with

sound quality in mind, and the Stream X Signature demonstrates this with a host of audiophile-grade components, filtering and acoustic design techniques.

The Stream X Signature offers control and navigation through either Cyrus' bespoke iOS app Cadence – freely downloadable – or the logical and intuitive n-remote control system. The Stream X Signature is available now finished in black or quartz. ▶





“The Truth, nothing more,  
nothing less...”



“This level of performance,  
convenience and style makes for  
an award winning product.”

*Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio Magazine, January 2013*



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*Paul Rigby, Hi Fi World, March 2013*



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**Fanthorpes**, Hepworth Arcade, SilverSt, Hull, East Riding of Yorkshire HU1 1JU Tel: 01482 223096

**O'Brien Hi-fi**, 60 Durham Road, West Wimbledon, London Tel: 020 8946 1528

**The Audioworks**, 14 Stockport Road, Cheadle, Cheshire, SK8 2AA Tel: 0161 428 7887

[www.avidhifi.co.uk](http://www.avidhifi.co.uk)

**AVID HIFI LIMITED**, Bicton Industrial Park, Kimbolton, Huntingdon, Cambs, PE28 0LW  
Tel: +44(0)1480 869 900 Fax: +44(0)1480 869 909 E-mail [info@avidhifi.co.uk](mailto:info@avidhifi.co.uk)

# McIntosh plays all

High-end hi-fi maker adds versatile disc player with SACD and 32-bit DAC

**PRICE:** £6,395 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 01202 911886 **WEB:** JORDANACOUSTICS.CO.UK



**AMERICAN-BASED HIGH-END AUDIO** maker McIntosh has unveiled the MCD550 SACD/CD player. Distributed in the UK by Jordan Acoustics, the new player is unmistakably McIntosh and follows what it calls classic fifties styling with contemporary features and technology. McIntosh says the MCD550 is built around a dual-layer chassis with linear power supply, and an eight-channel 32-bit/192kHz PCM/DSD digital-to-analogue converter.

The illuminated black glass front panel employs dial-based level control and track selection. Digital connectivity includes a coaxial input operating up to 24-bit/96kHz, with optical and asynchronous USB 2.0 inputs supporting up to 24-bit/192kHz, the maker says.

Both fixed and variable balanced and unbalanced outputs are provided to offer flexible system connectivity options, and the MCD550 can connect directly to a power amplifier without the need for a preamp. The transport drive has a die-cast aluminium tray and the advanced digital servo claims to give faster, quieter and more accurate disc-reading operation for better disc tracking and error correction processing.

## IN BRIEF

### ISOTEK EVO3 OPTIMUM CABLE

● The Optimum is the third of IsoTek's high-performance power cables to be upgraded to the new advanced EVO3 version. It claims radical advances over its predecessor with three silver-plated copper conductors made from Ohno Continuous Cast (OCC) copper at its core. A high-quality Teflon FEP dielectric (insulation) is extruded over each conductor, providing a very low dielectric constant over a wide frequency range, and is double shielded and terminated by hand with 24-carat gold-plated connectors. A 2m terminated cable costs £595. **SOUNDFOWNDATIONS.CO.UK**



## Musical Fidelity goes Blu

**PRICE:** £300 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 0208 9002866 **WEB:** MUSICALFIDELITY.COM

As a maker of predominantly high-end audio components, Musical Fidelity has managed to capture the attention of the less well-heeled hi-fi enthusiast with its V90 series of miniature hi-fi components. The V90-BLU is the latest model to join the rapidly expanding lineup, and is the fourth in the affordable mini series, which launched last year with the V90-DAC (HFC 374).

Musical Fidelity's original Vee series appeared on the scene several years ago, but the new V90 series sees the accessory hi-fi range morph into an attractive line of similarly sized mini components, measuring approximately 170 x 47

x 102mm (WxHxD). All four tiny hi-fi separates are made from fine-line extrusions and sport the same fine-textured moonstone casework finish with shiny chrome toggle switches adorning the faceplate.

Musical Fidelity says that its V90-BLU is the ideal mini component to wirelessly stream music stored or accessed via a smartphone, tablet, Mac or PC to any hi-fi system. It is equipped with 1x line-level RCAs in/outs, coaxial S/PDIF in/outs - with support for 32-bit/192kHz - and 1x Toslink connector in/outs - with support for 32-bit/96kHz.

Musical Fidelity tells us that the V90-BLU is ideally suited to

systems with limited inputs and can be connected between either a digital (priority-switched coaxial or optical) source and DAC, analogue source and amplifier or between a preamplifier and power amplifier, where it operates in 'bypass' mode until a Bluetooth source is detected. Once a signal is detected the V90-BLU automatically switches to receive the incoming Bluetooth source until the wireless session ends and it switches back to bypass mode.

A status LED indicates whether or not the V90-BLU is connected to a Bluetooth signal and MF claims line-of-site wireless connectivity of up to 30 metres. ▶

# pure virtuosity



For more than a quarter-century, Sonus faber has represented the pinnacle of loudspeaker aesthetics. From its earliest models, incorporating real wood, furniture-grade finishing, seductive curves and even grilles that reveal style and inventiveness, this repository of Italian artisan skills and artistry has achieved what was once deemed impossible: creating speakers that sound as beautiful as they look.

Along with a series of models paying homage to the great luthiers of Cremona, the company has since been inspired by the Teatro Olimpica in Vicenza. It is appropriate that this new family of speakers considered the standards of a famed venue as the ne plus ultra of the reproduction of music with vivacity and power... exactly what defines music from opera to orchestral to rock music to soul to jazz. To achieve this, Sonus faber has exploited all that it has learned since its inception.

Like all Sonus faber loudspeakers, Olympia represents what is possible, while respecting what has mattered.

---

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# Atlas Signature

Aesthetix launches new edition of hybrid power amplifier

**PRICE:** £10,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 0800 0436710/0845 6019390 **WEB:** AESTHETIX.NET

**HAILING FROM ITS** Saturn Series, Californian-based Aesthetix announces the Signature edition of its Atlas hybrid power amplifier. The new Atlas Stereo Signature uses the same circuits as the standard Atlas Stereo amplifier, but employs high-quality Rel-Caps as inter-stage coupling capacitors, and output stage power supply capacitance is doubled and claims to increase bass drive and solidity. Binding-post wiring is also upgraded to 14 AWG and a further refinement includes the replacement of all emitter resistors with

specialised metal foil low-inductance type, the maker says. Delivering a claimed 200W per channel into 8ohms and 400W per channel into 4ohms, the new Signature gives stunning dynamic impact thanks to the incredible transparency, clarity of focus and stunning coherence with no time smear or blurring, says the titan amp maker.

The new Stereo Signature joins the existing Mono Signature model. Standard Atlas Stereo models can upgrade to the Signature version. Available now sporting a black or silver fascia.



## IN BRIEF



## SONY HEADPHONES

● Sony's new lineup of headphones features 11 new headband-style and in-ear models. The MDR-ZX750BN above is the flagship model from the new range and possibly the most interesting to *Hi-Fi Choice* readers. It's fitted with NFC-enabled Bluetooth wireless technology as well as noise cancelling tech that claims to cut out up to 98 percent of external noise. A built-in rechargeable battery claims to give up to 13 hours of non-stop listening with noise cancelling enabled, and the built-in microphone enables calls from a smartphone to be answered on the move.

Pricing is yet to be announced, but models go on sale this month. **SONY.CO.UK**



## ATLAS ASIMI

● Scottish-based Atlas Cables announces a new reference interconnect cable. The Asimi Ultra uses solid silver conductors, manufactured using the highest-quality technique for drawing pure silver. Designed, developed and hand built at its factory in Kilmarnock, Scotland, the Atlas Asimi Ultra interconnect cable costs £2,750 for a meter pair. Other lengths are available upon request.

**ATLASCABLES.COM**

## EXTRA INFO

● The Oscars Audio headphone stand reviewed on p106 last month can also be purchased directly from: **OSCARSAUDIO.CO.UK**

# Balanced Music Concept

**PRICE:** £1,290 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** +49 2942 92997590 **WEB:** BMC-AUDIO.COM

BMC-Audio is a new brand to the UK distributed by Colab Audio. The German-based audio company has an established range of high-end electronics and loudspeaker models that were on show for the

first time in the UK at the Bristol Sound & Vision Show in February.

The eye-catching PureDAC is the newest model to the range and boasts an asynchronous USB input capable of handling up to

24-bit/192kHz files. Digital AES/EBU, Toslink and coaxial digital inputs, as well as balanced analogue outputs – compatible with BMC amplifiers featuring its Current Injection technology and claiming improved musical performance – RCA outputs and a special custom link to connect the PureDAC to a BMC amplifier are also featured.

Housed inside what looks to be a substantial extruded aluminium case, the PureDAC also has a built-in headphone amplifier, with independent controls for line and headphone levels, the maker says.

Look out for an exclusive review of the PureDAC appearing in *Hi-Fi Choice* next month.



# Webwatch

**Andrew Simpson** casts his expert eye over his pick of the best hi-fi websites and online content



## Analogue Seduction

From Avid to van den Hul, Peterborough-based hi-fi retailer Analogue Seduction represents an impressive A to Z of hi-fi brands. Thanks to its new website, finding the kit you want is made easy with plenty of product pics and info, combined with owner reviews: [analogueseduction.net](http://analogueseduction.net)



## K Pono praise

Neil Young's hi-res Pono concept continues to cause quite a stir in audioland and it's no surprise that the project has significantly surpassed its Kickstarter goal, thanks to endorsement from a long list of rock royalty. See who's backing it and why in this celeb-packed video: [kck.st/1cCP3xT](http://kck.st/1cCP3xT)



Picture: Neil Hallworth

## #PMCMugshots

Building top-class speakers is clearly thirsty work and we've been enjoying PMC's mug shot pics in recent months from happy and hydrated fans and owners around the globe. Follow [@PMCSpeakers](https://twitter.com/PMCSpeakers) or use the [#PMCMugshot](https://twitter.com/PMCMugshot) hashtag to see what's brewing on Twitter and Facebook.



## Picture perfect

Hats off to Frank Harvey hi-fi's superb Flickr pics. From stunning close ups of Michell's finest decks to inside KEF's factory and the latest Q Acoustics Concept speakers, these pictures show real hi-fi at its best: [flickr.com/frankharveyhifi](https://www.flickr.com/photos/frankharveyhifi/)

## flickr Wigwam festival

Regular visitors to the Hi-Fi Wigwam forum know that every March, the hottest ticket in town is the forum's annual show in Salford, where members get together for a good old hi-fi knees up to demo their wonderful and sometimes wacky kit. Take a tour and feel the vibe <http://bit.ly/O8o9mg>



## YouTube Riff-story lesson

Thanks to [@NADElectronics](https://twitter.com/NADElectronics) for reviving this weirdly addictive YouTube video from the archives where Chicago Music Exchange's Alex straps on his strat to pluck his way through 100 famous guitar riffs in a single take: [youtu.be/xiC\\_ljCa2s](http://youtu.be/xiC_ljCa2s)

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## CHOICE TWEETS

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Playing [#DaftPunk](https://twitter.com/DaftPunk) 180g [#vinyl](https://twitter.com/vinyl) on this £35K sys. [@KEFAudio](https://twitter.com/KEFAudio) BLADES, [@DEVIALET](https://twitter.com/DEVIALET) 240 and Clearaudio t/table [#vinylrecords](https://twitter.com/vinylrecords) [pic.twitter.com/CsDkMua2eq](https://twitter.com/CsDkMua2eq)

**KEF AUDIO UK (@KEFAUDIO)**  
Did you hear our KEF demos at [@SVBristolShow](https://twitter.com/SVBristolShow)? What's your ultimate track to show off your speakers? [t.co/2TPYR83A7W](https://twitter.com/tco/2TPYR83A7W) [#BristolShow](https://twitter.com/BristolShow)

**LOTUS HIFI (@LOTUS\_340R)**  
LOTUS Hifi is very excited and proud to have been appointed UK dealer for the incredible Danish brand of... <http://fb.me/1gdcfz7v3>

**RECORD STORE DAY UK (@RSDUK)**  
The cats out of the bag [@oasis](https://twitter.com/oasis) have announced [#RSD14](https://twitter.com/RSD14) plans. A re-mastered version of debut single Supersonic on heavyweight 12" for [@RSDUK](https://twitter.com/RSDUK)

**DENON UK (@DENONUK)**  
The [#Denon](https://twitter.com/Denon) [Buds](https://twitter.com/Buds) of May? Try these [#Headphones](https://twitter.com/Headphones) this Spring! [t.co/sF9rDsYSBU](https://twitter.com/tco/sF9rDsYSBU) & [pic.twitter.com/ctFxyAtfRd](https://twitter.com/pic.twitter.com/ctFxyAtfRd)

**PINK FLOYD (@PINKFLOYD)**  
Arnold Layne was released today in 1967. What title did the B-side of the single originally have?

**CYRUS AUDIO LTD (@CYRUS\_AUDIO)**  
A summary of the fantastic [#BristolShow](https://twitter.com/BristolShow) [ow.ly/ubEb5](http://ow.ly/ubEb5)

**THE SOUND GALLERY (@THESOUNDGALLERY)**  
Woo, the brand [#new600series](https://twitter.com/new600series) speakers from [@BowersWilkins](https://twitter.com/BowersWilkins) are now in-store! [pic.twitter.com/YHkfWdIU1](https://twitter.com/pic.twitter.com/YHkfWdIU1)

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▶ DETAILS

**PRODUCT**

Cyrus Lyric 09

**ORIGIN**

UK

**TYPE**

One-box system

**WEIGHT**

9kg

**DIMENSIONS**

(WxHxD)

420 x 105 x 320mm

**FEATURES**

- Claimed 170W RMS per channel into 8ohms
- 24/192 upsampling DAC with digital, USB and Bluetooth inputs
- DAB, FM and internet radio
- App, remote and touchscreen control

**DISTRIBUTOR**

Cyrus Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**

01480 410900

**WEBSITE**

cyrusaudio.com



# Design for life

A serious hi-fi system squeezed into a single box? **David Price** finds himself unexpectedly serenaded by the Cyrus Lyric 09

**I**t's official, and you heard it here first – we don't live in the seventies anymore. Like David Bowie, times have changed. He's no longer the Thin White Duke and the world isn't buying huge amounts of separates. Life moves on, and so does the way people play music. Which is not to say the specialist audio market is set to disappear; there are many companies that make a good living from a UK sector worth £200 million a year.

Trouble is, though, by its very nature the hi-fi market is rather exclusive. Audiophiles like their fancy gear and aren't too bothered if no one else does. On the other hand, most

people have never wanted anything more than a quality machine to play their music on. Cyrus' new Lyric 09 attempts to bridge this gap, bringing serious audio engineering to the stylish systems market in a people-friendly package. It's the top of the new Lyric range, the other being the £2,250 Lyric 05, which lacks some of the 09's special audiophile tuning.

This new Cyrus has a style all of its very own and has obviously been well made – and in Britain. It's a sort of one-box Cyrus 'greatest hits' package, containing much of the technology of the company's high-end separates in a single box. For example, its CD mechanism is effectively a rehoused

CDt, complete with slot-loading Servo Evolution II mechanism – claimed by Cyrus to be "the world's most accurate CD-reading device". It has been measured to have 20 percent fewer errors than the next best OEM kit available to the trade, the company says. The streaming section uses the engine developed for the Stream X, with 24/192 and wide codec compatibility. This feeds a preamplifier not a million miles away from the Cyrus Pre XP and a range of digital inputs which go through the company's 32-bit DAC, also seen in the Cyrus 8 DAC, and this uses high-quality op-amps and tuned audio circuits. The manufacturer is





**CONNECTIONS**



- 1 Speaker binding posts
- 2 DAB/FM antenna input
- 3 Mains power input
- 4 S/PDIF optical & coaxial inputs
- 5 USB input
- 6 Analogue input and output

proud of the headphone amplifier, which uses a circuit developed for a separate standalone headphone amp that never came to market. It has a dedicated power supply and is said to be very carefully laid out.

One key design criterion for the Lyric was that it needed to be able to drive practically any loudspeaker, but also use relatively little power doing so, and so a Class D output stage was chosen. But this was no simple implementation of any old chip; instead the company auditioned a large number, then set about perfecting it for the Lyric. Technical director Peter Bartlett is quite candid; he admits the company's expertise

## The best thing about the Lyric 09 is that it sounds great across all sources

has traditionally been in coaxing the best out of Class AB amplifiers, with much of the tweaking process down to the choice of passive components in the signal path. But with Class D, an entirely new approach was needed, the learning curve that the R&D team found itself on explains the fact that this product took three years to get to market. It employs a development of the well-established Cyrus analogue power supply, which makes for an impressive quoted 170W RMS per channel.

Pull the Lyric out of the attractive packaging, and it won't take long to set up. The unit uses a single mains lead (heaven for those that don't like clutter), standard speaker binding posts (thankfully), and has a welter of inputs around the back. You'll need to screw in the wi-fi antenna and DAB aerial, and connect up its single RCA line input if you have an analogue source you wish to use. Those who play out computer audio will also wish to hook up a USB-B cable, and folks with iPods can also connect up

their gadgets via another USB-A input. There are electrical and optical digital inputs too, for TVs, PlayStations and suchlike. The Lyric also hooks up to Bluetooth devices (via the fine sounding aptX codec) and last but not least has uPnP streaming built in. In short, every base is covered with the obvious exception of a phono input. However, vinyl spinning owners can, of course, buy an offboard phono stage and hook it up via the RCA line input.

The Lyric has three main ways of working. First is the unit's own touch-sensitive front panel, which is a nice user interface and marries up well to the touch screen. The main problem is that there's also a swish remote control – complete with backlighting and a motion sensor that turns this on and off whenever you move it, that does the job even faster. There's also Cyrus' Cadence app (iOS or Android), which is easier still. Which to use?

The machine generally feels very good to use. My biggest issue is that it introduces a new design language and form factor which isn't (yet) recognisably Cyrus. This won't be an issue for many, as I suspect the Lyric will pull a whole new type of buyer in – which is precisely what it has been designed to do. What you will discover, though, is that it's a lovely product to use.

### Sound quality

The purist 'elephant in the room' is the Lyric's use of Class D power amplification. Some believe its sound is too compromised, but several days of continuous use disabuse me of this notion, at least as far as this Cyrus is concerned. Properly run in and warmed through, it proves a highly enjoyable sounding product across all sources. It's crystal clear that Cyrus has got Class D sounding right, indeed it's surprisingly close to the 'house sound' it gets from its



The closest rival to the Lyric 09 is Naim Uniti 2, £2,795. The two are very well matched, scoring points off one another tit for tat. For example, the more modern Cyrus makes the Naim look a little dull and boxy, but the Naim is truly beautifully finished. The Cyrus has a great slot-loading CD drive, but the Naim beats its number of analogue RCA inputs; five instead of one. The Cyrus has Bluetooth, but Naim has more digital inputs, too. Both have excellent app controllers, but the Cyrus' touch-sensitive glass panel is a bit more exotic than the Naim's push-buttons. They're also well matched sonically; the Naim has a slightly more immersive sound, but lacks the vast power reserves of its rival. Our best advice is to make sure you try them both out before you buy.

Class AB power amplifiers – a bubbly, rhythmically engaging sound with lots of life, fine dynamic accenting and lots of detail.

Starting with an external CD transport into the unit's coaxial digital input, the Lyric 09 pushes Donald Fagen's *Tomorrow's Girls* along like a steamroller. The power amplifier section proves really impressive driving a range of loudspeakers, from easy Focal 948s to tricky Yamaha NS1000Ms. In both cases, the result is surprisingly musical, with strong and articulate bass that is as able to play tunes as well as any good-quality integrated amp. There is absolutely no sense of it compressing the music, even at high programme levels.

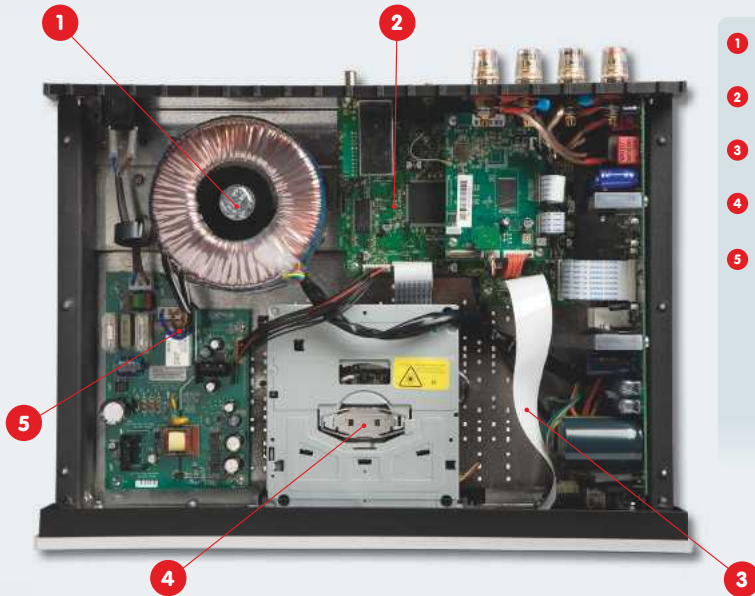
Running the system from the internal CD drive is particularly impressive; the disc transport is obviously excellent. Again it has that propulsive Cyrus Servo Evolution sound, one that shuffles the music along and ekes out loads of detail. As one-box systems go, this has to be one of the finest disc transports around. Fed from a MacBook Pro running Audirvana Plus, its USB input shows redoubtable ability. Via the streamer, Kate Bush's *Snowflake* at 24/96 is beautifully carried, with rich and engrossing piano work. Her voice – often a chore for solid-state amplifiers – is smooth and subtle, with no sense that the system is trying to flatten or harden it. Again, the lower frequencies amaze, with seemingly effortless reserves of power for those crashing piano cadences.

The Cyrus wows me from its analogue input, too. A Michell GyroDec turntable via a Trichord Dino phono stage makes a beautiful job of a rare and expensive 'blue triangle' first pressing of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. *Breathe* sounds enjoyably warm and mellifluous, and it throws out a wonderfully wide and deep soundstage, showing just how capable its amplifier section is. Fed an absolutely tip-top source, it rises to the challenge, and then some.

**Glass, steel and aluminium combine to great effect to make this a beauty**



**INSIGHT**



- 1 Low-noise toroidal transformer
- 2 Streaming modules
- 3 Front panel touch control connector
- 4 Slot-loading disc drive
- 5 Standby board and feed to multiple sub-regulation stages

**ON TEST**

Rated at 170W/8ohm, the Class D amplifier inside Cyrus' Lyric 09 system continues to deliver as much as 2x215W/8ohm and 2x370W/4ohm. Protection limits its output into lower impedance loads so 'tough' speakers are best avoided. The performance of the Lyric 09 is best divided into 'digital' (CD, coax/optical in and

network/USB audio) and 'analogue' (line in/power amp out). The latter has some typical Class D attributes including a load-sensitive frequency response that rises to +1.4dB/20kHz into 8ohm, but dips to -0.45dB/20kHz into 4ohm and a slightly lower-than-average A-wtd S/N ratio of 75dB (re. 0dBW). Distortion also climbs at very

high frequencies, from a low 0.003% at 1kHz to 0.12% at 20kHz (all at 10W/8ohm). The 'digital' performance is quite clean for a heavily integrated solution - the A-wtd S/N is 100dB, jitter modest at <600psec (all sample rates) and distortion between 0.0005-0.0015% over the top 30dB of its dynamic range. PM

Tonally the Cyrus isn't a radical departure from the company's separates amplifiers, meaning it's on the spry, crisp and dry side of neutral - you'd never confuse it with a sumptuous, warm tube amp. But it is open and transparent enough to let the full flavour of that original and beautiful EMI *Abbey Road* recording flood out, and the result is a mesmeric sound. This is quite a contrast to the Bluetooth input - which gives as good a sound as I've heard playing a 256kbps AAC file of Scritti Politti's *Perfect Way* from an iPad, but it's never going to match vintage vinyl via a top turntable!

The really impressive thing about the Lyric 09 is it sounds great across all sources. The streamer and CD drive are superb, the sensitive DAB radio doesn't let the show down and the analogue input is excellent. It underlines the fact that the Lyric has been designed as a complete package that uses the technology and philosophy behind Cyrus' popular range of separates. Spending the same amount of money mixing and matching components from a range of manufacturers might give a slightly superior sound, but not by much. I suspect many would regard it more as different, rather than better.

**Conclusion**

The intention of the Lyric 09 to give serious grown-up hi-fi sound in a scaled-down single-box package, across a wide range of family-friendly sources has been achieved. It might not quite have the operational sophistication of designs from, say, Bang & Olufsen, but it isn't far behind and the sound quality is dramatically better, as is the build.

If you're an audiophile looking to downsize, or a music lover with an understandable aversion to hi-fi clutter, then this is an excellent package - and indeed one of the very best of its type yet offered ●

**Hi-FiChoice**

**OUR VERDICT**

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Excellent sound across all sources; versatility; ease of use

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** More analogue inputs wouldn't hurt!

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Nothing less than a superb high-end one-box hi-fi system

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**OVERALL**



**Q&A**

**Peter Bartlett**

Technical director, Cyrus Audio



**DP: Why has Cyrus gone into one-box 'style systems'?**

**PB:** Separates sales are what the company is known for and I did not want to follow other brands by chasing new demographics by diluting our core products. Rather I want to maintain the specialisation of the Cyrus brand, possibly becoming more so, and create a new parallel brand for the emerging 'quality lifestyle' consumer. Sure we incorporate our audiophile knowledge in Lyric R&D, but the needs and desires of this consumer are different. It's also a superb place to develop technologies, and I'm confident Lyric R&D will flow into our specialist models.

**Would you say that the priority here is sonics or packaging?**

Sound is at the top of any development planning, but where Lyric did head down a new path was that the product had to be intuitive to operate and non-threatening for the non-enthusiast. Lyric needed development from one of the UK's most advanced industrial design teams to help us make a box of high-performance electronics look classy and have enough subtle detailing to keep owners interested over the years. This is the beginning of a range of Lyric models that could well last alongside Cyrus separates for another 30 years.

**How did you implement Class D power amplification?**

Tuning this sort of amplifier is completely different from tuning a Class AB design such as a Cyrus 8, and closer to our zero feedback mono amps in that both the Lyric 09 and the ZF mono amps possess such enormous dynamic ability, power and subtlety that top-quality loudspeakers are required to ensure subtle qualities are not overlooked when progressing through the tuning process. The amp provides very strong bass control and I recommend partnering with speakers costing £10,000 or more. Clearly most owners will choose more affordable speakers, but we believe it is also capable of getting the most from more serious speakers.

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# How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most rigorous test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

## Unique group tests

This month's group test is supported by rigorous listening tests, backed up with objective lab testing

### LOUDSPEAKER GROUP TEST

**IN THE EIGHTIES**, you not only needed a bunch of expensive equipment to measure loudspeakers, you also needed an anechoic chamber. That all changed when time-gated measurement techniques were introduced, allowing pseudo-anechoic measurements to be made in a normal room using a PC.

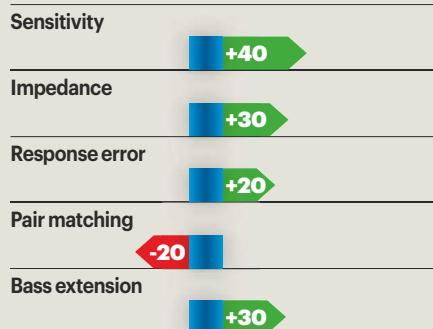
To achieve the most accurate results you need a costly, highly specified measurement microphone and post-processing software.

The measurement microphone comprises a GRAS 40BE capsule, coupled with the same company's 26CB preamplifier and 12AL power supply. Together these achieve an extraordinary frequency response, much wider than that of

most measurement microphones, specified as 4Hz-100kHz, -3dB. They feed a custom preamplifier built around the ultra-low distortion, ultra-low noise AD797 op-amp, and thereafter a carefully calibrated M-Audio Audiophile 192 soundcard.

ARTA software measures frequency responses using a periodic pink noise test signal, with dual-channel measurement removing the effects of the driving amplifier. An average of 10 consecutive measurements reduces any influence of environmental noise. LIMP software is used to measure impedance modulus and phase, via a connector box containing a high-precision series resistance.

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE



KEY: ■ Group average  
■ % below average ■ % above average



### SENSITIVITY

A speaker's sensitivity determines how loud the music is at a given volume control setting. We measure the sound pressure level achieved at a distance of 1m on axis for a pink noise input of 2.83Vrms over the frequency range 250Hz-20kHz, averaged for the review pair.

### IMPEDANCE

A speaker's impedance determines how easy it is for an amplifier to drive it - high impedance is easier, low impedance harder. We quantify this by measuring the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) - the load resistance that would cause the same peak power dissipation in a Class B amplifier's output stage as the speaker does, over the frequency range 20Hz-20kHz.

### RESPONSE ERROR

To deliver a neutral tonal balance and low coloration, a speaker must give an almost flat sound pressure response versus frequency on the listening axis. We measure the difference between the highest and lowest output sound pressure level, in decibels, over the frequency range 250Hz-20kHz, using 10th-octave response smoothing.

### PAIR MATCHING

In order to provide a stable stereo image and consistent tonal balance from both channels, a stereo pair of loudspeakers should have minimal disparity between their frequency responses. We measure the largest difference between the responses of the review pair, in decibels, over the frequency range 250Hz-20kHz, using 10th-octave response smoothing.

### BASS EXTENSION

Few speakers maintain their output down to the lowest audible frequency (nominally 20Hz), and bass extension has usually to be traded off against sensitivity and cabinet size. We measure bass extension using the near-field technique and then apply diffraction correction using the KHF tool in LspCAD. The quoted frequency is that at which the response has fallen by 6dB ref 200Hz.

### REFERENCE SYSTEM

#### CD PLAYER

Audiolab 8200CD

#### AMPLIFICATION

Creek Destiny 2

#### LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

QED X-Tube 400

#### EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS

Quadraspire

### CD TEST MUSIC

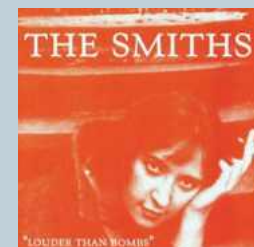
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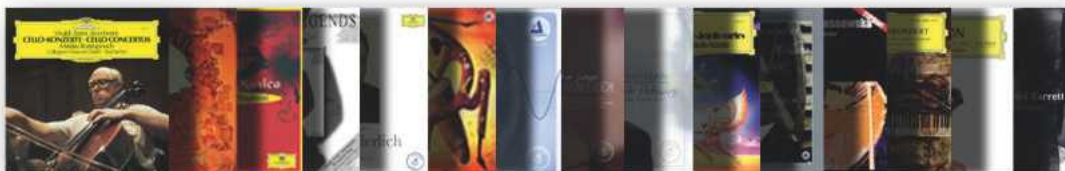
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# Group**test**

STANDMOUNT SPEAKERS £639-£810

## Hot property

Rising house prices means smaller homes for many. **David Price** rounds up six of the best smallish standmount speakers to fit inside





**OUR HOMES ARE** generally less spacious than they used to be, and new-build houses are a world away from the size of those built in the sixties. Britons are downsizing, and that especially goes for the young who simply can't afford to buy a large place to live or need to continue to reside with their folks.

So where does this leave hi-fi? Smaller is the simple answer to that

one. Expect high-quality one-box systems like Cyrus' new Lyric (check out our review of the 09, starting on page 16) to appeal more to those who in previous generations would have bought big stack systems. And don't be surprised if the boom in big floorstanders – which took off so strongly in the late nineties – shows a real sign of slowing down in sales. The lack of available space in people's

abodes will become an ever more pressing issue as the population continues to grow.

### Modern age

Fortunately though, help is at hand in the hi-fi world. The latest crop of mid-price standmounters is refreshingly capable, with manufacturers ever more inclined to be bold and innovative. We're seeing wider use of modern cone materials, better braced cabinets and all sorts of other design flourishes. It's a really healthy state of affairs because it gives buyers choice. Choice means competition, and competition drives quality up and prices down. The only trouble is where to start?

Here to help is our roundup of six high-quality standmounting speakers. Read on to see how they sound, and then use this as a starting point for your final purchasing decision... ▶



### ON TEST



**ATC SCM7**  
£810 p27

A hi-fi standmounter from a company with a reputation for professional monitors. It looks great, but how does it sound to a domestic audience?



**Dali Ikon 2 Mk2**  
£639 p29

There's no denying this Danish loudspeaker company's fine provenance, and there's also no denying the Ikon 2's very interesting three-driver design.



**Focal Aria 906**  
£798 p31

One of France's largest and most successful brands, this new box sports a dramatic upgrade to its mid/bass unit in the form of a new flax cone material.



**KEF LS50**  
£800 p33

Celebrating its fiftieth anniversary recently, esteemed speaker maker KEF decided to knock up something a little special, and the LS50 (get it?) is the result.



**Mission SX2**  
£700 p35

One of Britain's most commercially successful speaker brands of the modern age, can the smart little SX2 put its name on your shortlist?



**Monitor Audio Silver 2**  
£650 p37

A British company that's sold serious speakers since the seventies. The Silver series is MA's strongest ever affordable range, and promises much.



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## ATC SCM7 £810

Here's a loudspeaker company with its heart and soul in the professional audio market, but how does it sound?

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
ATC SCM7

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
Standmount loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
7.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
174 x 300 x 215mm

**FEATURES**

- Two-way, infinite baffle loudspeaker
- 25mm tweeter, 125mm mid/bass unit
- Claimed sensitivity: 84dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
ATC Loudspeaker Technology Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01285 760561

**WEBSITE**  
atcloudspeakers.co.uk

It's only since the eighties that ATC has made domestic loudspeakers, and even now it doesn't change its range very often. This is the company's most affordable speaker, as it's far smaller than most of its products, but still fairly big by the standards of this group. The two-way design sports a new ATC designed and built 25mm soft dome tweeter with neodymium magnet and precision alloy wave guide, working with a 125mm ATC designed and built mid/bass unit with an inhouse, hand-wound precision flat wire coil and 3kg optimised motor assembly. Compared to many speakers here, the ATC seems rather old fashioned – but that is because it doesn't have any of the features that some regard as gimmicks, such as elaborately shaped cabinets or fancy-sounding cone materials. You might say it is conservative with a small 'c', and none the worse for it; certainly the construction quality is excellent. One trait it shares with all ATCs is that it needs a lot of power to drive; the company claims 84dB/1W/1m sensitivity and this is very poor for a modern loudspeaker, but understandable considering its size and infinite baffle design. ATC says it is an easy load, but it still needs a serious amount of watts; I'd advise that at least 40W RMS per channel is needed to make the SCM7 go loud in

even a medium-sized room – so do take care to match carefully.

### Sound quality

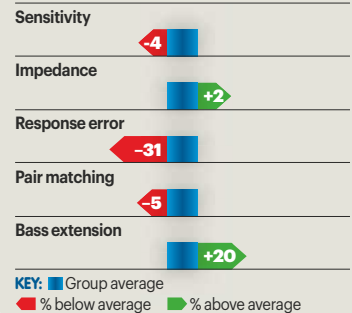
This little speaker sounds nothing like the others here. What it doesn't do is throw a massive sound into the room, hanging holographic images all around – that's the KEF. Nor does it thump out large amounts of bass (the Monitor Audio), or indeed go loud in an easy and lazy way (Focal, take a bow). Rather, the ATC brings its own unique skill set to the party, and does things none of the others here can. It is tight, taut, rhythmic, propulsive, expressive and unerringly musical. More than any other speaker here it gives you the sense that music is foremost an emotional experience.

Bass fans will love its tunefulness, but miss hearing the bottom octave of their favourite songs. Its midband is very good in its way, but doesn't sound sumptuous or especially sophisticated, and the treble is solid but doesn't have any special, ethereal quality. But cue up Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* and suddenly you're engrossed, absolutely captivated and pulled right in. It's the high quality, small and sealed cabinet that does it; it doesn't store any energy and has no bass port to huff and puff, and the result is that bass transients are lightning-fast with no overhang. At the same time, the ATC really showcases dynamic accents, and together this makes for a

### ON TEST

As the SCM7 is the smallest speaker in the group and has closed box bass loading, it is no surprise that it has the lowest sensitivity at 82.1dB – almost 2dB lower than ATC claims. Lower impedance could help, but ATC has chosen to keep the SCM7 relatively easy to drive. Its minimum modulus of 5.0ohms was highest in the group, but large phase angles reduced the minimum EPDR to 2.4ohms at 118Hz, near the group average. On-axis frequency response trend is essentially flat, leading to the second-lowest response errors, 200Hz-20kHz, of  $\pm 2.7$ dB and  $\pm 3.1$ dB. Pair matching wasn't as good at  $\pm 1.7$ dB, but mostly the matching was tighter. Given the small cabinet, bass extension of 58Hz is fair, but most of the larger speakers here achieve better. Fast initial energy decay and well-controlled resonances make for a mostly clean cumulative spectral decay waterfall. **KH**

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE



seat-of-the-pants listen. The Smiths' *Girl Afraid* is an enthralling three minutes, wonderfully fast and fluid.

Tonally it's a little dry, but it does still give a decent sense of what's going on in the recording. Not having a big cabinet thrumming away unlocks a whole world of detail, making Herbie Hancock's *Speak Like A Child* a pleasure. Piano has a solidity of tone that you can't not love, and flutes and flugelhorns have a simple purity that's only available when there's no cabinet joining in the party. Even with a relatively light bass, jazz sounds gloriously propulsive, the listener getting their rhythm cues elsewhere. Bliss ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★☆

**LIKE:** Wonderful propulsive; taut bass; clean midband; build

**DISLIKE:** Poor bass extension; needs lots of power

**WE SAY:** Fantastic, characterful speaker that won't appeal to all

#### OVERALL



# Bowers & Wilkins



## The new 600 Series. 19 years in the making.

In time, everything changes. That's progress. The new 600 Series brings 19 years of Bowers & Wilkins engineering advances, including the new Decoupled Double Dome tweeters for amazingly precise treble. But one thing hasn't changed: the new 600 Series offers the same amazing value now as when the award-winning original launched in 1995.

[www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk](http://www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk)



# Dali

## Ikon 2 Mk2 **£639**

Coming straight out of Denmark, Dali has been around for a few decades, but will it make experience count?

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Dali Ikon 2 Mk2

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**TYPE**  
Standmount loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
8.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
188 x 441 x 317mm

**FEATURES**

- Three-way bass-reflex loudspeaker
- 28mm tweeter, 17 x 45mm ribbon, 160mm mid/bass unit
- Claimed sensitivity: 86.5dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Dali UK

**TELEPHONE**  
0845 6443537

**WEBSITE**  
dali-uk.co.uk

**B**ecause the UK market is a particularly hard nut to crack, especially for speaker manufacturers, it's fair to say that Dali is less well known than it deserves to be. But recently there's been a concerted push and the name is making inroads here, in no small part due to a very impressive range. The Ikon 2 dares to be different thanks to its three-way design. A single 160mm wood fibre coned bass driver takes care of all frequencies up to 2.5kHz, while a 'hybrid tweeter module' handles everything further up. The 17x45mm ribbon and 28mm soft textile dome share mid and treble duties, crossing over at 14kHz. This is a most unusual arrangement on a speaker of this price, and should give it a distinctive sound. Ribbon tweeters are almost unknown under £700 and offer a delicacy and spaciousness that conventional domes can't.

The cabinet is more customary being a standard bass reflex box available in a choice of black ash vinyl, light walnut vinyl and white high gloss vinyl. Neither of these finishes are particularly attractive, and the Ikon looks and feels the cheapest speaker here. Perhaps Dali has spent the money on the drive units rather than the cabinet finish, which would be no bad thing! A quoted sensitivity of 86.5dB/1W/1m makes this better than the ATC, and

fairly class-competitive, but still not an ideal partner for low-powered amps; ideally you're looking at using it with a decent transistor amplifier of at least 50W RMS per channel.

### Sound quality

The Dali sounds a lot better than it looks. It presents a slightly bright face even when off axis, although not firing them directly at the listener helps considerably. This tonal brightness doesn't necessarily mean it's harsh, as it sounds fairly even and all-of-a-piece, although every now and then, the odd cymbal crash comes out and hits you a little harder than expected!

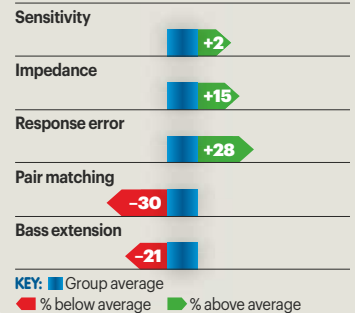
The Dali comes over as a well engineered loudspeaker with a surprisingly extended and firm bass, but this never overpowers the listener. It's also to be congratulated for lacking any kind of boxy thrum in the upper bass and lower mid – despite the rather cheap-looking cabinet that you'd think might not behave itself. Up in the midband it's detailed and open, but again it doesn't approach the KEF or Monitor Audio in this respect. Happily, the Dali hangs the soundstage back just a little more than the Mission, so never appears overly forward or aggressive despite its 'well lit' tonal balance.

The Herbie Hancock track shows the Ikon 2's stereo width to be a little disappointing – it doesn't push out as

### ON TEST

Dali claims 86.5dB sensitivity for the Ikon 2 Mk2, which is a little on the conservative side according to the 87.2dB that we recorded. Nominal impedance is 6ohms, which accords well with our measured minimum modulus of 4.5ohms, and impedance phase angles are well enough controlled that the EPDR dips to a minimum of 2.7ohms at 116Hz, making the Dali the easiest speaker in the group to drive. On-axis frequency response is essentially flat in trend before beginning to rise above 7kHz – an uptilt that will be countered if the speakers are listened to off-axis as recommended. The response errors should then be less than the  $\pm 5.8$ dB and  $\pm 5.0$ dB we measured. Pair matching was good at  $\pm 1.1$ dB while 38Hz bass extension was best in the group. The CSD waterfall shows fast initial decay, but some low-level residual breakup resonances from the bass-mid unit. **KH**

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE



far left or right as most speakers here, falling way behind the KEF. Still, the music flows along well, the Dali managing to throw out just enough timbral detail to keep the listener gripped. The elaborate tweeter array helps here, lending a satisfying degree of space and depth to the music. Speaking of which, despite being bright, the tweeter(s) never sound harsh; they're obviously good quality and really add to the speaker's overall performance with excellent filigree detail on struck steel string guitars. An interesting speaker, there's nothing weak anywhere and it's never a boring listen, just don't partner it with unduly bright ancillaries ● ▶

### HifiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Engaging, animated sound; detailed, open treble; taut bass

**DISLIKE:** Tonally too bright for some; poor finish; dated styling

**WE SAY:** Quirky but capable speaker that some will love, others may not

#### OVERALL





IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

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[www.dali-speakers.com](http://www.dali-speakers.com)



IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

# DALI EPICON 2

## Escapism for the Mind

If you dream of fantastic sound experiences the EPICON 2 is the perfect escape. Don't be fooled by the size of this speaker – the most diminutive in the EPICON family produces an astonishingly large and accurate three-dimensional sound that will impress even the most rigorous demands of true audiophiles.

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To learn more about the EPICON series and the revolutionary SMC magnet system please visit our website: [www.dali-speakers.com](http://www.dali-speakers.com)



# Focal

## Aria 906 **£798**

The biggest speaker brand in the world that's pretty much unheard of in the UK. Is this about to change?

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Focal Aria 906

**ORIGIN**  
France

**TYPE**  
Standmount loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
8.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
225 x 390 x 250mm

**FEATURES**

- Two-way bass-reflex loudspeaker
- 25mm Au/Mg tweeter, 165mm flax mid/bass unit
- Claimed sensitivity: 89.5dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Focal UK Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
0845 6602680

**WEBSITE**  
focal.com

**F**lax cones bring a more neutral and sweeter sound to mid-priced Focals, one that's smoother and softer yet if anything faster and more musical. The 906 gets an all-new 165mm mid/bass unit then, manufactured in France. Flax is a special type of textile fibre said to have been around since the fourth century BC, and used by the Egyptians as protective cloth for mummies, no less! In this speaker it is sandwiched between thin glass fibre sheets, making for a light but rigid speaker cone. It marries up to a 25mm aluminium and magnesium inverted dome tweeter, again a bespoke Focal design, crossing over at 2.8kHz. The cabinet is made from MDF with non-parallel side panels, braced internally; it comes in a choice of black high gloss and walnut finishes, with a leatherette-finished front baffle. A rap of the knuckles reveals this isn't the quietest cabinet here, even if it is one of the best finished. The Focal proves to be one of the more sensitive, going loud with only a moderate amount of power.

### Sound quality

Previous mid-priced Focals had a slightly shouty upper midband that required careful matching, but the new Aria 906 is nothing like this. The new flax cone invests the speaker with a warm, almost sumptuous

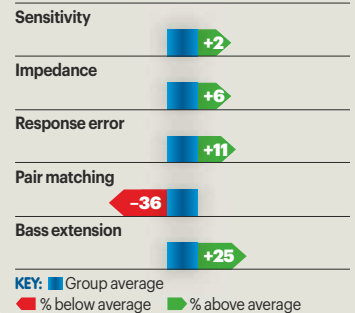
nature that takes it right to the heart of the sound that many British buyers go for. For its size, it's surprisingly large in scale, the fulsome sound is generally enjoyable to listen to. There's more bass energy from the 906 than most others in this group, adding a sense of physical heft to the music that isn't there with, say, the KEF LS50. This goes up to a wide, open and quite deep midband that's far less intrusive than the Mission; you find yourself being sucked into the music rather than having it brought right to you. Treble is good, with a fair amount of extension, but the metal tweeter does make its presence felt slightly; its less slick than the Dali or the KEF.

Cue up the beautifully recorded Isaac Hayes track and you find yourself luxuriating in a deep, wide and tall recorded acoustic; the keyboard is powerful and rich with sparkling harmonics, vocals are effortless and full of timbre and strings sweet and satisfying. But when the backing instruments kick in with a powerful bass guitar part, the Focal begins to show a slight overhang lower down. Bass is satisfyingly deep and lacking in compression – one of the best here – but there's definitely a sense of the cabinets thrumming a little too much, especially in comparison with the KEFs and ATCs. The upside of this is that the 906 can pummel out vast tracts of low

### ON TEST

Focal's claim of 89.5dB sensitivity for the 906 looks optimistic in light of our measured pink noise figure of 87.6dB. Neither does the nominal 8ohms impedance equate with the specified 4.6 ohms minimum (we measured a dip to 4.4 ohms) – 6 ohms would be more appropriate. But impedance phase angles are sufficiently well controlled that the EPDR doesn't fall below 2.5ohms, making the Focal one of the easier loads to drive. On-axis frequency response displays a marked presence band depression followed by a rise in extreme treble output because of the low 24kHz breakup resonance of the tweeter. Response errors are consequently above the group average at  $\pm 4.6$ dB and  $\pm 4.7$ dB respectively, but pair matching was tight at  $\pm 1.0$ dB. Bass extension was poorest in group at 60Hz, but the CSD waterfall was mostly clean with only low-level treble resonances visible. **KH**

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE



frequencies, without so much as breaking into a sweat.

The Smiths track shows that you're always listening to the Focal's own particular rendition of things. It's less transparent than the KEF, for example, and invests a sort of big-hearted warmth into everything it touches. It actually makes a really nice noise, but the problem is that the speaker does add its own two cents. I can see the 906 working best in larger rooms with a lower-powered amplifier – including more lively valve types – as it makes a spacious, enjoyable sound without demanding too much power. It's always fun, and you can't say fairer than that ●

### HifiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

**OVERALL**  
★★★★★

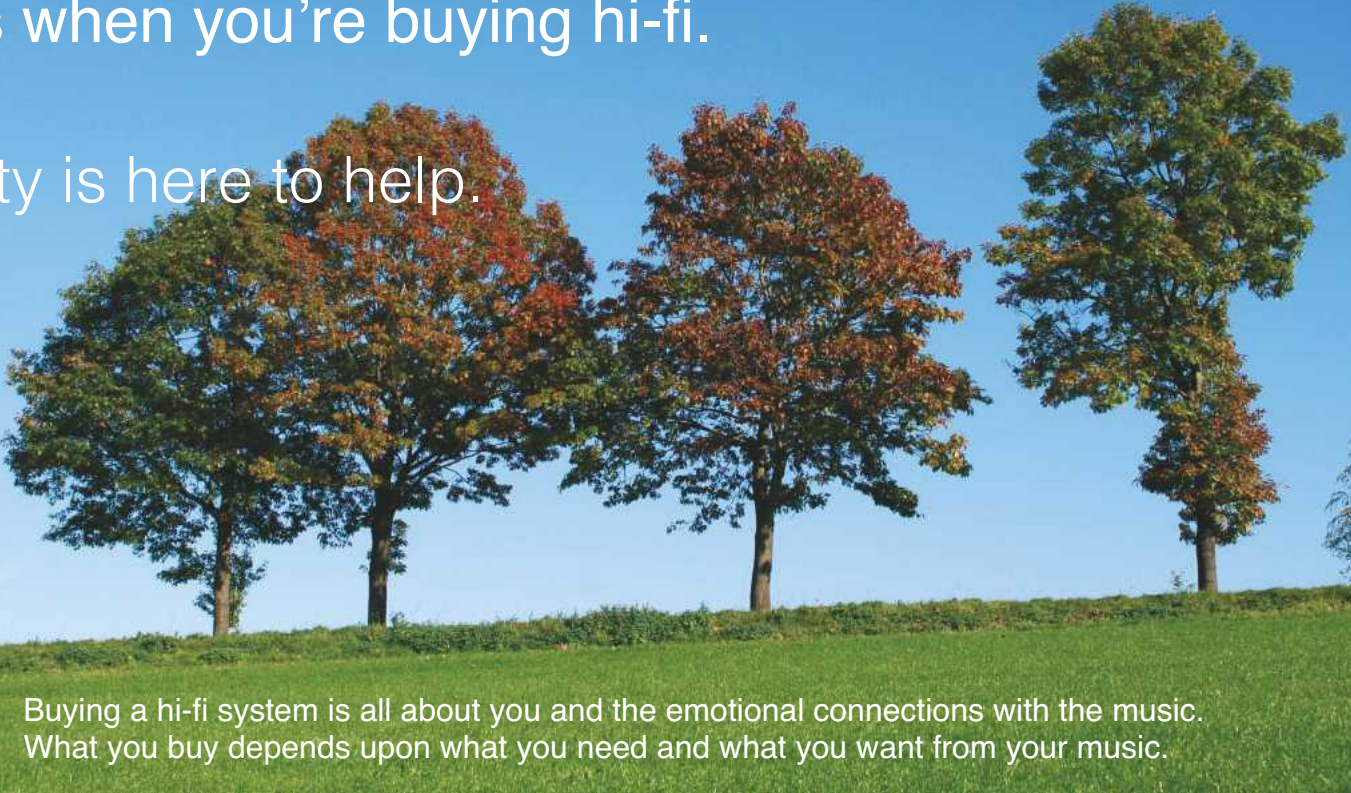
**LIKE:** Scale; warmth; smoothness; musicality; easily driven

**DISLIKE:** Slight bass looseness; slight upper treble glare

**WE SAY:** Great, friendly, enjoyable standmounting speaker

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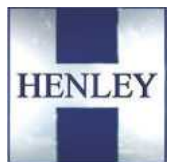
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## KEF LS50 **£800**

What better way to celebrate a 50th anniversary than releasing a special speaker, but will it do KEF justice?

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
KEF LS50

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
Standmount loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
7.2kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
200 x 302 x 278mm

**FEATURES**

- Two-way bass-reflex loudspeaker
- 1x 25mm Al tweeter, 130mm Al/Mg mid/bass driver
- Claimed sensitivity: 85dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
GP Acoustics Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01622 672261

**WEBSITE**  
kef.com/gb

**J**ustifiably popular, the LS50 gets off to a great start thanks to its gorgeous looks. There aren't many speakers in this Group Test that partners are likely to enthuse about, but this might just be the one. Its lovely 130mm 'rose gold'-coloured, magnesium/aluminium coned mid/bass driver makes a bold visual statement. Set into this is a 25mm aluminium tweeter, forming KEF's patented Uni-Q array, which appears to come from a single-point source – it's far more than just a gimmick. Crossover point is 2.2kHz.

The cabinet is really nicely done too, with a beautiful piano black lacquer and superb detailing – this loudspeaker looks far more expensive than it actually is. The front baffle is curved and made from a special polyester resin combined with glass fibre and calcium carbonate; the rear panel sports luxurious single-wire terminals and a decidedly unconventional-looking bass reflex port. It feels solid when you rap it with your knuckles, and is quite heavy given its relatively diminutive dimensions. KEF claims a sensitivity of 85dB, which is middling for a box of this size.

### Sound quality

The LS50 is a larger than life loudspeaker, throwing voices and instruments wide into the listening

room, giving that uncanny feeling of the sound hovering out into the space, completely detached from the speakers. Soundstaging is superb then, making most others here sound boxy and shut in. UB40's *Tyler* is amazing, a vast expanse of music with each instrument in the mix located with laser-like precision.

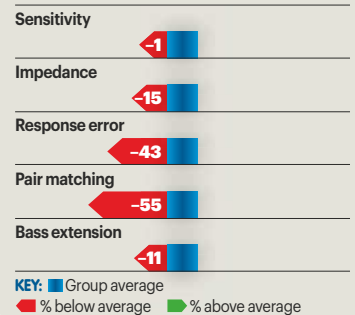
The KEF has an even, uniform tonal balance. It doesn't sound particularly powerful down in the bass, but what bass there is, is enjoyably tuneful and well extended. Ever so slightly warm, the LS50 doesn't dry out the recording, sucking the natural tonality out of instruments. Instead, it allows them to be heard in their full glory, and this extends to vocals, where there's a tangible and believable timbre. Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* sounds refreshingly natural, with no sense that the KEF is editorialising too much.

Indeed, the LS50 doesn't add much; it's actually a pretty neutral performer and throws out lots of fine detail from recordings. It's really good at conveying the gaps between the beats on the dense, crowded Smiths track, so you can hear right in and enjoy the attack transients of Johnny Marr's strummed guitar chords, for example. This gives the speaker real clarity, and also makes for a rhythmically satisfying feel. There's some slight overhang in the upper bass, which pads the sound out slightly –

### ON TEST

Given its compact dimensions, the LS50's lowish 84.7dB pink noise sensitivity was expected and accords well with KEF's specified 85dB. Low impedance is required to achieve this, though, the modulus dipping to 3.9ohms (KEF claims a lower 3.2ohms) while phase angles are sufficiently large to reduce the EPDR to twin minima of 2.0ohms at 25Hz and 148Hz. On-axis frequency response is the flattest in group with response errors of only  $\pm 2.3$ dB and  $\pm 2.4$ dB respectively, and pair matching error was group-leading too at a commendably tight  $\pm 0.7$ dB. Payback for the lowish sensitivity and impedance comes in the form of bass extension of 43Hz, which beats most of the larger speakers here. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall evinces fast initial energy decay across the spectrum, but some low-level breakup resonances in the bass-midrange cone are visible. **KH**

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE



especially compared to the ATC, which is superbly tight – but this aside the KEF is a snappy thing to listen to. Music bounces along with heady abandon, and so do you!

The treble is really good for a speaker of this type. It's smooth and well integrated with the midband, and nicely spacious too – making for a lovely, even, full-range loudspeaker that conveys the air of a good recording. Indeed, it's so insightful you can also hear the tape hiss on the UB40 track. The only caveat is that it's a little more directional than you might hope; there's definitely a sweet spot; owners will need some experimentation here ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**LIKE:** Soundstaging; detail; transparency; build; finish

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★  
**DISLIKE:** Treble more directional than some

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**WE SAY:** Beautiful looking little box with great sound

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

#### OVERALL



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## Mission SX2 £700

In the speaker game since the late seventies, Mission knows the key to mid-price success better than most

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Mission SX2

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
Standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
10kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
231 x 381 x 365mm

#### FEATURES

- Two-way bass reflex design
- 25mm titanium tweeter, 160mm metal/fibre mid/bass driver
- Claimed sensitivity: 85dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
IAG Group Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01480 447700

**WEBSITE**  
mission.co.uk

**S**peakers like the very first 770 loudspeaker and later the 700 have won Mission many friends over the years. Since those early days it has had a presence in the mid-price standmounter market, and in a sense the SX2 is the 700's spiritual successor. The SX range, launched just a few months back, sports brand new metal/fibre composite cone materials, using a mixture of pulp and aramid particles bonded to a precision-formed alloy 'voice plate'; the SX2 has a 160mm version of this as its mid/bass driver, and this mates to a new 25mm titanium dome tweeter, which takes over at 2kHz.

Unusually, the SX2 has a diecast aluminium front baffle, which should provide a very strong but light and non-resonant mounting for the drive units. The cabinet itself is a very well finished, profiled affair that comes in a choice of standard real wood veneers in black, cherry or rosewood, with premium piano black or piano rosewood lacquered options. The quoted sensitivity of 85dB/1W/1m is middling in this group, so you'll need a reasonably (50W or above) powerful solid-state amplifier if you want decent sound levels in larger rooms. The rear-mounted bass port means the speaker needs a little room from the rear wall to breathe, and it works best slightly toed-in, too, sat on a stand at least 16in high.

### Sound quality

The SX2 is voiced for fun; whatever you choose to play the result is always highly engaging. Indeed it proves very immediate and upfront by the standards of the group, but without in any way sounding hard or forward. Indeed, this is quite a clever trick, the result being that Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* comes over intimately, almost like listening through a pair of headphones; everything is clearly spelled out and vividly etched in space, right in front of you.

Contrast this to the KEF LS50, and the Missions seem a little crowded and claustrophobic. This is for two reasons; first the KEF is more spacious left-to-right, yet hangs back from the listener a little more, giving a more panoramic view. Secondly, the SX2's midband – although apparently quite detailed – can sound a little imprecise and out of focus. Although it catches the leading edges of notes well, it doesn't let go of the trailing parts of the envelope so well, apparently slurring things slightly.

You'd never call the SX2 a bad speaker, but it doesn't have the clarity of some others here then, and this isn't aided by a tweeter that isn't as extended as the best of the rest. UB40's *Tyler* loses some space, as does The Smiths track. It's decent enough but lacks sparkle at the very top, contributing to a slightly congested feeling across the upper midband.

### ON TEST

Mission claims 85dB sensitivity for the SX2, which accords well with our measured 85.2dB. Nominal impedance is 6-8ohms, but Mission's stated 3.9ohms minimum – let alone our measured dip down to 3.3ohms – makes 4ohms more appropriate. With quite large phase angles this is sufficient to drop the EPDR to 1.8ohms at 120Hz and 1.9ohms at 360Hz, making the SX2 one of the more difficult loads. On-axis frequency response has a pretty flat trend up to 7kHz above, which treble output declines before a cliff edge rise to the tweeter's dome resonance at 22kHz. This increases response errors to  $\pm 3.3$ dB and  $\pm 4.6$ dB respectively, but over much of the spectrum the output is flatter. Pair matching was poor at  $\pm 1.9$ dB, but again the extreme treble was to blame. Bass extension beat the group average at 45Hz, but low-level breakup modes were visible in the CSD waterfall. **KH**

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Sensitivity

-1

Impedance

-23

Response error

-5

Pair matching

+21

Bass extension

-7

KEY: ■ Group average

■ % below average ■ % above average

One point in its favour is that it's never harsh, so it will partner brighter sources better than, say, the LS50.

Bass, however, is the Mission's forte, proving nicely tight and taut, and here it makes some rival offerings appear flabby and ponderous in comparison. The KEF isn't bad, but the Mission is obviously better and combines a good bit of weight – able to better convey the grumbling bass guitar of the Isaac Hayes track, for example, with a slightly more purposeful rhythmic gait. It makes music roll along at a fair rate of knots, and really gets into the groove. Overall, it's a fine speaker then, but certainly not unsurpassed ●

### HifiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Great styling; fine build; large, engaging, upfront sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Slight lack of upper bass and midband clarity

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Enjoyable, involving speaker that's fine value for money

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★



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**twenty<sup>®</sup>·23**



**twenty<sup>®</sup>·24**





## Monitor Audio Silver 2 £650

Another eighties superstar, Monitor Audio has the pedigree to take the gold, or should that be Silver...

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Monitor Audio Silver 2

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
Standmount loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
9.7kg

**DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
230 x 375 x 323mm

**FEATURES**

- Two-way, reflex ported loudspeaker
- 25mm C-CAM tweeter, 200mm RST mid/bass driver
- Claimed sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Monitor Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01268 740580

**WEBSITE**  
monitoraudio.co.uk

**A**fter a conservative start to speaker production, by the eighties MA was pushing the envelope with metal dome tweeters – and then gold domes – and the Silver 2 features just this in a standard 25mm size. It also has a metal-coned mid/bass unit, which is nothing special in this company, but it's unusually large at 200mm, requiring a fractionally wider front baffle than is fashionable these days. This big driver has been squeezed in, so the speaker doesn't look too bulbous. It confers real benefits; larger drivers tend to have more in reserve, sounding more effortless and promising higher efficiency if implemented correctly. In the case of the Silver 2, it's quoted at 88dB, which is good by group standards and it duly goes a lot louder with the same amount of power as the ATC.

The speaker itself is beautifully finished, one of the very best here, and comes in selected premium quality wood veneers or high gloss finishes. The sense of opulence is heightened by the C-CAM gold dome tweeter and the dished metal mid/bass unit. The 20mm-thick, well-braced cabinet is very sturdy when given the knuckle rap test, thanks in no small part to single bolt-through drive units. Monitor Audio says silver-plated copper wire is used internally, along with premium polypropylene film capacitors. The

bass port sits discreetly around the back, and neat magnetically fixed grilles are supplied.

### Sound quality

With the largest mid/bass driver here, it was always going to be an interesting contender, and so it proves. It's an excellent-sounding loudspeaker, blessed with much of the clarity of the KEF, most of the immediacy of the Mission, plus the weight and depth of the Focal and its very own distinctive, highly detailed sound. Rather like a lazy, large-engined luxury car, the Monitor Audio can deliver all the power it needs, but does it in a more relaxed and less forced manner than most here. Those big mid/bass units don't augment its bass output particularly, but they offer a more gutsy yet relaxed presentation that's very good at carrying dynamic accents that most others miss.

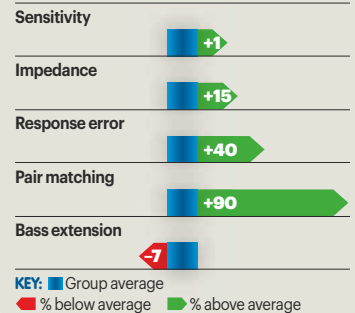
Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* is a joy. Percussion is better accented than most here, giving a better sense of rhythmic flow, and the crashing keyboard cadences push out in a more arresting and explicit way. But at the same time, the tonal purity is such that the piano sound is beautifully carried. Behind this, violins soar in a wonderfully accurate and expressive way, and the speakers catch the drama of this great song.

Interestingly, the Silver 2 also pushes out a wider soundstage than

### ON TEST

MA's claim of 88dB sensitivity looks optimistic given our measured pink noise figure of 86.7dB. Likewise the 8ohms nominal impedance, our measured minimum of 4.6ohms indicating that a 6ohms figure is more apposite. While a low of 2.7ohms in the EPDR would appear to make the Silver 2 one of the easier loads here, further dips to 2.8, 3.0 and 3.1ohms make it more challenging. Overall frequency response trend shows a mild presence band dip, but a narrowband notch at about 2.6kHz increases the response errors to high values of  $\pm 5.7$ dB and  $\pm 6.1$ dB, and pair matching was the worst in group at a poor  $\pm 3.2$ dB although again the worst departures were narrowband. Bass extension was a little better than average at 45Hz. Despite the showy dimpling of the bass-mid diaphragm, severe breakup resonances were visible in the CSD waterfall above 2kHz. **KH**

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE



its rivals. It can't match the superb KEF, but it isn't far off and gives a great sense of space to recordings. You can really hear inside and drill down into the low-level detail, in a way that the Mission simply doesn't allow. The Smiths' *Girl Afraid* is wonderfully open and detailed, but still carries the emotion within the song. Snare drums sound tight, while treble is delicate and smooth; the Monitor Audio tweeter proves one of the best in the group, with real delicacy that makes other seem ragged. The only downside is just a touch of upper and lower bass box boom, but no worse than any of the other speakers in this round up ● ▶

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**LIKE:** Refined treble; dynamics; detail; musical ease; finish

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★  
**DISLIKE:** Upper bass not rock-solid, but still fine

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**WE SAY:** Excellent all rounder with a performance way beyond its price

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

#### OVERALL



# Group test verdict

As the dust settles on this month's loudspeaker face off, **David Price** provides us with the final verdict on how the six models really stack up

**I AM SURPRISED** by how diverse this group turns out to be. That's why it's important to try them if at all possible with the rest of your system before buying.

Mission's SX2 sounds very good in isolation, but in this company it is overshadowed. It's nicely built and has an affable, engaging and upfront sound, but by the standards of the group it is a tad muddled.

The Dali Ikon 2 is a good speaker with especially fine treble, but it doesn't give the sort of scale or bass power that many others managed here, and the overall finish and

styling is frankly sub-par in this very impressive company.

Focal's Aria 906 proves to be an excellent all rounder, the sort of thing most listeners will enjoy and few will take a dislike to. On the end of a decent system it's capable of truly impressive results and has the bonus of being very efficient for those running smaller amps in larger rooms, but is beaten here at the price.

Things get trickier now, as we have three superb but very different speakers, and the ranking really depends more on the buyer than the product itself – but here goes! Placed

third is the Monitor Audio Silver, only because it spreads its abilities a little more thinly and doesn't excel in one specific area. It gives a powerful and expansive sound that's very enjoyable and highly detailed. The standard of finish is better even than the KEF, which is saying something, and the Silver 2 is a remarkable value loudspeaker.

The KEF is another superb speaker with the best imaging here, plus excellent detailing and fine tonality. With most systems it would likely win the group, but it's just beaten here by the ATC.



With a powerful amplifier, a smooth source and properly positioned, ATC's SCM7 is capable of a wonderful flowing musicality that gets into the groove like no other here. In a well-matched system, you will be amazed at its rhythmic and dynamic alacrity.



Make/model	ATC SCM7	Dali Ikon 2 Mk2	Focal Aria 906	KEF LS50	Mission SX2	Monitor Audio Silver 2
<b>Price</b>	£810	£639	£798	£800	£700	£650
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Value</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Build</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Ease of drive</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Overall</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	The most musically convincing here, but you'll need a serious system to drive it. A worthy winner	A pleasant, engaging speaker with a lovely, sparkling treble – but a little on the bright side of life	A great all rounder with a smooth, easy, open sound; also great for lower-power amplifiers	Outstanding design with a wonderful, room-filling sound – plus loads of detail. Looks great, too	Very exciting listen, with an upfront and engaging sound; nice styling rounds off the package	Extremely high achiever right across the board; superlative finish, powerful sound

### Key features

<b>Dual concentric</b>	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
<b>Three-way</b>	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>Bi-wire</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Reflex port</b>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Infinite baffle</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No	No

### TRY WITH THESE

#### CD PLAYER: Audiolab 8200CD £700

Still one of our favourite mid-priced silver disc spinners, it gives nothing away in performance terms to any rival and provides a powerful, detailed source for them to work with. Its digital inputs give it added DAC functionality, and very good it sounds too!



#### INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: Creek Evolution 50A £700

A little less lush in tonality than the Arcam, this is more suited to the likes of the even-handed Monitor Audio and the warmer Focal, and also makes the Mission sing. It's an excellent, open sounding amplifier with lots of power at the price and fine dynamics; one of Creek's best value amps.



#### INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: Exposure 3010S2 £1,350

All the speakers here will respond well to a really good premium-priced integrated amplifier, and the Exposure is just this. Compared to the cheaper Creek it is a good deal more transparent and controlled, yet is also more musical. Its powerful sound will make any speaker here sing.



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£649  
OR LESS

**ARCAM • FMJ CD17 / A19 • CD / AMPLIFIER**

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OR LESS

£749  
OR LESS

**AUDIOLAB • 8200CD / 8200A • CD / AMPLIFIER**

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OR LESS

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OR LESS

**CYRUS • CD i / 8 DAC • CD PLAYER / AMPLIFIER / DAC**

With its 2 x 70 w power output and extended range of digital inputs, the 8 DAC amplifier is a great partner for the new CD i CD player.



NEW

£550  
OR LESS

NEW

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OR LESS

**MARANTZ • CD6005 / PM6005 • CD / AMPLIFIER**

Replacing the 6004 models, the 6005 amp gains digital inputs using the same 24-bit/192kHz DAC as the CD player which now features enhanced USB playback and improved performance.



£599  
OR LESS

**AUDIOLAB • M-DAC • DAC / PREAMP**

Award-winning DAC featuring a USB input with asynchronous data processing along with two coaxial and optical digital inputs. High-res 24-bit/192kHz music files can be played via its coaxial input.

**AUDIOQUEST • DRAGONFLY v1.2 DAC / HEADPHONE AMP**

An affordable and easy-to-use device that delivers far superior sound by bypassing the poor quality sound card that is built into your computer. DragonFly is a sleek, flash drive sized Digital-Audio Converter that connects to a USB jack on a Mac or Windows PC, turning any computer into a true high-fidelity music source.



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**ROTEL • RA-10 / RCD-12 • AMPLIFIER / CD**

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**NAD • D 1050 DAC / HEADPHONE AMP**

The best way to add Computer Audio and HD Digital to your hi-fi system. In fact, all digital sources will get a boost when the D 1050 takes over for the inferior digital circuitry found in everything from Blu-ray, DVD and CD players, to music streamers and set-top boxes.



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Enjoy great sounding music from diverse sources, including Internet radio, music-streaming services, mobile devices, TV and other digital audio sources.



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OR LESS

AirPlay

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PRICE EXCLUDES STANDS

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**£599**  
OR LESS

**KEF • R500**

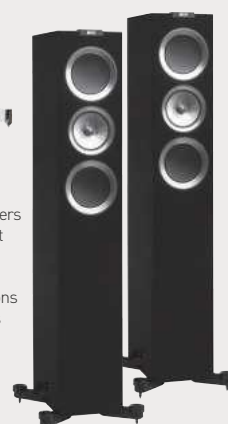
The smallest of the floorstanders in the R Series. Uses the latest generation Uni-Q driver array and two 5.25-inch aluminium bass drivers. Its slim proportions and sleek contemporary looks make it perfectly suited for any interior.

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OR LESS

**Q ACOUSTICS • CONCEPT 40**

The Q Acoustic Concept 40 floorstanding speakers are the latest addition to the award-winning Concept range and deliver unparalleled sonic performance at its price.

**NEW** £999.95  
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**NEW**

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OR LESS

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**NEW**

**£249**  
OR LESS

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**Choice EXOTICA** ACOUSTIC INSIGHT FOCASTAGE  
FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER **£2,650**



# Single figures

**Malcolm Steward** pumps up the volume and gets down with Acoustic Insight's single-driver Focastage floorstander

**I**t might be a name that you've never heard before, but Acoustic Insight actually began life five or six years ago as Aurousal and built speakers such as the VSx, which used the near-legendary Jordan full-range, JX92S metal coned drive units, before changing its name to Acoustic Insight a couple of years ago. The Focastage, reviewed here, features the most up to date array of Jordan Eikona units. Acoustic Insight chief, Kevin Warnes has long been highly enthusiastic about the unique Jordan drivers since

## The portrayal of strings is near holographic and can be really intense

using them in the first design he built many years ago in his teens.

Single-driver loudspeakers can sound wonderfully coherent and 'pure' because they do not need a crossover network chopping up the incoming signal and then sending it to disparate individual drive units. Nor do they have to make those drivers integrate and unify to present a coherent view of music. The flip side is that multiple drivers can be superior at handling the frequency extremes giving better performance in the treble and bass regions. The trade off is mid-range coherence and the openness and transparency the single, full-range driver often provides.

The Focastage is a fine-looking and unique design with a highly individual configuration. Most floorstanders of this size are three-way or two-and-a-half way designs, but the Focastage is unusual in that it uses just a pair of the aforementioned alloy-coned Jordan drivers operating in full-range mode, which claim to alter their cone stiffness according to

frequency. The speaker also includes a third driver, a dome tweeter, that you can adjust to supplement the HF output of the full-range drivers, if you so desire – if you don't want to use it you can throw a switch and disconnect it or there is a 'volume' pot to adjust its output. There is no conventional crossover network in operation here.

The cabinet employs a transmission line, which is loaded by a front-mounted port and controls the resonant frequency of the line: this delivers bass that extends to a claimed 23Hz (-6dB in-room). This new loudspeaker design also features several technological advancements including twice the original driver excursion (2cm) for extended bass with greater impact from those compact alloy-cone units.

Featuring its array of the latest Jordan ceramic coated aluminium cone full-range drivers in the mass-loaded transmission line, the Focastage design claims to provide a unique combination of innovations offering "the ultimate emotive performance" with an "electrostatic" level of clarity. The Jordan drivers in this configuration claim a frequency response that extends all the way out to 37kHz (-6dB in-room) or 27kHz (-3dB in-room), which makes an extra HF unit seem a little redundant.

## Sound quality

The Focastage delivers fine image accuracy and stability, regardless of room conditions provided it is setup appropriately. In my room optimal placement is with each speaker close to the rear wall and severely toed in. The Jordan array then provides a pin-point layout of the soundstage and the players within it.

Equally impressive is the way the speaker handles timbre, texture and tonal colour: given some instruments – strings in particular – its portrayal is

near holographic and can be amazingly intense. Witness Jane Scarpantoni's cello on Lou Reed's *Venus In Furs*: you can almost hear the cello screaming in pain, except, for when she plays the whimsical, sliding "whoop" sounds towards the end of her virtuoso solo break. Throughout her solo, the Focastage delights with its leading edge speed and note-shape, carefully delineating every touch of her bow on the strings, no matter how determined or delicate, scrupulously bringing out every nuance in her marvellous playing.

The revealing and exciting way the Focastage presents acoustic instrumentation certainly influences my choice of music during this review as I really want to hear the way it delivers much-loved music that I haven't played in a while.

One such rip that I'm eager to hear is the Vivid Curve album *Live At Edgefield*. This has always been a favourite because Curve is a power trio with a distinct difference: its 'psyfro-Celtic didgeridoo groove' lineup features guitar, percussion and, as the description suggests, the didgeridoo. This presents most hi-fi with a very stern test, especially when the band plays covers, with which music fans are already familiar. Think *Message In A Bottle* without Sting's ▶

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Acoustic Insight Focastage

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
Floorstanding loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
22kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
215 x 1,075 x 268mm

**FEATURES**  
• Full-range drive units: 2 custom Jordan Eikona full-range drivers  
• Quoted frequency response: 23Hz–37kHz (-6dB)  
• Quoted sensitivity: 89dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Acoustic Insight Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
07837 956069

**WEBSITE**  
acousticinsight.co.uk

**The cones are claimed to alter their stiffness according to frequency**



## Q&A

**Kevin Warnes**  
Acoustic Insight



**MS:** You seem highly enamoured with the work of Ted Jordan...

**KW:** Ted's masterful research over many years involved a thorough conceptual and mathematical understanding of how the cone loudspeaker performs the incredible task required from the challenging perspective of diaphragm acoustic behaviour, in particular how cone flexure plays a crucial part in frequency bandwidth and overall cone responsiveness. Working with natural laws of sound transduction proved a necessary step to solving the key problems of accurate sound production. Additionally, fine tuning of the cone properties, including curvature and material construction, has also proven essential in achieving ultimate clarity of stereophonic imaging with minimum resonance.

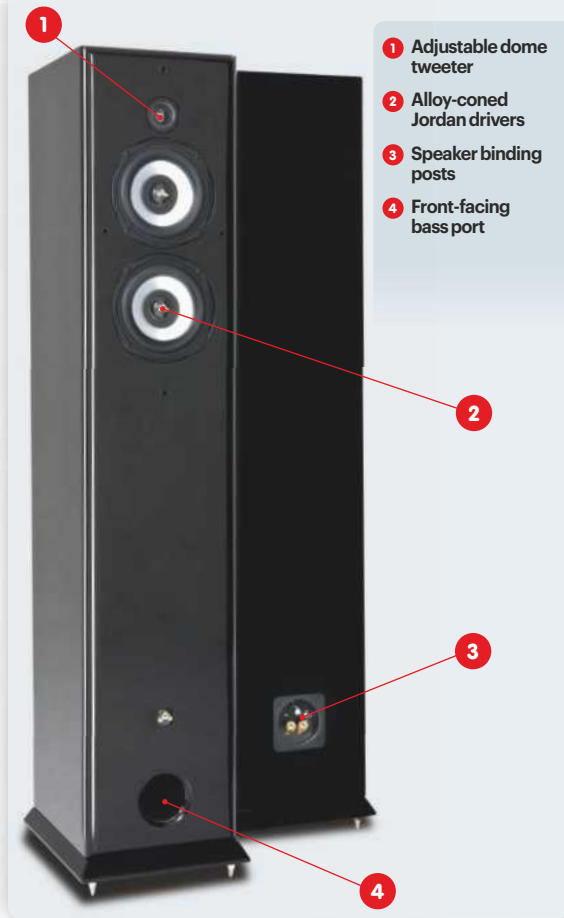
**Ultimately, what would you say your loudspeakers strive for?**

Driven by a passion for the tonal properties of live music and dissatisfied with the standard design, the aim is to convey the true 'soul' of the music using a pragmatic approach, free from esotericism and pretence. We use cutting-edge technology to bring our UK-designed, developed and crafted products to market without compromise and representing sound quality that is difficult to match at any price.

**What processes go into completing an Acoustic Insight design?**

We use the very latest computer simulation software, critical listening, stringent measurement and extensive comparative research to ensure our products break all conventional boundaries with strategic deployment of fundamental innovations in crossover-free, ultra-light, flexible, metal foil technology. The 'must hear' flawless musical timing, imaging and transient response is combined with full bass, adjustable HF and life-like dynamics to give uncannily real reproduction. Our mission is simple: to craft quality loudspeakers so realistic that they create that neck-tingling *live* experience every time, exposing music in its beautiful entirety.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 Adjustable dome tweeter
- 2 Alloy-coned Jordan drivers
- 3 Speaker binding posts
- 4 Front-facing bass port

## HOW IT COMPARES

I compare the Focastage to the extreme value for money, Neat Acoustics Motive SX2, which is a more conventional design of floorstander with the combination of a tweeter in its own internal enclosure and a port-loaded mid-bass driver. While this £1,395 design does not provide the extreme purity, transparency or precision of the Focastage, I find its low frequency authority, slam and cohesive impact more persuasive and credible. I also feel it is more musically convincing even though in hi-fi terms it does not perhaps equal the Acoustic Insight. Choosing between the two tends to be very much a 'horses for courses' situation.

infuriating "aye oohs" at the end of every line. The didgeridoo, played by self-taught 'didgister' Jeff Cooper, produces a sound replete with harmonics and overtones, not to mention a considerable frequency spread, that taxes the capabilities of any loudspeaker. Tony Sciola on guitars and mandolin and Ronnie Lamb on percussion further extend those requirements. The opening of the track *White Ochre* features bells and a gong that truly challenge the ability of any system to replicate real-world dynamic contrast accurately. The subtlety and sure-footedness of the Focastage comes to the fore here and the presentation is superb, aided, in no small part, by the spot-on precision and scale of the stereo soundstage.

I enjoy the surprisingly hearty bass on Bill Frisell's *Egg Radio* from his album *Gone, Just Like A Train*, especially considering the alignment of the speaker in the room with only minimal boundary reinforcement to bolster the low frequencies. It is not the sort of bass to stop you in your tracks, but it is certainly powerful enough to make you sit up and take notice. When I say bass, I really ought

to be saying mid-bass as that is the precise region we are really talking about here – as well as the leading edges of bass guitar notes, which this speaker sounds truly credible recreating. Those paralleled Jordan drivers are remarkably fleet of foot and seductively quick in the mid-bass frequencies and above.

Next I try the speakers with that tweeter switched on and its potentiometer set to the half-way position and there is a noticeable overall improvement in the music's presentation – a greater sense of life and vitality, particularly on vocal tracks. This does not appear to be due to any great tonal shift, but vocalists – even Lou Reed – suddenly appear far more animated and emotive. Listening to a favourite John Cale recording of *Fear Is A Man's Best Friend* from his fantastic album *Fragments Of A Rainy Season* it seems that while his voice has all of its expected anger and conviction, his piano playing sounds rather limp wristed and almost apologetic as though it were being played by Liberace or Bobby Crush instead of an angry, seemingly almost incensed and highly motivated John Cale. I suspect that this is down to the loudspeaker finding it hard to convey the lower octaves of the instrument with any genuine credulity and weight. Timing, which I don't think I have yet mentioned, is handled finely thanks to the speed and lack of smear of the Jordan drivers, as well as the lack of phase anomalies that is usually associated with crossover networks.

## Conclusion

Provided that you select appropriate music, the honest, lucid sound of the Acoustic Insight Focastage will entrance you thoroughly even if – as with most loudspeakers – it does not always escape criticism with every track you might want to hear ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



#### VALUE FOR MONEY



#### BUILD QUALITY



#### EASE OF DRIVE



#### OVERALL



#### LIKE:

Superb soundstage precision; realistic portrayal of acoustic instruments

#### DISLIKE:

Rather lacking when it comes to slamming bass

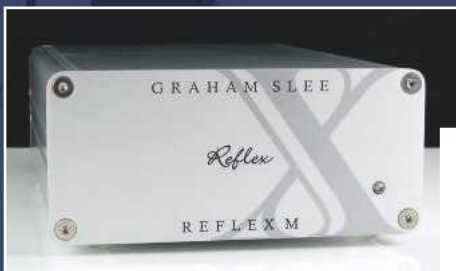
#### WE SAY:

If you prefer sweetness and spaciousness over bass, this is for you

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# Last of the Mohicans

Could we really be facing the final days of CD? If so, this could be the player to save the day reckons **Jason Kennedy**

**N**ow that the CD format appears to be in the twilight of its life Rega has produced one of the most entertaining and enjoyable players I have ever encountered. It's ironic really that when vinyl was being written off in the eighties folk in the audio business carried on improving and refining turntables and now they are significantly better than they were in the format's heyday.

It looks like something similar is starting to take place with CD. Disc sales are being trampled under the weight of downloads, yet in the last

year I encountered the best CD transport ever created in the MSB Data CD IV and now Rega has delivered all the best bits of its phenomenal Isis player in a machine that'll set you back £1,600. Helping to soften the blow of that price tag is the fact that it's also a fully fledged DAC.

The Saturn-R is a minimalist-looking player from most angles, it doesn't even have any buttons for its DAC section visible on the front panel, yet it has all the key flavours of digital input including USB. But that's not all because there are digital outputs too, two sets of them, one

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rega Saturn-R

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
CD player/DAC

**WEIGHT**  
5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 82 x 325mm

**FEATURES**  
● Digital inputs: 2x optical, 2x coaxial, Asynchronous USB  
● Digital outputs: 2x coaxial  
● Outputs: single ended RCA phono  
● Supported sample rates: 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 192kHz

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rega Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071

**WEBSITE**  
rega.co.uk

direct from the transport mechanism and the other from the DAC. Which is a first in my book. And lest you think that Rega has taken the guts of an Apollo-R and the salient parts from its DAC and stuffed them in one box, there is at least one key indicator that this is not the case. The USB input is a proper asynchronous type that can accept up to 24-bit/192kHz signals, full HD digital audio in other words. Which means Windows users will need to download a driver for the XMOS USB chip, but that's usually the case if you want to get best results. The USB input also has three LEDs surrounding it to indicate status, another first that might be of use in setup perhaps.

As previously mentioned, there are no DAC selection switches on the front panel, so you will need the Solaris remote – a properly festooned device that fooled me for a while with a button marked USB. That does not select said input, but relates to another product entirely. Eventually I discovered the input select buttons, which when brought into effect by the CD/DAC can scroll through all of the inputs.

Rega's electronics are rarely the most sexy at their pricepoint and the same could be said for the Saturn-R.



It's solidly built and inspires confidence in its longevity, but the paint finish just isn't that slick. The plastic nature of the drive cover is not entirely inspiring either, but having a fixed-disc transport is a good thing for reliability. Drawer mechanisms are prone to problems in the long term and introduce lightweight bits of plastic into the player, which must be prone to vibration. This drive also avoids the inconvenience of a puck by clamping discs with a spring-loaded mechanism. Look inside and one

**It might be a minimalist-looking player, but it's how it sounds that really counts**

thing leaps out at you, the words "A Valvepower Prime Layout", this has the hallmarks of Rega's electronics whizz Terry Bateman, a tube aficionado and presumed owner of some Porky Prime Cut vinyl – the signature of George "Porky" Peckham who mastered classics including *Led Zeppelin IV*, *Foxtrot*, *Made in Japan...*

If you look a bit closer you might be able to spot two Wolfson WM8742 digital-to-analogue converter chips that form the heart of this machine. It's these that deals with digital signals from the transport and external devices and this is where the indications of sample rate on the display originate from. It's a little vague on that front, referring to 88 – 96kHz rather than one or the other as some DACs do. It's more definite about which digital input is selected though, although you have to be pretty close to be able to read the number. The chosen filter is, however, very clear. What's less clear is why you can select one of five filters for digital inputs, but not the CD player as both use the same converter chip.

### Sound quality

I start warming the Saturn-R up in the other room and even at low level it becomes pretty apparent that it has a rhythmic integrity that is so far ahead of the norm it's uncanny. To be honest, there are very few CD players that can do pace, rhythm and timing well, but this is a member of that select club. Sitting in front of it, this is all the more obvious. Equally clear is the slightly forward nature of its presentation. If you are looking for tonal sweetness it may not be for you, if you want to get involved in the music. If, however, you want to feel like the performance is taking place right in front of you, then it is.

I find myself wondering just how Rega manages to do it, to make a

CD player that lets you hear all the important things in the music, the tempo, the timbre and the phrasing of instruments and voices. The relationship between the various elements within the orchestra or band – you can follow individuals or the whole with equal ease. The one thing that you don't notice is the sound quality, that might seem odd because it tends to be what most people think hi-fi is all about. But when you consider it, you realise that hi-fi is a tool to assist in the appreciation of music, a better way of accessing the message rather than its 'appearance'. Sound is a shallow thing, quite often a very nice thing, but not the reason

### It literally refreshes the parts that other CD players don't even know exist

why we love music. It's the heart of the music that this CD player gets too so well, it does reveal tone and imaging, but these are secondary to interplay, musicianship and composition. The various layers in a mix become apparent and the energy and feeling even more so, it literally refreshes the parts that other CD players don't even know exist and in an extremely coherent fashion.

Rega's Apollo-R does a similar thing but is a little cruder, while the Saturn-R is more revealing and subtle, live recordings are made obviously live and menacing pieces such as Massive Attack's *Inertia Creeps* become even darker. What I love most of all about the Saturn-R is the way it revives your music collection, I've bought a lot of albums that fail to retain their appeal but this machine reveals what's good about them, what's interesting and – critically

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 USB input for debugging
- 2 Optical digital output for DAC
- 3 Coaxial digital output for DAC
- 4 Optical digital output for CD
- 5 Coaxial digital inputs
- 6 Optical digital inputs

## Q&A

**Terry Bateman**  
Rega engineer



**JK: How do you manage to extract so much music from a CD?**

**TB:** A lot of it is do with the spinner circuit we unearthed many years ago. The servo, the decoding, the error correction the way the data is handled. It was developed by Global Silicon for the portable market and they tried to make it bombproof. They tried to get the best data and the most data off the disc and they built a particularly good circuit. Couple that with the Wolfson DACs and good old engineering like good power supplies, coupling capacitors, bypassing electrolytic with polyester caps etc.

**Does it share any elements with the Isis player?**

When we developed the Isis we improved the power supply in and around the player, we used some of that in the later Apollo (Apollo-R) and now the Saturn-R. It's got a bit of Isis in the power supply and we took it a little further than the Apollo-R. We got a larger transformer and improved the PSU to the audio stages, which makes the difference between the two. When we built the Apollo-R we kept some of the improvements back for the Saturn-R. Over and above the Apollo-R you've also got a high stability master clock. Saturn-R is the accumulation of improvements made for the Apollo-R and the Isis. It's also a different DAC, two Wolfson chips in parallel. We're squeezing as much out of them as we can.

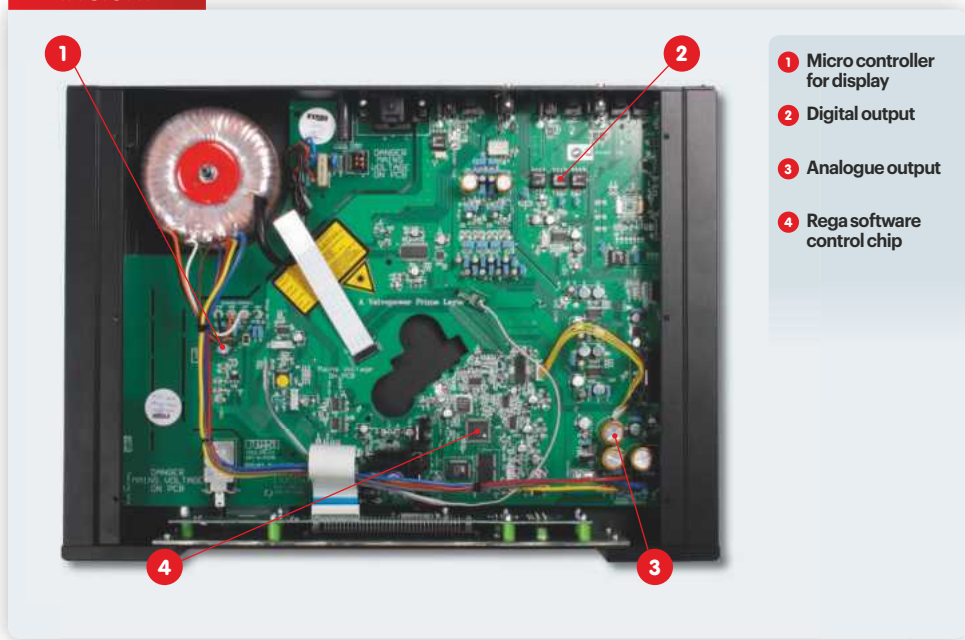
**Why have you included LEDs around the USB socket?**

It's for fault finding, debugging. We use the XMOS USB receiver that has the three LEDs that tell you what it's doing so we used them. It makes it much easier to help customers having trouble with computer audio.

**Why isn't there a DAC selection button on the front panel?**

Roy's got this very minimalist approach, if you look at the Rega turntables and compare them with what they first competed with, you can see where the approach comes from. Ultimately the design fits with Rega so we went with it.

### IN SIGHT



- 1 Micro controller for display
- 2 Digital output
- 3 Analogue output
- 4 Rega software control chip

– why it is that they you purchased them in the first place.

And, of course, it's a fully fledged DAC. Once I figure how to select USB, I discover that file playing delivers a more refined result than the disc and nearly as an engaging one. The timing remains strong and is superior to a number of pretty decent standalone DACs. If you want a rich and relaxed sound just hook up a laptop running JRiver and you will get as much out of the converter, you will also find yourself having a lot of fun.

Jeff Beck and Joss Stone's rendering of *I Put A Spell On You* has plenty of rhythmic solidity and you really appreciate Beck's fabulous playing, more perhaps than Stone's voice, but that could be a matter of taste. I try a number of tweaks with the Saturn-R to see how much more it can do, the most effective is a PS Audio P5 mains regenerator. This gives the player considerably more refinement by cleaning up the sound and letting it deliver a lot more hi-fi virtues. It doesn't enhance its ability to engage and enthrall, but does give the sound more depth and tonal richness, and these are nice things to have.

### Conclusion

If you are into hi-fi in order to get greater enjoyment out of your music collection, there are few CD spinners that will do a better job than this Rega. If on the other hand you are a dedicated audiophile, the lack of finesse and holographic imaging may not be to your taste. But ultimately hi-fi should be a conduit to the glory of music and in this respect the

Saturn-R is in another league to the majority of the competition.

It's not such a shiny piece of male jewellery and the remote is initially baffling, the red display can also be hard to read in bright light. This aside I can think of no reason why every music lover in the land does not need to own this CD player. With the

## It has a rhythmic integrity that is so far ahead of the norm it's uncanny

comprehensively equipped DAC it can also do wonders for your downloads and hi-res files.

With sales on the decline there may not be that many more great CD players produced, I recommend you get one of these while you can. You really don't know just how good the format is without it ●



### HOW IT COMPARES

As a CD player the Saturn-R will give the best at the price a very strong run for their money. In many ways its most obvious competitor is the Naim CD5 XS (£1,995), this is unlikely to match its timing skills, but it's a close call. The Naim wins on residual value, but loses on features because it doesn't have DAC inputs.

The Roksan Caspian M2 (£1,800) will give you more refinement and looks better, but can't compete on the musical engagement front. DAC wise you'd have to go to the Naim DAC-V1 (£1,250) to give it serious competition, but that does have a volume control.

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**LIKE:** The most enjoyable and musically engaging CD player you can afford.

**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**DISLIKE:** Finish is not as slick as some

**BUILD QUALITY**



**WE SAY:** If you like music you will love the Saturn-R. It reaches the parts that few digital components can

**FEATURES**



**OVERALL**





# The Age of the Superspeaker



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# Seven up

All-in-one systems are popular again. Can Ruark's R7 catch **Adrian Justins'** ears as well as his eyes?

**E**ver since it was formed in the mid-eighties, Essex-based Ruark has moved with the times. To meet the growing demand for multi-channel in the nineties the company expanded from its original portfolio of stereo speakers, then in the last decade it launched its Vita Audio sub-brand of digital radios. A couple of years ago the decision was made to cease the production of passive speakers and concentrate on making radios. At the same time the name Vita Audio was killed off with Ruark returning as the brand name under which all the company's products were sold.

While audio purists rightly balk at the idea of DAB because of its inferior sound quality, the operational convenience it offers and increased number of stations compared with FM and AM means DAB is massively popular. Additionally, the ability to play music from iPods and the like has also created a strong demand for speaker docks and streaming devices. It's a good time to be in the digital game, especially for Ruark, which operates towards the upper end of the market.

On the coat tails, then, of a slew of stylish and successful radios and speaker docks, the R7 is Ruark's most ambitious – and expensive – radio product yet. It combines DAB and FM tuners, CD-quality aptX Bluetooth,

DLNA network streaming, internet radio, CD playback, auxiliary analogue and digital inputs and a 2.1-speaker configuration in one beautifully crafted unit the size of a saxophone case. The R7 is the reinvention of the radiogram, especially when mounted on its spindle legs (it also comes with puck feet), combining cutting-edge audio technology with yesteryear looks that wouldn't look out of place in *Mad Men* Don Draper's Manhattan pad.

The R7's retro design turns more heads than Beyoncé in a bikini, but as a piece of furniture it may struggle to find a suitable spot in the modern home where huge TV screens have ousted the laughably small CRTs of yesteryear. One option is to place a TV screen on the R7's surface and use the radiogram as a soundbar, thanks to its digital optical audio input. Ruark MD Alan O'Rourke told me that the company is developing a TV mounting bracket that will elevate a screen above the R7's top surface and provide a shelf beneath the base for housing a PVR or Blu-ray/DVD deck.

The R7 is manufactured to an uncompromisingly high standard with a furniture-grade walnut cabinet providing a solid housing. The aluminium and glass fascia is pleasing on the eye with small buttons for selecting the source, controlling playback and navigating the menu. Either side of the CD loading slot and

display window are the 5.5in dual concentric drivers, while an 8in long throw subwoofer is located on the underside.

The rear side's metre-long panel has more than enough acreage to provide clutter-free sockets including dual RCA phono line inputs, a Toslink optical, S/PDIF coaxial and a handy USB socket for charging mobile phones and tablets. Two 75ohm F-type inputs are provided for DAB and FM aerials.

The remote control, which can be stored in the ashtray-like cavity on the top surface, is designed with a solid, flat underside, allowing you to operate it with one hand when it's on a table top or other flat surface. The remote is laid out to look like a dial with well-sized buttons surrounding the central volume knob. It's nicely responsive and feels perfectly weighted and because it uses RF rather than IR, it doesn't require line of sight.

As you'd expect for a £1,999 product, Ruark has turned its back on Class D amplification and under the hood is 160W power supply coupled to linear Class A-B discrete component amplifiers. The R7 doesn't just wind back the clock in terms of amplification and design, it also takes as long to power up as a fifties Decca TV or your granny's first kitchen radio.

## ► DETAILS

### PRODUCT

Ruark R7

### ORIGIN

China

### TYPE

All-in-one style system

### WEIGHT

30kg

### DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)  
1,000 x 175 x 400mm  
(without legs)

### FEATURES

- CD (CD-Audio, MP3); DAB; DAB+; FM; MP3; WMA; AAC; FLAC; WAV; A2DP; aptX Bluetooth
- DLNA streaming over wi-fi with UPnP
- 2x 5.5in dual concentric drivers
- 1x 8in long-throw subwoofer

### DISTRIBUTOR

Ruark Audio

### TELEPHONE

01702 601410

### WEBSITE

ruarkaudio.com



For an authentic retro style just add legs



Non instant gratification aside, it mostly proves a pleasure to own and operate. The fluorescent display boasts four lines of green text on a black background, one of which is a couple of centimeters high and is legible from across the room. This usually displays the station or track name. Enter a menu such as Audio Settings and the number of lines increases, but all of them are too small to see from across the room without a pair of binoculars. The only time this feels like a major drag is when trying to browse through sources such as internet radio stations and tracks from DLNA-connected drives. The easier option is to use the R7 as a Digital Media Renderer (DMR) in conjunction with a compatible smartphone app or Windows Media Player.

Setting up the R7 is logical and intuitive, with a Network Wizard asking all the right questions to take the pain out of the process. Essentially all you need to do is select your router and enter your password.

When listening to a source you can press the menu button to adjust screen brightness and access the equaliser, which consists of treble and bass management, a separate subwoofer setting and a so-called 3D Sound DSP mode. There's also a line input level adjustment, which is invaluable for levelling the volume of each source. The internet radio function usefully provides quick access to local UK stations, BBC stations and podcasts as well as stored favourites.

### Sound quality

Although it can't handle DSD I kick things off with the CD layer of *The*

*War of the Worlds* SACD. Not only is the output surprisingly powerful, but the sonic quality seems so good I have to check that it's the PCM downmix I'm listening to and not DSD after all. Richard Burton's sonorous *Eve of War* introduction is so rich and detailed you can hear the air drawing into his lungs between sentences and it almost sounds as if he's in the room. When the strings kick in, the R7 reveals its subwoofer is no shrinking violet and its out-of-the-box setting requires a smidgen of attenuation in order to eliminate reverb and optimise the bedrock for the building blocks of the higher frequencies.

The overall musical spectrum is impressive and the cabinet seems immaculately tuned so that there's no coloration. The higher frequencies of the wailing synth and flute are pin sharp and blend wonderfully with the

### Bluetooth streaming boasts aural quality that almost matches CD playback

midrange of the acoustic guitar. Overall, the Class A-B amplification delivers an energetic and lively sound that's as cosy as a Martian's heat ray. Sonic steering is good too, with impressive stereo imaging, the various frequencies of the chimes and bells at the start of *Time* on Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon*, for example, sounding dynamic and shooting off in all directions around the room.

Network streaming includes FLAC and WAV, but is hit and miss with ALAC files, with the R7 able to decode some 24-bit/48kHz tracks, but not

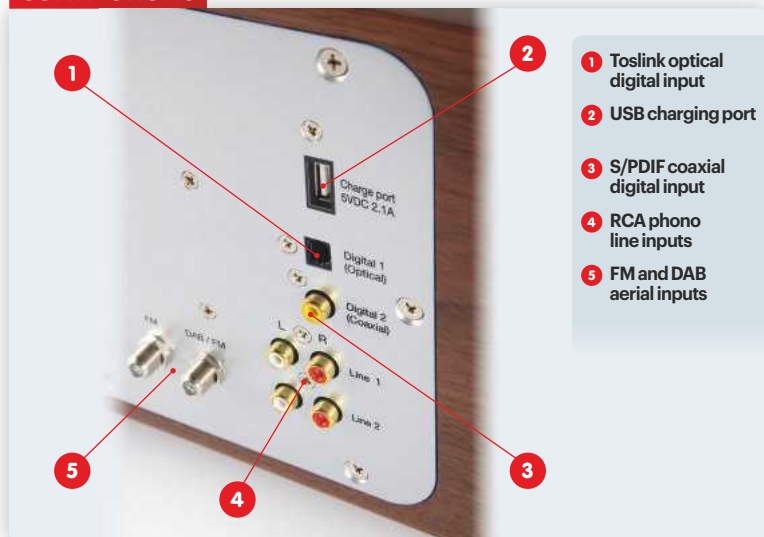
16-bit/44.1kHz. At least it automatically skips unplayable tracks in a playlist. One successful stream in terms of decoding and quality includes the wonderful *Hey Laura* by Gregory Porter, an iTunes AAC download. His vocals are deep and beautifully rounded, gliding effortlessly in harmony with the tinkling piano and percussion.

Bluetooth streaming from an iPhone is pleasingly reliable and boasts an aural quality that almost matches the unit's CD playback, just falling short in terms of sonic headroom and clarity. With John William's main title theme from *Jaws* the threatening double bass two-note sting is strong and punchy and you can push the volume to its maximum and still listen comfortably although the sub starts reverberating and the higher frequencies of the percussion and woodwind sound a tad shrill. The radio tuners are well implemented, and the R7 does a commendable job with DAB transmissions, especially fully orchestrated classical music, Beethoven's *Pastoral symphony*, for example, is detailed and articulate but smooth and balanced throughout the dynamic range as the piece escalates in intensity and diminishes in equal turn.

### Conclusion

No audiophiles are going to chuck out their hi-fi separates system in order to accommodate it, but the R7 radiogram reboot is a great deal more than simply an attempt to cash in on the current vogue for retro-looking appliances. On build quality and design alone it goes some way towards justifying that hefty £1,999 price tag (especially compared with some of the designer console tables that are available), but what seals the deal is that it's a real pleasure to operate and, most importantly of all, it delivers a remarkably powerful and pleasing sound ●

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 Toslink optical digital input
- 2 USB charging port
- 3 S/PDIF coaxial digital input
- 4 RCA phono line inputs
- 5 FM and DAB aerial inputs

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Design; ease of use; clean, powerful sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No hi-res ALAC playback or DSD; no app control

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Not just a pretty face, the R7 is a worthy reinvention of the radiogram

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

#### OVERALL





# Wood you believe it?

Nytech is back with its new preamp/power supply/power amp combination. Lucky **David Price** is the first to hear it...

**I**f you're a dyed-in-the-grain hi-fi aficionado, you'll remember the classic Nytech CTA252 receiver as something of a giant killer able to better some far more expensive pre-power amp combinations. It was launched by Richard Hay in the early seventies; a man who had served his audio apprenticeship at Radford Electronics. His company made respected, middle-market equipment for around 15 years.

Phil Balaam was Nytech's original test engineer, and worked closely with Hay, learning every aspect of the company's fine-sounding designs. The new Nytech Audio is based in South Wales and Phil has sourced as many of his components, suppliers and subcontractors as he can locally. The cases are pressed steel, finished in crackle black. The metalwork is done to a good standard and the wood is a lovely touch. Also pleasing is the absence of blue LEDs; instead they glow a shade of classic Nytech green!

The new Nytech Audio system features four separate components – a CP132 control centre/preamplifier (£676), CPS102 power supply (£300) and two CPA401 monoblock power

amplifiers (£498 each). The preamplifier is an active design and uses all-discrete components in the audio section, apart from the volume control, which is a digitally controlled audio law attenuator. It also uses a micro controller that can be programmed very simply (it was intended for educational use), so the display can be customised by dealers or customers alike. The source code and information on how to do this will be on the website. The power

**Rated at a mere 40W per channel, this combo doesn't half go loud gracefully**

amplifier is based around a Texas Instruments audio integrated circuit, "one of the best I've ever heard", says Phil. It puts out a claimed 40W RMS per channel into 8ohms and twice that into 4ohms.

## Sound quality

Nytechs were always loved for their easy, rhythmic sound that mixed a warmish, smooth tonality with lots of speed, dynamic accenting and energy.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Nytech CP132/  
CPS102/CPA401

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
Pre-power amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
1.2kg (CP132,  
CPS102), 2.2kg  
(CPA401)

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
206 x 70 x 160mm

**FEATURES**  
• 2 x 16 character  
OLED display  
(CP132)  
• 4x RCA line-level  
inputs (CP132)  
• Toroidal power  
transformer  
(CPS102)  
• Claimed power  
output: 2x 40W  
RMS (8ohms)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Nytech Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
02920 026176

**WEBSITE**  
nytechaudio.com

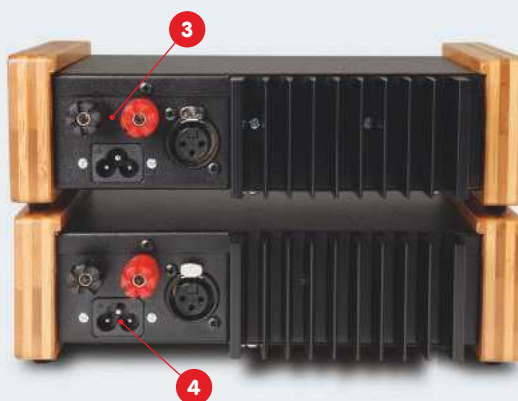
The new offering has the traditional sound in a more modern setting, retaining the classic products' 'warm side of neutral' tonal balance, but edging slightly closer to neutral.

Cue up The Flaming Lips' *One More Robot*, and that lovely, floaty bass guitar work is less amorphous than the original Nytech receiver – or indeed a similarly priced modern rival such as the Creek Destiny 2 integrated. You get a tighter, tauter sound – but still the instrument's warmth is retained. The new Nytech foursome follows the bass player's finger movements with great alacrity; it's very well resolved and you can hear the leading edge of the note in a way that surprises for a £2,000 amp.

A promising start then, and things only get better. The combo's midband is wonderfully open and explicit, offering up an outstandingly wide and deep soundstage. Where the Creek integrated is nicely spacious, the Nytech goes further and pushes way out beyond the physical boundaries of the speakers, and hangs the elements of the mix in space much more assertively. The whole recorded acoustic opens up like a picture book, and you find yourself easily able to focus on individual strands of the music. This is a clever trick, one you don't see at this price very often. Perhaps it's down to the physically separate dual mono design, but it sounds far more spacious than is expected. It shows the fine clarity of the amp, as it lets the listener dig right into the mix.

This doesn't come by virtue of a bright, overly explicit tonality, though. It's rare to hear great amplifiers able to sound apparently very open and detailed, yet not tonally forward – and the Nytech combo is one of them. Isaac Hayes' excellent cover of *Fragile* shows these four little boxes to be highly revealing. Everything is held in perfect proportion, the soundstage is ▶

## CONNECTIONS



- 1 Analogue RCA inputs
- 2 XLR audio connectors
- 3 4mm speaker binding posts
- 4 AC power inlet
- 5 DC power connectors

## Q&A

### Philip Balaam

Founder & designer, Nytech Audio



**DP: How much of the original Nytech DNA is in these amplifiers?**

**PB:** Richard Hay, the original owner of Nytech Audio, was an electronics genius. He was a very good engineer, but had an instinctive knowledge of how to get that basic design to sound musically good, and totally immerse the listener in their music. Richard spotted that latent talent in me and helped me to nurture and develop it. The new set of equipment bears little resemblance to the original circuits, but maintains faithfully the musicality of the original.

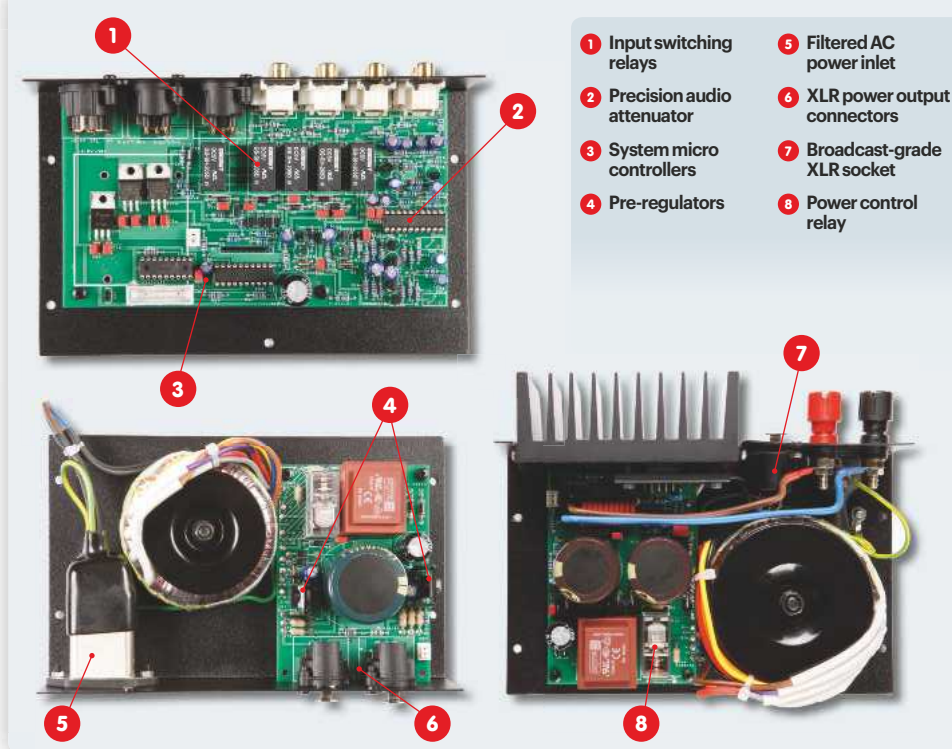
**What other products do you have planned to match them?**

Currently there are working prototypes of a phono stage and headphone amplifier, both in the same size boxes. There are plenty of these on the market so people have a lot of choice already, which is why we've concentrated on the basic amplification and control systems to begin with, but we will offer our own alternatives with our own unique styling if people want it. Development of these products will depend on customer interest and feedback over the coming months. There are also plans for a simple computer-based streamer controlled by a webpage (no app needed!) where the user can choose their own DAC if they wish, emphasising Nytech's desire to create products that are uncomplicated and easy to use.

**Will you be going down the active route, as the old Nytech did?**

Yes, there will be an electronic crossover to support the forthcoming new range of ARC loudspeakers from Nero audio and for users who currently have Classic ARC speakers, or other speakers that have removable crossovers. We will actively (excuse the pun) work with any loudspeaker manufacturer interested in developing active loudspeaker electronics as we believe that the advantages of an active loudspeaker system are too great to be ignored.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 Input switching relays
- 2 Precision audio attenuator
- 3 System micro controllers
- 4 Pre-regulators
- 5 Filtered AC power inlet
- 6 XLR power output connectors
- 7 Broadcast-grade XLR socket
- 8 Power control relay

### HOW IT COMPARES

There are few immediate rivals to this little four-box package, but surely Naim's £1,900 DAC-V1 DAC/NAP 100 comes closest. It's a two-box DAC/preamplifier and power amp with exceptional build quality and a built-in DAC with USB and coaxial digital inputs. The DAC-V1's OLED display is even better than the Nytech's too. But Nytech will be offering affordable active electronic crossover module options for its package, and this is a real boon that some will find very important. Sonically, the Nytech is perhaps a little more open and tonally sweeter, while the Naim is more gutsy with a slightly more powerful amp. Both are great fun to listen to.

again vast, and the different instruments in the mix are clearly resolved with excellent timbre. I love the way it accurately tracks the musicians' dynamic accenting, meaning the sound is never flat or disinterested. You often find highly detailed, open amplifiers are rather analytical and enthusiastic, bubbly performers lacking in clarity.

For something rated at a mere 40W per channel, this combo doesn't half go loud gracefully. Through my reference Focal 948s in a largish room, that wonderful walking bassline from Michael Jackson's *Billy Jean* gets the feet tapping and stays clean pushing up to really high volumes. Treble is crisp, with a good deal of atmosphere. It is more incisive than most amplifiers at the price, showing more air and space to Kate Bush's *Snowflake*. I find the piano work particularly convincing here, with sparkling harmonics accurately rendered, while Kate's voice has fine body and texture.

### Conclusion

The CP132/CPS102/CPA401 isn't perfect, of course; pitch it against a really good £4,000 amp and its sound is a little less gutsy and there's a slight opaqueness to the midband that you won't get from a truly high-end design, as if a thin veil is present. You can also discern a slight sense of brittleness in absolute terms; but this

also goes for most mere mortal amplification, and the Nytech combo is by no means the worst offender. In fact, taking into account its price, this is surely one of the strongest affordable audiophile amplifier packages around.

Straight out of nowhere comes this characterful combination, offering a really strong sound. There are virtually no rival pre-power amps to compete here, so the Nytech will prove a thorn in the side of a number of high-end integrations. Visually it's a quirky and charming little package, and the sound continues the theme, proving immensely likeable and offering a taste of the high end at mid-fi prices. Lest we forget, this is precisely what the original Nytech did all those years ago ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**LIKE:** Strong, spacious, engaging, open and musical sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**DISLIKE:** No matching wooden remote controller, yet...

**BUILD QUALITY**



**WE SAY:** Charming, effective and affordable amplifier package

**FEATURES**



**OVERALL**





Audio Destination are based in the market town of Tiverton in Devon. We are Mike and Caroline Rogers, a husband and wife team who are strong believers in the products we stock.



We believe that customer satisfaction is the first and only rule which is why we offer a very personal service with no "techno babble" after all we just love listening to music and want our clients to do the same. We pride ourselves in being able to cure any HiFi ailments you may be suffering from. Whether it is just the upgrade bug or your system just needs a tonic to give it some energy and drive, we can help you on the road to a full HiFi recovery with ease.

No one understands that choosing any HiFi is a very personal thing more than Audio Destination, another reason why we stock some of the finest products from around the globe. These have been chosen not only for their sonic performance but also for their style, after all there is nothing worse than having a dominating stack of boxes in front of you to distract you for your musical enjoyment.

All budgets and tastes are catered for from entry level to high end, lifestyle to esoteric. You can even spread the costs via one of our finance schemes, so there is no need to wait to get that product you have been promising yourself.

Our aim is to provide you with a system that will allow you to just sit down after a hard day, put on one of your favourite performers, sit back with a glass of something and allow the stress of the day to be washed away by the pure musical sound coming from your system.

Our contact details are: [www.audiodeestination.co.uk](http://www.audiodeestination.co.uk) [info@audiodeestination.co.uk](mailto:info@audiodeestination.co.uk) 01884 243584



SSC isolation products uses technology that simply improves your system so that all you will hear is the music



# Walk on by

Hi-res is helping Sony give its Walkman brand a new lease of life. **Adrian Justins** avails his ears of the NWZ-ZX1

**I**f anyone can help drive the take up of hi-res audio among non-audiophiles it's this Japanese giant of consumer electronics with its premium-brand reputation.

The NWZ-ZX1 operates very much like an Android phone with DLNA networking, web browsing, email, YouTube, etc, but without the telephony or texting features. Audiophiles may balk at this multi-tasking, but such features are largely software based and unlikely to compromise the player's performance. And by offering these features rather than say an expandable memory slot, digital optical audio output, DSD compatibility or the ability to use the NWZ-ZX1 as an external DAC, Sony is clearly targeting a different type of user. The trouble is that all of the supplementary features already exist

on most people's smartphones that also have a music player built-in, which is another argument for offering hi-res playback in a smartphone. After all, sales of the iPod Touch are lower than Boris Johnson's chances of winning the Tour de France. That said, I for one, am more than happy to have a separate audio device if it means sonic satisfaction that exceeds my phone's capabilities, so long as its size and weight aren't excessive.

The NWZ-ZX1 is the eagerly awaited, more expensive stablemate of the NWZ-F886, Sony's first hi-res portable, which I very much enjoyed reviewing back in *HFC* 381. The NWZ-F886 is a cracking little player, which sells for £259 and offers gapless FLAC, WAV and ALAC playback up to 192kHz/24-bit. The NWZ-ZX1 is more than twice the

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Sony NWZ-ZX1

**ORIGIN**  
Malaysia

**TYPE**  
24-bit/192kHz-capable digital audio portable

**WEIGHT**  
138g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
60 x 122 x 14mm

**FEATURES**  
● 24/192 FLAC, AIFF, WAV, ALAC, MP3, AAC, WMA playback  
● 128GB internal memory  
● DSEE HX; S-Master MX amplification  
● 4in FWVGA screen

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sony Europe

**TELEPHONE**  
0845 6000124

**WEBSITE**  
sony.co.uk

price, at £550, but is it more than twice the player? In terms of its spec the most obvious difference is that the internal memory is given a welcome boost to 128GB compared with the NWZ-F886's paltry 32GB. This provides enough capacity for around 720 tracks of approximately four minutes duration each at 24/192 or around 1,400 tracks at 96kHz. Like the first model, there's no expansion slot, but this higher capacity seems sufficient for the average user, who will undoubtedly have a mix of HD downloads and smaller-sized standard-resolution rips to carry around with them.

In terms of physical size, the NWZ-ZX1 is longer and thicker than the NWZ-F886, and feels more durable and robust. The external playback and volume buttons are bigger and much better engineered and the headphone socket is protected by a thick, gold-plated collar. As with the original model, these buttons let you bypass the screen in order to play and control your music.

While the cheaper model is sleek looking, but plastic and lightweight, the more manly NWZ-ZX1 is hewn from aluminium alloy and has a leatherette back panel that makes it easier to grip. A large chunk of the additional cost is down to the use



of specialised components and an optimised electrical circuit layout, which Sony says combine with the rigid machined body to offer maximum resistance to electrical interference, and deliver 'uncompromised audio performance'.

Similarities between the models include the same 4in Triluminos OptiContrast LCD screen with 410,000 pixels. Sony has eliminated a layer of air usually found on this type of screen, and in so doing reduced reflections, even in bright sunlight. Both models use the Android 4.1 operating system, which has helped Sony's mobile phones achieve healthy sales. Other common features include the S-Master HX Class D amp, which reduces noise levels usually experienced in the high-frequency ranges (above 40kHz), and Sony's DSEE HX (Digital Sound Enhancement Engine) technology for boosting the quality of low-res compressed music files (at the expense of battery life), which worked to good effect in the NWZ-F886. The cheaper model comes with headphones, which are compatible with built-in noise-reduction software. The NWZ-ZX1 has neither, but it does come with an utterly uninspiring pouch.

Setting up the player is aided by a printed quick start guide. The most

helpful user guide is located on the player itself (selected by pressing the onscreen icon), the online alternative is missing information about many features, for example the gimmicky 12Tone feature, which analyses each track so you can choose to listen to songs that suit your mood.

Transferring tunes on to the player via USB should be straightforward thanks to the Content Transfer app that installs itself on recent Apple

## Rest assured the NWZ-ZX1 is a triumph in terms of pure audio quality

OSX and Windows desktops. On an iMac you simply drag tracks from iTunes on to the transfer window. All metadata and album artwork is included, but playlists have to be manually reconstructed once copied on to the player. I also discover that the transfer process is unable to handle large amounts of data in one go, so that some albums require a drip-feed approach, which is about as thrilling as the security check at Luton airport. If you have a Windows computer and use Sony's Media Go software to transfer music, all tracks are automatically analysed for 12Tone – a process that has to be carried out in real time.

Most menu navigation is made by tapping, flicking, swiping, dragging, etc and while there are no complaints about the effectiveness of the screen or the gestures themselves, the layout and operating system can be confusing at times, and plain messy or illogical at others with myriad icons and different-sized fonts all over the place, some of which are no bigger than an atomic particle.

## Sound quality

Given how impressive the NWZ-F886 is in terms of audio quality, I am rather eager to see how much better the NWZ-ZX1 will sound. I revisit the cheaper player and compare playback with the new model across a range of music from MP3 rips to 24/192 downloads. The difference is not so much in terms of clarity, but more one of timbre, with the NWZ-ZX1 sounding slightly warmer and more natural. It's a welcome improvement on the clinical sharpness of the NWZ-F866, especially when using DSEE HX to improve 16/44.1 rips. When David Bowie sings the line 'I've never done

good things,' in *Ashes To Ashes* his vocal has a smidgen more roundness to it than with DSEE HX off, but overall the player is so good with any reasonable source that this battery-sapping booster is best left switched off.

A 16/44.8 AIFF rip of Antony & The Johnson's *Twilight* has bucketloads of detail on both players, but the slightly warmer tones of the NWZ-ZX1 are more satisfying. The slinky percussion blends effortlessly with the spine-chilling clarinet and the haunting nasal vocals effortlessly exert an iron-like grip on your senses as the player gives all the elements of the song the headroom required.

Cranking things up to higher-res tracks, again the difference is in terms of warmth, with the NWZ-FX1 absolutely nailing it with Bob Marley's *Could You Be Loved* (a 24/96 download from Linn), revealing all of the rhythm and energy of the song's inspired blend of percussion, guitar and mesmerising vocals.

As with the NWZ-F886 I try the ClearAudio+ option, which widens the stereo and boosts lows and highs. The wider spread and emphasis to the bass on *Ashes To Ashes* is unarguable, and deeply unpleasant in my book. Fans of Dr Dre and his Beats headphones may tend to disagree.

## Conclusion

Sony's players aren't everyone's cup of tea, but if you can live with (or like) Android and want the wealth of non-audio features it brings then rest assured that the NWZ-ZX1 is a triumph in terms of pure audio quality. Compared with the £1,099 Astell&Kern AK120, it also looks a real steal, but the much more affordable Sony NWZ-F886 is in no way £290 worse off than its stablemate. If storage is paramount the NWZ-ZX1 is the way to go, otherwise I'd say the NWZ-F886 remains a better buy ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

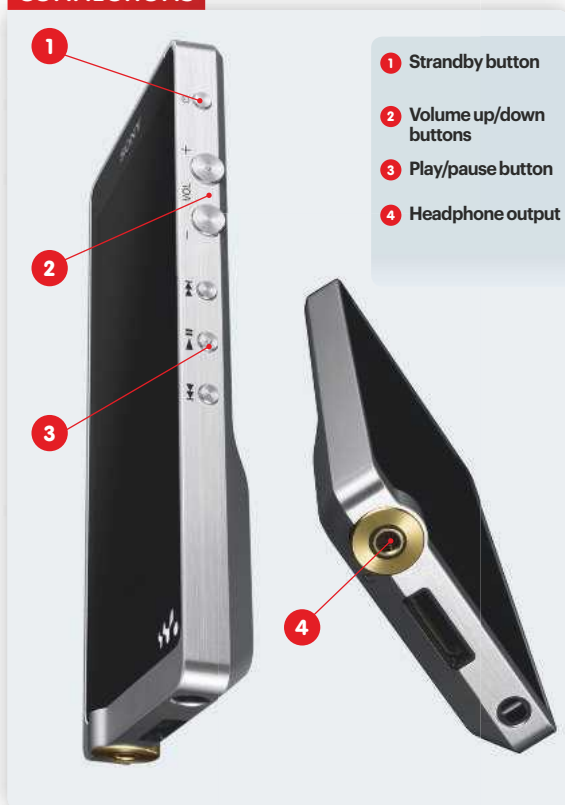
<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Terrific sound quality across all sound formats
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★☆	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Big price premium for that extra storage
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Doesn't do DSD, but what it does, it does well
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★☆	

### OVERALL



It looks like a smartphone, but sounds great...

## CONNECTIONS





# One for all?

FM radio, streaming, vinyl playback? This new all-in-one does the lot. But what about its sonics asks **Andrew Simpson**

**D**espite having its finger in many home entertainment pies, the fact that Yamaha continues to plough considerable R&D into dedicated two-channel audio shows how much it values purist hi-fi. This network player also signals a move into newer territory for Yamaha, as its first all-in-one streamer for the UK.

The R-N500 sits within Yamaha's more affordable amplifier range starting with the £200 A-S201 integrated through to the £340 A-S500. These amps, however, are fairly standard fare compared to the R-N500, which is bristling with features drawn from the company's

mainland Europe and USA-facing R-S receiver range, from where the R-N500 inherits its front panel layout. As well as being awash with digital and analogue inputs, it supports internet radio streaming via vTuner and DLNA/UPnP network streaming.

The R-N500 uses Yamaha's proprietary 'ToP-ART' technology (see Q&A) and digital conversion is handled by a Burr-Brown PCM5101 DAC chip, catering for up to 192kHz/24-bit across a range of file types. Analogue lovers are equally well served with a turntable input and FM/AM radio with 40 preset memory. Two sets of loudspeaker outputs (which can be

configured for 4 or 8ohm speakers), a sub out and a 6.5mm headphone jack complete the output options.

If you want to stream wirelessly to the R-N500 rather than via Ethernet, you'll need to fork out an extra £90 for Yamaha's YWA-10 wi-fi adapter, which connects to the rear USB socket. Bluetooth streaming will also cost you an extra £50 for Yamaha's YBA-11 BT adapter, although for Apple devices, streaming via AirPlay is just as easy and the R-N500 supports this straight out of the box.

The 500's tone, balance and loudness EQ trim pots will be welcomed by some, while for the purists there's Yamaha's 'pure direct' tone bypass switch, which also kills the front screen in an effort to keep signal paths short and interference to a minimum. Its other user features are almost endless, with five screen brightness settings, various display options and volume limiting, illustrating just how much Yamaha has packed in under the lid. There's even an 'Eco' mode setting, which claims up to 20 percent less power consumption by dropping the power supply's voltage.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Yamaha R-N500

**ORIGIN**  
Japan/Malaysia

**TYPE**  
Network receiver

**WEIGHT**  
9.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
435 x 150 x 387mm

**FEATURES**

- Network music playback via AirPlay and Ethernet with optional wi-fi and Bluetooth
- Support for FLAC/ALAC/WAV/MP3 up to 24-bit/192kHz
- 80W amplifier (claimed)
- USB, S/PDIF and MM phono input

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Yamaha Music Europe GmbH (UK)

**TELEPHONE**  
0844 8111116

**WEBSITE**  
uk.yamaha.com



Compared with the best all-in-one streamers, the Yamaha takes a little more effort to get going. And with a detailed 40-page manual and 70-button remote control, I'd welcome a user-friendly quick start guide, particularly for configuring the unit's network settings and smartphone/tablet app.

Out of the box our demo unit connects to my home network automatically via a wired Ethernet

**It also comes in black, but the brushed silver finish is so much cooler**

connection. And to test its full streaming capabilities, I specify the optional wi-fi adapter, although using this may not be as straightforward as the manual implies. The idea is to connect the YWA to the R-N500 via its USB lead, hit the unit's and your router's WPS buttons simultaneously (a BT Broadband Home Hub in my case) and hey presto, they sync automatically. If this virtual pairing isn't successful (it isn't in my case), you need to configure the wi-fi adapter manually by connecting it to a computer and using the manual to

### Vocal harmonies are laced with subtle delicacies that make this a joy to listen to

guide you through an online Setup Wizard. All of which seems a bit too labour intensive compared to other streamers, which usually just require your router's wireless key.

When connected, the app is fast and intuitive on my iPhone 4s, and the pop-up virtual volume knob is superb. The app's only Achilles heel is in how it kills the incoming source music as soon as you begin navigating to another input, meaning you're treated to a few seconds of silence as you select your next track or input, all of which makes for a less seamless listening experience.

### Sound quality

To get to the heart of the Yamaha's sonic charms, it's put into service with 'pure direct' activated and speaker settings adjusted to 4ohms for driving my Q Acoustics 2020i bookshelf speakers.

Kicking off with a 24-bit/96kHz ALAC of Mark Knopfler's *Redbud Tree* over AirPlay, the R-N500 immediately sets the mood in how it casts the

acoustic guitar strums, which sound softer and deeper in the mix than I'm used to hearing them. It's a relaxed performer that seems comfortable in its own skin and doesn't feel the need to push the boundaries to get your attention. Knopfler's trademark lead guitar doesn't extend from the speaker plane quite as far as I would anticipate and instead settles within the centre of the soundstage, making it sound convincingly realistic, but not quite as panoramic as some amplifiers can render it.

Testing the Yamaha's tempo with a 16-bit/44kHz FLAC of Four Tet's *She Moves She* gets my foot tapping from the word go. This track can sometimes catch a lethargic amp unawares, leaving it chasing the beat rather than driving it. Thankfully the Yamaha has its eye on the ball and reacts confidently to the change of pace, taking the percussion under its wing and running with it. The beat is nicely balanced, sounding progressive enough to keep my speakers on their toes without becoming aggressive, giving the music a well judged and lively, yet mellow pace.

Upping the ante with a no-nonsense 16/44 rip of The Temper Trap's *Rest* rock track reveals more of the Yamaha's natural disposition. The band's rhythm section picks up where Four Tet left off and motors through the song with impressive vigour, but the Yamaha's sedate characteristics take some of the energy out of the midrange, which sounds a little closed in with this rather harder-edged material.

Partnering the Yamaha with my reference Audiovector floorstanders lets the R-N500 really give its all to the music. Perhaps due to their claimed 91dB sensitivity, the R-N500 sounds more capable driving these speakers in 8ohm mode, which a 96kHz FLAC of Tom Petty And The Heartbreakers *Refugee* illustrates. ▶

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 Analogue and digital RCA inputs
- 2 Ethernet port
- 3 USB port
- 4 Speaker binding posts
- 5 Subwoofer output
- 6 FM/AM aerial inputs

## Q&A

Chris Wray

Product specialist, Yamaha Europe



**AS:** With so much packed into the R-N500, how have you ensured its performance remains high?

**CW:** It's really about isolation and low-impedance design using symmetrically balanced circuits, separate power supplies, a rigid structure and isolation for sensitive circuits, which all combines for a natural and realistic sound.

### What is ToP-ART?

ToP-ART (Total Purity Audio Reproduction Technology) uses input to output Direct Symmetrical Design with left and right channels organised in a straight, symmetrical layout for highest signal purity. Rigid Frame construction provides low vibration and audio and power is transmitted through thick wire.

### Why have you specified an R-core rather than toroidal transformer?

Both R-core and toroidal types have advantages and disadvantages. We wanted to make the R-N500 sound fresh enough to give modern music a great lively sound, yet smooth enough to give the classics the proper treatment they deserve. With an R-core type the sound is a little more punchy, with deeper bass compared with toroidal types, which is the sound we were looking for in the R-N500.

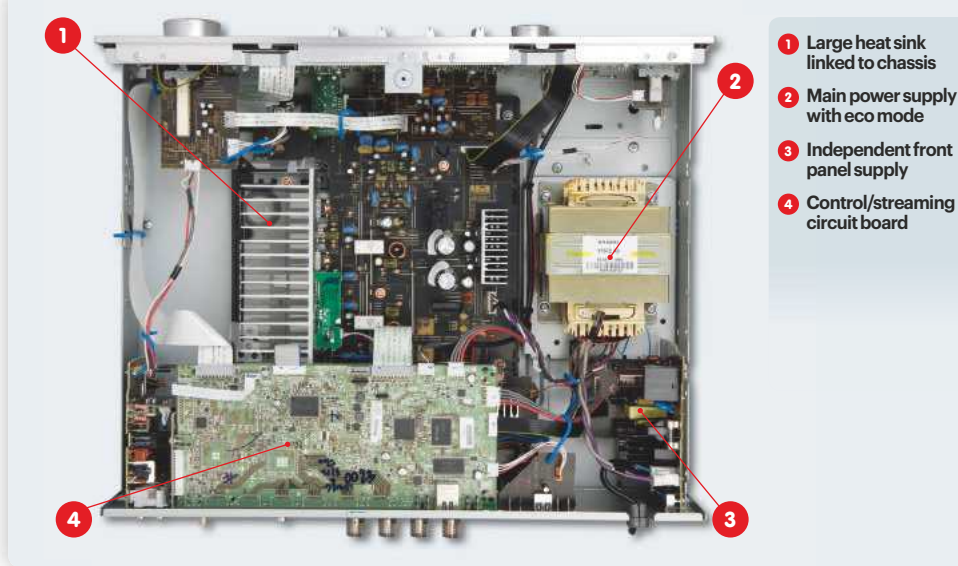
### Why did you decide to include analogue and internet radio?

Most European countries are still using analogue radio as DAB hasn't made much impact across mainland Europe. Secondly, not all customers have a network connection in their hi-fi room, but they'd like the option to upgrade further down the line. Our equipment is designed to last as customers upgrade.

### What was the most challenging part of the R-N500's development?

The sound quality of the network device and the overall sound quality was not easy to define. We wanted to create a young and fresh sounding component that's also suitable for hi-fi enthusiasts. That took us some time and we think we've got it right!

## IN SIGHT



- 1 Large heat sink linked to chassis
- 2 Main power supply with eco mode
- 3 Independent front panel supply
- 4 Control/streaming circuit board



The Yamaha's most obvious rival is Cambridge Audio's Minx Xi, reviewed issue 379, and once you factor in buying the Yamaha's wi-fi and Bluetooth adapters, the package costs basically the same as the Minx. The Minx has fewer inputs, lacks a phono stage, FM radio, AirPlay and is limited to 96kHz, but it's more intuitive to use as a network player and makes a fuller-bodied sound.

A few extra quid buys you NAD's D 7050 (£800), reviewed issue 382, which offers wi-fi, aptX Bluetooth and AirPlay streaming as standard, along with 192kHz capability and a preamp out. With its 50W digital amplifier, the NAD is the cleanest sounding of the three.

Compared to the 4ohm setting, with these speakers the 8ohm option puts more air and space around Tom's voice and the track's bass has greater impact – highlighting just how worthwhile it is to do some experimenting with this feature.

Judged against the best integrated amps at this price, the Yamaha's midrange can sound a bit flat with some material. Sticking with the Tom Petty track, his rhythm guitar and vocals sound slightly veiled and not as full bodied as I know them to be, hence I have to work a bit harder to fully enjoy their efforts. Likewise with this and other rock material, drums sound pleasantly articulate and sufficiently sharp, but the Yamaha doesn't recreate them with enough force to really bring them to life.

Changing gear with a 24-bit/96kHz FLAC of Cappella Nova's *Lux aeterna* puts the Yamaha firmly back within its comfort zone and vocal harmonies are laced with subtle delicacies that make this a joy to listen to and get lost in. The sound is free from hard edges and the soundstage has enough depth to provide a tangible degree of separation, with the baritones positioned deeper in the mix and the tenors coming to the fore.

Investing in a hi-res FLAC rendition of *The Four Seasons* by Avison Ensemble garners equally rewarding returns, as the violins spring to life and blossom within the piece. The sense of the orchestra's scale is also more apparent with this piece compared to the earlier test tracks, highlighting another key trait of the Yamaha. With this type of music it seems far more at home and excels at being graceful, rather than an

adrenaline junky looking to out-do itself with its next hard rock hit.

Bass wise it's no earth shaker, as The Police's *Bring On The Night* reveals. Lower bass is well controlled for an amplifier in this price bracket, but seems to roll off before it starts bothering my speakers' bass ports. Again everything's in check and there's no tendency to boom, but some may welcome a bit more grunt.

## Conclusion

Features wise, the Yamaha is fully loaded, which makes it super value at the price. But with so many options on offer, it's not the most intuitive to use compared with some rivals, and you'll need a bit of patience to really get to grips with all of its settings and network connectivity. Sound wise it makes for an upbeat performer that's never tiresome, but treads a bit too carefully for some genres. It's a safe pair of hands that will appeal mostly to classical fans, but those who like their music with plenty of dynamism should try before buying ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★
- LIKE:** FM radio; lots of inputs; pleasant sound; super value
- DISLIKE:** Captive mains lead; not as user-friendly as rivals
- WE SAY:** Amazing spec with lots of streaming options and a mellow sound that may not suit rock fans

### OVERALL



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**'outstanding'** Russ Andrews PowerKord-500™, Hi-Fi World, March '14

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Russ Andrews PowerKord-100™  
Hi-Fi World, March '14

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*'they let equipment both realistic and high-end deliver more of the musical detail, and that in turn means more rewards for your listening efforts'*

Hi-Fi Choice, January '14



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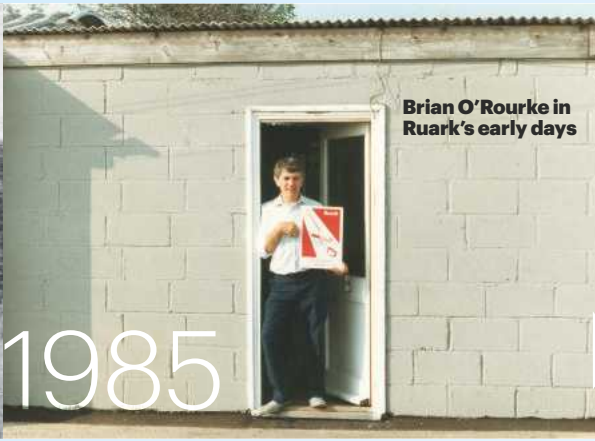
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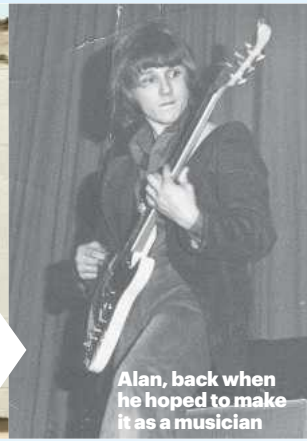


Little did Brian O'Rourke know what lie ahead...

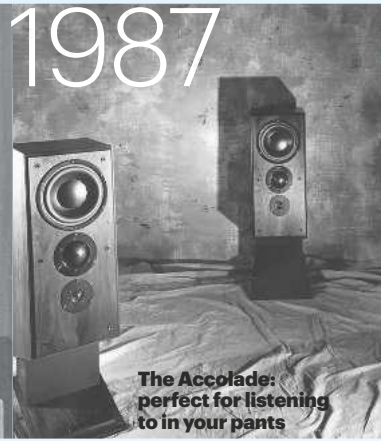


Brian O'Rourke in Ruark's early days

1985



Alan, back when he hoped to make it as a musician



The Accolade: perfect for listening to in your pants

# Radio days

Doyen of digital design, Ruark leads the way in digital radios. **Adrian Justins** finds out how it became a shining light of British hi-fi

**T**o be successful in hi-fi, let alone business, you need to be good at predicting future trends. Failing that, you need to be agile enough to react to demand even when circumstances are beyond your control. The latter is the reason Essex-based audio manufacturer Ruark is currently thriving with a slew of digital radios and speaker docks. DAB radios are now commonplace, but Ruark was one of the first to exploit the potential of the market, especially at the high end, where it is now established as a leading exponent of premium-quality products.

Entering the digital radio arena in 2006 with the launch of the R1 proved a defining moment in its fortunes, heralding a move away from loudspeaker production, but bizarrely Ruark only started making digital radios because another acclaimed analogue radio manufacturer refused to.

Ruark was first and foremost a loudspeaker manufacturer, but at the turn of the millennium it had become a distributor for Tivoli Audio. This happened when Ruark's co-founder Alan O'Rourke clapped eyes on the Model One, a compact FM radio designed by Henry Kloss that had an unforgettable effect on everyone who heard it (me included). When Pure launched its first Evoke DAB radio in the early noughties sales of analogue radios began to fall, but Tivoli Audio resisted its distributor's call for a digital model so the decision was made by Ruark, which after all knew plenty about speaker design, to make its own model.

A few years later, fate played its part again and the decision to stop making loudspeakers was precipitated by the closure of Ruark's cabinet supplier. "Our speaker business wasn't doing too badly, but we realised that the fledgling digital broadcasting and speaker dock market

presented us with some great opportunities," recalls O'Rourke. It was a sad day, though, for the company, not least as now all of its products are assembled in China.

Ruark commenced trading in 1984, when Alan's father Brian invited him to join him in starting a speaker company from scratch. It was never going to be easy, especially with the UK in recession, but he didn't need much persuading to give up his engineering job at

**We were happy doing something we loved, the fact that we were turning a profit was a bonus**

Marconi. He had always been nuts about audio and music – he was the teenager who spent all his money on hi-fi, impressing his mates with his £400 cartridges, burgeoning vinyl collection and Fender guitar-playing skills – and was keen to work in the hi-fi area, having given up on the idea of making a living as a professional musician. After an apprenticeship at Ford Motor Company, he'd worked as a bluecoat entertainer at Pontins and performed in a covers band, but he was now back in Essex, with the UK in recession. Brian, who'd routed out a career as a cabinet maker for British TV brands such as Pye, Decca and Ferguson, already had experience of making and selling speakers more as a hobby than as a job.

They rented a small Essex workshop where O'Rourke designed the drive units and crossovers, while his father took care of the cabinets. He explains how his dad worked: "We all know a cabinet is more than an enclosure with its own acoustic properties. Back then MDF was popular, but we found that a combination of chipboard and MDF

produced a better sound. Most people hate working with chipboard because it blunts the cutters and is hard to work with, but it has air in it, which naturally damps the sound." This insistence on doing the best thing rather than the easiest or cheapest thing has been, and remains the Ruark philosophy. "We wanted to make speakers that were better than anything you could buy," he explains.

## Early days

The first models were the Broadsword and Sabre, which they initially struggled to sell. Father and son would travel round the country trying to persuade dealers to order their hand-made, bespoke products. "It wasn't easy and I had to take a second job to keep the company going," he recalls. He worked part-time as a salesman in hi-fi shops in London and Cambridge. "But we persisted and eventually started to grow."

The company caught a lucky break in its early years when Ken Laurence the manager of the local Midland bank, where Ruark did its banking, took early retirement and



It's time for a bigger office...



Brian poses with a batch of Swordsman speakers

1989

approached the O'Rourke, but it hasn't stopped them from backing bricks and mortar-based independents. "We still try and sell through hi-fi dealers, we don't sell direct to the public and we have resisted calls to set up an online Amazon store." Alan wants Ruark's customers to enjoy the same kind of personal retail experience as someone who goes out to buy a Paul Smith suit from Selfridges or an iMac from the Apple store.

Another defining moment in the history of Ruark, if not for the entire hi-fi industry, came with the advent of home cinema in the early nineties with the development of multi-channel surround sound. It seems hard to believe now but the cutting-edge format of the time was the laser disc, yet the mass market was driven by VHS, which was much cheaper and more versatile, featuring compatibility with Dolby Pro-Logic as well as regular VHS recording and playback. Ruark eagerly jumped on the bandwagon and enjoyed good fortune with its first dedicated home cinema centre-channel speaker, the Dialogue One, closely followed by a range of mix-and-match surrounds, Prologue One, Prelude, Epilogue and Log-Rhythm. By the mid nineties, Ruark's business was split roughly 50/50 between traditional two-channel and home cinema speakers.

Home cinema continued to evolve, DVD arrived and brought with it Dolby Digital and DTS surround formats, which enthusiasts eagerly adopted. Despite the improvements in home cinema audio, the arrival of flatscreen TVs ushered in a new era of vision-domination at the expense of audio. "Back then plasma TVs cost between £6,000 and £7,000," recalls O'Rourke, "so people spent all their money on the screen and had nothing left to spend on the sound." The irony was that picture quality had actually deteriorated and the screens had awful speakers so people ended up with shoddy images and inferior sound. "We always knew it was hard enough getting people to put two large speakers in their living room never mind five or six," recalls O'Rourke before explaining how the

company reacted by launching its first sub/sat system composed of compact satellites, the Vita 100. "This was a vital addition to our range and we did very well with it." However, similar systems at lower prices from the likes of KEF and M&K forced Ruark to reduce its prices and as Alan points out, smaller speakers are more fiddly to build (by hand) and are not much cheaper to produce than large speakers. Things were not so rosy in the Ruark garden and the company was treading water.

COMPUTER SAYS YES

When Ruark started making loudspeakers in the mid-eighties Alan designed models such as the Sabre using calculators to work out the values of coils, resistors and the volumes of boxes. "When computers arrived in 1991 it made things so much quicker," he explains, "you could take a drive unit, make measurements, fill in the small parameters and plug them into a computer program." But he never abandoned his old-school methods entirely. Previously, Ruark had a room that was padded and well damped, but it moved to a computer-based measuring system for looking at cross-over slopes. "It's really good to see the crossover as well as phase response," he says, "but to get accurate measurements you really need a full anechoic chamber and there's not many of those around. We had a big factory and we'd mount a speaker in the middle as far away from walls and reflections and do the bass measurements there. But these simulations were so accurate it got to the point where you didn't have to worry, plus you can hear with your own ears whether the bass is tuned correctly or not. We spent ages listening to capacitors, coils, different cabinet construction and if we thought something sounded better than what measured best that was what we'd go with. People said we had our own Ruark sound."



Ruark may be eschewing the online retail environment, but Alan well understands the need for a decent website to promote the

need for a decent website to promote the



The Prologue One saw a move into home cinema

1998



An engineer tests a Ruark R4 speaker dock

2010

Entering the digital arena with the launch of the R1





Alan poses with some of Ruark's best woofers

brand. The Ruark website is certainly a good example of a small company getting its online presence right, with a nice mix of slick, contemporary design that showcases the company's products and the sort of behind-the-scenes stuff that highlights the heritage and personable nature of the company. Ruark's cosiness is promoted, but not at the expense of the products.

Maybe one of the reasons behind Ruark's success is the fact that it has never been driven purely by profits. It's refreshing to hear in an era where everyone seems obsessed with the need to maximise monetary opportunities to hear him say: "Even in the early days we were just happy doing something we loved, the fact that we were turning a profit was a bonus."

### **Selling yourself short**

O'Rourke admits that this cavalier attitude to financial returns probably cost his company in the past because Ruark arguably sold some of its products too cheaply. "People tell me we should have asked a lot more on the export market for our high-end Reference Series models such as the Solstice and Excalibur, which were priced at over £4,000 and nearly £9,000 respectively per pair." The Excalibur was basically a subwoofer (Ruark's own) with an isolated and suspended top box with isolated, external crossovers, two Dynaudio mid-range drivers and a high-end Scanspeed tweeter called the Revelator. It was well regarded by audiophiles and nearly 300 pairs were sold worldwide. "In terms of

pricing, though, I think we're getting it right now," he says, but acknowledges that Ruark hasn't always made things easy for itself. "We always wanted a distinctive look so that people would recognise a Ruark speaker without seeing the badge. And we always made the designs intricate with double-layer skins and bitumen panels to control resonance and damping. Ruark has never built to a cost, we make a product then price it accordingly."

Alan recognises that the market works according to price points, but says his products are aspirational.

### **Getting it right**

O'Rourke has many of the properties required to run a successful hi-fi manufacturing business. He has boundless enthusiasm for his work and is relentlessly optimistic, a quality that has served him well during Ruark's less successful times. "I firmly believe in getting back up again and having another go when you've been knocked back," he espouses. He is also realistic

### **Father and son would travel round the country to persuade dealers to order their products**

enough to acknowledge that for many people audio is not the priority it once was and that high-fidelity music has always been the preserve of a discerning minority. He explains how in the sixties and seventies virtually every home had a record player at the very least and a decent radio. When computers came in, they seemed to replace hi-fi in the pecking order, then, of course, there was the flatscreen revolution and the advent of MP3 when everyone wanted to take their music with them and nobody was interested in listening to it at home.

But, gradually things seem to be coming full circle. Sales of TV soundbars are increasing massively and there's a growth

### **WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

Naming a company or a sub-brand is a tricky business that can massively affect its fortunes. When Brian O'Rourke bestowed his nascent loudspeaker company with the name Ruark Acoustics to reflect his family's Celtic origins, his son Alan was not terribly impressed: "I didn't think it was that easy to pronounce" he says. "Luckily the name seemed to catch on and I like it now." However, when the company branched out in 2006 into the digital radio market it chose a new name, Vita Audio, for its fledgling range of small audio products in order to avoid confusion with Ruark's loudspeakers. Vita, means 'life' or 'a new start', which seems appropriate enough and it sounded more modern than Ruark. But the move to a separately named sub-brand ended up causing quite a bit of confusion with Ruark's customers and dealers. Many of them assumed that Ruark had simply ceased distributing Tivoli and switched to distributing some new brand on the block.

Then, when Ruark later ceased production of loudspeakers, the company found itself selling only Vita Audio products and naturally sought to register it as a company name, but because Vita was such a common name around the globe it proved impossible to do so.

So the Ruark name, which had looked in danger of disappearing from the retail landscape forever was resurrected back in 2012 when the decision was taken to scrap Vita Audio. The opportunity was then taken to modernise the Ruark brand name when the word Acoustics was dropped and replaced by the more relevant term Audio.



in the use of stereo desktop speakers as TV speaker supplements, including Ruark's own MR1 Bluetooth speakers.

With the launch of the R7 radiogram, meanwhile, the company hopes to exploit the fashion for retro-looking design coupled with cutting-edge technology that includes wireless streaming and hi-res audio playback. The unit went on sale just before I met the Ruark boss and he was thrilled to announce that his order book was already full. And it doesn't stop there, Ruark is planning new models and Alan remains as eager as ever to make a name for both himself and his company, whatever the future holds ●



A gorgeous glass version of the R7 radiogram



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IsoTek EV03 Premier, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013

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## THIS MONTH



### ED SELLEY

#### EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

For the best part of 10 years, Ed was developing and supporting products from some of the biggest names in audio. He enjoys blogging about his favourite tunes, too.



### NEVILLE ROBERTS

#### EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Retired NHS director, electronics engineer and physicist Neville is very much into valve technology. He's a classical music lover and serious vinyl junkie.



### TIM JARMAN

#### EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Electronics boffin Tim drives a 1959 Beetle and maintains the best B&O resource on the internet. When he's not rebuilding faulty review kit, he enjoys scouring audiojumbles.



### DAVID PRICE

#### EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

DP has spent much longer than he'd care to admit buying and upgrading his own hi-fi system, not to mention reviewing thousands of separates over the years.



### JASON KENNEDY

#### EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Former HFC editor Jason loves music so much that he has dedicated his life to finding the ultimate system. A long time vinyl nut he also enjoys a well-streamed file.

Email us at [letters@hifichoice.co.uk](mailto:letters@hifichoice.co.uk) or write to: *Hi-Fi Choice* Letters, AV Tech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, Kent, BR6 6BG Your letters may be edited before publication and we cannot enter into personal correspondence

## ➤ Make my day

I am a big music lover and am trying to put together a music playback system for my room of size 19 x 13ft. I like to listen to all genres of music except hard rock and heavy metal. However my real favourites are Indian classical vocal and instrumental, pop, reggae, flamenco and world fusion. So I have been looking around for the essential components to put together my dream system. I have visited my local hi-fi dealer and drawn up a shortlist of floorstanding speakers and here they are: KEF Q900, Monitor Audio Silver RS6 (I have the option of buying a pre-owned pair), Monitor Audio Silver RX6, Bowers & Wilkins 684, Quad 22L2 Classic (again, I have the option of buying a pre-owned pair), Quad 23L Classic and Wharfedale Diamond 10.7.

I have listened to all of the above speakers while each was connected to a different amplifier and hence I am a bit confused as to which one would sound the best. I am sure that you have had a lot

of experience with a variety of equipment and different combinations, so could you please recommend a speaker that might be well suited to the genres of music that I like? Could you also suggest a few amplifiers that might provide a good match to your suggested speaker?

*Anurag Moghe, India*

**DP:** Hi Anurag, my choice would be the Monitor Audio Silver RS6, simply because as speakers go, they're very good all rounders and don't work particularly well or particularly badly with one type of music or another. They're big enough to give really useful bass in your room too, and have an excellent tweeter with a very smooth and open top end that's ideally suited to your music tastes. Regarding a partnering amplifier, you're looking at Arcam's FMJ-A19 or a Creek Evolution 50A; both cost around £700 and both boast an excellent, powerful and highly musical sound. If you want more warmth and musicality, I'd go for the Arcam, whereas the Creek provides a more tonally even and detailed sound.

## ➤ Quite matchmaker

I would really appreciate your thoughts on my next pair of speakers. I have a Naim UnitiQute 192 currently driving a pair of Epos ES11s on their dedicated stands. I feel the Qute doesn't really do them justice (they need more power to sing), and I am wondering if I can do better 20 years on. I have thought about adding the NAP100, but it was not the step up I was

## I want to find some speakers to go with my Naim UnitiQute

hoping for so I'm thinking I might get better value for money and better synergy by pairing a set of speakers that really work with the Qute.

I have thought about changing the Qute, but apart from having no external controls I really appreciate it's functionality and find it sounds fundamentally right. So I am back to speakers. I listen to quite a wide variety

of music and do like to turn it up loud at times. I value a tuneful (as opposed to deep) bass, detailed midband and solid imaging.

I need speakers that work well about 3m apart, they can be up to 30-35cm from the rear wall, and I sit about 3.5m from them.

Speakers I have considered and are readily available here include the KEF LS50, Spendor A3 or S3/5R2, Neat Motive 2x, and at a push I can probably source Epos Elans. I suggest these all as I have read positive reviews and they seem to have good synergy with Naim. Key for me is what might work best with the Qute.

*Dennis, New Zealand*

**JK:** Hi Dennis, I would suggest something from the Neat range as that company uses Naim for most of its R&D work. I've not heard the new Motive range, but Bob Surgeoner who runs the company consistently makes tuneful speakers that offer the sort of qualities you are looking for. I assume that you mean the Motive SX2 compact floorstanders?

These are small enough to work in your room and might even sit a little closer to the wall without the bass getting overblown.

**DP:** Your main issue is size – do you want a standmounter as per your Epos or a smallish floorstander? This is hard to discern as you don't specify your room size. If it's the former, the KEF LS50 is excellent, with a



Arcam's FMJ-A19 will provide a good, warm match to Monitor Audio's Silver RS6 speakers

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**WHAT HI-FI?**  
SOUND AND VISION



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**Audiolab's M-DAC will turbo charge Brian's Marantz CD player**



very open and expansive sound, loads of detail and a nicely musical gait. But it's lacking in the bottom octave and won't sound physically more powerful than your Epos. As JK suggests, Neat's Motive SX2 is a great small floorstander that is wonderfully good fun to listen to, and will have more bass too; I'd guess that it is more suited to your needs. Another wildcard to consider is the brand new Q Acoustics Concept 40, which is well worth hearing against the Neat; I'd wager it has slightly superior imaging and is cleaner and more detailed, although slightly less bouancy and fun.



**JK and DP reckon Neat's Motive SX2 are a good match for the UnitiQute**

### ➤ Time for a change

In the last 12 months, after many years, I have started to get back into my hi-fi due to the need to replace my speakers. The driver on my Mission 733i is starting to disintegrate, as they apparently do. I have bought a pair of Monitor Audio RX1 speakers, eventually deciding on standmounts this time as

### I want to get myself a new preamp. What should I go for?

my listening room is fairly small at 2.5 x 5m. While I was instore a Quad 909 was on demonstration via a Cyrus preamp, it sounded fantastic – admittedly through some expensive speakers. I was hooked and as I had always taken a fancy to the Quad amp I bought it. I needed a preamp now as the amp I had could not be used with the Quad. My funds did not run to the Cyrus preamp on demo, but they did have an offer on the Cyrus 6XP that could be used as a preamp. I decided to succumb to temptation and along with the purchase of a pair of Mission speaker

stands and a Rega phono stage I left £1,700 lighter, but a happy chap.

My system now consists of the Cyrus 6XP which I am using as a preamp, the Quad 909 power amp, Marantz CD67SE CD player, Sony ST-SB920 tuner, NAD 533 and Dual CS500 turntables Rega phono amp and Monitor Audio RX1 speakers.

After a year the system is sounding good, though it has taken some time for the speakers to come on song, they've been moved around quite a lot to find the best position for them.

As the Cyrus is an integrated amp I am considering changing this and buying a preamp in the belief, rightly or wrongly, that for similar money a dedicated preamp would be of a better quality than an integrated (no need for internal power amp). What do you think to this and what would you suggest as a replacement? I will consider buying second hand.

I am also toying with the idea of upgrading both the CD player and the speakers (stand or floorstanding speaker) and maybe the turntables in the future and would appreciate any of your expert suggestions.

There is a budget constraint, initially maybe up to £1,000, though I don't expect to get everything for that, it will be a staged upgrade starting with the preamp unless you suggest otherwise.

I listen to a variety of music, Pink Floyd and Supertamp from the seventies and eighties and have got back into vinyl.

*Brian Swift*

**DP:** Okay, first thing's first. You need to get a really top-quality preamp. This will show you just how good the Quad 909 is – and it is actually very good – and also stand you in good stead for future front-end upgrades. Given your budget, you need to find a secondhand MF Audio Passive preamplifier or Townshend Allegri. Debates rage about the relative merits of these two, but suffice to say they're both good enough for power amps costing 10 times as much as your Quad so I'd simply buy the first one that comes along of either! They are wonderfully open and neutral, and will let your Quad give of its very best. This done, it's time to sort your sources; an Audiolab M-DAC will turbo charge your Marantz CD player, which you can then upgrade to a Cyrus CDt transport when funds permit. The turntable to aim for is a Michell GyroDec SE with TecnoArm, tracking something like an Audio Technica AT-OC9; the Rega phono stage will be good enough for this. Good luck, and get saving!

### ➤ Plus ça change

I've just had a read through of my latest copy of HFC. On the front there is a piece of kit from Sony that is not only

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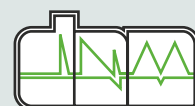
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LETTER  
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### ▶ Tape that!

Thank you David for showing me that I am not the only hi-fi geek to still use compact cassette.

With around 1,500 90-min cassette tapes, holding music recorded back to the seventies from radio programs and friends' vinyl and CDs using my Nakamichi CR7E, I still use tape for listening to what I consider to be my high-end system.

I've entered into modern-day digital music from my PC, but wonder why! It is fiddly and complicated, and subject to anxiety-causing crashes. We listen to music for pleasure, not worry. There must be many audiofiles who still relish the joys of cassette, so thanks for showing us we're not alone!

Mike Rodway

**DP:** You're welcome, Mike. There's still nothing like Compact Cassette for its sheer versatility and reliability. Just by way of example, I was at Red Kite Recording Studios in Wales the other day, interviewing Martin Levan – the man who designed the sound for all of Andrew Lloyd Weber's great musicals, from *Cats* to *Starlight Express*. To my horror my digital recorder packed up, so my Sony Walkman Professional was drafted into use. An old C90 cassette was found, Martin lent me one of his classic Neumann microphones and we were off, with a superbly recorded



**Mike's Nakamichi CR7E still holds a special place in his affections**

interview. Sadly I did have to wipe over my old Human League tape! Like Martini, Compact Cassette works any time, any place, anywhere...

**TJ:** DP is not the only satisfied HFC cassette user, I use a cassette deck (in my case a Sony TC-D5 Pro II portable) as my main source and am always delighted with the performance it gives. Cassette performance is mainly a function of how well the machine is set up (as opposed to its position in the marketplace when new), a mid-range model in perfect trim will always outperform a top-end one that has not been calibrated with the necessary accuracy. Therefore, regular servicing is a must, as is head cleaning (I wipe mine over with a rag dipped in IPA before every listening session – I never use abrasive 'cleaning tapes') and de-magnetisation if your machine doesn't do it automatically. I agree with you on computer audio, some years ago I spent ages building up a huge computer music library, but then found it tedious and uninteresting to use – back to the cassettes then!

new, but almost a new concept. Turning to the back I find that Creek is releasing a new amplifier with a tuner – 30 plus years ago when I bought my first amplifier from Laskys it was a Technics receiver. And now they are back in fashion!

On the other side of the page in *Through The Past Smartly* is a warning about the canning of the Laser Turntable (whatever the hell that is) alongside some comments about DAT.

The thing that strikes me is that fashions in hi-fi can be cyclical, but what people really want is convenience married with good sound. And so that brings me back to the Sony Hi-Res one-box system – as tucked in the middle of your magazine was an advert for a Cocktail Audio X30 high-fidelity, storage streamer and server. It seems the Sony is not alone in offering a one-box option.

Turning over the page I find a featured NAD product (NAD M-50) for £1,999 or less that

stores music without need for a computer and on the same page is a Naim Streamer that is also an amplifier and tuner – wow it's a receiver!

My point being: why should I marry my computer with my hi-fi when I can store it all on a single box that will sit comfortably on my hi-fi rack?

Is streaming from my computer in danger of becoming obsolete? Why do I need a QNAP when there are products that are far more easily integrated?

I speak, of course, as a practicing luddite.

Ian Hall

**NR:** You're not a luddite at all, Ian – you just cherry pick the best equipment from each era!

Even though my music streamer connects to my network, I store all my digital music directly on it on a large capacity USB memory stick and not on my PC because it sounds better and I don't need to have my PC on to listen to my music. So, while it was good in the early days of digital music to use a computer, I see no reason to link a PC anymore either.

**DP:** A very good question, Ian! Having lived with the Sony HAP-S1 for a while, it's rather

hard to go back to the idea of fiddling around with uPNP servers, Twonky, etc – it all seems rather tiresome. The Sony is a brilliant system, and it shows the company is still capable of greatness. If you have music on your computer, the HAP-S1 will get it wirelessly to its own internal hard drive automatically, and you can then play it as you would a CD player. There's no messing around, and it's all so intuitive. Given the fact that it also acts as a backup for your music collection, it makes an enormous amount of sense. To me, this is the very best implementation of what we used to call 'computer audio', and surely is the future.

## Why do I need a PC for streaming when there are other options?

**JK:** You're quite right Ian, you don't need a computer or an external NAS drive like the QNAP if you invest in a streamer with onboard storage. With the Sony and Naim players you can get substantial hard drives. External drives do, however, come in handy to back up your digital music collection and they can also be used to augment the storage. The other advantage they offer is price; a streamer without onboard storage like a Naim UnitiLite costs rather less than a Naim HDX and NAS drives start at around £100.

**ES:** I think that this is a question of two parts Ian. Devices with storage on board are not entirely new. As an evolution of the CD recorder, Yamaha released the CDRHD1000 over a decade ago and other products with varying degrees of storage, network capability and format support have appeared since then. The





Ed reckons the Tannoy Precision 6.2 is perfect for Vincent

advantages are convenience and simplicity, but equally there are downsides that need to be taken into account too. The first is that in 2014 storage is storage. My music is stored on a NAS drive separate from my hi-fi, but so are my photos and documents. This makes backing up to a different drive simple. The other advantage is that my music is available to multiple devices rather than just the one it is stored on.

The return to products that can carry out multiple functions is not unwelcome from my perspective. The uncertainty over how next-generation systems will look has meant that we're seeing a Cambrian explosion of audio where manufacturers look at new combinations of functionality. And long may it continue!

➤ **Quad or Tannoy?**  
My local dealer will sell me a Quad 25L Classic or a Tannoy Precision 6.2 for the same cost. I find the Quad to be

detailed and dry. I find the Tannoy to be dynamic and fun. I like both, but am not sure which to buy. Do you have an opinion?

Vincent Aronson

**ES:** Were it my money, I'd be buying the Tannoy as I always go for the one that brings a smile to my face. It's also a fabulous piece of industrial design.

➤ **RIP CD**  
I found a lot to agree with in your March issue. Firstly I suspect I may have beaten Sony to the "streamer with local storage" concept when, fed up of drop outs in playback caused by network glitches, I spent £100 on a second, simpler NAS for upstairs and set the main NAS to back up to it each night. Because it's on the same switch as my upstairs player it never misses a beat, and because moving data between

the two happens while I'm asleep, it can be as intermittent as it likes.

Next, I had to agree with Ed's piece on CDs. I believe they were a godsend when they were introduced, however, I have to agree with him on two points. Firstly, I would have liked to have been at the meeting where the material for the case was chosen: "Yes, the centre retention relies on the material's ability to flex and the hinge has two inherently weak tabs – have you nothing more brittle?" Secondly, a typical album of the day was under 50 minutes and if the industry had stuck with that we could have had CD at 24/48 quality right from the start. It seems bizarre that they chose to give us 'more' for our money.

I've also stopped buying compact discs where I can and started choosing vinyl by default. I'm a realist and I recognise its flaws, but I make a point of ripping each new purchase fairly soon to keep the crackles to a minimum. This forces me to sit and listen to the whole album, gives me a hi-res version that won't deteriorate, which I can enjoy in the car or on the train. And as a bonus I also get a legible sleeve that won't shatter and looks great.

So here's to the old and the new, and thanks to the CD for being there when we needed it – it's earned its retirement.

George Muir

**ES:** Amen Brother Muir. The need for brevity in the column also omitted even more horrifying CD storage 'solutions' like the cardboard envelope, the double case and the misery of the CD wallet. I also agree that the number of great albums that run to full length on a CD are very rare indeed. I confess that I don't tend to rip vinyl – I find that the Spotify version or supplied download is sufficient for use on the move. Nevertheless, vinyl is proving a surprisingly flexible option in 2014.

**NR:** A man after my own heart! I have no less than three NAS drives. Needless to say all of them

are RAID1 and so contain two identical disks for hot-swappable mirroring. Only recently, I heard of someone whose computer hard disk failed with all their documents, photos and digital music on it – and no backup! Fortunately, they were able to retrieve all of the data with the help of a specialist data recovery service, but at a cost of over £700! This makes the price of a NAS tiny in comparison, so other less-diligent readers take note and take regular backups of your precious music collection!

**TJ:** It would not have been a simple matter to make CD a 24-bit 48kHz format using the late seventies digital techniques that the format is based on. In those days linear DACs were used and it is difficult enough to make 16-bit ones of those that are usefully linear and noise-free down to 16-bit resolution, let alone 24. Even with modern 1-bit techniques the bottom two or three bits often represent little more than system noise, but that's what happens when you play the numbers game with hi-fi. Since most of the data processing in a CD player is done in serial form, greater bit widths also imply much faster data streams (multiplying by two for each extra bit), which also brings us onto sampling rates. To increase these relies on the availability of fast logic building blocks that can handle the signals accurately at high speeds. If you push up the speed but generate more errors in so doing there is no point, as would have been the case with the CMOS 4000 and TTL 74LS chips that the early CD players were built with. The original CD spec pushed the technology to the limit, that is why for most



A NAS drive is an excellent way to store digital music files



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### ➤ Warm me up

My system consists of a Rega Saturn, Rega Elicit R, Neat Elite SE loudspeakers, Chord Anthem interconnects (older black version) and Chord Epic speaker cable. I am satisfied with the sound, however, music can sound a little dry and the treble seems rather prominent and certain details stand out and distract from the flow of the music.

I know from past reviews that the Saturn has an extended treble and that the Elicit R is very transparent and unforgiving of poor recordings. I am thinking that a change of cabling or even speakers would help give a bit more warmth and rein the treble in. If a change of speakers is recommended I would be looking more to standmounts. Can you help?

Adam, Leicester

**JK:** Hi Adam, I would recommend changing your speaker cables first. Townshend Isolda cables have excellent bass extension and power with extremely solid imaging and very clean, open treble. You will get a lot more of the weight in the music, which will balance out the prominence of the treble. The other thing that would help is cleaner mains power – I reviewed the Saturn-R (see review p46) and was able to sweeten the mid and top with a good conditioner. I like the PS Audio PowerPlants and Isotek's new EVO3 units.



**Tellurium Q Black interconnects could hold the answer**

**NR:** I think your speakers are pretty good and feel that changing your interconnects and speaker cables, which are also good, is unlikely to tame the treble down to the extent that you would like. As you suggest, both the Rega Saturn and the Elicit R have a reputation for sounding a little bright and edgy, so I'd be looking to change one of these to balance out your system – perhaps start with a change of amp to match the Saturn.

**DP:** Aha, this might be a job for some Tellurium Q interconnects and loudspeaker cable! If there's nothing fundamentally wrong with your system (and I don't think there is), then you can tweak out some of that dryness with a slightly more open and warm cable; I'd look to trying Tellurium Q Black as a starter, and see where you get. Also, try placing your CD player and amp on FoculPods, which should animate the sound more and bring the bass up slightly.

consumer applications it still represents the 'gold standard' of audio reproduction 30 years later.

### ➤ Match me up

I have spent the last year updating my Cyrus-based hi-fi system to the following: Cyrus pre QX DAC, pair of X Powers with PSXRs, Cyrus stream X2, Cyrus CD 8 SE, Rega RP3 with Nagaoka MM cartridge, phono box DS+ and Chord interconnects.

And a pair of Monitor Audio silver RS8s, which are about 10 years old and connected using Cyrus flat bi-wired cable. Before I bought this cable I tried about a dozen much more expensive speaker cables and this was by far the best in this system. Some of the more expensive cables sounded harsh and unrefined so this one would

be my starting point. I have ripped over 1,000 CDs and bought about 20 LPs some new and some used in the last year. By the way, the last two new vinyl purchases have been appalling quality being warped and crackly. Despite this I like the sound of vinyl and intend to get a Michell Gyrodec with TecnoArm next year.

I am writing for your views on suitable upgrades for the Monitors. They have been great and sound excellent with music and as the sound for films from my Blu-ray Playstation. However, having upgraded everything but the CD and Rega, I think it's time to look at what can be achieved. Most of my listening is streamed FLAC files, but I pay more attention to the vinyl. With a budget up to around £2k

what would you recommend that will match the Cyrus components and the phono front end?

A floorstander that is preferably no bigger than the Monitors and can be placed about 12-18in from the wall would be ideal. An

**Can you suggest a cartridge for the Gyrodec that will match my system?**

oak finish or piano black will please my better half. Currently the Monitor speakers are bi-wired, each fed by an X Power.

Can you recommend a cartridge for the Gyrodec that is likely to match my Cyrus-based system?

Gary Roberts

**ES:** Hi Gary, prime candidate for me in this instance is the Neat Motive 1XS. The dimensions are sensible, the lower porting means rear walls are not a huge problem and your system has the power required to drive them properly and there's even a natural oak finish.

With regards to cartridges, I'm going to sound like a stuck record here but the Nagaoka MP150 is still one of the best cartridges I've used under £400 and should work extremely well with the Gyrodec.

**DP:** Focal's Aria 926 (£1,800) is an excellent choice, with a musical nature and a slightly warm tonality that would match your Cyrus electronics very well. There's also Monitor Audio's superb (£2,300) GX200, which is beautifully finished and has a superb ribbon tweeter. This will give a more detailed, spacious sound than the Focal, but isn't quite as bouncy and fun. Then there's the Spendor A6R (£2,495), which has a bigger sound than the MA that's very smooth and beguiling and natural – even more so than the Focal in some respects.

The Focal still has the edge on sheer physical scale, but the Spendor has a wonderfully intricate and involving quality that keeps the 926 honest. Try all three before you buy, if you can. Finally, a great starter cartridge for a Michell GyroDec/TecnoArm is the Audio Technica AT-F7 (£300) – this has a crisp, clean and clear sound that's always fun to listen to, and I also like the fact that it makes its price rivals sound a little crude in the treble region.



**The £300 Audio Technica AT-F7 is the perfect match for the Michell GyroDec**

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Whilst the Compact Disc is stuck with its dated 1977 software, vinyl technology continues to advance. New stylus shapes new tone arms keep pushing the boundary on what can be recovered from an LP groove. At Icon Audio we too are striving to this end. As the definition of equipment improves we have refined our designs to maintain the focus and presentation to be without any "mechanical" or contrived quality.

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# Set the record straight

The return of a childhood musical hero has got **Lee Dunkley** feeling all nostalgic about buying vinyl. If only the days of the humble record shop weren't a thing of the past...

**A**s someone who has just managed to secure tickets for what is possibly the most eagerly anticipated set of live shows in over 30 years, I think it is fair to say that I am rather partial to a bit of music nostalgia. Although I love discovering new tunes and artists and confess to having a bit of a chart download habit, sometimes there's nothing quite like hearing an old song to trigger a long-forgotten memory. Somehow music is so much better than a photograph at conjuring up an image or feel of the past, but I digress. The show I have unexpectedly managed to obtain tickets for is, of course, the seemingly once in a lifetime public reemergence of the music legend that is Kate Bush. Kate will perform a series of live shows in August and September for the first time since 1979. I have no doubt that the 15-date *Before the Dawn* shows will be a little more sophisticated than a roll call of her numerous hits spanning four decades in an unashamedly nostalgic romp down memory lane, but whatever extravaganza the shows have in store, they're sure to be *unbelievable!*

One of my earliest record purchases was a copy of Kate's single *Wuthering Heights* discovered while foraging through the bargain record bin of cast offs that no one wanted. I am sure Kate would be upset to learn that her hit single had made it into the bargain bin within a year after release, but from what I can recall the track was massively overplayed by the main radio stations at the time, and if the response of the rest of my family is anything to go by, listeners quickly tired of its melodrama. It was a Marmite tune that certainly divided opinion in my household, but I was hooked.

This was how you purchased music back in 1979, flicking through the racks in a record store in search of an album or single that caught the eye either because of who it was or the artwork. It was a strangely therapeutic activity that's been lost in the music download world of today, and it's one that I miss enormously. Even if you had no money it was hard to resist the temptation of passing a shop without experiencing an overwhelming urge to head inside and nonchalantly flick through the racks looking for nothing in particular. It was strangely addictive and appears to be something that's disappeared from our cultural landscape. Or so I thought.

Thankfully, Record Store Day is doing its best to ensure that the joys of riffling through the racks will continue for

many years to come. The annual celebration of all things vinyl was originally started in the USA by a bunch of independent record stores that were looking for a way to reconnect customers with the joys of vinyl. And it's gathering a considerable following in the UK.

This year's Record Store Day takes place on 19th April with some 200 plus independent shops taking part across the UK and opening their doors to vinylistas eager to get their hands on the special editions and rare releases being launched specifically as part of the celebrations.

## State of independence

Metallica officially kicked off Record Store Day at Rasputin Music in San Francisco on April 19, 2008 and the event is now celebrated on the third Saturday of April annually. In just a few short years it has grown significantly and is now enjoyed by record fans in nine countries around the world.

The ethos behind the day is very much about bringing record shop staff, customers and artists together to celebrate the unique culture of the record store and the special role it plays within the community. Participants are all physical stores with at least 50 percent music retail and they are not publicly owned. In other words, they are all independent and are most definitely not online retailers or large corporations.

Special vinyl and CD releases and various promotional products are being produced exclusively for the day and hundreds of artists across the globe will be making special appearances and performances. Among this year's 600 or so releases will be limited edition 7in singles from Paul Weller, Elbow, David Bowie, One Direction and Kylie Minogue, to name just a few. Pixies will make their new album *Indie Cindy* available to buy exclusively from independent record shops on the day – a whole 10 days before its general release date – and Chic legend Nile Rodgers will be releasing special mixes on 7in and 12in vinyl. Katy B is set to issue a remixed version of her album *Little Red*, while Green Day will release their new album *Demolicious*. To find a participating record store near you head to [www.recordstoreday.co.uk](http://www.recordstoreday.co.uk) ●



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**LEE DUNKLEY**  
Hi-Fi Choice editor



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# Can you dig it?

Audio archaeologist **David Price** goes all Indiana Jones as he heads off on a hunt for underrated, overlooked hi-fi gems, and comes back with a classic JBE Series 3

It's a long time ago now, but it remains an elephant in the hi-fi room, a thing that many audiophiles secretly wondered about all those years ago. Just why – from the late seventies to the early eighties – did large swathes of the hi-fi press obsess about the Linn Sondek LP12 turntable? Don't get me wrong, the Linn was – and is – a lovely device. I am not having a go at either the manufacturer or the deck's many fans (of which I am one). But what I can't quite understand is quite how so many rivals were largely ignored by the hi-fi magazines of the day.

These days, I find myself doing ever more audio archaeology, buying curios that had hitherto slipped between my fingers, restoring them and then putting them against either modern designs or their rivals at the time – some of which I also happen to own. There is so much interesting stuff out there if you can be bothered to look, and this is how I came upon a JBE Series 3 turntable.

Here's a great vinyl spinner that never had it easy, indeed maybe it was doomed to fail? After all, it was a Linn rival in the late seventies, meaning there was already a large number of people who'd invested in the LP12 platform. Second, it was a bit cheaper, which in a way worked against it; the assumption was that it was obviously inferior. And lastly – and certainly not least – it committed

## Properly fiddled, the JBE sounds lovely, even by today's standards

1979 high-end direct drives were *persona non grata*, ritually spurned in UK hi-fi magazines.

Manufacturers of belt-drive decks managed to make the case that direct drives were always 'cogging', searching for the right speed and never quite able to stay on it. They conveniently forgot the vagaries of a rubber belt, prone to dirt, stretching and slipping, however slightly. Under dynamic load conditions, unless done very carefully, belt drives were far from ideal too. Years of listening has taught me that the two drive systems start off sounding quite different, but the better they get, the more they sound alike – until they both deliver a crisp and tight but easy, open and smooth performance. In this way, it's rather like the best tube and transistor amps moving closer together, or even hi-res digital and top vinyl spinners – they use different methods to get to a common goal.

The JBE was an amazing turntable in its day; made from a thick slab of North Wales slate and fitted with innovative

shock absorbing Micro Seiki Microsorber feet, it lacked a complex suspension but still afforded excellent isolation thanks to the fine self-damping properties of its base. Instead of the usual Philips-derived 24-pole AC synchronous motor, it had an electronically controlled Matsushita direct drive motor – as seen on the Technics SL-1200. On top of this sat a distinctive platter that was essentially a black acrylic disc topped with six balanced, foam-topped aluminium pods. The deck came with an offboard power supply/control unit, some 10 years before Linn did the same thing with the Lingo.



**The JBE Series 3: Sadly, one of the seventies most underrated record players**

## Blast from the past

It's fascinating how fashions change. The LP12 has aged gracefully but never really looked modern, even when launched in 1973, with its obvious Thorens TD150 influence. The JBE by contrast went through a period of looking incredibly contemporary, then appeared ridiculously contrived for about two decades. But rather like old Japanese cars (which are fashionable for about 15 minutes, then look old, then look attractively 'period' again), the JBE now seems really rather fun. Its 'podule' platter has echoes of the Rega Planet (and its budget spin-off, the Amstrad TP12D), the long-lost Gale turntable and the Transcriptors (nee Michell) Reference Hydraulic.

The JBE isn't all show and no go, though. At the time, its manufacturer submitted it to a three-way blind listening test. Published in the (now long-deceased) *Practical Hi-Fi* in September 1979, it saw the company's Series 3 going up against a Linn LP12 and a Strathclyde Transcription Developments 305M. All three decks had SME Series III tonearms fitted and were set up by the manufacturers. The JBE was the cheapest, and many listeners thought it won. This was just about the only good write up the deck got in Britain (that I can find), and I don't think it's so wide of the mark. Properly fiddled, the JBE sounds lovely, even by today's standards. So sad then that, aside from this one moment of media glory, the poor thing was largely overlooked. There are plenty more such hidden gems where that came from, so more audio archaeology is needed I feel – wish me luck on my dig! ●



**DAVID PRICE**  
Hi-Fi Choice writer

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# What does that thing do?

Could it really be true that today's yoof find the whole hi-fi experience alien? **Tim Jarman** thinks it's time to pass on some of the pleasures of the past before they are lost for good

I read recently that there is a video on the internet somewhere of children struggling to use and understand a traditional type of telephone, the sort with a receiver on a curly cable and a mechanical dial. This is treated with much amusement, but to me that doesn't seem particularly fair; how and why should they know how to use such a thing? Telephones of this sort have not been in common use for some time now and I'm fairly confident that if they were shown how it worked they would grasp the basic idea almost straight away.

I have found a similar situation to be the case with hi-fi. Quite often when my wife has guests over I am called down from the relative peace and quiet of the workshop to show the children how the record player works.

Although the turntable isn't nearly as common a sight in British homes as it once was, the imagery of records and the things that play them is still strong in popular culture; this could be because downloads, streaming and the like aren't particularly 'visual' or it could simply be that old stuff is, for the want of a better word, 'cool'. Despite this, most of our young guests have never seen a record 'in the vinyl' before and are fascinated by the whole idea. Often the questions are quite elemental, "Where is the music?", "How do you choose which song you want to hear?",

## Share what you know, it's too wonderful to be kept to yourself

large-scale orchestral pieces) played on a proper hi-fi system is a world away from commercial pop delivered through the mobile phones and modern TV sets (both fairly hopeless objects in audio terms) that they have been brought up with. Some find it thrilling, some find it almost frightening (those big crescendos that build and build...), but seldom is the sullen shrug so normally associated with the young seen.

Given just how much money parents spend on birthday and Christmas presents these days, I sometimes wonder why the industry as a whole ignores this area of the market; it does a very good job of preaching to the converted, but is decidedly weak when it comes to the important business of appealing to the new generation, celebrity branded headphones (yuk!) and the long-defunct 'My First Sony' range aside.

Recently, however, I've become rather tired of just playing records on demand, so I introduced the most

recent hoard of visitors to the delights of the cassette deck. The game was simple, find a microphone (in this case a Sony ECM-909, which is really rather too good for this sort of thing, but was all I could lay my hands on at such short notice) and a blank tape, let them record themselves and then play it back. I remember what fun this was with a basic radio cassette recorder when I was little, but it seems that despite all the recording technology that is now on hand, hearing your own voice captured with reasonable fidelity sadly isn't a part of growing up any more.

They absolutely loved it, but on a technical level couldn't really get their little heads around how the whole thing worked. The best guess that they offered up was that there is a DVD hidden inside the tape deck onto which the sounds were stored; it is quite some intellectual feat to come up with an explanation like that because you've never seen magnetic recording before. To show that there was no trickery involved, I ejected the cassette and popped it into the radio in the kitchen. Again amazement, but then I'd forgotten that transferable media is also becoming a thing of the past; to do this today probably requires a round the world trip for the data to a distant server farm somewhere, along with the scrutiny of whichever security agency spooks happens to be looking in at the time. How on earth did we manage to make such a simple task quite so complicated?

## Skills to pay the bills

These experiences have made me realise what an odd set of skills it takes to get the best out of a hi-fi system. I have been messing around with gear like this for as long as I can remember, but it wouldn't take much for this to all become forgotten knowledge and for the mighty machines that once filled homes with music – that sounded so real that you could have almost been there – from discs of shiny plastic to recede, for all practical purposes, into folk memory. Don't let this happen, share what you know and what you have, these pleasures are too wonderful to be kept to yourself. As for the children, if they are really well behaved then I might just treat them and get the reel to reel out the next time they come over ●



Imagine just how much fun he'd have with your record collection



TIM JARMAN  
Hi-Fi Choice writer

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# The time's are a-changing

Having spent a small fortune on box sets and limited edition releases, **Patrick Cleasby** believes he might finally have found a better way to consume his music

**T**here are some times when only a foreign word fits just right to describe a concept. Those instances when a giant German compound word doesn't feel more cumbersome than the corresponding English description, or when a simple, elegant French word can't be beaten. A case of the latter is the use of *l'intégrale* to describe an artist's complete body of work. So much better than the prosaic 'box set'.

Of course, it helps when the artist is actually dead so the work is necessarily limited in scope, although endless barrel-scraping trawls for unreleased extras or again more elegantly in French, *les inédits*, have even put paid to that certainty. Notably, French linguistic treasures like Georges Brassens and the famous Belgian Jacques Brel have been given *l'intégrale* release treatment over there. In the case of the latter this has happened at least three times now, to the extent that French friends have opined on Facebook: "Do I really have to buy it all AGAIN...?"

Why mention this now? Well, I am one of those obsessive compulsive completest characters who, once interested in an act, likes to be able to negotiate his way through the whole sorry *intégrale*, which charts that artist's development. There is at least intrigue in the gauche juvenilia, the mid-career drugs wig outs, the worn out and terminal tedious piffle. Historically my impulses have led

## Spotify still has acts and music that are nowhere to be found

me to collect all of the singles, box sets and reissues that reveal the most obscure depths of someone's career. This gives me problems when trying to adapt to the modern way of consuming music.

In the broadcast industry it is taken as read that TV will inevitably move to a network streaming, largely on-demand model. This will, of course, be permitted by pervasive IP (internet protocol) networks with substantial bandwidth. For the majority of youthful listeners (other than us format-fixated, physical media enthusiasts) radio and music are already consumed this way. iPlayer Radio is a thing of beauty and even older people talk about use of Spotify as if it has entirely replaced their previous iTunes store (or heaven forbid, CD) purchasing habits.

My previous dabbles with Spotify have been limited to the setup necessary to test Onkyo or Loewe kit with integrated capabilities. In serious listening at home even the premium Ogg quality is exposed against lossless streaming. But a recent holiday coincided with the opening up of Spotify for iPhone and tablet-type users,



**Qobuz is well known for its classical inventory**

so I decided to dive in again. The other benefit of modern times is holiday accommodation with wireless is not rare, so the ritual of loading up iPods with what you think you are going to want to listen to has gone out of the window. Take the Bluetooth speaker of your choice and off you go.

But this is where my concern over the lack of *l'intégrale* comes in. At least the iPod method can give you all of say, Del Amitri and their B sides (including three different masterings of the awkward eponymous first album if you so wish). Until the recent reissues packed with B sides you would have been unlikely to find all of that on the streaming services. With iDevices and wi-fi you don't even need to 'pack in advance' as long as you're shelling out £20 a year for iTunes Match, and have loaded your collection up at some point.

## Spotify the difference

Spotify still has acts and chunks of music that are nowhere to be found, but I am more convinced than I used to be by its proposition. For higher quality and listening to whole albums in the right order, Spotify Premium is still necessary, so that amounts to £120 per year.

At around the same time, French company Qobuz announced that its streaming service would become available to UK users. The differentiator is that it offers lossless FLAC streaming at 16/44.1 using its own app. Maybe not so relevant for the holiday with Bluetooth pill principle, but of interest for the home hi-fi enthusiast. The annual cost is only a slight bump up from Spotify Premium at £200 per year. Qobuz is also known for its classical inventory – there is even a cheaper classical-only service.

So my habits have started to change – I am becoming truly 'wireless'. When I moved away from a DAB-equipped car I debated spending the £250 for a DAB upgrade to get my daily 6Music breakfast fix. I realised that I had the privilege of being in a decent 4G zone with a healthy download allowance. Having got the Bluetooth bug, I elected to simply Bluetooth from iPlayer Radio on the phone into the car unit and it works like a charm. So do iTunes Match, Spotify and Qobuz. This is the future! ●



**PATRICK CLEASBY**  
Hi-Fi Choice writer

# Minitest

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## Russ Andrews PowerBar

PRICE: £89 +£10.50 with SuperClamp +£51.95 for a 1m PowerMax Plus mains cable +£25 for six sockets CONTACT: 01539 797300 WEBSITE: russandrews.com

**THE POWERBAR IS** a mains extension block that comes fitted with a choice of four, six or eight high-performance UK sockets for a good, low-impedance connection to the mains supply. It can also be supplied with a SuperClamp to help protect your system from mains spikes and surges. As the PowerBar is supplied with a 10A IEC mains input socket, an additional mains lead will be required. The review sample was a 6-way PowerBar fitted with the SuperClamp option and a PowerMax Plus mains cable.

Despite being classed as an entry-level product in the Russ Andrews range, the PowerBar is a quality product. The sockets have a tight grip and a positive 'click' when a

mains plug is inserted. They are well-spaced apart and will accept 'wall-wart' power supplies with no issues of overcrowding.

When I compare the PowerBar fitted with the SuperClamp against a standard mains extension block, there is a noticeable difference in the elimination of clicks and pops from mains-borne interference, such as that coming from a refrigerator. There is also a discernible improvement in overall clarity together with a slight improvement in dynamics.

### VERDICT

The PowerBar is an excellent-quality product and the SuperClamp option is a no-brainer



## Merlin Cables Tarantula

PRICE: £50 +£50 for a 1m Tarantula power cable  
CONTACT: 0208 2245741 WEBSITE: merlincables.com

**WITH SIX 13A** sockets internally linked by solid metal bus bars, the Tarantula is made from extruded aluminium and has side-mounting brackets that can either be screwed to the rear of an equipment rack, a wall or, uniquely, fitted into an equipment rack. Since this compact unit has been designed to fit a standard 19in rack, it has the mains input 10A IEC inlet fitted at the front of the unit, along with high-quality RF/EMI filters. These have been designed to significantly reduce interference that screening alone cannot remove and also to minimise the leaked interference from the power supplies of your components. The total maximum load of the mains block is 10A due to the IEC inlet.

As the block is fitted with an IEC inlet, it allows you to choose the specification of an inlet mains cable to

suit your requirements. However, a Tarantula Mk 6 mains cable (supplied along with the block for review) is recommended by Merlin as a minimum requirement. The Mk 6 mains cable is available in various lengths from 1m to 5m and is constructed using three 2.5mm twisted high-purity oxygen-free copper conductors, covered in a high-grade LDPE (low-density polyethylene) insulation. An Ali/Mylar screen with drain wire is employed, together with a conductive carbon screen to shield the cable.

Replacing a standard mains extension block with the Tarantula, I detect an improvement in clarity that is particularly apparent with vocals and solo violin pieces. In addition, there is no sign of any mains-borne interference, which I put down to the high-quality mains filters.



### VERDICT

A beautifully made cable that delivers on both clarity and bass response





Even a modestly populated system of audio separates requires the availability of quite a few mains sockets. Preamplifier, power amplifier, CD player, music streamer, record deck and tuner – we’re already up to six sockets being required. Of course, you would never even think about stacking 3 multi-way adapters onto your single wall socket, would you? The solution is a decent-quality mains distribution block – the ones that you can

buy from your local supermarket for under a tenner are really not up to the job, as the cheap sockets and thin mains wiring can easily introduce noise into your system. In addition to heavy-duty cabling and high-quality sockets, some blocks also contain mains conditioners to remove mains-borne interference before it reaches your equipment. All the blocks reviewed here can be supplied with leads in various lengths.

## TCI Cables Constrictor

**PRICE:** £150 including an integrated 1m power cable  
**CONTACT:** 02892 673024 **WEBSITE:** tcicables.com

**THE DESIGN OF** the Constrictor centres on the use of TCI’s RFI filtering mains cable. When I receive the review sample, it is clear how it got its name as the outer covering certainly does resemble a snake. In fact, one of the mains cables in its range is called a Boa Constrictor!

This 13A distribution block is of a basic plastic construction using six sockets moulded into a black plastic block. The colour will keep it discretely hidden from view behind your equipment rack. The sockets are linked internally using a standard method of solid metal bus bars and a small neon indicator set into a corner of the block provides a subtle indication that the power is being supplied to the sockets.

The all-important mains lead has been manufactured using aerospace grade materials, which according to TCI give long-term reliability. The RFI



filtering mains cable is hand built in the UK by TCI and features eight cores of PTFE insulated silver-plated, oxygen-free copper, which act as a natural filter and eliminate unwanted mains noise. Additionally, the cable is braided to further enhance its RF rejection and filtering. The construction is designed to be non-inductive and self-screening and the insulating material around each of the wires is made from Polyolefin with a polyester-based outer jacket. The cable (which is rated at 45A!) is fitted with a good-quality TCI

True-Plug 13A UK mains plug and contains a Bussman 13A fuse.

Comparing the Constrictor against a ‘DIY store’ mains block, I do perceive a subtle improvement in instrument placement within the sound stage and a tightening up of overall imaging, proving that the mains cable is doing its job well.

### VERDICT

This basic block fitted with a superb mains lead offers sonic benefits over standard blocks



## Supra Cables LoRad

**PRICE:** £99 +£55 for a 1m power cable +£15 per additional metre  
**CONTACT:** 07711 939519 **WEBSITE:** wavelength-distribution.com

**THIS SWEDISH COMPANY** has made some substantial investments in creating a BS-approved UK 13A socketed block. This block features six shuttered and well-spaced sockets, together with a three-stage surge protection device. The beautifully made chassis is extruded from aluminium. This casework provides a robust enclosure for the sockets and effective shielding that helps to prevent 50Hz mains interference and mains-borne RFI emanating from within the enclosure from radiating into nearby cables. The block can be wall-mounted or floorstanding.

It is also fitted with a standard IEC mains input connector, so an extra mains lead will be required.

The LoRad 2.5 is a fully CE approved, flexible shielded mains cable that is made from three 2.5mm<sup>2</sup> cores of tin-plated multi-stranded

OFC wire and the external diameter of the resultant 16A cables is 11mm. As the block is fitted with a 10A IEC mains input socket, the total maximum load is 10A. The conductors, which have dual-layer insulation, are bound with a polyester tape together with three yarn ‘filler’ tubes to maintain the round outer shape of the cable and keep the drain wire in place. Around all this is a woven semi-conductive nylon/carbon screen material and the whole cable is finished with a PVC outer insulation.

In use, I find no issue with mains noise radiating to any audio cable deliberately placed in close proximity to the mains block and there is a noticeable absence of mains-borne clicks and pops. I also detect a definite improvement in clarity from all of my audio sources when using the LoRad.



### VERDICT

A really high-quality unit that provides great improvement in clarity and excellent screening



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# Van den Hul The Wave/ CS-122 Hybrid £310

From Holland comes this long-established cable specialist, with an impressive pairing

## DETAILS

### PRODUCT

Cable loom

### ORIGIN

Netherlands

### TYPE

Interconnect/  
speaker cable

### FEATURES

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper with Hülliflex jacket
- Speaker cable: silver-plated copper and carbon hybrid speaker cable with Hülliflex jacket
- Prices: interconnect £130/1m, speaker cable £20 per metre unterminated

### DISTRIBUTOR

Flamingo Audio

### TELEPHONE

07833 955014

### WEBSITE

vandenhul.com

**F**rom a company that has made itself a great name for the fine moving coil cartridges it makes, comes a vast range of interconnects and speaker cables. The Wave is towards the more affordable end of this, and is another silver-plated, copper cable featuring a “massive” 0.9mm central conductor of oxygen-free copper. A specially foamed dielectric insulation material is said to minimise high frequency signal attenuation. The outer and inner layer are made of the same material as the central conductor, which is described as a “triple shield” that is said to aid interference suppression. As with all van den Hul cables, it is covered in the company’s own ‘Hülliflex’ cable jacket, which is claimed to be both environmentally friendly and contain no halogens.

The CS-122 Hybrid is an updated version of one of vdH’s classic speaker cables, and sports two conductors made of 147 strands of 0.16mm diameter, high-purity, matched-crystal oxygen-free copper with a very dense pure-silver coating, alongside a carbon saturated layer that is said to

improve the sound. The cable jacket is also made of Hülliflex and is described as “a very attractive matt cream colour”. During the debrief one of our panelists counters: “it looks like something you see in a hospital!”

## Sound quality

From the opening bars of the Beethoven piece, it is obvious that what we are dealing with here is special. For the first time in the test, the sound hangs back from the speakers and dissolves into the room, rather than appearing to come from two points in space – which is what happens to a greater or lesser extent with the other looms. Indeed, the transparency of these cables is superb, but it isn’t transparency at the expense of musicality, as the vdH loom also has a wonderfully mellifluous quality to it that sees the music ebbing and flowing in a seductive and arresting manner.

The Paul Simon track is proof positive of the way these cables are able to let the singer’s real intentions flood out – every vocal inflection is carried beautifully, giving a mesmeric quality to the music. Sure, all the detail is there, but the bigger picture isn’t lost in the process of rendering it.

The first track is startlingly different to most of the other cable looms, in the way the decay on the voice seems to hang on, rather than ‘falling off a cliff’ with most of the others. The vocals are expressive and dynamic, and this is set over a backing that suddenly takes on an urgent, snappy quality to it – when previously the musicians seem to just be going through the motions. It is amazing how the same beats sound so different, as if they’ve been set free.

Soundstage width isn’t as good as some here though; this is where the

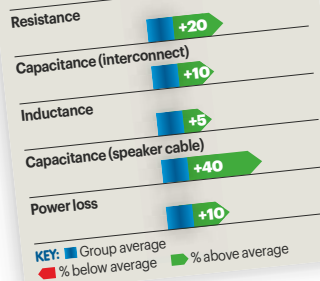


## ON TEST

In common with the Atlas Asymmetric interconnect, vdH’s The Wave is also a 75ohm coaxial type and so lends itself to both ‘analogue’ and ‘digital’ (S/PDIF) duties. This common geometry is reflected in the similarly low inductance and capacitance of the two interconnects although vdH’s greater conductor area lends it a very slightly lower 45mohm/m loop resistance.

VdH’s partnering CS-122 speaker cable, now in ‘Hybrid’ guise with mixed metal and carbon conductors is a very different beast from the original CS-122 that I tested for Hi-Fi Choice over 21 years ago. The spaced, figure-of-eight geometry means the 1.0µm/m series inductance is unchanged, but the improved dielectric means capacitance is half what it was at just 17pf/m. Resistance has also been cut by a factor of nearly 3x at 11.4mohm/m, further improving the achievable amp/speaker damping factor. **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE



vdH falls slightly short; it isn’t constrained or shut in, just not quite as expansive as – say – the Tellurium Q. That said, depth perspective is brilliant, “The first cable I’m hearing with front-to-back dimensionality,” says one panelist. Tonally it is pretty even – maybe just a touch on the dark and velvety side, but certainly not as sepia-tinged as the Tellurium Q. The overall effect is of an absolutely stellar cable combination and one that’s an essential audition for anyone that’s in the market for such a thing. The great thing is that it’s not really all that characterful, it’s just very unobtrusive and lets the music’s true flavour come flooding out ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★☆

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Very musical, engaging sound; open and detailed

**DISLIKE:** Slightly constrained stage width

**WE SAY:** Superb value cable loom, one that’s an essential audition





# Mission control

**David Price** remembers the huge mark that Mission's superb Cyrus One and Two integrations made on Britain's amplifier market

**L**aunched in 1977, Mission fast became a successful loudspeaker manufacturer with bold, innovative designs like the 770, but the company didn't take long to get into electronics and the 776/777 preamplifier/power amplifier combination was equally radical. It had a DC battery-powered preamp stage and a striking-looking power amplifier with an iron fascia into which the Mission logo was cast. It was an amazing flagship product, but the company needed something more mass market, and the 778 integrated was born.

This sported an equally imaginative, but rather less flamboyant half-width look, said to have been inspired by the first Sony PCM-F1 video recorder. Its fascia was the epitome of modernist minimalism, using just three identically sized control knobs for volume, input source and record source respectively. The latter feature was novel at the time, and handy in an age when home tape recording was popular. Apart from a headphone

socket on the side, a good MM/MC phono stage inside and a power button to the right of the fascia, that was your lot in terms of frills. Its all-discrete transistor design gave a clean-sounding 50W RMS per channel.

From the 778 came the Cyrus One. Launched in 1984, it shared the same dimensions and much of the chassis, but with a few detail changes. The inhouse styling was virtually identical,

**Its bright and bubbly sound really suited the warm vinyl front ends of the day**

but this new cheaper integrated had a top case made from a NASA-developed plastic called Nyrol. It was the first Mission product not to have a number, instead being named after the Persian king Cyrus the Great.

"Initially we wanted to build affordable amps, tuned to bring the extended hi-fi benefits of more

expensive kit," remembers Cyrus' technical director Peter Bartlett. "I can recall demonstrating the Cyrus One against amps costing 10 times as much, and wiping the floor with them. This was one of a small number of hi-fi products that truly changed the game at the time. Commercially, Cyrus amps were intended to make a fabulous sound with Mission speakers for students on a budget."

## The chosen One

The 30W RMS per channel Cyrus One proved an overnight sensation. It offered much of what the far more expensive 778 had done, including its superb styling (sadly it lacked its moving coil phono preamplifier), but cost just £130 on launch. In 1984, this was a direct rival to NAD's contender at the time, the 3130, which felt cheaper and more plasticky, and also had far more prosaic styling. Champagne corks were popping at Mission then, until the orders got ever higher and the company began to struggle to fulfil



them. "After the first year we realised that we had to reconsider our manufacturing processes," says Bartlett, "as demand totally outstripped our manufacturing capabilities of the time. We duly attempted to make them in the Far East but sonic consistency was an issue, so instead we made the decision to build a state-of-the-art factory in Huntingdon."

It wasn't surprising that the Cyrus One sold so well. Compared to its rivals it seemed like budget esoterica, rather than the Creek CAS4040s of this world which – although very worthy sonically – were hardly the stuff of high-end hi-fi dreams. Even if it didn't sound impossibly exotic, the One certainly looked it. It was also great fun to listen to; although limited in outright power and a little light in the bass, it had a bright and bubbly sound that really suited the warm vinyl front ends of the day, and the slightly soft and fuzzy sounding speakers. Its phono stage was excellent, providing a fast, detailed and engaging sound. With CD players of the day, it was a little stark and in your face, but modern silver-disc spinners and DACs suit it better now.

By 1985, the company was making hundreds of amplifiers a month, as well as selling a deservedly popular range of loudspeakers. When the production side stabilised, Mission's next act was to launch the Cyrus Two. Selling for £250, it shared its sibling's dinky size, but was a considerably reworked design inside. Power went up to 50W RMS per side with double the current-driving capability, a moving coil phono input was reinstated and the disc stage was tweaked with 11dB improvement to its signal-to-noise ratio. Like the Cyrus One, internal construction comprised a single printed circuit board and large toroidal mains transformer. Fast complementary power transistors were run in Class AB mode giving direct coupled output. Rear connections continued as upward-facing RCA phono sockets – great for access, but a real dust trap!

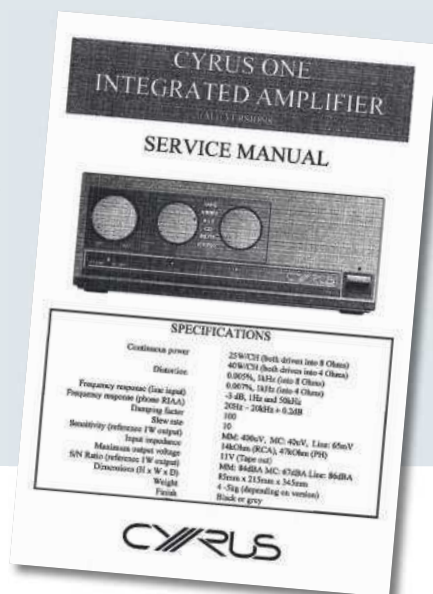
Most interesting about the Mission Cyrus Two, though, was its socket for the £200 external add-on PSX power supply. This considerably improved the amplifier's sound, bringing a much greater sense of ease, depth and smoothness to an already clean and musical performer. The stock Cyrus Two was something of a fast and furious listen, like its older brother, but on steroids, whereas the

addition of the PSX really smoothed it out and gave it a far more high-end sound, like a larger pre-power amplifier combination. The Cyrus Two/PSX sounded more grippy, bolder and had stronger bass – making it particularly suited to the new era of inefficient eighties loudspeakers like Celestion's notorious SL6. These would make mincemeat of a Cyrus One and made a Two struggle, but the PSX really did upgrade its capabilities enough to countenance far harder loads than Mission's own loudspeakers.

### The glory days

For a short period in the mid eighties, Mission could do no wrong. Peter Bartlett recalls: "People were amazed by the ability of this diminutive little amp. The *Hi-Fi Choice* year book had NAD, Pioneer and other amps listed, but the Cyrus amps dominated. I knew of retailers at the time who took deposits against deliveries in three months! Mission became the most attractive agency to stock and, although we had every retailer scheduling six months in advance, we still could not keep up with demand. The glory days of hi-fi!"

By the end of the decade, Mission began to tweak its baby amplifiers. Both kept their special 70MHz output devices, but internal components "evolved", as Peter Bartlett puts it. The company went through every element of the circuit design to squeeze the best out of it, without radically redesigning what was basically an excellent product. "The Cyrus One and Two models incrementally got better and better," says Bartlett. In 1986 the amplifiers appeared with a backlit Cyrus logo instead of an LED indicator, along with the use of a metal case. The big moment was in 1990, when the case was heavily redesigned; rather like



An original service manual for the Cyrus One

### MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

The Cyrus brand of today is an offshoot of Mission, but both companies have undergone countless changes since the latter launched in the mid-seventies. Farad and Henry Azima's company was a great British success story, but there was no shortage of superstition on their part according to ex-MD Peter Bartlett; they believed odd numbers were lucky, which is why 'Mission Cyrus' had seven and five letters respectively! Loudspeakers proved an early success in the seventies, then the Mission Cyrus amplifiers set showrooms alight in the eighties. So much so that in the nineties, Mission began acquiring its rivals. The company's research and development department grew as Quad, Wharfedale, Roksan and other brands were purchased. The team included many specialists working first on the then-new FEI technologies and later in NXT Distributed Mode loudspeakers. In 1996 NXT was set up as a standalone company that was later floated at £1.2 billion; understandably this dominated the group and it duly sold its 'non-core' audio businesses. This saw Roksan, Quad and Mission being unloaded between 2001 and 2003, and Peter Bartlett buying Cyrus in 2005. He sold most of his stake last year and is now technical director.

each new generation Porsche 911, it looked very similar to the old one, but was better in many ways. Both One and Two models went to superior diecast aluminium cases, with revised fascias sporting a new, non-backlit Cyrus logo with no mention of Mission to be seen. They also had a flip-up power switch and tiny round LED pilot lamp, plus a dual-ganged volume/balance control and switchable muting.

In 1991, the world said goodbye to the classic Cyrus One and Cyrus Two, and with it the Mission name on electronics altogether. The Cyrus 3 arrived and evolved the design language of its predecessors; arguably it was the purest-looking product since the 778 and a thing of beauty with its slightly softened, less angular case with beautiful detailing. The amp benefited from several high-end audio engineering concepts such as the non-ferrous magnesium metal chassis, and it also had a remote control, which was becoming essential on any mid-price amplifier. Selling for £499, it was considerably more expensive than the (then) £399 Cyrus Two, and sounded quite different with a more sophisticated, grown-up nature. The simple, affordable magic of the original Mission Cyrus amplifiers was gone, but lives on in many satisfied customers' listening rooms; even to this day it's a fine sounding bit of kit. Given that Cyrus continues to service them, bargain hunters looking for a classic amp could do a lot worse ●

# Tall order

Sometimes, size matters  
and this striking system has  
**Ed Selley** thinking big



**T**hose of you with the same curious affliction I suffer from of remembering adverts years after they vanished from the airwaves may remember a commercial featuring a slightly Lecteresque Sir Anthony Hopkins opining that a: “Big world needs a big bank.” The argument that the esteemed Mr Hopkins made has been somewhat undermined since by the same big banks taking the world to the edge of worldwide financial meltdown, but at the core of the argument is more than a kernel of

truth. To do some things correctly, you need to think big.

In musical terms, ‘big’ can translate to power or size (or for the completionist both) and in the case of the system you see here, in size terms, we’ve really pushed the boat out. The Magnepan MG 1.7 is as near as makes no difference six feet tall, which makes it comfortably the tallest (and I suspect the widest) speaker I’ve ever handled as part of a *Beautiful System*. What is more, this isn’t a huge cabinet designed to impart a bit of mass to some conventionally sized drivers. A

#### COMPONENTS

##### CANOR CD2 VR+ £3,100

The CD2 takes the idea of a valve CD player and runs with it with both a valve regulated power supply and an output built around two ECC83 and two 6922 valves with an EZ81 rectifier.

##### CANOR TP106 VR+ £4,000

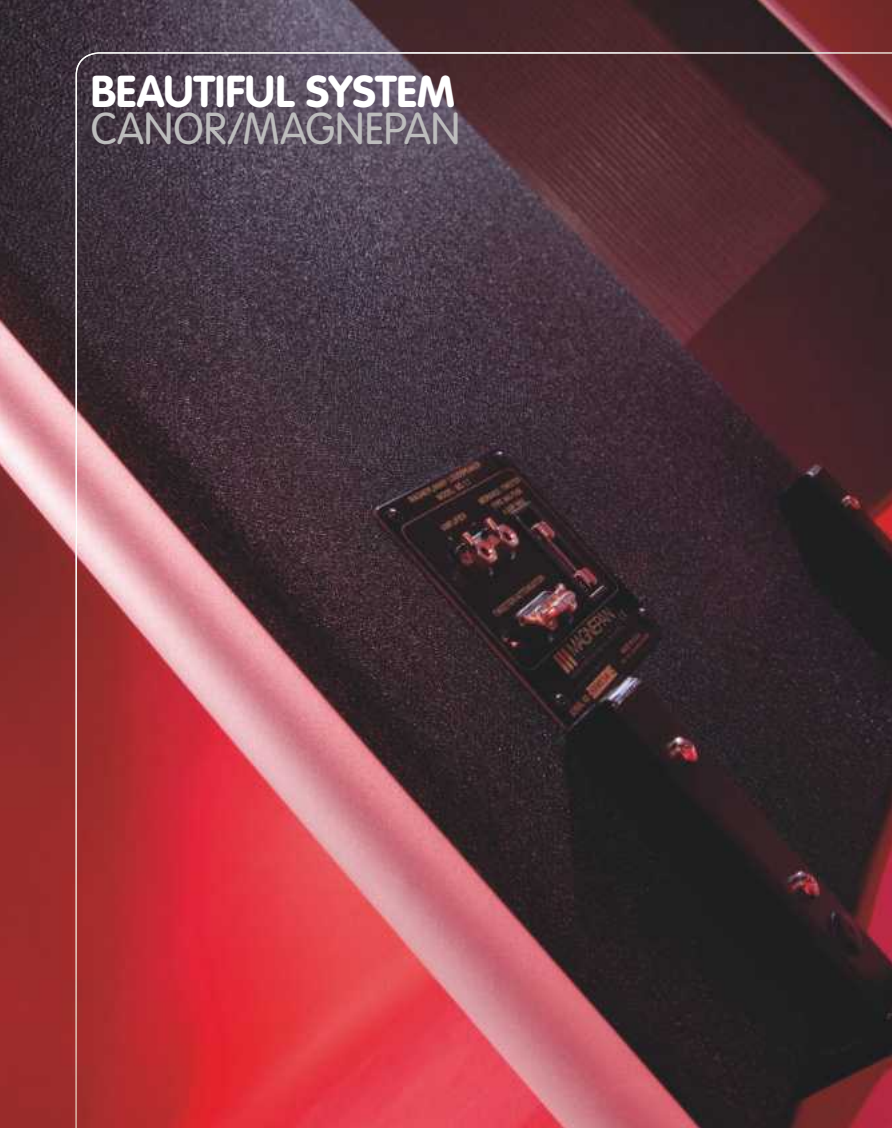
The largest amp in the Canor range, the TP106 VR+ is built around four 6550 valves with a strong Class A bias – the amp operates in pure Class A mode up to an output of 20W.

##### MAGNEPAN MG1.7 £2,700

A full-range electro planar speaker, the 1.7 is an impressive 65in tall and 19in wide, but only 2in deep. The panel is divided into tweeter and midbass sections and a variety of finishes are available.

**The tonality is unfailingly believable, which further aids the sense of total immersion**

## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM CANOR/MAGNEPAN



good two thirds of the MG 1.7 is radiating area. Just to be clear, this is a big loudspeaker.

The reasons for these imposing dimensions stem from how the Magnepan works. Instead of a complement of conventional dynamic drivers, it works on the planar magnetic principle where a membrane is imprinted with a voice coil (or in this case, two). Magnets down either side of the membrane react to current passing down the coils and create sound. This principle gives the Magnepan two interesting characteristics. The first is that although it is tall and wide, it is also extremely thin – less than 5cm deep. The second is that the panel radiates in both directions making the Magnepan a true dipole.

### Clash of the titans

You might think that such a burly speaker might need some monstrous electronics to make it sing, but this isn't the case. I'd hesitate to call the Canor TP106 VR+ amp and CD2 VR+ CD player small – they certainly aren't light – but they are perfectly normal in terms of dimensions especially when you consider that both units make use of valves. In the case of the amp this means a quartet of 6550 tubes running in ultra-linear configuration. Four of these valves

can be coaxed into outputs of up to 100W, but Canor has elected to bias them towards Class A, resulting in an output of 55W into 4ohms – which is fairly conservative.

The CD2 is also very distinctive in terms of how it makes use of valves. Whereas many 'valve' CD players boast a solitary device somewhere in the output, the Canor is entirely valve based and the power supply is also valve rectified for good measure. Combined with high-tech Burr Brown

### With pretty much no mass to the drivers, the Magnepan is supernaturally fast

PCM 1792 DAC, the result is a CD player that is at once very retro and entirely modern. The CD2 is also unusually focussed for a CD player in this day and age. Not only is there no sign of a digital input, let alone a USB connection, the CD2 doesn't even have a digital output.

Although they come from opposite sides of the Atlantic, the electronics and speakers are a very happy visual match. The silver edges of the MG 1.7 mirror the black line that runs across the front of the Canors (other finishes are available) and the result is rather

**Above: Tall, wide but incredibly thin, the MG1.7 is a very striking-looking speaker**

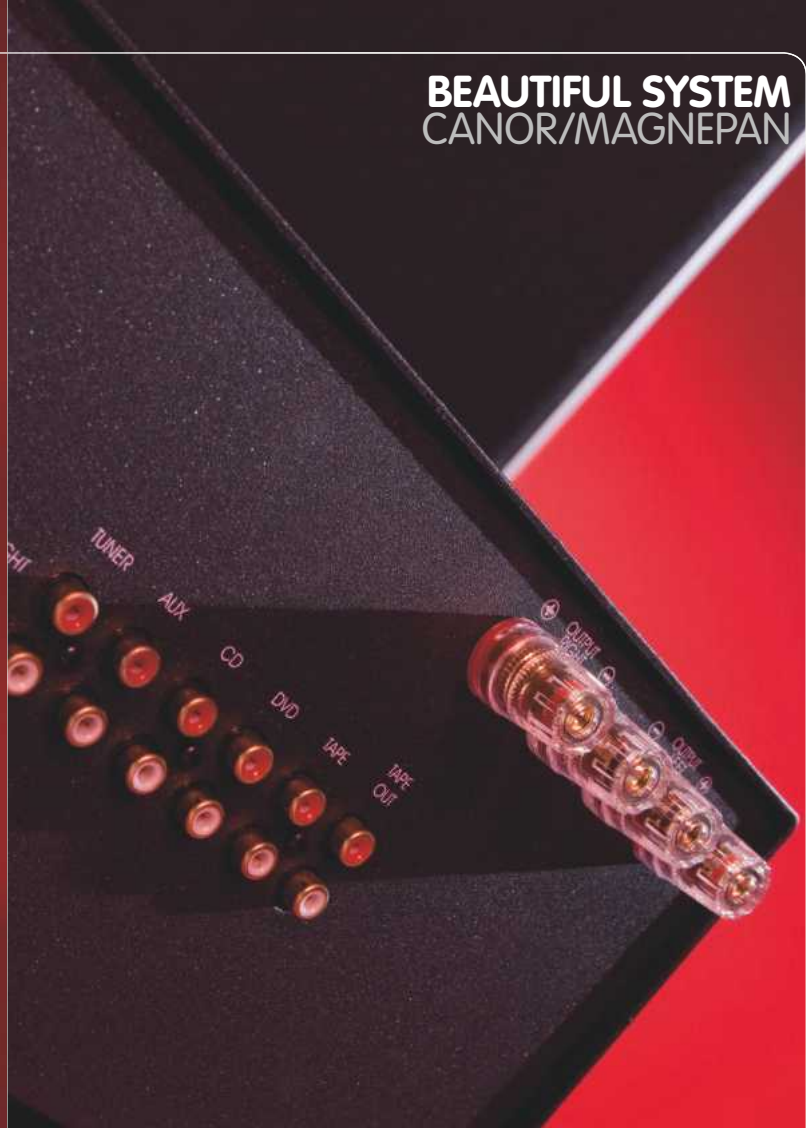
**Above centre: The TP106 VR+ provides a frill-free masterclass in valve amp design**

**Above right: The dimensions might be sizable, but the fit and finish is top notch**

elegant. The decision to use orange for lighting pays dividends too. The Canors look grown up in a way that electronics festooned with blue LEDs simply don't. As someone with rather less than 20/20 vision, the huge dot matrix display of the CD player that can actually be read across a room is welcome too. A final flourish is proved by the remote, which is a cut above the off-the-shelf efforts that small companies can find themselves stuck with. There is little point in any manufacturer trying to conceal something as large as the Magnepan, so I think that the very clean, almost minimalist lines of the MG 1.7 are the most sensible way of handling a speaker of this size.

### Having it large

Into the 86dB sensitive Magnepan, the 55W of the TP106 VR+ might not sound like the most promising power plant and the internet is littered with tales of the trials of trying to make the dipole panels work in a normal room. In reality, although there is no escaping the fact that the Magnepans will look fairly prominent in a normal UK lounge (they certainly do in mine), in the case of this particular system I have experienced more positioning issues with some standmounts than I do with the panels. Furthermore, as Mr Hopkins



noted, there are some compelling reasons to go big.

The recipe for understanding the appeal of this system is simple. Choose a recording that needs a little scale to shine – in my case, I make a beeline for Daft Punk’s phenomenal *Tron Legacy* soundtrack – and then sit back and let this trio redefine what you can expect from home hi-fi.

The performance that results is vast and unconstrained in a way that is so removed from box speakers there is little real point in comparing them. As the panel in the MG 1.7 extends well past the seated ear height of anyone who isn’t a professional basketball player, there is genuine height to the performance. With orchestral performances in particular, the result is astonishing and lends a realism to the way this system sounds that is utterly compelling.

### Keeping it real

Were this the only skill the system possesses it would still be fairly extraordinary, but there is rather more to it. The tonality of the setup is unfailingly believable, which further aids the sense of total immersion. Not only do voices appear from nowhere, they do so with exceptional reality. I’ve listened to the Canor amplifier before in a different system and the most noticeable trait is the complete



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**WEBSITE:**  
decentaudio.co.uk

absence of softness or warmth or indeed any of the usual vices you might expect from a valve amp. Instead, it uses those glowing bottles to present unfailingly real music with a soundstage that is something you can all but walk around in. Adding the CD2 to the mix only serves to emphasise these traits and elegantly demonstrates that Canor’s unusual combination of old and new is no mere marketing puff. When you combine this mastery of space with a speaker that already redefines scale, the result is captivating.

It is also something that captures the intimate as well as the grand. Smaller works like Fink’s *Distance and Time* are not rendered inappropriately huge, but still benefit from the near complete absence of the sense that sound is being beamed at you from two boxes. The closest parallel I can easily draw is that the presentation is like having everything performed at an intimate venue. There is a sense of the live that I’ve rarely experienced in other systems. I suspect that as well as the scale that comes out of the front, the fact that almost the same amount of sound is coming out of the back helps to give this impression, more accurately replicating the process by which sound reaches you.

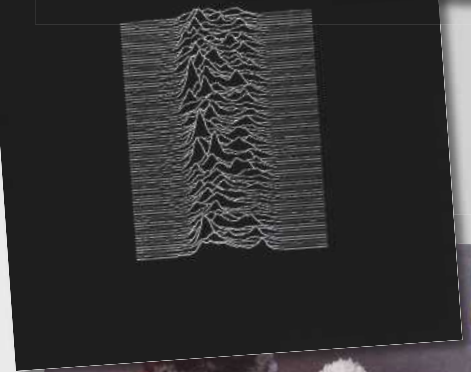
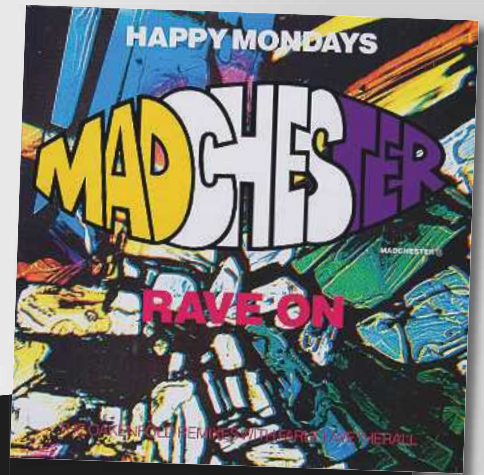
As a final party piece, the speed with which dynamic swings are

handled is almost unsettlingly quick. With pretty much no mass to the drivers, the Magnepan is almost supernaturally fast. Going back to conventional dynamic speakers afterwards is disappointingly leaden by comparison.

In case you hadn’t worked it out, beyond the charm and appeal that all beautiful systems bring, this one has me scratching my head and looking at what passes for my personal finances wondering if there is any way I can keep this unique sound in my life.

### Panel beaters

I have nowhere to put a pair of speakers this big and I suspect that there are limits to how useful they are for reviewing, but this formative experience with panels has been an intoxicating one. The experience has been boosted by a Canor duo that demonstrates just how good a well implemented pair of valve-based components can be. Beyond the individual superlatives, this is a system that makes all music an event. I cannot see how anyone could tire of how voices simply appear from the ether without any real sense of something so mundane as electronics being involved. The jury is still out on whether a big world needs a big bank, but the world of music certainly loves a big speaker ●



# Factory Records

The legendary Mancunian independent, home to some of the greatest alternative music across three decades, profiled by **Simon Berkovitch**

**W**ith a history as colourful as the musical output of its key acts, it's little wonder that Factory Records, Manchester's premier independent label, has spawned two excellent films: Michael Winterbottom's comedy-drama *24 Hour Party People* and Anton Corbijn's *Control*.

Production began at the Mancunian record label in 1978 with *A Factory Sample* double 7in EP, the first vinyl to be released. Taking inspiration from punk rock and a performance by the Sex Pistols at the city's Lesser Free Trade Hall, the label was an unlikely alliance between TV

presenter Tony Wilson, actor Alan Erasmus, manager and DJ Rob Gretton, graphic designer Peter Saville and – arguably most importantly – producer Martin Hannett, responsible for some of Factory's most important work – such as Joy Division's peerless discography, New Order's early explorations and Happy Mondays' swaggering *Bummed*.

These three premier league artists are the ones most readily associated with the label, but Factory was also a safe haven for mavericks of all persuasions, including virtuoso guitarist Vini Reilly's The Durutti Column, the dark new-wave

electronica of Section 25 and A Certain Ratio's danceable post-punk funk.

Factory was often as much a social experiment as it was an important independent record label, setting it further apart from the mainstream. Its unique cataloguing system, for example, was not restricted to just music releases: esoteric and eclectic subjects like posters, lawsuits, a nightclub, wagers and even co-founder Tony Wilson's coffin were all given the distinctive FAC catalogue numbers. The most famous catalogue number of all was FAC51, the Hacienda: the nightclub and music venue that opened in 1982, co-owned

by New Order, was the world's most legendary by the late-eighties' Madchester explosion, but also the most troubled by its closure in 1997.

Equally distinctive was the striking artwork that adorned each Factory release. With his beautiful and often insanely elaborate – and not to mention expensive – sleeves, graphic designer Peter Saville not only gave record buyers an education in art history, but also provided Factory with an instantly recognisable house style.

Factory finally declared bankruptcy in 1992. The bold experiment may have come to an end, but its legend lives on.

## Joy Division

Factory's most famous sons, whose impact on popular culture is immeasurable

The musical legacy of Factory's most famous sons is the most enduring of all the artists who recorded for the label. Arguably the first post-punk act, Joy Division's majestic body of work is slender – just two albums released before they split in 1980 in the aftermath of Ian Curtis' suicide – but the group's impact is immeasurable.

After the self-released *An Ideal For Living* (1978), the quartet of Ian Curtis (vocals), Bernard Sumner (guitar), Peter Hook (bass) and Stephen Morris (drums) appeared on Factory's first vinyl outing, the highly collectable double 7in *A Factory Sample*, released the same year, signing to the label soon after. Later reissued on 1988's *Substance*, their two contributions – *Glass* and *Digital* – were the first fruits of their relationship with producer Martin Hannett, co-architect of *Unknown Pleasures* (1979). Justifiably regarded as one of

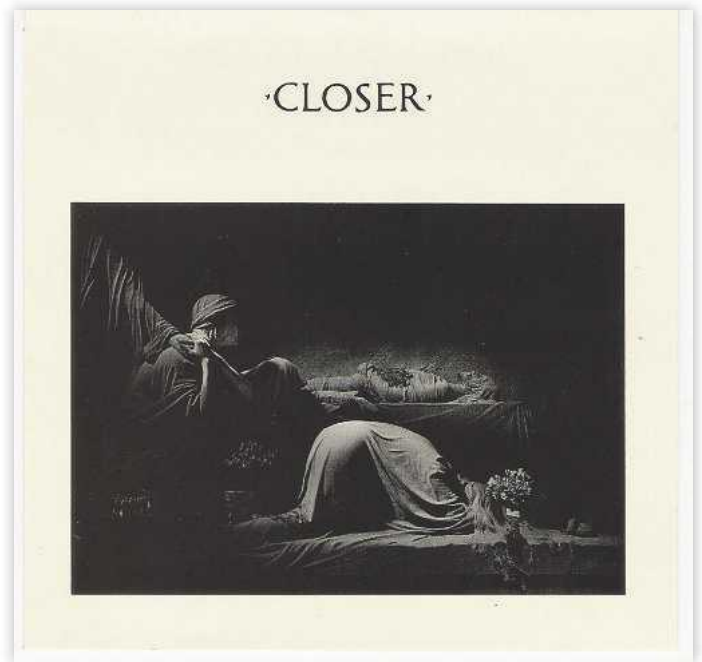
the greatest-ever debut albums, *Unknown Pleasures* is the marriage of some of Joy Division's most atmospheric songs to Hannett's innovative and unconventional production techniques. The claustrophobic punk rock of *An Ideal For Living* had given way to a grand, spacious and insistent new music, providing a grand platform for Curtis' post-punk croon and dark lyrics. Classic

**Punk had given way to a spacious and insistent new music**

non-album single *Transmission* helped raise the album's profile.

Aside from a French-only, more synthesiser-heavy single in early 1980, the remainder of Joy Division's discography emerged posthumously, sadly, following Curtis' death that year.

**1980's *Closer* was the second and final Joy Division studio album**



## New Order

From the ashes of Joy Division rises one of the eighties best-loved bands

Because of the shadow that Joy Division casts over New Order, it's best to view them as a separate entity. Indeed, the colossal success of *Blue Monday* (1983) alone – the best selling 12in single of all time – elevates them from Joy Division footnote to Factory's flagship band.

Debut single *Ceremony* and album *Movement* (1981), the first and last New Order album produced by Martin Hannett, owed a debt to their previous incarnation, but a key stylistic change occurred after a series of concerts in New York. Exposure to electro and post-disco music saw the group assimilating these effervescent sounds and rhythms into their new compositions, seeing New Order develop as an influential new wave and electronic dance music hybrid.

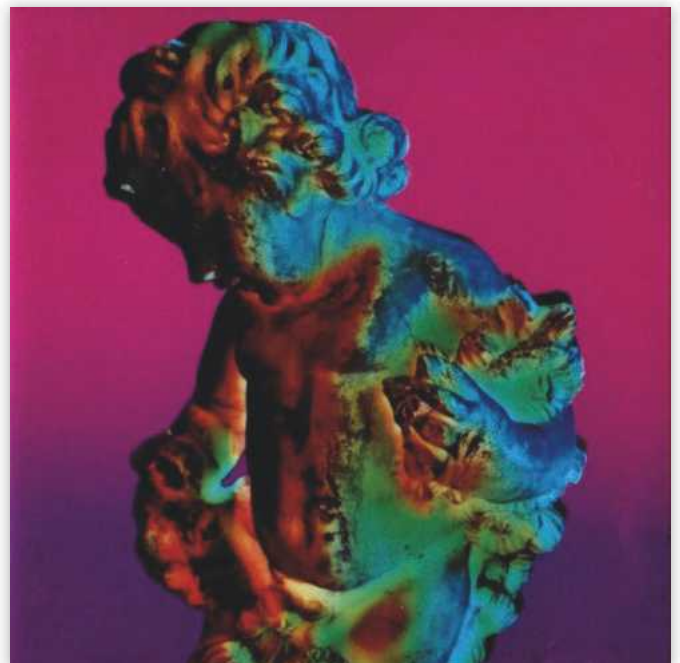
*Power, Corruption and Lies* (1983) saw this blend of technology and guitars taken to stunning heights, none more so

than on album opener *Age of Consent*, while synthesisers took a more prominent role on tracks such as the sublime *Your Silent Face*. The runaway success of *Blue Monday* – housed in a classic Peter Saville-designed sleeve – consolidated New Order's position as pioneers.

**An influential new wave and electronic dance music hybrid**

*Low-Life* (1985) and *Brotherhood* (1987) followed similar musical trajectories, with the following year's excellent *Technique* (1989) – New Order's final album for Factory – introducing the textures and instrumentation of house music to the mainstream, revealing the group to be as ahead of the curve as ever.

**Technique brought the sound of sun-drenched Ibiza to rainy Manchester**



## The Durutti Column

The vehicle for Vini Reilly, the post-punk who reclaimed the guitar solo

The first line up of The Durutti Column was an unstable grouping, documented by an appearance on *A Factory Sample* and then breaking up before recording a debut album. Only guitarist Vini Reilly remained and under his guidance The Durutti Column would henceforth be an expressive melting pot of experimental guitar styles.

Debut album *The Return Of The Durutti Column* (1980) was a set of breathtaking guitar instrumentals. Reilly set out his stall with the shimmering, drum machine-tinged *Sketch for Summer* – which recalls players as diverse as Tom Verlaine, Django Reinhardt and Johnny Marr. *The Return Of The Durutti Column's* original sleeve was an astonishing artefact, made from abrasive sandpaper, designed to destroy records placed either side of it – an

aggressive idea at odds with the gorgeous music that was concealed within.

The Durutti Column ploughed an underground

furrow with fine albums such as *LC* (1981) and *The Guitar and Other Machines* (1987) – the first new UK album to be released on DAT.



## Happy Mondays

The kings of the Madchester scene who took excess to the limit

The most notorious Factory group to crack the mainstream were, without question, the Happy Mondays. The group's excessive lifestyle largely overshadows their music, but at their peak, they were a dance-rock colossus.

Formed in 1980 and fronted by wry lyricist Sean Ryder, the Mondays' first album, the insanely titled *Squirrel and G-Man Twenty Four Hour Party People Plastic Face Carnt Smile (White Out)* (1987), was produced by ex-Velvet Underground member John Cale, and spawned the group's first anthem, the punk-funk of *Twenty Four Hour Party People*.

Cavernous-sounding second album *Bummed* followed the next year. A brilliant, club-friendly production, it had classics such as the Krautrock-influenced *Wrote for Luck* and *Brain Dead* nestling within its dance grooves.

The acid house-inspired *Hallelujah EP* (1989) kicked off both the Madchester scene and a run of hits, including a cover of John Kongos' *Step On*.



The final album for Factory, *Yes Please!* (1992), allegedly brought the label to its knees, costing a fortune to make due to the band's ludicrous excess.

### ► SHOPPING LIST

Eight essential singles from the Factory floor – from the obscure and fantastic to the biggest-selling 12in single of all time



**Various**  
*A Factory Sample* (1979)  
Fac 2: The debut vinyl release, home to groundbreaking cuts from Joy Division and Cabaret Voltaire.



**A Certain Ratio**  
*All Night Party* (1979)  
Fac 5: Angular debut outing for ACR before more danceable textures were added to the sonic stew.



**Section 25**  
*Girls Don't Count* (1980)  
Fac 18: Agitated post-punk from Blackpool's finest, produced by Ian Curtis and Joy Division's manager.



**Joy Division**  
*Love Will Tear Us Apart* (1980)  
Fac 23: The group's most famous recording. Arguably the best release put out on Factory Records.



**E.S.G.**  
*You're No Good* (1981)  
Fac 34: Endlessly sampled and influential disco from the Bronx to the mixing desk of Martin Hannett.



**New Order**  
*Blue Monday* (1983)  
Fac 73: The biggest selling, most instantly recognisable 12in single of all time. Enough said.



**Cabaret Voltaire**  
*Yashar* (1983)  
Fac 82: An early step on the journey from avant-garde industrialists to cutting-edge dance act.



**Happy Mondays**  
*W.F.L.* (1989)  
Fac 232: Rave on Madchester: two hedonistic remixes of the Mondays' classic *Wrote For Luck*, heavy on the Krautfunk.





“Get up and drive your funky soul!”

James Brown

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**100 Elton John**  
Goodbye Yellow  
Brick Road



**101 Yuja Wang**  
Rachmaninov  
and Prokofiev  
piano concertos



**101 Schumann**  
The symphonies

# Musicreviews



## Oasis Definitely Maybe: Chasing The Sun Edition

★★★★★

**ALBUM  
OF THE  
MONTH**

3-CD expanded edition **Big Brother Recordings**

**CAN IT REALLY** be 20 years since the Britpop wars were considered of sufficient cultural significance for the spat between Oasis and Blur to make front-page news in tabloids and broadsheets alike? Indeed it is, and two decades on the ability of Oasis and the quarrelsome Gallagher brothers to court controversy is undimmed; on the announcement that the group's 1994 debut album is to be reissued, former lead singer Liam resorted to Twitter to urge Oasis fans to boycott the expanded new edition.

He probably said it just to irk Noel, who has raided the vaults to augment the original album's 11 songs with another 33 tracks spread across two further discs, including demos, live recordings and the rather good stand-alone single *Whatever*.

History moves at a pace these days and its judgement has not been particularly kind to Oasis. While Blur's Damon Albarn has gone on to be

acknowledged as the most inventive and original British pop auteur since David Bowie, Oasis have been dismissed as a one-trick pony who recorded seven more-or-less identical albums recycling ideas borrowed from the Beatles with ever-diminishing returns until they broke up after another inevitable fight between Noel and Liam in 2009. There's something in the criticism. But if they only had one trick, their debut reminds us that for a while at least, the trick was damn near irresistible.

"How can you remaster something that's already mastered? Don't buy into it. Let it be," Liam Gallagher tweeted. In the narrowest sense, he has a point. The original 52 minute album was brilliantly produced by Owen Morris to create a sonic palette characterised by a swagger, volume and aggression that surely requires no further tweaking – and it will take more acute ears than mine to detect any significant differences between the 'old'

and 'new' masters on offer here. But then the point of a 20th anniversary reissue is surely not to sound radically different, but to evoke nostalgic familiarity.

Listening to *Definitely Maybe* in 2014 is to understand why Oasis connected a new generation to the notion that rock 'n' roll mattered and could define their lives in a way that few bands have managed since. From the snarl of the perfect opener *Rock'n'Roll Star* and the hedonistic rush of *Live Forever* via the classic riff of *Cigarettes and Alcohol* to the heart-rending *Slide Away* and the sardonic closer *Married With Children*, there's not much subtlety. It's triumphalist and bragging as the best, purest rock 'n' roll so often is. The extras are packed with memorable moments, too, including previously unheard acoustic versions of *Live Forever* and *Shakermaker*, an early demo of *Half The World Away* recorded in Noel's hotel room and ace b-sides such as *Fade Away* and *Listen Up*. **NW** ▶



**HOT PICK**

## Elton John

Goodbye Yellow Brick Road

★★★★★

Expanded deluxe box set four CDs plus DVD

Universal

**BY ELTON'S EIGHTH** album in 1973 the costumes and the campy were getting increasingly outrageous, but the larger-than-life showmanship was not permitted to get in the way of the burnished songcraft. *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* included some of the most poignant songs John ever penned with lyricist Bernie Taupin. Several had a cinematic theme, evincing the bittersweet taste of Hollywood fame led, of course, by *Candle In The Wind*.

## The larger-than-life showmanship was not permitted to get in the way of the songcraft

But the sheer diversity of the original album's 17 songs is breathtaking.

The remastering sounds crisp and lends a souped-up roar to potent rockers such as *Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting*.

Also included are a live Christmas 1973, show at Hammersmith Odeon, a period documentary on DVD, and demos, out-takes and cover versions by the likes of Ed Sheeran and Emeli Sandé, which might appear a little overblown, but the material is strong enough to bear the load. **NW**



## MUSICREVIEWS



**Dr John**  
Gris Gris

★★★★★

CD

Real Gone

**MALCOLM JOHN 'MAC'** Rebennack (that's Dr John to you and I) is best known for his funky New Orleans R&B piano playing. But his 1968 debut was a more singular affair – a weird, psychedelic take on voodoo ritual with Cajun overtones and ghostly, disembodied voices.

The album's most famous song, *I Walk On Guided Splinters* was later covered by Paul Weller. Its spooked sound is typical of the album, although much of the rest is even more outlandish and mysterious. The original stereo mix – retained here in all its spectacular exaggeration – adds to the album's unique and wonderful strangeness. **NW**



**Chromeo**  
White Women

★★★★★

Parlophone

**FOR THEIR FOURTH** album, the Canadian electro duo have created a tribute to 80s pop funk that could show Daft Punk a thing or two. *White Women* is packed full of R&B rhythms, fizzing pop hooks, choppy guitar riffs, rock bombast, bleeping electronica and a whole lot of fun. The soaring falsetto harmonies of opener *Come Alive* are pure Prince. *I'm Jealous'* infectious beat counterpoints a tale of a player's inner feelings, while Beyoncé's lil' sis Solange pops up for an unshowy cameo on *Lost On The Way Home*. This isn't how the eighties were, but in some, slightly better alternative universe, it's how they should have been. **DO**



**HOT PICK**

## Toumani and Sidiki Diabate

Toumani and Sidiki

★★★★★

CD

World Circuit

**THIS IS THE** first joint venture by undisputed master of the west African harp Toumani with his eldest son and the results are impressive with young Sidiki (23 actually) clearly a chip off the old block. It's acoustic kora duels all the way. The playing is simply stunning, with lightning-fast glissandos counterpointed by busy, shifting, chameleon rhythms that drive the pyrotechnics of each soloist to greater heights.

Sidiki's playing tends to be fierce and fiery where his dad's is more considered, not so showy, but perhaps more evocative and nuanced. The blend is often sensational, with the pair playing to each other's strengths to create a masterpiece. **DO**



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## AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

**Aretha Franklin**

Live at Fillmore West

180g vinyl

Speakers Corner/Atlantic



**IF YOU'VE EVER**

experienced Joe Cocker's *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* you will have some idea of what to expect from this 1971 performance by the queen of soul. Staged

at the quintessential counter culture venue, it features an all-star cast playing a variety of great songs some of which would have been performed by their originators in the same place. It kicks off with a rendition of *Respect* that would have made Otis proud and which introduces the scale of the ensemble: brass with King Curtis,

keyboards from the inordinately funky Billy Preston and drums courtesy of latter-day break beat king Bernard Purdie. Add in backing vocalists from the first church of hot soul, conga and Cornell Dupree on guitar and you start to get the idea. What that doesn't tell you is how much energy is coming from the audience, they push Aretha to new heights of intensity. There's only one Franklin original, *Spirit in the Dark*, but two versions, the second with Ray Charles on guest vocals. Highlights include *Love The One Your With* with a far tighter band than CSN and a highly individual version of *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. The sound is thin by the highest standards, but the soul power is in the top flight. **JK**

## HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



**Agnes Obel**  
Aventine



ALAC 24bit 44.1kHz

**Linn Records**

**THESE BEAUTIFULLY SAD** piano pieces, augmented occasionally by voice, string trio and guitar, evoke a sustained mood of wistful sadness, informed by themes of loss and failure. The mood is sombre and reflective, the perfect accompaniment if you wake up at 3am with a problem you just can't solve. It will soothe and reassure you that you're not alone, but it's delicate, pristine beauty will remind you not to give up hope. **DO**



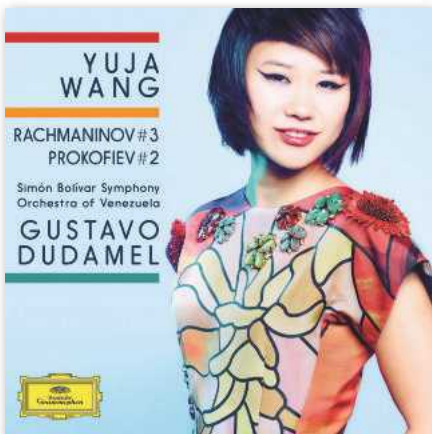
**Samantha Crain**  
Kid Face



ALAC 24bit 44.1kHz

**B&W Society of Sound**

**THIS IS THE** 27-year-old singer-songwriter from Oklahoma's third album and marks a change of pace from her usual band dynamics. Here, the sound is stripped down and eerily evocative of wide open spaces, with the focus on Crain's robust yet vulnerable voice and guitar, augmented by occasional hoe-down fiddle, simple drum backing, piano and guitar picking. From these primal elements she conjures an extremely intimate sound. **DO**



**There's more to Wang than just her infamous high heels**

## Yuja Wang

Rachmaninov and Prokofiev piano concertos 3 and 2, Simon Bolivar orchestra, Gustavo Dudamel (Cond)



0289 479 1304 7 CD

**DG**

**THESE DAYS, EVERYONE** seems besotted by Yuja Wang's unfeasibly high heels. So it's as well to remind ourselves that she really can play the piano. In terms of scale and technical demands, these are two of the biggest concertos on the planet, but Wang is equal to every challenge. Indeed, at times, she almost makes it sound a bit too easy. The playing is brilliant, but a tad slick. A certain weight and gravitas are missing. The live recordings are clear and well balanced, but the sound itself is a shade dry and wanting in atmosphere. Clarity is good, but there's not much air or space around the instruments. So, maybe not a first choice then. **JH**



**Schumann**  
The Symphonies  
Chamber Orchestra of Europe  
Nézet-Séguin (Cond)



0289 479 24371 2 CDs

**DG**

**I FIRST HEARD** the Schumann symphonies back in the seventies, courtesy of Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic. The music made a profound impression on me. With Nézet-Séguin and the COE, we get keenly played, sensitively shaped accounts, clear lines and plenty of detail. There's much to enjoy, but - had I heard Nézet-Séguin, rather than Karajan, would the music have made the same lasting impression? Alas, no. The impression is one of efficiency and control, but no real direction, no unfolding drama. Like the performances, the sound is a bit generalised and actually rather bland. **JH**

## BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

**The Who**  
Sensation - The Story Of Tommy

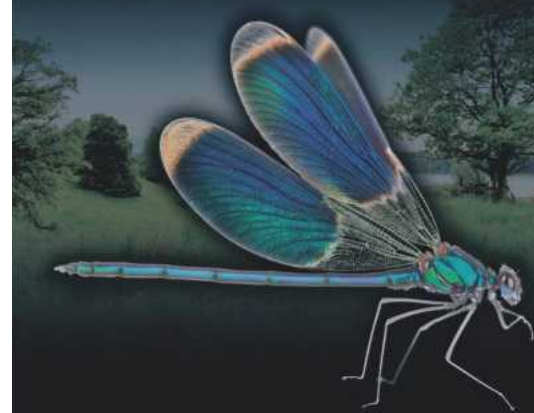
**EAGLE VISION**



**HOT PICK**

*Tommy* was the album that changed The Who from a singles band into a fully fledged rock band. The story is largely autobiographical for Townshend who had recently been spiritually awakened by his discovery of Meher Baba. This rockumentary reminds us of how good the band was at the time and of Townshend's remarkable ability to express difficult concepts in the context of great entertainment. It also credits manager Kit Lambert's contributions, without which the band may not have survived the sixties. **JK**

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**TOTEM** Model 1 speakers for sale. One owner from new. £550: **01628 626085 (Berkshire)**

**HMV** X1119 valve radio from the 1950s in wooden cabinet. 19.5 x 14.5 x 10in (wxhxd). Still in perfect working order, but preset buttons need some cleaning and an aerial is required. £50 ono: **07941 387692 (Kent).**

**RUSS** Andrews Signature Powerkords, 1m length, Wattgate 350I IEC plugs. Mint condition, RRP £440 – £295 each or £575 for both. Cheaper if collected: **01902 884694 or email: jukey39@yahoo.co.uk (W. Midlands)**

**KRELL** KAV 300i 2x 150W in fabulous condition £765 inc remote, Excellent condition Krell KAV 500 5x 100W power

amp £1,250 can be bridged to 2x 400W & 1x 100W. Pair 2m Transparent Ultra XLR cable 6 yrs old GC. £650 ono. Pair 1m Transparent super XLR cable 2yrs old VGC. £350 ono. Pair 1m Transparent Plus XLR cable 2yrs old VGC. £270 ono. Pair 2m Transparent Ultra RCA cable 8yrs old GC.



**KEF** Reference One. Great example of this classic bi-wirable floorstander in black finish. Denon D-F10 mini system. (£2,000 new). Supplied with all cables etc. £450 Buyer collects. Will split: **07888 853675 (North London).**

£500 ono: **07958 319976 or email: simon\_hope@btopenworld.com (Oxfordshire).**

**WANTED** B&W CDM 9NT speakers in cherry wood. Must be in excellent condition: **0207 2619494, or email: michaeljohnherrish@hotmail.com (London)**

**LEEMA** Antila MK1, hi-end CD player in excellent condition, hardly used. Boxed and including all accessories, buyer collects and demo £987: **07736 395 424 (SE London)**

**COPLAND** CDA266 CD Player, Copland CSA515 amp (150W), AVI S2000M pre-amp, Martin Logan Aeries i loudspeakers. All immaculate, only used 6 times in last 7 years due to unsuitable room. £1,500: **email: philipburrows@hotmail.co.uk**

**POWER** supply for Class A amplifiers, self contained, suits John Linsley Hood's or any low power Class A amplifier, £279. Pair of used



**CYRUS** X Power. Light use and good condition, but not boxed. Buyer to collect. £500 ono: **01252 430067 or email: kevin.pennycook@gmail.com (Farnborough).**

SEAS 10in drivers, £99: **0207 499 8729.**

**FIRESTONE** Audio Fubar II USB DAC and 'Supplier' power supply (both boxed) £80. No damage, scratches, etc: **07875 976 185 or email: gt1957xbla@gmail.com (Glasgow).**

**REGA** Planar 3 turntable with RP300 arm, with cartridge, plinth and cover. Rega instructions and cartridge set up. Buyer collects £150: **01483 729543 (Woking, Surrey).**

**MISSION** Stance stands, black, 59cms high. In VG condition, but no floor spikes or packaging £30 ono: **07903 578225 or email: dibster1@yahoo.co.uk (Manchester).**

**TRICHORD** Diablo MM/MC phono amp with never connected PSU. Two and a half years old, mint condition, boxed £500: **07905 348812 (Watford).**

**KIMBER** Select 9033 jumper set with super burn in £250. Kimber Orchid digital cable XLR 0.5m £130. Kimber HD19 HDMI cable 0.75m £50: **01772 314151 or**

**email: jamesmckendrick@btinternet.com (Preston).**

**EAR** 834 Delux preamp £900 ONO. AVI S2000M preamp £400 ONO. AVI S2000M Tuner £300 ONO: **07890 896819 (Cumbria).**

**NAIM** NAC 82 + 2 Hi-Caps, Naim NATO2 tuner: **01623 230472 (Notts).**

**DENON** RCD-M39DAB, Denon RCD-M38DAB, Dali Zensor 1 speakers, Tannoy Vi Mercury standmount speakers, Q Acoustics 20101 standmount speakers, Wharfedale 9.1 standmount speakers. All boxed, buyer to collect. Open to offers: **01977 695385 (West Yorkshire).**

**NAIM** NAP 90, NAC 92, CD 3.5, Flatcap, boxes and book £1,125. KEF Ref 104.2, boxes £500. Soundstyle WG3A/V AV unit £150. Mission 753F, boxes £175: **07770 601097 (Hants).**

**NAIM** CD 5i CD player as new. Bargain at £425. Pro-Ject headphone amplifier in box as new £60: **07973 426291 (Birmingham).**

**QUAD** II Mono valve amps/Quad 22. Pair Quad II amps



**MARANTZ** KI Signature CD player. CD 6000 OSE KI sig – immaculate condition, champagne silver, original box, remote etc. £225 ono: **01614 459770 or email: dan.overton1@btinternet.com (Greater Manchester).**

**BUYING TIPS** **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!



**HEYBROOK** TT2 turntable, Grace G-707 arm & Dynavector 10X5 cart with Clearaudio Synchro speed controller, VGC £500, collection only: **07938 835982 (Middlesex).**

unused since complete overhaul by Quad. Preamp Quad-modified for tape/CD. Complete with mains lead and bulgin plug £795: **07747 636965.**

**MARANTZ** PM6004 amp £165. Sony NS700 SACD/DVD player £45. Denon 1906 AV receiver £75. KEF 'Eggs' 1005 5.1-surround speaker system £150. Aiwa ADF700 cassette deck £20. All excellent condition: **01691 610589 (Shropshire).**

**SUGDEN** A21aL Class A integrated amplifier. Latest model, little used in second system £950: **01952 728773 (Shropshire).**

**AUDIOLAB** 8200CD CD player for sale in black, in excellent condition. Superbly transparent sound £400 ONO. Nordost Red Dawn 1m RCA interconnects £115: **01484 427426 (West Yorkshire).**

**DALI** Royal Menuet II speakers. Good condition, boxed with manual £150 ONO: **01326 374797 (Cornwall).**

**MARANTZ** 6004 amp, CD. Dali Icon speakers. Cambridge 650T tuner. Two years old VGC £550: **01273 500173 (East Sussex).**

**RUSS ANDREWS** Kimber Kable Hero HB Ultraplate phono analogue interconnect 0.5m. Boxed as new £299 (save £100): **0780 0606892 or email: schandler@dopag.co.uk (Worcestershire).**

**ARCAM** A38 integrated amplifier £960; Arcam CD37 CD Player £960; Arcam T32 FM/DAB tuner £400. All units have a black finish and are in as-new condition (unmarked)

and perfect working order. Each unit comes with remote control, mains lead, manual and box. The A38 and CD37 both retail at £1,600 and the T32 at £674: **02380 738935 or email: golf3385@hotmail.co.uk.**

**TURNTABLE** with Aux input - Direct Transfer to SD Card/USB, + hi-fi use, plus manuals. Can demo, £45: **01661 823606 or email: grant.darras@gmail.com (Northumberland).**

**MARANTZ** PM7200KI amplifier comes with remote control. Very good condition and in full working order £320: **07505920373 or email: byardley1294@hotmail.co.uk.**

**POWER** supply for Class A amplifiers, self contained, suits John Linsley Hood's or any low-power Class A amplifier, £279. Pair of used SEAS 10in drivers, £99: **0207 4998729.**



**ELAC** FS207.2 fabulous sounding and looking speakers with ribbon tweeters, work well with valve and solid-state amps. £300 spent upgrading crossovers internal wiring. £500: **07793 749178 or email: kingjuancho@yahoo.com (London).**

**SENNHEISER** HD650 headphones boxed, excellent condition £120: **01708 344334 or email: j\_McPherson@btinternet.com (Essex).**

**LIVING VOICE** Avatar 2 loudspeakers Santos Rosewood, perfect condition, one owner 4 years old, boxes and ownership manual included, £2,500 ONO: **01933 355989 or email: samej.ellis@gmail.com (Northants).**

**NORDOST** Flatline Blue Heaven speaker cables. Stereo pairs 1x 4.5m (cost £1,030) and 1x 2.5m (cost £630). Unused/new. Bargain at £550 the lot: **01945 463077 or email: deregle1@aol.com.**

**PMC** DB1+ Speakers, light oak, excellent condition, will demo, boxed, no cables, buyer collects, £220: **01483 891925 (Guildford).**

**CYRUS** Mono X amplifiers (pair) in quartz silver £1,200. Arcam FMJ T32 DAB/FM tuner silver £400 OVNO. Both items with original boxes and manuals and are in mint condition. Bryston BCD 1 complete with BR 2 remote and Bryston BP 1 preamp. Both items 17in in silver. £3,000 the pair or will split if required. Both items bought new in April 2011 and come with original boxes and manuals and are in mint condition: **07967 152114 or email: martin.dunn@btinternet.com (Aberdare).**

**JK** DAC32 little used. Giant killer battery-powered DAC gives stunning sound, huge dynamics, great bass and detail, with special USB cable included. USB in/phono out only £275: **07793 749178 or email: kingjuancho@yahoo.com (London).**

**QUAD** ESL57 Electrostatic Speakers. Perfect working order, checked by Bowers & Wilkins 2011. One careful owner from new. Manual, bills and history, very good condition £550. Can demonstrate: **07786 497303 (London).**

**NAIM** XS amplifier, mint condition, very musical, boxed, remote, power cable, £750: **01275 462948 (North Somerset).**

**RADFORD** STA25 series 3-valve power amplifier, all silver soldered. It's been cherished for the last 15 years £850. Silver High Breed Epitome 8 interconnects with phonos £40. Fuber USB DAC/ADC

converter £50. Fubar Supplier improved power supply: £50: **02476 679165 or email: woodbine@hotmail.co.uk.**

**KIMBER** Crystal Copper interconnect with 16dB attenuation (£184) £65. Audio-Technica moving coil cartridge AT-F5/OCC hardly used £45: **02476 711668 (Coventry).**

**AUDIOLAB** 8200CD £600 ONO. Few months old. Call for a demo: **01661 823606 or email: grant.darras@gmail.com (Northumberland).**

**ROGERS** Studio 7 speakers, walnut. Atacama Stands. Affordable valve amplifier (EL 34). Sony XA20ES CD Player. Sony STD777ES DAB/FM tuner. Gold fascias, VGC. Complete system £1,200 or will separate: **02476 711668.**

**ROKSAN** Kandy K2 amp and CD player (Silver) £350 each. Monitor Audio RX6 speakers (Walnut) £450. (Sell separately or as a complete system for £1,000). Also Naim CD5i £500. All mint. Buyer collects: **email: neiltoons1980@gmail.com (North Kent).**



**NAIM** Supernait 2 bought November used 2 weeks. As new. Remote, instructions, boxed. Cost £2,750, will accept £1,950: **0772 9620621 (Worcs).**

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# NAD

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**THE DAC MARKET** has gone from the point of extinction to close to saturation in just a few years and making your product stand out from the crowd is becoming increasingly difficult. And so NAD adopted a different approach to the rest. Instead of offering every input and giving it huge processing capability, the DAC 1 was equipped with a wireless receiver, that when coupled with a USB dongle allowed your computer to communicate with your hi-fi.

### What's in a name?

Time moves on, though, and the limited sampling rate of the DAC 1 has become an issue even for a DAC majoring on convenience, and the imaginatively named DAC 2 seeks to correct this. The new DAC is the same size to the millimetre as its predecessor and offers the same single wireless input mated to an RCA and coaxial digital output. The big difference is that the DAC 2 is capable of passing a 24-bit/96kHz sampling rate, which gives it a little more relevance in 2014. If you are adamant that your future listening will be 24-bit/192kHz or bust, the NAD won't be for you, but it can handle the bulk of hi-res material and does so without needing any additional USB software installed on your computer.

While the main unit of the DAC 2 is identical to the older DAC 1, the USB dongle has changed and not necessarily for the better. The DAC 2 comes supplied with a larger one than the DAC 1 that's designed to sit

on a flat surface on a rubberised foot, which is all well and good but means that if you connect it to a laptop it tends to flap uselessly down the side of your leg.

The good news is the connection is as fuss free as before. Attach the dongle to a PC or Mac and the DAC 2 will connect automatically – the LED turning blue to signify the connection. In the event you have another device that causes a conflict, NAD provides two alternative channels that the DAC 2 can be switched to. It is worth noting that as it has no sampling rate indicator, it is an article of faith that higher bitrate files are played unchanged when they leave the computer at their native sample rate.

The DAC 1 was an amenable sounding product and the good news is that the DAC 2 doesn't lose the welcome smoothness and control that the older design displayed. In keeping with the company philosophy, the DAC 2 doesn't divert your focus away from the music, and holds your attention. This means that the tonal balance is unfailingly believable and it is extremely difficult to provoke into harshness or aggression even with compressed or poorly recorded material. The DAC 2 manages to sound accurate without being ruthless or unkind, which is always a useful balancing act to pull off.

The NAD also manages to demonstrate the benefits of high-resolution files too. The 24-bit download of Scratch Massive's *Communion* has the immense bass and sizeable soundstage that this live album demands and the overall

presentation is suitably vast. Ask for something more intimate and the DAC 2 delivers with effortless ability. This is not the sort of presentation that tells you when the vocalist last cleaned their teeth, but it is consistently engaging and incredibly easy to listen to for long periods.

The overall refinement of the NAD is generally an asset, but there is a sense with very deep bass that there is a noticeable lack of definition that means you can only hear a single note rather than a more nuanced series that some rivals can manage with the same piece. This can mean with more energetic choices the DAC 2 isn't quite as exciting as it might be, but this is perhaps the trade off for the generally forgiving nature of the DAC as a whole.

The idea of a single input wireless DAC is getting your computer talking to your hi-fi where other DACs can't manage the same thing and this goes hand in hand with the idea that the DAC 2 might not be solely fed a diet of perfect high-resolution files.

### Kings of convenience

This convenience factor is still the main selling point of the DAC 2. You don't need to have your computer jammed right up against your hi-fi or have an exhaustive knowledge of the finer workings of USB to get it up and running. The DAC 2 builds on this by offering a genuinely capable performance with hi-res audio so if you have no need for additional inputs, this is a really convenient choice that now offers a little more hi-fi credibility. **ES**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£300  
**WEBSITE**  
nadelectronics.com

#### OUR VERDICT



## Townshend Audio Seismic Isolation Pods

**THE LAST THING** that you want to experience when listening to music is bad vibes! This is where Seismic Isolation Pods can help. Turntables are obviously very sensitive to unwanted external vibrations as the cartridge is specifically designed to generate audio signals from the 'wanted' vibrations in the record groove. Similarly, any vibration in the laser mechanism of CD players will also introduce sound-degrading jitter. In particular with valve amplifiers, vibrations rattle the internal electrodes causing microphony.

In order to combat the problem, Townshend has a range of products that incorporate its Seismic Load Cell. This consists of a compression spring covered by a flexible synthetic rubber jacket with two end plates that also have screw threads to enable height adjustment

and provide attachment points. A movement-sensitive, air-resistance damper rapidly dissipates any low-frequency oscillation caused by handling the suspended equipment and vibrations from 2.5Hz upwards emanating from any direction are also dispersed. As the frequency increases, the isolation gets progressively greater, ensuring that virtually no vibration can pass from and to the suspended equipment.

### Rock steady

The Seismic Isolation Pod is a Seismic Load Cell with a circular foot attached to the lower end cap for stability so that it can be used as a replacement for the feet underneath audio equipment. There are soft felt pads on the top and bottom faces to allow for easy positioning and to prevent scratching. The Pod is available with six different weight capacities,



ranging progressively from 1kg up to 32kg to match the weight of the supported equipment.

When I install four of these Pods under my record deck, I notice an improvement in image placement, with instrument positions more clearly defined. I also sense a deeper silence during quieter segments of slower passages of music and an improvement in the dynamic range. With the Pods fitted under a CD player, I perceive a general sense of greater clarity. These really are excellent devices and some of the best feet I have used. **NR**



#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£100 each  
**CONTACT**  
0208 9792155  
**WEBSITE**  
townshendaudio.com

#### OUR VERDICT



## Russ Andrews Kimber OPT-1 fibre-optic cable



**A FIBRE-OPTIC CABLE** is required to connect digital audio equipment that utilises optical Toslink connections. Toshiba originally created the Toslink standard to connect its CD players to the receivers that it manufactured for PCM audio streams. The Toslink standard was soon adopted by manufacturers of most CD players and although early systems used raw PCM data from the CD player, the S/PDIF (Sony/Philips Digital Interconnect Format) standard is now used for digital audio streams. S/PDIF can be fed through a 75ohm coax metal cable or via a Toslink optical fibre cable.

Sadly, many of the optical cables that are supplied with digital audio equipment are of poor quality. This can result in end connectors not lining up properly with the opto-electronic devices in the equipment or in poor quality fibre-optic cable that is lossy

and prone to spurious internal reflections. All of this will cause imperfections in the transmitted digital data that will in turn result in jitter that the DAC has to cope with. A degradation of the audio signal will be the inevitable result. It is, therefore, important to use a good-quality Toslink cable like the Kimber OPT-1.

### Wired for sound

The OPT-1 incorporates a medical-grade light conducting fibre-optic cable made from an advanced polymer to reduce signal distortion within the cable. This is also fracture-resistant both within the cable itself and at the terminations at either end, which improves longevity and decreases impedance reflections. The dual-layer thermal and mechanical outer jacket is

flexible and also protects the cable from external environmental influences thereby reducing warping of the fibre-optic polymer.

I find the quality of the plugs is such that I have no problems connecting them to my equipment, as I often find with cheaper cables. This means that I have a good digital signal without the need to wiggle the terminal around in the socket! The OPT-1 is certainly an affordable and high-quality cable. **NR**



#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£52 for a 0.5m cable  
**CONTACT**  
01539 797300  
**WEBSITE**  
russandrews.com

#### OUR VERDICT



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**hi-fi** |'hī'fī| informal  
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of, used for, or relating to the reproduction of music or other sound with high fidelity.  
*noun* (pl. -fis |'ha 'faizl)

## high fidelity

*noun*

the reproduction of sound with little or no distortion, giving a result as similar to the original as possible.



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## RipNAS

### Solid V3 CD ripper

**IT DOESN'T WIN** any prizes for build quality, looks, finish or indeed ease of use, but this latest big RipNAS is one hell of a CD ripper. What it does, it does brilliantly – which is to convert your Compact Discs to FLAC files so that you can store them. It's sold as a 'one-stop solution' to rip and keep your music, 'fit and forget' network attached storage, which works like any other NAS drive aside from the fact that it rips the music in extremely high quality on its internal CD drive, as well as storing it.

The unit is basically a slimline pressed-steel box with a black plastic fascia, which sports a CD tray recess and a rather crude blue dot-matrix alphanumeric display. Inside is a high-quality Teac CD-ROM drive, plus a 1TB hard disk to hold your ripped music on; there are a number of disc options including a 120GB SSD working with an HDD for £1,580. Round the back there are slots for the hard drives (so they can be easily changed, upgraded or swapped), four USB sockets to hook up external USB hard drives and/or DACs, HDMI and S/PDIF digital outputs, plus a Gigabit LAN socket into which you need to put a wire from your router.

#### Dual in the crown

A fast AMD dual-core processor takes care of the number crunching, a buffered and stabilised switched-mode power supply provides the juice, and the system comes bundled with Asset server uPNP software. Basically, the RipNAS is a versatile centre that can store and play vast amounts of music. It weighs in at 5kg.

After switching on, you have to wait about a minute while it remembers what it is and what it should be doing. During this time the display isn't very informative, but it eventually spews out the disc tray in order for you to feed it a disc. The tray is nasty in a way that all computer-based CD-ROM drive trays are, which means noisy and flimsy. Push the disc tray back into the unit and the mech spins up, and the RipNAS goes online to look up the CD's metadata. Then the unit starts to whirr, rather like a toy helicopter that seems about to take off, but never

### A great product that does the job it is purposed for quite brilliantly

does. The display then pipes up and tells you it's ripping the disc. This normally takes a minute or two, depending on the speed of the disc rip; the fastest I ever achieved was x46, which is jolly fast, but even at x30 it doesn't take longer than a couple of minutes.

This done you have an immaculately ripped FLAC file of your prized CD. The RipNAS uses dBpoweramp (version R14), which is widely thought to be the best-sounding ripping software around, and it employs AccurateRip ([www accuraterip.com](http://www accuraterip.com)) where an online database tells you if the disc's digital fingerprint is as it should be. It also accesses five databases to get the best metadata; the information it gleans on my admittedly rather diverse collection

of CDs is excellent, with just one CD (a Japanese pressing of Ryuichi Sakamoto's *B2 Unit*) coming up as an 'untitled artist'. You can always edit the metadata later, on your computer, by the way.

When you've fed the RipNAS with music, you can then stream your music off it as you would a standard NAS drive, with media server controller like Linn's Kinsky, through a network music player. The built-in Asset software means you don't need to install anything on the RipNAS itself. You can also access the files on your RipNAS as you would normally a network device; meaning you can copy your ripped music onto another hard drive or even your portable music player. This is something you cannot do with every CD ripper.

#### DAC's not all

There's more; the RipNAS has hidden depths. If you load the correct USB drivers onto it, then you can get it to play music out through a USB DAC, so there's no need for a streamer. This takes a bit of fiddling and so it's useful to have someone who's a tech geek or IT professional to get this done. It will play out at up to 24-bit, 192kHz resolution. The RipNAS can be controlled by Microsoft Remote Desktop software, whereupon you can get right into the system if you wish, even check the number of ripping errors. This is bundled in Microsoft Windows, but you'll need to download the Mac version from the Apple AppStore (for free).

Overall then, it's a great product – no prizes for operational refinement, but it does the job it is purposed for quite brilliantly. **DP**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,000

**CONTACT**  
+43-1-9550249

**WEBSITE**  
[hfx.at](http://hfx.at)

#### OUR VERDICT



## Musical Fidelity

### MF-100 headphones

**WHEN THE HEADPHONE** and earphone market suddenly exploded into life a few years back, Musical Fidelity was quick to respond. The EB-50 earphone managed to look and feel like a Musical Fidelity product and is still one of the best value propositions at the price. Now, the company is back with two new models. The EB-33 is a new less expensive earphone, while the MF-100 is the first foray into over-ear models.

The MF-100 is at the 'large portable' end of the size scale and the pads sit on, rather than over, the ear. The earpads are interesting as Musical Fidelity claims to have achieved some of the air and space of an open-back headphone while keeping the MF-100 closed back. This has apparently been achieved by paying close attention to the alignment of the components in the housing and their position relative to the ear. Quite how this works is unclear, but placing them on your head with no sound playing does reveal a slightly open quality to the sounds that make their way into the enclosure suggesting that something has been achieved to this end.

The other interesting feature is two sets of interchangeable earpads are supplied. You have a choice of leather or alcantara – good for those looking to use them for exercise. Changing the pads over is less simple, however, and you should make sure you have plenty of time and some space before trying to switch from one to the other. Both types provide a reasonable degree of padding, but the spring loading on the headband is quite aggressive and I find the pressure exerted on the back of my ear in particular after about an hour or so is rather high.

#### The look of love

Internally, the MF-100 makes use of a pair of 41mm dynamic drivers and these are set well back from the ear thanks to the earpads. In use, the MF-100 is impressively sensitive and should not be a challenge even for fairly low-powered headphone amps in smartphones and tablets. There



are some other neat design touches to make them more recognisably Musical Fidelity, like the coloured rings to denote left and right sides and a little machined metal remote on the cord. This also includes a microphone to allow you to make and receive calls from a smartphone. The MF-100 comes supplied with a carry bag and although it doesn't fold up, it is reasonably easy to stow.

In use, the sensitivity of the MF-100 is perhaps its greatest asset. It manages to sound effortless and civilised with a wide variety of music. Part of this is down to the bass response. Musical Fidelity claims a frequency response that suggests performance is almost completely flat, but in reality the bass response is extremely potent and this gives the MF-100 a real sense of drive even at low volume levels. As per the suggestion of the chart, the bass itself does seem to integrate well with the rest of the frequency response.

This bass extension combines well with a midrange and treble that is clear and detailed, but has the very slightest warmth to it. This means that even with compressed or edgy material, the MF-100 stays easy to listen to and very smooth. Being hyper critical, this warmth can rob strings and voices of absolute impact in comparison to something like Grado's forensic SR60i, but the

forgiving presentation is a good idea for any headphone that seems to have been designed with a view to being used on the move.

Considering that the design of the MF-100 is closed back, there is also a commendable sense of space to the performance too. Again, compared to a true open-back design, the MF-100 cannot compete with the airiness and space available, but given that the Musical Fidelity also effectively keeps the outside world at bay while doing so, the results are encouraging. Big orchestral pieces manage to have a soundstage to them that gives them an all-important level of believability. The MF-100 also proves at home with smaller-scale pieces too by capturing a sense of the space they were recorded in.

#### All right on the night

For a first attempt at a pair of over-ear headphones, Musical Fidelity has managed to get an awful lot right with the MF-100. This is a sensibly sized, well assembled and competitively priced pair of headphones. If you are looking for a pair of cans to use on the move that also manage to do the business for some home listening as well, there is a great deal to like about the way that the MF-100 goes about making music. **ES**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£119  
**WEBSITE**  
musicalfidelity.com

#### OUR VERDICT





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# Vieta Audio

## One Active Bluetooth Speaker

**AFTER AN ABSENCE** from the market of some years, Spanish-based Vieta Audio is returning to the UK in force. The company is predominantly focussing on desktop audio and has a large range of portable Bluetooth speakers as well as larger mains-powered devices. The One 3in is the smallest member of this mains-powered range of stereo Bluetooth speakers.

As the model name suggests, they are built around a pair of 3in mid/bass drivers partnered with a 1in silk dome tweeter. Larger models in the range retain the same tweeter, but use progressively larger mid/bass drivers. Low-end response is augmented with a forward-firing slot port at the bottom of each cabinet.

The cabinets are impressively sturdy affairs that are described as being 'wood' (they feel like MDF and not glass reinforced plastic). These are then finished in a choice of colours, which are applied in a pleasant sheen effect. The shape of the lower edge is gently angled, which means that the speaker is tilted back when placed on a flat surface. A welcome touch is the fitment of a soft tractable pad on the underside that means that the One won't mark wherever you choose to put it and won't move around either.

### The One show

The internal amplification is quoted as 20W although distortion figures and impedance aren't provided to give much of a point of reference to what this actually means. The amp is built into one of the cabinets and one channel of signal is then sent to the other speaker via a single RCA-RCA cable. The speaker with the amp is also fitted with an analogue line input on a 3.5mm jack connection and a subwoofer output. This allows for connection of any active sub, but Vieta is hoping you'll choose the One Active Sub, which comes supplied with the review sample and matches its styling – albeit at an ambitious £350.

The main input on the speakers is Bluetooth and this works extremely well. I have no difficulty connecting



an Android Phone, iPad and Windows laptop with them. Bluetooth 3.0 is supported, which means that with a suitably equipped device to pair with, it is possible to transfer lossless audio without further compression.

Connection is stable, but the noise the speakers make when pairing is successful and then again after they disconnect is annoying and doesn't seem to be something you can turn off.

Sonically, the Vieta has some encouraging characteristics from the off. For a speaker that is only 21cm tall, it sounds commendably large and there is an impressive soundstage. The small port in each cabinet is able to give a useful bit of low-end extension without audibly joining in with the performance. Unfortunately, I do find that a specific midrange frequency does seem to cause fractional resonance in the cabinet, which only manifests itself with a very small number of songs, but proves a little irritating when it does crop up.

The most likeable single aspect of the performance is the handling of voices and the One has a definite talent in this area. With spoken word and talk radio material in particular, it is clear, natural and very easy to listen to for extended periods. With vocals in music, the same striking clarity and detail is present and the handover between the two drivers is also impressively seamless, which further

helps the overall cohesion. As you might expect, the small size of the One does mean that absolute bass response is limited, but not jarringly so. Adding the subwoofer does fill the lower registers in very effectively, but given that the overall price of this trio is comfortably over £500, it does put the Vieta into a totally different price bracket and one that it faces some stiff competition in. On balance, the sub probably makes more sense for the larger monitors in terms of overall price balance, although you could use a less expensive sub if you wanted to augment the bass of the One speakers.

### One of a kind?

With acoustic and less bass-driven material, the Vieta manages to sound very engaging, helped in no small part by the stereo width that having a pair of speakers that can be spread to give actual width rather than the illusion of it from a single point. The design and performance makes it an ideal PC speaker, but as it is reliant on a mains power supply and it isn't exactly what you'd call portable, it is probably most likely to be used as a bedroom or second living room system for those wanting to pair their music from a smartphone or tablet. There is much to like about the first model in the One range and it augers well for the Vieta's UK return. **ES**

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£230

CONTACT  
0800 0857174

WEBSITE  
aqsound.com

#### OUR VERDICT



# Perfecting Sound Forever

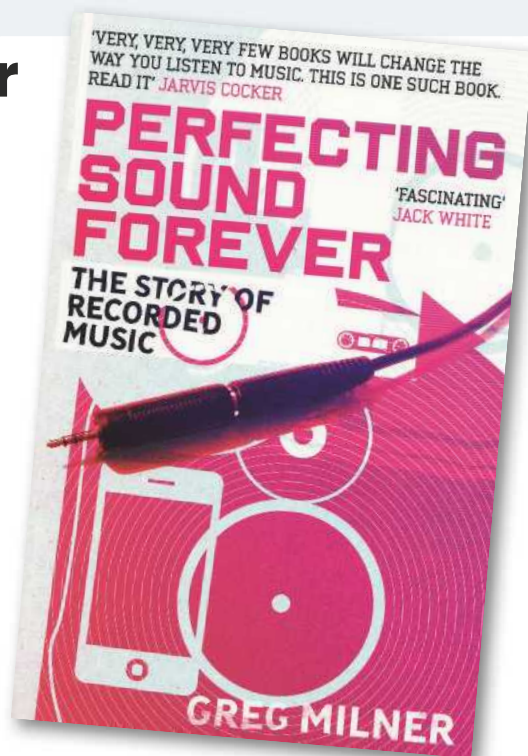
by Greg Milner

**HAVING SPENT TIME** at Air Studios recently, I have become acutely aware of how the recording and mastering processes affect the final sound of an album. Yet there are widely differing approaches in the studio; for example talk to the brilliant record producer Steve Levine and you'll soon see that he's more interested in the creative end product than whether or not it sounds 'hi-fi'. On the other hand, mastering maestro Bob Ludwig is obsessed with the sound of the finished product, and actively goes out to campaign for higher standards. But isn't it odd that the 'pro audio' and consumer audiophile sides are so disconnected, given how mutually advantageous it is to get the balance right?

Greg Milner's book zeroes right in on the tension between these two tribes, where normally never the twain shall meet. Avoiding both hi-fi and muso jargon, he deftly treads an intelligent path between the two, setting up a comprehensive historical account from the time of Edison and his desire to improve recorded sound to the wonderful richness of the Motown era. He documents the perfectionist, dry sound of the best seventies studios – as evinced by Steely Dan's obsession with creating a meticulous but arid sound that's unlike live.

## Paperback writer

He goes on to talk about the arrival of Solid State Logic mixing consoles in studios, and the profound effect they had on the industry in the early eighties. Suddenly recording facilities like The Power Station produced a totally different sound to what had gone before, with multi-tracking and effects making that era's music instantly recognisable. He cites mixing engineer Bob Clearmountain's work on Bruce Springsteen's *Born In The USA* as having a dramatic effect on eighties sound – as did David Bowie's *Lets Dance* and Roxy Music's *Avalon*. Then we move to the nineties, with tales of Nirvana's Kurt Cobain rejecting the slickness of



*Nevermind* for a grungier sound on *In Utero*, courtesy of Steve Albini. It's all fascinating stuff, and suddenly seems to make sense of the hi-fi world so much better.

It is fair to say that Greg Milner is not a digital fan. Steve Levine recently told me that the new technology was a revelation in the eighties, letting producers do what previously they couldn't. But Milner is a little sniffy; he's warm and sentimental about the early days of analogue, but not exactly glowing about the later years of digital. What we can all agree on is his loathing for the latest compressed music formats. Hear hear!

The author takes an intelligent view of the effects of compression on the recording process; he documents in forensic detail how it is invariably misused to destroy a recording. He weaves this into his account of the development of studio technology beautifully, and gives a rounded sense that its use and abuse is down to individuals – often the musicians' desire for the song to sound big and powerful. Indeed, there's a great sense of the thoughts of musicians about the final sound of their albums, and the political goings on in the record company that lies behind it.

Curiously perhaps, Milner doesn't move his gaze much beyond the pop and rock world, perhaps betraying his own personal music tastes. Indeed he

is disinterested in classical music, and gives several key players pretty short shrift. It's also salient to add that this book is very US-centred, which is a bit of a lost opportunity considering that much – indeed arguably most – great rock and pop of the sixties, seventies and eighties came from our side of the Atlantic.

## Pet Sounds

This said, *Perfecting Sound Forever* is still a cracking read. Milner gives us a fascinating historical narrative, into which a cogent theoretical analysis is beautifully interleaved. He obviously has his pet hates, but never gets too preachy, and just keeps on serving up more and more nuggets of information. Some of it goes off on a tangent, yet this is done in a really charming, interesting way. He is no lover of digital, but he doesn't proselytise to the point where history is skewed, nor does he lecture. The book's central contention – that the need for popular music to make money (it is first and foremost a commodity, whether you like it or not), supersedes any pursuit of sonic perfection – is unarguable. Written from the point of view of an American rock-loving vinyl fan it may be, but *Perfecting Sound Forever: The Story of Recorded Music* is a brilliant read regardless. **DP**

### DETAILS

PRICE  
£10

WEBSITE  
[grantabooks.com](http://grantabooks.com)

### OUR VERDICT



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"These are good cables. So good in fact, I started this review thinking they were the Proteus Proectus that cost ten times as much as the Genesis cables." Alan Sircom.

Analysis Plus, Voodoo Reference, Townshend Audio, Stealth Audio are just some of our Hi End Cable Brands that take your system to a new level. We also supply an impressive range of electronics from companies such as; Electrocompaniet, Astin Trew, Townshend, Bel Canto and Usher Audio, to name but a few.

So for free advice, great products and a service that aims to put the emotion back into your music, why not call us at Mackenzie Hi Fi on 07905 362545 or check out the website [www.mackenziehifi.com](http://www.mackenziehifi.com)

# Analogue Studio

## Mirrored Cartridge Alignment Protractor



**A PROPERLY ALIGNED** cartridge should result in improved imaging and better-controlled sibilance. An alignment tool is required for this task and the Analogue Studio Mirrored Cartridge Alignment Protractor from Analogue Seduction is one such tool. It is made from clear acrylic with mirroring applied to the back. The calibration markings are printed in white on the front and are used to align the cartridge at two null points of the arc described by the stylus as it moves across the record when playing. These points are at specific distances from the central turntable spindle and have been calculated using the Baerwald model.

To set up your cartridge, simply place the gauge over your turntable spindle, move your cartridge over

the first grid and adjust the cartridge to enable the stylus to sit on a point marked 'A' and be aligned with the graticule markings around that point. The arm is then moved to sit the stylus on point 'B', rotating the gauge as necessary, to ensure that the cartridge lines up with its graticule markings. If not, the overhang is adjusted by moving the cartridge forward or backward in the headshell and the process is repeated until it does. Alignment is then complete.

### Man in the mirror

Setting up the cartridge using this is far easier than when using a printed paper protractor as the mirrored surface is much clearer and there is the additional benefit of being able to adjust the azimuth of the cartridge until the stylus is perpendicular to

the surface of the mirror. The full instructions are printed on the reverse of the gauge itself and by following them I am able to align my cartridge very easily. This is a useful tool to aid setting up any turntable at an excellent price. **NR**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
From £13  
**CONTACT**  
01733 350878  
**WEBSITE**  
analogueseduction.net

### OUR VERDICT



# Mark Grant Cables

## Brush Swab and Cloth set

**IT IS VERY** important to ensure that your contacts are clean in order to attain the very best from your audio system. Whether the contacts are the pins and sockets in your audio connectors or simply the three pins on your mains plugs and sockets, they all need to have any surface tarnish removed from time to time. Contact cleaners are a great way to achieve this, but very often applying them precisely to the intricate pins of a DIN plug or to the inside parts of an RCA phono plug can be quite a challenge. Especially when using a cleaning spray, it is likely that the surrounding plastic parts and indeed your fingers are going to end up coated with the lion's share of the cleaning fluid! Interestingly, some cleaning solutions can actually harm certain plastic parts, so any way of confining the fluid to the metal contacts is highly desirable, as well as being a more

cost-effective use of it. This is where the Brush Swab and Cloth set from Mark Grant Cables comes in very handy.

These items have been put together from various sources by Mark Grant Cables to make a set that is primarily designed for use with the Caig Deoxit range of spray cleaning solutions. It can, of course, also be used with other cleaning fluids and products. The set comprises a pack of three brushes, three swabs and three lint-free cloths.

### Clean machine

The brushes and swabs fit perfectly inside XLR, phono and speaker



connectors and I find that the best way to use them is to spray some of the cleaner into the cap of the Deoxit or other cleaning product and dip a swab or brush into the liquid. I then rub the brush or swab on the surface of the plug or socket contacts to remove any surface impurities. It's a really great and easy-to-use solution. **NR**

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# Setting up a record deck

Get the best from your record collection by making sure your turntable, tonearm and cartridge are properly set up. Here's how...

**R**ecords, unlike other sources of audio, are very much a physical storage medium. After all, the music is stored as complex undulations of a spiral groove, or to be precise, two spiral grooves – one on side A and one on side B of the disc! The cartridge and stylus essentially form the delicate instrumentation that measures the deviation of the groove from a mean position at a point in time, converting it to an electrical signal. The tonearm's job is to support this measuring instrument and maintain it at this mean position of the groove. The turntable, apart from supporting the entire assembly and the record being played, must also rotate the LP at precisely the correct speed. As any audiophile knows, this must be carried out without introducing any extraneous signals or other unwanted noise into the output signal. When you consider all this, it's amazing that playing a record works at all!

It no surprise that a record deck must be correctly set up in order to faithfully reproduce the recordings stored on a vinyl disc. Fortunately, this is not as difficult a task as you might first imagine and there are a number of inexpensive tools available to assist you in every aspect of the process.

## For the record

Before contemplating any form of adjustment of the tonearm and cartridge, it is important to set the record straight – literally! To do this, the turntable itself must be level. The stylus is held in the groove entirely by gravitational force, and any imbalance means that the downward force on the stylus is not exactly perpendicular to the record, and a potential source of adding distortion.

Fortunately, most turntables are fitted with adjustable feet and

## Before tackling any form of adjustment, it is important to set the record straight

levelling is easily accomplished with the use of a spirit level. It is important to place the spirit level on the turntable platter, rather than on the body of the turntable itself, to allow for any variation in manufacturing tolerances to be adjusted out. A small spirit level can be placed on the platter, but a better solution is to use a level that fits over the central spindle, like Blue Horizon's Prolevel turntable tool, reviewed in issue 373.

Some record decks allow for the

adjustment of the turntable speed.

The easiest way to set this correctly is to use one of the many stroboscopic disks that are available. Simply place the strobe disk over the spindle, view the appropriate markings under a mains-powered fluorescent or incandescent light source, and adjust the speed until the marks are stationary. If possible, it is good to do this while actually playing a record so that any effect on the motor speed as a result of stylus drag will be taken into account.

## Toning up the tonearm

Assuming your cartridge has been fitted according to the manufacturer's instructions, the next step is to carry out an initial setting up of the tracking force. At this stage, it only needs to be done approximately to enable other adjustments to be made, which will have an effect on the final tracking force. This is usually accomplished by setting both the tracking force adjustment and the bias adjustment on the tonearm to zero and then moving the counterbalance weight so that the arm is perfectly horizontal. Make sure, of course, that you have removed any stylus protecting cover before you do this as this will affect the weight of the cartridge! Now

set the tracking force adjustment on the tonearm to the correct value according to the cartridge manufacturer. This is good enough to enable the other adjustments to be made before the tracking is set more accurately later.

Now we can align the cartridge. This is essential for getting it to perform at its best across the entire playing surface of the record. This involves setting the azimuth or vertical alignment, the overhang and the angle of the cartridge in the headshell.

Setting the azimuth simply involves ensuring that the stylus is perpendicular to the record when the cartridge is viewed from the front. Placing a small mirror on the platter and gently lowering the stylus onto it will highlight any misalignment. If your headshell does not have an adjustment for this, fitting a small paper shim between the cartridge and the headshell will allow for any slight adjustment, should this be required.

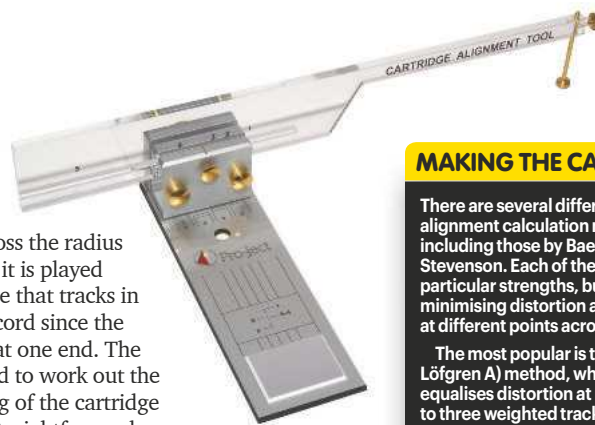
The overhang and the angle of the cartridge in the headshell are set using an alignment protractor, sliding the cartridge forwards or backwards and twisting it in the headshell so it lines up with the calibration marks on the gauge. The overhang is the difference between the distance of the tonearm pivot from the centre spindle (which is fixed for a given tonearm) and the distance of the tonearm pivot to the stylus (which is known as the effective length). The reason this is important is

because the groove of the record is cut using a cutter that is tracked straight across the radius of the record, while it is played back with a cartridge that tracks in an arc across the record since the tonearm is pivoted at one end. The calculations required to work out the optimum positioning of the cartridge are, therefore, not straightforward. Fortunately, there are a number of alignment protractors out there that make the job easy (including some free ones you can download from the

### The markings on the tonearm are unreliable for setting the tracking force

internet, such as The Vinyl Engine at [vinylengine.com/cartridge-alignment-protractors.shtml](http://vinylengine.com/cartridge-alignment-protractors.shtml), once you have registered on the forum). All you have to do is decide which calculation model you wish to use. As long as you follow the instructions on the gauge, you will achieve very satisfactory results with any of these models.

Now that the cartridge is exactly where it should be in the headshell, it is time to set the tracking force accurately. The markings on a tonearm are notoriously unreliable for setting the tracking force and the only



Pro-Ject's Align-IT alignment protractor

### MAKING THE CALCULATIONS

There are several different cartridge alignment calculation models around, including those by Baerwald, Löfgren and Stevenson. Each of these has its own particular strengths, but all are aimed at minimising distortion and tracking errors at different points across the record.

The most popular is the Baerwald (or Löfgren A) method, which minimises and equalises distortion at radii corresponding to three weighted tracking error peaks (at the beginning, middle and end of the record) and results in moderate distortion between the inner and outer radii.

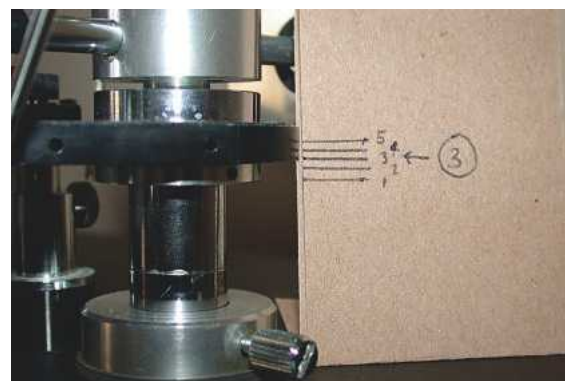
Löfgren B calculations aim to minimise distortion between the inner and outer radii to offer the lowest average RMS distortion across the bulk of the record playing surface at the expense of slightly higher distortion close to the beginning and end of the record.

The Stevenson method is a variation on Löfgren geometry and is optimised for lower distortion at the inner radius (often where crescendos occur at the end of a piece of music) at the expense of increased distortion elsewhere compared to Baerwald or Löfgren B.

The actual choice is one of personal preference, but the differences between the various methods are very subtle.



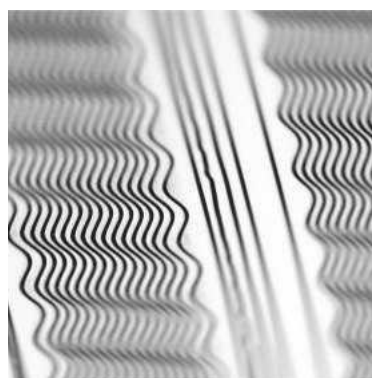
Below: Avid Level 45 spirit level; VTA adjustment homemade gauge; LP test record trackability groove; test LPs



way to do this properly is to use a stylus balance. Again, there are a number of balances on the market – my preference is to use a modern digital gauge as they are very accurate and easy to use.

The cartridge manufacturer will usually specify a range for the tracking force, and you should set the force to a value within that range – but what value to use? A test record is very useful for deciding this, but not essential. Usually they have a tracking ability test consisting of a tone recorded at increasing amplitudes, which can assist in setting the tracking weight and bias. Too low a tracking weight will result in poor tracking and do more harm to your records than erring on the high side, but don't overdo it! Tracking ability depends on your tonearm and cartridge combination. At very high levels of the test tone, your cartridge will start to miss-track and this is indicated by a buzzing sound.

The bias adjustment (sometimes referred to as the anti-skating) exerts a small outward force to the tonearm



a small outward force to the tonearm to counteract the tendency of the arm to swing towards the centre of a record when playing. Usually, the tonearm's bias adjuster has markings on it and you set the bias to the mark corresponding to the tracking force applied. However, if you have a test record, you can set the bias more accurately by the tracking ability test and when the point is reached when the cartridge starts to miss-track, there should be the same level of buzzing on both channels. Some try and set the bias with a smooth disc 'record' that has no groove, and adjust the bias so that the cartridge does not move in or out when the disc is rotated. This does not work in practice as the forces on the stylus are different when it is sitting in a record groove. What is more, the tip of the stylus will cut a fine groove in the disc after the first revolution, rendering it unusable!

The last adjustment to make is the tonearm height to set the Vertical

## The VTA is adjusted by altering the height of the arm and is best determined by ear

Tracking Angle (VTA), which sets the Stylus Rake Angle (SRA) of the cartridge. The VTA is the angle of the cantilever to the record surface (usually around 20°), which in itself is not that critical. However, the SRA, which is the angle of the stylus in the groove, is very critical and has a major impact on sound quality. The closer the SRA can be adjusted to match that of the original cutter head, the more information the stylus will retrieve from the groove. The VTA will vary depending on the tracking weight so it is important to set this before attempting to adjust the VTA. The VTA is adjusted by altering the height of the arm (which may be via an adjuster built into the tonearm or by adding or removing shims from the tonearm mount) and the correct point is best determined by ear. A good starting point is to set the arm height so that it is parallel to the record when it is playing and to choose a well-known record with some bass and either a solo violin or a female vocalist. If the arm is too high (VTA too great), the sound will be harsh and thin with poor imaging. If set too low, the sound will be dull with 'boomy' bass, lacking detail and again with poor imaging. The correct point is unmistakable where the instruments and vocals snap into focus and everything sounds



**Dust Buster stylus cleaner**

clear. A simple gauge can be made using a piece of card temporarily fixed to the turntable to help adjust the height and note the position where the VTA is correct.

### Cleaning up

Now everything is perfectly set up, it is important to keep everything as clean as possible. Apart from cleaning the record playing surface using a wet cleaner or record cleaning machine of some sort, we recommend cleaning off any dust before every play. There are many cloth and brush accessories available for this purpose, but our personal preference is using a carbon fibre brush. And remember that if you buy second-hand records it's always a very good idea to give them a thorough wet clean before playing. Always replace the inner sleeve with a polyethylene or paper and polyethylene product to avoid re-contaminating the cleaned record from any residual dirt left inside the old sleeve.

It's amazing how quickly fluff can accumulate around the stylus from airborne dust after only playing a couple of sides – even with records that are scrupulously clean. With a carbon-fibre or fine hair stylus brush, the way to clean a stylus is to gently brush from the rear of the cartridge forwards towards the front. Occasionally, the cantilever and cartridge underside may also require a gentle brush. Another favourite of ours is to use a stylus cleaning putty or cleaning substance where the stylus is gently lowered in to remove the dirt.

**Spin Clean wet record cleaning system**



### FINDING THE PERFECT MATCH

One of the physical properties of a tonearm is the effective mass, which is the mass of the arm as seen by the cartridge. Cartridges have a property called compliance that, in simple terms, is its ability to 'comply' with the groove and is measured in terms of the distance the stylus is displaced for a given sideways force applied (either X um/mN, X mm/N, X x 10<sup>-6</sup> cm/dyne or X cu for Compliance Unit – it's all the same value of X!).

That doesn't mean to say that low compliance is bad and high compliance is good. It means that, generally speaking, a low-compliance cartridge matches well with a high effective mass arm, and vice versa. It is this combination of effective mass and compliance that has an impact on the tracking ability and also results in a particular resonant frequency of the arm/cartridge combination.

Every combination of arm and cartridge has a natural resonant frequency, which should be about 10Hz. If it is much higher than this, it will intrude into the low frequencies of the recording, such as low organ notes. If much lower, the harmonics of this resonant frequency could intrude into the audible spectrum. This is why cartridge manufacturers specify the compliance of their cartridges and why tonearm manufacturers recommend low, medium or high-compliance cartridges. This is, of course, not an exact science, but it is a consideration when choosing a cartridge. Oh – and before you ask, we'd say that >20cu is high compliance, <10cu is low compliance and anything in between is medium compliance!

The final thing to mention is the turntable main bearing. Many bearings require some form of lubrication and they will also require occasional cleaning, the frequency of which will depend on use. It's a good idea to clean these once a year and replace the bearing oil. A special high-performance oil of the correct viscosity for your bearing needs to be used, and you'll find oils specifically blended for this purpose available from your turntable manufacturer and audio accessory supplier.

As modern bearings are high tolerance, a completely lint-free cloth should be used to avoid any risk of leaving debris in the central bearing or around the central spindle. It's important to be aware that some bearings have a small ball bearing inside, so be careful if you plan to turn your deck upside down to clean it!

So there you have it. Setting up a record deck may seem a complicated process, but if you carry out the steps in a methodical fashion, you will be rewarded with superb sound from your record deck ●

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# HIFI CHOICE ADVERTISERS INDEX

ABSOLUTE SOUNDS	11
ARMOUR HOME ELECTRONICS	104
ATLAS CABLES	78
AUDIO EMOTION	131
AVID HIFI	9
BILLY VEE	70
BLACK RHODIUM	123
BOWERS & WILKINS	28
CLARITY ALLIANCE	32
CLEAR AUDIO	23
COCKTAIL AUDIO	68
CYRUS	67
DYNAUDIO	107
EXPOSURE ELECTRONICS	108
FLAMINGO AUDIO	87
FURUTECH	82
GRAHAM SLEE	115
GSP AUDIO	45
HART AUDIO	49
HEED	98
HIFI SOUND	112
IAG INTERNATIONAL	132
ICON AUDIO	76
INSPIRE HIFI	115,123
ISOTEK	65
KEF	2
LEARS INTERNATIONAL	117,121
LUXURIE	111
MACKENZIE HIFI	115
MAINS CABLES R US	73
MUSICAL FIDELITY	34
NAIM AUDIO	26
NUNU DISTRIBUTION	55
OPPO	12
PJ HIFI	80
PMC	36
RUSS ANDREWS	61
SEVENOAKS SOUND AND VISION	39,40,41
T+A	15
TANNOY	87
TELLURIUM Q	121
TOWNSHEND AUDIO	75

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## WE HEAR...

BEST KNOWN FOR ITS EXCELLENT BLU-RAY players, it might surprise some to hear that OPPO is developing a pair of reference headphones, along with a matching headphone amplifier. And they will be heartened to hear that it isn't just a rebranded Chinese OEM headphone – of which there are far too many around currently. Rather, the new PM-1 Planar Magnetic Headphone uses a very thin and light planar driver to produce sound, and this sounds quite different to conventional dynamic drive units. Costing around £1,300, they will be out just at the time you read this, along with the matching £1,000 HA-1 headphone amplifier. This combines a high-quality full Class A output stage with an ESS Sabre 9018-32 DAC, and is likely to do the new headphones justice, we hear!

FOLLOWING THE LAUNCH OF ITS PRE-POWER amplifier, Nytech will have more new products out soon. In conjunction with Nero Audio from Germany, the new NPA602 power amplifier and NX0102 electronic crossover are based on the original Nytech CPA602 and EX0102, but taken to a "no compromise" extreme with every component selected for sound quality with major improvements to the power supply. Our spies tell us there is still a way to go to turn this amplifier into a commercially viable product, but Nytech says that it's likely to be on sale by the time of the Bristol Sound and Vision show in February 2015. The Nero range will be the high-end components in the Nytech range, in the same way Nexus was in the Ion Obelisk range in the past. Also, expect the classic Arc range of loudspeakers to be remanufactured, with the first expected to be launched this summer – with matching Nytech electronic crossovers for the active versions.

## THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



### HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 70 MAY 1989

In something of a high-risk strategy, the May issue included a feature called *Vanishing Into The Future* about the sort of technology that we might expect to see in the 21st century. Although there was no mention of hoverboards, automated homes or robot butlers, Richard Black's gaze into his crystal ball was impressively accurate. As he pointed out: "The greatest advances will be in computer technology, as that is where the greatest effort is concentrated. Basically, everything will go on getting smaller, faster, cleverer and cheaper", which is pretty impressive given the gamechanger of MP3. However, the idea that: "We could eventually see neural impulses being applied direct to the brain to simulate all the sensations of a concert" is still waiting to be realised. Here's hoping some bright spark makes it happen soon...

Meanwhile, Kylie Minogue was at the top of the charts with *Hand On Your Heart*, construction began of the first McDonalds in the USSR and in an iconic moment, Chinese students stared down tanks in protests in Tiananmen Square.



### HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 178 MAY 1998

"One day all amplifiers will be made this way" our cover boldly stated as the world's first digital amplifier was put through its paces in a world-first exclusive review by then-technical editor Paul Miller. The £5,000 TACT Millennium was deemed to be: "The beginning, a sign post towards lower-cost digital amplifiers running from practical power supplies in lightweight cases. Analogue interconnects, crossover networks and conventional, inefficient amplification *might* become a thing of the past." Hmm, maybe, maybe not. Meanwhile, editor Stan Vincent was of the opinion: "The TACT Millennium finally opens the door on a new hi-fi paradigm, where music can be stored and transmitted completely digitally, all the way from microphone to loudspeaker. I doubt there'll be another audio revolution so great". Of course, he hadn't read Richard Black's feature in May 1989...

Meanwhile the last ever episode of *Seinfeld* screened in the US, the Eurovision song contest was won by an Israeli transsexual and the nation didn't care as Geri Halliwell left the Spice Girls.



## DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month **Phil Balaam** designer and MD at Nytech Audio chooses four of his favourite long players...



### MUSSORGSKY NIGHT ON THE BARE MOUNTAIN

I first heard this when my father took me to see *Fantasia*. It was here that I learned to make my own pictures listening to music.



### LABI SIFFRE SO STRONG

Reminds us that the world is a very unjust place for many, but hope and kindness will always triumph over greed and repression. A really rousing song!



### AQUA AQUARIUM

There's nothing else to say about this simple piece of fairly meaningless 'happy music', apart from that it lifts my spirits when I'm down.



### THE SHIREHORSES OUR KID EH!

While starving on my desert island, at least I'll die laughing. Who says music always has to be in tune? Thanks to the two Mancunian greats, Mark and Lard.

# Hi-Fi Choice

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