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*"... the e.One Stream has a great deal to commend it."* HiFi News (April 2019)



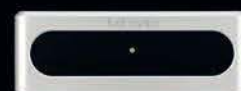
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# editorial

**T**he interesting thing about modern audio is just how diverse and international it has become. Back in the old days, the products of one country tended to stay in that country. Granted there were always exceptions (and many of those exceptions came from America, Japan, and the UK) but for the most part, the idea of a truly international audio system is an almost uniquely 21st Century concept. The big question is – is it actually real?

There are more products from an ever-increasing number of audio brands today, but they seem to be trying to reach out to a market that, if not in decline, is at best static. At the same time, retailers have become perhaps understandably over-conservative in their selection of products to support. They go with what they always used to go with, or with brands they always wanted to go with. New often doesn't get a look-in.

We strive to avoid such ruts, but even so, it's not easy. Because a lot of good audio has concentrated on its home market until recently, we often find those audio 'overnight sensations' have actually been in business for decades, and we just never knew because we were in our own little silo!

There's some circular logic at play here. Audio needs new blood. New blood buys new brands. But the dealers sell old brands to old hands, and then complain about the absence of new blood! A good dealer should stock the classics and keep an eye open for what will please the next generation, but this is not a common practice.

Unfortunately, because we buy so conservatively, most newcomers are left burned out and penniless in only a

few years. It doesn't need to be that way, however, but it needs to be a group effort. We all need to embrace more than just the popular choices; that doesn't mean we should prop up brands because of their novelty, but neither should we support older companies simply for the sake of rose-tinted brand history.

Or we can just climb back into our silos and ignore the rest of the world!

Our congratulations to Paul Comforth, who wins an outstanding Audiodesk Systeme Pro record cleaning machine, to Kevin Allen who receives a cleaner on loan, and to Roger Seaman who receives vouchers for cleaning his records on an Audiodesk Systeme Pro. Our congratulations also go out to Paul Joseph who wins the excellent Melco N100 digital music library. Well done, all!

Alan Sircom  
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Or email them to [editor@hifiplus.com](mailto:editor@hifiplus.com)

# incoming!

in association with **audioquest**

## LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS A DRAGONFLY BLACK

Both AudioQuest and *Hi-Fi+* are passionate about music and the sound it makes. We know what makes a good audio experience, and we know what makes it better. Most modern audio equipment is good, but with the right attitude, right advice, and the right components, the sound it delivers can move from 'good' to 'great' to 'fantastic'. AudioQuest has to deal with a lot of queries regarding audio systems, because almost everything in an audio system is connected with a cable. The company has amassed a wealth of information on a range of topics in audio, both in general terms and with a team comprising keen, specialist audio experts willing to impart their expertise.

Which is why we've teamed up with the good folks at AudioQuest to award the letter of the month a free AudioQuest Dragonfly Black headphone amp/DAC.

### Repair, recone, or replace?

I have had a lovely pair of old Heybrook HB1 loudspeakers for nigh on 30 years, but the rubber rings around the loudspeaker cones have started to disintegrate. There is still some life left in them, but I fear not much more. Eventually, the rubber will perish entirely. What can I do then? Heybrook no longer exists, but is it possible to get the loudspeakers repaired, or should I look to replace them?

**Mike Judd, via email**

*The bass drive unit on the Heybrook HB1 was an 8" Vifa paper cone. Vifa no longer make that drive unit, but the design was sold to Scanspeak. In both cases you are looking for a M21WG09-08 unit, and this can be supplied by Falcon Acoustics or Wilmslow Audio in the UK. Expect to pay about £150–£160 for a replacement pair.*

*If you don't relish the idea of repairing them yourself, there are a number of audio repair experts who would happily take the job on. However, as the job requires removing four bolts, desoldering two wires, removing a driver, then soldering two wires to the new driver and then using those same four bolts to place it in the cabinet, it's not a complex electronics operation.*

*Alternatively, if you don't fancy replacing the drive units, there are also companies like DC Boultons that can resurround the existing drive units. This will likely cost a lot less than buying new drivers, but the look of the end result may not be quite as spiffy as replacements.*

*Incidentally, it's a completely different story with the tweeter, primarily because Heybrook used different models over the HB1's lifespan.*

**Robert Hay – AudioQuest**



### Movin' on up!

I read the anonymous 'Movin' On' letter [Incoming, 176] first with anger, then some degree of sorrow, and ultimately empathy. I too have had hobbies that sustained me for years, only to lose their magic and lustre.

I think it might be a part of being human. The passion I had for stamp-collecting in my teenage years, for example, didn't survive much past my first encounters with girls and beer. However, I think there is also a tribal element to this; I cannot imagine life without football (I come from a Gooner family and I'm pleased to say my son didn't listen to the 'My Ol' Man' terrace chants) and could never contemplate life without that (extremely expensive) season ticket.

Perhaps audio's problem is that lack of a tribal element. It's a solitary pursuit with only limited opportunities for meeting fellow enthusiasts. Eventually, we get bored with our own company.

**Olly Knight, via email**



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- *The tribal element is possibly a factor, but there are many solitary pursuits that have a life-long sustaining quality. And while philately didn't hold your attention past puberty, there is a whole world of collectors who would disagree with your conclusions.*

*An interesting consideration is whether one's musical tastes grow over time. Many music lovers have relatively fixed tastes by the time they hit their 30s, and music is more about recapturing their youth than it is exploring new recordings and genres. From an audio position, theoretically someone who has all the music they are ever going to play by the time they are 28 might have equally fixed ideas about sound and both record collection and system remain essentially preserved in aspic. On the other hand, you could also find that someone with such fixed tastes will want to extract the maximum from those recordings, and constantly improve their audio system.*

*The argument is more or less moot these days as access to almost unlimited music is a few clicks away, but both clichés of the guy with 50,000 LPs and a £60 Crossley, and the bloke with a £60,000 turntable and two albums are valid, if extreme, examples.*

*Regardless, the nature of music appreciation does come with natural ebbs and flows. It's sad when the downturns in interest in music coincide with a burning desire to declutter and a loss of interest in audio, but it happens. However, if we focused on ways to overcome such ennui rather than tried to explain it, we might be able to limit its effects. I would hate for someone to clean house, only to realise they were just having a blip in an otherwise life-long passion for music and the sound it makes – Ed*

### The ultimate audio test – now with added Vikings!

I had something of a moment of epiphany recently. I realised just how difficult it is for an audio system to reproduce the human voice, especially when that voice has outstanding diction, is well-recorded in a studio environment, and produced to present optimum vocal articulation. But where can you hear such voices? Every night, on BBC Radio 4, just after they play 'Sailing By' (also a good test). The 00:48 *Shipping Forecast* is designed to punch through the airwaves to reach shipping around the UK. Its deliberately monotone delivery and bone-dry recording studio acoustic makes it ideal to assess the performance of a pair of loudspeakers. Of course, it helps if you are a bit of an insomniac!

**T.P. O'Connor, via email**

*I think many British people are secret fans of the Shipping Forecast. I'm not sure if its the odd names of the areas (I'm a big fan of 'Viking', 'North Utsire', and 'German Bight', and to my mind it's never been the same since they renamed 'Finnisterre' in 2002) or the rigid 380 word limit and the code it creates, but there is something signally (arf!) British and reassuring about the Forecast – especially as it's gently calm even when saying, "Southwest gale 8 to storm 10". And yes, from an audio perspective it's almost perfect to assess loudspeakers for the reasons you suggest. The deliberate, flat speech of the announcer is made for articulation and not metre or timbre, so it's almost a vocal test tone. If you can hear even the most subtle inflections and plosives in their voice, it's a sign of a good loudspeaker. On the other hand, if the voice is in any way inarticulate or unbalanced, it's generally a bad sign.*

*The Shipping Forecast is not ideal, however. For one thing, it starts way after midnight; fine for getting the purest power, not so good for determining high power handling. Recording the forecast is possible, of course, but for night owls and insomniacs, you run the risk of developing instant jet-lag (and if you do record 'Sailing By' as an introduction, risk putting your listeners to sleep). Secondly, although it's great for testing mid-range detail and clarity and vocal articulation, the voice (whether male or female) is very articulate, and can sometimes be too much of a good thing (paradoxically, less good loudspeakers can often get a free pass because the voice sounds so distinct). Finally, while it is a good test, you do have to stand and salute at the end when they play God Save The Queen.*

*In all seriousness, though, a vocal test like this is – or at least, should be – a vital part of evaluating a pair of loudspeakers. But it should be just a part, and just playing voice without music gives you just as skewed a performance as if you test with music alone. From experience, however, be careful of vocal pieces with more of a rhythm (such as Shakespeare's iambic Pentameter), as you can focus on the beat, not how it's spoken. – Ed*



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## SHOW REPORT

# Rocky Mountain International Audio Fest 2019 (part one)

by Eric Neff



A new day has dawned for the rechristened Rocky Mountain *International* Audio Fest. Premiering in a new venue, the Gaylord Rocky Mountain Resort and Convention Center, and a month earlier than its regular first weekend in October, the show had a wonderful feeling of being shiny and new. The move was welcomed by almost everyone as the new Gaylord offered more such as bigger rooms to show in and more of them. There were other events occurring at the facility and yet the show was generally self-contained within two areas of the hotel; the North Tower and the third-floor convention area.

Attendance from show patrons was excellent with all of the rooms experiencing solid crowds throughout the three-day weekend. The registration line was longer than I have seen at any US based audio show. Moreover, new gear was plentiful, and many pieces were making their North American debut, as befits the show's newly-minted 'International' status. Next year, the show returns to October, too!

This first part of our exhaustive round-up of the sights and sounds of Rocky Mountain is largely focused on high-end loudspeakers and electronics, as well as personal audio on pages 116/7. Next month, we will conclude this round-up with more affordable loudspeakers and analogue audio. +



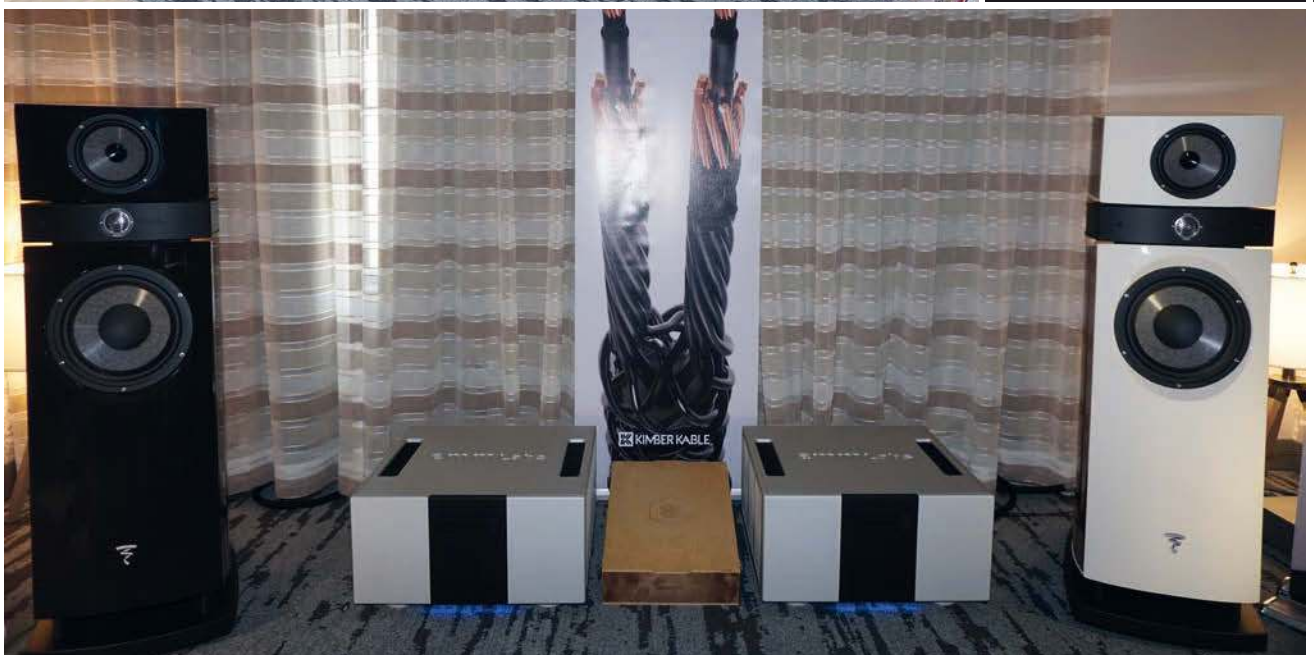


ABOVE AND LEFT: Aurender was showing its two newest creations, the ACS 100 ripper/server/streamer (left) and the new Digital the W20SE Flagship Caching Music Server/Streamer with MQA Core Decoder (above). The ACS 100 can be outfitted with a Nimble CD auto ripper allowing up to 100 CD's to be ripped without supervision. The W20SE incorporates a number of component upgrades over the W20 and comes in at \$22,000 USD.



LEFT: The Music Direct room featured the world premiere of their new Balanced Audio Technology REX 3 Triode Amplifier. Coming in at 160 wpc at 8 Ohms in a dual Mono balanced design. (\$25,000 USD each) Also new was the matching BAT REX 3 Tube Pre-amp. (\$30,000 USD)

BELOW: The EMM Labs room also featured Focal Utopia Scala V2's (\$57,000 USD) paired with their EMM Labs MTR Mono amps (\$85,000 a pair) All the rest of the electronics were EMM Labs as well. Also featured were Kimber Cables and Shunyata power conditioning.







ABOVE: Parasound was showing off its new JC-5 Stereo amplifier. (\$5,995 USD). It is a stereo version of the company's long-time favourite JC 1 Monoblocks.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Wilson Audio had its new Sasha DAW speakers (\$38,000 USD) and pair of WATCH Dog subwoofers. (\$9,000 USD each) Managed by a Wilson crossover (\$4,800 USD) The sound was exquisite. On static display only in another room was the new Chronosonic XVX. (\$329,000 USD without subwoofer) Daryl Wilson's newest creation. Too bad we could not hear this bad boy!



BELOW: Paradigm was featuring its Persona 7F floor standing speakers (\$25,000 USD) alongside its sister brand Anthem's electronics. The sound was outstanding and the setup was very straightforward.



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ABOVE: Richard Vandersteen was proudly introducing his new Kento speakers. (\$37,000 USD) The Kento's are replacing the venerable Model 5's in the lineup. Paired with the Vandersteen M5-HPA Mono Block Amplifiers (\$15,000/pr. USD) the sound was world class in its dimensionality and inner detail. Another top three room.



BELOW: NVS Sound offered Stenheim speaker's Model 5's (\$60,000 USD) paired with all CH Precision electronics including the A 1.5 150wpc amplifier (\$43,000 USD). Keeping it all in the Swiss family was a good idea as the sound was precise yet inviting.



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TOP LEFT: The Soundings Fine AV room featured a full rack of Boulder Audio's current gear driving the Vienna Acoustics Liszt Speakers (\$18,798 in Rosewood) It was the best I have heard the Liszt's. Perhaps some of this came down to the fact they were more than aided by six REL S/812 Subwoofers (\$2,899 USD each) with all Nordost cabling.



BOTTOM LEFT: Also, on static display in the Soundings Fine AV room was the new Boulder 866 Integrated amp (starting at \$12,250 USD). It replaces the venerable 865 reviewed previously in *HiFi+*. Boulder would prefer we didn't call this 200W, UPnP and AirPlay 2 supporting, Roon End Point with full IP control an 'integrated' amp and instead simply an 'amplifier'. The swept-back front has a panel that allows the user to upload images of the source components used... clever!

RIGHT: Ted Denney and Scott Walker Audio had a wide-ranging demonstration of Synergistic Research room and gear treatments, including the company's range of cables and power products, alongside some of its more esoteric treatments for room and audio equipment.

The rest of the system was suitably high-resolution, featuring The Gryphon Pandora Pre-Amp with Phono (\$41,300 USD) and the Mephisto amplifier (\$61,000 USD), a Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 3 DAC (\$21,995), and a pair of Magico M6 Speakers (\$63,600 USD). The sound was also a solid honorable mention best of show alongside a very interesting demo from Synergistic.

While not everyone 'gets' the more recondite concepts and technologies developed by Synergistic Research, one thing is clear – the company knows how to make good sound!





# [master]

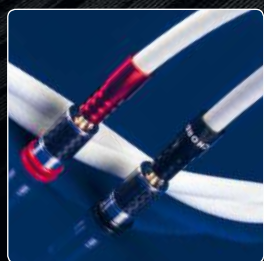
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LEFT: Vinnie Rossi introduced his new L2i-SE Signature Edition integrated amplifier (\$18,995 USD as configured). Paired with the Innuos Statement Music Server (\$13,995 USD 1TB) and QLN Speakers, the room threw the expected gorgeous soundstage and three-dimensional imaging that is a hallmark of Vinnie Rossi gear. There is a consistency here; Vinnie Rossi never puts a foot wrong in an audio demonstration, the Innuos Statement has sounded consistently good in its own demonstrations, and QLN has a commanding reputation for good sound that is also often backed up by excellent demonstrations. This is something of a 'dream team' assembled by Vinnie Rossi, and it worked exceptionally well in the Gaylord.

The fear of a new room is a constant companion for audio companies, and moving to a new show can mean a year of bad sound. Judging by the standards of the show in general, and by Vinnie Rossi in particular, the rooms at the Gaylord are well-matched for good audio. Of course, good audio helps!

RIGHT: Danish loudspeaker experts Raidho Acoustics paired up with Canadian electronics specialists Moon and New Jersey vinylistas *par excellence* VPI to show off the company's new TD 2.2 floorstanding loudspeakers (\$46,000 USD); the successor to the popular D2.2. Featuring entirely new internals, drivers, and crossovers in a trickle-down effect from the Raidho's top TD 4.8 flagship towers, the TD 2.2's were sounding amazing when paired with a Moon 700i V2, 780D, and 610LP alongside the 40th anniversary VPI turntable (tested in this issue of *Hi-Fi+*) and all Nordost cabling. An honourable mention best sounding room.





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— Roy Gregory, *The Audio Beat*,

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*“The after show party allowed many musical genres to be played, but when they spun some disco you could almost see the mirror ball!”*



ABOVE: One of the best demonstrations of the show was the exceptional sounds from the new Joseph Audio Pearl 20/20 Graphene speakers (\$37,000 USD) paired with all Doshi Audio electronics. Jeff Joseph and Nick Doshi have worked their magic at many other shows but this was a masterpiece in sound. That it was as out of the way as any room in the North Tower simply made it a must-get-to destination. Bravo!

RIGHT: Hands down winner for me of best of show went to High End by Oz and Oz Turan and his first USA showing of AudioSolutions Virtuoso M Speakers (\$32,000 USD) with Vitus Audio's SIA-030 Class A 30 wpc/Class AB 200wpc integrated amp (\$40,000 USD). Sourcing off of a United Home Audio Ultima 4 OPS-DC reel to reel deck (\$30,000 USD) or the Vitus Audio SCD-025 MKII CD Player/DAC (\$25,200 USD) the room was rocking. It was a really big room too. The after show party allowed many musical genres to be played but when they spun some disco you could almost see the mirror ball! Music needs to be played cleanly but it, for me, must be fun also. This room brought the fun with the gear. Thanks, Oz for the fun!



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| VTL ST150 Stereo Power Amp                              | £3,490  |
| VTL S200 Signature Stereo Amplifier                     | £8,990  |
| VTL MB-450 Series III Monoblock Amplifiers              | £12,500 |
| Symphonic Line Kraft 300 Power Amp                      | £8,250  |
| Sunfire 600 Signature                                   | £1,200  |
| NAT Audio Magma SE Limited Edition                      | £19,900 |
| NAT AUDIO MAGMA Limited Edition                         | £11,900 |
| MBL Model 9011 Stereo/Mono-Block Power Amp (Price each) | £18,700 |
| Mark Levinson Monaural Reference Amplifier No 33        | £17,900 |
| Luxman MQ88 Power Amplifier                             | £4,990  |

|                                                     |         |
|-----------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Linn Klimax Chakra 500 Twin (x4 Available)          | £2,650  |
| Linn C4200 Chakra                                   | £1,990  |
| Jeff Rowland Model 2 Power & Synergy III Pre        | £3,990  |
| Gryphon Antileon Signature Monoblocks               | £22,990 |
| Gryphon Antileon                                    | £5,990  |
| Boulder Amplifiers 2060 Stereo Power Amplifier      | £16,990 |
| Bel Canto EVO 6 Gen III                             | £1,990  |
| Bel Canto Black- Ultimate Amplification System      | £27,500 |
| BAT VK250se (Bridged, single Mono)                  | £2,990  |
| BAT VK 600se Stereo Power Amp                       | £5,490  |
| B.M.C. Audio M3 Monoblocks                          | £7,990  |
| B.M.C. Audio CS2 Integrated/Power Amp               | £2,990  |
| Audio Research Reference 250SE Monoblocks           | £17,950 |
| Analog Domain Audio M75P MkII Stereo power (X-Demo) | £9,900  |

#### PRE AMPLIFIERS

|                                                    |         |
|----------------------------------------------------|---------|
| VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference Line Pre-Amplifier | £12,990 |
| Tom Evans The Vibe & Pulse SEmkII                  | £3,500  |
| Symphonic Line RG3 mk4 Pre-Amp (Chrome)            | £7,350  |
| Plinius CD LAD                                     | £1,290  |

|                                                |         |
|------------------------------------------------|---------|
| NAT Audio Magnetostat SE Absolute Reference    | £13,500 |
| Linn Kisto System Controller                   | £2,990  |
| Jeff Rowland Model 2 Power & Synergy III Pre   | £3,990  |
| Classe SSP 600                                 | £1,490  |
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| Bel Canto Black- Ultimate Amplification System | £27,500 |
| BAT REX I                                      | £7,990  |
| B.M.C. Audio DAC1PreHR                         | £2,250  |
| B.M.C. Audio DAC1PreHR                         | £3,250  |
| Audio Research Reference 10B Pre-Amplifier     | £17,990 |
| Audio Research LS25 MkII                       | £2,000  |

#### PRE & POWER COMBINATIONS

|                                                |         |
|------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Orpheus Laboratories System (see details)      | £7,990  |
| Jeff Rowland Model 2 Power & Synergy III Pre   | £3,990  |
| Bel Canto Black- Ultimate Amplification System | £27,500 |

#### PHONO STAGE

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| Whest PS.30RDT Special Edition              | £1,990 |
| Whest Audio MC RefV mkIV                    | £8,500 |
| Tom Evans The Groove Plus SRX mkII psu      | £2,990 |
| McCormack Audio Micro Phono Drive           | £390   |
| LFD MC1 phono                               | £490   |
| Boulder Amplifiers 1008 Phono Pre-amplifier | £9,900 |
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#### TURNTABLES & ARMS

|                                                 |         |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Wireworld Platinum Eclipse 7 RCA/SME DIN        | £790    |
| VPI TNT mkV-HR /JMW12.5/ SDS Controller         | £3,990  |
| VPI TNT 5HR/ SDS/ JMW12.5 Arm                   | £3,890  |
| Thales Simplicity II                            | £7,990  |
| SME Series V Tone-Arm                           | £3,250  |
| SME Seies V Pick-Up Arm                         | £2,750  |
| SME Model 30/2                                  | £16,500 |
| SME Model 20/12A                                | £9,990  |
| SME Model 15A                                   | £6,990  |
| Kodo The Beat MagDrive Turntable                | £17,990 |
| Graham Engineering Phantom Elite (TechDas Spec) | £8,999  |
| Graham Engineering Phantom B44                  | £2,490  |
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#### CARTRIDGES

|                                                               |        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
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| Van den Hul Colibri XGW                                       | £2,490 |
| Koetsu Black K                                                | £1,090 |
| Heed Audio Zene MC Cartridge                                  | £450   |
| Clearaudio Titanium V2 Cartridge                              | £2,490 |

#### CABLES- SPEAKER & INTERCONNECTS

|                                                                |        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| Wireworld Platinum Eclipse 7 XLR/XLR Audio Cable               | £1,490 |
| Wireworld Platinum Eclipse 7 RCA/SME DIN                       | £790   |
| Transparent Audio Reference 8ft Bi-Wire (MM technology)        | £2,990 |
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| Tara Labs The One Balanced 1m XLR + FGS                        | £990   |
| Synergistic Research Atmosphere UEF Level 4                    | £3,050 |

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|------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Siltech Tripple Crown XLR/XLR Interconnect     | £13,990 |
| Nordost Valhalla 1m RCA/RCA                    | £1,490  |
| Naim Audio Hi-Line                             | £425    |
| Entreq Challenger 3V Speaker Cable (3.7m pair) | £2,490  |
| Entreq Challenger 3V Interconnect XLR          | £1,650  |
| Entreq Atlantis XLR Interconnect (1.65m)       | £4,500  |
| Entreq Atlantis Speaker Cable (3.7m pair)      | £7,500  |
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| Entreq Apollo XLR 2012                         | £2,990  |
| Entreq Apollo USB Cable                        | £550    |

#### CD/SACD PLAYERS & DACS, STREAMERS/DIGITAL STORAGE

|                       |        |
|-----------------------|--------|
| Weiss DAC202 Firewire | £2,650 |
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|                                           |         |
|-------------------------------------------|---------|
| Theta Jade CD Transport                   | £990    |
| Symphonic Line Belcanto CD                | £5,500  |
| Sony SCD1 (CD/SACD) Player                | £1,990  |
| Procead PDT3 CD Transport                 | £800    |
| Procead (By Madrigal) PDP2                | £350    |
| Prism Sound Callia DAC                    | £1,490  |
| Orpheus Laboratories System (see details) | £7,990  |
| Naim CDX2                                 | £1,490  |
| Mio Audio Systems La Clock                | £1,590  |
| Meridian Audio G96 DH DVD Transport       | £990    |
| Mark Levinson No.36 digital Processor     | £1,295  |
| Linn Sondek CD12                          | £3,990  |
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| Esoteric P03/ D03 (CD/SACD DAC/Transport) | £6,990  |
| Esoteric P03/ D03                         | £9,900  |
| EMM Labs XDS1 V1 (V2-MDAT DSP upgrade)    | £16,990 |
| DCS Paganini DAC                          | £5,500  |
| B.M.C. Audio DAC1PreHR                    | £2,250  |
| B.M.C. Audio BDCD1.1 CD Player            | £2,750  |

#### LOUDSPEAKERS

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|------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Wilson Audio CUB Series II & Stands            | £4,750  |
| Vivid Audio Oval B1                            | £6,990  |
| Vivid Audio Giya G3                            | £18,990 |
| Ubiq Audio Model 1 (Duelund Edition)           | £7,500  |
| Townshend Audio Maximum Supertweeters          | £990    |
| Thiel SS2 Subwoofer (& Passive x-over)         | £1,690  |
| Thiel CS6                                      | £2,990  |
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| Martin Logan Fresco (x2)                       | £490    |

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| Linn Klimax 350P (Aktiv/Passive)                                      | £9,990  |
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| ATC C6 Subwoofer (Piano black)                                        | £3,990  |
| Apogee Stage                                                          | £1,990  |

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|                      |      |
|----------------------|------|
| Audioquest NightHawk | £290 |
|----------------------|------|

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|---------------------------------------------------|--------|
| Torus Power AVR 16                                | £4,990 |
| Tice Audio Solo                                   | £390   |
| Siltech Tripple Crown Power Cable                 | £9,990 |
| Entreq Silver Tellus                              | £990   |
| Entreq Silver Minimus                             | £325   |
| Entreq Silver CleanUs                             | £1,450 |
| Entreq Poseidon                                   | £2,790 |
| Entreq Olympus Tellus                             | £4,250 |
| Entreq Everest                                    | £195   |
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| Entreq Challenger 3V PowerUs (US Outlets)         | £1,990 |
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| Entreq Apollo PowerUs (US outlets)                | £3,500 |

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# VPI Industries 40th Anniversary turntable

by Alan Sircom



It's perhaps not that much of a reach to see VPI as a company celebrating its 40th Anniversary. Products like the Scout line, the ever-evolving TNT, and more recently the Prime and Avenger series, VPI has been a stalwart of US high-end turntablism seemingly forever. In fact, VPI Industries has been around since 1978, when Harry and Sheila Weisfeld started making record cleaning machines. Good engineers never sit still for long, and soon VPI started adding record players to the company catalogue. Fast forward to 2018 and to celebrate those 40 years of family owned manufacture in New Jersey, VPI announced the 40th Anniversary (or HW-40) turntable.

This is an 'absolute unit' in all senses of the term (in the literal sense that it is a complete turntable and arm combination, and in the "look at this absolute unit" meme sense of 'being a bit of a big lad'). It turns up in a 40kg box that's the size of a car engine. Inside is a plinth large enough to house a 12" JMW Fatboy arm (with its 3D printed armtube) and dwarves the supplied peripheral ring that joins the clamp in holding discs flat to the platter mat. The deck itself sits on four hefty feet, and it even has a lid. The rear panel has an IEC input and terminals for connection cables (it's internally wired with top-notch Nordost).

There are three touch-buttons to the front left of the top-plate; power on, 33rpm and 45rpm. There is no speed adjustment but it's not necessary as the deck runs as close to accurate 33.33rpm and 45rpm as makes no odds.

The two headline features of the 40th Anniversary turntable are its Direct Drive motor system and that the JMW Fatboy is a conventional gimballed – as opposed to unipivot – design. We'll deal with the Direct Drive part first.

You don't have to look far back into VPI's history to find the starting point for the Direct Drive system for the 40th Anniversary. Back in 2012, Harry ►



*“What was state-of-the-art in 2012 is out-of-the-ark today.”*



► Weisfeld was riding high with the success of the Classic model line, but had almost gone as far as it was possible to take the design. So, he went Direct Drive. Loosely based on the Classic, the Classic Direct included a thick aluminium plinth and armboard, an inverted platter bearing riding on a PEEK thrust disc, and a cutting-edge BLDC direct drive motor. Despite its lofty price, this proved a huge success for the company. It was not without its problems; in particular, the motor system was overly complicated, difficult, and expensive to manufacture, requiring custom-written control software, with no ability to fine tune or scale the technology. It would always remain a pinnacle product for the company.

The design process for the 40th Anniversary turntable gave VPI a chance to revisit the Classic Direct, with a mind to create a more attainable production engineering-friendly motor system. Investigating the latest

motion control technology, it was apparent that advances had been made in not only the available drive electronics, but also in materials and software control. Given the glacial speeds at which the vinyl world can sometimes move, it's surprising just how much change has taken place in the wider world of industry in the last decade; what was state-of-the-art in 2012 is out-of-the-ark today.

This meant VPI could retain the brushless DC direct drive motor with an ironless coil assembly from the Classic Direct and re-engineer the motor housing and platter instead. However, the demands of mainstream industries involved in robotics, manufacturing, machining, inspection, etc. had been driving the motion control industry for higher precision, speed, reliability and affordability, and this meant greater consistency and lower cost in the design and implementation of the Direct Drive motor and its drive software.

In essence taking a 'legacy' design and re-engineering it also gave VPI the opportunity to address potential improvements. For example, re-laying out the internal architecture, placement of components needed to drive that big motor and run its equally large power supply, to make the turntable at once better sounding, more reliable, and easier to produce. There was also considerable thought given over to isolation, and the resultant 40th Anniversary features a combination of reinforced composite absorption pads coupled with low durometer horizontal isolators and their mounting assemblies. ►

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► This new elastomeric pad arrangement is a first for VPI, but will likely filter through the rest of the range in time. Think of it as a suspensionless suspension. In short, although the turntable looks at first glance like a big Classic and is based on the Classic Direct, the 40th Anniversary takes the Classic concept and runs with it about as far as its possible to travel at this time.

The variant of the 12" Fatboy seen on the 40th Anniversary is something of a new departure for VPI, although it's also a kind of culmination of lots of things we have seen from the brand of late. Or rather, seen from the brand through another lens; the VPI designed and built Mark Levinson 515 turntable. This was every inch a VPI, but used a gimballed bearing instead of a unipivot in the arm and – the few times I've heard it at shows – it sounds pretty good. Then there are the turnkey turntables from VPI (like the Traveller, the Player, and the Cliffwood) and they all feature gimballed arms. However, the standalone Fatboy arm still sports a unipivot bearing housing. I suspect this means the company is taking the pragmatic approach of using the right bearing for the job.

The rest of the Fatboy is straight out of the catalogue, with side-mounted knurled on-the-fly VTA adjustment knob to the side of a beefy, 3D printed armtube that feels pretty substantial.

Set-up is surprisingly easy, although the removable armwand of unipivots does make cartridge installation less straightforward. However, the advantage is this arm will take practically any cartridge and the turntable itself takes longer to get out of the box than it does to get running. Just add a decent power cord, a good phono interconnect, and a table rigid and butch enough to cope with a large and heavy turntable. Now throw the switch at the back, press one of the buttons on the top, and you are good to go.

The VPI 40th Anniversary oozes authority and precision. We have grown used to the precise attack of digital files, and we make automatic accommodations for the less precise timing of a turntable... except this turntable shows you need not compromise.



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Instead, when it comes to either precision timing, pitch and timbral stability, or solidity of image in a three-dimensional space, the VPI 40th Anniversary sets a benchmark. Put anything on that platter, and the way you pin it down with the peripheral clamp and the record clamp echoes the way the turntable pins down the music; controlled, precise, and intrinsically right (the analogy doesn't work perfectly, because those clamps also make records 'flat' and that is the last thing the VPI does to music).

This solidity needs no specific record citations; just pull a record down from the shelf, put it on, and it sounds more temporally accurate. Repeat the process and the same response happens, and keeps happening. And it always sounds exciting!

The other big thing you get from the deck is... nothing. Silence. Absolute whisper quiet backgrounds, tempered only by the surface noise of the record. In fact, even here the surface noise seems quelled by the authority of the deck (or something... truth is I don't know how or why the noise floor of the record should go lower, but it does). For this, I needed some really thick, really quiet, and really almost unplayed vinyl, and put on the outer groove of the EMI 100 limited edition pressing of Roxy Music's *For Your Pleasure*. I forgot how damn dynamic 'Do The Strand;' is as an opener, and the quiet of the run in groove gave no clues what was about to happen. Just quiet until... BAM!!!!

That Roxy Music track, and the subsequent whole album (followed by another Roxy Music album [*Flesh + Blood*, E.G.], then Brian Eno's *Here Come The Warm Jets* [Island], then over to King Crimson's *Discipline* [E.G.]... because that's what you do when you play a record on this VPI) highlighted the faultless flexibility of the turntable. It didn't matter whether the music was art-house glam pomp or New Wave tinged guitar pyrotechnics, it didn't matter if the music had gone all legato and orchestral or full-bore rock wig-out. After this session, I threw everything I could think of at the deck from light dinner jazz to heavy opera and nothing, I mean NOTHING, fazed it.

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*“As a part of the KLF experience, you might expect bass, but this didn’t just wash over you, it was a bass baptism!”*

► After discovering the speed control, the energy control, the sheer amount of detail, and the soundstage were all first rate over the course of a few stretched-out evenings, I thought I had tapped the character of the 40th Anniversary VPI pretty well. Then I played, of all things, ‘Little Fluffy Clouds’ from The Orb’s *Adventures Beyond The Ultraworld* [Big Life]. That’s coming up for 30 years old and I probably haven’t played it in 20 of those years, but it all came flooding back, and more so. As a part of the KLF experience, you might expect bass, but this didn’t just wash over you, it was a bass baptism!

The difficulty I as a reviewer face when discussing this turntable is I can come across as a credulous rube, but trying to find fault with the 40th Anniversary/HW-40 deck is a futile exercise. My biggest gripe is that it’s listed as ‘HW-40’ but says ‘40th Anniversary’ on the front, and that it’s a more physically substantial turntable than I usually use and I can usually get away with under the domestic version of the Geneva Convention I signed. That’s sort of it. Otherwise, I start pointing to things that 50 grand decks can do a little better than the HW-40/40th Anniversary. Even here, I feel I’m being churlish and picky.

Interestingly, this direct drive turntable appeared just as another massive direct drive left the shelf. The Technics SL-1000R. Intellectually, I find it fascinating that 10 years ago, you would have struggled to find any mainstream high-end brand putting their name to direct drive because of its bad reputation (largely predicated on cheapo models with cogging motors). Today, they are becoming a significant sub-set of the high-end vinyl world again. Respect must go to Technics here; by restarting its turntable brand it placed an ‘above the fold’ focus on direct drive replay that the likes of Brinkmann, Grand Prix Audio, and VPI could not. However, the ships that pass in the night comparison (not side by side) was still interesting. The big Technics has all the style chops; it looks expensive, and built like it was assembled by a team of watchmakers on their day off. The VPI, by way of contrast, looks a little more, er, ‘agricultural’. Both are very well made, but Average Joe would think the Technics a more advanced design. However, sonically the roles are completely reversed; the VPI just had more depth and body (paradoxically, more midrange body than bass depth). Once again, the Technics is a very good sounding turntable, but the VPI just puts you ‘there’ in the room better. In truth, I’d be happy with either, but I’d be happiest with the VPI.

The lone problem faced by VPI now in light of the 40th Anniversary is a significant one. The 40th Anniversary/HW-40 turntable and arm are nowhere near as expensive as the top of the tree Avenger models from the company, and while they are better in absolute terms (and certainly look the part), many who have done the direct comparison find the Avengers are not significantly better than this turntable (or more accurately, you have to go pretty far up the Avenger series to out-perform the 40th Anniversary). VPI stands to cannibalise

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Direct Drive, non-suspended turntable, with 3D printed gimbalised tonearm

**Chassis:** Aluminium and solid black walnut (stained)

**Platter size and type:** 12" Aluminium, 11.34kg

**Tonearm included:** JMW-12-Fatboy Gimbal

**Internal wiring:** Nordost Valhalla

**Motor:** Direct Drive

**Motor Torque:** 2.68Nm/sec

**Start/Stop Time:** 1sec

**Speed Monitoring:** 2,500 pulses per revolution

**Dimensions (WxDxH):** 55.9 × 43.2 × 25cm

**Weight:** 31.75kg

**Price:** £15,000

**Manufactured by:** VPI Industries Inc

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

**Distributed by:** Renaissance Audio

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

**Tel:** +44 (0)131 555 3922

its own upper tier products because of the quality of the 40th Anniversary. In truth, VPI has been here before – the Classic models were inevitably compared to the top TNT models of the day, and while the TNT was not found wanting, the differences between two very differently priced models were more ‘nuance’ than ‘night-and-day’. On the other hand, if your closest competition is yourself, that’s one heck of a First World Problem.

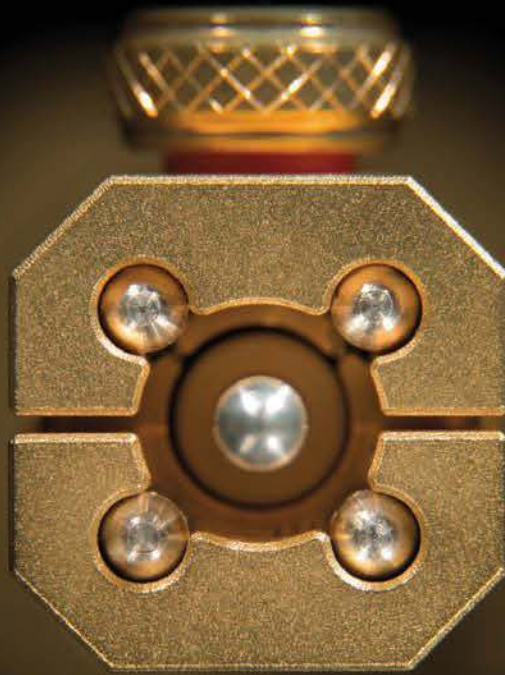
To say the VPI 40th Anniversary turntable is impressive is an understatement. Sonically, if it were twice the price, it would still be beating the competition. When its’ biggest real criticism is that the product can’t quite make up its mind whether it’s called the ‘HW-40’ or the ‘40th Anniversary’, you know you are on to a winner! +



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# PrimaLuna Evo 300 preamplifier and power amplifier

by Alan Sircom



**L**et's be brutally honest about high-end audio; sometimes it's a bit full of itself. The combination of ever-soaring prices and elaborate and often exaggerated claims can sometimes make even the most enthusiastic supporter of high-end audio shout 'Stop The Insanity!'. Fortunately, there are a few brands that seem to share the desire to create products that perform well without recourse to making outlandish claims or creating eye-watering price tags. PrimaLuna is one such brand.

However, as a consequence of this BS-free approach to product design and manufacture, the products didn't change that often. The ProLogue and DiaLogue models from the brand were mainstays of affordable valve-based high-end audio for some time, and the company didn't run through endless cycles of hyped-up micro-changes in product design. This isn't just 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', but a more honest approach that admitted at first principles that there are only a finite number of ways of making an amplifier circuit, and few people are legitimately reinventing the wheel every few years; more like, tinkering with a circuit design that's old enough to draw a pension.

So, when PrimaLuna announced a whole new range replacing the ProLogue and DiaLogue, interest was piqued. Was the company bowing to pressure and simply changing a couple of component values and proclaiming it the Second Coming of the Tube Amp, or will the Evolution range really live up to the name? The range launched recently with four series, each comprising integrated amp, line preamp, and stereo power amp that turns mono literally at the flick of a switch. These are, respectively, the Evo 100, 200, 300, and 400 series. There is also a single DAC in the range; the Evo 100. This sports a clever tube clock circuit, but that's another story!



*“I have torn through these specifications because they speak of a range that works in a wholly sensible manner.”*



► Even though we picked the Evo 300 preamp and stereo power amp, it's worth running through the range, to set them in context. Evo 100 is the entry point, but already it features point-to-point wiring, relay-switched 'super-quiet' inputs, is a dual mono, valve regulated design with the company's adaptive auto bias circuit and 'Bad Tube Indicator', has ALPS Blue Velvet potentiometers as volume controls in the preamp and integrated, and the integrated and power amp allow a degree of tube-rolling if the stock quartet of EL34s aren't your bag. The Evo 200 adds a home cinema bypass, larger transformers, and the option to include KT150s in your tube-rolling quest. Evo 300 tested here adds a special 'AC Offset Killer' circuit that reduces transformer self-noise, upgrades the internal wiring to custom Swiss made cabling (in point-to-point designs, upgrading the internal wiring loom makes a huge difference), upgrading to Takman resistors and DuRoch tinfoil capacitors. The preamp and integrated get a bigger, better remote, and the power amp includes remotely-controlled triode/

ultralinear switching, XLR inputs, and the beefiest transformers the company provides. Finally, the Evo 400 models bring XLR inputs to the preamplifier, and double the number of output valves, raising the power from a healthy 44W per channel in the Evo 300 amp tested here to 70W, or a potential 140W if used in bridged mono mode.

I have torn through these specifications because they speak of a range that works in a wholly sensible manner. Again, unlike many components in audio, where the notion of good-better-best seem separated by the thinnest sliver of difference, these are ►



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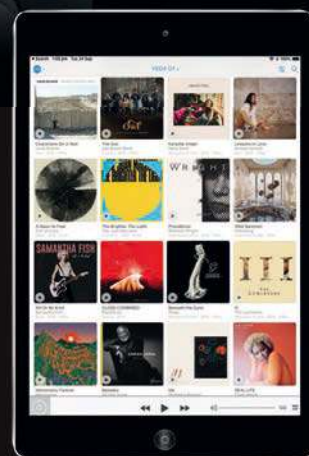


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### AURALIC PRESS AWARDS





*“It is in combination that the PrimaLuna Evo 300 duo shine. This isn’t magic synergy or tweaking the response of one to suit the other.”*



► tangible improvements in specification that are likely to have tangible benefits in performance. This is why there are no built-in phono stages or on-board DACs; they rarely provide an improvement over even very affordable aftermarket models, and frequently do little more than increase cost and (in the case of poorly shielded DACs) lower overall performance. That being said, PrimaLuna did make the PhonoLogue and PhonoLogue Premium phono stages upgrades a few years back, so they can't be *that* bad! Hopefully, however, this dismissal of the internal phono stage means a standalone Evo phono preamp or two is on the cards.

On to the specifics of the Evo 300 duo. The first observation is how the Evo 300 preamp is surprisingly weighty and bristles with valves (six 12AU7 and a pair of 5AR4 for the regulator). This weight comes down to a lot of transformers (because of that dual-mono, choke-filtered valve regulation). This is one of the sweetest sounding, yet insightful and upbeat, preamplifiers you can get for anything like the money. This is a harmonically rich sounding preamplifier that stays just the right side of 'warm' to be enticing, but that avoids the risk of falling into sounding too warm and ultimately cuddly-sounding. Stereo imaging is first-rate, with a great deal of image depth, and dynamics are more on the effortless rather than exuberant side. Fine detail resolution and vocal articulation are handled well, too.

In a way, the sound quality of the power amp is harder to track because it so readily invites tube rolling. The sound of the amp with two brace of KT150s is going to be markedly different to the Evo 300 sporting a quartet of 7581As, as it will with the stock EL34s. But with the stock EL34s in place it sounds damn fine. I felt the sound is perhaps best with smaller loudspeakers and in pentode mode than with more full-range designs or in triode operation. There's something intrinsically 'earthy' and 'gutsy' about the sound when partnered

with good, small loudspeakers that doesn't extend to the bottom octave or so (but, in fairness, this isn't the kind of amplifier that will be used in combination with full-range skyscraper speakers, and in context, it works fine). Moreover, while that sound gets a little smoother, warmer, and has better stereo in triode mode, I prefer the more dynamic pentode operation. Your mileage may vary here, however.

However, it is in combination that the PrimaLuna Evo 300 duo shine. This isn't magic synergy or tweaking the response of one to suit the other; more that the two are well-matched in performance terms and that comes across well. One of the more 'stand out' tracks from the listening session that highlighted this was 'Shipbuilding' by Elvis Costello [*Punch The Clock*, F-Beat]. Always deeply evocative, the track was focused in the room with Costello's voice and Chet Baker's trumpet is almost too painful to hear. Anything that stirs up that emotion works!

The usual criticisms of PrimaLuna will be rolled out with the Evo range: the fact they are built in Asia, and their 'bling-free' styling. But, here's the thing; you can buy valve amps ►

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## Loudspeakers of Distinction



Left to right: Kudos Titan 606, Duevel Venus, Amphion Argon 7LS

### Kudos

Kudos Audio, a long-established UK company, create some of the finest sounding speakers in the world. They tune all their loudspeakers systems by ear, which is the correct way with any audio design.

Their speakers have a neutral tonal balance, are very precise in imaging, and are well balanced across the frequencies. A high resolution of finer details produces a broad and deep soundstage with a life-like presentation.

A long-standing relationship with SEAS has resulted in drive units designed specifically for Kudos loudspeakers.

### Duevel

The main characteristic we look for in any speaker is its ability to generate a holographic image, with depth, as well as width. Omni-directional speakers do this more easily than conventional forward-facing dynamic designs.

Duevel, a family run business from Germany, have an impressive range of omni-directional speakers. From their entry point upwards, all models deliver a wide and deep soundstage with an organic presentation. The large sweet spot offers a live concert experience.

Duevel loudspeakers are well priced offering an entry into this type of design at realistic costs.

### Amphion

Amphion loudspeakers are designed and made in Finland. The key to their sound is their controlled dispersion technology, which enables their speakers to achieve a very musical sound repeatable in a variety of rooms.

The Argon range offers a high level of sound quality and are extremely well made. The soundstage is expansive, their tone and timbre very natural, and no listener fatigue due to excessive brightness. Bass is extended, well controlled with no exaggeration.

An unusual passive-radiator design from mid-way up the model line offers better room integration.



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### PrimaLuna Evo 300 Pre

Dual mono valve line preamplifier

**Line inputs:** five single-ended inputs, one home theatre bypass

**Outputs:** One stereo pair single-ended preamp outputs, one tape monitor output

**Valves:** 6x 12AU7, 2x 5AR4

**Bandwidth:** 10 Hz–95kHz  $\pm$  1 dB

**Output impedance:** 256 $\Omega$

**Gain:** 10dB

**Finish:** Black or brushed aluminium

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 396 x 207 x 403mm

**Net weight:** 24.4 kg

**Price:** £3,598

### PrimaLuna Evo 300 power amp

Dual mono valve power amplifier

**Inputs:** RCA and XLR stereo inputs

**Output power:** 44watts per channel

(with supplied EL34 valves.

pentode): 22watts (with supplied EL34 valves, triode operation)

**Outputs:** 4, 8, 16 $\Omega$

**Standard valve complement:** 6x 12AU7, 4x EL34

**Valve options:** 6L6G, 6L6GC, 7581A, EL34, EL37, 6550, KT66, KT77, KT88, KT90, KT120, KT150

**Finish:** Black or brushed aluminium

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 386 x 203 x 404mm

**Net weight:** 30kg

**Price:** £3,798

**Manufactured by:** PrimaLuna

**URL:** primaluna.nl

**Distributed by:** Absolute Sounds

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

**URL:** absolutesounds.com

► designed and built in America or Europe but they either cost more, or feature a lesser specification for the money. Or, you can buy something with a higher specification and better performance for less money knowing it logged a long boat ride in its infancy. Or, you can buy something that looks like a million bucks that doesn't sound as good. Pick any one of these. There is no underlying value judgment in that statement; you can do all three and the choice is yours. What's harder to do is buy a product of this specification and performance at the price that looks expensive, no matter how many times you stamp your feet and wish the world was different. Also, although some find the look a bit basic, with the protector like the styling; think of it as a 'singing bread bin'.

I haven't heard the full new Evo range yet, but I can't help feeling that this Evo 300 pre/power occupies the sweet spot in the range. Granted if you need more power the Evo 400 power amps (especially in mono form) are the logical choice, and if you need to put some distance between pre and power, then the Evo 400 preamp with either the Evo 300 or Evo 400 power amp, all running in balanced mode would be a more sensible option. But for many who are going to put less than five metres of wire between the two PrimaLuna products, and those who aren't in the market for bigger, beefier power amps, I can't help but think this is the perfect combination. That is based on a sample of precisely one product combination in the range, though... so maybe every PrimaLuna product is in that sweet spot!

This might make me sound like a character in a Jane Austen novel, but I'm excessively diverted by the PrimaLuna Evo 300 preamp and power amp. I like the sound they make, and I like the reasons why they make that sound. I like that they are attainably priced, and I like that there is an easy mono upgrade path. I like that they aren't built out of Bullshitted Credulium, and I like the 'WYSIWYG' approach to amplifier design. In short, I like 'em! +

*"This might make me sound like a character in a Jane Austen novel, but I am excessively diverted by the PrimaLuna Evo 300."*





# Robin Hood



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SoundEngine2

# Totem Element Fire V2 Bookshelf Monitor Loudspeaker

by Buzz Hughes

**M**y first opportunity to become intimately acquainted with Totem Acoustics was through my previous *Hi-Fi+* review of the Sky Tower loudspeakers last fall. I admit, a bit sheepishly, that after being bowled over by the Sky's crisp holographic presentation I had casually come to regard Vince Bruzzese's Totem as a speaker manufacturer whose bread was buttered with floorstanders. Naturally I was quite intrigued when I got the nod to review Totem's freshly reimagined V2 model of the Fire bookshelf monitor. The upscale new Fire V2 speaker sits on Totem's tippity top shelf in their pinnacle Element series. Anticipation of experiencing Totem through a two-way bookshelf monitor continued to build daily until I routinely found myself making trips to open my front door just to see if I could glance the UPS truck turning down my block.

When the doorbell mercifully did ring quite late one hot summer evening I confess I had not the self control to wait even one more night before greedily tearing into the boxes. For a few spellbinding moments it was unclear if I was love struck by the shape of the Fire's sexy tapering trapezoidal lines, or if I had actually hit my head on the front door jamb and my vision was still a bit woozy from impact. You see the new Element Fires are quite visually beguiling being purposely constructed to avoid any parallel lines, an effect that can become an optical illusion of sorts. To my eyes (and my faithful onlooking Sky Towers who were certainly turning green with envy) the unique shape was most definitely aesthetically pleasing. Visually arresting is only half the story though, the unique shape of the Element Fires are said to achieve phasing coherence and bass accuracy in the lowest octaves. The shape attempts to avoid any standing waves which will help enrich clarity in the midrange band and minimise cabinet resonance.

My review pair was 'Dusk' coloured and virtually shone under three splendid coats of lacquer. The ►







*“In virtually every place one could view the new Element Fire you will find substantive technological improvements.”*

to see how far he could push the envelope with a fairly priced bookshelf monitor. Vince isn't shy about letting the industry know he feels he has created a dead ringer with the V2 Element Fire. Vince has anointed the Fires as “the finest monitors on the planet.” How is that for booting a new set of speakers through the curtain out into the spotlight? No pressure, right? However, big talk aside, for your entry fee it is easily demonstrable that these new versions of the Element Fire are packed and then re-packed with so much improved technology that your head is going to get woozy. Or wait, maybe that's because you are still looking for parallel lines in the speaker cabinet.

On top of being easier to drive than their V1 predecessors, in virtually every place one could view the new Element Fire, you will find substantive technological improvements. There are almost too many to mention here, but we could start what I have dubbed “Totem's upgrade parade” by mentioning the titanium tweeter. The Fire sports an improved 25mm dome tweeter which now includes a 0.9cm thick front aluminium faceplate and finned aluminium alloy chamber. The tweeter section employs a new crossover and also a new internal bass tuning design that doubles the frequency response in the first audible octave. Other floats in the upgrade parade include: bi-wire ready platinum WBT four-way connectors custom fitted to annealed aluminium plates, ramped up efforts to control quality by slow producing the artisan speaker cabinets, and Totem's proven signature borosilicate cabinet dampening techniques. More reading on the list above is encouraged, but the Fire V2's most significant technological ace in the hole is the reborn Torrent driver.

Fire V2's new 178mm Torrent woofer is hand assembled at Totem's home base in Montreal and the driver boasts more damping, a larger dust cap, and is a bit shorter and more compact than previous versions. Already a celebrated and stunning piece of technology before revisions, Totem says the more compact nature of the V2 driver will allow the neck in the voice coil a stronger connection to the driver's cone. This stronger connection has the dual effect of smoothing out the midrange and bolstering deeper bass response. While re-tooling the physical aspects of Torrent, Totem is also begging to make its mark with new break-through magnetic field technology. Totem has found space in the driver to add another magnet (previously 16, now 17) to stretch the concavity of the magnetic cradle. The copper plating around the driver's magnetic structure has been changed to a tri-laminate, and that Canadian warlock Mr. Bruzzese says he has also included a few more undisclosed proprietary improvements thrown in for good measure as well. These sum changes to the magnetic components assert instantaneous control sonically by continuously immersing the voice coil within the magnetic field. The result is a highly engineered driver that has virtually perfect pitch, free flow of energy, phase correctness both on and off axis, as well as incredible scale and imaging height.

► lacquer was so luminescent it might as well have been adorned in a diamond necklace, or so it seemed as the speakers were dropped into place front and centre of my home system. One of the improvements from the V1 to the V2 version of the Fires was a far larger sonic sweet spot so, it being late in the evening already, I set them up square about 6' apart or so and let 'em rip. It took no more than a half a minute listening to my first track before the sonic jungle quickly overtaking my living room signalled that everything I knew about monitor playback was about to get flipped right on its head.

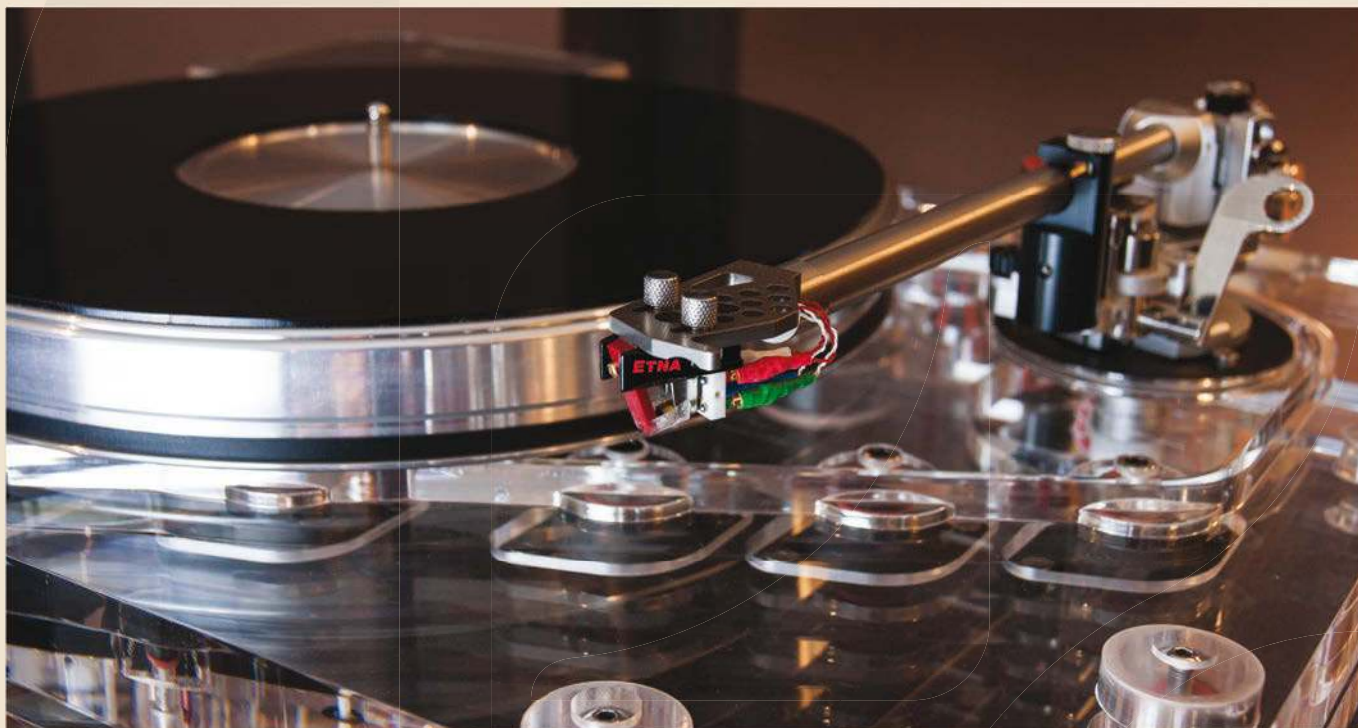
The Element Fire is anchored in Totem's success with their Tribe series. The Tribe's celebrated 100mm version of the world famous Torrent driver inspired Mr. Bruzzese



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Thankfully given such a sophisticated speaker I was allotted an extended review period to let the Element Fire V2s fully break in. When cresting approximately 200 of Totem's listed 300 hour break in, the Fires really started to reveal the advantages of a top class monitor. The Torrent driver suspended at just below eye level instead of being tethered to the floor opened up a new level of width and depth that was undeniable in the presentation. Suspension of the driver minimised unwanted vibrational interactions with my hardwood floors and instruments as well as vocals consistently represented vivid space and depth around them. Never once did harsh adjectives like analytical or sterile come into my thoughts while listening; this is a musical speaker if there ever was one. So enough reviewer vaguery, can I mention Funkadelic now please? My extended time with the Element Fire V2 could well be summed up by listening to Eddie Hazel's comet guitar transform my perceived boundaries of time, space, and soundstage. *Maggot Brain's* [Westbound] self titled opening track with the Fire speakers was ten glorious minutes of trying desperately to keep up with Eddie's serpentine guitar as it slithered and wiggled its way through an obscenely wide open soundstage. Eddie's shape shifting guitar continually pushed further and further past the expected edge of the Fires placement until the whole affair became nothing short of unearthly. Take my word: I have never gone that deep into *Maggot Brain* with a floorstander, whereas the Element Fires took me somewhere new. The Fires proved themselves versatile too when tested with two very different types of amplification and seemed to have a sixth sense about the goal of the exercise. When given pure solid state power courtesy of my Rega Osiris integrated the Fires responded with brilliant detail and accuracy. For the tube lovers, the Fires ate up a softer sounding

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** two-way bookshelf monitor

**Driver complement:** 178mm Torrent woofer, 25mm titanium dome tweeter

**Frequency response:** 30Hz–22kHz

**Impedance:** 8Ω

**Sensitivity:** 88dB

**Dimensions (W×H×D):** 224 × 422 × 297mm

**Weight:** 14.74kg

**Finishes:** Multi coat Dusk or Ice

**Price:** £7,000 per pair

**Manufacturer:** Totem Acoustic

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

**Distributed by:** Joenit

**Tel:** 0032 15 285 585

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



Luxman LX-380 producing meaty textures and a sense of vocal presence that blew past any rival I have ever heard. So what would I say if you twisted my arm and said, "Hey Mr. way too positive Reviewer man, give me something that brings these back to earth!" Well I would close my eyes, think for a minute, and probably tell you that in proportion for a few choice recordings I didn't hear the top end articulated as well as I had wanted. And then I would add that bi-wiring didn't really produce any sonic benefit at all when I tried it with the Luxman....but guy, come on, you are twisting my arm remember?

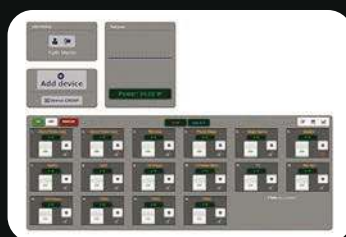
The Element Fire V2 is an incredibly complex and nuanced sounding speaker. At its best it holds all parts of the sonic spectrum together with a consistency and continuity that I have rarely heard in a sub \$10,000 speaker. For \$7,000 these guys are a steal and no question several rungs up the ladder from my very capable reference of Totem's Sky Towers. Worth every penny! +

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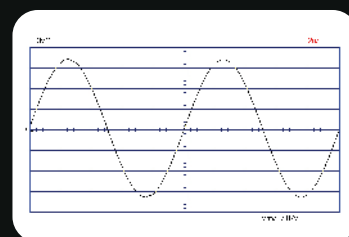


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# Innuos ZENmini Mk 3 music server with LPSU power supply

by Alan Sircom



Innuos' range of ZEN music servers each have their specific niche, that perfectly suits significant parts of the audio enthusiast market. As its name suggests, the Statement speaks to the high-end user who has a cost-no-object approach to audio, while the ZEN range covers everything from those dipping their toes in the music server world to those seeking a useful high-end solution. As befits the magazine, we've tended to look more to the top-end of the Innuos tree, but in many respects the humble entry ZENmini is the device that has the toughest job to do, because it will have to fill in so many different gaps in audio systems.

The ZENmini Mk 3 is the most flexible Innuos product to date. Where the more up-scale models are designed to output purely to USB or Ethernet (because the assumption can be made that the prospective ZEN, ZENith, or Statement user has a network streamer or USB-supporting DAC), the ZENmini Mk 3 makes no such reductionist decisions. The ZENmini Mk 3 might be used in a networked system with one user, into an older DAC with only coaxial S/PDIF connections, into a music system that only has a Toslink optical input, or to replace a CD player in a system with an amplifier that only has line-level RCA inputs. Moreover, because of this multiplicity of potential audio system options, the ZENmini's interface needs to reflect a wide range of users, from the tech-savvy enthusiast who dreams in TCP/IP right down to someone who considers the ZENmini Mk 3 to be their first musical venture into the 21st Century.

The flexibility continues at the power end. As standard, the ZENmini Mk 3 comes supplied with a perfectly servicable laptop-style switch-mode power supply 'brick', but there is an option to upgrade that with the LPSU linear power supply unit, to bring the ZENmini Mk 3 closer to ZEN Mk 3 performance. ►



▶ The ZENmini Mk 3 is a small ripping server with 1TB of WD Red hard disc as standard (you can configure it to have up to 8TB of on-board storage). It runs off an Intel N4200 Quad Core chipset with 4GB of RAM, making it on a par with an entry-level laptop in raw computing power. As with most music servers, there ain't much to see. The half-width cases of both ZENmini Mk 3 and LPSU are almost identical, with the same gently angled front panel with a power button in the bottom right corner. Aside from the obvious slot-loading CD drawer in the ZENmini Mk 3, they look interchangeable from the front. There are no other displays and the ZENmini's music playback, handling, and management are all removed to either a computer, a tablet, or a smartphone. It's here, too, where Innuos needs to demonstrate a lot of flexibility. Some will want this to run under its own steam, some will want it to be controlled by a third-party controller like Linn's Kazoo, some may even want it to operate as a Squeezebox server, or a Sonos server, or even a Roon server. And the ZENmini Mk 3 addresses all these avenues with almost equal aplomb.

The 'almost' part comes from the fact the company's products are so commonly used with third-party streaming systems, its own apps have taken a bit of a back seat compared to the demands made to 'get products out the door.' The company's own app hasn't been a major concern because so many ZEN products were used in Linn and Naim systems, where an app was almost surplus to requirements. That's changing, however, and the company is developing an app. Meanwhile, apps like iPeng Playback (iOS) or Orange Squeeze (Android) fill in the gaps in the meantime.

For the most part, the ZENmini runs entirely under its own steam. Ripping a disc generally involves little more than putting a disc in the slot, waiting a few minutes, and taking it out again. The ZENmini does all the heavy lifting. It doesn't go down the route of comparing to online absolutes, because accurate rip systems do not necessarily point to the optimum version of the recording. It does allow the user a fair degree of editing a ripped disc's metadata should you wish to go off piste, but in fairness, the ZENmini Mk 3 got things right more often than not. The joy of this is the ZENmini shares the same basic library management system used by all Innuos products, and unless you want to configure your music library in a weird manner, it works in a very logical way. Configuring the ZENmini Mk 3 to talk to Tidal, Qobuz, or Spotify is easy and quick too. In short, the ZENmini Mk 3 does what all good servers should do; act invisibly, letting other products in the chain do their jobs well. ▶



OUR RECOMMENDATION:  
**BUY TWO!**





*“With the LPSU, the ZENmini Mk 3 moved from ‘good general purpose music server’ to ‘low-cost powerhouse’.”*

► Sonically, the ZENmini Mk3 varies according to output. It’s routinely excellent through USB and Ethernet, very good through optical and coaxial S/PDIF connections, and pretty decent through its phono outputs. If you are looking for a direct replacement to a good CD player, I’d wager that the built-in DAC is more of a stepping stone than a destination in its own right, as it does sound a little ill-defined in the bass and the image is less precise than you hear from its own digital outputs. In this respect, I compared the interestingly ethereal ‘Alafin’ from the eponymous Iranian-Cuban *Ariwo* LP [Manana], and the almost tribal drumming was handled well in both cases, but the ZENmini Mk 3 had less of a sense of location in three-dimensional space. However, the versatility of the ZENmini Mk 3 scores points there.

This was with the ZENmini Mk 3 running from the standard supply. Adding the LPSU (which is what it says, replacing a switch-mode power supply with the kind of multi-way linear supplies used in Innuos’ more up-scale devices) brought small, but significant improvements to all outputs, even if that pecking order remains unchanged. With the LPSU, the ZENmini Mk 3 moved from ‘good general purpose music server’ to ‘low-cost musical powerhouse.’ Some really forensic comparison between the ZENmini Mk 3 and the likes of similar sized Melco and Naim models that cost considerably more showed just how good the ZENmini Mk3 can be. Sonically, there are still reasons these higher-end devices (including those from Innuos itself) reigned supreme; all other things being equal, there is more leading-edge information and better image solidity to be had when playing Rachmininov’s ‘Symphonic Dances’ [Zinman, Teldec 16/44 rip] with the more upscale players, but this only really became apparent under close and careful comparison. In real-world terms, you would struggle to hear big differences in performance between the ZENmini Mk 3/LPSU combination and some really big hitters in the server world.

Limitations are few and far between. In real-world terms, the big one is you are going for some real network heavy lifting (say, streaming multiple DSD files from an on-board Roon server), bigger is better; the ZENmini Mk 3 will rise to the challenge, but the bigger boys in the Innuos catalogue are better suited to such tasks. But once again, this is more down to ‘you get what you pay for’ than criticism of the product.

Most UK reviewers now have some kind of dedicated hardware streaming platform, be it a Naim, a Melco, a Roon Nucleus, an Aurender, or even an Innuos of some description. Truth to tell, we use them rather a lot, even though an increasing number of new recordings come from Tidal or Qobuz rather than as CDs to play or rip. And, where most of us have devices far more upmarket and elaborate than the ZENmini Mk 3, I dare say many of us would be more than happy using this server with its power supply. It wouldn’t seem like ‘slumming it’ either. This is a cogent, powerful server that is both upgradable and very good in its own right. What’s not to like? +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### ZENmini Mk 3

**Type:** Solid-state music server with HDD storage and CD ripper

**Storage:** Minimum of one 1TB HDD hard drive

**Network connection:** RJ45 Ethernet

**Digital Outputs:** RJ45 Ethernet direct, USB 2.0

**Back up connection:** USB (x3)

**Other connections:** Optical S/PDIF, coaxial S/PDIF, 2x RCA analogue outputs

**Formats supported:** WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, OGG Vorbis, AAC, MP3, DoP (DSD over PCM), MQA (on supporting DACs)

**CD rip format:** FLAC (zero compression), WAV

**Streaming services supported:** Qobuz, Tidal, Spotify Premium

**User Interface:** Web browser, third party control applications

**Other Features:** UPnP server, DLNA device compatible.

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 74 x 214 x 240mm

**Weight:** 4.5kg

**Price:** from £899 (depending on HDD)

### LPSU

**Type:** Linear Power Supply for ZENmini

**Compatible with:** Innuos ZENmini Mk II, ZENmini Mk III

**Connections:** 2.5mm-5.5mm barrel plug

**Connection type:** DC

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 74 x 214 x 240mm

**Weight:** 4kg

**Price:** £499

**Combination price:** £1,348 (1TB HDD)

**Manufacturer:** Innuos

**Tel:** +44(0) 1793 384048

**URL:** innuos.com



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# MartinLogan ElectroMotion ESL X floorstanding loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

**P**MC patron Peter Thomas says that he “has always had a sneaking regard for electrostatic loudspeakers”. Having used stacked Quads many years ago, I’m inclined to agree. There’s definitely something ‘different’ about listening to electrostatics, whether full-range or hybrid designs like the ElectroMotion ESL X tested here.

This might have something to do with the fact that they’re invariably dipoles, and therefore interact with a listening room in a rather different way to more conventional (box-type) monopole loudspeakers. It’s also important to sit down in the listening seat in order to achieve the correct treble balance.

After some years as distributors of electronic brands such as Bryston and AVM, PMC has recently formalised its UK Distribution operation as a separate division. Its first task will be to take over the distribution of MartinLogan loudspeakers from Absolute Sounds, offering hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers at the top end, plus lots of smaller and specialist niche models lower down the price ladder. This is not nefarious brand-raiding by PMC, however; MartinLogan’s smaller box loudspeakers and in-wall systems are at once part of the next-decade strategy for ML, a sector of the market in which PMC is interested. A UK speaker company distributing an overseas rival might be unprecedented, but the two companies do have very different philosophies and product portfolios, so they dove-tail rather than compete.

MartinLogan is actually larger than PMC by a comfortable margin, with an R&D operation of around 30 people in Kansas City, plus some 200 carrying out production in Toronto, Canada. Although it was originally founded in Kansas City, MartinLogan was purchased by Canadian company Paradigm some ten years ago, and is currently owned by the Bagby family, along with Anthem.

Full-range dipole Quad Electrostatics are well enough known in Britain, because they revolutionised the loudspeaker scene from 1957 via the original two-way model, or the subsequent more complex ESL63 and its variations. However, MartinLogan has always made hybrid electrostatics, with relatively narrow electrostatic panels that operate above conventional dynamic bass sections. My recollection of early ML speakers was that they experienced some difficulty in integrating the bass box with the electrostatic panel, but that doesn’t seem to be the case any longer.

Although five costly Masterpiece models have active dynamic bass units that incorporate ARC (Anthem Room Correction) room equalisation, our review is focused on a pair of entirely passive ElectroMotion ESL X, featuring twin ►





▶ port-loaded 200mm bass units and priced at a fraction below £5,000. (For smaller rooms there's a £3,500 ESL with twin 150mm drivers and a smaller panel; there are also a number of Home Cinema additions.) The 21×104mm panel used by this ESL X has a gentle lateral convex curve.

While the ElectroMotion ESL X undoubtedly stands tall, with an overall height of 150mm, most of this consists of a curved and semi-transparent panel. The reflex-ported bass unit, sitting underneath the vertical electrostatic panel, has a deliberately asymmetric enclosure, and mounts the 200mm drive units at the front and the back (so that the mechanical forces cancel out). The crossover point is designated at 400Hz, which is certainly lower than most two-way designs, but that's no problem at all here.

Basic measurements reveal a decent sensitivity (albeit somewhat below that claimed), plus astonishingly smooth and well controlled upper frequencies above 500Hz. Things are much less smooth below 500Hz, with variations as great as  $\pm 7\text{dB}$ , but they still supply an average 89dB sensitivity. The impedance looks a little problematic, as it appears to be rather low at both ends of the band. The bass is generally low, at around 5ohms, with good damping and reflex-tuned to around 28Hz. The top end falls steadily at higher frequencies, so that those above 12kHz are below 4ohms. (Frankly, I think it might well be compromised if used with valve amps.)

While I did find the bi-wire multi-way terminals to my taste, I was a bit perplexed by the need to energise each of the speakers with a low DC voltage. This is used to energise the upper range electrostatic panels, by plugging each speaker into the mains. Set-up involves carefully aligning the electrostatic panels by shining a torch at the two panels from the listening seat, to make sure that both panels matched and were set at the correct angle for best results. Having your speakers 'torched in' (This is also one of those times where British English wins out over its American counterpart; replacing the word 'torch' with 'flashlight' is fine, but 'flashed in' sounds a little pervy) is a unique way of installation that only applies to the curvilinear panels of MartinLogan loudspeakers. However, it is extremely effective and – if there are two of you (one in the hot-seat holding the torch and one steering the speakers) – remarkably quick. Fine-tuning from this 'torched in' listening position is possible and beneficial (especially in terms of relative position of speaker to length of room), but never forget to recheck the 'torched in' placement during the installation from time to time.

That done, I found myself falling in love with electrostatics all over again. Note that it's absolutely vital to sit down in order to maximise the treble output and audition the speaker properly. I think it was the sheer tangibility of the image that these things deliver (or at any rate used to deliver, until one example decided to go faulty on me). With that problem fixed, I'll happily admit that the ESL X sounds very neutral and is also quite dramatic. The smooth upper frequencies are particularly impressive, and the integration with the bottom end is both seamless and very well judged.

There's unquestionably something altogether 'right' about an electrostatic top end. This might be to do with the tiny movements involved, but its behaviour is certainly smoother and flatter than most conventional point-source domes, in the author's experience at least. When one speaker was playing in ▶



The image shows two white, tall, tapered floor-standing speakers positioned in a modern living room. The room features large floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a view of a lush green landscape with trees and a swimming pool. The interior has light-colored wooden flooring and a white ottoman. The speakers are white with black speaker drivers and feet. The Totem logo and tagline are in the top right, and the Torrent Technology logo is in the bottom right.

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## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker with reflex dynamic bass

**Drive units:** 102×22cm XStat™ CLS™ electrostatic transducer (HF), 2× 203mm high excursion, high-rigidity paper cones (LF)

**Frequency Response:** 41Hz–22kHz ±3dB

**Crossover frequency:** 400Hz

**Sensitivity:** 91dB/2.83 volts/metre

**Nominal impedance:** 6Ω

**Minimum impedance:** 1.6Ω @ 20kHz

**Horizontal Dispersion:** 30°

**Vertical Dispersion:** 101.6cm (line source)

**Recommended amplifier power:** 20–200Wpc

**Dimensions (W×H×D):** 150.3cm × 23.8cm × 52.6cm

**Weight:** 23.6kg

**Price:** £4,995 per pair

**Manufactured by:** MartinLogan

**URL:** martinlogan.com

**Distributed in the UK by:**

PMC Distribution UK

**Tel:** +44 (0)1767 686300

**URL:** pmc-speakers.com

► mono, during a television documentary, I was interested to note a substantial difference in distortion between poor quality ‘live’ (direct to camera) and much cleaner sounding dubbed vocals.

Part of the reason might have to do with the measurements, which were a little less even than I had expected, and also tended to emphasise the presence band. Indeed, although the response holds within ±3dB limits from 500Hz up to 7kHz, the output peaks at 2kHz, which is roughly the inverse of conventional dynamic speakers. As a result, while the ESL X tended to sound brighter than a dome-type tweeter, it never seemed too bright.

I’d rate the sensitivity at around 89dB, but the bass end (sub-500Hz) is very uneven. However, don’t let the uneven bass end put you off, as the smooth (albeit somewhat forward) mid-band dominates the bass end. This speaker works particularly well at modest levels, due in part at least to the forwardness that seems to emphasise the voice band.

Like most electrostatic loudspeakers in a dynamic loudspeaker world, this is a difficult speaker to summarise. In part it places an emphasis on the

listener’s reaction to the sound, but if you find yourself swayed by an unparalleled lack of perceived mid-band and high-frequency distortion, there might be no going back. The MartinLogan Electromotion ESL X is an exceptional performer for the price, especially for anybody who likes to listen at modest levels (the larger models are more accommodating for the unrepentant headbanger). What the speaker offers is something that both sounds – and looks – distinctly and genuinely ‘different’ from the norm, and for many that’s a good thing. I reckon that such an observation alone should be enough to put it onto many listeners’ short-lists. +



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# Synthesis Soprano LE integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

**S**ynthesis is an Italian electronics company with a strong emphasis on valve designs, and an equally strong bias toward value for money. The range is comprehensive, with more than 20 models across four separate ranges (and more to follow). The Soprano and Soprano LE integrated amplifiers represent the entry-point for the brand.

The Soprano is a small, elegant, and somewhat minimalist integrated amplifier with a solid-state preamp stage and a 12-watt valve power amplifier section that uses a quartet of EL84 valves. The EL84 is perhaps less well-known in

domestic audio circles compared to the more powerful EL34, but the little EL84 power-pentode is a popular choice in some guitar-playing circles, most notably for the 'chimey' sound of the Vox AC15 and the Marshall 'Model 1974' combo amps from the 1960s and are still highly prized today. The Soprano amp includes a built-in AKM-based DAC that supports PCM audio to 24-bit, 192kHz precision (on USB; 24/96 on optical and coaxial S/PDIF), and a MM phono stage; moving coil cartridges and DSD are not supported, although given the relative affordability of the Synthesis, it seems unlikely that it will be partnered in systems where the absence of a MC input ►



*“Every single piece of the Synthesis range is designed and built in Italy. Not ‘assembled’... built.”*



► or DSD replay will be a problem. Similarly, the lone line input might have been a stumbling block in the days of separate CD player, FM tuner, and tape recorder, but I suspect that most Soprano amps will be used with a record player and a laptop, and for the most part, that's how I used it.

The Limited Edition version of the Soprano is restricted to just 200 pieces. It differs from the standard version in terms of finish (the brushed aluminium or black front panel is replaced with a more refined titanium look), higher quality RCA input and loudspeaker output terminals, and a limited-edition plate with designer and owner Luigi Lorenzon's signature (and a certificate of ownership). More significantly, the power has been upped from 12W to 15W per channel.

The four EL84s sit to the left of the front panel, glowing away nicely, but kept from prying fingers by a horizontally-vened, black powder-coated protector/heatsink that runs the length of the amp (it's removed with two small Allen bolts, but

actually looks good in situ). Controls are limited to five small push-buttons (with accompanying LEDs) for channel selection, and a larger push-button for power, plus a remote eye and a larger power LED above the remote control. The whole unit is narrower than most modern audio and, combining that with the titanium front fascia of the LE, gives the Soprano a timeless and classy appearance, akin to classic Quad valve devices of the 1950s.

Affordable valve audio equipment is usually dismissed with a flourish by the cognoscenti for being either badge-engineered off-the-shelf Far Eastern products, or 'designed in Europe, built in a sweatshop' designs. Aside from the somewhat banal nature of this gripe (especially when it arrives typed on a laptop or smartphone designed in the US and built in Asia), it's simply not true here. Every single piece of the Synthesis range is designed and built in Italy. Not 'assembled'... built. Managing to build both up to a ►



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*“The amplifier goes ‘creamy’ and slightly ‘chimey’ (harmonically rich in the upper-mids and treble) rather than ‘edgy’ as it reaches its limits.”*



► standard and down to a price is difficult and admirable, but it's something that Synthesis does well, and the Soprano LE is the result. In fact, were it not for the very slightly clunky feel of the push-buttons, the light touch to the volume knob, and a remote control that is functional but lacks the 'blunt instrument' heft of the big-boys in the audio world, you'd put the Synthesis Soprano SE close to £3,500 or £4,000.

You'd make the same mistake after powering it up, too. OK, fifteen watts per channel is not what you'd call a 'powerhouse' and that places constraints on the listener in terms of loudspeaker efficiency. Any loudspeaker with a genuine sensitivity figure in the mid-90s or above is perfect, and those in the 88-95dB sensitivity range will be conditionally fine (depending on room size and ultimate listening levels). The Fyne Audio range (such as the F702 tested in last issue) would make a perfect combination, for example. Also, the amplifier goes 'creamy' and slightly 'chimey' (harmonically rich in the upper-mids and treble) rather than 'edgy' as it reaches its limits, so the occasional wig-out at volume is possible and actually quite enjoyable.

This is very much a 'grace' and 'space' amplifier; it also does 'pace' well (Lorenzon listens to a lot of rock music both in development and for his personal enjoyment, so he

wouldn't let a beautiful but rhythmically flabby sounding amplifier leave his test-bench), but what first attracts you to the Soprano LE are its rich, harmonic textures, fine detail retrieval, and exceptionally well-shaped soundstage; not too big, not too small.

Like many reviewers faced with a relatively low-powered integrated amplifier that doesn't cost as much as a moderately-successful racehorse, the listening session commenced with something of a soft start – 'Help Me' from *Court and Spark* by Joni Mitchell [Asylum] – as this is not a densely populated mix and Mitchell's voice is so well-known it's easy to determine whether the basic boxes are ticked. And they were ticked, and ticked well; so well, in fact, I played the track three times in a row, running from the USB input of the DAC, from the line input and from the MM phono stage, playing an early pressing. In all three cases, it sounded at once extremely natural, very rich and enjoyable, and consistent from source to source. I preferred the vinyl version the best and the ripped to computer version the least, but that itself is consistent with my findings elsewhere.

Having passed the recruit fitness test, it was time for basic training and review bootcamp. I marched out my usual range of recordings in order of difficulty. And the Soprano SE ►



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*“Playing ‘Chameleon’, the Soprano LE did exceptionally well, defining the attack and release of the bass notes perfectly.”*

► passed the test each and every time. OK, so this is not the first choice for anyone who thinks ‘dynamic range’ means ‘playing Mahler at window-shattering levels’, but what was surprising is just how much dynamic range and bottom end energy can be extracted from 15 watts when done properly. I have almost worn out the digits on Trentemøller’s ‘Chameleon’ [*The Last Resort*, Poker Flat] because of the intensity, speed, and depth of those stentorian notes mid-way through the track. Granted none of these sounds exist in nature, but they are a perfect indicator of bass depth and precision; if a sub-40Hz tone produced by a PCM-based synthesiser (that is as close to a square wave as it’s possible to make without destroying a loudspeaker) is perfectly rendered, it follows by inference (and confirmed by listening) that the same applies to tympani and deep organ pedal notes. And on playing ‘Chameleon’ the Soprano LE did exceptionally well, defining the attack and release of the bass notes perfectly, all the while not undermining the range of sounds in the mid and treble.

I’d hesitate to say this is the most neutral amplifier you can buy because the sound it makes is so sublime and satisfying. Any yet, neither does it go for the warm ‘comfort blanket’ sound of over-rich valve amplifiers. In short, it toes just the right balance. In fact, if the Soprano’s harmonically rich and elegant sound, plus its exceptional imaging, represent a deviation from strict neutrality, it’s a deviation that I’m sure many will happily go for. This also means the Soprano covers its tracks well, too, because you are enjoying the sound too much. In other words, it’s a lovely, sweet-sounding amplifier that makes you want to listen to music more... who really cares if that is not strictly accurate?

Perhaps the biggest plus-point for the Soprano LE sound is its ability to ‘scale’ well. Put something fey and small sounding its way [Feist’s ‘Mushaboom’, *Let It Die*, Polydor] and it will make it seem small, close, and intimate. Then flip over to a huge wall of sound [Muse’s ‘Invincible’, *Black Holes & Revelations*, Helium-3] and you can almost hear the stadium (or a haunted house ride full of sci-fi skyscrapers and evil pumpkin teddy bears, if you watch Muse’s crazy video). That ability to move from the tonsils of a breathy girl-with-guitar singer to a large orchestral piece, to post-modern progressive rock with a distinctly sci-fi feel is the mark of something really good, and the Soprano LE does it so very, very well.

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** hybrid integrated amplifier with built-in phono stage and DAC

**Analogue Inputs:** 1 Line, 1 Phono MM (47Kohm) 40dB gain

**Digital Inputs:** 1 S/PDIF coax, 1 S/PDIF optical, 1 USB “B” type Windows/Mac/iOs/Android compatible 24 Bit 192KHz

**Valve complement:** Matched pair EL84/6BQ5

**Power stage config.:** Push-Pull Ultra Linear

**Power output:** 15W RMS into 6Ω Class A

**Frequency response:** 20Hz to 20KHz–0.5dB

**Distortion:** 1% @ 1KHz max power (12W)

**Signal/Noise ratio:** >90dB A weighted

**Dimensions:** (WxDxH) : 310 × 295 × 150mm

**Weight:** 10kg

**Price:** £1,899

**Manufactured by:** Synthesis srl

**URL:** [synthesis.co.it](http://synthesis.co.it)

**Distributed by:** Audiofreaks

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

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

We haven’t compared the Soprano LE to the more commonplace non-LE version because the price differential between standard and LE is relatively slim, meaning there’s almost no point looking at the Soprano right now. Maybe when the 200 LE models are sold, we’ll revisit the Soprano in its standard guise; as it’s possible the great sound of the LE is built on the similarly great sounding foundation of the Soprano itself.

Regardless, the Synthesis Soprano SE is a lovely little amplifier in its own right, and those 200 owners will be getting something truly magical. If your speakers are sensitive souls, they will thank you for letting them work with so refined a Soprano. +





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# Wharfedale Linton 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary loudspeaker

by Chris Martens

**W**harfedale's first Linton loudspeaker was launched in 1965 and was, says the manufacturer, "bought in its millions right across the globe." Successive and successful models followed, culminating in the Linton 3XP, which was a three-way loudspeaker and one that marked the last Wharfedale offering to bear the Linton name. Or rather it was the last, until we come to the present day where Wharfedale has now created a Linton 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Limited Edition stand-mount model (which I will call the Linton 85 in this review). According to Peter Comeau, Wharfedale's Director of Acoustic design, the hallmarks of the original Linton design were "fine craftsmanship, natural sound quality, and affordability inside a beautifully proportioned loudspeaker," and—not surprisingly—these same characteristics also define the Linton 85.

The Linton 85s sell for \$1,198/pair US or £999/pair in the UK, and their matching floor stands sell for \$300/pair US or £100/pair in the UK. I would encourage anyone considering the Linton 85s to buy the matching stands. Any way you look at it, a per-pair price \$1,498 or £1,100 is not a lot of money for what turns out to be a *bona fide* audiophile-grade loudspeaker. So, consider the "affordability" box properly ticked.

Next, let's consider the "fine craftsmanship" and "beautiful proportions" factors. Let me state unequivocally that from the moment you first crack open their shipping cartons, absolutely everything about the Linton 85s suggests that they must surely cost more than they actually do—a lot more,







► in fact. I say this because the first thing you see when you open the boxes will be a clear vinyl, snap-closure pouch that contains the Linton 85 user guide (printed on parchment-coloured paper), a set of protective stick-on rubber feet, and a pair of white linen gloves to use when handling the speakers. Further down in the box, when you first glimpse the Linton 85s, you will spy cabinets covered in gorgeous real wood veneers (either Mahogany or Walnut), not the vinyl wraps that are so common on speakers in this price range.

Once you lift the Linton 85s from their cartons you realise another fine detail touch: all their surfaces (save for the front baffle) are covered in oil-finished wood veneers. This includes the tops, sides, bottoms, narrow front bezels, and even the rear panels. On said rear panels one finds two flared bass reflex ports, a pair of gold-plated speaker binding posts, and a brass escutcheon plate denoting the speakers' 85th Anniversary Limited Edition status, and bearing both the Wharfedale logo and a small red, white, and blue Union flag. From the front, the loudspeaker looks a bit like a trip back to yesteryear, in that these are relatively large, broad-shouldered monitors with tasteful, padded black grilles mounted flush to

the narrow bezel strips that frame the speaker's face. The design harks back to classic British monitors from the past—such as bygone models not only from Wharfedale, but also from Spendor and Harbeth. Let me come right out and say it: these speakers are a feast for the eyes so that their owners will, I think, feel an appropriate sense of pride of ownership beyond all proportion to the speakers' price.

The stands are no less lovely and they are sturdily and purposefully built. The top and bottom of the stands are satin black steel plates that exactly match the footprints of the loudspeakers, while square-section, satin black steel tubes serve as vertical risers. Then, on the underside of the top plate and the upperside of the bottom plate, there are thick mass-loading panels treated to wood-veneered surfaces to match the loudspeakers. Finally, there are nicely finished, threaded floor cones to complete the picture. These robust stands not only lift the Linton 85s to the perfect height for seated listeners, but also turn out to provide space for storing 50–60 vinyl albums beneath each speaker. Clever. Given all these factors, I think we can also consider the “fine craftsmanship” and “beautifully proportioned” boxes ticked. ►



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*“The Linton 85s caught the uplifting and meditative quantities of the middle and upper piano register lines.”*

► This, of course, brings us to the most important question of all: namely, do the Linton 85s deliver the promised element of “natural sound quality”?

Let's begin by looking at the internal ingredients responsible for delivering the Linton 85s' sound. The loudspeakers feature 200mm woven Kevlar-coned bass drivers with die cast chassis, 135mm woven Kevlar-coned midrange drivers that are housed in their own internal enclosures, and a 25mm textile soft-dome tweeter with a high flux ferrite magnet. Joining these drive units is a crossover that Peter Comeau describes as “near inaudible to the listener, resulting in a coherent, seamless musical output.” Last but not least, the cabinet panels are formed from a three-layer sandwich of MDF-Chipboard-MDF, a panel construction said to distribute and mitigate cabinet resonances.

I found the Linton 85s to have considerable audiophile appeal as they were, by turns, engaging, energising, seductive, and just plain fun to listen to. I mention those last several points because I have heard any number of high-end loudspeakers that, while impressive in an abstract, theoretical, and academic sense, somehow manage to miss the deep emotive impact that music should have. Happily, the Linton 85s are not among them; instead, they tread the fine line between being revealing yet also inviting and at times downright seductive. They also can boogie, when the occasion arises.

One of my favourite test tracks is ‘Flamingo Sky’ from Marilyn Mazur, Josephine Cronholm, and Krister Jonssen's album of the same name [ECM. 16/44.1]. The track is full of Mazur's delicate high percussion and insistent, syncopated low percussion, Cronholm's unorthodox vocals, plus Jonssen's angular yet almost jovial guitar lines. The Linton 85s proved revealing yet never edgy on the high percussion, delivered the deep ‘thwoomps’ demanded by the low percussion, captured the desirably quirky inflections of Cronholm's voice, and caught the energy, angularity, and underlying humour in Jonssen's guitar. What is more, the Wharfedales imaged beautifully and managed to convey a sense of front-to-back stage depth that is often elusive.

Another fine illustration of the Linton 85s' capabilities came when listening to ‘Chant’ from Nils Frahm's *Solo* [Erased Tapes, 16/44.1], which juxtaposes middle and upper range piano phrases against powerful and sonorous low-frequency keyboard passages. The Linton 85s caught the uplifting and meditative qualities of the middle and upper range piano lines, while nailing the sheer depth and gravitas of the low-frequency elements.

Finally, for those wondering if the Linton 85 can convey (or inspire) powerful emotions, try listening to them play ‘The Door’ from Hildur Gudnadóttir's soundtrack to the opening episode of the HBO mini-series *Chernobyl* [Deutsche Grammophon, MQA]. The track features eerie high percussion elements set against ominous, throbbing low-bass passages, with warning hints of midrange voices woven in and through the composition. The entire track brilliantly expresses the terrible threat posed by the as-yet-undiscovered

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Wharfedale Linton 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Limited Edition loudspeakers

**Type:** Three-way, bass reflex,  
stand-mount loudspeakers, sold in  
mirror-imaged left/right pairs

**Driver complement:** 200mm woven  
Kevlar cone bass, 135mm woven  
Kevlar cone midrange, and 25mm  
fabric soft-dome tweeter

**Crossover frequencies:** 630Hz, 2.4kHz

**Frequency response:** 40Hz–20kHz, ± 3dB

**Sensitivity:** 90dB (2.83v @ 1m)

**Impedance:** 6 Ohms nominal,  
3.5 Ohms minimum

**Dimensions (H×W×D):** 565 × 300 × 360mm  
(incl stands)

**Weight:** 18.4kg/each

**Price:** Speakers £999/\$1,198 US. Stands/  
Plinths: £100/\$300 US

**Manufactured by:** Wharfedale

**URL:** wharfedale.co.uk

**Tel:** +44(0)1480 452561

**US Distributor:** MoFi Distribution

**URL:** mofidistribution.com

**Tel:** +1 (312) 738-5025

nuclear reactor failure. Listening through the Linton 85s, ‘The Door’ becomes an unnerving experience that triggers a fear response.

Here are some tips. If the Linton 85s have too much bass for your room, try moving them well away from walls, which helps. Next, for best imaging use plenty of toe-in. Last, keep the grills on; the smoother the sound, enhance imaging, and minimise diffraction.

Wharfedale's Linton 85s are ideal speakers upon which to base truly affordable high-end audio systems. In fact, they are so good that for many listeners they will serve not only as a high-end audio starting point, but also as a wonderful end-destination. +





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# Acoustic Solid Wood Round MPX turntable

by Jason Kennedy



A visit to the High-End show in Munich, Germany feels like being assaulted by the sheer range and variety of turntables. What's more, between German brands in particular, there's lots of competition to produce the biggest, shiniest turntable of the show. One of those competitors is Acoustic Solid which has recently been made available in the UK by Elite Audio who submitted the Solid Wood Round MPX for our consideration. While the Solid Wood Round MPX is a large and shiny turntable in its own right, by the standards of Acoustic Solid's catalogue, it's restrained. The company has two ranges, Aluminium and Classic, with the latter offering metal platters on wooden plinths, of which the Wood Round MPX is but one of 12 models.

Acoustic Solid was founded in 1997 by brothers E. and Karl Wirth who did it the traditional way by starting in the basement and working up to a fully formed factory four years later. This factory is in Altdorf near Nuremberg – which is in the south of the country – in a facility that looks far too green and pleasant to contain CNC machines... but that's Germany for you. Acoustic Solid make a range of accessories for turntables, including some that come with this model. It also provides a booklet of 'Plattentips' or 'recommended records' and contains some well-known favourites alongside surprise choices like Lambchop's *Awcmonnoyoucmon* and The Shadows *Greatest Hits*. I want to meet the person who put together that list and browse their record collection; it's sure to be filled with the weird and the wonderful. ▶



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*“When the first box arrived, I was surprised to find that it contained only the arm and platter.”*

► Despite its high-end styling, the Acoustic Solid Wood Round MPX is a ready-to-roll record player package with everything set up out of the box; you don't even need to fit the counterweight. You do, however, need to fit the arm into the armboard, but that's a lot easier than adjusting a counterweight or getting the arm height right for VTA. Acoustic Solid provides a good quality digital downforce scale and cartridge alignment gauge in the box, presumably for future upgrades. The needle supplied is an Ortofon Quintet Red, a moving coil that retails for £249 and has an elliptical stylus and high output, it works with any load impedance above 70 Ohms and runs at a highish 2.1 to 2.5g downforce. I looked that info up and put it on the scales to discover that it had been set at the lower end of this scale already; I also checked VTA and found it to be spot-on correct. The WTB 370 tonearm is a Rega that's bolted to a collar, which slots into the armboard and sits at the right height when it's fully seated. There is a pinch bolt in the side of the board that allows height adjustment, albeit only upwards, I suspect that Acoustic Solid supply different height spacers between the armboard and the outrigger that connects it to the wooden plinth to accommodate smaller cartridges.

There's a school of thought that suggests once you get beyond a certain price point, the notion of a turnkey turntable becomes unworkable. The high-end, it seems, would rather pick and choose, roll their own, and set up vinyl to their own tastes than choose an off-the-shelf product. Except that, when you scratch the surface of this argument, it's clearly nonsense. Linn owners, for example, tend to choose from a very select portfolio of (typically Linn) arms and cartridges in assembling their masterpieces, and many other turntable brands – if pressed – will admit their turntables are often used with the same arm and cartridge combinations. Acoustic Solid is not the first – nor will it be the last – company to make it easy on its customers by supplying a complete package.

The main body of the turntable is as the name suggests wood and round albeit with three posts for the feet, it's also plywood rather than a lump of real tree, which must make for much easier manufacture. A small spike supports each leg, with the spikes having holes that allow easy height adjustment with one of the two supplied Allen keys. Spike receptors are provided to stop these pressure points from giving your equipment support a free round of acupuncture.

The whole thing comes in two sturdy boxes; when the first large box arrived, I was surprised to find that it contained only the arm and platter. The other half of the Wood Round MPX was still in the warehouse. That first box alone was large enough to accommodate most turntables. This filled me with some trepidation; the box for the turntable might be the size of a Aga. Fortunately, the two were manageable and I didn't achieve 'cardboard capacity'.

The platter is weighty enough as it's made from 60mm thick aluminium, and the plinth (which can accommodate two armboards) is not a lot lighter. The motor is a shiny free-standing column with a pulley that drives two long transparent belts around the perimeter of the platter. Given the elasticity of the belts and the weight of the platter startup is remarkably swift, so there must be plenty of torque on offer. It has a connection for a separate selector puck that sits wherever there is space, and this turntable requires more than its fair share of space.

The selector offers on/off, speed selection, and fine speed adjustment. Acoustic Solid provides a small strobe disc to check speed, but you need to have an 'authoritative' 50Hz light source to read it. The power unit is a small plastic brick that presumably contains a switched-mode supply and sits out of sight (and mind) behind the rack. A 5mm thick transparent acrylic mat covers the platter's suede leather upper surface, which itself provides a degree of damping between acrylic and aluminium. The bearing supporting this mass has a ceramic tip and a Teflon thrust pad, or in modern parlance TL:DR, it's a good, solid, high-end and high-mass turntable design, made for immediate out-the-box playing.

Running the output of the Ortofon into a Tom Evans Groove+ SRX phono stage with the impedance set to 100 Ohms I got a large scale (and even fulsome) image from the relatively high output of the MC. With Patricia Barber's 'Touch of Trash' [*Modern Cool*, Premonition], there is plenty of low-end, and the trumpet is brassy and forward, perhaps a little bit more than usual, but it's never precisely retiring on this track. The Wood Round MPX reflects the recording's luxurious nature and the absence of de-essing in its production; which is a bit odd but probably contributes to the vitality of the sound that Premonition gets on this album. You get a nice bluesy feel on 'Let It Rain' which contributes to the rich experience of turntable and album.

*“There was still plenty of space for the piano to get lyrical in; this turntable gives good melody, that’s for sure.”*

► The Acoustic Solid is not the most upbeat turntable around; it’s relaxed and the timing a little on the circumspect side, but this is often the case with high-mass platters. What they give in return is a sense of stability and ease that makes for effortless listening and – in the case of this Acoustic Solid – useful, large-scale imaging. Evidence of the turntable’s imaging properties comes from Conjure’s ‘Untitled II’ [*Music For The Texts Of Ishmael Reed*, American Clavé], where the sax solo was beautifully nuanced and the recording’s dynamic range well exploited. By comparison, streaming the same track on an Auralic Altair G1 resulted in a tighter, more precise rendition of events with a relatively dry balance that made the Wood Round MPX sound valve-like in its generous roundedness. KT Tunstall’s latest release *Acoustic Extravaganza* [Virgin] filled the room with a big blowsy soundstage in which the vocals are well defined; you can easily hear that they have been doubled up for extra depth. The bass line is also bold and chewy with plenty of impact.

I wondered whether the Ortofon might have been overloading the input on the Tom Evans phono stage, so I tried a Rega Aria where you can reduce the gain. This added some focus and reduced a sense of bloom in the sound which resulted in a more insightful experience, primarily where tonality was concerned. Lyrical intelligibility proved to be good with this phono stage and while ‘The Way Young Lovers Do’ [*Astral Weeks*, Van Morrison, Warner Bros] wasn’t as cogent as it might be, ‘Madame George’ was particularly moving. It extracted the energy from Binker and Moses’s superb sounding *Alive in the East* [Gearbox] but didn’t quite manage to give a real sense of the acoustic of the small venue. That did not undermine the intensity of the playing from a band at the height of its powers, however.

With Rymden’s *Reflections and Odyseys* [Jazzland] spinning at 45rpm (it sounded a bit sluggish at 33.3!) the double bass took the soundstage by storm with lots of texture and some lovely vibrato playing from Dan Berglund and deep bass notes from Henrik Schwarz’s synth. There was still plenty of space for the piano to get lyrical in; this turntable gives good melody, that’s for sure. Playing the next track ‘Bergen’ where the piano is stronger in the mix, made me think that the sound had improved since the beginning of the side, possibly a setup thing or maybe a ‘stylus warm-up situation’ even though this

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** High mass wood and aluminium turntable with arm and cartridge

**Rotational Speeds:** 33 1/3 RPM, 45 RPM

**Supported Tonearm Length(s):** 9-inch to 12-inch arms supported

**Tonearm:** WTB 370

**Cartridge:** Ortofon Quintet Red

**Drive Mechanism:** Synchronous motor with twin belt drive

**Speed Control:** Microprocessor controlled

**Platter Type:** 12-inch aluminium platter with leather and acrylic mats

**Platter Weight:** Not specified

**Bearing Type:** Ceramic ball and Teflon thrust pad

**Plinth Configuration:** Single piece solid plinth

**Dimensions (H×W×D):** 190 × 310 × 310mm plus motor and control switch

**Weight:** 17kg

**Price:** £5,950

**Manufacturer:** Acoustic Solid

**Tel:** +49 (0) 71 27 / 3 27 18

**URL:** [acoustic-solid.com](http://acoustic-solid.com)

**UK Distributor:** Elite Audio

**Tel:** 01334 570 666

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

wasn’t the first slab of vinyl to be played on the occasion. Perhaps I was just relaxing into the music itself!

The Acoustic Solid Wood Round MPX is a substantial and beautifully made German turntable at an attractive price. It is also the most straightforward to set up high-mass record player I’ve encountered, with no need to tweak and fettle, which is quite an achievement. It gives you the effortless warmth of vinyl with a good dose of bass to boot, which is hard to achieve with less substantial alternatives. It is also a statement turntable for less than bonkers money, and that I suspect will make it very popular. +





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\* Roon Ready with future software update.

# Totaldac d1-core digital converter/streamer

by Alan Sircom



Owning a Totaldac product is like an audiophile badge of honour. You fought valiantly in the Mainstream Wars and this is your reward. It will never be That Brand Everyone Knows because it's just too 'tweaky' for the poor schlubs who just buy the normal stuff, and yet it's not deliberately obscure. It's digital done right, and that filters out the brand-obsessed. To buy a Totaldac product means you are an individual; almost a feet-astirde, chin-in-the-wind Ayn Rand-style hero, only without all the neocon mansplaining.

To even describe the d1-core you own requires some discussion, which is best entirely side-stepped by saying "it's the right one for me!" You didn't get DSD (DoP) replay as just another acronym on the spec-sheet; you put it there. Streaming was your choice. Those BNCs were your decision, and the bass-boost circuit and the heavy aluminium front panel... yeah, you chose them, too.

The 'core' part of the name is one of the few things in which you, the end-user, don't get a say. In a world of off-the-shelf chips and full digital application notes boards used as end products, that 'core' is 'key'. The Totaldac core means a custom-designed R2R (or 'resistor ladder') DAC, sporting 100 Vishay bulk-foil resistors. These were chosen because of their 0.01% tolerance, although this makes for a very expensive DAC. This puts the Totaldac in with some very lofty company. Vincent Brient of Totaldac was one of the first and remains one of the leading-lights in the R2R world (others often build a R2R DAC out of chips, rather than the 'no-retreat, no-surrender' true resistor-ladder array approach), and his discrete components approach remains a world-class option. Others can fashion a DAC out of a clutch of DAC chips working together, lines of code on a FPGA, or even monolithic resistor-ladder chips, but only a DACmeister like Brient goes the whole hog and builds a fully discrete resistor-ladder DAC. ▶



*“The first thing that struck me about the d1-core was a sense of harmonic richness and musical structure.”*



► Our review sample came configured in the way apparently most d1-cores are configured today; the d1-core DAC with embedded streamer board, which brings UPnP, RoonReadiness, and Airplay to the basic spec. We also included a DSD replay option, and the USB GIGAFILTER cable to connect the streamer to the DAC itself. The entry-level d1-core essentially becomes three (well, four if you include the power supply) boxes in one; streamer, reclocker and DAC.

The use of the GIGAFILTER cable is the measure of the DAC itself; where most would connect the streamer card to DAC using an internal bus connection, Totaldac takes the streamers reclocked output as a USB datastream to be input to the d1-core's own USB input. The operating system for the streamer can be upgraded by microSD. The online manual for the streamer is comprehensive and will guide you through the set-up and basic operation, but it's pretty black-belt stuff by today's 'just use Google Home' standards.

It's worth the effort, though. The DAC sounds just fantastic. It's one of the most natural-sounding, almost vinyl-and-valve like converters you can get for the money and beyond. I ran the DAC both as a DAC and as a streamer in its own right, but primarily as a DAC for Naim Uniti Core and the

Innuos ZENmini Mk 3/LPSU music server combination tested in this issue. Both worked extremely well, although you could go a lot further in the server stakes and still the d1-core would not run out of road.

The first thing that struck me about the d1-core was a sense of harmonic richness and musical structure that analogue systems seem to do effortlessly, and digital often struggles to achieve. It also resolves a lot of spatial information, throwing out a soundstage that is big and muscular, but also deft and subtle.

If you think this is some rose-tinted fake-analogue sounding DAC, that's not the case at all. It just has that same 'you are there' realistic quality to the sound that is often associated with good vinyl. This comes across so well with something like 'Pale Blue Eyes' from the last Velvet Underground studio album [*The Velvet Underground*, MGM]; the purity and simplicity of the track, coupled with Lou Reed's plaintive, almost broken vocal, makes the song take on a degree of beauty it rarely displays except on vinyl.

Time and again, it was the naturalness of the recording that pulled you in. It's not a 'smoke and mirrors' trick, and the d1-core isn't smoothing every recording over; playing 'You ►



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*“The guy is there, physically in the room with you, with none of the artifices of mechanics of stereophonic sound in the way.”*

- Gotta Roll With It' from Oasis' massively compressed 1995 LP *What's The Story (Morning Glory)* [Creation], the d1-core did not hide the thin, loud, and brash recording style, but it also teased out as much music as its possible to extract from a wall of 'loud'.

It's on more well-balanced music where the d1-core really shines, however. Paul Galbraith's *Bach Sonatas & Partitas* [Delos] is a remarkable transcription for an eight-string guitar played like a plucked cello. They are both well-thought out and very well recorded, and through the d1-core it's total goosebumps time. The guy is there, physically in the room with you, with none of the artifices or mechanics of stereophonic sound in the way. Or rather, any such constraints are functions of the rest of the system rather than the DAC itself. It's just music, with all its texture, vivacity, and colour. This also shows the DAC to be extraordinarily detailed, exposing in the process the lie about this being a deliberately softened sounding DAC.

The d1-core's dynamic range isn't quite as remarkable as its naturalness, and this comes across as a lack of scale and solidity to Mahler's Eighth Symphony [Solti, Decca]. The staging is generally very good, reproducing the huge hall filled with musicians well, but the crescendo doesn't quite blow the doors off their hinges. Other DACs are more dynamic, although many trade range and scale for timbral honesty, and – while I'd like both – I'd go with the honest approach.

The best of all possible digital worlds in Totaldac-land is to bypass as much as possible upstream, and that means using the Totaldac's playing files from a thumb drive slotted into the converter itself. Think of this like inserting a CD to play an album, rather than trying to squeeze your whole CD collection into the same player at once. Yes, it's more fiddly and that flies in the face of the fingertip convenience of modern digital audio, but it works. This is the best sounding way of playing digital audio, in terms of stability of image, and just focus to the sound. Impractical, yet fabulous... it's the audiophile dream!

There's another feather in the Totaldac's cap. The d1-core is 'merely' the base model in a seven-strong range of converters, and fully upgradable too. Of course, moving up to the d1-twelve mk2 requires separate mono DAC boxes with a separate reclocker box, and a lot of power supply boxes. It also requires changing that single ladder array to six arrays per channel, and something close to €30,000... and

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** R2R discrete DAC with optional Streamer and DSD

**Analogue outputs:** 1 pair Stereo XLR (6Vrms) and 1 pair RCA (3Vrms)

**Digital inputs (DAC):** 2 x S/PDIF (1x RCA with optional BNC, 1x TOSlink), 1x AES/EBU, 1x USB Type B

**Digital Inputs (streamer):** RJ45 Ethernet, USB-2, microSD (for software updates)

**Digital outputs (streamer):** USB (for DAC input)

**D/A converter:** custom R2R converter

**Embedded reclocker:** 192kHz asynchronous XMOS USB circuit

**Dimensions (W×H×D):** DAC: 110 × 360 × 290 mm

**power supply:** 65 × 122 × 180mm

**Weight:** 4kg

**Colour options:** Black or Silver

**Price:**

**d1-core DAC:** €4,700

**DSD option:** €350

**Streamer board mounted in the DAC:** €1,000

**Manufactured by:** TotalDAC

**URL:** TotalDAC.net

**Tel:** +33 2 90 02 11 39 (European time zones only)

this would be even better with a dedicated d1-streamer and d1-player, cables, and so on. In reality, the next step up is a more manageable jump and brings twice the DAC and yet more flexibility.

A Totaldac is not high-maintenance, and it's not so ideosyncratic that it will only appeal to a really narrow band of audio enthusiasts, but neither is it a universally applicable recommendation. Normally that would be a bad thing, but here it's more of a 'many are called, few are chosen' design. Put it this way; if you think digital audio is an immediately-impressive sound in a very shiny box, look elsewhere, but if you are as uncompromising in your playback as Vincent Brient is in designing playback equipment, you might have just found your next DAC. +



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### ► The Colorado Symphony Orchestra

"The United States full-time professional orchestra, the Colorado Symphony embraces a tradition of musical excellence by presenting a diverse array of symphonic performances throughout the year. Originally established in 1989 as the successor to the Denver Symphony, the Colorado Symphony performs in Boettcher Concert Hall and throughout the Front Range, presenting outstanding education and outreach programs, as well as Masterworks, Pops, Holiday, Family, and the exciting new Inside the Score and Symphony on the Rocks series that have attracted a historic level of first-time concertgoers. By presenting music that is both timeless and inspiring, while taking risks with new musical collaborations and interactive concerts, the Colorado Symphony is attracting more diverse and younger audiences than ever before. The increasing popularity of Colorado Symphony concerts as well as a strong fund-raising base not only re-affirms the artistic excellence of the orchestra, but also reflects the Symphony's relevance to its Colorado community and deep-rooted enthusiasm for symphonic music felt by so many individuals across the region."

### ► From the producers point of view

The idea of this CD production is to use an entire microphone set-up of digital state-of-the-art microphones for a classical stereo orchestra recording. All microphones which we have used for this music production are regular products from the new digital product lines of Neumann, Berlin, (Solution-D) and Sennheiser (MKH digital).

The selection of these classical pieces of music are a variety of emotional streams from world famous composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Beethoven and many more. This series of recordings has been made during some rehearsal days of the Colorado Symphony. It is mainly made for technical demo purposes in terms of practical usability of our digital microphone technology in the field of recording and arts.

My special thanks go to the Colorado Symphony Orchestra consisting of such wonderful musicians; their Resident Conductor Scott O'Neill, to my entire team in the control room and in administration of this project - and to my friend and main mixing engineer, Mr. Mike Pappas, who was and is a highly professional help and technical advisor for all digital recordings.

I also want to thank my friends Tim Schwieger and my Grammy Award winning sound engineer Duke Markos for their contribution to my recording project in Denver, Colorado.



Wolfgang Fraissinet

### ► Neumann & Sennheiser: Two audio pioneers

#### About Neumann

Georg Neumann GmbH, with its headquarters in Berlin, Germany, is well known as one of the world's leading manufacturers of microphones. The company, which was established in 1920, has a long track record of world-leading product designs and has been recognized with a string of international awards for its technology innovations.

The basis for this success is an uncompromising quality-oriented approach to both product development and manufacture. This ensures that with their unparalleled sound quality, reliability and enduring value, Neumann microphones represent an investment which often outlasts several generations of audio engineers.

In recent years, Neumann, Berlin has been working intensively on the development of the world's first digital microphone system. This has involved basic research regarding a completely new technology. The so called Solution-D family includes a series of large and small-diaphragm microphones. Many of these microphones have been used for this recording.

Since 2010, Neumann offers its expertise in electro-acoustic transducer technologies to the studio monitoring market, and will provide optimum solutions to its customers in the areas of TV and radio broadcasting, recording, and audio production.

Neumann has manufacturing facilities in Germany (microphones) and Ireland (audio monitors), and is represented in most countries worldwide by Sennheiser subsidiaries, as well as by long-term trading partners. Georg Neumann GmbH is a Sennheiser Group company.

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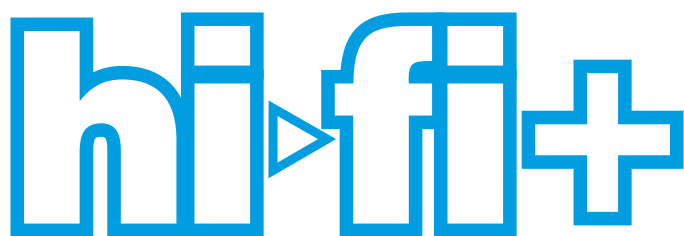
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# Grand Prix Audio Monza equipment support system

by Alan Sircom



**W**hen it comes to product names, some are more fanciful than others, but in the case of Grand Prix Audio's Monza equipment support system, it's easy to make the connection. With each level employing 16 bolts (each using one of three different Allen bolt sizes, while eight also sport a self-locking 3/8th inch hex nut), a carbon-fibre base, a bamboo platform, a quartet of one of several different sets of weight-matched viscoelastic interfaces between the two, with Apex feet beneath the whole stand (and ideally beneath the products that rest on each level), the precision engineered parts, high-tech materials, and tuning options, building it makes you feel like a member of a pit crew.

Fortunately, putting the Monza together does not challenge your Ikea-fu, and all that high-tech precision means that everything goes together with ease. One point to note, however, is that the outriggers for the bottom shelf (or the dedicated amplifier platform) are materially different to those

of the upper shelves, and this can cause some confusion and potentially inverted platforms for the hard of thinking. It's also worth noting that you should build up the platforms 'finger tight' until you have all the support levels in place, then start locking the Monza down. Once you get the knack, though, you whizz through the build-up like a boss, and there is a sense of achievement to building the Monza from scratch that you don't get from building a bookshelf made from cheap MDF, even if it has a name like Bøjåflürkøne.

This construction reflects the fact that each 'sub-system' is designed to cascade spurious energy, ensuring the components on Monza are effectively multiply decoupled from their environment (and each other). It's an approach successfully used in the company's flagship Silverstone support system, but here in a less elaborate form. Where the Silverstone's polymer damped, stainless-steel uprights have an extruded groove allowing infinite height adjustment of the individual suspension units from which each level hangs, the



*“The Monza not only brings a wider range of listening levels to the mix, however; your system just hangs together better.”*

- Monza uses a ladder of spaced bushes that runs the length of each upright and to which the outriggers are bolted. This simpler system might reduce the overall degree of isolation and decoupling relative to the Silverstone, but the Monza is still one of the most decoupled environments in the home. You can also add extra bays to the rack, with extension kits of two legs plus the necessary support levels.

Let's look at this systematically, from the ground up. Monza sits on four Apex or Apex XL couplers, each with a silicon-nitride ceramic ball sitting in a detent at its tip. That effectively decouples the Monza from the world beneath it. The carbon-fibre sub-frames are attached to the four, damped aluminium uprights by metal outriggers. The bamboo shelves (nature's own, natural 'carbon fibre') are supported on load-matched viscoelastic dampers that create a critically damped, constrained-layer interface between the shelf and its supporting frame.

Add in a set of Apex footers under each product and you create an extremely efficient exit path and multi-layer dissipation system to deal with both internal and external energy. Put Apex footers and levellers under your loudspeakers, and you have pretty much isolated the system from structural interference, unless you live on an active fault line in a war zone.

The strange thing is we don't realise just how significant the impact of the world outside the system is on good audio until we take a lot of that world away. This is what Monza does and does so well, just like the company's excellent Apex footers, only more so. What they all do is let the components be themselves, unalloyed and unvarnished by their surroundings. This has an interesting effect because it delineates 'good audio' from simply 'audio'. Many components are – consciously or otherwise – designed with an expectation of being influenced by their surroundings, and effectively removing that source of influence leaves a product that falls by the wayside in one of two ways; being too 'peaky' or – paradoxically – too bland. In fairness, most of the better grade of products of the sort that would be used with a rack of the Monza's gravitas make the cut, and for many more that 'absence of influence' is more benign than 'throw out my system and start again', but the absolute honesty of the Monza demands to be well met by audio electronics.

The most surprising thing about a truly honest equipment support system is just how much bass gets lost somewhere in other racks. The bass takes on a greater sense of 'torsional strength' irrespective of the size of the loudspeakers; there is greater definition, yes, but also greater energy, drive, and precision. However, Monza is not artificially tuned to make a more up-beat sound – that's not the job of a rack, after all.

This also gives another great advantage to the sound quality: headroom. Your system goes louder with less distortion. However, your system also hangs together better if you play it at post-whisper quiet levels. The Monza not only brings a wider range of listening levels to the mix, however; your system just hangs together better, and that holds regardless of playback volume.

The rest of the sound grows out of that powerful foundation but does so honestly and with excellent integrity and coherence. You notice this when turning back to a 'mere' support system, as the sound becomes more of a disjointed 'bass-midrange-treble'. You also notice it with vocals; you become awed by Joyce DiDonato's vocal range and diction as a cohesive whole, for example.

If you have reached that point in audio maturity where you don't want a 'tuneful' rack or a 'dead' sounding platform, but just want to hear what all those fine pieces of audio equipment you already own actually do for a living, then the Grand Prix Audio Monza tells it like it is. +

## PRICES AND CONTACT DETAILS

### Monza Equipment Support System

Monza Amp Stand including APEX XL: £5675

Monza four Shelf 42" tall rack including APEX XL, levellers and couplers: £20,500

Manufactured by: Grand Prix Audio

URL: [grandprixaudio.com](http://grandprixaudio.com)

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# Esprit Alpha power and Beta interconnect and loudspeaker cables

by Alan Sircom

**F**rench cable expert and electro-mechanics engineer Richard Cesari founded Esprit over 20 years ago. Esprit might not be the first name to roll off the tongue in terms of audio hookups, but perhaps it should be. Why? Because the Esprit Beta interconnect and loudspeaker cables, and the Alpha power cords all represent extraordinary value for money. They are basically high-end cables that forgot to get a bit too 'spendy'. Everything about them, from the box they come in, to the braided shield, to the quality of the connectors, all says 'money', and the performance they elicit isn't exactly cheap-sounding either.

OK, so the Alpha and Beta ranges are just the jumping off point; there are six more lines of ever more esoteric and expensive cables in the Esprit line-up. The same 1.2m interconnect, 3m of speaker cable, and 1.5m power cords from the company's top 'laboratory standard' Eureka range will set you back €7,200, €10,200, and €5,300 respectively. OK, by upper echelon cable standards, these are practically freebies, but for those of us who aren't deposed African dictators that's still a significant investment in cable.

Back to Alpha and Beta. The cables use 720 strand high-grade copper conductors (in the Beta interconnects)

and high-grade 20-micron silver-plated copper conductors and terminators in the Beta speaker cables and Alpha power cords (there is no mix and match mystery here; we wanted to listen to the Beta range, but at this time there is no power cord in the range, so the Alpha power cord stepped up). This is not only a good starting place for financial reasons, but also many of the company's core concepts start at this point, and the materials science stays constant throughout. There's no shields of unicorn hair or magic metals throughout the range; just good, honest PVC, silicone, air, copper, and silver.

Both ranges have worked on the application of shielding carefully. The Alpha power cord uses a unique directional shield, while the Beta interconnects and power cords rely on a partial shield (integral in the case of the Beta speaker cable). Arguably the most interesting of these is the Alpha interconnect cable. Although an electrically symmetrical design, the Alpha cable uses an asymmetric dielectric (PVC on one conductor, silicone on the other), with an air layer insulator. The asymmetry is seen in a cross-section of the cable, rather than an asymmetry along the cable's length.

For a relatively inexpensive cable, Esprit takes an age to run in. It sounds OK from the get-go, but unfolds inexorably over the days and weeks. A burn-in device (such as the Blue Horizons model we use) helps greatly, and the company doesn't break out in a case of hives if you use one to speed the conditioning.

Cesari takes a refreshing view on cables, for a cable maker. They intrinsically undermine the sound, but the better the cable, the less damage they do to the overall performance. It might not be the kind of 'sell' that wins over people looking for their next audio panacea, but when you think on it, it's axiomatic. A cable cannot (make that 'should not') add to the performance, only detract from it, and those that delicately push the sound like a tone control are compromising the sound on a basic level. Maybe it's better to passively do less harm than actively do more?







So perhaps it shouldn't have been a surprise that this cable didn't go for the 'audio fireworks' that typify so many lower and even middle-range cables. Instead the Esprit line make a very lithe sound leading from the midrange out in the manner of so many good audio components. This means there is a sublime sense of vocal articulation but without the forwardness or leading-edge impressiveness that often plagues cable designs. This is a more sophisticated and mature approach than you often hear at this level.

A fine example of how this midrange-first approach benefits the sound of your system is playing something where the vocals are hard for us to process, such as 'The Murder Mystery' on The Velvet Underground album [MGM]. This late 1960s avant-garde work has two voices saying different things in different channels. The more you hear, the better the performance, and the Esprit cables allow you to listen into the sound more accurately, but not in a forced way.

Aside from its tonal balance, the Esprit all worked together to make a soundstage that was as precise as it was solid. The image had some real three-dimensionality to it, with a stage that runs deeper than wider, but mercifully free of the mellifluous, 'fluffy', and ill-defined soundstage that is immediately impressive due to its width.

Across all three cables, what little sins they commit are those of omission rather than commission, and this is how it should be. A cable that introduces a slight 'zing' to the leading edges or a mild forward tilt to the upper registers leaves that mark on every audio component it touches. A cable that

retains a sense of good tonal balance and honesty throughout except where it runs out of road leaves no footprint.

Where the Esprit Alpha and Beta begin to run out of road are at the extremes. Gut-churning bass, cut-glass treble, and the sort of dynamic range that has people on the edge of their seats is not high on the Esprit agenda. It's not that the cables are relaxed or laid-back sounding, but they create a midrange so nice, you might see a cable that plays to the extremes as showy and over-impressive after logging some hours with Esprit cables.

Esprit's Alpha and Beta are not going to break the habit of a cable high-end aficionado, but instead may mint a few aficionados. The elegant midrange they produce is enticing, makes you listen to music more, and is full of detail and insight. It's not a cable to surprise you, just gently show you how much more enjoyment you can extract from your recordings. +

## PRICE AND CONTACT DETAILS

Esprit Beta interconnect: €290/1.2m pair

Esprit Beta loudspeaker cable: €580/3m pair

Esprit Alpha power cord: €180/1.5m (Schuko)

Manufactured by: Esprit

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# MEET YOUR MAKER

## Warwick Acoustics

by Alan Sircom



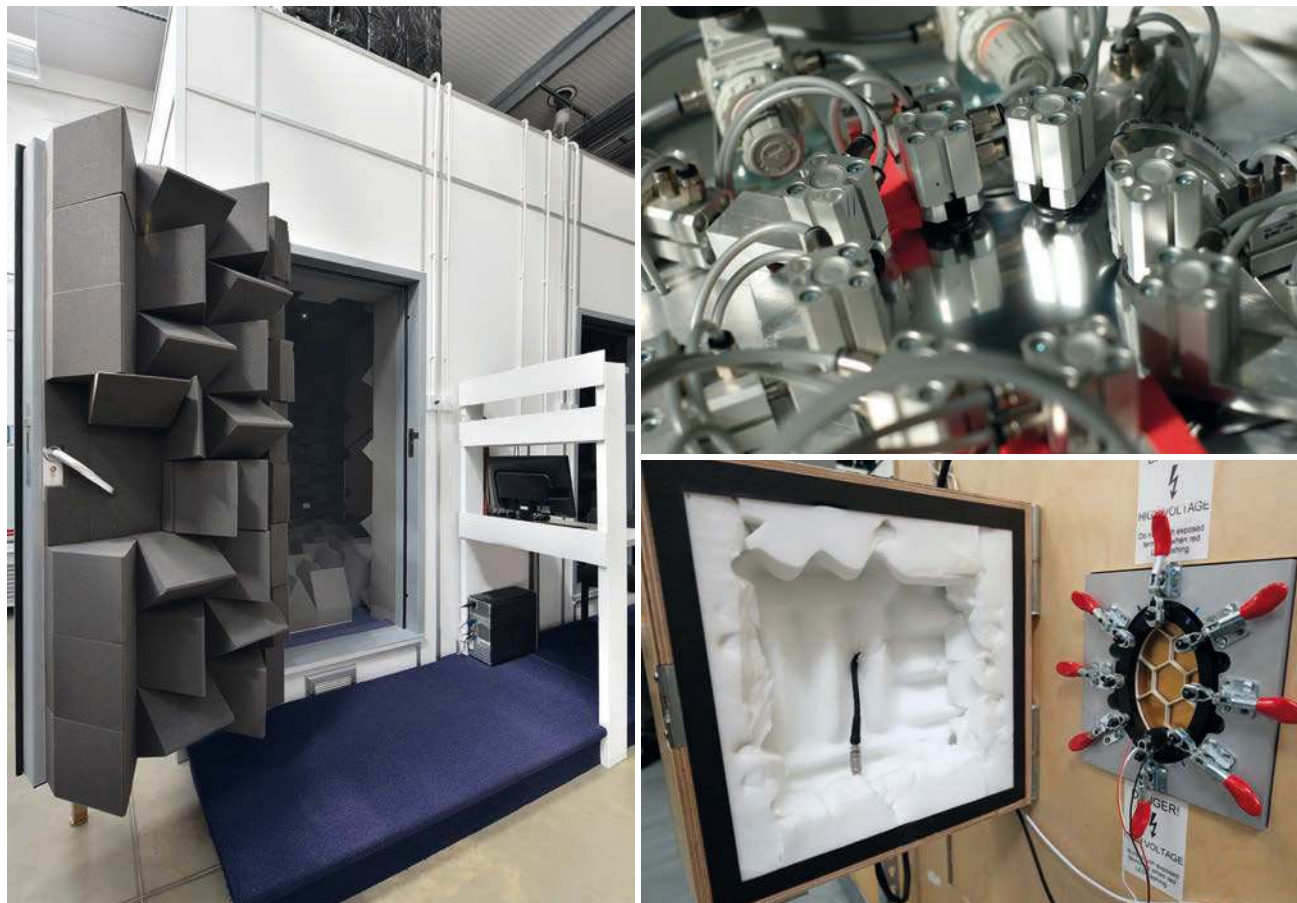
**W**arwick Acoustics is based at MIRA near Nuneaton, in Warwickshire, England. Before MIRA became one of the most important automotive test facilities in the world, it was a short-lived WWII base called RAF Lindley. This is relevant because it's easier for a 'civvy' to get into a military airbase than it is to try to get permission to visit any company in the MIRA Technology Park Enterprise Zone (especially if you want to take photographs) because there is so much secret-sauce car stuff going on there.

Warwick Acoustics having offices, design, and manufacturing facilities in MIRA invites some interesting questions in their own right. You don't just rent space on MIRA's tech park; you have to be vetted and have relevance to the automotive industry. And Warwick is ostensibly a manufacturer of electrostatic headphones. What's the connection?

The key word in that last paragraph is 'ostensibly'. The development that has gone into those unique electrostatic drive units is a very scalable thing, and a flat transducer lends itself to the limited space available in the passenger

compartment of a modern car. This means that rather than insert conventional cone-and-dome dynamic drivers in spaces where there is enough room to house them (which is why most in-car systems seem determined to play music to the driver's knees), thin, flat, and flexible drive units can be placed almost anywhere in that passenger compartment, and that interests the automotive world. ▶





► If it's understandable why the automotive industry wants Warwick, why does Warwick want the automotive industry? According to Martin Roberts, MD of Warwick Acoustics, they have a lot in common. "The space between the headphone and your ear is a very controlled environment and space, and a car is an incredibly controlled environment too. I mean, apart from road noise, everything in there is a given. You know what you're dealing with from the outset."

That automotive connection is an ongoing project for the near future (the MIRA cloak of secrecy means if I actually knew the car marques involved or even interested in this project, ninja death squads would be dispatched), but the known projects for Warwick remain the Sonoma M1 and the Aperio, both of which have been very favourably reviewed in *Hi-Fi+*. We were given

exclusive access to the manufacturing process from start to finish, and it goes a long way in explaining just how hand-built these units are.

To take you through the process we followed a drive unit through its creation. The driver's special double laminate is prepared for bonding using a plasma chamber; it's a bit like sandblasting on an atomic scale. You get the kind of bond that you could never achieve with simple adhesives, by drastically increasing surface energy. This increases the bond strength by many times over.

"The plasma chamber is one of the biggest improvements we've made in the last couple of years to our processes," said Martin. "We brought the process in house in the last seven months, and it's given us another level of control over the process."

The bonds made by the plasma chamber have been tested over time. Martin added, "You check the results of the process months later to see if the effects have worn off, and when they didn't, you can quickly imagine the quality improvements possible."

The materials count is impressive. "That's ninety-nine point ninety nine percent pure copper, that's then gold plated too."

The spacer layer is first placed in the laser cutter, and then on to the tensile jig for bonding (technical term, meaning 'glued') to the diaphragm. ►

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Then comes one of the clever bits. “You know when you pull a rubber band how you get to a point where it starts to pull and not return to its original shape,” says Martin, adding “All polymer materials are to an extent like that. What we’ve recently started doing with the film for the diaphragm is using the tensile jig to go through a cycle to pull/relax, pull/relax to get rid of some of the stretch, almost a form of work hardening, which results in a more stable film.”

The tension jig is the metal spider-like device seen in the photographs. The diaphragm is locked down and placed under tension (those spider legs help pull the diaphragm taut, and then the machine systematically tightens and loosens).

Before bonding to the spacer and film, the final layer, called stators are thoroughly cleaned with isopropyl alcohol and in an ultrasonic cleaner filled with “various other fun chemicals.” As a result, everyone has really clean glasses at Warwick!

Finally, each driver is carefully tested in a specially built chamber. The driver slots into a jig, which sits at the mouth of that measurement chamber for complete consistency. These plots are used to create matched pairs of transducers which are then tested again as a final headset on “Bob” the mannikin. At present, this is batch building in very low numbers. It’s one stage up from prototyping. But the process is designed to be scaled up, and part of the custom-making process is about working up ways to increase production by as much as a hundredfold.

This is very much a research and development lab, as well as a manufacturing facility. The development facility has its own anechoic chamber although not a huge one, but nevertheless this anechoic chamber didn’t come cheap and shows the level of commitment to audio design and development Warwick Acoustics is prepared to expend.

Like any ongoing project still in its earliest years, improvements happen on a regular basis as the technology becomes more mature. In Warwick Acoustics’ case, this has meant marked improvements in reject rates during the manufacturing process. This is entirely understandable; what begins as a laboratory experiment held together with electrical tape and crocodile clips quickly becomes a more practical proposition, and as the technology and the technologists who develop it learn better ways of making the transducer, so it becomes less likely to be rejected. For example, a small change in the layout of the honeycomb-like surface over the HPEL (High-Precision Electrostatic Laminate) electrostatic membrane almost halved the number of rejects

Ultimately, the limited-run, hand-built nature of the Warwick Acoustics transducer is not sustainable in the automotive industry, and it will need to be successfully production-engineered to be produced in greater numbers. But they have the expertise in house to make that jump when the time is right. +



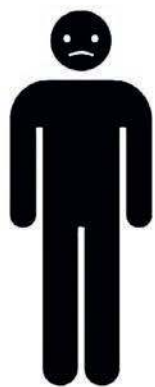
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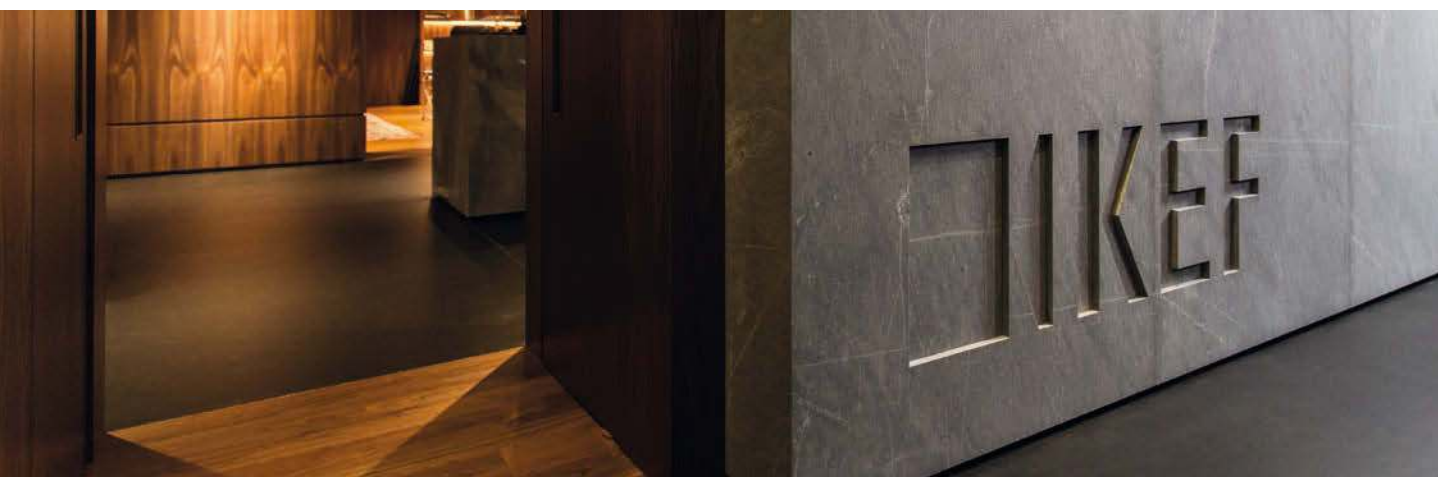
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MEET YOUR DEALER

# KEF Music Gallery, Hong Kong

by Alan Sircom



Continuing our short diversion into out-of-the-ordinary audio salons (and, in process continuing – and concluding – our short investigation into the state of the audio art in Hong Kong), this month we look at KEF's prestigious Music Gallery.

Situated on Duddell Street in the heart of the Central district of Hong Kong Island (which is a little like saying “Fifth Avenue”, “New Bond Street”, or “Avenue des Champs-Élysées”), the KEF Music Gallery isn't a store-front in the conventional sense; it's hidden away on the 10th floor of a retail block. While that sounds a little out of the way for most stores, this is Hong Kong and space is at a premium; it's an invite-only store and most visitors come to the gallery by word of mouth or active investigation on the part of the customer.

In a very real way, however, this is not a store about directly selling KEF products (although that happens a lot); this is more a store about selling the concept of KEF, cementing the brand as a part of a wider high-end lifestyle. Which is why, although you are met by products like the LSX on display as you walk through the door, there are no desks for salespeople to sit behind – instead, there's something more like a breakfast bar. Or, in fact, a bar – like many Asian high-end retailers, a glass of whisky is often considered a friendly introduction. What's more, you are invited in a remarkably laid-back manner, to explore the Music Gallery at your leisure.

The phrase ‘music gallery’ could sound pretentious in most cases; this is an audio store, not an art gallery, after all. Except it kind of *is* an art gallery. Masterpieces by renowned artists from around the world adorn the various connected areas. Exhibits include paintings by Hong Kong ink painter Nancy Chu Woo and renowned Japanese visual artist Yayoi Kusama. The gallery also features pieces by British contemporary installation artist Julian Opie and Australian photographer Luke Shadbolt, who finds particular inspiration in the ocean. In a world where expensive audio equipment is too often demonstrated in a shabby, dated room, it's a refreshing change to find what is hanging on the walls is more exclusive and expensive than the equipment playing.

With expensive art on the walls, expensive products playing, in one of the most expensive retail locations on the planet, it's perhaps little wonder that the space itself is equally well designed. It sounds like hyperbole, but the KEF Music Gallery genuinely elevates the showroom concept to another dimension. The space itself exudes an atmosphere reminiscent of a high-end apartment or an exclusive private club, and guests are invited to leave the real world outside and immerse themselves in music and art. The interior of the KEF Music Gallery is designed by Conran and Partners in England, and the main listening space is a huge room by Hong Kong standards, with its own library and art collection... as well as a kick-ass hi-fi and home cinema system. ▶



MEET YOUR DEALER / KEF MUSIC GALLERY, HONG KONG





*“You don’t notice the acoustic treatment until you realise the background noise of one of the loudest cities on the planet has dropped away.”*

► This area of the Music Gallery is called ‘The Collector’s Lounge’, where guests may enjoy ‘Dark Waves’, a sensory experience by digital artist collaborative teamLab, with stunning, immersive 3D effects and high-resolution music. This work has been commissioned specifically for the Music Gallery. The room itself has been incredibly carefully and sensitively acoustically treated. You don’t notice the acoustic treatment until you slowly realise the background noise of one of the loudest cities on the planet has dropped away, that you feel no strain in your voice as you speak to others and have no problems hearing their every nuance as they speak. When music or video footage is played, the same applies. The latest versions of the Muon are substantial loudspeakers with potentially prodigious amounts of bass that could overdrive a very live room, but are also accurate and so can sound almost flat in an over-damped room. In The Collector’s Lounge, they sound just about perfect!

Other sections of the Music Gallery are given over to more real-world scenarios, all featuring KEF speakers in systems commensurate with their prices. Given the commonly-played link at shows between first Arcam and now Hegel and KEF, you might be mistaken for presuming these brands dominated the equipment used to showcase speakers at the Music Gallery, but in reality several ranges of products are used, including Marantz, Luxman, Chord Electronics, and even a VPI turntable. Naturally, the KEF products in the Music Gallery are on display as if exhibits in an art exhibition, but these are exhibits that are frequently demonstrated.

Most importantly, KEF has made this showcase a place where sales are a vital part of the Music Gallery’s rationale, but more in terms of fostering a buying attitude in the visitors than a directly causal link. People leave the Music Gallery with an appreciation of what KEF is, and they want in... even if they then buy KEF loudspeakers from their traditional audio dealer. In this respect, the KEF Music Gallery shares much with retail concepts like the Apple Store – although people buy from the store directly, it’s as much about planting Apple seeds for future purchases as it is immediate purchases. Of course, a space that is as much about long-term appreciation for a brand rather than ‘money in the till’ requires a substantial financial commitment from the brand itself, which is not something most companies can cope with. KEF can.

The concept is clearly one that has a lot going for it, because KEF is building a second Music Gallery in America soon. A third has been suggested in Europe, but that’s probably some way off. The likelihood is as more spring up, so they may move from essentially ‘Design Museum and Art Gallery, with Loudspeakers’ to ‘Boutique audio retail environment, with Design Museum and Art Gallery.’ Even KEF’s pockets are not infinitely deep. And in that sense, the KEF Music Gallery will compete with manufacturer-run boutique galleries such as the Harman store on Madison Ave, in Manhattan.

So why is this part of the future of audio retail? As the retail environment becomes impossibly expensive, it’s possible that the only way an audio salon will continue to remain visible to more than just the cognoscenti is if it gets trade from these higher-profile, manufacturer-run stores. To extend that example of the Apple Store, they create a satellite environment of Apple Resellers who specialise in specific branches of Apple-ness that the t-shirted Genius Bar types in an Apple Store simply cannot attain. For example, to assess the relative benefits of Adobe Lightroom and Capture One requires a discussion with an expert in Apple’s photo-editing software, rather than a generalist. That specialist would struggle to survive without Apple Stores creating a market upon which they as specialist Apple Resellers can capitalise. The same could easily apply to audio retailers who can no longer trade in very visible retail environments, but use the manufacturer’s store as an introduction agency.

I suspect this ‘introduction agency’ model would only work as part of a broad-spectrum way of attracting and keeping new clients for retailers. To survive going into the third decade of the 21st Century as a specialist retailer in any sector is not easy, but to do so in a sector of the market that relies on demonstrations needs some form of introduction for a wider audience if it is to survive. While KEF Music Gallery is not a panacea for audio retail, it may yet be important.

In truth, I would have liked to visit a wider selection of stores during my short sojourn in Hong Kong, but the ongoing protests precluded that. The combination of heightened security and the possibility of being stranded in the midst of a protest was slightly too great to risk. On the other hand, there are far worse places to be stranded than in Hong Kong.... +

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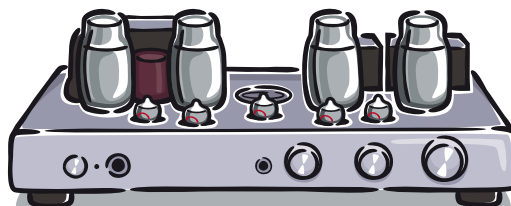
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## Angelina

by Sean Hannam

**F**rom the way she sings the blues, you'd swear that Angelina hailed from the Deep South, but, surprisingly, she grew up on the Isle of Wight – the deep south of England.

She moved there in the late 1970s with her parents, when she was nine – Angelina is now 53 – and settled in the seaside town of Ryde, where she still lives.

I met her there, in a hotel bar, not far from the beach, to talk about her latest album, *Last Cigarette*.

Written in the aftermath of a failed relationship, it's raw, visceral, menacing, and angry – a dense and psychedelic, garage-rock blues record that's a lethal cocktail of dirt, dust, diesel, and Louisiana swamp juice.

Its scorching opener, 'Throw Petrol At The Sun', has an oily, clanking rhythm and manic, trippy flute. The first single, 'Devil's Wishing Well', is built on a funky, Beck-like groove. 'See-Through Dress' is a smouldering, late-night tale of getting revenge on a soon-to-be ex-lover – she takes his last cigarette and stubs it out on the dress he bought her. Finally, the riotous, rock 'n' roll gospel-soul of 'God Bless The Road' was inspired by playing a gig in a Berlin biker bar, with bonfires burning outside.

Recorded on the Isle of Wight last summer, in production duo Boe Weaver's Studio Humbug – an old water tower on the outskirts of Queen Victoria's Osborne House estate – the album sees her reunited with Rupert Brown (drums, percussion, autoharp, and backing vocals), who worked on her debut album, 2016's folky and rootsy *Vagabond Saint*. But this time around she recruited ace electric and slide guitarist Barrie Cadogan (Little Barrie, Primal Scream, Edwyn Collins), and The James Hunter Six's Jason Wilson on double bass.

Session musicians Joe Glossop (keys) and Gary Plumley (flute) were also along for the ride, as were five singers from the People's Choir of St Louis.

"I love the sound and the truth of those early blues artists, like Blind Willie Johnson, Ma Rainey, and Charley Patton, but it wasn't a conscious design to make a blues record – that was just what came out naturally," she says.

"Studio Humbug is one of those places where you feel at home – the air is pungent with creativity, possibility, and opportunity. I didn't want the album to finish, and I didn't ever want to go home. It happened so effortlessly – it was telepathic and intuitive. It was voodoo..."

**SH: *Last Cigarette* is a much harder record than your debut...**

**A:** Yes, it's tougher and has more attitude – I have fireballs coming out of my mouth!

That was brought on by a change in my life and a ripple effect from it. *Last Cigarette* was also produced by a different team, which brought out another personality in the songs – it's a fierce production. That, and a new band set-up, with Barrie Cadogan on guitar, for instance. The sound developed in the studio.

I've known Rupert Brown for years and have regularly collaborated with him – he's a wizard. He introduced me and my songs to the musicians – he had recorded with them before. They blew me away when they said yes.

Barrie heard a rough demo of 'Devil's Wishing Well', with Rupert on drums and me on acoustic guitar, barking out the lyrics. He liked the vibe of that, and he turned up at the studio for five hours and nailed 11 tracks! I was sitting on the sofa next to him, drinking tea and eating banana cake, recording while he plugged into the desk. He took the record somewhere else.

Jason Wilson immediately wanted to get involved, Joe Glossop joined on keys and Gary Plumley, who plays saxophone typically, was asked to turn up with only a flute. It all came together – we jammed and then recorded. I guess we made the entire album in around eight days – the studio had to fit me around other artists.

*"Most of the songs were written in one draft at my kitchen table – simple, thumping blues chords. My voice led the way, and I let it go where I wanted"*



**It's an angry record – 'Throw Petrol At The Sun' speaks for itself, while on 'See-Through Dress', you're taking your lover's last cigarette and stubbing it out on the dress he bought you. Was it a cathartic experience writing and recording these songs? Did you exorcise some demons?**

A lot of the lyrics I penned were a heart-torn reaction to a relationship breakup – it was a slow death, but a realistic chapter.

It's that moment when you take off the rose-tinted spectacles and stamp on them. The day is dark and damp, and your knuckles are white – it's get-out time. That image of throwing a hand grenade and walking away or taking his last cigarette and stubbing it out on the dress is powerful.

I wrote day and night as a detox. I changed my diet, and I painted my house a different colour. Yes – I've exorcised demons. It's been a very liberating and healing experience.

Translating that chapter of my life into song has been overwhelming and recording with such class and seasoned musicians has been a triumph. I'd go as far as to say that I've turned a negative into a double positive.

#### **How do you approach songwriting? What's the process?**

I'm a disciplined songwriter – I set myself tasks and wagers all the time. I write regularly and, over the year, I've had about 100 ideas. I don't get precious about them – a lot are just sketchbook ideas. It is essential for me to get my creativity pumping regularly and to keep the pen flowing. I then audition the songs later.

I generally write with my guitar – the music spurs on the words – and I use a variety of approaches and starting points, like looking at paintings and old photographs or collecting phrases. It's sometimes intense and edgy, and I have to work quickly, just in case the character I am capturing and studying leaves the page.

I often write the bulk of my lyrics for a song in one sitting. ▶



JULIEN BOURGEOIS

► **How and where did you write the new album? Was it all composed in the studio?**

I wrote most of the songs for *Last Cigarette* in one draft at my kitchen table – simple, thumping blues chords. My voice led the way, and I let it go where I wanted.

My next-door neighbour is an old holiday camp bandleader – a drummer. I walk round to his place and play my rough songs to him. He gets his drumsticks out and taps a beat on a newspaper. That's how they start.

I wanted the lyrics to boil with hot-blooded emotion and with heartache, burnout, and punches. I was thinking about booze and overflowing ashtrays, lonely hollers, dark clouds, prayers and sweat, mountain air and survival.

**Are you a dark person?**

Ha! I always try and walk on the sunny side of the street, but I do have a habit of finding the shadows.

**There's recurring imagery on the album – trains, roads, petrol, and diesel. Are you a born traveller, or a restless soul?**

I've spent years listening to journey songs – songs about moving on to better places and days. I am restless when I'm unhappy like we all are. With songwriting and art, you can paint a world to live and escape into. I get inspiration from so many places and things, but this latest album is about the heart and standing up and valuing yourself.

**When you were growing up, was music a big part of your childhood?**

I was named after the Bob Dylan song 'Farewell Angelina'. When we moved to the Isle of Wight, from Leicester, we lived in a semi-derelict, 200-year-old stone cottage and we were a few minutes' walk from the beach. My life couldn't have changed more radically. I soaked up the adventure and the opportunity – anything seemed possible. ►



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*"I always try and walk on the sunny side of the street, but I do have a habit of finding the shadows."*

► I grew up without a TV – my dad used to sing me to sleep every night with folk songs. The record player was on all the time – we listened to blues singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and country and blues guitarists – Mississippi Fred McDowell, Blind Willie Johnson, and Memphis Minnie.

We had Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited* on vinyl – our copy of *Bringing It All Back Home* had the first two tracks missing, as it had a chunk taken out of it, but we played the album so much it sounded like a crackly, old 78 gramophone disc.

There was a big pile of country, blues, and rock 'n' roll albums propped up against the wall – artists like Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis, Hank Williams, and Woody Guthrie, vintage Hawaiian square neck slide guitarists and hula singers, English folk and sea shanty bands, Norma Waterson, Sandy Denny, Richard Thompson, Django Reinhardt, and gospel, honky-tonk, and country heartache. I didn't shut any of it out.

I picked up a guitar when I was 11. By 15, I was going to the local folk club with my brother and a group of high school friends. I bought a beginner's book called *It's Easy To Play Folk*, and I learnt a handful of songs with friends and tried them out. The audience was very kind and tolerant, and we turned up every week for years.

I taught myself how to sing with the guidance of recordings by Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. I would practise a sentence from a track for hours. I liked to rehearse in different rooms, as the sound changed my voice. The bathroom was great for that moaning blues sound, as it had a natural reverb.

**You've recently been playing on the Isle of Wight with a new, young band. Any plans for a UK tour to support the latest record?**

Touring the album with my new band would be a dream – we've been rehearsing since February. I was introduced to two brothers, Oliver and Ademar Boyden-Garcia. They're both classically trained, but have now hit rock'n'roll! Oliver is 15 and plays electric guitar and his brother, who is 17, is on drums. They are remarkable players and singers – a gift from God! Our bass player, Dan Smith, is twice their age and looks like Lemmy!

The band are pushing me more – I'm having the time of my life. The show is full-throttle and has plenty of attitude, and I love every minute of it. I can be a teenager again!

**What's it like being a musician based on the Isle of Wight?**

My cottage is close to the beach – the sea is an integral part of my life. I love the big, open beaches, the pier, and the faded grandeur of the once-popular seaside resort. I have the opportunity to have a quiet space for thinking and writing.

The Isle of Wight allowed me to study my craft in so much detail as I have been gigging since I was 16. I have been part of the music scene here for

years and have learnt so much from some great musicians – country blues guitar, skiffle, and jug band.

It's a beautiful place to live – for me it's a headquarters where I can get on and develop my music. It has a different pace, which is excellent, but, sometimes, it is so restful that you can be starved of stimulation.

If you are self-motivated, focused, and established as a writer/artist etc., then it's excellent, but if you're trying to make connections and get out and integrate and seek and taste things, then it can be isolating and frustrating.

There are some great bands over here, and the camaraderie is strong between all of us. It's a very creative time for the Isle of Wight.

**How does it feel to be releasing your second album in your early fifties?**

It's absolutely rejuvenating! +

*Last Cigarette by Angelina is out now on Wonderfulsound.*

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# record reviews

## How To Read Them

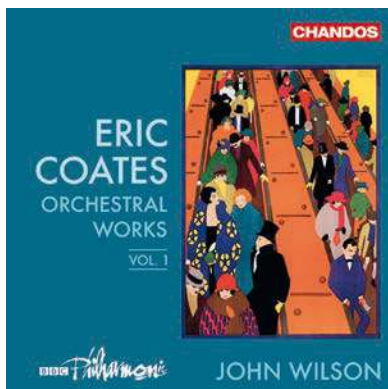
The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons that denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

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

*This issue's featured reviewers are:*

**DD** – Dennis Davis  
**SH** – Sean Hannam  
**JK** – Jason Kennedy  
**AS** – Alan Sircom

|  |               |  |                        |
|--|---------------|--|------------------------|
|  | CD            |  | 120g LP                |
|  | Gold CD       |  | 150g LP                |
|  | HDCD          |  | 180g LP                |
|  | XRCD          |  | 200g LP                |
|  | Double Disc   |  | 10" LP                 |
|  | DVD           |  | Availability As S/H LP |
|  | SACD          |  | Vinyl Double Album     |
|  | Hybrid SACD   |  | 45 RPM                 |
|  | Multi-Channel |  | Download               |
|  | Blu-ray       |  | High-Res Download      |



### Eric Coates

#### Orchestral Works Vol 1

**BBC Philharmonic Orchestra feat.**

**John Wilson**

Chandos CHAN 20036



Light music – especially that peculiarly British 'Light Classical' music of the early 20th Century – often gets short shrift among classical listeners. It's not that cerebral, but was one of the foundation stones of high-quality audio in its early heyday; the BBC Light Programme from 1945-67, and was a standard-bearer of early stereo.

Eric Coates (1886-1957) was one of light music's mainstays. A violist of note in his early years, by 1919 Coates abandoned the viola and became a prolific full-time composer and occasional conductor. He quickly mastered the through-composed (continuous, non-repetitive) form that made light music both undemanding for the listener and ideal for the thematic requirements of the then-new radio and 'talkies'. Despite this, Coates wrote few direct commissions for film and radio; a rare exception – and one of his last works – was the march used throughout the 1955 movie *The Dam Busters*.

That iconic piece is presumably for a later disc, but this collection of Coates work does feature some of his best loved works, including 'By The Sleepy Lagoon' (best known in the UK as the theme to the long-running Radio Four show, *Desert Island Discs*) and his 'London' Suite (of which 'Part III: Knightsbridge' is perhaps best known). However, from the opening

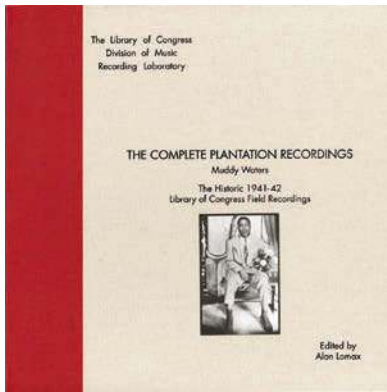
choice 'The Merry-makers (A Miniature Overture)' you know precisely what you are in for: bouncy, triumphant, easy pieces that are well captured by (fittingly) the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. Here, they are conducted by John Wilson, who is making a name for himself in 20th Century classical work (his recent recordings of works by Erich Korngold and Sir Richard Rodney Bennett show both range and a clear affinity to the era).

The recording itself seems to reflect some of the recording techniques of the age, rather than the almost cut-glass, close mic'd quality of modern recordings. It goes for orchestral space rather than instrument focus, and that is no bad decision given the inherent sense of flow of the material. And, while occasionally the orchestra does drift into 'musical confection' mode (treating light music as 'very light music') for the most part it is on point; precise, dynamic, impressive, and fun. I found the album worked best away from the most popular choices, and instead shone in places like the sweeping 'Symphonic Rhapsodies' or the surprisingly mournful 'Ballad for String Orchestra'.

I think light music gets a bad rap, in part because it can sound like easy listening for the interwar years. Maybe it doesn't have hidden depths, but as this fine recording shows, it can have hidden shallows. **AS**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**





## The Complete Plantation Recordings

**Muddy Waters**

Analogue Productions APB 121

220<sub>3</sub>

In 1941 and 1942, as part of the United States Library of Congress sponsored program to document and record America's 'folk' music, Alan Lomax travelled to Mississippi during 1941 and 1942 and made the earliest recordings of Muddy Waters on the Stovall Plantation near Clarksdale. The recording trip was the brainchild of Fisk University musicologist John Wesley Work III, who contacted folklorist Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress for funding. The two travelled to the Clarksdale area in 1941 and recorded Waters, Son House, Honeyboy Edwards, and others. They loaded several hundred pounds of recording equipment, including a new Presto Model 'T' Recorder, that company's most portable disc-cutting lathe. The recordings were made on fragile aluminium and glass based lacquers during two summer trips to Clarksdale.

One of the 1941 lacquers broke during the road trip, but three of the four sides of this release are from the 1942 sessions. Other than a few short interview cuts, and two vocals from guest singers, the four sides are composed of Muddy's singing and playing a Martin guitar supplied by Lomax, and with sidemen on some cuts. Two of the 1941 performances, 'Country Blues' and 'I Be's Troubled', were included in a 1942 five-disc 78 RPM Library of Congress album titled

Folk Music Of Congress album titles *Folk Music Of The United States, Album IV: Afro-American Blues and Game Songs*, and this was Muddy's introduction to the world outside the Delta. The blues explosion had begun—soon after the first Lomax visit, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Robert Lockwood Jr. had talked radio station KFFA in Helena, Arkansas into hosting a regular blues slot, named the King Biscuit Time after its sponsor. Muddy's appearance on the radio had folks talking and he knew he was going places. In 1943 Muddy boarded a train for Chicago and in 1947 got a call to record for the Chess brothers.

If Muddy Waters wasn't fully formed in 1941 and 1942 when he recorded his first songs, he was awfully close. He'd already established his unique blend of country blues and popular music. Just listen to 'I Be's Troubled' and recognise that it's one of Muddy Waters' evergreen hits, like 'I Can't Be Satisfied'.

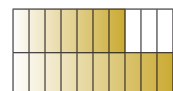
But how good can a field recording made in the early 1940's sound? While it doesn't have the dynamic slam and quite the richness of his Chess recordings from a half-decade later, it sounds really, really good. Early blues recordings from this period are obviously limited in frequency range, but unlike most recordings of classical music from the period they need not be demeaned with the disparaging term 'historic'. Yazoo Records sold a boatload of records of one man/one guitar LPs of Blind Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, and Blind Willie McTell (as well as sighted

blues singers) that still sound pretty decent. And those were from the 1920's and 1930's! By 1941, Presto Recordings equipment and especially its recording disc (an aluminium plate coated with a cellulose nitrate based lacquer) technology was the radio industry standard.

Until now, the complete plantation recordings were never available on LP. In 1966 Testament Records issued a one disc LP *Down On Stovall's Plantation* with 13 of the 19 songs from the session and none of the interviews. Chess released the complete sessions on CD in 1993. This new mastering by Analogue Productions make the earlier versions sound 'historic' by comparison. Ryan K. Smith at Sterling Sound, working from the original Library of Congress 16-inch acetate disc masters, cut a 24/192 source tape from which the LP was cut. Everything about the new transfer is simply stunning. Detail and rich texture replace the much thinner sound of the 1966 LP, and leave the sound of the CD versions in the dust.

This gem is truly a limited edition pressing—only 1,000 copies will be pressed, 999 if you eliminate my copy. The fold-out cover is linen coated and the print and layout mimics the 1942 release. The inside cover includes outstanding notes; photos and the three inserts complete the handsome package. An essential blues library addition! **DD**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**





## Oneness

Matthew Halsall

Gondwana



Matthew Halsall is a Manchester-based trumpet player with a penchant for the melodic and spiritual side of jazz. His influences include Miles Davis and John Coltrane, but on *Oneness* the figures of Pharoah Saunders and Alice Coltrane could almost have been in the room. *Oneness* was the first album that Halsall recorded back in 2008, yet it has been sitting in the vaults while six more releases have dropped. Most of these feature the same musicians found here. Halsall felt the tracks, “were too subtle and sensitive to release early on in my career, so I held them back until now”. *Oneness* is a calmer and more reflective album than his debut *Sending My Love* and stand-out *Fletcher Moss Park*, but it contains the same quest for ways to make new music that pays homage to what has gone before.

The pieces on *Oneness* were built around the tanpura drone that is a staple of Indian classical music. It creates a gently undulating harmonic backdrop that in Halsall's words “created a sort of meditative atmospheric pulse for the musicians to work over”. He used it to work out the themes and melodies for the seven tracks of the album.

*Oneness* was recorded over three sessions with a band that was to become the basis of his Gondwana Orchestra. The line up for five tracks consists of Nat Birchall on tenor

saxophone, Adam Fairhall on piano, Gavin Barras on double bass, and Gaz Hughes on drums. There was one variation between two sessions however, with Stan Ambrose playing harp on three tracks and Rachael Gladwin on the other two. This album makes a very good case for the inclusion of harp; it plays a key part in the various compositions and brings a richness of both melody and timbre to the overall picture. There's also a harp on Binker and Moses' *Alive in the East* that I reviewed a few months ago, where it makes a similar impact on rather more intense music.

Halsall has put the Gladwin band first on the album with two extended tracks. ‘Life’ starts with harp and drone laying down a calm, cosmic backing that's joined by a down tempo piano riff and then Halsall's trumpet enters the fray at the back of the stage. This is the balance used throughout most of *Oneness*, an arrangement that creates a sense of unity by not placing a specific instrument front and centre, but rather putting all of them on a equal footing. Inevitably the trumpet and sax provide the voice in most of these pieces and your attention is naturally drawn to them, but unlike the music that inspired this work there is nothing in the way of show-boating. Double bass comes in so low it's not obvious what the source is, but this soon becomes apparent; then sax takes over from trumpet eventually leaving the stage so that the sound of piano, harp and rhythm section can wash over you. It's a formula that can be

found on the title track too albeit with some extra astral travelling. Halsall's style is restrained and exploratory; it doesn't seek to impress but to weave the composition together, to create genuine musical unity. The track ends with a fine harp and trumpet finale just before the 12th minute is up.

The next three pieces feature the slightly brighter sound of Stan Ambrose's harp, in fact the first is called ‘Stan's Harp’ in his honour. The drone is left out, which makes for a cooler feel, but bowed double bass brings body to the sound, while the biggest instruments – the piano and harp – supply a cascade of sparkling sonic droplets as a denouement.

The third session for *Oneness* sees Halsall and Barras joined by Mohamed Assani on sitar and Chris Davies on tabla, bringing a strong Indian feel to the sound. I particularly like the tabla playing which adds some dynamics albeit without any of the fireworks that players are inclined to indulge in. The final piece, ‘The Traveller’, sees Halsall take the lead in the full sense, dropping a riff from *Love Supreme* and travelling far and wide before handing over to sitar.

This is a great example of spiritual jazz and one that Halsall had no right to keep from us for so long, but it's here. Perhaps he knew that there would come a time when the world needed unity even more than it did ten years ago. **JK**

RECORDING  
MUSIC







## Monks Road Social

### Out Of Bounds

(Monks Road Records)



Monks Road Social is the moniker for a talented collective of musicians, headed up by Robert Howard – aka Dr. Robert, the front-man of '80s popsters The Blow Monkeys.

Last year, Howard and his collaborators decamped to the residential Monnow Valley Studio in Monmouth, Wales for a 10-day recording session – the result was their impressive debut album, *Down The Willows*, which came out in February 2019. Hot on the heels comes the follow-up, *Out Of Bounds*, which was laid down in another 10-day stint at the same studio.

For *Out Of Bounds*, Howard has assembled a stellar cast, including folk singer-songwriter Kathryn Williams, Matt Deighton, guitarist and frontman of '90s acid-jazz outfit Mother Earth, who's played with Paul Weller and Oasis; keyboardist Mick Talbot of The Style Council, drummer Steve White (The Style Council and Paul Weller), UK blues singer Angelina, Mancunian crooner Nev Cottee, orchestral arranger Ben Trigg (Richard Ashcroft and Dexys Midnight Runners), and percussionist and programmer Steve Sidelnyk.

The opener, 'Tumble Hill', is a short, but sweet, piano instrumental that sounds like it should soundtrack video footage of a rippling brook in the English countryside. We're then transported to a late-night

Ibiza chill-out bar for the sultry, deep house groove of 'Bottomless Pit' – featuring Brand New Heavies vocalist Sulene Fleming, Balearic beats and some beautiful Spanish guitar from Deighton. On the seriously slinky 'If It Was All Down To Me', Sheffield duo Hague & White manage to evoke the social-political soul of *What's Going On*-era Marvin Gaye.

Then, over funky flutes and laidback wah-wah guitar, singer Joel White pleads: "If it was all down to me, there'd be no place for bigotry and people must live with each other, side-by-side, so we can put things right..." Things get even more anthemic on 'OK! Have It Your Way' – Fleming belts out this hip-shaking floor-filler that was written by Howard, but sounds like a long-lost Northern Soul classic.

Howard also penned 'I Ain't Running Anymore', on which he shares vocals with Kathryn Williams. Their voices work well together – the song is a sublime, comedown ballad with warm synth sounds and great jazz saxophone by Jacko Peake.

Williams crops up again on the delightful, folky 'May You Give It All Away' – written by Deighton, it's acoustic-led, with strings, and has shades of Nick Drake.

Deighton returns the favour by covering Williams's 'Monday Morning', turning it into a Weller-like, indie-rock track.

He's not the only one here who's been influenced by the Modfather – 'Autumn Leaves' by Neil Jones, singer of Midlands-based band Stone

Foundation, is an infectious, pop-soul strum that sounds like it was picked up and dusted down after it fell off the back of Weller's Vespa.

On the first Monks Road Social album, Nev Cottee turned in a stunning, world-weary version of Howard's 'Still Got A Lot To Learn' – Howard was so impressed by it that for this record he wrote a song with Cottee in mind. It's called 'Nobody Knows Anything' and it's one of the best tracks – a country-esque, slow-burning ballad that's perfect for Cottee's smooth, Lee Hazlewood-style baritone voice. Another highlight is the psychedelic, bluesy 'Bird Calling' – sung by Angelina and featuring lead guitar by Dick Taylor of '60s rockers The Pretty Things. Sadly, it's only just over two minutes long and ends just as it's getting going – the bird has flown too soon...

*Out of Bounds* is a richly rewarding and eclectic collection of songs – it has the feel of a compilation tape made by a middle-age, retro-hipster friend, who has a very impressive record collection. It's a perfect companion piece to the first Monks Road Social album – arguably, it's slightly better, with a stronger selection of songs.

No one can accuse Howard of resting on his laurels – there's a third Monks Road Social record due out next year. It could be just what the Dr. ordered... **SH**

**RECORDING**  
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## HIGH-FIDELITY LOUDSPEAKERS | NEW CHORA

The brand new Chora speaker range brings Focal technology to music lovers who crave a quality sound, wrapped in a modern design. Comprising three new models - the 806 two-way bookshelf; 816 2.5-way and 826 three-way floorstanding speakers - in your choice of black, light wood or dark wood finishes, the Chora line up offers the looks, features and, above all, performance to set it above rivals. Enjoy a full and generous sound, enabled by Focal's exclusive new Slatefiber cones, the latest example of Focal's 40 years of speaker innovation. Made in France, Chora is at home anywhere.

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Or email them to [editor@hifiplus.com](mailto:editor@hifiplus.com)

# Incoming!

## Hearing loss or headphone gain?

For many years now I have always had a two-channel system in my house. Over the last few years my hearing has sadly become worse to the point where I cannot clearly hear certain high frequencies from my speakers. A friend suggested moving to headphones as the near field listening improved the sound for him. Is this a general phenomenon, that I would likely experience myself?

**Marcin Jankiewicz, via email**

*You pose an excellent question, Marcin. My personal experience has been that headphones and earphones do offer heightened levels of perceived clarity vis-à-vis typical loudspeakers, partly because of the close proximity of the drivers to the listener's ear canals and ear drums, but also because they provide superior isolation from external sources of noise. Even in "quiet rooms" there is often more ambient noise than you might think and headphones help with this.*

*Two important points to note, however. First, headphones and earphones do not correct or reverse hearing loss; rather, they help you make the best use of the hearing you do have.*

*Second, headphones and earphones can sound remarkably clean and unstrained at ridiculously high volume levels, so please go easy with your volume settings. (You wouldn't want to cause further hearing loss, right?)*

**Chris Martens, Editor, Ultimate Headphone Guide**

## Podnessabounds

My son has recently purchased some Apple EarPods with his first pay-check. I like the versatility of these but I am concerned about the quality of them, are they any good, and could you recommend any similar high-end alternatives.

**Andy Black, via email**

*Andy, Apple's AirPods are thoroughly respectable products, though I would consider them Bluetooth ear buds rather than true Bluetooth earphones. This distinction is that earphones typically provide soft ear tips that create an airtight seal in the wearer's ear canals, thus providing a significant degree of isolation from external noise.*

*In contrast, Apple's AirPods fit relatively loosely in the outer ear, do not achieve an airtight seal, and thus miss out on a desirable degree of noise isolation.*

*To address your second question, yes there are good high-end alternatives to the AirPods. Two of our favourites are the RHA TrueConnect Bluetooth earphones reviewed in this issue and the somewhat more expensive, but excellent, Sennheiser Momentum True Wireless earphones.*

**Chris Martens, Editor, Ultimate Headphone Guide**

## I like to move it, move it!

I love to listen to headphones at home, however I dislike the lack of freedom and movement because I am attached to my Chord Poly and Mojo, are there any seriously good Bluetooth headphones, I'm prepared to lose quality, but would like to move?

**Jamie Skinner, via email**

*Today's best Bluetooth headphones are astonishingly good, Jamie—so much so that for many listeners they represent all the sonic excellence headphone enthusiasts need or want.*

*The very best Bluetooth headphone I have heard of date is the exceptional HiFiMAN Ananda BT planar magnetic wireless headphone (\$999 US). The Ananda BT sounds very much like a serious high-end headphone because, at heart, it is one, and it incorporates very well designed Bluetooth electronics.*

*Stepping down in price but not necessarily in overall performance are three models I consider class leaders: The PSB M4U 8 (\$399 US), the Sennheiser New Momentum Wireless (\$399 US), and the beyerdynamic Lagoon ANC Traveler/Explorer (\$399 US). All three provide robust Bluetooth connectivity and effective active noise cancellation circuitry, but most importantly they put musical sound quality first. Interestingly, the Lagoon ANC can employ Mosayc "Make It Yours" software to fine tune the headphone's response curve to match the user's hearing.*

*Finally, two more respectable and somewhat more modestly priced Bluetooth offerings are the Beats Studio3 Wireless headphones (\$349 US) and the Cleer FLOW/ FLOW II Bluetooth/ANC headphones (\$280 US).*

**Chris Martens, Editor, Ultimate Headphone Guide ▶**

## ► Toe-related ratios

I am dipping my toe into the Personal Audio waters, and wondered if there was a ratio that one should spend on equipment – for example should the cables be 1/3 the cost of the headphones and the amp ½ etc.?

**Eric Baumer, via email**

*C'mon in Eric, the water's fine! Because Personal Audio is, fortunately for us all, a hotbed of activity in the development of high-performance but value-priced components, it is very difficult to state a hard, fast expenditure ratio to follow that will remain useful or relevant for more than a fortnight or so.*

*However, I do think a viable strategy is first to set some specific sound quality goals, then to find headphones or earphones that meet those goals, and finally to choose electronics/source components that can make your chosen headphones truly sing.*

*The question of adding high performance aftermarket signal cables for your headphones or earphones will be a personal one and a decision that is also context specific. Some headphones and earphones already ship with very high quality third party cable sets and may require no upgrading at all. Others ship with "lowest common denominator" signal cables that sound OK-ish at best, in which case aftermarket cables can give you a big lift in performance. A friend from the cable industry advises evaluating cables in the same way you might evaluate other upgrade components. In other words, ask yourself "How much performance lift do these products provide, and at what price?" If you search carefully, you'll find cables that achieve a happy medium in terms of performance benefits per unit money.*

**Chris Martens, Editor, Ultimate Headphone Guide**

## YouTube Killed the Video Star

I was part of 'Generation MTV' and my musical interests were traditionally defined by what was the brightest, loudest, and most heavily-played music on channels like MTV and VH1. As a consequence, I didn't really go down the collecting music route until the early 1990s (my first album was Nirvana's *Nevermind*, which I bought aged 28). Although I have more of a collection today, the bulk of my musical pleasure is now either through YouTube, or listening to BBC 6 Music in the car. I rack up tens of thousands of miles in my car every year, and spend an inordinate amount of time living out of a suitcase in hotels. The sound quality from my laptop is no-where near as good as it is through my home cinema system I have at home. What I need is

a portable, rechargeable loudspeaker system, as well as a small, high-quality headphone system for when the hotel walls are paper thin. I don't want to spend more than about £300 for both. What do you recommend?

**Sam Tyler, via email**

*Sam, I sympathise. Anyone who travels for work can end up missing home comforts, and one of those home comforts is music that sounds better than you could ever get from laptop loudspeakers. I also think you are exactly right in looking out for both a loudspeaker and a headphone solution for hotel listening. I would say keep them small and light, however; carrying round a few extra kilos of audio gear into a new hotel room every night eventually means leaving a few extra kilos of audio gear in the car every night. I would also suggest going for a reasonable mono Bluetooth 'Mars Bar' music player rather than something larger and stereo. We loved the little KEF Muo when it launched in 2016, and although these things do get eclipsed fairly quickly, it also means the Muo can be picked up for a song these days. Bowers & Wilkins, Monitor Audio, and most notably DALI have similar models that we have not tested, but about which have heard good things. On balance, we'd probably still go with the KEF Muo, because it leaves about half your budget open to headphones.*

*When it comes to headphones, the options are almost limitless. Do you want to use them in the room only (in which case wired is the best option) or with your phone (where maybe a Bluetooth headset might be better)? If you are considering the thin-walls of hotel rooms (both in terms of not transmitting sound to other guests, and shutting out the sounds of other guests), we'd go for either in-ear monitors or closed back headphones: noise cancellation will also work, but the purpose of noise cancellation is to reduce drone tones (the background noise in an aircraft cabin, for example) rather than address what goes on in Room 248. It also pushes the costs up.*

*Given your budget, and assuming you have spent about half of it on a good Bluetooth loudspeaker, I'd recommend going for a pair of Audio-Technica ATH-MSR7, beyerdynamic DT770 PRO, or maybe Sennheiser HD25. What all these three headphone systems share is a professional audio background (whether from the studio, news-gathering, or DJ use), which makes them resistant to leaking sound into or out of the environment, and makes them rugged enough to survive being thrown in a suitcase day in, day out.*

**Chris Martens, Editor, Ultimate Headphone Guide**



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## Rocky Mountain International Audio Fest 2019

by Chris Martens



The \$3,500 Layla Aion earphone was developed specifically for Astell&Kern by JH Audio. It is essentially a universal-fit version of JH Audio's top-of-the-range Layla CIEM.



At \$2,000, StereoPravda's new SB-3.5 is the smallest, lightest, and most affordable SB-series model to date.



The new \$2,999 Matrix Audio Element X is a combination streamer/DAC/headphone amplifier with a sound quality that takes on some very high-priced DAC/amps.



One of the more 'out there' personal audio systems at the show, the \$3,499 RAAL/Requisite pure-ribbon headphones were entirely comfy being driven by the new Schiit Jotunheim R.



PrimaLuna's US distributor suggested that a surprisingly number of \$2,299 EVO 100 integrated amplifiers are purchased solely for use as superb headphone amps!



Final's new \$4,200 D8000 Pro is like the existing D8000, but with a more overt, energetic, and exciting sound.



Final's new B1 (\$699), B2 (\$299), and B3 (\$499) are optimised for identifiable trends in recording, so which one(s) you prefer will have much to do with the types of recordings you enjoy.



Etymotic Research new ER2SE, with flat frequency response, and ER2XR, with more impactful bass, both for \$159.





Periodic's \$399 Carbon uses a diaphragm with an 8-micron lab-grown diamond coating on a polymer substrate.



ZMF's new \$2,499 Verité Closed (closed-back) headphone uses a proprietary Beryllium-coated PEN driver with airflow technologies said to "make a closed headphone sound spatially accurate."



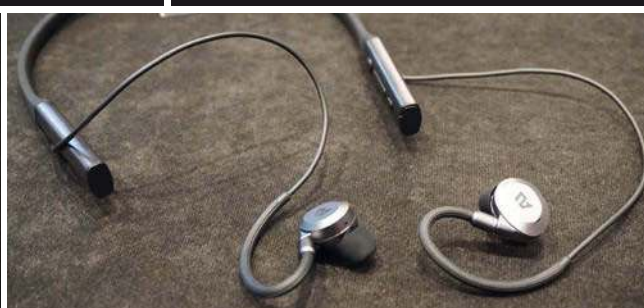
Marking the launch of a new range of Zen-series audio, iFi's \$129 Zen DAC is a fully balanced DAC/preamp/headphone amplifier that offers gain, xBass, and DSD256 capabilities.



QDC's \$2,100 Anole VX 10 driver universal-fit earphone features three tuning switches specifically for voicing options.



Offered as a cost-effective solution for the notoriously difficult-to-drive RAAL/Requisite pure-ribbon headphones, Schiit Audio's \$999 Jotunheim R put out tons of power on demand and sports a built-in multibit DAC.



From industry newcomer Ausound (pronounced "Ow-sounds") comes a neckband style \$199 Flex ANC BT Bluetooth earphone with active noise cancellation features and—get this—earpieces that feature hybrid dynamic/planar magnetic driver arrays.



Spirit Torino's \$1,999 Super Legerra headphones feature the firm's Twin Pulse Isobaric driver system, and sound light, lithe, and agile, while offering notably natural timbres.



Alongside the Zen DAC, the new iFi Audio \$149 Zen Blue Bluetooth receiver sports an ESS DAC and is aptX, AHD, LDAC, and Huawei compatible. The Zen range will replace the Nano range.



Periodic's new \$299 Nickel headphone amp is a powerful, wide bandwidth design with very low distortion.



# Final B-series universal-fit earphones, Part 1

by Chris Martens



**F**inal is a Japanese personal audio specialist with a reputation for offering products exhibiting very high build quality, innovative designs, and fine sound quality. Lately, Final has been pushing both the envelopes for performance (through its D8000 and new D8000 Pro planar magnetic headphones) and for value-for-money (through its affordable E-series earphones). Now, Final breaks new ground with its new B1, B2, and B3 earphones. With these B-series Final's engineering team focuses on three critical aspects of earphone design: perceived spatial presentation, perceived dynamic range, plus the ergonomics of the earphones' earpieces.

The B-models are named in order of their development and Final advises listeners not to read any sort of performance hierarchy into the products' names or prices. Rather, Final says the 'B' models offer three distinctive listening perspectives, any one of which might best fit a given listener's musical preferences or listening tastes, and are predicated on common recording techniques that tend to be used by specific musical genres. Final describes its 'B' models in terms of two axes of performance: the continuum between 'Wide' and 'Narrow' dynamic range, and the continuum between 'Clarity' and 'Spaciousness.'

The B3 offers the strongest emphasis on clarity, followed by the B1, and then the B2. In turn, the B2 offers the greatest emphasis on wide dynamic range, followed by the B3, with the B1 skewed toward narrow dynamic range—a voicing that, on narrower dynamic range recordings, helps “each of the instruments and vocals to ordinarily appear before the listener's eyes.”

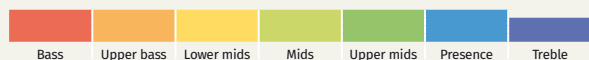
The 'B' models share a common earpiece design featuring somewhat angular two-piece shells made of injection-moulded stainless steel. The shell's shape provides three touch points in the ear (in the auditory canal, the Tragus, and the Concha cavity), which Final likens to a ‘tripod’ that holds the earpieces in a stable position with “no sense of pressure” in the ear.

The B1 features one dynamic and one balanced armature-type driver with no crossover network and a Rose Gold-plated, mirror-like finish. The B2 features a single balanced armature-type driver and a gunmetal grey satin finish. The B3 uses two balanced armature-type drivers with no crossover network and a silver satin finish.

All three B models need run-in to sound their best, but the B1 needs more than the others. Hence, Part 1 of this review focuses on the B2 and B3 models (in Part 2, we'll revisit the B1 once it is fully run-in).

## Summary (Final B2)

**Voicing:** Fundamentally neutral with a very slightly recessed highs



(All ratings relative to comparably priced earphones.)

Resolution/Focus:



Sound staging/Imaging:



Dynamics/Expression:



Value:



### Pros

- An excellent all-rounder, with very good clarity and an emphasis on dynamic expression
- Offers a natural, mid-distance listening perspective
- Beautiful build quality, plus the earphones can be re-built should the need ever arise
- Light and all-day comfortable
- Excellent value

### Cons

- Mid-distance listening perspective of the B2 will suit many tastes, but not all (which is why there are two other B models to choose from)

As advertised, the B2 offers greater clarity than many like-priced earphones and a strong emphasis on wide dynamic range, which works well for many genres of music and especially for classical music and acoustic jazz. As an example, consider the B2's performance on the Barbirolli/Philharmonia *Elgar: Enigma Variations* [Warner, 16/44.1]. As the Variations unfold, the B2 does a fine job of conveying the richness and sonority of the orchestra, plus a spectacular job of revealing the sharp dynamic contrasts heard within and between the Variations. The B2 also offers "cut from whole cloth" coherency that is very appealing.

In contrast, the B3 sounds almost like a B2 that has had its imaginary 'Clarity' knob turned up to '11'. This, too, works well for classical and acoustic jazz recordings, but has the effect of pulling the listening perspective much closer than with the B2. Where the B3 really thrives is on recordings that offer panoply of rich musical details to explore. A superb example would be "1 Speed" from bassist Dean Peer's *Airborne* [Eles Records, 16/44.1], which features mind-bendingly fast and precise, staccato bass guitar runs. Many earphones turn these into a sonic mush, but the B3 renders Peer's rapid-fire notes with exceptional levels of clarity and definition, thus showcasing the bassist's masterful fingering dexterity.

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Final B2 universal fit earphones

**Type:** Universal-fit earphones with single balanced armature drivers

**Driver complement:** One balanced armature driver

**Frequency response:** Not specified

**Impedance:** 41 Ohms

**Sensitivity:** 109dB

**Weight:** 32g

**Finish:** Satin-finish gunmetal grey

**Accessories:** Saucer-shaped silicon protective carry case, five pairs of silicone ear tips (XS, S, M, L, XL). 1.2m signal cable with MMCX earphone connectors and OFC conductors in a smooth black jacket, black slip-on rubber ear hooks

**Price:** £259 UK, \$299 US

### Final B3 universal fit earphones

**Type:** Universal-fit earphones with dual balanced armature drivers

**Driver complement:** Two balanced armature drivers with no crossover network

**Frequency response:** Not Specified

**Impedance:** 19 Ohms

**Sensitivity:** 102dB

**Weight:** 36g

**Finish:** Satin-finish silver

**Accessories:** Saucer-shaped silicon protective carry case, five pairs of silicone ear tips (XS, S, M, L, XL). 1.2m signal cable with MMCX earphone connectors and silver-plated OFC conductors in a clear twisted -air jacket, clear slip-on rubber ear hooks

**Price:** £439 UK, \$499 US

## MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

### Final/S'NEXT Co. Ltd.

3-12-7 Kitakase, Saiwai-ku, Kawasaki-shi,  
Kanagawa 212-0057, JAPAN  
URL: [snext-final.com](http://snext-final.com)

### UK DISTRIBUTOR

#### KS Technology Ltd.

A4 Dolphin Way, Shoreham-by-Sea, BN43 6NZ United Kingdom  
URL: [ksdistribution.co.uk](http://ksdistribution.co.uk) | +44 (0) 1903 768919

### US DISTRIBUTOR

#### Final Audio USA

URL: [facebook.com/FinalAudioUSA](https://facebook.com/FinalAudioUSA)

I encourage listeners seeking earphones in the price range of Final's B models to hear all three variations. Odds are one of them will provide a listening perspective that perfectly fits their musical sensibilities and tastes. +

# iFi Audio PowerStation and AC iPurifiers

by Chris Martens

iFi Audio is best known for its several successful families of high-tech and high-value personal audio electronics products, but what is perhaps not so widely recognised is that the firm also make a host of innovative cables, accessories, and power products. This review will focus on two of iFi's most significant power products: the recently released PowerStation power conditioning and power distribution module (£499, \$499 US) and the firm's clever, modular AC iPurifier devices (£99, \$99 US, each). Let's start with the AC iPurifier.

iFi's AC iPurifier is a small, cylindrical, plug-in mini-power conditioner that plugs directly into AC outlets. Versions are available for use with UK (via adaptor), EU, and US AC sockets. Each AC iPurifier uses iFi's distinctive Active Noise Cancellation circuitry, says iFi, to reduce noise on the AC mains and "to rid your system of electromagnetic interference (EMI) or radio-frequency interference (RFI)." Further, the AC iPurifier can

detect polarity and/or earthing problems, which are shown via two multicolour 'go/no go' indicator lights mounted on the face of the unit (green means go, while red means trouble). There is also a 4mm banana-sock for purposed of adding supplemental earthing wires if desired. Finally, the AC iPurifier provides surge suppression to a maximum of 30,000A @ 1,000V/10 $\mu$ S.

Basically the PowerStation leverages more expansive versions of the noise reduction technologies found in the AC iPurifier. The PowerStation looks like a cross between an oversized conventional AC power strip and a stealth fighter as it sports an angular, matt grey-anodised aluminium enclosure with multiple AC outlets on top and a wedge-shaped 'nose' on one end. Japanese and US-specification units provide eight AC outlets, while UK, EU, and AU versions offer six outlets. A device that looks much like an AC iPurifier protrudes from a recess in the wedge-shaped nose of the unit, complete with its own set of 'go/no go' polarity and earthing indicator lights, plus a banana socket for supplemental earthing. The opposite, squared-off end of the PowerStation provides a power switch and an IEC inlet for the unit's primary mains cord.

All PowerStation outlets are isolated from the others, while internal wiring features heavy 13AWG PurCopper (99.9999% pure OFHC/OCC) conductors. The PowerStation's signature feature, however, is iFi's Active





**"The really significant gains came in the form of deeper levels of textural and transient details in the music that the iFi components unlocked suddenly."**



Noise Cancellation2® system designed to cancel "all incoming noise... ..by generating a signal identical to the noise signal but in the exact opposite phase." iFi says this active system removes noise in the "high kHz and low MHz ranges," while a passive filter section tackles noise in the "high MHz range." iFi claims its active-plus-passive noise reduction

systems are far more effective than competing systems offering passive filtration only, enabling the PowerStation to address a wider range of noise frequencies (including noise from the AC mains, switch-mode power supplies, and digital circuitry), with noise floor reductions of > 40dB. Like the AC iPurifier, the PowerStation provides surge protection.

iFi suggests that the PowerStation works well in its own right, but works even better when used with one or more AC iPurifiers. I tried both configurations in my high-resolution reference headphone system and found that adding the AC iPurifiers yielded substantial sonic benefits. I obtained my best results by plugging two AC iPurifiers into the middle (number 4 and 5) power outlets of my 8-outlet US-spec PowerStation.

I approached listening tests with a healthy dose of scepticism and was surprised by the nature and magnitude of the sonic improvements the PowerStation/AC iPurifiers wrought. Backgrounds were as quiet or quieter than those achieved with other (more costly) conditioners I have tried, but the really significant gains came in the form of deeper levels of textural and transient details in the music that the iFi components unlocked suddenly —the sonic equivalent of 'zooming in' to get a better/sharper view of onscreen images on a computer.

What drove home this point for me was listening to the title track from John Adler's *Confronting Inertia* [Origin Classical, 16/44.1], which is a composition for solo trumpet and piano. I have played this track dozens of times, but with the PowerStation engaged I was floored by how much deeper, clearer, and harmonically rich the voices of the trumpet and piano sounded, and by how much more focused the reverberant acoustics of the recording space became. Better still, I heard similar benefits on one recording after another.

I recommend the iFi PowerStation and AC iPurifiers for the simple reason that they help unlock more music for less money than other competing power conditioners I have tried. You cannot say fairer than that. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### iFi PowerStation

**Type:** Multi-outlet AC power conditioner with both active noise cancellation and passive noise filtration

#### AC Outlets:

**US and Japan models:** Eight outlets

**UK, EU, and AU models:** Six outlets

**Operating voltage range:** 90V–265V

**Noise reduction:** Active Noise Cancellation2® system (addresses noise frequencies from the high kHz to low MHz range)

Passive Noise Filtration system (addresses noise frequencies from the low MHz to high MHz range) > 40dB

**Surge suppression:** Maximum 30,000A @ 1,000V/10µs

**Other:** Auto-detects and displays problems with AC polarity or earthing

**Dimensions (H × W × D):** 76mm × 96mm × 478mm

**Weight:** 1.98kg

**Price:** £499 UK, \$499 US

### iFi AC iPurifier

**Type:** Mini AC power conditioner with active noise cancellation that plugs directly into an AC outlet

**Operating voltage range:** 90V–265V

**Noise reduction:** Active Noise Cancellation system > 40dB

**Surge Suppression:** Maximum 30,000A @ 1,000V/10µs

**Other:** Auto-detects and displays problems with AC polarity or earthing

**Dimensions (Diameter × D):**

**US-spec:** 40mm × 105mm

**EU-spec:** 40mm × 115mm

**Weight:** 126g

**Price:** £99 UK, \$99 US

## MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

### iFi Audio

Balmoral Lodge, 139–141 Cambridge Road,  
Southport, PR9 7LN United Kingdom  
URL: ifi-audio.com

### US DISTRIBUTOR

#### iFi Audio (USA)

105 Professional Parkway, Suite 1502,  
Yorktown, VA 23693 USA

# Shure KSE1200 Electrostatic Earphone System

by Steven Stone

Shure has been involved with the creation and production of music since 1925, but the reason it is still around while most of its competitors from that era have vanished is Shure's ability to stay current with new offerings. In the headphone category Shure recently launched a new model, the KSE1200. It joins the KSE1500 in Shure's electrostatic, in-ear line-up. Priced at £1,769, the KSE1200 is £820 less than the KSE1500 and differs from the KSE1500 because the KSE1200 is a strictly analogue device that lacks the KSE1500's digital inputs and DAC conversion circuitry. The earphones themselves and the amplifier technology used to drive them are identical on both models. For anyone who already owns a good portable player and/or portable DAC the KSE1200 could very well be a more attractive and cost-effective option than the KSE1500.

The KSE1200 electrostatic in-ear system consists of not only the in-ear capsules containing the electrostatic elements, but also a special amplifier that supplies not only the power to energize the electrostatic elements but also a volume control for the amplification of the electrostatic elements. The amplifier has provisions for a mini-jack stereo analogue input that can be attached to any device with an analogue output, be it a fixed-level source, such as a DAC, or the variable output from a portable player or smartphone.

Accessories included with the KSE1200 include two cables with 3.5mm plugs (one 15.2 cm long, the other 92 cm long), a 6.3mm adapter, a cable clip, and two security bands for attaching the KSE-1200 amplifier unit to a smartphone. KSE1200's rechargeable Li-ion battery is capable of 12-hour battery life and a recharge time of 3 hours using a 1A charger.

I used the KSE1200 with a wide variety of devices, including an iPhone SE, Astell&Kern Activa, Fiio M11, Sony NW-WM1Z, Focal Arche, Sony TA-ZH1ES, and Mytek Manhattan II. With an adjustable gain range of -40 dB to +60 dB and a maximum published SPL at 1kHz with 3% TMD of 113 dB, the KSE1200 system could in every case be adjusted for optimal output levels. Generally, I found that

with variable output level source devices, turning the KSE1200 amplifier just above halfway up permitted the KSE1200 system to achieve comfortable volume levels.

The electrostatic earpieces/capsules themselves are extremely compact and lightweight. I was more aware of the KSE1200's headphone cable than the capsules themselves. The first foot or so of cable is light, flexible, and has zero microphonics. At the junction the cable gets thicker, with a cloth jacket that twists easily inside the jacket. The termination uses a LEMO connection, which is firm, air-tight, and protrudes straight upwards, slightly more than two inches from the top surface of the KSE1200.

The KSE1200 displayed all the audiophile-pleasing sonics that are characteristic of a good electrostatic transducer design. The sound was incisive, clean, and cohesive in a way that's unique to a single full-range electrostatic driver. The term "straight, no chaser" came to mind while listening to the KSE1200—they neither add to nor subtract from the original source. Romantic? Nope! But if you like your music portrayed with maximum "honesty" and a minimum of romanticism, the KSE1200 delivers that and more. Are they bass monsters? Nope, again. But when properly occluded the bass is delightfully detailed and texturally complex. The imaging through the KSE1200 was spectacularly precise, with every spatial cue immediately obvious. Upper frequencies were exceptionally smooth while retaining transient energy and dynamics.

Theoretically, the KSE1200 is 'pocket-able', but I suspect that in some situations a user could have issues with the volume knob moving in their pocket since there is no way to disable or lock it in place. Also, the two inches of rigid termination sticking up from the KSE1200's top isn't as pocket-friendly as a shorter or more flexible connection would be.

No one pair of earphones is ideal in every situation. The KSE1200 would not be my first choice as a workout exercise companion. But, if I wanted a completely portable electrostatic monitoring system for on-location recording and playback, the KSE-1200 would be top of my list. +



"The KSE1200 displayed all the audiophile-pleasing sonics that are characteristic of a good electrostatic transducer design."

## Summary

**Voicing:** Neutral



(All ratings relative to comparably priced electrostatic earphone systems.)

**Resolution/Focus:**



**Sound staging/Imaging:**



**Dynamics/Expression:**



**Value:**



### Pros

- Comfortable earpiece fit
- Enough volume range to handle virtually any signal level
- Made to withstand physical trauma

### Cons

- No way to disable, bypass, or lock the volume knob
- No protective travel case is included
- LEMO Cable attachment is not travel-friendly

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Shure KSE1200 electrostatic earphone system**

**Type:** Electrostatic in-ear monitor

**Driver complement:** Single full-range electrostatic driver

**Frequency Response:** 10 Hz to 50 kHz

**Impedance:** NA

**Signal to Noise:** 105 dB A-weighted

**Connector:** LEMO on amplifier attachment, 3.5mm mini-jack stereo analogue input

**Weight:** 44 g, or 1.55 oz.

**Price:** £1,769 UK, \$1,999 US

## MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

**Shure Incorporated**

5800 West Touhy Avenue, Niles,  
IL 60714-4608 USA

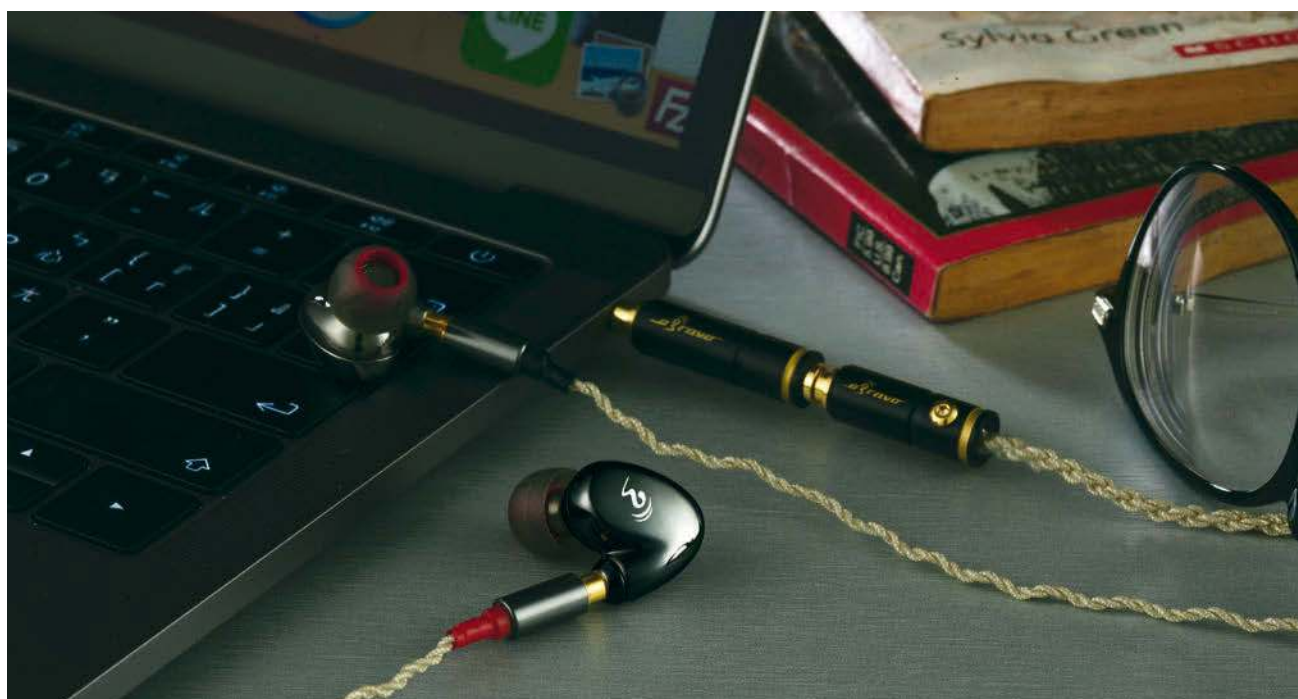
URL: [shure.com/en-US](http://shure.com/en-US)

Phone: +1 (800) 257-4873



# oBravo Cupid hybrid planar magnetic/dynamic earphone

by Chris Martens



**D**avid Teng is the founder of oBravo, a Taiwanese manufacturer specialising in high-end, high performance headphones and earphones. oBravo's initial development efforts centred on full-size headphones, such as the HAMT-1 hybrid AMT/dynamic driver-equipped headphones reviewed by *Hi-Fi+* Editor Alan Sircom in issues 120 and 121. Later, oBravo branched out to design ultra high performance hybrid earphones that sounded terrific, but also were typically quite expensive.

Most oBravo headphones and earphones use hybrid driver arrays, deftly combining dynamic mid-bass drivers with exotic planar magnetic, ribbon, or air motion transformer-type (AMT) tweeters. The three common threads we have observed in oBravo products to date have been an emphasis on refined and very revealing sound quality, expertly crafted hybrid driver arrays, and relatively high selling prices. However, at Munich

High-End 2019 oBravo surprised us with a highly disruptive new product we never anticipated.

At Munich, David Teng greeted me and said, "I've got a new hybrid earphone I want you to hear." The earphone was called the Cupid and it was beautifully made, surprisingly small, and sounded so good that I felt sure it would be expensive. But I was wrong about that.

When I asked the projected price of the Cupids, Teng replied with practiced nonchalance, "Oh, about £249." *Hunhh!?!?* I could scarcely believe my ears, partly because the Cupid sounded competitive with earphones carrying four-figure price tags, and partly because it was one of the least expensive oBravo earphones ever.

The Cupids use compact lozenge-shaped earpieces made of mirror-polished brass treated to an electroplated 'black gold' finish. The driver complement consists of a 6mm dynamic mid-bass driver with neodymium motor magnets and a 8mm

second-generation planar magnetic tweeter (patented). Signal connections are via enhanced oB-MMCX connectors. A 1.2m, balanced signal cable with silver-plated OCC conductors and a 2.5mm balanced plug comes standard, along with a 3.5mm adapter. Also included are three pairs of silicone and Comply™ Foam ear tips, a small two-chamber carry bag designed to keep the earpieces from chafing against one another, and an oBravo cable tie-down strip. This configuration, called the Cupid Prime, sells for £249 (or \$269 US).

I tried the Cupids with an Astell&Kern SP1000M DAP loaded with CD-quality or better music files and with the Tidal app. I also ran the earphones with an iPad Air and a Samsung Galaxy Note 9 smartphone. I soon discovered the easy-to-drive Cupids performed surprisingly well with my tablet and smartphone, though they were sufficiently revealing to underscore the substantial qualitative differences between those devices versus the much higher performance Astell&Kern DAP.

Next, I found the Cupids offered all the core elements of the oBravo 'house sound': namely, neutral and smooth top-to-bottom tonal balance, exquisite and seamless integration between their dynamic and planar magnetic drivers, expressive dynamics, and a very fine degree of resolution. If you were wondering if the Cupids are a 'real' oBravo, the emphatic answer is "Yes!"

Two tracks will help illustrate the qualities that make the Cupids so special. The first is 'Charlie Foxtrot' from The Souljazz Orchestra's *Chaos Theories* [Strut Records, 16/44.1]. The song is chockfull of incisive, intensely syncopated piano, percussion, trumpet, and saxophone lines and the Cupids conveyed the instruments' timbres and dynamics with terrific energy and clarity; each instrumental voice sounded pure and completely distinct from the others. The second is "My Friend the Forest" from Nils Frahm's *All Melody* [Erased Tapes, 16/44.1], where the Cupid's not only captured the sweet,

## Summary

**Voicing:** Fundamentally neutral with pleasingly extension at both frequency extremes



(All ratings relative to comparably priced earphones.)

**Resolution/Focus:**



**Sound staging/Imaging:**



**Dynamics/Expression:**



**Value:**



### Pros

- Value is off the charts (the Cupids pretty much sound like earphones with four-figure price tags)
- Seriously refined mids and highs
- Good bass depth and clarity
- Plenty of resolution, focus, and nuance
- Light and comfortable to wear

### Cons

- The modest carry pouch is OK, but a real carry case would have been nice
- Otherwise, no "cons" to speak of..

pensive tonality of Frahm's piano, but also brilliantly rendered all the small micro-details that conveyed the action of the piano and the reverberant characteristics of the recording space. Frankly, £249 earphones aren't normally expected to do such things so well, but somehow the Cupids pulled it off.

If you want a substantial taste of what serious high-end earphones are all about, yet without putting your budget in distress, look no further than oBravo's Cupids. At their asking price they are not just a bargain, but a musical gift. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Hybrid planar magnetic/dynamic universal fit earphone

**Driver complement:** 6mm dynamic mid-bass driver, 8mm planar magnetic tweeter (patented)

**Frequency response:** 20Hz–40kHz

**Impedance:** 16 ohms

**Sensitivity:** 105dB

**Weight:** Not specified

**Accessories:** Three pairs of silicone ear tips, three pairs of Comply™ Foam ear tips, fabric protective pouch, a cable tie-down strip, 1.2m balance signal cable with silver-plated

OCC conductors and a 2.5mm balanced plug, and a 3.5mm adapter

**Price:** £249 UK (or \$249 US)

### MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

**oBravo Audio**

URL: [obravoaudio.com](http://obravoaudio.com)

### UK/US DISTRIBUTOR

**oBravo UK**

URL: [obravo.co.uk](http://obravo.co.uk)

# RHA TrueConnect wireless Bluetooth earphones

by Chris Martens



**B**luetooth earphones are among the most popular products in personal audio today. This trend has emerged thanks to Apple's decision to build smartphones that no longer include 3.5mm headphone jacks—a step that made traditional wired earphones seem obsolete and gave rise to a generation of earphones that connect to smartphones wirelessly. In response, many manufacturers developed 'neckband-style' wireless earphones, which feature traditional wired-type earphones tethered to neckband-style, battery-powered Bluetooth modules.

However, since Apple's release of its ingenious AirPods-series earphones so-called 'True Wireless' earphones have become all the rage. Unlike neckband-style Bluetooth earphones, 'True Wireless' earphones have no wires whatsoever. Instead, their earpieces contain not only the requisite earphone drive units, but also miniature, Bluetooth transceiver/amplifier modules complete with rechargeable batteries. The earpiece electronics are designed to ensure the earpieces stay in sync with one another, meaning there are no discernible time delays between the left and right channels.

'True Wireless' earphone carry cases serve double-duty as fast chargers that can recharge earphones multiple times before the cases themselves must be recharged. The draw, obviously, is that this solution gives listeners complete freedom of movement, although the challenge for manufacturers involves fitting an awful lot of technology (plus drive units) within the tight confines of an earpiece enclosure. One of the most attractive and appealing 'True Wireless' models we have encountered to date is the RHA TrueConnect earphone (\$169.95 or £149.95), as reviewed here.

We have covered RHA's wired earphones extensively in the past and two consistent threads we have observed is their emphasis on 'musicality' (a warm, natural, and musically engaging sound that works for all genres of music) and 'value' (offering noticeably higher build quality and accessories, plus better sound quality than many like-priced competitors). Happily, these traits carry forward into the TrueConnect earphones.

The TrueConnect earphones feature 6mm dynamic drive units, Bluetooth 5.0 connectivity, simple-to-use control buttons and monitoring lights, and—of course—a hard-shell,



**"The TrueConnects are surprisingly revealing (though never cold or analytical), especially in the midrange and on vocals."**

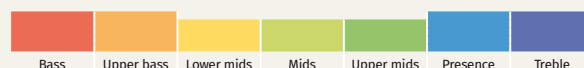
swing-open carry case/fast-charger. Fully charged the earphones offer five hours of playing time, while the carry case offers another 20 hours of charging time. RHA advises that 15 minutes of fast charging can bring the earphones up to 50% playing capacity, while a full recharge takes one hour and 40 minutes. The TrueConnects come with an extensive set of ear tips and an ear tip carrier: seven pairs of silicone TrueConnect ear tips (S/M/L), and three pairs of Comply™ Foam TrueGrip ear tips. A USB charging cable completes the package. TrueConnect earphones are offered in matt-finish white, black, or navy blue.

From the moment I first heard them, I was struck by how similar the sound of the TrueConnects is to that of RHA's wired earphones—in particular the well-rounded MA750 models. While close comparisons would likely show up at least some sonic advantages of the wired models, the TrueConnects manage to capture much of the warm, natural, and inviting feel of their wired brethren. Much like the MA750s, the TrueConnects are also surprisingly revealing (though never cold or analytical), especially in the midrange and on vocals. A great example would be the manner in which the TrueConnects capture the dry, sardonic humour in Elvis Costello's voice on 'Don't Let Me be Misunderstood' from *King of America* [Hip-O Records, MQA Master].

Another area where the TrueConnects excel is throughout the bass region, where they show exemplary depth and weight. To hear what I mean, try focusing on the potent, descending synth bass passages found on the choruses of the title track from Maroon 5's *Girls Like You* [Interscope,

## Summary

**Voicing:** Good natural warmth with a small degree of bass lift and slightly recessed upper mids and highs



(All ratings relative to comparably priced "True Wireless" earphones.)

**Resolution/Focus:**



**Freedom of noise:**



**Dynamics/Expression:**



**Features and versatility:**



**Sound staging/Imaging:**



**Value:**



### Pros

- Overall sound shows RHA design DNA, which is a good thing
- Extremely easy to set up and use on a day-to-day basis
- Establishing Bluetooth connection is a piece of cake
- Desirable qualities of natural, organic warmth make this an earphone to enjoy for hours on end

### Cons

- None other than the fact that this model makes us wonder what a 'True Wireless' version of RHA's T20 earphone might be like

Tidal]. As the synth dips lower and lower the TrueConnects track right along, exhibiting exuberant qualities of dynamic 'bounce' and punch. The top-end and upper midrange of the TrueConnects is arguably slightly recessed, but offers admirable clarity without edge or glare.

RHA's TrueConnect earphones have become my favourite go-to recommendation in their price class. This is because they look good, feel good, and sound good, honouring the music—all for not a lot of money. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** 'True Wireless'-type Bluetooth earphones

**Driver Complement:** 6mm dynamic drivers

**Bluetooth Connectivity:** Bluetooth 5.0

**Bluetooth Range:** 10m

**Battery Type:** Lithium Ion

**Playing Time/Charge:** 5 hours

**Charging Times:** 15 min. = 50% recharge;  
1 hour 40min. = Full recharge

**Carry Case Charging Capacity:** 20 hours

**Accessories:** 7 pairs of silicone TrueConnect ear tips, 3 pairs of Comply™ Foam TrueGrip ear tips, USB charging cable

**Weight:** 13 grams (earpieces only), 91 grams (earpieces plus carry case/fast charger)

**Price:** £149.95, or \$169.95 US

### MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

**RHA Technologies**

69 Haugh Road, Glasgow G3 8TX, United Kingdom

URL: rha-audio.com

# hi-fi+

## Next issue THE Hi-Fi+ AWARDS!

It's that time again! Our chance to round up the best products we have seen in the last 12 months in every possible category of audio and personal audio. If you want to know what are the best audio components to buy from those made during 2019, don't miss next month's issue. Are we giving the game away with the image below – who knows?



### Plus:

Naim's excellent Mu-so Qb 2nd Generation music system, Accuphase's outstanding E370 integrated amplifier, Lyra's remarkable Atlas SL cartridge... and more!

HI-FI+ ISSUE 178 ON SALE DEC 5 2019 (UK), JAN 2, 2020 (US)

# Meet our new NAITs – with added love for vinyl



SUPERNAIT 3

NAIT XS 3

The third generation of the legendary Naim Audio NAIT integrated amplifiers is here, building on the success of its predecessors with extensive upgrades, all in service of the music.

As well as a significant step up in performance, the **NAIT XS 3** and **SUPERNAIT 3** both now offer built-in phono stages – making them perfect partners for turntables, as well as for streamers,

CD players, or just about any other music source you want to enjoy with the signature Naim sound.

Each component within the amplifiers has been scrutinised to identify and implement areas of improvement, from optimising transistors to doubling the speed of the voltage gain stage.

The result? The best-sounding integrated

amps Naim has ever produced, delivering greater pace and intimacy, whether they are driving a pair of speakers or headphones.

Handmade here in England, **SUPERNAIT 3** and **NAIT XS 3** are ready to power your favourite music – whatever format it is on – at specialist Naim retailers worldwide.

[naimaudio.com](http://naimaudio.com)



# LET IT LOOSE



## THE PROGRESSION AMPLIFIER SERIES

"Progression" – it's a word that suggests forward movement. The latest in Dan D'Agostino's growing family of power amplifiers is the culmination of a lifetime spent in the research and development of components that always rise to the occasion, that always respect the demands of the music and that convey realism from the most subtle of nuances to the most thunderous of crescendos. Constraints are not allowed to affect the dynamics. No loudspeaker

poses a threat. Progression monoblock and stereo amplifiers and the matching preamplifier deliver sound that's visceral, tactile and authentic. And if you know and love your music, "Progression" also describes a sequence of chords, also describes a sequence of chords, and in the case of rock and blues in particular, "power chords". Progression thus defines, in so many ways, the very foundations of music in all its forms.

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