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March 2019**



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editorial

Running a pair of valve amplifiers as the Extinction Rebellion protestors took over parts of Central London gave me pause. Just how 'green' is high-end audio? We leave preamps and DACs running continually, we run power amplifiers that consume more electricity in standby than the rest of the electronics in the home combined, and shipping a pair of extremely heavy loudspeakers around the world can't be good, can it?

In fact, we fare better than you might expect. A significant part of the carbon footprint of a product concerns the frequency of replacement, as frequently the original product ends up as landfill. The average product life cycle of typical consumer electronics is frighteningly short, and that masterpiece of glass and plastic that inhabits your pocket today will likely sit in a drawer three years from now, and then end up in a landfill site on the other side of the world within a decade. By way of contrast, an audiophile still enjoying the performance of a preamplifier built in the mid-1980s is not uncommon. We also learned to 'upcycle' long before it was fashionable, and there is a healthy trade in pre-owned audio equipment.

The running costs of most audio equipment is relatively low, in part because we don't actually use it that much if we are truly honest with ourselves. A Class A amplifier consumes considerably more power than a TV, but many families spend more hours in front TV in a day than some audio enthusiasts might in a week. That's not necessarily because we are constantly tweaking our systems or don't play them enough; we like to savour the finer things in life!

Perhaps our biggest impact on the environment is the on-going audio show circus, as it moves from country to country. As the last issue went to press, we flew to Chicago for the AXPONA show, and the moment this issue goes to the printers, the audio world will descend on Munich for High End 2019. These all-important events have not replaced the bricks-and-mortar dealer, but many do view such events as places to slim down their choices from an ever-increasing pool of audio products. And, just as we report on AXPONA this month, next month... Munich!

It is with great sadness that we learned as we went to press of the passing of Derek Jenkins. Derek was considered one of the best set-up engineers of the LP12, and – with Mark Digman – was one half of the Tangerine Audio brand making some of the most highly respected upgrades for the Linn. He will be greatly missed.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

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Please send your letters to Hi-Fi+, Unit 3, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire, SP6 1PA, United Kingdom.
Or email them to 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.

Clever or not?

Has anyone ever thought of using Clever Putty in an audio system. It seems like it could work well in places where Blu-tack is used, and is inexpensive. Has it been tried, and does it work? If so, what (if any) are the downsides?

Nigel Crittenden, via email

Clever Putty (which functions very similarly to Thinking Putty, Panzer Putty, and – of course – Silly Putty) is a dilatant silicon putty, meaning its behaviour changes with respect to the force applied to it. Which means you can mould it in your hands, but it would shatter if you hit it with a hammer, only to behave like sticky gloop when you pick up the pieces.

The problem with these kinds of materials is what they are best at is their biggest potential downfall for audio. It eventually conforms to whatever shape it is constrained by, and if there is no constraint, it just keeps spreading. As Clever Putty never sets, this works well in some form of constrained layer damping, acting as the filler in a sandwich of materials, but because it never sets, any means whereby Clever Putty can find a way out of that layer, means it can and it will. So putting a blob of it between a loudspeaker and the top-plate of a stand could be great, but watch out for the occasional globs of putty drool.

Another potential advantage-turned-problem is that it self-levels as it conforms, and if a product does not have an even weight distribution, the putty will potentially conform differently to each foot of that product. That said, it might be worth experimenting with Smart Putty as a baseboard, with several sealed bags sandwiched between two heavy plates.

Robert Hay – AudioQuest



The Dragonfly of happiness!

I picked up my AudioQuest Dragonfly – that I received for winning the Letter of the Month – at AXPONA this year, and the really nice guys at AudioQuest (especially Shane Buettner), even upgraded it from Black to Red as a thank you for my patience. Writing this on the morning after the AXPONA event, I have just taken it out of its package and have instant results.

It sounds very excellent! As an added bonus, my 'fly' turned green, indicating MQA with no additional power needed. The Dragonfly feeds an Elrog 300B SE amp directly and produces an acceptable listening volume. Even the volume slider in Roon works, although the sound is good enough that it's maybe desirable to add a preamp.

I may have to buy another Dragonfly... very soon. I want to thank you again for the Dragonfly DAC. Please thank AudioQuest for me.

James Sit, via email



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Never miss a beat

A record's spiral groove is around 420m per side and over this distance, the needle will dance savagely, vibrating at up to 20,000x a second, capturing millions of transients at a micron level. Remaining rock-solid where it matters is Huei, an advanced phono preamp that never loses focus. Microprocessor-controlled and distilled from 30 years of UK amplifier manufacturing, Huei brings the legendary Chord Electronics' precision to vinyl playback.

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- *It's really nice to get some positive feedback sometimes, and yes – we know just how good that little Dragonfly can be. Both the Black and especially the Red punch way above their weight. One thing I will have to point out... the delay in getting your Dragonfly was all down to us not informing AudioQuest US quickly, and they graciously gave you an upgrade to make good on our error. Now that's service! – Ed*

Observation is king?

After reading *Hi-Fi+*'s 20 Anniversary Issue (Issue 170), I have been reflecting on the purpose of an equipment review.

The valuable commodity that the reviewer has is that they have used and heard the piece of equipment in question. It is this tangible and audible experience that I want to read about. The feel and the sound of it, together with suggestions about the context in which it gives of its best. A technical description can be found on the manufacturer's web site, taking up word count on this in the body of the review is simply a waste to the reader.

I was struck by the shortness of the portion of each review which actually describes how the piece of equipment sounds. For example, Paul Messenger's review of the B&W 603. The only description of how the speakers actually sound is in the penultimate paragraph with the words "overall neutrality".

A review devoted entirely to the experience of using and getting the best from the equipment in question would be a revelation and shake up what has become an industry wide formulaic approach to reviews. Focus on what the reader is looking for and they will beat a path to your door.

Andrew Gilyead, via email

We do try where possible to return a reasonable set of descriptions of a loudspeaker, but each reviewer has their own balance. Some run their own measurements and attempt to correlate that with their observational findings; Paul Messenger is one such reviewer. Others take a more pure observational route. We do strive to reproduce the sound of a product in print, but each product, and each reviewer, have their own approach.

We still hold that a review is viewed in isolation and that it should contain all the information required for an individual to make their decision. That will have some overlap with the information imparted by a manufacturer. Sometimes – especially in streaming products – this information is intrinsic to the operational performance of the product. We have to balance that with descriptions of the observational performance. – Ed

Still stereo after all these years?

I bought my first stereo system in 1970 and have changed incrementally to arrive at my present system of Cyrus electronics; CD & FM Radio with MonoX200s powering B&W 804D3s sited in a family living room where theoretically ideal setup has to be compromised for a music/life balance.

I do not habitually read hi-fi publications but bought this for the system set-up disc which confirms that my setup, whilst imperfect is as good and perhaps even better than I could have expected in my circumstances and chimes with the musical pleasure it delivers.

What was pleasantly surprising was to find that your magazine, in contrast to others which appear to concentrate so much on TV and AV, applies itself almost exclusively to two-channel stereo, the only real solution to serious enjoyment of music in the home and in this issue, has interesting articles on manufacturers and retailers.

I have no plan to become a subscriber but fully expect to be buying future issues on a fairly regular basis..

Douglas Bateman, Epsom

Thank you for your kind words. We do try to concentrate fully on the two-channel musical experience, although there is still some mileage in multichannel music, especially in terms of classical on Blu-ray Audio. Jimmy Hughes is a strong supporter.

Nevertheless, we feel that stereophonic music replay in all its guises has an ability to captivate the listener in a way no other media can. Whether it's a fully traditional stereo system using a record player or even reel-to-reel, or streamed music from online sources, regardless of whether it is played through conventional cone-and-dome loudspeakers, panel loudspeaker designs, or the latest in personal audio electronics, the feelings one gets from listening to music played well is hard to beat. – Ed

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or exploring the world of Roon, you'll enjoy music streamed with our signature pace, rhythm and timing. Handmade here in England, the slimline ND5 XS 2, Classic superstar NDX 2 (pictured) and flagship ND 555 players are winning Awards around the world. Hear the difference with your favourite music at your local Naim specialist retailer.

naimaudio.com/streaming

Awards for NDX 2



AXPONA 2019 Show Report

by Chris Martens, Eric Neff, and Alan Sircom



Computer Audio Design's £16.5k GC-R Reference Ground Control takes the idea of reducing high-frequency noise on the signal ground and earth to the max. I think it should be called the 'Major Tom'!



With the paint only just dry on the prototype, AXPONA was the venue for the world launch of Primare's new R35 MM/MC phono preamplifier. With 36 to 76 dB of gain, 21 step adjustable capacitive and resistive loading, and both RCA and XLR output, the R35 is expected later this year and is set to cost less than \$2,000.



VPI's new \$15,000 40th Anniversary turntable features an ultra-quiet coreless direct drive motor system and comes fitted with a gimbal bearing-equipped (not a unipivot) tonearm.



Design Build Listen Wand Plus- and Master-series tonearms: \$1,400 - \$3,250 (depending on arm length and series selected).

Each successive year, the high-end audio world gets more distanced from the leading consumer electronics event, the Las Vegas CES in early January. AXPONA is the American replacement to CES for audio companies, and as a result each year it grows in size and importance. Even late snow-storms and remnants of polar vortexes cannot slow AXPONA down, although a sudden flurry of snow on the last day of the show did hit overall attendance figures.

Based in the Chicago suburbs, AXPONA takes over an entire convention centre, with the halls filled with personal audio and vendors of smaller items, and the hotel rooms packed with new and exciting audio products of all kinds. Coming just a month before the largest audio show in the world – Munich High-End – does mean a few key product

launches are held back, but there are a number of brands that buck the trend, whether because the American market is their main venue, or simply because they want to get their new product to market as fast as possible. This makes the show more relevant than most regional events and, although it doesn't draw in the same degree of international focus as Munich or Hong Kong, it has become one of the must-see events in the high-end calendar. And shows no sign of waning.

Any show report has to be editorial. With hundreds of exhibits and potentially thousands of products on display, a definitive round-up of products would be as exhausting to read as it would be to produce. Even so, we have split the task in two, with a collection of the latest conventional two channel audio in this issue, and a follow-up focusing on personal audio in the next. +



Digital guru Ted Smith is putting the finishing touches on a two-box statement DAC for PS Audio, expected to cost up to \$25,000!



Acora Acoustics \$27,995 USD/pr SRC-1 are a two-Way speaker featuring a 7 in paper woofer and a 1 in soft dome ring tweeter and weigh in at 246 lbs thanks to a cabinet of solid granite.



Magico's surprise launch at the show was the \$56,000 M2 floorstanding loudspeaker, which pulls together many concepts developed for the M3 and M6, and weaves in some of its own!



Frank Van Alstine was showing his latest amp creation, the DVA SET 600 Mono Block Solid State Amplifier (\$2,500 USD ea.), driving Alta Audio Celesta FRM-2's speakers (\$13,000 USD/pr).



The newest model in Technics' resurgent direct-drive turntable family is the SL-1500C, an all-in-one model for \$1,200.



Western Electric was showing a soon to be released Integrated Amplifier, the single-ended triode 91E (\$12,500 USD).



Nagra's demonstrations are geared to showing its new \$60,000 HD Preamp, which was first shown in prototype form a year ago. It sounded great in this Brinkann/Nagra/Khama system.



Called an 'integrated D/A converter' EMM Labs \$30,000 DV2, combines the performance of the brand's outstanding DA2 DAC with a quantisation-noise-free VControl gain control.



Clearaudio Concept Active is intended as an all-in-one, 'instant analogue' solution that incorporates turntable, a choice of arm and cartridges, built-in phono stage, and headphone amplifier sections.



Polish digital experts LampizatOr showed a wholly new version of its popular Golden Gate DAC. The new \$16,995 GG2 supports digital audio signals to DSD 512 and has a new dedicated PCM engine.



The Ethos by Gryphon is a \$39,000 top-loading CD player flagship, that produced a truly awesome sound at the show.



Jeff Joseph is one of those designers who is incapable of making a bad loudspeaker. Joseph Audio's latest \$14,999 Perspective2 with graphene-coated magnesium woofers prove this!



AVM's \$17,390 A8.3 integrated amplifier is capable of delivering 200W per channel, sports analogue, digital, and next-gen Wi-Fi audio inputs, and even features a custom-made Class A headphone stage.



Alongside the exhibits and the stands, there were regular seminars at AXPONA. In this gathering, Gabi Rijnveld of Crystal Cable introduced the new Future Dream cables.



The compact flagship from Borresen Audio is the 05 (\$120,000/pr). It is deceptively powerful and very fast!



Raidho had two wholly new models on show; the \$126,000 TD 4.6 (above) and the \$24,000 TD 1.2 stand-mount.



The belt-drive Volare is the newest and also the least expensive of all Dr Feickert Analogue turntables. Demonstrated here with Origin Live Silver Mk3 tonearm: \$3,495 for the package.



Luxman's newest L-509x Integrated amplifier (\$9,495 USD) formed the heart of an extremely enjoyable system, fed by Luxman vinyl and digital, with Melco streaming, all into Harbeth speakers.



King of 'it's not home, but it's much', Florida-based Bending Wave showed the giant Goebel Divin Noblesse loudspeakers with CH and TechDAS. This \$200k design isn't Goebel's largest model!



MSB's full set of digital audio and amplifier components cost a pretty penny, but they also sounded exceptionally good, and were probably the best sounding of a slew of MQA demos.

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Model 9600 mk2 vacuum tube mono power amplifier



Model 120 solid state MC stereo phono preamplifier



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First seen at the Bristol show, but sounding even better thanks to a slightly larger room and some excellent Trilogy electronics, the Neat Acoustics isobarically loaded, ribbon using £2,999 Ekstra loudspeaker made the British brand a lot of new friends 'across the pond'.



The new three-way Y\$32,800 YG Acoustics Vantage slots between the Carmel 2 and Hailey 2 models. Played with Kronos vinyl and Mola Mola and Audionet electronics, this sounded sublime.



Vinnie Rossi introducing his new Stiletto 15 Loudspeakers (\$20,000 USD expected price). They were still in pre-production form yet these open-baffle designed speakers tantalised us!



Playing on Lateral's new stand, Playback Designs MPS-8 SACD player was showcasing Lyn Stanley's outstanding music.



Xact Audio offer Garrard restoration and upgrade services, including the exotic 7-layer Gen III Dobbins plinth.



Wynn Audio is fast becoming one of the best distributors in America, with a fine portfolio of great products, like this great-sounding Thales, Metronome, Karan, and Vimberg system.



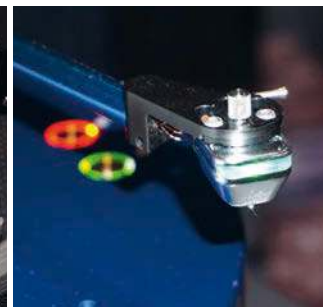
Zesto Audio's room was a true oasis after a long day of show coverage. Their latest tube wonder is the Andros Deluxe vacuum tube phono preamp (\$6,900 USD).



The \$9,700 remodelled Garrard (above) was sounding enticing in a fine system of vdH phono stage, Accustic Arts digital and analogue electronics, and Magico loudspeakers.



Cary's new \$5,995 USD SLI-100 integrated amp forgoes tubed rectification and replaces them with Hexfred solid state rectification and also moves the power tubes up to the KT150's.



The \$2,750 DS-E1 optoelectric phono cartridge with matching equalizer/preamp is DS Audio's new entry point.

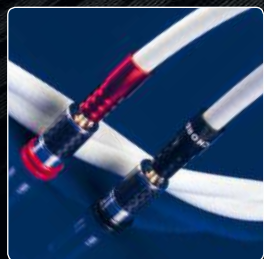
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Music Hall's new \$799 MMF 3.3 turntable/toner package, which comes bundled with a Ortofon Red MM cartridge.



Audio Note's playing of its *Pure Cello* recording of Vincent Bélanger was so life-like, you could have sworn he was in the room playing. In fact, the record does sound very good too!



Still making a name for itself in America, Fyne Audio showed its F1-10 (\$24,000 USD), it's first model in its flagship range. Judging by AXPONA it's off to a Fyne start in the US market.



British valve amp company Art Audio took over Claro Engineering turntables. Art's new Composer-Solo turntable with Ortofon TA-110 tonearm and Cadenza Bronze phono cartridge: \$8,199



Bel Canto's new e1X DAC/Control Preamp is Roon ready and can accommodate Tidal, Qobuz and MQA (\$6,400 USD) and e1X Stereo Amplifier with 200 wpc at 8 Ohms (\$6,000 USD) offer all the sonic qualities and sound shaping capabilities of their more expensive siblings. Paired here with Audiovector's SR 3 Avantgarde Arrete' (\$9,999).



People often associate T+A with audio electronics, but its mighty \$73,000 Solitaire loudspeakers beg to differ.



Audio-Technica's \$795 AT-LP7 is an all-in-one combo including a turntable (A-T's best), tonearm, an A-T VM520EB dual moving magnet phono cartridge, and a built-in MM/MC phono stage.



Gershman Acoustics played its \$13,000 USD Grand Avant Garde's through a VAC Statement 450S iQ dual mono amp (\$63,000 USD) and a VAC Master preamp (\$40,000 USD).



Esprit Audio is a French high-end cable brand with no less than eight different lines of products at different price points, ranging from the Alpha to the mighty and deliciously-named Eureka line.



EAT's new Forte (from \$9,500) uses a two-pulley/two-belt drive system and outboard motor/speed controller. The \$7,995 F-Note is a 12-inch tonearm that features an on-the-fly VTA adjustment system.

M O O N

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Magico A3 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Magico is well known as one of the world's best high-end loudspeaker brands, but when it comes to that world where the high-end meets the word 'attainable', things get a little sketchy. This is a company that makes uncompromising loudspeakers with equally compromise-free price tags, so bringing the Magico name down from the stratosphere without sacrifice was not an option. There have been some very successful entry-level products from the company, but 'entry level' was still beyond reach for many, and the uncompromising stance that might work for more elite consumers (such as needing to return the speakers to the factory for repairs) is not an option as we join high-end's nursery slopes. The A3 addresses all these things, producing at last an attainably-priced loudspeaker that Magico can call its own, while making it suitable for a wider audience. In the process, Magico helps reset what high-end is all about.

At a basic level, the A3 is every inch a Magico loudspeaker. It uses high-tech materials in its drive units, it has a sealed cabinet made of solid panels of aluminium, there is no such thing as bi-wiring, and it sits on a set of spikes that would rip through the armour of a WWII tank if fired at sufficient speed. The finish options – in Magico's traditional manner – range from flat obsidian, through pitch, to coal. In other words... matt black. It's a fine anodised finish rather than a powder-coat and is the finish shared by Magico models that cost 20x the price of the A3, so it's nothing to be sniffed at. ▶



“Magico has also made a conscious effort to make the A3 more of a practical solution for high-end neophytes and down-shifters alike.”

► Beneath the surface there beats a heart of pure Magico, too. The 6061 T6 aircraft-grade aluminium enclosure (like Big Boy Magico models) includes a complex series of internal polished aluminium bracing sections, designed to add mass and stiffness while lowering internal resonance. This has similarities with the internal structure of loudspeakers in Magico’s considerably more expensive S, M, and Q series. To make the A3 both attainably priced and weigh less than a small car, this is just internal bracing (essentially the plates of the outside of the A3 here form the enclosure itself, where in bigger Magicos they are a heavy skin on an aluminium skeleton). While the heavier and more expensive construction adds considerably to the performance of upper echelon Magicos, this simpler, lighter form of construction sacrifices next to nothing sonically, and sets the A3 head-and-shoulders ahead of the pack at the price.

The drive units are remarkably similar to those found in more up-scale Magicos. The A3 features a 28mm Beryllium-coated tweeter (although the top-flight Magicos now feature a Beryllium-diamond composite, Beryllium is still a major part of the Magico sound). In addition, the A3’s single 160mm Graphene Nano-Tec midrange unit and two 178mm Graphene Nano-Tec bass drivers are – notionally at least – like combining the cone-type midrange driver from the S series with two of the three bass drive units from the M3. In reality, the drive units in these more esoteric designs have an order of magnitude more engineering applied, utilise different magnet structures and even different grades of material in the drive unit itself, but the A3 still represents a trickle down of Magico’s Graphene Nano-Tec driver technology, and the benefits it bestows on the sound quality.

Perhaps the biggest concession to the more compromised world that comes with attainable price points is the drive units are both conventionally mounted on the front baffle, and don’t demand being returned to the manufacturer in the event of damage. In fairness, the S series also has drive units bolted to the front baffle, but ideally requires an engineer competent enough to perform such a driver swap in a relatively complex loudspeaker system, and in reality that likely makes for a more expensive process and one that leaves the listener Magico-less for a long period. The A3’s less elaborate internal architecture makes swapping out a drive unit easier.

Magico has also made a conscious effort to make the A3 more of a practical solution for high-end neophytes and down-shifters alike. The 88dB sensitivity figure coupled with a four-ohm impedance figure actually holds, with no nasty little phase angle impedance dips that would rip the MOSFETs from many good amplifiers. This wasn’t just a lucky break; Magico consciously designed, tested, and listened to the A3 specifically with equally attainably priced amplifiers in mind. In fact, when showing the A3 to the UK press last year, Alon Wolf of Magico let slip that – in spite of the hundreds of thousand of pounds worth of system playing at the time – the A3s were tested on (and sounded great through) a Hegel H360 integrated amplifier, which cost slightly less than one of the power cords used in that press demonstration.

In that spirit, the A3 was used with equipment exotic and prosaic. I even used it with the Primare I25 Prisma (tested on page 57 of this issue). This is colloquially known as a ‘mullet’ system, because of the way the budget is allocated (the speakers are worth almost 3.5x as much as the amp), and is traditionally not recommended as the speaker shows up too many of the limitations of the amp. But not this time. In fairness, this is probably the entry point for A3-compatible amplifiers (the bigger I35 integrated amplifier made a lot more sense with the A3). Read this back again in the context of other Magico models and you’ll see why the A3 is so important... and so popular. Typically, a Magico would sit at the end of a collection of hyper-exotic audio (popular pairings include Constellation Audio and Soulution Audio, neither of which are associated with the word ‘cheap’), so a loudspeaker that more than plays nice with more affordable electronics is a bit of a game-changer from a brand like Magico. If nothing else, it means others must do the same.

This might seem like a trivial thing, but the A3s are not shipped in the usual wooden crates that normally arrive with high-end loudspeakers, but instead arrive in thick, double-skinned cardboard. The A3s still require at least two people to manoeuvre them out of their boxes (ideally, two people to hold the loudspeaker and one to hold the box... and one to change the lightbulb), but these are not the stuff of piano movers, back injuries, or hernias. There is an accessories kit Velcroed to the rear of one cardboard box containing spikes, floor protectors, the warranty, and a Magico-branded orange cleaning cloth. ►

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“It works as you would expect it to sound, but more specifically as you would like it to sound.”



► The other big concession of sorts is installation. Magicos are loudspeakers that require careful and sensitive positioning, if not perhaps to the “three nanometres to the left” anal-retentiveness of some designs. While the A3’s user manual gives comprehensive instructions on setting up in the best possible way, the A3 seems more accommodating of both a less-than-perfect room and a less-than-ideal installation. The installation guide is relatively pragmatic, and free from voodoo. It does recommend using a well-recorded jazz track with a bass guitar to determine optimum position from the rear wall, and piano and female vocal to determine the best stereo imaging and distance from side walls. It also recommends overdoing both until finding the best position and compromise between these two important considerations. However, it’s a fact of modern life that as the man cave becomes increasingly a luxury unavailable to many, we have to place loudspeakers in environments and positions that are pretty far from optimal. The usual rear and side wall, equilateral triangle, and toe-in rules apply, but they can be considered guidelines instead of strict edicts. Yes, of course, the more you put into the installation process, the more you get from them, and no-one is going to just ‘plonk down’ a pair of loudspeakers like the A3. But, if you are one of those unlucky souls who craves high-end performance in a domestic environment where pragmatism reigns, this is one of the few truly high-end designs that will make concessions. So that right-hand loudspeaker that is a few inches closer to the wall than it should be is not something that ends in tears. Just remember to get as close to correct as possible... and make sure they are level. That seems to be extremely important.

Running in is a breeze, although the A3s do benefit from many hours of music replay to help shake them into shape. The loudspeaker’s basic character comes through from the first moment you play the A3s (although a trifle more bass seems to emerge after a few hours of play); it’s just that over time it improves and coheres.

From the outset, there is a precision to the performance of the A3. It works as you would expect it to sound, but more specifically as you would *like* it to sound. There is a myth that precision in loudspeakers spells some kind of boring mediocrity, but the A3 – like many Magicos before it – dispels that myth effectively. This is a piece of precision engineering and that precision applies to the sound just as much as it does to the enclosure and drive units.

The easiest ways of determining this precision engineering sound are using the same test record types Magico recommends in setting up a pair of loudspeakers; a well-recorded small jazz combo with a fine bass guitar line, a solo female voice, and piano. Perhaps this is why Diana Krall is so popular among audiophiles – she’s a one-stop shop for assessing equipment. Well, almost.

Starting with female vocals, and ‘Follow My Voice’ from Julie Byrne’s *Not Even Happiness* album [Ba Da Bing records], her ethereal, breathy vocal floats perfectly between the loudspeakers her guitar positioned just slightly in front of the mix, and the subtle strings to the rear – all combine beautifully. It’s not an ‘audiophile’ recording (the mix is a little forward, her voice is a little too close mic’d, and yet – strangely – there is a lot of reverb tacked on that voice), but it highlights just how much information is getting through the A3 that you can clearly define those imperfections in a recording. ►

“This loudspeaker is a transcript of recorded music, and makes many of its rivals sound like pale interpreters.”

► Moving over to solo piano – Glenn Gould playing the Bach Goldberg Variations [A State of Wonder, Sony Classical] I flipped between the mono 1955 version and the stereo 1981 interpretation and found the A3’s revelled in both performances, easily portraying the more showy earlier version against the more introspective later recording. The tonality of the two recordings isn’t that different (showing just how good Columbia’s engineers can be), but the musical intent is very different and the Magico plays both without favour. That is rare because even supposedly neutral loudspeakers here tend to either go with the impressiveness of the ‘55, or the more sonorous ‘81. The difference between them is not masked – if anything, it is more marked – but this loudspeaker is a transcript of recorded music, and makes many of its rivals sound like pale interpreters.

I’m not sure if the ‘jazz with bass guitar’ is solely directed at Jaco Pastorius, but it’s hard to leave him out of the mix. His eponymous debut on Epic includes the solo piece ‘Portrait of Tracy’, which is mostly harmonics. This really is an acid test for a loudspeaker; any flat spots in the presentation come across as dead music, any resonances buzz like crazy. But if it works, it’s an intensely moving personal work, as it is through the A3. The music flows entirely unimpeded by the loudspeakers and the system... and if you know just how rare that is and just how big a system you need to normally achieve that kind of result, you begin to get the reason why the A3 is so important.

The A3 has its limits, rather than weaknesses, but realistically those limits are only shown in comparison to bigger loudspeakers, and typically bigger Magicos. A sealed enclosure of this size doesn’t re-enact the Who’s *Live At Leeds* album [Decca] at the sort of deafening levels it was recorded at, but the A3 is so undistorted until it hits its end-stops, that might be a good thing – this sort of clean sound played very loud is deceptively easy to listen to, and that way spells hearing damage. Other speakers at the price sound as if they go louder than the A3s, but that’s often just the drivers crapping out!

Magico faces some tough opposition, both from similarly-directed high-end brands smart enough to recognise the high-end needs a shake-up, and from upper tier designs from well-established mainstream brands who can wield huge marketing budgets. Fortunately, it sees them off effectively by sounding damn good, making the A3 hit the ground running. It begins its life at the top of the tree of loudspeakers in the sub-£20,000 category.

The A3 is an important loudspeaker, and not just for Magico. In truth, the audio world already knows this... the lengthy hiatus between the A3’s launch and this, its first review in an English language high-end magazine, is simply down to the sheer number of A3s ordered every time they are demonstrated. There’s a reason for that. This isn’t ‘discount Magico’ or ‘Magico-lite’, and it isn’t even ‘Emporio Magico’: the A3 is a top-class Magico loudspeaker in its own right. It’s the one to beat at the price... and far beyond. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, four driver, sealed cabinet floorstanding loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1 × 28mm Beryllium dome tweeter, 1 × 160mm Graphene Nano-Tec Midrange, 2 × 178mm Graphene Nano-Tec bass units

Sensitivity: 88dB

Impedance: 4ohms

Frequency Response: 22Hz–50kHz

Recommended power: 50–300W

Dimensions (H×D×W): 112 × 27 × 23cm

Weight: 50kg per loudspeaker

Price: £11,998 per pair

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Von Gaylord Audio system:

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by Alan Sircom



There are those who snigger at the name Von Gaylord. The six-year-olds in the audio business aside, the company came out of design criteria first seen in the Legend loudspeaker. Von Gaylord Audio is designed to make a more systemic approach to music reproduction than can be made simply by adding a pair of loudspeakers to a system. ▶





▶ Von Gaylord's biggest identifier in some circles (puerile sniggering aside) was its liquid cooled valve amplifiers, the Uni Sea models. These came with a significant does of 'WTF?' when first seen (high voltages, glass, and liquid... what could possibly go wrong?), but is actually insanely sensible when you dig a little deeper. The four-chassis amplifier pumps out 200W in Class A and without that liquid cooling, listening would be on the Hades side of 'uncomfortable'. Overclockers and supercomputer designers regularly liquid cool their hot-running computers; why should audio be any different? We're not testing the Uni Sea (at least not yet), but instead have gone with VGA's other Big Idea... the systemic approach to audio. OK, so VGA is not alone in making such an approach, with brands like McIntosh and Audio Note both making valve amplification, speakers, and more. However, this only goes to show the validity of the idea.

VGA's quest for music perfection doesn't extend to the front-end, however. This is a conscious decision, both playing to the design team's strengths and a recognition that a small audio brand must concentrate its energies on devices that are not money pits. To *do* digital audio properly today requires a multi-disciplinary team of digital engineers, app designers, and even helpline experts to prevent that new wonder-streamer from becoming an expensive brick a month after launch because of a wireless router upgrade. There are companies that specialise in that field, but for a company of VGA's size, they specialise in that field alone. Instead, the brand takes the best of that digital output and gives it the full VGA treatment.

That treatment begins with the Harmony line preamplifier, the entry point into VGA's systems. This one-box valve design strips away all but the basic functions of a preamp, passing up on a balance control, balanced inputs or outputs, or even a tape loop. There are just three single-ended line inputs, two knobs, and a toggle switch (OK, there's a basic remote and a blue LED denoting power on status, but that's about it). Inside, this is a point-to-point preamplifier, using VGA's premium silver wire throughout. Short of a passive pot in a box, this has to be one of the simplest preamps on the market at the moment, and when it comes to preamps, simple is good!

This connects to the outside world through the deliciously named Chinchilla Mk II interconnects (there is a power cord – but not UK ready yet – and used ▶

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DYNAUDIO Evoke

▶ to be a matching loudspeaker cable which is temporarily off the radar, leaving just the Return Of The Legend 7000 wires). These use different gauge strands of silver and copper. Unlike most cables (where these conductors would either be twisted together or laid in parallel, the Chinchilla Mk 2 use a combination of both design types within the same grey braid. They are terminated at both ends with lacquered locking RCA connectors, which do mean the spacing of the outputs of any digital device need to be wider than usual (the RCA connectors of my workhorse Hegel Mohican CD player were too close together for these cables, for example).

The next link in the chain is the Nirvana mono power amplifier. This all-valve design uses two 6SN7 double-triode valves in the input stage and two matched pairs of 6550 power valves in the output. These are fully self-biasing and are capable of a claimed 130W per channel. Autobias aside, there are few concessions to modernity here, in all the good ways. OK, that also means no valve cage so it's perhaps not the first choice for those with tearaway toddlers (or lumbering Labradors), but it is also – like the Harmony – a full point-to-point wired design without a PCB in sight. It includes four and eight ohm output taps, with high-grade binding posts. The pair weigh in at a fairly meaty 41kg.

The final link in the chain is the Legend Reference, which has more than a nod back to VGA's original incarnation. This is a two-chassis low floorstander (which is, in fact, probably best used on low stands, getting the tweeter closer to ear height). It's a three-way ported design, with the top-box containing the 38mm inverted Kevlar dome tweeter and the 184mm Kevlar mid-woofer, and the lower cabinet sporting a 254mm woofer. The truncated pyramid shape means a lot of non-parallel surfaces inside the cabinets of both loudspeaker enclosures, which helps keep internal resonance at a minimum, and the loudspeakers are connected in series. As the top-box is bi-wireable, you could notionally run three sets of speaker wire from amp to loudspeaker, which could get spendy!

ALLNIC (ZERO LOSS) TECHNOLOGY



*"I don't understand why these are so good,
It's almost like other cable companies are doing it wrong"*
Happy client - Corby's Audio

VGA's Legend Reference is rare for a loudspeaker in that it has just the one finish on offer – gloss mahogany. There are no grilles, no frills, and there is little in the way of high-grade nonsense on the website. The loudspeaker system is efficient (the quoted 90dB sensitivity and eight-ohm load seem accurate, and if anything somewhat modest), and is stated as returning a full 20Hz-25kHz (within 3dB) frequency response.

The thing about VGA is there isn't a *thing*. The products are described in bullet points on the website and while there is more information on flyers whenever Von Gaylord Audio rocks up at a show, these are remarkably un-pushy, almost to the point of self-deprecation. It's almost as if the company wants us to listen to its product, not its hype!

Let's get the nasties out of the way first. The combination of a loudspeaker this sensitive with a powerful and dynamic valve amplifier, and a preamplifier that has a sensitive volume control means occasionally things get loud, fast. The difference in output level of two recordings is the difference between "that's really good" and "I promise not to play that loud again, officer." In terms of volume control adjustment, that point between 'too quiet', 'too loud' and 'just right' is a hair's breadth. I played two recordings in quick succession – 'Figure' by Vök from the Network album of the same name, and the title track from *Inform Educate Entertain* by Public Service Broadcasting [Test Card], and if you set the volume by the first, the second was almost inaudible, while vice versa was too loud. This is a first, and I'm not sure whether it even counts as a 'nasty'. In fact, it suggests the VGA system is transcribing the differences between digital files so well that changes in level that might otherwise pass almost unnoticed are brought into sharp highlight. What is good here, however, is that sound played loud is muscular, dynamic, and clean. There is no shouty element to this reproduction (unless you play very loud indeed) and the mix of samples and very fine drumming on the Public Service Broadcasting track was clearly delineated... and rhythmic fun to boot!



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“A part of this coherence comes as a result of exceptional dynamic range. Sounds have a shock quality as they start and stop fast.”

► Now that the safe-cracker volume part of the performance is out of the way, we can get on with enjoying the VGA system because it is extremely enjoyable. There's an ease to the whole presentation that accents the coherence of the system perfectly. Music flows effortlessly from theme to theme, and no track highlighted this better than 'Contact' by the Gary Peacock Trio on their *Tangents* album [ECM]. This track evolves from avant-garde noodling into a clever piece of thematic almost modal jazz over its first four minutes, and that acts as a test of a system's coherence; if you can tease out where the noodling is going in the first three minutes, the system is on form, but if you are still scratching your head five minutes into the track... get a different system. On the VGA rig, you got in lock-step with what the trio were doing pretty quickly.

A part of this coherence comes as a result of exceptional dynamic range. Sounds have a shock quality as they start and stop fast, whether that's the 'don't mess with me' anger of Little Simz [Grey Area, Age 101], or the sheer power of Joyce DiDonato's voice singing Donizetti's 'I Capuleti e i Montecchi' [*Stella di Napoli*, Erato]. Both these tracks also hint at other areas of excellence in the VGA system. Little Simz girl-grime rap is hard to follow both in terms of accent and sheer speed, but the system is both quick-witted and articulate enough to cope. On the other hand, the *Stella di Napoli* album highlights the good image depth created by the system. That image is deeper than it is wider, but the overall effect is one of a really natural sound, rather than hi-fi artefact. You don't feel like there is a ball of musicians in the distance, but neither do you get the artificial layers and metres-wide instruments of some of the more imaging-oriented systems.

An interesting part of this system is it isn't quite how you might expect it to sound. Big, efficient loudspeakers fed effortlessly by big valve power amplifiers... that's going to sound rich and lush; the kind of system that forces you to play Nat 'King' Cole albums every few days. While the VGA system is very good at playing 1950s crooners with spun-sugar voices, in fact this is a system that by those 'what's a tweeter?' standards is actually a detailed and almost bright-sounding system. It's not hyper-detailed, especially in the context of the etched brightness of today's audio, but neither is it the rose-tinted view of valve-based audio you might expect.

The more I played music through the VGA system, the more music I wanted to play, which is always a good sign in a system. Moreover, it invited me to explore different musical avenues with each piece of music played, rather than more predictable musical tramlines. That suggests the system is so adept at not getting in the way of the music, it's allowing me to be my own musical curator without the sound influencing my internal and almost unconscious decision-making processes. If James Brown leads you to Schoenberg, which then leads you (via Judas Priest) to Fela Kuti, the system is giving you the freedom to explore music well.

SYSTEM COMPONENTS

Harmony

One box, three-input single-ended line preamplifier: £5,995

Nirvana

Mono, all tube power amplifier: £6,495 per pair

Legend Reference loudspeaker

Two-chassis, passive ported stand-mount loudspeaker: £14,995

Chinchilla interconnect cables: £995/1m pair

Manufactured by: Von Gaylord Audio

Tel: +1 415-328-9572

URL: vongaylordaudio.com

You'll notice that throughout this test I have concentrated deliberately on discussing the system *qua* system and have not broken it into constituent components. That's not malign; these devices play nice with the other children. But it's that they work exceptionally well together that to break rank is to break some of that wonderful coherence, and it's one of those things that you almost immediately feel the urge to restore. That might just be the best part of the whole VGA package; it works so well that when you start splitting things up you start to appreciate how Yoko Ono must have felt in the late 1960s. You almost feel like blaming yourself for your senseless actions and rebuild the system.

Von Gaylord Audio has made a great system here. It's unprepossessing and understated yet is capable of great force and power. It's subtle, yet bold. All the components of this system work well outside of the VGA ecosystem, but work so well inside that system that I can't pick out one as being exceptional or the weak link in the chain. It all just works together so well that you can't help but be impressed. If you can handle the hyper-sensitive volume control, Von Gaylord's entry is worth looking up. +



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Positive Feedback, January 2016

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COMPETITION

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We have partnered up with the clever folks from Meze Audio to bring you an exciting competition for a chance to win a pair Empyrean planar magnetic headphones worth €2,999.

Our Editorial Director, Chris Martens reviewed the Empyrean in *Hi-Fi+* issue #171 where he wrote, "As I began evaluating the Empyrean, I quickly learned two things. First, the headphone initially sounds good, but perhaps a little softly focussed and dynamically reserved. It needs substantial run-in time (>100 hours) before it opens up to achieve optimal resolution, transient speed, and dynamic acuity. Second, the Empyrean proved very sensitive to the quality of ancillary amps and DACs; plan on using top-shelf electronics to hear the Meze at its best."

He went on to say, "At its best, the Empyrean offers neutral (yet never austere) tonal balance, extremely fine levels of resolution for both textural and transient sounds, expressive dynamics, and an almost casual-sounding, offhand quality of sonic naturalness."

He concluded by saying, "If you give the Empyrean time, it will reward you with a rare combination of balance, finesse, and all-round expressiveness. It is only with extreme reluctance that I must force myself to give these back to Meze." +



Competition Question

How long a run-in time does Chris Martens recommend you give the Empyrean?

- A. <10 hours
- B. <=50 hours
- C. >100 hours

To answer, please visit Meze's dedicated competition page at mezeaudio.com/pages/hifi-plus-competition Alternatively, send your answer on a postcard (including your name, address, and contact details) to Empyrean Competition, Meze Audio, Str. Independentei 12/3, Baia Mare, 430071, Romania.

Competition Rules

The competition will run from June 6th 2019 until August 1st 2019. The competition is open to everyone, but multiple, automated, or bulk entries will be disqualified. The winner will be chosen at random from all valid entries, will be contacted via email (where possible), and their name will be published in the magazine. The Editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd. is compliant with the Data Protection Act and UK laws apply. Our policy is such that we will not pass on your details to any third party without your prior consent.



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Alan Sircom – HiFi+ #163

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Cartridges clockwise from top left: DS-E1 , DS-002, DS-W2, DS Master1. Phono equalisers from left to right: DS-002, DS-W2

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DS-002 ‘Clean, yet sweet, precise in imaging and grand in scale’

DS-E1 “The chance to hear your LPs as you’ve never imagined” Ken Kessler, HiFi News

dCS Bartók Network DAC

by Chris Thomas



We are now well into what I might describe as the second-age of high-end steaming and dCS has completed its renaissance by discontinuing all its older models, leaving the company with three distinct product levels. Sitting firmly at the top is the Vivaldi, comprised of anything up to four boxes in complexity and quality, though there is also a limited edition single box model named Vivaldi One. Just below is the Rossini range, which recently had a separate SACD transport added. But now we have the Bartók. At the moment there are two models. The straight Network DAC that you see here or the DAC plus integrated headphone amplifier, which costs approximately £2,000 more and that we will take a closer look at in the near future.

For me, the Vivaldi changed everything as far as digital replay and streaming are concerned and the Rossini obviously benefitted enormously from that platform. Now the Bartók steps into the fray and the DAC is another impressive product that sets an extremely high performance plateau, with the potential for firmware updates long into the future. I have seen how the Vivaldi has benefitted from this over the years and how the Vivaldi DAC is now a far better and musically 'deeper' design than it used to be. This came about through work on just about every aspect of its technical performance through new mapping algorithms, digital filters, development of the Ring DAC, and other sections of the Vivaldi platform. For serious digital companies this open-ended

commitment to future firmware updates has become the way forward and the Bartók will be no exception.

Somewhere in the back of my mind and probably because I was bought up in the vinyl age, for a long time I had a simmering conflict where digitally encoded music is concerned. How can something as creative, limitless, organic, and human – along with all the billion nuances that the musical performance might contain – be contained within a tiny digital package ready to be regurgitated and reassembled while still maintaining all that speaks to us musically? For a long time, it seemed as though it couldn't. I guess it sounds a little naive to ask such a question right now while I am sitting listening to that very thing happening so wonderfully through the Bartók DAC, but it has long been a serious consideration for me. The over-mechanical, almost robotic realisation of rhythm and ▶



► tempo, the somewhat bleached and chilly tonality of earlier bandwidth-limited streamed digital has gone now, as has the detached and harsh performance of the streaming services. But, these days, get the digital side right and the world of music is at your fingertips and it's becoming more real and more human as time passes. I was, after all, a very late adopter.

The Bartók is a full width box that doesn't feature the sculptured front panel of the other dCS products, but it has just about everything else. It is an Upsampling Network DAC with full streaming abilities that borrows its Ring DAC from the Rossini. The company has been involved with intense development of their unique converter for a long time now. It's one of the main weapons in their armoury and they have learned how to control and deploy it since its inception all those years ago. The Bartók supports UPnP, asynchronous USB, and Apple Airplay as well as AES and S/PDIF digital audio streams. At the time of writing Bartók is also entirely compatible with both Tidal and Spotify Connect, but I can imagine that other streaming services may well be on the firmware horizon plus increased compatibility with other operating platforms (apart from iOS perhaps). If you have a separate dCS CD transport (no options are currently available within the Bartók range), it will accept everything up to and including SACD data through its Dual AES inputs.

Bartók shares the same basic platform as the Rossini and, as such, should be utilised with the dCS custom control app that gives users the option to decide their source for music playback by offering digital and UPnP sources while also providing straightforward access to the DAC settings. Upsampling can be selected as either DXD or DSD and dCS have also provided a wide range of DSP filters that you could use to trim the unit's performance for your individual taste. The combinations available are comprehensive, but my experience is that, after an initial period of experimentation, you will end up with a choice that suits you and your system and then you'll most likely stick

with that. The choice between DXD and DSD oversampling for instance had always been an interesting one for me and depending on the music and my mood, I can hear a strong case for either, although I tend to stay in DSD most of the time.

The Network interface is a critical aspect of the success of the dCS range and on the Bartók it runs at up to 24-bit, 384kHz and DSD 128. It is capable of supporting all lossless codecs, plus DSD in DoP format and of course native DSD. The onboard clocking is derived from the dCS auto-clocking architecture from the Vivaldi.

If you are already plugged into a quality streaming service and have realised just how far this technology has come over the last year or so, then you are going to be delighted with what the Bartók achieves. In systems like this, the upsampling network DAC capabilities of the Bartók really does tie the whole streaming experience together seamlessly. If you like the functionality and the superb presentation of the Roon software, as I do, then so much the better. You can stream through Roon or you can access Tidal directly through the dCS Bartók app. You can even spend your time comparing the difference ►

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“Although I have spent hours and hours with both the Vivaldi and the Rossini system, I never felt the Bartòk was a significant step down.”

► between the two of them if that's your thing. Tidal Masters offers increasing access to MQA encoded music and as you might expect, the Bartòk is your friend here too. Accessing the music you want, when you want it, at high quality or hi-def, is really what Tidal is all about. Roon gives you a more elegant browsing experience with reviews and facts about the music and many links to enable you to seamlessly cruise around the extensive library. For a long time I saw the whole streaming 'thing' as a second source, but no more: it has become the go-to listening set-up and over the past couple of years I have been lucky enough to have experienced all the dCS streaming solutions, as well as a few others. And if you see your future access to music as being streamed, then the Network DAC is going to lie at the heart of your system. Also, the time has come where the different sounds of available DACs have become more and more evident. So much so in fact that I find there is only one way to discuss their various merits and that's through the prism of their musical performance.

But, look a bit deeper. Gaze into the heart of the music and you will find that artistic, instrumental, and vocal composure, and especially their complexities, show significant differences between components from different companies. I'm someone who tends to ask the simple question, "Am I enjoying the music?" If I know a piece well, I will consider if this version brings anything new in terms of technique or nuance, or whether it is just different. There's a perfectly understandable human trait when considering music and audio systems, to regard what we know as some sort of reference of 'rightness' and to measure all newcomers against that. But, overall, I have also found that, if the system does small things like getting the leading edges just right and has expansive timbre, then it's usually pretty good. Down at note level, the Bartòk, like the Vivaldi and Rossini before it, is exemplary. That minuscule moment where the instrument or vocal-chords are energised is more than important: it's critical. Get it right and the rest can often follow. Get it wrong, in that there is a touch of compression or a minuscule blurring, and you can be left with what I would term a leading edge 'blister' and it will seldom be as satisfying despite the initial feeling of speed and excitement. I would also add here that, despite enormous strides being made in the streamed quality, there are still times when things just aren't right and you are dealing with a less than optimum music file and then it can sound awful. Perhaps this is to do with the location of the source in question or there may be some variance in the original quality along the line. I really don't know but, from the evidence of my own ears, these incidents are getting rarer and, in this regard, things are definitely improving.

Bartòk, like the other current dCS DACs, has a very capable variable output stage that can be utilised to drive a power amplifier through either single-ended or balanced connections. Control is accessible through the app, the optional remote, or via the front panel knob. Historically I would avoid using these in preference to a dedicated preamplifier, but the model that dCS

incorporates is rather good and, unless you have a really superb preamp, you may well find it preferable, which would eliminate the expense of a separate preamp and cabling. Output levels are switchable too through the deeply comprehensive menu system. If you are using headphones, then the low output settings of 0.2 or 0.6 will be relevant, but for straightforward output levels into a pre or power amp the choice is between 2v or 6v RMS. If your preamp has enough headroom then I am going to suggest that 6v is the way to go. The musical ride is more interesting and the system inevitably sounds faster, more dynamic, and generally 'on it', if you know what I mean.

Although I have spent hours and hours with both the Vivaldi and the Rossini systems, I never felt that the Bartòk was a significant step down. Its performance is so complete and beautifully balanced; it remains completely focused at whatever you ask it to do, and it has a way of projecting the music through its wide soundstage with a stunning sense of musical separation and then aiming lead vocals or instruments straight across the room at you. Its ability to superimpose layers and layers of musical detailing one upon the other is really enjoyable and quite overt at times. I was taken aback on many occasions at just how fresh and hard-hitting it could sound. I might even describe it being forward. This exuberant liveliness is addictive. You probably won't listen to Agnes Obel's *Late Night Tales* [Night Time Stories] for the stinging heavy-metal in her music. Agnes is about space, texture, and mysterious and dark ambience – and the Bartòk is expansive in these situations. It maintains a wonderful sense of occasion and often conjures up a rather spooky mood. It is colourful too and full of nuance both tonally and expressively. ►

“It is powerful too with a really tangible feeling of strength and weight allied to heavy-duty rhythmic impact.”



► Throughout her 2010 album *Philharmonics* [Play It Again Sam records], Obel coaxes the piano into some interestingly atmospheric situations, changing the mood by feeling out the notes and colouring them with her technique. As the opposing instrumentation lays across the backdrop it throws the piano into stark relief and the bass washes around between the speakers until her rather ethereal voice just happens and kicks you in the face.

The Bartók's command of such relative volumes and its ability to paint dynamic tonal colour with such bright markers is marvellously expressive, intimate, and perhaps best of all, surprising. But all this is tied together by a superb sense of sheer dimension to the musical presentation. The music lives and breathes, has height, width, and depth, and is always interesting enough to lead you on to new pastures. It is powerful too with a really tangible feeling of strength and weight allied to heavy-duty rhythmic impact. You can spend a long time in front of your system with a Bartók.

dCS has always been acknowledged for its high-resolution systems, but these days it has managed to merge that with a distinctly musical and indeed colourful feel. Digitally streamed music through the Bartók feels entirely joined-up and full of rhythmic transient movement and life. Both the flow, tempo, and lack of digital emphasis are really satisfying, especially if you are someone who likes to immerse themselves in the whole atmosphere and performance.

There is perhaps a rather understated, conservative austerity to the look of dCS equipment, but in use it has a driving, potent musicality about it that is anything but. Regardless of the source, the Bartók is a winner. Used as a Network DAC it is extremely impressive. But add its high-quality variable output stage and the certainty that updates will keep expanding its musical abilities into the future and it makes a lot of sense. I really can't fault it. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Upsampling network DAC
(Headphone version available)

Converter: dCS proprietary Ring DAC

Digital Inputs: Network Interface through RJ45 connector, USB 2.0 on B-type connector, USB-on-the-go type A connector (Asynchronous mode), 2 × AES/EBU XLR, 2 × SPDIF (1 × RCA/1 × BNC, 1 × optical Toslink)

Analogue Outputs: 1 × stereo pair XLR, 1 × stereo pair RCA

Output levels: 0.2, 0.6, 2 or 6V RMS, selectable in the menu

MQA: Full decoding and rendering of MQA data from Network and USB ports

Upsampling Conversions: DXD as standard with option of DSD

Software Updates: Download through Bartók app

Filters: PCM mode – up to 6 filters. DSD mode – 4 filters to progressively reduce out of band noise

Control: dCS Bartók app. dCS Universal IR remote available as optional extra

Dimensions: 115 × 444 × 430mm (H×W×D)

Weight: 16.7 kg

Colours available: Silver or Black

Price: £9,999

Manufacturer: Data Conversion Systems
URL: dcsltd.co.uk

Distributor: Absolute Sounds
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Vienna Acoustics Haydn Jubilee standmount loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



If there is an immutable law in modern day audio, it's that special editions don't come cheap. If there is a second immutable law, it's that cheap only happens in far-away places. So if Vienna Acoustics' evergreen Haydn compact ported two-way stand-mount loudspeaker was built as a 500-model limited-run 'Jubilee' version to celebrate the company's 30th year, you wouldn't expect it to be more affordable than the main run product, and you definitely wouldn't expect a product as well made and well specified at this sort of price to be made in Europe. But that's Vienna Acoustics for you!

It's hard for me to think of the Vienna Acoustics Haydn Grand (or the latest Grand Symphony Edition) without recalling the original Haydn. Back in the 1990s, while working for another audiophile magazine, that first Haydn was one of the most memorably 'right' sounding ported two-way standmounts

of its generation. Things moved on and newer, bigger versions of the Haydn were launched, but the archetypal Haydn was never far from memory. And, for the 500 owners of the limited run Haydn Jubilee, it's not even a memory, because the Haydn Jubilee is a modern recreation of that original, memorable, Haydn. It's also £500 cheaper than the standard £1,600 Haydn Grand Symphony Edition, that has long been and will continue to be a fixture in the current Vienna Acoustics line-up. ▶

“The sound of Vienna Acoustic’s birthday present is from a time before people equated ‘detail’ with ‘brightness’.”



► The Haydn Jubilee uses the same 25mm soft dome tweeter as the original (the current Haydn Grand SE uses a truncated tweeter surround – the horn of the tweeter remains extant, but the far left and right of the surround are removed as this is the excursion point for the bass port), and the loudspeaker has a more traditional – and extraordinarily well-built – rear-firing port. The 140mm bass driver is more in line with the original model, retaining the transparent ‘X3P’ cone material. Even the logo on the front replicates Vienna’s original V-shaped identifier, although this one is in a gold finish, as is the rear panel. The loudspeakers feature push-on grilles (magnets are just so 21st Century), but these are best left in the box. The finish is a rich piano gloss... combining Vienna, black and gold, and elegant Italic fonts, you can’t help thinking of pianos, which is handy because the loudspeakers really sing when playing piano music.

Listening to the Haydn Jubilee is a little like stepping into the audio wayback machine too, but in a good way. They work best resting on blobs of Blu-tack on 24” stands, sand-filled and spiked to the floor, with a mild toe-in and at least a couple of feet from the rear and side walls. The Haydn Jubilee sound best when partnered with well-designed and moderately powerful

amplification and used with stranded copper cables. In other words, precisely the kind of system one might have put together with a loudspeaker like this at the end of the last century. Run in is handy, and the bass of the loudspeakers fills in over time, but the fundamental performance of the loudspeaker is more or less cemented in place straight out of the box. There’s just more of it to play with as those drive units loosen up.

Everything about the Haydn Jubilee is recreating the Haydn of old. Consequently, the sound of Vienna Acoustic’s birthday present is from a time before people equated ‘detail’ with ‘brightness’, and instead treated the two as distinct sonic entities. The Haydn is a detailed but not bright loudspeaker, and while that might seem like an alien concept to some, those who listen to unamplified concerts hear it all the time. However, that piano music quip at the end of the last-but-one paragraph wasn’t just there because of the gloss; listen to well-recorded – but more importantly, well-played – piano and you are transported to the concert hall. It doesn’t matter whether that piano is being played by Keith Jarrett [*The Köln Concert*, ECM] or Alfred Brendel [*Beethoven: Favourite Piano Sonatas*, Philips]; what matters is the separation of notes (without separation of the intention behind the notes), and the sense of physical solidity of piano. This is surprising because typically solidity is a function of bass deeper than these loudspeakers can produce, and yet the sound is not ‘tweaked’. It’s just that those piano sounds are so intrinsically ‘right’ we expect it to have that physicality.

Similarly, adding more orchestral instruments doesn’t phase the Haydn. Of course (given the name) it excels at string quartets, but it’s worth remembering Haydn also penned the Nelson Mass [Kings College ►

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La Diva

“In an important way, what the Haydn Jubilee does so well is be better than the sum of its parts.”

- Choir, LSO, Wilcocks, Decca] and the Vienna Acoustics loudspeaker plays this with gusto and plenty of atmosphere. The dynamic range of the loudspeaker is perfectly balanced here; not so energetic that it makes a Kyrie sound operatic, but in no way foreshortened. This is not a recording of microdynamic shading, but the Haydn Jubilee nevertheless brings out the drama and majesty of the piece by revealing those subtle textures within the recording itself. This is as much about image space and dimensionality, and the speaker makes a great soundstage.

The stock and incorrect response to the above description is ‘it doesn’t rock’ (just as any mentions of rock music mean ‘it doesn’t do classical’). In fairness, naming a loudspeaker after a composer who more or less invented the string quartet does give rise to people presuming it quickly falls apart when things get turned to ‘11’. Actually, the Haydn seems remarkably adroit at all musical genres, although it doesn’t give signal compression a soft landing; playing ‘Vossi Bop’ by Stormzy [#Merky Records, Tidal], his lyrics are extremely cogent and articulate, but the backbeat is thin and reedy. Loudspeakers that accent the 80Hz region make this single seem more powerful than it actually is, but sometimes the truth hurts. No such problems are reported on something like ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ by Queen, which rocks along at a fair pace and lick, when the size of the speaker is taken into account.

In an important way, what the Haydn Jubilee does so well is be better than the sum of its parts. It’s a fine imaging, dynamic-sounding, and inherently musical loudspeaker that only draws attention to the music it is playing, regardless of the type of music being played. Many loudspeakers do this, but the Haydn does it with such effortless charm and elan, you can’t help but like it because of the way it makes you like music.

The limits of the loudspeaker are honest and are functions of the basic physics of a ported cabinet of this volume. You can bend the physics a bit, but in so doing undermine the sound. Most companies put up with that, making a loudspeaker that goes a fraction deeper in the bass, but at the expense of a considerably more muddled midrange. Or, they make a design that goes a notch louder, but at the cost of a more intrusive cabinet at all volume levels. In a way Vienna resolves these limits imposed by basic laws of physics with the current version of the Haydn by making it bigger (and consequently £500 more expensive). In both versions of the Haydn though, Vienna consciously makes trade-offs that don’t compromise the basic performance. It’s a loudspeaker that makes extremely good sounding music at the sort of listening levels that most people listen to most of the time. OK, if your needs are high volumes at all times, then you might want to make a different set of compromises; for example, you might put up with a less good loudspeaker, or a far larger loudspeaker and a far bigger hole in your wallet. But for the typical listener, the Haydn is just a great sounding loudspeaker.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: rear-ported two-way stand-mount loudspeaker

Drive units: 25mm silk dome tweeter, 140mm X3P mid-woofer

Frequency Response: 45Hz–20kHz

Impedance: 6 ohms

Sensitivity: 88dB

Reflex Enclosure type: QB3 (third-order quasi-Butterworth)

Crossover type: second order 12dB/octave Bessel filter

Crossover components: MKP

Capacitors and Inductors,

0.7% tolerance

Inductance-free metal-film resistors,

2% tolerance

Finish: Black piano gloss

Dimensions (WxDxH): 17 × 25.5 × 34.5cm

Weight: 17kg per pair

Price: £1,100 per pair

Manufactured by: Vienna Acoustics

URL: vienna-acoustics.com

Distributed in the UK by: Audiofreaks

URL: audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 941 4153

Vienna doesn’t break new ground with the Haydn Jubilee, but that’s probably not what you want from a company like Vienna Acoustics. This is a company that makes traditional audio at its best, makes it well, and doesn’t simply change direction with market trends or fashions. And while this is essentially a really well-built version of the classic Haydn, the listening shows there is nothing whatsoever wrong with that! My thirtieth year was remarkable because I once shared a bedroom with an active wasp nest; Vienna Acoustics has gone for something with less of a sting in its tail, and it sounds great in the process. +



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DiDiT DAC212SEII DAC & AMP212 power amp *by Jason Kennedy*



Small is Beautiful was EF Schumacher's advice to the world in 1973 and it seems that many of us have taken up the idea and started to make artisan gin among other things, some of them for the purposes of enhancing the enjoyment of reproduced music. DiDiT (Different in Design Different in Technology) is one such company, founded in 2007 by four Dutchmen with engineering backgrounds and a love of music. It started out with the first incarnation of the DAC212, which is a small but solidly formed converter that contains more ideas than usual and sounds better to boot. DiDiT is run by Rients Steenbeek who started out as a DIYer and went on to become a parts supplier for high quality audio components, which proved to be a good way of getting to know the rest of what would become the DiDiT team.

The DAC212SEII is a compact converter that's just over eight inches wide and two inches high, yet it crams in a broad

range of inputs onto a back panel that is hidden by a deep overhang. This makes it a pain to connect up but improves appearance the rest of the time, which for most users will be a more significant consideration. Inputs run the gamut from coax through USB, network connection via RJ45 and even I²S on an HDMI connector, but this DAC was built for the computer age and therefore USB is the key input. Indeed, this DAC is built around a computer, a Raspberry Pi CM3 module that DiDiT programmes to extract maximum performance from a 32-bit ESS ES9038 Pro Sabre DAC chipset. But as Rients points out the actual converter is only a small part of the story within a modern DAC (it ain't what you use, it's the way that you use it, as someone once said). There are two versions of the 212, a single ended one and this, the balanced output model. Both are fully balanced from input to output with conversion to single ended output occurring at the last stage. In the XLR version, they balance this already balanced ►



► circuit again and added Class A buffers before and after the analogue output stage. According to Rients these add nothing in terms of amplification but “they add a huge amount of authority”. Apparently, they “noticed that in order to achieve the best results eight buffers are really required. Beside the more authoritative sound it also enhanced the sound stage. It becomes deeper and wider while individual instruments can be easier placed. Something we did not quite expect.” My experience certainly mirrors this.

The XLR version uses more than twice as many components compared to the RCA version and the PCB is so full that they had to place the op amps for buffers on the bottom of the PCB. They also adjusted the case design so that these are cooled via the bottom plate. The DAC212SEII does get very hot and in some respects, you have to wonder why it was made in such a compact form. Part of the reason is that using a machined from solid casing gets significantly more expensive with size but I’m told they “wanted to make a design statement”. Apparently regular width versions of the DAC and AMP are on the drawing board which provide the opportunity to go further with each design.

The AMP212 is equally compact but has a more conventional array of connectors with analogue inputs on XLR only and speaker outputs of the regular variety. It’s a Class D design that they call HyperAmp which was designed in house by Sebastiaan de Vries. Creating a Class D amplifier module is a very unusual and time-consuming thing to do; pretty well all of the other examples on the market are based on modules made by third parties such as Hypex or ICEpower. I’m told that the DiDiT module took years to fully develop and originally only worked in simulations but with a lot of prototyping and research it has been optimised. That said the first sample

I received had a fan in that was audible from the listening seat; the second unit makes a fan noise at start up but is essentially silent thereafter, it does, however, get unusually hot. The power supply is limited to 300 Watts in order to avoid excessive temperature, but this is good for a 100 Watt specified output which can’t be bad for such a compact box.

The DAC and AMP both have capacitive on/off switches which is a nice touch and the DAC212SEII has a wide range of variables that can be accessed via a dot matrix display and the sonic screwdriver style remote handset. It’s a drill down menu system with lots of options but names are limited to five characters so it’s a struggle to figure things out without the set-up manual to hand. Variables include display, output, input, headphone (which includes gain and volume options), DAC with jitter reduction, de-emphasis, bandwidth, FIR roll-off and oversampling filter options, etc. So if you like to tweak there is a lot to play with. Some options are essential; if you want to convert the balanced XLR outputs to single ended with adaptors it’s necessary to convert the output via the menu as well in order to get it working.

I started out using the DAC212SEII with an AURALiC ARIES G1 streamer and converting the outputs as described above so that I could run it through the Allegri preamp. It followed an MSB Discrete in the system, which costs more than twice as much, but the DiDiT didn’t concede a great deal to it. It seemed a bit less clear-cut in the bass but well extended, possibly even a little colourful at this end of the spectrum. When I later started using the balanced outputs this completely changed to some of the best defined and most substantial low end I have encountered with a DAC/pre, so the adaptors were clearly not doing any favours. But they were good enough to reveal that the DiDiT has excellent precision ►

THE GRYPHON PRESENTS

Ethos



www.gryphon-audio.com



► of timing and a revealing, refined character that is essentially neutral. I like the way it can (usually) switch from PCM to DSD without squawking and particularly enjoyed Joni Mitchell's 'Big Yellow Taxi' [*Miles of Aisles*, Asylum], a live track that was to become even more live when I added the AMP212. But with my regular ATC P2 amp things were pretty engaging, the multi-track layers being peeled open on Radiohead's 'Burn the Witch' [*A Moon Shaped Pool*, XL] and providing more to listen to and enjoy. Lyrical intelligibility is also very strong as was proved on Espearanza Spalding's 'Ebony and Ivy' [*Emily's D+Evolution*, Concord] where the song was making a lot more sense than usual.

It started to become apparent that this is a rather good converter especially when it comes to separating out the characters of the various instruments and voices in a mix without sacrificing timing clarity. The more I listened the more this DAC grew on me, largely because it is so revealing yet also musically coherent. Some products manage the musicality side of things with subtle tweaks to the frequency response, but that always gets in the way of fine detail and ultimately tends to favour certain types of music. More neutral DACs have the opposite problem, they struggle to present music in a coherent and engaging fashion because the timing isn't quite right. The DiDiT really does seem to do everything rather well, revealing that the Doug MacLeod release *Break the Chain* sounds better than Fiona Boyes' *Professin' The Blues* even though both were recorded by the same engineer for Reference Recordings. There are always variables with that sort of thing and taste of course. But taste shouldn't be dictated by audio equipment, it should be something that it reveals and this does that rather well.

It also does image scale with some aplomb. I put on Sly and Robbie's *A Dub Experience* [Island], a release that I've often enjoyed on vinyl but have never been overly impressed with on digital. It seems that I had failed to play it on a good enough system. On the DiDiT it is massive in all respects with phasey effects thrown out left and right of the speakers and very tight timing underpinned by beautifully muscular bass. There is an electric sense of immediacy that makes for maximum thrill power. A more relaxed recording in The Silver Jews' *Bright Flight* [Drag City] was imbued with a vitality that it rarely delivers. Both these results suggest that the DAC is a little bit on the over enthusiastic side but with a clean ECM recording by Michael Benita – 'Ethics' from *River Silver* – it was calm with lovely depth and realism of tone. Listening to an interview with bass prodigy and sometime Jeff Beck side woman, Tal Wilkenfeld, inspired the streaming of her track 'Killing Me' [*Love Remains*, BMG], which is superbly played and composed, though the recording is a bit heavily compressed, on Tidal at least. It is, however, the best new rock track I've heard for a while. What all of this and further listening indicated is that this DAC is highly revealing of each recording it converts; it really lets you hear just what the original sounds like to an extent that is uncommon.

The next step was to add the AMP212 and see whether this could match the ATC P2. The transition suggested that the 212mm wide amp has a fuller low end and less clarity through the mid, but further listening made me start to wonder if the ATC has the less flat response. Now the soundstage with Sly and Robbie was not only wide but hugely deep with proper dubstep style explosions and remarkable depth and weight to the percussion. That was with USB from the Aries G1. After ►

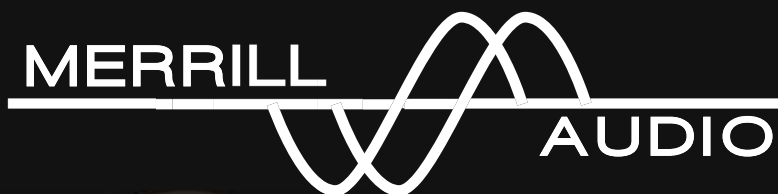
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Class D has always been good in the bass but I don't recall this level of nuance and clarity."

- switching to coax from a Rega Saturn-R I was struck by the intensity and sheer physicality of the sound produced, and was also rather enjoying it. Continued listening had me totally hooked on the DiDiT pairing which is so open and revealing that I have rarely encountered better. It pulls out so much vitality but no glare from Van Morrison's 'The Way Young Lovers Do' [Astral Weeks, Warner], which is still tonally thin but musically as compelling as it's ever been without vinyl as the medium. Putting on more and more tracks convinced me that this is one of the most open, well separated, and transparent digital systems I've enjoyed in a long time. So, I decided to remove the ARIES streamer and connect directly to the Innuos Zenith SE server to see if it would collapse, which often is the case but here the goalposts have been moved. Connecting the DAC212SEII straight to the server via a CAD USB cable relaxed the presentation and increased transparency – not much but enough to make it even harder to put down and get some work done. The AMP212 clearly works very well with PMC Fact.8 speakers; both are very strong when it comes to openness and the grip that the former has on the low end is positively inspiring. Class D has always been good in the bass but I don't recall this level of nuance and clarity. But it's helped in no small measure by the DAC sending the signal.

I wanted to try the AMP with an analogue source, a turntable and phono stage, so had to pull in the Townshend Allegri and use an RCA to XLR cable for the purpose. Once again, the level of transparency was very high indeed, revealing the way that the cartridge warmed up as it played – by the third track it was cooking with gas to an uncanny extent and much of layering and nuance found with the DAC became apparent. It's a pity that there's no analogue input on the DAC212SEII but there just isn't the space for it; a balanced preamp is probably the way forward if you want to combine analogue and digital sources.

I hope that it's clear by now that this Dutch pairing is both small and beautiful. It has the sort of foibles that you get with computer-based products that have been launched a little too early but delivers a level of transparency that is in another league to the price. I for one would be happy to carry on using the DiDiTs but that would make life very difficult when other DACs and amps need to be reviewed, I'd just have to stick to speakers! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

DAC212SEII

Type: Solid-state high-resolution PCM, DXD, and DSD-capable digital-to-analogue converter/preamplifier

Digital Inputs: one AES/EBU, one coaxial, one Toslink, one HDMI for I2S (PS audio compatible), one RJ45 network connection, one USB (audio)

Analogue Output: One balanced (via XLR connectors), two 6.3mm headphone jacks. (headphone jacks can be switched to double stereo or one balanced output)

Gain setting: +6dB with independent selection for XLR/headphone outputs with automatic switching

DAC Resolution/Supported Digital Formats: All PCM from 44.1kHz to 384kHz with word lengths up to 32-bit, DSD64 (2.8224MHz) to DSD512

Frequency Response: DC - 50kHz (± 0.1dB); DC - 90kHz -3dB

Distortion (THD + Noise): 0.00035% @ 100kOhm

Output Voltage: 4000mW/32 Ohms + 6dB gain (XLR and if balanced headphone mode is used)

User Interface: IR remote control

Dimensions (H×W×D): 212 × 212 × 50mm

Weight: 2.7kg

Price: €4,495

AMP212

Type: Class D stereo power amplifier.

Analogue inputs: One pair balanced (via XLR jacks).

Analogue outputs: One pair of speaker taps (via 5-way binding posts)

Power output: 100 Wpc @ 8 Ohm/channel

Bandwidth: DC - 22.5kHz

Sensitivity: 4V(dBu) to rated power

Distortion: 0.00025%

Signal to Noise Ratio: 130dB

Dimensions (H×W×D): 212 × 212 × 50mm

Weight: 3kg

Price: €3,995

Manufacturer: DiDiT High-End BV

Tel: +31 646204775

URL: didit-highend.com



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Primare I25 Prisma integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom



A few issues ago (Issue 163 to be specific), I was wowed by the excellent I35 from Primare. We deliberately chose the denuded version (without its clever Prisma media renderer platform) because we wanted to see how good the amp is on its own, without being clouded by the prism of Prisma. So, we have waited until the newer, smaller I25 emerged, so we can tick three boxes at once – how the I25 performs in and of itself, how it compares to the I35, and how Prisma works.

Short answer, all three boxes are firmly ticked, and ticked well!

Let's work in that order. The Primare I25 amplifier platform is a 100W integrated design, featuring the companies own UFPD 2 amplifier modules, an updated version of Primare's original 'all-analogue Class D' UFPD module. And let's stop almost immediately: there's a sort of myth in audio that the 'D' in 'Class D' stands for 'digital'. Class D refers to using the amplifying devices as high-speed switches instead of linear-gain devices as in Class A or Class AB amplifier designs. The confusion comes from the fact that Class D amplifiers create an audio signal by passing a pulse-width modulation output waveform through a low pass filter, "and PWM is digital, therefore... digital!" However, there is no analogue-to-digital or digital-to-analogue conversion taking place within these UFPD 2 amplifier modules. None at all. And yet, the 'D for digital' meme hangs round the industry like a fart in a camper van. I suspect it's because at least some of the 'D for digital' carney barkers are finding a convenient if functionally meaningless sound-bite to universally bash Class D, without the inconvenience of having to listen to any amplifiers first!

On its own, the I25 features five line-level inputs and two outputs, alongside some sync/trigger and RS232 inputs for multi-room use. That's a good starting place, but things quickly escalate.

There are two upgrade modules, which can – and in most cases, 'will' – be fitted in the factory as the I25 rolls off the line, or as after-sale plug-in modules. The first is the DAC module, which adds USB and S/PDIF connections (mostly Toslink) and sports an AKM AK4497 converter chip. The second (which requires the DAC module to also be in place), is the Prisma module, and it is here things get really interesting.

Prisma is the digital streaming platform common to Primare products. It runs on a Google Chromecast backbone, but is pretty much platform agnostic; you can connect it via Ethernet to a local network and/or the internet (it talks to UPnP devices in the home and to systems like Spotify Connect or Tidal out there in the big wide world). Chromecast also makes the I25 Roon-chummy. ▶



► Here's where things get a bit ranty again. The Prisma part of the deal invites some tough questions about the way other brands get music into their system. Basically, unless you are trying to send digital audio via semaphore or smoke signals, Prisma will cope. End of discussion and no qualification needed. Which kind of makes those discussions that take the "well, it doesn't do X because we think Y" line of reasoning sound like excuse creation. I get it when licenses are involved, and I get it when it comes to digital formats (a product might end up down a sonic wrong turns as a result of opting to support a specific and rare format), but when it comes to acquiring music from a range of places, if the system can't do it, it's the system's fault.

Staying in rant mode for a moment or two longer, some of this is simple 'not invented here' syndrome. Chromecast is a fully developed platform that works extremely well. There are more people at Google working on obscure bits of back-office code on Chromecast than there are members of staff in most high-end audio companies. And yet, we frequently re-invent the digital wheel either because of reluctance to pay Google (or similar) its pound of flesh, or the even less comprehensible notion that 'well, we know better'. While it's good to have that design and entrepreneurial zeal, sometimes it pays to just use the thing that actually works.

That's what Prisma does – it works!

Here's how it works. On the one hand, you have Google Home. This is either an app that came with your Android or Google device, or it's an app you download from Apple's app store. Then you download Primare's app. If your I25 is wired into a network, you get the three to handshake. If the I25 is on a wireless network, you need to set the Wi-Fi password on the I25. If you don't have a Tidal, Spotify Connect, Deezer, or Qobuz account... get any one (or all) of them. You might also want to consider using Roon in a 'one app to rule them all' way (but without any orcs or eyes of fire in the sky). If you have a tablet or a smartphone, the I25 Prisma will turn that into your musical home almost overnight. If you don't have a tablet or a smartphone, there's this whole thing called the 21st Century you should try... you might like it!

Operationally, the Primare I25 Prisma has that understated Nordic design down to a tee. Unlike its bigger brother, there's just the one dial and three small buttons, with a central monochrome display. This display can be somewhat small when dealing with track replay on a display that is less than 2cm tall across a room, but that's what apps are for, in which case it can be turned to just a larger volume display! The amp comes with an elegant all-black remote handset, and two stubby aerials for the rear panel. First box ticked.

Sonically it's extremely good. There's a clarity, openness, and extension to the top end that is reminiscent of more expensive audio equipment, and is the antithesis of the notion of 'digital sound'; this is clean and extended, but not hard-edged or bright, unless you push it beyond its limits. At the other end of the frequency range, bass is excellent, having a both a healthy weight to it and a good sense of beat. This seems independent of input, so if you play 'Something Better Change' by The Stranglers [*No More Heroes*, United Artists], all that raw energy comes across evenly whether it's a ripped CD stored locally or played via Tidal. Jean-Jacques Burnel bass lines are always crisp and here they came across as being a little thinner than usual, but they aren't the deepest bass lines around, and they still had some fierce energy behind them.

Stereo separation in particular was very good, with the music sitting in a three-dimensional space between and slightly forward of the loudspeakers. There was also some layering and depth to the image, giving something of a 'third row of the stalls' feel to the image, especially with classical music. ►



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C2
A2

“Within that control, there’s a lot of dynamic energy, both in terms of the big orchestral swells and the ability to pick out musical nuances.”



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier with optional internal streamer and DAC

Power output: 2 × 100W into 8 Ohms, 2x 200W into 4 Ohms

Analogue Inputs: 5 × unbalanced (RCA) stereo inputs

Digital inputs: 2x RCA digital inputs, 4x Toslink (up to 24/192), 1x USB A, 1x USB-B up to 768kHz/32 bit; DSD 256/11.2MHz, 2x Ethernet RJ45, 2x WiFi antennas

Line level Output: 2 × unbalanced variable (RCA)

Digital output: 1x RCA

Multiroom connectivity: IR 3.5mm jack, 12v 3.5mm jack, RS232

Prisma's Audio formats supported: WAV, LPCM, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, WMA, OGG: Up to 192kHz/24bit MP3, MP4 (AAC): Up to 48kHz/16bits, VBR & CBR 320kbps, DSD: Up to DSD128 (5.6MHz)

Streaming: Airplay, Bluetooth, Chromecast built-in, Spotify Connect, DLNA/UPnP

Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz -0.2dB

Signal-to-noise ratio: >100dB

THD+N: <0.05%, 20Hz–20kHz, 10W at 8Ω

Finish: black or titanium

Dimensions (H×W×D): 10.6 × 43 × 42cm

Weight: 11kg

Price: £3,200

Manufactured by: Primare AB

URL: primare.net

Distributed in the UK by: Karma AV

URL: karma-av.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1423 358 846

► The dynamic range of the I25 also sets a high standard to beat for the price. It's full of energy, although not to the point of running away with itself. There is always a sense of control and order to the sound of the I25, but within that control, there's a lot of dynamic energy, both in terms of the big orchestral swells and the ability to pick out fine musical nuances in a piece of music. This makes Joyce DiDonato's voice on the *Stella di Napoli* compilation [Erato] both beguiling and compelling, as it has almost weapons-grade force at times and yet subtlety that can move you to tears. Box two... ticked.

Finally, we come to comparing the I25 Prisma with the base I35. The I35 is better sounding, but in many cases 'better' just means 'more power and control'. Comparing the two side-by-side, the I25 is slightly thinner sounding and the I35's even greater capacity for 'oomph' wins out. But, it's a close-run thing, and in the context of smaller loudspeakers played at normal listening levels, the differences get a bit nuanced. Ultimately, if I had £3,200 burning a hole in my pocket and only £3,200, I'd go with the I25 Prisma over the base I35. If I knew that £3,200 could grow into a full I35, I'd go for the bigger model. The interesting part about Prisma, is if that growth was not immediate, I'd go with the Prisma-equipped I25 over its bigger brother. That's how important Prisma is, and with that comes the ticking of the last box.

Make no mistake, products like the Primare I25 Prisma are the best expression of why this is a golden age for audio. This one box does it all, and it does it all damn well! +

it just sounds right



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Arcaydis EB2S stand-mount loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger



The Arcaydis brand has actually been around for more than twenty years; I reviewed a couple of examples nearly that long ago. However, having run his business as a direct sale operation for several successful years, founder Richard Allen suffered personal and health issues. He failed to meet delivery targets and consequently the support from the hitherto

very positive internet forums turned against the brand, so somewhat reluctantly he closed things down in 2013.

Happily, that didn't turn out to be the end of Arcaydis – or indeed Richard Allen – as the brand was re-launched in 2016 by two brothers, born in Britain of Hungarian extraction, called James and Robin Szemeti, with Allen's assistance. After fifteen years in the BBC, followed by some years running a software operation, Robin currently holds the post of Technical Director, while James also has much technical knowhow, but is also very much the hi-fi nut.

Now based in Sheffield (not coincidentally, the home of excellent loudspeaker cabinetmaker Timberworks) rather than Kidderminster, Arcaydis ►

“This isn’t a big deal, but it does suggest that the EB2S may be better suited to those who prefer to listen to their music at modest levels.”



- once again uses a ‘direct sale’ strategy to keep prices low, alongside a 30-day returns policy (see website at www.arcaydis.com). It seems that there are currently two loudspeakers, an EB1S and EB2S, plus an inexpensive (valve) preamplifier and a Class D power amp under the Aeron brand that the company imports from Italy.

The EB2S is the subject of this review. It has a sealed-box enclosure, which is quite unusual these days, and accounts for the bulk of a speaker that occupies roughly half the volume of a typical floorstander. The sealed box construction should ensure fine bass extension alongside a ‘dry’ overall balance that should avoid ‘port boom’.

It also features something called ‘Arcolam’ in its cabinetwork, which is not

explained on the website, but apparently minimises cabinet coloration through the lamination of layers of different woods. I had a quick look (via removal of the terminal block), and found a worthwhile combination of birch ply and MDF, making an overall sandwich construction.

Stands of 40cm are recommended and were simply not available, though I did find some 45cm examples. These seem appropriate enough, given my 6ft+ stature and a highish chair. When in position I could certainly see the top surfaces of the enclosures, so I was actually above the tweeter axis. The stands themselves were coupled to the speakers using Blu-Tack, and were then placed (as usual) onto Townshend decoupling platforms.

The two-way driver complement consists of a 170mm bass/mid unit, with a flared, doped 120mm cone and a fixed and rigid dust dome, crossing over to a 25mm soft-dome tweeter. Twin terminals allow each driver to be addressed individually if so desired, though the review pair came with brass strips that connected the terminals together, with access only to the bass/mid terminal pair.

The in-room far-field averaged measurements are very impressive indeed. Much of the band holds comfortably within $\pm 3\text{dB}$ (or even tighter!) limits, so superior neutrality is guaranteed. The bass extension is pretty good too, registering -2dB at 30Hz and -9dB at 20Hz under our far-field measure, alongside a relatively even, albeit slightly dry balance.

A very slight trend in the overall output maximises output above 600Hz while minimising output below that point, which possibly helps project vocals slightly. Although this is a very slight characteristic, it did tend to over-emphasise Bob Dylan’s harmonica on *John Wesley Harding* [Columbia]: a fact that might well have something to do with the recording!

The sensitivity is a quite low 84dB/W on our measurements, which is a whole lot shy of the 87dB claimed. However, it does look like a very easy load to drive (over and above the essential simplicity of sealed box loading), remaining above eight ohms throughout. For the record, the main driver/box resonance occurs here at 64Hz.

Speech, from radio or TV, was particularly clear and open, but listening to music programming at higher volume levels, did have a degree of ‘forwardness’ that could become a tad wearing, depending upon the mix (see later). I suspect all speaker designers are faced with the dilemma of whether to achieve the best balance at low or at high volume levels. Arcaydis’ decision to opt for the former makes good sense for this listener, who has found his taste for high volume levels declining with the passing years.

This isn’t all that big a deal, frankly, but it does suggest that the EB2S may be better suited to those who prefer to listen to their music at modest levels. I’ve previously mentioned Dylan’s harmonica sounding a tad aggressive on ‘John Wesley Harding’, but that isn’t my favourite Dylan track (an honour ►



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“The two drivers are also well integrated by the crossover network, with an effectively seamless transition between them.”

► that goes instead to ‘Visions of Johanna’ from *Blonde on Blonde* [Columbia], which has a delightful guitar riffing away instead of a harmonica.) Once again it seemed to work fine when played at a fairly quiet level, though this time any aggressiveness was only audible after changing the cartridge (!)

Back with the Rega Aphelion cartridge, there was no hint of aggression when playing Joni Mitchell’s excellent *Hejira* [Asylum] – possibly my favourite of all her albums (as long as *Travelogue* remains a CD-only release) – so it would seem that much of the difference comes down to the individual mix.

During the listening tests I changed the cartridge, substituting an Audio-Technica AT-ART 1000 for the Rega Aphelion in my Rega Naiad turntable/arm combination. And although the result was satisfactory enough, the sound did have a little extra brightness over the Aphelion, and therefore tended to push things a little too far in that direction.

This was particularly noticeable when spinning my copy of The Incredible String Band’s *The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion*, a high quality Joe Boyd production for Elektra that normally works very well, but which did sound a bit ‘fierce’ in this particular combination. That, in turn, made me very conscious of the vital importance of compatibility between source and speakers, and the importance of checking this in an individual system context. This fact alone would seem ample justification for Arcaydis’ 30-day ‘money back guarantee’, which does at least provide this option.

However, the Mobile Fidelity version of the Garcia/Grisman double album *Shady Grove* didn’t sound at all aggressive when it was played with either cartridge, despite featuring a banjo more or less throughout. This only serves to reinforce my opinion that the net balance on any particular disc is usually down to its final mix.

Box coloration is certainly very low, indicating that the Arcolam cabinetwork is doing its thing with great efficacy. The two drivers are also very well integrated by the crossover network, with an effectively seamless transition between them.

I don’t consider myself particularly old (though I daresay others might disagree, since I’ve collected my OAP for the last five years), but it does seem unnecessary to have loads of power available, when the first watt is really the one that matters most. We might disagree with the manufacturer’s claim for a sensitivity of 87dB, preferring a significantly lower figure of 84dB, but low sensitivity is no real problem with today’s amplification.

That said, a genuinely high sensitivity speaker (of, say, more than 95dB) does seem to have some benefits in terms of dynamic expression, but also usually involves bulky horn-loaded loudspeakers that are domestically

MANUFACTURER’S SPECIFICATIONS

Cabinet: Composite, closed box

Drivers: 170mm bass, 25mm tweeter

Impedance: 8ohms nominal
(5.9ohms min)

Sensitivity: 87dB (2.8V@1m),
(83dB measured)

Frequency range: 45Hz to 20kHz

Finish: Natural or Black Oak, matt White

Size (H×W×D): 450 × 225 × 296mm

Price: £799

Manufacturer: Arcaydis

URL: arcaydis.com

Tel: +44(0)114 399 0199

unacceptable, especially in stereo. Assuming that such inevitably bulky loudspeakers are deemed unacceptable, there can be little reason to look beyond ‘normal’ loudspeakers, such as these Arcaydis EB2Ss.

This might look like a rather ordinary and unexceptional loudspeaker, but don’t let its somewhat mundane appearance put you off, as its performance is actually superb. Provided that it works well in tonal balance terms when driven by a potential user’s system (which is where the 30-day guarantee comes in), this Arcaydis EB2S is a totally exceptional speaker. It has a dry and slightly forward balance that favours low level listening, and won’t necessarily suit every system, but it is unusually neutral and therefore offers fine value for money. +



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Hana MH and ML moving coil cartridges

by Alan Sircom



If you are into vinyl and haven't been holed up in an Ecuadorian embassy for the last few years, the name 'Hana' will probably not have escaped your attention. A small, Japanese expert brand making high performance moving coil cartridges is always half way to the stuff of legend, but the fact these cartridges do not cost a small fortune helps cement that reputation firmly. We missed out on the first round of goodies (the £389 EL and especially the £599 SL have already developed powerful reputations among the vinyl cognoscenti) but the new top duo – the £995 MH high-output and the £995 ML low-output are something truly special.

We can cover both on the same pages because the two share so much in common. They both sit in a black Delrin body and brass base, feature high-purity copper wire and other metal parts that are cryogenically treated, have nude microline stylus tips on aluminium cantilevers, and both use alnico magnets. They have identical tracking force and compliance demands, and return the same frequency response, output balance, and channel separation. The differences – on paper at least – are that the high output design has a higher output and load impedance than the lower output model. And one has 'ML' on the side and the other has 'MH' on the side.

The reality is the 'MH' model is the one best used with more prosaic phono stages and ones with limited adjustment. On the other hand, if you have either a phono stage that can cope with that kind of low output, or includes a step-up transformer of suitable quality, the ML is the one to go for. If you read a review comparing SL and SH models, you'd pick up the same basic division, and the same conclusion. However, the further up the price points you go, the ►

“Let’s not damn the higher-output models with faint praise. The MH is awesome, but in the right setting the ML is awesome-r!”

- more the higher-output models become harder to justify; in a £389 cartridge, there’s a strong possibility it will be used with a phono stage that simply has a button to switch between ‘MM’ and ‘MC’, but a £599 and especially a £995 cartridge are more likely to be used with a more adjustable equaliser, and that skews things in favour of the more quicksilver performance of the lower output models. But let’s not damn the higher-output models with faint praise. The MH is awesome, but in the right setting the ML is awesome-r!

In the manner of all Japanese cartridges, the name means something, and that something comes close to ‘Brilliant’ and ‘Beautiful’ in English. This is surprisingly fitting because the M-series is Masao Okada-san’s hitherto greatest expression of those two goals. They are ‘brilliant’ in detail resolution and ‘beautiful’ in tonal balance.

The big story is two-fold. Both the sound and the tracking are excellent. Short of trying to get it to track the stitches in a revolving shoe, if there is a groove cut in a slab of vinyl, these two will play it. OK, so my run-flat copy of the Decca 1812 still warbles and buzzes when it should go ‘boom!’ but that was thanks to generations of music lovers before me, and although the Hanas are a pair of little miracles, raising the dead is a bit past most miracle-workers!

What the two have (and the ML has in spades) is a delicate, almost filigree top-end air coupled to a midrange that is only just on the sweet side of invisible, and a structural, architectural solidity to the bottom end, all of which combine to make a sound that is bolted down in place and yet sounds as light as air. That’s a hard mix to produce, and is usually the preserve of those ‘spoken of in hushed tones’ cartridges.

There is also something truly delightful about the way these cartridges handle voices. Listening to ‘Just a Gigolo’ from Louis Prima’s *The Wildest!* [Pure Pleasure] is always a pleasure, but here the mono recording pushes his powerful voice front and centre. It’s not only a delight to listen to, but the Hana brings out his delight in singing, and the intervening 63 years since the record was originally cut just melt away. This is more than mere vocal articulation; there’s a warmth and vibrancy to his voice that just shines through here. This recording does highlight the one slight flaw in the Hana sound, the one chink in the armour that keeps the big guns at the top; when the band go really wild (about once every three minutes), things can get a bit jittery. But for the money... c’mon!

Tonally, the Hanas are close to the mid-point between the sound of several of the big hitters of the Japanese cartridge world, with much of the romance of a Koetsu, the ‘shimmer’ of a Kiseki or an ZYX, the insight and detail of a Lyra, and the musical boppiness of a Dynavector, and they manage to do all of this without suffering the ‘Jack of all Trades, Master of None’ problem. Yes, all of these cartridges got their stellar reputations for being the best you could get in that field for a reason, but the Hanas give you more than a glimpse of

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: High and Low-output moving-coil cartridge

Stylus: Nude Microline tip

Cantilever: Aluminium

Magnet: Alnico

Output Level (@1kHz): 2mV (MH)
10.4mV (ML)

Internal Impedance (@1kHz):
130Ω (MH), 8Ω (ML)

Suggested load impedance:
47kΩ (MH), >100Ω (ML)

Trackability: 70μ/2g

Compliance: 10 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyne

Frequency Response: 12Hz–45kHz

Mass: 9.5g

Tracking Force: 2g

Price: £995 (MH or ML)

Manufactured by:

Excel Sound Corporation

URL: excelsound.jp

Distributed by: Air Audio Distribution

URL: airaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1491 629629

what the true masters have to offer, without the financial outlay. And yet, at no time does this sound like scraps from the very top table. The Hana ML in particular and the MH trailing close behind are every inch high-end super cartridges, only without the high prices.

What separates these Hana cartridges from the top echelon of Japanese jewel cartridges is casing. POM (Delrin) is an entirely right material for a cartridge body, but it isn’t a piece of jade or obsidian. The box it comes in is a nice black box that doesn’t smell of sandalwood. If it had these things, I’d be praising the considerably more expensive Hana ML for its remarkable performance. As it stands, this is the best £3,000–£4,000 cartridge you can buy... for £995. +

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Audiodesk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner Pro record cleaning machine

by Alan Sircom



There will be those who think we've been here before. I have to admit, in unboxing the Audiodesk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner Pro, I struggled to see the differences between it and its predecessor, the Vinyl Cleaner. In fact, on a surface investigation, you'd need to have the two side-by-side in order to see any real difference. But they are different, and the differences are worthy of note.

As before, the Audiodesk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner is a fully automated vertical ultrasonic record cleaning machine designed by Reiner Gläss. To recap, you part-fill it with cleaning solution (supplied in concentrate form, enough for five litres of liquid), insert the record in the slot at the top of the machine and press the red button. A traffic light arrangement follows – yellow for 'I'm working on it' and five minutes or so later green lights up for 'This disc is clean'. Inside is a set of counter-rotating microfibre cleaning barrels, and the fluid sump works in a way not too dissimilar from a jeweller's ultrasonic cleaning bath, only on a larger, more LP-shaped scale. The fluid is also constantly filtered, to prevent any stray crud from being moved around a record instead of removed from a record.

“The cleaner is extremely good at cleaning extraordinary amounts of deep-groove crud out of what seem like clean records.”

► So... what's changed? Since its initial release, Audiodesk Systeme has beefed up the drive mechanism, improved the pump, and switched to quieter fans, which makes the cleaner more than a little quieter and a lot more robust. In the latest release, the top plate has been redesigned with a wider aperture at the left hand side that allows for easier loading and removal of the LP at the end of the cycle. This means there is less chance of catching the LP on the microfibre barrels and having to remove water smears after cleaning.

Originally, the Vinyl Cleaner and the Vinyl Cleaner Pro were both fitted with white coloured wiper blades, but these were prone to squeaking when cleaning records and had a relatively short life. So now, new black wiper blades are fitted as standard. These have a coating on them that, allegedly, extends their life. The blades are suggested to have a lifespan of around 500 LPs before they need replacing. However, the manufacturer of the record cleaner thinks you can get nearer 700 LPs before a wiper blade change is required. While I'd love to say I tested the blades to destruction... I didn't. However, Audiodesk Systeme suggests that if you start to see droplets regularly remaining at the end of the drying cycle, or that the blades start to make squeaking noises, it's time for a blade change.

Looking back over our original review in Issue 117, sonically speaking everything that was said then applies now (except for the Jim Reeves LP... that quickly disappeared). The cleaner is extremely good at cleaning extraordinary amounts of deep-groove crud out of what seem like clean records, and this is audible in the reduction in both the distant frying pan sizzling background sound, and even on LPs with low background noise... they get even quieter.

Between successive generations there doesn't appear to be any significant changes in performance, both in terms of crudtraction or in the time it takes to cycle through its cleaning routine. It's as easy to drain and clean as before, and the only material changes (aside from the different colour blades and the quieter fans) are that possibly it has become a little more precise in fluid bath filling requirements. But this could be memory playing tricks.

There is also now a special outrigger for 7" singles. This can be retrofitted to Vinyl Cleaner Pros built in 2018 or later. I don't have a large collection of 7" singles and those I still have are not the kind that get played very much anymore (even hardcore Paul Young fans – if they exist – are unlikely to get that excited by listening to 'Toast' by Streetband and I don't have the desire or energy to flail around for two and a half minutes to 'Where's Captain Kirk' by Spizzenergi anymore), but the attachment is effective and not too difficult to put together. Anyone who does have a large collection of seven-inchers (and there are many who have tens of thousands – I know an avid Northern Soul collector who only owns 7" singles and he has close to three large rooms full of the things) this is something of a god-send. I suspect those who buy the £235 7" add-on might never use anything else.



One thing I think I missed in the last review was just how important the automation becomes in the cleaning process. I think this comes from years of working with a Keith Monks in the distant past. I mistakenly thought of the manual process as part of the record ritual, but there is a disconnect between record cleaning and record playing. Where queuing up a record is a joy when you get it right, cleaning them can become a chore. By taking the drudgery out of the record cleaning process, all you get is joy. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cleaning cycle: 5mins

Water capacity: 4.5 litres

Cleaning concentrate required: 20ml

Dimensions (WxHxD): 33 x 27 x 20cm

Weight: 5.5kg (empty)

Price: £2,525

Manufactured by:

Audiodesk Systeme Gläss

URL: www.audiodesksysteme.de

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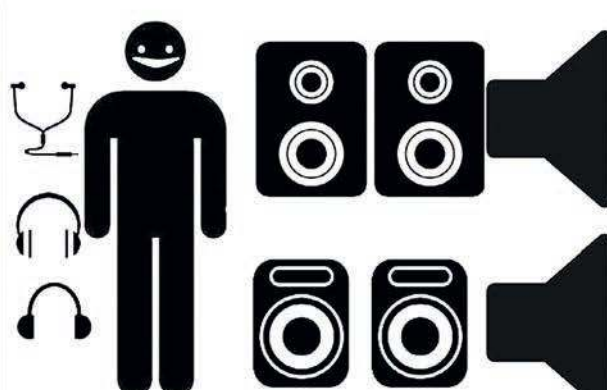
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It's Complicated



Turntable accessories

by Andrew Harrison

Depending on your viewpoint, the best – or the worst – thing about vinyl is that it breeds a host of aftermarket gadgets, many of which are not simply derived from the purest snake oil, but are there for a reason. Quite often that reason is one of keeping a microscopic vinyl groove free from the dust and grime that fills our everyday lives.

In fact, record cleaning only, pun intended, scratches the surface. Every aspect of vinyl replay can come in for scrutiny, from insuring the cartridge is perfectly aligned and has the absolutely correct tracking force, to ensuring flatness and centricity of the record. A good part of this comes down to the nature of the technology itself. The record was the first component of consumer electronics, in fact predating electronics... or electrification of homes. Dragging a rock through a groove and translating those movements into electrical signals is an almost alien concept in a digital world, and prone to errors from rotation, geometry, mechanical moments, and the ingress of dust and even mould-release agents used in the pressing of the record on both the surface of the record and the stylus that tracks it.

Not only can these errors produce poor sound, in extremis they can contribute to physical damage of record or stylus. So, it's little wonder that there is a vibrant world of vinyl beyond the turntable and the record itself. We chose a selection of some of the best for this issue – however, this could well be the first of many! It's up to you.

Cleaning Machines

The Okki Nokki RCM (£435) is hardly new but has been steadily improving in looks and build quality over 15 years. It's a simple all-manual vacuum-suction machine, tidy and low in noise that stands as an exemplar for affordable wet-cleaning.

The platter motor is bidirectional and runs smoothly in either direction, operated by a simple three-way toggle. The suction cycle meanwhile has the least din of any such machine I've tried. All-important suction from the 500W pump is not as high as my favourite VPI HW-17 though, requiring up to four revolutions to dry the surface, where the latter completes the task in under two. That does mean the velvet strips remain in contact with the record somewhat longer, potentially accelerating wear – and these do need regular checking and replacement when worn.

Siting the record on the platter requires care as the spindle is under 2 mm high before the thread starts, and I found it too easy to place a record non-concentrically on the shank shoulders.

The metal clamp feels solid but mind you don't quickly spin it loose and drop it, as it will damage the record or even the machine as it lands. Getting the right torque took some practice – too loose, and the record stuck to the tube after losing contact with platter. Too tight, and a circular mark was left on the record label from the puck's rubber O ring.

The supplied goat-hair brush deserves mention; it is an effective two-row brush of natural fibres embedded in a wooden handle. Slightly on the soft side, it works effectively in spreading solution and working it deep into the record.

Cleaning results were very good, if perhaps not quite as pin-drop quiet as with upmarket machines. Nonetheless in its new immaculate white finish besides black, this is the best vinyl cleaning machine for the money. Additional accessories include a clear acrylic lid and 7-inch armtube. It has a notably compact footprint too, a serendipitous 33.3 cm square.

Stylus Cleaner

Keeping your stylus clean and free of contamination is a self-evident step in ensuring good vinyl reproduction. Various techniques are possible, from simply blowing or using a record brush to banish dust balls, to the more clinical approach of isopropyl alcohol on a cotton bud. The latter is often frowned upon though, as some diamonds are only fixed in place by soluble glue, and alcohol is feared to wick up the cantilever and compromise rubber suspensions.

Many new cartridges include a stiff brush which can do a good job at lifting obvious build-up. Linn Products advocates a scarier method using the legendary green paper – a strip of abrasive sheet like fine wet'n'dry, with the sandpaper dragged along the needle's very point.

Over the years I've alternated between careful use of a moistened medical-grade cotton bud, and an Audio Technica AT-637 ultrasonic cleaner. A different ►

- *“It’s a simple all-manual vacuum suction machine, tidy and low in noise that stands as an exemplar for affordable wet cleaning.”*



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► high-tech approach is offered by DS Audio with its ST-50 stylus cleaner (£75). This has a sliver of transparent gel housed in a compact metal tray the size of a snuff box. The gel is made from an advanced urethane resin that has remarkable ‘sticky’ properties, crucially without leaving a residue, and said to be developed for holding micro-dust in clean-room environments.

The gel in its nickel-plated tray is placed on a static platter, the needle gently lowered onto the fly-paper polymer, then raised. This action quickly captures any debris from the diamond, and just one or two needledrops worked as advertised, leaving the needle entirely muck-free when viewed through an 8× loupe.

Similar products are available but this is may be the only one that uses ether-based urethane, so that absorptivity is not compromised over time by hydrolysis. In fact, the gel can be removed from its tray and rinsed under a cold tap to clean it, suggesting a good investment for squeaky clean stylus care.

Tracking force gauges

Time was when a simple Shure see-saw balance was deemed sufficient to set cartridge tracking force. Then like so much in audio, and life in general, we went digital. First up was the Winds Arm Load Meter ALM-1/01, originally many hundreds of pounds, followed by The Cartridge Man’s marginally more accessible yet eminently precise meter. Now the entrance fee for a digital balance has tumbled to just a few pounds, thanks to a plethora of Chinese-made devices marketed at jewellery and pharmaceutical enthusiasts.

The van den Hul Stylus Force Gauge (£81) is a seemingly starting point among many facsimiles under different names, and there appears to be two distinct types in circulation.

There’s a cheaper plastic-bodied version, typically around £10–20, working to two decimal places and powered by two watch batteries. It has mechanical buttons on its chassis but potential issues – my sample from ten years ago was eating (expensive) batteries before it stopped working altogether.

The vdH gauge is a different proposition, despite sharing the same style. For power it takes AAA batteries (2×), and while I’ve not tested long-term I’d anticipate these lasting longer.

It’s a weightier all-metal affair in die-cast aluminium, about 50% larger at 120 × 52 × 26 mm (wdh), and features a touchscreen with strong green backlight behind the large-segment LCD. Like most such ‘stylus balances’ it betrays its origins with selectable weighing units, handy for assaying your earrings to the nearest carat (ounces and pennyweight also available).

For cartridge calibration it has the benefit of reading to three decimal places, making it easier to see if a nominal ‘1.75 g’ downforce is actually set closer to 1.745 or 1.754 grammes, for instance. Until recently I survived with a Clearaudio Stylus Gauge EXACT, good to one decimal place; now I’m finding adjustments in the order of 0.02 g are audible with a vdH Grasshopper and so I depend on two- or three-decimal precision to record changes and repeat settings.

Ortofon has a high-quality offering in the DS-3, made for the Danish company in Japan. This resembles more closely a laboratory or jeweller’s balance, with a large top plate about 60 mm square that extends on one side to provide a flat shelf to carry the stylus. That platform is set 3 mm above the base, slightly above a heavyweight pressing, but closer to ground zero than the vdH at around 5 mm. This could be of interest to users of ‘stable balanced’ unipivots, which may be sensitive to measurements taken above actual playing level.

The DS-3 also takes AAA batteries, this time not requiring a tiny screwdriver to extract. It reads ‘only’ to two decimal places, in other words the nearest hundredth of a gramme, yet does feel like an even better constructed balance. Its maximum load is 200 g rather than the 5 g of vdH; not essential for magnetic pickups but handy to enable the Ortofon to earn its keep in the kitchen, for example, as well as the music room.

Record Brushes

Record brushes are a popular and for some indispensable accessory. Besides the dry ►



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Hall 4, booth P16

- ▶ brushes used for sweeping up surface dust there are those used wet for cleaning and restoration

For wet cleaning many enthusiasts swear by natural goat hair, as the tapered strands are thought to better reach the bottom of the groove. A few years ago I settled on the Tonar Wetgoat with its single line of stiff bristles, and the Analogue Studio Goats Hair Brush (£21.99) has a similar form, albeit with three stacked rows of bristles in a wooden handle.

The fibres are softer than the Tonar, giving a gentler action, a tad too compliant for my taste, although the sheer number of bristles that are in contact at once should mean plenty of mechanical contact per cleaning revolution.

Back on dry land, in the '70s the velvet block was almost de rigueur, with inlets for a few drops of water to barely moisten the pad and ward off friction-induced static. These have been almost totally supplanted by carbon-fibre wands, usually with two rows of fibres and a hinged cover that doubles as fibre wiper. AudioQuest sells a good example of the breed, its Anti-Static Record Brush (£17.95) pimped up with gold-plate strips either side. This suggests increased conductivity to the user-as-earth, promoted by a 'zero Ω anti-static' legend on the side. Curiously while carbon may have high intrinsic conductivity, its resistance here was measured at several tens of ohms.

In contrast to some models the brush ends are relatively uniform along the length, giving more consistent contact along the record radius. Overall the AudioQuest proved to be a respectable well-made record brush.

Analogue Studio has several similar brushes in its range. Resembling a dustpan brush in profile, the Big Vinyl Carbon Fibre Record Brush (£18.95) is easy to hold in a fixed place as the record spins, if less manoeuvrable through the wrist for elegant sweeps off the surface. Perhaps its main drawback, in common with its handle-free counterpart the Hand Held Carbon Fibre Brush (£16.95), is the lack of any built-in method to remove dust from the fibres. It's tempting to use a finger or the palm to wipe off debris but this will result in trace oil meeting the fibre ends, and thence to the record surface, an absolute no-no. Keep a microfibre cloth on standby.

If static charge is a concern, perhaps the best way to discharge is by connecting the brush to electrical earth: meet the De-Stat Brush With Grounding Cable (£16.99). This takes the classic wiper/guard form, adding a detachable 1 m wire with a spade terminal. This can be connected to an amp's earth post to keep the brush at ground potential, and the shiny chrome-effect plastic also proved conductive too.

Almost an order of magnitude dearer, the Yukimu ASB-1 (£140) nevertheless proved a most versatile brush, good for the most delicate of vinyl sweeping as well as dusting around

delicate fixtures like tonearms and cartridges. Marketed by Furutech outside Japan, this 165 mm-tall brush resembles a makeup artist or painter's sable, with very soft fibres around 20 micron thin.

These are a 50:50 mixture of light goat's hair, plus an innovative synthetic developed by Mitsubishi Chemical known as Corebrid B. This fine acrylic staple fibre incorporates a conductive carbon-loaded core that promises to allow coronal discharge of the weak microamp currents that flow in static conduction. In testing I found that a little tickling of the SME tonearm and its dust-magnet outriggers with the Yukimu would leave it spotless for longer than other spring-cleaning regimes. It also makes for a safe and strangely satisfying way to chase away random fluff from the vinyl surface.

Destatic treatment

On the basis that prevention is better than cure, why not stop dust from being drawn to a record in the first place? That's the aim of static-neutralising products like the Furutech Destat III, a hand-held ioniser running from four AAs. Resembling an ice curling stone, this lightweight gadget includes four balanced-ion generators that ionise surrounding air, and a silent fan that wafts the charged molecules toward your object of interest – not just LPs, it can be directed at the deck itself or anything that tends to get charged and collect dust. Besides helping reduce static ionisers also seem to have a calming feel-good effect on humans too.

Hole truth

The final accessory here I was blissfully unaware was even needed but will be useful to owners of certain turntables that closely follow engineering standards. The Clearaudio LP Drill (£40) is a simple tool to ream out the centre hole on any record that has been issued fractionally undersize.

International standards (IEC98-1958/1964/1987 and DIN45547-1981) agree that the diameter of the hole shall be 7.24 ± 0.09 mm. Some manufacturers such as Linn, Rega and Michell err toward the undersized (at 7.09, 7.15 and 7.14 mm respectively) so are unaffected by the majority of pressings, but Clearaudio itself plays closer to the rules. So if you find too many records are just too tight for comfort, use this drill to gently enlarge the hole. Verified at precisely 7.24 mm, this is a hard-to-find bit size, which Clearaudio mounts in a high-quality aluminium handle. +

[Thanks to Analogue Seduction, Decent Audio, and Sound Foundations for providing samples of the featured accessories]



▶ 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.

www.neumann.com



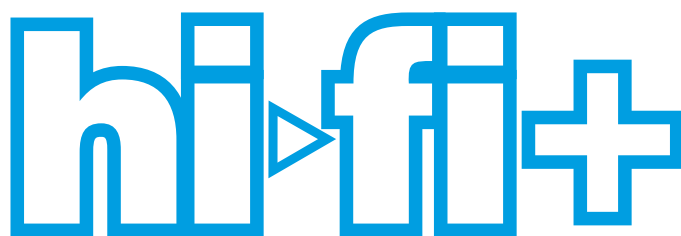
▶ Digital Neumann mics

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of audio engineering experts Neumann – probably knows more about microphones than almost anyone else in the business. This must have double CD in its exclusive presentation case is perfect for any music lover or audiophile.

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Costa Koulisakis, Moon by Simaudio

by Alan Sircom

Alongside the regular factory visits and telephone interviews, our Meet Your Maker feature can take many guises. So, at AXPONA this year, we took a chance to catch up with Costa Koulisakis of Moon by Simaudio, the Canadian audio electronic experts. This wasn't a formal interview, it was a free-form discussion, just with a slightly-broken audio recorder in the same space. It was over coffee because it was during the daytime, but it could have just as easily been over a beer in the evening. One of those kind of chats.

Costa might be an audiophile through-and-through, and might well have started in the way all good audiophiles start, but he has taken an uncompromising line toward audio and the way it's marketed. So, instead of the usual 'here's a product, here's why we make it that way' we started by talking about the good and bad of audio shows

AS: What do you think about audio shows such as AXPONA?

CK: The way I see shows are that they are an opportunity to show the world what we are all about. I love to hear about shows like Warsaw where there are more parents bring young children to audio shows. We need more young people in shows, but bringing young kids to a show kicking and screaming is not the idea. The point is, what is it that we're selling? We're selling entertainment. We are selling things that people want! We're not selling anything that people need – people don't *need* to have an expensive hi-fi system – they don't need to have a radio if they don't want.



How do we convince people about audio at shows and beyond?

Audio is not a necessity for life or survival. It's a luxury. And the best way to convince people audio is a luxury is for people in the industry to show that they enjoy it! Smile, play good and current music, engage with people. It's a show... be a showman! Audiophiles... they are necessary. we need them to come to events like this, but they will turn up at the opening of an envelope if there's good audio involved because they are already passionate about audio. But we are not going to survive on them alone anymore. A lot of them have bought their last music system, so we are seeing a deep decline in sales to them and a lot of the retail network has not properly substituted that with a younger demographic because they have not fully understood what it is that younger demographic wants. So they conclude hi-fi must be dying.

Is audio dying?

Not at all, but it will die if that view doesn't change. There's a new generation of people who are all listening to music. They have more music at their fingertips than any generation before them, they listen to more and more diverse music than any generation ever could, and yet we think they aren't interested in music? It's ridiculous!

“We aren’t going to attract newcomers if we just keep playing Diana Krall and Dire Straits? I like Dire Straits, but damn it!”



► **How much of that inertia is expressed by musical choices?**

That’s a real problem. We play a variety of music in our demonstrations. We aren’t going to attract newcomers if we just keep playing Diana Krall and Dire Straits? I like Dire Straits, but damn it, I’ve heard it one too many times at shows. And that comes back to the enjoyment we must impart to those listeners: if we are using the same demonstration music day-in, day-out that we played 20, 30, even 40 years ago, how can we still be enthused by it? There’s nothing wrong with these tracks and they are demonstration quality because they sound good, but mix it up!

But does playing new material disenfranchise the enthusiast?

Maybe. We got that at the Montreal Show recently. We got both kinds of responses. We got people saying “You’re not playing the right kind of music!” because we were playing ‘Scream & Shout’ by Will-I-Am, but it’s a good recording, and we had others packing out the room calling for more!

Have you seen that change in demographics alter your product line?

Yes. We’ve noticed a younger crowd gravitate toward products like our Ace integrated amplifier, 390 streaming preamplifier, and 400M mono power amps. This is not because they cost less, it’s because they fit the profile. To this end, at Munich this year there will be a bit of a streamlining of the larger power amplifiers. It’s a U-shaped market now, with a lot of interest in the ‘does-everything’ smaller products, and in the really big amplifiers like the 888 monoblocks, but less so for the products in between.

Is appearance important?

Yes of course, for both the products and the people behind the products. Modern day high-end audio isn’t about looking like a hobbyist. It’s about having fun but looking professional... and being professional. I see people in high positions in audio companies walking around at events like this; like they are having a barbecue in their back yard. We’re not helping the cause here. Yes it portrays a laid-back approach that some like, but that also informs the people in the stores; if the boss can dress that way at a show, I can do the same in store. I don’t mean everyone in audio should be ‘suited and booted’, but we should look more professional.

That extends to our products, and is why we at Moon ensure there’s a standard look to the products and even their LEDs. We’re long past the time when someone will put up with a red light on one product and a blue one on another, both meaning ‘on’! This alone isn’t going to change audio, but it all counts.

Isn’t that off-putting for some?

It’s about the ‘fun factor’; the fun factor isn’t about looking like a slob. It’s about enjoying yourself, but being professional enough to engage the customer at the same time. And that’s the big question – how do we do that across the board?

What about the stores themselves?

If possible, stores need to remodel every few years. This is a fact of retail life now around the world, why shouldn’t it apply to hi-fi stores. We try to help stores in that remodelling; not through heavy-handed branding, but because we get to see a lot of stores around the world and we know what works and what doesn’t.

But these really need to be engaging and inclusive. For example, let’s say you set up a ►

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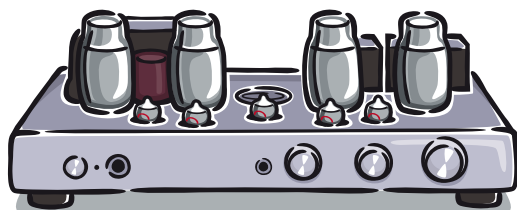


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“I quit my job waiting on tables to make less money working in an audio store because I was hooked on hi-fi!”



Is that how we engage the young?

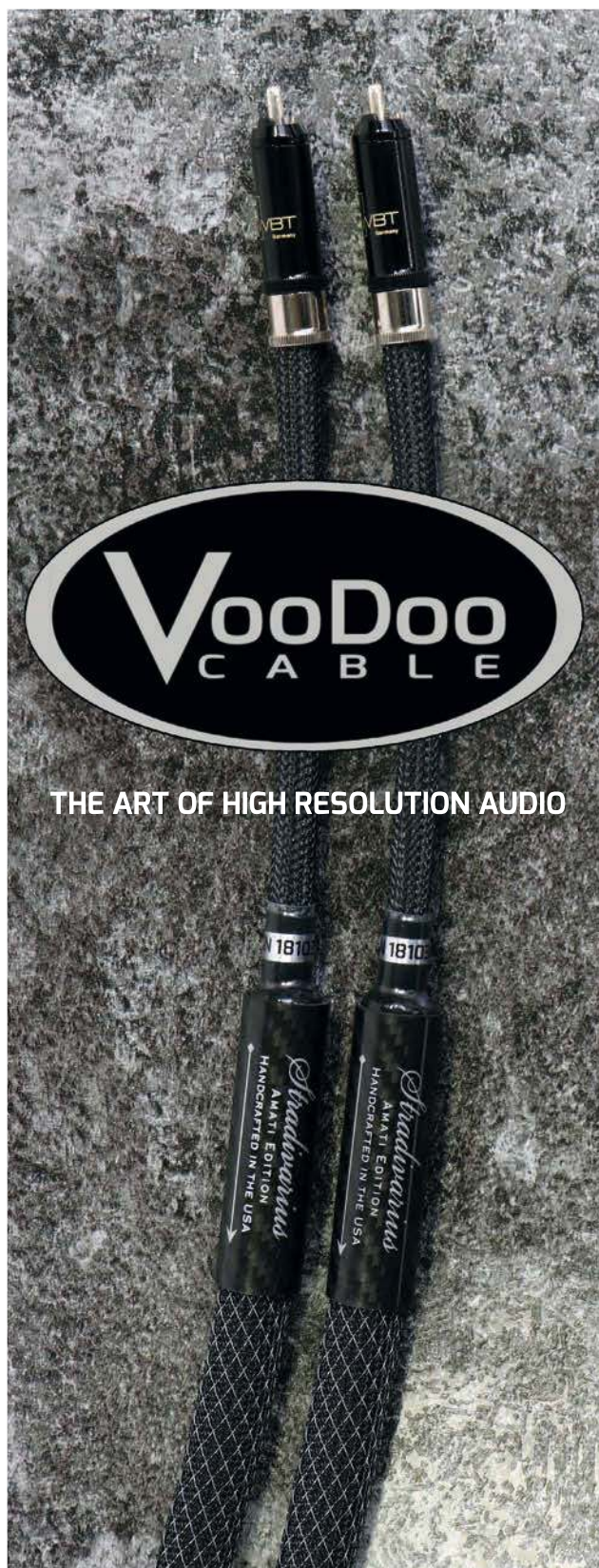
Yes, and that's how I got my start! It's my 30th year in this industry. Back in 1989, I was in school full-time. How did I get that first job in a store? I used to frequent that store all the time. I couldn't afford to buy anything, but I loved to hang out at those stores. There were places that snubbed me from the beginning – and I never forgot that – but there were others who were always nicer, and I remembered that too. And when I was 18, one of the stores said “Hey Costa, we're a little bit short-handed. Would you like to come work with us at the weekends?” I quit my job waiting on tables to make less money working in an audio store because I was hooked on hi-fi!

Moving over to the hardware, what do we need to do to reach that next generation?

Strangely, I think it comes from not relying on tablets and laptops to make music! That's an education issue, across the board. When Moon started investigating the world beyond CD, like everyone else we went with the laptop+DAC approach. While it sounds good, it also seems to lose something in the audio performance. Fortunately, it seems that ‘something’ can be recaptured through streaming. We need to demonstrate just that, because it shows what we as audio professionals have been saying for a long time and that we do know what we are doing! Those that know us, know they don't have to worry about performance, but we've noticed that newcomers tend to ask less about sound quality. That's not because they don't have the interest, it's because inexpensive audio now sounds pretty good, and they expect good audio to sound great! +

- ▶ really nice headphone bar. Naturally, you take all the precautions to make sure things don't get stolen, but you can take those precautions too far. Suppose your store is on the route of a kid returning home from school. He's interested in hearing headphones and one day walks into the store to listen. Engage with him... he might not be able to afford those things today, but maybe soon he will, and maybe his dad will share his interest too. What do we do, however? We make that kid feel like he's a robber! Engage the kid by saying “Do you like music?” not, “can you leave your bag behind the counter, just in case!”

But a listening bar is a great thing. Yes, it's about selling headphones, but it's also about selling the idea of headphones. Make it educational as well as entertaining. Say “here's what you currently play on MP3, here's what it sounds like through a better format, and here's what it sounds at its best. Do the same with headphones: good – better – best works for Apple, why shouldn't it work for a hi-fi store? But if you do this – no pressure! If I was a 16 year old and I was treated like I was an individual with my own taste, I'd be back in that shop every minute I could spare, but if I was treated like I was some kind of potential crook, I'd leave and never come back. Either way, I'm going to share that experience with my friends on social media, good and bad. And the bad experience of being treated like a second-class citizen because of your age will stick. We need to make a positive impression.



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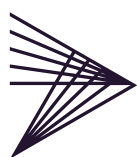
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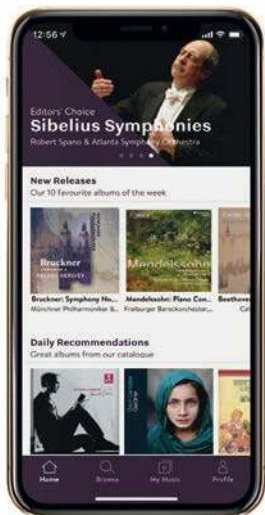
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STREAMING – What's best for classical music?

Music listeners can choose from a wide array of streaming services: YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music, Deezer, Tidal, etc. But, which streaming service is the best for classical music fans? We tested them all on the quality of their respective catalogues, their abilities as a classical-specific search engine, audio quality, artist payouts, and scope of recommendations. The winner is quite a surprise...



Freemium = not OK

First, we considered notionally free services like Youtube and Spotify's 'freemium' offering. However, we found that free actually comes at a pretty high price: in this case, the advertisements. While few music listeners appreciate ads in between their favourite tracks, these ads are particularly disturbing when listening to classical music.

Because classical music tends to be more delicate sounding than other music genres, the 'blatant' advertisements are even more disruptive to the listening experience. We love classical music too much to have it disturbed by advertisements. Therefore, for the remainder of this test, we will focus on Spotify Premium, Apple Music, Deezer, Tidal, Primephonic, and Qobuz. The first four are widely known and therefore probably need no further explanation. Qobuz is a download store that also offers streaming, focusing on higher audio quality. Primephonic is a specialist classical music streaming service.

Very similar catalogues

Our second criterion focuses on the catalogue of music these streaming services offer. Which service has the widest? The answer is none of them. All streaming services offer an almost identical catalogue as music labels are incentivised to make their content available on as many streaming platforms as possible, in order to maximise their revenue. Of course, we encountered a handful of exceptions, but none of the services particularly stand out.

MP3 only?

Third on our list is audio quality. Classical music is more nuanced than most music genres and has a broader spectrum of music expression. The listening experience is heightened when streaming is done at a higher audio quality: whether it is Hi-Res, 24-bit, Lossless, or FLAC. The delicate sound of a soprano reaching that high note, or the complexity of 100+ instruments playing at the same time during a Mahler symphony just get lost in MP3, a lower quality format.

Tidal and Qobuz offer streaming subscriptions at Hi-Res, but charge a substantial premium for it at £19.99 per month. Comparatively, Primephonic charges a much more reasonable £14.99 for its Hi-Res subscription.

Boring recommendations

The great thing about streaming is that you can listen to pretty much everything, even to works, composers, and artists you are less familiar with. However, sometimes it can be tricky to pick out what new music you want to listen to. Recommendations can help navigate this challenge. Spotify for instance, has a classical section with suggestions. It starts with their 'classical essentials' playlist, containing stuff we all know: Bach cello suites, Schubert's impromptus,



Beethoven's 9th Symphony. Great works, but nothing surprising. There are several playlists such as 'easy classical': Ave Maria, Pachelbel, etc. Nothing new. Another called 'chilled classical': Debussy's Bergamasque, Chopin's Nocturnes, etc. Nothing new either. When we scroll down to the 'new releases section', we find lots of neo-classical like Einaudi and Joep Beving, and light classical like Andrea Bocelli. Still, nothing we did not already know.

On Apple Music, Tidal, Qobuz, and Deezer, our experiences are very similar. The same famous works are repeated over and over again. Tidal's classical sections centre on 'classical focus', 'classical romance', and 'soft piano' playlists whereas album recommendations focus on (mainstream) artists like Nils Frahm and Andrea Bocelli.

Qobuz does a bit better with curated playlists and more varied album recommendations. Primephonic, however, truly stands out on recommendations. Their 'Hidden Gems' section contains an impressive number of lesser known albums selected by Primephonic's classical music experts. Even better, most of them are a true catch. These same experts have also created playlists with lesser known works of famous composers, introducing a variety of wonderful, but previously overlooked, works. When we use their 'browse' functions, Primephonic impresses us even more. We can find all the works of a composer,

filter them by genre (eg chamber or orchestral), and further sort them by rank (eg popularity or duration). For each composer we can browse their repertoire in any direction we want.

Search? What a drama!

When you're searching for a specific classical work or recording on streaming services designed for pop music, it's a nightmare trying to find exactly what you're looking for. In many cases, you simply cannot find the work you want. For example, Spotify does not show any matching results when looking for Mozart's 5th symphony. On Apple Music neither; we got Mozart's Requiem instead... On Tidal we got Mozart's 40th symphony. Similarly, when searching for Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto, we find the second piano sonata instead. ▶



Classical music searches are a drama on all well-known streaming services except Primephonic.

On Primephonic, we can instantaneously find the particular work we want to hear, and with one simple click, we also get a complete overview of every recording of a particular work. We can then sort these recordings by popularity, age, or duration, somehow making the search even easier. And, we can even find the right movements in the right order.

What about artist payouts?

Typically a streaming service will pay out about 60-70% of their revenues to all rights holders, and royalty allotment is based on how often their songs (or works) have been streamed. But, taking Mahler's 8th symphony as an example, its two movements together last more than an hour. Listening to an hour of a particular pop music artist could therefore generate up to 10 times the royalties a classical music artist might generate in that same hour.

Moreover, the payout formula used by the major streaming services creates poor incentives for the classical community. Contemporary composers now opt to compose shorter works, rather than follow their artistic inspiration. Similarly, artists record shorter works rather than larger, longer, and often more rewarding longer works, because of the poor returns. This also self-selects artists to record more popular works, in the hope of gaining larger royalty cheques. To a certain extent, this has always been the case since people started paying for concert tickets, but the effect seems magnified, possibly due to the payout formula used by the major streaming services. Some labels have even cut classical works into parts just to create more tracks.

Primephonic, in contrast, has developed a payout based on the total amount of minutes a work is listened to rather than the amount of times a work is streamed. It thus pays out classical artists much more fairly.

And the winner is...

Primephonic is clearly the best streaming service for classical music. It offers the highest audio quality at the lowest price. Its search engine is specifically optimised for classical music: its superiority is obvious. The recommendations Primephonic suggests to its users are more interesting, and its model for artist pay-out is fairer than its competitors'. Since Primephonic is relatively new, it does not yet have integration with Roon or Bluesound. However, for those not using Bluesound or Roon, Primephonic is clearly the best streaming service for classical music in the market. +

► Let's try opera. We start with possibly the most famous of all, *Aida*. On Spotify we find *Aida* (the musical), Aidan Gallagher (pop artist) and Aida Auslaufmuziek (playlist for a cruise ship called 'Aida'). Finally, after scrolling down the list, we find something related to the opera *Aida*; it is a playlist which contains only one aria of the opera. We are looking for the entire opera though, not just one aria. On Qobuz we get Aidan Baker, Ookoo, Miles Davis, and other unrelated stuff.

We refine our search to 'Aida opera.' On Spotify we now get the playlist 'opera chill out' (uff...), again one aria only. The next result is finally an actual full recording of *Aida*. But it's by the Sofia National Opera Orchestra... On Apple Music, Tidal, Deezer, and Qobuz we had very similar experiences. On Tidal, for instance, we get Nacho Vegas and Aida Cuevas as top results: both latin pop artists. On Apple Music we get Ed Sheeran!

Often, when we *do* find the right work and recording, it doesn't start in the right place. For example, Mozart's 39th symphony conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt on Spotify, it somehow starts with the third movement, rather than the first. On Apple Music we also get the third movement first. On Tidal, the fourth movement.

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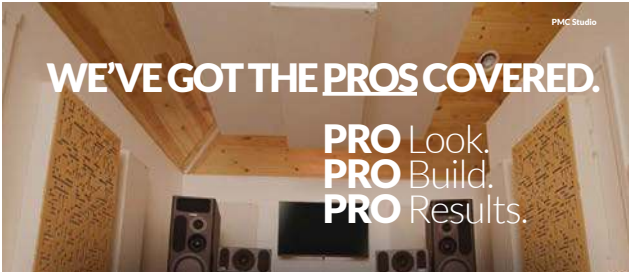


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record reviews

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.

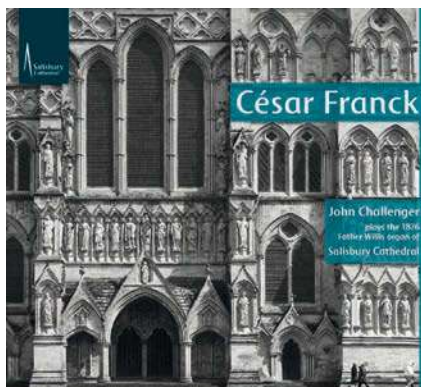
This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis Davis

JK – Jason Kennedy

AS – Alan Sircom

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César Franck

Pièce héroïque, Prélude, Fugue et Variation, Cantabile, Trois Chorals pour Grand Orgue

John Challenger, Organ

Salisbury Cathedral



In issue 171, we spoke with John Challenger, Assistant Director of Music at Salisbury Cathedral, about his passion for organ music (and also for Salisbury's 'Father' Willis organ currently in restoration). Now it's time to hear the fruit of his labours, with this new collection of the organ works of César Franck (1822-90).

The 19th Century saw something of a blossoming in organ music; in effect a confluence of technology and the genius to harness that technology. Utilising the technological step changes that came out of the Industrial Revolution, builders like Aristide Cavaillé-Coll in France and Henry 'Father' Willis created grand organs of size and complexity, and composers like Franck exploited these powerful instruments, in improvisation, interpretation, and composition. There was an undoing of this revolution, with a mid-20th Century movement to restore organ playing to its baroque precursor (and re-voice 19th Century organs as a result), but the great organ at Salisbury Cathedral remained resolutely unmodified... and will remain so when it returns from its year-long restoration.

Before the organ was disassembled for its wash and brush up, Challenger took the opportunity to combine the powerful voice of

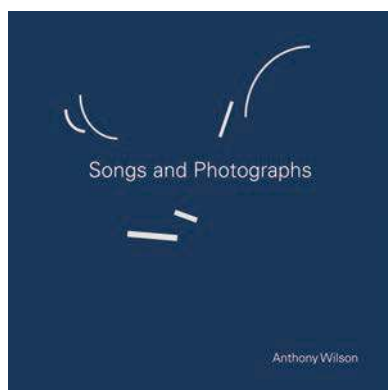
the Salisbury Cathedral organ with a collection of Franck's work made for organs of similar gravitas. From the outset, this is a work of bold intensity; the 'Pièce héroïque' lives up to the name. The 'Prélude, Fugue et Variation' is a haunting, moving piece played brilliantly, the 'Cantabile' is expressive and atmospheric, and Franck's last major work – the 'Trois Chorals...' pairing requires an organist not only of great virtuosity but also of the breadth needed to deal with Franck's scope. Challenger sets himself a hard task here but achieves it admirably, both in terms of his outstanding playing and his sophisticated registration. A musician that has the 'chops' to understand the music, recast it for Salisbury thanks to a thorough understanding of that organ's musical complex character, and play it with the gravitas and the subtlety required is rare indeed, and the disc is welcome because of that.

While the recording has a good sense of the three-dimensional space of the cathedral itself (especially in the Cantabile), for the most part this is a work-out for a system's dynamic range more than it is for stereo separation and imaging. Regardless, this is an important, brilliantly-executed work. **AS**

salisburycathedral.org.uk. On sale from June 13 in the Hi-Fi+ store (pre orders will be taken from June 1).

RECORDING
MUSIC





Songs and Photographs 180g

Anthony Wilson

Goat Hill Recordings GHR-005

Those of us who have kept up with releases from Original Recordings Group's (ORG) offshoot label Groove Note are probably familiar with Anthony Wilson and his releases *Jack Of Hearts*, *Power Of Nine*, *Savivity*, and *Our Gang*. ORG is the brainchild of Ying Tan, one of the founders of Classic Records. Groove Note is reserved for issues of new music, music that is always extremely well received. Son of bandleader Gerald Wilson, Anthony has grown up immersed in the Los Angeles jazz scene but he also grew up at a time when great guitar players like Clapton and Page roamed the earth and early blues guitar players' work was being reissued.

Wilson got a jump start to his career by winning a major competition (the Thelonious Monk Institute International Composers' Award), and played guitar on some of Diana Krall's best albums while hitting his stride as a composer and group leader on his Groove Note LPs. In 2008 Wilson started his own label, Goat Hill Recordings; this is his fifth title on that label, and the second one released on vinyl. Not satisfied with simply making the leap to vinyl, Wilson decided on something riskier and more adventurous—a deluxe package including a truly suburb art book accompanying the 180 gram RTI pressed record. Box sets of swag seem to be the rage this year. The

price of this recording may at first seem high, but compared to the more expensive Hendrix *Electric Ladyland* box set, it's a positive bargain.

Songs And Photographs, in contrast, has the look and feel of a limited edition book of poetry or photography; something you might expect to see under glass in a museum special exhibit. The 48-page photo book was developed by Wilson in collaboration with friend and art publisher Nina Holland at Little Steidl in Göttingen, Germany and includes 22 colour images of 35mm photos taken by Wilson, along with song lyrics. The book and LP are enclosed in a slipcase constructed of the same acid-free, wood-free archival paper as that used to construct the book's coloured boards and the LP sleeve.

What about the musicians? Los Angeles has always been ground central for session musicians, most famously with "The Wrecking Crew", a collective of LA players who seemed to back almost every important session during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. That dominance still exists today, and some of the crème of the crop of Los Angeles session players back Wilson on this album. The thing is, none of these guys (Gerald Clayton on keyboards, Joshua Crumby on bass, Jay Bellerose on percussion, and Patrick Warren on keyboards) is strictly a session player and their credits as leaders, composers, and arrangers are impressive. There is one surprise here—in addition to his usual guitar playing, Wilson sings on a number of the songs. Sounding

at times a bit like Jackson Browne, at time like James Taylor, it's a nice surprise. The 10 songs fill up the LP nicely, tightly fitting up near the label with a nice crossover between jazz and pop. It's a contemplative set of songs mostly composed by Wilson and the best thing I can say about it is that I've played it *far* more than normal for a record I'm considering for review, finding more depth with each listening.

In part, the beauty of the LP is the result of a masterful recording. It's a digital recording, but few recordings today approach this level of sound and the best of those share one thing with this recording—the recording engineer was Michael C. Ross, who also recorded the fabulous sounding Vanessa Fernandez discs for the Groove Note label. If there is a digital artefact, I'm not hearing it. Recorded at Sphere Studios in Los Angeles in 2018, this is one of the discs I'll pull out for guests to demonstrate how a recording should be done today. Wilson produced the session with 'tone poet' Joe Harley; Kevin Gray of Cohearant Audio mastered the LP, and the disc was pressed by RTI, so its DNA is unimpeachable.

More than anything, *Songs and Photographs* is a new breed of palpably rich physical media emerging in an age of physical media rejection. The melding of the physical art of photography and music is a hopeful sign of integration of the arts. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



**A Louder Silence****Leifur James**

Late Night Tales



If your musical tastes extend beyond the acoustically-based material that tends to benefit from decent recording standards – by which I mean jazz, classical, and classic albums from the good old bad old days – it can sometimes be challenging to find new and interesting music that also sounds good. Electronic music is one such area where quality varies enormously, but generally is beset by compression, distortion, and the use of effects that don't always benefit from the illumination of a transparent system. So, it's always exciting when something comes along that is both new and interesting as well as sounding decent; Leifur James' debut *A Louder Silence* falls into this category. It's in the same school as Kruder and Dorfmeister and has similarities in tone to Yello, although it's hard to say whether James has encountered their music. He is what is described as 'a producer' but not in the George Martin or Trevor Horn style; rather it's in the sense of playing everything on the record including the piano and cello, albeit the drums are provided by Jim Macrae.

The music is jazz-tinged electronica with a pretty relaxed vibe most of the time. What makes it sound good is the combination of original instruments – no samples – and analogue synths, and even some vocals from James himself who has a soulful style that perfectly

complements the compositions. He has a good grasp of the need for variety, for light and shade in music. Tidal gives *A Louder Silence* a 12 for range which is a big number for anything non-acoustic. It reveals that the production has plenty of space for both the crescendos and the calm. There is a lovely moment at the end of the final track 'Osho' where the beats die away to leave a bowed cello that remains when the backing comes back and then gets added to with a second element from the same instrument.

The first of the ten tracks is 'Alpine', which starts out with an electronic take on waves lapping at a shore or perhaps a lake given the title. The piece builds up with a thick, heavy bass line and simple drum beat that are joined by percussion playing on and off the beat. It ebbs and flows enough to keep your interest, but is more about creating a good vibe than distracting the listener. 'Time' is in a similar vein but introduces both keyboards and saxophone in an open yet pared down fashion, where there are no leads – just a groove that builds and retracts with piano and guitar being added to the mix in very effective fashion. Things get more lively on 'Suns of Gold' because this is the first tune with James' vocal. It's hardly a song as such – more a repeated phrase – but he sings it well, and when combined with some chewy, extended bass guitar over a field of electronica, it works very well. The bass guitar is particularly well captured on this album, with a full, round character

that's cleaner and more appealingly textural than the synth bass.

He also uses reverb in order to produce a sense of depth, which is strong on the tune 'Argonaut'. This has a degree of dimensionality in the chunky beats and sparkly synth over a snappy drum beat and flows very easily. The second example of vocals is on 'Mumma Don't Tell', where James plays his (classically trained) mother's piano. This instrument reveals that a degree of limiting has been used, but in fairly restrained fashion given the genre and the need to mesh acoustic and electronic sources of sound. There is also some lovely guitar noodling on this track; quiet but effective because it's given some space. 'Uncle Blue' also uses guitar to good effect and 'Night and Day' introduces the bowed cello for the first time, melding it with some subtle beats to keep up the theme.

The feel of the album changes on 'Salaninam' where a kora player and singer who could be Toumani Diabaté gets to play a fairly typical West African song over some background electronica. It seems an unlikely addition to the listing but provides a bit of contrast and shows that James is open to fresh input. If you like a well produced electronic groove, *A Louder Silence* is well worth checking out; the white vinyl has sold out but there's still plenty of the black stuff and a 24-bit WAV download is also available. **JK**

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Incoming!

Is there life after laptops?

I am starting back in audio once again after a long break. I am primarily listening to music on my laptop, as I no longer have a record or CD collection. My system is simple at present, comprising a pair of Sennheiser HD-25 closed-back headphones going directly into my MacBook Pro. Everyone seems to recommend adding a headphone amplifier and a DAC to get a better sound, but I am reasonably happy with the sound I already get. Will I hear a big difference and what would you recommend?

Hannah Osborn, via email

If you are well and truly happy with the sound you presently enjoy, there is no real reason to add a headphone amp/DAC unless you wish to do so. However, a well-made headphone amp/DAC will in most cases significantly improve sound quality and does not necessarily have to cost a small fortune. A great example would be the iFi Audio xCAN headphone amp (and Bluetooth DAC) reviewed in this issue, which sells for under £230. You can use the xCAN (and other devices like it) purely as an amp and get good results, but many find it also makes sense to stream music via Bluetooth connections from their PCs, Macs, smartphones, tablets, etc., to the headphone amp/DAC. In that way, you can enjoy the audibly superior sonic performance of both the amp and of its built-in Bluetooth DAC.

Chris Martens, Editor, Ultimate Headphone Guide

The heat is on!

Perhaps I am especially sweaty, but I find it difficult to listen to headphones for much longer than a couple of hours without finding them too warm and too uncomfortable. No matter how lightweight the headband, I find them hard to wear for any length of time, and as I listen to a lot of symphonic music and more than the odd opera, this is a huge problem for me. Are their headphones designed for the more hot-blooded individual, or is there some aftermarket add-on that I could use to stop the headband and ear-cups from making me hot, sweaty, and itchy?

Name withheld on request

Thank you for your inquiry. No matter what types of ear pads your headphones came with, the very good news is that a number of aftermarket manufacturers offer fabric covered replacement ear pads that do a good job of wicking away perspiration and of keeping your listening experiences relatively cool and comfortable. There are several reputable ear pad manufacturers, but one I can particularly recommend is Dekoni Audio, which offers a very wide range of custom pads with varying surface material

options including protein leather, sheepskin, fenestrated sheepskin, synthetic suede, and two-levels of velour. In particular, you might want to check out Dekoni's Velour and Elite Velour-series ear pads to see if they address your requirements. Two other manufacturers of replacement velour-covered ear pads are Brainwavz and Monoprice; check them out.

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

Custom fit – passion or fashion?

Which is better for long-haul flights?

Custom-made in-ear monitors without noise cancellation, or very good headphones with built-in cancellation systems? Also, do these things have a faddy element to them – I noticed two or three years ago, it was all custom-in-ears, but these have faded from view and universal-fit models are all the rage today. Why is that?

Darius Wing-Davies, via email

You raise several excellent questions, some of which have very personal answers that vary from listener to listener. Not all listeners can make peace with the feel of in-ear devices (whether universal-fit or custom-fit) and for them ANC headphones are really the only solution. However, for those who are comfortable with in-ear listening devices, both custom-fit in-ear monitors and universal-fit can give excellent results – potentially better results than even the best ANC headphones can provide. This is true because earphones and CIEMs are purely passive devices that do not alter the music in any way, whereas ANC circuits must always discriminate between external noise (which they attempt to cancel or to mitigate) and music (which they attempt not to alter). ►

► Now here's the very personal part. Although the measurable sound isolation differences between the two types of products typically are not large, many users report that CIEMs do a noticeably better job of blocking out external noise than do universal-fit earphones. Universal-fit earphones ideally contact only the wearer's ear canal (via their ear tips, which are used to achieve an airtight seal) and the areas touched by the earphone's signal cables, whereas CIEMs by definition make contact not only with the wearer's ear canal but also a significant portion of the outer ear (or pinnae). Which you find to be more comfortable for long-term wear is for you to decide. I have used both universal-fit earphones and CIEM's for long transatlantic flights with good results, and have observed that CIEMs are better in terms of noise isolation, at least for me.

Why the rise in the popularity of universal-fit earphones? There are two or three factors at work. First, by changing ear-tips, universal-fit earphones can be adapted for use by multiple listeners, whereas CIEMs fit you, but only you. Second, universal-fit earphones require no custom earmould impressions or ear scans at all; you just buy them and use them—simple as that. In contrast, CIEM's invariably require some sort of ear scans or custom earmould impressions and they also involve the harder-than-it-looks art and science of converting scans or impressions into well-fitting custom earpieces. Finally, universal-fit earphones are typically much easier (and at least somewhat less costly) to build than CIEMs. For this reason, some manufacturers release new in-ear designs first as universal-fit products and only later decide whether to make them available in CIEM format. Two great examples of this "universal-fit-first" approach would be Noble Audio's flagship Khan earphone and Westone's top-of-the-range W80 earphone.

Chris Martens, Editor, Ultimate Headphone Guide

Sensible listening levels

How loud and for how long should I be playing my headphones? I used to play in a band and just a few weeks of regular touring wrecked my hearing and I don't want to ruin what's left! The trouble is, I like to play music loud and I like to listen to a lot of music. My audiologist says this will damage what hearing I have left and recommended I either listen quietly for a few minutes or very quietly for longer. Neither of which satisfy me. Is she just being overly cautious? What do you recommend?

Terry Shay, via email

Your audiologist is not being overly cautious; she's just looking out for you. There's no escaping the fact that long-term exposure to high-volume sounds will damage your hearing. And here's the evil kicker: there's often a time lag (weeks, months, or even years) between the moments when damage occurs and the actual signs and symptoms of damage becoming apparent. In other words, you might think you are home free with no hearing damage, when in fact you are not.

A good recommendation is to listen at the very lowest volume levels you find satisfying and for this some 'retraining' of your ear may be necessary. Try listening to music you know well to see how far down you can turn the volume levels and still hear the parts of the music you enjoy most. Force yourself to listen at those levels for a prolonged stretch of time until they become the norm for you. Here are some hints.

Listeners often crank up the volume in order to add perceived excitement to their listening. Be aware, though, that earphones can not and do not deliver the 'whole body slam' experience of listening to music in a club, dance hall, or concert venue—no matter how high you turn them up. Don't try to use volume levels (sound quantity) as a substitute for sound quality.

Instead of pursuing excitement through raw volume, try focussing instead on dynamic contrasts in the music: that is, listen for and pay attention to the shifts between loud(er) and soft(er) passage, rather than sheer 'blast levels'. Often the contrasts are more exciting and rewarding than outright 'crank-up-itude'.

Try listening through higher quality earphones, especially ones that do a good job of revealing all of the music even at low levels. Honestly, many listeners play music way too loudly through overly mediocre earphones in an effort to 'hear more of the music'. The trick is that better earphones give you all the musical intimacy and expression you want at lower, safer volumes.

If you do continue playing in a band, please consider using high-fidelity hearing protection devices such as offerings from Etymotic, V-Moda, Westone, and others. Alternatively, budget permitting, use custom-fit in-ear monitors and keep the levels as low as possible. You'll save yourself from the blast of stage monitors/PA speakers/guitar amps/drums, etc., and hear a quieter and better-sounding monitor mix into the bargain.

When in doubt, take listening breaks—just to give your ears some recovery time. It costs you nothing and potentially helps save something irreplaceable; namely, your precious hearing.

Chris Martens, Editor, Ultimate Headphone Guide



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SHOW REPORT

CanJam Singapore *by the team*



CanJam has become a truly global phenomenon. It seems like every month, CanJam pitches up at another ballroom in a large city in a different part of the world. This time, it was Singapore. The packed rooms at the swanky Pan Pacific hotel in the heart of Singapore in the last days of March was home to the latest and greatest in personal audio.

Although many of the same names appear across the planet, there are distinct flavours to each show. Not only from the local representatives supporting a brand, but in terms of what is and isn't successful in a specific region. For example, some parts of the world seem to prefer custom in-ear monitors over headphones, and some places stress the importance of individual DAP and DAC, while others combine this into one component for portable use. Such is the case in Singapore.

The best thing about CanJam is each one makes you hungry for more, and you want to experience more of the great personal audio sound capable from some exceptional new products, often from equally exceptional new brands.

And the next big CanJam venue is... Park Plaza in London on July 27th and 28th. Don't miss out! +



Tom Hackforth of *Hi-Fi+* shows off our 20th anniversary issue to Final's team, in front of a trio of the brand's B series earphones.



With all the noise about Stax' latest SR-009S, it's worth remembering that there is still a Stax SR-009 and it sounds excellent especially when partnered with the T8000 energiser.



UFOEAR is a new brand from China. The UFO-112 earphones cost \$369 US come in a distinctive flying saucer case!



On page 35 of this issue, we put the dCS Bartok (without headphone socket) through its paces. However, the headphone amp-equipped version is proving to be a tough act to follow, too.



The Chord Mojo+Poly combination received a shot in the arm just before the show, with the launch of its version 2.0 firmware. Adding Tidal and Qobuz support, the improvement is significant.



At \$9,999 US, oBravo's flagship Ra C-Cu are strong contenders for the most expensive earphones ever made. They are also strong contenders for the best!



Martin Roberts from Warwick Acoustics was flying the flag for the brand. The company has since launched its outstanding Aperio flagship model.



Manley Laboratories was one of the few brands showing traditional audio equipment... with a twist. The brand's popular \$5,900 Stingray II integrated amplifier makes a fine headphone amp, too.



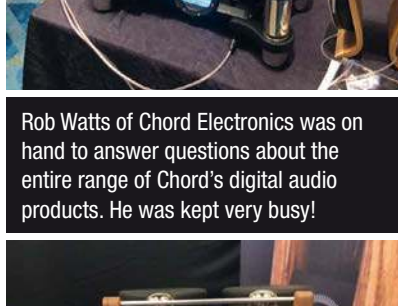
Rob Watts of Chord Electronics was on hand to answer questions about the entire range of Chord's digital audio products. He was kept very busy!



Alongside the popular QP2R, Questyle announced the distinctive \$2,000 US QPM, where 'M' is for 'Master', upping both internal memory and style!



Effect Audio's latest cable is the \$699 Cleopatra. Following in the footsteps of the Leonidas 2 Octa flagship cable, this all-silver Litz design is available in four or eight wire configurations.



Serbian audio experts Auris released the epic \$7,000 Nirvana valve headphone amplifier late last year, and it played to a very appreciative house!



Focal recently launched two closed-back headphone designs. The Elegia was tested in this issue, but the £2,795 Stellia is the real flagship model.



Cayin showed its complete power trio of personal audio products for the home, with the DAC6 (top), DAP6 media bridge (middle) and the extraordinarily powerful IHA-6 headphone amp (bottom).

Focal Elegia closed-back headphones

by Steven Stone



Since Focal began making headphones their roster of offerings has grown precipitously. Currently you can find Focal earphones such as the Spark Wired models for as little as £59/\$69 or you can go big with their flagship Utopias (£3499/\$3999). Focal's latest headphone release is priced in the middle; the Elegia (£799/\$899) is Focal's first closed-enclosure, wired, over-ear headphone. Although they are not Focal's most expensive closed-enclosure model, they share much of the design aesthetic and technical DNA of Focal's premium high-performance open-enclosure designs. How do they fit into the Focal line-up and how well will they fit into your audio lifestyle? Let's find out.

The Elegia enclosures have a similar shape and size to the Clear or Utopia headphones. They feature Focal's front baffle design that places the 40mm aluminum/magnesium full-range driver as far forward as possible and at an angle, which according to Focal is important so as "not to have too much space between the speakers and the ears to ensure the best dynamics and an ideal tonal balance on the entire audio spectrum." The driver itself uses a surround that is similar to the Clear, but with a different thickness of 110 microns. The Elegia also has a new internal geometry that improves the driver's movement and allowed Focal to reduce the driver's coil height from 5mm to 4mm. Also, to increase the new driver's magnetic flux, Focal switched to a new copper wire and a N50 grade neodymium motor.

Although the Elegia uses a closed enclosure, it has two vents; one is part of the driver itself while the second vent is actually built into the logo design in the centre of the earcup. The entire earcup design has been optimised to an ideal volume for optimal decompression and damping. It uses both internal diffusers as well as EVA foam to break up any standing waves and spread the energy evenly throughout the enclosure. According to Focal, "The main objective here being at all costs to prevent the energy emitted by the back wave

"While it is a medium-weight design, the Elegia feels light and comfortable due to its padded headband and soft over-ear pads."

from returning to the speaker driver cone and thus turning into an additional unwanted sound signal." Even Elegia's microfiber earpads got a redesign so as to optimize their isolating abilities while enhancing their comfort and preserving Elegia's high acoustic impedance.

In terms of fit, the Elegia reminded me of the Focal Clear. And while it is a medium weight design, the Elegia feels light and comfortable due to its padded headband and soft over-ear pads. At the end of several two-hour-plus listening sessions the Elegia was as comfortable at the end as at the beginning. Isolation was far greater than from an open headphone design and was almost as good at keeping outside noise from intruding as some of my most-isolating closed-back headphones, such as the AKG K-501. You could use these in a library as long as you don't go for max volume near another patron. Bundled accessories include a 1.2-metre single-ended terminated cable that has both 3.5mm mini-stereo and standard 6.35mm jacks and a protective travel case.

With a published sensitivity of 105 dB and 35-Ohm impedance the Elegia can be driven successfully by even a smartphone. My iPhone SE achieved comfortable volume levels at only about 60% of its maximum output. On the other end of the spectrum, the Elegia really came alive when it was tethered to something with a bit more push, such as the fantastic Manley Absolute Headphone Amplifier. I was especially impressed by the Elegia's bass control, which was nearly as extended and dynamic as the Abyss Diana Phi. Unlike some closed designs where the low bass can almost box your ears with excessive impact, the Elegia's bass response is more like an open enclosure design.

Imaging precision through the Elegia was excellent, with lots of space between instruments. The soundstage size was big enough to provide a panoramic soundstage, but the overall size was not quite as large as from the open-design MrSpeakers Aeon or Abyss Diana Phi. The Elegia's harmonic balance was basically natural but overall had a slightly drier harmonic character than the Abyss Diana Phi. Female vocalists have less 'chest sound' through the Elegia and lack

Summary

Voicing: Fundamentally neutral with excellent low bass extension and control



(All ratings relative to comparably priced CIEMs.)

Resolution/Focus:



Dynamics/Expression:



Sound staging/Imaging:



Freedom of noise:



Features and versatility:



Value:



Pros

- Extremely easy to drive, even with a smartphone
- Good controlled low bass extension
- Comfortable fit for long-term use
- Built to an extremely high level of fit and finish

Cons

- Moderately microphonic cable
- The headphones do not fold, so the travel case is large

a bit of overtone complexity. Also, the Elegia have a tighter, more damped overall sound than the Abyss Diana Phi.

So, if you loved the sound, feel, and overall quality of the Focal Clear but require a headphone that provides far more isolation, the Elegia should be on your must-audition list. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Over-ear, closed-back

Drivers: Dynamic Driver

Frequency Response: 5 Hz - 23 KHz

Impedance: 35 ohms

Sensitivity: 105 dB/1mw

Connector: 3.5mm dual-pin custom

Weight: 15.4 oz, 430 grams

Price: £799 UK, \$899 US

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

Focal-JMlab

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URL: focal.com

iFi Audio xCAN portable headphone amplifier

by Buzz Hughes



The British firm iFi Audio is widely considered one of the premier purveyors of small-chassis, ultra-fidelity audio products. iFi's new xCAN (\$299) is a uniquely styled portable analogue headphone amplifier in its primary use, but also functions in a secondary use as a Bluetooth DAC for wireless streaming inputs. The xCAN is an inherently versatile product with the goal to allow users to confidently enhance sound quality of audio sources such as smartphones, tablets, TVs, or even high-end DAPs. When directly wired to external audio sources in its primary analogue use, the xCAN supports both 3.5mm TRS single-ended inputs and outputs as well as 2.5mm TRRS balanced inputs and outputs. In its secondary use as a Bluetooth DAC the xCAN sports a dedicated ESS Sabre DAC chip giving users 16-bit 44.1kHz CD-Quality Bluetooth via AAC, aptX, and aptX LL.

The user interface of the xCAN's attractive, curvaceous chassis is relatively simple. At the front a user will find selection buttons for iFi's 3D+Holographic and XBassII proprietary sound enhancement circuits and a stepped attenuator volume control surrounding an intuitive LED push button that changes colours to indicate operation modes. The back face of the xCAN provides a USB-C charging port and a three-position switch that enables the user to customise various parameters of the XBassII sound enhancement circuit.

Internally, the xCAN is built around iFi's Cyberdrive circuit. Cyberdrive design creates a dual-mono headphone amplifier that provides a maximum of 1000mW of power per channel. This power should be sufficient to get the maximum performance out of any set of earphones, CIEMs, or full-size headphones you can throw at the device. iFi stresses that their Cyberdrive design embraces a 'best of both worlds'

formula by offering digital control over an internally analogue amplification process. The signal attenuation conducted on the analogue side is digitally controlled in order to maximize a full dynamic range and preserve resolution even at very low playback levels. Cyberdrive also has the added benefit of being able to deliver incredible battery power control, with playing time said to last up to 18 hours per charge.

xCAN also features iFi's important S-Balanced amplifier technology, which is found in its much more expensive Pro iCan big brother. Much has been written on the S-Balanced circuit (essentially a single-ended compatible balanced circuit) but succinctly put, the advantage of this technology lies in the fact that regardless of the user's choice of headphones, he or she will get the sonic benefits of balanced amplification. Also notable as a tech inclusion is the addition of parent company Abingdon Music Research's Global Master Timing memory buffer system, which makes the xCAN virtually immune to jitter.

In the several weeks I listened to the xCAN it continued to earn a space in my pocket owing to its simplicity and sonic effectiveness. The most exciting use I found was to use the xCAN with the various DAPs I had on hand from previous reviews. When connected with these DAPs, the xCAN rocketed playback quality to a stratospheric new level, delivering previously unheard degrees of precision, detail, accurately rendered spatial cues, and other pleasurable sonic enhancements across the board.

As an example, consider the organ bass notes in Felix Hell's *Symphony Concertante*, Op. 81: 1. *Allegro-Molto Moderato* from *Barber, Guilman & Jongen: Orgel & Orchester* [perc.pro]. With the aid of the xCAN the low range of the track seemed to be truly unearthed with a weighty, resonant, rock-solid bass performance not unlike what you would expect to hear when listening through a very high dollar desktop headphone amp. Disconnecting the xCAN after this

Summary

Sonic Character: Leans slightly toward brightness/clarity



(All ratings relative to comparably priced digital audio players.)

Resolution/Focus:



Freedom of noise:



Dynamics/Expression:



Features and versatility:



Sound staging/Imaging:



Value:



Pros

- Outstanding sonic enhancement to virtually any mobile device
- Connectivity, versatility
- Excellent battery life
- Stylish looks
- Light weight

Cons

- Even with supplied Velcro strips, holding xCAN + Source device can be a bit cumbersome
- Supplied 3.5mm connection cords a bit short; a longer cord would have been nice

experience revealed an auditory gulf that was painfully evident, so that I think most users would yearn for the added gravitas the xCAN provides.

In summary, while some might scratch their heads for a moment to wonder whether a product like the xCAN is necessary or beneficial, the proof is in the listening. To my ears, the xCAN delivers a sizeable sonic payoff beyond all proportion to its modest price. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

iFi xCAN portable headphone amplifier

Type: Mobile headphone amplifier with high-end Bluetooth connectivity

Inputs: 2.5mm TRRS balanced input, 3.5 mm TRS input

Outputs: 3.5mm headphone jack, 2.5mm headphone jack

Frequency Response: <2Hz- >200kHz (-3dB)

THD + N: <0.006% Balanced, <0.005% S-Balanced

Power output: >7.6v/90 mW (@600 ohms) Balanced, >3.8v/ 45 mW (@300 ohms) S-Balanced

SNR: >120dB Balanced, >121 dB S-Balanced

Dimensions (H×W×D): 19 × 67 × 95 mm

Weight: 127g

Price: \$299 US, £229 UK

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

iFi Audio

+44 (0) 1900 60195 | URL: ifi-audio.com

UK Distributor: Select Audio | URL: selectaudio.co.uk

US Distributor: iFi Audio USA | URL: ifi-audio.com/sales

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MrSpeakers **ETHER 2** planar magnetic headphones

by Chris Martens

At one point or another, most of us have either heard or used the expression, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” However, Dan Clark, founder and chief designer of the San Diego, California-based headphone firm MrSpeakers doesn’t think that way; when he gets new design insights, he can’t resist turning them into new headphone products. This is why, after releasing a succession of four different ETHER models (the original ETHER, the closed back ETHER C, the ETHER FLOW and the ETHER C FLOW, Dan Clark rolled up his sleeves to create an all-new flagship planar magnetic headphone called the ETHER 2 (£1,900 UK/\$1,999 US). Visually, ETHER 2 draws inspiration from MrSpeakers’ award-winning VOCE electrostatic headphones, which most enthusiasts identify by their delicate, satin-silver, spider web-like, metal ear cup covers. That same cover design is used in the ETHER 2, so that it resembles an elegant, matt black version of the VOCE.

Internally, the ETHER 2 receives a number of important changes, including a new driver. ETHER 2’s driver diaphragm is the same size (71×45mm) as the ETHER FLOW diaphragm, but it enjoys a whopping 70% reduction in the mass of its aluminium voice coil traces. Further, the ETHER 2’s driver was designed from the ground up to integrate TrueFlow driver technology, whereas the earlier ETHER models received TrueFlow features as after-the-fact add-ons. Next, the ETHER 2 features “an all-metal headphone cup and headband, with a carbon fibre driver baffle” and weighs in at feathery 290 grams (fully 95 grams lighter than the ETHER FLOW). Finally, ETHER 2 features the firm’s significantly improved VIVO signal cables, said to improve soundstages and imaging.

For this review I compared the ETHER 2 to my reference ETHER FLOW headphones at length, powering the headphones with the superb Chord Electronics Hugo TT2 headphone amp/ ▶



- DAC and Hugo M-Scaler combo. My comparisons revealed several sonically significant differences between the ETHER FLOW and the new ETHER 2.

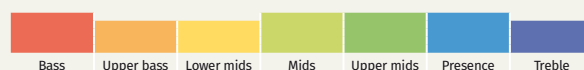
First, the ETHER 2 offers a quicker and more agile sound than the ETHER FLOW – a difference that can be heard across the entire audio spectrum, but is particularly noticeable from the middle of the midrange on up. Second, the ETHER 2 is slightly less warm sounding than the ETHER FLOW, partly because ETHER 2 dispenses with the ETHER FLOW's subtle touch of mid-bass lift, while also delivering superior openness and transient speeds. Third, ETHER 2 delivers notably superior resolution and focus from top to bottom vis-à-vis the already excellent ETHER FLOW, which is saying a lot.

Put these factors together and the ETHER 2 offers a substantial, satisfying step forward in terms of sound quality and overall musical enjoyment. On 'The Curse' from Agnes Obel's *Aventine* [PIAS America, 16/44.1], the pizzicato cello figure that forms the rhythmic foundation of the song sounds at once clearer, more tightly focused, and yet more natural and realistic through the ETHER 2. Obel's voice, too, sounds more evocative and expressive through the ETHER 2 – almost as though the music has 'stretched out' to reveal information hidden in the spaces between notes and phrases.

This pattern repeats itself on other types of material, such as 'Hor Che Tempo' from Joël Grare's *Grare: Paris – Istanbul – Shanghai* [Alpha, 16/44.1]. 'Hor Che Tempo' is a mesmerizing, almost Satie-like piece that features a soprano soloist supported by the minimalist combination of high percussion, an extremely high-pitched wind instrument, a large bass drum, and the recurrent drone of a plucked string instrument. What caught my ear was the sheer purity with which the ETHER 2 captured the overarching clarity and dynamic expansiveness of the soloist's voice, plus distinct timbres of the instruments. The ETHER 2 also did a great job of capturing complex reverberations within the recording

Summary

Voicing: Fundamentally neutral with exceptional openness and transparency from the middle midrange frequencies on upward



(All ratings relative to comparably priced CIEMs.)

Resolution/Focus:



Freedom of noise:



Dynamics/Expression:



Features and versatility:



Sound staging/Imaging:



Value:



Pros

- Extraordinarily light and very comfortable
- Good controlled low bass extension
- Comfortable fit for long-term use
- Built to an extremely high level of fit and finish

Cons

- This open-back design is more open than most, meaning you can hear the outside world and vice versa
- Some may find the sound less warm and 'cozy-sounding' than that of the earlier ETHER FLOW

space. Best of all the ETHER 2's sound put the emphasis on the music—not 'hi-fi'.

In sum, MrSpeakers' ETHER 2 is light and incredibly comfortable to wear and it offers the refined and sophisticated sound qualities normally associated with headphones selling for £3,000/\$3,000 or more. Happily, MrSpeakers will actually sell you a pair for a tick under £2,000/\$2,000, which is good new for us all. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MrSpeakers ETHER 2 planar magnetic headphones

Type: Circumaural, open-back planar magnetic headphones

Drivers: Two 71×45mm planar magnetic drivers

Frequency Response: Yes*

(This puckish response reflects MrSpeaker's belief that, "The industry has no standards for measuring or publishing results and many published specs wildly overstate the headphone's potential. We prefer not to play the "spec game" for this reason.)

Impedance: 16 Ohms

Weight: 290 grams

Price: £1,900 UK, \$1,999 US

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

MrSpeakers Headphone Products

3366 Kurtz Street, Suite 200, San Diego, CA 92110 USA

+1 (619) 501-6313 | URL: mrspeakers.com

UK DISTRIBUTOR

Electromod

Beech Road, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP11 1RY UK

+44 (0) 1494 956558 | URL: electromod.co.uk

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Manley Laboratories **Absolute** Headphone Amplifier

by Steven Stone



Most pure analogue headphone amplifiers are simple affairs with a volume knob, some gain adjustments, and that's it. And then there is the Manley Absolute Headphone Amplifier, which has so many controls and adjustments that even an experienced reviewer will probably need to glance at the owner's manual at least once. Instead of a simple circuit path, the Manley delivers two, and instead of a single global feedback setting the Absolute offers a 10 dB range of adjustment. Intrigued? I know I was, and I continue to be amazed by the flexibility and sonic adjustability of the Manley Absolute Headphone Amplifier. Let's take a look and see what absolute means when it comes to a headphone amplifier.

First off, in case you didn't glean this from the photograph, the Manley is a valve-based device. Its valve complement includes two 12AX7 input valves and four 6AQ5A (EL 90) output valves. Its rear panel has two stereo pairs of single-

ended RCA inputs. For outputs the Absolute supplies one single-ended RCA stereo pair, one 6.35mm stereo headphone jack, and one balanced 4-pin XLR headphone jack, which allows two different headphones and one line output to remain connected at all times. The rear panel also contains the AC mains connection, the Headphone Maximum Level adjustment threshold control, and an instruction panel that lists the controls and their functions.

All the controls are on the front of the unit. These include a large volume control thumbwheel with LED level indicators directly above it. Directly to the left side of the volume control is the push-pull/single-ended selector, which changes the amplifier's circuit topology. On the right side of the volume control is the mute button. On the top surface of the Absolute you will find two rows of controls, the lower row contains, from left to right, a three-way output impedance adjustment, output selector, input selector, mono/stereo switch, and an EQ on/off switch. The second row has a variable feedback adjustment

knob, bass control, treble control, and balance control knobs. The Absolute comes with a dedicated RF remote control that has only two buttons: volume up and volume down.

Installing the Absolute was easy: simply connect a source to the input and a pair of headphones to the output; turn it on; select the correct input, output, and impedance from the front panel controls; and you're done. I used a wide variety of headphones with the Absolute, but the Abyss Diana Phi and Focal Elegia spent the most time connected to the Absolute.

Because the Manley Absolute has a three-band impedance selector switch right on its front panel, matching impedances with any headphones in my collection was a push button away. Another neat feature was the 'bypass' function, which routes the signal directly from input to the pair of RCA output jacks. So, you can use the Absolute as an active line-level preamplifier or 'put it to sleep,' and let the signal go directly to the RCA output jacks.

Sonically the Manley Absolute can be anything from a push-pull amplifier with 0.16% THD to a single-ended amp with 1.0% THD. Also, you can add up to 10 dB of feedback. The sonic difference between the single-ended with no feedback and the push-pull with 10 dB of feedback is about as wide as the gap in opinions among audiophiles about the effects of cables on a system. But unlike polarized opinions, the Absolute offers you all the options in between its sonic extremes. Which setting did I find to be 'the one?' None, actually. Instead there was a range of settings that worked, depending on the music, the recording, and my own mood.

Generally, I found I needed to employ some feedback regardless of whether I was using the push-pull or the single-ended amplifier circuits. Without at least 4 dB of feedback the sound was a bit too 'wild and wooly' for my tastes. Conversely,

Summary

Voicing: Variable



(All ratings relative to comparably priced digital audio players.)

Resolution/Focus:



Sound staging/Imaging:



Dynamics/Expression:



Value:



Pros

- Extremely versatile sonic adjustments
- Unique looks
- Easily accessible controls

Cons

- All headphone cable connections on the back of the amplifier, which may necessitate using longer cables
- The wide range of possible settings means that you need to pay attention to their relative positions to duplicate sonics from one listening session to the next

above 8 dB of feedback the sound lost its immediacy and dynamic drive.

I haven't mentioned the Absolute's looks. It is a handsome piece of industrial design that is unlike any other headphone amplifier past or present. When you combine its unique looks with its abundance of features you have a headphone amplifier that lives up to its name. For me, the Manley Absolute Headphone Amplifier was an absolute joy to use, listen to, and adjust to my tastes. Try it out at your pocketbook's peril... +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Manley Absolute Headphone Amplifier

Type: Tube-based triode or single-ended analog desktop/studio headphone amplifier and line-level preamplifier

Valve complement: two 12ax7, four 6AQ5A valves.

Frequency Response: 10Hz to 20kHz push-pull, 20Hz to 20kHz single-ended

Output Impedance: adjustable from 12 ohms to 600 ohms @ 1kHz

Signal to Noise: 83 dB @ 100mW output

Inputs: two pair of stereo RCA connections

Outputs: one pair of stereo RCAs, one 6.35mm stereo headphone jack, one XLR balanced stereo headphone jack

Chassis Finishes: copper, silver, and black.

Weight: 12 lbs.

Price: £3,500 UK, \$4,500 US

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

Manley Laboratories

13880 Magnolia Avenue, Chino, CA, 91710

URL: manley.com

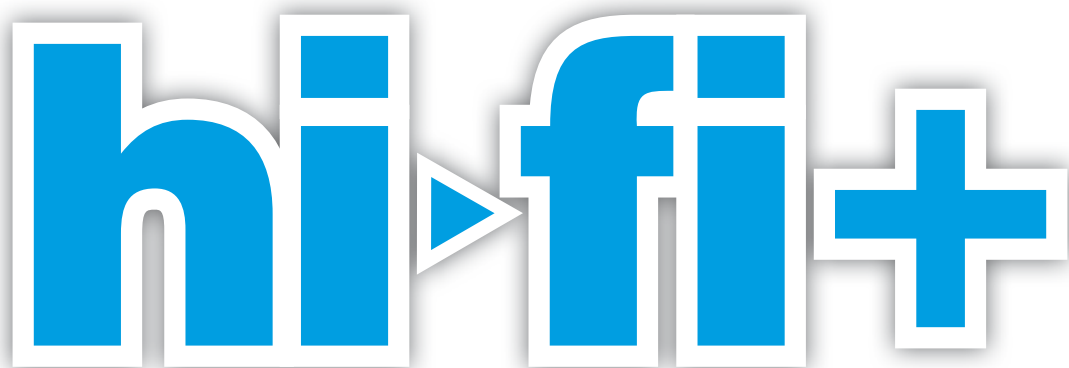
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Next issue

conrad-johnson ART300

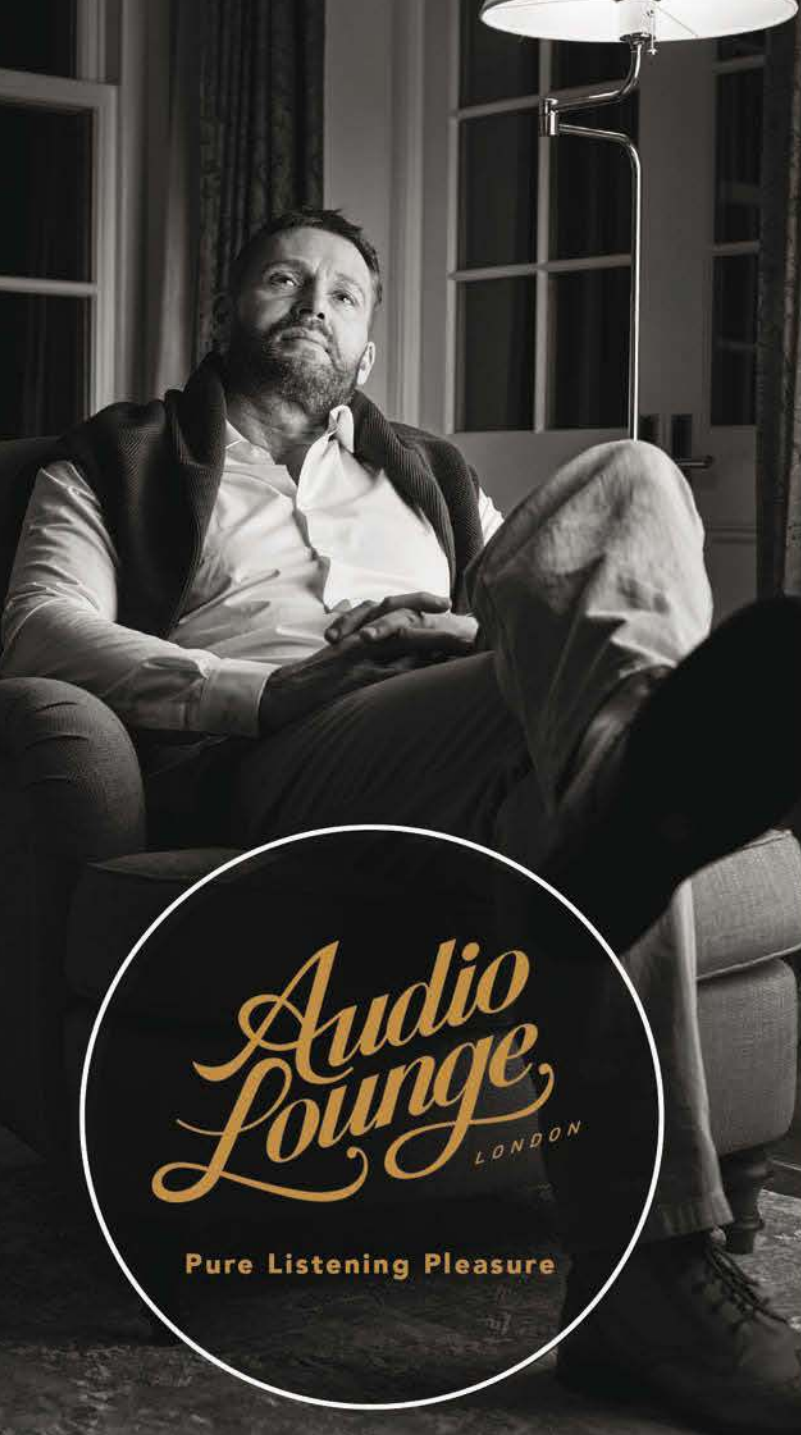
The name conrad-johnson has long been synonymous with some of the best in high-end audio amplification, but the new ART300 mono valve power amplifiers look set to raise that standard to new heights. Combining high power delivery with masterful sound, these form part of a trumvirate of power amplifiers that c-j believes are the best it has ever made. Do we agree? Find out next month!



Plus:

Totem's slimline superstar Tribe Tower loudspeaker, TechDAS Air Force V turntable, Sony's awesome IER-Z1R earphones, and more!

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'...one of the finest amplifiers I have ever heard, regardless of price.'
HiFi News - Ken Kessler



Audio Research's Reference Series demonstrates once again that it is worthy of the name. A reference is a benchmark by which others should be judged. The flagship models from ARC have always represented the state of the art in vacuum tube electronics, with the Reference 6 pre-amplifier continuing to serve as the control unit of choice for countless music lovers, reviewers and manufacturers who, indeed, demand a reference point for their listening.

Joining the existing Reference line-up is an all-new

design, heralding a major evolutionary step in the Series' development. With the 160M mono amplifier, powered by the jubilant KT150 tube, auto-bias has finally met all of ARC's demands, with the option to switch between Ultralinear and Triode modes. Now, the Reference amplifier owner can enjoy peerless operation without the need to monitor valve settings.

The look is captivating, with a glimpse inside the workings of one of the finest amplifiers ever created.

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