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# Hi-Fi Choice

**PASSION FOR SOUND**

Issue No. 460

March 2020

## Sonic high life

**GROUP TEST**

**Six classy floorstanders take music to the next level**

# 24

**PRODUCTS ON TEST:**

**Exposure, KEF, PrimaLuna & Wharfedale**

**MUSIC LEGENDS**

**Ravi Shankar: the man who popularised Indian music**

**BUYING GUIDE**  
100 essential components  
p111

**DESTINATION STOCKPORT**

Essential store for record collectors in the North



**Hegel H120**

Multi-talented streaming amp/DAC is a hi-fi hero

**American dream**  
Audio icons Krell and Magico unite in a sensational setup



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MARCH 2020

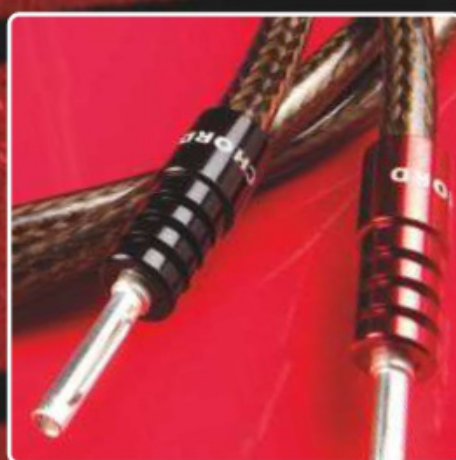


# [studio]

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# CHORD<sup>TM</sup>

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## Music reviews



## BADGES EXPLAINED

### OUR AWARDS



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



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



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



Floorstanding speaker *Group Tests* are one of the most disruptive roundups *HFC* puts together. The physical size of the cabinets, logistical demands in gathering models within a time frame and securing a reviewing space that's large enough to store, run-in and audition six

comparable pairs is one of our biggest challenges – but a hugely worthwhile one as it often results in our best-selling issue of the year. The low-cost designs that featured in our last floorstanders *Group Test* (*HFC* 447), demonstrated a variety of ways listeners can achieve hi-fi sound on a relatively tight budget, but this month's selection moves things on with six next-step models to show potential buyers what superior sonic gains can be had when you dig a little deeper.

Priced from £2,000 to £3,300, each of this month's six models has a unique design approach that promises to take performance to the next level. As hi-fi hobbyists, we're beset with a continuous desire to upgrade the sound of our setups and to my mind there are few more significant ways to achieve a rewarding sound quality breakthrough than identifying a speaker that works in harmony with your room and setup. To find out which one takes the group by storm, turn to p24.

As always, *Audiofile* brings you news of the latest product introductions to the market and there's sure to be more exciting announcements at the forthcoming Bristol Hi-Fi Show, see our full *Show Report* next month.

**Lee Dunkley** Editor

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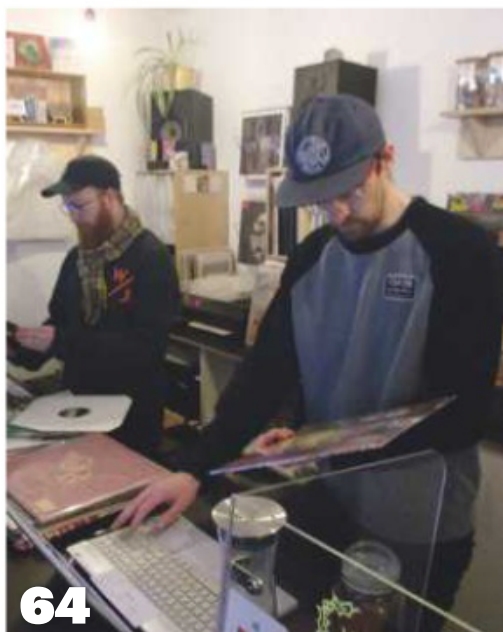
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**Spending a little more on floorstanders can yield incredible performance as these six models prove**



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"He married a faultless technique to a flair for showmanship to present the sitar in a variety of new musical habitats"

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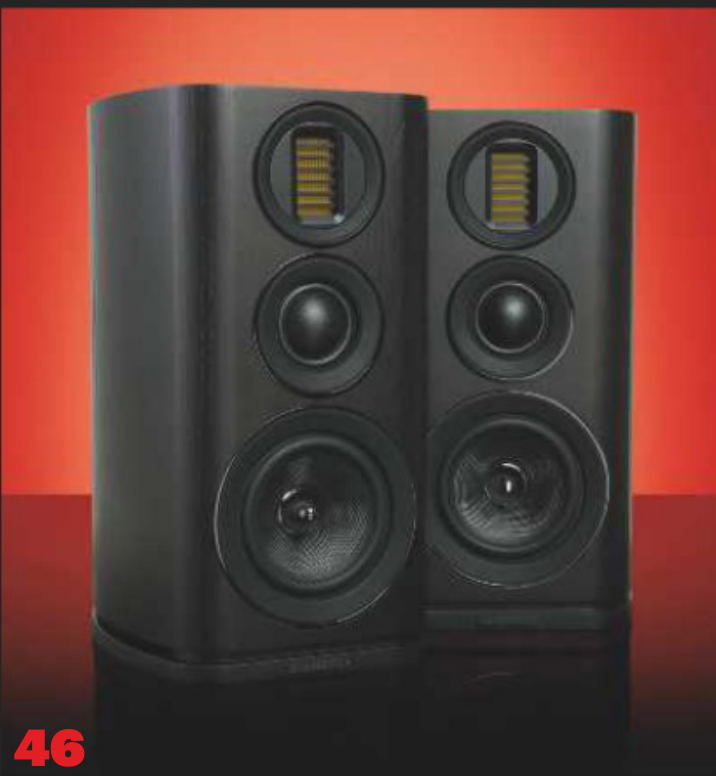
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**108**  
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**Never miss an issue – turn to p20 for our latest subs offer**



## Hugo 2go

Chord Electronics announces companion streaming module for popular portable DAC

**PRICE:** £995 **AVAILABLE:** NOW

**CONTACT:** 01622 721444 **WEB:** CHORDELECTRONICS.CO.UK

**AS ONE OF** our 'Top 100' must-hear components, Chord's Hugo 2 portable DAC/headphone amp (£1,800) is applauded for the organic way it goes about making music. Its class-leading proprietary DAC technology is arguably the reason it sees greater use as part of a home hi-fi setup rather than on the go, and unlike the company's Mojo DAC with its Poly 2 wireless streaming module, Hugo hasn't offered similar support. Until now.

Showcased in Europe for the first time at the UK's Bristol Hi-Fi Show, the Kent-based

company unveiled its £995 2go streamer/server, a wireless (2.4GHz wi-fi and A2DP Bluetooth) and Ethernet-enabled battery-powered module that turns Hugo 2 into a Roon Ready streamer with two SD card slots (rated up to 2TB each) for networked music storage and playback. Claiming gapless play and DoP/Bit Perfect support, it's also DLNA-compliant and AirPlay ready. Tidal, Qobuz and internet radio streaming service integration are planned and setup is via the company's updated Gofigure app.

Announced in partnership with 2go, the 2yu digital interface (£450) is a dedicated processing module fitted with four digital outputs (USB-A, optical, coaxial and BNC). Independent of Hugo 2, it turns the 2go into a standalone streamer/server that can be connected to any DAC or digital device.

Handmade in the UK, both modules share the same high-grade aluminium casework and come in silver or black finishes. 2go is available now from Chord dealerships, while 2yu will be on sale from March.





Available in silver or black, 2go fits with Hugo perfectly

**2go turns Hugo 2 into a Roon Ready streamer with 4TB music storage**

## COMMENT

### NUMBERS GAME

Much has been made of the buoyant state of the UK music industry, following the news that British music fans bought or streamed the equivalent of more than 150-million albums in 2019 (see *HFC* 459). And while the continued popularity of vinyl is great news for analogue enthusiasts, the real winner is without doubt streaming services such as Qobuz, Tidal and Spotify. But just how successful are they really?

As the UK's leading music streaming service, Spotify would appear to be the very definition of a success story. The company recently confirmed that it ended December 2019 with 124-million Premium subscribers and 271-million monthly active users (MAU) worldwide. To put that into some sort of perspective, that's an increase of 11-million users from September 2019, representing an average per-month subscriber growth rate in the fourth quarter of the year of 3.66-million users.

The company also confirmed that its global Premium subs at the close of 2019 had increased by 29 percent year on year, with the average paying Spotify subscriber across the world shelling out around €4.65, which is actually a decrease of five percent from 2018 (or six percent if you take into account foreign exchange rates).

In its defence, the company claims that a significant portion of this decline was driven by the extension of a free trial period, but the fact that its annual net loss was some €186 million does not make for good reading. Throw into the mix the fact that a recent report by analyst Kevin Rooke suggests that Apple's AirPods business alone posted more profit for 2019 than Spotify, Twitter and Snapchat combined, and you'd be forgiven for thinking the company needs to reconsider its strategy.

For its part Spotify told investors: "We are enthusiastic about the underlying trends in the business. From history, we know that MAU growth tends to be a leading indicator of future subscriber additions, which is then followed by revenue gains in both premium and ad-supported users." We can only hope it is right and the future is indeed rosy. ▶





# Fidelio X3 headphone

It's been a while, but Philips' open-back cans return

**PRICE:** £300 **AVAILABLE:** JULY **WEB:** PHILIPS.CO.UK

**LAST SEEN BACK** in *HFC* 394, Philips' open-back Fidelio headphone (back then it was the X2) is making a welcome return in the shape of the luxurious X3. Described by the Dutch company as being designed to offer accuracy with generous bass and a warm midrange, the X3 employs multi-layer 50mm polymer drivers that are gel filled for better damping combined with a neodymium motor system. Double layered, the enclosures incorporate an internal ridge construction to reduce vibrations and are pre-tilted to 15° – the optimum angle to ensure audio is directed into the ear canal explains Philips. Boasting a claimed bandwidth of 5Hz to 40kHz, the Fidelio 3 can be used in balanced mode to reduce crosstalk and improve stereo separation.

A balanced, twisted-pair cable is included with a 2.5mm TRRS connector, while the headband is constructed from lightweight but strong dark satin steel. It is covered with responsibly sourced Muirhead leather, while the earpads offer the comfort of velour memory foam.



## IN BRIEF

### NAIM ADDS QOBUZ SUPPORT



● Naim Audio has announced that it will be adding native Qobuz support to its family of music streamers. Available as a free firmware upgrade, the new update ensures that owners of Naim products will now be able to enjoy seamless access to the French music streaming service.

Boasting the largest selection of albums available to stream in true high resolution, Qobuz won our music streaming service *Group Test* back in *HFC* 455 and claims the most comprehensive CD-quality catalogue currently available. The update is for Naim's Uniti Atom, Star and Nova systems, plus ND5 XS2, NDX 2 and ND 555 network players. An update for Naim Mu-so 2nd Generation and Naim Mu-so Qb 2nd Generation wireless speakers is expected to follow in "Spring 2020".

**NAIMAUDIO.COM**

## Wharfedale's new Elysians

**PRICE:** £4,500-£6,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01480 452561 **WEB:** WHARFEDALE.CO.UK

As Wharfedale's new flagship range, Elysian captures everything the British loudspeaker company holds dear in one stylish cabinet – providing trickle-down tech to other speakers further down the range including the Evo4.2 standmount reviewed on p46. Introducing the new family with a

large standmount and floorstander, both models are three-way designs sporting an Air Motion Transformer (AMT) high-frequency driver for low distortion and claimed scintillating speed and dynamic ability. These are partnered by glass fibre cone drivers – 150mm midrange and 220mm bass driver (two in the case

of the floorstander). The £4,500 Elysian 2 standmount offers 89dB sensitivity while the £6,500 Elysian 4 floorstander claims 92dB (at 8ohm) and both come in a gorgeous bass reflex, slot-loaded cabinet available in a choice of hand finished walnut, black or white high-gloss piano lacquers. ▶





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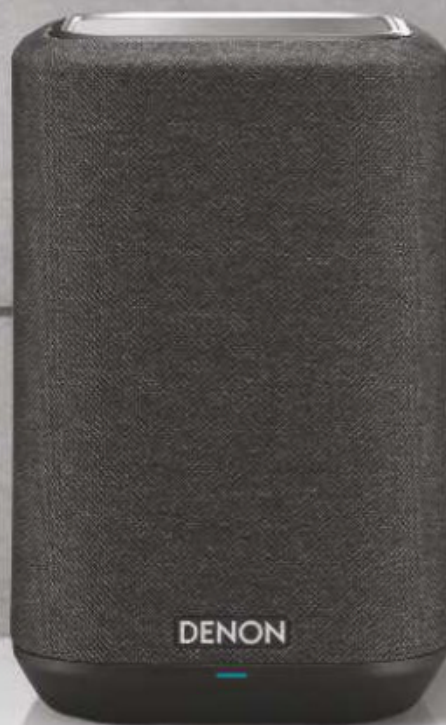
# Denon's Home run

Introducing three wireless speakers with Heos multi-room support

**PRICE:** £220-£600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 0208 1034770 **WEB:** DENON.CO.UK

**SOUND UNITED AUDIO** brand Denon has unveiled three all-new wireless speakers compatible with its Heos multi-room platform. The Home 150 (pictured), 250 and 350 are priced at £220, £450 and £600 respectively and boast file support up to 24-bit/192kHz as well as DSD128. Streaming service support is offered as is wi-fi and Bluetooth along with AirPlay 2 and physical connectivity in the form of a USB-B port and 3.5mm audio output.

The range incorporates a proximity sensor that illuminates touch controls when a hand moves near, while two Home speakers can be paired in stereo and integrated with Denon's DSW-1H wireless subwoofer. Available in a choice of white or black finishes and dressed in a water and stain-resistant material, the Home 150 has a single 25mm tweeter and 89mm mid/bass driver, while the 250 offers twin tweeters, two 101mm mid/bass units and a passive bass radiator. The 350 has the same twin tweeters with two 50mm midrange and two 165mm bass drivers.



## IN BRIEF

### MONITOR AUDIO BRONZE REBORN



● British loudspeaker maker Monitor Audio has announced its next-gen Bronze Series. Now in its sixth iteration, the updated budget series includes four dedicated hi-fi models plus four multi-channel options including centre, rear, Dolby Atmos and a subwoofer aimed at home cinema applications. Details are sketchy, but we're told the range starts at £260 for the Bronze 50 two-way standmount and visitors can find out more at its Bristol Hi-Fi Show preview. Monitor Audio's technical director, Michael Hedges says: "The performance and build quality are beyond what one would normally expect at this price point and I am certain that our customers will love them." Available in a choice of four finishes, look out for our review soon. **MONITORAUDIO.COM**

## Dan Clark Audio Aeon 2

**PRICE:** £900 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 01494 956558 **WEB:** ELECTROMOD.CO.UK

Formerly known as MrSpeakers, the Californian-based headphone manufacturer has recently undergone a rebrand to become Dan Clark Audio. In the process it has announced the next phase of its planar-magnetic headphone design with the introduction of its new Aeon 2 models. As with the company's previous Aeon designs – reviewed in the form of the Aeon Flow Open headphone back in issue 435 – the updated models are also available with a choice of open or closed back.

Featuring an all-new motor assembly directly derived from the company's flagship Ether 2 (reviewed *HFC* 456) they're said to use the same high-precision machined system to improve internal airflow with new voicing claimed to produce a warmer, fuller tone in the closed model and a leaner lower midrange in the open-back version. Claiming a larger soundstage presentation in both designs, superior driver damping is said to augment resolution and dynamics to deliver a smoother frequency response.

While the original Aeon was designed as a full-size headphone primarily for home listening, the updated Aeon 2 incorporates a sophisticated folding gimbal system to aid portability and also helps to improve the clamping, fit, feel and structural integrity of the entire headset. Unlike most folding designs that invert the earcups and tilt them towards the headband, the Aeon 2's joints allow the headband to collapse on the top of the earcups to take up half the space of the original.

Weighing in at 327g (without cable), the Aeon 2 comes in dark-red and its leather headband and earpads are said to be soft and comfortable. It's a lighter and more rigid design than the original Aeon and comes supplied with a custom-designed compact carry case. Both versions of Aeon 2 are on sale now priced £900 each and distributed in the UK by Electromod.





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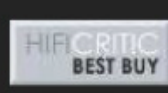
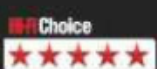
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AURALIC PRESS AWARDS





# Chord's Ultima duo

New stereo power amplifiers introduced at Bristol Hi-Fi Show

**PRICE:** £6,000-£9,250 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 01622 721444 **WEB:** CHORDELECTRONICS.CO.UK

**WIDELY CONSIDERED TO** be Chord Electronics' definitive amplifier, the SPM 1200 MK II is about to be replaced by the company's new Ultima 5 (pictured), while the SPM 1050 MK II makes way for the Ultima 6. Boasting a claimed power output of 2x 300W and 2x 180W RMS into 8ohm respectively, the stereo power amps include John Franks' first all-new circuit topology design in three decades with the Ultima 5 utilising 64 proprietary MOSFET power devices (while the Ultima 6 makes do with just 32). The drive circuitry features an ultra-low-distortion, high-voltage amplifier operating at 300V per microsecond and is claimed to benefit from advanced feed-forward and feedback compensation techniques.

Equipped with balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA stereo inputs, the £6,000 Ultima 6 and £9,250 Ultima 5 are finished in Chord's unique style with high-grade aluminium casework, solid 28mm-thick front panels and incorporate the company's stackable Integra Leg system.



## IN BRIEF

### KARL-HEINZ FINK ACQUIRES EPOS



● **Legendary loudspeaker designer and founder of German manufacturer FinkTeam, Karl-Heinz Fink has become the new owner of Epos. Having concluded negotiations to purchase the British loudspeaker company at the end of January from Mike Creek (of Creek Audio), Epos will now be run from Germany by Fink and in the UK by David Jefferys (a former Creek Audio sales director).**

Citing Epos' original founder, Robin Marshall, Fink noted: "When he started Epos, it was not just a brand like many others, but unique in many ways. Be prepared to see more unconventional ideas in our new Epos loudspeakers."

Creek Audio will be selling off any existing stock and will continue to be responsible for spares etc. on all models produced prior to 2020.

**EPOS-LOUDSPEAKERS.COM**

## T+A's headphone debut

**PRICE:** £4,800-£6,600 **AVAILABLE:** MARCH/APRIL  
**CONTACT:** 01249 704669 **WEB:** THEAUDIOBUSINESS.CO.UK

T+A has unveiled its first ever headphone, closely followed by an accompanying headphone amplifier/DAC. Hand built in Germany, the Solitaire P aims to mirror the company's Solitaire series of loudspeakers utilising a planar-magnetostatic design. Developed by a team of physicists and engineers, the ultra-lightweight membrane covers the entire area of each earpiece enclosure and is positioned between the planar magnetostatic drive system. The drive units are described by the company as delivering a spacious, airy feel that is unique even for planar headphones

with the entire surface area of the membrane driven to deliver high-quality sound. Made from high-grade aluminium and soft leather, the Solitaire P is available now for £4,800.

The £6,600 HA 200 amplifier/DAC follows in April and boasts three headphone outputs that can be fine tuned to match the sonic properties of any cans hooked up to it, plus separate toroidal power transformers for the analogue and digital circuits. Fitted with the proprietary T+A True 1 Bit DAC chipset, it is compatible with up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DSD1024 files.





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**AWARDS 2017**

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KEF LS50 Wireless

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# You really must hear this



You will have read elsewhere in the magazine a review of this system. To those fortunate enough to be able to consider owning equipment in this superb class, I invite you to come into the picture and join me in a listening session. Whether your plans include the most expensive system available or low cost — solid value hi-fi such as the Rega — Creek — Mordaunt Short system also reviewed in this issue; we offer the same integrity and high standard of customer service. Indeed, all you would expect of a long established family business.

*Doug Brady*

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# YOU STILL REALLY MUST HEAR THIS

WE'VE BEEN SAYING IT FOR DECADES AND IT'S AS TRUE TODAY AS IT EVER WAS



Reflecting on the last 6 decades at Doug Brady HiFi, whilst certain things have changed, a lot is still the same. Where fashions may have come and gone and our listening rooms evolved a little, our commitment to offering a wonderful selection of hi-fi equipment remains. Backed up with support and advice from a team of knowledgeable and friendly staff – whatever the level of your investment – our customers still sit at the heart of what we do. Through our passion for curating the very best the industry has to offer, we invite you to join us online, instore and at events throughout 2020, as we celebrate our 60th anniversary.

*Doug Brady*

**DOUG BRADY HIFI**

— CELEBRATING 60 YEARS —





► **DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**  
Hegel H120

**ORIGIN**  
Norway

**TYPE**  
Integrated  
amplifier/DAC

**WEIGHT**  
12kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 100 x 310mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power  
output: 2x 75W  
(8ohm)  
• Digital inputs:  
1x coaxial; 3x  
optical; 1x USB-B;  
1x Ethernet port  
• Analogue inputs:  
1x stereo balanced  
XLRs; 2x stereo RCAs  
• 6.35mm  
headphone output

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# Röst revisited

Hegel's talented Röst network amp/DAC may have been shown the door, but – says **David Vivian** – its new H120 is even better

**I**t strikes me that the one integrated amplifier Hegel chose to christen with a noun rather than a number was developed as a messenger; a product tasked with articulating the company's take on performance and functionality, but shrewdly priced for broad consumer consideration. In any event, there's no denying that the Röst (named after a Norwegian island, but literally meaning 'voice') – reviewed *HFC* 418 – swiftly became Hegel's celebrity amp – on message and affordable, while being a relatable brand ambassador.

Why the company has decided to revert to a numeric nomenclature for its successor is explained by Anders Ertzeid, Hegel's VP of sales and marketing, overleaf, but it's clear that

the new H120's mission to showcase its philosophy and tech in a real-world context hasn't changed, just evolved. The price stays the same, likewise the Class AB configuration rated at 2x 75W power output and the minimalist industrial aesthetic.

**Power and deftly delivered dynamics go hand in hand with impeccable control**

Nothing is changed for the sake of it; Hegel just isn't that kind of company. Which isn't to say the Röst – a network and streaming-enabled integrated amp/DAC – wasn't ripe for a thorough digital upgrade.

Hegel's methodology, essentially grounded in a quest to dump distortion, has been maturing for 30-plus years. In 1988 founder Bent Holter – then a student at the Technical University in Trondheim, Norway – wrote a thesis on the original design of the transistor used in amplifiers. To cut a long story short, the thesis became the basis for the fledgling company's patented SoundEngine tech (see overleaf), which in turn established a solid foundation for Hegel's growth and diversification into digital. 1994 saw the company's first DAC, followed two years later by a CD player. Over the next 10 years the brand continued to blossom and add new products and unique technical solutions to its portfolio. But just as the financial





## CONNECTIONS



- 1 Variable stereo RCA output
- 2 2x stereo RCA inputs
- 3 Balanced XLR stereo input
- 4 Digital coaxial input
- 5 3x digital optical inputs
- 6 USB-B port





crash of 2008 began to bite and saw competitors tighten their belts, the now established player from Oslo elected to do the opposite and hired fresh engineering talent to design a new generation of D/A converters, the latest iterations of which feature in all of Hegel's integrated amps.

In the Hegel hierarchy, the H120 slots in between the entry-level H90 (HFC 427) and 'next level' H190, just as the Röst did. It has a strategically breathed-on version of the Röst's analogue output stage, but its DAC and digital electronics come from the

## The H120 does the big picture/fine detail thing better than any amp close to its price

more powerful and expensive H190 and are described as "reference class".

Hegel's signature colour scheme might be a stormy dark grey, but like the Röst the H120 is available in white and is pretty much indistinguishable from its predecessor. Let's face it, apart from vertical bulk, all Hegel integrated amps look the same: left knob selects source, white-on-black OLED screen in the middle, right knob adjusts volume and, to the right of that, a 6.35mm headphone socket. It doesn't get much simpler than that and yet the 'Scandi chic' look is distinctive and very cool (especially in white). The supplied remote (black) is appropriately chunky, too, unlike the H90's lightweight plastic number.

The rear-panel socketry is similarly neat and comprises a three-pole IEC power inlet, one coaxial and three optical inputs, a USB-B port for connection to a computer, a pair of balanced XLRs, two pairs of unbalanced RCA line-level inputs, an Ethernet port, a pair of variable unbalanced RCA line-level output jacks, and a single pair of speaker terminals.

But even that lot doesn't tell the whole story. The H120 does Apple AirPlay, Spotify Connect, IP Control, Control4 and UPnP streaming from DNLA or a NAS drive. It can access music streaming services such as Tidal and internet radio, and Roon compatibility is almost ready to go. For enhanced flexibility, input settings are configurable for volume and functionality with any device you care to link up – a home cinema setup for example. If a Sonos or Bluesound streamer is part of your kit, simply connect it to the digital output and you're in business. Also new, the H120 will wake up from standby in a LAN setup. So when the unit is in standby mode, you can select it in Spotify or AirPlay etc. and be good to go.

To prevent high-current demands from the output stage impinging on the sensitive input and gain stages, the H120's beefy power supply employs two toroidal transformers. The larger supplies the output stage and has separate secondary windings for each channel feeding separate rectifier blocks and filter capacitors. This is normal Hegel practice and hardly unique. Much more radical is the company's SoundEngine topology, now in second-generation guise and Hegel claims it teams very low distortion with a very high damping factor. More on this in the opposite boxout, but put simply it works a bit like a noise-cancelling headphone comparing the output of the amplifier with the input and plays forward any detected distortion to the speaker output in reverse phase, cancelling said distortion in real time.

The H120 is also said to have a slightly quieter headphone output than the Röst. But the dramatic improvement, or so it claims, is purely digital. The new amp uses the same DAC as the H190, which is claimed to represent a massive step up from the Röst, resulting in a smoother, more precise and dynamic sound.



Priced at £1,990 the Moon Nêo 240i by Simaudio (HFC 430), has great design and build with plenty of sophistication under the lid. At 50W per channel, it isn't quite as powerful as the Hegel on paper but its DAC supports more hi-res formats (up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256). Both are formidable performers and not dissimilar sonically, their balance of attributes so finely tuned, their ability to play without favour or prejudice so sorted that the sonic outcome is just right.

Eschewing the asynchronous upsampling used by most CD players these days, Hegel's proprietary 'synchronised upsampling' aims to avoid the trap of converting jitter error into amplitude error and the resulting compromised sound quality. The so-called SynchroDAC and MasterClock work together to push down jitter and conversion errors, reducing distortion and achieving what Hegel contends is the "highest possible dynamic range". The DAC maxes out at 24-bit/192kHz PCM via UPnP and although DSD files can be played, they are down sampled before sending them onto the converter.

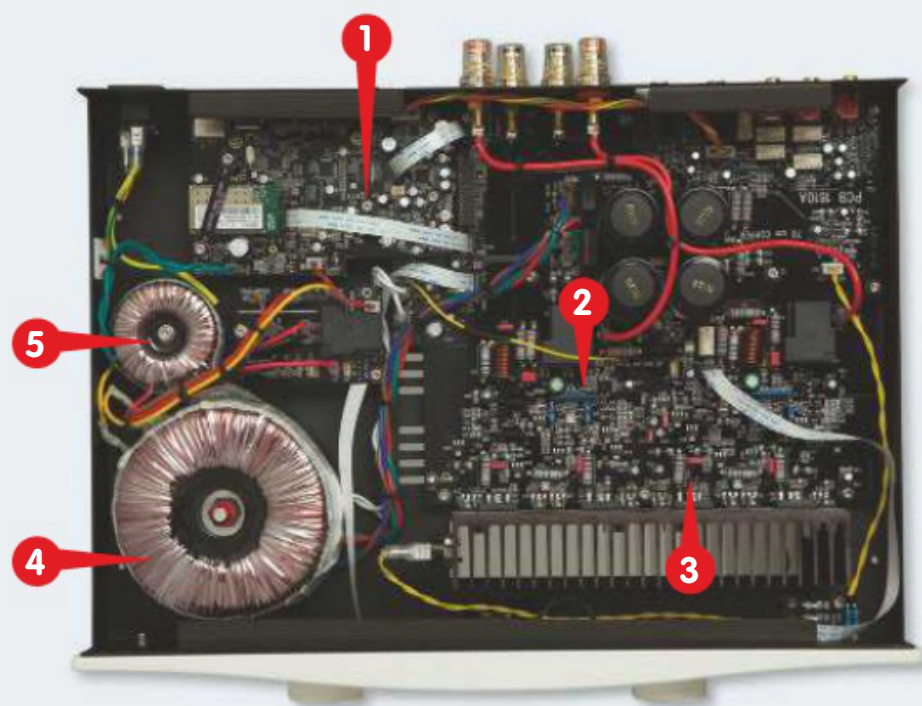
## Sound quality

As a long-term user and fan of Hegel's entry-level H90 integrated (albeit with a few reservations about the built-in DAC) I'm intrigued to see what advantages the pricier H120 brings to the table. Cueing up Joni Mitchell's original rendition of *A Case Of You* and relying on the respective amps' on-board decoding, the outcome is predictably unkind to the H90, which – while sounding pleasantly smooth and warm – lacks the H120's transparency, temporal precision and dynamic expression, making the track sound ever so slightly, muggy. The new amp more accurately captures the pure and sonorous quality of a young Mitchell's voice and renders the accompanying steel-string guitars with greater bite and harmonic complexity. Using Chord Electronics' Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428) evens things up to a large degree, both amps sounding much more alike, clearly hailing from the house of Hegel and able to make the most of the Chord's estimable sonic charms, though again the H120 sounds the more refined and energised of the two.

The H120 isn't one of those amps that gives material the sonic equivalent of a *Strictly Come Dancing* spray tan



**IN SIGHT**



- 1 AKM 4490-based DAC board
- 2 SoundEngine 2 modules
- 3 4x ultra-fast output transistors
- 4 Main toroidal transformer
- 5 Soft start/standby transformer

**SOUND THINKING**

Hegel explains that a story is told from person to person. Details change. Things are both added and lost along the way. When a music signal passes through an audio amplifier, a similar effect takes place. As the signal is passed from stage to stage within the chassis, it will inevitably be changed by every single amplifier stage.

By the time it finally reaches the loudspeaker, the signal is different from the one that originated at the source. Hegel claims that its SoundEngine 2 local error cancelling system prevents distortion in the audio amplifier circuit stages by preserving the original details and the dynamic

range in the original music, resulting in a much cleaner signal with a larger dynamic range and lower distortion.

A dynamic, multi-stage, feed-forward system, an analogue computer compares input and output at each amplification stage and if it finds what it determines to be audible distortion the SoundEngine circuit adds an inverted version to the signal to cancel its contribution. The result, Hegel says, is wider dynamic range and lower distortion – not only less steady-state harmonic and intermodulation distortion, but reductions in the dynamic distortion that arises from complex musical signals.

and wardrobe makeover. Nothing sounds shinier or more glamorous than it should and, by the same token, a great musical performance is neither hyped nor hindered as it reaches the loudspeaker – in this case Spendor's splendid A7 floorstander (HFC 440).

It's a partnership that appears to clear a path for musical expression of a very high calibre that makes listening a captivating rather than casual experience. This seems to be a consistent characteristic whatever the input. Stream any track from Eels' quirky *Daisies Of The Galaxy* and it has a wonderfully pure and present quality that bypasses the less than gleaming production values. This is not an audiophile-standard recording by any means, yet Mark Oliver Everett's mood-drenched songs swim by in an unerringly fluent, tuneful and enjoyable fashion.

Mike Stern and Jeff Lorber's latest jazz fusion vehicle, *Eleven*, under the H120's command sounds huge, fast, natural and unforced, rhythmically lucid and surefooted. The Hegel does the big picture/fine detail thing better than any amplifier I can think of remotely close to its price. Solidity, scale and authority sit comfortably

with the subtlest resolution of detail. Power and deftly delivered dynamics go hand in hand as well, and all with impeccable control, especially in the lower bass frequencies.

**Conclusion**

The versatile talent that was the Röst might appear to have left the building, but it hasn't really. Its star quality lives on in the H120, upgraded and buffed for the digital delights of a new decade. It might sit in the lowly part of Hegel's amplifier range, but the H120 delivers as much excellence as many will ever need ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

**SOUND QUALITY**



**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**BUILD QUALITY**



**FEATURES**



**OVERALL**



**LIKE:** Terrific sound quality and across-the-board competence; design and build

**DISLIKE:** No native DSD or MQA support

**WE SAY:** Another highly desirable Hegel that ticks all the boxes and then some

**Q&A**

**Anders Ertzeid**

Sales & marketing, Hegel



**DV: Why isn't the H120 simply called Röst V2 and what are the advantages of the new model?**

**AE:** Primarily because the name Röst does not sound as good as intended. It sounds a bit like either a barbecue or an old car. It is also difficult to fit in the line. H120 is much more relevant. The biggest upgrade is the digital section and the quality of streaming. You also get new functions like Spotify Connect. Later on we are hoping to add functionality like Roon end point and upgraded streaming performance as free updates.

**There's now a clearly delineated hierarchy of Hegel amplifiers, but presumably the H120 is more than just an H90 with more power?**

Yes, the difference between the H90 and H120 is much more than just power. First of all, the digital and network section is completely different than the H90's and at a different level entirely. The DAC implementation is balanced and with a better analogue section. The streaming section is also a lot more powerful and will gradually become bit perfect with updates. Then there are several individual upgrades in the analogue section of the amplifier, such as the quality of local power supplies. Small things on their own, but very important for the overall performance of the amp.

**Are there identifiable sonic qualities that run through the Hegel range, irrespective of price and power?**

Since the goal is always ultra-low noise and ultra-low distortion, there is a family sound at Hegel. They are not voiced by ear or tuned to a certain sound. They should be natural and simply add as little of themselves as possible. We see loudspeakers as an 'instrument' with a character, while amplifiers and sources should simply be neutral and stable. There are definitely sonic quality differences in revealing more detail as you move up the range, but through them all they are defined by a very neutral, organic and natural sound with great dynamics.



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Luxman's compact tube amp goes big on sound

**Hi-Fi Choice**  
PASSION FOR SOUND  
Issue No. 460  
March 2020

**Sonic high life**  
GROUP TEST  
Six classy floorstanders take music to the next level  
24  
PRODUCTS ON TEST:  
Exposure, KEF, PrimaLuna & Wharfedale  
MUSIC LEGENDS  
Ravi Shankar: the man who popularised Indian music

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# How we test

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

## Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening tests carried out by experts

### FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER GROUP TEST

**A LOUDSPEAKER WILL** never sound at its best when factory fresh from the box and so requires some time to free up properly to deliver its optimum performance. Consequently, all six floorstanders here are given a minimum of 72 hours running-in time with IsoTek's Full System Enhancer CD on repeat, plus an additional two days of music before any critical listening commences. Auditioning is done in both my smaller and larger listening room over a period of a week, during which time optimal placement is experimented with.

The listening position is adjusted so that the tweeter is roughly at ear height, and the speaker is initially placed close to the rear wall then

moved out into the room until the bass response is judged to be even. In the case of models that come supplied with foam bungs for their reflex ports, these are tried both in and out to achieve the best balance. Toe-in is also experimented with. Generally, a small amount is applied, which snaps the stereo image into focus and opens up the treble.

This process ensures each loudspeaker performs at its very best in the room. Following this setup, each speaker is auditioned with the others in the group reinstated for cross referencing. Levels are carefully matched and a wide variety of CD, hi-res and vinyl music is used, although four key tracks are focused on.



### TEST MUSIC

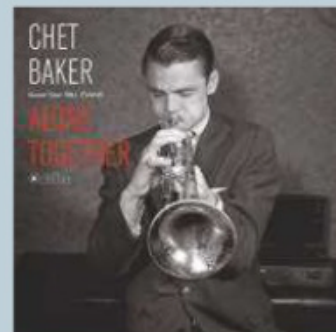
**ANETTE ASKVIK**  
Liberty  
Liberty (CD)



**BOZ SCAGGS**  
Dig  
Thanks To You (CD)



**CHET BAKER**  
Alone Together  
Alone Together (180g vinyl, 2011 reissue)



**THE STANLEY CLARKE BAND**  
The Message  
Combat Continuum (CD)



### REFERENCE SYSTEM

**CD TRANSPORT:**  
Audiolab 6000CDT **£380 HFC 447**

The 6000CDT is exceptional at revealing what's on your discs to deliver a great big soundstage with plenty of detail inside. It can dig down deep into the mix to eke out the different musical strands, while dynamically and rhythmically it's hard to beat at the price.



**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:**  
Hegel H120 **£2,200 p16**

The H120 isn't one of those amps that gives music a makeover. Nothing sounds shinier or more glamorous than it should and, by the same token, a great musical performance is neither hyped nor hindered as it reaches the speaker, which makes for musical expression of a very high calibre.



**TURNTABLE:**  
Rega Planar 6 **£1,400 HFC 427**

Partnered with Rega's entry-level Ania moving-coil cart, the Planar 6 delivers a level of performance that is pretty much untouchable for £1,500. The sense of togetherness is classic Rega, while the tonal realism, power and alacrity complete a perfect sonic picture whatever the musical genre.







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# Group**test**



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# Living the high life

Spending more on a floorstander opens up a world of possibilities – just ignore your preconceptions, suggests **David Vivian**

**LET ME PUT** your mind at rest. You're probably wondering if spending between £2,000 and £3,500 on a floorstander can possibly be a smart move when there's plenty of good-looking, over achieving talent clamouring for your hard-earned cash in the £800 to £1,900 class that sits below it. The short answer is yes.

This is where things start to get a bit tasty, where speaker designers loosen up and show what they're made of, where *Back To The Future's* Doc Brown might have said: "Plug into any one of these beauties, Marty, and you're going to hear some serious s\*\*t". It's where methodologies diverge and widen choice. We're still a long way from cost-no-object high-end fantasies, but not so far from

the kind of esoteric techniques a larger development budget and higher asking price can indulge.

## Sonic sensations

In this intriguingly diverse group, the Triangle Esprit Australe EZ's secondary (rear-firing) compression chamber tweeter and the surprising rear-facing passive radiator (substituting for a port) on the Amphion Argon3LS are examples of competing 'thinking outside the box' approaches. But there's also a disparity in size and driver count between our contenders and I'm at a loss to understand how as the least costly speaker in the group, KEF's R5 manages to be the best finished. To discover which of these designs nail the sonic sweet spot, read on.

## ON TEST



**Amphion Argon3LS**  
£2,520 **p27**  
Despite its domestic roots, Finland's Amphion has been making waves in the pro sector of late – good for cred in a model with such a potent Scandi lifestyle aesthetic.



**Dynaudio Evoke 30**  
£2,900 **p29**  
No stranger to critical acclaim on both sides of the domestic-pro divide, Denmark's Dynaudio is hot on Amphion's case with this remarkable svelte and stylish speaker.



**KEF R5**  
£2,000 **p31**  
KEF's R series looks the absolute business and is built to a standard that should have the competition breaking out in an anxiety rash, but how does the R5 sound?



**Spendor A4**  
£2,200 **p33**  
Spendor is all about understated quality and simple functionality. The A4 may not be big or conspicuously clever, but don't let that fool you – it could be the one to beat.



**Totem Sky Tower**  
£2,400 **p35**  
Canada's Totem enters the fray with a speaker so slim and light you'd have to assume the company knows something its rivals don't. This is a perfect way to find out.



**Triangle Esprit Australe EZ**  
£3,300 **p37**  
Tall enough to cast a shadow over the competition, Triangle's top Esprit floorstander has the tools to do some damage here, but size isn't everything.





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# Amphion

## Argon3LS **£2,520**

With some clear ideas about what makes a floorstander sound believable, this Finnish design certainly steps up

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Amphion Argon3LS

**ORIGIN**  
Finland

**TYPE**  
2-way floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
22kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
191 x 968 x 305mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 25mm titanium  
dome tweeter  
● 1x 165mm  
aluminium  
mid/bass driver  
● 1x 165mm  
aluminium  
passive radiator  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
85dB/1W/1m

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**A** snowy white, minimalist design from Finland? Predictable, maybe, but don't think that's the long and the short of it. Yes, Scandi design has bags of showroom appeal, but it's Amphion's specific approach to acoustic engineering that will count for most in this group showdown.

First, there's the influence of the jumbo-sized waveguide surrounding the 25mm titanium dome tweeter. Dubbed UDD (Uniform Directive Diffusion), Amphion contends that, in combination with the unusually low crossover of 1.6kHz, more of the directional frequencies we hear are emitted from a single point and benefit from the waveguide's widening and smoothing dispersion characteristics, which expand the listening sweet spot and minimise room interaction. The company also claims that by having the crossover frequency well below the ear's particularly sensitive 2-5kHz

region, the leading edges of notes are much more precise and defined when compared with speakers using higher crossover points.

In addition to the advantages granted by having one of the larger cabinet volumes in the group, bass frequencies also get a helping hand from a lightweight aluminium passive radiator located in the middle of the back panel, directly behind the 165mm aluminium-coned mid/bass driver. This is in place of the more common reflex port and, as part of the sealed box system, is claimed to give a smoother and more natural low frequency response, though the remarkable quoted 30Hz (-6dB) lower limit is doubtless aided by the low 85dB sensitivity. Puny budget amps need not apply.

Build, including the integral footprint-expanding plinth, is substantial, the finish is excellent and I really like the chunky black Argento Audio binding posts.

### Sound quality

It's a little disconcerting. I'm expecting the Amphion's pro-sector chops to deliver a slightly cool and dry but admirably neutral, honest and dynamic sound in the manner of an ATC or PMC. What I get, with Anette Askvik, is gentle grace and fastidiously ordered layers of loveliness, silky smoothness and ambient warmth. True, this is an audiophile-standard recording, young Askvik's hauntingly pure vocal and tasteful electric piano tinkling perfectly framed in an expansive soundscape delineated by beautifully rendered cello, drums, acoustic piano and sax. So nothing too raw or gritty. But the overall effect is a bit Tom Hanks, ie: irrevocably nice.

I'm counting on The Stanley Clarke Band to shake things up with *Combat Continuum*, a daft sci-fi themed multi-instrumental opus, by turns thunderous and tender with a wonderfully portentous voiceover by Steve Blum and some very high-speed drumming. Once again, I'm impressed and a little fazed. At both frequency extremes, the Argon3LS is superb –

### IN SIGHT

- 1 25mm titanium dome tweeter/waveguide
- 2 165mm aluminium passive radiator
- 3 Argento Audio binding posts
- 4 Integral plinth
- 5 165mm aluminium mid/bass driver

agile yet weighty and evenly extended in the basement, open, grainless and almost preternaturally smooth at the top. The speaker's clarity, naturalness and powers of resolution, especially through the midrange, are spookily good. Added to which, driver integration is seamless and helps promote a wide and deep soundstage with pinpoint imaging. Yet, despite rock-solid rhythmic precision, I can't help but feel strangely short changed. The composure and control never quite let go. In a nutshell, it sounds a little over damped and is just too polite to rock out with gusto ●



### Hi-FiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Resolution; imaging; coherence; bass; appearance

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Never really puts its foot down

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** A lovely sounding speaker for lovely music, but lacks fire and excitement

##### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★



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# Dynaudio

## Evoke 30 **£2,900**

Teaming a fashionable aesthetic with formidable sonics, the Evoke 30 crafts the perfect fusion of both



### IN SIGHT

- 1 28mm soft textile dome tweeter
- 2 Bass reflex port
- 3 High-quality binding posts
- 4 2x 140mm MSP mid/bass drivers

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Dynaudio Evoke 30

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**TYPE**  
2.5-way  
floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
15.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
268 x 920 x 342mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 28mm  
soft textile  
dome tweeter  
● 2x 140mm MSP  
mid/bass drivers  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
88dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
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**TELEPHONE**  
01353 721089

**WEBSITE**  
dynaudio.com

**A**s the second most expensive speaker in the group, the Evoke 30 has the distinction of being among the most compact, vying with the slightly slimmer Totem and marginally squatter Spendor for top trumps as a room-friendly presence.

In this respect, there's a lot to like. Dynaudio's designers apparently put in the extra hours, taking prototypes and models home to live with them as well as visiting interior design stores and a cross section of real homes to gain inspiration. The result, with its straight tapered cabinet walls, splayed bolt-on outriggers and, in the review sample's case, very tactile natural open-grain walnut wood veneer cladding, is a fifties/sixties retro vibe that I guess won't be to everyone's taste, but I'd certainly make room in my house for it.

The driver tech is anything but retro. Its 28mm Ceroter tweeter is a new design that lifts tech from the company's Forty anniversary, Contour and Confidence ranges. It uses a strontium carbonate Ferrite+ ceramic magnet system and the Confidence's Hexis dimpled, resonance-reducing inner dome. The intended upshot is a smoother response and sweeter treble with greater detail and clarity.

Being a rear-ported, two-and-a-half-way system, the Evoke 30 has twin 140mm Esotec+ mid/bass drivers. Each speaker cone is made from a single piece of MSP (Magnesium Silicate Polymer) for optimum rigidity and glued directly to the glass-fibre voice-coil former, meaning more of the coil's motion energy is transferred to the diaphragm.

### Sound quality

Within the first few bars of Boz Scaggs' evergreen gift to hi-fi demo suites, *Thanks To You*, it's clear the Evoke 30 has a fabulous sense of flow and lucidity. The understated, slow burning R&B ballad masterpiece contains some of the most luxurious, deep bass notes ever committed to master tape and while the Dynaudio can't quite get hold of the lowest ones with the confidence and weight of the Amphion, for suppleness, pitch and texture it has a sensuous quality you simply fall into.

Having to follow the much larger and heavier Argon3LS has notable consequences for scale as well as bandwidth, but this isn't too severe and if anything it's the Evoke 30's comparatively bijou cabinet that more convincingly 'disappears' within a spacious soundstage that extends easily beyond the boundaries of my listening room. And, for the first time, I'm hearing the kind of dynamic reach and expressive freedom the Amphion couldn't quite procure.

This is especially apparent with Chet Baker and Bill Evans duetting *Alone Together* on vinyl in a phenomenally 'live'-sounding 1958 studio session. Evans is playing piano quietly and with great subtlety, Baker's deft,

baleful trumpet figures are a little louder, but when Pepper Adams' baritone sax joins in its power and presence is startling and balloons the dynamic envelope. Yet each part stays precisely in proportion and is easy to follow. Whether it's Anette Askvik or Stanley Clarke, performances are consistently clear, cohesive and well resolved. The Dynaudio might not have the same scale and power as the Triangle or KEF, nor the deepest bass or whip-crack transients, but it is a compelling listen that's capable of holding you in its thrall for hours without any residual fatigue ●



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



##### VALUE FOR MONEY



##### BUILD QUALITY



##### EASE OF DRIVE



##### OVERALL



**LIKE:** Retro/modern style; clear, cohesive, well-resolved sound; build and finish

**DISLIKE:** Bass extension falls a little short of the best

**WE SAY:** Beautifully made and finished, it looks good but sounds even better



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# KEF

## R5 £2,000

Brit-fi bastion KEF brings huge experience, and yet the new R5 has been re-engineered from the ground up



### IN SIGHT

- 1 130mm hybrid aluminium bass driver
- 2 Bass reflex port
- 3 Bi-wireable binding posts and internal link
- 4 Screw-on stabilising outriggers
- 5 Uni-Q tweeter-midrange array

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
KEF R5

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
27.3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
175 x 1,025 x 344mm

**FEATURES**  
● Uni-Q driver array: 25mm aluminium dome tweeter with 125mm aluminium mid/bass driver  
● 2x 130mm hybrid aluminium bass drivers  
● Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01622 672261

**WEBSITE**  
uk.kef.com

**S**limmer than the bulky Amphion and only a squeak shorter and lighter than the imposing Triangle, the three-way R5 is an astonishing amount of floorstanding real estate for the money. What's more, it appears to be built and finished to a standard that sets the bar for the group. Colour-coordinated drivers and flawless piano black lacquer gloss, too? Glorious. Let's call it a value perk that big companies find easier to offer.

As with every current KEF speaker, the centrepiece is a 12th-generation Uni-Q driver array. In this instance comprising a 125mm midrange element with 25mm aluminium dome tweeter seated in the middle. Behind the tweeter is a damped cavity to reduce the effects of the engineered gap between the two drivers. KEF has been using and evolving the Uni-Q principle for decades, a firm believer

in its advantages with dispersion and integration. Even its fixture-hiding trim is shaped to reduce diffraction.

Above and below the Uni-Q, in a D'Appolito arrangement, are twin 130mm hybrid aluminium bass drivers – hybrid because they consist of a shallow concave aluminium skin joined to a paper cone in a bid to optimise rigidity and lightness with low resonance and thereby reduce distortion and improve precision.

The rear-ported cabinet's hefty weight and inert feel are at least partially accounted for by the complexity of its reinforced structure, which uses constrained layer damping between the internal braces and cabinet panels. The goals are low resonance and a stable platform for the drive units.

### Sound quality

Is there a KEF house sound? I think so, and it's a good one – refined and transparent with a natural tonal balance and unusually well-defined imaging. Easy to live with, it hasn't always shone in roundups like this where feistier fare has a habit of pinching points and praise. The new R5 appears to be having none of that.

Without diminishing, dressing up or in any way deserting those sterling core qualities, the re-engineering makeover has merely turned up the heat and excitement, making the R5 both more responsive and discriminating when the musical landscape demands.

In some ways, the KEF seems to marry the more obvious virtues of the Amphion (smoothness and resolution) and the Dynaudio (fluency and flow), while adding a little more muscle, scale, authority and drive into the mix. The upshot is a speaker that plays The Stanley Clarke Band's *Combat Continuum* large and loud effortlessly, but does so with great finesse and meticulous preservation of detail. It isn't the kind of detail that draws attention to itself, but simply paints a more nuanced and intricately textured sonic picture of the musical event. The speaker's

ability to render reassuringly solid stereo images and a soundstage with more front-to-back depth than any other cabinet in the group makes the exquisitely produced Anette Askvik cut sound still more mesmerisingly airy and ethereal. No less alluring is the KEF's facility for resolving rich tonal colours and harmonics – never more tellingly than on the sumptuously arranged and almost glowing *Thanks To You*. Indeed, the R5 seems to take everything in its stride and, unlike some previous good-natured KEFs, isn't to be found dozing in the corner ●



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**LIKE:** Great looks, build and finish; glorious sound; terrific value

**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**DISLIKE:** Nothing of any note

**BUILD QUALITY**



**WE SAY:** An almost flawless floorstander that capably delivers on all levels

**EASE OF DRIVE**



**OVERALL**





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AUDIO VISUAL

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

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Staplefield - West Sussex

Dungannon - N.Ireland

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9/10





# Spendor

## A4 £2,200

The brand name might reach back into the mists of time, but the sound is anything but old fashioned



### IN SIGHT

- 1 22mm soft dome tweeter
- 2 Bass reflex port
- 3 High-quality binding posts
- 4 Reinforcing integral metal base
- 5 180mm polymer cone mid/bass driver

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Spendor A4

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
2-way floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
16kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
165 x 861 x 284mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 22mm soft  
dome tweeter  
● 1x 180mm  
polymer cone  
mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
86dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Spendor Audio  
Systems

**TELEPHONE**  
01323 843474

**WEBSITE**  
spendoraudio.com

**A**s the only other straight two-way design among the smaller floorstanders in the group (along with the Totem), the A4 has a similarly compact form factor and simple, clean-cut presence to engender a 'job-done' feeling among prospective purchasers. It's never quite that straightforward, of course, and we wouldn't have invited the A4 to the party had we felt such things made it a stone-cold no-brainer. But there can be no denying its solid engineering, smart finish and strong sense of zero frills 'rightness' get it off to a great start.

Like Spendor's slightly larger A7 floorstander (HFC 440), the A4 uses a 180mm mid/bass driver with polymer cone, surround and suspension materials said to deliver exemplary thermal and mechanical stability. High power handling and good low-level

linearity are also priorities. The 22mm 'wide surround' tweeter strives to combine the extended frequency response of a small diaphragm with the low-frequency characteristics of a larger diaphragm, the intended upshot being stable, low distortion response over a very wide frequency range. Wide dispersion is also claimed, broadening the listening sweet spot.

Driver integration is mediated by a crossover network with precision-wound, high-linearity tapped inductors, said to avoid the distortion more typically introduced by attenuating resistors and allowing fine-tuning of frequency and phase.

The A4's splendidly sturdy, rearported cabinet isn't stuffed with copious wadding or anything that introduces unnecessary mass, but uses small, low mass constrained polymer dampers at key points that, so the theory goes, "convert the spurious energy in the cabinet into inaudible heat".

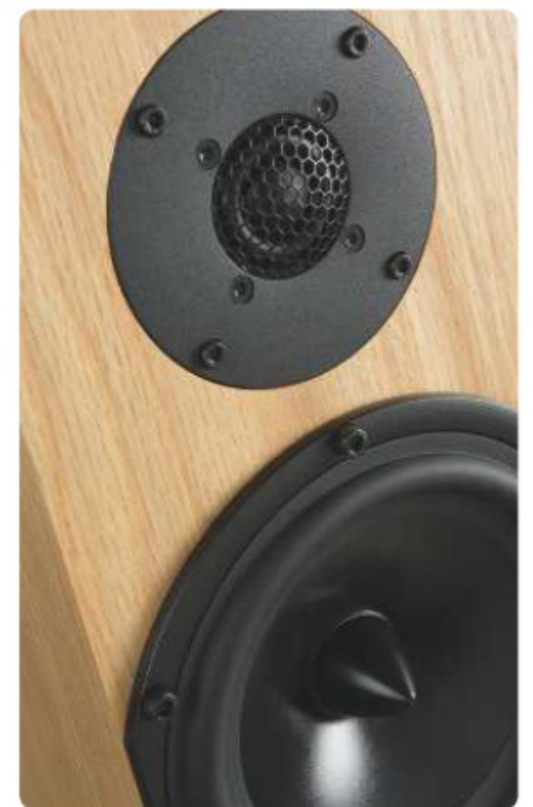
### Sound quality

The A4 sounds not dissimilar to its larger and more expensive A7 sibling – no bad thing and hardly a surprise given that the two models use the same drive units and crossover. The different cabinet volumes and port arrangements favour bass power and extension in the A7, but interestingly, I reckon the A4's lower frequencies are a little tauter and drier and, as a result, a tad more tuneful.

Certainly, there's nothing 'me too' about its presentation in this company. The baby Spendor is a conspicuously crisp, articulate and energetic performer, not too hung up on neutrality or depositing ticks in the hi-fi rule book but blessed with a nicely developed sense of fun and desire to entertain – qualities that serve most types of music extremely well and place it in a good critical light here. You have only to play something up tempo with a spring in its step to realise that it doesn't want for speed, spunk or sparkle either.

This being the case, while Anette Askvik doesn't sound quite as dreamy

as she does via the Dynaudio, KEF and especially the Amphion, the track has a terrific sense of location and presence in the room. Stanley Clarke and co. rip through *Combat Continuum* with so much snap, commitment, verve and dynamism, I almost expect to see plumes of smoke curling into the room from the back of the cabinet. That said, although the A4 sounds fast, rhythmically explicit and precise, it can sometimes fail to relax and loosen up when it should and therefore isn't quite as fluent and supple as the comparably compact Dynaudio and Totem ●



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



##### VALUE FOR MONEY



##### BUILD QUALITY



##### EASE OF DRIVE



##### OVERALL



**LIKE:** Clean, articulate, insightful and entertaining sound; smart design and sturdy build

**DISLIKE:** Needs to loosen up occasionally

**WE SAY:** Extremely capable and rewarding and only a hair's width away from greatness



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# Totem Sky Tower **£2,400**

A contender with a reputation among rivals for pulling magical sonic rabbits from improbably small cabinets

## DETAILS

### PRODUCT

Totem Sky Tower

### ORIGIN

Canada

### TYPE

2-way floorstanding loudspeaker

### WEIGHT

14.2kg

### DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)

162x850x232mm

### FEATURES

- 1x 33mm textile dome tweeter
- 1x 146mm mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m

### DISTRIBUTOR

Joelit BVBA

### TELEPHONE

+32 1528 5585

### WEBSITE

totemacoustic.com

**A**lthough not pictured, each Sky Tower comes with three rocket-shaped 'hooves' you have to screw into the base before settling down to listen. From a distance, they're the only things remotely diverting about the appearance of this painfully plain but not inexpensive little two-way floorstander. In a way, they set the tone, for all is not as it seems.

Stability enhancers? To a degree. Spike receptacles? Not needed or recommended according to Totem, yet each is threaded to accommodate the very same if you feel you really have to. Their primary function is isolation and they're called Composite Claws. Machined from high-density composite, their shape is said to break up standing waves to control surface resonance, tighten bass and heighten the soundstage as they acoustically decouple the cabinet from the floor.

And it's not your average cabinet. Uniquely, it benefits from a sparing

application of Borosilicate damping and the rigidity and air-tight precision afforded it by Totem's signature artisanal cabinet construction where the joints between panels are made using traditional interlocking mitring for superior fit, strength and seal. The box is light rather than heavy to reduce energy storage, but is claimed to be up to five times stronger than conventional V-Groove cabinets. Internal and external veneering resists warping, while the variable density fibreboard is denser at the extremities than the interior to reduce repetitive nodes and resonances.

What Totem describes as "the world's only 33mm soft dome tweeter" is claimed to be capable of extending to 30kHz and is joined by a customised 146mm mid/bass driver with a copper-capped voice coil said to be good for 36Hz. Typical Totem.

## Sound quality

Things don't get off to the rosiest of starts – at least not playing at the low to moderate volume levels the other speakers in the group have no qualms with. The Hegel H120 amp I'm using is no powder puff, but I have to push its gain scale a good 10 points – therefore making the Sky Tower noticeably louder in the room than the group norm – before it springs to life. Despite its quoted and entirely reasonable 88dB, it's an insensitive little box in the field but beyond that it simply needs more poke to perform at even a semblance of its best.

At lowish volumes, it doesn't seem to want to get out of bed, sounding strangely airless, leaden and dull, though you sense that structurally and tonally everything is in place, somehow waiting to be energised or engaged. And engage it most certainly does when gifted the requisite front-end encouragement. Amazingly, it gives the velvety and, for some, elusive lowest octaves underpinning Boz Scaggs' song a good go and, though not quite as successful as the larger Amphion, KEF and Triangle, it makes a better fist of it than the Dynaudio and game Sendor.

## IN SIGHT

- 1 33mm soft textile dome tweeter
- 2 Bi-wireable binding posts
- 3 Bass reflex port
- 4 Mass loading port
- 5 146mm mid/bass driver

Like all small Totem speakers, the sheer size and dimensionality of the sound seems to defy logic but does great things for the epic soundscape of *Combat Continuum*. Just as remarkably, there's nothing shiny or overtly analytical about the Sky Tower once it's motoring – nothing obviously 'hi-fi'. I hesitate to use the word 'organic', but there is a flesh-and-blood quality to the presentation that's incredibly affecting and moreish. It even makes the most 'digital' of productions sound human, but add vinyl, Rega Planar 6, Chord Huei, Chet Baker and Bill Evans, and a little bit of heaven enters the room ●



## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

.....

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

.....

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

.....

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

.....

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

.....

**LIKE:** Natural sound; expansive stage for its size; build quality

**DISLIKE:** Needs a good dose of volume to work properly; not much to look at

**WE SAY:** Capable of sonic magic, but not really one for low-level listening



## Quality Digital Streaming



Clockwise from top left: Innuos Statement, AVM Evolution MP 5.2 Media Player, AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 4T Streaming CD Receiver, Innuos Zenith

After auditioning many of the best brands in this arena, two stood out to us on sound quality, **AVM** and **Innuos**. Both offer excellent sound quality from physical sources as well as offering highly commendable streaming from subscription services. Most importantly, both brands offer a more natural sound than other streaming products as they are solely audio-focussed in their design and build.

**Innuos** has its history in computer based equipment but has focussed on audiophile components and quality power supplies in their designs.

Their models, with their striking chassis designed to reduce resonances, have the ability to quickly rip CDs to an internal storage and then serve this data direct to the audio system, or to a separate DAC, or to the network, along with streaming services such as TIDAL, QOBUZ, Deezer.

Because they start from a physical CD basis, and have focused on audiophile qualities, they have achieved a similar sound from streaming to that with a CD, from their entry model ZENmini to the impressive Statement.

**AVM** is a true high-end audio company manufacturing since 1986. All models are handcrafted to the highest standards in Germany.

By using simple, logical design principals to achieve optimal performance levels, the sound quality achieved is amongst the best in the industry.

Their products offer a wide variety of options due to the modular design and have a more classic audiophile appearance.

Their Media Players and All-In-One CD Receivers include a real TEAC CD Drive integrated into their streaming units which fully support TIDAL, QOBUZ, UPnP, Webradio.



# Triangle

## Esprit Australe EZ **£3,300**



### IN SIGHT

- 1 25mm titanium compression tweeter
- 2 Rear-firing 25mm tweeter
- 3 Bass reflex port
- 4 3x 165mm bass drivers
- 5 165mm cellulose paper midrange driver

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Triangle Esprit Australe EZ

**ORIGIN**  
France/China

**TYPE**  
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
38.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
300 x 1,170 x 460mm

**FEATURES**  
● 2x 25mm titanium compression tweeters  
● 1x 165mm midrange driver  
● 3x 165mm bass drivers  
● Quoted sensitivity: 92.5dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Elite Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01334 570666

**WEBSITE**  
eliteaudiouk.com

**I**f any speaker in this group deserves the description *tour de force*, this is probably it. The largest and heaviest of the three larger floostanders, it's frankly a bit of a monster, standing some 1,170mm tall, weighing just shy of 40kg and, finished in black gloss, looking properly imposing. It also has comfortably the most drivers – three bass, one mid and two tweeters, one of those facing backwards. Triangle's portfolio stretches all the way into the high-end clouds and although the Australe EZ is top of the Esprit lineup, Esprit is two tiers below the French company's flagship Magellan range. Predictably, some trickle-down tech from the top drawer is involved. Arguably most intriguing is the so-called Dynamic Pulse System's two horn-loaded tweeters facing fore and aft, the latter allocated a narrower

band confined to the highest frequencies and designed to improve the polar response of the front tweeter by helping reduce its directivity. Each unit – a 25mm titanium dome and compression driver – has a different crossover point, from 5kHz for the rear and 3kHz for the front.

The 165mm midrange driver features Triangle's favoured cellulose paper cone and, again, the membrane profile, suspension shape and dust cap are hand-me-downs from Magellan. Below that, the three 165mm wood pulp/carbon composite bass drivers boast over-sized voice coils. Meanwhile, Triangle's Driver Vibration Absorption System ensures the cabinet is comprehensively braced and damped.

### Sound quality

Dictated by alphabetical order, it's either the Triangle's good fortune to follow the comparatively twig-like Totem or a perfectly placed banana skin. In truth, it's a bit of both. That the tiddly Totem sounds so big puts enormous pressure on the very much larger, heavier and multi-multi driver Australe EZ to sound insanely massive and, of course, it doesn't. But having said that, it stills sounds bigger than the Totem and every other speaker in the group – not so much in terms of soundstage area as the scale and physicality of the players and instruments operating within it.

Clearly this is good news if you have a large listening room, but even if you don't, the Australe EZ doesn't really mind and will make itself at home in a smaller space just as comfortably without overpowering it. Contrary to appearances, the Triangle isn't a bass beast, its low-frequency chops quitting at a quoted 35Hz, some way above the Amphion's.

What's so likeable and probably the speaker's strongest USP – ably demonstrated by the Askvik and Scaggs tracks – is the utterly effortless quality of the bass; the way it feels so unforced and the way it breathes. It's one point of difference between the Astrale EZ and the best of the rest and something that kind of segues into an

enhanced sense of body and presence further up the frequency range. The Stanley Clarke Band are physically in the room, *Combat Continuum's* trippy production effects so far out they could be happening in the next county. If you want your music delivered with a righteous union of intimacy and grand scale, look no further. Just be aware that it won't be the cleanest sound around as, especially with the wick advanced a few clicks, there is a trace of benign midrange colouration, adding a little extra warmth to Boz Scaggs' already decidedly cuddly vocal ●



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

**OVERALL**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Large-scale sound and power; impressive size

**DISLIKE:** Bass not as extended as it might be

**WE SAY:** Big on physical involvement and hugely entertaining, if a little coloured



# Group test verdict

It's been a fascinating week of pitting little against large and late-night listening, but it's time for **David Vivian** to total up the scores and announce a winner

**THIS IS ONE** of those roundups where it's possible to make a case for at least two of the contenders to just as easily finish first or last. Both the Argon3LS and Sky Tower are capable of spell-binding moments that mark them out as very special, yet they also have their own downsides. For all the Amphion's sophistication and skill, its control and poise tends to shut out excitement. The Totem can sound terrific, but only above a certain volume threshold. Quieter listening isn't its forte. Audition with care.

The Spendor A4 is a more evenly talented proposition with a pacey,

articulate, musically engaging personality delivering all the verve and snap the Amphion lacks. It's a consistently entertaining performer that keeps hold of its musical mojo at moderate-to-low volume levels. It's just pipped for third place by the Evoke 30 which, while not quite as crisp and ebullient, is tonally richer and warmer, marginally smoother and sounds a little more rhythmically supple and fluent than the Spendor.

Perhaps it's no surprise that the top spots are occupied by the two largest speakers. The first thing to say is that, aesthetic considerations apart, their

size shouldn't exclude them from being used in smaller rooms. Bigger rooms are better, but neither the Esprit Australe EZ nor the R5 are fussy about positioning or will be too compromised by near-wall placement. That said, it's the Triangle that takes the second spot on the podium. Yes, it's pricey, but that money buys an awful lot of loudspeaker and sophisticated firepower. Its walk-in sized soundstage, effortlessly dynamic and easy-breathing delivery and ability to convey body and colour are just too hard to resist.



**WINNER**

Astonishing value and beautifully built and finished, the KEF R5 is just too strong in too many areas. Capable of generating much of the Triangle's scale and dynamic generosity, it also matches the best of the rest for musical insight, flow, timing and soundstage imaging.

|                 |                                                                                     |                                                                                     |                                                                                      |                                                                                       |                                                                                       |                                                                                       |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Make/model      | Amphion Argon3LS                                                                    | Dynaudio Evoke 30                                                                   | KEF R5                                                                               | Spendor A4                                                                            | Totem Sky Tower                                                                       | Triangle Esprit Australe EZ                                                           |
| Price           | £2,520                                                                              | £2,900                                                                              | £2,000                                                                               | £2,200                                                                                | £2,400                                                                                | £3,300                                                                                |
| Sound quality   | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                                | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 |
| Value for money | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                                | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 |
| Build quality   | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                                | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 |
| Ease of drive   | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                                | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 |
| Overall         | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                               | ★★★★★                                                                                | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 | ★★★★★                                                                                 |
|                 | An elegant fusion of Scandi style and studio-endorsed sound quality                 | With unceasing evolution, innovation and great sound, it has a style all its own    | A supremely well balanced and executed design with classy looks                      | Honest, open, energetic and a communicator of considerable skill                      | Despite its size, it defies reason by delivering a big, all-action sound              | A handsome hulk that nails the big picture with precision and finesse                 |

|                     |                                                  |                                               |                                  |                                             |                        |                                              |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Key features        |                                                  |                                               |                                  |                                             |                        |                                              |
| Configuration       | 2-way                                            | 2.5-way                                       | 3-way                            | 2-way                                       | 2-way                  | 3-way                                        |
| Horn-loaded tweeter | Waveguide                                        | No                                            | No                               | No                                          | No                     | Yes                                          |
| Dome tweeter        | Yes                                              | Yes                                           | Yes                              | Yes                                         | Yes                    | No                                           |
| Bi-wiring           | No                                               | No                                            | Yes                              | No                                          | Yes                    | Yes                                          |
| Finishes            | White, black, walnut, variously coloured grilles | Black gloss, white gloss, walnut, blonde wood | Black gloss, white gloss, walnut | Black ash, satin white, natural oak, walnut | Black, white, mahogany | White gloss, black, gloss, black ash, walnut |

TRY WITH THESE

**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:**  
Audiolab 8300A **£900 HFC 404**

Unlike a number of amps currently on sale, the Audiolab is exclusively analogue and its clean and insightful sound will complement the talents of the incisive yet fluent KEF R5 well.



**STREAMER:**  
Auralic Aries Mini **£450 HFC 442**

The Auralic isn't the prettiest streamer going, but the level of performance that it offers is beyond anything else at the price. As well as superb sonics, you get an excellent control interface and it can even be used as a server.



**DAC:**  
Chord Electronics Hugo 2 **£1,800 HFC 428**

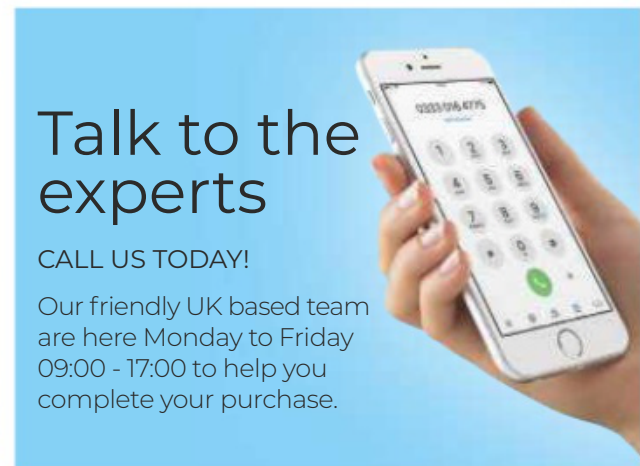
It might seem a tad expensive to team with a £2,000 floorstanding speaker, but Hugo 2 makes a great partner for the Audiolab 6000CDT transport and there's little question the KEF R5 has the bandwidth and transparency to fully justify it.







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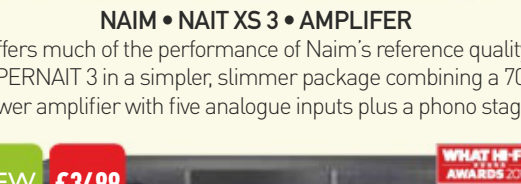
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Naim NAIT XS 3  
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**NAIM • NAIT XS 3 • AMPLIFIER**  
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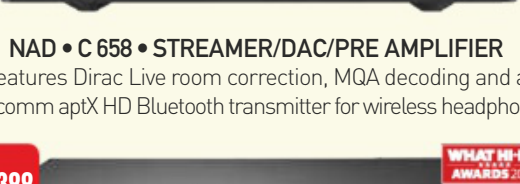
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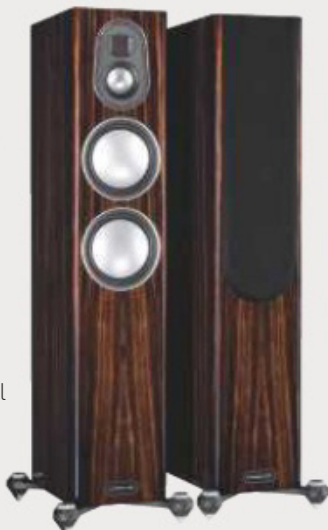
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**PMC • TWENTY5.23**  
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#### BOWERS & WILKINS • 805 D3

Features B&W's Diamond dome tweeter, isolated in its own solid-body tweeter assembly for precise imaging and clarity. Voices and instruments are delivered with purity and precision, thanks to the smooth, accurate Continuum™ cone mid/bass driver.

**NEW £4750**

Price excludes speaker stands



#### FOCAL ARIA 906

This 2-way loudspeaker features Focal's exclusive Flax cone, characterised by its low coloration and natural sound, coupled with Focal's inverted dome TNF tweeter. Aria is available in Black high gloss and real wood walnut veneer finishes.

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**BOWERS & WILKINS • 606**  
New 600 series 2-way standmount/bookshelf speaker combining Decoupled Double Dome tweeter technology with a 6.5-inch Continuum cone mid/bass driver. Matt black or white finish.

**£549**

Price excludes speaker stands



#### KEF • R3

A true three-way speaker, the 165mm bass driver pushes bass performance to new extremes. The 125mm midrange driver and 25mm aluminium dome tweeter creates a Uni-Q array that defies the expectations from the most compact main speaker in the range.

**£1299**

Price excludes speaker stands



#### Q ACOUSTICS 3020i

These substantial speakers, with 125mm and 22mm precision drivers, can be shelf-mounted on pre-fitted rubber feet, stand or wall-mounted on optional, dedicated stands and brackets.

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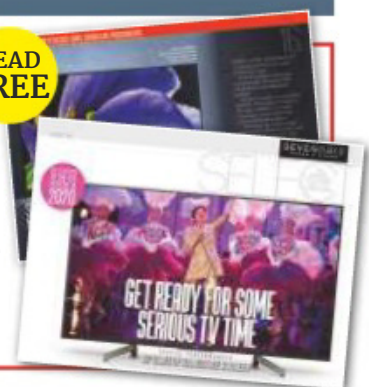
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# Active application

A luxury loudspeaker and high-end active crossover come together with extraordinary effect. **Ed Selley** is blown away

**S**ay the words 'active speaker' to most audiophiles and there is a good chance the first thing to spring to mind will be loudspeakers with built-in amplification to power the drivers. To be clear, the defining characteristic that makes a speaker active is that it has a powered crossover placed in front of the allocated amplification to best suit the frequency range of each driver, or at the very least each channel.

This active loudspeaker system is a combination of Kudos Audio's Titan 505 loudspeaker and Exposure's VXN

outboard crossover with power supply, pre and power amplification. As you can see, the crossover and amplification system is not confined to a pair of speaker cabinets and, more unusually, brings together two brands that up until now have had no association with one another. It is a different take on an active speaker, but there are very good reasons for adopting this approach.

Priced at £7,000 per pair, the Titan 505 appeared as a conventional standmount in *HFC* 451. The speaker here is identical in every way but

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Exposure VXN

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
Outboard active crossover

**WEIGHT**  
2kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
218 x 89 x 348mm

**FEATURES**  
• Compatible with two and three-way speaker designs  
• 1x stereo RCA input  
• 3x stereo RCA outputs (treble, mid, bass)  
• Dedicated PSU

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Exposure Electronics Ltd.

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unlike the original review that utilised its built-in conventional crossover, here it's bypassed via the unusual-looking terminal panel at the back by removing the horseshoe-shaped links to allow the tweeter and isobaric mid/bass drive units to directly connect to external amplification.

Key to making sure the correct frequencies are fed to corresponding

**The system has an effortless speed and dynamic flow that underpins everything**

drivers is Exposure's £1,545 VXN crossover. This is a single, half-width unit with a pair of speaker crossovers mounted inside. The crossover itself is configured on a speaker-by-speaker basis before leaving the factory and can be used with both two and three-way designs.

To maximise the performance of the crossover, it is powered by an external PSU priced at £995, which combines a custom-shielded toroidal transformer and a veritable forest of smoothing capacitors. It connects to the VXN via



## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Exposure XM7/XM9

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
Preamp/mono block power amps

**WEIGHT**  
5kg each

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
218 x 89 x 363mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 80W (XM9)  
• Analogue inputs:  
1x stereo RCA's;  
1x MM phono;  
1x AV direct  
• Digital inputs:  
2x optical; 2x BNC coaxial digital;  
1x USB-B port

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The half-width XM series components keep this setup tidy

a pair of 30V DC power cables, one per channel, and power is controlled via the on/off button on the front of the power supply. Placed side by side, the units are the equivalent of one full-width component. The VXN crossover is built for Kudos speakers, but can be partnered with any preamp or power amp combination that takes your fancy, offering intriguing possibilities for tweaking the sound of a system.

Of course, Exposure hopes that buyers will opt for its own for the task such as its XM series as seen here fronted by its XM7 preamp and four XM9 mono amplifiers (both reviewed in *HFC* 429) that connect to the crossover. The units claim 80W power output each and are sold in pairs, but if you need more analogue inputs its 3010S2D preamp could be drafted in instead and the 3010S2 stereo power amps would also reduce the box count and up the power output, for example. The VXN receives a signal from the preamp output over RCA and splits the signal to output to the power amplifiers, again over RCA. In this case the outputs are left tweeter, left mid/bass, right

tweeter and right mid/bass – the ‘midrange’ output is unused here.

It's a busy box count with seven separate units requiring six mains power sockets plus considerable cabling – in this case three Chord Company Clearway stereo RCA interconnects (*HFC* 420) and four mono runs of Clearway loudspeaker cable (*HFC* 405). There's nothing particularly complex about hooking everything up, but the penalties for doing so incorrectly are potentially considerable and successfully powering all the components on for the first time feels like a major achievement.

## Sound quality

If you're on the fence as to whether this collection of components is worthwhile, the first listen quickly removes any sense of doubt. The key word that crops up time and time again in my notes is “immediacy”.

Regardless of the tempo of the music being played, there is an effortless speed and dynamic flow that underpins everything it does. Imogen Heap's *Hide And Seek* is not a rushed or urgent piece of music, but the vocals display an agility and ability to be ready for the next syllable that helps to frame the music in a way that sounds and feels stunningly real.

And ‘feel’ is not a misplaced word in this context. It tears into the ferocious *Nobody Speak* by DJ Shadow, landing bass notes with blistering speed that does nothing to diminish their considerable impact. The effect of handing each of those isobaric drivers an 80W amp of their own is to ensure they have all the power they need, but on an extremely tight leash to ensure control throughout. Whether you are asking it to reproduce a dirty great lump of electronic noise or the analogue weight of a plucked double

## IN SIGHT



- 1 29mm fabric dome tweeter
- 2 4mm active bass and treble banana terminals
- 3 Rear-firing bass port/vent
- 4 180mm mid/bass driver



## Q&A

**Tony Brady**

Chief designer, Exposure Electronics



**ES: How did the decision to introduce the VXN come about?**

**TB:** We were asked if we could develop a conventional, analogue, active crossover for use with the higher-end of the Kudos range as they were interested in partnering with another manufacturer to support their active-ready loudspeakers. I'm a true believer in active speakers, in fact I've been using a pair at home for 38 years, so it was relatively straightforward to do a simpler adaption of what I have been using and pair it up with our VXN power supply, which had already been designed ready to be used with our forthcoming VXN phono stage.

**How important to the overall performance of the VXN is the use of the external PSU?**

It's extremely important because there is no room inside the VXN case for a decent power supply with the two large mono crossover boards using up most of the internal space. Of course, there are other benefits: by having the power supply in a separate chassis it means there is no source of hum near to the sensitive audio circuits – thus making the crossover very quiet.

**Would using two stereo power amplifiers instead of the four mono ones here have a significant effect on performance?**

All our mono amps have a different topology to their simpler stereo cousins, having separate power supplies for each channel, DC coupling throughout as well as higher power supply rejection ratios. As a result, our mono amplifiers sound much better than their stereo equivalents.

**Has there been any interest from other speaker brands in making use of this system?**

Yes, we have been talking to a couple of companies about making dedicated crossovers for use with their loudspeakers, but we can't make any announcements at this time.

## CONNECTIONS



- 1 Unbalanced stereo RCA inputs (XM9)
- 2 MM phono stage inputs (XM7)
- 3 2x optical and 2x BNC coaxial digital inputs
- 4 2x stereo RCA pre outputs
- 5 Treble, mid and bass outputs (VXN)
- 6 Preamp inputs



This system makes for a fascinating comparison with the Krell and Magico Beautiful System (p88). If unembellished reproduction of music is your final goal, there is little arguing that the American duo is the more capable. This is only half the story, though, as the Kudos Audio and Exposure combo engages more on an emotional level. The active system is more immediate and as tempos increase it stretches this advantage further. I'd be overjoyed with either setup at this elevated price point, but if I had to live with one of these immense partnerships it would be the Kudos Audio and Exposure pairing I'd be angling to take home.

bass string, there are precious few standmount systems that will keep up with this one.

It is admirably responsive to any changes in source equipment too. Exposure has supplied its XM CD player for the purposes of this review, but replacing this with Chord Electronics' Hugo M Scaler and Hugo TT 2 DAC as a digital front end opens out what is already a usefully spacious presentation and really starts to demonstrate the three dimensionality this system is capable of. Across a broad swathe of material, the Exposure components work with the Kudos to consistently deliver a soundstage that makes sense in the context of the music, whether it's Regina Spektor sat at her piano in *Consequence Of Sound* or entertaining the Hammersmith Apollo with her live rendition of *On The Radio*.

Finding fault with what this setup is capable of is very much a question of subjectivity. It would be wrong to describe it as coloured because that's far too drastic a term, but it definitely has a character of its own and compared with other systems at a similarly lofty price point, it is more of a big picture device than a micro detail one (see *How It Compares*). What it never struggles with, though, is fun. The incredibly vivacious group studio recording of My Baby's *Mad Mountain Thyme* on the *LIVE!* album is simply outstanding. More than anything else, this setup delivers on the premise of a group of sublimely

talented musicians letting rip and enjoying themselves. It finds emotional content with a deceptive ease and it's this ability to engage that keeps me listening for much longer than is strictly required.

## Conclusion

I am utterly smitten by what this Kudos Audio/Exposure system can do. It doesn't so much tick the subjective boxes of what I want a hi-fi to deliver as write an entire manifesto on it. What Exposure has done is take one of the very best standmount speakers you can buy in 2020 and somehow make it sound even better. What truly excites me, however, is that this is simply a confirmation of what is possible with an outboard crossover in place and based on the phenomenal demonstration of its abilities here, the benefits of going active are too impressive to ignore ●

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



#### VALUE FOR MONEY



#### BUILD QUALITY



#### FEATURES



#### OVERALL



**LIKE:** Superb dynamics and captivatingly vivid presentation

**DISLIKE:** A little bulky and complex to set up

**WE SAY:** Astonishingly musical system that will delight anyone lucky enough to be able to afford it



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## 2M

The 2M Series, named after the abbreviation of Moving Magnet (MM) technology, is an affordable range of pick-up cartridges with first-class audio design principles throughout. Featuring Ortofon's trademarked split-pole pin technology for a flat frequency response, all 2M cartridges have a high output for easy integration into any turntable system.

Ortofon's philosophy is to play the record sound as accurately as possible, without colouring the sound in any way. Both the 2M Bronze and 2M Black have diamonds which are cut and polished to the highest standards of the industry. The 2M Bronze and 2M Black also have interchangeable stylus units, and replacement styli are readily available in the UK.

The 2M range has been structured in the same way as the popular Rondo and Cadenza Moving Coil series, with ascending quality as you move from Red - Blue - Bronze - Black. The spectacular 2M Black has become the flagship of 2M, and all Ortofon moving magnet cartridges. 2M was also the last product designed by Ortofon's former chief engineer, Per Windfield, who developed the 2M series over the final 2 years of his 30 year tenure with Ortofon.



### Red

A hugely popular all-purpose cartridge with a Tipped Elliptical stylus that delivers an open, dynamic sound with a slight touch of warmth.



### Blue

An affordable step up in the range, which adds a greater resolution, dynamics, and detailed sound thanks to the Nude Elliptical stylus.



### Bronze

Featuring a superior body, the Bronze picks up even the highest frequency information for a rich, detailed and deep soundstage, and can be further upgraded with ease.



### Black

The musician's choice and flagship of the range, the 2M Black features a Nude Shibata stylus which guarantees a true-to-life sound performance. This is truly the best MM has to offer.







# Breaking the mould

Wharfedale's latest standmount evolves speaker design at the price. **James Parker** is intrigued by this eye-catching newcomer

**T**o many people, a £600 standmount speaker is likely to conjure up a few assumptions. For example, it will have two drivers, be around 30 to 35cm tall and there will be a port somewhere in the cabinet to aid its bass response. In presuming this, you will have a handle on almost every model available at the price. The 'almost' is important, though, because Wharfedale has different ideas...

The Evo4 Series is the company's latest range and is intended to bring some of the technology and thinking developed for its flagship Elysian family to a more affordable price point. The most notable is the use of an Air Motion Transformer-type tweeter, which is fitted to all models

**It extracts levels of information that are outstanding for a speaker at this price**

in the range. AMT-type drivers offer a tweeter design with the combination of large radiating area and low overall mass for wide dispersion and excellent high-frequency performance. With the baby 4.1 priced at £450, this is one of the most cost-effective price points I've seen for this kind of tweeter.

The Evo4.2 is the second of the two standmounts in the series and has a rare three-way configuration (at the price) with an AMT tweeter, 50mm soft dome midrange driver and a 165mm woven Kevlar bass driver. The company says that there's a strong argument for doing things this way.

AMTs typically offer excellent high-frequency performance, but don't traditionally work down to the same crossover point that a conventional dome tweeter is comfortable at, meaning the handling of midbass frequencies can be less than ideal. In the Evo4.2, the dome

midrange handles frequencies between 1.4kHz and 3.9kHz and keeps all the drivers within their operational comfort zones. The trade off comes in the form of a more complex crossover and notional reduction in efficiency.

The other interesting aspect of the Wharfedale's design is the bass port arrangement. This is also borrowed from its Elysian models and is called SLPP (Slot Loaded Profile Port). It's built into the base of the cabinet and gives the impression of being a separate plinth. Wharfedale says that this helps to control and regulate the flow of air in such a way as to permit placement where you want rather than working to a minimum distance from a rear wall. The cabinet also benefits from this trickle-down technology. It is made from varying thicknesses of MDF to quell resonance and ensure it is as rigid as possible. The curved sides further control and eliminate standing waves while also helping reduce the perceived physical size of the cabinet.

This works up to point, although the Evo4.2 sports a set of dimensions that are a long way outside the norm considering the price. Standing at 450mm tall, it is significantly larger than any rival I can think of (see *How It Compares*) and this has some implications on how it is best positioned. I initially try it on a 60cm high stand, but this places the AMT tweeter above the height of my ear when sat in the usual listening position so I switch to Atacama's shorter SE24 stand. You will need to budget for new stands if you've previously had a more traditionally proportioned standmount in place.

There's also the small matter of the looks, which may not suite all tastes. Some of the proportions feel decidedly awkward and the curved cabinets – something I associate with more modern designs – clash with the 4.2's classic proportions. The 165mm driver looks a little too small for the

size of the cabinet and the overall result is rather fussy, although it is very well made and points of contact such as the bi-wireable speaker terminals inspire confidence.

## Sound quality

Listening to the Evo4.2 for the first time goes some way to forgiving the slightly ungainly appearance. The first point of note is that, in keeping with the adage that there's no replacement for displacement, it demonstrates some impressive low end. This is slightly confusing as Wharfedale quotes a low-frequency response of 54Hz at +/- 3dB, increasing to 48Hz at +/- 6dB, but in my room it sounds like it comfortably exceeds both these figures without any appreciable roll off.

Where this really comes into its own is adding authority to material. The low synth line of John Grant's *Ernest Borgnine* has all the menace and drive it needs to set the stage for the singular vocal turn. It's certainly not the fastest-sounding speaker at £600 – although the SLPP system is effective at avoiding any perceivable chuffing effect to the bass itself – but with the bigger sweep of a massed band on Kamasi Washington's *Fists Of Fury*, it simply sounds so much more convincing than many rivals.

There's plenty to like about the upper registers too. The most important facet of the three-way

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Wharfedale Evo4.2

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
3-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
13.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
250 x 455 x 340mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x 30 x 60mm  
Air Motion  
Transformer tweeter  
• 1x 50mm  
midrange driver  
• 1x 165mm Kevlar  
bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
87dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
IAG Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01480 452561

**WEBSITE**  
wharfedale.co.uk

**Solid bi-wireable binding posts are the order of the day for the Evo4.2**





**IN SIGHT**



aspect of the Wharfedale is that the drivers work together in an entirely cohesive way with no perceivable handover between them. The dome midrange and AMT in particular form an impressively cohesive partnership with one another. *Royal*, the latest album from German-Nigerian singer-songwriter Ayo, demonstrates this to fine effect. The opening track,

## This is one of the most cost-effective price points I've ever seen for an AMT tweeter

*Rest Assured* is something that the Wharfedale seems to thrive on, and as the vocal performance makes use of both the midrange dome and AMT tweeter, there's no tonal irregularity as it moves between the two.

There is also impressively little sense of constraint or colouration from the cabinets. Provided that a modicum of care has been taken when it comes to placing and positioning in the listening room, it manages to disappear from my perception and is impressively difficult to pinpoint inside a big and very consistent soundstage. It benefits from being used with decent partnering equipment, but this is more a reflection of its ability to show the benefits of whatever it's attached to is capable of – thanks to its

admirable transparency – rather than being a difficult design to drive.

The only drawback is that all of these very positive qualities don't add up to a speaker that is always as much fun as you might expect. Taking the Evo4.2 on a lively blast through Kasabian's *Stevie*, is strangely unsatisfying. I say 'strangely' because none of the specific attributes of what it is doing suggests why this is the case. The tonal realism remains extremely convincing and for all the effortless top extension and dispersion, the Evo4.2 is usefully forgiving too. Simply put, at points in the track where you really ought to have a fist raised, yelling along to the lyrics, the Wharfedale has you parked firmly on the sofa. It would be wrong to describe it as dull, but it's not miles wide of the mark to call it rather matter of fact.

How important this is will depend on your musical preferences. With more relaxed-tempo music, even when the time signature is relatively complex, the Evo4.2 is capable of moments of genuine engagement and this allows you to delight in the superb performance of the upper registers in a more emotive context. The more time you spend with it, the more you become aware of the fabulous detail retrieval it offers. Without ever sounding forensic or wearing, it manages to extract levels of information that are genuinely outstanding for a speaker under £1,000. Listening to Portico Quartet's



**HOW IT COMPARES**

The Wharfedale is £50 and a world away in design and execution from the immensely capable B&W 606 that won the Group Test in HFC 454. With acoustic material and detail retrieval, the Evo4.2 is on a different level and is the logical choice. Where the 606 shines is with its all-round ability. With fast or more urgent music, it really delivers and across the full spectrum of music, remains one of our favourite standmounts at this price point.

*Steps In The Wrong Direction*, it teases out nuances of the band performing as a cohesive group that brings everything together in a way that is tremendously satisfying.

## Conclusion

Wharfedale's Evo4.2 is not the complete all-rounder, but I am not sure that's what the company intends. What this gentle giant can do is deliver certain types of music in a manner that is largely beyond most rivals at the price and if you are happy with its style and can work with its demands it will delight, making it definitely worthy of a thorough audition at the price ●

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**BUILD QUALITY**



**EASE OF DRIVE**



**OVERALL**



**LIKE:** Midrange and upper registers; soundstaging and sense of scale

**DISLIKE:** Can lack excitement with some material

**WE SAY:** Not a true all-rounder, but has some exceptional qualities at the price





## THE VINYL FRONTIER

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[CHORDELECTRONICS.CO.UK](http://CHORDELECTRONICS.CO.UK)



# Huei







# Heart of glass

This compact valve integrated is a significant departure from Luxman's usual muscular designs, but **Ed Selley** is still smitten

**M**ention Japanese brand Luxman in hi-fi circles and the kind of product that typically comes to mind will be one of its hefty solid-state amplifiers, such as the L-590AXII integrated that appeared as part of our Luxman/DALI *Beautiful System* back in *HFC* 457. Along with its handsome leviathan components, Luxman also has a range of vacuum tube amplifiers and the SQ-N150 is the smallest in the current lineup.

More compact in the flesh than it appears in images, it has a modest A4-sized footprint.

In design terms, it is a fairly conventional amplifier built around two ECC83 dual triodes in the preamp section and a quartet of EL84 power pentodes acting as the power amplifier. The EL84 is not known for its powerhouse output when used in any configuration, but even so the SQ-N150 has a comparatively low offering than some equivalent designs

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Luxman SQ-N150

**ORIGIN**  
Japan

**TYPE**  
Integrated valve amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
12.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
297 x 188 x 251mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 2x 10W (6ohm)  
• Inputs: 3x stereo RCAs; MM/MC phono stage  
• 6.35mm headphone socket

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
IAG Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01480 452561

**WEBSITE**  
luxman.com

(see *How It Compares* overleaf) and claims 2x 10W into a 6ohm load, although this should mean a longer lifespan of the valves.

Given the specs, some care is required when choosing a partnering loudspeaker. Ideally, a pair with a sensitivity figure greater than 90dB fits the bill while benign impedance should also be considered. But with due care and system matching attention, you'll be surprised at what this 10W-per-channel valve integrated amplifier can really achieve.

It has a useful spread of features, with four RCA stereo analogue inputs including three line-level plus a phono stage that supports both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges. There are no digital inputs, but the company's matching D-N150 CD player (£2,500) comes equipped with a trio of options in the shape of optical, coaxial and USB-B connections for handling external digital sources.

It is arguably the additional functionality that is more worthy of comment, however. As well as the phono stage, the SQ-N150 is fitted





with a 6.35mm headphone socket and taps the main amplifier section for power. In traditional Luxman fashion there are bass, treble and balance controls, but these can be bypassed via the direct button should you wish. There is also a bespoke remote that has volume and mute functions as well as a set of controls for the aforementioned matching CD deck. The overall impression is quite different from the decidedly minimalist fascia that many valve amplifiers convey.

As befits a product from a company with a strong reputation for build quality, the SQ-N150 looks and feels superb. The chassis is relatively compact, but still weighs in at over 12kg, while everything feels very carefully and solidly bolted together. All the points of contact inspire confidence and it's one of the single most beautiful devices I have reviewed in quite a while.

Obviously, if a product sounds good, aesthetics shouldn't be too important, but they do play an important role in how we view and interact with something, and this works to the

Luxman's advantage. Every part of it feels exquisitely finished and well thought out with lovely details such as the tiny pair of VU meters and the little bar that moves the input selector and denotes which input is selected. An effective protective cage for the valves is supplied, but there is no doubting the SQ-N150 looks far better without it in place.

### Sound quality

Initial testing is with Focal's Kanta No1 standmount (HFC 454) in place, which is generally regarded as a fairly benign and easy to drive speaker. From the off, it's not a particularly good match for the Luxman with limited headroom and signs of strain apparent. Swapping to Audio Note's AN-K speaker, which is designed specifically for use with low-power valve amplifiers, dramatically improves the performance and so this is duly recruited for the bulk of the listening.

With the more sensitive Audio Note in place and, initially connecting the SQ-N150 to a combination of Chord Electronics' Hugo M Scaler and Hugo TT 2 DAC running as a Roon endpoint, it takes very little time to establish that this is a very fine-sounding integrated that just happens to use valves. There is no appreciable background noise at idle, even with the volume cranked up and while the output transformers are not terribly large, they seem to have the required heft to ensure that the Luxman never sounds strained or soft at the frequency extremes.

In fact, the SQ-N150 is an impressively energetic performer. *Bonde*, the opening track from Ali Farka Touré and Ry Cooder's *Talking Timbuktu* is delivered with a

compelling and wholly engaging flow that underpins truly outstanding tonal realism. This is not the soft and rose-tinted take on the music that can sometimes be the case with valve designs, but a vivid and startlingly immediate presentation that actively draws you into the music rather than highlighting any limitations.

More impressively, even more dynamic material doesn't do a huge amount to unsettle things. The deep electronic notes of Christine And The Queens' *Goya Soda* will undoubtedly have a little more heft via a solid-state alternative with 10 times the output power, but the SQ-N150 does enough to ensure that their potency is entirely sufficient. While the frequency response feels very linear, there is no

### The headphone stage displays similar sonic characteristics to via the speakers

escaping the fact that vocals are absolutely sensational. Beautifully defined, they remain distinct from the backing instruments but not separated from them and packed with the micro dynamics of little breaths and inflections that can be missed even by fairly talented equipment.

No less importantly, provided that the speaker it's matched with is suitably sensitive, the performance manages to deliver heavier and larger scale music without sounding strained or lost. The live studio edit of *Bring Your Lovin' Back Here* by Gomez captures the heavyweight swagger of the band and the punch and drive of the music is central to the experience. ▶

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 Speaker binding posts
- 2 3x RCA stereo inputs
- 3 Phono stage input
- 4 Earth grounding post for turntable





Although certainly not a recording for the ages, the SQ-N150 takes the experience further with a level of refinement and airiness in the midrange that ensures any limitations of the music are avoided.

Given the excellent performance that the phono stage of Luxman's solid-state amps have demonstrated in the past, it would be reasonable to expect more of the same here and you'd be right, up to a point... Connecting Rega's Planar 10 turntable (HFC 456) fitted with an Ania Pro cartridge (see p63) shows that all the technical attributes are well handled. The low noise floor remains and, in keeping with other products from the company I've tested, the tonality of the phono section is identical to the

rest of the inputs. *A World Of Masks* by The Heliocentrics keeps that same rhythmic energy and tonal realism firmly in place and it does an impressive job of creating an open and expansive soundstage.

Any issue is more to do with gain. The 0.35mV output of the moving-coil Ania Pro doesn't translate into a satisfactory listening level, even when partnered with the sensitive Audio Note speaker. Changing to a Goldring Ethos (HFC 449) gives more headroom, but still leaves the SQ-N150 feeling underpowered with more dynamic material. Unless your system is assembled very carefully in terms of both cartridge output and speaker sensitivity, it is likely you will find the experience a little frustrating.



**HOW IT COMPARES**  
Quad's VA-One reviewed in HFC 417 (now revised to VA-One+) is less than half the price and has almost the same compliment of valves. While the hardware is similar, the Quad has a little more power output rated at 2x 15W into 6ohm, digital inputs and Bluetooth wireless with aptX. The SQ-N150 manages to sound less stereotypically valve-like, thanks to its faster and punchier sound. It has more analogue inputs, an excellent phono stage and that beautiful casework to consider, too.



**A protective cage comes bundled to keep the valves safe**

Happily, this is a something that is easily solved with a moving-magnet cartridge, and fitting the Planar 10 with Nagaoka's MP-200 (HFC 434) delivers levels of available gain that are far more consistent with a digital source. This has more of an effect on the performance than the quality of the cartridge and while the Nagaoka is not as good as the Ania Pro in an outright sense, the performance is superior simply because there is more headroom present. Given the plethora of great moving-magnet designs available, this shouldn't be a serious issue.

## It delivers heavier and larger scale music without sounding strained

Rather fewer allowances need to be made for the headphone amplifier, however. Connected to Audio-Technica's ATH-A2000Z headphone (HFC 412), the Luxman delivers a stellar performance with similar sonic characteristics to most of what's output via the speaker terminals. While upper registers sound fractionally harder edged, this is something that can almost certainly be corrected with more astute headphone selection, meaning it is more than up to the job for occasional users.

## Conclusion

The real value of the Luxman SQ-N150 needs to be considered in the context of how you intend to use it. Partner it with a sensitive speaker and make similar allowances for the phono stage, and it is something of a masterpiece able to deliver a huge variety of music with a wholly wonderful combination of accuracy and joy, plus looks and a sense of usability to match ●

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

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★★★★★

★★★★★

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★★★★★

**LIKE:** Vivid, detailed and engrossing sound; looks and build  
**DISLIKE:** Needs considerable care with partnering equipment  
**WE SAY:** A gem of an amplifier with beautiful looks and superb performance when carefully matched

### OVERALL

★★★★★



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# Concept album

Clearaudio's popular LP spinner has been updated to make it a one-stop vinyl replay package. **Ed Selley** gets his groove on

**A**s far as convenient audio formats and music sources go, vinyl and its archaic replay system don't typically rank especially high. To make things simpler for some users, we've seen turntables with a built-in phono preamp so they can be connected to any line input without the need for an outboard phono stage. Clearaudio has taken this idea and run with it.

The Concept Active is a development of the popular Concept model that forms the entry point of its extensive range. Already a fairly convenient piece of industrial design, it has electronic speed control – including the option to spin at 78rpm – and comes supplied with either a Concept MM or MC cartridge depending on your preference. Priced from £2,000 fitted with its MM cartridge, adding

the MC option will set you back £2,410. Our review sample comes pre-fitted with the Concept V2 moving-magnet version.

An internal MM/MC phono stage is also built in and claims 52dB and 72dB gain respectively. You can set it to provide a line-level output to your amplifier and leave it at that if you wish, although the Active offers some intriguing extra options. For starters, there's a rotary volume control that can be used to adjust the level of the rear-panel RCA outputs and allows you to hook it up directly to a power amplifier, active speaker system or plug in a set of cans via the 6.35mm jack socket mounted on the side of the plinth to listen to LPs via the built-in headphone amplifier.

What I like about the Active's functionality is that you don't have to

use it all. Clearaudio has carefully ensured that, should you wish, you can switch out the phono stage, volume control and headphone amplifier thanks to external switches and just use it as a conventional, upgradeable turntable.

The tonearm incorporates the company's sophisticated magnetic bearings to reduce friction, which feels a little odd at first but works very well indeed. Power comes via a wall-wart PSU, although an optional £630 Smartpower 12V unit (pictured) can be added as an upgrade and

**The Concept Active's effortless flow ensures that you are drawn into the music**

claims to feed the motor and phono stage with a clean supply of battery-regulated DC power from its onboard NiMH battery pack.

Everything about the Active and its matching PSU feels exactly assembled and exudes a level of design and engineering finesse that's typical of the brand. The setup procedure is pleasingly simple and the choice of black or silver plinth and wood trim finishes – some of which carry a price premium – mean it looks extremely smart. I'm not sold on every aspect, however, as there's no dustcover bundled as standard and

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Clearaudio  
Concept Active

**ORIGIN**  
Germany

**TYPE**  
Belt-drive turntable

**WEIGHT**  
7.6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
420 x 125 x 350mm

**FEATURES**  
• Electronic speed control for 33, 45 and 78rpm  
• Built-in MM/MC phono stage  
• 6.35mm headphone output  
• Preamp output with level control  
• Optional battery-powered PSU

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sound Foundations

**TELEPHONE**  
0118 9814238

**WEBSITE**  
clearaudio.de





### HOW IT COMPARES

If you can't live without the Concept Active's headphone socket, the best option is to combine Rega's Planar 6 and Ania cartridge (HFC 453) – or stretch to the Ania Pro version (p63) and combine it with Cambridge Audio's Alva Duo MM/MC phono stage/headphone amp (HFC 436). This pairing costs less than the Clearaudio and is a more emotional performer but isn't quite as elegant in execution and lacks the Concept Active's slickness.

you'll need to add £150 to the overall cost to prevent its shiny black plinth from becoming a dust magnet.

### Sound quality

Initial tests employ the Active as a line output device into the Kudos Audio/Exposure system on p42. The good news is that the integrated phono stage is free from hum with negligible levels of background noise while gain is extremely impressive. With the basics in place, the Active demonstrates many virtues we have come to associate with the brand.

Selecting the *Minimum-Maximum* live boxset by Kraftwerk, the turntable is very much in its element. The propulsive rendition of *Aero Dynamik*

is reproduced with all the impact and punch you could want. The effortless pitch stability and low noise floor combine to ensure that there are no distractions from the music. This means you are transported to the concert hall in Riga and into the crowd with an easy suspension of disbelief. Beyond the basic construct of timing, this is a turntable that flows. It takes a time signature and delivers it with an assurance that means you simply dial into the music. There aren't many turntables at the price that do this as effectively as the Clearaudio does.

There are some subjective quibbles, however. The bass extension is outstanding, but feels a little blunt at times. *Aero Dynamik* is punctuated by some seriously low notes, which are delivered with huge weight but definition and detail can sometimes be missing. Switching the phono stage out and using both the one fitted to Exposure's XM7 preamp and a Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage (HFC 408) don't significantly alter this, suggesting that the limiting factor is the Concept MM cartridge.

Switching to Sleater-Kinney's *The Center Won't Hold* displays composure and commendable tonal realism in the upper registers. Voices and instruments sound believable while that same effortless flow ensures you are drawn into the music. It's not the most emotive turntable you can buy at the price (see *How It Compares*), but it is consistently good fun. With the slower and more considered *Every Kingdom* by Ben Howard, the Clearaudio avoids forcing the music but keeps that same compelling immediacy.

While it's a little unusual to connect a headphone directly to a turntable, it works well. There's plenty of gain to drive Audio-Technica's ATH-A2000Z (HFC 412) to any level I fancy and the

performance characteristics of the Concept Active aren't significantly altered. It's still a potent and propulsive performer, but the top end is a little harder. Provided you choose your headphone with a degree of care, this shouldn't be too much of a challenge to overcome.

My main issue with the headphone output is not whether it works well, but whether this is really how customers will choose to listen to their vinyl at the price. I cannot imagine many Concept Active owners opting to use it for desktop audio.

### Conclusion

Happily if you are looking for a turntable package that's flexible enough to satisfy a range of different types of vinyl listener, the Concept Active makes a great deal more sense. Clearaudio has made a fuss-free and superbly built and specified package that delivers on the company's key strengths and makes music in a consistently compelling and entertaining way. When you also consider the upgrade potential it offers, this is a mighty fine 'concept' that's fully deserving of our enthusiastic recommendation ●

### Hi-FiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Potent, rhythmic and lively sound; build; features; easy setup

##### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Slight lack of bass definition and emotional warmth

##### BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** An unquestionably talented packaged turntable aiming for a broad appeal

##### FEATURES



##### OVERALL



### IN SIGHT



- 1 Moving-magnet Concept cartridge
- 2 Counterweight
- 3 Grounding post
- 4 RCA stereo outputs
- 5 Gain, mode and output selection
- 6 Platter speed fine adjustments





# Message in a bottle

An usual approach to the traditional valve DAC, **Ed Selley** reckons that PrimaLuna has hit on something special with the Evo 100

**B**est known for its extensive range of integrated, pre and power amplifier designs, PrimaLuna has also made a small number of digital sources for some years now. Initially, this was based around CD as a medium, but more recently it has switched to DACs to help digital fans consume music in all its modern forms. The Evo 100 Tube DAC is notionally part of the company's 100 Series of products, but can be partnered successfully with any amplifier from its extensive lineup.

The category of 'valve DACs' is a niche one, but within it there is a great deal of variation from devices that are almost entirely solid state with a solitary tube parked in the output stage all the way through to those that make use of valves for

much of their functionality. Even judged by the standards of the latter, the PrimaLuna is a very unusual device in that a valve is instrumental to the function of the digital section of the DAC – something which by convention is usually solid state.

This takes the form of what PrimaLuna calls the "SuperTubeClock". Instead of a standard solid-state oscillator as used in the vast majority of digital products, a compact triode valve is used to generate the signal. The oscillator valve itself is mounted on its side on the main board and PrimaLuna says that thanks to its military origins, it's reliable and should have a long life. The DAC itself is a Burr Brown PCM1792A with SRC4192 upsampler that supports sample rates up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD128.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
PrimaLuna  
EvoLution 100  
Tube Digital  
Analogue Converter

**ORIGIN**  
Netherlands/China

**TYPE**  
DAC

**WEIGHT**  
13.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
280 x 191 x 404mm

**FEATURES**  
• 24-bit/192kHz  
PCM and DSD128-  
capable DAC  
• Inputs: 1x USB-B;  
1x coaxial; 1x  
optical; 1x AES

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9713909

**WEBSITE**  
absolutesounds.com

Designed as a dual mono device, each channel has a complement of individual 12AX7, 12AU7 and 5AR4 valves. The 5AR4 is by far the largest and acts as the rectification for the power supply. Designed to the same principles as found in its amplifiers, the power supply combines low noise toroids with valve rectifiers and what it calls its "AC Offset Killer" – to reduce background noise. Point-to-point wiring and high-quality components are used throughout.

**The Evo 100 delivers a level of emotional engagement that is hard not to like**

As well as the USB-B port, there are optical, coaxial and AES digital inputs and a stereo analogue RCA output. Unlike some rivals (see *How It Compares*), it is strictly line level with no level adjustment and the DAC's sampling rate offers support for the vast majority of music files available.

Aesthetically it might be a little odd, but it is nonetheless likeable. The two separate displays for input and incoming sample rate aren't the most elegant, but the result is easy enough to follow. The chassis is also quite deep, which you may need to take into account if space on your hi-fi rack is tight. It is very well made, though,



and everything from the rear panel connections through to the little metal remote control feels carefully assembled and well thought out.

## Sound quality

Connecting it to a system comprising a Cambridge Audio Edge A and the Kudos Titan 505 from the active system (p42) and taking a signal from an SOTM SMS-200 Neo (HFC 449), the PrimaLuna has a key behavioural trait in common with the Evo 200 integrated amp we looked at in HFC 457. From the first few bars of the 16/44.1 rip of Fink's *Resurgam*, it's clear that this is an impressive digital product that happens to use valves rather than the other way around.

This is most elegantly shown in the evenness of the frequency response. *Resurgam* is a long, slow burning effort that rises from little more than a bass and drum. The drumbeats are clear, well defined and weighty. As the vocals begin, the PrimaLuna does a fine job of locking them to the centre stage, giving them the space they need without affecting their relationship to the rest of the instruments. The vocals are rich, detailed and tonally believable but there isn't any feeling of over emphasis to them.

This isn't something that only happens with gentle acoustic material. Switching to *Axolotl* by The Veils, sees the PrimaLuna get stuck into this monster of a song with considerable gusto. The shuffling time signature and potent bass are beautifully reproduced and underpin upper registers that come across as utterly convincing. More importantly,



Costing just over £1,000 more than Chord Electronics Hugo 2 (HFC 428), the Evo lacks the preamp functionality of the Chord. It has a greater presence and tangibility from the lower midrange upwards that helps acoustic material in particular sound more lifelike. The Hugo 2 hits back with better bass and three dimensionality with more complex material. It's a testament to just how good the engineering of the PrimaLuna is that it can compete with solid-state rivals in areas where they are often superior.



**An impressive DAC that happens to use valves**

there is no feeling of the top end being clipped or smoothed off. This is an angry, jagged piece of music and the Evo presents it as such. It's never unlistenable, but it achieves this without feeling sanitised.

It isn't perfect, however. Really deep electronic bass notes, such as those that underpin the 24/96 version of Aurora's *Gentle Earthquakes* don't have the same laser-edged definition that my resident (and more costly) Chord Hugo M Scaler and TT 2 DAC can produce. There's certainly no shortage of bass, but the last ounce of definition and control isn't there.

If it is beginning to sound like the Evo is a rather more elaborate and complex way of making a completely normal DAC, that isn't the case. If you give it the 24/48 Qobuz stream of Emily King's *Sides*, the way that it

deals with the joyous *Can't Hold Me* is something beyond 'ordinary' digital. It's not a reproduction, rather a performance and it sounds utterly and intoxicatingly real, helped in no small part by the low noise floor that PrimaLuna has worked so hard to create. Without doing anything to blunt the dynamics of what you are listening to, it delivers a level of emotional engagement to the music that is hard not to like.

## Conclusion

This then, is not a 'normal' valve DAC. Counter intuitively, by creating a product that adheres to the same 'all-in' principles as its amplifiers, PrimaLuna has created a product that goes toe to toe with more conventional rivals but can also reach into its bag of tricks to deliver a level of soul that is beyond all but the most exceptionally accomplished solid-state rivals. It isn't quite a universal solution, but the Evo 100 will delight a great many listeners and for a good chunk of them, absolutely nothing else will do ●

## CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA stereo output
- 2 AES/EBU digital input
- 3 Coaxial digital input
- 4 Optical digital input
- 5 USB-B port

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

|                                 |                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SOUND QUALITY</b><br>★★★★★   | <b>LIKE:</b> Accurate yet involving presentation; build; reasonable spec                                         |
| <b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b><br>★★★★★ | <b>DISLIKE:</b> Fractional lack of bass definition; some decoding limits                                         |
| <b>BUILD QUALITY</b><br>★★★★★   | <b>WE SAY:</b> An unusual but appealing DAC that delivers excellent performance across a wide spread of material |
| <b>FEATURES</b><br>★★★★★        |                                                                                                                  |

### OVERALL







# Cleansing agent

**Lee Dunkley** prepares to clean up his LP collection with this ultrasonic wonder, which promises to rejuvenate vinyl old and new

**W**e've often discussed the benefits a thorough wet clean can bring to those coveted LPs in your collection that have been well played over the years and are in need of a refresh or secondhand purchases that just need a bit of TLC to sound their best, but few people realise the benefits it can bring to newly pressed records too. As part of the production process, residues such as mould-release agents can often be left behind embedded in the grooves of newly pressed vinyl. Equally, grime can quickly build up on precious LPs of even the most fastidious record collector with traces of dust and dirt retained inside the sleeve that can

contaminate a disc every time you slip it back inside. With several wet cleaning products already on the market, many look like adapted turntables complete with rotating platter, wet clean applicator arm and some kind of suction system to remove the dirt along with the moisture and dry off the record once the cleaning process is complete. With these machines, to clean the opposite side of a record users often need to flip the vinyl over and start the entire process all over again.

The curiously named Degritter isn't like that. Developed with the help of online crowd funding by a young team of vinyl enthusiasts and engineers based in Estonia, the new

company has been fine tuning its record cleaning machine since 2017, and it goes about the business of cleaning up records in a refreshingly different way.

Lacking a specific model name for now – except the aforementioned Degritter monicker – this inaugural record cleaning machine looks like a large, single-slot toaster. The graceful curves of the wraparound brushed alloy casing afford it an elegance that sees me want to keep it out on display and the emblazoned branding on the front in what appears to be an achingly retro font is eye catching in a way I really like – rarely has a record cleaning machine looked so cool.

First impressions after unpacking the unit from its shipping crate are of a product that is well thought out and nicely put together. With around half the footprint of a regular-sized turntable, it sits on my hi-fi rack with room to spare and is conveniently close to my deck to enable me to quickly playback and hear the results. What becomes clear during set up is the remarkable attention to detail that this young company has lavished on every area of the product's manufacture process, from the robust packaging to the feel and finish of the

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Degritter  
**ORIGIN**  
Estonia  
**TYPE**  
Automatic record cleaning machine  
**WEIGHT**  
9kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
370 x 280 x 210mm  
**FEATURES**  
• 120kHz ultrasonic cleaning process  
• Four customisable cleaning programs  
• Progress screen  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Degritter  
**TELEPHONE**  
00372 5884 8839  
**WEBSITE**  
degritter.com

## The sound is more focused and there's a significant decrease in surface noise

unit and the impressively informative instruction manual that demonstrates just how seriously the Degritter team takes the business of cleaning records.

The two rotary controls on the front provide navigation to a surprisingly slick menu system displayed on the circular screen above that offers a choice of three automated cleaning programs: Quick, Medium and Heavy. Configuration settings and software info are selected via the control on the right, while drying times are chosen using the left control. At the back there's a removable water tank with 1.4-litre capacity, a mains IEC power inlet, on/off power switch and SD card slot for future software updates – version 2.2.0v8 is the latest. A replaceable open cell foam filter is located on the right side of the unit to collect dirt particles removed during the cleaning process. Spare filters come supplied.

Unlike other wet cleaning machines we've seen, the Degritter is fully automatic and adopts the same ultrasonic cleaning techniques utilised





in the semi-conductor industry where surfaces need to be pristine on a molecular level. Using 120kHz high-frequency pressure with a 300W amplifier to create tiny bubbles in a phenomenon called cavitation that releases energy as heat and miniscule strong water jets, the technique claims to be able to clean down to a microscopic level.

### Cleaning quality

Out of the box, the cleaning machine accommodates 12in records, but 10in and 7in adapters are available directly from the company website for around £50. As someone who values their vinyl collection, posting an LP for the first time through the Degritter's rubberised loading slot feels a little odd given that at this stage of the review, I have no idea of the cleaning process and there's no clue as to what's inside the unit and the potential for scratching my vinyl.

I needn't have worried, but I play it safe and select a well-worn version of

Yazoo's *Upstairs At Eric's* as I already own a second copy as a Mobile Fidelity pressing in my collection. The earlier album is plagued by surface noise that's not evident on the Mobile Fidelity version, so I am keen to hear the effect a wet clean has on it.

As I carefully insert the LP halfway into the slot, the bottom edge rests on what feels like a set of rollers that carefully rotate the record in a clockwise direction throughout the cleaning process without touching the playing surface. Degritter recommends using impurity-free distilled water. The removable 1.4-litre reservoir at the back of the machine aids filling and with it topped up for the first time from a new batch of distilled water purchased online, it's recommended that the machine goes through its 'degas' program to rid any excessive gas from the water before the ultrasonic cleaning process for the best results.

With some drops of cleaning fluid added to the water to aid cleaning, I opt for the Quick program and press



Priced at £1,375, Clearaudio's Smart Matrix Silent record cleaner (HFC 453) is the closest rival to the Degritter that we've seen recently. Despite the name it's not silent in use, although it is one of the quietest models around. It spruces up vinyl to a high standard, but unlike the Degritter it's not fully automated and only cleans one side at a time. You'll also need to factor in an extra £125 for the dustcover.

play. The chamber surrounding the playing surface fills with the distilled water and the record slowly rotates as the ultrasonic cleaning process takes place. The status display counts down the remaining cleaning time followed by the desired drying time that's set separately (up to 20 fan speeds can be selected).

Even after the machine's shortest clean, I am left with a shiny piece of vinyl that looks to be rejuvenated after removing years of dirt and grease from careless fingerprints while avoiding any moisture contamination on the record label itself. The disc looks so pristine, I play it immediately to hear the result and there's no doubt the sound is brighter and more focused and there's a significant decrease in surface noise.

### Conclusion

The Degritter automatic record cleaning machine does a remarkably thorough job and is one of the most sophisticated models we've seen. It's a great addition to any vinyl collection and only the slightly high price counts against it ●

### IN SIGHT



- 1 Record slot
- 2 Power on/off
- 3 SD card slot
- 4 1.4-litre water tank

### Hi-FiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

**CLEANING QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Fully automated cleaning; functionality; nice styling

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Fan noise; high price

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A convenient and highly effective record cleaner that will rejuvenate any record collection

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

#### OVERALL







# Rhapsody in Blue

This extraordinarily ambitious wireless DAC has **James Parker** re-evaluating exactly what Bluetooth is capable of

**B**luetooth has been part of the audio landscape for over a decade now, but it would be fair to say that for many the short-range wireless connectivity tech is something of a convenience feature; indisputably useful, but not necessarily regarded as worthy of a place in a serious hi-fi setup for critical listening. Part of this perception is due to the performance it offered in the early days. The default SBC codec introduced many to the idea of wireless connectivity, but was nothing to get excited about in audio terms, and this remains the feeling of many audiophiles to this day.

Since then, however, Bluetooth has continued to evolve and grow in capability. As one of the few examples of a genuinely open standard that can be developed by a number of different companies at once, there has been a wide selection of additional codecs added to the standard that boost the available bandwidth and increase performance. The catch with this is that finding a device that supports the type of enhanced Bluetooth that your device is equipped with is not always completely straightforward, but digital

audio specialist iFi Audio has created a DAC with a view to solving this.

As one of the latest introductions to its digital-to-analogue converter range, the Zen Blue is a dedicated Bluetooth DAC. With no other input connectivity, it initially looks a little parsimonious but there is a matching Zen DAC also priced at £130 to cover USB connectivity needs.

Built around a Qualcomm 5100 series chip running a Bluetooth 5.0 implementation, the Zen Blue is the most comprehensive Bluetooth DAC I've ever encountered and partnered to a Bluetooth 5.0 transmitter, it is considerably more energy efficient than older Bluetooth versions. As per the minimum requirement of Bluetooth, the Zen Blue supports the SBC codec but then goes on to cover off every base imaginable. Apple devices can use AAC while Android users get aptX and aptX HD. The Zen Blue goes a stage further and adds the LDAC codec developed by Sony along with HWA (also known as LHDC) by Huawei that bring higher resolution streaming using codecs supported by Bluetooth; pair a device with the Zen Blue and it will work out the best

connection standard available to it and stream at the highest quality.

Meanwhile an ESS Sabre chipset ensures that jitter – an unavoidable part of Bluetooth connectivity, even via a bespoke implementation such as this – is controlled before decoding takes place. This outputs via a stage employing custom op amps that the company uses in its more expensive products to a choice of stereo RCAs or a balanced 4.4mm jack plug connection. Alternatively, you can flick a switch on the back and turn the Zen Blue into a transport that can be connected via optical or coaxial to any DAC that takes your fancy.

The company has something of a reputation for making distinctive-looking components, and the Zen Blue stays true to eye-catching form with an enveloping metal chassis. It feels well made and worth the asking price. The controls are fairly limited with just a pairing button and a connection status light. A neat touch is the use of the iFi logo to denote the Bluetooth standard that's connected and tells you at a glance what the DAC is doing. It works very well and keeps the aesthetics simple. The large stubby aerial at the back might not be the prettiest, but it does at least ensure a stable connection.

## Sound quality

The Zen Blue is firstly tested via its RCA stereo line output into a Naim Nait XS 3 integrated amplifier (*HFC* 459) and Neat Ministra loudspeaker. Initially testing via a latest-generation iPad Pro, which offers support for AAC, the iFi Audio shows that it's clearly a talented DAC. AAC is decisively better than the standard SBC codec, but still effectively equivalent to 320kbps MP3. This is reflected in the performance on offer.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
iFi Audio Zen Blue

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
Bluetooth DAC

**WEIGHT**  
476g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
100 x 35 x 158mm

**FEATURES**  
• Codec support:  
SBC; AAC; aptX;  
aptX HD; LDAC; HWA  
• Digital outputs: 1x  
coaxial; 1x optical  
• Analogue outputs:  
1x RCA stereo;  
4.4mm balanced jack

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Armour Home  
Electronics

**TELEPHONE**  
01279 501111

**WEBSITE**  
ifi-audio.com



The utterly lovely *End Theme* by Zero 7 sounds sweet and tonally convincing, but lacks the weight and richness to the strings that a lossless version can bring to the party. This is comfortably the best that I've heard an AAC Bluetooth stream sound, but this is more a reminder that Apple would really rather you used AirPlay.

Switching to aptX via an Onkyo DP-X1 digital audio player is a significant step change in showing what the iFi can really do and the jump in three dimensionality, scale and tonal richness is immediately noticeable. This is the point that Bluetooth steps beyond simple convenience feature and becomes something more significant. Again, it's right at the pointy end of what you can expect from an aptX source and although the ESS DAC's presentation is extremely detailed, it's perhaps not the sweetest sounding device going.

## The connection is stable throughout and free from any background noise

The Zen Blue does have more to give, however. With Shanling's diminutive LDAC-capable M0 digital audio player (HFC 439) and playing a 44.1kHz rip of Air's *Alone In Kyoto*, it really shows what it can do. There is an effortlessness to the presentation that is not something I've experienced before with Bluetooth streams, even with more expensive DACs that support aptX codecs and my perception is that the performance is indistinguishable from connecting the Shanling to a USB DAC and playing the file directly.

The final party piece is being able to switch the iFi Audio over to 'transport' mode and listening to it



**Zen Blue makes Bluetooth a worthy hi-fi consideration**



Introduced in 2013, Arcam's rBlink (HFC 373) is a Bluetooth DAC with analogue stereo RCA outputs plus coaxial digital out. It offers AAC support but is without aptX HD and the more specialist codecs supported by iFi Audio's Zen Blue. Additionally, the Zen offers an optical output, shows useful connectivity status and is better value.

via another DAC I know well. In this case I use an Auralic Altair G1 (HFC 455), which has a coaxial input ideal for the task as the Zen Blue takes on the characteristics of the externally connected DAC. This may not be an obvious application for the Zen Blue – particularly as the Altair G1 is aptX-capable itself – but the underlying qualities of it as a piece of Bluetooth hardware do throw even the well sorted Auralic into sharp relief.

Throughout my time with the Zen Blue, the connection is unconditionally stable and completely free from background noise or interference. This might sound fairly obvious, but it hasn't always been my experience even with costlier rivals.

### Conclusion

The fact that iFi Audio has tied reliability, flexibility and outright performance together in a single package is very impressive. That it's also done all of this for £130 is nothing short of outstanding. Feed it the right Bluetooth source (and by

this I'm suggesting aptX or better) and the Zen Blue takes what many still see as nothing more than a convenience feature and delivers something that genuinely approaches hi-fi sound. The scope for it to be bolted to even better quality DACs is just the icing on the cake, making it not only a genuine bargain but quite possibly the best Bluetooth device we've ever encountered ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### FEATURES

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Exceptional performance; build quality; price

**DISLIKE:** Quirky looks

**WE SAY:** A brilliant Bluetooth DAC that delivers outstanding performance at a bargain price

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 4.4mm balanced jack output
- 2 Stereo RCA outs
- 3 Analogue/digital selector switch
- 4 Coaxial digital output
- 5 Optical digital output



TRUE COMFORT  
TRUE PERFORMANCE  
TRUE INDEPENDENCE  
TRUE YOU

Klipsch®



## T5 | TRUE WIRELESS



### *Legendary Sound*

The acoustic engineering and industrial design from Klipsch's home theatre speakers provide the voice and design for the T5 Series earphones. They are designed to be the best sounding and most comfortable headphones on the market.



### *Oval Ear Tips*

Klipsch in-ear monitors utilise patented contour ear tips that are designed to accurately sit inside the ear canal. These soft oval silicon tips reduce ear fatigue, provide the ultimate comfort and an excellent seal for noise isolation and superior bass. They fit better, they feel better, and only Klipsch has them.



### *Charging Case*

T5 True Wireless earphones boast a lengthy 8 hours of battery life on a single charge, but can also reach up-to 24 additional hours with the charging case, giving you the freedom to take calls and listen to music all day long. The metal battery case not only charges your earphones but protects them when not in use.



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#### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rega Ania Pro

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
Moving-coil  
cartridge

**WEIGHT**  
6g

**FEATURES**  
• ABS body with red  
protector plates  
• Suspension-free  
tapered aluminium  
cantilever  
• Vital stylus

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rega Research Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071

**WEBSITE**  
rega.co.uk

Arcade Fire has a warmth to it that's not displayed by either Apheta design in quite the same way. Even without the more advanced stylus profile, the Ania Pro is a cartridge that has a more forgiving manner with rougher sounding pressings.

This perceived warmth does mean that some of the fine detail I know to be available is harder to discern, but compared with Goldring's £895 Ethos MC cart (HFC 449) – which also uses a vital-type stylus – the Ania Pro doesn't feel at a disadvantage. It has a rhythmic energy to its presentation and the effortlessly funky *Rose Rouge* by St. Germain succeeds at engaging on an emotional level. The flowing manner in which the Ania Pro goes about making music is as effective with this jazz electronica as it is with slower and more considered material like Mazzy Star's *Into Dust*. Listening back to back with the Apheta 3, and some of the immediacy of the more expensive moving-coil cartridge is lost – although the Ania Pro is still a fast and fluid performer.

#### Conclusion

My criticisms of the Ania Pro are fairly limited. The 0.35mV output is lower than some rivals and may prove an issue in systems with more limited gain available, such as when testing with the Luxman SQ-N150 integrated valve amplifier (see p50).

Additionally, compared with its Apheta brothers, its ability to make sense of very complex material is reduced slightly, but there is little at the asking price that can decisively better it. In many ways, the Ania Pro takes the strengths of the now discontinued Apheta 2 and adds an extra dose of civility and warmth for a more attractive outlay. The resulting cartridge feels rather more complete and as well as being an excellent option for Planar 6 and 8 turntable purchasers, should be on everyone's shortlist at the price ●

# Simply red

Building on the strengths of its Ania and Apheta 2 cartridges, **Ed Selley** thinks the latest Rega MC cart is a consummate Pro

**A**s the latest introduction in what has been a continuous stream of new products over the last year, the Ania Pro cartridge is designed to bridge the gap between Rega's £500 Ania (HFC 452) and the recently introduced Apheta 3 priced at £1,250. The new MC offering costs £750 and can be preinstalled to either the Planar 6 (HFC 453) or Planar 8 (HFC 443) turntables, bringing their package prices up to £1,700 or £2,350 respectively.

Not everything about the Ania Pro cartridge is brand new, however. The key difference between the Apheta 2 and Apheta 3 is the specially designed 'fine-line' stylus profile, which was developed to improve performance over the previous older 'vital' stylus profile. The Ania Pro adopts the original vital profile stylus and tapered aluminium cantilever used by the Aphetas to provide higher performance, combined with the simpler body construction that's found on the £500 Ania.

The Pro cartridge is made of the same Polyphenylene Sulphide (PPS) plastic as the Ania. The generator assembly is extremely small but powerful and, as with the rest of Rega's moving-coil cartridge line, there's no internal suspension because

the company feels that this can tend to sag and shift over time – affecting performance in the process. Rather than the colourless casing of the Ania, the CAD (Computer Aided Design) cover that protects the generator assembly of the Ania Pro is red.

Three-point fitting ensures that the cartridge naturally aligns and sets the overhang in a Rega tonearm and with a weight of 6g and a tracking force of between 1.75 and 2g, it should be fairly easy to accommodate in most setups, although some tonearms might require a little additional weight at the headshell end.

#### Sound quality

As luck would have it, I still have the Planar 10 turntable (HFC 456) in situ to act as an ideal test bed – along with examples of both Apheta 3 and Ania MC cartridges and the now discontinued Apheta 2 by way of comparison. The presence of the older Apheta cartridge in particular shows that the Ania Pro is different in terms of its general presentation.

Like the standard Ania, the PPS body seems to have the effect of softening and sweetening the presentation of the Pro more than the company's metal body cartridges. The result is that *Keep The Car Running* by

#### Hi-Fi Choice

##### OUR VERDICT

###### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

.....

###### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

.....

###### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

.....

###### FEATURES

★★★★★

.....

###### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Engaging but forgiving presentation; spec; ease of fit

**DISLIKE:** Some lack of fine detail and slight congestion with complex material

**WE SAY:** A cartridge that arguably improves on the Apheta 2 and does so for less





DESTINATION:

# STOCKPORT

Who needs Manchester when you've got the rich local music heritage of Stockport to tap into? **Simon Berkovitch** samples the delights of SK1 Records

**L**eave behind Stockport's main shopping area, a classic mid-sixties precinct, and within seconds you're in the well-preserved old town – all cobbled streets with buildings dating back to the 16th century and steep alleyways and paths leading up to the market place. It's an area that's popular with film and TV crews for location shoots – including the hit drama *Peaky Blinders* – and home to a growing number of independent shops and traders, injecting new life into the old town.

In among the boutiques, cafes and comic shops springing up on Little Underbank you'll find SK1 Records. The brainchild of DJ Joe McBride (aka electronic producer Synkro), this record store first opened its doors in the long hot summer of 2018. It proudly takes its name from its postcode in an effort to reclaim bragging rights from the formidable shadow of nearby Manchester, seven miles to the North.

"So many big names have passed through either to play or record here," Joe tells us. You may not immediately think it, but Stockport is a rock and roll kinda town: its legendary sixties' gigs read like a *Who's Who* of prime psychedelic rock; 10cc's world-class

**"We're always looking to move forwards, and like everyone, we want to get bigger and better"**

Strawberry Studios (HFC 431) helped sculpt the sound of Joy Division and its post-punk contemporaries in the seventies and eighties, while its current hometown heroes include the indie band Blossoms.

It's probably fair to say that opening a record shop has been Joe's lifelong dream and with an £8,000 loan from Stockport Business Finance Scheme, that fantasy was

able to become a reality. But why here? "An independent revival was emerging in the town so it was an obvious choice," he explains. "Rent is affordable and there are great public transport links. We're just a few minutes from Manchester by train or bus."

After a successful first year, the shop became a joint venture with the arrival of Gareth Kenyon, formerly the record shop manager at High Street Books & Records in nearby New Mills (HFC 400), Joe's old local spot.

With bargain boxes of 45s outside to tempt in passers by, we call in to visit on a Friday lunchtime, tiptoeing our way through yet another BBC TV crew dominating the narrow cobbled street. It's chilly out, but we're greeted with a warm welcome inside the shop, as we chat to Joe and Gareth who are busy behind the counter. Joe is cleaning records on a Pro-Ject record cleaner ready for grading, while Gareth sorts the online orders, carefully packing records into card mailers and taping them up, ready to ship.





The brains behind SK1 Records:  
Joe McBride and Gareth Kenyon



Customers come and go, and all join in the conversation. It's a friendly, family-like atmosphere, with people swapping stories, recommendations and tips while browsing.

The shop also incorporates a cafe with dedicated seating on a mezzanine level (plus a few more records to browse), an impressive Sanremo Zoe coffee machine residing behind the counter, and freshly baked cakes to further tempt customers in.

### Rack and roll

Bright, airy and minimally decorated with plenty of generously filled, well-curated racks to browse, the emphasis is first and foremost on a carefully selected cross-section of genres. All are clearly categorised and graded and there's everything from well-known classics to the more esoteric and obscure, with plenty of choice releases displayed on the walls alongside a small offering of cassettes and CDs.

"We don't specialise in any one genre," Joe explains. "We have such broad tastes, so we like to express that through the collections we choose to buy in and stock – from library music and soundtracks, to punk and industrial, and everything in between. We also buy direct from artists or labels we respect, such as our friend Andy Votel at Finders Keepers or Rob at Be With Records".

He continues: "Some of the stock comes from our own personal collections. I've toured the world as a DJ and picked up so many records on my travels over the years that my collection expanded to the point where it was taking over my house! I use

sampling a lot in making my own music, so sometimes I buy a record for one chord or a drum loop. It makes sense to pass them on if I'm not listening to them."

The pair still buy as furiously as ever, Gareth admits. "We're both big collectors, so if anything, it's worse than before. The shop is an outlet for the other bits we acquire when chasing that elusive gem. We buy from all over – walk-ins, auctions, referrals, scouring online and trips abroad. You have to be proactive to find the best stuff. It's very competitive out there."

### Events have played a key role in establishing SK1 Records at the centre of Stockport's music scene

As for some of the rarer records that have passed through the shop, they have a refreshingly unique approach as to what constitutes a rarity. "For us, it's more about finding a killer unheard cut than what it's worth," Joe explains. "We often pick up the weird and wonderful – from Chinese drum records to Welsh folk-funk, private pressings... that kind of thing. Certain records are rare due to the nature of the style, so some bring an inflated price tag that match their collectability."

This is where selling online comes into play, with the Discogs marketplace being their outlet of choice. "As an upcoming independent, it's a valuable place to trade,"

says Gareth. "We can't sell everything in the shop, some things are so specific, so Discogs is a great way to connect with those customers. Also, it's another way for people to find out that we exist."

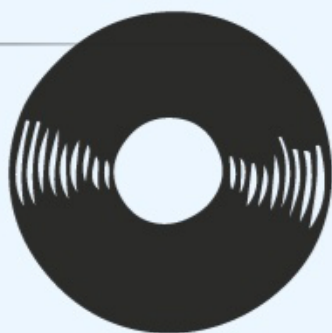
As for what sells in the shop to those who come through the door, the ever-present stalwarts of rock, pop, soul and prog still prove popular, "but it's nice to see people who browse plenty of genres and buy across the board, or ask for tips to push them out of their comfort zones", adds Joe, positively.

Customers can audition records on one of the shop's two trusty Technics SL-1210 turntables, both fitted with the DJ's favourite: the Ortofon Concorde. Gareth speaks with great experience when he calls it a "robust combination" and Joe is in agreement. The rest of the in-store hi-fi setup is equally trusty and robust: a Pioneer A-400X amplifier paired with a vintage set of Wharfedale Ritz Diamond speakers. It's a system that's rich and powerful enough to fill the shop with music, without totally dominating the space.

Not long before we arrive, actor and comedian Asim Chaudhry (Chabuddy G from BBC comedy series *People Just Do Nothing*) takes a break from filming to call in for a quick browse, pulling out a couple of Bollywood compilations to add to his collection. He poses with Joe and Gareth for a photo before he leaves, which immediately makes its way onto their social media feeds – an essential tool for their business.

SK1's Instagram and Facebook profiles are constantly updated with shots of some of the





The emphasis is on a carefully chosen selection of genres

more interesting items that pass through the shop or get a spin on the 1210. “Social media has to be embraced,” Joe acknowledges. “It’s a valuable work-tool in this day and age to help gain exposure and let people know you exist. There isn’t a better free platform for getting your name out there. We start at Instagram and work backwards from there. Being a visual platform, posting daily art in the form of record covers is the perfect blend to gain a following.”

It’s not all been plain sailing, however. Disaster struck in August last year when the

**“We can’t sell everything in the shop, so Discogs is a great way to connect with other customers”**

shop was hit by flooding after heavy storms, forcing them to close for repairs that took several weeks. Thanks to the community spirit that exists between business owners in this part of town, they were offered temporary space by one of their neighbours which allowed them to continue trading. “Lifesavers!” recalls Joe. Social media also played a big part in alerting their followers and customers to what had happened and the temporary arrangement.

The pair celebrated moving back into the premises by hosting an evening of DJ sets in-store. Events are a key part of what

they do, which have helped establish them right at the centre of Stockport’s music scene. “We’ve been putting on in-store events from day one,” says Joe. “It was another reason we opened the shop: we have so many friends that make music and we wanted a space to help push local artists. We’ve had some amazing acts pass through here since we opened, including a Mastersounds takeover, Bop, Robert Manos, Versa, Dom Blood & Fire, Bunny Hoova, Bianca Scout, Denis Jones and loads more. We even put on a small music and arts festival last summer across three venues in Stockport, with live performances and art installations from Neotantrik, Beach Surgeons, Folklore Tapes, Jack Lever, Black Lodge, Pearl City and more.”

## Kick start

For such a young venture, SK1 Records has got off to a mighty impressive start, complementing the town’s existing record shops (a branch of HMV and the more well-established Double Four, just up the hill from SK1) and even paving the way for ultra-specialist ‘micro-shop’ All Night Flight round the corner, with its leftfield and painstakingly curated vinyl selection.

“We’re always looking to move forwards, and like everyone, we want to get bigger and better,” exclaims Joe, clearly loving his job. “As long as people coming in continue to like what we’re offering, that’s the main thing. It’s all about enjoyment.” ●

## FANTASTIC VOYAGE

The record collecting boys from behind the counter assemble a playlist of some of SK1’s greatest jams, a head-spinning blend of in-stock outernational vinyl grails and diverse local talent...



**Jane Weaver**  
*Loops In The Secret Society*  
Forward-looking contemporary psychedelia that reworks gems from her *The Silver Globe* and *Modern Kosmology* albums to mesmeric effect on this 2019 release.



**DJ Krush & Toshinori Kondo**  
*Ki-Oku*  
This collaborative album from the producer and trumpeter ticks many boxes for Joe. “The perfect blend of instrumental hip-hop and jazz,” he enthuses.



**Various artists**  
*Louisiana Prison Blues*  
This 1965 LP (UK Storyville issue, pictured) is an intimate affair. “It doesn’t get more authentic than blues recordings from a prison chain gang,” notes Joe.



**Barış Manço**  
*Sakla Samanı Gelir Zamani*  
The undisputed king of Anadolu pop, Barış’ third album from 1976 is also a compilation of songs previously released as 45s. “Essential,” adds Joe.



**Meic Stevens**  
*Gog*  
There’s a (scarce) CD reissue of this gem out there, but vinyl hounds won’t rest until they’ve got a late-seventies original on the highly collectable Sain label.



**Orlando Kimber & John Keliehor**  
*East Meets West*  
“One of the best in the Bruton Music library, this record of experimental electronics has been on many people’s want lists for some time,” says Gareth.



**Stereolab**  
*Dots & Loops*  
“Pretty much everything Stereolab do is great, but this 1997 album is one of my personal favorites,” says Gareth about the band’s fifth long player.



**Fthmlss**  
*Aloe*  
Another local tip and debut. “Lusciously produced lo-fi hip-hop beats, from the drums to the bass to the field recordings, this is one to seek out,” says Gareth.



**SK1 Records**, 17 Little Underbank, Stockport, SK1 1LA  
**Phone:** 0161 474 1233  
**sk1records.co.uk**  
**Opening hours:** Monday to Friday 10:30am-5:30pm;  
Saturday 10:30am-6pm; Sunday 12-4pm



**Facebook:** @sk1records  
**Instagram:** @sk1records





## H120 Integrated Amplifier



# baby Giant



Standing on the shoulders of GIANTS, the H120 carries forward the proud history of HEGEL amplifiers. The multi award winning designs that over the years have

dazzled listeners with their combination of raw dynamics and delicate naturality. The H120 carries that legacy with it, but in a smaller and more affordable package.







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## THIS MONTH



### ED SELLEY

#### EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Active in the industry since 1999, Ed's first record was *Boss Drum* by The Shamen. He splits his time between reviewing and protecting hi-fi kit from his son Will.



### NEVILLE ROBERTS

#### EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Neville has an eclectic taste for classical baroque and jazz. His wife was forced to marry his transmission line speakers in the eighties and he collects BBC test card music.



### JASON KENNEDY

#### EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Editor of *HFC* from 1998 to 2001, Jason's first turntable was Rega's Planar 3 and Elvis' *40 Greatest Hits* was his first vinyl, so don't go stepping on his blue suede shoes.



### DAVID PRICE

#### EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

DP two-finger typed his first hi-fi review 25 years ago. Since then he's edited *Hi-Fi World* and *HFC*. He describes himself as an "unreconstructed analogue addict".



### CHRIS WARD

#### EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Like his first kiss, Chris will never forget the sound of his first amp – an Aura Evolution VA-100. *War Of The Worlds* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* were his first records.

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## Radio Four

In the seventies I put together what I thought was a decent system comprising a Lecson amplifier, Armstrong 624 tuner and Celef Monitor loudspeakers. Over the years I upgraded this setup piece by piece until I arrived at my present system of an Arcam amplifier, CD player and tuner plus B&W DM 603 S2 speakers. The elderly system was relegated to our bedroom where we are awakened each day to the sound of music.

This year I decided to decorate the room and hid the speaker wires under the coving and resolved to replace the Armstrong tuner after 30-plus years of use.

Looking at today's offerings of new tuners I was dismayed at the lack of thought given to their aesthetic design – they're either very plain or look as if they've escaped from some sort of research laboratory.

I investigated the secondhand market and finally bought a Quad FM4 stereo tuner. What a brilliant tuner this is – albeit of 1987 vintage. It has an unswitched power output to connect other units that reduces the length and number of cable runs (why don't others have this facility?) and tuning is simplicity itself.

Stations are fine tuned by using two parallel bar graphs that measure the signal strength while exactly pin pointing the station's location. Once tuned it locks on with no drift. Using this indicator to measure the signal strength, I changed the aged aerial plug for a gold-plated one resulting in an immediate increase in signal strength. As well as being aesthetically pleasing, the sound quality is superb with a clear and natural delivery and there are seven preset stations. Who could want anything more?

*Ken Bradley, Porton, Wiltshire*

**NR:** Hello Ken, I couldn't agree more – the Quad FM4 is indeed a great tuner. Your experience is another example of why we shouldn't look down our noses at older equipment. My FM tuner is a fabulous Leak Troughline II that I have restored and fitted with a modern stereo decoder and the result is a sound quality that



Quad's FM4 stereo tuner is a bonafide classic

is really quite staggering, especially with live broadcasts on Radio 3.

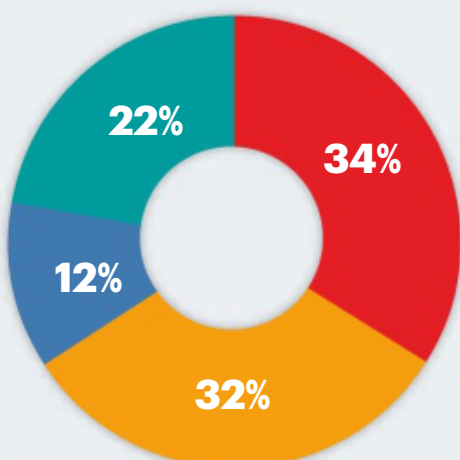
**DP:** Agreed. The Quad FM4 is a serious bit of kit – and rare in my view as it offers a combination of very high sound quality, plus some degree of convenience, plus excellent build, longevity and serviceability. There are only a handful of tuners that do this IMHO. The Leak Troughline is staggering good to listen to, but difficult to get working right and not easy to use by modern standards. The Creek CAS3140 sounds brilliant, is fairly reliable but has no presets. The Nytech CTA252XDII receiver sounds just exquisite, has presets but isn't very reliable. Get my drift? But here's a tip for tuner fans: if you want something that does it all and you want far better sensitivity than the Quad can offer, plus more facilities, consider a Sony ST-S770ES. This early nineties design is one of the best-kept secrets in tuner land.

**CW:** I still think a well setup FM tuner is a lovely source. I echo everything Neville recommends as he is a tuner

## WE ASKED...

How much do you spend on cables for your system?

- Less than £100
- Between £100 and £499
- Between £500 and £999
- More than £1,000



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guru. It's rather funny to hear how people now evangelise about streaming via wi-fi as a near miraculous, continual fountain of fresh, wireless music when radio achieved this accolade more than a century ago. And I do particularly enjoy pointing out that wi-fi is of a radio wavelength. Do keep abreast of the possibility that some FM signals may be phased out, though. The BBC had planned this, but shelved the idea. Maybe lobby your MP to keep them focused on your needs.

### ➤ Keep it simple

I hope you can help me by suggesting an alternative to the Marantz Melody X M-CR612, which I purchased expectantly but am really disappointed with. It replaces an Onkyo A-933/C-733/T-433 midi system, which I've had for 13 years but had developed numerous faults.

I chose the Marantz because it also fits into the 300mm-wide restricted gap where my sound system must reside; all cables etc. are also there.

The sound quality on both systems is not the issue, my problem with the Marantz is its shockingly poor user interface.

My eyesight isn't great. The Marantz has several small shiny black buttons on a shiny black surface and none of them are back-lit. Operating the fiddly hard-to-find buttons requires a torch every time. The remote control is also very unintuitive – tiny buttons, again not back-lit or easy to read – and in no way user friendly.

The Onkyo (and all other hi-fi components I've owned over the past 30-40 years) had a simple knob for volume and



Amazon's Echo can be operated by voice alone, meaning no fiddly buttons

source, that was lit for ease of use.

I am not blind; but if I were, are there any hi-fi manufacturers out there to turn to? A quick search has been depressingly unfruitful. I am staggered to think that few or none of the manufacturers seem to have bothered to do

clinics with the consumers who intend to buy and use their products to see how they fare.

So can you please suggest alternative brands that I can check out, that will fit into a 300mm max width, and that are actually intuitive and easy to

### I struggle to operate my system as the buttons are just too small to make out

view and use, with tactile and ergonomic and comfortably seen controls? Your help would be greatly appreciated.

Edward McCloskey, by email

**CW:** I feel for you Edward. It's strange that though hi-fi can often be associated with more mature listeners, nobody has truly embraced the most awkward customer-centric ergonomic challenges. I still regularly take photos of rear connections with my iPhone to be certain what I'm doing is right. Maybe rather than persist with units with tiny buttons and fiddly remotes, you could completely change tack and get a streamer that you operate with a large and clear tablet from your listening position. You may be put off by daunting new technology, but once set up you might find that playing any music you want is far simpler. Even



Like the award-winning DragonFly Red, the new Cobalt has the robust 2.1-volt output to drive almost any headphone, uses a bit-perfect digital volume control for outstanding signal-to-noise ratio, enables seamless compatibility with Apple and Android devices, and is an exceptionally competent and affordable MQA Renderer.

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### COMPETITION WINNERS

Back in our 2019 Yearbook (HFC 458) we gave one very lucky winner the opportunity to own IsoTek's Evo3 mains conditioner. We received loads of entries and can reveal that Steve Hall is the winner. Stanley Blackman won the Evo3 Polaris power block runner's up prize, while George Razvan Porumb, James Kendall and Andy Davenport won Evo3 Initium cables. Congratulations all!





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Excellent build quality and convenient size



Ripping CDs can be a nightmare, but not as much as losing your back up

Picture credit: Shutterstock.com

easier still, you could just use an Amazon Echo with the 3.5mm audio output plugged into the line input of your Marantz. You can then control a streamed music app via a tablet or just by asking for any tracks, playlists or radio stations you enjoy. This requires no button pressing at all.

➤ **Ripping nightmare**  
I read with interest Ed Selley's *Ripping Yarns* piece about his father in *HFC* 453. I would like to share my experience of going down this route. I had spent months ripping 800-plus CDs and an excess of 500 MP3 files and converting each to FLAC/WAV onto a portable storage device, thereby backing up my music to be futureproof. Using a Cambridge DacMagic XS and headphones or wired to my hi-fi the sound was very good.

## I spent months ripping over 800 CDs, and then the files disappeared

I was using a basic and rather old laptop, but with my music backed up the future held opportunities for advancement. Unfortunately it was not to be as I lost all my music files. I found the folders, but all of the music content went missing.

My son came to my assistance and unable to find the missing music and with no explanation other than blaming me, his advice was that I should have backed it up to the 'cloud', eh?

I don't have the time or inclination to repeat the processes of ripping, converting and marrying up missing

artwork. So I will stick with CD. My advice is: back up your back up. Thanks for a great read and keep up the good work!

Steve Brunson, by email

**ES:** Hi Steve, this was very much at the forefront of my mind so I ensured the Buffalo NAS I sorted for my dad backs up to an external USB drive as a matter of course. It wasn't a hard thing to persuade him to have this back-up process as he's pretty fanatical about it for his other files. You're right, though, back ups do indeed matter.

**JK:** Sorry to hear about your experience, that's a real nightmare. Sadly, hard drives are far from fail safe devices and those with digital libraries of this kind would do well to heed your advice. The cloud is a general term for storing files on external servers, usually run by internet mega corps such as Apple or Google, but also available from other organisations.

**CW:** Unfortunately, I hear this and similar stories all too often. For me the issue isn't one of local server versus cloud, because there are plenty of woeful stories out there about cloud storage too. On one hand, you have physical computer drives that are prone to corrupt or break down mechanically, and on the other you have a truly remote server that is utterly beyond your control that can decide to mislay your precious content at any time. For many, this is the rationale for high-quality streaming from the likes of Qobuz or Tidal. Then, there's nothing to get mislaid, and you have access to a vast array of new music as well.

**NR:** As I am from an era before we had the cloud, and prefer to keep control of my own back ups, I back up everything on my local network,

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including my digital music, to a solid-state drive that is permanently connected to my PC. I also run a back up program every day, which takes about 30 seconds or so and I back up everything to a USB hard disk every month, which I store remotely.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

### Find me a perfect match

I have had a keen interest in hi-fi for about 25 years now and have visited the Bristol Hi-Fi Show for the past two years. Last year I was blown away by the Ophidian Mojo, which, unfortunately was released two months after buying my DALI Zensor 1 speakers to go with my Denon D-M39DAB.

This year was the first time I found the best-sounding hi-fi I have ever heard. While visiting the DALI speaker listening room I noticed they were using the Audiolab 6000A amplifier and 6000CDT CD transport connected to a pair of DALI Oberon 5 floorstanders.

I could not believe my ears. Everything I have ever wanted to hear, or want, from a setup was all there. Amazing. So clear, I stayed listening for about 40 minutes.

What interconnect and speaker cables would you suggest for this setup? I have read Audiolab transport is best connected via coaxial cable, but any other suggestions would be most welcome.

Mike Dickinson, by email

**JK:** Hi Mike, I spoke to DALI's Matt Miller who tells me that he was using DALI CR M230ST speaker cable for that demonstration. However with prices starting at £400 for a 2m terminated pair, that is a little pricey for your system. I would suggest you try Kimber Kables 4PR speaker cable (HFC 447), Timbre interconnects and DV30 digital coaxial or look at the AudioQuest range where the Big Sur 2 interconnect, Carbon digital and Rocket 33 speaker cable would work a treat in your setup.

**NR:** Without knowing your budget, I would suggest looking at the Chord

Shawline coaxial cable for connecting the CD transport to a digital input of your amplifier and the Shawline interconnects for the analogue connections. As for speaker cables, consider the Kimber range from Russ Andrews, perhaps the 4TC or better still, 8TC depending on your budget.

**ES:** I've had good results from the Chord Company range. C-Line interconnects and C-Screen speaker cables in particular are sensibly priced, beautifully made and should work well in your system.

**DP:** The latest Audiolab electronics are really good at the price – traditionally they've been 'there or thereabouts' in terms of sound, but the new generation is pretty much at the top of its price class in terms of sound, with the

### I have DALI Zensor 1 loudspeakers, what cable would you suggest is best?

6000-series offering excellent all-round value for money.

Still, they haven't quite lost the slightly 'analytical' sound. They're simply not on the rich and sumptuous side, which is why careful speaker matching is important.

When I reviewed them, I used Black Rhodium Jive speaker cable (£195 for a 3m stereo pair), which is a little warmer and sweeter than some rivals, and this was a great acoustic match. With digital interconnects, the Black Rhodium Rondo Digital (£65/0.5m) is as good as you'll get at the price, in my view.

**CW:** I also heard that set up in Bristol and it did sound really good. These components could be perfect for you too, but do remember that the size, shape and materials of a room have a large bearing on the sound quality you perceive. So, is the listening room in your house similar to that in Bristol? When system building, I always urge people to get speakers that are correct for the room, then work backwards from there. One is aiming to neither over drive nor under drive the room. This can involve trial and error and be particularly tricky in a house that has hard floors rather than carpets or



Kimber Kable's 4PR is an ideal speaker cable for Mike

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Isolda cable is a great match for B&W's 702 S2 floorstander



furniture in places that might enhance or compromise speaker placement. Maybe sketch a plan of your room, ideally with dimensions and notable materials and we'll give you some extra advice.

### ► **Speakers corner**

**My system comprises: Luxman L-507UX amp and D-05U CD player, Technics SL-1200GAE record deck and B&W 702 S2 floorstanding speakers. I am finding my current setup to be rather tight sounding with an over bright treble, particularly when listening to a full orchestra. My main listening is classical, but also a fair amount of seventies and eighties pop music. Might you be able to suggest a warmer more open speaker with good bass and a less aggressive upper treble?**

**My room is approx 18 x 14ft and furnished. I'd prefer a speaker that is similarly sized (ie: within 1m high x 250mm wide). They will have to be positioned fairly near to the room's corners. We are rather short on choice up here, but my budget is up to £4,500.**

*John Campbell, Perthshire*

**JK:** Hi John, I think that you might find something from the Harbeth range much more to your liking. It doesn't go in for slim floorstanders like the 702, but instead prefers standmounts that tend to be wider and shallower. I think the Super HL5 (£3,695) will give you the sort of balance that will work in your room and with your musical tastes. The other element I would look at is speaker cable. In fact before you try a new speaker, audition some Townshend Isolda DCT speaker cable. It has a very smooth and even treble and superb bass and is well suited to Bowers & Wilkins speakers.

**NR:** If you listen mainly to vinyl, I'd consider an upgrade of cartridge as your first port of call as I suspect you'll get a much greater improvement for your outlay.

**DP:** There are two directions you can go here. Spondor's A7 floorstander (£3,200, HFC 440) is suitably compact and works well close to boundary walls. It has a slightly softer and sweeter balance than your B&W, but is in no way less detailed. It's also nicely rhythmically engaging. Second is the Monitor Audio Gold 200 (£2,900, HFC 401). It's just under metre tall and won't overpower your room. The treble unit is lovely, giving a silky sound to the high frequencies that's better than the B&W and superior even to the Spondor. It gives a slightly more 'analytical' and forensic sound than the Spondor, a little bit closer to what you're used to from the B&W.

**ES:** DALI speakers are a fine place to start looking. They gel beautifully with Luxman equipment for a combination that is greater than the sum of its parts. The Epicon 2 is in budget and could work in that near-corner space.

**CW:** I'd be minded to pick speakers that actively enjoy corner placement. Audio Note's AN-E is wider than your ideal width, but loves being tucked in a corner. It is a large standmount that needs a substantial stand, but its sensitivity, coherence, smoothness, tone and scale could bowl you over, especially for your musical tastes.

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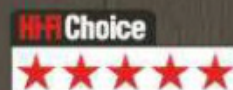
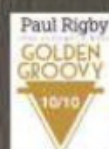
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# A golden age of Choice

As *HFC* editor **Lee Dunkley** moves on to pastures new, he reflects on how the hi-fi industry has evolved in the last seven years and ponders what the future might hold

**T**his month sees me reach a seven-year milestone on *Hi-Fi Choice* as editor and also my departure from the chair. In marriage terms the event could be seen as the onset of what is sometimes described as the ‘seven-year itch’ – the time frame where relationships are said to enter a slump and partners become restless and dissatisfied. In my case, nothing could be further from the truth as reviewing audio equipment I could never afford to own and spending a good proportion of time exploring and listening to my favourite music has always been my idea of a dream job.

I’ve always been a keen hi-fi fan and built my first separates-based setup by reading and researching from a collection of specialist magazines in the early nineties. For me though, it’s always been music first and my time as editor on this passionate audiophile publication has seen me navigate one of the most exciting periods in the music and audio industries I can recall. But for the sake of a fresh approach, the time is right to hand the reins over to another to take the magazine on its next journey. With 90 issues under my belt – almost a fifth of the magazine’s output since its introduction in 1975 – we’ve seen some major audio milestones together and what better time to celebrate the industry changes during this time?

## Perhaps the biggest surprise has been seeing the return of the vinyl format

all recognition. Just a few short years ago, the idea of using a PC as a music source would have turned many red-blooded audiophiles cold, but thanks to a plethora of USB DACs and music management software to bypass a computer’s sound-degrading inner workings, many of us began to download hi-res albums and use computers for just that. Downloads quickly moved on to streaming thanks to bandwidth increases and infrastructure advances by internet providers and many of us are now signed up to at least one music service that provides access to millions of albums via a monthly subscription fee, and stream to multiple devices simultaneously without issue.

Streaming seemed like an impossible dream back in 2013, but has rapidly turned into the way most of us experience new music, enjoy back catalogues by our favourite artists and rediscover long-forgotten tunes. It’s well documented that streaming accounts for one of the largest growth areas in the way we consume music today, and as an indicator of its popularity, it was easily the

Since rejoining the magazine as editor in early 2013, the way we listen to music at home and on the move has changed beyond



preferred source of audio brands exhibiting product lines at the Bristol Hi-Fi Show this year.

In putting together my final issue, the review of iFi Audio’s Zen Blue DAC (p60) reminded me of the major role Bluetooth connectivity has had in home audio and how influential the short-range standard has been in educating users about the possibilities of a wireless world. Sure, Bluetooth got off to a tricky start from a sound quality point of view, but as an open standard more and more manufacturers are coming up with increasingly sophisticated codecs that get its sound quality closer to that of CD, which is in turn fuelling a burgeoning portable solutions market with the rise of compact loudspeakers and mobile headphones for style and sound quality-conscious music fans.

## Turning the tables

Despite Bluetooth’s considerable progress, Ethernet or wi-fi is still the way to go for most audiophiles in their home setups, but with 5G just around the corner a wirelessly connected future anywhere looks like a tantalising possibility for many audiophiles.

Perhaps the greatest surprise during my time in the editor’s chair is seeing the return of the vinyl format into the mainstream. I started out my tenure without a turntable and like many my record collection was consigned to the loft, but I’ve been bitten by the vinyl bug and am once again growing the number of LPs I own. With more options now available than in the format’s original heyday, turntable reviews have appeared in almost every issue of the magazine during the last few years. That’s one of the many fascinating things about the world of hi-fi, things often have a way of coming back ●

**Who’d have thought seven years ago that the likes of Technics would return with a new turntable?**



**LEE DUNKLEY**  
Editor's choice



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# Seeds of creation

With loudspeaker design combining both science and art, **David Price** discusses seminal hi-fi models and explains why perfection remains but a pipe dream

**T**here are many iconic loudspeakers in the great hi-fi firmament. From the original Klipschorn and Quad ESL-57, to the BBC LS3/5a, Spendor BC1, KEF 104ab, Mission 770, Yamaha NS-1000M and B&W 801. And let's not forget the Wharfedale Diamond, Celestion SL6, Acoustic Energy AE1 and Epos ES14. I'm sure you could name many more. Every last one of them to my ears is flawed, some terribly by modern standards others only surprisingly slightly. But what hearing – and owning some – of them over the years tells me is that there's no such thing as a perfect loudspeaker.

This isn't just down to the limited materials science of the time or the lack of computer-aided design software, it is as much a philosophical issue. For me, the greats that stand head and shoulders above the others are ones that were totally focused on playing one particular role. The Quad ESL-57 (and its ESL-63 brother), BBC LS3/5a and Yamaha NS-1000M are arguably the most striking. The Quad was a quasi-full-range electrostatic, offering super-fast transients due to the feather-light electrostatic panels. The BBC was an unapologetic compact near-field monitor offering a limited bandwidth, but great purity of tone for its time. The Yamaha was a true full-range monitor with ultra-low distortion and superb speed due to its super-light metal drive units. None tried to compromise

**There are multiple ways to produce a loudspeaker, but all involve compromise**

in order to please a wider audience. Having listened to all of them in the past month, it's fascinating to see just how music dependent they are. Both the Quad and Yamaha are very enjoyable to listen to with most genres, yet they really excel when playing material that particularly suits them. The BBC design, however, is far more music dependent due to its built-in physical limitations.

Let's first look at the Quad ESL-57. To me, it's one of the finest midrange drivers – it has a wonderfully delicate midband that's able to fluently communicate the rhythms inside the music. It's excellent spatially too, giving an expansive and wide open window to the recording. On the downside, it can only shift a certain amount of air – and so cannot play that loud and can't go particularly deep in the bass. Its bottom end is taut and sinewy, but lacks guts.

The BBC LS3/5a is basically the Quad on steroids, minus some transparency. It too has a lovely midband, albeit one that by modern standards is a little soft and coloured. Still, the tone you get when playing classical music is quite something; it sounds exquisite on strings and brass, for



**Quad's ESL-57: one of the finest midbands around**

example, giving an almost nicer-than-real-life experience. Yet again it runs into trouble outside the midband; treble is decent, but not a patch on a modern speaker with a ribbon tweeter and bass is hugely lacking; it just chops the bottom couple of octaves right off. That's not really a criticism, just an observation of fact.

The Yamaha NS-1000M attempts to deliver a Quad-like midband, one that's full of delicacy and detail but with fewer of that speaker's compromises elsewhere. It uses a complex three-drive unit arrangement married together cleverly to give a phase-coherent sound that benefits from ultra lightweight beryllium treble and midrange drivers. Meanwhile, a big 300mm paper bass unit does the business down below. It's a blast. Big, fun, fast and loud, it has the sort of insight that approaches a modern B&W 800D. Yet for all its skill, it doesn't quite have that seamless, 'all of a piece' sound of the Quad and is unduly fussy about what's driving it.

## Champion of champions

The results? Well, the Quad and BBC are brilliant with classical music and decent with jazz. The Quad is also superb with electronic music too, if you can live without the bottom octave. The Yamaha is very good with all sorts of music, but not sweet enough to really fly with jazz. On the other hand, it's amazing with rock and electronic music. The BBC is lovely with classical, but rather poor with rock and electronic music.

All this teaches us is that there are many different ways to make a stunning loudspeaker, but all involve real compromises which end up making it less than a perfect all-rounder. Even today, with all our clever technology and materials science, we still face exactly the same dilemma. Loudspeaker design continues to be both a science and an art – and so will it always be ●



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# The ABC of Group Tests

Having spent the last week locked away with this month's floorstanding loudspeaker contenders, **David Vivian** shares his thoughts on his evaluation process

**F**or the sake of neatness and a linear narrative, the speakers in the *Group Test* I've just finished for this issue were auditioned in the order they appear in the magazine – alphabetically. It seemed the obvious thing to do. But as you've probably guessed, that wasn't the end of it. You may be wondering if it's worth adhering to such an order given that most of the week after day one is spent cross-referencing in an attempt to fine tune and verify a final judgement – an activity only truly concluded once you've gone cross-eyed and clumps of your hair are scattered across the listening room. So why not just dive in and start with the first speaker that falls to hand?

Well, you could. Come to think of it, maybe some of my fellow scribblers do – I haven't asked them. Me, I need a preordained starting structure to get going and, to be honest, I like the way the arbitrary sequence of listening sessions gives my first impressions a relatively gentle entry point to a process that will become progressively more tangled as the week wears on and the combatants start to prosecute individual feuds to gain ascendancy.

To start, things are relatively simple – as the first speaker basically sets the bar and the next one is either better or worse but for different reasons. By the time you get to the sixth speaker, you're still making comparisons with the previous one, but can also begin to draw on the notes

**Writing the final page first-to-last verdict is the hardest job of all**

made on those that went before that. The virtue of doing things this way is that, being alphabetical, the order of play by type (size/driver configuration/box *etc.*) is random and, swiftly establishes an overall performance envelope for the group through a series of leaps rather than lumping the speakers into sub-groups and immediately homing in on the subtle differences between those that are most similar. That can come later. Apart from anything else, there's the magical mystery tour factor that puts the skids under any preconceptions before they have a chance to develop and, I'm speaking for myself here, it's more fun for the reviewer.

This month's get together of next-level floorstanders was more fun than most. For one thing, we were generous with the price window, allowing a breezy £1,300 gap between the least and most expensive participants. Plenty of room for variety and diversity, then, but the first eyebrow-raiser was that the least and most expensive models – the £2,000 KEF R5 and £3,300 Triangle Esprit Australe EZ – were actually the closest in size, bulk and driver configuration.



Something of a temptation to cut to the chase there, but it was more interesting and illuminating to stick with the alphabetical protocol where the dreadnought-class Triangle followed the comparatively dinky Totem Sky Tower in the first round of listening. As I suggest in the test, it was either the lanky French supermodel's excellent good luck or a banana skin waiting to be stepped on. As it transpired, it worked out well for both, swiftly highlighting the very real but entirely comparable difference between a small speaker projecting an improbably panoramic soundstage and a genuine big hitter capable of generating real scale and a sense of palpable physicality. They were both remarkable in their own way and the happy juxtaposition provided a valuable early insight.

## Sizing them up

The David-versus-Goliath scenario was bound to crop up numerous times as there were three littluns (Totem, Spendor and Dynaudio) and three biguns (Triangle, Amphion and KEF), but I tried to avoid making it the main theme as there's more to a satisfying listening experience than scale and soundstaging and, in the round, the littluns more than held their own even though a Goliath (the indomitable KEF R5) was the last speaker standing.

Over the week there were inevitable rivalries that took the longest time to resolve. A particularly tough one arose between the Spendor A4 and Dynaudio Evoke 30 and although both were deeply rewarding, I had to make a call and it was a very personal one. Writing the final page first-to-last verdict is the hardest job of all, especially when all the players are as talented as they were this time around, but it does concentrate the mind like little else. The most important thing to remember is that it's all subjective and preferences differ. Feel free to let us know if you disagree ●

**Alphabetically seems to be the way to go for David, but what did you think of his final verdict?**



**DAVID VIVIAN**  
Testing times



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# Generation game

**Neville Roberts** considers how streaming is at last embracing classical music and attracting wider interest from a more youthful and tech-savvy audience

**A**lthough the classical music genre accounts for just five percent of the global recorded music market, streaming service providers are realising that there is a rapidly growing number of potential listeners. We are now seeing classical playlists starting to emerge on the likes of Qobuz that are reaching millions of people, many of whom are younger listeners attracted by the music's ability to offer an experience that is very different to popular music.

One of the problems for such service providers is that digital metatags were designed around popular music, which is easily sorted, searched or compiled by song, album, artist or playlist. Classical music requires a different structure. Pieces are often performed by different orchestras or performers in very different ways. Take, for example, Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, one of the most well-known of Italian baroque pieces. Apart from the many chamber orchestras that have recorded it, there are several versions available for jazz-lovers, such as Raymond Fol's *Vivaldi: The Four Seasons In Jazz*, as well as Nigel Kennedy's plethora of classic and modern versions.

A study undertaken by MIDiA Research has supported the view that a classical music resurgence is happening. Conducted via an online survey of 8,000 music consumers across eight countries and commissioned by IDAGIO, a Berlin-based classical music streaming service, the study

## Streaming services need to improve how they represent classical music

demonstrates a potentially fruitful and prosperous future for classical music, with as much as 35 percent of consumers being fans of classical music. In fact, classical music is the fourth most popular overall with 32 percent of listeners choosing it ahead of hip-hop or R&B. Pop is top at over 56 percent, followed by classic rock at 49 percent and country music at 32 percent. Interestingly, in seventh place at 20.7 percent is "relaxing piano music", something that reflects the rapid rise of piano-focused mood playlists appearing on streaming services. The study shows that 31 percent of 25 to 34-year-olds listen to classical music, and since younger listeners are increasingly turning to streaming as their primary music source, classical is becoming more relevant.

Of particular interest is the distribution of media formats chosen by classical music aficionados. Top of the list are radio listeners (40 percent), closely followed by CD (35 percent) while 29 percent use video streaming services such as Youtube. 24 percent watch concerts on television and 21 percent like a free audio streaming service. Digital



downloads are used by 16 percent and 14 percent opt for a paid-for streaming service. Only 11 percent buy vinyl.

Although classical streaming specialist Primephonic (HFC 451) has neatly tackled the issues of using metatags for content searches, older mainstream services such as Spotify, Apple Music and Amazon Music need to do more to improve how they represent classical music. Even so, the overall benefits of streaming are clearly recognised by classical listeners, with over 49 percent listening to classical music via audio or video streaming services.

## Room for improvement

The key message is that new classical music is being discovered thanks to streaming services' playlists containing new material. Personally, I feel there's plenty of room for improvement when it comes to the sound quality that's offered by some, but although classical fans agree that sound quality remains important, most are satisfied with what's currently available, with only 11 percent of those surveyed feeling dissatisfied.

Classical music is still under represented on many of the major services, which have yet to present their catalogues in a meaningfully searchable way by title, composer, performer and, perhaps, period or instrument. Enthusiasts are seemingly often overlooked, but the message is becoming clear that fans of the genre constitute a large and diverse group already engaged with streaming. The image of classical music fans being closed to other forms of music is no longer an accurate reflection of the sector and is increasingly attracting a more youthful and digital savvy generation who listen to classical as part of their wider music and cultural tastes ●

**The multiple versions of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* illustrate the difficulties of metatags for classical music**



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# Lost art of the cover

The sad passing of the sleeve designer that defined an entire generation of output from record label 4AD gets **Nigel Williamson** thinking about how streaming misses out

**T**he death of graphic designer Vaughan Oliver two days before the start of the decade served as a reminder of how much we have lost since streaming destroyed music's once vital connection between an album and its cover art. If readers are unfamiliar with the name, they will certainly know his work. As the in-house designer for indie label 4AD, Oliver's striking and imaginative artwork helped to capture the spirit of the dark and complex alt-rock music inside the record sleeves he designed for the likes of Pixies, This Mortal Coil, Cocteau Twins, The Breeders and Scott Walker among countless others.

Oliver changed the paradigm of record sleeve design, elevating the album cover to a state of mind, creating its own atmosphere in parallel to the music housed within. A record cover, he said: "Should work as an entrance door that invites you to cross it" and convey the "mystery and ambiguity" of the music inside.

What, for example, are we to make of the woman suspended in starlight on the cover of This Mortal Coil's *It'll End In Tears* (right)? We can only guess, but it somehow perfectly complements the strange allure of the music.

While listening to Pixies' brilliant *Surfer Rosa* one could construct an entire novel in one's head about the meaning of the topless flamenco dancer looked down upon by a

**A good album cover can be a map or a clue. A guide to the music that's within**

tiny figure of the crucified Christ. Or what was behind the elegant, dream-like abstractions he

created for Cocteau Twins' records which perfectly encapsulated (but never attempted to explain) the hazy, ambient romance of the music the artwork accompanied?

Vaughan Oliver wasn't the first to turn the album cover into high art. He described how his own youth as a working class lad from a dull town in county Durham had been lit up by the gatefold sleeves of Roger Dean for Yes and the work of the Hipgnosis design team for Pink Floyd.

"Everything I was getting came through record sleeves," he recalled. "It was a democratic way of discovering art and the local record shop was my art gallery". In turn he went on to inspire further generations with his own work.

In the week he died I read an interview with the American singer-songwriter Natalie Mering, whose 2019 release *Titanic Rising* was voted album of the year by *Uncut* and *Paste* magazines. "Starting with the cover, I've always considered the bedroom to be a strange initiation into society for a Westernised teenager, an isolated capsule



where you come up with your own concepts of reality based on imagination and the records you've heard," she said.

I'm sure that sounds familiar to many readers. It certainly describes the hours spent in my bedroom, trying to work out the identity of the figures on Peter Blake's cover for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, puzzling over the significance of the jugglers and clowns on the sleeve of The Doors' *Strange Days* or marvelling at Martin Sharp's swirling, dayglo patterns on Cream's *Disraeli Gears*.

## Lost generation

It was all part of the voluptuous experience – aural and visual – of buying and consuming records. As *The Guardian's* music editor Ben Beaumont-Thomas puts it: "A good album cover can be a map, a portal or a clue. A guide to the music within; a window on an artist's life, or something less obvious, an image that might allude to just one element of what's inside." At its best a great album cover could even do all those things at once. Yet one fears it's an experience that is lost on the streaming generation.

The convenience of Spotify, Apple Music and all the other streaming platforms is wonderful – so much of the world's music at one's command at the press of a button is a blessed luxury. Yet at the same time something vital has been lost. CD brutally cut down memorable works of album art to a mean-spirited 5in square, but streaming doesn't even deliver that.

In 2019 LPs reportedly outsold CDs for the first time since 1986 and one would like to think that the vinyl market is driven not just by music lovers rediscovering the unique pleasure of a turntable, but a desire to recapture the whole tactile experience of holding a meaningful piece of cover art in their hands while listening to great music. Meanwhile, RIP Vaughan Oliver – and long live vinyl ●

**Classic Oliver designs for Cocteau Twins, This Mortal Coil, Lush, Ultra Vivid Scene, The Breeders and Pixies**





# HEAVY METAL

How do high-end brands deal with making their products more affordable? **Ed Selley** thinks these two have got it sussed



## COMPONENTS

### KRELL K-300i £9,000

Krell's smallest integrated (a relative term) can be ordered as an analogue-only device or, as here, with a comprehensive add-on board that offers a selection of digital inputs, UPnP streaming and full Roon compatibility, effectively making it an all-in-one system.

### MAGICO A1 £10,000

Magico's smallest speaker is a two-way standmount that takes the company's very specific design philosophy – that includes aluminium cabinets, beryllium tweeters and graphene-infused carbon drivers – and brings it to an almost terrestrial price point.





**L**et me start by presenting two contradictory statements. The system you see here represents the entry level for the brands involved. It also costs £19,000. This might seem rather peculiar, but it is the asking price to join two very exclusive clubs and while the cost might feel high, it is what's required when the engineering is this involved.

Take the Magico A1 standmount speaker. This is the most affordable stereo model that the company makes in a range that extends to the point where "POA" begins to appear in the price list in lieu of a number. You might question why a two-way standmount can ever cost £10,000, but even though the A1 is the simplest speaker Magico makes it possesses some extraordinary engineering. The

tweeter is a 28mm beryllium dome and the mid/bass driver is made of layers of carbon fibre weave bolstered by XG Nanographene to further stiffen and dampen it.

Incredibly, this is but the tip of the iceberg. The cabinet is made entirely from aircraft-grade aluminium that would ensure that judged by any normal standard it would count as enormously stiff and rigid, but Magico





## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM KRELL/MAGICO

proceeds to brace it anyway. As well as the drivers, it houses a crossover that uses a design process the company terms 'Elliptical Symmetry' – making use of components from German company Mundorf that cost enough to buy a seriously capable speaker in their own right. The A1 incorporates everything that the company holds to be important and might be seen as the irreducible minimum of those ideals.

### Well connected

Krell's K-300i exhibits a similar philosophy, but the execution is slightly different to the point where I'm going to say with a straight face it represents strong value for money. You can buy it as a purely analogue amp with balanced and unbalanced analogue inputs for £1,000 less, but adding the digital board gives the K-300i an impressive spread of extra functions. As well as coaxial, optical and USB inputs, you can connect it directly to a Roon Core and it handles MQA too. More unusually, there's a pair of HDMI inputs with Audio Return Channel to make collating a wide spread of sources easier than on almost any other amp I've seen.

It's still very much a Krell, though. Peer through the top cover and you'll see a toroid the size of a melon that helps it produce 150W into 8ohm, which proceeds to double into four. Thanks to other refinements, it produces this power with exceptional linearity across an extremely wide frequency response. By dint of being a relatively compact, sealed cabinet, the Magico is not an easy speaker to drive

### If this is entry level, what on earth can the more expensive products do?

so here is an amplifier that's well equipped enough to get the job done.

In the here and now though, what this system does as a combination is more remarkable than any single facet of its specification or engineering, and what it does is disappear. If that sounds weirdly anticlimactic, like a firework that explodes only with black light, the reality is that as a means of listening to your music there's little I've ever

**Above left: Beryllium tweeters are the tip of the tech iceberg**

**Above: The Krell is an extensively specified powerhouse of an amplifier**

**Above right: The only thing more impressive than the build is the sound quality**

heard that comes anywhere near it. Pinning standard descriptive phrases on it seems almost pointless because they barely scratch the surface of what it's capable of.

### Vanishing point

This vanishing act is a combination of transparent amp and source acting on drivers that are entirely free of coloration and distortion and then mounted in an enclosure that is completely inert. It sounds easy and it is the ideal of anything that genuinely aspires to be described as hi-fi, but to encounter equipment that actually does it perfectly is the audio equivalent of cold fusion. It has been a listening process that has redefined some boundaries for me.

Take the opening of *The Trinity Sessions* by Cowboy Junkies, which is Margo Timmins singing *Mining For Gold* solo and unaccompanied. It's a simple recording made on a DAT recorder with a single microphone. Played here, none of the usual technical limits apply. Timmins is unambiguously there, stood in the Holy Trinity in Toronto, which is so tangible in the performance it is





effectively the only other instrument. This is not a snapshot of the event so much as a holographic reproduction, and the chances are you'll have to listen to the 92-second track a second or third time to overcome the shock of its tangibility. I certainly did.

### Upping the ante

Of course, a single female vocalist isn't the hardest of challenges. When you select something rather more complex like *Release* by Afro Celt Sound System with its dense overlaid percussion and soaring vocal turn from Sinéad O'Connor, this combination ups the ante by delivering that same unembellished view on the music. This isn't a live performance, it's a concoction of the studio where the performers were stitched together in the edit. Here, it's a presentation that's as cohesive and together as it would have been if it were a live recording.

It would be easy to chalk much of this up to the Magico and work on the principle that so long as it is fed a clean signal by a competent amplifier this is what it does, but that simply isn't true. Some brief testing with



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other equipment demonstrates that the K-300i is absolutely integral to the performance. For starters, it imbues the Magico with truly astonishing bass. I confess my understanding of the laws of physics pretty much end with agreeing to be bound by them, but I'm not sure this system signed up to the same rules. There is no bass port on the A1 and the cabinet is a

### Standard descriptive terms barely scratch the surface of what it's capable of

whisker under 40cm tall, but there are points where the low-end extension borders on subsonic.

It's no blunt instrument either; it integrates perfectly with the upper registers and even taking this system on a spirited blast through Mark Lanegan's latest album, *Somebody's Knocking*, reveals a speed and cohesion that makes it essentially unflappable. Logic dictates that this modern, slightly glassy and congested recording should be torn to shreds by

equipment this revealing, but this simply isn't the case. The pairing does suggest that there are limits to the mastering, but it still focuses more than anything else on the music itself. Would I suggest feeding this combination a diet of MP3 files? Probably not, but I do give *Raspberry Infundibulum* by the Shamen a blast and the sheer proto-dance strangeness of it is captured perfectly.

### Setting the standard

Summing up this system is not an easy task because it does things that even at the lofty asking price are beyond almost anything else I've ever listened to and it does beg the question that if this is the entry level, what on earth can the more expensive products do? We become so used to the idea that choosing a setup we like is a case of finding devices where the coloration and character that best meet our preferences and then using them to balance one another out. To find a system that dispenses with that idea entirely takes more than a little getting used to – but having experienced it, I think I'd be more than willing to give it a try ●



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# Musicreviews

## Maria McKee La Vita Nuova

★★★★★

CD **Fire**

**THERE'S A LOT** to be said for a good midlife crisis. Back in the eighties, Maria McKee was lead singer with LA country-rockers Lone Justice. The band's 'cow-punk' sound was heard on a brace of pioneering albums and Bob Dylan was impressed enough to write a song for them. After the band broke up, McKee launched her solo career in spectacular fashion with the single *Show Me Heaven*, which went to number one in the UK charts in 1990.

She followed with the evocative, reverb-heavy *If Love Is A Red Dress*, *Hang Me In Rags*, the only original song to feature in the soundtrack to Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. Her golden run was capped by 1995's totemic *Life Is Sweet*, a mash-up of roots-rock and post-modernism on which McKee played some feral lead guitar and sang like a force of nature.

Further solo albums followed, but after 2007's *Late December* radio silence descended. Until now. Having moved to London, at 55 her life hit the buffers. "After decades of numbing to routine, out of nowhere a heart-breaking epiphany awoke me to a shock of grief," she says. Her mother was in the advanced stages of dementia, she was struggling to accept that she was never going to have children and her heart had "grown fallow in a marriage that had become platonic".

She came out and felt her inner being had been "cracked wide open". Yet in her darkest hour, her creativity was unexpectedly re-awoken. Over six months, in her anguish she wrote around 40 songs. The process was cathartic. Writing them, she says, saved her life. A total of 14 of them now appear on *La Vita Nuova*, her first album in 13 long years.

What emerges is nothing short of sensational. Lyrically dense and poetic, there are references to Dante (the title track), William Blake (*Right Down To The Heart Of London*) and Yeats (*Ceann Bro*). Musically the songs are almost operatic in intensity, the dramatic piano and orchestra arrangements sitting somewhere between the bucolic romanticism of Vaughan Williams, the existentialism of Scott Walker and the leftfield genius of Love's classic *Forever Changes* – her late brother, Bryan MacLean was a key member of the band and McKee reckons he probably deserves co-writing credits for "channelling" inspiration from beyond the grave.

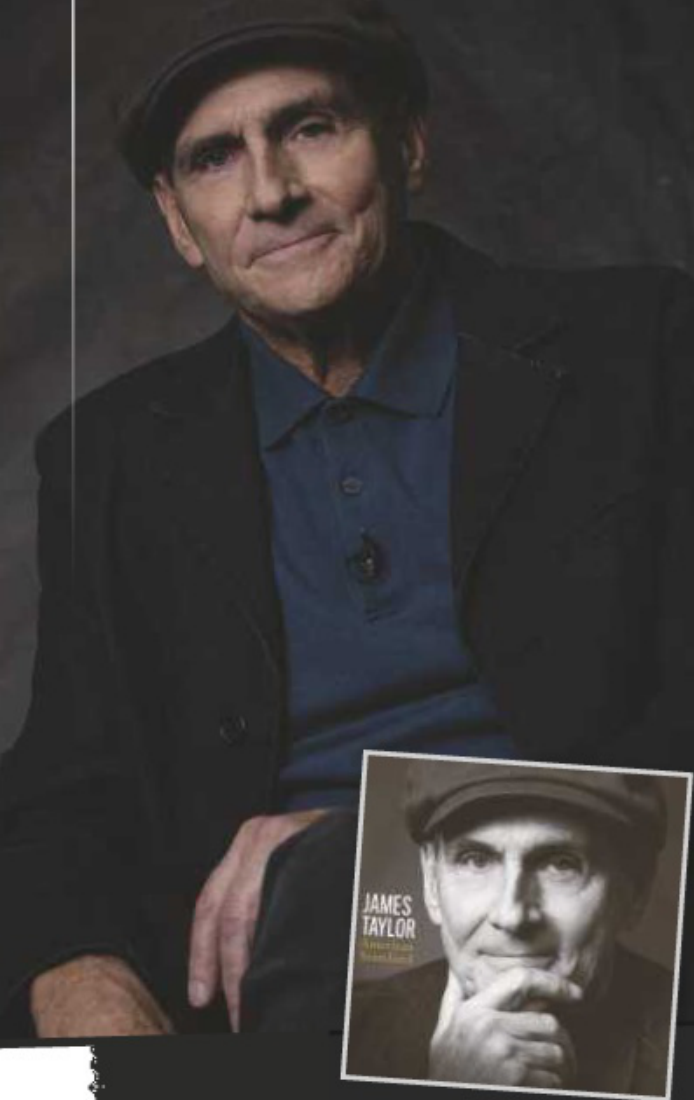
Poignant, haunting, nostalgic, wistful and deeply moving, *La Vita Nuova* is the sound of a mature but indomitable spirit returning to purpose as McKee finds renewed meaning in the world around her. It's a dazzling and hugely welcome return. **NW**

**ALBUM  
 OF THE  
 MONTH**





# MUSICREVIEWS



## James Taylor

American Standard



CD

Fantasy

**EVERYONE FROM ROD** Stewart to Bob Dylan has been reinterpreting the Great American Songbook, so why not James Taylor? From *Fire And Rain* to *Carolina In My Mind*, he's written enough standards of his own to earn the right – at 71 – to sing whatever he likes. From Hoagy Carmichael's *The Nearness Of You* to Rodgers and Hammerstein's *You've Got To Be Carefully Taught* from *South Pacific* via *Sit Down You're Rockin' The Boat* from *Guys and Dolls*, he reinvents these over familiar songs as gentle,

## Aged 71, Taylor has become the latest artist to reinterpret The Great American Songbook

stripped-down folk tunes, his skilful acoustic guitar work and warm vocals backed by a jazzily tasteful backing that includes upright bass, fiddle and dobro. Most striking of all is a poignant take on Billie Holiday's *God Bless The Child*. Also look out for Taylor's imminent audio memoir *Break Shot*, in which he reflects upon his long career and the artists he has been associated with, from Carole King to Carly Simon. **NW**



## Greg Dulli

Random Desire



CD

Royal Cream/BMG

**FOR READERS OF** a certain age, the fact that gravel-voiced troubadour Dulli is releasing his first solo record is a big deal. As frontman of Sub Pop legends Afghan Whigs, his artful, jagged records never seemed to fit on the Seattle label's grunge blueprint. The Whigs went on to a successful career, and here Dulli is let loose. Opening track *Pantomima* is a driving rocker, with his heavily treated vocals seamlessly mixed in. But elsewhere his trademark cracked croon is evident among 10 songs, which range from traditional indie rockers to string-infused, grand-sounding anthems. All in all, it's a very well-rounded, perfectly paced album. **PH**



## The Saxophones

Eternity Bay



CD

Full Time Hobby

**FANS OF REVERB-HEAVY**, bedsit-atmospheric tunesmiths like Tindersticks and Lambchop will find themselves getting into a froth over this husband and wife combo. It's mostly guitar, tinkling keyboards, fatigued vocals and, of course, saxophones that feature – broken up with light percussion and flute. It's a lovely listen. The delicate *Flower Spirit* should become your early morning wake-up call, while *Lamplighter* will gently get you off at the other end of the day. The nine tracks amble along nicely and never break a sweat. This is very much a winter album, warming you up gently until the orange Ready Brek glow is complete. **PSH**



qobuz

Do you agree with our reviewers? Decide for yourself and listen to some of this month's tracks at [www.hifichoice.com](http://www.hifichoice.com)

## Mozart

Quartets K.387 & 421  
Divertimento K.138  
Quatuor Van Kuijk



CD

Alpha

**SOPHISTICATED MOZART FROM** the Quatuor Van Kuijk – the early *F Major Divertimento* sandwiched between the *G major* and *D minor* from the 'Haydn' Quartets. Consider the performance of K.387: after a sprightly first movement we hear an assured *minuet* and *trio* followed by a well-considered, but unmannered, slow movement. The performance of the finale is marvellous in its virtuosity and joyful spirit. Close and multi-mic in style, the richly coloured recording has good balance and detail. Despite being made in a Berlin studio, we hear a rather church-like reverberation. Several edits are clearly audible. **JG**

## AUDIOFILE VINYL



### Lonnie Liston Smith & The Cosmic Echoes

Visions Of A New World

180g vinyl

Pure Pleasure



**JAZZ, SOUL AND** funk man Lonnie Liston Smith earned his keyboard chops in the late sixties/early seventies, playing with the likes of Miles Davis, Pharoah Sanders and Gato Barbieri among

others, but he didn't make an album under his own name until he formed The Cosmic Echoes back in 1973. That particular cut was *Astral Travelling*, named after the tune he wrote when he discovered the Fender Rhodes. But it's his third album *Expansions* that went on to become a solid soul jazz classic. *Visions Of A New World*

followed in 1975 and is much more of a laid-back affair that features pretty much the same lineup of brass, guitar, percussion, rhythm section and vocals on some tracks.

Co-produced by Bob Thiele and released on his Flying Dutchman label, the sound is distinctively rich and luxurious for its style and era, all of which means good if slightly thick bass and decent imaging on this Pure Pleasure cut at least. The eight tracks vary between slightly soporific fusion and finessed funk, the upbeat numbers such as opener *A Chance For Peace*, *Devika* (Goddess) and the second part of the title track are the winners unless you prefer your astral travelling more on the chilled side. **JK**



## Niklas Paschburg

Svalbard



CD

7K! Records

**SLOTting RATHER ELEGANTly** between the likes of Brian Eno, Max Richter and Nils Frahm, Paschburg's work subtly bridges the gap between classical and electronica, mixing glorious cinemascope washes of sound with more traditional minimalist piano for a highly contemplative listen. Recorded in the Norwegian archipelago from which it takes its name, the material was then mixed in Brighton by Lamb's Andy Barlow. The result is a moving collection that gently sashays between being uplifting, exultant and melancholic, but never sounding less than impeccably recorded. It's absolutely perfect for putting your system through its paces. **JDW**



**Neo-classical meets minimal electronica, the blissed-out vibes of Paschburg provide a great system test**



**A well-chosen mix of Russian works, with a refined account of Mussorgsky's Pictures as the centre-piece**

## Vasily Petrenko

Mussorgsky, Khachaturian, Rachmaninov, Shchedrin  
Royal Liverpool Philharmonic

HOT PICK



CD

Onyx

**PETRENKO'S INTERPRETATION IS** brooding, pensive, and introspective. The work is not played as a flashy virtuoso showpiece, but the big moments still have plenty of power and heft. The snappy overture to Kabalevsky's *Colas Breugnot* makes an arresting intro, while Khachaturian's *Spartacus* excerpts are gorgeous. Shchedrin's jazzy *Naughty Limericks* is fun, especially when played as brilliantly as this. A wistful Rachmaninov arrangement makes a lovely encore. The recording is smooth, clean and very well balanced, with lots of detail and a wide dynamic range. Clarity is excellent, with no hint of microphone spotlighting. **JH**



## Jean Baptiste Loeillet

Trio Sonatas  
Epoca Barocca



CD

CPO

**EPOCA BAROCCA PERFORM** six trio sonatas selected from the Op. 1 and Op. 2 sets written by the Flemish-born composer who was active in London in the early decades of the 18th century. The recording is tastefully engineered with a homely chamber music atmosphere. While the performances are consistently in tune and rhythmically secure, the tone production and phrasing of the solo instruments is beneath the standard expected of top period-instrument players. In addition, many listeners will hanker for a more zestful spirit in the fast movements, which often feel flat and uninspired. **JG**



## Krokofant

Q



CD

Rune Grammofon

**GENESIS, KING CRIMSON, Jaga Jazzist, Soft Machine, Jeff Beck, Snarky Puppy, Keith Emerson.** If those names mean something to you, then wrap yours ears around Q. What they don't indicate is just how intense the heaviosity is on the opening track. It starts with juggernaut drums broken up by staccato Hammond and followed by every shade of jazz and prog underpinned by monster bass. The other three parts are equally inventive with sax, guitar and organ leading a muscular rhythm section on a great-sounding set with powerful bass and sensible compression. Just don't forget the brace position. **JK**

## DEMO DISCS



**Lee Dunkley**, HFC editor, reveals four of his favourite albums used for product reviews – all tracks can be found on our Qobuz playlist



### Hans Zimmer Inception soundtrack

The perfect score for the film's altered reality topic with foghorn-like trombones, while the endlessly beautiful *Time* makes me want to listen all over again.



### Kate Bush Hounds Of Love

Embracing digital sampling, synthesisers and the perfect vocal marriage, the *Ninth Wave* suite demands both the full attention of the listener and a capable setup.



### Mark Ronson Late Night Feelings

*Don't Leave Me Lonely* is the standout track from this 2019 album, with breathless vocals by YEBBA and a terrific bassline that'll shake your insides.

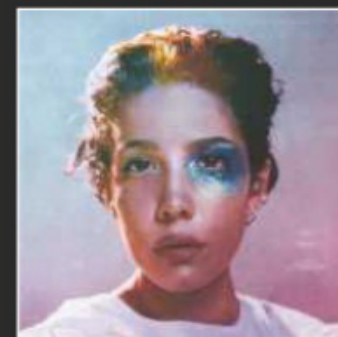


### Twin Shadow Caer

With elements of Bowie and Gabriel influencing the sound, *Caer* feels like its rooted in the best of eighties pop. Standout track is the infectious *Too Many Colours*.

## HI-RES HIGHLIGHTS

Our pick of the best hi-res downloads released over the past month...



highresaudio.com has Philip Glass' *Violin Concerto No.2* The American Four Seasons & Violin Sonata, Camille & Julie Berthollet's *Nos 4 Saisons*, Philon Trio's Max

Bruch: 8 Pieces, Op. 83 and Ben Goldberg's *Symphony No.9*. Staying on a jazz tip, hdtracks.co.uk unveils, *Graviton* by Andrew McCormack, *Speak No Evil* by Wayne Shorter and The Bud Freeman Trio's *All That Jazz Volume 124* as well as the more popcentric *Manic* by Halsey.



## STREAMING CHARTS

Qobuz.com's top-10 most popular albums



**1 Bombay Bicycle Club**  
Everything Else Has Gone Wrong



**2 Sheku Kanneh-Mason**  
Elgar



**3 Fazil Say**  
Beethoven: Complete Piano Sonatas



**4 Alexandra Savior**  
The Archer



**5 Nils Landgren & Jan Lundgren**  
Kristallen



**6 Lana Del Rey**  
NFR!



**7 Fleetwood Mac**  
Rumours



**8 Coldplay**  
Everyday Life



**9 Michael Kiwanuka**  
Kiwanuka



**10 Pink Floyd**  
The Later Years



**Farinelli**  
Cecilia Bartoli  
Il Giardino Armonico  
Giovanni Antonini



CD

Decca

**SOPRANO SUPERSTAR CECILIA** Bartoli dons a false beard for the cover photograph on an album of virtuoso arias written for Farinelli, the Italian castrato singer often cited as one of the greatest singers in the history of opera. We hear 11 arias from operas by Porpora, Broschi, Hasse and other high-Baroque composers, and despite their relative unfamiliarity the standard of the music is consistently high. In superb voice, Bartoli gives it her all in spectacular performances, splendidly accompanied by Il Giardino Armonico. The recorded sound is very good, and pleasingly avoids an over-close vocal sound. **JG**



**Tame Impala**  
The Slow Rush



CD

Fiction Records

**HAVING SOLIDIFIED HIMSELF** as one of the big hitters in the indie rock field, Australian musician Kevin Parker's Tame Impala returns with his fourth album. The blissed-out, sun-kissed sound Parker has become known for is taken to new levels here, with some gorgeous stoned, strobed-out effects being thrown into the mix right from the beginning. *One More Year* and *Borderline* start the album off in fine style, and throughout there seems to be a lighter, poppier feel to this outing. Closing tune *One More Hour* clocks in at seven minutes and follows the album's sonic theme – quietly powerful, groovy and supremely blissed out. **PH**



**CocoRosie**  
Put The Shine On



CD

Marathon Artists

**EFFORTLESSLY COMBINING TRADITIONAL** folk sensibilities with hip-hop breaks, children's toy instruments, burlesque, spikey guitar and skittering electronica beats, for the uninitiated CocoRosie is a bit like Shakespears Sister remixed by Aphex Twin. Sisters Bianca and Sierra Casady have a truly unique vocal style, veering wildly between operatic diva supreme, toddler burbling and the croaky voice of an aged chanteuse well past her prime. The result is a wonderfully eclectic mix of the tuneful and weirdly abstract that's a fabulous listen. **JDW**



**Bach Bartók**  
Julien Libeer



CD

Harmonia Mundi

**ON AN IMPRESSIVELY** assured debut for Harmonia Mundi, Libeer performs keyboard suites from the Baroque and 20th century — JS Bach's *French Suite No.5 in G major* and *Partita No.2 in C minor*, and Bartók's *Out Of Doors* and *Suite For Piano*. Libeer's Bach is fluent, and possesses a beautiful singing tone. He captures well the earthy moods of Bartók's highly individual writing. The recording balances for Bach and Bartók sound subtly different. The Bach sound is preferred, being more tonally round and focused while the Bartók is a touch over wide and phasey. **JG**



**Jon Hassell/ Farafina**  
Flash Of The Spirit



CD

Tak:til

**I MAKE NO** apologies for a review of a reissue from 1987 as this global jazz fusion landmark has long been unavailable and never bettered. Produced by Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois, it teams trumpeter Hassell with West African band Farafina. The mash up of Hassell's post-Miles Davis fanfares and African instruments such as kora, balafon and djembe would be exciting enough, but the mix is then brilliantly filtered through a haze of pitch-bending electronics by Eno and Lanois. The results are sensual, rhythmic, cerebral, ambient and sumptuous, still sounding entirely contemporary. **NW** ▶

CocoRosie picture credit: Peter Hönemann



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



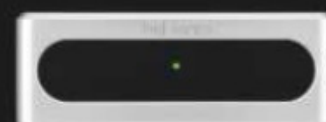
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HOT PICK

## Dmitri Shostakovich

Under Stalin's Shadow  
Symphonies No.6 & 7 etc.  
Boston Symphony Orchestra  
Andris Nelsons

★★★★★

2x CD

Deutsche Grammophon

### SHOSTAKOVICH'S SYMPHONY NO.7

*Leningrad* portrays wartime struggle on an immense symphonic canvass. The score is packed with under rehearsed detail, but here Nelsons' preparation is meticulous. He demands the highest standards of tuning in even the most demanding of passages. The heavy brass caps the structures with a huge sound, free from any hint of coarseness. The accomplished Boston wind players impress in the *Sixth Symphony* which, after a first movement slightly lacking in

**The sound is thrilling. Tonally bright, balance is natural and stereo perspective consistent**

atmosphere, develops into a thoroughly involving performance. *King Lear* is well performed, while the popular *Festive Overture* does not achieve the sharp precision of the very best readings. The sound is thrilling. Closely miked, it is on the tonally bright side but balance is natural and the stereo perspective consistent. The sumptuously full Boston strings are presented in a wonderfully open soundstage. Glorious stuff! **JG**



## Nadia Reid Out Of My Province

★★★★★

CD

Spacebomb

**KIWI SONGSTRESS REID** travelled to the US to record her third album, but you can hardly tell that this was a leap into the unknown. Previous to *Out Of My Province*, she had emerged as one of the strongest voices (both in timbre and talent) on the new-folk scene. Throughout the 11 tracks, Reid is backed by a full band – complete with strings and percussion – which gives her melancholic yet uplifting tunes real power. But it's her voice that shines through, swooning and soaring in equal measure; heart-rending and powerful, too. On *Out Of My Province*, she ably confirms that she's one of the most powerful acts out there. **PH**



## Tchaikovsky The Nutcracker Vladimir Jurowski State Academic Symphony Orchestra

★★★★★

SACD

Pentatone

**PENTATONE FOLLOWS UP** its excellent *Swan Lake* (HFC 447) with another enjoyable complete Tchaikovsky ballet score. Again we hear a full and naturally rich string sound. Winds and brass are focused and clear at a natural perspective. The reverberation is warm and flattering. The only criticism is that lower strings lack clarity. Recorded live, some incidental playing imperfections are to be heard, such as the odd shaky transition, but there is much wonderful playing on show and the famous dances feature beautiful solos from winds, horns, harp and celesta. Taken as a whole, the disc makes a splendid impression. **JG**



HOT PICK

## Pet Shop Boys Hot Spot

★★★★★

CD

x2 Records/Kobalt

**THE BELOVED PURVEYORS** of hooky electronica are back with more digital oomph than ever. Neil Tennant's beguiling Eeyore vocals tell of *A Wedding In Berlin*, some *Monkey Business* and other acutely observed scenarios. But as memorable as the lyrics are, it's the pulsating music that delivers the big thrills. Amid the melodic stompers and pulse pop rompers there's room for the Pet's obligatory wistful plodders and *Only The Dark* is a plum addition to the canon. The duo's 14th album continues their unbroken 35-year run of top-notch pop. **PSH**



## Schtschedrin/ Respighi

Carmen-Suite  
Pini Di Roma  
Mariss Jansons

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD

BR Klassick

**WHILE THE ORIGINAL** 1968 recording of Schtschedrin on Bizet's *Carmen* will probably never be bettered, the sound was a bit brash. This new account, with the BRSO under Mariss Jansons, is refined and sumptuously played. It seems like a large string band was used, so the percussion is less forwardly balanced than usual. Respighi's *Pines Of Rome* builds to a massive climax, yet never gets 'noisy' such is the quality of the playing. The recording is smooth, spacious and natural, benefiting from an increase in volume level to avoid sounding recessed. **JH**



## African Head Charge Drumming Is A Language 1990 – 2011

★★★★★

5x CD

On-U Sound

**THIS LONG-RUNNING COLLABORATION** between percussionist Bonjo Iyabinghi Noah and Adrian Sherwood is a must for fans of rumbling low frequencies and infectious rhythms. For those unfamiliar with AHC's output, the music is quite unlike traditional dub with each track employing a tribal approach, eschewing lyrics with the focus more on warbling chants and simple percussion. The result is a looping refrain of bass and rhythm that leaves the listener in a blissful state of euphoria. Five albums are included, but this is worth owning for *Songs Of Praise* alone. **JDW**



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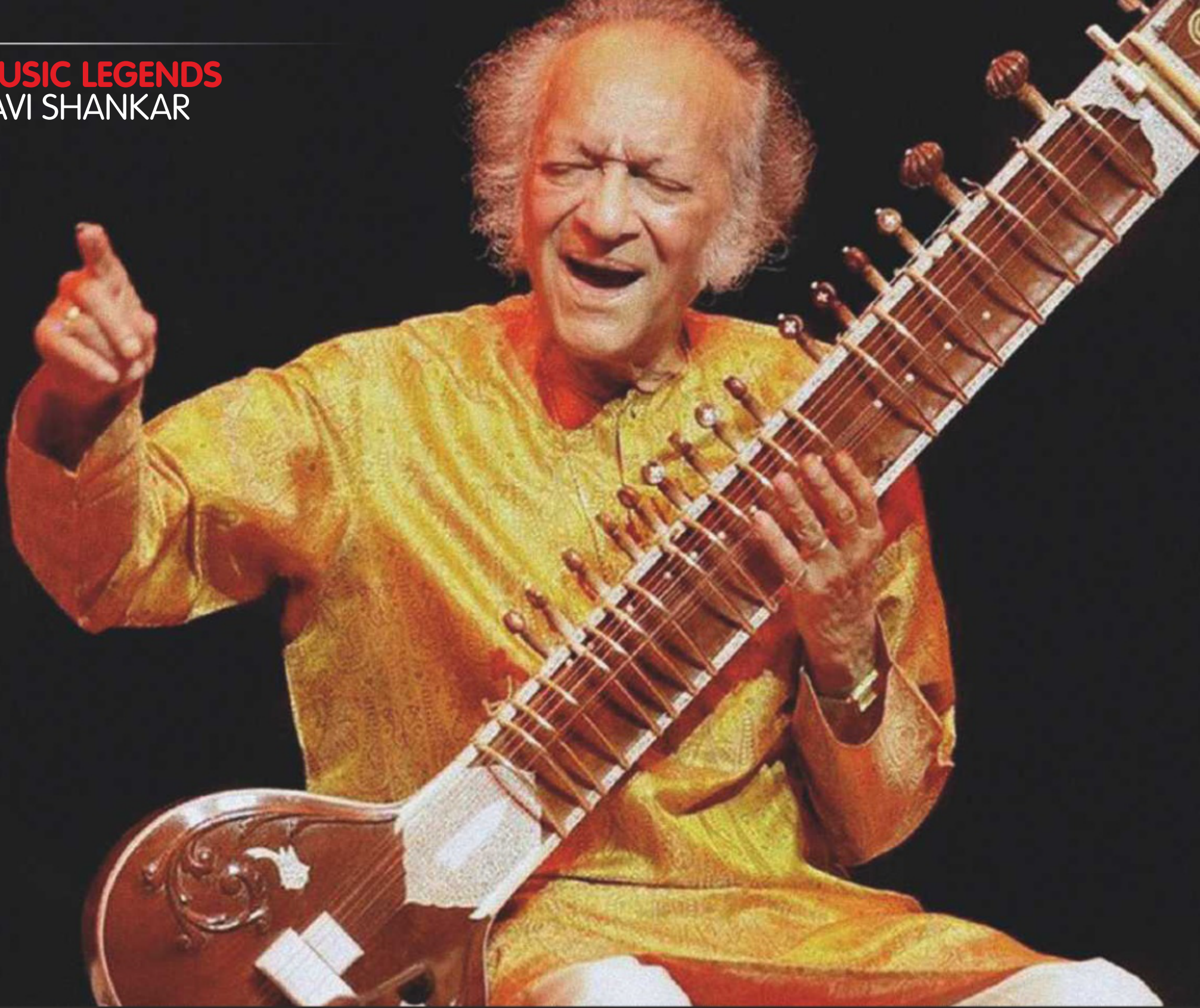


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# Portrait of genius

Famous for popularising Indian music the world over, Ravi Shankar also changed the sound of The Beatles with arguably his most famous student.

**Nigel Williamson** pays tribute to the sitar maestro

**T**here are very few musicians in the world whose technical virtuosity, creative vision and ability to communicate have made their names synonymous with their instruments. Yet say the word “sitar” and there is only one name that ever springs to mind: the late, great genius of Indian musician Ravi Shankar.

Able to play with both ornamental delicacy and robust power, Shankar was more than just the world’s most skilled and famous sitar maestro. He popularised Indian music on a global scale, created a bridge between Eastern and Western music and, in the words of his friend and pupil George Harrison, was “the godfather of world music”.

Shankar – the centenary of whose birth is being celebrated this year in a series of

festivals and tribute concerts staged around the world – was steeped in the proud tradition of classical Indian music and widely seen as the master of its most elevated form of expression, the raga.

Yet he married a faultless technique to a flair for showmanship, which enabled him to present the sitar in a variety of new and different musical habitats. He treated his instrument and the profound classical heritage of Hindustani music with a profound seriousness, but his genius lay in a combination of gravitas and gaiety.

He performed at three of the most famous pop festivals of all time – Monterey Pop in California in 1967; Woodstock in 1969; and George Harrison’s star-studded Concert for Bangladesh in New York in 1971. He was shocked at Monterey by the sight of Jimi

Hendrix setting fire to his guitar on stage, an act which he regarded as spiritual sacrilege, and was equally disturbed by the druggy hedonism of Woodstock. But his performances at such landmark events brought the sitar into the West’s popular gaze and established him as a musical icon far beyond the Indian classical world from which he had emerged.

At times he felt as though his profoundly serious music was not always fully understood by impatient Western audiences. At a WOMAD festival in the late nineties, he was given a huge round of applause for simply tuning his sitar. For a moment Shankar looked non-plussed. Then his crinkled face broke into a twinkling smile. “If you thought that was good, wait until we start playing,” he exclaimed.



"I wonder how much they can understand, and where all this will lead to," he mused in a 1971 documentary film about his life and music. "There is so much in our music that goes back thousands of years."

Yet he had nothing but respect for the seriousness of George Harrison, his most famous Western disciple who he met in 1966 at a friend's house in London. Harrison asked Shankar to give him sitar lessons and later that year went to India to undergo a period of intensive tuition.

### Village dance

Initially Shankar found the idea of blending Indian classical music with pop music a puzzling one. "It is strange to see pop musicians with sitars. I was confused at first. It had so little to do with our classical music," he admitted. "When George came to me, I didn't know what to think, but I found he really wanted to learn."

He told Harrison that learning to play the sitar was a serious business and closely questioned him about his commitment. "I told him it is not merely a matter of how to hold the instrument and playing a few strokes and chords and then you can prosper on your own, as with the guitar," he said. "But he was dedicated and I never thought our meeting would cause such an explosion, that Indian music would suddenly appear on the pop scene."

In turn Harrison called Shankar "the first person who ever impressed me in my life". From his first lesson, he was overwhelmed by Shankar's patience, compassion and humility. "The fact that he could do one of his five-hour concerts, but at the same time sit down and teach somebody from scratch: how to hold the sitar, how to sit in the correct position, how to wear the pick on your finger, how to begin playing, was amazing. And he enjoyed it, he wasn't grudging at all or flash about it."

Under Shankar's influence Harrison's sitar playing took on a distinctive role on albums

including *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. In many ways, pop music was never the same again.

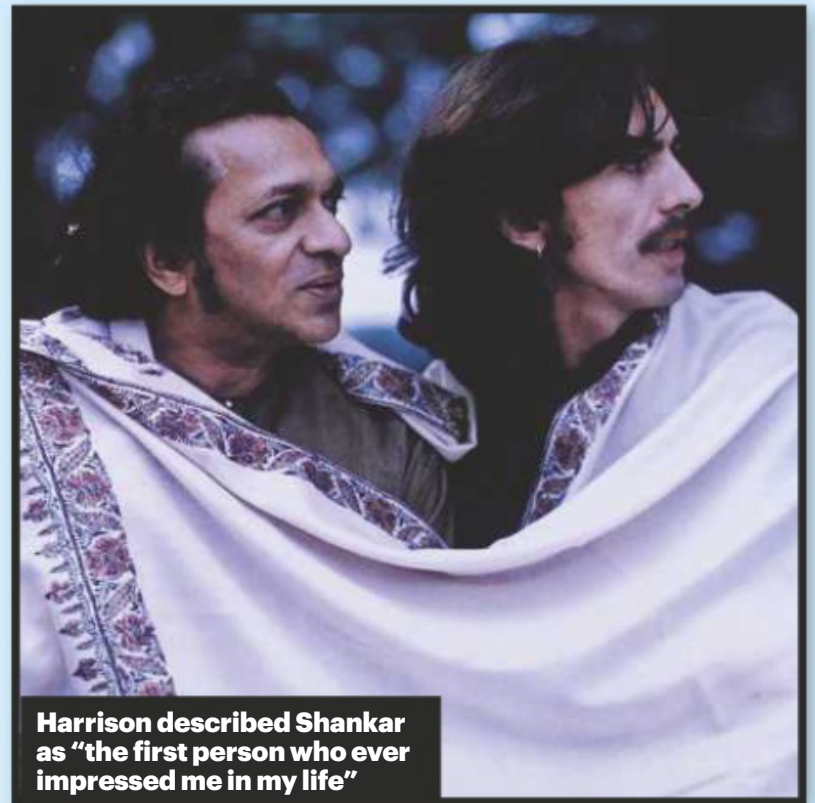
Shankar and Harrison went on to perform together on the album *Shankar Family & Friends* (1974), *Ravi Shankar's Music Festival From India* (1976) and *Chants Of India* (1997), all of which the former Beatle produced. When Harrison died in November 2001 following a four-year battle with cancer, Shankar was at his bedside.

Yet his association with Harrison was far from Shankar's first exercise in fusing Eastern and Western music. He first met Yehudi Menuhin in 1952 when the violinist was visiting India, though Shankar vividly recalled having seen him at rehearsals when they were boys in Paris in the thirties.

### He gave his final concert with his daughter just five weeks before he died in December 2012

Unlike his relationship with Harrison, which was essentially maestro and pupil, the collaboration between Shankar and Menuhin was an equal meeting of minds between two virtuosic giants of their respective instruments.

"His total commitment to his art goes far beyond pure music making," Menuhin said of their meeting. "For Ravi, all human activity eating, dancing, doing exercise is imbued with a symbolic value beyond approach and therefore it is all, in its own way, like some divine offering. I have learnt from him something which I always instinctively felt: that music is beyond human essence."



Harrison described Shankar as "the first person who ever impressed me in my life"

Menuhin returned to India every year thereafter to see Shankar, but when he first suggested they play a sitar and violin duet together Menuhin was hesitant. "But I took the plunge and we locked ourselves away while he gave me lessons in the basic formation of Indian music patterns. I was extremely nervous at the thought of performing with him," he recalled.

"Although our cultures and our music are so different, I have never found it a strain to play with him," Shankar said. "Through the rich melodies of our music, every human emotion, every subtle feeling in man and nature can be musically expressed and experienced. This is what we have shared together."

However, it was not until 1966 that they performed their first public duet at the Bath Festival. The following year they played for the UN general assembly at a human rights day event. Menuhin and Shankar also recorded three albums together, the first of which, *East Meets West*, won a Grammy award and remains a landmark in the fusion of classical Indian and European conservatoire traditions.

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

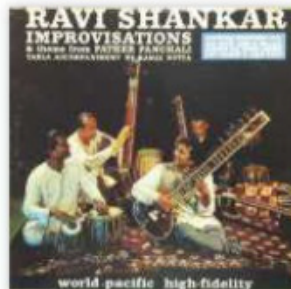
1956



#### THREE RAGAS

A perfect introduction to the intricacies of Hindustani classical music on Shankar's first recording, which was digitally remastered and reissued on compact disc back in 2000.

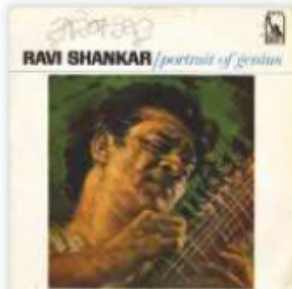
1962



#### IMPROVISATIONS

A mix of ragas in the classical Indian style plus Shankar's first recorded example of crossover work with American jazz musicians flautist Bud Shank and bassist Gary Peacock.

1964



#### PORTRAIT OF GENIUS

Side two contains a 20-minute long traditional raga, but side one consists of six short pieces featuring the empathetic playing of American jazz flautist supremo Paul Horn.

1967



#### WEST MEETS EAST

A landmark recording of sitar-violin duets featuring three compositions by Shankar and a 24-minute recording of Enescu's *Sonata For Violin And Piano in A minor*, with Menuhin's sister on piano.

1967



#### LIVE: AT THE MONTEREY INTERNATIONAL POP FESTIVAL

Shankar's celebrated first performance at a pop festival, accompanied by Alla Rakha on tabla and Kamala Chakravarty on tambura.



# MUSIC LEGENDS

## RAVI SHANKAR

The youngest of five sons, Ravi Shankar was born on 7 April, 1920 in Bararas, Uttar Pradesh, India, into an orthodox Bengali Brahmin family from what is now Bangladesh. He received his childhood education in Benares (Varanasi) – on the banks of the Ganges and an ancient centre of Hindu pilgrimage – and was much influenced by the reformist ideas of writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, one of the major figures of the so-called Indian Renaissance.

Interested in all aspects of Hindustani art and culture, his first commitment was to dance and in 1930 he joined the Paris-based troupe led by his eldest brother, Uday, who had worked as a dancer with Anna Pavlova before setting up an Indian music and dance company to perform in the West. The youngest member of the company, Shankar spent the next eight years finishing his schooling in France and dancing with his brother's troupe, touring Europe and the United States and meeting such iconic artists as Segovia, Toscanini, Paderewski and Pablo Casals, who excited his interest in juxtaposing Eastern and Western musical styles.

### Song from the hills

He began studying the sitar at the age of 16 under Ustad Allauidin Khan, during a summer at Dartington Hall, Devon in 1936.

Khan – a disciple of Wazir Khan, who in turn was a direct descendent of the legendary Tansen, chief musician of the Mughal emperor Akbar – became Shankar's principal guru and from 1938 to 1944 he withdrew from public life to immerse himself in sitar studies, living at Khan's house in Maihar, central India.

It was tough discipline that required him to serve his guru's every need and to practise up to 16 hours a day. He gave his first public concert in 1939, and the following year began giving recitals with Khan's son Ali Akbar Khan, who was to become a world-famous player of the sarod (a short-necked Indian lute). He married Khan's daughter Annapurna, herself an accomplished musician, and they had a son, Shubhendra.



**Yehudi Menuhin noted: "His total commitment to his art goes far beyond pure music making,"**

### Shankar never stopped reaffirming the history and beauty of Indian classical music or ragas

After completing six years of study under Khan, in 1944 he was finally able to move to Bombay (Mumbai), the most Westernised of India's cities, where he became a leading figure in Hindustani cultural circles and produced a ballet based on Nehru's *The Discovery Of India*.

From 1949 to 1956 he was the director of music for All-India Radio in Delhi, also acting as composer-conductor for its instrumental ensemble and producing radio plays and musical dramas which, while retaining essential classical Indian features, also drew on folk styles and incorporated Western instruments. Branching out into film work, he composed the score for Satyajit Ray's early Bollywood classic *Pather Panchali*. By then he had started giving concert performances in the West

and he recorded his first album *Three Ragas* in London in 1956.

In addition to his work with Menuhin and Harrison, his collaborations with Western musicians included the 1961 album *Improvisations* which forged a bold link between jazz and Indian classical music, *Rich à la Rakha* (1968) which he composed for jazz drummer Buddy Rich and tabla player Alla Rakha, a 1971 concerto for the London Symphony Orchestra (conducted by André Previn) and the score for Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982). He also taught Indian music to John Coltrane and Don Ellis and collaborated with Philip Glass.

### West meets East

His success in the West was based on an instinctive ability to adapt Indian styles to audiences unfamiliar with its traditions as well as to the commercial requirements of the music industry – shortening raga performances for Western concerts and recording sessions and bending the rigid rules of 'time theory', under which each raga must be performed at an assigned hour of the day. ▶

1968



#### A MORNING RAGA/ AN EVENING RAGA

After Menuhin and Monterey, Shankar reaffirmed his role as a traditionalist with this fine album featuring two long ragas played in the classical Hindustani style.

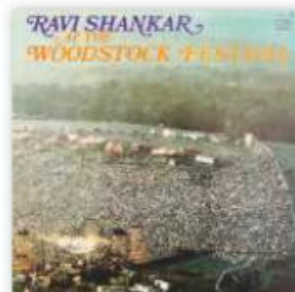
1968



#### WEST MEETS EAST, VOLUME 2

Following the same pattern as the first collaboration with Yehudi Menuhin, side one has traditional ragas while side two finds the two maestros performing a Bartók sonata.

1969



#### AT THE WOODSTOCK FESTIVAL

Forty minutes of music from his set at the festival – he later wondered what he was doing there and regretted that his music had felt "incidental" to the party atmosphere.

1971



#### CONCERTO FOR SITAR & ORCHESTRA

Shankar's first concerto – an Indian classical work for full orchestra, accompanied by his sitar – was commissioned by the LSO and premiered at London's Festival Hall.

1971



#### THE CONCERT FOR BANGLADESH

Shankar was given side one of this triple album set to play a composition he had especially written for the occasion, before Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton et al took over.



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# MUSIC LEGENDS

## RAVI SHANKAR

1974



### SHANKAR FAMILY & FRIENDS

Sitars meet synthesisers on an album that was produced by George Harrison and which opened with the charming *I Am Missing You* – the closest Shankar ever came to writing a pop song.

1976



### RAVI SHANKAR'S MUSIC FESTIVAL FROM INDIA

Another George Harrison production, conceived as an Indian music 'revue' but deeply rooted in classical tradition and featuring some of the finest Indian musicians of all time.

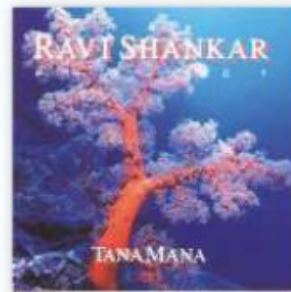
1976



### IMPROVISATIONS - WEST MEETS EAST 3

The third of the exquisite Shankar-Menuhin fusions, this time the sitar and violin duets are brilliantly augmented by the baroque flute playing of Jean-Pierre Rampal.

1987



### TANA MANA

Shankar at his boldest on a hybrid set of classical beauty and electronic experimentation. Harrison crops up on *Friar Park*, named after his home, where Shankar often stayed.

This drew some criticism from musical conservatives in India, but Shankar never abandoned the Indian classical tradition and in 1963 he founded the Kinnara School of Music in Bombay. Four years later he opened a branch in Los Angeles. He was undoubtedly Indian music's greatest innovator, but for all his experimentation he never stopped reaffirming the history and beauty of Indian classical music and its highest form of expression in the raga.

## From 1938 to 1944 he withdrew from public life to immerse himself in his sitar studies

He had three children by three different women, all of whom became acclaimed musicians in their own right. His son Shubhendra regularly accompanied his father in concert, playing the sitar and surbahar (bass sitar) until his death in 1992.

His eldest daughter, singer-songwriter Norah Jones, was born from a brief relationship with the New York concert producer Sue Jones in 1979. Father and daughter were estranged until Jones was 18, but they subsequently built a warm

relationship as she achieved her own success with sales of 20 million for her debut album *Come Away With Me*.

His second daughter, Anoushka Shankar was born in 1981 from his marriage to his tanpura player, Sukanya Rajan. Anoushka went on to become his star pupil and a skilled sitar player who appeared on stage with her father during the final years of his life and whose solo recordings have won half a dozen Grammy nominations. He continued performing with her until the end, and father and daughter gave their final concert together just five weeks before he died in December 2012 at the age of 92.

His final work, an Indian opera titled *Sukanya* which he regarded as the summit of his lifelong endeavour to unite the music of East and West, was premiered posthumously by the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 2017.

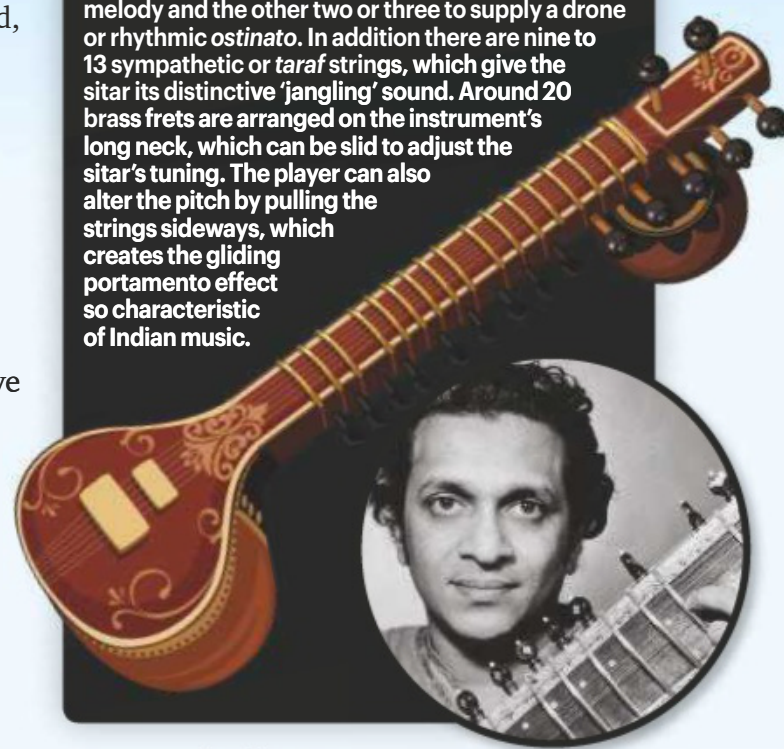
"The music I have learned and want to give is like worshipping God. It is like a prayer," he once said. One hundred years after his birth, his unsurpassable genius, his art and his humility continue to live on ●

**The Shankar 100 Festival, featuring concerts by Anoushka Shankar, Norah Jones and others runs at London's South Bank until November 2020.**

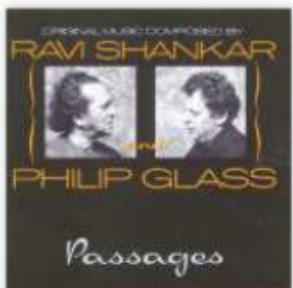
## THE SITAR

Said to have been invented in the 13th century, the sitar is a plucked stringed instrument which derives its distinctive timbre and resonance from sympathetic strings, bridge design, a long hollow neck and a gourd-shaped resonance chamber. Generally made from teak with the main resonating bowl made from a seasoned gourd, many sitars have a second gourd at the top of the neck to further amplify the sound.

Played with a wire plectrum, the sitar has six or seven main strings, of which four are used for the melody and the other two or three to supply a drone or rhythmic ostinato. In addition there are nine to 13 sympathetic or *taraf* strings, which give the sitar its distinctive 'jangling' sound. Around 20 brass frets are arranged on the instrument's long neck, which can be slid to adjust the sitar's tuning. The player can also alter the pitch by pulling the strings sideways, which creates the gliding portamento effect so characteristic of Indian music.



1990



### PASSAGES

An inspired collaboration between Hindustani classical music and Philip Glass' more contemporary minimalism, with the two men contributing three compositions each.

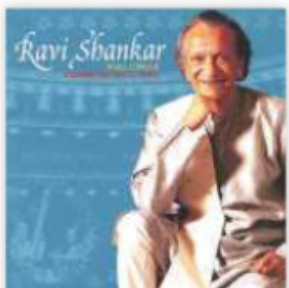
1997



### CHANTS OF INDIA

The sitar takes a back seat to the vocals on a Harrison-produced set of Vedic and Hindu sacred prayers set to music. Shankar regarded this as one of his finest ever recordings.

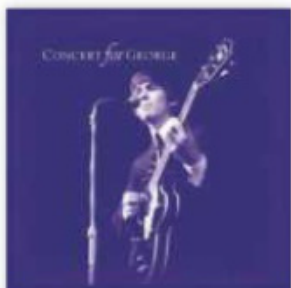
2001



### FULL CIRCLE: CARNEGIE HALL 2000

A fine live album recorded on the occasion of the great man's 80th birthday and featuring his daughter Anoushka on second sitar.

2003



### CONCERT FOR GEORGE

Following Harrison's death Shankar sat proudly on stage for a tribute at London's Royal Albert Hall while his daughter played *Arpan*, a 23-minute piece he had composed for sitar and orchestra.





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# Small wonder

**David Price** looks back at one of Aiwa's finest – and most petite – music solutions, the M-301 mini system from 1980



**R**efined to the essence of hi-fi perfection” or so said Aiwa’s 1980 brochure for its M-301 mini system. “The 35W System: Refinement. Ingenuity. Performance”, it continued. It’s easy to laugh at the marketing hype, but look beyond this and it’s actually a rather impressive bit of kit. This is largely because when it was launched in 1980 the market for ‘miniature components’ was absolutely cut-throat.

It’s important to point out that these weren’t simply the swish-looking, all-in-one ‘lifestyle systems’ that we have today; they were effectively full-size hi-fi separates that had shrunk in the wash, so to speak. They gave little away in terms of features to their full-size brethren and were often actually more expensive to buy. Competition was intense to deliver high-performing compact stereo systems with all the features that people had come to expect from full-size designs – and Aiwa was right at the forefront.

Although notionally independent, it had been 52 percent owned by Sony since 1969, so there was a lot of cross-pollination in terms of component usage and engineering resources. Aiwa had come to be known for its excellent tape decks, and was now living through its halcyon days. In 1979 it seemed to be on top of the world, with

## A brief history of Aiwa

1951

It’s a big year for newcomers as Aiwa is founded, while Sting, Steve Harley, Chris Rea and Julian Lloyd Webber are born



1969

Sony acquires a 52 percent stake in Aiwa and The Beatles perform for the last time together in public in New York



1980

The M-301 mini system launches, while Kate Bush becomes the first British female artist to reach number one in the album charts



1982

The M-301 is discontinued as The Who begin their only formally announced ‘farewell’ tour in Washington, DC





ultra-sophisticated products like the AD-6900 three-head cassette deck AT-9700 FM synthesiser tuner and LP-3000 parallel tracking turntable. These were close to the best that money could buy, at least in terms of engineering sophistication.

### System addict

Then Aiwa really got stuck in, producing the L22 system (including, variously, the S-A22 integrated amplifier, S-C22 preamplifier, S-P22 power amp, S-R22 tuner and SD-L22 cassette deck). This also appeared under the BASF, Metz, Uher and Wega brand names, and there was even a 'Boots Audio' badge-engineered Aiwa mini system sold in the UK.

The M-301 that you see here was the L22's direct replacement for the 1980 model. It comprised the SA-C30U preamplifier, SA-P30U power amplifier, ST-R30U tuner and SD-L30U cassette deck. Although less well known, it's a meaningful step up in quality over the L22, and something of a rarity in relative terms.

The nerve centre of the system is the SA-C30 preamplifier. It has a range of inputs including a moving-magnet phono section sporting specially selected polypropylene capacitors and metal-film resistors, said to hold RIAA phono-equalisation to within  $\pm 0.2\text{dB}$  from 20Hz to 20kHz. It uses one high gain IC and several ultra-low noise transistors to give a signal-to-noise ratio of 87dB. The selector switching is contactless for better longevity, and the tone controls are defeatable.

The really clever stuff begins with the matching SA-P30U power amplifier, which has a quoted output power of 2x 35W RMS into 8ohm. A Class AB design, it sports three-stage complementary DC construction – and uses discrete transistors rather than power ICs. Aiwa made a big fuss about this in its promotional literature at the time, adding that specially selected high-speed devices had been used. There's even a toroidal transformer fitted, and pair of large-capacity 10,000 $\mu\text{F}$  electrolytic capacitors.

Aiwa got to demonstrate its prowess for tuners with the ST-R30U; it's important to remember how rare it was in 1980 to have quartz-referenced digital synthesiser tuning. There's a digital frequency display, and the front end has a

high-stability cascade junction MOSFET. The IF detector stage boasts an excellent quoted selectivity figure of 70dB within 400kHz, by the use of specially chosen ceramic filters. Stereo separation is quoted at a superb – for that era – 45dB at 1kHz.

The system's *pièce de résistance* is the SD-L30U cassette deck. It's a simple single capstan, two-head affair, sporting a hard permalloy record/replay head that gives a claimed 25Hz to 16kHz with either chrome or metal tapes. A Hi-B double gap ferrite erase head was fitted beside it. Wow and flutter was quoted at a good 0.09 percent (WRMS), thanks to its DC servo motor with decently sized flywheel, and signal-to-noise ratio is a good 60dB (Dolby on).

### Even by today's budget standards, the M-301 turns in a seriously good sound

The M-301 system was highly sophisticated for its day, giving away little to full-size mid-priced separates of that era. The cassette deck is particularly sophisticated for something so small and turns in a performance that's easily the equal of any decent grown-up machine. The tuner will have seemed like a technological marvel to many at that time, and the power amplifier shows

### BUYING SECONDHAND

The good news is that there are more of these little systems around than you think. Build quality is of a high standard, which means that the M-301 will easily last half a century if properly serviced. The main 'consumable' is the main drive belt on the cassette deck, but replacements are relatively easy to find online. At the same time, the SD-L30U's main record/replay head is made of permalloy, and therefore wears out faster than other types – so check for a tape-shaped groove scored into the central head. The only other issues are of switchgear and socketry oxidising over time, so a good clean with Caig DeoxIT (HFC 449) is recommended. Generally, this is a reliable and well-made system that proves less can sometimes be more.

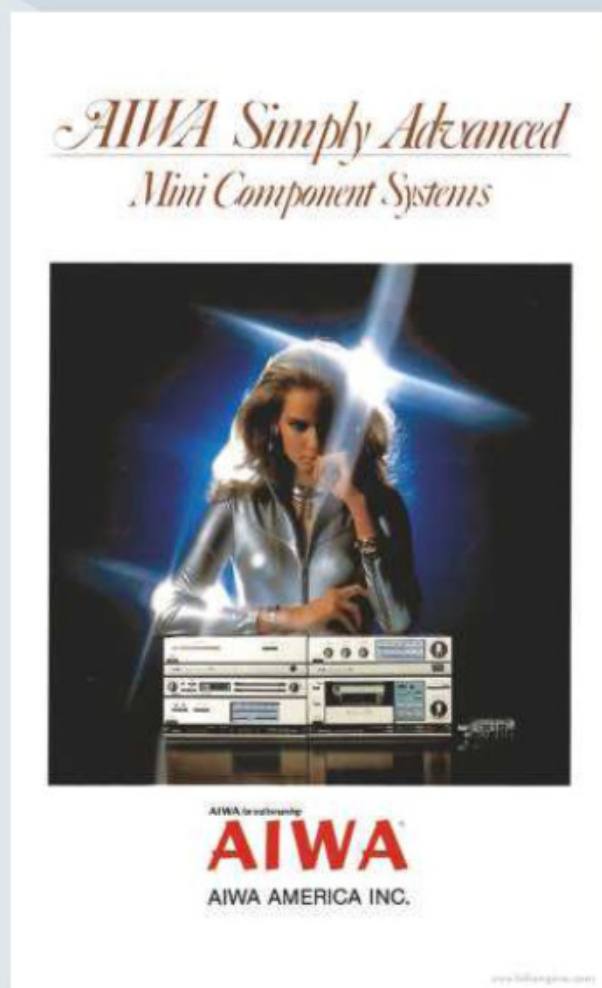
sound audiophile best practice – despite it being dinky. So there's a lot to respect about this system, despite the diminutive dimensions.

### Star quality

Given a decent pair of loudspeakers, the M-301 is capable of turning in a seriously good sound, even by today's budget standards. Its pre/power amplifier combination is quite the star, sounding open and musical with a good degree of grip in the bass and bite in the treble. At the same time, the power amp doesn't seem breathless until you really ramp up the volume close to the end stop, and it's a tactile and communicative listen. The tuner and cassette deck front ends do not let the side down, but it's possible to do better by plugging a decent turntable in.

Listening to Change's *A Lover's Holiday* is great fun via the Aiwa. This record is tonally quite warm, but has lots of super-snappy percussion and the M-301 setup really catches this well without machine-gunning it out at the listener. The mini system boasts that classically Japanese light and spry sound, but never falls into harshness. The energy and grip of the bass, allied to the precision and detail of the midband and crisp treble, make for an enjoyable yet surprisingly refined performance.

Play some classic rock like *Watcher Of The Skies* by Genesis, and you'll detect a slight lack of detail and insight in the midband, and the sound staging isn't quite as three dimensional as you'd hope. Still, it's really quite impressive for a 40-year-old design that's half the size of most traditional systems. The overall impression is of a setup that's full of life and energy, yet far less rough around the edges than you might expect. Modern full-size budget equipment does better, but not by that much ●



Promotional literature for Aiwa's mini hi-fi system series in 1980



# Blue Horizon

## Spike Shoes MkII



**ONE SOLUTION TO** the problem of protecting floors or carpets when using speaker spikes has been to slip a copper coin underneath each spike. Although this distributes the weight over a wider area and prevents damage, it doesn't do much to help deliver all of the sonic benefits spikes are designed to offer. Enter Blue Horizon's Spike Shoes MkII – claimed to provide the benefits of controlling resonances. The maker explains that rival devices focus on protecting surfaces without considering their sonic effect, making them little better than using the aforementioned coin.

### Chain reaction

As well as protecting the floor or equipment rack, the shoes are intended to enhance sound quality by suppressing resonances that can result in sonically damaging

microphony, which is then fed back to the equipment and can find its way into the audio chain. This resonance suppression is achieved by filling the machined stainless-steel outer casing with what the manufacturer describes as a “chaotic cork and rubber mix”.

This proprietary combination of materials has differing elasticities and frequencies claimed to cancel out resonances equally across the audio band. Measuring 38mm in diameter and at 7.5mm thick (6.5mm at the centre-point), the shoes allow for spike loading of up to 100kg.

Positioning them underneath the cones fitted to my 300B valve monoblocks, I play Laurent Garnier's *Tales Of A Kleptomaniac*. The track has



a big, thumping bass line running throughout, and with the shoes installed the lower frequencies suddenly come across as tighter and better controlled.

Although certainly not the most affordable spike shoes currently available, Blue Horizon's MkII solution offers an effective means of protecting equipment racks and floors, while the resonance-controlling construction delivers impressive sonic rewards too. **NR**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£80 for a set of four  
**TELEPHONE**  
01279 647039  
**WEBSITE**  
pulsecinemas.com

### OUR VERDICT



# MS HD Power

## MS-2160P six-way mains distribution block



**A VERSION OF** Murphy's law that often comes into play with any audio setup is that if you have X number of components to plug in, you will have X minus one available sockets. Help is at hand, thanks to MS HD Power's MS-2160P six-way distribution block supplied by Air Audio Distribution.

### Power play

Fitted with a 1.5m mains cable, it features a built-in RF/EMI noise filtration network. The UK mains plug is fitted with gold-plated live and neutral pins and the internal fuse clamps are silver-plated with 1µm-thick '925' pure silver. The fuse has silver-plated ends and the cable is double shielded against RFI interference. The three conductors are made from 2.5mm<sup>2</sup> cross-section 6N-OFC 99.9999 percent pure copper, so should be robust enough for the current requirements of your setup.



The six mains sockets are fed from the RF/EMI noise filter and offer 48,000A of surge suppression to protect from mains spikes and filter out mains-borne EMI and airborne RFI signals. Each socket is gold plated to ensure a good low-resistance contact between plug and socket.

Using the MS-2160P block and comparing it with a standard six-way distribution block purchased from an electrical retailer, I first connect my hi-fi to the MS-2160P. The plugs are

very well anchored in place and are noticeably more secure than the connections via the sockets of the standard block. There's a lower noise floor when the MS-2160P is used and a lovely UltraAnalogue tape recording of Grieg's *Cello Sonata Op.36* demonstrates 'blacker' silences and improvements in dynamic range as well as sharper imaging of the cello and piano, making it an impressive upgrade from a standard multi-way block. **NR**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£200  
**TELEPHONE**  
01491 629629  
**WEBSITE**  
airaudio.co.uk

### OUR VERDICT





# Ecosse Cables

## ES2.23+ loudspeaker cable

**WITH ITS WHITE** PVC outer jacket, the ES2.23+ speaker cable should glide around the edges of your room inconspicuously. Inside the 9.5mm circular cross-section jacket is a pair of Ultra Hi-Purity-OFC multi-stranded conductors with a 3mm<sup>2</sup> conductor cross-section. Each conductor has around 400 0.07mm diameter copper strands woven together to form the wire. The conductors are insulated in a low-loss polypropylene dielectric insulation arranged in a rope-lay twisted pair configuration. Also, the cables are filled with yarn and cotton paper to minimise microphonic vibrations that can degrade the audio signal. The ES2.23+ can be supplied terminated in z/x copper spade or banana plugs.

I kick off with a recording of Vivaldi *Sonatas For Flute* and am instantly aware of a performance that has

masses of detail and excellent clarity with no strain or unpleasant edginess to the sound. The flute and the individual instruments comprising the *basso continuo* are separately identifiable and do not blur into a wall of sound. Overall, the performance balance is natural and realistic.

### Easy rider

Beethoven's *Symphony No.4 in B flat major* by the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted by Rudolf Kempe engages from the outset with the opening *adagio*. This is quiet and tense, leading nicely into the *allegro vivace*, which is both powerful and exhilarating. All the complexities of the music are handled with ease and the performance is stirring and majestic.



Returning to some more Vivaldi and *The Four Seasons*, but jazzed up by the Raymond Fol Big Band, the ES2.23+ conveys the excitement of the *allegros*, which really sparkle with exuberance. The performance has great energy and gusto. Trumpet solos are clear and strident, without sounding abrasive, and the guitar in the second movement of *Spring* is very moving and involving.

In conclusion, the ES2.23+ really delivers on sound quality and is excellent value for money. **NR**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£180 for 3m terminated pair  
**TELEPHONE**  
07580 691803  
**WEBSITE**  
ecossecables.co.uk

### OUR VERDICT



# IsoAcoustics

## Delos 1815M1 isolation platform



### ISOLATION PLATFORMS PLAY

a vital role in stopping unwanted vibrations coming through the air, floor or furniture via the feet and chassis and affecting the components sat on them. The equipment itself can also generate vibrations that need to be dissipated away so that they don't find their way into the audio chain. The Delos 1815M1 is designed to support all types of audio equipment, and turntables in particular.

### Good vibrations

It measures 455 x 45 x 380mm, and consists of a solid 'butcher block' maple wood platform, designed to eliminate interference from external and structural vibrations and offer a stable platform for the equipment with a low noise floor. It can support equipment weighing up to 29.5kg.

When in use under my record deck, there's an immediate tightening up of



the bass, which suddenly has more attack and punch. Listening to a half-speed mastered LP of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon*, the somewhat menacing heartbeat that precedes *Speak To Me* ramps in from nowhere and builds to a climax. The bass is noticeably firmer and tighter, while the vocals of *Breathe* are more clearly positioned and the complexities of the music flow more effortlessly.

Spinning an LP of Scarlatti sonatas played on the harpsichord by George

Malcolm, I am really drawn into the performance by the excellent playing and the realism of the recording. The silences between musical phrases are inky black, highlighting the very low noise floor with the platform installed.

Overall, using the Delos 1815M1 results in the music sounding more natural and realistic. It is a very well made and solidly built isolation platform that provides some real sonic improvements. **NR**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£400  
**TELEPHONE**  
0330 1222500  
**WEBSITE**  
isoacoustics.com

### OUR VERDICT





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# Buying Guide

Selecting the components you want to audition is never easy, but help is at hand with our pick of the best to pass through our respected reviewing process



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# Award Winning Dream Team.

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## Digital Dream Team

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AMPLIFIERS



Audiolab  
6000A

PRICE: £600 REVIEWED: HFC 444

A cracking budget integrated amplifier with just the right mix of features and high-quality performance. The 6000A boasts a snappy and engaging sound with sufficient power and fine build quality. It's a great buy for the more discerning music enthusiast that demands plenty of flexibility at the heart of their system.



Copland  
CTA408

PRICE: £6,400 REVIEWED: HFC 450

Though this valve-based integrated isn't a lush or cuddly performer and there are times it sounds more solid state than many transistor-equipped rivals, its ability to delight across a variety of music combined with its useful features and real-world power output make it an exceptional performer.



Hegel  
H590

PRICE: £9,000 REVIEWED: HFC 449

The H590 is hugely powerful but tempers its brawn with total composure and impressive signal handling, enabling it to bring out the smallest, most subtle and dynamic details to give music presence and emotional impact. Its talent for mixing sheer brute force with incredible quality control takes some beating.



Naim  
Nait XS 3

PRICE: £2,200 REVIEWED: HFC 454/459

A clear improvement over its already impressive predecessor, the Nait XS 3 is an emotionally articulate and highly engaging performer that's hard not to love. It turns in a well-defined, detailed and carefully ordered sound that ticks all the right 'hi-fi' boxes, but more than that, it really sings when required.



Naim  
Supernait 3

PRICE: £3,500 REVIEWED: HFC 456

Some price rivals may offer higher claimed power output, but the Supernait 3 manages to combine a useful set of connections and supreme build quality with the ability to hit hard and go like the clappers when it needs to but provide a high level of subtlety when more nuance is required. A true all-rounder.



Quad  
Vena II

PRICE: From £650 REVIEWED: HFC 448

With a comprehensive spec that moves Quad's most compact integrated on and enough weight to bring any type of music so thrillingly to life, the Vena II does a fine job of giving bass natural weight, snap and dynamic ability while delivering a big room-filling sound that belies those tiny dimensions.



PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS



Cambridge Audio  
Edge W

£2,500 HFC 447  
The Edge W power amplifier quotes 2x 100W RMS output and has oodles of power to drive pretty much any speaker. It has a neutral sound with a hint of sweetness and an upbeat nature underwritten by plenty of insight that's seriously good for the money.



Emotiva  
BasX PT-100/BasX A-300

£400/£530 HFC 429  
A most enticing evocation of 'affordable high-end', the sound from this Emotiva pairing delivers a soundstage that extends well beyond the walls with a combination of satisfyingly nailed-on pace, rhythm, timing and dimensionality that seriously impresses. A great buy.



Exposure  
XM7/XM9

£1,240/£1,390 HFC 429  
Fast, open and three dimensional, the XM9 pairing is capable of driving more awkward speaker loads to high levels without any complaint. Partnered with the XM7 preamp/DAC, Exposure's house sound means a fulsome bass, midband detail and a smooth, yet spacious treble.



Mola-Mola  
Makua/Kaluga

£7,500/£10,000 HFC 427  
Class D amplification has come of age with the Kaluga offering great swathes of power that are summoned up with amazing speed without any sense of strain. Suddenly demanding multi-layered recordings appear effortlessly forensic without ever sounding clinical.





CABLES – INTERCONNECTS



Atlas Cables  
Equator Integra

PRICE: £115 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 438

Employing the same OCC copper conductors used in Atlas' higher end interconnects, the Equator Integra transmits consistently sophisticated music and represents excellent value for money. Subtle nuances become elevated, while elegance, refinement and fine details adroitly come to the fore.

★★★★★



Black Rhodium  
Minuet

PRICE: £160 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 453

Replacing the Prelude, this RCA interconnect is screened and employs silver-plated copper wire to improve clarity and high-frequency performance. The result is remarkably sophisticated for the money with detail, positioning of instruments, imaging and separation absolutely nailed on.

★★★★★



Ecosse Cables  
Master Reference SE

PRICE: £425 for 0.8m REVIEWED: HFC 455

Designed to convey an even greater degree of transparency, detail and three dimensionality than its rival interconnects, the Master Reference SE certainly doesn't disappoint. Punchy basslines, well-defined positioning, supreme soundstage width and clear focus are very much the order of the day here.

★★★★★



Gekko Cables  
Red Dusk

PRICE: £250 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 456

A directional unshielded RCA interconnect, the Red Dusk is made of two twisted solid-core OFHC copper conductors clad in silver. Once run-in, the soundstage takes on a more three-dimensional presentation, subtle details come to the fore and the orchestra fills the entire width of the room.

★★★★★



Kimber Kable  
Select USB-Cu

PRICE: From £563 REVIEWED: HFC 456

Terminated with hand-made purpleheart and gaboon ebony connector housings, this distinctive USB cable achieves a soundstage that is both wide and deep. The edginess of violins is deeply impressive while instruments are perfectly located across the room revealing a stunning mix of definition and clarity.

★★★★★



Tellurium Q  
Blue

PRICE: £186 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 439

The baby brother of TQ's Black USB cable, the Blue is of the AB configuration for hookup to a DAC and aims to minimise distortion. This it does with consummate ease while adding energetic, pounding bass and superb instrument placement within a broad, realistic soundstage for good measure.

★★★★★

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★★★★★



IsoTek  
EVO3 Initium

An entry-level power cable that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★



CABLES – MAINS POWER



Atlas Cables  
Eos dd

PRICE: £145 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 452

Referring to ‘dual drain’ technology, the Eos dd is designed to act as a filter against incoming contamination. The result is an inky blackness between musical phrases and a supremely low noise floor, while detail and imaging improve as interference is banished.



Black Rhodium  
Stream

PRICE: £450 for 1.7m REVIEWED: HFC 430

Black Rhodium has discovered that optimum sound quality is obtained from cables of 1.7m, hence this offering featuring silver-plated copper conductors. And who are we to argue, considering the impressive clarity and focus of instruments combined with a noise floor displaying an impressive lack of interference.



Chord Company  
Shawline

PRICE: £200 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 438

Available at a variety of lengths, the Shawline mains cable is made from three lots of 14 AWG multi-strand conductors. Test highlights include superior front-to-back imaging, with all the tonal complexities of the instruments really coming to life, delivering genuine energy to orchestral performances.



Furutech  
Roxy

PRICE: £233 for 1.5m REVIEWED: HFC 447

Connecting the Roxy to a source component immediately removes a layer of glare and ‘glint’ from the sound; tonally it’s darkly translucent instead of shiny white gloss, allowing the listener to hear more into the music and appreciate the space between the notes.



IsoTek  
Evo3 Initium

PRICE: £65 for 1.5m REVIEWED: HFC 413

IsoTek’s entry-level power cable has a distinctive opalescent green finish that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there’s a noticeable step up in the quality of musical instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.



Russ Andrews  
30th Anniversary Yello

PRICE: £65 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 423

First introduced in the nineties, the Yello benefits from years of research into the effects of mains quality. Employing pure copper conductors, this relaunched cable results in a wider, deeper soundstage and the improvement it brings to instrument focus has to be heard to be believed.





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|                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  SMS2.4 SPEAKER CABLE OF THE YEAR      |  MAESTRO/MS2.3 GROUP TEST       |  THE MAESTRO INTERCONNECT |  BIG RED HC POWERCHORD          |  LA PRIMA DONNA INTERCONNECT      |
|  LEGEND INTERCONNECT CABLE OF THE YEAR |  THE CONDUCTOR INTERCONNECT     |  MS2.3 SPEAKER CABLE      |  LA PRIMA DONNA INTERCONNECT    |  SMS2.4 MONOCRYSTAL SPEAKER CABLE |
|  THE MAESTRO INTERCONNECT              |  CS2.3 SPEAKER CABLE            |  THE PRODUCER DIGITAL     |  NUDIVA INTERCONNECT            |  BIG RED HC POWERCHORD            |
|  MS2.3 SPEAKER CABLE                   |  BIG RED UC POWERCHORD          |  MS2.15 SPEAKER CABLE     |  BIG RED UC POWERCHORD          |  SMS2.4 MONOCRYSTAL SPEAKER CABLE |
|  BIG ORANGE POWERCHORD                 |  ES2.3 ULTRA FINE SPEAKER CABLE |  CONDUCTOR INTERCONNECT   |  ES2.3 ULTRA FINE SPEAKER CABLE |  ES2.3 ULTRA FINE SPEAKER CABLE   |
|  BIG RED HC POWERCHORD                 |  BIG ORANGE POWERCHORD          |  NUDIVA INTERCONNECT      |  ULTIMATE GUIDE                 |  MS4.45 SPEAKER CABLE             |



CD PLAYERS



Audiolab  
6000CDT

PRICE: £380 REVIEWED: HFC 447

The 6000CDT is exceptional at revealing what's on your discs to deliver a great big soundstage with plenty of detail inside. It can dig down deep into the mix to eke out the different musical strands while dynamically and rhythmically it's hard to beat at the price. In short, it's a super, highly affordable audiophile CD transport.



Cambridge Audio  
AXC35

PRICE: £300 REVIEWED: HFC 454

Something of a budget marvel, you'll have to work extra hard to get the AXC35 to put a foot wrong. Bass is firm, detailed and blessed with excellent timing; the tonal palette is pleasingly broad and clean; and though the soundstage doesn't extend much beyond the speakers, there's great depth perspective.



Exposure  
XM CD

PRICE: £1,200 REVIEWED: HFC 455

A highly likeable half-width compact disc player that presents music in an enjoyable yet technically accurate manner, the XM CD might lack the operational slickness and versatility of some rivals, but it more than makes up for it with its energetic, lively sound, dynamic light and shade and charming character.



Métronome  
Technologie  
Le Player 2S

PRICE: £5,100 REVIEWED: HFC 449

As good as the sweet treble and rich bass are, what really impresses here is how when fed weaker CDs and impoverished MP3s the delivery remains unflappable and composed as layers of detail are locked into sharp focus.



Musical Fidelity  
M3scd

PRICE: £1,150 REVIEWED: HFC 450

Able to string together elements of the mix dextrously for a natural and believable sound, the M3scd's combination of detail and rhythmic alacrity are highly impressive while its excellent timing and tonal balance leave you wanting more. With its lovely, lyrical sonics oozing detail and subtlety, this is an extremely capable player.



Rega  
Apollo

PRICE: £630 REVIEWED: HFC 450

Displaying a rich, mellifluous, dreamy and wonderfully lyrical talent for vocals, the Apollo is an exuberantly musical performer. It's excellent at conveying microdynamics, is tonally warm and handles rhythms impeccably, making for a hugely charismatic performer considering its relatively low price.



ALSO CONSIDER



Audiolab  
8300CDQ  
£1,100 HFC 448

Taking the winning recipe of the 8200CDQ and adding an upgraded DAC with DSD playback, the accurate and uncoloured sound of the Audiolab is unmistakable. Vast amounts of detail are extracted from the mix, soundstaging is incredible and music flows naturally.



Leema Acoustics  
Stream IV  
£2,300 HFC 456

The latest update to this long-established player feels a considerable step forward. CD playback is highly refined, assured and transparent, bass is rock solid with visceral depth that positively grips your solar plexus and streaming shares all these qualities for the best of both worlds.



Marantz  
ND8006  
£1,100 HFC 450

A CD player with DAC and streaming capabilities, the ND8006 effortlessly conveys the true spatial contrast between all the different strands of the mix while sounding precise with loads of midband detail. Tonally smooth, it has a silky top end and chunky bass.



Roksan  
K3 CD Di  
£1,300 HFC 403

Offering the relatively rare combination of smooth tonality with a lively and animated way of presenting the music, the K3 CD Di displays a sweet and even tonal balance with a panoramic soundstage. In short, it's closer to good analogue sound than digital.





DACS



Alpha Design Labs  
Stratos

PRICE: £1,315 REVIEWED: HFC 455

Remarkably flexible at the price, the Stratos offers an impressively wide-reaching range of features without compromising sound quality. The soundstage is wide and open with a refined presentation, delicate details are reproduced with breath-taking accuracy and instrument separation and location are absolutely spot on.



Audiolab  
M-DAC+

PRICE: £800 REVIEWED: HFC 449

While some DACs can dive deeper into a recording, what's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. With its stunning grasp of flow and tempo, there's a welcome warmth to its presentation and its solid three dimensional imaging is second to none.



Chord Electronics  
Qutest

PRICE: £1,200 REVIEWED: HFC 436

Regardless of file, format, sampling rate or input, this great-sounding DAC allows you to hear things presented in a detailed, intricate and incisive way that absolutely nails the basic emotion of the music. Even disregarding the supreme styling and build, the sound quality alone warrants enthusiastic recommendation.



Copland  
DAC215

PRICE: £2,000 REVIEWED: HFC 418

Equally at home operating as a headphone amplifier or preamp as it is a DAC, the tube-driven DAC215 highlights an almost tremulous quality in vocals in a relaxed way that allows the music to flow easily and freely for a rich and evocative performance with a seemingly bottomless bass.



Musical Fidelity  
M6s DAC

PRICE: £1,400 REVIEWED: HFC 449

Like your DACs big, bold and full of features? Look no further than the M6s, which is sonically blessed with a wider, more holographic soundstage, pinpoint imaging that you can reach out and touch and a gift for projecting sonics with the finest low-level detail, cementing realism that only the best models can match.



Mytek  
Brooklyn DAC+

PRICE: £1,800 REVIEWED: HFC 449

With an unerring ability to drill down into a recording to deliver the kind of otherwise vanishingly small details that bring a sheen of believability to a performance, the Brooklyn DAC+ boasts a clean, highly detailed and thoroughly engaging sound with excellent timing and a feisty, forward presentation.



PORTABLE DACS



AudioQuest  
DragonFly Red

£170 HFC 423

Compact it may be, but the Red can hold its own in this company. There's plenty of detail and no sense of bass sluggishness or overhang while the midrange lends an appealing warmth to proceedings and the refined top end combines with a pleasantly spacious soundstage.



Chord Electronics  
Hugo 2

£1,800 HFC 428

An essential audition, the Hugo 2 is not just a portable DAC/headphone amp, but the best hi-fi digital converter available at or near the price. Music ebbs and flows along in an organic and unforced way and it images with stunning pinpoint precision.



Chord Electronics  
Mojo

£400 HFC 423

It might be small and have no gain setting adjustment, but the Mojo takes some beating. Its scrupulous accuracy presents what is contained in a recording with no embellishment so that fine detail is extracted with ease, treble energy impresses and stridency remains absent.



iFi Audio  
xDSD

£400 HFC 439

Justifying its inclusion on sound alone, the xDSD delivers a wide variety of musical styles with admirable clarity and precision. It's engaging, lively sonics and versatile connectivity make it equally adept for mobile or desktop use and the only minor downside is its battery life.





HEADPHONES



Audio-Technica  
ATH-M50xBT

PRICE: £180 REVIEWED: HFC 450

Taking its M50x and turning it into a very capable wireless design (thanks to Bluetooth v5.0) without altering its sonic character, Audio-Technica has come up trumps here. Balance and refinement join crunching bass, impressive three dimensionality and decent noise-cancelling to seal the deal.

★★★★★



NEW  
ENTRY

Bowers & Wilkins  
PX7

PRICE: £350 REVIEWED: HFC 459

Although it's no match for a high-end wired design, the noise-cancelling abilities of this wireless closed-back model are ideal for music on the move – offering an elevated listening experience amidst the hustle and bustle of the city. An essential audition if you're serious about enjoying your music out and about.

★★★★★



Focal  
Elegia

PRICE: £800 REVIEWED: HFC 447

The winning combination of spacious, three dimensional sound, supreme tonal balance and joyous realism mark the closed-back Elegia out as a seriously accomplished performer. Its undemanding nature and luxurious comfort make it the perfect choice for use on the move or in the comfort of your listening room.

★★★★★



Focal  
Stellia

PRICE: £2,800 REVIEWED: HFC 452

A welcome addition to the hall of high-end headphone fame, the closed-back Stellia rivals the best open-back competition, bringing new meaning to the word forensic. Imparting a benign character on everything it plays, this vice-free design has rhythmic engagement, endless vitality and depth charge-like bass.

★★★★★



Sennheiser  
HD 820

PRICE: £2,000 REVIEWED: HFC 442

Delivering a highly refined performance regardless of source or music type, the HD 820 is one of the best closed-back designs in the business. Top of a long list of positives is its staggering bass, which delivers such tight, punchy and extended low frequencies that it absolutely demands to be given an audition.

★★★★★



Sennheiser  
Momentum 3

PRICE: £350 REVIEWED: HFC 455

With a Bluetooth performance that makes it hard to believe this is really a wireless offering, the Momentum might just be the most consistently entertaining performer Sennheiser has ever produced. Excellent design, fabulous features, subsonic bass and impeccable noise cancelling complete the package.

★★★★★

IN-EAR HEADPHONES



Audeze  
iSINE 10  
£400 HFC 423

A must-have for Apple users, the world's first planar magnetic in-ear is decent with a regular 3.5mm cable but comes into its own when used with iOS devices connected via Lightning, sounding faster and more cohesive than the best dynamic or multiple armature designs.

★★★★★



Oriveti  
OH500  
£500 HFC 451  
Combining an airiness with low-end extension that most rivals can only dream of, the OH500's stylish resin enclosures house four Knowles balanced armatures (two for bass and two for the midrange) with an 8mm dynamic bass driver for an enjoyably vivid performance.

★★★★★



Sennheiser  
IE 80 S BT  
£440 HFC 456  
An impressive combination of excellent performance, comprehensive Bluetooth aptX HD implementation and Sennheiser's attention to comfort and build make this an exceptionally talented design that is likely to win over many converts to wireless audio.

★★★★★



Shure  
KSE1200  
£1,770 HFC 449  
Electrostatic technology might be undeniably costly and not exactly portable, but the KSE1200 compromises on none of the qualities that Shure holds dear to deliver a level of realism, space and involvement that's beyond all but the most supremely talented loudspeakers.

★★★★★



## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

## Acoustic Energy AE509

PRICE: £2,300  
REVIEWED: HFC 456

Employing a carbon tweeter to shun shrill brightness, the AE509 allows you to listen into instruments on your favourite recordings, sounding dazzlingly fast and frenetic without the slightest hint of grain or sibilance. Meanwhile its curious conjunction of tonal grace and transient pace; handling of lower frequencies; and taut bass from the matching carbon mid/bass drivers make this floorstander a worthy flagship.



## Bowers & Wilkins 603

PRICE: £1,250  
REVIEWED: HFC 448

Regardless of what you play, here's a speaker with the power, bandwidth and bass heft to do full-scale justice to Muse, Mozart and Motörhead. Its low-distortion transparency and 3D imaging conjure up the ambience and atmosphere of the most intimate gig with a tonal palette that's believable rather than manipulative. And all underpinned by a bass performance that delivers presence and vitality.



## DALI Oberon 5

PRICE: £700  
REVIEWED: HFC 447

A simple two-way design, the Oberon 5 is the smaller of two floorstanders positioned two tiers up from DALI's entry-level Spektor range and the sense of enthusiasm, exuberance and fun it displays right from the off is infectious. Requiring little in the way of toe-in towards the listener, its clear and resolute midband results in a fabulously subtle and nuanced performance while its gift for separation, layering and microdynamics is deeply impressive.



## Monitor Audio Gold 300

PRICE: £4,000  
REVIEWED: HFC 453

The benefits the Gold 300 brings to openness, clarity, fine detail and harmonic structure is very special. Although with vividly produced material it can verge on the 'hyper real', this is a consummate crowd pleaser that more than any rival at the price sells an idea of high-end luxury and sonic excellence that's hard to distinguish from the real thing.



## Ophidian P3 Evolution

PRICE: £5,000  
REVIEWED: HFC 451

The Ophidian projects an expansive soundstage with deep and powerful bass. This is one of those rare speakers that has genuine smoothness and warmth. Its balance and oodles of power paint a picture that's so natural and coherent that you almost feel you're breathing the same air as the artist you're listening to. A stunningly talented floorstander, it makes its £5k price seem a snip. Even if your budget is twice the size, it demands to be heard.



## Spendor D7.2

PRICE: £4,500  
REVIEWED: HFC 456

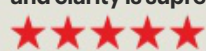
A crisp, open and even-sounding loudspeaker that's impressively engaging and surprisingly dynamic – especially for a floorstander at this price. There's more space around vocals and a lighter more spry sound to cymbals, making for a lifelike sound despite its ability to remain smooth and sophisticated. The D7.2 is a modestly sized, highly capable, do-it-all loudspeaker that's well worth an audition.



## LOUDSPEAKER CABLES



**Chord Company**  
Epic XL  
£600 1.5m, terminated HFC 450  
Combining elements of Chord's Signature Reference/XL with its Epic speaker cable, the XL bristles with energy and brings fantastic detail to the fore. Subtle elements are captivatingly clear, soundstage depth is enormous and clarity is supremely enhanced.



**Chord Company**  
Odyssey X  
£150 1m, terminated HFC 451  
Made from the same materials as the Rumour X (HFC 447), the Odyssey X is designed to bring more control to dynamics and definition, and boy does it deliver. Front-to-back imaging is superb, instruments are well focused and clearly positioned while piano is full and rich.



**QED**  
XT25  
£85 3m HFC 434  
Claimed to achieve a lowering of impedance compared with a traditional large cross-sectional area twin-core cable, the XT25 offers up great refinement and engaging musicality. Vocals are clear and full bodied, silence between phrases is eerily quiet and the noise floor is very low.



**True Colours Industries**  
Storm  
£22 1m HFC 453  
This flexible ribbon cable is 2mm thick, making it ideal for hiding away under the carpet for tidy bi-wire hook-ups, while its tight and well-controlled performance reveals impressive openness with a spacious sound that's full and entirely uncluttered, even during crescendos.





STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS



Amphion  
Helium510

PRICE: £720 REVIEWED: HFC 454

Amphion's stated aim of avoiding a clear sweetspot is achieved with ridiculous ease while its delivery is spacious with wholly convincing tonality and rich and smooth vocals. Piano shows excellent decay and though bass extension isn't the deepest, it is detailed, fast and superbly integrated with the other frequencies.



Bowers & Wilkins  
606

PRICE: £550 REVIEWED: HFC 454

Feeling far more sensitive than its claimed 88dB at 8ohm, the 606 presents no challenge for even the most anaemic amplifiers offering a startling balance between top-end sparkle and supreme refinement. With impressive bass weight; superb timing and drive; and top-end precision, it's mighty impressive.



ELAC  
Vela BS 403

PRICE: £1,750 REVIEWED: HFC 447

The Vela BS 403 splits the atom, generating serious power from a tiny package. And rarely does so much dynamism come with such refinement. It's like a BBC LS3/5a on steroids with an extra high and low octave thrown in. If you've ever felt the need for subwoofers and supertweeters, the ELAC covers those bases.



Falcon Acoustics  
RAM Studio 20

PRICE: From £2,000 REVIEWED: HFC 446

The RAM Studio 20 clearly favours amps with plenty of grip, especially in the bass. It might not offer forensic levels of detail with which to dissect a recording, but as a wide-bandwidth, high-performance standmount that sounds easy, natural and is dripping with musical finesse, it takes some beating.



Kudos Audio  
Titan 505

PRICE: From £7,000 REVIEWED: HFC 451

Worthy of its Titan monicker, the 505 extracts a truly room-filling sound from its relatively small dimensions, making it an absolute delight with whatever material you care to feed it. Fans of big, brawny loudspeaker designs that find small cabinets a sonic compromise will be forced to re-evaluate their opinion after hearing it.



Q Acoustics  
Concept 300

PRICE: £3,000 REVIEWED: HFC 448

With unexpectedly large amounts of midband detail, a bouncy bottom end and enjoyable musicality, the Concept 300 conjures up a charming sound that puts the accent on civility and smoothness, but never at the expense of musical enjoyment – making it excellent value for money at the price.



LOUDSPEAKER SUPPORTS



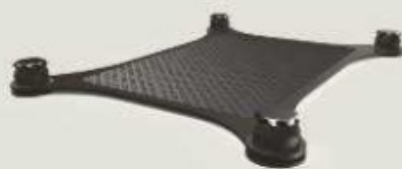
**Atacama Audio**  
Apollo Cyclone 6  
£100 HFC 455  
Available in a choice of three sizes so you can get the height of your cabinets correctly positioned to suit your listening position, this stand removes unwanted vibrations from the performance sharpening imaging and instrument focus for a full, refined sound.



**Hi-Fi Racks**  
X50  
From £180.48 HFC 453  
Solidly built, these elegant yet classy speaker stands are available in a choice of flexible customisation options, removing all colouration from the performance and giving the impression the cabinet is floating in mid-air. Great value for money and a simple upgrade.



**IsoAcoustics**  
GAIA II  
£300 HFC 427  
Attaching the GAIA II feet to the underside of your speaker provides a high degree of isolation that gives it the opportunity to breath and display a level of clarity and openness that's easy to hear. Music just sounds right with them in place and the price is right too.



**Townshend Audio**  
Seismic Isolation Podium  
From £1,400 HFC 426  
Placing your loudspeaker on to a Seismic Isolation Podium is a revelation. The way it completely removes its interaction with its surroundings is mind blowing, bringing clarity to the entire frequency range, enabling it to communicate far more effectively.





NETWORK AUDIO PLAYERS



Audiolab  
6000N Play

PRICE: £450 REVIEWED: HFC 453

Employing the DTS Play-Fi platform (which is not without its foibles), the Audiolab beautifully balances refinement and engagement with an impressive bass response and tonality. Given an operating system update, this has the potential to be class leading. Even so, it still remains the best-sounding streamer available under £500.

★★★★★



Auralic  
Altair G1

PRICE: £1,900 REVIEWED: HFC 455

Designed as more of a standalone front end than some of Auralic's network products, this streamer with added preamp has pretty much everything you need and little that you don't. Thanks to its effortless cohesion and ability to allow music to flow, the result is one of the best, if not *the* best streaming options around.

★★★★★



Auralic  
Aries G2

PRICE: £3,900 REVIEWED: HFC 431

A front-end transport that requires the user to bring their own DAC to the streaming party, the performance of the Aries G2 is therefore dependent on partnering equipment. Despite that, connections are entirely stable and Lightning Link is a superb addition, making this a wonderfully flexible and easy to use superstar.

★★★★★



Cambridge Audio  
Edge NQ

PRICE: £3,500 REVIEWED: HFC 447

Something of a departure from CA's usual fare, this network music player also combines the additional versatility of a DAC and preamp to serve up a sumptuously wide recorded acoustic, with a hugely expansive sound that partners massive punch with great precision for a clean, direct and enjoyable sound.

★★★★★



Naim  
ND5 XS 2

PRICE: £2,300 REVIEWED: HFC 454

Delivering Naim's distinctive flare and typically impressive sound – superb low-end drive with texture and presence combined with a delicious sweetness – this Roon-compatible network music player is supremely engineered, over flowing with useful features and capable of a sparkling performance.

★★★★★



Yamaha  
WXAD-10

PRICE: £150 REVIEWED: HFC 442

One of the smallest options around, this MusicCast network audio player might not look like much, but don't be fooled – it has it where it counts. Tonal balance is neutral; bass is well integrated with good detail; and the space and three dimensionality add to the realism, making it great value for money.

★★★★★

MUSIC SERVERS



Bluesound  
Vault 2i  
£1,100 HFC 452

If you see yourself buying into the BluOS ecosystem favoured by the Canadian brand and its cohorts, this 2TB, server, ripper and player compatible with up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM and MQA files, is a great way of starting off in one room and expanding as your system grows.

★★★★★



Innuos  
Zenith Mk3  
From £3,000 HFC 451

With one of the best interfaces going and a potentially flexible spec, the 4TB, CD ripping Zenith can be used as a Roon Core and delivers an outstanding performance that inspires confidence even for those starting out. It should be right near the top of any shortlist.

★★★★★



Melco  
N100  
£1,800 HFC 444

Supporting up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512, this 2TB music server and CD ripper delivers Melco's well-honed virtues – including excellent stability, clean and refined performance, partnered with elegant industrial design – at an affordable price tag.

★★★★★



Naim  
Uniti Core  
£1,900 HFC 438

Equipped with a CD ripper and 1TB SSD, the Uniti Core takes on an understated role as it handles 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128 music files impeccably. Presentation is pleasingly neutral and it simply lets whatever network audio player is attached get on with the music.

★★★★★



WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKERS



Bluesound  
Pulse Flex 2i

PRICE: £300 REVIEWED: HFC 453

With no shortage of lower frequencies, the Pulse Flex 2i's bass extension is controlled, pleasantly quick and has an impressive level of clout to it. Used as a pair, the soundstage is large and effortless underpinned by the aforementioned bass while the connections and range of features provide impressive flexibility.



Bowers & Wilkins  
Formation Duo

PRICE: £3,500 REVIEWED: HFC 453

The Formation Duo performs the magic trick of revealing new detail in familiar music while delivering a level of insight that's more akin to a studio monitor. There's stunning potency and immediacy; supreme bass speed and impact; rich and three-dimensional vocals; and everything feels unerringly accurate.



Devialet  
Phantom Reactor 900

PRICE: £2,580 REVIEWED: HFC 456

Unlike any other wireless designs on the market, the distinctive Phantom boasts 900W of peak power via its hybrid Class A/D amp and bass that dives down to a barely believable 18Hz. The result is power and extension that defies physics, but more impressive still is how it performs at low volumes – making it ideal for late-night listening.



KEF  
LS50 Wireless

PRICE: £2,000 REVIEWED: HFC 433

Fine clarity and focus, a spacious soundstage with stunning image solidity and unfettered musicality make for immersive and hugely enjoyable listening. Best of all, though, is the sense that every fibre and sinew of this system is pulling in the same direction. Wonderful regardless of music or source.



KEF  
LSX

PRICE: £1,000 REVIEWED: HFC 446

It might not be able to match the muscle and dynamic reach of the LS50 Wireless, but the LSX is cut from the same sonic cloth. Size, style, build, flexibility and sound quality all impress, but it's the active ingredient which enables a performance level that similarly priced passive systems will find hard to match that wins the day.



Naim  
Mu-so 2nd  
Generation

PRICE: £1,300 REVIEWED: HFC 452

A world away from the traditional components Naim is known for, the Mu-so 2nd Generation delivers unfailingly entertaining sonics with hi-fi values and an exceptional musicality. The best one-box speaker system full stop.



ONE-BOX SYSTEMS



NAD  
M10  
£2,200 HFC 451

With its super flexibility, powerful amplifier design, big front panel touchscreen and impressive BluOS platform, this is a supremely stylish offering. Sonically it's a very powerful and refined system while its definition and precision is in ample supply.



Naim  
Uniti Star  
£3,500 HFC 433

Fast, powerful and grippy with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality, the Uniti Star might not have the forensic detail resolution of some similarly priced rivals, but it isn't far off. Otherwise it's practically impossible to find fault at the price.



Novafidelity  
X14  
£690 HFC 446

Deserving of praise for the functionality it manages to squeeze into such a compact and elegant chassis, the X14's well thought out and practical approach will attract those looking to take their first steps into network audio and it makes a greater second-room setup.



Quad  
Artera Solus  
£1,500 HFC 434

Even by Quad's high standards the Artera Solus is unfeasibly talented. Excelling with immediacy, presence, weight, body, scale and authority, it offers not only looks and feels more expensive than it is, but it sounds it too. It deserves to be paired with a fine set of speakers.





TURNTABLES



AnalogueWorks  
TT Zero

PRICE: £1,500 REVIEWED: HFC 453

Pristine without being bright, the TT Zero has fine tonal discrimination and starts and stops precisely where it should. It is able to unpick all the audio strands with ease, sounding, open and airy with plenty of sparkle and bite, a low noise floor, lucid rhythmic gait and impressively clean, controlled and tuneful bass.



NEW  
ENTRY

MoFi  
UltraDeck+M

PRICE: £2,500 REVIEWED: HFC 459

Equipped with a MasterTracker MM cartridge, the UltraDeck+M is MoFi's flagship package and fit and finish are superb. Investing in the 367g Super Heavy Weight clamp (£200) is a must, resulting in rock-solid bass, clear and focused top end and the sort of timing and precision associated with direct-drive decks.



Pro-Ject  
X1

PRICE: £700 REVIEWED: HFC 452

A highly impressive turntable package for the price, the X1 makes music in a happy, engaging and big-hearted way with no obvious weak points to spoil your enjoyment. With its sizeable, open and engulfing sound, it serves as a perfect example of just how good vinyl can sound given half a chance.



Rega  
Planar 6

PRICE: £1,400 REVIEWED: HFC 427

Partnered with Rega's Ania moving-coil cartridge, the Planar 6 delivers a level of performance that is pretty much untouchable for £1,500. The sense of togetherness is classic Rega, the overall presentation is aided in no small part by the tonal realism while the power and alacrity complete a perfect sonic picture.



Rega  
Planar 10

PRICE: £4,500 REVIEWED: HFC 456

A masterpiece that is without doubt one of Rega's finest achievements, the Planar 10 manages to deliver a performance that is outstanding even at this lofty price point. Utterly unflappable, it offers incredible detail retrieval combined with a naturally low noise floor to dish up captivating vinyl execution.



Technics  
SL-1500C

PRICE: £900 REVIEWED: HFC 453

The built-in phono stage is terrific, while the take-no-prisoners sonic personality sounds joyously lively, enthusiastic and 'on it'. Thanks to its legendary torque and stability, it locks down timing and rhythm with start-stop precision and its firm, deep and expressive bass adds unrivalled impetus and authority.



PHONO STAGES



NEW  
ENTRY

Chord Electronics  
Huei

£990 HFC 459

The Huei's appeal extends from its rock-solid build and playful, sphere-based control system to its impressive knack of extracting the best from a turntable/cartridge combo without being too painfully honest about the rozier aspects of less-than-pristine recordings.



Cyrus  
Phono Signature

£1,200 HFC 408

A welcome addition to the ranks of high-end phono stages, the Phono Signature is something of a bargain. It delivers on the promise of vinyl as a high-resolution format and the fact it does so while offering class-leading functionality and flexibility makes it very special indeed.



Musical Fidelity  
M6 Vinyl

£1,400 HFC 451

An impressively quiet phono stage, the M6 Vinyl treads an interesting line between accuracy and imparting a little character of its own. Tonally accurate it has a heady combination of richness and weight that draws you into a performance, while bass response is startlingly good.



Rega  
Aura

£4,000 HFC 446

This MC-only preamp combines superlative engineering and build, but what sets it apart from the pack is its balance of peerless accuracy and realism with the ability to deliver unbridled musical joy, making it one of the finest phono stages available.





# Hi-FiChoice Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

**These pages** are a must-read if you're thinking about buying used kit, or if you have hi-fi you want to sell. It's free – simply submit your ad with no more than **50 words** (we reserve the right to edit it if not), remembering to include your email, phone

number and county. Simply email your ad to: **letters@hifichoice.co.uk**. This service is open to private advertisers only. Just **one** ad per household and please note that images are for illustration only and **do not** represent what is for sale.

## FOR SALE

**MARANTZ** ST7001 DAB/FM/AM tuner, boxed, £100. Yamaha KX-580SE cassette deck, boxed, little use £100. Buyer collects: **07900 320318 (SE London/Kent)**.

**PROAC** Tablette 2000 speakers in cherry veneer, excellent condition £250: **07398 642586 or email: johnakeanelangley@gmail.com (Berkshire)**.

**BBC** Music magazine Issues 1.1 (Dec 1992) to 9.12 (Aug 2001), very good condition. Magazines only (no CDs). Offers invited. Buyer collects/arranges courier: **07920 101740 or email: siloperi@gmail.com (Romford)**.

**MISSION** LX-1 speakers in black, as brand new, boxed £50: **07583 078744 or email: psutcliffe333@gmail.com (Derbyshire)**.

**AUDIOLAB** 8000P power amplifier £300, Audiolab 8000C preamplifier, both in good working condition.

For collection only. Cash or bank transfer: **07570 454727 or email: paulfield1@hotmail.co.uk (Birmingham)**.

**PRO-JECT** 2 Xperience '2-Pack' (acrylic) turntable includes 2M Blue, 9CC arm. As new condition and boxed £475. Collection only: **07889 807065 (Essex)**.

**LOGITECH** Squeezebox Touch, excellent condition with remote and original

packaging £170. Beresford TC-7220 amp switching box, excellent condition £70: **07885 157722 or email: t.rea@ntlworld.com (Co Antrim)**.

**SILTECH** Classic Anniversary 770i interconnects 1m pair XLR £1,500, RCA £1,500. Classic Anniversary 550i interconnects 1m pairs XLR £800, RCA £800. Classic Anniversary 330L speaker cable 3m pair, single set of banana plugs



**REGA** RP8 plus Dynavector cartridge in immaculate condition, owned from new and very little use (hence reason for sale), all original packaging and manual. Detailed pictures on request, £1,000: **email: stemar2@me.com**.



**LINN** 2 LP12/Ittok LVII, fitted Ortofon Quintet Red cartridge, recent Hercules power supply and motor. New Cirkus bearing, subchassis and arm board, Afrosia plinth and lid. Spare new belt. Serviced by House of Linn: £1,650: **01691 610589 or email: sankast@hotmail.com (Shropshire)**.

to amp, double set of plugs to speaker (bi-wire) £1,100. Hi-Diamond 7 3m speaker cable pair – bananas with jumper cables £900. Hi-Diamond 7 interconnect cable pair RCA £500: **0780 191729 or email: peter.holliday@soprasteria.com**

**SONY** PS-HX500 turntable, unused and boxed £149. Schiit Saga preamp boxed with remote, power cable and handbook, excellent condition £189. Linn Kairn boxed with remote, power cable and manual, excellent condition: **02392 453382**.

**KEF** 105/3 loudspeakers, just had woofers re-foamed, light use, small scratch on one speaker otherwise good condition. Walnut veneer £600: **01363 775880 or email: rogeredwards76@hotmail.co.uk**.

**PURE** DAB FM/AM tuner, excellent condition and fully working only £45: **07957 384795 (London)**.

**SPENDOR** Classic 100 loudspeakers, walnut, half price, demo by arrangement: **01661 823606 or email: grant.darras@gmail.com (Northumberland)**.

**PMC** FB1 speakers, light oak, excellent condition, original boxes, collection preferred £600: **07814 866496 or email: alanedg0355@gmail.com (Chester)**.

**OLSON** Sound Fantastic four-way mains block, excellent condition £60. Also Russ Andrews Classic Power Kord mains cable with IsoTek deep cryogenically treated wattgate connection £65 or both products for £100: **01484 427426 (Huddersfield)**.

**DENON** PMA-520AE and DCD-520AE amplifier and CD player, mint condition in original packaging, all accessories inc. £200 ono, collect only: **01285 851772 or email: seabird21965@gmail.com (Cirencester)**.

**WHARFEDALE** Diamond 9.1 bookshelf loudspeakers, one careful owner from new. Speakers in immaculate condition, finished in a walnut veneer and boxed. £110 ono: **01483 472650 (Woking, Surrey)**.

**WORLD DESIGNS** KEL84 valve amplifier with upgrades, mint condition. Arcaydis EB1S bookshelf speakers, oak, mint/boxed. Project The Classic rosenut turntable with Ortofon Silver cartridge, unused/boxed. Q Acoustics QA3108 24in speaker stands. Would like to sell as a system. All in pristine condition: **01159 754070 (Nottingham/Derby)**.

**MARANTZ** PM6006 amplifier, black, as new, boxed, £200. No longer needed as upgrading:

**BUYING TIPS** **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!



**07583 078744**  
(Nottingham/Derby).

**PROAC** Response 1 speakers, ash black, excellent condition, boxed £750. Atacama stands, unmarked, black £30. Audio Innovations L2 preamp, recently serviced, excellent condition £380. BK Electronics Gemini subwoofer, excellent condition £120. **01772 780976 (Lancashire).**

**TOWNSHEND** Seismic Bars size 1, boxed, mint condition: £500. Cyrus CD Xt Signature black, light use, mint condition and boxed with remote. Four years' warranty, free postage £800. **Email: moss.collie@gmail.com (Norfolk).**

**PMC** twenty5.26 walnut loudspeakers, three months old, pristine condition, full packaging, all accessories. Move forces sale £4,000: **07494 456770.**

**KEF** Q150 loudspeakers; black, still in the shipping carton, all seals intact, buyer collects, cash only £250 ono: **email: michael.bickley@hotmail.co.uk (Birmingham area).**

**PROAC** Response D20R, latest ribbon tweeter model, black ash finish, mint and boxed. £1,399: **07788 975856 or email: tyl590@aol.com (Gloucestershire).**

**SONIC LINK** AST 150 bi-wire hi-fi speaker cable. 2x 10m, termination 4x gold-plated bananas to 2x bananas/BFA £50 ono: **07905 224156 or email: hughaelane@hotmail.com.**

**MONARCHY AUDIO** SM 70PRO power amps



**MUSICAL FIDELITY** M6 DAC £895 with original box, Firestone 5V power supply £45, also matching Firestone analogue-to-digital DAC £45, Meridian rare black 101b preamplifier, 104 tuner, 105 (2x mono amps each with power supply), so stacked three high in pairs £625: **07968 769595 (Southport).**

£299 each, £499 for the pair. Schiit Audio Gungnir Multibit DAC £450. Auralic balanced line-stage preamp £450. Cambridge Audio Aeromax 6 speakers, white. £299. Everything boxed with manuals: **07483 817584 (Scotland).**

**MONITOR AUDIO** Gold 60 loudspeakers, perfect condition, light oak, amazing sound and staging £795: **email booning4@hotmail.com.**

**CHORD ELECTRONICS** Hugo Mk1 DAC, black, like new. Not a lot of use, £640: **01656 733354 or email: pauldavies242000@yahoo.co.uk (Glamorgan).**

**ICON AUDIO** HP8 headphone amplifier with 2W speaker outlets, recently re-valved (plus spares), unboxed, buyer collects £550: **07973 132199 or email: jbourn@ntlworld.com (Bromley, Kent).**

**QUAD** 66 preamp and 606 power amp, with manuals, refurbished by Quad, invoices available, VGC, £750 ono. Pair Quad ESL-63 electrostatic speakers, also refurbished by Quad with new panels and cloths, VGC, £650 ono, £1,350 for the set. Buyer collects: **07708**

**050152 or email: pollak1000@hotmail.com (Leicester).**

**REGA** Brio-R £100, Cambridge Audio Azur 351C (black) CD £50, Yamaha KX-393 cassette £30, SMSL headphone amp £10, Wharfedale Diamond 11.2 speakers (black) and stands £200. All VGC. Buyer to collect: **07510 687880 (Cambridgeshire).**

**GARRARD** 401 chassis, no plinth. In good condition all round and full working order £599 or may take a good offer: **0207 4998729 (Cams).**

**CLEARAUDIO** Concerto V2 wood moving-coil cartridge, gold coils, in new condition, still sealed with security seal. Cost new is £2,200 will accept £1,600 ono: **01837 871253 or email mcfllis117@gmail.com.**

**BOWERS & WILKINS** 703 black ash loudspeakers, bi-wireable. Both are immaculate and unmarked with well below average use. Comes with original boxes with manual and unused accessories. £550 including delivery. Can demo, in the BS29 area: **01934 827746 or email: daviddurney@ymail.com**

**NAIM** Nait 1 amplifier. Open to offers. Silver Arrow Daddy Ref. pure silver loudspeaker cable. This cable is 2M length and in very good condition. Very reluctant sale. Cost £1,000. I am asking for £320 ono: **07432 720033.**



**NAIM** Mu-so all-in-one system, little used £400. Bluesound Node 2i streamer £230. Both in excellent condition, buyer to collect: **01280 469852 or email: dauidsangster693@sky.com (Buckinghamshire).**

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# Next Month



Following our UltraDeck+M review last issue, *HFC* takes a look at this stripped-down package from audiophile vinyl champion Mobile Fidelity

## ALSO:

**REVIEWS** Mission ZX-3, Vincent PHO-300, Russell K Red 120, Gold Note Mediterraneo, IsoTek Evo3 Titan, plus a six-way headphones *GT*

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**CONTRIBUTORS**  
Simon Berkovitch, Jeff Ginn, Paul Hirons, Paul Hocker, James Hughes, Jason Kennedy, James Parker, David Price, Neville Roberts, Ed Selley, David Vivian, Chris Ward, Nigel Williamson

**PHOTOGRAPHY** Mike Prior

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**Group Editor** Paul Miller  
**Group Art Editor** John Rook  
**Chief Executive** Owen Davies

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**Phone:** 0844 4122262  
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