



EXCLUSIVE

## Italian flair

Gold Note's one-box super solution plays it with style

## Chord Qutest

Bijou home DAC with top-flight Hugo 2 tech



# Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 436

May 2018

# Small wonders

Big on sound – six high-value standmount speakers

The Knowledge  
Essential DACs  
for every  
budget



## Beautiful System

Dynaudio and NAD show the way to perfect harmony

# 28

PRODUCTS ON TEST:

ATC, Cambridge Audio, DALI, Mission & Scansonic



## ELAC Miracord 70

Sensational turntable pack puts vinyl in the groove



MAY 2018

9 770955 111120

£4.99

US\$15.00

# One More Time

**Sometimes  
perfection needs  
a few takes**

Like the best recordings, Chord Company cables are made with care and attention to detail. Every part we use is crucial to the final performance. Non-essential components are removed, but if we find a way to improve things, we don't hesitate to give it a try. Our aim is to get closer to the artist's intended sound.

The result is a range of award-winning, cost-effective, high-performance interconnects and speaker cables featuring our unique ARAY conductor technology and advanced shielding materials, backed-up with over 30 years of innovation and experience.

Designed and built in England by music lovers since 1985. Enjoyed by music lovers all over the world.

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THE  
**CHORD**<sup>TM</sup>  
COMPANY



*"The Shawlines are really top-class interconnects... Give them an audition and hear for yourself"*

OUR VERDICT



Chord Shawline Analogue RCA  
Hi-Fi Choice July 2016

*"...there is certainly great energy and excitement with the performance. The ShawCan sure can deliver sonic benefits and so consequently comes very highly recommended."*

OUR VERDICT



Chord Shawline ShawCan  
headphone cable  
Hi-Fi Choice Nov 2017





## Musicreviews



### 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!



Few consumer electronics companies manage to be successful in both audiophile and home theatre markets as effectively as Oppo Digital has been. Known in hi-fi circles for its high-end headphone designs (like the PM-1 flagship), headphone preamps with built-in DACs (see its acclaimed HA-2SE portable DAC on p109), along with market-leading universal disc players that are just as happy spinning SACDs as they are delivering UHD Blu-ray images to 4K TV screens, the company has announced that it will be calling it a day.

On the 2 April, the surprise announcement from the Californian-based company informed us that it would be winding down its manufacturing facility. In a statement it noted: "Existing products will continue to be supported, warranties will still be valid, and warrantee repair services will continue to be available. For disc players that rely on the latest firmware, updates will be released from time to time with on going customer support."

It's not known exactly why Oppo has chosen to close its audio and disc playback part of the business, but falling demand in physical media sales is a likely contributor. Oppo's mobile business is a separate company with strong markets in China and South East Asia, and looks to be unaffected. Oppo Digital UK told us that it will continue to trade while stocks last, but it expects to close its doors later this summer.

**Lee Dunkley** Editor

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EDENBRIDGE, KENT TN8 6HF

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"Prodigiously talented, she had given her first classical piano recital at the age of 10"

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**Never miss an issue – turn to p120 for our latest subs offer**

## Cutting Edge

Cambridge Audio celebrates its 50th anniversary with a new high-end series

**PRICE:** £2,500-£4,500 **AVAILABLE:** JUNE  
**CONTACT:** 0207 9402200 **WEB:** CAMBRIDGEAUDIO.COM

**2018 MARKS 50** years since Professor Gordon Edge came up with Cambridge Audio's first product, the P40 integrated amplifier. And so it seems rather fitting that one of the British company's founders is the inspiration for this new high-end series, released specifically to celebrate its golden anniversary. In a marked change from Cambridge's more traditional affordable fare, the new Edge series is designed to bring all of the company's experience in 'Great British Sound' to produce its most accomplished system to date. Consequently, every product has been selected for its sonic merit through an exhausting set of blind auditions, rather than working towards a price, featureset or series of measurements.

### Keep it simple

The result is a stunningly distinctive series with a simple, approachable design and friendly menus. Signal paths have been kept as short as possible, capacitors completely removed (in the case of the Edge W power amp), Class XA amplification utilised to give the sound quality benefits of Class A but with greater efficiency, and opposing symmetry twin toroidal transformer arrangement that cancels out magnetic interference while offering impressive power levels.

Kicking off the range, the £4,500 Edge A amplifier offers a quoted 2x 100W RMS into 8ohm speaker loads (doubling into 4ohm), a headphone stage and a USB input that supports music files up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256. Additional connectivity includes S/PDIF coaxial and optical Toslink digital inputs plus aptX HD Bluetooth and AirPlay support

alongside balanced and unbalanced analogue inputs and a 6.35mm headphone output.

The £3,500 Edge NQ preamp and network player features a new version of StreamMagic and is fitted with a Class 2.0 USB port supporting PCM files up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD up to DSD256, while the optical Toslink and coaxial S/PDIF inputs offer up to 24-bit/96kHz. Features like Spotify Connect, AirPlay and Chromecast are included, while aptX and aptX HD Bluetooth is also on hand.

Completing the range, Cambridge describes the £2,500 Edge W as the best power amp it's ever made. With just 14 components in the signal path, it's claimed to deliver pure, unfiltered British sound with incredible power. It offers a quoted 2x 100W RMS (into 8ohm) continuous power output (and again, is rated at twice that with 4ohm loads) and like the Edge A has a USB input that supports up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256. The Edge series will be available in the UK at selected Richer Sounds stores.



## COMMENT

### JIVE TALKING

Pushed to pinpoint which specific area of the hi-fi world is most likely to enjoy growth and help drive interest in music over the coming years, what would you suggest? Vinyl? Record players? Streamers? DACs? Portable players? Multi-room? Surprisingly, the answer is smart speakers.

First released onto the market towards the end of 2014, with Amazon's Echo and Echo Dot (HFC 421), there were doubts as to how useful a loudspeaker that could be operated by voice alone would actually be. While it initially felt daft to stand and bark at your speaker: "Alexa, play David Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*", the idea isn't really any stranger than walking down the road and talking into the built-in mic on headphones instead of holding a mobile phone, and has enjoyed huge growth, with Google getting in on the act with its Home and Home Mini (HFC 434) equivalents at the tail end of 2017, closely followed by Apple's HomePod (also HFC 434). With analysts suggesting that between 24 and 27-million smart speakers were sold last year, it's no surprise that Sony, LG, Panasonic and Sonos have all launched their own Goggle Assistant-powered versions, while Spotify and Facebook are understood to be preparing their own products in the near future. As Simon Bryant at Futuresource Consulting, puts it: "The winner of today's smart speaker land grab could be the owner of tomorrow's consumer".

"So what?" you may say, "Where's the benefit for proper hi-fi?". Well, according to a report recently produced by the British Phonographic Industry and Entertainment Retailers Association, just under half of all smart speaker owners have a premium subscription to a music streaming service and just over a third spend more than four hours a day listening to it using their speakers. In short, smart speakers are taking the place of radio. In the same way that the explosion in popularity of headphones has provided many listeners with an introduction to proper hi-fi, is it really that hard to believe that smart speakers might similarly be a gateway to investing in a dedicated amplifier or streamer? We can but hope...



**Edge is a stunningly distinctive series with a simple design and friendly menus**

**The Edge lineup (from top): the NQ network player, W power amp and A integrated**



# A new kind of Magico

Introducing the A3 floorstander

**PRICE:** £11,998 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 020 89713909 **WEB:** ABSOLUTESOUNDS.COM

**HEWN ENTIRELY FROM** aircraft-grade aluminium and coated in an elegant brushed anodised skin, Magico's new A3 floorstander sure is designed to stand out from the crowd. Described by the Californian manufacturer as "the impossible made possible", the A3 incorporates a pure beryllium-diaphragm tweeter with an optimised 28mm dome surface partnered by a 153mm multi-wall carbon fibre cone midrange driver with a layer of XG Nanographene for optimal stiffness and damping. A pair of 178mm low-frequency drivers complete the lineup, boasting the company's new Gen 8 Magico Nano-Tec cone, which is claimed to offer the same properties as its midrange counterpart. With a quoted sensitivity of 88dB at 4ohm, the A3's drivers are acoustically integrated using Magico's Elliptical Symmetry Crossover topography to maximise bandwidth and minimise distortion.



## IN BRIEF

### WHARFEDALE'S DS-2 GOES BLUE

● Following on from its desktop DS-1 Bluetooth loudspeakers, Wharfedale has unveiled its next-generation DS-2 follow up. Featuring a 19mm silk dome tweeter and 75mm mid/bass driver, the wireless DS-2 outputs a claimed 2x 15W continuous power (2x 30W peak) and is designed for hook up to PCs and mobile devices. Connectivity includes a 3.5mm analogue stereo input (on the master speaker) along with the aptX version of Bluetooth. Weighing 2.9kg each and with 120 x 190 x 140mm dimensions (WxHxD), the DS-2's bass reflex enclosure is available to buy now in a choice of black or white finishes for £180.

**WHARFEDALE.CO.UK**



## Atoll's new Signature range

**PRICE:** £1,595-£2,495 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 07501 518580 **WEB:** ATOLL-GB.COM



Atoll Electronics has unveiled its new Signature range, which incorporates a pair of amplifiers alongside a matching CD player.

The IN200 and IN300 amplifiers are true dual mono designs with dual transformers, fast rectifiers and dual channel capacitors produced by Mundorf and Vishay. The £1,595 IN200 Signature boasts a claimed 120W output per channel into 8ohm, has two pairs of MOSFET transistors for each channel and symmetrical output stages with discrete components. Connectivity includes five line-level RCA inputs, a pair of XLR inputs, pre outputs for bi-amping or a subwoofer and a headphone out.

An additional digital DAC board can be added for £200.

Featuring the aforementioned DAC board – which adds coaxial and optical inputs capable of handling PCM files up to 24-bit/192kHz – the IN300 Signature increases the quoted power output to 150W. Up to DSD128 and PCM files up to 32-bit/384kHz can be played via its asynchronous USB. It's available

for £2,495 and additionally offers wireless Bluetooth connectivity.

The £1,595 CD200 Signature CD player has a drive that's claimed to be optimised for jitter reduction mounted on an anti-resonant chassis. The Burr-Brown 8x oversampling DAC supports PCM files up to 24-bit/192kHz while an optional digital source card providing USB, coax and optical inputs can be added for £200.



# Special Forty. Simply innovative.



**WHAT HI-FI?**  
**AWARDS 2017**

Stereo speakers  
Best standmount speaker £2000+  
Dynaudio Special Forty



## Cutting-edge acoustic technology in a classic Dynaudio design

New soft-dome tweeter. New woofer.

New magnet system. New anniversary speaker.

Our legendary technologies, taken back to the drawing board.



**DYNAUDIO**  
Special Forty

# Active game changer

Bijou Kii THREE loudspeaker mixes cutting-edge amplification and DSP for big sound

**PRICE:** £12,480 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 0800 0096213 **WEB:** KIIAUDIO.COM

**DESIGNED TO BE** unfussy about room positioning, the Kii THREE is a fully active loudspeaker built around Bruno Putzeys' (HFC 426) Ncore Class D power amplifiers to handle six speaker drivers firing to the front, side and rear, but working together to throw the sound in the forward direction only. Measuring just 200 x 400 x 400mm (WxHxD), the compact system from the Germany-based specialist deploys its proprietary 'Active Wave Focusing Filters' to create a time-aligned output from the front-firing 25mm tweeter and 127mm midrange, plus 2x side and 2x rear-firing 165mm bass drivers. The sophisticated DSP ensures a coherent 'forward' sound and keeps the drive units within their safe operating range. A 16-position Boundary control allows the DSP to compensate for room positioning and a 'Contour' control selects from 14-preset EQ curves to fine tune the system to your taste. Available in high gloss white and graphite satin metallic as standard, with custom colours and finishes available at extra cost.



## IN BRIEF

### AKG UNVEILS IN-EAR FLAGSHIP

● Following the UK preview at The Bristol Show in February, AKG has officially unveiled its N5005 in-ear headphone. Priced at £800, the N-series flagship uses a single 9.2mm dynamic driver and four balanced armatures to create a hybrid five-way driver system inside the high gloss black ceramic and scratch resistant ear pieces. Available now, each set has a unique serial number and comes with a carrying case and an interchangeable Bluetooth dongle for wire-free listening for up to 8 hours. **AKG.COM**



## Naim's new network players

**PRICE:** £1,999-£12,999 **AVAILABLE:** SUMMER  
**CONTACT:** 01722 426600 **WEB:** NAIMAUDIO.COM



Since their debut at The Bristol Show in February (HFC 435), Naim has released further details about its three new standalone network streamers. Each model is built around the same streaming platform found in its integrated Uniti family and includes the ND5 XS 2 (£1,999), NDX 2 (£4,999) and ND555 (£12,999). All models support PCM files up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD128 via UPnP and provide access to Tidal, Spotify and Internet Radio network streaming services, together with AirPlay, Chromecast, Bluetooth and Roon compatibility.

The ND5 XS 2 does without a display or remote control and,

with no front panel controls, is reliant on Naim's Control app, while the NDX 2 and ND555 (pictured) are fitted with a full colour LCD display as found on the Uniti models. Naim says that improvements in its ClockMaster system, power supply arrangements and output stages mean that the new network players outperform their predecessors, and any future firmware updates will be wirelessly downloaded and seamlessly controlled via the app.

The flagship ND555 is the first 500 Series product in 12 years and represents the ultimate expression of Naim's streaming

philosophy. The streaming hardware is placed in a separate enclosure within the chassis and the main boards are mounted on massive floating brass plates to ensure that they are correctly isolated. Twin Burr-Brown PCM1704U-K DACs are fitted in their own Faraday cages to isolate from interference and the unit is designed to work with the company's flagship 555 PS DR power supply (£6,999) to deliver separate digital and analogue power feeds to the streamer.

The first of the new streamers to appear will be the ND5 XS 2, followed by the two further models arriving later this summer. ►



ROTEL®

Performance  
beyond  
expectation.



RCD-1572 CD PLAYER  
RA-1572 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

## Introducing three new stereo models from Rotel.

For over half a century, Rotel has been manufacturing award winning hi-fi components that set new levels of audio performance within and often above its class. The tradition continues with the latest additions to the 15 Series. There are three new models – the RA-1572 integrated amplifier, RC-1572 preamplifier and RCD-1572 CD player.

Learn more at [rotel.com](http://rotel.com)

*Pictured with the P9 Signature headphones from Bowers & Wilkins, an exclusive partner of Rotel.*

# Webwatch

**HFC** reveals the best hi-fi websites, social media and online content to fuel your passion for sound



## Turntable orchestra

What happens when Technics gathers 30 of the world's best turntablists and gets them to scratch and cut Mendelssohn's *Concerto in E minor* (the first LP issued, back in 1948)? The Philharmonic Turntable Orchestra, that's what: [bit.ly/2G0mQRV](http://bit.ly/2G0mQRV)



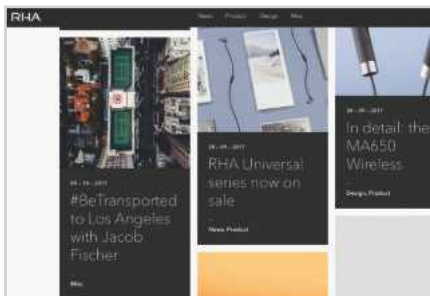
## Importance of sound

Bowers and Wilkins' superb blog is always a great read, and the latest feature – an interview with Nicolas Krauze – is no exception. The conductor of the Orchestre de Chambre Nouvelle Europe talks about music he can't live without, the importance of sound and so much more: [bit.ly/2pw9VAT](http://bit.ly/2pw9VAT)



## Treasure trove

Ortofon's Treasure Trove concept offers refurbished products that have previously been used for demos, training or reviews. They're not factory new, but are under warranty and available in small numbers at a discount. Products are available irregularly so it's worth checking often: [bit.ly/2pvCq1Q](http://bit.ly/2pvCq1Q)



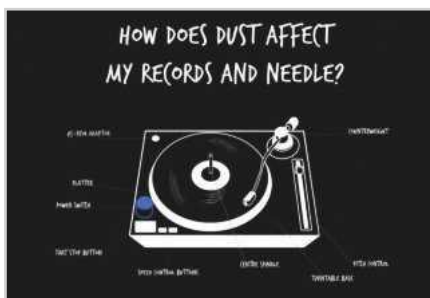
## Procrastinate with RHA

Glasgow-based RHA produces some of the most distinctive in-ear headphones in the business and its blog features everything from advice and news on its products to interviews with photographers from around the world and show reports: [rha-audio.com/uk/blog](http://rha-audio.com/uk/blog)



## Debut disc spinner

Youtube member Perlewitzaudio has put together an eclectic series of reviews including Sony's most advanced DAT Walkman and U-Turn's Orbit turntable, but the most interesting has to be the world's first CD player, Sony's CDP-101. See and hear it in all its glory here: [bit.ly/2psMQPJ](http://bit.ly/2psMQPJ)



## Time for a change

Staying on the subject of needles, The Vinyl Factory's series of Vinyl FAQ videos is perfect for virgin vinylistas, providing invaluable advice on everything from when it's time to change the needle on your turntable to how dust affects the playback of your records: [bit.ly/2q5et03](http://bit.ly/2q5et03)

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## CHOICE TWEETS



**CYRUS AUDIO LTD @CYRUSAUDIO**  
Lovely to hear Nile Rodgers is appointed Chief Creative Advisor at Abbey Road Studios



**CHORD ELECTRONICS @CHORDAUDIO**  
It's not uncommon to see immaculate 20-year-old amplifiers like this SPM1200B, come in for a service, but our digital sources are equally robust, the new DAVE (left, with the BLU MKII transport) is an evolution of a 20-year-old design which still outclasses regular chip DACs.



**RECORD STORE DAY UK @RSDUK**  
Only one month 'til #RSD18. Sign up to our mailing list for all the latest updates and release info! <http://bit.ly/2IT1PzU>



**KEF AUDIO UK @KEFAUDIO**  
Set up the #KEF Kube where it's most convenient to you; match it to any main speaker or with any type of music system and start exploring new depths in your sound. Kube #Subwoofer – <https://goo.gl/UFbxes>



**ARCAM OF CAMBRIDGE @ARCAMUK**  
Experience the latest blockbuster the way you've always wanted. #Arcam #SR250 combines the performance of a fully equipped AV receiver w/ the ease of a stereo amp to deliver world-class audio & simple operation. <http://www.arcam.co.uk/products/FMJ-Stereo-AV-Receiver,sr250.htm> ... #AV #hifi #hometheatre #audiophile



**BOWERS & WILKINS @BOWERSWILKINS**  
868. The number of changes that went into the 800 Series Diamond from the previous incarnation. #SoundMatters



**NAIM AUDIO @NAIMAUDIO**  
Quality Streaming for Quality Listening. TIDAL x Naim, experience music how it should be with uncompressed audio files, boasting the best listening experience on the streaming market. [#TIDALxNAIM](http://bit.ly/TIDALxNAIM) #TIDAL #NaimAudio #MusicReimagined



**LINN RECORDS @LINNRECORDS**  
On Bach's birthday we are spoilt for choice, since so many great recordings of his music exist. We recommend @KKUNIKO, @DunedinConsort, @AcadPrincipal, William Carter, Pavlo Beznosiuk, Nigel North & Matthew Halls. <http://bit.ly/LINNJSB>



**DISCOGS @DISCOGS**  
Worried About Disc Rot? Here's How To Look After Your CDs: <http://disc.gs/CDcare>



**AUDIO T @AUDIOTGROUP**  
Sound & Vision – The Bristol Show Vox Pops 2018: <http://youtu.be/Ee09vvV39q0?> via @YouTube



**ABBAY ROAD STUDIOS @ABBAYROAD**  
The past year has seen the biggest transformation in Abbey Road's history with the opening of 2 new studios, a mix stage, plus new audio tech innovation, so we are thrilled to share that we have won 2018 Studio of the Year at tonight's @ukMPG Awards. Congrats to the whole team!



**MELCO AUDIO @MELCOAUDIO**  
If you want to sample hi-res #streaming from @qobuz at no cost, you can do so with this playlist: <http://open.qobuz.com/playlist/1452463> Enjoy

The new 800 Series Diamond  
didn't get better by chance.  
It got better by change.  
868 changes to be precise.

Bowers & Wilkins

[bowers-wilkins.com](http://bowers-wilkins.com)



# Trade up to 800 Series Diamond

This spring, upgrade to any one of the 800 Series Diamond range and your retailer will buy your existing loudspeakers, regardless of their age, condition or brand\*. 800 Series Diamond represents the pinnacle of performance with Continuum drivers, and iconic Diamond Dome Tweeters that deliver sound quality that will leave you speechless. **Contact your local retailer to find out about upgrade options or visit [bowers-wilkins.co.uk](http://bowers-wilkins.co.uk)**

## NORTH

Acoustica, Chester 01244 344227 <a href="http://acoustica.co.uk">acoustica.co.uk</a> <a href="mailto:info@acoustica.co.uk">info@acoustica.co.uk</a>	Hi-Fi Corner, Edinburgh 0131 556 7901 <a href="http://hificorner.co.uk">hificorner.co.uk</a> <a href="mailto:sales@hificorner.co.uk">sales@hificorner.co.uk</a>	Lintone Audio, Gateshead 0191 4774167 <a href="http://lintone.co.uk">lintone.co.uk</a> <a href="mailto:sales@lintone.co.uk">sales@lintone.co.uk</a>	Sound Organisation, York 01904 627108 <a href="http://soundorg.co.uk">soundorg.co.uk</a> <a href="mailto:info@soundorg.co.uk">info@soundorg.co.uk</a>
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## SOUTH

Audience, Bath 01225 333310 <a href="http://audience.org.uk">audience.org.uk</a> <a href="mailto:info@audience.org.uk">info@audience.org.uk</a>	Grahams Hi-Fi, Islington 020 7226 5500 <a href="http://grahams.co.uk">grahams.co.uk</a> <a href="mailto:enq@grahams.co.uk">enq@grahams.co.uk</a>	Oranges & Lemons, Battersea 020 7924 2040 <a href="http://oandlhifi.co.uk">oandlhifi.co.uk</a> <a href="mailto:sales@oandlhifi.co.uk">sales@oandlhifi.co.uk</a>	Soundcraft Hi-Fi, Ashford 01233 624441 <a href="http://soundcraftthifi.com">soundcraftthifi.com</a> <a href="mailto:sales@soundcraftthifi.com">sales@soundcraftthifi.com</a>
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Frank Harvey Hi Fi Excellence Coventry, 02476 631 707 <a href="http://hifix.co.uk">hifix.co.uk</a> <a href="mailto:sales@hifix.co.uk">sales@hifix.co.uk</a>	Nintronics, Hertfordshire 01707 320788 <a href="http://nintronics.co.uk">nintronics.co.uk</a> <a href="mailto:sales@nintronics.co.uk">sales@nintronics.co.uk</a>	Senso Systems, Truro 01872 273215 <a href="http://senso-systems.co.uk">senso-systems.co.uk</a> <a href="mailto:michael@senso-systems.co.uk">michael@senso-systems.co.uk</a>	

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# Bowers & Wilkins

\*The 800 Series Diamond trade-up promotion runs from 1st May 2018 to 31st July 2018. Participating retailers only. Buy back value is at participating retailers' discretion. Offer valid on the following models in the 800 Series Diamond range: 805 D3, 804 D3, 803 D3, 802 D3 and 800 D3.







# Going for Gold

This Italian super integrated is impressively ambitious. **Ed Selley** get to grips with the one-box music system that does it all



#### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Gold Note IS-1000

**ORIGIN**  
Italy

**TYPE**  
One-box system

**WEIGHT**  
18kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 135 x 375mm

#### FEATURES

- Claimed power output: 2x 125W RMS (8ohm)
- 24-bit/192kHz PCM and DSD64-capable DAC
- UPnP streaming; AirPlay
- Digital inputs: 3x optical; 1x coaxial; 1x USB-A
- Analogue inputs: 2x RCA (1x MM/MC switchable); 1x XLR
- Integrated Tidal, Qobuz and Spotify streaming

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Audio Pinnacle Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01420 544140

**WEBSITE**  
goldnote.it

**B**illed as the ‘complete all-in-one super integrated amplifier’, Gold Note’s IS-1000 is an ambitious design to bridge the gap between a traditional standalone integrated amp and an all-in-one music system with network streaming in an almost imperceptible way. At its heart it’s an integrated amplifier with a Class A/B output section, claiming a healthy 2x 125W into 8ohm that doubles to 250W into 4ohm. The model reviewed here is priced at £3,820, but if your setup demands even greater power Gold Note offers a 2x 150W output version into 8ohm, taking the cost to £4,370.

Connectivity is impressive and analogue sources are catered for via three inputs; one via XLR and two using RCA phonos. The first of the RCA connections can be used as a conventional line-level input or as a phono stage input for a turntable and configured for moving-magnet or moving-coil cartridges – the circuitry for which is derived from the company’s flexible PH-10 phono stage (£1,150).

Digital inputs are catered for via one coaxial and three optical connections. These make use of a Burr-Brown

## Honest tonal realism complements pretty much everything you choose to play

PCM1796 DAC chip, and support decoding at sample rates up to 24-bit/192kHz across all inputs (a higher-spec PCM1792 option is also available for an extra £680). This is joined by a USB Type-A port that will read PCM files up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD64.

As well as being a hi-fi hub for all your audio sources, the IS-1000 also includes a streaming module which can connect to your network wi-fi or wired via an Ethernet port, and just like the digital inputs it supports network audio at sample rates up to PCM 24-bit/192kHz and DSD64. You also get native access to a range of streaming services including Tidal, Qobuz, Deezer, Spotify and internet radio via vTuner, while AirPlay protocol support is also on board.

For this review, control is handled via the third-party mconnect control app. While it has some niggles, it is quick, stable and easy to use – Gold Note isn’t the only company to use it (see How It Compares). A Gold Note app is in development and due for release soon.

Tying the functionality together is a control interface that lurks somewhere ▶



between clever and idiosyncratic. It uses the dial on the front panel as a push-and-turn control to scroll through and change settings on a large colour display. Once you get to grips with it the effect is pleasingly slick, but the lack of any direct input selection is a little irritating as I find it too easy to leave the input selection highlighted and inadvertently select another input when wanting to adjust the volume.

There is a remote, but it's small and not terribly responsive, which is a bit disappointing, although the IS-1000 is designed to be controlled via its own app on iOS and Android devices. The casework of the unit is absolutely lovely and the curved ventilation slots either side of the Gold Note logo are nicely judged at the asking price. It all manages to look and feel special and build quality is generally excellent.

## Sound quality

Connected to a pair of Dynaudio Special Forty standmounts (HFC 434), the IS-1000 shows some behavioural characteristics in common with the company's Valore 425 Plus turntable (HFC 424). While

it can be easy to stereotype Italian audio products as smooth and mellifluous, this isn't the Gold Note way. Instead, it majors on scale and drive to great effect. Listening to the 16/44.1 download of GusGus' *Lies Are More Flexible*, the performance with the epic *Fuel* is very impressive. There is a sense of a vast unfettered soundstage that extends in front of and well beyond the listener. Despite the scale, the positioning of instruments and effects is accurate and unerringly consistent.

This is backed up by an effortless sense of power and drive that benefits less potent music as well as it does electronica. Ray LaMontagne's *Repo Man* has the impact required to convey the vigour and energy of the band's performance. Again, there is a sense of order and positioning that helps you to close your eyes and be 'there' in a way that some rivals struggle to match. Equally impressive is its honest and believable tonal realism that complements pretty much everything you choose to play, and there's enough of a slight gravel in the vocals that it becomes a tangible part of the performance

**Don't be fooled by the simplicity of the front fascia, there's a lot going on here**

supported by instruments with genuine weight and decay.

There is an impressive sense of rhythmic energy to the way that the IS-1000 goes about making music and it engages on an emotional level too. The 24/88.2 download of Kraftwerk's *Minimum-Maximum* benefits from this impressive sense of flow and drive and the *Tour De France* suite of tracks positively hammers along. There is no sense of overhang to the rapid-fire bassline and combined with the depth and impact that it extracts from the Dynaudios, the result is tremendously entertaining. This feeling of agility isn't dependent on there being a heavyweight bassline either. The lightning-fast guitar of The Sword's *Used Future* is also relayed with all the frenetic energy very much intact.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the digital inputs closely match the performance of the streaming module. The decision to go with a Burr-Brown DAC has the very definite subjective benefit of the

**Gold Note offers a 2x 150W output version into 8ohm, taking the cost to £4,370**

digital front end having a pleasing sense of refinement and a slight tonal darkness that makes this an easy product to listen to for long periods of time. It isn't always perfect; listening to the beautifully recorded 24/96 FLAC of *The Chopin Project* by Ólafur Arnalds and Alice Sara Ott there is the feeling that the piano lacks the last fraction of energy and sparkle that this beautiful work can benefit from. The counter to this is that the IS-1000 gets stuck into some lesser quality recordings and handles them in a manner that keeps me listening

## CONNECTIONS



- 1 3x optical digital inputs
- 2 Coaxial digital input
- 3 Ethernet port
- 4 Unbalanced RCA outputs
- 5 Unbalanced RCA inputs
- 6 Balanced XLR inputs



#### SUPER INTEGRATED

Gold Note describes the IS-1000 as a 'super integrated amp' in its literature and is an example of a trend where integrations assume the role of source equipment as well as the traditional job of driving speakers and adding gain.

Thanks to the network streaming module complete with streaming service support, the IS-1000 has no need for any source equipment to function, which technically puts it in the realm of an all-in-one music system. Looking at the specification of Simaudio's Moon Néo Ace (HFC 420) and the more recently introduced Naim Uniti Nova – both of which are described as all-in-ones – the feature list of

the IS-1000 has a great deal in common. The difference seems to come down to company ranges. Both Simaudio and Naim make more conventional integrated amps while the IS-1000 is Gold Note's sole device of this nature, so it has plumped for the title of integrated amplifier.

This suggests that consumers still attribute different qualities to components described as an amplifier, even when it also contains at least one of your likely sources. It will be interesting to see if this changes over time as the products themselves continue to evolve and the shape and construction of the systems we build changes too.

along happily rather than leaving me feeling fatigued.

Coming from the company's dedicated upmarket preamp, the phono stage feels well engineered. Connected to a Michell GyroDec with SME M2-9 tonearm and van den Hul DDT II special moving-coil cartridge (HFC 425), the basics are all in place. There is no background noise, while the plentiful gain on tap ensures that the performance has a real sense of dynamic range to it. This allows Yazz Ahmed's *La Saboteuse* to rise out of the extremely quiet background of the record with no discernible sense of amplification or processing taking place. Compared with my standalone Cyrus Phono Signature MM/MC phono stage (HFC 408), the internal stage of the IS-1000 lacks the last fractional ounce of bass weight, but for a built-in preamp it offers strong performance and can usefully be switched out if you find you need that RCA input for a line-level component.

#### Conclusion

One of the most important and overarching aspects of the IS-1000's performance is that it feels like a single cohesive unit rather than a

collection of elements partnered together in a nice-looking box. The way it carries out its extensive functionality is sufficiently homogenous once you are dialled into the control system that you can happily make use of everything it does to form a very capable music system indeed. This isn't a traditional integrated amplifier, but one that reflects the requirements of audio enthusiasts in 2018, and if you are looking for an amp with a built-in network music streaming source, it makes a great deal of sense ●

#### Hi-Fi Choice

##### OUR VERDICT

###### SOUND QUALITY



###### VALUE FOR MONEY



###### BUILD QUALITY



###### FEATURES



###### OVERALL



**LIKE:** Spacious and involving performance; excellent specification and build

**DISLIKE:** Supplied handset; slight lack of top end sparkle

**WE SAY:** A super integrated amplifier for today's audio fans with audiophile sensibilities



The IS-1000's closest competitor is Leema Acoustics Quasar one-box streaming music system (HFC 425). This also uses the mconnect control app for its streaming section and closely matches the Gold Note in terms of its connectivity. The IS-1000 commands an £800 price premium over the more powerful Leema and whether this is worth it to you will come down to the presence of that very capable phono stage and whether the lovely casework is worth the extra cost. In performance terms, both units offer an exceptionally capable core to a modern system.

## Q&A

**Maurizio Aterini**  
Founder, Gold Note



**ES:** The IS-1000 is closer to an all-in-one system than a classic integrated. Was this the intention?

**MA:** Our heritage comes from the audiophile domain so the idea behind the IS-1000 was to combine the best of our world with the simplicity of an all-in-one to create a new kind of machine. With the IS-1000 we can deliver the audio quality expected from an 'audiophile' integrated amp while offering a versatile and complete solution to enjoy music.

**What are the advantages of a display and menu-driven operation over more conventional controls?**

We strongly believe that well-designed audio equipment should be easy and pleasant to use on a daily basis. Good sound and ease of use should go hand in hand even if it means more complex engineering. Using a display with a menu not only allows the user to adjust every single function in a few seconds, it also shows the status at a glance.

**Is the power amp section derived from the PA-1175 power amplifier?**

Whenever we approach a new project the starting question is always "How can we make it sound best?" Since the research and development work done on the power amp PA-1175 and the preamp P-1000 gave such great results, we developed a design that comes directly from the PA-1175. The IS-1000's amplifier stage is based on MOSFETS – unlike the PA-1175, which uses power transistors – to maximise the efficiency in terms of power since the architecture of the IS-1000 is more compressed.

**Where does the IS-1000 sit in the Gold Note range?**

The IS-1000 is the first step into a new direction: it's the completion of the current line of electronics, but it also embraces a whole new concept of hi-fi. For the moment, our efforts will be aimed to achieve the best possible results in audio quality and compatibility with the IS-1000. In future there may be other models exploring the new hi-fi frontier.



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*van den Hul*

# How we test

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

## Unique group tests

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

### STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER GROUP TEST

**NO LOUDSPEAKER PERFORMS** optimally fresh from the box. All six standmount models here are treated to several days running with varied source material to settle in. Additionally, each pair of loudspeakers and the system electronics are thoroughly warmed up before critical listening commences. Auditioning is done in the smaller of my listening rooms, which is L-shaped, furnished and carpeted to give a quite dry and well-damped acoustic character.

Over the course of a week, positioning and support types are experimented with, though in the majority of cases, heavyweight 24in Slate Audio stands are used. The listening position is adjusted so the tweeter is roughly at ear height,

and the loudspeaker 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 the models that come supplied with foam bungs for their reflex ports, these are tried both in and out to get the best balance. Toe-in is also experimented with; generally a few degrees is applied, which snaps the stereo image into focus and opens up the treble.

With the setup completed, each speaker system is auditioned with other designs reinstated to cross reference the results. Levels are carefully matched and a wide variety of CD, vinyl and hi-res music is used, although four key CD tracks are focused on.



### BLIND LISTENING TESTS

This crucial process is very carefully controlled so that we get reliable and consistent results in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Our listeners must not feel that they're being tested, despite being unaware of the brand or price of the products they are auditioning.

The session begins by setting the volume level to an agreed point, one that all three panellists feel comfortable with, yet that is

high enough to make differences easily discernible. Then the choice of music is agreed – it needs to be familiar, but also well recorded and of sufficient variety to give meaningful listening comparisons. The chosen selection of music is played, and the panellists are encouraged to discuss their impressions of the sound of the product. This is then repeated, and periodically the panel listens to earlier products for reference purposes. The

consensus, or otherwise then forms the basis of our sound quality section.

At the end of the session, there's a final debrief when panellists discuss their findings. It's an exhaustive process, but carried out in this way is free from prejudices based on brand, price or appearance, while the different sensitivities of the listeners help to round out the analysis in order to make it more widely applicable.

### REFERENCE SYSTEM

**CD TRANSPORT**  
Cambridge Audio CXC

**DAC**  
Chord Electronics Hugo 2

**AMPLIFIER**  
Rega Elex-R

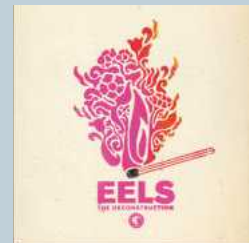
**CABLES**  
Loudspeaker: Nordost Red Dawn  
Interconnects: Nordost Heimdall

### CD TEST MUSIC

**THE BEACH BOYS**  
*Surf's Up*  
*Disney Girls*



**EELS**  
*The Deconstruction*  
*The Deconstruction*



**NATHAN EAST**  
*Nathan East*  
*I Can Let Go Now (Feat. Sara Bareilles)*



**THIRTY SECONDS TO MARS**  
*America*  
*Walk On Water*



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you get when  
watching 4K films is  
worth every penny ”



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excels ”



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they've ever looked  
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# Group**test**

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS £400-£500

## Bijou standmounts big on sound

**David Vivian** settles down to audition six compact loudspeakers aiming to prove that spending a little more on your budget standmount can reap big rewards

**IF YOUR IDEA** of a hi-fi system still revolves around amplification with cables trailing behind, achieving a super sound has never been more affordable. Even if the lure of a wireless setup is just too hard to resist, be assured that a canny coalition of inexpensive separates joined together with wires still takes some beating if pure musical satisfaction is the goal – not least because every major speaker manufacturer knows that an entry-level standmount simply has to make a good impression as it could easily be the component that hooks customers into the brand. It's why choosing from the plethora of talented designs in the £150-£350 price bracket almost certainly guarantees solid sound quality if chosen wisely.

But, even armed with trickle-down possibilities from pricier models and the green light to make a good impression, there's only so far speaker designers can go on a budget so tight it twangs. Loosen the fiscal constriction, however, and those same designers can be more adventurous

and command better-quality materials and components. If they work for large companies with commensurately large resources and R&D budgets, the cutting edge tech and innovation they bring to bear can be that much sharper. If they don't, a little ingenuity, craft and some experienced ears can go a long way.

### International trade

Maybe banking on that, the only indie-produced Brit contender here comes from Epos, and it's up against some serious corporate big hitters. Mission and Elipson set up a fascinating Anglo-French showdown with the two largest, heaviest speakers in the group. Hoping to eclipse their best game, DALI and Dynaudio bring an on-going Danish rivalry to the table with somewhat daintier duellists. And entering from the far leftfield, US brand Klipsch does things a little differently but with evangelistic confidence and a bit of cult following. I have a feeling this one could go down to the wire. ▶

### ON TEST



**DALI Opticon 1** £499 **p27**

If you're looking for a true miniature with a spacious sound without the box taking up too much space, this Danish offering presses all the right buttons.



**Dynaudio Emit M10** £499 **p29**

Denmark's other contender is also small, but don't let that fool you. What Dynaudio doesn't know about extracting a big, solid sound from a bijou box isn't worth knowing.



**Elipson Prestige Facet 8B** £499 **p31**

This larger standmount represents something of a new dawn for the French company, with an update of its long-running and well-regarded Prestige range.



**Epos K1i** £499 **p33**

An assiduously tweaked and fettled version of Epos' well-liked K1 might just set the cat among the pigeons. It's a classic Brit standmount and, moreover, it looks absolutely great.



**Klipsch RP-150M** £450 **p35**

Toting a horn-loaded tweeter, a horn-shaped reflex port and a heritage that reaches all the way back to 1946, this is a speaker with a point to prove. And a copper-coloured driver.



**Mission QX2** £399 **p37**

Mission's newbie is the cheapest speaker here by a breezy margin, but it doesn't feel it and, with its retro/hi-tech fusion aesthetic, it doesn't look it. Can its sonic talents compete with the rest?





All the *style*, with no  
compromise on **sound**



## Debut III S Audiophile

The Debut III S Audiophile takes the iconic, multi-award winning Debut design and adds advanced features to enhance the look and performance to an all-new standard.

With new features, including the one-piece S-Shape tonearm, Pick-IT 25A cartridge and upgraded turntable feet, the latest addition to the Debut range delivers a very harmonic and warm sound to impress even the most experienced audiophile.



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## BABY DRIVER

The DALI way is to do almost everything in-house, the sole exception being dome tweeters which, while designed by DALI, are manufactured by Scan-Speak. When it comes to the dinky mid/bass driver as used in the Opticon 1, however, the Danish brand has ploughed its own unique development path, side-lining the usual solid iron cores for a soft magnetic compound formulated from a composite of materials, including magnetic granules, with the aim of improving efficiency, reducing electrical conductivity and significantly lowering distortion – assets permitting a crossover design that retains a flat frequency response across the critical midrange where the ear is at its most sensitive.

# DALI

## Opticon 1 £499

The smallest speaker often starts off as the underdog, but small can be good, especially if it's made by DALI

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
DALI Opticon 1

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
4.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
152 x 261 x 231mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 26mm fabric  
dome tweeter  
● 1x 121mm  
mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
86dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
DALI Audio UK Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
0845 6443537

**WEBSITE**  
dali-speakers.com/  
uk

**A**lmost lovably petite, the Opticon 1 is the smallest speaker in the group by a clear margin, which means it will fit almost anywhere. For the purposes of coaxing out its best performance, however, its journey starts atop my Slate Audio stands and Townshend Podiums, initially pulled a little way into the room. The cabinet feels solid and inert and is quite weighty for its size. Round the back, the small reflex port is angled downwards beneath the high-quality, gold-plated binding posts.

The Opticon 1 has been designed to be placed close to the wall or even mounted on it to give the lower frequencies a helping hand. That said, a surprising internal volume of almost 5 litres and the rear port provide decent support for the 121mm low-loss wood-fibre mid/bass driver, which uses exactly the same cone material as DALI's flagship Epicon models – likewise the unique Soft Magnetic Compound magnet motor system, claimed to deliver a high magnetic conductivity and a very low electrical conductivity. The 26mm ultra-light soft-dome tweeter, however, is new and has been developed specially for the Opticon range.

As with the mid/bass drive unit, all the woodwork that goes to make the Opticon 1's enclosure is carried out by

DALI's large facility in Denmark. The matt satin white of the review pair looks very smart, but black and walnut finishes are also available.

### Sound quality

Immediately impressive is an airy soundstage with good dimensionality and specificity, if a little restricted in scale. The Beach Boys' famous nostalgia-fest *Disney Girls* is perhaps too starkly enunciated. But a more gorgeously warm, cuddly and velvety recording it would be hard to imagine and the little speaker lets you hear that without any need to be brimming over with tonal balm itself. A small production, maybe, but deftly realised.

Re-positioning the speaker to within a few inches of the rear wall certainly plumps up the bass. Perhaps that's a must to respect the weighty bedrock of low end on Thirty Seconds From Mars' anthemic *Walk On Water*. But it also sacrifices some of its previous agility and texture. Sure, small speaker bass nearly always lacks weight and extension without boundary reinforcement, but I prefer the DALI's fast, taut and nimble offering with no fat or flab.

It's a speaker that revels in its midrange and upper bass. It knows exactly what it can and can't do. Pulled back away from the wall its treble can seem a little exposed, but



An airy soundstage despite the small cabinet

the animated clarity and detail are beyond question listening to the carefully crafted acoustic and ethereal electronic effects that run through much of Eels *The Deconstruction*. You rarely get the feeling you're missing anything, save low bass and heft ●

## HIFIChoice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Fast, airy, animated sound quality; small-size convenience; build

**DISLIKE:** Lacks scale and bass authority

**WE SAY:** Talented and fun, but rather overwhelmed in this company



**NCF BOOSTER**  
Connector & Cable Holder



FI-50 NCF



FI-50M NCF

FI-E50 NCF



FI-UK1363 NCF

## NCF Series



Nano Crystal<sup>2</sup> Formula - Nano Crystalline, Ceramic and Carbon Powder Incorporated into selected Furutech products, NCF features a special crystalline material that has two 'active' properties. First, it generates negative ions that eliminate static. Second, it converts thermal energy into far infrared. Furutech combines this remarkable material with nano-sized ceramic particles and carbon powder for their additional 'piezoelectric effect' damping properties. The resulting Nano Crystal<sup>2</sup> Formula is the ultimate electrical and mechanical damping material. Created by Furutech, it is found exclusively in Furutech products

## Refinement Has a New Name... Furutech's Top-of-the-Line Flux Cable series



Nanoflux-NCF UK



Speakerflux



## THE PLEASURE DOME

Dynaudio has relied on silk soft-dome tweeters for recreating high frequencies since it was founded, continuously improving and perfecting the soft-dome principle over the years. Its tweeter designs necessitate a labour-intensive manufacturing process where the fine fabric diaphragm is shaped into a dome and then treated with a specially formulated coating. As a further refinement, its aluminium voice coil is suspended in a magnetic oil to increase power handling and improve the dome's excursion. So the fabric dome is king and Dynaudio is rightly proud of its tweeters, which it claims achieve a higher level of balanced and natural frequency response than any other design.

# Dynaudio

## Emit M10 £499



As the entry model to its range, Dynaudio understands the importance of making a good first impression

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Dynaudio Emit M10

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
5.6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
170 x 292 x 240mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 28mm soft-dome tweeter  
● 1x 140mm MSP mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Dynaudio UK Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01638 742427

**WEBSITE**  
dynaudio.com

**H**aving largely ditched its wilfully wacky designs, Dynaudio's Emit M10 is a smart, well-finished box with nicely chamfered edges at the front that's only slightly larger than the DALI, though once you've pulled away the grilles the bare baffle's exposed fixings aren't quite as pretty. Even so, the solid, no-frills approach is refreshingly unselfconscious and raises expectations for a similarly honest performance, as do the chunky, high-quality binding posts.

A 140mm MSP mid/bass driver and 28mm soft-dome tweeter team up with a first-order crossover and what should be an amp-friendly linear 6ohm impedance. The tweeter deserves special mention. Named D280, it's a derivative of the D260 used in speakers from much further up the Dynaudio food chain. It has a silk soft dome with Dynaudio's 'precision coating' – a process that has been continuously developed and updated over the years.

The critically tuned bass-reflex port and long-throw main driver are said to be optimised for smaller and mid-size rooms and Dynaudio's designers claim the M10 will still work "shoved up against a wall or on a shelf – because we know not everyone has (or wants) a dedicated listening room".

In spite of this, the M10 is afforded the same luxury of super-heavyweight Slate Audio stands and bouncy Townshend Podium isolation, with a degree of flexibility allowed for boundary proximity and toe-in.

### Sound quality

Two things are apparent from the off. Mild toe-in helps focus the sound and the M10 doesn't actually need much bass reinforcement. It's at its best around a foot away from a rear wall. And that 'best' is very good indeed. Rather than be a small speaker trying hard to sound like a large one, the M10 takes the virtues of a superbly realised large speaker and downscales them to work optimally with a smaller box. All right, there's less bang for your buck, but musically everything is picture perfect.

It would be hard to make *Disney Girls* sound anything other than 'nice', but the balance and natural sense of proportion is beautifully judged. Again, dealing with the busy, twinkling upper-register complexity of Eels' *The Deconstruction* there's genuine transparency rather than spotlight detail. The Dynaudio is so exquisitely voiced, I can't begin to imagine the hours of fine tuning that must have been poured into it. What it lacks in slam, it makes up for in speed and subtlety. No, the massed



**Musically the performance is absolutely pitch perfect**

strings that cushion Sara Bareilles' pure and sonorous vocal on *I Can Let Go Now* aren't the warmest or most fulsome in the group, but the fine sense of individual instruments playing with a proper, breathing harmonic life is just as appealing ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Clean, balanced, musical presentation; classy tweeter

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not a particularly big hitter; workmanlike cabinet

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** In any other group this would be a clear winner

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





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## BLACK DIAMOND

Elipson's big speaker revamp happened in 2016 with the aim of enhancing "musicality and emotion". In an effort to improve the cabinet's damping factor porous materials were chosen for their absorption coefficient and frequency range. As a result, the PF8B's front panels are reinforced with a thicker panel for improved inertia. The company feels that providing twin binding posts is important, too, allowing audiophiles to bi-wire or bi-amp should they wish. The aim of the sculpted diamond-pattern silicon rings that surround the drivers is to minimise the baffle effect and ensure a symmetrical polarisation of the high frequencies for a smoother and clearer response and improved listening experience.

# Elipson

## Prestige Facet 8B £499



This is the French company's price point best-game offering with an update of a more conventional design

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Elipson Prestige Facet 8B

**ORIGIN**  
France

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
230 x 360 x 347mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 25mm soft-dome tweeter  
● 1x 170mm mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity: 91dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Avoke Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01628 484968

**WEBSITE**  
elipson.com

**A** significant bump up in size and bulk for our nominal £500 outlay, the Elipson offering comes with an optional screw-in plinth that increases its already substantial footprint size, but not the sound quality if you have a good stand to hand. There's a different approach to design and materials here, too: heavily radiused corners, an unusual mix of tough, durable matt-black exterior (walnut or white finishes are also available), super-beefy build and distinctive drivers. It's also the first model with twin binding posts to enable bi-wiring or bi-amping (made something of a feature by being mounted on a protruding mound of plastic), while the bass reflex port just above is of the big-bore variety.

It's the ring of sculpted silicon facets surrounding each driver that gives the range its name. At 360mm high, this is the second tallest speaker in the group and, by a small margin over the Mission, the deepest as well. The 170mm mid/bass driver looks meaty with a prominent bullet-shaped phase plug at its centre, which is joined by a conventional 25mm soft-dome tweeter.

Being bigger has its advantages when it comes to efficiency, but even so, the claimed 91dB is good going, removing the need for a muscle-bound amplifier (our Rega Elex-R's

little brother, the 2x 50W Brio, would be more than ample here) and promising good dynamics.

### Sound quality

The PF8B makes a great first impression. The Beach Boys are on a larger stage with a greater sense of ease, smoothness and refinement. There are more layers of luxury – akin to stepping from an Audi A8 to a Bentley Silver Spur. Bass is weightier and more propulsive, tonal colours more saturated and richer. It's a 'fatter' presentation that doesn't sound as conspicuously fast and crisp as that of the DALI and Dynaudio, but only because everything is bigger and fuller bodied. What's more, the low frequencies go lower, giving *Walk On Water* a palpable presence and power the smaller speakers here can't quite emulate. On top of its musical skills and subtlety, the Elipson can pump it out at party levels in larger rooms, too.

Its midrange is sexier because it's not the be-all and end-all, not the speaker's *raison d'être*. It's actually excellent, but what's so appealing is the way it integrates with the muscular, extended bass and silky treble to present such a seamless, coherent whole. This works as well with Sara Bareilles as it does Eels. Nothing is forced, rushed or dragged; nothing hyped or held back to create

The musical flow is just one of many highlights



a particular sonic profile. It may not be the most resolute or articulate speaker in the group and, sensibly, gives forensic analysis the swerve. But it is very much a master of the way musical strands fit together and flow and so is very easy to buy into ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Big, smooth, powerful, plushy upholstered sound; material value

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Marmite appearance; a tad too laid back

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A hair's width away from outright excellence, but impressive all the same

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL



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# Epos

## K1i £499

With a fine Brit-fi pedigree, the K1i showcases Epos' very particular ideas about how to build a great loudspeaker



### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Epos K1i

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
5.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
185 x 295 x 226mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 25mm soft-dome tweeter  
● 1x 150mm polypropylene cone mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Epos Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01442 260148

**WEBSITE**  
epos-loudspeakers.com

**B**ehold the pristine white box. Or black box. There's even a limited edition walnut veneer box. But go for white, like the review sample, and you can see more clearly just how neatly the contrasting black tweeter and mid/bass driver have been sunk into the baffle. Just surfaces, no visible fixings. A slot-type reflex port towards the base of the baffle completes the spotless, minimalist vibe. The other notable physical feature is its enclosure's removable rear panel. This serves two functions. First, it makes it easy to swap the passive crossover for an active network upgrade so the speaker can be self-powered with the Epos Active-K module. For the second, see the 'Back off' boxout opposite.

Driver complement is nothing too out of the ordinary, comprising a 25mm soft-dome tweeter and 150mm mid/bass driver with a polypropylene cone and high-temperature voice coil. A clamping mechanism is used to secure the drivers and to reduce unwanted vibrations. The crossover uses high-quality polypropylene capacitors and metal oxide resistors and all the internal wiring is oxygen-free copper. Further performance enhancements include closer tolerance tweeter selection, strengthened internal bracing for

lower cabinet colouration, improved internal damping and a double-sided PCB for lower resistance connections between crossover components.

### Sound quality

Oodles of couth. Maple syrup tonality. In short, the K1i is smoother than a peach that's been smothered in face cream. This speaker doesn't do tickled up sparkle or transients so sharp they glint in the sun. It doesn't quite have the cut-glass clarity of the Dynaudio or DALI offerings and can sound a little bunched up when things get loud, dense and busy – as they frequently do with *Walk On Water*.

If you want dangerous decibels and depth charge bass, forget it. Hi-fi histrionics aren't on the menu. *Disney Girls* is a pure delight – more than a master class in mellow, it positively glows. The K1i isn't on the front foot with snap and conviction, it doesn't breathe quite as freely or have the dynamic freedom of the best in the group. But it is very articulate, composed and in control.

And something of a slow burner. The longer you listen the more musically compelling it becomes. Sara Bareilles' exquisite performance of *I Can Let Go Now* is lushly detailed, beguiling, musical and emotionally replete. And even when asked to dig deep, lower registers are clean,

### BACK OFF

Epos regards cabinet colouration as a critical area of design that is often overlooked. Not so with the K-Series. Not only are the cabinets carefully braced internally, they have also been developed with removable rear baffles. This is an idea dating back to the ES11's sandwich construction method. The theory is to reduce the energy absorbed by the cabinet. One way to achieve this is by making the rear baffle a separate element in the construction. The aim is a reduction in cabinet colouration, or unwanted resonance. Being able to remove the back allows the Ki to be converted from a passive to an 'active digital' product using Epos' optional Active-K module. This allows the K1i to be at the heart of a modern hi-res setup.



nimble, tuneful and punchy with good extension and no notable bloom or overhang – if unlikely to ripple the plaster. In many ways it's a little gem of a speaker that might not blow you away on first listen, but will grab you like quicksand over time ●

### HIFIChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**LIKE:** Refined, smooth, organic style of music making; rather minimalist style

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★  
**DISLIKE:** Lacks the gee-up gene with some music

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**WE SAY:** Not the last word in excitement, but subtle and satisfying nonetheless

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

#### OVERALL





# Artera Solus

A Complete Stereo System In One Box



*"It not only looks and feels far more expensive than it is, it sounds it too"*

Hi-Fi Choice, March 2018

Celebrating 83 years in industry, Quad has added a one-box hi-fi system to its award-winning Artera Series. The Artera Solus combines a CD transport, DAC, preamplifier and power amplifier in a single compact chassis, with extensive connectivity options including Bluetooth wireless streaming.



# Klipsch

## RP-150M £450

This striking US brand is known for its horn driver technology, but how does it fare in this company?

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Klipsch RP-150M

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
6.7kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
195 x 370 x 271mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 25mm horn-  
loaded titanium  
LTS tweeter  
● 1x 133mm  
Cerametallic  
mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
93dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166

**WEBSITE**  
henleyaudio.co.uk

**E**very *Group Test* should have an intriguing oddball and, for this one, it's the Klipsch RP-150M with its horn-loaded tweeter, copper-coloured mid/bass driver, slim and mildly tapered cabinet, built-in plinth and horn-profiled, rear-firing, reflex port. Within the framework for a two-way standmount, this is about as daringly different as it gets.

Let's begin with the horn technology, a long-standing Klipsch belief in the clear advantage to be had by exploiting its founder's bright idea. The notion of having a flared opening in a speaker cabinet is to project sound waves more accurately and efficiently towards the listening area with less colouration and unfettered dynamic impact. For the tweeter, the newly designed Hybrid Tractrix horn features a circular throat around a titanium diaphragm tweeter that fires into a square 90 x 90mm mouth.

Klipsch says this horn design delivers a wider sweet spot with more precise placement of instruments and vocals. A matching Tractrix horn-shaped bass reflex port round the back makes claims for faster air transit and a more powerful low end with reduced port noise and distortion.

As for the drivers, the 25mm titanium dome tweeter is joined by a distinctive 133mm spun-copper

treated aluminium Cerametallic coned mid/bass driver, which is attached to a newly developed titanium voice coil former said to give more linear excursions for enhanced efficiency, lower distortion and extended low-frequency response.

### Sound quality

If you crave the sonic equivalent of throwing back a triple espresso with a cayenne and turmeric shot chaser, the RP-150M is happy to oblige. Although Bruce Johnston and the rest of the boys emerge still sounding more or less dreamy at the other end of the RP-150M's raw scrutiny, it's hard to avoid the impression it would rather be ripping into Rage Against The Machine and giving it a good shaking.

It quickly becomes clear that, whatever I play, the way the RP-150M takes care of business, while not especially refined, is open, airy, potentially detailed and an indecent amount of fun. Yet it's far from aggressively shouty. Eels' *The Deconstruction* gains in immediacy and clarity with leading edges suddenly crisper than a chromium-plated Granny Smith. Slightly stripped-back tonal colours rob *I Can Let Go Now* of some warmth and emotional tug, but Thirty Seconds To Mars sounds as if it's been slipped a handful of uppers.

### HISTORY LESSON

In 1946 Paul Wilbur Klipsch designed and hand built what was later to be called the Klipschorn speaker with the goal of bringing live music into his living room. During his service at the Southwest Proving Grounds in Hope, Arkansas, he refined his corner horn speaker design. The story goes that visitors to his officer's quarters were amazed by the lifelike sound quality and encouraged him to start his own manufacturing business. He duly patented his design, registered the name Klipsch & Associates, and began making each loudspeaker with his own two hands until he hired his first employee in 1948. The Klipschorn is the only speaker in the world that has been in continuous production for over 70 years.

Prepare to  
have an  
indecent  
amount of fun



Everything the Klipsch does seems to be a scorching mainline route to the musical core. This isn't a soft, fluffy, cloud-cushioned ride – the music is vital, active and engrossing. It will tangle you up, there's no escape. You have been warned ●

### HIFIChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Take-no-prisoners clarity and dynamic expression that's huge fun

**DISLIKE:** Silky warmth? Forget it

**WE SAY:** Something of an acquired taste, but addictive if you 'get it'

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## Mission QX2 £399



This standmount from Mission's newest family aims to marry lifestyle, performance and value like never before

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Mission QX2

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
8.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
220 x 320 x 300mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 38mm textile  
ring dome tweeter  
● 1x 150mm  
long-fibre  
composite cone  
mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Exertis Unlimited

**TELEPHONE**  
01279 459170

**WEBSITE**  
mission.co.uk

**T**ubby' isn't a word usually associated with the form factor of a standmount, but in the case of the QX2 I can't think of a better one. It starts with the stand-out difference of looking as if it's upside down, the tweeter sitting beneath the mid/bass driver. Mission calls it Inverted Driver Geometry. The rationale is that by positioning the treble unit below the mid/bass driver, the length of path is equalised so that the sound waves coincide at the listener's head height, optimising time alignment. This is nothing new for Mission, but the near-cube-with-rounded-corners shape and aluminium top and bottom plates are a departure for the brand. I think it looks good in a slightly retro G-Plan way, especially with the walnut wrap finish – black or white alternatives are also an option.

More than just a pretty upside-down face, it employs Mission's new DiaDrive cone system, which has an inverted cone driven by a secondary sub cone to "transfer maximum transient impact" from the motor system, which uses an oversized magnet to improve sensitivity. The 38mm ring-dome tweeter is a new design, and is claimed to offer high detail resolution and low levels of distortion. The heavily flared rear-firing bass reflex port is shaped

like an athletics running track and, as most ports are, designed for low drag and minimum unwanted 'chuffing'.

### Sound quality

Being the final audition isn't easy. Listening receptors abraded by myriad talents covering just about the whole gamut from grace to groove, there are some classy acts for the QX2 to follow. So it's saying something when the cheapest speaker in the group sounds like an interloper from the class above.

Within the first few bars of *Disney Girls*, it simply sounds more seductive than anything that's gone before it; invitingly smooth and warm yet, at the same time, clear and incisive. It has a lighter touch than most, but with greater dynamic reach and capacity to move air. *Walk On Water* seems more completely realised in a more clearly defined space – tonally, temporally, temperamentally. The low-frequency energy is suddenly fleshier and more foundational.

It's all a bit moreish bordering on addictive. Here's a speaker that sounds extremely comfortable and confident in its own skin, making it a joy to spend time with. It's in synch with itself, settled in equilibrium. It combines sweetness with authority and an approximation of slam that's remarkable for a standmount. Listening to the tightly intertwined

### RINGING TRUE

The QX2's 'ring dome' tweeter seeks to deliver high levels of musical detail with low distortion and avoid 'dome cavitation' effects. It's a dual-ring radiator and utilises a woven, textile material formed in a double-ring arrangement. The combination of textile dome and multi-ring surround applies optimum stiffness to the maximum radiating area. It's also a twin rear cavity non-reflecting design, meaning back pressure from the diaphragm is vented to a twin rear cavity, reducing resonance and maintaining a wide operating bandwidth. Meanwhile, Mission's DiaDrive twin-cone mid/bass driver has been designed with the aim of marrying a natural midrange quality to superb bass transient impact.

An addictive offering that bellies its price tag



intricacies of *The Deconstruction*, the QX2 is responsive right down to the last vestigial microdynamic nuance. It's honest to the recording, transparent to the power and emotion of the music and captures its inner beauty like nothing else here ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** All the finesse and maturity of a much more expensive speaker; style

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** A 'fat' fit for most speaker stands

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WESAY:** It's hard to fathom how Mission has pulled this off, a terrific speaker for the asking price

##### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

# Group test verdict

And so as dusk fades to night while a hot and bothered CD player spins the final track, it's time for **David Vivian** to sit down and reveal the final verdict

**TOUGH GROUP, TOUGH** call. To be perfectly honest, I hadn't expected such a high standard – that allocating an extra couple of hundred pounds to the top line of the budget crop could make the soundscape so much sunnier. That's the abiding message of this test: the onset of diminishing returns is far away on the horizon at the £500 price point.

It hurts me to hand the wooden spoon to the DALI Opticon 1. It's a fab little box overflowing with brio and the urge to entertain that could be ideal in a small room with the right system. Unfortunately, it gets pushed

around in this company and, frankly, flattened by the big hitters from Elipson and Mission. My sympathies.

Fifth spot goes to the Klipsch RP-150M and, again, I'm really torn by this decision. If ever an affordable standmount was on fire with the right material, this is it. Were power, loudness, dynamics and enthusiasm the only considerations it would walk it. I still love it, but for the long haul I'd hanker after a bit more refinement and finesse. Which is where the Epos K1i comes in. Actually, it has a little too much civility and couth for its own good and occasionally could do

with some of the Klipsch's zeal and zip, but for much of the time it sounds just lovely.

The fight for the top-three places is squeaky tight. First on the podium is the Elipson PF8B, which delivers a widescreen sound in great style and knows how to sell a tune. It's edged out of the runner-up spot by the Dynaudio Emit M10, almost landing a killer blow for the short of stature. As things stand, it's simply the best speaker of its size I've encountered – beautifully balanced and composed, but also insightful, involving and great fun.



In the end, though, the Mission QX2 punches so far above its entirely reasonable price, it thoroughly deserves the top spot – not just as the best all-round deal, but the most polished and capable performer. Unfailingly engaging and hugely likeable, it's a big win for Mission.



Make/model	DALI Opticon 1	Dynaudio Emit M10	Elipson Prestige Facet 8B	Epos K1i	Klipsch RP-150M	Mission QX2
Price	£499	£499	£499	£499	£450	£399
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of drive	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	With its vivacious personality it nails music's pulse, but it can't quite paint the big picture	An object lesson in how to make a small standmount sound grown up, grounded and full of great music	A big and beefy standmount that delivers, but, most importantly, engages musically	Care and craft under the skin give the Epos silky sonics with fine control, texture and timing	The horn tech is out on a limb here, but it does leading edge and dynamics like little else	This Mission speaker looks much pricier than it is and delivers a class-leading performance

## Key features

Configuration	2-way	2-way	2-way	2-way	2-way	2-way
Horn loading	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Dome tweeter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Bi-wiring	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Finishes	Satin & wood	Satin	Matt & wood	Gloss & wood (LE)	Wood	Satin & wood

## TRY WITH THESE

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

Unlike a number of amplifiers currently on sale, the Audiolab is exclusively analogue with plenty of inputs including an MM/MC phono stage. Rated at 2x 75W, the Class AB design has a clean and insightful sound that will complement the talents of the warm and fluent Mission QX2 nicely.



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

Chord's cutting-edge converter might seem on the expensive side to team with a £400 standmount speaker, but it makes a great partner for the Cambridge CXC transport and there's no question the Mission QX2 has the muscle and transparency to justify it.



### CD TRANSPORT: Cambridge CXC **£300 HFC 401**

If you aren't ready to give up on CD just yet, the CXC is a keenly priced transport that will extract the best from your DAC. Choose something like the Chord Electronics Hugo 2 (left) or Rega DAC-R (HFC 405) and you'll have a source that will do justice to any of these speakers.



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\*The Amazon Alexa feature becomes available in Spring 2018.

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WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2017

DSD Direct Stream Digital

#### SONY • PS-HX500 • USB TURNTABLE

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#### PRO-JECT • 2 XPRESSION DC ACRYL • TURNTABLE

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WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2017

#### NAIM • UNITI ATOM • ALL-IN-ONE STREAMING SYSTEM

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£3499

#### NAIM • UNITI STAR • STREAMING/CD SYSTEM

The clue is in the name: this system is the star of the show. With plenty of features and the ability to play, rip, store and serve your treasured music collection, Uniti Star offers infinite possibilities. Ready to go with practically any speaker set-up, Uniti Star will have you rediscovering your entire music collection with a deep, immersive sound.



NEW

£249

NEW

£299

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

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



£549

£799

#### ROTEL • CD14 / A12 • CD / AMPLIFIER/DAC

This 60 watt amplifier features both analogue and digital inputs including PC/USB. The CD14 has been carefully engineered to ensure it resolves even the smallest musical details.



£4199

#### NAIM • UNITI NOVA • ALL-IN-ONE STREAMING SYSTEM

The reference player in the range, Uniti Nova has been configured to offer the very best solution that Naim can implement in a single-box, compact enclosure.



£799

BluOS requires optional MDC module

BLUOS READY

#### NAD • C 368 • AMPLIFIER/DAC

NAD's exclusive future-proof design allows you to customise your C 368. Its two MDC slots can accommodate a variety of optional modules including BluOS, one of the most advanced Hi-Res Audio multi-room wireless systems available.



NEW

£499

#### NAD • C 328 • AMPLIFIER/DAC

Includes many cutting edge technological breakthroughs developed by NAD over a 45-year history of creating affordable ultra-high performance audio components. Features 2 line inputs, a MM phono input, 4 digital inputs and Bluetooth.



NEW

£399

#### NAD • D 3020 V2 AMPLIFIER/DAC

The D 3020 starts with the original NAD 3020 concept and brings it straight into the 21st century using the latest high-speed digital technology. Now with V2, NAD have refined the looks and added a MM phono input for vinyl playback. Also includes both optical and coaxial digital inputs and a line input.

**FOCAL**

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Be surprised by Kanta, highly original speakers that will reconnect you with your music. Focal offers a hitherto unknown amalgamation of technologies: the marriage of Beryllium, in the latest generation IAL3 tweeter, with Flax, for the midrange and bass drivers. The result is precise, detailed sound brimming with warmth and musicality. This is the start of a new era for those who love sound.

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£6999



NEW

#### B&W • PX WIRELESS HEADPHONES

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#### PSB • M4U 8 WIRELESS HEADPHONES

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**BOWERS & WILKINS • 702 S2**  
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**£3299**



#### ACOUSTIC ENERGY AE109

The new AE109 is designed to offer effortless, room filling performance from a slimline floorstanding loudspeaker in much the same way the world acclaimed original AE109 did 20 years ago.

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Walnut finish  
Satin black finish  
£549



**PSB  
IMAGINE MINI (GLOSS BLACK)**  
Meet the smallest member of the ultra-stylish Imagine Series. The deceptively small Imagine Mini makes a big impact on an already impressive range of award-winning speakers.

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**SAVE  
£370**



**PMC • TWENTY5.23**  
Arguably the most elegant model in the range, the twenty5.23 takes the speed, transparency and sophistication of the twenty5.21 and adds greater bass extension and power. And yet its slim-line form doesn't mean it can't move you.

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#### MONITOR AUDIO SILVER 200

The Silver 200's sleek appearance makes it a truly compact and attractive floorstander, blending audiophile performance with lifestyle proportions.

**£999**



Standard finishes • Black Gloss £1099



#### MONITOR AUDIO BRONZE 2

The Bronze 2 builds on the strength of its predecessor's audiophile credibility with a neutral tonal balance and high detail resolution combined with high overall efficiency and power handling.

**£279**



**Q ACOUSTICS • 3050**  
The flagship 3050 is the perfect speaker for larger rooms, boasting ultra-low levels of distortion, typically found of speakers costing three or four times its price.

**£549**



3050 Standard finishes • Premium finishes £699

#### Q ACOUSTICS CONCEPT 500

Designed to appeal to discerning audiophiles, the Concept 500 achieves a perfect balance between art and science. It is a loudspeaker that is at once, stylish, contemporary, fine-sounding and astonishingly accurate.

**£3995**



#### KEF • Q350

The remarkable Q Series speakers excel when space is limited. Featuring the signature KEF Uni-Q driver array with Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) port design, the Q350s deliver detailed natural sound with high clarity and tight bass.

**£529**



**NAIM • MU-SO • WIRELESS MUSIC SYSTEM**  
Combines Naim's expertise in streaming, amplification and loudspeaker technology. Mu-so is the stage your music deserves, bringing you closer to the songs that inspire your life.

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PRODUCT OF THE YEAR  
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Bluesound



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SMART SPEAKER**  
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# SEVENOAKS

SOUND & VISION



# Ready player two

Components need to be flexible to survive in today's audio market. **James Parker** tries ATC's updated multi-purpose player for size

**W**hile it is probably best known for its loudspeakers, which are more commonly found in recording studios, ATC has been producing amps and preamps since the introduction of its standalone 'hi-fi' electronics line in 1996. This CD player/DAC/preamp combo is actually an updated version of the company's innovative CDA, which has been specially designed to accompany its £3,375 P2 power amplifier and active speakers.

The CDA2 Mk2's mixture of facilities is something of a masterstroke in simplifying what could be a multi-component system. Then again, there

will be those that sound a note of caution, as they would with any multifunction device of this kind: in what is still a rapidly evolving digital audio market, buying such a product might be putting too many eggs into one basket. After all, while the CDA2 Mk2 might be convenient, it is prey to the appearance of future formats requiring decoding or processing beyond its capabilities, and appears to have no clear upgrade route through modular design or firmware updates.

That's not forgetting the formats and services that are already available that the CDA2 Mk2 won't play ball with. So, while it will comfortably

handle files up to DSD256, it won't play SACDs, and onboard streaming is notable only by its absence. Meanwhile, if you want to play music from network or internet sources, you'll have to do so via a computer connected to the USB-B input or add a dedicated network music player. And with line analogue inputs only, turntable users will have to add an offboard phono stage, too – making this a comprehensive but not quite complete solution.

The CDA2 Mk2 uses a Chinese-made TEAC drive to spin discs, partnered with an AK4490 DAC from Asahi Kasei. Part of AKM's Verita Series, and using what the company calls its 'Velvet Sound' architecture, the AK4490 supports up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM (the CDA2 Mk2 uses this capability up to 384kHz) and DSD256. The DAC also receives data from the digital inputs, which include USB-B, coaxial and optical. Interestingly, the USB port will support DSD128 when used with Windows computers, but only DSD128 with OS X machines.

The output of the DAC stage, and the three analogue inputs (one of which is of higher sensitivity, and provided on a 3.5mm stereo socket

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
ATC CDA2 Mk2

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
CD player/USB DAC/  
preamp

**WEIGHT**  
7kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
445 x 90 x 330mm

**FEATURES**  
● 32-bit/768kHz  
PCM and DSD-  
capable DAC  
● Digital inputs: 1x  
optical; 1x coaxial;  
1x USB-B  
● Analogue outputs:  
balanced XLRs;  
RCAs; 6.35mm  
headphone jack

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
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**The distinctive go faster stripes ensure the CDA2 Mk2 stands out from the pack**

extrusion with a brushed and anodised silver finish.

So what's changed from the previous model? Both the USB and 3.5mm stereo socket are new additions, but the CDA2 Mk2 is also the result of extensive reworking under the lid. The AKM DAC is new, as is the TEAC-supplied transport, chosen for faster seek times, lower mechanical noise and improved error correction, while the power supply has gained nine extra voltage regulators and better decoupling. The input/output gain stages have been upgraded with discrete op-amps in six blocks – two for input buffering and

touch being a 'CD standby' button to turn off the disc section when listening to other inputs – reducing the potential for noise and vibration.

### Sound quality

ATC recommends J River Media Centre 22 for playback on both Windows and Mac OS X, and provides illustrations in the user manual for the optimum setup for the best possible sound. One thing that's immediately clear from the start is that no matter what you feed it, the CDA2 Mk2 sounds very special indeed. Whether it is spinning discs, receiving audio via its S/PDIF inputs, connected via its analogue ins or handling hi-res audio from a computer, there is a rightness and directness about the sound, with tight, powerful bass, a clean, informative midband and a treble that's as explicit as it is sweet, all suggesting that it is just letting the music flow through it and not messing with it in the process. It's this neutrality that makes it such a joy to use – it is amazing just how addictive its 'nothingness' really is. You can pay a lot more for a CD player, DAC and preamp and still find the components imposing something of themselves on the sound. That this (relatively) affordable player offers so much and yet adds or removes so little is a major achievement by ATC's engineers.

For an indication of this in action, I turn to the eponymous debut album ►

## The CDA2 has a wide open sound with masses of detail and unrestrained slam

four to deliver the balanced output.

The output section is also designed to drive long cable runs, as might be the case when, for example, the CDA2 Mk2 is connected directly to a pair of active speakers. ATC says it's good for balanced cables of up to 50m, which should be adequate for even the largest room. The headphone amp has also been upgraded, to give it better drive for tricky loads. The package is completed by a comprehensive IR remote control, handling all the functions, a neat

instead of a pair of RCA phonos) feed into a fully balanced preamp stage. Even the 6.35mm headphone socket, which is driven by its own amplifier, is on the rear panel to keep signal paths as short as possible.

Outputs are provided on both balanced XLRs and conventional RCA line-level phonos, and the CDA2 Mk2 is built on a chassis that combines steel and aluminium and uses constrained mass damping to control resonances, with the front panel machined from a 13mm aluminium

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 Coaxial and optical digital inputs
- 2 RCA line-level analogue outputs
- 3 Balanced XLR output (right)
- 4 6.35mm headphone output

## Q&A

**Ben Lilly**

Technical sales manager,  
Loudspeaker Technology Ltd. ATC



**JP: What are the key differences between the original CDA2 and the Mk2 version of the player?**

**BL:** For the Mk2 we're using a new TEAC CD transport and an upgraded AKM 32-bit DAC. We've introduced a USB digital audio input, a high-sensitivity 3.5mm analogue input for connection to portable audio devices, re-engineered the headphone amplifier for a wide 30-600ohm range and refined both the power supply design and the analogue audio circuits.

**As there doesn't appear to be a clear modular or firmware upgrade path, what futureproof support is offered to owners?**

The DAC we have selected is capable of converting up to quad rate DSD and 384kHz PCM data. It would be great if there was a wider choice of high-resolution material on offer, but the reality is the majority of sessions are produced in 24-bit/96kHz. While the DAC is not upgradeable, its specification surpasses what is required to listen to the vast majority of digital releases currently on offer and we do not see this changing in the future. On top of this, all ATC products are designed, engineered and manufactured for an extremely long life and are supplied with a six-year warranty.

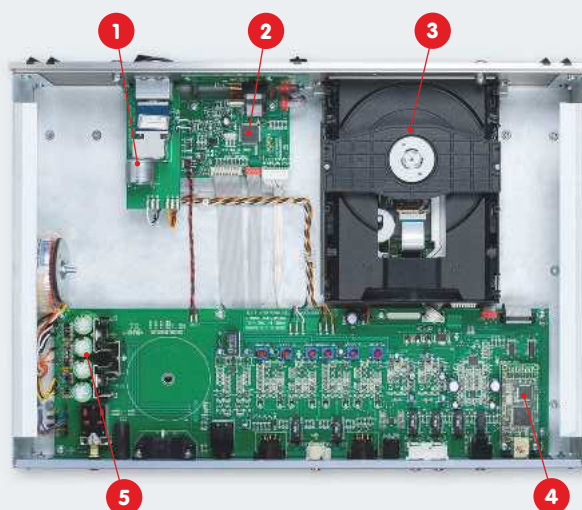
**How does ATC see the future of CD?**

Given the limited choice of quality CD mechanisms on the market, it's hard to say what the future holds. At the moment CD is still the most popular physical format, it's just that the buzz in the market surrounds the resurgence of vinyl. In Asia, an international market where ATC is strong, CD is still very popular.

**Why is DSD file support limited when using OS X platforms?**

OS X supports driverless DSD playback, but only up to DSD128. For DSD256 playback on OS X a dedicated driver is required. Based on availability of DSD256 releases, it wasn't viable to develop a dedicated driver.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 ALPS 'Blue Beauty' motorised potentiometer
- 2 Control board and system control processor
- 3 TEAC 5020A transport
- 4 USB interface
- 5 Highly regulated linear power supply

by The B52's from 1987. While some saw the 'High Fidelity' logo on the cover as a joke – given the snappy, jerky rhythms, dense mixes and camped-up vocals – the album lives up to the description right from the opening riff of *Planet Claire*. The CDA2 Mk2 delivers it with real drive and a wide open view of the layers of the recording, charging through the album with such verve that it seems to be over almost before it's started.

This front end may come out of a studio heritage, but it knows how to have a good time, and there's nothing anonymous or 'technical' about the way that it plays music.

The same can be said about Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*, in DSD64, played via the USB input. The crisp resolution of the CDA2 Mk2's digital section allows the lumbering rhythms of *Have A Cigar* to power out into the room, while making every detail of the lyrics and recording plain to hear. Meanwhile its unfettered dynamics are perfectly suited to the slow burn of *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*, before it lets the guitar riffs scream out with fine attack.

Entering somewhat spikier territory with Elvis Costello And The Attractions' *Armed Forces* album, and the gutsy Nick Lowe production combined with the still punky charge of the band on tracks such as *Oliver's Army* and *Goon Squad* is meat and drink for the wide-open ATC sound.

It's an album on which you can hear Costello's sound continually changing, his voice opening up, the song's still hard hitting lyrically, but now becoming more layered with keyboards, more guitars and harmonies. Here it comes up fresh as a daisy, reminding you what all the

fuss was about back when it was first released back in 1979.

Coming bang up to date with Beth Hart and Joe Bonamassa's *Black Coffee* – an album that looks dynamic range in the face and throws its head back with laughter – and the CDA2 Mk2 lets the full-on, 'bouncing off the limiters' effect thunder through with all its melodrama intact. It ain't pretty, but boy, it sure is effective!

## Conclusion

Though it may have the air of a component that's been designed by committee and is perhaps lacking in some areas when it comes to features, this is all forgiven once you hear just what the CDA2 Mk2 is capable of. With a wide-open sound, masses of detail and unrestrained slam, it makes a fine partner for power amps and active speakers alike, getting on with the all-important business of delivering the music without adding or subtracting anything. Assuming you can live without SACD playback and onboard streaming, it's well worth an audition ●



**HOW IT COMPARES**

In the UK, ATC's CD2 Mk2 finds itself entering a dwindling product category, but this is good news for the longevity of the model as rivals are limited and plenty of audiophiles still enjoy playing CDs. There are a couple of lower-cost models, including Audiolab's 8300CD (HFC 404) at £1,000 with a slot-loading CD transport mechanism, preamp functionality and DSD playback via USB. Cambridge Audio's Azur 851C (HFC 349) is also a CD player with upsampling USB DAC and preamp built-in. It's a popular choice, although its price has increased to £1,400.

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



**LIKE:** Neutral, detailed and wide-open sound

**DISLIKE:** No over-the-air upgrades; price

**WE SAY:** Functional styling and an impressively neutral performance make this a great multi-purpose CD player



# "Quite simply the no-brainer of the year"

★★★★★ *Hi-Fi Choice, April 2018*



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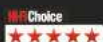


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# CYRUS



# The look of love

**David Price** dallies with one of Chord's most affordable converters and discovers it's so much more than just a pretty face

**I**t's all getting rather complicated. Chord Electronics' range of digital-to-analogue converters is growing faster than Tribbles on the Starship Enterprise (*Star Trek* fans will get the allusion). Indeed, the comparison bears scrutiny, because like the aforementioned small objects that seemed to increase in number every time you looked, the company's DACs are quite cute. So much so that Chord itself rather immodestly called its last

standalone entry-level DAC the 2Qute, which itself was the replacement to the Qute EX, and before that the Qute...

So, if you've managed to keep up, you'd probably like to know that the 2Qute (HFC 402) was closely related the Hugo DAC, in the company's distinct Chordette casing, sans rechargeable battery and variable output of course. The new Qute2 you see here is the same relation to the Hugo 2 (HFC 428), inasmuch as it's a simplified, pared-down version

without the portability and a few other non-essential odds and ends. It also loses the Chordette casework, looking a lot more like the Hugo 2. So, your £1,195 buys you Chord's latest and most advanced FPGA chip, four different user-selectable filters, and the same wide range of file compatibility. There are also some interesting new features that you don't get from its portable brother.

Before we get into specifics, it's useful to point out that – unlike the vast majority of digital-to-analogue converters on sale – Chord uses its own custom-made digital conversion hardware. The Rob Watts-designed Field Programmable Gate Array at the heart of the Qute2 is not simply repurposing other peoples' ideas of DACs and digital filtering – it is exclusive to the brand, not bought off-the-shelf. The Watts Transient Aligned digital filter uses clever mathematics, implemented on a huge Xilinx Artix 7 FPGA to give a far higher tap-length than that seen in stock DAC chips. There are 49,152 taps, compared with 26,000 in its predecessor and approximately 150 in standard DACs, says Watts. This, he

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Chord Electronics  
Qute2

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
DAC

**WEIGHT**  
770g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
160 x 41 x 72mm

**FEATURES**  
● 32-bit/768kHz  
PCM and DSD512-  
capable DAC  
● Inputs: 1x optical;  
1x USB-B; 2x BNC  
coaxial  
● Output: RCA  
phono

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
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Ltd.

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communications with a possible future Chord Electronics transport and/or upsampler. Unlike the Hugo 2, these inputs are galvanically isolated, which eliminates the transmission of digital noise via the digital outputs of lesser ancillaries. One pair of RCA phono outputs is fitted, and runs at a fixed level, but variable between 3V, 2V and 1V (changeable by pressing both Filter and Input buttons on startup). This is a clever feature, because you can tune it for the sort of preamp you use – be it passive, solid-state, tube or whatever.

The John Franks-designed casework

## The Qutest DAC is able to impart every last inflection of the singer's vocals

is new, and a dramatic improvement over what came before in my view. It brings a beautifully surfaced modern look, and is significantly heavier. Precision machined from solid aircraft-grade aluminium billet, the PCB sits in a smallish cavity inside the case. In addition to the trademark glass window – which is a great feature because it adds a bit of eye-catching drama that everyone in the household will love, as well as providing some practical visual indication of the sampling frequency by means of colour – there are two acrylic buttons that control the frequency-shaping filters, and input selection; again these change colour depending on the option selected. Like Henry Ford's Model T car, it's available in any colour you like as long as it's black; which is a bit of a shame because I feel I would opt for a silver version if one became available. Finally, power comes into the unit via a 5V, 2A micro USB supply.

Chord Electronics' DACs seem able to communicate particularly well at an emotional level, in a way that most others cannot. The Qutest is no exception – it's the cheapest serious digital converter that the company produces, yet you wouldn't be able to tell by listening to it. It's rather like its DAVE bigger brother – doing what all Chords do, albeit on not quite such a grand scale.

## Sound quality

Take ABC's *Date Stamp* for example. This is a sugary piece of classic eighties pop and not to everyone's taste, yet the Qutest captures the song's deep groove and from then on in you're hooked. It's as if it has got some magic means of propulsion, that pushes the song along in a bubbly, effervescent way. Most rivals give you a strong and detailed presentation, but make the musicians sound like they're going through the motions. Bass guitar, for example, is really bouncy, but more than that it is delivered in perfect time relative to the rest of the mix; everything seems snappy and nicely syncopated and the Chord's great sense of timing is hard not to fall in love with.

In other respects, it's also highly accomplished. For example, it conjures up a deep and wide recorded acoustic. It's not spectacularly good, but of particular interest is the pinpoint precision with which instruments are located. In certainly makes the ABC track snap into focus, as if the auto-focus on your camera smartphone finally gets a lock on to what you want to photograph.

It's truly impressive on classical music, though, where things are done on a larger scale altogether. The way it hones in on different instrumental sections in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra's rendition of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, for example, is a

claims, translates to better time domain performance, among other things.

The Qutest features a USB Type-B input that runs up to 32-bit/768kHz resolution. Two BNC coaxial digital inputs are fitted offering the same specs, and the Toslink optical input goes up to 24-bit/192kHz. In addition to PCM it supports up to DSD512 (so-called octa-DSD). The dual BNCs flag up the prospect of dual data

## CONNECTIONS



- 1 Micro USB power supply input
- 2 Fixed-level RCA phono outputs
- 3 24-bit/192kHz Toslink optical digital input
- 4 32-bit/768kHz BNC coaxial digital inputs
- 5 32-bit/768kHz Type-B USB input

## Q&A

**Dan George**  
Chord Electronics PR



**DP: Who is the Qutest aimed at?**

**DG:** Any music lover who wants to hear their favourite music exactly as it should sound. It's not Chord's cheapest non-portable hi-fi DAC – that's now the Mojo, which offers our proprietary DAC technology and UK manufacturing for just £399. The pricier Qutest has the Hugo 2 DNA, but without the portability, headphone outputs, crossfeed option and volume control.

**The styling is different to its 2Qute predecessor, why is that?**

Following the popularity of the newer casework designs developed for the TToby stereo power amp, HugoTT DAC/headphone amp/digital preamp and most recently, Hugo 2, our transportable headphone amp/DAC, we also wanted to update the Qutest.

**What are the differences between the Qutest and flagship DAVE DAC?**

An enormous amount! It would probably take more room than we have here to explain the differences between our flagship DAC and our entry-level system DAC in detail. However, a good Chord Electronics retailer will be able to explain and demonstrate the differences. We have a new dealer locator on our website ([chordelectronics.co.uk/locate-dealer](http://chordelectronics.co.uk/locate-dealer)) to help people audition our products.

**Will there be an optional uprated power supply?**

No, it's simply not necessary: like its predecessor, the 2Qute, our digital consultant Rob Watts spent a long time designing the internal power filtering and regulation so that the external power supply could not influence the sound.

**Can we expect a matching disc transport in the future?**

There are no plans for this. We will, however, have all the latest Chord Electronics products, including a few interesting new ones, at the High End Show in Munich in May. Those interested can check for these new products on our social media channels, where they will be announced first.



**Like previous Chord designs, colour is used to provide a variety of info on the DAC's status**

revelation. The Qutest doesn't quite match the vast, panoramic scale of its DAVE bigger brother, but the recorded acoustic is still impressively wide; within this there's a fabulous sense of focus that makes things sound bold and highly defined.

You get this with jazz, too. My well-played Japanese Bluenote CD copy of Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage* is a joy to hear. There is a great sense of being transported back – TARDIS-like – to the time and place of the recording. The soundstage is beautifully etched with the piano sounding so solid it could have been bricked into my listening room wall. What really strikes me here, though, is the sweet, smooth tonality of the Qutest. It sounds more natural than anything else at or near the price; it's smooth, even and is able to communicate the natural tonal patina of acoustic instruments surprisingly well. Some of its price rivals can strip the colour out of warm recordings, almost as if you've brought the saturation setting right down to zero on your photo editing software. Whether it is strings or brass, the performance just sounds so much more natural and organic here.

Dynamically, the baby Chord is great. The real test of a DAC's mettle, however, is slow, soft soul, which can sound like wallpaper music through the wrong system. Rose Royce's beautiful *Wishing On A Star* sounds like anything but, transfixing me from the start. The way the Qutest carries the expressive emotion of the vocals is a delight. Not only is the timbre of the singer's voice a pleasure to hear, but the DAC is able to impart every

last inflection. With out-and-out dynamic crescendos, there's just a hint of compression, but you'll have to spend a lot more money than this to find a DAC that does any better here. Allied to the Chord's lovely, beguiling rhythms, it makes for a superb listen – giving a spookily natural quality to the sound that is very impressive at the price.

## Conclusion

Regardless of file format, sampling rate or input, I find that this is a great sounding digital converter – indeed spectacular at the price. You can run the gamut of your digital music collection – from classical to country, folk to electronic – and hear things presented in a detailed, intricate and incisive way, yet one that absolutely nails the basic emotion of the track. Even disregarding its superlative styling and build quality, the stellar sound quality alone warrants enthusiastic recommendation. Meet the new class of the field ●



Once again, we see Audiolab's £799 M-DAC+ (HFC 410) as the class of the field at or near the price of the Qutest. It sounds way better than it has a right to for the money, and is more versatile than practically anything else nearby. The Chord's feature count pales by comparison; it has no preamp functionality or headphone connectivity and nice as those coloured lights are, the Audiolab's display is far more informative. Sonically the M-DAC+ puts up a brave fight, but is outclassed in terms of overall listenability and sounds curiously vague and diffuse and somewhat tonally coarse compared with the brilliant Qutest.

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Beautifully etched, liquid sound; styling; build

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Colour-based user interface can be hard to learn

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Superlative sound per pound; the one to beat

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★



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# Photo Finnish

A speaker that's immune to the room it is placed in sounds like a tempting idea. **Ed Selley** discovers if the Argon1 delivers

**C**elebrating its 20th year, Finnish loudspeaker company Amphion maintains a presence in both domestic and professional market places. It's been a good six years since we've seen anything from the brand and while the original Argon1 was the winner of our standmount *Group Test* in HFC 353, it has recently undergone something of a refresh and is with a new UK distributor – Auden Distribution. As the middle model of three standmounts in the five-strong Argon

## Speed and agility make themselves felt in almost everything the Amphion does

range, it retains its remarkably neat and compact design. The 25mm titanium dome tweeter is mounted in the centre of a large waveguide that matches the diameter of the mid/bass drive unit, which means it is set back a considerable distance from the leading edge of the cabinet. This is not an accidental or aesthetic choice and the waveguide – now in its fifth iteration – helps the integration between the two drivers as well as control the directivity of the tweeter and aid with time alignment.

The tweeter hands over to a 133mm aluminium mid/bass driver at a relatively low crossover point of 1.6kHz. The relationship between the two drivers is dictated by what Amphion describes as Uniformly Directive Diffusion, which aims to make the output from the speaker as even as possible to help minimise room anomalies and create a cabinet that's unfussy about placement.

As part of the refresh, the mid/bass driver is augmented by a rear-mounted bass port that now sits

directly behind it with the terminal panel placed above, which depending on your choice of speaker cable can result in the wire being visible from the top of the speaker. There's no bi-wiring facility. While a 316mm-tall speaker with a 133mm mid/bass driver doesn't sound like a recipe for large amounts of low end, Amphion quotes a surprising low frequency response of 45Hz at +/-3dB, which is impressive for a speaker of this size. This is combined with a relatively benign impedance of 8ohm and a sensitivity of 86dB/1W/1m, which should ensure it's a relatively easy load to drive for many amplifiers.

It's a cliché to talk about clean Scandinavian design, but predictable trope or not, the Amphion is both from this part of the world and unquestionably elegant. The decision to finish the cabinet in a sheen rather than a high gloss works extremely well and this can be combined with a choice of different colours for the tweeter and mid/bass protective

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Amphion Argon1

**ORIGIN**  
Finland

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
160 x 316 x 265mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x 25mm titanium dome tweeter  
• 1x 133mm aluminium mid/bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Auden Distribution Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
0791 7685759

**WEBSITE**  
amphion.fi

grilles at the time of purchase or £40 per pair if retrofitted. The white review pair looks business like, but has enough of a nod to lifestyle sensibilities to ensure it will sit happily in most living spaces. A walnut veneer cabinet finish is also available costing £1,120 per pair.

### Sound quality

Connecting the Argon1 to the NAD M32 integrated amp and M50.2 streamer that form part of this month's *Beautiful System* (see p88), the Amphion does a good job of delivering on the promise of being unaffected by its surroundings. My listening room is a fairly benign space and its major foible happens at a frequency rather lower than the Argon1 will generate, but even so there is a sense that provided that it isn't jammed up against a rear wall, the cabinet is impressively decoupled from the space it is in.

This sense of separation allows me to focus on the performance of the speaker itself and here the Argon1 delivers handsomely. With a very slight toe-in, there is a large and very even sweet spot that works happily both nearfield and listening further back. Within this flexible listening position, it demonstrates an extremely spacious and three dimensional performance. The midrange in particular is exceptional. It allows A Fine Frenzy's *Almost Lover* to be reproduced without any perceived congestion or compression. Alison Sudol's lovely vocal turn has the scale and texture that's required to make her sound real. Above everything, there is a real sense of emotion to the way that the Argon1

**The grilles can be customised to any colour you choose**



## Q&A

**Anssi Hyvönen**

Founder and MD, Amphion



**ES:** Does the Argon1's claim of being "insensitive to the problems of room acoustics" represent the starting point for the design?

**AH:** Understanding acoustics along with knowledge of how human hearing works is the starting point of any speaker design. "Amphion seems to treat acoustics as a friend and not as an enemy" is one of the nicest, most insightful comments I have come across. For us a loudspeaker is primarily an acoustic device. What we get right acoustically means we do not have to fix things electrically. A speaker with a controlled, wide, even dispersion that works well also off-axis will be more acoustically stable and will sound more like it is intended in acoustically different environments.

**How is the Argon1 voiced in relation to similar models from the pro audio side of the company?**

A good loudspeaker should open a large, clean window into whatever you're listening to. Our role as a speaker maker is not to recreate, but to reproduce what is in the recording as faithfully as possible. We are very fortunate to be working with some of the best mastering engineers in the world. Having access to hearing a master in the room where it has been made gives us a clear goal on what we need to be striving for. The biggest difference stems from the fact that Argon1 relies on reflex loading, where the One15 uses a passive radiator. While the pro variant is intended for nearfield listening, Argon1 is very flexible in its use and is equally at home in high-quality two-channel or multichannel systems as well as part of a reference quality desktop system.

**Do you have any preferences for partnering electronics that work particularly well with the Argon1?**

Due to being electrically very simple and acoustically 'pure' our products are very transparent. They naturally show the true character of the electronics in a very clear fashion. This gives the customer a chance to fine tune the system's sound to their exact liking.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm titanium dome tweeter
- 2 Binding posts
- 3 Rear-facing bass reflex port
- 4 133mm aluminium mid/bass driver

reproduces music that engages the listener beyond accuracy alone.

The biggest surprise is the bass response. Jan Garbarek's saxophone performances in *In Praise Of Dreams* are underpinned by some deep percussion and the Amphion does a better job than you might expect at relaying this with a force you feel as much as hear. What is notable is that the impact doesn't come at the cost of forcing a vast amount of air from the bass port. There is no sense of sluggishness or the distinctive 'whoomp' sound to low notes and everything starts and stops with alacrity. To be clear, this is not the sort of output that will embarrass a large floorstander, but the Amphion always does enough to leave you satisfied with what you are hearing rather than thinking about how to augment it.

In fact, this speed and sense of agility makes itself felt in almost everything that the Amphion does. The hysterically fast guitar work of Bjørne Berge's *Live In Europe* is delivered with nothing missing or subsumed in the relentless barrage of notes. This ability to pick recordings apart and reveal their inner workings doesn't mean the Argon1 will take poor recordings to pieces, though. Compression is dealt with acceptably and all but the most low bit-rate internet radio remains listenable. Poorer-quality material can aggravate the high treble response to the point where it comes across as fractionally forward, but this generally only becomes an issue at higher volumes.

What has more of a consistent effect on the Amphion is that some care should be taken into account when thinking about partnering equipment.

While it isn't especially hard to drive, it has no trouble in showing the limitations of any equipment further up the chain. Connected to over £3,000 of NAD amplifier the performance is excellent, but a test run with the supremely talented Rega Brio (HFC 422) isn't quite the knock out combination that I expect. Some of that excellent bass response is lost and the effortless sense of space becomes slightly constrained. This may be as simple as the difference in output – the NAD claims three times more power output than the Rega – but the Amphion definitely sounds superior with the more upmarket and capable amplifier.

## Conclusion

A slight fussiness to what it partners nicely with is the limit of any criticism for this remarkably entertaining little speaker. Its ability to drop into even fairly confined spaces and show off its strengths of speed, clarity and musical joy in any environment is sure to win it many friends ●



The Amphion makes for a rather interesting counterpoint to the Russell K Red 50 that triumphed in the Group Test in HFC 422. The Red 50 effectively integrates the cabinet into the performance of the speaker as a whole while the Amphion takes a more traditional approach and attempts to keep it out of proceedings where possible. The result in both cases is a fun and communicative speaker. Choosing between them would be one for an extended demo session, but provided your electronics are up to the job, the sensational low end and speed of the Amphion might be enough to swing the decision.

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Fast, engaging transparent sound; unfussy placement

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Needs some care with choice of partnering electronics

#### BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** A compact standmount capable of delivering excellent performance in many different settings

#### EASE OF DRIVE



#### OVERALL



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# Second coming

Two years after ELAC's return to turntable production comes its new Miracord 70 package. **Adam Smith** takes a listen

**V**inyl's resurgence in the hi-fi market has proved interesting in a number of ways, particularly when it comes to turntable manufacturers. Naturally, well-established names such as Rega and Pro-Ject have seen their output rise dramatically and, unsurprisingly, more than a few new names have appeared on the block. What is fascinating, however, are

those manufacturers that made turntables in their past that are once again returning to their roots.

Interestingly, the first two names that spring to my mind in this respect are Perpetuum Ebner and ELAC, so maybe it's a German thing! Regardless, ELAC's new Miracord 70 has an illustrious line of forebears, as it is rumoured that ELAC, along with Perpetuum Ebner and Dual,

## DETAILS

### PRODUCT

ELAC Miracord 70

### ORIGIN

Germany

### TYPE

Belt-drive turntable

### WEIGHT

11kg

### DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)  
465 x 140 x 365mm

### FEATURES

- 33 & 45rpm
- 9in aluminium/steel tonearm
- Fitted with Audio-Technica AT-95E moving-magnet cartridge

### DISTRIBUTOR

Hi-Fi Network Ltd.

### TELEPHONE

01285 643088

### WEBSITE

[hifi-network.com](http://hifi-network.com)

accounted for 90 percent of the world's turntable supply in the mid-fifties. Consequently, the Miracord 70 has a lot to live up to.

ELAC actually re-started its turntable production two years ago with the Miracord 90, named in honour of the company's 90th anniversary. Naturally, it hasn't managed to reverse the aging process; rather, the Miracord 70 celebrates another anniversary. This time marking 70 years since the first ELAC turntable, the PW1 autochanger, rolled off the production line.

One similarity with the 90 is that the Miracord 70 comes as a complete package including arm and cartridge. This time around, the cartridge that's been chosen is the evergreen Audio-Technica AT-95E (HFC 387), which I still maintain is one of hi-fi's great bargains and a fine starting point. This is pre-fitted into the tonearm, meaning setup is merely a matter of fitting belt and platter, balancing the arm and setting anti-skate, and you're good to go.



tonearm. This is J-shaped and has a lovely retro appearance. Fortunately, under the skin it is technologically bang up to date, being based around a carefully selected mixture of aluminium and steel materials to optimise its resonant behaviour. It also features multiple electrical grounding points to help combat unwanted noise and hum.

As mentioned, an Audio-Technica AT-95E cartridge is fitted as standard, but the arm seems good enough to warrant an even better transducer should the upgrade urge strike. During my review I try it with both

### For a £1,000 deck this is an incredibly accomplished all round performance

Goldring's 2500 moving-magnet (HFC 389) and Audio-Technica's AT-F5 moving-coil designs and it performs very well indeed with each, ensuring that its beauty is definitely more than just skin deep.

There's no lid supplied with the Miracord 70, but it has both mounting points and screws fitted at the rear of the plinth ready to accept one. The instruction manual talks of an upcoming accessory section on the ELAC website from which a suitable cover can be ordered, which is a good thing – gloss black plinths and dust do not mix! Also at the rear of the plinth

are output phono sockets and a grounding terminal. The deck is provided with a good-quality interconnect lead, which is used throughout the review.

### Sound quality

Careful placement of the Miracord 70 is a point worth taking care over, as the deck does not have adjustable feet. When properly positioned, though, it gives a remarkably good account of itself, even if it has me a little fooled initially. My first test track is Mark Ronson's *Bang Bang Bang* and I have a slight concern that the deck might be running fast. However, a stroboscope disc and precision LED light source quickly confirms that it is actually spinning at the right speed. It turns out that it locks onto rhythms like a terrier and does such a good job of following them that they seem to be skipping along even more enthusiastically than usual.

The Miracord 70's bass performance is an utterly fascinating experience. I also initially wonder if it might be a little lightweight at the very bottom end, and not be digging quite as deep as I would like, but a quick blast of Jazzanova's *Takes You Back* confirms my concerns are misplaced here as well. This track has some low bass notes capable of shifting furniture on the right system and the Miracord 70 powers them out without even breaking a sweat. It turns out it has a very clean, detailed and extended low end, but it is also tight, focused and

The ELAC is built around a solid MDF base with a high-gloss black finish and metallic trim that imparts a stylish appearance. The sub-platter rotates on a ceramic ball and has a hardened steel bearing shaft, spinning between two sintered bronze radial bearings. Sat on its upper surface are four rubber bumpers that support the main platter when in place.

Said platter weighs in at 2.6kg and is a solid piece of glass that is coated on its underside with a black ceramic paint and topped with a felt mat. The sub-platter is belt driven by a high-quality synchronous AC motor made by Premotec, which is topped with a twin-stepped pulley to provide 33 and 45rpm. The on/off switch is tucked discreetly under the front of the plinth, but – disappointingly – speed change is effected by physically moving the belt, which still seems somewhat draconian to me on a turntable in 2018 bearing a near four-figure price tag.

An important feature of the Miracord 70 is the in-house designed

**Audio-Technica's AT-95E cartridge is pre-fitted, aligned and ready to play**



## Q&A

Nils Ehrnsberger

Turntable project manager, ELAC



**AS: How much technology is shared between the Miracord 90 and the Miracord 70?**

**NE:** The Miracord 90 uses a hardened steel axle on a ruby ball in sintered bronze bearings. We found that this combination works very well and adapted it for the Miracord 70, adjusting for the different dimensions and the lighter weight of the platter. We have a similar bushing, but we use silicon nitride instead of ruby and a different type of sub-platter. Ultimately, while the 90 inspired the 70, and the two packages on offer are similar on paper, the only identical part that you will find in both turntables is the brass thrust plate.

**Did ELAC always intend to draw on the experience of its original turntable designers from the seventies? Would the projects still have gone ahead without them?**

We engineers stayed in contact with Wilfried Werner (ELAC's turntable mechanical designer) after his retirement and when our management suggested launching a new turntable we immediately thought of him. He was very eager to start designing and so he started drawing what he called "his ultimate turntable", the Miracord 90. I think that we might possibly still have made turntables if Mr Werner declined, but they would have turned out very, very differently. And most likely not as pretty! What's certain is that his experience helped make the project possible in the first place.

**How much of the Miracord 70 is made in-house by ELAC?**

Unfortunately, we have sold the machines we used to make the turntables in the seventies. However, we have a very good network of high-grade suppliers, which we check and expand continuously. We take great pride in the quality control of both incoming parts and outgoing assemblies, which is why it takes around 45 minutes to adjust and inspect every finished turntable.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 Premotec synchronous AC motor and manual speed change
- 2 9in J-shaped tonearm
- 3 Audio-Technica AT-95E cartridge
- 4 2.6kg glass platter with felt mat

has absolutely no overhang, wallow or bloat. As a result, it can appear to sound a little 'thin' at times, but when a proper bass note comes along, it becomes clear that it is actually missing nothing and not adding anything either. In fact, for a £1,000 deck, it is an incredibly accomplished all-round performance.

Fortunately, the rest of the frequency range is more than up to the high standards set by the ELAC's low-end performance. Across the midband, the Miracord 70 is fluid and detailed but does err on the slightly brighter end of the tonal palette. In its supplied configuration it can lack a little warmth and even very occasionally stray into upper midband hardness, but experimentation reveals that this is a characteristic of the tonearm and cartridge combination. The AT-95E cartridge does belie its budget origins a little here, and even though it is good in most areas, a change to the smoother-sounding Goldring 2500 works wonders in this respect and is never at the expense of atmosphere or detail. Michael Hedges' guitar work on *Aerial Boundaries* is expansive and located beautifully centre stage, with each pluck as perfectly outlined as I could hope for.

All things considered, the Audio-Technica is a good partner for the Miracord 70. At the top end, this cartridge can occasionally become a little hard and splashy but the ELAC deck makes its treble sound surprisingly couth and almost sophisticated. Cymbal strikes, meanwhile, are sharp and crisp but

blessed with a purity that makes them sound truly lifelike.

The other thing that is very obvious is the fine sense of precision within the soundstage that is usually the preserve of rather more costly designs than this one. The Miracord 70 sets up a very solid and well-defined image within the loudspeakers and extends nicely behind the speaker plane as well. As a result, performers are given plenty of space, which allows them to be easily located within the musical action.

## Conclusion

This is a well-engineered and beautifully made turntable that offers a fine performance. The inclusion of a good-quality cartridge is a big plus and yet the Miracord 70 is more than capable of revealing the benefits of transducer upgrades, if desired. As plug-and-play combinations go, this is one of the best I've encountered ●



## HOW IT COMPARES

The £999 price tag is a competitive one, and the ELAC is up against stalwarts from plenty of well-established names. The Michell TecnoDec (HFC 309) comes in at around this point, fitted with an OEM Rega tonearm, and Rega itself has a big-hitter in the form of the Planar 6 with Neo power supply (HFC 427). Pro-Ject offers various flavours of 2 Xperience SB (HFC 397), RPM 5 Carbon and The Classic (HFC 416) models, all complete with cartridges. Even ELAC's old adversary, Perpetuum Ebner, has a stake in the game with the £950 PE-800 package. All are worthy adversaries, but the sheer poise of the Miracord 70 makes it an alluring prospect.

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Sophisticated bass; build quality; overall package at the price

**DISLIKE:** Manual speed change; lack of Perspex lid

**WE SAY:** A super sounding, ready-to-play turntable package



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# Six appeal

Slim and stylish Danish floorstanders are nothing new, but few sound quite as sophisticated as this one says **David Vivian**

**I**ntrinsic appeal can take many forms, but this super-svelte number from Scansonic seems to be an object lesson in ticking all the boxes. As floorstanders go, it's just large enough to snare admiring comments but small enough to be unobtrusive. Sidekick range to renowned high-end hero Raidho and designed by the same talent, Michael Børresen. Yes, that is a proper ribbon tweeter you see. And, no, your eyes won't water when you're told the price.

Let's backtrack a little. Scansonic and Raidho are both owned by Denmark's Dantax. The 47-year-old company started as a small-scale speaker manufacturer, expanding to absorb fledgling driver specialist

## How can so much scale, separation and air come from such titchy boxes?

ScanSpeak into its operation in 1977. Twenty years later, it sold its speaker factory and now collaborates with partners from other countries. But its prestige proposition is Raidho and, rather cleverly, the halo effect it bestows on mainstream brand Scansonic. Despite the obvious price hierarchies that separate the two brands, the democratised design expertise adds a classy sheen to the Scansonic HD range and particularly its most affordable M series.

The common factor here is designer Børresen, 12 years with Raidho. He explains his approach: "From the start, I was very focused on building on all the experiences and strengths obtained from designing the Raidho speakers. At the same time, I also had to be aware of the long heritage and the Nordic design tradition of the Scansonic brand. This time, the task also came with a budget and a desire to create the very best possible within financial limits." Not as much money to spend on materials, then, but some of the core techniques established

with the Raidho designs do make the cut, not least an edge-sealed ribbon tweeter with a super lightweight diaphragm placed as close as possible to the midrange driver.

Børresen's first Scansonic designs carried his signature initials, thus launching the MB-series early in 2015: a compact standmount, three floorstanders and a home cinema centre speaker. Critically, the new line went down a storm, delivering a slice of Raidho style and sonics without the swallow-hard ticket.

The new M-series seeks to push things still further in the direction of value for money and the M-6 is the smaller of the two floorstanders in the range. The three-way M-9 (£1,599) swells the enclosure dimensions and adds a couple of 203mm side-firing bass units, while the M-5 standmount (£499) and M-8 active subwoofer (£649) complete the lineup. Mirroring the MB series, the standmount and floorstanders are designed around an ultra-light ribbon planar tweeter as used in the MB series. Its membrane is formed by a Kapton and aluminium sandwich just 20µm thick with an extremely low mass – Scansonic estimates 50 times less than any conventional textile or ceramic, beryllium or diamond-coated dome, the aim being higher resolution and lower colouration rather than sky-high frequency response, though the 30kHz ceiling is more than adequate.

Because it sits so snugly beneath, the 114mm mid/bass driver almost looks like a material extension of the tweeter. It uses a paper-polypropylene cone and underhung magnet system and, being part of a 2.5-way system, there's a second identical driver beneath that takes on the bulk of bass duties, working between 50 and 300Hz. The mid/bass unit hands over to the tweeter at 3.5kHz via a second order filter. Along with the close axis proximity of the tweeter and mid/bass, both of the large drivers take up the full width of the narrow baffle, which should be good for dispersion and imaging. In fact, with such short distances between the

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Scansonic M-6

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark/China

**TYPE**  
2.5-way  
floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
15.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
151 x 900 x 198mm

**FEATURES**  
• Kapton/aluminium  
ribbon tweeter  
• 2x 114mm paper/  
polypropylene  
mid/bass drivers  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
89dB/1W/1m  
(>4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Decent Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
05602 054669

**WEBSITE**  
decentaudio.co.uk

corners (the M-6 is just 151mm wide and 198mm deep) the enclosure is an inherently rigid structure, but even so, heavy internal bracing helps the cause while bass reflex loading is via a front-facing slot-style port.

Inherently rigid it maybe, but the downside is a tiny footprint and high centre of gravity. Even if provision for spikes was provided, an overcoat brushing past could wobble the slimline tower, if not topple it, and never mind the "Timber!" scenarios posed by itinerant toddlers. So instead, Scansonic provides a substantial screw-in plinth (not shown) to both nail the stability issue and mitigate one drawback of the M-6's modest stature by tilting the enclosure back a few degrees so the tweeter fires up towards the listening position. It still all looks impressively neat and elegant and the two-tone gloss finish of the review pair – mostly white but with black 'spats' that merge seamlessly into the black gloss plinths – is very nicely executed.

### Sound quality

For the M-6 to have a fair crack at living up to its son-of-Raidho billing, I give the nursery slopes a swerve and hook up my regular reference front end, comprising a Cambridge Audio CXC CD transport (HFC 401), Chord Electronics Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428) ▶

The ultra-light ribbon tweeter is taken from the MB series



## Q&A

### Rune Skov

Sales director Raidho  
Acoustics and Scansonic



**DV:** Which elements of the 'Raidho sound' would you say survive the trip from high-end down to 'deliciously affordable'?

**RS:** To a certain degree, Raidho's high-end spacious sound character, speed and resolution are all evident in its Scansonic designs. This is not at the levels of Raidho models of course, but the speaker designs from Scansonic are built with the same philosophy as their 'cousins'.

**What's Scansonic's secret for achieving scale and air in this bijou floorstander?**

In manufacturing larger quantities of the more affordable models we are able to lower the costs of components, meaning we use more costly and refined components in these designs than you would normally expect. The choice in tweeter and mid/bass drivers that we use is the most important. It has to be a collaboration between the components that creates this fine balance in tonality. The planar-magnetic ribbon tweeter is the heart in any of our loudspeakers but it also comes down to our design philosophy in building the crossover circuitry and the way we think the music should be reproduced.

**Does Scansonic consider a ribbon tweeter to be vital for all of its loudspeaker designs?**

It is always top priority to build our loudspeakers around a ribbon tweeter. We will do our utmost to integrate a ribbon in any new design from either Scansonic or Raidho in the firm belief that a ribbon tweeter is the best possible choice when it comes to music reproduction.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 Kapton/aluminium ribbon tweeter
- 2 114mm paper/polypropylene mid/bass drivers
- 3 Bi-wireable binding posts
- 4 Forward-facing slot-style bass port



### HOW IT COMPARES

It's interesting to see how the M-6 squares up to one of the best built and most meticulously engineered and designed £1k slimline floorstanders – Monitor Audio's Silver 200 (HFC 430). The MA is one of those speakers that hits the ground running. Its clarity and clout are immediately impressive, even startling, and its muscular bass is nothing less than remarkable. In any showroom head-to-head it would blow the Scansonic away. But, to live with, it's the Scansonic's subtler charms that gain traction. It can't rock like the MA, but its airier supple presentation has great listenability and is likely to give long-term satisfaction.

and, from ATC, a CA-2 preamp and P1 power amp. Managing the mains and making the connections is a Nordost cabling loom including Q6 block and QKore 1 grounding unit.

Too much? No, the M-6 loves it. Pulled a little way clear of walls in my smaller listening room and limbering up with some orchestral manoeuvres in the Dvorak (*New World Symphony*) vein, the first thing that occurs to me is a question: how can so much scale, instrumental separation and air be coming from such titchy boxes? And as is often the case, it's a one-word answer: resolution. All right, resolution and some clever voicing and port tuning. The M-6 shows you don't need a speaker that blocks out the sun driven by an amp that requires its own power station to be sold a sense of space, substance and slam. Actually, it's the smallest driver that can make the biggest impact. Feed a highly transparent, fast and linear tweeter the right spatial cues and you're half way there. Few DACs are more resolute than Chord's Hugo 2 and if the M-6 has to use a little physics-defying tuning manipulation to fill out the lower frequencies, its

ribbon leaves you in no doubt that it's the Chord's transient information that ultimately sets the agenda.

And that's good for all sorts of reasons. The M-6 doesn't only deliver a surprisingly three-dimensional and remarkably tactile sound, it does so with exquisite touch and supple, unstrained musicality. Its delivery is flowing, fluent and easy breathing. Presentation of fine detail is beguilingly natural rather than conspicuously spotlit.

I've been playing some early recordings of jazz fusion saxophonist David Sanborn lately and I can't recall enjoying them more than with the Scansonic in situ. Where the M-6 runs up against the bump stops is with ramped, heavily processed bass. The results can be a little flabby and over ripe, even with the grippy, muscular ATC P1 on the other end. Sanborn's 1980 album *Hideaway*, by way of contrast, is a masterclass in lean, quicksilver, delicately detailed Michael Colina production and, above all, wide open presentation of raw sax power. The M-6 simply nails it. Sanborn's alto has rasp, resonance and finger-clicks, Michael Brecker's tenor bite, body and breathy warmth. Marcus Miller on bass and synth meshes perfectly with Ray Marotta on drums in providing palpable rhythmic impetus and structure. This music motors, it gels, and sounds fabulous.

## Conclusion

The test of a fine loudspeaker is really quite simple. It must allow the real character of any recording to shine through: the contrasts, the textures, the tempo, the dynamics, the emotion. The Scansonic M-6 certainly isn't the loudest or most forceful bijou floorstander you'll ever hear, but it prosecutes its musical mission with a degree of insight and finesse that belies its price. A taste of Raidho for shallower pockets? Spot on ●

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Sweet, sophisticated sound; slim profile; finish

**DISLIKE:** Not the heaviest hitter

**WE SAY:** Best suited to smaller rooms, but a class act in every sense

★★★★★

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# Dynamic Duo

Cambridge Audio unleashes a versatile phono stage at an attractive price.

**Andrew Simpson** gets his groove on

**I**f you want to hear your vinyl at its best, a separate phono stage is generally the way to go, as it helps to keep your turntable's dedicated amplification circuits away from other electronics, which can introduce unwanted noise.

The Duo is the more feature-rich of two new models from Cambridge Audio. While the £150 Solo caters for moving-magnet pick-ups only, the Duo offers both moving-magnet and moving-coil and with a headphone output to boot. Its solid build quality and high level of finish is quite superb, with a graphite grey 3mm alloy front panel that is kept clutter free, with just an on/off button, MM/MC switching, plus a volume knob and accompanying 6.35mm output jack for headphone listening.

Around the back are separate gold-plated phono inputs for MM and MC pick-ups, highlighting separate circuits under the hood. There's also a handy balance control, which has been added to offer a degree of fine trim across each channel.

In a bid to reduce noise and hum, it sports a switch mode power supply and surface-mounted components. For MM cartridge input you get 47kohm resistance with 39dB of gain, while MC offers 100ohm and 60dB.

Powered up, the Duo's front panel LEDs (for power/standby and MM/

MC) are subtle. The volume pot is redundant in normal listening mode and comes into use once headphones are connected, and also auto-defeats the RCA outputs.

## Sound quality

Nestled between my VPI Scout 1.1 turntable with an Ortofon 2M Black cartridge (HFC 434) and Musical Fidelity M6PRE/M6PRX preamp and power amplifier (HFC 340) shows the Duo to be a solid performer.

Spinning The Police's *Bring On The Night* reveals a reassuringly measured and mellow sound. There's no treble harshness, allowing Andy Summers' fast, looping guitar riff to sound clear and insightful without being overly forward, giving its notes a dreamy edge to hook you in.

The soundstage depth is generous for a phono stage in this price bracket. This aspect hits me early on in the Police track with the thud of the opening kick drum's echo, that dissipates deep behind my Spondor A5 loudspeakers.

Serve up something richer such as Pink Floyd's *Us And Them*, and the Duo demonstrates that it can easily handle lush material. The slow building intro is laid forth in a wide soundstage, within which the saxophone is imaged just right of centre with a soothing tonality. As the music builds to a crescendo the Duo

remains unruffled, taking the dynamic swings in its stride and not allowing any congestion to creep in.

It remains just as composed when dealing with more delicate matters, such as Aldous Harding's *Stop Your Tears*, where it brings out layers of subtle nuances in her voice that hints at the emotion of the performance.

Flipping the Ortofon cartridge for a Denon DL103R moving-coil pick-up reveals just how capable this little box really is. Harding's voice takes on a softer and more natural texture, and the way she pushes or holds back her voice for effect is more apparent, showing how well this phono stage responds to different pick-ups.

Headphone listening via Audio-Technica's ATH-SR5BT (HFC 413) using the wired connection strikes a good balance between digging deep into the detail without being forensic in the amount it's able to reveal.

## Conclusion

This is fine-looking and mature-sounding phono stage that's at home with both MM and MC pick-ups. It's a worthwhile step up for many built-in phono stages to low-cost integrateds or anyone looking for a versatile upgrade to an entry-level model ●

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Cambridge Audio Duo  
**ORIGIN**  
UK/China  
**TYPE**  
MM/MC phono stage  
**WEIGHT**  
950g  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
215 x 48 x 159mm  
**FEATURES**  
● MM and MC inputs  
● Balance trim control  
● Built-in headphone amplifier  
● 6.35mm headphone output  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Audio Partnership PLC.  
**TELEPHONE**  
0207 9402200  
**WEBSITE**  
cambridgeaudio.com

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Build; well-rounded sound that's equally refined with MM or MC pick-ups

**DISLIKE:** Lacks some slight bass definition

**WE SAY:** Superb-value phono stage and headphone amp that performs beyond its price point



# The new **GOLD** standard

Not content with having the voice of a slightly saucy angel, Lyn Stanley has made it her mission to raise the quality of hi-fi itself. **David Vivian** is intrigued

**W**henever the subject has come up for discussion at *HFC*, it seems that professional singers and musicians generally aren't into audiophile-grade hi-fi. Why would they be? Immersed in their own music for a living, even the world's greatest system is going to come off second best. Their 'hi-fi jollies' don't involve 24/192 downloads but living and breathing the music itself. We can understand that. There are exceptions, though, and maybe one exceptional exception.

Meet Lyn Stanley, originally from Tacoma, Washington, working out of sunny California and notable visitor to the Bristol Sound & Vision hi-fi show this year. People call her a jazz chanteuse with a voice to make you melt, but she's more than that – not only someone with solid audiophile sensibilities, but also a denizen of the mixing desk and on a mission to ensure her music, beyond the live experience, can be enjoyed in the highest quality possible.

Remember the 'Is it live or is it Memorex?' ad for compact cassettes back in the seventies where Count Basie had to say whether he was listening to Ella Fitzgerald singing in a sound booth or a recording of her singing on a Memorex cassette with MXR, Oxide?

Rather surprisingly, he couldn't. Almost half a century on, Lyn occasionally lends her pipes to repeat the exercise at hi-fi shows across the world (minus the Memorex, of course) and now the closeness of the result is a genuine jaw dropper. Good for Lyn's presence as a performer among those of us that take our sound quality seriously, good for sales of her meticulously engineered

**At the time of writing, over 70 jazz radio stations are airing Lyn's work worldwide**

and mastered albums on vinyl, CD, SACD, hi-res download and even reel-to-reel tape (38,000 and counting), and good for the high-fidelity cause period.

They say life is a journey. Lyn Stanley's has certainly taken a few unexpected turns to arrive where she is at today. Exposure to well-reproduced music, however, is a vivid early memory. "My introduction to high-end audio equipment happened at my parents' home in the sixties and seventies when I was growing up," she says. "My stepfather had a

massive Pioneer amplifier that took a college degree to figure out. And an expensive Technics phono stage. I think the speakers were JVC. If memory serves, he moved to Macintosh systems in the eighties. We had a good collection of classical music and Sinatra swing albums on LPs, but he also dabbled with reel-to-reel on a beautiful TEAC.

"I was allowed to play the vinyl as long as I followed the instructions I was given. I didn't want to lose that privilege, so I was very attentive to the details. Everything was done to a level of perfection and I guess I just bought into that by training. But most important was the chance to play great old standards, instrumental and classical albums at our home. I thought I was lucky compared to my friends.

"Unfortunately, my mother didn't engage with my stepfather's hobby and on his passing, without my knowing, she gave away his equipment. I was heartbroken."

It would be many years before Lyn found jazz as a performer and a host of behind-the-glass legends of the genre – especially those of the Great American Songbook standards persuasion – found an 'exceptional talent'. In that time she'd 'lived' – as a competitive ballroom dancer and a college professor



Lyn's albums are available to own on vinyl, CD, SACD, as a hi-res download and reel-to-reel tape

while taking up a prolonged residency at the school of hard knocks. Two divorces, a cancer scare and a career path seemingly entrenched in corporate marketing is a chequered back story for an artist described by Los Angeles radio station KKJz-88.1FM as: "One of today's outstanding jazz vocalists". But Lyn insists that one informed the other. "I've been through a lot," she explains, "and if I don't have it in my background, I can't sing it. When I'm singing, I try to see in my mind where I was at a time in my life."

### Breaking through

The big break came with her first stage performance in 2011 where she was accompanied by legendary ivory tickler Paul Smith (Frank Sinatra, Ella, Tommy Dorsey, The Beatles). So impressed was Smith, he invited Lyn to tour with his trio for the next four months. Her first album release, *Lost In Romance*, followed in 2013 while last year's *The Moonlight Sessions Volume Two* brings the catalogue total to five. Unsurprisingly, it's the most immaculate set yet, thanks in no small part to the glowing production skills of mixing engineer Al Schmitt and mastering engineer Bernie Grundman – Grammy Award winners both. At the time of writing, over 70 jazz radio stations are airing her work worldwide.

Bernie Grundman was an early fan and supporter of Lyn's style and vocal gifts. She relates: "When I met Bernie for the first time at his mastering studio, I felt like I was back in my childhood again. It was Bernie that told me my debut record was so good and well recorded. He thought I would be a hit in the audiophile market and that I should make a vinyl record. I agreed and with his help my first album was pressed by Pallas in Germany with 180g vinyl and at 45rpm. I did this to state that I was in the audio market with my best foot forward and with Al Schmitt at the mixing desk I knew the recording would be the best it could be."

Lyn enjoyed meeting British audiophiles at the Bristol show, describing them as true enthusiasts with little time for equivocation. One, after hearing her work, bought her entire back catalogue on the spot. "That's



Lyn's *Potions* album challenged audiophiles to spot the different recording qualities

### "My first introduction to high-end audio was at my parents' home in the sixties and seventies"

what I love about the Brits," she says, "no middle ground – if they're in, they are in." And she's in a good position to judge. As well as delivering the odd impromptu song, Lyn is a seasoned speaker at high-end shows, giving fans a taste of what it's like to record at top studios with top-tier engineers and world-class musicians.

"Many audiophiles are real music lovers," she continues, "and they want to know about the behind-the-scenes activity that goes into making reference recordings. In all my time on the audiophile circuit – and I go to Munich, Hong Kong, Japan, Chicago and Los Angeles as well as other shows – I usually get requests from the rooms to play my music and give them feedback on their systems. The best of these demos is when we can play a vinyl, reel-to-reel and SACD of the same song or album and watch the reaction of the room audience to the different formats. I've done this with Tim de Paravicini

at Munich and Hong Kong and we packed the rooms – great fun. I hope to do something similar at the Bristol show if I come back next year."

### The analogue challenge

Lyn certainly isn't afraid to experiment as a means of research into what constitutes optimum sound quality. She explains: "Back in 2013, a 24/192 recording was considered high-end digital, so that's what we used for my first album. In pure terms, if you start with 24/192 you should stay there as you go through the recording process. So the album was mastered in this format too. But, once I had entered the audio market and attended shows, I got a taste for analogue recordings which, to my ear, are not as bright and 'in-your-face' as digital. So with my *Potions* album, I did an experiment and challenged my album buyers.

"Most of the tracks on this album were recorded on 2in 24-track analogue – just as it was done in the fifties. But three of the songs on this album were recorded differently. One was recorded entirely digitally at 32/192, and two were hybrids where some of the musicians were kept on the analogue track and a few of the other



Lyn likes to nail a recording in the first couple of takes to keep the likes of Mike Garson (next to her on piano) fresh

musicians were replaced by a digital track. I wanted to see if the audiophiles could figure out which tracks had the variances. With regard to recording formats, Al Schmitt has a strong opinion about what he would do if it were his money on the line. He told me a story about recording with Bob Dylan using both tape and digital and asking Dylan which he preferred. According to Al, Bob decided the digital was fine and not taken on the additional expense of tape. Tape cost? It's very high today. You can easily add an extra \$25,000 to an album to make it an analogue tape recording. But I like analogue because you can do anything with it after you're done, even convert it to digital.

"As a producer, you have to weigh the costs against the advantages. For instance, I will never make a reel-to-reel of my first album because it was a digital recording and I think that would be ripping off the customer. If he or she really wants it on tape they can make a copy for the price of a blank tape. This is

my philosophy and many music tape manufacturers don't agree. It's just quality control for me. As much as I'd love to make more money, you've got to set standards for your work in the audiophile world."

## Sound matters

So, great sound in the studio, great sound at home, right? It's crucial, states Lyn. "Even modest systems will sing with an investment in a great recording. What you put in will dictate what you get out. If you hire engineers that make a good living at what they do, they buy the best and they keep their equipment in tip-top condition at all times. It's a mandate. Hire an engineer that has to rent his equipment and you are getting used equipment that does not have the same attention to detail. Use great studios that have high standards. When I record, I pay attention to the pianos in the studio now more than ever. I've learned lessons along the way. The same

**"With Al Schmitt at the mixing desk I knew the recording would be the best it could be"**

goes for my musicians – they know that the instruments they bring to play need to be in top shape when recording. That's why studio musicians are the salt of the music earth; they know a bad sounding instrument could mean no more work for them in recording sessions.

"I believe in investing in music for obvious reasons. But do it smart and trust engineering know-how. Of course, I also think great sound means great music, but I know several audio fanatics who will disagree with me and some will play the wildest music for the sound reproduction only. Of course, I cannot do this. I hear every off-pitch instrument or unlikely mesh of instruments and sometimes cringe. I am a music lover who uses the systems to produce lifelike performances" ●

## GIVE ME THE MOONLIGHT



"The *Moonlight Sessions Volumes 1 & 2* project was my most aggressive in terms of recording and planning. I wanted to do a new (to me) challenging pressing technique developed and used in the fifties called 'one step'. This required a bit more attention to all the parts of the recording process for me as I wanted this project to be the best I have ever produced and to up my game once again.

"I do not let others manage my work; I am with a project from inception to delivery of the final product. In the recording industry, the more efficient you can be, the more you can control your costs. This project was an investment of about \$150,000 for me, but I created two albums from it and we efficiently recorded 26 songs for the project in three days. This is pretty much unheard of in the industry. I then divided the songs into two albums and added 30 strings to *Volume Two* using the Budapest Scoring Symphonic Orchestra.

"We recorded the 26 songs in one or two takes, rarely a third. So, fresh thinking from the musicians isn't worn down by multiple tries that can often exasperate them. My studio musicians are used to nailing a song on the first or second take. When you use Mike Garson on piano, for instance, he gets bored with more than three tries; his best ideas came out in the initial takes. It's the same for all the guys and gals I use. If musicians don't step up to the plate, we don't use them, it's that simple.

"So, the standards are high and the stakes even higher as we work to meet our goals. One of the songs on *Volume One* of this project was a one-take scratch track, *My Funny Valentine*. We stood down the other musicians for lunch and then Mike Garson and I did this solo piano and vocal track, no formal arrangement. Mike simply had my key and wrote down his chords in pencil on one sheet of paper. If you listen carefully, you'll hear how Mike and I begin to engage more closely as he makes the music more complex. This is one of the best piano solos you will ever hear, in my opinion.

"The 'one step' pressing is simply a pressing plant technique. As the record sold to the customer is made by the father stamper, it sounds so much like a reel-to-reel tape and there are no degrading layers between the many generations of stampers you get with a traditional three-step album. I think this new recording has a place in the audiophile archives because of the sound quality."



Despite the prohibitive cost, Lyn prefers to record in analogue over digital

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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 toddler 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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## Wired for sound

Please can you explain the sonic differences between budget and high-end cables? Many people claim that the reason the differences between cables are often subtle is due to the quality/cost of the partnering system used in the test. As a result, the differences only really become apparent on high-end systems. This I believe is the origin of the '10 percent rule' when determining the correct ratio of budget to assign to purchasing cables for a system.

Do you agree that the difference between budget and high-end cables is only really noticed on high-end systems or can budget

kit also clearly reveal the differences that more expensive cables offer?

*Mike Farrow, by email*

**JK:** Hi Mike, the benefits of better cables are pretty obvious on almost any system. They are in many respects the weakest link in the system, so a budget system should suffer just as much as a high-end one. That said, a high-end system will reveal much more of the benefits. Take a look at last month's *Group Test* and then see if you can borrow a set of decent cables from a friendly dealer and see what it does for your system. Be sure to write and let us know the results.

**CW:** I've heard quality cables lift budget systems and modest cables that don't hold high-end systems back. As a general rule, I find budget systems may benefit from a little extra spend on the speakers or source ahead of superior cabling. Once components reach a certain quality then better cables can squeeze more performance from them. Commonly, I find the synergy of cabling in a system is often more beneficial than outright spend. In particular, try experimenting with interconnects and speaker cabling from a single manufacturer before you decide to mix and match.



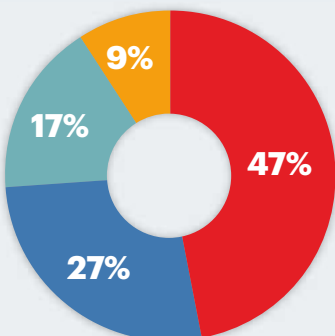
**The debate about what to spend on cables continues to rage, check out HFC 435 for our Group Test**

**NR:** This question is doubtless going to cause some controversy. I don't think it is a simple yes or no answer. Rather, the full benefits of high-end cables are most likely only to be heard with high-end systems that are capable of reproducing all of the subtleties that these cables have to offer. It's not so much that you won't hear any benefits whatsoever by using an expensive cable on a budget system, it's just that fitting an £800 interconnect to a £500 amplifier is not going to give you sonic benefits worth £1,300. It's about balancing your expenditure to get the most from your investment. However, the nice thing about hi-fi separates is that you can focus your money on the components that you are likely to use the most. So, if you are a vinyl devotee, for example, I would perhaps consider going over your 10 percent rule when choosing a phono interconnect as you may well enjoy

## WE ASKED...

### How much of your overall system budget has been spent on cables?

● Less than 10% ● 10-15%  
● More than 15% ● Cables don't matter



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JK thinks Naim's Uniti Star could solve Dave's top-end problem



noticeable improvements for a small additional outlay. Just don't go mad!

### ➤ Trouble at the top

In order to declutter my living space I recently replaced my CD player with a Melco N1A/2 music server, onto which I have copied all of my CD collection. The Melco is connected to a Chord Hugo DAC by a QED Reference USB lead, which was the best cable I could find that would actually connect to the Hugo's recessed micro USB socket. The Hugo in turn feeds a Cambridge Audio 851A integrated amplifier via Chord Anthem

### My latest upgrade is an improvement, but now the top end is bright and coarse

interconnects, which is connected to my PMC twenty.21 speakers with Chord Odyssey cable.

I had expected that this upgrade might affect the sound quality, and while there has been a pleasing improvement in detail retrieval and timing, the top end now seems both brighter and coarser. This is particularly noticeable on vocals – male vocals have a rasp to them and female vocals can sound breathy and hissy, especially if they are recorded with high levels of reverb. Sibilance is also highlighted and I sometimes find it necessary to switch on the 851A's previously unused tone controls in order to reduce the

treble somewhat. Can you suggest what might be causing this effect? Could it be jitter or has it perhaps always been on the recordings, but only now being heard due to the extra detail retrieved?

*Dave Houghton, by email*

**JK:** Hi Dave, you have assembled a pretty revealing system, one that I can imagine will highlight shortcomings in recordings with ease, but it's very unusual for a CD player to have a smoother top end than a streaming set up like yours. I agree that an amplifier upgrade would definitely help, and would opt for one like the Hegel H190 that can stream directly from your Melco. Streaming over Ethernet consistently sounds better than USB connections and amp/streamers eliminate a lot of potentially lossy cables (digital and analogue interconnects). The other amp/streamer to try would be Naim's Uniti Star, (HFC 433) this is a little over your budget, but it would mean that you could trade in the Hugo and will certainly provide a serious upgrade all round.

**ES:** First up, do any of the filter settings on the Hugo affect this harshness? I've never found the changes to be dramatic, but it is possible that one might help and that would be at a cost of £0. Secondly, I have found that if the output of the Hugo is too high, this can also result in the sort of issues you describe so backing the volume off and using more gain on the amp can also help.

If none of these areas have any real effect, my view would be "Go Moon". Simaudio's Moon 340i and 240i (HFC 430) are great integrated performers and the former can be ordered with less digital inputs to avoid 'doubling up.'



### Can a £39 insect make all your CD files sound better than Hi-Res?

Yes and no: Using the same equipment and a quality DAC, a 24/96 file (for example) will always sound better than a CD 16/44.1 file ... but, even a single JitterBug will often allow a CD file to be more musical and more emotionally stimulating than a Hi-Res file without the benefit of a JitterBug.

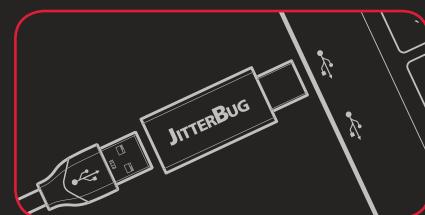
**Noise** is the problem. Real noise—the kind you can't hear directly. Most often, the word "noise" is used to describe tape hiss or a scratch on a record, but these sounds aren't noise; they are properly reproduced sounds that we wish weren't there.

**Problem noise** is essentially random, resonant or parasitic energy, which has no meaning. It can't be turned into discrete sounds, but it does compromise signal integrity and the performance of everything it touches.

**JitterBug's dual-function** line-conditioning circuitry greatly reduces the noise and ringing that plague both the data and power lines of USB ports, whether on a computer, streamer, home stereo or car audio front-panel USB input.

A single JitterBug is used in between devices (i.e., in series) as shown below. For an **additional "wow" experience**, try a second JitterBug into another USB port on the same device (such as a computer). Whether the second port is vacant, or is feeding a printer or charging a phone, JitterBug's noise-reduction ability is likely to surprise you. No, the printer won't be affected—only the audio!

While a JitterBug helps MP3s sound a lot more like music, high-sample-rate files have the most noise vulnerability. Try a JitterBug or two on all your equipment, but never more than two per USB bus. There is such a thing as too much of a good thing.



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### ➤ Where to next?

In the last year I decided to take the plunge into streaming and bought a Naim NAC-N 172 XS preamp/streamer, ripped my CDs to a NAS drive and all is well.

My system now consists of the Naim preamp powered by a Quad 909 amplifier, Marantz CD 67SE (as a transport using the DAC in the preamp), Thorens TD 160 Super (I'm still a vinyl fan), Rega Fono Mini phono stage and Monitor Audio Silver RX1 speakers on Mission stands.

I think the speakers are letting the system down and am thinking about an upgrade, but I'm not sure what to do. My listening room is quite narrow and long (2.3m wide

### I want speakers for my 2.3 x 5.5m room, what would you suggest I go for?

by 5.5m long) and I don't know whether to go for a standmount speaker or a floorstander. I have previously had floorstanding speakers in the room (Mission 733i) until the cones disintegrated.

What speakers would you suggest as possible choices, considering my system? I am looking to spend between £1,000 and £1,500, but may be able to go a little higher if needed. Any other suggestions would be useful as it's something to aim for in the future.

*Brian Swift, by email*

**JK:** Hi Brian, my favourite speaker in this price range has to be the Rega RX3, a

**B&W's 705 S2 might stretch Brian's budget, but it's worth the extra investment**



medium-sized floorstander with side-firing bass drivers. This latter feature means that you can experiment with pointing the bass units in – or outward – which helps to balance the bass to the specific characteristics of the room. The other upgrade I would suggest is a better phono stage. The Fono Mini is good for the price, but you can certainly do a lot better with a Rega Aria, which works with both MM and MC cartridges and will shift your sound with vinyl into another league entirely.

**ES:** I would be tempted to have a look at the Bowers & Wilkins 705 S2 (HFC 430) – even if it means accruing funds for a little longer. You can make use of the existing stands and I suspect it will offer a balanced performance that should move the performance of the system on, even in a relatively confined space.

**DP:** Yes, your Monitor Audios are a little out of their depth considering the potential of your system. There's a plethora of loudspeakers around this price point, but sadly you don't specify what type of sound you prefer or the music you listen to, which precludes me from getting too specific. No bother, because Cambridge Audio's Aeromax 6 (HFC 391) is a great all-rounder for £900 – indeed it's one of my favourites at anywhere near this price point. It uses a BMR driver to give seamless treble and midband to right down into the middle bass, so there's no crossing over of drivers in the sensitive presence region. Soundstaging is excellent too, and it is very room friendly – use the supplied foam port bungs and move them around 30cm out from the rear wall in your room. The result is a really smooth, delicate, detailed sound that would certainly suit your Naim front end.

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Russ Andrews Superkord 500 has made a huge difference to Guy's setup

LETTER  
OF THE  
MONTH

### ► The mains man

For some time now I've been intending to write to you about the beneficial effect different mains cables and conditioners can have on the sound of a hi-fi system. Except every time I think of emailing you I find another product worth trying out! Last week, though, I received another new mains cable and it's probably the final link in the chain.

Most of the items are from Russ Andrews – many of which have been reviewed in *HFC*. The exception is a balanced mains transformer (BMT) bought from Airlink Transformers.

My system is entirely analogue, with a Roksan Xerxes 20 Plus record player, Roksan Artemiz II

## Mains power varies from area to area and minute to minute in the same area

tonearm and a van den Hul Colibri cartridge. All amplification is valve, with two 300B parallel single ended mono blocks providing 20W of power. The speakers are kit built and use 8in and 5in Audax woven Kevlar units with SEAS tweeters. All of the supplied mains cables have been replaced with RA ones with Sawyers discs fitted. The BMT supplies the whole system and various mains conditioners are plugged in before the BMT. The latest cable upgrade was a RA Superkord 500 to supply the BMT.

Each change of mains cable, or addition of a mains conditioner has subsequently lead to an improvement in the overall

quality of the sound. Each time there has been greater clarity, more detail, less background 'mush'. In short, more all-round musical enjoyment.

The addition of the Superkord 500 to supply the BMT is possibly the most significant upgrade yet. It allows the hi-fi to open up and portray even more musical emotion and excitement. Timing is improved, more information is retrieved from the vinyl,

separation between instruments is better and the soundstage is larger, more three dimensional and more realistic.

It's such a shame that so many people scoff at the very idea of changing the mains leads. It's an easy upgrade to try out and if the cables are bought by mail order there is the statutory minimum 14-day period during which they can be returned. Some suppliers even give up to 60 days to try them, can't say fairer than that...

*Guy Pettigrew, by email*

**DP:** I started as a cynic, but experience has taught me that mains is a vital part of any system and should not be regarded as a bolt-on extra. I've come to liken it to car tyres; it doesn't matter how fancy your car is, if the actual 'contact patch' with the ground isn't good then it's never going to give its best. Likewise, poor mains really does sully the sound. The trouble is it varies from area to area, and even from minute to minute in the same area, thanks to demands on the network. Mains leads play a small but significant part in ameliorating this, and for this reason shouldn't be ignored. As letter of the month winner, you can add Russ Andrews yellOPower main lead to your setup too.

**JK:** I totally agree, cleaning up the mains and improving the links between outlet and audio inlet produces major benefits in pretty much any system – the more revealing it is the better the improvement. Something you might be interested in is CAD's GC-1 ground control unit, which takes noise off the ground plane and either plugs straight into the mains or to the ground of individual components. Anyone that's trying to establish whether or not it's worth using better mains cables should try one on the source element in their system – in the case of vinyl systems that's the power supply for the turntable, in digital ones the server or CD player.

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**NR:** Your comments are very much in line with my experience. It is easy to scoff at the concept of mains cables improving the sound of a system, but what you've articulated is there to be heard on systems at all price points. Of course, there are some manufacturers that are trying to jump on the mains cable upgrade bandwagon, but the cables we've reviewed will deliver sonic benefits for most systems.

### ➤ Good advice

Following my previous letter to you (HFC 428) I wanted to let you know that I have just purchased the Yamaha WXAD-10 streaming device and it's great. I am able to stream music from my Android smartphone using Bluetooth and the results are excellent.

I purchased it using your reviews and am delighted to say it's very easy to use and setup. The sound quality is good when it's fed to my Yamaha amplifier and B&W 683 S2 speakers. Many thanks to Hi-Fi Corner, Falkirk and thanks for a great magazine!

*Christopher Smith, Falkirk*

**ES:** Hi Christopher, I have to agree, the WXAD-10 (HFC 424) sees a huge amount of use here too. Since my Naim ND 5XS operates on a closed network, it has become my defacto access point for streaming services and internet radio and it is a very flexible and stable little device.

### ➤ DIY phono stage

Thanks for publishing my letter in HFC 427. I may have not made my idea for a more useful phono stage design quite clear, so I've enclosed a schematic (right). As you can see, there is no possibility of overloading a delicate phono stage. In essence, it's a preamp minus the volume control and so needn't even be powered up if listening to a line-level source. Simple. What do you think?

*Tom Reid, Dundee*

**JK:** You'll have to build that one yourself Tom, I've never seen such a thing. I know a man who might be able to do it, though. Try Jonathan Billington of Music First Audio (mfaudio.co.uk). But you

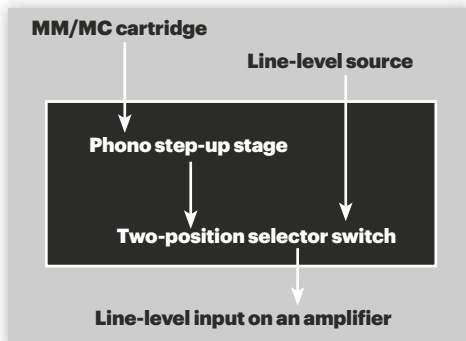


**Yamaha's WXAD-10 is a great option for streaming**

might find that it's cheaper to buy an amp with the inputs that you need.

**CW:** Ah OK, I see where you are coming from Tom. Step-up transformers are generally used to get you from the very low-level moving-coil signals up to a slightly higher range suitable to utilise a moving-magnet phono input on an amp. Stepping up to 'line level' is a considerable hike further. I'm no expert, but I fancy you would fall foul of serious impedance matching problems and considerable degradation in sound quality. Keep up with the innovative thinking, though. Maybe you'll write back in a year, confirming that you've got Kickstarter funding and a revolutionary prototype.

**Neville thinks Tom's idea will work just fine**



**NR:** Hi again Tom, yes, what you are proposing is what I alluded to in my previous response – that is, using a switch box that can be bought cheaply from Amazon or online auction sites. You connect the output of your MM or MC phono stage to one input of the switch box and use the other input(s) for your line-level sources. The phono stage incorporates equalisation, amplification and impedance matching to bring the phono signal to a line level, so your design should work perfectly.

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# Hi-fi made simple

Breaking with the traditional mix-and-match approach to hi-fi system building, **Verity Burns** considers the virtues of fuss-free active loudspeaker setups

**S**ystem matching is arguably one of the most enjoyable aspects of hi-fi, and also one of the trickiest. It's one of the first things you learn about when building your first setup, and something that's always at the back of your mind when it comes to expanding and improving it later down the line. The reason it's so contentious is that there's no exact science to it – no right or wrong. But that's also what makes it fun, mixing and matching components to get a sound that's been tailor made by you.

Despite that, one of the growing areas of hi-fi is premium active setups – speakers with all the system matching done for you, built into a compact one- or two-box system. Of course, active speakers are nothing new. They have long been a more convenient alternative to traditional setups because of their lack of wires and boxes, and preferred as studio monitors due to their ability to make the signal as pure as possible. While tinkering to create a sound yourself is part of the fun, leaving the system matching to the engineers that create the drivers, crossover, cabinet and circuitry has a lot of benefits too.

Yet there has been a hint of hesitation in the industry when it comes to active systems – a feeling that they aren't as authentic as separates amid claims that they're always 'too bright' or 'too forward' compared with a passive setup.

**KEF's LS50 W is as precise and focused as it is fun and dynamic**

The industry certainly seems to be trying hard to change that opinion, while also attracting new audiences with a more accessible approach. That's only been helped along by the relatively universal shift towards streaming – another trick that the many active speakers have up their sleeves compared with their passive counterparts.

Of course, it's important to distinguish the difference between a proper active system and the often-cheaper powered kind. Both have their place, but when it comes to getting the best sound, it's the active type that's going to give you the purest experience. At its simplest, an active system features a power amp for each driver and more precise line-level crossovers, whereas a traditional system often uses just one amp for all drivers fed to a standard passive crossover. It's the latter you'll find used in the majority of regular Bluetooth, desktop and multi-room speakers, plus powered stereo speakers, such as DALI's superb Zensor 5 AX floorstander costing £800 (*HFC* 410).

Go to any forum and find a post from anyone asking advice on an active system and you'll find people trying to talk them out of it.



However, it's the former where things start to get interesting in performance terms, and I've recently been spending some time with possibly the best sound-for-pound active speaker system I've heard – KEF's LS50 Wireless (*HFC* 433) – and I have to say, if you've had any hesitation in turning to an active system, an audition of this smart, flexible system comes highly recommended.

## Time to get active

Not only does it come with a good selection of inputs for external sources, including optical, RCA and USB Type-B, but it also supports aptX Bluetooth 4.0 and is network enabled for streaming from connected drives. Best of all, it sounds as good as – and in many cases better than – any comparable separate system you could build for the same £2,000 asking price.

Put simply, you're getting all of the brilliance of KEF's superb LS50 standmount, which is now transformed into an active setup, all built into an equally attractive design that measures only a few millimetres wider and deeper.

It produces hugely enjoyable sound, as precise and focused as it is fun and dynamic. It excels with all genres of music and all sources, with a spacious soundstage and a stunning display of musicality, and music streamed from services like Tidal sound fantastic.

Its built-in DSP also gives you control over how exactly it performs, a level of tailoring a passive system just can't offer, allowing you to adjust the sound depending on placement, as well as to your taste. Best of all, it welcomes all levels of listener, from newbie to enthusiast.

While separate systems remain the way to go if you'll want to keep improving your system over time, active systems like the LS50 Wireless prove that good hi-fi doesn't have to be complicated, nor come in multiple boxes – it really can be as simple as this ●

**KEF's LS50 Wireless proves active speakers have a place in modern hi-fi**



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Paul Rigby – The Audiophile Man, Dec 16

# Big bang theory

**David Price** samples a reborn classic eighties Klipsch loudspeaker, which helps him see today's updated design – with a subtly adjusted name – in a completely new light

**Y**ou've got to hand it to Klipsch – calling a loudspeaker Forté is about as honest as hi-fi branding and marketing ever gets. Back at the time of its launch in 1985, this was the very dictionary definition of the word – loud and strong. If you're not familiar with the marque then you might be surprised to know that even then – in a decade famed for rather insensitive speakers – this big three-way was hugely efficient. It used a combination of compression loaded horn midrange and treble drivers, alongside a large 12in woofer and a similarly sized rear-mounted passive radiator, to give a sensitivity figure of 98dB/1W/1m. Boom!

Everything about the Forté was the epitome of an old-school loudspeaker, even back then. Lest we forget, the eighties was the decade where speakers began to transform, *Doctor Who*-like, from one 'body' to another. The familiar form through the sixties and seventies was as large wooden cabinets, with wide front baffles and a plethora of drivers. By the eighties, however, the breed was transmigrating to a new, slimmer look. Often two-way designs with simpler crossovers and smaller, narrower enclosures, this era was epitomised by the likes of the Celestion SL6, the Epos ES14 and the Mordaunt-Short R352. Across the pond in Hope, Arkansas, however, Klipsch had just launched a near metre-high boom box with four drivers and a box wide enough to be reused as

a living room storage cabinet.

For me, the Forté is an essay in classic design. Rather like seeing a mid-eighties

**The Klipsch sounds wonderfully fast and propulsive, yet quite crude**

Chevrolet Corvette at a classic car show, its size, styling, engineering and aura says so much about its era. It's like time-warping back to experience how people lived over 30 years ago. The Klipsch embodied US loudspeaker design norms of the time, and has what I would describe as 'the classic American sound'. Fascinatingly, the company has just revived this speaker for today's buyers, and it's an amazing thing to listen to in both a good and a bad way.

The new Forté III – note the anglicised spelling – costs £4,000 and is very close to the eighties-tastic original. The box is slightly bigger, but pretty much keeps the same proportions, and a little heavier too. The mid and treble drive units are updated versions of the originals, and the woofer and rear passive radiator have grown slightly. All-in-all, however, it's fair to say that the company has pretty much kept to the formula – it's almost as if that metaphorical 1985 Corvette has been relaunched largely

untouched aside from modern tyres, fuel injection and an iPod dock wired into the stereo radio/cassette player.

Listening to the new Forté (right) is a blast from the past. Sat next to a modern pair of similarly priced floorstanders – let's say Monitor Audio's Gold 300 – you'd be amazed at how different the two sound. These days – as anyone who's worked in hi-fi retail or reviewed a *HFC* loudspeaker group test will know – there are clear differences between speakers, but they're not that profound. Yet this comparison is dramatic – and it's both a win and a loss for the modern speaker. Put simply, the Klipsch sounds wonderfully fast and propulsive – thanks to the horn loading and those light cones – yet quite crude. It lacks transparency, delicacy, finesse, insight. It isn't the smoothest thing, yet somehow you're not bothered. The Forté has a wonderful swagger – it's got an attitude of fun and confidence that makes most modern speakers seem like pedantic party poopers.

## Ode to joy

This is no disrespect to the Monitor Audio by the way, which in most aspects is vastly better. It's just that there's a certain *joie de vivre* that the Forté has that seems lost in many contemporary designs. The obverse is that the Klipsch sounds overly coloured and imposes too much of its character on things – you get the feeling that this speaker wants to turn even the softest soul ballad into one of Whitesnake's most powerful heavy metal thrashes. Going back to that car analogy, it's great for shredding the tarmac and doing burnouts, but you wouldn't want to take the wife and kids in it on a camping holiday.

The new Forté has an even higher claimed sensitivity, and even greater power handling. It is a *tour de force*, an extreme speaker for people who like extreme things. My view is that it is great to be offered this choice. Aside from the high end, the loudspeaker market is pretty formulaic these days. Go and hear this big box for yourself if you possibly can – you may not always like what you hear, but at least it will make you think ●



**Returning without the accent on the e, the Forté is a real blast from the past**



**DAVID PRICE**  
Basil Forté



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# Winter wonderland

A run in with the 'Beast from the East' sees **Chris Ward** putting his skis and sledge to one side and considering what can be learnt from the acoustic properties of snow

**I**n recent weeks most of us have experienced a little snow. For some this has been an annoyance, for others a welcome excuse not to commute and for millions of kids a chance to build snowmen or sit on a sledge. Yet my abiding memories of the snow are acoustic. Trudging through my local woods I'm struck by the way the experience of sound is markedly changed. You may have noticed how you perceive sounds differently, but have you ever wondered whether snow could improve your hi-fi?

For me, the lack of reflected sound in the snow is really pronounced. Without snow, the sound of my footsteps, speech, the wind and birdsong ricochet around the trees giving a complex and bristling soundscape, rich in treble and harmonics. In the snow, every sound is heavily damped. Most sounds have now lost their extra acoustic depth, but as well as being somewhat flatter, most sounds now seem purer. There is a natural personal introspection from hearing sounds that somehow feel as if they're being produced for your ears only. You find that you are getting less reflected sound and more direct sound.

I recently flicked through an ancient hi-fi tome from the sixties, which recommended that the speaker end of the listening room

**I hear tiny sounds more clearly on days when the air is full of water molecules**

should be relatively 'dead' and unreflective while conversely the listening position end be 'lively' and reflective. This is shrewd and logical, but maybe the snowy insights mean we should experiment with having our rooms far deader, even around the listening 'sweet spot'.

So, should we spray fake snow around our living rooms and go for the full Santa's grotto vibe? A better starting point must surely be the floor covering. A carpet or rug is akin to a good snowfall and will absorb a fair amount of stray sound. If you are considering laying a new carpet, talk to the fitter about your underlay choices. In my experience the underlay is more important than the carpet in achieving the acoustics you seek. There are even special underlays for flats designed to stop sound travelling through floors to the apartment below. Do some tests. Get a few larger samples and ask a friend to hold them in front of your speakers while you listen from your listening position. Do any really soak up the sound?

Consider hanging larger canvas prints on your walls. These are usually stretched over frames that can be 20-80mm deep, giving you plenty of room to insert rectangles of underlay or thinner loft insulation in the

cavity. These are excellent at taming early sound reflections. Place them between speakers or side walls where the sound would bounce first to reach your ears.

Find the right places by asking a friend to hold a mirror on the wall until you can see your speaker's drivers. This will be the point of first reflection.

While snow in the corners of your ceiling is fanciful, pre-formed coving is cheap, simple to fit and remarkably effective at taming some deeper frequencies. This is because it fills the last few centimetres where boundary reinforcement can amplify longer wavelengths. The effect can be profound on the sound of your room.

Curtains can be magnificent sound absorbers, even when left open. I've often heard excellent results from drawn curtains behind speakers either side of a window. As with carpet and underlay, any curtain lining material can seriously multiply the impact in absorbing sound. The way that curtains undulate backwards and forwards is also particularly helpful at catching and dissipating sound, so don't skimp on the width of curtains. The more they undulate, the greater the surface area to tame stray sound.

## Cool your boots

Given our inspiration was a snowy walk, why don't you experiment with temperature? Turn down the thermostat or open a window or door. I think my room sounds better when colder and I hear distant tiny sounds more clearly on misty days where the air is laden with water molecules.

I'm not going to suggest you change an expensive sofa or armchairs, but be aware that the position of your furniture may help the absorption of unwanted bass boom. Thinking back to snow drifts against walls and fences, bass trapping furniture near boundaries can be highly effective. But try moving furniture about, as even small distances can subtly shift towards a bass anti-node from a node of longer wavelengths, potentially taming deeper resonances from forming. Add some extra large scatter cushions and your newly improved acoustic winter wonderland could be complete! Now, where's my hot toddy? ●



**Is this the ideal environment for listening to hi-fi?**



**CHRIS WARD**  
Mr Freeze

# WHO ARE TRUE SIGNAL AUDIO AND WHY DO OUR INTERCONNECTS STAND OUT AGAINST OTHER MANUFACTURERS?



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# Play your cards right

**Neville Roberts** recalls the music that accompanied the test card transmissions and finds he's not alone in his appreciation of these often-derided compositions

I have enjoyed listening to light music for as long as I can remember. When I fancy a change from classical, I usually turn to jazz, big bands and easy listening orchestral music. Up until the mid-eighties when 24-hour television took over, there was always the test card to fill in the gaps between shows and the music that accompanied those iconic images was of much higher quality than you might at first think.

Sadly, this light music has often been described as 'muzak', but in reality it was far from bland. The huge diversity that was used and the high quality of the musicians and performances may come as a surprise to those that equate it with the sort of piped music that has polluted the audio atmosphere in public places over the years.

At the start of television in 1936, programmes were not shown continuously throughout the day, and something was required to be transmitted between the broadcasts to allow dealers to demonstrate and set up their products. Furthermore, when colour came to Britain in the late sixties, it was realised that some form of test pattern was essential to assist with the aligning of receivers. It was not until after the second world war that the first test card was broadcast. Not only was a video test pattern required, but an audio signal was also needed – if only to check that the sound circuits were working. It was, therefore, decided that music should also be transmitted to accompany the test card.

## A number of the orchestras included the cream of library session musicians

It was back in September 1955 when the BBC changed from the live playing of 78rpm records in random order to accompany the test card to using music recorded on tape. For ITA, the first trade test schedule commenced on Monday 17 June 1957 and, unlike with the BBC, it opted to use commercially available records until the late sixties when it started using tape. In October 1959, the BBC started building a library of half-hour tapes to accompany the famous monochrome Test Card C image.

One of the problems for the BBC music compilers was the restrictions imposed by the Musicians' Union on the use of needle-time music, which meant that music recorded in the UK could not be used. As a consequence, the compilers had to go abroad for material, and the first stop was France. These early tapes, therefore, exhibited a distinct French style with plenty of accordion music. As more tapes were produced, music began to be sourced from further afield – for example, from Mozart Edition in Germany. The tapes were themed, and some were devoted to classical music.

The quality was high, showcasing superb orchestras and composers such as Roger Roger, Heinz Kiessling, Werner Tautz and our own Frank Chacksfield, Charles Williams and Syd Dale. Music was purchased by the BBC from a variety of music

publishers and made into BBC LPs, which were used to create the BBC Coded Music library. Many of the orchestras included the cream of library session musicians who were assembled abroad to record the music.

Moving across to ITA music, this was sourced from commercial LPs with styles ranging from easy listening such as Bert Kaempfert, Herb Alpert, Mantovani, Frank Chacksfield and Robert Farnon to classical pieces performed by the Halle and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras.

## New kid on the block

November 1982 saw the arrival of Channel 4, which was keen to establish its own identity. The music chosen to accompany test card transmissions was very different and used UK library trade-only LPs from publishers like KPM, Joseph Weinberger and Ready Music. Moog and ARP synthesisers were the order of the day and the music reflected the modern era featuring reggae and funk music.

As the eighties progressed, improvements in screens meant that less work was required to set them up. As a result, the test card was squeezed out to make room for daytime TV. What gaps there were between programmes were filled with Ceefax in Vision on the BBC.

No article on test card music would be complete without a reference to the Test Card Circle ([testcardcircle.org.uk](http://testcardcircle.org.uk)). This organisation was formed in 1989 for those that enjoy the music played during BBC and ITA trade test transmissions. One of the members, who is an ex-BBC person herself, transmits a monthly internet radio programme for the members and other trade test music devotees to enjoy.

For me and many others, the golden age of test card music was from the mid-sixties to the late seventies. How many of you are also lovers of this music? Please let us know your favourites by writing to us at: [letters@hifichoice.co.uk](mailto:letters@hifichoice.co.uk) ●



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# Sisters aren't doing it...

From Aretha and Annie Lennox to the Spice Girls, female empowerment has always been important in music, but **Nigel Williamson** notes that 'girl power' still has a long way to go

**T**here's a wonderful new film titled *Here To Be Heard: The Story Of The Slits*, which not only chronicles the ups and downs of punk rock's fabulous first all-female group, but exposes the shameful sexism of the music industry back in the seventies and eighties. After watching the film, I reflected that we have come a long way from those days and while other creative industries grapple with the issues thrown up by the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, in gender terms popular music proudly operates on a level playing field. How complacently wrong could I be?

A week after, a major new initiative called Keychange was announced aimed at redressing what turns out to be a vast gender imbalance in music. The statistics behind the campaign are staggering. A BBC study of recent UK music festivals found that out of 660 headline appearances, only 37 were all-female acts. The Wireless Festival, held at London's Finsbury Park in July, has just three female artists across three days, while this year's Green Man Festival lineup has no women among its headline acts. A survey by *The Guardian* found that on any given night, more than two-thirds of the gigs taking place all over Britain feature an exclusively male lineup.

The stats are just as depressing away from the stage.

## Why did the rallying cries turn out to be little more than hollow slogans?

According to the PRS Foundation, women represent less than 15 percent of all registered composers and songwriters.

Meanwhile, earnings for women in music are on average far lower than for men and women are chronically under represented in executive roles, making up just 5 percent of all sound engineers, according to industry group SoundGirls. The Music Producers Guild says that only 6 percent of its members are women. Of the almost 900 acts nominated for the last six ceremonies at the Grammy Awards, 91 percent were men. Gender diversity in the American music industry, it turns out, may be even worse than it is over in the movie business.

The Keychange initiative, set up by the PRS Foundation, has so far recruited 45 international music festivals, which have pledged that by 2022 at least 50 percent of their lineups will be made up of women. Those signing up to the equality pledge include the Proms, Liverpool Sound City, the Aldeburgh Festival and Cheltenham Jazz Festival. BBC Music has also lent its support, promising a 50/50 gender split on the 'Introducing' stages it hosts for new performers across various festivals.



The big ticket rock festivals from Glastonbury to Roskilde in Denmark are yet to sign the pledge and are reluctant to move away from boys armed with guitars and fuelled by testosterone, although Glastonbury's Emily Eavis is a Keychange 'ambassador' and supports in principle.

What is perhaps most depressing is that long before the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, popular music was singing about gender and power. It's more than 30 years since Eurythmics and Aretha Franklin told us "sisters are doin' it for themselves" and more than 20 years since the Spice Girls celebrated 'girl power'. So why did these brave anthems and rallying cries turn out to be little more than hollow slogans?

## Part of the problem

Every one of the 25 musicians featured on David Byrne's new album *American Utopia* (HFC 435) is male. When this was pointed out to him, his response was contrite and instructive. "It's hard to realise that no matter how much effort you spend nudging the world in what you hope is the right direction, sometimes you are part of the problem," he admitted. "I never thought of myself as being 'one of those guys', but I guess to some extent I am."

Many remain uneasy about positive discrimination and I've long had reservations that quotas are the best answer, preferring to cling naively to the belief that change should come through education and awareness campaigns. But David Byrne's experience has forced me to change my mind. If someone as cool and enlightened and well-meaning and right-on as the former Talking Heads singer can make the mistake of releasing an album featuring more than two dozen men and not a single woman, the message is clear. Sadly, it seems quotas are the only way anything is ever going to change ●

**Girl power was over 20 years ago and yet nothing has really changed**



**NIGEL WILLIAMSON**  
Riot Grrrl

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM  
NAD/DYNAUDIO

# Leading the way

What happens when you combine NAD's flagship electronics with some burly Danes? **Ed Selley** finds out





ne of the most interesting developments in hi-fi over the last few years has been the slow but inexorable

move away from the idea that minimalism is a prerequisite of high performance. The notion of a device doing two or – shock horror – even more functions and being superb at all of them is finally taking root with a number of manufacturers. Even allowing for this development, though, the system you see here takes that idea and runs with it.

Of course, NAD has some positive form in this particular area. Its Modular Design Concept has been around for some time now and allows you to tailor the facilities that a given product offers to suit your needs. It has sufficient faith in the concept that it extends to its flagship Masters

## The functionality on offer here makes many rivals look underdeveloped

range and the rated 2x 150W M32 integrated amp has become pretty much the physical embodiment of the concept. As well as two line inputs supported by a MM phono stage, the back panel is arranged with various slots to allow for different modules to be fitted. As standard, you get a digital board with optical, coaxial and AES digital inputs to partner the analogue ones, or you can add HDMI inputs and outputs or the company's own BluOS UPnP module.

If you want streaming to be a part of your music consumption, you would do well to consider the M50.2. This uses the same BluOS interface, but in ►

### COMPONENTS

#### **NAD M50.2 £3,799**

The M50.2 combines network functionality, streaming service access and digital inputs with a RAID mirrored internal drive and CD ripper for a one-stop solution.

#### **NAD M32 £3,499**

Built around NAD's Digital Direct architecture, this integrated combines a unique software control amplifier stage with on-board digital-to-analogue decoding.

#### **DYNAUDIO CONTOUR 30 FROM £5,750**

The middle of three Contour models, the 30 is a 2.5-way floorstander that's built around a pair of 180mm mid/bass drivers and a 28mm soft dome tweeter.

## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM NAD/DYNAUDIO



the spirit of multi-tasking, adds a selection of other features that make it a little different from a conventional streamer. The most significant of these is that it is also a server, thanks to an internal 2TB drive and can add and tag its own content using the on-board CD mechanism. Should you not happen to own the file in question, you can access it via one of the many streaming services that BluOS supports. Where the M50.2 doesn't double up is with the decoding. As there's a DAC board in the M32, you simply connect it via digital cable to that and away you go.

### Built to last

Compared with this armada of functionality, Dynaudio's Contour 30 has to be content simply as a speaker, but some of the same ethos can be seen in the lengths that Dynaudio has gone to in its construction. Everything from the Esotar2 tweeter through to the recently upgraded feet – allowing the speaker to be levelled while in situ from above the spikes, something you don't want to take for granted with a speaker this size – is bespoke. Dynaudio isn't a 'me too' sort of company, its solutions are frequently different to those seen anywhere else

and have come about for very good reasons. Where both companies have pulled a bit of a blinder, though, is that they have managed to encase this technical wizardry and engineering prowess in an aesthetic that won't have minimalism advocates running for the hills. Thanks to the use of touchscreens, the NAD duo is free of swathes of buttons and the casework is beautifully finished, benefitting

### NAD's Modular Design Concept lets you tailor features to suit your needs

from lovely attention to detail. The black of the front plate does a neat job of breaking the chassis up into smaller sections while the spiked feet, with their matching magnetic cups, are gloriously over engineered.

The Dynaudio is also immaculately built. Any imperfection in the (£6,325) gloss finish on a cabinet of that size is going to stick out like an iceberg in the Mediterranean, but the Contour is perfect. Once again, the use of the brushed steel front panel section helps break up the mass of the

**Above left: Dynaudio's bespoke drivers work superbly with the NAD**

**Above: Both companies have a fantastic sense of design**

**Above right: All the connectivity you'll ever need with the option to add even more**

cabinets making this pretty hefty speaker feel a little smaller and more discrete than it actually is. There is also a sense when you unbox and install the Contour that the company's professional heritage is never far from the surface. Sure, it's beautifully made and extremely pretty, but you also get the feeling that if required to do a 10-year stint as a pro monitor, it'd be more than able to get the job done.

### Complete control

Combining these products achieves one critical thing pretty much from the moment that you start listening. All of the technical cleverness that goes into them aids and abets their musicality rather than being the story in itself. The M32 is a very radical amplifier – its Direct Digital design works on the idea of keeping the signal in the digital domain for as long as possible. There is also no preamp in the accepted sense of the term, the volume is instead adjusted via software control (although NAD has not been so foolish as to forgo fitting the M32 with a beautifully weighted volume knob). When you play the stunning *My Queen Is Harriet Tubman* by Sons Of Kemet, you won't care one iota for



## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM NAD/DYNAUDIO



any of that. You are instead drawn to the fact that the control it exerts over the Dynaudios is absolute.

This means that the potent drumming and staccato brass is delivered with the force and fury of a front row seat. There isn't a picosound of overhang at any stage and this lends this system an immediacy that does a fine job of convincing your brain that you and the artist are sharing the same space and there is nothing so ordinary as electronics in the way. The Dynaudio builds on this lightness of touch by having the ability to deliver the scale required to make instruments sound correct. The piano reproduction in The Cinematic Orchestra's *To Build A Home* is simply beautiful. The weight of the struck notes, their richness of tone and the manner in which they decay is truly lovely.

### Are friends electric?

Of course, impressive as this is, if you do limit yourself to smooth and well-recorded material, you will miss out on this system's truly outstanding party piece. If you're a listener to electronica in all of its many forms – and I unquestionably am – this setup can do things that I have heard



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considerably more expensive equipment fail to achieve. The combination of the NAD's incredibly transparent digital decoding and vast power delivery into a speaker as effortlessly capable as the Dynaudio is a recipe for extended sessions at the sort of volumes that makes the air in

### There is a sense with the Contour that its heritage is never far from the surface

the room a visible presence. The dreamlike *When You're Out* by Kauf loses none of its ephemeral quality even when the Contour is reproducing its baseline with a force that you can feel in the sternum.

The word that crops up time and time again in my notes is 'clean.' It reflects the near impossibility of tripping this system up with any style of music at any volume that is remotely achievable in most domestic settings. This is tied to functionality that makes many rivals look parochial and rather underdeveloped. The BluOS interface has been carefully honed into something that is stable,

wonderfully intuitive and impressively flexible. The M50.2 is all too easy to overlook in this trifecta of units because it is unassuming to the point of stealthiness, but it forms the heart of this system's impressive user friendliness – there are very few other one-stop network audio solutions that get within a mile of it.

### Better than all the rest

The longer I listen to this system, the more I am reminded of the strategic concept of full spectrum dominance. It reflects the idea of cumulative superiority from being better than your opponents in every single area you contest with them. While it might not be a familiar principal for most hi-fi companies, what NAD and Dynaudio have done here is clearly along the same lines.

What this system does is contend every area you might rationally or emotionally judge it by and make a bulletproof case in all of them. It is one of the most remarkable blends of technical ability, real-world user friendliness and outright musical joy that I have experienced in quite a while. This is the new way of doing things and, be under no illusions, it is astonishingly good ●



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**94 Beach House**  
7



**95 Massenet**  
La Navarraise  
London Symphony  
Orchestra



**96 Ry Cooder**  
The Prodigal Son

# Musicreviews

## Hailey Tuck Junk

★★★★★

CD Sony

**HAILEY TUCK HAS** some nerve. Unable to get a recording deal and noting that her favourite jazz records by singers such as Madeleine Peyroux and Melody Gardot had all been produced by Larry Klein, she set about stalking the Grammy-winning producer. After getting hold of his email address, she sent him an unsolicited message saying that she was convinced that they could "make a great album together".

To her surprise, Klein – who has an uncanny knack of coaxing the best out of female singers and whose other production credits include Tracy Chapman and ex-wife Joni Mitchell – replied that she should come and see him the next time she was in Los Angeles. Tuck was there within hours.

Impressed by her voice, Klein agreed to produce her and used his contacts to get her a deal with Sony. "It's nuts for jazz not to mix with other genres. It needs to get out there and have some fun," she told him. "Straight away, we were on the same page."

Although the album they recorded together is titled *Junk*, it's a masterclass in sophisticated artistry, jazzy in its aesthetic but with a broad appeal to rock fans with exquisite covers of songs by the likes of Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Paul McCartney, Pulp's Jarvis Cocker and Ray Davies of the Kinks.

It takes a bold ambition and a special voice to interpret songs by such singular writers and take ownership of them, but Tuck has the character and back story to pull it off. Educated at a Baptist military boarding school, she ran away at 18 with what was supposed to be her college fund, singing in the jazz and burlesque clubs of Paris.

From there to recording in Hollywood's famous Sunset Sound studios with Klein and a bunch of veteran jazz sophisticates was a long and sometimes tortuous path, but making one's debut album at the relatively advanced age of 28 has its advantages. Although the songs on *Junk* are mostly covers, she sings them as if she has lived them. "All sorts of emotional baggage is on there, tons of f\*\*\*ed-up times," she says. "Topics on which, believe me, I'm an expert."

Adding a couple of show tunes from *Cabaret* and Leonard Bernstein's *On The Town*, she sings – with a delicious, sly guile that is addictively dark and yet simultaneously playful. Every modern-day jazz chanteuse tends to be held up against the likes of Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, but Tuck throws in a touch of Liza Minnelli and Bette Midler and delivers the package with the glamorous style of a twenties flapper icon. The mix is quite irresistible and is destined to make her a huge star. **NW**

**ALBUM  
OF THE  
MONTH**





## Courtney Barnett

Tell Me How You Really Feel

★★★★★

CD

Milk! Records

**IF AUSTRALIAN FEMALE** singers conjure up pre-packaged pop images of Olivia Newton-John and Kylie Minogue, Melbourne's Courtney Barnett is here to make you think again. Her 2015 debut *Sometimes I Sit And Think, And Sometimes I Just Sit* won Grammy and Brit award nominations and established her as a whip-smart new champion of punk-inflected indie.

The follow-up is even spikier, her voice ranging from deadpan to tender on a set of infectious melodies buttressed

## Barnett's voice ranges from deadpan to tender on this set of infectious melodies

by howling guitars and muscular riffs. Her ever inventive lyrics swing between self-analytical vulnerability and wittily acerbic anger as she tackles subjects from misogyny to self-doubt. "I could eat a bowl of alphabet soup and spit out better words than you," she sings on *Nameless, Faceless*, quoting an internet troll on a perfect, indignant punk anthem for our times. Quite simply, neurotically brilliant. **NW**

## MUSICREVIEWS



### Beach House

7

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD

Bella Union

**THERE HAS ALWAYS** been something of a lo-fi quality to Beach House's gorgeous, shimmering music, and here on its seventh studio album, that haziness is retained despite better, clearer production. *Pay No Mind* is languid and tuneful, while *Woo* is all New Order-style synths and drum machines. Victoria Legrand's ethereal vocals are once again centre stage, but there's a sneaky rhythmic muscularity behind the songs that occasionally shines through. They will never be enormous stars because their niche is small – a shoegaze band for modern times – but this is a lovely, beguiling album full of sparkling gems. **PH**



### The Sheepdogs Changing Colour

★★★★★

CD

Dine Alone Records

**THE SIXTH ALBUM** by this Canadian five-piece featuring instruments as varied as the ukulele, mellotron, viola, trombone, mandolin, glockenspiel and gong. The anatomically improbable *I've Got A Hole Where My Heart Should Be* is typical of the Altman Brothers/Free/Love flavours across this album. Chugging electric guitars, full-throttle vocals and red-blooded tunes will keep the cowboys at the bar happy. *Let It Roll* has a lovely organ solo and brings to mind Ween, while *The Big Nowhere* benefits from a very faithful Santana invocation. Get the album, a pick-up truck, move to the US and blast it down a dust road. **PSH**



## Mamas Gun

Golden Days

HOT PICK

★★★★★

Vinyl/CD

Candelion

**WITH ITS RICH** harmonies, sweet – but not cloying – melodies and a strong West Coast vibe (think The Doobies when Michael McDonald was lurking among them), *Golden Days* catches my attention from the very first track. Each of this London ensemble's 10 compositions is pure Radio 2 catnip. *I Need A Win* rolls along on a tune Carole King would have been happy to knock out and is a stone-cold keeper. As is *London Girls* – a seamless gear change into seventies Isley Brothers territory. Mamas Gun is not firing blanks here with an album that's sprinkled with nods to Orleans, Toto and Crosby, Stills and Nash, while still sounding very much of the moment and entirely authentic. **PSH**

TIDAL

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

## AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

### Charles Mingus

Pithecanthropus Erectus

180g vinyl

HOT PICK

Speakers Corner/Atlantic



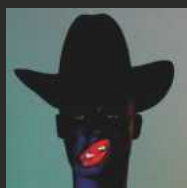
### CHARLES MINGUS

**WAS** a bass player a bit like Beethoven was a pianist, in other words he was a whole lot more than just a bass player. Composer, arranger, visionary, you name it,

Mingus' genius is encapsulated in the title track of this 1956 release. A piece that cruises along on a perfect groove and then explodes into freeform mayhem at just the right moment, but before it gets too much it returns to a clearer path with Jackie Mclean on alto and JR Monterose on tenor plus the occasional glimpse of Mal Waldron's

sophistication on the piano. The sound of this mono recording is very much of its time, bandwidth is clearly limited, which means bass is woolly and cymbals can be fuzzy. But dynamics are good and tone is superb, it was called a High Fidelity recording on its release and that is true when it comes to the music, it proves rather worryingly that when a band of this calibre plays live in the studio the message is abundantly clear without the aid of sparkly highs and bone crunching lows. This album was *avant garde* when released and sounds exciting today, pushing the form right up to the edge but avoiding the excesses that were to follow a decade later. In other words, it's a scorcher. **JK**

## HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS


**Young Fathers**  
*Cocoa Sugar*


FLAC 24/44.1

onkyomusic.com

**CURRENT DARLINGS** OF the urban pop scene, the hype surrounding Young Fathers is entirely justified, thanks to these sprawling, dizzying 12 tracks. If ever there was a musical reflection of multi-cultural, 21st-century Britain, this is it – there are hip-hop and grime flavours, soulful pop numbers (*Turn* and *Lord*), and tribal rhythms (*Wire Explicit*) galore. What's more, this HD version really brings this enjoyable and energetic collage of urban rhythms to life. **PH**


**The Fratellis**  
*In Your Own Sweet Time*


FLAC 24/96

onkyomusic.com

**THIS SCOTTISH INDIE** three-piece scored a huge chart hit a decade ago, and since has been producing perky, occasionally soulful indie pop with shades of Springsteen, glam rock and, here, even a bit of INXS. The production is bright, but there's no denying that *In Your Own Sweet Time* is a breezy, likeable album that begs to be played on warm, sunny days. Just don't expect huge depth from either the songwriting or production. **PH**



HOT PICK

**Massenet**

*La Navarraise*  
 Lucia Popp, Alain Vanzo,  
 Gérard Souzay  
 London Symphony Orchestra



CD

Sony Classical

**THE FIRST COMPLETE** recording of Massenet's two-act opera *La Navarraise*, this is a short work that lasts only 40 minutes, but the music – by turns dramatic and lyrical – is full of passion. Lucia Popp is in fabulous voice and gives one of her greatest performances on record. Conductor Antonio de Almeida and the LSO revel in the vivid colours and earthy pathos of the score, resulting in a definitive performance. The recording (made at Abbey Road Studios) is newly remastered for this reissue and sounds good for its age. Balances are clear, though the mix favours voices over the orchestra, and there is some added reverberation. **JH**

Originally released  
 in 1975, this recording  
 sounds good for its age


**Henri Herbert**  
*Boogie Woogie Piano*


Vinyl

HH Records

**AS THE EX-PIANIST** of the incredible Jim Jones Revue, Herbert should need no introduction, but for those that have never heard the great man in action imagine Jools Holland on steroids and you still don't come close. The 10 rollocking cuts here more than live up to the name of the album, taking in blues-stomp, driving rock and roll swing and smokey R&B in the style of Oscar Peterson, Jack Dupree, Dave Brubeck, Ennio Morricone and Lalo Schiffrin, with a dash of Jerry Lee Lewis and Charlie Mingus for good measure. Beautifully produced and impeccably played, this is good old-fashioned ragtime brought bang up to date. **JDW**


**Anton Urspruch**  
*Piano Concerto Op 9,  
 Symphony Op 14*  
 Oliver Triendl  
 Nordwestdeutsche  
 Philharmonie


2x CDs

CPO

**WHEN IT COMES** to dredging up forgotten works by composers no one's ever heard of, there's no finer label than CPO. But, even by its standards, Anton Urspruch is something of a find. A favourite pupil of Liszt, his music is tuneful and well crafted, with more than a nod in the direction of Brahms and Dvořák. If only he'd had Brahms' command of architecture and ability to sustain a narrative. No matter, there is much to enjoy here. The performances are expertly played, committed and very well recorded, making this double CD worth hearing by anyone intrigued by neglected music from the late 19th century. **JH**

## DEMO DISCS



**Bob Surgeoner**, MD of Neat Acoustics, reveals the music he uses to develop and demo products


**Barbara Dickson**  
*All The Pretty Little Horses*

This stripped-down arrangement has incredibly pure vocals accompanied only by double bass and a single ride cymbal.


**The Peddlers**  
*On A Clear Day You Can See Forever*

This funky interpretation of the title song from the 1965 musical provides an ideal test of a system's ability to reveal both texture and 'flow'.


**Mozart**  
*Concerto For Flute And Harp*

Flute and harp are really challenging, especially when played together. The balance between them and the orchestra is critical.


**Rage Against The Machine**  
*Bullet In The Head*

A truly wonderful recording. We use this to assess dynamic contrast, bass impact and pure visceral enjoyment!

## HI-RES HIGHLIGHTS

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



hdtracks.co.uk new releases include Casey Abrams' *Put A Spell On You*, Steve Miller Band's *Number 5* and Cocteau Twins' *Head Over Heels*. Over on

highresaudio.com Neil Young and Promise Of The Real's *Paradox* and Mara Galassi's *Portrait Of A Lady With Harp* are the standouts, while onkyomusic.com has Tom Waits' *Closing Time (Remastered)*, Kumi Uchimoto's *24 Preludes From Japan* and Patti Smith Group's *Radio Ethiopia*.

## STREAMING CHARTS

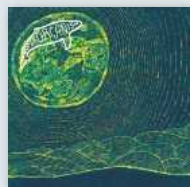
Qobuz.com's top-10 most popular streamed albums



**1** Brad Mehldau  
After Bach



**2** Eddy de Pretto  
Cure



**3** Superorganism  
Superorganism



**4** William Christie  
JS Bach Mass In B Minor (Live In Paris)



**5** Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock, Jack DeJohnette  
After The Fall



**6** Vincent de Car senti  
All the Ways of God (Meditative Music)



**7** Jimi Hendrix  
Both Sides Of The Sky



**8** Melody Gardot  
Live In Europe



**9** Joan Baez  
Whistle Down The Wind



**10** Feu! Chatterton  
L'Oiseleur

HOT PICK



Jon Hopkins  
Singularity

★★★★★★

CD

Domino

**JON HOPKINS HAS** had plenty of experience playing with what many would call 'proper' musicians (Imogen Heap, Brian Eno and King Creosote among others), so it's no surprise that his epic electronic music has a sense of real structure to it. Yes, there are those enormous bass rumbles and a constant thrum in the background, which gives Hopkins' music such depth and portent, but heard as a whole, *Singularity* is a fantastically rewarding listen. From stomping techno to lush soundscapes and melancholic stabs of piano, all produced and mixed with real skill, this is one electronic album that is a must listen. **PH**



Michael Wollny  
Trio Live  
Wartburg

★★★★★

CD

ACT

**MICHAEL WOLLNY AND** his rhythm section are one of the few piano trios on the European jazz scene who don't sound like EST – they're ploughing their own furrow and doing it rather well. When they do it live it's even better. Here they are joined by soprano saxophonist Emile Parisien for the most intense pieces and his lyricism brings colour and depth to the material. This is an excellent-sounding release with lots of space and tactile, 3D instruments underpinned by powerful bass. Like Wollny's playing it's dynamic and wide ranging, running from atmospheric to energetic, but always searching for new ways to make a connection. **JK**



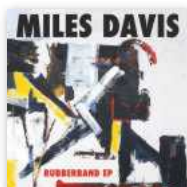
Laura Veirs  
The Lookout

★★★★★

CD

Bella Union

**THE 10TH ALBUM** by the Portland-based purveyor of folk sees Veir's sweet vocals cascading over 12 beautifully constructed songs. That other delicate folk flower, Sufjan Stevens, makes an appearance on *Watch Flower*, but it's not all Joni chords and patchouli oil here. *Everybody Needs You* has a hypnotic rhythm similar to that found on some of Kate Bush's recent work. After 20 years of music making, Veirs is clearly not running short of the good stuff and still able to give new pretenders like First Aid Kit a run for their money. **PSH**



Miles Davis  
Rubberband EP

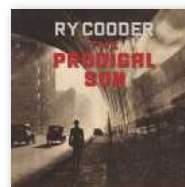
RECORD  
STORE DAY  
EXCLUSIVE

★★★★★

Vinyl

Warner Music

**WHEN MILES DAVIS** decided to jump ship from Columbia Records to Warners in 1985, he decided it was time for a change in sound. The radical departure saw him teaming up with vocalists Al Jarreau and Chaka Khan for a dirtier street feel. Sadly, after a year the album was ditched and instead he went on to record *Tutu*. Some 32 years later, original producers Randy Hall and Zane Giles have revisited the sessions and with the help of Miles' nephew, Vince Wilburn Jr. have updated it. The result is a glorious slice of funk soul with a modern twist. Hunt it down if you can. **JDW**



Ry Cooder  
The Prodigal Son

★★★★★

CD

Fantasy

**FOLLOWING LAST MONTH'S** *Music Legends* feature comes Cooder's first new album since 2012, and the surprise is that he has returned to the blues, folk and roots-rock that originally inspired him. Ry's slide guitar is as sparkling as ever, but what's changed over the years is his voice – now a deeply expressive instrument with a rich, patina that lends extraordinary gravitas to Americana classics by the likes of Blind Willie Johnson and the Carter Family alongside his own compositions. It's a huge claim given his stellar back catalogue, but this may just be Cooder's crowning glory. **NW**

Picture credit: Jason Quigley



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# LITTLE GIRL BLUE

Singer, songwriter, pianist and civil rights activist, Nina Simone had it all.

**Nigel Williamson** pays tribute to the High Priestess of Soul

1958



**LITTLE GIRL BLUE**

A stunning debut including *I Loves You Porgy* alongside jazz ballads and Broadway show tunes – up tempo, elegant, sensual and already touched by genius.

1959



**NINA SIMONE AT TOWN HALL**

The first great live recording included several songs that became Simone standards, such as *Summertime* and *Wild Is The Wind*.

1961



**FORBIDDEN FRUIT**

Stepping out of her dinner jazz style with an earthier feel on the likes of *Gin House Blues* and *Work Song*, one of three Oscar Brown Junior songs here.

1962



**NINA SIMONE SINGS ELLINGTON**

Nobody does Ellington quite like Nina as she reinvents 11 of the Duke's compositions with suitably sparse string arrangements.

1962



**AT THE VILLAGE GATE**

A live recording from her early, pomp when she was a regular attraction in the clubs of Greenwich Village – which explains the inclusion of *House Of The Rising Sun*.

1964



**NINA SIMONE IN CONCERT**

The album on which she emerged as the voice of the civil rights movement, with the first recording of *Mississippi Goddam*.

**A** week before Nina Simone's death in 2003, the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia awarded her an honorary doctorate in recognition of a grievous error half a century earlier when the conservatoire had rejected her application for a scholarship to study classical piano. Simone was convinced that she had been refused for no other reason than the colour of her skin.

Prodigiously talented, she had given her first classical piano recital at the age of 10 and, by all accounts, played her entrance exam pieces by Bach and Schubert expertly. Devastated when her ambition to become the world's first black concert pianist was thwarted, she was still stinging years later from what she called "the shame, humiliation and anger" of being a victim of prejudice. "When Curtis turned me down, I never got over it. I had never thought about being black before," she said.

Yet by an ironic twist of fate, in rejecting the 20-year old Eunice Waymon – as she then was – the school made an unwitting contribution to black musical history. Had she been accepted, she would have become a concert pianist and we never would have heard the searing, unforgettable voice of Nina Simone, the High Priestess of Soul.

### Young, gifted and black

It was a voice so visceral that it was "the closest we have to the sound that blood would make were it to sing," as one critic memorably put it. At her best she performed with a lacerating intensity that cut so deep that it left almost everything else sounding flimsy and shallow.

"I'm not a blues singer," she once insisted. "I'm a diva." It was a claim she more than lived up to off stage in a life of wayward unpredictability. Volatile and highly strung, her career was littered with no-shows, walk-outs, fights and tantrums.

"If you're a black woman and you stand up for yourself people say you're difficult," she replied when, towards the end of her life, this writer asked how she had required such a fearsome reputation.

**Rejection from the classical music world saw Simone create her own style**



### By the age of six she was playing piano and organ in church and singing in the choir

But she was a diva in her art, too, and her single-minded determination turned everything she sang or played into a chapter of an unfinished autobiography. As a diva she identified with Maria Callas rather than her peers in popular music. Embracing jazz, pop, rhythm and blues, show tunes, soul, chanson, gospel and classical forms, Simone mastered them all.

She sang Gershwin, Ellington, Jacques Brel, Kurt Weill, Lennon & McCartney and Bob Dylan – but they all ended up sounding like Nina Simone tunes. She did not so much interpret a song as take possession of it and no popular singer since Billie Holiday

invested songs with quite as much personal anguish as Simone.

The songs with which she was most closely identified dealt with emotional darkness and persecution. "All my life I've wanted to shout out my feeling of being imprisoned," she said. The results included *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*, *I Put A Spell On You*, *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free* and *Sinnerman*, songs which once you had heard her sing them seared themselves deep into your soul.

To listen to her spine-chilling version of *Strange Fruit*, about the lynching of blacks in the Deep South, is one of the most harrowing experiences in popular music. The song "tears at the guts of what white people have done to my people," she said. "It really opens up the wound."

Eventually the intensity with which she delivered the song came to spook her and she had to give up performing it. She ▶

1964



#### BROADWAY-BLUES-BALLADS

Show tunes by Cole Porter and Rodgers & Hammerstein nestle alongside the bluesy *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*.

1965



#### I PUT A SPELL ON YOU

One of her finest albums with her monumental version of *I Put A Spell On You*, a tender take on Brel's *Ne Me Quitte Pas* and the exuberant *Feeling Good*.

1965



#### PASTEL BLUES

Nine choice cuts including two of the landmark recordings of her career, in her take on *Strange Fruit* and a frantic tour de force on the traditional *Sinnerman*.

1966



#### WILD IS THE WIND

Stand-out tracks include the wonderful *Four Women*, *Wild Is The Wind* – which Bowie covered – and the gorgeous *Lilac Wine*, later recorded by Jeff Buckley.

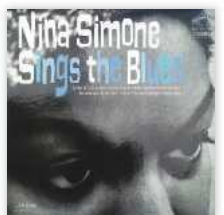
1967



#### HIGH PRIESTESS OF SOUL

Backed by a large band directed by Hal Mooney, the material ranges from Chuck Berry to Duke Ellington plus her own brilliant *Take Me To The Water*.

1967



#### NINA SIMONE SINGS THE BLUES

Another top set, from Gershwin to Bessie Smith's lascivious *I Want A Little Sugar In My Bowl* via *Backlash Blues*.

# MUSIC LEGENDS

## NINA SIMONE

simply could not sing lines such as “black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees” without breaking down.

Although many of her best-known songs were covers, she was also inspired by the civil rights movement to write some memorable work of her own.

*Mississippi Goddam* was written in 1963 in response to the killing of four young girls when the Ku Klux Klan bombed a church in Birmingham. Her first reaction was to seek vengeance on the white supremacist murderers. “If I had the choice I would have been a killer,” she said.

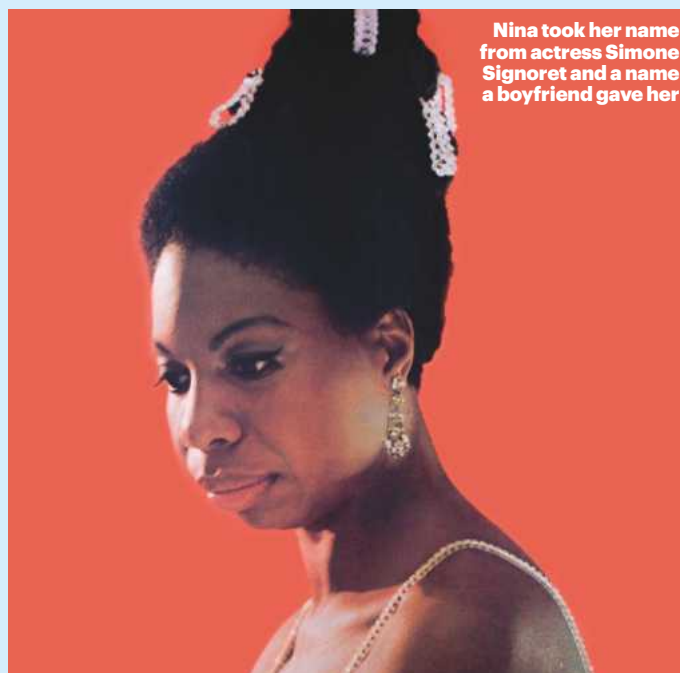
Instead, she expressed her anger in a song calling for black people to rise up, rejecting Dr Martin Luther King’s call for passive resistance. She became a close friend and ally of King, but the first time she met him she bluntly told him: “I’m not non-violent”.

### Backlash blues

She supported the militancy of the Black Panthers because “they scare the hell out of white folks and we need that” and at festival in Harlem after King’s assassination, she asked her audience if they were “ready to smash white things”. By taking up the cause of black power, she claimed that she had at last found “a purpose more important than classical music’s pursuit of excellence”.

She also wrote the enduring black pride anthem, *To Be Young, Gifted And Black*, while art and protest have seldom combined to such sublime if terrifying effect as in her ballad *Four Women*. The song announced the birth of a distinctively black feminist sensibility, like a Toni Morrison novel compressed into four verses, set to an almost classical piano vamp, underpinned only by double bass and softly accented percussion.

By the end of the sixties, she’d had enough of America. Claiming that both the FBI and



Nina took her name from actress Simone Signoret and a name a boyfriend gave her

erratic and unreliable, still capable of thrilling audiences, but just as likely to exhaust their patience with wayward and baleful performances.

The uncompromising nature and fierce independence that had made her art so compelling in later years was often manifested as a perverse wilfulness. It seemed that the drama and turbulence of the sixties, which had inspired her to such towering heights had also left a turmoil in her troubled soul that could not be stilled.

She was born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in North Carolina on February 21, 1933, the sixth of eight children. Her father fell on hard times during the Depression and her mother, a travelling Methodist minister, supported the family working as a maid.

By the age of six she was playing piano and organ in

church and singing with her sisters in the choir. Her mother’s employer paid for her to have classical piano lessons and she was taught by Muriel Mazzanovich, the British wife of a Russian painter, crossing the tracks from the black quarter to the white part of town every Saturday to study Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms with the teacher she called ‘Miz Mazzy’.

### To listen to her version of *Strange Fruit* is one of the most harrowing experiences in music

the CIA had files on her and she could no longer stand the racism, she left the country, never to live there full-time again. At the time she was enjoying the most commercially successful period of her career, with big pop crossover hits such as *Ain’t Got No, I Got Life*, from the musical *Hair*, and a cover of the Bee Gees’ *To Love Somebody* and another factor in her self-imposed exile was a huge bill in unpaid back taxes, which the IRS was demanding with menace. “America was my daddy and he got under my skin,” she said.

Exile signalled the beginning of the end of her most intensely creative and prolific period. There was still plenty of memorable music to come when the planets were in alignment. But she became increasingly

### Do what you gotta do

At her first recital at the local library when she was 10, her mother and father were moved from their seats to make way for a white family and were forced to stand at the back. She refused to perform until her parents were found seats. After that, “nothing was easy any more,” as she wrote in her 1991 memoir *I Put A Spell On You*.

With the financial support of the local black community, which shared a collective pride in her precocious talent, she was sent to a girl’s boarding school and then spent a year at the Juilliard School of Music in ▶

1967



#### SILK & SOUL

Simone hit a prolific peak with her third album in a year, which included *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free* and her take on Bacharach’s *Look Of Love*.

1968



#### ‘NUFF SAID!

Martin Luther King was assassinated three days before this live album, hence Simone’s moving tribute *Why? (The King Of Love Is Dead)*.

1969



#### NINA SIMONE AND PIANO

Everyone’s *Gone To The Moon* was not to everyone’s taste, but songs by Randy Newman and Hoagy Carmichael make up for it.

1969



#### TO LOVE SOMEBODY

Nina goes sophisticated pop with elegant takes on songs by the Bee Gees, Cohen and Bob Dylan, plus her own *Revolution (Parts One and Two)*.

1970



#### BLACK GOLD

Recorded live at New York’s Philharmonic Hall shortly before she opted for self-imposed exile, and notable for the first recording of *To Be Young Gifted And Black*.

1971



#### HERE COMES THE SUN

The Beatles and Dylan covers and pop standards such as *Mr Bojangles*, *Angel Of The Morning* and *My Way* typically sound anything but standard in Simone’s hands.

*Something not sounding right?  
Maybe we can help.*

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# MUSIC LEGENDS

## NINA SIMONE

New York in preparation to sit the entrance exams at the Curtis Institute.

The entire family moved to Philadelphia to support her ambitions, but nobody had warned them she might not be welcome in the extremely white world of classical music.

Rejection led her to create a highly distinctive style, although it came about by accident. Forced to take a summer job at the Midtown Bar & Grill in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1954, the owner, who thought he had hired a vocalist, was horrified when she spent her first evening playing Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. "Tomorrow you're a singer, or you're out of a job," he told her.

Forced to sing in public for the first time, the enthusiastic response her huskily expressive voice evoked led to a reluctant change of career direction.

### Blues for mama

Afraid of her mother's disapproval that she was singing "the devil's music", she assumed a new name for club work: Nina was taken from a term of endearment used by a Hispanic boyfriend and her surname from the French actress Simone Signoret, whose steely sensuality she admired.

Three years later she was singing at Carnegie Hall. "I'm where you always wanted me to be, but I'm not playing Bach," she wrote to her mother, who was not mollified. She reportedly only attended her daughter's concerts twice in the next 40 years.

*Little Girl Blue*, her 1958 debut album, was a phenomenal introduction, including a majestic version of *I Loves You Porgy*, her first million seller, and *My Baby Just Cares For Me*, which three decades later became a top-10 hit after it was used in a perfume ad.

Throughout the sixties she made a string of potent albums, including numerous recordings of her fearlessly intense live concerts. Yet after leaving America in 1970, she struck an increasingly brittle and restless figure.

She set up base in Barbados, then Liberia and then in Europe, living first in Holland and then France. There were difficult relationships with a string of powerful and often violent men, to whom she seemed to

Inspired by the civil rights movement, Simone wrote some of her best music



### No popular singer since Billie Holiday invested songs with as much anguish as Nina Simone

be addicted. In Liberia, she danced naked in a club drunk on champagne, a performance which earned an offer of marriage from a septuagenarian millionaire on the condition she revived his flagging desire. She reported that she failed.

There were problems with drugs and ill-health, including diagnosis with a bipolar disorder. Stories about her behaviour were manifold. A London concert was cancelled without notice because she was "distressed" about an injured dog. At Ronnie Scott's club in Soho, where she performed regularly in the eighties, she would arrive at the bandstand in a fur coat and trainers, with a plastic shopping bag in her hand.

She once chased a record company executive out of a restaurant with a knife

claiming that she had been defrauded of her royalties and in 1996 she was given a suspended sentence for firing an air-rifle at two boys playing in the swimming pool of a villa adjacent to her home in the South of France. She complained that they had been making too much noise.

Yet despite her problems, radiant flashes of rather old brilliance continued to shine through until the end and – when the mood took her – she could be extraordinarily gracious and generous. When this writer visited her at home in France in the late nineties, I was told that I was being granted a 45 minute audience and that outstaying my welcome would be at my peril.

She must have been having one of her better days because as I got up to leave two hours later, she smiled broadly and asked if I would like to hear her play. Seated at the piano, she treated me to a 30-minute private recital that included a Beethoven sonata and a Bach prelude. She didn't sing *I Put A Spell On You* or *Mississippi Goddam*, but her spirit was indomitable. Thank you, Miss Simone ●

1972



#### EMERGENCY WARD

A part-live and part-studio album dominated by an 18-minute gospel medley of George Harrison's *My Sweet Lord*, the poem *Today Is A Killer* and an 11-minute *Isn't It A Pity*.

1978



#### BALTIMORE

Backed by a group of A-list session men, her first studio album after a long break was a patchy affair, the highlights of which is a deathless take on the title track by Randy Newman.

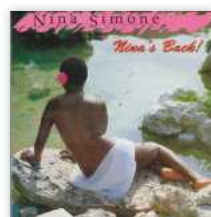
1982



#### FODDER ON MY WINGS

An introspective set inspired by her time living in the Caribbean and in Africa, led by the calypso-tinged *I Sing Just To Know That I'm Alive*, which could have served as her motto.

1985



#### NINA'S BACK

A sub-standard update of her sound to a synth-saturated eighties R&B gloss. Even her voice and some decent songs (several recycled from previous albums) can't save the day.

1993



#### A SINGLE WOMAN

A fitting swansong of ripe and reflective ballads. An expanded two-disc version released after her death was even better, including songs by Bob Marley and Prince.

*Something not sounding right?  
Maybe we can help.*



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Ken Kessler, Hifi News*



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01334 570 666





# DESTINATION: HORNSEY



Small and perfectly formed, The Little Record Shop's back-to-basics business model offers its customers vinyl collections to die for. **Simon Berkovitch** drops in

**E**merging from the treasure-trove back room, The Little Record Shop's owner David Sternberg stands beneath two clocks reading conflicting hours and minutes as he reverently shows me an incredible artefact. He's taking a pristine condition original Mary Wells LP from a sleeve with colours so vibrant it could have been printed yesterday, not over a half-century ago. Like all his records, the previous owner played this immaculate vinyl with a deep, dark sheen just the once when recording it to reel-to-reel. "This record is a time machine," David beams.

Welcome to Hornsey and North London's best-kept secret – less a vinyl store, more a comprehensive music education. With its ever-changing wall of rarities, boxes of 45s, desirable floor-to-ceiling LPs, an overheard conversation about hen's teeth acetates, and a postie delivering a travel-ravaged record-shaped parcel from Nigeria, there's a wonderfully old-school vibe to soak up here.

There's no bespoke totes or artisan coffee, but there is the offer of a hot mug of tea on this freakishly wintery March Saturday. David opened the store in June 2014, with a wealth of experience and knowledge under his belt. "I started dealing with a bag on my shoulder, selling and buying from record stores, markets, charity shops and car-boot sales, about 12 years ago," he explains.

## Opportunity knocks

When this former solicitor's office round the corner from his house came up for rent, it was too good an opportunity to turn down – and also a practical storage solution to a home fit to burst with wonderful rare wax. On HFC's pre-opening visit, new arrivals from Sternberg HQ are piled high on the racks and David mentions he has a lock-up as well. "There's a lot of stock," he laughs. "Too much for the space of The Little Record Shop!"

The vast majority of the vinyl – rock, reggae, African, jazz, library, soundtracks,

punk, indie and much more – is second-hand. "All rare wherever possible," David adds. "About five percent of what's here is new. I have a handful of CDs for sale, but only if they're very interesting. I have been known to sell the odd strange items – a bit of hi-fi... posters... old stuff that looks interesting." Two model Daleks atop a listening deck under the watchful gaze of Morrissey and a space-helmet 8-track cartridge player are testament to this. "I do still collect vinyl myself," he adds, "but it seems to be less each year. It's most genres, including sixties mod and psychedelia and a bit of punk and post-punk. And I buy a lot more jazz and some hip-hop these days."

To avoid unintentional sticker damage to covers, records are priced in pencil on the inner sleeve. Reflecting the insatiable demand for vinyl artefacts from the big hitters of sixties and seventies classic rock, it's little surprise to discover that the titles that absolutely fly out of The Little Record

Store's racks are *Abbey Road*, *Dark Side Of The Moon* and *Wish You Were Here*, *Rumours*, *Never Mind The Bollocks* and pretty much anything by The Doors and Jimi Hendrix. The browsers are custom-made, courtesy of Oxfam in Crouch End. In a regular arrangement, David donates his unsold bargain records to the charity shop down the road and a grateful volunteer with carpentry skills has crafted these excellent wooden display racks. A warhorse Technics SL-1200 is one of the shop's listening turntables and David also sells these in-demand decks when they come up for sale with vinyl collections.

## Taking a gamble

Around a tenth of the used vinyl walks in through the door from locals or regular sellers. The vast majority comes from private collections. "The shop is open four days and the rest of the week I am out travelling and making home visits around the UK. I like meeting people and I love the driving, too." One recent acquisition involved a road trip to Scotland and an overnight stay to investigate a Krautrock collection. "The guy was emigrating and was selling everything, but I didn't know whether they were first-pressings or not, so it was a bit of a gamble." And one that paid off, too, as an enviable selection of rarities from the German experimental music scene made their way back to London – and much of it into David's personal archive.

Ever-enthusiastic, he ushers me to a small pile of vinyl to make an experimental music fan's heart skip a beat – a clutch of Anthony Braxton platters and a beautiful-condition copy of Annette Peacock's masterful *I'm The One*, competitively priced at £75, immediately catch the eye. As we chat, he pulls an already out-of-print limited edition LP from last year out of the rack. "Oh, you'll love this," he smiles, as the righteous sound of *Wildflower* leaps from the speakers. And he's not wrong – it's my immediate purchase for the day at a very reasonable £30.

All the stock here – even the glorious wall of rarities (see boxout) – is definitely priced to sell: "Everything is below Discogs prices," David explains, as we touch upon how the *Record Collector Rare Record Price Guide* feels anachronistic in the internet age, the usefulness of Spotify and streaming, the mixed blessing of social media and, inevitably, the vinyl revival. "It's not a fad," he says. "It looks like it's here to stay, for the time being. It feels like hi-fi is back, too, and that's important – you can't have one without the other, after all. I'm not crazy

about Twitter and Facebook and the like, but I enjoy Instagram the most."

Indeed, David's business model is refreshingly bricks and mortar: "There's no online selling for me whatsoever. In my opinion, that's what killed off shops before the vinyl revival – you'd often find that a shop's best items were posted worldwide, never hitting the racks, which are only filled with average stuff; the usual same old titles. I remember going to some and asking to buy a record and being told: 'That's on ebay, mate'. Well, what's the point in having a shop, then?" And we're pleased to note that David's in-store-only take appears to be working well: "With The Little Record Shop, customers love the fact I have genuinely rare records on my wall and each time they pop in they know there will be plenty of new surprises in the racks."

These are just a couple of reasons that his customer base is a loyal one. Bang on opening time, a couple of familiar faces amble in and Annette Peacock immediately creates a sensation. "My main customers

are regulars who keep coming back," he gestures. "There's very little footfall where I am. It's long-term collectors and dealers from all over the world. I'm pleased to say that we have increasing numbers of younger customers, too." As well as more than its fair share of famous names. "Ray Davies has popped in a few times. He's been friendly and encouraging right from the start [the former Kink's Konk Studios is a

stone's throw from here]. The lovely Alexis [Taylor] from Hot Chip is a regular, as is his About Group bandmate John Coxon [Spiritualized; Spring Heel Jack]". As if on cue, David's phone beeps while we're talking and he discovers he's missed a call from the latter, no doubt eager to discover what new treasures he has brought into the store from home this week.

No empire-builder, David is happy with his small and perfectly formed store, a social hub for global vinyl enthusiasts. "I've no plans to expand or have other Little Record Shops," he smiles. "I like it as it is – it's great fun and lovely when the place is full of people chatting, listening to fantastic records and enjoying the friendly vibe. It's a relaxed and no-pressure environment for anyone to enjoy." Long may it reign ●



David's small shop is a big draw for vinyl collectors in the know



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07946 412766  
david@thelittlerecordshop.co.uk  
cash4records.co.uk  
Tuesday, Friday, Saturday  
and Sunday, 1:00-6:30pm

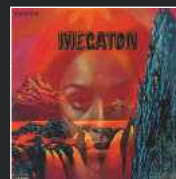
## ▶ A DROP IN THE OCEAN

On the wall... out of a box... in the racks... on the racks... from the back room... There's an enviable mountain of vinyl treasure to pore over. Here's a tiny taste of the goodies discovered on our visit



### Whalefeathers

*Whalefeathers* (£125)  
The rare, second album from 1971 by the bluesy psychedelic rockers from Cincinnati. Released in the UK on the collectable Blue Horizon label, home of early Fleetwood Mac outings.



### Megaton

*Megaton* (£80)  
This German Decca pressing is the less expensive way of getting hold of this keyboard-heavy slice of prog. "A UK first press sells for well over £800," explains David.



### Jimi Hendrix

*Band of Gypsies* (£75)  
Original LP in withdrawn cover featuring Brian Jones, John Peel, Bob Dylan and your man Jimi as puppets. You'll be more familiar with the sleeve with Hendrix at the Isle of White festival.



### Annette Peacock

*I'm The One* (£75)  
Housed in an incredibly trippy, kaleidoscopic sleeve, the soaring space-age avant-jazz that's contained within the grooves is equally mesmerising.



### The Fall

*Perverved By Language* (£30)  
An essential transmission from the gloriously skewed synapses of the late Mark E Smith from 1983. Key cut: the magnificently malevolent *Smile*.



### White Noise

*An Electric Storm* (£40)  
Seminal electronica from Delia "Doctor Who" theme" Derbyshire and David Vorhaus. A big influence on Broadcast and Stereolab, this is the first 'pink label' UK pressing on Island Records.



### Prince

*Gotta Stop (Messin' About)* (£90)  
Mint copy of this 1981 reissue 12in. The title is either a tribute to Kenneth Williams or, judging by what he's wearing, a warning to Prince's stylist.



### Wildflower

*Wildflower* (£30)  
Exquisite modern spiritual jazz. Fans of Kamasi Washington and Alice Coltrane will find plenty to like here. A reissue will soon be available from the group's Bandcamp page.



# Let's get digital

Getting the most from your digital music files involves more than just investing in a decent DAC, here's everything you need to know, but were afraid to ask

**Y**ou may not realise it, but any music that you have stored digitally – whether it be on CD, SACD, Blu-ray, computer, portable player, hard drive or even if it is streamed or downloaded – requires a DAC to play it. A digital-to-analogue converter is the vital component that makes it possible for digital music files to be converted into an analogue signal so that you can hear it – without a DAC, your music is little more than a series of ones and zeros. With analogue formats like vinyl and compact cassette, there was never any need for a converter, but the advent of digital music formats – starting with the compact disc – changed all of that.

Digital music files generally (except DSD) appear in the shape of Pulse Code Modulation (PCM), measuring the amplitude of the analogue music signal at regular intervals, which is more commonly known as the sampling rate. The value of the amplitude, meanwhile, is a number that is represented by a series of ones and zeros and the length of each is what's known as the bit depth. The greater the bit depth, the more accurately the amplitude is represented. Hence 16-bit/44.1kHz. Similarly, a typical hi-res track has a sample rate of 192,000 times per second at a bit depth of 24-bit, or 24-bit/192kHz. Digital audio is stored at a variety of bit depths and differing sample rates (while compression formats and encoding also have a part to play), resulting in a number of different file types capable of storing music in various qualities. The one constant regardless of file type is that a DAC is necessary to translate the ones and zeros into a sound that's as close to the original recording as possible.

## Timing is everything

DACs are built into just about every digital component capable of playing music – from mobile phones to laptops and tablets to CD players – but not all DACs are created equal. One of the things that separates a great one from a not so great one is the DAC's ability to correct jitter. Best described as the result of digital timing errors, where the clock in a component that is responsible for the frequency of the sampling rate is not stable and accurate enough, the signal can degrade and suffer from distortion. Standalone, dedicated converters have more stable and accurate clocks – unlike the cheap ones found in smartphones, PCs etc – resulting in a superior performance.



**Chord Electronic's excellent Hugo TT DAC (HFC 423)**

There are two ways to enjoy digital audio: either by streaming it digitally from remote storage via a network or sending it digitally to a compatible DAC via your computer's USB socket. There are pros and cons to both approaches, but there are key differences. The USB option is simple and cheap, requiring the purchase of a quality USB cable to reach between your computer and DAC. The streaming approach can potentially offer

## Invest in a software player that turns off all the processing that goes on in the computer

better quality, but can be more expensive as you need a streamer, a wireless router and ideally a NAS drive to store your music.

It's important to think about the file format you'll be storing music in. We recommend Free Lossless Audio Codec (FLAC) or Apple Lossless Audio Codec (ALAC), because unlike the computer file equivalent of CD music – WAV – FLAC and ALAC files allow the use of 'metadata'. Embedded inside every file along with the music is a string of data with information about the song, such as the artist, name and cover art.

Arguments rage in computer audio circles about whether uncompact WAV files sound better than FLAC. Regardless, it is important

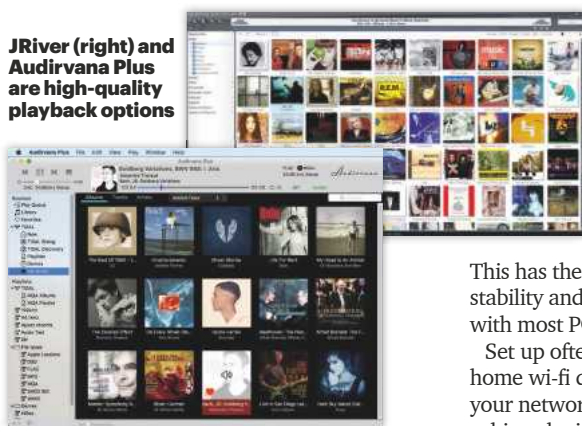
to take two things into account. The first is that all FLAC files can be restored to their original file size and type – the only difference is that increasing the compression will increase the effort it takes to restore the file. The second is that some software now rips to uncompressed FLAC – ie exactly the same data rate as WAV, which should result in an identical performance with easier tagging.

There are two ways to create music files – ripping (or 'recording') your existing CD or vinyl collection or downloading new music. The first can be tedious, but there are plenty of software packages available from the likes of Exact Audio Copy for PC, dBpoweramp for PC and Mac and X Lossless Decoder for Mac OS X, all of which ensure you get accurate rips, and will even reread parts of the disc so the copy is perfect. This slows ripping speeds down, and if you own thousands of discs could be a time-heavy process.

Once you have your files, you have a choice between a USB-capable DAC or a streamer with a built-in DAC. The former is the most straightforward, but to get the best out of it you need to think about the software you use. It's best to invest in a player that turns off all the extraneous processing, allowing your DAC to do all the audio conversion, bypassing the computer's internal processing.

A number of options are available, but JRiver (jriver.com) for the PC or Audirvana Plus (audirvana.com) for the Mac are excellent starting points. Windows and OS X

### JRiver (right) and Audirvana Plus are high-quality playback options



are set by default to up or downsample the audio output, and/or mix system sounds into it, whereas these applications will give you 'bit-perfect' playback where what comes out is exactly the same as what went in.

Next comes the hard disk. It's a good idea to buy a bespoke hard drive to store your music on. A simple portable drive will suffice for those playing their music out from their computer via USB, although solid-state (SSD) drives generally have faster access and fewer read errors, which helps sound reproduction.

### Stream lover

Those that want to stream music via a network should consider investing in a dedicated Network Attached Storage (NAS) drive. The beauty of this is that it's very easy to use with any networked music streamer, thanks to its built-in media server software. Many drives are 'bay' types that allow you to select your drive size and use one as a RAID-type backup, but nothing is more effective than a second drive that is connected only for backing up if you want true peace of mind.

If you're using a Windows PC and a USB DAC, you'll need to install the USB audio driver for the DAC. This is supplied by the manufacturer and can be downloadable from its website. Never connect the USB DAC to

the PC before installing the driver. If you're using a Mac, there's usually no need to install a driver. It is also possible to use specialised NAS drives that have adaptive USB outputs to connect directly to a USB DAC without the need for a driver.

This has the added bonus of impressive stability and very low noise levels compared with most PCs or Macs.

Set up often just involves inputting your home wi-fi details to access music across your network. The best results are normally achieved with wired networks – not so much because the performance of wireless is inferior, but because some of the variables that can affect performance are removed. Some NAS drives allow for direct connection via Ethernet, so invest in a good-quality Ethernet cable like Supra Cables Cat 8 (HFC 415). The most effective way of connecting drive and streamer together is via your router as this will make the drive available to more than one streamer in your home and allow for use of a control app via a phone or tablet.

## The DAC is the vital component that makes it possible for digital files to be played on a hi-fi

Once all of this is done, you'll have the makings of a serious system. Both the USB DAC and the streamer-based approach will give you access to hi-res files of very high quality, and if you've only ever used CD you're likely to be impressed by the performance that some files offer in comparison. Take care to get the basics right and you'll have a system that allows for a very happy combination of performance and convenience so that you can experience more music from more places than ever before – there's never been a better time to make the switch.

If you want to turn your computer into a serious music source, don't use iTunes or Windows Media Centre. These are fine for chart music, but in sonic terms they send the music through all manner of processing before arriving at your speakers.

That's why it is essential to invest in serious music playback software, and the good news is that there are numerous options available, all of which have a slightly different presentation, both visually and sonically. Don't forget to download the demo versions to try for yourself first, then you can buy the one that best suits your needs ●

### FORMATS EXPLAINED

There are numerous file types to choose from. Here's a handy summary of what's what

#### AAC

Advanced Audio Coding (AAC) is a lossy audio codec designed as the successor to MP3, claiming better sound quality at similar bit-rates.

#### AIFF

Audio Interchange File Format (AIFF) was developed by Apple in 1988 and uses uncompressed pulse-code modulation (PCM). There's also a compressed variant of AIFF known as AIFF-C or AIFC, which can sometimes be recognised by an .aifc file extension, although these can also appear with the standard .aiff or aif extension, so check for higher bit-rates to know you're playing uncompressed files. Being uncompressed means AIFF files will demand more space than lossy and lossless equivalents.

#### ALAC

Apple Lossless Audio Codec data is stored within an MP4 container, but it employs different encoding in a lossless (not lossy) format that uses a linear prediction method, similar to FLAC. Many music sites now offer ALAC files up to 24-bit/192kHz levels. Because of its lossless compression, ALAC claims to give the same audio quality as WAV/AIFF equivalents, while requiring less hard drive space.

#### DSD

Direct-Stream Digital uses pulse-density modulation encoding to store audio signals on SACDs. The signal has a sampling rate of 2.8224MHz that is 64 times that used by compact disc. Higher sampling rates are also available at twice, four times or even eight times as much data as a DSD disc.

#### FLAC

Free Lossless Audio Codec uses a lossless compression, which will not change the quality of the compressed audio. This makes it suitable as an archive format for owners of CDs that wish to preserve audio quality. The technical strengths of FLAC compared with other lossless formats lie in its ability to be streamed and decoded quickly.

#### MP3

MP3 coding employs lossy data compression based on an algorithm designed to reduce the amount of data needed to 'represent' an audio recording while sounding like a faithful reproduction of the original file, allowing for much smaller file sizes. The compression reduces parts of sound considered to be beyond the hearing of most people, although in reality hearing MP3 files on any half-decent hi-fi quickly reveals their sonic shortcomings.

#### MQA

Master Quality Audio format is developed by Meridian to provide studio quality at high resolution while reducing the download streaming bandwidth and the amount of file storage space required by using an 'audio origami' process to pack and unfold digital content.

#### WAV

Waveform Audio File Format is the main format used on Windows systems for raw, usually uncompressed audio encoded in the linear pulse-code modulation (LPCM) format. LPCM is also the standard format for audio CDs, which store two channel LPCM audio at 16-bit/44.1kHz, so ripping CDs as WAVs arguably gives you the most faithful reproduction, although many audiophiles also argue that there is no difference in sound quality between WAV and ALAC/FLAC files.

**NAS drives like Melco's N1A/2 (HFC 424) are ideal for storing music files**

### STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Music streaming has evolved from an affordable way to discover new music, to – in some cases – a viable alternative to a CD or record collection. The improvements in speeds and stability of broadband in the UK has revolutionised the way that we can now access and listen to music – meaning that millions of tracks are a mere tap of a keyboard or touchscreen away. Perhaps the most exciting thing about these on-demand services is that some (most notably Tidal and Qobuz) offer lossless music files that have the potential to sound every bit as good as your compact discs. Look out for our high-quality music streaming service *Group Test* coming soon.



DACS £199-£1,800

# Time to convert

Following this month's review of Chord Electronics' excellent Qutest (p46), here's our pick of the best digital-to-analogue converters available to buy



## Audiolab M-DAC Mini

PRICE: £299 TELEPHONE: 01480 452561  
WEB: audiolab.co.uk REVIEWED: HFC 428

The fourth addition to the M-DAC family, the Mini is built around the ESS Sabre ES9018K2M DAC. Consequently, the USB connection supports PCM up to 384kHz and DSD256, while the supporting digital input connections are capable of handling signals up to 24-bit/192kHz. Additional connections take the form of a single coaxial and Toslink, aptX Bluetooth for wireless connectivity and a USB-A port that allows the Mini to charge a portable device that you might happen to be using as your music source. More unusually, you get a digital coaxial and optical output, too.

### Sound quality

The Audiolab displays many of the qualities we've come to expect from other members of the M-DAC family. There's a fine balance of force and delicacy that ensures that guitar is captured with weight and emotion and there is enough space around the performers to make them easy to distinguish from one another. This doesn't affect its ability to deliver the intimacy of music, where it is also very impressive. Bass response is extremely good with plenty of detail and definition to low notes as well as the necessary low-end heft. There is a slightly matter of fact nature to the way it makes music, but this doesn't get in the way of engaging material being just that.

**WE SAY:** A bit chunky to be truly portable, this very capable DAC boasts a detailed, refined and involved sound



## Chord Electronics Hugo 2

PRICE: £1,800 TELEPHONE: 01622 721444  
WEB: chordelectronics.co.uk REVIEWED: HFC 428

Hugo 2 is more than just a prettier face than its predecessor, it's a whole new product inside with a real evolution of Chord's digital conversion and filtering platform. It's been heavily reworked by its creator Rob Watts with a 49,152 tap-length filter, near double that of the original. To achieve this, it sports a much larger, Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) and advanced Watts Transient Aligned (WTA) filters. Via USB, Hugo 2 runs at up to a dizzying 768kHz in PCM mode and up to DSD512 (Octa DSD). Its analogue outputs comprise RCA stereo phono sockets, and 3.5mm and 6.35mm headphone outputs. A seven-hour battery life is claimed and charging is via micro USB.

### Sound quality

Because – unlike so many other DAC producers – Chord makes its own chip rather than buying it in, you can really hear the difference. What was especially impressive about the original Hugo was the timing. There's something really special about the way it plays music – which just ebbs and flows along in an organic and uncontrived way. That's precisely what you get here, except it's even better. The Hugo 2 brings superb texture to instruments and human voices. The result is that the music bristles with boppy rhythms set behind layers and layers of quite superbly textured sound.

**WE SAY:** Better in every way than the original Hugo, if you can afford the high price this is an essential audition



## Chord Electronics Mojo

PRICE: £399 TELEPHONE: 01622 721444  
WEB: chordelectronics.co.uk REVIEWED: HFC 428

Famed for taking the basic architecture of Chord's Hugo down to a more affordable price, the Mojo boasts a USB connection that supports PCM sample rates to 768kHz and DSD256 via Toslink and coaxial input – the latter is via a 3.5mm connection to save space. The Mojo then outputs via a pair of 3.5mm jacks, so two pairs of headphones can be used at once. Unlike rivals, there is no gain adjustment, EQ or filter settings. The plastic balls that function as the power and volume buttons change colour to show volume levels and incoming sample rate, while a separate USB charging port means you can listen and trickle charge at the same time so long as you connect a second USB cable.

### Sound quality

Mojo is barely at tickover with the test level and absolutely silent when nothing is playing. This means music rises from an extremely quiet background and has an immediate benefit to its performance. Each plucked bass string is an event with a defined beginning and end and this very effective sense of decay also helps piano notes sound real. Underpinning this is a bass response that balances force and impact with speed and detail to near perfect effect.

**WE SAY:** Balanced and detailed sound makes Mojo a real all-rounder that delivers a sparkling performance





Digital-to-analogue converters come in all shapes and sizes and if space is a premium a USB DAC is an excellent space-saving solution. More often than not they use the power from your computer, meaning that there's no need for an external power source. Connections are usually limited to just a headphone socket and sometimes a line-level output for connecting the DAC up to powered speakers or your system.

If you require more connectivity options and are not bothered about being able to carry your DAC around with you when out and about, a desktop USB option might be more suitable. These are invariably bigger and require their own power source, but usually offer additional analogue and digital audio inputs.



## iFi Audio nano iOne

PRICE: £199 TELEPHONE: 01900 601954  
WEB: selectaudio.co.uk REVIEWED: HFC 431

Powered directly from your PC's USB port or using the supplied power adapter, the nano iOne uses Burr-Brown's Bit-Perfect DSD and DXD MultiBit DAC, which handles PCM and DSD natively. It supports PCM inputs up to 192kHz PCM, DSD256 and DXD384kHz. Audio signals come via USB, S/PDIF via a combined RCA coaxial and optical input socket – a neat little adapter enables the coaxial input socket to also act as an optical input – or via aptX Bluetooth. Output is via a pair of RCA phono sockets or the S/PDIF for when you're using Bluetooth or USB inputs. The logo illuminates in different colours to indicate the input selected – blue for Bluetooth, green for USB or red for S/PDIF.

### Sound quality

The first thing to strike us is just how good the nano iOne is with timing and pace, while excitement is really well conveyed and vocals display great energy. Bass sounds tight and well controlled, piano is particularly believable and the spatial imaging is spot on in our listening room. Hi-hats are precise and ring without any hint of edginess. Some may feel that high frequencies are a little rolled off, but the nano iOne does produce a mellow and musical sound that suits jazz music particularly well. Switching to classical music, allegros are bright, sprightly and energetic with impeccable instrument placement and a wide soundstage that stretches well beyond the speakers.

**WE SAY:** Easy listening and superb tonal qualities with acoustic material make this a splendid performer at the price



## Mytek Liberty

PRICE: £895 TELEPHONE: 01484 538438  
WEB: mytekdigital.com REVIEWED: HFC 435

The headline news here is the inclusion of MQA (Master Quality Authenticated), 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256 capability. More prosaic features include USB Class 2 and AES/EBU digital inputs (handling PCM up to 192kHz, up to DSD64 DOP), plus two S/PDIF coaxial digital ins (PCM up to 192kHz, up to DSD64 DOP), and a Toslink optical input (PCM up to 192kHz, up to DSD64 DOP). RCA phono and twin balanced TRS outputs (TRS to XLR adaptors are a cost option), while an IEC power inlet and 12V DC input complete the rear panel connectivity. Inside the tiny alloy chassis is an ESS Sabre 9018K2M digital converter chip, a low-noise clock generator with a claimed 10ps of jitter and a high current headphone amplifier offering a claimed 300mA, 3W power output.

### Sound quality

The Liberty adopts most of the sonic DNA of its more expensive Brooklyn sibling (HFC 416), but without the frills and for far less money. Don't buy it to calm forward-sounding systems or to help you fall asleep on the sofa at the end of a long day. It's quite the reverse – an edge of the seat performer that's fizzing with life and bubbling with enthusiasm about whatever it is asked to play. Tonally the Liberty is even and neutral, with just a little extra shine around the upper midband that gives things a lift.

**WE SAY:** A great DAC with a taut, insightful sound that's lively and highly engaging, making it worth an audition



## Oppo HA-2SE

PRICE: £289 TELEPHONE: 0345 0609395  
WEB: oppodigital.co.uk REVIEWED: HFC 423

Internally, the Oppo is built around an ESS Sabre ES9028-Q2M DAC that handles sampling rates up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256. This is partnered with a compact but fully discrete headphone amplifier. At the base of the unit, there's a micro USB Type-B connection that acts as the charging point and digital input. Alongside it is a full-size USB Type-A connection that gives it the ability to interface directly with an iOS device, which is just one of a few neat tricks that make the HA-2 SE something of a star for practical portable use. At the top, is a 3.5mm headphone out and a bi-directional 3.5mm line jack next to it that's a little too easy to confuse with the headphone socket.

### Sound quality

The HA-2 SE has to run at a slightly higher level than most to hit the test level, but there is still a decent amount of volume in reserve and it is encouragingly free from background noise. The musical presentation is subtly different to most DACs too, with a rich and believable sound. Its handling of piano in particular is weighty, detailed and extremely convincing, but there is also an extra sense of speed and immediacy to timing and bass notes that makes it more of an invigorating listen. There's reasonable tonal accuracy and it never becomes thin or harsh, but it doesn't open out the midrange in the manner that better rival models can.

**WE SAY:** With its pacy and immediate sound, the well-built HA-2SE works impeccably on the move



# Switch to digital

Having taken the time to find the perfect device to convert all those ones and zeroes into music, here are some add-ons to get the most from your DAC



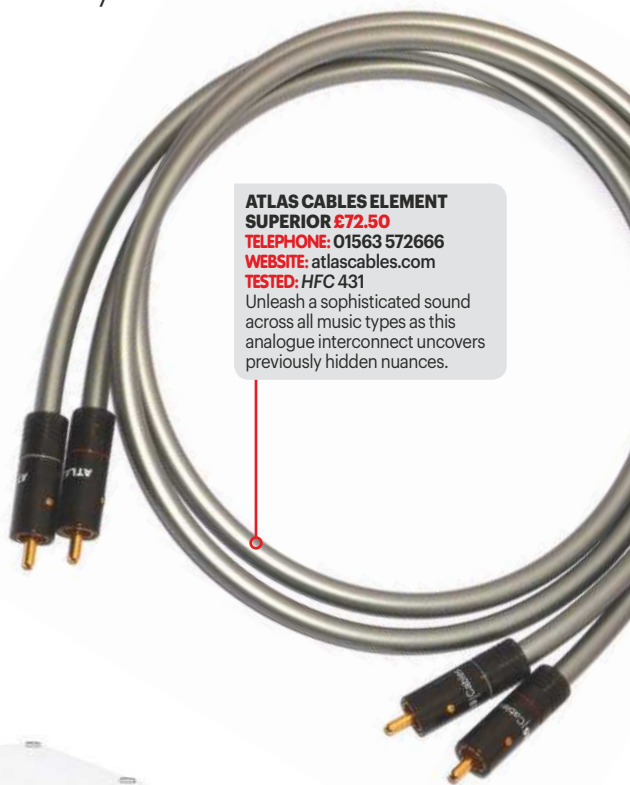
**THE CHORD COMPANY C-USB £50**  
**TELEPHONE:** 01980 625700  
**WEBSITE:** chord.co.uk  
**TESTED:** HFC 427

Score yourself significantly improved soundstage accuracy and instrument placement with this great-value interconnect.



**BLUE HORIZON PROFESSIONAL RACK SYSTEM £2,225**  
**TELEPHONE:** 0118 9814238  
**WEBSITE:** soundfoundations.com  
**TESTED:** HFC 426

A modular system that grows as your setup does, this rack helps music sound more natural and reduce external interference.



**ATLAS CABLES ELEMENT SUPERIOR £72.50**  
**TELEPHONE:** 01563 572666  
**WEBSITE:** atlascables.com  
**TESTED:** HFC 431

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**WEBSITE:** ecossecables.co.uk  
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**WEBSITE:** russandrews.com  
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- Mono & Stereo, 2015



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# ortofon

accuracy in sound



## PW<sub>Ti</sub>

Per Windfeld worked at Ortofon for over thirty years, and during his time as Chief Engineer he became widely recognised in the industry as a true hi-fi visionary. The **MC Windfeld Ti** phono pick-up cartridge is a tribute to the myriad designs and technical developments Mr Windfeld oversaw prior to his retirement. Boasting a variety of true high-end features and components, this is an exclusive cartridge design built only for the high-end vinyl enthusiast.

At the heart of the MC Windfeld Ti lies a revolutionary customized **Selective Laser Melting (SLM)** manufacturing technology pioneered by Ortofon. The SLM process makes a **titanium core** for the cartridge, protecting all the carefully selected components for the pick-up system in a rigid, lightweight, vibration-free housing.

Those who choose to adopt the MC Windfeld Ti will experience the lifelike, dynamic and open sound, with exceedingly clear midrange. The MC Windfeld Ti remains **extremely musical** while paying close attention to micro dynamic details, with its delicate, but also **analytical nature**.



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# Orbitsound

## Dock E30 wireless loudspeaker

**AT FIRST GLANCE**, Orbitsound's Dock E30 looks a little old-fashioned, harking back – as the name suggests – to the docking stations that were popular in the early days of the Apple iPod. However, the E30 puts a more modern, mobile spin on that theme with new technologies such as wireless charging, wi-fi streaming, and multi-room compatibility.

It is available with a black, white or bamboo finish, and measures 291 x 114 x 150mm (WxHxD). There's a lot packed into the compact design, including three 48mm neodymium drivers – facing front, left and right – a 90 x 60mm front-facing bass radiator and two on the rear.

### Feature comforts

The controls are straightforward, with a dial on the front for power and volume control and one for aptX Bluetooth pairing. One last button allows you to select other sources – switching to wi-fi streaming rather than Bluetooth, or using the optical and 3.5mm inputs on the back. There's a slot carved into the top that can act as a stand for a smartphone or tablet, along with a charging pad for devices that offer Qi wireless charging. A USB Type-C port on the front can be used to charge other devices as well.

You can link two or more E30 units or Orbitsound's P70W wireless soundbar (HFC 434) via wi-fi, with setup handled by Orbitsound's app for iOS and Android devices. The app also works with streaming services, including Spotify, Tidal and Apple Music. And, although it's not mentioned anywhere on its website, the E30 supports Apple AirPlay, for streaming lossless ALAC files from iTunes and MQA audio from the Tidal app on my MacBook. Users of Windows PCs will have to rely on Bluetooth or a wired connection, as there's no Windows app available.

The arrangement of the drivers is part of Orbitsound's 'AirSound' technology, designed to create a wider soundstage. And, to its credit, the E30 does a good job with the widescreen atmospherics of Enya's



*Orinoco Flow* streamed from Tidal, producing an expansive, open sound. It's surprisingly powerful too, capable of filling a medium-sized room with sound quite easily. A little distortion creeps in as you approach maximum volume, but this isn't a speaker that's meant for party time, and its volume and sound quality will work a treat for a tasteful dinner party or simply relaxing in the evening.

The E30 works particularly well with more laid-back tracks. *The Blower's Daughter* by Damien Rice has a rich, wistful timbre to the lingering cello at the end of the song, and the last mumbled phrase as Rice seems to be staring down at his boots as he mutters "can't take my mind off of you..." is picked out clearly.

The trio of bass ports work well, too. The opening bassline on *Rapture* by Blondie bounces along with a light, rhythm, and isn't overwhelmed by the jangling guitar that normally dominates. The E30 even does a respectable job of digging down to the deep, electronic bass on *Prime Evil* by The Orb, and I'm pleased to find that there are separate bass and treble controls on the remote control as well. And if you're using a Windows

PC you'll find that the Bluetooth streaming works surprisingly well too, managing to avoid the muffled, constricted tone that afflicts many Bluetooth offerings.

### Power struggle

The only real weaknesses tends to come with denser, more powerful tracks. Switching back to Tidal via wi-fi, the over-driven guitar thrash of *This Is How I Disappear* by My Chemical Romance sounds clear enough at around 50 percent volume, but step above that level and you can hear the cabinet struggling to contain the crashing power chords and rapid-fire riffing. To be fair, that's a lot to ask from a small coffee-table speaker such as this, but it emphasises the fact that the E30 is better suited to more relaxing background sounds, rather than a party playlist.

If you don't need features like Qi wireless charging or AirPlay, you could certainly get comparable sound quality from a number of less expensive speakers. However, the sound of the E30 is well suited to relaxing at home, while also offering versatile charging and streaming. **CJ**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
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**TELEPHONE**  
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**WEBSITE**  
orbitsound.com

### OUR VERDICT



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# Optoma NuForce

## Be Free8 Bluetooth in-ear headphone

**KNOWN FOR ITS** projectors and NuForce home audio equipment, Optoma also ventures outdoors occasionally, with a range of in-ear headphones that put an emphasis on sports activity. The latest addition to that range is the NuForce Be Free8, which leaps onto the 'truly wireless' bandwagon started by Apple's AirPods just over a year ago.

The £200 Be Free8 is a little more expensive than the £159 AirPods, but boasts a tough, sturdy design well suited to outdoor use. With no wires, it weighs just 11g and offers IPX5 water-resistance to protect it from rain and sweat. The chunky body that fits into the outer ear feels sturdy enough to cope with being jammed into a pocket when not in use and there are five different sets of silicon tips to ensure a good fit.

### Upside down

The design is a little odd, though. There's a button on each earbud (labelled 'left' and 'right'), to control Bluetooth pairing, voice calls and audio playback. The button is small and quite fiddly to use, and it's hard to see the labels clearly as you put them on. I actually start out wearing them upside down, and it is only after downloading the manual from Optoma's website that I figure out the correct way to fit them.

Battery life is always a stumbling block for wire-free earbuds such as these, and the Be Free8 only offers four hours of music when fully charged. The sturdy little bundled carrying case includes a separate battery that can fully charge the headphones a further three times when you're travelling. That gives you a total of 16 hours of use with the case – but it does take two hours to charge the earbuds fully each time, making them really only suitable for brief workout sessions or commutes.

One problem with many in-ear headphones – wired or otherwise – is that they need to achieve a good seal in the ear for the best sound quality. So it comes as a pleasant surprise to find the Be Free8 sounds very good even when resting quite lightly and comfortably in my ears. Listening



to a lossless ALAC file of *My Lagan Love* by Kate Bush, the haunting *a cappella* solo vocal is delivered with a clear, light tone and an attractive sense of space that seems to fill the air all around my head, despite the compact design of the little earbuds. If the aim is to insulate you from the outside world, immersing yourself in a little cloud of sound then it's mission accomplished straight out of the box.

Also on *The Hounds Of Love* album, *The Big Sky (Meteorological Mix)* serves up a denser, more layered arrangement, and the Be Free8 handles the change of pace admirably. Optoma's claims of 'explosive bass' may be typical marketing hyperbole, but there's a satisfyingly firm quality to the bass, and the sound remains clear and balanced as the avalanche of drums and chanting chorus pile up layer after layer. It even does a respectable job of reaching down to the deep, electronic rumble of Max Richter's *Shadow Journal* – a task that defeats many compact headphones and speakers.

I'm curious to see how the Bluetooth connection handles the hi-res MQA streaming of Tidal, but the clarity of *Knights Of Cydonia* by Muse is impressive, keeping a tight focus on

the galloping rhythm of the drums while the Sergio Leone horns and Queen-esque harmonies soar above. On the same album, the Be Free8 also shows precision in the sonic mash-up of *Supermassive Black Hole*, delivering the combination of deep, fuzzy bass and grinding guitar chords with great power, while keeping each instrument clear and distinct. If there's a minor flaw – which might be attributable to the Bluetooth streaming – it's that higher frequencies, such as those harmonies on *Knights Of Cydonia*, can sound a little harsh at times. Even so, it's an admirable performance from such a compact and affordable little set of headphones.

### Head of the class

Most wire-free models trade sound quality for convenience, but the Be Free8 defies its compact design to provide surprisingly clear and attractive sound quality. The limited battery life means it's really only suitable for relatively short listening sessions – but that's a common weakness with wire-free headphones, and the sturdy but comfortable design puts it at the top of this new and evolving category. **CJ**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£200

**TELEPHONE**  
01923 691800

**WEBSITE**  
optoma.co.uk

#### OUR VERDICT



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## Black Rhodium Symphony 18 interconnect

**WITH THE EVER-GROWING** number of interconnects on the market, any attempt to categorise and simplify the range from a manufacturer has got to be a good idea. To this end, Black Rhodium has introduced its Intro series, which promises great sound quality at affordable prices. As part of this initiative, the company has added the new Symphony 18 interconnect to replace the now-discontinued Symphony cable. The new interconnect employs Black Rhodium's Distortion Busting technology to a cable that actually boasts a less advanced specification than its predecessor.

Assembled at the Black Rhodium factory in Derby, the Symphony 18 has a special 110ohm screened cable to protect the inner cores from picking up RFI. It is sheathed in a black, vibration-absorbent outer

braid and uses a thick insulation to minimise the interaction between the internal conductors to reduce what the company calls 'Transient Phase Distortion'. The cables are terminated with gold-plated RCA plugs with an 'Hourglass Silhouette' profile designed to be easier to grip when connecting.

### Stay focussed

With the interconnect hooked up between my valve preamp and monoblocks, I spin an LP of Branford Marsalis playing Debussy's *L'Isle Joyeuse* on saxophone. This sophisticated and polished performance is very enjoyable and expertly reproduced with the Symphony 18 in place. The balance between saxophone and orchestra is really good, although I do feel that the space and imaging is not quite as wide and focussed as I have grown accustomed to with my reference



cables. Meanwhile, the rhythmic pounding of the drums on a CD of He Xun-Tian's *Earth Drums*, moves from left to right throughout the performance demonstrating great timing and musical engagement. This cable certainly brings out some great musical qualities but stereo focus is a little lacking in my setup. **NR**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£180 for a 1m pair  
**TELEPHONE**  
01332 342233  
**WEBSITE**  
blackrhodium.co.uk

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

## JAYS a-Six Wireless in-ear headphone

### SWEDISH HEADPHONE

**MANUFACTURER** JAYS is taking its first steps into the wireless in-ear headphone market with its a-Six Wireless – a budget-friendly model whose sound and build quality belies its price. The ear-piece housings are made from aluminium and the flat cable with a remote for play/pause, as well as a central unit housing the batteries and Bluetooth technology drapes around the back of the neck.

### Born slippy

More thought could have gone into the design, however, as the battery unit slips all too easily off of my neck, pulling down on the earbuds in the process. The in-ear housings, meanwhile, are on the smaller side, and while JAYS does include a choice of five sizes of silicone tips in the box, those with larger ear canals may struggle to get a secure fit.

Sound quality is impressive at the price, with clear mid-frequencies and a good bass response even at high volumes, thanks to its tuned bass port design. The bass and guitar notes in Pink Floyd's *Another Brick In the Wall* are prominent and engaging, and it does a good job of bringing all the elements together in one cohesive sound. The high frequencies balance out the bass frequencies – something that's particularly evident in Elton John's *Are You Ready For Love?* – with the highs of the instruments and the lower range of Elton's baritone vocal maintaining clarity across an impressively wide range of frequencies.

To summarise, the a-Six is a low-cost wireless in-ear option that



delivers a solid performance at an affordable price. The battery unit slipping off the neck can be annoying, but only happens occasionally. The Bluetooth connection is reliable, and the 12-hour battery life lives up to expectations in use. **LT**

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£79  
**TELEPHONE**  
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**WEBSITE**  
jaysheadphones.com

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Kudos C30 in Oak	used	1749
Kudos X2, rosenut	used	699
Magneplanar MG1.7 mint boxed	x/d	1399
Martin Logan Vista, excellent	used	1299
Martin Logan Ethos, excellent no boxes	used	2599
Martin Logan Ethos, near mint boxed	used	3399
Mirage M1si vgc boxed	used	999
Monitor Audio Bronze 5 nr mint boxed	used	399
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Monitor Audio RS8, nr mint boxed	used	499
Monitor Audio BR5, nr mint boxed	used	299
Monopulse 42a, good condition boxed	used	749
NAIM Aliae, excellent in maple	used	899
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Proac D20r, excellent boxed, ex dealer demo	x/d	1849
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Rogers LS1, bookshelf excellent	used	199
SD Acoustics SD1 in good condition	used	599
Sonus Faber Concerto Grand Piano, vgc boxed	used	799
Sonus Faber Venera 1.5 with matching stands	x/d	999
Sonus Faber Venera Centre channel excellent	x/d	399
Spendor A6, vgc boxed	used	799
Spendor BC1, near mint boxed	used	499
Tannoy XT6F excellent boxed	used	649
Tannoy Albury, excellent with serviced drivers	used	1199
Totem Mite in black, ex dealer demo	used	379
Usher Mini Dancer 1, excellent boxed	x/d	1299
Usher 6371 fantastic sonic bargain	used	999
Usher SW103 Sub, superb	used	249
Usher N Series. Various	x/d	Call
Veritas H3 (Lowthers) gloss black, 100db,	x/d	2399
Wilson Watt/Puppy, crated, new foams, lovely	used	Call

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Caim Diablo/Tornado Amp/CD pack was £1900	x/d	599
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Devialet 400 & Magneplanar MG3.7i speakers	used	9979
Devialet 200 & Magneplanar MG1.7 speakers	used	5249
Naim Muso nr mint boxed	x/d	799
Quad 77 CD/Tuner/Pre and Power with remote	used	999
Scansonic USB100 Turntable & Active Speakers	new	349

## Accessories/Cables

Audeze EL8 Headphones	x/d	449
Audeze LCD2, near mint boxed with extra cables	used	599
Cyrus PSXR, excellent from	used	299
Elemental Audio speaker stands	x/d	449
Finite Element Rack, excellent	used	Call
Grado headphones many models	x/d	Call
Grado SR325is, excellent boxed	used	199
HiFi Man HE500, excellent boxed	used	379
HiFi Racks, large black oak AV rack	used	Call
Kimber BiFocal X 2.4m pr	used	999
Kimber KS3033 2.4m pair	used	1999
Kondo KSL Vc 2m Din to phono	used	Call
Lexicon MC12 Balanced AV Processor c/w remote	used	499
Naim HiLine and Powerline both available used	from	299
Naim Headline Headphone amplifier	used	279
Naim Flatcap 2, excellent	used	299
Naim XPS Power supply, excellent boxed	used	749
Oppe HA2 Headphone Amp excellent	used	199
Sennheiser HD800s excellent boxed	used	1099
Townshend Seismic racks 2 of...	used	Call
Van den Hul D102 mk3, selection	used	Call

**Tel: 01642 267012 or Email: [choice@2ndhandhifi.co.uk](mailto:choice@2ndhandhifi.co.uk)**

## Dekoni Audio

### Elite Hybrid replacement earpads

**AS AN OWNER** of Sennheiser's HD 800 S headphone (HFC 411), it's good to know that replacement earpads are available for the already very good velour ones that come supplied. Dekoni Audio produces replacement pads for a range of headphones, that includes models from Beyerdynamic, Fostex, AKG, Audio-Technica, Sony and Bose.

#### Comfort break

The earpads fit both Sennheiser's HD 800 and HD 800 S and have a sheepskin outer ring designed for good isolation and fit over the ears, while the velour face makes them feel very comfortable indeed. The inside of the pad uses fenestrated sheepskin perforated with tiny holes, which the company claims has the best acoustical properties.

The pads are supplied with a little plastic tool along with instructions

that facilitate the unclipping of the existing earpads ready for the installation of the replacements. This is a straightforward process and I waste little time in slipping the upgraded headphone over my ears.

First impressions are that the already comfortable HD 800 S headphone design is even more so with the Elite Hybrids installed. The replacement earpads provide a lovely snug fit over my ears, but how do they sound?

Playing a recording of Ravel's *Bolero* by the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra, the sound is really quite captivating and incredibly spacious. I did play this recording before swapping over to the Dekoni earpads and I'd argue that the breadth and overall sense of air around the instruments improves with the Elite Hybrids in place. With the additional comfort and as the music builds to the famous crescendo

at the end, I'm really pulled into the performance – making it easy for me to forget I'm wearing a headphone.

Despite my initial scepticism about this product, the replacement pads have won me over. They make a great upgrade for this already impressive headphone and are a worthwhile investment at the price. **NR**



#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£80

**TELEPHONE**  
01494 956558

**WEBSITE**  
electromod.co.uk

#### OUR VERDICT



## True Signal Audio Cables

### True Phase Digital 75 interconnect

**DIGITAL CABLES ARE** required to have 75ohm characteristic impedance. Analogue cables are not suitable for use as digital interconnects as their bandwidth is not great enough. If a cable with a poor high-frequency characteristic is used as a digital interconnect it can result in timing errors in the digital signal, which manifest as jitter or unwanted reflections of the digital signal.

#### Foiled again

As its name implies, the True Phase Digital 75 has the correct characteristic impedance for a digital coaxial cable. It has a solid silver central conductor surrounded by an ePTFE (expanded Polytetrafluoroethylene) dielectric. Like its analogue siblings, the cable also benefits from having a two-stage shield – one foil and one silver woven braid. This cable is specifically designed for connecting together

digital equipment, such as a CD player or streamer to a DAC. If required, the True Phase Digital 75 can additionally be fitted with 75ohm silver BNC connectors.

Using a PrimaLuna ProLogue Eight Mk2 CD player as a source and connecting the True Phase Digital 75 between its output and the input of a Cambridge Audio Stream Magic 6 v2 network streamer (HFC 393) used as digital-to-analogue converter, I spin a CD of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* with Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic. With the interconnect in place, the opening crescendo somehow swells to an even greater magnificence and during the

quieter passages I almost feel that I can hear a pin drop and the performance flows smoothly and effortlessly with the interconnect in place. The price may be high, but this is a well-made cable that seamlessly carries the digital signal from anything it's connected to. **NR**



#### DETAILS

##### PRICE

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01582 937465

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# Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified

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## FOR SALE

**MONITOR AUDIO** Gold Reference 20 floorstanders, cherry wood, complete with manual and tool kit. 205 x 315 x 980mm (WxHxD), Superb sound £350: **07801234205 (Lincolnshire)**

**WANTED** ALPS source selector switch for Naim NAC 62/72 preamp. Also, Exposure preamp and Inca Tech The Claymore amp plus Naim-type 24V PSU: **07756271992 or email: hollson19@gmail.com (Sheffield).**

**CABLES** Silvermann mains 2x1.2m, 1x1.1m and 1x0.85m £85 sold together. Missing Link Alaqueia RCA Eichmann 0.5m £45, Chord C-Power mains 1.5m £25, Chord Rumour speaker cable 4m pair unterminated £20, QED Revelation speaker cable 2m pair with QED plugs £20: **07843746026 or email: stevecousins136@gmail.com (Dorset).**

**LOWTHER** Corner Acoustics Horns in walnut, cabinets repolished, DX2 drivers rebuilt by D.K. Loudspeakers with Kapton coil formers.

Magnificent, effortless sound: £875 ono: **01162882338 (Leicester).**

**MUSIC FIRST AUDIO** passive preamp Mk1 copper version with twin XLR outputs in silver, VGC: £995. Primare NP30 streamer and DAC in silver £1,095. Details and pics on request: **07813367409 or email: lyndon.taylor@tiscali.co.uk (W. Sussex)**

**AUDIO RESEARCH** VT 60 power amplifier (silver) near mint and original carton £749 ono: **02392453382 (Hants).**

**GARRARD** 401 chassis £749, Rega RB300 tonearm (rewired) £279, Goldring 1042 cartridge (used, boxed) £249,

Plinth for 401 £199, power supply for Class A amps £300: **02074998729.**

**AUDIOLAB** Q DAC unused and original boxed, so mint condition. £179 including P&P: **02392453382 or email: alanmacleod1@virginmedia.com (Hants).**

**SONUS FABER** Venere 3.0 speakers in immaculate condition with special base plate and conical 'spikes', spike shoes, manual and original packaging. £1,900: **02380738935 or email: golf3385@hotmail.co.uk**

**ORACLE** Delphi mk4, Ortofon Black Quintet, two years old, one owner from new



**YAMAHA** CA1010 integrated amp, 1979 with original receipt in Japanese Yen. Super condition and performance. Must see and hear £500: **07770601097 or 01420538429 (Hampshire).**



**AUDIOQUEST** DragonFly Black, good condition, boxed £50. AudioQuest Golden Gate mini-jack-to-RCA, 2m, mint boxed, £55. Both items include UK shipping in price: **01902751872, or email: bufobill4@gmail.com. (West Midlands).**

(1994), Denon DLS1 pick-up, SME arm 345, extra plinth, lid and hinges, never been used, one screw missing, not original packaging: **07974725585, or email: bo@vikingtrees (South Yorkshire).**

**WANTED:** Nespa optical disc finaliser. Must be in good working condition: **07708431963 (ask for Ray).**

**KEF** Coda 9 stereo speakers, black finish, used but totally new condition, collection only £110: **07787574784 or email: stephenadolphus@yahoo.com (West London).**

**OPTIMUM** six shelf hi-fi stand, 10mm clear glass shelves 610 x 520mm (WxD), assorted sets of pillars: start feet 4x 80mm, £275. Audio Suspension deck shelf, clear Perspex shelf 20mm thick, 550 x 450mm (WxD), boxed £175: **email: stan11@btinternet.com (Salisbury, Wiltshire).**

**PS AUDIO** Perfect Wave Memory Player CD transport, as new except small scuff, boxed, remote, power cable £1,395 ono. Burton Somerville BS16s speakers – Colin Howard/Paul Burton. 55in high, 16 Scanspeaks, Fountek ribbons £1,500 ono: **07932674810 or email: mhay7@icloud.com (NW London).**

**CHORD** Epic RCA 1m interconnect, purchased November 2017, perfect condition: **01432853243 (Herefordshire).**

## WILSON BENESCH

Discovery Mk1 speakers, mint and boxed £2,750. No offers: **02392453382. (Hants).**

**CAMBRIDGE AUDIO** S70 bi-wire floorstanding speakers, excellent condition £40 (RRP £200): **02085649552 or email: paulrowell8@sky.com (Middlesex).**

**MUSICAL FIDELITY** £100 amp E600 CD E50 tuner, mint condition £550. B&W AS2 subwoofer boxed £125, Marantz PM 7001 amp, boxed £150. Free hi-fi mags (100+) for collection: **01708457691 (Hornchurch, Essex).**

**HI-FI** rack/sculpture. Cardboard rocket-shaped, artist-made 8 x 2.5ft with shelves for turntable and three units. Total one-off. Offers/pictures available: **01312376787 (Edinburgh).**

**NAIM** Nait 5si black CD player £500, Naim Nait 5si black amp £500, two years old: **01273500173.**

**NAIM** NAC 282 + NAPSC with remote and leads. One owner, new since 2012, looks and sounds as new, boxed with manual, prefer collection £2,450. HiCap (olive), serviced 2011, boxed, £250: **01245250375 or email ruane. hp@blueyonder.co.uk (Chelmsford, Essex).**

**TECHNICS** ST GT 1000 DAB, FM tuner, mint condition, boxed, handbook £350: **07940704570 (Kent).**

**TORUS** RM15 power conditioner, six outputs, perfect condition £1,500. Densen 420 CD player, recent service, little use since £800. Ruark Talisman II floorstanders, boxed, good condition £350: **07814198334.**

**GRADO** headphones model 3251S, perfect condition and boxed (originally £269), will accept £120 ono: **07761215032 (Suffolk).**

**GAUDER AKUSTIK** Isophon Corvara floorstanding speakers. Selling at a really low price of £980. Lehmann Rhinelander headphone amp (RRP £335) £120: **01483472650 (Woking, Surrey).**

**NAIM** Uniti Star, boxed complete £2,700. Proac

**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!

Response D20R cherry floorstanding loudspeakers with upgraded cabinet and bass £1,600. Hegel H80 integrated amplifier £600 plus delivery or collect: **07793765779 or email: rdnyhean@aol.com (CoDown).**

**WANTED** old Spondor S8/S9 or S8e/S9e speakers. Cabinets must be in excellent condition. Will pay a fair price that reflects the condition: **07453064274 or email: stemar1@tiscali.co.uk**

**NAIM** FlatCap power supply. Great condition. Little used. Serial no. 123416. £90: **07785724849 (South Oxfordshire).**

**ROTEL** RA-05 amp, silver, £150 ono. Rotel RA-06 CD silver, £150 ono. KEF iQ5 speakers, apple finish, £175



**GRAHAM SLEE** Solo SRG II headphone amplifier, mint condition, boxed and supplied with custom made 5-pin DIN to 2 x RCA phono cable by Cadman Enterprises. £330 including postage to UK mainland: **07858 221281 or email: james\_mcleod789@btinternet.com (Caithness).**

ono. Marantz 7004 streamer £150 ono. Buffalo NAS drive £50: **01404891106 or email: alanwruell@uwclub.net (Devon).**

**CHORDELECTRONICS** DAC64. Mint. Original boxes and instructions included. £650: **07792233171 or email: drkpgill@hotmail.co.uk (Lancashire).**

**PMC** fact.3 speakers in rich walnut finish. Only 4 years of light use and very well looked after so still in mint condition. Sold in original packaging with user manual. £2,995: **07747008065 or email: spriestman@theiet.org (Hampshire).**

**ELECTROCOMPANET** EC 4.8 preamplifier, VGC, boxed with remote and manual £1,000: **07555263931 (Northamptonshire).**

**REGA** Planar 3, new type £300. Rega Fono MM Mk2 £100. Rega TT-PSU £100. Audio-Technica AT150SA £100. All as new, boxed: **07583078744 (Notts/ Derby area).**

**EXPOSURE** 3010S2D amp (£1,790) with phono board £260. 4 months old, finished in black, with all packaging and in unmarked condition £1,295: **02380730359 (Hampshire).**

**NAIM** NAC112X pre, NAP150X power-boxed, FlatCap power supply-olive, Naim NAC A5 speaker cable 2x 3m lengths with connections. Graham Slee

The Communicator Phono Stage, Chord Cobra RCA/Din lead plus two other RCA/Din leads £1,200: **07795621673 or email: peterdilworth@btinternet.com (N Yorks).**

**LEHMANN AUDIO** Rhineland Headphone Amplifier (brand new) RRP £335, unwanted gift for £150 ovno, Van den Hul D-501 tonearm cable suits SME & Rega tonearms RCA-to-5-pin DIN plug end at 90°: **01483 472650 (Woking).**

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**LYNWOOD** Mega Ultimate mains cleaner for any system, rated at 3KW, three output sockets, capable of making improvements with any equipment £50 ono. Buyer collects: **02085908590 (Ilford, Essex).**

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**NAIM** amplifiers NAC122X, NAP150X with FlatCap 2X & Stage 50 line phono head amp. All in mint condition with leads, boxes & remote. £1,250 ono. **07748320549 or email: mcleodian43@yahoo.co.uk (Suffolk).**

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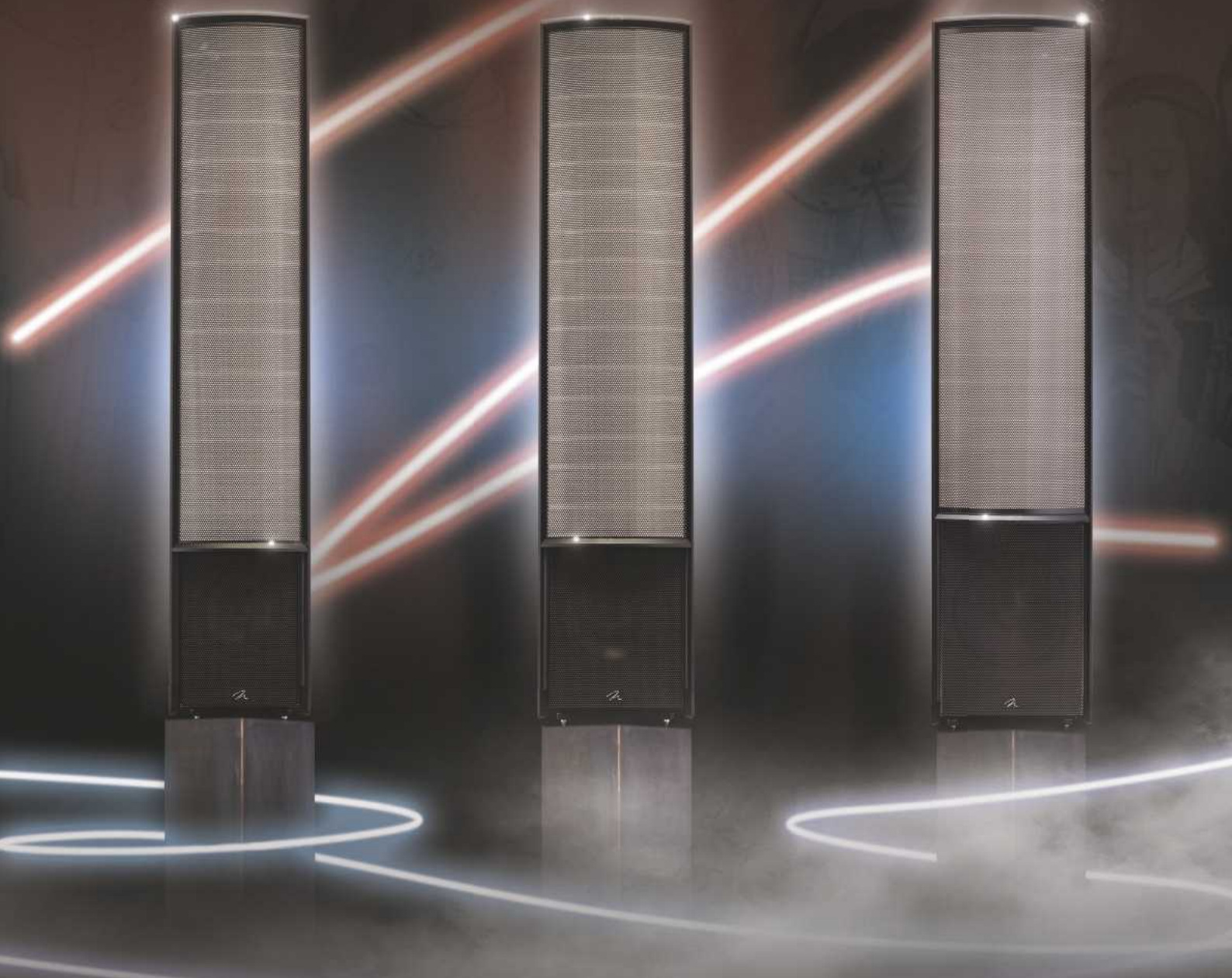


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