



Products on test: iFi Audio iPhoneo 3 Black Label, Chord EpicX cable, Topping D10S

JBL Club One
Stunning 'hi-res' headphones



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 467

October 2020

BUYING GUIDE

100+ essential components
p111

TREBLE TOPS!

Klipsch 'The Fives' standmount, Elipson Chroma 400 BT turntable & Astell&Kern SE200 DAP spoil us for Choice!



CHAMPIONS!

All the big winners at the 2020 EISA Awards

HEAD OF THE CLASS

T+A debuts HA 200 headphone amp

BACK IN BLACK



Rotel's Michi P5 preamp & S5 power amp are bang on!

NATIONAL ANTHEMS

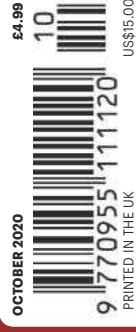


Lana Del Rey reveals her all-time favourite LPs

PRECISION POINTS



Six of the best MM and MC cartridges battle it out





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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!

Welcome

www.hifichoice.com Issue No. **467** October 2020



On p83, occasioned by the closure of Q magazine, you'll find a piece I put together on the sad demise of the once great British music press. The gist of it is that if your business depends on finding people who are willing to pay for your thoughts on any forthcoming music release, it is likely to be in a spot of trouble.

Now, you may think it highly ironic that this piece should appear in the *Opinion* section of a magazine you've just bought, and I have to admit you're probably right, but buying hi-fi equipment can be a complicated business and it's likely to set you back a fair bit more than a Spotify upgrade. And that's why we're pleased to do what we do, tasking experts to test and rate all the latest releases so you can make an informed choice.

Anyway, this got me thinking that, as we're coming to the close of this crazy year, it might be fun to gather some of your thoughts on the equipment you've personally encountered in the past 12 months or so.

To that end, if you've made a happy hi-fi purchase relatively recently, we'd like to know about it. Whether it's a new set of standmounts, an amplifier upgrade, a change of turntable or a fresh foray into in-ear headphones and you'd like to share your experience, we'd really like to hear about it. Just email us at: letters@hifichoice.co.uk or write to us (address below) and title your communications 'Favourite 2020'.

Enjoy the issue!

Steve Sutherland Editor

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Perhaps the greatest UK blues guitarist ever, the sadly departed Peter Green

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Six MM/MC heavy hitters battle it out for the crown of most desirable cartridge



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"I've cried myself to sleep many a night listening to early Fleetwood Mac and asking myself, 'What happened to this guy?'"

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Dawn of a new era

Marantz introduces its next-gen Model 30 integrated amplifier and SACD 30n network audio streamer and SACD player

PRICE: £2,700 EACH **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** MARANTZ.COM

MARANTZ HAS ANNOUNCED details of its new Model 30 integrated amplifier and SACD 30n network audio streamer and SACD player, which it claims are the first products to feature: "the brand's new industrial design language, celebrating and modernising signature design elements from legendary Marantz products of the fifties, sixties and seventies."

Manufactured in Shirakawa, Japan, the Model 30 boasts an all-analogue design featuring a fully discrete two-stage build, with independent power supplies for the pre and power amplifier sections. A phono stage is incorporated (compatible with both moving-magnet and coil carts) for vinylistas, complete with Marantz Musical Premium Phono EQ circuit and Marantz HDAM technology. Distortion is reduced using two-stage amplification in the phono stage, and Marantz HDAMs are combined with JFETs in the input stage, giving high input

impedance. The exclusion of coupling capacitors further simplifies the design, reducing signal distortion and enhancing signal purity. Further, the Model 30 is equipped with an input impedance selector, which can be adjusted between three different settings: MC low (330hm), MC mid (100ohm) and MC high (390ohm), to further optimise sound performance when using MM or MC cartridges.

Meanwhile, the SACD 30n draws on Marantz's proprietary SACDM-3L transport mechanism and – leveraging the built-in Heos multi-room platform – combines a premium CD/SACD transport with a USB DAC and a built-in preamplifier.

It is able to stream PCM files up to 24-bit/192kHz and up to DSD128 from major streaming providers. Heos is also compatible with a variety of voice-enabled technologies, including Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant and Apple Siri.

Relying on proprietary Marantz Musical Mastering (MMM-Stream converter and MMM-Conversion stage) for optimal digital audio conversion, the SACD 30n's PCM inputs are up-converted to DSD256. The high-frequency signal produced is processed by the MMM-Conversion stage (in place of a conventional DAC) to produce the analogue output. Two system clocks ensure accurate up-conversion of the incoming signal, whether it's from the disc or digital inputs, ranging from 44.1kHz to 384kHz. The design of the DSD-to-analogue converter feeds into the familiar Marantz HDAM in the output stage for optimal sound quality.

A built-in headphone amplifier features a dedicated module using exclusive Marantz HDAM-SA2 circuitry. The gain factor can be adjusted to three established presets—low, mid and high—making it possible to drive high impedance headphones. Look out for a World Exclusive review of both next month.

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DYNAUDIO

We are the Champions!

EISA AWARD WINNERS 2020-2021

CHOSEN BY JOURNALISTS from 61 publications spanning 29 countries, the annual EISA (Expert Imaging and Sound Association) Awards are the world's most prestigious hi-fi accolades. The plan for 2020 was to follow the same pattern as those of

previous years with companies presenting their entrants at the EISA convention in Antwerp in April, followed by voting which would have been finalised at EISA's annual global meeting in June. However, that was all banjaxed by the Coronavirus outbreak.

Not to be defeated by a global pandemic, EISA organised the awards virtually via Skype and email, each category voted by one of six expert groups. The winners have just been announced and here they are – the very best in hi-fi.

BEST VALUE FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER

Focal Chora 826

PRICE: £1,300 REVIEWED: HFC 457

The panel said: "At the heart of the Chora 826 is a new 'Slatefibre' driver, for speed and bass extension, and the speaker has a sound that'll make you want to keep on listening, with both bass weight, treble clarity and sparkle. It's also easy to set up and position, will work with modest amplification and sounds good in almost any room."



BEST VALUE BOOKSHELF LOUDSPEAKER

Monitor Audio Bronze 100

PRICE: £325

The panel said: "Monitor Audio has built an enviable reputation for superb small loudspeakers, winning the EISA Award for its bookshelf model last year and building on this performance for its latest, sixth-generation series in 2020. They're admirable performers across a wide range of musical styles, with a killer combination of bass weight and sweet treble from the brand's in-house-designed Ceramic-Coated Aluminium Magnesium (C-CAM) drivers and a reflex port 'rifled' for smoother airflow."



BEST LOUDSPEAKER

SVS Prime Pinnacle

PRICE: £1,800 REVIEWED: HFC 465

The panel said: "Sitting at the top of the SVS Prime range, this classically styled floorstanding model is of simple design and construction, yet delivers a clear, crowd-pleasing performance – not least due to its trio of 16.5cm bass drivers and rear-facing ports. The woofers are drawn from the company's Ultra Tower flagship model and ensures music driven by bass and percussion is always thrilling, just as the midband and treble are crisp and sweet."



WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKER

System Audio Legend 5 Silverback

PRICE: £2,400

The panel said: "They're active, with dedicated amplification for each drive unit, and become wireless when you add the full-function Stereo Hub or third-party transmitter. Operation using WISA technology to avoid interference and carrying sound up to 24-bit/192kHz, the system can connect to a wide range of sources, from a digital connection from a computer to TV sound. It also has multiple streaming options, from DLNA/UPnP to GoogleCast, AirPlay and Bluetooth."



BEST VALUE TURNTABLE

Pro-Ject T1

PRICE: £260 REVIEWED: HFC 464

The panel said: "The T1 is... a budget audiophile record-playing package with excellent sound for the money. The company also offers versions including a built-in phono stage and Bluetooth transmitter! With its machined plinth, high-precision bearing, glass platter and newly designed one-piece aluminium tonearm, the T1 offers a wonderfully weighty and detailed sound - and even the bundled Ortofon OM 5E MM cartridge is pre-installed, making it a completely plug-and-play turntable package."



SMART AMPLIFIER

NAD Masters M33

PRICE: £4,000 REVIEWED: HFC 466

The panel said: "NAD won this category last year with its compact Masters M10. This year it has comprehensively evolved the concept with its Masters M33, combining state-of-the-art Class D amplifier technology from Purifi Audio with in-house streaming know-how. The result is just about all the amplifier anyone could need, combining massive power and beautiful clarity and finesse with broad connectivity, streaming and DIRAC room correction, all presented on a large front-panel touchscreen."



HIGH-END INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Musical Fidelity M8xi

PRICE: £5,650 REVIEWED: HFC 465

The panel said: "Musical Fidelity has always designed fabulous big amplifiers, following its belief that you can never have too much power. Now sharing a stable with Pro-Ject, it's delivered the M8xi, offering a massive 550W - which it comfortably exceeds from its dual-mono construction. Inputs extend to digital and analogue audio options, but this isn't just a big prize-fighter of an amp: it's also fast and nimble, delivering music with both speed and accuracy, not to mention masses of detail."



AMPLIFIER

Arcam SA30

PRICE: £2,000 REVIEWED: HFC 462

The panel said: "Arcam joins the 'all-in-one' streaming amplifier trend with its flagship integrated amplifier. Within the elegant but purposeful casework the SA30 combines the company's Class G amplification, for both finesse and power, with a raft of digital technologies. It will stream, and you can plug in everything from your TV to a turntable, while Dirac room correction is offered to optimise the sound, using a computer and the supplied microphone."



HIGH-END PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER

Rotel Michi P5/S5

PRICE: £3,300/£5,400 REVIEWED: HFC 467

The panel said: "Rotel's high-end sub-brand is back, some three decades after its first appearance, and the Michi P5 control amplifier and S5 power amp bring a welcome breath of weight, scale and entirely natural music making to the high-end arena. With cool, black looks and stunning build quality, the duo displays a wide-ranging ability across a broad spectrum of musical genres... The amps are flexible too, the preamp offering a wide range of digital and analogue inputs, and the quality is assured by painstaking hand assembly, from the basic components upwards."



AUDIOFILE EISA AWARDS

PHONO PREAMP

Primare R15

PRICE: £895 REVIEWED: HFC 463

The panel said: "Housed in a compact case just 35cm wide, Primare's R15 phono amplifier offers two levels of gain for both moving-coil and magnet cartridges, with further adjustments of resistance and capacitance to optimise loading for the cartridge in use. Its low-noise design is informed by the flagship R35 model just as its sound is the familiar 'Primare' mix of weight and substance allied to detail and resolution."



DIGITAL SOURCE

Volumio Primo

PRICE: £479 REVIEWED: HFC 450

The panel said: "This unassuming-looking little black box is a highly affordable solution to all your digital streaming needs, for not only will it play music stored on home network devices, it also allows you to access a huge range of online music services. With simple operation via web browsers or apps and an on-screen GUI delivered over HDMI, the Primo includes digital outputs to feed any DAC while also playing music via USB stores. Compatible with music formats all the way up to DSD, via Ethernet or wi-fi..."



BEST VALUE DAC

iFi Audio Zen DAC

PRICE: £129

The panel said: "With eye-catching looks, flexibility, solid engineering within and a remarkably grown-up sound, this entry-level DAC is a conspicuous hi-fi bargain. It proves that desktop audio doesn't have to be the poor relation of 'proper' hi-fi and is a real giant-killer, whether as a DAC/headphone amp or a simple digital preamp... Amazing value for money."



TURNTABLE

Thorens TD 1601

PRICE: £2,600

The panel said: "While the TD 1601 has a look reflecting classic turntables of the past, under the skin it's all new. It retains the three-point sprung suspension of the TD150 of the sixties, but brings the company's latest decoupled synchronous motor for speed accuracy and an electric arm-lift and end of side stop for convenient playback. A fully manual version of the deck, the TD 1600, is also offered. All this plus a balanced audio output alongside the usual connections, for even lower noise, makes for a turntable that combines heritage with bang-up-to-date sound quality."



AUDIO ACCESSORY

Pro-Ject VC-E

PRICE: £329

The panel said: "Having spearheaded the vinyl revival with its excellent – and very affordable – turntables, Pro-Ject has now turned its attention to looking after your precious LP collection with its compact VC-E record cleaning machine. Not only is it small, it's also very affordable and fast, spinning the disc at 30rpm to enable it to be cleaned in just a few rotations."



MOBILE AUDIO PLAYER

FiiO M11 PRO

PRICE: £600

The panel said: "This portable music player packs best-in-class functionality into a high-quality chassis with bezel-free touchscreen display. Format support and listening options are unrivalled – the M11 Pro can be used as both a Bluetooth receiver and transmitter, as a USB DAC and USB audio player (with native DSD output), or playing direct from its onboard storage (expandable to 2TB) or streaming apps. A Samsung Exynos hexa-core SoC ensures seamless music management and a responsive user experience. Two AK4497EQ DACs with Velvet Sound architecture, meanwhile, support hi-res audio to 32-bit/384kHz, plus MQA decoding. The player's trio of headphone outputs benefit from powerful, low-distortion amplification."





ON-EAR HEADPHONES

Bowers & Wilkins PX5

PRICE: £269

The panel said: "These are effortlessly stylish headphones with a spectacular finish blending carbon fibre, aluminium and fabric, while soft cushioned earpads and headband support long listening sessions. Sound quality from the custom-designed 35mm drivers is superb, with a frequency response ranging from deep bass to delicate highs. Both wired and wireless connections are possible, the latter via Bluetooth with support for aptX Adaptive. On-body controls include instant pause by lifting an earcup and adjustment of the PX5's high-quality noise cancelling."

PORABLE DAC/HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

AudioQuest
DragonFly Cobalt

PRICE: £270 REVIEWED: HFC 462

The panel said: "The Cobalt not only converts a huge range of formats from your computer, it also features a high-quality headphone amp, as well as delivering great sound to a hi-fi system – and all in a package no bigger than a USB thumb-drive. It's an ideal portable audio companion: simply pop it into a USB port on your computer or smart device, which will both power it and supply the music. Then just plug in your favourite headphones and you have all you need for superb music wherever you happen to be."



IN-EAR HEADPHONES

Sennheiser
Momentum
True Wireless 2

PRICE: £279

The panel said: "Compact and lightweight, yet packed with essential features, the Momentum True Wireless 2 is a design triumph – and sounds sublime. Custom dynamic drivers deliver a balanced performance with convincing bass and rich detail that can be fine tuned through the Smart Control app, while new active noise cancelling works to keep you focused on the music. Battery life has been upgraded to seven hours and the case extends this via its own rechargeable battery."



HEADPHONES

DALI IO-6

PRICE: £400

The panel said: "Not only is the IO-6 a wireless headphone design, it also incorporates excellent active noise-cancelling technology, adding to its closed-back design three modes of noise cancellation. As if that wasn't enough, it then further impresses by adding best-in-class battery life to keep you listening longer – with up to 30 hours on offer between charges."



MOBILE SPEAKER

LG XBOOM Go PL7

PRICE: £139

The panel said: "Designed in partnership with Meridian Audio, LG's XBOOM Go PL7's stereo driver array and onboard amplification – accompanied by dual passive radiators – engineers a performance that's outstandingly clear and transparent with vocals and packs a superior bass punch. And this mobile speaker's build and specification is equally impressive. It's stylish and compact enough to be taken everywhere, which its 24-hour battery life (with power bank functionality) and IPX5 water-resistant certification encourages. The XBOOM Go PL7 also offers smart lighting effects and up to 100 can connect together wirelessly to create a real party atmosphere. Hook up via Bluetooth or 3.5mm..."





Go outdoors with Diggit 55

Kitsound unveils new outdoor Bluetooth speaker

PRICE: £50 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** KITSOUND.CO.UK

KITSOUND HAS ANNOUNCED the launch of the Diggit 55, the latest entry in its outdoor Bluetooth loudspeaker range. Fitted with a removable stake for sticking in the ground, it comes with added features such as an Outdoor EQ Mode and new 'Tap to Pair' for those that have more than one Diggit 55.

Kitsound explains that the speaker uses double dual opposing drivers – two active and two passive – to deliver crisp notes and deep bass. It also boasts IP66 water and dust resistance, up to 15 hours of battery use and an LED downlight for night-time listening.

Kitsound has made it easier to stereo pair two Diggit 55s, thanks to the aforementioned Tap to Pair feature you can simply touch two speakers together to create immersive stereo sound. The Bluetooth connectivity distance is up to 30m, frequency response is quoted at 20Hz-20kHz, output at 12W RMS and the speaker's dimensions are 82 x 162 x 81mm (WxHxD) with a cable length of 80cm.



Cassette Store Day cancelled

Cassette Store Day, the annual co-ordinated release of music on collectable tapes that was inspired by the success of Record Store Day, has cancelled its 2020 event in the light of sexual misconduct claims made against one of its principal participants, Burger Records.

The event was planned for 17 October worldwide and would have been a boon to the resurgent industry re-emerging after difficult times under lockdown. It was immediately cancelled when news broke that Burger, based in Fullerton, California and the fount of many of the events' tape releases, was accused of "normalising a culture of sexual assault" at its shows and within its catalogue of artists.

Despite an attempt to rebrand and launch a separate imprint for female artists in response to the claims, Burger has been

forced to shut down entirely, prompting organisers to announce the cancellation.

In a statement on its Twitter and Facebook pages, CSD, which was launched in 2013, said of Burger: "We find this behaviour to be not only abhorrent, but completely unacceptable. We stand in solidarity with those who have come forward and those who have yet to."

At the time of going to press, there has been no news forthcoming of CSD's return.



*Cassette
STORE DAY*

Kimber KS Phono tonearm cable

Russ Andrews introduces new Kimber cable

PRICE: £2,400-£7,650 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** RUSSANDREWS.COM



REPLACING THE PREVIOUS
KS-1216 and KS-1236 cables, Kimber's three-model KS (Kimber Select) Phono range comes in copper (CU), hybrid copper-silver (HB) and pure silver (AG) variants. The company says that each cable shares a construction methodology based around four 24 AWG signal conductors insulated with dye-free, air articulated PTFE to ensure minimal capacitance and dielectric losses and maximum integrity. The CU version uses copper for the four conductors, while the HB and AG cables are made using pure silver.

Shielding, to ensure the signal remains pure and hum-free, surrounds the four conductors and is manufactured using a 44 AWG, heavy (8 percent) silver-plated copper shield – the company claiming it can be drawn to finer diameters to give greater coverage while retaining flexibility. This design is common to all three variants of the KS Phono.

The grounding of the CU and HB cables is further enhanced through the use of eight 24 AWG pure copper braided conductors bonded to the shield with pure silver foil and silver solder, and are terminated in spade connectors.

The cables can be supplied with phono plugs at both ends – WBT 0102Cu for the KS Phono-CU and WBT 0102Ag for the hybrid and silver cables – or a combination of phono plugs and the traditional straight DIN or 90° SME plug for the turntable end.

Keith Monks cleans up its act

PRICE: £800 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** VINYLDISCOVERY.COM

Keith Monks announces the launch of its new Prodigy record cleaning machine, which comes in a sustainable bamboo sculptured chassis and, so the company says, is quiet in use. Where previous machines have used a thread between the suction nozzle and the record, the company claims the Prodigy is the world's first threadless point suction cleaner – making it considerably easier to use and more effective at cleaning.

Fitted with a multi-colour lighting system and using 'a liquid on/liquid off' solution guaranteeing no recontamination from previously used fluids, it will clean both sides of a vinyl LP in five minutes. The cleaning fluid is fresh (not reused as it is with many other machines) for each record, and the contact with vinyl during the precision vacuuming process is minimal as the nozzle rides on a wave of fluid.

Designed to be effective cleaning both old and used records it also claims to improve the performance of new vinyl as it removes any excessive mould release agent left after manufacture. Prodigy can also be used to clean CDs, Blu-ray discs and computer CDs.



► **DETAILS**

PRODUCT

Rotel Michi P5

ORIGIN

UK/Japan

TYPE

Preamplifier

WEIGHT

60kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)

485 x 238 x 465mm

FEATURES

- Inputs: 2x balanced XLRs; MM/MC phono stage; 4x RCA; 3x coaxial; 3x optical; USB-A; USB-B
- Outputs: RCA line out; 2x pre outs; 2x balanced XLR; 1x optical; 1x coaxial; 2x subwoofer

DISTRIBUTOR

Rotel Europe

TELEPHONE

01903 221710

WEBSITE

rotel.com



► **DETAILS**

PRODUCT

Rotel Michi S5

ORIGIN

UK/Japan

TYPE

Power amplifier

WEIGHT

60kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)

485 x 238 x 465mm

FEATURES

- Inputs: balanced XLR; unbalanced RCA; Ethernet network port; RS232

DISTRIBUTOR

Rotel Europe

TELEPHONE

01903 221710

WEBSITE

rotel.com

Back in black

Not seen since the early nineties, Rotel's high-end Michi components return with a vengeance. **HFC** rolls out the welcome mat for the P5 and S5



CONNECTIONS



- ① 3x coaxial/optical digital inputs (P5)
- ② Balanced XLR inputs (P5)
- ③ Phono stage inputs (P5)
- ④ 4x RCA analogue line inputs (P5)
- ⑤ RCA preamp outputs (P5)
- ⑥ XLR balanced pre outputs (P5)
- ⑦ Balanced XLR/unbalanced RCA inputs (S5)
- ⑧ Fan-assisted heat pipe to cool power transistors (S5)

Rotel's Michi sub-brand, in case you hadn't already realised, is back. But before we get into that, let's turn the hands of time back and indulge in a brief history lesson. A family-run concern, the Japanese company first emerged back in 1965. Jump forward a few years to 1981 and it formed an alliance with British loudspeaker manufacturer Bowers & Wilkins that continues to this day. Its 800 series really put the company on the map the following year and then in 1983 Rotel introduced its first CD player. But it wasn't until the early nineties (1993 to be precise) that things started to get really interesting as the manufacturer that had up until this point been best known for its high-quality, yet affordable components made a move into the big-time with

A full-bloodied, holistic sound that really lets the music take centre stage

the flagship Michi range. With its distinctive red-lacquered wooden sidecheeks, this was one of those all-or-nothing products that showed that Rotel was so much more than just a producer of generously priced equipment. Over the following years, the Michi family grew to include an active preamp, tuner and CD player to name but a few (see *One Direction* boxout overleaf). Adored by those that were lucky enough to be able to afford them, the RHCD disc transport, matching RHA-10 slimline preamp

and more substantial RHB-10 power amplifier were a high water mark for Rotel. And then, just as quickly as it appeared, Michi was gone again...

All of which brings us back to where we came in. Some three years in development in a newly established facility where hand-made production is very much the order of the day, Michi has re-emerged phoenix-like from the ashes. Any signs of Rotel branding or any other connection with the Japanese manufacturer may have fallen by the wayside, but there's no mistaking these huge black hunks of electronics. The £3,300 P5 preamp, £5,400 S5 stereo power amp and £5,400 M8 monoblock are the rather glorious-looking result.

Forgetting about the M8 monoblock, today we're giving our attention to the P5 and S5, which are about as far removed from the slender preamps of the past as it's possible to get. The P5 is a fully featured preamp – with an impressive offering of analogue and digital connections – while its custom install features allow it to become part of a complete remote system.

When it comes to analogue sources, it has two sets of XLR balanced inputs, four line-ins (courtesy of RCAs) and a switchable moving-magnet/moving-coil phono stage. Outputs incorporate a line out, 6.35mm headphone socket on the front and a brace of subwoofer outs. If anything, the digital roster is even more impressive, including three optical and three coaxial inputs (plus a single output for each), a USB-B port for hook up to a computer and a USB-A socket to power external devices. A network port is on hand for control over IP and firmware updates ►

– but not network audio streaming – while there's a socket for a remote infrared sensor, 12V triggering and serial RS232. Bluetooth is additionally available, supporting both AAC and aptX codecs.

In comparison, the S5 is a far simpler proposition. Inputs come via balanced XLRs and RCA sockets (selected by a switch) and there are two sets of solid rhodium-plated speaker terminals per channel.

Under the hood, the P5 boasts a pair of AKM DACs, handling PCM files up to 32-bit/384kHz, while DSD, DoP and MQA are all supported by the USB-B port.

The extensive menu provides tone control, configuration or bypass as well as enabling the user to label the inputs, fix their levels or turn them off completely. The analogue preamp section runs in Class A and is powered by 17 regulated supplies that are hung from a pair of toroidal

The Michi pairing boasts great weight, scale and a natural approach to music

transformers. These are custom wound inhouse and are positioned at the front of the chassis, away from any audio circuitry.

Similarly, the S5 power amp uses inhouse transformers – a pair of 2.2kVA units, feeding a bank of British-made capacitors totalling 188,000µF. The dual-mono Class AB design is of a symmetrical layout, with the two channels positioned in



Unsurprisingly, B&W speakers pair well with the Michis

separate fan-cooled housings and packing a total of 32 high-current output devices.

Sound quality

Though a fairly demanding load, Bowers and Wilkins' 800 D3 feels a suitably fitting choice of speaker to partner with the Michi combo and sure enough wastes little time in revealing the duos' ability to exert plenty of control while delivering an open, captivating sound. Additional components called into action include a dCS Vivaldi One network music player and Melco N1ZS20/2 digital music library hooked up to the P5's USB-B port.

While initial impressions create a soundstage that isn't quite the last word in detail, the way that it is



Where power is the priority, albeit not without musical finesse, then one of the Michi's biggest competitors is not another pre/power but a beast of an integrated amp – Musical Fidelity's £5,650 M8xi (HFC 465). If on the other hand you can live with slightly less power, but hanker for full network-enabled flexibility then Primare's PRE35/A35.2 (£3,500/£2,700) combination is a class act. It offers plentiful facilities coupled with slick ease of use and an enjoyably fulsome, focused and articulate sound.

mercifully free from the sort of sting and forwardness that is so often evident in ultra-high-end systems impresses. Those that find their nose turning up at the mere mention of words like 'brash' and 'abrasive' will certainly find their comfy place here. That's not to suggest, of course, that the Michi pairing is in any way soft or over lush. On the contrary, it delivers a full-bloodied, holistic sound that avoids hi-fi trickery and instead lets the music take centre stage.

Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Karn Evil No.9* displays a big, bold sound with both striking bass extension and decent speed across the frequency range. A 24-bit/96kHz remastered version, it sounds a lot better than the original, which can focus too much on the top and bottom, but here there's a very good balance across the entire frequency range on show. While there's not quite the analytical revelation of every thread of the music being held up for examination like you might find on similarly high-end propositions, the symmetry of attack and substance is highly impressive. Given the scale of the ELP sound, the system does a superb job of drawing the listener into the music and then keeping it powering along as Carl Palmer's distinctive percussion remains taut and full of impact.

Michi's naturally generous balance is pushed to the fore even more with less processed recordings. Kyle Eastwood's 24-bit/44.1kHz *Blowin' The Blues Away*, for example, sounds bright breezy and bracing and yet is underpinned with weight and an impressive sense of substance. As the track unfolds, it becomes easier to discern every element of the performance from Eastwood's



The S5's large display offers a choice of VU meters, three spectrum analysers or being turned off



ONE DIRECTION

Launched back in 1993, the Michi range took its name from the Japanese word for 'direction' and was a clear attempt to move the Rotel brand into the high-end. This was something the company had already come close to with models such as its RC-5000 preamp and RB-5000 from the late-seventies – a point that was further rammed home by them being named The CONTROL amp and The POWER amp on their front panels. As was the style of the time, the models looked highly technical: the preamp boasting a multitude of knobs, flip-switches and sliders – including a 10-fader octave equaliser – while the power amp had both VU meters and peak level LEDs.

In direct contrast, the Michi lineup was more subtle in its industrial styling, with a minimum of controls and not a VU meter in sight. The lacquered side panels emphasised the use of traditional Japanese craftsmanship, while each of the three initial models boasted not just a number, but a Japanese monicker. Thus the RHC-10 was also known as *Takumi* (craftsmanship), the RHQ-10 phono preamp *Shih* (poetry) and the RHB-10 dual mono power amp, delivering 200W/8ohm, *Kokoro* (heart). The range continued to grow, with an active preamplifier, the RHA-10, an RHT-10 FM tuner, a second power amp, the RB-05 and a huge CD player in the shape of the RHCD-10.

propulsive bassline to the piano stabs and dynamic drumming.

Switching to a 24-bit/192kHz recording of Mozart's *La Nozze Di Figaro*, there's a rich, ripe sound that has the necessary agility and detail to convey the exuberance of both the score and the performance. There's a more than healthy display of dynamic extension on show here, making clear both the light and shade of the orchestra and the composing itself.

While it could be argued that more intimate tracks like Lake Street Dive's *Better Than* can sound a little more distant than more forward rivals, this pairing is all about conveying the music and sweeping the listener along

– something that becomes all too clear with everything from the Tallis Scholars mesmeric take on Allegri's *Miserere* to the slow build of Mike Oldfield's *Return To Ommadawn*.

Conclusion

OK, so the Michi combo might not be the last word in attack and slam, and some might bemoan its slight lack of detail, but to concentrate on such details is to ignore its weight, scale and breath-takingly natural approach to music making. With a wide-ranging ability across a broad selection of genres, the emotion and spirit that's on display here more than makes up for any shortcomings ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: P5

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Impressive balance of power, attack and substance

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: The soundstage can lack a little detail at times

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Though not as analytical as some, the P5 gets right to the very heart of the music

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: S5

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Powerful, yet gentle sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Intimate tracks can sound a bit more distant than rivals

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A supreme combination of naturalism and agility with a wide range of different music

OVERALL



Q&A

Darren Orth
Rotel CTO



HFC: What prompted the return for Michi and why now?

DO: The original Rotel Michi series was launched in the mid-nineties and was mainly aimed at the home (Japanese) market despite quickly achieving a global reputation. Twenty-five years later we felt there was nothing of this quality currently in the market, so we embarked on a three-year project to develop a series of completely new and dedicated electronic designs that combine superlative performance with real overall value.

The new range doesn't appear to have any Rotel branding on it. Is there a difference between Rotel and Michi?

It would have been easy to simply build a bigger, better Rotel, however this would not have been true to the heritage of those original Michi products. So our engineers returned to the archives to gain an insight into those original nineties designs before re-imagining them through the lens of modern power supply, digital processing, audiophile component and PCB layout technologies.

When Michi emerged in the nineties it didn't stick around for long. What are you doing to ensure this doesn't happen again?

The current Michi products are only the beginning – our engineering teams are actively engaged in extending this platform and new models are scheduled for launch later this year. Michi will also extend to digital sources and other options, but we don't currently have firm timings on a launch for those products.

How we test

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

Unique group tests

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

CARTRIDGE GROUP TEST

COMPARING SIX DIFFERENT cartridges back-to-back is not a logically simple feat, so two stages are used. First, each product is fitted and aligned to a Michell GyroDec/TecnoArm turntable and run for a day or two to break-in the cartridge and get a general impression of its sonic character. After this, each cartridge is fitted to an identical Technics headshell and aligned to SL-1200 Mk2 geometry using a Mobile Fidelity Geodisc.

The Technics detachable headshell means that speedy back-to-back comparisons can be made, with just the arm balance and height needing to be adjusted. This is done with a set of Ortofon cartridge scales. Tracking force and bias are set

to the manufacturer's recommended figure; if not quoted then it is set to the maker's recommended upper limit. An Arcam rPhono (HFC 423) phono stage is used, due to its input flexibility and clean, detailed sound.

Comparisons are made with each of the four different songs. Some cartridges can be quite music-dependent, so the track selection is designed to catch this. The two turntables (and tonearms) have a distinctive sound, with notably different strengths and weaknesses. This makes it possible to get a broader sense of the test cartridge's ability. After the direct back-to-back comparisons, the findings are amalgamated before any conclusions are reached.



REFERENCE SYSTEM

TURNTABLE:

Michell GyroDec/TecnoArm 2 £3,100

Still one of the finest turntables at its price, the latest version of the Gyro provides an excellent platform for Michell's TecnoArm - a carefully modified Rega tonearm that's a fine mechanical and sonic match for all the cartridges tested here.



INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:

Creek Voyage i20 £4,500

This new Class G integrated is arguably the most transparent-sounding amplifier that Creek has ever made. It combines forensic detail with a musical sensibility, making it an ideal comparative tool. There's also plenty of power to drive the chosen loudspeakers.



LOUDSPEAKER:

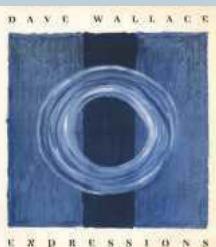
B&W 705 Signature £2,700 HFC 466

This special-edition standmount represents excellent value for money and - usefully for this test - is a highly revealing speaker. Its fast, clean and engaging midband, smooth treble and taut bass make it well able to reveal the differences between the cartridges.



TEST MUSIC

DAVE WALLACE
Expressions
(12in single)



RYUICHI SAKAMOTO
(FEATURING THOMAS DOLBY)
Field Work (12in single)



THE BODINES
Therese Played (vinyl)



BEETHOVEN
First movement
Pastoral Symphony (vinyl)



The first reviews are in for R15 and R35 phono preamps!

R15 EISA PHONO PREAMP 2020–2021

"Built with the same care the company brings to its main amplifiers, its low-noise design is informed by the flagship R35 model just as its sound is the familiar 'Primare' mix of weight and substance allied to detail and resolution. It's the ideal interface between a high-quality record player and the line input of your amplifier."

EISA Award Citation, August 2020



R15 Hi-Fi Choice – Recommended, Five Stars

"... a precision and focus that doesn't blunt edges, blur textures or drag tempos and presents the solid and the spacious as a coherent whole with the full spectrum of tonal colours and accurately rendered instrumental timbres."

David Vivian, UK, May 2020



R35 Hi-Fi News – Outstanding Product

"Flagship phono stage is an analogue triumph... an incredibly flexible and capable phono stage that seemingly has the ability to extract the very best from any cartridge that crosses its path. A rare feat at any price, this only further pumps up the R35's value."

Adam Smith, UK, May 2020



► For more information go to primare.net



Grouptest



CARTRIDGES £230–£760

Pick-up artists

David Price puts six of the best affordable high-end cartridges through their paces

STRANGE DAYS INDEED. Warp back 30 years to 1990, and there was a distinct 'end-times' feeling for vinyl. Although the grim reaper had been fended off by the house music boom – for which the 12in was its staple – there was still a strong feeling that vinyl was in the late autumn, if not the winter, of its life. Ten years later, at the turn of the new millennium, it was pretty much game over.

Then something happened, as vinylistas refused to accept its demise

and kept on asking for new releases. Limited-edition LP or 12in releases never stopped selling out. No matter how much they tried to kill it off, vinyl kept getting up out of the grave they'd dug for it. Now in 2020, sales have been rising for 12 consecutive years. The British Phonographic Institute reports that LPs currently account for one in every eight albums bought, with 4.3-million purchased last year, up over 2,000 percent on the format's low point back in 2007.

Here in the hi-fi world, we've seen the arrival of loads of new turntables and now there's a renaissance in cartridges, too. This *Group Test* pulls together five top-quality moving-magnet designs and one moving-coil, every one of which comes from a classic brand that was around in vinyl's best-ever sales year in the UK, 1975. Whether you're a newcomer to the format or someone who's getting their old deck out of the attic, there's something here for you. ▶



ON TEST



**Dynavector
DV-10X5 MkII £550 p23**
The Japanese company has been making this series of cartridges since the seventies. The DV-10X5 MkII adds a twist because it's a high-output moving-coil – the only one in the group.



**Grado
Gold3 £230 p25**
Another long-running brand, this time from the USA. It was popular in the UK during the seventies for its crisp, etched and musical-sounding, high-compliance moving-iron designs.



**Nagaoka
MP-500 £760 p27**
This long-established Japanese brand made its name with its affordable moving magnets. The MP-500 is one of the most expensive MM cartridges on sale, as well as being the priciest offering here.



**Ortofon
2M Black £500 p29**
This iconic Danish company's product line stretches way back to the fifties. This reference moving magnet is a modern classic for many vinylistas, but can it fend off these competitors?



**Rega
Exact £270 p31**
Rega has been making its own cartridges since the eighties and the Exact is its current flagship MM. Often sold with its own decks, it's also available separately at a very reasonable price.



**Sumiko
Moonstone £325 p33**
This US brand builds its carts in Japan, and has something of a cult following for its quirky range of MM and MC cartridges. Can its fine provenance help the Moonstone in this tough company?

Audiodesksysteme PRO Ultrasonic Vinyl Cleaner



The original and the simplest ultrasonic vinyl cleaner is now even more efficient in use.

New top plate aperture allows for easier loading and unloading of the discs.

Drying fans are even quieter and the drying cycle extendable.

New black wiper blades are more efficient and have extended life.

Simple to use optional adaptor for cleaning 7" vinyl discs.

Contactless cleaning action removes much more dirt than conventional cleaners relying on applying liquid and suction.

Completely automatic cleaning and drying cycles. Both sides cleaned simultaneously resulting in a dry, ultraclean LP in 6 minutes.

Previously cleaned LPs, used LPs, and brand new albums sound significantly better after ultrasonic cleaning.

This ultrasonic cleaner makes vinyl discs sound better, more than just removing noise. Soundstage is larger, more detail is revealed, a better tonal balance, and greater dynamics.

Deliberately low energy ultrasonic generator ensures efficient cleaning without the risk of potential damage to the delicate vinyl surface.

Ultraclean grooves will extend stylus life.

More than just a vinyl cleaner, an essential component.

4 Colour options available: grey, black, white and red. £2525.

Small footprint:
33cm (w) x 20cm (d)

[Visit our website for more details.](#)

Please contact us for your nearest dealer.

The original Audio Desk Vinyl Cleaner PRO was a superb performer – and it still is, I might add. The PRO 2019 is that much better. It not only corrects some of the wrinkles from the original design, it cleans 7" singles properly and (mostly) efficiently but it improves upon the basic sound quality. Sound had a great 3D effect... as if the information presented to the ear was embossed. Music flowed very easily.

Paul Rigby – The Audiophile Man, October 2019



Dynavector DV-10X5 MkII £550

This has been a cult cartridge for decades, but how does the latest and greatest version compare?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Dynavector
DV-10X5 MkII

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
High output
moving-coil
cartridge

WEIGHT
7.5g

FEATURES

- Shibata III stylus
- Aluminium cantilever
- Quoted frequency response:
20-20,000Hz

DISTRIBUTOR
Pear Audio

TELEPHONE
01665 830862

WEBSITE
pearaudio.com

As the only participant in our *Group Test* that isn't a moving-magnet cartridge, the DV-10X5 MkII is the latest in a long line of high-output moving coils sold by Dynavector since 1978. I'm old enough to remember hearing the original 10X sold in the UK under the Ultimo brand, and even back then it was enthusiastically recommended as a cheap way of getting high performance. Thanks to Dynavector's own coil-winding technology, the cartridge uses ultra fine wire to produce a claimed 2.8mV output, with a 150ohm impedance. This is nearly 10 times higher than an average MC and makes the DV-10X5 MkII compatible with a normal MM phono input – so there's no need for an extra moving-coil stage. Still, the output level is the lowest in the group by a quite considerable distance.

As you would expect, this iconic phono cartridge has benefited from a number of tweaks over the years – including Dynavector's magnetic flux

damping system and more powerful neodymium magnets. This latest MkII version of the fifth-generation 10X sports a nude diamond Shibata III line contact stylus and an improved aluminium cantilever. Its beautifully finished body is also aluminium, giving a more solid mounting to the headshell than the plastic that some rivals here use. Cartridge weight is 7.5g, and tracking force is specified at 1.8g to 2.2g. Being an MC, this has a lowish compliance design and is therefore happiest in tonearms of medium effective mass or above. I find it tracks securely and is easy to fit and align in the headshell, thanks to its high-quality build and effective stylus guard.

Sound quality

This is a really impressive-sounding cartridge considering the asking price, one that has plenty of tricks to teach some other members of this group. Its most obvious characteristic are its speed and energy; it's as if the Dynavector had been imbibing Red Bull for a week leading up to the listening sessions. Interestingly, though, its obvious energy, gusto, vim and oomph aren't simply a function of an upper midband or treble with a sting in its tail. Actually, the Dynavector is a little more tonally balanced than some others here – it's smoother than the Ortofon yet brighter than the Sumiko, for example.

Cue up the eighties electro pop of Thomas Dolby's *Field Work* and one is struck by its punch and speed; the

IN SIGHT

- ① Aluminium shell
- ② Aluminium cantilever
- ③ Shibata III stylus

music is relentless and forceful and has firecracker dynamics. It's certainly great for pepping up an otherwise sleepy system, and I have a riot playing the old-school drum and bass of Dave Wallace's *Expressions*. Yet the intense eighties indie rock of The Bodines' *Therese* proves to be a touch too much; I am left wanting some of the subtlety that the more high-end Dynavectors display.

That's actually the DV-10X5 MkII's biggest problem – it's so good it invites comparison with considerably more expensive moving coils, and is then found slightly wanting. Certainly, compared with a direct price rival such as the Ortofon, there's nothing to apologise for; the first movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral*

A really impressive cartridge, its most obvious traits are its speed and energy

Symphony sounds more insightful than most designs here, although it isn't quite as spacious and three dimensional in terms of soundstaging as the Nagaoka. Again, though, you come back to its fun factor; its slightly plump bass is as bouncy as a puppy, and massed strings have a lovely raw timbre to them that doesn't grate, yet sounds breathy and natural. A really capable cartridge at the price then, many will think it an audiophile bargain. It's still a bit 'Marmite', however, so does require the right system to really flourish ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Punchy, engaging, vivid sound

DISLIKE: A bit frenetic for some tastes

WE SAY: Great value budget esoterica

BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF SETUP



OVERALL





H95 Integrated Amplifier

HEGEL
MUSIC SYSTEMS

Intelligence is Change



The measure of **INTELLIGENCE** is the ability to **CHANGE**, said Albert Einstein. With the H95 we believe we have done this statement justice.

The H95 is indeed intelligent. It is not just an amplifier, but also a complete streaming solution with Spotify Connect, AirPlay and UPnP connectivity. Software upgradeabi-

lity ensures improved functionalities and new features, enabling the H95 to change over time.

Changing up to Hegel's cool design and signature sound quality, with a host of inputs and playback possibilities, will allow you to build an amazing multi-talented system. That is intelligence.



SoundEngine2



Software Upgradable

www.hegel.com

IN SIGHT

- ① Plastic shell
- ② Aluminium cantilever
- ③ Elliptical stylus

Grado Gold3 £230

With roots dating back to the sixties, the latest addition to the Prestige series has a proud heritage to uphold

DETAILS**PRODUCT**
Grado Gold3**ORIGIN**
USA**TYPE**
Moving-iron cartridge**WEIGHT**
5.5g**FEATURES**

- Elliptical stylus
- Aluminium cantilever
- Quoted frequency response:
10-60,000Hz

DISTRIBUTOR
Tonar**TELEPHONE**
+31334 554511
WEBSITE
gradolabs.com

rado Labs was founded back in 1953, and the Prestige series from which the Gold3 comes can be traced all the way back to 1968. A descendent of Joe Grado's unique version of the moving-iron principle, this cartridge's plastic body has four stationary coils of copper wire and a magnet, with two magnetically permeable pole-plates. The removable stylus/cantilever housing slots into this with four small pole pieces that correspond to the four coils of wire. As the stylus tracks the record, the cantilever moves a tiny piece of iron near the fulcrum and changes the flux lines within those four gaps. The company calls this its Flux-Bridger system, and claims very low distortion.

The Prestige Gold is fairly high compliance, making it ideal for lower effective mass tonearms; its elliptical diamond stylus tracks well at 1.9g

and the cartridge puts out a strong 4.8mV. Cartridge weight is just 5.5g. Input load is quoted at a standard 47k ohms and Grado says the cartridge is "non-sensitive to capacitive load". The boxy body makes alignment in my headshell easy, the mounting hardware is not so good, nor is the stylus guard.

Sound quality

If anyone thinks vinylistas are smoking something they shouldn't be when they talk in terms of "massive differences between cartridges", then compare the Dynavector DV-10X5 MkII against this Grado. It's an order of magnitude larger than between any two DACs of anywhere near the same price, for example. The Gold3 is rich, spacious and smooth sounding. It's also pleasingly musical in a way that has you gently grooving along to the song. Still, it does lack the fine detail resolution of many others in the group, leading to a sound that gets the basics very right, but sounds less than transparent. This, of course, can be largely excused by the Grado's modest price in relative terms, so we shouldn't be too harsh on it.

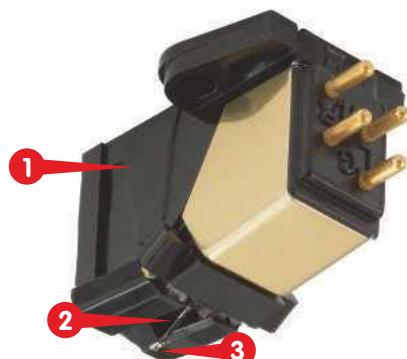
Cue up the electro of Dave Wallace's *Expressions*, and you'd be forgiven for thinking this is one of the most expensive sounding pick-ups here. The basic architectural aspects of the Gold3's sound are spot on; you get a particularly large, wide and expansive soundstage. Put simply, the music just sounds 'big'. It's got a fair degree of depth too, which is impressive considering the price. Then there's

the sweet, fulsome bottom end; it's almost syrupy and it bleeds over into a nice, sugary-sounding midband.

Its easy, fluid rhythmic gait is nice to listen to, yet when you go to a more nuanced recording like The Bodines' *Therese* with all those ringing Rickenbacker guitars and a lot more hidden detail, there's a slightly opaque feel. It sounds like I am getting the structures of the notes, but at the expense of the texture which is being airbrushed away slightly. It isn't an unpleasant sensation, but the more I listen, the more I realise it lacks that last nth degree of detail – which the admittedly much more expensive Ortofon and Nagaoka have in spades.

Music just sounds 'big' and there's a fair degree of depth considering the price

This is especially obvious with classical music, where you want to hear right to the back of the concert hall. There's a dexterous, engaging sort of sound that flows along really enjoyably, yet still the music is vague in texture; the grain of the massed strings for example, is conspicuous by its absence and seems obscured. I also hear a slight flattening of dynamics, compared with group leaders, although its beguiling rhythmic quality seems to make up for it. Overall, then, this is an endearing design that does an awful lot at the price – though it's not flawless •

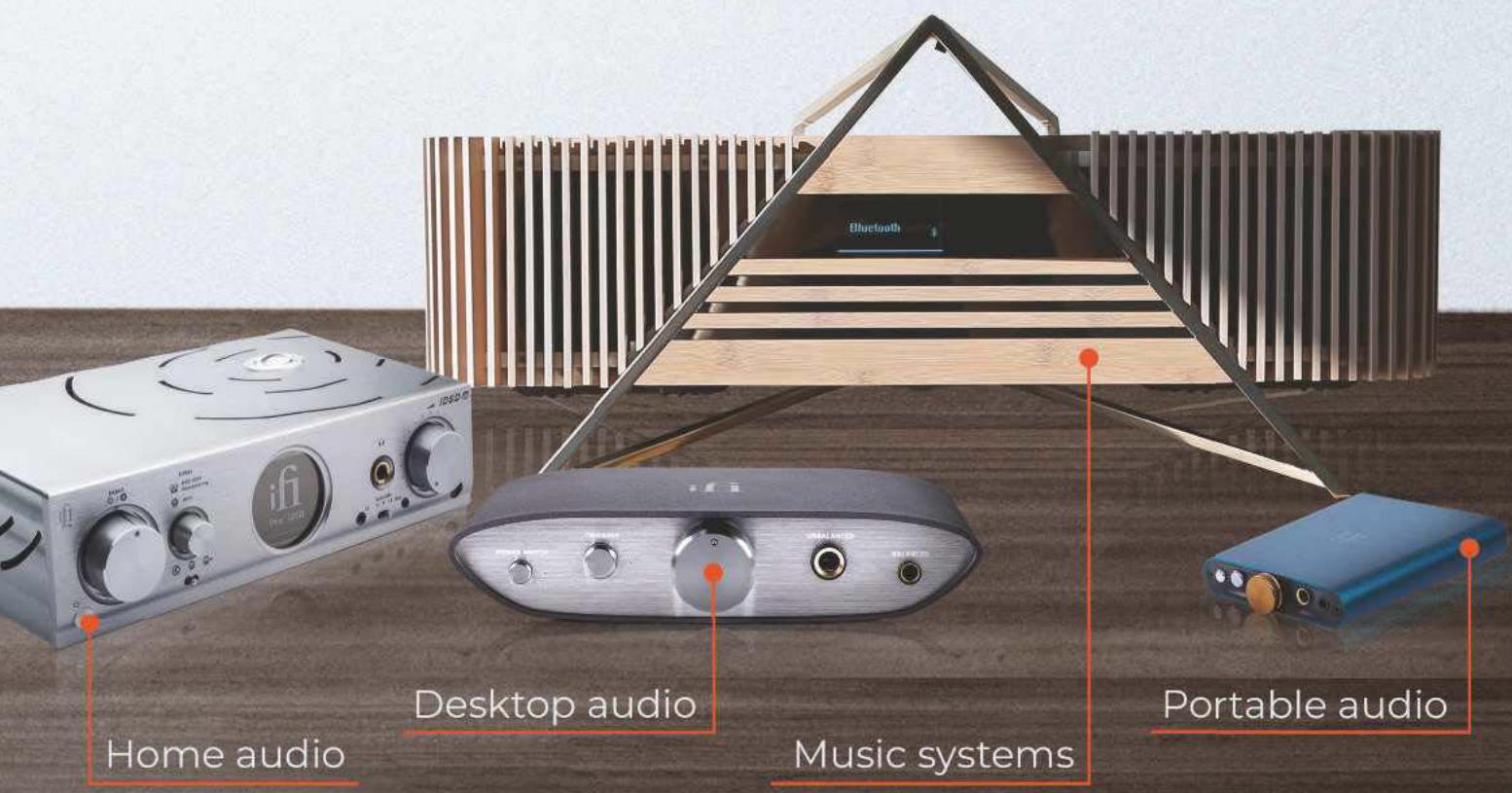
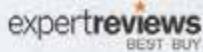
**Hifi Choice****OUR VERDICT****SOUND QUALITY****LIKE:** Beguiling, sweet, expansive sound**VALUE FOR MONEY****DISLIKE:** Lack of detail; packaging**BUILD QUALITY****WE SAY:** Charming, quirky budget bargain**EASE OF SETUP****OVERALL**



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IN SIGHT

- ① Anti-magnetic permalloy shell
- ② Boron cantilever
- ③ Line contact stylus



Nagaoka MP-500 £760

The most expensive cartridge in the group, this has plenty to live up to, but does it fulfil its promise?

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Nagaoka MP-500

ORIGIN

Japan

TYPE
Moving-magnet cartridge

WEIGHT
8g

FEATURES

- Line contact stylus
- Boron cantilever
- Quoted frequency response: 20-25,000Hz

DISTRIBUTOR

Tonar

TELEPHONE
+31 334 554511

WEBSITE
nagaoka.co.jp



Nagaoka started making precision clock parts in 1940. By the late seventies it was winning praise for its moving magnets, and also made a line of high-quality vinyl accessories too. Now it's a prolific producer of cartridge styli, and has continued to develop its pick-ups. The MP-500 is the flagship model, and sports the combination of a super-fine polished line contact stylus and a boron cantilever. I'm a fan of the latter because it confers high strength with low mass and tends to have less of a sonic footprint than aluminium; it can be expensive, though. Nagaoka bodies are lovely things too; this one is very rigid and sports a powerful samarium cobalt magnet, reinforced carbon fibre pole shoe and anti-magnetic permalloy casing.

The MP-500 puts out a fairly average 3mV and load resistance is a standard 47k ohms, so it should work with pretty much any MM phono stage. The body weighs a high-ish – by this

group's standards – 8g. Like all models in this test with the exception of the Dynavector and Rega, the stylus is user-replaceable. On this design it's locked in place by a small Allen bolt for extra rigidity and tracks between 1.3g and 1.8g; I run it at the upper limit and it proves most secure. Again, the old-school boxy oblong body makes alignment in the tonearm's headshell easier than some, and I am impressed by the general fit and finish. Sadly, though, the shiny gold body ends up covered in my grubby fingerprints – sometimes you just can't win!

Sound quality

This is the most expensive-sounding cartridge of this group – proving that sometimes in life you actually get what you pay for. The MP-500 has a lot of everything; it's tonally warm without going over the top, it has a slightly soft but strong and tuneful bass and a lovely, delicate and finely resolved treble. In the midband, this cartridge bristles with detail, yet this isn't presented in a forensic or analytical way. Rather, it's sweet and supple, with a really good rhythmic flow. There's also a remarkable lack of surface noise.

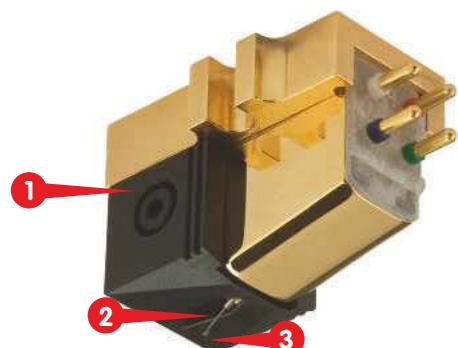
Cue up The Bodines track for example, and a recording that tends to sound vague through the Grado, brightly lit on the Ortofon or frenetic on the Dynavector suddenly seems beautifully balanced. Instead of being distracted by a particular trait of the cartridge's performance, I'm transfixed by the sheer emotion of the

recording. I'm especially drawn into those distinctive vocals, which some cartridges here tend to make a little bland. Via the Nagaoka, the timbre is crystal clear. The same goes for Thomas Dolby's *Field Work*, which is a massively compressed and dense recording, but the MP-500 just scythes through it like a machete through the jungle undergrowth. It seems to have more conspicuous spaces between the notes, with the proverbial 'inky black' silences where most others here have a tendency to just smear things.

Yet it's with my other two reference recordings that the Nagaoka really pulls ahead. The Beethoven in particular is a delight – with a

It has a slightly soft but strong bass and a lovely, finely resolved treble

cathedral-like soundstage inside which different instruments are very accurately located. Not only this, but you can hear right back into the hall, something most other designs fail to allow. Instrumental timbre is excellent; strings sound lustrous and there's almost a glow to violins. This is neatly tied into a living, breathing feel to the performance; the MP-500 giving a great sense of flow to the music without sounding forced. A brilliant all-round moving magnet then, this shames even some respected moving-coil designs ●

**Hi-Fi Choice****OUR VERDICT****SOUND QUALITY**

LIKE: Brilliant all-round performer

VALUE FOR MONEY

DISLIKE: Nothing except the price

BUILD QUALITY

WE SAY: One of the best MMs that money can buy

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Ortofon 2M Black £500

This flagship MM cart has become a benchmark for many, but how will it fare in such rarified company?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Ortofon 2M Black

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
Moving-magnet
cartridge

WEIGHT
7.2g

FEATURES

- Shibata stylus
- Aluminium cantilever
- Quoted frequency response:
20-31,000Hz

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
ortofon.com



Launched in 2011, the 2M Black came out at a time when Ortofon had recently completed research into optimum cartridge body materials, and the result was the use of a Noryl plastic/glass combination developed in conjunction with Møller Jensen, who also collaborated on the widely well-respected MC Jubilee and Kontrapunkts. It was also the last product designed by former chief engineer, Per Windfield. Inside is an upgraded generator with split pole pins and silver-plated copper wire. The removable stylus assembly plugs into this and sports an aluminium cantilever tipped by the same nude Shibata diamond stylus as the Jubilee.

Everything about the 2M Black is well thought out; the body is easy to handle and to mount, the stylus guard works well and the cartridge weighs a sensible 7.2g. I find it tracks securely at 1.5g, although 1.4g to 1.7g is permitted. Compliance is high-ish by the standards of this group, but

nothing wild. It has standard 47k ohm loading resistance, a recommended load capacitance of 150 to 300pF and a healthy 5mV output. The 2M Black comes nicely packaged with a carbon fibre stylus brush and simple stylus balance that works better than many fancy designs. It's supplied with two different lengths of M2.5 screws, but as ever with Ortofon, these are a little soft so you can't tighten them up as much as other mounting hardware.

Sound quality

The 2M Black sounds excellent across a wide range of programme material, with a distinctively 'clean' Ortofon sound that has tremendous detail resolving capability. By the standards of the group it's a little brightly lit in the upper midband, with a crisp nature that picks out female vocals and percussion for example, yet is by no means tonally hard or grating. Indeed, it makes some others here, like the Grado, seem a little woolly.

Cue up the punchy electronica of Dave Wallace and you'd be forgiven for thinking you're listening to an expensive moving coil; the mix is accurately conveyed with every strand located precisely in its correct place. The percussive sounds stop and start very quickly, giving fast attack to the drum machine's hi-hat cymbals. At the other end of the scale, the bassline is taut and tight with energy and animation – even if it's a little lighter than the likes of the Nagaoka. The 2M Black thrives with this sort of music, and classical too. Again, it



IN SIGHT

- ① Hopelex shell
- ② Aluminium cantilever
- ③ Shibata stylus

goes to work on the recorded acoustic, setting it up tidily with lots of atmosphere stretching right back to the edges of the concert hall. At this point, I am impressed by just how quiet my eighties-vintage Deutsche Grammophon pressing is; despite decades of (ab)use the Ortofon delivers a near-silent surface. Interestingly though, there is some emphasis on the violins, which tend to sound more 'lit up' than on some cartridges in the group.

The Thomas Dolby track is fun too; those fast-paced drum machines and dense swathes of electronic sound come over with gusto. Despite the mix being populated with all sorts of embellishments, the Ortofon keeps

The mix is accurately conveyed with every strand located correctly in its place

everything tidy and in perfect proportion. It is very good at expressing the emotion in the lead vocal and capturing the dynamic nuances in the track overall. Enjoyable stuff, although this cartridge doesn't quite have the rhythmic flow of the Nagaoka or the sheer brio of the Dynavector. It's a more matter-of-fact-sounding design than most here, working hard to bring vast amounts of detail for the listener without getting overly emotionally involved. For some this will be a huge plus, for others a minus. Whatever, it remains a great option • ▶



OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

LIKE: Superb all-round presentation

DISLIKE: Nothing at this price

WE SAY: Great do-it-all high-end MM cartridge

BUILD QUALITY

EASE OF SETUP

OVERALL

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IN SIGHT

- ① Plastic shell
- ② Aluminium cantilever
- ③ Vital diamond stylus



Rega Exact £270

Who says you have to be a Rega turntable owner to appreciate the charms of this MM contender?

► DETAILS

PRODUCT

Rega Exact

ORIGIN

UK

TYPE

Moving-magnet cartridge

WEIGHT

5g

FEATURES

- Vital stylus
- Aluminium cantilever
- Quoted frequency response: n/a

DISTRIBUTOR

Rega Research

TELEPHONE

01702 333071

WEBSITE

regar.co.uk

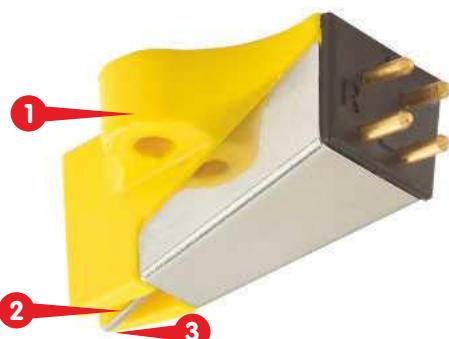
Rega started producing turntables in the early seventies, and by the latter part of that decade was importing a Supex-made cartridge called the R100 to fit in them. By the eighties, the company had started making its own moving-magnet cartridge called the RB100 – to which this is distantly related. At the time of its launch, it was unusual for not having a detachable stylus assembly; Rega said this was in the cause of the cartridge body's integrity and rigidity. This holds true today with the Exact, which shares the same profile body as all Rega cartridges aside from the entry-level Carbon. Inside is a pair of parallel wound coils, which are carefully assembled on custom jigs to create a working stereo generator. An aluminium cantilever holds a Vital profiled diamond stylus.

Rega has sensibly employed a three-point mounting system on its light 5g body, although of course the third forward, central point can only

be used on modern Rega tonearms. If you possess such a thing it makes it easier to fit as the alignment will be automatically correct. You can, of course, mount it to a standard headshell too, using its two main mounting apertures. Like all Rega cartridges I've ever tried, the recommended tracking force is 1.75g – and it's a secure enough tracker at this setting. Output level is said to be between 6.8 and 7.2mV, very high by the standards of both this group and moving-magnet cartridges in general. Recommended loading is a standard 47k ohm with a minimum possible capacitance of 100pF. I don't mind the sparse packaging, but the stylus guard that keeps falling off while I am trying to install the Exact doesn't exactly impress. As per Rega tradition, many of the technical measurements are not specified.

Sound quality

This proves to be a fascinating contrast to the similarly priced Grado offering. The Exact sounds pretty much its diametric opposite; where the Gold3 is expansive and sumptuous while lacking inner detail, this moving magnet is all about information and accuracy. It's tonally quite thin, meaning that it doesn't sugar-coat everything it's asked to play. Rather, you get a matter-of-fact sound that's similar in some respects to the Ortofon. Bass is taut and sinewy but never sumptuous, and the treble is incisive and detailed yet never glistens or shimmers in a romantic way. In the midband, the



Rega sounds controlled and punchy, with a slightly dry taste.

This cart proves to be quite music sensitive; it tends to work very well with the dense indie rock of *Therese*, which itself isn't a particularly warm recording but needs the forensic skills of cartridges such as the Exact and the Ortofon to really make an impact. It gives an intense, involved, close-up sound that majors on the rhythmic elements in the music – yet its tonal and timbral ability is less impressive. I find the drum and bass of *Expressions* great fun, as my attention is drawn to the tune of the bassline and the way it syncopates with the keyboard effects higher up. Yet it doesn't convey the

Bass is taut and sinewy but never sumptuous, while the treble is incisive

tonal warmth of this spacious-feeling track quite so well.

In a way, its lean and tidy tone helps with classical music. The Beethoven is certainly an involving listen with lots of detail and a general sense of drive and intent, yet one of the joys of classical music on vinyl is its rich string timbre and the glint of the harmonics coming off the violins. This is something the Exact doesn't deliver that much of, lessening its appeal a little. Still, at the price this is a great performer in many respects and even if you're not a Rega turntable owner, do give it serious consideration •

Hifi Choice**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Engaging, intricate, detailed sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Dry tonality; fussy stylus guard

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Excellent performer at the price

EASE OF SETUP



OVERALL



zaZen

(sitting meditation)

zaZen isolation platforms are the latest addition to the award winning family of isolation products from IsoAcoustics. They provide a stable isolation platform with a low noise floor, designed for turntables and audio components.



zaZen is designed for turntables, tube amps and other sensitive audio equipment. The combination of the platform mass with the integrated IsoAcoustics isolation technology allows audio gear to reveal greater acoustic clarity and detail.

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IN SIGHT

- ① Non-resonant plastic shell
- ② Aluminum cantilever
- ③ Elliptical stylus

Sumiko Moonstone £325

The sonic performance of a moving coil with the power of a moving magnet is the claim, but does it ring true?

► DETAILS

PRODUCT

Sumiko Moonstone

ORIGIN

Japan

TYPE

Moving-magnet cartridge

WEIGHT

6.5g

FEATURES

- Elliptical stylus
- Aluminium cantilever
- Quoted frequency response: 12-33,000Hz

DISTRIBUTOR

Henley Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE

01235 511166

WEBSITE

sumikoaudio.net



umiko is now American owned and part of the McIntosh group, selling a range of moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges made in Japan. It has built a strong following over the past four decades, offering something just a little different in flavour to the mainstream cartridge brands. The alluringly named Moonstone is a premium-priced member of the company's entry-level Oyster series, sharing a body with the Rainier and Olympia models that can be upgraded by changing the stylus. It's a tapered shape that's made of non-resonant plastic; this conceals and protects the generator assembly inside that the manufacturer says uses copper wire. That red stylus assembly is removable and houses an aluminium cantilever that's tipped by an elliptical profile diamond stylus.

The Sumiko proves the easiest to fit in the group, thanks to its excellent and commendably simple stylus

guard. It should balance out in most tonearms, given its middling 6.5g weight. Compliance isn't extreme one way or another, nor is its loading; the manufacturer recommends a load capacitance of 100pF to 200pF and a load impedance of 47k ohm. Quoted output level is a little on the low side by the standards of the group at 3mV @1kHz, which isn't much more than the Dynavector high-output moving coil. To my ear, I think this cartridge tracks very securely at its recommended 2g pressure, although there's 0.2g either way to play with, should you so wish.

Sound quality

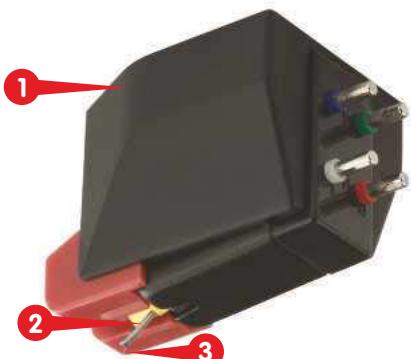
Talk to your friends down the pub about your passion for black plastic and many well wax lyrical (if you'll pardon the pun) about its 'romantic' sound. There are some in this group, like the Ortofon and Rega, that simply do not fit this description. Others like the Nagaoka and Dynavector partially qualify, whereas the Grado and this Sumiko are wearing the T-shirt and signing autographs, so to speak. The latter two share a similar sound, with the Moonstone being even more of a trip down memory lane. In short, it's big, warm and soft – a sort of comfort blanket of an MM cartridge, compared with the Ortofon's light sabre.

It's the smooth tonality that comes before all else. Cue up the forward and intense-sounding Bodines track and suddenly it's less John Peel and more Terry Wogan. That's not necessarily a bad thing, it's just not strictly neutral; it actually makes

middling recordings such as this more listenable and – dare I say it – more enjoyable in a way. The Sumiko is a sort of 'effects pedal' of a cartridge, imbuing everything it plays with a sepia-tinted hue that's really rather nice. Trouble is, when you want it to really emote, to capture belting guitar solos or crunchy bass guitar work, it's a bit too cuddly. *Expressions* comes over as wide and spacious, with a nice drop back to the soundstage that the Grado fails to muster, yet still it lacks a certain rhythmic tension that makes it so hypnotic via a great pick-up cartridge. To an extent, this can be ameliorated by clever choice of turntable and tonearm; for example, it calms and soothes slightly forward Technics SL-1200 very nicely.

**The Moonstone
imbues everything
with a sepia-tinted
hue that's really nice**

I find the cartridge's naturally soft and sweet demeanour takes some of the energetic edge off *Field Work* too, which is a good thing when all is said and done, considering how it's mixed. Yet at the same time, the *Pastoral Symphony* loses some of its immediacy and insight. It delivers a more resolved sound than the Grado, but still has a slightly glossy string sound that makes things seem too processed for my tastes. Overall, this may not be perfect, but it does a lot right at its modest price and really makes any vinyl system sound nice ● ▶

**Hifi Choice**

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Rich, expansive, romantic sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Lack of detail and insight

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: This charming MM offers great value for money

EASE OF SETUP



OVERALL



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TRIANGLE
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Group test verdict

David Price ranks the six cartridge contestants in order of merit. Because of their sheer quality, it's far from an easy job...

IN SIXTH PLACE is Grado's Gold3. It's the cheapest here and has a rather charming and lovely sound, albeit one that's not hugely accurate. I am quite taken by how musical it proves, yet it commits too many sins of omission to rank higher. Some will adore it, though, so audition it if you can.

Fifth place goes to the Rega Exact. It's almost the precise opposite of the Grado in terms of character, with a crisp, clean, tight and percussive nature that majors on information and pace. It's really good at the price and impresses a lot, yet proves a little thin tonally and doesn't quite have

the charm that many are looking for in a phono cartridge.

Sumiko's Moonstone ranks fourth; there's an awful lot that's right with this cartridge. It has much of the musicality and romance of the Grado, but with a sweeter tonality and a more expansive feel. It does great considering its modest price – and I love the stylus guard; it proves the easiest to fit in the group.

Ortofon's 2M Black is next – a very good moving magnet, but just not special enough to rank higher. It's a real class act with lots of delicacy, insight, perspective and detail. Yet it

doesn't quite have the character – the soul, you could say – that many vinylistas crave. It's a funny old world when being accurate isn't quite good enough.

Dynavector's DV-10X5 MkII is the runner up. It's a bit of a 'Marmite' cartridge, but if you have a high-quality system that matches its personality and a tonearm that tracks it well, you'll be amazed by its price/performance ratio. It has most of the detail of the best here, plus a pleasingly warm tonality and a wonderfully expressive nature. In this respect it's true budget esoterica.

WINNER

Proving you get what you pay for, Nagaoka's MP-500 pushes what's possible from moving-magnet carts to the edge; everything about its sound is right. If you don't have a moving-coil-equipped preamp or phono stage, but still want fireworks, this is the one for you!



Make/model	Dynavector DV-10X5 MkII	Grado Gold3	Nagaoka MP-500	Ortofon 2M Black	Rega Exact	Sumiko Moonstone
Price	£550	£230	£760	£500	£270	£325
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of setup	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Beautifully built, charismatic, high-output MC cart with a gripping sound	Quirky but unfailingly enjoyable MM with a rose-tinted yet engaging sound	The king of MM carts, this high-end design will have budget MCs quaking	Excellent across-the-board performance shows what a class act this MM still is	Delivering a lot of sound per pound, this MM punches way above its weight	This charismatic and romantic-sounding pick-up is one of the surprises of the group

Key features

High-output MC	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Advanced stylus profile	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Detachable stylus	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Boron cantilever	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Metal body	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No

TRY WITH THESE

TURNTABLE: Michell GyroDec/Tecnoarm £3,100

This evergreen turntable has been regularly updated over the years. The result is an excellent-sounding design whose partnering TecnoArm is ideal for the higher compliance moving magnets tested here.



TURNTABLE: Rega Planar 6 £1,050 HFC 427

The latest affordable design in a long line of Planars sports an offboard power supply and a new belt, giving far greater speed stability than earlier versions. Thanks to its aesthetic and ergonomic purity, it's easy to setup and use, and delivers a clean, crisp and propulsive sound that's hugely impressive.



TURNTABLE: Technics SL-1200G £3,000 HFC 418

This super tight and taut-sounding direct-drive deck lacks the Michell's soundstaging abilities, and overall subtlety, but is arguably more fun. The cartridges tested here span the sort of price range best suited to its tonearm.





Breaking new ground

Hot on the heels of its first ever headphone release, T+A introduces another first. **HFC** sees how its headphone amp debut fares

Taking your first tentative steps into a previously unknown arena can be a daunting prospect, particularly if everything that has come before has displayed the same level of pedigree that German company T+A prides itself on. But then if you're going to explore new directions, every now and then you're going to have to take the plunge and start out on your journey. Having already come up smelling of roses after diving headfirst into the world of headphones with its recent Solitaire P planar magnetic offering, the company is following up with its

first ever foray into headphone amplifiers, in the shape of the beautifully designed HA 200, throwing in network connectivity and a DAC for good measure. If you're going to give it a go, you might as well come out all guns blazing...

Priced at £4,800, the Solitaire P is the sort of product our *Exotica* section was designed for, as – when partnered with the HA 200 – the whole kit and caboodle will set you back £11,500. For that sort of money you'll have to be pretty serious about your headphone listening.

Though perhaps not offering the same sort of dimensions as some of

► DETAILS

PRODUCT

T+A HA 200

ORIGIN

Germany

TYPE

Network-attached
headphone amplifier

WEIGHT

6.5kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)
320 x 100 x 340mm

FEATURES

- Headphone outputs: 6.35mm; balanced 4.4mm Pentaconn; four-pin XLR socket
- Inputs: RCA; balanced XLR; 2x coaxial; 2x optical; AES/EBU; BNC; USB-B

DISTRIBUTOR

The Audio Business Ltd.

TELEPHONE

01225 704669

WEBSITE

taelektroakustik.de
theaudiobusiness.co.uk

T+A's other hefty components, the HA 200 still has the same sort of rock-solid build quality to it. The thick alloy front fascia has been machined from billet, while the side panels – which form the heatsinks – are extruded from aluminium. Available in a choice of silver or black finishes, the result is that although relatively compact – at least in T+A terms – it still weighs in at a hefty 6.5kg.

Despite being designed to partner the Solitaire P, this amp by no means precludes the use of other non-T+A cans. Consequently outputs including a standard 6.35mm jack, balanced 4.4mm Pentaconn and four-pin XLR socket cater to a wide range of listeners. Each output has its own individual selector so you can have three headsets connected at once, although you'll only actually be able to use two of them at a time. There are six impedance settings to take your pick from with 8, 12, 18, 25, 40 or 80ohm catered for. Additionally, there are Minimum, Low, Medium and High loudness settings – none of which impact on the overall gain (+14.1dB balanced in/SE out) or maximum power output of the HA 200. Obviously, the same cannot be said for the impedance settings.



Regardless of what it's driving, it creates a coherent 'out-of-the-head' experience

Connectivity takes the form of unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR inputs, two coaxial and two optical digital ins, AES/EBU and BNC sockets, plus an asynchronous USB-B port for connection to a computer. Bluetooth is onhand for wireless hookup, offering compatibility with aptX HD, SBC and AAC codecs, while a port for an antenna is provided on the back panel. Beyond the headphone connections, there are no analogue outputs.

CONNECTIONS



- ① 2x coaxial digital inputs
- ② 2x optical digital inputs
- ③ HDMI ARC in and output board
- ④ USB for charging remote control
- ⑤ Balanced XLR analogue inputs

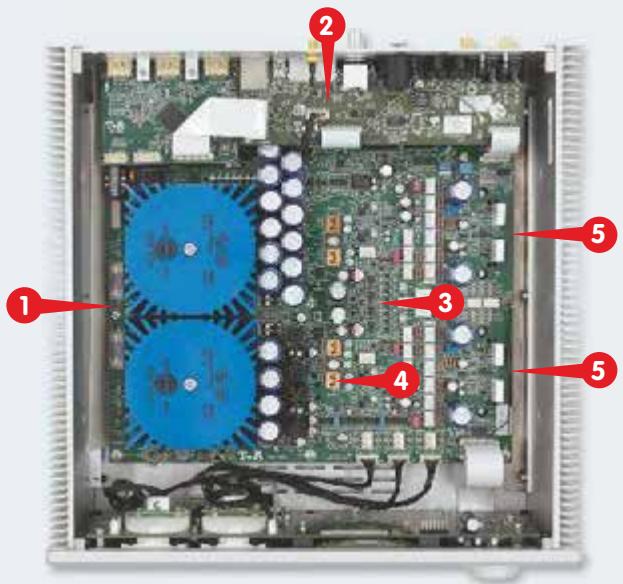
There are also some familiar sockets that are not what they first seem. The Ethernet port and second USB-B input are included, says T+A, for future devices further down the line, while two more RJ45-style Ethernet ports labelled for the company's E2 Link system are there for the same reason. A USB-A port is also onhand, but is for charging purposes (most notably the rechargeable FM8 remote control that comes bundled) and will not support thumb drives. On the subject of futureproofing, there is the upgrade option of an HDMI ARC board, offering two in and one output, allowing for LPCM stereo sound from your Blu-ray player to be fed to the HA 200 and on to your TV.

Like previous T+A digital products that have come before it, the DAC section uses separate signal paths for LPCM and DSD datastreams. The former uses a 'Double-Differential Quadruple-Converter' with 32-bit Sigma-Delta converters per channel, while the latter employs T+A's proprietary 'True-1-Bit' – handling the single-bit signal in native form all the way up to DSD1024.

The USB-B port will accept a wide variety of formats up to 32-bit/768kHz and DSD1024. Mac users are limited to a maximum of DSD256, while Windows computers will need to be equipped with a suitable driver.

T+A's traditional choice of digital filter settings include two linear-phase FIR types and two Bezier types – both of which are interpolative – plus two new NOS (no oversampling) options. The combined Bezier/IIR filter is a minimum phase type with hardly any pre-ringing, while the pure Bezier option has hardly any pre- or post-ringing but has an early treble roll-off with CD/48kHz media. We spend a good couple of hours playing with them all before coming to the conclusion that there is no 'fits-all' solution and you'll be best off experimenting to see what's right for your setup. While you're at it, you might want to play with the bandwidth setting that can be switched between a 60kHz low-pass response and a 120kHz wide option said to give "more spatial music reproduction". There are also balance, bass and treble controls alongside a

IN SIGHT



- ① Dual-mono PSU with separate regulation for digital and analogue circuits
- ② Digital input/output board
- ③ 'True 1-Bit DSD converter' matrix
- ④ Four PCM DACs capped with small copper-coloured 'T+A' heatsinks
- ⑤ Class A headphone amplifiers

variable loudness mode for when listening at low levels. And if all of that isn't enough to keep you occupied, you can always experiment with the crossfeed facility, which bleeds the signal between the channels for a more speaker-like sense of stereo imaging.

Sound quality

Boasting T+A's HV (High Voltage) technology and with separate power supplies for the digital and analogue sections, it won't come as that big a surprise to learn that the HA 200 can comfortably drive pretty much any headphone you care to partner it with. Our tests take in everything from the aforementioned T+A Solitaire P to Oppo's PM-1 (both of which utilise planar magnetic technology) throwing in B&W's closed-back P9 Signature (*HFC* 421) and Focal's wide-open Clear (*HFC* 439) for good measure.

Regardless of the cans partnering it, the HA 200 doesn't hesitate to drive them in an entirely convincing manner, irrespective of whether it's using conventional unbalanced or balanced connectors.

Kicking off listening with Dana Zemstov and Anna Fedorova's

Silhouettes in DXD, highlights why – if you can afford it – spending the thick end of £11,000 on a T+A headphone setup is a very good idea indeed. It's not so much the confident weight and delicacy of the piano or the timbre and bite of the accompanying viola, but more the open, spacious yet intimate acoustic that's captured in the recording.

Changing over to Bowers & Wilkins' P9 Signature sees a darker hue

It's difficult to think of anything that's driven Oppo's PM-1 with such authority

brought to the music, but the way that the HA 200 keeps in check what can be a slightly lush listen is still very commendable. The result is an altogether sprightlier sound without losing any weight.

Regardless of whether it's driving the P9 Signature or Focal Clear, the HA 200 effortlessly creates an entirely coherent, 'out-of-the-head' listening experience. And all without having to experiment with the crossfeed control, which can make things a bit

confused if not employed carefully. Listening to the Vasily Petrenko and Oslo Philharmonic's recording of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, it's impossible not to be impressed by the sheer force of the large orchestra, persuasively recorded to emit a free-breathing, uncompressed and hugely dynamic sound.

Over the years, the Oppo PM-1 has been a favourite go-to option for testing headphone amps, but it's difficult to think of anything that's driven it with such authority that it takes on even greater weight or percussion with effortless ease. All of which is ideal for material like Snarky Puppy's *Live At The Royal Albert Hall* with its large musical forces, tumbling rhythms and palpable audience presence.

Meanwhile, the jangly pop of Sports Team's *Deep Down Happy* grabs the attention from the first note, thanks to its deft mixture of power and flexibility to make every lyric crystal clear while allowing the music to flow.

Even Ella Fitzgerald's 1956 *Live At Zardi's* sweeps the listener up as the immediacy of the recording shines through the atmosphere of the evening. It's powerful stuff alright.

Conclusion

While it's all too easy to quibble about the lack of built-in network and USB HDD playback or analogue outputs – especially given the price tag – it's perhaps better to focus on what the HA 200 does, and does to exceptional effect. Very few headphone amplifiers are able to take you on such an epic sonic journey when you slip on your cans, and combined with a seemingly endless array of tweaking options and flexibility, it's very difficult to see this as anything other than the perfect option for those that take their headphone listening seriously. Just because it's high-end, doesn't mean it doesn't know how to have fun ●



At this high-end price point there's little to directly compete with T+A's late entry into the headphone scene except, perhaps, for dCS's Bartók. This is another tour-de-force of bespoke engineering that offers comparable digital connectivity, a very similar power output and an alternative raft of (digital) filter options. At twice the price of the HA 200, the Bartók offers truly superb sound quality and the latest generation of dCS's Ring DAC to deliver an enormously detailed yet highly immersive sound that's high on both emotion and entertainment.



The VU meters can be configured to show input or output level, the temperature of the device or the quality of the digital signal

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



- STORES NATIONWIDE
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★★★★★



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WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
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EDITOR'S CHOICE
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WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2019
EDITOR'S CHOICE
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Best speaker under £1000 £1000-£2000

Price excludes speaker stands

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Vive la révolution!

Elipson has updated its turntables for 2020. **Ed Selleys** jumps into the fray with the all-singing, all-dancing Chroma 400 RIAA BT

One of the tell-tale indicators as to how serious a manufacturer is about joining a new market segment is not the range of products for its first attempt, but whether there's a second generation follow up. Elipson is best known for its innovative and often unusual-looking speakers, but the company took the decision to enter the affordable turntable market in 2016. The result has apparently been considered sufficiently successful that it's updated the lineup with the Alpha and Omega models giving way to the Chroma series. The Chroma 400 RIAA BT is the top of the range with both a built-in phono stage and Bluetooth.

Crucially, the most technically interesting aspect of the turntables haven't been altered. With the exception of their Ortofon cartridges, the Elipsions are bespoke and do not

share parts or thinking with any other model. This means they retain the interesting Orbital Torsion tonearm of the preceding models, which combines the bearings into a 'knuckle' in the centre of a circular housing that has the antiskate applied through the axis of the two bearings. Without changing the basic design, Elipson has added an armlift – absent on the original – and made the counterweight easier to adjust for fitting different cartridges.

Elsewhere, the design has changes that reflect feedback from the first generation, seeking to improve performance. The belt still acts on the outer edge of the aluminium platter, but this no longer ships in place and there is a sub platter underneath that helps to reduce interference to the playing surface. The decision to now supply the Chroma 400 with a flat and reasonably wide belt means that fitting it is fairly straightforward, too.

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Elipson Chroma
400 RIAA BT

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
5.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 120 x 380mm

FEATURES

- 33/45/78rpm
- Carbon fibre tonearm with Ortofon OM10 cartridge
- On board MM/MC phono stage
- AptX HD Bluetooth transmitter

DISTRIBUTOR
Avoke Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01628 857958

WEBSITE
en.elipson.com

The motor is also new and benefits from an improved mounting system to reduce interference and vibration. Unusually at this price, it includes an electronic speed control. Like its predecessor this is still a slightly odd thing to use; flick the switch for 33 or 45 and there is a pause before the platter starts to spin that seems perfectly timed to make you start to question if something's wrong. The circuitry that controls this has also been improved and Elipson says that speed stability is better as a result.

The Chroma 400 has an on-board phono stage that cannot be switched

The Chroma 400 sounds detailed and energetic, but never overly bright

out of the circuit, although it alternates between moving-magnet and coil operation. Additionally, there is a Bluetooth transmitter that can send the line-level signal to a suitably equipped receiver. This is aptX HD for improved performance, although I'm still not sure there are many owners using this function.

The Chroma 400 manages to look both elegant and functional at the same time. Little touches like the domed 45rpm adapter and neat switch for speed selection help it to feel a cut above some of the budget offerings (see, how it compares). It also feels well made and goes together out of

the box in a logical and confidence-inspiring manner. The only area of concern is the new armlift, which tends to drop the arm fairly quickly and can bounce out of the intended groove if you aren't careful. As it was originally designed for hand cueing, this remains very easy to do.

Sound quality

Any turntable with a phono stage that cannot be switched out of the circuit is going to live or die on just how well that stage executes. The good news is that here it meets all of the basic criteria for good performance admirably. Connected to a Cambridge Audio Edge A integrated amp and Kudos Titan 505 speaker (HFC 451), it's silent at idle and the available gain should be sufficient for most systems. It is commendably pitch stable and noise levels are low to the point of being inaudible during normal use.

This translates into a turntable that does a good job of being sufficiently transparent that you concentrate on the music rather than the delivery system. It takes Joan Armatrading's *Me Myself And I* and delivers those wonderful, sonorous vocals with enough warmth and richness to be wholly convincing without tipping over into sounding bloomy or overblown. They form the centre of the soundstage with supporting instruments arrayed neatly behind. The Elipson might not produce a truly expansive soundstage, but there is generally enough room to ensure that nothing sounds congested.

The partnership that the Chroma 400 RIAA BT has with its Ortofon OM10 cartridge is a good one. There have been times when I've used turntables with the OM10 and the balance has been a little on the bright



Pro-Ject's T1 Phono SB (HFC 464) closely matches the spec of the Elipson at a significantly lower price and a Bluetooth version is available too (although adding Bluetooth means you lose the speed control). The Pro-Ject manages to get impressively close in absolute sound quality, but the Elipson looks and feels more special and offers more design stretch if you want to upgrade it. Whether this is worth the price premium is up to you to decide.



side, making it sound a little sharp and forward with poorer pressings. The Elipson doesn't have this issue, instead sounding detailed and energetic, but never overly bright.

At the other end of the frequency response it isn't quite so assured. The bass extension is tight and well controlled, but never feels especially seismic, even when I use something like Dead Can Dance's *Spiritchaser* with its sensational bass mastering. It consistently manages to sound fun, though. Without compromising on the fundamental feeling of accuracy, there is a rhythmic engagement that ensures that the Elipson manages to get the head nodding. It has been a while since I listened to the preceding Omega model, but this does seem to be a meaningful improvement over the older design – which was a little more matter of fact in its presentation.

The Bluetooth implementation is very good too. Streaming to the aptX HD-capable Bluetooth input of the aforementioned Cambridge Audio Edge A integrated gives a commendable facsimile of the performance via a wired connection while listening to Marina's *Love + Fear*. The range is sufficient that I can place the Elipson in a different room without any drop out or interference.

It is also possible to stream to a Naim Mu-So Qb2 over roughly the same distance while it's physically connected to the Cambridge amp, but as this connection is at the default SBC codec (as the Naim doesn't have aptX and the Elipson doesn't have AAC), it's nowhere near as compelling to listen to. Unless you have a very specific application for this feature, I'm not completely sure I can see the point of it, but this isn't a complaint that's specific to the Elipson turntable.

Conclusion

The Chroma 400 RIAA BT is a useful step forward over its predecessor without losing the aesthetics and design flair that made the original so appealing. The changes add up to a more capable and user-friendly turntable that still looks and feels more special than most of its rivals. Thanks to its decent on-board phono stage and fundamentally benign characteristics, the Elipson is a fine option for anyone looking for a capable plug-and-play turntable that doesn't compromise when it comes to the business of vinyl replay. The Bluetooth section doesn't feel like a 'must have' extra, but judged in comparison with similar fitments there is no arguing with the performance it offers. Elipson is sticking around in the turntable market and, based on this, that decision looks like a very good one ●

IN SIGHT



- 1 Ortofon OM10 cartridge
- 2 Felt mat
- 3 Belt-drive mechanism
- 4 RCA outputs
- 5 Counterweight

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Engaging and refined performance; attractive; build quality

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Limited bass extension; crude armlift

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A capable and engaging turntable that delivers excellent plug-and-play performance

OVERALL



**DETAILS**

PRODUCT
JBL Club One

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
Over-ear headphone

WEIGHT
379g

FEATURES

- 40mm graphene dynamic drivers
- Frequency response: 10Hz-40kHz (passive); 20Hz-20kHz (active)
- Bluetooth streaming (SBC)

DISTRIBUTOR
Harman International

TELEPHONE
01612223325

WEBSITE
uk.jbl.com

Turning to the soaring polyphonic choral of *Spem In Alium* by Thomas Tallis and performed by Pro Cantione Antigua, there's a genuinely imposing sense of space as the dense, multi-layered harmonies swirl around me, giving each set of voices room to be heard clearly. The hi-res headphone handles higher frequencies particularly well, picking out the gentle, whispered voices in the early sections of the track and allowing them to float by. Yet it embraces the power of the 40-singer chorus, maintaining clarity and detail as the voices converge in an almost overwhelming crescendo.

Moving from the sublime to the ridiculous, the Club One really flexes its muscles with the raucous energy of My Chemical Romance's *Vampire Money*. It handles the frenetic guitar with aplomb, stepping back and allowing the chopping riffs to take off like fireworks. The chanted chorus, thrashing guitars and pounding drums risk collapsing into sonic mush, but the JBL deftly balances the clashing sounds and maintains a clear, precise focus throughout.

Conclusion

The noise-cancellation features work well too – even if the process of timing button presses in order to switch between the various modes is irritatingly fiddly. The Club One is particularly effective at cutting out the deep rumble of aircraft engine noise and manages to do so without muffling the sound of the music, as some noise-cancelling headphones can. However, the sound does start to feel a bit more confined as I switch to wireless Bluetooth streaming, with the challenging chorus of *Vampire Money* losing some of its brightness and clarity. Even so, the hi-res precision of the Club One remains impressive when used in wired mode and the noise-cancellation features will earn their keep for those that are embarking on long journeys ●

Club classics

Cliff Joseph says don't be fooled by the branding – JBL's hi-res headphone can handle any music genre you throw at it

Traditionally focussing on the more affordable end of the market, with its new Club range JBL's consumer division is aiming for a slightly more discerning audience. There are three models, starting at £130, but the flagship Club One weighs in at £300 and promises hi-res audio and advanced noise cancellation.

The over-ear headphone boasts 40mm graphene drivers housed in sturdy earpieces with adjustable metal hinges, while the padded headband and earpieces are comfortable enough to wear for long periods of time. The Club One can be used with Bluetooth, but the emphasis seems to be on wired listening as the hi-res support and extended 10Hz-40kHz frequency response are only available with a wired connection. Both coiled and straight cables are bundled as well as a 6.35mm adapter and hard case.

The Bluetooth side of things is a little basic with no aptX support, which is disappointing at this price.

However, the Club One compensates with versatile noise-cancellation options. 'Ambient aware' allows you to keep an ear on things around you to avoid accidents, 'talkthru' lowers music levels so you can have a chat without removing the headphone, while 'silent now' simply blocks out any background noise.

Battery life is good, at around 45 hours using Bluetooth or 23 hours when using Bluetooth and noise-cancellation together. A wired connection with noise-cancellation lasts 25 hours. Finally, the 'Club' branding comes from the EQ presets provided by well-known DJs that are included in the JBL app.

Sound Quality

I kick off proceedings with The Orb's *Prime Evil* and am impressed by the firm, precise delivery of the bass in the intro. Despite JBL's emphasis on club music, the lower frequencies aren't especially overwhelming as the Club One shows a deft touch with the nervous, ticking percussion.

HIFIChoice**OUR VERDICT****SOUND QUALITY**

LIKE: Hi-res clarity and precision; effective noise cancellation

VALUE FOR MONEY

DISLIKE: No aptX; fiddly controls

BUILD QUALITY

WE SAY: Bluetooth streaming could be better, but the Club One's wired mode is a real treat

FEATURES**OVERALL**

33 Revelations Per Minute



STUDIODECK +

“ From nowhere to easing past one of the greats is no mean achievement, but the StudioDeck+ package really is that good, displaying an open, lucid, style that's thoroughly addictive and an almost magical ability to make music come alive in a way only the best can. ”

Hi Fi Choice, September 2020



ULTRAPHONO

“ The MoFi UltraPhono redefines what you get for £500, even if you don't factor in what is a mighty fine headphone section. ”

HiFi News, March 2020

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Famous Fives

Klipsch's new powered loudspeaker will knock your listening room for six, says a deeply impressed **David Price**

Part of Klipsch's Heritage Wireless series, The Fives sets out to give a tiny taste of what it's like to own a grown-up Klipsch without having to drop £12,000 on the La Scala AL5.

Whether you're an old-school wired-for-sound audiophile touting a 3.5mm-to-RCA phono lead, a smartphone-wielding Bluetooth dude, or a digital fanatic with a Toslink cable, you can make music play through this speaker. Plus The Fives connects to your TV via HDMI-ARC (Audio Return Channel), so you can switch between the audio sources hooked up to your screen (like games consoles, etc.) – in effect making it a superior soundbar.

There's even an RCA line input with a switchable moving-magnet phono stage. Oh, and don't forget the USB

input, letting you play music from a computer at up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM resolution. Finally, there's a subwoofer output should you wish to turn The Fives into a 2.1 system.

It's all well and good having a highly versatile set of powered loudspeakers, but such packages can be compromised by the fact that they're gimmicky with cheap and nasty cabinets, drive units and amplification.

The Fives is more robust than you'd expect at the price. Genuine walnut wood-veneered MDF is more than most rivals offer, and there's the option of a matt-black finish.

Lurking inside each cabinet is a 25mm titanium TLS-vented tweeter, with Klipsch's proprietary Tractrix horn; this is a version of the premium high-frequency drivers found on its

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Klipsch The Fives
ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
Powered
loudspeaker system
WEIGHT
5.35kg (powered)
4.85kg (passive)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
165 x 305 x 235mm
FEATURES

- 25mm horn-loaded tweeter
- 110mm mid/bass driver
- Quoted max SPL: 109dB/1W/1m
- Quoted power output: 160W RMS

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk

Reference Premiere range. Claimed benefits include increased efficiency, controlled directivity, greater dynamic sound and a wider soundstage. Sharing the action is a custom-designed 110mm long-throw fibre composite coned mid/bass unit, loaded by a Tractrix port – inspired by the Heritage range.

The electronics inside serve up a claimed 160W RMS of power, with a maximum quoted sound pressure level of 109dB (at 1m). The juice comes

The star attraction is the speed and grip – courtesy of that fine tweeter

courtesy of Class D modules, running in bi-amped configuration with passive crossovers. A sturdy proprietary umbilical cable runs from the powered speaker to the passive one, carrying a proper balanced amplified signal. Claimed frequency response is 50Hz to 25kHz. There's also tailoring of the sound via Klipsch's Dynamic Bass EQ, effectively a variable loudness feature.

The package is augmented by the inclusion of a suite of different leads – including 4m of four-conductor

speaker cable, a 1.5m USB Type-B-to-USB Type-A cable and a 1.5m HDMI. The soft mat on the underside of each speaker is a nice touch and avoids scratches to the cabinet or the surface it's placed on. The remote control is easy to use and there's also a Klipsch Connect app, which currently only supports product registration and access to updates, but will soon add EQ adjustments and other features.

Sound quality

Being an old-school stick in the mud, I am not easily charmed by powered speakers. Happily, however, The Fives delivers a half-decent sound by grown-up hi-fi standards. Across all sources, it proves fast and fun yet more refined and listenable.

Firstly, I'm sceptical of the quoted frequency response; Nookie's *Give A Little Love* is a hard-hitting track with some serious subsonics. This speaker is prolific in the upper bass, with a satisfying punch that's unexpected from a powered package at this price – but it starts to tail off under around 100Hz. This is just what you'd expect from a compact cabinet such as this, so don't take it as a criticism. Tonally, things are reasonably smooth through the midband, ever so slightly recessed perhaps before rising a bit to give the treble some added spice.

While the high frequencies are quite explicit, they aren't as harsh as I'd feared. I'm left in no doubt of the cut-through of the hi-hat in Marillion's *Kayleigh*, but it is satisfactorily fast and percussive. The sound of the piano in



Acoustic Energy's £1,000 AE1 Active (HFC 421) is perhaps a more sober and traditional take on this sort of powered loudspeaker. It might not have horn loading, but the sound is more balanced with slightly better bass extension and a smoother treble, with an impressively even midband. It's lots of fun, but doesn't have the speed and bite of this Klipsch package, even if outright detail is better. Well worth an audition, if you're serious about sound.



Debussy's *The Submerged Cathedral* is well etched and blessed with sparkling harmonics, but doesn't 'clang' out at me. Vocals in Thunderclap Newman's *Something In The Air* are well resolved yet don't screech, The Fives instead basks in that thick, syrupy bass guitar. Ultimately, there's a good deal of Klipsch's characteristic 'shock and awe' that makes music fun, and this powered speaker is better than expected.

Without a shadow of a doubt, the star attraction is the speed and grip. This is largely courtesy of that fine tweeter, which has lightning-fast transients that are in turn leveraged by the horn loading. This unrelenting turn of pace never fails to make music enjoyable; you're always being reminded of the attack of – for example – the strummed steel string guitar chords in *Pale Shelter* by Tears For Fears. Play this track on

rivals and it's as if they mysteriously recede into the moonlight, whereas The Fives constructs the whole song around it. Also, there's never a drum kit that this speaker doesn't want to be close to – I love the snare 'thwack' in The Smiths' *The Headmaster Ritual*.

Spatially it's great too – imaging is as 'out of the box' as you can expect for an inexpensive powered speaker. I find it is able to create a believable three-dimensional space, Especially via the analogue inputs. Feed it a good source and the sound takes a clear step up from Bluetooth. The digital input is very decent for this sort of product, so you can stick it on the end of a CD transport or Blu-ray player and enjoy an atmospheric sound. The way it handles a live recording of Rush's *Tom Sawyer* is really holographic, with fine image location too. Overall, you never fail to be moved by the music.

IN SIGHT



- 1 HDMI-ARC port
- 2 Rear-firing Tractrix bass port
- 3 Subwoofer output
- 4 Passive speaker umbilical – 4m cable supplied
- 5 Phono inputs with switchable MM phono stage

Conclusion

If the aim is to get a hugely enjoyable sound with minimum of fuss, Klipsch has succeeded. Yes, proper separates sound better, but that's not the point. As a quick, easy and inexpensive way to unlock the world of music, this is a great package to get you started ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Power; punch; speed; fun; packaging

VALUE FOR MONEY

DISLIKE: Styling is not to all tastes

BUILD QUALITY

WE SAY: A surprisingly capable powered loudspeaker

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL





Parallel lines

A&K's latest audio player looks conventional enough but, as **Ed Selleys** discovers, it has some unique features under the hood

In recent years, the market for dedicated portable audio players has been forced to up its game in response to the traditional 'iPod-type' player sector being subsumed by the continued rise of the smartphone. Astell&Kern has judged this shift extremely effectively and now offers three very distinct ranges of audio players with prices starting from £600. The SE200 is rather neatly positioned smack bang in the centre

of the middle 'A&Futura' range and is yours for £1,800.

A first glance at the portable player raises the not unreasonable matter of why it costs nearly three times the A&Norma SR25 that was reviewed back in *HFC* 465. The format handling of the two is identical (although, in fairness to the SE200, there's not anything I could realistically think to add) and while the SE200 sees an increase in its internal capacity to 256GB, the presence of a micro SD

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Astell&Kern
A&Futura SE200

ORIGIN
South Korea

TYPE
Digital Audio Player

WEIGHT
274g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
77 x 132 x 16mm

FEATURES

- Parallel AKM and ESS DAC outputs
- Quoted battery life: 10 hours (AKM); 14 hours (ESS)
- 256GB internal storage
- MicroSD slot

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
astellkern.com

card slot with a maximum capacity of 1TB on both devices is going to be the final arbiter of actual capacity.

There are some other oddities, too. The SE200 does without the LDAC Bluetooth codec that comes with the SR25 and the quoted battery life is lower too. The most significant difference concerns the interface. Like the SR25, the SE200 also utilises an Android base for its operating system, which means that Tidal (inclusive of masters and MQA support) and Deezer are installed as standard. This can be augmented with other services via the Astell&Kern download system, but in a very peculiar move indeed, none of them allows for content to be stored offline – meaning that it can only be accessed with a network connection.

Thankfully, the SE200 does have a feature that goes some way towards explaining its higher cost. Internally, it features an AKM AK4499EQ DAC that outputs in the trademark Astell&Kern practise to either a 3.5mm unbalanced socket or a 2.5mm four-pole balanced connection. It also has a pair of ESS ES9068AS DACs that have their own

3.5mm and 2.5mm outputs. Effectively, the SE200 has two completely independent decoding and output stages that allow the user to choose between the leading DAC chipset manufacturers of the moment. Each output stage is also slightly different in an effort to complement the chips themselves.

Your choices don't end there. Both outputs have adjustable filter settings and there is a complete user EQ system, which should give considerable scope for adjustment. In the (hopefully unlikely) event of you not liking either converter, you can attach an external one via the USB-C output and an OTG connector. Finally, even if LDAC is absent, you can still connect to the SE200 via aptX HD Bluetooth for when you don't want a cable between your head and the player.

There's another feature that is potentially handy, too. Once placed on a wireless network, the SE200 can be instructed to act as a UPnP library and becomes visible to any renderers on the same network. While I'd hesitate to use an SE200 as a full-time server solution, it has some benefits for holidays and other situations where it becomes your access point for your content where otherwise it would not be available. In some brief tests here, it works extremely well in this role. Like other devices of its type, you can also set a line-level output and use the SE200 as a source in a main system and, while the cable required to do it looks a bit weird,

IN SIGHT



the 2.5mm-to-twin XLR connection is fully balanced.

Like the rest of the Astell & Kern lineup, the chassis of the SE200 is largely made of metal but there are some refinements to the process that are worthy of note. As part of the A&Futura series, the SE200 has a ceramic rear panel that mirrors the display on the front while the metalwork itself is absolutely exquisite. The sculpting around the volume knob is, without exaggeration, one of the loveliest bits of detailing I've seen on any product at any price. It isn't cheap, but the SE200 stands comparison with devices at similar prices (see How it compares). One aspect of the styling that appeals to me a great deal is the lack of the slanted display. I'm aware that some people rather like it, but as a left hander the one thing it guarantees is that no matter how I hold it, the screen is never properly upright. The SE200 avoids that and, thanks to the angled edges, is comfortable in the hand at the same time.

Sound quality

Once you've stopped channelling your inner Kevin McCloud over the design, the Astell&Kern is no less impressive musically. Using Sennheiser's IE 800 S earphone (HFC 434) and connected via the conventional 3.5mm socket, the early running is made by the AKM 'side.' Listening to a 44.1 rip of Buck 65's *'Talkin' Honkey Blues'*, the AKM chipset does a better job of sweetening this extremely stark recording and does so without losing the emotion – at times barely concealed fury – of Richard Terfy's unique vocals. The natural talents of the Sennheiser are well to the fore here, but this is further aided by the SE200's considerable gift for creating a convincing soundstage.

Even without any form of crossfeed setting, it is able to push information out in front of the listener.

The ESS output, almost regardless of filter setting, sounds a little harder and leaner than the AKM. As many of the albums I enjoy a great deal have a somewhat lean presentation, I'm more of a fan of the AKM, but with something that is naturally lusher like the sumptuous 24-bit/96kHz download of Craig Armstrong's *'It's Nearly Tomorrow'*, the extra fine detail and more up-front presentation

It quickly becomes second nature to flip between different DACs and filters

begins to make much more sense. Where it really shines, though, is when you switch to using the balanced output. Employing AKG's N5005 (HFC 437) with its 2.5mm cable attached, the slightly more laid-back presentation of the headphone combines to spectacular effect with the ESS DAC. The same lush soundscapes created by Armstrong feel like they have nigh-on unlimited headroom and the SE200 combines dynamism and effortlessness to truly spectacular effect. The balanced output of the AKM chipset still sounds good, but struggles to reproduce the same dynamics.

What neither side struggles with is headroom. As you might expect, using the SE200 with earphones isn't ever going to see you short of volume, but switching to Audio-Technica's AT-HA2000Z over-ear model (HFC 412) doesn't give any cause for concern either. I am sure there are planar magnetic designs and the like ➤



The more traditional display than the SR25's slanted one is much easier to use



that might be more challenging, but Astell&Kern builds a complete higher tier of players for that sort of role.

The performance of the SE200 is also admirably consistent regardless of the material you happen to be feeding it. The decoding is more than up to the job of making sure that hi-res content like a gloriously leftfield DSD64 vinyl rip of Corduroy's *High Havoc* is delivered with all the nuances – including in this case, the turntable that played it – fully intact, but nothing I play from the less well mastered end of proceedings gives me cause for alarm. Likewise, the Tidal app, while operationally limited, sounds entirely in keeping with the same rips on the internal memory or on an SD card.

The sculpting around the volume knob is one of the loveliest bits of detailing going

What's important to stress about this choice of outputs – and what makes them so compelling in design terms – is that there's no configuration or setup lag when moving between them. Because they are completely separate from one another you can start listening to something, wonder if the other DAC might do a better job, pause, change socket, press play and find out. There's no menus to be adjusted, no switches to be flicked, you simply have the benefits of both stages available all the time.

Furthermore, as you become more versed in the respective abilities of

both outputs, you find yourself moving effortlessly between the two, depending on your mood and music selection.

No less impressive is the Bluetooth section. Obviously, if you do have LDAC-capable headphones or earphones, the lack of it here is going to be an annoyance, but via the Bluetooth yoke of the N5005 (which is 'only' aptX capable) the SE200 is still a compelling DAP to listen to. For the avoidance of all doubt, a wired connection is (considerably) better, but that completely misses the point of why Astell&Kern includes the feature. When you're on public



Chord Electronics' seriously capable Hugo 2 (HFC 428) is the same price and can be used in connection with a smartphone via OTG as a portable (ish) option and also can use the 2go module (HFC 465) to become more self-contained – albeit at the cost of another £1,000. The Hugo 2 outperforms the SE200 and it makes more sense when connected to a full-size hi-fi. Despite being well made, it has to concede to the beauty of the SE200. As a home hi-fi device the Hugo 2 has the edge, but once you're on the move the SE200 makes more sense.

transport, even in its recently thinned out state, you don't want a cable that can catch or snag. In fitting Bluetooth, A&K ensures that your significant investment is able to do the sort of real-world grunt work that is going to feature for most of us. And, while it isn't as good as the wired connection, it is more than good enough to engross.

Conclusion

The A&Futura SE200 is unquestionably a highly specialised player, but it takes its unusual design premise and does a remarkable job of converting you from thinking: "Why has A&K done this?" to: "Why doesn't everyone do this?" Once you dial into the flexibility of having an output and filter for any occasion, it becomes second nature to use it in the manner that it is intended, flipping effortlessly from one to the other. Combined with the usual Astell&Kern build and truly top-notch aesthetics, you have a remarkable portable player that should win many converts •

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



LIKE: Fabulous sound quality with great flexibility; superb build and aesthetics

DISLIKE: Streaming services are online only; fairly pricey

WE SAY: Outstanding portable player that offers great spec and excellent performance

OVERALL



 SVS

Prime Pinnacle

Audiophile Refinement
Breathtaking Home Theatre Dynamics



Prime Pinnacle makes towering statement with critics worldwide

*"In practice the Prime Pinnacles are svelte enough to slip into all but the smallest rooms, so if you crave a warm and a full-bodied sound, these towers will have your system glowing".
EISA LOUDSPEAKER 2020-2021*



"...these floorstanders have clear all-round appeal, matched by a big crowd-pleasing performance." Hi-Fi News May 2020



"...the Prime Pinnacle's natural proclivity towards the low end is a key part of a soundstage that's as big and bold as they come..." Hi-Fi Choice August 2020



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www.exposurehifi.com



Quiet gains

iFi's latest phono stage promises class-leading measurements and impressive flexibility. **Ed Selley** sees if it stacks up

IFi Audio has been most prolific on the digital side in recent years, but the company has made phono stages for some time and the iPhono3 Black Label (unsurprisingly replacing the iPhono2) is the latest model to go on sale. The basic specification of the new model is very similar to its predecessors. It's a single-input design (although MM and MC carts have separate inputs, you cannot switch between them) with adjustment for impedance, capacitance and gain undertaken by dip switches on the underside. This is less convenient than some rivals, but once it's set the iFi can be stored out of sight which is potentially handy.

The headline feature here is the noise levels, or indeed the lack of them. A noise floor of -85dB is quoted, which means that if the turntable it's connected to is quiet, it should be all but inaudible at idle. It also means that a signal-to-noise ratio of 85dB for MM and MC is technically possible. Up to 72dB of gain is available and there are some

useful intermediate settings for high-output MC types too. The iPhono3 also has six different EQ curves for pre RIAA material (and indeed post in some circumstances), which can be selected via a small switch on one end of the chassis.

The power supply is an off-board type that's one of iFi's own iPower X units. The underside dip switches are initially slightly intimidating, but iFi has had the good sense to put a configurator on its website explaining what's best for your specific cartridge.

Sound Quality

Connected to an original production Avid Ingenium (HFC 379) complete with metal platter upgrade and SME M2-9 arm, the iPhono 3 makes good on the promise of its low noise level. At idle, it's as quiet as the Cyrus Phono Signature (HFC 408) and gives everything an instant dynamic boost.

Kicking off with the moving-magnet input being fed with a Nagaoka MP-200 (HFC 434), the iPhono3 conveys a feeling of unforced but appreciable accuracy – something

that underpins everything that it does. Antony And The Johnsons' *Hope There's Someone* reveals Antony Hegarty's unique and heartfelt vocals and the supporting instrumentation with effortless realism. There is also a wholly convincing perception of space and depth to the way the iPhono3 presents the information that's a side effect of that very low noise floor.

Moving to the more powerful recording of *Au Rêve* by Cassius, the iFi retains its ability to open out this dense and varied album and keep everything sounding believable.

Switching over to a Goldring Ethos (HFC 449) and setting the iFi up as per the suggestions of the online calculator, sees a comfortable jump in performance commensurate with the leap in cartridge quality. Once again, it's the effective absence of noise that helps it to sound so effortlessly dynamic because the peaks of music come up from a near silent base. With the superb recording of Talk Talk's *The Colour Of Spring*, the iFi delivers a performance that allows for the suspension of disbelief and that then pulls you into the music.

Conclusion

The limitations of the iPhono3 Black Label are slight and depend to a great extent on your partnering equipment. With the extremely matter-of-fact Avid and SME combination, some listeners may find they want more character from their phono stage – something the iFi, with its exceptionally accurate presentation might not necessarily deliver. The (more expensive) Cyrus also demonstrates a slightly greater bass extension, but it would be a stretch to call the iPhono3 Black Label lightweight. When you accept that accuracy is the order of the day here, what this phono stage offers is a level of unvarnished realism and effortless dynamics in a compact and well thought-out design that will appeal to many people.

DETAILS

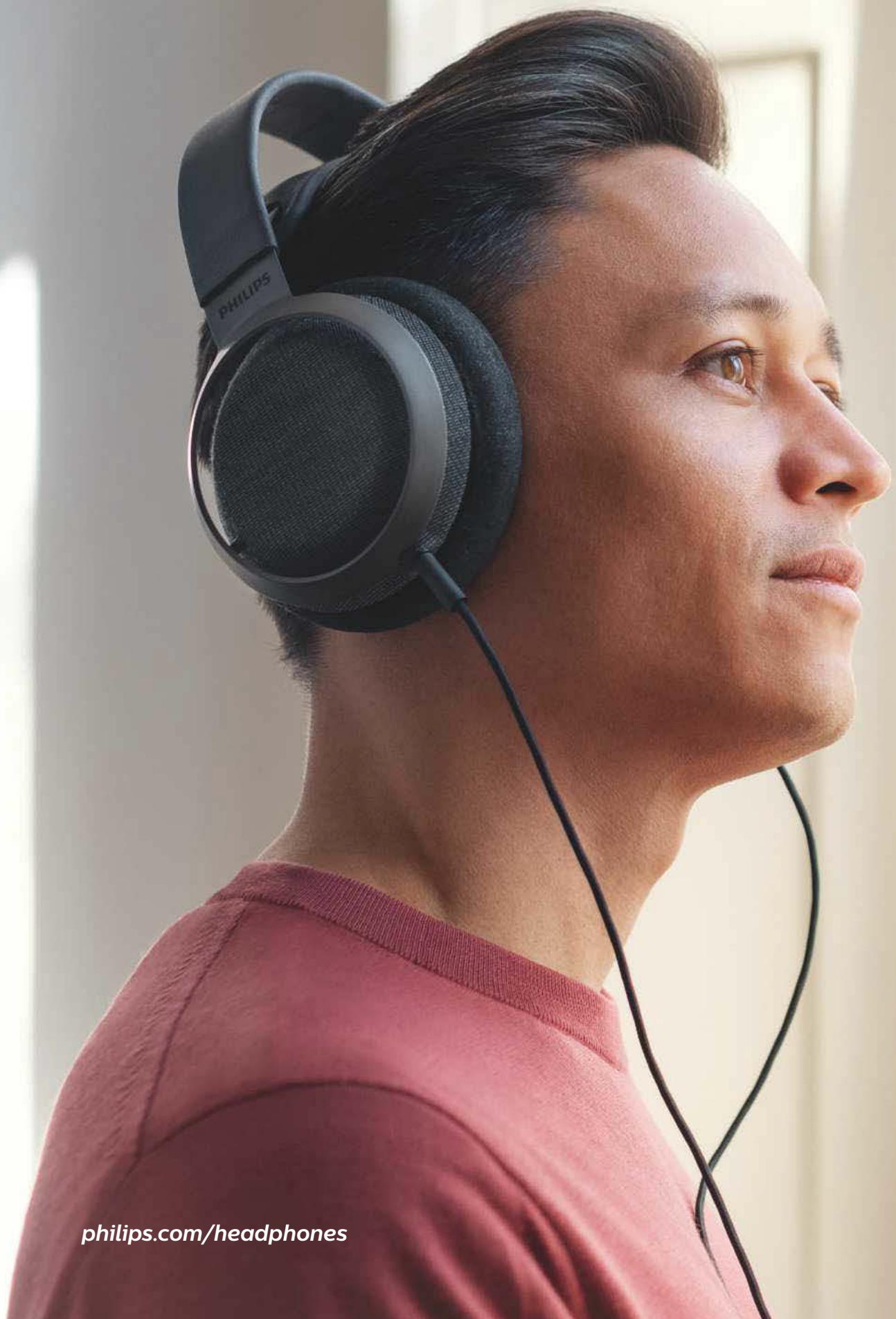
PRODUCT	iFi iPhono3 Black Label
ORIGIN	UK/China
TYPE	Phono stage
WEIGHT	265g
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)	58 x 28 x 158mm
FEATURES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MM/MC inputs with wide range of configurable options • Supplied with iPowerX PSU
DISTRIBUTOR	Armour Home Electronics
TELEPHONE	01279 501111
WEBSITE	ifi-audio.com

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★	LIKE: Exceptionally low noise levels; strong dynamics; very flexible spec
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★	DISLIKE: Fiddlier than some to set up; can sound matter of fact
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★	
FEATURES	★★★★★	WE SAY: An accurate and capable phono stage that offers exceptional dynamics
OVERALL	★★★★★	





philips.com/headphones

PHILIPS

Fidelio

X3

Crafted for serious listeners

Be there. From the singer's breath to fingers squeaking on a fretboard, these audiophile-grade open-back headphones match feather-light comfort with pristine tuning. Discover new layers of transparency and detail every time you slip them on.



Running in the family

Speaker manufacturers tend to leave electronics to others, but **Ed Selley** wonders if they might have some bright ideas of their own

It should not come as any great surprise to find that the audio industry thrives on specialisation. Within the church of hi-fi there are, of course, manufacturers that only produce components in a single category and do very well out of it. There are also those that take pride in being able to make a complete system, keeping the entire process inhouse. Between the two exist infinite variations on the theme, but the setup here is sufficiently unusual to be worthy of comment.

Mention PMC to anybody with at least a passing understanding of the hi-fi sphere and they'll talk about speakers. The company has a superlative track record in the construction of both domestic and professional audio monitors, all tied together by the use of transmission lines to augment and shape their

bass response. In some ways, the twenty5.24i is almost the standard of what many of us expect a PMC speaker to be. It's a slim, two-way floorstander that combines a soft dome tweeter with a woven driver that exits via a transmission line that is nearly 10 feet in length.

Even though the basic formula hasn't changed, PMC has been hard at work on the details. This latest iteration features all the evolutionary developments the company has been working on. This means the transmission line exits in the specially developed 'laminair' port and that those smart outriggers you see at the bottom of the cabinet have been exactingly engineered to improve the way that the speaker couples to the floor. Without looking like it has changed much of anything, PMC has in fact, changed just about everything. ▶



COMPONENTS

BRYSTON BDP-3 £3,900

The BDP-3 is a network streaming transport designed to work in a wide range of implementations with fit-and-forget reliability. It offers a selection of digital outputs that allow the decoding of your choice to be connected.

BRYSTON BDA-3 £3,600

An exceptionally flexible DAC that has a complete range of connections you might reasonably expect, but then proceeds to add a whole set of HDMI options to act as a 4k video switcher while decoding the audio.

PMC COR £6,000

The Cor is an integrated amplifier that builds on the experiences of PMC's active speakers and places a 95W Class AB amplifier that adheres to the company's design principles in a striking-looking piece of industrial design.

PMC TWENTY5.24I £5,500

The largest two-way speaker in the newly revised twenty5i lineup combines a 170mm woven mid/bass driver with a 19mm soft dome tweeter in a cabinet that benefits from laser measurement and includes a 3m transmission line.

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
PMC/BRYSTON



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM PMC/BRYSTON



If the twenty5.24i is PMC doing business as usual, the Cor is anything but. The company wanted to make an amplifier, so it did. It isn't the start of a planned range or a piece of brand building, in fact more than anything, the Cor is a physical manifestation of the company scratching an itch. It is an amplifier built as PMC feels that amplifiers should be. This means you get 95W into 8ohm, a useful spread of analogue inputs and tone controls that are actually designed to be used in such a way to facilitate that.

Cor blimey

The front end comes from Bryston, a company with an entirely symbiotic relationship with PMC that shares a similar attitude toward fripperies. The BDP-3 is a network streaming front end designed to function in environments that would leave rivals flummoxed and sulking and features a degree of customisation that simply isn't present elsewhere. Outputting to a BDA-3 DAC, the duo oozes a 'built to survive the end of the world' feel that I'm hugely fond of. There's

something charming about the way that, by eschewing any conscious aesthetic, Bryston wound up with one of the most distinctive design languages in the industry.

The trio of units feel special in an entirely pragmatic way. The 24i is a compact and elegant speaker, but there's a heft to the way it is built that

It's no surprise to find that the relationship between PMC and Bryston is symbiotic

never lets you forget it's related to speakers designed to withstand anything the professional world can throw at them. The Cor is infused with the same feeling of purpose. That giant volume knob isn't a design flourish. It gears the pot so you can set exactly the right volume rather than an approximation of it. The Bryston might have swathes of setup menus, but once it is set the way you want it it stays set that way – seemingly

Above left:
Slender cabinets give little hint of the extension that's on offer

Above: The Cor and Bryston duo exude a purposeful air

impervious to what your network might be doing in the meantime. This is heavy-duty hardware that manages not to dominate the space it is in.

Hanging out

It will fill it, though. Keen to hold off talking about sledgehammer bass for at least part of this review, I begin with *Exile*, the recently released duet between Taylor Swift (yep, really) and Bon Iver. This stunning, goosebump-inducing work is not about low end, but it lives or dies on the perception of scale and this system delivers it perfectly. Both Swift and Justin Vernon are convincingly sized and the supporting music hangs behind them in a way that extends far beyond the position of the speakers themselves. The piano that anchors the track sounds big and convincing and when the gentle application of low end happens towards the end of the track, it's beautifully understated. The 24i can hit like a hammer when you need it to but, crucially, when you don't need that blunt force, it's exceptionally dexterous too. ▶



Available in:



X2 TURNTABLE

The X2 is fine-tuned to focus on audio excellence. It has all the features needed for convenient day-to-day use, but no superfluous add-ons that start to negatively impact the sonic character. The end result is a highly engaging, musical turntable that delivers deep, detailed lows, crisp high frequencies and an engaging well-presented midrange. Thanks to Pro-Ject's advanced manufacturing experience, while delivering great sound the X2 is also a beautiful piece of engineering that can stand proud as the focal point in any home environment.

The X2 is available in four finishes; a premium walnut wood veneer, a luxurious black 8-layer high gloss paint, or black or white eight-layer hand-polished satin paint.



Includes pre-installed
Ortofon 2M Silver



Electronically regulated
precision drive motor with
sub-platter system.



33/45/78 RPM
speed compatible



High quality resonance-free
acrylic platter



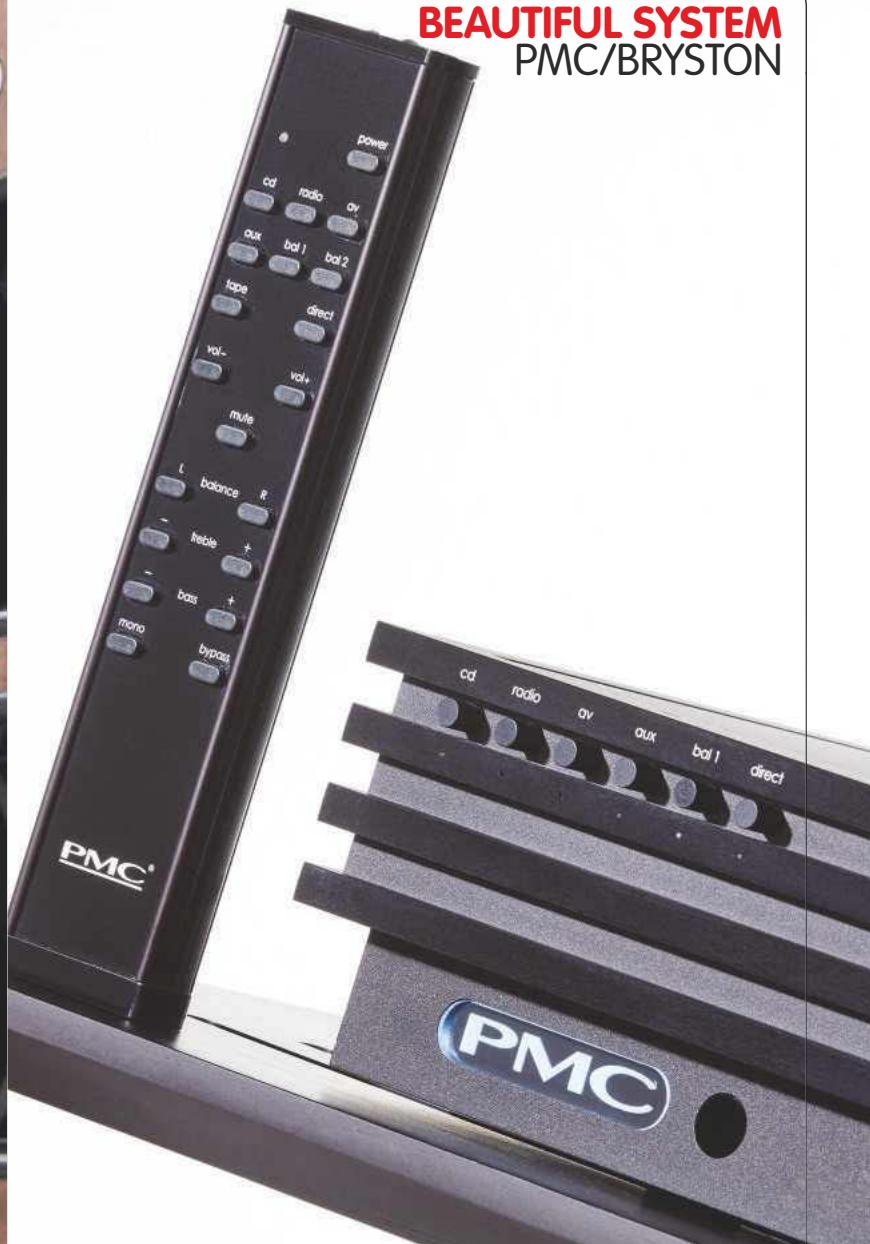
Above these technical aspects, there is an emotional content to the performance that belies the exceptional accuracy with which it goes about reproducing music. It may sound contradictory, but the reality is that the lack of embellishment these products apply to music means the emotional content shines through perfectly. The opening *Ponta de Lança Africano* from Jorge Ben's *África Brasil* is reproduced with its warm and analogue quality intact and it absolutely fizzles with the infectious energy that earns this album a place of the list of 'Music I am no longer allowed to drive to.'

Control freak

There is also an agility here that is a demonstration of the combined qualities of the components that forms it. The Cor exerts a level of control over the 24i that means it powers through the insanely catchy *Tell The DJ* by Le Peuple De l'Herbe in a head-nodding, foot-tapping whirlwind of energy and punch. The deep electronic note at the start is effortlessly



WEBSITES
pmc-speakers.com
bryston.com



subsonic; a pressure wave felt as much as heard. PMC's feelings on amplifier design naturally feed off its speakers and it should be no surprise to find the relationship between the two is symbiotic. Even allowing for this, it's hard to work out where the talents of the amp end and the speaker's begin.

This is heavy-duty hardware that does not dominate the space it is placed in

Against this, the charms of the Bryston are more subtle, but make themselves felt the longer you listen. I close off my session with *Impossible Object*; the haunting closer from Hayden Thorpe's *Diviner*. This is an exceptionally simple track with only Thorpe's vocals, his piano and the gentlest application of electronica. There's nowhere for any mistakes to hide and it is here that the Bryston duo shows how good it is. Thorpe's

striking vocal is flawless and aided by the tiny details of the movements of his hands on the keys, controlled breathing and tiny inflections are all there. They aren't overblown or obvious, simply stitched into the music itself. It's unshowy and, because of that, utterly wonderful.

Class of its own

The more you listen, the more it becomes clear this is a class act. PMC's single mindedness and vast experience with speakers makes itself felt with every driver excursion of the twenty5.24i and what is so impressive is that the Cor, despite being one of one in the PMC electronics range, feels exactly the same in the way it works with your music. Mated with a digital source as capable as the Bryston, you get all the positives of the single mindedness wrapped up in a system with an exceptionally broad range of talents. It is undoubtedly a good thing for companies to specialise, but this setup shows that the same passions applied elsewhere can make that main offering better still ●

*Bring all
your music
to life*

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DSD512

L-LINK 42.1

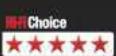
Precise

AURALIC

In keeping with our innovative spirit and advanced research, the globally acclaimed G2 Series evolves into G2.1 featuring hardware improvements, new aluminium chassis, integral isolation support and an internal pure copper sub-enclosure. Our latest app driven control software adds new features including bit perfect CD playback and CD ripping to internal or external storage.

For more information please contact your local specialist retailer or visit auralic.com

AURALIC PRESS AWARDS



Multi-room Service

HFC catches up with Dannie Lau, founder of DTS Play-Fi, to get the inside track on the latest developments around the technology and learn more about Dannie's journey through the AV and hi-fi industry

HFC: What exactly is Play-Fi?

DL: DTS Play-Fi is a premium wireless audio ecosystem for whole-home music, whole-home TV audio, surround sound and app-based private listening. Our technology supports high-resolution audio streaming and sub-millisecond playback accuracy. Compatible with over 300 products from 29 brands, including TVs, mobile devices, soundbars and speakers, all Play-Fi products seamlessly interoperate to form a complete whole-home entertainment experience.

How long has it been around?

Play-Fi was originally developed back in 2010. In 2012, the technology was acquired by DTS, which began licensing it throughout the audio industry as DTS Play-Fi.

How does it work?

Play-Fi works over any standard-based IP network and over different combinations of network topologies. Play-Fi audio can synchronise over Ethernet, wi-fi, powerline or even MoCA (multimedia over coaxial) connections, making it extremely flexible.

The beauty of Play-Fi is it works on top of standard networking protocols. Wi-fi radios and Ethernet today exist in TVs, speakers, set-top boxes and other network-connected products already, making Play-Fi an easy

addition for manufacturers. No additional proprietary radios are needed, meaning the technology can be adopted in more price points. Previously, if synchronising audio to video was a requirement, it meant the use of wires or proprietary radios with only in-room range. Play-Fi brings that level of performance to the whole-home, wire-free.

What are some of its most significant achievements to date?

Wow, there's been a lot. Getting to 29 brands and 300+ products was a major accomplishment. Being selected by some of the best brands in the industry says a lot about the technology. I would say, though, our technology leadership is our most significant achievement, with market leading performance in surround sound, whole-home TV audio and private listening apps for wireless headphone experiences all over wi-fi.

What would you say are the main goals next for the platform?

You're going to see more penetration of Play-Fi into categories like TVs and set-top boxes. We have unique capabilities around synchronising audio with the video that make these products a natural fit for our wi-fi-based technology. And, of course, we're going to tie these capabilities in with our existing

ecosystem of Play-Fi-compatible speaker and audio products.

Tell us about Philips' announcement and why it is significant?

Philips will be our first partner deploying Play-Fi in TVs. TVs featuring Play-Fi offer the industry's most advanced wireless audio feature set and are the only Android TV systems on the market that support:

- 1) Multi-room Music – Grouping of TVs and speakers together for multi-room music playback from top music services with sub-millisecond accuracy.
- 2) Multi-room TV Audio – The 'Big Game' mode that allows TV Audio to flow through the house with no echoes or AV sync issues.
- 3) App-based Private Listening – An app-based wireless headphone experience with the range and quality of wi-fi. Unlike Bluetooth, users have the freedom to roam everywhere they have a wi-fi signal and up to three people can simultaneously listen at the same time.

How has the market and needs of consumers shifted to create an environment where DTS Play-Fi is able to fully flourish?

The market needs something that works equally well across platforms. Rarely is a





household all Android, all iOS or all Alexa users. With Play-Fi, households get broad cross-platform compatibility, including support for protocols like Google Cast and AirPlay2. But they also get unique capabilities like high-resolution streaming from services like Amazon Music HD and Qobuz, wireless surround sound and whole-home TV audio that those protocols alone do not support.

How will the platform compete with other options such as Sonos, Denon Heos and Yamaha MusicCast?

It is competing quite well. Those solutions lock users into products from a single brand, limiting a customer's possibilities. With Play-Fi, there are so many products to choose from; TVs, soundbars, AVRs, streamers, speakers, battery-powered speakers, set-top boxes... consumers will find exactly what they're looking for at the price point that suits them best. From a technology perspective, our feature set is unmatched in the industry and we hold a good size lead over our competition.

What would you say are the main selling points of DTS Play-Fi from a consumer point of view?

Play-Fi offers consumers broad compatibility with products from brands that they already know and love. While many products on the market support multi-room music in different forms, Play-Fi products go a step beyond with hi-res audio streaming, wireless surround sound, whole-home TV audio

and a wireless headphone experience through our private listening apps.

What's next for the platform in terms of new partners and continuing technical advancements?

We're always announcing new partners and we have a lot up our sleeves from a technical standpoint that will extend our leadership in wi-fi audio streaming. Stay tuned.

How did you come to be in the market of creating digital audio platforms and solutions in the first place?

I have a long background in digital audio as an entrepreneur, beginning with my first startup in 1999, PhatNoise. PhatNoise developed the first hard-drive-based MP3 players for the automotive industry allowing thousands of songs to be stored in the vehicle, when the state of the art at the time was six CDs. Our products were deployed by major automakers including Volkswagen, Audi, Mazda and GM as the first OEM MP3 HD systems in cars.

Harman acquired PhatNoise in 2005 and I continued at Harman running product development for its consumer division. Apple engaged us to create one of the first AirPlay speakers, which was developed for the JBL brand. At the time, using wi-fi for audio distribution was revolutionary, but AirPlay was so limited in its capabilities and I knew the timing was right for real innovation.

I left Harman in 2010 to start Phorus, where we developed Play-Fi with the intention of

licensing it to the industry. DTS believed in the same vision and acquired the company in 2012 and the rest is history. Fast forward to 2020 and Play-Fi is the performance leader in wi-fi audio with 29 brands and hundreds of products launched to market.

Tell us about your role at DTS Play-Fi and what you are responsible for.

I am the General Manager of the DTS Play-Fi business. My teams are responsible for the development, deployment and promotion of the ecosystem and technology.

What is the best thing about the role?

This is a great space to work in. With wi-fi, the possibilities are endless. It's a big dumb pipe, that gets bigger every year, opening up new opportunities. Finding the right application at the right time for the market is both the challenge and the reward.

How do you see the way that people listen to music developing over the next 10 years? Do we even know where it can go next?

I would say the last 20 years of the audio industry has been driven by consumer convenience. I think we'll see a trend back towards audio quality and heightened listening experiences in the next 10. Hi-res audio streaming and immersive music content are becoming mainstream. And there's a lot of innovation around rendering content in ways that can be more enveloping and life-like, even from smaller form factors ●

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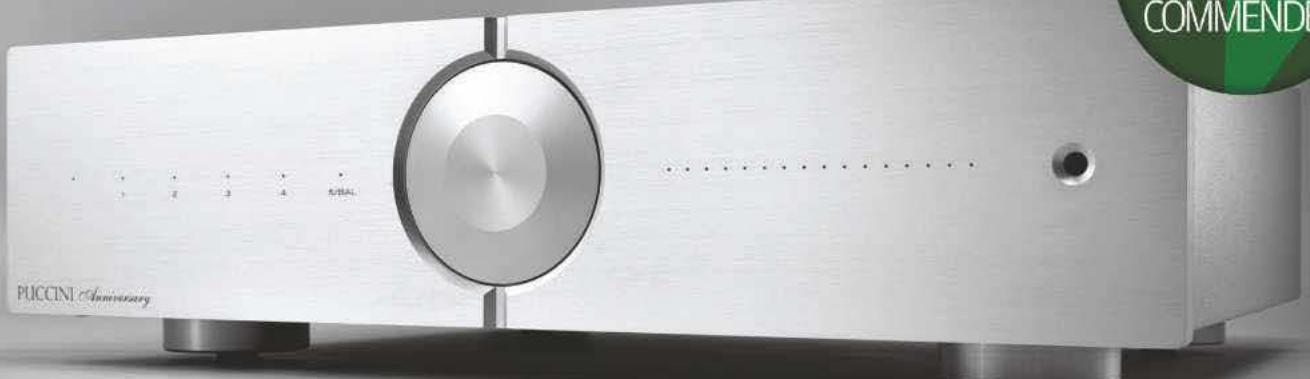
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- Alan Sircom, HiFi+



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Dare to dream

David Price remembers one of the best Japanese pre/power amplifier combinations ever – Sony's TA-E86/TA-N86

The golden age of Japanese hi-fi was arguably from 1976 to 1981 – a time when the Yen was drastically undervalued on world markets, allowing Japanese manufacturers to launch products that Western companies simply couldn't compete with. The things that came out during this period were weird and wonderful; with massive

turnovers, these companies could afford to be daring.

One such example was Sony's TA-E86/TA-N86 high-end pre and power amp combination. Launched in March 1978, it seemed impossibly advanced and exotic at the time. Part of what has retrospectively come to be called Sony's 'Pre-Esprit' era, this combo was the company's second ultra-high-end pre-power pairing. It

laid the ground for the famous Esprit range that became so iconic in the world of eighties Japanese high end.

This pre/power amp pair followed on closely from what is surely Sony's most ambitious and advanced product ever. 1977's TA-N88 power amplifier was a stunning Class D design that offered a quoted 2x 150W RMS per channel and used V-FET output devices and a switching power

A brief history of Sony pre/power combos

1977	1978	1983	1984
Sony launches the TA-E88/TA-N88, while in June Elvis gives his final concert before being found dead in August	Sony launches the TA-E86/TA-N86 and Keith Moon is discovered dead after a prescription drug overdose	Sony discontinues the TA-E86 as compact discs go on sale in the US and Dire Straits goes on to become the first artist to sell a million discs	Sony discontinues the TA-N86 as Marvin Gaye's father tragically kills the soul singer with a gun he was given to protect himself

supply – pretty much the stuff of science fiction back then. Selling alongside it was the matching TA-E88 preamplifier, a perfect visual complement. Together, these Shigeo Takahashi-designed flagship separates were strikingly minimalist by the standards of the age.

Our featured TA-E86B/TA-N86B pair followed on from this illustrious forebear around six months later, and were an altogether more affordable proposition. It's all relative though, because you'd still have to pay around £1,000 for both of them – more than a Mini 850 car.

Making a statement

The TA-E86/TA-N86 were both surprisingly compact at 480 x 160 x 410mm (WxHxD). In a world where bigger meant better, this was a powerful statement sent by Sony. Soon, almost all Japanese hi-fi separates would share similarly svelte dimensions, ushering in a new look that would dominate the eighties.

Here was a power amplifier that offered a quoted 100W RMS per channel into 8ohm in Class AB mode, but could be switched into full Class A whereupon it put out a claimed 30W RMS per side.

Round the back are switches for Class A or Class AB operation, plus AC or DC-coupled mode. When partnered with the matching TA-E86 preamp, the latter mode is used.

The TA-E86 preamplifier is also a thing of beauty, albeit far more conventional. Once again, simplicity, proper engineering and very high component quality is key; it has a good-quality ALPS volume potentiometer and other switchgear, premium components and even a second winding taken off the mains transformer for the MC phono stage. Like its partnering power amp, no integrated circuits are used. Oddly the

preampl has two sets of outputs, one of which has bass boost built in.

The combo sounds quintessentially 'Japanese high end' – clear, open, precise and transparent, with great insight into the recording, impressive dynamics and apparently endless power. It's gutsy and grippy in a way that you don't hear any more, and drives any normal loudspeakers to high volumes – spectacularly so considering the year it was launched. Yet there's a caveat, because the TA-N86 power amp is very strong sounding – but only up to a point.

In Class AB mode, thanks to the way that Sony's switching power supply is designed, its output actually drops into lower speaker loads, making less power into 4ohm than into 8. In practice, with most speakers and at

There's a controlled aggression that communicates the recording's intensity

anywhere near normal volume levels, this isn't an issue and you're left stunned by its speed, clarity and grip, but it's something to remember if you're looking for something closer to a public address sound system.

The other criticism of its otherwise excellent performance is a slightly tinselly sounding upper midband. It's not harsh, but things like snare drums and female vocals are well lit in the mix. This all changes when you switch to Class A mode, however. Suddenly you have less power, but it's a whole league smoother and more three dimensional. Now this pre/power sounds super-subtle, delicate and three dimensional, with oodles of naturally articulated detail.

Things also seem to change rhythmically in Class A mode, as you



Socketry is located on the top right-hand flank rather than the rear

BUYING ADVICE

Despite being a very hot-running Class A design (when thus configured), the TA-N86 has proved largely reliable, and the only servicing required is a periodic tweak of the bias current and DC offset. The matching TA-E86 is beautifully put together and requires only light contact cleaning. In both cases, the designer's deliberate decision to avoid the use of integrated circuits for sound quality reasons has blessed these classics and extended their service life, as there are no particularly hard-to-find components inside. Try to buy the best cosmetic example you can find and get it serviced to check it's running right. Prices are between £600 and £1,200 for the TA-N86 power amplifier and around £600-£800 for the TA-E86 pre. The only caveat is to make sure you get a 220 or 240V, 50Hz European version as many examples that come up on eBay are often 110V Japanese ones.

hear a swing in the music that wasn't there before. In Class AB this combo sounds super-fast and exciting but is a little relentless, whereas back in A it retains the speed but threads the music together in a more organic way.

Class of its own

Feed this combo with some classic new wave like The Motors' *Forget About You* and it's amazing to hear every strand of the mix playing by itself, while remaining perfectly syncopated to everything else. The precision is quite superb and in Class A it doesn't feel like the recording is being deconstructed before your very ears. Rather, the music sashays along with a kind of controlled aggression that communicates the intensity of the original recording.

Move to a great eighties pop production such as Grace Jones' Trevor Horn-produced masterpiece *Slave To The Rhythm*, and you can't help but be amazed by the production effects and the dynamic tension on show in the singer's voice. The whole thing comes together in a way that makes you marvel at the insight and musicality this combination offers.

Sony's TA-E86 preamplifier and TA-N86 power amplifier combination is important in the great scheme of things for Sony, and indeed the wider Japanese high-end market. It was the company's first reliable ultra-high-end amplifier combination, with a sound to match the exquisite looks. It also directly inspired the company's iconic Esprit series, which came later. In my humble opinion it was significantly better – purer in both design and sound. Many of these preamps and power amps are still in use even today, over 40 years on – which is a testament to their brilliance ●

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THIS MONTH



ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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



NEVILLE ROBERTS

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

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



JASON KENNEDY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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



DAVID PRICE

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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



CHRIS WARD

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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

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► Hi-fi history

My interest in hi-fi started when I was 10, thanks to my parents' Ferguson record player with its BSR turntable and idler wheel-powered platter. The sound was awful because the built-in speaker vibrated in an unpleasant way. By the time I was 13 I had got myself a ITT SL 75 radio-cassette player recorder. It was very far away from 'proper hi-fi', but I loved it and used it for many years.

By 1978 I found myself working in a discount electrical shop in Falkirk where I purchased my first proper hi-fi system: Pioneer SX-690 tuner amplifier, PL-516 turntable,

CT-4040 cassette deck and Goodmans RB20 loudspeakers. It would be many years before I could afford to change this setup, but since then I have had various systems. Move forward to 2020 and it's still Japanese electronics winning the battle for me: Yamaha's A-S2100 amp and

CD-S2100 CD player, Leema Acoustics Elements streamer and B&W's 702 S2 speakers.

I still find it amazing considering my hi-fi journey how I can now stream Qobuz and access smooth jazz (much of it in hi-res) albums that I wouldn't have been able to afford in the past and some are not even issued on CD. Many thanks for your great magazine!

Christopher Smith, Falkirk



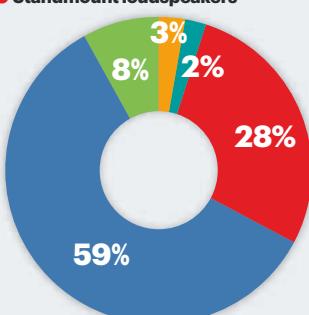
Yamaha's CD-S2100 and A-S2100 are the beating heart of Christopher's current setup

had was a Collaro autochanger and that was replaced with a mono valve radiogram that had a BSR autochanger. I eventually was given the radiogram when I was in my teens and learning electronics. Early experiments into the world of hi-fi included the connection of a Collaro Studio mono valve tape recorder, the construction of an infinite baffle external loudspeaker (fitted with an old Wharfedale drive unit) and the installation of a Stanton magnetic cartridge. Fitting the cartridge necessitated building a two-transistor RIAA magnetic preamp (powered from the radiogram valves' heater supply) and (I now cringe at the thought) fitting a heavy-duty counter-balance spring to the BSR tonearm to get the tracking weight down into single-figure grams! Well, my pocket money wouldn't stretch to anything better, but by then I had been bitten by the hi-fi bug.

WE ASKED...

What is your favourite way to listen to your music?

- Desktop monitors
- Floorstanding loudspeakers
- Headphones
- In-ear headphones
- Standmount loudspeakers



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CW: Great letter Christopher, I feel I've wandered through your hi-fi life, reminiscing about my own systems along the way. It's astonishing when you consider just how far we've all come. You're obviously bang up to date with streaming, so hats off for staying on the cutting edge.

NR: I had a similar story to you – the first mono record player my parents



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► Computer music

I have an Acer Chromebook and I'm looking for a good wireless speaker to go with it. I own a small one, worth around £70 at the moment. It sounds pretty good, but I really want something that has a better overall stature, superior subtlety and that is crafted in a way that would impress a fine designer or craftsman. It does not need to go loud, but must be able to play well at low-to-medium levels. I don't mind it having lots of its own colour or personality if it's well done or if it's more analytical as long as the performance is musical and well presented.

In terms of budget, I don't think I can go as high as £1,000, but I'm guessing that less than that will not give the classy overall musical feel I'm looking for. I'm also aware that the sound from a cheap-ish laptop can be bettered with a DAC. But how would that work with a wireless speaker?

Neil Porter, by email

ES: Hi Neil, secure yourself a Naim Mu-So Qb2 (circa-£750). It works over Chromecast as well as UPnP, Bluetooth and AirPlay, sounds superb, looks great and doesn't need the Chromebook for when you don't want to have to leave it open. It's comfortably the best sub-£1k device of its type I've tested.

NR: Another option for you to consider is Tangent's Spectrum X5 BT (HFC 399) Bluetooth active speaker, which is great sounding and well within your budget. To answer your question about an external DAC, wireless speakers have a DAC built in, so the Bluetooth output from your laptop is not using the PC's converter. However, you could also consider a separate DAC with a Bluetooth wireless input capability, such as the iFi Audio Zen Blue (HFC 460) Bluetooth receiver DAC, and use the analogue outputs to connect to separate active speakers.

► Gig economy

Although the articles in your mag are always interesting I found the ones in the July issue particularly thought provoking in different ways.

Gill White's Opinion piece – *No (re) fun (d)* – made me realise just how much things have changed,



are changing and will continue to change regarding live music and venues. My first experience of live music, apart from supporting my mate's band at the local pub/church hall, was when I was old enough to drive and got my licence when I was 17.

I used to borrow my dad's van and drive up to the Marquee Club in Wardour Street with a van load of hippies rolling around in the back as there were no seats.

We always managed to park in Wardour Street and were charged

Can you suggest a wireless speaker that's musical and well presented?

on average between 5 and 8 old shillings (as we were members) for the evening. We were heavily into Yes after they played at the Isle of Wight festival and watched them every Wednesday when they had a residency.

The point of this ramble is that if the gig had been cancelled (although you paid on the night) the money was not really an issue, but today I think tickets for a top band can run into hundreds of pounds. My wife and I got tickets to see Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck at the O2 a few years ago after getting a second mortgage and apart from having to hire a Sherpa and climbing equipment to get to our seats, we were so far away it could have been my mates playing, apart from the fantastic musicianship. And we had a nightmare getting home by public transport. Times always change

Ed reckons Naim's Mu-So Qb2 should fit the bill for Neil

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but not necessarily for the better for the paying public.

Dave Arnold, Bromley

CW: Hi Dave, a wonderful letter! Don't get me started about over-priced gig tickets. I really feel for artists not making enough money from streaming, but some far-flung (but expensive) seats are sometimes closer to another venue than the stage! Next time, wear a white T-shirt and selection of random wristbands and pretend to be a roadie for a better view, or carry an official-looking clipboard and insist on a personal sound level check while they are setting up.

ES: The trick is to see bands at the stage of their development that Yes were when you paid 8 shillings. It's rare indeed that I've spent more than £30 for most artists I've been to see, but I've still had the pleasure of hearing some brilliant stuff.

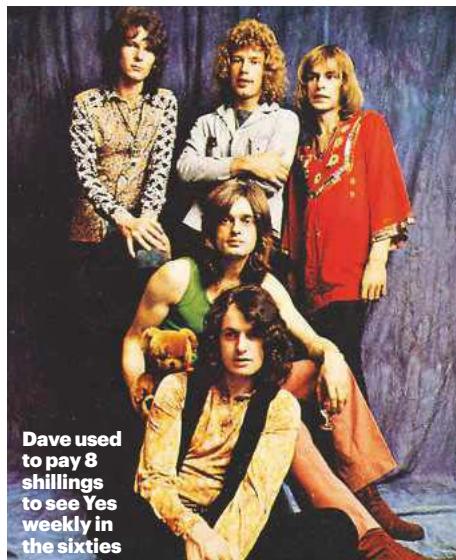
► Back for more

Last year I sought some advice after purchasing a brilliant Musical Fidelity M6s DAC that I decided to then also use as a preamp and plug directly into my Rotel Class D power amp, feeding Linn Kaber speakers. The issue was that when I did this I lost a fair chunk of absolute volume, so my question was: should I put a better dedicated preamp back into the chain? The advice given was to maybe start by looking for some new speakers that

When we saw a gig at the O2, we were so far away it could have been anyone

were more efficient. Six months later after an interesting journey, in the end I plumped for Monitor Audio's PL200 MkII. With some music (light rock or female vocals for example) they sounded unbelievable, but with anything rock based they became a muddled mess.

Fortunately the dealer agreed to take them back with a minimal restocking charge and then demo'd a range of other speakers including various models before being impressed by some second-hand Wilson Benesch Curves, in perfect nick and black. They sounded brilliant. We got them home on a



sale-or-return basis, set them up but again once I started playing music through them they had way too much bass.

At this point we saw some mint Linn Akubarik passives on the net, drove to the dealer and listened to them and WOW, they were everything we'd wanted. There's no rear port, so they're much happier closer to the wall, and they boast that snappy Linn sound we've always loved.

Thankfully, now they are home they still sound breathtaking. They are more efficient so the volume is back, but the clarity, detail and soundstaging is just at a completely different level.

The final piece of the jigsaw was installed this week. We'd been using Linn K400 cable for 10 years with our Kabers and with the Akubariks we figured it was working okay. But we found a perfect length set of Chord Signature Reference ex-demo cables and hooking them up has just added more of everything. The bass is so much tighter, there's just that little bit more detail and everything sounds more natural and bigger.

Thanks for the advice and for giving me a nudge in the right direction. What next? The wife says nothing, but I'm tempted to look at mains conditioners or maybe a Townshend Seismic Sink rack. I'm also worried that I'll unbalance what I've got, what would you advise?

Dave Mayer, by email

JK: Looks like perseverance paid off for you there Dave, well done. Room/speaker matching is often the key to

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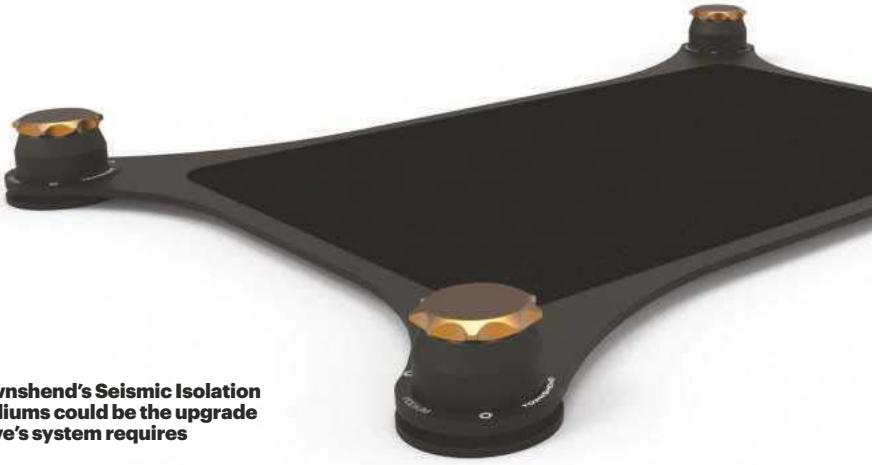
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Townshend's Seismic Isolation Podiums could be the upgrade Dave's system requires

great sound as you have proved. I would encourage you to try Townshend's Seismic Isolation Podiums (HFC 426) under your speakers as and when the urge for more returns. They will give you better timing and a more open sound without changing the character of the speakers.

CW: I'm so pleased there is a happy ending. I was on the edge of my seat with your ups and downs. It's great that you've ended up in such a positive place, but for me it absolutely underlines that speakers, however good a deal, need to be well matched to the room. You wouldn't shoehorn a throbbing V8 in a small hatchback and expect great road holding.

It's tricky to believe, but we are mostly listening to 'reflected' sound, so

Mains conditioning can only help the performance of a well-balanced setup

overload your room at your peril. Add to this the likelihood of potent speakers aggravating bass wavelengths that create problematic room modes, and you have an audio disaster on your hands. Of course, we only know this because we made the same optimistic errors of judgement as you, and like you, now know better!

NR: To be honest, I very much doubt you'd unbalance your current setup by improving the mains supply, racks or cabling. There are some surprising improvements to be experienced by cleaning up your power supply. For example, you might consider using a balanced mains transformer to power your equipment, as well as a mains conditioner and better mains cables. Russ Andrews has plenty to choose from to suit all budgets and offers a 60-day money-back guarantee so you can try out a product or two at a time

with no risk. Also, the Townshend Seismic Sink Rack can only improve matters in your well-balanced system.

► Going live

I read with interest Nigel Williamson's piece concerning seventies progressive rock music (HFC 465). I have several of the albums that Nigel mentioned, which I thoroughly enjoy listening to when the mood takes me. Indeed that's what is so wonderful about the age of recorded music and hi-fi. We can, depending on how we are feeling, select an appropriate album from our collection that fulfills a certain need relating to our current mood.

Like most people I'd imagine, lockdown gave me the opportunity to listen to more of my music collection than would otherwise be the case and I've re-connected to some neglected albums.

I have also indulged in a re-read of my back issues of HFC and a feature in issue 451 by Simon Berkovitch entitled *Got Live If You Want It* piqued my attention. Interestingly one of my earliest record purchases was The Rolling Stones 7in EP of the same name. I only have some of the albums listed, however two that I do have were inexplicably not on Simon's list - Peter Frampton's *Frampton Comes Alive!* and Lynyrd Skynyrd's *One More For/From The Road*. Surely two of the very best...

Anyway, the article got me thinking: attending a live event whether it is music, theatre or sport is as much about soaking up the atmosphere as it is about seeing a favoured performance. So how does an audio-only live album compare with a television broadcast or DVD/Blu-ray in attempting to convey the sense of having attended the event in person? It would be interesting to



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Best Analogue Product Award

— FEDELTA DEL SUONO" (Italy)

"The value of this arm is off the scale"

— John Stratton (Owner)

Silver MK3A Arm

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— STEREO TIMES

Best of Year Award "the Origin Live Silver tonearm is phenomenal and makes me realize what a bargain it truly is at its asking price"

— 6 MOONS

"Design of the decade"

— HI FI WORLD

Enterprise C Arm

"The ultimate real world tonearm"

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Conqueror MK3C Arm

Tonearm of the Year Award

— HI FI WORLD

Most wanted component award

— STEREO TIMES (USA)

Best sound at the show award

— KLANGBILDER (Vienna)

Perfect 10 award "The most addictive product I've heard"

— AUDIO 10 (USA)

"For me Origin Live in the analogue sector is the discovery of the year! ..."

— IMAGE HI FI (Germany)





hear from your contributors and other readers on this subject.

Another thing I have done recently is to spend a morning disconnecting all the mains, interconnect and loudspeaker cables from my equipment and giving all the plugs and sockets a good clean with Deoxit. When

How does a live album compare with a TV broadcast or Blu-ray sonically?

everything was re-connected and given a while to settle, I played some familiar music. I obviously hoped to hear some improvement, but was pleasantly surprised by just how much clarity and detail had been revealed by this simple and low-cost exercise. Time and money well spent!

Neil Harper; Bexhill-on-Sea

NW: I'm glad if my nostalgic musings have helped you to "reconnect to some neglected albums," Neil. It's infuriating how once an idea gets around that a certain artist or musical genre is "uncool", group-think can take over and it becomes a struggle to swim against the tide of received opinion.

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Needle craft

Fresh from the pleasure of carrying out this month's *Group Test*, **David Price** takes a moment to consider the weird and wonderful world of phono cartridges

Like many readers, I got into hi-fi from a pretty early age. To me, it was a means to an end, that meant being able to hear the music I loved in as clear a way as possible. Back in the mid-seventies, at the tender age of 11, I can't remember craving a fancy turntable – but I certainly did want something nice to play my Abba, ELO and Donna Summer singles on.

As my love of music grew, I worked to expand my record collection and to improve my setup. The turntable I inherited from my Dad was a Garrard SP25 MkIV tracking a ceramic cartridge (remember them?) with a sapphire stylus sharper than a machete. As I changed to my first proper moving-magnet – a Goldring G850 with a spherical diamond stylus tracking at 3g – I realised the damage the previous pick-up had inflicted upon my record collection.

My goal was to use a cartridge refined enough to not recut my records, so I finally bought an Ortofon VMS-20E MkII. However, this low-compliance design wasn't happy tracking in my high-mass Garrard tonearm, so a Trio KD-1033B turntable duly took its place – which could just about manage the 1.5g recommended tracking force of the Ortofon. Finally, I had a record player I felt I could play music on with impunity. It was around this time I bought The Clash's *London Calling* and sat down to listen to it without worrying about inner groove damage. Even to

this day, this album still sounds great.

As I chopped and changed my hi-fi over the years, upgrading as I went, it fast became clear

Even within brands there can be chasms of difference in overall performance

to me how important the cartridge was to a vinyl-based system. More than just being good enough to not damage the vinyl it was playing, I found that each different design had a distinctive sound. I began to think they had personalities as obvious and distinct as speakers, and began to pay close attention to my specific cartridge and loudspeaker combination.

It wasn't just down to simple frequency response, though. I later found that my slightly rolled-off Supex-based Rega R100 moving-magnet fitted to my Rega Planar 3 turntable, sounded more lively and fun than the new Rega RB100 cartridge that followed, despite the latter having a flatter and more accurate frequency response. Indeed, having chopped and changed cartridges so much over the years, it's clear that a myriad of factors play a part. There's the basic 'motor' or generator in the cartridge, there's the suspension system, cantilever material and stylus profile – plus of course overall



tolerances and manufacturing quality. I found, for example, that my Supex-based Rega R100 moving-magnet sounded closer to my subsequent Supex SD900V high-end moving-coil, than it did to some other similarly priced moving magnets. In my Linn LP12/Ittok LVII, the MC was way more focused and revealing, yet it shared the same rich and romantic feel with that cheap, now-obsolete Rega MM. I then bought an Audio-Technica AT-110E MM to fit to my second turntable and despite it being a moving-magnet design like the Rega RB100, it had little in common sonically.

Spot the difference

Even within brands, there can be chasms of difference. After getting my Linn LP12 around 1986, I kept my Rega Planar 3 as a spare deck and decided to dramatically upgrade its cartridge. I fitted an Audio-Technica AT-OC9, and was amazed by how good it sounded. This cartridge then went over to my main LP12/Ittok combo, whereupon it was impressive but with a higher resolution deck it didn't gel quite as well as when it was in the Rega. I duly moved to a similarly priced AT-33E moving-coil and was blown away. The improvement was dramatic, with loads more detail, insight and definition, but set in the context of a sweeter and more refined sound.

All of this experience has taught me two things. First, different cartridges make an enormous difference to your system's sound; like loudspeakers, they really are distinct and characterful things. Secondly, it's hard to legislate what cartridge is going to sound good in what tonearm – even if you've got a correct mechanical match. Ultimately the only answer is to listen for yourself and then decide. Meanwhile, I hope this month's *Group Test* provides a useful starting point, and/or thought provoker... ●

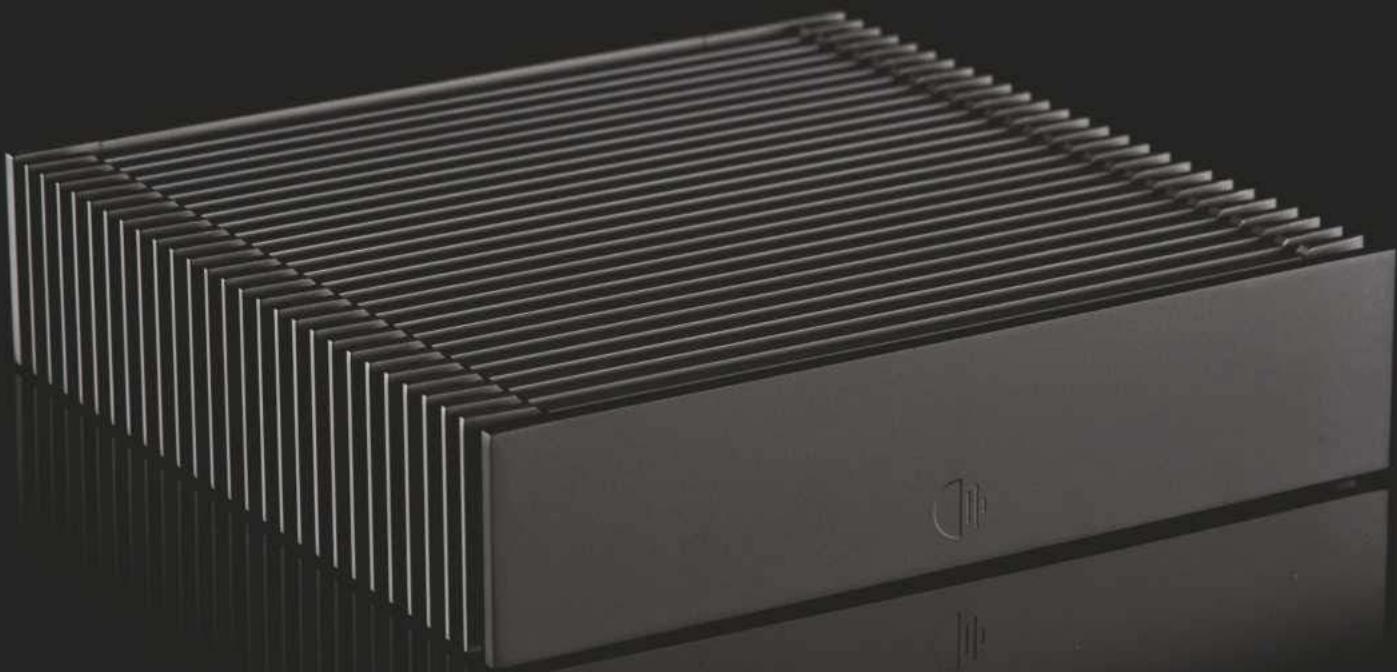
Variations of cartridges, tonearms and turntables can make a huge difference to performance



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*Reviews of the original Nucleus+, which has the same technical performance of the 2019 revision but a different look.



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Stop the press!

As Q becomes the latest music magazine to hit the skids, **Steve Sutherland** rejects the cries of derision and suggests how things should have been done to stop the rot

There's a bit in the animated movie *The Incredibles* when a fan repeatedly spurned by Mr Incredible returns as evil genius Syndrome and captures the Incredible family. Once they're all trussed up, he launches into a villainous monologue, concluding: "I'll be a bigger hero than you ever were."

As he turns to walk away, Mr Incredible shouts after him: "You mean you killed off real heroes so that you could pretend to be one?" Syndrome swivels on his heel: "Oh, I'm real. Real enough to defeat you. And I did it without your precious gifts, your oh-so-special powers... and when I've had my fun, I'll sell my inventions so that everyone can be superheroes. Everyone can be super. And when everyone's super... ha ha... no-one will be."

Back when I was Editorial Director of *NME* in the mid-noughties, I used to show this clip to students whenever I was invited to guest lecture about prospective careers in music journalism. I'd say: "Look at it this way: Mr Incredible is a music journalist working for *NME* and Syndrome is a bedroom blogger." After that, I'd tell them, thanks to the internet, anything the blogger cared to author would most likely reach an audience larger by several millions than anything I had ever written. But, unfortunately, there was one small snag: I got paid whereas no-one was ever going to fork out for the blogger. Everyone was online now, everyone had a platform,

everyone's voice was as valid as everyone else's. And when everyone's got an opinion, no-one has. Career path duly aborted.

Flash forward 15 years and Q has just joined the pile of music magazines to cease publication. Its sales were in the toilet and its advertising revenue run dry. The music industry, which traditionally provided circa 50 percent of its revenue, is on its knees due to file-sharing, hence no ads. And the readership has buggered off online. Few, if any, could weather such a perfect storm.

I think we all assume that the demise of the music press is inevitable. Its frequency makes it too slow with the news, print isn't as sexy as video and reviews aren't necessary when you can hear the goods for yourself. None of this is rocket science. However, the response from most publishers was as inept as our government's to COVID-19. They did all the wrong things and all of it much too late.

They launched websites, but ran them as if they were just online marketing opportunities to promote print issues. And when that didn't work, some made their most



Join the Q: gone but not forgotten

disastrous move. They cheapened their product until, in the case of my beloved *NME*, they gave it away for free in a pathetic bid to broaden its reach and attract more advertisers. This short-terming, turning *NME* into something soulless and list-based like those dreadful opportunistic freebies was a catastrophic error. For a start, freebies aren't built to last. They're just land grabs, sucking up a little cash by marketing the belief that nobody actually wanted to read anymore. They're basically websites on paper, text kept to a minimum, celebrity pics stacked high and everything suspiciously positive. Advertorials in other words.

Staying credible

The fundamental basis of most good music magazines was the exact opposite. They embraced the divisive and opinionated, and often gloried in the entertainingly negative. When they panicked and shucked their edge, they surrendered their credibility.

Once you make something free you are declaring it valueless. If I was in charge, I'd have done the opposite. My mag's articles would have been long and contentious – the internet doesn't do long well, reading on screen is a pain. The photography would have been luxurious, spread page after page, creating something you'd want to own and keep, even collect. It would be thick and glossy and desirable. And it would be expensive. Very expensive.

The demise of Q was greeted with the usual gnashing of teeth from those who perceive the closure of such titles as acts of cultural vandalism as if they were powerless to prevent it. But, here's the thing. Such magazines would still exist if all the moaners had just got off their asses and kept on buying them. Who killed Q? You did, dummy ●



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It might get loud

It's not just restaurants that turn up the volume in an effort to create an atmosphere. **Neville Roberts** explains how classical composers have been doing it for centuries

It seems that some restaurants and pubs are playing background music at volumes that are far from 'background'. Such establishments are trying to create a buzz, but there's a difference between ebullient sound levels and those that approach the pain threshold. A *New York Times* reporter measured sound levels in 37 bars and restaurants across the city and found levels that bordered on dangerous in about a third of them. These days, children in the audience at TV shows like *Britain's Got Talent* need to wear ear defenders to protect their hearing from the lunatic levels that are prevalent. However, the desire for decibels goes back a lot further than just the nineties.

One *New York Times* article noted that as far back as 1813, Beethoven wrote a rather noisy symphonic work entitled *Wellington's Victory*. This 15-minute-long orchestral composition premiered on 8 December 1813 in Vienna to benefit Austrian and Bavarian soldiers wounded at the Battle of Hanau. As a rousing piece, it made extensive use of percussion and brass instruments to create an exciting and exuberant sound. A hundred musicians played at the premiere and were arranged around the audience. Afterwards, someone voiced the opinion that Beethoven had written a piece of music intended to make the listener as deaf as its composer.

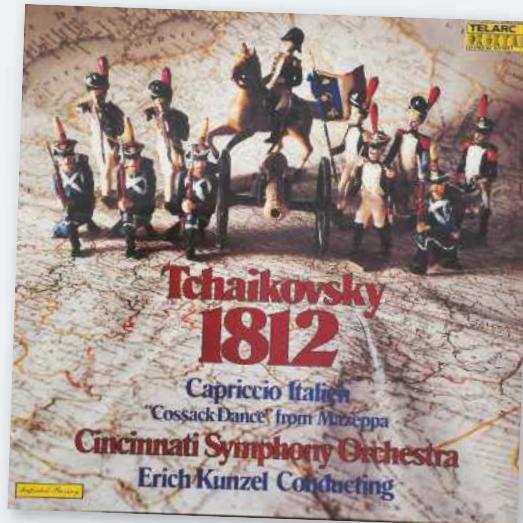
Prior to the industrial revolution, the main sources of loud noise emanated from cannon fire, church bells and

Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* used a pair of church bells to add weight

managed to depict rather than deliver loud sounds in their music. For example, in *The Four Seasons* he used dynamic peaks to depict a thunderstorm in *Summer* and the barking of dogs and hunting horns in *Autumn*. Beethoven went one stage further in *Wellington's Victory* and used loud music not just to portray the violence of the battlefield, but to actually deliver the experience to the audience.

After Beethoven, *fortissimos* in music became much louder. Much of this was made possible by the development of the musical instruments themselves. Metallic flutes replaced those made from wood, and steel replaced gut for strings. However, the greatest increase in decibels resulted from changes to the design of instruments in the brass section. The introduction of valves in horns and trumpets meant they could now play notes across the whole musical spectrum instead of being limited

thunderstorms, and this was something that could not be easily reproduced in a concert hall. However, composers like Vivaldi



The famous 1979 recording of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture used cannons

to those of the overtone series. This allowed composers to add more energy and volume wherever and whenever they wanted to.

In 1830, the fifth movement of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* used a pair of massive church bells to add weight to the clamour of the piece. Berlioz wrote a treatise on orchestration, where he envisaged orchestras of over 400 players. In it, he said: "When at rest, it would be majestic, like a slumbering ocean. When in a state of agitation, it would recall tropical storms. It would erupt like a volcano." To achieve this, Berlioz went on to say: "There is a common prejudice that large orchestras are noisy. But if they are properly composed, well drilled and well conducted, and if they are playing real music, they should be called powerful."

Turn it up to 11...

Moving forward to the 20th century, the world grew louder and so did the orchestras. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's formidable brass section under the baton of Georg Solti led the way. Not to be outdone, the famous 1979 Telarc recording of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, performed by The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, used live cannons in the courtyard of the Baldwin-Wallace College in Ohio and, according to the album liner notes, "managed to remove the glass in the lower windows of the college's department of English building some several hundred feet away". The resulting LP is a challenge not only for cartridges to track, but for amplifiers and loudspeakers to reproduce. Such masterpieces led the way in raising the loudness of music – until rock and it's use of amplification took over. But that's another story ●



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Not British enough?

Nigel Williamson laments the extraordinarily out dated criteria imposed on entrants for the 2020 Mercury Music Prize and questions the value of such decision making

The Mercury Music Prize can usually be relied upon to generate controversy. Why isn't one's favourite record on the list? How come M People won it, but Radiohead and Coldplay have consistently been snubbed? What bunch of tin-eared judges reckoned Skepta's *Konichwa* was better than David Bowie's *Blackstar*? It's too white. It's too black. It's too mainstream. It's too cultish. Its attitude to minority genres such as folk and jazz is patronising...

Over the years since Primal Scream won the inaugural prize in 1992 with *Screamadelica* (a rare instance of the judges getting it right), the Mercury has come in for some ferocious criticism. I know because I was one of the judges for several years.

This year's shortlist has provoked a unique twist on the customary rows over taste and artistic merit. The argument this time is eligibility and the exclusion of artists whose albums have been ruled out because they're deemed to be "not British enough". They include the British-Japanese singer Rina Sawayama, who came to the UK when she was five, has lived in London for 25 years, has indefinite leave to remain and is a British tax payer.

Her record *SAWAYAMA* is brilliant. Elton John called it: "The strongest album of the year by far" and *The Guardian* described it as: "Brilliantly inventive and futuristic". Most

It's surely time that outdated concepts of citizenship are done away with

seem to agree. It's ranked as one of the top-rated albums on Metacritic, which cleverly calibrates all of the star ratings given by reviewers in order to come up with an overall score. Yet the issue is not as simple as how good the record is, but the ridiculous stipulation that to be eligible for Britain's most prestigious music prize, artists must have British or Irish nationality. In a further twist of irony that you couldn't make up, the prize is sponsored by a South Korean company.

The organisers have dismissed as irrelevant that Sawayama has lived in the country for longer than some of those who have made the shortlist – such as 24-year-old Dua Lipa – have been alive. She's also signed to a British label, the album was recorded and mixed in the UK and all of her lyrics, except for one verse, are in English.

"All I remember is living here and I think I'm really British," she says. "I feel like I've contributed to the UK in a way that I think is worthy of being celebrated, or at least being eligible to be celebrated."

Another who has been ruled ineligible is Sarathy Korwar, whose 2019 album *More Arriving* received rave reviews.



Born in the US, his family moved to India when he was 10 but he settled in the UK a decade ago. "Just one in many ways the 'othering' occurs," he said of the exclusion of Sawayama and his own album. "We live here. We pay our taxes here. We make our music here. But..."

Despite living here for 25 years, Rina Sawayama is not deemed "British enough"

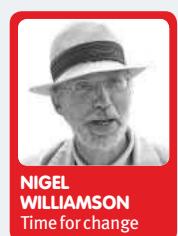
Outdated thinking

That musicians from an immigrant background are being 'othered' in this way is indefensible. In this era of Black Lives Matter surely it is time that border controls and apartheid concepts of citizenship are abolished and music is recognised as an inclusive and international language that can bring us together rather than divide people into 'them' and 'us'.

The same week the Mercury Music Prize shortlist was announced, the longlist for the Booker Prize was also published. The contrast could not have been starker. To be eligible for the Booker, novels have to be published in the English language – but there is no nationality test. The 13-strong list includes books by two Zimbabwean writers, a Polish immigrant, an Ethiopian and a Chinese-American author. As a result it offers a far better snapshot of the state of fiction in 2020 than the Mercury's one-eyed, blinkered view of popular music.

After listening to all 12 records that made the Mercury Music Prize shortlist, my vote goes to *Dark Matter* by Moses Boyd, the poster boy of the exuberant and youthful British jazz renaissance, which I wrote about on these pages earlier this year.

Apologies to Moses, my endorsement is almost certainly the kiss of death. I've seldom, if ever, managed to predict the eventual winner. If you haven't heard *Dark Matter*, check it out. It's fabulous with a truly global perspective ●



NIGEL WILLIAMSON
Time for change



DESTINATION: GLASGOW

HFC heads North of the border to discover the past, present and future of independent music is in safe hands at this Glasgow institution – now back open

Take a trip to Glasgow, head in the direction of Argyle Street train station and legendary music venue The 13th Note and step inside Monorail Music, succinctly described on Twitter as an: “independent record shop based in Glasgow... vinyl enthusiasts and carriers of CDs, DVDs, cassettes, fanzines... open to the moment”.

The shop takes its name from the Milngavie – or Glasgow – Monorail: a remarkable piece of retro-futurist transportation from the thirties. It’s an apt choice: Monorail Music embraces the present, looks forward to the future with enthusiasm and curates the most essential sounds of the past. And it’s now re-open to the public, albeit with limited hours and a maximum capacity of four customers (face-masked, naturally) at once. Its online service is slowly returning to normal and orders are now shipping most weekdays.

“We’re just about back at full capacity,” explains Michael Kasparis, our Monorail

guide. “There’s a degree of anxiety for the future, of course, and the shop isn’t quite at pre-lockdown levels, but it’s encouraging.”

There are eight members of staff – four of them full-time – including Michael, multi-project musician and boss of inspiring

If lockdown lifts in some way we'll maybe have a wee 18th birthday celebration in December

independent Night School, currently excited about the release of his label’s outing from “New Orleans no wave glam synth punks” Special Interest (see boxout, right).

The foundations of Monorail are rooted in Glasgow’s underground. “At grassroots level, we wanted people we respected in the music community to feel that it was their shop too,” its website explains, “so we’ve always had an

extremely close relationship with Optimo, Chemikal Underground, Teenage Fanclub, Belle & Sebastian, Mogwai and many others.”

Michael provides more detail: “Monorail was opened by Dep and Stephen in December 2002,” he explains. “Stephen had been working in another record shop here, John Smith’s. Dep was the assistant manager of Missing Records.” Both of them are important figures in independent Glasgow music: “Stephen is in The Pastels, while Dep had been selling the scene their records for years after playing in bands and such himself.”

Stressing Monorail’s community focus, “the shop has stuck to its original goal of being a local record shop for the world,” Michael adds. “That can be geographical and relating to Glasgow, but we’re also part of a much wider community and ecosystem, and are proud to be supportive of and supported by it.” Indeed, Monorail is part of the Dinked collective of like-minded UK independent record stores, which coordinates the release



Dep Downie, Eilidh Rodgers and Michael Kasparis behind the counter

of special editions, and orders come in from around the globe such is the desirable, esoteric and exquisitely curated stock you'll find in the racks.

Monorail is a mix of new and used, with the emphasis on the former. "We definitely focus on new stock," Michael explains. "We're all avid record buyers and run record labels ourselves, so that's what we're most excited by. That said, we've always bought and sold second-hand and it's a significant part of our business. Glasgow's pre-owned record scene isn't as vibrant as some other cities, but we do take part in it. We just never have the time to really sell it online so it's sold in-store only, often at pretty reasonable prices."

There are thousands of titles in stock. "It's around 15,000. We're strong believers in good back catalogue, hand-picked and curated."

The online store is a little different to the physical shop out of necessity. "There's a kind of constant need for excitement and novelty, meaning it can be tough to sell some back catalogue on it unless you make a splash about it," Michael explains. "People are dazzled by events online, flashing images or tweets – and I don't feel like they're willing to trawl through the website for hidden gems like they would in the shop."

Give and take

"We like to think there's a kind of synergy between what we like and what our customers like. Sometimes it's a matter of our own tastes informing what we stock and turning people onto something you love is one of the biggest thrills of the job. But it can work the other way: we're often introduced to something by a customer and go on to stock it. It's a very reciprocal relationship. We try not to be snobby or dismissive of anything."

Naturally, for a store catering to music lovers on both sides of the counter, its hi-fi setup is suitably robust. You'll find a direct-drive Technics SL-1200Mk2, Cambridge Audio C500 amp, Spirit Absolute 2 studio monitors and Onkyo C-SV5L VLSC SACD/CD player enlivening proceedings.

It's mainly vinyl at Monorail – but not exclusively. "CDs were a higher proportion of our stock when we started, but that has changed over time in line with customer buying trends," Michael explains. "We're all from that culture anyway, so it feels a lot more natural to most of us I would say. I like

compact discs too: I always bought both, but tended to gravitate towards LPs because they used to be cheaper and now buying records is just ingrained."

Today's version of the business is unthinkable without social media – "essential" is Michael's definitive assessment. "It's one of the biggest changes in the last five or six years," he continues. "We only started selling online in 2015 and since then Twitter, Instagram and Facebook – as well as our mailouts – have been the only way we can feasibly draw attention to what we're doing."

Connect more

"We've been active on Twitter for longer than that and it was always a nice way to speak to people who use the shop and our friends, but it can also be a powerful tool to sell records. One thing to mention is that we're pretty independent and none of us are tech-experts, and we're definitely not graphic designers, so our focus is on curation and writing. We're proud of our ability to connect with people in a pretty organic way that doesn't scream big business."

Record Store Day takes a different form this year – and Michael and Monorail are big supporters. "It's easy to be cynical around this but we genuinely have a great time on RSD," he says. "It's usually a big party with all your friends listening to music and talking about records... and if we didn't think that sounded like a great day why would we be doing this? Of course originally Record Store Day was an initiative instigated by an industry that was dying and I do think it's been a big factor in the vinyl revival. It's become mainstream – I mean could anyone have envisioned Tesco selling records 10-15 years ago?"

Monorail's take is that music and vinyl shouldn't just be a niche pursuit by and for nostalgia-peddlers: "It's a passion that's alive today and you can clearly see that on Record Store Day," he says. The regular customer base is pretty varied too. "On the day itself, we get loads of young people in, excited to buy something to represent the feeling they have for the music they love and it's really hard to be cynical about that. It's a joy to see and I hope we never lose the ability to share that with everyone."

Celebrating music in all forms is a way of life at Monorail music. "If lockdown lifts to some degree we'll maybe have a wee 18th birthday celebration in December," says Michael, looking toward the near future with upbeat optimism. "We're also in the process of launching a new website, so we're excited about that. Besides that, we're gonna keep on truckin'." ●



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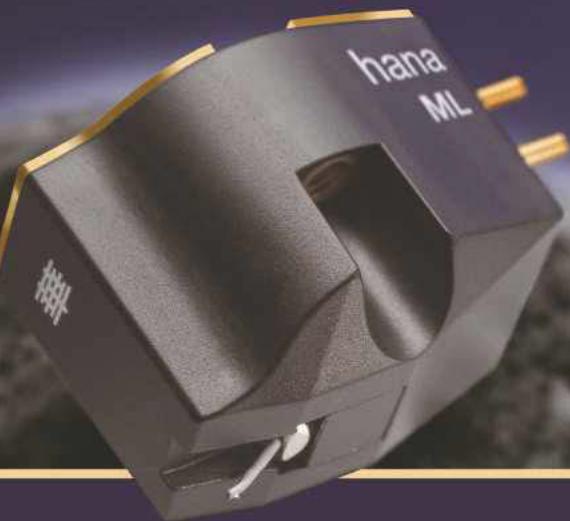
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Martyn Brabbins

Musicreviews



**ALBUM
OF THE
MONTH**

Sufjan Stevens

The Ascension

★★★★★

CD **Asthmatic Kitty**

EARLY IN HIS career Stevens announced a grandiose plan to record albums inspired by each of the 50 states of America, from the snows of Alaska to the tropics of Hawaii and from the urban grit of New Jersey to the sun-dappled canyons of California. In the end he only got as far as his native Michigan and nearby Illinois, before abandoning the plan. Perhaps it was just as well. Since 2005's *Illinois* he's released just three further unrelated albums at the rate of one every five years, which means the project would have taken him 250 years to complete.

On *The Ascension* he takes a justifiable shortcut by tackling the state of the entire union in 15 sharply observed and often sardonic songs. It's a break-up album in the profoundest sense for its subject matter is nothing less than the fracturing of humanity and "the psychic trauma of our current apocalyptic condition". At 80-minutes long, it would

have been a double LP back in the vinyl days and we would probably have called it a concept album.

Stevens last album, 2015's *Carrie & Lowell*, was an intimate set of autobiographical songs about his relationship with his mother Carrie, who abandoned him when he was a year old and in one sense *The Ascension* takes a giant leap from the personal to the political. Yet it's not that simple. In Stevens' best work intimacy and universality have always gone hand in hand and a similar dynamic is at work here. The political is personal and vice versa, nowhere more so than on *America*, the 12-minute, keynote track in which he lays bare his crisis of faith. "I have loved you, I have grieved, I'm ashamed to admit I no longer believe," he sings. "Don't do to me what you did to America".

On the tinkling ballad *Tell Me You Love Me* he contemplates the collapse of society refracted through our search for redemption in the warmth

of human empathy. Elsewhere the apocalyptic visions of *Death Star* bleed into the gently ruminative *Goodbye To All That*, which finds him "alone in my car, hopelessness incorporated/I'm driving to wherever you are now that all of my dreams have been confiscated." As a microcosm of the macrocosm, the conceit is perfect.

Over a singular career Stevens' work has covered indie-folk, alt-rock and electronica. Think of *The Ascension* as his pop auteur album, brimming with irresistible melodies, catchy hooks and simple choruses, everything recorded on his computer using a drum machine and swelling synths.

It's that juxtaposition of his sombre existential message in such a breezily upbeat pop framework that makes the album quite so compelling – and perhaps therein lies a seed of hope that if we change our ways, all may not be lost and ascension may just still be attainable after all. **NW**



Soundwalk Collective and Patti Smith

Peradam



CD Bella Union

INSPIRED BY THE mystical writings of the French author René Daumal and named after a mythical stone only visible to seekers on a spiritual path, this has to be the most improbable album in Smith's long career as she recites metaphysical poetry in a tender, tactile voice over field recordings made in the Himalayas of natural sounds, Tibetan drums, gongs and trumpets by Stephan Crasneanski and Simone Merli. Anoushka Shankar adds some shimmering sitar to *Knowledge Of The*

Who would have thought the priestess of punk would make the New Age album of 2020?

Self, Charlotte Gainsbourg's whispering voice combines with Smith on *The Four Cardinal Times* and on *Nandi Devi*, a sherpa chants Buddhist mantras over the sound of the wind, recorded on the summit of an Indian mountain. Transcendental and meditative, who would have guessed when she was tearing it up on stage at CBGB's that the high priestess of punk would make the New Age album of the year? **NW**



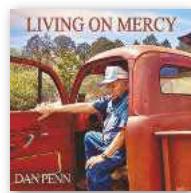
Brian Eno
Rams



CD

Domino

ORIGINALLY PLANNED TO be released to coincide with the April Record Store Day, this fascinating soundtrack is now available for the first time, thanks to the rearranged second coming celebration of all things vinyl. An intimate documentary from 2018, Rams celebrates the life and work of legendary designer Dieter Rams, and Eno was the obvious choice to match the simple aesthetic of the German sonically. From the elegant flow of *A Warm Sweet Bed* to the more abrasive *Bright Clouds Of Metal*, this will be familiar stuff to Eno fans and though hardly re-inventing the wheel, it's a joyful journey. **JDW**



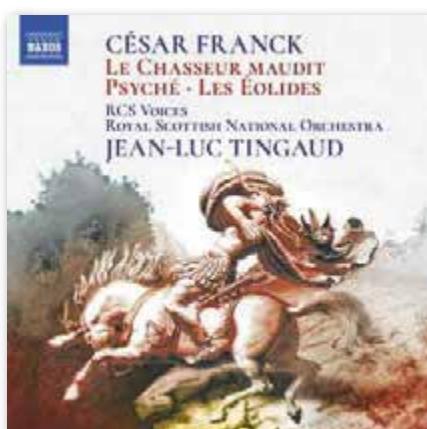
Dan Penn
Living On Mercy



CD

The Last Music Company

PENN'S GOT FORM. Back in the sixties he was bashing out hits for Aretha, Janis and Percy Sledge, and now he's back with his first new music in 26 years, and there's some good stuff here. *Clean Slate* is a great example of his simple verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus form, with hooks galore. He's got a decent band backing him up including a tight horn section giving everything a Muscle Shoals gritty authenticity. *See You In My Dreams* is a sweet tale of longing that suits his languid vocals. The sturdy country/soul is a case study in simple songwriting – what you'd expect from a 78-year-old with soul running through his veins. **PSH**



Do you agree with our reviewers? Decide for yourself and listen to some of this month's tracks at www.hifichoice.co.uk

AUDIOFILE VINYL

Matthew Halsall & The Gondwana Orchestra
When The World Was One

180g vinyl

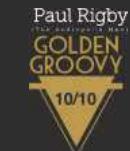


Gondwana

BRITISH TRUMPET PLAYER Matthew Halsall has a yen for the spiritual side of jazz, his influences include Alice Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders (in his more peaceful moods), and he seeks to communicate musically via sublime transcendence rather than force. Which makes him unusual in the contemporary scene albeit this album is from 2014, but it's still available on vinyl and a sonic beauty. The use of exclusively acoustic instruments including harp, flutes, double bass, drums, piano and a sax that sounds

like a clarinet give the soundstage a depth and openness that enhances the music perfectly. The tempo is generally relaxed, but there is plenty of variety in the seven tunes. The title track is more lively with Halsall leading the field, but on *Tribute To Alice Coltrane* his input is second to Lisa Mallett's flute while Rachel Gladwin's harp delivers on the title's promise in fine style.

This is very much an ensemble production, Halsall provides the framework but lets the likes of Nat Birchall on sax and Taz Modi on piano populate the soundscape in such a way as to enrich each composition. Those seeking true serenity should check *Kiyomizu-Dera* (a Buddhist temple in Japan), it's an absolute peach. **JK**



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The Flaming Lips
American Head

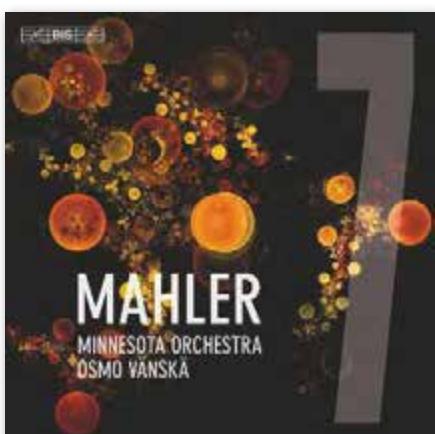
HOT PICK



CD

Bella Union

WAYNE COYNE NOTES that the band's goal here is to be a "different version of The Flaming Lips," claiming Tom Petty and The Grateful Dead as influences. While strictly speaking this has not been fully achieved, there is a tighter focus here that has been missing on their last handful of releases. There are some really beautiful melodies drifting in and out of songs like *Mother Please Don't Be Sad*, *Assassins Of Youth* and the truly stellar, transportative *Flowers Of Neptune* 6, and sonically it's constructed beautifully, subtly and imaginatively. The good news is this is their best record since *The Soft Bulletin*. **PH**



Vänskä does in 77 minutes what many others often need 80-plus to achieve

**Mahler**

7

Minnesota Orchestra
Osmo Vänskä

HOT PICK



SACD

Bis

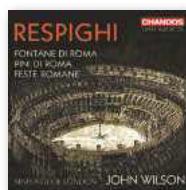
MAHLER'S MOST 'PROBLEMATIC' symphony receives a confident assured performance from Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra. While it's handy to have the work complete on a single disc, most of my favourite Mahler 7s exceed 80 minutes. Vänskä takes just 77, yet does not feel hasty or rushed. It's a well-organised highly detailed reading, but not the least bit fussy or precious. The impression is one of spontaneity, and the long 'difficult' finale sounds joyful and athletic, rather than laboured. The Bis recording is clear and open, yet rich, atmospheric and warm. Excellent clarity is achieved without microphone spotighting. **JH**


Nell Bryden
The Collection


CD

Absolute

BRYDEN ALLUDES TO the high priestess of singer-songwriting, Joni Mitchell on *These Changes* – a dangerous association to invoke as it can bring with it comparisons that might not flatter. This collection covers Bryden's singles output – the type of big production, hooky pop that Annie Lennox and Sarah MacLachlan have been serving up for years. Lots of reverb-swathed vocals, robotic percussion and an unspecified romantic angst. It's perfect for Radio 2, playing through warehouse tannoyos or from a decorator's paint-spattered radio. Its fine, inoffensive, music to put together flat pack furniture, but it's not Joni. But then who is? **PSH**

**Respighi**Fontane Di Roma; Pini Di Roma; Feste Romane
Sinfonia of London
John Wilson

SACD

Chandos

A RECORDING FOR big, powerful systems, the ferocious opening of *Feste Romane* will push even the most capable components to their limits. The orchestra plays with virtuoso brilliance, but a little more subtlety would be welcome. At just over 60 minutes for all three works, Wilson is among the fastest on record. The result is undoubtedly thrilling, but some of Respighi's more picturesque sections lack intimacy and atmosphere. Dynamic range is awesomely wide and the disc needs to be playing at anti-social volume levels for the quietest passages to be audible. Those with 15W tube amps should give this a wide berth. **JH**

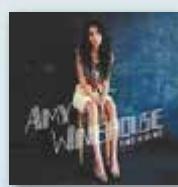
► COOL COLLECTION

No-one has released a string of albums of such consistent class and creativity in modern times as Lana Del Rey. Her latest, *NFR*, incredibly upped her game to even greater heights. So who better to recommend an album or three that you should investigate asap?

**Julee Cruise***Floating Into The Night*
Warner Brothers (1989)

If David Lynch ever gets back to movie-making, surely LDR will play a part in the soundtrack. Cruise was Lynch's substitute for *This Mortal Coil* (he couldn't

afford them) for the *Twin Peaks* soundtrack and the dream-pop created from her whispery vocal aligned to Angelo Badalamenti's swoonsome synths and Lynch's hallucinogenic lyrics is Lana through and through which she acknowledges on her own *Sad Girl*, singing: "He's got the fire, and walks with it".

**Amy Winehouse***Back To Black Island (2006)*

The tortured template Amy Winehouse created in 2006 stylishly resembles Lana's sultry Gangsta Nancy Sinatra *modus operandi*. Both embrace

and wallow in darkness and the lure of dangerous criminality, both spin the wretched and unsavoury into something starkly beautiful. "I believe in Amy Winehouse," Del Rey once said in an interview. "I know she's not with us anymore, but I believe she was who she was and in that way she got it right."

**Eminem***The Marshall Mathers LP*
Aftermath (2000)

Last but by no means least, the influence of Eminem's brutally honest approach has had possibly the most profound effect on Del

Rey's output. "He really changed my life because I didn't know music could be intelligent," she once said. "He was talking about his own life and he wasn't just rhyming over music for rhyme's sake... That made me think I could talk about the way things were instead of just making stupid music."

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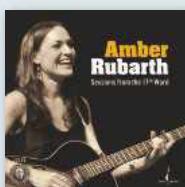
HDtracks.com's top-10 most popular albums



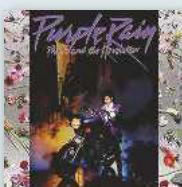
1 Bill Evans
Top of the Gate
(Remastered in DXD & DSD)



2 Eagles
Hotel California



3 Amber Rubarth
Sessions from the
17th Ward (Binaural)



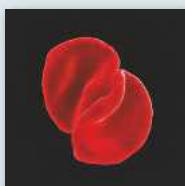
4 Prince & The Revolution
Purple Rain Deluxe
(Expanded Edition)



5 Fleetwood Mac
Rumours



6 Norah Jones
Come Away
With Me



7 Peter Gabriel
Scratch My Back
(Special Edition)



8 Michael Jackson
Thriller



9 Hikaru Utada
Hatsukoi



10 Santana
Abraxas



CD

Debussy
Images; Prélude
À L'après-Midi
D'un Faune
Hallé Orchestra
Sir Mark Elder



CD HLL



CD

Lemon Twigs
Songs For The
General Public



4AD

CLAUDE DEBUSSY'S EAR for tonal colour was perhaps the most fastidious of any composer who ever lived. Just listen to the second movement of *Iberia* from *Images* with its delicate evocation of a warm summer night if you don't believe me. Sir Mark Elder's performances of this glowingly sensuous music seem straightforward. Yet this is deceptive. Many subtle details, previously unnoticed, emerge. The shimmering orchestration of *Et la Lune...* by Colin Matthews is a great bonus. The recording sounds warm and rich, setting the Hallé in a clear but nicely hazy ambience that lends mystery without losing detail. **JH**

FOR THEIR FOURTH album the brothers D'Addario don't deviate too much from their post-modernist take on seventies kitsch and glam pop. Which is fair enough. There are piano stabs and synth squiggles on the Wings-esque *No One Holds You*; harmonicas blare away on *Moon*, which has a whiff of early Springsteen about it; while album opener *Hell On Wheels* sounds like a top-10 hit from 1975 (and even includes a Dylan impression in the middle of it). In all, *Songs For The General Public* is a hugely enjoyable and melodic listening experience, and something a little bit different for your post-summer listening. **PH**



CD

Prince
Sign O' The Times



Warner Bros

DESCRIBED AS HIS Sgt Pepper, this was Prince's most purple of patches. The 16 original tracks have had the audio Mr Sheen applied and sound wonderful. It's an exhilarating listen, the title track, *Strange Relationship*, *Adore*, *If I Was Your Girlfriend...* I'll stop there as it's all fabulous. The Super Deluxe edition adds 45 previously unissued studio tracks and two concert recordings plus some combustible jams and a geniuses-only pow-wow with Miles Davies. It's not so much a sign o' those times, but one for all time. Essential! **PSP**



CD

Gillian Welch
All the Good Times
Are Past & Gone



Acony



CD

Cosmo Sheldrake
Wake Up Calls



Tardigrade

RECORDED AT HOME on analogue tape *All The Good Times...* is the first covers album from Gillian Welch and partner David Rawlins in a career spanning nearly 25 years. With songs from Bob Dylan, John Prine and Elizabeth Cotton alongside folk tunes all pared down to acoustic guitars and beautifully harmonised voices, it's a tonal delight with lots of space and depth for the sound to expand in. Highlights include opener *Babe It Ain't No Lie*, *Señor* and *Jackson*, but it's all good, especially if you enjoy bittersweet folk crafted by musicians immersed in the form. **JK**

MANKIND'S FIRST ATTEMPTS at making music probably involved imitating the natural polyphony of birdsong, and this magical record re-establishes an ancient tradition. Recordings of endangered British birds are woven into a wondrous oscillating and perfectly calibrated soundscape of baroque pop and folktronica, commencing at night with a nightjar and nightingale and proceeding through the dawn chorus and the day-time calls of the skylark and cuckoo and back to nightfall with a hooting owl. Close your eyes and be transported to somewhere very magical indeed. **NW**

Picture credit: Jeff Katz (Prince)



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MUSIC REVIEWS



Anna Clyne/ Edward Elgar

Inbal Segev
London Philharmonic Orchestra
Marin Alsop



CD

Avie

ALTHOUGH THE ELGAR concerto will probably be the reason most buyers choose this disc, *Dance* by Clyne is by no means a makeweight. Written for Inbal Segev, this is its first recording. In five titled movements – *When You're Broken Up; If You've Torn The Bandage Off; In The Middle Of The Fighting; In Your Blood and When You're Perfectly Free* – it takes you on a rich kaleidoscopic journey. Like an evocative film score, it's very picturesque and Clyne's inventive scoring ensures your attention never

Segev plays Elgar superbly and gives a commanding yet assertive performance

wavers. In Elgar's concerto she plays superbly and gives a commanding assertive performance. Spiritually, the composer was in a dark place when he wrote the piece, but defiance offsets the sadness. Avie's sound is bright and detailed, while balances are close, forward and compressed to heighten immediacy. The cello is magnificently rich and sonorous with a deep burnished tone – fantastic stuff! **JH**



HOT PICK



Reawakened

Robert Plane
BBC Scottish
Symphony
Orchestra
Martyn Brabbins



CD

Champs Hill Records

THIS WONDERFUL COLLECTION features four 20th-century British works for clarinet and orchestra. The concertos by Hamilton, Walthew and Gipps certainly deserve to be better known and their neglect is not down to the quality of the music. Hamilton's concerto is the most 'advanced', but none are astringently modern. The John Ireland piece, meanwhile, is an arrangement of his popular *Fantasy Sonata*. Plane plays with brilliance and sensitivity, and the recording is smooth, well balanced and very natural sounding. Clarity is good, with no sense of mic spotlighting. **JH**



The Avett Brothers

The Third Gleam



Loma Vista Recordings

THIS EIGHT-TRACK LP from the Grammy-nominated, neo-bluegrass siblings has a welcome, stripped-down feel – a stark contrast to what's come before. The group is renowned for its shows at Colorado's legendary Red Rocks Amphitheatre, which have become a summer tradition (although not this year). Here, Seth and Scott Avett are joined by bassist Bob Crawford and their sound is delicate, plaintive and melancholic... and entirely acoustic. The beauty of this record – in among the guitars and banjos – is that the songs are beautiful and simple, but the sound is rich and immersive. **PH**



Artemis

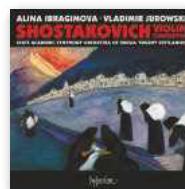
Artemis



CD

Blue Note

ARTEMIS' SEVEN MUSICIANS hail from everywhere – USA, Canada, France, Chile, Israel and Japan – but combine to become something very special. *Instrumental Goddess Of The Hunt* opens proceedings with structure, piano and saxophone solos showcasing serious chops. The Stevie Wonder beauty *If It's Magic* gives serious competition to the original with a stately vocal from Cécile McLorin Salvant. Every track is beautifully produced and impeccably played. **PSH**



Shostakovich

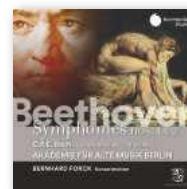
Violin Concertos
Alina Ibragimova
Vladimir Jurowski



CD

Hyperion

HUGELY IMPRESSIVE ACCOUNTS of Shostakovich's violin concertos that meld outstanding technical accomplishment with seriousness of purpose. Ibragimova's feisty attack and ability to play with minimal vibrato never ceases to amaze. In both performances she gets right to the heart of this deeply personal music. We also get to hear the original opening of the *Burlesque Finale*. Vladimir Jurowski and the orchestra offer crisp committed support, by turns athletic and brooding, while the recording sounds clear, open and natural. **JH**



Beethoven

Symphonies No.1 and 2
Akademie Für Alte
Musik Berlin
Bernhard Forck



CD

Harmonia Mundi

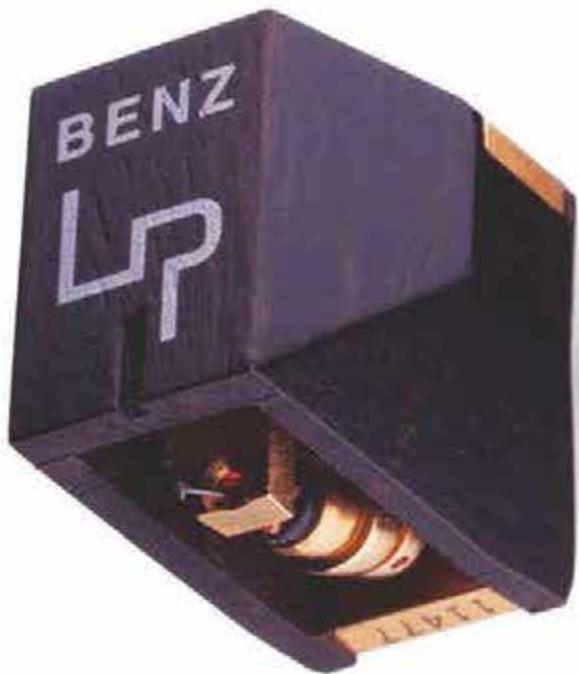
HERE IS BEETHOVEN played with fire and passion. The music leaps out at you – bearing its teeth like a hungry tiger. LvB's untamed wildness and willingness to shatter boundaries shocked contemporary listeners. But, as the two symphonies by CPE Bach also show, Beethoven did not have a monopoly on craziness. Bach's two symphonies, penned a quarter of a century earlier, are also shockingly original and bizarre – like Haydn on acid! Harmonia Mundi's recording is bright clear and forward, with impact in spades and impressive speaker-shaking immediacy. **JH**

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The supernatural

Nigel Williamson honours arguably the greatest blues guitarist ever to go missing in action, the recently departed Peter Green

B B King once said that of all the guitarists who emerged during the sixties British blues boom, the most talented was Fleetwood Mac's Peter Green. "He has the sweetest tone I ever heard," the doyen of American blues guitarists enthused. "He was the only one who gave me the cold sweats". Given that the competition included Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck, it was some compliment.

At the time Green founded Fleetwood Mac in 1967, white British blues bands were ten a penny. Yet Green's sensuous guitar playing, haunting voice and ability to write original blues songs that didn't sound like pastiche elevated Fleetwood Mac above their rivals.

By the end of the sixties the band was not only the finest British blues outfit, but had become one of the biggest-selling bands in the UK with a string of hits written by Green including *Black Magic Woman*; the dreamy,

chart-topping instrumental *Albatross*; *Man Of The World*, which was only kept from number one by The Beatles' *Get Back*; and *Oh Well*, which made number two in the British charts. In the NME readers poll of 1969, Fleetwood Mac defeated both The Beatles and The Rolling Stones to win best group.

The Green Manalishi

When Stevie Nicks joined Fleetwood Mac five years later, she admitted that she had never heard of Peter Green and had to be given a crash course in the band's origins. The new iteration of the band fronted by Nicks and Lindsay Buckingham went on to even greater commercial success and that story was told in these pages in HFC 422.

The sad death of Green in July at the age of 73 makes it a fitting time to recount the tale of the first Fleetwood Mac and the troubled genius of its founder – although the two

lineups shared a name and the rhythm section of drummer Mick Fleetwood and bassist John McVie has remained constant, they were in effect two different groups.

By the time, Nicks arrived, Green had turned his back on music and become one of rock and roll's great lost heroes. Like Pink Floyd's Syd Barrett, he was an acid casualty although in both cases the drug merely exacerbated pre-existing mental health issues.

Green's personal meltdown came one night in 1970 when after taking LSD, he had a demonic dream in which he was visited by a green and fiendish hound that barked menacingly at him. "It scared me because I knew the dog had been dead a long time," he later recalled. "It was a stray and I was looking after it. But I was dead and had to fight to get back into my body."

When he awoke, Green concluded that the beast was the devil and the dream had been

telling him that money was the root of all evil. His first reaction was to write a song about the hellhound on his trail. The result was *The Green Manalishi (With the Two Prong Crown)* in which he described a satanic creature “Sneakin’ around, trying to drive me mad/Bustin’ in on my dreams/Making me see things I don’t want to see.”

Heavy heart

The song was both brilliant and harrowing; its sinister riff, eerie howling and tormented lyrics made it one of the most disturbing hit singles to infiltrate the top 10. When Green sang it on *Top Of The Pops* wearing white robes and a crucifix he cut a haunted figure and it was obvious that all was not well. “I want to find out about God,” he told his band mates. “I want to believe that a person’s role in life is to do good for other people, and what we’re doing now isn’t just sh*t.”

The Green Manalishi turned out to be the last song he recorded with Fleetwood Mac, for his second reaction to his dream was to leave the group and give away all his money to War On Want. His guitars followed and were gifted to an Oxfam shop.

He talked about joining a hippie commune but was instead committed to an institution and underwent electro-convulsive therapy. “I was throwing things around and smashing things up,” he said many years later. “I smashed a car windscreen and the police took me to the station. They asked me if I wanted to go to hospital. I said ‘yes’ because I didn’t feel safe going back anywhere else.”

The waste of such a prodigious talent was both a personal and artistic tragedy. “I’ve cried myself to sleep many a night listening to early Fleetwood Mac and going, ‘What happened to this guy?’” Mick Fleetwood said in 1997. “He was taking a lot of acid and mescaline around the time his illness began manifesting itself. We were oblivious as to what schizophrenia was back in those days, but we knew something was amiss.”

ALBUM BY ALBUM

1967



A HARD ROAD – JOHN MAYALL AND THE BLUESBREAKERS

The album that established Green as a guitar god to rival Clapton, from his dazzling virtuosity on *The Stumble* to the reverb of *The Supernatural*.

1968



FLEETWOOD MAC – FLEETWOOD MAC

Potent covers of blues standards by Howlin’ Wolf and Robert Johnson, an all-time classic in *Black Magic Woman* and his emergence as both a great guitarist and blues singer.

1968



MR. WONDERFUL – FLEETWOOD MAC

The band’s second album suffered from a sameness in the choice of material, but Green’s *Stop Messin’ Around* and *Love That Burns* are outstanding.

1969



THEN PLAY ON – FLEETWOOD MAC

Green’s final album with the Mac is full of fine moments, but could have been even stronger if any of the band’s brilliant single releases had been included.

1969



IN CHICAGO – FLEETWOOD MAC

On tour in America in 1969, Green and Fleetwood Mac stopped by the Chess studios and jammed with some of their authentic blues heroes, more than holding their own.

Green’s shadow seemed to hang over Fleetwood Mac even after his departure, as the band lurched from one crisis to another. Jeremy Spencer, the band’s second guitarist, disappeared while on tour in America in 1971 – joining the Children of God cult and never returning. A year later, a third guitarist Danny Kirwan had a breakdown and was asked to leave after smashing up the band’s dressing room and refusing to go on stage.

Those who went searching for Green came back with bizarre tales. While the new iteration of Fleetwood Mac topped the charts with *Rumours*, the group’s founder was reported to be living as a tramp and was called “The Werewolf” by local children. He had grown his fingernails until they were 8in long. He was said to be working as a gravedigger, as a hospital orderly or was living quietly with his mother and brother in Essex. All seem to have been true at some point, but as the rumours swirled they became harder to verify. Seldom can any major rock star have disappeared from view so completely.

When Eric Clapton took a two-month holiday in Greece in the autumn of 1965 Green took his place

In subsequent years there were two attempted comebacks yet, as Mick Fleetwood put it, after 1970 Green, “took a left turn and never really came back.” A return to the recording studio in the early eighties showed only tantalising flashes of his old virtuosity before his problems resurfaced. When an *NME* reviewer saw him playing in a London pub in the mid-eighties he reported that the once-great guitarist: “Stared awkwardly at his fretboard, his scuffed fingers fiddling at the controls, as if even the most basic elements of his craft had forsaken him.”

In the late nineties he re-emerged fronting the Peter Green Splinter Group, but was a



Green’s playing was never the same after leaving Fleetwood Mac

shadow of his former self and much of the more intricate guitar work was left to his friend Nigel Watson, who had helped coax him back from obscurity. “I’ve had to relearn how to play,” Green admitted. “I’ve gone back to basics. I used to worry and make things very complicated. Now I keep it simple.”

Loser two times

The group ceased playing in 2004 when Green reported that the anti-psychotic medication he was on made it difficult for him to concentrate. The Public Guardianship Office stepped in to protect his interests.

Although his imperial phase was fleeting, his legacy was profound. “As the plaudits have been heaped upon Clapton, Beck and Page as the holy trinity of British guitar playing, Peter Green has become something of a forgotten man,” this writer noted in *Uncut* magazine in 2019 when reviewing previously unheard live Fleetwood Mac recordings from the sixties. “On his night, Green was capable of out-playing all of them.”

Born Peter Allen Greenbaum in October 1946, unlike so many of his peers on the British music scene of the sixties, Green was not a middle-class art student from the lace-curtained suburbs but came from a working-class Jewish family and grew up in the hard scrabble of a still bomb-scarred East End. On leaving school at 15 he became a butcher’s boy.

By then his older brother Michael had taught him a few chords on the guitar and

MUSIC LEGENDS

PETER GREEN

1970



THE END OF THE GAME

Experimental and free-form and influenced by Fleetwood Mac touring with the Grateful Dead in 1969, Green called his solo debut his "acid album" and it actually sounds better today than it did back then.

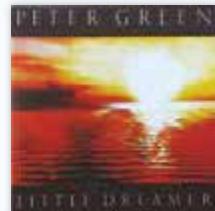
1979



IN THE SKIES

After his long lay-off the spark was missing. "He never took control of the sessions. He wasn't back on form and was hardly involved with the end result," according to Snowy White who played on *In The Skies*.

1980



LITTLE DREAMER

Green turned up for the sessions with his finger nails so long he couldn't play and producer Peter Vernon-Kell had to cut them for him. Most of the songwriting credits were ascribed to brother Michael.

1981



WHATCHA GONNA DO?

Sluggish blues-rock with a touch of soulful funk. It might have been an OK record with a journeyman's name on it – but everyone knew that Green was capable of so much better than this...

he was playing in various semi-pro bands including Bobby Dennis And The Dominoes, The Muskrats and The Tridents before he made his recording debut in 1965 with Peter Bardens' band Peter B's Looners, whose lineup also included Mick Fleetwood.

Hiding in shadows

Having graduated from playing copies of The Shadows' hits to the electric blues of Muddy Waters and the other Chicago bluesmen who had moved North from the Mississippi Delta to escape Jim Crow, his ambition was to join John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, although the presence of Clapton in the lineup meant there was no opening for another guitarist.

Undeterred, Green followed Mayall around the clubs, asking him repeatedly for a job and shouting from the audience that he could play better than those who were in his band. His chance came when Clapton took a two-month holiday in Greece in the autumn of 1965 and Green took his place.

"He was a strong, confident person who knew exactly what he wanted and where he was going," Clapton wrote in his autobiography. "More importantly he was a phenomenal player with a great tone."

However, when the prodigal guitar god returned, Green was ousted. "He was not

happy to see me, as it meant rather a sudden end to a good gig," Clapton admitted.

Yet Green did not have long to wait for a recall. Nine months later in the summer of 1966, Clapton left again to form Cream and Green became his permanent replacement, making his recording debut as a member of Mayall's band on the album *Hard Road*.

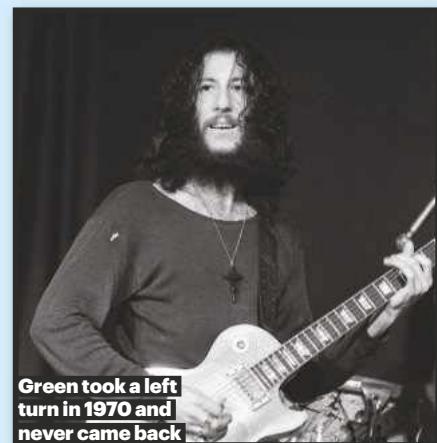
Mike Vernon, who produced the record, didn't know about the lineup change and

He was taking a lot of acid and mescaline when his illness began manifesting itself

asked where Clapton was. "He's not with us anymore, but don't worry, we've got someone better," Mayall replied.

Green's clean and fluent blues style shone on the album, from the weeping note-bending of *Someday After A While (You'll Be Sorry)* to the reverb-drenched sustain of *The Supernatural*. The graffiti on walls around London had famously proclaimed Clapton Is God. His replacement was swiftly dubbed, "The Green God".

Yet although Green's technical dexterity was second to none, he had little time for



Green took a left turn in 1970 and never came back

the grand-standing of showier axe heroes. "Good luck to the Snoggley Blues Band who are growing very popular now in the white blues world with a guitarist who can play 7,541 notes a minute," he sneered. "I like to feel every note."

Within a year he had quit Mayall's band and was replaced by Mick Taylor, soon to join The Rolling Stones. He felt Mayall's style was getting "too jazzy" and planned to head for America and check out the Chicago blues clubs. Instead, when permit and visa hassles left him stranded in London, he decided to

1982



WHITE SKY

A hard-rocking set of nondescript compositions, but there were occasional flashes of the old Green on the dreamy *Just Another Guy* on which his playing evokes the earlier glory of *Albatross*.

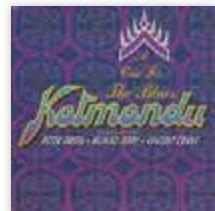
1983



KOLORS

A patent lack of decent material, bulked out by the eight-minute free-form closer *Funky Jam*, on which Green at least illustrates that he could essay a passable if chaotic Jerry Garcia imitation when it suited him.

1984



A CASE FOR THE BLUES – KATMANDU

Green formed a band with Mungo Jerry's Ray Dorset and Atomic Rooster's Vincent Crane. The project didn't last long and the album it produced is solid, but unspectacular.

1997



PETER GREEN SPLINTER GROUP - PETER GREEN SPLINTER GROUP

Thrilled as the world was to have Green back, it was clear that he was not in charge of much of the more intricate guitar work.



STELLAR SOUND

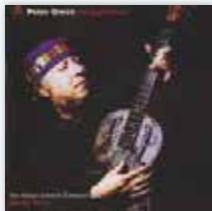
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MUSIC LEGENDS

PETER GREEN

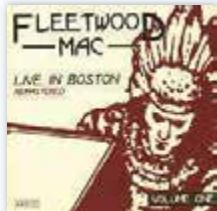
1998



THE ROBERT JOHNSON SONGBOOK – PETER GREEN SPLINTER GROUP

Decent covers of songs by the King of the Delta Blues. The highlight comes when Paul Rodgers takes over the vocal duties on *Sweet Home Chicago*.

1998



LIVE AT THE BOSTON TEA PARTY, VOLS. 1-3 - FLEETWOOD MAC

Intended as Fleetwood Mac's first official live album, but unreleased for many years due to Green's breakdown. If he was cracking up, his stellar playing showed little sign of it.

1999



SOHO LIVE – PETER GREEN SPLINTER GROUP

Lacklustre versions of *Albatross*, *Green Manalishi* and *Black Magic Woman* merely serve to highlight that Green was a shadow of his former greatness.

1999



DESTINY ROAD – PETER GREEN SPLINTER GROUP

Green becomes an even more shadowy presence as Nigel Watson and newcomers Roger Cotton and Pete Stroud provide the songs and most of the action.

put together his own group. With Mayall's encouragement, he recruited Fleetwood on drums plus Jeremy Spencer as a second guitarist. Mayall's bass player John McVie took a few months longer to be persuaded to jump ship, but billed as Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac, the band played their first gig at the Windsor Jazz and Blues Festival in August 1967 and signed to Mike Vernon's Blue Horizon label.

Feeling good

The group's self-titled debut album appeared in early 1968 and made number four in the UK charts. Many of the songs were covers of blues classics by the likes of Robert Johnson and Howlin' Wolf. But the record also included a stunning original Green composition, *Black Magic Woman*, which became a minor hit and was later memorably covered by Santana.

A second album, *Mr Wonderful*, followed later the same year and found Green developing further as a songwriter, although many of his best compositions from *Albatross* and *Man Of The World* to *Oh Well* and *The Green Manalishi* were kept for non-album singles. By the time of 1969's *Then Play On*, Danny Kirwan had joined as a third guitarist but it was to be Green's final album with Fleetwood Mac.

If his departure was a shock to fans, with hindsight the warning signs were beginning to make themselves evident, even before the demonic visions of *The Green Manalishi*.

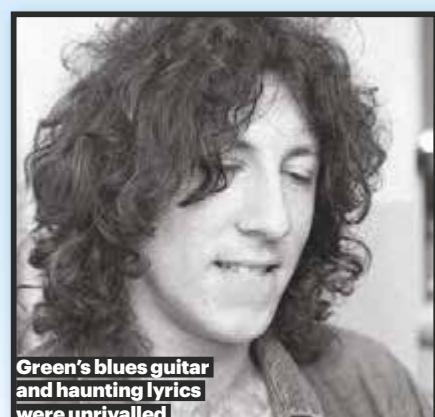
"I'm going downhill and I blame myself," Green had sung on the doomy *Jumping At Shadows*, his voice full of dread. "I can't help it 'bout the shape I'm in," he told us on *Oh Well*, while *Man Of The World* found him wishing he'd "never been born".

His blues were real – and so was his pain. "The guitarists who copied the old black

The Green Manalishi was the last song he recorded with Fleetwood Mac before quitting the band

players were doing an interpretation, but couldn't get to the feeling," he said. "It was too deep, too painful if you do it right. It got too deep for me anyway. It ended up hurting my soul."

After he had left Fleetwood Mac, his 1970 solo debut, *The End Of The Game*, was much anticipated, but its acid-fried jamming lacked focus. Green never played with the later incarnation of the group and talk of a reunion of the original lineup came to

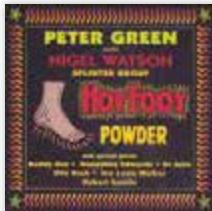


Green's blues guitar and haunting lyrics were unrivalled

nothing, but last year on the band's 50th anniversary tour, Nicks paid tribute to Green by singing *Black Magic Woman* and making it sound as if he had written it for her.

In February 2020, Fleetwood also organised a tribute concert for Green at the London Palladium. Pete Townshend and Pink Floyd's Dave Gilmour were among those who performed his songs, but Green did not attend. Tragically, his genius flickered all too briefly and he could and should have achieved so much more. But the music he bequeathed us when his flame was still burning bright will shine forever ●

2000



HOT FOOT POWDER – PETER GREEN SPLINTER GROUP

A second set of Robert Johnson covers, lifted by appearances from Buddy Guy, Howlin' Wolf's guitarist Hubert Sumlin, Otis Rush, Dave 'Honeyboy' Edwards and Dr. John.

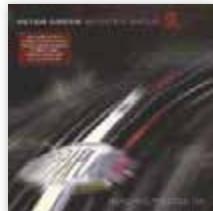
2001



TIME TRADERS – PETER GREEN SPLINTER GROUP

A decent modern blues set, including a pleasing version of the spacey instrumental *Underway*, which Green had first recorded 32 years earlier on Fleetwood Mac's *Then Play On*.

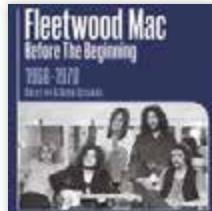
2003



REACHING THE COLD 100 – PETER GREEN SPLINTER GROUP

Green played a minor role, but it was fitting that a 'bonus' disc featured remakes of some of his songs – even if he was reduced to strumming an acoustic guitar on *Albatross*.

2019



BEFORE THE BEGINNING – FLEETWOOD MAC

Unreleased until half a century after the event, this triple-disc archive set features two concerts from 1968 and 1970 with Green at the height of his powers.

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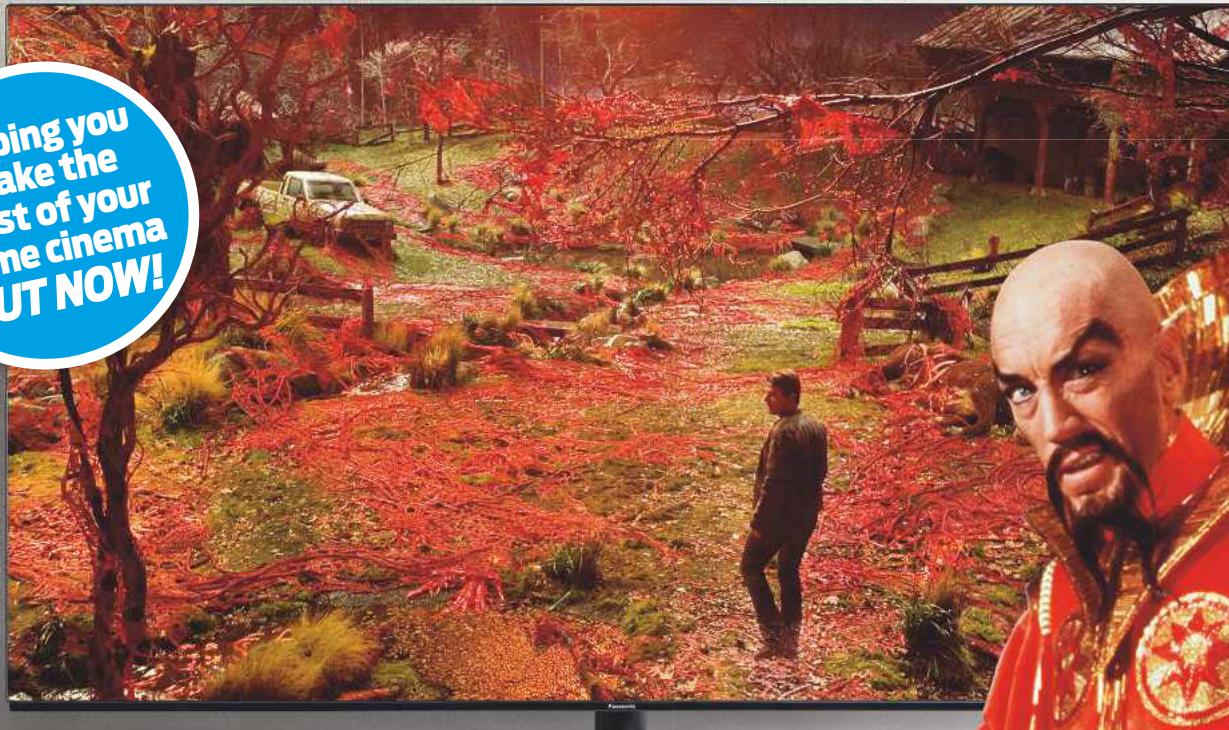
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Chord Company

EpicX speaker cable

BUILDING ON THE design of Chord's OdysseyX (HFC 451) speaker cable, the EpicX adds a high-frequency combination shield and translucent PVC jacket for an improved performance. The twisted-pair cable uses silver-plated 12 AWG oxygen-free copper in both of the conductors, which are insulated with an XLPE dielectric. The EpicX is then screened utilising a high-density foil and 93 percent coverage metal braid. It is sheathed in a translucent brown outer PVC jacket and at each end the two wires are separated and finished off neatly in a 'trousers' configuration. They can either be supplied factory terminated with Chord Company ChordOhmic plugs or terminations fitted by participating dealers that have access to Chord's ChordOhmic Hex Gun tool – allowing for tailor-made lengths.

Using the cable between my valve monoblocks and transmission line speaker, my 15IPS copy-master tape from UltraAnalogue Recordings featuring a live recording of Alena Baeva and Vadym Kholodenko playing Schubert's *Rondo Brilliant in B minor*, Baeva's sprightly and energetic violin flows effortlessly with a commanding brilliance. Kholodenko's piano adds another dimension, ensuring that the two instruments integrate quite beautifully.

X marks the spot

The EpicX effortlessly delivers the commanding authority and power of the performance and conveys the air and space of the recording hall. The clarity and dynamics of the instruments are in perfect proportion to the ambience of the environment, all of which is impeccably recreated in my listening room.



Listening to Pierre Gossez's *Come Bach*, the final movement from *Sonata* is a Jacques Loussier composition played on the saxophone with harpsichord, piano and drums. I am rushed along by the energy of the track, while all of the instruments are crystal clear and well defined. The EpicX is excellent value for money for a screened speaker cable and really delivers a high-quality sound. **NR**

► DETAILS

PRICE £60 per metre plus £120 termination
TELEPHONE 01980 625700
WEBSITE chord.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Topping Audio

D10S USB DAC

AS A VERY compact USB DAC, the D10S meets the needs of those wanting a standalone converter at a competitive price. The DAC's input is via its USB port and supports PCM files up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD from DSD64 to DSD256 (native). It can also deliver 16-bit/44.1-192kHz through its optical or coaxial outputs. The DAC is powered through the USB connection via the supplied cable.

Inside is a ES9038Q2M Sabre Reference chipset, while the USB interface is controlled by an XMOS XU208 USB chip that contains a 32-bit multi-core micro-controller. The output driver for the analogue outputs is taken care of by a Texas Instruments OPA2134 low-noise operational amplifier chip. A rather nice touch is that Topping Audio allows DIY-ers to replace the op-amp

to experiment with different sound signatures. I can't resist looking and, sure enough, the OPA2134 is fitted into a PDIP-8 socket on the PCB, which makes it simple to upgrade it with, say, a Texas Instruments LME49720 at a later date.

Topping off

I start auditioning with a fantastic 16-bit/44kHz WMA of Vivaldi's *Gloria in D major*. From the outset I am treated to a clear and bright presentation. Next up is a FLAC file from UltraAnalogue Recordings,



which specialises in copy-master analogue tape and digital downloads. The recording of Tatsuki Narita on the violin and Yun-Yang Lee on piano performing Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre* is spectacular. I also have the master tape of this and, although the digital version is not quite up there with the tape, it is still exhilarating through the D10S. The image placement of the two instruments is spot on and Narita's opening chord is startling, marking the D10S out as amazing value and a great and compact DAC. **NR**

► DETAILS

PRICE £85
TELEPHONE 01494 956558
WEBSITE electromod.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Black Rhodium

Black and White loudspeaker cable

RESPONDING TO THE impact of the recent lockdown restrictions, Black Rhodium has been exploring the best way to make use of its high-quality cables and connectors. Alongside its recently introduced Black and White interconnect (HFC 464) comes a new loudspeaker cable priced at £99 for 3m. The design philosophy is to make good use of the company's current stocks of high-quality parts and to use a simple construction in order to keep the cost down.

Looks familiar

The cable uses a silver-plated copper wire insulated in silicone rubber. This is the same wire used in the company's range of high-end loudspeaker cables. It has gold-plated Universal 4mm banana

plugs, which are also used in Black Rhodium BiWire cables and feature a flexible cover that makes them ideally suited for bi-wire setups.

Using the Black and Whites to connect my valve monoblocks to my transmission line speaker, I start my listening tests with a recording of solo harpsichord of Trevor Pinnock playing JS Bach's *Partita No.2*. I am immediately struck by the beautifully clear and open presentation, which is a testament to the silver-plated conductors. I find myself drawn into the performance from the outset and there is an overwhelming sense of realism as the stately opening progresses into the tuneful and cheerful main section.

At the other end of the musical spectrum, and in an effort to explore the bass performance, I turn to Laurent



Garnier's *Desireless* from his album *Tales Of A Kleptomaniac*. The pounding bassline of this heavy rock track is deep, powerful, well extended and exceptionally well controlled, but does not in any way swamp the top end of the hi-hats or the synthesised percussion sounds, which remain extremely clear and precise.

In conclusion, the Black and White speaker cable delivers a remarkably refined sound for the money and, as such, is a real bargain. **NR**

► DETAILS

PRICE
£99 for 3m pair
TELEPHONE
01332 342233
WEBSITE
blackrhodium.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Russ Andrews

RF Clamps

FERRITE BEADS ARE ordinarily clamped to the outside of mains cables to stop the RF noise generated by these low-cost units from feeding back into the mains supply. However, not all equipment that can generate noise has them attached. These RF Clamps from Russ Andrews are designed for this very purpose and come in two sizes – small for cables up to 6mm diameter and large for up to 13mm. It's important to choose a clamp that's appropriate for the cable and is neither too loose nor doesn't pinch or deform it.

Keep the noise down

The RF Clamps are not to be used with hi-fi mains cables, interconnects or speaker cables. Russ Andrews considers that they have a negative effect on the sound quality and may result in a sound that is flatter, less musical or less engaging. The clamps



are therefore designed to be used on the non-audio equipment in your room that may be generating noise, including table lamps that use LED bulbs and the wire feeding the bulb on pendant lights hanging from the ceiling. Computer equipment is particularly prone to injecting noise into the mains, while peripherals such as printers often use switched-mode power supplies and will also benefit from having a clamp fitted. Other equipment that it's certainly worth

experimenting with includes fridges, washing machines and other domestic appliances, especially if they are in relatively close proximity to your hi-fi.

The clamps are very easy to fit as they simply clip over the mains cable and I have no difficulty in attaching them onto my equipment. When using them, the silences between tracks seems 'blacker', which generally indicates a reduction in the background noise. **NR**

► DETAILS

PRICE
£8 per pair (small)
£14 per pair (large)
TELEPHONE
01539 797300
WEBSITE
russandrews.com

OUR VERDICT



Buying Guide

Selecting the components you want to audition is never easy, but help is at hand with our pick of the best to pass through our respected reviewing process

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CD PLAYERS



Audiolab 6000CDT

PRICE: £380 REVIEWED: HFC 447

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



Cambridge Audio AXC35

PRICE: £300 REVIEWED: HFC 454

Something of a budget marvel, you'll have to work extra hard to get the AXC35 to put a foot wrong. Bass is firm, detailed and blessed with excellent timing; the tonal palette is pleasingly broad and clean; and though the soundstage doesn't extend much beyond the speakers, there's great depth perspective.



Exposure XM CD

PRICE: £1,200 REVIEWED: HFC 455

A highly likeable half-width compact disc player that presents music in an enjoyable yet technically accurate manner, the XM CD might lack the operational slickness and versatility of some rivals, but it more than makes up for it with its energetic, lively sound, dynamic light and shade and charming character.



Métronome Technologie Le Player 2S

PRICE: £5,100 REVIEWED: HFC 449

As good as the sweet treble and rich bass are, what really impresses here is how when fed weaker CDs and impoverished MP3s the delivery remains unflappable and composed as layers of detail are locked into sharp focus.



Musical Fidelity M3scd

PRICE: £1,150 REVIEWED: HFC 450

Able to string together elements of the mix dexterously for a natural and believable sound, the M3scd's combination of detail and rhythmic alacrity are highly impressive while its excellent timing and tonal balance leave you wanting more. With its lovely, lyrical sonics oozing detail and subtlety, this is an extremely capable player.



Rega Apollo

PRICE: £630 REVIEWED: HFC 450

Displaying a rich, mellifluous, dreamy and wonderfully lyrical talent for vocals, the Apollo is an exuberantly musical performer. It's excellent at conveying microdynamics, is tonally warm and handles rhythms impeccably, making for a hugely charismatic performer considering its relatively low price.



ALSO CONSIDER



Audiolab 8300CDQ £1,100 HFC 448

Taking the winning recipe of the 8200CDQ and adding an upgraded DAC with DSD playback, the accurate and uncoloured sound of the Audiolab is unmistakable. Vast amounts of detail are extracted from the mix, soundstaging is incredible and music flows naturally.



Leema Acoustics Stream IV £2,300 HFC 456

The latest update to this long-established player feels a considerable step forward. CD playback is highly refined, assured and transparent, bass is rock solid with visceral depth that positively grips your solar plexus and streaming shares all these qualities for the best of both worlds.



Marantz ND8006 £1,100 HFC 450

A CD player with DAC and streaming capabilities, the ND8006 effortlessly conveys the true spatial contrast between all the different strands of the mix while sounding precise with loads of midband detail. Tonally smooth, it has a silky top end and chunky bass.



Roksan K3 CD Di £1,300 HFC 403

Offering the relatively rare combination of smooth tonality with a lively and animated way of presenting the music, the K3 CD Di displays a sweet and even tonal balance with a panoramic soundstage. In short, it's closer to good analogue sound than digital.



AMPLIFIERS



Audiolab 6000A

PRICE: £600 REVIEWED: HFC 444

A cracking budget integrated amplifier with just the right mix of features and high-quality performance. The 6000A boasts a snappy and engaging sound with sufficient power and fine build quality. It's a great buy for the more discerning music enthusiast that demands plenty of flexibility at the heart of their system.



Copland CSA 100

PRICE: £3,500 REVIEWED: HFC 465

Combining a preamp that utilises a valve circuit with a solid-state power amp, this supreme hybrid integrated rarely fails to delight across its many inputs and a very broad spectrum of music. With a sublime performance, excellent spec and rock-solid build, it's a must-audition at the price.



Hegel H120

PRICE: £2,200 REVIEWED: HFC 460

The versatile talent that was the Röst may have left the building, but its star quality lives on in the H120. Upgraded and buffed for the digital delights of a new decade, its mixture of terrific sound quality, supreme build and across-the-board competence ensure that it ticks all the boxes and so comes highly recommended.



Naim Nait XS 3

PRICE: £2,200 REVIEWED: HFC 454/459

A clear improvement over its already impressive predecessor, the Nait XS 3 is an emotionally articulate and highly engaging performer that's hard not to love. It turns in a well-defined, detailed and carefully ordered sound that ticks all the right 'hi-fi' boxes, but more than that, it really sings when required.



Quad Vena II

PRICE: From £650 REVIEWED: HFC 448

With a comprehensive spec that moves Quad's most compact integrated on and enough weight to bring any type of music so thrillingly to life, the Vena II does a fine job of giving bass natural weight, snap and dynamic ability while delivering a big room-filling sound that belies those tiny dimensions.



Yamaha A-S3200

PRICE: £5,000 REVIEWED: HFC 464

This highly accomplished performer succeeds through its breadth of ability rather than exceeding in one specific area. A highly capable performer, its snappy sound and gutsy demeanour combine with speed, grip versatility and power to create a great-looking beast of an integrated.



PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS



Cambridge Audio Edge W

£2,500 HFC 447

The Edge W power amplifier quotes 2x100W RMS output and has oodles of power to drive pretty much any speaker. It has a neutral sound with a hint of sweetness and an upbeat nature underwritten by plenty of insight that's seriously good for the money.



Emotiva BasX PT-100/BasX A-300

£400/£530 HFC 429

A most enticing evocation of 'affordable high-end', the sound from this Emotiva pairing delivers a soundstage that extends well beyond the walls with a combination of satisfyingly nailed-on pace, rhythm, timing and dimensionality that seriously impresses. A great buy.



Exposure XM7/XM9

£1,240/£1,390 HFC 429

Fast, open and three dimensional, the XM9 pairing is capable of driving more awkward speaker loads to high levels without any complaint. Partnered with the XM7 preamp/DAC, Exposure's house sound means a fulsome bass, midband detail and a smooth, yet spacious treble.



Mola-Mola Makua/Kaluga

£7,500/£10,000 HFC 427

Class D amplification has come of age with the Kaluga offering great swathes of power that are summoned up with amazing speed without any sense of strain. Suddenly demanding multi-layered recordings appear effortlessly forensic without ever sounding clinical.



CABLES – INTERCONNECTS



Atlas Cables Equator Integra

PRICE: £115 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 438

Employing the same OCC copper conductors used in Atlas' higher end interconnects, the Equator Integra transmits consistently sophisticated music and represents excellent value for money. Subtle nuances become elevated, while elegance, refinement and fine details adroitly come to the fore.



Black Rhodium Minuet

PRICE: £160 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 453

Replacing the Prelude, this RCA interconnect is screened and employs silver-plated copper wire to improve clarity and high-frequency performance. The result is remarkably sophisticated for the money with detail, positioning of instruments, imaging and separation absolutely nailed on.



Ecosse Cables Master Reference SE

PRICE: £425 for 0.8m REVIEWED: HFC 455

Designed to convey an even greater degree of transparency, detail and three dimensionality than its rival interconnects, the Master Reference SE certainly doesn't disappoint. Punchy basslines, well-defined positioning, supreme soundstage width and clear focus are very much the order of the day here.



Gekko Cables Red Dusk

PRICE: £250 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 456

A directional unshielded RCA interconnect, the Red Dusk is made of two twisted solid-core OFHC copper conductors clad in silver. Once run-in, the soundstage takes on a more three-dimensional presentation, subtle details come to the fore and the orchestra fills the entire width of the room.



Kimber Kable Select USB-Cu

PRICE: From £563 REVIEWED: HFC 456

Terminated with hand-made purpleheart and gaboon ebony connector housings, this distinctive USB cable achieves a soundstage that is both wide and deep. The edginess of violins is deeply impressive while instruments are perfectly located across the room revealing a stunning mix of definition and clarity.



Tellurium Q Blue

PRICE: £186 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 439

The baby brother of TQ's Black USB cable, the Blue is of the AB configuration for hookup to a DAC and aims to minimise distortion. This it does with consummate ease while adding energetic, pounding bass and superb instrument placement within a broad, realistic soundstage for good measure.



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IsoTek
EVO3 Initium

An entry-level power cable that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.



CABLES - MAINS POWER


Atlas Cables
Eos dd

PRICE: £145 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 452

Referring to 'dual drain' technology, the Eos dd is designed to act as a filter against incoming contamination. The result is an inky blackness between musical phrases and a supremely low noise floor, while detail and imaging improve as interference is banished.


Black Rhodium
Stream

PRICE: £450 for 1.7m REVIEWED: HFC 430

Black Rhodium has discovered that optimum sound quality is obtained from cables of 1.7m, hence this offering featuring silver-plated copper conductors. And who are we to argue, considering the impressive clarity and focus of instruments combined with a noise floor displaying an impressive lack of interference.


Chord Company
Shawline

PRICE: £200 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 438

Available at a variety of lengths, the Shawline mains cable is made from three lots of 14 AWG multi-strand conductors. Test highlights include superior front-to-back imaging, with all the tonal complexities of the instruments really coming to life, delivering genuine energy to orchestral performances.


Furutech
Roxy

PRICE: £233 for 1.5m REVIEWED: HFC 447

Connecting the Roxy to a source component immediately removes a layer of glare and 'glint' from the sound; tonally it's darkly translucent instead of shiny white gloss, allowing the listener to hear more into the music and appreciate the space between the notes.


IsoTek
Evo3 Initium

PRICE: £65 for 1.5m REVIEWED: HFC 413

IsoTek's entry-level power cable has a distinctive opalescent green finish that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of musical instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.


Russ Andrews
30th Anniversary Yello

PRICE: £65 for 1m REVIEWED: HFC 423

First introduced in the nineties, the Yello benefits from years of research into the effects of mains quality. Employing pure copper conductors, this relaunched cable results in a wider, deeper soundstage and the improvement it brings to instrument focus has to be heard to be believed.



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LEGEND INTERCONNECT CABLE OF THE YEAR	THE CONDUCTOR INTERCONNECT	MS2.3 SPEAKER CABLE	LA PRIMA DONNA INTERCONNECT	SMS2.4 MONOCRYSTAL SPEAKER CABLE
THE MAESTRO INTERCONNECT	CS2.3 SPEAKER CABLE	THE PRODUCER DIGITAL	NUDIVA INTERCONNECT	BIG RED HC POWERCHORD
MS2.3 SPEAKER CABLE	BIG RED UC POWERCHORD	MS2.15 SPEAKER CABLE	BIG RED UC POWERCHORD	SMS2.4 MONOCRYSTAL SPEAKER CABLE
BIG ORANGE POWERCHORD	ES2.3 ULTRA FINE SPEAKER CABLE	CONDUCTOR INTERCONNECT	ES2.3 ULTRA FINE SPEAKER CABLE	ES2.3 ULTRA FINE SPEAKER CABLE
BIG RED HC POWERCHORD	BIG ORANGE POWERCHORD	NUDIVA INTERCONNECT	ULTIMATE GUIDE	THE MAESTRO INTERCONNECT
*****	*****	*****	*****	MS4.45 SPEAKER CABLE

NETWORK AUDIO PLAYERS



Audiolab 6000N Play

PRICE: £450 REVIEWED: HFC 453

Employing the DTS Play-Fi platform (which is not without its foibles), the Audiolab beautifully balances refinement and engagement with an impressive bass response and tonality. Given an operating system update, this has the potential to be class leading. Even so, it still remains the best-sounding streamer available under £500.



Auralic Altair G1

PRICE: £1,900 REVIEWED: HFC 455

Designed as more of a standalone front end than some of Auralic's network products, this streamer with added preamp has pretty much everything you need and little that you don't. Thanks to its effortless cohesion and ability to allow music to flow, the result is one of the best, if not the best streaming options around.



Cambridge Audio Edge NQ

PRICE: £3,500 REVIEWED: HFC 447

Something of a departure from CA's usual fare, this network music player also combines the additional versatility of a DAC and preamp to serve up a sumptuously wide recorded acoustic, with a hugely expansive sound that partners massive punch with great precision for a clean, direct and enjoyable sound.



NAD M33

PRICE: £4,000 REVIEWED: HFC 466

Hot on the heels of 2019's M10, the M33 has raised the bar even further. In its full-size guise it offers the same style, flexibility and ease of use combined with a performance that's just as arresting with analogue sources as it is when streaming. Throw in futureproof MDC updating slots, and you're on to a winner.



Naim ND5 XS 2

PRICE: £2,300 REVIEWED: HFC 454

Delivering Naim's distinctive flare and typically impressive sound – superb low-end drive with texture and presence combined with a delicious sweetness – this Roon-compatible network music player is supremely engineered, overflowing with useful features and capable of a sparkling performance.



Yamaha WXAD-10

PRICE: £150 REVIEWED: HFC 442

One of the smallest options around, this MusicCast network audio player might not look like much, but don't be fooled – it has it where it counts. Tonal balance is neutral; bass is well integrated with good detail; and the space and three dimensionality add to the realism, making it great value for money.



MUSIC SERVERS



Bluesound Vault 2i

£1,100 HFC 452

If you see yourself buying into the BluOS ecosystem favoured by the Canadian brand and its cohorts, this 2TB, server, ripper and player compatible with up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM and MQA files, is a great way of starting off in one room and expanding as your system grows.



Innuos Zenith Mk3

From £3,000 HFC 451

With one of the best interfaces going and a potentially flexible spec, the 4TB, CD ripping Zenith can be used as a Roon Core and delivers an outstanding performance that inspires confidence even for those starting out. It should be right near the top of any shortlist.



Melco N100 EX

£2,000 HFC 462

Following a software update back in December 2019, the N100 became the EX so it's now powered by the excellent Intelligent Music Library system – the best in the business. The sharp lines of the chassis combined with the crisp, clean sound help seal the deal.



Naim Uniti Core

£1,900 HFC 438

Equipped with a CD ripper and 1TB SSD, the Uniti Core takes on an understated role as it handles 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128 music files impeccably. Presentation is pleasingly neutral and it simply lets whatever network audio player is attached get on with the music.



DACS



Alpha Design Labs Stratos

PRICE: £1,315 REVIEWED: HFC 455

Remarkably flexible at the price, the Stratos offers an impressively wide-reaching range of features without compromising sound quality. The soundstage is wide and open with a refined presentation, delicate details are reproduced with breath-taking accuracy and instrument separation and location are absolutely spot on.



Audiolab M-DAC+

PRICE: £800 REVIEWED: HFC 449

While some DACs can dive deeper into a recording, what's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. With its stunning grasp of flow and tempo, there's a welcome warmth to its presentation and its solid three dimensional imaging is second to none.



Chord Electronics Qutest

PRICE: £1,200 REVIEWED: HFC 436

Regardless of file, format, sampling rate or input, this great-sounding DAC allows you to hear things presented in a detailed, intricate and incisive way that absolutely nails the basic emotion of the music. Even disregarding the supreme styling and build, the sound quality alone warrants enthusiastic recommendation.



Copland DAC215

PRICE: £2,000 REVIEWED: HFC 418

Equally at home operating as a headphone amplifier or preamp as it is a DAC, the tube-driven DAC215 highlights an almost tremulous quality in vocals in a relaxed way that allows the music to flow easily and freely for a rich and evocative performance with a seemingly bottomless bass.



Musical Fidelity M6s DAC

PRICE: £1,400 REVIEWED: HFC 449

Like your DACs big, bold and full of features? Look no further than the M6s, which is sonically blessed with a wider, more holographic soundstage, pinpoint imaging that you can reach out and touch and a gift for projecting sonics with the finest low-level detail, cementing realism that only the best models can match.



Mytek Brooklyn Bridge

PRICE: £2,500 REVIEWED: HFC 461

Adding a new network card – with two USB ports, two coaxial and an optical input – so that the Brooklyn DAC effectively becomes a network-capable music player, the Brooklyn Bridge boasts exceptional bass with a clean and highly detailed sound, impressive features for easy operation and superb clarity.



DRAGONFLY COBALT

DAC + PREAMP + HEADPHONE AMP

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

Cobalt's precedent-setting performance is made possible by:

- New ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip with a minimum-phase slow roll-off filter for more natural sound.
- New Microchip PIC32MX274 microprocessor reduces current draw and increases processing speed by 33%.
- Improved power-supply filtering, specifically designed to reduce WiFi, Bluetooth, and cellular noise.
- Includes a form-fitting Carbon-level DragonTail USB-A to USB-C adaptor.

From MP3 to MQA and Hi-Res, DragonFly Cobalt preserves the body, warmth, and natural color in all your music. Experience more beauty at home and everywhere you listen.



audioquest

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

Acoustic Energy AE509

PRICE: £2,300
REVIEWED: HFC 456

Employing a carbon tweeter to shun shrill brightness, the AE509 allows you to listen into instruments on your favourite recordings, sounding dazzlingly fast and frenetic without the slightest hint of grain or sibilance. Meanwhile its curious conjunction of tonal grace and transient pace; handling of lower frequencies; and taut bass from the matching carbon mid/bass drivers make this floorstander a worthy flagship.

**Bowers & Wilkins 603**

PRICE: £1,250
REVIEWED: HFC 448

Regardless of what you play, here's a speaker with the power, bandwidth and bass heft to do full-scale justice to Muse, Mozart and Motörhead. Its low-distortion transparency and 3D imaging conjure up the ambience and atmosphere of the most intimate gig with a tonal palette that's believable rather than manipulative. And all underpinned by a bass performance that delivers presence and vitality.

**DALI Oberon 5**

PRICE: £700
REVIEWED: HFC 447

A simple two-way design, the Oberon 5 is the smaller of two floorstanders positioned two tiers up from DALI's entry-level Spektor range and the sense of enthusiasm, exuberance and fun it displays right from the off is infectious. Requiring little in the way of toe-in towards the listener, its clear and resolute midband results in a fabulously subtle and nuanced performance while its gift for separation, layering and microdynamics is deeply impressive.

**Monitor Audio Gold 300**

PRICE: £4,000
REVIEWED: HFC 453

The benefits the Gold 300 brings to openness, clarity, fine detail and harmonic structure is very special. Although with vividly produced material it can verge on the 'hyper real', this is a consummate crowd pleaser that more than any rival at the price sells an idea of high-end luxury and sonic excellence that's hard to distinguish from the real thing.

**Ophidian P3 Evolution**

PRICE: £5,000
REVIEWED: HFC 451

The Ophidian projects an expansive soundstage with deep and powerful bass. This is one of those rare speakers that has genuine smoothness and warmth. Its balance and oodles of power paint a picture that's so natural and coherent that you almost feel you're breathing the same air as the artist you're listening to. A stunningly talented floorstander, it makes its £5k price seem a snip. Even if your budget is twice the size, it demands to be heard.

**Spendor D7.2**

PRICE: £4,500
REVIEWED: HFC 456

A crisp, open and even-sounding loudspeaker that's impressively engaging and surprisingly dynamic – especially for a floorstander at this price. There's more space around vocals and a lighter more spry sound to cymbals, making for a lifelike sound despite its ability to remain smooth and sophisticated. The D7.2 is a modestly sized, highly capable, do-it-all loudspeaker that's well worth an audition.



LOUDSPEAKER CABLES



Chord Company Epic XL
£600 1.5m, terminated **HFC 450**
Combining elements of Chord's Signature Reference/XL with its Epic speaker cable, the XL bristles with energy and brings fantastic detail to the fore. Subtle elements are captivatingly clear, soundstage depth is enormous and clarity is supremely enhanced.



Chord Company Odyssey X
£150 1m, terminated **HFC 451**
Made from the same materials as the Rumour X (HFC 447), the Odyssey X is designed to bring more control to dynamics and definition, and boy does it deliver. Front-to-back imaging is superb, instruments are well focused and clearly positioned while piano is full and rich.



QED XT25
£85 3m **HFC 434**
Claimed to achieve a lowering of impedance compared with a traditional large cross-sectional area twin-core cable, the XT25 offers up great refinement and engaging musicality. Vocals are clear and full-bodied, silence between phrases is eerily quiet and the noise floor is very low.



True Colours Industries Storm
£221m **HFC 453**
This flexible ribbon cable is 2mm thick, making it ideal for hiding away under the carpet for tidy bi-wire hook-ups, while its tight and well-controlled performance reveals impressive openness with a spacious sound that's full and entirely uncluttered, even during crescendos.



STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS

**Amphion**
Helium510

PRICE: £720 REVIEWED: HFC 454

Amphion's stated aim of avoiding a clear sweetspot is achieved with ridiculous ease while its delivery is spacious with wholly convincing tonality and rich and smooth vocals. Piano shows excellent decay and though bass extension isn't the deepest, it is detailed, fast and superbly integrated with the other frequencies.

**Bowers & Wilkins**
606

PRICE: £550 REVIEWED: HFC 454

Feeling far more sensitive than its claimed 88dB at 8ohm, the 606 presents no challenge for even the most anaemic amplifiers offering a startling balance between top-end sparkle and supreme refinement. With impressive bass weight; superb timing and drive; and top-end precision, it's mighty impressive.

**ELAC**
Vela BS 403

PRICE: £1,750 REVIEWED: HFC 447

The Vela BS 403 splits the atom, generating serious power from a tiny package. And rarely does so much dynamism come with such refinement. It's like a BBC LS3/5a on steroids with an extra high and low octave thrown in. If you've ever felt the need for subwoofers and supertweeters, the ELAC covers those bases.

**Falcon Acoustics**
RAM Studio 20

PRICE: From £2,000 REVIEWED: HFC 446

The RAM Studio 20 clearly favours amps with plenty of grip, especially in the bass. It might not offer forensic levels of detail with which to dissect a recording, but as a wide-bandwidth, high-performance standmount that sounds easy, natural and is dripping with musical finesse, it takes some beating.

**Kudos Audio**
Titan 505

PRICE: From £7,000 REVIEWED: HFC 451

Worthy of its Titan monicker, the 505 extracts a truly room-filling sound from its relatively small dimensions, making it an absolute delight with whatever material you care to feed it. Fans of big, brawny loudspeaker designs that find small cabinets a sonic compromise will be forced to re-evaluate their opinion after hearing it.

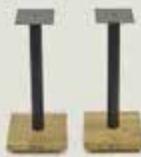
**Q Acoustics**
Concept 300

PRICE: £3,000 REVIEWED: HFC 448

With unexpectedly large amounts of midband detail, a bouncy bottom end and enjoyable musicality, the Concept 300 conjures up a charming sound that puts the accent on civility and smoothness, but never at the expense of musical enjoyment – making it excellent value for money at the price.



LOUDSPEAKER SUPPORTS

**Atacama Audio**
Apollo Cyclone 6

£100 HFC 455

Available in a choice of three sizes so you can get the height of your cabinets correctly positioned to suit your listening position, this stand removes unwanted vibrations from the performance sharpening imaging and instrument focus for a full, refined sound.

**Hi-Fi Racks**
X50

From £180.48 HFC 453

Solidly built, these elegant yet classy speaker stands are available in a choice of flexible customisation options, removing all colouration from the performance and giving the impression the cabinet is floating in mid-air. Great value for money and a simple upgrade.

**IsoAcoustics**
GAIA II

£300 HFC 427

Attaching the GAIA II feet to the underside of your speaker provides a high degree of isolation that gives it the opportunity to breath and display a level of clarity and openness that's easy to hear. Music just sounds right with them in place and the price is right too.

**Townshend Audio**
Seismic Isolation Podium

From £1,400 HFC 426

Placing your loudspeaker on to a Seismic Isolation Podium is a revelation. The way it completely removes its interaction with its surroundings is mind blowing, bringing clarity to the entire frequency range, enabling it to communicate far more effectively.



WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKERS

**Bluesound**
Pulse Flex 2i

PRICE: £300 REVIEWED: HFC 453

With no shortage of lower frequencies, the Pulse Flex 2i's bass extension is controlled, pleasantly quick and has an impressive level of clout to it. Used as a pair, the soundstage is large and effortless underpinned by the aforementioned bass while the connections and range of features provide impressive flexibility.

**Bowers & Wilkins**
Formation Duo

PRICE: £3,500 REVIEWED: HFC 453

The Formation Duo performs the magic trick of revealing new detail in familiar music while delivering a level of insight that's more akin to a studio monitor. There's stunning potency and immediacy; supreme bass speed and impact; rich and three-dimensional vocals; and everything feels unerringly accurate.

**Devialet**
Phantom Reactor 900

PRICE: £2,580 REVIEWED: HFC 456

Unlike any other wireless designs on the market, the distinctive Phantom boasts 900W of peak power via its hybrid Class A/D amp and bass that dives down to a barely believable 18Hz. The result is power and extension that defies physics, but more impressive still is how it performs at low volumes - making it ideal for late-night listening.

**KEF**
LS50 Wireless

PRICE: £2,000 REVIEWED: HFC 433

Fine clarity and focus, a spacious soundstage with stunning image solidity and unfettered musicality make for immersive and hugely enjoyable listening. Best of all, though, is the sense that every fibre and sinew of this system is pulling in the same direction. Wonderful regardless of music or source.

**KEF**
LSX

PRICE: £1,000 REVIEWED: HFC 446

It might not be able to match the muscle and dynamic reach of the LS50 Wireless, but the LSX is cut from the same sonic cloth. Size, style, build, flexibility and sound quality all impress, but it's the active ingredient which enables a performance level that similarly priced passive systems will find hard to match that wins the day.

**Naim**
Mu-so 2nd
Generation

PRICE: £1,300 REVIEWED: HFC 452

A world away from the traditional components Naim is known for, the Mu-so 2nd Generation delivers unfailingly entertaining sonics with hi-fi values and an exceptional musicality. The best one-box speaker system full stop.



ONE-BOX SYSTEMS

**NAD**
M10
£2,200 HFC 451

With its super flexibility, powerful amplifier design, big front panel touchscreen and impressive BluOS platform, this is a supremely stylish offering. Sonically it's a very powerful and refined system while its definition and precision is in ample supply.

**Naim**
Uniti Star
£3,500 HFC 433

Fast, powerful and grippy with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality, the Uniti Star might not have the forensic detail resolution of some similarly priced rivals, but it isn't far off. Otherwise it's practically impossible to find fault at the price.

**Novafidelity**
X14
£690 HFC 446

Deserving of praise for the functionality it manages to squeeze into such a compact and elegant chassis, the X14's well thought out and practical approach will attract those looking to take their first steps into network audio and it makes a greater second-room setup.

**Quad**
Artera Solus
£1,500 HFC 434

Even by Quad's high standards the Artera Solus is unfeasibly talented. Excelling with immediacy, presence, weight, body, scale and authority, it offers not only looks and feels more expensive than it is, but it sounds it too. It deserves to be paired with a fine set of speakers.



TURNTABLES



AnalogueWorks TT Zero

PRICE: £1,500 REVIEWED: HFC 453

Pristine without being bright, the TT Zero has fine tonal discrimination and starts and stops precisely where it should. It is able to unpick all the audio strands with ease, sounding open and airy with plenty of sparkle and bite, a low noise floor, lucid rhythmic gait and impressively clean, controlled and tuneful bass.



MoFi UltraDeck+M

PRICE: £2,500 REVIEWED: HFC 459

Equipped with a MasterTracker MM cartridge, the UltraDeck+M is MoFi's flagship package and fit and finish are superb. Investing in the 367g Super Heavy Weight clamp (£200) is a must, resulting in rock-solid bass, clear and focused top end and the sort of timing and precision associated with direct-drive decks.



Pro-Ject X1

PRICE: £700 REVIEWED: HFC 452

A highly impressive turntable package for the price, the X1 makes music in a happy, engaging and big-hearted way with no obvious weak points to spoil your enjoyment. With its sizeable, open and engulfing sound, it serves as a perfect example of just how good vinyl can sound given half a chance.



Rega Planar 6

PRICE: £1,400 REVIEWED: HFC 427

Partnered with Rega's Ania moving-coil cartridge, the Planar 6 delivers a level of performance that is pretty much untouchable for £1,500. The sense of togetherness is classic Rega, the overall presentation is aided in no small part by the tonal realism while the power and alacrity complete a perfect sonic picture.



Rega Planar 10

PRICE: £4,500 REVIEWED: HFC 456

A masterpiece that is without doubt one of Rega's finest achievements, the Planar 10 manages to deliver a performance that is outstanding even at this lofty price point. Utterly unflappable, it offers incredible detail retrieval combined with a naturally low noise floor to dish up captivating vinyl execution.



Technics SL-1500C

PRICE: £900 REVIEWED: HFC 453

The built-in phono stage is terrific, while the take-no-prisoners sonic personality sounds joyously lively, enthusiastic and 'on it'. Thanks to its legendary torque and stability, it locks down timing and rhythm with start-stop precision and its firm, deep and expressive bass adds unrivalled impetus and authority.



CARTRIDGES


**Audio-Technica
AT-OC9XEN**
£300 HFC 452

This Group Test-winning moving-coil cart utilises an elliptical nude stylus mated to an assembly using two coils rather than one – which is something of an A-T trademark – and balances excellent performance with a useful boost to user friendliness, thanks to its threaded body.


**Hana
ML**
£1,000 HFC 447

With a threaded insert to make fitting easy, the ML is a low-output moving-coil design sat right at the top of Hana's range. Boasting a performance full of energy, presence and a believable sense of delay, it's the depth and fine detail of bass that really impresses here.


**Ortofon
MC Anna Diamond**
£7,250 HFC 463

It's not exactly cheap, but Ortofon's flagship moving-coil cart effortlessly shatters all expectations. From its stunning design and impeccable engineering to the way that it drags even the dullest recordings into sharp relief, this is a very special pick-up indeed.


**Sumiko
Blue Point Special EVO III**
£600 HFC 461

The latest incarnation of the long-standing Blue Point Special moving-coil range, the EVO III is available in high or low output (we tested the former). It provides a stunningly realistic sound that's smooth and effortless yet highly detailed with controlled bass.



PHONO STAGES



Chord Electronics Huei

PRICE: £900 REVIEWED: HFC 459

The Huei's appeal extends from its rock-solid build and playful, sphere-based control system to its impressive knack of extracting the best from a turntable/cartridge combo without being too painfully honest about the ripper aspects of less-than-pristine recordings.



Cyrus Phono Signature

PRICE: £1,200 REVIEWED: HFC 408

A welcome addition to the ranks of high-end phono stages, the Phono Signature is something of a bargain. It delivers on the promise of vinyl as a high-resolution format and the fact it does so while offering class-leading functionality and flexibility makes it very special indeed.



Lindemann Limetree Phono

PRICE: £600 REVIEWED: HFC 441

Offering outstanding levels of performance with moving-magnet cartridges alongside a more than respectable showing with moving-coil options, this engaging performer offers up wonderful tonal richness, propulsive energy and a sense of urgency that engages with upbeat material. And all at a very reasonable price.



Musical Fidelity M6 Vinyl

PRICE: £1,400 REVIEWED: HFC 451

An impressively quiet phono stage, the M6 Vinyl treads an interesting line between accuracy and imparting a little character all of its own. Tonally accurate it has a heady combination of richness and weight that draws you into a performance, while bass response is startlingly good.



Primare R15

PRICE: £900 REVIEWED: HFC 463

With both moving-magnet and moving-coil carts, the R15 is extraordinarily impressive. Not only is it one of the largest phono stages around, but this affordable option combines vanishingly low noise with great transparency and a slightly cool but lean tonal balance. Just keep bad recordings away from it.



Rega Aura

PRICE: £4,000 REVIEWED: HFC 446

This MC-only preamp combines superb engineering and build quality to create an unashamedly high-end phono stage, but what sets it apart from the pack is its balance of accuracy and realism with the ability to deliver musical joy, making it one of the finest phono stages available.



IN-EAR HEADPHONES



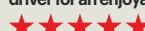
Audeze iSINE 10
£400 HFC 423

A must-have for Apple users, the world's first planar magnetic in-ear is decent with a regular 3.5mm cable but comes into its own when used with iOS devices connected via Lightning, sounding faster and more cohesive than the best dynamic or multiple armature designs.



Oriveti OH500
£500 HFC 451

Combining an airiness with low-end extension that most rivals can only dream of, the OH500's stylish resin enclosures house four Knowles balanced armatures (two for bass and two for the midrange) with an 8mm dynamic bass driver for an enjoyably vivid performance.



Sennheiser IE 80 S BT
£440 HFC 456

An impressive combination of excellent performance, comprehensive Bluetooth aptX HD implementation and Sennheiser's attention to comfort and build make this an exceptionally talented design that is likely to win over many converts to wireless audio.



Shure KSE1200
£1,770 HFC 449

Electrostatic technology might be undeniably costly and not exactly portable, but the KSE1200 compromises on none of the qualities that Shure holds dear to deliver a level of realism, space and involvement that's beyond all but the most supremely talented loudspeakers.



HEADPHONES


Audio-Technica
ATH-M50xBT

PRICE: £180 REVIEWED: HFC 450

Taking its M50x and turning it into a very capable wireless design (thanks to Bluetooth v5.0) without altering its sonic character, Audio-Technica has come up trumps here. Balance and refinement join crunching bass, impressive three dimensionality and decent noise-cancelling to seal the deal.


Bowers & Wilkins
PX7

PRICE: £350 REVIEWED: HFC 459

Although it's no match for a high-end wired design, the noise-cancelling abilities of this wireless closed-back model are ideal for music on the move – offering an elevated listening experience amidst the hustle and bustle of the city. An essential audition if you're serious about enjoying your music out and about.


Dan Clark Audio
Aeon 2 Closed

PRICE: £900 REVIEWED: HFC 462

Available as both open (warmer, fuller tone) and closed options (leaner midrange), the Aeon 2 is a timely update of the Aeon Flow that was so popular back in HFC 435. Its improved planar drivers feature increased damping and conjure up pinpoint detailing, thundering lower frequencies and a deft touch with subtle effects.


Focal
Stellia

PRICE: £2,800 REVIEWED: HFC 452

A welcome addition to the hall of high-end headphone fame, the closed-back Stellia rivals the best open-back competition, bringing new meaning to the word forensic. Imparting a benign character on everything it plays, this vice-free design has rhythmic engagement, endless vitality and depth charge-like bass.


Sennheiser
HD 820

PRICE: £2,000 REVIEWED: HFC 442

Delivering a highly refined performance regardless of source or music type, the HD 820 is one of the best closed-back designs in the business. Top of a long list of positives is its staggering bass, which delivers such tight, punchy and extended low frequencies that it absolutely demands to be given an audition.


Sennheiser
Momentum 3

PRICE: £350 REVIEWED: HFC 455

With a Bluetooth performance that makes it hard to believe this is really a wireless offering, the Momentum might just be the most consistently entertaining performer Sennheiser has ever produced. Excellent design, fabulous features, subsonic bass and impeccable noise cancelling complete the package.



PORTABLE DACS


AudioQuest
DragonFly Cobalt

£270 HFC 463

With a relatively low 24-bit/96kHz sample rate, expectations for the Cobalt aren't high until realising it means there's no need for USB driver software. Native MQA decoding is also supported and the open and richly detailed sound make this the best DragonFly offering yet.


Chord Electronics
Hugo 2

£1,800 HFC 428

An essential audition, the Hugo 2 is not just a portable DAC/headphone amp, but the best hi-fi digital converter available at or near the price. Music ebbs and flows along in an organic and unforced way and it images with stunning pinpoint precision.


Chord Electronics
Mojo

£400 HFC 423

It might be small and have no gain setting adjustment, but the Mojo takes some beating. Its scrupulous accuracy presents what is contained in a recording with no embellishment so that fine detail is extracted with ease, treble energy impresses and stridency remains absent.


iFi Audio

xDSD

£400 HFC 439

Justifying its inclusion on sound alone, the xDSD delivers a wide variety of musical styles with admirable clarity and precision. It's engaging, lively sonics and versatile connectivity make it equally adept for mobile or desktop use and the only minor downside is its battery life.



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Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

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FOR SALE

NAIM Nait XS3 in excellent condition, comes with original packaging and remote. Collection only. £1,900 ono: **07505 583615 (Nottingham)**.

WANTED B&O Beovox S45 speaker bass driver and TDL Studio 1 tweeter as mine are broken. Someone may have a broken speaker, in which case it is easy to remove the drivers: **0208 5798110 or email: joel@counselling.**

SOTM SMS 200Ultra Neo £600, also its partnering power supply PS 500, £300. Both have had very little use, in mint condition, with original boxes and full working order: **07923 047638 or email: dave.drew@talktalk.net (East Yorkshire).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY M6 DAC £895, Firestone 5V power supply £45, matching Firestone Analogue to Digital DAC £45, Meridian black 101b

pre, 104 tuner, 105 (2x mono amps each with power supply) stacked three high in pairs £625: **079687 69595 (Southport)**.

KEF R300 bookshelf speakers, gloss black, immaculate condition, boxed with instructions, can demo, plus Spectral stands, buyer collects £850: **01159 754070/07531 288156 (Nottingham)**.

TECHNICS SL-1210 Mk.2 turntable, right channel needs attention, no lid, no cart, buyer collects £150. Meridian 563 DAC £300 ono. Will post (shipping

to be determined), but collection recommended: **email: ken@kenworthing.com (Shropshire)**.

LINN Sondek LP12 turntable with black ash plinth. Recently serviced by Linn dealer. New suspension, Valhalla drive unit, lid hinges and belt. Packed in original box, collection preferred: £900 or best offer. Linn Ekos tonearm, black, with original wooden box with Allen keys, etc. £970 or best offer: **0780 4500141 or email: straw.graham@gmail.com (Guildford)**.

REGA DAC-R £300 ono, Cambridge Audio CXC CD



MAGNUM Dynalab MD90 analogue tuner in very good condition with cables, all enquires answered, bargain at £650 ono: **01566 776115 or email: nhawke@hotmail.co.uk (Cornwall)**.

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!



GRAHAM AUDIO LS5/9 monitor speakers finished in a natural pine veneer and in very good condition. Comes in original box, but one speaker has a missing grille – I prefer to listen to them without. Also official solid metal stands to match £2,500: **01626 332260 or email: dionricketts9@gmail.com (Devon)**.

Transport £180 ono, both mint condition + Chord Clearway RCA-to-RCA digital cable £35 ono. All bought new in 2018: **07985 781177 or email: colinchantler1@gmail.com (Holyhead)**.

LINN Krystal moving-coil cartridge, four years old, approximately 900 hours of use. Removed from tonearm and checked by House of Linn, £350: **07549 257426 or email: petersharbles20@gmail.com (Lancashire)**.

MARANTZ PM6006 UK Edition amplifier in black, as new boxed £200: **07583 078744 (Nottingham/Derby)**.

QUAD Vena II as new, all original packaging £375: **07398 642586 or email: johnakeanelangleym@gmail.com (Heathrow area)**.

BEYERDYNAMIC A2 Headphone Amplifier excellent condition and full working order £495: **07923 047638 or email: Dave.drew@talktalk.net**

SONY Professional WM-D6C cassette player/recorder with black leather cover & mic £550 ono. SME Record Clamp suits SME Models 10, 15A, 20 and 30 turntables £116: **01483 472650 (Woking, Surrey)**.

REGA moving-magnet phono stage, boxed as new £125. Rega

headphone amp, boxed as new £125. Eight pairs new gold-plated 4mm banana plugs £2 pair. Shark speaker cable, quadruple, brand new on reel: **07531 288156 (Nottingham)**.

AUDEZE Deckard headphone amplifier/USB DAC, mint condition and boxed, includes all cables and accessories plus Atlas Integra Superior 0.75m interconnect cable boxed for sale £475 ono: **01732 490492 (East Malling, Kent)**.

NORD ACOUSTICS NC500 mono amps, silver, all the upgrades including brand new power supplies, WBT copper binding posts, OCC internal speaker cabling. £700 the pair: **07494 456770**.

NAIM ND5 XS streamer/DAC with internet radio, pristine condition, owned from new. Complete with original box, cables, remote control, manual and purchase receipt. Purchased 2013 £1,050: **07951 537138 or email: stevehind455@aol.com (Doncaster, South Yorkshire)**.

LINN LP12/Itock LVII, fitted with Ortofon Quintet Red cartridge; recent Hercules power supply and motor; new Cirkus bearing, subchassis and arm board; and Afromosia

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Hi-Fi Choice

plinth and lid. Spare new belt, serviced by House of Linn £1,650: **01691 610589 or email: sankast@hotmail.com (Shropshire).**

ATC SCM40 for sale, new type, two-and-a-half years old, perfect condition, three-and-a-half years warranty left £2,000 ono: **01981 242067 or email: treesurglee@aol.com (Monmouthshire).**

MICHELL GyroDec Bronze turntable, DC motor, HR PSU, Origin Live RB250 tonearm, Dynavector DV-20XL cartridge, £1,000. Naim Stageline S MC phono stage, £100. Buyer collects: **07900 320318 (SE London/Kent).**

RECORDS for sale, eg: opera (14); James Last (6); million sellers (8). Little used system - CD; tape; streamer. Make an offer: **01661 823606 or email: grant.darras@gmail.com (Newcastle/Tyne area).**

WORLD DESIGNS KEL84 integrated valve amplifier with upgrades, just serviced. Excellent condition/slight damage to casing £525. Arcaydis EB1S oak bookshelf speakers £250. Pro-Ject The Classic turntable, Rosenut with Ortofon Silver cartridge. Unused/boxed £425: **01159 754070 (Nottingham).**

MANA ACOUSTICS eight-tier equipment rack complete with SoundStage £600. Buyer collects: **07900 320318 (SE London/ Kent).**

QUAD 67 CD player, excellent condition: £300. Marantz CD-17 CD player VGC: £250. Marantz SA7001 SACD player VGC: £250. Marantz CD-17 with



NAIM Nait 5SI integrated amplifier £495. Nait CD5SI CD player £550. Both in superb condition. Very light use since purchased new June 2015. All original packaging manuals etc: **07884 952389 or email: jackson114@btinternet.com (Kent).**



USHER S520 standmount speakers, birchwood finish, boxed, owned from new £100: **01825 722936 or email: stewartandjoy@gmail.com (Sussex).**

noisy CD tray hence £100: **01895 625636 or email: bryanwebb3@aol.com (Uxbridge, West London).**

GATO AUDIO DIA-400S NPM integrated amplifier/DAC, 400W/8ohm, £5,500 (bought last year), sale for a good reason: **01661 823606 or email: grant.darras@gmail.com (Ponteland).**

B&W RMT60 surround speaker package, five MT1 mid/upper speakers complete with all mounts and PV1 sub. With original boxes and manuals. Two MT1 stands also available. Good condition with some cables £950, collection only: **07801 4543595 or email: Jkmarsh72@live.co.uk (Kent).**

PROAC Response 1 standmount speakers, ash, black, excellent condition, boxed £670. Atacama stands, unmarked, black £40. Audio Innovations L2 preamp, recently serviced, excellent condition £380.

BK Electronics Gemini subwoofer, excellent condition £80. Van den Hul CS-122 hybrid speaker cable, banana plugs £55: **01772 780976 (Lancashire).**

CELESTION 100 loudspeakers, walnut veneer, immaculate condition with all original packaging and documents. One owner since new, can demo but collection only £250: **email: timmitesttube@hotmail.com (Ipswich).**

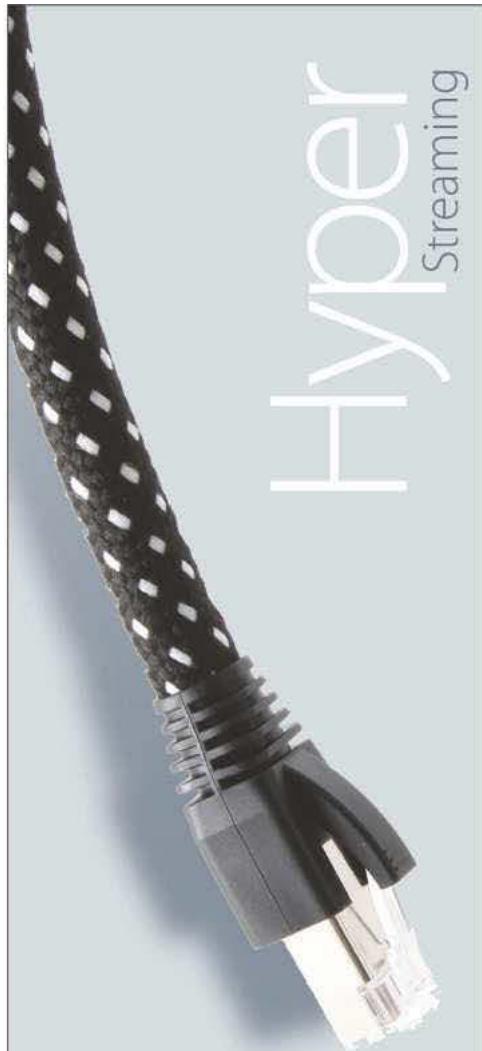
AUDIOQUEST Rocket 44 loudspeaker cable, 2.0m stereo pair with factory terminated silver banana plugs. Approximately four years old, but in excellent condition, boxed as original £125: **01953 607658 (Norfolk).**

PMC twenty5.26 walnut loudspeakers, three months old, pristine condition, full packaging, and manuals: £4,000: **07494 456770.**

REGA RP8 turntable plus Dynavector cartridge in immaculate condition, owned from new and very little use (hence reason for sale), all original packaging and manual. Detailed pictures on request, £1,000: **email: stemar2@me.com.**

MARANTZ ST7001 DAB/FM/AM tuner, boxed, £100. Yamaha KX-580SE cassette deck, boxed, little use £100. Buyer collects: **07900 320318 (SE London/Kent).**

PROAC Tablette 2000 speakers in cherry veneer, excellent condition £250: **07398 642586 or email: johnakeanelangley@gmail.com (Berkshire).**



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Hi-Fi Choice

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The Music Streaming Player

Uniti Atom



AirPlay 2



TIDAL

Made in
BritainSpotify
Connect

Qobuz



Bluetooth®

“A triumph of both style and substance. This is hi-fi for the 21st Century”

Stuff

“Sets the standard for audio quality”

Forbes

“A mighty plug-in-and-play music system that just needs speakers”

The Times

Uniti Atom is a compact music-streaming player that helps you hear more from your favourite music and radio stations. Built-to-last in Britain, it combines beautiful design with stunning performance and all the streaming features you need.

It can even boost your TV sound, too.



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Joining the outstanding Krell line of audio components, the K-300i integrated amplifier is designed to meet all the demands of the modern music lover. It's elegant, flexible, can be used with practically any loudspeaker. It's a simple approach to music replay, but with the power and scale needed to make your music dance into life.

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