

"People look to us for inspiration" A *Flashback* manifesto from The Cult

Artistic iFi's GO pod Max wearable Bluetooth DAC



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **534** December 2025



BUYING GUIDE
100+ Essential Components
p104

VIVA DIVA

Just landed! Indiana Line's Diva 6 floorstanders are mighty towers of power

UK HI-FI SHOW *LIVE*

Full five-page report from the high-end hi-fi gathering at Ascot

FORMIDABLE!

Wharfedale's EVO 5.4 three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

Naim For Bentley

We take "The world's best in-car sound system" for a road test

NEWS SPECIAL:

Launches from Philips Audio, Pro-Ject, Arcam, Campfire, FiiO, Exposure, DALI, Kensington Audio & more...

QOBUZ PLAYLIST

Kinks, Gorillaz, Traffic, The Orb & many more...

COMPANY CONFIDENTIAL

Chord Company: top gear connectors

LEGENDARY



Acoustic Energy's AE1 40th Anniversary Edition

SOPHISTICATED



Nagaoka's MP-700 moving-permalloy cartridge

EXTRAORDINARY



Unitra's GSH-630 Fryderyk direct-drive turntable

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Welcome

hifichoice.com Issue No. 534 December 2025



53
IK Multimedia
ARC ON-EAR



58
Wharfedale
EVO 5.4

Musicreviews



88
Wednesday
Bleeds

Picture credit: Martina Gonzalez Bertello (Wednesday)

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!



Taking our cue from the recent UK Hi-Fi Show *Live*, where brands from all over the globe assembled to show off their high-end wares (see our five-page roundup starting on p38), this issue proudly sources its contents from the very best of the UK and some rather farther-flung regions as well.

Among our reviews you'll find the Nagaoka MP-700 cartridge from Japan, Poland's Unitra GSH 630 Fryderyk affordable direct-drive turntable, the classy ELAC Concentro 2.0 M 807 four-way floorstanders from Germany and, from Italy, IK Multimedia's ARC ON-EAR headphone amp/DAC and our cover star, Indiana Line's Diva 6 floorstanders.

While political harmony between nations isn't exactly at a high point right now, the hi-fi industry continues to thrive on cultural exchange and the creative benefits of such collaborations are perfectly evinced by this month's *Company Confidential*. Wiltshire's Chord Company (p74) was originally founded in a home in Salisbury in direct response to demand from an overseas distributor wanting high-quality interconnects for use with Naim Audio amps. Today Chord Company is internationally revered, going from strength to strength – just one example of what can happen when we all decide to work together.

Enjoy the issue

Steve Sutherland Editor

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Hi-Fi Choice

Contents

hifichoice.com Issue No. 534 December 2025

BUYING GUIDE
100+ essential components
p104

NEWS & OPINION

6 Audiofile
The latest news on the hottest products from the world of hi-fi coming your way

79 Opinion
Our experts say it as they see it as they discuss the biggest issues of the day

82 Letters
Put your points of view and queries on audio matters to our team of experts

88 Music Reviews
The month's essential new CD, vinyl and hi-res releases given a work out

100 Qobuz Playlist
HFC's pick of the best happening tunes to stream in hi-res from Qobuz

READER SERVICES

71 Back Issues
Missed a copy of *HFC*? Look no further

104 Buying Guide
Our hottest hi-fi component picks

118 Reader Classifieds
Sell your unwanted hi-fi for FREE here

130 Next Issue
The sonic treats to look out for next month

FEATURES

38 Show Report
Everything you need to know about what was hot at the recent UK Hi-Fi Show *Live*

68 Showdown
Which sounds better: the world's best in-car system or one of our reviewer's home setup?

74 Company Confidential
In business for 40 years, Chord Company is the interconnect and accessories king

120 Flashback
It's 1985 and The Cult have plenty to say as they make a move for the mainstream

127 Reasons To Be Cheerful
Our pick of the most exciting things coming your way this month



Reasons To Be Cheerful
Triangle Burgundy speakers

AUDIOFILE





Company Confidential: Chord Company



Flashback: The Cult

CONTENTS
DECEMBER 2025



57
Apple
AirPods Pro 3

"Premium kit from around the globe was on display and demo for thousands of hi-fi nuts eager to experience, buy or just gawp in amazement at goods within earshot"

The UK Hi-Fi Show *Live* show report p38

TESTED THIS MONTH



48
Indiana Line Diva 6



54
Unitra GSH-630 Fryderyk



62
ELAC Concentro 2.0 M 807 (*Exotica*)



47
Nagaoka MP-700



102
TCI Podium 1

REVIEWS
Kit testing

47 Nagaoka
MP-700 moving-permalloy cartridge

48 Indiana Line
Diva 6 three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

50 Acoustic Energy
AE1 40th Anniversary two-way standmount loudspeaker

53 IK Multimedia
ARC ON-EAR headphone amplifier/DAC

54 Unitra
GSH-630 Fryderyk direct-drive turntable

57 Apple
AirPods Pro 3 Bluetooth in-ear headphones

58 Wharfedale
EVO 5.4 three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

60 iFi Audio
GO pod Max wearable Bluetooth DAC

62 ELAC
Concentro 2.0 M 807 three-way floorstanding loudspeaker (*Exotica*)

CHOICE EXTRAS

102 Kimber Kable
PBJ interconnects

102 True Colours Industries
Podium 1 equipment platform

Picture credit Lynn Goldsmith (The Cult)

Never miss an issue – turn to p72 for our latest subs offer

Audiofile

THE LATEST INDUSTRY NEWS...

Ton up!

Plenty of new celebratory releases from Philips Audio

PRICE: £30-£400 **AVAILABLE:** NOW/2026 **WEB:** TPVISION.COM



PHILIPS AUDIO IS 100 years old and the first of the brand's planned Century celebration campaign comes this month comprising the launch of its five-product Retro range, which includes two turntable-based all-in-one systems, a new DAB/FM portable radio and a brace of new headphones.

Philips describes The Tina (Philips V9000, above right) as the world's most powerful, all-in-one integrated turntable system, offering a claimed 120W RMS power into a 2.1 configuration featuring two 25mm tweeters, two 65mm midrange drivers and a dedicated 115mm bass reflex subwoofer. It also includes a DAB+/FM tuner, USB Playback and RCA Aux audio-input. Components include a two-speed precision belt-drive, solid aluminium diecast platter, extruded aluminium straight arm – with an adjustable counterweight – and a replaceable Audio-Technica MM cartridge. The system can also be expanded for a wider soundstage by adding external Bluetooth speakers and there's a 6.3mm headphone socket. It's priced at £400.

The Stevie (Philips V3000, right) is an entry level all-in-one turntable system with a three-speed, belt-driven turntable featuring a replaceable Audio-Technica MM cartridge. The system includes digital sound control and 12W RMS power output into two 65mm full-range, bass reflex speakers. Alternative audio options include streaming via Bluetooth 5.4, with compatibility for both the SBC and LC3 codecs, and audio-in for connection to mobile music players. Users can also listen with wired headphones via the 3.5mm connector.

The soundstage can be expanded by adding external Bluetooth speakers via the Stevie's BT out facility, while an aux out option is designed to allow easy system building and it can all be set up via the Philips Entertainment App. It's priced at £130.

The Philips Entertainment App allows both The Tina and The Stevie to stream music via BT 5.4 with Auracast and compatibility with SBC and LC3 codecs. It also provides independent digital sound, treble and bass control.

The Janet (Philips V2000, above) is a portable radio with DAB+/FM and comes in a classic Fifties' rounded design measuring 180 x 100 x 60mm (WxHxD). There's a claimed 5W RMS power output and a 65mm full-range driver. It's controlled by a large knob and touch-sensitive buttons – including 20 FM and 20 DAB radio presets – plus a 2.4in colour TFT display.

Listeners can also stream from their mobile device using Bluetooth 5.4 with compatibility for both SBC and AAC codecs. The Janet can be used as an alarm clock offering a sleep timer and choice of two alarms. Philips says the internal battery is easily replaceable and offers a claimed 15 hours of playback, which can be fully recharged in 3.5 hours. It's priced at £70.

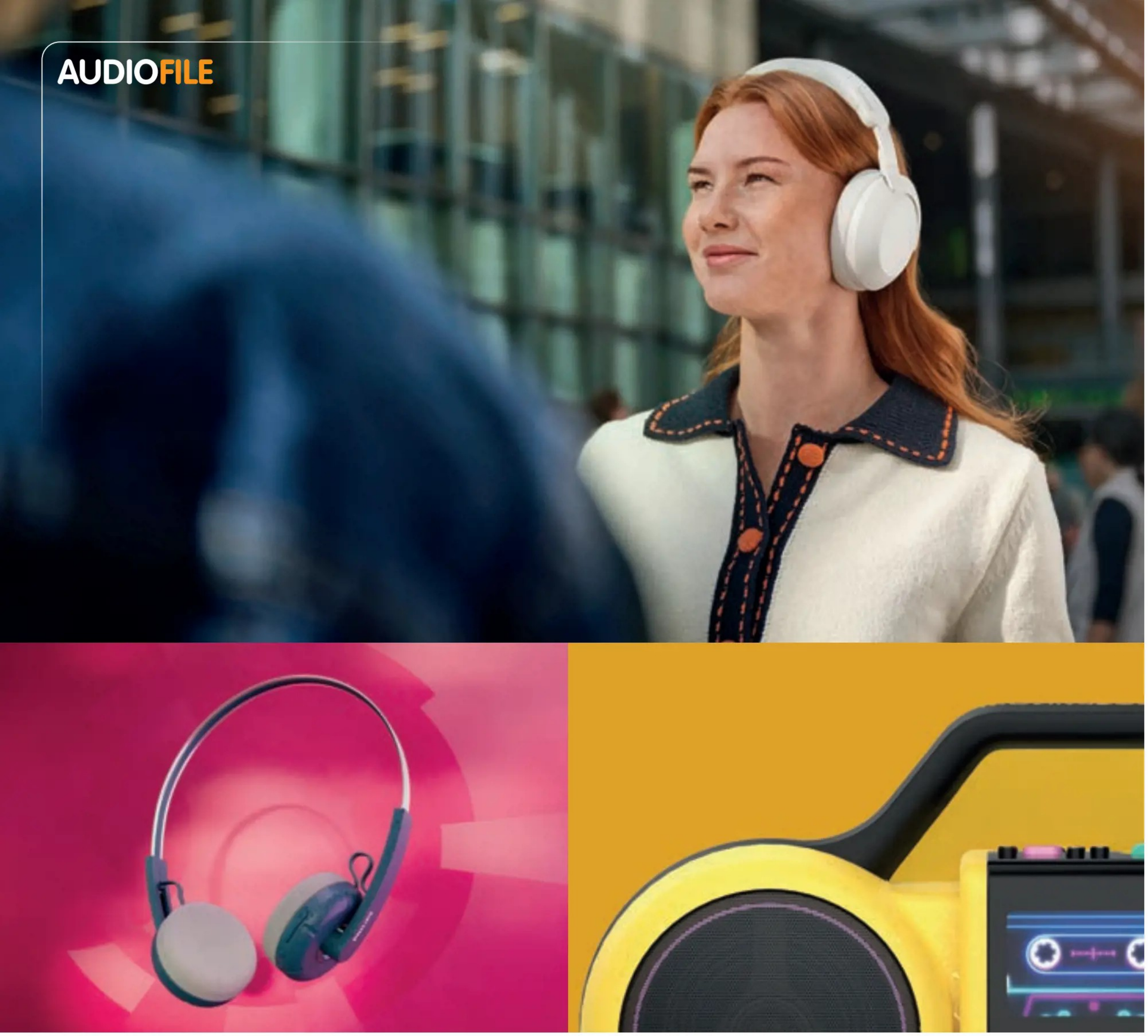
The Freddie (Philips SHP9500CY, right) is a retro-styled, open-backed, over-ear wired headphone featuring 50mm neodymium drivers and a steel headband with a double-layered cushion. It comes with a 3M detachable connection cable and is priced at £100.

The Ringo (Philips H2000, overleaf with pink background) is a lightweight on-ear headphone




PHONO





available in a choice of three colours – Deep Black, Crystal Teal and Silk White. It includes an adjustable headband and two sets of spare ear-cushions. Philips says the retro design hides a modern specification including 40mm drivers, wireless multipoint connectivity via Bluetooth 5.4 and up to 26-hours of playback are claimed. A quick charge facility gives an extra six-hours of use in just 15 minutes. Call reception is aided by an AI mic and The Ringo is also compatible with the Philips Headphones app. It costs £30.

Coming your way in 2026

The four-model Moving Sound range will be the second introduction in Philips Audio's Century Celebration. Planned for launch in the second quarter of 2026, products in the range will include two portable speakers and two headphone models all available with the company's classic Yellow (above right) or a more discreet Black finish.

The MS80 – aka The Tube – portable speaker measures 510 x 200 x 165mm (WxHxD) and features a built-in carry handle and integrated shoulder strap. It boasts a claimed 140W RMS power into two 130mm midrange drivers and two 40mm tweeters. Bass is via two side-firing passive bass radiators plus there's Moving Sound Bass+ technology.

The Tube offers Bluetooth 5.5 connectivity or the option of music via USB audio playback with Auracast for multi-speaker arrangements. Setup and control are achieved either via the built-in colour display – that also shows an animated cassette to accompany music plus The Tube's built-in light show – or the Philips Entertainment App. Battery life is a claimed 24 hours, there's the option to use The Tube as a power bank and it will arrive with an IP67 waterproof rating.

The MS50 – aka The Roller – measures 380 x 200 x 120mm (WxHxD) and comes with a built-in handle. Power output is a claimed 60W RMS into two midrange drivers and two tweeters, with bass via two passive radiators and the inclusion of the Moving Sound Bass+ system.

The Roller has Bluetooth 5.5 connectivity and can play music via USB audio playback with Auracast for multi-speaker setups. The setup is the same as the Tube, boasting the same 24 hours playback with the option to use the speaker as a power bank. It will also be covered by the IP67 waterproof rating.

The MS5 headphones include Spatial Audio plus Hybrid noise cancelling supplied by an array of six mics. Multipoint connection and touch controls enable device switching and operation on the fly while Auracast and Swift Pair plus control are featured via the Philips Headphone App – which can be customised for a Moving Sound personal touch.

Battery life is a claimed 48 hours (ANC off) via the charging case that includes a display with the signature Moving Sound cassette animation. There is also a rapid charge mode, which gives an extra two hours playback after 10 minutes. It will come IP54-rated dust and sweat proof.

The MS1 headphones offer wireless connection and a built-in AI mic for calls with reduced background noise. It has 40mm drivers and there's a claimed 26 hours of play time. Featuring an adjustable headband, the MS1 comes with two sets of ear cups and is available in the classic Moving Sound Yellow or Black, both with a Neon Pink insert. Control comes via the Philips Headphone App, which can be personalised with Moving Sound skin for the personal touch. Prices for the Moving Sound range are yet to be announced. ▶

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The EISA Award-winning DP-3000NE premium direct drive turntable, DCD-3000NE Reference Series SACD player, and PMA-3000NE 2-channel integrated amplifier unite precision engineering with timeless design to deliver music in its most authentic form—from the warmth of vinyl to the clarity of high-resolution digital.



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HI-FI SYSTEM
Denon DP-3000NE, DCD-3000NE & PMA-3000NE

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Further future Philips launches include the H8000E (top two pics) lightweight, midrange, over-ear, wireless ANC headphone with a folding design. It comes in a choice of Black or White and uses bespoke 40mm drivers with ceramic coating and woven silk suspension. Hi-res performance is available via LDAC and wired connections, while Spatial Audio is also available via the Philips Headphone App.

Featured are five integrated microphones for adaptive ANC, three of which are AI mics designed for noise-free calling. The battery life is a claimed 50 hours ANC playback with a rapid charge giving eight hours playback after 10 minutes. There's multipoint Bluetooth 5.4 connectivity and Auracast plus the headphones comply with Google Fast Pair and Microsoft Windows Swift Pair. Price is tbc.

Last, but by no means least, both the new Fidelio FT1 turntable and FS3 active wireless speakers will be available in the first quarter of 2026 and can be purchased separately or together as a system.

The FT1 (above right) is a two-speed, belt-driven Bluetooth-enabled turntable that includes a front-mounted tray-loading CD player. It features an aluminium diecast platter, rubber slip mat, removable dust cover, extruded counterweighted aluminium straight tonearm and replaceable Audio-Technica MM cartridge.

Pay and display

A dimmable LED display shows key information including source and volume level, while a clock is displayed when the FT1 is in standby. It can be made part of a traditional hi-fi setup, via a wired RCA connection from the onboard phono stage to the line-level input on an amplifier. The FT1 also features a 3.5mm headphone jack.

Alternatively, the FT1 will pair with wireless speakers or headphones via Bluetooth 5.4 with the option of LC3 codec compatibility for high-quality audio. The FT1 can also broadcast vinyl or CD playback to compatible speakers via Auracast. It includes both physical controls for source selection including Bluetooth, Auracast and CD playback or the choice of smart controls via the Philips Entertainment app including a virtual remote and source selection.

The compact FA3 wireless active speakers (above left) each feature bi-amplification and an active crossover for delivery of a claimed 2x 50W RMS power into a 130mm glass fibre mid/bass driver and a 25mm titanium tweeter. The FA3 has a full suite of connections for wired sources including a USB-C port, RCA AUX-in, optical in and HDMI ARC. Wireless connectivity includes Bluetooth 5.4 with support for LDAC and LC3 codecs, while Auracast allows it to be part of a multi-speaker setup.

The FA3 can be operated via the supplied remote control or the Philips Entertainment App. The speakers come in a Piano-Black finish with rounded magnetic removable speaker grilles featuring acoustically transparent fabric. Pricing for both will be confirmed nearer time of launch. ▶

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Discover more online







Assets plus

A trio of British integrated amp updates

PRICE: £750-£1,700 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ARCAM.CO.UK

BRITISH COMPANY ARCAM has added to its Radia Series with the release of the A5+, A15+ and A25+, a trio of integrated amplifiers built on the DNA of the outgoing A5, A15 and A25 with upgraded circuitry, refined components and intelligent power management. Each amp incorporates Arcam's latest Bluetooth 5.4 platform, featuring Snapdragon Sound (aptX Lossless), LE Audio and Auracast, allowing one-to-many wireless playback without pairing.

Both the A15+ and A25+ now include HDMI eARC. The Class G-powered A25+ also boasts a precision-cut glass front panel that complements the company's ST25 streamer (*HFC* 529), a new transformer with dedicated winding for the digital and DAC circuitry, double linear regulation in the analogue power supplies and further power and mains filtering refinements to lower impedance and enhance overall clarity.

Arcam claims the transformer upgrades in both the A15+ and A25+ further reduce unwanted current within the chassis while the A5+ benefits from component refinements that cut PCB interference and lower power supply impedance. The A25+ design also incorporates an ESS9018 DAC.

The company reveals that noise reduction remains a key engineering focus and by selectively powering down idle components, the overall noise floor has significantly decreased. For example, the DAC PCB is powered down when an analogue input is used; the Bluetooth and HDMI modules are powered off with the Autoswitch features disabled; and the trigger input is powered down when no cable is connected – all measures introduced to contribute to: "a cleaner power supply environment".

In more detail, the A5+ features 2x 50W Class AB power and a wide range of digital and analogue inputs, including a tuned MM phono stage. Now with Auracast and upgraded Bluetooth 5.4, including support for Snapdragon Sound and reduced-noise power supply it's priced at £750.

The A15+ has been created to provide more muscle for larger rooms and tower speakers. It provides 2x 80W Class AB amplification, HDMI eARC for TV integration and all the wireless upgrades of the A5+. It's priced at £1,200.

The A25+ is the flagship Radia+ integrated, delivering 2x 100W of Class G power, an additional DAC, USB-C input and HDMI eARC. It's priced at £1,700.

Star struck

Celeb-endorsed German headphones

PRICE: €1,300 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** LOEWE.TV

GERMAN BRAND LOEWE has introduced leo, its first ever over-ear headphones – which are being marketed by footballer Kylian Mbappé and DJ/producer David Guetta.

Loewe reveals that the new 'phones integrate a top-quality DAC, powerful amplification, precision 50mm drivers and full hi-res codec support into a fold-flat design made for mobility and longevity. The driver features a diaphragm crafted from OCE (Olefin Composite Elastomer) – a lightweight and durable material it says delivers: "clear vocals, detailed highs and smooth, controlled bass, ensuring a balanced and immersive listening experience".

With adaptive noise cancellation, transparency mode and support for Hi-Res Audio Wireless, Spatial Audio, Dolby Atmos and Bluetooth LE Audio, leo also boasts LC3+ at 24-bit/96kHz. Loewe's exclusive Mimi Sound Personalisation, accessible through the Loewe app, tailors playback to each listener's unique hearing profile, while rotary dials and touch controls offer alternative usability.

Smart features include voice assistant support, real-time AI translation and multipoint connectivity with a claimed battery life of up to 65 hours. The headphones come in an anodised aluminium frame, with padded leather cushions.

For collectors of bling with cash to burn, Loewe has partnered with luxury jeweller Jacob & Co. to create the leo – bespoke edition. Limited to just 10 pieces worldwide, each handcrafted headset is set with around 12 carats of gemstones, priced in the six-figure range.

The regular leo comes in Midnight Blue and Moonlight Beige finishes with a hard case and additional leather lamb bag. The Loewe leo app is required for some applications. There's one year free usage with 30,000 interactions after which subscription will cost €8 a month.



Music makers

UK newbie's "musician-assembled" MC carts

PRICE: £600-£3,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: KENSINGTONAUDIO.CO.UK

KENSINGTON AUDIO MADE its official debut at the recent UK Hi-Fi Show *Live* showing off its array of moving-coil cartridges. The company reveals that: "each model is hand-assembled in the UK by musicians, not machines – those who understand not only how music should sound, but how it should feel. This musician-led approach sets Kensington apart, delivering 'The Sound of Distinction – from the world's great stages to your stylus'."

The launch collection features a five-model lineup, from entry-level to flagship. It starts with the C-500 at £600 which is described as: "expressive and accessible, with elliptical stylus and aluminium cantilever for warm, distortion-free sound". Then there's the C-600 at £850, featuring: "a boron cantilever and elliptical stylus, offering precision, clarity and lifelike focus". The £1,500 C-700 offers: "extended bandwidth and refined dynamics, balancing technical performance with emotional engagement". The C-800 costs £2,000 and has a ruby cantilever with ultra-pure copper coils delivering: "tonal richness, depth and holographic space". Finally, there's the flagship C-900 at £3,000, which has a sapphire cantilever, offers a claimed 30kHz extended frequency response and: "absolute resolution – a masterwork of musical truth".

"Our vision was never to build just another cartridge," said Kevin Edwards, owner of Kensington Audio, "We wanted to create instruments that honour the performance itself – cartridges that musicians would trust to carry their art into people's homes. That's why every Kensington cartridge is assembled by musicians. It's about preserving the performance, not just reproducing the sound."

Kensington Audio is part of the Talk Electronics family.



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New convert

Desktop DAC/ amp from China

PRICE: £280 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** FIIO.COM

FIIO HAS ANNOUNCED the launch of the K13 R2R, its desktop DAC/amp featuring the latest discrete resistor ladder decoding technology, an ultra-low noise architecture and desktop-class driving power.

The K13 R2R's resistor network is paired with FiiO's proprietary error correction algorithm in an effort to ensure precise matching, linearity and ultra-low distortion. It integrates an FPGA + DSP system that manages digital signal processing, clocking and oversampling, and the unit supports PCM up to 1536kHz and DSD1024.

Boasting 2,400mW of power, selectable gain levels allow users to fine-tune the output for different headphones and connectivity includes balanced XLR and 4.4mm headphone outputs, a single-ended 6.35mm headphone jack and balanced and single-ended line outs for active monitors or external amps.

The company explains: "Equipped with XMOS XU316 USB receiver, it supports USB, optical, coaxial and I²S inputs, making it compatible with PCs, streamers, CD transports and more. An OLED display with intuitive UI ensures effortless control of input selection, gain, filters and output modes.

"Low-noise LDO regulators and dual-independent power supplies guarantee isolation and stability. Premium film capacitors and precision resistors deliver consistency in the R2R ladder. An all-aluminium chassis with precision CNC machining ensures both durability and heat dissipation and the knurled volume knob has been engineered for precise, tactile control."

The display and menu system give instant feedback on input, sample rate and filter settings while a full suite of digital filters allows users to tailor the sound to their preference. The FiiO Control app provides full control and access to PEQ control so users can create their own sound profiles.

The K13 R2R comes in Black and Silver, measures 210 x 188 x 42mm (WxHxD, including feet) and weighs 980g.

Spin doctors

A brace of new turntables



PRICE: £4,350-£10,600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** PROJECT-AUDIO.COM HENLEYAUDIO.CO.UK

HENLEY AUDIO, THE UK distributor for Pro-Ject Audio Systems, has announced the UK availability of two new turntables: the Signature 12.2 (above right), Pro-Ject's new flagship and the Classic Reference (below). Both debuted at The UK Hi-Fi Show *Live*.

The Signature 12.2 is assembled from more than 100 individually CNC-machined parts – all made inhouse – with all metal parts hand-polished before final assembly. Its hand-painted MDF chassis is finished with ten layers of Piano Black lacquer, rounded at the edges to reduce standing waves, and it sits on newly designed conical-tipped spring-loaded feet adjustable from the top of the chassis for levelling.

At its heart lies a 10.5kg aluminium platter, precision CNC-machined as a base before recycled vinyl records are glued on top to provide the mat. This 'sandwich' is baked and precision-balanced in an effort to enhance resonance control. Beneath it, an inverted ceramic ball-bearing with magnetic support is used for ultra-quiet running. A new 12in aluminium tonearm uses a three-point pivot bearing – a switch from its predecessor's uni-pivot system – which the company claims delivers greater stability, less friction and better handling of today's heaviest MC carts. It's priced at £10,600.

The Classic Reference builds on the company's Classic EVO and the enhancements developed for Pro-Ject's limited-edition 175 Vienna Philharmonic turntable. While the 175 remains on sale, the Classic Reference brings that design and engineering ethos to a wider audience. It features Pro-Ject's EVO 9 AS HG tonearm with ultra-low friction ABEC-7 cardanic bearings in an aluminium housing, paired with an SME connector for quick cartridge swaps. The aluminium platter is precision-machined and damped with TPE, sitting atop an MDF/aluminium sandwich chassis with TPE-suspended sub-chassis for isolation. It includes both traditional RCA outputs and balanced XLR sockets.

Inside each deck, a precision DC-driven AC generator powers the motor and creates what the company claims is a completely clean sine wave, ensuring ultra-clean power and remarkably stable speed. It's priced at £4,350 for the Piano/Silver finish and £5,200 for Acacia/Brass. ▶



“Seriously designed, properly equipped and positioned at a competitive price.”

- Pierre Stemmelin, on-mag.fr



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The great outdoors

Late addition for enjoying music in the open air

PRICE: £370 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** TRIANGLEHIFI.COM

STRANGE TIMING, BUT still… French hi-fi specialist Triangle has announced the release of its GARDEN 7, a weatherproof speaker specially designed for outdoor use on a patio, near a swimming pool or on a terrace. Featuring UV-treated polypropylene casing so it can withstand all kinds of weather and stay outside all year round, it provides 360° sound diffusion and comes in a choice of two colours – Green and Grey – with built-in LED lighting.

It's a passive loudspeaker featuring a two-way coaxial driver fitted with a 25mm poly-etherimide (PEI) dome tweeter on a 160mm polypropylene cone, all specially designed for outdoor use. Triangle says that the speakers cover a wide frequency range from 63Hz to 20,000Hz, offering 60W of power handling and a voltage selector for use with all amplifiers.

The speakers are also fitted with a 12V transformer for connection to a power line. Equipped with a 100V-compatible power selector, Triangle says it enables signal distribution over long distances and optimised power management – ideal for multi-speaker systems.

The GARDEN 7 measures 330 x 530 x 270mm (WxHxD) and weighs in at 3.8kg.



The sound and vision of Scandinavia

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Allt-i-Ett ("all-in-one" in Norwegian and Swedish) offers a complete high-performance sound system for those who may not have the space, budget, or even desire for separate components, as well as for those who already enjoy a full-scale audio system but want uncompromised sound in other rooms of the home.

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EISA AWARD Best Product 2025-2026
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Dynaudio Confidence 20A

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PRICE: £720-£1,970 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: RUSSANDREWS.COM

RUSS ANDREWS IS bringing Kimber Kable's new Fenix In-Ear Monitor cable to the UK. Fenix (pronounced Phoenix) is based on the Kimber Axios headphone cables and can be fitted with MMCX, A2DC and two-pin connectors to suit the majority of IEMs. For hook up to the headphone amp, termination is possible with a comprehensive variety of connectors including: 3.5mm and 6.3mm TRS; 4.4mm TRRS Balanced, four-pin XLR Balanced and 2x three-pin XLR Balanced.

Kimber has made Fenix in three variants, the first being CU (pure copper) with 8x 24AWG conductors in a braided arrangement. A hybrid model – the Fenix HB – utilises 4x 24AWG pure silver conductors and 4x 24AWG pure copper. For the ultimate in performance, the AG (silver) version features 8x 24AWG pure silver conductions arranged in an innovative woven design that has been developed specially for this cable type.

Due to the many variations in connectors and cable length, the Fenix cables are hand-crafted to order, with a four-week lead time but are still covered by the standard Russ Andrews 60-day money-back guarantee.

Example prices are as follows: 1.2m CU 6.3mm TRS to MMCX Connectors £720, 1.2m HB 6.3mm TRS to MMCX Connectors £1,430, 1.2m AG 6.3mm TRS to MMCX Connectors, £1,970.

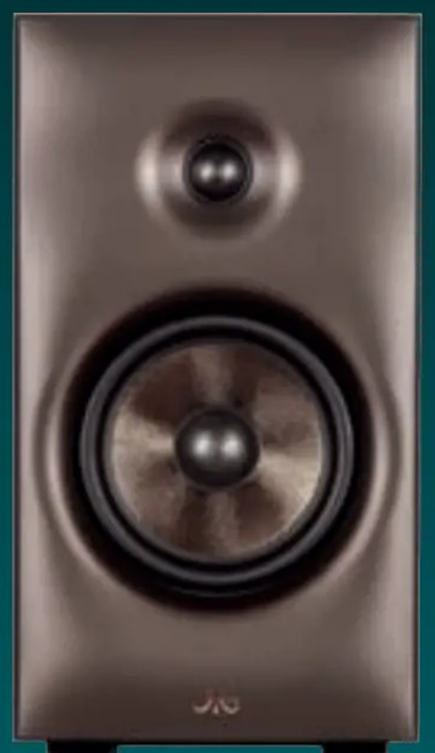
Standard lengths available include 1.2, 1.5 and 2m, while custom lengths can be ordered on request. Available source connectors include: 3.5mm TRS, 6.3mm TRS, four-pin XLR and 4.4mm Balanced connector (£100 surcharge).

Little...

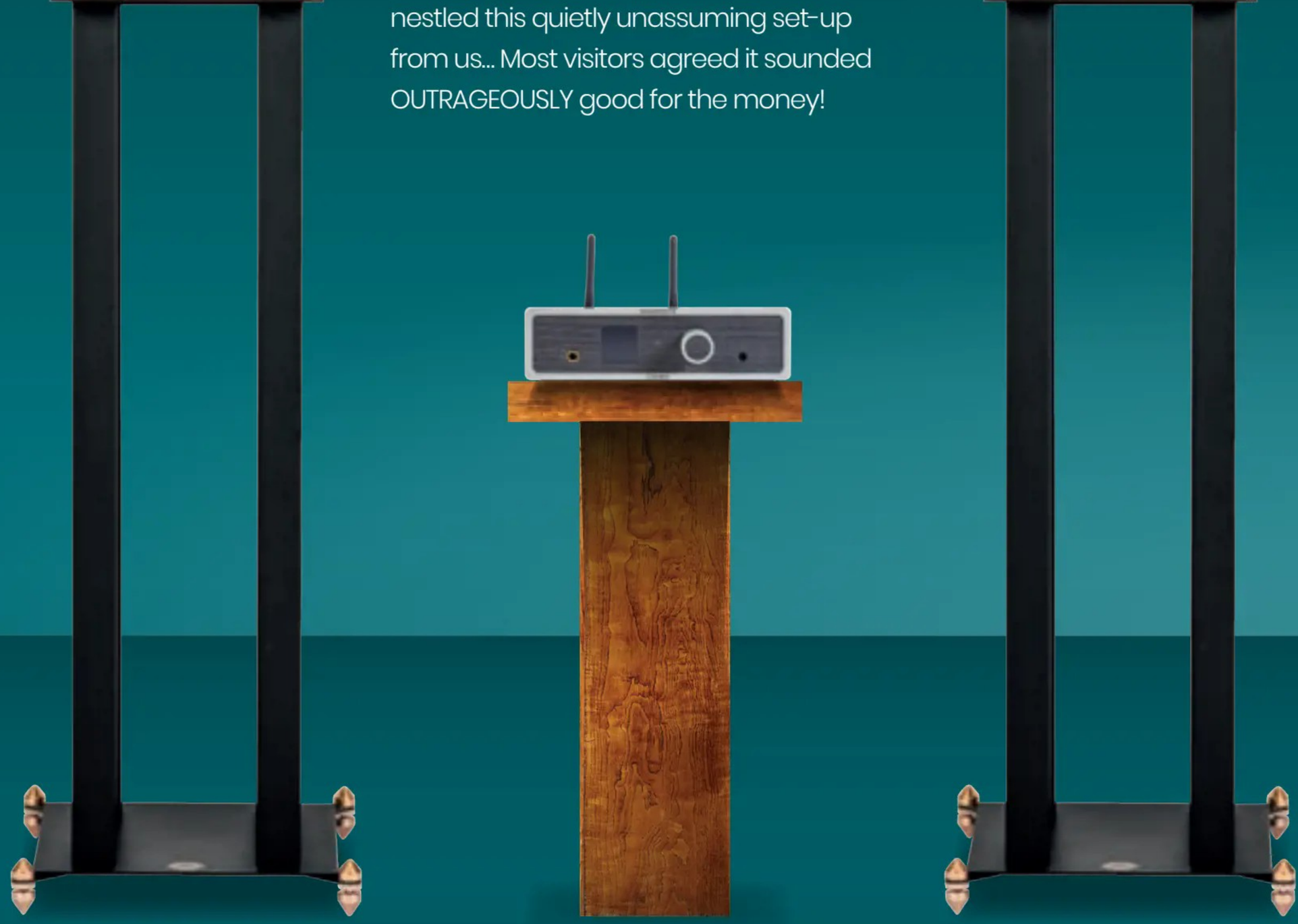
WAS THIS ONE OF THE BIGGEST EYE-OPENERS
AT THE 2025 UK HIFI SHOW LIVE! ?



Lindemann Woodnote:COMBO
Streamer/Power-DAC
+
Revival Audio SPRINT 3
Loudspeakers



Amongst many rooms with many excellent systems featuring many large boxes costing many tens of thousands of pounds, nestled this quietly unassuming set-up from us... Most visitors agreed it sounded OUTRAGEOUSLY good for the money!



Revival Audio **SPRINT 3** available from:
EliteAudioUK | Premium Sound | Richer Sounds | Audio-T | Analogue Seduction | Winters Audio

Lindemann **Woodnote:COMBO** available from:
EliteAudioUK | Analogue Seduction | Audio Affair | Audio Emotion | Futureshop | HomeMediaLtd | Igloo Audio

EliteAudioUK

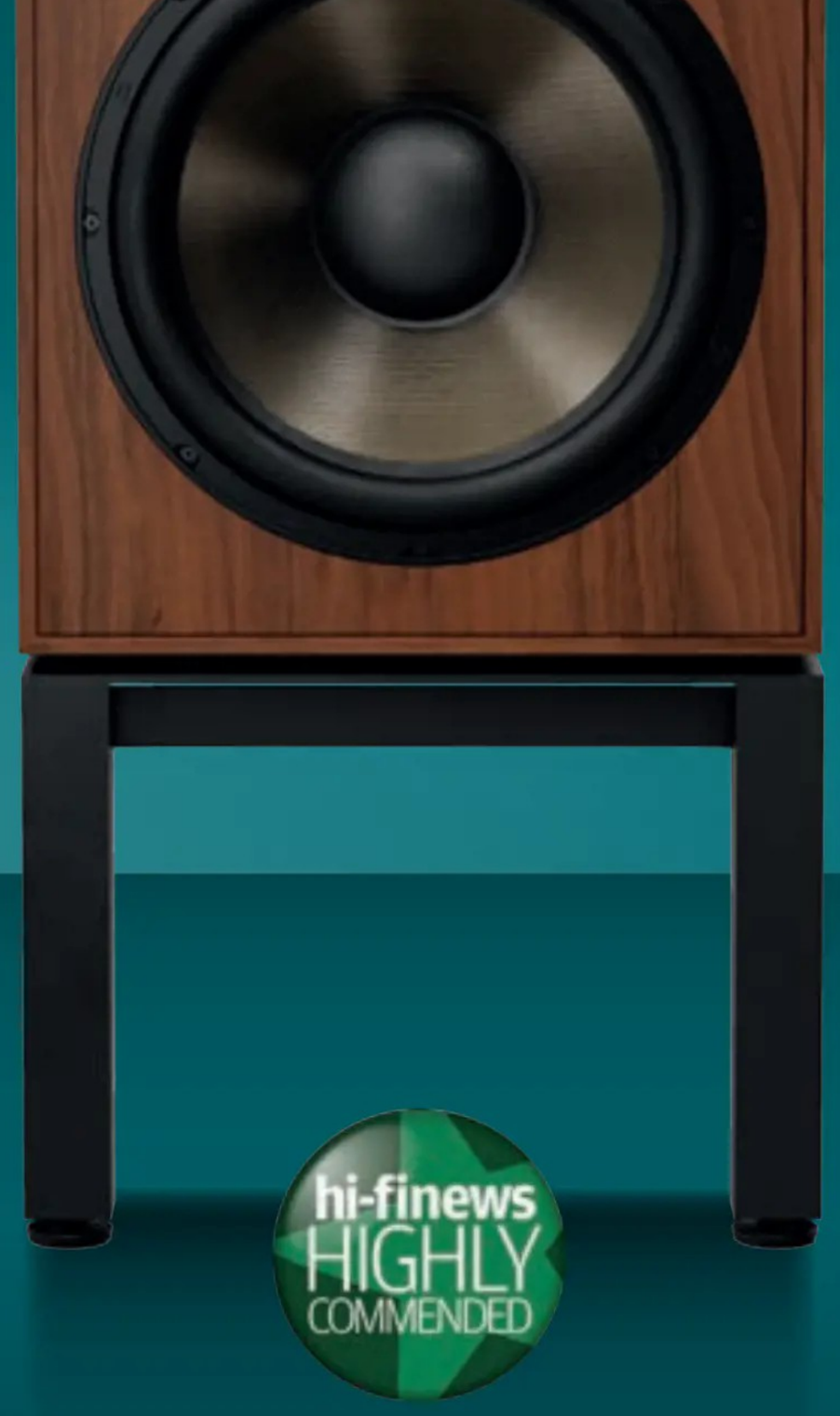
and Large.

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Electrocompaniet EC5 + AW300M
Preamplifier* + Monoblock pair
**due Dec 2025*

+ Revival Audio ATALANTE 7 Évo
Loudspeakers

We already know these two brands make a fantastic pairing (Revival use EC amps to tune their speakers!)—the AW300M have oodles of power and grip to drive the Atalante 7 Évo with its awesome 15" bass drivers. And when the NEW EC5 preamplifier drops, in December, the sound will really come into its own.
Pre-order now—demand will be high!





Revival Audio **ATALANTE** series available from: EliteAudioUK | Premium Sound | Audio-T

Electrocompaniet **AW300M** available from: EliteAudioUK | Audio Emotion | Musicraft

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MUSICAL FIDELITY



B1xi

Integrated Amplifier

Designed for today's diverse listening needs, the B1xi features an array of input options. From the low-noise, high-gain MM phono stage, through multiple line-level inputs for other traditional sources, and onto the built-in DAC, HDMI ARC input and Bluetooth receiver for wireless streaming – each input is optimised for the best possible performance.

The B1xi benefits from a premium amplifier design, using transistor amps in Class A/B to deliver a highly engaging, tube-like sound. Delivering 60 watts into 8 ohms (100W, 4Ω / 140W, 2Ω), it doesn't struggle to drive a wide variety of speakers. There's a good degree of headroom on offer for proper peak power delivery and a wide dynamic range, meaning your listening experience is never strained.

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Stay connected

Neat new American audio accessories

PRICE: £60-£300 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** CAMPFIREAUDIO.COM

US COMPANY CAMPFIRE Audio has announced two new accessories: its Portable DAC Wallet and Time Link cable. The DAC Wallet is made of leather, magnetically attaches to a smartphone and features a custom USB-C cable, which the company explains aligns connection points for a lower-profile, reduced-tension fit – minimising the risk of port-wear on either the owner's phone or portable DAC device.

For phones or other portable devices without built-in magnetic support, an optional adhesive magnetic ring is supplied. The DAC Wallet costs £60.

The Time Link cable, meanwhile, employs six conductors of high-purity copper and silver-plated copper to channel a signal into the swappable termination of the user's choice via a 3.5mm single-ended; 4.4mm balanced USB-C DAC. Available now, it's priced at £300.





Public transport

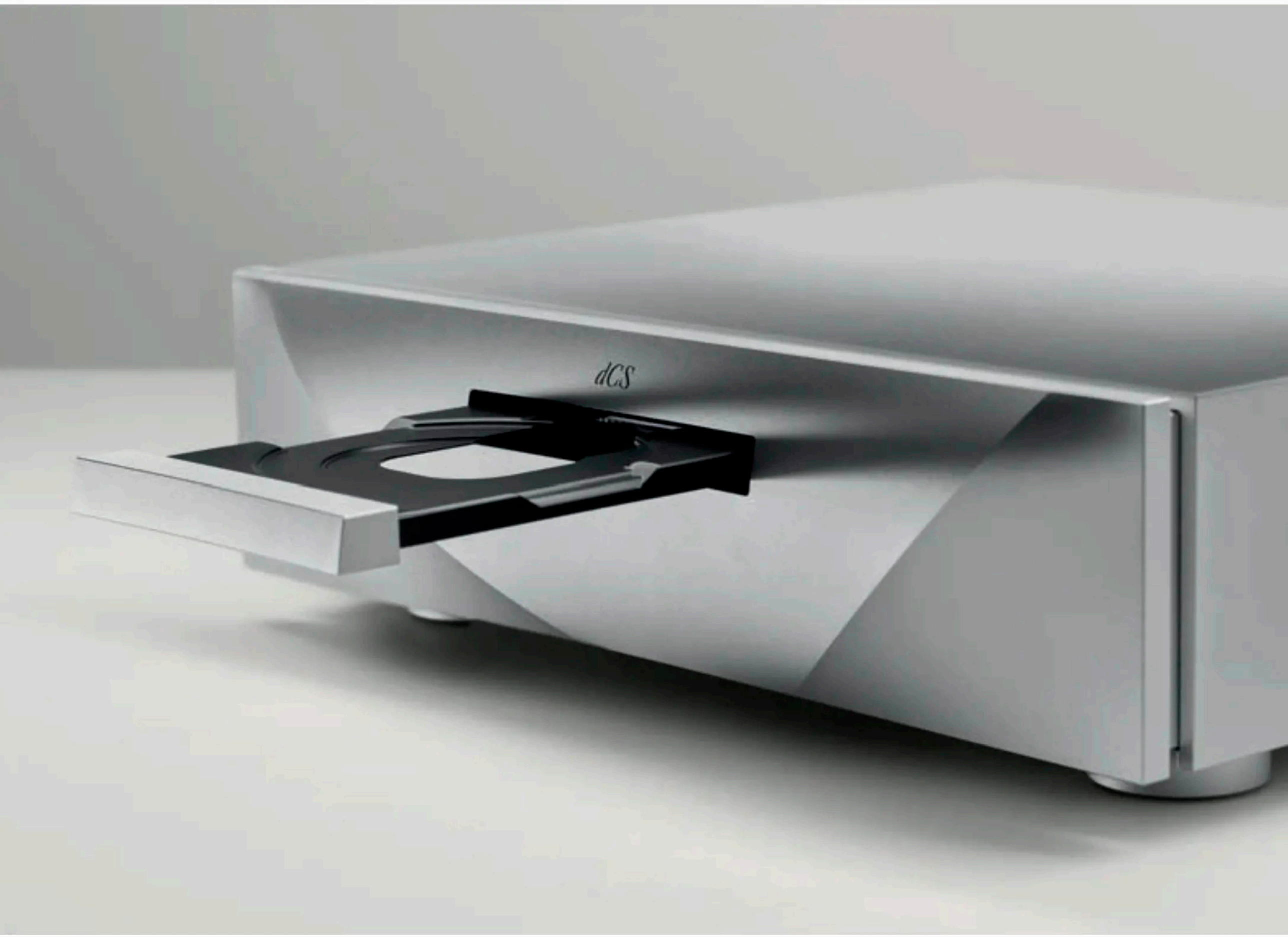
Pricey new CD transport

PRICE: £35,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** DCSAUDIO.COM ABSOLUTESOUNDS.COM

DCS' VARÈSE MUSIC System now includes a dedicated CD/SACD transport. The system launched with five components – Core, User Interface, Dual Mono DACs, the aforementioned CD/SACD transport and Master Clock – plus the Varèse Remote and Mosaic ACTUS app. The new dedicated transport features what dCS says is its quietest, lowest vibration disc spinner to date, benefitting from a new chassis design and use of a bespoke ACTUS interface. The transport plays Redbook CDs in their native 44.1kS/s format and SACDs in their native DSD format. It connects to the Varèse Core via dCS ACTUS, with a single cable running from the Core to the Transport. dCS claims this allows for bit-perfect transmission of audio signals and enables simpler setup and enhanced control.

The Varèse Transport automatically syncs to a master clock signal via ACTUS (provided by the Varèse Master Clock, if present or the Varèse Core if no clock is connected), removing the need for listeners to manually configure sync mode settings. The Transport can be connected via the Varèse User Interface, Varèse Remote Control or Mosaic ACTUS app and the top, sides and front of the chassis are machined from a single piece of billet aluminium – an approach also seen in the Varèse Clock, Core and Mono DACS – with constrained layer damping between the chassis base and dress plates. Mechanism mounts are also milled from a single piece of aluminium, with no joins or fixings devised to aid performance.

The transport utilises the same mechanism seen in the Vivaldi transport II and Rossini transport, but this has been mounted with a new method in an effort to further reduce noise and physical vibrations. It comes in Silver or Black.





Saving Grace

Swish earpiece imports from Denmark

PRICE: £1,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** BANG-OLUFSEN.COM

DANISH COMPANY BANG & Olufsen has announced the arrival of its Beo Grace earpieces, which the company describes as: “a study in wearable sculpture, inspired by the elegance of fine jewellery”. Its aluminium stems reimagine Bang & Olufsen’s A8 earphones with their distinctive metal stem design. Each earpiece is hewn from polished aluminium and rests in a pearl-blasted aluminium case.

B&O adds that the eartips have been updated with an oval profile to improve fit and sealing, and are dust and waterproof resistant with an IP57 rating. The Beo Grace claims up to 4.5 hours of playtime with ANC and up to 17 hours using the charging case. The eartips feature an integrated nylon mesh that safeguards the driver from dust and debris. There’s a soft, premium leather pouch offered as an optional accessory for an extra £250 available in Infinite Black, Cranberry Red and Seashell Grey featuring a discreet USB charging opening, shoulder strap and clasp.

B&O says the Beo Grace has been designed around a new acoustic architecture inspired by the acoustic principles behind its Beoplay H100 headphones. The earpieces employ a 12mm titanium driver in a small form factor, placed behind precision-milled aluminium grills. Beo Grace also features Spatial Audio optimised for Dolby Atmos.

The company claims that the Adaptive Active Noise Cancellation offers four times more effective performance than its previous best earbud with the new EarSense technology automatically adapting sound and ANC performance in real-time by detecting ambient noise while measuring the acoustic signature of the user’s ear, tailoring sound and silence for personalised effect. The earpieces also use advanced wind reduction tech and are paired with a three-mic array in each enclosure.

Amazing Grace

Volume is adjusted via taps in front of the user’s ear – the right-side increases, the left side decreases. The Beo Grace also features Bang & Olufsen’s new Amadeus Platform for wearables. This software platform is upgradable by design so that Beo Grace will continue to evolve through software updates. As for the battery, B&O has partnered with Breathe, aiming to remove the constraints of battery service-life through advanced power handling innovation. This features a custom-designed battery management system that has surpassed a claimed 2,000 charge cycles in internal testing.



BE THE CENTRE OF THE MUSIC





ARCAM

arcam.co.uk

Rocky power show

Canadian network amp

PRICE: £6,250 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** SIMAUDIO.COM

CANADIAN COMPANY MOON by Sim Audio has announced the launch of MOON 371, its network amplifier which combines a premium amp, preamp, DAC, network player and phono stage into a single enclosure. The MOON 371 is the first product in MOON's new Compass Collection and comes equipped with the MOON MiND 2 streaming platform offering access to leading streaming services such as Tidal, Qobuz, Deezer and Spotify. It is fully compatible with Apple AirPlay and Roon, and supports Qobuz Connect, Spotify Connect and Tidal Connect.

The built-in phono stage caters for both MM and MC cartridges using the company's proprietary MHP (MOON Hybrid Power) supply and MDCA (MOON Distortion Cancelling Amplifier). The company explains that the MHP supply: "provides ultra-stable, efficient power to the circuitry", while the MDCA: "virtually eliminates distortion and improves linearity, delivering exceptionally clean, dynamic and accurate sound reproduction". Previously, the MHP supply has been used in the North Collection's network player/preamps. The 371 becomes the first MOON amplifier to feature the technology.

It boasts a 170mm colour screen to display settings, album art and track details, while the CRM-4 aluminium remote – designed specifically for the Compass Collection – provides control. The 371 measures 429 x 87 x 385mm (WxHxD) and weighs in at 9kg. ▶



Prime time



Ascot-debuted sound system import

PRICE: £2,700 **AVAILABLE:** NOVEMBER 2025 **WEB:** PRIMARE.NET

FIRST PREVIEWED AT The UK Hi-Fi Show *Live*, Scandinavian brand Primare has announced that its Allt-i-Ett ("all-in-one" in Norwegian and Swedish) will be available in November. A spokesperson told *HFC* that it delivers: "a complete high-performance sound system in a single elegant cabinet – ideal for those who may not have the space, budget or desire for separate components, as well as for experienced enthusiasts seeking uncompromised sound in additional rooms around the home.

"Whether analogue or digital, streamed or stored media, wired or wireless, the system offers effortless connection and intuitive control via remote, mobile or its built-in touchscreen," a spokesperson said.

At its core, the Allt-i-Ett combines a streamer, amplifier and speaker array, powered by 300W peak amplification and enhanced by advanced digital signal processing, that includes Auto Room EQ and Bacch 3D Sound Technology.

Equipped with HDMI eARC in and subwoofer output, the Allt-i-Ett can be employed as an alternative to a conventional soundbar. Network and streaming include WLAN/LAN, AirPlay2, Prisma app (UPnP/DLNA), internet radio, Tidal Max, Qobuz, Qobuz Connect, Tidal Connect, Spotify Connect, Bluetooth (SBC, AAC, aptX and aptX-HD) plus FM and DAB+ radio with assignable presets.

There's Bluetooth and a 3.5mm jack for headphones, while the speakers feature a pair of waveguide tweeters, two midrange and six bass drivers. Peak power is a claimed 300W.



Get black!

New flagship integrated amp

PRICE: £4,600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** EXPOSUREHIFI.COM

AS EXCLUSIVELY REVEALED in last month's *Company Confidential* feature, Exposure Electronics has launched its flagship 5510 integrated amplifier offering a claimed 120W per channel, "deep, controlled bass, detailed mids and sparkling highs". It features six line inputs so users can opt to upgrade the amplifier with a selection of phono boards (MM, MC or DS) to suit any turntable or a plug-in DAC board for digital playback. Utilising a custom toroidal transformer with hum shield and an engineered low-noise design, the company claims that music: "emerges from a pitch-black background, letting every detail shine without unwanted interference."

The 5510 comes in a high-grade aluminium chassis designed to control resonance and boasts a white OLED display offering five brightness settings and an auto-off mode. It comes bundled with a remote control, has a Black finish and three-year guarantee. ▶





How low can you go?

Serious new subwoofer from Denmark

PRICE: £4,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** DALI-SPEAKERS.COM

DALI HAS UNVEILED its V-16 F subwoofer, specifically designed for reproduction of bass in high-end audiophile music systems and home theatre setups. The company says it's the most powerful subwoofer it has ever built: "capable of filling the largest of rooms with audiophile, ceiling-shaking bass, while at the same time possessing all the precision and control needed to work in any audio system context and even in small rooms. It plays lean, deep, detailed bass without any sacrifice of dynamics, pitch, speed or tonal coloration."

It's optimised both in and out of the primary frequency band and other key features include wideband, low-loss design with low harmonic and non-harmonic distortion, naturally extended bandwidth from driver and amplifier, well controlled, non-resonant, low-pass roll-off, ultra-low signal latency, low frequency in-room bandwidth to -3dB at 19Hz and four continuous flare reflex ports tuned to 18Hz.

There's a single 406mm driver incorporating the largest ever Constant Surface Surround (CSS rubber surround) and boasting ±16mm linear diaphragm travel with 70mm peak-to-peak excursion, 1,500W Class-D power amplification (2,500W peak power) and Room Mode Attenuation. The cabinet volume is 90 litres and it weighs in at 53.15kg.





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From a team with over a century of industry experience and leadership, Perlisten Audio offers music and home cinema enthusiasts a completely proprietary path to greater fidelity and value. Transducers, electronics and software are developed entirely in-house while precision in production and QC delivers optimum performance and enduring quality from Perlisten's technologies, including its magical Directivity Pattern Control (DPC) "beamforming" array of tweeter and twin midrange drivers.

Perlisten Audio's lineup embraces two speaker ranges, architectural models and active subwoofers incorporating proprietary amplification, DSP and App control.

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The UK Hi-Fi Show Live

For two special days in September, Royal Ascot was packed with the heavyweights from the hi-fi world. Here are some of the highlights

THE UK'S BEST high-end hi-fi show returned to the elegant grandstand at Ascot racecourse over the weekend of 27 and 28 September where premium kit from around the globe was on display and demo for thousands of hi-fi nuts eager to experience, buy or just gawp in amazement at the fine array of goods within eye and earshot.

There was so much to see and do that it was near impossible to get around to visiting all the rooms and stands, but our intrepid team did its very best to cover as many brands as we could. This, then, is a distillation of some of the very best gear we came across – by no means a fully comprehensive coverage of the entire event – that would fill a whole issue! – but just a taste representing some of the products that impressed us the most.

HiFi Rose

The all-new RS451 streamer was on demonstration, showcasing new full-width casework. This allows for a combination of the now traditional large display, overseeing the streaming module and a comprehensive selection of digital in and outputs. It's now partnered with a dedicated headphone amp section with 6.35mm unbalanced connection supported by both 4.4mm and four-pin XLR balanced connections, which together with balanced and unbalanced analogue outputs, means the £2,700 streamer has considerable flexibility. It goes on sale imminently.

Klipsch

A wide selection of the company's powered designs were on show, including The Fives and The Nines. The long-running Heresy IV speaker was on demonstration showcasing a very useful new arrival in the form of the £360 KS-12 short floor stand. This is intended to raise the Heresy IV up to a more suitable seated listening height, but it looks absolutely ideal for a number of other non-Klipsch loudspeakers too.

Musical Fidelity

The newly launched B1xi integrated amp was on display with the range-topping NuVista Vinyl 2 phono stage, while the 600.2 integrated amplifier was part of one of the running systems. This £8,000 unit features a circuit that includes 6S51N Nuvistor tubes in a Class A preamp, fronting dual mono power amplifiers that deliver a claimed 160W of power and that features a very healthy spread of analogue inputs.

Ortofon

As well as a demonstration of the formidable MC X models, the show was also an opportunity to hear the newly launched £4,000 MC 90X moving-coil cartridge. Based on the MC A90 design – which established quite a reputation – it combines that with modern Ortofon engineering including technologies like the Wide Range Damping system, Replicant 100 diamond and a revolutionary stainless-steel structure crafted with Selective Laser Melting. The performance on offer sounded very impressive indeed.

Piega

Helping the Ortofon to sound as good as it did was the Piega Coax 611 floorstander. The smaller (a relative term) of two Coax floorstanders, it features the sizable C212+ Coaxial Ribbon Driver, which can operate at frequencies far lower than a 'normal' ribbon partnered with an interesting arrangement of two 160mm UHQD bass drivers and three passive radiator versions to help with low-end response. All this comes wrapped in the trademark extruded aluminium cabinet that ensures exceptional rigidity.

Electrocompaniet

Centre stage at Electrocompaniet was the Norwegian company's new high-end preamplifier, the EC5. The fruit of a 10-year development cycle, it's a pure Class A design with fully discrete, dual-mono topology and features a proprietary volume control in which the signal path has been reduced to an absolute minimum using only one resistor and no relays. It also has a new input switch system and support for Ethernet-based app control and firmware updates. Teamed with Electrocompaniet's ECM1 Mk 2 streamer and AW300 monobloc power amps driving Revival Audio's new Atlante Grande Reserve speakers, presence and energy were not in short supply.

Pro-Ject

The show marked the UK unveiling of the range-topping Signature 12.2, which takes the original Signature and refines a number of aspects of the design in pursuit of higher performance, including a revised speed control and improved plinth-levelling system. The magnetically decoupled platter and motor are retained, as is the 12in polished S-shaped tonearm. If the £10,200 12.2 is a little large and pricey, the £4,350 Classic


Electrocompaniet


Klipsch


Piega



WiiM


Pro-Ject

Reference might be more suitable. This combines a small footprint with a TPE isolated sub-platter with newly updated EVO 9 AS HG S-shaped tonearm and a choice of two luxury finishes.

WiiM

The entire range of WiiM devices was on static display. The newest arrival is the £500 Amp Ultra, which combines much of the streaming hardware of the exceptionally capable Ultra streamer with a 100W ultra-low distortion Class D amplifier to create a compact all-in-one system. Also on show was the Sub Pro, a wireless subwoofer designed to partner the electronics and the upcoming standalone wireless speaker, which looks like a very flexible and technically interesting bit of kit.

Focal/Naim

Focal used the HiFi Show *Live* as an opportunity to demonstrate its complete family of wired and wireless headphones, allowing visitors to hear for themselves what improvements were to be had from moving further up the range. The wired series made use of Naim Uniti Atom Headphone Editions for their power and decoding (with a Uniti Core supplying content) ensuring any difference you heard was purely down to the headphones themselves. Meanwhile, the Bathys, Bathys Dune and Bathys MG could also be used with a variety of source equipment.

Cadence

The big new arrival for Cadence was the Sphinx Audio Element 3 floorstander. Built out of Corian and feeling immensely solid as a result, the Element 3 uses a system of parallel transmission lines and carefully time-aligned drivers that utilise onboard amplification to present an ultra-stable 16ohm load to the outside world. At no less than £40,000 a pair, it's not cheap but a short demonstration on the end of SME and Sugden electronics was extremely impressive.

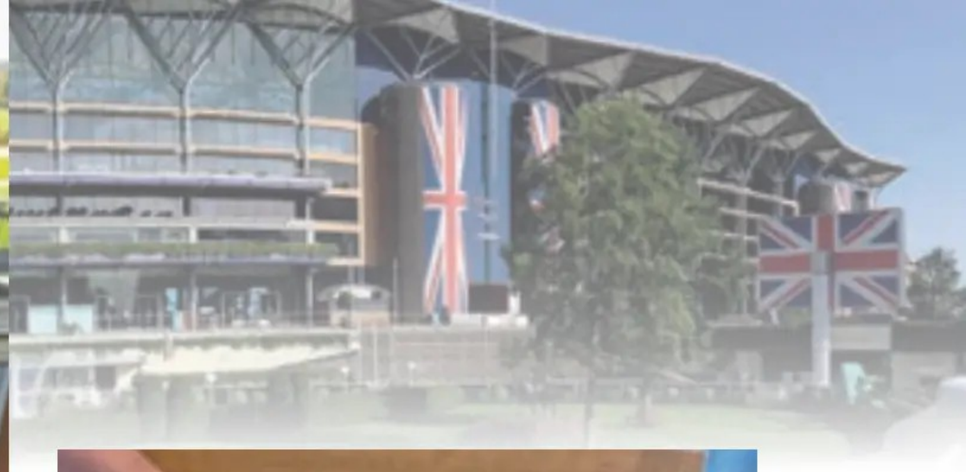
Audio-Technica

Helping the Cadence Sphinx to sound as good as it did was the Audio-Technica AT ART1000X running on an SME Model 35 turntable. The £4,700 AT uses a unique layout the company calls a Direct Power System, which places coils on top of the stylus to capture the subtlest sonic details. This has been updated to include rectangular non-magnetic core coils for enhanced efficiency and extended low-frequency output. The result: mighty impressive!

JBL

Sounding frankly awesome in JBL's generously sized room, it was hard to believe so much immaculately resolved bandwidth was being delivered by a pair of modestly sized standmounts. But then, as the junior member of JBL's new Summit flagship lineup, the new Ama is the company's idea ▶


AVID




Aurender


Unison Research

of the ultimate, cost-no-object compact speaker, comprising a 205mm HC4 cone bass driver, D2 compression driver and HDI horn. Lined up nearby were the more imposing Makalu and Pumori floorstanders, joining the existing Everest and K2 at the peak of JBL's high-end offerings.

Aurender

A significant chunk of the Aurender range was present at the show. As well as the digital front-end offerings that the company is best known for, it also demonstrated the AP20 Reference All-In-One Music Server, which combines the digital section of the server with a hefty 200W Class D amplifier and selection of analogue and digital inputs to create a formidable system. Elsewhere in the room, the flagship N50 Server was keeping an AVID Acutus honest, running with Bel Canto amplification into YG Acoustics speakers.

AVID

AVID unveiled its brand-new Celcus Preamplifier at the show, which combines extensive phono input options (as one might expect) with a selection of other analogue inputs. The major new development is the arrival of a remote volume control, which has been done without having to dispense with the high-quality ALPS RK50 volume pot; AVID having devised a modification that motorises it. The show also gave many viewers the chance to see the new Relveo turntable for the first time. The Relveo replaces three models in the range and brings technology from the Acutus down to a more affordable price point.

Crystal Cable

Crystal Cable was showcasing its Infinite Liberty headphone cable, which can be terminated with any connector to match the headphone, combined with standard 6.35mm or 3.5mm jack plugs at the other end. The cable is supplied in a smooth finish, white faux leather case. The company was also demonstrating its sister company Sphinx Audio's Element 3 loudspeaker, which was launched earlier in the year.

Headphone Zone

There was a fine array of headphones and personal music players on display, including a few of the huge list of brands that Hifonix represents. For example, Hifonix was showing off some lovely HIFIMAN headphones that were being fed from some Astell&Kern high-resolution personal music players. The HIFIMAN headphones sounded great and were very easy on the ears, both physically and sonically.

Atlas Cables

The range of interconnect cables from Atlas was on demo, highlighting Atlas' GRUN coherent earthing system, which is employed in its cables. GRUN is an independent earthing system designed to reduce RFI and EMI, as well as noise on the signal ground. The company says the effect is cumulative when several cables are used in a setup. The effect is to make vocals sound more natural with reduced sibilance, widen the dynamic range of music and offer a relaxed quality to the sound without affecting perceived timing.

Devialet

Devialet was demonstrating the Astra high-end audiophile integrated amplifier, which was paired with Phantom Ultimate speakers. The company was also host to one of several talks from Matthias Böde, Editor of *Stereo* magazine from Germany. This talk gave us all an insight into the audible differences across the range of digital audio formats, from MP3 to 24-bit/192kHz hi-res, which was very enlightening.

Edwards Audio

As well as a number of special show offers on some of its range of turntables, Edwards Audio was also exhibiting products from its range of amps and phono stages. However, the main attraction was the official launch of a new family of phono cartridges from sister company, Kensington Audio. The range is dedicated solely to moving-coil cartridges, with the five-model line ranging from an entry-level £600 C-500 to the flagship £3,000 C-900 cartridges. (See p14 for more).

Silent Angel

On display in the Sound Design Distribution room was Silent Angel's Bonn NX Ultimate audiophile network switch and the Forester FX audiophile power supply. The Bonn NX Ultimate is the company's top-of-the-range switch and can be powered from the Forester FX external power supply if desired.

Technics

Technics was demonstrating the superb EISA award-winning SL-1300G direct-drive turntable. The vinyl spinner is powered by the company's delta-sigma drive, which is a new motor drive technology delivering high rotational accuracy and low vibration. By employing delta-sigma pulse width modulation to drive the motor, the turntable offers an extremely high standard of speed accuracy and absence of cogging. This is combined with a three-layer, dynamically balanced platter and a vibration-damped dual-layer chassis. The deck is finished off with a well-engineered S-shaped tonearm.

Revox

Revox has recently joined forces with Horch House, the German supplier of copy-master open-reel tapes. On display was the new Revox B77 Mk III tape recorder, playing a selection of music from the Horch House catalogue. Open reel tape offers the ultimate in sound quality as evinced by ▶

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Pictured: Bronze Series 7G 300 in White

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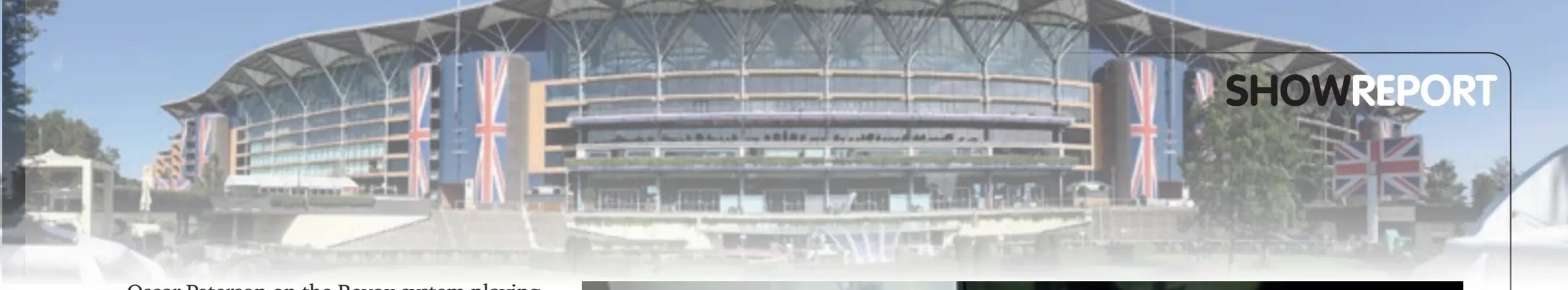
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Oscar Peterson on the Revox system playing *Bye Bye Blackbird* from his *My Favourite Instrument* album. Wonderful stuff!

Hegel

This popular Norwegian specialist brand, in the UK courtesy of Auden Distribution, had two rooms. In one was Hegel's big H600 streaming amp, partnered to a D50 DAC and pushing vast dollops of power into a pair of Amphion's new Argon 3x loudspeakers. The sound was as expansive and clean as a Norwegian lake. Next door was the new H150 streaming amp – on sale in the UK now – getting a very nice noise from Amphion Argon 1s and a Luphonic turntable. Sonically and aesthetically crisp and refined, it created a relaxing space for making music.

Node Audio

This young British high-end speaker specialist had two rooms, one showcasing its striking spherical Hylixa speakers, aspirated by Valvet amplification, an Aurender streamer and iFi DAC. It was used to demo the benefits of Node's SS-1 isolation system, which really opened up the already superb sound. Next door, the new Atom speaker range made its debut. The 525 standmount and 650 floorstander – complete with Helical Transmission Line loading and the company's MonoCell lattice construction – gave a crisp, tight and transparent sound via SPL amplification. These will be on sale early 2026, says the Cambridge-based company.

Perlisten

Wisconsin-based Perlisten was showing a brace of its big, multi-driver loudspeakers, in association with UK importer Karma AV, which also supplied some serious Primare amplification. That's just as well, as these speakers love power! The monster S7t Black Edition floorstander was unleashed, alongside a pair of D8i subwoofers and duly delivered flare-flapping sound levels. Full range, expansive and dynamic, we enjoyed its detailed midband and fine stereo depth – unusual for a hi-fi show. Other Perlisten custom install speakers adorned the room, for added visual drama.

Bowers & Wilkins

Star debutante was B&W's new flagship over-ear headphone, the Px8 S2, boasting a new 40mm Carbon Cone driver, eight high-performance microphones for noise cancellation and support for aptX Adaptive and aptX Lossless for high-resolution streaming. Designed for comfort and extended listening, the Px8 S2 offers 30 hours of battery life with ANC on and a 15-minute quick charge for additional listening time.

Effortlessly commanding the room was the stunning 803 D4 floorstander driven by a powerful Marantz MODEL 10 amp. A scaled-down, more affordable and easier to accommodate version of the 801/802 flagships, it is claimed to be the next best thing.



Clearaudio

Primare

Primare amplification was used in various manufacturers' rooms, but via Karma AV the Swedish brand debuted its new Allt-i-Ett (all-in-one) streaming speaker system in its very own place. A large and versatile thing, it's surely a gateway product for those getting into real hi-fi or people downsizing but wanting to keep enjoying serious sound. Packed with features – including room EQ, HDMI eARC, digital inputs, Bluetooth and FM/DAB+ radio – it worked very well in the compact Ascot room. Touting six bass drivers, twin midrange drivers and a pair of waveguide tweeters, it really moved air. (For more details, turn to p32).

ELAC/Clearaudio/AVM

Courtesy of Hi-Fi Network, ELAC's flagship Concentro M807 loudspeaker delighted listeners with its huge sound. Driven by an AVM Ovation CS 8.3 CD-receiver and SA 8.3 lite power amp, the massive power on tap was sufficient to rattle parts of the room when streaming progressive house music like Venetic's *Neverless*. This all-German combo was big audio dynamite, with a super clean and dry sound that was nevertheless highly immersive and infectiously rhythmic. Also present was the beautiful Clearaudio Innovation/Tracer/Concerto vinyl front end, with Balance v2 phono stage, alongside other select models.

Audio Solutions

Lithuanian brand Audio Solutions added its latest Figaro M2 floorstander to UK distributor Elite Audio's collection of star performers. Middle child of an eight-strong family, built and finished to the company's exquisite hand-crafted and semi-bespoke standard, the three-way M2 features a brace of dedicated 183mm bass drivers teamed with a 'Mini-Horn-loaded silk dome tweeter' and an extended bandwidth midrange driver that: "pushes crossover frequencies further away from the most critical area for the human ear – 1,000-1,500Hz and thus reduce crossover distortions and perception of them".

AMG (Analog Manufaktur Germany)

Crowning a stellar system comprising a Gryphon Diablo 333 integrated amplifier, Pink Faun Scion streamer, Ideon Ion DAC and mighty Marten Parker Trio Diamonds floorstanders, AMG's Viella Forte turntable and Fezz Gratia Prestige Mk 2 phono stage proved a powerful draw for anyone interested in a substantial, no-frills deck with a heavy duty, circa-£30k, price tag. A splendid example of high-mass solidity, precision and fine-tuning adjustability, there's even a tiny spirit level set into the top of its tonearm.

Marantz

The MODEL 10 is the new high-end integrated amp from Marantz. It can be run as a straight integrated, but at the show was configured in power amp mode, switching out the whole pre stage. Taking its feed from a Marantz Link 10n network streaming player running in Roon or the hugely built Marantz SACD 10 CD/SACD player – and benefitting from a mechanism still manufactured by Marantz inhouse – 500W a side of Class D power driving a pair of B&W 803 D4 floorstanders sounded right at home.

Epos

The revival of the Epos speaker brand was represented at the show by the ES-28N, three-way floorstander, fittingly capping the progression of ES-14N and ES-7N standmounts – all, of course, designed by Karl-Heinz Fink. The distinctive design features adjustable radiused metal feet and a ▶

ROTEL

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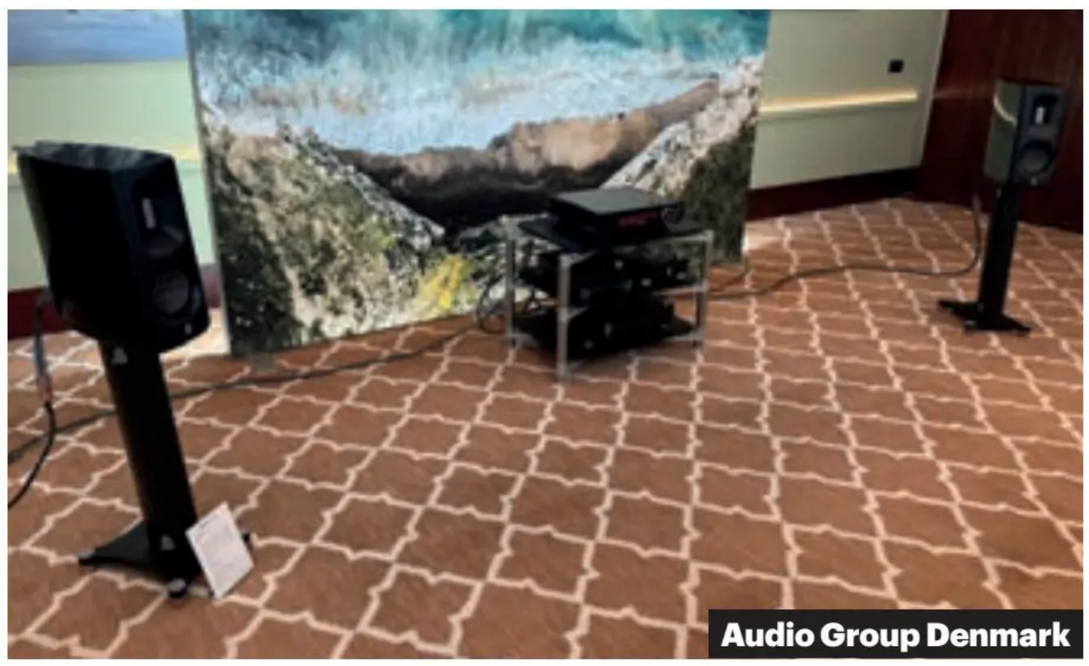
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Loewe


Audio Group Denmark


SVS

backward-slanting cabinet to ensure the downward-firing bass reflex port is not impeded by a thick carpet. Exhibiting several trademark Fink touches, the speaker is pressure compensated with internal vents to prevent pipe modes and, aesthetically, the front baffle can be integrated with, say, Walnut side and top panels, though the demonstration pair was a gleaming Gloss Black throughout.

SVS/Unison Research

A fun room that showcased the combined talents of US-based Sound Vision Systems and Italian veteran tube amp purveyor Unison Research, courtesy of Karma AV. On demo was a pair of SVS Ultra Evolution Pinnacle floorstanders, aspirated by Unison's S6 Black Edition integrated amp and CD Uno source. The former proved to be a really capable performer, while the latter's KT77 tubes running in ultralinear mode made for a plush, three-dimensional listening experience. The Black Edition brings a host of technical refinements to the company's standard range, including upgraded circuitboards and manual biasing for better sound.

Audio Group Denmark

Audio Group Denmark showcased a 'compact' (all things are relative, but this is one of the smaller sets of products it makes) system built around the 300W Aavik I-580 integrated amplifier, which combines Class D technology with the company's trademark Ansuz Tesla Coil noise reduction systems. It was partnered with a pair of Børresen C1 standmount speakers, which combine a ribbon tweeter with the company's 'Neo' honeycomb drivers. Linked together with Ansuz cabling – another Audio Group Denmark brand – the result was a winner.

Denon

Riffing on a heritage theme, Denon's presence at the show was built around the effective relaunch of its premium direct-drive turntable, the DP3000NE. Sporting an S-shaped tonearm with detachable headshell (cartridge choice is yours), it offers 9mm of vertical height adjustment to enable precise vertical tracking angle if you feel like swapping platter mats. It was joined by Denon's PMA3000 amplifier and DCD 3000 CD player.

Radiant Acoustics

The prize for the largest sound from the smallest cabinet had to be the recently launched Clarity 4.2 standmount speaker from Danish brand Radiant. A smaller sibling to the remarkable Clarity 6.2, the truly tiny 4.2 utilises three 100mm USHINDI bass drivers from Purifi, two employed as side-firing passive radiators and an AMT high-frequency driver, though it must do without the larger 6.2's waveguide as it simply didn't fit. Bass is claimed to be flat down to 40Hz, which is remarkable enough but it was the breeze, breadth and depth of the soundstage that floored visitors.

Revival Audio

Revival Audio's ongoing drive to evolve its speaker ranges found expression at the show in the deep-chested shape of the Atalante Grande Reserve, a limited edition, 300-off, strategically souped-up Atalante 5 with some trickle-down tech from the larger Atalante 7 evo, not least its tweeter and midrange dome. Rather than the 7's 380mm bass driver, the Grande Reverse makes do with a still more than ample 305mm driver, as are the 25mm-thick front baffle and upgraded internal components.

Loewe

Visitors were invited to try the new £1,300 Leo wireless headphone. This is Loewe's first foray into wireless headphones and features an exceptionally comprehensive specification that includes a listening test-based setup and EQ system, Spatial Audio support and an on-board AI assistant. A limited edition bejewelled version made in partnership with Jacob & Co is also available for a brisk €99,000!

T+A

The new Symphonia all-in-one player is a digital streaming amp powered by an integrated amp with 120 reworked Purifi Class D Watts per channel into 8ohm. The beautifully built unit includes an FM/DAB tuner, internet radio,lossless music playback and DSD. Easy-fi? You can even Bluetooth from your phone. It has lovely VU meters, too. Pretty much irresistible! ●

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Hi-Fi Choice EDITOR'S CHOICE

Shine on you crazy diamond

Neville Roberts gives Nagaoka's new flagship moving permalloy cartridge a workout in his system

Launched at the Munich High End show, the MP-700 is Nagaoka's new top-of-the-range moving-permalloy cartridge. For the uninitiated, permalloys are similar to moving-iron carts, where both the coil and the magnet are fixed in the body and a tiny sliver of ferromagnetic metal – such as iron – is attached to the cantilever. This makes the moving mass of the cantilever assembly less than that of MC or MM options.

The MP-700 has a boron cantilever fitted with a new micro-ridge nude diamond stylus measuring 0.12 x 0.3mm. The cantilever is supported with a soft damper and has a newly integrated suspension wire in the pivot system to provide stability, enhanced stereo separation and clarity across the frequency range. Nagaoka has added an induction plate inside the cartridge to improve the uniformity of the magnetic flux. Also, the amount of magnetic flux around the permalloy at the rear end of the cantilever has been increased, improving sensitivity to tiny vibrations.

The MP-700 also features an ultra-duralumin shielded case and cartridge frame enhanced with a three-layer surface treatment, which includes nickel plating, black tin plating and the application of an insulating coating. All this is designed to minimise static interference and improve heat and wear resistance. It's also available fitted with a plug-in headshell for £1,250.

Sound quality

I install the MP-700 in my Vertere Super Groove SGTA-HB tonearm, setting the tonearm to provide the recommended 1.4g tracking force. Listening to a direct-cut LP of Chabrier's *España* performed by the National Symphony Orchestra, the stately plucking of the strings during the opening are pleasingly strident, clear and refined. The bass drum sounds powerfully punchy and the trackability is excellent. The cart copes effortlessly with all the crescendos. For some jazz, I swap the *España* LP for Matthew Halsall's gorgeous *Sending My Love*. Halsall's trumpet is clear and bright throughout without being overly strident, while the bass is tuneful and quite forward. The accompanying flute and saxophone sections are also wonderfully emphatic.

Staying on a jazz tip, but with the addition of some female vocals, I switch to a 45rpm cut of Lyn Stanley singing *The One I Love Belongs To Someone Else* from her latest album, *Tribute To 1924*. The opening mournful guitar solo sounds realistic and transparent in my listening space and when Stanley joins in with the melody, the soundstage is both wide and deep with her voice in front and the instrumentalists each having their own location behind her in the room.

For some baroque music, I opt for an LP of CPE Bach's *Symphony No.2* with George Malcolm on the harpsichord and Neville Marriner conducting the Academy Of St. Martin-In-The-Fields. The orchestra sounds powerful, bright and clear from the start, while Malcolm's playing is effortlessly light and beautifully complemented by the orchestral accompaniment. I have a real sense of an overall refinement with this lovely recording.

Turning to some delicate guitar playing by John Williams performing Giuliani's *Concerto For Guitar And String Orchestra* with the English Chamber Orchestra, I am instantly struck by the ease of the performance. The sophisticated rendering and detail of the guitar makes the sound utterly believable and the sense of depth is very well reproduced.

Conclusion

I'm seriously impressed with the MP-700. This is a cartridge that continually delivers a very clear and powerful listening experience, coupled with excellent tracking of all the loud passages of music ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Nagaoka MP-700

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
Moving-permalloy cartridge

WEIGHT
8g

FEATURES
- Micro-ridge naked diamond stylus
- Boron cantilever
- Recommended tracking force: 1.4g

DISTRIBUTOR
Sound Design Distribution

WEBSITE
nagaoka.co.jp
sounddesign distribution.co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
TRACKING ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: A superb sound from a really engaging moving-permalloy cart

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Another winner from this established Japanese cartridge manufacturer

The joy of six

Indiana Line is new to the UK, but if its Diva 6 floorstander is anything to go by its future is a rosy one says ***David Vivian***



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Indiana Line Diva 6

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
18.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 957 x 335mm

FEATURES
- 26mm silk dome tweeter
- 150mm Curv polipropylene midrange driver
- 3x 150mm Curv polipropylene bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 93dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
RAD UK

WEBSITE
indianaline.com
raduk.co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Value for money is very much an evolved concept in hi-fi. With the virtual disappearance of what we used to call 'mid-fi' – reasonably priced gear that was honest and decent enough, but knew its place in the grand scheme – it seems there's been a tectonic tilt towards the aspirational where conspicuous over achievement for a given price is the only game in town. Under no circumstances must a cheap, budget component sound budget, cheap or even cheaply cheerful – which, of course, is great.

It's a phenomenon that appears to stem from the idea that the notional bottomless consumer pockets sustaining the high-end's business model of magnificent over engineering and exotic builds has a balancing equivalence in thoughtfully designed and similarly impressive-looking alternatives – sold for a fraction of the price – that can deliver considerably more than a fraction of the performance. Real-world affordable high-end, it seems, is where it's at.

It's certainly where Italian brand Indiana Line is at, the new-to-the-UK company's avowed goal being to: "combine high-quality production

The Diva 6 goes satisfyingly low with good weight, body and timbral realism

with rational component utilisation and consistent product improvement". With that on board, its Diva 6 floorstander appears to be bang-for-buck incarnate. Certainly, anyone drawn to columnar real estate will find plenty to celebrate here. Standing some 957mm tall, 220mm wide, 335mm deep and weighing a chunky but not unduly heavy 18.5kg each, the three-way Diva 6 has the space to accommodate no fewer than three dedicated bass drivers, a midrange unit in its own enclosure and a sophisticated silk dome tweeter. They all reside in an MDF cabinet with a sturdy 30mm-thick inclined front baffle, four-way cross-brace internal reinforcement and a downward-firing bass reflex port tuned to a low 36Hz. At the base, the speaker rests on machined aluminium outriggers with rubber pads to provide a degree of isolation.

The 150mm bass and midrange drivers have so-called 'Curv' cones with concave dust caps and are made from woven polypropylene composite

operating in redesigned chassis baskets with smoother rubbing to reduce air resistance behind the cone and minimise unwanted resonances. The three bass drivers use long multi-layer coils and thick aluminium rings with the aim of linearising inductance. Also, they allow for large, linear cone excursions but, being modestly sized, are said to respond quickly and precisely, maintaining low distortion at high sound levels. This is aided by Indiana Line's proprietary Dual-Wave upper suspension system, which is said to prevent resonance of the suspension-membrane at midrange frequencies. It is also claimed to widen the linear operating range of the speaker, resulting in much cleaner low bass reproduction while reducing intermodulation distortion and improving articulation of the midrange. Indiana Line reckons this has a positive impact on the sound of percussion, strings and all acoustic instruments. In addition, frequency response irregularities resulting from membrane edge resonance are further reduced.

Located above the trio of bass drivers, the midrange is set in its own sealed and dampened chamber. It uses a powerful 90mm ferrite magnet and a short 9mm coil with a copper shorting ring placed directly in the magnetic gap, resulting in low inductance and widely dispersed sound characteristics.

Handing over to the 26mm silk dome tweeter at 3.5kHz via a crossover that contains only air coils and foil capacitors, Indiana Line's designers have aimed to optimise performance in the critical 2-to-4kHz region. The tweeter itself has a Radial Venting Chamber claimed to counteract resonances behind the dome. As you might hope with so many drivers, the claimed frequency range is a generous 36Hz to 23kHz.

Sound quality

As my resident three-way Audiovector QR5 (*HFC* 468) floorstander is actually a little taller than the Diva 6 and sounds great in my smaller listening room – albeit as the recipient of Townshend Audio Seismic Isolation Podium's (*HFC* 426) room decoupling magic – the Indiana Line towers are a direct swap and thus at the (not always) tender mercies of Leema Acoustics' terrifically potent and grippy Tucana II Anniversary integrated amp fed by a Primare Np5 Prisma Mk2 (*HFC* 494) streamer, Marantz SA-12 SE SACD player and Chord Electronics Hugo TT2 (*HFC* 468) DAC and M Scaler.

HOW IT COMPARES

Perhaps the most talented rival in the £1,500-£2,000 price bracket is Revival Audio's £1,790 Sprint 4 (*HFC* 531). It's a bass driver down on the Diva 6, but is arguably more overtly entertaining with a presentation that's a little forward but powerfully driven to extract the best from up-tempo material, a likeable enthusiasm that nevertheless isn't wrong footed by musical genre. The Diva 6 is a little more poised and balanced, making it the more relaxing listen of the two.



Although the Audiovector is around twice the price of the Diva 6, I'm not expecting the Italian stand-in to give an inch and so it proves, not least when it comes to bass performance. The QR5 and Diva 6 both have downward-firing bass reflex ports, making the ports less 'audible' and the effects of boundary reinforcement less critical. The Diva 6 goes satisfyingly low cleanly with good weight, body and timbral realism, exploiting the Leema amp's grip and control to great effect. The opening few minutes of *Help Me* from gospel singer Tamela Mann's live *Overcomer* album, streamed over Qobuz, has some positively subterranean, rippling, pulsing, viscerally wall-bowing bass lesser floorstanders won't even look at, yet the Diva 6 is right there with the QR5 letting the weapons-grade low frequencies flood the room. You'd swear there's a subwoofer joining in. Up to now, I haven't heard any sub-£2k floorstander that could live with the Audiovector's low-end heft, extension and tunefulness, but the slim Indiana Line tower gets mighty close and might even reach a little lower.

When it comes to projecting a spacious, well-scaled sonic landscape it's a similar story. There's a certain effortless largesse the best three-way designs often exhibit that smaller two-ways struggle to replicate, however coherently they hold together musical content. The Diva 6 has the compass to let music breathe, ebb and flow naturally in a setting that extends well beyond the outer edges of the speakers themselves. Take a 24/96 Qobuz stream of Jack Garratt's *Love Myself Again* from recent album *Pillars*. As *Love Myself Again* welds blues-soaked harmonies to funky, propulsive rhythms, the sound is expansive, punchy and naturally dynamic – layers of smoothness and refinement making for an easy, unfatiguing listen yet wedding this with on-point musical insight that's capable of bringing a sense of life and structure to recordings with less immediate vibrancy and vigour than those apparent in Garratt's spotless production, just as a lofty, well-executed, multi-driver floorstander should.

Conclusion

Unlike some large speakers that claim to fly the bang-for-your-buck flag, the Diva 6 doesn't rely on size and driver count alone to close the deal. Its sonic skillset is clearly that of a more expensive speaker which, if you're going to make your mark in the prevailing market conditions that anticipate a degree of over delivery for success, isn't a bad place to be. Expect to hear more from Indiana Line in the future ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

LIKE: Expansive, effortless sonics; material value; smart design

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: A keenly priced blend of physical presence and rewarding performance

OVERALL ★★★★★



Life begins at forty...

Nick Tate busts out the champers as he listens to Acoustic Energy's 'reimagined' version of its classic mini-monitor

Founded by bass guitar-mad musician Phil Jones back in 1985, Acoustic Energy's first product was the AE1. Launched in 1987, it followed the trend for increasingly small, minimalist two-way bookshelf designs, epitomised by the hugely popular Wharfedale Diamond. Unlike the latter, the AE1 was mid-priced and conceived at least in part for near-field monitoring in studios.

Now the AE1 is back. This time in 40th Anniversary Edition guise. Designer Mat Spandl says: "we had to examine where we could improve upon the original while retaining the character which made it such a hit". It's been painstakingly voiced to sound like the first-gen AE1, although he added that he aimed the voicing more closely at the Mk2 version, which he believes was superior.

The new design sports an aluminium dome tweeter with a larger 29mm voice coil (up from 25mm) with a larger rear chamber to absorb rearward energy and lower resonance. The bass unit is slightly larger than the original at 125mm, with a spun and hard anodised aluminium cone and twin magnets.

The cabinet is the same size and topology as the original, but the new internal treatment frees up 500ML of internal volume. It's made of high-density fibreboard with Acoustic Energy's RSC anti-resonance compound. It then gets a choice of Walnut veneer or Piano Black finishes (the latter with 10 layers of paint). The finish of my review sample is superb, better than how I remember the original being. At the back is a simple pair of decent-quality speaker binding posts.

The new crossover uses low-order filters and high-quality components to achieve a natural 'live' dynamic sound, according to the company. Mat says it's been voiced more with domestic use in mind, rather than studio work. The result is a claimed frequency response of 50Hz-45kHz (+/-6dB), a 87dB/1m/1W sensitivity (2dB up from the original) and a nominal impedance of 6ohm. This means this new AE1 40 should be a tad easier to drive than the original, but you'll still need a gutsy solid-state amp for best results. In my listening room it works best up close to a rear wall on tall, stable stands.

Sound quality

This is a fascinating combination of forensic detail and fun, but isn't the most even-sounding mini-monitor around, having a slightly rich upper bass that transitions up to a well-lit midband. Then there's its crisp, sparkling treble that illuminates the recording well and helps with its excellent 'out of the box' imaging. Factor in its expansive soundstage, and you have a small speaker with a large personality.

In this respect it retains the original AE1's distinctive character – although it's a bit more refined. The original's rough edges are subtly curtailed, yet there is still vigour and vim aplenty. Indeed the 40th Anniversary edition feels like it was made for fast, punchy pop, rock and techno music. Play Manix's *Join The Future*, and you'd think that a small speaker with limited low-end grunt wouldn't really do justice to this classic slice of drum and bass. Yet oddly the AE1 40 does, and with relish. This isn't a great hi-fi recording, but the diminutive Acoustic Energy doesn't care – indeed, the bassline sounds pluckier and more bouncy than almost any small speaker I've heard. The upper bass is a little bit 'plump', with a teensy bit of extra padding, yet this speaker never booms. You can feel the bass synth modulating up and down with great speed and grip, falling away gracefully as the AE1 is asked to reproduce the very low notes that its limited cabinet capacity prohibits.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy AE1 40th Anniversary

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
7.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
295 x 180 x 240mm

FEATURES
- 29mm aluminium dome tweeter
- 125mm aluminium coned mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1m/1W (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Acoustic Energy

WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.co.uk



Further up in the mix, there's lots of detail, aided by both the good-quality drive units and low colouration cabinet. There's almost nothing in the way of slurring or blurring coming from the AE1 40's compact enclosure. This in turn lets you hear right into the mix and enjoy the subtle filigree detail of acoustic instruments, such as the great guitar work on The Jam's live version of *That's Entertainment*. There's nothing in the way of embellishment here, either to the guitar or Paul Weller's plaintive vocals. The recording sounds cold and edgy, yet the emotion shines through

The bassline sounds more bouncy than almost any small speaker I've heard

thanks to the intricate way this speaker communicates his phrasing.

Fire up a better quality pop recording like *Head Over Heels* by Tears For Fears, and the AE1 40 gets into its stride. Now we're hearing Roland Orzabal's impassioned vocals at full tilt with a morass of synth power chords crashing away in the background, set beside a big, close-mic-ed Eighties drum sound. Given the track was mastered for FM radio play, it's a bit compressed – yet this speaker ekes out loads of detail in a forensic way, as if it's shining a searchlight on the recording. The new AE1 40's skill is that it brings all this together in a highly satisfying way; its innate speed, accuracy and lack of overhang makes this infectiously catchy.

On direct modern recordings, with amplification that doesn't flatter to deceive, this speaker can sound quite in your face – it's direct and focused, and doesn't hide the music behind cotton wool. That makes recordings like Deadmau5 & Kaskade's *I Remember* real edge-of-the-seat stuff. The AE1 40's tweeter is unmistakably a metal dome, for better and for worse. Transients are super fast and explicit, so you can really enjoy the bite of hi-hat cymbals. However, this standmount will remind you of its presence. It's still a lovely sound though; sinewy, immersive, immediate and atmospheric.

Has the great stereo imaging that the original AE1 was famous for been retained? Yes, and it's possibly even better. The tiny cabinet and close-knit drivers make for a near point-source sound, which helps this new Anniversary edition perform a disappearing act with any decent recording. The beautiful Byrds-inspired country rock of The Long Ryders' *Too Close To The Light* pushes out hard into my listening room, growing ever more engrossing as the volume is ramped up. Inside the panoramic recorded acoustic, this speaker serves up an extremely well-structured sound. Each element of the mix is clear to hear and perfectly positioned.

Such excellent spatiality, plus the sheer speed and grip, makes this track a thrill ride. This character is of course what endeared the original to its fans, nearly 40 years ago, and it's grin-inducing today. Whatever type of music you play – from the elegant psychedelic rock of Buffalo Springfield's Sixties epic *Expecting To Fly*, to baroque classical in the form of Bach's *5th Brandenburg Concerto* – this little loudspeaker just wants to make music magic.

Conclusion

An excellent reboot of Acoustic Energy's first ever loudspeaker, the new AE1 40th Anniversary edition doesn't sound identical, but is close. Indeed, it captures the charm of the original while shaving off a few rough edges. Delightfully – unlike many 'retro modern' designs – it isn't insanely expensive, either. So, whether you view it as the recreation of an audio icon or simply just as an affordable yet capable standmount, it's still great value for money. The legend lives on ●

HOW IT COMPARES

Bowers & Wilkins 707 S3 (*HFC* 513, £1,400) is just the sort of bookshelf speaker that the AE1 40 finds itself up against pricewise. It's a class act, so the Acoustic Energy has its work cut out. The B&W gives a super-clean sound that's highly precise and detailed, with surprising bass power and depth. The AE1 40 has less bottom end extension, a slight upper bass bump and little bit of brightness up top. Yet it's far more dynamic and engaging and has a wonderful 'out of the box' feel. In other words, it's more flawed but so much more fun.

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★½

LIKE: Lots of fun; loads of detail; size

DISLIKE: Lacks bass extension compared with rivals

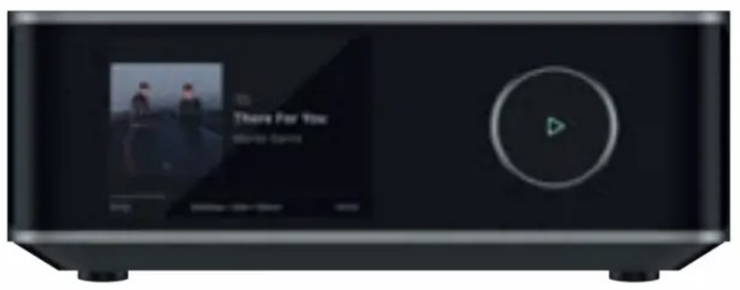
WE SAY: Great remake of this iconic mini-monitor

OVERALL ★★★★★



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Hi-Fi Choice EDITOR'S CHOICE

Studio sound

This headphone amp/DAC contains clever calibration to provide a speaker-like experience. ***Neville Roberts*** checks it out

This handy device has been produced to correct tonal imbalance and spatial disconnection for headphone listening, and is compatible with a very wide range of dynamic headphones. The ARC ON-EAR is designed to offer a consistently accurate, speaker-like reference experience without requiring any plug in, software host, or DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) setup. Essentially, it aims to provide the same listening experience on headphones that you would get from speakers in a good listening room.

The ARC ON-EAR contains a 200mW low-distortion headphone amp with digitally controlled analogue volume and studio-quality DAC. It has dedicated push buttons for bypassing calibration and studio simulation, five storable presets and a user-assignable button for common actions. A companion software app is used to manage these presets and all settings. The analogue input is via a 3.5mm jack and the digital is through a USB-C connector. A 6.3mm jack is included for the headphone output. The integrated lithium battery provides up to four hours of use and is charged via the USB-C socket.

The device uses the frequency responses and characteristics of supported headphone models, which have been pre-programmed into the app. These include how headphone drivers interact with the ear canal and middle ear structures.

Because headphone drivers are positioned at 180° to the ears, they can create an unnaturally wide stereo image with a lack of room cues – making decisions on reverb, panning, and stereo width especially difficult. The ARC ON-EAR solves this with a custom cross-feed algorithm to create a believable stereo image on a par with listening to speakers in a well-tuned room. ARC ON-EAR uses hand-measured profiles from over 250 headphones (and the list is growing) using cross-feed and tuned early reflections algorithms instead of conventional impulse response reverberations to recreate a believable stereo field without artifacts.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
IK Multimedia ARC ON-EAR

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
Headphone amplifier/DAC

WEIGHT
170g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
170 x 320 x 270mm

FEATURES
- Analogue input via 3.5mm jack
- Headphone out via 6.3mm jack
- In-room listening simulation

DISTRIBUTOR
IK Multimedia

WEBSITE
ikmultimedia.com

Sound quality

To test the unit, I use a Sennheiser dynamic headphone and start with an analogue signal from my hi-fi. I leave all the adjustments at their default settings and use the ARC ON-EAR as a headphone amplifier. Listening to Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No.1* played by Vladimir Ashkenazy and the LSO, the piano is very realistic and the image placement and clarity across the orchestra is excellent. The trumpet blasts are bright and clear and the piano is perfectly positioned in front of the other instruments.

On Steve Race's *Late Race* the strings and solos are fast and rhythmic in *Bach, In His Own Bachyard* and the presentation is open, but the volume has to be at maximum to be audible. Going to the Headphone Settings section of the Safe Headroom app allows me to turn off the default 11dB setting for much better volume.

For some vocals, I turn to Frank Sinatra's *Days Of Wine And Roses* and the unmistakable sound of Old Blue Eyes' voice comes through perfectly while the Nelson Riddle orchestra has great depth and presence behind him. I activate Studio Simulation to change the presentation and stereo image, allowing me to adjust the width of the orchestra behind Sinatra, creating a very pleasing effect.

To check out the DAC, a 24/192 WAV of Vivaldi's *Concerto for Violin, Strings and Harpsichord RV386* by Interpreti Veneziani reveals captivating results and I am able to locate each of the individual players across the soundstage, which is highly unusual for headphone listening.

Conclusion

A great product with a difference, the ARC ON-EAR works very well as a straightforward headphone amp for both analogue and digital inputs, but also offers a tweakable soundstage, which is very useful ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Great sound quality; feature-rich

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: An excellent-value portable headphone amplifier with very impressive room simulation



Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Pole star

All new turntables are different. All new turntables from Poland are more unusual still. ***Ed Selley*** learns all about Unitra

Testing a brand new turntable in 2025 is not that uncommon; indeed far more common than testing a device for playing a 70-year old format ought to be. Testing a turntable where the only component shared with anything else on the market is a cartridge is rather rarer, however. It's given an even more unicorn-like quality when the turntable in question could be described as reasonably affordable with a straight face.

The Unitra GSH-630 Fryderyk is all of these things (and, as we shall discover, more besides). It's the more affordable of two models designed and built in house by Unitra. The company is relatively new, having been founded in the last few years. It takes its name from the brand that acted as an umbrella of firms building audio equipment for the Polish market and wider Soviet Bloc between the Sixties and late-Eighties.

The GSH-630 is unusual in the pantheon of modern turntables because it uses direct-drive as the means to rotate the platter. This is an assembly called the NB-1 (which is available to purchase separately). It uses a brushless motor with coreless coils that act directly on a small sub-platter. Compared with the rather burlier arrangement used by notable direct-drive proponent Technics, this is less about wrist-snapping torque and whacking-great stators. Instead a chunky but straightforward High Density Polyethylene platter topped by a thick mat is rotated via contact with the sub-platter and spindle.

The tonearm is also all Unitra's own work and is available separately. Called the R-10, it's an aluminium arm that uses a J-shaped profile with detachable headshell. The overall effective length is just over 228mm and it mounts 210mm from the spindle. It's a captive-type design with two pairs of bearings on tapered pivots, clearly visible in a concentric arrangement. Unitra supplies the GSH-630 with an Ortofon 2M Bronze, which is a solidly specified cartridge to find at this sort of price.

The R-10 is well made, but not without its slightly curious aspects. The counterweight is relatively small, which means that some testing with a Goldring Eroica HX (*HFC* 492) high-output moving-coil in a magnesium headshell requires the help of Blu-Tack to achieve the correct tracking force. The arm rest also needs the armlift to be in the lowered position to fit, which is mildly irksome too. You get used to it, but it doesn't feel completely seamless.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Unitra GSH-630 Fryderyk

ORIGIN
Poland

TYPE
Direct-drive turntable

WEIGHT
11.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 152 x 386mm

FEATURES
- 33 and 45rpm
- R-10 J-shaped aluminium tonearm
- Two-speed direct-drive motor
- Ortofon 2M Bronze cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR
The Audio Business

WEBSITE
unitra.com
theaudiobusiness.co.uk

The delicacy and articulation ensures that even complex material feels natural

The rest of the turntable is rather easier to live with. Unitra places the power supply together with speed and power controls in the milled and veneered plinth. This means the GSH 630 Fryderyk doesn't spread out over several shelves and presents a conventional IEC socket and RCA outputs on the rear, for which Unitra also supplies an excellent cable.

The plus points for practicality don't end there. You get a hinged lid and

the business of setup is pleasingly straightforward, with only the novel (but it must said, clever and effective) location of the anti-skate weight needing even the slightest recourse to the instruction manual. This is an impressively unintimidating device to set up and live with.

It's good looking too. Unitra generally leans towards retro, but the GSH-630 Fryderyk strikes a clever balance that allows it to sit with more contemporary-styled products without looking too incongruous, helped by there being six finishes (Silver/Walnut, Black/Walnut, Silver/Black Ash, Black/Black Ash, Silver/Light Ash and Back/Light Ash). The level of build and finish is exceptional, with every point of contact having a confidence-inspiring solidity to it.

Sound quality

I connect the Unitra to my Cyrus Phono Signature Phono Stage (*HFC* 408), Cambridge Audio Edge A amp and Kudos Titan 505 (*HFC* 451) standmounts. The Unitra starts off getting all the basics right. The motor unit is utterly silent when running, even when the platter is removed and pitch stability is extremely good. It doesn't boast the sort of instant start up that larger Technics possess, but neither will you be able to go make a cup of tea while it reaches playback speeds.

The performance is consistently engaging too. Listening to *La Saboteuse* by Yazz Ahmed allows the GSH-630 Fryderyk to demonstrate an impressively low noise floor that helps fine detail in the mix to be readily apparent. The pitch stability ensures that sustained notes are correctly handled and the overall tonality is convincing, with the Unitra ensuring that the fractionally forward presentation of the Ortofon doesn't become an issue.

There is a delicacy and articulation to what the Unitra does that ensures even relatively complex material like Cinematic Orchestra's *Channel 1 Suite* is delivered with a fluency that feels consistently unforced and natural. Compared with a few options around this price point, bass lacks some of the truly seismic edge that can be experienced, but the manner in which it starts and stops will be enough to win over many users.

When you further increase the tempo and ask the Unitra to play Leftfield's *Space Shanty*, there is a sense that this is not the GSH-630's true forte. It's never dull or overtly constrained but, where some direct-drive turntables positively thrive with material like this, the Unitra retains the same agile and fundamentally sweet presentation it does with less urgent content. It's important to stress it's more than up to the task of ensuring that Editors *The Weight Of Your Love* is still a potent, brooding and pleasingly visceral experience.

Interestingly, I don't see any improvement in the bass response (or indeed much else) from the Unitra when using a record weight on the spindle, but the relatively lightweight Stack Audio Serene dampener manages to extract a little more fine detail and three-dimensional space from Sarah Jarosz's *World On The Ground*. Likewise, testing with the suitably Blu-Tack-enhanced Goldring Eroica HX suggests that the Unitra is responsible for the bulk of the qualities you might realistically describe as 'character'. The Goldring delivers a slightly sweeter tonal balance, but the overall balance remains much the same. This is almost certainly not a tweaker's turntable where absolutely every adjustable medium makes a difference, but the more time I get to spend with it, the more deliberate that feels.

Conclusion

What the GSH-630 Fryderyk does very effectively is shoot for a little fit-and-forget convenience over and above the approach taken by some rivals where the performance that is potentially possible is superb but you'll need to put the legwork in to extract it. This is not a 'lifestyle' product; something wholly bespoke like this rarely is. What it does instead is guarantee a level of performance regardless of its surroundings that is likely to leave most owners very happy. The combination of clever engineering and exacting attention to detail has rather won me over and I'm rather looking forward to seeing what the rest of the Unitra range can do ●

HOW IT COMPARES

The Unitra costs £200 more than Technics SL-1300G (*HFC* 525), but the inclusion of a cart that costs more than the difference between the two means they are very closely matched. The Unitra can't match the Technics' muscularity and the 1300G is the more potent and exciting performer of the two. Where the Unitra hits back is an articulation and fluency that the burlier Technics can't easily rival. These are both seriously talented direct-drive turntables, but the Unitra manages to feel more special because of its bespoke parts.





OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★★½
OVERALL ★★★★½

LIKE: Articulate and detailed sound; superb build; appearance

DISLIKE: Lacks bass and urgency; some quirks to the tonearm

WE SAY: A beautifully engineered turntable that has quite considerable appeal

AE1

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

A sound apart

This long-awaited update delivers better sound and noise cancelling, but it's still for Apple users only says ***Cliff Joseph***

It's been more than two years since Apple last updated its AirPods Pro, so there's been plenty of pent-up demand waiting for this latest version. Most audiophiles will not be particularly interested in Apple's obsession with health and fitness features, or the inevitable AI – or, as Apple prefers to call it, 'Apple Intelligence'. Even so, the AirPods Pro 3 still include a number of welcome improvements including using your AirPods as a hearing aid or heart-rate monitor and an AI-powered language translation feature (although you'll need the iPhone 15 Pro or later).

Features more likely to win over Apple-owning audiophiles include a new design that uses slightly larger and more elongated earpieces, claimed to introduce a new "multi-port acoustic architecture" to provide better airflow, resulting in firmer bass and a more expansive soundstage.

My biggest problem with previous AirPods was that they tended to fall out every five minutes. Apple states this new design provides a firmer and more secure fit. It has even redesigned the 'foam-infused' ear-tips, now providing five different sizes, and I'm happy to say this is the first set of AirPods that stays put inside my ears for hours at a time, without constant readjustment. The earpieces are also tougher now with an IP57 rating for improved water and dust resistance.

The headline feature is the improved active noise-cancellation (ANC). Apple claims the AirPods Pro 3 cut out twice as much background noise as before, for: "the world's best ANC of any in-ear wireless headphones". Meanwhile, it ups the battery to eight hours when using ANC. Oddly, additional charge from the case has dropped from a total of 30 hours to 24.

Of course, Apple remains committed to the AAC codec for Bluetooth audio, eschewing aptX and LDAC.

Sound quality

The new 'acoustic architecture' seems to deliver the goods, providing firmer bass and a more open soundstage.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Apple AirPods Pro 3

ORIGIN
US/China

TYPE
Bluetooth in-ear headphone

WEIGHT
Earbud: 5.5g
Case: 44g

FEATURES
- Bluetooth 5.3
- Spatial Audio with Dolby Atmos
- IP57 water/dust-resistance

DISTRIBUTOR
Apple UK

WEBSITE
apple.com/uk

Both qualities are evident as I listen to a hi-res stream of Gorecki's *Symphony No.3* from Apple Music. The AirPods do an excellent job of embracing the deep tone of the opening double bass and there's an impressive sense of space that allows them to pick up small background sounds in the concert hall. The AirPods also know when to step back and make room for Beth Gibbons' solo vocal. This piece also reveals the effectiveness of the improved noise cancelling, completely eliminating the deep drone of an aircraft engine. While they still let in some of the high-frequency sound of a busy airport, they're still more effective than most rival earbuds – with the possible exception of the £300 Bose QC Ultra (*HFC* 515).

I'm not a fan of Spatial Audio, but the Dolby Atmos mix of *Eleanor Rigby* plays to the strength of the AirPods. The string arrangement has an almost balletic quality, there's a rich, woody texture to the staccato cellos and the rising run in the second verse is positively uplifting. The final verse is heart-breaking, though, as the AirPods contrast McCartney's lead vocal with the backing harmonies yearning in the distance.

Sturgill Simpson's *Sing Along* is sonically much denser, with layers of fuzzy guitar, keyboards and percussion competing for attention. The AirPods handle the change of pace with ease, finding room to keep the heavy guitar riffs and wailing keyboards clear and distinct. They hone right in on the precise percussion and really stick the landing as they swoop right down for the final bass drop.

Conclusion

The only drawback with the AirPods Pro 3 is that they remain very much an Apple-only product. The sound quality and noise cancelling are the best yet, but you'll need an Apple device – preferably, a high-end iPhone – to enjoy all their new features ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★½

LIKE: Excellent noise cancelling; clear, spacious sound

DISLIKE: No aptX

WE SAY: A good upgrade for Apple users, but Android and Sony users will need to look elsewhere

Theory of EVOlution

The flagship of Wharfedale's new Evolution range looks like a lot of speaker for the money. ***Ed Selley*** puts it to the test



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Wharfedale EVO 5.4

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
13.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
302 x 1,028 x 350mm

FEATURES
- 35 x 70mm Air Motion Transformer
- 50mm midrange driver
- 2x 165mm Kevlar bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/m/W (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG

WEBSITE
wharfedale.co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice EDITOR'S CHOICE

While so many hi-fi manufacturers look to the past for inspiration, Wharfedale's EVO 5.4 bucks the trend by being bang up to date both in the technology it uses and the aesthetic chosen for it. As the flagship of the EVO 5 range and the larger of two floorstanding models, it is a four-driver design offering a three-way configuration. Bass is handled by 165mm woven Kevlar cones used in a variety of Wharfedale designs. As a pair they give the EVO 5.4 a very respectable claimed low-end roll-off of 42Hz at +/- 3dB.

The other two are much more interesting. Like the preceding generation of EVO speakers, the tweeter is an Air Motion Transformer that has been designed and built specifically for this role. The unit here is not the same as the one used in the previous range. It is larger – 35 x 70mm compared with 30 x 60mm – and now features a new sound-absorbing material that Wharfedale calls SilentWeave, designed to reduce unwanted energy coming back through the diaphragm.

Closing the gap between the happy operating envelope of these drivers is a 50mm soft dome responsible for

It handles a huge bandwidth without so much as a hint of compression

everything between 1.1 and 4kHz. We've seen a version of this driver before in the Super Denton (*HFC* 515) and it's an ideal partner for an AMT, which can struggle to hit the sort of crossover point that more conventional domes can manage. Finding one of these drivers on a £1,400 speaker is a fairly notable thing. Finding one equipped with both is fairly remarkable.

These are assisted by a bass reflex system that is built into the base of the cabinet. It uses a system called Slot Loaded Profiled Port (SLPP), which radiates the air in multiple directions to control airflow better and keep everything inaudible, making the bottom of the EVO 5.4 a huge multiway slot port. Contact with the floor is via a set of outrigger feet that allow for levelling adjustment.

Wharfedale has constructed the cabinet from a sandwich of boards of different densities, designed to reduce panel resonance. It features a curved cabinet side that serves the dual purpose of helping both the looks

and overall rigidity and response to standing waves. Given the size of the EVO 5.4 and the drivers it contains, it's very respectably bolted together.

As already noted, the EVO 5.4 doesn't go in for the retro aesthetic of other recent Wharfedale offerings. It takes the preceding EVO 4 range as a starting point but tweaks the proportions for an altogether more pleasing result. This is a big speaker, but one that wears its dimensions very well. Aside from Black, White and Walnut, you'll find the extremely up-to-the-minute Grey Sheen option of the review sample.

Sound quality

The bulk of testing takes place with a Naim Supernait 3 (*HFC* 456), which is getting on for three times the price of the floorstander. The most potent first impression that the Wharfedale delivers is that the gulf in price never really makes itself felt in terms of what you hear. The 50th Anniversary release of Robin Trower's *For Earth Below* provides a perfect opportunity for that four-driver complement to really show what it can do and the EVO 5.4 delivers in fine style.

The handover between the AMT and dome midrange is seamless under all conditions and ensures that the magnificence of Trower's vocals and heavyweight guitar work is delivered with a convincing tone and texture. At no stage does the EVO 5.4 tip over into 'stop and listen to this!' style over emphasis, but what you hear is still startlingly vivid at times. Little Barrie and Malcolm Catto's *Quatermass Seven* reveals some lovely incidental detail, but the effect is to augment the performance as a whole rather than draw your attention to it.

As you might expect from a speaker with the dimensions of this one, the bass response is good too. The 42Hz lower roll off at +/-3dB is bettered in the space thanks to a spot of benign room reinforcement and the reality of using the Wharfedale in many UK lounges will be meaningful and usable with output down to 30Hz; something that even floorstanding rivals will struggle to compete with. Like all sizeable speakers, the EVO 5.4 will overdrive small rooms, but the scope to convincingly fill larger ones is hard to ignore.

Listening to the more urgent *Out Of A Dream* by Slow Readers Club shows that the Wharfedale is less energetic than some others at the price. It would be wrong to call it 'slow', but this isn't the sort of speaker that really wants to go ballistic. There are upsides to this approach. For what is a detailed and revealing bit of kit, the Wharfedale is impressively forgiving of less than perfectly mastered material while still being able to show what a good recording is capable of.

More than anything else, though, it's the combination of scale and that driver complement that effortlessly handles a huge bandwidth without so much as a hint of compression that wins you over. Listening to Kamasi Washington's *Fists Of Fury* is an experience that's rare at this price. As the scale of the piece increases, most of the EVO 5.4's rivals will ask you to choose between scale and cohesion. Instead, the Wharfedale says: 'why not both?' and proceeds to deliver in a way that makes most other things at the price sound a little bit broken.





HOW IT COMPARES

Focal's superbly engineered Theva N°2 (*HFC* 505) is just about the only speaker anywhere near the price of the EVO 5.4 that can mount a serious challenge to it. The key area where the Focal has an advantage over the Wharfedale is that it is a more dynamic and exciting-sounding speaker pretty much regardless of the partnering equipment. In the deeply subjective area of looks, I also fractionally prefer the Theva. From there, though, the Wharfedale chalks up the wins. It has better tonality and detail, hits harder (and with less thought needed for placement) and produces a more convincing stereo image. The Focal is good – very good – but the Wharfedale is even better still.

Conclusion

The EVO 5.4 arrives to remind us both that Wharfedale is perfectly capable of making a modern-looking speaker when it chooses to and that the result is utterly formidable when it does. I dislike absolutes in reviews; it normally prompts something turning up in the next four to six weeks that contradicts me entirely, but you really cannot buy more speaker than this for £1,400. It delivers a deft combination of scale, detail and engagement that is deeply and consistently impressive and it represents Wharfedale laying down a marker that rivals are going to have to dig deep to get anywhere near ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

LIKE: Combination of superb scale, impact, detail and realism

DISLIKE: Not the last word in excitement; it needs a bit of room

WE SAY: As long as you have room for it, the EVO 5.4 is the best remotely affordable floorstander going

OVERALL ★★★★★



Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Maximum joy

iFi's latest DACs bring state-of-the-art Bluetooth to your IEMs of choice. ***Cliff Joseph*** tries them on for size

iFi Audio's first GO pod was launched last year – and, in truth, at first seemed like something of a head scratcher. The GO pod consisted of a pair of chunky units that doubled up as both Bluetooth receiver and DAC. These included detachable loops with two-pin or MMCX connectors that allowed you to attach a variety of in-ear monitors of your choosing – effectively turning wired IEMs into very upmarket Bluetooth earbuds. The size of the earpieces made them seem like a rather inelegant solution to a problem that probably doesn't worry too many people in the first place. Even so, it seems to have been quite successful, spawning a lighter model called the GO pod Air and now the top-of-the-range GO pod Max. Of course, that price doesn't include any IEMs – although iFi has provided 64 Audio's U4s for this review.

The GO pod Max looks very similar to its predecessor, with the Bluetooth/DAC components housed in two rectangular lozenges that sit behind the ears. These are held in place by loops, which wrap around the ear and provide two-pin and MMCX connectors for your IEM of choice. There are optional loops with T2 and Pentaconn connectors also available for £29. The bulky design might deter some users, but the earpieces are just about small enough to wear without feeling too intrusive and are no more annoying than the mess of braided cables the U4s relies on for a wired connection. The GO pod Max is rated IPX5 for water resistance, battery life is seven hours and the bulky case lets you top-up for an extra 35. It even includes built-in ultra-violet lights to sterilise the earpieces.

That's not the only new feature. The Max steps up to the latest Bluetooth 5.4 with aptX Lossless alongside aptX Adaptive, AAC, SBC, LDAC and LHDC. The flagship feature is K2HD, the audio upscaling technology developed by JVC-Kenwood designed to restore frequencies and harmonics that are lost during compression. iFi's Gaia app has been replaced by iFi Nexis, which provides OTA updates as well as digital filter and touch control options.

Sound quality

64 Audio's U4s is an excellent set of in-ears, but "garbage in, garbage out" as the saying goes, so it's up to the GO pod Max to provide a high-quality Bluetooth connection, clean it up using K2HD and then output the analogue audio via its DAC.

It very quickly proves its worth with a hi-res recording of Gorecki's *Symphony No.3* streamed from Apple Music. The rumbling double bass is very impressive and the iFi captures the melancholy of the sound as well as any Bluetooth device I've come across. It's good with dynamics too, capturing the atmosphere of the concert hall and creating the sense of scale of the strings. The swell of the orchestra is precise and measured, and the amplification stage of the DAC provides plenty of power for the piercing violins. The GO pod Max also captures all the anguish in Beth Gibbons tremulous vibrato.

At the other end of the vocal range, it digs down deep for the lower register of Leonard Cohen's *You Want It Darker*. His voice sounds like gravel, but is balanced by the rich harmonies of the Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue Choir and the sensuous sway of the track's wonderful bass riff. It can turn on a sixpence too, as I switch to the hi-res version of Sturgill Simpson's dance-rock mash up *Sing Along*. There's a gleeful fizz to the electronic keyboards, but the grinding, fuzzy guitar riff anchors the sound, while the crisp tick of percussion really gets the toes tapping.

Conclusion

The design may not suit everyone, but it's hard to fault the sonic performance of the GO pod Max. It's a worthy partner for a good set of IEMs if you want the convenience of a wireless connection on the move ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
iFi Audio GO pod Max

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Wearable Bluetooth DAC

WEIGHT
Units: 12g each
Case: 185g

FEATURES
- Connectors: two-pin; MMCX
- Bluetooth 5.4; aptX Lossless/Adaptive; AAC; SBC; LDAC; LHDC
- Battery: 7 hours (35 with case)

DISTRIBUTOR
iFi Audio

WEBSITE
ifi-audio.com

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★½
FEATURES	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★½

LIKE: Impressive sound via Bluetooth; good battery

DISLIKE: It's bulky and expensive

WE SAY: A good option for owners of high-quality IEMs that want the convenience of Bluetooth



UNISON RESEARCH

Make Your Music Glow

Whether you listen on vinyl, disc or stream, it’s understood that valves add a special warmth to your music, but in the hands of a maestro in valve design, they can also impart a greater awareness of power, dynamics and bandwidth. Since 1987 Unison Research has focused its experience on the production of valves, valve amplification and hybrid electronics to become a prime exponent in the art of valve craft, allowing new tube lovers and purists alike to discover and appreciate its revelatory contribution to listening pleasure.

Engineered entirely in Italy, Karma’s twenty-five model range includes Class A pre/power and phono amplification products, and the Unico line of the hybrid 2-channel systems at retail prices between £1,000 and £34,000.

Triode 25 BE

Unico CD Uno

Simply Italy BE

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karma

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Choice EXOTICA

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED



The more the merrier

In time for its 99th anniversary, ELAC launches a new flagship speaker with room-friendly, 'steerable' sound

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ELAC Concentro 2.0 M 807

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
Four-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
62kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
461 x 1,340 x 595mm

FEATURES
- JET 6c AMT tweeter
- 2x 115mm low-midrange AS-XR cone drivers
- 6x 40mm high-midrange A-XR cone drivers
- 2x 250mm bass AS cone drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/m/W (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Hi-Fi Network

WEBSITE
elac.com
hifi-network.com

You could never accuse ELAC's £37,000-a-pair Concentro 2.0 M 807 flagship speakers of being minimalist. Available in gloss Black or White finishes, they come with a choice of black or grey 'Deco ring' trims around the drivers, which are positioned at the very peak of a reinvented Concentro series starting with the (much simpler) S503.2 bookshelf/standmount design, yours for around £6,500 a pair.

But when it comes down to the M 807s, the eye is instantly drawn to that polygon of six 40mm A-XR (Aluminium-coned eXtended Range) midrange drivers, their 'faceted' cones enhancing stiffness without adding weight, surrounding the sixth-generation JET 6c AMT (Air Motion Transformer) tweeter – operating down to 2.65kHz before handing over to the midrange array, which in turn carries the baton down to 650Hz.

Elegant and stylish

ELAC calls this ring design its VXe (Variable Coaxial electric) array and though the fact that it enhances the sense of the treble/midrange package as something akin to an ideal point source isn't a unique arrangement, but here it goes further by providing a rear-panel 'directivity control'. This allows the array's acoustic output to be steered across the horizontal plane, focused or diffused, to compensate for the room, the speaker position and the listener's personal taste. You want sharp focus? It can be done. You want the impression of a piano filling the room from wall to wall? Likewise.

That directivity control is indicative of the M 807's complex design. Above and below the VXe array on the baffle are 115mm aluminium-sandwich coned 'low-midrange' drivers, again with that 'crystal-effect' stamping aiding rigidity and kicking in at around 650Hz. Below those, stirring into life below 150Hz, are two side-firing sandwich-coned 250mm bass drivers, also aluminium and tuned with a substantial downward-venting port (of which more later). With that upper roll-off, these constitute what is almost a built-in subwoofer section, taking the speaker's bass response down to a claimed 24Hz. Meanwhile, the upper frequency extension of the M 807 is stated as 50kHz.

So yes, despite the presence of just two sets of terminals, this is a true four-way design. The terminals are sensibly low-down on the cabinet rear, using high-quality heavy-duty hardware in a black chrome finish and supplied with links for single-wire operation. The crossovers use selected premium-grade film capacitors, air coils and non-inductive MOX (metal oxide) resistors. Each crossover section is mounted to its own aluminium heatsink panel, lined up the length of the speaker's spine.

There's a winning combination of stunning weight and near-forensic detail

For all that, the Concentro 2.0 M 807 is a relatively elegant floorstander. There's certainly no mistaking its presence in the listening room, but it stands a reasonable 1.34m tall, tapers down from a maximum width of 46cm and is a smidge under 60cm deep. Big, then, but impressively rather than oppressively so, with only the somewhat industrial-looking, and suitably hefty, grey alloy plinth to break up those smooth curves. The styling and finish of the curvaceous main enclosure is immaculate, the industrial design being the work of an unnamed consultancy located in ELAC's home city of Kiel.

But back to the plinth… Its outrigger legs carry substantial – and also very heavy – floorspikes but, for all their substance, they are not especially deep. This is fine for use on hard floors, for which protective footers are supplied, but with carpets there's always the risk that your prized tufted Axminster will 'short' the big, down-firing bass reflex port, diminishing its effect. The Concentro 2.0 M 807 looks like a prime candidate for the old slate/paving stone platform trick should your tastes run to wall-to-wall carpeted floors, which admittedly seem to be something of a British thing.

Within the cabinet the drivers work into separate chambers whose divisions also serve as additional bracing for the entire structure, contributing to the all-up weight of 62kg per speaker. Crucially, the six midrange drivers in the VXe array are mounted into individual, sealed tubes, attenuating their rear output while ensuring that each plays a completely unencumbered role in the 'steering' adjustment.

Sound quality

These ELAC flagships are a little tougher to drive than the quoted 4ohm rating might suggest, but the company recommends pairing them with amplifiers in the 80W-600W range and they seem to be especially happy on the end of the hardly lily livered Constellation Revelation 2 fed from the dCS Varèse streaming 'stack' that we have in our listening room.

Initial impressions? Superb multi-driver integration and rock-solid imaging – at least once you get that directivity control 'dialled in', and, in our large listening room, just a little gentle toe-in. Bass extension is prodigious, the Concentro 2.0 M 807 easily the match of any loudspeaker – similarly priced and otherwise – that we've tested in this room.

That clean low-end reach is very much in evidence with bass supremo Pino Palladino's *That Wasn't A Dream* set with Blake Mills. The grumbling low frequencies of the extended version of *Heat Sink* are crisply defined and especially convincing throughout. Meanwhile the slick driver integration contributes to the soundstaging of the lead instruments in all their processed glory, filling and bouncing around the room to startling effect. The sonic image here is every bit as immersive as it is three-dimensional.

With the far more conventional (and resolutely mono) recording of Miles Davis' *A Night In Tunisia*, from the recent 2025 remaster *Miles '55*



The ELAC has six-axis milled reinforcements to brace and separate bass, mid and VXe compartments

– *The Prestige Recordings* boxset, the sound remains tight and crisp. There is excellent character on show from Miles' horn, the piano and the rhythm section – unearthed from the original analogue recordings by engineer Paul Blakemore. The one-channel sound, with its tendency to wander as one moves either side of the ideal central listening position, rather gives the game away, as does the abrupt change in noise-floor between tracks. However, the tonality of the instruments is beyond reproach and these ELAC floorstanders give them full scope to be heard and fully appreciated.

The Concentro 2.0 M 807 delivers pin-point imaging with Joyce DiDonato's glorious recording of Dido's *Act 3* lament from the recent Il Pomo d'Oro release of Purcell's *Dido And Aeneas* – and with wonderful warmth in the accompaniment and radiant timbre to the voice. This is so even when playing the recording at high levels, ELAC's loudspeakers remaining super clean and controlled, with not a hint of that distortion-induced soprano ear-bashing effect.

That same clarity of tone and excellence of character is true with Ian Bostridge's so often system-challenging voice in Britten's song-cycle *Our Hunting Fathers,* while the exemplary accompaniment from the Britten Sinfonia under Daniel Harding sounds suitably spiky and dramatic. This ability with the complexities of both ensemble and orchestral music is also apparent with the recent BBC Philharmonic/Hallé Choir/ Storgårds recording of Shostakovich's *Third Symphony,* coupled with the *First* in the fifth instalment – still with us? – of the orchestra's complete cycle.

Here the ELAC floorstanders are able to deliver a winning combination of stunning weight and near-forensic detail. The sound builds from the simple woodwind opening into the drama of the full orchestral sections, conveyed with massive power when required and yet with all the space that the composer wrote into the score. Speed and deftness in the *scherzo* is followed by huge scale in the final *moderato*, with a considerable contribution from the always-reliable Hallé singers.

Switching things up a bit, Peter Gabriel's *The Rhythm Of The Heat* from the re-released *Live At WOMAD 1982* set is thrilling stuff – close vocal focus with thundering bass and percussion, really filling the room with a sound that will surely rattle any loose fittings.

As will the new Steven Wilson remix of Deep Purple's classic 1972 *Made In Japan* live album where *Smoke On The Water* in particular benefits from all the extra resolution and slams hard – alongside the good audience ambience from those oh-so-polite Osakans watching on.

ELAC recommends pairing the speakers with amplifiers in the 80W-600W range

The ELAC Concentro 2.0 M 807 also sounds big and bold with Hans Zimmer's frenetic score for *F1: The Movie*, delivering all the bombast of the main theme and the vivid energy of the climactic *Three Laps Is A Lifetime* cue, with its swelling strings joined by – umm – driving percussion.

On a smaller scale, the speakers are just as convincing with the funky *Two Trains* from the 2023 remaster of Little Feat's *Dixie Chicken*. Here they are able to deliver a punchy, good-time rock feel, with fine guitar tone from Lowell George and the boys and those of-a-time female backing vocals (in this case a stellar lineup including Bonnies Bramlett and Raitt alongside Gloria Jones).

During something of a folky interlude, we move on to Folk Bitch Trio's *That's All She Wrote* from *Now Would Be A Good Time*, enjoying the focus of the Concentro 2.0 M 807 –

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the three voices distinct yet blending beautifully. Meanwhile, *Timbuktu* from Les Amazones d'Afriques' *Amazones Power* is offered up with room-busting weight and beautiful resolution, a scale matched by the massive, unstoppable *Whirl-Y-Reel 1 (Beard And Sandals Mix)* from Afro-Celt Sound System's trendsetting *Vol.1: Sound Magic*. This eclectic mix of growling bass, unusual electronica and transcontinental instruments – Gaelic pipes whirling above synthesised sub-Saharan percussion – is totally joyful from start to finish.

And what about Peat & Diesel's *Stornoway* from their folk/thrash

Bass extension is prodigious – easily the match of any other loudspeaker

crossover set *Uptown Fank*? Well, the wistful opening sounds lovely and then, after a few beats on the drumstick, the musicians leap into life – accordion, bass and drums blazing, with the snarling vocals coming through clean and clear. Well, as clean and clear as they can – this band carries its rawness as a matter of pride and the effect is both infectious and irresistible via ELAC's flagship loudspeaker offering.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the distraction of fiddling with those dispersion controls and the need for a solid floor for the reflex port to achieve its full potential, these big, complex speakers are a captivating listen. The sound integrates superbly, bass is as massive and powerful as anyone could ever need and they're every bit as impressive with big, dense mixes as they are with super-clean, simple recordings. Notch one up for over engineering, then... ●

HIGH-END COMPARISONS

ELAC's VXe 'ring radiator' of six ultra-compact A-XR (Aluminium – eXtended Range) midrange drivers, surrounding its latest JET 6c AMT tweeter, underpins a concept that's already been trialled in a few high-end loudspeaker solutions. For example, Monitor Audio's Hyphn flagship showcases its 'M-Array' where six 50mm RDT III midrange drivers are positioned around a bespoke implementation of its third-generation Micro Pleated Diaphragm (MPD) tweeter. Similarly, both ELAC and MA designs also bear comparison with the 'nest' of carbon-ply domes and central beryllium tweeter of Perlisten's DPC (Directivity Pattern Control) waveguide.

While none of these driver clusters are true coaxial/single-point arrays like KEF's famous Uni-Q driver – they are perhaps better described as co-planar – the symmetry of the layout does hold out the promise of consistent horizontal and vertical dispersion. However, compared with the symmetrical dome tweeter used by Perlisten, the AMT drivers at the core of both MA's M-Array and ELAC's VXe array typically have a wider horizontal than vertical dispersion, but that's a trade off for improved HF power handling and lower distortion.

Unlike with the MA Hyphn and KEF Blade One Meta, ELAC makes no specific claims for its VXe technology being a 'point source'. Neither does it place its force-cancelling bass drivers up close to the acoustic centre of the mid/treble array. Instead, ELAC has another trick up its sleeve – the ability to tailor the speaker's direct and off-axis output to optimise performance where the M 807s are placed close to side walls or in rooms with an irregular shape.

A five-position switch on the rear of the cabinet invokes alternate crossover arms to shift the relative output of the A-XR mid drivers on the left and right sides of the baffle, respectively. But while ELAC's directivity control has specifically been designed to increase or reduce off-axis output to suit every room boundary condition, it is also perfectly suited to optimise the M 807's subjective sound quality in more ideal situations.

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

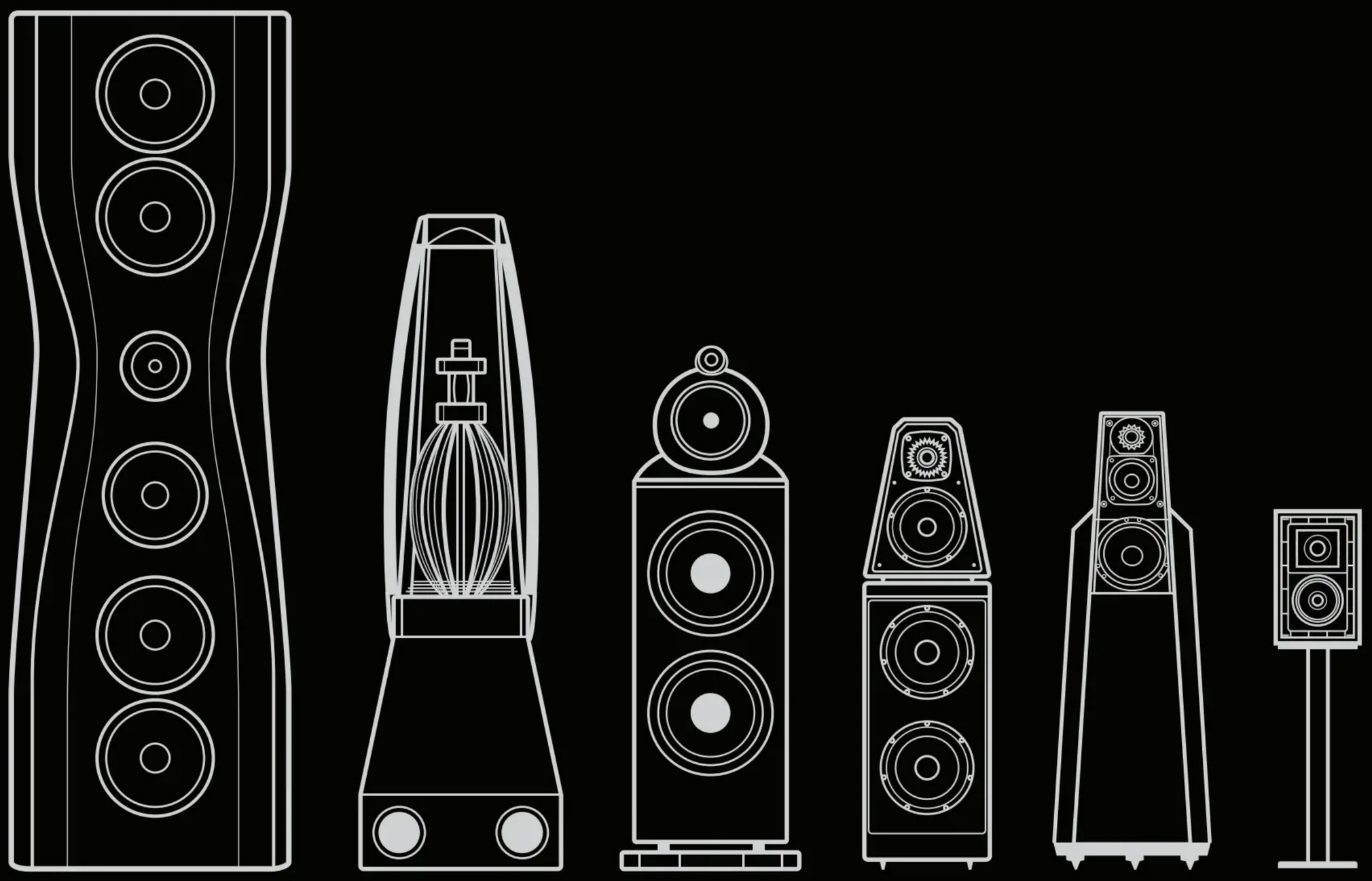
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Superb sound integration

DISLIKE: Needs a solid floor to reach potential

WE SAY: The apex of stunning loudspeaker over-engineering

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NAIM FOR BENTLEY

Showdown



Which sounds better, 'the world's best in-car sound system' or a hi-fi reviewer's reference system? ***David Vivian*** prepares his for battle

It's right here in black and white. From Bentley's website: "The Naim for Bentley system offers the power and refinement of a premium home audio setup, with an accurate and wide frequency response, low distortion and a vast dynamic range".

As fate would have it, an NfB-equipped 2025 Bentley Continental GTC Mulliner soft top is parked on my drive and what I would like to think is a 'premium home audio setup' resides in my listening room a flight of stairs away. What do you think should happen next? The search for a deserted airfield to exercise the twin-turbo V8/electric hybrid powertrain's 771 horse power and 738lb/ft of torque, capable of delivering 0-100mph in seven seconds? Tempting. An all but silent EV top-down waft along Whitstable High Street to swivel a few heads? Maybe later. A brutal, bloody, no-holds-barred car versus house sonic slap down? Can't wait.

To say the system that seems to have been built into the very fabric of the uber posh GTC Mulliner is formidable is quite the understatement. Naim has been collaborating with Bentley for some 17 years and it's hard to grasp the sheer weight of technical advancement, acoustic analysis, critical listening and iterative tweaking poured into the project since then. Now that Bentley hybrids can whisper along in EV mode, Naim's contribution has effectively become the thumping heart of the beast.

And we can safely say the latest system doesn't want for fire power or sophistication: 2,200W of Class D amplification, 20 strategically positioned drivers including super tweeters, Balanced Mode Radiators (BMR), a subwoofer and 'kinaesthetic' bass drivers built directly into the seats so you can feel as well as hear the lowest frequencies. Digital Signal Processing (DSP) with eight modes is at the core of system, tailored to the shape, size and acoustics of the Conti GTC offering a range of possibilities to optimise soundstage depending on seating position as well as listening preferences, while Naim's Dynamic EQ adjusts sound in real-time based on cabin conditions

The sound is richly upholstered and textured rather than whippet-lean and edgy

and driving mode be it Sport, Comfort, top up, top down or whatever.

From the driver's seat, control is accessed via a 12.3in HD touchscreen interface at the centre of the fascia. It can be configured in several ways: as a single display, split 2:1 or showing three different functions simultaneously. The overall design highlights simplicity of use with a contemporary and elevated aesthetic. As for the inevitable streaming smarts (sadly no CD transport any more), most of the usual suspects are available, including Spotify, Apple Music, Tidal and Deezer.

Arguably the Bentley's greatest asset, though, is its essential bespoke-ness. Much like a world-class recording studio, the system components have been chosen, tailored and optimised for a known acoustic space and build material characteristics, advantages denied most audiophiles even those who've invested in extensive room treatments and Dirac correction which, incidentally, is not me.

The challenger

My current reference system – the one modified only when I'm reviewing components to appear in the magazine – contains its fair share of tweaky stuff and, like most enthusiast systems, has grown organically to form a good partnership with, in my case, a smallish but well damped L-shaped listening room. As the Bentley is, of course, all digital, we'll skip the turntable and focus on the rest of my setup which consists of a Primare NP5 Prisma MK2 (*HFC* 494) streaming transport, Chord Electronics Hugo TT2 (*HFC* 468)/Hugo M Scaler DAC, Leema Acoustics Tucana II Anniversary integrated amp and Audiovector QR5 (*HFC* 468) floorstanding speakers with angled, rearward-facing Townshend Audio Maximum supertweeters sitting on top and Townshend Seismic Podiums supporting both from beneath. Cabling is mostly Nordost with contributions from Townshend and Merlin, mains conditioning by Nordost and Merlin and grounding/noise floor reduction Nordost once more joined by The Chord Company. Works for me.

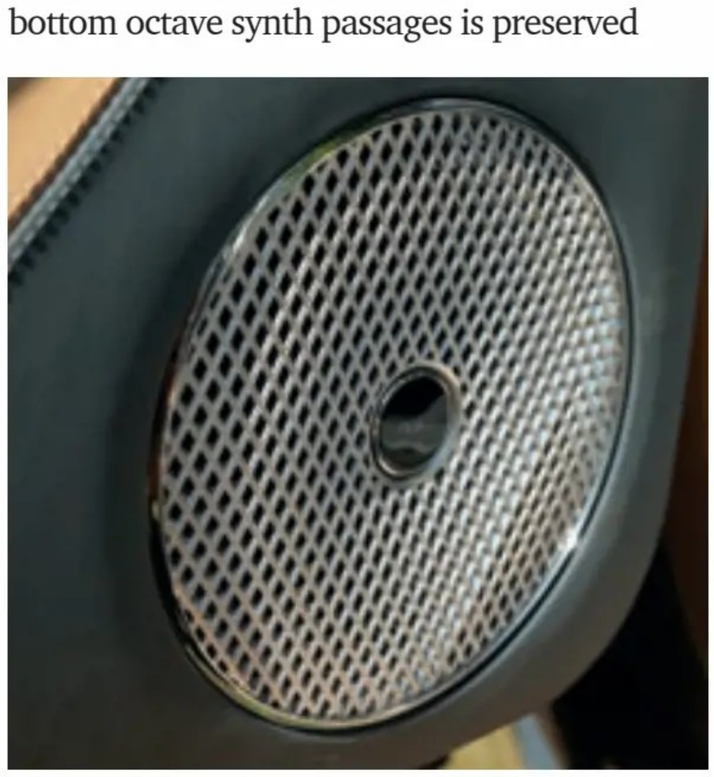
Time to drive. Despite the plethora of DSP sound-shaping options, the purest 'audiophile' setting seems the obvious one to go for given the task ahead. My initial impression, as the



Conti whispers out of Whitstable and onto the M2 motorway, roof up and volume very much in the foothills of the system's vertiginous imagined peak, is of a presentation so anchored, assured and agreeable, thoughts of spooling up the Bentley's twin-turbos for a spot of perception-distorting action take a back seat. The sound has substance and is richly upholstered and textured rather than whippet-lean and edgy – nicely unforced, balanced and composed at a gentle canter.

Auto balm

With the active bass 'shakers' built into the seat on standby for the moment, low notes – and Jamiroquai's *Automaton* has plenty of those – exhibit a solidity and tunefulness that seems right and in proportion and not bloated or overblown as is sometimes the case with high-powered in-car systems attempting to drown out low-frequency tyre roar and bump-thump. The Naim's DSP is smarter than that and, despite riding on 22in rims shod with wide, ultra low-profile rubber, the sonic intrusion of the underpinnings is quite brilliantly well suppressed, as is any wind noise and unwelcome external hubbub thanks to well-designed aero and double glazing. Jay Kay's meticulous production of those wrecking ball, bottom octave synth passages is preserved



With 'kinaesthetic' bass drivers built into the seats, you can feel and hear the lowest frequencies

and delivered with satisfying weight, smoothness, speed and midband integration.

It doesn't matter if your fix is Marcus Miller or Hank Marvin, expressive and emotional power are delivered intact. Even at modest levels, the result is palpable, easy to relax into with well-resolved tonal colours and harmonics. Engage the sonic afterburners, though, and it isn't just the seats that start to vibrate. Naim calls the experience 'immersive'. It isn't kidding. There's an unbreakable surety, a consistency, a visceral cadence to the output that hits body and soul as a pressure wave that, I don't know, must fizz up some feel-good chemical interactions. It's a sound you can subsume at gut level without much need of cerebral analysis. Cars that compete in max dB 'sound-off' competitions can do this. Trouble is they don't sound like music. The Bentley does, nuclear but natural.

Back in my listening room, and despite the healthy sensitivity of the Audiovector floorstanders and the Leema's more than ample 150W into 8ohm, I can't get anywhere near the Naim's mammoth sound pressure levels and ultimate dynamic reach. But, at saner volumes, things are much more interesting. For the most part, my reference collaboration of separates sounds freer, more open and supple, if a little more unpredictable and occasionally ragged. The absence of exact room optimisation is a factor here. It's not bad at all, but it's not perfect. On the other hand, the little Primare streamer and £7k worth of Chord DAC hardware deliver transparency, resolution, clarity and a sense of believability the Bentley's more surround-sound, cinematic approach can't quite match.

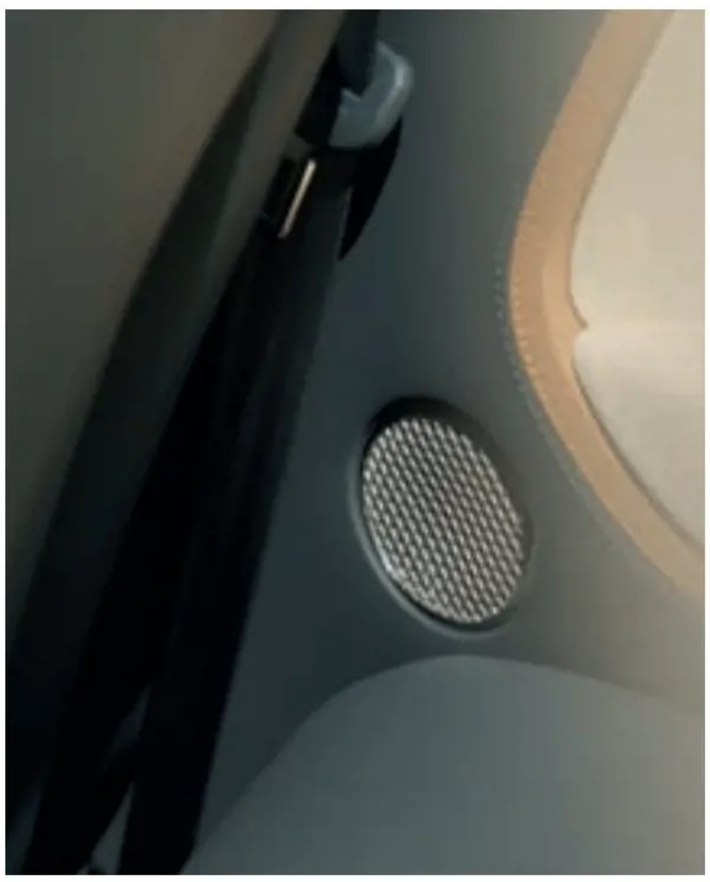
No, my team can't match NfB for bass extension and weight but, by a small but telling margin, it has its number for agility, texture and definition. Also, with the attendance of those Townshend supertweeters and the estimable inherent talents of the QR5's ribbons, if imaging isn't quite as specific as it is in the Bentley's cabin, the soundstage is wider and deeper and gifted a more immediate sense of air, space and clarity. Indeed, to a degree that brilliantly enlivens and opens out the surprising gospel beginning of *Everything We Need* from Kanye West's otherwise rather baffling *Jesus Is King* album – which sounds heftier but a little flatter in the Bentley.

It's true, the three-way Audiovectors can't quite match the precision and full-blooded presence of the Bentley's 20-driver array, yet they never sound less than beguilingly clear and lucid, and have an unerring ability to communicate on an emotional level. Given the system's ample sonic gifts elsewhere, they more than hold their own.

Conclusion

A close call? Inasmuch that neither party has been able to land a killer blow, yes. Would I trade my reference setup for the Naim system? If it came with a £300K+ Bentley convertible attached, in a heartbeat. But seriously, although their styles may contrast, musical rewards are prodigious in either case. The solution, of course, is to live with both. Much to my regret, that won't be happening any time soon ●







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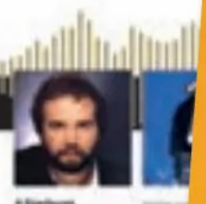
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“Everything we make should preserve and deliver the musical purity of the signals they are transmitting”

In business for 40 years, **Chord Company** enjoys a reputation for audiophile interconnects, cables and accessories



Based in Amesbury, Wiltshire, and a short ramble from historic Stonehenge, the dedicated team of music and cinema lovers that work at Chord Company have been designing and hand-building multi-award-winning high-performance audio-visual products since 1985. This talented group is essential in maintaining Chord Company’s famously high standards of quality and service.

Chord Company was originally founded by Sally Gibb, working from her then home in Salisbury, in response to demand from an overseas distributor wanting high-quality interconnects for use with Naim Audio amplifiers. Sally drew a logo, designed the packaging and started testing prototypes. The first prototype was named Chrysalis Cable and the Americans swiftly returned with an initial order of 250. These were built on a kitchen table (health and safety legislation was different back then), before being tested, packed and taken along to the Post Office. Invoices were typed on a typewriter. After two steady years, Chord Company got its first positive press review by one-time *HFC* reviewer Malcolm Steward. Demand quickly outgrew this improvised workshop, so new and larger premises were found, along with new staff members, drafted in to cope with increasing sales. It was at this early stage that the company principle that everything it makes, whatever its level, should preserve and deliver as much as possible of the musical purity of the signals that they are transmitting was hit upon.

Hi-fi retailers soon found that these cables improved performance, so Chord Company started supplying the UK market. Such was the good relationship that the company built with its overseas and UK customers, that many of them still sell and distribute Chord Company products to this day.

Although the Chord Chrysalis is not a particularly expensive cable, it set standards at its price point and soon gathered good reviews in the hi-fi press. It also set the standard for all future products.

In 1994 the Cobra cable won a Best Cable award, which saw a significant rise in interest and a corresponding increase in business. Within a year, the company was forced to move yet again.

The number of production staff had to be increased in order to meet the demand, particularly from UK retailers. Cobra, albeit the guitar/instrument cable version, is still part of the Chord Company range today.

1999 saw the creation of Chord Company Rumour, its first speaker cable and still a staple of the range today.

The company continued to grow, in size and status, into the new millennium and moved into its current purpose-built home in 2004. That year also witnessed the debut of Chord Company Signature speaker cable, with its advanced shielding and construction methods, and part of an acclaimed, new high-end range. This triggered a series of major advances and innovations, that continue to this day and have recently incorporated a range of high-performance mains distribution blocks, noise-reduction devices and the English Electric EE1 Network Noise Isolator.





CHORD COMPANY
UNIQUE TECHNOLOGY

Advanced, multi-layer screening/shielding
Conductor configuration and layers of all-important shielding become increasingly complex as the ranges ascend. Foil shields provide excellent protection against high-frequency noise, while woven braid shields are particularly effective at blocking low-frequency interference. By combining these two types of shields, Chord Company developed cables that could effectively mitigate both high and low-frequency noise, making them ideal for the noisy environments of modern technology.

Taylon insulation
Taylon insulation virtually eliminates the temperature-related phase instability and mechanical variation that mars the sonic and musical performance of PTFE, delivering a remarkably natural, musically communicative and expressive performance – challenging the best and most expensive cables available.

Tuned ARAY conductors
The unique ARAY, Tuned ARAY and Super ARAY technology emerged from a radical idea and much laborious trial and error. The transforming effects of the ARAY was discovered during development work within the Chord Company digital cable range. The ARAY consists of a mechanically tuneable configuration incorporated within the cable construction process.

ChordOhmic speaker connectors (& Hex Gun crimp termination system)
ChordOhmic 4mm crimp-on 'banana' and spade speaker connectors are ChorAlloy plated and designed to bring electrical and sonic benefits to any speaker cable. They are fitted as standard to all new Chord Company speaker cable sets as well as being separately available as a retro-fit upgrade and are attached using the Chord Company Hex Gun, which provides a superior long-term connection over the soldered equivalent.

ChorAlloy plating
A unique performance upgrade over previous silver-plated connectors. The upgraded ChorAlloy plating is available on VEE3 and PTFE RCA/phono connectors, ChordOhmic speaker connectors (spade and 4mm banana), BNC and mini-jack connectors, certain USB connectors and the connecting pins of DIN and XLR connectors.



INTERVIEW

“An era where noise management is as critical as signal transmission”

Alan Gibb, Managing Director, Chord Company

HFC: How vital is your original philosophy to how Chord Company operates today?

AG: Our founding principle – that everything we make, whatever its level, should preserve and deliver as much as possible of the musical purity of the signals that they are transmitting – remains the heartbeat of Chord Company. It's not just a legacy; it's a living ethos. From our earliest designs to today's most advanced products, we've stayed committed to engineering products that endeavour to reveal music's full emotional and technical depth. That philosophy led directly to innovations like ARAY technology, which began with a simple question in 2012: "Where do we go from here?"

Have these principles adjusted with technological developments over the years?

They've evolved in tandem with the industry. Cable design is dominated by mechanical engineering as well as material technology: impedance-matching, shielding geometry, bandwidth and phase accuracy. But, as digital systems and RF noise became more prevalent, we have had to tackle these additional challenges. We have since incorporated techniques to mitigate the negative impact of high-frequency noise, especially on the signal ground integrity. The birth of TunedARAY, sparked by a breakthrough modification to our Sarum cable, marked a turning point. It introduced a new way of controlling unwanted high-frequency issues without entering the signal path itself.

How would you categorise the Chord Company house sound?

We don't impose a sound, we reveal one! The Chord Company house sound is defined by transparency, timing and musical coherence. Our cables aim to remove barriers between the listener and the performance. With ARAY technology, for instance, you don't just hear the piano, you hear the phrasing, the intention, the rehearsal behind it. That's the difference between listening and connecting.

How do you go about designing and testing new products?

It's a dialogue between measurement and music. We begin with a technical challenge, say, reducing high-frequency noise on signal grounds and explore materials, geometries and shielding strategies. But, the final arbiter is always listening. Every prototype is auditioned across diverse systems and genres. If it doesn't make the music feel more alive, it doesn't move forward. That's how ARAY, GroundARAY and PowerARAY, in fact all of our products came to life: through curiosity, experimentation and a lot of listening.



How significant is trickle-down tech to your ranges?

With any new technology, we always try to make the very best prototypes first. It is essential to know what the maximum impact on the music or video quality might be. Almost everything for the prototypes is hand-built: casework, connectors, each individually designed and built locally by specialist

The Chord Company house sound is defined by transparency, timing and musical coherence

companies. The assembly of each of these test pieces can take our best technicians up to a day, depending on their complexity. If the idea has been proved then an enormous effort goes into ensuring that we can produce the product as consistently and as efficiently as possible. Our TunedARAY technology, for example, began in Sarum and now features across our portfolio. Our GroundARAY materials, originally sourced from military-grade anti-RFI applications, have found their way into our PowerHAUS mains blocks, (English Electric) EE1 Plus filters and even turntable earth wires. We believe high-end innovation should improve every level of the listening experience.

What developments do you see happening to the hi-fi industry in the future?

We're entering an era where noise management is as critical as signal transmission. With the explosion of Wi-Fi, LED lighting, mobile devices and digital processing, high-frequency interference is everywhere and it's affecting performance in subtle but significant ways. The future will demand smarter, more passive solutions like our GroundARAY system and EE1 Plus, which clean up the environment without compromising dynamics. We also see a growing appetite for compact, high-performance systems that integrate seamlessly into modern living spaces.

Can you tell us anything about new Chord Company products on the horizon?

We're constantly exploring new ways to tame noise and enhance musicality. Expect refinements to our digital and power ranges, including expanded applications of our GroundARAY tech. We're also developing new materials and geometries that could push performance even further, all while keeping our products accessible.

Whether it's a flagship PowerARAY Professional noise-reduction system or a clever tweak to a network filter, our goal is the same: to make music sound more like music ●

HFC HIGHLIGHTS

Chord Company RumourX speaker cable



PRICE: £260 for a 3m pair REVIEWED: *HFC* 512

Featuring silver-plated oxygen-free copper conductors insulated with XLPE, the RumourX is flexible and so easy to route around the listening room. Performances have a real sense of energy and freshness, sounding smooth and detailed throughout.

★★★★★

Chord Company Leyline RCA interconnect



PRICE: £37.50 for 1m cable REVIEWED: *HFC* 528

A first-time upgrade over standard bundled cables, the Leyline is terminated with gold RCA plugs and comes in lengths up to 3m. Performances are powerful and clearly defined with instruments perfectly placed in the soundstage, making this a superb-value option.

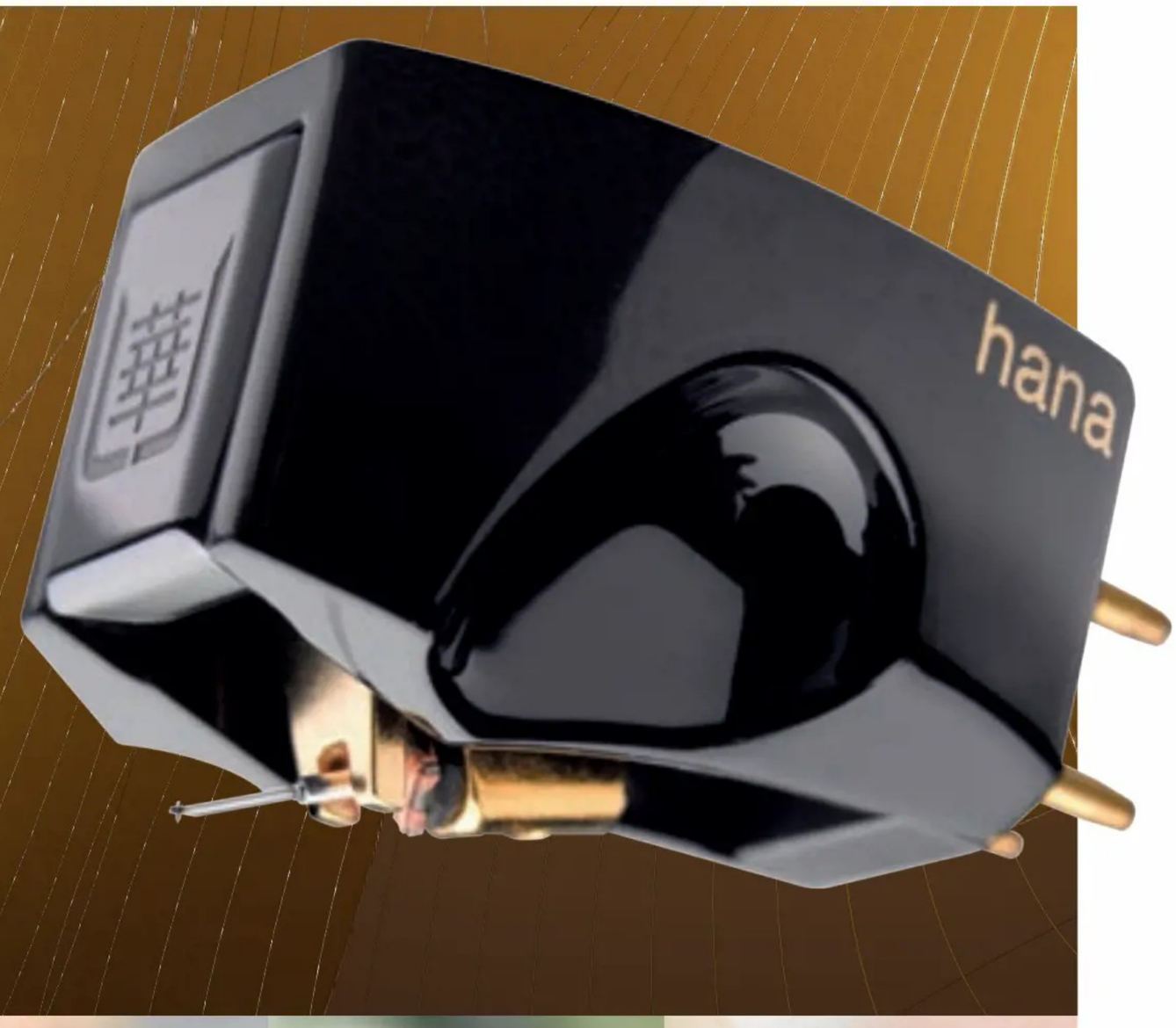
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Paul Rigby (The Audiophile Man) Golden Groovy 10/10

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Let's get physical!

In an age dominated by streaming, it seems the younger generations are continuing to drive the demand for physical music. ***Neville Roberts*** looks into some recent research

Our old friend the vinyl record is more popular than ever, but according to recent research there appears to be a growing appetite for CDs. What's really interesting is that much of this interest is fuelled by younger listeners who think physical media offers something digital formats can't supply: authenticity, ownership and emotional connection.

A 2025 survey that explored music listening and buying behaviour has revealed that interest in physical music is extending beyond Generation Z (17-28 year-olds), with Generation Alpha (1-16 year-olds) also embracing physical music by listening to vinyl, CDs and cassettes. The survey was conducted by Key Production, which works with the music industry to ensure best practices for sustainability within physical music production are met throughout the whole supply chain.

The survey of over 2,000 respondents across the UK found that 46 percent of Generation Alpha listen to physical music, 53 percent know how to use a CD player and 46 percent of parents say their children listen to CDs. When asked about vinyl, 38 percent of parents said that their children listen to vinyl and 36 percent of their kids can use a record player.

The findings follow a landmark year for physical music sales in the UK. In January, the British Phonographic Industry reported that purchases of physical music in 2024 had shown positive year-on-year growth (1.4 percent) for the first time in two decades, led by a 17th consecutive annual rise in vinyl album sales (9.1 percent). This resulted in 2025 being the most successful Record Store Day to date. This boost to vinyl sales was coupled with a marked slowing in the decline in demand for CDs (-2.9 percent). All of these trends are attributed to younger consumers showing more interest in both vinyl and CD formats. While Generation Z has played a pivotal role in this resurgence, the latest insights suggest physical formats are continuing to grow among even younger audiences too.

80 percent say vinyl offers a different listening experience to streaming music

What's more, the findings suggest parental influence is also having an impact. Only 20 percent of parents prefer their children to listen to music via a smartphone, rather than CD or vinyl. The survey also found that physical music is being used as a form of digital detox across all generations, with 71 percent of Generation Z and 75 percent of Millennials/Generation Y (those born between the early-Eighties and mid-Nineties) playing physical music.



As Whitney once sang: "I believe the children are the future..."

The results also show that the way people receive their physical music is stable across the generations. They either acquire their vinyl, CDs and cassettes from friends or they inherit them from family. Around 27 percent of Generation Z receive their physical music from friends while nearly 15 percent across Generation X, Y and Z inherit some of their collections. Overall, about 80 percent of all survey respondents agreed that vinyl offers a different listening experience to streaming. This is considered to support the view that the appetite for physical music has certainly taken root across the younger generations, and that this will continue across the generations to come.

Back to the future

Certainly, physical music is now no longer considered to be a relic of the past. It's firmly part of the future. Perhaps we have reached a point of disillusionment with the futuristic visions of a touchless multiverse or perhaps it reflects a rejection of Danish politician Ida Auken's unfortunate phrase: "You'll own nothing and be happy" published by the World Economic Forum! It appears that the younger generations are increasingly opting for engagement and the pride of ownership over ease of access, together with all the attendant rituals of being a collector. Certainly, young people are clearly enjoying reading an album cover or booklet while listening to the music – something that you simply cannot enjoy with streamed music. Indeed, as David Sax said in his book *The Revenge Of Analog: Real Things And Why They Matter*: "A funny thing happened on the way to the digital utopia!" ●



NEVILLE ROBERTS
Young at heart

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In praise of the playlist

Steve Sutherland takes a look at the different ways that pulling together a compilation of tracks can make life – and death – so much more enjoyable

Creating the inaugural *HFC* Qobuz playlist which appeared in last month's issue got me thinking about how we all love compiling tracks and the different reasons, occasions and motives behind them that prompt us to do so.

Many of a certain age will remember taping with reel-to-reels, the mic pressed up to the built-in speaker on an ancient mono record player. Then, pre-CD, it was the beloved cassette comp, made for mates and prospective love interests and to show off what exquisite taste we had.

One compilation I gifted to someone is a particularly dear memory to me as that someone was David Bowie. Back when I was working for the weekly music press, I would occasionally compile a playlist of happening new music and send it to him, at his request, via his press officer. He famously liked to keep abreast of what was "going on".

On this occasion I'd put together a bunch of Shoegazing bands – Ride, Lush, Slowdive, Moose, Adorable *etc*. – and received in response an envelope inside of which I found a broken-up jigsaw. When I assembled it, on one side was an image of Michelangelo's David, on the other a message handwritten in green ink from Bowie saying, basically, thanks for the lovely tape, but it's not his cup of tea. As you can imagine, the puzzle is still a prized possession.

Later, burning a handful of CDs at Halloween, Christmas, Easter and at the start of the summer holidays as a thank-you for my kids' school teachers became a seasonal ritual, but today playlist encounters are more likely to be of a more sombre nature as the older one gets, news reaches us of friends, relatives and ex-work mates passing away.

Playlists are often used in the hope of aiding patients out of comas

Funeral playlists are always fascinating and choosing the tunes that will soundtrack your farewell ceremony is a serious business. There are some who like to make sure everyone attending is as sad as possible at their demise so you get a bunch of weepies – cue Robbie Williams' *Angels*. Others go for the *Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life* jokey upbeat option. Then there are those who like the list to serve as a remembrance of their own personal taste, such as a recently passed neighbour who had her cremation accompanied by lots of Gladys Knight and Sixties Motown. Another work colleague chose to go soundtracked by a bunch of pretty naff Eighties pop including, yup, incredibly Simple Minds' *Don't You Forget About Me*!

I can't think of a greater responsibility than being asked to compile a playlist for a funeral of someone near and dear who didn't leave a wishlist. What would they have wanted? Did I really know them that well? It's a task beset by pitfalls and one I hope I never have to undertake – no pun intended!



The playlist or mixtape can be used to woo or show off your impeccable taste

Stop making sense

It's a well-known fact that attention through hearing is one of the human attributes that hangs around the longest when other senses fail – hence playlists are often used in the hope of aiding patients out of comas. It's also come to light recently that putting together a playlist of songs which evoke strong memories can help people suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia as it stimulates recognition and tends to have a beneficial, calming influence.

Of course, there are tons of happier occasions which you may be asked to help go off with a musical bang – weddings, birthdays, parties – when you're the elected DJ, improvisation to the mood of the occasion available live and in the moment thanks to Qobuz, Spotify and other digital agencies.

My personal favourite playlists are the ones compiled to turn other people on to new (or recently discovered ancient) sounds that you think they might enjoy; easy to share on digital platforms. And I'm always entertained by *HFC*'s *Cool Collection* – our monthly trio of album choices featuring a musician telling us what they personally love. I've had a go at pretending I'm a talent worthy of creating a *CC,* but my picks change on a daily basis. Today I recommend you check out Linda Perhacs' *Parallelograms*, The Incredible String Band's *Wee Tam And The Big Huge*, and Black Box Recorder's *England Made Me*. Tomorrow it'll be Denim's *Back In Denim*… How about you? ●



STEVE SUTHERLAND
Making a list and checking it twice...

Picture credit: MPIX/Shutterstock

Hi-fi choices

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Weather report

Can you please help resolve a long-running dispute between me and my brother? For years I have maintained that the weather can have an effect on how my hi-fi performs. He thinks it's nonsense, but I'm convinced there's something in it. I also reckon that music sounds better at night, is there a scientific reason for this or is it more likely to be because I often have a glass of wine when listening… Hoping you can lay this one to rest for me once and for all. Thanks!

Tommy Grieg, via Facebook



CW: I think there are a host of scientific reasons why hi-fi can be affected by weather and time of day Tommy. Starting with weather, if you live near a church I reckon you'll hear the bells more clearly on a damp day. This is because water is a much better conductor of sound energy than air. I'm not suggesting your home is leaky, but humidity can vary considerably in houses.

Turning our attention to time of day, this has changed markedly over the last decade. Ten or more years ago the national grid was smoother and less lumpy at night as power generation was broadly similar, but demand was far less. At night there is also far less use of heavy industrial electrical machinery that can introduce unwanted noise back into local grids. So, I'd agree that my hi-fi did sound better at night. But now, our grid is far more reliant on solar generation during the day, so the supply side mix can change markedly at night. Equally,

Generally speaking, listening at night is better as there is less noise in the mains

the rise of electric vehicle charging has started to increase demand at night. Taken altogether I think the superiority of night-time mains has decreased, but later night listening will still be best. But, as you suggest, a lowering of stress after a busy day, potentially enhanced by some imbibable muscle relaxant can all serve to heighten your enjoyment of your favourite music.

NR: I've been asked this by many people over the years. My view is that the weather phenomenon is most likely due to the quality of your mains supply – particularly your earth connection. The Neutral mains connection is actually the earth at your power station and you will have a local Earth at your house, which is your Earth connection. That is why you'll find there are a few AC volts between your Earth and Neutral. When it's been raining, the earth connections tend to improve, which should reduce earth-borne interference. At night, many of the heavy users of electricity, such as local businesses, will have powered down and will not be injecting noise into your mains supply. Even if you have invested in mains filters and high-quality mains leads, as I'm sure you have, there is nothing better than not to have the noise on your incoming mains in the first place.

Your cartridge's performance can be affected by temperature

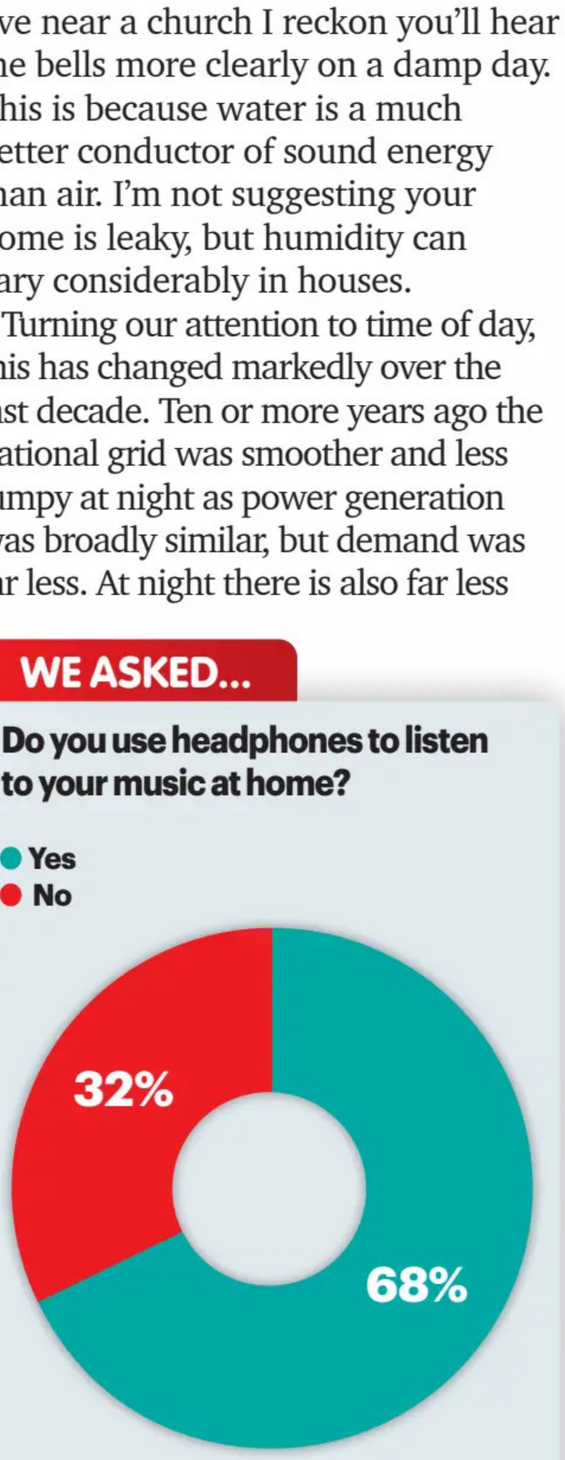
ES: The only thing I'd add is that temperature and humidity can affect the mechanical aspects of your hi-fi. Cartridges in particular can be appreciably different in cold rooms to warm ones (one of mine is not a fan of cold weather in particular) and this can also affect some loudspeaker drivers as well. I've not found that solid-state electronics are affected as much, but it's not outside the realms of possibility that some devices will be.

Trade-in or not?

Long-time reader, first time writer. I'm looking to upgrade my system and was wondering whether you know if any dealers

WE ASKED...

Do you use headphones to listen to your music at home?



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are happy to do a trade-in of my old kit as part payment for the purchase of new gear? I know you have your *Classified* pages that I could use to raise cash, but I was wondering if there's a way to cut out the middle man? Also, is there a reliable way to check whether or not the price I'm being offered is fair?

Chris Murray, Cheltenham

NR: I know that Richer Sounds, which I believe has an outlet in Cheltenham, offers a trade-in service Chris. As for confirming if the price is fair, have a look at online second-hand platforms as well as classified ads, but do be aware that the dealer will have overheads to cover that are associated with selling on your traded-in equipment, so do allow for that.

ES: The dealer's willingness to offer a trade-in will live or die on the equipment you are offering. Richer Sounds is willing to accept certain equipment, but, be aware that it needs to offer a price that will give it a shout at making some money itself. You may find that forum classifieds might be a solid bet as well as eBay if you can stomach it.

CW: You may get lucky, but I'd assume that most retailers of new equipment will be reluctant to take preloved gear in part exchange. You will stand more chance if you approach a quality second-hand dealer, but it may depend how valuable and desirable your existing gear is. A good way to check is to look on eBay as any 'buy it now' prices should be representative.

Shut up!

I work in a busy, noisy office and was wondering if you could recommend which earbuds offer the best noise cancellation for a reasonable price, say £300 max?

Dan Adler, Scunthorpe

CW: There are two clear options for me, Dan. One, I'd go for over-ear headphones as they will have far superior noise exclusion performance. Two, check the noise levels you are working in aren't breaching safe employment practices. Seriously, your hearing is a really precious resource that can be degraded by persistent noisy environments. You may have cause to seek acoustic improvements to your office workspace.



NR: I'd look at Sennheiser's Momentum wireless earbuds with Sennheiser's Adaptive Noise Cancellation. Also consider Sony's WF-YY2963 and Bose QuietComfort earbuds. The choice of earbuds is very personal. It's important that they fit well in your ear canals, so I suggest that you find a dealer who will let you try them out first.

I work in a noisy office and need earbuds with good noise cancelling

ES: For in-ears, nothing has been able to come close to the JBL Tour Pro 3 (*HFC* 530, pictured above) that I've tested. They're comfortable, sound decent, have a really useful display on the case and features for days. As Chris points out, over-ear models are much better when it comes to blocking sound out. Sony's WH-1000XM6 (*HFC* 533) is like bolting on your own isolation tank.

Lean machine

I recently upgraded my system with a Naim Uniti Atom as my all-in-one amplifier/streamer, paired with my trusty Spendor A4 speakers. While the convenience and detail from the Atom have been generally excellent, I sometimes feel the presentation can be a touch lean compared with my older Rega Brio setup. Would adding a dedicated DAC between the Atom and speakers make much of a difference or is it more about speaker synergy?

James Crooks, via email

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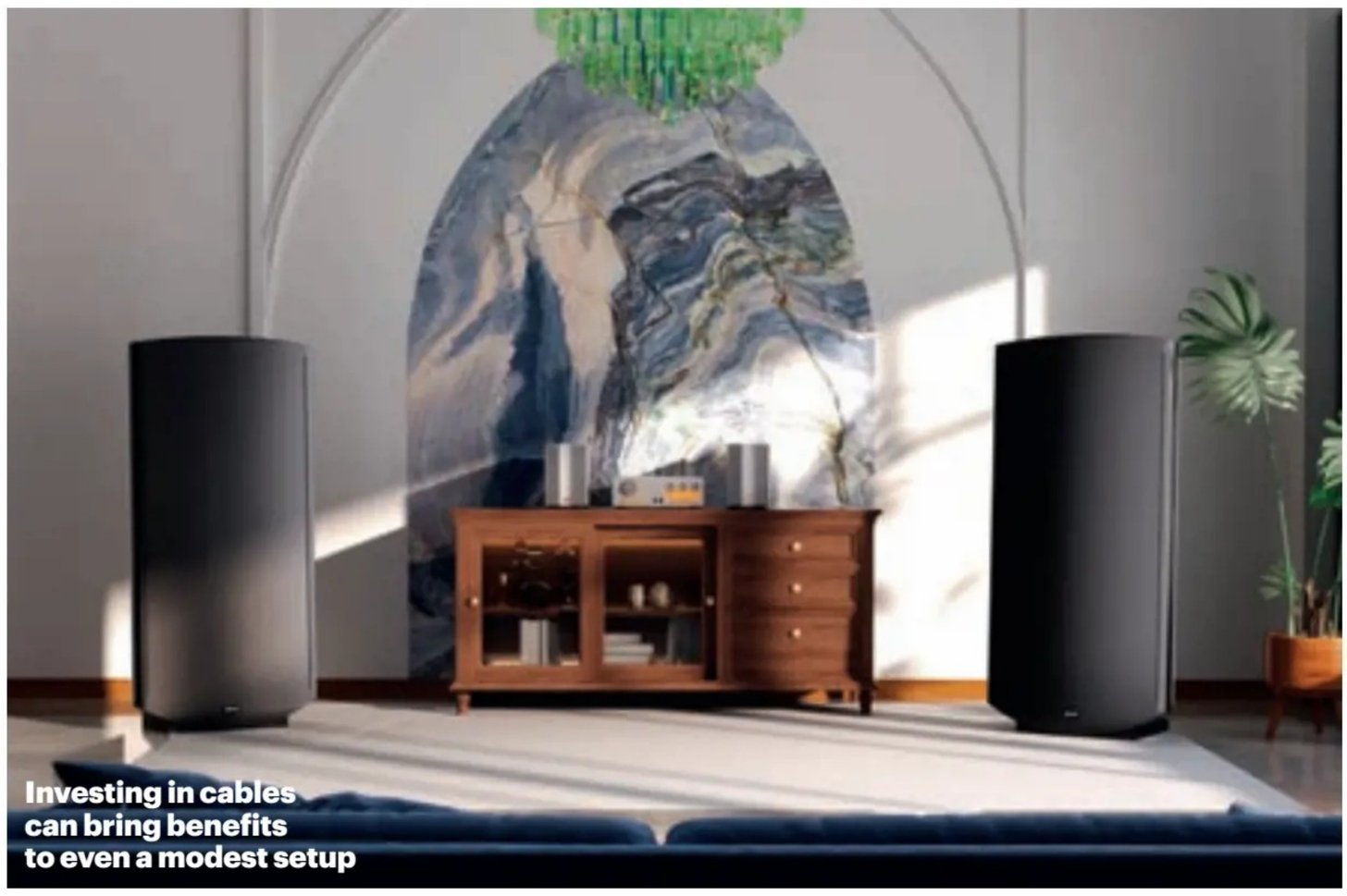
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Investing in cables can bring benefits to even a modest setup

ES: This is a tricky one James as adding a DAC to a Uniti also means finding a streaming front end as well. The Naim can't loop digital out back into an analogue input. What you can do is attach a power amp to the preout of the Naim and simply let it decode instead. You might find that the Cambridge Audio MXW70 (*HFC* 531) winds up giving you the slightly warmer, fuller sound that you seem to be looking for.

NR: I'm not sure about adding an external DAC as that would also mean disconnecting your speakers from the Uniti Atom and using a digital output from your Naim, so you would also need to buy an external preamp/power

Inserting a second DAC into your setup might make the problem even worse

amp or integrated as Ed points out. I would also think carefully before ditching your lovely Spendor speakers, so maybe first look at things like your speaker cables and speaker positioning in your room.

CW: I also don't think a separate DAC is the answer. In fact it could take you even further in the wrong direction. I think you have hit the nail on the head about amplification and loudspeaker synergy. I find some contemporary Naim products can be accurate, but somewhat uninvolving. It may seem a retrograde step, but you could consider reinstating the Rega Brio (if you still have it) and introducing a WiiM streamer such as the Pro Plus or Ultra (*HFC* 511/522) as a dedicated new source. I feel this will inject the convenience you seek while building on the sound foundation that you already appreciate.

Swap shop

I've read countless opinions on whether speaker cables and interconnects make a real difference to sound quality. Some swear by expensive brands, while others say basic, well-made cables are all you need. In your experience, how much of an upgrade can I reasonably expect if I swap out my standard copper cable for something more exotic?

David Henry, Leeds

NR: You can certainly expect noticeable improvements by replacing a standard copper cable with a cable designed for loudspeaker use David. The amount of the upgrade will depend on your particular setup, but even a modest system will benefit from good cabling, as speaker cables are intended to conduct the entire range of frequencies of the audio spectrum and not just a 50Hz mains supply. This requires an appropriate spacing of the two conductors, as well as a good choice of both the conductor and its insulation materials.

ES: The Czech playwright and politician Václav Havel once described environmentalism as the whipped cream on the chocolate cake of the economy; desirable but not structural. Notwithstanding that, environmentalism has become somewhat more significant since he said that, it's the view I take on cabling.

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It can make a difference and it's an excellent finisher to a system, but it's not going to correct fundamental issues in the electronics as a whole. There is no harm in trying things on a sale-or-return basis, but I tend to suggest not expecting miracles.

CW: I firmly believe that interconnects and loudspeaker cables can make a massive difference. However, do not assume that expensive or 'exotic' cables as you describe them are always superior. I have listened to systems plumbed with esoteric substances like pure silver or other rarified materials and known instantly they would perform better with quality copper connections. Sometimes over complication gets in the way of musical enjoyment. As an example, some swear by silver-plated copper, but as treble frequencies have been measured to travel more on the surface of some conductors, I have found this can cause a clear disconnect between higher and lower frequencies.

Every cable has its own capacitance, inductance, impedance and resistance, and many of these qualities interact with each other and vary with frequency of signals and the impedance of the amplifier or source connected. For instance, valve amplifiers react very differently from solid-state amplifiers in their tolerance of higher capacitance cables. This can then become a full ten-dimensional Rubik's cube of permutations when you consider how cables are terminated, whether they are single-ended or balanced and even the amount of RFI in your home. In short, it is only from loads of experimentation that I came to some optimised solutions.

Match of the day?

I'm considering a slightly unusual pairing and would welcome your thoughts. I own a PrimaLuna EVO 200 integrated valve amp and have been looking to add a Cambridge Audio CXN V2 network streamer for convenience. My speakers are KEF R5s, which I really enjoy for their balance and imaging. Do you think the warmth of the valves combined with the clean, detailed sound of the Cambridge streamer is a good match or am I better off sticking to an all-analogue chain with a separate DAC?

Anil, Manchester

ES: I don't see any reason why this shouldn't work very well Anil. I've used various PrimaLuna designs with my Chord Electronics front ends and a pair of Focal Kantas, and have been delighted with the results every time.

NR: I use a Cambridge Audio Azur 851N network streamer feeding into a valve preamp and valve monoblocks, and that works really well for me for my digital sources. Connecting a CXN V2 into your analogue chain simply employs the internal DAC of the Cambridge Audio unit and I think it would be an excellent solution for you.

Clean, detailed signals going into valves is possibly the best place to be

It will not stop you from using a digital output of the CXN V2 to feed a separate DAC if you wish to do so at a later date, but I think you'll be very satisfied with the Cambridge DAC.

CW: I also see no reason why this needn't be a wonderful combo. Clean, detailed signals going into valves is possibly the best place to be. It's what I do. Rather than considering valves warm and soft while digital is cleaner but colder, I would urge you to hear what valves and digital can do in a high-end system. Get along to a hi-fi show or dealer and ask for a demo. A well set up valve system with efficient loudspeakers can pin you to a wall with engaging detail and supremely involving dynamics. Strictly speaking, valves aren't warm, but they can uplift certain 'even order' harmonics that we find pleasing. Similarly, some digital products can underscore 'odd' harmonics that we find more incisive but grating!

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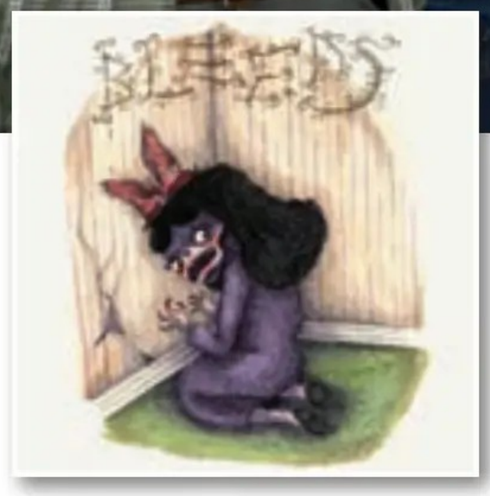


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Musicreviews



ALBUM OF THE MONTH



Wednesday
Bleeds

★★★★★

CD **Columbia Records**

THIS GUY, GARY, 33 years old, goes for a drink at his local bar, steps outside for a smoke and gets cracked in the face with a baseball bat by some bloke in a fisherman's hat. Gary goes down, the bloke stands over him, takes a long hard look at the damage, then laughs and says: "I never seen you in my God-given life!" He's looking for some dude who's slept with his wife and he's whacked the wrong guy.

He chucks the bat down and turns to walk off. Gary stands, spits out his teeth, grabs the bat and takes out the bast*rd's kneecaps.

Later the dentist reckons there's nothing he can do to replace Gary's missing gnashers so Gary says to take the rest out and he'll have dentures. And that's how come Gary 's teeth look so good today, even now he's in his sixties.

Welcome to Asheville, North Carolina, the stamping ground of Wednesday, a band now on their sixth LP, fronted by the fabulous Karly Hartzman who writes songs like postcards from the middle of nowhere with genius lines like: "You saw a pitbull puppy p*ssin' off a balcony" and: "Threw up in the pit at a Death Grips show," and: "I drove you to the airport with the E-brake on" or: "Said I wanna have your baby/Cause I freckle and you tan".

Wednesday have been called 'countrygaze', which makes kinda sense as they frame Hartzman's wanton vocal twang with a guitar maelstrom leavened by steel guitar so no matter how hardcore the action gets, there's always an undertow tugging at the heartstrings. It's like a vocal marriage of J. Mascis and Dolly Parton who've OD-ed on John Cheever. In other words, stunning, but never haggard. This is lost US youth in excelsis.

Hartzman self-doubts beautifully: "I oversold myself on the night we met/ I'm not as entertaining as you might've thought I was then". And her reminiscences are tough: "Met you in the neighbourhood you had connects to get us high and then/You sent my nudes around," she sings in *Townies*. "I never yelled at you about it/'Cause you/Died".

There are movies in here... or, at least, vivid scenes: "When you pick up that knife, you were askin' for a fight/Mouthed off to those bikers at a vacant stoplight/ They'll meet you outside... Had to bury you deep to keep the dogs from diggin'."

There's a rare and raw keenness of eye and economic honesty to Wednesday, with a whip-smart, mocking self-awareness. Witness *Phish Pepsi* which goes: "We watched a Phish concert and *Human Centipede*/Two things I now wish I had never seen".

Only *Wasp* is to avoid; one minute 26 seconds of Hartzman screaming because she'd done the Pixies loud-quiet thing to death and wanted to see what it feels like to go full out. The rest is incredible – the perfect messed-up soundtrack for a world with its sights set on achieving the ultimate fatal imperfection. **SS**

Picture credit: Martina Gonzalez Bertello

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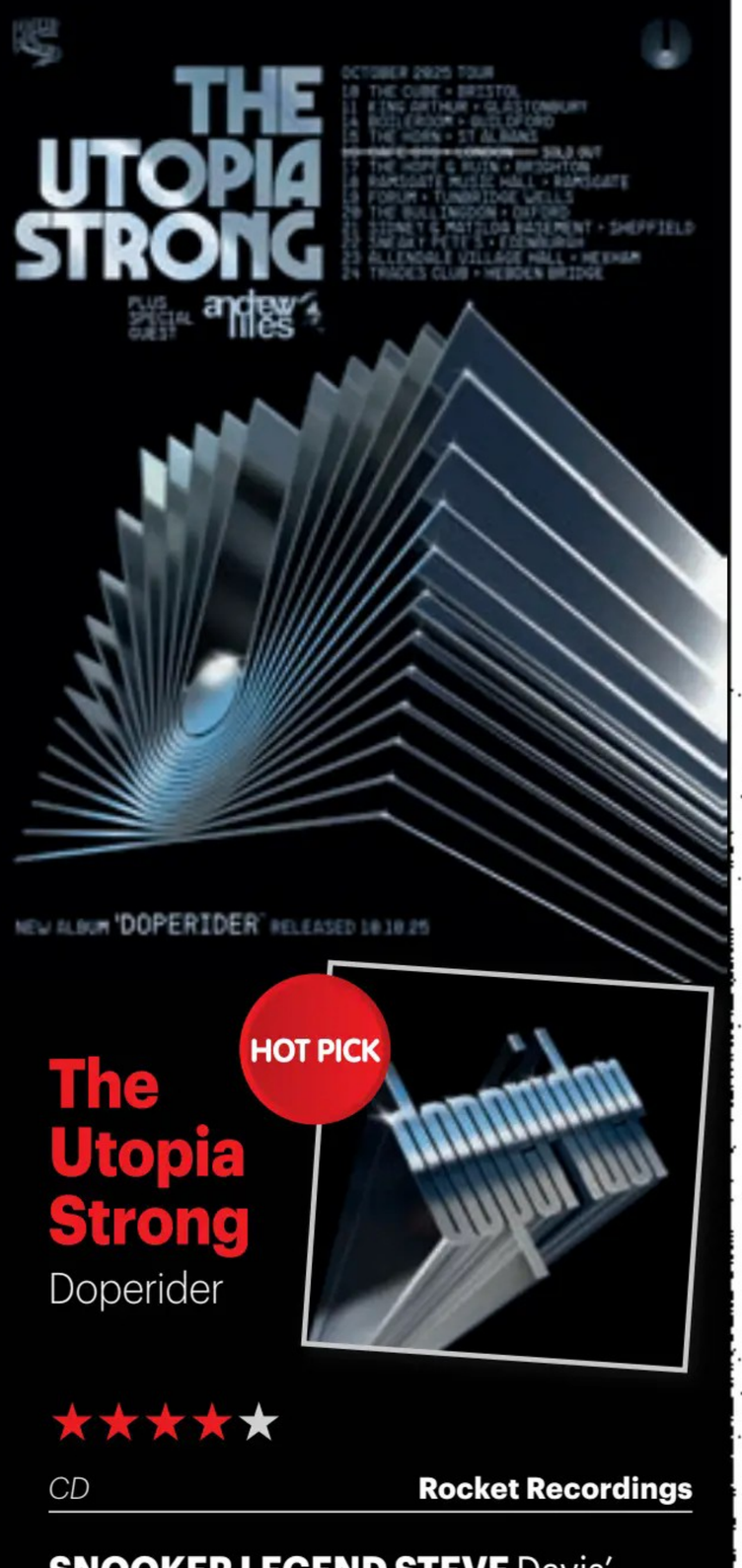
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HOT PICK

The Utopia Strong
Doperider

★★★★★

CD **Rocket Recordings**

SNOOKER LEGEND STEVE Davis' transformation from king of the green baize to ambient and experimental music DJ remains one of the more unlikely cultural shifts of the past decade. Now, alongside Kavus Torabi (Gong, Cardiacs) and Mike York (Coil), he returns with the third Utopia Strong record. As the title suggests, *Doperider* is a trip – immersive and not for the faint hearted. Each of its seven tracks begins with pulsing, atmospheric electronics: some swell into full-blown psychedelic freakouts with coruscating bass and heavy riffs, while others keep to gentler, lilting patterns that feel playful and strange. There's a homemade, DIY systems quality to the sound that makes it both fresh and unusual. One listener neatly described The Utopia Strong as: "halfway between the rave room and the chill-out lounge," and that perfectly captures Doperider. A curious, spectral experience not to be missed. ***PH***

The homemade, DIY quality to the sound makes it feel both fresh and unusual



Tchaikovsky
The Seasons
Yunchan Lim

★★★★☆

CD **Decca**

AFTER BRUCE LUI'S excellent DG Tchaikovsky *Seasons* last year, here's another from Yunchan Lim. If Lui projected the work for a mass audience in a large hall, Lim's approach is more intimate and personal – as if he's playing just for you. His *tempi* are more flexible than Lui's and phrasing is subtler and more finely shaded. In all but one of the 12 pieces, Lim's speeds are broader than Lui's; he takes around 44 minutes over the complete work to Lui's 41 minutes. Decca's recording is detailed with lots of subtle half tones, no doubt accurately reflecting the delicate refined qualities of Lim's exquisitely sensitive playing. ***JH***



The Lovely Eggs
Bin Juice

★★★★★

Vinyl **Egg Records**

HOLLY ROSS (VOCALS and guitar) and David Blackwell (drums) have now been churning out their effervescent brand of Lancashire-infused DIY punk pop for 20 years to an audience of devoted fans. Though consisting of unused songs from last album *Eggsistentialism* and rare B-sides, *Bin Juice* is so much more than the usual hobbled together collection of stuff that has remained unreleased for a very good reason. From the urban mundanity of *The Grind* to the timely *Melody For Meathead*, this is a glorious reminder of the fun that can be had pogoing to loud, fast music – even if our knees creak a little more now than they used to. ***JDW***



Forget the original 1762 casting of Orpheus as a castrato, here Paul Agnew opts for a tenor

Gluck
Orphée et Euridice; Reinoud van Mechelen; Ana Viera Leite; Julie Roset; Les Arts Florissants; Paul Agnew

★★★★☆

2x CDs **Harmonia Mundi**

GLUCK'S BEAUTIFUL OPERA exists in two main versions – the original 1762 Vienna score in Italian and a revised expanded 1774 Paris edition in French. Among many changes, Orpheus is cast as a tenor – the 1762 original was for a castrato. A third version (by Berlioz) has Orpheus as a female alto! This new performance directed by Paul Agnew is exquisitely sung and nicely paced, with refined sensitive orchestral playing. It includes the Ballet music – as an appendix at the end. The recording is smooth and well balanced. It's reverberant, yet doesn't quite suggest a real acoustic with tangible depth and space. ***JH***



SML
How You Been

★★★★☆

CD **International Anthem**



SML'S *HOW YOU* *Been* captures a group in full stride constructing intricately sculpted sound. Sourced from live improvisations across late 2024 and early 2025, the album reframes raw spontaneity into dense, hyper-detailed collages through deft post-production. Lead single *Taking Out The Trash* distils their approach: perky synths spark a pulse that grows into breakbeat ferocity, jagged guitarlines and a wailing saxophone solo. The record draws on Afrobeat, techno and electronic noodling without settling into any genre, exploding influences into a unique, enthralling sound. *How You Been* documents a sound both of the moment and ahead of it. ***PSH***



Beethoven

The Nine Symphonies
National Symphony Orchestra; Brighton Festival Chorus; Rimma Sushanskaya

★★★★★

6x CD **Quartz Music**

SERVING AS A glorious Beethoven pilgrimage, this six-disc boxset is the first ever cycle of the nine symphonies recorded by a female conductor and was completed in 2024. Probably the most familiar symphony is the *Fifth*, with the opening bar that spells out the letter 'V' in morse code. The *Sixth 'The Pastoral'* is particularly captivating and engaging, and the *Ninth 'The Choral'* is powerful and fresh throughout. The NSO does full justice to all nine pieces with fresh and energetic performances, making this a must-have addition to any serious music collection. ***NR***



Johannes Brahms

Complete Works For Viola – Vol. 1
Mikhail Zemtsov & friends

★★★★☆

CD **Challenge Classics**

EVEN THOSE WHO adore these works in their intended instrumentation will find themselves totally won over by Mikhail Zemtsov's deeply expressive playing and rich warm tone. The two sonatas *Op.120* sound really good played on the viola – especially by someone as accomplished as Zemtsov! He even makes a convincing case for the trio *Op.40* being played by viola, though the original scoring for horn creates a greater contrast to the violin. The recordings are full-bodied and rich sounding, with impressive naturalness and effortless clarity. *Volume II* will include the *Clarinet Quintet* and *Trio*. ***JH***

The Lemonheads

Love Chant



★★★★★

CD **Fire Records**



THE LEMONHEADS' PERFECT fusion of punk-rock roots and irresistibly catchy melodies returns for the first time in two decades. Despite a decidedly rocky period back in the Nineties, happily Evan Dando is still around and though his honeyed voice is a little frayed from years of hard living, this record surprisingly orbits close to the blueprint created by 1990's classic *Lovey* – upbeat indie rock full of solos (oh hello guest, J Mascis) and chugging riffs. *58 Second Song*, *Deep End* and *In The Margin* make for a powerful, high-energy opening, while *The Key Of Victory* shows that Dando can still deliver as the vulnerable troubadour with the best of them. It's good to have him back. ***PH***



Aaron Parks

By All Means

★★★★★

CD **Conspiracy International**

AARON PARKS' *BY* *All Means* swings and swoons throughout, a tipping of the hat to the jazz giants that pointed the way for this forward-facing traditionalist. Expanding his long-trusted trio – bassist Ben Street and drummer Billy Hart – into a quartet with tenor saxophonist Ben Solomon, Parks unveils seven originals that shimmer with melody and sparkle with consummate musicianship. There are tender dedications, sly grooves – lead single *Parks Lope* swings via a rhythm section that cooks with quiet fire. After the genre-bending of 2024's *Little Big III* odyssey, this feels like Parks is having a ball unimpeded in his jazz playground. ***PSH***



Tippett

A Child Of Our Time
London Philharmonic choir and orchestra
Edward Gardner

★★★★★

CD **LPO**

TIPPETT'S EMOTIONAL HEART-RENDING oratorio has its roots in the Forties, yet its message of compassion and outrage at mankind's inhumanity is just as contemporary in 2025 as it was 80 or so years ago. Indeed, the message possibly strikes home more strongly today, given the huge number of conflicts around the world. This new performance under Edward Gardner is deeply felt and impassioned, leaving one chastened, moved and saddened that world peace still remains elusive. The recording, live from London's Royal Festival hall, sounds clear and open with excellent clarity and detail. ***JH***

Picture credit: Charlie Weinmann (SML)



Bach

The Well-Tempered Clavier Book 1
Mahan Esfahani

★★★★★

2x CD **Hyperion**

A GOOD-HUMOURED FRIENDLY account of Bach's *WTC Book I*. Mahan Esfahani clearly loves the work and his playing is warm and flexible – even quite sensual at times. His enjoyment of this wonderful music is palpable. He plays a modern two-manual harpsichord by Huw Saunders modelled on a 1710 instrument by Johann Heinrich Harrass. It has a lovely sweet sound, producing crisp incisive results without harshness, avoiding the dry edgy mechanical clatter some harpsichords produce. At the end, to close the circle, Esfahani repeats the first prelude; a nice touch, mimicking the return of the aria at the close of the *Goldberg Variations*. Hyperion's focused immediate recording captures the sound of the instrument in a truthful, realistic manner. The result is smooth and clean, with plenty of air and space and no congestion. Hopefully, *Book II* will follow soon on the same instrument! ***JH***

Hyperion's focused recording captures the instrument in a truthful, realistic manner

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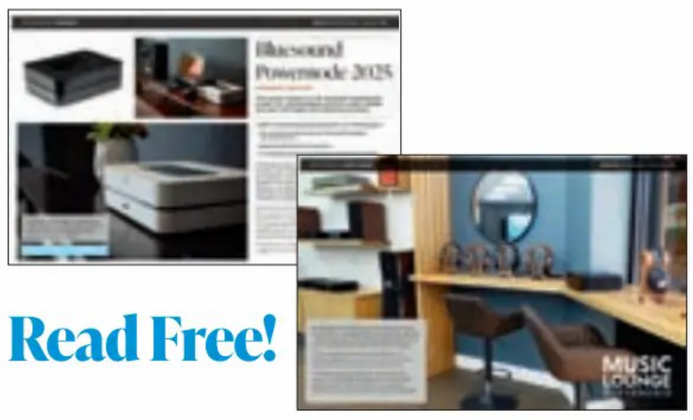
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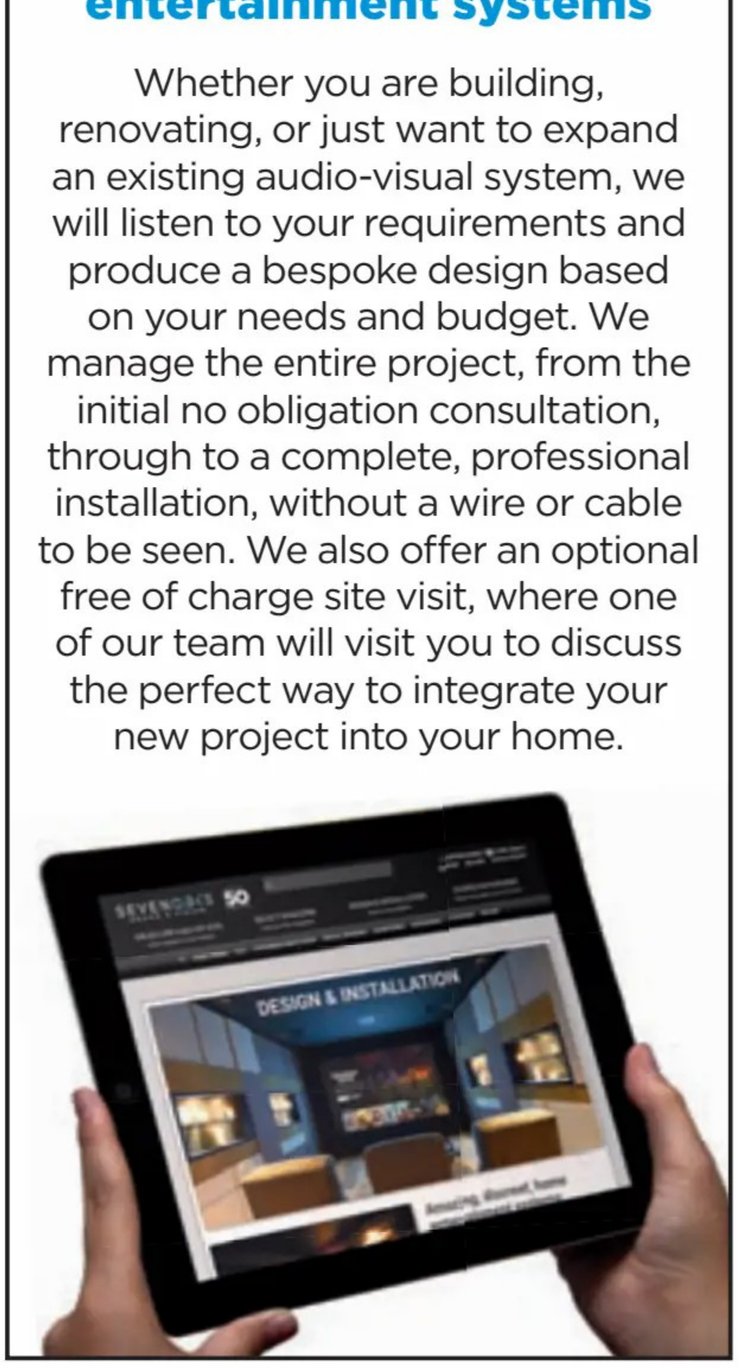


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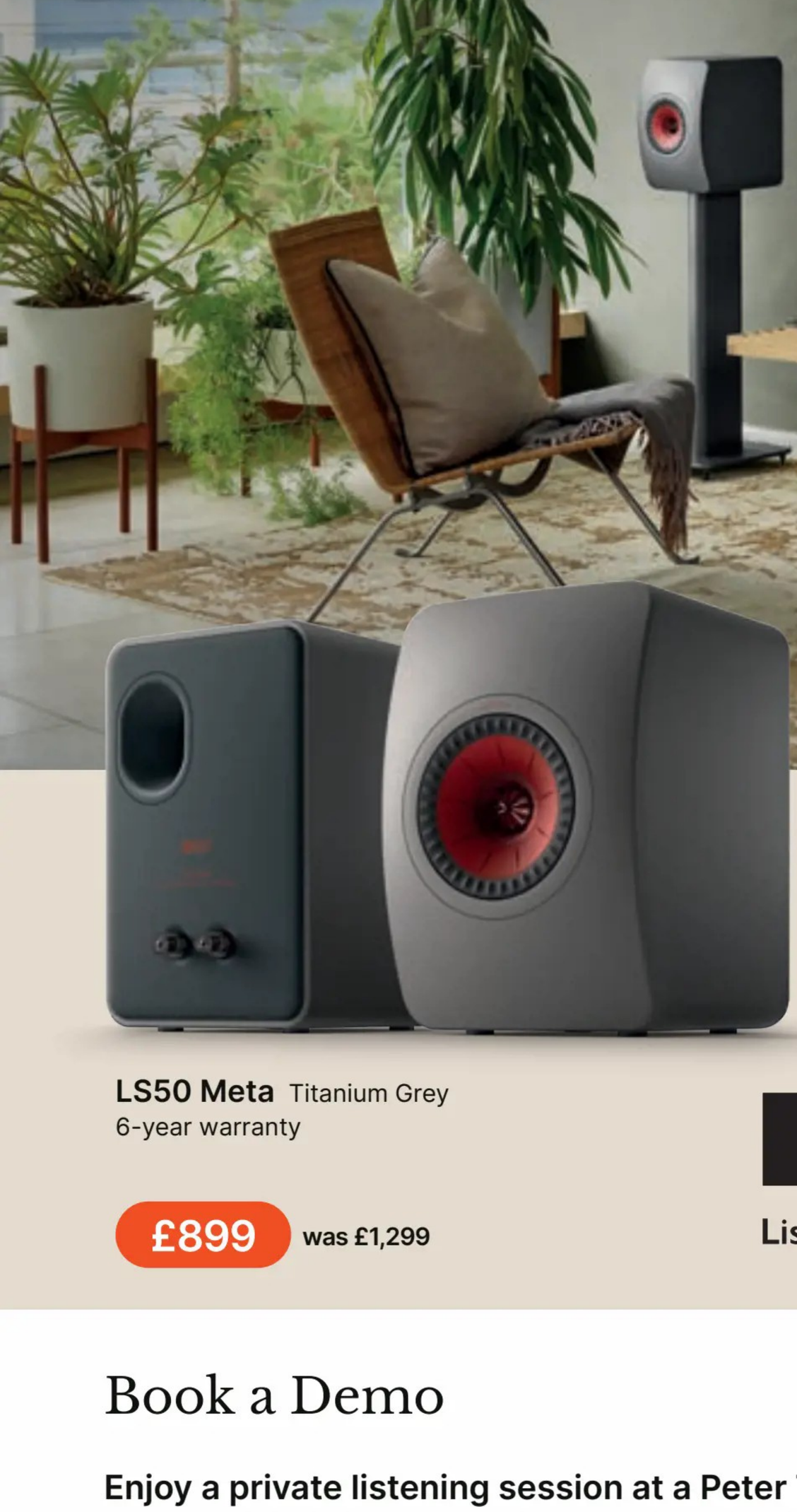
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Clark
Steep Stims

HOT PICK

★★★★★

2x vinyl **Throttle Records**

OVER THE YEARS Chris Clark has subverted what it means to be an electronic musician, actively going in the opposite direction to the mainstream. 2023's *Sus Dog* saw him steeping out from behind the desk to sing vocals in actual songs and *Steep Sims* in turn heads off in an entirely new direction. Having used an old Virus synth at a gig, Clark decided he loved its retro sound and set about making an album with it. The resulting triumph captures some of the 'four-to-the-floor banger' nature of classic Nineties dancefloor fare while retaining Clark's trademark uniqueness. Back to basics it may be in approach, but basic it ain't. ***JDW***

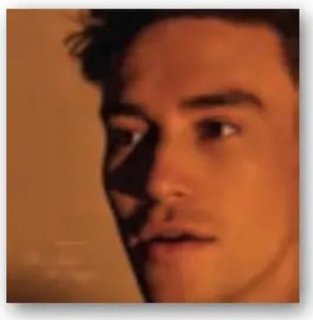


Arvo Pärt
Credo
Estonian Festival Orchestra
Paavo Järvi

★★★★★

CD **Alpha Classics**

TO MARK THE 90th birthday of Arvo Pärt on 11 September 2025, this well-filled 74-minute CD offers pieces written between 1968 and 2013. The title track *Credo* (1968) borrows from JS Bach to good effect, while popular compositions like *Cantus In Memory of Benjamin Britten* and *Fratres* sit alongside less well-known works like *Swansong*, *La Sindone*, *Estonian Lullaby*, *Silhouette*, *For Lennart* and *Mein Weg*. Järvi's direction is idiomatic and he draws raptly intense playing from the Estonian Festival orchestra. Alpha's recording is clear, detailed and very atmospheric, with some nice deep bass. ***JH***



Jacob Collier
The Light For Days

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Hajanga/Interscope/Decca**

CELEBRATED FOR HIS intricate arrangements and lush harmonies, Collier strips things back to simple acoustic guitar here, supporting a mix of original songs and reimagined classics. James Taylor's *You Can Close Your Eyes* is a standout, Collier treating it with reverence while uncovering fresh beauty in its melody. Covers of The Beatles, The Beach Boys, and John Martyn also shimmer under his inventive touch. Still, it's the new material that truly defines the album. *I Know (A Little)* is a fragile, unforgettable ballad – haunting in its simplicity, lingering long after the final note. ***PSH***





Arielle Beck
Des Lunes et des Feux
Piano works by Schumann, Brahms and Beck

★★★★½

CD **Mirare**

SCHUMANN'S *HUMORESQUE OP.20* is a thorny work that can easily seem episodic and disjointed. But Arielle Beck (incredibly, just 16 years old) makes it sound totally coherent. She gives full reign to Schumann's poetic flights of fantasy, yet never sacrifices structure or loses her way. In Brahms' *8 Klavierstucke Op.76*, her remarkably mature playing suggests a deeply personal conversational quality. That she's a musician of exceptional talent and artistry is confirmed by Beck's own gravely beautiful *Schumann Variations* that close the disc. Mirare's recording is clear, focused and very natural sounding. ***JH***



Laura Veirs And The Choir Who Couldn't Say
Live in Angoulême

★★★★½

CD **Raven Marching Band**

VEIRS' REPUTATION FOR achingly beautiful, understated folk means any new release is noteworthy, but this live album is extra special. Here she teams up with a French school choir of 32 students, aged 12–18, performing in Angoulême earlier this year. Together, they deliver 14 songs from her catalogue, with Veirs accompanying the young voices on vocals and guitar. The result is really interesting: the raw innocence of a school choir set against Veirs' seasoned songwriting creates a moving, almost otherworldly contrast. For Veirs diehards, this is a treasure; for newcomers it's also a must-listen. ***PH***

Picture credit: Theo Batterham (Jacob Collier)

If Wishes Were Horses



"I wanted to bring Mythical Creature goodness to a much bigger audience. The Mythical Horses are proof that I got my wish."

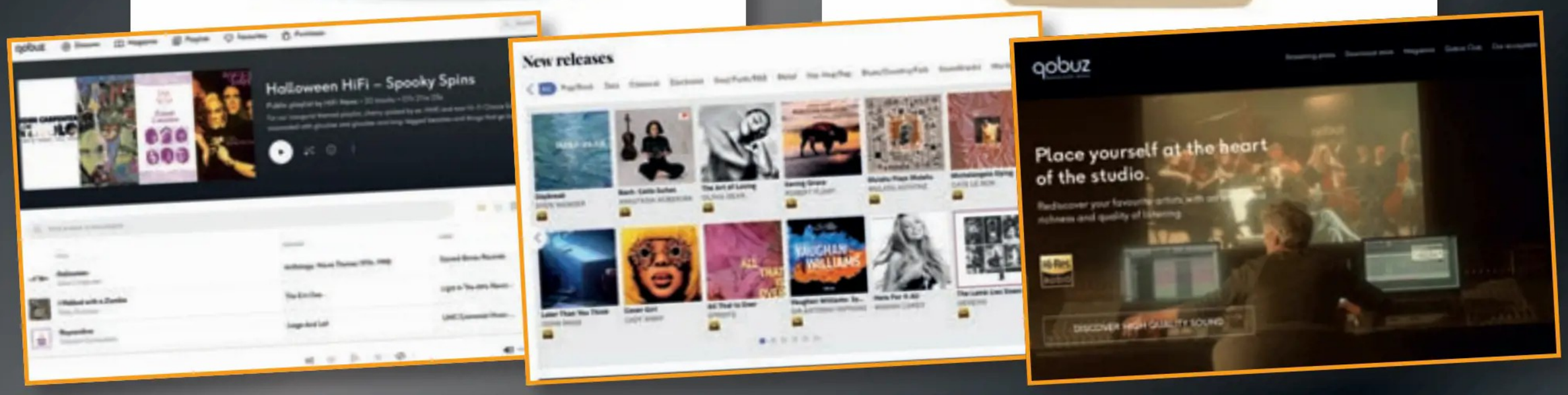
William E. Low
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REDISCOVER MUSIC



Outkast
Stankonia
(25th Anniversary)

★★★★★

2x vinyl **Legacy Recordings**

BEFORE TRUMP TRIED to manufacture a civil war so he can cancel the next US election and stay in power, there was a push to make reparation for the US' racist past and replace statues of slave-owning Confederate generals with more harmonious figures. In Georgia, Atlanta, homeboys Andre 3000 and Big Boi were proposed as candidates and *Stankonia*, reissued here in an expanded form to celebrate its 25th anniversary, is testament to why. A joyous work which differed from the aggressive, heavily macho hip-hop norm of the time, it was – still is – inclusive, clever, ravey, genre-busting, lively, light, witty and, most important of all, big, big fun. ***SS***



Mozart
6 String Quintets on historical instruments
Spunicunifait

★★★★½

3x CDs **Alpha**

SPUNICUNIFAIT, NAMED AFTER a naughty made-up word by Mozart, are a fearsome band! Bows dig deep into strings, creating a keen sense of excitement and elation. Their swaggering gutsy playing projects Mozart's music with vivid immediacy and an impressive brilliance and bite. But while there's great gusto and panache, it's not all fire and brimstone; many passages of subtle elegance ravish the ear. Alpha's recording is vivid and bold. And if things seem a little raw and harsh, it's not a technical fault – more a truthful no-holds-barred recreation of the sound being made by Spunicunifait at the time... ***JH***



BRITTNEY PARKS RETURNS with her third full-length album and once again proves she's at the top of her game. Exploring her mother's roots in Michigan and her father's in Illinois, the record weaves in club sounds from those regions while embracing everything from Jersey club to global dance music and experimental beatwork. What sets Sudan



Sudan Archives
The BPM

★★★★½

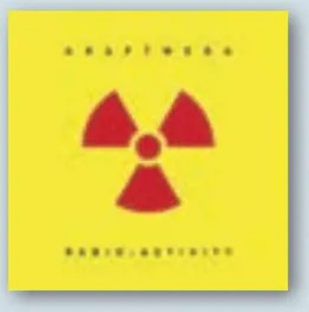
CD **Stones Throw Records**

Archives apart from her R&B contemporaries is her fearless experimentation. The result is a vibrant, urban sound infused with her trademark electric violin, adding an unusual yet consistently fresh edge. Across 15 tracks, she delivers an accomplished collection of modern, soul-tinged pop elevated by bold, imaginative flourishes. ***PH***

COOL COLLECTION



Alex Kapranos is singer, guitarist and leader of smart Glaswegian popsters Franz Ferdinand – who have recently released their sixth album, the critically acclaimed *The Human Fear*. But what's spinning on his turntable? Here is a trio of releases he considers life-long pals



Kraftwerk
Radio-Activity
Kling Klang/EMI (1975)
"The mood of this record as a whole is perfect," says Kapranos. "It has more in common with classical music than with pop or rock records and whenever I listen to it, every muscle in my body slackens and the blood becomes thinner and more fluid in a really beautiful way. It's almost as if you are relaxing and giving yourself over to the melancholy that you try to deny in everyday life. When you hear this music, it allows you to acknowledge it."



Sparks
Kimono My House
Island (1974)
Kapranos reckons: "Sparks are unique. Even though they progressed through the early Seventies, it's not glam rock, it's something else. Lyrically it's an incredible record because... they approached lyrics more from the perspective of writing a film script or someone writing a novel. You have these characters created by Ron for Russell to articulate, in the way a scriptwriter would write to bring a character to life. It's one of those records I literally wore the groove out to."



The Beatles
1962-1966
(The Red Album)
Parlophone (1973)
"This record is the most loved of my life," says Kapranos. "The copy I picture right now is the one that was in the flip-down compartment of my parents' Grundig stereogram that they got as a wedding present. Like Angel Delight, the Ford Cortina, G-Plan furniture or Clark's shoes, this LP was a ubiquitous object of their generation: a part of everyone's life. It was my first taste of music, before I could speak."

Picture credit: Yanran Xiong (Sudan Archives)

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QOBUZ
PLAYLIST

Qobuz playlist
DECEMBER



This month's pick of the best happening tunes to stream in hi-res from Qobuz

WELCOME TO THE second *HFC* Playlist in collaboration with Qobuz, our digital partner in providing over 100-million tracks via the highest-quality 24-bit downloads and streaming

Every month we'll be creating a fresh playlist of 20-or-so songs reflecting what's most happening musically at the moment – newly released tracks, songs to commemorate artists who've recently passed away, anniversary releases, seasonally fitting classics, that sort of thing…

Our lists will do their utmost to swerve the obvious, avoid the ubiquitous and instead strive to turn you on to some relevant but thrillingly different sounds to feed your hi-fi setup.

You can sample the list and play along as you read by visiting the *HFC* website, plus look out for great trial and subscription offers and competitions in the future.

OK, let's go…

Living On The Ceiling, Blancmange

This was the Harrow electropop duo's biggest hit, going Top 10 back in 1982 and listed this issue in memory of keyboard player Stephen Luscombe, who sadly left us last month.

The Happy Dictator, Gorillaz featuring Sparks

This is the first track released from the forthcoming album *The Mountain* by Damon Albarn's inspirational collaborative cartoon band (pictured top), their ninth, due next March. Guest performers are those bonkers arch-popsters Ron and Russel Mael.

Life Of Mine, C.Y.M.

C.Y.M. is the pairing of Vampire Weekend bassist Chris Baio and producer Michael Greene aka Fort Romeau. This is a forerunner from their debut LP, eponymously titled, and out soon.

Who Knows Where The Time Goes?, Fairport Convention

Another track to celebrate the coming of winter while mourning the passing of Autumn. It's from *Unhalfbricking*, the Fairports' third LP, released in 1969, and featuring one of Sandy Denny's most thrilling vocals.

Hit My Head All Day, Dry Cleaning

This is the feisty precursor to the London post-punkers' (pictured left) third LP, *Secret Love*, due out in January on 4AD.

John Barleycorn (Must Die), Traffic

Chosen to mark the harvest season, the title track of the fourth LP from Steve Winwood's exquisite outfit, which was released back in 1970; a trad folk horror tale of how we get our brew.

PRETTY THINGS DRUMMER VIV PRINCE SADLY DIED LAST MONTH

I Fought The Law, The Crickets

One of the great early rock anthems, made famous by the fantastic Bobby Fuller Four and, later, by The Clash. This is the original, written by Sonny Curtis, leader of Buddy Holly's Crickets who sadly passed away last month.

In The Stars, Melody's Echo Chamber

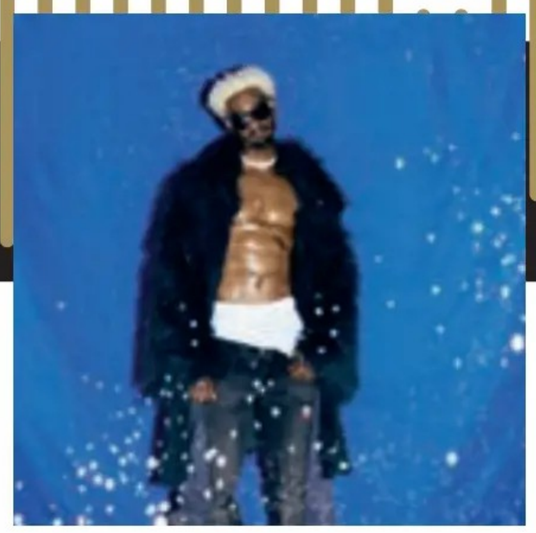
The first taste of Melody Prochet's new LP, *Unclouded*, due for release in early December. A sweet, floaty treat for fans of Stereolab and Tame Impala.

Autumn Almanac, The Kinks

A super-English seasonal classic non-album single from 1967 courtesy of Mr Ray Davies (right). All together now: "I like my football on a Saturday, Roast beef on Sundays, all right…"









Starburst, Danny Brown

The first track released from the nutso Detroit rapper's (above, centre) forthcoming sixth album *Stardust*. Check out the video – it's something else!

Arabebonics, The Orb

Characteristically genre-hopping track from the new LP, *Buddhist Hipsters*, amazingly Dr. Alex Paterson's (pictured below, right) 18th long-playing offering under the Orb umbrella.

To Autumn, Warren Ellis & Marianne Faithfull

A lovely bit of John Keats romanticism courtesy of Nick Cave's oppo and Ms Faithfull from 2021's *She Walks In Beauty*, a collaborative collection of poetry readings set to musical atmospheres and, sadly, Ms Faithfull's final studio LP.

Solid Air, John Martyn

We're listing this in honour of the magnificent stand-up bass player Danny Thompson who died last month. Danny featured on more classic records than almost anyone else we can think of, including work with Pentangle, Nick Drake, Talk Talk and John Martyn (above, left), with whom he formed a formidable, volatile and always entertaining touring partnership.

Loser, Tame Impala

A splendid number from Kevin Parker's new TI long player, *Dracula*. This is the one that stars Tame Impala fan and *Stranger Things* hero Joe Keery, aka Djo, in the video.

Layered Presence, Tortoise

This is a taster from *Touch*, the creative Chicago post-rock outfit's (pictured above, right) eighth LP and their first in nine years. Welcome back!

Jump Into The Fire, Harry Nilsson

To mark 5th November, Guy Fawkes Day and Bonfire Night, here's a stunner from *Nilsson Schmilsson*, the legendary singer/songwriter's seventh LP, released in 1971, featuring a crazy drum solo from Jim Gordon who tragically went on to murder his mother with a hammer and a butcher knife under the influence of the devil.

Autumn Sweater, Yo La Tengo

Another seasonal gem, this one courtesy of Hoboken's Ira Kaplan and Georgia Hubley aka YLT. It's the title track of a 1997 EP released via Matador.

GORILLAZ'S NEW LP, FEATURING SPARKS, DROPS NEXT MARCH

In The Margin, The Lemonheads

Evan Dando returns in feisty form with a new LP, *Love Chants*, on the horizon and a cracking autobiography, *Rumours Of My Demise*, in the shops now (see *Reasons To Be Cheerful,* p127).

Lovin' You, Richard Ashcroft

The title track from Ashcroft's forthcoming album finds the Britpop psych guvnor getting his baggy groove on. It's like the Nineties never ended.

Rosalyn, Pretty Things

This one – Pretty Things' debut single from 1964 – goes out to Viv Prince (below), the crazed drummer with the early incarnation of the band until he just got too much to handle. He taught Keith Moon a thing or two about misbehaviour, coined the nickname "Moon The Loon" and, amazingly, survived until last month. Salut! ●







Picture credits: Pooneh Ghana (Dry Cleaning), Todd Weaver (Tortoise) and Shutterstock (Viv Prince)

Kimber Kable
PBJ interconnects



AN UPDATE OF an old favourite, Russ Andrews has re-introduced the wallet-friendly Kimber analogue PBJ interconnect. PBJ is, of course, short for Peanut Butter and Jelly – the popular sandwich filling invented across the pond in the US. Kimber's reasoning is this cable should also be considered a staple for serious audiophiles, hence the name.

The new interconnects employ the same braided VariStrand conductor configuration as the original, except higher purity oxygen-free copper (with 102 percent IACS conductivity) is used for the conductors. These are made from seven individual strands of differing gauge wire as Kimber considers this favours different audio frequencies and offers the best conductivity across the audio spectrum. The three conductors are arranged in a woven tri-braid construction to offer effective RFI filtering. The conductors are insulated with a fluorocarbon (Teflon) dielectric and terminated with nickel-plated RCA connectors as standard or – for an additional cost – Kimber UltraPlate RCAs or Switchcraft studio-grade XLRs.

Peanut butter jelly time

To test the PBJ interconnects, I connect them between my valve preamp output and valve monoblocks and start listening with a new remastered LP of Count Basie and His Orchestra's *Best Of The Roulette Years*. The well-known piece *Cute* displays an amazing realism in my listening room, which is quite incredible for a recording made way back in 1962. The stereo imaging is excellent with great location of the instruments across the soundstage, as opposed to 'left or right' like many stereo recordings of the period.

A direct-cut LP of Vivaldi concertos performed by Interpreti Veneziani, the *Concerto For Violin, Cello, Strings And Harpsichord RV546* is lively and cheerful throughout. The dynamic range of the orchestra is vast and sounds very realistic. The fingering on the cello is particularly clear and the instrument once again has a very defined location in the soundstage.

The Kimber PBJ is a great-value interconnect and a superb upgrade to the 'in the box' cables that come supplied with equipment. ***NR***

DETAILS
PRICE
£103 for a 1m pair
WEBSITE
russandrews.com

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

True Colours Industries
Podium 1 equipment platform



FOR MANY YEARS, TCI has been associated with high-end mains cables and interconnects, but now it has started to produce a range of equipment platforms designed to minimise vibration and noise across a wide audio spectrum from low to high frequencies.

TCI's view is that most equipment supports concentrate on isolating low-frequency vibrations, but the company considers that this only addresses part of the problem. The Podium 1 uses a combination of noise suppression and isolation solutions and materials, which can have their own sonic signature. These materials are chosen to interact positively rather than fight against each other to reduce or eliminate unwanted noise and vibrations without altering the sonic integrity of the reproduction equipment. The Podium 1 is intended to act as an energy reservoir, storing and dispersing noise energy originating from external sources and from the supported equipment. It then dissipates this energy away from the component.

Podium finish

The Podium is very well made and the composite cork and rubber feet sit nicely on my equipment rack. For the purpose of this review, I place it under my turntable and conduct 'before and after' listening tests. Spinning an LP of Mendelssohn's *Octet* performed by The Locrian Ensemble, I am first aware that the silences at the start and between the movements seem quieter with the Podium in place. The opening *Allegro* has a clearer presence in my listening room with the support in situ and the sprightly *Scherzo* somehow displays more energy and pizzazz.

For some jazz vocals, I play a 45rpm LP of Lyn Stanley singing *Fascinating Rhythm* from her latest release *Tribute To 1924*. With the Podium, the soundstage appears to be more believable and has more precise timing of the drum rhythms. Stanley's vocals are also very clear and much more believable. The Podium is beautifully made, good value for money and delivers real sonic benefits. ***NR***

DETAILS
PRICE
£350
WEBSITE
tcicables.com

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

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■ **Cables** p108-109 ■ **Streaming solutions** p110
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CD PLAYERS



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.

★★★★★



Cyrus
CDi-XR Phantom Black

PRICE: £2,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

Familiar Cyrus traits such as clean speed, punctuality and strong sense of transparency are present and correct, but previous signature leanness has been bolstered by a weightier, warmer balance that sounds more natural.

★★★★★



Fell Audio
Fell Disc

PRICE: £500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 524

New hi-fi brands don't come along very often, but when they do and they insist that every single component is produced in the UK, you have to sit up and take notice. From the off, the brand offers an enticing mix of neat design, excellent features and superb performance, ensuring CD hasn't quite had its day just yet...

★★★★★



Marantz
CD 50n

PRICE: £1,600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 518

Equipped to not only get the most from your CD collection, but also for online streaming and dabbling in downloads, the CD 50n boasts a weighty, well-defined and technically accomplished performance that is enormous fun. Throw in a decent built-in headphone amplifier and you have a great silver disc pinner.

★★★★½



Musical Fidelity
M6scd

PRICE: £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

An exemplary player with more than a hint of star quality to it, the M6scd paints a broad and deep soundstage populated with solid, well-focused and perfectly placed images. Regardless of genre of music or production standard, its handling of spatial elements is among the very best in the business.

★★★★½



Rega
Saturn MK3

PRICE: £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

A supremely talented digital source with appeal well beyond the remit of a Rega system, the Saturn MK3 demonstrates an effortlessly musical performance that sounds gloriously 'undigital' without smoothing off or losing any aspect of musicality. It also has superb connectivity and is an utter joy in use.

★★★★★

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.

★★★★½



Marantz
SACD 30n
£2,700 *HFC* 468
While its styling might be a touch divisive, the SACD 30n's involving, detailed and highly refined sound is beyond dispute whether it be with SACD or CD. Meanwhile, its neat supreme streaming integration ensures a great performance without discs too.

★★★★★



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



Advance Paris
X-i50 BT

PRICE: £500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 521

What initially appears to be a presentation tilted towards politeness quickly reveals a natural sense of life, texture and rhythmic cohesion. Given its impressive style, high-quality build and more than generous feature set at the price, the X-i50 BT is insanely classy for the money and so a stone-cold affordable high-end hi-fi bargain.

★★★★★



Audiolab
6000A MKII

PRICE: £700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 528

Power updates, a new DAC chip, HDMI ARC connectivity and improvements to the phono stage are just some of the headline changes over what's come before. The result is a supreme balance of energy and refinement. The MKII takes everything the original did and proceeds to do them all that little bit better.

★★★★★



Musical Fidelity
M5si

PRICE: £1,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 506

With exemplary control and consistent sound at high levels, the M5si never descends into harshness and is tonally better than most. Combined with its clean, musical sound, ample power, battleship build and great value for money, it really is a do-it-all integrated that shines brightest with rhythm-driven music.

★★★★★



PrimaLuna
EVO 200

PRICE: £3,100 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 519

Offering all of the joys of valves with few of the pitfalls, the expansive soundstage, liquidity and naturalness of the midband, and sweetness of the treble are a joy to behold. Throw in the fact that it is so much more powerful than most of its glass bottle-wielding rivals, and this is a real bargain.

★★★★★



Pro-Ject
MaiA S3

PRICE: £550 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 492

This *Group-Test* winning integrated ran Rega's io pretty close – ultimately coming out on top thanks to the functionality it offers that the io doesn't. Compact and well made, this is a great-sounding amplifier that does a pretty impressive range of things very well indeed. In short, top of the pile for those on a budget.

★★★★★



Rega
Elex MK4

PRICE: £1,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 500

Arguably the most complete Rega integrated amplifier yet, the Elex MK4 is a stunning bargain capable of an engaging and highly musical performance. Connectivity is spot on, build is superb and it comfortably gives more expensive rival offerings a serious run for their money. An enormous amount of amp for the price.

★★★★★

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS



Audiolab
9000Q/P
£2,500 *HFC* 527
An evolution of the existing 9000A integrated amp, the Q and P's ESS DAC implementation introduces detail, soundstaging and bass in abundance alongside a previously unseen level of emotion. Whether used together or separately, the results are superb.

★★★★★



Chord Electronics
Ultima Pre 3
£6,000 *HFC* 503
Combining class-leading sound with an attractive and distinctive visual look and feel, the Ultima 3 preamp takes some beating. With a nimble and highly lithe sound that's never slow out of the blocks, it might be expensive but it still offers exceptional value for money.

★★★★★



Exposure
3510 Preamplifier/
3510 Power Amplifier
£1,590/£1,590 *HFC* 505
With its strong and colourful bass and sweet midband, the 3510 combo is something of an old-school powerhouse with grunt aplenty at its disposal that performs far better than anything else even remotely close to the price.

★★★★★



Leema Acoustics
Neutron
£1,500 *HFC* 514
This *Group-Test*-winning preamp effortlessly combines wide-ranging functionality and exceptional performance in the most effective way. You can connect more to it, while paying less to do so and revel in its superb performance. A true bargain.

★★★★★

CABLES – INTERCONNECTS



Atlas Cables
Element Achromatic

PRICE: £86 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Achromatic means without colour and that's very much what you get with this affordable offering. Compared with previous Atlas Element cables this has increased OCC copper content on the conductors and a new process for reduced distortion. The result is great spaciousness to the soundstage and imaging plus powerful bass.

★★★★★



Black Rhodium
Minuet S

PRICE: £240 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 492

Replacing the original Minuet (*HFC* 453), this RCA interconnect is screened to shield against extraneous RFI and EMI interference. The result is improved intimacy in quieter sections of music and great dynamics in the louder passages. The soundstage reveals new breadth and depth coupled with great mids.

★★★★★



Chord Company
Clearway RCA digital

PRICE: £110 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 507

In addition to its silver-plated VEE 3 RCA plugs, the Clearway can be fitted with BNC and/or mono mini-jacks. Either way, it displays a full, deep and refined sound perfectly placing individual instruments within a broad soundstage. Vocals have great energy and excitement, making this a great option for digital signals at the price.

★★★★★



Ecosse Cables
Baton MkII

PRICE: £145 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 493

Turning out a remarkably sophisticated performance at this price point, the Baton MkII utilises Ultra High Purity Oxygen-Free Copper that's plated in Ultra High Purity Oxygen-Free Silver to minimise signal loss. The result is an analogue interconnect that brings detail and clarity to the fore.

★★★★★



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.

★★★★½



QED
Reference Audio 40

PRICE: £120 for 1m pair **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 487

Fitted with QED's Analoc2 RCA plugs with tightening lockrings, these cables are made from two silver-plated 99.99 percent oxygen-free copper conductors of different diameters. The result is a refined performance with well-extended, punchy bass, strident highs and clear and precise timing.

★★★★★

"A man who stops advertising to save money is like a man who stops a clock to save time."
- Henry Ford

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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
Intro Power Cable

PRICE: £75 for 2m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 502

Available as part of BR's Intro entry-level series, this power cable comes in a choice of seven different-coloured braids to help identify it. It is supplied with a flat pin 13A plug fitted with a 5A fuse and a large ferrite core at the IEC connector end resulting in a clearer and more detailed sound across all frequencies.

★★★★★



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.

★★★★★

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

STREAMING SOLUTIONS



Bluesound
NODE ICON

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 527

The largest and most sophisticated Node yet from Bluesound adds the ability to natively handle DSD to 256 and balanced output for the first time. The result is a step forward from the performance of previous Nodes, more extensive connectivity and supreme ease of use. In short, it's a must-audition for serious streamers.

★★★★★



Cambridge Audio
CXN100

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 518

Integral to the CXN100's appeal is the user experience that makes better-equipped rivals seem fiddly in comparison. Throw in the engaging but refined performance and flexible spec, and it's easy to see why this remains one of the most influential streamers ever made.

★★★★★

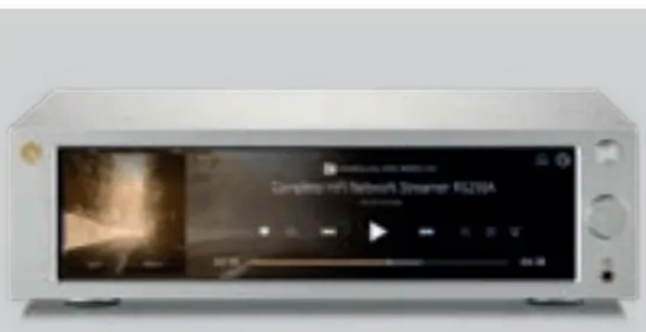


Eversolo
DMP-A6 Gen 2

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 531

An enhanced version of the already superb DMP-A6 (one of the best sub-£1,000 streamers going), this update supports PCM to 768kHz and up to DSD512. Key to what it does is offer a presentation that is fractionally better lit than some rivals. Though not a massive step forward from the original, it's still a must-audition network player.

★★★★★



HiFi Rose
RS250A

PRICE: £2,350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 502

Don't be fooled, the ability to stream both audio and video is no gimmick. In fact the core functionality is so well sorted that this can be judged as a sober and carefully engineered network streamer that's competitive with anything at the price. Throw in the engaging and fluid sound, and you have a winner.

★★★★★



Silent Angel
Bremen SL1 Plus

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 533

If you can live without the visual flair of a display, there's very little that the Bremen SL1 Plus can't do to a very high standard. Its controlled, considered and consistent approach doesn't seek to dazzle with a canon of sonic fireworks or forensic interrogation instead letting the music make its own case with just a hint of warmth.

★★★★★



WiiM
Ultra

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 522

In terms of functionality, the Ultra is leagues ahead of anything else anywhere near the price. It sounds far less 'etched' than other streamers with ESS chips and the adjustable EQ options allow some fine tuning of the performance. In short, it's a breath-taking front end capable of great results that can also operate as a preamp.

★★★★★

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.

★★★★½



Innuos
Zenith Mk3
From £3,000 *HFC* 451
With one of the best interfaces going and a potently 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.

★★★★½



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



Chord Electronics
TT2

PRICE: £3,400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

We could talk about dynamic range and noise floor modulation, but the TT2 simply creates a more believable illusion of a physical presence and space than its rivals. Combining superb build, typical design flair and stunning sound quality, this is a DAC that not only believes in the superiority of digital, but goes on to prove it too.

★★★★★



iFi Audio
ZEN Blue 3

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 522

Able to operate as both a Bluetooth receiver and transmitter, the ZEN Blue 3 boasts support for lossless audio as well as being a conventional wired DAC for hi-res. Performance is fabulous while the extensive connectivity and features make this a superb option as part of a wider entertainment system.

★★★★★



Musical Fidelity
M6x DAC

PRICE: £2,100 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 509

A more than worthy runner up in our DAC *Group Test*, the M6x DAC does an awful lot very well indeed. It's tonally smooth, has an expansive stereo soundstage, glides along with the music in an enjoyable way and is decently dynamic. Factor in its impressive connectivity and versatility, and it's hard not to be won over.

★★★★★



Pro-Ject
DAC Box RS2

PRICE: £1,550 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 509

The RS2 has a smooth, crisp and detailed sound that's very impressive for the relatively low price. The sound is perhaps a touch more accurate through the solid-state output stage, but the tube option adds a more romantic feel that suits some music better. Either way, it's nice to have the choice.

★★★★★



PS Audio
DirectStream

PRICE: £4,860 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

By converting everything it's fed to DSD, the DirectStream reveals more from CDs than its rivals for a superlative analogue-like sound that has more in common with master tape than anything digital can usually muster. Low-level resolution, refinement and a majestic sense of composure add to the positives.

★★★★★



Synthesis
Roma 69DC

PRICE: £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 509

Specialising in tube amps, this small boutique company from Italy comes up trumps with this *Group Test* winner. Beautifully finished, it plays music with an authentic sense of emotion that really tugs at the heartstrings, making digital audio a tactile delight. The fact it does so at such a relatively low price is rare.

★★★★★

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IsoTek
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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.

★★★★★

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

Acoustic Energy Corinium



PRICE: £6,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 513

Acoustic Energy's designers are let off the lead in creating this more high-end design that started out as a research project. The defining characteristic is its combination of tonal smoothness, supreme couthness and great musicality. It has beautifully even and balanced tonality with great delicacy and detail retrieval, sounding closer to flashier names costing five-figure sums. A must audition.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins 702 Signature



PRICE: £5,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

Sporting B&W's tweeter-on-top, this stunning three-way comes with a glorious Datuk Gloss ebony-coloured veneer. It has a big controlled sound that fills large rooms with ease, ensuring rousing renditions of music overflowing with copious air and space and impressive soundstaging. Deft handling and plenty of punch complete the package.

★★★★★

Focal Theva N°2



PRICE: £1,300
REVIEWED: *HFC* 505

A more affordable alternative to Focal's Vestia (and divested of the latter speaker's multi-channel duties), the best thing you can say about the Theva is just how close it comes to its sibling – while arguably sounding more fun. The result is a floorstander that delivers a big, confident and engaging sound in spaces that some rivals might struggle in.

★★★★★

Monitor Audio Bronze 300 7G



PRICE: £1,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 531

This seventh-generation offering from MA's entry-level lineup has ample resolving power, precision and a beautifully open, expressive and fluent midband. But the first thing to hit you is this floorstander's sheer intelligibility. The result is a more mature and sophisticated sonic style without losing any of the traditional Bronze energy and enthusiasm.

★★★★★

PMC prophecy5



PRICE: £4,575
REVIEWED: *HFC* 529

Featuring the latest incarnation of PMC's famed Laminair port, this transmission-line floorstander is one of the more attractive offerings from the UK company in a while. The result is an almost impossibly hard-hitting speaker judged by its compact dimensions, featuring bass that displays a winning combination of depth and speed. Quite simply one of the best sub-£5k speakers around.

★★★★★

Wharfedale Diamond 12.3



PRICE: £500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 491

This *Group Test*-winning floorstander has skills that mark it out as something special. And first of these is the midrange, which is wide and airy. This is accompanied by some next-level transparency, spooky insight and extraordinary tonal temperance. Completing the picture are the supremely supple bass and glorious build quality.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES



Atlas Cables
Equator Achromatic Speaker Z 2.0
£231 for a 3m pair ***HFC* 516**
A 2mm² cable using oxygen-free copper conductors contained in a high-density polyethylene foam dielectric, the Equator 2.0 is highly flexible and easy to connect. Presentations sound detailed, full and open. Instrument placement is spot on and sounds dynamic and spacious.

★★★★★



Chord Company
RumourX
£228 3m ***HFC* 512**
Featuring silver-plated oxygen-free copper conductors insulated with XLPE, the 6mm diameter of the RumourX makes it flexible enough to route around the room. It delivers a beautifully balanced performance across all types of music and has a three-dimensional soundstage.

★★★★★



QED
XT25
£85 3m ***HFC* 434**
Claimed to achieve a lowering of impedance compared with a traditional large cross-sectional area twin-core cable, the XT25 offers up great refinement and engaging musicality. Vocals are clear and full bodied, silence between phrases is eerily quiet and the noise floor is very low.

★★★★★



True Colours Industries
Storm
£22 1m ***HFC* 453**
This flexible ribbon cable is 2mm thick, making it ideal for hiding away under the carpet for tidy bi-wire hook-ups, while its tight and well-controlled performance reveals impressive openness with a spacious sound that's full and entirely uncluttered, even during crescendos.

★★★★★

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS



Audiovector
QR 1 SE

PRICE: £1,350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 520

This update of the entry-level QR range is basically the original model all grown up. The mid-forward immediacy and sparkly treble are dialed back a tad while the bass is gently pumped for more tonal balance. The result is supreme sonics, making this one of the most accomplished sub-£2k standmounts going.

★★★★★



Bowers & Wilkins
606 S3

PRICE: £750 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 513

The 606 S3 nails the 'compete with key rivals' brief with an assurance that is impressive. More enticingly, it displays B&W qualities normally found higher up the range on more expensive models. The relationship between the drivers is seamless, tonality is convincing and similarly priced rivals will struggle to match the low end.

★★★★★



Monitor Audio
Studio 89

PRICE: £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 522

One of the slimmest standmounts going, the Studio 89 wears its Eighties styling on its sleeve. It's not especially tall either, but with two HiVe II slot ports at the rear, it's surprisingly deep. Those seduced by its size and style will be rewarded with a direct, energetic and captivating sound way bigger than expected.

★★★★★



Russell K
RED 50SE

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 527

The impressive RED 50 (*HFC* 422) gets the Special Edition treatment, enjoying upgraded internals and plinth in the process. The result is a standmount that gets you closer to the living force of musical performance adding a more human touch to what, in the RED 50, already sounded exceptionally fresh, vital and natural.

★★★★★



SVS
Ultra Evolution Bookshelf

PRICE: £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 528

The biggest threat to the Bookshelf is SVS' smaller Nano, which is superb. However, the UEB sounds bigger has more effortless dynamic reach and its bass goes lower. The ideal choice for those with larger rooms that don't require a floorstander.

★★★★★



Wharfedale
Super Linton

PRICE: £2,000 (with stands) **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 526

An old dog taught new tricks? Maybe, but it's hard not to conclude the work Wharfedale has done in refining this classic design pays off in a sound that's bang up to date while retaining all the ease of listening of the original. Throw in that retro visual appeal – especially on the stands – and you're onto a real winner.

★★★★★

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



Bowers & Wilkins
Formation Duo

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

It might offer relatively poor connectivity without the Formation Audio hub (an extra £650), but otherwise this is one of the best wireless speakers around thanks to its stunning design and class-leading sound which reveals impressive levels of power and poise under pressure regardless of source.

★★★★★



Cabasse
Pearl Akoya

PRICE: £2,950 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

Bringing a retro futuristic touch of glamour to the wireless world, the Pearl Akoya is sold as a single speaker only – so doesn't come cheap. HDMI aside, it ticks most boxes connectivity-wise and its crisp, expansive sound ensures it will prove more than capable for audiophiles. Superlative space-age stereo at its best.

★★★★★



KEF
LS50 Wireless II

PRICE: £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 502

Combining an extensive and highly practical specification that makes it an ideal one-stop shop with a level of overall performance that is truly outstanding, this *Group Test* runner-up might not be cheap, but it is unquestionably a quite superb all-in-one solution that images better than most rivals and is sonically fabulous.

★★★★★



KEF
LS60 Wireless

PRICE: £4,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 517

A supremely impressive, potent and highly entertaining speaker regardless of whether or not it is wireless, this floorstander romped to victory in our active loudspeaker *Group Test*. Boasting a preternatural performance, the LS60 Wireless' power, transparency, control and dynamic reach is second to none.

★★★★★



Q Acoustics
Q Active 200

PRICE: £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

With each cabinet boasting a pair of Balanced Mode Radiators – each with its own DSP and amplifier channel – this *Group Test*-winning standmount has a hi-fi like sound that's tonally neutral, smooth and well balanced. Offering a combination of great sonics, stylish design and superb connectivity, it's the one to beat.

★★★★★



System Audio
Legend 5.2 Silverback

PRICE: £2,400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 502

The Legend 5.2 Silverback's *Group Test*-winning combination of flexibility, tweakability and knockout sonics ensure that it excels where it really counts and delivers a sound-per-pound proposition that simply rewrites the rules in the sector. In short, the Legend 5.2 Silverback is an unalloyed triumph.

★★★★★

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS



Audiolab
Omnia
£1,600 *HFC* 490
Despite some operational foibles, the Omnia offers a level of performance that very little under £2,000 can get anywhere near. It combines excellent functionality and spec with a supreme level of performance across its wide spread of connections.

★★★★★



Cambridge Audio
Evo 150
£2,250 *HFC* 477
In terms of functionality, the Evo 150 offers little over a dedicated streaming amp such as Hegel's H95. As an object of desire, however, it's on a different plane – as lovely to look at as it is to use and to listen to. There will be many takers for it.

★★★★★



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.

★★★★★

TURNTABLES



AVID
Volvere SP

PRICE: From £5,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 472

With its dynamic, detailed and confident presentation, the Volvere SP delivers all of the thrills hidden in your vinyl's grooves and adds a few more just for good measure. Rock solid, unerringly precise and gloriously natural, it's a triumph that combines the joys of a belt drive with the accuracy of a direct drive.

★★★★★



Michell
TecnoDec

PRICE: £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 505

Essentially unchanged from when it began production 20 years ago, the TechnoDec offers a tantalising combination of effortless setup, supreme ability at capturing fine detail and highlighting the size of a venue, and glorious build quality. Throw in its lively energetic nature, and it's tough to beat

★★★★★



Pro-Ject
Debut EVO 2

PRICE: £600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 521

Described by our reviewer as not only the best turntable that they've listened to priced under £1,000, but also the best all-round Pro-Ject Debut deck fullstop, the EVO 2 flows through material in a way that is engaging without being wearing. The new cart is a considerable step up and the performance and build are top notch.

★★★★★



Rega
Planar 1 Plus

PRICE: £385 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 516

With its built-in phono stage, RB110 tonearm and Carbon cart, this *Group Test* winner is a stunning package at the price. Vinyl sounds clean and accurate, if a touch clinical, but music is delivered in a neat and orderly way – never sounding harsh or rough. The result sounds way more expensive than the price.

★★★★★



Rega
Planar 8

PRICE: £1,870 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 505

A more affordable deck that closely follows design principles more commonly associated with Rega's A-game Naiad, the Planar 8's blend of features, good looks, ease of use and decent spec are tough to beat. Bass offers sensational speed and depth, and detail brings performances to life. A truly class act.

★★★★★



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



Goldring
Eroica HX
£550 *HFC* 492
Replacing the H as the only high-output moving-coil in Goldring's range, the Eroica HX can work into a standard moving-magnet input. The result is a cart that though fiddly to fit rewards with a spacious and convincing soundstage with impeccable control and flow.

★★★★★



Ortofon
MC X10
£270 *HFC* 530
The MC X10 has an elliptical stylus with hand-wound coils in silver wire and a new magnet system. As the entry-level cart, it is a particularly good option if you have a moving-coil input on your amp or phono stage. Superb musicality, tracking and soundstaging across the board.

★★★★★



Sumiko
Olympia
£225 *HFC* 518
This *Group Test*-winning moving-magnet cartridge takes some decent basic ingredients and turns them into a gold medal-worthy performance. Simple to install and use, it's keenly priced and delivers a great balance of tonal realism, timing and drive.

★★★★★



Vertere
Sabre
£900 *HFC* 503
This *Group Test*-winning high-output moving-magnet has us captivated from the moment it hits the groove. It presents a wonderfully believable sound, bass is tight and punchy and the midrange and top end clear, refined and totally captivating regardless of the music.

★★★★★

PHONO STAGES



Cyrus
40 PPA

PRICE: £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 531

With its updated power supply and interface, Cyrus continues to offer an extremely low noise floor, level of detail, tonality and fun that can't be beat at the price – and yet it still manages to extract a small but meaningful amount more while bringing the interface bang up to date. A perfect fit for most setups.

★★★★★



Hegel
V10

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

It might be fiddly to setup and ensuring you pick the best combination of DIP switches for your cartridge isn't the most of intuitive of processes, but the V10 is effortlessly smooth, gloriously insightful and impeccably voiced for a crystal-clear performance with a wide range of different MM or MC pick-ups.

★★★★★



iFi Audio
ZEN Phono

PRICE: £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 495

An astonishing performance and superb flexibility. Until you find yourself at the price where features like adjustable loading and capacitance are possible, the spec for the asking price is outstanding. This is one of a tiny number of designs anywhere near this price that can do justice to pretty much any cartridge under £500.

★★★★★



Musical Fidelity
M6x Vinyl

PRICE: £1,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

This multi-talented design offers a superb combination of excellent connectivity, versatile loading and gain options, a great user interface and excellent sound. Tonally it's very neutral with a crisp clean and spacious tone that's less euphonic than some may like, but nonetheless fun to listen to.

★★★★★



Pro-Ject
Phono Box RS2

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

The RS2's transparency is genuinely impressive, even judged at the price and its lack of colouration is potentially very useful indeed. This is the product you buy when you're already satisfied with the tonal balance of your system and simply need a well-specified phono stage to complete it.

★★★★★



Tom Evans
MicroGroove+ X mkII

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

The closest thing the UK has to a phono stage guru, Evans designed the circuit for this stunning stage in 1989. Unapologetically plain, light and unassuming, the MicroGroove cuts the sonic mustard like nothing else to make even mid-priced turntables sound far higher end than they actually are. Superb.

★★★★★

IN-EAR HEADPHONES



Bowers & Wilkins
Pi8
£350 *HFC* 521
With a charging case that doubles up as an aptX transmitter for use with wired sources and new 12mm Carbon Cone drivers and noise cancelling, the Pi8 is vastly superior to the previous Pi7 – offering a level of performance and functionality that few can match.
★★★★★



Cambridge Audio
Melomania A100
£120 *HFC* 532
The first Bluetooth in-ears that our reviewer found uncomfortably loud at max volume, the A100 provides an impressive performance and decent battery. If noise cancelling isn't a priority, the excellent sound quality is hard to beat at this price point.
★★★★★



Master & Dynamic
MW09
£320 *HFC* 515
Available in Black, Silver or Gold finishes with an aluminium charging case or Blue, Grey and Green with a Kevlar case (for an extra £50), this *Group Test* winner has impeccable build quality, top-notch noise cancelling and supreme sound across a variety of music genres.
★★★★★



Sennheiser
Momentum True Wireless 3
£230 *HFC* 504
With its quoted 5Hz low-end frequency response, this *Group Test*-winning wireless in-ear is the perfect all-rounder for music on the move. Deftly able to handle grumbling bass as adeptly as it does trebles and mids, its supreme noise cancelling seals the deal.
★★★★★

HEADPHONES



Audio-Technica
ATH-R50x

PRICE: £140 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 528

Designed to offer a natural listening experience with an expansive soundstage, the R50x takes drivers from the R70x and re-engineers them to give more powerful bass and accurate upper midband response. The result is a spacious and clear sound partnered by more defined top-end and deep yet powerful bass.

★★★★★



Bowers & Wilkins
Px8

PRICE: £600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 500

B&W doesn't put a foot wrong with this *Group Test*-winning over-ear. Featuring a tantalising combination of attractive design and comfort for long-term listening, the sound quality is an absolute delight. Capping the overall performance are impressive connectivity options and supreme noise cancelling.

★★★★★



Grado
Signature HP100 SE

PRICE: £2,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 527

Marking the centenary of the Grado founder's birth, the Signature HP100 SE boasts 52mm drivers, 50 percent more padding that what's come before and is the first headphone from the company with detachable cables. Pumping out a refined, crystal clear sound with plenty of detail, this is a reference-quality open-back option.

★★★★★



Philips
Fidelio L4

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 515

Ditching the aptX processing of its predecessor, the Fidelio L4 is now spatial audio compatible and comes equipped with Immersion AI software for noise cancelling. Though L3 owners will hardly want to bin their cans in favour of the L4, this has a spacious and natural sound that's hard to beat.

★★★★★



Sennheiser
Momentum 4 Wireless

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 495

Its 42mm dynamic drivers may be the same as its predecessor, but the Momentum 4 has updated Bluetooth and battery, ensuring that regardless of wired or wireless use its sound quality, versatility and noise-cancelling are superb.

★★★★★



Sony
WH-1000XM6

PRICE: £400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 533

With its lively and tonally believable sound the WH-1000XM6 is sonically capable, well made and extremely comfortable to wear. Throw in one of the more effective noise cancelling systems going, and this is the perfect option for those that seek complete isolation when listening on the move.

★★★★★

PORTABLE DACS



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 2
£450 *HFC* 488
It might be £50 more than its predecessor, but the follow-up Mojo makes the superb original sound opaque, coloured and closed-in by comparison. Prepare to experience complex textures, limpid transparency, striking stereo and unnoticed details like never before.
★★★★★



iFi Audio
GO bar
£330 *HFC* 494
A near technically perfect example of a portable DAC, the GO bar sets new standards of for the breed with functionality for every occasion. Accurate, with a potent yet engaging sound, it partners great features with exceptional sound.
★★★★★



iFi Audio
hip-dac 3
£200 *HFC* 515
Now in its third iteration, the hip flask lookalike sees the already impressive portable DAC/headphone amp boosted by PowerMatch (upping gain for powerful cans) and IEMatch (reducing noise for more sensitive ones). The result is just about the best portable DAC at the price.
★★★★★

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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.

These pages are a must-read if you're thinking about buying used kit, or if you have hi-fi you want to sell. It's free – simply submit your ad with no more than **50 words** (we reserve the right to edit it if not), remembering to include your email, phone number and county. Simply email your ad to: **letters@hifichoice.co.uk**. This service is open to private advertisers only. Just **one** ad per household and please note that images are for illustration only and **do not** represent what is for sale.

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ARIAND FV34B valve integrated amplifier, excellent, boxed £375. Carriage at cost. Email: **07743 380657 or email: rodtheobald@googlemail.com (Lancs).**

BRICASTI M5 streamer, renderer, Roon end point. RRP £3,000, excellent condition, £999: **07720 447247 (Aylesbury Bucks).**

PRIMARE I32 amp, black and in pristine condition. Comes with original packaging, mains cable, remote and manual. £895 free delivery in UK: **07815 295662 or email: ali.hall05@protonmail.com (Nairnshire).**

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"WE AIN'T GOT ALL THE ANSWERS..."

It's October 1985 and The Cult have shucked off positive punk and goth for a stab at the mainstream. ***Steve Sutherland*** gives them a grilling over the return of retro rock



Apparently, I'm supposed to be a naïve, romantic kid, some middle-class drop out who's quite well educated. but I've got me 'ead up me ass so I just walk around going: 'Everything's beautiful'."

Ian Astbury is well aware of his reputation.

"Kids take us on a more serious level than they take a lot of other bands and a lot of journalists seem to find that very annoying. They think what we do is shrouded in a mysticism that we create in order to hide a basic lack of understanding, but it's not as complicated as that. We're not that clever. We're just two lads from the North. We're doing what comes naturally. 'E makes a noise with 'is mouth and I play guitar. That's what we do."

Billy Duffy also has a fair idea of what some folks think. The pair of them are on the defensive. Me? You could say I'm on the attack. The Cult are becoming pretty popular right now and, try as I might, I simply can't fathom why. Everything they do seems fake to me, pilfered from rock history and brazenly gussied up. Ian Astbury's one of those people who has embroidered his pretty uneventful youth into a diary of momentous incidents and traumatic turning points and told so many tales about it to so many people so many times that he probably now believes it himself. He's made absolutely sure we know all about his obsession with the rituals of Native Americans and how hearing The Doors' *The End* at the start of *Apocalypse Now* was akin to a religious experience. His band name's been changed from Southern Death Cult to Death Cult to just The Cult in search of wider acceptability – a scheme that seems to be working considering the latest rousing single, *She Sells Sanctuary*, has just made a dent in the charts despite the fact that it's errant Gothic nonsense.

"The first gig I ever done was filmed for TV, my fifth ever gig with Southern Death Cult was reviewed by the press," he says. "Anything I've done, people have wanted to know what it's all about. I find it so amusing that all these people keep slagging us off and I couldn't give a sh*t about it. I'm not bothered. People have tried to pound us into the ground, but they just can't get a hold of it."

Ian Astbury strikes me as being a bit dim but he carries himself with a certain arrogance to shield him from all the slings and arrows coming his way. A pop star in other words. He intones the most commonplace truisms so haughtily that you'd believe he actually believes he's imparting some precious pearls of wisdom. Billy Duffy's different, but the same if you catch my drift. He's confident, but sharper. He listens whereas Ian, for all the spiel about community he's about to unleash on us, exhibits, in his own favoured condemnation of others: "a very closed mind".

For someone intent on letting it be known that he's dead set on learning, Ian actually never listens, he just stares off into a more important world of his own and sometimes deigns to descend to our level just to say his piece. I'd say he was stoned, but…

"The funniest thing about the music business is that the people who are most into the rock 'n' roll cliché lifestyle are the ones whose public image is the least like that. We don't take drugs. We've never done it. That's just a personal way this band are and I suppose it's a paradox. We're a rock band – we've been saying that for a while now and it wasn't too acceptable a year and a half ago, it was like putting your heard in a guillotine. The times have maybe changed a little bit now."

Spiritwalker

It's at this point I'm reminded of the old adage: those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. The Cult are a new throwback… or at least something so old they can appear new. The rock of ages.

"Everything in this world right now is fast, fast, fast," says Ian, fiddling with his Led Zeppelin badge. "Fast food, fast TV, fast sex, fast everything. And people just skim on the surface all the time and I think a lot of journalists look at us on the surface and pick up on certain things. Like the North American Indian thing – but that didn't just happen to me overnight. That was an experience that happened to me over five or six years. And hippies…"

Ah, I'm glad he's brought that up. The new Cult album is called *Love*, which has

Picture credits: Lynn Goldsmith (left) and Andrew MacPherson (right)



encouraged some wags in the press to compare Astbury with Neil the hippy from *The Young Ones*. What with his cowboy hat with the eagle feather in the hatband, his snakeskin cowboy boots with gold points and his Cure badge, he cuts quite the caricature. Here he is now, staring into middle space and asking: "What's a hippy? A lot of kids who come to see us haven't got any conception of what a hippy is except for maybe a teacher at school with long hair and a beard. I got called a hippy in the street by some 14-year-old kids the other day. I wonder where they got that idea from?"

He fixes me with a glare.

"Look, what the f**k is a hippy? I think people see a hippy as some guy with long hair and glasses with a peace sign and flared trousers… it's just an image. Like punk."

"Yeah, and what does punk mean now?" asks Billy. "It's become a deprecating term. 'Let's go and laugh at the punks down the King's Road'."

"It's that guy on the Natwest advert," says Ian. "The one with the Mohican haircut who spits at people and headbutts walls."

Ian's proud of having missed punk. He says he was in Canada at that time, in the army. But when he heard The Sex Pistols, of course, it changed his life. He came over here, hung out in all the right places, met all the right people and picked up on the vibe after the event as it were. This, he considers, for some inexplicable reason, to have given him a unique insight born of hindsight about which he now proceeds to pontificate:

"I think it's really nice what's happening now because it's unquantifiable. Because so many things have gone in the past, I think what we do is an amalgamation of all those different influences and it's gonna be a lot longer lasting."

Wild flower

"A lot of things have been in the negative," adds Billy. "Maybe now is the time for… well, the positive. That's been a terrible word for a few years, almost frightening. But maybe what we're involved with is the first thing that's positive. Every other fashion – hippies, acid rock, punk – seemed to be incredibly against something. Well, we're not necessarily against anything in that obvious way."

Before The Cult became a self-professed rock band, they embraced the idea of being positive punks, whatever that was supposed to mean. Now, though, they say they don't have any truck with fads or fashions except the personal image they project.

"You take a walk in Newcastle and the kids are expressing a lot of things in the way they're dressing now and they look to a band like us to be US," says Billy. "In a sort of perverse way, they see us standing up to what they consider a very conservative music press. Kids think the papers are always going on about new funk-rock and all this, that and the other, and when they go and see these bands, they're bored out of their

"THERE'S A LOT OF STRENGTH IN WHAT WE DO AND PEOPLE CAN SENSE IT"

minds. So, they look around and think: 'Well, what the f**k is there that's exciting around here?' And they look to us. That's why you see kids in bright green paisley shirts – they're looking for real bands they can actually get excited about."

"I agree with the attitude that in the late Sixties, a certain group of people got so far up their own asses they sh*t all over themselves," says Ian. "They did contradict themselves but look what it produced, look at the imagination, look what it actually started. The fact that so many young people could go on the street and stop a war. The fact that you've got CND now. We're not into any political movements or anything but, at the same time, CND is a powerful cause, they're on about the same thing as us, they wanna f**king survive, they wanna have somewhere to live. All that was produced from the Sixties, a lot of very positive things came out of it as well as a lot of negative self-indulgence."

I counter, somewhat cynically I admit, that all the Sixties actually achieved was in creating a new generation between childhood and adulthood that could be marketed at and sold stuff. Economics is what gave youth its perceived power.

"Young people the most powerful?" says Ian, triumphantly, missing the point entirely. "And so they should be!"

I'm intrigued as to how his lyrics, his message, manifests this faith in a hopeful, fresh new dawn. I quote the Cult song *Nirvana* – "It rained flowers when the music began." I quote *Phoenix* – "I'm on fire like a kiss from the lips of Ra". I mention long guitar solos nicked wholesale from Jimi Hendrix and thrift store threads from The Incredible String Band. Surely it's all posturing retro bollo*ks?

"Young kids pick up *Are You Experienced* or a Doors album and it's mind-blowing because it's so good," counters Billy. "And they've grown up never being told that this great music happened. To them it's like a new group."

She sells sanctuary

Look, it's not that I have anything against The Cult per se. I guess it's just that I like my music to reflect the times and to pursue variety and change whereas The Cult just recycle. They're like actors going through the moves and motions.

"My image of the Sixties is romantic," says Ian to no-one in particular. "The colours, the clothes, the music and the ambience of the concert – not so much the drug culture that went along with it, but the community. A lot of people coming together and something really exciting happening. I'd like to be able to experience that in this day and age and, when I go out and look for it, I'm beginning to experience it. It does exist. It's there if you want it."

He cites the new psychedelic club in London, Alice In Wonderland, as proof of what he's talking about. Then Billy launches into this: "Somebody – I think it was Nick Cave – once said something along the lines: 'What's a cliché? A cliché is the best way of expressing or doing something and, because it's the best, it's become a cliché.' I think that just about sums things up. We used to almost apologise for our existence when we started because we didn't feel we were Supertramp. But I think the fact that so many people are into the band and into the music, that's the justification."

"We do reflect what's going on," Ian insists. "We're typical English kids and I think vagueness and confusion are definitely a big part of people's lives, the unspoken word, what's it all about? I think that element is forward in what we do because we're quite honest and open about things. We haven't tried to contrive one formula which is very simple and easy to understand because what we've experienced, what we've been through as individuals, can be very complicated."

Is this, I wonder, why their songs remain quite so incomprehensible? ▶



"We ain't got all the answers. What are the answers to everything? A lot of people put pressure on us, as an alternative group. Remember at one stage in the Banshees' career, people were looking at them and saying: 'What the f**k are you saying? Where is it in black and white? Are you Socialists or are you Conservatives? We want some sort of doctrine from you.' Well, I think we've got to a similar stage in our career. People are trying to draw manifestos out of the group and they're not there."

So, what are The Cult exactly? The Muppets of goth? Certainly not the Wizards Of Oz! They're shadow-rioting, make-believe tripping, making a nonsense of mystery, the implication of the pose is that there's something there, but now they're admitting there's nothing behind the facade.

"Look, lots of people don't believe in themselves," says Ian, "so they always look to something else for inspiration and there's a lot of strength in what we do, a lot of commitment and I think people can sense it. That's why I think they gravitate towards us.

"I used to have this habit, in Southern Death Cult, of getting on stage and making statements and everyone used to go: 'Yeah, they really know what's going on'. But now we communicate through the music, we go for the emotional as opposed to the intellectual. We go from the experience of what people actually feel and that's what we're now into more than making out-and-out statements."

Aphrodisiac jacket

"I think maybe we're honest enough to say that we don't have all the answers," says Billy. "Emotions are something you can't cliché. In the early days we were chasing our tails around trying to find some obscure angle to communicate something basically very simple. We went along that path with some of our early records, searching for something when the obvious thing was screaming at us. There's no point meandering for six months trying to make a song to go to Tibet."

I've got no idea what he's on about so I ask him what's the very worst thing The Cult could do right now.

"Make a concept album about gerbils and use bazookas on it and Japanese nose flutes."

What the…?

"We haven't talked about deliberate provocation," says Billy. "Like calling the album *Love*. Love is a very powerful word, and it can mean many things, not just falling in and out of… To us, it's about respect, space and, perhaps, happiness. It's an irreverence to certain things that have been set up, certain barriers that have been put up by the media to say to kids: 'Don't explore that area, we've been down there and it's a waste of time. Basically, all you've got to live for is this because that's what we like'."

"KIDS TAKE US ON A MORE SERIOUS LEVEL THAN THEY TAKE OTHER BANDS"

Huh, what do you mean?

"Look, it would be so easy for us to go and p*ss all over Rolls Royces or do a big turd outside the House of Commons or sign our record contract outside Buckingham Palace and be sick everywhere or to tell *Top Of The Pops* to f**k off. But doing things like that is bad because you lead people to believe you're something you're not. I think we're responsible to our audience in the sense that we do what we feel is right. We don't try and present something that's not us."

"We just do what we believe in," says Ian. "And I think it's basically a good thing. I don't think it's evil." He takes a pause, then goes here: "There's no religion in this country. Christianity, the spiritual side, is a very special part of people's lives. It gives them strength just to live and the only thing for kids to look to now is the music.

"Music matters," he continues. "A 14-year-old kid buys a Duran Duran record, grows up a little bit, becomes a little more wise to what's going on, and sees that Duran Duran aren't really saying what they feel. So they go on to something else, maybe the Frankies, something a bit heavier, something that makes a statement. And then they become bored with that and they end up with us."

I'm not sure I've ever heard anything quite so pompous…

"Well, there's a hell of a lot of kids out there who haven't experienced punk rock or had a mind-expanding experience. They've just picked up on things for themselves and I think now a new generation's coming up for the first time that wants something new."

Which surely is exactly what The Cult aren't.

"We're skimming the surface of something quite spiritual," Ian insists. "We don't really want to quantify it. I find it very, very rare to bump into people who are communicating on the same level as us because they're so hung up with looking cool or hanging round with the right people. It's so hard to meet people who are tuned into something more than the rational world. We're called hippies because we're into life, right?"

Wrong. You're called hippies because you talk a load of air-headed twaddle.

"Look, there's certain things we just can't talk about because there's an incredible danger of being misinterpreted. It's really sad and unfortunate, but that's the way it is."

Such as? C'mon, what things?

"What's the panic? There is no panic. The only panic is old people trying to blow us up and that's a real danger, a real panic. I get scared about stuff like that."

Ian pauses to recapture whatever he has that passes for a train of thought.

"This is our time," he announces." This is where we live. We don't live in the past. We don't live in the Sixties. There are no jobs. This is a real situation. Who wants to spend their middle-age when they're 20 years of age? Who wants to make a home for themselves and then get completely secure and then be terrified in their homes? That's really sad."

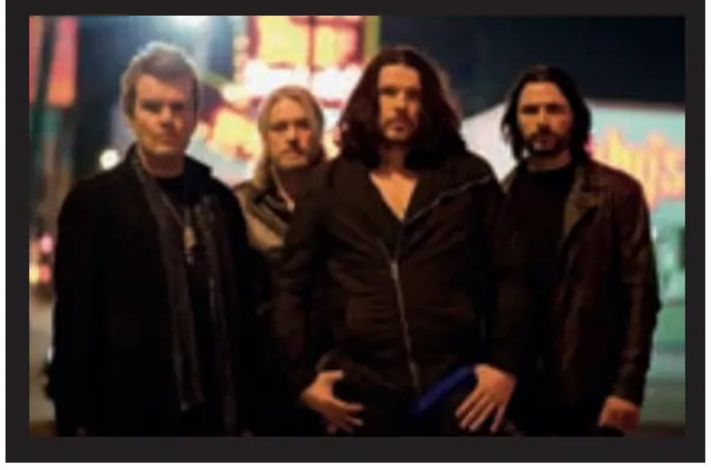
What are you on about?

"When punk happened to me, I didn't want to go and make a home for myself and get a wife and kids and that. I wanted to go out and meet people and enjoy being alive and, if anything, I guess that's the band's message. In whatever way you can, live your life, enjoy it while you're here. It's your time."

Well, at least Amen to that ●

AFTERMATH…

The Cult split up in 1995, reformed in 1999, split again in 2002, reformed four years later and are currently still recording and touring. Ian Astbury also took time out to be lead singer in Doors Of The 21st Century, as a Jim Morrison substitute.





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Exciting things coming your way in the month ahead

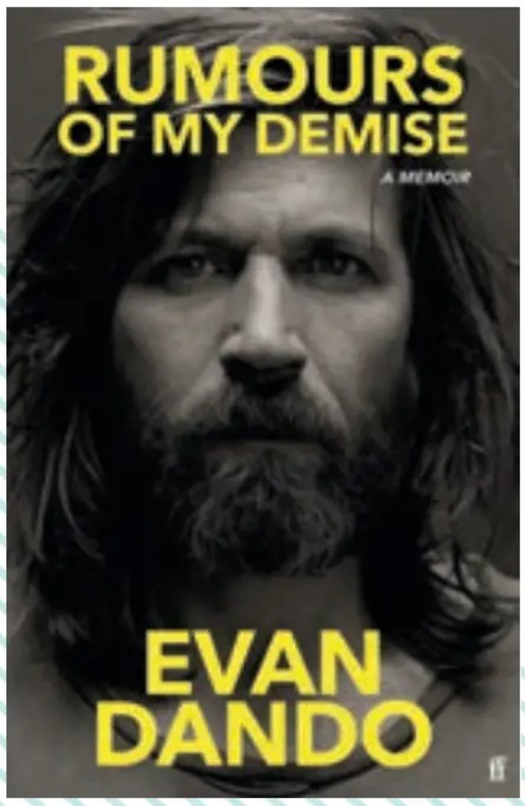
1 BIG RON

Triangle has unveiled a new exclusive Burgundy finish for its BR02 Connect & BR03 Connect speakers. The company reveals: "The subtle balance between the satin wood grain and the soft sheen of the Burgundy gives the speakers a warm, modern look that fits seamlessly into both minimalist interiors and more expressive spaces to create a visually harmonious setup, while a new version of the Lunar 1 turntable shares the same tones as the speaker fronts, creating a refined and cohesive ensemble."

2 SLACKER

Rumours Of My Demise: A Memoir is the autobiography of Lemonheads main man Evan Dando The press release says: "After Kurt Cobain's passing in 1994, everyone expected Evan Dando to be next. The Lemonheads frontman, songwriter and actor started in the Eighties hardcore scene and went on to become a Nineties icon with two gold records to his name. Think of Evan Dando and you think of heroin chic, grunge and celebrity burnout. From sleeping on floors in the punk rock days, to crashing at Johnny Depp's place in Hollywood, he was right there in the thick of it. So much so that social media once prematurely reported his death.

"Now, very much alive and sober, Dando tells his own story." It's available, now published by Faber & Faber for about £15.



RONNIE SCOTT'S CLUB HAS A NEW 140-CAPACITY UPSTAIRS ROOM

3 PLAY MISTY

Ruark has introduced a new colourway to its R2 Music System – the Sea Mist finish. "Evoking the gentle hues of misty shorelines and frosted mornings, Sea Mist captures the calm elegance of the winter season while enhancing the R2's timeless design and rich sound," according to the company. "With its blend of retro styling, modern streaming features and refreshing new colourway, the R2 in Sea Mist is designed to brighten interiors and soundtrack the colder months in style."

4 JOIN THE QUEUE

BluOS, the multi-room music management platform, has launched its Queue Builder Mode, a new feature designed for intuitive queue and playlist management. Available now as part of the BluOS 4.12 software update, the company says Queue ▶



REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Builder Mode provides users with a more efficient way to create personalised listening experiences while browsing their favourite streaming services.

The update is available for download now via the BluOS Controller app and will roll out to all BluOS-compatible products, including those from Bluesound, NAD, PSB, Cyrus, DALI and Monitor Audio.



5 CAMOUFLAGE CAMBS

Cambridge Audio has teamed up with Maharishi – designer of ultra-hip, environmentally conscious, durable, utilitarian clothing, to launch a new look for its Melomania A100 true wireless earphones and Alva ST turntable. The bumf explains that: "Both products have been re-imagined with Maharishi's signature visual language, fusing high-visibility elements with a classic Olive colourway, inspired by their traditional camouflage patterns, reflecting a pacifist reinterpretation of military aesthetics". The CA/Maharishi Melomania A100 is available now at cambridgeaudio.com and maharishistore.com priced at £140. The Alva ST will be available later this year for £650.

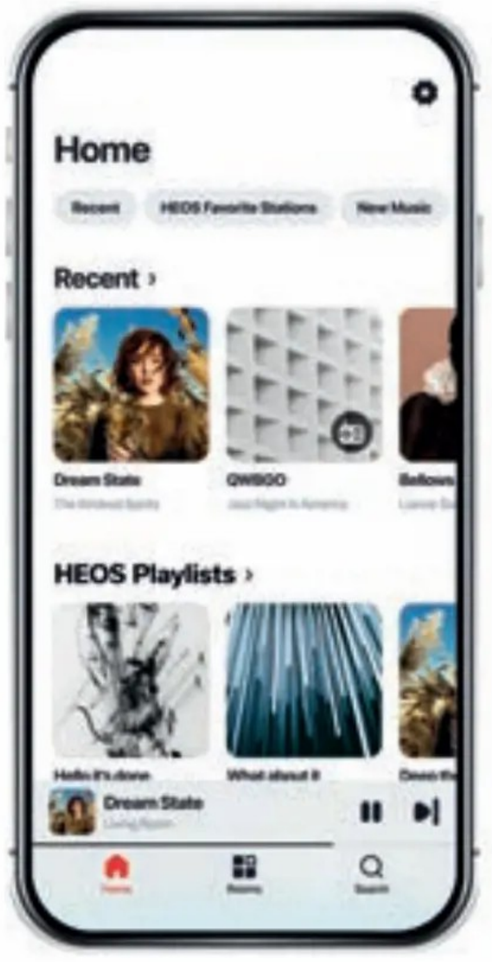
6 GREAT SCOTT!

Following a major refurbishment, the legendary Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in London's Soho has announced details of a new upstairs 140-capacity music venue and – for the first time in its history – an exclusive members' lounge and artist space.

Opening in February 2026, the upstairs space has undergone a complete transformation as part of a major revamp of the entire Frith Street building, featuring enhanced acoustics, high-spec Yamaha and D&B Audio sound and lighting systems, an upgraded stage, Yamaha S3X grand piano and new state-of-the-art kitchen, plus, for the first time, Ronnie Scott's will also be opening its backstage spaces to the public with its aforementioned brand-new members' lounge and artist space The Greene Rooms – a "club within a club".

Upstairs at Ronnie's will host jazz, contemporary soul, acoustic R&B, gospel, hip-hop and global music performances. The programme will also inaugurate a new classical series. Of course, regular shows will continue downstairs.





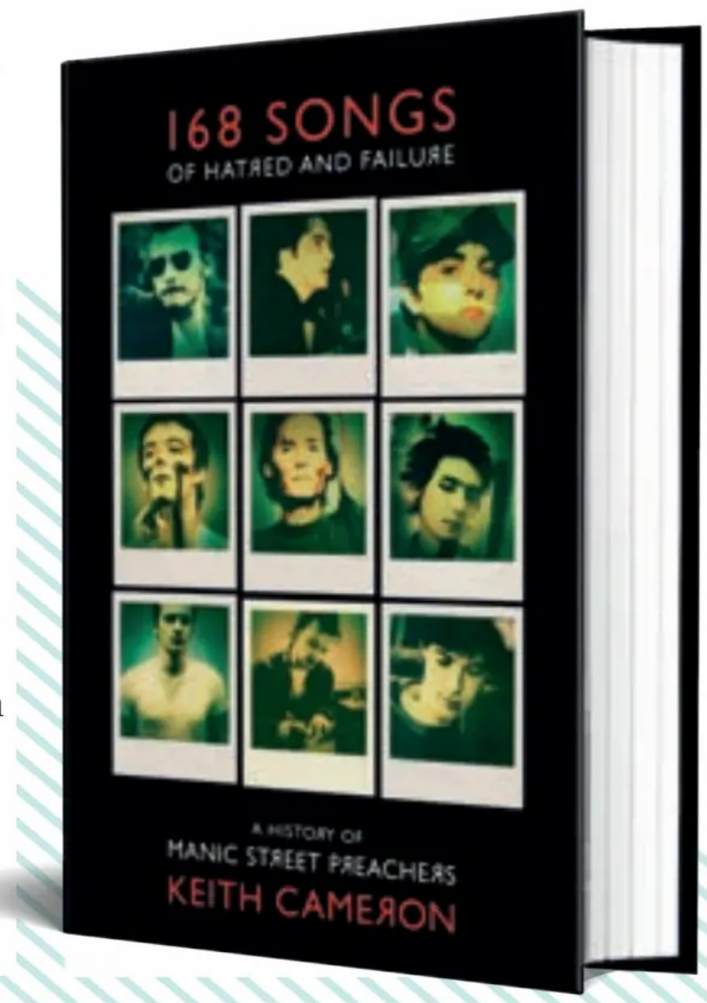
7 POWER UP

Denon, Marantz and Classé have announced a: "bold new chapter" for HEOS, the wireless audio platform with a refreshed identity – Powered by HEOS – redesigned app experience and expanded platform capabilities. The redesigned app claims to offer faster, more intuitive controls, room grouping, search and personalisation options. All components Powered by HEOS (except the first-gen HS1 products from 2014–2016) also now support Spotify Lossless playback once the feature is made available to the user by Spotify. There's also support for Qobuz, Roon Ready certification and ongoing additions of top music services. Last, but by no means least, it also enables connection to up to 64 devices across 32 zones from a single speaker to a full home theatre.

RUARK HAS A NEW SEA MIST FINISH FOR ITS R2 MUSIC SYSTEM

8 GENERATION TERRORISTS

168 Songs Of Hatred And Failure: A History of Manic Street Preachers is a new book authored by Keith Cameron with the Welsh band's full co-operation. The press release explains that it: "charts the dynamic evolution of a universe in which Karl Marx and Kylie Minogue happily co-exist, that accords Rush and The Clash equal favour, and where Morrissey & Marr meet Torvill & Dean via Nietzsche and New Order in a single four-minute pop song." It's published by White Rabbit for around £25.



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Next Month





RUARK MR1 MK3



Wowed by these bookshelf/desktop speakers, our reviewer says: "The MR1 Mk3 improves upon the strong sound quality of its predecessors and reminds us yet again of the advantages of a good set of stereo speakers, compared with the less dynamic sound produced by one-piece systems. It's competitively priced and will make a fine addition to any desktop computer system. With this update, the MR1 Mk3 also boasts improved input features so it will also fit nicely within a wider home entertainment system."

Read all about it in our January issue

ALSO:

REVIEWS Bryston Bi-200 integrated amplifier, Kali Audio HP-1 headphones, Arendal 1961 Bookshelf loudspeaker, Eversolo T8 streaming transport, Bowers & Wilkins Px8 S2 headphones, PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid tube amplifier and much more...

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