

BACK IN BLACK: DAN CLARK'S AEON 2 NOIRE

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MOON 680D + REL SERIE T7/X + ROGERS LS3/5A SE

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AUDIO

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editorial

It's strange; really good audio equipment is like London buses; you wait for the longest time, then several come along all at once. So it is with this issue. We had already arranged reviews of some really high-performance audio (such as the Magico) when from out of almost nowhere, Linn approached us with the striking new Klimax DSM streamer. These and others are truly ground-breaking products, born at a time when good audio had become popular for the same reasons designing and making good audio had become difficult!

It's exciting and interesting to see just what's been happening during the planet's most fallow period in more than a century, and those products are finally coming to fruition. Granted there might be some problems along the way – right now, it's hard to find enough decent cardboard to package up new products because Amazon bought all it could in 2020 – but what were a few months ago giant icebergs in the way of getting good audio are increasingly melting away.

Better yet, while some of us made lockdown promises that went entirely unachieved (thank you Babble for reminding me that I am still at the 'ciao!' stage of learning Italian), others took the time to take stock of what was good and make it a lot better. OK, so for every brand new design, there are models that were announced early in 2020 and are still in final stages of production, but they are proving increasingly rare now. The audio world seems to be coming out of solitary confinement, and is coming out fast and coming out pulling no punches!

For once, this seems to be right across the board. Good, affordable audio has taken several steps forward over

recent years and latest products show no sign of that changing, and in the high-end, we are seeing products that show what the best in audio was always supposed to be capable of delivering, but never quite lived up to the promises. In particular, we've seen that point of inflexion happen to streaming audio that happened to CD in the early 1990s; when suddenly products almost all took several steps forward. While I still think a lot of the next year will be spent making up for lost holiday time, we are in for some true audio brilliance this year. It's almost been worth the wait.

We'd like to congratulate Dimitrie Jelisavcic and Dr Ralph Würthner, both of whom win an all-expenses paid tour of Gryphon's factory, museum and listening rooms. Congratulations!

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

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- Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi + 194



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Karan Acoustics Master Collection LINEa



Zanden 1200 Signature phono preamplifier



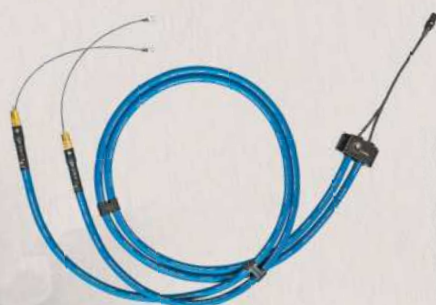
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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

in association with **audioquest**

LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS A DRAGONFLY BLACK

Both AudioQuest and *Hi-Fi+* are passionate about music and the sound it makes. We know what makes a good audio experience, and we know what makes it better. Most modern audio equipment is good, but with the right attitude, right advice, and the right components, the sound it delivers can move from 'good' to 'great' to 'fantastic'. AudioQuest has to deal with a lot of queries regarding audio systems, because almost everything in an audio system is connected with a cable. The company has amassed a wealth of information on a range of topics in audio, both in general terms and with a team comprising keen, specialist audio experts willing to impart their expertise.

Which is why we've teamed up with the good folks at AudioQuest to award the letter of the month a free AudioQuest Dragonfly Black headphone amp/DAC.

Waxing lyrical

Something I would like to mention to your readers especially seasoned audiophiles like myself. Having very recently turned 60 I have noticed that when my wife speaks to me there are times when I can't make out what she is saying (some of you may consider that a blessing!).

My wife tells me (and she's usually well up on medical matters) that as one gets older there is a build-up of wax in the ear. And you know what, she's absolutely right about that as confirmed when I went to see my local opticians! I have now had the wax removed from both ears and my valve-based hi-fi system has never sounded so good. There is more detail, more transparency and the music even sounds more 3D and that's through headphones!

If any of your readers are in my age bracket (sorry but I am also thinking of reviewers like yourself and Roy Gregory and perhaps even Jason Kennedy?) then I would certainly recommend them paying a visit to their local opticians. You may even want to say it's for those who are 55+!

Ray Lukie, via email

Been there, done that! Cerumen (the waxy stuff in your ears) builds up long before your 50s, but it becomes all the more noticeable when you seem to get all the hair that used to grow out of the top of your head suddenly starts growing out of your ears and nostrils!

Some suffer wax build-up more than others, though. And there are two good – and arguably several bad – ways of removing that wax. Syringing and microsuction both perform the same task, although the latter doesn't need the wax to be softened up beforehand. Both have a slight risk of eardrum damage, however, so they are best considered a



last resort than a regular spring clean. It's surprising – and not a little shocking – to see the amount of gunk that can be liberated from your ears using either of these methods.

A good regular preventative action plan is then called for and is better than coming back for regular cleaning. Once a week or so, apply a couple of drops of olive oil into each ear (don't do this if you have a damaged eardrum!). This should keep the ears clean and reduce the need to de-gunk your ears frequently.

Everything else is not advised, and the unfortunate trend of using a cotton bud to clean out your ears is potentially extremely dangerous. A doctor friend of mine once said "do not put anything smaller than your elbow in your ear." That sounds like good advice.

Robert Hay, AudioQuest

The stage is set

I've been wondering about soundstage height. I don't see how such a thing can exist in a recording and yet I

- have experienced it through my system. Admittedly such a thing is fleeting at best, and only applies to some extremely well-made recordings of orchestral works, but I wonder if this is merely self-deception.

If you speak to a recording engineer, stereo is all about panning and reverb anyway, so the idea of a soundstage is relatively abstract, so the idea of a soundstage with height simply isn't a function of what a recording can do. Is it really just a trick of the mind?

Len Taylor, via email

We reconstruct a three-dimensional soundfield in our heads based on some extremely subtle reverberation cues. In that sense, the answer to "is it a trick of the mind?" is 'yes', and applies to stereo too. In fact, there are a tiny number of people who perceive stereo as separate left and right channels, but it's not an evolutionary strong point, as you would be more likely to be eaten by that sabre-tooth tiger if you couldn't place it in a soundfield around you; you'd might end up running toward the tiger while others more blessed by soundfield would know which way to run away.

Those cues are perceived through two ears, and then can be recorded on two channels. Everything from Ambisonics to binaural to Dolby Atmos Music try to recreate this full three-dimensional soundfield, often using some very sophisticated algorithms. And yet, remarkably studio engineers working for Decca, Mercury, and RCA were nailing three dimensionality in two-channel recordings more than 60 years ago.

Yes, you can reduce the position of an instrument in the soundfield to reverb and panning (the panning bit is why early

*Beatles stereo recordings had three of the Fab Four in the right channel and Ringo and his drums in the left). And some gifted engineers can create something very close to the live soundfield in this manner, but the difference between the real deal and 'reverb and pan' is usually easy to spot on a good system. **Ed***

In praise of tape

I am overjoyed at the renewed interest in cassette. I skipped the whole 'vinyl vs. CD' debate back in the day by investing in a really good cassette recorder and I still have a healthy collection of pre-recorded tapes from the 1970s right up to the time they began to disappear from the record store shelves in the early 2000s. At which time, I stocked up on blank tapes and started recording music I bought on iTunes, as I couldn't bring myself to play the music directly from iPod to stereo system. I know it might sound odd, but I preferred the sound of iTunes music recorded this way than I did straight out of the iPod itself.

The choice of tapes is sadly very limited these days, although I can still usually pick up a set of TDK D90s or Maxell UR90 pretty easily. The cost has rocketed however, and chrome or metal tape are both too old and too expensive to be viable. I've long since used up my stock.

So, my question is, if there's a revival in blank tape to match that of vinyl, do you think they'll start making decent players and tapes again?

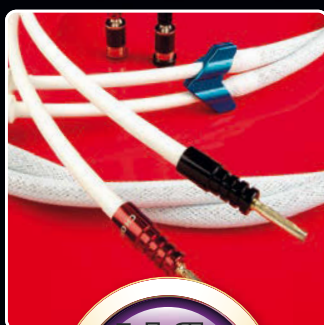
Steve Parr, via email

It's possible. There remained a small market for cassette tape decks and blank tapes even before the reversal of tape's fortunes, and new tape recorders are being made. Urban Outfitters – the store that arguably rekindled the vinyl revival – is getting behind cassette. There have been new tape decks launched recently (such as the TEAC W-1200 of last year). And the BPI's 2020 sales figures showed cassette sales doubled in a year.

However, before breaking open the champagne, it's worth noting that those figures are still extremely low (with just 157,000 pre-recorded tapes sold last year) and except for some very cheap portable players, there are no new manufacturers entering the cassette market at this time, and it looks doubtful that we'll see the rebirth of chrome or metal tapes any day soon, I'm afraid. I'm not sure if this is a fad, a flash in the pan or the start of a legitimate counter-culture movement kicking against a downloadable, always-on world. But, except for a few years in the 1980s, cassette sales were always a fraction of sales of LP and in the early 1990s they were eclipsed by CD.

*It's great to see both cassette and reel-to-reel making a comeback (even if to some they never went away), but let's not make them seem more than they actually are just yet. **Ed***

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► Mixing my toasties

I am experimenting with valve amplification, but I don't have many places near me that can provide a decent demonstration of the difference between valve and solid-state.

Which provides the greatest advantage for the end user – a valve preamplifier with a solid-state power amp, a solid-state preamplifier with a valve power amplifier, or an all-valve system? Also, what are the advantages of using an integrated hybrid valve/solid-state amplifier – is it the best of both worlds or a compromise too far? Finally, I'm simply limiting myself to the amplification here, as I think adding valves to digital audio is a step too far, or am I missing the point?

I don't have a fixed budget as yet, although I would likely spend a few thousand rather than a few tens of thousands or a few hundred pounds. My system as it stands features a Pro-Ject 6 PerspeX SB turntable with an Ortofon Quintet Blue cartridge, Leema Elements CD player, Sugden A21SE and Stage Two phono stage and a pair of Harbeth Compact 7 ES3 loudspeakers on stands.

Basically, I'm won over by valve sound (I'm a guitarist... the creamy sound they make is really nice), and I just want to know the best place to use them, preferably without turning my living room into the inside of a toaster.

Paul Bunney, via email

In making this answer I am aware that after this I'll probably need get some cushions made for the fence I am about to sit on, but the answer is "it's complicated, and it depends!" Unfortunately, if there were a single, simple answer, we'd never have this discussion. Audio is a very broad church, and there are well-made cases to argue in

favour of – and passionately against – every one of these valve/solid-state combinations. Equally, there are those who say the only way is an all-valve amplifier and others who would swear blind that valves should never have made it past the mid-1960s. Taking a pragmatic line that says 'all of the above' isn't really good enough, but 'all of the above... but trust your ears!' is probably the closest you get to some kind of honest answer that doesn't just add your own opinion dressed up as fact.

The argument in favour of a valve preamp is that the key to a good preamplifier is in its minimalism; the fewer active components in the signal chain, the less there is to mess up the delicate line-level signal. And in a valve preamplifier, you might be looking at possibly two amplifying devices between input and output. The argument against such preamps is most valve circuits are noisier than their solid-state equivalents and adding noise to a low-level signal is not a good idea. The arguments for a valve power amplifier is their 'inherent' sweet-sounding presentation, which is countered by suggesting that sweetness is second-harmonic distortion, and what you are listening to in a valve power amplifier is the sound of the output transformers rather than the valves themselves. In truth, I think most of these arguments are washed away with a good listening session, and although I recognise that might prove difficult for you, I believe it's worth the effort if making such a big step.

From personal experience, I've tended to find that at the cheaper end of the spectrum, a good valve preamplifier coupled with a solid-state power amplifier often sounds best, but at the high-end, the reverse is more commonly true. In addition, some of the cheapest 'eBay bargain' all-valve combinations can sound either too sweet or rolled off in treble and bass, especially when compared to more established brands (such as Icon Audio, PrimaLuna and Manley).

In terms of hybrid amplifiers, my feelings are that the Pathos range delivers some excellent performers, but my colleague Chris Thomas was extremely taken by the hybrid performance of the Copland CSA150 in our test in the last issue.

*The good news in your case is you have one of the least problematic loudspeakers around for using with valves or solid-state. The Harbeth C7ES3 might not be the most high-sensitivity loudspeaker around, but it has the kind of benign loudspeaker load that means it will prove a good partner with almost any amplification system you care to mention. This means you are less likely to produce a system that sounds bad. In addition, you already have one of the sweetest sounding amplifiers (in a good way) in the Sugden A21SE, and its comparatively low power output means you are already more than used to the headroom limitations imposed by a similarly lower powered valve amplifier. So the transition to a valve amplifier system – should you decide to go there – should be relatively easy. **Ed***

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Magico M6 floorstanding loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom



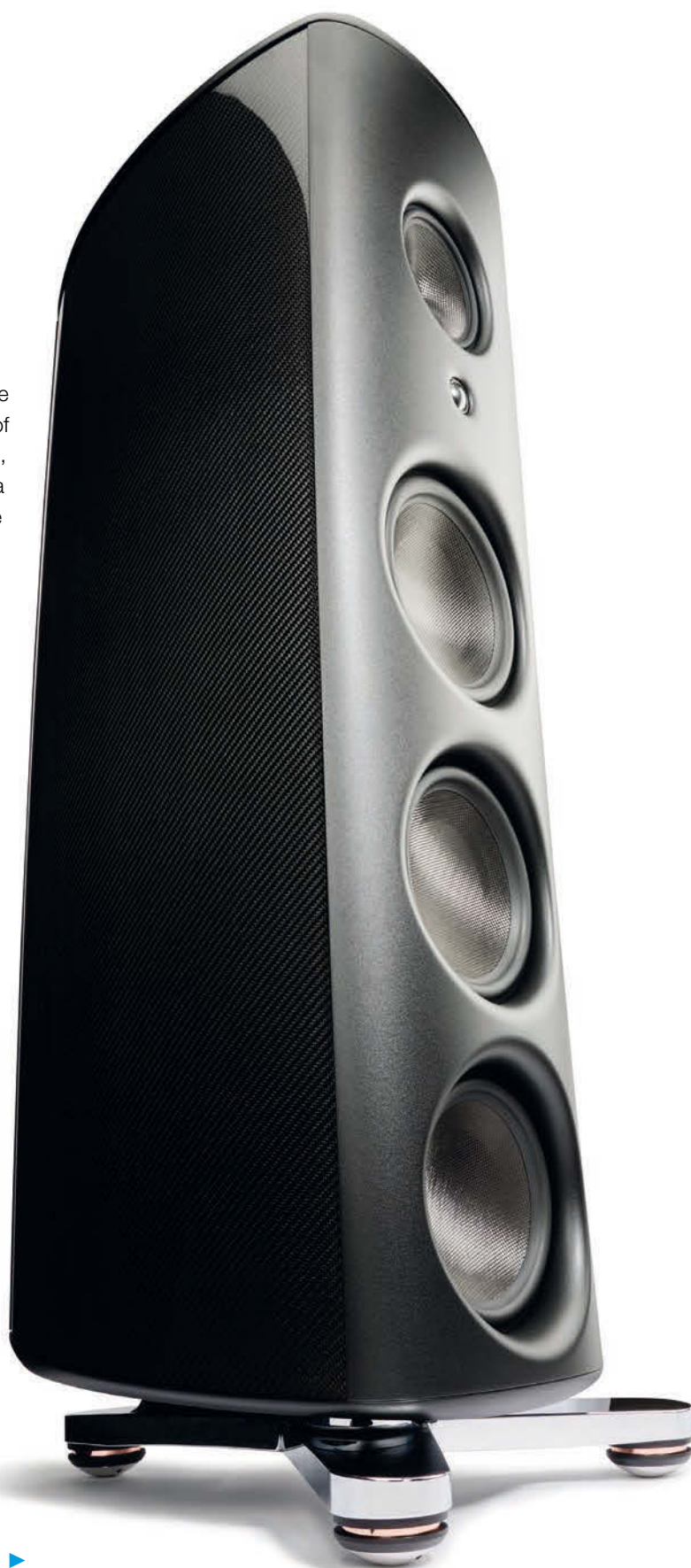
Even by Magico's own big-boned approach to high-end audio, the M6 sets a high bar. While there is an M9 flagship that eclipses even this model, the M6 is by most reckoning a loudspeaker of the highest standard, and a cost-no-object interpretation of what goes into making a floorstanding loudspeaker.

Magico's M6 is ostensibly a three-way, five driver design in a 1cm thick six-sided carbon fibre monocoque, which is made yet more rigid by thick aerospace-grade aluminium front and rear baffles, top plate and inner baffle, all tensioned with aluminium rods. The drivers feature a diamond-coated beryllium dome (in the tweeter) and graphene in the midrange and bass units. If that sounds familiar, it's not too dissimilar from Magico's 2014 limited run 'thank you' M-Project loudspeaker. The M-Project, built to celebrate Magico's ten years as a speaker maker and sold to its most loyal followers, both set a high performance bar for subsequent Magico loudspeakers to achieve, but also was a launch-pad, instigating design concepts and criteria that the company has used to this day. The M6 is very much a child of the M-Project.

One of the first big outcomes of the M-Project was a radical change to the way big-hitter Magicos looked, but for reasons that were predicated on sonics as much as aesthetics. The slab-sided black aluminium monolith was gone, and the aluminium matrix frame that helped define projects like the Q-series (which still exists in the shape of the Q7 and Q Sub) was replaced by the aforementioned carbon monocoque. Perhaps the best way of looking at this sea-change is it requires a shift in analogies; the previous matrix frame worked best with the inevitable motoring analogy (reminding you of the space-frames of classic 1960s F1 racing cars) where the designs that came from the M-Project require higher-tolerance aerospace analogies (think the monocoque build of a modern F35 fighters). One of the results of this was a loudspeaker that was both more domestically acceptable and integrated in room better than before. Better performance from the enclosure was the outcome; a better-looking enclosure was the happy by-product.

As opposed to the normal statement piece loudspeakers at this level, where the sheer size of the loudspeaker physically dominates the room, the Magico M6 is positively understated. It's still a big loudspeaker, both in size and weight, but the M6 still *looks* like a floorstanding loudspeaker and not an exercise in mechanical engineering or, as in the case of the M9, a house Dalek. However, let's not back away from the fact a loudspeaker that stands 143cm tall, weighs in at 177kg, and is finished in contrasting shades of anodised matt black aluminium and a shinier - but still black - sculpted carbon fibre monocoque still cuts an imposing figure in a listening room. But it's a 'loudspeaker, but bigger' rather than 'an exploded diagram of what makes up a loudspeaker' and that will make the M6 a more attractive prospect in many high-end listening rooms.

In a very real way, the M6's more room-chummy appeal is a recognition of how the audio world has changed recently. The age of the 'man cave' seems to be coming to an end, as the next generation of well-heeled audiophiles move inexorably eastwards. The space and aesthetic concerns of a market that supplied wealthy dentists in the mid-West of America are increasingly being challenged by the demands of merchant bankers and high-ranking executives in places like Singapore. Where the M6 scores highly is it works well in both settings, and those in between, without compromise or sacrifice. Sure, there will be those who think no loudspeaker is complete unless it looks like a late 19th Century wardrobe, and there will be those who think the M6 is too understated, but in the most part I think it's got the balance just about right, for both existing and newly minted music lovers.





“We’ve concentrated on the enclosure because it’s such a major step-change for Magico.”

► However, the advantage to taking a more modular approach to loudspeaker design at this level is a greater degree of installation flexibility. Loudspeakers that allow the installer to fine-tune the baffle alignment and then lock that alignment in place do afford the user a greater degree of control over the loudspeaker design’s interaction with the room. The counter to this is that it also allows a greater degree of messing that interaction up, and unless the installer is a 10th degree black belt in audio installation, that adjustable alignment has the potential for causing more harm than good. The M6, by way of contrast, still places demands on installation, but these are more universally-understood installation concerns such as placement of speaker and listening position, room treatment and eventual fine tuning of all three. That’s not to say the M6 should just be ‘plonked’ down in the room, but it does mean should your installer be more ‘piano mover’ than ‘audio ninja’ you can get still good performance.

We’ve concentrated on the enclosure because it’s such a major step-change for Magico, and Magico itself also focuses on the ‘box’ a lot in its literature, but let’s not forget the other key links in the chain. Magico’s own 2.8cm diamond-coated beryllium dome tweeter, partnered with a 15.2cm midrange cone and three 26.7cm bass cone (all using Magico’s latest XG Nanographine cone material) are fed using the company’s own ‘Elliptical Symmetry’ crossover. The move to XG Nanographine does for Magico’s drivers what the monocoque chassis does for the enclosure; less weight, more stiffness (the cone is 30% lighter and three-times stiffer than its predecessor). Meanwhile the crossover uses high-grade components throughout (you’d expect nothing less at this price, of course, but it’s perhaps reassuring to know there are Mundorf components in the crossover that cost as much as a pretty good watch in and of themselves). Finally, the three point base incorporates built-in MPOD constrained layer damping floor-coupling pods.

All of which makes the M6 ‘the friendly flagship’ loudspeaker. It’s a more sensitive and easier to drive loudspeaker than some of its peers, meaning that there is more flexibility in up-stream electronics. While not a true ‘platform agnostic’ loudspeaker (I imagine most M6 will be partnered with high-grade solid-state electronics), the design is far more comfortable with lower-powered valve amplification than previous designs from the Magico stable. ►

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“The M6 does everything you want of a loudspeaker and does it exceptionally well.”

► I’ve been saving the best until last; the sound quality. Because it is the best part of this loudspeaker, even despite the healthy laundry list of high-grade technologies. Put simply, the M6 does everything you want of a loudspeaker and does it exceptionally well. This is one of those loudspeakers where your initial highly positive assessment (most of us tend to greet new top-end products with ‘wow!’ followed by a slower realisation of where the limits of that ‘wow!’ are placed) opens out to prove even more positive over time. For example, you might be drawn to the impressive dynamic range of the M6 at first, and the more you listen, the more you get hear both the expressiveness, the precision and the impact of that dynamic range, and the way it resolves up to the largest scale orchestral pieces you can find, and down to the smallest microdynamic details that are the key to tricking you into thinking you are there in the same room as the musicians.

I’ve chosen ‘dynamic range’ here because it’s one of the elements in music that so impress people at first, but I could have just as easily pointed to ‘imagery’ or ‘soundstaging’ or ‘coherence’ or any other aspect of the musical presentation that will grab your attention first and foremost. Because, regardless, after that initial attention-grab, you get a wider picture of that aspect of musical performance, and it’s all good, all the way down. Then you begin to join the dots, adding in those other things that grab your attention (or the attention of others) and do the same again. Pretty soon, you draw up a picture of a loudspeaker that doesn’t have holes in its presentation and doesn’t pick holes in the music; it just plays it with absolute fidelity... which is kinda important in an industry that attempts to create ‘high fidelity’ sound.

However, this does make a bit of a mockery of the usual “I listened to a specific track through this loudspeaker to highlight the loudspeaker’s performance in a specific manner” because every test recording is a test the M6 passes with ease. In essence, the usual test-track listing just becomes a collection of music you played during your most recent listening session. Sure, you can try to shoehorn that listening session as justification for equipment analysis, but that’s not the point and not the point of the M6. The loudspeaker invites you to re-evaluate your recordings and acquire more recordings in the process. You don’t just play music, you explore music through the Magico M6.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Driver Complement: 1 × 2.794cm Diamond-Coated Beryllium Dome Tweeter, 1 × 15.24cm XG Nanographene Cone Midrange, 3 × 26.67cm XG Nanographene Cone Bass

Sensitivity: 91dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Minimum Recommended Power: 30 watts

Dimensions (H×W×D): 143 × 66 × 51cm

Weight: 177kg

Price: £200,000 per pair

Manufacturer: Magico Loudspeakers LLC

URL: magicoaudio.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0) 208 971 3909

However, all of this fails to describe precisely how the M6 sounds, but in part that’s because it has less of an intrinsic ‘sound’ than most loudspeakers. It treads lightly through the music, leaving very slight footprints for so heavyweight a loudspeaker. In that respect, it’s like a monitor loudspeaker, but closer to an idealistic form of a monitor than most true monitors. It’s extraordinarily accurate and detailed throughout, almost to the point of having a pathological hatred of distortion. Making this one of the most ‘least’ loudspeakers (in all the good ways) you can hear at this time.

If you want magical sounds, however, the M6 is a tougher call. This isn’t a ‘warts ‘n’ all’ loudspeaker, but neither is it a loudspeaker that will pretty up the sound of a bad recording. The honesty of the M6 is not stark, but it will not add warmth or body to a thin-sounding or shrill singer. Sometimes this is surprising – Britney Spears and Beyoncé are better singers than most people imagine – and sometimes its discomforting – let’s just say that my love of Jane’s Addiction from the early 1990s clearly stayed in the early 1990s. But ultimately it’s the sheer honesty of the M6 that wins through every time.

The Magico M6 is a remarkable loudspeaker whichever way you view it. It’s a technological tour de force, drawing on the lessons learned in the M-Project. It proves the top-end loudspeaker doesn’t need to look like an oil rig. It plays nice with almost all kinds of equipment, and it sounds like you moved your listening room into the studio. It’s awesome! +

10 SERIES

**“Sometimes products really are simply better
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*Roy Gregory,
Hi-Fi+ Issue 194*



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Moon by Simaudio 680D streaming DAC

by Eric Neff

Over the years I have had many opportunities to enjoy some quality equipment from Moon, made by Simaudio of Boucherville Quebec, Canada. Now in its fortieth year, Moon has become one of the world's premier audio brands. I have always been impressed by their products fit and finish and the ten-year warranty. There is a clear sense of pride in their work, and it shows in all of their products.

There is a good range of Moon digital products for an audio fan to consider, covering all the bases from traditional disc spinners and headphone amps with built-in DACs, through add-on streaming devices and network streaming DACs in preamps and integrated amps right up to cost-no-object flagship designs. The new 680D streaming DAC is second in line to the throne currently occupied by the 780D v2 flagship. And, from experience, the wide range fits all well, because this isn't my first Moon rodeo. I have been using the Moon 430HAD Headphone Amp/DAC for many years and it is a reference piece for me; we reviewers can be a fickle lot (continual exposure to all the new toys can do that), so anything that resists the urge to swap boxes bespeaks of high quality and high-performance products. The 680D streaming DAC exudes that same quality, albeit to an even higher degree as befits a DAC of its class.

The 680D is a streaming DAC and therefore removes the need for a computer in your network audio chain. Plug your ethernet cable into the unit and you get access to Qobuz Sublime+, Tidal Masters, Deezer HiFi and Spotify Connect. Or you can stream from your own NAS or Apple Airplay 2 via Moon's excellent MiND2 streaming hardware. All of which can be controlled using Moon's MiND2 App or through Roon if you so subscribe. I used both during the review period and found each to be easy and intuitive to use with the 680D. One specific benefit of using the MiND2 App is if you are connecting the 680D to another piece of Moon gear like the 740P Preamplifier, the Simlink cable (included) allows you to control system volume (amongst other features) both from within the MiND2 app and from within Roon. A nice feature for system building, especially in a multi-room context.

Physically, the 680D occupies a full shelf in your rack, but although exceptionally well-built, doesn't have the imposing 'I've got a Man Badge' over-the-top build of some more showy digital products. With three finish choices (Silver, Silver/Black or Black) you can select your preferred look. All three are handsome options. My review sample was their classic Silver and Black. It looked great on my rack. The large red LED's provided playback information such as file bit rates and track time. You have three light brightness levels to choose from. The DAC will process to PCM 32/384 and DSD to DSD256. The unit is fully MQA certified and Roon Ready. At its core, there beats a heart of pure digital royalty: the ESS Sabre 9028pro DAC chip. This is one of the most highly respected converter systems available at this time

As you would want and expect, the Moon 680D is able to seek and play from all of the major sites and all hi-res source material. If your home is so configured it will also support multi-room synchronous playback. The 680D offers nine input options covering all of the expected options including USB, AES/EBU, S/PDIF, Optical, Ethernet, Wi-Fi and aptX audio for Bluetooth, and to aid wireless set-up. The unit has two included Wi-Fi antennae giving a nod toward the robustness of the wireless capabilities. The FRM-3 metal remote is robust and very capable.

The MiND2 app is also your path toward all firmware updates. One was available during my time with the 680D. It was simple and painless. Nice to see as they typically incorporate a half dozen or so updates annually. As I opened the app it indicated a firmware release was available and initiated the update. Simaudio handles all aspects of audio in house but they do work with some outside programmers who excel at network related programming to make sure all aspects of their MiND2 works optimally on as wide a variety of systems and networks as possible. MiND2 is, of course, totally proprietary. All of the audio specific portions of MiND2 are developed and maintained in house. Once initiated, the 680D's screen indicated an update in progress. A few seconds later it was done and on with the music I went. No Harry Potter style Dark Arts mastery required; Moon does offer

“By using daughterboards, Moon can switch out the DAC chip to something more advanced when the time comes.”

YouTube instructional videos should you want to watch how to install, but these are not mandatory to set up the 680D. Given the net-savvy skills of the average six-year-old today, it's literally child's play.

One welcome upgrade feature is an external power supply. The £7,200 Moon 820S can provide DC for power up to two separate components, from a pool of six products in the Moon range. So, if you had the aforementioned 740P preamplifier (or, for that matter, the 810LP phono stage) it could also utilise the 820S to power both units with higher end power and greater isolation. It's always nice to have a system upgrade path should you want one.

Speaking of upgrade paths, one challenge with DAC's is advancing technology. A great amp or preamp can provide decades of reference quality functionality. DAC's, however, can be surpassed with changes in digital technology. Many of my colleagues have expressed concern about expensive

DAC's becoming outdated in short order. How can you have confidence that your new pricey DAC will be credible in the future? I spoke to Dominique Poupart, Moon's product manager, who said that product obsolescence was not a concern with Moon's DAC design. By using daughterboards, Moon can switch out the DAC chip to something more advanced when the time comes to move on from the ESS 9028Pro chip. This would be a dealer upgrade to manage warranty concerns. Dominique did mention that since the 680D was a fresh design there were no current plans for any chip changes on the table currently, yet the path was already in the planning for the future. Also upgradeable is the MiND2 platform; should a MiND3 ever become available the upgrade for the dealer would be very straightforward. This is not an empty statement either; any owner of an original MiND streaming platform was able to upgrade in this same fashion to the new MiND2 when it became available. That's



“The 680D opens up the song smoothly and allows the band to bring the listener along for a great sonic ride.”

- ▶ reassuring to know when you are spending almost nine grand on a DAC! Dominique was excited that Moon is able to allow its products to evolve and yet bring existing owners along with the advances in technology.

I also asked Dominique about the collaboration necessary to integrate Roon and MQA into Moon's products. He said that both companies were very attentive to manufacturer differences when integrating their technologies into Moon products. An example with Roon centred around how the volume control programming was written at Roon did not function well with the Moon volume control. They worked together to write new software to correctly meld Roon, MiND2 and the 680D DAC function when using Simlink and a Moon preamplifier. That tight collaboration between vendors ultimately works for the benefit of music lovers.

Enough preamble! How does it sound? In fact, the preamble gets you through the few weeks of burn-in you should spend before opening up the 680D's throttle for some critical listening. First up after the burn, was 'Miss Marlene' from Donald Fagen's Solo album *Sunken Condos* [Warner Music]. Fagen sets a strong groove with this song that really drives the music. The guitar work is crisp and precise. Fagen's control of the sound space is well represented. Clear spatial definition outlines each instrument within the whole. The bass

guitar and drums provide a funky strong rhythm that gives the song a jump that engages the listener. The 680D opens up the song smoothly and allows the band to bring the listener along for a great sonic ride.

Next up was the new Evanescence album, *The Bitter Truth* [BMG] and the song 'The Game is Over'. Amy Lee is one of my favourite female singers. Her voice can be powerful, subtle and bewitching. Combine her vocal prowess with hard crunching metal guitar work and you get a symphonic rock sound that is wonderful. 'The Game is Over' showcases her soaring operatic power to full effect. The 680D gave perfect shape to her impressive range while framing it with the crunch and growl of the drop D guitar assaults. The presentation is at times kaleidoscopic and thrilling. Ultimately, I listened to the entire album enthralled by the 680D's wonderful presentation of this great new work by Amy and the band.

One evening listening with the 680D and Roon radio up popped Duncan Sheik's 'Barely Breathing' [*Duncan Sheik*, Atlantic]. I have always enjoyed this breezy song. What I took notice of was once again the clarity of the presentation. Duncan's voice was smooth and relaxed. The band was presented in a near 3D sonic field. The song is now twenty-five years old, and it still sounds fresh and new, and it sounded as grain free and pure as I have ever heard it. Coming across as a ▶



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| VTL IT85 | £2,490 |
| Vitus SIA025 mkl | £8,500 |
| Vitus RI 101 with Dac | £9,500 |
| Sonus Faber Musica Integrated Amplifier | £1,890 |
| Primare Prisma i15 | £995 |
| Kondo Ongaku Special Edition | £49,900 |
| Gryphon Callisto 2200 | £4,490 |
| Devialet Expert 220 Pro | £3,990 |
| Analog Domain Audio M75D mkII (On-Demo) | £17,500 |
| Allnic T2000 25th Anniversary | £4,450 |

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| Fourier Sans Pareil OTL | £3,500 |
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| Bel Canto Black- Ultimate Amplification System | £27,500 |
| BAT VK 655se | £11,990 |
| B.M.C. Audio M3 Monoblocks | £7,990 |
| Audio Research Reference 75se | £5,500 |
| Audio Note Neiro Monoblocks | £16,990 |

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| Analog Domain Audio M75P MKII Stereo power (On-Demo) | £16,500 |
| Analog Domain Audio Artemis Mono-blocks | £69,990 |

PRE AMPLIFIERS

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| VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference Line Pre-Amplifier | £12,990 |
| Tom Evans The Vibe & Pulse SEmkII | £5,990 |
| Plinius CD LAD | £1,290 |
| NAT Audio Magnetostat SE Absolute Reference | £9,990 |

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| Naim NAC 202 | £990 |
| Naim Headline & NAPSC psu | £350 |
| Jadis JP30 MC (MKI) | £3,990 |
| Gryphon Sonata Allegro with Legato phono input | £5,490 |
| Boulder Amplifiers 1008 Phono Pre-amplifier | £9,900 |
| Boulder 2010 Pre-Amp | £14,990 |
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| Audio Note M2 Phono | £2,950 |

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| Quad 306/ 34/FM4 | £795 |
| Orpheus Laboratories System (see details) | £5,990 |
| Bel Canto Black- Ultimate Amplification System | £27,500 |

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| Whest PS.30RDT | £1,590 |
| Tom Evans The Groove Plus SRX mkII psu | £3,990 |
| Tom Evans The Groove | £790 |
| Tom Evans Mastergroove MKII & PSU | £7,490 |
| Clearaudio Balanced Reference Dual Mono Phono Stage | £2,500 |
| Boulder Amplifiers 1008 Phono Pre-amplifier | £9,900 |
| B.M.C. Audio MCCI Phono Stage | £1,990 |
| Audio Note M2 Phono | £2,950 |

TURNABLES & ARMS

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| Vertere DG1 turntable c/w Magneto MM cartridge | £2,450 |
| Technics SP10 mkII/ Obsidian Plinth & SH-10E Power Supply | £2,990 |
| Stillpoints LPI Record Isolator | £450 |
| SME Series V Tonearm | £2,950 |
| SME Model 30/2 | £16,500 |
| SME Model 15A | £7,500 |
| Roksan TMS 3 Artemis/Shiraz/ Caspian DS1.5 Power Supply & Reference Phono Stage | £7,490 |
| Nordost TYR Phono (Din-RCA) | £590 |
| Merrill Williams REAL 101.2 & MD1 controller | £3,990 |
| Kuzma Stabi R-1 Wing (4Point9 mount) | £5,450 |

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| Kodo The Beat MagDrive Turntable | £17,990 |
| Graham Engineering Phantom Elite (TechDas Spec) | £8,999 |
| Graham Engineering Phantom B44 | £2,490 |
| Brinkmann 12.1 Tonearm | £3,590 |
| Artisan Fidelity 301 Statement | £13,500 |

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| Van den Hul Coilbri XGW | £2,490 |

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| Wireworld Platinum Eclipse XLR Interconnect 1m | £1,790 |
| Transparent Audio MusicLink Ultra 1m RCA | £495 |
| Transparent Audio Music Wave Plus 25ft Bi-Wire | £750 |
| Townshend Audio Isolda DCT 8m Pair Speaker Cable Banana/Banana | £1,490 |
| Townshend Audio Isolda DCT 5m Pair Speaker Cable Banana/Banana | £1,250 |
| Townshend Audio Fractal 1m RCA Interconnect | £790 |
| TelluriumQ Ultra Black 2x2m Spade/Banana | £750 |
| Tara Labs The One Balanced 1m XLR + FGS | £990 |
| MIT Cables Matrix HD12, 1m RCA Interconnect | £390 |
| Kimber Cable Select 1136 XLR 1.5m | £2,300 |
| Entreq Primer Pro USB | £290 |
| Entreq Challenger 3V Speaker Cable (3.7m pair) | £1,990 |
| Entreq Challenger 3V Interconnect XLR | £990 |
| Entreq Atlantis XLR Interconnect (1.65m) | £4,500 |
| Entreq Atlantis Speaker Cable (3.7m pair) | £7,500 |
| Entreq Atlantis Speaker Cable (2.5m pair) | £6,500 |
| Entreq Atlantis Speaker Cable (1.65m Pair) | £5,900 |
| Entreq Apollo XLR 2012 | £2,990 |
| Entreq Apollo Infinity USB Cable | £990 |
| Cardas Cross 1m RCA | £290 |

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| Cardas Clear Light SC 2.25m Spade/Spade | £550 |
| Cardas Clear Light IC 1.5m XLR | £395 |

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| Theta Compli | £1,790 |
| T+A E Series CD mkII | £790 |
| Sony SCD1 (CD/SACD) Player | £1,990 |
| Prism Sound Callia DAC | £990 |
| Primare Prisma i15 | £995 |
| Orpheus Laboratories System (see details) | £5,990 |
| Jadis JD3 CD Drive | £1,980 |
| Exogal Comet DAC with Comet Power Supply | £1,990 |
| Esoteric P03/ D03 | £7,500 |
| EMM Labs XDS1 V1 (V2-MDAT DSP upgrade) | £16,990 |
| B.M.C. Audio BDCD1.1 CD Player | £2,750 |
| Audio Note CDT Five CD Transport | £15,900 |
| Analog Domain Audio DAC1 & /V | £15,500 |

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| Townshend Audio Maximum Supertweeters | £990 |
| Tannoy Canterbury GR (OW) | £23,990 |
| Spendor SP9/1 | £2,100 |
| Sonus Faber Olympia Nova III | £8,990 |
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| Stillpoints Ultra 6 (with Base) | £750 |
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“I expect recordings that are hi-res and directed at audiophiles to sound pristine but to have 16/44 older recordings transformed is outstanding.”



► random stream it was exciting to have a sit up and take notice moment that I place at the feet of the 680D's exceptional technology. I expect recordings that are hi-res and directed at audiophiles to sound pristine but to have 16/44 older recordings be transformed is outstanding.

Moon's goal for the 680D was to provide as much of the capability of the flagship 780Dv2 for a lot less money, which – given the 780Dv2's reputation for high performance – is no small achievement. However, Moon's 680D more than delivers the goods. The 680D is also an expensive piece of audio equipment and the engineering team is very aware of the investment being made by their customers. Their goal was to give the end user many years of high-end sound with low maintenance or fuss. I like the idea of years of set it and forget it. I would heartily agree that they accomplished their mission. The 680D is certainly not inexpensive, yet after spending time with it you wonder how much farther could you go for better sound and at what price? Add to that the now required function of streaming and a ten-year warranty with an essentially obsolescence proof upgrade path and you have the beating heart of a modern high-end system. Do yourself a favour and seek out a Moon dealer for an audition. This one should go home with you and stay there for a long time. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Streaming digital converter

Digital inputs: USB, AES/EBU, SPDIF, Optical, Ethernet, Wi-Fi and aptX audio for Bluetooth

Music providers supported: Spotify Connect, Tidal Masters, Deezer Hi-Fi and Qobuz Sublime+ Music Services, HighResAudio (where available)

AirPlay 2: compatible

Roon: Roon Ready

PCM Bit-depth range: 16 – 32 bits

PCM sampling frequency rates: 44.1 – 384 kHz

DSD sample rates: DSD64, DSD128 & DSD256, DSD and MQA decoding from all digital inputs

Multi-room synchronized playback

Power supply: MOON Hybrid Power (MHP) DC output, 12 stage DC voltage regulation with two stages of M-LoVo (MOON Low Voltage Regulation) and 4 stages of i2DCf (Independent Inductive DC Filtering)

Frequency response (full range): 2Hz–100kHz +0/-3dB

THD @ 1kHz, 0dBFS (A-weighted) 0.0005 %

Intermodulation distortion 0.0003 %

Dynamic Range: 123 dB

Signal-to-noise Ratio: 123 dB @ full output

Channel Separation: 120 dB

Intrinsic Jitter: 1 Pico seconds RMS

Analog Output @ 0dBFS: 2.0 V

Analog output impedance: 100 Ω

Shipping weight: 18 kg.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 47.6 × 10.2 × 42.7 cm

Price: £8,900

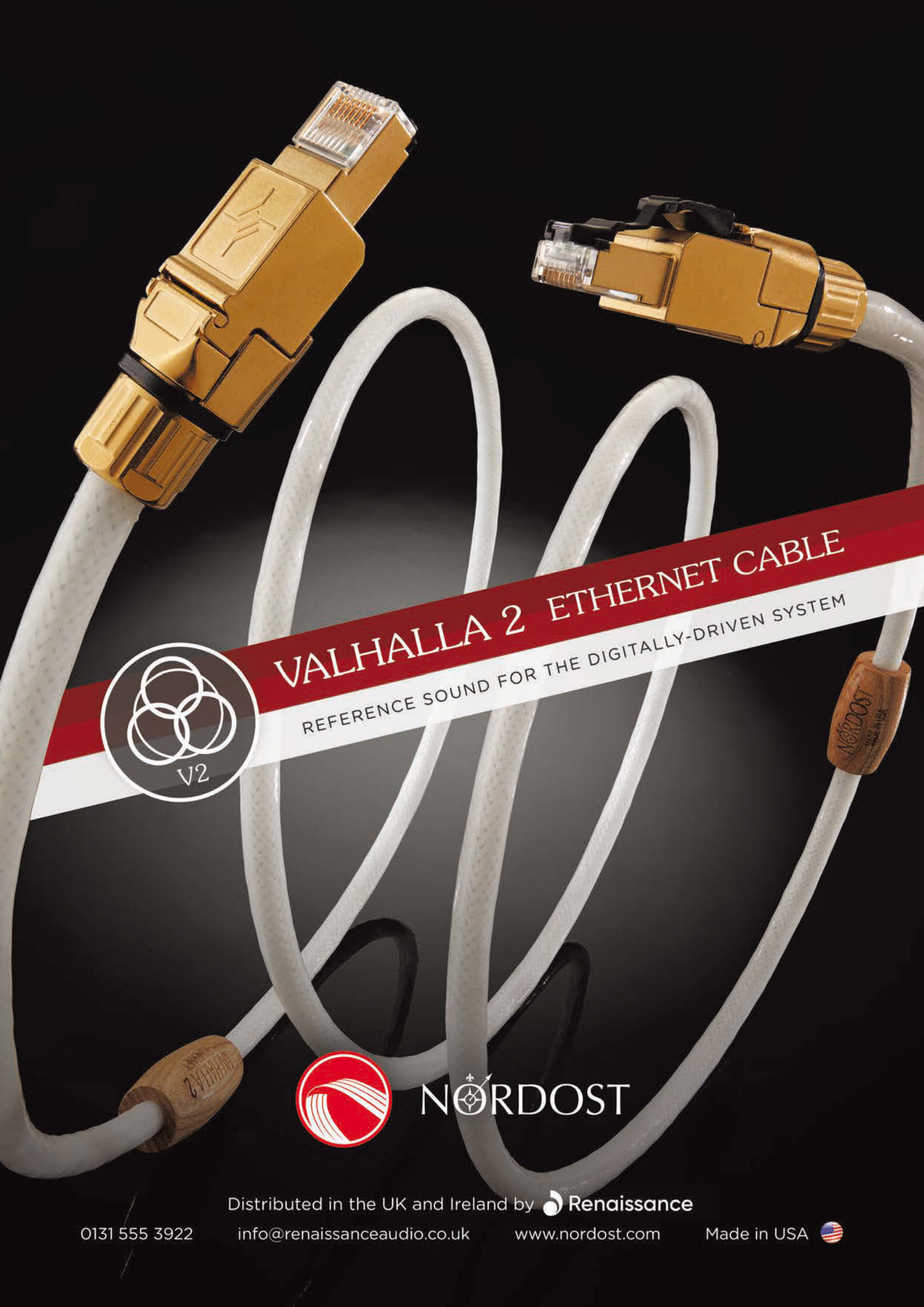
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Linn Klimax DSM network streaming preamplifier *by Alan Sircom*

Perhaps the strangest turn in 21st Century music replay is this: how did the UK get so damn good at streaming? This isn't simply flying the flag for Britain; UK companies were early adopters to the benefits of streaming, and while others have caught up, that commanding early lead has long kept paying out dividend in terms of high-performance streaming audio. So perhaps it should be no surprise that a brand that has been in pole position since 2007 – Linn Products – has reworked its flagship Klimax DSM streaming player to produce an identically-named replacement.

In fact, the name is one of the few things this Klimax DSM shares with its predecessor. This is an entirely different streamer for a market that has become ever more discerning and wanting to extract the best possible from networked audio. Although Linn itself might argue that the point of transition – from physical digital media to local networked and ultimately online streamed music – occurred more than a decade ago (hifiplus.com/articles/linn-products-announce-the-death-of-cd/), it took some time for the rest of the world to catch up. However, catch up it did, and the world has largely moved from considering streaming as the poor relation in digital music replay to being the primary source of music, and with that comes a desire to hear that music in its best possible context. While that has meant a whole new sub-set of the audio world has sprung up producing audiophile-chummy versions of domestic network audio devices and cables, the need for a damn good streamer remains. And in the case of the Linn Klimax DSM at least, that damn good streamer now becomes the damn good heart of a damn good system too.



“A set of configurable buttons that wouldn’t feel out of place in the passenger compartment of a Rolls-Royce.”

I don’t want to focus on the styling, as there is a whole lot of tech going on under the hood that makes the Klimax DSM just so advanced when put against its peers, but you just can’t help be drawn to those looks. Klimax DSM is one of those products where the images look great, and yet still don’t do the product justice when compared in the flesh. It’s a bold departure from the ‘smiley-face shiny pizza box’ styling of its predecessor – and with its top dial is clearly designed more to sit on its own rather than in a rack full of shiny toys, but it does ‘understated elegance’ supremely well. It’s full of those clever touches like a screwless case, a front display that blends invisibly into the front panel, a set of configurable buttons that wouldn’t feel out of place in the passenger compartment of a Rolls-Royce, and a central top-mounted dial that is so tactile, and makes such a bold-as-brass statement about Linn’s Clydesdale home, you can’t help but be drawn to it. The nearest to criticism I’ve heard here is it looks as if it is made for someone in a Huf Haus full of Ercol furniture; in other words, it’s too elegantly designed for audio!

Then there’s the grooved top panel, designed specifically to remind users that Linn is both a music-led company and that it cut its teeth on record-players. Remarkably, it’s getting close to half a century of Linn Sondek LP12 turntable production, and the venerable, continually-amended design still shows no sign of aging; not even greying round the p-clips! Those with an LP12 in its current top-spec will view the Klimax DSM as its visual and sonic peer; those without a record player will like the grooves as a nice flourish, and those with another brand of high-end turntable might reconsider their options.

But it’s what’s inside that counts, and it’s here that Linn has distilled all of its recent work on digital audio design, and taken it to a new level. The headline ‘new level’ is the brand’s new ‘Organik’ DAC. Hitherto, Linn’s engineers were content with drilling down into the darkest recesses of a DAC, to ensure each sub-system within the DAC chip itself was carefully fed. This was called ‘Katalyst’. However, where Katalyst took someone else’s digital converter and made it as good as Linn thought it could take that chip, ‘Organik’ is a custom DAC, with the processor written in code and stored in FPGA chips (that’s ‘Field-Programmable Gate Array’ and nothing to do with swearing at pro-golfers) and a discrete conversion stage.

According to Linn itself, this “powerful FPGA processing stage uses custom-designed algorithms to provide increased upsampling, more precise volume control, and distortion free modulation. Its partnering discrete conversion stage renders the ▶

“Of course, rolling its own digits provides the company with greater control over its digital destiny.”



► analogue signal with extremely low levels of distortion thanks to a new ultra-low jitter oscillator and carefully designed clock distribution network.”

In fairness, this is mostly ‘new to Linn’ than a completely ‘new’ concept, but once again without seeming to wave the Union flag from the rooftops, why are so many top-line British companies willing to go that extra mile and develop their own DAC, rather than choose an off-the-peg design? With Linn joining a select list of UK-based digital brands who also write their own DAC, it shows the UK to be a true digital centre of excellence.

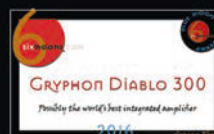
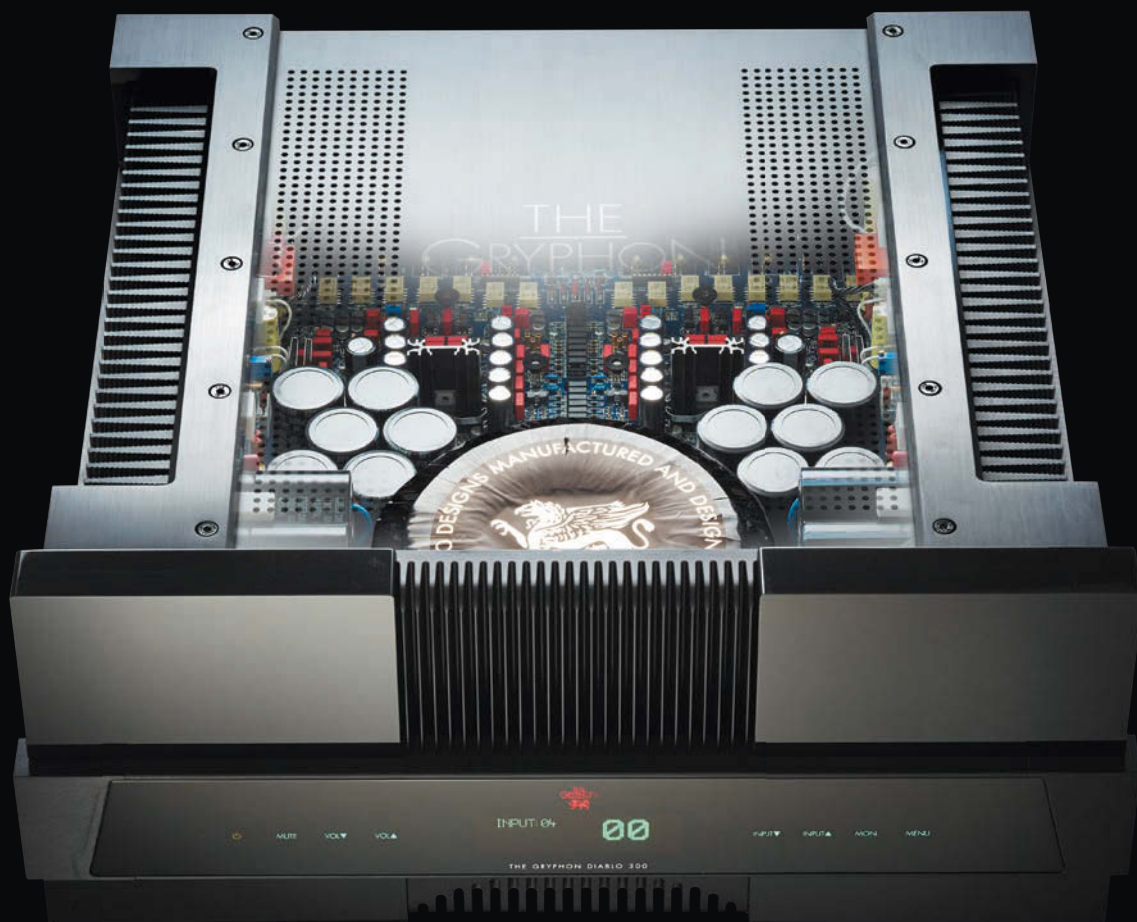
Of course, rolling its own digits provides the company with greater control over its digital destiny, and unlocks the brand from having to dance to the tune of the chip-maker. Given we saw the AKM chip-fabbing plant burn to the ground last year, and the previous version of the Klimax DSM used the AK4497EQ digital converter chip, not dancing to the digital chip-maker’s tune sounds like a good idea.

More importantly, from a company perspective, making your own digital converter means you can shape the sound to suit your brand’s requirements. In base terms, while Linn’s boss Gilad Tiefenbrun was once extremely dismissive of DSD, the new Klimax DSM supports DSD256, alongside 24-bit, 384kHz PCM. MQA in all its guises is not on the Linn map, however. But it also allows closer integration with other digital sources and clever bits of Linn technology like Space Optimisation; this last allows the user to encode the speakers and basic parameters of the room into the decoding process, allowing the listener to dial out a significant portion of the room’s acoustic influence in the digital domain, without the need for sonic measurement or more heavy-handed DSP found in some systems. While this is the kind of set-up function that could be performed by any end user, a trained and intelligent dealer who has had experience of installing the system in a number of rooms helps a lot.

There are two and a bit versions of the Klimax DSM now. The first is the all-audio version, the second is the AV version that comes with HDMI connections. As these are identically priced, I’d say go with the AV version as it adds flexibility without undermining performance or sacrificing inputs or outputs. However, while these sections are the most physically isolated inputs possible, there remain audiophiles around the world who respond to the inclusion of AV inputs with a case of hives, so if you fall into that group, go with the audio-only option. Then there’s the Klimax Hub option, which costs £15,000 and doesn’t include any DAC option, because it’s the preamp/hub for active Klimax 350 loudspeakers. The Klimax 350 speakers now include the Organik DAC as standard, and there is an upgrade for existing owners. ►

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“Linn streamers have a characteristic sound that still holds here. It’s dry... like a good martini, not a desert.”



► Linn has famously made its products as open-source as possible (which might explain why the closed-loop of MQA remains anathema to Linn). Meaning that while you are strongly encouraged to use the Klimax DSM with the Linn App to control it, Linn Kazoo to select, search, and play your music, Linn Kazoo Server to store that music and Linn Konfig to set-up and manage your system, you could forge your own path... ish. I'd say trying to set-up a Linn Klimax DSM without using Linn Konfig is a bit like trying to sew on a button with a hammer, and I would also say that unless you have a pathological dislike of using Linn's own software, use the damn programs. That being said, I'd like to see the Linn App speak to Android phones and tablets, and I hope Kazoo Media can one-day work with Apple M1-chip computers and more than just QNAP NAS drives. Fortunately, my older Mac Book Pro is still serviceable and was pressed into service as a server. Although 'Roon Tested' rather than 'Roon Ready,' Linn and Roon work well together.

Linn's streamers have a characteristic sound that still holds here. It's dry... like a good martini, not a desert. That gives the music a sense of directness and focus, but can trade speed for space, creating a tight ball of sound that sits between the loudspeakers. In the Klimax, however, you get both that precision of speed and good spatial properties, without sacrificing the '... like a good martini' part. No extra padding, no euphonic 'niceness' or anything like that is added to the sound, because it's not needed to be added to the sound. Who needs 'padding' when you've got 'direct'?

That directness has always been a strong Linn streamer suit, but it takes on powerful proportions here. I played one of the more challenging classical pieces I've heard in years; Orange by Caroline Shaw and the Attacca Quartet [New Am/Nonesuch]. The composition is inspired by gardening, and while some parts are beautiful and refined, others are dense, woody and wild. Often, it sounds like no garden you'd want to be in, but here the whole performance sounds more contiguous and whole. Yes it has the same dynamic range and can get more than a little screechy, but you do get the sense of someone trying to make music more synesthetic and include colour, smell and the physical aspects of the outside world. It's oddly relaxing inside an album that often gets turned off after about a minute for sounding too much like a string quartet pretending to be seagulls. That's not to say the Linn is laidback or the sound is polite; when called on, the angular sound of this recording is harsh and powerful, but the Linn gets beyond that surface sound to make something far more musically interesting, and places you at the heart of the music in a way I've not heard before from the album. It's truly inspiring. ►

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“We play music that we think will show limitations in a device, and they end up highlighting their strengths instead.”



▶ A reviewer's job is to trip products up, but the best products trip us up instead. When this happens, we play music that we think will show limitations in a device, and they end up highlighting their strengths instead. So it was with the Klimax DSM; I played the Overture to *The Pirates of Penzance* [D'Oyly Carte, Decca] which is a great test for imaging, but ended up being so musically bouncy and fun (as it should be) I felt like I should have mutton-chops and be wearing a smoking jacket. I played 'Back In Black' by AC/DC [Atlantic] on Tidal and air-guitared my way to dislocating a shoulder and I played some Miles Davis to check on that complex interplay on Shhh/Peaceful [In A Silent Way, Columbia] and now I have a \$1,000 per day coke habit. And that's the big thing about the Linn Klimax DSM; you feel rolling out the same old terms for audio performance when you are dealing with a product that is so very much about the music isn't just wrong, it's positively asinine. Of course, it ticks all the audiophile boxes of good soundstaging, outstanding levels of detail, excellent vocal articulation, superb image solidity and dynamic range and fluidity of sound that could give a turntable a run for its money, but that's just par for the course in high-end streaming. What this gives over and above that is a sense of being as one with the musical intentions of the composer or musicians.

Another way of looking at this is it takes what the already excellent Linn Klimax DSM did and tears up that product's rules of musical engagement in a very positive way. The older Klimax DSM got out of the way of the music better than most, but the new model makes that performance sound intrusive, arch, and overly mechanical by comparison. It's still a world-class streamer, but the new model pushes those boundaries way further than ever.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital Inputs: Toslink: × 1, RCA S/PDIF: × 2 (1 configurable as an output), USB Type: B × 1, HDMI: × 4, HDMI ARC × 1 (via HDMI out), Ethernet: × 1 (1000BASE-T RJ45), Optical Ethernet: × 1 (SFP socket), Wi-Fi (802.11ac), Bluetooth (4.2)

Analogue inputs: RCA Phono: × 2 pairs, Balanced: XLR × 1 pair

Digital Outputs: HDMI: × 1

Analogue Outputs: RCA Phono: × 1 pair, Balanced XLR: × 1 pair

Exakt Link: × 2

HDMI Specification: HDMI 2.0

HDMI support: 4K res @60Hz 4:4:4;

HDCP 2.2; HDR; eARC; CEC

Formats supported: FLAC, ALAC, WAV, DSD (64/128/256), MP3, WMA (except lossless), AIFF, AAC, OGG

Integrated Services supported: Tidal, Qobuz, Spotify Connect, Airplay, Roon, TuneIn, Calm Radio

Resolution: Up to 24-bit 384 kHz

Screen Type: 1600 × 480 TFT display

Dimensions (W×H×D): 35 × 13 × 35cm

Weight: 16.4 kg

Price: £30,000

Manufacturer: Linn Products Ltd

URL: linn.co.uk

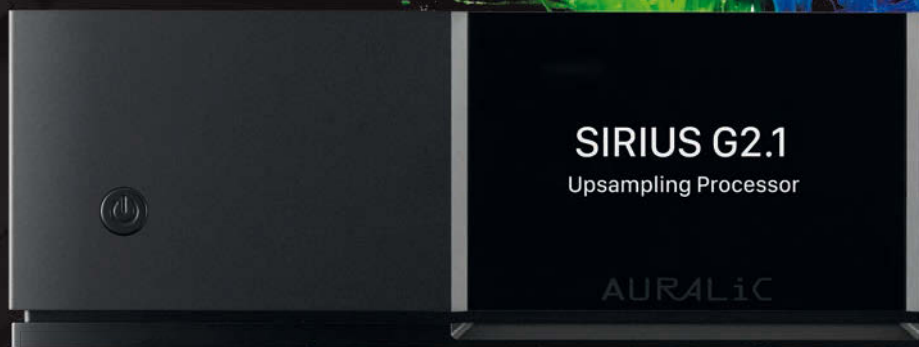
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The Linn Klimax DSM is one of those ultra-rare products that resets what you thought possible from a component, in this case streaming. If you are already down the top-tier Linn rabbit hole then this is a 'must include' on your wish list. But even those with absolutely nothing from the Scottish brand should put this on their 'must hear' list, simply because it gives you an insight into what streaming is truly capable of. Let's not mince words; this is the best streaming audio component I've ever reviewed. +

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Rotel A11 Tribute/CD11 Tribute/Bowers & Wilkins 606 S2 Anniversary system

by Simon Lucas

The term 'rock star' has been devalued more than somewhat of late. Time was, one could only be confidently described as a 'rock star' if one worked within the boundaries of 'rock and roll' – although these days you can even be a 'rock star' estate agent if you have the skills and the hair cut.

Ken Ishiwata was perhaps the nearest the hi-fi industry ever got to a 'rock star'. His 40-plus years of designing and developing audio equipment for Marantz brought his

name, admittedly quite stealthily, into the consciousness of people who would never describe themselves as 'hi-fi enthusiasts', let alone 'audiophiles'.

I can't think of any individual whose name or initials has appeared in the actual model numbers of hi-fi components, other than Ken Ishiwata. His judicious amendment of both mechanical and electronic elements of existing Marantz models delivered 'KI Signature' editions – which are widely recognised as among the company's most high-profile and successful amplifiers and CD players in what was an already successful and high-profile range.

Ken Ishiwata and Marantz called it a day early in 2019 – but anyone who met him, knew Ken Ishiwata wasn't about to down tools. And anyone who heard his acceptance speech at the *What Hi-Fi?* Awards in October 2019 (where he picked up a profoundly merited 'Outstanding Achievement' award) knew his enthusiasm and sense of purpose was undimmed. So the ►





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► announcement of his death a little over a month later came as the most unpleasant surprise – especially as he seemed to be the most vital and vigorous 72-year-old around.

At the time of his death, Ken Ishiwata had been doing what he always did best: taking well-regarded, affordable and mainstream hi-fi components and making them better. Who knows if Rotel intended to call these breathed-on incarnations of its A11 integrated amplifier and CD11 CD player ‘KI Signature’? Having had these two components signed off by Ishiwata’s children, Rotel has instead gone with ‘Tribute’ (and included the Japanese character for ‘respect’

in the fascia badging too). And both products confirm what anyone with an interest in the subject must surely have instinctively known already: Ken Ishiwata died with his boots on.

As two-thirds of a reasonably ‘entry level’ (and reasonably traditional) stereo system, the Rotel ‘Tribute’ components are nigh-on perfect.

The Rotel A11 Tribute is an integrated stereo amplifier of the (reasonably) old school. 50 watts (into 8 ohms) of Class AB power, four line-level inputs and a moving-magnet phono stage, pre-outs to a power amplifier or what-have-you, defeatable tone controls, 3.5mm headphone output, switching for two pairs of speakers... it’s exactly the sort of product Ken Ishiwata might have involved himself with back in the twentieth century. Only the appearance of a Bluetooth receiver module on the rear panel nods towards the current hi-fi vogue for wireless streaming. But this is a closed circuit – the A11 Tribute will accept aptX and AAC Bluetooth streams and then deal with them via a very capable 24bit/192kHz Texas Instruments digital-to-analogue convertor, but ►

▶ this DAC is otherwise inaccessible. There are no physical digital inputs of any variety here.

Similarly, the CD11 Tribute is something of a throwback – this is a CD player and a CD player only. The fascia has the usual ‘play/pause’, ‘forwards/backwards’ and ‘open/close’ controls, and (like the A11 Tribute) a two-tone display. Around the back there are stereo RCA analogue outputs and a digital coaxial output – and that’s your lot. No inputs to access the CD11 Tribute’s 24bit/192kHz TI DAC, no streaming, no SACD playback... spin this specification as ‘purity of purpose’ and it makes a lot of sense.

Operationally, as well as its fascia controls each product comes with a big remote handset featuring small and unlit buttons. Control app? Don’t be daft.

Both machines have come under the Ishiwata microscope, and consequently both have had a lot of attention paid to chassis damping, power supply dimension, and capacitor and resistor selection. But, of course, the only indication that anything out of the ordinary has occurred here are those discreet little ‘Tribute’ fascia badges.

A total spend of just shy of £900 on front-end electronics like these inevitably suggests a number of loudspeaker partners. But given that Rotel is distributed in the UK by Bowers & Wilkins, there are reasons other than sonic for the company to propose the 606 S2 Anniversary standmounters to complete the system – happily, the 606 S2 Anniversary have the performance, as well as the business credentials, to make this an appropriate pick.

The 606 S2 loudspeakers have, like their Rotel partners, been amended, updated and otherwise fussed over to produce this ‘Anniversary’ edition – but unlike the Rotels, this work hasn’t been done by a rock star. And as with the Rotels, there’s more than a hint of the ‘old school’ about the B&Ws – but in this instance it’s to do with their dimensions (a rather retro 34.5 x 19 x 30cm (h/w/d)) rather than their specification. An upgraded version of the ‘double dome tweeter’ (with a first break-up mode occurring at 38kHz), an optimised

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crossover design and some 'celebratory' cosmetic changes let you know it's an Anniversary.

These three components are turned into a system using a couple of lengths of QED XT25 speaker cable, a pair of QED Performance Audio 40i interconnects from CD player to amp, and a pair of Atacama Moseco 6 speaker stands. As well as by the CD11 Tribute, the A11 Tribute is also exercised using a Sony Xperia 5 smartphone as a Bluetooth source and a Rega Planar '1.5' turntable (a Planar 1 that has been fitted with the RB220 tonearm from the Planar 2 – with Rega's input, it should be emphasised).

By his own eclectic standards, there's not all that much diversity in Yusef Lateef's 1970 album *The Diverse Yusef Lateef*

[Atlantic], but the 2002 remaster for release on CD nevertheless is an ideal test for a modestly priced system like this. And (as might confidently have been predicted, given its provenance) it's delivered in winningly natural and musical style by this system.

What's initially most striking about the way this set-up delivers *Live Humble* is the deft and articulate understanding of the rhythm and tempo. Drummer Bernard 'Pretty' Purdie is, by his standards, fairly restrained and understated here, but nevertheless he's the one who dictates terms – and the Rotel/B&W combination has absolutely no trouble in giving the driving, spring-heeled rhythmic signature full expression.

Timing and integration is impressive too, with the eye-contact between performers as they respond to each other's inputs into the piece almost audible. It's not every recording that can accommodate Fender bass and acoustic bass without getting at least a little sludgy at the bottom of the frequency range, but the Rotel electronics deliver the information to the 606 S2 Anniversary speakers cleanly and coherently, allowing distinct individualisation of tone and timbre of the competing bass sounds – even when pianist Richard Tee reaches down towards the left-hand end of his keyboard too. ▶

MUSIC IS LIFE



L-8500 OTL

“The A11 Tribute/606 S2 Anniversary combination make the source of the music unmistakable.”



► A switch to the more straightforward but no less committed indie-pop stylings of Standard Fare's *The Noyelle Beat* [Thee SPC/Melodic] allows the system to continue to shine. The four-square boom/bap arrangements are delivered with all their fervour and dynamism intact, and – again – low-frequency information is alive with detail both broad and fine. The momentum on which so many of the songs on this album rely is translated with something approaching relish by the electronics and served up in full by the speakers. The lack of artifice to the production of *I Know It's Hard* doesn't allow the system playing it anywhere to hide, and while there's not a lot of harmonic subtlety or variation on display there is plenty of attack. The Rotel/B&W combination balances this intensity against a surprisingly clinical assessment of the recording, and the result is as musical and as straightforwardly engaging as listeners have any sort of right to expect when spending this sort of money.

Switching to a vinyl copy of Radiohead's *The King Of Limbs* [XL] reveals the A11 Tribute's moving-magnet phono stage to sound altogether less forthright than the CD11 Tribute. In absolute terms it's a more reticent listen, diminishing the overall system's levels of attack and giving a rather

hazy insight into the structure of a recording. As a result there's sufficient poise to *Give Up The Ghost* but not quite the forensic levels of detail retrieval the CD11 Tribute is capable of delivering. The rudimentary rhythm is still granted full expression, mind you, and the vinyl-derived sound enjoys greater high-end substance than the compact disc equivalent, if not quite the same drive. Those characteristics for which the vinyl format continues to be fetishised ('warmth' and 'timing' being high among them) are to the fore here – the A11 Tribute/606 S2 Anniversary combination make the source of the music unmistakable.

Putting on a record with much greater emphasis on beats, rhythm and tempo (A Tribe Called Quest's *People's Instinctive Travels And The Paths Of Rhythm* [Jive] in this instance) lets the phono input explain itself more eloquently. It's capable of a fluid, convincingly naturalistic presentation, even when it's dealing with a cut-and-paste collage rather than an actual, unified 'performance'. Yes, it could handle greater levels of attack and broad-strokes dynamism – but it gives *Can I Kick It?* the sort of implacable, instinctively correct propulsion that could, as that old jazz standard has it, "make a wallflower dance".

Playing each and every one of these pieces into the A11 Tribute via its Bluetooth input allows the system to maintain its overall balance while also making the limitations of the format apparent. In almost every respect, there's a slight but definite drop-off in performance – and consequently enjoyment. Low frequencies don't have quite the square-edged positivity they previously enjoyed, and the opposite end of the frequency range starts to glint as dangerously as some broken glass in long grass. The system's rhythmic positivity is undermined just a little, too, and while detail levels remain high the little harmonic discrepancies that are casually revealed by the turntable are glossed over somewhat. It is, however, worth reminding readers that all four of these albums were streamed wirelessly at absolutely no effort whatsoever – which puts the Bluetooth input at a distinct advantage in one respect at least. Convenience isn't the be-all and end-all, of course, but anyone who claims to ►

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£1,500 for an integrated amplifier of some flexibility, a compact disc player of equal merit and a pair of deeply capable loudspeakers from one of the planet’s more prestigious mainstream brands is hardly daylight robbery. Yes, you’ll immediately need to spend money on speaker cable, a pair of interconnects and some speaker stands, but even taking this additional expenditure into account you’re buying an awful lot of enduring enjoyment.

Yes, fitting a hugely capable DAC in each box of electronics and then sternly restricting access to it seems like a bit of a missed opportunity and yes, these four boxes aren’t the last word in decorative modernity no matter which finish you specify. But what this Rotel/Rotel/Bowers & Wilkins combination proves, if nothing else, is that giving someone the opportunity (and the time) to appraise a piece of equipment and then maximise its potential without sending its price rocketing through the roof is a deeply worthwhile business decision – no matter if it’s being done by an anonymous team or a single rock star. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ROTEL A11 TRIBUTE

Integrated amplifier

Type: Class AB integrated amplifier

Analogue inputs: stereo RCA × 5 (line-level × 4, moving-magnet phono)

Digital inputs: aptX Bluetooth

Analogue outputs: stereo RCA pre-out

Supported sample rates: 24bit/192kHz

Input impedance: 47kΩ

Output impedance (preamp): 470Ω

Power Output: 50watts

Frequency response: 10Hz–100kHz (line-level); 20Hz–20kHz (phono)

Harmonic distortion (80% power, 8Ohms @ 1kHz): <0.03%

Signal to Noise Ratio (dB): 100 (line-level); 85 (phono)

DAC

Type: Texas Instruments

Resolution: 24bit/192kHz

Distortion (THD + Noise): Not quoted

Dimensions (H×W×D): 93 × 430 × 345mm

Weight (kg): 6.85

Price: £499

Manufacturer: Rotel

URL: rotel.com

ROTEL CD11 TRIBUTE

Compact disc player

Type: compact disc player

Disc types: CD, CD-R/RW

Digital inputs: none

Analogue outputs: stereo RCA

Digital outputs: digital coaxial

DAC resolution: 24bit/192kHz

Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz

Distortion: 0.009 @ 1kHz

Signal to noise ratio: >125dB

Dimensions (H×W×D):

98 × 430 × 314mm

Weight (kg): 5.8

Price: £399

Manufacturer: Rotel

URL: rotel.com

Bowers & Wilkins 606 S2 Anniversary Standmounting loudspeaker

Type: 2-way vented box

Driver complement: 25mm decoupled double-dome aluminum tweeter; 165mm continuum cone FST mid/bass

Frequency response: 52Hz–28kHz

Crossover frequency: not quoted

Impedance: 8 Ohms (minimum 3.7 Ohms)

Sensitivity: 88dB/W/m

Dimensions (H×W×D): 345 × 190 × 300mm

Weight: 6.9kg/each

Finishes: black, white, oak

Price: £599/pair

Manufacturer: Bowers & Wilkins

URL: bowerswilkins.com

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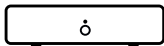
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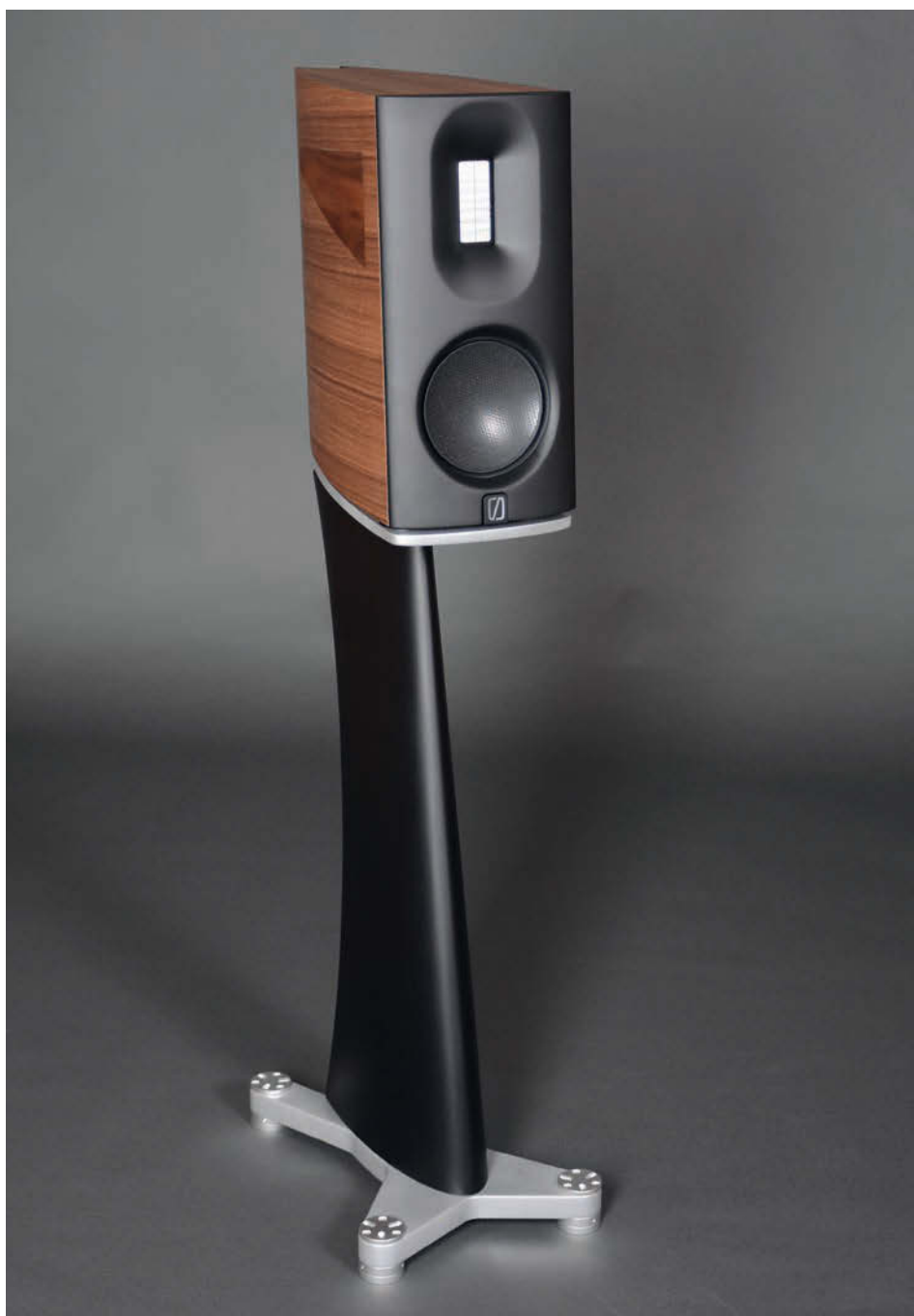
Børresen Acoustics 01 Silver Supreme Edition stand-mount loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

It's hard not to think of the development of Børresen Acoustics loudspeakers without falling into the classic voice-over speak mode of those late, lamented and much-copied vocal talents, Hal Douglas and Don LaFontaine: "In a world where loudspeakers are boring, in a time where people are held captive at home. One man, a renegade speaker designer, can change everything. Now. More. Than. Ever... Børresen: Rise of the Silver Supreme."

You see, that's kind of the whole thing about Børresen; it's built around the brain of Michael Børresen, a designer with more than his fair share of hits under his belt; not only with the current Aavik, Ansuz and Børresen lines, but with a string of notable prior works in the audio business. A maverick in the truest sense, he's more directed toward looking forward and building up the brand that bears his name than raking over the past, but let's just say if you haven't run into an aspect of Børresen's design input in some form in the 21st Century high-end audio world, you've been leading a very cloistered life.

It's also hard not to view the Børresen line as the distillation of all that he's had input on. However, it's also worth looking at those three different product lines, because they are still relatively new to the world and the distinctions might seem blurry to those who haven't been keeping up. Aavik is the electronics brand, Ansuz is the cable, power, network infrastructure, and resonance control products, and Børresen is the speaker brand. ▶



“The copper pole ring is replaced with a ring of solid silver, which also benefits from cryogenic treatment.”



From here, Børresen has two ranges in its line-up; the lower-cost Z-series and the four models in the ‘0’ series, of which the ‘01’ is the smallest model, the others being ever larger 2.5-way designs, culminating in the seven-driver slimline Børresen 05 tower. They all share a common design brief, combining a large ribbon tweeter with a 115mm mid-bass unit that both uses a specially-created membrane for its diaphragm and features a unique iron-free motor unit. In each speaker in the line, there are three options; the 01, a cryogenic-treated version, and a model where the copper pole ring is replaced with a ring of solid silver, which also benefits from cryogenic treatment.

The removal of iron from the magnetic motor of a driver is not an easy task, which might explain why practically every dynamic transducer made in the last 90 years sports an iron core. But it is the only practical solution if you want to reduce a drive unit’s inherent inductance. With the company’s standard iron-free drivers, that inductance was already cut about 12-fold, but by swapping out the copper pole ring for silver, the conductivity of that component increases, and the inductance decreases still further, and because that component is also subjected to the cold shoulder treatment, the cryogenic silver pole ring reduces further inductance by somewhere between 12-16%.

We decided on the Børresen 01 Silver Supreme Edition because in a very real way it’s the purest of the pure. A two-way stand-mount design has effectively nowhere to hide. It also puts the other technologies in the Børresen design front and centre; you have a much closer working relationship with the Darkz decouplers – for example – in the 01, because you use them to decouple the speaker from the stand.

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“This does three extremely important things to the sound; it makes it faster, it makes it more accurate, and it makes it go deeper.”

► The speaker cabinet itself is extremely elegant in all the speakers in the range. The walnut veneered top and side panels are extremely nicely finished and contrast well with the black and silver of the baffle, the drivers and the back plate. Maybe it's just because I'm looking back at a pair of stand-mounts, but I find the contrast of black and silver stand works extremely well, too. A distinctive feature unique to Børresen is the triangular ports inset to the side cheeks of that boat-backed cabinet. This makes a feature of something most companies try to hide, and personally I think it looks good and works well.

The manual – common to all '0' series models is extremely comprehensive, and those not handing the installation task over to experts would be wise to download the manual first, if only to work out the most expedient way of opening the boxes. That may sound trite, but we've all approached the task with all the subtlety of a charging rhino at times, and this well-thought-out manual makes that operation clear. It also recommends a run-in of at least 50-100 hours of music replay, and suggests (in graphic form) how the improvement tracks a sigmoid curve, improving rapidly in the first hundred hours and still improving gradually for the next few hundred hours as the curve flattens out.

Given the panoply of Aavik electronics and Ansuz goodies that arrived from Denmark on the same carnet, you might expect us to view the speaker in context, but we did more than that. We also used it with a variety of audio electronics from Burmester and Linn (at comparable costs) to Hegel and Primare (at far lower cost) to see just how flexible the speakers can be. We did use Ansuz cables and Darkz decouplers where possible.

The difficulty with integrating that large ribbon tweeter and a dynamic bass driver has been encountered several times before, in the designs of another well-known Danish loudspeaker brand (one that Michael Børresen worked for before forming his own company); Raidho. Over the years, they cracked the integration problem through clever crossover design and ever lighter, ever stiffer bass-driver materials, making the step between treble and midrange/bass almost disappear.

Børresen takes a slightly different approach by addressing the magnet 'motor' of the bass driver. This does three extremely important things to the sound; it makes it faster, it makes it more accurate, and it makes it go deeper. The third of these things is perhaps the most immediately surprising; every review of a two-way stand-mount gears itself up to say "given the limitations of the cabinet..." and then try to justify why that speaker shouldn't be dismissed for being light in the bass. Here, there is no need; you get full-thickness bass down to 50Hz, and good, well controlled bass down still further, possibly to around 30Hz in room based on listening to some organ pedals at work [Albinoni's Adagio, John Challenger, *Salisbury Meditation*, PIAS]. Below that, you are going to need a bigger room, and a bigger room means bigger speakers. But, this is one of those rare stand-mounts that is neither the size of a refrigerator, nor has to make apologies for itself in bass delivery. The fact it can produce that depth of bass without the cone flapping itself out of existence is impressive too.

I'm not laying the praise solely at the drive unit here though. I think that clever cabinet is contributing to that deep, powerful bass too. However, it's so well-engineered that it's almost impossible to hear its influence in the real world; my routine Trentemøller 'Chameleon' test [*The Last Resort*, Poker Flat] can identify any uncalled for port resonance or other problems within a few low beats, and there was nothing but malevolent, deep bass. Jason Kennedy often calls this kind of bass 'chewy', but in the case of 'Chameleon' whatever it is that lives in this track just might be chewing on the listener. That's one of the 'joys' of the 01 Silver Supreme Edition; the sound is so vivid and visceral, tracks like this one get you on a more atavistic, primal level. "Whatever it is, it's big and we should be afraid of it!" says the early hominid part of your brain.

The speed of that bass unit is vital to creating that primal effect, which – when not listening to Trentemøller recordings – helps put us in the same space as the musicians making the music itself. More importantly, the speed of that bass unit is vital to keep up with the speed of a ribbon tweeter. Except this time, it seems to be closer to the other way round; the bass unit is almost supernaturally reactive to transients, to the point where drum-pedal kicks are presented as fast as the hi-hat. Let's differentiate 'speed' and 'pace' here; this isn't about the timing of the drum beat (pace), but about the sound of that drum's attack, sustain, decay and release and how there is no overhang. ►

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► That speed of instrument sound ‘envelope’ loops into the accuracy of the bass unit, which in turn matches the treble from the tweeter, the absence of cabinet intrusion, the decoupling from the stand and surroundings, and so on. This means the Børresen 01 Silver Supreme Edition presents an extremely accurate rendition of music played, to the point where other designs could be more of an interpretation. That means a fast, reactive and uncolored performance no matter what you play on these speakers. And while that can be a double-edged sword (poor recordings sound really poor here), when it works you get an open window on the music in a manner akin to Quad Electrostatics, but with the added drive and energy of a well-made box speaker.

I’ve focused on the bass unit because it’s so innovative, but in reality both units take some beating. The lighter, thinner carefully optimised ribbon tweeter is remarkably linear and doesn’t ‘beam’ as much in the process (it’s still a speaker you sit and listen to, but not one where a few inches either way ruins the sound). Like its bass sibling, it’s extraordinarily fast (even by ribbon tweeter standards) and extremely musically unobtrusive. The purity of Joyce DiDonato’s mezzo-soprano voice coupled with the weapons-grade lungs that power that voice, rings out with a vivid clarity and tonal beauty that is just emotionally intense.

I must admit, I came away from listening to the 01 Silver Supreme Edition somewhat shocked. My expectations were that this would be something akin to a Raidho with extra gift-wrapping, due to Michael Børresen’s prior connection and the overall look and shape of the design. It might be a bit better in some places and a bit worse in others. It will probably nail most of that point of interaction between ribbon and bass, but it will still be at least slightly noticeable. And, while that was almost what I heard for the first few hours, it quickly and clearly showed itself to be something altogether different. The Børresen loudspeaker is pretty much invisible in use, with no cabinet intrusion to speak of, no audible distortion from box or drivers, two drivers working in surprising harmony, and with a speed and dynamic range that will leave you wondering where the much bigger panel loudspeakers (and accompanying subs) have been hidden.

In use, however, I found they are so good at soundstaging, you tend to want to accent that. I found myself repositioning the speakers so that they fire across the room rather than down. This meant they were wider than usual with a sharp toe-in. In so doing, I created a very wide, but incredibly detailed, soundstage. The worry here with most loudspeakers is that added space comes at the expense of some energy and rhythmic pace, but here that was never a problem. The 01 Silver Supreme Edition just does everything right.

I started this review with a cinematic joke about trailers, so it’s fitting I end this review with a line from a cinematic joke: *The Godfather Part III*, “Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in!” But that’s a different Michael speaking;

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way bass reflex stand-mount loudspeaker

Drivers: Børresen planar ribbon tweeter, Børresen 114mm iron-free bass/midrange driver

Frequency Response: 50Hz–50kHz

Sensitivity: 86dB/1W

Impedance: >6Ω

Amplifier recommendations: >50W

Finish: Walnut

Dimensions (incl stand, W×H×D):
25.8 × 110.3 × 25.8cm

Weight (incl stands): 18kg per loudspeaker

Price: €43,000 per pair

Manufacturer: Børresen Acoustics

URL: borresen-acoustics.com

UK Distributor: Auditorium Hi-Fi

URL: auditoriumhifi.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)7539 499449

Corleone not Børresen. Just when I thought the two-way stand-mount loudspeaker had reached its peak, Børresen comes along and pulls me back in by re-drawing the landscape with the 01 Silver Supreme Edition. While the notion of a two-way stand-mount loudspeaker hitting this price point is going to raise some eyebrows, those of us who can only dream of products at the lofty price point should think of this review as a ‘proof of concept’; the reduction of induction made by the ironless motor system, increased still further by swapping copper for silver in the pole ring, has significant benefits for the listener, and those benefits must be capable of filtering down to more attainably priced products in the future. In listening to the Børresen 01 Silver Supreme Edition, I think we are actually listening to the sound of audio’s tomorrow being forged. +



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Amphion Argon 3S standmount loudspeaker

by Steve Dickinson

Having spent a fair amount of time with the floorstanding Amphion Argon 7LS for the system piece in issue 181, I ended up buying the review pair for my own use because I think they represent a significant benchmark as to what is available in the sub-£4k price range. Plus, they seem to suit the size of my listening/living room quite well. There's lots that I think the Argon 7LS gets right and that many similarly priced speakers don't, but it's also interesting to note that the Amphions' presentation is a little different to many of their peers. So it's a thought-provoking exercise in what is important, and what is simply nice to have if it can be costed-in; and conversely, what might seem initially attractive but turns out to be not necessary, important or, ultimately, desirable.

And following on from that thinking, there's a conversation to be had as to whether the 'right' choice for my situation is automatically going to be a floorstanding design. What would I lose if I moved to a standmount design, and would it matter? Might there even be gains? [Looks down to see a small, neat standmounting loudspeaker pointedly tugging at his ankle and looking meaningfully at the space currently occupied by the 7LSs].

The Argon 3S is the largest of the three standmount designs in Amphion's Argon range, sitting above the dinky Argon 1 and the positively cute Argon 0. It has much in common with the floorstanding Argon 7LS, utilising the same titanium tweeter and aluminium main drive unit, same crossover point, and the cabinet is the same width and depth, just shorter and with fewer drivers. It also uses the same approach of the sealed box with rear-mounted, passive auxiliary bass radiator as used in the Argon 7LS, whereas the smaller Argon 0 and Argon 1 are both ported designs. It's not by any means a large standmounter either, being a little taller but no wider than the classic 'BBC' mini-monitor designs, and about twice as deep, so around twice the internal volume of that famous 5 litre box. (There's an Argon 5 centre channel speaker, too, which could conceivably be stood on its end and paired to make a larger standmounter than the Argon 3S, but this is another ported design using the same, slightly smaller, ►



“It’s very, very easy to get drawn into the narrative and carried along; it’s a 10-minute track, but it felt much shorter.”



► main drivers as the Argon 0 and Argon 1). So from a technical standpoint, the Argon 3S looks to be the closest match to the Argon 7LS, just rather more compact.

Amphion market the Argon 3S as a ‘bookshelf’ design and they don’t offer dedicated stands, so I set them up on the pair of curvaceous MusicWorks acrylic stands that I have on hand, and hooked up to my Accuphase E-480 integrated amp via Nordost Tyr 2 cables. If you think that’s a bit OTT for a pair of small, £2,000 loudspeakers, something about the Amphion philosophy suggested this wouldn’t be wasted. The review pair came in the other standard finish Amphion offer: nominally black, it’s really a dark charcoal grey and in the same slightly chalky, silky finish of my white (a gentle, soft white) Argon LS7s. Both these finishes are a little different to the normal run of things, and I like the attractive, slightly understated vibe that seems to speak to that low-key Amphion approach.

Let’s start with an old warhorse from just about every hifi show since Noah invented the stereo pair: Hugh Masekela and ‘Stimela’ from *Hope* [Analogue Productions, SACD]; this was in every meaningful sense a most convincing account: solid, secure imaging, believable vocal and instrumental timbres and textures, and a superb sense of atmosphere and presence. The live recording, the audience response, and the way Masekela builds that sense of anger and injustice through his phrasing and cadence, all portrayed to unexpected levels by these diminutive boxes. It’s very, very easy to get drawn into the narrative and carried along; it’s a 10-minute track, but it felt much shorter. These speakers do that small-box disappearing act supremely well, largely failing to draw attention to themselves, and just letting the music spill forth. It’s a familiar Amphion trait, they don’t impress by being impressive, they just let the music speak for itself. Leonard Cohen’s ‘Who by fire’ from *Live in London* [Sony Music] was another case in point, no obvious source of sound here, just tight, natural images on a convincing and lifesized soundstage. And here comes that slightly diminutive elephant in the room; the thing that everybody will tell you about small box loudspeakers. We can’t talk about Laughing Lennie without mentioning bass, can we?

So let’s talk a bit about the bass performance. Like the Argon LS7, the 3S uses a sealed cabinet and ABR rather than the more familiar (and probably less costly) reflex port. As far as bass is concerned, it’s more about quality than quantity. ►



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“It has reminded me that enough of all the important things is actually plenty.”

- Which is emphatically not to say it doesn't do bass, there's much more on offer in that regard than in those BBC monitor designs, for example, but the numbers don't tell the full story. There are small standmounters whose measurements will tell you they go deeper, and louder, and perhaps they do. But what the Argon 3S gives you is tight, tuneful, convincing and, more importantly, properly focussed bass that securely underpins the music and propels it along, not woofly grumblings that rattle the rafters but don't seem to belong to anybody in the band. Leonard Cohen's vocals might, through the 3Ss, go more lightly on that famous subterranean bottom octave, but he sounds like a real person, performing to a real audience in a real event, because all the harmonics in his voice are happening at the same time, as they would in life. 'Killer' from Seal's debut album *Seal* [ZTT] relies on a deep, solid, driving bass riff and the Argon 3S gave a much more satisfying rendition of that than some of those ported standmounters can, precisely because the bass traded a little depth for a lot more impact. The leading edges of the bass notes are cleanly defined, the timbre is more solid and refined, the pitch is more tuneful, and the timing of its delivery is absolutely on the money. There's also great depth to the image and lovely, natural vocal textures. And here's a thing, yes the same track through the Argon LS7 might go deeper and harder, but the Argon 3S feels slightly more immediate and present, lighter on its feet with a corresponding slightly better sense of *bounce*.

Much of this tradeoff depends on context, of course. My fairly modest, squareish, 4m room necessitates relatively nearfield listening, the floorstanders will offer more scope in larger spaces. They also scale up a little better, the NDR Big Band with Abdullah Ibrahim on *Ekapa Lodumo* [Enja] is given its head more through the LS7, the 3S works hard and does well, but ultimately has to concede in matters of scale to its larger sibling. But, perhaps because there's a little less bass energy, the interplay between Ibrahim's piano and the big band is easier to discern via the 3S, you sense his contribution more and the smaller speaker disappears more readily; so ultimately you pay your money and makes your choice. And actually, it's quite shocking how little the smaller speaker concedes to the larger model when it comes to resolving a convincing and satisfying musical experience. The key touchpoints of timing, energy delivery, resolution and timbral detail are very evenly matched.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two way, standmount loudspeaker with passive bass radiator

Driver complement: 1 x 1" titanium tweeter; 1 x 6.5" aluminium woofer

Crossover frequencies: 1600 Hz

Frequency response: 38 Hz–25,000 Hz (-6dB)

Impedance: 8Ω

Sensitivity: 87 dB

Power handling: 50–150 W (recommended)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 380 x 191 x 305 mm

Weight: 12Kg

Finishes: white (accent colour options available for driver grilles); black; walnut

Price: £2,000 (white/black); £2,200 (walnut)

Manufacturer: Amphion Loudspeakers Ltd

Tel: +358 17 2882 100

URL: amphion.fi

UK sales: Auden Distribution

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And it's not like the Argon 3S lacks heart. They will make very good use of lots of high quality power. Patricia Barber, 'Mourning Grace' from *Café Blue UN-mastered* [Premonition] went antisocially loud without getting hard or shouty, retaining all the important nuance and the interplay between what are very obviously superlative musicians. 'The Moon' from *Mythologies* [Blue Note] shows her very much at the top of her game; atmospheric, driving, urgent and compelling, Barber's piano is agile, tuneful and the subtleties of her phrasing very apparent; this is a convincing and involving musical event.

So if there's a tradeoff, it is perhaps on the continuum between speed and agility, or scale and ultimate depth, but in reality, in normal sized rooms, this represents a relatively small shifting in one direction or the other. And the other strengths both loudspeakers have, in terms of an overall coherence, an ability to get out of the way and let the music speak for itself, the easy, natural way they draw you in to the performance, that was there in bucketloads in both designs. Don't dismiss the Amphion Argon 3S, and don't assume it can't make sense in a high end system. It has reminded me that enough of all the important things is actually plenty. +



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Line Magnetic LM-512 CA preamp/LM-845 Premium integrated/power amp

by Jason Kennedy



Greg Chapman at VAL Hi-Fi is a brave man. He became a dealer and distributor when the industry is thick with others doing the same thing and took on a marque sold directly by the manufacturer at prices a distributor/dealer could not hope to match. Line Magnetic is a Chinese company specialising in valve amplification. It has a substantial range of products on the market, many of which are also available on eBay at what appear to be silly prices. There is at least one catch with such apparent bargains, and that's the line in the small print that goes, "International postage of items may be

subject to customs processing and additional charges." And that is on top of pretty steep postage prices. As anyone buying from Europe has discovered this year, "customs processing and additional charges" can add up significantly, with both VAT and import duties adding in the region of 40% to the cost at your door.

What Greg has in his favour is the ability to demonstrate the product; a bargain isn't a bargain if it doesn't work with your system. He also offers a two-year warranty (six months on the tubes); saving a few quid importing an amplifier from the other side of the world doesn't seem like quite the bargain if it ►

“External build and finish are to a high standard, and only the styling gives away the preamplifier’s geographic origins.”



► comes with a whole heap of grief should something go wrong with it. On top of that, you’ve got to hope that what you buy isn’t counterfeit, something that Line Magnetic warn about on their site. These factors favour buying from the official source, and all of which add up to buying added peace of mind.

The LM-512 CA preamplifier is the top model in Line Magnetic’s range, and it’s a substantial beast with a very distinctive volume pointer that can be used as a knob or controlled with up/down buttons. In most instances, you will use the neat aluminium remote for this and input selection. It’s essentially a tube preamplifier with an RCA 22DE4 for rectification, 6922 (ECC88 equivalent) valves in the driver stage and Mullard 6KZ8 triode/pentodes providing gain. It counts Jensen and Mundorf MCap capacitors among its

components and includes a solid-state bridge rectifier, a job done with tubes in some preamplifiers. Construction internally uses point-to-point wiring. Although a circuit board is exposed when you lift the tube cover, this is mounted on springs to provide a degree of isolation to the smaller tubes. There are large rectifier tubes fixed to the main chassis below. External build and finish are to a high standard, and only the styling gives away this preamplifier’s geographic origins. I like using chunky connectors and switches on the back panel where there are three RCA inputs and one pair on XLR, the latter provided with a rare hot pin switch to suit different arrangements within the connecting cable. Output is on both connectors, although the XLR connections do not provide a balanced signal that requires extra transformers.

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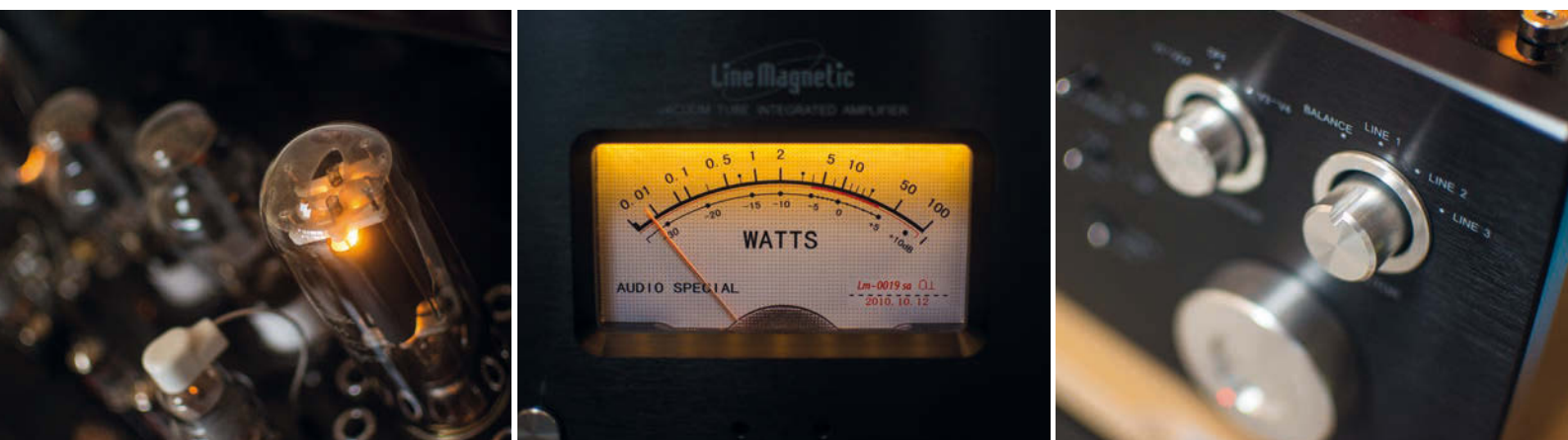


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“The ML-845 Premium is a real gas guzzler of an amplifier built on two chassis, with the main one alone weighing 40 kilos.”



► The LM-845 Premium is a real gas guzzler of an amplifier built on two chassis, with the main one alone weighing 40 kilos and the ‘smaller’ unit coming in at over 20kg. The latter houses the output transformers, which gives you an idea of the manufacturer’s ambitions and how little the company is prepared to compromise. As you might be able to tell from the array of controls on the front panel, the LM-845 operates as both an integrated amplifier or as a power amp, and there are four line inputs (one on XLR) plus a preamplifier input and a control to choose between operational modes. There’s even a remote handset for volume. The array of knobs and meters on the front would suggest that it’s a measurement device for good reason as it can also measure the bias on the various tubes sprouting from the top.

There is also the option to adjust negative feedback between minimum and maximum. I listened in its full-on mode because that was how it arrived and would lend itself to less sensitive speakers than are generally chosen for 30 Watt amplifiers. However, I gave the minimum feedback option a try and got a more ethereal and soft sound that worked well with classical pieces but less so in situations where rhythm is crucial. The tube array consists of 12AX7 triodes in the input stage, pairs of 310A and 300B drivers, and the eponymous 845 triodes in single-ended mode, providing the loudspeakers’ power. The latter usually looks pretty significant, but on an amplifier of this scale, they don’t seem extreme in the least. The output transformers in the second, Premium, chassis

connect to the amp with a pair of chunky umbilical cables, and speaker cabling connects to one of three impedance taps (4, 8 and 16 Ohms) on the back of this unit. Fit and finish are once again excellent, but the styling is more restrained than the main amplifier.

Listening commenced with the 845 Premium as an integrated driving Bowers & Wilkins 802 loudspeakers that are strong on sensitivity if not easy to drive. Still, the pairing worked well, unusually so for a single-ended triode. The critical tube quality of tonal colour was immediately apparent on Arve Henriksen’s trumpet and the atmospheric electronica that surrounds it. There was good depth to the soundstage too, and not too much midrange forwardness. The latter is all too common with SETs when they struggle with a heavy load, but there wasn’t much struggling going on here. I loved the depth of tone it pulled out of the basses on ‘Magnet Pulls Through’ [*Tortoise*, Thrill Jockey], and the weight behind the kick drum was round and deep. When the snare comes in, you can feel its snap and the pulse of the soundfield produced by the bass, which is tactile music reproduction with lots of nuances. Immediacy is a classic triode characteristic, one of the reasons for this ancient technology’s appeal, and you get plenty of it with the Line Magnetic, which brings Leonard Cohen and Herbie Hancock’s version of ‘The Jungle Line’ to life [*River: The Joni Letters*, Verve]. The amplifier enhances the gravelly-voiced description of Rousseau’s painting, making the imagery that much more vivid and lush. ►

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“The 845 Premium is no slouch when it comes to timing, letting the groove shine through.”

► Adding the LM-512 CA preamplifier to the system significantly enhanced all-round transparency; the low-level resolution was clearly increased, which meant that even simple pieces of music took on a far stronger sense of realism. One such being ‘Grandma’s Hands’ [Bill Withers, *Just as I Am*, Sussex], where the voice gains depth and shape as you might expect, but the rhythm section comes into full focus as well, now you can feel the groove as well as follow the tune. The preamplifier brings precision and definition of the quieter elements that, while it’s more revealing, is also beneficial to the musical flow. There often seems to be a trade-off between resolution and musicality, but this pairing brought a balance to these key qualities that were extremely rewarding. Allowing you to play jazz, classical, rock, you name it... and feel emotionally and intellectually involved with every piece.

Voices are a speciality, of course, each one offering up so much of its distinctive flavour when Van Morrison sings ‘Who was that Masked Man’ [*Veedon Fleece*, Warner Bros] in a falsetto, it strikes you to the core in a way that rarely happens. With more up to date recordings, the effect was equally provoking; the sheer presence of notes in the room giving the music a power to captivate that was inspiring. Out of interest, a pair of PMC twenty5.26i speakers were harnessed to this amplifier; these showed that the 845 Premium is no slouch when it comes to timing, letting the groove shine through on whatever was played.

The balance here was more mid-forward, which meant that voices and brass were more prominent but not to the detriment of the musical whole. The quiet atmospherics at the start of Michael Chapman’s ‘Aviator’ [*Fully Qualified Survivor*, Harvest] seemed so natural and intriguing with lots of depth in the violin and bass, the amp raising this song up and revealing its sad beauty in full effect.

Good tube amplification puts back what the recording, mastering and pressing process leaves out. It may do this thanks to what are in essence subtle colorations to the sound that can be picked up on the test bench, but they are not perceived as distortions by the ear, and the effect is more of an enhancement. This Line Magnetic pairing is a lot of amplifier for the money, even at the official price, definitely one to hear if you want to get to the heart and soul of your music collection. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

LM-512 CA

Type: Valve-driven line-stage preamplifier

Valve complement: Two RCA 22DE4, two 6922, two Mullard 6KZ8 valves

Analogue inputs: Three pairs of single-ended inputs (via RCA jacks), one pair of balanced inputs (via XLR connectors)

Analogue outputs: One pair of balanced outputs (via XLR connectors), one pair of single-ended outputs (via RCA jacks)

Input impedance: 600kOhms (RCA)

Output impedance: Not specified

Bandwidth: 17Hz–100kHz (–3dB, RCA)

Gain: 24dB

Distortion: 0.5dB (1kHz)

Signal to Noise Ratio: 90dB

Dimensions (H×W×D): 196 × 430 × 383mm

Weight: 20kg

Price: £8,499

LM-845 Premium

Type: Valve-driven stereo integrated/power amplifier

Valve complement: Two 12AX7, two 310A, two 300B, two 845 valves

Analogue inputs: Three pairs single ended (via RCA jacks), one pair balanced (via XLR), one preamplifier input (via RCA jacks)

Analogue outputs: Two sets of speaker taps for 4, 8, and 16 Ohm loads (via 5-way binding posts)

Power output: 30Wpc

Bandwidth: 15Hz–35kHz (–1.5dB)

Sensitivity: Line 250mV, pre in 1V

Distortion: 1% THD

Signal to Noise Ratio: 87dB

Dimensions (H×W×D):

Control Chassis: 460 × 435 × 456 mm

Output Chassis: 165 × 435 × 410 mm

Weight: 40kg + 20kg

Price: £9,999

Manufacturer: Line Magnetic Audio Co. Ltd

URL: line-magnetic.eu

UK Distributor: VAL HiFi

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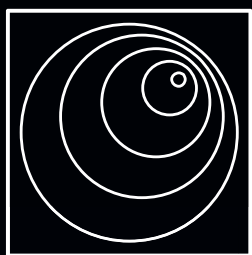
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REL Serie T/7x subwoofer

by Alan Sircom

First, let me begin with an apology. I got into publishing at a time when 'hot metal' was still just about a thing and REM and the KLF were in the charts. And in that time, I have never once broken an embargo. Until I flagged up the REL Serie T/7x in one of our Next Issue contents pages! My apologies to all concerned.

In my defence, I was left unattended with a really good subwoofer I wanted to discuss and my excitement got the better of me. The new three-strong Serie Tx range represents a new starting place for subwoofer experts REL and the Serie T/7x (in between the T/9x and T/5x) is something of the sweet spot; a good balance between price and performance that makes it the perfect choice for audio enthusiasts in the jumping off spot for subwoofery.

A subwoofer in an audio setting has to balance bass depth, speed and integration with the rest of the loudspeaker sound. This is subtly different to the requirements in home cinema, where the subwoofer is considered a channel in its own right, rather than a reinforcement to the sound of a pair of good speakers. Get it right in audio, and it's like you've given the main speakers the freedom to be themselves, opening out the soundstage, making the midrange more clear and open, and focusing the sound more tightly and accurately. Get it wrong and you have a speaker that slows the music and booms along with the song, undermining what a makes a good system. REL has always batted above average in making a good sub that integrates well into a domestic audio system, so any changes to the REL genome is met with some trepidation.

The T/7x uses the well-trodden path of front-firing active driver with down-firing passive radiator; in this case a 200mm 'FibreAlloy' long-throw unit with an inverted alloy dustcap housed in a steel chassis, and a 250mm long-throw unit with its own inverted dustcap. This is driven by a 200W Class AB amplifier and includes the usual Neutrik speaker-level connector alongside the regular line level inputs. REL also has an optional 'Arrow' wireless connection that can be used with the T/7x. The cabinet is no longer a equal-sided cube; its stubbier look isn't just decorative, though; although it looks smaller, cabinet volume has been improved slightly over previous models in the same ball-park. ▶



► Set-up remains the same for audio purposes; use the Speakon cable and high-level input, with the cables connected to the left and right positive and a single negative terminal of your power amplifier. Now use a vocal recording and dial the subwoofer down until it is just past audibility. Then confirm with a record with good bass; you can combine the two if you use 'Ballad of the Runaway Horse' by Rob Wasserman and Jennifer Warnes [*Duets*, Universal]. Now come back a week later and turn it down a notch, then make a cup of tea or coffee, sit back down to your system, and be a bit amazed!

So far, so REL. What the T/7x does is introduce some extra speed and weight to the bass, the sort of performance normally expected from more upmarket models in the line. Weight here is a difficult subject, because the Serie T/7x does not make a small speaker seem 'weightier', just 'bigger' and more importantly 'better' across the midrange. I used this in particular with the Rogers LS3/5A SE tested in this issue and this proved to be both an ideal test subject and an ideal candidate for the Serie T/7x. The REL added depth to the sound, but not in the way that it changed the tonality of this well-known speaker system; more that it filled in the bottom end in the same way the SE version fills in the midrange over the original; thoroughly, but paradoxically almost imperceptibly. The REL was fast enough to pass the Trentemøller test ['Chameleon', *The Last Resort*, Poker Flat] and provided enough reinforcement to make out a few more left-hand piano notes on the Liszt B-minor Piano Sonata played by Martha Argerich's during her Début Recital [DG], but more importantly on this recording it also gave that recording the sense of space and gravitas needed to make it something truly outstanding. Switch the sub off and seemingly not a lot happens to the sound, but the sound also collapses and becomes insubstantial. Put it back in and the bass is not overt or oppressive, in fact it's almost not there, but the way the T/7x delivers that 'almost not there' bass makes all the difference. And, if you compare that bass delivery to previous REL designs under about £1,500, the new T/7x has both more substance and form, and less intrusion into the sound of the speakers.

The speed of the Serie T/7x is its outstanding feature. Few do bass depth and bass speed like this subwoofer at anything like the same price, and for that alone it deserves very high praise because that means the REL sub can keep up with fast musical transients played through equally fast and reactive loudspeakers. Couple that with the sort of depth to fill out floorstanders in this category and it's an exciting addition to the audio canon.

While we aren't geared up for home cinema here, it must be noted that the REL Serie T/7x is not just for us music lovers. When used as bass channel instead of bass reinforcement, it has the sharp transient response and directness that makes it so good for two-channel, but with more of an oomph needed to resolve what home cinema does so well. In fact, I'd argue that where previous REL subs at this price point were hi-fi subs that could be used in cinema, the Serie T/7x straddles the divide almost perfectly; home cinema enthusiasts will view this as a powerful sub that can also do two-channel music, where two-channel enthusiasts see this as the audiophile's friend that can also speak cinema.

In audio settings, a good subwoofer should be seen and not heard like a Victorian schoolchild. REL has consistently been one of the few subwoofer

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Front-firing active woofer, down-firing passive radiator

Inputs: Hi Level Neutrik Speakon, Lo Level single phono, LFE phono

Active drive unit: FibreAlloy™, 200mm long-throw, inverted alloy dust cap, steel chassis

Passive radiator unit: 254mm long throw, inverted dust cap

Power output: 200w (RMS)

Lower frequency response: 31Hz at -6dB

Gain control range: 80dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 36 x 32 x 36cm

Weight: 17.5kg

Price: £999

Manufactured by: REL Acoustics

URL: rel.net

Tel: +44(0)1656 768777



brands to achieve that goal, and the REL Serie T/7x does it better than before. No, it's not going to out-do a No. 25 or the big 212/SX from the brand, but it does draw heavily from the S/510. While in absolute terms, the S/510 is a better sub all round, the gap has closed significantly. The Serie T/7x at £999 throws down a gauntlet to other subwoofers. It's the one to beat right now. +

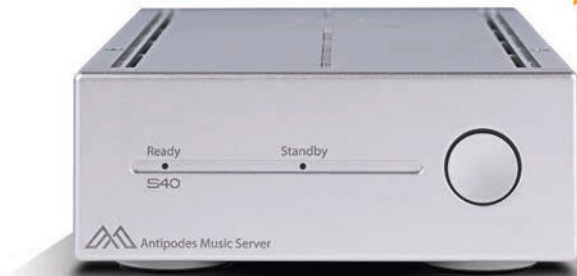
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Xavian Quarta Evoluzione floorstanding loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

Xavian was founded in Prague in 1997 by Italian loudspeaker designer Roberto Barletta. It seems an odd place for an Italian to start such a project, but apparently, destiny led him to Prague at the tender age of 23, and he has never felt the need to return. Xavian makes its drive units and produces the cabinets for an extensive range of speakers. If the exceptional gloss finish on the Quarta is anything to go by, they have clearly mastered the art.

Xavian makes two Classic Series models, Terza and Quarta Evoluzione; they look alike, but the Quarta is the bigger box and sits on a lower stand, but that doesn't make it a lot easier to install. This is a substantial 40kg loudspeaker with no ports to grab and a luxurious finish that you don't want to mark. I had to get help to put them on the dedicated stands that Xavian makes. Fortunately, the speaker bolts onto the stand, so it is possible to move the whole thing as one.

The Quarta is classic in the full sense of the word, and few companies make speakers in cabinets of these proportions today. I can only think of a few, with ATC being the first to come to mind. The reason is largely down to fashion dictates; ever since the eighties, when Lawrence Llewellyn Bowen and his ilk started telling people about how their homes should look, loudspeakers have become distinctly unpopular. Anything that can be done to make them less obvious is desirable, which has resulted in narrow baffles on relatively deep cabinets. Wide baffles have pros and cons as far as acoustics are concerned. On the negative side, the more baffle (flat material around the drivers), the more coloration you get from vibration in the baffle. The other side of the equation is that a flat surface is the mildest form of horn loading available, so a larger baffle increases efficiency. Some fabulous wide baffled speakers are made today, and many consider them to be more desirable than their skinny cousins.

The drivers in Xavian speakers carry their founder's brand AudioBarletta; they consist of a 270mm bass





“A rib braces the motor system or magnet on the bass driver within the cabinet.”



- ▶ driver with a hand impregnated ‘non-pressed’ paper cone in a diecast chassis with neodymium magnets, the latter being a rarity on bass drivers because of their cost. The voice coil is a double layer type with two windings on the in-and outside of the former for extra control. A rib braces the motor system or magnet on the bass driver within the cabinet with an elastomer between wood and metal; this provides a damped but firm fixing for the rear of the driver.

The 175mm midrange unit has an impregnated paper cone with a diecast chassis again and a 50mm voice coil, this time in copper-clad aluminium. It also has a pleated fabric surround which is a bit of a throwback but popular among tube enthusiasts among others. They don’t allow plenty of excursions but have a different character to rubber surrounds. At the top of the box is a 29mm soft dome tweeter controlled

by a copper-clad aluminium voice coil. Copper shorting rings assist its motor system and its rearward output absorbed by a labyrinth chamber.

Xavian has gone to town on the crossover and its components, using Mundorf resistors and Jantzen capacitors in a crossover with variable slopes to give this new Evoluzione version of the Quarta a frequency response of 35Hz to 35kHz. The latter being an exceptionally high figure for a soft dome. The Quarta has bi-wire terminals on the back of its sealed enclosure and those disinclined to look at the drivers in the front baffle can use the magnetic grilles supplied, even if the quality of veneer and finish warrants as much exposure as it can get. The stand for the Quarta is made of MDF with a matte black finish and discreet branding. It stands 372mm high and has adjustable felt-covered feet for hard floors. ▶

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► Despite its size, the internal volume must be in the region of 90 litres, and driver area; this is no boombox, quite the opposite. The bass is tight and highly articulate, you have to throw serious amounts of very low end to get it to rumble, and I suspect that a warm and not too grippy amplifier might suit it better than the Moor Amps Angel 6 that I use for most of my listening. Positioning is essential with any speaker and no less so with this one. In my room, best results were achieved by placing the Quartas close to the back wall and firing straight out from it with very little toe-in; this is because of the above-mentioned restraint in the bass and a revealing midrange that produces better image scale in this arrangement. Pointing their axis at the listening seat increases detail resolution to a degree but restores the image width quite significantly and can be a shade forward with some recordings.

The midrange is particularly clear, and it allows you to hear right into each recording and pick out what's going on, what each musician is contributing and, critically, how well they are gelling with other members of the ensemble or band. The Grateful Dead's 'Cumberland Blues' [*Europe '72*, Warner Bros] can sound chaotic because there are several lead instruments jamming together in a live situation, but this speaker is able to delineate what they are all doing and how their contributions knit together, the result being boogie power on the next level and a whole lot of fun. They proved very adept at revealing differences between versions of the same song too, the track on this occasion being 'Home Again' by Steely Dan [*Aja*, ABC], of the two digital versions available, DSD proved the most even-handed and revealing, a CD rip sounding quite bright despite being a quieter mastering. On vinyl, I was surprised to find an audiophile pressing by Cisco that sounded better than an old UK release; generally, older is better, but on this system, older had a pronounced lower midrange hump that thickened the sound. Bernard Purdie's drumming is superb, and Larry Carlton's guitar sublime on each version, but the Cisco took top honours, all of which was made obvious by the Quartas.

I tried a newer recording from Boz Scaggs, 'Thanks to You' from *Dig* [Virgin]; this has some serious low end on it and proved that the Xavians are happy to produce the stuff in delicious style. The synth is sounding dark and chocolatey in a rolling glue kind of way while letting the vocals deliver their message with clarity and feeling. This speaker is very good at vocals, a fact reinforced by David Thomas and Two Pale Boys' 'Obsession' [*Erewhon*, Cooking Vinyl], where the bass guitar comes out in full, three-dimensional form behind Thomas' pitiful lyrics, the texture and depth of his voice popping out of the speakers alongside sharp yet rounded guitar notes.

The Quartas are revealing the makeup of the piece whilst simultaneously honing it into a cohesive whole that sounds very real in the room. A couple of tracks followed this by Miles Davis, firstly the opener on *Miles in the Sky* [CBS], where Ron Carter's double bass propels the groove without ever standing out and Tony Williams responds in a more clear-cut fashion. Leaving the centre stage to the horn where it's as expressive as ever and never less than engaging, it's a surprisingly good recording for 1968.

Bitches Brew [CBS] is also a cracker, especially on vinyl, the track 'Spanish Key' being revealed in all its splendour across the wide soundstage provided by the Quartas. They manage to reveal just how good the band was on this session and how adeptly Davis guides them without getting caught up in the density of the piece, something that can easily get in the way of lesser speakers.

Xavian's Quarta Evoluzione is something of a rebel speaker in the market today. Its squat, wide shape and infinite baffle loading are rarities in a world of tall slim reflex-loaded designs, yet Barletta and his team have proved that a well-executed design does not need to conform to the latest trends. The Quarta may look old fashioned to some eyes, but when it comes to ears, its sonic abilities are very much of the moment. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 3-way, standmount speaker with infinite baffle enclosure

Driver complement: One 29mm impregnated soft dome tweeter; one 175mm midrange driver with impregnated paper cone; one 270mm hand impregnated, 'non pressed' paper cone

Crossover frequencies: 300Hz, 2.5kHz

Frequency response: 35Hz–30kHz

Impedance: 8 Ohms

Sensitivity: 87dB/W/m

Dimensions (H×W×D): 680 × 350 × 400mm

Weight: 40kg/each

Finishes: High gloss zebrano, silver ebony, rosewood real wood veneers

Price: €11,990/pair, stands €990

Manufacturer: Xavian Electronics s.r.o.

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Dan Clark Audio Aeon 2 Noire Headphones

by Buzz Hughes

Once upon a time in a land before globally life altering virus events, I vaguely remember my scant headphone listening time as merely a fun change of pace to my beloved loudspeaker set up. Interesting how a one-time dalliance is now a mental health necessity in my house which stuffed tight with a full time working wife, two elementary-aged daughters, and a fluffy pandemic puppy. I don't think it is a quantum leap to see why I was champing at the bit when I got wind that the new closed back Aeon 2 Noire headphones from Dan Clark Audio were heading my way. Having loved my experience when reviewing the former Mr. Speakers Aeon in 2018, I was highly anticipating experiencing what Dan Clark could do with more budget, a folding and a closed back design to take me far, far, far... far away from the all too familiar domestic grind.

Famed designer Dan Clark needs little to no introduction to the headphone buying world evidenced by the first production run of the new Noire line sold out instantly when launched in Dec 2020. Maybe the initial welcome has to do in part with Noire now including the highly-requested all black metallic paint colour. I had plenty of time to ogle this beautiful new finish myself while I studiously waited out the full 75+ hours break in period and have to say they do present a quietly sophisticated look paired with the unique Aeon ear cup shape that is by now a standard. In many ways comparing the new Noire against the existing Aeon 2 you will find that the Noire is an updated improvement rather than a radical departure from the A2's successful design. The Noire and the A2's ►



“These cans will be welcome in even the smallest of carry-ons and should hold up to the rigours of travel.”



► are both built with Dan Clark’s personal time tested second generation 62mm x 34mm single-ended planar magnetic driver, but note that the Noire drivers show an improvement in the driver matching at +/- 1.5dB between 30Hz and 5kHz (the A2 claimed an 2dB matching of drivers). The Noire’s driver like the A2 includes some Dan Clark Audio technology standards like the Trueflow system which improves the headphones ability to produce microdetail by allowing more airflow through the motor. Afficionados will also be familiar with the extremely effective patented V-Planar driver processing, which molds the textures on the driver surface for low-frequency optimization and diaphragm stability. To round out our similarities with the original A2, Noire also shares the unique folding gimbal design for the Nitinol memory metal headband. This comfortable and extremely light headband and leather strap will fold into a conveniently included lightweight custom travel case. As the world sets its sights back on normal this year the folding gimbal is a benefit that should

pay buyers dividends down when you launch into your 2021 revenge travel campaign. For me, the folding gimbal mechanism took a bit of practice to master with my clumsy meathooks but ultimately just looked more fragile than it actually was. These cans will be welcome in even the smallest of carry-ons and should hold up to the rigours of travel.

Similarities with the A2 abound, but before you make this mistake of thinking the Noire is merely a recycled Aeon, let me now illustrate a notable improvement where the Noire has left the A2 behind. Perhaps the most exciting refinement found new in the Noire is in a change to the perforated ear pads construction. The original Aeon earpads were comprised of a solid surface on the inner wall of the pad closest to the ear. The Noire uses a newly built inner wall where half of the wall is fenestrated (perforated) synthetic Japanese protein leather, and half the wall remains solid like the old A2 pad. “What kind of tech can possibly be in a leather pad?” I hear you saying. Well, actually this new construction of the inner pad wall is responsible for the Noire’s new turning to be almost exactly aligned with the Harman Curve. Briefly, the Harman Curve is a target frequency response for what an ideal pair of well engineered headphones should exhibit. The idea was introduced to the community in 2013 when headphone whiz Tyll Hertsens published his findings. The curve is in some ways a nexus of characteristics appreciated by the collective headphone listening community as well as specific individual measurements and Dan Clark Audio is bought in to the concept. In conversation with Mr. Clark, he expounded upon the Noire’s crucial earpad development, “the perforations allow energy at specific frequencies to be absorbed by the foam in the ear pads, which allows ►

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“It rather enhanced some of my favourite intensity-soaked recordings by finally enabling me to add more volume.”

► us to reduce the output in the midrange giving us the characteristic response of the Harmon curve.” Mr. Clark heeds that any headphone’s voicing is not something to be over-looked and few competitors prioritize this technology to give the earpads their rightful due in the final sound output.

The Dan Clark Audio website states about the Noire that “the result of all the updates is a ‘lighter’ sounding midrange and a soundstage that moves the ‘stage’ a bit further from the listener for a wider and deeper space.” In my 2 months with the Noires I can confirm this assertion is deadly accurate. In fact, I will take it one step further to scientifically suggest Noire listening feels like having your brain and music fused together in a honey waterfall and laid on a candy cane bed adorned with marshmallow pillows. A moment of levity, but the intention is sincere. Even the screeching raw punk music and the shredding heavy metal I threw at the Noire’s seemed to have more ‘do-able’ presentation I could actually relax and enjoy as opposed to white knuckles and gritting of teeth usually required. I knew in about 45 seconds of donning the Noires that by a long shot these were most effective anti-fatigue headphones I had ever had on my dome. The sound is in fact strikingly ‘pretty,’ but this is not at all meant to imply the Noire detracted from earest music. In fact, it rather enhanced some of my favourite intensity-soaked recordings by finally enabling me to at last add more volume without cringing.

To further draw out this point let me point you to some good old fashioned 1992 Seattle grunge courtesy of the Screaming Trees *Sweet Oblivion* [Epic]. So yes, the Trees aren’t going to unseat the Rolling Stones any time soon as the worlds most talented rock band, but damnit all if this record isn’t class A, kick-the-amplifier-off-the-stage Rock N’ Roll. At about 2:40 into Troubled Times (24bit/192kHz via Qobuz and through my Oppo HA-1 headphone amplifier) when St. Lanegan is getting his pipes nice and lubed up in time with the jet fueled guitar the Noire’s assets plainly made their worth known. Few headphones I have auditioned can gift this often stale chunky grunge such a mesmerizing top end extension that it so desperately needs to breath. This track can easily fall into the dull sound of just another 90’s record, but Noire kept pumping it full of space at the top which kept every second fresh and lively. In an A/B comparison with my reference open back set of Focal Elears I had gotten used to allowing this track to become a turn it down and save my ear drums situation and it never gripped me the way it deserved. Listening with the Noire I felt like I could finally lean into the music, and lean hard. Yes some small subtleties were missing in a head to head with the capable Elears, but not enough to panic or disparage. I also never felt myself missing the open design of the Elear. The sound from the Noire was plenty open and spacious for a noise blocking closed back design. It was not just hard rock where the Noire’s excelled, but well recorded Jazz percussion that seemed to continually garner my review notes throughout the Noire audition. Flip on the track Contemplation

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Circum-aural

Drivers: Single-Ended Planar Magnetic
Driver

Frequency response: not listed

Distortion: not listed

Weight: not listed

Price: £899

Manufacturer: Dan Clark

URL: danclarkaudio.com

Tel: +1 (619) 501-6313

(24bit/192kHz) from McCoy Tyner’s *The Real McCoy* [Blue Note] and enjoy a truly excellent percussion recording Elvin Jones & Rudy Van Gelder have left for us. The relaxed essence of Elvin’s drum line to my ears found new life and much more space than I was expecting. Contemplation has always been a great track to monitor how much and what quality of ‘air’ a good pair of cans can pick up around a drum kit. Noire’s contributed noticeable pockets of additional space around the cymbals. Irresistible cat-nip if you happen to be a jazz cymbal head like myself. Again I just had more *fun* listening to the Noire and top to bottom and gave just about every piece of music I tried a very pleasing spin on what I was used to previously.

I appreciated the fact that Dan Clark further bolstered the Aeon 2 design and sound while still holding onto the very attractive price point. At this price I think Noire makes a very attractive purchase for a serious listener who knows more often than naught their listening sessions will extend past the hour long mark. If you live in a quiet controlled environment, yes you probably can seek out and find a headphone that does any one thing better than the Noire, but interacting in the real world at this price you aren’t going to find anything as close to as enjoyable, comfortable, and convenient as the finished product you get with the Noire. +

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Rogers LS3/5A SE loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

To say the classic BBC LS3/5A is 'iconic' is something of an understatement. Even though the design is older than many of the people who buy a pair today, despite the BBC having long since moved on to other loudspeakers for speech monitoring in small spaces, and the age of the design notwithstanding, the LS3/5A still pulls in the kind of cult following that few other products can match.

As such, the LS3/5A's specification sheet is functionally sacrosanct. Which means that Rogers making an 'SE' version could be the

stuff of pitchforks and burning torches (OK, angry posts on internet forums and Twitter feeds... but that is merely the 21st Century version of the angry mob). In fairness, Rogers is one of the few brands that could make a souped-up LS3/5A, as most of those original era BBC-designed loudspeakers sold in the domestic market had a Rogers badge. But that brand equity would be eaten up fast if the SE version of the LS3/5A was more an 'homage' to the speaker than the speaker itself.

Rogers already makes standard 15-ohm versions of the LS3/5A, using new versions of the 19mm Mylar dome tweeter and 110mm Bextrene mid-bass cone originally made by KEF. Everything about those standard Rogers LS3/5A is as per the original LS3/5A; an outstanding mini-monitor of its time that still sets a high bar in terms of transparency, especially in the mid-range. However, if we are being truly honest about the LS3/5A, its dynamic range is somewhat 'muted' in its standard guise. In an effort to not be burned at ►





► the stake for my heretical stance, that is set against modern loudspeaker designs, many of which trade tonality and accuracy for excitability, and that's one of the big reasons why the LS3/5A deserves its cult status.

The whole SE version project actually started out as trying to find a way to make the LS3/5A more dynamic without changing the speaker itself. Rogers experimented with the loudspeaker stand and found Panzerholtz (a.k.a. 'Tankwood') to be a perfect, if costly, partner. Panzerholtz is a mix of hardwood and phenolic resin, prized both for its acoustic properties and the fact it's literally bulletproof! It ends up being about the densest material this side of making the stand of solid metal, but without the hysteresis issues or the problem of making a stand into a kind of 24" tuning fork you can get with solid metal stands. It wasn't too much of a step from there to seeing what impact Panzerholtz would make when replacing one or more of the thin walls of the LS3/5A's cabinet. Listening tests followed fast.

To maximise benefit without ending up with a loudspeaker that costs significantly more than the base model, only the front baffle of the LS3/5A SE is made from Panzerholtz. This also facilitated an investigation into what benefits the last half century of electronic engineering might have on the crossover network, and the R1 and R2 resistors in the crossover are of a higher grade (but the same values) than the BBC circuit specifies. Such is Rogers' commitment to the LS3/5A, however, that everything else remains identical to the specifications laid down more than half a century ago. And if you want absolutely identical to the original – right down to recreating something close to the original Gold Badge of mid-70s Rogers speakers – you can get that too.

The SE invites a bit of a musical conundrum though. The Keepers of the Flame will likely reject the SE version without ever listening to it. Those who want a LS3/5A because they have heard it can sound good will – hands down – prefer the SE in a straight comparison. It does everything the LS3/5A does, but with a little more pep in its step. Dynamic range is wider, soundstaging is deeper and more open, the sound is lithier and music flows effortlessly, and the overall sound has a bit more of a rhythm to it. Those who think the piano tone of a LS3/5A is sweeter than the real thing will find the SE is more like an actual piano. And yet, all of these changes do not undermine the basic LS3/5A presentation; speech is still world-class, and that more accurate piano sound just sounds more like it gave up artificial sweeteners.

One of the big changes sonically is in terms of soundstage size and the ability for the loudspeaker to 'disappear' in the room. Typically, the smaller a loudspeaker gets, the closer it gets to a point source, making for superior ►

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“Because that Panzerholt front baffle is so inert, the pace of the sound is markedly improved.”

► soundstage properties. The LS3/5A has long had that advantage so it's soundstaging was never less than 'excellent', but the SE version makes that soundstage both wider and deeper, and present a more focused ball of sound between and in front of the loudspeakers. This is most telling in the trail off from 'I Capuleti e i Montecchi', Act 2: "Tu sola, o mia Giulietta... Deh! tu, bell'anima" from the *Stella Di Napoli* album by Joyce DiDonato, [Erato]. Gradually the orchestra fades to just her voice and a beautiful bit of French horn playing, and the two 'instruments' sit perfectly in a three-dimensional space that just makes the sound that bit more enticing.

Perhaps just as importantly, the SE version makes the LS3/5A start and stop faster. Often typical LS3/5A music programming doesn't really challenge a loudspeaker's transient delivery, as a lot of speech and classical music is quite legato in reality. So for this test, it's best to really push the Rogers loudspeaker to the edge of its comfort zone... 'Becoming Insane' from Infected Mushroom's *Vicious Delicious* album [World Club Music]. When the fast back-beat kicks in, the speed and precision of the SE responds accordingly. Original LS3/5A models tend to be slightly behind the beat, but because that Panzerholtz front baffle is so inert, the pace of the sound is markedly improved.

The SE doesn't radically change the LS3/5A. It doesn't add octaves to the bass, doesn't make a low-sensitivity design with relatively limited amplifier headroom suddenly become a party loudspeaker... but if it changed these things, it wouldn't be an LS3/5A, and I'm both aware and conscious that this name game is sailing close to philosophical noodling. The point is, just that relatively simple change to a Panzerholtz front baffle makes the LS3/5A SE a better loudspeaker without undermining what makes the LS3/5A a great speaker to begin with. While that will fall on deaf ears to some, I suspect many will feel this the right balance between 'preservation' and 'performance'.

Finally, there are two parts to this story. The Panzerholtz stands designed for the SE are expensive but are a worthwhile upgrade to any existing LS3/5A. Compared to a pair of old but trusty Kudos S50 stands that have regularly been pressed into service to support BBC loudspeakers, the improvement is astonishing, in a 'Playtex' kind of way (it lifts and separates the sound). Vocals – which are the original reason for the LS3/5A's existence in the first place – are better projected into the room and are even more articulate. Listening to BBC (of course) Radio Four newsreaders and continuity announcers is an acid test of a loudspeaker because they are perhaps the best annunciators around and if you listen regularly, a known source. Even the mildest deviation from fidelity comes through as too much chestiness, slight emphasis on sibilants or even a mild 'spitchiness' to the midrange, and the loudspeaker stand ensures those elements are dealt with thoroughly. I think the stand is a mandatory 'must include' for LS3/5A owners, whether or not that loudspeaker has a SE suffix. It might also be a 'must have' for owners of post-LS3/5A designs like the

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way infinite baffle stand-mount loudspeaker

Frequency response: 80Hz–20KHz +/-3dB

Nominal Impedance: 15 Ohms

Bass/midrange: 110mm Bextrene cone

Tweeter: 19mm Mylar dome

Crossover frequency: 3KHz

Sensitivity: 82.5dB/W/M

Recommended amplifier range:
30-80 Watts

Finish: Amazaque (other finishes on request)

Grille: Black Tygan

Dimensions (HxWxD): 305 x 190 x 165mm

Weight: 4.9Kg (per speaker)

Price: £3,499 per pair

Type: dedicated loudspeaker stands

Base plate: 210mm (W) x 290mm (D)

Top plate: 190mm (W) x 160mm (D)

Height: including base and top plate
610mm excluding spikes

Weight: 4.3 Kg each, excluding spikes

Construction: Panzerholz wood

Finish/: Black

Price: £1,499 per pair

Manufactured by: Rogers International
UK Ltd

URL: rogers-hifi.uk

Tel: +44(0)333 533 0135

Spendor Classic 4/5 or the Harbeth P3 ESR, but I didn't have a pair of either to test.

The Rogers LS3/5A SE maintains the BBC legacy while adding to it just enough to make the speaker that bit more exciting sounding, yet not so much as to undermine what makes the speaker so beloved. Meanwhile the stand will make a group that often dismisses such things sit up and take notice. And the combination of the two makes a LS3/5A sound that I always wanted to hear, but never quite worked out in the real-world. +



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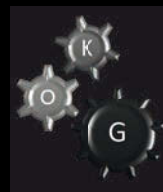
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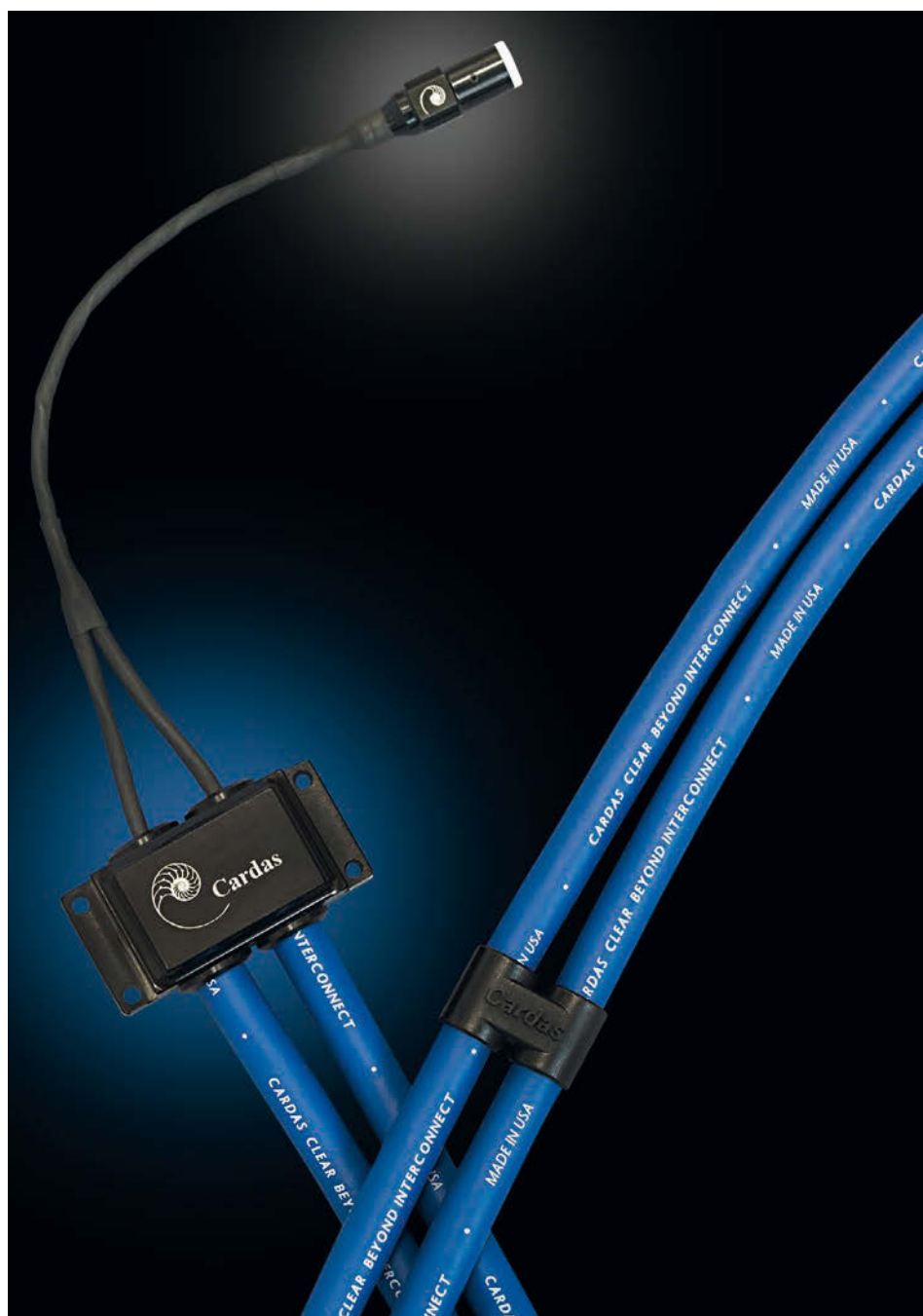
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Cardas Audio Clear Beyond X2 Phono cable

by Alan Sircom

The genesis of the Cardas Audio Clear Beyond Phono X2m (read: 'times two', or 'double') cable is as interesting as it is retrospectively obvious. The original – and still very much extant – Clear Beyond Phono cable takes a single standard Clear Beyond cable and teases out a pair of phono cables and an earth tag at one end and your tonearm connector of choice at the other. In fairness, I've not tested this particular configuration, but reports from those who have are extremely favourable.

So, perhaps it's only logical that the next step in the Cardas Clear Beyond evolution was to further divide the delicate signal from the cartridge into two distinct cables, and the X2 was the result of that thought process. There are two ways you could do this; take an ordinary set of interconnect cables and build a breakout box that connects to the tonearm (that usually requires a separate earth cable and creates a break in the signal chain where a break is best avoided), or make some kind of thinning out system that ultimately conjoins the two separate cables into one (opening up a potential strain-relief portal to hell if it isn't done entirely correctly). Cardas took a 'belt and braces' approach and combined the two. The connection to your tonearm (a right-angled DIN in this case) is a Y-shaped cable that ultimately turns into the two Clear Beyond interconnects. This is supported by a solid box (that could be screwed to your turntable's plinth if you so wish) and the two cables are kept evenly apart by two spacers along the length of the cable (thereby minimising any potential strains on the cable). Each of the Clear Beyond cables terminates



“A low-noise link between two devices that is electrically unchallenging enough to let you hear just what the cartridge is doing.”

- ▶ in a conventional Cardas-designed RCA plug (CGXLR termination available as a no cost option), although each also has a flying earth tag that pokes out of the end of the black heatshrink around the end of that RCA plug. It's a surprisingly simple and surprisingly elegant solution to a concept that otherwise has a high potential for 'kludge'.

Waggling around magnets and coils of wire inside a phono cartridge generates a voltage, but one several orders of magnitude lower than the output of a preamp, streamer, or CD player (or even between a phono stage and a preamplifier). As such, cables designed to cope with one setting might not work in the other, but fortunately many of the elements that go to make Cardas so successful in line-level applications also apply to low-level phono settings, which is why Cardas has long been something of a go-to for rewiring tonearms or for those using tonearms with breakout boxes. From a purely technical standing, the layout of Cardas is inherently well designed to limit both any interference or resonance from external sources and between conductors inside the cable itself, making it the kind of low-noise, electrically unchallenging ideal link between turntable and phono stage.

And that's precisely what you get with Clear Beyond Phono X2; a low-noise link between two devices that is electrically unchallenging enough to let you hear just what the cartridge is doing. In my case, that was between a Hana Umami and RCM Audio's TheRIAA. What's truly surprising here is how much of that cartridge's information remains locked away unless you have a cable good enough to release it. The Cardas Clear Beyond XL is that cable. My early Blue Note pressing of Cannonball Adderley's Somethin' Else is a fine example of just what can be heard in process. I've played 'Autumn Leaves' exhaustively over the years on different formats and felt it holds no mysteries or secrets. I was wrong. There's a 'situational awareness' that one immediately unlocks when you begin to hear those micro-details like hammer strikes on a piano or the sounds of sax keys opening and closing. These are there on the record, they are picked up by the cartridge, and they are usually lost in the aether soon after. By making a cable that doesn't place emphasis on one aspect of performance, these near-inaudible elements become just noticeable enough to make you feel as if you are listening to a live event. Other cable systems can deliver the same detail, but their tonal balance puts you on some kind of musical alert. While it sounds like an oxymoron, the Cardas Clear Beyond Phono X2 helps put you in a state of 'relaxed alertness' while listening... to a record replay system that can finally unveil all those dynamic and tonal nuances that are seldom heard in audio. This isn't a 'records strewn around the room' moment, more a realisation that your record player is now delivering more information across the board... and is doing that without changing the tonal balance one iota. The slow dawn realisation isn't that slow, however, and you find yourself liking what you hear and what the rest of your system is doing a lot more.

PRICE AND CONTACT DETAILS

Cardas Clear Beyond Phono X2:

£5,000/1.25m

Manufacturer: Cardas Audio

URL: cardas.com

UK distributor: Audiofreaks

URL: audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153

Any limitations here are effectively self-sealing. Cardas Clear Beyond Phono X2 demands high-grade components at source. If they are not of the highest calibre, the cable is forgiving and doesn't show up limitations in an obvious manner... but your money might be better spent on something like the regular Clear Beyond Phono instead. Beyond Phono X2 should be considered the last step on the path to an outstanding turntable replay in an already extremely good vinyl system, rather than the first upgrade. That being said, if you have mapped out a fine upgrade path and the Cardas is one of the steps on that, go for it. The great advantage here is that Clear Beyond Phono X2 isn't the kind of cable that exposes limitations... it just removes the cable as a potential limitation itself.

Cardas Clear Beyond cables are perhaps the best expression of 'less is more' in modern audio, and Beyond Phono X2 phono cable brings that absence of musical intrusion to vinyl replay. If you are done with shiny, zingy, bright or forward sounding cables colouring the sound of an otherwise outstanding turntable replay system, Cardas Clear Beyond Phono X2 is the obvious choice. +



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Russ Andrews RANS-1 Network Switch

by Alan Sircom



A couple of years ago, the concept of an audiophile network audio switch was all but the stuff of sci-fi. Now, however, it has become a staple of the modern face of good audio. What's changed? In no small part, it's the result of an ever-broader acceptance and understanding of audio meeting the requirements of networked audio. The 'everything makes a difference' drive of modern audiophiles might not extend to the direction of a water faucet or folding over pages in books anymore (what happened in the 1980s stays in the 1980s), but it does reach almost everything electronic in and around the audio system. The RANS-1 by Russ Andrews takes a lot of the good concepts in traditional audio electronics and applies them to the network connections we use to get the music that drives those audio electronics today.

The RANS-1 approaches the network switch in a classic audiophile way; it separates the boxes into 'gubbins' and 'power supply', then uses higher grade components in both to get the best possible performance out of the 'gubbins' part. I am not being dismissive here; this is a tried, tested and trusted way of improving an electronic circuit in the audio world and it has worked for preamp, phono stage, DAC and even streamer, so why shouldn't it work on a network switch? OK, the naysayers (of which there are many, and Russ Andrews makes products that are naysayer-magnets at times) will argue that in many cases adding a separate power supply and more esoteric components in a device is little more than gilding the lily, but they say that about a lot of things. Sometimes, a spot of lily-gilding can produce results, even ones that aren't in the 1940s book of audio engineering. ▶



► The Russ Andrews RANS-1 is an eight-port gigabit switch in identical and nondescript enclosures that have pinpoint blue LEDs on the front and the usual array of yellow and green LEDs to accompany each port. This eight-port switch is given additional shielding and damping, as well as a custom Trichord clock. The box without any ports is a linear power supply with a single IEC inlet (a Russ Andrews Yello power cord is provided) and the two are connected by locking three-pin power connectors, with a short (0.3m) Kimber PBJ cable to hook them together. The power supply feeds the switch and its internal clock with separate supplies. I guess if you asked nicely you could play ‘Pimp My RANS-1’ with a more exotic power cord and connecting cable, but this is more than enough.

My sample came pre-used through the review circuit (we’re not the first to review the RANS-1, and the box it came in free from instructions and was more *ad hoc* than we’ve come to expect from Russ Andrews), so there was no need for running in and the box was good from the get-go. I used it to connect the Linn Klimax DSM tested in this issue, both to the outside world and to a range of servers (Naim and Melco) during test. I also compared it with the Melco S100 switch (tested last issue) and a baseline Netgear eight-porter. Finally, I compared it to the Network Acoustics ENO filter (also tested last issue), and used that in and out of the digital chain.

The RANS-1 fared extremely well in all settings, demonstrating a quieter, more controlled sound throughout. Naturally, its biggest differences were heard comparing this to the Netgear baseline switch. This budget device seemed to give the sound a nasality and unsatisfying forward-brightness to the sound that might seem initially ‘clean’ but was ultimately ‘grating’. This applied whether streaming locally or online. Swapping that Netgear box out for the Russ Andrews RANS-1 switch (with no other changes) was a subtle shift in the right direction, making music more approachable and listenable. It replaced that fake ‘clean’ sound with a sense of balance and musical order.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Network Switch with external power supply

Ports: 8 RJ45 gigabit ethernet ports with additional shielding and damping

Clock: internal re-clocking with custom made Trichord unit

Internal wiring: Kimber Kable

Russ Andrews 0.3m DC link cable made with Kimber PBJ and locking connectors

4mm grounding socket

Supplied with 1m Yello mains cable

Casing: Custom, matching ABS cases

Dimensions (W×H×D): 187 × 47 × 130mm per unit

Price: £956.50

Manufacturer: Russ Andrews

URL: russandrews.com

Tel: +44(0)1539 797300

The results were less clear cut between the Melco and the RANS-1, with the Melco going more for the sheer detail of a performance and the Russ Andrews going for a more sonorous and relaxed approach. Both were extremely musical sounding, just musical in different directions. Finally, in the ‘compare and contrast’ part, the ENO filter levelled the playing field somewhat, making all three options less marked in performance boosts. Nevertheless, the combination of ENO+RANS-1 works extremely well... and sounds like an German experimental album title from the 1970s.

Taken on its own, the Russ Andrews RANS-1 really does demonstrate just why the audiophile network switch is a viable product in today’s audio. It’s a subtle performer, gently and quietly improving the lot of streamed audio by making it sound more ‘human’. Backgrounds are distinctly quieter, the treble is more refined and less harsh and forced sounding. There’s a sweetness and ease to the sound, but it’s one with a gently-focused sense of rhythm too. In a medium that is often accused of being loud and shouty at times, the RANS-1 shows it’s possible to be deft and delicate, without being ‘flaky’ sounding.

In truth, I’ve been sort of avoiding the whole audiophile switch due to my own digital preconceptions. Packetised data should be unfazed by its transfer through a network, but the RANS-1 makes a convincing argument that there’s more to the topic than it first appears. This is a true eye-opener. +

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Origin Live Silver Hybrid 2/Silver Hybrid 2S interconnect cables

by Alan Sircom

Origin Live is best known for its excellent turntables and tonearms, for good reason (the hint is the use of the word 'excellent' in that first sentence). However, there's a lot more to the brand than just decks and arms; it makes cartridges, phono stages and has been known to make its own distinctive line of loudspeakers, too. In the process of making those good turntables and arms, the company learned quite a bit about the making of a tonearm cable, and it found that those cables also worked well in line level. But then it came up with the Silver Hybrid/Hybrid S.

Mark Baker of Origin Live looked to the way a cable operates in a system; nothing new there, it should be said, but what Baker did is work out that many of the problems we attribute to a system come from effects similar to 'ringing' from cable capacitance (as opposed to resonance, which Baker points out has been largely 'nailed' by better clamping of

the terminals inside components among other concerns). By developing an anti-ringing design, Baker and Origin Live aims to side-step the issues of most other cables. There is a lot about Origin Live's cable design and ethos on the company's site, more than enough to fill several pages of a magazine. So, we won't do that.

Given the name, the cable itself is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a hybrid design; using a mix of copper Litz wire and silver conductors, some cryogenically treated and terminated using Graham Nalty (of Black Rhodium fame) GN4 RCA plugs. The secret is in the configuration of those conductors, which is inherently hand-built and a bit like the audio equivalent to the recipe for Coca-Cola or the 11 herbs and spices in KFC... although I'm pretty much guaranteeing that 'salt', 'sugar' or 'MSG' is not in either cable. The difference between Hybrid 2 and Hybrid 2S is the material content of the conductors, but the level of copper to silver mix is, once again, a closely- ▶



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“These are also the legato kings, teasing out musical themes across the piece of music itself.”

► guarded secret. This isn't to coat the Silver Hybrid 2/Hybrid 2S in 'special marketing sauce', but to give Origin Live room to develop the product without immediately giving away its secrets. Regardless, a long weekend of music programming fed through the cables wakes them up nicely; they sound a bit inconsistent in the bass at first, but that goes away fast and they reach close to their peak a few hours after first being installed and music is first played, then it's a slow and steady improvement for the next 80 or so hours.

Let's dispel the obvious first. Putting silver in a cable doesn't make it 'bright' or 'shiny'. That's akin to 'red car go faster'. Instead, what Silver Hybrid does is make the sound of a system incredibly coherent, giving music great fluidity and cohesiveness. This might not be the first choice in cable options for those wanting to lay the music bare in order to gain insight into the recording quality of the audio signal chain, and not for those who think of a cable as some kind of tone control that adds brightness or high-frequency zing (hence the 'red car go faster' comment at the start of this paragraph), but they rank very high indeed for those wanting to make a sound that presents musical instruments as a 'whole' rather than a kit of musical parts. They are also the legato kings, teasing out musical themes across the piece of music itself. Don't confuse that fluidity or effortless sound for lack of dynamic range or being too laid-back, however, as these cables are extremely dynamic and upfront-sounding when called upon.

In fact, that 'when called upon' part is what marks the Origin Live cables out for being so good for the money. Their character is one that reacts *to* music rather than reacts *on* the music; there is no imposing of a specific performance or musical angle here; the cable just performs effortlessly and gracefully. If there is limitation, it's that possibly the beat of a piece of music is 'swallowed' slightly; it's not like the Silver Hybrid 2 range can't keep a beat, more that it is so good at getting out of the way of the signal in most places that its slight reticence in pace is – depending on your viewpoint – either a limitation or a minor observation. Given that we can counter that with the excellent stereo separation and soundstaging the Origin Live cables produce, and that many of those who are directed toward soundstaging aren't so bothered by timing abilities (and vice versa) means most will just like their effortless overall presentation.

The difference between the two cables is one of getting more of that 'effortless' across. Silver Hybrid 2 is clean and detailed and coherent, but Silver Hybrid 2S takes that easy sound to new degrees of addictiveness and liquidity. You are closer to the music and the musical intent here.

It would be easy to simply point to Origin Live's cables as being an adjunct to the turntable world, because in part the cables are an adjunct to the company's main line of work. But therein lies a problem, because many might simply dismiss these cables as being 'vinyl related'. They might use them connecting a phono stage to an amplifier but might never think about using Origin Live between a CD player and preamp, for example. This is daft. This is a damn good cable that works well between any source and amplifier, or between one part of an amp and another.

I have more sympathy for the 'incomplete loom' argument because while Origin Live makes a wide range turntable-level and line-level interconnects, it makes just two speaker cables and no power cords or (perhaps understandably) digital interconnects. But that doesn't mean you should dismiss either version of Silver Hybrid, more that I'd like matching cables that make it part of a full family of Silver Hybrid cabling. Those who take more of a pick 'n' mix approach do point to Wireworld as a good partner, however; and Origin Live itself sells Wireworld power cords on its site.

I really like the Silver Hybrid 2/Hybrid 2S. They cut to the quick of music, with a vibrancy and fluidity to the sound that is attractive, yet not so overly fluid that they sound too laid-back and is intensely listenable. Hybrid is outstanding value and Hybrid S is a high-end superstar in all but price. Well worth seeking out. +

PRICE AND CONTACT DETAILS

Silver Hybrid 2: £535/1m RCA pair

Silver Hybrid 2S: £1,130/1m RCA pair

Manufacturer: Origin Live

URL: originlive.com

Tel: +44(0) 2380 578877

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Demonstration-grade sound

choosing the right recordings to test and showcase your system

by Alan Sircom

An offhand comment, made by a friend, sparked a bit of a thought process: *“What’s the difference between a recording you use for testing audio and one used for demonstrating audio?”*

While there are simple surface answers – “there is no difference” – springs to mind, in fact there is a subtle and occasionally blurred distinction between the two.

Recordings used for testing are designed to highlight specific attributes of a component or a system in a musical manner. Meanwhile, demonstration discs are designed to show off a component or system in the best possible light. Sometimes these two elements cross over, because the disc used to highlight a specific aspect of musical performance might also work well to show off the same in a system. In other words, if a piece of music is used to show how a system resolves soundstaging properties, it might also be used to show just how good the soundstaging is on a particular product in demonstration. This can end up being somewhat circular, with a reviewer attending a show, hearing a piece of music that shows off good imaging, then uses it to test the imaging on components, which then makes that recording prove popular among those wanting to show off their system’s imaging.

Often, the recordings used for testing a system are rarely played in demonstrations, because they are so-called ‘torture’ tests. For example, I often use ‘Chameleon’ by Trentemøller [*The Last Resort*, Poker Flat records] for a very specific reason; in ported loudspeakers, the repetitive almost square-wave bass notes are almost perfectly designed to trip up the port, the resulting sound quickly loses the attack and release of the note as the air pushed out of the port from the first note hasn’t cleared the port fast enough for the following note. About two or three bars into this deep bass, it begins to unravel and the sound stops being deep and fast and starts to sound flabby and ill-controlled. I would not use this recording in a demonstration unless I was absolutely confident the bass was controlled enough to demonstrate it well, and that either

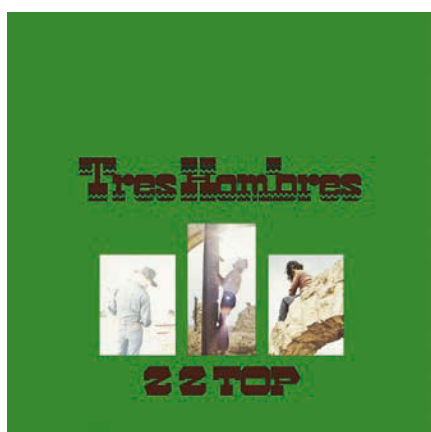


means a port large enough (or well-engineered enough) to cope, or a sealed-box or transmission line loudspeaker.

Finding your own tracks

Gradually, over time, a reviewer finds good recordings that highlight the width, depth and height of a soundstage, the solidity of instruments within that soundstage, the ability for a system to present detail, and the coherence of that detail across the frequency range; some of the best audio equipment in the world can break up detail into separate treble-midrange-bass elements, while others make the frequency range seem more contiguous and it’s largely the choice of the listener which one is preferable, and a function of a useful test disc to highlight the relative strengths and demerits of each type of sound. Yet more systems are particularly good at resolving vocal detail, and project something close to the sound of a real voice into the room, while others perhaps not as good ►

“This is why an expert listener might choose a recording with a female singer front and centre and also a heads-down rock recording.”



► in that setting are better at creating the impression of a full orchestra or a live rock event, and this is why an expert listener might choose a recording with a female singer front and centre and also a heads-down rock recording. ‘La Grange’ by ZZ Top [on *Tres Hombres*, London records] is a firm favourite in the latter sense, as it gives a live and direct swampy sounding guitar, well-recorded drums and bass. However, Billy Gibbons equally swampy vocal doesn’t lend itself to assessing vocal articulation and detail, so for that you might use something like Kat Edmonson’s *Way Down Low* [Sony Masterworks/Okeh] where it’s all about the voice. Use the same parameters for what rings your musical bell and find similar recordings.

One thing to note, often reviewers and retailers use recordings they know well, meaning they might not be the most contemporaneous tracks ever. In most cases, these are well-used tools of the trade, not necessarily recordings we might actively seek out. And sometimes these recordings take on a life of their own; ‘Tin Pan Alley’ by Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble [*Couldn’t Stand the Weather*, Epic] was originally the choice of demonstrators wanting to have a quick smoking break during a demonstration, knowing the well-recorded outtake track would leave people in their seats for ten minutes. It was only later that it became the audiophile behemoth and ‘must-use’ track in so many audio demos.

We’re slowly looking toward a time when audio shows might happen again, possibly later in 2021. And attending a show sometimes comes with a problem; we all want to hear

the music we know well on a system we want to evaluate, so why do so many exhibitors respond with a firm ‘no’ when it comes to playing our music? Part of this is down to controlling the demonstration; the demonstrator has a set ‘patter’ that will be accompanied by a selection of recordings and even if they prefer to let the system do the talking, they often have a set selection they run through in sequence. Playing a recording of your own breaks that sequence.

Losing control

Many also fear losing control of the demonstration; your music might fit perfectly both with their system and the other listeners in the room, but the person sitting to your right or left might want to play ‘Achy Breaky Heart’ (or worse... ‘Agadoo’) and clear the room of prospective clients. Nevertheless, I think a refusal to play the music of prospective customers does show an almost arrogant disrespect toward the customer. If you want to hear your music and the demonstrator says ‘no’, ask if there is a quieter time when you can come back and play a couple of tracks. If the response is still ‘no’, I’d consider possibly striking that brand from your list.

Assembling a list of useful test and demonstration tracks, and learning how to differentiate one from the other is a useful skill in the audiophile’s toolbox. Don’t just use the recordings that the manufacturers or reviewers use; build your own list of good recordings. It’s worth it to not just show off what your system can do, but help you build a better system. +

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THE CORAL

by Sean Hannam

It's been almost two decades since cosmic Scousers The Coral released their self-titled, Mercury Music Prize-nominated debut album – a brilliantly quirky collection of '60s-styled guitar and organ-driven pop, psych-rock, skiffle, folk and sea shanties.

This year, the Merseyside band, who have sold over a million albums to date, are celebrating the release of their tenth album, *Coral Island*. It's the best record they've made.

An inventive and adventurous, 24-track double concept album, with spoken word passages narrated by 85-year-old Ian Murray (also known as The Great Muriarty), who is the granddad of band members James and Ian Skelly, *Coral Island* is inspired by faded British seaside glamour, childhood holidays to North Wales, end-of-the pier amusements, pre-Beatles rock and roll and jukebox pop.

Musically, its list of influences includes Duane Eddy, Chuck Berry, Sun Records, Joe Meek, The Kinks, The Byrds and Crosby, Stills & Nash.

I spoke to one of The Coral's founding members, keyboard player, Nick Power, who also wrote the narration and a book that complements the new album, to find out the story behind the record.

"It's based on a sort of nostalgia. We've created an adult world that's been rewired through a child's eyes," he says. Welcome to *Coral Island*.

SH: How are you doing, especially in this time of COVID-19?

NP: I'm like everyone – I'm lost in the dream world of lockdown. I'm alright in my own company, and during the first lockdown my wife was pregnant, but the third lockdown has been a bit of a test – even for hermetic people like myself.

Do you feel like you've been marooned on *Coral Island*?

I've been marooned on *Coral Island* all my life!

Did you make the new album pre-COVID-19, or after the outbreak?

It was pre-COVID-19, luckily – we finished it around the time we were doing a gig with Supergrass at Alexandra Palace [March 2020]. It meant we've had to sit on it for a bit, which was frustrating, because we like writing and recording quite swiftly, but it's also good because people want to hear new stuff.

It's a fantastic record – I think it's your best album.

Thanks – that's amazing.

What was the writing process for the album? Did you all contribute songs?

James [Skelly – frontman] wrote the majority, because he's the most prolific songwriter in the band, but everyone wrote songs and brought ideas and bits of lyrics that were all threaded together. We used the idea of *Coral Island* as a kind of umbrella for everything. To use an analogy, it was more like *The White Album* – we wanted to make something expansive and cinematic.

Did you set out to make a concept album, or did it happen organically?

We always have a bank of songs that we can dip into and make something fit on to a certain album or into a concept, just by tweaking a few things, but we did purposely write quite a chunk of the songs for this album when we decided to do it. We had a few songs that we thought would fit. The kind of singles we write could be the soundtrack to a summer on the pier – that faded glamour of the British seaside.

I grew up on the Isle of Wight, so I can relate to that concept – the busy summertime, when tourists arrive, and then the bleak and barren autumn and winter, when the holidaymakers have all gone home...

Exactly – that's the vibe. There's a strange, dream-like rush of summer, when you meet loads of new people, or even fall in love, then, in the autumn, there's an exodus of people and feelings, and you're left to deal with that.

Was the concept of the album inspired by where you grew up, on the Wirral?

Yes. If you live on the Wirral, you spent a lot of your holidays in North Wales – places like Rhyl. We were trying to capture the magic of that, when you see it as a kid. When you see it as an adult, it's totally different, but we still love



“We didn’t really rehearse the songs – we constructed them in the studio. That was how it differed from a lot of our albums.”

going to places like that. When we’re on tour, we’re always happiest when we’re in Brighton.

That’s very much how the album’s split, isn’t it? The first half, ‘Welcome To Coral Island’, is summery and optimistic, while the second half, ‘The Ghost of Coral Island’, is more autumnal and melancholy, but it does end on a hopeful note, with the song ‘The Calico Girl’...

Yes – it rests in the knowledge that even if the crowds go, you’re safe within the madness of your own people. I’ve always liked how at the end of the movie *Halloween*, the song ‘Mr. Sandman’ plays – it’s light relief after all the darkness, but also a little bit sinister.

Was it a fun record to make?

It was really fun – it was great. We recorded it in Parr Street Studios in Liverpool.

We didn’t really rehearse the songs – we constructed them in the studio. That was how it differed from a lot of our albums. It had that pre-rock and roll feel – like old, spooky fairground soundtracks, with ridiculous amounts of reverb.

I can hear that – the glamour and excitement of the fairground, but with a seedy underbelly...

Going to the fairground was like a full life lesson in one evening – all the danger, beauty, thrills and heartache would probably happen to you, with no health and safety regs. Everyone can remember those times. ▶



► **I never won the coconut shy...**

Never? They've got them rigged in some way, haven't they?

Some of the album reminds me of old '50s and '60s 'death discs'. There's definitely that feel to it, as well as the eerie pop sounds of legendary '60s producer Joe Meek, who made records like 'Telstar' or 'Johnny Remember Me', and used the bathroom in his home studio to create weird echo effects...

Definitely – that's our magnetic north. Those death discs had a beautiful fatalism – it was also like England trying to impersonate America, in a funny kind of way. We used to cover 'Johnny Remember Me' – you can see us playing it in Japan on YouTube. That song and those sounds of the fair have always been with us – that dark magic.

Let's talk about some of the songs on the album. 'Change Your Mind' is one of my favourites – it's jangly guitar pop with a great melody and harmonies. It reminds me of The Byrds – it has a real West Coast feel...

Definitely – I think it came before we had the concept for the album. Once we get a song like that, we can work with it and use it as the foundation. If you get that in your pocket, you're cooking on gas and then you can go somewhere odd for a bit. I think it has a little bit of The Cure in it, too.

Yes – I can hear that. Maybe a song like 'Inbetween Days', or 'Just Like Heaven'...

Yeah.

'Mist On The River' is even more West Coast – it sounds like Crosby, Stills & Nash, and, once again, it has some great harmonies. It's very atmospheric. I like the haunting keyboards on it – in fact, there are some really good keyboard sounds all over the album...

Over the years, we've built up a collection of keyboards. In England, at car boot sales, there's an array of them – some of which there were only 20 made. You can't even look up the make of them online. They're probably worthless – not even collectors would be interested in them. Things like Tivoli, with just one great, magical sound on them.

Do you use a lot of vintage keyboards?

We use Farfisa organs from the '60s and also modern Mellotron samples. You can combine the two – we don't really want to be retro. We definitely want to be modern, but with a ghost of the past.

'Vacancy' has a cool vintage organ sound, which is quite Kinks-like...

Totally.

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► **I also really love 'Autumn Has Come', which brings the first half of the record to a close. It's a very haunting and melancholy song. I can imagine Scott Walker or Richard Hawley singing it...**

I love them both.

It reminds me of one of those great, sad '60s songs, like 'The Windmills of Your Mind'...

I love that – we should've got you in for the album! It's melancholy, but also slightly uplifting, and it brings the second side in. James wrote that song – one of the big influences was the album *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society*, which has a lot of Mellotron flute on it.

You wrote the narration parts for the album, as well as the accompanying book, which was illustrated by Ian Skelly. Did that come before the songs were written and recorded?

I actually did it as liner notes. I was inspired by classic British literature, like Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, and I love British comics. We're always trying to think of an angle – it was our tenth album and we wanted to do something different to keep people interested. That's what you have to do.

On the second side of the record, there's a song called 'Golden Age', which has some spooky organ and whistling on it, as well as a Johnny Cash 'boom-chikka-boom' rhythm. It sounds like the soundtrack to a Spaghetti Western set in a haunted fairground...

Totally – I'd go with that. That's one of our drummer Ian's songs – it has the sound of him playing drumsticks on a couch. It has a '50s Sun Records aesthetic – it's a lost art.

Some of the album has a pre-Beatles/ early rock and roll feel – 'Faceless Angel', the first single, is like Duane Eddy meets Joe Meek...

We wanted it to be the first single because it kind of encapsulates the album. There's a Chuck Berry song called 'Downbound Train', which we were obsessed with – it's really hard to play like that, but I think we do it naturally. When we walk in and pick our instruments up, that's the first thing we do. If you've got something rare, that's what you should be doing – you've got to stand out.

'Strange Illusions' is a lovely song – quite folky, with a pretty, spiralling melody. I think it sounds like Shack / Michael Head...

That's my first lead vocal – it's an old song that we dug out. Mick Head has been a massive influence on us – we all love him. The lyrics were kind of based on a Ray Bradbury book called *Something Wicked This Way Comes* – it's about a haunted fair that comes to a kid's town and messes with him.

In the age of streaming playlists or single songs, Coral Island feels like an album that needs to be sat down and listened to in its entirety, as a complete piece of work. It's also available as a nice heavyweight, double vinyl package, with a book. It's an immersive experience...

I do like playlists, but I think people now just tend to write songs and put them out... With lockdown, people have learned how to have more time, so it might be time for an immersive experience again. Psychedelia, immersion and being expansive are good – maybe we'd forgotten about that before lockdown.

It's almost 20 years since The Coral's first record came out. You've managed to endure and make 10 albums, while some of your contemporaries have fallen by the wayside. Is that because you've always ploughed your own furrow?

I think so – it's a fine balance of being alternative and interesting, but also being accessible and mainstream. That's always attracted me – that's the hardest thing to do.

If you were marooned on Coral Island, what would be your desert island discs and luxury item?

The Best of Joe Meek seven-inch singles box set and a Dansette record player.

Coral Island by The Coral is released on May 7 (Run On Records, in association with Modern Sky UK).

thecoral.co.uk





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Sept 2020



the ear
EDITOR'S CHOICE
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record reviews

How To Read Them

The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons that denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis Davis
JMH – Jimmy Hughes
SH – Sean Hannam
JK – Jason Kennedy
SM – Shaun Marin
AS – Alan Sircom

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MUSIC REVIEW / CONTEMPORARY



Fat Pop (Volume 1)

Paul Weller

(Polydor Records)

Lockdown was good for Paul Weller. In just under 12 months, the Modfather and elder statesman of Britpop released two albums – the summery and soulful *On Sunset* and now its follow-up, *Fat Pop (Volume 1)*, which, like its predecessor, is one of the strongest records he's ever made. There's a strong soul and funk feel to a few of the songs, but there's also plenty of, er, fat pop.

The punky 'True' features an unexpected jazzy sax break, as well as guest vocals by Lia Metcalfe of Liverpool alt-rock band The Mysterines, while the dramatic, soaring and symphonic 'Shades of Blue' was co-written by his daughter, Leah, who shares vocal duties on the song.

The title track, a paean to the power of music, has a heavy, dubby bassline – Weller describes it as "Cypress Hill doing something that sounds like a DJ Muggs production" – and 'Testify', with added vocals by Andy Fairweather Low of '60s Welsh pop band Amen Corner, is a '70s-style, funk-soul strut, with flute and sax supplied by Jacko Peake.

Pastoral and acoustic guitar-led ballad, 'Cobwebs/Connections', which could've come off *True Meanings*, features a lovely string arrangement by Hannah Peel, who worked on that album. She also scores the gorgeous closing song, 'Still Glides The Stream' – another reflective and mellow moment that was written as a remote

collaboration between Weller and his long-time guitarist, Ocean Colour Scene's Steve Cradock.

Work on *Fat Pop (Volume 1)* began in spring 2020. He had plenty of ideas for new songs stored on his phone, so he started to record them on his own, with just vocals, piano and guitar. These were sent to band members, Cradock, drummer Ben Gordelier, and bassist Andy Crofts, who added their parts. "It was a bit weird not being together, but at least it kept the wheels rolling. I'd have gone potty otherwise," says Weller.

Fat Pop (Volume 1) also sees Weller reunited with producer Jan 'Stan' Kybert, who's been at the helm since 2012's *Sonik Kicks* album. It's a rich-sounding and eclectic record – vibrant and colourful – and, considering the wide range of influences and styles, *Volume 1* lends itself to subsequent albums, too.

Each of the 12 tracks is instant and any one of them could be a standalone single. "That was a conscious design," says Weller. "I even thought about putting every song as a single first then gathering them all on an album, but that wasn't practical."

Apparently, producer Kybert was so taken with the concept that he half-jokingly suggested that the album be called *Greatest Hits*, but, wisely, Weller decided against it. Fat's entertainment. **SH**

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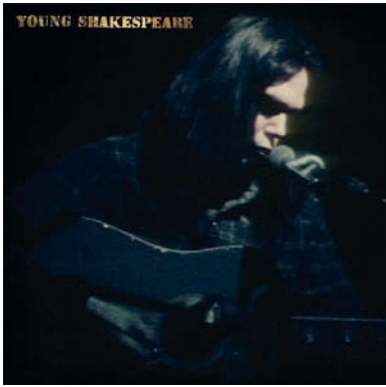
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HIGH-END SHOWS | NEWS | REVIEWS



Young Shakespeare

Neil Young

Reprise 093624889519

Young's latest release in the Neil Young Archives Performance Series is *Young Shakespeare*, a live solo acoustic performance recorded on January 22, 1971 at the Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut. It was a part of the *Journey Through The Past* tour, recorded just three days after the Toronto, Canada concert released in 2007 as *Live At Massey Hall 1971* and only a couple of months after release of Young's third album *After The Gold Rush*. This concert was recorded on film for German television broadcast and is being released simultaneously as a single LP and a package with the LP, a CD and a DVD of the concert film. This is the first official release of the music, little of which has found its way to bootlegs. A short while ago, in advance of the release, Young posted to his blog that in his opinion the concert was superior to the Massey Hall recording, "I say this is the best ever. *Young Shakespeare* is the performance of that era. Personal and emotional, for me, it defines that time."

The 12-song set list is shorter than Massey Hall's 17 songs, and eleven of the songs overlap. Half the songs were new to the audience, having not yet been released on an album. And what a song list! Twelve songs drawn from Young's most creative period. 'Tell Me Why', 'Old Man', 'The Needle And The Damage Done', 'A Man Needs a Maid/Heart Of Gold (Medley)' – you get the picture.

150g

A collection of greatest hits performed before anyone had ever heard most of them. And when they were officially released, they were built up with a band, produced in a studio with most of the warts burned off. Here, the songs are stripped down both acoustically and sometimes lyrically. Even more than in the Massey Hall concert, this is a more intimate Neil Young, more fragile and introspective. Part of that effect is the way the two recordings document the crowd noise—Massey Hall's audience response up front and loud compared to the distant and more muted crowd noise in the barn like Shakespeare Theatre. Part of that fragile impression comes from the more out of tune piano used in Connecticut and the greater number of wrong notes struck there, as though Young was searching for a sound he had not quite identified. Notwithstanding these more technical explanations, Young seems to have shifted his approach and squeezed more angst from the lyrics. The biggest surprise is 'A Man Needs A Maid'. The song, first appearing as a studio release on *Harvest* previously left me cold, with Young coming off a bit of a misogynist, a lazy bastard unable to pick up after himself. With slightly expanded lyrics and a more contemplative mood here, he presents as a likeable guy struggling with insecurity. On 'The Needle And The Damage Done' Young's stage banter has been refined and his sincerity carries over into the diffident performance. In 'Old Man' Young seems to have wiped the earlier sneer

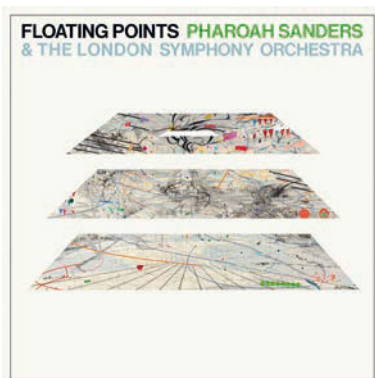
off his face referring to the 70-year-old caretaker of his ranch, a sentiment he probably feels more comfortable with now that he is past that mark.

The recording was made by a German television crew, and the recording engineer was Dutch counterculture photographer and film and television director Wim van der Linden. It is a very well recorded concert, but not the equal of the Massey Hall concert. Or even the UCLA concert eight days later, used to pull 'Needle And The Damage Done' for *Harvest*. Much of the blame goes to the venue, with a Shakespeare Theatre being an inferior place for recording music. The voice is a little thin by comparison. The guitar lacks the three dimensional 'you are there' fullness found on the Massey Hall recording, but that is a tough comparison.

Unlike so much of Young's output, this is not all analogue. Chris Bellman of Bernie Grundman used 192/24 bit Plangent-processed masters, a fact refreshingly disclosed on the back cover and record label. The 150-gram pressing from Record Industry in The Netherlands was flat and quiet. This is an essential part of any Neil Young collection. Even if you have the Massey Hall LP set, this concert packs a more distilled punch. If it falls short of the Massey Hall acoustics, it shows Young growing up quick over just three days! **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Promises

**Floating Points, Pharoah Sanders
& The London Symphony
Orchestra
(Luaka Bop)
LB97LP180**

Editor's note: This is one of those truly rare moments when two reviewers strongly argue to review the same album, because it's so important. Rather than let them fight it out and choose a second review, it's a perfect time to compare and contrast the reviewers tastes and conclusions. In fact, what's striking is they agreed on a lot more than they disagreed.

Promises inhabits a fertile musical landscape where jazz meets classical meets electronica meets beings from an alternative astral plane, imparting their mystical secrets for the good of mankind. A myriad of influences, borrowings, innovations and moods come together to create 46 spellbinding minutes of breath-taking artistry. To list all the musical touchpoints *Promises* invokes in the listener would take up most of this review, but if you think Miles Davis' *Sketches of Spain*, Sun Ra and the very best of Alice Coltrane you won't be far off.

Promises is so mesmerising and engaging, that at its close you find yourself reevaluating your jaded perception of how quickly time passes. Much of the credit for this temporal readjustment must go to the timeless quality of Pharoah Sanders' saxophone playing. Now in his 80th

year, the master of spiritual jazz is at the forefront of this recording, one that will undoubtedly go down as a late-period masterpiece.

However, Floating Points, aka Sam Sheppard, is the man with the overarching artistic vision here. Known for his atmospheric electronic music, *Promises* sees him take that atmosphere from the lower to the higher reaches. Yes, there were hints of sweeping strings on 2019's *Crush*, but these were chopped up and electronically enhanced, and they were invariably gently nudged aside by beats at some point in the track. *Promises* is a different beast, with true orchestral participation from the LSO and not a beat to be heard anywhere.

Promises is split into nine movements, and flows seamlessly from one to the next until the end of Movement 8, where close to a minute passes before Movement 9 delivers a final, beautiful goodbye. We reviewed the 180g vinyl pressing, but the download or CD may work better in terms of the experience if not audio quality, making *Promises* one continuous piece, without breaking the flow when changing sides between Movement 5 and Movement 6.

The first five movements are a mediative, cleansing affair, with a repeated seven-note, multi-layered keyboard refrain providing the cohesion that allows Sanders to work his improvisational magic on the saxophone – and at one point his mumbled vocal intonations.

However, Movement 6, 7 and 8 are when *Promises* escapes earthbound constraints and heads for the stars; this is the pulsating heart of the work. Movement 6 builds slowly, as layer upon layer the massed strings of the LSO swell and swirl around the same seven-note refrain.

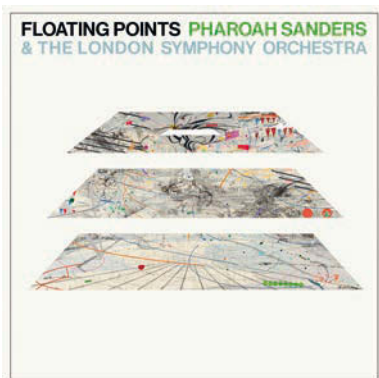
Movement 7 sees Sanders deliver one of the roaring solos with which he made his name – although placid has been his preferred medium for some decades now. The breathy sax is supplemented by cosmic synths that replace the real-life strings of the LSO, before themselves being displaced by a considerably more analogue organ that takes centre stage for Movement 8.

And then there's that minute to gather your breath... before Movement 9 begins, and confirms that yes, you did just hear something truly special.

This is one of those rare records that pulls together many form different jazz disciplines, both in terms of musicians on the record and music lovers who listen to the recording itself. While there will always be purists, in fairness neither Sam Shepherd nor Pharoah Saunders are the kinds of musician who attract that sort of purist. Mashing up jazz genres has had its ups and downs (just look at the highs and lows of fusion), but *Promises* offers much and delivers on that, er promise! **SM**

**RECORDING
MUSIC**





Promises

**Floating Points Pharoah Sanders
& The London Symphony
Orchestra
Luaka Bop**

The story goes that Floating Points AKA Sam Shepherd met saxophone legend Pharoah Sanders five years ago and the two talked about doing something together, an idea which resulted in them getting together in an LA studio in the summer of 2019. It was here that Shepherd came up with the arpeggio that repeats throughout *Promises*. This is played on a harpsichord with a piano and a celeste added on top, but you cannot tell that this layering is going, just that the sound is as Shepherd puts it “treacly and creaky”. It forms a constant across the nine movements that make up this album and it was this gentle motif that inspired Sanders to go into the studio and play the parts that give the album its soul.

The following year Shepherd decided to add strings to the work and got the London Symphony Orchestra into Air studios to record his arrangements. He describes the sound they produced as “a sonic manifestation of social distancing” because the pandemic scenario meant that the musicians had to be socially distanced and this combined with the live nature of the large main studio at Air made for what he describes as “a nebulous sound”.

Promises is made up of movements that are segued together to form a whole in the classical style,

on digital it comes across as one piece and it’s very skilfully arranged with light and shade, calm and intensity, ebb and flow all of which maintains variety underpinned by the simple arpeggio. There is no indication of what the title alludes to but there are periods of silence at the end of the last two movements that suggest a memorial for lost lives. The album is dedicated to the memory of the late Tom Relleen of the band Tomaga.

Promises starts quietly with the “treacly, creaky” arpeggio that doesn’t seem so treacly but rather tonally rich with some fairly quiet creaks from the instruments. This gives this motif an extra facet and life that you cannot get with electronic sources, there are plenty of those though and very lovely they get at times as well. Shepherd adds vibes too, creating shiny droplets of acoustic with perfectly judged reverb. When the sax comes in it is restrained and nicely placed in the soundstage, it images rather well in fact largely because it’s the only acoustic source that sounds like it has not been tampered with in the studio. At least that’s the case much of the time, at others there is a degree of manipulation to keep the instrument in line with the backing. In the fourth movement Sanders puts his horn down and burbles away to the backing, it brings to mind Leon Thomas with whom the saxophonist made the jazz classic ‘The Creator has a Master Plan’, except that Thomas was a vocalist, Sanders at 80 is all about the feel.

The recording is a shade on the

loud side by our standards and the 24/44.1 download is smoother than the vinyl, but the latter has a scale and textural depth that reveals a lot more, it also has a gatefold sleeve with superb die cut artwork by Julie Mehretu. The string recording sounds very clean at times and a little edgy at others, Shepherd pulling together the various electronic and acoustic elements and creating a sound that while not purist serves the music well.


The finest moments on *Promises* come in the last four movements where the strings have a lavish, symphonic feel that is reminiscent of Debussy but this slowly changes to something a lot more glacial for the crescendo. Breathy saxophone and synths create a spacey backdrop that segues into sounds that emulate birdsong in a jungle. Shepherd uses the strings with considerable aplomb, working up from a solo instrument to the full ensemble and taking the mood from misery to hope in the process. He also brings up the electric organ in the final movements and on the eighth the scape and power take on epic proportions, the dynamic range far exceeding that found on most non classical releases. Shepherd and Sanders have created a genuine masterpiece in *Promises*, in creative terms it is a tour de force and the emotional punch it packs is quite astonishing. **JK**

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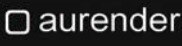




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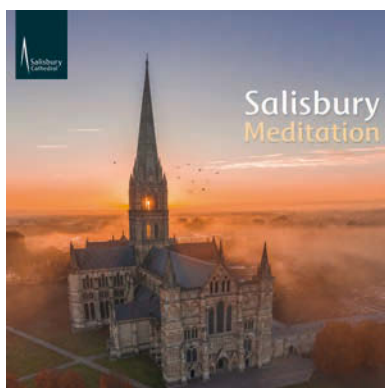
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Salisbury Meditation – Music for the NHS

Various Composers, John Challenger (organ)

[PIAS] UK

Hi-Fi+ has something of a connection with Salisbury in general and Salisbury Cathedral in particular. And while 2020 was a year where the cathedral was often stilled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 has seen the cathedral become a focal point once more... for vaccination. While many of us have had our COVID-19 vaccinations in pharmacies, anonymous local authority office buildings or 20th Century built Church Halls and sports clubs, the good people of that city in Wiltshire have received their armful of vaccine amid the Early English Gothic splendour of Salisbury Cathedral.

While people waited for the vaccine in socially distanced quiet along the nave there was a gentle soothing musical backdrop of live music played on the spectacular – and recently restored – Father Willis organ. And on the day when GPs (family doctors) from the Salisbury area who form the Sarum South Primary Care Network began administering the second round of covid vaccinations for the over 80s in Salisbury Cathedral, an album of that music was released on Monday: *Salisbury Meditation – Music for the NHS*. This is a digital album of classics played during the vaccination sessions. Profits from the recordings will go to NHS Charities Together, the

membership body for 241 National Health Service charities that give £1 million every day to help UK hospitals do more.

At the time of the album's release, the Sarum South Primary Care Network had vaccinated more than 25,000 people at Salisbury Cathedral since the programme began rolling out in January 2021, and both the Director of Music (David Halls) and the Assistant Director of Music (John Challenger) for Salisbury Cathedral have between them clocked up more than 270 hours of organ playing for those waiting for their jabs. And now a selection of that music has become one of the only live recordings made in the UK in the first quarter of 2021.

Salisbury Meditation – Music for the NHS is a collaboration between John Challenger, the Cathedral's Assistant Director of Music, and award-winning classical music recording producer and engineer Andrew Mellor of AJM Productions Ltd, it features sixteen tracks played by John on the Cathedral's renowned organ. The album is being distributed by classical music specialist [PIAS] UK.

The album itself plays very much to the meditation aspect; as discussed earlier, it's contemplative, light classic works designed as a musical backdrop for those waiting for their vaccinations rather than densely-packed complex music or deeply contemplative material that might make people think of those who weren't so lucky to be waiting for a jab. Many are arrangements for

the organ rather than organ works in and of themselves. So, it's more 'Sicilienne' by Handel than it is 'Zadoc The Priest', but that conscious choice is a good one.

The recording itself is excellent, really showing the quality of the organ's recent restoration, and has a delicate balance between flattening out the space around the instrument and making it seem as if it is too distant and is lost in the ambience. The album itself is both extremely well recorded and very well played. The tone of the Father Willis Organ is both sonorous and portrayed well in its natural acoustic. Given the material and its intended audience, this is light classical music rather than aural workout, but it's both perfect for quiet contemplation and a good excuse to give money to a vital cause.

Given that most people were emotionally frazzled as they received their vaccinations, it's little wonder there are tears here. Also, given that this might just have been the first live music some people will have heard for a year, the level of emotion here is conveyed well.

This might be a charity album with a very contemporaneous feel (as we move past vaccinations and back to our real world, it feels like looking back to a strange time), but the need for quiet contemplation never goes away. **AS**

**RECORDING
MUSIC**





CD x70

Stravinsky – complete edition.

Deutsche Grammophon 4839962

Igor Stravinsky died aged 88 on April 6th 1971. So 2021 sees the 50th anniversary of his passing. To mark the occasion, *Deutsche Grammophon* has released his *complete works* on 30 CDs – a new set that updates their earlier *Stravinsky Edition* from 2015, and includes important extra pieces...

Stravinsky successfully wrote music in just about every genre – ballet, orchestral, concerto, opera, oratorio, chamber, instrumental, songs, sacred. His views on music were interesting too; trenchant and very acerbic. Writers find him an endlessly-fascinating subject.

For this complete edition, DG draw heavily on their extensive catalogue of Stravinsky recordings, while using material from Decca, Philips and a few outside labels. The early *Chant Funèbre*, written in 1909, is now included. Only-recently re-discovered, it was long-believed lost.

For the three early ballets, DG choose their celebrated Pierre Boulez recordings, adding Leonard Bernstein's account of the revised 1947 *Petrouchka* to complement Boulez' recording of the 1911 original. For the complete *Pulcinella* we get the excellent Abbado/LSO recording.

Suites from the longer ballets – for example, *Pulcinella* and *Baiser de la Fee* – are included, but no suite from *Petrouchka* (with its 'concert' ending), nor the 1919 suite from *Firebird* – just the longer revised 1945

suite. The original jazz band version of *Scherzo a la Russe* is not included.

Also missing; the revised 1947 *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* – only the original 1920 version is included. And the reconstructed original 1913 *Rite of Spring*? There are at least two recordings, which – given its importance – might have been licensed.

The *Symphony in C* and *Symphony in Three Movements* are performed by Leonard Bernstein, while rarities like the fascinating *Persephone*, and *The Flood* are respectively performed by Kent Nagano and Oliver Knussen. Knussen also conducts an excellent complete *Baiser de la Fee*. Meanwhile, *The Rakes Progress* is conducted by John Eliot Gardiner, while *Oedipus Rex* is performed by James Levine and the Chicago symphony. The *violin concerto* is played by Anne Sophie Mutter, and the *works for piano and orchestra* by Ollie Mustonen. All are first-rate.

For the rarely-recorded *Mavra*, the old Melodiya recording with Rozhdestvensky is used. It's from the mid '70s, but it still sounds good... Most recordings in the set date from the '80s and '90s, and the great majority are digital, with only a few exceptions. Some historic recordings are included.

While this edition contains more Stravinsky than many listeners will ever want or need, virtually everything in the set is interesting and worth hearing. *Igor Fyodorovich* was a fastidious highly self-critical composer

who always made sure his music was meaningful and well-crafted.

It's instructive to listen to Stravinsky's music while referencing Stephen Walsh's fascinating two volume biography of the composer. Being able to place a work in the time and place that witnessed its creation gives valuable insights into *how* and *why* certain pieces were composed.

Stravinsky passing in 1971 certainly made headline news. Amid much pomp, he was buried in San Michele, Venice, not far from his mentor Sergei Diaghilev. Yet, curiously, the record companies almost all conspicuously failed to mark the event. Only CBS responded... with a measly three LP set called *In Memoriam Stravinsky*...


Once a composer dies, their music often suffers a decline before being revisited a generation or three later. But not Stravinsky; his music has steadily grown in popularity since his passing. Just look at the stream of new recordings released from a wide variety of performers for proof of that.

Now, 50 years after he left us, we have this magnificent DG set of Stravinsky's *complete works* at less than £90. It's a fantastic bargain; an essential purchase for anyone and everyone interested in music of the 20th century – and (arguably) its greatest exponent... **JMH**

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NEXT ISSUE

We have been promising this product review off and on for months, and finally it's here! The Robert Koda K-15EX preamplifier is perhaps the ultimate in purist audiophile line preamplification from Japan. It's no-compromise performance represents a pinnacle in solid-state minimalism and elegance. Not for the faint-hearted, this is a preamplifier for those who have graduated from the mainstream school of audio and want less, but also want so much more! Find out just how much more in next month's issue.



AGD Adante Pre-DAC and The Audion monoblock amps
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