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editorial

It's one of the less enjoyable tasks of being an editor, but you do get to write obituaries with alarming regularity. Such is the case this month. As we went to press, we learned of the passing of Malcolm Steward, contributor to this magazine and stalwart of UK audio reviewing from the 1980s until late 2015. Malcolm's writing career came to an end as the result of a serious road traffic accident that he was not expected to survive; in typical Steward fashion, he was too charmingly curmudgeonly to quit that quick.

Malcolm Steward was one of the mainstays of what became known as the Flat Earth school of UK audio, where brands like Linn and Naim were championed – often to quite extreme lengths – and all others were often sidelined. While an uncompromising stance, it was also highly entertaining, especially when driven by extremely good writers, including Malcolm and the then-nascent crime writer, Ian Rankin.

The Flat Earth way was not mere journalistic hyperbole with Malcolm; he lived it. OK, so the infamous response to the question "What budget CD system should I buy?" (Answer: Buy an Linn LP12 turntable and save up to buy an amplifier and loudspeakers!) might have had a touch of hyperbole! However, many in the industry with more than a few miles on the clock will remember visiting one of the smallest listening rooms on the planet, which may have been less than 10' square, but managed to shoe-horn an active Naim SBL system in the space.

I can also recall a long musical listening session running late into the evening, only stopped by the police beating down the door because one

of the triple-glazed window panes was buzzing like a power drill. Oh yes, Malcolm liked to listen loud!

In a very real way, Malcolm gave me my first break in the audio industry. I was working in photography at the time and assisting on cover photography for *Hi-Fi Review*, the title that led the Flat Earth charge in the late 1980s! As a struggling photographer's assistant, he 'gifted' me a small Naim 42/110 amplifier set, helped me on the first rungs on the hi-fi ladder, and put in a good word for me in terms of securing my first writing job in the industry. Of course, his professional demeanour of 'bulldog chewing a wasp' would never admit to such things!

After his accident, we knew this day was coming, but that doesn't make it any easier. In a manner made famous by the followers of legendary DJ John Peel, don't raise a glass to his passing, raise the volume! Play it loud, just one time, for Malcolm.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

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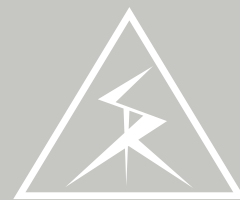
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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

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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.

Cassette comeback

My son surprised me recently (he does that a lot). This time, he announced that he would like a cassette recorder to play tapes he gets at gigs. I thought the cassette recorder disappeared in the 1990s. Is there a cassette revival taking place and if so, where can I get a new player?

Richard Peach, via email

Not only is there a cassette revival underway, there is even a reel-to-reel revival in full swing. It's not a complete revival, so don't expect a new Elcassette or 8Track player any day soon.

The reason for the cassette revival is simple. Providing gig-goers with CDs or digital files invites copying and piracy: curiously although cassette tape was the instigator of piracy, it's a little too analogue for modern music piracy, and an unprotected digital audio file is easier to copy than almost any format ever made. Bands would release on vinyl, but the pressing plants are so overloaded, an unsigned band might wait a year or more for the chance to cut a record. Besides, tape is even more retro-cool than LP these days.

However, the novelty of cassette tape comes because there is not much in the way of new equipment available. There are a handful of very low-grade portable devices that sprung up recently, but the days of a full-sized tape deck that might slot into an existing system are passed. You can still get second-hand recorders (Akai and Nakamichi models are highly prized on the second-hand market), but even finding new tapes is more of an exercise than it ever was. This may change if there's enough of a market – but expect high-end refurbishing options first!

Robert Hay – AudioQuest



Reader feedback part one

Your request for feedback (Editorial, Issue 179) for a new decade makes me reflect on how my own audio 'journey' has been shaped in the last 10 years. I guess that was the point.

Ten years ago, I was firmly in the CD only camp. I had amassed a wall of discs, had a very good Marantz player, and although everyone was talking about computer audio, downloading and streaming, the notion left me cold. It reminded me too much of the iPod; I never got the fascination over what was basically a portable device.

Headphones did nothing for me then. They do nothing for me now, too. Streaming on the other hand, I have embraced with open arms, primarily because in 2012 a number of changes in circumstances (a painful divorce meant a substantial downshift from house to a small flat) left me with serious space issues that meant the wall of music had to be reduced. Spotify was king, but sound quality was compromised.

► Tidal and later Qobuz have been important for me, as they have filled in the gaps in my music collection made when the CD wall shrunk. I found myself listening less, however, and I'm not sure if that's due to work-pressure or simply not getting as much from my streamed music. Regardless, was when my CD player finally gave up the ghost, I had the choice of buying a new player or ripping those discs, and I did neither. The CDs went into a cardboard box for about a year, then, I hate to admit, went to Music Magpie.

Recently, I've had a more positive change in fortune, having remarried and retired with a healthy pension plus an unexpected windfall meant I could indulge my hi-fi hobby a little. I still have a system that would barely register on the *Hi-Fi+* scale, but I like it.

You probably want something more than my hi-fi life story, so here goes. I think *Hi-Fi+* should have more features, not just endless reviews and show reports. Useful features too, about things like setting up home networks dedicated for audio, how new formats like MQA really work, what the readers really listen to (both kit and music). Ideally, I'd love to see some comparison reviews at all levels – I know Wilson and Magico loudspeakers sound great and sound different, but which one sounds better, and why?

Finally, when talking about what I'd like to see, it's perhaps good to talk about what I wouldn't like to see. While I get vicarious pleasure in seeing show reports from exotic locations, please try to make them relevant. Write about new things or things that were good, not "Here's the GTI 5000 that we saw in another show last month!"

Graham Watson, via email

Reader feedback part two – keep it coming!

You are asking for some feedback, so here is a quick look at my hi-fi history.

My love of music started with a Christmas present of a record player from my parents. This was bought in 1964 from a local TV Radio shop. In 1967 I bought my first stereo from Comet; a Garrard turntable, Goodmans amplifier and speakers.

In 1975 came the first of two Naim pre/power amps, an LP12 and Gale Loudspeakers. Later came an Arcam CD transport with a matching Black Box DAC and a change of loudspeaker to a pair of Castle Howards.

In 1990, 'tis all change with an Electrocompaniet CD player, then the dealer made me an offer so I changed to an Audio Research CD3 and pre and power amp into a pair of Sonus faber Guarneri loudspeakers. However, after eight months, the power amp needed the power valves and a resistor replacement, which then followed with each channel blowing up and the same resistor giving up again. So, I bought a Luxman integrated amp instead, and replaced the turntable with an Avid Sequel with an Naim Aro arm.

My current system is back to the Linn LP12 (with all the trimmings) and a Dynavector cartridge. This goes to a Trilogy phono stage, Lavardin IT integrated amp, Moon 650 CD player, Moon 180 MiND streamer module, Innuos ZENmini and Sonus faber Guarneri Tradition.

My current system was selected after a test period of a couple of week's listening in my living room where I also compared various interconnect and speaker cables before I made a choice (and that choice was Chord Signature).

Headphones: STAX!

All of my systems have been bought through dealers who have all been superb at helping me choose a system that suits my tastes. I have been to hi-fi shows when they happened in Scotland. The exhibitors guided me to their shop rather than a particular system.

As you might gather from all this, my main choices for music are vinyl or CD, or listening to internet radio. I have dipped my toe in streaming, but mostly as a discovery service that has steered me to a physical purchase. I find with streaming that my mind wonders and I end up not listening to the whole album. My tastes are quite varied, encompassing Rock, Jazz, Classical, Opera and Americana – I suppose it would be easier to list the music that does nothing for me (usually what makes it to the charts).

As to suggestions for the magazine, well maybe more technical information like if the equipment has to be left powered up what is the idle wattage. Or complete systems with choices to emphasise how the system can be improved or expanded.

Bill Henderson, via email



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SHOW REPORT

2019 Tokyo International Audio Show

by Robert Kelly



T

he 37th Tokyo International Audio Show was held at the International Forum building in the centre of Tokyo from November 22nd to 24th, 2019. This show was originally set

up by a group of audio importers to show case their wares, but a number of Japanese high-end brands – including Accuphase, Luxman, Panasonic and Yamaha – also now participate. This year there were 33 rooms – some extremely large – showing over 200 brands. The show appeared to be well attended and the very heavy rain on the first two days did not appear to deter the Japanese audiophiles, who were clearly made of stern stuff! Note that at the time of going to press, the exchange rate stood at 100¥ = 70p, €0.82 or 92¢. +



Hachidori Co Ltd., a small start-up based in Japan run by American Jonathan Knight, who left a career in semiconductor design to go into audio, showed the latest version of his valve-based tape preamplifier. This has switchable CCIR, NAB, AES equalisation, enabling it to play almost any tape the end user is likely to come across. It also has an RIAA equalisation setting, allowing it to function as a phono stage. Master copies of jazz and big band music from the 1950s and 1960 played on a Nagra T tape machine sounded very fine indeed. A version finished in a traditional Japanese lacquer called “wajima nuri”, will be available next year, priced at around 3,500,000¥.



One of the many desirable items in the Accuphase room was this pair A-250 mono power amplifiers. Priced at 1,250,000¥, these class A units can deliver 100W into 8 ohms and 800W into 1 ohm.



The inside of MSB's Discrete DAC showing a chassis milled from a solid block of aluminium and very neat electronic construction. The Discrete DAC is said to accept PCM sample rates from 44.1kHz to 3,072 kHz, with up to 32 bit resolution and DSD rates up to 8 x DSD. Price 1,450,000¥.



The Air Force Zero from Japanese maker TechDAS. The platter, which is divided into five sections with a total weight of 100kg, is driven by three-phase 150W drive amplifiers. Other features include the ability to accommodate two tone arms and an air suspension system. Pricing for the Air Force Zero starts at 45,000,000¥.



This Ayon Audio Crossfire power amplifier ticks a number of boxes for the Japanese valve lover. It is a single-ended Class A design, it uses Ayon's version of the iconic 300B valve – called the AA62B – and it is beautifully constructed. It can deliver 30W into 8 or 4 ohms. Price 1,480,000¥.



The demonstration system in the Accuphase room. In the centre of the top row is the new E800 integrated amplifier. This class A design delivers 50W into 8 ohms and a healthy 200W into 2 ohms. It is priced at 980,000¥ and was driving a pair of Fyne Audio F1-12 loudspeakers very well indeed.



In the EAR Yoshino room, Tim de Paravicini was playing stereo and quadraphonic tapes on machines that he had personally rebuilt. Tim enjoys celebrity status in Japan. This is due to his considerable ability and achievements as a designer, but also due to his strong links to the country, having worked here for many years. Shown here are a Sony TC-854-4 and a Denon DH-710F. Next to the bottom of the rack is Tim's excellent EAR 912 tube preamplifier.



Fyne Audio's F1-12 features a 12-inch Fyne Audio Isoflare driver that combines a 12-inch woofer with a coaxially mounted 75 mm compression tweeter, providing an exceptionally coherent sound. The cabinet work on this loudspeaker is superb. The owner of their distributor told me that Fyne Audio's loudspeakers are being very well received in Japan and are providing him with good sales. Driven well by D'Agostino amps, the F1-12 costs 4,100,000¥ per pair.



Grandinote is an Italian company that produces a range of electronics and loudspeakers. They use solid-state devices in what they call a "tube configuration" and combine this with their proprietary Magnetosolid® transformer technology. Unfortunately, I was not able to hear them play, but the concept is intriguing. Shown here is the Proemio preamplifier, which is priced at 1,300,000¥.



Boulder's unusually styled Model 866 caught quite a few peoples' eyes. The 200W integrated amplifier features a full-colour touch screen display. This is used to show the available inputs – you can even have pictures of your own sources, or show the unit status and it is also used during the unit set-up procedure. Price 1,840,000¥.



Lansche Audio from Germany showed its new 5.1 loudspeaker. This features an improved version of their plasma driver. This driver covers the range from 2,500Hz to 150,000Hz and gives the 5.1 phenomenal speed and transparency. Driven by Mola Mola electronics and an EMM Labs TX-2 SACD transport, the 5.1s produced what was said by many to be the best sound in the show. Price 4,950,000¥ per pair.

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Monitor Audio's PL 300 II. This three-way design features an interesting ribbon type tweeter. This has what the maker describes as a Micro Pleated Diaphragm and was custom designed for this model. Overall this loudspeaker is nicely put together. Priced at a very reasonable 1,600,000¥ per pair.



The Masterline 7 phono stage from Swiss professional audio products maker HSE Swiss Audio Lab gets the prize for the product with the most stunning looks in the show. Components that are matched to within 0.2%, a cabinet with 20 mm thick walls, that is milled from a solid block of aluminium, silver-Teflon wiring and a design life of 30 years go some way to explain the eye-watering 8,700,000¥ price.



Just to show that not everything at the show was priced at stratospheric levels, Triode showed its Ruby stereo integrated amplifier which will only set you back 80,000¥. This uses one EL84 tube per channel delivering 3W into 8 ohms. Combine this with a pair of headphones and a good quality streamer and you have the basis of a compact, good sounding audio system that won't break the bank.



On display in the Esoteric room was this handsome pair of Tannoy Westminster Royal/GRs, (6,000,000¥/pair) fitted with their Prestige GR Super Tweeters (550,000¥/pair). Tannoy has consistently been the most popular British loudspeaker in Japan. It is not uncommon here to see a large pair of Tannoys shoe-horned into a room that is really too small for them, such is their desirability among audiophiles here.

[master]

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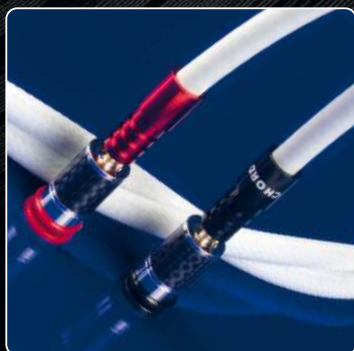
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AURALiC SIRIUS G2 Universal Upsampling Processor

by Alan Sircom

We've blown more than a few column inches on AURALiC's G2 system, and for good reason; the ARIES G2 Wireless Streaming Transporter, VEGA G2 Streaming DAC and LEO GX Master Reference Clock work together to deliver one of the finest streamed digital sounds you can get, irrespective of price. The system is completed, however, in the AURALiC SIRIUS G2 Universal Upsampling Processor.

The nature of the SIRIUS G2 does create a bit of a conundrum for the reviewer. Do you review it as the last part in the big AURALiC jigsaw, as a standalone upsampler for equally high-grade systems, or both in and out of AURALiC's matching products. I went predominantly for context rather than comparison, but in reality what applies in the AURALiC stack holds equally well elsewhere. So, it sits in the now four-tier stack of AURALiC – with the ARIES G2 at the head of the table, the VEGA G2 connecting the whole caboodle to the next device in the chain, and the LEO GX and now the SIRIUS G2 making each component give its best possible performance in that system.

Of course, this means a lot of potential ways to configure the system, as you will be looking at something like an Ethernet connection on every box, and inputs like coax or USB on three out of the four boxes. Which goes where for the best sound? The reality is there is a lot of redundancy or upgradability (depending on viewpoint) here. Taking the slow route to full AURALiCOSITY, you will likely start with the VEGA G2 DAC, amassing all your source components to play them through that device on its own. From here, most will likely go with the ARIES G2. This Streaming Transporter acts as a bridge product, collecting all the digital inputs in one dedicated place and controlled by the Lightning DS app. Just one Lightning Link cable connects all those sources to the DAC, and instead of taking some kind of proprietary route to create this high-speed digital connection, the company uses HDMI connectors (even if the connection itself is not run as part of the HDMI protocols). This makes adding in the additional products a breeze; the next in line is the SIRIUS G2 tested here, which requires a single Lightning DS connection to hook all three devices together, and then the LEO GX requires three cables to link all four devices together. ▶



“The idea here is you already made an informed decision buying that good DAC and streamer and you don’t need to remake that decision.”

► This relative simplicity of connection between the devices (once explained) not only makes sense, but works out cheaper than many of its rivals. A full dCS Vivaldi stack – for example – requires five AES/EBU and five BNC connectors; twice as many connectors and twice as many types of connector. While you can still spend big on cables in the AURALiC stack, the company has taken a shine to AudioQuest’s Diamond HDMI. Depending on whether you use them for the digital audio pathway only or both digital and clock pathways, that’s anywhere between £2,000-£5,000 on inter-AURALiC cabling, which compares favourably with the £35,000+ worth of Transparent XL cables used in many dCS Vivaldi demonstrations. Granted, the four-box dCS includes a CD/SACD transport, and the comparisons begin to run out of puff when comparing hardware as well as connections, but it is worth noting that the commonly-used connections for the dCS Vivaldi (commonly top-end Nordost and Transparent) routinely cost more than the AURALiC stack and all its own cables!

The SIRIUS G2 itself is substantially built, and relies on AURALiC’s digital smarts as well as its best modules to make it a step up on run-of-the-mill devices.

Some of the more outlandish products in this sector act like beachheads; they force you to change direction. You start out with one brand of DAC, but pretty soon the sheer weight

of electronics means the DAC you started with gets the boot. The AURALiC concept – although more than good enough to make such changes extremely valid – is different; instead of forcing you to view everything digital through an AURALiC-shaped filter, the SIRIUS G2 simply brings out the best in your existing products. Granted, its abilities gently coax you into exploring more in the AURALiC line, but the idea here is that you already made an informed decision buying that good DAC and streamer and you don’t need to remake that decision in the light of an upsampler, no matter how good. In fairness, I suspect those who have already gone far down one of the many alternate rabbit holes (CH Precision, Chord Electronics, dCS, Esoteric, Wadax, etc) will have a matching upsampling and clock solution, or have one in their sights, but it’s good to keep the options open.

A new and key term in the AURALiC SIRIUS G2 is ‘Universal’. The AURALiC-based pathway that uses HDMI cables to run Lightning communications between the devices is fine, but it’s an AURALiC-only gig; you don’t get the upsampling benefits if you use another brand’s devices. If you aren’t using AURALiC components, the SIRIUS G2 is still entirely relevant. It includes inputs and outputs for S/PDIF coaxial and optical, AES/EBU 110v balanced XLR connectors, and one USB in and two out. There is also a single RJ45 ►





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“Your humble 16/44 LPCM files get given upsampling power-ups like a boss.”

► network connector. How this works is as a go-between, connecting between your source and your digital converter, neither of which need to be made by AURALiC. This doesn't just have an advantage to network streaming; so-called 'legacy' devices get buffed up by the SIRIUS G2 too. Connect it between a CD player and a DAC, and suddenly your humble 16/44 LPCM files get given upsampling power-ups like a boss.

More importantly, how you configure the SIRIUS G2 should depend on what kind of DAC you are using. For example, R2R (a.k.a. ladder) DACs respond best to signals that have the highest possible PCM sampling rate, and the SIRIUS G2 will convert the incoming signal to 32bit, 352.8kHz, by-passing the internal interpolation and filtering, regardless of whether the incoming signal is a PCM or DSD-flavoured datastream. On the other hand, the SIRIUS G2 can upsample PCM data to DSD for a Sigma-Delta DAC, but depending on the chip, this need not be the highest sampling frequency. In both cases, the SIRIUS G2 delivers an upsampled datastream with crazily low distortion and noise floor levels. This is one of the secrets of why the SIRIUS G2 is so useful in a system; feeding a Sigma-Delta DAC the appropriate higher bit rate DSD signal allows the chip to operate at a higher frequency, reducing modulation noise, but this only works if the upstream signal is of sufficiently low noise. With THD+N figures when upsampling PCM to DSD as low as -158dB, the SIRIUS G2 feed, it means distortion figures at or lower than those generated by the DAC's own chipset.

Internally, SIRIUS G2's hardware is controlled by AURALiC's own TESLA G1 platform (used throughout AURALiC's product line). This is met by what the company calls the Proteus G2 Co-Processing Platform, which comprises 512MB of DDR3 memory and custom code on a Xilinx FPGA chip, which delivers 740 DSP slices across more than 200,000 logic blocks. Factor in three power supplies, a flexible filter, dual galvanic isolation and femto clocks, all



in AURALiC's own Unity chassis used in across the G2/GX range, and it becomes clear why the AURALiC ARIES G2 is no simple upsampler.

I used the SIRIUS G2 with both a Melco N10 and a Naim UnitiCore as streaming front-ends, using the USB output from the Melco and the S/PDIF BNC digital output of the Naim. I output these to both the AURALiC VEGA G2 DAC and direct into the digital inputs of a Devialet Expert 240 and an old Wadia 121 Decoding Computer on its last legs. I also used it in the full AURALiC stack as described previously. Unfortunately, AURALiC came in as the Totaldac d1 went back, so I didn't have a ladder DAC to play with.

In fact, the choice of DAC was immaterial, the improvements were universal, and compelling. They were universal in terms of music choice and in terms of decoders. It made music uniformly more analogue sounding; not in a 'fake LP' way, it just made music sound more visceral and real, with greater solidity, image separation, soundstage width, depth and even height and even more coherence, both in terms of frequency and timing. I mildly preferred keeping DSD as DSD and PCM as PCM, however. ►

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“To get the best from the SIRIUS G2 does involve some fairly complex app-wrangling.”

► Using SIRIUS G2 in a system means playing more music. That's something of an audio reviewer cliché, but here it holds because music sounds more harmonious through the SIRIUS G2. Whatever the genre and wherever the source. I found a lot of good in boosting ripped CDs to higher-rate PCM. Whether it was beautifully-recorded audiophile fluff (*River: The Joni Letters* by Herbie Hancock on Verve) or angular Polish nu jazz '1958' from the eponymous *Skalpel* album [Ninja Tune], the sound was just more approachable and understandable. Or, in the case of the title track of *Conditions of My Parole* by Puscifer [Puscifer Entertainment, via Tidal], more direct and frightening.

The traditional digital brightness and thinness that people associate with streaming begins to go away here. Interestingly, the more components you build into the AURALiC G2 stack, the more those criticisms of streaming became outdated and unfair. The graunch of guitars in the Puscifer track showed this in stark relief; the tone of the track takes on a truly malevolent disposition here, something it rarely does through Tidal.

Is there a downside? Sonically, I don't think so. However, to get the best from the SIRIUS G2 does involve some fairly complex app-wrangling, matching the upsampler to your DAC's performance and if you get technofear terms like 'Parallelize Sigma-Delta Modulator' might send chills along your heatsinks. Everything is explained in multiple places, however, but you might feel the need to hand setting up over to an expert. That being said, it's not complexity for its own sake, but digital matchmaking... almost like Tinder for DACs.

The above highlights aspects of the full AURALiC stack that don't quite unwrap at first thought, but unwrap a whole lot faster with the SIRIUS G2 in situ. When you hear this system, you almost automatically place it in the same standing as the likes of Esoteric, CH Precision and their ilk. At first, you do this simply because there are four boxes staring back at you, rather than just one. Then you hear what it does and the full stack meets the same criteria, even though the cost of all four AURALiC boxes is considerably less than its peer group. OK, very close investigation shows where the top systems are better, if only fractionally better. But upsetting the apple-cart is not the point; this four-box system goes toe-to-toe with some

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Streaming Upsampler

Input channel: Lightning Link (Up to 384K/32bit, DSD512), USB Audio (Up to 384K/32bit, DSD512), AES/EBU (Up to 192K/24bit, DoP DSD64), Coaxial (Up to 192K/24Bit, DoP DSD64), TOSLINK (Up to 192K/24Bit, DoP DSD64)

Output channel: Lightning Link (Up to 384K/32bit, DSD512), 2x USB Host (Up to 384K/32bit, DSD512), AES/EBU (Up to 192K/24Bit, DoP DSD64), Coaxial (Up to 192K/24Bit, DoP DSD64), TOSLINK (Up to 192K/24Bit, DoP DSD64)

Sampling rate: PCM in 44.1K - 384K (16 to 32Bit), DSD64 - DSD 512 (Both 44x and 48x)

THD+N: <-150dB (Upsampling to any PCM or DSD64)

THD+N: <-155dB (Upsampling to DSD128-DSD512)

THD+N: <-130dB (Downsampling to 44.1K/48K) Digital

Dimensions WxHxD: 340 x 80 x 320mm

Weight: 7kg

PRICE: £5,499

Manufacturer: AURALiC LIMITED

URL: www.auralic.com

Distributor: Auralic Europe

Tel: +44(0) 7590 106105

URL: www.auralic.com

of the gods of modern digital audio and not only doesn't come away bruised, but gives them a bit of a bruising too.

All of which means the SIRIUS G2 gets a real seal of approval. Whether used to start, finish, or flesh out an AURALiC stack or simply to buff another brand's DAC, it works and works surprisingly well. If you are sceptical (rather than a cynic) and take a listen, what it does to a digital signal is surprising in a good way. What's more, I've tried hard to hear where there is a downside to this kind of upsampling and for the most part I'm still trying. While the SIRIUS G2 shows listeners why AURALiC is so good by virtue of doing an exceptionally good job, it doesn't force you into an AURALiC-shaped future. That being said, if you have a very good DAC and hear what the SIRIUS G2 does for it, don't be surprised if you start asking questions about those other boxes in the line-up. +



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Krell K-300i Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas



The first time I heard the name Krell was in the 1956 sci-fi movie *Forbidden Planet* that was a remake of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* but set on a world far, far away. Glorious colour and Theremin-fuelled range of sound effects, groundbreaking at the time, leant an atmosphere of shimmering scientific achievement. The extinct Krell were so technologically advanced that they had driven themselves to extinction, leaving behind their accumulated knowledge in the shape of great glistening machines of unimaginable power.

Fast forward to the early '80s and the name Krell makes a re-appearance on British shores as an American audio amplifier called the KSA-50, followed by the 100. It was affectionately

referred to here as the first high-end solid-state amplifier, and it certainly had its advocates. It seems odd to reflect now that what we might call the British high-end, the Linn/Naim axis, was one of the only complete systems that made much sense. Love it or hate it (and some did both), it bought the system approach into stark focus. Though the worthy Krell had no ready-made supporting cast, it often found itself driving a pair of Apogees, perhaps coupled with an Audio Research preamplifier. But the important thing was that there was an American amp that wasn't only good in a straight line. It went round corners too. Dan D'Agostino and Krell had arrived.

You can research what happened next, but eventually, like many companies, new investment was sought, lots happened, ►

“Its low-level achievements are excellent, and those late-night listening sessions find the amplifier still weighty and robust”

► and by 2009 the entire D’Agostino family connection was broken. They were out, but Krell ploughed on. As per usual, there were all sorts of criticism alongside the new funding. The usual post-takeover stuff really and it has been no surprise to see that Krell has now dug deep and gone back to what it has always done best. The entry-level K-300i I have been listening to is a US-made integrated amplifier that embodies some of the original amplifier’s solid virtues, certainly in so far as it looks like a Krell anyway.

This solid-cased design, with its bow-fronted central section, is an integrated design that is easy to equip thoroughly for today’s audio environment. The K-300i can be a straightforward amp with separate source components like a CD player or a turntable (though it has no onboard phono stage) or supplied with a digital module that certainly enhances its scope considerably. This latter configuration is the K-300i’s defining character because it becomes a powerful digital hub. If you like your audio system as compact as possible and want to keep the component count down, then a K-300i plus access to one of the primary subscription streaming services makes the three-box system (one-box amp/streamer/DAC and a pair of speakers) an attractive proposition.

It’s a handsome thing (silver in this case) and heavy too at around 20 kg due, in no part, to its dinner-plate-sized 771 VA transformer. It runs using Krell’s i-Bias circuit topology that reduces heat and draws less power than their original Class A designs. It is also very well equipped as far as inputs go. Three RCA and two balanced XLRs are the analogue options and there is a preamp out too. Digital inputs, with the optional card fitted, include three HDMI sockets, two of which are for inputs plus a solitary out. There are a couple of USB connections as well. On the rear panel, you’ll find a USB-B, and on the front, you can utilise the USB-A, should you want playback from a memory stick. It also offers both S/PDIF coaxial and optical options and a single pair of splendid speaker outputs with spade lugs or 4mm connectivity.

The digital card is based around a DAC from ESS and can function as a full network renderer. It can deal with the usual file formats up to 192 kHz/24-bit and will even do DSD up to 128. It caters for all the quality online subscription services as I mentioned, including Tidal and its MQA encoded Masters. For those who prefer the superb productive music surfing

environment of Roon, the Krell is ready to be utilised as an endpoint for a Roon core. There is a good Krell Connect app too. Oh, and it also has Bluetooth wireless streaming. So, pretty well equipped I reckon for just about every current eventuality. It’s easy to set up and has a comprehensive remote control. Through its menu section, you can individually name each input and even equalise their levels if you so choose. A neat but small display window allows you to control the menu section and the day-to-day operation of the amp well.

I used this Krell with both a dCS Vivaldi CD player and streamed music using Tidal through Roon while the speakers were the splendid Wilson Duette 2 all hooked up with some Nordost cabling. At 150 watts into 8 ohms, doubling up to 300 watts into 4 ohms, you might expect the Krell to be something of a powerhouse. It is, but the Krell doesn’t just rely on muscularity to achieve some very musical results. Its low-level achievements are excellent, and those late-night listening sessions find the amplifier still weighty and robust through its bandwidth, and this came to become one of its defining strengths at any volume level. The sheer density and breadth of the music is always compelling, as is the driving nature of the bass.

Listening to *Soul Insight* from The Marcus King Band [Evil Teen] the amplifier has the sort of taut rhythmic impact that is so much a part of his music. With shades of the Allman Brothers, this draws its influence from the southern states. Its robust and solid bass and drum-propelled driving rhythms are intensely ‘live’ in feel, and King’s voice has that smokey throated soulful sound offset by his thick and honkey Gibson 345 guitar. For someone in his early 20’s King plays with an attack and a ferocious depth of technique that is remarkable. The Krell has an air of relentless push when confronted with this and kicks the rhythm section into the room, giving the drummer plenty of leeway to charge around the kit while the bass is so pervasive and articulate.

The amplifier has a fantastic grip and shows the recording for what it is. The music reminds me of rock bands of the ‘70s and ‘80s but in the right way. It’s electronically tight and rhythmically loose at the same time and the Hammond organ that feels like a real throwback is tasteful and often used as a thickener for the overall weight and density of the music. The K-300i shows it to be brim-full of flavour. The sound is ►



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► completely integrated and rhythmically to the point and on this album maintains the raw feel that is so absolutely essential for it to work. When listening to this through the Krell, I didn't want to sit back and peel the audio layers away, and I never felt like examining anything in minute detail. The performance is all about freedom, soul and impact and the joy and musical exuberance of just playing together. In other words, the Krell can get down and dirty and listening to it is genuinely an exciting and compelling experience.

Flip that musical coin and take a listen to Madison Cunningham's latest album *Who Are You Now* [Verve Forecast, MQA version] and you will hear how the Krell, tasked with a very different set of musical challenges, becomes an entirely different animal indeed. Madison is one of those singer/songwriters who comes along rarely and again, for such a young artist, seems to have accumulated a lifetime's experience from who knows where? Shades of Joni, Shawn and Rikki are all there, hanging in the harmonics and

the Krell's intimacy is gentle yet persuasive with a beautiful separation between the vocals and the beautifully arranged instrumentation. Now, this is the kind of music to walk in and investigate so you can take your time and look closely at the components and small details that slot together so well to make the whole. You can listen to the poetry of the pieces and find their meaning and appreciate how the various reverbs have been so masterfully judged to bring the words to life. Of course, you get a front-row seat to the production and the way the producer has given the material life. It's the sort of joined-up performance that one usually associates with high-end pre/power combos.

When I think back through the amplifiers that have left their mark, I tend to recall them through a single listening session or even a solitary piece of music that brings together their technical abilities and their ability to connect emotionally. With the Krell, this happened for me after watching the TV presentation of Joni 75, the celebration of the wondrous

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Joni Mitchell's 75th birthday. Her songs, performed by various artists have become etched in my mind over the years. I thought I knew them and their secrets but this celebration gave them new relevance for me. It's not the greatest of live recordings, and MQA hasn't transformed it into such, but the respect that the artists show to these gems is fantastic. Seal's take on 'Both Sides Now' has a fragile delicacy and a poignancy within those lyrics that is incredibly moving, while Marisol (backed by Los Lobos) singing 'Nothing Can Be Done' shows these songs live on and find new meaning for each generation. The intimacy of the Krell-based system took the listening experience to memorable level and surely we are all looking for systems that can do that.

John McLaughlin's live version of the flowing river that is 'Lotus Feet' from ►

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► the astonishing *Remember Shakti* album [Polygram] is so crammed full of the most delicious tonal and rhythmic suggestions. Yet, it merely drifts by on so many systems. Even some ultra-expensive set-ups that I have heard render it as a series of percussive events linked by some noodling bits of Bansuri (bamboo flute) and guitar. The Krell showed its tonal deftness. With a drone instrument throwing a distant sheet of shifting shade and light, the band work the meandering and elusive melody in and out of the themes. It has the space and time to be understated and yet to draw you in.

Jackson Browne's 'Live Nude Cabaret' from *Time The Conqueror* [Inside] is where the Krell shows its uncanny ability to grow very wide image-wise. It describes a different and even deeper musical landscape and acoustic with depth and a rock-solid bass line rolling underneath the whole event, creating time and ambience. Not every amplifier has the gentle confidence of the Krell on this song, but its overall clarity and taut power always work to bring the music alive. The production is sparing with nothing superfluous in the mix. It was delicious through the Krell, which is very fine at controlling musical perspectives and gentle dynamic shifts as well as tonal landscapes.

Drawing on its well of power and coupling it with notable resolution proves to be a winning combination for the K-300i. It has even found favour with Naim Audio die-hards (no easy task), who view the K-300i as something akin to a 'SuperDuperUniti'. So, purely as an integrated amplifier, the Krell-300i is a winner. The Krell has an excellent taut tonality that stays this side of 'lean', has power to burn and can deliver it into all sorts of speaker loads with speed and sure-footed dynamic stability. Like all good amps, it imposes itself on the music yet never gets in its way and the 150 watts into 8 ohms

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier with optional digital board which is retrofittable

Power Output: 150 watts -8 Ohms, 300 watts - 4 ohms

Analog Inputs: 2 x XLR, 3 x RCA

Digital Inputs: 2 x USB, 2 x HDMI plus 1 x HDMI output, 1 x Optical, 1 x coaxial

Remote Control:

Damping Factor: >228

Gain: 25dB

Dimensions: 105 x 438 x 457mm (HxWxD)

Weight: 23.6 kg

Finishes Available: Black or silver

Price: £7,500. Optional digital Module £1,300

Manufacturer: Krell Industries

URL: krellonline.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

is going to be ample for all but the more extreme systems and locations. So far, so good, but the K-300i becomes a different proposition entirely with the addition of the digital board, and for the extra outlay, it is well worth it. Audiophile-grade streaming is a growing area of the market and incorporating all the electronics into a single component is going to be attractive to many people. If you're one of them, you should certainly put the Krell K-300i on your audition shortlist. +

“Drawing on its well of power and coupling it with notable resolution proves to be a winning combination for the K-300i.”





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
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

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
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Mark Levinson No. 515 turntable

by Jason Kennedy



It says something about the state of the vinyl revival that established high-end brands which existed in the day of vinyl supremacy are building its first-ever turntables. That is the case with the Mark Levinson No. 515, which is the first turntable to bear that name in the history of the marque. Eagle-eyed record player enthusiasts will notice however that this turntable bears a striking resemblance to

those from a well known US turntable specialist, namely VPI. Mark Levinson make no bones about this and given that developing a turntable that's worthy of their name would be quite a challenge for an electronics company, the approach makes a lot of sense, why go to so much trouble when an expert in the field is happy to create a custom turntable to your specification. OEM turntable manufacturing has happened in the past, with companies including Rega making decks for other brands, but it's relatively uncommon now and especially in the high end.

The No. 515 is not merely a rebadged model from the VPI range. Mark Levinson has put some research into the design, and the result has several ►

► distinctions not seen in the VPI range. The plinth is a sandwich of aluminium and composite materials with a vinyl wrap, and it's big, at 533mm it's too wide for the top of my rack. Four Delrin and aluminium feet keep it perched high enough for the power supply to sit underneath with the drive spindle sticking up at the right height. The way that the motor sits within a niche in the plinth is elegant, and the fact that the power supply is part of the system means that you don't need to find space for another small box. It does mean a potentially chunky power cable hanging off the back but as the PSU and motor are separate to the turntable that doesn't provide a direct conduit for vibration. What this approach does mean is that the No. 515's performance can be affected by the nature of the supporting surface as this provides the energy path between motor and plinth.

Mark Levinson has chosen to drive the platter with no fewer than three belts, which is not a VPI trait. Levinson's take is, "We use

three belts to provide a somewhat tighter connection between the motor and the platter, which mitigates the effects of drag and results in a slightly more extended and accurate bass sound than a single belt. (It doesn't look half bad either!)." The motor is a high torque AC synchronous type with the requisite power to spin up the substantial platter to 45rpm from standstill; the switch system doesn't allow you to jump straight from 33.3 to the higher speed, you need to switch one off before using the other.

The platter is a robust and attractively machined lump of aluminium that sits on an inverted stainless steel bearing with a phosphor bronze bushing. The platter has a threaded centre spindle; however, the heavyweight stainless steel clamp that sits over the spindle requires no turning, which makes switching records a much quicker process. A mat made of a synthetic material that's thicker than the wool variety sits atop the platter.

The tonearm looks very much like a VPI except for one significant variation which is that rather than being a typical JMW Memorial unipivot it has gimbal bearings, an idea that Mark Levinson brought to the table. The other difference is that the tonearm is not a metal or carbon tube but a 3D printed creation; this has the advantage that armtube and headshell are all one piece and means that no finishing is required. I couldn't find any reference to its effective length in the manual, so I got the ruler out. As measurement required taking the distance from stylus tip to the bearing centre on the arm, it is a bit tricky, but using the supplied (metal) set-up gauge, it comes out at 275mm, which is close to 11 inches (279.4mm). The official word, however, is that it's a 10inch arm. ►



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“When it comes to getting a sense of being in the room with the musicians, it was a strong showing.”

► The printed element armtube combines with a stainless steel gimbal assembly and counterweight, the latter having the advantage that it allows for fine adjustments with a knob on the back. It's not clear whether the heavy counterweight is removable because of this facility, which could be an issue with the bearings in transit. The more obvious knob and dial on the arm is the large one for VTA, which offers an obvious and easy way to set and change the height of the arm. So much so that you can replicate VTA settings for different records which is quite a luxury. Rather than having a pair of arm cables exiting the back of the turntable, the No. 515 has a couple of RCA phono sockets either side of an earth post. You don't get cables for this link however so you will need to find some suitably shielded interconnects for the job.

The No. 515 comes in two forms, with or without an Ortofon Cadenza Bronze cartridge, with which the name gains an MC suffix. This moving coil has cobalt-iron pole pieces and has an extruded aluminium housing with a conical aluminium cantilever and a Replicant 100 stylus (no *Blade Runner* jokes please). The price jumps by £2,000 with the Ortofon in place, but you do get it pre-installed and set up at the higher-than-recommended 2.7g downforce that Mark Levinson feels sounds best.

After hooking up the outputs with Townshend F1 Fractal interconnect to a Tom Evans Groove SRX phono stage, my initial impressions of the No. 515 were not very good. It seemed opaque and lacking in dynamic contrast and timing precision, so uninspiring in fact that I decided to change the cartridge. At this point, I discovered that the fixing bolts were not sufficiently tight. Unsurprisingly, sorting this proved highly

beneficial to the results, which came under the category 'gas on and cooking'. Now Weather Reports' '125th Street Congress' [*Sweetnighter*, CBS] was busting out of the speakers in forthright fashion and flowing freely with it.

Not being a massive fan of record clamps I made a bit of comparison with the weight on and off different albums and concluded that not using the clamp was less appealing than leaving it on. It seems to sit on the sound, darkening the balance and stealing some of the life and energy which is what happens when you attempt to damp a piece of vibrating plastic, of course. Without the weight, the No. 515 sounds more open and vital with better resolution of mid and high frequencies, so that's how listening proceeded.

On Bill Evans' *Waltz for Debby* [Riverside], this record player resolved the brushes on skins of Paul Motian's drums very clearly, with a bit more emphasis on this element than usual. It's not the most resolute result I've had with this record. Still, the Cadenza is a relatively affordable MC, so I decided to change cartridges after all and put on something that seems more appropriate to the cost of the turntable. This cartridge upgrade took the form of a Transfiguration Proteus, which delivered a lot of the low-level detail that I was looking for straight from the first bar. When it was warmed up things got a lot more interesting especially when I put on Jocelyn Smith's *Honest Song* [Berliner Meister Schallplatten], a direct to disc recording with a full band that was rendered with considerable power and realism by the No. 515. Timing is not in the very first league, but when it comes to getting a sense of being in the room with the musicians, it was a strong showing.

With Joni Mitchell's live version of the 'Circle Dance' [*Miles of Aisles*, Asylum] the sense of being in a broad audience with all their requests for songs was palpable, the atmosphere almost crackling with the energy of the event. When Joni speaks and sings, you get a lot of the acoustic reverb from the stage; it's great to hear the character of a recording it takes the listener to the place and time of the event. This is as close to time travel as it's possible to achieve without a suitably equipped DeLorean. You get the warmth of Joni's voice in full effect, the performance might have had a bit more scale and power back in 1974 but I don't imagine that the PA would have been as revealing as this. The Proteus sounds rich and mellow on the Mark Levinson and when I dug out a vintage pressing of Al Green *Explores Your Mind* [London] to contrast with a modern audiophile repress it's clear that tape decay is not something to be taken lightly. The faults of the worn pressing are audible, of course. Still, they take second place to the clarity and energy on offer that makes tracks like 'Take Me to the River' all the more essential it sounded so good that I had to let the album run into the fabulous 'God Blessed Our Love' with its super sweet backing vocals.

For a bit of contemporary contrast, I put on Tord Gustavsen's *The Other Side* [ECM], which I reviewed when it came out on CD but only really began to ►

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Full-size, AC-drive turntable with 10-inch tonearm
Rotational Speeds: 33 1/3 RPM, 45 RPM
Supplied Tonearm Length(s): 10-inch
Drive Mechanism: Belt driven via AC synchronous motor. Triple belt drive
Speed Control: Electronic speed control
Platter Type: Solid aluminium with soft mat
Platter Weight: Not specified
Bearing Type: Hardened stainless steel shaft spinning in a phosphor bronze bushing
Plinth Configuration: Rigid plinth on Delrin and aluminium feet
Dimensions (HxWxD): 200 x 533 x 404mm
Weight: 26kg
Price: £10,000 (turntable), £12,000 (inc Ortofon Cadenza Bronze)

Manufactured by: Harman International
URL: marklevinson.com

Distributed in the UK by: Arcam
URL: arcam.com
Tel: +44(0)7917 685759

► appreciate once I got the vinyl. This album sounded sublime on the No. 515 with impressively quiet backgrounds and fabulous phrasing from the piano and double bass alike; the long arm gives this turntable a calm, sure-footed presentation that sounds even better when you wind up the level. I was still not quite feeling the timing however and decided to try a different interconnect to see if that would help, I went for Rega's relatively inexpensive but turntable specific Low Capacitance cable. This cable isn't as refined as the Townshend but did benefit timing quite obviously, and it also reduced hum a little probably because it's fully shielded. Now the Mark Levinson gained some coherence which made for even more captivating listening, the full beauty of the Gustavsen set becoming all the more apparent as a result.

As Mark Levinson is keen to point out the low-end capabilities of this turntable, I found one of my heaviest albums in Burnt Friedman and Jaki Liebezit's *Secret Rhythms* [Nonplace]. This 45rpm pressing of bass and percussion revealed that the No. 515 does indeed plumb the depths well; low drums in particular kick with a resounding thud and the percussive metal work zings into life. The resulting full bandwidth powerplay is highly entertaining and sofa-vibrating in equal measure. It could have a bit more of the reverb that the best turntables extract from this album, but the calm, powerful delivery is easy to enjoy. I went back to the Ortofon Cadenza at this point to see how close it could get and discovered a delivery with impressive extension and some genuinely 3D imaging. It didn't have the charm of the pricier cartridge, but I have to say that the texture it found in bowed double bass and the stability it brought to lively passages was not unentertaining. Continued listening did little to undermine this impression with a clean and open sound that's strong on instruments and gives voices a sense of 'body' in the room.

Mark Levinson makes the No. 515 with the company's customer base in mind, and ML amplifiers now have seriously good phono stages onboard

(which put paid to my suggestion that they make a stage that could fit under the plinth of this turntable). The opportunity to buy a matching record player will appeal to that base. For the rest of us, the No. 515 is a substantial turntable with many appealing qualities and a sound that is as physical as the record player itself. It would be interesting to contrast cartridges that you can get for the £2,000 premium for the Ortofon Cadenza Bronze to the turntable. This Ortofon is competent and revealing, but there may be alternatives that are a little easier to love, and the turntable is more than capable of handling a more up-market cartridge. But such things are often in the ear of the beholder so don't discount it by any means. +

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Triangle Borea BR03 stand-mount loudspeakers

by Simon Lucas



“**N**ever mind the quality, feel the width.” Citing the title of a ‘60s UK sitcom is not the most zeitgeisty way to begin a review, I realise – but it’s nevertheless appropriate, for no other reason than Triangle’s brand-new Borea BR03 stand-mount loudspeakers aren’t the most zeitgeisty product.

These days, a modestly priced pair of speakers like this tends to be designed as either a gateway drug into a life of hi-fi hedonism or as an accompaniment to a compact all-in-one system. And, first and foremost, they tend to be of manageable size. Look at the companies who have dominated the entry level during this century (Q Acoustics,

Monitor Audio or DALI, for instance) – if their £300–£400 standmounters have anything in common (beyond excellent pound-for-pound performance), it’s that they’re usually small enough to remain discreet.

Well, Triangle doesn’t roll like that.

If there’s any such thing as a typical Triangle loudspeaker, it features a large cabinet and a large number of drivers. And while Borea BR03 is just a two-way design, its cabinet is (by prevailing standards) undeniably on the large side. There’s no replacement for displacement, however, and significant internal volume never held a loudspeaker back before, so that the Borea BR03 are a shade larger than the typical ‘bookshelf’ design normally touted at the price should prove popular. ▶

“Their emphasis on drive, vigour, punch and all aspects of music-making that can turn every tune into a party-starter.”

► What is certain, though, is that Triangle hasn't allowed the need to hit an extremely modest price point to compromise its engineering principles. Yes, that hefty cabinet is covered in the sort of vinyl wrap that's much more the norm than the exception at this price. But after that, Triangle's Borea BR03 are specified like more expensive speakers.

Inside the precisely-cornered cabinet, for example, Triangle has deployed its Driver Vibration Absorption System: perforated MDF panels and foam gaskets stiffen the enclosure, and both reject and absorb unwelcome vibration at the same time. At the back of the cabinet there are nice chunky gold-plated binding posts capable of accepting a 4mm banana plug.

And up front, the bottom of the baffle is dominated by a couple of forward-facing tubular reflex ports – these should offer a degree more flexibility when it comes to positioning the BR03s, if a little less opportunity for fine-tuning low frequency response, than the more usual rear-firing arrangement. Above them sits a 165mm mid/bass driver with a diaphragm built of natural cellulose paper, bulleted in the centre for the usual reasons. Triangle is 40 years old this year and has been designing and building its own drivers for the last 35 of them – this particular driver technology has trickled down from Triangle's more expensive Esprit Ez range. Up top is a 25mm silk dome 'Efficient Flow System' tweeter – it's sited behind a phase plug designed to make the highest frequencies less directional, and thus the speaker (once again) easier to position. The speaker grilles are attached magnetically, although the grille-off appearance of the BR03s is so fashionably retro that a quartet of grille-holes would look appropriate too.

There are some other worthwhile numbers attached to the BR03 beyond the 38 × 21 × 31cm cabinet dimensions. Frequency response is a claimed 46Hz–22kHz, which is impressive even by 'chunky stand-mount' standards, while sensitivity of 90dB/W/m and a nominal 8 Ohms impedance shouldn't make the Triangles all that taxing a load. A 7kg kerb weight per speaker is pretty significant, too.

Securing the BR03s on a pair of Atacama Moseco 7 stands brings them up to a good operating height, isolates them as effectively as they ever can be, and gives a strong visual suggestion of a big, boxy lollipop.

The majority of the critical listening is done using the Marantz M-CR612 (or Melody X to its friends) all-in-one stereo system. It's as compact as the BR03s are beefy, and during the testing process serves up audio from CD, internet radio and many of the world's most popular streaming services. Naim's excellent pocket-rocket NAP 100 power amp (in conjunction with the equally compact UnitiQute 2) is also pressed into service – purely to examine the limits of the Triangles' capabilities, you understand. Speaker cable is QED's splendid new XT40i Reference – at £11 per metre it's at the upper end of what's appropriate.

It doesn't take long for the BR03s to establish their modus operandi – once through Count Basie's technicolor version of The Beatles' *Do You Want To Know A Secret?* [Verve] is more than enough for them to lay their cards on the table.

Fundamentally, the Triangles want to entertain you. It's not that they're ignorant of the concepts of accuracy and fidelity, it's simply that they don't prioritise them. Instead, the BR03 put their emphasis on drive, vigour, punch and all the aspects of music-making that can turn every tune into a party-starter.

The midrange is the attention-hogger here. A biggish band arrangement like this one can too often result in the middle of the frequency range getting crowded and consequently indistinct, but the BR03s do sterling work in keeping competing elements distinct. This lack of clutter gives a reasonable impression of breathing space on what could easily descend into sounding like a congested soundstage, and while the Triangles won't unseat the (admittedly way more expensive) leaders in the field in the clarity stakes, they're an enjoyably organised and upfront listen.

Unlike quite a few price-comparable rivals, though, the BR03s don't confuse excitement with shouting. The hefty dynamic variances in the Basie recording are ramped up confidently, but the Triangles are never in any danger of letting things get out of hand. And their powers of midrange communication are spotlit even more effectively by a listen to Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds' *(Are You) The One That I've Been Waiting For?* [Mute]. There's an unequivocal quality to the singer's delivery that brings makes the character and sincerity of his vocal more significant than the finest details – which is just as well, really, because the finest details tend to go astray in the BR03s' never-ending quest for scale and dynamism. ►

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Stepping into the spotlight



“They generate scale even greater than they look like they might; their soundstaging is believable.”

► Swapping over to Blawan's *Why They Hide Their Bodies Under My Garage?* [Hessle Audio] switches the emphasis to the top and bottom of the frequency range, and here too the Triangles are determined, like Viv Savage in *This Is Spinal Tap*, to have a good time all the time. Treble sounds attack with proper verve and purpose. Nothing in the nature of the Marantz, Naim or QED partners in this test suggests that the Triangles are adroit and direct at the highest frequencies. Place them in a system with a very forthright treble and they could be provoked into brightness, however.

By way of contrast, bass sounds are altogether more disciplined. There's the necessary punch and heft, but enough control and square-edged rapidity to initially make that claimed 46Hz seem a possible false alarm. In fact, there's no shortage of extension here – but the control that's at such a premium at the top end is far more apparent down at the bottom.

Overall tonality is generally convincing (though the bass response can rob some recordings of richness) and that's true of timing too. Only when a recording gets complex and multi-faceted (as the Basie does, constantly) do the Triangles demonstrate a mild lack of unity and togetherness.

In every other respect, the BR03s fluctuate between 'pretty good' and 'really quite impressive'. They generate scale even greater than they look like they might; their soundstaging is believable; low-level harmonic dynamics are alluded to while broad-strokes dynamism is available in spades. But they're capable of decent subtlety, too, even if you know they're drumming their fingers while waiting for the next opportunity to pounce.

This magazine is far from unfamiliar with speakers costing anywhere between ten and one hundred times the price of the Borea BR03s. But keep the Triangles firmly in context – of their likely partnering electronics, mostly. Then their enthusiasm, verve and straightforward musicality makes them an intriguing choice. And, as is obvious by now, any shortfall in perceived quality is more than made up for in straightforward quantity. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, two-driver stand-mount monitor with front-ported bass reflex enclosure

Driver complement: 25mm EFS silk dome tweeter; 165mm cellulose paper mid/bass driver

Frequency response: 46Hz–22kHz

Crossover frequency:

Impedance: 8 Ohms

Sensitivity: 90dB/W/m

Dimensions (H×W×D): 380 × 206 × 314mm

Weight: 7kg/each

Finishes: Black; White; Walnut

Price: £399/pair

Manufacturer: Triangle

URL: trianglehifi.com

UK distributor: Elite Audio

URL: eliteaudiouk.com

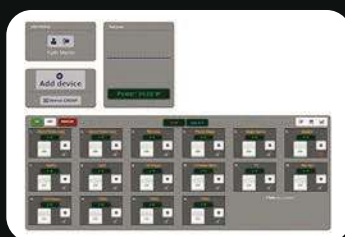


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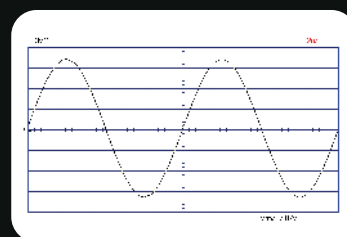


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———— The Art of the digital domain ————

Thorens TD 1601 suspended semi-automatic turntable

by Janine Elliot



As a teenager my close friend had a Thorens TD 160 with a SME Series 2 arm. I was jealous. All that I could muster from my meagre pocket money was a Trio KD1033B, and whilst that turntable was well respected in the hi-fi magazines of the day as a starter spinner it could never compete with the Swiss made

Thorens, a turntable considered as one of the best in the 70's. It and its forerunners, notably the TD 150 (1965) and TD 125 (1968) were the company's first models to have a 3-point spring suspended sub chassis, an idea originally conceived by Acoustic Research and later also taken up by Linn and Ariston amongst others. Thoren's TD 126 and its extensions the TD 127 and TD 226, plus the Reference from 1980 and Prestige from 1983 were also designed with this kind of suspension. At the 2019 Munich hi-fi show amidst retro designs from a number of famous manufacturers I was quite excited to see TD 160 look-alikes, in the form of the TD 1600 and TD 1601 (£2,299 and £2,799 ►

“Thorens began its long history in 1883 by producing music boxes and clock movements; it even made Edison-type cylinder players.”

► respectively). They were being presented alongside the TM 1600, a reel to reel player of the same size, due out this year developed in cooperation with manufacturer Ballfinger. Thorens had a great reputation in the past for turntables – and I’m honoured to possess both a TD 124 and TD 135 – but it is the TD 160 that I always wanted to own.

Thorens began its long history in 1883 by producing musical boxes and clock movements; it even made Edison-type cylinder players, harmonicas and cigarette lighters. Whilst most of its turntables were iconic there were a few ‘original’ ideas that perhaps the company would like to forget about; from the TDW 224 that had a record changer for eight discs sat next to the player so that they didn’t rest on the spindle, to even the development of a concrete plinth. The company was indeed prolific in terms of its designs and numbers of models. Whilst it effectively hit the bumpers a while back it has been given a new lease of life in the form of Gunter Kürten who took over in May 2018. His CV is impressive; former CEO of ELAC, General Manager of Denon and various roles at LG, Sharp and Sony. His acquisition of the company brings a desire to carry forward some of the company’s history into the 21st century and it is fitting to see a new incarnation of the TD 160 albeit with significant developments in the form of the motor, arm, suspension and also semi-automation in the case of the TD 1601. Gunter wants to reflect the original ethos of the brand; things like high performance, engineering innovation and good value. Indeed, there are a large number of models (17 on their website!) being made under the Thorens label.

The three-point suspension and damping on the TD 1600 and TD 1601 is important to mention, as rather than having the three

conical coil springs suspended from above (as it is in the models mentioned earlier) it is now supported on the baseboard. This means that the sub-chassis doesn’t hang but rather it stands on these springs, and is free from wobbling using a clever system that stops lateral movement; a stiffening plate is there to ensure rigidity of the sub-chassis and ties the location of the main bearing precisely with the arm mounting point. A tension wire is in place to oppose the pull on the suspension from the drive belt and to lessen ‘suspension stagger’ by stabilizing the movement of the sub-chassis in the vertical plane, restricting any lateral movement specifically in the direction opposing the drive belt.

Both new models come supplied with a tonearm, the gimball bearing 9” TP 92. Where the TD 1600 is a basic manual model the TD 1601 here for review is semi-automatic with motor stop and arm-lift at the end of the record, allowing you to fall asleep at the end of the LP without fear of wearing out the stylus or motor. The extra £500 for this turntable is simply for the addition of this mechanism. Setting up the cartridge weight requires plugging in the unit and pressing the “lift” button on the right of the plinth to lower the arm as there is obviously no traditional manual viscous cue. Placing the stylus on the record is easy; turn the motor on, move the arm to where you want it to be and press the ‘green’ illuminated lift button and when the record has been lowered onto the record it will change to ‘red’. Selection of 33rpm and 45rpm is made using buttons to the left. The exact point at which the arm raises at the end of the record can be adjusted internally, and the turntable has a separate and fairly quiet motor that lifts the stylus off the record. Both models also have balanced XLR output and come in a choice of piano black or beautiful high-gloss walnut variants. XLR outputs have a little ‘form’ with Thorens, having previously been used on the TD 900 series, which were released in May 2017. However, Thorens only released three such models (903, 905, 907) and they are being phased out this year, making the TD 1600/1601’s XLR output unique in the Thorens line. The similarity with the iconic TD 160 is evident in the classical wooden plinth, two-part platter with inner belt drive, thick rubber mat, the arm board and acrylic dust cover. That cover particularly makes the turntable look retro.

The players come supplied with external power supplying +/- 16V to the turntable chassis mounted printed circuit board. A quartz referenced synthesized AC signal of low voltage of around 12v is then generated to power the synchronous AC motor of a type used by other notable turntable manufacturers. A stable and smooth AC signal is switchable between two frequencies which enables the player to play both the speeds. The circuit also allows fine adjustment of each speed via two trims at the rear of the turntable. Like the TD 160 this is a belt driven turntable with the belt feeding the inner of the two part-platter. The main platter fits carefully over the smaller one making for a very tight fit, so care must be taken in placing it on the smaller platter. ►



P1
PHONO PRE AMPLIFIER



I1 INTEGRATED
AMPLIFIER



P1 + X1
PHONO PRE + POWER



M1, L1, P1, C1, D1, I1
EDITORS CHOICE



I1 INTEGRATED
AMPLIFIER



I1 INTEGRATED
AMPLIFIER



M1
POWER AMPLIFIER



C1
D/A CONTROLLER



P1 PHONO
PRE AMPLIFIER

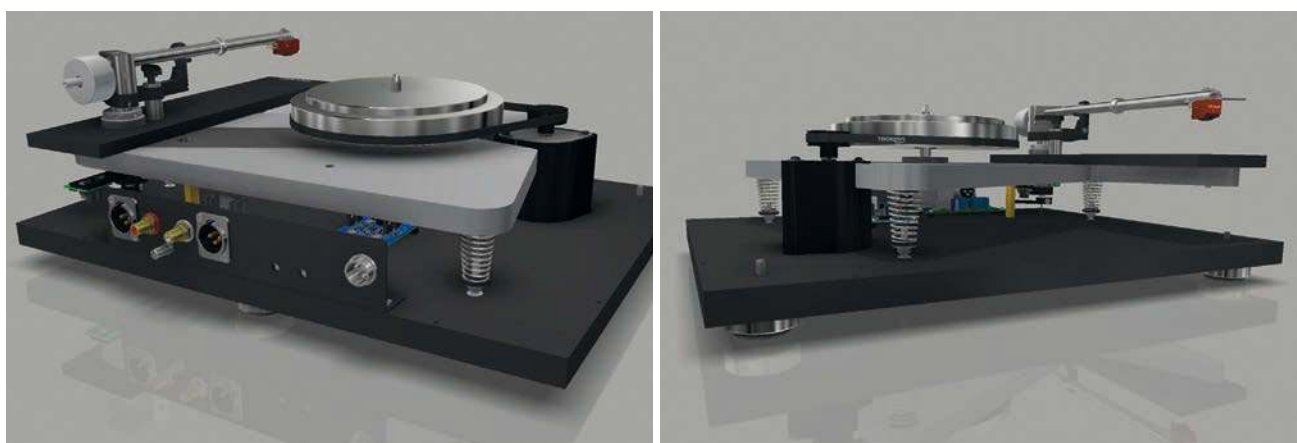
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“The counterweight is positioned at the height the stylus touches the record, therefore minimising changes in downforce if the LP is warped.”



► The original TD 160 platter could ‘ring’ quite a bit but this platter is heavier and quieter. The plinth is also significantly better than the original turntable; the MDF base is thicker and the unit sits on three feet. The arm is an excellent improvement on the company’s earlier TP 82 unipivot arm, though the elder is still seen on other turntables in the current line-up. The TP 92 has a multilayer aluminium tube for increased internal damping, plus there is a non-moving damping ring added at the first bending node midway along it. This helped to maintain a very quiet operation with no noise created. The tube is terminated and clamped at the cartridge mount end making for a larger surface area of connection resulting in stable mechanical contact. Mechanical energy could therefore be dissipated from the stylus to the arm and then to the sub-chassis and stiffener plate. The counterweight is positioned at the height the stylus touches the record, therefore minimising changes in downforce if the LP is warped. Where my pre-production sample had a counterweight screwing into the back of the arm relying on my stylus scales to get the weight at the right point, the production

model will have a conventional styled counterweight where you can balance to zero and then dial to your chosen weight. I always rely on weighing scales, whatever the counterweight says! The arm looked very good and worked very well with the supplied Audio Technica AT-OC9XML, an excellent cartridge with micro-linear stylus and boron cantilever. While Thorens has returned to Germany, a country steeped in record deck production, the manufacture of these decks is being performed in Taiwan. The standard of manufacture is very good, as is the separate power supply which has an on-and-off rocker switch at the rear.

I listened to a large variety of music for the review. Amplification was a Manley Steelhead EQ, a Music First Audio pre and Krell power. Firstly, I decided to play something appropriate for this time of year, the white-vinyl *In Winter* from Katie Melua [BMG]. Her voice and the relaxed and ostensibly quiet instrumentation allowed me to hear how silent and accurate the turntable worked. I needed to add a little force to the cartridge for the louder sections to get it sounding at its best; 2.1g. Once I had got things just right I could really hear the music start to breathe. The sound was very open and clear from top to bottom, though particularly good with the very low frequencies. Track 3 ‘Perfect World’ was very well defined and controlled, whether it be the vocals, guitars, piano or percussion. This is a natural and musically confident player.

Time for David Bowie’s *Legacy* album [Sony] so I could hear some of the music from the TD 160 era. Everything was clear and accurate covering all frequencies, especially the bass end, though I reduced that somewhat going up to 400 ohms load. Audio Technica only advise 100 ohms plus, so play about with your settings if you have them! If you want excessive excitement then look elsewhere, this turntable is all about accuracy and honesty. A bit like my old headmaster at school at the time of the TD 160; he wasn’t extravert, rather ►



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TITAN 606

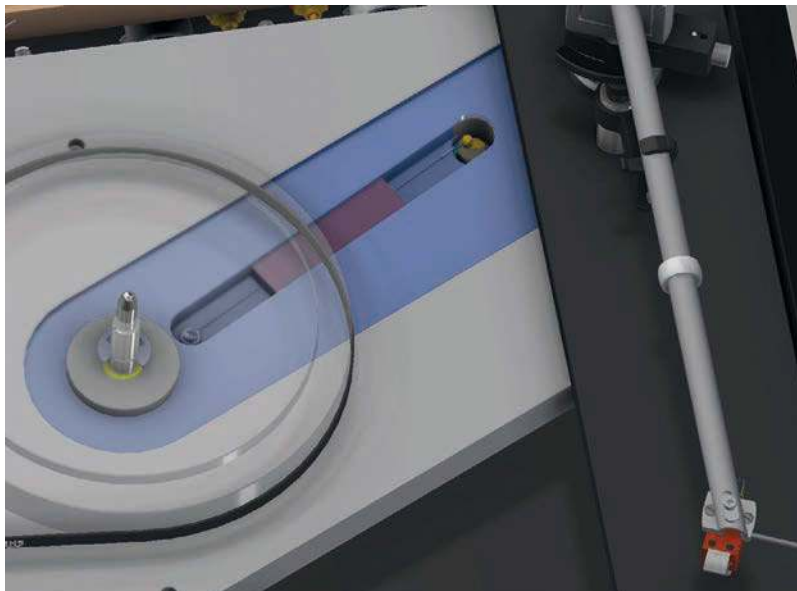


TITAN 505



K U D O S

DESIGNED AND HAND-CRAFTED IN ENGLAND



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Suspended semi-automatic turntable

Suspension system: Stabilised sub chassis on three conical springs

Platter: two part aluminium with rubber mat

Belt: Polished precision, with adjustable tension

Motor: electronically controlled, with contactless auto shut-off

Arm: Thorens 9" precision tonearm (TP 92) with electrical lift

Finish: Black, aluminium

Price: £2,899

Manufactured by: Thorens
url: thorens.com

Distributed in the UK by: UKD
URL: ukd.co.uk
Tel: +44(0)1425 460670

► he was 'to the point', but he knew his stuff and was very reliable. Similarly, this turntable was honest and showed authority over the music being played with nothing sounding out of place, just perhaps a little too polite. Turning to a bit of excitement, Nielsen's 4th symphony (DG, Herbert von Karajan), the instruments were clearly positioned in their designated seats with brass and percussion coming across precisely but still allowing the quieter strings to have their say. The turntable never felt strained and was detailed and dynamic, with the quieter sections as exciting as the louder, the arm showing no signs that it couldn't cope. There were also no fluctuations in speed from this electronically controlled motor. Dr John's *City that Care Forgot* [Diverse Records] was next to hit the platter. 'Keep on Goin' opened up the sound with lots more gusto and the AT-OC9XML allowed it to sound at its best. The cymbals came across as clearly as the bass. Headroom was excellent with no signs of panic from either the cartridge or arm. I can see why Thorens want to utilise an Audio Technica cartridge for their own brand. I have been using AT cartridges for years as they are excellent and certainly cost effective. The modified three-point suspension worked a treat, there was no noise making its way to the stand nor any vibrations to the stylus; I always tap plinths and tables to test for vibrations – a bit like folk kicking tyres when they go to buy a car, except that my tapping makes a point. It is imperative to have a turntable free from external vibrations as well as able to dissipate or quell internal energy from the stylus. Similarly, the effect of the motor pulling on the belt didn't give any problems, that thread of steel doing its job. Mike Valentine's *Espana* album [Chasing the Dragon] is one of my favourites, one that was directly cut to vinyl in one go, so any noises between movements can still be heard, such as the performers turning pages. This was a very realistic and 'careful' performance, not far from how I heard it when it was recorded at Air Studios. There was no colouration from the arm or platter, or from the substantial MDF base. The rubber mat is fairly thick and heavily damped and 'branded' and it worked well with all the

records I played. There is no record clamp, since this would take away links with its DNA, though I did find my aged free gift puck (from Richer Sounds) that I was given at the same time as my friend bought his TD 160. It just gave slightly better contact between record and mat and on some records more command of the music.

All in all, then, the sound quality was what I would expect from Thorens; both good control of all the music and an excellent control of the speed. The arm was also surprisingly good for a P&P turntable, with no colouration. Only on a few occasions did I find the arm wouldn't lift at the end of the LP, though as mentioned earlier that can be adjusted. Performance of the TD 1601 was well controlled and refined, doing everything well, if perhaps just a little too well-behaved, but if you want a retro looking turntable with all the history to go with it then this is certainly a good choice. +



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Zesto Audio Andros 1.2 Vacuum Tube Phonostage Preamplifier

by Eric Neff



Walking the halls of any audio show of size can be a bit exhausting. After three days and over one hundred rooms navigating the crowds and the noise (Good sound loud or not so good loud) can give your ears a fatigue that makes one long for silence sometimes. For this reason, I tend to schedule a trip to the Zesto Audio room for the final day of a show. George and Carolyn

Counnas always have a room of impeccable sound quality that, for me, is an audio oasis where my ears can recover. I had been hoping for the chance to have their gear in house.

Imagine my delight when the Zesto Audio Andros 1.2 tube Phonostage preamplifier arrived for review. The Andros 1.2 is crafted with the same graceful aesthetic as the rest of the Zesto line-up which is to say four glorious ECC83S gold pin tubes set in a reflective case that shows the glass off like jewellery.

After installing the valves with the included white glove, I adjusted the settings on the back to match my Ortofon Cadenza Bronze moving coil cartridge. The switches and dials for the settings are well labelled. MM and MC connections and setting are each located in specific zones making

“The Andros 1.2 helps draw you in and feel the connection with this nuanced imagery in a way only a well-engineered component can.”

► setup straightforward. I used the single ended output from the moving coil area utilizing AudioQuest Water cables. Input cables were from VPI from my VPI Prime Signature turntable.

Zesto Audio's very well written user manual is specific about turning on the Andros 1.2 before the rest of your audio system and giving it five minutes of warm-up first. Each Andros 1.2 arrives with a factory burn in of 50 hours and will reach optimal performance at 100 hours. My experience concurs with these recommendations as the output reaches peak fullness around the 100-hour mark. The manual gives some recommendations for tube rolling. I used the supplied valves for my listening.

I had recently watched the movie *Rocketman* about the life of Elton John. Inspired by this I started listening to *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*'s 'Someone Saved My Life Tonight' [Mercury]. Jumping out at me was the attack on the piano keys; precise but not strident. Tonality was pure and uncoloured. The drum kit is centred with excellent decay of the strike. Compared to my reference Simaudio Moon 610LP phono pre the Zesto Andros 1.2 offered up slightly more colour. A bit more body reminding me of my Cary SLI-80 integrated; it has 'tube sound' but does not distort or dominate the performance. The difference in character was quite enjoyable.

Moving on to something with great dynamics, I queued up Tower of Power's *What is Hip* [Sheffield Lab]. This album is a direct to disc recording and the performance really pops. Valve gear in general has a mostly unfair reputation for slow response and overly 'tubey' or 'valvey' sound. Gear like that will struggle with this recording. Not so the Zesto Andros 1.2. Tower of Powers' terrific speed

and precision is shown to great effect as the horn section alongside the bass and drums deliver a staccato performance. *Fortissimo* peaks rise, transitions fall to seeming silence as this fast paced and powerful tune moves forward. The Andros 1.2 was up to the challenge. This tube-based phono pre effortlessly delivered to range and power required. The jump of the band translated through without any hesitation. Complex horns and saxophones offered up perfect tone and rasp alongside precise guitar work. There are several versions of *What is Hip* out from the band, but this live direct to disc version is my personal favourite. It was blissful listening to it via the Andros 1.2. I had been concerned that the Andros 1.2, being valve-based, would not be able to offer the precision and speed I enjoyed so much from the Moon 610LP. After the Tower of Power demonstration those concerns were completely removed.

Now it was time for a classic nuance and sense of space audio trip with Shelby Lynne's title track to *Just a Little Lovin'* [UMG Recording]. An audio show favorite, this tune showcases many desired traits audio fans seek in their gear. One of these is a sense of space within the recording room. You can almost sense the room dimensions within this recording. The rim shots from the snare drum reverberate and decay in a way that allows the listener to 'walk' the room during the playback. The high hat has the appropriate sizzle and the bass is powerful but controlled. The instruments frame Shelby's beautiful and haunting voice with a firm delicacy setting the mood of a lazy morning. The Andros 1.2 helps draw you in and feel the connection with this nuanced imagery in a way only a well-engineered component can. In short, it's all very well done!

Certain bands are fun not just because of great song writing and musicianship but also because they offer unusual instrumentation. Morphine is one such band featuring two stringed slide Bass Guitar, Baritone Sax and Drums. Led by two string Bass player, Mark Sandman, they were a Popular Boston based group until Sandman's early death from an on-stage heart attack at age 46. The fun rhythm's and unique sound due to their choice of instruments makes for a great discovery for new fans. Their album *Cure for Pain* (1993 Ryko) features a track called Buena that showcases their great sound and unique delivery putting lower register instruments to the fore to great effect. Sandman's plucking and tapping drive the song as the Baritone Sax played by Dana Colley provides a deep and powerful melody. Jerome Dupree's drum's provide foundational rhythm and syncopation. Once again, the Andros 1.2 lets the fun come through. The vibration from the two string slide bass brackets the guitar's tone while the baritone rasp of the saxophone plows the lower registers. The drumstick tip on skin is presented as live with just the right amount of "snick" for an authentic strike. The ability of the Andros 1.2 to offer a holistic presentation is a trait I greatly appreciate and one that places the Andros 1.2 in fine company among high end Phonostage Preamplifiers. ►

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“We included the Andros 1.2 in a UK-based magazine because Zesto should be in the UK – get the hint, distributors!”



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: MM and MC Single ended or MC transformer balanced phono stage

MC Ground On/Off Switch

MM Impedance: 47K or 15K Ohms

MM Capacitance: 200pf

MC Impedance: 1000, 800, 600, 400, 300, 200, 100, 50, 20 Ohms

MC High/Low switch: with -3dB for high output MC cartridges

Outputs per channel: Impedance 10k Ohms, +6V max output level

Power consumption: 27W, 0 drain when off

Voltage: 110/120 AC 60Hz standard (Optional factory installed 220V or 230/240V AC 50/60Hz)

Connector: Standard 3 Pin IEC

Power: ON/Off switch on the side

Power Supply: Two internal high quality linear regulated power supplies 250V and 12V

Tubes: Four (4) Gold Pin ECC83S vacuum tubes

Sockets: High quality Gold pin ceramic sockets

Gain MM input: 47dB

Gain MC input: 67dB

Noise: -75dBu below max output

Frequency response: Complies to RIAA curve within +or- 0.5dB

Features: RIAA curve achieved using a passive filter

1% metal film resistors throughout

Polypropylene capacitors

throughout the audio path

All units are made by hand

Dimensions (WxHxD): 43 x 12.7 x 30.4cm

Weight: 9.07kg

Two-year limited warranty – six months on original tubes

Price: \$4,700 USD

Manufactured by: Zesto Audio

URL: zestoaudio.com

Tel: +1 (805) 807 1841

▶ Wrapping up my time with the Andros 1.2 I selected a long-time personal favourite, ‘Fires at Midnight’ from Jethro Tull’s *Songs from the Wood* album [Parlaphone]. A song that evokes late nights around a fire with friends, Fire’s at Midnight features some great licks from Ian Anderson’s flute. Tones are perfect and the breath through the instrument comes through nicely. Surrounded by guitars, bass and drums the signature sounds of the band shine through. It is a sprightly tune with a relaxed and calming message that the Andros 1.2 delivers beautifully as the dénouement for a wonderful experience.

So why did we review an amp with no local distribution? Simple – *Hi-Fi+* is an international title and we included the Andros 1.2 in a UK-based magazine because Zesto should be in the UK – get the hint, distributors!

The Phonostage Preamplifier occupies an interesting spot in an audio system. It is a pre-pre-amplifier. Matching it with the rest of a system is critical as it is amplifying the likely weakest audio signal in the systems chain. We hear the phrase, if the first watt is bad then more won’t help, well if the attenuation of the first 0.2 is bad then the rest of your gear won’t matter either. It is important to find that component that offers synergy with the rest of your carefully chosen system. The flexibility of the Zesto Audio Andros 1.2 Phonostage Preamplifier provides a solid foundation for that compatibility. In addition, the high-quality hand-built assembly process offering audiophile grade components and gold pin tube choice will add to the qualities of your results. From Moving Magnet to a wide range of Moving Coil cartridges the Andros 1.2 can accommodate most cartridge choices. The device itself is right sized to allow a wide range of system placement and at 20 lbs. it will not break your back moving it around. Did I mention it is a visually beautiful unit? Great sound for listening and pride of ownership build quality and aesthetics make the Zesto Audio Andros 1.2 a must audition piece for your system and a reasonable price of \$4,700. +



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D2
C2
A2

Norma IPA-70B integrated amplifier

by Jason Kennedy



I did wonder why this company has the name it does but a quick scan of founder Enrico Rossi's background indicates that he's a big fan of opera, and an Italian, so it didn't take much of a leap to guess that the name comes from Bellini's opera of the same name. Rossi's company is based in Cremona, an Italian city that's steeped in musical history thanks to the craftsmanship of Guarneri, Amati and Stradivari. Names that will be familiar to Sonus faber enthusiasts as well as those with a passing interest in violins and violas. There must be something in the water because this Norma amplifier is also extremely musical despite the absence of wood and gut.

Norma makes a range of electronics that largely consists of amplifiers in one or two boxes and digital sources in the form of a CD player and a DAC... alongside a unit that does both. The IPA-70B is a rather elegant integrated amplifier that sits just above the entry level HS-DA1 and forms the starting point for the IPA range. This amp is as impressive inside as it is attractive outside, as its internals are very neatly laid out and colour coded in black and red with the heavy-lifting elements of the power supply shut away in their own case, presumably

to keep transformer radiation away from the signal chain. The asymmetric nature of the heatsinking reveals that the power transistors are on the opposite side to the transformer, which must also help with keeping the signal clean.

In its standard state, the IPA-70B has five line inputs and a direct or AV input alongside a record output, but it can be supplied with either an onboard USB DAC or an MM/MC phono stage which is a useful degree of flexibility. The DAC is a relatively old-school Wolfson type with a maximum 24-bit/192kHz sample rate. This choice suggests it was made for sound quality rather than specmanship reasons. The optional phono stage has multiple gain and impedance settings plus 'spare' options for both, so you can have a setting of choice within reason. The amp can be controlled with the single button and volume knob on the front or with an aluminium remote handset which is almost festooned with small switches. It does, however, fit easily in the hand and with practise you can find the volume buttons without looking. The only minor gripe with ergonomics is that it's difficult to see how high the volume is in anything but bright light. ▶



► Being an opera nut, Enrico Rossi is very keen on the human voice and bases his designs on the getting it right, in his own words “I have never heard a system, with correct voice reproduction sound bad with other types of music. If you reproduce the voice well, everything else will be automatically reproduced well too.” I hadn’t read that when I first started using the Norma through Bowers & Wilkins 802 loudspeakers but one of the first notes made was about how good the voice sounded, specifically how much nuance and subtlety could be heard in Ishmael Reed’s voice on Conjure’s *Bad Mouth* album [American Clavé], where the cymbals were clean and open and the bass line muscular. This is achieved partly because noise levels are clearly very low but more importantly because this amp’s timing is absolutely bang on, yet it is also smooth and relaxed. It’s a bit of an enigma, usually this combination of qualities can only be found with planet busting Class A amps, and only the biggest have the bass capabilities offered by this 70 Watter.

The distributor Anthony Mills puts a lot of this down to Norma’s preference for very wide bandwidth; 2MHz, which is not outrageous but neither is it common. I started out using

the IPA-70B with a pretty high end Moon 780D streaming DAC, which undoubtedly helped matters but the performance wasn’t that far behind with the onboard converter. Not as smooth and sweet but extremely articulate and well separated. This is a relaxed but phenomenally precise amplifier that lets you hear right into the mix with anything it plays, if the speakers are up to the job. My preferred timing test this season is ‘Cumberland Blues’ by the Grateful Dead [*Europe* ’72, Warner Bros]; it’s not the sweetest recording and there’s a heck of a lot going on but the clarity and coherence of the Norma made it hang together perfectly, allowing two guitars, two keyboards and a rhythm section to bang out a kickin’ groove. The following track ‘He’s Gone’ is more laid-back and an absolute beauty with this amp, full of superb bass lines and heart rending lyrics.

Moving over to vinyl with an external phono stage revealed just how good it is at opening up the micro dynamics, tracking the different levels of the voices and instruments in the mix. Here it became apparent that there is a slight sense of smoothness in the amp’s character, which stops anything sounding grainy in the typical class ►

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“To combine so many strengths in what is a relatively compact and attractive amp is unusual.”

- ▶ AB fashion. It is slightly synthetic and not something I’ve previously encountered but it doesn’t get in the way of the music which is extremely compelling regardless of type. If you are looking for the grit and grain in a recording this might be an issue, but if you are looking to hear right into the soundstage and enjoy great timing then it’s a price worth paying. A Class A amp will give a bit more transparency but won’t have the power available here nor necessarily the ability to track microdynamics so well.

Going over to the onboard DAC on the Norma and hooking up an AURALiC ARIES G1 network streamer to the USB input the sense of great timing continued, the onboard DAC is not as finessed as the external and admittedly very pricey one I was using but in some ways the extra bite it brings to leading edges is no bad thing. Playing Esbjorn Svensson Trio’s *Live in Hamburg* (ACT) it strikes me that they were the ZZ Top of the jazz world, both bands had phenomenal rhythmic precision (the difference being that E.S.T. could do this whilst improvising, I’ve not heard the little band from Texas do the same). The Norma distributor mentioned that this amp works well with Russell K speakers so I hooked up some Red 120s and found a lot to like in the surprising scale and low end extension they delivered. There was so much of the latter that I had to pull them a good half metre from the wall, which suggests a less than vice like grip on the IPA-70B’s behalf, however tricky tunes like ‘Cumberland Blues’ worked a treat.

The last speaker to take the Norma test were my trusty PMC fact.8s, and almost immediately I realised that they should have gone on first. This is a superb combination thanks to the ‘no holds barred’ transparency of the speaker and the smooth but fast nature of the amp. Imaging was superb as was contrast and separation between instruments and voices, a quality that made Radiohead’s ‘Decks Dark’ [A *Moon Shaped Pool*, XL] a lot more interesting than usual. A lot of work has clearly gone into this production with the engineer using depth variations and placement to create a holographic soundstage that while totally unnatural is extremely effective and envelopes the listener. It inspired me to play Arvo Pärt’s ‘Tabula Rasa’ with Tasmin Little on violin [Fratres, EMI Classics], here the texture and variety of the timbre from that instrument was scintillating, but it didn’t move me as much as ZZ Top’s ‘10 Dollar Man’ [Tejas, Warner Bros], which hit the

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state, two-channel integrated amplifier with remote control and optional built-in DAC or phono stage

Analogue inputs: Four single-ended line-level inputs (via RCA jacks), one direct AV input (via RCA jacks)

Digital inputs: One USB port with DAC option

Analogue outputs: One rec out (via RCA jacks)

Supported sample rates: USB: 16-bit, 24-bit, 32-bit — 32kHz–192kHz

Input impedance: 10kOhms

Output impedance (preamp): N/A

Headphone Loads: N/A

Power Output: 70Wpc @ 8 Ohms, 140 Wpc @ 4 Ohms

Frequency response: 0–800kHz

Distortion: Not specified

Signal to Noise Ratio: Not specified

Dimensions (H×W×D): 75 × 430 × 350mm

Weight: 15kg

Price: £3,475 line only, £4,024 including USB DAC

Manufacturer: Norma Audio Electronics

Tel: +39 (0)372 493113

URL: normaudio.com

UK Distributor: Hi-Fidelity Ltd

Tel: +44 (0)7787 056723

URL: hifidelityuk.co.uk

spot far harder than expected thanks to the dynamics of Billy Gibbons’ guitar playing.

This Norma is an intriguing amplifier; it does so many things so well that you have to wonder how Enrico Rossi has achieved it. The ability to combine so many strengths in what is a relatively compact and attractive amp is very unusual, very few do pace this well and it’s equally rare to hear microdynamics delivered so clearly. It certainly makes you wonder about the bigger IPA-140B, which if like this it can double its output into a halving of load must be a bit of a monster. Feature wise the single input DAC might be a limit for some and at this price level some competitors offer balanced inputs, but the DAC itself is very good and personally I’ve yet to hear real benefits in balanced connections where cable lengths are sensible. If you’re in the market for a new amplifier I suggest you put this near the top of your audition list. +

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Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe Network streamer/amplifier

by Alan Sircom



The law of unintended consequence is not always a harsh mistress. Take the Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe integrated amplifier for example. Meant to be collected after the last review, a series of 'locational complications' (the polite term for 'the courier kept delivering it back to the collection point' style cock-ups) meant we retained the product long after the original review appeared in print; long enough to benefit from the latest round of software and firmware updates. The Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe was a good integrated amplifier when we first met it in Issue 175 and it's a good integrated amplifier today. Physically nothing has changed – it's the same physical product under test, with the same serial number... because it never even made it back to the factory, so hasn't been upgraded in component terms. What's changed is the 'appvailability', and a couple of firmware upgrades.

What's changed is almost everything.

A quick recap on the IS-1000 Deluxe is in order. The Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe is essentially what happens if you let

Gold Note's P-1000 preamplifier and PA-1175 power amplifier meet on a hot date. Well, almost. OK, so the IS-1000 Deluxe doesn't bristle with the same number of RCA and XLR inputs, and sports a built-in DAC and phonostage, while the PA-1175 is four and a half times more powerful than the IS-1000 Deluxe, but the similarity in circuit design makes the integrated model a very close blood relative to the pre and power.

The all-in-one concept of the IS-1000 Deluxe is clear; it talks to online streaming services like Tidal, Qobuz, Spotify/Spotify Connect, and Deezer like a native speaker, and its Roon Ready standing, vTuner support and UPnP/DLNA network streaming/USB stick replay means almost all the quality post-CD stereo bases are covered. The optional DAC board connects to USB and Ethernet with equal aplomb, and it supports MQA and even converts DSD64 files to PCM where required. Furthermore, Gold Note steps away from the 'arms race' here by opting for the quality Burr-Brown PCM1792A DAC chip (which supports files to 24/192 precision) instead of a numerically superior and sonically inferior chipset. ►

As discussed in the previous review five issue ago, power is Class A/B and rated at 125 watts per channel into an 8 ohm load, with nary an op-amp in sight. A function unique to Gold Note (I believe) is an adjustable damping factor – ‘high’ is intended for bigger, less sensitive speakers while ‘low’ (which Gold Notes claims enables the IS-1000 Deluxe to mimic a low-power valve amp) is for high-sensitivity/monitor-type speakers. Note that these are damping rather than ‘gain’ settings, so the IS-1000 is adjusting its power output to accommodate different loudspeaker designs rather than changing its volume ceiling to match more or less sensitive loudspeakers.

One of the two pairs of analogue RCA inputs is switchable between line level, moving magnet and moving coil – the phono stage circuitry is derived from Gold Note’s excellent PH-10 phono stage, but without that model’s control of equalisation and loading. With an additional XLR input, three digital optical sockets, a digital coaxial RCA input and a type-A USB socket, Ethernet and Wi-Fi (this supports Apple AirPlay (although not AirPlay 2 or Bluetooth)). There are two basic models – the Classic (which includes a PCM1796 DAC) and this Deluxe model. We’d go with the Deluxe, even if there is a price premium.

As discussed, physically speaking nothing at all has changed. The amplifier is still the same solidly-built ingot of silver, gold or black, with high-grade connectors all round. And it hasn’t functionally changed the way it sounds, either. Although upgrades to firmware can radically shift the sound of products, there’s a good deal of ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ here. The sound quality of the Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe remains rich and satisfying in the midrange, with expressive vocals rising out of a wide soundstage. There is a tendency in audio circles to think every Italian designer spends their downtime gesticulating to operatic arias; it’s largely myth of course, but has a kernel of truth in that amps like the Gold Note make good opera sound wonderful.

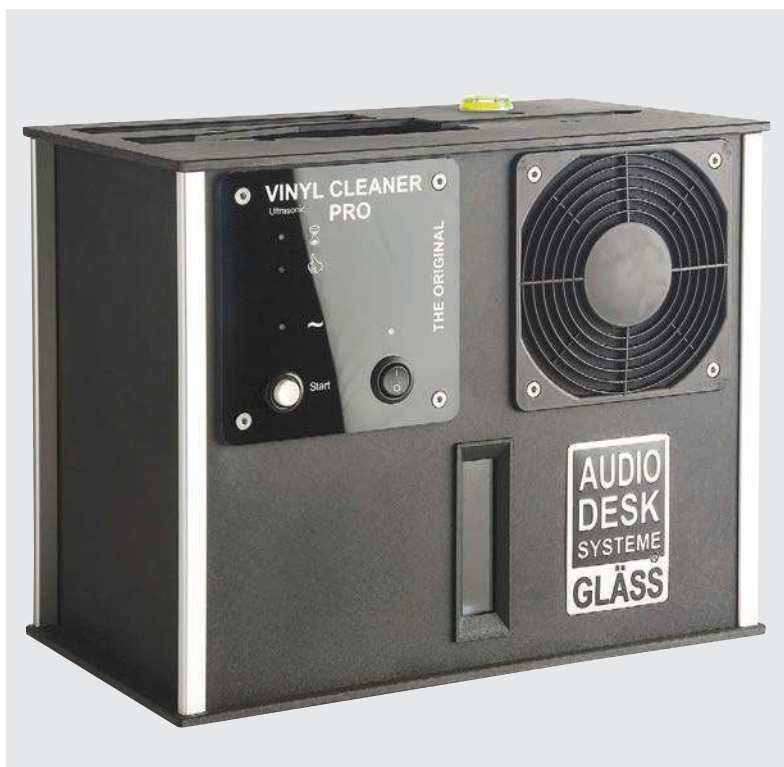
If it simply delivered additional diction to hear Joyce DiDonato as she should be heard, I’d be OK with that, but the Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe has the speed of attack and precise timing that set it apart from the masses. It’s refreshing to have an amplifier that can keep up with the back beats and Mach 2.0 grime on ‘Audacity’ from Stormzy’s *Heavy Is The Head* [#Merky] just as well as it can with the deceptively simple and gentle key changes of ‘Time Has Told Me’ by Nick Drake [*Five Leaves Left*, Island]. Reading back the review from issue 175, the phrase that repeats is ‘sure-footedness’; the Gold Note sticks to music like a mountain goat sticks to a hillside.

Gold Note provides a tidy app specifically for the IS-1000, for both iDevices and Android. Early iterations of the IS-1000 relied on the generic Mconnect streaming app, but the dedicated app brings a greater degree of amplifier control and integration to the table. The app has been available in the relevant app stores since late Spring 2019, and any owners of the Gold Note IS-1000 still relying on Mconnect are strongly advised to update both the app and the amp’s firmware; although neither is mandatory and one does not ‘unlock’ the other. It just seems odd not to have the latest software and the latest firmware, when there are no downsides to using either.

The firmware changes came about toward the end of 2019. They just seemed to make the integration between app control and the onboard streamer more direct, and that means it both is and isn’t transforming; the basic sonic performance of the IS-1000 Deluxe remains essentially unchanged – it’s still the elegant, open-sounding, detailed performer it has always been. There is a slight bit more ‘pace’ to the ‘grace and space’ sound of the DAC, but the difference is subtle and probably won’t turn the heads of the beat-obsessed (who only appear to be open to just one or two audio electronics brands anyway), but the rest of us get an amplifier that is that bit more beguiling, more refined, and more capable of providing the musical goods for unfatiguing hour upon hour.



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Paul Rigby – The Audiophile Man, October 2019

“The changes to the IS-1000 make that integration more seamless and makes access that bit faster.”

► The crucial change is in ease of integration and use. In the new millennium, hair-shirt products may have their place, but that is increasingly not the top slot. Instead, on the global stage, the winners are the products that make listening easier, both in terms of sonic performance and ease of accessing local and online streamed sources. The changes to the IS-1000 Deluxe make integration more seamless and makes access faster. In fairness, accessing online sources wasn't exactly leaden before the updates, but the combination of app and firmware that came as an early Xmas present to Gold Note users gave the IS-1000 Deluxe a greater snappiness to musical access. Granted, we are talking the difference between 'an eyeblink' and 'two or three eyeblinks', but we are now so used to instantaneous access to material that 'near-instantaneous' seems ponderous. The change is noticeable.

In all, I'd give Gold Note's combination of app and firmware a solid 8.5 out of 10, making it considerably better than most and on a par with the likes of Naim and Moon. Using Roon, Linn's open-source system and AURALiC's excellent (and suitably well-named) Lightning arguably pip these systems, and Sonos remains the apex predator in the app world.

If I'm honest about things, products like the IS-1000 Deluxe make a bit of a mockery of the whole review process. A review of the Gold Note amplifier taken early in its life will discuss the product in the context of an app that is completely different to the one used today, and as that app may form most of the way you interact with the Gold Note amplifier, that early review is almost completely invalid, and yet we live in a world of 'exclusives' where a follow-up six months later is lost in a sea of 'now, now, now!' reviews. The same applies to any streaming device.

Regardless, the IS-1000 Deluxe is one of the many contenders for the 'why do you need anything more?' award that defines top-end integrated amplifiers. Amps like the Gold Note invite difficult questions when it comes to box counting; sure, separate pre/power systems offer more power, more dynamic range, sometimes better separation, detail and so on, but do so at a price – financially, physically or operationally. In the case of the Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe, each baby step forward in app and firmware makes the move to separates less needed. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state two-channel integrated amplifier, with integrated DAC, phono stage, and network streamer

Analogue inputs: One switchable MM/MC phono input (via RCA sockets), one single-ended line-level input (via RCA sockets), one balanced input (via XLR sockets)

Digital inputs: Three digital optical inputs (via Toslink sockets), one digital coaxial input (via RCA socket), one USB input (type A), one ethernet (via LAN socket), wi-fi (dual band)

Analogue outputs: One line-level unbalanced (via RCA sockets), one line-level balanced (via XLR sockets)

Power Output: 125wpc @ 8 ohms

Bandwidth: 20Hz – 20kHz

Distortion: THD </+ 0.015%, 20Hz to 20kHz; IM </+ 0.015%

Signal to Noise Ratio: 100dB (phono stage)

Type: Solid-state, switchable MM/MC

Input Sensitivity: 3mV for full power.

Input impedance (MC): 47kOhm

Input capacitance (MM): 220pF

Output impedance: 100 ohms

Output level: 1V for 3mV input

RIAA linearity: +/- 0.1 dB, 20Hz – 20kHz

Distortion: </= 0.015% THD, noise levels covered by S/N ratio specification, below

Signal to Noise Ratio: 80dB

(DAC)

Type: Solid-state high-resolution PCM and DSD-capable Burr-Brown digital-to-analogue converter

DAC resolution/supported digital formats: All PCM from 44.1KS/s to 192KS/s with word lengths up to 24-bit, DSD64 (2.8224MHz)

Frequency Response: 20Hz – 20kHz, ± 0.005 dB

Distortion: (THD + Noise): <0.00015%, 20Hz–20kHz at 0dBFS

Price: £4,718 (IS-1000 Deluxe)

Manufactured by: Gold Note

URL: goldnote.it

Distributed in the UK by: Audio Pinnacle

URL: audiopinnacle.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1420 544140



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Etymotic Research ER2SE and ER2XR earphones

by Chris Martens



The Elk Grove Village, Illinois-based firm Etymotic Research is arguably one of the oldest, if not *the* oldest, makers of high performance earphones in the world. Long before Apple created the iPhone or iPod and long before Beats by Dre came into existence, Etymotic was building its iconic, high accuracy ER•4p-series earphones. The operative phrase there “high accuracy”; from day one Etymotic was fiercely committed to building earphones that delivered linear, neutrally balanced and true high-fidelity representations of the recordings being played. In sharp contrast to the tonal

‘flavour-of-the-month-club’ approach we so often encounter these days, Etymotic was, is, and probably ever shall be an accuracy-first earphone maker.

The early ER•4p earphones were marvels of miniaturisation and were among the first commercial earphones to be based upon purpose-built, precision-matched and custom-tuned balanced armature-type drivers (then more uncommon than they are now). The tiny ER•4p’s featured extremely slim cylindrical earpieces fitted, in most cases, with Etymotic’s signature triple-flange silicone ear tips. Remarkably, those earphones offered between 35dB – 42dB of passive noise isolation, making them the world’s first true noise-isolating earphones—ones that even today offer unmatched levels of noise reduction.

While the ER•4p models remain in production today, Etymotic has expanded its product range to include three new families of earphones: the top-of-the-range ER4SR/XR models, the mid-level ER3SE/XR models, and the new entry-level ER2-series models selling for \$159 or £169. Present-day ER4 and ER3 models use balanced armature-type drivers, while the ER2 models ▶

“The ER2XR is voiced much like that same loudspeaker, but with the bass dialled up to about ‘11.5’.”

- ▶ introduce new high performance dynamic (or moving coil) type drivers. At Etymotic’s suggestion this review focuses on the ER2 models, partly because they are the firm’s newest offerings, but also because they represent the lowest cost means of accessing Etymotic’s famous high accuracy sound.

Like most Etymotic earphones, the ER2s come in two versions: the ER2SE (Studio Edition) that promises dead neutral tonal balance and flat frequency response, and the ER2XR (Extended Response) that adds a generous but not egregious dollop of added bass lift. From the lower midrange on up, the two models sound more or less identical, so that bass output is the real differentiator between the two. Rest assured that whether we are talking about the ER2SE or XR-version earphones, Etymotic simply doesn’t do grotesque sonic colourations; it’s not in their corporate DNA.

Etymotic’s founders were audiologists who have a deep, abiding concern for hearing health and hearing preservation. This concern manifests itself in Etymotic’s commitment to building earphones offering extremely high (35dB – 42dB) levels of noise isolation. Etymotic explains that the ER2 models feature “a variety of ear tips to provide 35dB+ of noise reduction so you will hear all the detail buried in the mix *without raising the volume to compensate for ambient noise*” (italics are mine).

The ER2SE/XR earphones feature slim, cylindrical metallic blue metal earpieces embossed with white text on the earpiece barrels to indicate which model is which. Accessories include a set of protective filters and a filter removal tool, a shirt clip, one set of compressible foam and two sets of 3-flange silicone ear tips (sizes M and L), a detachable four-foot signal cable and a compact zipper-closure storage pouch.

For my listening tests I ran the ER2SE and ER2XR earphones in side-by-side comparisons, while driving them with Astell&Kern’s excellent SP1000M digital audio player. The player was loaded with standard and high-res PCM and DSD music files and also provided access, via Tidal, to a wealth of MQA material. Here are my findings.

First, as a long-term user of Etymotic ER•4p-series earphones, I was struck by the strong sonic family resemblance between the classic ER•4p’s and the new and far more affordable ER2-series earphones. The ER2’s carry forward Etymotic’s traditional deep-insertion ear tip and earpiece design motif (more on this later), but they introduce slightly revised (and nominally more comfortable) versions of the firm’s signature triple-flange ear tips. The ER2’s also feature detachable and user replaceable signal cables—a feature the venerable ER•4p’s did not have.

I’ve referenced Etymotic’s ‘high accuracy’ house sound several times in this review, so it’s only fair to ask what sonic characteristics define that sound. To my ears, Etymotic’s sound is defined first and foremost by notably neutral tonal balance in the SE (Studio Edition) models or by mostly neutral balance

with audible but not overblown levels of added bass lift in the XR (Extended Range) models. Next, the Etymotic sound brings unexpectedly high levels of focus, resolution and transient speed and definition at every price point in the line—even for the entry level ER2 models (which, speaking candidly, are ‘entry level’ in name only). Finally, the tiny ER2’s offer, once properly fitted, downright astonishing levels of bass extension, impact, clarity, and low-end grip. In short, the ER2SE is voiced much like a high quality, high accuracy and decidedly full range loudspeaker, while the ER2XR is voiced much like that same loudspeaker, but with the bass dialled up to about ‘11.5’.

What my words perhaps do not convey is the extent to which the ER2 models are sonic overachievers of the first rank. Most of us who have spent significant time in the personal audio world will have formed opinions about the levels of performance we can expect from sub-\$200/£200 earphones and I found the ER2SE’s and XR’s surpassed those expectations in a truly major way. In terms of focus, articulacy, dynamic expression, and extended frequency response the ER2’s could easily pass for models three or four times their price, which I consider remarkable.

To appreciate what I mean, try listening to the track ‘Goodjinns’ from Renaud Garcia-Fons’ *Oriental Bass* [Enja Records, 16/44.1], which offers intricate slapped acoustic bass passages, delicate and equally intricate percussion accompaniment, brilliant contributions from a forceful horn section, and soaring statements from violins. The ER2’s did a superb job of delineating the signature transient characteristics and timbres of each of the instruments, while also conveying the distinctive dynamic ‘feel’ ▶

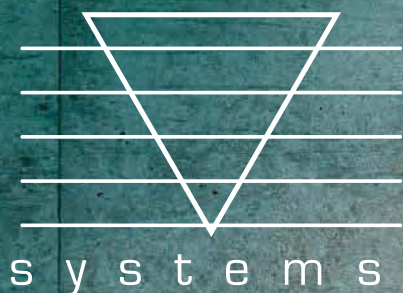
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“The Etymotic ER2SE and ER2XR are sufficiently revealing that they invite close and careful listening.”

- of each instrument—neatly showing how each in its way helps bring the composition to life. The net effect is of hearing a rich, thoroughly engaging, and masterful presentation of the recording—one that left me thinking, “Can these really be sub-\$200/£200 earphones; they sound much too good to be sold for that price.”

Similarly, listen to Brad Mehldau’s original soundtrack for the Yvan Attal film *Mon chien Stupide* [My Melody, 16/44.1] and note both the purity of timbre and also the rich, vibrant and accurate tonal colours the ER2 models deliver on each of the instruments represented. The interplay between the acoustic bass, piano, and drum kit on ‘Henri’s Lament’ sounds terrifically delicate and soulful, while the voice and textures of the piano in particular are spot on. On ‘Breakfast’, note how both the ER2SE and XR capture the deep, woody, and swinging voice of the acoustic bass as set against lilting piano lines and the incisive ‘clack’ of wood-block percussion accents. Then, on ‘Cecile I’ observe the deft way that both ER2 earphones define and delineate differences in textures and timbres between the bowed cello and pizzicato acoustic bass heard on the track (there is enough overlap between the ranges of these instruments that their voices can become muddled through some earphones, but this was not a problem at all for the Etymotic ER2’s). The point I mean to make is that the Etymotic ER2SE and ER2XR are sufficiently revealing that they invite close and careful listening, much as one might do with far more costly earphones in play.

Given my positive comments thus far, some will surely ask, “But is there a catch?” Indeed there is, sort of, in that Etymotic earphones use a so-called ‘deep insertion’ design involving use of the firm’s steeply tapered triple-flange ear tips. To get satisfactory sound and proper isolation the ear tips must seal properly in the ear canals, which is a proverbial ‘piece of cake’ for some listeners, but much easier said than done for others (sadly, I fall in the latter camp). The solution turns out to be a shorter and less sharply tapered new dual-flange ear-tip design from Etymotic, which worked a charm for me, providing ease of insertion, an excellent seal and long term comfort.

It’s not often we find earphones that are accessibly priced yet can be recommended enthusiastically for listeners of all experience levels, up to and including jaded audiophiles. Just try a pair of ER2SE’s or ER2XR’s (we’ll leave the voicing choice to you) and see if you don’t agree. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Dynamic driver equipped universal-fit earphones with flat frequency response (SE version) or a moderate degree of bass lift (XR version)

Driver Complement: One miniature, full-range, high performance dynamic (or moving coil) driver per earpiece

Frequency Response: 20Hz–16 kHz

Noise Isolation: 35dB–42dB

Impedance: 15 Ohms

Sensitivity: 96dB @ 1kHz at 0.1V

Maximum Output: 120dB

Accessories: One pair compressible foam ear tips, two pairs (sizes M and L) trip-flange silicone ear tips, one pair of inline filters and filter insertion/removal tool, detachable and user replaceable four-foot signal cable, shirt clip and compact zipper-closure storage pouch

Weight: Not specified, but extremely light!

Warranty: 2 years

Price: £169 UK, or \$159 US, the SE and XR models are identically priced

Manufactured by: Etymotic Research, Inc.

Tel: +1 (847) 228-0006

URL: etymotic.com

Distributed in the UK by: Etymotic UK and Europe

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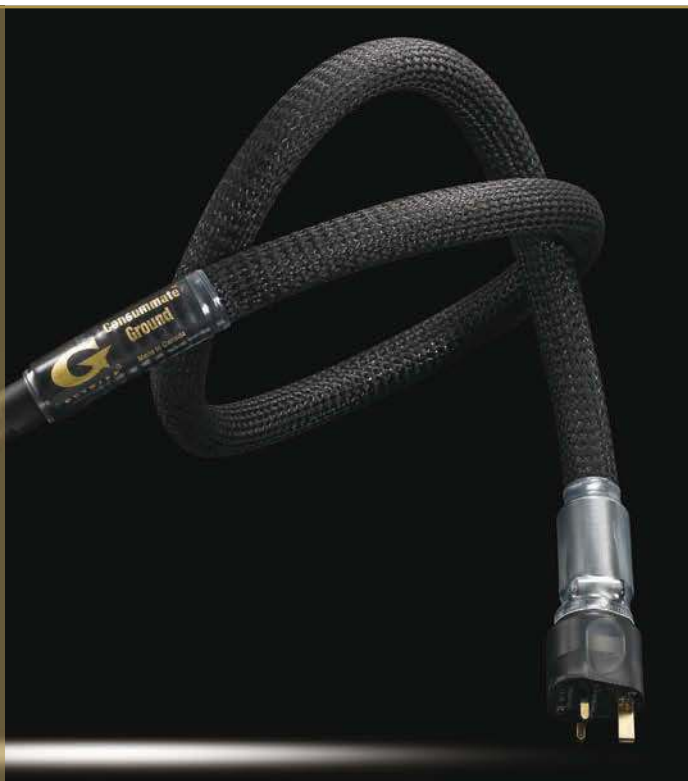
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A large advertisement for 'Enjoy the Music.com'. The top half features a woman in a white shirt and black skirt, floating in the air with her arms outstretched, surrounded by floating musical notes. To her left is a large, glowing speaker. The text 'Enjoy the Music.com' is written in large, bold, orange letters at the top. Below this, the words 'Reviews', 'News', 'Show Reports', and 'And More...' are written in orange. At the bottom, there is a row of six magazine covers: 'hi-fi', 'hi-fi+', 'HIFI CRITIC', 'hifimedia', 'HI-FI WORLD', and 'NOVO STEREO'. Each cover features different audio equipment and headlines.

Nordost Valhalla V2 Tonearm Cable +

by Andrew Harrison



Anyone familiar with Nordost's bottom-up cable hierarchy could be forgiven for wondering why we should invest heavily in a tonearm cable. Nordost, like most cable specialists, started by promoting the primacy of quality loudspeaker and interconnect cables. And then the Valhalla power cable joined the range, when the sanctity of the mains power link became indisputable. The company's interconnects and speaker cabling are all justly praised, but if one is upgrading piecemeal, the power cable is demonstrably the place to start.

Several months' experience with the Valhalla v2 Tonearm Cable + has convinced this listener though that there's plenty of mileage remaining in nurturing the audio signal at the other end of the system, where voltage levels dwindle from 240 down to microvolts. The care with which Nordost has wrought an extremely well-shielded, low capacitance conduit to pass pick-up cartridge signals from tonearm to phono amplifier ultimately reaped dividends well beyond expectation.

The V2 tonearm cable was relaunched this year with some mild revisions, and is now marked out by an additional '+' sign. Like the rest of the V2 overhaul, the first V2 tonearm cable saw substantial improvements designed to uprate performance, making the V2 series in general a serious performance threat to the original Odin series. In place of the trademark Micro Mono-Filament layout came a dual-filament

“The new approach is said to minimise any crosstalk and electromagnetic radiation between channels.”

- ▶ principle of applying two twisted strands of FEP dielectric, further reducing contact area around the conductor; and likely responsible for the lowered capacitance, from around 72 pF/m to 56 pF/m. Terminating each end of V2 were brand-new plugs, Nordost Holo:Plugs that replaced a generic right-angle DIN plug at one end and locking WBT NextGen phono plugs on the other.

The new ‘plus’ edition builds on all this, and takes a new layout internally, with the left and right channels wound individually as a twisted pair inside their own shield, in place of four insulated conductors all wound loosely together. The new approach is said to minimise any crosstalk and electromagnetic radiation between channels, although conducting copper had to be reduced slightly in cross section from 22 to 24AWG in order to maintain flexibility. That was probably a wise move: some compliance is essential in a tonearm cable that must be carefully ‘dressed’ in a sub-chassis turntable, to avoid unwanted mechanical loading on the delicately tuned suspension bounce. Perhaps tellingly, Nordost no longer trumpets the specification of V2+ capacitance, so this has likely increased in the new twisted-pair configuration.

Also new to this year’s plus-rated cable is a clever new earthing arrangement that allows more options when grounding the arm and turntable. Unusually, the earth lead, or ‘Bond Ground Wire’ does not connect to any part of the DIN plug. It runs parallel to the left and right channels, straight through to the other side (completely isolated in its own FEP extrusion and shielding). In my setup this resulted in the turntable chassis and arm mount being effectively earthed, and in practice was found to be enough to provide totally hum-free operation. There are two whip leads or “Detachable Ground Wires”; one that plugs into the amplifier end, and the other the tonearm end. On the amplifier end, when it is plugged in, this whip connects to the main shield of the cable. On the SME tonearm at least, this could enable the armtube plus cartridge body to be earthed independently of the turntable chassis, such that one earth line could be bonded to phono stage ground and the other to mains distribution ground, for example. For the most part though, the single default ground wire was sufficient and preferred.

Many plug configurations are offered, with prices starting at £4,470 for the simplest 1.25 m length with phono plugs both

ends, for those turntables that include RCA outputs. A 90° DIN plug that befits many popular tonearms adds £100, while each subsequent half metre in length is £575. For the holy grail in cartridge wiring, connected to a fully-balanced phono stage, XLR terminations are available at the same price as RCA.

When measuring up for installation, bear in mind Nordost’s ‘over-delivery’ in cable lengths, which are described as mechanically tuned to optimise performance. In the case of the tested 1.25 m cable, this was 110 cm from DIN plug to the metal barrel that marks the stereo cable split, then a further 30 cm to RCA Holo:Plugs, a total of 1.4 m.

Listening tests were with a Michell Orbe SE and SME 309 arm, connected by the Nordost cable to MFA step-up transformer and Longdog Audio Reference Phono amplifier, the latter combination a perfect partner to witness the extreme resolution and low-noise potential of the cable.

Shortly after installation it became evident that my reference vdH Grasshopper III SLA cartridge was showing the early signs of advancing age – now plain to hear through the new cable – so was away for service in the Netherlands for part of the testing. A search through the cartridge spares box turned into a marathon spree to hear every pickup again and afresh, as it quickly became evident how much this augmented front-end was telling me about each cartridge for the first time.

Setting up a cartridge can be considered a chore – that’s certainly been my view at various times – or conversely an odyssey into what’s musically attainable, as more and more fine fettling brings greater rewards. Time spent with this cable reawakened the eternal tweaker in me. Half a dozen cartridges later I realised what an exceptional tool the tonearm cable had become in cartridge setup, as literally microscopic changes in VTA and azimuth were laid bare between (and all around) the loudspeakers. When the sweet spot in alignment is near, the increasing cohesion in sound is usually recognisable as ‘getting better’; here it was simply and unmistakably either close, or bang on.

So how does this piece of wire sound? In line with the revised Valhalla 2 series, the ‘plus’ tonearm cable follows a lean and mellow voicing, in contrast to original Valhalla interconnects which were sometimes found bearing a sin of commission through their spotlight treble.

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► There’s no such over-exposure here, just guileless revelation from bottom to top. The comparatively darker shading is nonetheless entirely natural in character, refusing to draw unwanted attention to the upper registers, instead allowing more relaxed attention equitably throughout the musical spectrum.

Listening through the Valhalla 2 Tonearm Cable + was more like unlocking the back door to the recording studio, or bagging the best concert seats in the house. Once the deck/arm/cartridge are perfectly tuned, which as discussed becomes a whole lot easier with an effectively transparent conduit carrying tiny signals from deck to amp, an LP side becomes a personal musical event.

Barenboim is at the seat of the piano, a grumbling monster of lacquered wood, cast iron and steel from which he coaxes these tender melodies as his right hand ripples back and forth, while the left punctuates with heavy yet deft low groans of bass in the opening of the *Waldstein* [EMI SLS 794/12].

The fine patina of tape hiss from the 50 year-old recording is part of the event and easily ignored, and instead I’m always captivated – in turn for instance by the incredibly soft vibration of barely touched keys in *Der Sturm*’s first movement. With the Nordost cable, I was hearing deeply into the incredibly long sustained open chords that drift through the piece, seemingly lost to the faint hiss but no, still there and ringing on and gently on.

A recently acquired box of the cycle by Alfred Brendel [Philips 6768 004] shows the Czech pianist’s touch with wider dynamic shifts but similarly thoughtful musical timing. Beethoven sonatas have never sounded so conversational, ranging from somnolent to downright scary but always uncannily expressive.

King Crimson’s debut album has just seen its anniversary reissue, replete with ruinous digital mastering, but a pink-rim Island pressing sounded the fresher after the cable upgrade, and crucially with correct on-the-beat timing. With the aid of a supporting cast of the LCR phono stage and a transformer volume control, surface noise melts away to inconsequence, another unexpected dividend of V2+. Somehow, more mortal tonearm cables seem to accentuate impulsive clicks where the Nordost ushers them through without emphasis.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Tonearm cable

Insulation: High purity 1.1 extruded Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene (FEP)

Conductors: 4× solid-core, Dual Mono-Filament design

Construction: 2× twisted pairs, individually shielded

Mechanically tuned lay and lengths

Material: 24AWG silver-plated, 99.999999% Oxygen-Free

Copper solid core conductors, 24 AWG silver-plated, stranded Oxygen-Free Copper, Micro Mono-Filament design for bonded and grounding whips

Velocity of propagation: 87%

Termination: HOLO:PLUG® Straight or 90° low-mass 5-pin Din, RCA, or XLR connectors. Whips and bond wire terminated with gold-plated 5mm spades

Price: from £4,470

Manufactured by: Nordost

URL: nordost.com

Distributed in the UK by: Renaissance Audio

URL: renaissanceaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)131 555 3922

A final word must go to bass replay, as the cable truly opens this area up being variously lean and fast, but rich and thunderous when demanded. Low-octave content comes across as staggeringly honest, whether delivering tuneful bass figures from an accomplished player, or the incidental effects of distant train and road traffic rumble, inadvertently captured at the edge of perception in 1960s recordings of chamber music. It may come as a surprise how much the stylus is reading when a tonearm cable is finally able to retell the whole story it receives. It’s only natural that one of the most sensitive cables in the whole audio pantheon should garner big differences in performance, but even so... wow!

The V2+ tonearm cable follows the house V2 sound of exceptional transparency and stunning transient playback, without ever falling to the temptation of over-sharing the treble content. The midband and top are deliciously open and see-through, seamless and nearly organic in naturalness, while bass is disarmingly honest and musical in its flow. This is a staggeringly insightful wiring upgrade to hear what’s hiding in the groove. +

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Critical Mass Systems QXK rack system

by Alan Sircom

There used to be one inviolate rule in audio; racks – like fine wine – don't travel. There was good reason for this; they are heavy and tended not to be in the same high-end league as their electronic counterparts in a system. Critical Mass Systems was one of the first companies to tear up that rule book, producing products that retain all the elements of high-end audio in terms of performance-raising abilities, weight and price. The company's Olympus V-12 and Maxxum systems form the foundation for many of the highest of high-end systems around the world. Meanwhile the QXK system tested here brings many of those high-performance sonic elements down to a more manageable price and physical aspect.

The basic concepts of all three Critical Mass Systems racks (five, if you include the otherwise identical to QXK three-legged PXK and the Sotto Voce rack) is the same throughout and came about as a response to vinyl enthusiasts wanting to divorce their turntables from the environment without hobbling the sound in the process. Each system features a very solid aluminium frame using black tubes as uprights and contrasting clear (or matching black) anodised aluminium platforms, designed to support Critical Mass Systems' range of damping/filtering shelves. Each shelf features a six-stage, dual-zone damping system with 20 damping layers in its upper sections and 12 damping layers in the shelf's lower stages. This was developed using a punishing regime of iterative, trial-and-error evaluation until a 'recipe' that worked uniformly well was developed and



given this is effectively the third iteration of this shelf system, the process of honing the performance is ongoing.

The shelves themselves rest on four ball-bearings to limit the possibility of vibration transmission from stand to platform to shelf but given the amount ▶

“QXK presents that detail in an ordered, natural and coherent way; the way the equipment should sound.”

- ▶ of filtering inside the shelves themselves, the need for additional vibration control in the rack is almost academic. There are three grades of shelf: Black Sapphire (for products up to 100lbs/45kg), Black Platinum (for products up to 200lbs/90kg) and Black Diamond (as per Black Platinum, but with improved damping and filtration). It's entirely possible to upgrade as your demands change over time, using Black Sapphire for sources and preamps and Black Platinum for power amps, switching over to Black Diamond when funds permit. Given the price of admission for the support system in even its most basic Black Sapphire guise, I suspect the upgrade path will not be taken too often. Maxxum and Olympus have their own shelf systems that take the Black Diamond concept and run with it.

Assembly of the rack is straightforward but is both time-consuming and should be performed with painstaking precision. Set aside a day for doing it properly. There's nothing that would challenge your Ikea-Fu (the feet, legs and platform supports all bolt together in a logical manner, but to give the QXK Grandmaster-grade stability requires a lot of bolts). Unlike many stands, it's possible – advised, even – to build a layer, add the product intended for that layer, then build the next layer. This is a good idea as it limits the possibility of either moving or damaging the filter platforms (damage is unlikely, but as the platforms sit on ball-bearings, accidentally moving them during the installation is not a good idea... just ask any user of a Naim Frain just how much swearing that produces). Of course, this means optimal tightening of the outer frame from the get-go – by way of contrast, so many stands act like a set of untamed bagpipes until they get the final tighten and levelling process.

The net result is a sound that brings out the best from the equipment that resides upon the QXK rack and its shelves. We want and get detail – but that's on show in almost every good system – but QXK presents that detail in an ordered, natural and coherent way; the way the equipment should sound.

Without it sounding like it accents the bass or drums, the QXK system makes your system sound like it has a better back section. Equipment on the QXK hang together better in a more rhythmically-coordinated manner. Often, this sense of rhythmic cohesion happens because of an accented leading-edge, which is why 'PRaT' (Pace, Rhythm and Timing) is so commonly associated with music in strict 4/4 time. Here, by teasing out the nuances of the rhythm section – through sheer absence of background interference – that rhythmic integrity just seems natural and makes recordings that bit more lifelike. Weirdly, that applies far beyond the 4/4 time signature; try Panufnik's Sinfonia di Sfere [Tampere Phil, Storgards, Ondine/Naxos] for example; the almost architectural compositional style doesn't give much rhythm for a system to cling to, but without that rhythmic scaffolding, it can just sound like random orchestral noodling. The QXK system gives the system that scaffolding needed

PRICE AND CONTACT DETAILS

Critical Mass Systems QXK Rack

Black Diamond shelf: £5,000 per level

Black Platinum shelf: £4,000 per level

Black Sapphire shelf: £3,000 per level

Manufactured by: Critical Mass Systems

URL: criticalmasssystems.com

Distributed in the UK by: Select Audio

URL: selectaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1900 601954

to support the music, and this makes it more comprehensible.

Moving away from more challenging modern classical music, the QXK's combination of letting the audio electronics do what they are supposed to do with few constraints coupled with a general tying together of the sound makes for a very entertaining experience. In particular, the rack gives the system opportunity to play loud (or very quiet) without being influenced by the surroundings and it makes you want to listen to more music for longer. Not just delicate audiophile-approved jazz; 'Wiley Flow' by Stormzy [*Heavy Is The Head*, Merky/Atlantic] spits along with real power and force.

Despite being two stages down from Critical Mass Systems Olympus V-12 flagship, this is a physically big, tall and heavy rack. Its turntable heritage shines through because the top-most component on the rack with its platforms is at an ideal height for changing a record without crouching. The system exudes Gibraltar-like solidity, and the rack acts like a peacemaker, bringing all that sit on it into musical accord. This is a change to the sound that at once immediately impresses but more importantly has staying power. It's the rack that keeps on giving. If you have the best and want the best, Critical Mass Systems might just have all the answers. +

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KLH Ultimate One headphones

by Steven Stone

Some audio firms are forever written into the history of high-performance audio. Acoustic Research (AR) and Kloss, Lowe and Hoffman (KLH) are two that immediately come to mind. Over the years the trademark KLH has appeared on a variety of components, few of which achieved the same levels of importance as their early offerings. But that may change. Former Klipsch Global Sales President David P. Kelly is now the CEO and owner of KLH and is looking to bring the brand back to prominence, in part through the firm's first headphone product, appropriately named the KLH Ultimate One.

The Ultimate One's design is built around a 50mm 'pure beryllium' driver that according to KLH has a frequency response of 18 Hz–22 kHz (± 3 dB) and a high sensitivity specification of 97dB. The Ultimate One's circular, open-back enclosure is made of genuine Ebony wood with a mesh opening at its centre. Supplied accessories include a two-metre detachable silver Litz braided cable with 3.5mm terminations, a 6.35mm adapter, a travel case, and a soft velour carry bag.

The fit and finish of the KLH Ultimate One is exceptionally fine, especially considering its price. There's no "carbonized plastic" where there should be metal. And instead of the usual lateral pivots that have some flex or play, the side-pivots on the KLH Ultimate One are tight, smooth, and move without a trace of wobble. This same level of construction quality extends to the ear pads, cushioned headband, and extension detents on the headband. Everything is tight, carefully finished, and exudes a sense of solidity. Unlike many mid-priced headphones, the KLH Ultimate One carries a two-year warranty.





“Sonically, the KLH Ultimate One delivers a classic large-diaphragm dynamic driver sound.”

► The KLH Ultimate One is an extremely comfortable headphone. Together, the combination of light weight, wide range of band adjustability, adequate (but not excessive) side-pressure, padded headband and large over-ear ear pads, make it easy to forget you are wearing headphones, especially during extended listening sessions. My only ergonomic quibble is with the termination where the cable connects with the headphone. The 1.9cm long stiff barrel on the end of the termination could, if torqued sideways, damage the headphone's input connector (a soft, flexible barrel could eliminate this potential problem).

Sonically, the KLH Ultimate One delivers a classic large-diaphragm dynamic driver sound. The soundstage (with the right music) is large, cohesive, and dimensional. Listening to my recent live recording of the local neo-old-timey band, Masontown, I noticed that the KLH Ultimate One reproduced all the subtleties of the recording. Compared with several of my reference headphones the KLH harmonic balance was quite close, with the exception being the bass, which was fuller and slightly less controlled than through the Focal Elegia

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Over-ear, open-back headphones
Driver complement: 50mm dynamic drivers with Beryllium diaphragms
Frequency Response: 18 Hz–22 KHz (± 3 dB)
Impedance: 32 ohms
Sensitivity: 97 dB/1mw
Connector: 3.5mm single-pin custom
Weight: 340 g
Price: £299 UK, \$299 US

Manufactured by: KLH
 984 Logan Street, Noblesville, Indiana 46060 USA
Tel: +1 (833) 554-8326
URL: klhaudio.com

Distributed in the UK by: KLH (EU)
 Unit 5 Keypoint, Rosemount Business Park
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or Abyss Diana Phi. Lateral focus and image definition was good through the KLH Ultimate Ones, but again the two reference headphones delivered a somewhat more precise and better-defined three-dimensional image.

One especially attractive aspect of the KLH Ultimate One's sound was an extremely natural and relaxed sonic presentation that always sounds musical. Unlike many “mid-priced” headphones that aim for a spectacular sound that emphasizes certain parts of the harmonic spectrum, such as the mid bass or the upper midrange. The KLH Ultimate One's would be an excellent choice for someone who wants a musical over-ear headphone that allows for a high level of situational awareness.

I mention ‘situational awareness’ because the KLH Ultimate Ones do not isolate you from outside noise like a noise cancelling or noise blocking earphone. If your airline decides to change gates, you will still know about it. On the airplane itself you will find the KLH Ultimate Ones do little to reduce noise, so you may need a second pair of earphones that can isolate you from jet engine sounds.

Listeners looking for exceedingly comfortable, open-back, over-ear headphones that deliver a relaxed and musical presentation would do well to try the KLH Ultimate Ones. After a couple of minutes, you may find them hard to take off... +

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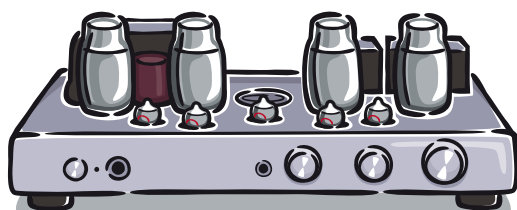
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Allnic Audio ZL-5000 power cord

by Alan Sircom

I'm more disposed toward reviews of complete cable systems than individual cables, but Nicholas Ripley's review of Allnic's clever Zero Loss Technology in the ZL-3000 power cord piqued my interest, so it's time to try out the flagship.

To recap, Allnic's 'Zero Loss Technology' system was designed to minimise or eliminate signal losses by functionally by-passing three regions where active cable resistances might muster — connection, contact and wire. To overcome resistance issues in connection, many companies deploy a cold-welding system, but Allnic goes in the other direction; welding at 1000°C between terminations and conductor. That way, Allnic can eliminate solder joints or screw-in terminals, which is especially useful in power cord terminations. It also uses a Four Surface Contact IEC receptacle instead of the line contact clips commonly found inside IEC plugs. Both terminations feature beryllium copper, with rubber insulation between the wires for safety at high temperatures (useful in the unlikely event that the cable is in an unprotected open-short state).

In the cable itself, Allnic uses large gauge nickel-plated oxygen-free copper conductors set in a double-shield of aluminium and nickel-plated alloy and copper mesh rather than conventional screens and shields for the power cords. This was chosen because while copper or silver are fine electrical shields, they are still influenced by magnetic fields; this three-metal shield is less magnetically prone.



Allnic presents the ZL-5000 in the way all good cables should be packaged; kind of like a gift, but not in an overtly ostentatious way. The box is a hefty slip-case with a warranty card and the cable in its own black velvet bag. The cable itself is relatively thick, although by audio-anaconda standards, not so much, and there are no flattened carbon-fibre ducks, 1980s hard drives, or designer soda cans set into the cable. Perhaps this is why although the cable represents the top of Allnic Audio's power cable range, and has all the trimmings of super-exotic wire, the price is not in the "you can get a new BMW for that much!" level, even if its performance certainly does reach the top tier.

What first strikes you about the Allnic Audio ZL-5000 power cords is just how well-balanced they are. These are impressive performers by dint of being extremely expressive and subtle, but without having any obvious tweaks to the performance of the equipment. If you are rebuilding your system from the cables outward, and doing that step-by-step instead of a single, substantial investment, it's usually best to start from the amplifier or even preamplifier outward. This is because they are the nerve-centre of every system, and some of the most demanding in power delivery terms. In addition, preamplifiers are the hardest nut to crack in audio, and if a cable gets it right here, it gets usually gets it right throughout. I used the ZL-5000 from the amps on out.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Allnic ZL-5000 power cord:

\$2,000/1.8m (20A version \$2,200)

Additional 0.5m is: \$150

Power connections:

Schuko/US male plugs only

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URL: allnicaudio.com

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► The ZL-5000 maintains a very deft touch on the music, with a strong accent on detail resolution, but not at the expense of warmth or musicality. What I found particularly attractive was the way it could help unmask subtle microdynamic cues in the musical performance, ones that usually lurk at or just below the sonic waterline. Here, quiet finger squeaks can be clearly picked out over the acoustic guitar onslaught of Rodrigo y Gabriella's 'Diablo Rojo' from their eponymous album [ATO]. This recording also highlights the impressive amount of detail these cables deliver (more accurately, the impressive amount of background hash they remove allowing all that detail to shine through). And yet, for all this immediacy and detail, these aren't overly bright or forward and 'shiny' sounding power cables. They are neutral and natural sounding; normally functions that take time to reveal themselves to listeners, especially in the context of a power setting. Here they shine out, but without being overly flashy. That makes them ideal for playing good jazz (of course... *Everyone Loves Bill Evans*, and almost every system loves to play his music because it sounds so good), but more importantly the ZL-5000 brings that even-handed naturalness to less than natural-sounding music. I played 'Pale Green Ghosts' by John Grant (from the album of the same name, Bella Union records) and the lo-fi electronica (all buzzes and bleeps) were given the same honest treatment. There's almost nothing on the track (Grant's voice aside) that isn't electronic or heavily treated so there is no 'absolute sound' baseline to check against, but the recording 'seemed' more like the real deal than often heard at this price.

ZL-5000 is possibly not the first choice for those looking to recapture their early years of punk or thrash metal. When something gets that spikey, nothing can really change it. Playing 'Theme from Sparta FC' by The Fall [Live at the Knitting Factory, Hip Priest] sounds like it was recorded in a garage with a broken tape recorder, and nothing will change that. But the ZL-5000 doesn't get in the way of the raw energy, which is a good thing.

My only regret with the Allnic cables is there is at present no UK plug option, only EU/Schuko and US plugs. With the uncompromising stance

"Here they shine out, but without being overly flashy."

put upon the plug by Allnic, I can't imagine seeing a ZL-5000 with a Furutech plug any day soon – it kind of defeats the object of at least part of the exercise. If enough UK audio enthusiasts express an interest, that plug will happen; otherwise from a strictly legal perspective, you are going to have to use them with Schuko plugs with an adaptor, or conversion plug. Which defeats the object in a different way.

Fully half our readers fall into the other two territories however, and they don't get the benefit of the ZL-5000 in its native form. The Allnic cables are the perfect answer to the power cord sceptic, as the difference in performance is marked, easy to spot and entirely positive in sound quality. Granted the willfully tin-eared will not hear a difference, but those who hear differences between amplifiers can hear similar grades of improvement brought about by the ZL-5000. It's hard not to be impressed by their innate sense of rightness, making the sound of a good system really come to life, but without over-exaggerating anything. +

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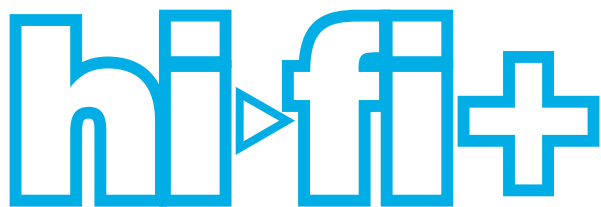
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Jerry Leger

by Sean Hannam

Canadian singer-songwriter Jerry Leger is a voracious collector of vinyl records. When I spoke to him on his last UK tour, ahead of a gig with his band, The Situation, in East London, he told me: "When I get into a record, I dissect it – I listen very closely to it and it means something to me. Over a beer, I can talk all night about music I love."

His new record, *Time Out For Tomorrow*, has been heavily influenced by two albums that he adores – Lou Reed's *Coney Island Baby* and Nick Lowe's *The Impossible Bird*. "*Coney Island Baby* was the first solo Lou Reed record I heard. I think it was my brother, Shawn, who bought it at a garage sale or something. I was still pretty young, maybe 14 or so. I had got into The Velvet Underground a couple of years earlier," he says.

"It's an album that has always stuck with me. It's not trying to prove anything – it's there to discover. I love the production, especially the drum sound, which is what I really wanted on this record."

He adds: "Nick Lowe's *The Impossible Bird* is just a beauty of an album. It has a wonderful bright sound to it. I get the same feeling listening to an Everly Brothers or Jack Scott record."

"Have you ever listened to Jack Scott? He was one of the first Canadian rock 'n' rollers to break through abroad and he's one of my dad's favourite singers. I suppose he influenced me to some degree. I know my parents did, musically. They have great taste in music. When my parents like my album, then I know I've made a good one."

Time Out For Tomorrow – the ninth studio album by Toronto-based Leger – should meet with his parents' approval. It's a brilliant record – from the Dylanesque country-rock of first single 'Canvas of Gold', to the melancholy, piano-led ballad 'That Ain't Here', the blues-folk of 'Burchell Lake' – inspired by a ghost town in Ontario – and the haunting mountain tune, 'Survived Like A Stone' – with fiddle and saw – these are raw, powerful and emotional songs that deserve to be heard by a much wider audience.

Through a gruelling touring schedule, Leger has slowly started to build up a following in the UK and Europe. In spring 2019, he released a limited edition, retrospective compilation album, called *Too Broke To Die*, which was put together especially for the European market and was available to buy from his merchandise stall.

Six months after our first meeting in London, I caught up with him again to talk about the making of his latest album and find out more about the influences behind it...

SH: Could *Time Out For Tomorrow* be the your 'breakout' album?

JL: I hope it does – just to make it easier to keep travelling and making albums. I certainly think that there are enough people that would dig it to make that happen, but it's hard these days. Once upon a time the music would come to them, now they gotta dig for it, unless there's a lot of money behind it, pushing

it. We'll definitely be back [in the UK and Europe] in the spring. We're just starting to figure that out. I'm really looking forward to it.

2018's *Nonsense and Heartache*, was a double album – the first half had a raw, electric, blues feel, but the second half was much more stripped-down and alt-country. The new album feels less bluesy and more Americana...

Yeah – that's a fair comment. I think the *Nonsense* portion of *Nonsense and Heartache* was basically a blues record. It's just where I was at for those sessions. They're all kind of blues records, but this one swings more.


With 10 tracks, it feels very direct – it doesn't mess around...

The last record was a double because we were making two very different records at the same time. [Producer] Michael Timmins said, "why don't we just release them together under the same roof?" I knew this one was gonna be a single album and I wanted it to be short and sweet – to say what it needs to say and then move on to the next thing.

Some of my favourite albums are doubles for the reason that the artists do it because they need to let it all out at that moment, for better or worse. On the other hand, some of my favourite albums are the ones where they're there and then they're gone – just like some of the best memories you have. You get a natural high and all you wanna do is re-live it. I wanted to make a record like that – that made you feel good.

Your basic band set-up on this album is very mid-'60s Bob Dylan...

Bob Dylan has influenced everything and everyone, whether they like it or not. As Warren Zevon once said, 'He invented my job.' Having said that, it wasn't anything intentional. We just have a good buddy, Alan



“Bob Dylan has influenced everything and everyone, whether they like it or not.”

Zemaitis, who plays the organ like you’ve never heard. He recently played with Buddy Guy in Chicago, and Buddy gave him the nod and thumbs up. I really wanted him as part of the family on this record.

How were the recording sessions?

Smooth and quick. It basically took a week, but a few tunes were recorded during the rehearsals and they ended up as final takes. Unlike the other records, the band and I met up more to try out different arrangements of the tunes, or hammer out parts that we really dug. There was still spontaneity and some songs were re-arranged on the fly, but we definitely took more time finding the world each song lived in. We recorded it at the Cowboy Junkies’ studio, The Hangar, in Toronto.

What’s Michael Timmins (Cowboy Junkies) like to work with?

He doesn’t interfere, but he’ll suggest things when he feels like he needs to. A lot of times he’s right. I trust him. There are only a handful ▶

▶ of people that I really trust with my music. I think this record is the closest sound-wise that I've ever got to what's in my head. You can never get there 100%, but I'm very proud of it.

Did you have many songs left over from the album sessions?

Yeah – every record has that. Sometimes the best song is dropped because it just doesn't fit. This record had about eight or nine other tunes that didn't make the cut. They were some of my favourites, but I trusted the vision of the album.

Are all the songs on *Time Out For Tomorrow* new, or do some date from a while back?

There was just one song, 'Tell A Lie' that we recorded for the last album. I knew it didn't fit, but I also knew that it had something – a great chorus and feel, so we re-recorded it for *Time Out For Tomorrow*. The rest of the songs were new. I wrote 'Canvas of Gold' days before we started recording.

The title of the new album is taken from a '60s dime store collection of sci-fi short stories that a friend gave you. Why and how did that inspire you and why did you feel it summed up the record?

I just couldn't get the title out of my head. It seemed to make sense to me for this record. Sometimes I know exactly what it means and sometimes I think it could be something else. I dig that.

The first song on the record – and also the first single – is 'Canvas of Gold'. Is the song autobiographical?

Well, my dad had a rough upbringing – not a lot of money in a very full house in St. John's, Newfoundland. He always worked very hard – he did a few jobs to make sure that we didn't grow up the same way. His work ethic is still inspiring to me. He always had pride in what he was doing. My Dad was no sell-out.

As a full-time musician trying to earn a living, do you feel like a hustler?

Yeah. Life is a hustle for people that don't rely on luck, or rely on someone to create the illusion for them.

One of my favourite tracks on the album is 'Burchell Lake', which was written about a ghost town in Ontario. Can you tell me more about the song?

I read about Burchell Lake in a book on ghost towns, which was written by Ron Brown. The gas station was still there, with some products left behind on the shelves, a row of houses, a general store... I wrote the song in five or 10 minutes. 'Burchell Lake' just seemed like a song that needed to be around.

The song 'Survived Like A Stone' has a folk feel to it and a fiddle and a saw on it. It has an eerie and dark atmosphere, and sounds like a mountain ballad...

I wrote it on piano, but it felt better on guitar. I pictured it in an old Western film – coming off the mountains. That's why the choruses have that atmosphere to them. *Once Upon A Time In The West* is one of my favourite movies and I love Ennio Morricone's scores. I really like the words to 'Survived Like A Stone'. I thought it was a cool idea – stones and rocks, some have been here forever



and we come and go. There are spirits in those stones...

Would you say this album is more personal than some of your other records? It feels like it is...

I think they all have a degree of that. It's intertwined with make believe and random thoughts, too.

What music are you currently enjoying? You're a big record collector. Have you bought any vinyl recently?

I've been listening to a lot of Butch Hancock. I finally got my hands on a few of his albums – they're not easy to find. I was in Newfoundland recently and picked up an album by a legendary artist from there named Ron Hynes. When you get a chance, check out a song called '1962'. It's beautiful.

If you could get some 'time out for tomorrow', what would you do?

Probably just write more songs, or maybe try and write and direct a good, old haunted house movie. Something that is simple and creepy. I hope that someday someone asks me to write music for a spooky film. +

Time Out For Tomorrow by Jerry Leger is out now on Latent Recordings.

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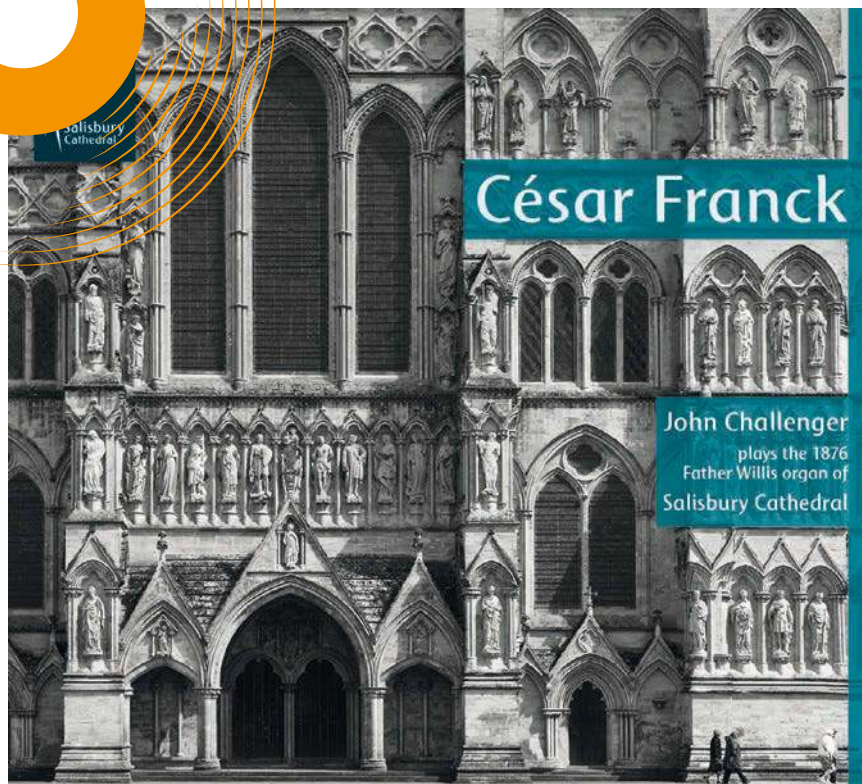

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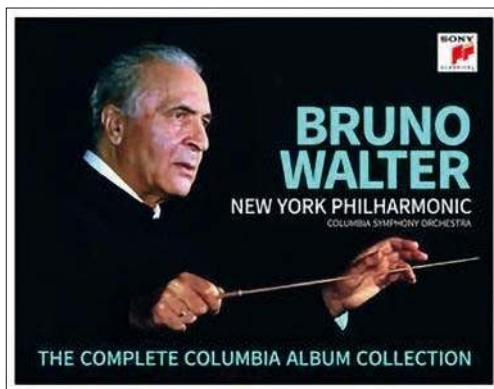
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This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis Davis
JH – Jimmy Hughes
SH – Sean Hannam
JK – Jason Kennedy

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This handsome new edition is complete, so it features Walter's earlier hard-to-find New York mono recordings along with the later stereo remakes. 'Original Jackets' presentation gives us the Columbia LP album covers/disc labels, and all recordings have all been newly remastered at 24bit/96kHz.

But who exactly was Bruno Walter? Born in 1876, he was one of the most important conductors of the 20th century. He personally knew Gustav Mahler, and premiered several of his works (including the *9th symphony* and *Das Lied von der Erde*) after the composer's death in 1911.

Walter's dates – 1876–1962 – overlap those of podium rivals like Arturo Toscanini (1867–1957) and Wilhelm Furtwangler (1886–1954). But, living a few years longer meant a large number of his Columbia recordings were stereo – unlike Furtwangler's and Toscanini's mono-only legacy.

Starting in 1941, Bruno Walter made his first Columbia recordings

in New York; Beethoven's *Eroica* and an *Emperor* concerto with Serkin. There followed more Beethoven and Mozart symphonies, plus Schubert's 'Unfinished' and 'Great C Major' symphonies.

The first Mahler 5

In 1947 came the first-ever commercial recording of Mahler's fifth symphony. Still largely an unknown composer at that time, Mahler himself had led the very same *Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of New York* for a couple of seasons almost 50 years earlier.

Walter's early New York recordings were made before the use of magnetic tape became widespread. Instead, Columbia used 16in lacquer discs running at 33.1/3rd rpm – not short-duration 10in 78's. As a result, the consistency and continuity of both performance and sound are excellent.

Sony's 1994 CD issue of Walter's Mahler 5 sounded remarkably good for the period. But there were a few crackles and swishes that could not (at the time) be got rid of. However, this new transfer has eliminated these noises completely, and the recording now sounds even better than before.

Likewise, the 1941 recording of Beethoven's *Eroica* sounds remarkably clear and detailed, and not greatly inferior to Walter's 1949 remake – the latter presumably recorded on magnetic tape. True, Columbia's 1941 mono *sonics* are a bit bright and 'peaky', but clarity is excellent.

Bruno Walter's first stereo sessions seem to have been held in February



1957, when he began recording Mahler's Resurrection symphony in Carnegie Hall. Unfortunately, he suffered a serious heart attack shortly after, so the recording wasn't completed till Feb 1958.

For health reasons, Walter relocated from the East coast of America to the West coast, and from then on nearly all his subsequent stereo recordings (except Schubert's Unfinished and Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde) were made with a 'pick-up' orchestra called *The Columbia Symphony*.

Age brings Mellowness

Generally speaking, where Walter recorded the same work more than once, the earlier mono (*New York*)

performances are tougher and more fiery than the later stereo (*Columbia symphony*) versions. Typically, the latter tend to be slower, warmer, and more lovingly phrased.

The two accounts of Schubert Great C Major illustrate this perfectly – the 1946 NY performance being crisp, taut, and strongly projected, while the 1959 stereo remake is more romantic – perhaps even verging on the sentimental at times.

Not that I'm complaining! Hearing such a heartfelt, warm, and loving performance provides a welcome antidote to today's cold brusque 'hipster' interpretations that make Schubert 9 sound hard, nasal, and utterly charmless. Given a choice, I know which I'd rather have!

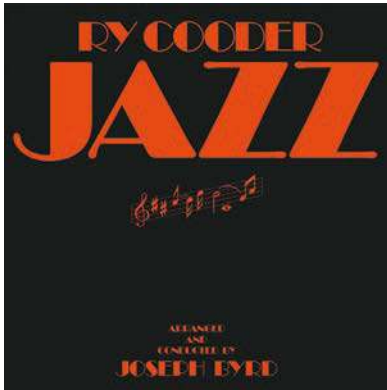
Likewise, the New York mono set of the Brahms symphonies show the tougher more acerbic side of Walter compared to the more-lyrical stereo West-Coast cycle recorded a few years later. Both are excellent, but the earlier set shows that Walter wasn't all sweetness and light.

That said, I was all but transfixed listening to the stereo version of Brahms' hard-to-get-right third symphony – thrilled to hear how Walter shapes this work to perfection. The re-mastered recording sounds wonderful too – amazingly-good in terms of richness and depth.

A lavish 200 page hard-bound book gives background detail on the recordings – where they were made, and when – plus alternative album covers and lots of interesting pictures of Bruno Walter – many I'd not seen before. A full discography of Walter's other recordings is included too...

The set also includes all the various interview and rehearsal discs Bruno Walter made for Columbia, including John McClure's fascinating 'A Working Portrait' that came with the original In-Memoriam Mahler 9 set on LP.

All told, this is a wonderful set that does Bruno Walter proud. It's a labour of love for all concerned, and an object lesson in how a record company should honour the legacy of one of its great artists, and I wish more would do the same. Buy a copy, before it sells-out! **JH**



Jazz

Ry Cooder

Speakers Corner/Warner Bros BSK 3197

2019 gave us too many choices of great music on vinyl, and so many delivered excellent sound too. Two of the three best sounding LP issues of the year, as usual, appeared in the waning moments of last year, and two of the three sound more than vaguely familiar, because they are supercharged versions of records released in earlier years.

Legrand Jazz is a 1958 recording from the best of times and places—a recording made in Columbia's famed 30th Street Studio at the height of the golden age of recording when Columbia had the cream of the jazz world's stars at its disposal. This recording was made to show off that stable of players, and includes performances by, among others, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans and Ben Webster. Each of these star players made better albums, but this gathering of the greats produced an extremely fine performance that never disappoints. Impex released the reissue in a 33 RPM platter, and we gave it the highest ratings for recording and music back in Issue 153. This new 45 RPM two-disc set demonstrates that all top ratings are not created equal. Instrumental texture is the biggest beneficiary of the new mastering by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman Mastering—Ben Webster should always sound juicy, but here he is downright succulent.



Legrand Jazz

Michel Legrand

Impex/Columbia IMP-6030-45

Add a more seamless soundstage and this is a perfect artefact of Columbia's wedding of the best recording engineers, decks, microphones and hall. In addition, the news fold-out cover embraces a handsome booklet.

Twenty years later the golden age of recording was history, but someone forgot to tell Warner Bros, a company that had been producing great sounding pop records all along. One of its most legendary recordings was Ry Cooder's *Jazz*. Like Paul Simon's 1986 album *Graceland*, Cooder incorporated new musical worlds into his albums. Five years before the soundtrack to the movie *The Sting* made ragtime new again, *Jazz* wove honky-tonk, ragtime and early jazz into what for me is a more enduring soundtrack. The biggest influences are Jelly Roll Morton, Bahamian guitarist Joseph Spence and early jazz cornet legend Bix Beiderbecke yet it does not seem anachronistic like *The Sting* soundtrack. The recording by engineer Lee Hershberg is perhaps Cooder's best sounding release. Mobile Fidelity reissued it in 1984, and it became one of the most sought after (and ridiculously expensive) Mobile Fidelity collectibles. The album did not sell all that well, and original copies are plentiful and cheap. This new version from Speakers Corner was mastered by Kevin Gray and sounds significantly



Use Me

Vanessa Fernandez

Groove Note GRV-1050-45-1S

better than the original. There is lots of air around the instruments lending a more three-dimensional feeling to the presentation. The soundstage is a little deeper the sound of the tuba and bass saxophone are lush without lacking in dynamic impact.

From the 21st Century, Groove Note delivers a new One Step Pressing of Vanessa Fernandez's 2014 *Use Me*. Back in 2014 the original version knocked my socks off with its great music and sound. In Issue 118, I noted that the "captivating set of performances covering everything from Barry White to Curtis Mayfield to Al Kooper" had "jaw-dropping sound." Thus, my expectations were low that a do over of the original two LP 45 RPM set could sound even better. The One Step process has been used by Mobile Fidelity in ten deluxe box sets. The improvements of this One Step release from Groove Note are not subtle—sure the dynamics are more striking, but it's the voice that amazes with less sibilance and smoother delivery. If there is a more impressive sounding modern recording of the human voice, I haven't heard it.

These three impressive sounding albums show that record producers did not rest on their laurels in 2019. The golden age of vinyl reproduction went platinum! Pull these albums out next time your house guest asks, "you mean they still make vinyl?" **DD**



A Northern View

Arborist

(Rollercoaster Records)



Northern Irish singer-songwriter Mark McCambridge – the main man behind Arborist – has a great knack for combining truly beautiful music with dark, unsettling lyrics. From the outset of the Belfast-based band's second album *A Northern View* – the follow-up to 2016's critically acclaimed debut, *Home Burial*, things aren't quite what they seem...

The first song, *A Stranger Heart*, begins with lush, uplifting orchestration, before it suddenly comes to a shuddering halt and, after a few seconds is replaced by a low organ, delicate guitar and McCambridge's rich, soaring vocals. You'll be convinced that you've got a faulty copy of the record, but don't worry, it's purely intentional – designed to create a sense of unease.

The track soon picks up again – turning into a swooning, Elbow-like epic, with towering strings and heavenly backing vocals, as McCambridge sings of “the taste of your blood on the tip of my tongue.”

It's a dramatic way to open the album and is followed by another anthemic song, *Here Comes The Devil*, which has a shadowy undercurrent and deals with the subject of people's unspoken or subconscious prejudices.

First single, *Taxi*, is a red herring – standing out from the rest of the record, it's a captivating spoken word track, inspired by the Scottish indie sounds of Arab Strap and Belle and Sebastian,

and is based on an apocryphal rock 'n' roll story told by McCambridge's father's cousin. It's moving, sad, and, ultimately, very funny, with a great twist. No spoilers here...

Arborist began as a solo project for McCambridge, but he was later joined by drummer/ engineer Ben McAuley. For their first album, which was nominated for the Northern Irish Music Prize, they recruited other musicians and now the line-up includes James Heaney – nephew of the late poet Seamus Heaney – on bass, Jonny Ash (guitar) and Richard Hill (piano/organ).

On *A Northern View*, they're accompanied by violinist Emma Smith (Noel Gallagher, James Yorkston), who is responsible for the sublime string arrangements, which adorn many of the songs. Talking about making the successor to *Home Burial*, McCambridge, who had written all the songs for this album ahead of the recording sessions, said: “Melody was still paramount, but I wanted the listener to work for it a little more.”

Recorded at Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios, near Bath, McCambridge's aim with *A Northern View* was to capture the live sound of the band as much as possible – the studio's famous Wood Room, which has high ceilings and warm, rich acoustics, is said to have inspired the musicians.

It sounds like it did the trick... Listening to the record is a lovely, immersive experience and the performances are outstanding, with a real depth to them.

The folky *Don't Let The Sky Take Me* – a song about where McCambridge hails from – is fragile, gorgeous and intimate.

Can I Add You To My Will? brings some Southern soul to the Northern Irish sound – over some Stax-like horns, McCambridge asks, “who's going to love you when I'm old, frail and ill? Can I add you to my will?” It's a tender and affecting moment on one of the album's best songs. Another highlight is the honest, soulful and tear-jerking country ballad, *Too Much On My Mind*, with plaintive organ, violin and a terrific twangy guitar solo.

Sounding like a Northern Irish Hank Williams, McCambridge is seeking solace in the bottle and tells us: “Well, I haven't seen the sunshine in nearly a month – I've retreated, I've drawn the blinds. I need some space so I can unwind, but I've got too much on my mind.” He has described this album as an ode to Northern Ireland and a reaction against what he calls “the abomination of Brexit.”

The majestic, six-minute title track, which closes the album, juxtaposes jagged electric guitar with triumphant brass and haunting strings, and has some wonderful, evocative imagery inspired by the landscape of McCambridge's home country: “I was born at the edge of a dark and restless sea.... I've seen the sunset bleeding through an evening sky...” Listening to it feels like you're standing on the cliff edge and looking out across a stormy ocean.

A Northern View is breathtaking and simply stunning. **SH**



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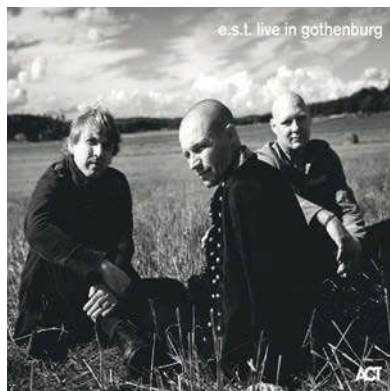
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Live in Gothenburg

E.S.T.

ACT



The Esbjorn Svensson Trio made their name with the albums they recorded in the second half of the nineties, *EST Plays Monk* was the first to gain attention outside of their native Sweden in 1996 and was followed by three albums of original work culminating in *Good Morning Susie Soho* in 2000. *Live in Gothenburg* was recorded in October 2001 in front of a home crowd of sorts before the band took off and started selling out shows in major venues around Europe. It finds pianist Svensson, double bass player Dan Berglund and drummer Magnus Öström at a point before they had really nailed themselves to a particular style. *Live in Gothenburg* is the second live release since Svensson's death in 2008, and the improvisational nature of the playing means that the 11 pieces performed are all quite distinct from their studio precursors and thus interesting for fans and newcomers alike.

'From Gagarin's Point of View' is a fine example of this where Berglund plays a bowed bass intro with great subtlety and lots of texture, setting the tone for this funereal reflection of what it must have felt like to have been the first man in space. The tune itself follows a dark crescendo that those of us less inclined to leave the planet can easily imagine awaiting anyone who dares transcend the boundaries of space and time. The piece is leavened

by Svensson's shining piano notes which give some solace and keep the piece from getting overly sombre.

The concert starts with 'Dating' which has some lovely, generous bass playing plus more shining piano and reveals just how well this trio could play together. Three does appear to be the perfect number when it comes to improvisational musicianship and while this is not a terribly ambitious piece the way that the sound from all three instruments gels is inspiring. It's not particularly dense but complex enough to give a less cohesive system trouble, I was quite surprised that a seemingly good amp/speaker combo had trouble delivering it in an easily accessible, musical form. 'Somewhere Else Before' starts off quietly with brushed drums and nuanced play from piano and bass, Öström restraining himself admirably for the first third before things start to ramp up to a reined in climax, suggesting that the band had learned by this point that you need to save your energy for the emotional apex of the concert.

'The Rube Thing' has a solo piano intro that sees Svensson looking at many of possibilities he could explore, it skirts around the abstract and oblique, both being uncommon in EST's released works, before going back to a structured approach that lets the band back in the door. This transition between the almost free piano improv and the locked groove of the trio is particularly pleasing. It reminds you why their appeal was so broad.

The first disc finishes with 'The Wraith' where Berglund unleashes a sound that could be electric guitar from the 'bull fiddle' and Öström leans toward the heavy rock influences of his youth. It's the most powerful piece in the concert and rhythmically propulsive at the same time, Svensson filling in the gaps with quicksilver but melodic piano. If you ever wonder what inspired so many of today's piano trios to escape the bounds of jazz remember EST.

The second disc starts with the bright lively 'Providence' which shows the influence of Thelonius Monk. You need a decent system to reveal the musical flow that Svensson achieves in the rhythmic intricacies that unfold. The highlight of the set is a near 13 minute version of 'Good Morning Susie Soho', the title track from the album that was being toured at the time. This starts slowly with great sound effects on the bass and some elliptical percussive sounds prior to Berglund going off in funky, expressive and engaging form before a quiet bridge to some Gustavsen style serene piano. Here Svensson builds things up with shimmering runs before eventually returning to the theme with considerable finesse.

Live in Gothenburg reveals that EST were a rather more varied and outgoing band than their rhythm masters image gives. They certainly could lay down a fabulous groove but you can't sustain a 17 year career on vibe alone and this performance makes it clear that there was a lot more to their sound. **JK**



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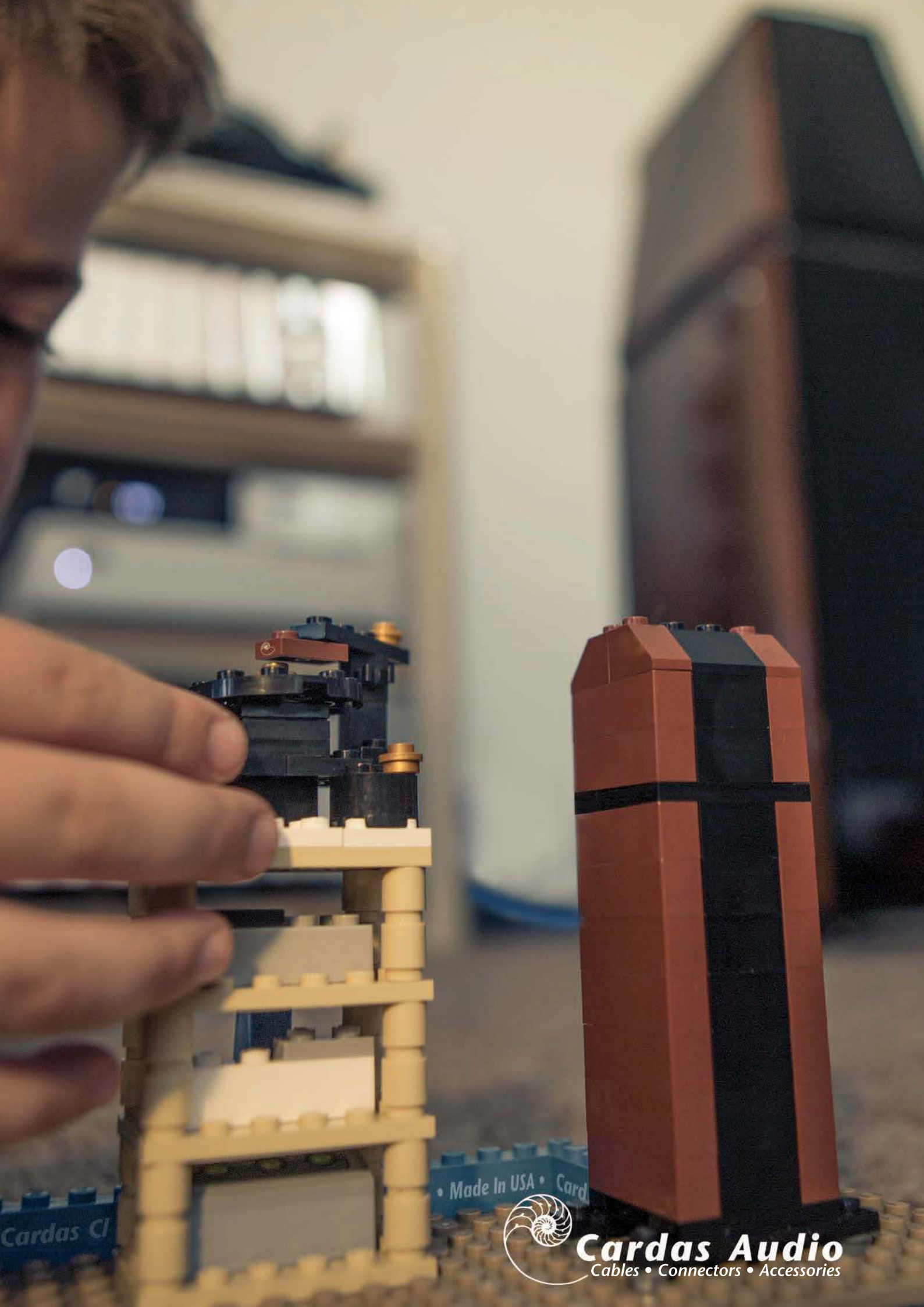
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