

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO REVIEW MAGAZINE £15 Vol8/No2 APR - JUN 2014

REGA'S TOP TURNTABLE

Rega's new low-mass, high-stiffness RP10 record player changes the rules of turntable design

PONO ETCETERA

Which device is likely to give high-resolution audio true mass-market appeal? Andrew Everard speculates

LINN KLIMAX EXAKT 350

Linn's uniquely flexible digital active loudspeaker system and streamer interface is reviewed by Martin Colloms

MUNICH 2014

Jason Kennedy reports on two days' hard labour trying to cover this year's vast Munich show

SPIRAL GROOVE

A radical US high end turntable and tonearm comes under the hificritic microscope

UPGRADING THE SASHA

Martin Colloms assesses the new Series-2 version of Wilson Audio's highly regarded two-box floorstander.

NAIM POWER AMPS

Paul Messenger listens to three generations and 40 years of Naim Audio power amplifiers

U GO WITH HUGO

Hugo is a totally portable DAC and headphone amp. Paul Messenger tries out Chord Electronics' game-changer

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE: REGA RP10, LINN KLIMAX EXAKT 350, LINN KLIMAX EXAKT DSM, SPIRAL GROOVE SG2, SPIRAL GROOVE CENTROID, WILSON SASHA SERIES-2, ADAM F7, NAIM POWER AMPS, MORGAN AUDIO RMS15, CHORD HUGO, KRELL KSA50, SCHIIT AUDIO MODI, SCHIIT AUDIO LOKI, ENKLEIN DAVID, TANGERINE AUDIO KARMEN, HIGHEND NOVUM INITIUM



Editor | Paul Messenger

Writers

Colin Anderson
Chris Bryant
Martin Colloms
Stan Curtis
Barry Diament
Greg Drygala
Andrew Everard
Nigel Finn
Chris Frankland
Jason Kennedy
Paul Messenger
Mark Prendergast
Bob Pyle

Publisher | Martin Colloms

Design | Philippa Steward

Published by

HIFICRITIC
29 Flask Walk
London
NW3 1HH
info@hifcritic.com
www.hifcritic.com

Printed in the UK by
Premier Print, London

HIFICRITIC is a printed publication available by subscription only.

© HIFICRITIC Ltd 2014. All rights reserved. Any unauthorised editing, copying, reselling or distribution of the whole or part of this publication is prohibited. The views expressed in any articles in this magazine should be taken as those of the author or the person quoted unless indicated to the contrary. While HIFICRITIC endeavours to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication, its accuracy cannot be guaranteed and HIFICRITIC.COM accepts no liability for any use of, reliance on or the accuracy of such information.

I make no apology for expanding a topic that occupied part of last issue's *Editorial*, but experiencing the latest turntables from Linn, Rega and Vertere has only reinforced my enthusiasm for the vinyl medium, causing me pose the question: how long do you want your music to last?

Some favourites in my personal collection go back more than fifty years, and today they sound better than ever, thanks to many years of hi-fi system improvements. Admittedly my personal memories don't stretch back to the original Buddy Holly LP that I found in a Brighton secondhand market some thirty years ago, but much of the vinyl I bought new during the 1960s and '70s remains treasured and regularly played today. That's not intended primarily as a criticism of current music and recording practices (though that may well be deserved), but it does affirm my delight in the vinyl disc, as a music storage format that continues to give lasting pleasure across a lifetime.

Languishing in the box room, the Compact Cassettes that I accumulated during the '70s and '80s haven't received much attention in the last thirty years. Most of the CDs went into the shed after I'd ripped them to a server a couple of years ago. However, I'll keep them accessible for the nonce, as my faith in computer-based things is all too often threatened by events well beyond my control. (Over the past forty years, a number of other putative formats have flickered briefly into life before quickly fading into obscurity.)

It seems that anything connected to the outside world *via* the internet is vulnerable to cyber attack. I was recently advised to change all my critical passwords (they've got to be kidding!). Possibly just as serious for music lovers might be Microsoft's announcement that it will shortly stop supporting its *Windows XP* operating system, which was first introduced just 13 years ago. I daresay that a new PC and operating system will continue to support existing music files transferred from an older computer, but I for one would resent being forced into it.

I reckon the Compact Cassette format lasted about thirty years. CD has now been around for about the same length of time, though it now seems to be in decline as downloading and streamed services grow. It's far too early to try and predict what the future holds for either CD or computer-based audio, but the rapid obsolescence and regular updating of computers and their operating systems has got to be a worry – or at any rate a confounded nuisance – for anybody building a music collection into a library.

Furthermore, the sheer complexity of computer audio playback, with numerous different software players and formats, can be quite intimidating (especially for those who find computers boring). Compare the plethora of features on Naim's least ambitious *DAC-VI D-to-A* converter, with the straightforward simplicity of its analogue-stereo-out-only CD players and it's clear that computer audio is very different from all previous hi-fi formats.

Vinyl will never have the modern convenience of spitting the music out of a smartphone or operating a server. But it does combine simplicity, fine quality and hitherto unmatched longevity, all of which would seem to make good sense in my opinion, if music is to last a lifetime.

Paul Messenger

Editor

Contents

- 4 STAN'S SAFARI No26**
Stan describes a radical technique for assessing the audibility of musical changes
- 6 REGA'S TOP TURNTABLE**
The new RP10 record player can rival far more costly alternatives, as Paul Messenger discovers
- 9 PONO ETCETERA**
What will give high-resolution audio mass-market appeal? Andrew Everard speculates
- 12 LINN'S KLIMAX EXAKT 350**
Martin Colloms tackles Linn's uniquely flexible digital active loudspeaker system and its partnering streamer interface.
- 18 MUNICH 2014**
Jason Kennedy spends a tough couple of days covering the vast High End Society Munich show
- 21 SPIRAL GROOVE**
Martin Colloms tries out the Spiral Groove SG2 turntable and partnering Centroid tonearm
- 24 THE PPE EXPERIENCE**
Bob Pyle describes his sometimes tortuous journey in putting together a system that truly satisfies his passion for music
- 28 LISTENING TO TOMORROW**
Barry Diament discusses the basics and benefits of servers from a recording engineer's perspective
- 31 UPGRADING THE SASHA**
Wilson audio has upgraded its two-box Sasha floorstander. Martin Colloms assesses the new Series-2
- 36 ADAM F7**
ADAM stands for 'advanced dynamic audio monitors'. Chris Bryant tries a pro-oriented active monitor
- 38 OLD VERSUS NEW(ER)**
Paul Messenger compares three generations of Naim power amplifiers
- 40 RIBBON ACTIVITY**
Chris Bryant tries Morgan Audio's active rms15, which has a digital input and a ribbon tweeter



- 42 U GO WITH HUGO**
Hugo is a DAC, but also a totally portable headphone amp. Paul Messenger tries Chord Electronics' game-changer
- 44 THE FLAT RESPONSE STORY**
Chris Frankland describes why and how he founded the radical 'The Flat Response' magazine back in 1984
- 47 KSA50 REVISITED**
Martin Colloms reviews Krell's classic 1983 class A reference power amplifier
- 48 NO SCHIIT**
Andrew Everard tries Schiit Audio's very inexpensive Modi and Loki USB DACs
- 50 THE GIANT SLAYER**
Paul Messenger discovers a remarkable but costly interconnect from Kansas City
- 51 BITS & PIECES**
Tangerine Audio's Karmen Linn top plate replacement, and HighEnd Novum's Initium 'baby bell'
- 52 FAVOURITE THINGS**
Ambient music specialist Mark Prendergast chooses his ten favourite albums
- 54 JAZZ PICKS**
Greg Drygala selects six recent jazz releases
- 56 THE BEST OF CLASSICAL**
Colin Anderson selects a handful of new classical releases
- 58 ROCK, POP AND OTHER NICE MUSIC**
Six more new releases discussed by The Chord Company's Nigel Finn
- 60 SUBJECTIVE SOUNDS**
The difficulties of getting the best performance from review components



Martin Colloms' review of Linn's Klimax Exakt on page 12

The Giant Slayer

PAUL MESSENGER FINDS A REMARKABLE BUT COSTLY INTERCONNECT FROM KANSAS CITY



HIFICRITIC
AUDIO EXCELLENCE

During this year's Munich show I bumped into Rumen Artarski (of Thrax) and Mark Doehlmann (ex-Caliburn and Constellation). Doehlmann's promised made-in-Bulgaria turntable is still under wraps, but the pair of them handed me a bulky 2m phono-to-phono interconnect cable labelled EnKlein *David* that they thought I ought to try. It uses silver conductors, is quite fat (nearly 2cm diameter across most of its length) and was terminated in some Eichmann 'bullet' type phono plugs. The latter have been modified with extra shielding around the inside of the locking barrel, and I was specifically warned not to lose them.

After I got home I managed (not without some difficulty, as this stiff, bulky cable is 2cm in diameter) to substitute them for the Vertere *Pulse B* cables I had been using between a Rega *Ios* phono stage and Naim *NAC552* pre-amp, and was quite surprised that the effect of the change was so obvious. I wasn't immediately won over, as the *David* cable seemed a little brighter and 'sharper' than before, but by the third album side I noticed my foot was tapping more than usual and I was finding that LP replay had become significantly better than before. I played a number of favourite discs and found that all of them without exception sounded better than I'd heard them previously.

The most obvious advantages were tauter, tighter timing, a lower noise floor and consequently a wider dynamic range – but especially reduced timesmear and more precise dynamic expression and tracking. The only downside seemed to be that the *Apheta* cartridge's treble peak was rather more audible, partly no doubt because silver conductors tend to sound brighter than copper. However, this also acknowledges the cable's accuracy: it doesn't necessarily sound beautiful in every contexts, but it does invariably sound honest and truthful, which is more important.

Although I fell in love almost immediately with

EnKlein's *David* cable – and am certainly not the sort of reviewer that enjoys messing around with or changing cables – there is a real sting in the tail here. The one aspect of *David* (subtitled 'The Giant Slayer') that I didn't know and hadn't even contemplated was its price. I'd guessed that it wasn't going to be cheap, but certainly didn't anticipate anything like the pricetag of \$20,000 for a phono-terminated 2m pair. Had I known this in Munich I might well have refused to take them; but then had I done so, I might never have appreciated what was possible.

EnKlein operates out of Lee's Summit, a suburb of Kansas City on the Eastern border of Missouri. Its roots lie in the professional audio sector, where musicians and recording engineers expressed frustration that they couldn't capture the emotional content of music recordings, despite using high quality hardware. Experimenting with cables proved very successful, and has ultimately led to the current ranges for both professional and domestic customers.

The website (<http://www.enklein.com/Pages/David.html>) gives some explanation about *David's* key elements, which seem to be mostly about shielding and shield energy dissipation. The former is described (presumably metaphorically) as 'Dragon Skin' shielding, which apparently consists of: "a 4 part shield topology using 'Super Metals' alloys of cobalt, nickel, aluminium, copper and steel". The intention is not only to protect the signal from external electromagnetic interference, but also from any electromagnetic interference generated by the cable itself. And the company's shield energy dissipation techniques are applied to the individual conductors here.

After first using the *David* cable between the *Ios* and the *NAC552* I tried the cable in a number of alternative locations, such as between the *CDS3/PS555* CD player and both the pre-amp and a Townshend *Allegrì* passive control unit. While the results didn't seem quite as dramatic as they had been with vinyl, they followed broadly similar lines, generally improving specific timing, overall time coherence and vocal realism.

Given the stratospheric pricetag, it's impossible to rate EnKlein's *David* interconnect on value for money grounds, but it is a remarkable performer nonetheless. It sets the bar significantly higher than this reviewer had previously encountered, so an Audio Excellence rating is clearly indicated.

Contact:
Tel: 00 1 816 875 6619
www.enklein.com

Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

BECAUSE HIFICRITIC IS FUNDED BY ITS READERS THE SUBSCRIPTION COST IS NECESSARILY HIGHER THAN FOR MAGAZINES SUBSIDISED BY ADVERTISING REVENUE, THOUGH CERTAINLY NOT AS HIGH AS PROFESSIONAL SPECIALIST JOURNALS.

Our budget is directed towards obtaining the very best research and writing from the very best freelance authors, whom we encourage to express themselves fully in print, an opportunity not always available via established publishing regimes.

Through the use of a virtual office, we aim to be exceptionally cost effective. Subscription management, production, printing, editorial, design, laboratory measurement and journalism are scattered around the world, yet are also efficiently and almost instantaneously linked at the touch of an e-mail send button.

Our independence from product advertising allows us to criticise and comment without fear or favour. The HIFICRITIC team scrutinises interesting and internationally important issues and equipment in depth and detail, technically and subjectively, and provides comprehensive investigations into the key issues facing high quality stereo music recording and reproduction today.

Martin Colloms, Publisher

SUBSCRIPTION DETAILS: Full details are provided on the WWW.HIFICRITIC.COM website, including foreign rates and secure electronic payment. If you prefer to pay direct for the UK please copy this page and send the filled in form, including a cheque payable to HIFICRITIC Ltd and send it to: HIFICRITIC, 29 Flask Walk, London NW3 1HH.

Our website supports the day-to-day activities, reports, archive and download material, while the Journal contains the primary contemporary output of our editorial team. The HIFICRITIC audio journal is a full colour print magazine with about 40,000 words of original editorial content per issue. To see what is in our most recent issue, see our [current issue page](#).

Name

Address

.....

.....

Town

Post Code

Country

Email

Please give your choice of issue number for start of subscription (see above) Issue no.

UK SUBSCRIPTION PRICES: (*mail included*)

1 Year £60, for four, quarterly issues

Over the past few months I've listened at some length to three new record players that have been at least the equal of (and possibly rather better than) my own. Linn's *40th Anniversary LP12* [reviewed in *hificritic Vol8 No1* (Jan-Mar 2014)] had an overall consistency and top-to-bottom coherence that I've never quite matched with my own turntable, while the Touraj Moghaddam's Vertere *SG-1* record player with the less costly 'unipivot' *SG-1 TPA* tonearm and Roksan *Shiraz* cartridge is no less impressive, especially in its dynamics and bass 'speed'.

Both those record players are very costly items, well beyond my limited means, but that's much less true of the Rega *RP10*, reviewed in much greater detail elsewhere (pp6-8). This is the first Rega I've encountered that can seriously rival a Linn, and the fact that it's also much less costly is a major bonus. (Whether I should even have contemplated using a £3,000 turntable upstream of a \$20,000 EnKlein *David* interconnect [see p50] is of course a matter for debate!)

However, while vinyl replay is certainly a function of the components themselves, to what extent does it also come down to the ancillaries? We know for certain that the support furniture underneath a turntable has a significant effect on its performance. MC struggled to get good results with the Spiral Groove turntable (pp21-23) until he moved it to a different platform, whereupon his overall judgements were significantly improved. One could say something similar about the various computer problems he encountered in dealing with the Linn *Klimax Exakt* system (see pp12-17), but everything was working very well indeed by the end.

I have to hand it to Martin, for his skill and persistence at fighting these variables, and wonder whether I'd have had the patience to go as far. The reviewer is in a difficult position for a number of reasons. Access to the media and an appreciation of the acoustic behaviour of the room he's working in are naturally substantial advantages, but there are also a number of unavoidable constraints, again to some extent imposed by a listening room.

In any given room, the dimensions and shape, the sources of heat and the seating arrangements, will all tend to take priority over the location of both the hi-fi system and the loudspeakers. Indeed, the position of listening zone will largely determine the location of the loudspeakers in the overwhelming majority of cases. (Perhaps the only exception is something like the clever Linn *Klimax Exakt* system, which is capable of some optimisation of the stereo sound even when the loudspeakers have to be located away from their ideal sites.)

And one shouldn't overlook the effects that the building materials and construction techniques have on the bass reproduction in particular. It's long been apparent that when a range of, say, five models is introduced, the largest – usually with at least two bass drivers – will almost certainly sound bass heavy in my solid-walled 4.3x2.6x5.5m room. However, that's probably because it's primarily intended for the US market, where rooms tend to be larger and walls less solid, using stud-and-plasterboard that tends to absorb more bass energy than brick.

My reviewing activities are therefore inevitably limited by my room conditions, and I do sometimes envy the dealer, for both his experience in dealing with a wide variety of different rooms, and especially his resources. Peter Swain of Leicester-based dealership Cymbiosis recently told me that his shop had no fewer than 12 different Linn-based record players available for demonstration, so that customers could compare all the possible alternatives. The excellent hard wood Harban plinths that Cymbiosis imports from the US doubtless account for several, but that's still an awesome commitment, and certainly enough to make this reviewer very jealous.