

HIFICRITIC

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THE SILVER DISC'S GOLDEN AGE

Five upmarket SACD players reviewed and compared, complete with panel tests

JERN14 DS A miniature speaker made of cast iron? Just add subwoofers to get close to the state-of-the-art

MQA – IS THE TIDE TURNING?

Andrew Everard asks whether the Tidal link means that MQA is finally coming of age

MUSIC BOXES Martin Colloms examines the dramatic sales explosion of sound docks and Bluetooth music boxes

LEJONKLOU BOAZU + GAIO

Chris Frankland tries an ultra-simple integrated amplifier and phono stage from Sweden's Lejonklou

MFA REFERENCE PHONO AMPLIFIER

Andrew Harrison tries one of the most elaborate and costly phono stages around

MUSIC & MORE

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE:

McIntosh MP100
NAD C368
JERN14 DS
PS Audio LANRover
Leema Tucana Anniversary Edition
Ayon CD-35
Luxman D-06u
McIntosh MCD550, Esoteric K-01X
T+A PDP 3000 HV
Music First Audio Reference Phono Amplifier
Lejonklou Boazu
Lejonklou Gaio

CD-35



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Today's hi-fi magazines are certainly struggling, for several reasons that are obvious enough, but worth pointing out nonetheless. Let's be frank about one thing: hi-fi is no longer the fashionable item that it was during the 1970s and '80s.

Part of the reason has to do with the music, which is arguably less interesting than it was, say, between 1955 and 2000. One aspect of the problem might be to do with changes in recording technology. Another concerns the relatively recent popularity of MP3-coded downloads, which certainly have served to undermine the whole concept of hi-fi.

While the music, the recording technology and its delivery methods may all have played their roles, and might well demonstrate some lack of creativity, that's not the only reason why hi-fi as a whole, and the magazines in particular are suffering.

The emergence of the internet has had the most dramatic influence of all, impacting on the hi-fi scene in a number of different ways. Besides dramatically affecting the delivery of music, it has had huge impacts on hardware retail, and the readership of magazines. The latter have seen the replacement of relatively costly print by free-to-readers online publishing. This has not only diluted the expenditure on advertising, while the decline in the whole hi-fi sector has also significantly reduced revenues.

Faced with this 'double whammy', there's a strong danger that the British hi-fi magazines will take the line of least resistance, sacrificing a hard-won international reputation for honest criticism in order to maintain profitability.

I hear tell that some UK magazines now routinely send reviews to the brands concerned prior to publication, presumably giving the brand concerned the opportunity to incorporate any modifications, and mollify any criticisms.

One problem which currently faces hi-fi is that most of the latest equipment tends to be rather good, so serious criticism can often be difficult. But there's still no excuse for the degree of blatant sycophancy that seems an integral part of most paper magazine reviews today.

We certainly don't send out or doctor any of the *HIFICRITIC* reviews for 'correction' or modification. And I don't think any of my reviews for other magazines have been tampered with. But one incident that does stick in my mind was when I received payment from another magazine for a commissioned review that didn't actually appear.

Apparently the review in question had been sent to the brand's leading people, who had deemed it 'insufficiently enthusiastic', and expressed the preference that it shouldn't appear. (They were probably also major advertisers in the magazine.) At least no attempt was made to alter the copy in any way, and I received the promised payment, ostensibly from the editorial budget, so I didn't worry about it unduly.

Paul Messenger

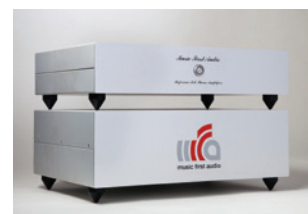
Editor

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The Silver Disc's Golden Age

WE SENT JULIAN MUSGRAVE OFF TO ROUND UP A COUPLE OF SERIOUS CD/SACD PLAYERS. OFF HE WENT, BARKING WILDLY, AND CAME BACK WITH NO FEWER THAN FIVE

Are CD and SACD as dead as a dodo, or are they the beating heart of high end audio? Perfect sound forever, or nails on blackboard? Precious collectible physical media, or cheap plastic dross? The point of these questions is that newcomers like cloud-streamed and NAS-served files are making us re-think our relationship with the silver disc, which has been the *de facto* king of the hill for nearly forty years now.

Sure, we're all playing with data files and its super-cool vocabulary, ripping WAVs to NASs, streaming FLACs to DACs, replaying DSD through USB and all the rest of it. But all that is very different to relying entirely on non-physical media, because, despite claims to the contrary, the whole thing just doesn't work reliably enough to give us that essential zen-like connection with the music.

Add in the knowledge that this generation of players can make the silver disc sound better than ever, and mindful of the sheer quantity of music available in CD/SACD, a strong case can be made that the silver disc is just as current as ever, despite the invasion of the file-snatchers. Sure, its place in our rigs is changing subtly but as Chardin's Third Law of Technology (1) states: "Old

technologies never die; they sublime to the sacred". Just so. CD has joined vinyl as a simply wonderfully retro way to listen to and revere music. Listen without prejudice to this test group of disc players, and it's shock'n'awe all the way. So you'll probably be needing some insight into your next CD/SACD player purchase, because secretly you want a dreadnought-build player much, much more than a poxy laptop, a hard drive in a sardine tin and a bunch of perfidious 'computer says no gremlins' ruining your evening.

The Current Generation

The first assumption for this survey is that, since a high end DAC is now virtually mandatory, we might as well get a disk player in the same box, and keep open the options on when (or whether) to rip those CDs to a hard drive. The second assumption is that we're going to spend high-end money for a heritage product that should outlast us. These, therefore, are not cheap; they're built for the long haul and cost from about £6,000 to £16,000.

Ayon CD-35

Ayon is an Austrian company with a product range that stretches from leading edge digital through to speakers. Most of them use valves and most of it is black – very black, but with silver highlights.

Owner Gerhard Hirt agrees with us about the future of the silver disc: "In view of the still very popular CD and its high market share (even in 10 years there will be new CD-players, merely because of the factual existence of millions and millions of CDs and considering that, for example, in Germany *circa* 60% of the income of the music industry results from CDs), and because of the still good demand for exceptionally designed CD players, particularly with tube output stages, we have decided to launch a new SACD/CD reference top model."



Ayon:
Fi-Audio
Tel: 01563 574185
www.ayonaudio.com
www.fiaudio.co.uk



JULIAN MUSGRAVE

This *CD-35* is its latest CD/SACD/DAC offering and our sample had two additional upgrades from the base model. The first is an analogue pre-amp section, with a fully balanced, discreet-resistor volume control (2) and three analogue inputs (1x XLR + 2x RCA/phonos). The *Signature* version has a DSP module that converts all PCM material (including CD replay) to DSD, and then upsamples DSD from 128x to 256x (switchable). It also has some Mundorf Silver/Gold capacitors. The back panel is clearly laid out and easy to access with excellent quality connectors.

Ergonomics are good rather than superb. As a top-loader its top panel must be exposed, precluding many convenient locations. However, using the beast is a joy. Lift the acrylic lid to expose the large bowl that's warm from the valve heat, drop CD onto spindle, ease in the magnetic puck, replace the lid and off we go. Does it look good? That's a personal judgment, though the black disappears nicely.

The specification and DAC connectivity is on the generous side of typical for the breed with no obvious gaps. The remote is a black plastic job that works well even if it is a bit pedestrian. During its stay here the *CD-35* was kept on 24/7, worked perfectly at all times and despite being packed with valves, ran merely warm rather than hot.

Esoteric K-01X

Esoteric has come to define the Japanese High End for UK audiophiles in some significant ways: the chunky but timeless styling, the excellent ergonomics, and above all the unctuous sound, has provided deep musical satisfaction for many. The *K-01X* sits near the top of its one-box player range (only the recently announced *K1 Grandioso* is above it) and all the usual Esoteric hallmarks are there: superb fit and finish, creamy operation, and a range of settings and filters to investigate. The one disappointment in the *K-01X* is that Esoteric have dropped the volume control that graced the original *K-01* (3), a decision that precludes the *K-01X* from being the hub of a digital-only rig feeding power amps directly. (The remote handset is not what it was either.... ho hum.)

At the heart of the *K-01X* is Esoteric's own disc reader, in this case the high-precision VRDS-NEO 'VMK-3.5-20S' from the *Grandioso's P1* transport. That Esoteric has been the default source of disc readers for so many other companies adds a quiet lustre to such a device. The electronics are summarised by a quote from the Esoteric website: "Electronic circuitry has also been further



improved with the latest technologies, including a new *AK4495S* DAC IC, an advanced 35-bit D-to-A processing algorithm, an HCLD buffer amp, a DSD-compatible USB interface, and a large, low phase and noise clock, all ensuring the *K-01X* achieves the absolute pinnacle of sound quality."

The front panel is attractively clean, but the operating buttons are so small that remote control is the better option. By contrast the back panel is a model of clarity with the usual DAC input options, digital outputs and RCA/phono and XLR analogue outputs. Option menus are accessed from the front panel buttons and are simple enough to understand, if a tad fiddly. In daily use though, the *K-01X* is a peach, is all but silent, and gave no problems during the test period. For a variety of reasons it (and the Luxman) are the easiest to live with and use by a small margin.

Luxman D-06u

Asked to describe the Luxman brand, we might struggle. In a world of vaunting, often insufferable arrogance, Luxman walks its chosen path quietly. That constant brag-fest between Magico, Wilson & YG, for example, where each is always trying to be bigger and better than the others gets tiresome, but such displays of primate chest-beating are not, it seems, the Luxman way. Such vanities as: 'The Best. Period' would make Luxman executives blush. The website is a model of restraint, and the most provocative word in use is 'natural'.

Eventually, after a period of meditation, we might assemble a few adjectives like modest and elegant. Now modest and elegant are all very well but does that translate into desirable audio products? To this somewhat rhetorical question I will add an unhealthy dose of personal ignorance. My own experience of their products amounts to rather less than a bucket of spit. Except. Except that at the Hi-Fi Show last Autumn I wandered as empty-headed as ever into one of the rooms and

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Luxman:
IAG UK
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<http://www.luxman.com>



realised that I was hearing was quite exceptionally, well, natural. Source? A Luxman *D-06u* CD/SACD player. Nice one Luxman.

At which point I might gush over the *D-06u*, but it's so modest and elegant that gushing would simply be uncouth. Physically it is lighter than average and beautifully finished in subtle variations of brushed aluminium. The remote handset is nicely hand-sized and does what handsets do best, without fuss. Its technical specification is standard fare for the breed at this price point, apart from a home-brewed transport. I quote: "For disc playback, the *LxDTM* transport mechanism is a proprietary Luxman creation – a high-rigidity design constructed to block out external vibrations, with a die-cast aluminium loader for smooth, quiet, resonance-free operation."

To define Luxman it's necessary to say what it isn't. In stark contrast to the other models it doesn't look like a goth on a girl's night out, it's not the size of a bungalow and lifting it needs little or no grunting. Neither does it use parrot droppings in its output stages or have raffia-work feet. It just works, and works beautifully. So beautifully you tend to overlook the fact that this is how audio equipment should be – nigh on invisible, with nigh on perfect functionality.



McIntosh
Tel: 01202 911886
www.jordanacoustics.co.uk
www.mcintoshlabs.com



McIntosh MCD550

If the *MCD550* were a motorbike it would be a Harley Davidson. It's a classic American muscle product like a Ford Mustang, Kentucky vintage bourbon and Marlon Brando. Mac has a culture, a history, and a visual aesthetic that runs apart from, but parallel to, the rest of the market. But to say Mac is a 'Marmite' brand is just plain wrong because we all love it to bits, don't we? It's whether we decide to live with its signature styling and sound that divides us. Its black, green and blue livery, plastic rocker switches, and quirky control knobs are so Mac that examining it forensically as we are required to do seems an indignity. But hey, we're gonna do it anyway!

Two control knobs dominate: on the left we play with tracks, on the right with volume. Yes this player has a volume control (fixed output if required) so the Mac will feed power amps directly. Two other features include a headphones jack and a 30 minute auto standby, both of which seem slightly perverse on a disc spinner until you consider the context and culture of McIntosh. Confirmation comes with the shocking discovery that there are no filters, up/down/sideways sampling thingies or audiophile gizmos to play with and that the DAC specification is PCM only and maxes out at 24-bit/192 kHz.

There is a clear message here from McIntosh to its users and it runs something like this: Trust us; we've done the twitchy bit and all you need to do is relax and listen. If you can live with that you can live with a Mac. Oh, and it's solid state through and through so no glass tubes going fizz in the middle of the night. Like the man says, relax and listen.

Ergonomically it works fine without being awesome. The remote handset is so busy it could probably control the International Space Station, but it is at least clearly marked. Do we like plastic rocker switches? Hmm, I'll get back to you on that one. The volume control, however, is excellent, the percentage display is world class, and I've detected

no drop in sound quality at low volume levels.

The visual aesthetic is more difficult. We've all seen the pictures of a New York pad overlooking Central Park with a huge stack of Mac kit, but will it work in a rig in a bungalow on the edge of Harlow New Town? Only if you like it, as this is not a 'background boy' like the Esoteric or Luxman, modestly blending in with the aluminium rack and the carpet. This McIntosh makes a visual statement. Do I like it? Heck no, I love it. Life without somebody else buying and cherishing McIntosh equipment would be a flatter and duller place, but so far I have not found space for it in my home, because at heart I am a twitchy tweaker. Why not have a broken tape deck, an FM tuner that you never listen to, and a tricky turntable plugged in and gathering dust? What's wrong with crawling to bed at three am, trying to work out which of 36 filter/sampling settings make a harpsichord slightly less like someone dropping a bag of spanners? That's the audiophile for you. However, if this doesn't appeal, the McIntosh makes a powerful case for itself. Indeed looking at its pretty lights and knobs, and knowing it's as simple as possible and that there's nothing to twiddle is really quite calming on its own.

T+A PDP 3000 HV: T+A is a company that many UK audiophiles will have heard of but have not really noted before. My only previous experience was at a Heathrow Hotel show some years ago, when it demonstrated an electronic room correction system that, if I remember correctly, significantly degraded the sound in every possible way! To say things have moved on might just be the understatement of the year.

Its *HV* (as in 'High Voltage', since these beasts use 360V DC) range of High End electronic exotica is a relatively new state-of-the-art offering, and in their own words is all about: "innovative technologies, uncompromising construction and absolute top performance."

The *PDP* is the CD/SACD/DAC in the range: a large, chunky unit that's superbly finished in white/silver. The 'source' knob scrolls through the inputs while 'select' is all about silver disc replay: neat, intuitive, functional and reassuringly Germanic. Inside, the pure aluminium casework is compartmentalised, there are separate power supplies (and separate IEC sockets; yes, two mains cables needed) for analogue and digital. When the disk drawer slides silently back in, the whole mechanism is teleported to a parallel universe. I might have slightly misread the handbook, but the word 'decoupled' occurs so many times that this is

Manufacturer's Specifications

Brand	Ayon	Esoteric	Luxman	McIntosh	T+A
Model	CD-35 Signature	K-01X	D-06u	MCD550	PDP3000 HV
CD Replay	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SACD Replay	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Volume Control	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Analogue Inputs	Yes	No	No	No	No
DAC max PCM	768kHz	348kHz	384kHz	192kHz	384kHz
DAC max DSD	DSD 256	5.6MHz	5.6MHz	Not supported	5.6MHz
Price	£10,000	£16,000	£5,995	£7,000	£13,700
Website	ayonaudio.com	http://esoteric.jp	Luxman.com	mcintoshlabs.com	ta-hifi.de

the only feasible explanation. Oh, and it outputs PCM on one set of sockets and DSD on another, so that's two inputs on your pre-amp spoken for.

The *PDP*'s ergonomics are something else. Those control knobs have a silky heft that has you up all night twiddling with them, the drawer opening & closing is an event you could sell tickets for. As for the remote handset, let's just say your average Saxon berserker might forsake his war axe for it because it makes an axe look and feel a bit girly. 'Uncompromising construction?' Check. You know you've got a piece when you have the *PDP* in the rack. But is it all Metalwerk and no Kraftwerk? Read on...

Filters, Samples & Other Options

With limited time and space available, this survey is going to concentrate on silver disc replay only and ignore the virtually infinite permutations of using the DAC separately. As with our previous survey on line stages, a mixture of panel (2) and writer-only listening is used. The first thing to do was to investigate the various upsampling and filter options on each machine and then fix the preferred sound for comparative listening.

Ayon CD-35: The *Signature* version of the *CD-35* has PCM conversion to DSD then upsampling to x256. Having selected conversion and upsampling to x256, I wrote "makes a huge difference. Now

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“The Ayon is a masterpiece of High End design and execution. Its few, very modest weaknesses are more than balanced by huge strengths”

full, lush textures with more bite and precision”. Sorted.

Esoteric K-01X: The *K-01X* offers five PCM filtering options or conversion to DSD. As with the Ayon, we preferred conversion to DSD; the cleaner better-timed DSD stream was preferred to the warmer but coarser PCM, although the effect was rather less pronounced. Differences between the filter options was ephemeral to the point of self-delusion (3), and I suspect that long extended listening sessions in which each audiophile makes what amounts to a personal, and possibly random selection are the only way to resolve this.

Luxman D-06u: This Luxman has three PCM filters: Normal FIR, Low Latency FIR and High Attenuation FIR, and these are easily switchable from the remote handset. We chose Normal FIR for its more relaxed, natural musical flow; the other two sounding more etched. DSD had two filters: Normal FIR and High Attenuation FIR. These were too close to call so we kept the *D-06u* on Normal FIR for auditioning.

McIntosh MCD 550: No options. (Even I could sort this one out!)

T+A PDP 3000 HV: The situation with T+A players is more complex. On PCM here is no conversion to DSD, but a range of four oversampling options go with its dedicated analogue output. As with the Ayon, it was not difficult to hear the differences and prefer one over the rest. I found that the Short FIR and Bezier FIR were a mite bright and grainy while the Long FIR (regular red book spec.) was better in this respect. However, none of them was a patch on the Bezier overall, which was “cleanest, warmest, most natural, lowest distortion” according to my listening notes. You may decide differently. Of two filter options for SACD replay, the softer roll-off SACD2 was significantly more organic and spacially adroit than SACD1. So Bezier and SACD2 it was.

Group Auditions

Five very different machines, cunningly selected to display a variety of design and build philosophies. One uses valves; one revolutionary model browns out whole cities; two are quietly evolutionary; and one grew up in an 1880s bar in Arizona. They're bound to sound wildly different then? Well, actually no. Both under single and group auditioning, the overwhelming opinion was how similar they sound. How we could probably live with any of them,

how very musical they made the silver disk sound and thus how choosing one over another was going to be a more balanced process, where sound was merely *primus inter pares* with other aesthetics like how they look, how they work and other very important stuff.

That doesn't mean that there are not differences in sound because there are and I will get there eventually (I promise). But long, really quite silly-season depths of listening is needed to spot these differences consistently. This convergence suggests that CD replay is now, at last, being fully realised – that what each machine pulls off the disc and presents to us is close to the limits of what the format has to offer. And it has taken forty years to do this (a lesson we might like to apply to the squalling brat that is data file audio). What we are detailing below then is flavours, shadings and nuances derived from comparative listening – essentially A versus B as detailed below. Listen to any one of these machines in a good system in isolation and the simple descriptor ‘stonking’ may well fall from your lips. And rightly so.

We compared both CD and SACD replay on a variety of recordings where we had two copies; one for each machine in an A/B switch input comparison. The rig used was: all outputs from XLR to XLR input to a Hattor passive control unit. Power amps and speakers were ATC *100* anniversary actives, with a B&W *DB1* sub.

Ayon CD-35: The Ayon is a masterpiece of High End design and execution. Its few, very modest weaknesses are more than balanced by huge strengths, so let's deal first with its sound. Initial listening compared to the T+A and Esoteric was simply too close to call. It took longer, quite a lot longer, to find that it lacks the last 5% of definition, both in detail and timing. But it is kinder to poorer recordings, makes voices sound angelic, and will sustain long, long listening sessions.

With Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole* (CDC 7 47318 2) Anne-Sophie Mutter's violin sounds richer on the *CD-35* than on the other players, and has impressive fluidity and texture. Both the Esoteric and T+A make the string tone more metallic, which is itself an interesting point. A more metallic sound on strings can be a symptom of graininess and upper frequency glare but it is very likely that Anne-Sophie Mutter is using metal strings on her violin, as *Symphonie Espagnole* is a bravura piece that demands oodles of attack and volume (and according to chatter on Violinist.com she uses metal strings). So the Esoteric and the T+A may be closer to the performance than the Ayon - if that

matters to you. Am I making the *CD-35* sound a tad valve-like? Probably, and here we come to the sort of problem that the high end is struggling with. Knowing that it was a valve piece, did my head make it sound like one? A distinct possibility until a couple of weeks into the survey when one evening, quite out of the blue, Elisabeth said she thought the T+A was ‘clearer’. Case closed.

So a very modest hit in the absolute realism stakes for the *CD-35*. Its strengths, however, lie in its analogue inputs and volume control which, frankly, put it in a class of its own. Want a creamy CD/SACD player, DAC and preamp in one modest, but darkly gorgeous box? And all at a very realistic price? Nothing else even comes close.

Esoteric K-01X

Esoteric players represent the classic High-End CD sound, which it may even have created. So the *K-01X* has an impressive boldness with excellent instrumental timbre, and a pleasing fluidity that appeals to classical and other acoustic instrument genre listeners. The downside of my own now ageing *K-01*, and one of which I have become increasingly aware, is a slight deficit in the subtlety department. Its reproduction of small changes in dynamics, instrumental texture and soundstage depth is no longer world class. So the challenge for the *K-01X* is to put the *Appassionata* back into the *Appassionata Sonata*, and the gel back into *Vangelis*.

In head-to-head auditioning the Esoteric scored well. “Esoteric cleaner sound”, “Esoteric defined the orchestral sound slightly better” and “Esoteric separates the instruments better” being three that pretty much define what the *K-01X* does probably better than any of the other machines (although the McIntosh is equally analytical). Overall, however, its sound was judged more accurate to the source than either the Ayon or the Mac.

That puts it head-to-head with the T+A, which is the other fanatical truth-seeker, and here it has to give ground in most departments. The T+A has, to quote from listening notes, a ‘fuller midrange’. It is also ‘faster’ and more dynamic, and makes the *K-01X*’s cleanliness sound slightly clinical, and at times bright by comparison.

The soundstage of the Esoteric is probably the most forward of the group and switching between it and the T+A was particularly enlightening. The T+A not only stepped back a few feet but increased the soundstage depth by a significant margin, albeit with the slight loss of instrumental focus that a deepening soundstage brings.

On sound alone, and balancing the various virtues of each, the Esoteric was rated as the equal

of the Ayon. Fair enough, you might say, but the Ayon costs £6,000 less and has an analogue pre-amp too. Had the *K-01X* a volume control like the original *K-01*, a much stronger case could be made. At £16K it is also significantly more expensive than the T+A, let alone the Luxman, and I suspect many truth-seeking audiophiles might prefer their sounds too.

Despite these comparisons, the *K-01X* is still a world class player and the differences in sound are modest. If heard on its own in a system that optimises its virtues, the *K-01X* will give immense, long term musical satisfaction. It has all the strengths of the brand and if these are what count most to you then it will give a lifetime of enjoyment.

Luxman D-06u

The first thing I did was listen to each machine on its own, to familiarise myself with its ‘sound world’. The adjectives that oozed out of the woodwork here were ‘refined, pellucid and sophisticated’, and the *D-06u* makes music sound so seductively gorgeous that the thought of stopping it was akin to an act of self-mutilation. This gorgeousness is not the euphony of valves but a more deeply rooted virtue grounded in what I can only (somewhat cravenly) verbalise as ‘naturalness’. Nothing was pushed forward; distortion and glare were absent; and all was voiced and balanced with a stereotypical Japanese zen-like finesse. Neither was there any apparent loss of detail or focus, which is a *very* clever trick.

In head to head with the T+A, the initial impression was that they are ‘incredibly similar’ to quote a panel member, but eventually some slight audiophile grade shortcomings in the *D-06u* gradually revealed themselves. Prokofiev’s cantata *Alexander Nevsky* (DG 447 419-2) opens with unison Cs in the wind and strings, but with most of it either above the treble stave or below the bass stave (that is four octaves apart), which opens up a huge space between the two musical lines. The T+A gave a greater sense of that void, had slightly more attack at the start, and better dynamic contrast in the hairpins of the following bars. On track two *Song about Alexander Nevsky* the T+A separated the voices of the chorus a shade better, but the integrity of the choral sound was at least as good on the Luxman. Moving on to Janacek’s *Glagolitic Mass* (Chandos CHSA 5465) and the sense of performance space was better with the T+A, and the dynamic contrasts greater. One panel member noted that the Luxman sounded a bit ‘sat on’ after the T+A.

“the K-01X has an impressive boldness with excellent instrumental timbre, and a pleasing fluidity that appeals to classical and other acoustic instrument genre listeners”

NOTES:

(1) Chardin's Three Laws of Technology are: 1: Technology is the inevitable consequence of sentience. 2: Technology is the only proven morality. 3: Old technologies never die; they sublime to the sacred.

(2) The listening panel comprised: Faris Najjar, audio equipment trader, collector and confirmed subjectivist. Steven Andrews, first flute for the Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra and audiophile objectivist. Elisabeth Davison, singer, keyboard player and non-audiophile. Julian Musgrave, violin for CPO and audiophile of the analyst persuasion. Wouter Kolkman provided the digital specification analysis.

(3) I have previously spent hours twiddling with my own *K-01s* options and discovered little except an overwhelming desire to commit seppuku rather than trying to parse any differences that would survive a blind A/B audition.

Against the other players, the Luxman's slight dynamic reticence was probably its only significant failing. On the credit side its instrumental timbre and musical flow was better than most, and that is before we get to that naturalness, let alone its seductive way with music. As one member wrote: 'the Luxman is very delicate'. So here we have a player that is less than half the price of the T+A, not far off a third the price of the Esoteric but yet still makes the running in some key areas of sound. Need I say more?

McIntosh MCD550

What's the difference between a house brick and the colour blue? Impossible question, isn't it. That summarises the difficulty of comparing the sound of the *MCD550* with the others in this survey. Words (ever an act of desperation in trying to describe sound) don't really do it, because the first word that came into my head when I heard the Mac was 'right'. As in, this sounds so 'right' that all this review stuff is just so much earache.

Earache it may be but here goes. With Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole* in both the *MCD550* and the T+A, we switched between them. There are clear differences: the T+A is warmer than the Mac, and hall ambience and instrumental textures were more fleshed out. The Mac makes the violin slightly wirier and, with less ambience, the performance is more articulate, with better forward motion. String tone (a talking point between the Ayon and the T+A) was closer. Which is more realistic? It's impossible to be sure, as both have what we recognise as 'realistic' sound.

Do the same with an SACD of Janacek's *Glagolitic Mass* (Chandos *CHSA 5465*) and the sound quality notches up several degrees, but here the *MCD550* is notably calmer than the T+A. Or do I mean that the T+A makes it all more exciting? Like I said earlier: at this level it's all about flavour and nuance.

So if we apply audiophile values to the *MCD550*, saying that it doesn't present detail as powerfully as the *K-01X*, it doesn't sound as dynamic as the T+A, and is drier than the Ayon, then these are perfectly valid. But they pale into insignificance beside the *MCD550's* 'rightness'. And by 'right' I mean that its version of a disc is so complete and self-referencing that audiophile judgments just seem out of place. This is the McIntosh sound, so I'm told.

I'm going to go take a flyer here. I suspect that its 'rightness' is due to the Mac timing better than the others. I'm never quite sure what other audiophiles mean by equipment 'timing'.

Apparently it's a rock/jazz/reggae music thing and since none of us panelists bangeth the head, we pay it scant attention. I do get tempo and textural integrity, and the Mac excels at these, so perhaps this is what 'timing' means. To test this proposition, I slipped Iron Maiden's *The Number of the Beast*, first into the T+A and then into the Mac. What I heard was that the disc had more drive, more vigour and more impact through the Mac. It put the steel back into Iron Maiden – with added titanium. Is that what timing means?

If, as I suspect, the Mac does indeed time better on this sort of music, and if your own musical diet tends towards the boisterous, the *MCD550* may well kick all these other boxes into the long grass on this parameter alone.

T+A PDP 3000 HV

This beast entered as the 'dark horse' of the group; the outsider from a company that had a lot to prove (in the UK, at least). It had neither the lustre of the Esoteric or the Luxman, the dark mysteries of the Ayon or the pedigree of the Mac. Way to go, then. How did it do?

You may well have noticed that in the above, the *PDP 3000 HV* became the go-to machine to compare the others, and that nicely demonstrates just how it elbowed its way to the front of the pack. Here's is a bunch of listening panel comments: 'slightly clearer'. 'slightly better delineated'. 'fuller sound'. 'darker backgrounds'. It's not that the others could not garner such compliments; it's just that the T+A did so more consistently, and across a wider range of judgement criteria. It would be mere repetition to say more: it's all there in the critiques of the other machines.

After extended listening, and on almost all audiophile parameters the *PDP 3000 HV* marginally outscored the others and became the default player for non-critical evening listening sessions. Its almost spooky low self-noise means it can tease out detail that the others only hint at. That was brought home in an off-duty, past-midnight listen to Michael Praetorius' *Michaelivesper* (Rondeau *ROP 7007 SACD*), where the illusion of space and choral texture was quite extraordinary. Putting this disc into the other machines and we lost that last two percent of magic – a flea bite of difference perhaps, but flea bites matter to us audiophiles.

Conclusions

As a music-lover's system centrepiece, the Ayon wins hands down. At £10K it is a snip; an audiophile Volkswagen Golf at half the price; because unless you have a T+A or an Esoteric

to hand you will never notice that slight lack of definition, and if your speakers are of the Focal or Triangle persuasion you may prefer it that way anyway. For anybody who wants to build a system from scratch around a CD/SACD player, the Ayon clearly merits Recommendation

Which brings us to the McIntosh *MCD550* and the question is, bearing in mind that the Mac walks its own very particular path through the High End, should you audition it? If you listen to rock and related genres then yes, certainly, because if you don't you will never know what I mean by 'rightness'. If the Mac path is also your path, nothing else will do, whatever clever tricks the others pull off. Do listen to one before committing yourself, as the Mac is very much a personal choice. It clearly deserves a Recommended rating, but this will only be appropriate for a certain type of listener.

That leaves the T+A, the *K-01X* and the *D-06u* slugging it out for Audiophile Big Beast title. Each has its virtues, especially the Luxman which, to these ears at least, on sound alone performs way above its price point, and clearly deserves a Best Buy rating. For the sensible audiophile (if that's not an oxymoron) who already has a world class preamplifier and is balancing performance against cost the Luxman is a must-hear piece. I can't say whether you will opt for it above all others but I do promise you will love it.

However, it will come as no surprise that at this time, in this rig and for this audiophile, the T+A edges it, and undoubtedly deserves an Audio Excellence rating. The killer attribute of the T+A is that it has no weakness. As a music lover and after two months of listening, I can put in any CD or SACD and be guaranteed a good result, and a transcendental experience as often as not. It's at least as good as the others and in several key areas better; not by a lot, but if that extra two percent of this and one percent of that are worth our attention, then for me the T+A takes the biscuit.



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In discussing my streaming experiences in the last issue, I omitted to mention the one crucial advantage of this relatively new source of music for anybody seriously into classical music. That is the ability to compare the same work when played by different conductors and orchestras, and also recorded in different environments.

No other category of music comprises the re-interpretation of the work of long dead composers by different conductors and orchestras, and few types of music leave the sanitised world of the recording studio (or bedroom!) to explore alternative acoustic surroundings.

Few readers are likely to have more than a handful of examples of any one work, and most may just have one or two. For example, while I have access to the Davis/LSO, I tend to play my Maazel/VPO versions of the Sibelius symphonies (my favourite classical works). However, after reading Kevin Fiske's *Favourite Things* piece elsewhere in this issue, I feel I ought to check out the Sir John Barbirolli/Halle interpretations too – and am using the Auralic *Allair* streamer *via* Quobuz to try and do so.

While sitting on the HIFICRITIC stand at the recent Bristol show, a Scandinavian (probably Norwegian) addressed me in excellent English, enquiring whether I had encountered his *Little Fwend*. I said I hadn't, whereupon he handed me this little device, explaining that it was an automatic end-of-side arm-lift for manual turntables, which will hopefully protect valuable styli from unnecessary wear.

I commented that it wasn't the first, and that I'd written about a couple of examples many years previously (possibly way back in the 1970s!). I remembered a British mechanical device that was deliberately unstable, and set so that the heavier top part would swing down when touched by the arm, lifting the latter onto the lighter section as it swung upwards. It worked, sure, but it did seem a tad brutal.

The other device came a little later, the AT6006a from Japanese cartridge specialist Audio Technica, and was much closer to the *Little Fwend*. It triggered the arm lift *via* a carefully positioned vertical wire, lifting the arm gently on a damped horizontal platform. I certainly used one for a while, but regret I've no idea what happened to it, or indeed what it cost.

Whatever, there's no avoiding the observations that these little devices are very useful, so the arrival of the *Little Fwend* is very welcome. However, I was a trifle surprised to discover that it's far from inexpensive. The website doesn't yet mention sterling, but the quoted prices (including carriage but excluding VAT) are \$249 (US dollars) or 199 Euros, which I guess may be worthwhile to save the re-tipping cost of an upmarket cartridge, but is also more expensive than many turntables!

If I can figure out the *RP10* interface, I'll probably fit a *Little Fwend* in time for the next issue, but wanted to leave enough space to point to my review of the *JERN14 DS* on page 18. The '2.1' configuration of satellites underpinned by subwoofers might not appeal to diehard purists, but their wives are going to love the idea of getting rid of a large pair of floorstanders and replacing them with a couple of tiny stand-mounts and two or more compact amplified subwoofers.

There's a strong trend towards ever more compact loudspeakers, and the above arrangement is certainly that, and it doesn't represent much of a compromise either. And what it might lose in terms of total coherence is compensated for by possibly the very best imaging I've ever encountered.