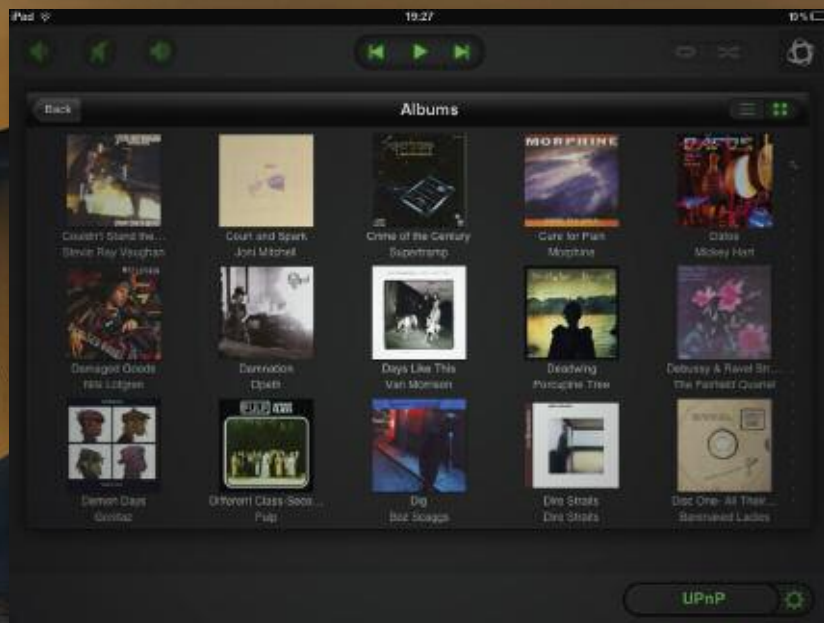


interconnect



the signals yearbook - issue fourteen
2012

Que?



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Signals supply and install audio, home theatre, smart lighting, control and multi-room products.
But mainly just really good music systems.

Brands include:

Arcam, Audio Technica ('phones), Dynavec-tor, Epson, Focal, Grado, Hutter, Isoblu, Kudos, Linn, Lyra, Magneplanar, Naim, Neat, Nottingham, Ortofon, PMC, Primare, Rako, Rega, Simple, Something Solid, Sonos, Stax & Sumiko

cover picture © Gary Yeowell
Death Valley dunes 2011

Welcome to the latest edition of 'Interconnect', our irregular indoctrination booklet. My name is Alastair Gardner and I started Signals back in 1993. For the last eight years, Andy Heavens has been part of the business too.

Thanks, as ever, to all our customers for keeping us afloat. We have experienced a terrific amount of loyalty over the years which I hope we manage to reciprocate. Thanks also to Garry Yeowell, talented photographer and valued customer, for allowing us to use his photograph for the cover.

It is two years since the last 'yearbook' and, sitting here typing, trying to be interesting, I realise why! In 2009 I was saying that all had been well, so far, given that the world was apparently ending. I might as well give the same reassurances again. And yet again with the same sense that the next 12 months could well be the most challenging of all. Looking on the bright side, our exports to Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal have always been pretty small.

Stand-out successes since the last newsletter have been the Naim Uniti and NDX streaming products. The Uniti all-in-one system sales have been particularly interesting to us because they have often been to new, non-hi-fi, customers. On a couple of occasions they have turned those fresh listeners onto the joys of proper music replay to the extent that they have purchased much higher-end systems, pushing the Uniti to another part of the house or passing it along to offspring.

Addiction? No-one is immune. Thank goodness.

what's occurring

With almost 24 months of change, here is a quick run-down of what is new at Signals:

After all these years, we now stock Linn Products. It's early days. We have all the 'Majik' stuff, some 'Akurate' but, most significantly, we have the LP12 turntable in a variety of configurations.

Truth be told, they are working rather well with the 'entry' Majik version giving more than a hint of the refined musicality for which the LP12 is famous and our almost 'fully loaded' LP12 sounding great. Probably the best results that we have ever had from vinyl. Mind you this is the most expensive turntable we have ever had too . . .

On the loudspeaker front, PMC rejoined our portfolio in 2010. The fact 8 has made a number of friends with its crisp clean and open performance from a slim, compact scandinavian-looking enclosure. The fact 3 is a stylish alternative for smaller spaces. The new 'twenty' series offers a fair amount of the 'fact' performance at a lower price point and we have been very impressed with them.

Kudos remains a firm favourite with the new high end Titan T88 landing extremely well. A large, fast, natural speaker with stunning bass quality thanks to its isobaric design and surprisingly room and placement-friendly We have even sold some!

Linn have resurrected the isobarik name for the new Majik Isobarik loudspeaker an affordable tour de force capable of impressive results.

Naim have added the S400 Ovator to the S600 and seem to have hit the spot for size, price



and performance. The S600 is now available in active configuration (S400 should join it later in 2012) and the results are extremely convincing.

We continue to stock the full Naim range right up to 500 series components, including CD555 'maxed out' with twin 555PS - naturally!

We have added Magneplanar to our range. These ribbon designs look like electrostatics but require no power. Serious qualities lie within!

Rega have given the RS series of loudspeakers a make-over. Mostly it is simply an aesthetic improvement but the RS7 has been properly upgraded with a new cross-over design too.

Neat acoustics have revised the Ultimatum range, produced a Motive SE2 and a revised version of the Petite, the SX, that has been a bit of a surprise 'hit'. Late 2011 they have added a compact stand-mount called the Iota. It's aimed at the new compact 'streamer' audio system market.

Oh yes, streamers. We have dedicated a couple of pages in this booklet to explain all this.

The Naim Uniti range and Linn Majik DSi are bringing an appreciation of quality music replay to a lot of new people. If there is a theme running through this issue, it's streaming. At a higher level, the new NDX and ND5XS are bringing purist music streaming to a Naim system near you and the Linn Majik DS, Akurate DS and Klimax DS are doing the same for a Linn system. And yes there is some crossover potential here.

On the amplifier front, things have been a little quieter. The Primare i32 is a gem. Rega have launched the mind blowingly-lovely-on-a-budget Brio R amplifier and their hints-like-bricks department seem to be indicating that there is some more new amplification due during 2012.

Beyond that, we can report that the Rega DAC has been a delight, bringing easy musical access to computer-based audio and an upgrade to their (and other people's) CD players.

Rega's los phono stage has had a stonking update, not least to the price! Now housed in the larger and much heavier 'reference' casework the los has had some significant development work under the lid. A very significant product in our view.

Along with many in Essex, Rega have their peddle to the metal. Not, in this case, driving a white van on the A12 but in keeping up with turntable demand. You would think that they would have learned by now but a constant stream of new models (RP1, RP1 performance pack, RP3 and

RP6) are keeping demand sky high and quite a bit ahead of supply speed. More is to come too.

Staying with analogue, Lyra have produced the Kleos, which sits between the very successful Delos and Skala cartridges. Along with Dynavector, Linn, Ortofon, Sumiko and Nottingham we have a lot to show you.



Kudos T88 : Titan the magnificent

just data

Good old CDs are effectively a folder containing a collection of music files. It's data and the job of the CD player has always been to collect this data via laser (essentially an analogue process) and to present it as a stream to the in-built or external Digital to Analogue Converter, producing a (hopefully) musical result.

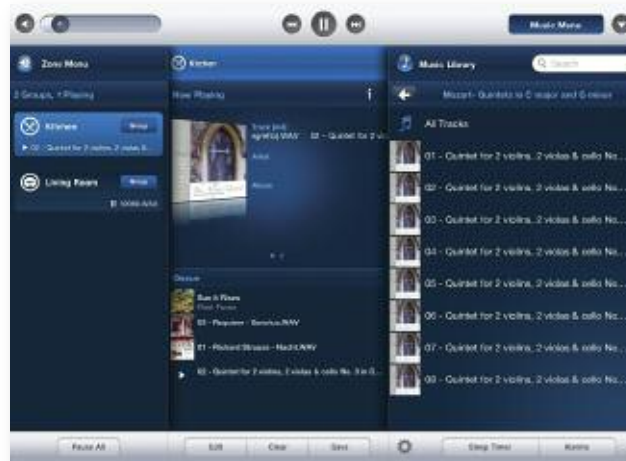
In the last few years it has become popular to 'rip' CDs, I.E. to harvest the data, and to store this in a number of formats, the most popular of which has been MP3 compressed files. These compressed music files were so much smaller that it has spawned a new industry selling music as an internet download.

With music files freed of the restrictions of the CD packaging and the internet speeding up, the situation has turned on its head and we now have access to far higher than CD quality recordings too. Downloads are easy to do and stashing your prized music on a centralised self-backing up "NAS" hard drive is simple even for mere mortals.

A corollary of this has been the ease with which music can be shared (whether compressed or not) and accessing music throughout the home has become big business. What was called multi-room audio has become the near-exclusive domain of a relatively young brand called Sonos.

Sonos is very good at what it aims to achieve too. It's easy to set-up, the user interface, be it on iPad, iPhone, Android devices or their own

handsets is superb. Sound quality through their own 'Connect Amp' is roughly a match for standard multi-room kit and you can use their 'Connect' with an external amplifier or run it digitally into a DAC for a further uplift in quality. In addition to their amplifier they offer all-in one speaker / amps which can be used individually or in pairs. Their recent



re-naming of the products 'connect', 'bridge' and 'play' has rendered it nigh on impossible to write about sensibly! Still, we have it all here and can explain better face to face.

Their combination of wired Ethernet and proprietary 'mesh' wireless operation is very stable. It does the Apple thing and 'just works'.

Limitations? It plays uncompressed formats but is limited to no more than standard CD resolution. Quality can be improved by using an external DAC but it is never the N'th degree (not, in fairness, that it was ever intended to be).

There is no rule that says that you can only ever use one system and devices such as Sonos can also be used in a household where the standards for the main listening room(s) are a whole lot higher. High end in the sitting room, a more basic level in the kitchen study, bedroom etc.

Sonos is not the only fruit either. Squeezebox is a very popular product, although it requires slightly more computer know-how to set it up and it lacks some of the user-friendly features.

A new arrival is called Simple Audio. Based in Glasgow, Simple is a fairly substantial start-up business with proper funding behind it. The range of products is small but it is effectively a higher quality version of the Sonos idea. Where Sonos uses a wireless link or wired Ethernet, Simple uses Ethernet over mains as an alternative to standard wired Ethernet. This removes the main restriction to higher quality files and Simple can handle 24 bit HD music. It sounds pretty damned good too and the control interface is not unlike Sonos (looming centre page).

Astonishingly Simple is not just UK designed but is actually manufactured in Scotland. Let's celebrate and each buy ten of them . . .

just music

So it's not garbage then. The principals of streaming audio are good but the execution matters. Simply plugging a PC into the mains near your Naim system squeezes something significant from the audio quality. Even the switch-mode supply in a consumer grade network audio device can do the same thing.

Get it right, on the other hand, and it's not just high end CD quality that can start to feel threatened. High resolution audio can challenge analogue too.

It is easy to download music in 24 bit format with sample rates as high as 192 khz. The Linn and Naim devices are 'elastic' to the format choice and can play the music at the native resolution.

A typical hard disc based system requires a server for the music, a ripper to place the CD data onto the hard drive, and a streamer, probably more accurately described as a renderer, to convert the digital files received via the network into an analogue music signal. Ideally, all of these will be linked together via a wired local network,

although some can work wirelessly. Ideally, too, the local system will have a good quality router and switches and will have a separate system for the music distribution to keep normal internet / printing / games traffic away from the audio feed. A subtle gain but tangible.

There are a number of ripper / servers available. Both Linn and Naim require UPnP (Universal Plug and Play) servers. These rippers store the CD data in an uncompressed format (WAV is what was on the disc), find the titling and artwork from the internet and file the information in a way that you can find by artist, genre or album title either through the front panel of the music player or through an 'app' on the iPad, iPhone or similar device.

There are a number of suitable server / ripper/ storage points available from around £600 upwards. With the Naim equipment, the very best sounding are their own UnitiServe, NS01 or HDX units but we stock Ripcaster too and have

learned to set the network parameters on a Zoneripper to give excellent results.

Armed in this way, the computer can be pretty much ignored. The control interfaces, Linn's Kinsky (above), Naim's n-stream on the front cover are a joy. This is not computer audio, it's simply the next logical development of an existing path.



new world order

All-in-one systems are hardly new, it was how the whole audio thing started, after all. For the last three decades, though, *quality* has really meant separate components.

The gentle rise to audiophile credibility started in 1997 when Linn produced the Classik, a CD player, radio and amplifier in a single box. It brought decent quality to a new audience.

Networked, or streamed, music has become a catalyst for the new wave of compact systems. With Linn's Majik DSI and the Naim Uniti, single box music systems have become worthy of discriminating listeners. In the case of Naim's Uniti, the feature count has also gone straight off the scale. A single box offering CD, FM, DAB and internet radio, iPod access and digital inputs, networked music via wired or wireless Ethernet a really good amplifier and control from a handset or apple iPhone or iPad.

The Linn Majik DSM connects via an Ethernet cable to the domestic network and allows access to music files located in a wide range of compressed and uncompressed formats on your

network. It can also access internet radio, be controlled via PC, MAC, iPhone etc. The killer addition is that it allows various rooms to be synchronised in what they term 'party mode'. Neat.

The Naim Uniti range has expanded from the original all singing Uniti to the more compact UnitiQute (no CD, slightly

less power).

New for 2011-12 we have the Naim SuperUniti and it is yet another significant step forward.

It's hard to get your head around the

idea of connecting over £3k's worth of loudspeaker to a single box system but in this case it is perfectly rational. Verily we have the all-in-one for grown-ups!

Every feature that you have ever wanted in a sensible quality music system and none of the bits you didn't; wires and clutter. Sure, you can upgrade with a power amp, add sources like a phono stage for a turntable or maybe even a CD player. You can route digital audio into it directly from the TV or PVR. But none of this needs to be done.

Sitting on a network with good quality music available it can bring unmitigated joy.



tap feet, talk about tunes

We can't add a brand with the stature of Linn to our portfolio without dedicating some space to the fact. I think it is fair to say that Linn have something of a reputation, one hinted at by the tongue in cheek heading.

Our involvement has come about partially as a result of a campaign waged by Linn-owning customers and mainly by the logic in offering buyers access to the two premier manufacturers of networked audio devices plus the most iconic turntable on the planet.

We have hit the ground running more with the turntable than anything else. It's easy to dismiss the LP12 as an old design but just about every component has been revised and refined over the years. We have an almost full-spec LP12, only the Urika in-built phono stage would be an improvement, and it really is very good indeed. At least as good as we have ever had from the medium and a long way

from the slightly boxy sound we associate with older LP12 decks.

The phono stages have been a revelation and the £2000 Uphorik is a terrific device with sufficient adjustability to match the loading of any MC you are likely to find as well as work with a more prosaic moving magnet. Urika is better still. As for the Linn Adikt, it's almost certainly the best moving magnet cartridge we have come across.

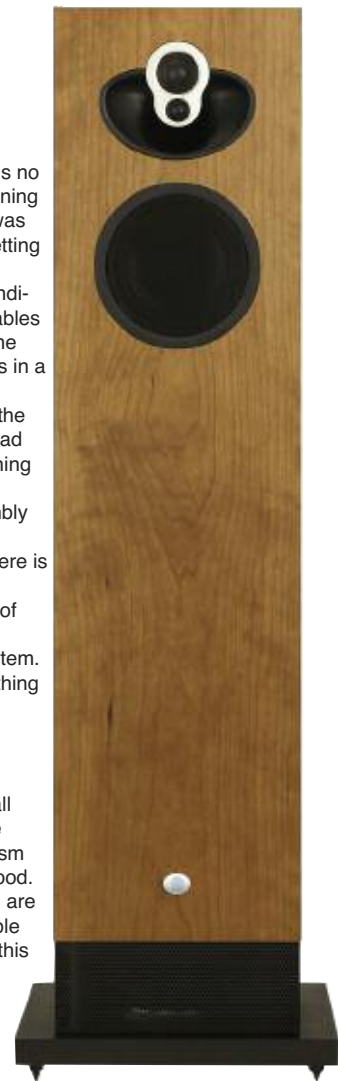
Beyond the 'Sondek LP12', we have the full Majik range: LP12, integrated amplifier, active boards, power amp, DS, DSM, the 109 speakers and the new Majik Isobariks pictured right. We have Akurate DSM and will develop our involvement with the full Akurate range in the fullness of time.

I recall that, when we took on Naim, almost a decade ago and mainly for access to the CD players at the time, that it took a while to get our heads around the products.

This new arrival is no different. We've had the training on the turntable and Andy was already very clued-up on setting up the decks. Certainly, the results that we are getting indicate that we have the turntables properly on song. Indeed, the Majik LP12 is attracting ears in a way that we did not expect.

We have visited the factory at Eaglesham and had the full tour. It is an astonishing place. The sight from the windows of the main assembly floor of cows grazing was particularly memorable. There is a staggering amount of automation yet a high level of human input too, with an individual signing off each item. Linn make just about everything on site, even constructing casework and applying all finishes in an impressive sequence.

Most striking of all was the human aspect. The warmth, pride and enthusiasm was infectious. So far, so good. Orders that we have placed are being fulfilled with remarkable speed. As an organisation, this one takes some beating.



legacy replay

OK, I'm guessing that the heading will have set a few teeth on edge. It's not entirely serious anyway. CD players might be feeling under threat but the good old turntable soldiers on. No, strike that, turntables are selling extremely well and, perhaps most surprising, are still improving too. This is not a case of treading water.

We have a pretty expansive range of them, too:

Rega covers the 'budget' to 'sensible' ground and they have the most new products in 2011-12.

The first of the new-wave decks was the RP1 and at well under £250 included-

ing a cartridge, it is one of the great audio bargains. Upgradable either at the point of ordering or subsequently with the Performance Pack



(better cartridge, white belt, thicker mat) it offers all the sound quality that many will ever need.

The new RP3 (right) is even more convincing for not a massive amount of extra outlay. Replacing the P3/24 (and sounding appreciably better too), the RP3 can be upgraded with a PSU. There is a package deal with the excellent Elys II cartridge.

Above that, the new RP6 replaces the P3 gloss and RP5. Again, proper progress. Then we come to the P7 and P9 with an über deck (at an extremely high price) under development too.

Nottingham Analogue have not had any fresh developments in the past year or so.

Despite this, they do still find new buyers quite regularly and the Ace Space deck remains the sweet spot of the range. Add a heavy kit and it is extremely close in ability to the much more expensive Hy-

perspace. Add the Wave

Mechanic PSU and it really is hard to beat almost regardless of price. The Roksan Nima is a terrific affordable arm for it and it can justify some eye-wateringly expensive cartridges if you really want to push the boat out.

And pushing the boat out is something with which Linn can help. As mentioned elsewhere, the entry level Majik LP12 has turned out to be an unexpected delight, so the leap into the iconic turntable need not be too much of a financial drain.

Cleverly, it can be upgraded to the highest Sondek LP12 specification incrementally. We have come to the conclusion that Linn have actually been improving most aspects of the decks (just like they've said they did) because even without Keel, Radikal Trampolinn II etc, etc, it is still a lovely-sounding and very sophisticated source component, far more compelling than quite a few of the higher spec, breathed-on-by-gods trade-ins that we have had over the years.



it's all just Greek

A couple of years ago Lyra launched the Delos, their sub-£1000 cartridge. It has gone down a storm and is their most successful product to date. This used to be the second up the range with the entry point being the excellent Dorian. Sadly, it has been dropped. Some stocks still remain but when they are gone it will be no more. This years new product is the £1750 Kleos and it is yet another stunner.

back in black

Primare is yet another brand that has been working rather hard recently. There is a new product range in place and here we have some of the fruits of their labours: The radical i32 amplifier and CD32 player. The pairing even won EISA product of the year 2011. The amplifier is a particularly novel proposition not least because it has a port which will allow for the intriguing option of adding UPnP music streaming as well as FM and



DAB radio. Oh yes, and digital inputs plus the inevitable iPod interface too. Claims are high but we have yet to hear or see how this feature performs. It should arrive early 2012.

For now, we have the CD player and 'bare' amplifier and they really are very good indeed. Clear, refined and open as before but also agile, transparent and powerful. Tonally neutral, seemingly slightly 'cool' but with remarkable bass power and control. A world away from the blandness that increasingly seemed to define the previous i30 model.

The sense of 'coolness' probably stems from the absence of bloom and blur.

With some PMC Fact 8 speakers which are themselves quite 'cool' in balance, the Primare actually comes over as tonally richer, warmer overall, than some mid range Naim components. The results utterly belie the relatively low cost of the electronics. Combinations, eh?

The timing is good, as are scale and dynamics. The bass delivery is quite unlike any previous Primare but the important bit is that it is musical and engaging.

As usual, cable choice is relevant, with

some of the Nordost cables proving very successful. Hey, we might get to sell some 'sensitive' cables again! Tellurium Q cables have suited them really well too, and these seem to be the fave wires of the moment with good reason.

The i32 uses what Primare call UFPD. It's a class D design and the design brief can be downloaded from their website.

The upshot is that the i32 is very green indeed. Stand-by draws just 0.2W and almost no energy is wasted as heat when it is playing. On top of that, warm-up is rapid too. All too good to be true?

After a previous bad experience in reuniting with a brand that appeared to be back on form, we took the trouble to listen to a few samples to be completely sure that the first 'good' example was completely representative. We have sold a few units over 2011 too and consistency (and reliability) has proved to be good.

An area that used to elude Primare was the quality of the displays and control logic. Both are now excellent and the CD player and amp can display their settings clearly. This bodes well for when you are searching for music files or internet radio on the i32 fitted with the upgrade board. Mind you, there is an iPhone 'app' for this. For now, the amp allows you to 'trim' individual input levels and to name them specifically. Even the colour of the text can be adjusted via settings - so it can actually look green too.

The new range includes AV processor, multi-channel amps and a BluRay / SACD / CD player. All share the super efficient power delivery.

If black simply won't suit, Titanium finish is an option too.



PMC discover style

PMC are becoming a force to be reckoned with. Their products have always been very capable and some even downright astonishing, but they have never been objects that you would desire for looks alone.

The fact 8 was (pictured right) changed all this when it was launched a couple of years ago. The combination of a clean, fast and open sound allied to crisp good looks made them an instant success, suiting a wide range of listeners and musical styles. The success is all the more surprising when you consider that the pricing is far from 'budget'. The '8 has now been joined by a slightly smaller fact 3 stand-mount with an integral pillar stand.

The latest arrivals are at the more affordable end of the scale and celebrate PMCs 20 years in business as does the new 20 year warranty, and they bear a more than passing resemblance to the facts.

The new twenty series (eyes left) comprises two stand-mounts and two floor-standers. As with the facts, the grilles are attached via hidden magnets and cover the entire face of the speaker. The good news is that they sound even better than they look. The higher quality crossovers and the new bass drivers share quite a lot of the fact DNA. All use the advanced transmission line loading (ATL) and the results are visually pretty, compact and very easy to drive speakers with remarkable resolution, scale, imaging and bass extension. As with the fact, they also manage a level of punch and drive that used to elude their 'consumer products' in the past. Well that's our take on the matter.

The 21, 23 and 24, to give the model numbers, have left a huge impression on us. Using even a Naim SuperUniti, we are getting results that belie both price and size. They look great, work fairly close to boundaries and sound fantastic whether playing orchestral, jazz, rock or simple acoustic material. The largest 24 floor-stander could well be the 'killer' product. Great stuff!



thin, flat & rounded

Magnepan is an American loudspeaker manufacturer. Their full ribbon and quasi ribbon designs are called Magneplanars and there is a substantial range of models. The affectionate nickname within the hi-fi world is to call them Maggies and they have been around for years. They are now distributed in the UK by Decent Audio - I know, one of us really ought to have a word with him about the name - and we have been impressed enough to invest.

The more affordable panels are 'quasi ribbons' (coated mylar film). Lest you expect scary numbers, I should point out that the smallest full range free-standing model, the MG12 is priced at £1500 per pair. When you consider the handmade in America element plus import duties, shipment etc, this is surprisingly modest. The next model up, the bewilderingly heavy MG1.7, pictured right, comes in at £2500 / pair with an aluminium frame, wooden trim is £100 more.

Sound quality is not unlike electrostatic designs, which is not all that surprising given that both involve a light, thin membrane and are open front and back. Placement is incredibly critical, as is the amplifiers ability to drive a 4 ohm load. Beyond that, the load is not reactive or difficult in any other way. Where electrostatics involve the signal going through a transformer, these ribbons are far more directly linked to the amplifier.

I say 'even' better because there are some engaging qualities evident here, the lack of boxiness, staggering detail retrieval and obvious speed of delivery being the most obvious. Bass is not as punchy as with conventional designs but it is far from lacking. It is fair to say that their bias is towards 'natural' acoustic recordings but that is as far as it goes. The positive aspects are so dramatic that you could argue that no conventional speakers can sound as natural.

The Naim amplification seems to have broadly the right qualities, bizarrely, old solid state Quad gear seems to as well, so these might not be quite as difficult as the reputation suggests. At the time of writing we have had the MG12s for less than a month and are just bedding in the MG 1.7s, having sold the initial demo pair to the first person to try them, so knowledge is still developing.

rega update

As mentioned on the opening page, Rega have given their RS speaker range a make-over. For the RS1,3 and 5 this amounts to neater grilles and nicer feet on the floor-standers.

For the RS7, there is also a redesigned cross-over. The previous RS7 was not at all bad but this version is substantially better. More spirited, open and dynamic, simply more musical. The entire range remains very well matched to Naim electronics as well as Rega's own and continues to hit the spot for a wide range of listeners.

For 2012, the RS10 looms. It will feature a Naim-like BMR but this time with a tweeter.



life force

The Naim Ovator 400, smaller brother to the larger '600, finally arrived at the end of 2010. This has proved to be the loudspeaker for which buyers have been waiting.

Good as the '600 is, it is too large for many people's rooms. The '400 is just right.

There has been quite a lot of debate out there as to how good these new-generation Naim speakers actually are. The shift in style brought about by the BMR midrange-to-infinity driver is quite marked. It can seem quite dull in balance, at least initially, not something that aids quick-fire comparisons.

Paradoxically, owners seem to become increasingly hooked on them over time and their most obvious attribute is the amount of spirit and energy they bring to music. At £3250 (until April 2012) the '400 is impressive value for money. It needs a little bit of room to breath, but as little as 20 cm from the wall has been fine. They are far more critical of preamplifier and source than power and small adjustments to toe-in, even vertical azimuth can make dramatic and worthwhile changes to tuning.

The active crossover for the Ovator 600 arrived late summer 2011 and it elevates the speaker to a completely different level of ability. One of our customers has them in a fine, large room and the sense of realism they achieve, of an actual performance taking place, is mesmerising. As he has said they "don't sound of speaker" yet they punch in a way that no panel ever could. If the 400 improves by even half as much, this will be the must-have upgrade for any existing owner.

reet neat

Neat Acoustics have had a fairly productive time over the past 24 months. The popular Motive 2 compact floor-stander has been joined by a more refined sibling, the Motive SE2. Yup, letter / number order something odd with. The excellent Motive 3 stand-mount continues with very minor production improvements and there has been a more significant revision (most obvious is the new soft dome tweeter) to the evergreen Petite, now Petite SX (right) and, guess what? People really like 'em. Stand-mounts uncool? Certainly not.

Where the Motives 2 and SE2 are probably the most engaging and musical ultra-compact floor standing speakers out there, there really is something about a stand-mount. As with most Neats, the Petites need careful siting and are very critical of stand choice (not necessarily the Neat one). Set-up correctly, they are capable of top-notch performance. Neat have always been good partners for Naim electronics and good matches for the Petite SX have included the Uniti and the Nait XS system.

Revelling in the continued interest in speakers-on-sticks, the new Neat Iota, at 2.6 litre size, a sub-miniature, is due to be in production for the end of 2011. We've not heard them yet but the ingredients look promising with a ribbon tweeter and smaller driver from the same stable as used in the Motive series. Priced at £650 / pair, they are surely a cult product in the making.



much kudos

We've known Derek Gilligan for around ten years now and have been keen supporters of his products from the day he branched out to building loudspeakers as Kudos Audio over five years ago. The Cardea C10 stand-mounts continue to be one of our mainstay speakers and the 'Super' version that I mentioned two years ago in 'Interconnect' looks like it will finally make production in 2012. So fast, Derek!

In the meantime, he has been working on more compact floor standers and on his flagship piece, the T88 Titan.

When he brought along the pre-production Titans in spring 2011 there was some unease. Truth be told, his hitherto 'top' speaker, the C30 floor-standers, had never been all that good a match for our larger listening room and was far too bass heavy for the smaller one. On top of that, they really need a lot of power to control them. The larger Titan might just be. . .
. . . utterly brilliant, as it turned out. Our fears were obliterated in an instant and the demo pair ordered soon after. Far more placement-happy, far more room-friendly and, unexpectedly, far easier to drive too. From top to bottom the T88 is smooth without being *smoothed*, has bass that can stop on the edge of a precipice (you need to hear what I mean) with a level of extension that defies belief. They image, they do dynamics, they time. They manage to be revealing whilst being generous enough to let you play the music in less than stellar recordings. Can you feel the love?

As you can see from the two pictures of them in this issue, they are a two box design. The larger upper cabinet is effectively a full range speaker and the lower one a very well-judged passive sub-woofer using twin back-to-back bass drivers in an isobaric configuration. Each cabinet contains the relevant cross-over and they can be can be bi-amped with ease. They come with Chord Signature link cables and this was the only issue for us. In a system where the Signature is the right cable (not in our case with the Naim 500 system) it may be fine. With NAC-A5 replacing the Chord here, we finally got the full Titanic experience.

If the exposed plywood styling is too much to take, high gloss lacquer is an option. One of the pairs we have supplied are finished in this way and they look fantastic. Price? At just under £13k, they are cheaper than a lot of less good alternatives!



artistic differences

Hi-Fi is a passion for a lot of people and the lure of the tweak has been big business for many years. A certain Mr Andrews probably has the contact details for every hi-fi enthusiast in the country, such is the interest in cones, cables and cure-alls. There is a lot of stuff out there from a lot of places!

Signals will soon be twenty years old and I'd like to think our understanding has matured, that we've grown up a little over this time. It has never been our way to simply list all the products out there, pass along the manufacturers claims and sit back. We are sad and pathetic enough to actually want to have some faith in what we sell.

Truth is that just about everything makes a difference. A case in point is mains cabling. Swapping between various brands of mains cable will change the character of the sound. Some will seem better, some worse. Even the ones that are deemed to be an improvement can often seem like a bad idea a week or two later. And if you get past this point, changing a single component in the system can bring it all crashing down.

With Naim equipment we are happy to recommend the Naim Powerline as being worth a try. Reassuringly, it is more about mechanical damping than a change in electrical behaviour. It is supplied as standard with the 500 series components anyway. In 90% of the situations it increases resolution, refinement and scale. If a single

cable is being considered, then it can make sense to feed the system from it and use a passive mains block with an IEC input. We have two:

Our 'best' is the Music Works reflex lite pictured left. Not cheap but very successful 99% of the time (note the endless caveats!). The Wireworld Matrix

block is about a quarter the price and more than half as good, if you can quantify such things. It is also usefully compact.

Both are available for home trial before you buy.

Large chunky transformers (as

often used by Naim) are prone to mechanical hum when there is a DC offset in the mains supply. The problem often only occurs at specific times of day or when certain devices are running. A hairdryer or dishwasher pump can stimulate some very noticeable hum here. One device that has been known to help is the Isotek Syncro power lead. Unusually, it has not produced any negative effects, just a reduction in noise.

Equipment support choice is rather more crucial to the results than many will expect and the relevance or otherwise of isolation / energy management devices is influenced by the support system in place. For example, the nifty little black ravioli pads, the more professional looking Big Foot (right) or new stick-on feet can be

terrific, positioned under electronics sited on simple shelving. In fact, they can be bewilderingly effective.

Use something more focussed on the characteristics of the equipment, such as the Naim Fraim with Naim equipment and the pads give a more mixed in result. IE they can make things murky. Nevertheless, with caveats in place, we heartily recommend trying the Black Ravioli prod-

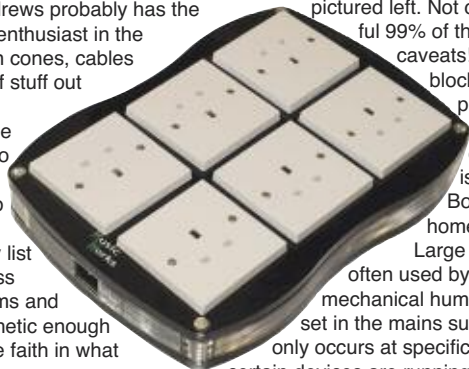


ucts and have a wide selection in stock available on sale or return.

On the signals / speaker cable front, we have had some stunning results from the Linn Silver interconnect in quite a few applications. It's not stupidly priced but sounds refreshingly clean, open yet refined. It's funny how a manufacturer trying to make a single good cable seems more likely to hit the spot than one making a huge range of them. The Naim cables are another case of this but they are very specific to Naim electronics. Again, we carry demonstration samples of just about everything.

For more general use, we also have the Tellurium Q cables. The most successful for us have been the Black and Ultra Black.

Despite quite a few Naim owners choosing this cable (even for all-Naim systems too), our own feeling is that this is not the best long term match. Other brands of electronics, Primare, ATC, AudioNote, Arcam and Electrocompaniet are known good matches and, with them, these cables have been extraordinary.

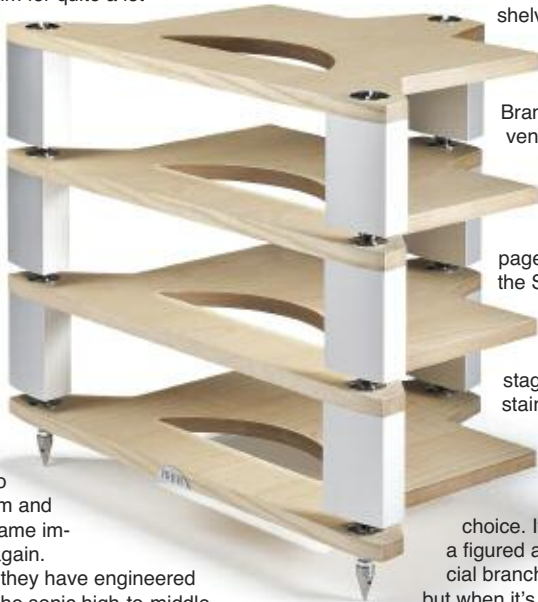


stands that deliver

New arrival of 2011 on the support front was the Naim Fraim Lite looming large below. Hideous name aside, it does exactly what you would expect, performing slightly less well than the 'full fat' version of Fraim for quite a lot less money. The ironic sales result has been to sell more of the 'proper' stuff!

The most interesting comparison for us was when placing a middling Naim system on a few levels of Isobluë: Results were very good, musical, dynamic and spirited. Transferred to the Fraim Lite and it became cleaner, more refined, definitely more musical and compelling. Then onto the good 'ole full Fraim and got pretty much the same improvements all over again.

Quite how they have engineered something to inhabit the sonic high-to-middle ground, I have no idea, but this is exactly where it resides. You can upgrade by adding the ball and cups and glass shelves from the full Fraim and, in this respect, it makes tremendous sense. Results



with other electronics brands may vary. The other popular products for us have remained Isobluë and Hutter. Isobluë (bubble right) is a UK manufactured modular system. The 'V' section uprights are solid wood and it is available in three grades: Graphite painted finish 60 series, real wood 60 series with natural ash or oak

shelves veneered shelves and edges in stained MDF to match. Top of the range is the Special Branch with higher quality veneer and solid edging even to the groove that runs front to back to align the uprights.

Pictured at the page edge are examples of the Special branch finishes from the left, walnut, quilted maple, cherry and pippy oak. At some stage, Isobluë stopped staining the standard oak finish on the more basic 60 series and this has become a very popular

choice. It's not quite a figured as the special branch version but when it's full of audio equipment . . .

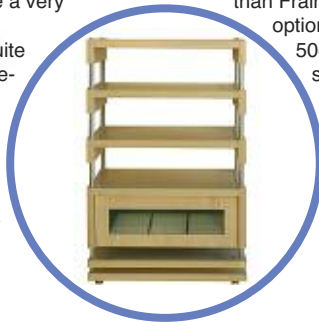
Hutter Racktime stands (bubble right) are made in Austria to exacting standards and are another mod-

ular system. Aluminium and / or wooden uprights of many optional lengths are used to connect the levels.

The shelves are made from a deceptively complex sandwich of three layered cross-grained fir blockboard and are double veneered (again cross-grained) with the final layer in a wide variety of woods. There are even two cherry finishes, American and European. The quality is full-on furniture grade and the consistency, within the constraints that these are real woods, unusually high. Hutter make high quality furniture anyway and these audio stands were a spin-off developed by Hutter Jr.

This is a very musical solution at a price substantially lower than Fraim. The option of the

50cm wide shelving makes this ideal for where space it at a premium.



fresh, local, healthy

So . . . is Signals now entering the food business? Curiously, there are parallels. With UK Inc constantly being criticised for having become a service rather than manufacturing economy, it is heartening to note that a high proportion of what we sell is actually made here in the UK by real live human beings.

Quality audio is a tiny industry in global terms yet the UK brands have a spectacularly high reputation. The products manufactured by the companies that we support represent some of the very finest anywhere. Not bad that you can access it from a tiny operation located just outside Ipswich!

The last two or three of years have seen colossal changes in the way that people have chosen to handle their music. Holding a centralised store of 'ripped' CDs and downloads, frequently at ultra high resolution 'studio master' level has become a reality and there has been a burst of fresh and exciting technology to make the most of this.

The quality of the user experience in controlling accessing streamed music has been raised significantly by the widespread adoption of the iPad and other such devices. Hair shirt audio, this is not. But truly high uncompromised quality it nevertheless is, and both Linn and Naim are at the forefront.

I would never suggest that we should be buying products made in the UK for that reason alone. It is, however, a very nice thing when the best that you can get just happens to come from within our own shores.

My personal goal in setting up Signals was to make a living doing something I find interesting and rewarding. It is encouraging to see that our most successful suppliers seem to have an enlightened approach to their own businesses.

You don't need to spend a lot of time with the manufacturing staff at Linn, Naim, PMC or Rega to see that there is an intense level of pride and enthusiasm for what they do. Even a factory as spectacularly automated as Linn's at Eaglesham is full of people with real sense of fulfillment in what they achieve. This is perhaps less surprising at smaller concerns such as Neat, Nottingham or Kudos where the staff are much closer to the 'core' and it's there just the same.

Your investment in quality is supporting something that, over time, supports you. Superlative musical quality, software and even hardware updates, high residual worth, reliability, long warranties and long term support are the pay-off.

Genuinely involving music systems go beyond simply bringing pleasure. They improve our wellbeing too. In the current climate is there any better investment opportunity than this?



hi-fi for grown-ups



Working with Hitachi Capital, we are pleased to offer interest free credit on purchases over £750. This must be of brand new items (not used or ex-dem, I'm afraid). Deposit is 10% (or more if you're very keen) and we reserve the right not to make interest free finance available in addition to other offers.

Example :

Purchase price £2795. Deposit of £279.50 amount of loan £2515.50 12 monthly payments of £209.62 APR 0.0%

Alternatively we can offer 12 month deferred credit: Sign up for a three year credit deal with Hitachi which starts 12 months from the purchase date. If you settle the full outstanding before the commencement of the credit term, no interest applies. They write to you to remind you of the situation prior to the interest-bearing period commencing.

Example:

Purchase price £2795. Deposit of £279.50 amount of loan £2515.50 36 monthly payments of £107.84 APR 19.9% Monthly payments will commence after 12 months and be payable on the same date in each subsequent month.