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reg

year book

2019

signals

hi-fi for grown-ups



Musings

Our business spluttered into life in October 1993. The precise date is a little uncertain because it was merely the beginning of a two year period agreed with my wife to 'see if it works out'. Juggling childcare for our three year old, freeing my wife to work full time, meant that it was not the only thing on my mind in any case.

Twenty five years on, I'm typing this partly as a diversion from writing something far more important, namely my father of the bride speech at said offspring's wedding.

She survived, the experience. We all did. I guess it worked out all right!

This significant anniversary has set me thinking and, despite all the technological advances, it's surprising just how little has changed.

Back in '93, audiophile, or 'audiofool' cables were just breaking onto the market. Then, as now, their worth was being discussed and mocked. Back then, this took place in the letters pages in the various magazines. It was a slower, gentler world.

Valve amplifiers were going through a renaissance (I dabbled but didn't inhale). High end CD players were morphing into two or more box DAC /transport combos (Naim excepted).

And the turntable was still king.



For loudspeakers, the physical similarities between then and now are just as notable.

There has been progress, though. Most electronic components and loudspeakers are more capable than their forebears were at the same point in the marketplace. Some dramatically so, for example with DAC design.

The Lyra Etna lurking here is a clue that something else has happened too. Evolution and creativity have kept the analogue world every bit as relevant and vibrant as the digital one. Perhaps more surprisingly, at its best, analogue seems to be maintaining its edge too.

The digital vs analogue debate is now more nuanced than back in 1993. The quality of the recording and / or the mastering are often more significant factors than the method of replay.

Nevertheless, recordings, digital or analogue, can offer something more magical via a turntable based system than a digital one.

This explains the existence of so many turntables at St Cecilia's House. We're drowning in the bloody things! Still, it's part of what keeps us busy and for that we are thankful. By the way, that Etna is truly wonderful!

Thanks, as ever, go to our customers for buying from us. Without you, there would be no us. Thanks too, go to Andy Heavens for being an ever more important part of our little operation.

Have a wonderful 2019. Yours, Alastair

News

We held our seemingly annual Audio Show East at the beginning of November '18 in Trinity Park Ipswich.

Turn-out was the best yet and the show seemed to go down well on the various forums. Thanks go to the sizeable team of suppliers who put in so much effort.

We had some prize winners in the raffle, five in total, and three are pictured below. Adam Cronin who won the Quadraspire QPlus interfaces.



Terry Turner got the True Signal interconnect, Malcolm Lomer PMC's prize, the freshly remastered Beatles White Album signed by the mastering engineer and complete with his mastering notes.

Roy Mellor won the record voucher donated by Theme One and Paul Lloyd the Emotiva USB lead from Karma AV. Andy was kind enough to make the presentations. Seems he wears different jumpers every day.

Under 'other' news, we have increased our portfolio of brands quite significantly. As well as the innumerable turntables, we have loudspeakers and electronics from ATC. We've taken on Quad who offer electronics, speakers and headphones. We have a new brand called Fyne Audio who at least have the decency to restrict themselves to loudspeakers.

We've increased our involvement with Mark Levinson, have the new two channel electronics from Arcam and their sister loudspeaker brand, Revel.

On top of this, we have new DACs and amplifiers from Chord Electronics, new speakers from Kudos, some huge fact Fenestria towers from PMC (looming in the photos left) and new networked products from Primare.

Naim's new streamers are here too, the full set. In fact pretty much everything in the Naim range is here.

What we've failed to squeeze into these pages are headphones. We have the good ones from Sennheiser, Grado and Focal, including Utopia.



K U D O S

The long awaited Kudos **Titan 505** finally arrived in late 2018. Or at least the stand, that had been delaying things, finally broke cover. These were demonstrated to great effect in active configuration with Linn electronics at our ASE 2018 event and, with the 505 (and stand) now on demonstration, we can say that we are very pleased with them.

The entire Titan range is in stock for demonstration and we even seem to have figured way of equipping ourselves with Naim SNAXO crossovers for active operation with Naim electronics. Sadly, this process is proving to be quite time intensive.

With Linn, it's a comparatively simple matter of using their digital crossover. Memorably, the 505s arrived at the same time as the Chord Étude. All needed running in and, using the Dave DAC straight into Étude with the Titan 505s made for a startlingly good, simple and fairly compact system.

Further down the price range, The Kudos X3 and X2 floor-standers have been finding new friends. Despite the existence of the new super high value loudspeakers that have joined our ranks, spending that bit more on a quality hand crafted UK built product, still holds appeal and makes sense too.



Our supersized arrival of 2018 for has been the PMC **fact fenestria** loudspeakers. We have been looking for the 'next level' speakers to partner the Naim Statement pre-power combo in our void-like central room. With the **fenestrias**, we are very happy that we've found something genuinely worthy.

There is a lot of novel technology at play here but the upshot is that they simply get out of the way and let you hear through to the music. These communicate the whole event with vigour and spacial cues intact. Voices and instruments hang in space and the 3D environment extends to behind you. In time, the ideas within them will, we are told, cascade down the range.

Clearly, a large room is a prerequisite but, by virtue of their modular construction, moving these around for home demonstrations is actually viable. So too is accommodating the shipping cartons. This is an utter revelation when you're used to large loudspeakers from other manufacturers.

Beyond these whoppers, we also have the smaller **facts** and far more compact and affordable (but still high achieving) **twenty5** series on demonstration.

PMC's lovely **Cor** amplifier continues to impress and is proving very compatible with a wide range of loudspeaker brands.





DYNAUDIO

Late 2017, we started stocking Dynaudio products. This has turned out to be one of our better decisions.

The model of the moment was the Special 40 stand-mount and we were in a state of rapture. These, plus the low cost but European made Emit 10 and 20 stand-mounts, have sold very well.

At ASE 2018, we had the honour of the UK preview of the new Confidence series. The ones we had, Confidence 50, are the second largest in the range. For a variety of reasons, the room was a little less well damped than would have been ideal, but they still acquitted themselves very well. We suspect that at least one of these fairly serious towers will be gracing our own 'Signals Tower' in 2019.

In the meantime, there is a new Evoke series being launched and the Special 40 remains ... special.



FYNE
AUDIO

New arrival towards the end of 2018 was Scottish based Fyne Audio,. It's a new brand with a substantial heritage. The design and R&D is done in the UK but it's built in the Far East, although high end models are being made here.

The F500 stand-mount pictured here is a £599 / pair loudspeaker finished in real, albeit heavily stained, wood and it's very nicely turned out. It also sounds very good indeed with a stunning midrange, decent bass extension and very refined treble. More importantly, it struck us as being very musical too. The 300 series is brilliant too and, yes, we have them as well.

Reviewers have been in raptures over both these and the sibling F501 floor-stander; which we also have. Award winners the lot of them. Nightmare scenario: no room at the inn but they are really good products. You may have to clamber over boxes on the way in. Eyes, bellies, lost cause...

Wiltshire based ATC was formed in 1974 by Billy Woodman to manufacture custom drive units for the professional sound industry. They quickly made their mark with speaker drivers capable of handling more power and producing less distortion at a higher sound pressure level than any other unit on the market.

For years, their slightly cruel approach to letting you hear the flaws in any given recording was almost at a level of parody. "My system's so revealing I can hardly play anything on it".

Things have moved on. Source components these days are generally more capable of accepting analysis and, anyway, ATC now have rather better tweeters! Ones that they now make themselves, we should point out.

The current range is very hard to ignore, with an affordable 'Entry' Series representing remarkable value for money.

The SCM40 passive speaker is a bargain at £3750 and the active one does an awful lot for £6800. Their active speakers have proved to be very compatible with Naim and Linn electronics as well as ATC's own.



The SDA 2-2 pre-amp / CD / DAC is a gem and drives the active speakers (or a power amplifier) brilliantly.

Infected as we are by the prices of other high end kit, even huge devices like the SCM 100 or 150 A actually look surprisingly inexpensive.

Their heavy build and thug-like looks hint at their more brutal forebears but actually these are refined and very musical transducers. ATC speakers, both active and passive, are capable of producing deep, clean, extended bass in even quite small rooms. We've known the large SCM100As to work well in some impossibly small rooms.



As most are aware, Focal are Naim Audio's sister brand under the ownership of Vervent Audio Group. For the last few years, existing products, such as the high end Utopia loudspeakers, have been updated to a character that dovetails more completely with the Naim electronics.

Other ranges, such as Aria, Sopra and Kanta, pictured here, have been voiced with Naim in mind from the outset.

We have a particular fondness for the Sopra series and have some of the Aria and Kanta range on demonstration too. All have matching centre channel speakers, by the way.

At the Audio Show East event that I keep drizzling on about, Naim demonstrated the differences between ND5 XS 2 and NDX 2 streamers through a Supernait 2 amplifier. They used the new Kanta N°3, largest of the range, in what was a very large room. The results were excellent.

As well as the Kanta N°2 floor-stander, which we have, there is a new Kanta N°1 stand-mount and a centre speaker.

These come in a range of colours and finishes, generating quite a few permutations.

Choice, don't you just love it?!

As a footnote, can I put forward the image on the left for a caption competition?



Arcam came under the ownership of Harman Audio in late 2017, so their new HDA range was launched under the new regime.

The AV products are unchanged and remain extremely competitive with a reassuringly solid reputation for reliability, high end features and performance. If only our cinema room had not been (temporarily) taken over for box storage!

The new SA10 and SA20 amplifiers and CDS50 CD player are refinements of the previous, very successful range.

Over all, the new CD player strikes us as being a proper sonic upgrade over the outgoing model, with a less clunky implementation of network audio features making it far nicer to use.

The SA10 relates quite closely to the late lamented A19 but adds a DAC to its input armoury. The similarly equipped SA20 is a development of the A29. Both have very respectable phono stages and both will drive a wide range of real world loudspeakers.



Revel Loudspeakers are another member of the substantial Harman empire. These days, electronics brands are keen to promote their products with partnering equipment that, they feel, gets the best out of them.

Certainly, both the Concerta2 and Performa3 loudspeakers that we have sound exceedingly happy on the end of an Arcam system. With a package offer running in December '18, we have demonstrated the combination to some people and the reactions have been very positive.

Concerta2 and Performa3 ranges cover stand-mounts, wall-mounts floor-standers of various sizes, centre speakers and sub-woofers. And, no, we don't have all the models and sizes in all the colours.

Above Performa3 comes PerformaBe and Ultima2. There is no gratuitous use of the space bar in this organisation!

A small part of me is relieved that terrifyingly high end (read expensive) Salon series is no more.



ACOUSTICS

Here, we have a budget loudspeaker brand with the purist values of a high end specialist. They are co-designed between the UK and Germany and built in the far east to a very high standard.

The new "i" series, arrived a few months ago and is a proper step forward from the previous generation. These are cracking partners for Naim Uniti, Rega, Arcam, just about anything of quality. The range includes centre speaker and sub-woofers.

We have almost all of the models in stock, right up to the rather high end Concept 500. Across the board, performance, finish and construction quality belie the low asking price. With these and Fyne Audio we have the two big players in the budget speaker market.



Dunstable based Russell K have been making loudspeakers that make us smile for about four years now, although Russell Kauffman has over 40 years experience in the industry.

There are two stand-mounts and two floor-standers in the range and all share the same principle of having zero internal damping.

All Russell K models reward careful set-up and can justify electronics that cost considerably more than they do.

One of our favourites, the Red 150 floor-stander was demonstrated at Audio Show East in its new SE form. It sounded stunningly good but we did not hear it against the original for comparison.

It is available as a stand-alone model or as an upgrade for existing Red 150 owners.

On site, we have Red 50 and Red 100 stand-mounts and Red 120 and 150 floor-standers. I expect 2019 will see 150 SE arrive too.



Good amplifier matches are Naim, Chord Etude and PMC Cor. True Signal cables have impressed with them too!

MELCO

This has become something of a watershed brand for us. At first sight, these are simply high quality network drives that have their roots in predominately Linn users in their native Japan wanting better sounding music storage than an off the shelf NAS drive.

When we first came across them, we were already using something that was demonstrably better than a NAS and were surprised that (a) the cleaning functions of the internal data switch in the Melco was improving the sonic character of all data pulled through it and (b) that the more expensive NI_Z h and NI_Zs drives sounded so much better.

Having become believers, we have sold quite a few of these and have acquired a fair amount of knowledge along the way. Recent enrolment into their Master Dealer programme was therefore pretty much automatic.

An interesting feature of this type of device is that, if you connect it via USB to a suitable DAC, it can also become a network player in its own right.

Control can be via their own 'App' or ones from a



variety other vendors. Full functionality, including access to online services such as Qobuz can be expected.

Audio quality is potentially very high indeed, only significantly influenced by the choice of DAC and cabling.

Given that something of this calibre is of relevance to any stand-alone streamer, it actually makes for a surprisingly cost effective high end streaming solution.

Ripping CDs into the Melco can be accomplished by plugging any USB 3 laptop style CD drive into one of the USB ports. One of 2018's more surprising discoveries was that Melco's new posh, heavy and clearly overpriced D100 CD drive actually delivers 'rips' that are discernibly better than those from a 'cooking' drive. Indeed, the experimentation showed that doing this with an inexpensive drive via the office Mac via DB Poweramp software produced the least appealing sound of all.

The 'it's all dots and ones' conversation still has some way to go!



Further down the ladder, the Uniti series has become a dominant force in quality two channel audio. Even if you ignore the convenience, value and compact size, these are fine sounding systems.

Flexible whole house multi-room audio

Naim Audio have had a busy year. Finally bringing the innovative new Uniti series to market towards the end of 2017, all efforts were then put into the launch of the 'new platform' streamers.

First of all, we had the ultra high end ND555, then the NDX-2 pictured above and finally, the 'entry level' ND5XS-2.

The level of uptake on the ND555 has exceeded expectation by a significant margin. So much so that issues with getting a sufficiently high yield on the anodised cases has led to a significant delay in supply.

The level of performance uplift of the near as dammit £20k with power supply ND555 over the £5k NDX-2 seems to be in line with the price differential. This is a statement that I cannot have imagined making 25 years ago.

Certainly, the bulk of ND555 buyers have been existing NDS owners with a couple who have had the CD 555 players..

On our Naim Statement system the ND555 is giving results of a commensurate level.

IE it's really rather marvellous!

comes without any quality trade-offs.

At Audio Show East 2018, Naim partnered a Supernait 2 with some Focal Kanta 3 loudspeakers. They were driving a very large room and demonstrated the difference between ND5XS and NDX2 with ease.

This was judged by many to be the sound of the show, so well done guys!

We carry the entire Naim range on demonstration and aim to have the Uniti series in stock for immediate supply.

On top of that, we have a substantial, some might say ridiculous, range of loudspeakers.

If you have not yet visited our new facility, please do, we are very proud of what we have to offer and are able to demonstrate systems in normal domestic environments.

• CHORD •

Chord Electronics Ltd.

Chord have become synonymous with ultra clever digital, especially DAC, technology. So, why the picture of their latest analogue power amplifier?

For a start it's utterly brilliant. Far more powerful than the diminutive size would imply, Étude is built to the same 'Chordette' form factor as the Dave DAC, Blu II scaler cum CD player and 'Prime' analogue preamplifier.

As with the rest of the range, it's also available in black as well as silver. All Chord's products seem to be produced and therefore photographed first in silver. The concept here is that these collections form matched systems.

Pictured below left is the TT, or is it Hugo range of Hugo TT DAC, Hugo M Scaler and Ttoby power amplifier. It's great, bizarre, weird and just a bit baffling. But mixing them up

certainly adds interesting mismatched shapes to otherwise straightforward systems. I suspect that some explanation is required, though: All Chord's latest non-portable DACs have the capacity to handle data via twin coaxial cables at up to 768 khz 24 bit.



The Blu II CD transport and Scaler brought the ability to scale CD resolution to 16 times the original data rate. Quite why this makes so much difference is a mystery to even Rob Watts, the designer, but it certainly works. It goes beyond detail retrieval, adding spacial cues, timbre and musicality.

With so few people wanting the CD transport in the fairly pricey Blu II, the more modestly priced M Scaler has been awaited with some excitement. It may have launched in February but finalising it took a while and it only entered production in early November. Now, at last it's reasonably freely available.

For us, the interesting and surprising discovery was how much scaling brings to even the relatively lowly Qutest DAC.

We now have all these products on demonstration so you can compare and contrast.



regga

Rega Products seem to be becoming an ever increasing part of our business. The move to St Cecilia's House, from home to retail legitimacy, has increased the amount of relatively affordable systems being sold. And people are still in love with turntables too.

The Brio, Elex-R and Elicit amplifiers are all proving popular. The Fono Mini, MM, MC and Aria phono stages too. In a world where CD players are almost history, the Apollo-R and Saturn-R CD player and DAC-CD player continue to sell respectably. In fact, only their top loading arrangement seems to hold them back.

We have the Osiris amplifier and Aura Reference phono stage. The spectacularly heavily built and energetic sounding Isis CD player is available on request.

The best bit is the turntables, though, and the very latest is the stunning, skeletal Planar 8, which is available with either no cartridge or one of three bundle deals:

The Exakt Moving Magnet or one of Rega's two MC cartridges, Ania or Apheta 2.

It's as lovely sounding as it's beautiful looking. There, see how we've left room for personal opinion?

This is where you come in. We have the full range on demonstration so you can make an informed decision.



LINN

Linn who, with Rega and Naim, are one of the trio to have started in 1973, have also been busy.

There is the new Selekt range of modular and upgradable network streamers and all in one systems.

With the Katalyst DAC architecture being the latest upgrade for the Akurate range, this is also an option for Selekt. We will know more during early 2019.

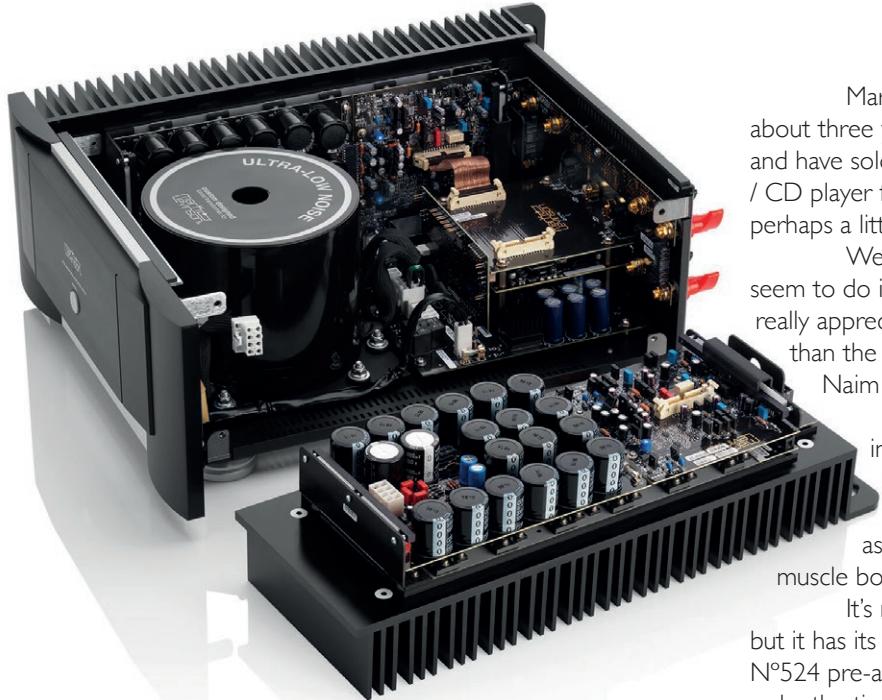
On the turntable front, the Majik LP12 has received a shot in the arm or, more accurately, a new arm.

Gone is the Project carbon fibre affair and in its place comes the Linn branded Majik tone-arm made for them by Jelco.

This has improved performance significantly and, needless to say, we have it on demonstration.



Until the end of January 2019, there is a special offer to save 10% if you buy the Majik turntable with a Majik DSM streamer / amplifier.



Mark Levinson products have been on our books for about three years now. We've had the N°585 integrated amplifier and have sold a few of them. We've also had the N°519 streamer / CD player for a year or so. It's an excellent streamer but, perhaps a little over qualified for the integrated amplifier.

We have this large space to fill (with sound, although we seem to do it with boxes) and, with the PMC Fenestras that really appreciate driving, we needed something more powerful than the Naim NAP 500 and rather more affordable than the Naim Statements. Enter the N°534.

This thing is powerful (250w into 8 ohms, 500 into 4) and massive. Technically, more than a two man lift. It looks small in this picture but, believe me, it isn't. Slightly surprisingly, it costs roughly the same as a NAP500 and it's very good too. No overbearing muscle bound juggernaut here.

It's not perhaps quite at the Statement level of control but it has its own qualities. This itch scratched, the matching N°524 pre-amplifier, which should improve it further, will be with us by the time you read this.

Late 2019 should see the arrival of a new less expensive '5000 series' of Mark Levinson products. The future here is definitely looking interesting!



P R I M A R E

Primare have been in the background with us for several years. We had a soft spot for the amplifiers, CD players and even DVD/BluRay players in the past but the control software for their first generation streamers was a little hit and miss.

This time around, things are a lot more sorted. Manufacture was in the far east a few years ago but it has been back in Sweden for some time. Build quality is good and support via UK distributor Karma has always been excellent.

Here we have the Prisma i15 and i35 products. These are both fully integrated amplifiers with network players. There is a CD / network player available too.

Unusually, the i15 looks like a shrunken i35 rather than just a slimmer one. It makes for a very compact unit and it caused quite a stir at our recent ASE 2018 event driving a pair of Falcon Acoustics' lovely LS 3/5A loudspeakers.

The i35 predictably does more than just go louder. It has the rather more sophisticated UFPD2 all Analogue class D amplification. Yup over my head too. It goes head to head with the Naim Uniti Nova.

It's refined, neutral, unfatiguing yet spirited and can drive proper loudspeakers to serious levels. Despite its more compromised power amplification, the i15 remains a very civilised device, well suited to an advanced starter or second system.



enhancements & accessories

Let's start with Quadraspire's little gift to the world: **Q Plus**. We've been impressed by their racks, particularly the EVO and Reference ones. These interfaces, made from similar materials upgrade just about anything. Prices in fours are:

Evo £119.95 Advanced £299.95

Naim's **Power Line** mains cables have turned out to be surprisingly universal, suiting non - Naim systems and often beating far more expensive alternatives, not that these are cheap:

Power Line £599

Musicworks make a couple of high quality utterly passive 6 way mains blocks that we think really suit the Naim power line.

The ultimate mains cable enablers, or Dogs Blocks, according to the maker!

Reflex Lite (above) £485

Reflex Ultra Generation 3 £999



IsoAcoustics **Gaia** isolators work! These replace the speaker spikes and sit straight onto a hard floor or, on carpet, with their optional spike bases. Masses of happy people! Priced per pack of 4



Gaia 1 £599 Gaia 2 £299 Gaia 3 £199 Spike bases £49



If you're a weight obsessive you need this! The **Rega Atlas** tracking force gauge is a very high quality device, unlike the vast majority out there.

Rega Atlas £175



Speed obsessive too? If you have the **Neo TPPSU** (also available), you can adjust speed to perfection. Or just set it fast like Regas of old! Rega Strobe works at 100Hz for added accuracy.

Rega Strobe £63



A **Vibration Measuring Machine** (book) by Bill Philpot, Paul Messenger, Roy Gandy. Essential reading for anyone with an interest in music reproduction.

A **Vibration Measuring Machine** £39.50



cable network news

Despite an extreme enthusiasm for cables in the early days of Signals, we have for some time now shied away from making too much of them.

It's not that they are irrelevant but there are no absolutes. What's great in one context can be a toxic in another. An interesting example of this is that, despite doing it with the HiLine, Naim don't make a 4-5 pin Super Lumina cable for use with the Superline phono stage. Why? "Because it sounds rubbish there". Go figure.

Cables that have stood out for us over the past few years are:

For Naim the standard NAC-A 5 speaker cable takes some beating.

At a significant price and with higher budget electronics, Super Lumina has done it for us too and it's in a lot of high end Naim systems, that we've sold. Indeed, it's our default for the serious stuff.

Recent arrival, True Signal, has hit the spot too with Naim systems and also ones involving Mark Levinson, Chord and Linn electronics. So far, this does seem to be a surprisingly universal match.

The £300 Silver RCA interconnect is a stunner that seems suited to just about everything from Rega to Quad and Naim.

We have just about all the permutations on hand so that buyers can try them out.

For day to day USB and Ethernet cabling, we've become very fond of QED. This takes us back to our roots, since it was the cable brand that kick started the audiophile cable industry in the UK.

In fact the QED loudspeaker and interconnect cables are really impressive at sensible prices.

Audioquest and TS RJ45 cables have gone down well and there is a True Signal USB lead due soon.

For mains, we've found the Naim Power Line to be remarkably universal. Mind you, the True Signal guys keep promising to let us try one of their mains leads.

Beyond this, there is a lot to be said for the Linn cable with Linn (and Arcam) and Rega with Rega. These are both wonderful value.



Q U A D

It all started in the hot summer of 2018. A local customer was looking for a CD player to replace a dead Arcam player and compliment their existing older Quad amplification.

The Rega players were not to their taste, and they waited for new Arcam to come out only to find it too similar to the Rega. We borrowed the Quad Artera from another friendly dealer and it hit the spot perfectly.

Quad were nice enough to deal with and we found ourselves opening an account with them. We now have Artera Play + CD / preamp, the matching power amplifier and the fully integrated Solus system with CD, pre and power amplifiers in one box.

Build quality is lovely and these all have the solid, heavy 'hewn' build that reminds us of Naim products. Sound quality is recognisably Quad but with sufficient spirit to keep music engaging.

Now, the new Vena II amplifier with phono stage and digital input has arrived. It's available as a sub-£1000 package with the lovely dinky S1 loudspeakers.



We've even got some of the other Quad loudspeakers too!

Have we mentioned that, if you're looking for speakers, we're the place to come?

signals
hi-fi for grown-ups

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