

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO REVIEW MAGAZINE

Volume 11 / Number 1

Jan - March 2017

£17 (UK)

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



Editor | Paul Messenger

Writers

Colin Anderson
Peter Aylett
Richard Clews
Martin Colloms
Stan Curtis
Greg Drygala
Richard Dunn
Andrew Everard
Kevin Fiske
Chris Frankland
Harry Harrison
Keith Howard
Jason Kennedy
Paul Messenger
Julian Musgrave

Publisher | Martin Colloms

Design | Philippa Steward

Published by
HIFICRITIC Ltd.

Registered in England No.6054617
Registered Office: Winnington House,
2 Woodberry Grove, London, N12 0DR
info@hificritic.com
www.hificritic.com

Printed in the UK by
Premier Print, London

HIFICRITIC is a printed publication available by subscription only.

© HIFICRITIC Ltd 2017. All rights reserved. Any unauthorised editing, copying, reselling or distribution of the whole or part of this publication is prohibited. The views expressed in any articles in this magazine should be taken as those of the author or the person quoted unless indicated to the contrary. While HIFICRITIC endeavours to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication, its accuracy cannot be guaranteed and HIFICRITIC.COM accepts no liability for any use of, reliance on or the accuracy of such information.

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.

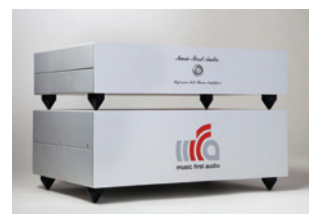
Paul Messenger
Editor

Contents

- 4 STAN'S SAFARI No37**
In which Stan asks some pertinent questions about 'high end' pricing
- 6 SOUND & VISION BRISTOL 2017**
Jason Kennedy reports from Britain's biggest annual hi-fi show
- 8 MP3 RE-EVALUATED**
Keith Howard looks at the sometimes surprising results of evaluating digital compression codecs
- 11 MQA – IS THE TIDE TURNING?**
Andrew Everard asks whether MQA is finally coming of age – or is it just an irrelevance?
- 14 LEEMA TUCANA ANNIVERSARY EDITION**
Martin Colloms assesses a substantially re-worked version of the Tucana II integrated amplifier
- 16 MCINTOSH MP100**
Andrew Harrison reviews McIntosh's first ever phono stage, complete with D-to-A conversion
- 18 JERN14 DS**
A miniature speaker made of cast iron? Just add subwoofers to get close to the state-of-the-art
- 21 DSD: REVIVAL OR THROWBACK?**
Andrew Everard delves deeply into digital audio, discovering a crucial link between DSD and analogue
- 24 THE SILVER DISC'S GOLDEN AGE**
Julian Musgrave rounds up no fewer than five serious CD/SACD players. Reviewing the Ayon CD-35, the Esoteric K-01X, the Luxman D-06u, the McIntosh MCD550, and the T+A PDP 3000 HV
- 32 MFA REFERENCE PHONO AMPLIFIER**
Andrew Harrison tries one of the most elaborate and costly phono stages around
- 34 MUSIC BOXES**
Martin Colloms examines the dramatic sales explosion of sound docks and Bluetooth music boxes:
- 38 HERESY?**
Richard Dunn (NVA) and Paul Messenger provocatively examine the future of the hi-fi business
- 40 USER EXPERIENCES MATTER**
Technology journalist Peter Aylett states that hi-fi must improve the user-experience for younger consumers
- 42 NAD C 368**
One of three new digital amplifiers, Andrew Everard, checks out a modern NAD integrated amplifier
- 44 LEJONKLOU BOAZU + GAIO**
Chris Frankland tries an ultra-simple integrated amplifier and phono stage from Sweden's Lejonklou
- 47 PS AUDIO LANROVER**
USB audio isn't all it could be, so Andrew Everard describes a clever idea from the USA
- 48 HIFICRITIC AWARDS 2016**
Our retrospective awards come in three forms: Audio Excellence, Recommended and Best Buy
- 50 INDEX TO VOL 10 (2016)**
- 52 FAVOURITE THINGS**
Kevin Fiske picks out ten long-term favourites from his record collection
- 54 JAZZ PICKS**
Greg Drygala selects six new and noteworthy jazz releases
- 56 THE BEST OF CLASSICAL**
Several recent classical releases reviewed by Colin Anderson
- 58 DREAMING AWAKE**
Julian Musgrave describes a fascinating 2xCD release from Philip Glass
- 59 ROCK, POP & OTHER NICE MUSIC**
Nigel Finn is unwell, so Richard Clews is helping out
- 60 SUBJECTIVE SOUNDS**
Paul Messenger's usual miscellany



JERN14 DS, page 18



MFA Reference Phono Amplifier, page 32



HIFICRITIC Awards 2016, page 48

MFA Reference Phono Amplifier

ANDREW HARRISON TRIES ONE OF THE MOST ELABORATE AND COSTLY PHONO STAGES AROUND, COMPLETE WITH VALVES



Stevens & Billington is the company behind the Music First Audio (MFA) brand, and specialises in signal transformers for broadcast and high-end audio applications. MFA quickly became recognised for its class-leading transformer volume control (TVC) pre-amps, using tapped transformers to control the volume of line-level sources, as well as a range of moving-coil step-up transformers. Now it also produces two phono stages – a solid-state *Classic MM Phono Amp 632* at £2520 (reviewed in *HIFICRITIC Vol10 No2*, p47), and this valve-based *Reference Phono Amplifier (RPA)* at £9840.

Music First Audio's dedication to transformers makes the specification of the *RPA* initially surprising, as it's entirely devoid of any signal transformers at its input, between the stages, or in buffering the output. However, the unusual design – a collaboration between S&B's Jonathan Billington and Nick Gorham of Longdog Audio – does still call upon the company's wire-winding expertise, using two custom inductors per channel at the heart of a novel passive RIAA equalisation circuit.

And as a moving magnet-only design, the *RPA* will almost certainly call upon separate step-up transformers such as MFA's own *Classic* (£2040) or *Classic V2* (£3000). (Few customers at this performance and price level will be using moving-magnet cartridges I'd reckon, although the amplifier's decent gain of 52 dB should allow high-output moving-coils.)

Almost every phono pre-amp ever made has relied on simple RC filter networks, built up from a combination of resistors and capacitors to restore a flat response from a vinyl record's pre-emphasis. Adding inductors (L) to form an LCR-based RIAA network does have a precedent though, starting with the first Westrex 45/45 stereo disc cutting lathe in 1957.

A small band of enthusiasts, initially in Japan and other Far East territories, have been experimenting with LCR-based phono amplifiers since the 1980s, although very few commercial products have followed the lead. To my knowledge, there's only esoterically priced valve stages from Wavac and Allnic (*HIFICRITIC Vol10 No4*, p38) plus standalone passive filters for DIY applications (*Tango EQ-600P*) as well as Stevens & Billington's low-key *EQ600* unit.

A passive equalisation approach, in contrast to filters placed in a feedback loop, is often prized for its more natural sound. Active RIAA is the more common circuit design, but by way of contrast some designs tend to exhibit a distortion characteristic that rises with frequency, which might explain the more 'etched' and over-detailed sound of many examples. Passive EQ designs may also be kinder to vinyl surface noise, making less of a meal of every transient click, for example.

Making that passive network LCR rather than RC has the advantage of constant impedance, such that following stages are literally unfazed by the T-network's sharp tonal tilts. In fact, accurate phase response, an issue with many filters, is a mooted advantage of the LCR topology.

ANDREW HARRISON

Design and Construction

The MFA *RPA* is a two-box design, the larger unit housing the RIAA equalisation and the all-valve gain stages, and this is fed power by the smaller dedicated linear supply. The latter has a custom toroidal transformer and provides initial high-voltage and heater regulation using solid-state technology. The main box then adds more power smoothing, with ten heat-sink equipped silicon regulators mounted on each of two mono circuit boards. The two boxes are linked by a thick 1.4m umbilical, terminated by heavy-duty Lemo connectors.

Three valves per channel are used: a *D3a* pentode for initial gain, followed by the passive EQ, then a shunt-regulated *6072a* double triode to restore the level lost through equalisation, and finally another triode (*5687*) as output buffer. A third PCB hosts the passive RC equalisation components, a hand-matched layout of Mundorf M-Caps and 0.1% metal-film resistors that follows standard RIAA curve without added LF filters. Standing either side of the RC board are two large cans, personally initialised JGB, each containing two S&B inductors: air-cored for the high frequencies; and with a mu-metal core to provide a high-inductance low frequency choke.

Overload input margin is specified as 300mV, which is two orders of magnitude above the nominal MM output. Input impedance for the single RCA phono inputs is set to standard 47kohm, with 15pF capacitance. Output is single-ended only, on well-spaced phono sockets.

Compared to US and Japanese super-fi designs, the aluminium casework is functional, far from stylish, and almost lightweight at 6.3kg and 5.4kg for main box and power supply respectively. The supply fascia has a blue-lit on/off button, and a delay circuit mutes output for 30 seconds after switch-on, allowing the electronics to stabilise before the relays click in for operation. Power consumption was around 108W, though the *RPA* didn't demand constant powering to achieve final sound quality.

Sound Quality

Low noise was one priority that was required to earn the 'Reference' name, and although final signal-to-noise ratio figures are not published, I can attest to the unit's supreme quietness in use, akin to my best active solid-state stage. As hoped, surface noise intrusion was blissfully low: nearly absent on the best cuts and effectively masked elsewhere on other occasions.

For the moving-coil step-up I tried both the

MFA *Classic* and the *Classic V2* transformers, the latter sounding fractionally more flowing and coherent sounding. Three quite different turntables (from Rega, Linn and Michell) were available during testing and while their combined price still probably undercut that of the phono stage plus step-up, the differences wrought in clarity and naturalness over more mortal pre-amps was enough to make me reconsider the usual system hierarchy. Cartridges included the Ortofon *Kontrapunkt* and *Windfeld*, the Transfiguration *Orpheus* and the Clearaudio *Victory Gold*.

An utterly natural tonal balance was the starting point for a privileged journey into this phono amp's capabilities. Treble rendering was silky smooth and soft to the ear, while still allowing deep insight into instruments' upper harmonics and the recording acoustics. It never appeared showy or spotlighted to bolster detail: sweet, yes, but clean and not cloyingly romantic.

Midrange presentation was equally without artifice, revealing beautifully staggered three-dimensional soundstages that could cement and showcase individual players or singers. It made the sonic characters of Linn *Ittok LVII* and SME *309* arms easily discernible, the former showing some midband 'shout' while the SME was drier but kinder to vocal pieces, drawing me into voices, whether rapped or choral, in a way that I'd not normally notice.

However, the bass performance undoubtedly saw the biggest advantage over standard phono stages. That could be the LCR phase accuracy, because the texture and timing of bass guitar sounded spookily (dare I repeat?) natural. The lowest pitched pedal notes and synth lines from The Orb had a palpable solidity, and even better were the sprightly bass figures played from the *Sondek*. The MFA *RPA* always unrolled a life-like delivery of low-frequency pitch and timbre, then guilelessly blended the whole from bottom to top.

Conclusions

At first sight of MFA's extravagant phono project, I was rather put off by both the ruinous price and the kit-build looks, but an hour's listening helped me forget any aesthetic prejudice. Although this remains one pricey way to match a cartridge signal, I've heard US valve stages at the same and double the price that are both far fussier to live with and also lack the rightness I was hearing from this combination. Given the outstanding sound achieved with relatively real-world cartridges, this exceptional phono stage can certainly jump to the head of any queue for a big-budget upgrade.



Manufacturer's Specification

Type	Two-box valve moving-magnet phono stage Solid-state linear supply and regulation Passive LCR RIAA equalisation Dual mono circuitry
Valves	2xD3a, 2x6072a, 2x5687
Input	1x single-ended RCA/phono pair
Output	1x RCA/phono pair
Power consumption:	108W
Weight	6.27 + 5.39kg
Size (WxHxD):	430x133x285mm + 430x88x285mm
Price	£9840 (inc VAT) (plus step-up)

Contact:
Tel: 01424 858260
www.mfaudio.co.uk

Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

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

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

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

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

Martin Colloms, Publisher

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

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

Name

Address

.....

Town.....

Post Code

Country

Email.....

Please give your choice of issue

number for start of subscription (see above) Issue no.

UK SUBSCRIPTION PRICES: (*mail included*)

1 Year £65, for four, quarterly issues

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.