

# HIFI CRITIC

**AUDIO REVIEW  
MAGAZINE**

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## **HIGH END 2016**

Jason Kennedy spent three days at Europe's biggest hi-fi show, but we only gave him two pages for his report

## **A PURR OF PRE-AMPS**

Julian Musgrave compares a number of pre-amps and passive system controllers

## **dCS ROSSINI PLAYER + CLOCK**

Chris Binns assesses dCS's Rossini CD player/DAC and its associated Master Clock

## **WHY DO WAV AND FLAC FILES SOUND DIFFERENT?**

Dr. Charles Zeilig and Jay Clawson measure the sound quality loss when interconverting FLAC and WAV files

## **WILSON AUDIO SABRINA**

Martin Colloms tries out an accomplished floorstanding, three-way moving-coil loudspeaker with ample power handling

## **ROGUE AUDIO SPHINX V2**

Paul Messenger auditions an affordable hybrid integrated amplifier that combines valves with digital amp modules

## **MUSIC & MORE**

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Cambridge Audio Azur 851N  
Benchmark AHB2  
Thorens TD124  
Focal Sopra No2  
First Watt M2  
Naim NAP 500 DR  
Townshend Allegri  
Bespoke Audio  
Gamut D3i  
XTZ Tune 4  
NVA The Second Statement  
Exposure 3010 S2  
Rogue Audio Sphinx V2  
Glasshouse Passive #1  
Vincent SV-700  
Hattor Ultimate Passive  
Little British Monitor  
Roksan Caspian RPP  
dCS Rossini Player+Clock  
Glasshouse TVC  
MFA Classic 632 Phono Amp  
Rothwell Headspace  
Rothwell Simplex  
Lounge Audio Copla  
Lounge Audio LCR MkIII  
MFA 632  
MFA Classic Step Up





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As we rush headlong into the future, let us not forget that hi-fi has been around for most of our lifetimes, and that most of what the music business considers as progress has been about improving access and convenience rather than quality, through such initiatives as the widespread popularity of MP3-encoded files.

I'm currently feeling somewhat exasperated, as my computer, *iPad* and smartphone have decided to stop communicating with my Naim *UnitiServe*, and I've not the slightest idea why. I've tried restarting various bits and pieces, so far without success, and the control Apps simply refuse to make the connection.

This may well be because I have no real enthusiasm for wrestling with computers, but suspicion inevitably falls on the 'software updates' that seem to have become an inevitable and regular part of life these days. Nobody seems interested in explaining why software engineers don't get it right in the first place, but I suspect that one reason behind the continual 'updating' is simply that it's possible to do so. By their very nature, home computers and their ilk are foxy little devices that are well able to change their spots almost on a whim.

Fortunately I still have access to my music *via* plenty of 'oldfashioned' CDs and vinyl – and indeed the numerous tracks that are stored on my laptop. But you'll probably have to wait until the next issue to find out about access to my server.

### **Towards the Future?**

In the meantime it may well be high time I got into streaming. It's something I've not really bothered with to date, largely because I've spent more than fifty years collecting enough discs (vinyl and compact) to keep my CD and vinyl players busy for years. (Indeed, simply because I've already got plenty of material, my disc collecting seems to have tailed off somewhat in recent years.)

However, I've recently been staying for a few days with my younger brother in Sweden, who streams his music *via* a Spotify subscription. While this may not particularly appeal to my hi-fi sensibilities, I have started to appreciate the easy access to all manner of tracks that it brings. And although I've always regarded my music collection as reasonably comprehensive, it does inevitably have some gaps (usually around the time that progeny are arriving), so a streaming service does therefore have some advantages (especially since contact with my server has temporarily been lost).

I should have got streaming up and running by the next issue too, so will be able to report on any of the practical difficulties this computer phobic encounters along the way. As a parting shot, however, it seems to me that the advantages of streaming may well depend on the size of one's music collection, which is likely to be a function of one's age.

*Paul Messenger*

Editor

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# A Purr of Pre-amps

JULIAN MUSGRAVE TRIES OUT VARIOUS PRE-AMPS AND SYSTEM CONTROLLERS FROM MUSIC FIRST AUDIO, TOWNSHEND, BESPOKE AUDIO, GAMUT, EXPOSURE, GLASSHOUSE AND HATTOR

Let's play the High End Audio collective noun game. What, for instance, should we call a group of speakers? Since they sit up straight and sing for us that might well be a Choir of Loudspeakers. Power amps? Visually challenged, muscle-bound and maybe a tad bovine? Must be a Herd of Power Amps. Now we come to pre-amps. Quiet little chaps pre-amps. They sit there in the middle of the rig apparently not doing a lot but actually controlling the whole darned show. That makes them smug; positively feline as they settle down on the shelf humming quietly to themselves as the music flows. So it has to be a Purr of Pre-amps (or, for that matter, Passives).

Which is what we have here – no less than eight of them. But which are the velvety Persians that roll on their backs and juggle balls of wool, and which are the smelly alley cats that scratch the furniture and personalise the room for you? Sorting the Orlandos from the Top Cats is the job of a review isn't it? Yet a review usually does one piece at a time, does it not? Not eight. Ho Hum! Methinks we have to take time out to look at this knotty little problem.

## Reviewing the Reviews

The hegemony of the single product review (SPR) – which reviews only one piece of equipment at a time – over the multi-piece group test review must be one of the oddest tropes of High End Audio (HEA). And the reason for this is that the SPR simply does not fit the patterns of discrimination we audiophiles are wont to exercise.

*[The Editor should point out that he conducted numerous panel-based loudspeaker group tests for Hi-Fi Choice magazine, from the mid-1980s until the magazine changed hands around 2010. Publisher Martin Colloms has also carried out numerous group tests, for Hi-Fi for Pleasure, Hi-Fi Choice and Hi-Fi News magazines.]*

If we are looking to replace, say, our pre-amp, what we do is initiate a beauty parade in which every plausible model struts its stuff hoping that we are going to point at it and say: "You're the one for me, my beauty. Compared to all the others your volume knob is perfection, your casework makes my heart sing, and you sound pretty sweet too."

The phrase 'compared to all the others' is the

giveaway here. It tells us that hard choices must be made, wielding the trusty sword of value-related comparison. Which is exactly what the SPR either does not do, or does inadequately as an afterthought in a couple of sentences at the end of the piece. Put like this the SPR no longer seems quite as fit for purpose as it once did. Hence what we are trying to do here is present information in a more user-friendly form. Anyone looking at pre-amps and saying: "So how do these passives everyone is on about compare with actives?" should, we hope, find that this will get closer to answering that question than any SPR, simply because it is directly going to address what we, as audiophiles, are always asking. That, anyway, is the theory.....

## The Beauty Parade

We have therefore assembled a collection of pre-amplifiers and system controllers. Two are active with potentiometer volume controls; six are passive which can again be split into resistor ladder volume controlled (2); and transformer volume controlled (4). Our contestants, in alphabetical order are:

**BESPOKE AUDIO** (£9000): a passive unit with a transformer volume control (or TVC), it normally has 3xXLR and 3xRCA/phono inputs, and also remote control. Owned and operated by ex-Music First Audio employees, this personalised and customisable luxury product is hand-built in the UK. ([www.thebespokeaudiocompany.com](http://www.thebespokeaudiocompany.com)).

**EXPOSURE 3010 S2** (£1060): an active pre-amp with a potentiometer volume control, full remote control and DAC/Phono board options. 6x RCA/phono inputs. Now owned by Far Eastern interests, Exposure is still a UK based company with components priced from around £500 to £2000. Its 3010 range has long been favourites with both media and audiophiles, and can be taken as sound and value benchmarks for the type. ([www.exposurehifi.com](http://www.exposurehifi.com)).

**GAMUT D3i** (£6150): an active pre-amp with potentiometer volume control, full remote control, 1xXLR and 4xRCA/phono inputs. Denmark based Gamut has recently received enthusiastic reviews, and the D3i represents the lowest price point at

which one might reasonably expect world-class performance. But can its positively retro carbon-track potentiometer cut it against those sneaky passives? ([www.gamutaudio.com](http://www.gamutaudio.com)).

**GLASSHOUSE PASSIVE #1** (£600): a passive controller with a selected Takman resistor ladder volume control and 6xRCA/phono inputs. The Glasshouse brand is a newish enterprise from Hi-Fi Collective offering kits or ready built passive pre-amps from about £400 to £800, with a choice of resistor ladder or TVC volume control and a long options list. (<http://www.hificollective.co.uk/kits/glasshousehome.htm>).

**GLASSHOUSE TVC** (£660): as above, but with transformer volume control instead of resistor ladder. Again it has 6xRCA/phono inputs.

**HATTOR ULTIMATE PASSIVE** (£1300): a passive controller with Japanese Amtrans AMRG resistor ladder stepped attenuator, including channel balance and full remote control. It has 3xXLR and 2x RCA/phono inputs, and is fully balanced, requiring four volume control tracks (one each for left and right positive and negative signal phase). This new product line from Arek Kallas (who is also behind the Khozmo brand) covers a range of resistor ladder passive controls in the £250 to £1500 price range. ([www.hattor.com](http://www.hattor.com)).

**MUSIC FIRST AUDIO BABY CLASSIC** (£1440): a passive controller with transformer volume control plus 1xXLR and 1xRCA/phono inputs. Music First Audio (MFA) is a spin-off from a long established Hastings-based transformer maker. It makes passives from £1440 to £6120, is very much the standard bearer for passive system controllers, and probably needs no further introduction here. ([www.mfaudio.co.uk](http://www.mfaudio.co.uk)).

**TOWNSHEND ALLEGRI** (£1990): a passive pre-amp with auto-transformer volume control and 6xRCA/phono inputs. Uses 'fractal' wiring in its transformers (a Townshend Audio exclusive). A much praised piece that will be well known to *HIFICRITIC* readers. ([www.townshendaudio.com](http://www.townshendaudio.com)).

### Methodology

The single product review (SPR) often reflects the views of just one reviewer, so the product is inevitably refracted through the prism of his or her audio world view. Panels get over this but generate problems of their own, due in part to diversity of opinion, and also the possibility of members



*Glasshouse Passive #1*

modifying their opinions through peer pressure. For this survey we therefore used a panel of four for two of the three listening stages, giving a more nuanced range of opinions. The whole auditioning process fell into three stages.

### Live vs Recorded

To assess instrumental timbre we recorded a riff of five or six seconds played on an actual violin and a flute using a good quality microphone and a piece of PC freeware called *Audacity*. We then cut a CD of each riff and played first the recordings then the actual instrument with each of the pre-amps in the system, comparing the playback sound with the actual instrument sound, and taking care to match volume, playing style and any other variables. Since the rest of the system remained the same, differences in instrumental timbre heard between live and recorded is probably due to the pre-amp/controller. This was scored on a scale from 1-10. (This procedure is described more fully at: <http://audio-insight.org/article-29-creating-the-first-anthem-sound-test-ast1-recording/>)

### Recorded Examples

We then moved on to commercially recorded examples of acoustic instrumental music. The first two steps were carried out by the panel; the third step was a much longer audition under more relaxed, evening listening conditions carried out by the writer. The latter were intended to reveal any subtle colorations or corruptions that would influence or even mar the proposition of long term ownership. Let's be clear here. This test method is not designed to be scientifically objective (whatever that means). But Stage 1 *is* a test of the equipment's ability accurately to reproduce the sound of real instruments

**The System**

**Source:** Esoteric *K-01* SACD/CD player. **Speakers:** ATC *100 ASL Anniversary* active speakers. **Cables:** The Missing Link. All comparisons made *via* RCA input and outputs; single ended.

in the same acoustic space and time and using those very same instruments as a reference. It should therefore approach the gold standard for audiophiles who believe that reproducing the sound of live music is their objective, and should be a better assay than either the reviewer’s memory of acoustic instruments, or equipment to equipment comparisons. Contextualised alongside more conventional listening we find it is now an indispensable first step in judging equipment. Other housekeeping data are detailed below.

**Moggies, To the Catwalk!**

**Stage 1:** Instrumental Timbre (Averaged for both instruments).

Bespoke Audio .....	8.7
Exposure .....	8.0
Gamut .....	8.7
Glasshouse Resistor .....	8.4
Glasshouse TVC.....	8.0
Hattor .....	8.6
Music First Audio.....	8.8
Townshend Allegri .....	8.6

The close grouping of these scores suggests that all these components made a pretty good fist of instrumental timbre. As ever in High End audio, we make big deals of small differences, so stating that the two 8.0 scores reveal a noticeable gap in performance may well be valid. However, the scores

of the higher group (8.6-8.8) are probably too close to call, and the conclusion is that none of this group sounded clearly more accurate on this very narrow test of timbral authenticity.

**Stage 2:** Recorded Examples; General Comments  
By widening the test criteria to complete musical extracts, more generalised inferences could be made. There was a marked difference in presentation between the resistor volume controls and the transformers. The latter were brighter, cleaner and more authoritative; the former slightly warmer with a softening of focus. In the case of the Exposure this stretched to a noticeable graininess of texture that was absent in all the TVCs. In the case of the Gamut the difference manifested itself as a creaminess that particularly suited the exquisite texture of Emma Kirkby’s voice.

**Stage 3:** Extended Audition

This is the stage where most of those tricky little audiophile differences disappeared again because all of the top group allowed a musically rewarding immersion, after spending around five minutes of adjustment to accommodate their sound. Only the Exposure’s graininess became a bit wearing after extended listening, and this effect was possibly exaggerated by the knowledge that a more musical sound was probably available by changing a cable or two.

*Music First Audio Baby Classic*



**Individual Conclusions**

So far we have concentrated purely on the sound quality of these beasts – an aesthetic that is at the heart of our obsession. But HEA is about more than sound and includes both the visual and the practical, so we must also satisfy these criteria as fully as we do the sound, or we will struggle to live with our choice. A fuller picture of each pre-amp is as follows:

**BESPOKE AUDIO**

The price of the Bespoke is unquestionably high, but I would rather stare at this sublime creation every evening than virtually any other piece of audio equipment ever made. And it can be customised, so it’s likely to get much closer to an ideal pre-amp than most off-the-shelf designs. It also has the transparency, fluidity and speed that is the equal of any £20,000 preamplifier. Do these points make it something of a bargain then? Yes, but its only weakness as yet is that there’s no optional, partnering DAC or phono stage.

**EXPOSURE 3010 S2**

Judged on sound alone the Exposure’s weaknesses

have indeed been cruelly exposed. Compared to the others here, it does rather get in the way of the music. But anybody who needs a pre-amp with oodles of gain, and a built-in DAC or phono stage, it might just fit the bill nicely.

### GAMUT D31

This pre-amp disproves the proposition that all carbon track potentiometers are pants, and that passive pre-amps have a clean sweep of the sound quality aesthetic. However, £6150 is a steep price to pay for a nice faceplate and what many will consider to be a slightly euphonic take on the music compared to the TVCs. Nevertheless two members of the panel chose it as the pre-amp they would have liked to walk away with!

### GLASSHOUSE RESISTOR

If measured by music pleasure per pound spent, this modest little box wins hands down. It comes within an ace of the big boys at a fraction of their price. And since every user of a high end pre-amp needs a back-up in case #1 fails, having one of these about the house earning its keep (maybe in the home office system until it has to step in to save the day) just seems like common sense to me.

### GLASSHOUSE TVC

This TVC debutant didn't initially make the cut, but then we looked at the price and suddenly it's the same story of TVC superiority. It's half the price of the Music First Audio and a third the price of the Townshend, yet offers 85% of the sound. True, it sounded a tad two-dimensional compared to the other TVCs but if you want the clean, grain-free voicing that a TVC supplies, it offers extraordinary value for money.

### HATTOR ULTIMATE PASSIVE

This dark horse of the group attracted comments like "nothing terrible" and "not as much air as the Music First Audio". Damnation with faint praise perhaps, but it still recorded scores in the top group, indicating that the very highest quality resistor ladders volume controls can be sonically in the same league as the TVCs. Add in true balanced operation, remote control, a L/R balance control and attractive styling and the Hattor is smiling at you very seductively indeed.

### MUSIC FIRST AUDIO BABY CLASSIC

"Can hear inner parts easily.....gorgeous voices..... more air", the MFA Baby Classic won over yet another set of listeners. Add in that it's easy to look at, so if the lack of facilities are not a problem, it

will demonstrate all the virtues of TVC passives at a relatively modest cost.

### TOWNSEND ALLEGRI

"Very realistic timbre and attack.....clear and clean", typified reactions to the *Allegri*. It's probably the most revealingly accurate of the controllers here: ruthless even. It doesn't flatter in the way that the Gamut does, and that will make it the first and only choice for many. Its styling is unusual too; it is so light I swear it could float in the updraft of a valve power amp, but that is also part of the *Allegri*'s abundant charm.

### Conclusions

Both this survey and a wider experience strongly suggests that if judged on sound alone the best passive controllers are High End audio's finest bargains. They effortlessly achieve a transparency, speed, instrumental timbre that makes active pre-amps of similar price blush. The Gamut, at four times the price of the Music First Audio and thrice that of the *Allegri*, is neither sonically better nor worse, but different.

Put the *Allegri*, for example, between the finest source on the planet and the best power amp and speakers in the planet, it can justifiably be argued that it doesn't get any better. That is some achievement for a £2,000 box of coiled wire! So hats off to these pioneers for creating an alternative audio technology mainstream.

Whether you go this route or not depends on whether you are prepared to live with the different culture of the passive control unit, which is generally a facility-free zone and visually unusual. Which brings us to an interesting speculation. If Music First Audio, Townshend or Bespoke Audio were to offer a passive TVC with the option of a high end phono stage and/or DAC, full remote control, a balance facility, and fully balanced operation at a plausible price (not unlike the resistor-based Hattor), they might well have a killer product that simply makes every other pre-amp priced above it dead in the water. But that would be far too sensible for High End audio.

It's time to return to our feline metaphor. Is there a Top Cat in our purr of pre-amps? The Exposure is like the cartoon character: a wise-guy of a pre-amp with scratch-your-eyes-out strengths (its gain and options list), to counter any sonic weaknesses. And the Orlando of the bunch? For me, in this particular system and at this particular time, it was the Bespoke. If we listen with our eyes – even by a teensy-weensy bit – then it sounded sweeter than them all. Even with my eyes wide shut.

**The panelists were:** Faris Najar (audio equipment trader, collector and confirmed subjectivist), Steve Andrews (first flute for the Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra and audiophile), Elisabeth Davison (singer, keyboard player and non-audiophile), Julian Musgrave (violin for CPO and audiophile).

**Recordings used were:** Liszt – Transcendental Studies (Decca Set 467 801-2), Stravinsky – The Soldier's Tale (Pentatone PTC 5186 046), Vivaldi – Vocal Works (Chandos 0518).

# Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

## HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

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*Martin Colloms, Publisher*

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Three issues ago (*HIFICRITIC Vol9 No3*) I wrote about a very practical, sensible and inexpensive *irDAC* from Arcam. At a typical price of £425, it naturally made no attempt to set the sort of high standards one might encounter from brands like dCS or MSB. But it proved most effective at doing the very basic job of extending the analogue inputs of my system pre-amplifier into the digital domain, with full remote control over input selection too – a vital feature in my view.

Not long after that review had gone to press, however, I received an e-mail about a new *MkII* version. The differences seem quite minor, but are the reason for covering the new version here. For examples, the replacement does include a price rise to £495, which is still quite inexpensive in my opinion, but also seems to have addressed a couple of irritations that snuck up on me after I'd already written the original review.

Although I was happy enough with the original, a couple of minor niggles that emerged included a tendency to 'click' when changing either sources or TV channels. This was only mildly irritating, but the DAC also showed an occasional tendency to 'crash' (as all computers seem wont to do), which was certainly rather more exasperating. The good news is that the 'click' seems to have completely disappeared from the latest version, and (after a couple of weeks) it hasn't yet crashed (he says, carefully touching wood).

I normally use one of the two optical (Toslink S/PDIF) inputs for the TV, a USB type II input for my laptop (which only started working after I restarted it and went to a sub-menu), and one of the two electrical S/PDIFs for the Naim *UnitiServe* (when it's working, which it isn't right now – see *Editorial*). That leaves three inputs that are currently unused – one optical, one electrical, and one other. On the original *irDAC* this 'other' was labelled '*iPod*' on the handset, and appeared to add an extra USB type I on the unit, but the new *irDAC-II* has replaced that input with a Bluetooth capability, which is why a stubby little aerial now attaches to a screw terminal on the back. Another difference between the old and the new models is that the 'digital out' socket has been replaced by a pair of variable analogue outputs (which I naturally ignored).

The new handset is the same intelligently small and light plastic affair as its predecessor, though it actually has three fewer buttons, eliminating an unnecessary on/off and others labelled 'AES' and 'filter', neither of which I used previously (or indeed knew what they did!)

Since CD now seems to be in decline, I reckon I'll stick with vinyl as my prime source. Although the arrival of downloads, servers and streaming might have made digital stuff more musically interesting, it has also become much more complicated too, as computers, networks and the internet have effectively taken over from the much more straightforward (and reliable) CD player. This might be no problem for those who enjoy interacting with computers and computer technology, but digital audio seems better avoided by people like yrs trly that consider them useful but also a pain in the proverbial.

I'm perfectly happy for others to follow a digital audio future, but I myself will continue to regard it as a secondary source: certainly worth having, but hardly meriting the sort of expenditure I'll happily lavish on the analogue gear. Simply as a remote-controllable switch-box for digital sources, Arcam's £495 *irDAC-II* is clearly exceptional value for money, so the no-frills Best Buy rating of its predecessor definitely deserves to continue.