

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO REVIEW MAGAZINE
£15 Vol7/No1 JAN - MAR 2013

STAN'S SAFARI

Stan Curtis discovers a powerful statistical analysis tool that explains some of the differences we can clearly hear

ALEXIA SCRUTINISED

Martin Colloms discovers that Wilson Audio's new Alexia floorstander is something rather special

THE NEW BOSS?

Does Naim's new NDS network-connected digital player/streamer/DAC deliver flagship worthy performance?

FOCAL WITH NAIM

Focal's managing director Gerard Chretien tells Steve Harris about his own company and the Naim Audio merger

HEADSOUNDS

Headphones and earbuds are hot right now, but they're often not as good as they pretend. We put a dozen through their paces

ULTIMATE CONTROLLER

Linn's Akurate DSM streamer/pre-amp can handle virtually anything – analogue or digital – that's thrown at it

MUSIC & MUCH MORE

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE: NAIM NDS, C.E.C. TL3N/DA3N, WILSON AUDIO ALEXIA, LINN AKURATE DSM, AUDIOQUEST DRAGONFLY, GRADO SR80i, CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DACMAGIC 100, THINKSOUND TS02+, MICROMEGA MYDAC, GRADO SR325i, PSB M4U 2, MARTIN LOGAN MIKROS 70, CONCERT FIDELITY CF-08LSX2, BEYER CUSTOM ONE PRO, BOWERS & WILKINS P5, BEYER T70/T70P, GRADO PS1000, BEYER DTX 501P, BOWERS & WILKINS P3, VON SCHWEIKERT UNIFIELD-2, SENNHEISER IE80



Contents

- 4 STAN'S SAFARI No21**
Stan discovers a powerful statistical analysis tool that helps explain the differences we can clearly hear, but which defy accepted 'scientific wisdom'
- 7 BLISS**
Christian Schuller describes his road to musical bliss
- 10 ALEXIA SCRUTINISED**
Martin Colloms discovers that the *Alexia*, the latest floorstander from Wilson Audio, is something rather special
- 18 MADE IN JAPAN**
Japanese hi-fi specialists rarely operate outside Japan. C.E.C. is one exception, and here we review the TL3N disc drive and DA3N DAC
- 
- 20 THE NEW BOSS?**
Does Naim's new *NDS* network-connected digital player/streamer/DAC deliver the performance worthy of a 'flagship' model?
- 26 FOCAL WITH NAIM**
Focal's managing director Gerard Chretien tells Steve Harris about his own company and its merger with Naim Audio
- 29 RIPPING YARNS**
Jason Kennedy reports on the computer hi-fi developments he encountered at America's CES
- 30 TUBE ROLLING**
This minimalist Japanese pre-amplifier from Concert Fidelity has easy access for trying out different valves
- 33 HEADSOUNDS**
Headphones and earbuds are the hot hi-fi products right now, but experience suggests they're often not as good as they pretend, so Martin Colloms has put a dozen through their paces

- 40 VSA UNIFIELD-2**
A high class stand-mount from Von Schweikert in the USA comes under close *HIFICRITIC* scrutiny
- 43 CLASSIC VALVE AMPLIFICATION**
Neil Goodwin discusses his enthusiasm for some of the best post-war valve amps, and suggests some likely examples



- 44 ULTIMATE CONTROLLER**
Linn's *Akurate DSM* streamer/pre-amp can handle virtually anything – analogue or digital – that's thrown at it
- 46 WHITHER HI-FI?**
Loudspeaker engineer Geoff Hill queries whether hi-fi is really progressing, or if we should be looking back at audio's history
- 48 THREE BUDGET PRICE DACS**
Martin Colloms assesses the Audioquest *DragonFly*, the Cambridge Audio *DACMagic 100*, and the Micromega *MyDAC*
- 50 INDEX FOR THE 2012 EDITIONS**
- 52 FAVOURITE THINGS**
Paul Messenger chooses ten rock/pop releases that have stood the test of time
- 54 JAZZ PICKS**
Greg Drygala unearths four new and interesting jazz releases
- 56 THE BEST OF CLASSICAL**
Colin Anderson picks up on some recent classical releases
- 58 ROCK, POP & OTHER NICE MUSIC**
Nigel Finn (The Chord Company) chooses six recent releases
- 60 SUBJECTIVE SOUNDS**
Looking back at three months of varied listening



Wilson Alexia scrutinised on page 10



Editor | Paul Messenger

Writers

Colin Anderson
Martin Colloms
Stan Curtis
Greg Drygala
Nigel Finn
Neil Goodwin
Steve Harris
Geoff Hill
Jason Kennedy
Paul Messenger
Christian Schuller

Publisher | Martin Colloms

Design | Philippa Steward

Published by

HIFICRITIC
29 Flask Walk
London
NW3 1HH
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 2013. 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.

A hot topic in the hi-fi industry today is whether or not the Compact Disc medium has much of a future. Hard it may be to believe the fact, but the CD format has actually been around now for nearly 30 years, which is an unquestionably good run by any standards, given technology's rapid rate of progress. Indeed, I started using CD players (albeit rather reluctantly) some years prior to the arrival of my first Mac, and indeed well before mobile telephones became commonplace.

The last 30 years have seen all manner of changes, in both the music software itself and the means of delivering the music. In the UK at least, sales of downloaded digital music files via the internet (to computers, tablets and smartphones) actually overtook that of other means of music distribution during the first three months of 2012.

While I don't think such a trend necessarily applies to, or has much relevance to a hi-fi listening minority, anecdotal evidence does suggest that CD player sales are currently weak. And it's certainly also true that downloaded files no longer have to be a poor MP3-encoded relation of the full uncompressed 16-bit/44.1kHz resolution that is the CD medium.

So is the CD format on the way out? Frankly, I doubt it. I for one like a solid and physical piece of software, rather than something rather nebulous called a file, sitting in a computer or cloud, especially as said computer is constantly updating itself, and will probably need upgrading in a couple of years.

Computer audio in its various forms clearly represents a threat to hi-fi's traditional component approach, partly because of its potential to deliver 'hi-res' digital music files that represent a significant improvement over CD's 16-bit/44.1kHz, but probably more significantly for its extra convenience in rapidly accessing one's music. And as far as the public at large is concerned, I'm quite certain that convenience of music access (and relatively low cost) is of vastly greater importance than the possibility of superior quality.

I can't help recalling the era of the Compact Cassette, which offered 'go anywhere' convenience over the vinyl LP, especially for Walkman and in-car applications. Consumers loved it, but the music business regarded it with deep suspicion, coining and publicising the slogan: 'Home Taping is Killing Music'.

Music survived, thanks much more to the creativity of the musicians themselves than the greed of an increasingly profit-driven and accountant-led music biz. I might well have used a cassette deck to record friends' albums back in my impecunious 1970s student days, but it hasn't stopped me from subsequently accumulating an enormous quantity of paid-for music on vinyl and CD. The music biz has done very well out of me.

However, I must admit I've been struggling to find new material that I've wanted to buy and play in recent years. The music biz blames file-sharing for a 40% drop in world sales by value between 1999 and 2011, but I'm inclined to believe that a lack of creativity, the widespread use of dynamic compression, alongside a general ineptitude when it comes to spotting and fostering new talent, is equally significant.

Paul Messenger
Editor

Made In Japan

JAPANESE HI-FI SPECIALISTS RARELY OPERATE OUTSIDE JAPAN. C.E.C. IS ONE EXCEPTION, AND HERE WE REVIEW THE TL3N DISC DRIVE AND DA3N DAC



We're all familiar with the big Japanese companies that rose to consumer electronics world domination through hi-fi's 1970s boom years. Some are still active in the hi-fi field, others have moved on to a broader stage, but below these high profile multinationals are scores of smaller Japanese hi-fi operations that have remained modest in size and ambition. A few are known overseas thanks to enthusiastic distributors, but their main concern has always been to serve a music-obsessed 128m home market.

C.E.C. doesn't have much of a profile here in Britain, and Kevin Scott's Definitive Audio operation obtains his samples via a European distributor based in Germany. Indeed, Scott sells some of the rarer and more interesting brands around, including specialist Japanese valve amp maker Kondo alongside his own impressive Living Voice speakers.

One factor that stands out after spending time with this C.E.C. combo is that the serious, specialist Japanese audiophile scene is quite distinct from that found in the UK, or indeed the USA for that matter. We've experienced hi-fi products from giant Japanese multinationals for decades, but these are inevitably designed for volume production and international mass market sales. However, we know very little about Japan's more audiophile-oriented specialist hi-fi scene, which certainly exists, but seems primarily interested

in serving the country's very substantial domestic population of nearly 130m.

C.E.C. might be smaller than Japan-based specialist hi-fi brands like Marantz and Rotel, but it's much more than a shed-at-the-bottom-of-the-garden affair. It was founded way back in 1954, and was originally known for vinyl turntables, growing steadily into a major supplier of same, under its own brand but also as an OEM source, until CD came on the scene during the 1980s.

The company moved naturally enough into CD player manufacture, and found a USP in the early 1990s by adopting a belt drive approach to the disc drive (and pickup drive) mechanisms. This seems to make good sense, yet to my knowledge only German brand Burmester has adopted a belt-drive spindle mechanism.

Another unusual technique C.E.C. applies to the £2,400 TL3N disc drive and the £3,200 DA3N DAC is a so called 'Superlink'. This separates the digital signals into four different components, labelled MCK, BCK, LRCK and DATA (Master clock, Bit clock, L/R clock and digital data stream), and carries them between drive and DAC via four supplied BNC-terminated cables. (This is in addition to numerous other interconnection possibilities.) I gather such a split connection system using various degrees of separation is by no means unique, though it's not found on mainstream UK CD players.

Another surprise feature was the use of a quite hefty stabiliser (puck) placed manually on top of the disc. This is the complete opposite of the normal UK approach, where practitioners like Naim and Rega have gone to considerable lengths to minimise rotational inertia and hence the demands made on the servo that controls the varying rotational speed required. According to C.E.C.'s Ken Ishiwata (no relation to Marantz' well known Brand Ambassador of the same name, I understand), the key purpose of this device is to increase the inertia, damping and ultimately the stability of the rotating disc – hence it's called a stabiliser rather than a puck. While the progressive variation in the rotational speed of the CD does require servo control, the varying is invariably gradual, so it is suggested that a significant rotational inertia will be largely irrelevant (depending on the servo characteristics).

That amounts to three quite different features that distinguish this Japanese specialist hi-fi combo from

PAUL MESSENGER

the UK norm. However, before getting on to discuss their effectiveness – or otherwise – a rundown on the construction and features is appropriate.

The remote control unit is arguably the most important element in any component combo, and the one supplied here pushes nearly all the right buttons. It's attractively unpretentious, being a light, slim plastic affair, with decent button differentiation by shape and position too. My only complaint is that the labelling of the various digital inputs is faint and difficult to read, which is quite significant when there are nine of these from which to choose.

A similar lack of pretension applies equally to the two components themselves. Both have nice shiny alloy front panels, but the grey wraps are simply fabricated sheet steel – there's no fancy (and hence costly) hewn-from-the-solid casework here: you're paying for the engineering inside, rather than a pretty box.

The *TL3N* disc drive (generally known as a transport, though transportation doesn't really feature in the operation) is a full width top-loading unit designed to be used with its high inertia (330g brass) stabiliser puck. Its key feature is of course the powerful belt drive mechanisms. Replacing the usual 'direct drive' spindle motor with a proprietary belt-drive arrangement separates the disc hub bearing from the motor drive, and this is claimed to reduce both mechanical vibration and electromagnetic interference effects. An indirect belt drive is also used for the pickup tracking, for similar reasons. A sliding smoked Perspex drawer type lid keeps dust away from the drive mechanism, and the modest dot-matrix display provides ample visual feedback. The rear panel is well supplied with signal socketry: alongside the 4x BNC Superlink arrangement described above are regular phono S/PDIF, AES/EBU XLR and Toslink optical outputs, plus a 'word clock input' on BNC.

The *DA3N* DAC has a rather larger display, to confirm input selection, locking, filter setting and the volume of the variable outputs. This is flanked by two large knobs – one to select between the nine (!) digital input options; the other to adjust the volume fed to the variable output sockets. That plethora of digital inputs must surely cover all eventualities, though it's maybe surprising that there's only one S/PDIF on phono (alongside one AES/EBU XLR). Superlink comes in two flavours: 4x BNC and D-Sub; three opticals include a front panel mini-jack; two USBs include a Type B mini on the front. Outputs include fixed and variable single-ended (phono) and balanced (XLR) pairs, and a front-mounted 6.3mm headphone jack. Inside the *DA3N*, the DAC section is handled by the popular 'audiophile' ESS *ES9008* chip which is capable of dealing with signals up to 24-bit/192kHz (somewhat dependent on the input selected). The remote handset also provides access to two alternative output filter settings, labelled 'Flat' and 'Pulse'.

The one trick that this DAC seems to miss completely is the provision of any form of analogue input. Granted it might be necessary to incorporate A-to-D conversion to operate with the internal digital domain volume control, but had such a capability been included, the *DA3N* could have operated as a complete system pre-amplifier.

Sound Quality

Using the Pulse filter throughout, the overall character of this disc drive/DAC combo is essentially sweet, kind and free from any unpleasant nasties, and if the fine detail is slightly suppressed compared to the best, marginally compromising texture information, there's no quibbling about the superior timing and presentation.

One surprise was the significant sound quality difference heard between the single-cable S/PDIF connection and the four-cable Superlink. Despite using a costly Kondo digital S/PDIF cable, the four supplied BNC-terminated Superlink cables clearly sounded superior, delivering a combination of improved dynamic vigour and a greater impression of scale.

Linked together via the four-cable Superlink, connecting it to my Naim NAC552/NAP500 amplification via Vertere *Pulse B* interconnects, with Vertex AQ *HiRez Moncayo* speaker cables feeding Spendor BC1 or PMC IB2i speakers, I found the *TL3N/DA3N* combo a very satisfactory and satisfying was to play CDs. The bass might perhaps have been sharper and better defined, but imaging and timing were fine, and the presentation was always musical and easy on the ears.

There's no denying this combo makes a fine CD player, but of course this DAC has a plethora of other digital inputs. Despite the proliferation of digital sources, I don't think anybody at C.E.C. expects purchasers to use all of them. Rather the *DA3N* comes with such a huge variety of different input types it ought to be able to cater for any possible eventuality. For practical reasons I restricted myself to comparing the DAC to alternatives that were around using the S/PDIF connection from a Naim UnitiServe. Using the Kondo digital lead, it delivered a 'bigger' sound than the Metrum Octave, and a 'sweeter' character than the Rega DAC. Compared to Naim's network-connected NDX, the S/PDIF-connected *DA3N* somehow sounded less mechanical, with a more rounded and human character alongside slightly less fine detail.

Conclusions

This is a very impressive two-box CD player, with lovely timing and dynamic expression plus a sweet and delicate presentation. Add in exceptional DAC input flexibility, a sensible remote handset and cost-effective construction at prices well below today's high end norm, and as a result deserves my confident recommendation.

Data

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| TL3N | dual belt CD drive |
| Stabiliser | 70mm, 330g |
| Digital outputs | Superlink (4x BNC) AES/EBU XLR S/PDIF phono Toslink |
| Inputs | Word clock |
| Dimensions (WxHxD) | 435x109x320mm |
| Weight/Finish | 11kg/Silver |
| Price | £2,400 |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| DA3N | multi-input DAC |
| Inputs | 2xSuperlink (4xBNC + D-SUB) (44.1kHz) 2xUSB (Type B and Type B mini) (to 96kHz) AES/EBU XLR (to 192kHz) S/PDIF phono (to 192kHz) 3x Toslink (one on mini-jack) (to 96kHz) |
| Outputs | Fixed balanced XLR and S/E phono Variable balanced XLR and S/E phono Headphones (6.3mm jack) |
| Dimensions (WxHxD) | 435x109x320mm |
| Weight/Finish | 9kg/Silver |
| Price | £3,200 |



Contact
Definitive Audio
 Tel: 0115 973 3222
www.definitiveaudio.co.uk
www.ccc-web.co.jp/english_index.html

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 £60, for four, quarterly issues

Since my days of editing the original A5-size *Hi-Fi Choice*, I've always rather enjoyed the extended schedule of a quarterly publication. I can cope with monthlies, but dislike the time constraints of weeklies, and the prospect of working on a daily fills me with dread. I like to be able to take my time, and to have time for second or even third thoughts.

That said, I still haven't quite adjusted to the *HIFICRITIC* schedule. One problem I've encountered concerns my own reviews. I start work at the beginning of the quarter, gathering in the components I'm planning to try, writing a couple of introductory paragraphs and carrying out some initial listening.

Then the pressure of putting together the rest of the magazine seems to take over. Articles arrive and need subbing; others need chasing; components need to be organised for other reviewers; and so on. My own writing is consigned to a Pending file, in the often vain hope that I'll get around to paying it some attention before the contents list has to be finalised.

In the end I did manage to finish the C.E.C and Linn reviews. I also wrote the first example of a planned series of music features called *Favourite Things*, the idea being to persuade at least our reviewers to share their favourite music with the *HIFICRITIC* community. Meanwhile, several items remain in the Pending file, so this column will act as something of a preview for the next edition.

I was intending to report on the Roksan *Caspian M2*. It's a relatively upmarket integrated amplifier that has been around for at least two years, so tends to be overlooked in the media. However, a friend suggested it was sufficiently exceptional that I ought to give it a try, and a brief listen has left me very impressed. I don't think it handles the extreme bass and treble quite as well as my regular Naim amplification, but it does show an exceptional ability to reproduce midrange voices with considerable poise and precision. Indeed, on some familiar discs I found myself making out lyrics and phrasing that had hitherto been obscure, so I'll have to make certain it receives full and proper treatment in the next *HIFICRITIC*.

I've also started work on my latest wallspeakers. The baffles have been cut for the latest 260mm Tannoy *Kensington* drivers, and these have been inserted into the hatch-like holes in my end wall. Crossover networks have been appropriately located and the speakers connected to the system.

The initial impression was certainly positive. It has been some years since I've actually got around to using a big Tannoy Dual Concentric flush-mounted into the wall, and I was immediately made aware of the bonus of eliminating the enclosure. However, adopting such an ad hoc approach is always unpredictable – after all, the *Kensington* is intended to be loaded by a specific volume of air in a port-loaded enclosure, and that combination unquestionably works very well indeed. Right now I'm not entirely convinced that the wall-mount arrangement works quite as well as I had anticipated. It's good, without question, but my first impressions are that it falls short of true greatness.

I've also got around to baffle-mounting the pair of vintage Goodmans *Axiom 80* drivers I've acquired, but I haven't worked out the wiring arrangements or tried them yet. I'm also a little apprehensive about damaging these ancient full range drivers, as a friend recently informed me that a pair sold on eBay for around £2,500 the other day!

Then there's my plan to write about the sound quality differences between several generations of Naim power amplifiers, temporarily held up by the need to find the old Cannon *XLR-LNE* type mains lead that original casework *NAP250s* used. Hopefully I'll have found them in time for the next issue.