

Grand Designs

Originally run from a domestic property, Suffolk-based Signals has moved to new premises where **Ed Selley** discovers, it's still very much business as usual

During the time we've been running *Dealer Visit*, changes in the high street have seen many dealers forced to move away and set up shop in business parks or domestic premises. Ipswich-based Signals neatly avoided this by being one of the very first dealers to operate from a domestic property when it was founded in 1993.

Since we visited back in *HFC* 400, owner Alistair Gardner, ably assisted by colleague Andy Heavens, has taken the plunge and moved the business out of his house. The reason was simple enough. Signals has been doing a pleasing amount of business and quite a bit of it has been at higher

price points with larger systems. This has required a larger building and the one he selected is a little different from the norm. A former Catholic church, it retains a slightly spiritual feel as a result. It has also been extensively adapted to work as a space for auditioning the Signals portfolio and Alistair has some further ideas to improve it. The brand portfolio hasn't really altered too significantly in the move, but some of the larger components can now be held as demonstration equipment. Not everything is vast, though, as the first system of the day – ticking over in the smaller of the two demo rooms – is about to comprehensively prove.



SIGNALS UK LTD.

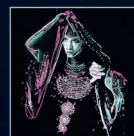


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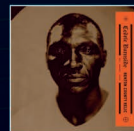
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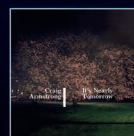
System test music



MY BABY
Mounaiki
180g vinyl



CEDRIC BURNSIDE
Benton
County Relic
Tidal



CRAIG ARMSTRONG
It's Nearly Tomorrow
24/96 FLAC

System 1 – Rega/Trilogy/PMC

SIGNALS IS A keen supporter of both Rega and PMC, and this setup combines both to great effect but in a way that was impossible until very recently. The Planar 8 needs little introduction. It was an open secret that Rega was working on a replacement for the RP8, but we were still surprised by how radical the resulting turntable it came up with was. No part of the Planar 8 is 'good enough.' Instead, it takes ideas that Rega has been working on for years and combines them into a startlingly advanced design that became our turntable of the year.

Feature comforts

In some ways, the PMC Cor was even more unexpected. Given that the company distributes two high-quality electronics brands, it might seem an odd decision to build an amplifier but the Cor scratches an itch that PMC has clearly had for some time. It is an intriguing mixture of minimalism and features not seen anywhere else – such as the remote-operated tone controls – all wrapped up in hefty casework. As the Cor does not feature a built-in phono stage, a Trilogy 907 takes on responsibility. This compact design is no less distinctive than the rest of the electronics, featuring discrete gain stages given power via a bespoke off-board supply.

Finishing the system is a pair of twenty5.23 floorstanders. This

compact, two-way design benefits from the Laminair port to control the flow of air out the speaker and an extremely low crossover between tweeter and mid/bass driver. Thanks to its transmission line, it promises to hit harder than you might expect.

Kicking off with My Baby's *Mounaiki*, it is easy to find plenty of validity to this argument. The Planar 8 fitted with the Apheta 2 cartridge is an incredibly vivid performer and delivers music without the slightest hint of 'analogue bloom' and the Trilogy very clearly subscribes to the same way of thinking. What results is music that feels incredibly unembellished – simply what is in the

The speakers start and stop with the precision of an atomic clock

groove of the record with nothing added or taken away.

Combine this with the PMC contingent, which also takes accuracy to be a watch word, and you have an almost viscerally real take on the music. What makes this system more than a well dressed selection of pro audio equipment is the unburstable joy that it manages to capture while delivering every nuance of the performance. A lot of this is down to the relationship between the Cor and

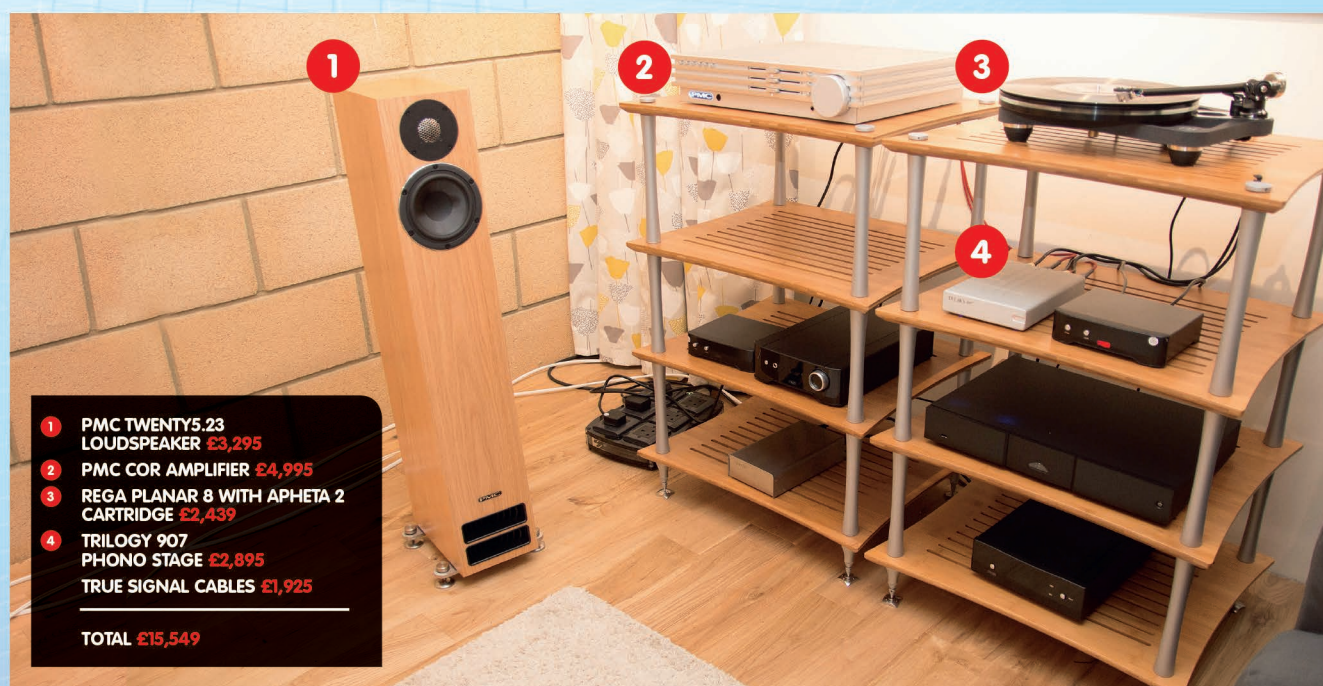
the twenty5.23. The control the amp exerts on the speakers is absolute and they start and stop with the precision of an atomic clock.

The right stuff

This means that any time signature at all, from the loping blues of Mark Lanegan and Duke Garwood's *With Animals*, to the altogether more ballistic *Monsters Exist* by Orbital, is something that this system latches onto like a metronome. With this fundamental rightness in place, the equally impressive virtues of uncannily real tonality and a truly outstanding soundstage can make their presence felt. This isn't vinyl as a nostalgic, dewy-eyed look back to the past, but vinyl as a truly outstanding medium for the enjoyment of music, utterly unforced but still delivering the depth, scale and sheer impact to rival anything in the digital domain.

What impresses the most is that while this system is incredible from the off, the longer you listen, the more its considerable virtues grow on you. Thanks to its superb levels of refinement, you can spend a long time running it at firmly anti-social levels and still be entirely unfatigued at the end of it. When you consider it is compact, beautifully made and capable of handling plenty of other sources, it's hard not to agree with Alistair that it represents impressive value for money.

PMC and Rega combine for a no-compromise musical thrill



- 1 PMC TWENTY5.23 LOUDSPEAKER £3,295
 - 2 PMC COR AMPLIFIER £4,995
 - 3 REGA PLANAR 8 WITH APHETA 2 CARTRIDGE £2,439
 - 4 TRILOGY 907 PHONO STAGE £2,895
- TRUE SIGNAL CABLES £1,925
-
- TOTAL £15,549**

System 2 – Chord Electronics/Melco/ATC

THIS SYSTEM IS not significantly more expensive than the first, but represents a completely different way that Signals can construct you a hi-fi that occupies the upper limits of what is technically possible with digital audio. Much of this is down to the input of Chord Electronics.

We have seen the DAVE DAC in previous *Dealer Systems*, but here it is joined by other members of the family. The Hugo M Scaler is designed to sit between a digital source and the DAVE and use its custom FPGA software to upscale the signal. A 16/44.1 incoming signal exits to the DAVE as 24/705.6 over two BNC cables, allowing it to focus its own heavyweight processing simply on decoding the incoming signal.

Art of noise

In this case, that signal has a head start in the form of a Melco N1ZH/2 server, which feeds the Hugo M Scaler via its digital output. This can store 6TB of material as well as provide an access point for Tidal and Qobuz. The three boxes together form a digital front end that can lay claim to being state of the art.

As if to make up for the number of boxes involved in decoding, the amplification is impressively compact. The Etude power amplifier is built

into the same chassis as the DAVE and its compact form doesn't appear to be a limiter. There is no less than 150W on tap from its unique amplifier topology (and the option to bridge it if you need more), which means there are few speakers it can't handle.

Alistair has opted to finish the system with one of his favourite speakers, the ATC SCM40. The largest member of the SCM family, this three-way design has some fixed (and not inconsequential) requirements about the amount of power that it needs to work, but provided those are met it proves to be an incredibly capable speaker.

In fact, 'incredibly capable' is a neat two-word summary for precisely how this system performs. The most important single aspect of this is that none of the technology at work makes its presence felt. In fact there are times when this setup sounds smoother and warmer than the previous turntable-fronted one. Initially selecting the wonderful *Benton County Relic* by Cedric Burnside on Tidal, it responds with a truly outstanding sense of immediacy. This is a simple recording and it is effortlessly unpacked into a rock-solid three-dimensional soundstage.

The sheer presence of what fills this soundstage takes a little getting used to. The combination of the ATCs dome midrange and the enormous decoding horsepower of the DAVE and Hugo M Scaler render Burnside's vocals and guitar with the sort of tangibility that doesn't so much invite the suspension of disbelief as demand it. Close your eyes and Burnside is utterly and unambiguously there.

The Etude also plays a pivotal role here. The grip it exerts on the ATC is

outstanding and it ensures that the truly astonishing bass response that this speaker is capable of is in full effect. The intoxicating flowing *Song Of The Stars* by Dead Can Dance is delivered with the deep, almost tribal drumming that underpins it neatly bridging the gap between audible and subsonic and doing so without ever letting up on the incredible speed it possesses.

Easy peasy

Perhaps the most impressive feat of all is how easy this system makes the business of doing this look. It is only when I listen back to music I played on it on other systems in the following days that I realise how much fine detail and nuance this system finds in everything you play on it and how effortlessly it works this into the presentation. Aided by the bulletproof stability of the Melco and its operating system and the utterly linear volume control of the DAVE, and you have a system that manages the unlikely pairing of being utterly painless to use while totally engrossing to listen to. Only the promise of greater things lures me on to the final offering of the day.



1	ATC SCM40 LOUDSPEAKER	£3,250
2	CHORD DAVE DAC	£8,499
3	CHORD HUGO M SCALER	£3,495
4	MELCO N1ZH/2 SERVER	£4,750
5	CHORD ETUDE POWER AMP	£3,999
TRUE SIGNAL SILVER ULTIMATE 4MM PLUG-TO-4MM PLUG 2M PAIR		£825
TRUE SIGNAL TRUE PHASE SILVER ULTIMATE BALANCED XLR MALE-TO-XLR FEMALE 1M		£1,695
TOTAL		£26,513

**A technological
masterclass
that also
delivers
musically**



System 3 – Melco/Naim/PMC

MORE THAN JUST a final flourish, our last system is representative of the equipment that Alistair felt the old premises was unable to do justice to and why he has sought out this one.

The PMC Fact Fenestria is never going to vanish into anything smaller than the Mojave Desert. It looks extraordinary, but every detail is there for a reason. The inert metal buttress that supports the tweeter and midrange is sandwiched between the four 165mm bass drivers with two transmission lines. The curved anti-resonance panels also serve to add an element of heft to your perception of it and further accentuates the visual drama.

Personal statement

Against this, the Naim Statement is almost self effacing. The details of the three slender towers – one containing the preamp and the others a mono power amp – are simply gorgeous. The 764W of power (one horsepower should you be wondering why such a seemingly arbitrary number has been chosen) is considered enough to encourage most speakers to do what it wants.

The front end is also digital and takes us further up the Melco chain to the N1ZS/2A server, which further improves the already comprehensive

spec of the N1ZH/2A and switches to solid-state drives for storage. This drives the new flagship Naim ND 555 streamer with two 555 PS DR power supplies. Despite being the ultimate expression of Naim digital, you still get AirPlay, Bluetooth and all the other convenience features of the ND5 XS 2.

You might imagine that a high-on 2m-tall speaker being driven by a horsepower's worth of grunt would be all about the sort of scale and impact normally associated with Glastonbury, but with Craig Armstrong's *Crash* the effortlessness and transparency is what grabs you first. The Fenestria is one of a very small number of speakers that image with laser precision and then all but vanish from the soundstage.

The Naim contingent wields its tremendous output with a surprising amount of delicacy when it needs to. The deceptively simple *Consequence Of Sound* by Regina Spektor is rendered with the scale it needs rather than the full force of what is available and sounds spellbinding as a result. Like all great digital, the ND 555 and Melco never so much as hint at the huge amount of processing going on, they simply deliver music as naturally as if it were by the artist themselves.

Of course, you can't spend time in the company of a system that boasts specifications like this and not let it

off the leash. A final invigorating blast through Scratch Massive's *Communion* at firmly anti-social levels is to experience the reality of power corrupting absolutely.

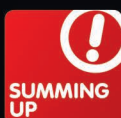
Primal scream

The Fenestria might run an electrostatic close for imaging and delicacy, but it will also deliver a bassline with the sort of impact that hits you on a primal level. There is a point where hi-fi ends and the visceral experience of music as a palpable force begins and, as you might expect, it is usually the preserve of live events. This is a system that delivers it domestically along with everything else that a high-end, two-channel system might be expected to. As a demo of what the high-end is capable of and what Signal's new premises can handle, it proves irresistible.

An astonishing demonstration of just what high-end audio can deliver



- 1 PMC FACT FENESTRIA LOUDSPEAKERS £45,000
- 2 NAIM STATEMENT PREAMP/MONO POWER AMPS £61,999
- 3 NAIM ND 555 NETWORK PLAYER £12,999
- 4 MELCO N1ZS/2A SERVER £8,750
- 5 2 X NAIM 555 PS DR POWER SUPPLIES £6,999
- 2 X NAIM STATEMENT POWER AMPLIFIER £53,999
- SUPER LUMINA INTERCONNECT AND SPEAKER CABLE £11,025
- TOTAL £200,771**



Moving a successful business is always a risky undertaking and, given how much I enjoyed Signals' original premises, I embarked on this trip with a little trepidation. I shouldn't have worried, though. Alistair has made his distinctive new digs very much his own. The smaller

listening rooms behave in a manner very similar to domestic lounges, while the main space is able to give high end the space it requires but many retail spaces can struggle to supply.

No less importantly, it is business as usual for all the other Signals virtues.

Alistair and Andy certainly know their portfolio inside out and they use this knowledge to create systems that are far greater than the sum of their already superb parts. Signals now has a little more space to breathe, and the results of this are hugely impressive.