

year book  
twenty twenty one

signals  
hi-fi for grown-ups



# Who?

If this is your first encounter with Signals, here is a potted history. My Name is Alastair Gardner and it's all my fault. Boyhood ambition, (fairly early) mid-life crisis and all that.

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.

Andy Heavens joined the business ten years later and, in 2006, he became a director. Our little operation was based in my home until 2017. By then, it had already more than outgrown the space available.

In summer 2015, we spotted a 1993 church for sale in Trimley. By 2016 it was ours and, after the usual delays of

planning etc., we modified the building, moving in for spring 2017. We opened on May the fourth, obviously :)

Mick Dann joined the team at the end of 2019 bringing computer network experience along with a decent pair of ears and, let's just say, a different taste in music.

Twenty seven years have now elapsed and I guess we will stick with it. Our greatest issue is accommodating all the audio equipment that we have here. It feels like we've outgrown the space all over again!

Our company ethos is straightforward and constant:

We want our customers to buy products rather than be sold them.

As for products, we major on two channel stereo replay and cover wide range of price levels. We occasionally sell and install the better Sony projectors and hold some Anthem AV equipment for demonstration.



Andy



Alastair



Mick

# What?

Over the years, it has become a signals tradition to produce some sort of annual newsletter, published around Christmas / new year. Just like us, it has expended over time into this rambling booklet.

One aspect of our operation that I had never really considered is just how social our business had become. The gatherings, the open days and shows were obvious points of contact. Better than that, though, was a feeling that St Cecilia's House had become a sort of drop in centre for music buffs. That some could be fairly well heeled and might buy from us was a happy coincidence.

Writing this brings home to me, too, just how much audio equipment we seem to be amassing and that some of it now goes clean over my head. All hail the technical skills of Andy and Mick and those of the very supportive manufacturers and distributors with whom we work.

It's fine and dandy to have new and exciting products but it's utterly imperative that consistency, reliability and longevity is part of the deal too, and good support is a crucial part of this.

2020 might be ending in tiers but has been a remarkably busy year for us. This has been both in terms of new sales, upgrades and the need for ongoing support. Whether it be networked audio or good old analogue, problem solving is part of our brief.

So ... anything new? Despite the preceding waffle, yes! Japanese high end brand Accuphase was added to our portfolio in December 2019. Definitely one of our better decisions.

In March, we were talking to another oriental brand, Auralic. Covid rather got in the way of getting to try things out but we've had experience of their products in the past so knew a fair amount of what to expect and ended up ordering blind. Or, more accurately, deaf.

More on this and other brands on the following pages. Finally big thanks to all the lovely customers who have kept us afloat and in coffee.

And for the coffee, thanks to Nicholas, the local customer-cum-artisan roaster and semi-retired physicist who supplies and roasts the beans.

# AURALiC

inspire the music



Any notion that China is simply the assembly point for western know-how, was laid to rest some time ago when Oppo brought their own cutting edge technology to video replay. A high end ultra high quality creative Chinese brand is not such an outlandish idea and Auralic products (beautifully made, sonically exceptional and functionally terrific) provide further proof.

A local customer had bought along some previous generation Auralic products a few years ago and, in using them whilst looking for suitable partnering equipment, we developed a grudging respect.

Auralic have their own quite idiosyncratic ideas and you have to adapt to their way of thinking, but the products play music with spirit and engagement and offer seamless control.

The range starts with the Altair G1, a streaming DAC and Aries G1, a streaming transporter. The latter needs a DAC to function and the former can be used as it is but sounds better when running to the DAC. Or maybe a Chord one. Confused yet? :)

This then repeats with the Vega G2.1 streaming DAC and Aries G2.1 transporter. These have proved sufficiently impressive for us to (a) sell some, and (b) be acquiring the full set. There is a high end clock that we have yet to try and a scaler too. So far, the 'ladder' has made perfect sense and the higher end products justify themselves by offering a significant uplifts in performance.

The only potential issue looming is Brexit. All distribution in Europe is through Germany and we buy directly from there on an individual basis.

# audioquest

Here we have a very long-standing cable brand with a significant heritage. Some time ago, they were synonymous with a laid back presentation. Times have definitely changed.

Audioquest has been lurking in the background a little but seems to have become our default brand for Ethernet RJ45 leads, some USB ones, a few analogue interconnect and even some speaker cables.

By and large, we've learned to avoid talking too much about cables largely because what they sound like is so often dependent on what they are being used with.

For Ethernet, we've not spotted any differences in behaviour depending on brand, so feel very relaxed about simply recommending their wires.

Our only issue is with the very highest-end ones, which seemed somehow over refined, perhaps leading towards the slightly tame and relaxed character mentioned at the beginning. This is all taste and opinion.

Cinnamon and, particularly, Vodka do a wonderful job with Ethernet duties, doing serious harm to the 'digits are just digits' viewpoint.

The Rocket speaker cables are excellent with Rega in particular and the HDMI ones with Auralic.

We are quite power conditioner-phobic (amazing when you put them in, even better when you take them out) but have run into very impressive results with an Audioquest Niagara conditioner and (one) of the power leads with a Chord and ATC active system.





2020 saw the arrival of two new Linn Majik components: the new Krane Tonearm for the Majik LP12 and the completely redesigned Majik DSM all in one audio system. All of this was overshadowed by the new Karousel bearing for the LP12 turntable. See next page.

This upgrade has landed extremely well with the Linneratti. Other than having a purchase price, it seems to be devoid of downside and simply opens up the turntable, regardless of specification, to a higher level of musicality, dynamics, expression and resolution. Unsurprisingly, it has sold very well, keeping Andy busy through what has been a most peculiar year

So what's with this Krane? It's no secret that the Majik arm was supplied by Jelco in Japan or that, sadly, Jelco fell victim to the financial impact of coronavirus, forcing Linn to forge a new alliance. This time it's with Clearaudio in Germany. Frustratingly for Linn, they had just taken a whole host of publicity shots of the Majik LP12 with the previous generation arm in place. See below for a good example! The new Krane looks more photogenic and is promised to be better too.

The new Majik DSM is a most welcome arrival. I hardly dare I say it, but it's unfamiliarly spirited. Physically, it resembles the Selekt DSM, but without the centrally located control / display knob of the latter. Functionality is broadly similar too. It's a musically enjoyable companion and quite aggressively priced too. During 2020 Linn have been struggling to keep up with demand.

This has been constant theme with so many manufacturers. Majik DSM has an excellent moving magnet and moving coil phono stage, HDMI inputs and plenty power. What's not to like?





There are many upgrades to the classic LPI2 and this year we have seen an update on the Cirkus bearing that has been around for decades.

Named **Karousel**, this bearing is totally different in design. The point of contact to the sub chassis is with a single nut over a thread, the old cirkus used 3 bolts to secure it.

Generating less noise and less 'hash' it sounds more dynamic than before, giving more life to well known recordings.

The rest of the Linn upgrades are also impressive: **Lingo4** borrows ideas from the much more expensive **Radikal**. With the platter feedback keeping speed stable, this is another addition that gives a much lower noise floor, better timing and stability. The **Radikal** does still take things further though.

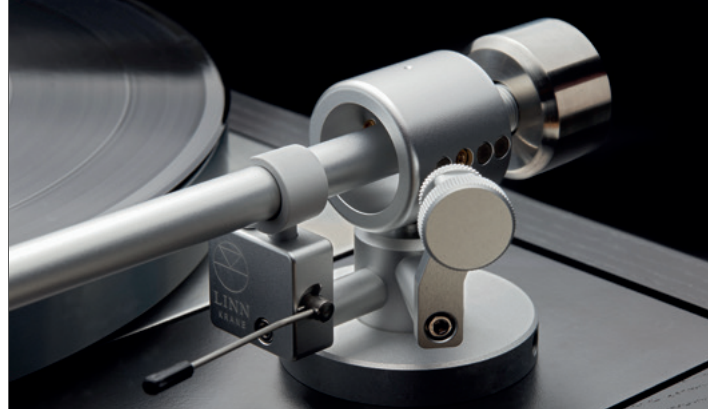
Add in the newer sub chassis with better strength and rigidity there are some compelling ways to upgrade. The mid range **Kore** uses an aluminium arm board similar to the **Keel** and this is bonded to the standard Sub chassis to improve rigidity. Of course, it is still the one piece **Keel** which offers the very best performance.

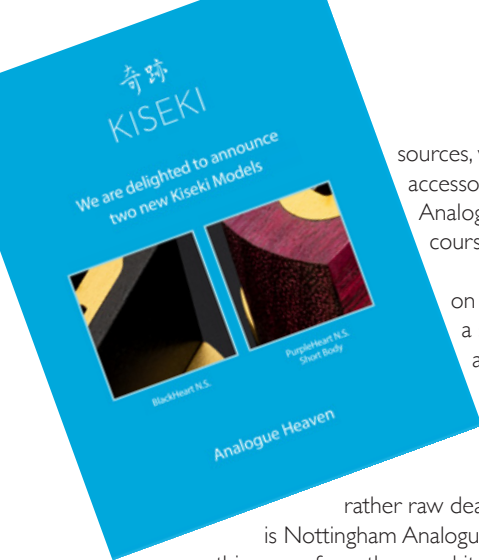
We can service and upgrade any LPI2 and can check and guide you in the right direction.

We supply cartridges from **Dynavector**, **Lyra**, **Kiseki**, **Ortofon** and, now, **Audio Technica**.

The entry MM carts such as the 95e are excellent for that first step up on a Rega P2 or 3, but things start to get interesting at the 540 level and above. Each model can feature a better stylus profile and many can be upgraded just by adding a replacement stylus. We also have a range of the MC offerings such as the OC9 and 33EV, both of which work well in the LPI2.

A special mention for the new **Dynavector I7DX**. It's proving to be an excellent match for the LPI2 too.





Remaining with analogue sources, we also stock turntables and accessories from Project, Nottingham Analogue, Mobile Fidelity and, of course, Rega.

For cartridges, as mentioned on the previous page, we have a sizeable collection of options and most are held on site for demonstration. Some recent arrivals from Kiseki have broadened the range further. One brand that has had a

rather raw deal from us in recent years is Nottingham Analogue. The issue is the lack of anything new from them and it turns out that 'new' is usually what drives interest.

Who knew? :)

It is enlightening, though, to listen to them with fresh ears and we recently renewed our demonstration Ace Space Deck. We have the Dais too and both Ace Space and Ace Anna arms, the heavy kit and Wave Mechanic power supply. Excellent with both Lyra and Kiseki.



# rega

Rega keep rolling from strength to strength. They've even taken on new staff during the Covid crisis to help keep pace with unprecedented demand. There has been significant gentrification, of the range over the last few years, what with new reference components but there is something for the paupers too.

So let's start there.

Here is the Rega System One. It comprises the Planar One turntable with the



new compact

los amplifier and Kite loudspeakers.

System One was shown at the Bristol HiFi show in February 2019 and external factors not unrelated to Covid have delayed its arrival. Now due early 2021 at a price of £999 including cables.

The los started shipping in summer 2020 and we have some in stock. Its a great little low cost amplifier that is getting stellar reviews, but it does not instantly put the larger Brio into an awkward place either. We find that people tend to be willing to spend a little more if the gains are worthwhile. So far, this judgement has led to the Brio selling better than los with the larger Elex-R doing very nicely.



Rega are, of course, most famous for their turntables and their very latest is the stunning, skeletal Planar 10 which is available with or without one of several well priced bundle deals with Rega cartridges. It looks lovely but definitely works best with the belt and platter that are missing in the picture here.

The Apheta MC cartridge has graduated to Apheta 3 and it's better than 2 in much the same way that the 2 was over the original, i.e. richer, more refined, with a larger soundstage. More solid and dynamic too.

The Aphelion 2 pictured at the bottom of the page is Rega's latest and finest MC cartridge. It's an extremely compelling proposition and, at £3149 (at time of writing) it certainly ought to be!

Since the last newsletter was produced, we have received the Aethos amplifier. An enigmatic angled shot of it is gracing the front cover.

Sonically, Aethos is chalk to the Osiris' cheese. In terms of internal design, it has more in common with the Elex-R yet has a larger toroidal transformer than the much chunkier and far more expensive Osiris. If you're wondering, the Elicit and Osiris are apparently the most closely related.

The line level only Aethos is an extremely capable performer, more than happy to drive demanding loudspeakers.

We have almost the entire Rega range on demonstration, although space constraints have sometimes limited the number of loudspeakers. The lower priced electronics and turntables up to Planar 3 level are not only available for audition but usually held in stock. If we should run out, next day supply from Rega is rarely an issue.





Chord Electronics Ltd.

Chord are synonymous with ultra clever digital, especially DAC, technology and our sales of them reflect this.

Star products over the past year or so have been the entry level Qutest DAC, the Hugo TT2 and Hugo M Scaler. This last device is in many ways the most intriguing.

The M Scaler brings 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 transport and scaler, the more modestly priced M Scaler was awaited with some excitement. More recently, the supply of components for Blu II have become sufficiently scarce for Chord to have had to cease production.

We gather that Chord will still be able to repair / support these, but it would probably make sense for us to sell our demo unit.

A couple of years ago, Chord launched the compact, relatively affordable but very high performance Étude power amplifier. It's in similar casework to the Dave DAC and Prima preamp and was the first Chord product to have an entirely new power amplifier design. This presaged the new Ultima series, an example of which is looming top left.

In the heady days of summer 2019, before Covid if you recall, we had a number of events at St Cecilia's. One of the more memorable ones was to launch the £22k per pair Ultima 3 mono-bloc power amplifiers.

We used a Melco front end, Dave with Hugo M Scaler and CPA 5000 preamp. The new Ultima Pre was not yet available and we know how relevant this is to driving the power amps properly.

We have become used to some very powerful amplifiers running into accommodating loudspeakers and, occasionally, we have let things rip in our mini concert hall central listening space. The 7m apex allows things to breathe, we find :)

All the same, these are very special. The clarity, openness and utter dynamic freedom was deeply memorable. We had listeners there who 'detest digital' yet were utterly spellbound. Quite an achievement when you consider how loud it was.

We ordered our demo Ultima 3s in black and without the 'oil rig' legs. They're terrific, even if our preamp is silver. Doh!

# MELCO

At first sight, these are simply high quality network drives. They have their roots with 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 N1Zh and N1Zs 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. 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 of other vendors. Full functionality, including access to radio and online services such as Qobuz is straightforward.

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, simply adding a DAC actually makes for a surprisingly cost effective high end streaming solution.

Suitable DACs are available from Rega (Saturn and Isis),



Chord and, now, Accuphase. See that Champagne gold coloured N10 above? It's no accident!

Ripping CDs into the Melco can be accomplished by plugging any USB laptop style CD drive into one of the USB ports. One of the more surprising discoveries was that Melco's posh, heavy and clearly overpriced D100 CD drive actually delivers 'rips' that are discernibly better than those from a 'cooking' drive.

There has been an ongoing battle with Melco who wanted to make silver boxes for customers who always want black. Suddenly, celebrating their 45th anniversary, the opportunity came for a special limited edition (of 50) gold coloured ones.

Everything else, their S100 switch, D100 ripper and E100 extension drive, come only in black or silver.

As always seems to end up being the case, we have the entire range on demonstration.

The new EX software is a success. It requires explanation too wordy for here. In standard or limited edition, that analogue power-supplied two box N10 pictured above is one of our favourites.

Oh yes, I should mention that the excellent Singapore built Plixir power supplies do great things with the N100, S100, D100 and E100. Again, they are all on site and home trials are encouraged. We should even have a version for Chord's scaler and DACs.

A collection of Innuos Zen MkIII Music Servers, including a large Zen MkIII, a smaller Zen Mini, and a Zenith, all in a dark, minimalist design. A smartphone displaying a music library is also visible next to the Zen MkIII.

innuos

**ZEN MkIII**  
Music Servers

Powered by innuOS

Innuos music ripper / server / players are now in their third generation. These are the most affordable best featured devices of this type that we stock and the sub £1000 Zen Mini has become a staple for Naim Uniti Atom buyers who want to keep costs in check. Adding the power supply upgrade is very worthwhile, by the way.

Innuos are to be applauded for their software design too. These are the most straightforward, least demanding music servers that we supply.

The range extends from Zen Mini, through Zen to Zenith. At each level, there are various sizes of storage and it culminates in SSD storage in the Zenith. Actually, there is a Statement two box server above Zenith.

All can run Roon software directly and this has been a very popular feature for those who prefer to organise their music in this way.

For us, the most popular role for the Innuos servers has been as a digital store for a Chord DAC, into Quad amplifiers with USB digital and with Rega's Saturn CD / DAC. In this situation, with a USB connection, the DAC and server combine into a single device that amalgamates music storage and control with the functionality of a dedicated music streamer.

This sounds more complex than it actually is, so a hands-on demonstration is ideal.



Of all the brands under the banner of International Audio Group, Quad strikes us as the one that maintains its heritage DNA most effectively. Their amplification still has the reassuring build quality, warm yet natural tonal balance and expansive sound stage. In the Artera series, the thoughtful, subtle tone control adjustments are a continuation of the tilt and filter slope controls of the past.

The entry level amplifier, Vena II, has analogue and digital inputs, an MM phono stage and comes in casework redolent of the Quad II. It's one of the more interesting candidates at the £600 ish price level. As it happens, we have the other two; Audiolab 6000A and Rega Brio, and will happily talk you through the merits of them all.

Further up the ladder, comes the Artera series. Artera Solus is an all in one system with amplifier and CD replay built in. Both Solus and Vena can be supplied with in-built DTS Play-Fi streaming. In truth, the DTS system is a little bit 'my first streamer and its inability to play gaplessly is most likely to offend classical listeners. The very people most likely to buy Quad, in fact. Online music streaming is unaffected by this issue, thankfully, as is internet radio, so it's not a terrible outcome.

Further up the ladder, the Artera Play+ CD Player cum DAC cum preamp and more purist Artera Pre, a straightforward analogue pre-amplifier, do a fine job of driving the Artera Stereo power amplifier.

This is an excellent amplifier combo that holds its head high in quite expensive company. As outlined at the beginning, it's more suited to classical or 'natural' recordings with its large sound stage, fine resolution and natural balance. Power output is substantial but it's not, perhaps, seeking to introduce you to the most intricate workings of the rhythm section. It is a fine thing all the same.



The USB DACs in the Vena, Solus and Play+ give another opportunity for streaming. You can either use an external third party streaming 'engine' or add an Innuos or Melco ripper store. See the previous pages for details.

Beyond the electronics, we have a smattering of Quad's loudspeakers and their new and rather excellent ERA-I headphones.

I mentioned Audiolab back there. This is sister brand from IAG and we have found ourselves carrying a reasonable cross-section of their range too.

Their 6000N network player is also a DTS Play-Fi device but it has the handy provision of direct buttons on the front panel for saved internet radio stations. This simple feature has sold it to many!





You may spot the reference on the right hand page to Accuphase being Japanese audio royalty. How fitting, therefore, that this should be the one brand we've taken on in recent years for which we actively created space. The red carpet, though, was possibly a little OTT.

We've been hankering after a thoroughly complete compromise-free range of integrated amplifiers for some time and finding Accuphase was our little bit of manna from heaven.

The range encompasses five integrated amplifiers, the E-650 on the right being the second largest. We tried the rather massive E-800 too. We found it a little intimidating in terms of physical bulk and mass and decided to try the pre-power combo of C-2150 and A-48 (pictured left). The power amp is essentially the one lifted from the E-800 but the pre-amplifier is significantly ahead of what comes in the integrated amplifier.

The upshot is that we found ourselves adding a pre-power combo to our demonstration portfolio from a brand chosen for integrated amps. All the amplifiers are awash with features. The very things pared away from most European products in the search for audio purity.

The irony here is that, if you were searching out an amplifier that sounds 'pure' it could very easily be an Accuphase.

The range is split between the (more expensive) Class A products and, well, the slightly less royal ones. The output power given for the E-650 is 30 watts per channel. It sounds nowhere near this



# INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER OF THE YEAR, OVER £10,000 Accuphase E-650

restricted, though. The 30 watts into 8 ohms turns into 60 into 4 ohms and 120 into 2. The reality is that this sounds like a properly powerful amplifier. Similarly the more gutsy A-48 and E-800. Larger models are available. All are physically heavy, even the pre-amps.

There are four pre-amps, with the entry level C-2150 and range-topping C-3900 being the newest. We've played with the over £31k C-3900 and it's special enough for the price not to seem silly.

For the bulk of the range, the pre-amps and amplifiers have slots that can accommodate phono and / or DAC boards. By C-3900 level, the phono stage has to be wholly external, but Accuphase do make a very nice one.

Excellent too, are the CD player / DACs. There were five in the range but the entry D-430 that we have has just been rendered obsolete with the new model a little way off. There are some digital processors too and active crossovers. Kudos have already spotted this!

If you're looking for what Accuphase is most like, it's Naim. The two brands share a lot in their ability to get under the skin of the music and allow the interplays, dynamics, the life, to shine through. They are not the same, though. Both are utterly valid.

Where there does seem to be an uncanny similarity is in the cables, and even support furniture, that suit them. I'm ignoring the small matter of DIN plugs here, of course. Powerline mains leads, the MusicWorks mains blocks, even Super Lumina. All is valid. A Polish cable brand called Audiomica is proving very good with Accuphase too.

“There's as much fine detail as you could wish for, including those vital ambience cues. It's not a smooth, airbrushed presentation – any beauty is entirely down to the music.”

Accuphase is Japanese Audio Royalty, and its range of integrated amplifiers are among the most highly-prized models money can buy. The 30W Class A Accuphase E-650 might not seem at first to be the kind of product that would engender this kind of loyal following among integrated amp fans, but the company's 'to die for' engineering, build and range of matching components all serve to make this amp the stuff of legend even before it arrived on the audio scene.

Legends can sometimes be based on myth, and the myth surrounding Accuphase is that it makes a 'house' sound that is 'warm' and 'soft'. Something Steve Dickinson was keen to debunk in his review, "these are just reflections of the true sounds of the instruments, it's not any kind of euphonic coloration. I think, rather, that it's less of a 'house' sound, and more about the form of experience." He continued, "there's as much fine detail as you could wish for, including those vital ambience cues. It's not a smooth, airbrushed presentation – any beauty is entirely down to the music. Unlike some more analytical amplifiers, detail isn't pushed at you for its own sake; it is layered but not separated or highlighted, so the Accuphase seems to trigger the 'music appreciation' part of my brain more than the 'music analytical' part." and concluded by saying, "There's just you, and the music. It's not so much transparent as invisible." ✦

Reviewed in Issue 185





If much of what follows here appears to be written in code, I apologise. Naim are a high end audio brand located in Salisbury, Wilts. Their products are musical and addictive. Do you need more?

This is our mainstay brand. We took them on roughly ten years after Signals started and we've never looked back. Indeed, it could be argued that Naim was the making of us.

We now have an example of everything that they make, with multiples of most of the power amplifiers and power supplies. The upshot is that we've been able to demonstrate active systems with 3 x NAP 500 and fronted by either NAC 552 or Statement S1 pre-amplifiers. We have the Statement S1 pre and S1 power amplifiers on site. Not a lot of people do this!

Our egos were suitably inflated back in the summer of 2019 when we managed to tempt design director Steve Sells to Signals Towers to explain the inner workings of the Statement pre and power amps (that he designed) to a select band of our customers.

Oh my! Remember open days and events? These days will come again, I'm sure.

In common with many others in the 'serious' audio industry, Naim have had a very busy year: November 2020 was apparently a record month. Supply has been decidedly patchy, though, with parts shortages all through 2020 and we have seen merit in buying stock when we can. The result of this is that we've been able to supply Supernait 3, Supercap DRs, PS 555 DRs, various pre and power amplifiers and even the odd streamer from stock.

This has become our way of working with Uniti products

since 2018, so it no longer seems odd. Anyway, who actually needs a cinema room? ;)

Years after us putting the S1 pre and power on demonstration, the Statement pre-amp has suddenly become an object of interest. It's great to see buyers taking the plunge into this level of audio investment. At 140 kg, the S1 needs bodies to manoeuvre it. How frustrating it was to have two arrive on the very day that lock-down part one was announced. A long delay was the only answer, but we managed in the end.

The Naim streamers are proving to be hot products. ND5XS2 has won a few hearts, the NDX 2 is a serious step up but the ND555 is pure musical seduction. Particularly if you can run to a brace of 555 power supplies.

The speed with which customers have clambered the Naim 'ladder' never ceases to amaze us. It's not dissatisfaction but a desire for **more**. The Unitis have proved to be an end in themselves for many and a gateway drug for others. Novas have been traded for Supernait 3s with NDX2s and the Supernait for 282 / Supercap 300 all in the space of two years.

If you're looking for trends, it's the willingness by some to abandon CD altogether. As CD replay gave way to playing them indirectly by ripping discs to the Uniti Core or other music servers the discs were still relevant. These days, many are choosing to simply rely on Qobuz, Tidal or even Spotify for all their music.

Pictures on the right clockwise from top.

- 1) Close-up of active system Statement preamp, 3 x NAP500 system driving Kudos Titan 808s.
- 2) Similar system with 552 Pre
- 3) Steve Sells with some Dynaudios full Statement system out of shot.
- 4) Active 552 / 300 system with Kudos Titan 707







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 greater power with less distortion at a higher sound pressure level than any other on the market.

For many years, they have championed fully active loudspeakers with cross-over and power amplification handled in modules mounted in the loudspeaker cabinet or externally for the largest speakers.

This continues to this day and it seems to be becoming an increasingly popular option. Reduced box count is very appealing. On top of that, one of the truths of manufacture is that the more you can consolidate items, the better value they become. Casework and cabinetry is a large part of the cost.

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

The SCM40 passive floor-standing speaker is a bargain at £3750 and the active one does an awful lot for £6800.

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.

We finally managed to wrestle up some room for a pair of SCM 50 actives and have the means to demonstrate them in both active and passive form.

Ours are in Pippy Oak veneer and look far less intimidating than this one on the right. The grilles are designed into the sound, so covering them up is fine. Pleased to report that they are really rather wonderful. Definitely better than the ones I had twenty years ago.

Tower versions are available, indeed the variants are innumerable. We've had the SCM 100A in the past, and they are the better speaker; but the 50 is a good balance of size, performance and price.





# DYNAUDIO

We started selling Dynaudio in 2017 not long after we moved to St Cecilia's House. Bill Livingston is either a very persuasive character or they're really good products. I've a feeling that Bill would be happier with the latter reason than the former and this is certainly how we see it. These are very good products.

Using high tech drivers in sometimes quite radical cabinet designs made from cutting edge materials and finished with very modern surfaces has become the Dynaudio way. There is a downside and the Dynaudio sound may well be more agreeable to some listeners than the striking aesthetics.

Factor in the perennial success of products from other manufacturers that still look just as they did decades ago, step forward, ATC, Falcon, Russell K and plenty more, and you can see the argument for the Heritage Classic on the right.

Drive units are at the bleeding edge of technology and from the Confidence series. Cabinetry, though, is utterly old school, with damped walls and heavy construction. Everything is done in-house in Denmark and the standard of finishing utterly stellar. Choice is limited to American Walnut.

They sound great too with an 'easy' nature that's hard to quantify but very enjoyable to listen to for hours. Best you meet them before they sell out!

Beyond this, we have all the Evokes, new Contour i series and Confidence on demonstration and the Special 40s that hooked us in the first place. All are extremely competitive. Modern too.

# Old's cool.

The new Dynaudio Heritage Special.  
Classic premium hi-fi, handmade with love in Denmark.



Listen to craftsmanship. Listen to real wood. Listen to true, state-of-the-art, hand-built tweeters and woofers. To more than 2000 hours of devoted R&D. To the depths of your record collection. Listen to what you love.

'Heritage Special' isn't just a name. It's a salute to traditional high-performance Danish audio design, featuring Dynaudio's now-legendary materials, technologies and performance.

Each of the 2500 limited-edition pairs is unique. And they're brimming with the spirit (and flodebolle-filled boldness) that made the Dynaudio name. Run your fingers over the hand-finished American Walnut veneer. Pause at the groove around the baffle (you'll remember it from our speakers that you coveted years ago). Then play some music and rock your socks off.

It isn't for everyone. But that's OK. We made it for you.



Focal are Naim Audio's sister brand under the ownership of Vervent Audio Group. Over the last few years, higher end products, specifically Utopia have been updated to dovetail more completely with the Naim electronics. The bulk of the other designs now for sale have been voiced with Naim in mind from the outset.

We have examples of the Sopra, Aria, Chora and Kanta range on demonstration. All of these have matching centre channel speakers, by the way.

The most recent is the Chora range which launched in late 2019. It replaces Chorus and crunches hard on the toes of Aria. It is also impressive value for money. It's entirely made in France too.

Super clean styling is by Naim's casework designer, Simon Matthews and the Chora 826 floor-stander is, we feel, quite special at the price-point. All are very efficient with both the 816 and 826 floor-standers happy to work fairly close to boundaries and in a wide range of room sizes. There is something rather old school Naim-like about their behaviour.

We often encounter people trying to squeeze large powerful systems into small rooms and the converse is true too. It's good to be able to report that a Uniti Atom and a pair of Chora 816s will happily fill our 7m barn-like space to a semblance of 'party' listening levels.



We were there pretty much for the birth of Kudos. Guess, it could have been worse ...! We've stuck with the brand and have the entire Titan series on demonstration. The Cardea series too. Uniquely, the entire Kudos range can now be driven in active configuration, with power amplifiers connected directly to the drivers. We have now equipped ourselves with Naim SNAXO crossovers, various power supplies and multiple power amplifiers to allow us to demonstrate this very feature.

It's worth the effort too. Active results from Kudos have proved to be genuinely stellar:

With Linn, it's a comparatively simple matter of using their digital crossover. With Naim, as outlined above, it's a little more involved!

Memorably, the Titan 505s arrived at the same time as the Chord Étude power amp. All needed running in and, using the Dave DAC straight into Étude with the compact 505s made for a startlingly good, simple (passive) system. With a stand-alone active crossover now available from Exposure, even the Chords can theoretically be active.

We've had greatest success with the Titan 808, although the 606s seem to be the ones hitting the spot currently. We've noticed a very strong emotional bond between customers and their Kudos speakers.

Hand crafted UK built products, still hold great appeal. It makes sense too, the standard of build and quality of drivers and components here is top notch. These are for the long game!





# Russell K.

Dunstable based Russell K have been making loudspeakers that make us smile for five or six years now, although Russell Kauffman, the man behind them, 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 is now in SE form. It is available as a stand-alone model or as an upgrade for existing Red 150 owners.

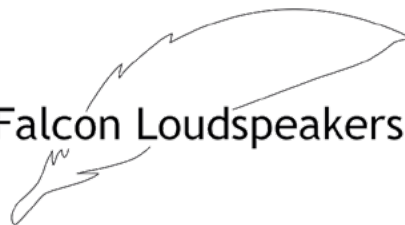
On site, we have Red 50 and Red 100 stand-mounts and Red 120 and 150 floor-standers along with rather delayed 150 SE is now with us.

Brexit and Covid have conspired to make life complicated for Russell K and both production and cabinet construction has moved from Poland to the UK. Now using the same UK cabinet company as just about everyone else, cabinet quality is now much

better. Prices have risen, though and, to assuage this, there is a new black texture painted version of all but the 150 SE.

Imaginatively, these are called the Black 50, 100 etc.

## Falcon Loudspeakers



Falcon were founded in 1972 by Malcolm Jones, the first Chief Design Engineer at KEF. They are known for quality, and innovation together with peerless attention to detail.

Falcon has been associated with the BBC LS3/5a for many years, and their Classic LS3/5a is the only authentic LS3/5a to meet BBC's original 1976 specification.

To sum up, these are fairly expensive and unapologetically 'retro'. These overpriced tiddlers have sold in numbers that we could never have anticipated. With on site demonstration becoming rarer or not happening at all during the lock-down periods, it has become evident that people needed to be introduced to the 3/5A. They rarely seek them out.

Falcon manufacture the drivers in-house in short runs and the quality is clearly top notch. They are disproportionately full range, dynamic, coherent and very musical.

A recent development is the new gold badge version. Everything is the same except that all the crossover components are purchased within UK and Europe. They do sound more 'open' despite all the specifications being the same.

So far, there has been no change to the RRP, but there are some upward pressures. Existing speakers can be upgraded, reggraded? Costs of this are a little fluid and there are significant delays too so a conversation is best.





Few brands can name-drop like PMC.

Company founder, Peter Thomas, can draw on his years at the BBC prior to setting up PMC as well as all the connections with the recording industry forged since then.

He's terrific company, being far more modest and enthusiastic than my opening line implies. Loads of anecdotes and a vast amount of knowledge. His collection of recorded music, much of it in the form of original master tapes, is, nevertheless, legendary and he has been able to help record companies out with rare or lost recordings needed for re-release on numerous occasions.

This was true in 2020 when Rocket Records were assembling Elton John's Jewelbox. Peter came to the rescue.

PMC manufacture loudspeakers and amplification and we have a fair amount of their products on demonstration.

Bought primarily for our large central 'hall' we have the largest of the fact range ; fact fenestria. Beyond these whoppers, we also have the recently revised smaller facts and far more compact and affordable (but still high achieving) twenty5i series on demonstration.

All PMC loudspeakers use an advanced version of transmission line bass loading (ATL) and have remarkably high power handling and extended bass as a result. They are generally easy to place and easy to drive too.

Their lovely Cor amplifier continues to impress and is proving very compatible with a wide range of loudspeaker brands including the two on the left.





Naim's Mu-So Gen2 and the smaller Mu-so Qb 2 are held in stock and always available for demonstration.

The Mu-So 2 is a terrific sound bar alternative with proper bass and the ability to play music well.

Both can integrate with other Naim components to form fully fledged multi-room systems.



# REL

ACOUSTICS LTD.

Adding a (good) sub-woofer to a music system can achieve surprising things. This is in addition to the more obvious ones of finding your bags have been packed for you or that your dinner's in the cat.

Assuming domestic acceptance can be negotiated, the effect of adding some subtle but serious bass extension to an already full range system is to bring more spacial information, greater focus and clarity throughout the frequency range.

REL was formed by Richard E Lord. He was a good friend of one of our local customers and well known to another. All this despite him being from and living in Wales.

We met him on numerous occasions and 'larger than life' doesn't quite cover it. He sold the business over a decade ago and, sadly, passed away in 2017. There is a rather nice tribute to him on the REL web site.

What we can say is that his legacy appears to be in good hands and REL still make rather fine sub-woofers.

A couple of years ago, when we still thought we had room, we bought a few examples. I won't try to claim that we are world experts in the sub-woofer's art, but Rob Hunt at REL is a walking instruction manual and we've managed to get some very successful results.

On site at time of writing, we have a couple of the Limited Edition Carbon subs, S510 and T5i. Customers are reporting excellent results with a variety of electronics brands, including Accuphase, Densen and, of course, Naim.

All are brilliant for home theatre duties but their way with music is what sets them apart.

Demonstrations are always a possibility!





Meze Audio was founded in 2011 in Baia Mare, Romania. There are essentially two designs in the range. Two closed back models called 99 Neo and 99 Classic. Both are almost identical but for the material used for the body; a polymer for the Neo and machined solid Walnut for the Classic.

There is a tangible difference between them with the Classics sounding cleaner and more natural but both are remarkably good and neither have that closed-back headphone signature sound.

Both come with a carrying case, with the Neo you get a relatively short mini jack lead, with Classic, some longer, proper cables too. And a better case. Prices are £179 and £279

On the left is their flagship product, the £2799 Emyrean. This is described as the first Isodynamic Hybrid Array headphone. It's a development of the planar design. Details are on their web site but suffice it to say that these things really are pretty damned amazing. You might look like a Cyberman with them on but it's worth it!



## QUAD

Fairly recent arrivals from Quad are the excellent ERA-I planar headphones. These sub-£600 'phones are the first planar magnetic headphones from Quad, offering a frequency range of 10 to 40k Hertz. They are supplied with 2 pairs of different ear-pads (genuine and synthetic leather) for slightly different acoustics; the sound is tuned to match Quad's worldfamous ESL range of loudspeakers.



From Focal we have their top end Utopia headphones pictured on the right. Priced above the Meze Emyrean, they bring a fascinating contrast that will be as much to do with personal taste as the electronics used to drive them.

Further down the ladder, there is the excellent Clear and then, replacement for the lovely, if rather fulsome Elear, we have the closed back and quite analytical Elegia. All are on demonstration.



A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a pair of Grado SR325e headphones. The person is wearing a dark leather jacket. The headphones have a black and silver design with a mesh grille on the ear cups. The word "GRADO" is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on the left side of the image.

# GRADO

To our ears, the best sounding Grado 'phones are the lower end prestige series. SR-60e is good, SR-80e quite a lot better for a fairly minor price increase but SR-325 is the one.

Grado chose a powder-coated aluminium housing for these headphones because the added mass means smoother transitions from the lowest frequency range to the highest. You might also enjoy the authentic 60's style, which goes perfectly with skinny ties and sullen glances. The genuine top-grain leather padded head-strap is Brylcreem resistant.

The best Prestige Series Headphone, the SR325e has a new driver and cable design. The added mass from the metal housing minimizes transient distortions. With the new 8 conductor cable design you will notice superb control and stability of the upper and lower range of the frequency spectrum, with both supporting Grado's world renowned midrange. The SR325e will produce a sound that is pure Grado, with warm harmonic colours, rich full bodied vocals, excellent dynamics, and an ultra-smooth top end.

A photograph of the Stax SR-L700 Earspeaker System. It includes a black rectangular energiser unit and two large, circular electrostatic earphones. The word "STAX" is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on the right side of the image.

# STAX

After a few years break, Stax is coming back. We had a Stax SR-L700 Earspeaker System comprising SR-L700 Earspeakers and SRM-006tS Kimik Energiser and it was good. Very good.

Just as we were deciding to put it into demonstration stock, it was whisked away because there is a revision. So now we wait with bated breath. . .

For the uninitiated, Stax is a Japanese manufacturer. Its history goes back to 1938. Their first electrostatic headphones, or Earspeakers as they prefer, were made in 1960. For an electrostatic 'phone to work, it needs an energiser to power the stators. The energiser unit is therefore both a headphone amplifier and (fairly high) voltage generator.

The better Stax energisers have valve output stages and Symmetry Systems, the UK importer has been arranging for upgrades, called Kimik, for these over the years.

SR-L700 system that we tried was sort of mid range, roughly in line with the old Signature system.



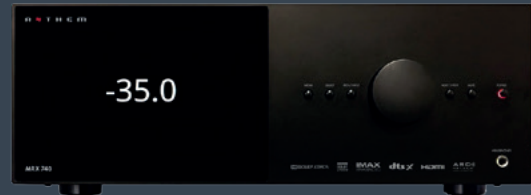
# Home Cinema Done Right!

For a proper home cinema, there is nothing to touch the drama of a darkened room and a full projected image onto a screen. For several years, now, we've been supplying Sony Projectors (they come in black or white) and Anthem AV processor / amps.

Quality is impressive, as is reliability. And goodness knows, we've been through plenty of other brands along the way.

The latest 4k Sony projectors are still at the cutting edge and their Laser projectors are almost becoming affordable! For St Cecilia's, we were considering their rather nifty ultra short-throw laser which would sit inches from and just below the screen. This would work in the large space in front of 'the wall' even with a reasonable amount of ambient light, and only be evident when in use. Once we are having events again, I suspect we will press the button.

Anthem have a new range due in early 2021, so we have put our names down for some of those too. Just thought I should mention that we can still do something in this area!





# t w e a k e r y



**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 I £599 Gaia 2 £299 Gaia 3 £199**  
Spike bases £49



Lateral CC Contact Components (see back page).  
More complex than they look and far more effective than we expected. These come in sets of three. **£450**



IsoAcoustics ZaZen turntable isolation shelf.

**ZaZen I up to 11.3 kg £199**

**ZaZen II up to 18.1 Kg £229**

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 TTPSU** (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**



The **Collaro Mat** Bizarrely effective upgrade for any turntable that we've tried it on. Special wool from special sheep!

**Red £99**

**Black Centenary Mat £120**



Equipment support is crucial part of the audio system and the impact this has cannot be overestimated. It's telling that, when testing samples out, we've found that a single Naim Uniti Nova can reveal virtually all we need to know.

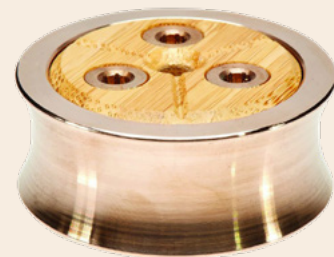
We have Naim's own Fraim and Fraim Lite, the entire Quadraspire range, Isoblu and now, Lateral, so there are plenty alternatives to play with.

Quadraspire have taken the concept into new territory by making interfaces that replicate the sound signature of their various racks. The Reference version is on the right and these are available in threes and fours.

Our remarkably diligent customers are forever experimenting and we can say that these interfaces not only 'rescue' poor sounding support furniture but continue to improve some of the better ones.

Putting these between a Naim Fraim shelf and an NDX II the other day brought unexpectedly dramatic results. Just like a serious power supply or high end cable. Work of the devil ...

## Quadraspire



Naim were one of the first to grasp the concept of system synergy and the interdependence of components. No surprise, therefore, that their cables, including the PowerLine mains lead, should dovetail magnificently. It is supplied as standard with their high end products (PowerLine Lite comes with everything else).

It is a surprise, though, to find that this high end power cable has proved to be so universally useful with other brands too. Melco, Linn, Chord and many others sound noticeably better when used with PowerLines.

Some of our more adventurous customers, who talk of exotic mains leads in the manner of fine wines have been very impressed too. In this elevated world these actually seem comparatively inexpensive.

As with many other Naim designs, these cables are more about high quality materials and mechanical decoupling than anything else and the layered design of the MusicWorks blocks (right) are an extremely good match.



We've had the MusicWorks mains blocks for some time. Their top end block, the third generation 'Ultra' G3, was a revelation. We've enthused about it but, at £999, it's not something we would expect to sell in significant numbers.

And then one of our customers wrote of their experience on the Naim forum. Suddenly a £1000 mains block is perfectly normal! The range starts at £485, by the way.

Now, here's a thing. For another £300 the Ultra block can be supplied pre-built or, for a little more, upgraded with a base layer made of a Peek / Acrylic composite. Peek is what the feet are made from but that never seemed particularly interesting.

Adding this new material, called Acouplex, does stupidly positive things to the sound quality. Peek has become rather intriguing! Designer and manufacturer Larry Ogden was telling us how he initially started manufacturing the Acouplex material as a way of making expensive peek go further. They were surprised to find the composite to actually work better for their purposes.

They chop up the peek then grind it themselves to mix with the acrylic to make the sheets. It's all far more hands-on than we had ever appreciated.

# | LATERAL |

audio stands

It's an audio cliché, but Lateral Audio Stands stemmed from a desire to make something better than was already available. Impressively, Lateral's owner, Kevin Hancock, has achieved his aim.

In terms of audio quality, we think these stands outclass many similarly priced and more expensive ones from established makers. The design is subtly unusual but very logical, with the shelves supported with lateral fixings through sturdy oak uprights. There is a naturalness and dynamic freedom about these stands that is instantly appealing.

Fundamentally, these are low-mass designs. Kevin is based in Derbyshire and he uses locally sourced solid oak, oak faced plywood and aluminium. These are hand finished in either natural wood or satin black and with alloy components anodised in black or silver. Pictured right is the Concert stand.

We have both 'Integral' and 'Concert' on demonstration. The former can be upgraded with the Concert isolation shelves which are rather tremendous.

The late 2020 arrivals were the jauntily named the CC 'Contact Components'. Oh to be there for the naming brain-storm.

Don't mock, though, these are well priced and very effective at just making things sound better. There is a CF version for use on floors too and these are used on large single shelves for chunky power amplifiers. Clever stuff.



signals  
hi-fi for grown-ups

Signals St Cecilia's House 188 High Road Trimley St Mary IP11 0SS 01394 672464 [www.signalshifi.com](http://www.signalshifi.com)