

Merry Christmas :)

waffle

After years of producing the increasingly overwrought annual yearbook and card, we've decided to step back a little and simply combine the sentiments of a Christmas card with a more prosaic newsletter.

And the Humbug? Oh yes. Let's blame Rob Noble from Rega. We were discussing how hard it is to put a positive spin on grim times.

For almost 30 years, I've carried some guilt, renewed annually, for owing up to my very young, inquisitive daughter that Santa Claus did not exist. The other day I was reading an article about the Swedish actor Stellan Skarsgård. The opening line was 'Don't Lie, even about Santa Claus'. I was relieved to find out that I'm not the only father to have done this.

Just in case you think I'm having a 'Peppa Pig moment', my point is that the desire to tell things as they are is clearly deep seated. I see this trait in Andy and Mick too. I'd like to think that straight talking is one of our strengths. With all that's happening in the world, this Christmas, let's settle for a humbug!

So how is our world? Looking the charging ports and the line-up of electric cars at the front of the building when we are all on site, it has turned a little greener. Certainly for Mick, this is pretty close to being a mission. I confess that for Andy and me, the Government incentives for electric company vehicles play a greater part.

We have much to be thankful for, not least our terrific customers and suppliers. Our business really does feel like a community.

Whilst lock-down turned out to be very good for the hi-fi industry, as 2021 has played out, it has become apparent that the wider implications of Corona Virus on trade are becoming less benign. Shortages and delays, some of which also relate to our move from the single market have become the major theme of 2021.

Slowly, the situation is improving, although prices are now rising at a significant pace. "Order early to avoid disappointment" has taken on a new urgency.





Over the past year or so I've been generating more or less monthly newsletters available to those who sign up to receive them. The link to subscribe is at the bottom of every page on our web site. Reassuringly, every email also gives you the opportunity to cancel the subscription.

Any advice of special offers or impending price rises are on the news section of our web site and in these news emails so I won't fill space here with that. Perhaps, instead, I should address the elephant in the room; that striking looking black turntable on the left.

Meet the Naim Solstice. This was launched as a full package, encompassing turntable, arm, cartridge, power supply and phono stage on the Summer Solstice of 2021.

And then it all went quiet.

As of early December 2021, we have yet to deliver a single example to a customer, although our first retail unit is apparently just around the corner. This is a very fine turntable, and it represents a valid alternative to the Linn LP12 Klimax, whilst having a very different sonic signature. The overwhelming sense when we first heard a Solstice was that we were somehow hearing past the record to the original tape. There is an eerie peaceful solidity. It also does the Naim timing and dynamics thing. Of course it does. Roy George designed it! Depth and scale are part of the deal too.

Pitted against the slightly more expensive Klimax Linn LP12 of Summer 2021, the Solstice makes an exceptionally strong case for itself. The only issue is that the standard Klimax LP12 is not what everyone has. Many have gone 'off piste' in some way or other; be it phono stage, cartridge or other structural enhancement.

Then, in October 2021, Linn launched Radikal II and the new Ekstatik cartridge. Forget any semblance of price parity here, but as an upgrade over the previous 'top' Linn, this is a bewildering improvement.

Bear in mind that the Solstice package deal comes with a rather less accomplished phono stage than Naim's existing superline and that the supplied cartridge is relatively modestly priced against the Linn Kandid, let alone Ekstatik.

Separating Solstice from the package will be very interesting indeed.

trends

System optimisation has been the hi-fi hobbyist's objective for a very long time. An element of lock-down naval gazing seems to have booted this into overdrive and we are aware of far more people looking to make what they already have perform better.

For network based (streaming) systems, we seem to be in a golden age of tweakery. Just as with mains cables, where the one used to deliver power to the component seems to have inordinate relevance, high quality Ethernet cables for the final metre or two seem very relevant.

Cable of choice for us is Audioquest Vodka, but we carry quite a few alternatives. Having stolen an AQ Vodka from work for home system between Melco server and Auralic transporter, I took it out for something quite basic. Audioquest was back in place the following day. Digits might be digits but they seem to have opinions!

The quality of network switches really matter too, as do the power supplies that drive them. IT professionals have known a lot of this for years and, being close to BT research at Martlesham we are familiar with their thinking. When streaming became the default music playing system a few years ago, I remember the technical gurus at Naim lamenting that folks would shell out for mains spurs, buy vastly expensive kit but hang it all off an incredibly cheap router and low quality data switches.

Both Melco and Innuos make high end switches that have found favour with our picky customers. We carry demonstration examples of both, along with Plixir power supply upgrades for the Melco one. In addition, we have the NuPrime Omnia 8 port switch that punches above its weight.



AUDIOPHILE
DIGITAL OPTICAL
TECHNOLOGY

A fascinating development in the matter of network silence has been the ADOT system that we've started demonstrating to people. Audiophile Digital Optical Technology is an extremely rational way of blocking the transmission of electrical noise by transferring at least part of the network onto fibre.

This is established technology and certain components, including Melco's S100 switch and the new Linn Klimax DSM streamer, have the facility to connect directly to an optical feed. In the scheme of things, posh switches, etc. considered, this is a fairly low cost system and it is exceedingly easy to demonstrate.

Noise is a funny thing and, whether it be electrical or mechanical, anything that cleans it away seems to make the core of the music more solid, more vibrant and simply nicer to listen to.

The Plixir analogue power supplies that we sell to upgrade various Melco devices are also available for ADOT components. They can be used on third party routers and switches too, to maintain this code of silence.





Innuos' Phoenix Net (switch) and Phoenix USB (re-clocker) have both been hitting the spot for a number of our customers over the past year. Demonstration samples of both are held in stock.

These can be used jointly but, for those using a DAC / music server combination, and who are only contemplating a single purchase, the Phoenix USB is generally the more productive. At over £2500 each, these are not trivial purchases, so we encourage home trial.

Another trend we've seen has been towards some level of simplification and reduction of box count. Active systems are great but one with the amplification in the loudspeaker, such as with ATC actives, can accomplish the box reduction requirement at a stroke. It also sounds brilliant. Sadly, with 12+ week lead times on loudspeakers from ATC, sales can only be sporadic!

A gentle drift towards integrated amplifiers was underway a couple of years ago but has certainly gained momentum. It's hard to better what Accuphase have to offer and this brand has seen our greatest level of growth in 2020 / 21.

The E-5000 pictured top right is launching in early 2022 and promises some serious capability in a single chassis, albeit a back-breaking one.

We also carry a selection of Accuphase power amps (both class A and AB) and pre amps as well as various integrated offerings. We love the stuff! Whilst the bulk of our customers have embraced streaming for ease of access to music, others are resolutely sticking with CD replay. Accuphase are one of the few manufacturers to still be manufacturing proper high end CD players and this has given them a significant niche, one we're happy to exploit!



The CD range kicks off with the £5500 DP 450 and on to the two box over £40k DC-1000 / DP-1000 combo.

Back in May I reported on our email news sheet how impressed I had been using the new £10k ish DP-570 at home as a DAC. This instantly elicited interest from a couple of customers who both proceeded to buy one. With new stock then exhausted until September, it was suggested that we ought to hear the rather more expensive DP-750 too.

A demonstration here of the DP-750 rather blew our socks off. Running via an E-650 class A integrated amplifier into some Dynaudio Heritage loudspeakers, we were genuinely astonished at the quality. The upshot is that one customer upgraded from 470 to 750 at break-neck speed and the DP-750 has had us questioning the sense in all this streaming malarkey.

The irony is that my initial enthusiasm was for the 470 as a DAC whereas this turns out to be its least compelling feature. The similarly priced DC-37 DAC does a rather better job and can be used as an upgrade to the DP-450 or 570 even for SACD replay.

The market for 'serious' CD players may be small but, my goodness these players are superb. We have DP-450, 570, 750 and DC-37 on hand for demonstration.

enhanced Radikalism



The new Radikal II upgrade mentioned on the waffle page is relevant to new or existing Akurate and Klimax specification LP12s. Existing Radikal decks can be upgraded for £1750 and it's a significant improvement.

The kit comprises a new control board and a new motor. Improved speed stability and a reduction in noise, even when nothing appeared to be there before, brings greater solidity, scale, far more vibrancy and musicality than you might expect.

If your Radikal also powers a Urika phono stage, you get a double upgrade, because it improves that too.

We have both Radikal I and II versions of Klimax LP12, so can demonstrate the changes.

The new £5500 Ekstatik cartridge sits above Kandid and brings something particularly special to the party. The new 'top' Linn is most certainly a force to be reckoned with.

ecological realism

Pretentious? Nous?

Despite the 'leccie vehicles, we're not sustainability zealots. Having said that, the potential for waste in constantly changing consumer electronics is not lost on us. Proper, good quality, hifi equipment has a very extended life whether still in the hands of the original owner, passed within the family, or as a trade in.

Naim, Quad and Rega are still supporting, servicing and repairing equipment sold 40+ years ago. Linn have a slightly crisper view on what constitutes end of life for electronics but they still offer help. Their LP12, of course, can be kept going, and improving, perpetually. It's the Triggers broom of hi-fi.

aural optimism

One of the either - or decisions for customers buying into streaming over the past few years has been whether to opt for a full blown streamer or to use a quality music server, such as Melco or Innuos straight into a quality DAC. Readily available control software exists that allows the music server to behave just like a 'proper' streamer such as Naim NDX 2 or Linn DSM.

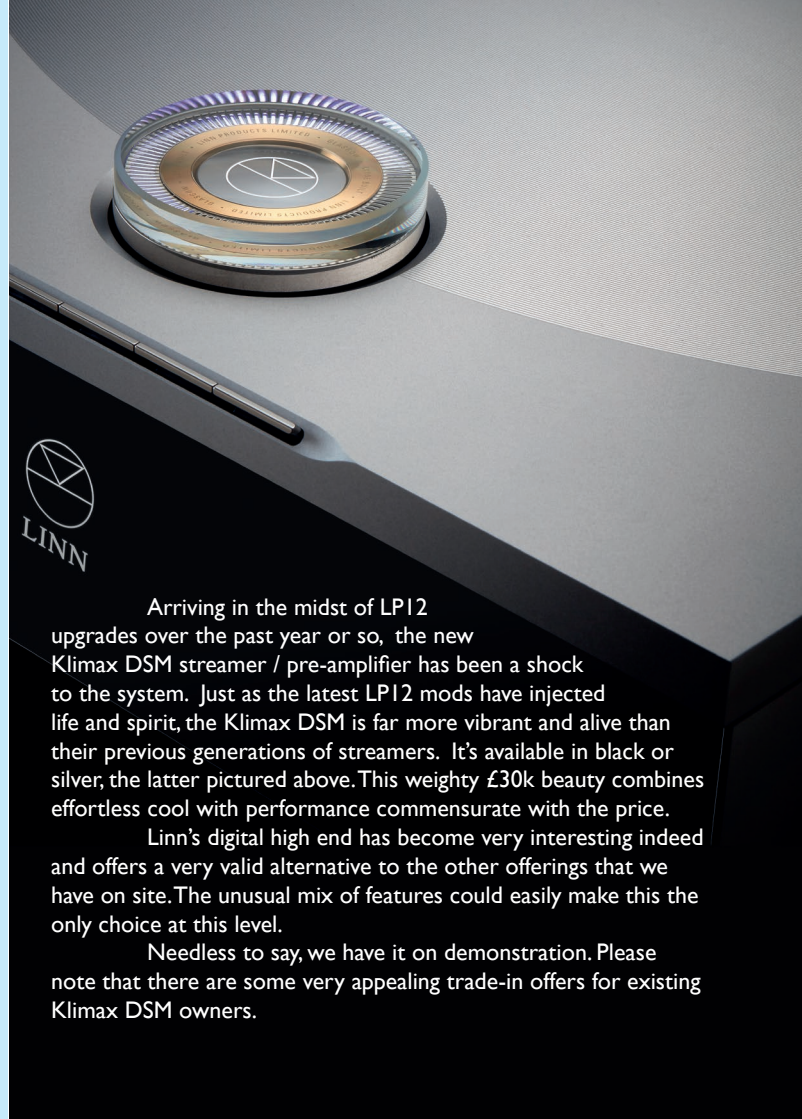
On demonstration in conjunction with a variety of Chord DACs, this arrangement has made a very good case for itself, although several have preferred to use a Naim streamer ahead of the DAC. The advent of the Auralic products, though, has muddled the waters just a little more.

Auralic's designations of 'Streaming DAC' and 'Streaming Transporter' hint at a separation of talents and several Chord Dave owning customers have been wowed by the effectiveness of the better of the two Auralic Aries Streaming Transporter products, namely the enigmatically named Aries 2.1.

The best analogy for the difference is of that between a proper, well designed active pre-amplifier and a passive controller. There is a much greater sense of musical *commitment* with the transporter in place. It simply sounds more alive and vibrant.

I've been using both the 1 and 2.1 versions of the Aries at home with a Melco N1ZS and Accuphase DC-37 DAC. Both are good but the 2.1 is a lot better. These results correlate with every other DAC we've tried be it by Chord or Auralic.

We've invested in the full set of Auralic components and the ability for the various items to integrate together into an operational single unit is impressive. You can start with the Vega 2.1 Streaming DAC, progress with the Aries 2.1 Transporter and add Sirius scaler and Leo clock as desire and funds permit. The consensus is that the clock does more than the scaler but both certainly sound very good indeed. This is proper 'first division' kit.



Arriving in the midst of LP12 upgrades over the past year or so, the new Klimax DSM streamer / pre-amplifier has been a shock to the system. Just as the latest LP12 mods have injected life and spirit, the Klimax DSM is far more vibrant and alive than their previous generations of streamers. It's available in black or silver, the latter pictured above. This weighty £30k beauty combines effortless cool with performance commensurate with the price.

Linn's digital high end has become very interesting indeed and offers a very valid alternative to the other offerings that we have on site. The unusual mix of features could easily make this the only choice at this level.

Needless to say, we have it on demonstration. Please note that there are some very appealing trade-in offers for existing Klimax DSM owners.

just one more thing . . .

Excellent! The last page has come around sooner this year. Surprised at the lack of Naim news this time round? Truth is most Naim stories relate to lack of supply at the moment. Fleetingly, we have had some of the new Atom HE headphone amp / pre-amp streamers. Utterly brilliant, both as a headphone amp or as a streaming preamp with either Naim's own power amps or active loudspeakers such as those from ATC.

The trouble is that actually getting any is a serious challenge. We've had back-orders in place for some time.

The new Focal Clear MG 'phones, pictured left, are a lovely match for the Atom HE and can take advantage of the 'balanced' connection that it provides.

In fact, using the balanced lead is the only way to get a useful length of cable. The standard jack lead is remarkably short. Third party leads are available.



The equally new Focal Celestee closed back 'phones are excellent too but the Clears definitely win out.

The Chord Anni, pictured top right is a slightly bizarre proposition.

Primarily (an excellent) headphone amplifier, it's equipped with loudspeaker sockets and can drive reasonably efficient loudspeakers to respectable, near field listening levels.

One of the stars of the past year have been the Quad ERA1 Planar headphones. Despite being a Planar design, they've proved very easy to drive and compatible with a wide range of electronics.

The Meze range, particularly the 99 Classics, have sold incredibly well. New maple and silver option is pictured right.

Closed back phones that sound open!



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