

Bristol Show **Sound and Vision** February 25-27 2011

Bristol was upbeat this year with HIFICRITIC attending to a record number of visitors and while overall attendance was a little down on last year, those who came were clearly core enthusiasts. Dealer and press numbers were up, perhaps in recognition of the relative importance of this spring show. Backing this view was a goodly number of product launches, many reported below. It all went smoothly with the now combined Sevenoaks, SuperFi and AudioT dealer groups working well together. As usual, What Hi Fi delivered valuable pre show publicity and made a strong appearance with their large and well organised demos to the public.

iPod Touches and iPad controllers figured strongly along with computer based hard drive stored server audio, displacing a number of turntable sources of previous shows. Unquestionably 2011 is the year when server audio enters the stereo hi fi mainstream, no pun intended. Our issue vol. 5 No 1 will cover this in some depth, leading with the Linn Akurate DS, and while LINN did not exhibit, Neat did have an ADS on dem at the show.

Some of the many visitors to the HIFICRITIC stand with Martin Colloms pontificating in the foreground, Pam Messenger in the background



Acoustic Energy showed two new models, a high value, export led NEO series floorstander called a NeoV2-4, with a clearly capable driver array. This includes their characteristic alloy cone drivers comprising two 6.5inch bass and a 5inch mid, plus the DST wave shaped ring radiator tweeter and all neodymium motors (£700). The tiny £150 Compact-1 was also attracting attention for its particular clarity and room filling sound levels, out of all proportion for the size, the first in a new series of speakers using low mass fibre bass-mid cones.

AE designer Mat Spandl looks happy enough with his little creation



Arcam: The rCube iPod dock was hammering away in a lobby, loud enough at times for you to want to move away from its vicinity! I enjoyed their Joe Bonamassa video 'Live at the Albert Hall', using a fine Panasonic plasma and those tidy little Arcam Muso two-way speakers, not cheap, but then they didn't sound cheap.

Audiolab had a recently upgraded range breathed on by Peter Comeau. Their new 8200CDQ all dancing CD DAC combination was powering the big floorstanding, three way, four driver **Wharfedale** from the Jade 5 series to good effect in a huge room. Remarkably, all the Jades are sealed box, from the stand mount to the flagship Seven.

Wharfedale Jade 5



AudioNote: AudioNote's all round 'fixer' Mario needed some time to settle into the Bristol dem room and opened late on the first day, but it was worth the wait. By day two the system had settled and LPs half a century old were sounding vital, musical and involving on this relatively modest but clearly purist system with SE triode amplification. The setup looks as if it breaks all the rules; hearing was believing.

AudioNote at Bristol



Boston Acoustics , now under the D&M Holdings banner has 'emigrated' to Europe from the USA, though with Far Eastern manufacture, of course. With input from Karl-Heinz Fink, the euro-speaker guru, combined with the inspiration and direction of Ken Ishiwata, a complete Boston series was shown to the press with promising demonstrations of their compact £199 A25 two-way, while the static display A360 floor stander is an impressive tower design of fine finish at just £719. Boston was always competitively priced and this brand tradition clearly continues.

Ken proudly shows off the new Boston range



B&W were showing various 'iPod' Zeppelins including the new Airplay version



which seemed to play impossibly loudly, while in a separate dem, the tidy new CM8 floorstander was motoring along nicely supported by Rotel electronics, a well balanced arrangement of good clarity.



The CM8 in clean white finish

Personally I am not so sure about the 'purveyors' bit!



Castle, now part of the IAG group, shows signs of serious renewed design input. Peter Comeau again, with a gutsy, larger than usual stand mount with recognisable Castle timbre and detail, plus a hefty dynamic whack. This was the Knight 2 at £400

in a real wood finish. **Quad** provided the music source and amplification from the recently introduced Elite series. The Knight is larger than it looks from my picture, and has a 6.5 inch bass-mid driver.

Knight 2



Chapter Electronics had a foyer display showing new cable designs. The Forward CD player /DAC was of particular interest, with a stack of SPDIF inputs and USB. It's also HD audio capable. In a sense it's a versatile DAC with an onboard CD replay facility and many new players are similarly multifunctional, including that AMR we reviewed recently.

Chapter Forward



Nigel Finn of the **Chord Company** was brave enough to demonstrate some of the detail improvements they were making, and while I missed it, other press attendees seemed impressed by the results obtained from seemingly small details in build quality and connectors. New digital cables were also shown, such as the Sarum, and the VEE series of improved connectors.

Chord Electronics had scored something of a coup with the production of a significant batch of Google approved and branded micro electronics, where the interconnection harnesses at the back were nearly as large as the miniature rack itself. This dinky set has remarkable functionality and versatility. The foundation is the Chordette one box hi fi unit which is so small you have to see it to believe it. It was heard on dem quite happily kicking about some large Dynaudio speakers and overturns preconceptions about amplifier size and loudness. Chord fought hard to successfully deliver the full allotted order for Google on time, a discipline which will stand them in good stead for the future.

The Chord Go0gle Rack



A theme at Chord was the advanced wireless connectivity of their audio systems using the apt-X technology for Bluetooth. This power and data efficient technology soon to be rolled out for WiFi, should offer far lower radiated power, both received and transmitted, and greater and more stable data rates including full HD audio. Wireless has truly arrived here and the ubiquitous iPad was also in evidence controlling all that you wanted.

Chord boss John Franks presiding over his micro hifi.



The stack below includes the smallest full Windows 7 computer I have ever seen, recently shown capable of accepting an internal one terabyte drive, (external keypad and display of course).

The miniature Chordette Mogul Windows 7 computer is the lowest item in this diminutive Chord rack



Cyrus: Unfortunately I missed the three new streamers introduced by Cyrus, namely: one audio source, one preamp equipped, and one complete with compact amplification. Not shown in this mug shot, they have full colour screens and the necessary two way interface. The top of the line Stream X is £2000 and does 24 /192 decoding in the usual formats.

Cyrus Streamer X series



Elipson

Speaker brand Elipson (famous for partly spherical French broadcast monitors) have returned after a long absence, with some colourful spherical stand mounts, the Planet L, using a proprietary dual concentric driver in a ported enclosure. A compatible and complete matching Elipson electronics system is available, also stand mounted.

Elipson Planet L



Exposure have revamped their well reviewed IIx Classic CDP, now in the 2010 series. The newest item in the range is the 2010S2 DAC with 3 coax inputs for up to 192kHz 24 bits; 2 optical inputs up to 96kHz 24 bits and 1 USB input up to 96kHz 24 bits. It also has a coax output, optical output and headphone output, enhanced by 5 selectable replay filters, selectable digital volume control or fixed output level. Estimated price is around £700, available mid 2011.

The new Exposure range including that versatile 2010S2 DAC, seen one level down



Focal were showing a flagship all-purpose speaker in their expanding Utopia series. It has a centre located mid-treble array which may be unbolted and rotated 90 degrees to allow for horizontal, centre channel operation. This technique was used three decades ago in the KEF R103, allowing lateral or vertical disposition, while maintaining the designed radiation signature (if long before Home Theatre)?

The new Focal Viva Utopia



We aim to review the tempting Electra 1038Be this year, a well priced design with more than a hint of Utopia technology.

Focal also showed some table top systems such as the XS BOOK and the Little Bird with wireless linking, iPad controlled of course. Note the KLEER plug-in resting on the amp, an optional wireless music connection to the iPad.



Furatech products were presented by Sound Foundations

Two new products grabbed my attention. First, a miniature battery powered ioniser to neutralise static on CDs and LPs, and second, a really small ADL GT40 USB ADC/DAC. This allows recording of vinyl to hard drive at 24/96 and replay of same or any other audio file at up to this resolution, (competitively priced at £399). From Alpha Design Labs, it has moving coil and MM inputs, RIAA equalisation, and for replay, a headphone amplifier with volume control plus audio outputs. It is described as 'low latency' USB which probably means minimised delay when monitoring the recorded material on the computer.

ADL GT40 USB ADC/DAC



The destaticiser, DESTAT II also fits in the hand.



Jays

Exhibiting for the first time in the UK, this serious Swedish earphone brand has been trading for a few years now and was selling product in quantity off the stand. (It seems to be a quality outfit with original electroacoustic design voiced for sound quality per se, and not personalised effects or a disco sound. All in all, a well presented line-up.



KEF were showing their popular Q300 loudspeakers, plus the new T series for home theatre. These are ultra thin carefully designed systems, in contrast to some other more wacky slim line expositions.

KEF Q300



Kudos were showing their newly completed flagship the Titan 88, a cool £13,000, sounding crisp and dynamic despite difficult show conditions.

Leema were alone on the 10th floor, with no noise pollution from other brands, ably showing the potential of their Hydra II power amplifiers, 200W stereo, operable as 500W monoblocks in pairs

Leema Hydra II power amplifier



Meridian released their new DSP3200 digital active loudspeaker from the series that began with the delightful DSP7200, reviewed in HIFICRITIC Vol. 3 No 2. Here the compact '3200 is shown with the Audiocore 200, all in one source component and remote control.



Monitor Audio released the Gold GX range, with ribbon tweeters from the flagship Platinum series, bringing this technology down to a more competitive sector. The **gx50**, the diminutive compact on dem, was almost dwarfed by the attached cables. It had indications of a clear and vibrant performance after I was allowed to play my own tracks, though not before a sternly voiced objection!

Monitor Audio Gold-gx50



NAIM Audio

Running two rooms for the new Ovator S-400 floor stander at £3,250, one was used with conventional audio drive, the other server-streamer audio with a UnitiServe and the new NAIM NDX streamer.

With twin 165mm bass drivers and a 46mm BMR in a 40 litre sealed box enclosure, the S-400 is designed for more modest listening rooms. Presented in two finishes in two sizes of room, it sounded and looked quite different in each situation.

Apologising for using the expression, 'an acquired taste', I found that the usual excessively exuberant treble heard at many show audio demos was absent here, the '400 showing a degree of restraint and subtlety at higher frequencies which slowly grew on this listener.

NAIM Ovator S-400 in black. This design is larger than it looks, all in all quite an imposing object.



NAT Audio

Peter Downs of Alternative Audio introduced me to the NAT electronics line, built by a clearly talented young Serbian designer, Dejan Nikic. The two-box and slightly agricultural valve preamp on audition was in fact the thesis project for his degree. With no apparent fear of technology, the range, virtuosity and commitment shown was something special, not least by the Transmitter SE monoblock rated at 120W 1kHz 8ohms, with the amazing QB5/1750 transmitter tetrode (capable of over 3.5kW in paired transmitter mode), here used as an audio power tube. The size of a grapefruit, it doubles as a hand warmer but do not approach too closely! It was heard capably driving the further developed Apogee clones made in Greece by Analysis, the design a derivative of the well regarded Duetta Signature.

NAT Transmitter SE



The Alternative Audio set up at Bristol



The Analysis Omega speakers have improved bass panels while the full height, true ribbon mid treble remains. While the room was patently too small, lending a thickened lower mid, good bass dynamics were evident and the mid treble from the whole system was sparkingly natural, spacious and subtle. Once you settled in you didn't want to leave.

I can't tell you how the NAT 'plasma effect' push pull Xenon mains stabiliser works. It uses 635 'mercury vapour and xenon' valves. Note the shield for blocking some emitted UV for this 4KW rated device. This unit was operating, but lurking safely behind the rack

NAT Xenon Mains Stabiliser



With the NAT products too numerous to mention them all I espied the NAT Se1 Mk11 211 SE stereo integrated amplifier on a shelf. It offers a high 50W output from the 805, thanks to the more powerful 6N30P-DR driver triode, and claimed to deliver 9Hz to 60 kHz. The special and massive transformers contribute to the packed weight of 70kg per pair! In case you hadn't noticed, this unit is also comprehensively remote controlled.

NAT Se1 Mk11 211 SE stereo integrated amplifier



Neat Audio: I enjoyed the new Neat Ultimatum XLS stand mount, which looks really compact in this photo but is actually quite substantial, with a second, internal pseudo-Isobarik bass driver. The bass was taut and dynamic and I was driven to stay longer than expected thanks to the good sounds produced. Definitely a review contender. The XLS features a birch plywood cabinet, membrane-coupled baffles, Sonomex domed

tweeter, upward-firing super tweeters and a revised crossover. Replay amplification was Naim NDAC and LINN Akurate DS, rendering from a UnitiServe net source. Designers Bob Surgeoner and Paul Ryder have musical and studio connections and there were firm indications of credible monitor quality in this new model.

Neat Ultimatum XLS



PMC chopped a foot or so from the lower section of their well received FACT8 to make the stand mount FACT3. As a result, it looks and sounds somewhat different, and may be preferred by some but there's not much difference in price between the two models, once you include the stand.

The Show debut model was the PB1i, a slim, higher value two-way ATL in floor standing form.

PNC PB1i



The clean looking PMC display with stereo PB1i



PROAC presented their latest iteration of the evergreen Tablette miniature, their Tablette Anniversary at £1250, which performed out of all proportion to its diminutive, finely finished dimensions. It threw a massive and well focused sound stage, filling the room with transparent, articulate detail, and was impressively balanced too. Both drivers are PROACs, a custom 20mm silk dome and a UK made Kevlar bass mid cone, the latter built on an advanced Scan chassis and motor.

Proac Tablette Anniversary



Pro-ject?

Among the many products from this prolific company is a recent LP player. Looking smart in clear acrylic, the Pro-Ject 6 PerspeX two speed cord rim drive with the established carbon fibre tonearm and Corian sub chassis, costs around £1,300

Pro-Ject 6 PerspeX



Below is the exquisite and inexpensive Pro-ject FM tuner



SP Acoustics

Company founder Steve Phillips returned for his second year, proudly flagging up the fine review he got from What HI FI for his high power, sealed box design, with its much improved appearance in two tone gloss.

SP Acoustics



Smythe

I first heard a prototype of the Realiser A8 head borne sound field synthesiser at an AES conference a couple of years ago. Now in production, it uses a lightweight optical tracking device to correlate head position, this mounted on the special headphones, in this case Stax electrostatics. Either operating with a reference calibration, or better, the personal calibration of the user HRTF, the Realiser is able to synthesise and thus simulate a full and convincing out of head full surround spatial soundfield, substituting for the real life operating speaker array. You have to hear it to believe it, as the tracking function recomputes on the fly for your head movement where the virtual speaker array remains naturally in position. You can look towards the 'left hand speaker' and the image does not spin around with you giving that unnatural 'headphone effect'.

Smythe Realiser A8



Andrew Minnis of IPC Media being Smythed by Dr Mike Smythe.



Spendor introduced their new £1295 A3, a tidy, two way floor standing compact; this neat footprint may well catch on.

Spendor A3



Triangle Triangle showed off their new ‘colour’ series and my photo doesn’t do them justice. A range of colours may be ordered to suit differing decors and the usual crisp and expressive sounds were in evidence.

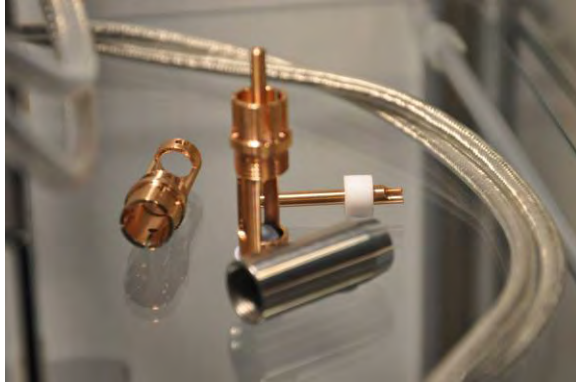
Triangle Colour Series



Vertere

Wholly owned by Touraj Moghaddam, his company’s products seek to address the problems of well chosen systems, where the sound disappoints or has gone off. Finding the cause of such variations is a painstaking task. Products range from cables to custom connectors, and address those points of imperfection, to produce better and more stable sound quality.

A detail of the Vertere connector practice
with special copper alloy parts



Wilson Benesh

In their usual airy and spacious room, out beyond the magazine stands, the new Vector 21/2 way floorstander was operating with valve amplification and the reference grade Torus subwoofer. Details included a superbly engineered, milled from alloy base plate; the proprietary curved carbon fibre composite sides and alloy driver panel. A new WB tweeter has been developed with an enhanced, acoustically defined faceplate flare and a new dome contour.



Wilson Benesh Vector



WireWorld were showing their newly introduced range of cables with new build detail. These claim to have improved RFI suppression and control ability and we hope to assess these in the near future. The new tech is called DNA Helix and a close up of the inner structure is shown here

Wireworld DNA Helix construction



XTZ

The XTZ range is expanding fast with several new models shown at Bristol. It includes upwards of 16 speakers including various subwoofers, passive and active. The flagship is the 70kg Divine 100.49; described as state of the art, the literature makes a deliciously understated reference to the Accuton midrange C173-T6-90 as, 'one of the world's better midrange drivers'. (don't understand?) Bass is twin SEAS pure piston alloy, treble is a fine ceramic dome, a 1 inch from Visaton. Other models use ribbon tweeters including the stand mount 99.26 in gloss black shown in the picture below. Bass is Seas Excel, treble a selected ribbon unit and I thought the sound quite promising, despite difficult conditions.

The XTZ 99.26



If that was not enough there is an ambitious range of electronics, CD players, amps and DSP room equalisation, the latter a practical expression with correction of the better known XTZ room analysis unit.