

# HIFICRITIC



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## **TRANSPORTER OF DELIGHT**

Does the Slimdevices Transporter deliver audiophile quality music from computer to hi-fi?

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## **CABLE CONTROVERSIES**

Martin Colloms tries different mains cables and checks out the Isotek Titan mains purifier

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## **TUNING & TWEAKING**

How to get the most music from your system without spending money

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## **AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE 110**

Audio Research's new valve power amp, partner to the impressive Reference 3 pre-amp

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## **NO EASY ANSWERS**

ProAudio engineer Philip Newell looks at the subtle art of matching a loudspeaker to its application

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## **THE ACTIVE/PASSIVE DILEMMA**

Same speakers; same price: Martin Colloms compares Naim's SL2 with active and passive drive

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## **SERIOUS STAND-MOUNTS**

Focal, ART and Haliaetus: three seriously upmarket, totally dissimilar stand-mount speakers

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**MUSIC & MORE**



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Several features in this issue merit further Editorial discussion, but after some thought I've decided draw particular attention to Martin Colloms' piece on mains electricity connection.

Because it proved virtually impossible to predict how any particular cable would perform, irrespective of price or 'features', one inescapable but nonetheless interesting conclusion from the mains cable comparisons is that we still have a great deal to learn about how mains leads and mains electricity interact with hi-fi systems. A couple of personal anecdotes will put some more flesh on the bones.

I was particularly interested by Martin's work with the IsoTek Titan mains conditioner, because I tried out this device a year or two back, and I too found it didn't provide a net benefit to my particular system under my conditions. But then I too run my hi-fi from a quite separate spur, and consider the installation of such an automatic and essential part of moving house.

However, I didn't go as far as Martin in creating mains quality that was deliberately compromised, and subsequently discovering that the Titan could indeed have a positive effect under such circumstances, and I think these findings are particularly interesting.

I'm sure that mains sensitivity will vary significantly and unpredictably from system to system, and I do know that the Naim kit I mostly use is extremely susceptible to changes in mains. I still recall the improvement I achieved back in the mid-1980s, merely by changing the fuse feeding my hi-fi spur from 15 amps to 30 amps.

Even more bizarrely, I recently suffered a strange power cut which only blacked out one house in three in my road, because it had only affected one output phase from the triple-phase input mains that came in to the transformer down the road. And when the power came back on, the hi-fi sounded noticeably better – crisper and cleaner – than it had before. I wandered out to find the engineer who'd been fixing the power cut, who explained that he'd replaced the very large and very ancient fuse that had been feeding one third of the houses including my own. Presumably, the act of changing the fuse had dropped the source impedance from the sub-station down the road, sufficient to be audible in my hi-fi system 100 yards away.

One of the most effective recent upgrades to my mains power has been the use of a Powerigel (pronounced power-eagle), made by Naim's German distributor Music Line. This is simply a mains distribution system, but a carefully researched one that gave remarkably good results. It connects the whole system to the mains via a single 13 amp plug, via a leaf-spring-decoupled alloy tube, from which sprout numerous IEC-plug terminated leads

Each lead is exactly the same length, and inside the tube each of the three groups of conductors is welded together, eliminating numerous pressure contacts and ensuring precise 'star earthing'. The Powerigel brought a surprisingly big sound quality improvement to my Naim-based system, and having read Martin's copy I wonder how much the welded contacts might have had to do with it, since welded plug contacts was a feature of the cheap generic Sheng Shi Da Electronics mains cable that performed so surprisingly well in Martin's listening tests.

*Paul Messenger*  
**Editor**

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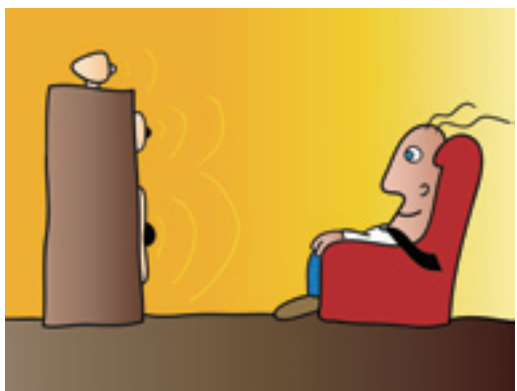


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# Transporter of Delight

SLIMDEVICES (NOW A LOGITECH COMPANY) CLAIMS ITS TRANSPORTER IS AN AUDIOPHILE SOLUTION FOR INTERFACING COMPUTERS WITH HI-FI SYSTEMS.

MALCOLM STEWARD CHECKS OUT THE ERGONOMICS AND PERFORMANCE

Having, it seems, been appointed Captain of the good ship CRSD (Computer-Related Stereo Devices), the second port of call on my cruise through the waters of networkable music boxes turned out to be Slimdevices *Transporter* (around £1,300 in the UK). This sleek black (or silver) network music player promises to: “Let you play your digitized music collection through your stereo system using your wireless or Ethernet network.” In plain English, this means that it’s fundamentally a box that you plug in to your pre-amplifier, which then grabs digitised music off your computer.

Well, that’s half the story, anyway. The *Transporter* relies upon a neat piece of software – the open source *SlimServer* – loaded on that computer to organise and deliver the digitised music to it. Furthermore, the *Transporter* can be used as a standalone DAC, and will also deliver internet services such as radio and podcasts to your hi-fi. Both the device and its software look to be extraordinarily, in a word, neat: and they proved to be equally attractive once I had them connected to my systems – both hi-fi and computer. The highly capable software is noteworthy for its slick operation, minimal footprint and the minimal impact it has on the computer’s resources, although some of the skins supplied with it were, I thought, far less decorative and easy-on-the-eye than the basic default schema. (Unfortunately, aesthetics don’t seem to be a forte of the on-screen community.)

Set-up problems were, for once, minimal and quickly sorted, which made a welcome change from the phone calls to technical support and internet searches I’ve previously encountered with such devices. For example, hooking the

*Transporter* into my computer network was essentially near-trouble-free, using both Ethernet and wireless connections: the only glitch was that the device couldn’t locate my network’s internet gateway address, even though it managed to locate my DNS server, DHCP server, and the shared directory on my desktop that holds my music collection without any problems. A few button-pushes on the remote control told the device that I wanted to configure it manually, inserting the correct IP address for the gateway instead of the default address it had assumed to be correct, and all was working – literally – within five minutes. When I switched from an Ethernet connection to my wireless network, the process was relatively plain sailing, which was a surprise given the technical and security hoops that most visitors have to jump through to allow their laptops to gain access to my network and the internet.

Primarily, I suppose, that’s because the *Transporter* is not a storage device, and since all that aspect of its operation is taken care of by the user’s computer, there’s no need to have a display of any type in the listening room. It is driven by a remote control, or its fascia buttons, in league with a pair of front panel 640 x 32 pixel fluorescent display elements. These are thoughtfully designed, informative, and quite entertaining if you enjoy ‘dancing’ displays, and the programming behind them means that they operate logically and consistently – at least they do as far as I’m concerned, which represents a major step forward in GUI (graphic user interface) design!

Appearing very early in the Owner’s Guide are the following potentially contentious sentences: “*Transporter* was designed to appeal to the most discerning audiophiles

MALCOLM STEWARD

and music lovers. It streams digital music with sound quality that surpasses even the most exotic compact disc players.” Many reading those bold statements will immediately be put on the defensive – as admittedly, was I initially – but there’s more than a grain of truth in there.

The *Transporter* is without a doubt an audiophile device in the true, almost pejorative, sense of the word: it seemed highly sensitive and discriminating about how it was connected to the system, and the source feeding it. Steve Harris, a friend, music lover, industry PR, and equipment and computer enthusiast, had called by one evening with a car boot full of cables and his Mac laptop – running both OSX and Microsoft Vista – plus a portable hard drive full of WAVs to see what I was up to and join in the fun. Things, as is customary, became convoluted as soon as he arrived and we were soon listening to a WAV of Jaco Pastorius’ delightful, percussive bass playing on Joni Mitchell’s *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* while comparing the performance of iTunes to the VLC player on his Mac using OSX. Interestingly – some might say sadly – we found that the *Transporter* sounded rather hi-fi like, prosaic and not especially musically rewarding playing the track through iTunes: there was no groove to Jaco’s marvellous repetitive riff, and Joni’s voice appeared rather ‘thin’, nasal and lacking any sense of conviction. It was all rather flat and uninspiring.

Harris and I regarded each other as I imagine Holmes and Watson would have done had they found themselves in the same circumstances. “Let’s just try something, even though it sounds mad”, Harris said, and fired up the laptop again. Instantly and unmistakably, a transformation took place: Jaco now sounded like the phenomenal player he was and Joni had shaken off the malady that had robbed her voice of most of its body. What’s more, the music had begun to groove and our feet had started tapping. “What have you done?” I asked. “I just switched from iTunes to VLC”, said Harris. So, even though we were listening to the identical WAV bitstream through exactly the same cabling and system, the change of just the player software had wrought a dramatic improvement to the music and our perception of the *Transporter*. (So there’s the first warning for you: if you audition the *Transporter* and it sounds a bit so-so, look at literally everything in the replay chain before you condemn the device out of hand.)

Surprisingly, there was little or no discernible difference in the *Transporter*’s performance when it was connected to my network by Ethernet or wirelessly, so I settled on the wireless connection for the simple reason that I was running short of CAT5 patch leads.

Whether the *Transporter* rivals “even the most exotic compact disc players”, however, is a moot point. I’ve not

heard all the exotic players currently available, but on past experience I’d say the statement may have some truth, although it didn’t dust off my venerable Naim *CDS* in hi-fi or musical respects. The latter still imparted a sense of musical ‘rightness’, flow and authority that the *Transporter* couldn’t match when comparing CD replay with the same data streaming over the network from my PC. But, read that again: the *CDS* was connected by three feet of expensive cable to the pre-amplifier, whereas the *Transporter* was reading the same data being sent through metres of CAT5 through my network switch to my wireless access point from where it was beamed through my home to it before being sent down a similar interconnect to another input on the same pre-amplifier. In truth, the performance difference, while overt and apparent to experienced listeners, would probably be near-negligible to less picknicky souls.

The *Transporter* comes equipped with an array of audio connections that befit its audiophile aspirations: it offers both balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA (phono) outputs, along with a host of digital ins and outs that include Toslink S/PDIF, capacitor-coupled co-axial RCA S/PDIF, transformer-coupled co-axial BNC S/PDIF, and balanced XLR (AES/EBU), along with a word clock input for use with an external word clock generator. There are also infra-red in/out and RS232 connections along with an Ethernet port and wireless antenna connections on the rear panel where you’ll also find an IEC mains socket. The RS232 port permits the device to be connected to Crestron, AMX and similar home automation systems. Within the *Transporter*’s slim 17-inch aluminium case is an AKM AK4396 multi-bit Delta-Sigma DAC using a ‘linear super-regulated’ power supply feeding the analogue outputs.

The front panel features an array of tiny buttons flanking a central TransNav knob, which allows you to cycle through and select the menu options that appear in the left-hand display. The minor buttons are clearly labeled with their respective functions, and the right-hand display provides eye candy in the shape of analogue-style VU meters, digital VU meters, a spectrum analyser, or a constant display of the currently playing song. Strangely, most of the visitors to my room found the analogue VU meters the favourite, for no better reason than that they ‘looked cool’.

The player supports a host of compressed and lossless formats including MP3, AAC, Ogg Vorbis, MP2, MusePack, AIFF, PCM, WAV, Apple Lossless, FLAC, and WMA Lossless. It supports MP3 at all data rates and sample rates including VBR, although during my time with the player I used only raw WAV, FLAC and 320kb/s MP3 CBR files for the majority of my listening. Again,

*“The Transporter is without a doubt an audiophile device in the true, almost pejorative, sense of the word: it seemed highly sensitive and discriminating about how it was connected to the system, and the source feeding it.”*



*“The ease with which it allowed me to take music off my office PC and enjoy it in the comfort of my listening room has been overwhelming.”*

the *Transporter* lives up to its audiophile reputation by being quite discriminating about MP3s, happily tolerating most 320Kbps CBR files while sounding noticeably more ‘compressed’ when the bit rate varies or drops. It’s the same story with internet radio where it sounded rather impressive on higher bit rate transmissions and flat as the proverbial pancake (and please don’t bother to point out my misuse of the word proverbial in that instance, but it seems to be an acceptable transgression as far as most readers are concerned these days) on lesser broadcasts.

As mentioned earlier, the *Transporter* will act as a stand-alone DAC and so I tried it listening to The Decemberists’ *Shankill Butchers* from *The Crane Wife* album using the Mac as a digital source. It sounded good in hi-fi terms but was a tad musically uninvolved compared to the same track played through the DAC in a Naim *SuperNait*, which seemed not only to bring a sparkle and enhanced timbre to the guitar but also imbued the music with more feeling and energy. The best performance, however, was elicited by playing the track off my PC through the *Transporter* acting in its primary role as a music server, where it better managed to convey the sense of musicians playing together and with purpose.

I’m currently re-listening to a lot of blues albums because there’s an inherent simplicity and naivety to the music that I find appealing and, interestingly, devastatingly revealing of the inadequacies of much hi-fi equipment. The slack timing of many blues guitarists is a case in point: some gear ‘understands’ it while other equipment simply doesn’t. Some equipment captures the flow and sparseness of their playing, while much renders it as almost amateurish and incompetent. The *Transporter* falls into the former category and relishes the simplistic beauty of, say, Honeyboy Edwards’ Delta stylings or Freddie King’s careful selection of notes, while other devices aren’t always satisfied unless the player shreds like Dragonforce’s Herman Li.

With any device that has the potential of sounding this good playing MP3s, one runs the very real risk of being lulled into a complacent mode and effectively switching off one’s critical faculties. This happened while I was enjoying listening to the *After Hours Swing Session* album by guitarist Duke Robillard, which is replete with nuances for the guitar buff to savour. Realising that this was happening, and timing the track to play in sync with the original CD while switching between the two sources, revealed a host of subtle differences in the presentation of the music. Through the *Transporter*, for example, the leading edges of Robillard’s playing appeared muted – as though his guitar had been noise-gated – while the CD rendition sounded more incisive and complete. A similar effect was noted on the bass line of several tracks and the attack of the piano

and drums. This, I feel, merely demonstrated the inherent flaws of the psychoacoustic theories upon which MP3 compression is founded, rather than any shortcoming in the *Transporter*: the ‘insignificant’ data that the encoding process had discarded wasn’t, in truth, in the least insignificant.

As the weeks passed and the *Transporter* settled in, its performance matured and it began to produce a richer, more complete rendition and a more satisfying portrayal of all manner of music: in the early days it had tended to sound a little bleached and stilted on some recordings. Whether this was a function of the device or of those recordings is really a moot point, because this effect subsided as the machine became more thoroughly warmed up. It never reached the stage where it made MP3s sound like WAVs, which rather reinforced its claims to audiophile status, but those lesser recordings became more bearable. However, a final session with dear old Joni Mitchell proved the *Transporter*’s ability to satisfy with good recordings. It gave a thoroughly capable and enjoyable rendition of her *Mingus* album – in particular such tracks as *God Must be a Boogie Man* – where it accurately laid bare the dynamics, tone and quirky syncopation of her alternatively tuned acoustic guitar playing, and that of the legendary Jaco Pastorius on bass, along with a pin-sharp picture of what was happening in the mix, for the benefit of those who prefer listening to hi-fi rather than the awe-inspiring musicianship that makes up this album.

In conclusion, I have to say that I’ll be sad to see the *Transporter* being transported away. The ease with which it allowed me to take music off my office PC and enjoy it in the comfort of my listening room has been overwhelming. The sound quality and entertainment it has provided have been beguiling, and it looked so at home alongside my Naim gear (despite its grab handles and those lairy VU meters, which can be switched off if you don’t possess a sense of humour). Whether it’s truly an audiophile device I’ll leave you to decide when you audition it, but I will say that it certainly came damned close when you listened with uncompressed music. Regardless, I suspect that many listeners will, as I was, be more than happy to trade a degree of absolute fidelity for the sheer convenience it offers.

#### SPECIFICATIONS

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Formats, interfaces    | see text   |
| Dimensions (W x H x D) | 43 x 7 x 31 cms  |
| Weight                 | 31kg   |
| Price (UK inc VAT)     | c £1,300   |
| Contact                | <a href="http://www.slimdevices.com">www.slimdevices.com</a> |