

Contents

4 RICARDO FRANASSOVICI

The Absolute Sounds founder looks back on high-end culture wars and the early days of his company, and explains what really matters when it comes to extracting maximum musical enjoyment. He tells some tales, shares some philosophy, and answers the question 'How have you been spending your lockdown?' His reply? Listening to much more music, of course!

8 STAN'S SAFARI

Stan's not convinced by expensive streaming hardware, simply because he doesn't think you get that sufficient bang for your buck when you invest heavily in the technology. Why's that? Well, he says it's all in the hands of the software, with all its vagaries and foibles – it isn't like this in the analogue domain! And he reviews the latest edition of a classic textbook on amplifier design

11 DARTZEEL NHB-18NS/ NHB-108 MODEL 2

In this issue's feature review, Martin Colloms achieves a long-held ambition to get his hands on this handbuilt pre/power amplifier combination from Swiss designer Hervé Delétraz. He looks into the company's technology of zero feedback, the cleanest possible signal paths and dedicated interconnects, and finds much to like in the captivating sound of the duo. We also hear from the designer himself about the genesis of the remarkable preamplifier

23 PICKUP CARTRIDGE ALIGNMENT

Getting your record player's cartridge aligned perfectly for accurate tracking of the record groove isn't just a nicety – rather it's vital if you're to optimise performance. Keith Howard explains it's all a matter of science, not black art, mythology or 'having the knack': he explores why it makes a difference, and the simple steps you need to take to make sure you've got it right

29 PMC MB2SE

Having interviewed PMC founder Peter Thomas for the last issue of HIFICRITIC, Kevin Fiske found himself intrigued enough to try some of the company's speakers. Never one to do things by half, he opted for the latest iteration of one of its best-known studio monitor designs

35 BRYSTON BP-17³ / 3B³

With the PMC MB2se speakers on order, Kevin Fiske began to wonder about driving them properly. A muscular pre/power amplifier combination from Bryston's 'Cubed' range was soon on its way

39 FOCAL STELLIA, CLEAR AND ARCHE

French company Focal has a striking range of headphones. Chris Frankland opens our headphone special with two of its latest models, and a DAC/amplifier to drive them

42 AUDEZE LCD-X

The American company's headphones have been widely acclaimed, both by hi-fi enthusiasts and professionals. This planar magnetic design shows why

44 NOVAFIDELITY HA500H

Best-known for its range of network audio products, the Korean manufacturer has now turned its attention to this valve/solid state DAC/headphone amplifier, with no less than spectacular results

46 HEADPHONE SHAKE-UP

Bolting a low-frequency shaker to his chair gives Keith Howard's headphone listening a much-needed kick in the pants

50 T+A SOLITAIRE P / HA 200

The German manufacturer's début headphones and DAC/amp are a no-holds-barred statement of technical intent. Ed Selley listens

53 KEITH MONKS PRODIGY

Compact, quite and competitively priced, the latest Keith Monks record cleaning machine is an attractive buy – it even has a built-in lightshow!

56 PRIMA LUNA EVOLUTION 300

Coming back to valves after an extended hiatus, Chris Kelly, finds he likes what he hears from this elegant amplifier

58 MUSIC

Our critics round up their pick of the classical and jazz releases – and some great secondhand buys

64 SOUND STAGE

The inside track on the DSD revival from NativeDSD's Floor van der Holst



Ricardo Franassovici spends almost as much time buying music as he does listening. Interview, p4



Clearly showing their studio heritage, these big standmount speakers from PMC have a mighty sound. Review, p29



An impressive headphone début from T+A, p50