

HIFICRITIC

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PICTURES AT AN AUDITION

Bob Pyle records his somewhat traumatic search for the ultimate DAC

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TEDDY PARDO HPN & TEDDYDAC

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MUSICAL FIDELITY M6 ENCORE CONNECT

Designed in-house, MF's new hard-disk music player could be the start of something big

CHARTWELL LS 3/5

Paul Messenger compares a new Chartwell LS3/5 to an original Chartwell LS3/5A from the 1970s

MUSIC & MORE



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This has turned out to be a most interesting issue, as I've managed to pass many of my digital audio responsibilities over to the excellent Andrew Everard. I've never really had much personal enthusiasm for the digital stuff, and while that wasn't really a problem through the '80s and '90s, when CD was the only significant digital game in town, a subsequent proliferation of digital sources, devices and software have made my analogue preferences feel more than a little isolated. (Despite recent news that the UK sales value of vinyl discs had actually overtaken download sales for the first time since the 'vinyl revival' first began!)

I'll carry on experimenting with new digital sources as and when they become available – indeed, this very issue sees me trying out 16-bit streaming for the first time, and with some rather positive results (see also Auralic review, pp12-13, and Subjective Sounds, p60). But I'll no longer feel obliged to keep up to date with the latest digital developments, which, to be honest, is quite a relief.

Instead I'll be able to bang on about some of my favourite hobby horses, such as the premature death of rock music, the ludicrous and totally unjustified price inflation that seems to have afflicted hi-fi (and house prices) in recent years, and so on. (And I should manage to come up with some other issues before we go to press, I'm sure.)

Although it's neither finished nor ready for publishing yet (hopefully it'll appear in our next issue), I've started writing a piece with NVA's Richard Dunn, who has some very radical ideas about where the hi-fi business is heading. To summarise his views, he reckons that the effect of the internet has barely started yet, and to a great extent will undermine the role of the traditional specialist dealer.

He's very critical of the way prices have increased, and claims that this rise is often down to increasing trade margins to compensate for a shrinking marketplace. That's as may be: it may well be true but I'd have to undertake some further investigations to confirm it. (I do, however, believe that money itself has been dramatically devalued by something that we're supposed to call 'quantitative easing'; I prefer the phrase 'printing money', but maybe that's another story.)

Dunn's arguably most contentious claim is that internet forums might have rendered regular hi-fi journalism – and indeed the traditional specialist hi-fi dealerships – effectively redundant. He may have a point, inasmuch as every hi-fi enthusiast out there now has a voice that he/she can use to discuss equipment and its performance.

It's a powerful argument, as the availability of space for anybody to express an opinion has certainly expanded, and should allow a more democratic discussion on the merits or otherwise of specific items or combinations of equipment. Dunn's theory is that this will lead to sale-or-return deals on equipment *via* eBay and forums, and dramatically shake up the profit margins, which is certainly an interesting point. We shall see...

Paul Messenger
Editor

Fostex HP-A4BL

CHRIS BRYANT IS SEDUCED BY A FOSTEX DAC/HEADPHONE AMP

CHRIS BRYANT

Japanese brand Fostex has made interesting loudspeaker drive units and headphones for many years, gaining a strong reputation for quality and performance.

This £399 *HP-A4BL* is a DAC/Headphone amplifier designed to look like a miniature domestic hi-fi unit. It's 150x34x157mm (WxHxD) will fit unobtrusively virtually anywhere.

The two headphone outputs include one 4-pin XLR (for balanced operation) and a gold-plated ¼in (6.35mm) jack. It has a volume control and four switches, controlling output selection (phones or phono), gain, filter and input selection (either optical or USB).

The USB Audio 2.0 compatible input is capable of asynchronous transfer up to 24-bit/192kHz using a type B socket. Also on the back panel are variable audio left and right gold plated phono sockets (for driving active loudspeakers or a separate power amp and speakers), a S/PDIF optical digital input and output, a micro SD card slot (for firmware upgrades only), an audio standby mode switch, and a 12V DC input socket.

An AKM transceiver decodes digital data to feed to a Texas Instruments PCM1792 24-bit/192kHz DAC, capable of decoding both PCM and DSD encoded material up to 11.2MHz, followed by low noise op-amps. The 4-pin XLR socket works in balanced mode provided appropriately wired headphones are available. The single PCB uses mainly surface mount components but some audiophile Nichicon Fine Gold capacitors will enhance performance. The external power supply with complex internal filtering means that plenty of low noise voltage is available to drive almost every headphone on the market to high levels.

The USB Audio 2.0 can be used with both Windows 7,8, 8.1 and 10 for which driver software has to be installed and MAC OS 10.6 or later which works with its own driver. A pair of stereo Texas Instruments current-feedback amplifiers (TA6120A2) are used to provide balanced drive. The electronic volume control works exceptionally well with good balance and control.

Sound Quality

On headphone listening the sound is dynamic and full of life and interest. It performs exceptionally well with Fostex' own *TH610* 'phones; together

they have good rhythm and timing. Images are very well defined from a high level of presented detail. It manages to resolve minutiae and put structure into music in a reasonably natural way, producing a convincingly precise and well ordered soundstage.

The sense of dynamic ability is fairly unusual at this price point and it consequently has unusual freedom of expression, more reminiscent of a top class digital replay system. I preferred the slow roll-off filter setting. It provides lots of detail, and can be very transparent with top class recordings. The bass is firm and well resolved, the midrange detailed and fairly natural, and the treble well focused and finely etched. I was able to listen longer on headphones than I can usually tolerate, though I did find it slightly hard and forced at times. Timing could also be improved, as the bass could become just a little out of sync with the mid, especially on more complex pieces.

It continued to perform well on other makes and types of headphones, and feeding the DAC with high resolution material produced an improvement over CD quality recordings. Its provides even more natural sounds and greater detail with more natural dynamics.

I tried the variable audio outputs driving my power amplifier directly, and was pleasantly surprised that it sounded even better than through headphones. It also works well as an active loudspeaker controller, with the same traits but even livelier with better timing. It sounded smoother and more natural than through headphones, and shows the verve, precision and musicality necessary to earn a place in any system designed around USB audio.

Conclusions

Although it doesn't look as if the designers have created anything particularly 'audiophile' here, there's some evidence of careful tuning and parts selection. It gave its best driving active speakers or straight into a power amplifier, so perhaps it just needs a better headphone amplifier section.

It hasn't many facilities or remote control, but if the object is just to recreate an enjoyable musical experience, Fostex hits the target at a very reasonable price. It's exciting and keeps you listening and not much at this price can do that, so it's an obvious Best Buy.

HIFICRITIC
BEST BUY



Manufacturers Data

Fostex HP-A4BL	
Input USB	USB2.0, Hi Speed, Connector B
Input S/PDIF	Optical
Sampling Frequencies PCM	44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4, 192kHz
Sampling Frequencies DSD	2.8MHz, 5.6MHz, 11.2MHz
Quantisation	16/24-bit
RCA Outputs	2.V maximum (variable)
RCA output load required/Distortion	<10kohm/THD <0.01% at 1kHz
Headphone Output Unbalanced	6.35mm stereo jack (16 - 600ohm load)
Headphone Output Balanced	XLR (4-pin) (16 - 600ohm load)
Maximum output power per channel	300mW balanced, 150mW unbalanced
THD	<0.5% @ 30mW 32ohm load
Size WxHxD (mm)	150x34x157
Weight	630g
Power supply	DC12V external (plug top)
Price	£399

Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

BECAUSE HIFICRITIC IS FUNDED BY ITS READERS THE SUBSCRIPTION COST IS NECESSARILY HIGHER THAN FOR MAGAZINES SUBSIDISED BY ADVERTISING REVENUE, THOUGH CERTAINLY NOT AS HIGH AS PROFESSIONAL SPECIALIST JOURNALS.

Our budget is directed towards obtaining the very best research and writing from the very best freelance authors, whom we encourage to express themselves fully in print, an opportunity not always available *via* established publishing regimes.

Through the use of a virtual office, we aim to be exceptionally cost effective. Subscription management, production, printing, editorial, design, laboratory measurement and journalism are scattered around the world, yet are also efficiently and almost instantaneously linked at the touch of an e-mail send button.

Our independence from product advertising allows us to criticise and comment without fear or favour. The HIFICRITIC team scrutinises interesting and internationally important issues and equipment in depth and detail, technically and subjectively, and provides comprehensive investigations into the key issues facing high quality stereo music recording and reproduction today.

Martin Colloms, Publisher

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I'm not sure whether it's really appropriate to use this column to bang on about a means of receiving music over the internet, but Qobuz and TIDAL have loomed large in my leisure activities over the past couple of months, and have actually proved a generally positive experience.

I could see the attraction of streaming services when I visited the children, who had relatively small collections of pre-recorded music and seemed happy enough listening to compressed MP3-encoded files. They seemed perfectly content, streaming off Amazon via the TV and a pair of tiny B&W *MM1*. But I couldn't really see the relevance to my own situation, in view of my large music collection and dislike of MP3 encoding.

I was therefore rather surprised to find myself quite seriously impressed when recently experiencing the 16-bit streaming delights of Qobuz and TIDAL, courtesy Auralic's *Altair* (see pp12-13). Journalists get to play with such things without having to pay a subscription, which is certainly a worthwhile bonus, and it does mean that I can try more than one streaming service without the usual cost penalty. But I'm still not certain I can sensibly advise which one is the better. Auralic rates Qobuz, but on my explorations it seems a trifle less capable than TIDAL.

The bottom line is if course that streaming involves computers, and computers do have a will of their own, and if you don't like them (and I don't), they don't like to cooperate. I was happily listening to a live Ry Cooder concert from San Francisco when the stupid thing simply stopped. I did eventually get the concert starting again, after spending about an hour restarting several things several times. But it was a frustrating experience that did nothing for either my blood pressure or my attitude towards computers.

Still, I suppose I'd never have heard Ry Cooder's version of *Woolly Bully* if I hadn't had access to a decent streaming service, so I ought to be grateful for such a merciful experience...only for the damn thing to crash again a few minutes later. Maybe I'd just chosen a 'difficult' album... who knows.

When everything's working fine, I have to say that streaming has a lot going for it, because of the way it can expand even a reasonably comprehensive record collection. I'm particularly fond of live recordings, and found a number of alternative versions of familiar (and sometimes not so familiar) tracks. Quite often I've acquired a studio version of an album without realising that live performance versions were also available from around the same time.

Being a Deadhead at heart, I was particularly pleased to notice that a whole collection of live recordings had now been released from the *Europe '72* tour. I've had the vinyl triple album for many years, but had never expected to hear the set that I'd heard live at the Bickershaw Festival more than forty years earlier. (I do remember the sun coming out for the first time that weekend, just as the Grateful Dead took to the stage!)

At the same time, I did try to play four Rolling Stones albums (including my all time favourite *Let It Bleed*), only to be told that none of my selections was available. It all seems to be rather random, as I had no trouble finding some very rare Beatles tracks, along with the regular mainstream material. It all seems to be very unpredictable.

What really matters, however, is that streaming is all about the music, not the hardware. The 16-bit/44.1kHz services like Qobuz and TIDAL sound just fine to these ears *via* the Auralic *Altair*, so what's not to like: it's a golden opportunity to expand your record collection dramatically for £20/month.