

HIFICRITIC

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PICTURES AT AN AUDITION

Bob Pyle records his somewhat traumatic search for the ultimate DAC

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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



REVIEWED THIS ISSUE: B&W 800 D3, Apple MacMini, Auralic Altair, Arendal Monitor, Fostex HP-A4BL, Fostex TH610, C.E.C. CD5, Totem Sky, Teddy Pardo HPN, Teddy Pardo TeddyDAC, Musical Fidelity M6 Encore Connect, CH Precision A1, Google Cast, Chartwell LS3/5, Allnic H-3000, Clearaudio Concept MC, Q Acoustics 3020, QED Supremus, Teddy Pardo UnifiServePS, Mutec MC-3+ USB, Gustard U12, iFi S/PDIF iPurifier, Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 2, Roon, HiFiBerry

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How internet streaming could take over hi-fi



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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 TH610

CHRIS BRYANT ASSESSES AN UPDATED AND AFFORDABLE FOSTEX HEADPHONE

CHRIS BRYANT

HIFICRITIC
RECOMMENDED



Fostex TH610 Specifications

Type	Closed-back Dynamic
Driver Diameter	50mm round
Magnet	Neodymium
Frequency Response	5Hz - 45kHz
Impedance	25 ohms
Sensitivity	98dB/mW
Cord Length	3m
Connector	Gold-plated ¼in/ 6.3mm jack
Weight	375g
Price	£599

The £599 *TH610* is the latest of Fostex' 'almost affordable' headphone range, following on from the well received *600*. It's supplied with a leatherette carrying bag, which might be helpful for portable users, and also provides a dust free storage environment. This headphone is nicely engineered with clean, understated styling, and is carefully designed to achieve good adjustability with considerable ear comfort.

The closed earcups are carved from black walnut in a perfect matte finish, and are obviously carefully shaped to provide resonance-controlled spaces behind the drivers. These house 50mm drivers that use neodymium magnets with a claimed 1Tesla (1,000 Gauss) field strength that helps minimise harmonic distortions. Fostex employs a special diaphragm it calls 'bio-dyna', and the earcups are lined with a soft synthetic leather, which looks good and feels very comfortable. The cloth-wrapped chord has equal lengths for left and right channels, with a detachable 2-pin connector at the headphone end. The pins are gold plated with a tough rhodium coating, while the other end is terminated by an aluminium barrelled gold plated ¼in (6.35mm) jack plug.

The headband is a fairly complicated affair, assembled from various materials that are engineered to keep the headphone on the head and fit perfectly over the ears in a stylish way: a multi-jointed frame with a slider mechanism is used to create a perfect fit while keeping the weight down. The same synthetic leather is used to cover the headband as the earpads. The adjusters work well and click firmly into position, while an elaborate hinge mechanism tilts and swivels the earcups to ensure a comfortable fit.

This headphone has a sensitivity of 98dB/mW, and with a maximum input power of 1800mW will be able to reach very high (potentially hearing damaging) volume levels very easily – so do take care.

Sound Quality

The *TH610* has excellent micro detail, being able to resolve subtle nuance particularly in the midrange. Instruments and vocals are clearly resolved and defined, and even small variations in the replay system can be easily heard: the differences between interconnect cable types and the way they are

dressed becomes very obvious. Once set up, the music playing, the equipment used, and the quality of the recordings may be very easily analysed using these 'ear monitors'.

The headphone itself is not without coloration, and the frequency response doesn't sound perfectly uniform, with a little excess here and there. A slight lack of air can be heard in the upper mid and treble, and a touch of added sibilants too. On initial listening, violins also seem to excite some of these colorations, but one seems to come to accept these and soon fail to notice them at all. On the down side I'm sure that the musical character sounds a little shut in and the soundstage is somewhat less expansive than with open-back headphone designs.

The treble is first class with clear detail that extends down into the articulate midrange. The bass has good extension and satisfying weight, and although it can appear a little too heavy on some recordings, it does have fine definition. Overall, however, this headphone does have a more even balance than most.

Using the best amplification I had available provided a wealth of spatial information with superb image location. The soundstage is wide with quite good front-to-back imagery that's locked in with plenty of spatial clues. The *TH610* does have very good slam and dynamics, but the soundstage is definitely more contained than some other examples, particularly open-back types, and while rhythm and timing are good, I've definitely heard better at this price level.

Technically this headphone has a 25ohms impedance alongside a good sensitivity, so headphone amplifiers find should find it easy to drive. The claimed frequency response is 5Hz – 45kHz (without specified limits) and the weight is a quite reasonable 375g, so it shouldn't be too heavy on the head.

Conclusions

The Fostex *TH610* is not devoid of mild colorations which give it a particular flavour. It is comfortable to wear for quite long periods and has a good range of adjustments. It certainly has many strengths, and represents a very good headphone set that will provide hours of musical enjoyment. Firmly Recommended.

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 *Wooly 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.