

HIFI CRITIC

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THREE BIG SPEAKERS

Paul Messenger gets to play with the Spendor SP200, the Graham Audio VOTU and the B&W 802 D3

A SYSTEM OF NOTE

Chris Frankland tries out a relatively affordable complete system from Audio Note (UK)

MAGICO S5 RE-INVENTED

Five years on, Magico has released a MkII version of the S5. Martin Colloms assesses the results

JL AUDIO + ATC

This issue we've given Kevin Fiske a solid-state sub/sat system, to try and expand his world view!

NVA's INTRO SYSTEM

£650 for a serious hi-fi system? NVA sells direct in order to keep prices exceptionally low

MQA DACs

Harry Harrison and Chris Bryant finally get to try a couple of MQA-equipped DACs

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REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

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iFi Pro iCAN

Audio Note TT-1+Arm-One+iQ3

Audio Note OTO SE Phono Signature

Audio Note CD 1.1x

Audio Note AN-J Lx Hemp KEF Carlton

Spendor SP200

Graham Audio VOTU B&W 802 D3

NVA Intro System

JL Audio CR-1

JL Audio Fathom F112 V2 Magico S5 II

Audioquest DragonFly

Meridian Explorer2

Dynaudio Emit M10

SLIC Eclipse C MkII

Vertex AQ Pico

Audience OHNO III

EnKlein David Digital





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I am sometimes accused of Luddism, less perhaps for preferring vinyl over CD than my scepticism about computer audio in general (he says, just as his server starts working again!). However, it seems that I'm by no means alone, as others too are finding that the computer is not necessarily the all-singing-and-dancing godsend that was originally assumed. I was chatting to a contributor who shared my suspicions and had stopped trying to use his NAS drive. And I recall another contributor, returning from holiday, had to restart his server some 20 times before it began working.

“But a CD player is essentially a computer” is sometimes heard (though in truth it's really only a dedicated microprocessor). However, because it's a fixed standalone unit it doesn't connect to the internet, and therefore doesn't keep downloading software updates, which seems to be the curse that plagues all computers these days.

Granted it's not very convenient to have hundreds of silver discs, all with those horrid jewel cases, just hanging around and getting in the way. It's so much handier to store everything on a NAS drive. That's certainly true, but for me the core problem appears to be to do with timescales. Some of my favourite albums are 50 years old, which is long before personal computers came on the scene. And a few of my favourite CDs even go back to the days of floppy discs, long before the internet allowed the people developing computer software to go off at half cock on the basis that it can always be fixed and downloaded later. On the music side it's difficult to decide who is responsible: customer demand spurs the music industry into creating new standards and formats, internet streaming services react, and hardware makers are required to keep up.

In the days when vinyl and CD were developed, it was important to get things right 'first time' as there was little or no chance of changing things later. (The evidence is seen in numerous failures that also occurred!) Attitudes seem to have changed today. I've recently endured two spells of 'no internet', each lasting a week. While it was interesting to realise just how internet-dependent we've become, one of the Openreach guys who came and fixed the system told me that the 'fault' had been due to a software change that had stripped off my ID. He added that it was quite normal to start using software when it was just 80% finished, as it could always be updated after any bugs had revealed themselves.

Those internet incidents might not be strictly relevant to computer audio, but they do represent a similar attitude. I shall therefore carry on using my server as long as it continues working because it's so incredibly convenient, but I won't lose any sleep if it stops working again. And I'll keep my CD player well warmed up just in case.....

Paul Messenger
Editor

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Magico has released a MkII version of the S5. Martin Colloms reports on page 38

JL Audio CR-1/Fathom f112 v2

THIS ISSUE WE'VE GIVEN KEVIN FISKE A SOLID-STATE SUB/SAT SYSTEM,
TO TRY AND EXPAND HIS WORLD VIEW

HIFICRITIC
RECOMMENDED

JL Audio may well be a new name to many *HIFICRITIC* readers* – indeed it was to this reviewer – as the brand is better known for car audio subwoofer systems than for high-end music replay in the home. However, publisher Martin Colloms of *knew* JL Audio, and at the February Bristol show he asked the distributor to provide a system for a subjective review.

Assisted by ATC, the system comprised the following collection of components: a pair of JL Audio's *Fathom f112 v2* subwoofers, each actively driven by 1.8kW of power amplification and its new *CR-1* active subwoofer crossover; plus ATC's *SCM19* two-way stand-mounts, which are just 85dB efficient, and were driven by ATC's own *CA2* pre-amplifier and 150W/ch *P1* power amplifier.

Such a system would have a total solid-state power of around 4kW. Obviously, such a combination is unlikely to be best appreciated by a reviewer who not only prefers flea-power single-ended triodes and high efficiency speakers, but who also has an openly declared aversion to inefficient speakers and Classes B to D solid-state amplification. However, in his commissioning e-mail, Colloms said: "Once you hear a pair of actively driven 12in subwoofers you might have your world view altered, at least at this modest price level...or discover another way of enjoying music..."

The Set-Up

When Manny Jarnail of AV Tech Solutions arrived to deliver and set up the system in my listening room, a procedure that I'd naively assumed would be done inside an hour and half. It actually took the thick end of three hours. Each *Fathom* subwoofer weighs 45kg, so lifting them in from Jarnail's car was a two-person careful-how-you-go job. After unboxing the subs, the crossover, the ATC *SCM19*s, and the stands, the speakers were temporarily placed simply where it felt right. Then Jarnail's work began.

From the safety of the sofa I saw that the secret to the sound that had so intrigued Colloms at Bristol is a methodical and painstaking process of tweak-listen-tweak-listen...and then tweak some more. The

CR-1 crossover is the key to how good the end results of all this to-and-fro can actually be. However, the seamless integration it enables can only be achieved if the user is discerning, and preferably experienced too. Neophytes who simply fiddle without any understanding of what they are doing will likely be driven rapidly towards hair-tugging insanity.

JL Audio designed the *CR-1* after realising that many subwoofer buyers were using them with crossovers not designed for high-end two-channel applications. The company's motivation was to develop a crossover that would deliver results truly complementary to its high-end subs. The *CR-1* therefore contains two banks of Linkwitz-Riley networks with selectable 12 or 24dB slopes, enabling the setting of 167 cutoff frequencies of 0.7Hz steps between 30Hz and 150Hz. It also allows the shape of the selected crossover points to be modified or damped from the standard 12 or 24dB alignment by boosting or cutting the Q of the subs or the stand-mounts, (or both). The balance between the subs and the stand-mounts is also controllable from the *CR-1*'s front panel. The signal path through the crossover is entirely analogue (and not digital as in many alternatives) and the circuitry uses audio-grade components. Jarnail says that JL Audio has no antipathy towards digital circuitry, but felt that a purely analogue device would have greater appeal and be more relevant to a conservative two-channel marketplace.

The *Fathom* subs are usefully configurable in their own right, with selectable cutoff frequency, volume, polarity and phase adjustment, and a built-in 18-band automated EQ/room optimisation program. So they can be used at a pinch without the cherry-on-the-cake assistance of a crossover like the *CR-1*. The *Fathoms* have an effective air volume displacement of 4.7litres, have a peak power output of 1.8kW and a bandwidth that's effectively flat from 21 Hz to 119 Hz. Finish is flawless piano black, and the subwoofers use a slew of patented technologies of which JL Audio is justifiably proud, and which would take too long to describe. (JL Audio's website has plenty more information for those sufficiently interested.)

Set-Up

Around an hour on from the unboxing and physical setup, Jarnail had painstakingly homed in on a combination of *CR-1* and *Fathom* settings that he felt was working well in my listening room. The crossover point had been dialed in at 110Hz, and the ATC satellite speakers had been slightly moved from their initial positions; they were now around two metres from the wall in front, half a metre from the sides, and toed in slightly to the listening position. The subwoofers were placed in between, each one adjacent to and with its front just forward of the stand-mount.

Jarnail acknowledged that a crossover point at around 80Hz might have been the more conventional choice, but after undertaking many demonstrations and installations he has found that the sonic quality of the *Fathoms* enables them to be pushed a little higher, thereby relieving the partnering stand-mounts of some load and enabling them to work closer to the real comfort zone of their drivers.

I asked whether he particularly recommends the *SCM19s*. “We like them a lot but we’ve done successful installations with a good number of other speakers. What’s more important is that the speakers are infinite baffle designs. Ported speakers just add a variable that makes things more difficult. If we have to integrate with ported speakers, we always stuff the ports in order to take their contribution out of the equation and convert the speakers to infinite baffle operation.”

Jarnail played some more music and asked me what I was hearing. I told him that while I felt the subwoofers and stand-mount speakers were integrating well, in the sense that I could neither hear unseemly gaps nor a tussle over sonic territory, the setup sounded a bit slow overall. For example, on a live jazz club recording of a drum solo, the leading edges of the drum strikes were slurred. Jarnail adjusted the damping settings, applying negative to the subwoofers and a touch of positive to the *SCM19s*, which brought the sticks and skins into sharper sonic focus. At this point we decided to call it a day: Jarnail was happy that he had achieved a sound he was pleased with, and I was eager to do some uninterrupted listening.

The System

Before I move on to my subjective impressions, some terms and conditions must be accepted. To deploy the system as described, the potential buyer is going to need a pre- and power-amplifier combination capable of driving a pair of *SCM19s*. The little speakers are indeed as power hungry as ATC’s efficiency figure suggests, and when asked to



drive my listening room to 87dB peaks the *P1* power amplifier got surprisingly hot. At those sorts of SPLs the gain control on the *CA2* preamplifier was at 4 o'clock, which is not far off of its 5 o'clock maximum (3 o'clock is apparently the unity setting). Despite this there were no signs of clipping.

Then there's the cost. The combination of *Fathom* subs, ATC *SCM19s*, their associated stands, the *CR-1* crossover, and the extra interconnects that are required, have an all-up ticket somewhere slightly north of £13,500. That places the JL Audio/ATC combination in competition with a number of very worthy floorstanding speakers, some of which actually cost less. I will return to that point later. Obviously the cost can be trimmed to about £10,000 by using just one rather than two subwoofers, but Jarnail cautions that bass is more location critical than is often supposed and that two separated subwoofers simply sound much better. [Two subwoofers also drive a room much more evenly – *Ed.*]

Then there's the matter of listening room real-estate. Each *Fathom* sub has a footprint of 384mm x 451mm, and when perched on a suitably wide-stance stand, an *SCM19* occupies a broadly similar amount of floor area. In other words, the subwoofers and stand-mounts together will take up roughly twice the floor area of a typical pair of floorstanding speakers, although their visual impact

“the quality of integration meant that I was mostly never actually aware that I had 2x12ins of massively-powered pistononic subwoofer in my listening room”

may well be rather less. Depending on the size of the listening room and whether or not it doubles up for other household duties, that’ll be either a trivial point or a major consideration.

Personal Prejudices

When spending our own money on audio, most of us will eventually gravitate towards a system that primarily gives us pleasure. Mistakes may be made along the way, cul-de-sacs encountered and U-turns executed, but eventually we’ll decide to worry less about the boxes and spend any spare cash on buying recorded music instead.

My own path, after a twenty year and rather costly dalliance with high wattage solid state amplification and inefficient monitor speakers, involved a screeching U-turn in the early 2000s. The choices we make can be as binary as valves *vs* solid state, and we may well find that one particular technology offers more musical enjoyment than another, and vote with our wallet accordingly. Since 2004 or thereabouts I’ve spent my own money on Class A valve amplification and high efficiency speakers, so you can now treat my subjective observations with either head-nodding approval or a pinch of salt.

Colloms is well aware of my audio peccadillos, and no doubt invited me to write for *HIFICRITIC* partly because of them, relishing the opportunity to help me experience the solid state dark side. He may therefore allow himself a smile of satisfaction at my reaction to the JL Audio system. Compared to the zero feedback 211 tube amplification and efficient two-way speakers that I choose to own, the review setup was certainly ‘different’... but not pejoratively so.

Sound Quality

The most distinctive features were its pin-point imaging, relentlessly excellent clarity, and a notable absence of coloration, all coupled seamlessly to relentless bottom-end extension and weight. No, it did not sound like home theatre, all exaggerated boom and thud. It just sounded like good quality full-range solid state audio. In that sense, and considering its configuration, the system was remarkable for being unremarkable – until one remembers that it goes flat to 21 Hz. That is an impressive technical achievement, no matter what musical value one places upon it.

Feeding the system with a truly catholic range of recordings on vinyl, CD, and FLAC files from a Mac via USB to an S/PDIF converter (loaned from emergent UK brand SW1X of Coggeshall in Essex), the quality of integration meant that I was mostly never actually aware that I had 2x12ins of massively-

powered pistononic subwoofer in my listening room. This is how it should be, in my view: like children, subwoofers – particularly grown up ones like the JL Audio *Fathom* series – should be seen but not heard.

Sometimes however, one simply has to experiment. My music library contains very little material with sub-27 Hz musical detail. Nevertheless, the depths did need to be plumbed, so one night I played Yello’s *Touch* at ‘enthusiastic’ volume levels. This CD features a generous amount of infra-bass, and halfway through the third track my wife appeared at the listening room door. I paused the CD. She, rather testily and with an arched eyebrow: “You do know, don’t you, that just about *everything* in the house is vibrating?”

This is the nature of a pair of very capable subwoofers like the *Fathoms*. If asked to, they can not only massage the listener’s internal organs, but their output can penetrate walls spectacularly well too.

Specialist Installation

In a similar spirit of adventure I spent an afternoon playing with the settings on the *CR-1* crossover (having first recorded the original positions of the switches and knobs on my camera-phone as insurance). All I managed to do was prove was that ignorant fiddling can quickly turn a very acceptable sound into a pretty poor one.

In truth, the setup procedure can easily be taught, but left to their own devices I think that only a minority of buyers would have the patience and commitment required to achieve optimum sound quality, and quite a few would not have the necessary ear either. In my view the *CR-1* and *Fathoms* are therefore probably not the kind of audio components that can be successfully sold for DIY installation. Acknowledging this, Jarnail has recruited eight dealers in England and one in Northern Ireland, who are not being allowed to sell JL Audio products until trained to install systems to AV Technology Solutions’ very high standards.

Subwoofer Sounds

The *CR-1* has front-panel buttons that allow the speakers and subs to be independently muted, thus enabling the subwoofers to be played on their own without the stand-mounted speakers, or *vice-versa*. This interesting experiment reveals that subwoofers on their own on some recorded material contribute not much more than a seemingly disjointed stream of muffled sound effects, snuffles, grunts and bumps that make absolutely zero musical sense. (Those who try this might become anxious about just what the £6,800 purchase price of the subwoofers has actually bought, at least temporarily.)

However, repeat the same track with the *SCM19s* on their own, then switch the subs back in, and the musical value of those strange sound effects becomes gloriously evident, as they flesh out the sound and deliver a ‘full fat’ soundscape that is satisfying in the way that only truly full-range music reproduction can be.

Disconnecting the CR-1

As a further experiment I disconnected the *CR-1* entirely and used the volume and frequency cut off controls on the *Fathoms* to integrate them directly with the *SCM19s*. It was not terribly successful, as the best I could achieve was a blurred handover between the subwoofers and the stand-mount speakers, plus notably reduced transparency and overall dynamics. Had I not been spoiled by first hearing the system with the *CR-1* in place I might have formed a less harsh view, but all I could focus on was just what a major beneficial contribution is made by the *CR-1*, and how, despite its flexibility, it sounded remarkably and commendably transparent.

Nevertheless, the *Fathoms* are by far and away the most capable and musical subs that I have heard to date; a technical *tour de force* able to deliver immense bass power without breaking a sweat. But there is a price to be paid for all that shock and awe. While with the *CR-1* in place the handover between the subwoofers and the *SCM19s* is seamless, the subwoofers are a little shy of pitch definition and harmonic detail right across their bandwidth relative to what the *SCM19s* and some floorstanding speakers can provide. However, how many floorstanders can we name at the price that are flat to 21 Hz? I can't help wondering if that tension will ever be resolved, given the different technologies and design goals involved.

Conclusions

The JL Audio/ATC combination is indeed arresting. During the weeks I had in in my listening room I played a lot of favourite tracks, but also recordings that I haven't touched for some time, curious to see what new light might be thrown upon them by the system. In the end though, and for my tastes, it was all just too literal, too clinical and too forensic and... I'll have to say it... too solid state.

That undoubtedly says much more about me than it does about the review system. I want my audio to read me a story rather than show me the printed words on the pages under a bright light. However, it doesn't mean I can't recognise and appreciate quality when I hear it. For the record then, and for the majority of buyers, the JL Audio/ATC combination has a tremendous amount going for it. Properly set



up by AV Technology Solutions or one of its trained resellers, it is two channel on steroids, two channel with attitude – a genuine high-end alternative to what might be thought of as more conventional speaker solutions.

Even so, pragmatism and curiosity means we need to ask what else we could buy for a similar all-up cost of some £13k. Well, for a fiver less we could have a pair of the PMC *fact.12s* to which Martin Colloms gave an Audio Excellence Award in 2014. Similar money also buys a pair of ProAc's *K6s*. Indeed, there are several floorstanding speakers that offer sub-30Hz extension at that price level.

However, whereas those alternatives are really rolling off steeply towards the mid-20s, the JL Audio/ATC system doesn't just hang on to the last bit of the final octave but delivers it with an iron fist and a good degree of musical sophistication. It is amply good enough to stand on its own as a high-end two-channel setup, but would make even more sense if also fed two-channel sound from a home cinema system. Given that the *CR-1* is usefully designed to cope with this dual role, the buyer would have a system truly able to deliver full range musical satisfaction along with cinematic ‘bangs for the bucks’.

In conclusion then, while they didn't change my world view, the JL Audio *CR-1* and *Fathom* subs left me appreciative, thoughtful and impressed. I greatly enjoyed the journey and am pleased to award them a firm *HIFICRITIC* Recommended label. By inference we must also endorse the ATC *SCM19* loudspeaker as a valiant supporting act.

NOTE

*Around the turn of the millennium, the Editor spent some years reviewing car audio components, and became very familiar with JL Audio's excellent subwoofers, which had an irritating habit of sounding much better than appearances might have suggested. JL Audio invariably established what was very much the gold standard for in-car subwoofers, so it's hardly surprising that it achieves something similar in the domestic arena.

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Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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It's quite useful to have this back page available as a rolling diary, catching up with recent experiences and updating some of the things I might have overlooked. Saying that, this particular past quarter has been traumatic, thanks to multiple power amp failures. To summarise, I've been using a Naim *NAP500* with total reliability for around fifteen years (and *NAP135s* and *NAP250s* before that, going right back to the 1970s, again with utter reliability). However, I sent it back for a *DR* upgrade in mid-June, mindful of the fact that it would need 6-8 weeks running in after re-fettling, but unhappily, a week after it came back (and with Spendor's Philip Swift sitting right next to me), smoke arose from the power supply unit, due to a faulty component.

The '500 went back to Salisbury for repair, which took a week (thanks to an intervening bank holiday), so I installed an NVA *The Second Statement* as a replacement. Everything seemed to be working fine for a few days, but then the B&W boys arrived. Everything went swimmingly for an hour or so, and I was perfectly happy using the NVA amplifier as a substitute. Until, that is, Steve Pearce slipped a techno disc into the CD player. I then got carried away with the volume control, and I blew one of the NVA's channels. Timing couldn't have been worse as the 500 was already sidelined, so I had to dig out a very old (but recently serviced) *NAP250*, which happily worked out fine.

The 500 came back and I used it for another three weeks before I discovered another problem. This only revealed itself when I wound up the wick and started using serious power, whereupon one channel showed signs of instability. It was back to Salisbury for another week or so, and the problem this time turned out to be faulty soldering of a power transistor in the amplifier itself.

I'm not going to complain, as this is the first (and second!) time I've encountered any reliability problems with Naim components in forty or so years. And the *NAP500 DR* certainly sounded particularly good when it came back the second time. But the toing and froing has certainly chucked an unexpected spanner in the running-in and hence the reviewing procedures, for which I should apologise.

Why do I always discover niggles with digital audio devices after I've already written about them? I was certainly happy enough at getting Arcam's little *irDAC-II* to sort out my digital sources when it came to writing last quarter's *Subjective Sounds*, especially as it seemed to have sorted out the mild irritations I'd encountered with the *MkI* model.

Now I've found a new niggles that certainly affects the practicality of the *MkII* version. It doesn't seem to affect the co-ax or optical inputs that are used for my server and TV respectively, but the problem seems to involve the USB input which is normally used for my lap-top. If I switch the DAC on after the lap-top, all is well, and the lap-top recognises the presence of the DAC. However, when I shut down the lap-top and go to bed leaving the DAC on, the lap-top sometimes no longer recognises the Arcam DAC. In practice this can be rather inconvenient, as I tend to leave the DAC permanently 'on', but shut down the lap-top overnight, with the result that it sometimes (and somewhat unpredictably) loses the connection.

I also owe Andrew Rothwell an apology, for completely ignoring the M-C cartridge loading adjustment that is available on his *Headspace* step-up. It was only after we'd gone to press that I found the little bit of paper that told me to open up the unit and make the required adjustments to match cartridge and load...