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EXCLUSIVE: CANJAM LONDON
SHOW REPORT



**NORDOST ODIN 2
CABLES: THE BEST
JUST GOT BETTER!**

Audio Research, Wilson, Crystal, and HRS system

by Roy Gregory

High-end' is a term with specific meanings but also less specific implications. In audio terms, it's not just about performance but a particular style of performance. Historically speaking, it exhibits distinct leftist leanings (left of the Atlantic that is), no surprise given that the term – indeed, the whole concept – was first coined in *The Absolute Sound* magazine by the late, great Harry Pearson. Ask most audiophiles to draw a quick sketch of a typical high-end system and you'd probably end up with something that looked remarkably like the system featured here. Again, that's no real surprise, given that in UK terms at least, you don't get much more 'high-end' than Audio Research, Wilson Audio, and of course Absolute Sounds, the distributor named for the US magazine but responsible for introducing US high-end products and thinking to the UK market.

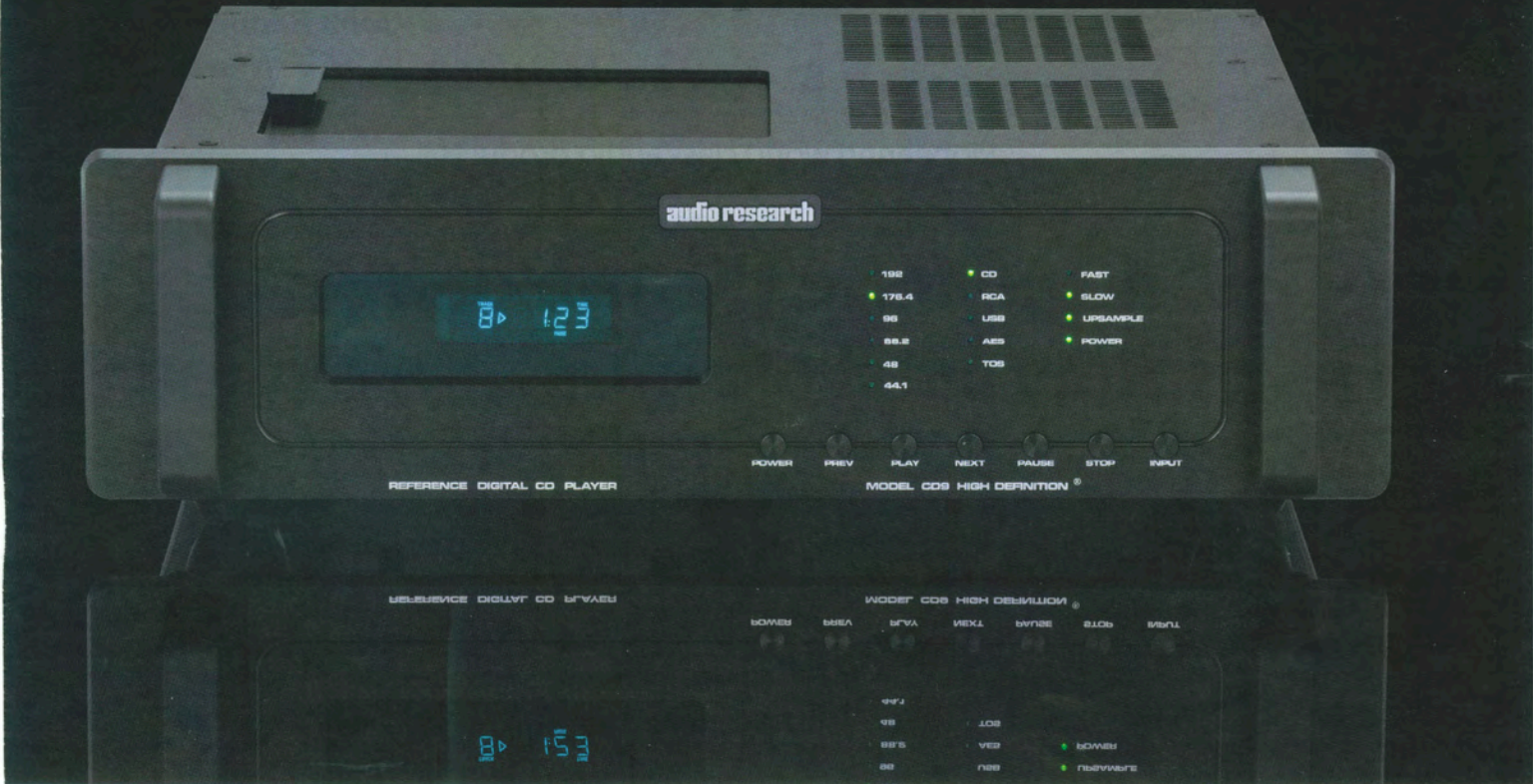
What is more, this system contains current versions of two early high-end icons. Wilson Audio's Watt/Puppy speaker system quickly became (and remains) a high-end benchmark, one of very few imported speakers to enjoy any real success or longevity in the UK market, while it was Audio Research's pre-amps and especially the two-box SP10 that were the first products to introduce the UK market to a world of performance (and price) that stretched out beyond the flat horizons of Linn and Naim. The size and nature of UK rooms also played its part in creating a firm preference for compact speaker systems (at least in high-end terms) and single chassis stereo power amps. In fact, what you have before you might well be described as not just the current incarnation of several classic high-end products, but the modern embodiment of the archetypical UK high-end solution.

Over thirty-years young, Wilson's Watt/Puppy evolved out of a near-field location monitor, first gaining a range of accessories to try and extend its bass before finally gaining an optional conjoined sub to turn it into a credible domestic speaker system. Now in its tenth iteration, it's a neater and far more elegant product, having cast off its studio roots. These days the subs are no longer optional although it remains a four-box set up; that evolution reflected in the adoption of the Sasha name, bringing it in line with the rest of a family that stretches all the way from Sabrina to Alexandria. The

latest Sasha 2 employed here boasts further developments of the baffle and head-unit to better integrate the established 178mm midrange driver with the new silk dome tweeter, adapted from the unit developed for the flagship Alexandria. The baffle itself is now constructed from Wilson's proprietary phenolic material and angles the two drivers individually. Beneath the back of the head unit is a machined ten step, sliding 'staircase' that engages with the single rear spike and allows the baffle to be precisely angled and set relative to the bass units to allow for the listener's height and distance from the speaker. The bass unit retains its two 200mm pulp-coned drivers a side, along with the interchangeable casters and spikes that are such an effective (and necessary – the Sasha 2s weigh over 90kg each) aid to set up. It would be easy to point to the introduction of that soft dome tweeter and stepped baffle as the big news here, but despite the fact that this is the first W/P version to eschew the inverted and latterly titanium dome used in all previous models, that would rather miss the point. The Sasha 2 is simply the latest step in a long but steady evolution – and evolution by its very nature involves subtle change. The Sasha 2 might offer more outwardly obvious clues than previous steps in the progression, but make no mistake: this is still very much a Wilson, and very much a Watt/Puppy.

Audio Research's Reference 150SE power amp and Reference 10 line-stage have enjoyed a similar, evolutionary development path to the speakers they are paired with – albeit not quite as long or unbroken. The Ref 150SE can arguably be traced all the way back to the D90, although its true, spiritual roots lie in the D115 with its four 6550 output tubes per channel. Like the Sasha 2 it can also claim a key technology innovation, being part of the company's first range to use the KT150 output tube. But that SE designation indicates more than just a change in output tubes, with the KT150 demanding totally different filament and bias supplies as well as revised output transformers. The enclosed chassis is cooled by a pair of rear-mounted fans whose speed (and thus the noise they generate) can be adjusted using two small switches concealed under the cover: Not the quietest, they arrive set on the highest speed, which you might want to reduce if you are using the amp in an open setting as opposed to a rack, or near the listening seat. ▶

EQUIPMENT REVIEW / ARC/WILSON SYSTEM



“We can only listen to a system. The best systems are considerably greater than the sum of their parts and this one is a case in point.”



► ARC has a long history of producing legendary twin-chassis preamps and the Reference 10 is going to do nothing to damage that lineage. Roughly amounting to the “(almost) everyman” evolution of the limited production 40th Anniversary Edition reference line-stage, it employs a number of significant refinements in componentry over its predecessor, along with a touchscreen user interface paired with a single, large volume control rocker. Sadly lacking the pleasing symmetry of previous ARC flagship preamps, my initial disquiet was quickly dispelled by the utterly intuitive and ultra positive control and switching options offered by the touchscreen. I’ve been saying for a while that if hi-fi manufacturers are going to move to touchscreen control, they need to make sure they execute it to the same standard as Apple and the iPhone/iPad: that’s exactly what ARC have done here and the results are as reassuringly clear as they are easy to use. With a full suite of both balanced and single-ended, fully configurable inputs and outputs, the Ref 10 is as versatile as it is capable, perfectly suited to the task of driving the balanced input only Ref 150SE.

Of course, we could have paired the Ref 10/150SE with a Ref 2 or Ref 10 phono-stage and an appropriate record player (Absolute Sounds would doubtless suggest a TechDas) but in the spirit of keeping things iconic, we stuck to an all ARC solution, using the Ref CD9 as the system’s primary source component. A top-loading CD-only machine, the CD9 nonetheless embodies current digital thinking with a host of up-sampling and filter options as well as digital and USB inputs, allowing it to act as a DAC for multiple digital sources, including file replay at data rates of up to 24bit/192kHz. I did dabble with the USB input, but primary listening for this review centred on the all ARC chain and optical discs, a choice that produce such impressively engaging results that for once I really wasn’t tempted to look elsewhere.

System reviews are often seen as somehow limited: they only apply if you use the whole system together. Unfortunately guys, that’s true of audio in general and it’s the individual product review that’s out of step. We can’t listen to an amplifier or a CD player – we can only listen to a system. The best systems are considerably greater than the sum of their parts and this one is a case in point. Rather than fixating on the individual contributions here, what’s more interesting and useful is understanding just how we reached this state of grace. Yes, I can marvel at the sweet top-end and overall spatial coherence of the result – and it would be easy to put that down to those revisions in the Sasha 2. But do you really think that the Ref 10 line-stage isn’t playing a part? In fact, if I’m going to start pointing fingers at what makes this system work so astonishingly well, it’s the Ref 10 that’s going to get the attention. Sure, the CD9 has to deliver the signal and the Ref 150SE and Sashas have to preserve and project it, but it’s the line-stage that invests it with the sheer musical integrity and authority that I’m hearing here, that provides the firm footing for take off and the glue that binds the whole thing together.

There are other, equally important factors at work too. Taking the system coherence concept a stage further, Absolute Sounds ensured that I was using a full set of Crystal Cable’s Absolute Dream to hook up the AC supply, distribution, balanced signal path, and speaker cables. They would have insisted on sticking everything in an Artesania rack too, but I drew the line there, given that I’ve already got a number of other racks in-house and under review: The listening room would have looked like a furniture depository. Instead, they (somewhat grudgingly) ‘allowed’ me to use the excellent HRS RXR rack, equipped with a mix of M3X and R3X shelves, Nimbus couplers, and damping plates. As impressive as the system sounded when first fired up, it was a number of these final steps that really elevated its performance. Switching ►

the speaker connections from the 4 Ohm to the 8 Ohm taps on the Ref 150SE introduced a remarkable increase in presence, immediacy and dynamic authority – despite the fact that the Sashas represent a solid 4 Ohm load, with a minimum impedance that barely scrapes above the 2 Ohm mark. Placing HRS damping plates on the rear top of the CD9 and running down the spine of the Ref 150SE's cover produced the kind of increase in harmonic resolution, and dynamic definition, along with a reduction in grain leading to a much blacker background, that was hard to credit – until you look at the quality and resolution of the equipment involved. If this system might be considered a window, it's a window Canaletto might have used to view Venice, instantly reflecting any change in light or shade, just as it immediately reacts to any shift in musical weight or emphasis.

Wilson speakers and ARC electronics have always done the space thing. From the starkly spot-lit, walk-in soundstages of early Watt-based systems, to the expansive warmth and presence of the SP8 and 10, these quickly became both sonic trade marks for the respective brands and sticks their detractors beat them with: too clean; over-etched; too warm; too soft; no sense of pace, rhythm or timing – that last the most damning criticism of all. Well my, how times have changed! While the flat earth long ago started to curl up at the edges, the high-end also embarked on embracing those contrary views. In the last few years, musical integrity has stepped right to the centre of the high-end stage, with an increasing awareness of the relationship between direct and reflected energy informing a deeper understanding between the notes and the acoustic space in which they're played. Increases in performance are never linear across different elements in a system or different technologies: you don't always hear what a change can do because other elements in the system are masking it. But occasionally, just occasionally, you get one of those happy accidents or coincidences where advances across a system and across different manufactures happen to fall in step, creating a step change in performance. That's exactly what we have here.

Sit the original Sasha and the Sasha 2 side by side and there's no doubting the increased dynamic, musical, and spatial coherence of the revised speaker. Truer harmonics, a broader tonal palette and sweeter, more natural balance are valuable by-products, but the key musical results lie in its more emphatic delivery, its ability to sound both more delicate but also more purposeful. At the same time, the switch to SE status has allowed the Ref 150 to deliver its power in a more unimpeded way, with a greater sense of substance and flow. Now throw in the fact that the Ref 10 has taken the

relaxed, unforced, and spacious presentation of earlier ARC Reference line-stages and added considerable focus, and resolution, while also anchoring the whole musical edifice to a firmly planted sense of time and place and the remarkably impressive musical results start to make a whole lot of sense. Bind those changes together with a carefully considered and totally coherent system infrastructure and you really hear the benefits. In the case of Absolute Dream, the cables don't just come from the same range; each and every cable throughout the system employs identical conductors, construction, and materials. Likewise, the HRS supports employ a completely integrated approach to both isolating the equipment from the



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- ▶ outside world and isolating the signal path from microphony generated within the equipment itself. These are not ancillaries or accessories: both supports and cabling are crucial elements of the system as a whole that you underestimate at the peril of the musical performance that results.

And what a performance it is. Play familiar recordings on this system and you’ll be astonished at the sheer presence it brings to the performance. If the mark of a great system is to bring the original event, the sense of that performance into the room with the listener, then this is definitely a great system. It’s partly to do with the size and dimensionality of the acoustic, partly to do with the system’s ability to track shifts in level and dynamic density. But it’s all to do with the natural perspective, scale, and the lucid clarity it brings to proceedings. It doesn’t matter whether you are playing classical recordings from the Decca Analogue Years box, or contemporary rock or pop recordings; you’ll immediately recognize the unforced quality, with all the effortless flow and dynamic response, presence and rich tonality that have long been familiar in ARC-based systems. But where this system takes a significant step forward is in terms of its almost physical sense of substance, of concentrated energy and musical purpose.

It’s down to that planted quality I referred to earlier. There’s a temporal security, a sense of each note having a place and being in its place, that brings a wonderful, natural inevitability and flow to the performance, whether it’s the restraint and hesitations of a Nanci Griffith or the joyous, propulsive riot of Paul Thorn covering ‘Doctor My Eyes’. There’s a new-found sense of musical purpose to this latest generation of ARC and Wilson products that gives music an unmistakable and incredibly natural sense of direction. Combine that with the impressive presence and substance and it reveals an immediacy that makes listening a compelling and engaging experience. Throw in the ability to capture the texture of instruments, the character of a voice, and suddenly you find yourself being pulled into the music. Few systems I’ve used allow you to forget the system itself quite as completely as this one. Few systems I’ve used encompass different genres with such ease and scale the dynamic shift from solo voice or instrument to large ensemble with such comfort. When Lorin Maazel calls for the bass drum and timps to punctuate a point in his Sibelius One, it’s that point that gets made and stays made.

SYSTEM COMPONENTS

Audio Research Reference CD9 Price: £10,998

Audio Research Reference 10 Price: £25,998

Audio Research Reference 150SE Price: £11,998

Manufacturer: Audio Research Corporation

URL: www.audioresearch.com

Wilson Audio Sasha Series 2 Price: £30,998/pair

Manufacturer: Wilson Audio Specialities

URL: www.wilsonaudio.com

Crystal Cable Absolute Dream Prices: from £10,000

Manufacturer: Crystal Cable

URL: www.crystalcables.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds Ltd

Tel: +44 (0)208 971 3909

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

HRS RXR Rack with M3X and R3X shelves

Prices: from £1,280

Manufacturer: Harmonic Resolution Systems

URL: www.avisolation.com

UK Retailer: The Audio Consultants

Tel: +44 (0)118 981 9891

URL: www.audioconsultants.co.uk

Those who’ve dismissed older ARC electronics as lazy, or past Wilson speakers as splashy and disjointed owe themselves another listen, because this system is special. It takes all of the spatial, tonal, and textural qualities for which ARC products are justifiably renowned, all of the Wilson speakers’ dynamic range and projection, and binds them to a solidly anchored musical structure that is full of life, intent, musical energy, and (that word again) purpose. It captures the motivation, the space and the atmosphere of recordings – and it brings it, nervous, hesitant, kicking or screaming into your room. If you want to experience that expectant hush that falls when a conductor raises his baton, or the muggy atmosphere and sticky floor of some backstreet gig, this system can take you there – because that’s what it is and that’s what it does. This is a system that does indeed exceed the sum of its very considerable parts. You’ll pay (handsomely) for the pleasure but that’s not really the point. In the real world you’ve either got the money or you haven’t. For the rest of us, this system stands both as an example of what “high-end audio” is all about – and just what’s possible. +