

United nations

Danish, American and Italian hi-fi combine to deliver something greater than the sum of the parts says **Jimmy Hughes**

Imposing; authoritative; commanding; solid; engaging; just a few of the adjectives that passed through our minds as this month's *Beautiful System* settled down and began to weave its spell. It certainly delivers a big bold sound that has amazing weight and presence. Nor do you need 'golden ears' to appreciate what's on offer; it's something that hits home as soon as you listen in.

If anyone mistakenly thinks high-end audio can only be appreciated by cognoscenti, a few minutes with this system should demonstrate otherwise. There's a sense of scale and drama that isn't often encountered. The sound has gravitas that is palpable – and not just on large-scale music. Even quiet solo instruments (and voices) display a vivid presence that creates holographic three-dimensional soundstaging.

We'd say the amplifier is largely responsible for this – though, of course, each component plays its part. Audio Research electronics are renowned for delivering a full-blooded sort of sound and the SP17/VS115 does not disappoint. But what about the Copland CD player; how does it differ from an Audio Research front end? We had to find out...

The all-important source

So, before getting the full system up and running, we separately auditioned Copland's CDA825 in our own set-up. And what we heard immediately convinced us that this player is of the first rank. It delivers a crisp, lucid sound that is very transparent. The top end has a beautifully open quality that lacks the slightly closed-in hardness one

often seems to get with CD, while the bass offers outstanding depth and power.

The CDA825 seems slightly more airy and open-sounding than (say) ARC's DAC 8; though not necessarily better or worse, just different. The ARC delivers a darker, slightly richer tonality, with strong midband and a full bass. Not that the Copland lacks bass heft; on the contrary, it proved exceptionally good at lower frequencies, delivering some of the deepest, fullest bass we've ever heard from CD.

Playing a disc of Britten's *Courtly Dances* from *Gloriana*, we were impressed by the effortlessly breathy weight of low-frequency instruments like bass drum and massed double basses – the sound seems to waft out

“An exceptional system – one that offers a winning combination of musical involvement.”

of the speakers in a manner one doesn't often encounter with CD. At the same time, the music sounded very natural and tonally realistic – smooth, open and well-balanced.

Copland claims its upsampling network was developed using psycho-acoustic modelling, with extra care taken to eliminate noise. A Philips CD Pro 2 transport is featured, with twin sets of Woolfson D/A converters used in dual-differential mono mode, plus 24-bit/192kHz processing from a low-jitter master clock. The DAC reads data from a large RAM data-memory buffer to reduce low-frequency jitter.

COMPONENTS



1 COPLAND CDA825 CD PLAYER £4,289

Airy and spacious, yet focused and crisply detailed, Copland's CDA825 is an impressive-sounding player that lets you experience Red Book CD at its best. Features include balanced and unbalanced outputs and a bomb-proof Philips Pro mechanism.



2 AUDIO RESEARCH SP17 SOLID-STATE/TUBE PREAMP £3,319

The SP17 builds on the solid foundation established by the popular SP16 and delivers the kind of results expected from Audio Research. For vinyl-lovers, there's a built-in phono stage, but a line-only version is also available.



3 AUDIO RESEARCH VS115 TUBE STEREO POWER AMP £6,299

This big-sounding tube power amp is what Audio Research is all about. It offers a huge soundstage, plus a rich tonality you can almost touch. Smooth and clean, the presentation is bold and seems almost infinitely powerful.

COMPONENTS CONT.



4 SONUS FABER
CREMONA M
LOUDSPEAKER **£7,090**

Sonus faber loudspeakers almost sell on looks alone. The cabinets are beautifully styled and superbly finished. But more than just a pretty face, the Cremona M delivers a winning combination of smooth unforced naturalness and wide bandwidth, with impressive dynamics.





LEFT: The Cremona M's integral grille plays a big part in the unique visuals
RIGHT: Toploader: adding that extra layer of interactivity
BELOW: The SP17 has a good-quality phono stage for users with large vinyl collections

bigger, more 'dimensional' sound – though when you listen to the results produced by the SP17, you might well think such a thing is impossible!

Welcome to the big school

The SP17 is an updated version of ARC's popular SP16. It's available in a line-only version (LS17L), or with built-in low-noise phono stage. Although the externals of the SP17 are close to those of the SP16, internally there are many changes. The new preamp offers a much improved specification and the manufacturers claim it sounds significantly better than the older one.

Bandwidth is wider on the new preamp (stretching from 0.3Hz to 120kHz -3dB) and the line-level overload point has increased from 3.5V to 9V. Overall, the new preamp is also quieter; the phono stage by an impressive 9dB and the line stage by 2dB. The SP17 shares the LS17's 103-step electronic volume control (the SP16 had just 70 steps), giving finer control over volume, especially at low levels.

The SP17 is a tube/transistor hybrid. A JFET input stage is employed, along with two 6530 tubes. During use, a modest amount of heat is produced, albeit nothing much. Certainly it's unlike the impressive VS115 power amp, which

Because of this, there's a four- or five-second delay between seeing the time counter start and actually hearing the music play. Press Stop and the sound carries on for a few seconds, even after the disc has stopped spinning! This is very similar to some of Chord Electronic's digital products (DAC 64, QBD 76) which also make use of a buffer. It's slightly disconcerting at first, but you soon get used to it.

The player itself is an aesthetically attractive top-loader, with a svelte swing disc-drawer cover. The design itself is simple and understated. It looks both stylish and unusual – the epitome of cool Scandinavian chic – with clean lines and no clutter. The use of red LEDs (and a red illuminated display) is quite eye-catching, as is the red inside of the disc drawer.

The CDA825 offers the option of balanced and unbalanced (single-ended) operation, as does the V115. However, the SP17 is single-ended only – so, if you want to exploit the advantages of balanced cabling, consider replacing the SP17 with an LS17. This should result in an even





features a total of 12 tubes – four 6H30 triodes and eight 6550C pentodes – and, therefore, puts out quite a bit of heat. Power output is a healthy 120 watts per channel.

The magic of tubes

Historically, tube gear has something of a reputation for sounding smooth, rich and warm. And true to form, the SP17/VS115 combination is beautifully clean and free from edginess. But it's not the least bit warm or rosy-sounding – quite the opposite, actually. The musical presentation is lean, taut, and businesslike, offering a solid, powerful driving quality that sounds assertive and dynamic.

Rhythmically, the amplifier delivers a taut forward-moving quality; it's smooth and clean, but not lazy or relaxed. The music has an almost hair-trigger immediacy that makes the performance sound alert and committed. Bass is especially good – full, deep, solid and surprisingly powerful. At the same time, bass and treble extremes are well balanced and the entire musical presentation is very integrated.

Subjectively, the VS115 sounds far more powerful than its paper specifications would indicate. It offers awesome dynamics, with a presentation that is big-boned and imposing, yet refined and smooth. The output transformer has taps for both four and eight-ohm loudspeakers and the 'correct' choice is whichever sounds loudest with your particular set of speakers.

None of this impressive fire-power would be of much consequence if the speakers did not translate this energy

into sound. Fortunately, Sonus faber's Cremona M delivers a winning combination of smooth refinement and crisp dynamics. It's a very well-balanced loudspeaker that's beautifully integrated and natural-sounding, while offering plenty of impact and immediacy.

The M stands for 'Modified', and points to the fact that this speaker borrows from Sonus faber's more expensive Elipsa model. The cabinets are beautifully finished; they're made from solid maple wood, which feels dense and inert. Black leather-covered baffles add a discreet touch of luxury. A Graphite grey finish is also available – giving the speaker a slightly more modern 'techy' look.

A three-way design featuring four drive units, the Cremona M is a four-ohm-ported design offering around 91dB/W sensitivity. It weighs in at a substantial 73kg. Low frequencies are handled by two 110mm aluminium/magnesium-coned drivers, while the midrange is covered by a special 120mm black wood-fibre drive unit with a symmetric drive motor and a vented acoustic chamber.

The high frequencies are delivered by a superb 25mm ultra-dynamic ring-radiator tweeter that sounds crisp and ultra-clean. The crossover is a non-resonant second-order design, with optimised phase characteristics for correct space/time performance. Frequency response is quoted from 40Hz to 20kHz, but there's decent output down to 20Hz.

The Cremona M images precisely and sounds very integrated – despite the relatively large number of drive units. Even when you sit close to the



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speakers, the overall presentation is very homogenous – you're hardly aware of the individual drive units themselves – the total sound being extremely coherent. A single set of terminals are provided – so bi/tri/quad wiring is not possible.

Impressive results

This is a highly capable system that does justice to a wide range of music – from delicate solo vocals, to heavy rock. Tonally, the presentation is very transparent and neutral, but the amplifier ensures plenty of bite and drive should the need arise. There's a welcome absence of cabinet coloration and the wide dispersion of the amazing Ring Radiator tweeter ensures impressive lack of directionality.

Although imaging is precise, the presentation has an almost holographic see-through quality that places voices and instruments in a space between, behind and beyond the enclosures. As a result, the speakers seem to 'disappear' as sources of sound, while the VS115 is well up to the task of driving them.

If you like the basic sound of this combination, then we'd definitely suggest auditioning the LS17 with balanced cabling in place of the single-ended SP17. Not that the SP17 is lacking – far from it. It's a truly superb preamp that delivers ARC quality in spades – and we loved it.

By any standards, this is an exceptional system – one that offers a winning combination of smoothness, dynamics, detail, control and musical involvement. Agreed, it's not inexpensive. But you get what you pay for – superb, lifelike sound reproduction that never fails to hit the spot. ●