

# hi-fi **news**

The **No.1** for Home Entertainment Tests



## CD PLAYER GROUP TEST

The top £600-£900 models reviewed

# Fly me to the Muon

Blast off for KEF's concept speaker

## dCS Puccini

The player that converts CD to SACD

## Luxman returns

New CD & amp from the Samurai of valves

## HD Wars - the facts

Why Blu-ray's battle has only just begun



**BIG SCREEN CINEMA EXPERIENCE**  
**MARANTZ VP-15S1**  
Full HD 1080p Projector

UK £4.00 US \$9.50 Aus \$9.95



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hi-finews  
**Super** BUDGET  
 £43,750  
**Systems**

Absolute Sounds provides a mix of eclectic and stylish high-end components some of which have already tickled Ken Kessler's moustache. **Richard Stevenson** discovers they work together like a dream come true

**H**igh-end distributor Absolute Sounds has been around since the 1970s, bringing the UK some of the best esoteric audio goodies from around the world. Owner Ricardo Franassovici is something of a master-chef of hi-fi. His 'Absolute Studio' project is famed for blending the finest, freshest ingredients to produce audio delights tailored perfectly to individual customer

**Mimetism 20.1  
 CD player (£3900)**

No, this isn't an early prototype: the Mimetism MA 20.1 really doesn't have a single legend, label or logo on the fascia. Instead, the controls are intuitive through the turn and push knobs, and the display shows key information about playback. The player's depth (some 550mm measuring knob to IEC plug) might be an issue for some installations.

**DarTZeel NHB-18NS preamp (£15,900)**

The Dartzeel 18NS is one of the most eccentric solid-state preamplifiers ever made, combining DC battery power, an ultra-simple signal path and a passive non-potentiometer volume control. The whacky colour scheme (also available with blue or yellow case), three lamps that indicate mode by their colour and the surreal control labelling say it all. The package is complete with the most robust and simplistic remote control yet to grace a preamp of any description. Maverick hi-fi genius at its very best.

**Wilson Audio Duette loudspeaker  
 (£11,000/pair, inc. stands)**

The Duettes are one of the few high-end speakers genuinely designed for use close to walls or on a bookshelf. A range of supplied tweeter resistors attach across terminals on the external crossover to tailor response according to positioning. Additional resistors and dedicated cables are supplied for those preferring free-space standmount placement.

**DarTZeel NHB-108B power amp  
 (£12,950)**

The Swiss-made Dartzeel NHB-108B Model One power amplifier combines exemplary build with aesthetics that are madder than a box of frogs. From the glowing 'eyes' on the fascia to the glass lid revealing its ultra-lush interior engineering, build quality is superb. Set-up involves choosing a suitable speaker impedance on an internal switch.

tastes. Today's challenge is to devise a two-channel system with compact standmount speakers to impress me – a man for whom large-cabinet floor-standing loudspeakers are right up there with breathing, as one of life's essentials. Ricardo's answer is a most diverse mix of European and US-designed equipment that has no obvious reason to work synergistically together on any level.

### THE INGREDIENTS

The French-Swiss Mimetism CD player, DarZeel's wonderfully eccentric pre-power combination and Wilson's truly gorgeous Duette's have, in isolation, all favourably tickled Ken Kessler's not insignificant moustache in *Hi-Fi News* – but

this is the first time we have brought them together for review as a holistic system.

The Mimetism immediately wins my affections with its ultra-cool, button-less design and beautifully finished casework in brushed matt aluminium. There is not even a brand name on the fascia and the entire operation is accessed from small turns and pushes of the two knobs.

The basic remote is rather uninspiring, but chances are that potential purchasers will invest in the optional MA ZAP model or a quality system controller anyway.

Inside the enormous MA 20.1 case, bound to hang over the back of all but the largest of equipment racks [a Pagoda rack

from Finite Elemente is pictured here] is a high quality ATAPI disc mechanism, a Texas Instruments upsampling device that converts 44.1kHz to 192kHz and a Wolfson Delta-Sigma DAC. The output is balanced S/PDIF digital and simultaneous RCA single-ended and XLR balanced. The Mimetism is sleek, sophisticated and at £3900 something of a statement in sheer style.

Not fitting with the perhaps accepted notion of contemporary style, the DarZeel pre- and power amplifier combo is utterly bonkers. For starters I have never before opened an amplifier box and been greeted with a pair of glazier's suction clamps. These are supplied

to help place the separately wrapped glass top-panel for the NHB-108, designed to give you a clear view of the beautifully finished internals.

The NHB-108 Model One is built around a philosophy of simplicity, purity and reliability, with a minimum of transistors and no in-circuit fuses or protection relays to potentially degrade sound. It is a zero negative feedback design with open-loop input and output stages, so care must be taken connecting everything up correctly before it is powered up. It will accept single-ended RCA, balanced XLR or a dedicated 50ohm 'Zeel' input from the preamplifier.

Much of the NHB-18NS preamp's weight is down to a



## AUDIO FILE

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large battery pack from which the preamp is permanently powered to offer a perfect DC power source. These charge up when the preamp is in standby mode so are always ready for use. Even if dead-flat they are used as a buffer for the external power source/charger until charged.

**LABELS AND ENGRAVINGS**

Like fine instruments, the DartZeel duo is a work of aesthetic art as much as a music-making device, with touches of flair and fastidious attention to detail throughout. The overall cosmetic appeal is, well, a matter of taste, and the interesting labels – ‘pleasure control’ for volume, ‘power nose’ for the main on/off switch – certainly garnered opinions. The gold-plated brass plaque on the front will be engraved with the owner’s name, which I find rather appealing. (Then again, I am shallower than a puddle.)

In complete contrast, the obsidian black Wilson Duettes on their matching gloss-black external stands and with their black external crossovers are paragons

of understated style. This compact speaker was designed specifically for harsh sonic environments – such as close to wall placement, resting on bookshelves, upright, side-on or just plain stuck in a corner – and is supplied with a range of external tweeter resistors and dedicated speaker cables to tailor results.

Almost as a sideline, the Duette can also be used in free space on the optional stands by using the supplied ‘free space’ tweeter resistor. In a nutshell, the Duette is Wilson’s answer to a domestically acceptable loudspeaker that requires not too much fine-tuning and will integrate into a wide range of systems, positions and rooms. With 64 cabinet/baffle colour combinations it should also be able to complement your decor and keep the other half from throwing an anti-hi-fi wobbler.

I have heard a few very good systems combining compact two-way loudspeakers in my time. These systems have had much merit, often sounding airy, detailed and delicate, but if I am really honest

BELOW TOP: This 1in soft-dome tweeter was developed specifically for the Duette

BELOW LEFT: Wilson’s external crossover isolates the circuits from mechanical and electro-mechanical feedback from the drivers. Fine-tuning is possible using additional tweeter resistors

BELOW RIGHT: DartZeel’s fire engine-red remote may be workmanlike, but it certainly won’t get lost in the dark

they have never stirred my soul like the drive of a large system with big-box floorstanding loudspeakers. Well, not until now.

**ARTICULATE COHEN**

While this super-system may look complex with its battery charger, external crossovers, choices of tweeter resistors and linguistically hilarious control labels, it is actually the most outstandingly flexible all-round system I have ever had the pleasure of experiencing. With the Duettes back to the wall (or tuned to free-space) the sound is a rich tapestry of detail, backed with a depth, quality and quantity of bass that has no right to emerge from such a relatively small box. While some experimenting with position, angles and tilt of the speakers has minor inflexion on the imaging, the overall sound is remarkably consistent. This is as close as you will get to plug-and-play perfection in high-end audio.

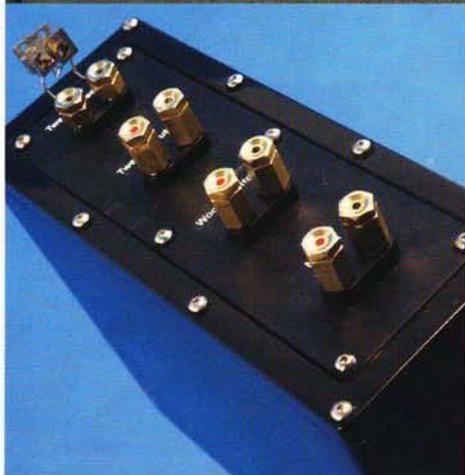
Laughing Leonard Cohen’s *Ten New Songs* is an acid test of low frequency coherence and this system simply laps up the challenge. Its timbre across the often bulbous bass beat and the bottom registers of Cohen’s voice has a rich, tangible texture and warmth that cuts straight to the core of the music – making last month’s Marantz Legendary/MS Performance 6 Super System sound lightweight by comparison. From the quietest of backgrounds, I suspect due in no small part to the battery drive preamp, the disc’s bass beat is every bit as thickly layered and intense as Cohen intended, creating a huge, moody atmosphere that spans the length and breadth of the room.

In fact I am so used to my own speaker’s overhang on ‘Boogie Street’ that this system combination has been an utter revelation in low-frequency articulation. But it is the system’s near perfect overall balance and sumptuous communication abilities that really take your breath away.

As Sharon Robinson’s voice soars above and counterpoints Cohen’s gruffness, it simply comes alive. The extension in her upper reaches is silky-smooth, with a finely crafted edge that is so real and believable. Each song seems to gain a level of detail across the range that I have just not heard before, forcing you to focus on not just the lyrics but their meaning and intonation. Suddenly what are essentially light pop



‘As Sharon Robinson’s voice soars above and counterpoints Cohen’s gruffness, the system simply comes alive. The extension in her upper reaches is silky-smooth’



songs emerge as Cohen's eloquent statement on everything from love and politics to alcoholism and religion.

From the first CDs, I began to savour every disc in anticipation of playing Susie Suh's eponymous first album. Like a child waiting for the big Christmas present I knew it would move me – and I was not disappointed. This emotionally charged CD of lush female vocal and complex modern instrumentation simply burst into the room, crafting a huge soundstage with Suh's voice immaculately portrayed centre-stage. Her often strained tone is craft full of depth, urgency and raw passion that seems to drill into your heart. By the superb last track, 'All I Want', grown men could easily be blubbing into empty glasses of Rioja...

**HARD TO FAULT**

This stunning ability to recreate natural female vocal instigated a full-scale romp through this genre of my disc collection, culminating in Emiliana Torrini's *Fisherman's Woman*. With this ultra-simple material the system gorgeously enhances the separation of each facet

of the recording. You can reach in and critically listen to the soft plucked guitar on the opening track and visualise the session perfectly. Torrini's voice comes in to overlay the sound, with her upper ranges sumptuously extended. The imaging is utterly lush and expansive, the notes detailed and the midrange a simple lesson in why high-end hi-fi is alive and well in the UK. It is just so solid and tangible without any of the cloudiness in the upper bass or lower treble that often afflicts systems with such a robust midrange.

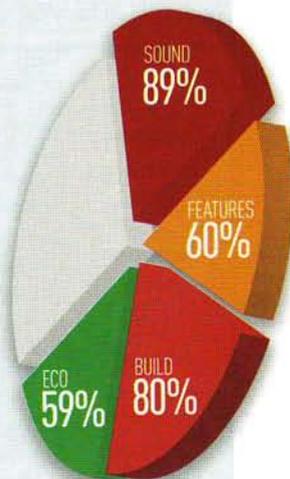
Moving up to more up-tempo rock music and larger-scale orchestral works finds this system simply stepping up a gear. The cleanliness and fidelity of the DarTZeel duo cannot be faulted, and the scale and dynamic range of the Duettes has to be heard to be believed. Its orchestral swell at the end of Beethoven's *Egmont Overture* could turn a die-hard rock fan on to classical music and the speakers go considerably louder, deeper and wider than any standmounts I have heard. I am frankly at a loss to criticise, well, anything!

Clearly the drive and rich sound of the Mimetism, the ultra-clean and transparent

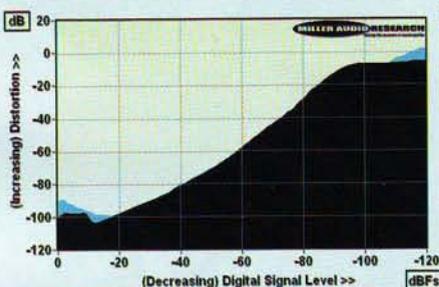
fluidity of the DarTZeel and the fabulous balance and power of the Duettes combine to form a stunning system. Worthy of three Michelin Stars, this is a truly delicious dish blended from the finest ingredients by someone – to borrow a Master Chef phrase – that really understands flavours. ☺

**HI-FI NEWS VERDICT**

An unusual mix of components come together to form a truly balanced and communicative system with flexibility to impress in any room, position or environment. Rich, detailed, expressive and backed with power that wholly belies its size and relatively subtle domestic impact.



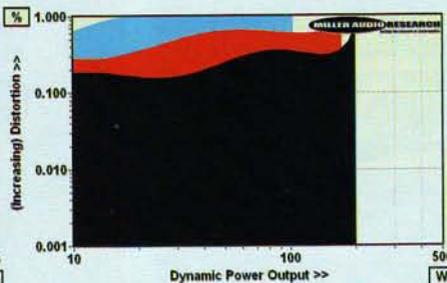
**HFN LAB REPORTS: CD PLAYER**



First reviewed by KK and tested by myself back in *HFN* Jan '06, this exquisitely constructed CD player remains as wonderfully eccentric as ever. The balanced (XLR) outputs deliver a full 3.1V at just ~0.0005% distortion and with a substantial 110.8dB A-wtd S/N ratio. Analogue distortion does increase slightly to 0.004% at 20kHz but falls away closer to 0.001% over the top 20dB of its dynamic range. This is clearly illustrated by the blue infill on the graph [above] which is very closely matched to its performance through the midrange (black infill).

The uncommonly high –1080ppm clock error may fail to achieve a lock with an onboard DAC even though its low ~140psec jitter is a match for many a state-of-the-art player. Low-level resolution is also unusually compressed below –80dBFS – a deliberate and cunning ploy to bury faint but highly distorted musical detail, perhaps? PM

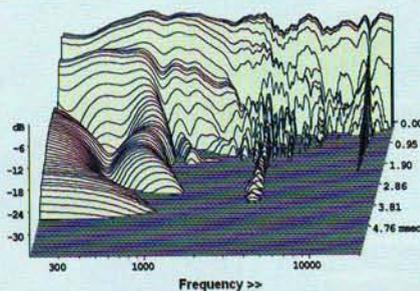
**PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS**



In its own way, this darTZeel pre/power combination is as unusual as the partnering Mimetism CD player. No criticism is implied because, quite frankly, they both perform precisely as specified. The NHB-18NS preamp offers a modest 10dB gain and 84dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV) but the residual noise improves by a further 15dB once the digital volume circuit is disabled. Distortion is low at ~0.0065% through midrange and high treble frequencies but surges to ~3% in the subsonic bass.

The NHB-108 power amp easily bests its 100W rating at 2x160W/8ohm but its moderate 0.3ohm output impedance and reduced output into very low impedance loads [see graph, above] suggests that difficult speakers are best avoided. Distortion is also moderate by solid-state standards at 0.15–0.20% but, importantly, this harmonic quality is maintained right across the audio spectrum. PM

**LOUDSPEAKERS**



The Duettes were tested with the 5.3ohm tweeter resistors fitted to their external crossovers, which configures them for free-space use away from walls. Wilson Audio's claimed 89dB sensitivity was almost verified at 88.5dB – within experimental error. Nominal impedance is specified at 4ohm with a 3ohm minimum, a conservative rating in this mode for which we measured a minimum modulus of 3.8ohm at 3.0kHz. The maximum impedance phase angle is quite high but the Duettes are not a demanding load to drive, with a minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 2.2ohm at 2.3kHz. Frequency response errors are modest and the pair matching fair, although the larger disparities occur mostly above 7kHz. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [above] shows some low-level bass-mid driver breakup modes but suggests good control of cabinet resonances. KH

**HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS**

Maximum output level	3.21Vrms	Power Output, 8/4ohm (<1% THD)	160W/205W	Sensitivity (SPL at 1m/2.83V)	88.5dB
A-wtd S/N Ratio	110.8dB	Dynamic Power, 8/4/2/1ohm	200W/175W/100W/10W	Impedance modulus (min/max)	3.8ohm @ 3.0kHz / 21.1ohm @ 20Hz
Distortion 1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS	0.0005%/0.006%	Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.275-0.315ohm	Impedance phase (min/max)	-47° @ 74Hz / +30° @ 58Hz
Distortion 20kHz, 0dBFS	0.004%	Freq. Response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.23dB	Freq. resp. error (200Hz-20kHz)	±3.5dB
Digital Jitter	145psec	Input Sensitivity (0dBW/100W)	135mV/1347mV	Bass extension (-6dB re. 200Hz)	46Hz
Resolution @ -100dB	±3.5dB	A-wtd S/N ratio (0dBW/100W)	72.8dB/92.5dB	Treble extension (-6dB re. 10kHz)	>40kHz
Stereo separation (20Hz-20kHz)	>106dB	Distortion (10W, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.14-0.20%	THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (90dB at 1m)	0.4%/0.1%/0.5%