

# NEWSLETTER vol. 32

# September 2005

**With over 25 years' experience at the cutting edge of high-end audio and video, Absolute Sounds is your best guide through the maze of home entertainment.**

As we felt last year, our belief in the resurgence of two-channel sound has been reinforced by our clients' preferences and global trends. Make no mistake: multi-channel has become a niche, not a controlling force, and our brands are perfectly placed to serve the needs of music



lovers who have not been seduced by gimmickry. The commitment to two-channel playback has been reinforced by the continual delivery of sensational new products from our major suppliers. Home cinema, though, remains an important option. We have a unique perspective based on direct experience rather than pressure from giant multinationals. Our cineaste clients want the very best, they want systems that enhance the experience of movie lovers who appreciate film at its finest, and who do not judge a movie on the number of explosions or helicopter crashes. Our suppliers have come up with an array of delights that we find almost impossible to fathom. In our stable this year are what may be the finest valve pre-amp ever unleashed, a speaker that redefines dynamic driver systems, a new hybrid electrostatic that defies naysayers, and a multi-chassis pre-amp/power package that raises the bar so high, we don't know where we can go next in solid-state technology! All of these and much more await you, from entry-level valves to state-of-the-art moving-coil cartridges, from truly musical surround sound processors to display components that make 'vivid' seem like understatement. Welcome to the Absolute Sounds' 2005-6 Collection. Thanks to the support of all of our customers and dealers, to the continuing strength of the market for pure audio, and to a family of suppliers habitually striving for better sound, better reliability, better value, we are confident that the 2005-6 season will be as laden with surprises as was last year, so watch this space.

## AUDIO RESEARCH

Faithfulness to two-channel has empowered and inspired Audio Research to deliver a hammer-blow to the high-end community. The Reference 3 pre-amplifier is so radical an approach to system control that it will take reviewers and customers a while to acclimatise themselves to everything it offers. Most notable is the large alphanumeric display that dominates the front panel, keeping the user informed of level, input, tube condition and other data, visible from across the room. But under the bonnet, it's a reaffirmation of the genius of Bill Johnson. Bill and the ARC team have created four new circuit boards and two new transformers, allied them to a new tube line-up and proprietary parts, to deliver performance with greater headroom, bandwidth and speed, lower noise, lower distortion and better stability. In every way, the Ref 3 is an advance on all tube preamps that have gone before. It even moved Hi-Fi News' reviewer to call it 'the finest-sounding pre-amplifier I have ever tried in my own system', while Hi-Fi Choices writer was driven to say it possesses, 'the most natural sound-stage, the most accurate tonality and the finest detail you'll ever hear.'

A pre-amp such as this deserves a matching power amplifier to best exploit its virtues. The Reference 610T is ARC's response. Its predecessor had a long, successful run, along the way having grabbed the valve amp crown. The REF 610T monoblock had to be more than an update, or a mere refinement. For openness, it boasts a new physical layout: the REF 610T comes in a 21in tall column-type architecture, with a footprint of only 14x22in. Its distinctive presence is enhanced by an LCD display like that of the REF 3, above which are housed an incredible 16 - yes sixteen - 6550C valves for over 600 watts of power. Silent fan-cooled, with an optional valve cover - though why would you want to hide all that glorious glass? - the REF 610T will surely be the yardstick for the future.

Now here's the good news for those of you who feel that the REF 610T is a bit too ambitious or too large: ARC has also announced the Reference 210 monoblock, slightly more conventional in appearance, slightly smaller in every way - including price - but delivering more than 200 watts of power that clearly mark it as part of the Reference family. We're expecting it to be a runaway best-seller, sort of like a Lamborghini Gallardo relative to the Murcielago, or an Aston-Martin DB9 relative to a Vanquish!

ARC's other models continue, with the CD3 Mk II CD player making the most musical sounds imaginable off silver disc and the LS25 Mk II pre-amp performing way above its fighting weight. And we're still head-over-heels in love with the SP16 pre-amp (with or without phono) and VS55 power amp for their unbelievable value-for-money - truly a painless way to enter the world of Audio Research. And we mustn't forget: the PH5 phono stage is so good, we've sold some to reviewers!! Of course, the Reference Phono remains the ultimate, but the PH5 will cosset your cartridge with almost the same authority. No doubt - it's an Absolute Bargain.

## COPLAND

We said before that there would be some surprises - who'd have thought that Copland would come up with what may be the most sane, practical and effective room correction system yet? And at only £1290!?! The DRC205 looks like a DAC or low-profile power amp, so it will sit with the rest of your system unobtrusively. Set up its microphone, hit a button, and 20 seconds later (yup, 20 seconds) it will have tailored the sound of your system to your room. Its properties include optimizing system performance, adjusting the system's frequency response, eliminating room acoustics problems and adjusting impulse response. You can even hook it up to a Windows-compatible PC to access other functions. At its price - less than a metre of high-end cable! - it has to be the best accessory on the market.

Naturally, there has to be something 'normal' from Copland as well. As first seen at our good friend Jean-Marie Hubert's show in Paris, there's a sensational power amp joining the Copland line-up. The CTA405 combines the best of classical construction with the latest in circuit design, to produce a relatively compact amp able to yield 50 watts per channel from four KT88s. It even looks like someone grafted an iPod to its front panel! We loved it immediately, even before we found out that it will sell for only £2288. The system remote supplied will also control the Copland CD players.

## CRYSTAL CABLE

Mandrake Cable, due to a series of unforeseen events, has ceased production, but that didn't stop demand for a silver cable from our customers. Added to that, our successes in the entry-level sector with PrimaLuna and the new Sonus faber Domus models convinced us that we could benefit from adding a line of cables to meet both criteria: silver content and well priced. Thus the newest addition to our family is Crystal Cable, a brand with a peerless pedigree and a background in metallurgy that is the envy of all other cable companies. Their unique approach to design extends even to the packaging, which we can only describe as 'cool and sexy'! For under £300, you can invest in Crystal's interconnects, and no corners were cut: even the connectors are 'cool and sexy'! There's also a matching speaker wire, a digital cable, FireWire, BNC-to-RCA, power cables, HDMI and more.

## DARTZEEL

One of the hottest products of the past two years is an amplifier from Switzerland, of all places. The darTZeel NHB-108 Model One boasts radical new technology, striking good looks, construction that could only have come from the Swiss and sound quality that is, quite simply, breathtakingly real. Compact, intelligently-priced, this 100W stereo amplifier has been stunning journalists around the world. We at Absolute Sounds never rush into things - no bandwagon-jumping, no Flavour Of The Month coups de foudre - so we waited for our own team to assess it. And what we found is so remarkable that the NHB-108 Model One has been chosen as the heart of our new undertaking: the Absolute Sounds 'Studio' system. Yes, it's that impressive. This, we feel, is a brand to watch.



**DreamVision- X3**

## DREAMVISION

Whenever we hear that such-and-such a projector or such-and-such a flat-screen display is the nec-plus-ultra, we chuckle, for the commentator must not have seen DreamVision. The DreamWeaver 3 projector, in addition to looking so smooth that you won't want to hide it (unlike some projectors we could name) squeezes all the latest technology into such a compact package - only 12.7cm tall and weighing a mere 4.4kg - that you'd be forgiven for thinking it was a mid-range affair. But, no: behind the Carl Zeiss lens is 1280x720, 16x9 resolution from the latest Texas Instruments DarkChip 3 720p DLP, aided by the new Faroudja DCDi enhancement circuitry. There's nothing this projector cannot resolve, with its 16.7 million colours, 1200 lumen brightness, nine inputs covering every possible scenario, and a 3000:1 contrast ratio.

If, on the other hand, your home cinema is smaller, or your needs less ambitious, DreamWeaver's baby sister, the Dreamy, might be exactly what you need. With a price way below £2000, this ultra-compact projector - around 10in square and 4in thick - will still yield 480P performance from its Texas Instruments DarkChip2, and provide you with a 2500:1 contrast ratio. At 2.4kg, you can even use it as a portable for business purposes. Whatever your choice, DreamVision can also offer the new Day-Dream motorised projection screens to accept the output of your projector, in sizes up to 136in.

Of course, not everyone wants a projector system, and there's not been anything in display hardware to match the explosive growth of flat-panel monitors. In the rush to make them affordable, though, quality has - in our opinion - suffered. DreamVision has stayed true to its tenets by not pursuing the entry-level consumer, preferring to create displays that give projector-like performance without the hassle. The Moviestar HD 42in and 50in plasma screens offer, respectively, 1024x124 and 1366x768 pixels in the 16:9 format, compatibility in every format and up to 1080i, a host of inputs and, frankly, the best pictures we've seen from plasma displays.

## EAT

Hey, we didn't believe it either, at first. But now that we've tried the superb EAT replacement valves in everything from PrimaLuna amps to Audio Research and Jadis, we're convinced that they're worth every penny. "Sonically the results are absolutely superb" as quoted by Roy Gregory in Hi Fi Plus who awarded EAT with product of the year. If you use KT88s, 6550s, 300Bs or other popular output tubes, and your amp is due for re-valving, give us a call to discuss what the beautifully-made, fully matched and tested EATs can do for your system.



**EAT - KT88**

## JADIS

If your tastes run to the Continental, Jadis' DA88 Signature integrated valve amplifier is a definitive example of the genre as interpreted by the Gauls. Bristling with fat tubes, like an overfed goose's liver, the DA88S sports eight mighty KT88s (hence the name) to deliver a robust 60W/channel into 8 ohms. With so many tubes running so conservatively, the Jadis should, unlike the French, prove supremely reliable. But, as those experienced in the ways of Jadis know, this is - like the French themselves - deceptive, and the DA88S will drive loads far tougher than you'd imagine. As quoted by Alan Sircom, "The sound is so harmonically rich, it brings out the musician and dancer in all of us". Substantial at 40kgs, it is more than an amplifier: it is a grand gesture. To our surprise and delight, that modern classic, the JCA30 monoblock, has found favour with audiophiles who are using them in quantity for...home cinema! We admit that this caught us unawares, but it makes sense: if anything can add a touch of romance and warmth and audio vérité to the artifice of a soundtrack, what better than an amplifier from the land of Cahiers du Cinema, Nathalie Baye and Georges Melies?

Another exciting novelty from Jadis has got to be the new Symphonia Evolution CD player, which delivers a harmonious and musical analogue style sound.

Naturellement, the full range of Jadis is available to complete your system, including pre-amplifiers, DACs and mono and stereo amplifiers deliver up to many hundreds of watts per channel. Vive la marquée!

## KOETSU

Our dear friends at Koetsu continue to employ that uniquely Japanese talent for applying different materials to familiar objects, always blending the aesthetic with the functional. Quite how they struck upon it for the body of a moving-coil cartridge we don't know, but this year the company has topped its range with the Coral - an utterly gorgeous material representing Mother Nature at its most glorious. Crowning this is the option of a diamond cantilever - again, Mother Nature showings her limitless skills.

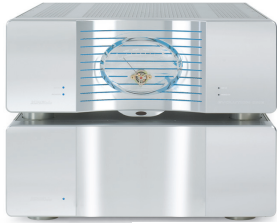
The Coral, like all Koetsus, is a limited edition - they cannot be made in greater numbers because of the skills required to assemble and tune them. They are like fine wristwatches or Italian exotic cars - they're simply works of art. Because of the demand, Koetsu has not felt the compulsion to introduce new models gratuitously. In addition to the Coral, the range for 2005-6 will consist of the Black with aluminium body, Red T with rosewood body, the various Urushis (including the brand new Sky Blue Urushi) configured differently in terms of 'engine tuning', the Platinum series comprising of the legendary Signature, Gold with onyx body, Itoigawa, Jade and the new Burma Jade, Blue Onyx and Tiger Eye - all built in different semi precious stones. For those who care even more exclusively, we can arrange for any Platinum model to be fitted with a diamond cantilever. It continues to amaze us that Koetsu cartridges demonstrate longevity not evinced by any other moving coils, making them long-term investments rather than short-term risks. Quite simply, there's no better way to retrieve sound from vinyl.



## KRELL

While Krell has long supported a range that encompasses entry-level models – and that certainly continues – we get the impression that Dan D'Agostino has been reasserting his assault on the extreme high end. And there's no greater evidence of this than the most extreme components Krell has delivered in years: the Evolution models.

Dan has separated everything into constituent parts, resulting in a two-chassis monoblock amplifier called the Evolution One, driven by a pair of two-chassis Evolution Two mono preamplifiers. Yes, your maths are correct: a complete Evolution pre/power combination in stereo will consist of eight chassis of some of the most handsome hardware we've ever seen. The sound of the Evolution System is so incredibly pure, clear, musical and powerful – that it now stands alone in a new reference class and price of its own. The new look graces cutting-edge components, the Evolution One delivering 450W in Class A mode into 8 ohms, and up to 1800W into 2 ohms. Driving it is a line-level pre-ampli-



**Krell - Evolution One**

fication system with zero feedback, fully balanced operation, and performance so clean, clear and precise that the hardware seems to vanish.

To make the most of this sublime signal handling, there's the LAT-1000 floor standing loudspeaker, in its solid aluminium enclosure. Standing 54.6in tall, the LAT-1000 houses three 8in aluminium cone woofers, two 5.25in mids and a 1in neodymium tweeter; they combine to deliver a flat frequency response down to 28Hz. Below that, we recommend the Master Reference Subwoofer.

For a source, Krell has refined its disc spinner to SACD 5.2 status. This is resolutely a music player – not a home cinema adjunct – and Hi-Fi Choice argues that, 'It resoundingly makes the case for SACD.' While SACD soldiers on, making some of the nicest sounds ever from a digital carrier, this is the way to access it.

Of course, Krell hasn't neglected the Resolution Series loudspeakers, the Class A series electronics, or the KAV stereo or home cinema ranges.

## MARTINLOGAN

With rave reviews having already preceded the official UK launch at Heathrow, the Summit is clearly the big news for MartinLogan in 2005-2006. This sensational product is the vanguard speaker for a new concept and look – more powerful lower registers, better attack, but even more svelte appearance and greater emphasis on the see-through effect that makes MartinLogans so appealing. Somehow, the Summit manages to outperform older models that were far larger and bulkier. But that's because it's bristling with new and proprietary XStat, AirFrame and PoweredForce technology, exclusive to MartinLogan. Also new with the Summit is an even greater choice of options for 'personalising' the speaker, including assorted woods for the bass enclosure, and a choice of metal finishes for the grille. Don't think, however, that the good folk of Kansas are making this available only to the consumer with deep pockets.

Following hot on the heels of the Summit is its baby sister, the Vantage. Replacing the Ascent i, it delivers much of the Summit's performance and all of the looks in a package only 57in tall and with a footprint of only 10.7x16.25in. And yet it contains an 8in woofer powered by a 200W amp, to produce real bass down to 34Hz. Naturally, we expect to see these in a lot of home cinemas, especially as they work so beautifully with the Grotto, Descent and Depth subwoofers.

Speaking of home cinema, MartinLogan has a new addition to the room-friendly series of on-wall/in-wall products. The Ticket, is, pardon us, just the ticket if you want something with superior performance but really do need to make the speaker unobtrusive. Consisting of a self-contained in-wall enclosure fronted by a sleek, curved grille, the Ticket can be used for any of the five home theatre positions of left, centre, right or left and right rear channels, and they can be fitted vertically or horizontally. Despite requiring a wall opening of only 5.875x14.25in, and 3.56in deep, they'll still deliver a 75-20kHz frequency range. Inside, is a 1in textile tweeter and two special 4in woofers, all mounted in rugged and clever aluminium hardware. And they only stick out just over an inch from the wall!

## PRIMALUNA

We can't be happier with the way PrimaLuna performed for us last year! In our previous newsletter, we predicted that 'Prima Luna could emerge as one of the hottest brands of the decade,' and it would appear that the public – and the world press – agree with us. But we were concerned that the programme of new models they announced would be too ambitious. We were wrong. As promised, PrimaLuna has cooked up three new models and an accessory, and this can only increase the appeal of the range...upward!

For its first standalone pre-amp, PrimaLuna has released the Prologue Three. This is based on the control section of the One and Two, but without any compromises, a beefier power supplier, a more substantial valve line-up, point-to-point wiring, and top-grade components. And you can add phono compatibility to it with the optional Prologue Phonologue stage. The Three is designed to control either of two new power amplifiers, the Prologues Four and Five. The former uses EL34 tubes to deliver 35W/channel, while the latter comes with KT88s, for 40W/ch output. As with the One and Two, the new models are available in black or silver.

## SONUS FABER

With Franco Serblin's dream now realised – the Stradivari Homage having completed his honouring on the master luthiers of Cremona – we thought that would be it for the series. We were wrong: to mark the 500th anniversary of the birth of Amati, the Homage range's middle model has been given a slight tune-up. The detail changes are a direct result of the lessons learned in creating the Stradivari and its carefully-configured baffle, the enhancing the Amati's sound diffusion with technology not available when the first version appeared. Still gorgeous, still musical, but now with that little something extra.

The Cremona range, which as you all know, sits in between the Homage and Domus series, continues with its awesome Cremona floor



**Sonus Faber - Amati Anniversario**

stander and Cremona Auditor, to be the affordable high-end speaker with super high-end performance. While we simply adore Sonus faber's more extreme models, it's the real world speakers that have made Sonus faber one of the most admired in the world. After all, where else can you get both performance and savoir faire for the same price? To ensure that its presence at entry level remains secure, Sonus faber has created below the successful Cremona range of speakers, a full range called Domus. What we find so astonishing is that our Italian friends have managed to increase both the value-for-money and enhance the appearance! We have absolutely no doubts that the Domus range is the best-looking line-up in its price sector, to say nothing of the smooth, detailed, lush sound. Able to satisfy both two-channel and multi-channel requirements, the range consists of the Concertino Domus small two-way floor stander, the Concerto Domus full-height floor standing speaker, the Grand Piano Domus floor stander, and the Center and Wall Domus models for 5.1 systems, capped off with the 200W, self-powered Gravis Domus subwoofer. Take our word for it: you're going to think these beauties are part of the Cremona series.

## THETA DIGITAL

Theta never ceases to amaze us, positioning themselves at the forefront of music and cinema digital technology. Apart from the 6 Shooter analogue controller which partners Casablanca III allowing the CB III to connect and control multi-channel sources such as SACD and DVD-A and converting SE to Bal or Bal to SE without compromising the signal path by avoiding the signal going through the processor, the range has two serious and novel additions: The affordable and versatile Valis multi-channel sound and video processor, including LCD-TFT which offers to monitor menus as well as queuing program material. It is a 2-zone machine with 7.1 analogues and digital on zone 1 and stereo on Zone 2, the video switching includes DVI/HDMI/HTCP-agnostic compatible and display interchangeable. The Virtu, inevitable partner for the Valis, a 7-channel ultra-high speed 150W per channel digital amplifier operating in the digital domain accepting the full digital stream from the Valis and other digital sources. Here again only in the digital domain, unlike conventional class T amplifiers (PWM) the Virtu power DAC is a digital pulse with WIDTH modulation amplifier (DPWM) which operates at 1MHz compared to the standard 250KHz/384 KHz PWM amplification.

## TRANSPARENT AUDIO

Transparent has over the many years of exclusive partnership with Absolute Sounds rewarded the most demanding audio enthusiast with cables that assure nicest system connection with the greatest respect to music. From The Link to Opus, Transparent offers connections to fit all budgets and all audio and video applications. This year sees the launch of the new Power Isolator with a 20 amp IEC connection and 2 hospital grade outlets to boost your system performance. Also a nice powerbank for plasma users to assure you clean mains supply for a truly better picture. Another new Power product the high-performance PowerLink mains power cord. Last but not least, Transparent has finally launched a high-performance HDMI cable. All Transparent users should contact their dealer to participate in the upgrade program, can choose to go 1 or 2 steps up in the brand accompanied with a little expenditure, reflecting Transparent's continuous commitment to their customers.



**Wilson - System 7**



**Prima Luna - Prologue Five**

## WILSON AUDIO

This is going to be a big year for Wilson, because they have it all covered from both ends of the scale. The year began with shipments of the Alexandria, unquestionably the ultimate reference speaker for those with the space and system able to exploit its supreme qualities. This really is a speaker you must hear, even if you have no intention of shopping in its price sector. So good is its performance that its serves as an education in what 'high performance sound equipment' really means. Because it moved the goal posts right off the pitch, Wilson Audio was able to share some of its brilliance with Grand SLAMM X1 owners. Note that this is not about a short-cut to a new model, but a gesture exclusive to 'SLAMMers': there is an upgrade that replaces much of the upper enclosures, to create what is effectively a Mk V. But we repeat that there is no production equivalent. This is as close as you get to Alexandria bliss without going all the way. But the really big news is, er, small. Wilson Audio announced, in Las Vegas in January, the forthcoming **Duette**. This is the new entry-level Wilson speaker plus external crossover, and all we saw was the swoopy, colourful enclosure in mock-up form. Wilson is taking its time with this, because it is too important a model to issue in haste. It will open to the door to Wilson ownership to more potential owners than any model in the brand's history.

**News flash:** Absolute Sounds will be launching a radical concept at the London show, a special division of the company to be called The Studio. It will showcase hand-selected models from exclusive and young boutique brands, which combine to form a flawlessly homogeneous system. The performance, price and dimensions have been carefully calculated for the discerning British consumer. We anticipate that the system will be compatible with the majority of UK homes, a compact alternative to the large systems normally fitted in larger rooms. Note: we are not fashioning a multitude of systems from entire ranges. We are doing the cherry-picking for you by identifying specific models that work in a particular context, to produce an unabashedly musical experience. There will be just The Studio System – no 'alternates', no confusing choices, just a comprehensively tried and tested assemblage of superior components that work in harmony. At the time of writing, we have elected to source a CD player from le belle France, an amplifier from Helvetia and speakers from the Left Coast. Mystified? Then you must visit our specially-appointed suite at the Park Inn.

## THIS YEAR'S AWARDS

It's becoming something of a tradition for us, to take the opportunity presented by our newsletter to congratulate our suppliers for their achievements. Our brands are recognised around the world as the premier manufacturers within their respective disciplines, and it continues to warm our hearts, every time their efforts are acknowledged. It is with much delight that we raise our glasses in acknowledgement of the following honours during 2004-5:

### **Audio Research VS155**

Hi Fi Choice Awards 2004

Best Stereo Amplifier £2,000 - £5,000 - Bronze Award

### **Audio Research LS25 MKII/VM220**

Hi Fi Choice Awards 2004

Best Stereo Amplifier over £5,000 - Bronze Award

### **Crystal Cable**

Hi-Fi Review (Hong Kong)

Best Buy of the Year 2004

### **Crystal Cable**

What Home Cinema

Editors Choice

### **Krell SACD Standard**

Hi Fi Choice Awards 2004

Best SACD Player - Bronze Award

### **Krell KAV400d**

Hi Fi Choice Awards 2004

Best Stereo Amplifier £2,000 - £5,000 - Gold Award

### **Krell HTS7.1/TAS**

Hi Fi Choice Awards 2004

Best Multichannel Amplifier over £5,000 - Bronze Award

### **Krell KAV400i**

Hi Fi News Awards 2004

Editors Choice - Integrated Amplifier over £1,000

### **Martin Logan Descent**

Hi Fi Choice Awards 2004

Best Subwoofer over £1,000 - Gold Award

### **Martin Logan Depth**

Hi Fi News Awards 2004

Editors Choice

### **Prima Luna Prologue Two**

Hi Fi +

Product of the Year 2004

### **Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor**

Hi Fi News Awards 2004

Editors Choice - Loudspeaker up to £5,000

### **Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor**

Hi Fi Choice Awards 2004

Best Loudspeaker £2,000 - £5,000 - Bronze Award

### **Sonus Faber Stradivari**

Hi Fi News Awards 2004

Award Winner - Loudspeaker over £5,000

### **Theta Dreadnaught II**

Hi Fi News Awards 2004

Editors Choice - AV Multichannel Power Amplifier

### **Theta Compli**

Hi Fi Choice Awards 2004

