

Hifi Pig Magazine

WWW.HIFIPIG.COM

February 2014
Issue #3



**Naim's New
\$200 000
Statement
puts the cat
amongst the
pigeons**



INTERVIEW Behind the Brands with
Scott Berry of Computer Audio Design

REVIEWS

Coffman Labs, The Cartridge Man, Simple
Audio, Oriton Audio, Astintrew, Atoll,
LessLoss

PLUS Editorial, Reader System, Dealer System, Album Reviews

WIN Astintrew Concord USB cable worth £695

Dealer System

Hifi Pig first met Geoffrey Armstrong of Sound Galleries a few years ago whilst we were visiting the Top Marques supercar show in Monaco and as a side attraction we attended a small hi-fi show Geoffrey had organised in one of the principality's hotels. It turned out the hi-fi was actually much more interesting than the cars and we got to listen to some pretty amazing kit that Geoffrey sells. Here we've asked him to put together a relatively high-end system using a computer as the system's source.

Sound Galleries (Monaco)

Telephone Monaco 97 98 32 60

[Website](#)

[Email](#)

Many years ago I was frustrated by the huge gap between my HiFi rig and live music. I'm a frequent concert goer, and listening to Jazz in a small club the sheer vivacity and excitement of acoustic instruments was always a shock compared with what I was getting at home. The first speakers that brought me much closer to that experience were High-Efficiency and Horn loaded speakers. I think that's why the level of realism this type of speaker is capable of often comes as a shock to most people. They are difficult to ignore or use as background music, even at low levels, because they have such an uncanny ability to draw you into the music. The speaker I've picked for this system is perhaps a bit of an unsung hero in this class. It's the Rethm Saadhana. By augmenting the main driver with a sealed Isobaric active bass system, which also employs fast paper cone drivers, the experience is extended all the way down to 20 Hz. This bass can easily be perfectly integrated using the controls on the Saadhana, resulting in a top to bottom, full range coherent sound.

The Saadhana is a highly resolving speaker and most people drive it with tubes. With this type of driver though a very slight peak can occasionally be detected in the "presence" region, which is heard as being a little "white" sounding in this area. Using the Saadhana while in the normal listening position this is almost impossible to detect and is not likely to bother anyone using high quality tube amps. However, listening on axis (with a Saadhana basically firing straight at you) this peakiness can be detected. Last year I had a revelation when a customer brought his NCore amp in and we tried them on the Saadhana. Even on-axis the peakiness could not be detected. What was happening? Most of you know that the impedance measurement of a speaker is "nominally" rated, most commonly at 8ohms; but "nominally" translates to "approximate", meaning it will vary depending on the frequency the



Rethm Saadhana loudspeakers move the air in this system

Dealer System

amp/speaker is being asked to re-produce. NCore amps seem to have an uncanny ability to respond so instantaneously to changing demands in power, that they smooth out any peaks and dips in the frequency range. This suggests that any slight peakiness you may detect with this type of wide-band driver, is probably due to the amp/speaker interface and not the driver itself. So I'm going to take the unusual step of combining a pair of NCore Mono-Blocs with these speakers, even though they deliver far more power than the speaker really needs to sing. In audio it pays to have an open mind!

I find the NCore's are also highly-resolving with no smearing of transients or added texture. At the same time they manage to avoid sounding clinical. This certainly leaves this system in the high-resolving/truth telling camp, so why not continue down this route and use the latest Antelope Zodiac Platinum DAC? This is just about the highest resolution DAC known to me and is also the most advanced, supporting DSD and the ability to up-sample all DSD to 256 (256 x the sample rate of CD). With its remote volume control allowing fine adjustment, it also makes an excellent pre-amp. We

Side view of the Rethms



NCore
audio power conversion

Dealer's System

can thus feed those NCore mono-blocs directly with the Zodiac via XLR.

Now we just need to add our source. This is going to be a Computer Based audio system using a Mac mini with iTunes to manage our music library and specific choices for the software audio player.

I had a real bully of a dentist when I was a teenager. He assured me that if I didn't give up Mars bars, Coca-Cola and sugar in my coffee, very nasty things would happen to me. He would personally see to that. It worked! A customer heard this system recently and was very impressed by it. The one observation he made is that compared to his tube based system, it would be like giving up sugar in coffee. At first it would taste a little too strong. After a while though, he would adjust, and if after that he tried to take sugar again, it would taste way too sweet. I think it's a good analogy.

In the age of Computer Audio the software audio player has a significant outcome on the sound in my opinion. It really is the source of your system and instead of comparing different CD players which

may cost thousands to tens of thousands, we can now try out software players which, in any case, cost far less to buy.

The customer I just mentioned found his sweet spot when I played some DSD files using Audirvana +. It's one of just two players which support DSD on the Mac and I think it's the best choice. DSD tends to sound more "analogue like" and sweeter than the PCM we are all much more familiar with, since it is the format of CD's and most other higher resolution music files. Audirvana + is also a popular choice for playing PCM files on most systems. On this system though I prefer to take my PCM with Amarra; a player that most listeners agree imparts an analogue like sound to PCM audio. Through this system Amarra for PCM and Audirvana for DSD would be all the "flavouring" I would need.

This system is truly "transparent" and not just in the usual sense of that term, that there seems to be nothing between you and the performers. Srajan of 6Moons already noted in his review of the Saadhana's that they provide "deep insight into musical performance". Couple them with NCore

Antelopes Zodiac Platinum dealing with the zero and ones



Dealer System

amps and the Zodiac Platinum and this "transparency" is taken to the nth degree. This allows the real meaning of the music to come through, which is what I need to become both emotionally and intellectually engaged in the music.

I would hook up the system with TelluriumQ cable, which really does seem to do as it claims in terms of helping to rid the system of any timing errors. I was shocked at how big a difference it made when I swapped their Graphite speaker cable in place of another company's highly regarded cable in an Avantgarde Trio based system. The Graphite was so much better in the context of that system. Since then they have introduced their ultimate Black Diamond cable. I am using their Black Diamond USB cable together with Ultra Black balanced interconnects and speaker cable, in this system.

A simple 2 shelf rack will suffice for the components in this system as they are all compact and run cool. I favour the Quadraspire Sunoko-Vent racks as providing excellent performance for the price and

Pricing inclusive of VAT/TVA:

Rethm Saadhana, Pair €13000
Zodiac Platinum 384khz PCM/256 DSD DAC/Pre-Amp €5000
Ncore Mono Block Power Amps €5000 - €7000 (Depending on exact model/options)
TelluriumQ Black Diamond 1 Meter USB cable €800
TelluriumQ Ultra Black Balanced XLR interconnect 1m Pair €653
TelluriumQ Ultra Black Speaker Cable 2M pair €1256
TelluriumQ Blue Power Cables €432 x 5 = €2160
Quadraspire Sunoko-Vent 2 Shelf Rack €500
Mac Mini Suitable as source for this system, Approximately €1000 - €1500 (Depending on exact model/options)
Audiophile grade player software from Audirvana + at €59 to Amarra Symphony with IRC €580

Total System Price from €29428 to €32449 depending on options.

blending in well with existing furniture.

Putting together what I call a "traditional audiophile system" such as this is a lot of fun. The most rewarding part for me is when a smile spreads over the customers face and you know you've hit on the combination which really pushes all his/her buttons.