



Kondo valve designs bring a magic to the music that marks them out from the crowd

DEFINITIVE AUDIO SYSTEM

March to the beat of a different drummer

PRICE Complete system £155,140 **CONTACT** Definitive Audio Ltd ■ 0115 973 3222 ■ www.definitiveaudio.co.uk

Some systems are designed by committee using a mix of very good products to produce a system with high-end aspirations. Often, you could drop in any famous name CD, amp and speaker and produce a different sound but a similar level of performance.

This Definitive Audio system is different. Using a select series of products, largely taken from Kondo Labs in Japan, this is a system built from first principles to work in a specific manner. There are options, but in the main they would involve swapping out one Kondo product for another. Taken as a complete system, this offers a very different performance and ethos from the audiophile norm.

The CD transport is a CEC TLOX, a £15,800, two box, top-loader with 'quirky' operation.

This is hooked to a £19,000 Kondo KSL-DAC, a 24-bit valve powered converter with a high precision clock.

Amplification consists of a £24,500 Kondo KSL-M77 valve line preamp, a pair of Kondo GAKUOH power amps (£48,500 a pair, using 300B valves to deliver 30 watts of push-pull power) and loudspeakers are the £7,500 per pair Living Voice Avatar OBX-RW. This is a Scanspeak-based D'Appolito two-way, three-driver design that inhabits chipboard cabinetry selected for its sound quality, you'd not guess as much from the finish however. Unusually the crossover is housed in a separate box. Factor in Kondo KSL-LP interconnects at £1,450 per stereo metre and bi-wired KSL-SPz speaker cable (at £490 per mono metre) and it is clear we are deep in 'crikey' territory. All that valve-delicious Kondo kit adds up to half a mine full of copper and silver. Oh, and not forgetting the bronze and masur wood equipment stand, which costs a mere £34,000.

Run that bit again. Yes, the Living Voice G8 equipment stand starts at £22,000, depending on materials. It is designed for use in super yachts, where the hi-fis of the rich and richer can be subjected to surprisingly potent shocks. We would love to say it is called the G8 because you need to own a G8 nation to afford one, but the real reason is that it was originally designed to withstand forces up to 8G, although in reality it is specced to 'just' 4G.

In all seriousness, this is a valid design for providing protection and isolation in the marine environment, although when faced with a 197kg custom cast bronze arrangement, internally supported with steel and an elastomer suspension system, the classic phrase from

Jaws – "You're gonna need a bigger boat" – is hard to resist.

Most music is not wallpaper. Mahler didn't tear his soul apart to write elevator music. And this can be a problem with some systems; they make music an intellectual exercise where it should be an emotional one. Here is one of the very few true exceptions.

You will struggle, and fail, to divorce yourself from the emotional content of your music on the Definitive system. This can be a tough journey for those more used to polite, slightly soulless soundscapes. Listen to a rough cut of *Sister Morphine* by the Stones and you can really feel the pain and emptiness of addiction; play some Schubert lieder to an emo and they'll dob in their Good Charlotte albums in seconds, leaving a snail trail of

thick-wept mascara across the floor.

Turn that on its head, and instant uplift is only a couple of ska records away. Yes, there is something majestic about

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the sound of the Definitive system that makes you want to use terms like 'dark' and 'brooding' in the same sentence, but it is merely a mirror of your mood and the music you choose to play.

Suitably impassioned, the system has a dynamic scale that few others, regardless of cost, can hope to replicate. Even dynamically compressed pop will deliver its musical range with fire and energy.

One of the big hi-fi no-nos is the system that leaves you drained at the end of a listening session. Except here; the Definitive system can be musically and emotionally exhausting, just like real live music. This isn't merely a good thing, it's remarkable; making the kind of atavistic connection between you and the music that normally only happens in concert halls.

Downsides are few. This isn't the audiophile PA system or the musical beautifier some crave. Nor is it the first choice for those who live for dub reggae versions of Bach's organ works, but it goes more than deep and fast enough for most music in most rooms. Only those who have listening rooms that are measured by the hectare will need more of a speaker and even then many

would prefer the sublime clarity and musical flow as a trade off.

Definitive's system marches to a different beat to the rest of the audiophile product portfolio. Essentially, either this ethos is right, or everyone else is. And, it makes a strong case for being totally right. If your reason for buying hi-fi is the music and not just the sound it makes, this makes a lot of sense. ■■■

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