



On Test: iFi Zen Phono,
Orchard Audio Starkrimson,
Audio Research REF80S

EXCLUSIVE REVIEW:
Philips Fidelio L3
wireless headphones



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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GROUP TEST

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TOP SPINNER



Thorens TD 148A automatic
belt-drive turntable



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Three dimensional

A triffecta of products from three companies in three different countries, tied together by real-world inspiration. **Ed Selley** explains all...

Whenever we encounter the word 'compromise' in written English, we subconsciously brace ourselves for a potentially negative connotation. In the audio industry in particular, we place great stock in the phrase 'no compromise' to burnish the audiophile credentials of something to the extent that a suggestion that this is not the case is taken to be bad. The reality is that a little bit of give to

considerations of real life is not a sign of weakness. Don't believe me? I present this system by way of a case for the defence.

What you see before you here are components that balance the design ideals of the companies that make them with a welcome helping of real-world practicality. In the case of the MoFi Audio StudioDeck+, spotting any sign of compromise can be something of a challenge because ▶



COMPONENTS

MOFI STUDIODECK+ £1,350

The more affordable of the two MoFi turntables (the other being the UltraDeck), the StudioDeck+ is a belt-drive, unsuspended turntable that uses a bespoke 10in tonearm for reduced tracking distortion that in + form comes with the Studio Tracker MM cartridge.

PRIMARE I15 MM £1,150

This is a 60W integrated amp built around Primare's Class D engineering that offers four line inputs and a moving magnet phono stage, along with pre and tape outs. As part of the I15 range, external phono stages and digital sources are available too.

SYSTEM AUDIO SAXO 40 £1,000

The smallest floorstander in the Saxo range, the Saxo 40 is a 2.5-way design intended to combine benign measurement characteristics with entirely full-range performance. Black and white finishes are available.

The StudioDeck+ and Saxo 40 rejoice in clean lines and sparkling performance



this is a pretty serious piece of analogue hardware. The StudioDeck+ borrows nothing from any other turntable manufacturer in its design and execution and instead brings some features rarely seen at this price. The 10in tonearm, constrained layer plinth and hefty AC motor all point to a turntable that's been built to get the most out of a record.

Look a bit closer, though, and the real-world elements are all there. MoFi has managed to package all of this into a turntable not significantly bigger than 9in arm rivals and, thanks to cleverly designed feet, it naturally isolates on most surfaces. There's a lid too for those of us whose attritional war with dust is a losing one. It is also a joy to get up and running. Fitted with a Studio Tracker cartridge, it goes together in a way that many rivals could learn something from.

Cool runnings

The engine room for this system comes in the form of Primare's I15 integrated amp. Again, at first glance, the Primare is all business. It generates 60W into 8ohm and has the sort of considered minimalism to the specification that garners the approval of the committed. Consider the spec more closely and the I15 reveals a thoroughly practical side too. The use of a Hypex Class D module for power means it is usefully compact and it runs cool in use. The example here has the MM15 phono module added, ensuring that the turntable connects up with no extra boxes needed. It's also part of a range that offers everything from CD replay to full

network audio playback depending on what it is you require.

Finishing things off is the System Audio Saxo 40. Here the nod to reality is rather easier to spot, but no less useful for that. Standing just 85cm tall, this is an obligingly compact speaker, but one that still features the considered niceties that System Audio has developed for its more expensive speakers including a tweeter with a specially developed lens to aid dispersion and the ability to coax two 140mm drivers into a

This system delivers a magnificent balance of accuracy and sheer, unbridled joy

40Hz roll off at +/- 3dB, which is no mean feat. I'm a huge fan of any speaker that comes out of the box without facial expressions that cause orthopaedic surgeons to grimace, and the Saxo 40 does that with bells on. Once unboxed, it is simplicity itself to correctly position too.

As a system this all hangs together rather well. I have to admit to being rather taken with the aesthetic of this trio in a way I wasn't necessarily expecting. It abounds with lovely but wholly unshowy details like the orange detailing on the StudioDeck+ that brightens it up, the beautifully legible display of the Primare and the lovely integrated plinth on the Saxo 40. This is a system that will sit happily in most spaces without dominating them. It's also a joy to use ▶

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM

MOFI/PRIMARE/SYSTEM AUDIO



The I15 sounds every bit as good as it looks thanks to Primare's clever amplifier design



with little details like the lovely cueing action of the StudioDeck+ and full remote control of the Primare meaning that there is absolutely no suffering for your art here.

Instead, there is the specific and gratifying satisfaction of enjoying a system that is a great deal more than the sum of its parts. The reason for this is simple enough and stems from the slight variation in design philosophy from the different companies involved. For MoFi and, to a slightly lesser extent Primare, the priority is accuracy. If you've built a reputation for truly reference-level pressings, it really cannot be any other way and the StudioDeck+ rejoices in this mission statement.

Unforced detail

Present Tense by Wild Beasts in the hands of the MoFi is an armchair in the corner of the studio where they worked their craft. Without once feeling like there is a moment of over emphasis anywhere in the frequency response, the level of unforced detail and three dimensionality on offer here is truly outstanding. The Primare takes this feed and does nothing to affect that 'straight off the desk'-style presentation. What it does so effectively as well as this, though, is ensure that this is never matter of fact, let alone harsh or aggressive. This means that your studio vantage point is never an uncomfortable one, even if the operatives themselves might not have been having the best day.

The true twist in the tail is the input of the Saxo 40 into this signal path. Again, with a focus on remaining faithful to the recording, voices in particular are seriously impressive in their presence and realism, making everything enormous fun. Some of this stems from technical application – the bass is controlled and cohesive and there's little perception of the cabinet in the performance. Some of it is purely down to System Audio's determination to have a good time.

This is a system that will sit happily in most spaces without dominating them

What this means is that when you play something with a bit of get up and go to it like *Imploding The Mirage* by The Killers, this system delivers a truly magnificent balance of accuracy and sheer, unbridled joy. Not for the first time, I am happy to point out that timing is a somewhat subjective concept and one that is more than an easily defined measurement on a trace. At the same time, I'd be very surprised if you didn't sit down in front of this system – even if your own regular listen is rather more expensive – and still not be momentarily taken aback by just how astonishingly together it is.

With this comes a reminder that timing is not simply a reflection of



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WEBSITES
mofi.com
primare.net
system-audio.com
karma-av.co.uk

speedy rock music being played like the clappers. Pivoting genres to *Sorcerer* by Miles Davis sees this trio still deliver truly remarkable involvement. Here the ability of the MoFi to unpick this dense and complex recording without any sense of over emphasis or favouritism is complemented by the wonderful even handedness of the Primare and the speed and liveliness of the Saxo 40. It's not a 'good cop, good cop, bad cop' dynamic, more that one third of the partnership is a glass half-full type of personality and it imparts a positivity to everything that they do as a team. I've heard systems from one manufacturer that can't do this – perhaps because this sort of synergy requires more than one take on the way things should be done.

Considered compromise

All of this happens without impinging on the gratifying practicality of this trio. It takes up an entirely sensible amount of space, is a joy to use and it exudes the beauty that comes from good design being well implemented. I had envisaged writing a piece that focused on this real-world usability but, instead I've been sideswiped by the sheer joy that it offers. It is a reminder, though, that compromise is not a dirty word in audio. By making some considered compromises in their design thinking, these companies have created a system that brokers no compromise where it matters and the results are outstanding ●