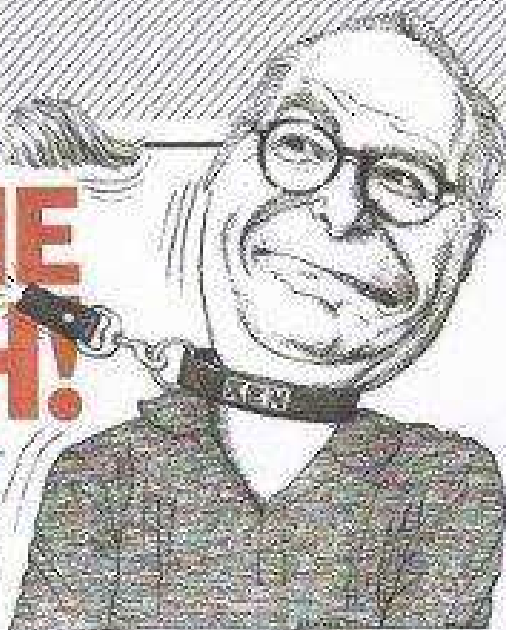


OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Downsizing but not out... Ken Kessler takes a fresh look at the new breed of compact components



My instincts dictate that I should not champion a certain new trend in hi-fi, but age has reassured me that there are few more useful truisms than: 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em'. That does not mean I'm about to embrace the iPhone nor set my Sky recorder for *X Factor*. But I am beginning to appreciate the down-sizing of home-entertainment products – and by association, hi-fi – after decades of resisting it.

IN PROPORTION

Actually, that's not completely true: my track record speaks for itself when it comes to placing hi-fi equipment in proportion, while trying to address the need for domestic suitability. I fell in love with LS3/5As the first time I heard a pair, and have adored other small speakers along the way, including Tannoy Mini Autographs, assorted Sonus Fabers and Lineacs. Amongst panel speakers, my heart was twang'd by the Quad ESL, Stax FB1 and the sublime Apogee Stage. And those three are hardly gargantuan.

I would fight to get to the head of the queue for praiseworthy components that raised two fingers to the '430mm-wide' industry bulging: Quad preamps from the II to the 33 to the 99, preamps and phono stages made by Nagra, NAD phono amps, Musical

Fidelity's X-Ray. And what turntable demands less shelf space than the SME 10 I so admire?

Thus it's not out of character for me to commend the itty-bitsy components – almost all at mouth-wateringly-low prices – that are bridging the worlds of traditional hi-fi and the iPod/computer. Musical Fidelity's latest range of compact modules, the M1 models, promise maximum bang from half-width components. The various Benchmark headphone/DAC/preamps are perfect examples of what thoroughly modern, space-saving hi-fi separates must be if they're to seduce people away from iPod

docks and other musical compromises.

But those are still 'serious' audiophile products in the sense that they cost a whole lot more than the man/woman/student/civilian on the street is prepared

'Such people are the reason this down-sizing thing has occurred'

to spend on audio gear. And such people are the reason this whole down-sizing thing has occurred. They constitute the segment of the population that the hi-fi companies need to reach if the industry is to survive.

So what is available as the down-size champ for budget electronics? I brought back from the Milan TOP Audio Show an integrated amp so tiny that it defies belief: 65x60x98mm (w/h/d)! Sticking out of the top is a 6D18/6922/12AU7 valve that forms the preamp. At the front are 3.5mm sockets for line input and headphone output (delivering

3W/ch into 33ohm), a rotary on/off/volume control and a blue LED on the fascia.

There's a reason for this LED even though the valve on top glows orange, with uplighting from another blue LED; a side view reveals that this 'integrated' is actually a separate pre/power combination sharing only the front and back panels to hold the two together! That bottom blue LED lets you know that the lower section, a 2x6W Class D power amplifier, has been switched on by the dedicated toggle at the back.

Also at the back are two separate inputs for DC power from the external (12V/13.2V max, 5A) mains adaptor, as well as decent multi-way binding posts for speaker connections, the aforementioned on/off mini-toggle for the power amp and a pair of phono sockets for a line signal from an external source. And, no, the company isn't playing any tricks with an outboard power supply size of a house-brick or loaf of bread; it's an equally minuscule 110x50x30mm. I wish my netbook's adapter was as tiny.

BABY CAROT

I don't see how even the most Apple Store-addicted fashion victim can resist trying a Carot One, at a draft €220 including shipping throughout the EU. It even comes with a gold-plated 3.5mm-to-3.5mm jumper to make the pre/power connection! As for inveterate high-end experimenters who might want give this a whid for the study kitchen or shed, they can tweak to their hearts' delight by changing from 6D18 to 6922 to 12AU7 for the best sound.

Devilishly, I slipped the Carot One in between the Quad CDP99 II and the 110mm LS3/5As on my desk. I was staggered – I repeat: staggered – to attain my preferred listening level with the volume control turned from its 'off' position at 7 o'clock to just past 9 o'clock! The sound was enticing, satisfying... dare I say it: musical.

No, it doesn't supplant the Quad 909 on my desk. But equally, I can't wait to try the company's NeroNano Tube – again, tiny stuff that you could hide behind an iPhone.

As for another truism that argues 'Size doesn't matter,' well, that only applies up to a point: big speakers always slaughter small ones. Except in the eyes of your partner. ☺

Mar 4th FEB
issue on sale

ON TEST:

- ▶ Emu Test: High-watt pick-ups
- ▶ SME 2013 turntable
- ▶ Musical Fidelity AMS100 Class A amp
- ▶ Linnem D-500 CD player
- ▶ Grimm Audio LS1 loudspeakers

PLUS:

- ▶ Investigation: The A7 of pick-up technology
- ▶ Vintage Review: Teren Work's Aesir bookshelf speakers
- ▶ Vinyl Frontier: Tetra LP releases
- ▶ Audio Missives: Marantz 105 tube FM tuner
- ▶ Vinyl feat: Phil Collins's *W* (not required)