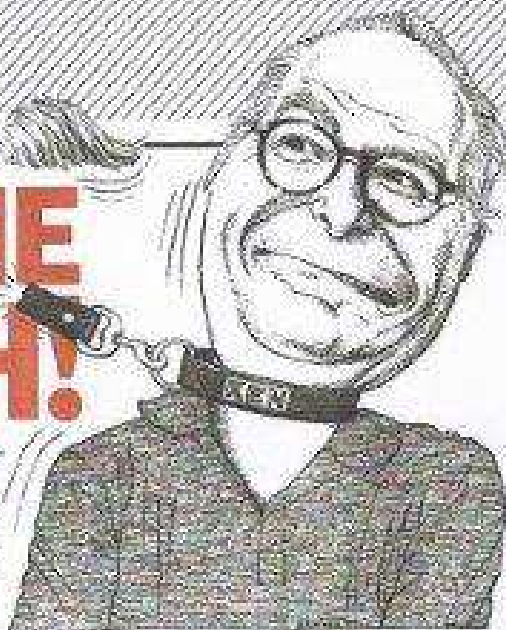


# OFF THE LEASH!

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 Linears. 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 praising 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.

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

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 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 adaptor 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 daft €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 whiff 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.

Deliciously, I slipped the Carot One in between the Quad CD998 II and the 11ohm 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 4<sup>th</sup> FEB  
issue on sale

### ON TEST:

- Giga Test: High-watt pick-ups
- SME 20.3 turntable
- Musical Fidelity AMS100 Class A amp
- Linnan D-380 CD player
- Grimm Audio LS1 loudspeakers

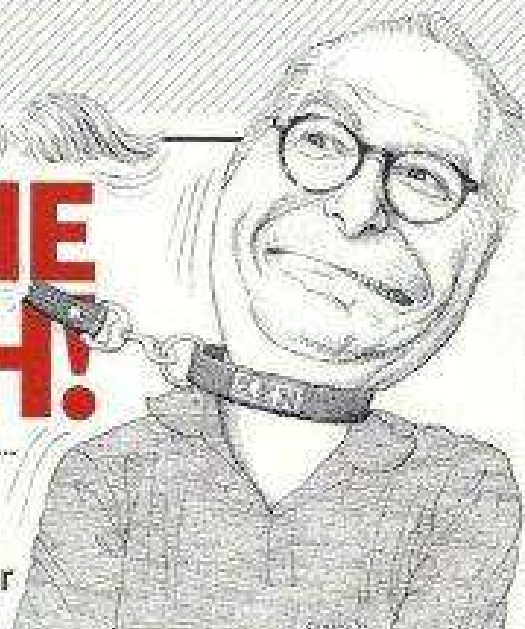
### PLUS:

- Investigation: The A-Z of pick-up technology
- Vintage Review: Teren Wertz: Airster bookshelf speakers
- Vinyl Frontier: Tetra LP releases
- Audio Missives: Marantz 105 tube FM tuner
- Vinyl Icons: Phil Collins's W.J. Taylor Revisited

# OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Will portable gear ever be good enough to use in the home? Ken Kessler thinks it's now possible...



As evinced by recent issues of this magazine, portable audio's boom makes the original Sony Walkman's arrival seem inconsequential. Many components, such as Chord's Hugo, have true high-end authority. Such devices are so good that they are causing us to re-think just what is needed to have fine sounds in the home... and on the go.

While the 1980s were characterized by people listening on portables (even Cliff sang 'Wired For Sound'), the Walkman and its progeny inspired few listeners to abandon "proper" hi-fi. Digital-based portables, though, are doing just that.

## ELEVATING SOUND

Most of us have no problem taking seriously the quality of the better portables, like those from Astell & Kern. Audioquest inspired an entire genre with portable USB DACs (not forgetting HRT's seminal role). Every serious headphone maker offers lightweight cans of audiophile quality.

Such convergence may be the high-end's salvation. Ever since the Walkman arrived, both high-end makers and pro-active audiophiles have attempted to elevate the sound quality of portables. Remember that Infinity once had a tape player called the Intimate. And who didn't try out Sennheiser HD414s with their portables?

Now there is a drive to make portable gear good enough to be used in the home as well as on the move. This is nothing new, and I recall tales of Japanese commuters schlepping the bulky combination of Sony Walkman Pro and Stax SRM001 mini-electrostatic headphones on Bullet trains. With the elimination of physical software, size ceases to be an issue. With no motors to drive, battery life is of less concern.

Undeniably, the initial assault for buying separates forever was led by iPod docks with built-in speakers, but a schism immediately presented itself: could a dock be a standalone substitute for a full system, or should a dock be speakerless, to feed a proper system? B&W's Zeppelin and Krell's KID represent the two schools of thought.

There are others, but these spring to mind for representing, respectively, a genuinely

'Imagine a portable headphone amp... with a valve in it. How wild is that?'

decent all-in-one standalone system with speakers, and a serious dock for feeding iPods into existing systems. The Zeppelin has little competition, because most standalones with speakers are poor.

and I know people who happily abandoned separates for Zeppelins, especially the neater, prettier II. Oh, how B&W must despise B&W. As for the KID, the Krell name alone imparts gravitas.

Our 'Budget Esoterica' series has uncovered what we might call 'bridge'

components that forge a link between portables and domestic systems. I am still reeling from the sonic revelation that is the Geek Out EM [WFN Sept '14], however much I dislike the look, the heat and the attitude. (Imagine Apple run by children with OCD, on a sugar high.) Meanwhile, Musical Fidelity, Focal and B&W make headphones that flatter whatever feeds them.

If USB DACs are the most obvious means of marrying the transportable and the fixed, there's more good news from an unexpected quarter. While most of the proactive brands have been content to concentrate on USB DACs as peacemakers, those crafty Italians at Carot One have come up with a charmer that will do much to add a sense of purist magic to components smaller than a deck of cards.

## GUERRILLA TACTIC

A new Carot One item at the Munich High End Show convinced me it's possible to downsize and still exercise hard-core audiophile sensibility. While we've been pre-occupied with USB DACs that can run off notebooks or tablets, Carot One has issued a far more important device for improving the headphone performance of iPods, iPads, smartphones and other devices unable to host a USB DAC.

Imagine a portable headphone amplifier... with an actual valve in it. How flippin' wild is that? Obscure, expensive at €699, but Carot One's NIK 5B-TUBE is a guerilla tactic. At 58x23x85mm (whd), it's virtually identical to a [Mk II] Astell & Kern player, so you can strap 'em together.

Its lithium battery feeds off any 5V USB charger. A window in the machined aluminium case lets you see the Philips JAN6111WA valve. And with a claimed 102mW/ch into 300ohm, it could drive B&W P5s with ease. Sheer bliss.

OK, this is so 'cult' as to be almost invisible, but the sound is terrific. It's tactile like a fine pen or watch, and it's, er, orange. A no-brainer if you need a headphone amp for indoors and out.

Most importantly, it's so tiny that you could tuck it into the hosse without upsetting 'Er indoors. Try that with an amp filled with EL34s. <3

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on sale 12<sup>th</sup> SEP

### ON TEST:

- Group Test: £1500 floorstanders
- Exclusive: Aesthetix Atlas Signature amp
- Exclusive: Magico S5 loudspeakers
- Exclusive: Aurorasound Prota preamp
- Exclusive: Primare 60 Series

### PLUS:

- Investigation: Room tuning from scratch
- Show Blog: We visit the Hong Kong Show
- Classical Companion: R Strauss' Zarathustra
- From The Vault: Speaker testing the digital way
- Vinyl Icons: The Zombies' 'Odyssey & Oracle'