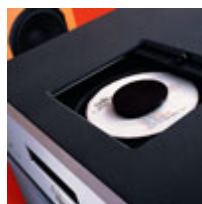
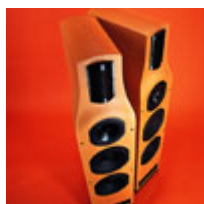


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Audionet/T+A



A brutishly heavy, but disarmingly true-sounding system

This is a heavy system. Especially the speakers. If you have any friends who can do that pneumatic pecs, ripping shirt, Incredible Hulk thing, get them to help you wrestle the boxes from their cartons.

Don't bother if your listening room is on the cosy side, though. The big T+A transmission liners aren't really comfortable in small spaces, aesthetically or sonically. Even with a 1.5dB bass cut (the cross-over allows +/- 1.5 dB adjustments to the nominally 'flat' response for bass, mid and treble) there are tracks where these modest behemoths will produce low frequencies that skew a natural-sounding balance. Ideally, they need room to breathe. And then... well, we'll come to that.

If space is a factor, here's a suggestion. Replace the towering T+As with the Wilson Benesch Arcs that featured in our first installment of *High End for the Real World (HFC 230)*. WB handles Audionet in the UK (because the electronics work well with their speakers) and this is a stunningly good, space-efficient combo.

But we're asking rather more of the Audionet electronics here. They've got to make sense of £5,500 three-way transmission line speakers that stand 120cm tall, 40cm deep, weigh 54 kilos each and have electrostatic tweeters. T+A kit - of which there is much - goes down a storm in Germany but, so far, hasn't pressed all the right buttons in the UK. The Criterion could change that. It's a truly ambitious high-end design that costs about half what you might expect.

Without an all-new laminate moulding construction technique, the Criterion's resonance-stifling wine bottle shape wouldn't have been possible. The narrow upper baffle and curved surfaces are designed for optimum radiation and phase characteristics. Panel joints and edges are incredibly precise. These are quality items.

The folded transmission line augments the output of the carbon fibre coned 220mm bass drivers down to a claimed 30Hz. More critical, though, is the hand-over of dynamic driver to electrostatic at 2500Hz. A special glass fibre mid-range driver has been developed to up the ante in linearity and speed before the tweeter takes the response all the way up to 40kHz. SACD and DVD-A ready, then.

But it can wait because, in the Audionet ART V2, we have a top-loading CD player of truly Terminator-class - built to savour. The manual sliding lid and magnetic stabilising puck are nicely esoteric but it's

the ART's weight that makes it a singular product. At 18 kilos, it's heavier than most serious power amps. Blame the resonance-killing ten kilo slab of granite that forms part of the bass, onto which the electronic components and the clock circuit are mounted in "floating" form. The idea is that the mass damping gets a stranglehold on error-inducing vibes at their root.

The matching SAM V2 integrated amp totes an identically-sized casing fronted by a half-inch thick aluminium fascia. The projected image is velvet-gloved power. Which is no idle boast. Inside is a 700VA mains transformer with separate output for pre and power sections. The latter produces 110 watts into eight ohms and 200 watts into four ohms.

PERFORMANCE

Although notional 'best of all worlds' hybrid speakers set out to excel with their grasp of 'high fidelity', it's surprising how many forget to make music.

Driven by the immaculately clean, controlled and muscular Audionet duo, the Criteria and their electrostatic tweeters don't have the hyper-airy, supernaturally transparent sound you might expect (or fear). In fact it's initially disconcerting because you simply can't hear the usual treble artefacts: the fizz, the edge, the shine. Some might even call it dull, but it's probably truer than a lot of hi-fi which sounds a little bright. For a German rig this is almost a volte-face.

The more you listen to the Audionet/T+A combo the more classically BBC-neutral it sounds. It could almost be an LS3/5A-Quad system. Except with bass to die for - extended, powerful, tuneful - and a sense of realistic image scale that you just don't get with small speakers, no matter how agile they may sound.

Marcus Miller-styled bass guitar wasn't as leading-edgy as we've heard it but what funk, weight and effortless control! Power with poise sums it up. It doesn't matter what you play - from ELP to LSO - nothing fazes this system, nothing gets the better of it. It's high end on a grand scale that's a joy to live with.

FEATURES

Audionet ART V2 CD player (£2,300), contact Wilson Benesch 0114 285 2656
Audionet SAM V2 amplifier (£2,300), contact Wilson Benesch 0114 285 2656
T+A Criterion TC12E speakers (£5,500), contact BBG Distribution 020 8863 9117

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