

Flashback:
A cheeky chinwag
with Keith Richards

Higher plane: OePhi's
Transcendence 2
standmount



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 514

May 2024

MIGHTY BOOST

GROUP TEST

Six potent preamplifiers – digital hub or keep it trad?

**BUYING
GUIDE**
100+ Essential
Components
p109



**BRAVO
MAESTRO!**

Austrian Audio's The Composer
open-back headphone

"SMASH HIT"

WiiM's new wonder streaming Amp

**NEWS
SPECIAL:**
Launches from
**Exposure, Russ
Andrews, FiiO,
PMC, Meze Audio,
Q Acoustics
& more...**

BUILT TO LAST

T+A's PSD 3100 HV
network-attached
DAC/preamp

Bargain of the month

Creative's Aurvana Ace 2 Bluetooth earbuds

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

How a dealer can help you
choose the right system

FLIPPIN' GREAT!



Audio-Technica's AT-SB727
sizzling 'Soundburger'

METAL GURU



We salute the glam-rock
genius of Marc Bolan

"JOYOUS MUSICALITY"



Neat Acoustics' Mystique
Classic floorstander



MAY 2024 65.75 05

9 770955 111144

PRINTED IN THE UK



Leema Acoustics Neutron £1,500

The Leema sets about doing more for less and it manages to deliver on the promise in fine style

Newly arrived in the market, the Neutron represents Leema building products that simplify some aspects of design and construction while still embodying the ethos of the company. Something that defines the Neutron in particular is that its connectivity is designed around the premise of company co-founder Lee Taylor being able to connect all the things he wants to it. One has to assume he has a lot to hook up because the Neutron has more extensive connectivity than most.

How extensive? The Neutron offers a single XLR input and four RCA connections, backed up by a phono stage that supports both moving-magnet and moving-coil operation. Want some digital connections? No problem. There's a USB input that supports PCM to 384kHz and DSD128 and no less than six supporting digital inputs; three optical, three coaxial. Decoding for all is via an ESS9018 DAC. Nothing else in the group gets anywhere near it in this regard. Outputs are similarly thorough with XLR, two RCAs, a tape-out and a subwoofer output.

Other aspects of the Neutron are similarly impressive too. Volume control is via a Burr-Brown rotary encoder and something unique to it is that it will remember the last volume level of each input – which is really quite handy although it takes a little getting used to. With 13 inputs and no direct selection, cycling through them can be time consuming and the input selection and volume control buttons are easily confused. I do like the large and easy-to-read display, though, and the build quality is reassuringly solid too. The Leema also comes in black and silver finishes, which is potentially handy as well.

Sound quality

The Neutron's encoder-style volume control delivers linear gain, but it still has plenty of it and there's enough fine adjustment to set the test level precisely. The performance of the Neutron is less overtly energetic than some of the other models in the group, but this doesn't extend to it sounding languid. Beatrice Rana's piano isn't quite as weighty as some of the other contenders can achieve,

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Leema Acoustics
Neutron

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Preamplifier

WEIGHT
5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 310 x 110mm

FEATURES

- 2x RCA preouts; tape loop; sub outs
- 4x RCA line inputs
- Moving-magnet/coil phono stage
- 3x optical; 3x coaxial; 1x USB in

DISTRIBUTOR
MIAN Audio

but it combines sufficient scale and heft with a truly lovely tonality. Struck notes spark into life with a presence that helps suspend disbelief and the Leema does the best job here of avoiding any perception of compression as the music reaches its peak. It then glides through Dr Octagon's *Blue Flowers* with enjoyable clarity and snappy timing.

This effortless flow is also apparent when the Neutron tackles Peter Gabriel's *The Court*. As before there are more urgent performers here, but it still displays effortless timing and energy, and there is a spaciousness and three-dimensionality that helps this large piece of music to sound like it should. Bass is deep, controlled and extremely well integrated into the midrange. Vocals are also extremely impressive; both Gabriel and Taylor Swift and her *Champagne Problems* are able to grab and hold the

Nothing else in the group gets anywhere near the Neutron's connectivity options

attention without sounding forced or unnatural in how they are portrayed. The Leema is perhaps not the preamp here likely to impress the most in the first five minutes, but over longer listening sessions, the fundamental rightness starts to show through.

Something else that warrants mention is that, having held its own via RCA, the Neutron's digital board is really quite impressive, delivering a performance that would be good enough to have many owners entrust their decoding to it. Meanwhile, the moving-magnet side of the phono stage in particular is also very impressive. Not content with input dominance, the headphone amplifier is one of the better offerings in the group to boot ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
LIKE: Effortless and convincing sound; connectivity; build

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
DISLIKE: Input selection is fiddly; MC phono not as good as MM

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
WE SAY: Does an enormous amount and it does almost all of it exceptionally well

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



Group test verdict

Variable roles and functionality make ranking the contenders tricky, but **Ed Selley** nonetheless sets out to bring order to the chaos

I'VE NEVER had a *Group Test* where it's so important to consider your requirements over and above the final ranking. This is because these devices are sufficiently different that your ideal candidate may not actually be the winner. The Parasound NewClassic 200 Pre, for example, has integration functionality that is absent from every other design, so might be more useful than any reservations about how exciting it sounds or its appearance.

The Cyrus Classic PRE and Pro-Ject Pre Box RS2 Digital tie for third. The Pro-Ject's plethora of digital inputs and the flexibility with which they


can be adjusted is very impressive, but it can sound a little forward. The more conventional Cyrus has a character of its own that many will prefer over any other preamp here. Its speed and urgency are a delight, but there is no escaping that it is the most expensive design and has more limited connectivity than some rivals.

Another tie, the wildly different Eversolo DMP-A8 and Exposure 3510 Pre-Amplifier share the runners-up spot. The Eversolo is a technical marvel that boasts functionality that nothing else in the group can get near. It's capable of a very fine

performance as well across its plethora of connections and looks like the shape of things to come.







In direct contrast, the Exposure doesn't look forward in quite the same way but there is no denying that it sounds utterly brilliant.

Of course, not everyone reading this roundup will require their preamplifier to be a DAC or the functionality of a streamer as they might already have these features elsewhere in their system. The 3510 shows that when you trim away all the extra frills, the preamp that results can be very good indeed.



WINNER

Leema Acoustics' Neutron combines wide ranging functionality and exceptional performance in the most effective way. You can connect more to it, while paying less to do so and revel in its superb performance. It's a true bargain and worthy winner.

						
Make/model	Cyrus Classic PRE	Eversolo DMP-A8	Exposure 3510 Pre-Amplifier	Leema Acoustics Neutron	Parasound NewClassic 200 Pre	Pro-Ject Pre Box RS2 Digital
Price/month	£2,600	£1,890	£1,700	£1,500	£1,800	£1,900
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of drive	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	A highly capable and engaging performer with a useful selection of inputs	Truly innovative, the Eversolo is a uniquely featured but highly appealing option	If all you need is a preamp, its single minded focus yields excellent results	It does an enormous amount and it does almost all of it exceptionally well	It has some excellent features, but the lack of excitement might be a bit of an issue	Not quite a complete all-rounder, but still a great take on a modern preamp
Website	cyrusaudio.com	eversolo.com	exposurehifi.com	leema-acoustics.com	parasound.com	project-audio.com

Key features

RCA inputs	3	1	4	4	2	1
XLR inputs	None	1	None	1	None	1
Digital inputs	4	7	Optional	7	3	6
XLR outputs	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Phono stage	MM	No	Optional	MM/MC	MM/MC	No

TRY WITH THESE

NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER:
SOtM SMS-200 Neo **£450 HFC 449**

Bolt this affordable component to the Leema Acoustics Neutron's USB input and you have a complete streaming front end that will deliver exceptional performance and stability regardless of music type.



TURNTABLE:
Rega Planar 8 **£1,870 HFC 505**

Fresh from its recent turntable *Group Test* win, the Planar 8 is a perfect analogue front end for the Neutron's phono stage and delivers a level of performance that no sub-£2,000 turntable can currently match.



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER:
ATC SCM19A **£4,990 HFC 413**

While you could bolt a power amplifier to the Neutron, the active ATC is a potentially excellent alternative that will allow you to create a compact and elegant system with devastating performance.



REPRINTED FROM **HifiChoice** FOR GLOBAL DISTRIBUTION

www.hifichoice.co.uk