

# Proper decorum

Deco Audio combines a distinctive range of brands and equipment to make its unique systems.  
**Ed Selley** went along for a listen...

**D**eco Audio is an example of the increasingly scarce high street audio dealer. Founded by Peter Empson and Mark Orr in April 2010, a portion of the brand portfolio, including Marantz, Rega and Q Acoustics, is suited to inquiries off the street for a cost-effective and capable system in the time-honoured fashion.

Peter and Mark have a customer base that extends across a large swathe of the UK and Deco also stocks some very high-end equipment. Indeed, the Deco portfolio is one of the most comprehensive, both in terms of pricing and capability, than we've ever featured in *Dealer Systems*. Deco is also involved in the distribution and production of various types of electronics and accessories.

The Deco philosophy is extremely clear; Peter and Mark are keen advocates of low-output valve amplification and high-sensitivity speakers, employing paper drivers wherever possible. Where they differ from other dealers, is in the effort that goes into the complete system. Mark has years of experience in the field of rack and support design and Peter has devoted considerable time into developing his own cabling and electronics.

Both men feel strongly that simply selecting some electronics and loudspeakers is only half the story. To this end, all three systems they had prepared for me were 'complete', and included very deliberate choices of stands and cabling.

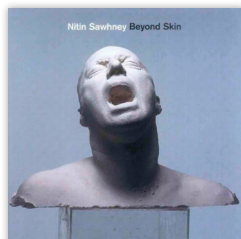


## THE EXPERTS



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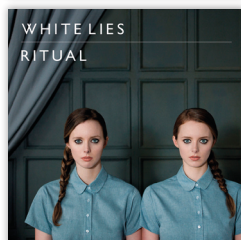
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**NITIN SAWHNEY**  
**BEYOND SKIN**  
VINYL



**JUNIP FIELDS**  
**CD**



**WHITE LIES**  
**RITUAL**  
VINYL

## SYSTEM 1 – ANALOGUE ALCHEMY

**D**eco's smallest system might have been the least expensive, but is still a fully formed example of the complete system concept that Deco advocate. The key features are a carefully chosen front end, suitable valve amplification and relatively sensitive paper driver speakers, connected by specially chosen cabling, all supported on a dedicated rack.

### Bigger brother

The source is a £500 Edwards Audio TT2 turntable. This is the bigger brother of the TT1 (tested in HFC 342) and the design is based on the evergreen Rega Planar line. Peter prefers the Edwards over even the latest Rega RP3 and partnered with the equally classic Goldring 1042, he feels that this combination very is hard to beat at the asking price.

The amplifier is a £1,065 Tsakiridis Aeolos. This challengingly titled design is an integrated amp from Tsakiridis Devices, which designs and builds its products in Greece. The line-only device uses a quartet of EL34 output valves for a power rating of 35 watts. The asking price seems incredibly low compared to the fit and finish of the Aeolos. The chromed top plate, solid controls and bulky transformers suggest something altogether more expensive.

As the Aeolos is line only, the output of the Edwards goes via a Croft RIAA phono stage. Croft has something of a cult following and continues to design and build its products entirely in the UK. The RIAA is designed to handle moving-magnet stages and, while not as pretty as the Tsakiridis, is still astonishing value at £500.

Partnering the electronics are Usher V604s. These £1,150 floorstanders combine sensitivity, sufficient to work well on 35 watts, and the paper drivers that Deco feel are vital to natural tonality. The large, well-finished design also represents strong value-for-money.

These components are then mounted on one of Mark's Something Solid equipment racks and wired together with Atlas cabling. The components are interesting and the full system philosophy is in place, but how does it sound?



### Utterly unfazed

Sticking Nitin Sawney's *Beyond Skin* on the Edwards, the results are immediately and startlingly impressive. The performance is open, fast and utterly unfazed by the massive dynamic swings of the piece. There is none of the softness or bloom that can characterise less-expensive valve systems and the relatively large Ushers have considerable low-end heft.

At the same time, vocals and instruments are not defeated or pushed back by this bass extension. On the contrary, they take centre stage and have a richness and vitality that is incredibly engaging. Combine this clout and delicacy and you have something that is incredibly engaging.

Even when the tempo is further increased with Fontan's *Winterhyla*,

this system stays firmly in control and adds impeccable timing to an already considerable list of talents.

What is interesting, is how difficult it is to say with any authority which component is contributing what to the overall sound. The final result is so cohesive and 'right', that considerations as to who is the star of the show are somewhat irrelevant. These are all, undoubtedly, good components, but it is the result of combining them that makes this custom-built system truly special.

Were you to need a digital source as well, Peter feels that either the baby Consonance CD player, or one of Rega's all-star offerings would do well in this context and it is hard to argue with the reasoning for either.

- 1 GOLDRING 1042: CARTRIDGE £265
- 2 EDWARDS AUDIO TT2: TURNTABLE £600
- 3 CROFT RIAA: PHONO STAGE £500
- 4 TSAKIRIDIS AEOLIS: INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER EL34 PUSH PULL, 35W £1,065
- 5 SOMETHING SOLID EXR: EQUIPMENT SUPPORT £350
- 6 USHER V-604: LOUDSPEAKER £1,150
- ATLAS HYPER 2: SPEAKER CABLES, INCLUDING FITTED PLUGS 5M X2 £215
- EQUATOR ASYMMETRICAL MKIII INTEGRA: INTERCONNECT £75
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £4,220





## SYSTEM 2 – NATURAL FIBRES

**E**xtra funds mean this second system can allow Deco to embrace other technologies that they believe are vital to a great sound, namely single-ended amplification and digital sources that don't use filtering.

### Substantial offering

Vinyl is still Paul and Mark's preferred medium though and system two features another turntable. Nottingham Analogue has a lower profile than some other British turntable manufacturers, but Paul and Mark rate the range very highly. The Ace Space is one of its smaller decks, but is still a very substantial offering for £1,230.

This is partnered with the brand new Rega RB303 tonearm, supplied on the RP3. Paul feels the £240 Rega is an absolute bargain and a happy partner for the Ace Space. Throw in an Audio Note IQ2, which I last encountered on the end of the Audio Note AN TT2 (HFC 353) and you have a capable, but still very reasonably priced front end.

This is joined by a Consonance CD2.2 Reference Linear CD player. Since

Consonance switched over to filterless designs, Deco has been an enthusiastic proponent of them and believes that they offer the best performance and system-matching for the price.

Amplification is courtesy of Amphion. Deco is the distributor of this distinctive range of British valve components and the powerplant for this system is the £3,500 300B Silver Knight. This is a single-ended 300B design and, as such, has an output of 8 watts. Again, as a line only design, a phono stage is required and this is another Audion unit, the £845 Premier phono.

To extract the maximum from those 8 watts, the speakers are Audio Note AZ-Twos. This small hemp driver floorstander appeared as part of the full Audio Note system in HFC 348, and its high-sensitivity makes it the perfect partner for the Audions. The pair used here differ from the standard AZ-Twos, in that they are mounted in a prototype cradle that will be launched under the Heretic brand name – more of which later. This cradle acts to isolate the speakers, while keeping them at a sensible height for listening.

As well as the speaker cradles, another Something Solid rack is used for the electronics and cabling is a combination of Atlas signal interconnects and Deco Audio power cabling and mains box.

### Sense of realism

After about thirty seconds of listening, the output of this system is irrelevant. Once again, this is a sound that is the result of every component working perfectly with one another, rather than any one part dominating. Cinematic Orchestra's *Live at the Albert Hall*, has an extraordinary combination of heft and delicacy, with an incredible sense of realism.

Switching to CD keeps the same entirely benign qualities as the analogue front end. Junip's *Fields* is a rough and ready recording that this system handles admirably, without losing the incredible energy of the performance. This is an even-handed and immensely capable system, that will do justice to any genre, and proved extremely hard to drag myself away from.



- 1 CONSONANCE CD2.2 REFERENCE LINEAR: FILTERLESS CD PLAYER  
£1,595
- 2 NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE ACE SPACE DECK: TURNTABLE  
£1,230
- 3 REGA RB303: TONEARM  
£240
- 4 AUDIO NOTE IQ2: MM CARTRIDGE  
£420
- 5 AUDION PREMIER PHONO: PHONO STAGE  
£850
- 6 AUDION SILVER NIGHT 300B SE ANNIVERSARY: INTEGRATED AMP (8W)  
£3,500
- 7 AUDIO NOTE AZ2H: LOUDSPEAKER WITH HEMP CONES  
£1,250
- HERETIC CRADLE SPEAKER SUPPORTS  
£1,250
- SOMETHING SOLID XR: EQUIPMENT SUPPORT  
£650
- ATLAS HYPER SYMMETRICAL: INTERCONNECT X2  
£250 (EACH)
- DECO AUDIO MAINS CABLE 1.5M X2  
£90 (EACH)
- DECO AUDIO MAINS 6-WAY DISTRIBUTION BLOCK  
£175
- ATLAS HYPER 3: SPEAKER CABLES, INCLUDING FITTED PLUGS 5M X2  
£265
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE:  
£11,195

### SYSTEM 3 – SHEER HERESY

**W**hat you see here is the logical conclusion of the Deco Audio philosophy. It incorporates the features of the two less expensive systems and adds one final flourish that Paul believes is vital for the best possible sound.

#### Greater control

Nottingham Analogue once again provides the vinyl front end in this system. In this instance, the larger Dais model is partnered with the 12-inch variant of the Ace Anna arm. The Dais can mount either 9-inch or 12-inch arms and Paul feels the longer arm offers greater control.

The partnering cartridge is another Audio Note design, but unlike the preceding IQ2, the Io1 is a low-output moving-coil device. Low output is the key phrase here, as the Io boasts an output of just 0.05mV, which is very low indeed. Normally, using an Io demands that a dedicated Audio Note step-up transformer is also employed to give the necessary increase in output.

This system employs a prototype phono stage, which will be produced under the in-house Heretic Audio brand name. This is able to provide the required levels of gain internally; a considerable accomplishment and Paul points out that it will work equally well with higher output devices.

This system makes the move to pre/power amplification and Audion provide the power section in the form of its Black Shadow monoblocks. Each uses a single 845 triode for an output in the region of 25 watts. They are partnered with a preamplifier from German brand Silvercore. The Preamp One uses transformers with different outputs for the volume control. This is Peter's preferred design for preamps and he feels the Silvercore offers superb performance at the price.

The digital front end is a combination of Audio Note's filterless DAC – in this case the 2.1 – with a belt drive transport from Japanese concern CEC. This considerable array of electronics is partnered with another pair of Audio Note speakers. The AN-E also uses a hemp main driver like the smaller AZ-Two, but this is mounted in a larger enclosure and uses higher quality wiring and components. Combined with Something solid racks and stands, Nordost and Heretic cabling, this is the fullest extension of the Deco philosophy.

#### Delicate detail

From the moment that the opening chords of Dead Can Dance's *Towards the Within* thunder through the Audio Notes, it is clear this is a very special system indeed. This is a system that can hit you in the chest with its bass extension and simultaneously reproduce the most delicate detail of any recording. It is unfazed by anything you can throw at it, and it finds the brilliance in any recording, analogue or digital.

All of the Deco systems don't conform to any valve stereotype, but this takes the entire valve rulebook and seemingly throws it away. It is staggeringly fast and, above all, it balances incredible insight and detail retrieval with a sound that is totally unfatiguing. Even presented with the torture test of *Ritual* by the White Lies, it simply rolls its sleeves up and finds the music hiding within the hash. This is an incredible system and a ringing endorsement of the Deco philosophy.



- 1 CEC TL3N: BELT-DRIVE CD TRANSPORT £3,000
- 2 AUDIO NOTE DAC 2.1 BALANCED: DAC £4,645
- 3 NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE DAIS: TURNTABLE £4,190
- 4 NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE ACE ANNA 12": TONEARM £1,935
- 5 AUDIO NOTE IO1: CARTRIDGE £2,580
- 6 HERETIC PHONON: PHONO STAGE (PRE-PRODUCTION VERSION) £3,000
- 7 SILVERCORE PREAMP ONE: TRANSFORMER VOLUME CONTROL, SILVER WIRED/WOUND £2,500
- 8 AUDIO NOTE AN-E HE SPE: SPEAKERS £5,800
- 9 SOMETHING SOLID XFII: SPEAKER STANDS £235
- 10 HERETIC AUDIO PXR: EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS X2 £1,000 (EACH)
- 11 AUDION BLACK SHADOW: MONOBLOCKS 845SE (25W) £7,000
- HERETIC AUDIO SILVER 6-WAY MAINS DISTRIBUTION: (PRE-PRODUCTION ENCLOSURE) ALL SILVER STAR WIRED £1,000
- NORDOST BRAHMA: MAINS CABLE £1,300
- NORDOST VISHNU: MAINS CABLE £569
- NORDOST BLUE HEAVEN: MAINS CABLE X2 £200 (EACH)
- NORDOST VALHALLA: MAINS CABLE £2,500
- HERETIC AUDIO SILVER SANCTUARY: SILVER/COTTON INTERCONNECTS X3 £800 (EACH)
- HERETIC AUDIO SILVER SANCTUARY: SILVER/COTTON SPEAKER CABLE WITH TERMINATIONS 5M X2 £2,700
- SOMETHING SOLID LITTLE LINKS X 9: UNDER SOME COMPONENTS £270
- SOMETHING SOLID MISSING LINKS X 16: UNDER RACKS AND SPEAKERS £520
- HERETIC AUDIO SILVER SANCTUARY DIGITAL: SILVER DIGITAL CABLE £350
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £48,894



Deco Audio is not alone in choosing valves and high-sensitivity speakers as its preferred route to great sound. Where Deco is more unusual is the different price levels it can create systems at and the level of attention

it puts into the ancillaries. A poor system can never be redeemed by stand and cabling choices, but equally, when the quality of the components is good, the difference in details is what makes this trio great.

All were brilliant, but it is system three that made the most profound impact. An astonishing all-rounder, that will do justice to the most diverse of material and makes listening fun, which is surely what it's all about.