

Works of art

The Audio Works features some of the most exclusive brands in the UK and **Ed Selley** is blown away by the results

Many dealers never really deviate from the pattern of brands and system construction that they originally embarked on – some have been offering the same brands for years. Other dealers, however, can reach an epiphany after a period of time that leads them down a radically different path to the one they set out on. Based in Cheadle, just south of Manchester, The Audio Works is an example of the latter. Now in its twentieth year of business, founder and owner Larry Ogden was originally an advocate of the Linn/Naim 'Flat Earth' philosophy, but over the years has migrated to a different approach – and indeed no longer stocks those brands.

In their place has come a portfolio that can genuinely lay claim to being unique in the UK. Larry and colleague Ed Needham mix more well-known brands such as Sugden and Rega with much less commonly seen products like Accuphase, Nagra and Lavardin to create the sort of systems you listen through rather than to and are equally capable of being used with CD, streaming or vinyl.

Mix and match

To this end the three systems featured in this month's visit make use of these brands and are intended to try and express The Audio Works philosophy at different price levels. I am genuinely excited at what I am going to hear.

DEALER DETAILS

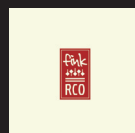


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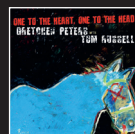
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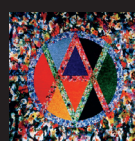
System test music



FINK
*Fink meets
the Royal
Concertgebouw
Orchestra*
Vinyl



GRETCHEN PETERS
*One To The Heart,
One To The Head*
Lossless FLAC



**AFRO CELT
SOUND SYSTEM**
*Sound Magic
Volume One*
CD

System 1 – French fancy

OUR FIRST SYSTEM combines two firm HFC favourites with an amp that compliments them to superb effect. The Avid Ingenium and Focal Aria 926 have been reviewed recently, but the third member of the system needs a little more introduction. The Lavardin IS Reference is a small, simple integrated amp that's very special.

Lavardin hails from Tours in central France. On the face of it, a 45W solid-state amplifier with four inputs and no remote control might seem ambitiously priced at over three grand, but like all Lavardin products the IS Reference is built around a design that is intended to be resistant to what Lavardin calls 'memory distortion'. This remains a contentious issue, but nonetheless there is a certain something about the way this little amplifier goes about making music.

Partnering the Lavardin is the Avid Ingenium. This new entry-level offering left a positive impression on me when I reviewed it a few months ago (HFC 379). This simple yet beautifully engineered turntable is the least amount of money you can spend on a turntable that offers a glimpse of high-end performance. The version seen here is fitted with the equally talented Pro-Ject 9c arm and Ortofon 2M blue cartridge, which gives you a very capable combination for less than £1,500. The Lavardin can be equipped with a phono stage, but in this system. Avid's Pulsus phono stage has been drafted in to do the job.

The 45W of the Lavardin are used to drive a pair of Focal's 926, the smallest floorstander in the Aria range. The key innovation is a trio of 'F Sandwich' drivers that use a layer of flax in them to allow for the production of a driver closer in design to the costly 'W Sandwich' type used in the more expensive models. We have a stylish Gallic duo fronted by some textbook British engineering – how does it pan out?

Size matters

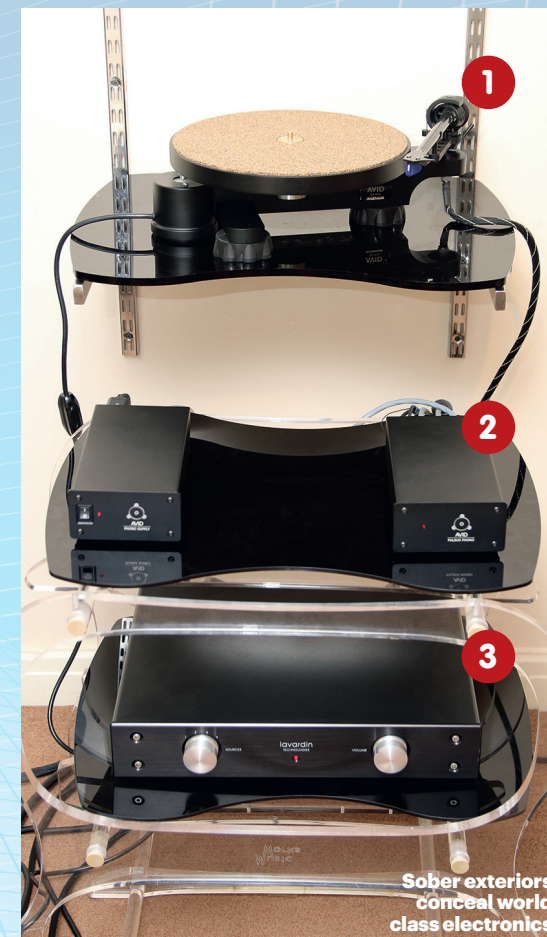
The Focal might be a big speaker, but it's also a sensitive one and coupled with the useful gain from the Pulsus phono stage, the Lavardin has no trouble sounding very big indeed. This is a system that manages to effortlessly convey the size and scale of *Fink Meets The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra*

without ever sounding strained or challenged. The performance on *Berlin Sunrise* shows up most of the areas that this combo excels at. The quiet intro reveals that the Avid has an impressively low noise floor and as the piece builds the Lavardin has no trouble letting the Focals sound effortlessly big. The swell of the massed instruments is felt as much as heard and there is a real impact to the sound that only a big speaker properly driven can deliver.

If you ask for something smaller – in this instance, the pared-back styling of Mark Lanegan and Duke Garwood's *Black Pudding*, the system responds in kind. With so little to each track, there is nowhere for any mistakes in tonality to hide and, put simply, there are none. The presentation of Lanegan and Garwood, square centre between the speakers and with a genuine sense of their space is a real demonstration of what vinyl is capable of and I know of few decks priced at the Ingenium's level that can do this so effortlessly.

The final piece of this very appealing puzzle is that there is a very definite sense of fun to how the system performs. A spirited rendition of Lowell George's *Thanks, I'll Eat It Here* is full of perfect timing and head nodding entertainment. My time with the system is limited, but it is clear that this combo is unfazed by any genre of music and as enjoyable as it is capable. From the outset, The Audio Works unique product combinations are delivering superb results. What happens when you up the ante and increase the budget?

- 1 AVID INGENIUM TURNTABLE INC PRO-JECT CARBON ARM £1,260
- 2 ORTOFON 2M BLUE CARTRIDGE £170
- 3 AVID PULSUS PHONO STAGE £1,300
- 4 LAVARDIN IS REFERENCE AMPLIFIER £3,129
- 5 FOCAL ARIA 926 SPEAKERS (WALNUT) £1,798
- 6 MUSICWORKS REVO 3-TIER TABLE £1,300
- 7 AUDIOMICA MICA TRANSPARENT INTERCONNECT 1M £475
- 8 AUDIOMICA KAMMER CLEAR SPEAKER CABLE 4.5M £305
- 9 MUSICWORKS REFLEX IEC LITE MAINS BLOCK £450
- 10 MUSICWORKS REENTRY IEC MAINS LEAD £125
- 11 MUSICWORKS REVIVE IEC LEAD £750
- 12 MUSICWORKS REVIVE 'LITE' IEC LEAD £350
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £11,412



Sober exteriors
conceal world
class electronics



The Focal is
an engaging
and powerful
performer