

# Cultural exchange

With a portfolio that matches traditional British with the best from overseas, Oxford Audio Consultants is as diverse as the city's University. **Ed Selley** gets schooled

One theme that continuously makes itself felt in HFC's visits to dealers is that some of our most interesting systems come from those that have a clear philosophy to their brands and equipment. In the case of Oxford Audio Consultants, its 28-year history has seen its lineup evolve into something perfectly suited to Oxford and the surrounding area. The locale is affluent, but properties are frequently compact and the clientele are keen audiophiles but want kit that requires little in the way of fiddling or tweaking. And so its portfolio balances famous British brands alongside a selection of

imported ones intended to create systems that achieves these varying requirements. The result of this is a selection of products that founder Jon Harker and store manager Alistair McDonald feel is unique and able to create systems at a variety of price points that encompass these values. Many of the brands picked to do this have been fixtures of Oxford Audio since the store opened. While keen advocates of streaming, CD and vinyl are also well served and all will be on display here. Sat in the pleasant upstairs demo rooms, it is time to see just what the Oxford Audio effect is on some well-known classics.



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dcsLtd.co.uk, aurender.com,  
audioresearch.com, chord.co.uk,  
psaudio.com, quadraspire.co.uk



System test music



JOSEFÍN ÖHRN +  
THE LIBERATION  
*Horse Dance*  
Vinyl



M83  
*Saturdays = Youth*  
Vinyl



DAVID BOWIE  
*Blackstar*  
24/96kHz FLAC

System 1 – Simply ecstatic

IN MANY WAYS the first system is like being greeted by an old friend. It is fronted by a trio of electronics that I've encountered a few times on my travels, but here they are being presented with a twist – a pair of loudspeakers that I've never seen partnering them anywhere else and a promise to take the performance in a different direction to what I might have experienced previously.

The electronics come courtesy of Rega. Specifically designed to work with one another, the RP6 turntable, Elicit-R integrated amplifier and Saturn-R CD player are individually great, but cumulatively greater still. Like many Rega products, there is little truly radical about the engineering that goes into these components, but thanks to careful design and construction as well as Rega's considerable engineering expertise, they deliver excellent performance and a level of flexibility that customers consistently find enormously appealing.

Socket to me

The Elicit-R has a useful selection of inputs including a cracking moving-magnet phono stage while the Saturn-R is equipped with a choice of inputs that allow it to act as a capable digital hub as well as a seriously talented CD player. Against this, the RP6 can seem more minimalist but you still get electronic speed control and that most underrated of items, a lid.

Partnering the collection of Regas is the smallest member of the MartinLogan hybrid electrostatic speakers. Of course, small is a relative term for the Electromotion – it is over five feet tall and imposing with it – but these dimensions are needed to allow for an electrostatic panel of sufficient size to be useful and to allow for the fitment of a conventional 8in bass driver that handles the low-end duties. As a system, this is a good-looking selection of components. The Electromotions aren't exactly shrinking violets, but their footprint is compact and they complement the Regas nicely. We aren't here to judge

aesthetics though, so what does this lot sound like?

In short, this combination takes both speakers and electronics to places you might not expect, but you'll be extremely happy that they do. *Dunes*, the opening track of Josefín Öhrn + The Liberation's *Horse Dance* is a rowdy, powerful piece of noisy shoe-gazing rock that might not be the obvious material for a speaker like the Electromotion. With the RP6 and Elicit

It is unusual for the strengths of both brands to be quite so easily combined

working in partnership with it, though, the result is joyous.

The trademark MartinLogan soundstage is present in all its glory; a vast and utterly unforced three-dimensional space in which the performers are arranged with absolute

assurance. So far so conventional. Where things start to take a slightly unexpected turn is that this system really wants to rock. There is an urgency and desire to be on each beat to the picosecond that produces a level of excitement that is infectious. Some of the less well-known positive traits of the Electromotion come to the fore at the same time too. That 8in bass driver has real slam and impact to it and the integration with the panel is effortless.

CD is no less assured. A quick blast of *Hollywood* from Marina and the Diamonds' *The Family Jewels* gives the MartinLogan a chance to show that even when partying, it can still do things with the female voice that speakers that cost many times more can



The perfect mix of UK electronics and American speakers

only dream of. Her dulcet tones have a texture and scale that create a reality that is absolutely vital to the way that you perceive the recording. The greater radiating area of the Electromotion really does lend everything a scale and ambience you'll really miss when it's gone.

Come together

This then, might not be a partnership of brands that you'd automatically assemble, but it's one that works exceptionally well. It is unusual for the strengths of both brands to be so effortlessly combined without any sense that they are working against one another, but that is what is happening here. These are great products in their own right, but this system has genuine star quality.

- 1 REGA RP6 £1,098
  - 2 REGA SATURN-R £1,598
  - 3 REGA ELICIT-R £1,598
  - 4 MARTINLOGAN ELECTROMOTION £2,599
- CHORD EPIC TWIN 3M £396  
CHORD CHAMELEON RCA 1M £180  
QUADRASPIRE Q4 EVO £330
- 
- TOTAL £7,799

## System 2 – The cutting edge

**WE NOW TAKE** a big jump in price and an equally significant step forward in capability and desirability. While this setup uses completely different brands to the first system, some of the same tenets of the Oxford Audio Consultants' philosophy are still very clearly present here.

The heart of the setup, providing both decoding and amplification is a limited-edition Devialet. Resplendent in gold casework, the 'Edition Original d'Atelier' is one of 100 pieces and effectively represents a best-of-everything entry from Devialet that is hand finished and tuned. Packing an extraordinary 900W into two slender chassis, it remains one of the sleekest and most elegant bits of hi-fi on the market today.

### NAS the way I like it

Supplying a music library for the Devialet is a Melco N1ZH NAS. This effectively combines the exceptional casework of the flagship N1Z with the non solid state drives of the N1A. With 6TB of storage and the usual Melco virtues, it ensures that the Devialet has a viceless signal to work with.

Of course, the other source is hardly flawed. The Michell Orbe is less commonly seen than the prettier Gyrodec, but while it might look a little more sober this is a tremendously capable turntable. Finished with an SME 309 tonearm and Ortofon Quintet Black moving-coil cartridge, it promises to try to keep analogue on a similar footing to digital.

For speakers Alistair has selected the KEF Blade. Part technical demonstrator, part flagship, all sculpture, the Blade is designed around the principle of 'Single Apparent Source'. This means that sat in the listening position, only the front Uni-Q array is visible. The quartet of 9in bass drivers use a clever force-cancelling system to control the drivers in such a way as the listener only receives bass information that is in phase. It's a fittingly striking finish to a handsome system, but how does this selection work together?

The 24-bit/96kHz FLAC of the Neil Cowley Trio's *Touch And Flee* reveals a great deal about how this system goes about making music. That prodigious power output never

makes its presence felt in an overt or obvious fashion, but there's a latent sense of force to even the gentle piano on *Kneel Down* that suggests this system is unfazed by the demands of giving a piano the scale it needs to actually sound like one. This sense of effortlessness is aided by the bass on offer. Those 9in drivers under the leash of the Devialet are absolutely effortless, but produce the sort of low end that is felt as much as heard.

Breaking down the division of responsibilities between the Melco and the decoding side of the Devialet is almost impossible, but they combine to give you digital that is wonderfully detailed, utterly free of any sense of processing and compellingly real. In a system at this price point, even if the Melco was the passive partner, its ability to deliver a perfect signal from a silent and beautifully assembled device is worth the price of admission alone.

Switch to the Orbe and the strengths of this extremely underrated deck compliment the rest of the system perfectly. The Michell is a turntable that delivers a wonderfully open and effortless presentation that is still underpinned by a sense of drive and timing that is a hallmark of the brand. Give a pair of Blades with the thick end of a kilowatt at

their disposal a copy of M83's *Saturdays = Youth* and the result is simply spellbinding. The dreamy electronic of *Skin Of the Night* is utterly captivating with the shimmering, ephemeral vocals laid across a vast space of sound that envelopes you entirely.

### Blade runner

There's no sense pretending this system is cheap, but spend 30 minutes with it and I defy you not to see why it costs what it does. This is music on a scale that rarely happens with domestic audio systems and it is important to stress that while the Blade is hardly compact, its behaviour in the demo room is entirely benign. For many dealer visits, this would be a fitting end to the day, but we're just getting into our stride here.

The Blade delivers a performance to match those amazing looks



- 1 MICHELL ORBE SE £3,090
  - 2 MELCO N1ZH £3,500
  - 3 DEVIALET EDITION ORIGINAL D'ATELIER £22,900
  - 4 KEF BLADE £20,000
- SME 309 £1,511  
ORTOFON QUINTET BLACK £650  
QUADRASPIRE X REF £3,000  
AUDIOQUEST OAK 3M £3,060  
AUDIOQUEST DIAMOND USB £599  
AUDIOQUEST CARBON COAX £145
- 
- TOTAL £58,455

Elegant aesthetics conceal a huge performance

## System 3 – Digital dreamland

**THE FINAL SETUP** of the day is a single-source affair. When the source in question is this good, it is difficult to feel short changed – especially when it is partnered with a magical amplifier and a pair of speakers that's a byword for obsessive engineering.

The digital front end is a pairing of server and preamp, not entirely unlike that seen in the second system. In the case of the Aurender W20 and DCS Rossini Player and Clock, the relationship is more symbiotic. Amplification is handled by an Audio Research REF75SE valve power amplifier. Built around an output stage of KT150 valves and JFET transistors, it produces 75W of power with low distortion and plenty of current delivery. Built into a hefty but sumptuously finished chassis, the Audio Research has a presence in the room that even more expensive components struggle to rival.

But in terms of in-room presence, even it has to give ground to the Wilson Audio Sasha 2. It seems absurd to describe a speaker that costs £35,000 as 'midrange' but it sits almost equidistant in the Wilson roster. Built around a pair of 8in bass drivers, a 7in midrange unit and 1in tweeter, each enclosure is exquisitely finished. With Chord Sarum cabling connecting everything together and a hefty PS Audio P10 Mains Regenerator handling power, it's time to take this rig for a spin.

The Sasha 2 is an exceptional piece of engineering



outstanding bass depth and detail, but it's the speed that takes your breath away. Of course, if the partnering electronics weren't up to the job, the Wilson would simply be showing up problems further up the stream, but there aren't any.

In fact, this relationship between DCS and Audio Research is another fine example of the Oxford Audio Consultants team being able to partner brands so that they become greater than the sum of their parts. The incredible resolving power and scale of the Rossini is perfectly augmented by the Audio Research. Together they offer the ability to take any recording at any scale and render it with an intoxicating blend of accuracy and sweetness.

This means that even taking something less than stellar in recording terms like Public Service Broadcasting's *Sputnik* is an utterly joyous experience. The way that the track builds and builds over the course of its seven minutes is always wonderful, but on a pair of valve-fed

Wilson's it's outstanding. From the point where the threshold of your hearing kicks in, to the deepest reaches of the bass response, the integration is perfect and the tonality unflinchingly convincing. For a

sizeable speaker with four drivers a side, it manages to do an uncanny job of sounding like an impossibly competent full-range driver.

### Why have cotton...

This is an unapologetically expensive collection of equipment, but viewed objectively it is still reasonably compact, impressively flexible and entirely simple to use. It also stands as the physical embodiment of the Oxford Audio Consultants' philosophy and an incredibly convincing one it is too.

- 1 WILSON AUDIO SASHA 2 £34,998
  - 2 PS AUDIO P10 £4,999
  - 3 DCS ROSSINI PLAYER £18,000
  - 4 AURENDER W20 £12,999
  - 5 DCS ROSSINI CLOCK £5,000
  - 6 AUDIO RESEARCH REF75SE £8,698
- CHORD SARUM 3M SPEAKER CABLE £3,300  
CHORD SARUM MAINS 1.5M X 4 £8,600  
CHORD SARUM MAINS 16A £2,160  
CHORD SARUM SUPER ARAY USB £1,000  
CHORD SARUM XLR £2,750  
CHORD SARUM BNC X2 £3,800  
AUDIOPHILE BASE QUADRABASE £3,000
- 
- TOTAL £109,304

### Straight down to it

Some systems need a serious amount of time and listening to tell you what they're all about. This is not one of those. A minute of the 24-bit/96kHz FLAC of David Bowie's *Girl Loves Me* is pretty telling. The performance is dominated by the Wilson, which in some ways is an odd thing to say because it is incredibly transparent and effortlessly able to reveal details about the connecting equipment.

What it also brings to the system is a sense of utterly unflappable control. The Sasha 2 has truly



A perfect synergy of brands makes for a digital masterclass



You might make the not unreasonable point that with two systems that cost a significant sum of money, it shouldn't be too hard to turn out some staggering performances, but that misses the point. What ties these systems together is that they combine brands in a way that might

not be self evident at first, but deliver results that are truly outstanding. Furthermore, the ethos of flexibility and user friendliness is also present throughout. These are systems that ask very little of the user while delivering the performance that they do. Furthermore

they possess sensible footprints and a surprising degree of room friendliness. Oxford Audio Consultants seeks to produce systems that deliver outstanding performance with little in way of sacrifice from their owners and it has unequivocally succeeded.