

Space to breathe

Deco Audio has invested in new premises, but as **Ed Selley** discovers it is still a master of the old ways

Those of you with good memories will know that we visited Deco Audio back in February 2012 on our tour of the UK's best hi-fi dealers. So what has prompted that rarest of phenomena, a revisit? When we first went to see Deco, the store was based in a high street location – very much a classical hi-fi dealership. Last year, owners Peter Empson and Mark Orr made the decision to relocate to new out-of-town premises. The motivation was simple enough. They wanted more space, control over parking for customers and in moving away from the town centre the intention was to become more of a destination location than before.

It's important to stress that the move to new digs hasn't altered the key philosophy of a Deco Audio system and this is one that is different to many dealers that we visit. Integral to the Deco approach is the use of high sensitivity speakers that allow for lower output amplifiers, frequently using valves. Peter is also a fan of physical media – although he's perfectly capable of working with digital streaming when required – and the impressive selection of turntables and tonearms on display is elegant proof that they know their way around analogue too. With the systems sitting in new demo rooms, it's time to see if the Deco ethos has also successfully made the move.

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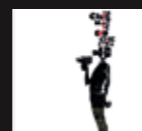
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avantgarde-acoustic.de/en
cec-web.co.jp/english_index.html
airaudio.co.uk/brands/hana



System test music



HUSKY RESCUE
Ghost Is Not Real
CD



CINEMATIC ORCHESTRA
Man With A Movie Camera
180g vinyl



LEMON JELLY
Lost Horizons
Vinyl

System 1 – Strike the right note

THE FIRST SYSTEM looks deceptively conventional. What could be more normal than a pair of standmounts powered by an integrated amp and a choice of sources? Dig a little deeper and it becomes clear this is something a little different from the norm. The reason for this is that it is an Audio Note Oto Phono SE. By the standards of many of its siblings the Oto is a rip-snorting beast of an amp, getting as it does into double figures with 10W available. To make best use of them, Peter has paired it with Proac's Studio SM100 speakers, a reworked version of the long-lived Studio 100. Unlike many professional monitors, it is impressively sensitive and easy to drive, making it an ideal choice for use with the Audio Note.

Eye of the tiger

The digital front end is also a little unusual. As a dealer with a number of keen CD users and an increasing paucity of CD players, Peter has become very fond of Pro-Ject's CD transports. This system uses the newly launched CD Box DS2T. Featuring a slot-loading mechanism controlled by a dedicated 'Blue Tiger' servo solution, this is a very elegant transport mechanism indeed and the perfect partner for the partnering Audio Note DAC 0.1x. The system is finished by an Edwards Audio TT2 turntable fitted

with a Hana SL low-output moving-coil cartridge. To work into the moving-magnet input of the Oto, an Audio Note step-up transformer sits between the turntable and amp to boost the voltage to the required level. Selecting *Ghost Is Not Real*, this system shows in short order that it has qualities that are decidedly unusual at any price, let alone this fairly terrestrial level. The haunting quality of the vocals is captured with an effortless tangibility that is seriously attention grabbing. The combination of valve amp and studio monitor might not be obvious, but it works like a charm. What is especially convincing is the lack of any sense of processing. The

Unlike many monitors the Proac Studio SM100 is sensitive and easy to drive

DAC 0.1x is designed around the Audio Note principles of having no filtering or upsampling and while this might sound a little anarchic, it results in a sound that is exceptionally natural and easy to listen to. Switching to the remastered version of ZZ Top's *Tres Hombres*, the way this system handles the shuffling, low-key performance of *Sheik* is excellent. Those 10W go a surprisingly long way in the Proacs. There's never any sense of strain or

limited headroom and the Studio SM100 returns the favour by displaying deeply impressive bass for a speaker of this size. Make the switch to vinyl and the performance keeps the same fundamentally invigorating qualities and adds a little sniff of pace that a well-sorted turntable can bring to musical reproduction. The way that the Edwards deals with the addictive groovy *Love Dance* by My Baby is simply joyous. The Proac sets about the rolling bass line with enthusiasm and Cato Van Dyck's vocals are as clear as a bell. All of this is set in a soundstage that is utterly solid and three dimensional in a way that I'm reliably informed should not really be possible when listening to just the two loudspeakers.

Flexible friend

Even at this fairly sensible price point, Deco's experience with step-ups and valves shows through. There's no hum or interference at any stage and the noise floor is less audible than some solid-state rivals. This is part of a wider sense that nothing about the decision making processes that have gone into making this system have any impact on how user-friendly, flexible and compact it is. This is Deco Audio at its most real world. It's time to find out what can be done when given a little more money to spend.



- 1 EDWARDS AUDIO TT2SE TURNTABLE: £750
 - 2 PRO-JECT CD BOX DS2T CD TRANSPORT: £560
 - 3 AUDIO NOTE OTO PHONO SE SIGNATURE INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: £4,345
 - 4 AUDIO NOTE DAC 0.1X: £1,234
 - 5 PROAC STUDIO SM100 STANDMOUNT SPEAKER £1,850
- HANA SL CARTRIDGE: £589
AUDIO NOTE AN-S1H STEP-UP TRANSFORMER: £639
ATLAS HYPER 2 SPEAKER CABLE DOUBLE UP: £300
SOMETHING SOLID XFII STANDS: £300
SOMETHING SOLID XR STAND: £825
HERETIC AUDIO COPPER STAR MAINS DISTRIBUTION BLOCK: £400
OTHER CABLES, MIXTURE OF NORDOST, ATLAS & CHORD.
ACOUSTIC TREATMENT FROM ADVANCED ACOUSTICS: VARIOUS
- TOTAL £11,792**

System 2 – Testing the faith

ONE OF THE more intriguing aspects of the high sensitivity, low output approach favoured by Deco is that as you increase the price of the systems that use this philosophy, the power output often goes down rather than up. By this stage in the pricing structure, all the basics we saw in the first system are present and correct, but there's scope to add more.

Partnering the Audion Silver Night 300B Special Edition amp with its 7W of output being generated by a pair of 300B valves is a preamp, but not just any old preamp. The Audion Select TVC assumes the roles of input and level selection via solid and weighty controls, and doesn't need any additional mains to do so.

Elsewhere, Audio Note and Pro-Ject remain responsible for digital, but the duo is now one of the flagship RS CD transports with optional linear PSU and the Audio Note DAC 2.1x. The turntable is also a significant step forward – the recently released Nottingham Analogue Hyperspace with 12in Ace Space Anna tonearm and Ortofon Cadenza Black cartridge. As before, the phono stage is a two-stage arrangement with a Croft RIAA phono stage receiving a signal boosted by a Silvercore step-up.

Finishing off the system, Heretic Audio's Huron 3SV speaker is an



inhouse project available in varying levels of spec. What makes the Huron 3SV perfectly adapted to use in systems of this nature is it combines extremely high sensitivity with easy load characteristics. The result is that this sizeable speaker is happy to run on the output of a single 300B valve.

Having it large

The most significant hurdle to this system is the mental leap required to overcome the idea that 7W can sound this big. Starting with Tori Amos' *Crucify* on CD, there is control and finesse to the way it handles very low notes that would put some very potent systems to shame. Of course, it's extremely good in the areas you would expect it to excel in. Amos' vocals hang centre stage, free of any sense of boxiness or colouration and their relationship to the supporting instruments is explicit at every stage.

Even with a pairing as good as this, digital has to take a back seat to analogue. The Hyperspace is not the prettiest turntable at the price, but the performance it offers in this configuration is absolutely stunning. I put on The Cinematic Orchestra's *The Awakening Of A Woman/Burnout* and sit down, failing to do anything remotely constructive for the full 10 minutes and 20 seconds that the track takes to run through.

The reason for this addictive, attention-grabbing presentation is the incredibly understated and synergistic way these components hang together. Nothing seems to fight to become the star of the show and the result is one of the most utterly unforced and natural performances I've ever had from a turntable – even at prices that exceed this one. It will imperiously handle pretty much any genre or style, good pressings and not so good ones with absolute assurance.

It might look complex, but the sound is simply wonderful

- 1 AUDION SILVER NIGHT 300B SPECIAL EDITION POWER AMPLIFIER: £4,150
 - 2 AUDION SELECT TVC PREAMPLIFIER: FROM CIRCA £4,500
 - 3 AUDIO NOTE DAC 2.1X: £2,809
 - 4 NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE HYPERSPACE TURNTABLE: £2,950
 - 5 CROFT RIAA PHONO STAGE: £500
 - 6 PRO-JECT CD BOX RS CD TRANSPORT: £899
 - 7 HERETIC AUDIO HURON 3SV SPEAKERS: £4,500
- PRO-JECT UNI BOX LINEAR POWER SUPPLY: £349
 NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE 12IN ACE SPACE ANNA TONEARM: £2,340
 ORTOFON CADENZA BLUE CARTRIDGE: £1,299
 SILVERCORE 1:10 STEP-UP TRANSFORMER: £495
 SOMETHING SOLID XR RACK & HERETIC AUDIO THE RACK: £1,825
 HERETIC AUDIO COPPER STAR MAINS BLOCK: £400
 CABLING, MIXTURE OF AUDIO NOTE, ATLAS, CHORD & NORDOST: VARIOUS
 ACOUSTIC TREATMENT FROM ADVANCED ACOUSTICS: VARIOUS
- TOTAL £27,016**



The Heretic is a true gentle giant

System 3 – The horn section

ALL THE PROCESSES we have seen in the previous systems are still present here, but they are joined by a final twist that grants this system extraordinary abilities. Avantgarde's speakers combine powerful active bass systems with horn-loaded mid and treble drivers. The result is a horn speaker that can almost be described as compact – at least by the standards of the breed.

Powering the horn section of the Uno XDs is a pair of Audion Golden Dream parallel 300B monoblock power amps. Boasting an output of 20W, they can drive the horns to pretty much any level. Controlling them is a Bespoke Audio Copper preamp – one of the most sumptuous examples of a transformer preamp I've ever seen. With 1.5km of wiring, it represents the ultimate expression of the design philosophy.

Source equipment is once again split between digital and analogue, giving Peter the chance to show off another product Deco has been working on inhouse. The Heretic Audio Dacon DAC uses a resistor ladder to perform the decoding and is valve based with no filtering. At the moment, this is in final prototype stage so it isn't in the photographs. A CEC TL5 CD transport

with unique belt-drive mechanism provides the signal.

A Helius Designs Alexia turntable with Omega tonearm mounts an Audio Note Io phono cartridge – which is extremely heavy by the standards of a normal design. This ultra-low output moving-coil cartridge requires a special Audio Note step-up transformer to work into the Audion Premier Phono.

Round the horn

Listening to a horn system, there is always a brief moment of shock when you first hear it. There is such a lack of compression or strain that you need to readjust your understanding of its abilities (and suffer the crushing disappointment of listening to something else afterwards). When I reach for *Tres Hombres* again, the frenzied musicianship, teetering on the edge of distortion is reproduced with almost impossible realism.

It's clear that when the Dacon DAC goes on sale it will be an exceptionally noteworthy piece of equipment. It is absolutely free of any sense of digital and doesn't tip over into delivering anything other than a faithful representation of what is on the disc.

Great though digital is, vinyl is other worldly. Lemon Jelly's *Ramblin' Man*

The Avantgarde redefines what horn speakers can do



sounds incredible. The active bass arrangement of the Avantgarde puts it in a unique category for speakers. Nothing else at this price and size can combine the spaciousness and scale of the upper registers with the sledgehammer impact of the lower orders. Combined with the Io, this system is utterly compelling.

All the Deco specialties combine to awesome effect



- 1 HELIUS DESIGNS ALEXIA TURNTABLE: £4,464
 - 2 AUDION PREMIER PHONO STAGE: £950
 - 3 CEC TL5 CD TRANSPORT: £2,600
 - 4 BESPOKE AUDIO CO COPPER PREAMPLIFIER: FROM £9,000
 - 5 AUDION GOLDEN DREAM PARALLEL 300B SINGLE-ENDED MONOBLOCKS: £10,500
 - 6 AVANTGARDE UNO XD SPEAKER: FROM £21,500
- HELIUS DESIGNS OMEGA TONEARM: FROM £3,224
 AUDIO NOTE IO CARTRIDGE: £2,838
 AUDIO NOTE AN-S2L STEP UP TRANSFORMER: £887
 HERETIC AUDIO DACON DAC (DISCRETE R2R FILTERLESS DAC WITH VALVE OUTPUT STAGE): CIRCA £2,750
 HERETIC AUDIO SILVER AND COTTON CABLES: CIRCA £5,200
 MAINS CABLES FROM NORDOST AND ATLAS: VARIOUS
 2X HERETIC AUDIO COPPER STAR MAINS BLOCKS: £800
 2X HERETIC AUDIO THE RACK: £2,150
 SOMETHING SOLID MISSING LINK FEET (UNDER SPEAKERS): £256
 ACOUSTIC TREATMENT FROM ADVANCED ACOUSTICS: VARIOUS
- TOTAL £67,119**



What must be considered when looking at systems from Deco Audio is that the approach to system building did not come about because it wanted to be different or stand out from the crowd. Peter and his team do what they do because they genuinely believe that

these are the best methods for securing a great sound. Confronted by the three systems I've heard, it is hard to argue, as if you know what you are doing – and they certainly do – the results are stunning. What the new premises do is give Deco the ability to show this skill off with

larger and more complex systems while still having the space for simpler ones. That there's also room for an excellent record store and manufacturing space for their ambitious electronics program vindicates the decision to move from the high street. It's clearly going places.