

# Ultimatum!

**Hi-Fi World challenged itself to come up with three radically different dream systems, reflecting the writers' respective thoughts on what constitutes a top high end system.**

**David Price is your host...**

**P**eople often ask me what "the best system in the world" is, and I'm always lost for words. Why? Because one thing this job has taught me - hearing vast amounts of systems of all shapes, sizes and prices as I do - is that there's no such thing as *the best*. Rather, the question should be asked in terms of "the best system for me".

What then would your dream, cost-no-object system be? Ask ten different people and you'd get ten different answers. And interestingly, it's often not just about pure, unalloyed sound quality. People put their dream systems together as pure indulgence, to suit their own personal circumstances. That's what makes life so interesting.

So we thought, why not get three *Hi-Fi World* scribes to do just this? The only rule was that they (we) couldn't come up with a long shopping list of our current kit. This was brought in to force us to think off the page, so to speak, and introduce interesting solutions to problems. Oh, and also to stop yours truly droning on about old Yamaha speakers and Noel about Garrard turntables and World Audio valve amps...

The result is that yours truly - who has vast amounts of sprawling kit at home - decided to come up with an 'ultimate compact system' using an iPod as a digital transport. Channa - an architect by day who leads a minimalist, ascetic life - went for precisely the opposite, fronted by a humungous Clearaudio Master Reference turntable. And Noel, who I'm sure has to step around ECC83 tubes when he gets out of bed, went for a hassle-free all-digital active special from Meridian!

So, this system feature was something of a walk on the wild side for all of us, producing as it did three radically different systems with suitably diverse sounds. Unfortunately, I felt compelled to pull editorial rank and reluctantly adjudge the winner. Read on to see if it was me...



**DAVID'S SYSTEM** **P16**  
Wadia 170iTransport/Chord QBD76 DAC, NuForce P9/Ref 9SE  
amps, Monitor Audio PL100 loudspeakers

**CHANNA'S SYSTEM** **P18**  
Clearaudio Master Reference/Graham Phantom/Clearaudio  
Goldfinger turntable, Aesthetic Rhea/Calypso/Atlas amps,  
Kudos Cardea C30 loudspeakers

**NOEL'S SYSTEM** **P20**  
Meridian 808.2i digital disc player/preamplifier, Meridian  
DSP7200 active loudspeakers



# Big Love

With size no object, Channa Vithana goes for a massive high end vinyl and valve hybrid system, fronted by Clearaudio's seminal Master Reference turntable...



There are many who simply can't understand why people try to assemble ultimate systems using a digital front end. After all, no amount of superlative amplification and majestic loudspeakers can recover all that ambience lost by converting the music to ones and noughts, then back again. No, good though high end digital is, for me things have got to stay in the analogue domain!

Whilst DP's 'ultimate system' had the emphasis on compactness, mine followed a different path. I went for the biggest, sweetest possible sound I could get, and I'm afraid this just happened to make for a not inconsiderably sized collection of components! Given that vinyl is capable of a scale that digital can't muster, I opted for a grandiose turntable from German specialist Clearaudio. Their Master Reference turntable is clearly their aspirational exemplar, with a three-motor drive system, honed 70mm acrylic-platter and exquisitely machined stainless steel construction. It is truly *grosse* (as in grand). For a challenge such as this, what else could be a better place to start?

At 53kg, the £12,900 Master Reference 'AMG Wood' featured here would look out of place on an Ikea coffee table, so 'in for a penny, in for a pound', thought I! To that end, behold Clearaudio's £5,600 Everest 'Wood' stand. At around 90kg, this is hefty enough to support the mighty Master Ref and its APG (Accurate Power Generator) power supply and speed-control just below. Like the deck, it uses 'Panzerholz' or 'tank wood', said to be bullet-proof thanks to its many fine plywood layers, bonded under immense pressure. Indeed it is apparently harder to machine than titanium, as a result. For Clearaudio the benefits of using Panzerholz are excellent damping and anti-resonance properties.

For pickup arm duty I have appointed the £2,540 Graham Phantom B44. Like the Master

Reference, it is a sophisticated beauty; a Lorzig-ceramic detachable arm-tube is precision ground and progressively extruded to resist sound-degrading standing waves in the tube, then an attractive "proprietary-process glass overlay" is applied over the tube to suppress resonances. At the headshell area, phosphor bronze cartridge connectors are used and internal wiring utilises high purity silver with solid and litz construction plus Teflon and silicone insulation for transient speed, says Graham.

'Magne glide' technology is used for stability, where the arm is partially damped by neodymium magnets in the horizontal line from the pivot. It confers lateral stability, azimuth-adjustability, damping-assist, "true" vertical pivot of the stylus tip, and (thumb-wheel) adjustable anti-skate; VTA is also adjustable. As a result Graham states that unlike most unipivots, the Phantom doesn't 'wobble' when lifted. A Swiss-made matched tungsten carbide cup and pivot is used as the low-friction main bearing.

Last but not least in the turntable trio is Clearaudio's Goldfinger v2 moving coil, at a hefty £7,200. The nomenclature is no mistake, as the Goldfinger is resonance-controlled by - and made of - 16g of polished 14k gold. Internally it uses 24k gold coils and a 0.00016g HD diamond tip at the end of a boron cantilever.

My thinking with amplification was to find a hybrid one-make system. That way, I could retain much of the sweetness of valves with the wallop necessary to aspirate a pair of large floorstanding loudspeakers. This, in theory, would be the best way to chase my goal of size and sweetness. I found myself using the latest (£2,850) Rhea phonostage, (£3,200) Calypso line stage and (£5,950) Atlas power amplifier from American brand Aesthetix. The Rhea is rather unusual as it's a three input, finely adjustable, remote-controlled phonostage that uses five valves per channel where all the gain is achieved without





solid-state amplification. The remote controlled, fully balanced Calypso line stage incorporates six inputs and its gain remains via valves only. It uses a discrete resistor volume control which operates in eighty-eight, 1dB steps. Both are dimensioned at 457x447x111mm and weigh 17.5kg. The Atlas is a zero-global feedback hybrid power amplifier sporting bipolar output and driver stages, with valve gain stages and 200W/8ohms and 400W/4ohms claimed.

With the Clearaudio, Graham and Aesthetix combination hitting a stiff £35,000, my choice of the relatively low-cost £5,250 Kudos Cardea C30 loudspeaker may seem somewhat out of proportion. However, having been greatly impressed with the lower-cost Kudos standmount range I had no hesitation in auditioning the C30 amongst such high-end company. It uses a SEAS one-inch fabric-dome Crescendo tweeter, said to be amongst the Norwegian manufacturer's costliest units. The mid/bass drive units feature tri-laminate paper cones externally coated with Nextel that are internally damped, while the aluminium phase pug along with the pole-piece ring is said to reduce compression and eliminate resonance. The crossover uses Clarity Caps and Chord Company silver wiring. Each cabinet measures 200x270x1120mm and weighs 30kg.

## SOUND QUALITY

It's rare that anyone gets the chance to audition a system as expensive as this, and you'd be forgiven for thinking it would emit a massively showy sort of sound, with incredible scale and intimidating dynamics. However, what really defined it was sheer natural ease. It was wonderfully musical, but not in the sense that it pinned me to my seat and assaulted

me with its brilliance. Instead, what was on the disc poured out in an unfettered way...

Music was not only effortless and detailed, but possessed precision, solidity and unflappable confidence. For example, Jeff Wayne's 'War of The Worlds' came over as highly complex yet utterly listenable, those exhilarating melodic flourishes sending chills down my spine. Another highlight was the usually compressed sounding 'Exile On Coldharbour Lane' by Alabama 3, where their melodically laid back mix of groove-pop-funk-blues was a joy - I forgot about the recording and kicked back to enjoy a massive, wide open sound without any sense of strain. I particularly loved the way the system 'unpicked' the song's many dense layers, making for a wonderfully natural feel.

Listening to 'Rimski-Korsakov: Scheherazade' (1960) by Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Reiner conducting was another textural, layered, dynamic delight. The sound effortlessly spread out into the room, where the individual instruments of the orchestra - as well as the power of the ensemble - could be heard in unison like live concert music.

Other highlights were Bob Marley's 'Exodus' and 'Kings Of The Wild Frontier' (1980) by Adam and The Ants. Marley had never sounded so good, with bass tunefulness, rhythm and expressive vocals, and musicality - it's a difficult call to make reggae sound this exciting and enveloping via a high-end system. Similarly Adam Ant sounded arresting, with the song's sophisticated drumming as clear as day. Normally this song turns into a raucous 'cacophony', as the source, amplification and speakers struggle to get a grip. Here though, things stayed together without the system so much as raising an eyebrow.

## CONCLUSION

As you might expect considering its price tag, this was an exceptional sounding combination. The lion's share of the budget went on the turntable, showing that if there's anything that must be got right, it is the source (no matter how

## DP SAYS:

For me its defining characteristic is its openness and ease - that monster Clearaudio vinyl spinner is such that no recording is ever too much trouble, and it simply fails to get flustered no matter you play on it. The amplification is sweet and smooth too; a big fist in a velvet glove giving an expansive and easy sound, yet with emotion intact. As for the Kudos speakers, they never once sounded out of their depth, turning in an extremely refined yet instinctively rhythmic sound. I was particularly impressed by their low price (in the context of this system), and the fact that they don't sport flashy, trick technologies yet work so effectively. A thoroughly designed and well honed transducer. My sole criticism of the system was actually the Clearaudio's clamp and stabilising ring - they work well, adding extra bite and insight, but are a pain to use, removing a layer of 'immediacy' that spinning a record normally has. Still, using the Clearaudio felt rather like worshipping an altar, so this was just another part of the holy ritual!

good the amp and speakers are, they're doomed without a serious front end). And it's true to say that the Clearaudio Master Reference, Graham Phantom and Clearaudio Goldfinger source provided the stability, dynamics, detail and intricacy that defined the basic sound. But this isn't to downplay the Aesthetix amplification that evoked the rich harmonics at the heart of the music, or the wonderfully self-effacing Kudos loudspeakers that delivered clarity and tunefulness in spades.

Along with that vast, expansive but easy sound, another facet of this system I appreciated was the way it looked. The top Clearaudio table is going to be a focus of attention in any room, something you cannot say of DP's iPod! The massive Everest support makes it all the more striking, although many will buy it for its flamboyance rather than the sonic benefits it brings. Huge, expensive and striking looking, perhaps this system is not for everyone aesthetically but I adored its sound - few would want more.



Clearaudio Master Reference AMG Wood turntable	£12,900
Clearaudio Everest Wood turntable support	£5,600
Graham Phantom B44 tonearm (SME base version)	£2,540
Clearaudio Goldfinger V2 cartridge	£7,200
Graham IC70 arm lead	£570
Clearaudio Statement record clamp	£440
Clearaudio Outer Limit peripheral record clamp	£640
Clearlight Aspekt equipment rack	£640
Aesthetix Rhea phono stage	£2,850
Aesthetix Calypso preamplifier	£3,200
Aesthetix Atlas power amplifier	£5,950
Kudos Cardea C30 loudspeakers	£5,250
Merlin & Silvermann interconnects/cables	

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