

# All in your head

With the boom in headphone sales, it's inevitable that a dedicated store would open **Ed Selley** heads on over

**U**nless you've been living in a cave for the last few years, you will have noticed that headphones have become big business. For many dealers they have gone from being an incidental display in the corner to a key part of their portfolios. This being the case, it followed that someone would take the logical step and devote a store solely to them.

For pedantry's sake, High End Headphones is not a completely standalone concern. Those of you with longer memories will remember that we visited the then brand new HiFi Lounge in early 2013. Owner Paul Clarke was sufficiently impressed with the interest in headphones that

he has extended into one of the other buildings at the lovely former granary where HiFi Lounge is based. With wife Wendy overseeing day-to-day operations, High End Headphones has now been open for a few months.

As befits a different type of store, this is a slightly different dealer visit. Rather than the traditional good, better, best model, I asked Paul and Wendy to show me three high-end setups. The reason for this is that comparing these three systems in one place is only possible in the UK at this store so it would have been a shame not to make use of what High End Headphones is all about. In the fabulous surroundings, I sit down to experience some serious cans...

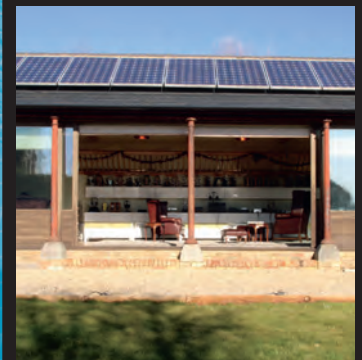


## THE EXPERTS

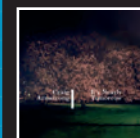


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## System test music



**CRAIG  
ARMSTRONG**  
*It's Nearly  
Tomorrow*  
FLAC 24/96



**KRAFTWERK**  
*Minimum-Maximum*  
FLAC 24/88



**CASSIUS**  
*Au Reve*  
FLAC 16/44

## System 1 – Into the Abyss

**KICKING OFF WITH** the most expensive system of the three, this setup combines Paul's deep seated love of Bryston with a truly extraordinary pair of headphones. Pretty much the only part of the Abyss AB-1266 that is remotely run of the mill is the name – it really should be called Terminator, Dreadnought or Revelations.

The Abyss is a planar magnetic design built around a pair of bespoke planar drivers. It is unique in that it doesn't have a rear magnet structure, which means it's entirely open backed in a way that most planar designs aren't.

These drivers are then encased in some serious metalwork. Abyss mounts the driver enclosures on a right angled frame that is effectively fixed in place. As this frame would only provide a comfortable fit for Herman Munster, a separate leather band is used to effectively hang the Abyss on your head. As this means that the earpads don't exert much traction on the ears, they are exceptionally deep and can be rotated to achieve the best seal between you and the outside world. While you look a bit like a Cyberman wearing them, they are supremely comfortable.

### Balancing act

By design, the Abyss is a fully balanced headphone with two separate leads exiting the main body. To make full use of this it is connected to a Bryston BHA-1 headphone amp that supports these balanced connections as well as more conventional ones. Partnering it are the BDP-2 digital player and BDA-2 DAC (as well as a legacy BCD-1 CD player that helps Paul do CD demonstrations for customers that need it). These are connected to the mains via an Isol8 mains conditioning unit that makes a useful and cost effective addition to the system.

With the Abyss hanging on my head, it takes less than a minute of the 24-bit/96kHz rip of Craig Armstrong's *It's Nearly Tomorrow*, to appreciate that it sounds even more striking than it looks. The most immediately arresting part of the performance is that the AB-1266 is capable of incredible delicacy underpinned by staggering force when needed. Brett Anderson's soaring vocals in *Crash* seem to

arrive in the head without any intervening processes as mundane as electronics getting them there. The scale is absolutely and unambiguously convincing and the tiny details lift playback from a simple reproduction to out-and-out performance.

This is underpinned by a bass response that is positively seismic

### Incredible delicacy underpinned by staggering force when needed

when required, but it also seriously fast. With the fast and complex low end for Kraftwerk's *AeroDynamic*, the Abyss captures everything but the result is never forensic or sterile, you simply receive absolutely every single last detail as a welcome by product of a performance that is totally and utterly captivating. Thanks to the care that has gone into the design, neither

does the listening experience ever really feel 'nearfield' in a way you might expect headphones to. Instead, the vastness of the soundstage extends well beyond the confines of those spacious earpads. There is no sense of left or right, just a wonderful soundstage around the head.

Something that emerges listening to the Abyss but that is applicable across all of these setups is that these are not mere convenience items – something to turn to when you can't use conventional speakers – but a truly arresting way of listening to music that has an immediacy and presence that a pair of speakers, even ones at or beyond the lofty price of the Abyss, cannot easily match. There are few conventional setups anywhere near this price that can transport you so completely to the space that the artist intended. I'd be happy to slouch in one of the armchairs and kick back for the rest of the day listening to the Abyss, but there are still two other systems to consider...



- 1 ABYSS AB-1266 HEADPHONE £4,254
  - 2 BRYSTON BDP-2 DIGITAL PLAYER £3,125
  - 3 BRYSTON BCD-1 CD PLAYER ~~£2,595~~
  - 4 BRYSTON BDA-2 EXTERNAL DAC £2,595
  - 5 BRYSTON BHA-1 BALANCED HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER £1,495
- ISOL-8 MINISUB WAVE & AXIS £799
- 
- TOTAL £12,268

The Abyss/  
Bryston rig  
offers  
seriously  
accurate yet  
enjoyable  
performance

# DEALER SYSTEMS HIGH END HEADPHONES

## System 2 – Value added Stax

**I HAVE HEARD** the Stax SR-009 and partnering SRM-007tII Kimik Energiser when doing *Beautiful System* in the past and would have been entirely happy to hold on to them indefinitely. Of all the brands that Paul and Wendy have at their disposal, Stax is the one that most defines premium headphones, not least because it has been doing it for so long but because it's going about its business in a totally different way to anyone else.

As far as Stax is concerned the SR-009 is not a headphone at all. It is in fact, the premium 'earspeaker' in its lineup and, like everything it makes, it uses electrostatic drivers to produce sound. In the case of the 009, these are the latest version with a new polymer for the membrane and MLER electrodes to drive it. These require a level of current delivery that even the very capable collection of headphone amps that High End Headphones has at its disposal cannot drive, so the SR-009 forms a double act with a matching Energiser. This is a headphone amp that also supplies the required electrical current via a bespoke connection.

Like the SR-009, the SRM-007 is the flagship in the Energiser category and this Kimik variant enjoys some UK-specific tweaks including cryogenic treatment of the

valves and uprated fuse. Like many Stax Energisers, it is capable of driving two pairs of earspeakers at once. It is also one of the most beautifully finished and ergonomically satisfying pieces of electronics you can buy. Providing a source for such a piece of equipment is no small undertaking, but Chord's brilliant Hugo takes a digital feed from the Bryston streamer in the first system and decodes it for the SRM-007. Once again, the electronics benefit from the Isol8 mains conditioner.

### Extra terrestrial

In the terrestrial world of headphone listening the Hugo is a seriously good amp, but here it only has to be a capable DAC as in headphone terms we are a long way from terrestrial with this system. What is interesting and indeed unique about High End Headphones is that you can approach a system as singular as the Stax having listened to other equally special headphone systems, which gives far more perspective about what the setup does but doesn't make the way that it does it any less special.

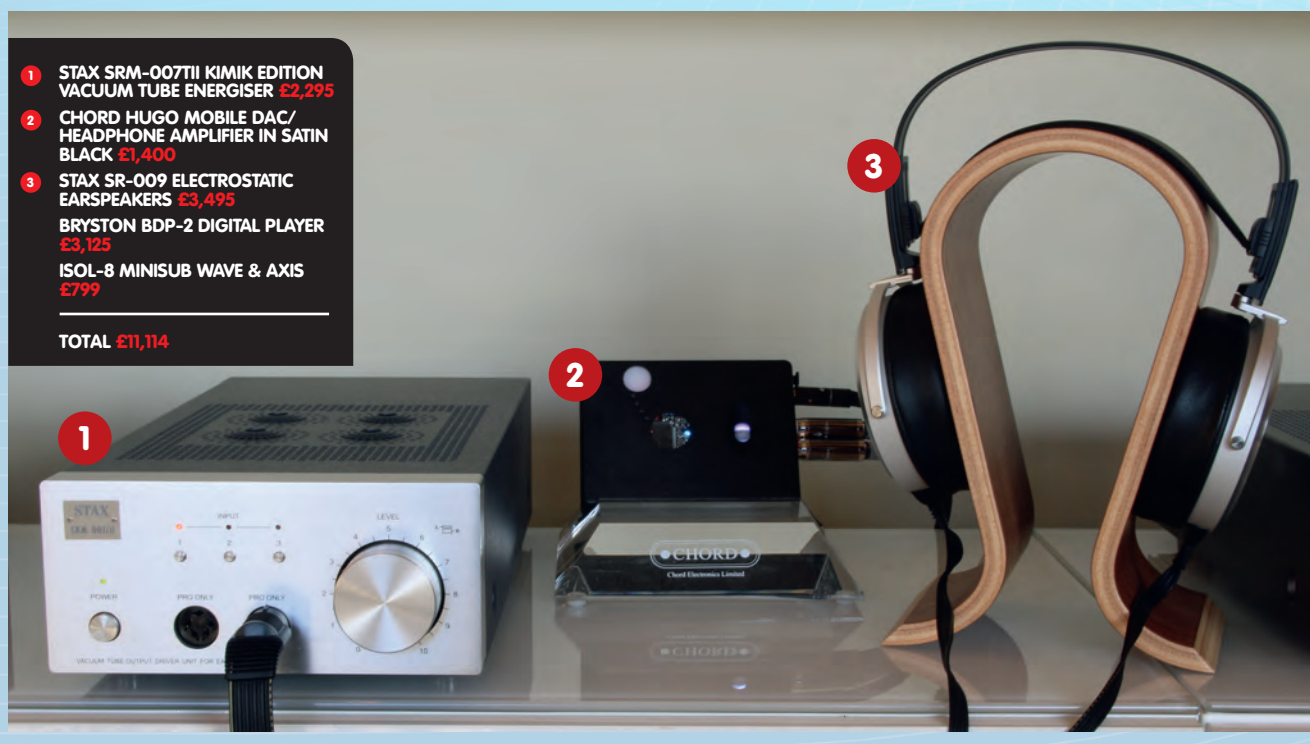
Listening to it after the Abyss rams home that the electrostatic principle of making headphones is extremely difficult, technically complex and has required a huge amount of time to perfect. Five minutes with the Stax and you discover it's worth the effort.

There is still outstanding detail retrieval and it is totally unconstrained by the supposed limitation of being so close to your head. The Craig Armstrong piece is still vast and beautifully arranged, but the Stax brings an almost liquid quality to the midrange and treble that I have never experienced from any other brand or headphone. Saying that it makes everything sound analogue is wrong because there is nothing in the way of warmth or bloom to the music, but equally there is no sense of processing.

Some of this extraordinarily natural performance is down to the Hugo, which manages to be both ferociously clever and tremendously self effacing at the same time. With Air's *All I Need*, the intoxicating way that Beth Hirsh's vocals are presented is a fantastic partnership of Chord's pinpoint accuracy and Stax's effortless three dimensionality. Absolutely every last detail is extracted, but never overwhelms the balance of the performance as a whole. It is only when you have to step down from the Stax and return to headphone normality when you head home that you realise just how much information the Stax can extract seemingly without trying.

The asking price is considerable, but after a few minutes of listening to it you'll be wondering just how much a slightly careworn kidney might fetch.

**This high-end rig more than holds its own in exalted company**



## System 3 – The Mac daddy

**AS ONE OF** the senior companies in hi-fi, McIntosh hasn't rushed into the business of making headphones, but the MHP1000 has been causing a bit of a stir since it was launched last year.

This is because, working in partnership with Beyerdynamic, it has elected to make the MHP1000 a closed-back design, which is unusual in high-end headphones and practically unheard of at the elevated price point. Inside these sealed enclosures is a pair of 40mm dynamic drivers and the whole ensemble connects to a headphone amp via a conventional jack. After Planar drivers mounted on spaceframes and electrostatic exciters it almost seems run of the mill, but hold the McIntosh in your hand and it feels anything but. The build quality is simply perfect and every component feels like it has been engineered to the point of obsession and then engineered a bit more. Visually impressive though the MHP1000 is, it is nothing compared to what McIntosh has built to partner it.

Calling the MHA100 a headphone amp is correct in the sense that Picasso's Guernica is an anti war doodle. It features a selection of analogue and digital inputs and, of course, a loop through so that any signals can be passed onwards and

out to a full-size power amp. Not that you absolutely need a power amp. As well as being a serious headphone amp, the MHA100 is an actual amp too. The 50W internal amplification is pretty *bijou* by McIntosh standards, but it is enough to run a fair few speakers perfectly happily.

### Big Mc

Of the three setups, the McIntosh sounds the most like a headphone system, but when you stop to consider that these are closed-back headphones and thus the only pair here you could listen to in a room

### The sheer sense of attack that these electronics have is utterly addictive

without the other person having to listen to what you are, you begin to realise just how good the MHP1000 is. With the test pieces of music, the McIntosh still sounds vast, it's just that there is barely perceptible edge to the space. If you feel you can only listen to open-backed designs, you need to listen to these.

There is also a sense of drive and power to this system that means if you tend towards electronic and rock music (and I do), it delivers an energy

that it is hard to live without once you've heard it. The Kraftwerk album is simply more visceral when the McIntosh is involved. What is very clever about this duo is that although they are not 'normal' McIntosh products, they exhibit the same powerful, accurate and extremely compelling sound that the traditional electronics do. If you want to hear what the recording is about, there is very little to touch this setup.

The really clever bit is that this accuracy and tonal honesty doesn't come at the expense of fun. Having run through the test music and being in no rush to leave my armchair, I switch to *The Sound of Violence* by Cassius. I love this track unconditionally and letting the McIntosh loose on it is simply and unapologetically joyous. The sheer sense of attack that these electronics have and the speed and agility with which they handle basslines is utterly addictive. And as you sit there with Steve Edward's epic vocals filling your head and those trademark McIntosh VU meters bouncing away like moshing rockers, the entire experience is sublime. Everyone else can get on with what they are doing none the wiser to what you're listening to. The McIntosh is a near perfect balance of accuracy, power and sheer excitement and represents a fantastic way to finish the day.

**All the McIntosh joy in a slightly smaller package**



Setting up any audio business in the present climate should be admired and the fact that Paul now has two is commendable. The care and attention that Paul and Wendy have lavished on the premises, the exceptional brand portfolio assembled to fill it and the

unapologetic joy that they have about creating great sound are the right ingredients for the task.

There is no finer indicator that the business is on the right lines than the three systems you see here. Being able to compare at leisure a set of brands

and equipment that normally only exist on their own gives you much greater confidence that you are choosing the right one for you rather than simply reaching the top of a dealer lineup. I'm afraid that having heard them, though, I don't want to choose. I want them all.