

Munich MOC 2018

JASON KENNEDY REPORTS BACK FROM THE MOC IN MUNICH



PMC Fact Fenestria

Where do you start? What must be the world's biggest exhibition of high end hi-fi is not getting any smaller and the amount of new products seems to multiply every year. It's tempting to go for the most radical examples of the audio art, such as Metaxas & Sins sculpted reel-to-reel tape machine or ESD's giant carbon fibre horn and Class A amplification. However, my emphasis here is on the few brands who managed to make a compelling and musical sound in the challenging environs of Munich's MOC exhibition centre. That narrows things dramatically, and the list looks a little thin, but it does provide a starting point.

One company that shone this year was The Fink Team, headed up by loudspeaker design guru Karl-Heinz Fink (see also Andrew Everard's separate feature, pp42-44). The first loudspeaker shown last year was the *WM-4*, a substantial beast with faceted 'stealth' styling and a proper 15in bass driver. This time around they were back with *Borg* (€24,000), sharing the two-tone finish and radar-proof styling and combining a 10in paper-cone bass/mid driver with an AMT planar tweeter. K-HF has managed to take the woofer up to a 1.6kHz crossover point that the tweeter can reach down to. A substantial magnet was needed on the driver to do this, but initial impressions suggest it has worked. *Borg* includes a range of adjustments, including variable presence, to adapt to source and amp; 'mid' changes perceived image depth, and 'damping' can be used to tailor *Borg* for different amplifier damping factors.

Innuos followed its limited edition *Zenith SE* server by trickling down some of its remarkable tech to the *Zen Mini* (€999), *Zen* (€2,099) and *Zenith* (€3,299) models which are now in *Mk 3* guise. These get customised mother boards and extra capacity (up to 8TB). An optional outboard PSU (€499) is available for the *Zen Mini*; the *Zen* gets a double linear PSU; and the asymmetric foot arrangement (developed for the *SE*) and now in the new *Zenith*, is described as an 'SE lite' by its Portuguese makers.

Sean Jacobs, the power supply guru who has been helping Innuos on these projects was on hand to tell me a little bit more about the new range topping *Zenith Statement* (€11,000). This two box server has eight linear power supplies and spreads the load between one box that contains the transformer and caps and the player which applies regulation as close as possible to the action. In particular the USB

and Ethernet outputs are re-clocked, a process that Innuos claims will improve the sound of streaming services such as Tidal. The company contrasted *SE* and *Statement* servers in a system with Kii *THREE* digital active speakers and the integrated *BXT* bass system. Up until that point, the *SE* was the best digital source I'd heard; it isn't anymore.

PMC has been hinting at something big for Munich for a while, but few could have anticipated the *Fact Fenestria*: not a double glazed window/speaker, but an ambitious floorstander. Much like the company's pro speakers, this puts one bass system on top of another. Transmission line vents at top and bottom have fins to reduce turbulence, while the radical drivers are flat discs of a foam core sandwiched in carbon fibre skins. Long throw operation delivers serious SPLs. The mid and tweeter, both domes, sit on an aluminium casting that's open all round and linked to the two bass sections with isolating mounts, to avoid cabinet vibrations getting to these drivers. The rear of the midrange dome is now properly tube-terminated. The side panels have compliant mountings that work in anti-phase to the main box, so cancelling energy coming off the sides, and the sound in this room was more than a match for systems costing dramatically more. The *Fact Fenestria* itself will cost £45,000 and should be available in September.

Tape mania shows no sign of abating and two brand new analogue reel-to-reel recorders will do nothing to help, the most extreme is Metaxas & Sins *GQT* (for Georges Quellet Tribute). (Quellet was the man behind Stellavox and a big favourite of Kostas Metaxas, the larger than life Aussie behind the brand.) Metaxas describes the *GQT* as having old school electronics on plug-in boards and changeable tape heads, plus the option for battery operation. Price is €40,000 for the full recorder or a bit less for a player. The Ballfinger *M063* looks rather more traditional even though it was conceived by German industrial designer Roland Schneider. He has developed a new system for tape tensioning but says that this €24,000 machine is essentially a classic design.

For those with a penchant for leather Atlas has dressed up its *Asimi* cable range in hand stitched hide and called it *Luxe*. (Fetishists will be saddened to know that there is no plan for a rubber version just yet!)

Chord Electronics is sticking with anodised aluminium in its latest *Hugo TT2* desktop DAC/

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headphone amp. Digital tapmeister Rob Watts has put in five times the processing power of its predecessor, and has also incorporated an unusually powerful output stage into this source component, which can deliver up to 18W from the balanced outputs. Chord Electronics also showed the *Choral Etude* power amp, a ground up design from John Franks that offers 150W per channel and much lower claimed distortion than the *Mezzo 75* it replaces.



D'Agostino Relentless

Dan D'Agostino can't resist going large. His aptly named *Relentless* power amp looks like a four man lift on a good day (apparently 220kg, and therefore burglar-proof). It has claimed output of 1.5kW into 8ohms, price is £250,000/pair (and yes, it's a monoblock!).

Rather more manageable (and affordable at €6,000), is Dr. Feickert's new *Vantaggio* phono stage: two MC, two MM and two line inputs, loading may be changed by remote control on the fly. Impedance, gain and capacitance can be tweaked in fine steps as you listen, and each input is separate, so cartridge comparisons should be a piece of cake.

Feickert has a new turntable too but this seems rather less exciting than Arthur Khoubessierian's revival of the Pink Triangle brand. So radical is the *Preference* (approximately £70,000) that he wanted me to sign a non-disclosure agreement so I couldn't tell you about it. Sadly the matching arm had been stolen during set up, so the turntable couldn't be demonstrated. However, interesting noises in the room came from a slightly odd looking server from Lucas Audio Lab called DMS. The custom finish disguises a device with heavy RF/EMI shielding, vibration control, a separate linear power supply and "efficient energy tuning" to minimise noise. The DMS is available from our jazz reviewer Greg Drygala for £7,000 in 4TB form.

Breaking news at Munich was that Pro-ject boss Heinz Lichtenegger had purchased Musical Fidelity (leaving more than a couple of people in Wembley looking for new employment). One wag sent me a link to *Ding Dong the Witch Is Dead* from The Wizard of Oz.....can't think what that's about.



Speaker designer Graham Bridge has decamped from ProAc to join Jerry Bloomfield at Falcon Acoustics, where he has not only risked his reputation with an active version of the *LS3/5a* but also created a floorstander called *GC6500R* (£18,000). With more than a little of the Sonus Faber about its appearance it has graphene-loaded bass drivers, a 50mm mid dome and ribbon tweeter. The cabinet has a leather covered baffle and a pair sounded rather good indeed on the end of Sugden amplification.

Sugden itself unveiled the *ANV-50* (£3,950), celebrating an anniversary of its 1967 foundation and answering some of the criticisms of its Class A designs (one of which is that they inevitably run hot). The solution found here is to use a high speed switch-mode power supply alongside a hybrid amplifier section consisting of Class A drivers and an 'ideal' Class B output stage. The *ANV-50* therefore draws just 10% of the mains power required for an *A21*, and its 50W of power doubles

Metaxas & Sims GQT





SME Synergy



Audio Silente Blackrock Reference



Vivid's new Kaya 90 floorstanders



Paul Beckett with the Onkk Cue

into a 4ohm load, which doesn't sound like a Sugden.

I found Peter Comeau bemoaning the excess of High End audio: the sheer quantity of big, shiny, but ultimately not great value audio equipment at the show could presage the end of the sector, in his view. That didn't stop his employer IAG from showing a prototype of the biggest Quad Electrostatic ever created – a toe in the water exercise to see if there's any demand for this sort of madness! Apparently demand for shiny speakers with a TAG McLaren Audio badge exists in the Far East, so that the company has started making replicas of Graham Landick's banana-shaped speaker. More to Peter's taste is Audiolab's entry level 6000.A integrated: with a projected £600 price, this seeks to emulate the 8000.A but adds a DAC and phono stage. The Quad name, meanwhile, appears a pair of headphones – sadly not electrostatic, but planar magnetic (the next best practical alternative). These also cost £600, so which is the best value Peter?

SME's new owners are beginning to make their mark. The *Synergy* packages turntable, arm, cartridge and phono stage at a decidedly unpackaged price of £14,950. *Synergy* mounts the phono stage in its base, and has a suspension system like that found in the *Model 10*. The arm is apparently closely related to a *Series IV*, and Crystal Cable is used throughout (Crystal being a sister company of course). SME is also beginning to realise that there's still demand for its legacy products, and plan to put the 3009 *Series II* arm from the 1970s back into production. The company has also acquired the Garrard name, and is working with Loricraft to make a plinth for refurbished 301 and 401 turntables. (There is also a plan to re-engineer the 301 idler-drive design because it has become something of a cult design; I saw

several beautifully restored examples at the show.)

SME is not the only ones with an eye on idler-drive. Audio Silente from Rome was playing its *Blackrock Reference*, a contemporary idler-drive turntable “made of stone, metal and blood” (according to the literature). The triangular chassis is machined from isostatic graphite and the spindle housing is cast iron, so it weighs 45kg before you add an arm. It didn't sound bad playing through a Jeff Rowland amp and Vivid's new *Kaya 90* floorstanders.

Realising that the *Gija* models weren't everyone's cup of tea, Vivid used external design input to come up with a less dramatic but nonetheless curvy range that starts at €9,000 for the pretty two-way *Kaya 25* and works up through the three-way *Kaya 45* (€16,400) with side-firing bass to the €26,000 *Kaya 90* with twin side firing bass units in the company's preferred reaction-cancelling arrangement.

You can't go to the High End show and not visit the Silbatone room, where there is usually a selection of enormous Western Electric cinema horn systems from back in the day. This year I was a little underwhelmed by the 757-A system from 1947. Possibly its diminutive size was a problem in the enormous room. (Either that or it was simply not old enough!)

Rather more entertainment was to be found in one of Living Voice's popular rooms, where its bank-busting *Vox Olympian/Elysian* horn system was making some very convincing sounds courtesy of a Canary Audio CD player that Kevin Scott has been working on. It sounded pretty glorious with a cello recital and much more to boot. The system is properly excessive at £750,000, but at least the build quality is in the mega league.

I can't finish this piece without mentioning Paul Beckett, a clockmaker from Norfolk who decided to build a direct drive turntable from the ground up. I told him a couple of years ago that it was an ambitious task, and now he realises as much, but the direct drive Onkk *Cue* (€25,000) is nearly finished and he showed its glossy red cast aluminium form to the world in the Newcomers section of the show. The latest feature is adjustable torque using open and closed loop control *via* sensor systems or back EMF. Apparently the higher torque of closed loop operation is best for percussive, timing-sensitive material, while open loop's lower torque better suits voices and instruments. Paul also showed a very sexy design for the forthcoming *Scribe 306.5* arm which is due to retail for €5,000.

But that's enough excess for one year. I'm sure there will be plenty more when the halls of the Munich MOC are thronged with audio nuts during May 2019.