

Space race

Five years after it first opened its doors, Criterion Audio has added two exceptionally impressive demo rooms. **Ed Selley** goes along for a listen

When we last visited Criterion Audio in 2015 (HFC 402), it was newly opened and seeing how its carefully proposed business model would work in reality. We were impressed at the time and customers have been too, so much so that it has since expanded its premises.

Director Mike Cunningham has overseen the construction of a stock room and two new demo rooms that must rank as some of the most impressive spaces I've ever seen in a UK dealership. Both have non-parallel walls and carefully considered dimensions to ensure they perform optimally. The attention to detail is absolutely superb with wall sockets

laid out to allow for tidy installations, ventilation routed in such a way to keep noise levels to a minimum and a meticulous level of fit and finish. Not for the first time, the decision to base out of town has paid off because I cannot see how such spaces could have been created on the high street.

In the last five years, the Criterion portfolio has also changed a little. Many of the originally stocked brands remain, but Mike has made some considered substitutions in response to feedback and demand. Criterion remains able to offer system solutions starting from a few thousand pounds, and an example of its more affordable offerings is in the first of the new rooms ready and waiting to go...

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System test music



GRIMES
Miss Anthropocene
So Heavy I Fell
Through The Earth
Qobuz 24/44.1 FLAC



STANLEY JORDAN
Magic Touch
Eleanor Rigby
Qobuz 16/44.1 FLAC



FOUR TET
Pink
Locked
180g vinyl

System 1 – Naim, ProAc

WHEN IT COMES to the range of features and functionality that today's all-in-one systems offer, you'd be forgiven for wondering why anyone bothers with separates any more. This Naim and ProAc pairing emphatically proves this very point.

In its current Uniti range, Naim has some of the most exceptionally capable all-in-one systems on the market. The range-topping Uniti Nova is a fearsomely capable bit of kit. Beyond the core attributes of an 80W amp that applies traditional Naim virtues of fanatical attention to the layout and power supply and a streaming platform that has been carefully honed into one of the very best in the business (that now features Qobuz support), it is the extras that truly impress. You can send audio to it via Bluetooth, AirPlay and Chromecast, connect your TV via HDMI Arc and it is equipped for a record player if you fancy going down that route.

Rapid Response

In comparison ProAc's Response D20R is almost understated, but it is seriously impressive nevertheless. It takes the basics of the preceding D18 and replaces the soft dome tweeter with a ribbon design that the company uses right up to the upper echelons of the range. By carefully reworking the crossover to make best use of this light and exceptionally fast treble unit, the D20R ensures it has the perfect partner for the 165mm glass fibre mid/bass cone. In its own way, it is as practical as the Naim; easy to

drive, unfussy about positioning and able to work in a range of room sizes.

Both components also feel like furniture. This might not seem hugely important, but in this beautifully specified listening room, it is something you become more aware of. You can place this combination in any room and it won't feel incongruous to do so. The Uniti is one of the best pieces of industrial design on the market today with its tactile volume and vivid display. The D20R is less overt, but no less immaculate in its fit and finish.

Making use of the newly added Qobuz support, the manner in which this system deals with *So Heavy I Fell Through The Earth*, the opening track

Low notes are felt as much as heard, but there isn't any sluggishness

of Grimes' *Miss Anthropocene* is a wonderful example of her work. The combination of impossibly delicate vocals overlaying the cold electronic fury she does so well, is a stiff challenge that is perfectly reproduced here.

The ribbon of the D20R is a star turn. It releases these vocals as a tangible, three-dimensional presence

1 NAIM UNITI NOVA £4,199
2 PROAC RESPONSE D20R £2,885
CHORD COMPANY RUMOUR
2 LOUDSPEAKER CABLE
(6M TERMINATED) £108
TOTAL £7,192

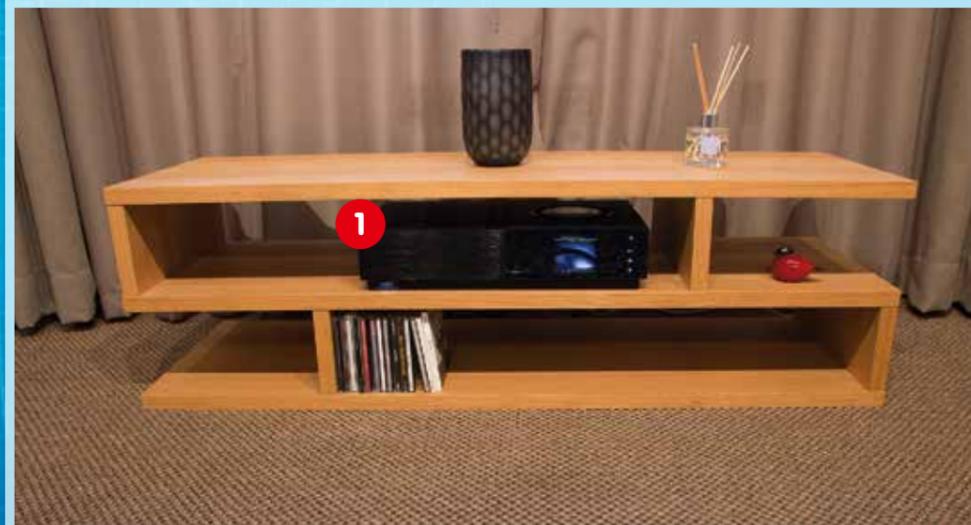
in the room. They're perfectly defined in front of the underpinning electronica, but never separate it. The deep low notes are felt as much as heard, but there isn't any sluggishness or overhang. At any volume level the control remains pretty much absolute.

Champagne super Nova

Neither is this solely the preserve of doom-laden electronica. Bat For Lashes lovely live cover of *The Boys Of Summer* is delivered with the same effortless realism. The crowd is pushed to the outer edges of the left and right channels leaving Natasha Khan in the centre sounding as rich and immediate as if she were in the room. For all the technical correctness of what I'm hearing, the emotional hook is what really grabs you. As cover versions go, this is a premier league effort and this system finds the joy in it, both in Khan's evident pleasure at performing it and the crowd's delight at hearing her do so.

It might be something of a cliché to suggest that this is all the system you'll ever realistically need, but there's more than a grain of truth to it. We're about to go a long way further up the Criterion portfolio, but I'm in no rush to stop listening to this superbly complimentary setup. Even at its terrestrial price point, it sets a very high bar to follow.

Simple but enormously talented, a modern marvel



System 2 – Nagra, Falcon Acoustics, Aurender

SOME OF YOU reading this will inevitably already browsed the prices for this system and have a few questions. While ‘front-end first’ is an entirely valid system building philosophy, I think this might be the greatest lengths I’ve seen it taken to. There is a method in the madness, though, and given it combines two of my favourite brands, it augers well in performance terms.

Nagra is a relatively recent arrival at Criterion, but Mike is already a huge fan. This setup is a combination of valves and solid state with the valve-equipped Tube DAC and its partnering off-board power supply being paired with the Classic preamp (which also benefits from the PSU) and Classic power amp. Nothing about any of the numbers this system generates is going to suddenly make the price points seem logical, but everything is sublimely over engineered. The 100W of the Classic amp is a far from outrageous figure, but it spends much of its time operating in Class A and is designed with unconditional stability in mind.

You Tube

The Tube DAC is every bit as uncompromising as its siblings. It has 25 internal power supplies and there is total separation between the analogue and digital sections. It relies on the external power supply to deliver these two feeds and is fed a signal of commensurate quality by Aurender’s N10 music server. Everything about the electronics, from the tiny but precise controls to those beautifully over engineered

isolation platforms is a thing of absolute loveliness.

Ostensibly, connecting a speaker that costs £3,274 to this little lot makes no sense, but there is a method in the madness. The Falcon LS3/5a is a perfect recreation of this seminal BBC monitor and the attention that has gone into its construction is no less impressive than the Nagra equipment. There is a school of thought that in nearfield conditions it is still all the speaker you’ll ever need, so there is a definite excitement to firing this system up.

Even with a track I know incredibly intimately it still springs surprises

I kick off with Stanley Jordan’s eclectic *Eleanor Rigby* cover. At times he sounds like two guitarists, which can make listening to him almost fatiguing as you strive to make sense of it all. Here, there’s no ambiguity at all. You can clearly perceive the unique playing style where he uses the fingerboard to effectively get two tunes from one instrument.

Jordan is a living presence conjured by the Falcon. You sense his movement, the points of emphasis and his flow. There is something contradictory about a system that has so much

personality but so little colouration, but the more you listen the more sense it makes. The moment this system reproduces voices, things step up another level. I can’t resist trying Regina Spektor’s *Consequence Of Sounds* and even with a track I know incredibly intimately it still springs surprises. I’d never picked up on the change in intonation in the repeat of the second verse before and, quite possibly, never will again.

Special delivery

This combination also has truly outstanding timing. The gentle *Rest Assured* by Ayo depends on being delivered with immediacy and this setup effortlessly delivers. The deep drum notes in this wonderful recording do a fine job of reminding me that the bass output from Falcon’s lovingly crafted homage is just that little bit better than the original could ever muster. In the smaller space that this system is running in, it is completely sufficient.

Ultimately, the performance is governed by the LS3/5a. In that regard, it can’t escape its constituent parts. If you like what this speaker does, however – and I do – this is the best LS3/5a setup there will probably ever be. The Nagra equipment takes it to levels I didn’t think possible to achieve and I don’t merely understand it, I covet it absolutely. System three has its work cut out...

Fronting this setup with the LS3/5a makes total sense



- 1 FALCON ACOUSTICS LS3/5A £3,274 (INC. STANDS)
 - 2 NAGRA CLASSIC AMP £13,000
 - 3 NAGRA CLASSIC PRE (POWERED BY CLASSIC PSU) £14,500
 - 4 NAGRA TUBE DAC PACKAGE: WITH PSU, CLASSIC VFS, SPIKES AND DC CABLES £30,500
 - 5 AURENDER N10 £8,900
- 2X SILTECH CROWN PRINCESS/CROWN PRINCE BALANCED INTERCONNECTS/ LOUDSPEAKER CABLES (2M) £18,710
- TOTAL £88,884

System 3 – SME, Shelter, Burmester, YG Acoustics

BURMESTER HAS SLOWLY but surely been building a following in the UK and Mike feels it is a superb addition to the portfolio. Even before you turn them on, these components manage to perfectly epitomise the ideals of high end.

This isn’t simply a collection of nice boxes, though. Take the 151 Musiccenter. You can pop a CD in and play it as normal, or you can rip it to an internal hard drive. You can then access music over network or from streaming services and tie it all together via bespoke software. The 088 preamp, meanwhile, balances an elegant circuit with such niceties as input level adjustment and naming and optional phono modules. The 911 MkIII power amp that completes the trio disposes of 350W into a 4ohm load and can be bridged should you need more power. This is seriously clever equipment that’s also beautiful.

Gimme shelter

They are joined by an SME Model 20A with SME V arm and the rarely encountered Shelter 901 III moving-coil cart acting as a vinyl source plus YG Acoustics’ Hailey 2.2 floorstanding speaker. YG has been part of Criterion’s portfolio since the very beginning and in a building full of impossibly well-made objects, it still ranks right at the very top.

I kick off with a vinyl half-speed master of Four Tet’s *Pink* as the opening track *Locked* contains a bass noise that defies easy description and only truly sounds its best on vinyl. The opportunity to experience it on something like this is simply too good to pass up and it doesn’t disappoint. In the build up, the SME and Shelter demonstrate all the attributes of great vinyl: it’s utterly silent at idle, pitch stability is absolute and it finds space in this dense recording that you feel you can walk around in.

And then, everything combines for ‘the noise’. It’s a dense, mechanical ‘whun-whun’ sound and in the hands of this setup it appears from nowhere, resonates in your chest cavity like a distant explosion and

instantly vanishes. It’s the perfect combination of an accurate signal treated right, given the power it needs and handled by a speaker with the reaction time of a trapdoor spider. In short, it’s utterly addictive.

Spin doctor

Of course, it does some amazing things with sounds that aren’t mechanical noises too. The title track on Fink’s *Resurgam* is incredibly intimate. This is a big system that doesn’t struggle to fill this large listening room, but there’s no sign of unwanted scale or loss of subtlety. It’s understated in its brilliance, but brilliant nevertheless. The 151 Musiccenter is no less impressive as a source. It manages to be completely free of any sense of processing or effort to what it does, but still takes the Ayo track *Rest Assured* that system two thrived with and put its own spin on proceedings. Reverse course completely and ask for the demotedly wonderful

Remember To Breathe by Sturgill Simpson and that same effortless, unforced brilliance shines through.

For all their astonishing technical attributes, these components can still take the heartfelt canned synth and guitar of One True Pairing’s *I’m Not Afraid* and find the joy in them. It is rare that a system this capable across the board can also be so viceless to live with, but that is the case here. This is an unashamed demonstration of just what the high end is capable of.

A serious high-end masterclass that’s great fun



- 1 YG ACOUSTICS HAILEY 2.2 £53,000
 - 2 SME MODEL 20A WITH SERIES V TONEARM £15,450
 - 3 SHELTER 901 III £2,300
 - 4 BURMESTER 151 MUSICCENTER £14,800
 - 5 BURMESTER 088 PREAMP WITH MC PHONO STAGE £15,800
 - 6 BURMESTER 911 MKIII POWER AMPLIFIER £17,500
- 2X CHORD SARUMT BALANCED INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLE (3M) £9,600
- TOTAL £128,450



Spend more than a few minutes at Criterion and it becomes clear that these systems aren’t accidentally brilliant. Mike and his team have listened to pretty much everything that they sell with a view to knowing just how it relates to everything else. This is how you find out

you can partner a £3,000 speaker with £40,000 of electronics. The result is as clear in the first setup as it is in the last. What’s more, all of them are clever, easy to use and utterly painless to live with, well and truly able to work in the sort of spaces we have in the UK.

What elevates Criterion is its listening space. This premises truly feels up to the job of representing the incredible kit it contains. Purchasing components of this nature should always be an experience, and Criterion Audio has what it takes to ensure it is an extraordinary one.