

Sweetness AND BITE

Set in a countryside location between Bath and Bristol, The Right Note is a dealership with a difference. Proprietor Jeremy Baldwin recommends a high-end, small-room system for us to hear and Tim Bower finds himself in sonic Utopia.

THE SYSTEM

Wadia 830 CD player	£3,000
Advantage A300 power amp	£2,250
Audio Physic Step loudspeakers (inc. stands)	£1,299
Argento Silver i/connect (XLR)	£295/m pair
BKS loudspeaker cable	£250/2m pair
TOTAL COST	£7,094

It's a beautiful day in early spring. Fresh, white sunlight slips down from on high, casting elegant shadows across a stretch of cool, green grass. In the centre of this idyll lies a Georgian country house. Beside the house is a traditional English pub, beyond the pub run the tranquil waters of the River Avon. The clutter of the city seems a distant memory, expelled and refreshed with every lung-full of untainted air. No hustle, no bustle, no traffic roar to pollute your ears – just the twitter of birds, the rustle of leaves and the sweet, sweet sound of hi-fi's true high end. Bliss...

The house is owned by a Mr. Jeremy Baldwin, an audiophile of exacting taste. Following the natural course of his obsession, he has extended the building to incorporate his business, a retail service he provides for the hi-fi connoisseur which trades under the name 'The Right Note'. Anyone with an interest in the field can visit his premises by appointment and experience top-notch high fidelity in the most relaxed location imaginable. A typical session with a 'customer' may include a trip to the

pub or a walk by the river, without the slightest hint of sales pressure to ruin the occasion. It's a treat for the senses, and the perfect environment in which to fully appreciate such rich sonic finery.

So, should you decide to visit Jeremy in his heavenly domain, what kind of system are you likely to become acquainted with? We asked him to recommend a set-up for us to listen to, supplying him with a scenario on which to base his ideas:

"Imagine a customer with a provisional budget of around £7,000, give or take a few bob. He or she has varied music tastes and requires a CD-based system for use in a smallish room. What would be your first thoughts?" The result is described forthwith, and simply represents a starting point for the high-end gear with which Jeremy deals.

SMALL ROOM UTOPIA

Let's start at the top. To spin those silver discs Jeremy decided upon the Wadia 830, a CD player of real distinction and an excellent place

to begin. US-based Wadia is a company much respected by those in the know, with fans that include many analogue stalwarts who have found its digital products to be the first they could live with. The 830 is its entry-level player, and while obvious savings have been made in the aesthetics department – the front panel looks

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more like an early '80s video game than a piece of precision hi-fi – it's a true high roller under the skin. A disc-clamping transport, multiple Burr-Brown DACs, temperature-stabilised clocking and a resonance-controlled cabinet combine to produce a thoroughly convincing musical performance.

Moving on through the system, our journey arrives upon its most obvious hook – the omission of a preamp. By removing this link from the chain, the signal's path is made more direct and, in theory, better sound can be achieved for less money. But you can't do this with any old CD player: it requires one incorporating a highly accurate digital volume control, and Jeremy reckons the 830, with the help of Wadia's proprietary Digimaster filtering, is the most affordable such device on the market. He also says that to maintain the level of performance with a preamp on board would probably add at least 3K or 4K to the cost – a pretty persuasive argument.

That leaves us with just a power amp, the Advantage A300. The Swedes are less



This system, as recommended by Jeremy Baldwin of The Right Note, makes a perfect small-room high-end combo.

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known for their hi-fi prowess than their Danish cousins, yet this 175 Watt power house proves itself a most communicative beast, with its class-A operation, over-sized transformers and MOSFET transistors. Advantage is unwilling to divulge much more about its internals, claiming "micro-processor technology unique in power amp design", but keeping secretive as to what that actually entails. But it sounds great, and that's what counts.

The system's final component touch is German — a pair of Step speakers from Audio Physic. Their specific design tenet is to deliver no-compromise performance in a small-room scenario, featuring 33cm high cabinets with a slim, rounded defraction-reducing baffle and a built-in diffuser board with 38 different-sized holes to "lower-standing waves and optimise cabinet resonances". They're rather fussy about placement, preferring free space and relatively close proximity to the listener, but their performance when placed on Audio Physic's open-frame stands is exceptionally pleasing.

Naturally, the cables are another vital part of this set-up's sound, but I dare not describe them in detail lest I entirely run out of space to outline the system's sound. Suffice it to say that the Argento Silver interconnect is used in balanced form, making use of the extra degree of quality supplied by the CD player's XLR-type output and the power amp's input, while the BKS woven copper speaker cable was supplied to us in two metre lengths.

SOUND QUALITY

So what does it all sound like? Imagine listening to a honey-voiced chorister wrapped in a

sumptuous cathedral acoustic, without any extraneous noise to cloud your perception. That, metaphorically-speaking, is the essence of its performance.

The shocking thing, considering the diminutive size of the speakers, is the utterly convincing scope of its soundstage — just close your eyes and listen. Music spreads far and wide, seeming to stretch beyond the cabinets and even room boundaries, creating such an illusion of three-dimensional space that, upon opening your eyes, it takes a couple of blinks just to re-orientate your mind. The energy and location of each instrumental performance is adroitly imaged, a wonderful 'listen-through' clarity in the mid to treble region giving the listener full view of every individual note, its harmonics and its ambient surroundings. Magical stuff.

Analytical qualities are undoubtedly strong, but of even greater merit is that they are seamlessly tied to fundamental musicality. It neatly sidesteps the sterile trappings of an over-clinical approach with a supremely pure and effortless tone, engaging ears as deftly with The Beastie Boy's jazzed-up/mellowed-out instrumentals on *The In Sound From The Way Out* as with each delicate stroke of key in Chopin's *Impromptu No.1 in A Flat Major* (Howard Shelley). Nothing too soft, nor too hard; sweetness and bite in equal measure.

Anything to criticise? Ultimate bass depth is naturally constrained by the speakers' size, though the impression you get is anything but lightweight. Neither is it a system that seeks to wow the listener with massive dynamic peaks and thunderous ability at high volume, but in its own context it comes perilously close to perfection.

VERDICT

SOUND	★★★★★
SYNERGY	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★
PRICE	£7,094.00

A triumph of simple design and high-quality components, carefully chosen for a complete sonic performance. A majestic high-end/small room system.

The Right Note (01225) 874728

The lack of a preamp may concern users of multiple sources, but the solution is simple — with the Wadia hooked up to the power amp's balanced inputs, a preamp for additional sources can be attached to the single-ended phono-type inputs at any time. Jeremy even provides hints for future upgrades, recommending that I try some Yamamura Churchill M4000 mains cables (£249 each) to

hear the difference for myself. I did, and though the change in quality isn't revolutionary, greater resolution undoubtedly warrants the outlay.

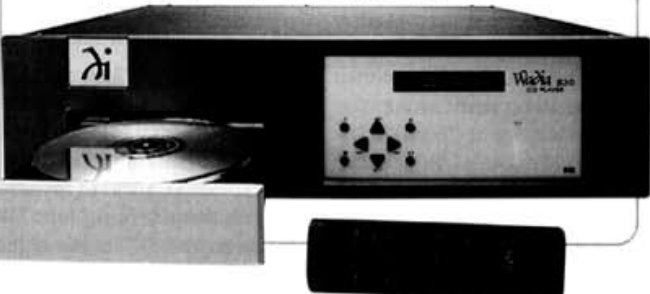
It just shows, you can improve on 'perfection'. It's another step up the ladder towards sonic Utopia, and in that respect, as a CD-based system for small room use, this outfit gets closer than almost anything else I've heard. Like I said, bliss.

THE SYSTEM COMPONENTS

CD PLAYER

WADIA 830 £3,000

Wadia's entry-level spinner is not the prettiest of players, but it's an exceptional performer. Gutsy, dynamic and copiously detailed, it's a fine component indeed, and particularly impressive when used without a preamp. Alternatives: Acoustic Precision Eikos £1,850; Audio Research CD1 £3,290; Naim CDSII/XPS £3,700/£1,925; Helios Stargate £2,550



SPEAKERS

AUDIO PHYSIC Step £1,299

Small, slim speakers that supply maximum sound in minimum space. Featuring a neat 8cm mid/bass cone and metal dome tweeter, they project a soundstage that utterly belies their modest dimensions. Price includes stands. Alternatives: Jamo Concert 8 £1,365; Dynaudio Contour 1.3 MkII £1,198; Harbeth HL Compact 7 £1,300; Acoustic Precision Eikos £800



CABLES & SUPPORTS

We used Argento Silver balanced XLR interconnects and BKS woven copper loudspeaker cable, both recommended by The Right Note. Audio Physic's own speaker stands were used, with a Mana rack supporting the equipment for the purposes of review.

POWER AMPLIFIER

ADVANTAGE A300 £2,250

A black monolith of a power amp, delivering 175 Watts per channel and offering both balanced and single-ended inputs. Advantage claims its design is "unique", but won't quite say why. Still, its sound is effortlessly good. Alternatives: Sirius D200 £2,995; Border Patrol 300B SE £3,995; Krell KAV-250a £3,195; XTC POW-1 £2,250

