



3D SONICS SCD-T200C SPLENDOR VALVE CD/SACD PLAYER | MUSIC FIRST AUDIO PASSIVE MAGNETIC PREAMP
3D SONICS FOUNDATION VALVE MONOBLOCKS | HYPERION HPS-938 LOUDSPEAKERS | E10,150

Sci-fi system

If you haven't felt your scalp shiver with pleasure recently, this could be the system you've been waiting for

Tingle factor... Not my invention. A colleague coined the phrase many years ago to distinguish between the merely excellent and, well, something a bit sexier. We've touched on it before in these pages, possibly in mutated form as 'that goose-bump thing'. Hardly surprising: hardware that stimulates the parts other systems can't reach is Beautiful Systems' stock in trade.

The phenomenon shouldn't be confused with 'X factor', though. X factor is a 'hard-to-define something'. Tingle factor isn't nearly so mysterious. It's that hard-to-touches-Ferrari-door handle moment, that one-in-a-million leaping off a bus and cannoning into a film star incident (that really happened to my dad; he knocked over Ingrid Bergman). And, just occasionally, if you're lucky, a combination of hi-fi and music that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end.

At least, the tingle factor was an occasional event until this system arrived. The tingling sensation began as I was unpacking it and has continued pretty much ever since, getting a boost every time (and that's every time) I play something on it. The back of my neck must look like a corn field in a stiff breeze. I've been trying to work it out. Far more expensive kit has passed through Beautiful Systems and failed to generate half the excitement. I think a short but frank, point-by-point description of what we have in front of us might help. Here goes.

One, a hi-fi system so dramatically 'retro-future' in design, not only isn't it remotely like any other you can buy, it

wouldn't have looked out of place as the skyline in Fritz Lang's seminal sci-fi movie *Metropolis*. Two, an already frighteningly talented, high-value Chinese CD/SACD player and monoblock amplifier combo modified in the UK to deliver simply awesome, mickey-taking performance per pound. And three, a pair of two-box speakers finished in gorgeous black piano lacquer that look remarkably like those five-figure American icons with the cute baby-dog name, cost but a fraction of the price and sound, uh, astonishing. Tingle yet?

All right, this system isn't the result of any system-matching alchemy on my part. It all comes from Real Hi-Fi (www.realhi-fi.com), distributors of Shanling electronics, Hyperion speakers and the Music First Audio passive magnetic preamp among others. Perhaps most excitingly of all, Real Hi-Fi is home of avowed tingle factor merchants 3D Sonics. 3D Sonics styles itself as a new, independent UK manufacturer that, as well as producing its own designs, breathes on the Shanling products from China to create "state of the art CD/SACD players and amplifiers". Although, that isn't solid-state of the art; we are in a distinct hollow-state technology world, where valves remain king.

SOUPED-UP SHANLING

It's more than just tweaking. Once 3D Sonics have done their stuff, the Shanlings aren't really themselves, featuring completely redesigned insides with 240V transformers and 240V rated components throughout, simplified

"A Chinese SACD/CD player and monoblock amplifier combo modified in the UK to deliver simply awesome, mickey-taking performance."



3D Sonics SCD-T200C Splendor valve CD/SACD player
£2,150

Shanling provides the 'out there' styling. 3D Sonics the souped up bits. The result is sonically and aesthetically jaw-dropping.



Music First Audio passive preamp
£1,500

Not much to it, but less is more. This uses one custom made transformer on a nickel permalloy core per channel cleverly wired to an Ekma switch.



3D Sonics Foundation valve monoblocks

£3,000 per pair
The Shanling power amps they're based on are so modified, it's little wonder 3D rounded them. They anchor this system with a rare alliance of grace and power.



Hyperion HPS-938 loudspeaker

£3,500 per pair
This Wilson lookalike is a deceptively valve-friendly speaker that comes as close to being all things to all audiophiles as virtually anything at the price.



circuitry and upgraded power supplies. The top loading SCD-T200C valve SACD player that fronts this system, for instance, becomes a pure valve design with no operational amplifier chips after the DAC and upgraded power supply rectifiers and regulators. There's more than a smattering of top grade specialist audio components, too, such as Audio Note copper-foil coupling capacitors, Audio Note Tantulum resistors, Silver/Mica bypass capacitors and Black Gate as well as Sanyo Organic Semiconductor electrolytic capacitors.

The standard player is no slouch on the spec front combining a top-loading, heavy-duty, aluminium-housed drive mechanism and magnetic puck system with Sony's KH1M-2BDAAA bare head laser assembly in a custom aluminium housing. Sony's CXD2753R chip takes care of SACD decoding and Burr-Brown's custom PCM1738 24-bit/96kHz SACD chipset handles the digital-to-analogue conversion. For the 3D Sonics version, the analogue circuitry uses a super totem pole valve stage. Round the back, there are two sets of RCA output sockets, one for the standard line output, the other utilising the valve stage – Shanling promising a 'sonic treat' for anyone who uses the latter. The SCD-T200C (re-named Splendor when given the 3D Sonics treatment) comes with remote control and demo SACD and even has

an electronic volume control which enables you to connect the SCD-T200C directly to a power amplifier or active speakers, bypassing the need for a conventional preamplifier.

PASSIVE MAGNETIC

As with all digital volume controls, even high-quality ones, resolution suffers at low volumes. So, Real Hi-Fi recommends adding Music First Audio's passive magnetic preamp, a passive unit with the option of balanced outputs. Modestly functional it may be, but all internal connections use 0.6mm silver coated, solid copper wire with PTFE insulation, while the Swiss made Elma switches are silver plated and the mu-metal shielding provides protection from magnetic fields. In short, it's a gem of a unit.

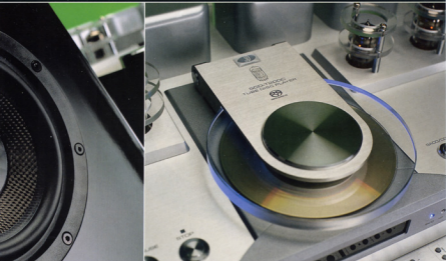
For connection to the 3D Sonics Foundation valve monoblocks we've used balanced cables, as recommended by Real Hi-Fi. Based on the Shanling SP-80C UK chassis, the Foundation is extensively modified and something of a tour de force for the 3D Sonics philosophy, totting a super-differential amplifier circuit with a direct-coupled driver circuit, copper-foil coupling capacitors to the output stage and differential output stage biasing technology. The amps are capable of accommodating EL34, 6550, KT88 or KT90 output valves and offer three

operation modes – triode, ultra-linear and pentode – that allow a trade off between power output, load tolerance, bandwidth, soft clipping behaviour and general sonic quality in order to best match the amplifier to a given speaker system. Potentially, triode should give the best sound quality but limits power to around 20 to 25 watts, depending on the exact output valves fitted and bias current chosen.

Using the ultra-linear operation raises the output power to between 30 and 40 watts, again depending upon the exact output valve and biasing condition used. The downside is said to be a somewhat rougher sound with perhaps a little less refinement, but subjectively more power. Switching to pentode operation raises the power even further to 45 to 60 watts from a single pair of valves. But you can expect a further notable reduction in tolerance to the kind of wild impedance swings certain dynamic speakers are well known for.

But Hyperion's HPS-938 is much better behaved than that, with an average impedance of six ohms dropping to an entirely reasonable 3.8-ohm low. Sensitivity is healthy, too, at 90 dB. The substantial (and extremely heavy) duo-cabinet design so reminiscent of the Wilson WATT/Puppy assigns a dedicated slot ported cabinet for the bass, housing two 200mm graphite SVF drivers. The





“The way the Hyperions marry the openness, resolution, speed and transparency more usually associated with a panel to the weight, extension and dynamics of a top-class box borders on the uncanny.”

separate upper cabinet with its sloping, time-aligned baffle sports a 165mm carbon fibre SVF midrange driver with magnetic fluid damping and a semi-horn loaded 25mm silk dome tweeter. Claimed frequency response is 30Hz to 22kHz, with the crossover set at 230Hz and 3kHz, and three sets of terminals are provided for tri-wiring/amping.

SONIC IDENTITY

Experimenting with the 'sonic identity' switch located between the speaker terminals at the back of each monoblock is fascinating. As predicted, the single-ended triode mode possesses a delightful lucidity and effortless sense of flow that isn't readily apparent with ultra-linear and pentode alternatives. Despite the modest 25 watts per channel rating, this is where the amps sound fastest and most transparent. They do the maximum information retrieval thing but with superbly natural tonal texture and balance.

Moreover, the stereo imaging is to die for with a soundstage so broad, deep and convincingly proportioned, I can't

think of a solid-state amp that even comes close. Having said that, I finally settled on a system configuration that paired the standard line output from the SACD/CD player (the valve stage option made things just a little too lush) with the ultra-linear settings on the amps, a combination that retains much of the sweetness and spacious imaging of the triode mode but involves you with the music in a more physical and emotional way. It offers better low frequency control, too, with greater definition and shaping, especially at basement level.

In particular, the way the Hyperions manage to marry the openness, resolution, speed and transparency more usually associated with a panel to the weight, extension and dynamics of a top-class box borders on the uncanny. Bass guitar sounds astonishing through these speakers, not just the remarkable transient definition but the realistic weight and note shaping.

Treble is a bit tasty, too – not just for its obvious extension and smoothness but also its ability to resolve rich tonal colours and harmonics – never more

obvious than on the shimmering massed string arrangement of Michael McDonald's latest outing *Motown Two*. Festy soundscapes are a rarity on this system; there's no getting away from the fact it has an alluringly warm tonal balance. Its never overbearing, though. Presentation is essentially honest, explicit and open, especially through the midrange, and stereo perspectives are strikingly believable.

So, the single factor, as generated by this *Beautiful System*, is made up of many things: breathtakingly natural textures and limpid transparency; speakers that are faithful to the tempo of the music yet sound big, uncompressed and dynamic; previously unnoticed recorded details, subtly yet emphatically unearthed. It's hi-fi that images in 3D, goes loud without sounding forced and creates an almost tangible presence of real musicians in the room. But, most of all, hi-fi that prickles your scalp every time it catches your eye and every time you hit 'play'. Fancy some of that? **HFC**

David Vivian

