

Going for Gold

Audio Gold matches the best of vintage audio with some carefully curated new products, **Ed Selley** finds out how the blend works in practice

Go to most hi-fi dealers and you'll find they usually offer a selection of used equipment, ordinarily accrued via trade-in. This generally plays second fiddle to the new product and it is rare that it forms much more than an addendum to the main business. Audio Gold in Muswell Hill, North London, has inverted that relationship. For over 25 years it has offered a vast array of used equipment, usually between 10 and 50 years old, all backed up by a one-year warranty. More recently it has started to stock a range of new equipment to bolster the used product and give it some new capabilities.

Audio Gold is quite unlike any other venue I've visited. Occupying a former bank, it's a treasure trove of equipment, some of which is rare and much sought after, combined with a selection of new and used vinyl that puts many dedicated record stores to shame. The team of Ben Shallcross, Alex Barwise and Robin Brunson work to keep a running supply of certain products, but each time you visit it is likely you'll find something different, which ensures that a huge selection of possible combinations are available. To demonstrate how this works, one system comprises new equipment, one almost entirely used and one a mix of both new and old.



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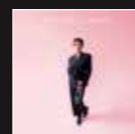
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System test music



CINEMATIC ORCHESTRA
Ma Fleur
180g vinyl



EMILY KING
Scenery
180g vinyl



MY BABY
Loves Voodoo!
Tidal 16/44.1

System 1 – Edwards Audio, Icon Audio, Rogers

WHEN SELECTING BRAND new equipment, the team is keen to keep a cohesive 'feel' to how everything works together. As a result, this system combines a piece of hi-fi royalty with an amplifier based on a design barely less illustrious in partnership with a turntable that offers some sparkling performance at a very affordable price.

Modern Classic

The Rogers LS3/5a Classic hardly needs an introduction. The little BBC monitor routinely passes through Audio Gold, but this one is brand new. Great care has gone into the execution and it is utterly faithful to the original down to the birch ply cabinets, carefully pair matched mylar dome tweeters and doped bextrene drivers.

Driving the Rogers is another new product and, once again, it is one with a fair degree of pedigree. Icon Audio's Stereo 25 MkII is a valve

integrated that makes use of either EL34 or KT88 valves to give a healthy but sensible 30W per channel. The circuit is an evolution of 'trad Brit' thinking, but has been implemented with considerable care and attention and has garnered some useful extra features like a headphone socket. It's the perfect foil for the Rogers and many of the speakers Audio Gold offers.

The turntable can't claim quite such a length ancestry, but Edwards Audio has carved out a name for affordable designs that punch well above their weight. The TT6 is towards the upper end of the range and this is the first time I have experienced the new in-house tonearm. Built around

Rogers' LS3/5a is no bass monster, but its balance never leaves you wanting for more

unipivot principles, it is both elegant and confidence inspiring in use. Audio Gold has fallen for Audio-Technica's VM-95 series of cartridges in a big way, so the VM-95EN is in use here running into an Edwards Audio Apprentice phono stage. Customers wanting to add digital have a choice of a number of used CD players or some of the Yamaha MusicCast components that offer network audio.

Selecting *Ma Fleur* by the Cinematic Orchestra to kick off proceedings, the performance of this system is at once nostalgic and at the same time bang up to date. The combination of the

LS3/5a Classic and a decent valve amplifier listening to *To Build A Home* has pretty much perfect tonal realism with everything from Patrick Wilson's haunting vocals and delicate piano playing to the plucked double bass sounding precisely as they should.

The LS3/5a Classic is the star of the show. It's never going to be a bass monster, but the balance it possesses from the top to the bottom of its frequency response never leaves you wanting more. The relationship between the drivers is so utterly cohesive you'd swear there's only one at work in each cabinet.

As good as it gets

They're only as good as the components that feed them, though, and the Edwards and Icon combine to ensure they can sound their best. Neither is this solely something that happens with material as laid back and well recorded as the Cinematic Orchestra. The rather more dynamic *Two Dancers* by Wild Beasts is a demonstration that while it looks traditional, there are no stereotypes present here. It handles the shifting tempo and scale of the title track with aplomb and the timing and attack might take people lulled into assuming from its appearance that it is a bit more 'pipe and slippers' rather by surprise.

Listening to this system at length reveals that while Audio Gold has made a name for itself as purveyors of used equipment, it knows exactly what it's doing with new product too. This system handles anything you throw at it with an effortless ability to sound right whatever it might be. If this is what Audio Gold can do with a relatively recent addition to the business, I'm keen to see what happens when it is back to more familiar territory.

Traditional looks combine for an entirely contemporary performance



- 1 ROGERS LS3/5A CLASSIC £2,750
- 2 EDWARDS AUDIO TT6 £769
- 3 ICON AUDIO STEREO 25 MKII £1,400
- EDWARDS AUDIO APPRENTICE £179
- AUDIO-TECHNICA VM-95EN £100
- CHORD CLEARWAY SPEAKER CABLE 2X 3M £180
- AUDIOQUEST EVERGREEN INTERCONNECT 1M £35
- AUDIO GOLD CUSTOM WALNUT HI-FI CADENZA £550

TOTAL £5,963

System 2 – Yamaha

THE RANGE OF choice for the used system is truly biblical, stretching from a true ‘flat earth’ combo of chrome bumper-era Naim through to more valves. In the end, the decision makes itself. Sat in plain view is an immaculate pair of Yamaha NS-1000 speakers. From there it’s a hop skip and a jump to making a system of matching Yamaha electronics – with something from the current lineup thrown in for good measure.

The NS-1000 requires little introduction. A sealed, three-way design, it is most notable for its use of beryllium for the tweeter and midrange units, which are underpinned by a hefty 12in doped paper driver. Built for both pro and domestic use (the pair here are domestic units with the better finished cabinet), it still has a legendary reputation and this is one of the nicest-looking examples I’ve seen in a long time.

Age is but a number

The CR-1000 is from the same vintage and while less radical, it is no less gloriously over engineered. Able to deliver 85W at vanishingly low distortion, it boasts a vast swathe of inputs, has enough controls to satisfy even the most determined tweaker and at 19kg, is built like a lorry. It might seem peculiar to spend £750 on something that’s 43 years old, but there’s not much at the price that feels as substantial as it does.

The YP-800 turntable is a very rare beast in the UK and this is the first

time I’ve seen one. It’s a direct-drive design with a 12-pole brushless motor acting on a 2kg platter. The arm is an S-shaped device that features a bearing assembly that is rather smarter than those found on modern turntables at the same price and is finished with another Audio-Technica VM-95, this time a VM-95E. And if you don’t fancy living on a diet of vinyl and analogue radio, you can add the modern WXC-50 streaming preamp to access files over network, a plethora of streaming services as well as AirPlay and Bluetooth.

If you do an online search for information on the way the NS-1000

The thwack to the chest that the 12in drivers deliver is utterly compelling

sounds, you won’t have to look too hard to find comments to the effect of it being a little forward or relentless. Partnering it with Yamaha amplification seems to be the perfect antidote to issues of that nature. The spectacular pressing of Emily King’s *Scenery* is delivered in a manner that instantly puts to bed any notion of making allowances for the bulk of this system being older than I am. *Forgiveness* is simply perfect here. The weight and scale on offer is very special indeed and the richness and emotion of King’s vocals is something that it manages on an innate level. You’ll be hard pressed to tell that the whole ensemble is being fronted by a

cartridge that costs less than £50, but as we’ve noted before: the VM-95E is a bit of a bargain.

This civility doesn’t rob the NS-1000 of its more singular talents. Changing tack completely and moving to LCD Soundsystem’s *Daft Punk Is Playing At My House*, the speed and slam here is grin-inducingly brilliant. This is a system that lives for the leading edge of the first note and for the moment the percussion strikes. It makes any time signature, however complex, entirely self-explanatory. It is easy to see why the NS-1000 has the following it does.

Back to the future

Network streaming might have been beyond even the savants of *Tomorrow’s World* when the rest of the system was built, but the WXC-50 slots in like a charm.

Tribulations by My Baby gives another chance for it to show the startling levels of immediacy and presence that it possesses and when I go to the other end of the sonic spectrum and stick Sturgill Simpson’s *Remember To Breathe* on, that same instantaneous thwack to the chest that those 12in drivers so effortlessly deliver is utterly compelling. This snapshot of what a carefully selected used system can do is truly impressive and I’m fascinated to see how the team plans to top it.

Yamaha’s experience over 40 years shows to good effect



- 1 YAMAHA WXC-50 £329
 - 2 YAMAHA CR-1000 APPROX £750
 - 3 YAMAHA YP-800 APPROX £500
 - 4 YAMAHA NS-1000 APPROX £2,500
- CABLES FREE OF CHARGE
-
- TOTAL £4,079



System 3 – Linn, Quad, Icon Audio, Yamaha, JBL

OUR FINAL SYSTEM is the best representative of what Audio Gold does for most customers in that it combines used and new products to play to the strengths of both.

Linn LP12s are generally available in strength at Audio Gold and this example is a relatively young one. The Akito arm has been fettled by Audio Origami and the classic K9 cartridge mounts a Shibata stylus from the VM-95SH. Here it is connected to an Icon Audio PS2 phono stage. The Yamaha WXC-50 from the previous system stays put to offer its services.

Firm favourites

The PS2 isn’t the only offering from Icon Audio. The LA4 MkIII preamp is an all-valve design, making use of a trio of 6SN7 Triodes with a GZ34 rectifier. It is partnered with a pair of Quad Elite Monoblocks. Quad is one of the staple brands for Audio Gold and the Elite Monoblock and earlier 909 are firm favourites.

I’m overjoyed to see the JBL L100 Classic being called up for use as the speaker for this system. Like the Rogers in the first setup, the L100 is a new production that is a faithful recreation of the original, down to the splendid orange foam grilles. This is the sort of device that makes me happy just looking at it and I’m fascinated to see how this unique system works in principle. The answer is: absolutely outstanding. If

you need to know what colour pants the artist was wearing on the day of recording you might want to look elsewhere (or substitute the NS-1000 back in), but if you want the music to be a living, breathing representation of what’s on the disc, this is where you need to look. Some of this comes down to the sheer amount of air it can move. The opening *Sea Borne* from Dead Can Dance’s *Dionysus* is given a scale that simply eludes most modern narrow baffle speakers.

The Icon/Quad amplification lends an effortlessness to proceedings that is hard not to love. The influence of the LA4 MkIII is that nothing I play upsets the top end of this system. Instead you get upper registers as smooth as Leslie Philips. Where the Quads come in is that they endow the performance with a punch that would be tricky to achieve with valve amps at a sensible price. The spellbinding *Soul In Isolation* by The Chameleons has a punch to it that takes you to the heart of the recording. There is something about the combination of effortless power and fairly benign speakers that makes for a joyous listening experience, and this is the perfect illustration of that.

The LP12 makes its presence felt too. This example in its classic spec is impressively fun to listen to. It seizes on rhythms and has you performing all the clichés of LP12 ownership because all it wants to do is entertain. The combination with the amp duo is

simply perfect. The Linn sends a signal absolutely bursting with energy and the Icon and Quads find the refinement and slam that makes things viscerally real. It’s a level of cross-brand partnership that is quite simply perfect.

Talking heads

This is not an identikit system. It’s never going to tuck away into a corner out of sight, but every part of it from the time capsule JBLs through the Icon’s valves to the timeless lines of the LP12 is a talking point. This system is almost as much fun to look at as it is to listen to and given just how good it sounds, that’s one of the highest complements that I can pay it.

A unique mix of equipment capable of a spellbinding performance



- 1 YAMAHA WXC-50 £329
 - 2 QUAD ELITE MONOBLOCKS X2 £900
 - 3 ICON AUDIO LA4 MKIII £1,599
 - 4 ICON AUDIO PS2 £699
 - 5 LINN LP12 WITH AKITO 1 ARM AND K9 CARTRIDGE £2,500
 - 6 JBL L100 CLASSIC £3,995
- AUDIO-TECHNICA VM-95SH £159
AUDIOQUEST GOLDEN GATE PHONO INTERCONNECTS X2 £118
CHORD CLEARWAY INTERCONNECT £99
AUDIOQUEST ROCKET 11 SPEAKER CABLE 2X 3M £140
THE POWER BLOCK UK SUPERSOCKET £560
-
- TOTAL £11,098



It is easy to look at Audio Gold and assume what it does is easy, but the longer you spend here the more impressive it becomes. Being able to source the equipment, have the contacts needed to keep it all in running condition and offer a warranty on it is no mean

feat. To then effortlessly work in the new products needed to ensure that these wonderful veterans work in the context of 2019 is even more special – taking the uncertainty out of the process and ramping up the enjoyment. Simply browsing the incredible selection of

components – and we’ve only scratched the surface of what’s on offer – is an experience, and the systems they create are masterpieces. Choosing approved used equipment might not be the obvious path in system building, but Audio Gold shows just how rewarding it can be.