



AUDIO AÉRO PRESTIGE CD/SACD PLAYER | ARTEMIS LABS LA-1 PREAMP
AUDIO AÉRO PRESTIGE POWER AMPLIFIERS | BC ACOUSTIQUE ACT A4 SPEAKERS | £27,990

Hi-Fi Choice
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The big issue

Mix the latest in audiophile high technology with the best in 1930's radio valves and the result is huge... in every sense

British understatement is a terrible thing sometimes. "It's a bit big," says the distributor. "The speakers are a little large," admits the photographer. "The crates are quite heavy," announces the courier. Truth is, the speaker boxes are coffin-sized and the crates weigh as much as a small car engine. Each. To paraphrase scouse philosopher Jim Royale, "Quite heavy... my arse!"

The system was put together by the audio industry's main consumer of Lapsang Souchong tea and all-round tall guy, Ron Tabor of The Audiophile Club. Ron's height is important, because he drives a big car (for its headroom) and even that was stumped by the size of the system when packed up.

It's remarkable; when confronted by mighty valve monoblocks and loudspeakers that stand nearly two jockeys tall, the vast 15kg flight deck that is the Audio Aéro Prestige CD/SACD player seems almost miniscule by comparison. Of course, in reality it's one of the biggest players money can buy. Built around a centre-mounted Philips transport, encased within a thick aluminium shell and resting on a trio of Black Diamond Racing Pyramid Cones, this valve-sporting two-channel player can double up as a digital and analogue preamp, too. It includes a single-ended and XLR balanced pair of line inputs as well as BNC, coax and XLR balanced digital inputs, and ST and TOSlink optical inputs. In other words, it's stacked. We'll come back to the French Audio Aéro, later.

HUNTING THE PREAMP GODDESS

Before we do, the Artemis Labs LA-1 from Pasadena in California squeezes into the preamp role. This deceptively basic, strangely dated-looking ('strangely' because it doesn't look dated, it just seems like it looks dated...

perhaps it's the graphics) line preamp has just five line inputs and two outputs. Named after the Greek maiden goddess of the hunt, Artemis Labs make just the one preamp, a high and low gain phono stage and two power amps, all of which are no stranger to sporting valves.

In the case of the LA-1 preamp, it features a 5687 double triode tube per channel in what Artemis calls 'Cool-Swap' configuration. This means each side only uses one part of each double-triode valve and when they begin to fail, swapping the valves from one side to the other doubles the life of the valves. This also means they run half as hot as usual, extending their working life further still.

The exposed valves sit mid way along the chassis, hidden from view in a trench. The LA-1 also uses a 24-position stepped attenuator for a volume control, just 4dB of feedback and choke loading, all of which is the audiophile preamp equivalent of Angelina Jolie in a bikini made of dental floss and baby oil. Pure audiophile porn.

FRENCH PRESTIGE

We return to Audio Aéro again for the power amplification. And once more we are at the top of the French company's tree. The Prestige monoblocks are giant single-ended triode valve amps. Most SET designs churn out a measly handful of watts; the Prestige pumps out a healthy 40 watts per size. This is because each side uses a giant 211/VT-4C triode and a scary high voltage 813 pentode (both from the golden age of valve radio transmitters). A couple of 6SN7EH units complete the valve complement and all four are sat in a steel slat cage. Good thing too; that push-on top connector on the 813 has nigh on 500 volts running through it. The amp's not new, but is the stuff of legend to all who hear it. ☐



**Audio Aéro
Prestige CD/
SACD player**

£7,950

Futuristic-looking disc spinner that really does sound as good as it looks.



**Artemis Labs
LA-1 preamp**

£2,195
Beautifully made valve line preamp with slightly dated look but state-of-the-art performance. A cult classic for valve-loving audiophiles.



**Audio Aéro
Prestige mono
amplifiers**

£12,995 per pair

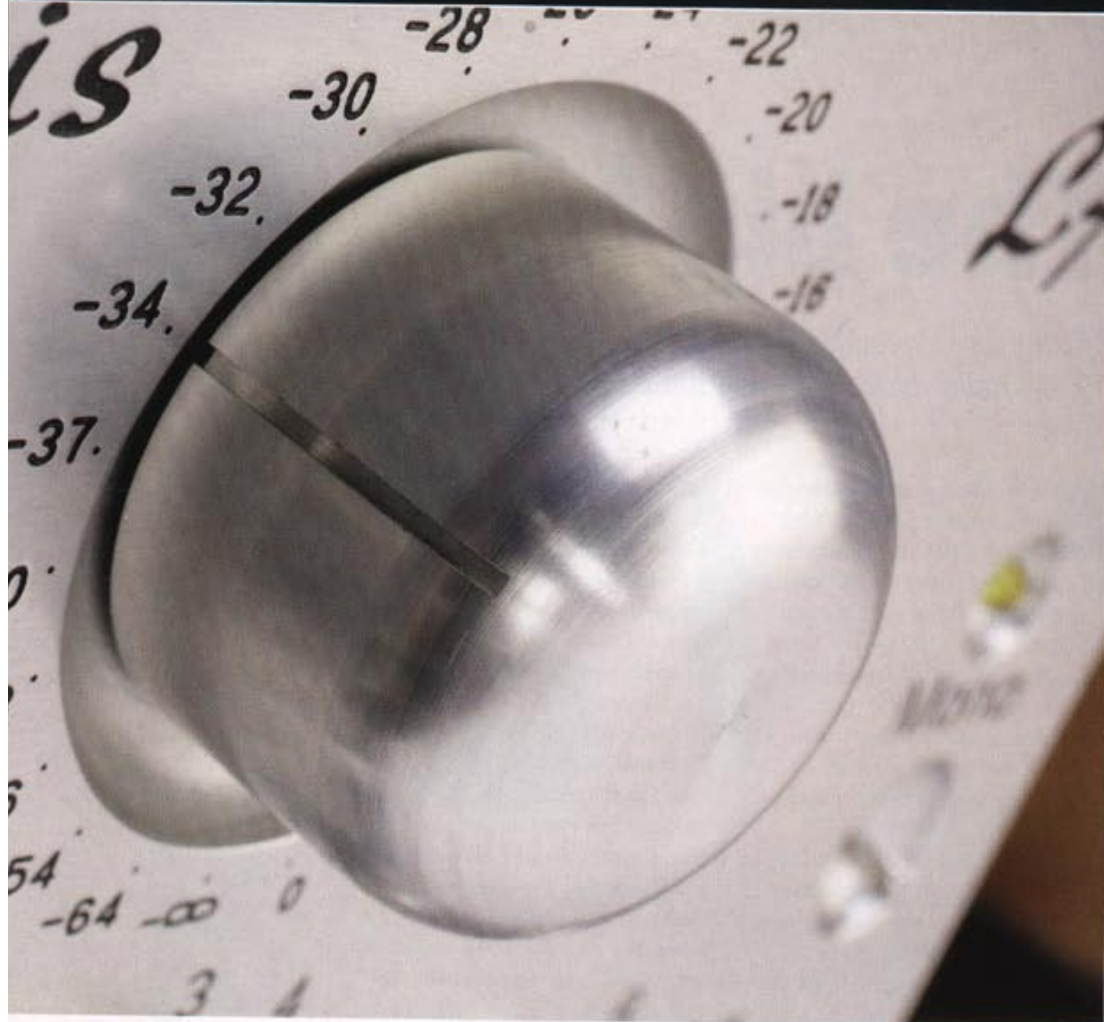
With 40 of the smoothest, most unobtrusive watts around, these are a slice of hi-fi heaven.



**BC Acoustique
ACT A4 speakers**

£4,850 per pair
Tall, mighty efficient speakers that are great for big rooms and valve amps.

"Ron's height is important, because he drives a big car (for its headroom) and even that was stumped by the size of the system when packed up."



One of Audio Aéro's key features on these stunning monoblocks is the company's TRAC system. Short for 'Tube Relay Amplification Concept', TRAC means the amplifier has all the driving force of pentodes with all the smoothness of single-ended triodes. Like the CD/SACD player, each 30kg monoblock sits on three Black Diamond Racing Pyramid cones and, as most of that weight comes from the transformers at the rear, it bodes well for producing a good, deep bass sound.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

Staying with the Gallic charm, BC Acoustique's ACT speaker range is no stranger to *Hi-Fi Choice*. The company picked up a 'Best Buy' in an *Ultimate Group Test* back in September 2004 (HFC 257) for its ACT A1 floorstander. We weren't prepared for the audiophile onslaught that is the ACT A4, however. Top of the BC Acoustique line, this tall, slim and deep loudspeaker is claimed to reach right down to 25Hz and right up to 50kHz. Armed as it is with BC Acoustique's own BC100 horn tweeter, a pair of 180mm midrange units and a side-firing 300mm bass unit, all housed in a 40mm-thick MDF cabinet and standing more than 130cm tall, it's little wonder the speaker is delivered to

achieve such an extended frequency response. The downside to the big MDF box is the weight; you are looking at 80kg of loudspeaker-builder's art.

BC Acoustique is rare among high-end speaker makers in that it allows some tailoring of the tweeter's output, with little jumper pins on each speaker to set the high frequency in line with the room size and reverb. Whatever setting you select, it does not change the efficiency of the speakers, which is a ruthless 94dB (ruthless efficiency? Bring on the soft cushions, Cardinal Biggles).

Big speakers and even specs mean you need a huge space to give them breathing room, although if you point the bass drivers at one another, the room requirements get a smidgeon smaller. Bed-sit owners need not apply.

SUFFER FOR YOUR ART

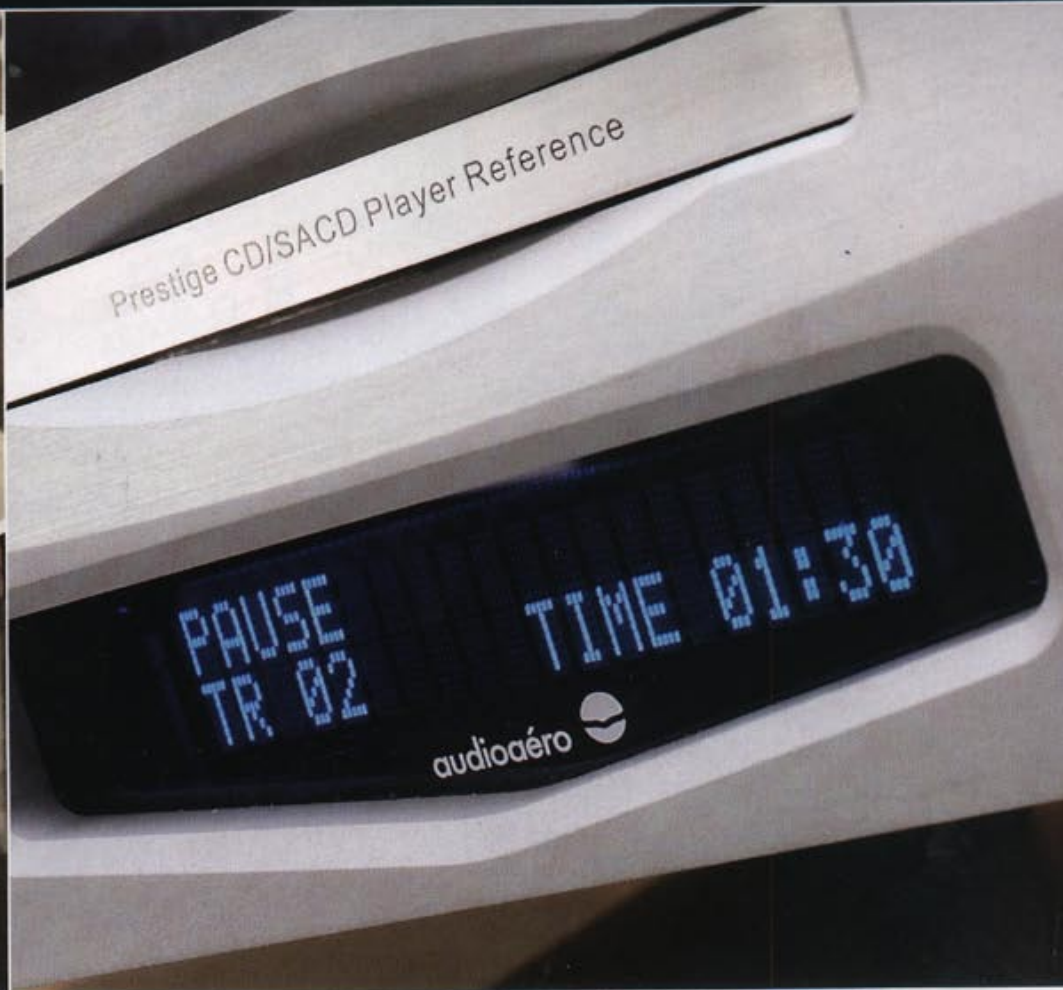
There are more convenient systems. Those ones that are less of a pain to move, unpack or set-up. Or those systems that don't turn your living room into a sauna and make your 'leccy bill read like Paris Hilton's Amex statement. There are even products that have a better level of fit and finish than the Audio Aéro/Artemis/BC Acoustique line-up. Who cares? Those systems miss out on what this offers.

So, what exactly does it offer? Well, there's a sense of 'thereness' that's uncanny and not that far removed from the sort of sound made by that long-standing audiophile super-reference point, the Audio Note Ongaku. It must have something to do with the ultra minimalism of the amplifier stages (just half a valve in the preamp and four in the power amp), or maybe the magic kicks in whenever you get power valves that are about the size of a small marrow. Whatever it is, this system has 'thereness' in spades.

'Thereness' is easy to define, and yet somehow impossible to explain cogently. Go someplace where (preferably unamplified) live music is taking place and listen. Then go back to your normal hi-fi system and play something similar. Feel the disappointment? Now, do the same on this system and you'll feel more like you are 'there' at the live event. You'll also feel the disappointment lift.

Nope, it doesn't vanish entirely; this is a hi-fi system, not a TARDIS. But therein lies the real joy of this kit. The next big upgrade on this system isn't a new disc player or bigger speakers... it's a time machine. To get a considerably better replay of the Count Basie orchestra in full swing involves nipping back to the 1950s and sitting in on a recording.





“The individual components are all of the absolute first water and they all contribute to a sound so utterly right, you’d be forgiven for thinking someone slipped LSD in your Horlicks.”

The live event keeps getting mentioned here, because this system is remarkably good at reproducing all those subtle cues that make us distinguish the live gig from a recording. If you take this to mean that studio cuts are somehow lacking, think again. This makes a studio recording sound like you are listening in from the comfort of the engineer’s chair. It’s like all the artificial intermediaries between you and the music get cast aside. This is very different from the civilised, huge PA sound or the genteel musical refinement programme that seems common to most audiophile kit.

BIG AND BAD

The speakers are handy in a fight. First, there’s the tweeter tailoring. We tried it at a number of levels before settling on the best siting in the room, and can confirm it’s a gentle change and has no deleterious sonic effects when switching from level to level.

Then there’s the side-firing bass units. Point them inwards if you listen from

within a typical British living room, point them outwards if you have more than a metre either side of the speakers and two or three metres between them and at least the same between them and you.

For all their size, these speakers don’t sound big and slow; they sound big and fast, with bass that kicks in powerfully, but only when required. It’s probably too bright for solid-state electronics, but the ACT-A4 takes to valves like Pete Doherty takes to recreational pharmaceuticals.

THE ACID TEST

Ultimately, it’s pointless to single out an individual component in this system. They are all of the absolute first water and they all contribute to a sound so utterly right, you’d be forgiven for thinking someone slipped LSD in your Horlicks. If you were either to substitute one of these products in another system – or replace one of these products in this system – you’d quickly see how good every part is. So don’t bother looking for weak links; there aren’t any.

If you were to sit in front of this system for 30 seconds, you’d be wowed by the dynamics. That’s the immediate rush out of the way. After that, the long-term listening shows there’s much, much more than just top-notch dynamics. It has the grace and charm to make the system come to life whatever you plonk in the player. It has the sort of 3D imaging that seems so natural that if you were to play a recording made at a festival, you’ll be able to smell the veggie burgers. It has the detail that will allow Clapton obsessives to spot that he changed to a heavier gauge of strings for a particular solo. And yet, for all this, the whole system remains fundamentally musical.

It’s hard not to be impressed at each new round of *Beautiful Systems*. Each one different from the last, but each one capable of delivering so much good sound. And yet, even among such lofty peers, some systems shine as being a notch above the rest. This is one such system. The only word is ‘wow!’ **HFC**

Alan Sircom

