



MICROMEGA ARIA CD PLAYER | AUDIO ZONE AMP-1 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
ART EMOTION LOUDSPEAKERS | £8,745

Way out there

Just how weird and wacky can hi-fi really be? Only the Shadow knows, because that's who selected this odd-ball collection

Exactly how strange and wonderful is the hi-fi universe? We suspect no one knows for sure. If you're a follower of hi-fi show reports from around the world (or maybe a regular attendee), you might just think you've got weird down. Just then, something comes along that almost makes you jump out of your skin.

At the recent Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, for instance, there was a loudspeaker that looked worryingly like a Gatling gun. Talk about blowing the competition away. Another large floorstander appeared to be modelling a selection of hub caps from 1950s Cuban taxis. They were the drive units, naturally. And that's to say nothing of entire fleets of CD players that looked like heavily armoured flying saucers. It's all brilliant, of course. Who would have thought, 20 years ago, that a stack of plain black boxes with a few knobs on would re-emerge as an *avant garde* design statement?

Here at *Beautiful Systems*, we try not to stray too far from planet Earth (and we wouldn't dream of entering the Delta quadrant) but, just occasionally, a system comes together comprising components that really do look as if they've been sourced from different planets. This is one of them.

It was suggested to us by Shadow Distribution as something "quite extraordinary"... and that turned out to be understatement. It isn't just the countries of origin – France, Canada and Scotland – that point to the insanely eclectic thinking behind the combo, the disparity in the sizes of the individual pieces is extreme almost to the point of humour. We're talking, front to back, surprisingly small, absolutely bloody tiny and something the size of a modest fridge. Well, almost.

'Surprisingly small' is Micromega's new flagship 'reference' CD spinner, the £2,150 Aria. A long time in the making and building on the reputations of the iconic Duo and Trio models from a few years back, the single chassis Aria is a top loading player barely a foot wide with notably nuggety build and a thick Perspex top plate that covers the sprung CD transport. The machine is so new, Micromega was still finalising the design of the remote control and redesigning the magnetic puck that holds the disc in place (currently plastic, production versions will be metal) during its stay with us.

HAZY SHADE OF DETAIL

Technical details about what lurks under the lid were distinctly hazy too. Suffice to say, for the time being, it's a fully balanced design that employs a single bit DAC and posts some very impressive stats. It's a lovely thing to use, even without the remote, a tactile feast of sheen-smooth metal, heavyweight plastic and precision action buttons. And the large, blue LED display is easy to read from a distance. The CD player is the first release in a new reference range series of Micromega Aria components and will be joined, later this year, by a 200-watt integrated amplifier, a preamp and DAB Tuner.

Here, however, it teams up with the 'absolutely bloody tiny' Audio Zone Amp-1 single input integrated amp from Canada. It may be small, but it's creating dirty great ripples of unalloyed enthusiasm around the globe. The reason can be found in its spiritual heritage, to wit a hi-fi underground legend from Japan called the 47 Lab GainCard. A pricey two-box miniature, dual mono 25-watt integrated amp that used an op-amp for its output device, ☐

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**Micromega
Aria CD player
£2,150**

Solid, sexy and, thankfully, not shaped like a flying saucer, the Aria is French manufacturer Micromega's take on the current state of the CD art. As engaging to use as it is to listen to.



**Audio Zone
Amp-1
integrated amp
£1,595**

This absurdly small two-box integrated amp from Canada is attracting a cult following and, listening to it, it's easy to understand why. Makes other amps sound murky and sluggish.



**ART Emotion
loudspeaker
£5,000 per pair**

As bulky as the Audio Zone amp is bijou, these lavish floorstanders from Scotland bring a real sense of scale and weight to the party, but present the front end's quicksilver sonics to perfection.



■ super-short signal paths and extremely minimal circuitry, the GainCard spawned a burgeoning GainClone DIY movement populated by hard-bitten audiophiles who craved the GainCard's sensational sonics, but couldn't run to the attendant expense.

The £1,595 Amp-1 is a compelling alternative to a soldering iron, circuit schematic and small pile of components on the kitchen table. It's a clone all right and owes no small debt to Sakura Systems and 47 Lab, who pioneered the uber-minimalist approach. But it's a clone you can buy. Its designer, Peter Daniel, has spared no effort on the aesthetics, build and component quality. And, of course, its sonic performance.

LESS IS MORE LOVE

Lovers of the idea that less is more should feel right at home here. No, it isn't a piece of wire with gain (the 'ideal' amp) but its simplicity and ultra-short signal paths do at least get within orbiting distance of the ideal. With less stuff to muck up the signal, greater purity should be the result. Not only that, Audio Zone claims, but a greater sense of immediacy or directness.

The Amp-1 comprises two boxes. One chassis contains the power supply and the other the amp itself. Both are aluminium, both are very small and both

are startlingly stark. It's makers call it "a revolution in two-channel amplification" and you can see what they're getting at. Audiophile purists tend to turn their noses up at op-amps and yet it's the op-amp integrated circuit at the heart of the Amp-1 that enables it to be so small.

The main chassis has dual mono construction with precisely matched, 31-step volume controls for each channel, supported by a built-in protection circuit and, reassuringly, a 10-year warranty. Although there barely seems room for them, it comes equipped with Cardas gold plated speaker terminals. The key to what is claimed to be exceptional linear transient response, outstanding speed, soundstage size and accuracy is the incredibly short (120mm) signal path which includes the length of the input RCA sockets and speaker terminals; the 9mm feedback loop is surely one of the shortest in the world.

Component quality is classy, too, with Black Gate capacitors, Riken and Caddock resistors, Noble volume pots, Cardas wire and Piltron transformers. The power supply has an AC inlet, two Cardas cords for connection to the amp, and also the amp's on/off switch. Claimed power output is 45 watts per channel into eight ohms (100 watts peak). Two volume knobs and an on/off switch. That's it.

Slightly rude of us to compare the dimensions of the ART Emotion loudspeakers to those of a fridge. It's big but not that big – though, if it were a fridge, it would still hold an awful lot of cans of Stella. Designed by Derek and Ramsay Dunlop (of Systemdek turntable fame), the Emotion is intended to compete with the world's best, but not require a direct feed from the nearest nuclear power station to drive. The result is a no-compromise, two-way floorstander of notably wide bandwidth and sensitivity that uses very high quality drivers, a downward firing port (hence the breathing space created by the integral 'stands') and mildly exotic Kondo internal wiring. It comes in three versions: the Emotion (£5,000), the Emotion Signature (£9,000) and the still on the test-bench, take no prisoners Emotion Silver Signature.

Basically, the more you pay, the better the crossover. What you see here is the standard Emotion. The good news is that you can buy it and, at a later date, upgrade it to the Signature or Silver Signature (when it is finally launched). A bonus of having a downward firing port, of course, is that positioning becomes much less critical. The Emotion can even be placed against a rear wall, if necessary, and as such is quite happy in smaller rooms.





“This system has a fabulous reach: a deep, tangible bass, crystalline mid and treble clarity that’s strong on atmosphere. There’s plenty of height and space to the soundstage, too.”

This is a system that simply reeks confidence – from the aesthetic audacity of its small/tiny/huge scaling of its component line-up to the death defying brilliance of its sonic performance. It certainly hit the ground running with *Rave Un2 The Joy Fantastic* from Prince, the bass guitar and kick drum propelled into the listening room with impressive impetus and gusto. The forceful, up-front sound on this track sounded exceptionally solid and rhythmic, with lightning transients and outstandingly explicit presentation of midrange information. The sound was fast and articulate, the presentation well balanced and effortless.

A great mix of punch and delicacy was apparent with classical music, too. Spinning up a slice of Dvorak – not noted for its jaunty tempo – the combo handled the music with finesse and a sense of ‘performance’. String tone had a particularly natural and unforced quality – smooth and nicely integrated with just the right amount of body. There was a palpable instrumental presence.

Jazz fusionist Larry Carlton’s laid back acoustic guitar playing on the old Michael McDonald number *Minute By Minute* moved along in a nice, relaxed groove, the incisive sting of the guitar’s plucked strings sounding nape tinglingly real. As did jazz pianist Julian Joseph’s Steinway. Joseph is a powerful player and, thanks to this system’s transparency and temporal precision, the listener is left in no doubt that JJ possesses more expressive ammunition than your average ivory tickler. Moreover, the instrument’s timbre and acoustic signature were beautifully resolved in three dimensions, sounding as rich and resonant as it should. Both its size and presence were convincing.

CRYSTAL DEEP

This system has fabulous reach: a deep, tangible bass, crystalline mid and treble clarity that’s strong on atmosphere. There’s plenty of height and space to the soundstage, too. And, when the material requires it, wonderful delicacy and lightness of touch.

Further experimentation revealed that the Audio Zone amp is most definitely orientated towards the clarity/detail end of the presentational spectrum. Fed by the Micromega, it delivers an astonishingly transparent insight into all types of music, always sounding clean and fast, precise and explicit – but never harsh or artificially tense. With the big Emotions in the equation, though, things sound perfectly in balance. Clear, lucid, fast and involving, this combo’s grip and powers of resolution benefit all types of music and let it breathe in an effortless, uncompressed manner. It’s an artful combination of power and finesse, both thrilling and satisfying.

Things are often quirky for the sake of simply being quirky, the idea being folks will buy a product on the basis of it being different alone. This system is different. It’s quirky for a single-minded reason: the pursuit of good sound. Nothing else – not even an extra input on the amplifier – matters. And that’s hard logic to fault. **HFC**

David Vivian

