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STAGE FRIGHT!

WHY HRT'S £1100
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THE COMPETITION

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AND MAGNI

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High Resolution Technologies STAGE system

By Alan Sircom

High Resolution Technologies has made its mark delivering top-class PC-powered DACs and headphone amps that don't cost a fortune. When the products first appeared in 2009, they represented something of a paradigm shift in audio performance. Now, HRT has shifted the goalposts again with its new STAGE system.

STAGE is a complete amplifier/DAC and loudspeaker system. It comprises a control centre unit with a built in 70W Class AB amplifier, which connects to two small four driver rear ported loudspeakers. These are serious drivers, with an integrated custom built 28mm soft dome tweeter and three 70mm mid-bass units in parallel. Both units

are made from a solid, matt black or white ABS. The control unit comprises a simple four-button control panel (volume up, down, mute and the ability to switch between USB input and a stereo analogue line level input). Eagle-eyed followers of HRT designer Kevin Halverson might recognise the sideways-T four button layout from Muse front panels of the past. It's flanked by a series of LEDs denoting the sampling rate (32k to 96k). A simple remote replicates the limited range of functions on the front panel.

This isn't a system for separation; the speaker cable is a coaxial affair,

with what look like 12V power connector plugs and sockets at either end. Not only that, but the control unit equalises the output specifically for the speakers. The amplifier unit drives the speakers with sufficient power to play loud, but not overdriving loud. It also includes left and right channel line input (just in case you wish to connect an analogue playback system, a tuner or anything else delivering a line level output) and LF output phono sockets. Finally, there's a co-molded insert with a brass screw thread at the rear of the speaker, which allows wall-mounting. Aside from the obvious use of flanking a TV set, making the STAGE an excellent foil to the dreadful speaker systems built into ever-slimmer televisions, this could be an ideal alternative to taking up increasingly expensive floor space in modern homes. ▶



▶ The STAGE control unit actually works in one of two USB modes: Host driven and stand alone. Host-driven is when the STAGE is connected via USB to a computer or other 'intelligent' device. This places all the functionality of the STAGE under the control of the host. Stand alone applies in those rare occasions where host control is not available, and hands over things like mute and volume level to local control. The change is seamless. Kevin Halverson has ideas for the STAGE beyond its current guise. That front panel is designed to be interchangeable, with other 'missions' potentially available as a result.

Regardless, it's worth taking care with the installation of this system, because it rewards that attention in a way few other systems at this price could ever deliver. Because the front baffle of the loudspeakers is relatively narrow, toe-in is not critical. Also, that distributed array of bass drivers seems to make the speaker relatively insensitive to sitting on a desktop (or for that matter wall mounting). In an ideal world, these speakers are best in free space on 60cm stands. Halverson recommends the distance to the back and side walls not be an integer ratio to avoid boundary effects, and naturally avoiding the port venting into another room. I found in a 12x16x9 room, the speakers sounded best slightly wider than usual (about two and a half feet from the side walls) and about three feet from the rear wall, with a mild toe-in. And in such a room, it shone.

STAGE delivers the clear and clean midrange, the high-frequency extension without brightness, the openness and the soundstage width and depth that normally comes with carefully selected and really good high-end equipment. That ends up with you pointing your computer's media player at the better recordings in your collection, and sitting back and enjoying the ride. I found myself drawn to 16/44 rips made of Fritz Reiner and the Chicago SO playing Dvorák's *New World Symphony* (Living Stereo), Ben Harper's *Fight For Your Mind* (Virgin), Jackie McLean's *Bluesnik* (Blue Note) and the Jan Garbarek/Hilliard Ensemble first *Officium*



album (ECM), just to see how they sounded. And STAGE didn't disappoint; room filling, natural and extremely unforced sound emanated from the STAGE.

This doesn't just apply to audiophile recordings. I played 'Sweet Child O' Mine' from *Appetite for Destruction* (Geffen) by Guns 'N' Roses and the same thing happened. You could easily pick apart Izzy Stradlin's rhythm guitar from Slash's playing lead over rhythm; even though they are at other sides of the soundstage, they frequently blur into one generic 'big geetar' sound. Good systems separate the individual strands of the music, but in the process often forget this isn't cerebral music. STAGE – to its great credit – never loses sight of the purpose of such music is to entertain. And it's perhaps that combination of audiophile insight coupled with a fair slathering of what can only be described as 'mojo' that makes the STAGE such a delight to listen to.

In fact, my biggest criticism of the STAGE is nothing to do with the STAGE; it's the willingness on the part of the audiophile to force the system into an undeserved pigeonhole. When the prototype of the STAGE was shown at CES in Las Vegas in January this year, many audio pundits walked on by dismissing ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Control Centre

DAC: to 24bit, 96kHz

USB transfer protocol: asynchronous

Jitter contribution (DC to 30kHz): >130dB below FS

Preamp line input impedance 20k Ohms

Attenuator steps: 0.5dB

LF output impedance: 500ohm

Power amplifier: 70W/Channel, Class AB

Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz):

+0dB/-2dN

Dimensions (HxWxD): 21.6x15.9x20.3cm

Weight: 3.9kg

Loudspeaker System

Drivers: 1x 28mm dome tweeter, 3x 70mm cone woofers

Voice coils (diameter): 25.4mm, four layer, Kapton former

Impedance (minimum/maximum): 7 Ohms/39 Ohms

Sensitivity: 84.5dB @ 1m/2.83V

Distortion: >0.3% @ 90dB SPL

Power Handling: 100W

Frequency Response (with Control Centre): 45Hz-20kHz ±2dB

Crossover: 2.8kHz (second order)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 38x15.9x18.4cm

Weight: 4.26kg (per speaker)

Available in black and white

Price: £1,099

Manufactured by: High Resolution Technologies

URL: www.highresolutiontechnologies.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 208 948 4153

- ▶ it as 'desktop audio'. Others will look at the product, look at the sticker price and conclude "it can't be that good" without ever hearing it.

That is a concern not only because STAGE may simply fly under the radar of many who would welcome such a system, but because it means people will pay lip service to installation and usage. If you approach this with all the care and attention someone might give to a system costing £25,000 or more, you will be rewarded with a sound quality far beyond the expectations based on the look and price of STAGE.

There are limitations. It's considerably less bass-challenged than something like the LS3/5a, but it's not full range. It manages to project a fairly good simulation of full-range sound though, without too much of the usual 80Hz boom designed to make loudspeaker boxes sound larger than they are in reality. And if you are thinking this a budget replacement for a home PA system, guess again. This is more about refinement and musical grace than trying to shatter windows or ear drums. With those caveats in place, the rest is truly remarkable; this is high-end audio through and through; put STAGE behind an acoustically transparent curtain and play 'guess the size of the system' to any passing audiophile, and they will put this at something far larger, and considerably more expensive.

STAGE challenges the very concept of 'high-end' on a fairly deep level. Is high-end audio about sound or is it about making a statement about your bank balance? Is it Beethoven, or bling? If it really is all about sound, then the HRT STAGE is a legitimate high-end product, delivering the kind of maturity of sound that is normally the reserve of a room full of shiny things. This is a system that delivers and comes strongly recommended. +