Fantastic Phantom
Is Devialet’s modular system the future of hi-fi?

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PRODUCTS ON TEST:
Audio-Technica, Entotem, NuForce Tannoy & Wadia

Dealer visit
Three home-grown setups from a domestic dealership

MINI TEST:
Into the groove
Moving magnet cartridges to upgrade your turntable

Naim that tune
Is this the most complete network music player ever?
The latest offering from high-end stalwart Wadia is refreshingly affordable. Ed Selley finds out if the magic is still doing its stuff.

The di122 is fitted with five digital inputs, two optical, two coaxial and one USB-B connection. The coaxial and optical sockets are both 24-bit/192kHz-capable, while the USB implementation is able to pass 24/384kHz as well as DSD and ODD. This ticks pretty much all the format boxes one might expect and should please those that the Wadia is pretty much futureproof. Some rivals offer an AES input or Bluetooth functionality in this level, but I’d personally not want to trade off a useful number of ‘normal’ inputs for either of them. Internally, the di122 is built around a high-end linear architecture, with a bit of drive to it. Where some rivals offer an ESS Sabre chip, in this instance the Wadia is fitted with a more conventional line-level component and I find that backing the volume off improves the performance considerably.

This is an impressive amount of detail and texture, which means that the di122 is no more aggressive than a very linear performer at its price point. Where many rivals at the price point offer an aggressive, the clever part of the presentation is that it manages to balance this impressive sense of grip and power with a refinement that makes it a very satisfying long-term listen. With both a Naim Supernait 2 and Musical Fidelity M77i, the Wadia is a very civilised partner. It can’t be provided with anything but the poorest and most compressed material and even then, the volume has to be up at the firmly antiseptic side of things. I am sure that really careful system matching might serve to exacerbate this, but a cursory demonstration beforehand should be sufficient to avoid it. Switch to high-resolution material and the di122 doesn’t change the overall presentation, but does reveal a further step up in the sheer vividness of the performance. A 24/96kHz version of Fleetwood Mac’s Rumours is exceptionally lifelike. There is a real sense of the performers, their relationship to one another and the space they inhabit. This is matched by believable tonality and an impressive sense of decay – notes all underdamped by base that is deep, fast and tonally detailed. My HFC DSD material remains limited, but the Wadia has no issue playing any of it and saves for a slightly longer pause when changing sample rate or format, it makes for a compelling high-resolution companion.

Using it as a preamp and headphone amplifier does not alter the balance of the performance too significantly. The slight lack of fine adjustment to the volume still favours rival products with a rotary dial, but there is no real sense that it is anything other than a very linear performer at every increment.

The news is rather better using the di122 as a headphone amp. Not only is there plenty of power on tap – using an Open B-05 headphone amp (JRC 399) only requires a whisker over 50 percent on the display to listen loud – but also the comprehensive detail retrieval combined with the general refinement of the design makes the headphone socket far more than just a convenience feature. Conclusion

And it is this balance of convenience and capability that makes the di122 a very fine proposition at the price. If we accept that a rotary volume dial and remote control will make the best device for use as a preamp, the Wadia hits back thanks to a genuinely useful set of real-world inputs and outputs, a full house of superb power amplifiers and a very refined look that is consistently and genuinely exciting. There is a little clunkiness to the home buttons and interface and careless system matching might not suit it at its best, but the di122 is a very welcome addition to a rack that needs to be on anyone’s shortlist at the price point.

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