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The conductor on recording Kurt Weill symphonies in Berlin

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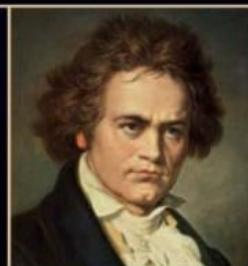
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Compact Hi-Fi

The latest amplifier technology is making possible truly tiny hi-fi components without compromising audio quality. **Andrew Everard** is thinking small



Do you think top-quality hi-fi means a rack packed with less than visually appealing black boxes somewhere in your listening room, along with a pair of towering speakers? If so, reconsider: the latest hi-fi launches have seen the arrival of some truly tiny audio components and systems, many offering surprising levels of performance.

So, whether you want a desktop system, a set-up for a small room or even a main room system, you can now reclaim a whole load of living space with the right equipment choices – and even get closer to that ideal of invisible hi-fi. And at its simplest, this could mean an all-in-one wireless speaker system: these days, the very best of these can rival more conventional multi-component set-ups.

Models such as the **Bowers & Wilkins Zeppelin 1** – now in its fourth generation – and the **Naim Mu-so 2**, which comes in ‘soundbar’ format and a smaller cube-shaped Qb model, as well as special editions celebrating the company’s supply of audio systems to Bentley Motors, are well-established in this ‘all-in-one’ speaker systems market. They offer streaming from local storage and online services, and can also play direct from smartphones and the like, and can offer surprisingly room-filling sound without filling the room with equipment.

Now there’s a new addition to this market in the form of **Meridian’s Ellipse 3**, which draws on the design of the company’s F80 all-in-one of almost two decades back to create an ultra-compact unit with all those streaming attributes and

Meridian’s digital expertise, plus the ability to fill a large space with stereo sound. Yes, I imagine the styling might have raised a few eyebrows at Bowers & Wilkins HQ down in Worthing, but the Meridian is pitched rather higher than the Zeppelin, and an initial listen to the Ellipse at the recent High End Show in Munich had me interested enough to order up a review sample for a future issue of *Gramophone*.

Also making its show debut in Munich was the latest arrival from fast-growing company WiiM and, having been impressed by the brand’s swift progression from plug-in streaming solutions to the all-in-one WiiM Pro streamer/amplifier, which is a remarkable bargain at a little over £300, I was much taken with the even more comprehensive **WiiM Amp Pro and Ultra 4** models. The former is a more powerful version of the WiiM amp, offering 60W per channel, upgraded Bluetooth and digital conversion, and built-in room correction to optimise the sound of speakers and/or subwoofers.

The Ultra, meanwhile, ups the ante with a front-panel touchscreen display for album artwork and control, a wide range of user-customisation, and the ability to be used into a conventional amplifier, or direct to power amplification or active speakers. And like the other WiiM products, it comes in a form-factor small enough to be used on a desk, or to hide away on a shelf – though with that crisp, if small, display, it might be a shame to put the WiiM Ultra out of sight!

British company Chord Electronics is no stranger to miniature hi-fi, already having its little Anni integrated amplifier,

16cm wide and 42.5cm tall, and able to be stacked with its Qutest digital-to-analogue converter and Huei phono stage to create a complete desktop ‘rack system’ using its little Qutest System Stand. Now it’s taking the concept even further with its Suzi amplifiers, drawing on its flagship Ultima amplification technology and on the way this Autumn. This range is designed to match its Hugo/2go series of DACs and streaming modules, and includes a power amplifier designed to combine directly with those components.

With a Hugo DAC and 2go network module, the Suzi power amp will create an all-in-one system with amplification, digital conversion and streaming: as well as Wi-Fi/Ethernet connectivity, it will also offer library storage and playback, using the 2go’s twin microSD card slots. Alternatively, the Suzi power amp can be used with the Suzi preamplifier, to create an all-analogue amplifier system in miniature, complete with a built-in phono preamp for a turntable.

There’s no shortage of conventionally compact speakers available, with notable recent arrivals being the Bowers & Wilkins 607 S3 and PMC’s Prodigy 1, but even they look huge beside the remarkable **Neat Acoustics Iota 5** speakers, which are just 13cm tall and 20cm wide. I’ve been using these in my desktop system for well over a decade, simply because I’m yet to find anything to beat them – but if you want a compact floorstanding speaker system, don’t overlook the same brand’s Iota Alpha model, which adds a downward-firing woofer for even better bass extension, yet stands just 45cm tall. **G**