

# Hard **Act** to follow

*Wilson-Benesch's 'half price ACT' anchors this high-performance, high-tech combo*

**Y**ou want solid? Here's solid. You want heavy? The CD player in this Anglo-German ensemble is so heavy, you'll feel like a seven-stone weakling just lifting it on to the stand. (If you're a seven-stone weakling, welcome to the immovable object.) You want sharp lines? The power amps could splice a human hair at 20 paces. You want high-tech? Any higher and you'd need an oxygen mask.

What we have here is a high-end stereo system dedicated to function, form and performance in pursuit of the musical truth, and nothing but the musical truth. If it's romance you're after, you've come to the wrong place. Likewise wood: this is essentially a timber-free zone (unless you really insist on veneer trim panels). Aluminium and carbon fibre composite sound like a fair swap? Yeah, does to me, too.

It's what Sheffield-based, high-end speaker and turntable manufacturer Wilson-Benesch uses to build all of its speakers – and it's what makes them so distinctive, both visually and sonically. Innovative design and advanced materials are very much the foundation stones on which W-B has built its reputation. Moreover, the speakers (and, indeed, its Full Circle turntable) are all engineered from raw materials under the one roof. And with painstaking precision – carbon and aluminium demand nothing less and W-B's CNC machining facility is capable of repeatable tolerances of down to 0.005mm. Ask any Formula 1 team how important that is.

The lean and gracefully understated Curve is Wilson Benesch's latest loudspeaker design and something of a landmark product for the company, borrowing numerous design elements from its acclaimed, and rather fabulous, circa £10,000 ACT floorstander, but fascinatingly costing only half as much. Another way of looking at it is as an elongated version of its entry-level Arc standmounter (they have the same plan view). But as the Arc comes with its own dedicated stand, the Curve is actually slightly shorter and just as room-friendly though, at 48kg, it's remarkably weighty for its size.

#### PINPOINT ACCURACY

Perhaps the greatest endorsement for the Curve, though, lies in its maker's claim that, along with the ACT, it's the most accurate transducer it's ever made. The ACT's main contribution to the Curve is its Active Composite Technology 'monocoque' curved-back carbon cabinet, which is enormously rigid and has near ideal internal damping properties. W-B reckons the structural integrity is an absolute benchmark and delivers clarity and precision that would be impossible to achieve with conventional speaker materials and technology – and in the light of last month's *HFC* review we'd be inclined to agree. As well as its advanced composites, the Curve uses steel, Neodymium Iron Boron magnets for the 170mm Tactic bass and bass/mid drivers and advanced polymer diaphragms.

A 25mm silk dome tweeter completes the driver complement of this **▶**

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**Wilson-Benesch Curve loudspeakers**  
**£4,900**

Drawing heavily on technology from the twice-the-price ACT, the Curve remains true to its maker's high-end ideals.



**Audionet ART V2 CD player**  
**£2,300**

One of the heaviest CD players available, there's nothing flabby about the ART's sound, which is extremely transparent, fast and detailed.



**Audionet Pre 1 G2 preamp**  
**£2,000**

Slim casing doesn't stint on features, with six inputs, microprocessor control, balanced/unbalanced connects, tape loop and twin outputs.



**Audionet Amp 1 power amp**  
**£3,000**

A juggernaut of a power amp with oodles of power on tap. What really impresses is its transparency, resolution of detail and unerring poise.



■ two-and-a-half-way design which, with its rear-firing port, is designed for free-space siting. W-B claims an on-axis frequency response of 36Hz to 24kHz  $\pm$ 2dB, 88dB sensitivity and a nominal six ohms impedance.

#### PERFECT PARTNER

What to use upstream of the Curves is a decision Wilson-Benesch is only too happy to take for you. After all, it was keen to discover complementary electronics itself, both to demonstrate its speakers to best effect at shows and recommend (even sell) to its customers. The search for a philosophical and sonic soul mate ended in Germany with a company you probably wouldn't otherwise have heard of – Audionet.

Audionet's mission statement is to provide an engineering solution to an emotional pursuit, a sentiment that might have been written by W-B itself. True, it's a very Teutonic thing to say, but what blew W-B away was the build quality, the engineering and, of course, the tell-it-like-it-is sound quality.

The thing that strikes you first though, is the way these things are put together. In the £2,300 Audionet ART V2, for instance, we have a top-loading

CD player of truly terminator-class build, and it's something to savour. The manual sliding lid and magnetic stabilising puck are quirky and nice, but it's the ART's sheer weight that makes it such a singular product. At 18 kilos, it isn't just by far the heaviest CD spinner ever to be included in a Beautiful System, it's heavier than most serious power amps. Blame the resonance-killing ten-kilo slab of granite that forms part of the bass, on to which the electronic components and the clock circuit are mounted in 'floating' form. The idea is that the mass damping gets a stranglehold on error-inducing vibes at their root.

Upstream of the 24-bit/96kHz delta-sigma DAC, Audionet's super-trick "intelligent sampling" circuit not only upsamples the CD signal but claims to eliminate clock jitter in the process. Signal processing has two settings – 'Lagrange' (primarily for timing and rhythm merchants) and 'Audionet' (which tends to be more laid-back and airy overall). The output stage sports MOSFET solid-state devices run in Class A, and the transport and converter are fed by a separate 50VA toroidal transformer.

The £3,000 Amp 1 power amplifier is even more imposing, while the £2,000 Pre 1 G2 preamplifier is an object lesson in contrasting svelteness, though technically it's every bit as uncompromising. Audionet says that the Pre 1's circuit board track layout has been optimised specifically to achieve the shortest possible signal paths and, therefore, effective immunity from any type of electromechanical interference. Microprocessor control takes care of the six source inputs and is flagged up on the blue vacuum fluorescent display.

As a visual statement, the Amp 1 power amp should leave no-one in any doubt whatsoever that it means business, not least because its cliff face of a fascia is made from half-inch thick aluminium. The projected image is of immaculately controlled power, and lots of it. It's no idle boast – the Amp 1 pumps 200 watts per channel into eight ohms, 300 watts into four ohms and 450 watts into two ohms.

The six-ohm Curves should be a walk in the park, but it's not all brawn and no brains. Audionet uses a digital control circuit to measure and maintain signal accuracy in real time; it also





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monitors DC, HF, temperature and overload, and will shut down the amp if necessary. Like the preamp, ultra-short signal paths and eliminating electromechanical interference set the scene for a design philosophy that Audionet claims allows it to set new standards in linearity, reflux damping and speaker control.

**SLOW HEAT**

And what does that sound like, exactly? Well, a little chilly to begin with. A word to the wise: this is kit that needs more warming up than an Olympic sprinter in the middle of winter – the speakers in particular don’t appreciate that early-morning, cold-room feeling. Even then, you may experience a little disquiet for the first hour or so of serious listening. With many of the high-end systems so far featured in these pages – especially with those hailing from Italy – part of the allure

has been a comfortable, almost balmy, euphony; a beguiling warmth and smoothness you just don’t get with less expensive hardware.

This system refuses to pull that trick however. It’s too honest, too transparent, too accurate. So initially, there is no wow factor, no artificially enhanced rosy glow. And to be honest, it’s a bit of a disappointment. It’s rather clinical – you think, more Spock than rock. Give it time, though, and you realise that all you’re missing is a sense of exaggeration.

This combo has simply stupendous resolving power and musical insight married to enormous speed and grip. If it sometimes sounds a little cold or bright, it’s merely a reflection of the recording – George Benson’s *Irreplaceable*, his latest outing on the GRP label, for instance. Spin up something with a warmer balance – say, James Taylor’s exquisitely produced

*October Road* for example – and the system responds magnificently, putting the music first and the hi-fi second. The results can sound ordinary and they can sound utterly enthralling, and they can sound all points in-between. It depends on the music, the performance and the nature of the recording.

So much so it’s hard to attribute the system with much of a sound at all. What’s so extraordinary is that it does nothing extraordinary. It’s wide open, dimensionally anchored, finely textured, dynamically unhindered and as fast as a Ferrari Enzo. Bass guitar has believable weight, power, extension and drive. Pace and control are beautifully conveyed. It all contributes to an almost-tangible presence – scalp-tingly so when the music demands it. In short, here’s a system that connects on every level. It’s a thoroughly modern marvel. **HFC**

David Vivian



[ Beautiful Systems ]



WILSON-BENESCH CURVE LOUDSPEAKERS | AUDIONET ART V2 CD PLAYER  
AUDIONET PRE 1 G2 PREAMP | AUDIONET AMP 1 POWER AMP | £12,200