

Sonic masters

Audio Research and Sonus faber have given us many memorable moments and **Ed Selley** suspects this might be an all time great

As a reader of *HFC*, you are unquestionably someone of great knowledge and taste and I'll wager even before you fully clocked the products that comprise this setup, you already knew on a subconscious level. This is two of the original high-end audio brands in partnership together. The products are new and their features and abilities have changed a little, but in essence this pairing is one of the hi-fi industry's power couples.

Audio Research is one of the few companies that has been consistently committed to the use of valves throughout its existence – even to the point where doing so was almost painfully unfashionable. What is almost as important is that when the company does not see a benefit to using vacuum tubes, it chooses not to. And this is why the GSi75 integrated amplifier is blessed with a considerable compliment of them and the partnering CD6 CD player is not.

Of course, depending on your requirements, the GSi75 might be all the electronics you ever need. Within its sizable chassis is a valve preamp, power amp, phono stage, headphone amp and DAC, the latter of which can handle formats up to and including DSD. As it is built around a quartet of hefty KT150 output valves – each looking like a scale model of Norman Foster's Gherkin – the output on tap is an entirely real-world relevant 75W into 8ohm. ▶

COMPONENTS

AUDIO RESEARCH CD6 £7,998

The CD6 combines a top-loading CD transport with a selection of digital inputs that are fed into a 24/192kHz DAC that has separate clocks for PCM and S/PDIF sampling rates.

AUDIO RESEARCH GSi75 £14,500

The flagship integrated in the Audio Research range, the GSi75 combines a healthy power output from its four KT120 valves with an extremely extensive feature set including digital inputs.

SONUS FABER VENERE SIGNATURE £4,448

The flagship member of the Venere range, the Signature is a three-way floorstanding speaker that features a downward-firing reflex port that is intended to avoid conflict with the drivers and aid placement.







With all this wizardry in a single box, you might ask what the function of the matching CD6 CD player is. Quite apart from its ability to play CDs directly and without requiring any form of conversion to another format, there is the inescapable fact that there is enough of a ceremony to using its Philips Pro 12 CD mechanism to make even the little silver disc feel a bit special. If you are going to have a CD player at your disposal, why not make it a rather lovely one? Additionally, Audio Research has equipped it with its own digital inputs, which means that across both units this system can play host to a serious quota of sources.

Signature move

The setup is completed by a pair of Sonus faber Venere Signature floorstanders. These hefty towers were not part of the original Venere range and sport a few visual touches that are not shared with the smaller models. And I emphasise smaller because while the Venere 2.5 is a fairly sizeable speaker, the S is a real whopper, standing 1.2m tall and with a correspondingly greater volume thanks to its three 180mm bass drivers, which give it a real sense of purpose.

This purpose doesn't come at the expense of the Signature losing the

qualities that make it a Sonus faber, though – in many ways quite the reverse. The bright work around the drivers compliments the wood finish in a way that doesn't always come across in pictures and sets off a shape that has people wanting to interact with them. It might be big, but it has almost perfect proportions and it manages to look more expensive than it is. Combined with the Audio

Few rivals at this price so effortlessly achieve the balance between style and substance

Research pairing, the result is a system that is never going to tuck itself away in the corner of a room but instead one that is going to dress it, and provide a focal point.

In some ways, the CD6 and GSi75 don't feature 'styling' as everything on them is there to provide a means of controlling them. But the result of this simplicity is a pair of products that have real presence. This is not simply because in the case of the GSi75 in particular, they are seriously imposing bits of kit, but because they make no apologies for what they are. No less

Above left: Simple controls front an extremely sophisticated amplifier

Above centre: The Signature is big, but exceptionally handsome

Above right: With digital and analogue connectivity, this is a very flexible system indeed

clever is that they have a considerable amount of flexibility in their setup, but only if you desire it. If you don't want to play with adjustable filters and balance settings, that's fine.

Feel the music

What they are, above everything else is a means of making music something that is a visceral presence rather than a pleasing effect that happens at a safe distance. Starting off with Lloyd Miller And The Heliocentrics' eponymously titled album, there is an electrifying sense of energy to the way these units make music. What makes this happen is a collection of attributes that combine to spectacular effect. The first is fairly self evident – with 75W on tap into a pair of speakers that are large and usefully sensitive, this system scales in a way that is utterly effortless. The plucked bass at the start of *Electricone* is utterly believable because there is real weight and texture to it.

There is unquestionable tonal brilliance, too. The manner in which Audio Research employs valves ensures they are kept under a tight leash and the GSi75 puts in a very measured performance, although an intangible sense of life and energy to the way it handles instruments that is



rarely encountered in solid state remains. When you combine these two key skills with the ability to take a piece of music and – regardless of its scale and arrangement – ensure it reaches the listening position in a manner that is instantly and unequivocally logical, you don't so much have an audio system as a live act generator.

Keeping control

Now, you might reasonably say that with a well-recorded piece of Jazz, this is hardly an enormous surprise. But what separates this system from pretenders to the throne is that if you do something uncouth like stick The Crystal Method's *Sine Language* on at a volume level that could reasonably be described as 'healthy' the system remains absolutely in control of events. This is a congested and at times actively harsh recording, but the GSi75 finds the fury and energy while delivering ever syllable of the ridiculous lyrics and placing them atop a bass line that pairs serious heft with a fleetness of foot that seems impossible for a valve-driven speaker.

In short, if you place them in a vaguely sensibly sized room, there is no genre of music at any level that won't boil the fluid in your inner ear



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that will upset this trio of units. After a little while you appreciate that the relationship the components have with one another is greater than the sum of their parts. The CD6 has an accuracy and assurance that ensures that the material the GSi75 works on is an unfailingly accurate portrayal of the digital signal. The GSi75 then

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adds that intangible sense of realism and airiness without losing that all-important original tonal honesty and passes it on.

What the Venera Signature does is – if anything – even more impressive. This is a speaker that is a third of the price of the GSi75 and yet it works in partnership with the Audio Research in a manner that would have you blissfully unaware of any such disparity. It is unquestionably big and beautiful, but it is also seriously capable at the business of tonal accuracy and timing. *Beautiful Systems* is above such trite considerations as value, but this is an enormous amount

of speaker for the asking price. It is as effortlessly happy delivering a single unamplified voice as it is standing in for a stadium PA system, and that it's able to do this while feeling like a decent piece of furniture is worthy of note – few other rivals at the price walk so effortlessly a balancing act between style and substance.

Coming up trumps

In fact, this is an enormous amount of system full stop. As a means of unlocking the true joy in a music collection regardless of what it happens to be, this is a truly exceptional collection of equipment. It delivers at every level, from the simple joy of interacting with the Audio Research remotes that could be used for demolition work, to the moment when you hear something previously unsuspected in a piece of music that you have heard hundreds of times before. Both Audio Research and Sonus faber have been tweaking their offerings to make them more suitable for the requirements of 2016, but at their core they haven't forgotten that their purpose is to deliver music at its very purest. There's a reason why this system triggers instant recognition and that's because it is quite simply exceptional ●