

SAM'S by SAM TELLIG SPACE

THIS ISSUE: Sam catches up with Croft, KEF, and Dayton Audio's Sola Bluetooth speaker.

Don't brush Bluetooth aside!

Procter & Gamble is about to introduce the Oral-B SmartSeries electric toothbrushes. They will connect, via Bluetooth, with a smartphone app to help you brush the teeth that most need brushing. The app will monitor your brushing progress in real time and nudge you when it's time to move on. Expect it to go for around \$250—about the cost of filling two cavities. Expect to spend two minutes brushing with your Bluetoothbrush.

More Bluetooth devices are arriving left and right, including Bluetooth audio receivers and speakers—like the Dayton Audio Sola wireless speaker, to which I'm listening in my office as I type. Meanwhile, let's catch up with Croft and KEF.

Croft Phono Integrated amplifier

Art Dudley was the first at *Stereophile* to discover this little gem, which he reviewed in the October 2013 issue. I was intrigued because: a) Artie loves it, and b) John Atkinson does not. After measuring it, JA snorted: "To me, it seems, at best, inadequately engineered, and at its worst . . . just plain inadequate."

You have been warned: If you listen to test tones, you can probably hear distortion. JA: "[T]he phono stage suffers from a severe rolloff in the treble. . . ."

JA measured the output impedance as 2.15 ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, so your speakers might not run ruler-flat, boosting some frequencies, attenuating others. This is what happens when Croft crafts hi-fi for pleasure rather than for pain. As we all know, hi-fi should cause pain when you pay, pain when you play—but bliss when you play test tones.

JA arranged for Stephen Mejias to receive a sample of the Phono Integrated. Perhaps AD had lost *his* marbles. Or JA had.

SM loved the sound. Knowing that ST had long ago lost his marbles, SM arranged for yet another sample to be sent—to Sam. Mischief was afoot. All of this can be found at the *Stereophile* website (www.stereophile.com/content/croft-acoustics-phono-integrated-integrated-amplifier).

Glenn Croft has been making audio gear in England for more than 30 years. My friend of 50 years, Lew, had the first Croft gear to arrive in North America: a pair of OTL¹ monoblocks that he used with his Quad ESL-63 electrostatic speakers. It was a match made in heaven—until Lew's carpet caught fire. Not realizing that tube amps can deliver heat from hell below, he'd placed the amps too close to a carpeted floor. He needed to put them on a platform. When it comes time to bury your uncle, ask for extra slabs of granite.

I don't remember whether the Crofts were damaged by the blaze. I think Lew had the carpet resized. *Never place any amp, tubed or solid-state, directly on or even close to a carpet.*

1 OTL stands for output-transformerless. Instead of output transformers, an OTL amp uses an array of tubes in the output stage to lower the output impedance.



Croft's controversial Phono Integrated amplifier.

These days, Croft still uses small input tubes, like the ECC83 (12AX7). He now prefers MOSFET output transistors to big output tubes—far less troublesome, more economical, and less prone to pyrotechnics.

'umble 'eye-fye!

The Croft Phono Integrated has the thinnest faceplate I've ever seen—less than 1/8" thin. The knobs, while attractive enough, look as if they're from the 1970s. They appear to be the same or knockoffs of the knobs Counterpoint and others used four decades ago.

The Croft Phono Integrated should come wrapped in newspapers, like English fish and chips. Roy Hall used to import equipment like this. It was called Creek. Early Arcam, Musical Fidelity, Naim—these, too, were drab. Croft is still made in the UK.

The Croft eschews features—*eg*, anything convenient or cosmetic that might help dealers sell it. I didn't find an instruction manual. If there is one, you don't need it. There's no remote control, no headphone jack. No balance control—instead, the user must adjust separate left and right volume pots. Of course, these pots have no markings or clicks to help you do this precisely. And the Phono Integrated comes in any color you want, as long as it's black.

The beauty is out of sight. The RCA jacks are of very high quality, and robustly mounted. There's a line-out pair of RCAs, for biamping or use with a subwoofer or two. (The Phono Integrated is part of Croft's Series 7, which includes a standalone preamp and a standalone power amp.) The Phono Integrated costs \$1895.

Inside, the Phono Integrated is hardwired, like my cat: no circuit boards. The phono stage uses two ECC83 tubes—ah, valves. The power amp's driver stage uses another ECC33, plus two MOSFET output transistors per channel to deliver the claimed output of 45Wpc into 8 ohms, or 50Wpc into 4 ohms.

Ah, for some nice NOS (new old stock) Mullards. Ask Croft about availability. The standard tubes are JJs, from Slovakia.

Mull this. The Croft Phono Integrated is one of the best integrated amplifiers I have ever heard. It satisfied Stephen and delighted Artie. A pox on test tones! A pox on cosmetics! A pox on convenience! If it weren't for the KEF LS50 loudspeaker, this would have been my top choice for *Stereophile* 2013 Component of the Year.

The phono stage is moving-magnet only. You could add a step-up for moving-coil cartridges, or use a high-output MC

like the superb Dynavector 10X5. The phono stage stays on whenever the amp is on, whether you're using phono or not. The amplifier seems to scold you: What are you *doing*, listening to digital? Or Bluetooth (which sounded wonderful with the Croft)? Put on an LP!

I'll play devil's advocate.

Why would someone blow nearly \$2000 on an integrated amp with built-in Bluetooth and locked in with today's technology? Keep all your dirty digital doings away from the amplifier. You wouldn't put the litter box next to the kitchen table, would you? If you do digital cheap, and change your DAC and Bluetooth receiver often, you can avoid being stuck tomorrow with today's technology.

Why spend real money on today's tech? Spend it on *yesterday's* technology. What is already obsolete cannot become obsolete.

Gleefully, I installed the Croft Phono Integrated in my system, which included a Musical Fidelity V90-DAC and a Rega P25 turntable with Goldring 1042 moving-magnet cartridge. I used various Bluetooth devices, too, including Arcam's rBlink receiver and Musical Fidelity's V90-BLU. I sank my blue teeth in. Speakers included my Harbeth Monitor 30.1 Domestic, the Stirling Broadcast LS3/6s, and DeVore Fidelity's Orangutan O/93s. I'm told that these speakers are easy loads—a phrase that always makes my wife, Marina, laugh. Before the Croft's arrival, I'd been using my LFD LE IV and Unison Research Simply Italy integrations. (Watch this column for the phenomenal LFD LE V, which is more than twice the price of the Croft and does not have a phono section.)

The sound of the Phono Integrated was musical in a way that very few hi-fi components are. For a hybrid amplifier, it sounded almost totally tubed. There was none of that misty, plasticky quality that I and others have long associated with MOSFETs. (I think I invented the term "MOSFET mist.") The Phono Integrated sounded tubed—warm, full-bodied, and, most of all, immediate: the performers were in the room with me. They came to me; I didn't have to come to them. This was almost single-ended-triode (SET) sound. Or OTL sound, if my memory of Lew's Croft OTL monoblocks serves me right.

This, to me, is what sound reproduction should be about:



KEF's LS50 was *Stereophile's* 2013 Product of the Year.

the tonality, the atmosphere, the immediacy. Yeah, the Croft looks crude, dude. Deal with it!

I've been listening a lot lately to two great jazz singers who are no longer with us: Shirley Horn (great pianist, too) and Carmen McRae. Each was blessed with a unique style and presence. For Shirley Horn, I suggest her albums *You Won't Forget Me* (you never will, that's for sure) and *You're My Thrill*. For Carmen McRae, it's *Carmen Sings Monk, Lover Man and other Billie Holiday Classics, Birds of a Feather*, and, if you can find it, *Bittersweet*. Most of these albums by McRae are out of print.

The Croft Phono Integrated does have its limitations, aside from some limitations on test tones. As I said, if the amp is turned on, so is the phono stage. With the DeVore Orangutan speakers, the bass was not quite as controlled or as tight as I might like. Plump, but not pinched.

Transparency was another matter. I can hear into good recordings with the new LFD LE V in ways that I couldn't with the Croft Phono Integrated. There was some lack of air there, some loss of definition. But compared to what, and at what price?

Save the Stereo!

Save the Stereo, founded by Gordon White, is "a project to develop and promote the best ideas for leading the next generation of music lovers to the healthy and enriching lifestyle of high-performance audio" (www.savethestereo.com).

² www.stereophile.com/content/you-really-can-help-save-stereo.

com). It was a hot topic a few months ago at www.stereophile.com.²

Save the stereo from the superrich? Adjusting for inflation, I think more reasonably priced audio gear is available now than at any other time I can remember. That's true of tube amps, turntables, whatever. At the same time, a glut of used gear continues to trickle down.

Save the stereo from computer geeks? Downloading music is not my thing, but Internet radio is one of the best things to have happened in my listening life. Let geeks fiddle with their files and codecs. Oversampling. Upsampling. PCM. DSD. Enhanced DSD. I can always put on a record. Or brush my teeth.

Save us from the hoi polloi—the mob that our founder, J. Gordon Holt, called "the great audio unwashed"? Forget reaching those who never cared for stereo and never will. I'd just as soon reach out to a leper.

Save the stereo from audiophiles!

Now *there's* an idea I can get behind. Save us from those whose fixation on sound rather than music has created a market for sterile stereo.

One reader who posted about Save the Stereo on our website suggested why the Croft Phono Integrated sounds so swell despite the swill of JA's measurements. Maybe it's the paucity of parts. The simpler a circuit, the better the sound—so long as the thing works. Maybe it's tubes. Maybe it's the fact that each Croft product is hardwired—no circuit boards. Completely hand-assembled—no robots. Maybe the problem is too much engineering.

KEF LS50 loudspeaker

The Croft Phono Integrated and KEF LS50 loudspeaker made a spectacular combination in my listening room. I welcomed the Croft's warmth, immediacy, and tonality. Once again, Sam's maxim is proved: You can have excellent hi-fi for very little money; you just can't have a lot of it.

The KEF LS50 retails for \$1500/pair. You'll need to sit them on stands 20–22" high. I think they're best suited to rooms of small to medium size. I found them very flexible in terms of room placement. Their Uni-Q concentric drive-units—a 1" tweeter nested inside a 5.25" mid/woofer—make them ideally suited for nearfield listening. (I would like to

see a protective cover that I can place over the speakers when they're not in use.) They sounded as one, even from close-up. They also worked well spaced far apart and close to the sidewalls. (But avoid room corners.) Placed just right in a room, the LS50s could deliver surprising bass: down to around 50Hz.

Sensitivity (2.83V/m) is a claimed 85dB. The nominal impedance is 8 ohms, with a minimum of 3.2 ohms. At higher listening levels, that might put a strain on the Croft in a larger room. Fleawatt SET amps seem out of the question. (KEF suggests amplifiers with outputs of 25–100Wpc.)

I found the LS50's tonality spot-on, more neutral than sweet. Soundstaging and imaging were top-notch. Definition was superb, ranking with the very best speakers at any price. I haven't had such great sound in my listening room since the departure of Quad's ESL-2805 electrostatics.

Despite the "LS" designation, the LS50 is not a minimonitor à la the BBC LS3/5A, with a pumped-up midbass and a soft treble. Brass could bray; strings could sound wiry when they should. Percussive sounds were quick and clear.

The LS50 was introduced in 2011, to mark KEF's 50th anniversary. The good news is that although the 50th-anniversary year has passed, it will remain in production.

Dayton Audio Sola Bluetooth speaker

Unlike the Croft Phono Integrated, the Dayton Audio Sola comes in your choice of three colors: black, dark red, or white. Why not blue, too? Mine



Dayton Audio's Sola Bluetooth speaker lists for a penny under \$150.

were red—quite attractive, and not at all garish. The cabinet is made of MDF, not plastic. The dingus measures 10.44" wide by 3.75" high by 7.75" deep.

At its website, Parts Express offers the Sola for \$99.80 each, with free shipping within the contiguous US. The list price is \$149.99.

Each of the Sola's two drive-units is driven by its own 15W class-T amplifier. Of course, you're not going to get spectacular stereo imaging from two little drivers in a single small box. I was surprised, however, by the way the sound filled our 17' by 13' living room—as if the two high-end stereo speakers in back *were* playing. I duped several visitors into thinking they were hearing those separate speakers. All that sound from one little box? That must be what Bluetooth is about.

The Sola includes a 3.5mm miniplug audio cable for direct connection to a computer, smartphone, iPod, or even a portable CD player. When you do so, Bluetooth automatically shuts off. There's a line out for connecting to a subwoofer, and a charge port for

your iPhone. Pairing my Bluetooth devices was easy. There is no volume control; you must use the level controls on your source device.

The Sola includes a microphone at the center of the top panel. If you're using the Sola with a smartphone and a call comes in, the music (via Bluetooth) shuts off and the Sola becomes a speakerphone. This works very well in a small office. The Sola is a bit large and heavy (6.2 lbs) to take along on a plane or train.

The Sola runs from its switch-mode power supply, which must be plugged into an electrical outlet. It's really for indoor use, though in good weather it might be ideal for a protected porch or patio. (Don't get it wet!) Marina and I plan to use it on the deck of our dacha this summer, to fill the back yard with the sounds of the latest pop from Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Speaking of sound . . .

At our house, the Sola really did fill rooms large and small with surprisingly big sound, for about half what I might expect it to cost. Quibbles: The treble seemed attenuated. The midbass was emphasized, but not in a grotesque, boom-box sort of way—it was just a little rich and overripe. Definitely not lean. I love to listen to this thing with Radio Swiss Jazz on the Internet. I do wish it had a bass-attenuation button.

Is the Sola the only Bluetooth speaker you'll ever need? Maybe not. But it's likely the best you'll find for \$100.

I want my Bluetoothbrush! ■

Sam Tellig (sam.tellig@sorc.com) laughs his evil laughs in rural Connecticut.

CONTACTS

Croft Acoustics, England, UK

TEL: (44) (0)1723-355111

WEB: www.croftacoustics.co.uk

US distributor: Bluebird Music Ltd.

40 Sonwil Drive

Buffalo, NY 14225

TEL: (416) 638-8207

FAX: (416) 638-8115

WEB: www.bluebirdmusic.com

Dayton Audio/Parts Express

725 Pleasant Valley Drive

Springboro, OH 45066-1158

TEL: (800) 338-0531

WEB: www.daytonaudio.com

www.parts-express.com

KEF/GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd.

Eccleston Road, Tovil

Maidstone, Kent ME15 6QP

England, UK

TEL: (44) 1622-672-261

FAX: (44) 1622-750-653

WEB: www.kef.com/gb/

US distributor: GP Acoustics (US) Ltd.

10 Timber Lane

Marlboro, NJ 07746

TEL: (732) 683-2356

FAX: (732) 683-2358

WEB: www.kef.com/us