



EASTERN ELECTRIC MINIMAX CD PLAYER | EASTERN ELECTRIC MINIMAX PREAMPLIFIER
EASTERN ELECTRIC MINIMAX POWER AMPLIFIER | JAS AUDIO ORSA LOUDSPEAKERS | £4,036

King Kong

A one-time outpost of the British Empire is now the home of some of the best value valve super-fi ever

Hong Kong: inventor of the "made in" label and location of a skyline against which Manhattan's looks as imaginative as a bunch of breakfast cereal boxes. The place you go if you want Yuen Wo-ping to choreograph a Kung-Fu punch up in your next movie (and have a sharp suit sewn together while you're discussing it with him over coffee). The culture/mythology/wire work Quentin Tarantino just can't get over. And, just in case you were wondering, the birthplace of this month's *Beautiful System*.

The timing is apt. Much sooner than most people expected, China has, in the last few weeks, overtaken Britain to become the fourth largest economy in the world. It's unlikely to stop there. If you haven't already noticed that an increasing amount of what purports to be British hi-fi is already made in the Far East (it applies to plenty of other countries' hi-fi, too – even neighbouring Hong Kong), it's hard to miss the proliferation of Chinese and Far East brands currently giving the world market apple cart a good shaking.

The reason the *status quo* might just be on wobbly wheels is simple. Because China's labour-driven economy is in overdrive and sustaining its 'miracle phase' against fearful pressures (including a worried US trying to re-value its currency), 'high-end for peanuts' is a natural strategy. The promise is Harrods quality at Homebase prices, and stories of audiophiles dumping their five-figure American pre-amps and CD players for cheap Chinese alternatives aren't hard to find on the internet.

So is it all hype, myth and Hong Kong Phooey or are the Tectonic plates starting to groan? Could this be the start of a major and irreversible realignment of our super-fi sensibilities or merely a minor seismic blip? Step this way and

behold the Hong Kong conundrum: a tube-based stereo system that, on the one hand, looks too small to be taken seriously yet, on the other, seems far too good to be true.

Here's why. For a total of £4,036, you get the following: from Eastern Electric, the Minimax front end, consisting of a CD player with a valve output stage, plus a fully valved-up preamp and power amp. These are teamed (at the suggestion of EE's UK distributor, Shadow Distribution) with JAS Audio's frankly gorgeous ribbon-tweetered Orsa standmount speakers.

LOOKS CAN BE DECEPTIVE

Truth be told, the electronics really don't look that wonderful. Their diminutive stature, nondescript styling and nicely executed, but curiously cheapening, metalflake painted facias cut sharply across the traditional high-end grain. Despite the profusion of gently glowing (albeit rather titchy) valves sprouting from the amplification, the overall appearance is unlikely to convince you that these components can compete with the world's best.

This is deceptive, though. Build quality inside and out is, in fact, impressively solid and neat; with the exception of the Weetabix box sized preamp, they're weighty little beasts, too. And here's the thing. This system isn't budget esoterica. It isn't about stunning aesthetics. It isn't even pitched explicitly as junior league high-end for the slimmer-figured wallet. With this modest looking bundle of components, it is claimed, you can face down the Audio Researches, Mark Levinsons, Conrad-Johnsons, Border Patrols and other high-end mavens of this world for sheer sonic beauty. There are a few caveats, of course (there would have to be), but we'll come to those. ▀

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Eastern Electric Minimax CD player
£879

It looks as if it wouldn't say boo to a micro system, but this valve-equipped CD spinner possesses sonic gifts from heaven. The star of the system.



Eastern Electric Minimax preamplifier
£769

EE believes in short signal paths, that's why this preamp is so small. The soundstage it delivers is anything but – it's wide open, as only the best valve designs can be.



Eastern Electric Minimax power amplifier
£989

There are more powerful headphone amps, but you'd never believe it has only eight watts per channel when you hear it with the JAS Audio Orsas. Dynamics to die for.



JAS Audio Orsa speaker
£1,399 per pair

Radical two-way, split enclosure design boasts seductive looks and a ribbon tweeter. It's so valve-chummy, you'll never want to try it with anything else. Fortunately, there's no need to.



■ Eastern Electric was started by US high-end distributor Bill O'Connell and valve-loving, Hong Kong-based electrical engineer Alex Yeung. They got together as the result of some Internet commerce. O'Connell placed an order for one of Yeung's early amps and quickly understood why Yeung is known as 'The Man with the Golden Ear' in Hong Kong. They haven't looked back. Yeung is now the president of Eastern Electric and continues to design all of the company's Chinese-made products. He frequently hops on the ferry to mainland China to visit the factory and make sure production standard match his own.

TAKE IT TO THE MAX

The Minimax CD player, which is just 30cm wide and 33cm deep, uses Burr-Brown 1732 DACs and leaves the factory with two 6922 tubes installed, though EE doesn't just permit owners to experiment with other compatible valves (tube rolling, as it's often called) but positively encourages it. The custom-made toroidal power transformer was designed specifically for the player and, in part, accounts for its 5.9kg weight. The player supports both conventional and HDCD-encoded compact discs, and its display can be dimmed in two stages using the beautifully chunky metal remote control (though the layout of the tiny buttons

isn't exactly intuitive). Round the back there's one pair of RCA analog outputs and one S/PDIF coaxial digital output. The Philips CD12 transport mechanism and CD7II servo circuit operate with reassuringly silky smoothness.

The Minimax preamp is a real cutie. It weighs just 4kg and is barely 7.5cm deep. That said, the front panel is fashioned from a thick slab of aluminium with rounded edges and the ends thinner than the middle. The volume and selector knobs have a smooth, positive feel, and the power flick switch has a satisfyingly precise action, too. There's no remote control, though.

On the back plate are RCA sockets for the three inputs and two pairs of outputs. In keeping with the minimalist design philosophy, there's no tape loop or headphone jack. The circuit is a basic voltage amplifier that is directly coupled to a cathode follower. Because they perform different tasks, the two tubes (12AU7s) don't need to be a matched pair. In fact, they can be chosen for complementary or contrasting sonic values. Again, experimentation is encouraged. Tube rectification falls to a 6X4 valve and a smoothing choke. There are no coupling caps between the stages and, according to Eastern Electric, the circuit is as simple and straightforward as it can be. High-end niceties include Rifa caps, low-noise,

high-precision metal-oxide film resistors and point-to-point wiring. "Is there another product out there that can bring you closer to the music?" asks Eastern Electric, expecting the answer 'no'. "We don't believe there is and will put our MiniMax up against any challengers."

EIGHT DELIGHTFUL WATTS

Never say we don't bring you contrast at *Beautiful Systems*. After the 200 and 500-watt monsters of recent issues, 'power amp' is almost a misnomer in the case of the Minimax. Although a push-pull design, it kicks out a measly (though "delightfully enjoyable", according to Eastern Electric) eight watts per channel. But then it is tiny and uses tiny tubes. Each channel has a pair of 6BM8 miniature valves, still in production at the Svetlana factory in Russia. The 6BM8 is unusual in that it contains both power pentode and triode sections in one tube. A pair of 6BM8s, where the pentodes are connected in ultralinear fashion, makes the Minimax a very simple push-pull amplifier design.

Again, attention to rectification is a feature of the design. Where many manufacturers opt for an inexpensive solid-state diode bridge rectifier and smoothing filter (even in much more expensive valve gear), the MiniMax features a 5AR4 tube rectifier and a genuine pi filter.





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Finally, we come to the speakers. If the Eastern Electric kit errs on the side of understatement, these JAS Audio Orsas more than compensate. They also originate from Hong Kong and are anything but ordinary, either in design or standard of finish.

A radical two-way, two-cabinet design, with the bass-reflex port placed between the two cabinets to “enhance a 360 degree horizontal dispersion of air from the speaker”, the Orsa uses a very Dynaudio-esque 150mm bass/mid driver and a 130mm ribbon tweeter, which is claimed to extend all the way up to a dog-worrying 60kHz. It also features switchable crossover settings: ‘Reference’ activates an additional circuit that maintains a more even resistance to current flow and presents an easier load to the amplifier, while ‘Dynamic’ permits more variations in resistance in the mid and bass regions, giving a punchier and more dynamic sound.

Impressive sophistication considering the £1,399 per pair asking price, but the build quality and finish are, well, bananas. For instance, inside each cabinet, pure

natural wool from New Zealand is used for damping, internal wiring is pure silver and, on the outside, the sumptuous real wood veneer is treated to 14 coats of piano lacquer. In short, the Orsa looks vastly more expensive than it is.

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

Tube-based systems, especially low-powered ones such as this, are often expected to sound like a bar of Galaxy Caramel tastes: sweet, smooth but, ultimately, a little hard to swallow. But the first thing that strikes you about the Eastern Electric/JAS Audio combo is its exuberant sense of life and pace.

Leaving aside tonal considerations for a moment, it's a remarkably tactile sound, tightly focused and projected well beyond the boundaries of the cabinets in all planes – truly, expensively three-dimensional sounding. All right, it lacks the explosive presence of something with huge speakers and big power but its presentation has startling immediacy nonetheless.

The lovely lightness of touch and grainless, almost romantic treble are true

valve hallmarks and hugely alluring, as is the effortlessly fluent and wonderfully easy-breathing delivery of complex material. The presentation of fine detail is beguilingly natural, and is all the more remarkable for the absence of fatiguing effects. It's not strictly neutral, but when the music is allowed to communicate this intimately, does it matter?

Yes, even with speakers as efficient as the Orsas, eight watts a side only goes so far, so loud and so deep. But so long as you're not considering using the system in a barn conversion to play Black Sabbath at party levels, you'll rarely want for more volume. If what you crave, however, is genuine high-end magic – a level of believability and musical coherence that you thought was the preserve of house-priced systems – this combo just might be the answer to your dreams.

True, it won't be everyone's idea of audio nirvana, but if you're growing a little tired of the wham, bam, lapel-grabbing school of system design, you owe yourself a listen. **HFC**

David Vivian

