

Great Return

John Pickford on the return of a great name – Leak – with their new Stereo 130 amplifier.

Leak branded equipment last appeared in show-rooms over 40 years ago. Now they are back with two new models styled upon their classic 1960s designs. A comprehensive history of

the original company can be read elsewhere in this issue so I'll spare you the long lesson here. Those who know and are interested will notice the new Stereo 130 integrated amplifier bears a striking resemblance to the original Stereo

30, launched in 1963 as the world's first domestic transistor amplifier, as our original Leak advertisement picture shows.

Like its spiritual predecessor, the new Stereo 130 is a solid-state design incorporating latest digital



technology alongside traditional Class A/B amplification, power specified as 45 Watts per channel. In spite of its breadth of modern ability, this is not an expensive amplifier – just £799 with Walnut veneered wooden sleeve as shown, or £699 without.

The Stereo 130 is joined by the similarly styled CDT CD transport (£549/£449) that makes a perfect partner, rather like the Stereo 30 Plus and Stereofetic FM tuner combo I once owned. The new models' Walnut surround is classier looking than my old Leaks – and Leak suggest these sleeves match their veneered loudspeakers like Wharfedale Lintons and Dentons.

Can you slot them in? The Stereo 130 with sleeve is 326mm wide, 146mm high and 267mm deep; the CDT 326mm wide, 146mm high and 283mm deep.

Front panel controls on the amplifier comprise an electronic rotary switch for input source selection, a similarly sized motorised Alps volume pot (activated by the fully-featured remote control) and three smaller knobs for adjustment of bass, treble and balance. Tone controls are essential for some listeners while others find them unnecessary so naysayers will welcome the direct button to bypass the tone and balance circuits. Headphone users will appreciate the excellent dedicated amp stage.

A button marked power is in fact a standby switch as is common nowadays; the true on/off power switch is on the rear panel above the mains socket. In standby the 130 consumes less than one Watt from the mains, as mandated by the IEC. Standby power is needed to keep the remote control active so it can switch the amp on. It's user adjustable too, so the unit will go into auto-standby when there has been no input signal for either 20 minutes or an hour. The amplifier will be in standby mode after these periods, to reduce electricity consumption, unless the function is disabled completely.

Analogue connectivity comprises two sets of unbalanced line inputs along with a moving magnet phono input for vinyl replay. Digital is catered for via coaxial and optical connectors and there is a USB input if you wish to play music from a computer; a Bluetooth 4.2 aptX receiver enables remote



Comprehensive connectivity including Pre-Out to feed an external power amplifier. Plenty of digital inputs; no XLR balanced inputs. Note the DSD logo at top left: DSD can be played from a computer via USB connection.

wireless playback and it connected with my phone in less than a minute.

Power from the Stereo 130 is aplenty, easily driving my insensitive (82dB/W/m) Rogers LS3/5a loudspeakers, even though the

3050is.

As many potential users of this vintage styled equipment will want to spin vinyl – or so I guess – I plugged in my 1970 Goldring Lenco GL75 turntable, fitted with a period-correct G800 cartridge with

"it reveals excellent depth of image and betters my ancient TL/12s in the way it fleshes out lower registers"

volume control needed to be at the 12 o'clock position to produce similar levels the 10 o'clock spot produced through Q Acoustics

Super E stylus. Feeding the LS3/5a speakers, I couldn't resist playing a recording from 1963, in honour of the Stereo 130's heritage.



Under the hood of the CDT CD disc player. At left the slot-loading CD transport mechanism. Near top is the circular toroidal transformer of a linear power supply. The historic Leak logo (right) now adorns a modern electronic circuit board.



Full remote control is available for both CD and amplifier.

Twist And Shout from the Beatles' debut album is no audiophile recording but it's raw and honest. Thrilling as it is, this track can sound thin and harsh through bright sounding equipment yet the Stereo 130 delivered the performance with all its guts intact. Lennon's larynx-shredding vocal (hear his sigh of relief at the end) had all the pleading passion only quality systems can reveal, while the guitars and drums could be clearly heard in correct proportion to the roomy ambience of the studio. Groove noise could've been reduced with a mono switch, a useful addition to tone controls.

Impressed with the fulsome reproduction of a basic mono recording, I stuck with the Fab Four but selected something more modern – 1969 to be precise. That's a half-truth because the 2019 remix

of Come Together improves on the original, especially in its stereo separation. I swapped out my little BBC monitors for some Q Acoustics 3050i floorstanders at this point to get a better insight into bass response.

McCartney's swampy bass line was as deep and weighty as it should be, but more importantly the Stereo 130 got into the groove and played the tune. And subtle nuances such as the odd bit of fret squeak and off-mic vocalisations that inferior components mask were presented in clear focus. This impressed me enormously.

Both of these tracks were, of course, recorded at EMI's studios in Abbey Road, which is apt as throughout the 1960s Leak amplifiers were used exclusively to power the studios' monitors.

Adding the CDT to the set-

feeding the 3050i loudspeakers made the recording warm and inviting. Smooth as they are, the Leak pair does not overlook fine detail as I could distinctly hear the highest vocal harmony less accomplished amplifiers often gloss over.

Having performed brilliantly in my office system, I slotted the Stereo 130 into the main set-up, swapping out my beloved Leak TL/12 Plus monoblocks. Driving 15in HPD equipped Tannoy Berkeleys and fed by a Thorens TD124 based front end, the new Leak amplifier asserted its authority throughout an evening spent listening to a selection of acoustic jazz.

John Coltrane's A Love Supreme needs to be heard through high-resolution equipment to fully appreciate the emotional intensity of the performance. While the solid-state Stereo 130 doesn't quite



The 12V Trigger connector enables CDT and Stereo 130 to be controlled by a single remote control. There are no analogue outputs, only electrical and optical SPDIF digital outputs.

up I played Moving by Kate Bush, from the 2018 CD remaster of The Kick Inside. Kate's icy vocals can sound unbearably shrill through treble-hyped systems yet the Leaks

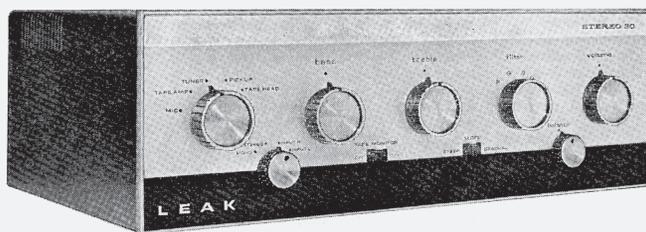
produce the holographic soundstage of the valve powered Leaks, it reveals excellent depth of image and betters the ancient TL/12s in the way it fleshes out the lower registers.

The new Stereo 130 also comprehensively outperforms my old drab-sounding Stereo 30, which, with its aged electrical components, is becoming to me nothing more than a chic Sixties ornament.

I listened to digital audio through the amp with similarly impressive results. My own hi-res studio masters in Logic Pro replayed accurately through the internal ESS ES9018 DAC, and the even-handed nature of the Stereo 130 even made Spotify an enjoyable background listen. The USB input will accept 32/394 PCM and DSD256 Leak say.

If you're eyeing up the CDT to slot into an existing analogue set-up, be aware there is no analogue RCA output – you will need an external

Britain's best Hi-Fi Equipment



STEREO 30 Transistorised integrated amplifier . . .
Superb styling, faultless performance and a breakthrough in price and reliability. Price £49.10.0

Leak's first transistor amplifier, the Stereo 30, launched 1963. Price £49.10.0 the advertisement says, so around £1035 in today's money (Bank of England inflation calculator). Its rotary controls are mimicked on the new Stereo 130.

DAC. Also, it will only play files up to CD quality (WAV, 16/44.1 or 48) from the flash drive. Higher resolution files were not accepted. Whilst you can't play hi-res from CDT's flash drive, nor DSD, for most users CD, MP3, WMV and such like will be enough.

As a pair, this is a winning combination offering outstanding analogue and digital performance at an attractive price. Had Leak not got these products spot-on, it would've been difficult to disguise my disappointment. I'm delighted with them. Welcome back Leak – you've been a long time coming.

NOEL SAYS -

Great to see the Leak name finally resurrected. I say "finally" because it has been on the cards for some time but IAG, who own an array of respected UK brand names – Quad, Wharfedale, Mission, Castle and Audiolab – likely did not want yet another model range. But the recent success of Wharfedale's Dentons and Lintons, built for trad appearance and sound, has seemingly changed their mind. Unsurprising really because the audience for hi-fi is an old one (50+) but an affluent one. Add in the desire for traditional British hi-fi in overseas markets and you end up with these cosmetic near-replicas of yester-year.

I've used a succession of Leak products in the past and am a dyed-in-the-wool Leak man! The TL/12 Plus was just gorgeous to hear – liquid beauty. My Troughline VHF/FM tuner is untouchable for sound quality – it puts me right in the studio. And as for Leak loudspeakers – can't even go there.

All of which is to suggest the Leak brand name has value and potentially a great future.

I enjoyed using these products briefly after testing them, but then I know the Quad Vena II well, upon which the Stereo 130 is based. It's a tried and tested design, replete with ESS ES9018 digital-to-analogue convertor (DAC) that's wholly appropriate sound wise, making for what I see as a piece of magical retro at astonishingly low price. Bear in mind that 45 Watts will blow you across the room if you use sensitive loudspeakers (90dB from one Watt). Think Wharfedale Lintons or Q Acoustics 1050is, but there are plenty more modern floorstanders that would suit if you want to go head-bangingly loud – 1960s style. **NK**



MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Leak 130 produced 55 Watts into 8 Ohms and 64 Watts into 4 Ohms, similar results to Quad Vena II (June 19 issue). This is sufficient power to go very loud in most systems. Distortion was low at all frequencies and outputs – and I noted that the output stage was very linear with signals below 1 Watt, helped partly by low output noise.

I suspect excellent low level linearity, low noise and rolled off treble all contribute to its smooth sound.

Output rolled down slowly above 20kHz (-1dB at 38kHz) ensuring easy treble. Low frequency output rolled down below 10Hz too, especially with tone controls engaged, to limit subsonic gain when bass lift is applied.

The tone controls were neatly engineered to give a useful but not excessive +7dB maximum bass lift around 40Hz, but more importantly there was good low level resolution, allowing just +1dB to be dialled in.

Similarly the treble control gave +7dB lift maximum (20kHz) but could be set to give fine treble cut of -1dB at 10kHz to reduce the excessive treble of current loudspeakers.

The optical S/PDIF digital input worked to 192kHz sample rate, but frequency response rolled down fast, extending to 26kHz (-1dB). The electrical input gave identical results.

Inside there is an ESS ES9018 Sabre 32 Series digital-to-analogue convertor (DAC) that gave a very high 117dB EIAJ Dynamic Range value from the loudspeaker outputs (and 118dB from Pre-out), a very good result able to convey the benefits of hi-res digital but there will be no brightness in the sound.

Distortion at -60dB came in at a low 0.03% with 24bit digital (0.22% with CD).

The MM phono stage needed a normal 4.5mV for full output and overload was high at 50mV. There is no warp filter as such but switching in the tone controls helps. Noise was low at -80dB. Frequency response measured flat from 10Hz-20kHz, with just a smidgeon (0.3dB or so) of bass lift to ensure a sound with some body.

The CDT delivers only CD quality, being unable to play hi-res from the USB drive. It gave flat frequency response to 21kHz and standard CD performance figures of 0.22% distortion and 101dB EIAJ Dynamic Range. With no internal DAC it is a transport, not a player.

The new Leak Stereo 130 measured very well in all areas. It is very linear (no distortion), has low noise and frequency response has been rolled off above 20kHz on all inputs to help toward an easy sound lacking sharpness. **NK**

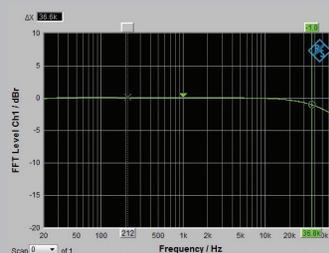
Power 55W
Frequency response (-1dB) 10Hz-38kHz
Distortion (10kHz, 1W) 0.02%
Separation (1kHz) 91dB
Noise (IEC A) -111dB
Sensitivity 600mV

DIGITAL
Frequency response (-1dB) 10Hz-26kHz
Distortion (-60dB, 24bit) 0.03%
Dynamic range 117dB

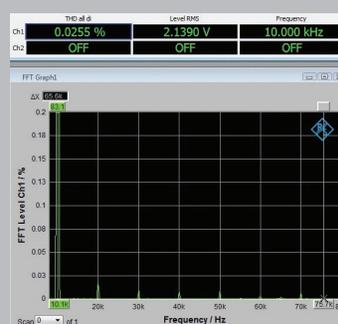
PHONO (MM)
Frequency response (-1dB) 10Hz-20kHz
Distortion (1kHz, 5mV in) 0.01%

Separation (1kHz) 68dB
Noise (IEC A) -80dB
Sensitivity 4.5mV
Overload 50mV

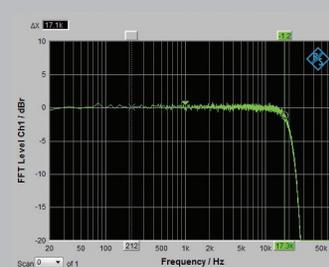
FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



FREQUENCY RESPONSE CDT



LEAK
STEREO 130 £699
(£799 WALNUT)



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced.

VERDICT

Warm yet detailed sound from vinyl and digital sources with vintage style and modern features. Superb.

FOR

- smooth, full-bodied character
- lovely linkable remote control
- retro good looks

AGAINST

- no mono switch

LEAK CDT £449
(£549 WALNUT)



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced.

VERDICT

A CD transport that can also play digital files from flash drive.

FOR

- easy to use
- plays from a flash drive
- remote control

AGAINST

- no hi-res from flash drive
- poor display

LEAK
www.leak-hifi.co.uk