

SING like a bird

Not content with distributing Canary Audio, Living Voice tweaks the components too and **Ed Selley** is singing its praises

Sometimes, the relationship between a manufacturer and distributor goes beyond a conventional one allowing the former to sell products in a different country or via a larger sales network. When that distributor is also a manufacturer in their own right, products can be developed to work in partnership with one another in the pursuit of synergy. This system takes this a stage further. Such is the relationship between the companies here, it is not immediately obvious where one ends and the other begins.

This is because Definitive Audio, the company that distributes the Canary Audio electronics that make up the front end of this system is not simply

a dealer. It also produces and sells the Living Voice speakers that make up the other half of the system. So far so normal, but the engineering attention of Living Voice has not been limited to the speakers – the Canary Audio components have also been carefully and thoroughly revised by Living Voice, in the pursuit of higher performance and better synergy with the speakers.

This process is sufficiently extensive that the CA-339 monoblock amplifiers are suffixed LV to denote the reworking of their internals. The basic layout of the amplifier doesn't change – each amp is still a hefty ▶

COMPONENTS

CANARY AUDIO CA-339LV MONOBLOCK AMP £16,250

The basic CA-339 is a 50W monoblock built around four 300B valves. In LV form, the internal wiring is completely revised and a range of components upgraded to further improve the sound.

CANARY AUDIO C1600 PREAMPLIFIER £11,250

Commissioned by Living Voice, the C1600 is a two-box preamp with the second box containing the power supply. On arrival in the UK, components inside the units are further upgraded by Living Voice.

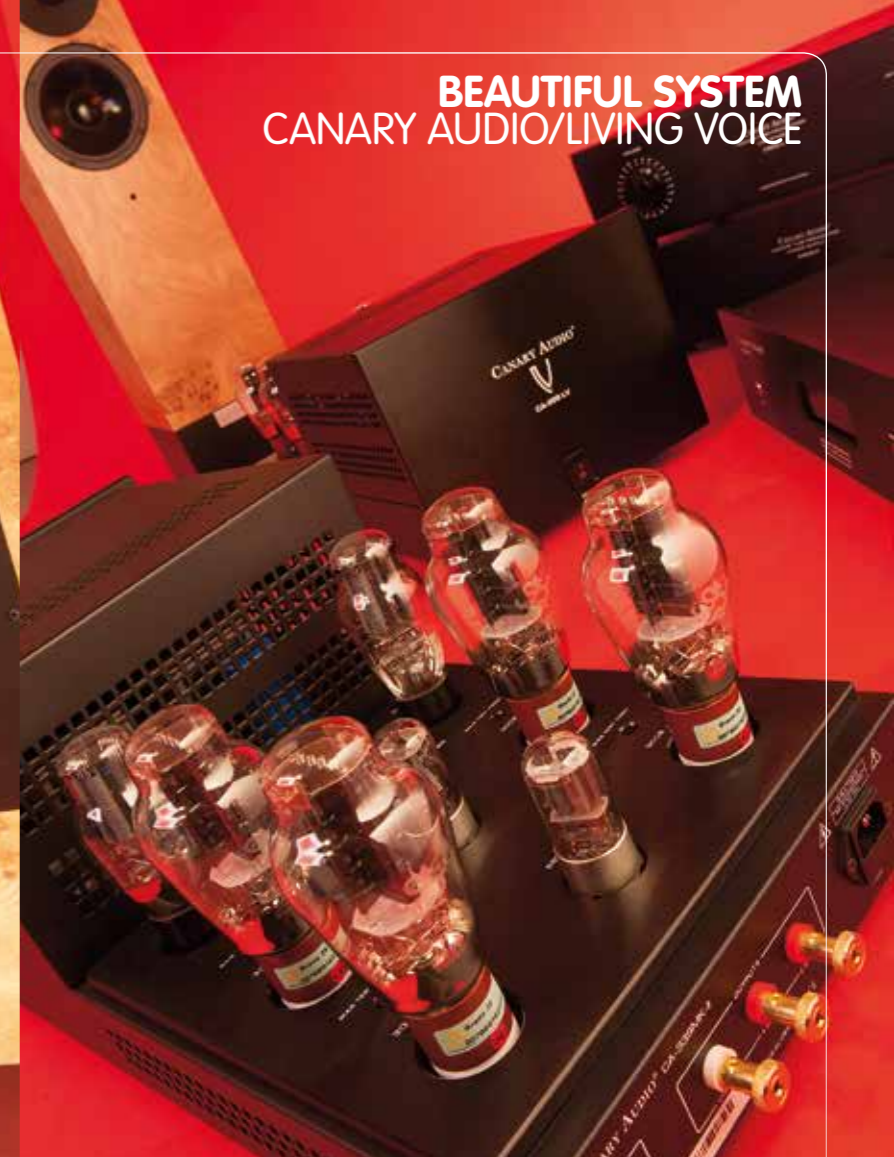
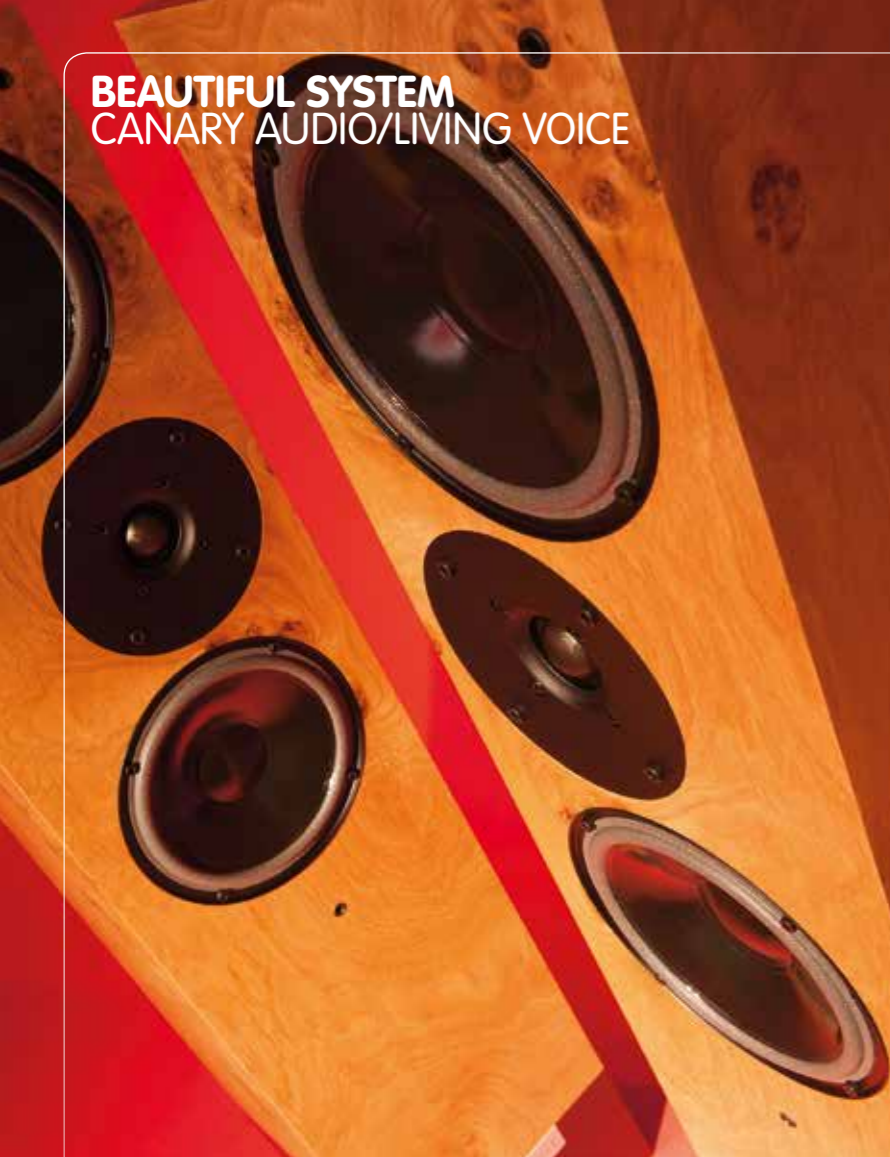
CANARY AUDIO KD-2000 DAC £5,950

Built around a pair of ESS Sabre DACs with a selection of custom filter settings, the KD-2000 is DSD and 24-bit/384kHz capable and offers a choice of six digital inputs including asynchronous USB.

LIVING VOICE IBX-RW3 LOUDSPEAKER £8,100

The IBX-RW3 is the flagship internal crossover version of the Living Voice Auditorium Series loudspeaker and features bespoke drivers, crossover and hand-wound air core inductors.

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM CANARY AUDIO/LIVING VOICE



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monoblock design incorporating the relatively unusual complement of a quartet of 300B triodes giving it a healthy 50W power output – but under the skin, it is a different story. Carefully remove the lower plate from one and the underside is laden with custom capacitors built to Living Voice's specifications and wiring courtesy of another Definitive Audio brand, Kondo.

Fully modified

The situation with the C1600 preamplifier is even more entwined. The existence of the product full stop is largely at the behest of Definitive Audio which while a keen fan of Canary's full-fat four-box reference preamps, notes that they aren't always the perfect tonic for your average UK lounge. Having produced it, Canary makes the 'cooking' C1600 as part of its existing range but the one you see here has undergone further Living Voice sorcery in pursuit of further performance gains.

By contrast, the last piece of electronics goes unmodified... for now. The KD-2000 DAC is an extremely sophisticated piece of decoding. Built around a pair of ESS Sabre DACs partnered with FPGA-sporting custom filtering software, the KD-2000 is an absolutely up to the minute,

DSD-capable monster which just so happens to have a pair of 6922 valves nestling in the output. This system can also be fronted by a dedicated CD player, and there is a Living Voice fettled version of that – the £7,500 CD-300LV.

The speakers that finish off this particular arrangement are all Living Voice's own work. The IBX-RW3 is the second loftiest member of its Auditorium Series of box

The bassline moves with speed, capturing each bass impact with absolute precision

loudspeakers. The premise is relatively straightforward but as with many things Living Voice, the execution is anything but. Designed to offer levels of sensitivity sympathetic to valve electronics, within that simple and beautifully finished cabinet are bespoke drivers, an isolated crossover packed full of similarly esoteric components to those used in the Canary electronics. The only real concession the IBX-RW3 speaker makes over the series-topping OBX-RW is the crossover lives inside the cabinet rather than in its own enclosure.

Above left: Living Voice speakers look simple but hide fastidious engineering

Above centre: The Canary Audio electronics are understated but beautifully engineered

Above right: 55W into sensitive speakers gives effortless headroom

Combined as a system this is a collection of components that are at once entirely businesslike and utterly gorgeous at the same time. Nothing here is a frippery or embellishment – indeed, the Canary units might just rank as the most understated American electronics I've ever seen – but this doesn't stop them being packed with lovely details. The casework is finished to an exceptional standard and the controls move with the weight and fluidity you simply don't achieve using anything other than the very best parts. In its burr oak veneer, the Living Voice speaker has a timelessness and elegance that brings to mind a good piece of furniture. Existing in a world outside of design trends, it will look as timeless in 30 years as it does now.

Great expectations

As I continue to be haunted by the vision of a toddler's hand grasping a powered-up 300B valve, listening takes place back at Definitive Audio. With a Melco N1A (HFC 397) providing a suitable USB feed for the KD-2000 DAC to strut its stuff and a smattering of Kondo interconnects, speaker cable and mains leads binding the system together, this system confirms a number of expectations but subverts a fair few of them too.

First up, forget what you know or think you know about the 300B valve. Packing four a side into a CA-339LV is something that makes total sense after about 30 seconds of David Bowie's *Lazarus*. There is still a sweetness to the way this amp makes music, a sound utterly free of harshness or aggression but here this is combined with an effortlessness and sheer grip that is quite unlike anything that I've heard a 300B do before. With the sensitive IBX-RW3 loudspeakers at their disposal, the headroom that's on offer is effectively unlimited.

Keeping it real

What this gives you is a system with tonality that is truly astonishing and a delicacy that leaves it able to reproduce even the gentlest of sounds without ever making it sound forced or unnatural, but also able to handle scale in a way that goes beyond even what you might assume a 50W power output can do. A rendition of Arvo Pärt's *Fur Alina* is an object lesson in how this comes together. Each struck key is detailed, effortless and utterly real. Underpinning this is a weight and impact, almost a sense of potential energy, that is key to making this piece of music work. The piano is not a small instrument and accurately portraying that sense of potential



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scale is a tricky business, which this system nails with consummate ease.

Of course, if you want actual scale, you can have that too. Daft Punk's wonderful *Adagio For TRON* builds and builds with an effortless and absolute lack of compression that is terrifically grin inducing. The swell of strings and brass is felt as much as heard and within this wall of sound it

It's able to reproduce even the gentlest of sounds without ever sounding forced

is still perfectly possible to discern individual instruments. This detail is never unnaturally forced upon you, there is simply the sense that you can hear everything you need, where it needs to be, when it needs to happen.

Neither is this ability the preserve of sober and well-recorded orchestral material either. Terry Callier's *You Goin' Miss Your Candyman* fizzles with an intensity and excitement that is captivating. This is not a recording for the ages, but the Canary electronics and Living Voice speakers combine to give you everything that is good without shining too bright a light on the limitations of the piece. Similarly,

the rendition of *Rakim* from the latest Dead Can Dance live album demonstrates beyond any reasonable doubt that this system has grunt. The driving bassline moves with speed and sheer energy, capturing each bass impact with absolute precision and palpable force. The character of this system never changes. Instead it simply takes abilities you thought would only be of relevance to a single genre or category of music and makes it equally pertinent to categories you never thought would benefit.

All about the music

As it should always be, this is a system that is about the music. Behind the tweaking, fettling and obsessive attention to detail that goes into its construction is the simple desire to make whatever you play on it sound astonishing. The way it performs has made any glib attempts to reach for valve stereotypes completely pointless. Here valves are a means to an end and that end is truly outstanding all-round ability with whatever you're listening to at that particular moment. If you are lucky enough to be shopping at this relatively rarefied price point, you need to hear this system. Maybe all distribution arrangements need to be as intimate as this one ●