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Bit player

Cyrus Audio's flagship XP Qx music streamer tested

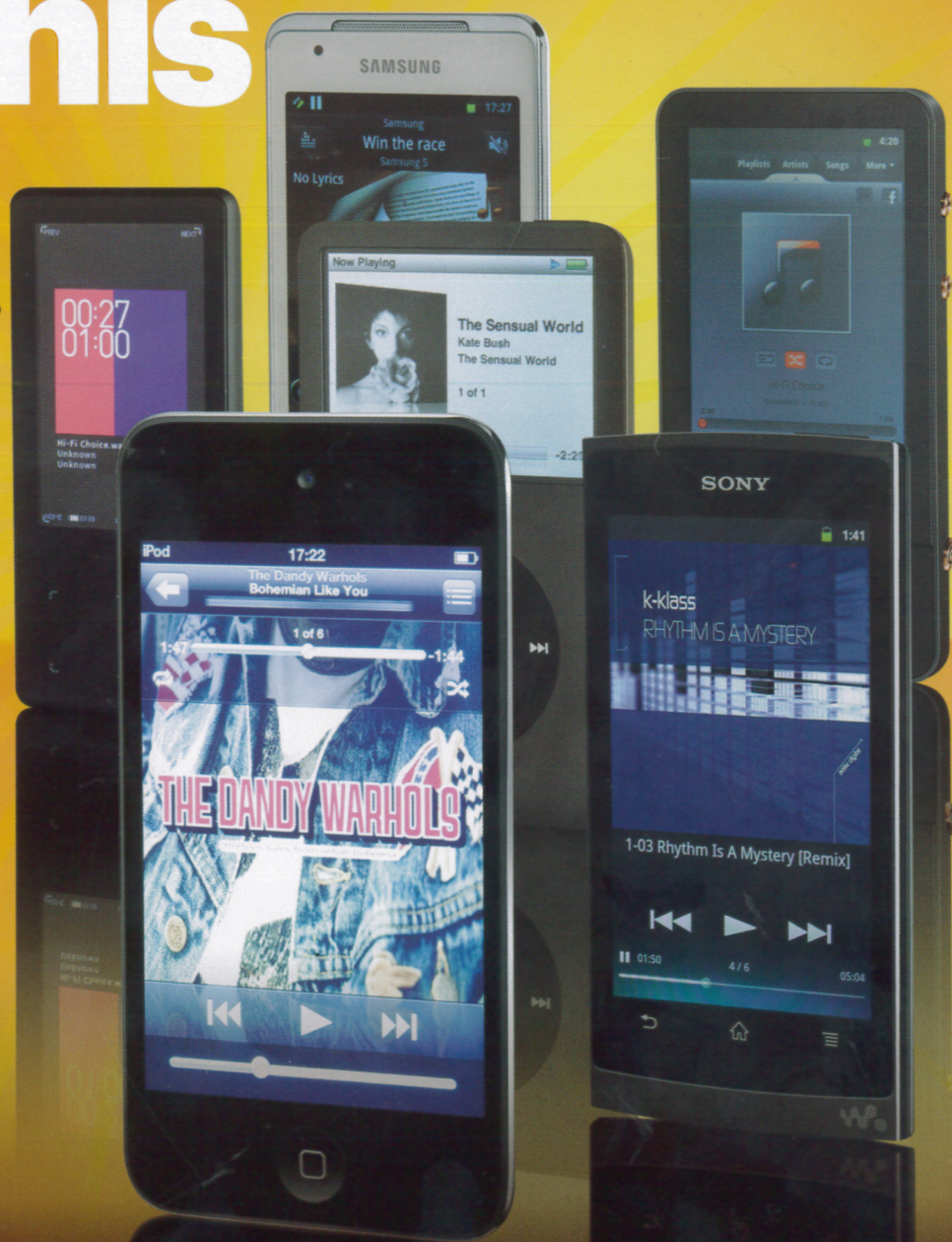


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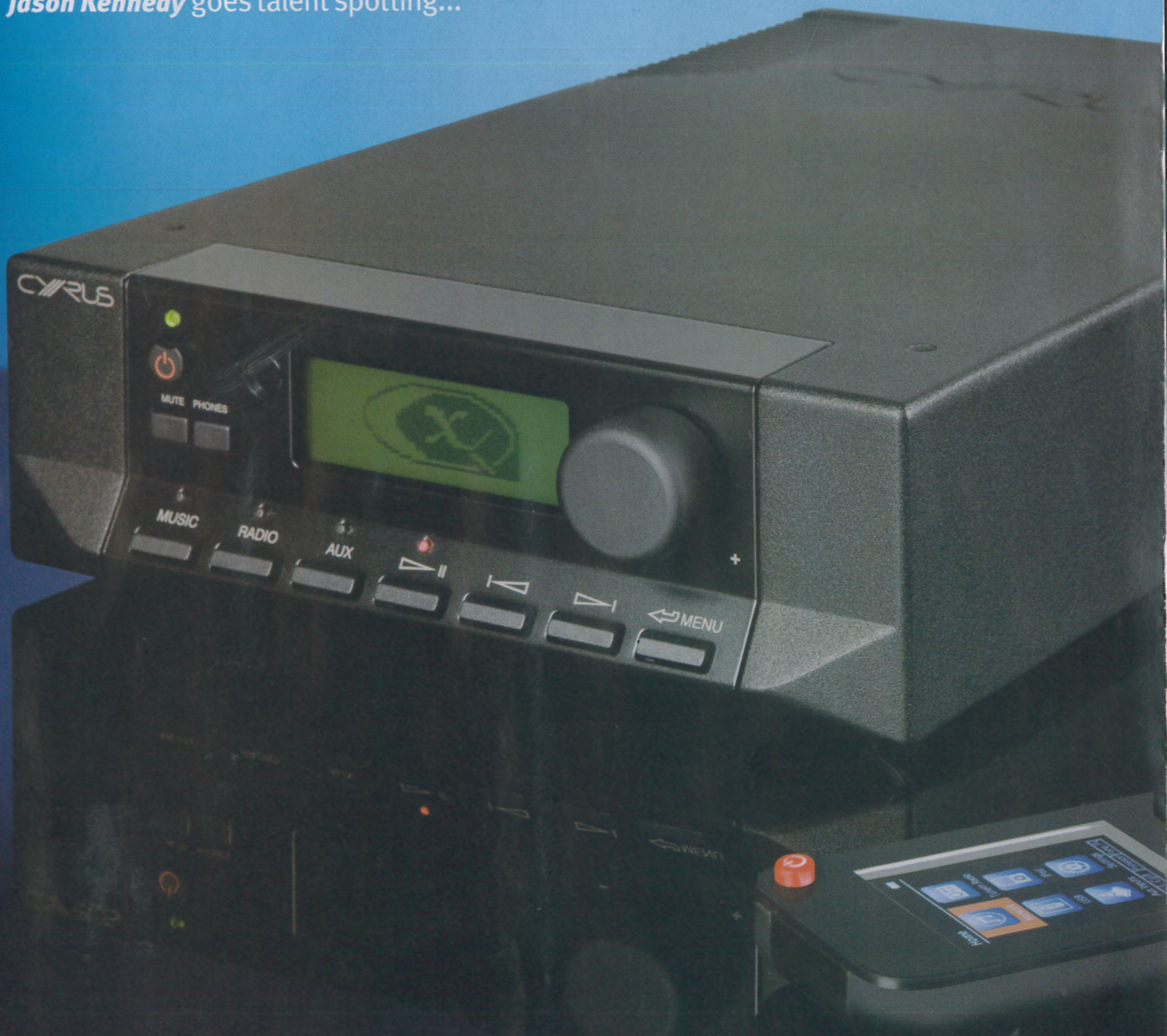
Cyrus Audio has packed a preamplifier, DAC and streamer into its latest and greatest Stream XP Qx.

Jason Kennedy goes talent spotting...



Cyrus brought out a trio of streamers last year at prices that were almost across the board, so it's surprising to see another, higher priced variant appear at this stage. But the new Stream XP Qx is, as the parlance goes, the destination product that the Stream platform was developed for...

Cyrus devotees will know that there's already a Stream XP in the range, and a Qx DAC module. This therefore brings those two in to one single package – just as Cyrus always intended. One only wonders why it took so long?



The Huntingdon company got a head start with streaming when it worked with Imerge to create the Link server nine years ago, a product that taught that ease of control and access was of paramount importance with streaming technology. This is why Cyrus invested heavily in its swish N-Remote handset, because customers want a straightforward and reliable means of getting to their music. This seems pretty obvious, but is surprisingly rare in practice, most systems rely on third party app control of a media server on the NAS drive that pushes the data to the renderer (or streamer) – and these

can be less than gratifying pieces of software. By integrating control of the NAS into its system remote, Cyrus manages to make this a lot easier. For a start the N-Remote has an RF link to the Stream box, which ensures that you do not get dropout, and it can send information about the music you have in the library back from the data 'pulled' from the NAS.

This is the same approach that Naim uses in its streaming components and is based on the BridgeCo core and Audivo interface software. Because of the immense complexity of the technology, no single hi-fi company has the resources to build a streaming system from the ground up, and most use the same intrinsic parts, the Airplay system is also BridgeCo-based for instance. Few hi-fi companies, however, have commissioned the software required for a bespoke remote handset rather than an app to run the system.

The Stream XP Qx may look like just another cast alloy, half-width component from Cyrus, but the incorporation of its penultimate DAC means that it's a better equipped streamer than any the company has previously made. The Qx is a 24-bit/192kHz upsampling convertor with inputs for TOSLINK and coaxial digital sources as well as a USB A input that is licensed to extract the ones and noughts from an iPod or material stored on a USB drive.

The Stream XP Qx also has quite a nice bit of software for the headphone output which ramps down the main output and fades up the headphone feed at the press of a button. As ever with Cyrus, there's the option to upgrade with a PSX-R external power supply, which takes over all preamp supply duties leaving the onboard power supply to run the DAC and streaming sections.

Cyrus has a number of recommendations for setting up a streaming system, for a start it prefers Western Digital NAS drives, because they are reasonably quiet and usually incorporate Twonkymedia server software that's, if not perfect, at least reliable and consistent. It also recommends placing an Ethernet switch between the NAS and the router, which is something that Naim also prefers. One new tip I picked up is that it's better to have a long lead between switch and router than it is between switch and renderer. This reduces the amount of CAT6 cable the data travels down before being converted into audio, and thus reduces the likelihood of it being corrupted in the process.

The manufacturer also recommends ripping your discs to WAV rather than the alternatives, because it sounds better. The drawback with WAV files, is of course that metadata is not sent

The Qx is also a 24-bit/192kHz upsampling convertor with inputs for digital sources

by media servers, so you don't get much more than artist and track info, but Cyrus tell me it is planning a solution to this which will be of interest to the whole computer audio community, methinks...

As well as being able to stream pretty much any format that the self-respecting music lover would use, the Stream XP Qx can also work with Apple Lossless (ALAC) and has onboard net radio from TuneIn. The latter requires registration and device association with the TuneIn site if you want to add your own presets, but will play 'listen again' material with consummate ease. And if all your favourite shows are on while you're on the mountain bike (for instance) that's a real bonus.

The N-Remote is worth expanding on a bit more as well, it's motion-sensitive so rests its batteries after a while, but comes to life when you pick it up and shows what's cued up on the player. It is also a learning remote that can be programmed to operate up to eight components via Cyrus' online database, it has an IR emitter for conventionally controlled components. It displays album

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Cyrus Stream XP Qx

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: streamer, DAC, preamp

WEIGHT:
3.4kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
215x75x385mm

FEATURES:

- digital inputs: 3x coaxial, 2x optical S/PDIF, USB
 - digital outputs: coaxial S/PDIF
 - analogue outputs: RCA phono fixed & variable
 - D/A convertors: 24-bit/192kHz
 - 3.5mm headphone output
 - TuneIn net radio
 - UPnP & DLNA compatible
 - supported file formats: WAV, FLAC, AAC, MP3, WMA, AIFF
 - wireless operation via supplied antenna
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Cyrus Audio
- TELEPHONE:**
01480 435577
- WEBSITE:**
cyrusaudio.com

Q&A

JASON KENNEDY SPOKE TO CYRUS AUDIO'S MD PETER BARTLETT ABOUT THE STREAM XP QX



JK: Where does the Qx DAC fit in the Cyrus product hierarchy?

PB: We have three DACs in our range, there is a lower priced one that we install in our digitally equipped integrated amplifiers, then you have the Qx DAC which is the high performance, 24-bit/192kHz, reclocking convertor that we use in the Stream XP Qx and at the high end, we have a dual differential DAC that we use in the XP preamp.

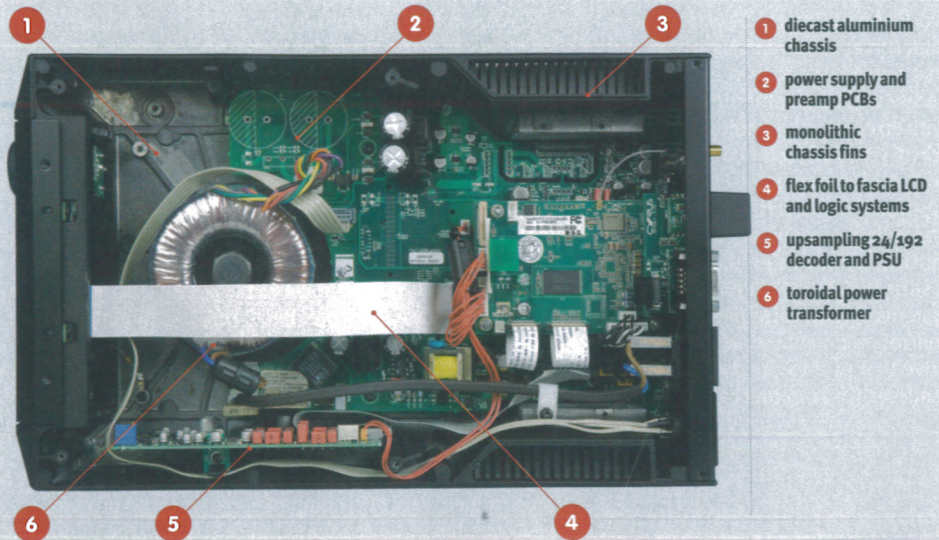
Why wait for so long after the Link Server before you built the current Stream range?

We realised that we needed somebody to allow a company like Cyrus to control the system without a computer. We had to wait for the maturity of the market to produce the BridgeCo chip, this is the heart of the majority of streaming units available. The next thing you need is the ability to talk to the Ethernet and a whole set of software stacks are needed to work between BridgeCo and the bits you see on the front panel of the streamer. The only company that had built a stable software platform that was going to continue to be developed was a German company called Audio. And we worked with them to develop this platform.

Why build a remote rather than a software app?

The problem is to be able to present the technology in a way that's appealing to the consumer. If you have to run an app on an iPhone for instance, you are dependent on the quality of the network, the stability of the app and the limitations of what the app can actually do. Most will look at the media server and push data to the renderer. They let you select and play media, and in some instances they will give you volume control, but this is applied at the server before it's sent to the streamer, so it limits dynamic headroom. Pulling the data with full dynamic range to the renderer gives you the ability to have high quality and also means you can include Apple Lossless and 24/192 compatibility.

LAB REPORT



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- 3 monolithic chassis fins
- 4 flex foil to fascia LCD and logic systems
- 5 upsampling 24/192 decoder and PSU
- 6 toroidal power transformer

ON TEST

In common with other network players based on the BridgeCo processor (Musical Fidelity's CLiC the other notable example), the Stream XP Qx is capable of handling data up to 24-bit/192kHz and 32-bit floating-point files over its wired network connection. This puts the XP Qx in the top-flight of network players.

The fixed analogue out offers a maximum 2.17V from a low 910ohm source impedance, equivalent to the

'-6dB' position on its variable output. Distortion, response and noise performance is consistent across all network, S/PDIF and USB inputs. Frequency response shows a mild +0.36dB/20kHz lift with 44.1kHz/48kHz media, increasing to +0.8dB/40kHz with 96kHz/192kHz files, the latter rolling gently away to -3dB/70kHz and finally -9.3dB/90kHz.

Spectral analysis quickly reveals a slightly 'noisy' environment (I've seen

players with a smoother floor) while distortion and noise demonstrate a greater difference between channels than input, the left typically poorer than the right over much of its dynamic range – the A-wtd S/N is 95dB vs. 100dB and THD 0.0015% vs. 0.0004% (L vs. R, 1kHz), for example.

Jitter is higher over the network interface than over S/PDIF, the latter reduced to 270psec with 48kHz data and 240psec at 96kHz. PM



NEXT TO A CHORD INDEX, which is a third the price of the Stream XP Qx and PSX-R combination it sounds rich, three dimensional and very sophisticated, but that price difference is not small. Naim is the more natural competitor in this field, but its Naim Uniti is an integrated amplifier rather than a preamp/streamer/DAC and, therefore, not a straightforward comparison.

I'd say that the Naim Uniti emphasises pace, rhythm and timing, while the Cyrus is very strong when it comes to imaging and fine detail resolution; it's none too shabby in the timing department either. It also has the N-remote, which makes accessing the music you want and controlling the system easy.

artwork where it is available from the library, and is designed to be as user-friendly as possible. However the word 'festooned' could be applied to the large array of shiny buttons it presents – very well made as it is, it takes a little practice to perfect. Interestingly, despite this there's still a demand for a dedicated app from Cyrus customers, so the company plans to offer one as an alternative to the N-Remote in the autumn.

After I had been using the N-Remote for a while, it became apparent which buttons are what and I pinned down the key ones like 'back' for going back a page in the library and 'i' for info which tells you bitrate. It's also possible to jump a page at a time on the screen with the next/previous track keys. I like the way that the remote's screen tells you volume level and shows album art, it feels a bit clunky using buttons rather than a touchscreen but also somehow rather reassuring.

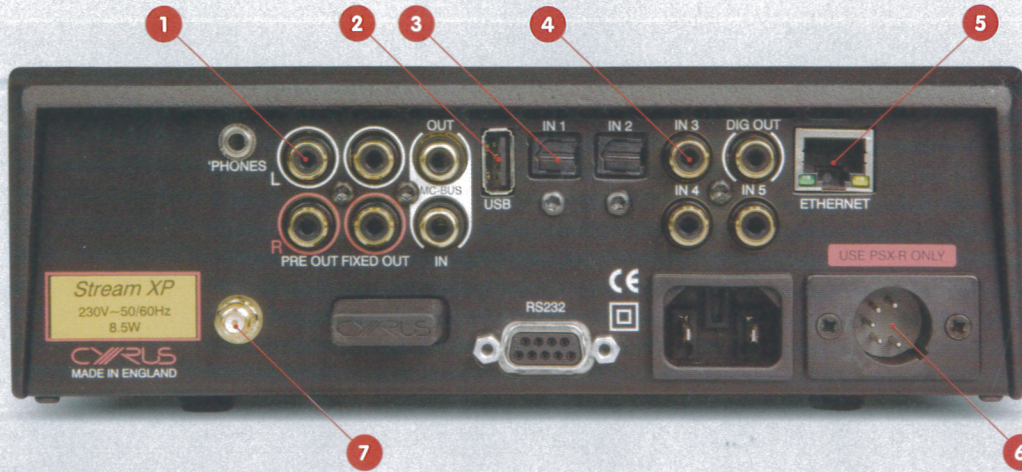
One gripe is that the play and stop symbols are tiny, because they are on very slim keys. It would improve ease of use if they were more obvious, but familiarity would get you round this, of course. There are also quite a few keys that are not related to the streamer, but they presumably come in handy with the other bits of kit.

The Xpd preamplifier section offers fixed and variable outputs and volume control via a front panel knob and the N-Remote, usefully all the important functions are available on the unit itself, which is not always the case with streamers. On the occasions when the remote is not to hand you can use the onboard display to scroll through and select tracks or Internet radio stations. Cyrus recommends that you stream material via Ethernet cable, but the unit is also able to work wirelessly and an antenna on a cable is supplied for this purpose.

Sound quality

To get a handle on the core capabilities of the Stream XP Qx, I started out by using it as a digital source, connecting its digital output to the input of my Resolution Audio DAC. The reason being that I wanted to know how it compared to the best I could achieve with the Apple iMac computer I generally use to play my files. It's not possible to completely level the playing field because the computer has a USB connection and the Stream an S/PDIF coaxial one, but that aside it made an interesting comparison. Playing that old demonstration chestnut *Keith Don't Go* by Nils Lofgren, the Mac delivered

CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA phono analogue outputs
- 2 type A USB digital input
- 3 optical TOSLINK digital input
- 4 electrical coaxial digital input
- 5 Ethernet socket for network connection
- 6 PSX-R external power socket
- 7 Wi-Fi antenna socket

an open, detailed and energetic rendition that seemed pretty impressive until the Cyrus showed just how much more detail there is in the mix, and how this information produces a far more focused and lifelike rendition of the musician sitting in the soundstage. It made the Mac sound positively vague in image terms and lacking in finesse, a split ends sound that blurred the picture and got in the way of the performance. Not a bad start at all for the streamer, then.

Bass is superb too – really deep and substantial with no shortage of timbral detail. A double bass should have texture as well as weight and this is readily apparent with the Cyrus. It also has a very engaging sense of immediacy, which brings out the timing cues in pretty much everything you play. In Antonio Forcione’s version of *Take 5*, for instance, the counterpoint between two guitars is precisely yet harmoniously delivered. You can hear right into the mix and make out the character of each element, what formally sounded like a vague clonking sound is in fact his boot tapping the floor, which isn’t so much a timing cue for the listener as a reference for the player, but it all adds to a highly coherent presentation.

Used as a full preamplifier, streamer and DAC, this unit concedes surprisingly little to more expensive separates. Detail levels remain very high and this brings real shape and depth to the instruments and voices in the soundstage. Joni Mitchell’s *Overture to Cotton Avenue* for instance, surprised me with the way that sounds shift in and out of phase, creating a very dynamic presence in the room. It’s also highly musical thanks to the way that you can hear how Joni and Jaco Pastorius weave their parts together so cleverly to produce a rhythmically dynamic and sinuous sound. The recording cramps up a little on the crescendos, but is

otherwise fabulously vital and difficult to tear yourself away from.

Another classic from this era, Fleetwood Mac’s *Gold Dust Woman*, also offers up a degree of layering that’s remarkable. The way that Stevie Nicks’ voice is presented varies hugely between verse and chorus, it’s not alone for the latter of course but there’s more to it than that. The bassline on this is also delicious, those megabucks recording

The Stream XP Qx corrals the data in the stream into a highly coherent and engaging presentation

studios in the mid-seventies produced a sumptuous, yet detailed and immersive sound. It was pretty well the peak of analogue recording and you can hear it very easily with this Cyrus.

Radiohead’s *In Rainbows* has rarely delivered such precisely sculpted soundstaging, yet this quality is soon overtaken by that of the emotional content in the songs and you are left in no doubt that the sound is supporting the music rather than the opposite. This holds with hi-res music too – the Stream XP Qx is an analytical and highly revealing component then, but not one that sacrifices musical engagement at the altar of transparency. Rather it corrals the data in the stream into a highly coherent and engaging musical event.

Cyrus supplied a PSX-R to try with this unit and was right so to do. It has a very positive effect across the board, the treble in particular gets cleaner and more solid. High piano notes have a body and depth that they struggle to achieve without the separate supply. Timing is also enhanced quite markedly, your feet notice this first which is a bit of a cliché, but rarely more

marked than on this occasion. The Stream XP Qx sounds good on its own, but the PSX-R makes it very special indeed.

Conclusion

An extremely impressive piece of kit, this top Cyrus does so many jobs that you expect it to be compromised in at least one area, yet the whole proves greater even than the sum. If it had analogue inputs as well, few of us would need to spend more. Some might prefer a bit more romance but those seeking the truth within their music collections will be hard pressed to find a preamp, DAC and streamer combination that gets near it for the price.

Perhaps it doesn’t quite look like two and a half grand, because you get the same chassis on the least expensive units in the range, but that chassis is highly rigid and very carefully thought out. I don’t think you’ll find something that sounds better, even if there are plenty of more shiny alternatives. What’s important is the appearance of the sound it produces, which can be uncannily rich, detailed and musical – and worthy of ancillary components at dramatically higher prices. ●

HifiChoice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Highly open and revealing sound; well featured; packaging
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Remote is not as sexy as an app to use
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent do-it-all design that beautifully renders digital music and does so in an easy, fuss-free and stylish way
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL

