

hi-fi+



Aiming High...

Goldmund For Beginners

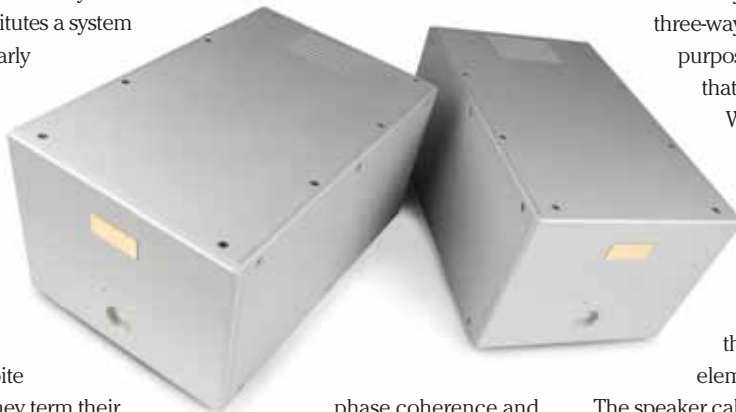
by Roy Gregory

Goldmund is a company that's nothing if not individual. But this isn't a case of different for difference sake. The distinctive visual identity of its products reflects their conceptual coherence, a philosophical identity that's just as clearly defined as their stand-apart aesthetics. So much so that, units that look off-beat, even odd-ball when seen in isolation, make perfect sense when assembled together, underlining the fact that this, more than almost any other range I know, constitutes a system approach. Here, form clearly follows function.

Beyond the instantly identifiable appearance, the one other thing that most people know about Goldmund is that their products don't come cheap. The system assembled here is no exception, and despite being drawn from what they term their High-End Series, represents one step up from entry level in the Company's product line. What does that mean in financial terms? Think of these units as costing £8K a box and you won't be far off, yet they are smaller and simpler in appearance than most of the competition. Just what is it you are paying for?

To answer that question you first have to appreciate the Goldmund agenda. C.E.O. Michel Reverchon (interviewed back in Issue 51) describes them as a "fundamental research" company, pointing to their investigation of both human hearing response and the

high-tech solutions they've developed in response to their discoveries. For Goldmund, hi-fi performance rests on several basic performance parameters – parameters that are woefully inadequate in most products on the market. First and foremost is wide bandwidth, which in Goldmund speak means not just passing signal from DC to 3MHz, but developing amps that deliver full power across that bandwidth. Then there's



phase coherence and minimizing group delay, followed closely by mechanical grounding designed to that end. Finally comes dynamic range. These priorities are of course, inextricably linked, but their importance informs every aspect of Goldmund product design and development. Look ahead to their recently revealed Project Leonardo and you see the use of DSP to correct phase inaccuracies in passive crossovers – which might sound simple, but believe me, it isn't! The results are also shockingly audible, but we're getting ahead of ourselves...

To really understand the depth to

which conceptual thinking informs Goldmund system designs, the easiest place to start is the speaker. The Logos 1/2 combination supplied for review is a modular set-up, consisting of a smallish two-way, reflex loaded head unit and a pair of active sub-woofers. The elements can be bought separately, allowing the speakers to be assembled over time, but it is in their full, final form as seen here that they best reveal their nature. Rather than a sub-sat system, this is a dedicated three-way design, mounted in a purpose built stand. Having said that, all is not as it seems.

Whilst the stand serves to lift the bass unit 42cm off the floor, perching it at a visually incongruous height, and fixes the head unit around 5cm above that, supporting those elements is its sole function.

The speaker cabinets themselves are constructed from aluminium plates, close coupled by solid alloy rods that ground mechanical energy directly into the floor. Look around the back and you'll be in for another surprise. As well as the expected inputs and controls on the back of the Logos 2 bass units (level, roll-off and an RCA analogue socket) there's a pair of digital inputs too. Yep, inside each sub there's a DAC. You can buy an active version of the Logos 1 as well, and that has a digital input option as well. In fact, every power amp in the Goldmund range offers the option of digital inputs, allowing the company to institute digital signal transfer within the system. ▶

▶ eliminating the losses associated with analogue cabling, as well as harnessing DSP to provide phase coherent active crossovers. Of course, digital signal transfer and DSP don't exactly have the best of reputations in high-end audio circles, where practitioners have been all too willing to accept theoretical performance standards in place of the real thing, but like just about everything else in audio, it's not just about what you do, but how you do it that matters, and Goldmund are very, very serious about their DAC and DSP technology. How serious? Serious enough to give the new Reference record player a digital output!

Another thing you'll notice about the Logos 2 bass units is that despite the relatively compact dimensions of their sealed, 35cm cubic cabinets, each one contains two horizontally opposed, 305mm drivers. This "force-canceling" arrangement is clearly in line with the concept of good mechanical grounding, but the use of such large drivers and their removal from the benefits of boundary reinforcement demands the use of a high-quality, high-powered amplifier to deliver good linearity and bass depth. The electronics package in the Logos delivers 300 Watts with an unusually low output impedance to guarantee excellent linearity and control. The twin drivers help to maintain the sense of scale and wide dynamic range, while the carefully chosen pulp-coned midrange driver and soft-dome tweeter in the Logos 1 were selected to maintain micro-dynamic detail and instrumental texture: Dynamics cut both ways and you need to be able to do the smallest changes in level just as convincingly as the widest ones – at high and low frequencies.

The Telos 200 mono-blocs share many characteristics with the amps found in the Logos bass units, including their digital inputs. These are the smallest incarnation

of Goldmund's most advanced amplification circuit, yet are still capable of delivering 400 Watt peaks into an 8 Ohm load, their high power output reflecting the importance the company places on uncompressed dynamics. The problem is, that the ability to provide 400 Watts at 3MHz is



potentially lethal to speakers if anything goes wrong. Thankfully, the Telos amps incorporate a parallel fault sensing circuit that clamps their output in a matter of nanoseconds – in itself no mean technical feat. Each chassis is densely packed, not least by the complex, multi-stage power supply, while the slab-sided construction is used to sink mechanical energy out of the components and circuit boards. The Telos 200s run noticeably warm to the touch, three colour coded LEDs on the front panel showing power and signal status (including digital lock) as well as a range of possible fault conditions. Chunky and solid, their compact dimensions make them quite manageable – but only because of their mono-bloc construction. I wouldn't fancy lifting a stereo version!

In comparison to the maps and speakers, the Mimesis 27.3 analogue line-stage and Eidos 20 CD/SACD player seem quite conventional – although both are considerably heavier than their appearance suggests. The line-stage offers four line-level inputs, a tape loop and two sets of main outputs (essential to drive the hybrid active/passive speakers). There are also three digital inputs, which

will feed an optional internal DAC, although this wasn't fitted to the review unit. The large, central display offers numerical readouts for input and level, the massive red numerals easily legible from distance.

The CD player is similarly minimalist, with just the basic controls represented on the front-panel, and it is here that this system is open to criticism. Like all CD/SACD transports, the one used in the Eidos 20 is slow to react. What I don't understand is why the display is just as lethargic. The screen stays resolutely blank until the transport actually reacts, leaving you wondering if the machine is even powered up. What's more, the small green numerals clash horribly

with the size, colour and style of the ones on the pre-amp; definitely a case of "should do better". However, once the disc drawer finally opens, things start to look up. The normal plastic tray has been replaced with a beautifully CNCd alloy slab, much more in keeping with the inert chassis and surprising mass of the player. Round the back you get analogue outputs for stereo and discrete multi-channel, as well as TosLink and SPDif digital. Remote is a nasty plastic item, although thankfully not over-populated with buttons. In the absence of any video connections the various on-screen menu options essential for full SACD functionality can't be accessed, whilst the player has the disconcerting, DVD-esque habit of returning to the last point played on any disc, even after its removal from the machine. Once again, the user interface is letting the side down; why no system remote and why no video output? Goldmund's insistence that this is a CD player first, but one that also plays SACD, might just explain this, but if I was filling in a report card then the phrase "could do better" wouldn't be far away...

In fairness, such operational issues ▶

► are par for the course with much high-end equipment, but in this case they do detract from what is otherwise an astonishingly accomplished system. Be in no doubt, this Goldmund system's musical performance, it's ability to sound real – especially on live material – can teach many a system more than a thing or two. If you want immediacy and clarity, look no further. This set up places musicians, solid and present, right in front of you, with credible scale and in a believable acoustic space. Start with something simple like voice and guitar and you'll be astonished at just how impressive and convincing a good recording can sound. Whether it's majoring on micro-dynamic acoustic detail or the kind of explosive, almost percussive pyrotechnics you hear so often from spot-lit electric instruments (and their players) this system doesn't just rise to the challenge, it encompasses it without any noticeable effort or strain, no limits on soaring levels, tiny details or intimate textures.

Just one track is all it will take you to realise that this is one of the fastest systems you'll ever have heard. It transits dynamic steps with ease, follows rhythmic twists and turns like a bobsleigh on a gold medal run, leaps giant buildings in a single bound... Because this isn't just speed for speed's sake; this is speed harnessed to a purpose, speed that's been rooted to solid ground, giving it the sort of firm footing and traction that makes for both surefooted agility and giant steps. Just like a really good dancer, it combines delicacy with an explosive power and the ability to bridge gaps without apparent effort. And just like a dancer it's all down to power to weight ratio. This isn't the biggest system and it doesn't have the deepest or heaviest bass, but it absolutely makes the most of what it has. Indeed, in many respects, the real secret of its performance lies in the way it delivers low frequencies.

Take one look at those bass boxes, each with its pair of 12" drivers and the old volume monster starts to wriggle at

the back of your mind. Read the specs and experience their considerable mass and you start mentally rubbing your hands in glee – mentally because it doesn't do to be seen contemplating the extreme physical abuse of expensive equipment in front of its owner. And yes, the Logos speakers will go loud. In fact, they'll go VERY loud if you really want them to. But their bass doesn't really do the gut-churning, trouser-flapping thing. That's not what it's about. Instead of rampaging around your listening room it stays firmly in the plane of the music, within the acoustic space, there when it needs to be, loud when it needs to be, LOUD when it needs to be – but otherwise, it's remarkably unobtrusive, noticeable more for the planted stability it brings to images and the sense of physical acoustic boundaries, than the sort of rumbling, impromptu eruptions so beloved of AV demonstrators. But fear not, reach for *This One's For Blanton* or Mina Agossi's riotous take on 'Slap That Bass' and you'll quickly appreciate the tactile qualities, speed, texture and agility of this bottom end – the way it moves along, setting the pace, clearly defined in pitch and progress. The rapid fingering of a Ray Brown or Eric Jacot, so often smudged or blurred by even the best hi-fi systems, is quick,

clear and articulate, full of shape and energy, the work they put on notes, the rhythmic accents and subtle pushes, the way they stretch the tail of this note or chop that one.

Part of the clue lies in the sub settings themselves. Clear of boundary reinforcement, you'll find that unlike most sub-woofers, which you seem to be constantly turning down, these run at much higher levels and deliver a cleaner signal that integrates more readily and far more meaningfully. Hence my insistence that the Logos set-up be considered a three-way design: It's not a physical or conceptual thing – more a question of the way it sounds and the balance of virtues and issues it brings to the problem.

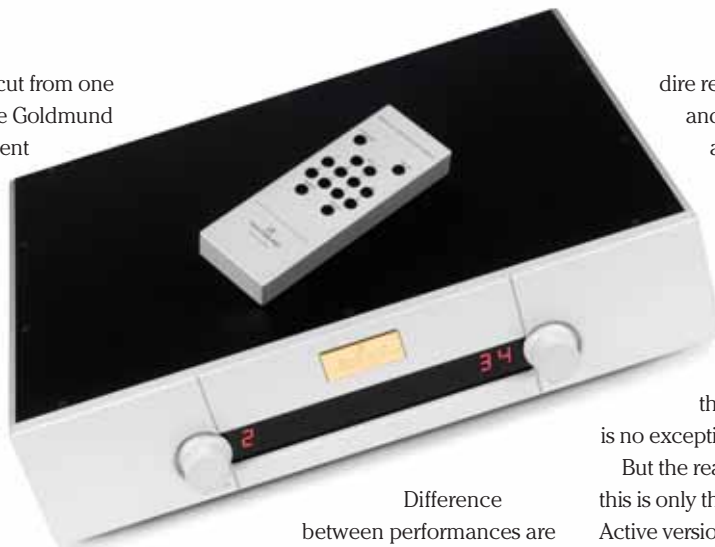
Of course, all that clean, uncluttered and coherent bass, matched so seamlessly to the mid and treble, would be useless without the amps to drive it and the source to deliver detail (and make sense of it); which is exactly where the Goldmund system scores. Because each and every link in the chain shares the same concerns and design criteria, there's a balance of abilities that's mutually reinforcing – the complete opposite of the mix and match, compensatory approach adopted by so many listeners when it comes to "system matching".

Coherence is the watchword here: conceptual, technological but above all, musical. Really successful musical reproduction relies first and foremost on presenting the ►



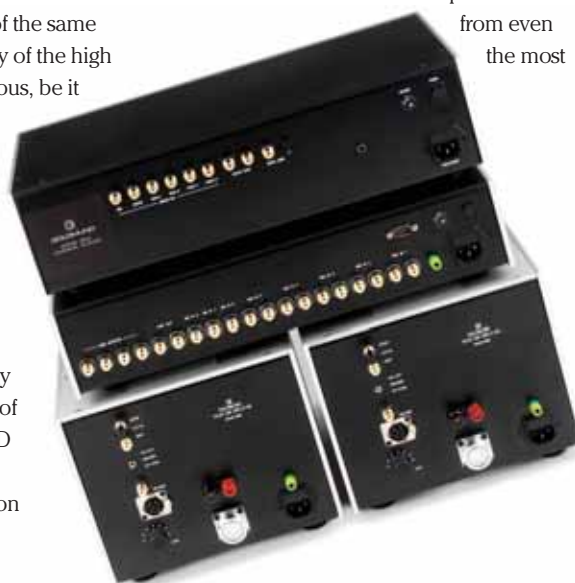
performance as a piece, cut from one cloth and it's here that the Goldmund excels. The binding element here is that sheer speed of response across the system's bandwidth and the impressive dynamic range that results. This set-up could never be described as warm or cuddly and those who bask in the cozy glow of traditional tube amps will blanch at its self-effacing clarity and unashamed precision. This is the epitome of the ultra transparency, almost hyper reality that many listeners have come to associate with high-end performance. This is one system for whose performance you will never have to explain or apologize to the uninitiated. Its qualities are starkly, almost smack you in the face apparent – never more so than with a live recording; whether it's the funky, up-beat groove (and incidental noise) on the opening of Art Pepper's *Besame Mucho*, or the immediacy and presence, the sudden dynamics and "right there" feel of Jackson Browne's solo acoustic recordings.

The clarity isn't just about detail either; it's about musical purpose too. Comparing the differences between CD and SACD versions of the same recording, the superiority of the high definition format is obvious, be it the Pixies' *Doolittle* and the texture and tactile quality of the bass, the way the system sorts out and layers the dense mix, adding clarity and focus without dismantling the driving rhythms and edgy feel, or Reiner's reading of the *New World*, the SACD adding transparency, acoustic space, separation and dynamic range.




Difference between performances are just as apparent, so that comparing Piatigorsky and Starker in the Dvorak *Cello* has rarely created a more dramatic contrast, while ushering Queyras into the equation underlines both his lack of power and lyrical sweep in the opening movement, but his poise and total mastery of the second.

The beauty of a true system is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – and this is a system in the truest sense of the word. It's also a system that never forgets that the musical whole is more important than the parts that reproduce it. Whilst the Goldmund approach could never be described as devoid of character, I can't imagine anybody being less than captivated by its musical insight and authority, its ability to conjure the spirit and life from even the most



dire recording. In that regard – and in its unflinching clarity and linearity – it reminds me of the Lavardin amplifiers, which is praise indeed, especially given the scale and bandwidth of which it's capable. Michel Reverchon's systems are never less than musical – and this one is no exception.

But the really exciting thing is that this is only the first step on the journey. Active versions of the Logos 1 and the introduction of the Mimesis 30 Universal (digital) pre-amp promise significant advances in performance over these already impressive results – without significant increase in cost and with a reduction in the number of boxes and the resultant domestic impact. As many people who have tried to do "B&O for the customer where musical quality counts", Goldmund have delivered the first solution that really scores in that regard. Unashamedly post-modern aesthetics, unequivocally impressive performance and remarkable system versatility constitute a powerful and striking package – and one that gets bigger and better from here. I can't wait to take that next step... 

Eidos 20 CD/SACD Player: £7495
 Mimesis 27.3 Line-stage: £6495
 Telos 200 Mono-bloc: £5995 ea
 Logos 1 Loudspeaker: £3495 ea
 Logos 2 Bass-units: £5495 ea
 Logos Frame: £1195 ea

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