

Get the X-Factor

A complete, state-of-the-art hi-fi system for less than £2,000? *Jimmy Hughes* uncovers one of hi-fi's best-kept secrets: XTZ

It's one of life's little tragedies; Beautiful Systems tend to be very expensive. Great hi-fi equals Big Bucks. You can't get quality on the cheap. Or can you? In recent years we've seen some impressive Chinese-made amplifiers and CD players offering great build and superb sound, at amazingly keen prices.

All the same, this XTZ system takes the concept of 'value' to a whole new level. It costs significantly less than any of the previous set-ups recently featured in *Beautiful Systems*. For example, it's about a third the price of last month's Tri/Triangle system – costing roughly the same complete as the Tri amp or CD player individually.

We absorbed all this intellectually before the system arrived, yet nonetheless found ourselves gasping with astonishment as we unboxed each item. An amplifier and CD player with this sort of finish and build quality for just £600 and £365 respectively? Unbelievable!

Had you told us in advance that the XTZ's amplifier and CD player retailed for (say) £1.5k each, we'd have easily believed it given the lavish/heavy build quality.

Perhaps, inevitably, the electronics are made in China. The speaker cabinets also hail from China, but are assembled in Sweden using SEAS drive units.

Unbeatable value

However, the real cost-savings are created by cutting out distributor and retailer margins and letting you buy XTZ direct online. There are two purchasing options. With the first, you pay for the system (or individual component) outright. The goods are shipped and you have 21 days to listen and decide.

If after three weeks, you're not satisfied, just return the item(s) in perfect condition for a full refund, minus shipping. With the second

option, you pay a hefty deposit and a set of demo/loan equipment is sent out. Assuming you like what you hear, you pay the outstanding balance and return the demo kit for new components.

Again, if you're not convinced, the demo kit goes back and your deposit is refunded, minus shipping costs. Sounds like a good deal; you get the chance to listen at home for three weeks and obtain massive cost-savings. Okay, if you end up returning the kit, you bear the shipping costs. But otherwise there's seemingly little risk.

Bought on spec

Given that you might well be buying XTZ without having auditioned it first, a review is perhaps more important than usual. While evaluating this system, we tried to put ourselves in the place of someone who had bought on-spec, asking the question – would we be happy to keep this system, having spent £1,800?

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First impressions are very positive. We don't think anyone could fail to be impressed by the sheer weight of the amp and CD player, as well as the quality of build and finish. We were bowled over. The amp is a real behemoth, weighing in at a massive 22 kgs. The front panel is made from solid aluminium around three centimetres thick. And there's a choice of finishes – silver-white, silver-white/black, or black.

The output stage can run in Class A or Class A/B, while power output is either 50w or 180w respectively. ▶

COMPONENTS



1 XTZ CD-100 CD PLAYER £365

DAC samples at 384kHz. Choice of RCA/phono or XLR output sockets. Solid all aluminium chassis with very high standard of finish.



2 XTZ 100D3 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER £600

CHOICE of 50w Class A or 180w Class A/B modes. Inputs for four line sources and five digital sources, plus MM/MC phono stage. Outputs for tape, two subs and one set of loudspeakers. Pre/power amps can be separated. Solid all-aluminium chassis – sections individually screened.



3 XTZ 99.36 LOUDSPEAKER £825

REFLEX design with three ports and 90dB efficiency. User-tunable for optimum results. Three drive units, including a high-quality ribbon tweeter.







Set to A/B, the case temperature reaches about 27 degrees centigrade. In Class A, temperatures reach around 35C – which is pretty hot

There's a difference in sound quality between Class A and A/B – while the sonic improvement isn't huge, the music sounds slightly cleaner and more mellifluous in Class A. But, the amp delivers a lot more power in A/B mode, as previously mentioned.

High-quality cartridge

Four unbalanced analogue line inputs are offered, plus four co-axial digital inputs and a single optical digital input. You've two sub-woofer outputs and the pre and power amps can be unlinked so each can be used independently. There's even an MM/MC phono stage – but no balanced analogue line input.

We first tried the 100D3 with an expensive, high-quality low output MC pickup cartridge (costing two or three times more than the amp!), and LPs produced excellent results that were fully comparable with the quality of sound produced by the CD-100. Sensitivity (gain) seemed a wee bit low, but there was virtually no hiss or hum.

Loudspeakers connect via a pair of stout binding posts and the maker claims the amp can deliver over 60 amps of current! There's just one set

of speaker outputs and no headphone socket. And, although quite large for an integrated amp, the 100D3 is pretty feature-packed, so there isn't much free space on the back.

The CD-100 compact disc player matches the 100D amp in terms of styling and build quality, weighing in at a reasonably substantial 9kg. It features an AD1955 DAC that upsamples to 384kHz. There are fixed-level XLR outputs and two sets of unbalanced analogue outputs via RCA phono sockets.

The CD-100 can function as a transport driving an external DAC, having digital outputs (coaxial/RCA

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and Toslink optical) for this purpose. We tried the CD-100 with the 100D3's internal DAC, but (as expected) the sound is cleaner with firmer/fuller bass, when using the CD-100 via its internal DAC and analogue outputs.

As last months' Tri/Triangle system was still in situ, one *Beautiful System*

ABOVE LEFT: Ribbon tweeters, 90dB sensitivity and just £825

ABOVE RIGHT: The XTZ 100D3: Class A or Class A/B, you decide

ABOVE: Superb build and onboard upsampling; how does XTZ do it for the money?

morphed into another. Retaining the Tri CD player and amplifier, we replaced the Triangle Genese Trios with XTZ's 99.36 loudspeakers. Costing £825, the 99.36 is a tall floorstander featuring a SEAS ribbon tweeter and two SEAS 150mm bass/mid drivers.

First impressions are very good. The 99.36's displayed something of the crisp immediacy and attack we liked about the Triangles, but overall the sound is much more evenly balanced. The treble is detailed and articulate and this was complimented by a nice full-sounding midrange and bass.

The 99.36 makes a pretty good job of reproducing 20-hertz sine-waves – rattling the windows in the process! Smaller speakers tend to 'chuff' and produce 'doubling', whereas the XTZs are impressively clean and solid at low frequencies. The bass is deep, clear, tight and free from boom.

Airy and spacious

The speakers are user-tunable which is useful and you can alter the output of the treble and bass/mid drivers to suit your room and/or taste. Each enclosure is endowed with no less than three rear-facing ports and all three came fitted with user-removable foam bungs.

Removing one, two (or all three) bungs allows further fine-tuning.

With all three ports closed, the sound is tighter and more firmly controlled. Remove the bungs and things ease up; the sound grows fuller and more voluminous. There's no 'right' combination. It all depends on personal taste, room acoustics, and how loud you like to listen.

The XTZ 99.36 speakers produce a bigger sound than last month's Triangle Genese Trio and give a nice portrayal of ambience and depth. The music sounds crisply focused and immediate, yet the presentation is quite airy and spacious – as though the music is emanating from a place beyond the enclosures.

These first impressions of the 99.36s were formed using the Tri amp and CD featured in last month's *Beautiful Systems*. Substituting the solid-state XTZ Class A 100D3 for Tri's all tube TRV 88SE changed the sound noticeably. The spacious openness seems to evaporate and the tonal balance becomes slightly 'hard' and constrained.

On the plus side, the 100D3 was clearly very focused and controlled. It produces a clean, solid non-nonsense sort of result, free from brashness. When compared to the TRV 88SE, the sound is less delicate and sophisticated, but very clear and detailed. The Tri's smooth 'liquid' ease is much less apparent, but the sound is still good.

To try and counter this slight sense of constraint and lack of openness, we removed all three bungs from the speaker ports. This produces a slightly fuller bottom end and makes the music seem a little freer – though the sound is still not as see-through and open as it had been with the TRV 88SE.

Clear and unpretentious

Subjectively, the Tri amplifier had really flattered the 99.36s, making them seem very transparent – they all-but 'disappeared' as sources of sound. The 100D3 also sounded good, but this spatial/transparent quality was missing. As a result, our initial reaction to the 100D3 was one of slight disappointment...

But, it's a curious thing; the more we listened, the less of an issue this lack of openness seemed to be. While the loss had been very apparent when going from the TRV 88SE, after a day or two it hardly seemed to matter. Sonically, the 100D3 probably started to 'open out' a little as we used it more – albeit not by much.

The more we listened, the more we started to appreciate that the 100D3 had its own virtues and strengths. It produces a darker more tightly drawn, less 'glamorous' sound than



the Tri. But, once you accept this, you realise its musical presentation is actually very solid and cohesive and highly listenable.

Sonically, there's nothing flash or fancy about any of these XTZ components. Musically, the presentation is clear and unpretentious – solid and free from obvious nasties. XTZ has created a very nice system that's a pleasure to listen to because you're able to hear the music without unwanted/unnecessary additives.

Maybe your ear is not beguiled by amazing finesse or incredible refinement. However, once you forget about 'hi-fi' and just listen to music, a different picture emerges. With XTZ, your attention is always focused on the music – not the sound of the music. That's because the basic sound is admirably clear and cleanly-focused.

The price is right

While price is a big factor here, what's far more important is that the whole XTZ system doesn't leave you feeling dissatisfied or short-changed. Indeed, when we briefly returned to the TRV 88SE after living with the 100D3 for a few days, we actually missed the latter's solid-cohesiveness and control!

The CD-100 CD player produces very good results. It's a very smooth



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refined and clean-sounding component that compliments the amp and speakers extremely well. Build quality is extremely solid and like the amp, it could easily pass for something costing four or five times more.

As with a great many sub-£1,000 CD players, the CD-100 sounds focused, crisp, and clean, but not exceptional or extraordinary. However, at just £365 one can't complain – in the context of this system it performs perfectly well and that's what counts. It certainly offers exceptional value.

So, if we'd just spent £1,795 on this XTZ system, would we send it back? Not a chance! In fact, we'd be absolutely thrilled (and feel insufferably smug) to have bought such a great system for so little outlay. The only possible downside might be a slight sense of guilt.

This system offers great sound and terrific value. And for those unable to listen, prior to purchase, we'd simply say this – order with confidence. Trust us, we are the reviewers after all and it's our job to know these things.

Of course, we can't say with absolute certainty that this XTZ system will suit your room, or your musical tastes. Only you can say that. But we do know this – to get something significantly better you'll have to spend a great deal more ●