

A design for **LIFE**

Not only does Leema Acoustics make complete systems, **Ed Selley** thinks the result is a perfect fit for modern audio

Like a famous brand of wood preservative, *Beautiful Systems* strives to do what it says on the tin. This means that we feature systems that are attractive to look at or otherwise innovative, bold or at least a little different from the norm. We then also seek to have a complete functioning system – something you could buy in its entirety if you fancied. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, of course, but I think we feature some

great looking kit, as well. This second part sounds easy enough, but in reality there are some caveats. Some systems feature more than one brand that divide the roles and responsibilities of two very different disciplines – electronics and acoustics. Even when we do have systems supplied by a single company, behind the scenes, I generally wire them up with accessories I have to hand. The system you see here is absolutely in brief as it is built by one company and

what arrives in the boxes is a complete functioning hi-fi that needs no other components to work. So, there's no doubting it's a system, but is it beautiful?

Attractiveness for the sake of it is almost certainly not part of the design remit for Leema Acoustics. The result of two ex-BBC sound engineers Lee Taylor and Mallory Nicholls (who's names combine to form the brand name rather than any deep seated affection for Peru), there is a definite

COMPONENTS

LEEMA ELEMENTS CD PLAYER £1,395

The smallest CD player that Leema makes still boasts a dedicated CD transport, the company's Quattro Infinity Multi DAC and the ability to be connected to two separate systems at once, thanks to two sets of outputs.

LEEMA ELEMENTS INTEGRATED AMP £1,695

The matching integrated amp in the Elements range can be fitted with a DAC board and when so equipped boasts no less than nine inputs as well as a 56W output into 8ohms that rises to over 100W into 4ohms.

LEEMA XERO STANDMOUNT SPEAKERS £1,295

The diminutive Xero is an evolution of the original Xen monitor and shares the same very compact dimensions. Small or not, Leema claims that the Xero can keep many larger designs honest.





whiff of no nonsense about these components. Leema has developed a reputation for doing things its own way, but this isn't about flamboyance so much as a belief that its approach is the one that yields the best results. The Elements electronics you see here are the entry-level components, but their relatively sensible price point doesn't preclude their specs including some distinctive design practise.

Rear of the year

Take the rear of the Elements CD player. This relatively compact chassis features two separate sets of outputs, with a choice of balanced and unbalanced for both. This is done with a view to being part of Leema's fearsomely clever 'LIPS' system that grants the control to use both those outputs to go to different systems or for a seriously purist bi-amping setup. The matching Elements integrated amp is equally busy. As well as a matching set of XLR inputs, it is fitted with three RCAs, three optical and a single coaxial input alongside a USB connection. Building a half width amp with nine inputs isn't exactly what you'd call 'normal' behaviour, but it does mean that this unassuming little box of tricks is able to handle a truly sprawling system if you really need it to.

The really clever aspect of the Elements is that despite all the functionality, the styling is simple and they avoid being a mass of controls and lights. A small display on both products manages to condense a considerable amount of information into a limited space and the combined volume and selector switch arrangement on the amp is easy to use and saves further controls. The Elements are undoubtedly functional

The Leema nails it in a way that is so much more than just the sum of its parts

– pretty much the only decorative feature is a raised curve on the outside of the front panel – but there is an elegance that's hard not to like.

Leema has let its hair down a little with the partnering Xero standmount loudspeaker. The Xero is a domesticated version of the Xen, the original project undertaken by Leema. Like the Xen, it is very small indeed – a mere 220mm high in fact – but finished in 'gloss zebra', the result is a very pretty speaker indeed. Don't be too concerned by the rather petite size either. The Xen was a design program

Above left: They might be small, but the Elements deliver enormous capability

Centre: With the entire system coming from one manufacturer, the synergy is excellent

Above far right: Serious socketry means the Leemas can handle XLRs and future expansion

that took several years, but resulted in a compact monitor with decidedly uncompact sound. With this DNA coursing through it, the Xero should be able to punch rather harder than its limited dimensions might suggest.

The final ingredient is the cabling. In the interests of scrupulous accuracy, this is built for Leema by another company, but the Linx Two interconnect and speaker cables are built to Leema's specification and mean that if you are minded to do so, the whole process of playing a CD is undertaken by it from the moment that the disc is placed in the tray to the instant where the sound comes out of the speaker.

Great expectations

The good news is that the resultant sound is really rather something. The expectations you might have for a design that has a 4in driver and a frontal area comfortably smaller than a piece of A4 paper should be kept firmly to yourself until you sit them on some sturdy stands, allow them a little bit of bass re-enforcement from a rear wall and apply a little toe-in. The sound that results is not what should be coming from a little standmount. It punches forth with a scale and impact that you'd expect from something larger and heftier.

A bigger speaker would struggle to sound exactly like this one, though, because the Xero is fearsomely quick. That small driver moves like a skilled featherweight boxer – never still for a moment, but possessing a fearsome punch when needed. The way that the midbass and tweeter are mounted so close together gives the Xero a cohesiveness that is wonderfully compelling and means that the detail retrieval is phenomenal. They might have been domesticated, but the monitor ancestry certainly hasn't gone anywhere.

Maintaining control

In the face of this impressive disregard for the laws of physics, the electronics can initially pass a little unnoticed, but their contribution becomes clearer the longer you listen. For starters, the Xero achieves some of its awesome performance at the expense of sensitivity and it needs a fair amount of power to strut its stuff. The Elements Integrated might only dispose of a claimed 56W into 8ohms, but the control it exerts over the Xero is absolute. The other impressive attribute of the Elements duo is an extremely well judged presentation. The sound engineering background of the founders is apparent in the accuracy of the Elements, but this



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never steps into a ruthless dissection of poorer recordings.

This comes together to awesome effect with Unkle's mighty *Psyence Fiction* – a disc I rediscovered after many years of it being trapped behind a cabinet at the same time as the Leemas arrived. This is a flawed recording, but one with a set of musicians working with a real sense of purpose. With the awesome *Lonely Soul*, Richard Ashcroft's vocals anchor

The sound is not what should be coming from a little standmount

a disparate collection of samples and loops that can sound thin and disjointed on merciless equipment. The Leema simply nails it in a way that is so much more than just the sum of its parts. The passion is all right there and in many ways so are the limitations, but such is the engagement you simply don't care.

This ability to grab you and bring you the signal rather than the noise is where the Leema truly excels. Subconsciously most of us divide our collections into great recordings and music we love that was mastered in

such a way that we listen through it rather than to it. This little system is one that rubbishes that convention in a way that should have lovers of music rather than lovers of hi-fi (and while the two overlap, they are not the same) in raptures. In short, it manages to find music where others find flaws.

Size matters

If this was all it did, we should be pretty happy, but the icing on the cake is how easy these little components are to live with in the real world. Their tiny footprint means that they should represent no real challenge to any room and not content with working exceptionally well together, that vast collection of inputs on the back of the amplifier means that it can Hoover up any other sonic responsibilities you might have for it without breaking sweat. When you are finished listening, they revert to being compact, elegant little boxes.

This is what 21st century audio should be. We live busy, crowded and complex lives and the limited time we have for something as decadent as sitting down and listening to music needs kit that can deliver the goods with everything we throw at it. This is one company's complete vision of how that should be achieved and my word, it's a very beautiful system indeed ●