

# hi-fi news

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& Record Review

## ULTIMATE HI-FI 2009

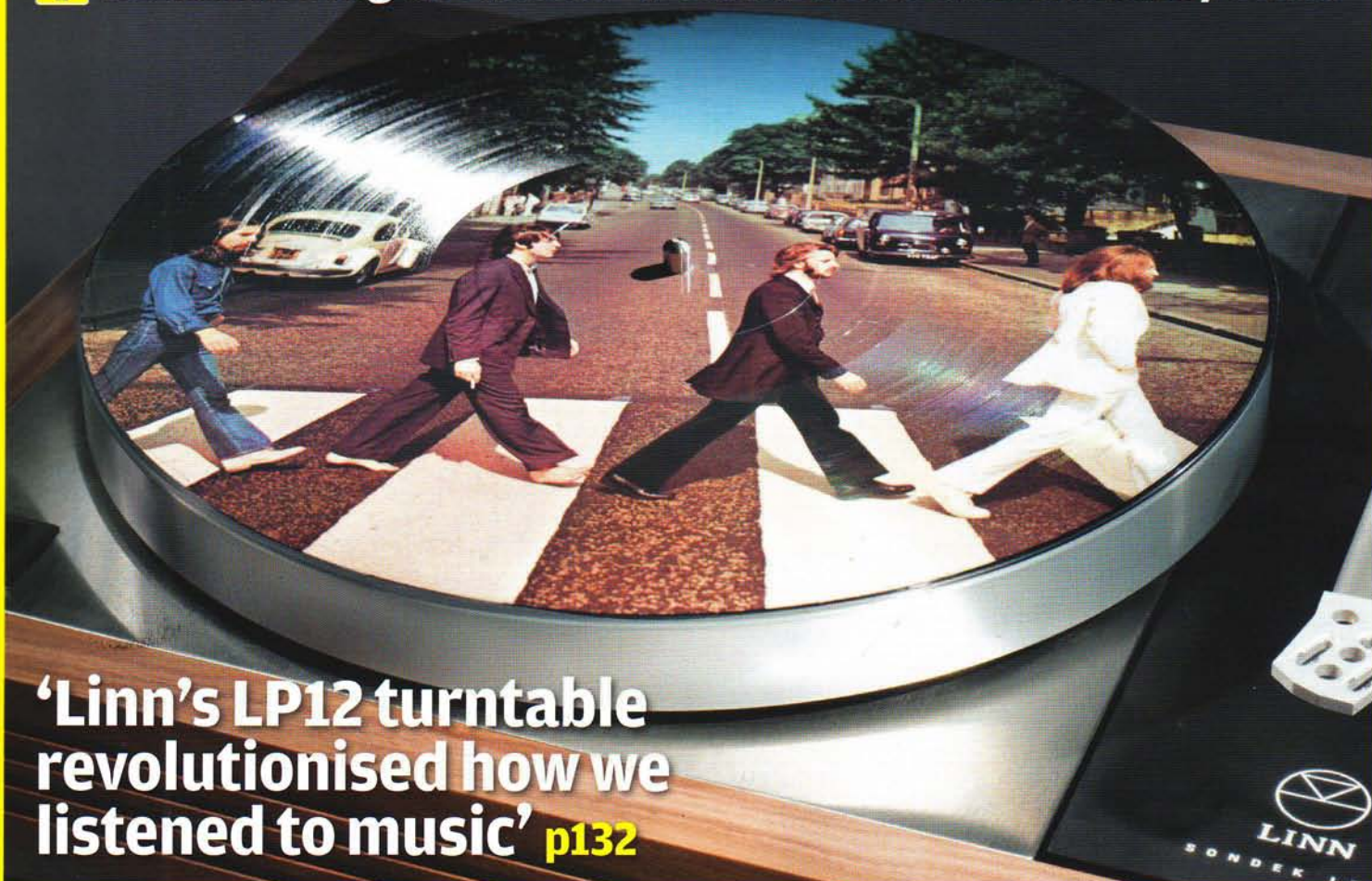
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UK £4.00 US \$9.50 Aus \$9.95



AUDIO  
FILEStereo integrated amplifier. Rated at 220W/8ohm  
Made by: darTZeel Audio  
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds  
Telephone: 020 8971 3909  
Web: www.dartzeel.comhi-fineWS  
EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

## DarTZeel CTH-8550 (£16.5k)

**A**s our March '09 Movers & Shakers feature showed, darTZeel partners Hervé Delétraz and Serge Roch are nothing if not methodical in their approach to amplifier design. Their goal is to keep the audio path as straight and simple as possible, avoiding input/output switching and even using an optically-coupled rotary encoder for volume rather than a conventional potentiometer.

Of course, darTZeel does have an eccentric sense of humour, which is why the aforementioned

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knob is referred to as the 'Pleasure Control'. Its NHB-18NS preamplifier has another hefty control called the 'Enjoyment Source', replaced in this integrated amp by a row of ball-bearing push buttons for the nine possible inputs. Naturally, these do not 'switch' the inputs by logic or relay but 'enable' them via a series of LDRs (light dependent resistors)...

In another departure, the CTH-8550 is configured through an entirely proprietary menu, the yellow display running to some 50 pages of options covering the name, input level, balance and mono/stereo/bypass mode of the selected source. Every CTH-8550

has a USB key for its owner and an internal clock for its CPU that also permits the amp to function as a luxury alarm. If you really wanted one of these in the bedroom then plump for the sober black livery instead of this eye-watering red and gold. Regardless of colour, the standard of machining and finish is simply superb.

### A GOLDEN SOUND

DarTZeel's XLR inputs require a source with balanced outputs and Krell's Evolution 505 made a perfect partner. To hear the darTZeel at its very best you should avoid lugubrious sounding front-ends, for any

colour at the input tends to taint the inherently natural and easy-going magic of the amplifier itself.

The 8550's sound is at once massive but contained, free-sprited and yet ordered, a roller-coaster ride of thrilling you-are-there emotion. Perilously close to the edge it retains sufficient security that your musical carriage never tips off the rails.

The faintly bizarre *Seven Lives Many Faces* from Enigma [EMI] is about as digitised a composition as you'll encounter, yet the darTZeel had the capacity to unravel its many disparate threads into a genuinely involving and compelling

three-dimensional performance – somehow, the darTZeel had divined music from what is typically a mêlée of sound.

By contrast Pete Brown's *Not Before Time* is a far closer and more dynamically restrained recording that the darTZeel rendered in appropriately compact scale as the drumkit and keyboards tumbled over his vocals. This could have sounded oppressively dense – instead it simply sounded like authentic, bluesy rock 'n' roll.

But the real capability of this intriguing amplifier is only revealed by recordings that have the in-built range to breathe. The natural acoustic and uncompressed dynamics of Pat Metheny's *Day Trip* [NoneSuch] lets this trio of guitar, acoustic bass and drums become fully animated before your very eyes, the unmistakable lilt of Metheny's guitar bringing a broad smile to your face.

The '8550 won't camouflage any shortcomings with a colour of its own. There's no rose-tinting going on here, but neither is there the sense of the amplifier struggling to deliver an exceptionally deep bass or penetratingly extended treble. The '8550 has more than enough grunt to manhandle, say, B&W 802s; the bass is rich, earthy and fabulously well-rounded but simply stops short of subterranean.

### VERDICT

DarTZeel's CTH-8550 was never going to be exactly affordable. But this is no ordinary amplifier: you are buying into a lifestyle if not a fully-fledged religious experience. Once heard, the gospel of this maverick audiophile product is not likely to be forgotten in a hurry. ☺

**ABOVE:** Spring-loaded ball bearing push buttons provide access to darTZeel's novel facilities and, yes, the 'Pleasure Control' is the volume knob. Single, unswitched 4mm speaker outputs are joined by optional MM/MC phono inputs, four unbalanced line (RCA), two 'Zeel' (BNC) and one balanced line (XLR) input. Two USB ports support 'security and customisation'

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	248W / 400W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	290W/520W/680W/440W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.250–0.295ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz, 8ohm)	+0.0dB to –1.65dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/220W)	65mV / 975mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/220W)	87.9dB / 111.3dB
Distortion (10W/8ohm, 20Hz–20kHz)	0.046–0.076%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	40W/800W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x170x335mm