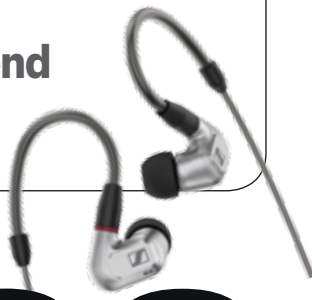
**Reviewed:** Magico A5, Triangle Borea BR08, Bowers & Wilkins P17

**GROUP TEST:** Six high-end in-ear headphones take the ultimate challenge



# Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 478

August 2021

BUYING GUIDE
100+ essential components
p109

+ NEWS EXTRA:
Launches from Q Acoustics, JBL, Grado, Audiolab, Melco & more

# BRIGHT SPARK

EXCLUSIVE!
We take a shine to Sonus faber's Lumina II standmount

## "THE GREATEST"
A retro appreciation of Sony's MDS-JA555ES MiniDisc recorder

## THE ALCHEMIST
A celebration of the legendary producer Andrew Weatherall

## Sibling rivalry
Can the Rotel Michi X5 integrated amp best its lauded younger brother, the X3?

SWISS ON A ROLL!

Merason's frerot: the tiny DAC with a huge heart

"A SONIC ADVENTURE"

Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder picks his favourite LPs

"SIMPLY BRILLIANT"

Wattson Emerson Digital Network Bridge delights

£5.25
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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

# The bridge

Streaming takes many forms but one of the best high-quality options involves a digital network bridge. ***David Vivian*** rates this one

Why only a brief, one-page review for a meticulously made, high-end Swiss streaming conduit? It's simple. No, that's the reason. Making the Wattson Emerson Digital network bridge work is fall-off-a-log simple. So simple I'll cover the entire set-up procedure in the next sentence. Remove from box, insert Ethernet cable (no wi-fi, here), connect to DAC, plug in power, download dedicated iOS app (any UPnP is fine if you're not using an Apple device, but Wattson's own is a cracker). We're rolling.

I can hardly tell you how satisfying this is. Excellent and capable as sophisticated one-box all-in-one network streamers such as the Cambridge Audio CXN v2 (*HFC* 437) and Arcam ST60 (*HFC* 477) are, they're not really in the minus two minutes category when it comes to lift-off – and, if things don't go well, it's a SpaceX go/no-go launch hold with a storm front approaching.

Small and beautifully formed just about sums up the aesthetic. And it's intriguing. The rather industrial-looking dark grey aluminium housing has one rounded edge flowing into a mildly raked front panel but no apparent seam, let alone any controls. It's a kind of hi-fi nugget. What action there is happens at the flank panels, Ethernet port to the right and S/PDIF and AES/EBU XLR socket to the left – top-quality connectors at either end. Instruction manual? Surely a courtesy rather than a necessity.

But, as Wattson itself says, the apparent simplicity: "hides a complexity and a finesse far greater than it seems." Shoehorning the necessary electronics into such a compact form meant a layered configuration with the CPU board – toting a powerful ARM processor with RAM and Flash memory from Samsung – sitting on top of the audio board.

I'll be plugging the Emerson Digital into the Texas Instruments PCM1789 based DAC that lives on board Electrocompaniet's ECI 80D (*HFC* 473) integrated amp, but Wattson makes a matching Emerson Analog unit for those who want to complete the conversion with the same brand and that uses a WM8742GEDS chipset from Cirrus.

Switzerland's reputation for fastidious attention to detail is evident throughout the Emerson Digital: choice components, precise clocks to minimise jitter, embedded software developed and refined to within an inch of its life. Wattson claims a 'straight wire' approach, sidestepping sampling frequency conversion and data processing.

The company also points out that internal processes have been optimised to support hi-res file formats (PCM and DSD). Emerson Digital is also Roon ready.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**
Wattson Audio Emerson Digital

**ORIGIN**
Switzerland

**TYPE**
Digital network bridge

**WEIGHT**
371 grams

**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
104 x 38 x 87mm

**FEATURES**
- Digital outputs: 1x S/PDIF; 1x AES/EBU on XLR connector
- Supported formats: WAV; FLAC; AIFF; ALAC; MP3; AAC; Ogg Vorbis; WMA
- PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz
- Control protocols: UPnP/DLNA; AirPlay compatibility; Roon ready

**DISTRIBUTOR**
VAL HiFi

**WEBSITE**
en.wattson.audio

## Sound quality

The Wattson Music iOS is hugely impressive compared with most of the streamer control apps I've used: stylish, well designed and slick in operation. But following on from the last streamer in my kit rack, Arcam's redoubtable ST60, I'm expecting the massive uplift in simplicity with the Wattson and Electrocompaniet to be countered by a dip in the sonic standard set by the Arcam. Not so...

The style changes, but the overall standard is upheld. The Emerson Digital is transparent enough to let the full flavour of the amp's warm, lucid and fluent DAC to flow through.

Streaming the new collaboration between jazz fusion saxophonist Dave Koz and guitarist/producer Cory Wong from Tidal, *The Golden Hour*, the result is spellbinding, contrasting textures tied together, tempo nailed sound big, uncompressed and dynamic. The presentation is honest and open, especially through the midrange.

## Conclusion

Simplicity done well. It may not have all the bells and whistles of a full-size, all-in-one streamer, but in action it's an unqualified triumph ●

### Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★½☆

**LIKE:** Size, build, simplicity and sound

**DISLIKE:** Minimalism won't appeal to everyone

**WE SAY:** A beguilingly straightforward path to quality streaming

OVERALL ★★★★½