Here's how it works: some months before you receive your issue of HIFICRITIC, Mr Editor Messenger sends me an email saying something along the lines of 'Next issue – what've you got?' and I reply with a list of suggested review products and features ideas. On this issue’s list was the AVM Inspiration CS 2.2, and back came the question ‘What is it?’, to which the most sensible answer was probably ‘I’ll be quicker to say what it isn’t!’

The CS 2.2 is the entry-level all-in-one streaming system from the German manufacturer, which comes to the UK through distributor PMC Loudspeakers, with a range of products that’s either comprehensive or baffling, depending on your viewpoint. PMC has decided to concentrate on the network audio products, but even so there are ten to choose from, spread across three product ‘strands’: Inspiration, Evolution and Ovation. This CS 2.2 costs £3995 and the streamers go all the way up to an £11,695 Ovation CS 8.2.

Even the Inspiration group has three similar looking models: the £3870 C2.2 is a CD receiver, minus the network capability, while the SD 2.2 is a network preamplifier at £3670. This CS 2.2, however, is the whole deal: it not only has a CD player and a network audio player, it also has onboard power amplification delivering a very useful 165W per channel, and can also play music direct from USB memory devices.

In fact, the only significant omission is a Type B USB input for connecting a computer for DAC duties. S/PDIF inputs for both optical and coaxial connectors are available, but it’s necessary to look further up AVM’s extensive range for USB computer connectivity.

However, this digital-based system does include a decent set of analogue inputs, including three sets of line-in RCAs and a phono stage with adjustable sensitivity (for both moving magnet and high/medium output moving-coil cartridges). There’s even an FM RDS radio tuner, though of course the CS 2.2 also does internet radio and streaming (including Tidal).

Outputs, meanwhile, run to terminals for one pair of speakers, along with fixed and variable level analogue outs (the latter enabling it to be used with an alternative amplifier, or a subwoofer). The subwoofer’s own filtering controls must be used, though the internal power amp stage may be turned off for using an external power amplifier.

All of this is packed into a more compact unit than most hi-fi: it’s around 34cm wide and just 8cm tall. But while that makes the CS 2.2 admirably room-friendly, along with its ‘just add speakers’ appeal, it’s as well not to be fooled into thinking that this is ‘lifestyle hi-fi’, with all the lowered performance expectations that might suggest.

Talking to Udo Besser (owner and boss of the 30+-year-old company), it’s clear that he doesn’t underestimate the importance of the looks and finish of his company’s products, and is determined that even the ‘entry-level’ models should perform to very high standards. The products are designed and hand-assembled in Malsch, Germany, and feature a modular design. The latter helps explain how the company can make a wide range of similar models, each targeting a particular market niche. The high-end Ovation CS 8.2, for example, uses custom-made valves to AVM specifications in its line input stage.

Those models offering CD playback, such as this CS 2.2, don’t use the usual off-the-shelf DVD-
This isn’t a system that’s ever going to shriek or scream, although it has more than enough clout in hand to ensure it can drive big speakers to ‘exciting’ levels with everything from powerful rock to large-scale orchestral music. That 165W claim is into 4ohms, and the 8ohm figure is given at 110W per side, but that’s more than adequate to allow the AVM to kick up a storm with speakers such as the PMC GB1s with which I tried it, and to get a pair of the much larger OB1s shifting plenty of air while sounding entirely under control.

What tailoring there is of the sound is heard in the system’s rich, ripe bass; the midband is well integrated, and the treble is sweet and clean rather than overly softened. There’s maybe not quite the last nuance of space and ambience with atmospheric live classical recordings, but the AVM still delivers three-dimensional soundstage pictures that are large in scale.

Play the striking Royal Academy of Music recording of Stravinsky’s The Soldier’s Tale, conducted by Oliver Knussen, and the dynamics and drama of the piece, along with the sharply-focused voices and instruments, are impressively resolved. Streamed in 24-bit/192kHz via wired LAN (preferred to Wi-Fi for stability), this Linn Records set sounds crisp, vibrant, and entirely captivating.

And the CS 2.2 is just as impressive with intimate jazz recordings or acoustic rock: yes, there’s still that hint that the treble is slightly reigned in and the upper bass a little on the rich side, but that makes the music slip by with exceptional ease, pulling the listener into what’s being played, rather than being just that bit too ‘easy listening’.

Conclusions
As an introduction to the newly-arrived AVM range the CS 2.2 makes a pretty strong statement of intent, combining as it does style, flawless build, flexibility and a decidedly seductive sound. It’ll be interesting to see what more the brand can do as one moves up through its catalogue, but for now the CS 2.2 clearly merits very confident Recommendation.