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the absolute sound



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BUYER'S GUIDE

Letters

Bose Bravery

Thanks to Jonathan Valin for admitting to owning a pair of Bose 901 speakers [*Loudspeakers I've Owned or Coveted over the Last Half-Century*, "Issue 307"] (insert hate comments here). After college, when I moved into my first apartment, my very large Altecs were a non-starter. I read Julian Hirsh's (more hate?) review of the Bose Acoustimass Series II, auditioned them at my local hi-fi store in the mall (again, more hate?), and bought them. For their forgiving size yet full sound (approaching the giant Altecs), they were perfect for the time. I had grown up with live music, and they "did no harm." Pure bass depth and finesse, and other small compromises, were more than made up for by the ability to listen to high-quality music in my small apartment. Bose's technique of using reflected sound sounded very natural to me. As Jonathan Valin mentioned about the 901s, soundstaging with these speakers was excellent as well. I still remember that when a friend stood right in front of one speaker his presence did not change the center image (top cube 45 degrees from the straight-ahead bottom cube). The Boses truly disappeared as sound sources.

As finances and housing allowed, I moved back into larger, full-range speakers. The Bose speakers made me a fan of reflected sound, so the speakers I currently have are bi-poles (from a very well-reviewed, and also very successful, "hater"-approved brand).

I aspire to MBLs, but could easily "settle" for Wilsons, both of which my wife and I have auditioned and loved. Boses did not wreck my audiophile, music-loving soul. Quite the contrary; they encouraged me to enjoy the music and to look forward to even better ways of reproducing it in my home.

Jay Jackson

Three-Channel Stereo

Ever since I converted to Magnepan speakers, which sound to me more like live orchestral music in the opera house I go to than speakers I've heard demonstrated costing over \$50,000, I have been following Magnepan's website. I even met Wendel Diller and his wife in person at a traveling Magnepan seminar, where he demonstrated how speakers should energize the room. Magnepan does not follow prevailing audio orthodoxy. A case in point is its report on listening tests with three-channel stereo. When Bell Labs first invented stereo it discovered that it needed three channels across the front to mimic the sound of a full orchestra. (For an orchestra, pinpoint imaging is not relevant.) However, LPs could only be made with two channels and two channels became the norm.

Magnepan has conducted listening experiments with test audiences where it uses three channels, with the center channel being reconstructed via a Bryston SP3 Dolby Pro-Logic processor, which makes the center channel the sum of L + R, turned down 3dB.

For orchestra recordings I run my Magnepan 0.7s with 833-As through Hammond 1642SE output transformers for the left and right channels, and I combine the left and right channels by running an extra pair of 45s connected to one transformer, which drives a more modest GM-70 single-ended triode amplifier connected to a (discontinued) Magnepan MMG-C speaker in the

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center. (I prefer to design my own amplifiers so I can have the circuits and components I want, which, even if I could afford them, are not available in amplifiers you can buy.) This greatly enlarges the sweet spot and the size of the soundstage. For many recordings of large orchestral works this sounds more to me like a live orchestra than two channels. For five-channel SACD, I have a switch on the center-channel amplifier to choose between three-channel stereo and the output of a five-channel universal-disc player. If there are stereo recordings of small chamber works, I still use two-channel stereo.

Robert Vincelette

RH replies: Mr. Vincelette is correct that the early successors to Alan Blumlein (inventor of stereo) believed that three channels were optimal for natural spatial reproduction. (Remember that “stereo” means “solid,” not “two-channel.”) Mr. Vincelette should try Meridian’s Trifield processing, which I’ve found creates a natural-sounding center channel from stereo sources.

Turntable Isolation

Regarding Paul Seydor’s informative and thorough review of SME’s new Model 12A turntable system in the July/August issue, I’d like to make a correction related to the following paragraph.

“In 1991, SME debuted the Model 30 turntable, another masterpiece and genuinely groundbreaking in at least one critical area. AR-A [Alastair Robertson-Aikman] believed a tuned suspension the proper route to ultimate protection of the stylus/groove interface from outside disturbances . . . but was wary of the high compliance of hung suspensions, the way they bounced, jiggled, or otherwise reacted either to external disturbance (notably structural-born feedback) or to eccentricities and anomalies of record pressings. In other words, he wanted the filtering action of tuning but without the possibility of the entire sub-chassis being set into motion. His solution was to use a highly viscous fluid that damps the motion of the suspension, thus eliminating overshoot while conducting “unwanted reactive energy to ‘ground.’” Offhand, I can’t think of another turntable that handles the critical matter of isolation in quite this way and very few that even approach it in effectiveness.”

Although the SME 30 was and is an excellent turntable, the design’s suspension was not genuinely groundbreaking. A.J. Conti’s inaugural product, the Basis Audio Debut turntable, was released in 1986 five years prior to the SME 30’s release. And in 1989, Basis Audio released its second product, the Ovation turntable. Though slightly different, both Basis turntables utilized suspensions critically damped with a very high viscosity fluid to solve the problems that Mr. Seydor claimed the SME 30’s suspension attacked. But the Debut and Ovation achieved those goals years before the SME was on the market.

As a previous owner of an Ovation and two Debuts (one with vacuum), I can attest to the effectiveness of their suspensions. This is best described by how a friend used his Ovation purchased about 1990. When his dealer installed the Ovation (with a SME V tonearm no less), he puzzled over where to place it, as its footprint was larger than the turntable it replaced, which had been situated on a crowded platform. Familiar with the effectiveness of my Ovation’s innovative suspension, I suggested placing the turntable on top of his system’s subwoofer. Although my suggestion generated quizzical looks, my friend, who listens to lots of powerhouse orchestral works, used the Ovation in this manner for a number of months. That configuration made beautiful music without mistracking, distortion, lack of clarity, or loss of micro- or macrodynamics.

Ian Fogel

Paul Seydor replies: Thanks kindly for your interest in my review of the SME. As regards the issue who got there first with viscous damping and suspension, I have no experience of either the Debut or Ovation turntables, so I cannot speak to their similarities

with the SME. But I do have considerable experience with the Basis 2200, which has been my reference for years. Despite its use of viscous damping, it nevertheless remains a very compliant suspension in contradistinction to the SME Model 30, which combines a hung suspension with damping so viscous that it results in almost zero Q when excited. This was my point about SME, and so far as I know it is the only company that has a hanging suspension in combination with damping so viscous it results in almost zero play.

Again, if this is also the case with the Debut and Ovation turntables, I stand corrected. Otherwise, I stand by my assertions as regards SME. Many thanks for taking the time to write so thoughtful a response.

No Substitute for Listening

I write in reference to the article “Measurements, Listening, and What Matters in Audio” in the September 2020 issue of TAS. In this article, Robert Harley misstates Robert E. Greene’s position. Harley writes that Greene’s essay “argues that measurements can fully explain all audio phenomena.” In fact, Greene’s article states that “almost everything in audio can be explained by measurements. . . .” That word “almost” qualifies what follows and makes Harley’s characterization of Greene’s position erroneous.

Greene’s essay argues that speakers and the rooms in which they operate have a much greater effect on the sound of a system than the much smaller differences in electronics, cables, and so on. I think this is a widely agreed-upon commonplace. It hardly strikes me as controversial.

Harley accuses Greene of suggesting that “any improvements in sources, amplification, cables, AC power, etc. aren’t worth pursuing.” Greene writes that “when the room and speaker thing works well, the electronic things fade in significance.” This is effectively disputed by an example Harley provides wherein a change in an AC power cable reveals two guitars where one was heard before. Greene asserts that “there is no way to decide whether the effect, if any, was positive or not.” The clarification of instrumentation in Harley’s example persuades me that there *is* a way to decide, namely: *listening*.

Thank you for a most interesting article!

George S. Roland

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~ Robert Harley, Editor In Chief. The Absolute Sound



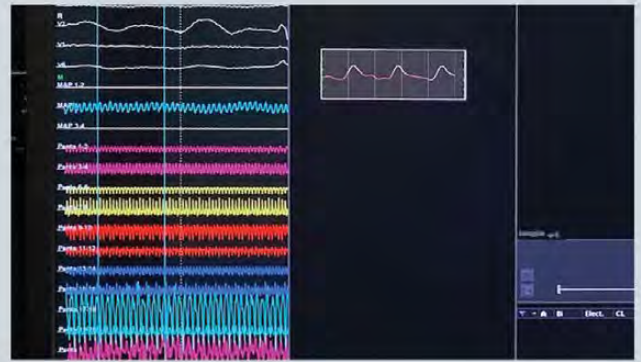
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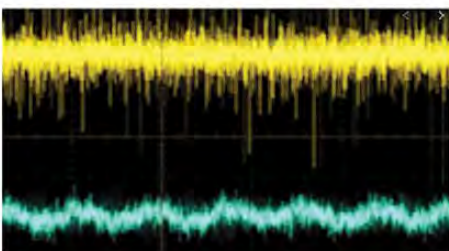
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Cable Cradle System

The Everest utilizes a tower design and cable cradle system inspired by the ground-breaking and award-winning Denali 6000/T.

From the Editor

“ I experienced a similar moment of enlightenment about 25 years ago while listening to...a boom box. ”

Lessons Learned

This year's annual Buyer's Guide issue is chock full of capsule reviews of the products that we've written about, currently recommend, and are available for sale today. As I read through the entire document before it was laid out —700+ components, 85,000+ words—it struck me what an extraordinary body of work this issue represents. Our recommendations embody nothing less than the collective judgment of our reviewing staff on the best in high-end audio. This issue could only have been created by a talented and experienced team working together over many decades. Every product in this issue has been set up, auditioned at length, judged, and reviewed by expert listeners. When you consider the sheer number of components recommended, that's an astonishing feat.

But before you look through our recommendations for your next upgrade, I suggest you first consider the importance of AC power quality, cables, and vibration isolation—a system's foundation. It's surprising how much better your existing gear can sound when fed by noise-free AC power. I recently became friends with a retired high-school math teacher and part-time bass player named Gary, who also happens to be an audiophile and TAS reader. Before I met him, Gary had been gradually upgrading his system (Schiit Audio Mjolnir 2 preamp, Vidar power amp, and Yggdrasil DAC feeding Focal Chora 806 speakers), and had never considered aftermarket power cords. I lent Gary Shunyata's entry-level Venom AC cord (not even the new Venom NR series with noise reduction built into the cord) so that he could hear for himself how the stock black AC cords that come with equipment are weak links that should immediately be chucked out. Gary was floored by the improvement in his system's sound; he plans to replace all his power cords, as finances permit. The differences he described were exactly what I hear when improving a system's AC power—greater detail, more separation of individual instrumental lines, and cleaner timbre.

I experienced a similar moment of enlightenment about 25 years ago while listening to...a boom box. AudioQuest founder Bill Low brought to my house a portable stereo that had small plastic detachable speakers, along with every speaker cable AudioQuest made at the time. The boom box, speakers, and cables were specially terminated for quick cable swaps. Bill set up the boom box and speakers on barstools between my loudspeakers, and proceeded to play the same piece of music through every cable, starting with AQ's entry-level model and moving up one step at a time. As we went up the line, I could hear distinct improvements at every step, along with larger jumps in quality when the cable was built with the next level of conductors, dielectric, or geometry. The mids and treble were smoother and more liquid; the soundstage was more expansive; bass lines became clearer; and with each advance the sound became more musically expressive and involving. I could listen to any cable for as long as I liked, and could request at any time that we go back a step or two before

proceeding. The exercise took the better part of a day.

That brilliant demo illustrated two profound concepts. The first was that *any* audio system, even a humble boombox, can benefit from better speaker cables. The second was that the cable designer has precise control over a cable's sound with the mix of conductors, dielectric, and geometry available to him. I was also fascinated to hear the same conductors in a different dielectric, for example, or different conductors configured in the same geometry.

As for vibration isolation, I'm a relative latecomer to this party, but now recognize the vital role that racks and footers play in letting your system achieve its full potential. I distinctly remember how surprised I was the first time I installed Stillpoints under my electronics, or when I replaced the Focal Stella Utopia loudspeaker's stock spikes with Stillpoints Ultra SS. Today you can choose from a variety of superb vibration-isolation feet, including the CenterStage² from Critical Mass Systems, the new Wilson Audio Pedestal, the M and Q pods from Magico, and the RevOpods from England's Arya Audio. I haven't heard the IsoAcoustics footers, but our reviewer Matt Clott reports that they are a bargain at \$79.

Once considered an afterthought when building a music system, these component categories have turned out to be the very foundation on which every great-sounding system is built. Live and learn.

Robert Harley



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The SabrinaX comes by these qualities by virtue of its relationship to Wilson Audio’s new flagship, the Chronosonic XVX. The SabrinaX shares its tweeter, the Convergent Synergy MKV, with the XVX. The new woofer comes directly from the Sasha DAW. As is true for Wilson’s flagship, the SabrinaX’s cabinet shell is constructed entirely from Wilson Audio’s third-generation X-Material, a composite possessing an unmatched combination of extreme hardness and rigidity with superb critical damping.



Like the XVX, the new SabrinaX is the beneficiary of Wilson Audio’s new capacitor division. Wilson’s engineers developed a proprietary AudioCapX multi-wound capacitor specifically for the SabrinaX. Wilson’s unique capacitor technology significantly lowers the noise floor to even greater extremes, allowing the listener to hear more detail and resolution.

Daryl and his team infused much of the technology developed for the XVX into SabrinaX’s DNA. He preserved the original Sabrina’s inherent affability and flexibility while, at the same time, elevating transient speed in the bass, enhancing midrange beauty and clarity, and increasing overall resolution and transparency.

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MEET THE WRITERS

Just who are the editors and freelance writers who contribute to *The Absolute Sound*? What are their backgrounds, musical interests, and sonic priorities? What kind of systems and listening rooms do they have?

To answer these questions, we'd like to introduce you to the people who create TAS. In a new feature that debuts this issue, we'll look at seven TAS freelance writers—

Dick Olsher, Andre Jennings, Steven Stone, Stephen Scharf, Paul Seydor, Drew Kalbach, and Andrew Quint. Future issues will include biographies of other contributors.

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MEET THE WRITERS



Dick Olsher

Although educated as a nuclear engineer at the University of Florida, I spent most of my career, 30 years to be exact, employed as a radiation physicist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, from which I retired in 2008. My work in the area of radiation instrumentation led to two U.S. patents in the field of neutron dose measurement.

I probably would not have been bitten by the audio bug were it not for Harry Pearson and Gordon Holt's writing. They got me motivated in the mid-1970s to visit audio dealers in the Baltimore-Washington DC area where I auditioned great-sounding systems that I couldn't possibly afford to buy. I still have fond memories of the Dahlquist DQ-10 being driven by the GAS Son of Ampzilla and of my first listen to the Spendor BC-1 at Murray Zeligman's place.

My audio reviewing career began after I hooked up with J. Gordon Holt in Santa Fe, NM, in 1980. He became a good friend and a superb mentor. Santa Fe turned into audio hotspot during the 1980s when Larry Archibald purchased

and energized *Stereophile* magazine, and with the arrival on the scene of John Atkinson, Robert Harley, and Tom Norton. After 20 years at *Stereophile* and short stints at *Fi Magazine* and *Enjoy the Music.com*, I joined TAS in 2007, happily reuniting with Robert Harley after all those years.

Gordon instilled in me the importance of tonal balance in reproduced music if we ever hope to reproduce the concert hall experience at home. I'm in love with female voice and value tonal fidelity, textural purity, and a system sound that is adept at unearthing dynamic nuance and rhythmic drive. Basically, my sonic priority is the midrange, which explains my ongoing love affair with tube gear.





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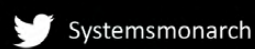
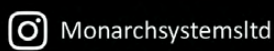
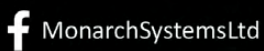


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Andre Jennings

My professional career has spanned 30+ years in electronics engineering. Some of the interesting products I've been involved with include Cellular Digital Packet Data modems, automotive ignition-interlock systems, military force protection/communications systems, and thrust-vector controls for space launch vehicles. The hardware design aspects of my career have centered on component-level engineering employing micro-controllers, microprocessors, CPLDs, FPGAs, ASICs, analog power supplies, and RF A/D-D/A interfaces.

Throughout my engineering career, audio has provided a refuge in which I can relax and unwind. While I certainly enjoy listening to music sourced from any format, I have a particular fondness for analog (vinyl and 15/30ips tape).

My personal priorities for a music system are somewhat different than my standards for reviewing equipment. My personal system needs to permit the exploration of a wide variety of music genres *and* bring me satisfaction. Within the limits of the source material, I look for the total package (big sound, delicate pianissimos, natural vocals, true instrumental timbre, discernable micro/macro dynamics, palpable resolution, fluid tonal balance, window/wall removing transparency, and total system cohesiveness). For my needs, sins of commission (excessive brightness or warmth, sluggish timing, one-note bass, grainy midrange) are more disturbing and disorienting than sins of omission (less than the ultimate in those total package items).

This sounds like what most readers want, right? Well, that's not necessarily the

case. Experience tells me there is a world of sonic tastes and that each person has his/her idea of what sounds good. My writing is an impartial attempt to get at the core attributes of a product under evaluation and communicate those objective findings to readers. I do this because I realize that every product is not going to appeal to everyone's taste, including my own.



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Sound & Vision gives the BRX top honors!

And *Sound & Vision's* Al Griffin gave it Top Pick honors and raved, "Its price performance ratio shot up through the roof...lifelike dynamics, strikingly spacious...lush yet detailed, thunderous brass and bells and powerful bass."



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Steven Stone

I bought my first stereo from Sam Goody's when I was a junior in high school and it lasted less than ten minutes before the H.H. Scott receiver blew up. Goody's replaced the Scott under warranty with a Harman Kardon Nocturne 330 receiver, which continued to soldier on for many years. The rest of that system consisted of a pair of EPI 100 speakers and a Garrard automatic turntable with a Shure cartridge. Cables? Zip cord and cheap manufacturer-supplied RCAs. Time moved on and during college I began to replace the original system with separates. Also, during that time I began reading *The Absolute Sound*. I wrote a letter criticizing a review (in retrospect I was wrong) and Harry Pearson wrote a note which said, "If you think you're so smart, write a review." Which I did, and have continued to do, with one hiatus, for 43 years, so far.

During my writing career I have also written for *Stereophile*, as well as home theater magazines and websites including TAS' original guide. I have also written for many music-oriented magazines. My monthly column, "Acousticville" ran in *Vintage Guitar Magazine* for over 200 installments. I've also done features

for *Spin*, *Creem*, and *American Songwriter*.

I've also had the honor of working with J. Gordon Holt on recording projects between 1993 and 2009. We recorded the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra during live concerts in Boulder's Macky Auditorium. The results were broadcast over KGNU, Boulder's NPR station. Due to recording I became interested in headphones, nearfield listening, and computer-based audio early on. Gordon and I were among the first to record with Gus Skinas' Sonoma DSD system. What I look for in a system is the resolution and transparency to do those recordings justice.

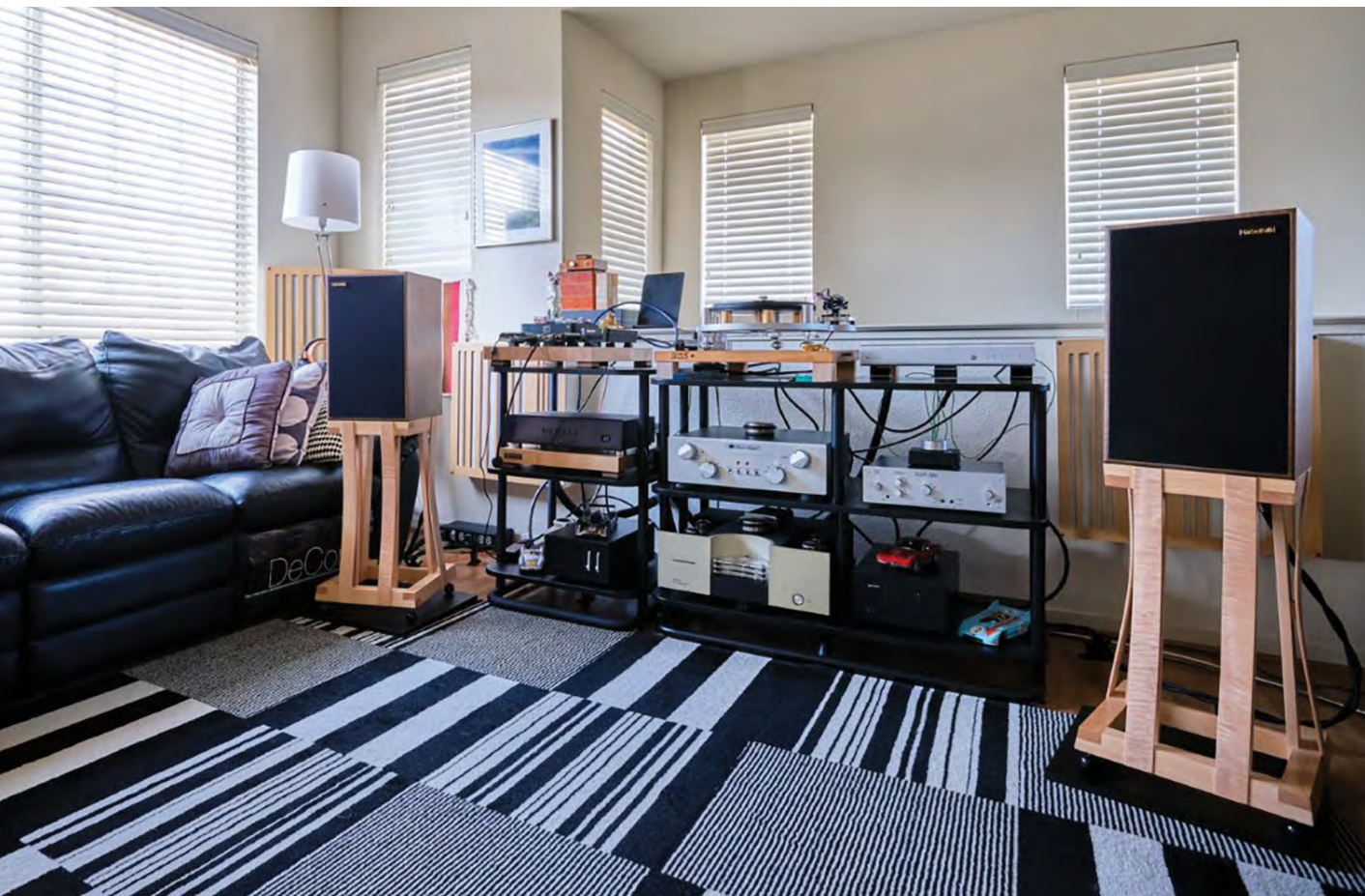
I recently stepped back from editing and contributing to the website *Audio-ophile Review* to devote more time to other projects, many of which will be in future issues of *The Absolute Sound*.



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Stephen Scharf

I've worked as a molecular biologist for my entire professional career. As one of the inventors of Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), I worked in human molecular genetics and developing molecular-diagnostic and DNA forensic tests. In addition to my role as a scientist, I also worked as a designer for Six Sigma Master Black Belt, leading scientific and engineering teams in biotech product development.

I'm also been an accredited motorsports photojournalist and track photographer for Sonoma Raceway. My photographic interests include commercial, landscape, and street photography. In addition to writing for TAS, I've been the author of several scientific papers, as well as articles for motorsports publications.

I originally got into high-end audio in the late 70s, though my involvement waxed and waned over the years, as I also studied classical ballet for 10 years, and retired from that to take up motorcycle road racing. I got back into audio seriously in 2008 and put together a tube-based system with dynamic loudspeakers. My current listening is centered around jazz, classical, vocal artists, and some rock/popular music.

My sensibilities are more on the slightly warm and musical side of neutral, rather than the super-transparent, analytical, and highly resolving side. Some of the qualities I listen for in a system are its ability to re-create the human voice and instrumental timbres and tone colors with verisimilitude, the ability to scale quickly and smoothly when reproducing instrumental

and orchestral transitions and transients, dynamic range that has naturalness as well as power, and finely articulated harmonics. I'm much more interested in the actual musical or vocal performance of the artists I am listening to than analyzing or thinking about the next upgrade to my hardware.

What's most important, ultimately, is a beguiling and engaging musical experience.





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Paul Seydor

Although I did not grow up in a musical household, my parents owned a restaurant and night club that featured live entertainment. So from infancy I heard the great tradition of the American Popular Song and several forms of traditional jazz, while the jukebox paraded an endless number of hits by such as Sinatra, Elvis, Peggy Lee, Julie London, Ray Charles, and Buddy Holly. But it was the classic Walt Disney animation feature *The Sleeping Beauty*, its score adapted from Tchaikovsky's ballet of the same title, that got me hooked on classical music. Blessed with a passion for music yet cursed with no ability to play it, perhaps becoming an audiophile was inevitable.

Outside audio, I majored in literature and journalism at Penn State, where I reviewed movies for the school newspaper. I got a PhD in American Civilization at the University of Iowa, where I wrote the first draft of a critical study *Peckinpah: The Western Films*, published in 1980, never out of print, and still widely regarded as the best critical study of his work. Soon afterward I jumped the academia ship to become a film editor. With an Oscar nomination, an American Cinema Editors award, and several features I'm proud of, it's been, and continues to be, quite a ride. In 2005 I was invited to join the faculty of Chapman University's film conservatory. (I'm also a not bad photographer.)

I've been writing for *The Absolute Sound*

since the early eighties. I prefer systems that are tonally neutral and transparent to the source, but I also love components that color the sound in pleasing ways. There is no contradiction here. Just as no two concert halls sound alike, yet many are beautiful, why should we not also appreciate the different paths forged by gifted designers to the mountain top of music?





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Drew Kalbach

I have a degree in English from Temple University and a Masters in Fine Arts with a specialty in poetry from the University of Notre Dame. I'm a full-time self-published author with over 100 books in both romance and men's adventure fiction.

I found hi-fi by accident. I bought a 7-inch vinyl single of some random punk band one afternoon—maybe out of confusion, maybe because I thought it was actually a large, black CD (since CDs were all I ever knew growing up). But when the thing came, I realized I had to find something to actually play it on, and so began my foray into the junk piles of Craigslist and eBay.

My dog ate that little record when he was a puppy, which is why I can't remember the band. But it was already too late for me by then. I fell in love with gleaming Sansui faceplates, peeling vinyl-wrapped wood cases, and gloriously stacked Large Advent speakers. I became obsessed with Dual and Thorens. I practiced the dark arts of cheap used equipment, learned how to

solder (poorly) and how to listen closely (better).

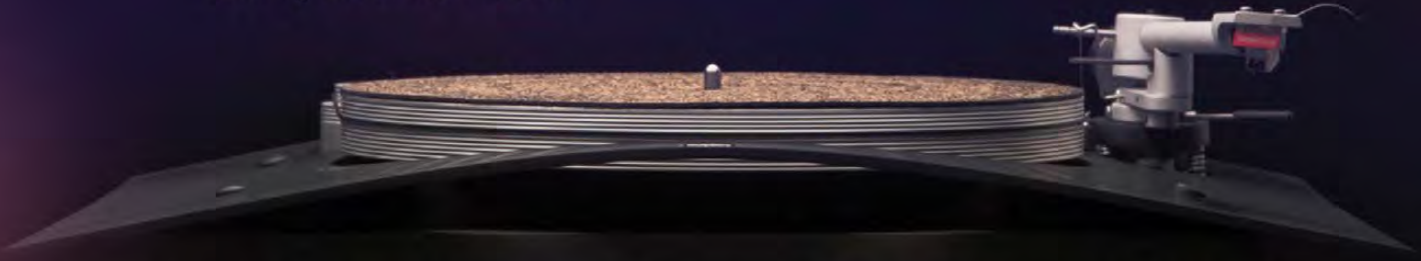
Now I favor equipment that pays homage to the partially destroyed magnificent stuff I started out with, while, you know, actually working. I want a kick drum to hit me in the chest. I want a saxophone to sound so buttery smooth I could swear Kenny G is whispering in my ear. I want rhythm and dynamics and a sense of ease and flow. In short, I want to forget my equipment exists because I'm too busy enjoying myself in an entirely different room than the one I'm sitting in, with absolute strangers that might be long dead, with instruments that sound like themselves.





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Andrew Quint

As a teenager, I aspired to be an orchestral musician and was admitted to the Oberlin Conservatory as a trombone performance major. There, I came to understand my limitations as a player and, although I prepared a senior recital and played in Conservatory ensembles for my entire time at Oberlin, I graduated as a biology major and went to medical school. I've been a practicing endocrinologist for 35 years.

I came to perfectionist audio through music, discovering *The Absolute Sound* in the 1980s. In 1995, I sent an unsolicited 4500-word article surveying Olivier Messiaen's work to Harry Pearson, who invited me to contribute regularly. Over the past 25 years, for TAS and other publications, I've produced about a thousand record reviews as well as dozens of fea-

tures concerning music and the recording community. Five years ago, Robert Harley asked me to write about gear. Though I don't have an engineering background, I've found that manufacturers are happy to bring me along from a technical standpoint, and I've learned a lot. Still, I feel strongly that to be an effective audio reviewer, what's most important is an informed appreciation of many types of musical expression: It's as important to be able to read a score or lead sheet as an electronics schematic.

With both equipment and recordings, I'm after a listening experience that approximates the participatory immediacy of playing in an orchestra or band—being close to the musicians has always been my preferred location at a concert, club, or outdoor venue. I value good dynamics and tonal accuracy but it's a life-like

representation of the spatial attributes of music-making that's my leading "reality trigger." It's led to an interest in surround sound and, while most of my listening is in stereo, I have thousands of multichannel music recordings.


High-end audio is about the point of intersection between art and technology. It's one of my great joys to be able to immerse myself in this wonderful endeavor pretty much every day of my life.



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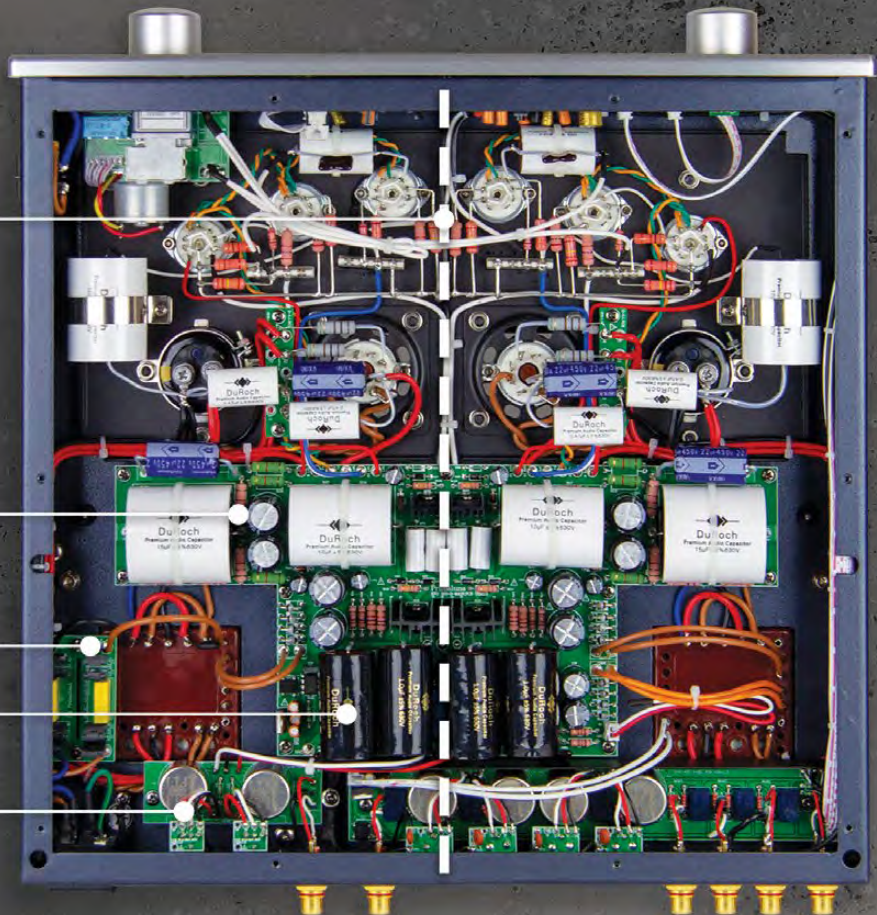
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A Survey of Amplifier Types

Robert Harley

Excerpted and adapted from The Complete Guide to High-End Audio, fifth edition. Copyright © 1994–2020 by Robert Harley. To order call (800) 841-4741. hifibooks.com

MOST OF YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE TRADITIONAL power-amplifier technology that has dominated mainstream and high-end audio for decades—the solid-state push-pull Class A/B amplifier. In fact, when discussing power amplifiers, it's assumed that the amplifier is a Class A/B design unless otherwise specified. But a number of variations on this basic design are significant forces in the amplifier marketplace. These include the single-ended-triode amplifier, the single-ended solid-state amplifier, the switching (Class D) power amplifier, and the digital amplifier. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Single-Ended-Triode Amplifiers

One of the most interesting trends in high-end audio over the past 30 years has been the return of the *single-ended-triode* power amplifier. The single-ended triode (SET) was the first audio amplifier ever developed, dating back to Lee De Forest's patents of the Audion (1907) and triode amplifier (1912). SET amplifiers generally deliver very low power, sometimes just a few watts per channel.

You heard right: Large numbers of audiophiles are flocking to replace their modern power amplifiers with amplifiers based on technology more than a century old. Have the past 113 years of amplifier development been a complete waste of time? A surprising number of music lovers and audio designers think so.

The movement back to SET amplifiers began in Japan in the 1970s, specifically with designer Nobu Shishido, who combined SET amplifiers with high-sensitivity, horn-loaded loudspeakers. Many who heard SET amplifiers were startled by their goose-bump-raising musical immediacy and ability to make the music “jump” out of the loudspeakers. Thus began the rage for SET amplifiers in Japan, which was about 10 years ahead of the SET trend in the United States. You can't open a high-end audio magazine today without seeing ads for very-low-powered SET amplifiers. The SET enthusiast's mantra, coined by *The Absolute Sound* reviewer Dick Olsher, is, “If the first watt of amplifier power doesn't sound good, why would you want 199 more of them?”

One of the early audio-amplifier triode tubes, the Western Electric 300B, was suddenly in such demand that audiophiles were paying as much as \$500 apiece for them. This shocking fact prompted Western Electric to start producing the 300B again. If you told Western Electric executives of the 1980s that in 1997 they would put the 300B back into production, they'd have thought you were crazy. (A single-ended-triode power amplifier using the 300B output tube is shown in Fig.1. The 300B is the bulbous tube in the middle.)



Fig 1: A single-ended triode amplifier with a 300B output tube.

The triode is the simplest of all vacuum tubes; its glass envelope encloses just three electrical elements rather than the five elements in the more common (and modern) pentode tube. Triodes produce much less power than pentodes, but their distortion characteristics are less musically objectionable. Before the SET comeback, virtually all modern tubed amplifiers used pentodes.

In a single-ended-triode amplifier, the triode is configured so that it always amplifies the entire audio signal. That's what “single-ended” means. Virtually all other power amplifiers are “push-pull,” meaning that opposing pairs of tubes (or transistors) alternately “push” and “pull” current through the loudspeaker. (We'll look more closely at amplifier output-stage topology and class of operation later.) SET proponents point to the fact that the triode amplifies the entire waveform. Moreover, SET amplifiers have no need for a

circuit called a phase splitter, which makes them even simpler. Note that a single-ended tube amplifier can use more than one output tube; what makes it single-ended is that the tubes are configured in such a way that they always conduct current throughout the entire musical waveform.

SET circuits are further simplified because they often use very little or no *negative feedback*. Negative feedback is taking some of the amplifier's output signal and feeding it back to the input. Such feedback lowers distortion, but many listeners have discovered that any feedback is detrimental to amplifier musicality.

On the test bench, SET amplifiers have laughably bad measured performance. They typically produce fewer than 20Wpc of output power, and have extremely high distortion—as much as 10% THD at the amplifier's rated output. Although most SET amps use a single triode output tube, additional triodes can be com-



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A Survey of Amplifier Types

bined to produce more power. Some SET amps, however, put out only 3Wpc. In fact, there's a kind of cult around SET amplifiers that strives for lower and lower output power. Enthusiasts of these amps believe that the lower the output power, the better the sound. One SET designer told a reviewer, "If you liked my 9W amplifier, wait until you hear my 3W model." In addition to low output power and high distortion, SET amplifiers have very high output impedances, as amplifiers go: on the order of 1.5–3 ohms. This is contrasted with the 0.1 ohm output impedance (or less) of most solid-state amplifiers, and the 0.8 ohm of many push-pull tubed designs. Because a loudspeaker's impedance isn't constant with frequency, a SET amp's high output impedance reacts with the speaker's impedance variations to produce changes in frequency response. That is, the SET amplifier will have a different frequency response with every loudspeaker it drives. These variations can range from just 0.1dB with some loudspeakers that have

a fairly constant impedance, to as much as 5dB with other speakers. The SET amp's sound will therefore be highly dependent on the loudspeaker with which it is matched.

Despite these technical drawbacks, my listening experience with SET amplifiers suggests that this ancient technology has many musical merits. SET amps have a certain presence and immediacy of musical communication that's hard to describe. It's as if the musicians aren't as far removed from here-and-now reality as they are with push-pull amplifiers. SET amps also have a wonderful liquidity and purity of timbre that are completely devoid of grain, hardness, and other artifacts of push-pull amplifiers. When I listen to SET amps (with the right speakers), it's as if the musicians have come alive and are playing in the listening room for me. There's a directness of musical expression that's impossible to put into words, but is immediately understood by those who have listened for themselves. You must hear a SET firsthand to know what the fuss is

about; no description can convey how they sound.

When auditioning a SET amplifier, it's easy to be seduced by the midrange. That's because SET amplifiers work best in the midband, and less well at the frequency extremes of bass and treble. If the SET demo is being run for your benefit, be sure to listen to a wide variety of music, not just small-scale music or unaccompanied voice—these will accentuate the SET's strengths and hide its weaknesses.

The importance of matching a SET amplifier to the right loudspeaker cannot be overemphasized. With a low-sensitivity speaker, the SET will produce very little sound, have soft bass, and reproduce almost no dynamic range. The ideal loudspeaker for a SET amplifier has high sensitivity (higher than 93dB/W/m), high impedance (nominal 8 ohms or higher), and no impedance dips (a minimum impedance of 6 ohms or higher). Such a speaker will produce lots of sound for a small amount of input power, and require very little current. There's been a resurgence in high-sensitivity speakers that has paralleled the popularity of SET amps. Some speakers designed for SETs have sensitivities of more than 100dB, which allows them to produce satisfying listening levels with 5Wpc. SET amplifiers are often coupled with horn-loaded loudspeakers, which have extremely high sensitivity but, in my experience, often introduce unacceptable levels of coloration.

The popularity and unmistakable sound quality of SET amplifiers pose a serious dilemma: How can an amplifier that performs so poorly by every "objective" measure produce such an involving musical experience? How can 100-year-old technology eclipse, in many ways, amplifiers designed in the 21st century? What aren't we measuring in SET amplifiers that would reflect their musical magic? Why do conventional measurements fail so dismally at quantifying what's right in SET amplifiers? Do SET amplifiers sound so good *because* of their high distortion, or *despite* it? As of yet, no one has the answers to these questions.

Single-Ended Solid-State Amplifiers

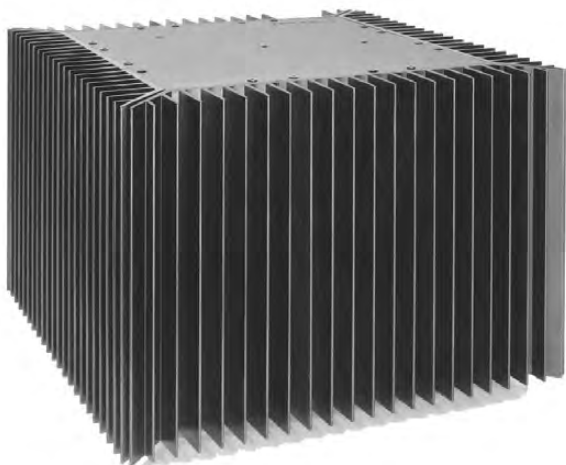
Single-ended amplifiers aren't confined to those using ancient vacuum-tube technology. Transistors can also be configured to amplify the entire musical waveform. A solid-state, single-ended amplifier is shown in Fig. 2. Note the large heatsinks required to dissipate the additional heat produced by Class A operation.

Single-ended solid-state amplifiers have better technical performance than single-ended-triode amps, with a lower output impedance, more power, and the ability to drive a wider range of loudspeakers. They share many of the benefits of SET amps, particularly the very simple signal path, lack of crossover distortion, and greater linearity. Although single-ended solid-state amplifiers generally produce less power than their push-pull counterparts, they generally output much more power than single-ended tubed units. Nonetheless, it's a mistake to equate single-ended solid-state with single-ended tube amplifiers: there are so many other design variables that single-ended solid-state and single-ended tubed amplifiers should be considered completely different animals.

Class D (Switching) Power Amplifiers

If single-ended-triode amplifiers represent a return to funda-

Fig 2: A solid-state single-ended power amplifier, the Aleph from Nelson Pass.



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mental technology, the Class D amplifier may represent the future of audio amplification. Class D amplifiers, also called *switching amplifiers*, have been gaining in popularity due to their small size, low weight, high efficiency, and low cost. You can hold some 250Wpc switching amplifiers in the palm of an outstretched hand. Many of them dissipate so little heat that they can be housed in an enclosed equipment cabinet—something you'd never do with a conventional amplifier, aka a linear amplifier. That's because a linear amplifier is typically about 15% efficient, meaning that it converts only about 15% of the power it draws from the wall into the electrical signal that drives the loudspeakers, dissipating the remaining 85% as heat. By contrast, a switching amplifier is as much as 90% efficient, converting just 10% of its power draw into heat. Fig.3 shows a switching power amplifier. This monoblock delivers 175W into 8 ohms or 335W into 4 ohms, and weighs just eight pounds.

Class D amplifiers are sometimes erroneously called “digital” amplifiers, but that appellation is reserved for a special type of Class D amplifier described later in this chapter. At the low end of the audio market, Class D amplifiers are ubiquitous in home-theater-in-a-box systems and as integral subwoofer amplifiers. A home-theater-in-a-box may need to power six loudspeakers from a case the size of a Blu-ray player—all for a few hundred dollars. Such an amp can output perhaps 300W (50Wx6), yet run cool enough to be placed in a cabinet. In this application, the advantages of Class D are undeniable. But are Class D

amplifiers suitable for high-end systems?

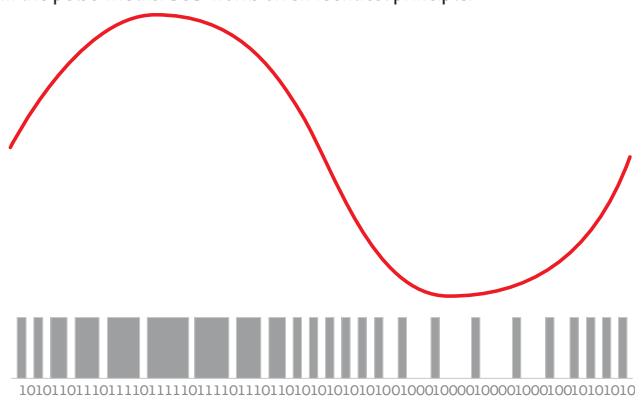
Before tackling that question, let's look at how a Class D amplifier works. In a conventional linear amplifier, the output transistors amplify a continuously variable analog signal—the musical waveform. The current flow through the output transistors (or tubes) is continuously variable, and is a direct analog of the musical waveform. In a Class D amplifier, the analog input signal is converted into a series of on and off pulses. These pulses are fed to the output transistors, which quickly turn the transistors fully on or fully off. When the transistors are turned on, they conduct the DC supply voltage to the loudspeaker. When they're turned off, no voltage is connected to the loudspeaker. The audio signal's amplitude is contained in the durations of these on/off cycles. The train of pulses amplified by the transistors is smoothed by a filter to recover the musical waveform and remove the large amount of switching noise caused by the transistors suddenly turning on and off. Because the signal amplitude is contained in the width of the pulses, switching amplifiers are also called pulse-width-modulation (PWM) amplifiers. In fact, the Direct Stream Digital (DSD) encoding system used in the production of Super Audio Compact Discs (SACDs) is nearly identical to the PWM scheme used in Class D power amplifiers (Fig.4). A major drawback of Class D amplifiers is their need for an extremely clean power supply. Remember that the transistors switch the DC supply directly to the loudspeaker.

Consequently, any noise or

Fig 3: An eight-pound, 175W Class D monoblock power amplifier.



Fig 4: In Pulse-Width Modulation, the audio signal's amplitude is encoded in the pulse widths. DSD works on an identical principle.



ripple (a small amount of AC on the DC supply voltage) will appear at the loudspeaker's input terminals. Moreover, the output transistors may not turn on and off at precisely the right times, which will introduce distortion or cause the amplifier to become unstable. Finally, Class D amplifiers generate large amounts of switching noise that must be filtered by large inductors and capacitors at the amplifier output. In practice, the sound quality of Class D amplifiers seems to be highly dependent on the environment, the speaker, and the speaker cables. A Class D amplifier that sounds reasonably good in one system might be unlistenable in another.

Nonetheless, some successful high-end amplifiers employ Class D technology. The field is relatively new, and manufacturers are finding ways to get good sound from Class D amplifiers. A few of the high-end Class D amps I've heard sounded excellent, suggesting that this technology may have a future in products other than car stereos and home-theaters-in-boxes.

Digital Amplifiers

A related amplifier technology uses a switching output stage, but accepts digital rather than analog input signals. These “digital” amplifiers take in the pulse-code-modulation (PCM) signal from a digital source and convert those audio data to a pulse-width-modulated signal. This PWM signal then drives the output transistors, just as in a Class D amplifier. The difference between a Class D amplifier and a digital amplifier is that the digital amplifier accepts digital data rather than an analog signal.

This difference might not seem that great at first glance, but consider the signal path of a conventional digital-playback chain driving a Class D power amplifier. In your music server, a digital audio stream is fed to a DAC that converts the digital data to an



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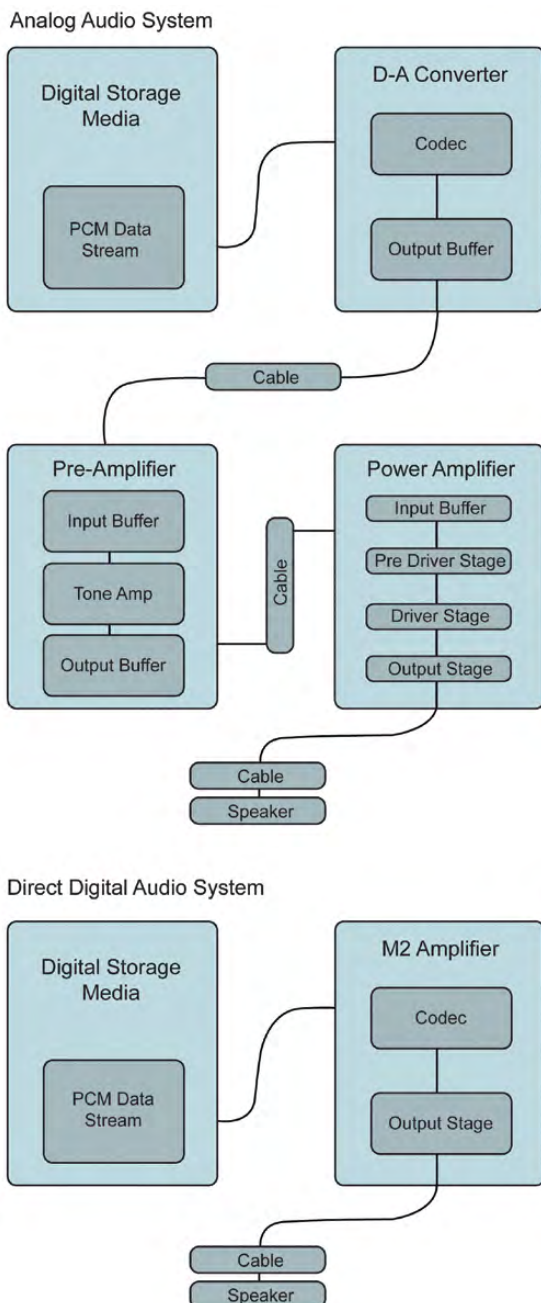
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A Survey of Amplifier Types

Fig 5: A true digital amplifier.



Fig 6: A comparison of a conventional audio system architecture with that of a digital amplifier. (Courtesy NAD.)



analog signal; the DAC's current output is converted to a voltage by a current-to-voltage converter; the signal is low-pass filtered, then amplified in the DAC's analog-output stage. This analog output signal travels down interconnects to a preamplifier with its several stages of amplification, volume control, and output buffer. The preamp's output then travels down another pair of interconnects to the power amplifier, which typically employs an input stage, a driver stage, and the Class D output stage. In addition to the D/A conversion, that's typically six or seven active amplification stages before the signal gets to the power amplifier's output stage.

To reiterate the contrast with a true digital amplifier, PCM data are converted by DSP into the PWM signal that drives the output transistors. That's it. There are no analog gain stages between the PCM data and your loudspeakers. The signal stays in the digital domain until the switching output stage, which, by its nature, acts as a digital-to-analog converter in concert with the output filter. The volume is adjusted in DSP. Digital amplifiers are usually not just power amplifiers, but also include a range of inputs, source selection, and volume control, effectively giving them the functional capabilities of an integrated amplifier. Fig.5 shows a digital amplifier, and Fig.6 is a block diagram comparing the signal path of this amplifier with a conventional system architecture.

A Unique Amplifier

In 2010, the French company Devialet introduced a radically different amplifier that may portend the future of audio amplification. The company's first product, the D Premier, featured an output stage that combined a Class A voltage amplifier with a Class D current amplifier. The idea was to merge the sonic benefits of Class A with Class D's cool operation, low power consumption, small size, and high efficiency. The company's subsequent products have built on this platform, and added many new and interesting capabilities to a category that hadn't seen much functional innovation in decades.

For example, Devialet's model 200 (Fig.7) performs the functions of an integrated amplifier and DAC, but with a suite of unprecedented features. Rather than think of the 200 in terms of traditional component categories, it's more useful to view it as a multifunction, general-purpose, audio hardware platform controlled by software. That hardware platform includes a 200Wpc integrated amplifier with a DAC, phono input, wireless streamer, A/D converter (with LP ripping capability), and subwoofer crossover. The 200's inputs can be configured to fit into just about any system. Don't have a turntable but have two analog line sources? No problem; the analog inputs can be configured as line inputs. Conversely, those same input jacks can become phono inputs, complete with adjustable gain and cartridge loading (impedance and capacitance). With a new technology called Speaker Active Matching (SAM), the 200's output signal can be optimized for your particular loudspeakers.

To give you an idea of this product's flexibility: The Devialet 200 began life as the 170Wpc model 170. A software update turned it into the 200Wpc model 200. You can even convert the stereo model 200 into a 400W monoblock with the addition of a second model 200—which also doubles the number of inputs.

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Fig 7: Devialet's unique amplifier combines a Class A voltage amplifier with a Class D current amplifier in the output stage.



The 200's appearance is as radical as the technology inside. About the size and shape of a laptop computer, the chrome-plated aluminum case can be mounted flat against a wall. Only one button, an on/off switch, adorns the front panel (if you can call it that). You interact with the 200 through a square remote control with four small buttons and a huge volume knob. Alternately, you can control the 200 with an app on your tablet or mobile device.

Configuring the 200 is quite simple. A page on Devialet's website shows the 200's rear panel with the configurable components highlighted. Clicking on, for example, the RCA input jacks brings up a screen that allows you to select between line and phono; and, if phono, the cartridge gain and loading. Other phono options include mono or stereo, selectable equalization curve, and channel balance. A digital-out jack can be an analog line-out jack, with or without high- or low-pass filtering, with selectable crossover frequency and slope. The signal appearing at the binding posts can be high- or low-pass filtered, again with selectable frequency and slope. These filtering functions are ideal for systems with an active subwoofer; the signal driving the speakers is high-pass filtered, and the signal driving the sub is low-pass filtered.

Once you've configured the 200, you download the configuration file to an SD card. You then insert the SD card in the 200's rear panel, and in a few seconds the 200 has morphed into an audio product with the parameters you've specified. Because the 200 is essentially a digital platform, analog inputs, including phono signals, are digitized. You can select a sample rate of 96 or 192kHz in the A/D converter. The digitized signal, from any input, appears at a digital-out jack (RCA). You could use this function to digitize and archive a library of LPs, for example.

Digital inputs include USB, AES/EBU, TosLink, and S/PDIF coaxial. You can also wirelessly stream audio at up to 24-bit/192kHz via Devialet's AIR Universal Streamer. Wireless connection between the computer music server to the 200 has a theoretical advantage over USB, including isolating the computer's noise from the 200. The AIR app provides asynchronous connection between your computer and the 200; the signal is buffered, then processed to reduce jitter. You can also stream music files to the 200 via the 200's Ethernet connection.

Returning to Speaker Active Matching (SAM), this technology applies a correction in DSP that optimizes the output stage's current and voltage delivery for your particular speaker's impedance curve, and corrects the timing of the bass. SAM also extends the speaker's bass response through equalization, and limits the output-stage power to prevent the speaker from being overdriven. Note that SAM doesn't attempt to correct speaker- or room-in-

duced frequency-response variations, as do full-blown DSP room-correction processors. As with all the other configuration options, SAM involves choosing your loudspeaker on the Devialet website, downloading the optimization file to an SD card, and updating the 200's software.

Output-Stage Topology and Class of Operation

We've seen that the output stage of a power amplifier can be configured either as single-ended or push-pull. To reiterate, in a single-ended amplifier the output devices (tubes or transistors) are configured so that they always amplify the entire musical waveform. The single-ended amplifier cannot operate in any other way—that's the very definition of single-ended.

In a push-pull output stage, pairs of opposing devices (either tubes or transistors) are arranged to work alternately—one device "pushes" current through the loudspeaker as the other device "pulls" current through the speaker. In a parallel push-pull circuit, multiple pairs of output devices are grouped together to increase the power output.

That's a description of an amplifier's output-stage topology—how the amplifying devices are configured. Now let's look at a separate but related factor: the amplifier's class of operation.

Class of operation is how a given output stage is driven. The two main classes of operation are Class A and Class B. In a Class A amplifier, the output stage (single-ended or push-pull) amplifies the entire musical waveform. In a Class B amplifier, opposing pairs of transistors (or tubes) are operated so that one transistor in

the pair amplifies the positive half of the waveform as the opposing transistor amplifies the negative half of the waveform.

Class of operation is easily confused with single-ended and push-pull output-stage topologies. But there's an important distinction: A single-ended amplifier always operates in Class A, but a push-pull amplifier can be operated in Class A or Class B. It might seem as if a push-pull Class A amplifier is a contradiction in terms, but it's not. In a push-pull Class A amplifier, opposing pairs of transistors are driven in such a way that current flows through both transistors throughout the entire musical waveform, and all the output devices participate in amplifying through the full cycle of the audio signal. One device pulls current through the loudspeaker while the other pushes current, but both are always turned on and conducting current.

By contrast, in a Class B push-pull output stage, one transistor amplifies the signal during the positive-going portion of the signal, and the other amplifies the negative-going half of the signal. When one is working, the other is resting (and getting some needed cooling).

The two factors are the output-stage topology (how the output devices are configured) and the class of operation (how those output devices are driven). The following four statements may clarify the matter:

- Single-ended topology always operates in Class A
- Class A operation can be implemented in a single-ended or push-pull topology

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A Survey of Amplifier Types

- Push-pull topology can be operated in Class A or Class B
- Class B operation is always implemented by a push-pull topology

Let's move on from these distinctions to the more practical aspects of amplifier class of operation.

Most power amplifiers are categorized as Class A/B because they operate in Class A at very low power outputs, then default to Class B at higher power outputs. A 100Wpc amplifier may put out 5W of Class A power, and then switch to Class B above that level. Even the heftiest Class A/B amplifiers can put out only a small portion of their rated power in Class A—a typical value is 1 or 2%. Although this may not sound like much, an amplifier driving high-sensitivity speakers at low listening levels may be delivering only a couple of watts.

How much of an amplifier's power output is Class A is determined by the amount of *bias* applied to the output transistors. Bias is a DC current that flows through the output stage at idle (no audio signal). The higher the bias, the more current flows through the transistors when no signal is present. More bias results in more Class A output power. Class B operation has no bias current; Class A/B has moderate bias current; and Class A has high bias current. The designer can keep increasing the bias

in a push-pull output stage until all of its output-power capability is delivered in Class A. The amplifier's power-output rating would be the point at which the amplifier leaves Class A and begins operating in Class B. The factors limiting increasing the bias current are the ability of the transistors to handle the greatly increased current flow through them, of the power supply to keep up with the transistors' current demands, and of the heatsinking to dissipate the considerable heat caused by the high bias current.

To give you an idea of the demands placed on an amplifier's output stage, power supply, and heatsinking by an output stage biased for

Class A operation, let's compare two integrated amplifiers from Pass Labs that have identical output stages but are biased completely differently: the INT-150, 150Wpc in Class A/B; and the INT-30A, 30Wpc in Class A. The INT-150's push-pull output stage is biased so that it produces 10Wpc of Class A power before switching to Class B to deliver its full rated output of 150Wpc. The amplifier can double its output power, to 300Wpc into 4 ohms. The INT-30A is exactly the same amplifier, employing the same power supply, an identical number and type of output transistors, and the same heatsinks as the INT-150, but is rated at just 30Wpc. The

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difference is that the INT-30A's 30Wpc are pure Class A watts. The amplifier delivers just one-fifth the power of its Class A/B counterpart.

As you can see, Class A operation is enormously inefficient. A Class A amplifier converts nearly all the power it draws from the wall outlet into heat, and consumes just as much power at idle as when it is operating at its maximum output power. Moreover, a Class A amplifier is much more expensive to build on a "watts per dollar" basis than its Class A/B counterpart. So why would designers go to the trouble and expense of creating Class A amplifiers, and why would consumers pay such a huge premium for

"Class A watts"?

Class A has many theoretical and practical advantages. For starters, Class B and A/B amplifiers suffer from crossover distortion, a discontinuity at the zero-crossing point where one transistor in each opposed pair "hands off" the signal to its partner. A waveform discontinuity can occur at this transition, and is lessened as bias current is introduced and increased in value. Crossover distortion can't occur in Class A operation because each transistor amplifies the entire audio waveform, not just half of it. Second, the large thermal hardware capacity required by Class A has the advantage of keeping the output transis-

tors more thermally stable (i.e., at a more constant temperature). This makes their operating characteristics more uniform, and less subject to changes resulting from the signal characteristics the transistors are amplifying. Third, increasing the bias current so that an amplifier produces more Class A power not only reduces harmonic distortion but, more important, changes the nature of the harmonic distortion. As the bias is increased, the upper-order harmonics (everything above the third harmonic), which are the most sonically harmful, are most dramatically reduced in amplitude, leaving the predominant distortion component the more sonically benign second and third harmonics.

Class A power amplifiers can sound extremely good, with a sweetness and liquidity that set them apart from Class A/B amps. In my experience, Class A amplifiers have many of the virtues of a tubed amplifier but without the tube amp's technical limitations. This isn't to say that a Class A amplifier mimics the sonic character of tubes, but rather that Class A avoids many of the characteristic nonlinear distortions of Class A/B solid-state amplifiers.

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Magnepan Mini Maggie System
\$1490

The Mini-Maggie system is a three-piece, ribbon-tweeter-equipped, planar-magnetic, dipole speaker system intended primarily for desktop use. Featuring small tweeter/midrange panels that sit atop the desk and a stereo mid/bass panel that sits in the footwell below, it is arguably the finest desktop speaker ever made. In fact, in detail, resolution, purity, freedom from grain, soundstage width and

depth, and, above all, coherence, the Mini-Maggie rig sounds for all the world like a pair of Magnepan's exceptional 3.7i's on a slightly smaller scale. (223)

Wilson Audio TuneTot

\$9800-\$10,500, depending on color

For those who love the Wilson sound but must place their loudspeakers close to a room boundary, the diminutive but hefty (29-pound) two-way TuneTot is intended for use on a bookshelf or a piece of furniture positioned next to a wall. The TuneTots excel in nearfield applications and could be considered for a no-compromise desktop system. A 1" doped silk-fabric tweeter gets its own sealed sub-enclosure, and the paper pulp woofer is vented to the rear, with foam plugs provided in the event bass proves unruly. A system of front and rear spikes permits the speakers to be placed at a wide range of heights above the floor, all the while preserving the correct time alignment of the two drivers. With a variety of tube and solid-state amplifiers, the 'Tots manifested considerable poise with complex and dynamically challenging music; the bass foundation was quite satisfactory with large-scale symphonies as well as exuberant rock 'n' roll. (286)



Naim Mu-so 2
\$1690

It may be a similar size and shape to a "boom-box," but once you hear what this compact system (with three smallish cone drivers per side, 75W on tap for each driver, and integrated pre-amp, DAC, streaming, and DSP) can do, there will be no mistake. It is a different creature entirely. Its best qualities compare favorably to those of systems of separate components up to about twice its price, though it will not play super-loud (an expected result for amps and speaker drivers of this size) and won't give you the kind of wide, deep soundstage that you get from individual speakers. Highly recommended. (306)



Burmester Phase 3

\$39,395

Designed for music lovers who aren't typical audiophiles, this unusual all-in-one system adds panache to the solid build-quality and sonics for which the German manufacturer is well known. This *über*-striking three-piece system includes a pair of the company's B15 loudspeakers along with the digital 161 all-in-one unit that incorporates an integrated amplifier, DAC, server, CD player (with ripping), and a wide array of inputs and outputs. Sound-wise what stood out were more than respectable resolution and transparency plus surprisingly good bass response. If you lack the desire, patience, or space for assembling separate components, and have a taste for the exotic—plus the financial wherewithal—this unique system really does make a bold statement, sonically and aesthetically. (283)

TABLETOP SYSTEMS

KEF Muo
\$179 each

This wonderfully portable wireless loudspeaker system delivers the sonic goods well beyond expectations, especially given its petite dimensions. Intended for those who want quality listening on the go, it's a tiny two-way that pumps out big, full, and expansive sound with respectable resolution—and even reproduces some sense of soundstaging on many recordings. The Muo boasts a miniature version of KEF's Uni-Q "point-source" driver array—a decoupled central tweeter dome and a mid/bass, plus a long-throw radiator in the middle for better bass extension. How KEF packed this remarkably clean- and clear-sounding configuration into a sleek enclosure is a wonder—and a testament to clever design. (265)



Technics Ottawa SC-C50/C70

\$799/\$999

These two table- or stand-placed, all-in-one systems impressed MK with their value-for-money. The nearly-complete systems incorporate digital and analog inputs,

Bluetooth, wireless and streaming capability (Tidal and many others), D/A conversion, and power amplification. The multiple speaker drivers create the illusion of a larger soundstage than you could get from such closely spaced drivers. The sound, while entry-level, has some distinct high-end qualities, which is more than one might expect for an entire system at this price point. The SC-C70 also incorporates a CD player, AM/FM tuner, and headphone jack. Two units can be configured to operate as one stereo pair for a wider soundstage. (300)





Vanatoo Transparent One Encore

\$529 passive/\$649 active

The Vanatoo Transparent One Encore all-in-ones (with 5.25" aluminum cone woofers and 1" aluminum dome tweeters powered by internal Class D amps generating 100Wpc for the woofs and 20Wpc for the tweets) look boxy and simple and just fine on a desktop. Equipped with assorted analog and digital inputs and a built-in Bluetooth receiver, they can

handle just about any source. For a streaming-centered solution, they don't need anything more than Chromecast to get solid sound—and even that's unnecessary if you use Bluetooth. Deep enough bass, nice midrange clarity, even a little sparkle on the uppers give them better than decent sound: You can't ask for too much more for the convenience and the money. (301)

KEF LSX

\$1099

The KEF LSX is truly a little wireless marvel. There is no tether necessary to connect the primary and secondary speakers in the pair, although using the tether bumps resolution from 24-bit/48kHz up to 24-bit/192kHz. They sport sleek, gorgeous looks, including real cloth wrapping that feels almost luxurious. An integral 70W Class D amp drives the mid and bass driver, and a 30W amp powers the tweeter. The inputs are simple: Bluetooth, Wi-Fi streaming, one optical connection, and a 3.5mm analog AUX port. Their small sizes belies their huge sound: bass was big and tight and adjusted via the Control app and the midrange was a pure delight. For anyone looking for an all-in-one solution in a tight package that does not sacrifice sound, the KEF LSX is highly recommended. (293)



Dynaudio Xeo 10

\$1499

The Xeo 10 is a wireless, internally bi-amplified/DSP'd two-way speaker system in a svelte cabinet. Less than a foot tall, it has a bold, confident voice that neither screams with treble lift nor shrinks into the background with presence suckout. It

is dark, warm, and musical, making for soothing long-term listening. Its midrange-centric sound does justice to both male and female vocalists, conveying high intelligibility, tactile presence, and a distinct sense of the physical underpinnings of the performance. Connectivity is as easy as pairing with your iPhone Bluetooth. The Xeo's room-adaptive EQ settings are also helpful. In sum, a combination of packaging, performance, and convenience that deserves a receptive audience. (270)

KEF LS50 Wireless Nocturne

\$2199

The KEF LS50 Wireless marks a well-conceived reinvention of the company's iconic LS50 compact speaker as a wireless and active system (with circular glow-in-the-dark patterns lighting up the faceplate of its sleek black enclosure in the Nocturne edition).

The LS50 Wireless still contains KEF's patented Uni-Q concentric driver array, but in this wireless model the Uni-Q is driven by a built-in, dual-mono 230Wpc amplifier, streaming preamplifier, and Roon-ready 24/192 DAC. The LS50 Wireless has a high degree of detail and overall naturalness of timbre—particularly through the midrange. Also, these smallish speakers pumped out punchy bass that delved deeper than expected while still maintaining composure. Quick-stepping, snappy, and relentlessly musical across genres, the LS50 Wireless speaker system packs big sound in a little box. (285, \$1499 LS50 passive version 231)



Elac Navis ARB51

\$2299

Elac's active three-way compact is beautifully finished. With a rich full-bodied midrange, it projects a warm, cozy aura that proves ideal for vocals. (Fans of choral music will revel in the clarity of massed voices.) The Elac has a weighty, dynamic, bottom-up sound that suggests a speaker that not only doesn't need coddling but actually dares you to crank it up—way up. A hallmark of active bass is the way it grabs onto rhythm tracks, orchestral percussion (like kettle drums), or organ pedal points with the steely grip of a raptor. One of the rare small compacts where you *don't* have to scale back expectations in order to enjoy it. (291)



Bowers & Wilkins Formation Duo

\$4000 (stands are an additional \$799)

The Formation Duo is the first in what will likely be a long line of active wireless loudspeakers from the venerable British speaker-maker. Inside each cabinet the Duo incorporates wireless streaming capability, DACs, and amplification, all under DSP control. You simply plug in the Duo, and with a few taps on the Formation app, you're streaming music. The Duo's sound quality is a knockout, with spectacular imaging, a very smooth and flat tonal balance, and surprisingly extended bass. Easy to use, highly musical, and technologically advanced, the Duo brings true high-end performance to a lifestyle product. (298)




Dali Callisto 2C

\$4750 (includes the Dali Sound Hub and BluOS module)

The Callisto 2 C is the stand-mount solution in Dali's new "wireless ecosystem" that empowers users to easily access

all their high-res music directly from their smart devices. The speakers are two-and-a-half-ways, with a planar-magnetic super-tweeter augmenting the response of a 1" dome tweeter and a 6.5" woofer. All drivers are powered by a built-in Class D amplifier, sourced by a built-in DAC, and eq'd and crossed-over by built-in DSP. Reviewer MK immensely enjoyed his time with the Dali's, rediscovering favorite music in the highest fidelity he has experienced in his home. Highly recommended. (293)



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Elac Debut 2.0 B5.2

\$289

It's little; it's vinyl clad; it's dirt cheap; and it sounds terrific. The B5 compact represents the first effort in what has turned out to be a long and fruitful collaboration between Elac and its celebrated VP of Engineering, Andrew Jones. The B5 is robust in the mid and upper bass, but the real difference is how everything comes together in such an exquisitely balanced and musical fashion. NG instinctively connected with the basic honesty of the B5 sound and was wowed by its bargain-basement price. What Jones and the Elac team have managed to wring from this most humble of designs is nothing short of exceptional. Newer B5.2 version improves on the original. (Debut B5 reviewed in 259)



Wharfedale Diamond 11.1

\$349

The middle level of the three available stand-mounts in the updated Wharfedale 11 line, the Diamond 11.1 is a two-way stand-mount with a 1" textile-dome tweeter and a 5" woven Kevlar mid/bass in a curved enclosure that tapers back from

the baffle. They are moderate in sensitivity (87dB), so reviewer DK found them easy to drive, even with his First Watt J2. Your typical boxy bookshelf speaker can feel a little veiled or muted in the midrange, but the 11.1 avoids this problem (thanks to that curvy box). Mids felt projected and effortless, polished in a really nice way, with no boxy veil. Since bass extension isn't very deep, excitement is somewhat diminished, and low-end rhythm and timing take a hit. Still and all, the Diamond 11.1s never failed to keep DK engaged and always did justice to his favorite records. (293)

PSB Alpha P5

\$399

The PSB Alpha P5 is a budget mini-monitor for our time. Sonically it's pure PSB, with a nicely weighted midrange, non-fatiguing treble, and overall naturalism that make it very easy to engage with. Commendably there are few of the tonal peaks and bumps associated with lesser engineered speakers in this class. Midrange presence and dynamic energy are captured with many of the strengths of the P5's sibling T20 floorstander. Vocals retain a nice blend of physicality, warmth, and clean articulation with hints of airiness in the upper octaves. The ability to fully define the contours of an auditorium is a wee bit beyond the P5's purview; nonetheless it conveys its share of string section layering and orchestral depth cues, with an image stability that outclasses much of the competition. The Alpha P5 represents the essence of what it means to be an entry-level compact in 2020. (306)



Focal Chora 806

\$990

Focal's latest two-way compact combines a hip look with sonics that have an even, somewhat mellow balance and a light responsive character. Focal's all-around conservative voicing means that the Chora 806 doesn't stray beyond the base paths—neither assaulting the senses nor plumb the bottom octaves. Vocals, male and female, are expressive and relaxed, but generally offer a little less chest energy and presence than a full-range speaker. However, in true compact monitor fashion, musical details—small and large—are abundant. Overall a well-rounded package of solidly engineered performance that touches a multitude of sonic bases, and proof that there's still a lot of life left in the budget two-way compact monitor. (304)

Polk L100

\$1199

As the smallest member of the Legend Series, the L100 offers a level of execution, balance, musicality, and outright aural thrills that places it at the top of its class. Its personality is one of effortless musicality, with an ability to convey rich midrange tonal color and complex textures. It has a well-grounded and earthy sound, a rarity in this class of stand-mount monitors. Its treble range is open with naturalistic transients and extension. Its lively presence range never grows impolite or coarse. The L100 turns out to be a superior voice speaker, sensitive to the finer nuances of vocal stylings, shadings, and dynamics. It also navigates bass solos with acrobatic ease. One classy little two-way. (308)



Elac Carina BS243.4

\$1379

Visually, the Carina BS243.4 is the portrait of a high-performance two-way monitor. Though it barely tops a foot in height, its sonic signature is rich and ripe. Outfitted with Elac's JET tweeter and supported by a 5.25" inverted-aluminum-cone mid/bass with unique downward-firing port, the Carina was capable of a low-end impact, dynamic drive, and sheer timbral weight that caught reviewer Neil Gader off-guard. With a more forward monitor-like signature, Carina can swing with the best of them, even when pushed to higher output levels. Critically, the smooth JET tweeter doesn't announce itself or grow overly assertive; its fatigue-free performance blends invisibly. On the scale of musicality and value Carina rates very high in its segment. (304)





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please.”

*Michael Framer,
Stereophile,
May 2020*



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International patents pending.

STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS



MartinLogan Motion 35XTi

\$1399

On the surface the MartinLogan Motion 35XTi looks like pretty standard bookshelf model. The review pair came in a nice reddish walnut with a curved silver MartinLogan badge beneath smooth, simple grille covers. Under those grilles are a 1.25" by 2.4" Folded Motion XT tweeter atop a 6.5" aluminum cone woofer. Sonically, the

35XTi's impactful forwardness—for lack of a better term—was driving and engaging, although that same enjoyable intensity could potentially come off as harsh or a little too forward on some music. These aren't the most neutral speakers DK has ever heard, or the warmest, but they still have an enchanting quality. (304)



Monitor Audio Studio

\$1400

This stand-mount features dual 4" mid/bass drivers above and below a MPD (micro-pleated diaphragm) tweeter that is based on the tweeter in Monitor Audio's \$30k flagship Platinum PL500 II. The build- and finish-quality are exceptional, with the Studio conveying an upscale vibe. For such small speakers, they have remarkable depth in the low end, likely helped by the dual mid/bass drivers and the dual slot-loaded ports in the back. The bass is satisfying and controlled, not remotely woolly or bloated. The midrange is gorgeous and lush, with no trace of hardness in the upper registers of vocals. Matching stands are \$500 per pair. (291)

HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021



Audience The One V3/1+1 V3

\$1695/\$2960

The One is a single full-range driver shoehorned into a small box. The driver itself is the same unit, the A3A, that Audience uses in its \$2345 1+1

V3—and in its \$72,000 flagship 16+16 speaker. Audience is unique in this regard; no other speaker manufacturer employs the same driver in all its speakers from the smallest to the largest. According to Audience, the A3A has exceptionally flat response, claimed to be within +/-3dB from 40Hz to 22kHz. The 1+1 V3 employs a significantly redesigned version of this full-range driver (one each front and back, plus passive radiators on either side), top-level Au24SX internal wiring, re-tuned passive radiators, and custom tellurium solderless binding posts. The result is more resolution and detail (particularly in the treble), superior transparency, wider dynamic expression, and greater midrange purity. Properly set up, the One and the 1+1 V3 are the best desktop speakers reviewer Steven Stone has heard. (V2 versions reviewed in 236, 273)



Focal Aria 906

\$1990

From Focal's Aria line, the compact two-way 906 has a lot to sing about. It uses Focal's innovative F-cone sandwich-construction with a flax-fiber core for lightness, rigidity, and superior damping. Its sonic character is vivid, fast, vibrant, and thoroughly engaging. Bass response is excellent for this class—defined, controlled, and reliably extended into the fifty-cycle range. The lifelike body of its midrange gives the 15"-tall 906 a nicely weighted tonal balance, with good dynamics and a notable amount of air and dimensionality. Befitting its size, its sound is slightly lighter overall, but thanks to its impressive and frisky midbass the speaker always feels grounded. Quibbles are minor—the upper-mid/lower-treble range lacks some intensity, resulting in a softening of orchestral presence and brilliance. But the Aria 906 gets most of the music just right, and at just under \$2k, does so without breaking the bank. (243)

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Totem Acoustic Sky

\$1995

Classic Totem through and through, the Sky is purpose-built—clean and seamless, with rigid cabinetry and beautiful veneer finishes. The Sky is also prima facie evidence of just how far small speakers have evolved in the way of a fuller-bodied and warmer musical balance. Its tweeter and woofer sing with an of-a-piece coherence. Given the right-sized room (medium-to-smallish) and strong amplifier support, the Totem Sky just clears its throat and lets loose, eliciting tuneful bass with resonant energy, dynamic vigor, and surprising slam. With break-in, the Sky grows significantly more textured and realistic: The ambience surrounding singers, for example, becomes airier and better defined. Hats off to Totem's Vince Bruzese for his continuing quest to coax big-time performance from a tiny two-way, while still harnessing the virtues of speed and transparency that come with a little box. (275)

Revel Performa3 M106

\$2000

Revel's M106 is cut from the same rich fabric as its big brother the F206, but designed for smaller spaces. A vocal lover's dream, the two-way M sports the same, brilliantly refined dome tweeter with acoustic lens waveguide as the floorstander, creating a wide sweetspot, a rewarding lack of localization, and estimable composure under all sorts of dynamic fire. Plus, it delivers nearly imperturbable output so that even under punishing conditions the feisty M106 remains linear. There's a cooler cast to its tonal balance likely due to the lighter bass, but its character is still unmistakably, accurately Revel. History will show this is one of the great compacts of its era. (234)



Watkins Generation 4rev-1

\$2495

The late Bill Watkins poured decades of experience into this small and innovative two-way. One of its key design elements is operation of the woofer as a wide-range driver without a low-pass filter. The 1" aluminum/magnesium alloy dome is damped to tame ultrasonic breakup modes. An unusual patent-pending bass-reflex tuning is implemented with two damped internal chambers. The end result is in-room extension to nearly 41Hz, a remarkable accomplishment for a 6.5" driver in a compact enclosure. The spatial presentation is nothing short of amazing and virtually leaves the BBC-spec LS3/5A in the dust. Expect an exceptionally wide and transparent soundstage coupled with transient speed, precise image focus, timbral accuracy, and an ability to retrieve low-level detail that is generally unheard of at this price point. Recently "rev-1" added Cardas silver inputs and Cardas 11ga Litz wiring. (278)



Totem Acoustic Signature One

\$2895

In celebration of Totem's 30th anniversary, the Signature One represents the largest series of changes ever to this iconic model. Sonic performance is classic Totem—a high-revving, high-output presentation that doesn't shy away from combustible dynamic swings or demanding acoustic bass or rock rhythms. Its responsiveness to low-level inputs is where the cabinet rigidity pays off. The Signature One's ability to vanish within the confines of a small listening

room remains a credit to the Totem résumé. Tonally it has a reasonably neutral balance anchored by a tuneful, full-bodied midrange that is rich in color and texture. Not merely a quick, peel-out-and-burn-rubber compact, it has fairly broad shoulders that impart authentic gravitas to recorded music. Continuing to widen the performance envelope of the small speaker, the Signature One is the widest expression of Totem's grand quest thus far. (282)

Bowers & Wilkins 705 S2

\$3000

Balanced, uncolored, remarkably precise, and self-efficacious, the 705 S2 two-way monitor/bookshelf loudspeaker is a shining example of a large company providing more (not less) value. Leveraging technologies and techniques developed for Bowers & Wilkins' 800 Series speakers, the new 700 Series actually delivers on the often-promised, seldom-delivered "trickle-down." The PVD (Physical Vapor Deposition) carbon-coated tweeter and Continuum cone mid/woofer are keys—long-tested elements that take the 705 S2 well beyond the performance of previous-generation 700s. The 705 S2 plays larger than expected, and possesses that rare ability to allow musical essentials to shine through. A "must-audition" in sub-\$5k monitors. (280)

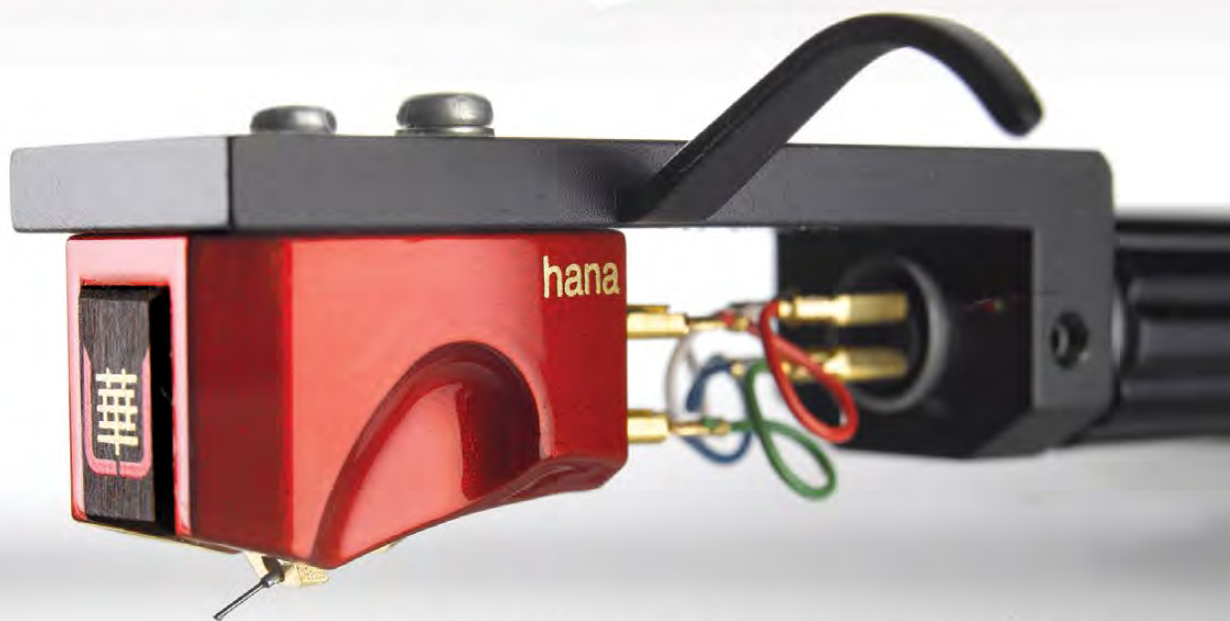


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LSA Statement LSA-10

\$3495

The LSA-10 is a two-way with a custom 6.5" aluminum mid/bass and a 1" copper/beryllium-dome tweeter on its front panel and a 5" by 7" passive radiator on its back. Its cabinet's

curved sides reduce in-cabinet resonances in addition to giving the LSA-10 a less boxy and more stylish look. Generating lots of clean, extended bass from a small cabinet has been one of the alchemical goals of speaker designers since the first transducer squawked to life. And while the LSA-10 doesn't break the laws of physics, for those audiophiles who require that push on their solar plexus delivered by a 50Hz kick drum, the LSA-10 *sans* subwoofer may be perfect. Do you long for a small speaker with powerful bass that still retains detail and delicacy in the midrange and upper frequencies? If the answer is "yes," you should give the LSA-10 Statements a listen (304)



ATC SCM19-V2

\$3999

Not a brand to cater to the fashions of the marketplace, ATC has bolstered these stout, professional-grade monitors with bespoke drivers created to do a single job—accurate pro-caliber reproduction. Still, in spite of ATC's stellar track record, NG never expected the new and aggressively priced SCM19

to be as good as it is. A superb and superbly defined midrange, overall tonal neutrality, broad-shouldered micro- and macro-dynamics are all in evidence. The surprise is the extent to which the SCM19 outshines its distinguished predecessors—particularly ATC's other passive consumer speakers—in voicing and seamless inter-driver coherence. There are no discontinuities and/or vestigial box colorations, either. In addition there's more air on top, likely attributable to the all-new, in-house-engineered-and-manufactured soft-dome tweeter, which is a real beaut. Simply one of the best compacts NG has heard to date. (245)

Revel Performa3 M126 Be

\$4000

To describe the M126 Be as merely the hot-rodged version of the nifty little two-way M106 does not give it its sonic due. There are fireworks and butt-kicking dynamics, yes, but more importantly, there's a degree of silken, shimmering refinement that's rare in this segment. Tricked out with a new 1" beryllium dome tweeter with a ceramic-coated, cast-aluminum acoustic-lens waveguide, and a 6.5" ceramic/aluminum-composite mid/bass, the M126 Be offers low-level resolution, timbral realism, and top-end air and speed that are improved across the board. The low-end response from its bass-reflex cabinet is quick, with little indication of port artifacts—the timbral clarity of acoustic bass, for example, is richly defined in both extension and grip. Relatively easy to drive at a sensitivity of 86dB and a load of 8 ohms, the M126 Be still craves good amplification. (290)



Bowers & Wilkins 805 D3

\$6000

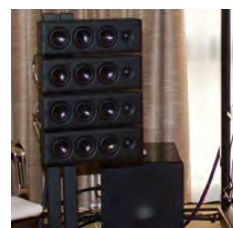
The 805 D3 is the sole compact in Bowers & Wilkins' revamped 800 D Series lineup. Stunning both visually and sonically, the two-way 805 is a bold performer. Its midrange signature is a near-seamless combination of speed, wideband dynamic contrast, and dense tonal color. And the civilizing influence of the 805's superb diamond

tweeter cannot be overstated. Chameleon-like in how it adopts the character of source material, it can be terrifically expressive and liquid, or warm and richly shaded. Other decisive factors include its integration of port and woofer, and excellent inter-driver coherence. Compact or not, the 805 D3 is a loudspeaker to be reckoned with at any price, from any company. (266)

High Resolution Technologies Stage IV

\$7000 (for a four-speaker-per-side array and a Stage stereo amplifier)

And now for something entirely different than ordinary speakers. The HRT Stage IV comprises twelve mid/bass drivers (each channel) arranged in a rectangle with a four tweeter sub-array running vertically down the approximate middle. This arrangement projects sound forward in a big way: Walk around behind it, and the output almost vanishes over most of the frequency range. Like the Larsen Model 9s but via a different method, the Stage IV system really erases the listening room around you, leaving you immersed in the recorded acoustic environment. The system is subdued in the presence range: You might want to EQ the presence region somewhat. But perceived distortion is very low, and the directional nature of the speakers puts you in the recorded space in a striking and very satisfying way. (301)



Graham LS5/9f

\$7999

The LS5/9f is the floorstanding tower version of the Graham LS5/9, both BBC-derived models designed by Derek Hughes. The larger enclosure of the LS5/9f gives additional bass extension and dynamic capacity while losing none of the neutrality and articulation of the LS5/9. The result is a speaker with bass and dynamics that are adequate for orchestral and rock music and with an extraordinary truth to the sound of real instruments. (The extreme top is a little rolled off: fans of "air" may want to add a super-tweeter). An instant classic that far outperforms its elegant but understated appearance. (forthcoming)



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Fleetwood Sound Company DeVille

\$9600

The star attraction here is a solid-wood conical horn with an impressive dynamic range. A 1" compression driver covers the frequency range to below 2kHz while an 8" woofer fills in the frequency range below 1500Hz. Listening height is a critical factor to obtaining the most accurate tonal balance. Ideally, your ears should be at the tweeter axis or slightly above it. The midrange is full-bodied and felicitous of cello timbre, while the upper octaves sound just a tad recessed relative to the core of the midrange. Best of all, the DeVille is capable of breathtaking transient clarity and soundstage transparency. Its ability to resolve detail in a complex mix is exemplary. High sensitivity (94dB) and a flat impedance curve make the DeVille easy to drive. DO's current favorite in the two-way stand-mount category. (309)

Focal Sopra No1

\$9990

Reviewer Andy Quint wrote this about these superb two-ways with articulating cabinets from celebrated French manufacturer Focal: "Perhaps the most telling part of the audiophile loudspeaker review process is what happens when all the critical listening has finished. With the Sopra No1s, I felt compelled to hear them play music until the last possible moment. When the truck picking them up for the trip back to their U.S. distributor showed up earlier than anticipated, I had to tell the driver to return later and then scramble to finish disassembling the Sopras and get their constituent parts back into the cardboard boxes. Sometimes it's hard to say goodbye." 'Nuff said. (266)



MBL126

\$11,800 (Stands, \$1190)

Marking MBL's entry level for omnidirectional speakers, the Corona Line Radialstrahler 126 three-way contains much of the DNA of its bigger, upper-tier siblings, but brings the cost of acquiring MBL magic way down. The Radialstrahler designs are painstakingly handcrafted in Deutschland and feature intricately assembled omnidirectional drivers—in the 126 model, the midrange and tweeter—the latter reproducing the sweetest, smoothest upper octaves imaginable with effortless openness, detail, and delicacy, sans beaminess, edginess, or harshness. With a pair of 5-inch push-push woofers inside and a rear port, the 126s also reach deeper into the lower octaves than expected, and overall coherence is exemplary. Rich in reach-out-and-touch resolution and utterly convincing instrumental tones and textures, the 126s work within the room (with proper setup) to create a holographic and immersive listening experience, drawing you deeper into the musical event. What's not to love? (forthcoming)

Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo/Minissimo Diamond

\$12,100 (\$13,400 with stands)/\$20,100 (\$21,500 with stands)



Replace whatever loudspeakers you've been using with a pair of two-way Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimos and people will notice—before they've even heard a note of music. The whimsical apostrophe shape, the vibrant color, the assured smallness of the things stop folks in their tracks and make them smile. Sonically, the Minissimos are superb everywhere but the low bass, which is to be expected in a two-way. (Extra lower-bass support—provided by Crystal Cable's formidable, powered \$13,400 Subissimo subwoofer—will enhance and extend dynamic range, resulting in a wholly pleasing balance of structure and substance.) When it comes to imaging, the Minissimos disappear, creating a broad, deep, and continuous soundstage. Focus is highly specific, reflecting the recording engineer's decisions regarding perspective. A superior and stylish little transducer, the Minissimo is also available in a sonically superior Diamond Edition, with diamond tweeters and Crystal Cable Absolute Dream internal wiring. (256, 273)

TAD-ME1

\$14,995 (includes black ST3 stands; \$15,495 w/Titanium finish)



The Micro Evolution One (ME1) may be the smallest offering in TAD's Evolution lineup, but this three-way bass-reflex stand-mount arguably has more heart and soul than its larger Evolution Series siblings, the CE1 and E1. It shares common themes such as the brilliant CST (Coherent Source Transducer), the woven-Aramid bass driver, and TAD's sonically undetectable, bi-directional, slotted port. "Micro" in name only, the ME1's sonics are high-energy and potent beyond the speaker's modest footprint. On tap are admirable symphonic scale and soundstage immersion well outside the norm for a speaker of this specification. The headliner, however, is the coaxial midrange/beryllium tweeter, which projects uncommonly transparent and precise imaging and goose-pimpling musical minutiae. What is unexpected are the bare-knuckled dynamics and a power range that will shock even the staunchest large-speaker fan. (278)

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Aavik 180 series



Aavik I-180 Integrated Amplifier



Aavik S-180 Streamer



Aavik D-180 DAC



Aavik R-180 RIAA

Aavik 280 series



Aavik I-280 Integrated Amplifier



Aavik S-280 Streamer



Aavik D-280 DAC



Aavik R-280 RIAA

Aavik 580 series



Aavik I-580 Integrated Amplifier



Aavik S-580 Streamer



Aavik D-580 DAC



Aavik R-580 RIAA

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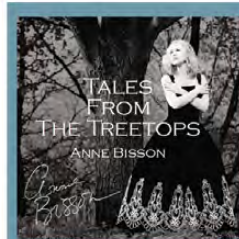
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Horace Parlan
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Yamaha NS-5000

\$14,999

While looking nearly identical to the legendary Yamaha NS-1000, the NS-5000 is in fact something quite new, packed with plenty of unique and well-considered technologies. Zylon, one of the world's strongest fibers, is used for the membranes of all three drivers, presenting an identical and nearly ideal combination of stiffness and damping at all frequencies. Internally, tuned "J"-shaped resonators replace broadband cabinet stuffing to target unwanted low-frequency resonances, while two resonance-suppression chambers attach to the backs of midrange and tweeter to deal with higher-frequency resonant modes. The NS-5000s are characterized by a nearly Quad ESL-like unforced, natural, and open midrange/treble. The bass provides a scale and fullness one would expect from a much larger speaker. A serious, glorious addition to the high-end audio landscape. (308)



Harbeth 40.2/40.2 Anniversary Edition

\$15,995/\$19,490 plus stands

The principal differences separating the 40.2 Anniversary from the stock 40.2 (the virtual embodiment of tonal neutrality) are special exotic or premium wood finishes; the latest WBT-NextGen binding posts; custom Harbeth internal wiring; and Harbeth-branded British-made audiophile-grade poly-capacitors. On casual listening the two editions are so similar they could be different samples off the assembly line. But on critical listening, PS noticed three consistent differences: (1) The Anniversary sounds ever so slightly smoother; (2) the tweeter sounds fractionally better integrated; (3) the whole presentation sounds slightly purer, akin to what you might hear from a really good electrostatic. The 40th Anniversary version of the Monitor 40.2 is every inch the stock 40.2 PS wrote so enthusiastically about, and in a few areas it's actually even a tad or three better. With either version, however, you simply can't go wrong. (293)



Gamut RS3i

\$18,900 (Gamut integrated stands, \$3450)

From the moment reviewer KM first connected the RS3i two-way mini-monitor without much regard to optimizing its placement and just let music play, he heard a sound that was compelling, and it only got better with time and fine-tuning. The RS3i's liveliness never proved anything less than entertaining and engaging. In fact, the more he listened to the RS3i, and the more kinds of music he threw at it, the more he admired its winning ability to dig into the music and bring out its essence and do so with a beguiling *joie de vivre*. Its bass extension and dynamic power are right up there with the best of the mini-monitor breed. The RS3i offers all the advantages of a small stand-mounted speaker combined with stunning dynamic presence. Capable of sounding much bigger than it looks, this is a honey of a speaker and should be on anyone's short list for a small-to-medium-sized room. (266)



STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS

MBL 120

\$21,400 (stands \$1630)

Yes, it looks remarkably similar to the classic 'droid silhouette of the MBL 121. But the 120 has higher damping and rigidity, and a massively reinforced cabinet with twice the volume of the 121—large enough to increase the diameter of the push-push, side-firing woofers. But it's the seamless frequency response of the 120 that represents its greatest improvement. This speaker spins silk from top to bottom but especially in its grainless treble. Imaging and soundstage replication are also more precise. And midbass integration, a weakness of the 121, is much improved in the 120, not to mention it achieves an easy half-octave or more of low bass. The finest compact Radi-alstrahler yet. (228)



Raidho TD1.2

\$23,000

This wonderful mini-monitor plays music with a lot more dynamic impact, control, and sonic heft than it should be able to muster given its size. Its robust sound could easily be mistaken for that of a small-to-medium floorstander. It recreates a large, airy soundscape filled with well-defined images in a coherent contextual whole. High resolution without sounding forced is the TD1.2's main strength. It



also allows all kinds of music to retain their verve and beauty and thereby makes listening a real pleasure, despite the inevitable two-way limits in low-frequency extension and dynamic range. With Raidho's updated ribbon tweeter and a new tantalum-diamond mid/woofer, this complete redesign (by Benno Meldegaard) of the venerable D1 is expensive, but the TD1.2 is for the enthusiast of fine mini-monitors, who appreciates the strengths—and accepts the weaknesses—of the genre and is willing to acquire one of the best available. (304)

**ATC SCM19A****\$8999**

The active, two-way, tower version of ATM's compact, passive SCM19, the 19A equals or betters the stand-mounted version across virtually all sonic criteria. It has superior bass extension, although its greatly improved low-end control and pitch definition are what truly engage the listener. Images just lock in. Its comforting warmth in the lower mids and upper bass further adds to the impression of musical scale and substance. Also, the 19A has a little fuller midbass than you might expect from a two-way (piano aficionados take note). Though this ATC may seem pricey at first glance, considering the amp-packs and precision electronics bundled in each speaker and the studio-grade performance, the SCM19A's true value becomes more and more evident with every recording. Audiophiles might shrink from active loudspeakers, but the SCM19A makes the case for them, emphatically. (272)

Avantgarde Acoustic Zero 1 XD**\$20,600**

Avantgarde Acoustic's DSP'd, active Zero 1 XD compact horn loudspeaker does the seemingly impossible: preserves almost all of the virtues of a horn-loaded loudspeaker while eliminating almost all of its vices. Digitally corrected for accurate phase, amplitude, and impulse response (via FPGAs designed by Denmark's Thomas Holm) within a "listening bubble" of 2m to 4m, the Zero 1 XD is the least horn-colored horn loudspeaker JV has heard—the first horn loudspeaker that can actually "disappear" as a sound source. Exceptionally neutral, coherent (even in the bass), detailed, and fast, with surprisingly lifelike imaging and good soundstaging, and that three-dimensional midband presence that horns give you par excellence, the Zero 1 XDs can make certain instruments and voices sound as "there" as any other speaker on the market. Perfect for a small-to-moderately-sized room or for combo use in a home-theater system—all you have to add to these powered, digitally optimized, horn-loaded loudspeakers is an optical, AES/EBU, or SPDIF cable and a digital source. (245)

**ATC SCM50 ASLT****\$28,000**

The tower version of the famed pro monitor, the three-way, tri-amplified SCM50 ASLT has an ease and neutrality that are underscored by three key properties. One, midrange presence and immediacy. Two, midband speed that borders on electrostatic territory. And three, a staggeringly wide dynamic envelope that easily puts electrostatics and most cone loudspeakers of this size to shame. The vocal and piano images it creates are of such fluency and liquidity that they seemed to materialize players in the room—a transducer that captures harmonics, timbre, and dynamic potency and nuance in a way that can elicit shivers. Bass response plummets effortlessly into the mid-thirty-cycle range. Is active for everyone? Maybe not. But for enthusiasts willing to open their minds just a bit, ATC might be the first call you should make. (290)

Eikon Audio Image1**\$25,000 (optional veneers available at extra cost)**

This integrated system from high-end legend Gayle Sanders breaks new ground in audio-system architecture. Consisting of two speakers and the Eikontrol electronics, the Eikon Image1 system employs sophisticated DSP to correct fundamental problems of speakers in rooms. Each speaker incorporates four power amplifiers, and is driven by four line-level analog outputs from the Eikontrol. With two 8" woofers (one rear-firing), a 5" midrange, and an air-motion transformer tweeter in a diminutive multifaceted floorstanding enclosure, the Image produces a much bigger sound than its size suggests. The "Wavelet" DSP corrects timing information in the bass, realizing greatly improved clarity and definition. The Image1 is technically innovative, highly musical, and an exceptional value. (304)



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PSB Alpha T20

\$649

PSB takes budget seriously, and the short-tower two-way T20 is a serious ground-up redesign. It targets the essentials of musicality first, and lets everything else fall tunefully into place. A very approachable, high-output speaker,



its overall character retains PSB's familiar—and welcome—warmish slant. Midrange integrity has improved, as has dynamic output and low-level resolution. Driver coherence is excellent, as per PSB tradition. Bass response is solid, though the midbass is not always as sharply controlled or pitch-specific as that of more elaborate offerings (though the T20 never veers too far astray). Staging could be more dimensional, and the T20 is a bit dry on top but never dull. The perfect way to impress those highfalutin' audio friends. (302)



Magnepan LRS

\$650

Replacements for and improvements upon Magnepan's venerable, bargain-basement MMGs, the LRSes (Little Ribbon Loudspeakers) look identical to their predecessors, only they are equipped with *all* quasi-ribbon drivers, where the MMGs used a quasi-ribbon tweeter and an "old-fashioned" planar-magnetic mid/woof. The result of this

uptick in driver complement is markedly faster transient response, higher resolution of inner detail, greater coherence with the quasi-ribbon tweeter, and more neutral voicing overall. Minus a subwoofer the Little Ribbons won't plumb the lower depths like Maggie's larger panels do and, sub or no, they slightly roughen up then roll off the mid-to-top treble, but in the midrange they sound like the real thing, and that, folks, is not a given, no matter how much you spend. (302)

Elac Debut 2.0 F5.2

\$699

The floorstanding F5 leverages the strengths of Elac's compact B5, then significantly builds on them. Yes, there's the same warm, relaxed, and responsive midrange, overall tunefulness, and strong sense of musical truth. What distinguishes the F5 is the sheer volume of air that its additional pair of woofers can move.

This results in dividends that include authentically weighted orchestral scale, rock-level dynamics, and vocal reproduction that depicts singers as fully formed and fleshed out with chest resonance, weight, and bloom. While the speaker may not be flawless, it could be reasonably argued that the F5 is as faultless as a transducer is likely to get at this price. A veritable gift to budget-conscious audiophiles and the younger audience. (Debut F5 reviewed in 260)

JBL Stage A190

\$999

The top dog in the Stage family, the A190 is a no frills, 2.5-way, bass-reflex design. The square-shouldered, 42" tower, is an appealing and brawny performer that shows its muscles in the mid- and upper-bass. It energizes a room as only dual-woofers capable of launching a lot of air can. Tonally, it's commendably neutral, neither etching the treble nor port-pumping single-note pulses in the bass. On occasion, the lower octaves seem a little out of step with the tweeter—due to a hint of cabinet coloration or port interaction that can thicken familiar bass tracks. If the goal is musicality and a semblance of full-range, seat-of-the-pants slam and dynamic authenticity, the Stage A190 is one of the best and affordable *real-world* efforts NG has encountered, and a no-brainer bargain. (293)

Dali Oberon 5

\$1199

Stretching the sonic limits in the lower-cost, small-floorstander category, Dali's three-driver, two-way, bass-reflex Oberon 5 strikes a satisfyingly warmer tonal balance, offering good extension and timing, and well-focused detail. Output is robust with a wealth of timbral cues and colors in the midrange. The high frequencies are smooth, although a bit dry and perhaps a tad shaded. Singers are reproduced with a pleasing flesh-on-the-bone physicality, accompanied with lively presence. The Oberon 5 won't venture deeply into the bottom octave, but there is enough oomph in the midbass to suggest some grandeur. An economical yet formidable speaker that with few concessions permits users to toe the line of everyday practicality, while still allowing their audiophile hearts to lead the way. (297)

GoldenEar Technology Triton Seven

\$1538

One of the best loudspeakers for the price, this D'Appolito floorstander was one of CM's favorite products. The Triton Sevens are equally adept in a two-channel system or a home-theater setup. Capable of handling up to 300W, with bass that extends down to 29Hz, this three-way, five-driver speaker is perfect for starter systems or home-theater needs. (238)

Fyne Audio F501

\$1750

Built in the Tannoy tradition by ex-Tannoy employees, the F501 looks and feels like a brilliantly executed mature product. Fyne's coaxial driver is built around a rigid cast-aluminum chassis with the tweeter, a titanium dome, located in the throat of the midrange/woofer cone to achieve point-source acoustic coherency. The bass response is augmented by a 6" woofer operating up to a frequency of 250Hz. The F501 is easy to listen to over long listening sessions. There isn't even a hint of gratuitous brightness, but careful front-end matching is required to mitigate a slight upper-midrange dip. It seems to prefer solid-state amplification for best bass performance and delivers outstanding detail resolution, midband clarity, and spectacular imaging. Add excellent transient speed and control to the sonic mix, and what you end up with is a mighty fine loudspeaker. (304)



The Premier DAC



The Discrete DAC



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Magnepan MG 1.7i

\$1995

In Issue 107 JV selected this tall, skinny, three-way, full-range, quasi-ribbon, dipole floorstander as one of his favorite loudspeakers of the last seventy years. High in resolution, low in distortion, with enough bass and treble (of superlatively high quality) to satisfy anyone save a head-banger and a midrange that reproduces well-recorded voices and acoustic instruments with jaw-dropping realism, it is one of those “sweet spot” wonders that pops up once in a decade or two. The 1.7i gives you a generous taste of everything its bigger and more expensive Maggie brothers are capable of for a tiny fraction of what you'd pay for the same wonderment in a top-line dynamic speaker. A genuine classic. (forthcoming)



Monitor Audio Silver 300

\$2000

A three-way, four-driver speaker (dual 6" woofers, 4" midrange, 1" tweeter) housed in a real-wood cabinet that looks far too nice for this price, the Silver 300 offers a compelling array of musical virtues. Chief among them are the Silver 300's terrific speed on transients, effortless reproduction of dynamics, and overall musical coherence. Bass is detailed and resolved, providing a clear sense of pitch. These qualities infuse music with a vitality that is particularly apparent on rock, pop, and jazz. The Silver 300 is one very well-designed loudspeaker, built with an economy of scale that allows this level of performance to be offered at a reasonable price. (282)



Vandersteen 2Ce Signature III

\$3279 including stands

The Vandersteen 2Ce is the classic three-way floorstander, delivering excellent top-to-bottom balance and engaging musicality. Moreover, Vandersteen's baffle-less, time-and-phase-coherent design can suggest the spatial focus usually heard with planars. It benefits from bi-wiring and should be placed away from walls. The first-order crossovers essential to time-coherent performance somewhat limit maximum sound-pressure levels. In continuous production in eight iterations since 1977, more than 100,000 pairs have been sold. A genuine classic. (139, 122)



Revel Performa3 F206

\$3500

It doesn't take a “golden ear” to be smitten by the prodigious strengths of the F206. This three-way, bass-reflex floorstander has charisma, pure and simple. With its musicality, dynamic energy, and imaging precision, the F206 simply commands its audience to attention. Tonally there are no broad flat spots or nasty peaks. Rather, the F206 presents a united front built upon strong low-frequency dynamic reserves (virtually billiard-table-flat down to 40Hz), excellent upper-bass slam, and lifelike midrange presence. Thanks to its all-new and brilliantly refined dome tweeter with acoustic lens waveguide,

the treble is eloquent yet mercifully without the needle of tweeter localization. A remarkable loudspeaker that exceeds all expectations of performance in its price class and well beyond. (234)

Larsen Model 6.2/Model 8

\$4295/\$7495

Like its smaller and bigger siblings, the two-way Larsen 6.2 is designed to be positioned against a wall, facing forward, which vastly simplifies the process of room placement. Early reflections from the speaker's backwave are eliminated. Additionally, the drivers face inwards and upwards, which addresses the issue of the first sidewall reflection. Tonal accuracy, detail, and spatiality are exemplary. The requirement to site the Larsens near a boundary also contributes substantially to their surprisingly (for their size) potent bass performance, though a powerful amplifier—think 150-to-200Wpc—assures the best results in this regard. The larger Larsen Model 8 is also designed to be placed against the rear wall, thus eliminating the rear-wall reflection. Orchestras sound surprisingly like orchestras, with a transparency that doesn't just go down into the midrange but all the way to the bass. Images are very solid, but the focus is different from free-space speakers, being either more “dimensional” or less precise, depending on one's viewpoint. (276, 251)



KEF R11

\$5000

A three-way, bass-reflex floorstander, the R11 has four 5" aluminum woofers and the same size Uni-Q concentric array (5" midrange with 1" vented aluminum dome tweeter) found in KEF's Reference and Blade speakers. It also has a Tangerine waveguide to improve upper-end frequency dispersion. By design, the KEF R11 delivers a kind of purity or neutrality to the sound that can often reveal finer details that result in greater accuracy and realism—attributes that aren't found every day in more approachably priced speakers. The R11's seemingly play well with various amps and within home-theater setups, as well. But it is their top-to-bottom coherence and even dispersion that helped the R11 sound less like speakers and more like music itself. (298)

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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS



Vandersteen 3A Signature

\$5774 (includes stands)

Like all Vandersteens, the Golden Ear Award-winning 3A Signature is time-and-phase accurate. Its driver complement features the patented midrange and tweeter used in the vaunted Vandersteen 5. The 3A Signature has a relaxed presentation, is musically seductive, and will appeal to those

who want to forget about the sound and enjoy the music, though it does trade off some dynamic contrast and midrange resolution for its overall ability to involve the listener. (139, 122)

Focal Aria 948

\$5990

A three-way, bass-reflex floorstander, the 948 is the top model in Focal's Aria 900 line. Like all the transducers in the company's 900 Series, the 948 uses Focal's unique flax-sandwich drivers—two 8" woofers and one 6½" mid/bass in a vented enclosure—along with an aluminum/magnesium alloy inverted-dome tweeter. These painstakingly engineered drivers enable the 948s to really strut their stuff when it comes to detail, transparency, and resolution—particularly on vocals, percussion, and strings. The sense of realism they deliver can be spooky at times. Although the 948s initially required some set-up tweaks to avoid a touch of treble brightness, they were



excellent after break-in, bringing so many musical layers to life that they created a truly immersive soundscape. (254)

GoldenEar Triton One.R

\$6599

The three-way One.R is a true full-range loudspeaker, loaded with heaps of drivers (three 5" x 9" subwoofers, four 7" x 10" passive radiators, two 5.25" mid/basses, and one folded-ribbon tweeter) that deliver a real wallop. Nice-looking as well as almost unbelievably great-sounding (particularly at their relatively modest price), the One.R bowled reviewer JHb over. Coming off his three-quarter-of-a-million-dollar Wilson WAMMs, JHb wasn't sure what to expect. But he was immediately smitten by the One.Rs planar-like qualities, phenomenal soundstaging, high transparency to sources, sheer airiness in the treble, astonishing resolution, and superb bass. "In selecting the name GoldenEar for his company, Gross has set a high bar," Jacob concluded. "With the Triton One.R he easily clears it." (298)



Magnepan MG 3.7i

\$6600

Maggie's three-way, true-ribbon/quasi-ribbon planar 3.7i successfully addresses three issues that have long vexed "true-ribbon" Maggies: the seamless integration of that ribbon with the other planar-magnetic drivers; the retention of detail and dynamic range at relatively low volume levels; and the reduction of "Maggie graininess." The solution to these problems combined with the famous virtues of true-ribbon Magnepan (neutrality, low distortion, high resolution, superb transient response, lifelike timbres, and natural imaging and soundstaging) produce what is, in JV's opinion, one of the best buys in a high-fidelity transducer regardless of price, provided you have enough amp to drive the 3.7i, and the space to house it. Note that the 3.7i does not produce deep bass below about 45Hz and, like all planars, runs into membrane-excursion limits, slightly limiting dynamic range (particularly in the bass) at extremely high SPLs. (forthcoming)



Monitor Audio Gold 300

\$7000

The three-way, four-driver, bass-reflex Monitor Audio Gold 300s deliver neutrality, powerful presence, and substantial sound output. Of course, the Gold 300s' "fidelity to source" tendencies reveal both a recording's finesse and flaws. This isn't to say that the 300s ever sounded sterile or analytical, but rather that they generally got out of the way to show you what was there. This also means that if you've never heard your favorite songs *without* certain "forgiving" enhancements, you might be surprised by what come through. In a way, this made listening with the Gold 300s a voyage of discovery. If you appreciate or collect well-recorded material, the Monitor Gold 300s will enable you to reap its rewards. (300)

Dynaudio Contour 30

\$7500

The middle model of Dynaudio's middle line, intended for mid-sized rooms, the two-and-a-half-way floorstanding Contour 30 is yet another well-engineered and thoughtful product from this "soup-to-nuts" manufacturer of over 35 years. The key words here are accessible and comfortable. A subtly warm tonal balance is combined with an engaging, solid rhythmic ability, resulting in a loudspeaker that is more modern luxury sedan than "follow every rut in the road" sports car. Newly designed long-throw mid/woofers can easily handle the heat of irresponsible late-night listening. In a first for the Contour line, Dynaudio has also included its most advanced and well-regarded tweeter, the Esotar2 (yes, silky). Serious technology from one of the most accomplished loudspeaker manufacturers in our industry. (287)



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Sonner Audio Legato Duo

\$8500

The Legato Duo from Boston-based Sonner Audio has an invitingly warmish signature that makes music more listenable than challenging. The mids are accurate in timbre, and the presence range is articulate without veering into forwardness. Transients are fast—crash cymbal, hi-hats, snare drum snaps, flat-picked instruments spring forth with a sparkle that conjures the real thing. And solo violin has a nice balance

of bowing and attack without any sacrifice in the resonant sweetness of the body of the instrument. The Legato Duo never overreaches in the upper octaves; nor is it prone to excess sibilance. Low-frequency response extends fairly steeply, albeit with a bit of compression, but the drivers still move a notable amount of air, giving the Legato Duo a heavier footprint than might be expected. A fine debut and a welcome addition to the high-end neighborhood. (293)

Vandersteen Treo CT

\$9499

A loudspeaker of uncommon musicality and precision. Built upon the R&D that gave birth to the flagship Model Seven, the four-driver, medium-scale Treo CT conveys a single-driver-like coherence that immerses the listener in the very moment the recording was captured. It combines uncanny image specificity, color, and texture with an enveloping sense of air and immersiveness. At least some credit must go to the Model Seven-derived CT (carbon tweeter), which is as transparent and open as it is extended. Basically a passive version of the Quatro Wood CT, the Treo may not have quite the bass slam of that model, but you'd hardly miss it due to its unflappable resolution of pitch. A true classic. (262)



Focal Kanta No2

\$9990

The Kanta line from the esteemed French manufacturer is right in the middle of the company's wide range, with the Chorus and Aria series below it, and the Sopra and Utopia lines above it. All Kanta models feature a new "F-sandwich" driver construction that surrounds a flax core with glass-fiber diaphragms. The Kanta No2's 6.5" midrange and dual 6.5" woofers feature this driver design, while the tweeter is the latest version of Focal's acclaimed IAL (Infinite Acoustic Loading) beryllium tweeter. This tweeter sounds superb, with very clean textures. The tonal balance is a bit on the brighter side of neutral, but not to the point of egregiously altering instrumental or vocal signatures. A stout solid-state amplifier is recommended to realize the Kanta No2's bass extension and dynamics. Soundstage width and depth are excellent although the Kanta doesn't throw razor-sharp images. (289)



Audiovector R3 Arreté

\$9999

The R3 Arreté is a two-and-a-half-way floorstanding design with an Air-Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeter and two 6.5" mid/woof cones with membranes made of cross-woven Aramid fibers in a sandwich structure. High-frequency reproduction is exceptionally open, extended, and non-fatiguing, most certainly thanks to the AMT tweeter, a pleated membrane with the voice coil bonded to it. Bass is taut and tuneful; with most musical content, the use of a subwoofer isn't even a consideration. Spatiality and transparency are first-rate. All Audiovector loudspeakers with the

"Arreté" designation offer a proprietary technology called the "Freedom Grounding Concept." Two cables, one from each speaker, join in a Shunko connector that's externally grounded. This serves to reduce motional feedback distortion derived from the woofer baskets. The FGC circuit is standard, but the cable needed to implement it costs an extra \$750 over the base price—well worth it. (305)

GoldenEar Technology Triton Reference

\$9999

GoldenEar's Triton Reference may not be the equal of speakers six times its price, but it is an extraordinary value for the money at \$9999 the pair—especially in a package that is comparatively small and exceptionally well styled for its level of performance. Its built-in subwoofer goes to the lower depth with outstanding realism and detail; the combination of an advanced crossover with a new folded-ribbon tweeter and upper-bass/midrange drivers in an improved layout ensures equally good performance over the rest of the spectrum. A very smooth and musical speaker that is remarkably "listening fatigue"-free without any loss of detail or high frequencies, and with an equally good soundstage given proper setup. A genuine buy and well worth the added cost above the Triton One. (276)



MartinLogan Impression ESL 11A

\$9999

The 11A is the third from the top in MartinLogan's Masterpiece series, replacing the Montis, enthusiastically reviewed by PS. The main advancement in the new model is the incorporation of Anthem DSP room correction in the bass, which makes it possible to achieve exceptionally clean, clear, and powerful low end. A novel sliding-phase network allows for suppression of the backwave. As with the Montis, the integration of dynamic bass drivers with electrostatic arrays is managed with essentially perfect coherence, and all the other familiar ML virtues are in evidence, including life-sized scaling, broad and deep soundstaging, wider than usual dispersion for a paneled array owing to the company's unique "curvilinear" electrostatic elements, and very low apparent distortion. The tonal balance here, however, replaces the Montis' lovely ying-like personality with an altogether more yang-like, even aggressive forwardness; thus listening before buying is highly recommended. (281)





Audio Solutions Figaro L

\$10,000

High frequencies in the five-driver, three-way Figaro L floorstander are handled by a 1" silk dome tweeter with "mini-horn" loading. Above and below the tweeter are 6" ER paper-cone midranges (the "ER" signifies "extra rigid"); a pair of 9" woofers toward the bottom of the cabinet completes the driver complement. For the nearly two months that reviewer AQ spent with the Figaro L's as his primary loudspeaker, he was continually amazed by how such physically large transducers could effectively disappear. Timbral accuracy and dynamics were gratifying, as was resolution. The Figaro L's were revealing, both in terms of uncovering meaningful musical detail and demonstrating differences in recording technique. An excellent loudspeaker. (304)

SteinMusic Highline Bobby M

\$14,000 (available without the woofers for \$7000/pr.)

The Bobby M and its myriad configurations are uniquely striking-looking and wonderfully musical-sounding transducers that actually make good sense when you break them

down—or, rather, when you put them together. Stein's Bobby speakers are modular: The M (for Medium) designation actually refers to the duo that was reviewed, with one bass extender (with two 6" woofers) under a two-way, bass-reflex monitor with horn-loaded tweeter and 6" cone mid/bass. If you use two bass extenders per channel, with one atop the Bobby S monitor and the second beneath it, you'll have a Bobby L (for Large). Sonically, the High Line Bobby M offered such pleasing and smoothly natural musicality and impressive dispersion. (304)



Magnepan MG 20.7

\$14,450

Magneplanar's big, full-range, ribbon/quasi-ribbon dipoles may not be the ideal "fidelity to sources" loudspeakers (transparency to sources is not the strongest suit of dipoles); nor are they the ideal "as you like it" speakers (at least, not for rockers looking for the ultimate in dynamic range and midbass slam). The listeners for whom the 20.7s are very nearly ideal—for whom Magneplanars have always been ideal—are those seeking the absolute sound. These Maggies' magical ability to transport you to a different space and time, and to there realistically recreate (with lifelike scope and size) the sound of acoustic instruments and the venue in which they were recorded, is extraordinary. It almost goes without saying (since these are Magnepanns), but the 20.7s are also incredibly good values, although (as with all Maggies) you're going to have to bring a lot of high-quality power to the party, and you're going to need a good deal of room to house two speakers the height and width of a couple of NFL linebackers. (249)

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Larsen Model 9

\$14,999

This is the latest and best embodiment (superb drivers and crossover) of the Larsen concept, using wall placement and woofers near the floor combined with wide dispersion of the higher frequencies to generate a sound with minimal early reflections but impressive uniformity over the room. The sound of your listening room is replaced by the sound of the original recording venue to a surprising extent. The speakers needs minimal fuss about exact placement and little or no room treatment to achieve independence of the listening room. The Model 9 is superbly finished and, surprisingly small, considering its bass power and extension. Domestic compatibility is ensured, along with striking sonic character. (309)

T+A Talis S300

\$15,300

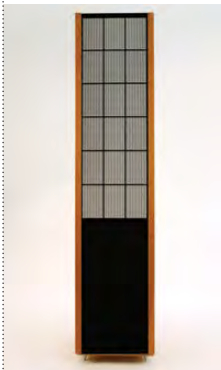
Reviewer AQ thoroughly enjoyed all stripes of music through the three-way, bass-reflex Talis S 300s. If there was one sonic attribute above all others responsible for the S300's appeal, it was their complete lack of additive and subtractive tonal coloration. That's not to say that the S 300s were bland or that they short-changed music in drama or character. Quite the opposite: Distinctive voices and instrumental timbres were immediately identifiable. There are plenty of loudspeakers that will parse these kinds of distinctions. What the Talis S 300s does that most others can't is to reliably represent the uniqueness of more complex sonorities, sounds that may be responsible for a musical effect of special significance. Sonically, the S 300s hold their own with competing models from Wilson and Magico that cost thousands more. Most importantly, the Talis S 300s can make you forget that you are listening to a recording. And that's what it's all about. (293)



Muraudio SP-1

\$16,400

Muraudio developed its doubly curved electrostatic radiating elements initially for its omni electrostatic hybrid, the Domain Omni PX2. The SP1 uses one of the double-curved panels in a hybrid speaker with a wide (120 degrees) but not omni pattern (the electrostatic radiation is effectively a dipole), combined with a sealed-box woofer system with two drivers above and two below (it looks unusual but graceful). The result is a sound with very low distortion, a complete absence of boxiness, a spacious stereo presentation, and the complete integration of the electrostatic panel and the bass drivers. The speaker sounds like a point source. The SP1s offer much technical and musical sophistication at a price that others often charge for an ordinary box speaker. If you are shopping in this price range (or higher), seek this one out for audition. The SP-1 really is a bargain and a truly exceptional product. (293)



Sanders Sound Systems Model 10e

\$17,000 (includes one Sanders Magtech amplifier)

The Sanders Model 10e is the culmination of decades of work by designer Roger Sanders toward perfecting hybrid electrostatic design. A flat electrostatic panel is mounted above a transmission-line-loaded woofer. The speaker, which must be bi-amped, comes with a DSP crossover with a variety of user adjustments. The uniformity of radiation pattern, together with the absence of resonant coloration, gives the midrange of the Model 10e a lack of coloration that is truly in the top echelon. This is one of the lowest coloration speakers available. Within the category of speakers that emphasize facsimile reproduction of the direct arrival, the Sanders system can surely claim to be the equal of any, and far superior to most. And when you consider that even if you buy two Sanders Magtech amplifiers—one comes along as part of the \$17,000 package—the total cost exclusive of source components is \$22,500, this system seems to REG to be not only a wonder but a bargain. (276)

Magico S1 Mk II

\$18,000, M-Cast (\$22,235, M-Coat)

Magico's smallest floorstander sports all the key features seen in the larger models of the California company's S Series—an extruded aluminum enclosure, a diamond-coated beryllium tweeter, and a nanographene mid/bass cone driver. So it's no surprise that the sonic character (or lack thereof) of the new S1 is highly reminiscent of the S3 Mk II and S5 Mk II, as well as, to a significant degree, the exalted Q Series products. The continuity between the two drivers is exceptional—as good as you'll hear in a dynamic loudspeaker design—resulting in excellent imaging and realistic instrumental/vocal reproduction; in addition, bass is well defined and impactful. The lower price is for the granular anodized M-Cast finish, the higher tariff gets you the high-gloss M-Coat version. (270)





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Wilson Audio SabrinaX

\$18,500

The SabrinaX is the smallest and least expensive floorstander in the Wilson line. Entry-level, maybe, but there are no observable shortcuts. The SabrinaX has commanding and linear top-to-bottom energy. It's a ripe sound, a relaxed sound, with a slightly warmer signature that may surprise the brand's devotees. It's a Wilson, of course, so the SabrinaX also has remarkable dynamics, outstanding low-level resolution, and the sense that it willfully wants to drive music forward rather than let it passively lay back. The SabrinaX artfully combines low-level resolution with powerful bass dynamics, never losing grip or control. Unsurpassed in a smaller listening room, this may be pound for pound the best Wilson Audio loudspeaker available today. (Sabrina reviewed in 256)

Piega C711

\$19,995

This floorstander from Switzerland boasts one of the most impressive drivers in all of high-end audio: a coaxial ribbon of Piega's own design and construction. Mounting a ribbon tweeter inside a ribbon midrange gives the driver perfect coherence no matter what the listening position or height. This coherence combines with the manifold virtues of Piega's ribbons—tremendous speed, clarity, transparency, resolution—to create a speaker that, above 400Hz, has few equals at any price. Four woofers (two active and two passive) in an extruded and braced enclosure couple seamlessly to the coaxial ribbon. (287)



Kharma Elegance S7 Signature EL-S7-1.1-S

\$21,750

A loudspeaker for connoisseurs who appreciate the finest the high end can offer. The look is sumptuous, the quality of materials stunning, and the mirror-like finish breathtaking. But it's the sound that truly seduces—ripe with detail and harmonic complexity. Credit is owed to the new beryllium tweeter—a wonderfully coherent match with Kharma's proprietary composite (KCD) woofers. (Say goodbye to Kharma's traditional ceramic drivers.) Ideal for smaller to medium-sized rooms, yet so potent in output and midbass thrust it's easy to forget it's a mere two-way. Like all Kharma speakers the S7 has a micro-dynamic delicacy and resolving power that touch both the head and the heart. (253)



German Physiks HRS-130

\$22,000–\$26,000 depending on finish



The Unlimited II's bigger brother combines a carbon-fiber Dicks Dipole Driver (DDD) with a floor-firing 10"

woofer. The DDD is a serious attempt to mimic the coherent soundfield produced by a small radially pulsating cylinder. The design is capable of wide-range operation and by its nature generates an omnidirectional radiation pattern in the horizontal plane. Expect an exceptionally wide sweet spot coupled with palpable image outlines. The HRS-130 is almost perfect for a small-to-medium-sized room, providing that the room is acoustically tuned along the lines of live-end/dead-end to sharpen image focus. Solid-state amplification works best to tighten bass lines. Micro-dynamics pop right out of the fabric of the music, making it a breeze to connect with the music's emotions and drama. Midrange textures are capable of exceptional purity. (276)

Legacy Audio Aeris with Wavelet Processor

\$22,975

The Legacy Aeris sports extraordinary drivers and cabinet design matched to advanced electronics that provide DSP room compensation and the ability to select a wide range of equalization settings for given types of recordings. The Aeris provides outstanding performance at every frequency to the limits of hearing and beyond. Add in excellent definition, dynamics, and a visual image that might win it an entry in New York's Museum of Modern Art. It has built-in 500W subwoofer amplifiers that provide powerful, room-filling bass, with a crossover point low enough to still get the best sound out of your regular power amplifier. The mix of other drivers provides a coherent and naturally detailed soundstage, as well as enough dipole radiation to widen the stage and give it more natural ambience. The electronics and software allow the Aeris' response to be adjusted to be as musically realistic as possible in any real-world listening room. Now available with advanced Wavelet DSP processor. (235/269)



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

Wilson Audio Yvette

\$25,500

The Wilson Audio Yvette is a three-way, single-enclosure floorstander utilizing drivers, or driver technology, developed for Wilson's much larger and more costly reference products like the WAMM, Alexandria XLF, and Alexx. These marvelous drivers are housed in a highly inert cabinet made of Wilson's proprietary X- and S-material, which lets them do their jobs without smearing. Like the latest-generation Wilson speakers, the Yvette has a richer tonal palette featuring even better resolution, clarity, and transparency than its Wilson predecessors of similar size. The Yvette packs a surprisingly powerful dynamic punch for such a relatively small-footprint loudspeaker, with extended, detailed, and controlled bass. It's a lot like hearing the amazing WAMM but on a smaller scale. (280)



Rockport Technologies Atria II

\$26,500

The Atria—a true Rockport at a more accessible price and size—embodies the best in modern speaker design. Its vanishingly low distortion leads to uncanny levels of purity and resolution, while also making the speaker easy to listen to. The Atria is also highly coherent, speaking with one voice—a voice that disappears as a source and is capable of throwing a soundstage so deep it's spooky. Surprisingly in this size and price range, this speaker has plenty of bass heft—and dynamic range to spare. All these elements come together effortlessly, creating an experience that will hold you in its spell. The Atria is that rare component that is effortlessly "right" in its musical presentation. Further, the speaker emits a contagious vibe of simply being happy to make music. A terrific speaker and a great value, too. (Rockport Atria reviewed in 241)



Acora Acoustics SRC-1

\$28,000

Acora Acoustics speaker enclosures are fabricated from African black granite, a homogenous and mechanically inert material. Owner and designer Valerio Cora is a lifelong audiophile and music lover whose family business for a half century has been "dimension stone"—natural rock utilized for numerous structural and decorative purposes, though not in high-end loudspeakers until Cora found the necessary CNC machinery to produce the precisely hewn granite pieces needed to build the three models that comprise the current Acora line. The SRC-1 is a two-way floorstander with a 1" soft dome tweeter and a 7" sandwich paper-cone woofer, both drivers sourced from ScanSpeak and modified by Cora. The speakers are heavy (246 pounds each), yet elegant tapered monoliths standing 44½" tall. Treble is relaxed, open, and airy; bass manifests good "slam" with plenty of extension to provide a satisfying foundation for symphonic music. (308)




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**Monitor Audio
Platinum PL500 II**

\$29,000

It's been said that big loudspeakers can mean big problems. What's more, it's not hard to spend big bucks on big speakers, especially on, say, a three-way tower with seven drivers. Happily, neither statement rings true here in Monitor Audio's state-of-the-art flagship, the Platinum Series PL500 II. Tall, dark, and handsome, these big boys

impressed from the very first listen. In some ways—in their warm, rich musicality and overall driving energy, for instance—they were slightly reminiscent of certain Raidhos (minus nearly another zero on the price). The PL500 IIs have proven infinitely enjoyable in their layers of depth and detail, delightful musicality, and overall coherence. They can also rock out with the best of them. (268)



Bowers & Wilkins 800 D3

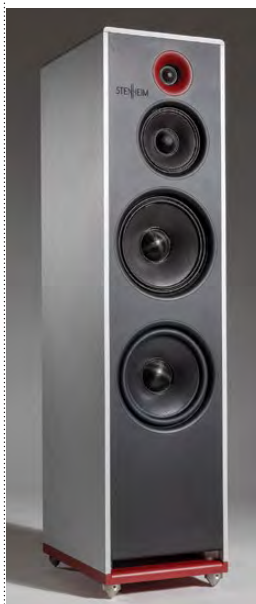
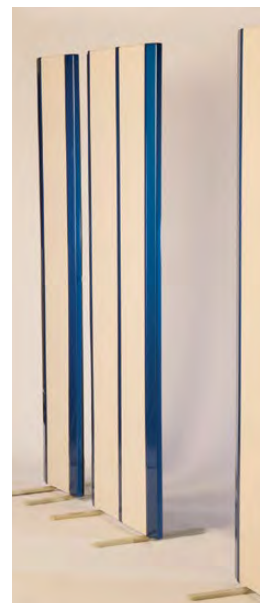
\$30,000

The 800 D3 is the new flagship atop Bowers & Wilkins' acclaimed D3 series of diamond-tweetered speakers. Compared to the next model down, the 802 D3 (there is no 801), the 800 sports larger, heavily re-engineered woofers, netting more linear piston motion within the bass and fewer harmonic artifacts in the mids. The result is tight, meaty bass down to 15Hz, equally extended highs, and purity throughout. Dynamics, imaging, coherence, neutrality, and resolution are also reference caliber. Overall, the 800 D3 is remarkably self-effacing and transparent to the source. You'll need a big amp to get this level of performance, and nearfield listening isn't recommended. Otherwise, considering the technology and quality that have been lavished on this highly pedigreed speaker—and the sonic results—the 800 D3's \$30,000 price seems almost like an error. (276)

Magneplan MG 30.7

\$30,000

A three-way, two-panel-per-side planar with a ribbon tweeter and quasi-ribbon midrange in one section and a huge quasi-ribbon woofer in the other, the 30.7 is likely the fastest, most neutral, highest resolution Maggie JV has auditioned—phenomenally lifelike from the upper bass to the lower treble. As marvelous as it is, its tweeter may still need a little “damping down” via a resistor, depending on your electronics, your room, your sitting position, and your hearing. On acoustic music, its bass is quite natural; on electronic music, it gives up some power-range weight and slam to select dynamic speakers (as all dipoles do). Then again, rock 'n' roll has never been the forte of any Magneplanar; however, if you're an absolute sound listener, you're not going to find a more realistic transducer for this kind of money—or any kind of money. (279)



Stenheim Alumine Three

\$30,000

The Alumine Three is Stenheim's most advanced “compact” floorstanding loudspeaker, intended to deliver the quality and character of the larger Alumine Five in a smaller and more affordable package. The newest Three is a four-driver 3½-way design, where the bottom woofer is taken lower in frequency, and the upper 8" higher. (They share what's in the middle of the bass passband.) A compact, exceptionally built, and easy-to-drive loudspeaker that fits into real rooms, with the heart of a large horn system and touches of electrostatic transparency thrown in for good measure, the Alumine Three stands at or near the top of the finest compact loudspeakers available today. Put it on your short list. (304)

Magico S3 Mk II

\$30,400, M-Cast (\$35,200, M-Coat)

A strong case can be made for the new S3 Mk II occupying the “sweet spot” of the company's entire line—that is, it is a notable value-for-dollar product. The three-way S3 Mk II incorporates Magico's latest driver technologies in the 1" diamond-coated beryllium dome tweeter, the 6" nanographene midrange cone, and a pair of 9" nanographene bass cones. The four drivers function with the unified voice of a good electrostatic but with the gutsy resoluteness associated with the best dynamic drivers. They are detailed and accurate without seeming “analytical” and definitely maintain their composure with large-scale musical material of all sorts. Bass is punchy and extended; the S3 Mk IIs are completely up to the task of providing a satisfying listening experience with opera and orchestral repertoire, big band jazz, and full-throttle rock. A glossy M-Coat finish adds \$4k to the price, compared to the anodized M-Cast version. (276)



Paradigm Persona 9H

\$35,000

Along with the Legacy speakers, the Persona 9H is a product from one of only two manufacturers AHC has found that can really do DSP room correction well. The 9H is truly flat, has very deep, quick, and detailed bass, and a superb new beryllium midrange and tweeter the possess a great deal of life and detail but no hardness. With excellent driver integration and something much closer to a point-source sound than most complex speaker systems, the 9H provides some of the best imaging and soundstage performance around. Pricy at \$35k, but the sound quality really delivers, and its size and weight are far more practical than that of many contenders for the state of the art. (273)



Joseph Audio Pearl 20/20 Graphene

\$37,995

The Pearl 20/20 Graphene comprises two modular sections. The lower half contains twin 8" woofers and the upper module contains a 7" graphene-coated midrange and 1" Sonatex tweeter. When combined, the two sections form the complete speaker. The Pearl 20/20 Graphene further improves upon the sound of Joseph Audio's excellent smaller Perspective2 Graphene, especially in the bass with additional power and extension. New FEA advancements in the graphene midrange and subsequent crossover adjustments have yielded a transducer with solid imaging, great soundstaging, excellent clarity, and a stress-free yet detailed presentation. Audition the Pearl 20/20 Graphene (and reviewer AJ recommends you do) with your favorite music on vinyl, disc, or stream, and prepare to have some fun. (309)



Estelon Xb

\$36,900

The Estelon Xb is all about style—both the aesthetic and musical varieties. The speaker, like all Estelons, has one of the most sensuous silhouettes on the market. But the Xb also features resolution so extraordinary, timbres so richly fleshed-out, and imaging so stellar that it can take the listener beyond engagement with the music to engagement with the hearts, minds, and style

of the players behind the music. Note, though, that the speaker will only do this under the right circumstances. Being of modest sensitivity, the Xb requires substantial power. Also, if toed in even a little, the Accuton ceramic tweeter can prove harsh. With these caveats duly noted, Alan Taffel sums up the Estelon Xb as a rare component that forges a rare listener connection. (255)

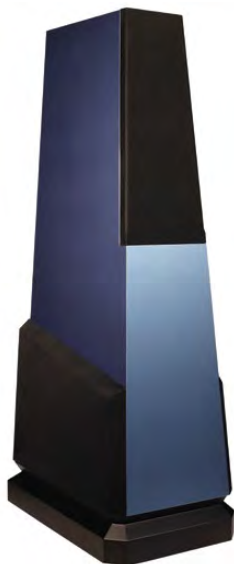


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Vandersteen KENTO Carbon

\$39,475

The KENTO Carbon is a four-way, five-driver floorstander (1" carbon tweeter, 4.5" Perfect Piston midrange, 6.5" tri-woven mid/woofer, and two 9" powered woofers) in an inert, minimum-baffle, constrained-layer cabinet-within-a-cabinet enclosure. A key advancement is the side-firing 9" woofers that, when used with the 11-band analog low-frequency room-optimization/compensation controls, allows for increased 20Hz-to-200Hz integration adjustments near walls or out into the room. The sound of the KENTO Carbon is, first and foremost, extraordinarily cohesive and completely of-a-piece—it takes little effort to be convinced you are listening to realistically reproduced sound. Music through the KENTO Carbon manifests itself in three-dimensional form; even though you can't physically see the performance, your ears will tell you what is happening directly in front of you. (forthcoming)

Magico S5 Mk II

\$41,800, M-Cast (\$47,025, M-Coat)

The S5, now in a Mk II version, stands second from the top of Magico's S Series. A four-driver three-way, it epitomizes the line-up's newfound tonal lushness, freer-flowing bass, and emphasis on organic musicality. The beauty of the S5 is that it achieves these fresh attributes without sacrificing Magico's traditional strengths. The S5 is a detail-unraveller nonpareil and an imaging champ. Its bass is a nice mixture of ease, control, and extension (this is unequivocally a full-range speaker), although its low notes don't breathe and bloom quite as marvelously as do notes elsewhere in its musical palette. With the S5, and the entire S lineup, reviewer AT feels that Magico has found a way to create speakers that are both more affordable and more inviting than those in its flagship Q line, without losing the essence of the brand. (246)



Von Schweikert Audio Endeavor E-5 Mk II

\$45,000

Leif Swanson joined forces with Albert and Damon Von Schweikert in 2015 and his Endeavor loudspeaker line now proudly wears the VSA badge. The E-5 is a large (9" x 66" x 15") vented box manufactured from a cellular matrix material that, especially with the damping techniques employed, is acoustically inert. The speaker incorporates seven drivers per side: a beryllium-dome tweeter, a pair of 6.5" Kevlar midrange cones, and four 7" aluminum-cone woofers, arranged in a D'Appolito configuration. The E-5 provides a vivid and robustly dynamic presentation of large-scale music. In most applications, a subwoofer won't be necessary. Tonal nuance is revealed (if the recording has it) and the speakers can create a gratifyingly capacious soundfield. (276)



YG Acoustics Hailey 2.2

\$46,800

The Hailey 2.2 gets so much right and offers so much trickled-down technology that one could make a compelling argument it represents the performance/price sweet spot in the YG line. It actually comes pretty darn close in overall performance to the next-model-up Sonja 2.2 in bass extension, dynamic range, and soundstaging. The Hailey is also the lowest-priced model to include YG's patented hybrid tweeter with a soft-dome membrane supported by a lightweight, acoustically transparent aluminum "air frame." The Hailey 2.2 is a musically expressive, revealing speaker capable of deep-reaching, tuneful bass and agile, wide-ranging dynamics. It creates focused images within an expansive soundstage into which the speakers sonically disappear as sound sources. The more expensive Sonja 2.2 performs better in top-to-bottom coherency, but the Hailey really delivers the sonic goods in its own right—especially in its price category. (309)

Legacy Audio V System

\$49,500

This digitally optimized, multiway floorstander with highly sophisticated Wavelet processor is one of the best speaker systems AHC has heard—one of those rare new approaches to high-end audio that is so good it compels serious audiophiles to audition it. AHC was truly impressed with what the Legacy V could do in making subtle improvements in the realism of imaging, the definition of image size and depth, and the smoothness and clarity of the bass with a wide range of classical music and acoustic jazz. The Legacy V does have some truly great competition from speakers without any of the features of the Wavelet processor, but, to quote AHC's conclusion, "Damn, the Legacy V is really good!" (258)





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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS



Kharma Elegance dB11 Signature EL-dB11-1.1-S

\$54,000

This reference-quality, three-way, four-driver floorstander uses a beryllium tweeter that is exemplary in its sonic purity and control, and a 7" carbon-composite midrange driver that employs Kharma's sandwich-cone technology, designed to push break-up frequencies as far up as possible, thereby eliminating colorations in the drivers'

working range. This lightweight yet rigid midrange driver reportedly employs the highest-strength, least-resonant carbon fiber available today. Two 10" aluminum woofers complete the package, housed, together with the other drivers, in a handsome yet inert cabinet, utilizing Kharma's "Bullet-Proof Laminate" to help reduce resonance and associated colorations. This is an extraordinary speaker with wonderful coherence, terrific low-level detail, gorgeous timbre, smooth yet extended highs, and surprisingly explosive bass. (256)

Voxativ 9.87

\$55,000

The horn-loaded Voxativ 9.87 has certain advantages that neither planar nor dynamic speakers offer. First, it is very high in sensitivity at close to 100dB/1W/1m, which allows you to drive it to thunderous levels with an SET or lower-powered tube amp. Second, it is a single-driver speaker, using one Voxativ 8" wooden-cone AC-4D wide-bander with Voxativ's top-line neodymium motor to cover its entire audible range.

This means there is no need for a crossover because there are no separate woofers, midranges, and tweeters to join together. Third, the AC-4D is augmented in the bass by an independent, fully adjustable, amplified dipolar subwoofer, the Pi-Bass; as a result, the 9.87 doesn't thin down and roll off in the power range and low end the way other single-driver loudspeakers do. Indeed, the 9.87 doesn't sound like any single-driver speaker JV has heard. It has the body, power, and extension that are almost always missing in such designs, and is uncannily even in response from top to bottom. In sum, the 9.87 is the most complete and realistic-sounding single-driver transducer JV has yet auditioned. (289)



Wilson Audio Alexia Series 2

\$57,900

The Wilson Alexia Series 2 is scarcely cheap, but it does deliver much of the technology and sound quality of Wilson's very expensive speakers in a much more affordable form. The Alexia is the first relatively compact Wilson speaker with Aspherical Group Delay, which allows it to be fully time-aligned for a specific listening position. The end result is a speaker that comes far closer to the imaging and soundstaging accuracy of an ideal point source, with smooth and revealing overall frequency response, no hardness or artificial warmth, and a woofer that provides extraordinary power and low-frequency extension with room reinforcement. One of AHC's reference speakers, and one where his admiration and listening pleasure have steadily increased over time, the Alexia is revealing but not forgiving. It deserves a really good front end and a powerful amplifier that can properly damp and control its bass. It is also sensitive to the choice of speaker cables, but with a matching cable, such as the Transparent Audio wires, it provides a truly remarkable musical experience. (238)

HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

Von Schweikert VR-55 Aktive

\$60,000

Built from the ground up to replace the VR-5 Series of products, the VR-55 Aktive takes advantage of advances in materials sciences and collaborative component manufacture to create a landmark product. The application of VSA's pioneering, patent-pending, active noise-reducing cabinet technology combined with specially developed custom-built drivers from Accuton and Scan-Speak results in a level of performance that GW feels breaks new ground below the \$100,000 mark in resolution, transparency, and transient response. Its resolute yet

sweet and extended high frequencies, vibrant and expressive midrange, and astonishingly fast and accurate bass make it a natural at revealing finely detailed pitches, rich harmonics, and accurate textures. (256)



Magico S7

\$63,800, M-Cast

(\$70,400, M-Coat)

An extraordinarily revealing speaker that has very neutral timbre, and does not exaggerate or fail to reproduce any aspect of sound quality. Deeply extended in the bass but very uncolored, it can seem slightly weak until you realize how far down the bass goes and how clean and tight it is. Dynamics are truly excellent, although the S7 does need real power to show how good it can be at the most demanding dynamic peaks. The only drawbacks are that this level of quality is anything but cheap, and the S7 offers accuracy, not romance or euphonic coloration. Here, however, its lack of any trace of hardness in the upper octaves makes its accuracy as musical as the recording, the rest of the system, and listening room allow. A great speaker. (266)



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Vandersteen Model 7 Mk. II

\$63,999

Although we haven't reviewed the Mk. II version of the Model 7, we've heard it sound spectacular at many shows ever since its introduction. Based on that experience, and our high regard for the original Model 7 (reviewed in Issue 206), we can confidently recommend the Mk. II. This phase-and-time-coherent four-way features Vander-

steen's proprietary balsa-wood and carbon-fiber drivers. A 12" powered push-pull woofer couples to a 7" mid/bass driver, 4.5" midrange, and a 1" dome tweeter. The Model 7 Mk. II features an eleven-band fixed-frequency equalizer, accessible via a row of tiny rear-panel trim pots, that operates below 120Hz, allowing the speaker's low-frequency response to be tailored to the room. This loudspeaker competes with any speaker in the world in many ways, and exhibits top-to-bottom coherence, gorgeous and glare-free timbral reproduction, exceptional bottom-end extension and definition, and a planar-like freedom from box colorations. (forthcoming)

Wilson Benesch Resolution

\$69,500

Reviewer Alan Taffel is not sure whether it's the carbon-fiber enclosure or the rarely-seen isobaric woofer arrangement, but something is responsible for making the Wilson-Benesch Resolution one phenomenal loudspeaker. It achieves with technology and dexterity the same benefits that many others accomplish with brute force. Specifically, the Resolution's background is deathly quiet, distortion is inaudible, coloration is negligible, and imaging is uncannily realistic. These are the sonic hallmarks of a vibration-free enclosure. Further, thanks to in-house made, carefully matched drivers and equally well-thought-out crossovers, the Resolution does everything else well, too. Indeed, its strongest suit is bass performance. With its aesthetic appeal, unerring sonics in every parameter, and unfailing musicality, the Resolution is a speaker you will manifestly enjoy living with. (289)



Estelon X Diamond

\$69,900

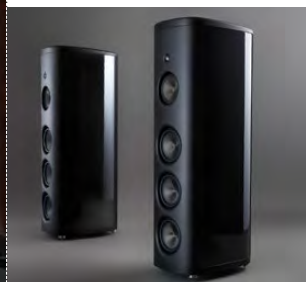
The knocks against big, multiway ceramic-driver speakers, like this gorgeous, quasi-hourglass-shaped number from Estonian designer Alfred Vassilkov, have always been a slightly sterile presentation of timbres, a somewhat limited range at the loud end of the dynamic spectrum (they are superb at the soft one), and (with diamond-tweetered numbers) a lack of overall coherence. With its dead-quiet, molded (literally from stone and acrylic) enclosure, its greatly

improved crossovers, its three (per side) highly-select Accuton drivers, and the superb blend of its diamond tweeter, the Estelon X Diamond appears to have successfully ameliorated all three problems. The result is a speaker that disappears the way certain omnis and line arrays do. Highly transparent and detailed, with exceptionally fast, tight, well-resolved, and deep-reaching bass and, as noted, the best treble this side of a ribbon, the X Diamond contends manfully for JV's large, full-range, dynamic-loudspeaker Palme d'Or. (228)

MBL 101 E MK II

\$70,500

Always the thrill rides of the high-end audio amusement park, with sensational dynamic range, superb transients, high resolution of inner detail, and the most surround-like soundstaging this side of a full-bore home-theater system, the four-way, omnidirectional MBL 101 Es had three weaknesses: Their ported bass, though sensationally exciting, was a bit overblown; their upper midrange could be a bit bright; and their imaging at centerstage could be a little vague. The MK II version of this unique omni loudspeaker ameliorates these problems, without losing the unique Radialstrahler virtues, via a re-designed woofer that offers better control, a new subwoofer cabinet, a new ring design for the bass port, re-tuned front-to-rear dispersion, and new crossover technology. The result is a genuine improvement in a genuine classic. (218, 287)



Magico M3

\$75,000 (\$9600 for optional M-Pod feet)

This new three-way, five-driver (one 28mm tweet, one 6" midrange, and three 7" woofers) floorstander from Alon Wolf leverages and improves upon the strengths of the limited-production M Project. Equipped with better versions of Magico's audibly superi-

or-sounding diamond-coated beryllium dome tweeter, graphene-carbon midrange and woofer (with a novel driver-coupling system), and the aluminum-and-carbon-fiber enclosure initiated in the M Project, the M3 is quite possibly what Magico claims it is: the company's most sophisticated speaker yet. It is certainly among its best-sounding, as lifelike as any multiway JV has heard and, thanks to the curves of its carbon-fiber sidewalls and rounded-aluminum top plate, as invisible as any cone speaker in JV's experience. The M3 pulls off a disappearing act that sets a new high for Magico—and a soundstage of dimensions that, short of an MBL omni, are also a new high for JV. (282)

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YG Acoustics Sonja 2.2

\$76,800

The Sonja 2.2 improves upon the award-winning 1.2 with even greater dynamic ease, bass weight, soundstage continuousness, and resolution of fine detail. The main technical improvement comes from a kind of hybrid tweeter (patented) called BilletDome that combines a soft-dome membrane with a very lightweight, strong, and acoustically transparent supporting “air frame.” The result is a remarkably articulate tweeter capable of withstanding G-forces similar to those of good metal domes but without their oft-associated tell-tale metallic ringing. The cabinet and crossover have also been updated for greater accuracy and efficiency in the bass. The 2.2’s inter-driver coherency and transparency to sources are exemplary. It recreates a very large, focused soundscape, and its overall presentation allows a great deal of musical expressiveness to come through—to thrilling effect on good recordings. (279)

Avantgarde Acoustic XD Series Trio

\$81,000 w/two subs 231; \$92,500 w/two Short Basshorns; \$178,000 w/six Short Basshorns

The eldest of transducer technologies, horn loudspeakers are an acquired taste nowadays; nonetheless, they still offer transient speed, resolution, and SPLs that dynamic and planar speakers simply can’t deliver in the same ratios. The trouble is that horns have generally taken back with one hand what they’ve given with the other. Marred by driver-to-driver phase/time/coherence issues, gross “cupped-hands” coloration, and bass (usually supplied by conventional subwoofers) that simply can’t keep up with the speed and clarity of their horn-loaded mids and treble, they’ve always been sonic mixed bags. However, these perennial problems have been greatly reduced or outright eliminated in Avantgarde’s latest Trio/Basshorn transducer—gorgeous, three-way, spherical-horn-loaded “main” speakers paired with equally gorgeous, outlying, ingeniously equalized quarter-horn bass units that can be stacked to generate low end down into the upper-20Hz range. With horn problems minimized, you are left with a presentation of simply phenomenal scale, color, detail, and power—a wall-to-wall soundfield that comes closer to matching the sheer sonic majesty of a full symphony orchestra in full throat than any other transducer JV has heard. If you’ve got the space, the money, and a taste for big, powerful music, the Trio/Basshorns are essential listening. (253)

Kharma Exquisite-Midi Signature EXQ-MD-2.1-S

\$85,000

The \$85,000 Exquisite Midi is, incredibly, the seventh from Kharma’s top of the line. The speaker employs a unique method of cabinet fabrication, implementing high pressure laminate (HPL) in a multi-layer construction that is CNC’d and adhered in vertical plates to dampen mechanical vibration to almost zero. This allows incredible control of both the internal cavity shape and volume of the cabinet, and ensures the reduction of diffraction and phase and time delays. The result is a speaker enclosure that is sumptuous, and a sonic signature that connected with reviewer Matthew Clott on a very deep emotional level. Subtlety and refinement, tonal structure, timbre and texture, the music itself are all wonderfully present, within one of the deepest and most natural stages MC has ever heard. Staggeringly compact, the Kharma’s only weaknesses are slightly diminutive soundstage height and a lack of true visceral impact and slam in the midbass. (309)



Zellaton Stage

\$89,975

The Zellaton Stage from Germany can be considered the “Stradivarius of loudspeakers.” Each Stage is exquisitely and painstakingly hand-crafted, is one-of-a-kind, benefits from multi-generational know-how, and reproduces sound gloriously—arguably better in some respects than any other loudspeaker. The secrets to the Zellaton’s breathtaking transparency and coherence, as well as its ability to replicate the natural timbre of instruments and voices with lifelike realism, are its hand-made, proprietary drivers, as well as its open-back cabinet design and superb (and costly) electrical parts. The Stage has the most seamless integration of any multi-driver speaker JH has heard, only rivaled in this respect by some full-range electrostatics; as a result, it reproduces all genres of music in a highly engaging and satisfying—as well as riveting—way. JH never before experienced the illusion of live performers in his listening room more often than he did with the Zellaton Stage. (297)



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MartinLogan Neolith

\$99,999

MartinLogan swung for the fences with the Neolith, mounting a roughly 4' x 2' XStat electrostatic panel atop an enclosure that houses a front-firing 12" driver and a 15" rear-firing woofer. Once you've heard the transparency, resolution, and sheer sense of nothing between you and the music that the Neolith's big panel delivers, you'll be spoiled for life. Surprisingly, these virtues of electrostats are combined with seamless integration with the bass, resulting in a speaker with full frequency extension and dynamics along with fabulous transparency. The Neolith is beautifully built and finished (available in seven colors), highly flexible in room-matching, and backed by a solid company with nearly forty years of experience in building electrostatic loudspeakers. An unqualified triumph that competes in the upper echelon of today's best cost-no-object loudspeakers, the Neolith was *The Absolute Sounds* 2015 Overall Product of the Year. (259)



Raidho TD-3.8

\$100,000–\$115,000

These newly redesigned (by Benno Baun Meldgaard), three-way, five-driver (one ribbon tweeter, two 5" tantalum-diamond midrange, and two 8" tantalum-diamond ported woofers) floorstanders from celebrated Danish speaker manufacturer Raidho are simply great sounding—well worth a trip to a dealer who can properly demonstrate them. TD3.8's features do a truly exceptional job of reproducing the sound of music. The speakers may look somewhat ordinary from the front, and a bit small to approach reference-quality, but even a few minutes of serious listening to any good recording with high-quality ancillaries will convince you that they have exceptional detail, life, and dynamic energy, a remarkable amount of bass extension and resolution, and an overall frequency balance from the deep bass to the top treble that is unusually accurate and low in coloration. Even if you can never afford speakers at this price level, listening to the TD3.8s will still teach you something worth knowing about buying the speakers you can afford. (309)



Wilson Audio Alexx

\$109,000

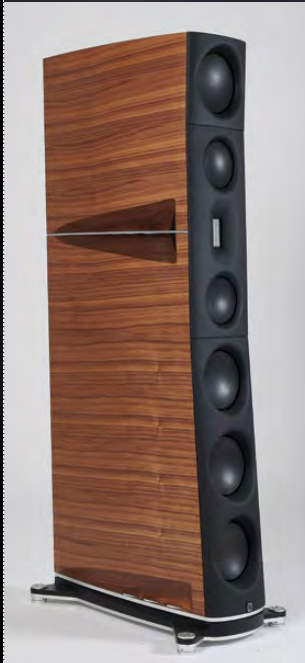
Wilson Audio's Alexx is the first multi-enclosure speaker designed by Daryl Wilson, son of the late Wilson founder and designer extraordinaire, David Wilson. The five-driver, four-way system features the identical 12.5" and 10.5" woofers found in the \$850k WAMM Master Chronosonic, along with dual mid-ranges flanking a silk-dome tweeter. This being a Wilson, the midrange and tweeter drivers are housed in separate movable enclosures for realizing driver time alignment at the listening position. The Alexx exhibits the traditional Wilson virtues of a "bottom-up" presentation, with tremendous low-end weight, dynamic impact, and solidity. The bass is more resolving dynamically, texturally, and in pitch than any previous Wilson. But in a departure for the brand, the Alexx is a more intimate loudspeaker than classic Wilsons, favoring midrange warmth, textural richness, harmonic beauty, and tone-color density. (298)



Børresen Acoustics 05

\$120,000

This svelte, handsome, five-foot-tall, seven-driver, two-and-a-halfway floorstander from justly celebrated Danish loudspeaker designer Michael Børresen sounds, surprisingly, very little like the dark, powerful, immensely detailed Raidho speakers that made Børresen's reputation. Though it uses the same cone/ribbon driver complement as his Raidhos did, the characteristic "bottom-up" tonal palette of Børresen's Raidhos has dramatically changed. Indeed, minus a bit of excess midbass energy around 80–100Hz, the 05 comes as close to a dead-center-neutral timbral balance as any cones-in-a-box loudspeaker JV has reviewed. And thanks in part to its aerodynamic cabinet, it disappears as a sound source as completely as any cone speaker he's heard. Resolution is astonishing without *any* hint of the analytical. And dynamics remain edgelessly explosive, top to bottom. When you combine the 05's newfound neutrality with its extraordinary reproduction of fine detail and unfettered energy, you get a speaker capable of forehead-slapping realism on just about every kind of music. (309)



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Dick Olsher, *The Absolute Sound*, April 2020



The award winning F501 is capable of delivering low bass and effortless dynamics from a compact, small footprint cabinet. Bringing additional scale and power to the F500 series' signature clarity and articulation, the 150mm (6") proprietary IsoFlare™ driver is accompanied by a matched 150mm (6") bass driver. The IsoFlare™ driver delivers isotropic energy radiation with point source constant directivity providing outstanding stereo imaging, even off axis. Ideal for small to medium-sized rooms, the F501 is supplied with a dedicated plinth incorporating our BassTrax™ Tractrix diffuser system, which integrates bass energy uniformly into the room.



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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS



Zellaton Reference MkII

\$150,000

The Reference MkII is a three-way floorstanding loudspeaker with a single 2" true cone tweeter, a single 7" mid/woofer covering the range from 200Hz to 6.5kHz, and three 9" woofers, all housed in a gorgeously finished, multi-layered, matrix-braced, open-backed enclosure. Every one of the Reference's drivers uses Zellaton's unique sandwich cone, rather than a mix of cones and domes made from a variety of materials—which is one reason why the speaker sounds so

remarkably 'stat-like and of a piece. Of course, the main reason the Zellaton Reference MkIIs are reminiscent of electrostats is the realism with which they reproduce voices and many acoustic instruments. This is in equal parts the result of extremely high resolution, extremely lifelike reproduction of timbre, extremely natural and linear reproduction of transients (at less than thunderous levels), and extremely low driver/box coloration. With really great recordings of acoustic music, the result is a truly remarkable sense of being in the presence of actual vocalists and instrumentalists. With electric music, however, they are limited in dynamic range and output level. (279)

Gamut Zodiac

\$159,000

The Gamut Zodiac, with its uniquely shaped, all-natural wood body fabricated from 28 different layers, offers one of the most exotic and beautifully crafted forms in high-end audio. Employing uniquely modified drivers, including an SB Acoustics silk 1.5" dimpled-dome ring-radiator tweeter, a cut-paper 7" Scan-Speak midrange, and three 10.5" Scan-Speak woofers, two at the bottom of the baffle, and one at the top, it is one of the most unfailingly musical loudspeakers GW has had the pleasure of reviewing in thirty years of writing about audio components. While it may fall shy of rendering the ultimate in resolution and transparency compared to products using ceramic, metal, or composite drivers, its exceptional bass extension and impact, authentic rendition of timbre, texture, attack, body, and weight, combined with a disarmingly open, spacious, and organic presentation, afford it an extraordinary degree of musical insight, almost putting it in a class all its own. (286)



Magico M6

\$172,000

Starting with the M Pro, Magico has gone from massive, squared-off metal enclosures to tapered carbon-fiber and smoothly curved milled-aluminum ones. The parallel sidewalls and sharp diffractive edges of Alon Wolf's earlier floorstanding models have been eliminated, and you can hear the difference in the way the M speakers disappear as sound sources A little more than a year ago, Magico introduced the first descendant of the M Pro, the M3. This year it has introduced a larger version of the

same basic design, the M6, with an even more aerodynamic shape (a nearly elliptical chassis) and bigger woofers with considerably greater oomph in the bass and power range. The result was the fullest-range, least cones-in-a-box-sounding cone speaker reviewer JV had heard to that point in time. Of course, the M6 weighs a ton, requires the best amplification and source components possible, and costs a bundle. But if you have a strong back and an even stronger bank account, it (or the smaller, less pricey, sonically similar M3) is a must-audition. (302)

Von Schweikert Audio ULTRA 9

\$225,000

A complex and exotic six-way, eight-driver loudspeaker, the ULTRA 9 combines an inert and voiceless enclosure with a collection of fabulously coherent drivers, a distinct and transparent dividing network, and an extraordinary and unique ambiance speaker array with unparalleled room integration capabilities. The ULTRA 9 speaks with a singularly coherent voice, offers world-class resolution and transparency, and has an ability to render the essence of musical body, bloom, and texture more persuasively than any other speaker in GW's experience. Its exceptionally detailed yet relaxed presentation, as well as its ability to reproduce more harmonic complexity and tonal vividness, allowed it to take a fundamentally musical step forward, making the ULTRA 9 the most musically authentic speaker GW has heard—so much so that he ordered a pair. (298)



Rockport Lyra

\$169,500

Although positioned just below the \$225k Arrakis in the Rockport line, the Lyra sets a new standard in innovative construction as well as in sound quality. The Lyra is a three-and-a-half-way, five-driver design with a rear-firing port. Two 6" midrange drivers flank the 1" waveguide-loaded tweeter, with two 10" drivers on the bottom. The enclosure is made from two massive shells of cast aluminum, with the cavity between them filled with a proprietary, high-density urethane core material. Musically, the Lyra delivers a horn-like visceral immediacy with its absolutely stunning dynamic performance. The musical effect cannot be overstated; the Lyra sounds "alive" in a way that other speakers do not. Yet for all its verve and panache, this is a speaker of great delicacy, capable of conveying the subtlest nuance of texture and shading. It's also the most beautiful in timbre that RH has heard, combining high resolution with lush textural liquidity. The icing on the cake is the Lyra's small size (for a world-class reference, which it certainly is) allows it to fit in many more rooms than other speakers of this price. (276)

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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

Magico Q7 Mk II

\$229,000

Magico has taken the Q7, a speaker RH has long considered to be the state of the art and, surprisingly, made it significantly better. The Q7 Mk II benefits from an entirely new tweeter designed from the ground up, a new midrange diaphragm made from graphene (a new carbon material), and a redesigned crossover with exotic capacitors. The Mk II obviates the classic dilemma of resolution vs. ease by combining extraordinary midrange and treble resolution with tremendous delicacy and a complete lack of harshness and glare. The reduction in distortion is so profound that the Mk II sounds as though it has a different tonal balance than the original Q7, even though the two speakers have identical measured response. Although the woofer section remains unchanged, the Mk II's bass is considerably improved, perhaps by virtue of greater midrange resolution of bass instrument overtones. The overall result is a much deeper connection with music. (256)



Wilson Benesch Eminence

\$235,000

The Eminence is a nothing short of a technical *tour de force* in advanced loudspeaker design. With its in-house-made carbon-fiber enclosure, custom drivers, isobaric woofer loading, innovative tweeter, and no-compromise execution, the Eminence can lay claim to being one of the world's most sophisticated loudspeakers. All that cutting-edge technology is in service to a single goal: to make the speaker disappear. And disappear it does, not just spatially but in tonal colorations and dynamic eccentricities as well. The Eminence is as colorless in timbre as you'll find, and its ability to convey music's rhythms, dynamic accents, flow, and energy is spectacular. The sound is decidedly "top down," favoring dynamic agility, speed, and a light-on-its-feet character over the last measure of bass weight and extension. The electrostatic-like midrange transparency and resolution vaults the Eminence into the upper echelon of the world's greatest loudspeakers. (293)



MBL 101 X-treme

\$263,000

As anyone who has heard it at trade shows can attest, this huge, one-of-a-kind loudspeaker system, comprising two omnidirectional MBL 101s in a D'Appolito array and a separate, three-cabinet, six-driver, push-push subwoofer column per speaker side, is high among the world's most exciting, realistic, beautiful-sounding, and immersive transducers. Though it is hard to beat in dynamics, density of tone color, and sheer spaciousness, what the 101 X-Treme does indisputably better than anything else that JV has reviewed is the third dimension. Vocalists and instrumentalists aren't just imaged in a single plane or with a touch of body behind them, as in a bas-relief. They



stand before you like actual objects, within a soundfield that no other loudspeaker can exceed in width, depth, and height. Where listening to music on other speakers is like going to a film of a concert, listening to music on the 101 X-tremes is like going to the concert itself. The most enjoyable speaker JV has heard in his home (or anywhere else), and his current reference. (301)

Wilson Audio Chronosonic XVX Loudspeaker/Subsonic Subwoofer/ActivXO Crossover

\$329,000/\$40,000/\$4500

Wilson Audio's latest speaker is a landmark achievement, setting a new standard of realism in reproduced music, regardless of technology. The massive four-way, seven-driver speaker, housed in five separate enclosures, features new drivers, cabinet materials, crossover components, even binding posts. The XVX shares with Wilson's \$850,000 WAMM Master Chronosonic the ability to time-align the driver outputs at the listening positions with astonishing accuracy—within just two microseconds. The XVX has stunning transient performance and dynamic agility, a gorgeously beautiful midrange that combines harmonic warmth with high res-



olution, a sweet-sounding top end, and world-class soundstaging. The result is a transducer capable of conveying a wealth of musical expression, from the smallest subtleties to the most visceral. A world-class reference that advances the state of the art in loudspeaker design. (308)

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JL Audio Dominion

d08, \$900; d10, \$1100 (black ash, add \$100 for gloss black)

JL's less costly Dominion series shares much of the design technology and all the philosophy of its more upscale models. What differentiates the Dominion from the slightly more expensive E Series? First the E-series has more sophisticated electronics. Second, the Dominion's drivers don't use the dual-spider technique of the E subs, and third, their baskets are not as deep. For a multi-purpose living room system, a combination of two Dominion D110s and JL's CR-1 electronic crossover is just the thing to help your system go from extremely good to arresting excellent. (forthcoming)



REL Acoustics T/7i

\$999

A special round of applause is due this mini-sub for music lovers. The new T/7i is even faster and tighter than its forbear, yet remains tonally supple, with well-defined timbres. It's also remarkably potent for a single, forward-firing 8" driver augmented by a quick-reacting, downward-firing 10" passive radiator (and a smooth 200W Class AB amp). The sumptuous high-gloss lacquered enclosure with aluminum accents has inputs for high-level Neutrik Speakon (cable included), plus low-level RCA and LFE. A little classic. (265)

GoldenEar SuperSub X

\$1375

Almost impossibly small but packing dual active drivers and twin passive radiators plus 1500W of Class D DSP-controlled power, the little X captures the realism of the concert hall. Bass is full bodied and controlled, and exhibits the requisite bloom and resonant sustain expected of a subwoofer in the bottom octaves. Not just for the classical or jazz aficionados, the SuperSub willingly hits the dance floor with all the right moves—rhythmic output, speed, and punch that belie its modest dimension. It will mate superbly with a wide range of compacts and smaller floorstanders and fit into almost any room. Home cinema anyone? You betcha. A subwoofer of estimable shock and slam along with musical subtlety that's also a bargain to boot. (287)



JL Audio e110/e112

\$1650/\$2100

Before he got this hefty little cube (with 10" driver) from JL Audio, JV was anything but a fan of subwoofers, which always seemed to take more away in midrange transparency, tone color, and resolution than they paid back in bass-range extension, detail, and power. Crossed over at the right frequency—which is easy to do with the instructions that JL provides and the e-Sub's manifold built-in controls, including a genuine fourth-order Linkwitz-Riley high-pass/low-pass crossover—the e110 is the very first sub he's heard that doesn't screw up the sound of the main speaker. Rather it seems to extend that sound into the bottom octaves, producing some of the highest resolution of bass timbres and textures he's heard from any transducer. (244)

GoldenEar Technology SuperSub XXL

\$2199

Speaker maker GoldenEar Technology is legendary for extracting big sound from reasonably priced products. The SuperSub XXL is a case in point. The company has crammed an astounding amount of technology into this fairly diminutive subwoofer, including a 1600-watt digital amplifier that is controlled by a 56-bit DSP device with a 192kHz sampling rate. Add two 12" long-throw active drivers and two infrasonic drivers, and you've got a recipe for a powerful, bone-crushing sub. No matter the source material—rock, pop, or classical—the XXL will deliver a deep and tuneful foundation that helps to create an airier and wider soundstage. (264)



REL S/812

\$2999

The S/812 hits all the bottom-octave benchmarks we've come to expect from REL's top-drawer subs. Luxuriously finished, the S/812 is equipped for battle, with 800W of Class D power, a twelve-inch forward-firing driver, and a matching downward-firing passive woofer. Frequency extension is rock stable and linear, plummeting like a pile driver into the 20Hz range with nary a resonance, squeak, or rattle. Even at assault-force levels, NG wasn't able to trigger spurious resonances or overhang. Though its emphasis is on speed and control, the S/812 doesn't clamp down on decay cues or attenuate instrumental resonances. It provides a firm foundation beneath the music that fortifies images, perspective, and scale. (308)



JL Audio CR-1 Crossover

\$3000

Outboard active analog crossovers are scarce on the ground nowadays. Which is why JL Audio's CR-1 subwoofer crossover comes as such a surprise. You've got to hand it to Brett Hanes and his fellow engineers at JL Audio: They are serious about subwoofering, and the CR-1, which took years to perfect, is a serious effort to optimize the interface between your main speakers and your subs. Built around two banks of extremely high-precision Linkwitz-Riley low-pass and high-pass filters, the CR-1 gives you an entire toolbox of controls that allows you to dial-in the hinge frequencies, slopes, output, and damping (Q) of both the mains and the subs. Though JV has never loved outboard crossovers because of the price they so often exact in transparency, resolution, and dynamic range, the CR-1 appears to be an exception. It is highly transparent, and the improvements the CR-1 can make in achieving a truly seamless blend through the crossover region are considerable—and quite audible. (254, 283)

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AudioKinesis Swarm**\$3200**

The Swarm is a subwoofer system with four subwoofer enclosures powered by a single high-powered amplifier, the four being connected in a series-parallel configuration. Placed suitably, the four subs make possible a remarkable uniformity of bass response over a considerable area, following acoustic ideas originated by Earl Geddes and later seconded by Floyd Toole. This statement of fact hardly does justice to the positively enveloping sound one obtains. The room around is all but erased and the acoustic signature of the recording venue, which is carried in so large a part by the bass, is revealed, nay experienced directly, to a startling extent. The prospect of having four subs in a living room is less daunting than it might seem—each sub can be placed with its driver facing the wall, at which point the sub looks like a rather elegant, if solid, end table. This type of system is the future of bass reproduction in REG's view, and the price here is extremely reasonable as well. (252)

**JL Audio Fathom IWS In-Wall Subwoofer****\$4900/\$7800**

Leave it to JL Audio to reinvent the in-wall subwoofer. Forget the stereotypes of in-wall subs— bloated mid-bass, no real low bass, and as much sound coming from wall vibration as there is from the subwoofer. The IWS system eliminates these problems by isolating the woofer enclosure from the wall structure with an innovative suspension system. Second, JL has shoehorned many of its patented technologies into a shallow version of the fabulous 13.5" driver first developed for the company's Fathom f113. Third, the woofer is powered by a hefty outboard amplifier with integral crossover and JL Audio's superb DARO 18-band DSP room correction. Five enclosure sizes are available depending on the stud depth and number of woofers in the enclosure, along with two amplifier configurations, with each tailored to a specific enclosure volume. All this attention to detail pays off; the IWS delivers deep, clean, well-defined bass with zero audible wall vibration or rattling. A great product that fills a much-needed niche. (300)

**JL Audio Fathom f112/f113v2****\$4000 (f112v2); \$5000 (f113v2)**

These two subs—identical except for woofer size (12" vs. 13.5") and amplifier power (1800W vs. 3000W)—raise the bar in subwoofer performance with their unlikely combination of brute-force power and tonal and dynamic finesse. Capable of delivering high SPLs at very low frequencies without strain, the Fathoms are adept at resolving the pitches, dynamics, and timbre of an acoustic bass. Loaded with useful adjustments, including low-pass filter, polarity, variable phase, and ELF trim. Built-in DARO room correction, considerably upgraded in the newer V2 models, greatly smooths in-room response and makes for easier integration with your main speakers. Reference-quality performance at a reasonable price. (283)

REL 212SX**\$4200**

The REL 212SE was designed to offer clean prodigious deep bass output at a reasonable price. In a beautifully finished piano-black cabinet, each 212SE houses two front-facing 12" drivers made of continuous cast alloy and capable of an astounding 2" linear excursion. The bass drivers are driven by an onboard Class D amplifier rated at 1000 watts. Each cabinet also contains a back-facing 12" passive radiator and a downward-firing 12" passive radiator, both made of the same alloy material. In use, the name of the game for this subwoofer is speed, speed, speed, with negligible distortion.

Because of that speed, reviewer Don Saltzman found it was much easier to mate the 212SE with full-range loudspeakers. Basically silent until called upon for action, a pair of 212SEs will radically increase the perceived sense of air and space of almost any recording. At the same time, definition is precise and output capabilities are immense, adding enjoyment to listening to everything from jazz and orchestral music to the most intense effects-driven movie soundtracks. New 212SX (not reviewed) brings upgraded technology and performance. (212SE reviewed in Issue 285)

**JL Audio Gotham g213v2****\$16,500**

This gigantic \$16.5k subwoofer with two 13.5" drivers has simply redefined subwoofering for JV. Never a fan of subs, he's been turned around by this wonderful product, which in combination with JL's CR-1 crossover, is capable of a more seamless blend with main speakers (be they two-ways, panels, or multiways) than anything he's yet heard (in fact, than anything he imagined possible), with next-to-none of the midrange veiling—the loss of resolution and transparency—that was inevitably part-and-parcel of subwoofering in the not-too-distant past. What the Gotham does is open up an entire new world of loudspeaker possibilities, wherein smaller and/or less expensive mains can be made to sound a whole lot like Wilson Alexandrias or Rockport Arrakis or Magico M 6s, for a lot less dough. JV's reference. (254)





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Emotiva A-150

\$299

The Emotiva A-150 is a compact, black two-channel power amplifier weighing a modest 15.5 pounds. Though Class AB, it runs surprisingly cool, even when pushed.

A shockingly affordable piece of equipment, the A-150 delivers plenty of power for most setups (75Wpc into 8 ohms, and 150Wpc into 4 ohms). Simple and straightforward, its sound can be summed up as “sleek and tight.” With a little run-in time, bass is extended and highs are smooth, creating an ear-pleasing soundstage. Despite its price, there’s nothing inexpensive about the music coming from the A-150. It’s the perfect foundation on which a new audiophile can build a superb-sounding system at a reasonable cost. (284)



NuPrime STA-9

\$745

Generating 120Wpc and weighing just under 10.5 pounds, the STA-9 uses a Class A input circuit with a Class D output stage. NuPrime’s website says it “is designed with enhanced

even-order harmonic circuitry that mimics the most attractive features of tube-amp sound without incurring tubes’ drawbacks and limitations.” It’s easily bridgeable into 290Wpc monoblocks, and its 47k ohm input impedance should work with virtually any preamplifier. In monoblock mode, the STA-9 produced powerful bass, even with the small KEF speakers. (273)

Audio by Van Alstine Vision SET 120

\$899

The solid-state Audio by Van Alstine Vision SET 120 is rated at 60Wpc into 8 ohms and “much more” into 4 ohms. AVA doesn’t publish full specs, although the website states that they are available on request. (In keeping with the AVA spirit reviewer DK chose not to request them.) In any event, those 60 watts were plenty for driving DK’s Monitor Audio Studios to a more than room-filling blast, never losing control despite the raging instrumentation swirling around the driving backbeat of Spiritualized’s challenging *And Nothing Hurt* album. Like its companion AVA Transcendence RB 10 preamp, the Vision SET 120 is the best bargain DK has reviewed. An easy recommendation. (290)



Odyssey Khartago Stereo/Mono

\$995/\$1975/pr.

Although the 130Wpc Odyssey Khartago solid-state stereo amp has been around for better than a decade, it was new to JV until amp-connoisseur Alon Wolf (of Magico) told him he used it in his shop and it was excellent. Wolf was right. Although the Khartago doesn’t have all the articulation and transparency of the standard-setting Soudation 711 stereo amplifier, it has a surprisingly similar balance, no discernible grain, high resolution, and a deep, wide soundstage.

Positively, the best budget amp JV has heard, not counting the Odyssey Khartago monoblocks, which have the same power rating as the Khartago but a stiffer power supply and wider bandwidth, giving them the same basic sound as the two-channel unit with slightly more resolution, dynamic oomph, top-end air, and channel separation. (194, 246)



Optoma NuForce STA200

\$1299

Basic solid-state power amplifiers are not, due to their essential nature (boxes with parts inside),

sexy objects that inspire a lot of audiophile lust. The STA200 will never be accused of looking sexy or especially stylish, unless you’re into stark minimalism. But if sound quality and solid-state reliability are your primary purchasing criteria, the STA200 should be on your radar. You may not be blown away by the STA200’s looks, but its sound turns it into one sexy beast. (268)



Channel Islands C•100S

\$1495

For some audiophiles the highest praise that can be heaped upon a solid-state or digital amplifier is that it sounds “tube-like.” My position is different. I prefer a power amplifier that attempts to sound as invisible as possible, a straight wire with gain, to repeat that old audio cliché. The C•100S stereo power amplifier provided more than enough power to drive all the loudspeakers I threw at it and did it in a way that allowed each loudspeaker’s unique personality to come to the foreground. I suppose if you want an amplifier that has “personality” you should look elsewhere. But if you need a harmonically neutral power amplifier that you can attach to a wide variety of loudspeakers, the C•100S stereo power amplifier would be an excellent choice. (297)

NuPrime ST-10

\$1595

In 2014, NuForce’s co-founder Jason Lim, with backing from the OEM factory, bought the assets of NuForce’s high-end division, obtained the rights to NuForce technologies, and formed NuPrime Audio. In essence NuPrime is NuForce, built in the same factory, but with its focus now strictly on high-performance home-audio products. The NuPrime ST-10 amplifier is what NuPrime calls “near reference class.” Why only “near” reference? As far as reviewer SS can tell it’s because this stereo amplifier only puts out 150 watts per side into an eight-ohm load. The ST-10 is an extremely low-noise power amplifier that, as long as it isn’t pushed into clipping, sounds exceedingly neutral and uncolored. (255)





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Audio by Van Alstine Ultravalve

\$1599

According to Frank Van Alstine, the Ultravalve's lineage is traceable to the Dynaco Stereo 70, which he denotes as its "great grandmother." Although not as romantic sounding as the original, it is far better focused, and in general sounds like a higher-resolution device. It handles bass lines with superb control and good impact and is capable of dishing out plenty of boogie factor. Its ability to retrieve microdynamic nuances allows for the full scope of the music's dynamic intensity and interaction between musicians to shine right through. (204)



First Watt F7

\$3000

For over fifteen years First Watt has served as Nelson Pass' creative playground, allowing him to explore unusual low-power designs with an emphasis on sound quality. The F7 is intended as an improved version of the popular F5, a 25Wpc stereo push-pull Class A amplifier. What makes the F7 so special is its inherent textural sweetness and warm tonality. There are many solid-state amps out there that manage to sound smooth and refined, yet they lack the organic character of live music. The F7, on the other hand, manages to sail through reproduction of violin tone with superb upper-register sheen and transient finesse. The F7 delivers far more incisive transients than tube amps, while its command of space is competitive with the sort of 3-D presentation that tube amps excel in. Simply put: one of the best low-power amps money can buy. (263)

Coincident Speaker Technology Dynamo 34SE MKIII

\$1799

The swanky Dynamo isn't your typical 8Wpc single-ended triode (SET) design. There is no 300B in sight. A 6SL7 dual-triode drives a triode-connected EL34 output stage. There is no global feedback, and the power supply is tube rectified. Expect a sweet midrange, an exceptionally di-

mensional soundstage, and a dynamic presentation belying the amp's miniscule power rating—at least when driving a high-sensitivity loudspeaker. Harmonic textures aren't overly liquid, implying decent-bandwidth output transformers. Treble textures can be improved via judicious tube-rolling. Here is an amp that shouldn't be defined on the basis of its cost. It captures much of the magic of SETs at an entry-level price for that technology. (250, 283)



Odyssey Stratos

\$2700/pr.

These \$2700-the-pair, ultra-high-speed, ultra-high-bandwidth monoblocks from Klaus Bunge are phenomenally good for the money. Of course, there is a reason for this—their family heritage. As was the case with Klaus' near-equally wonderful Khartago stereo and mono amps, the Stratos uses the same circuit as Germany's celebrated Symphonic Line monoblock amplifiers. Even if you A/B'd these monoblocks with super-amps like Soullution's 711 (as JV did), you might still find yourself pondering whether the difference in sound justifies the difference in expenditure. That JV ultimately thought it did is beside the point. The way he sees it, the fact that the Odyssey Stratos monoblocks could give even a picky listener like him pause makes them super-amps in their own right. Yes, you can buy better. The question, as JV said in his review, is: "Do you really want to?" (248)



Audio by Van Alstine FET Valve 600R

\$3199

Frank Van Alstine's 300Wpc hybrid amp is based on AVA's patented forward transimpedance design. A 12AT7 triode front end is coupled to a fully complementary power MOS-FET output stage. The stock JJ Electronic tubes are quite musical, so there's no compelling reason to tube roll. No, it doesn't sound like a tube amplifier, but what sets it apart from a host of solid-state designs is its soulful midrange and ability to retrieve music's drama and tension. Tack on decent spatial delineation and you have the making of a successful hybrid design. It's a complete package featuring low distortion, superior speed, killer bass, and superb dynamics. The treble is somewhat closed in, and harmonic colors are on the dark side of reality, requiring careful system matching. At its best, the 600R can sound much like a \$20k power amplifier. (225)

Dynaco ST-70 Series 3

\$3000

The new ST-70 was not intended to be an exact copy of the original, but rather aims to considerably raise the sonic bar compared to what was expected in the early days of stereophonic sound. Development was driven by the notion of what David Hafler would do today, given modern components and available tubes. It captures what is good about vintage tube sound while dodging its weak spots. Harmonic textures are consistently sweet and refined without sounding overly liquid. Transient decay is accommodated by an impressively low noise floor. The bass range is much improved. And detail resolution and microdynamic intensity are significantly sharpened. This is an amp that David Hafler would have been proud of. (290)





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POWER AMPLIFIERS

NAD Masters Series M22 V2

\$3299

The partner to the excellent M12 pre-amp/DAC, the M22 is a 250Wpc hybrid Class D amplifier that uses the latest nCore amp technology licensed from Hypex. A paradigm of power and touch, its bass response is startling in its boldness, extension, and iron-fisted grip. Yet it goes deeper, exploring more of the dynamic contrasts and harmonic complexities that define the timbre of a bass drum or the skin of a timpani or the drumhead of a tom-tom. But it's not just about the bottom octaves—particularly rewarding is the broader, more crisply defined frequency extension, color, and open window of transparency that makes the M22 all but invisible to the ear. A serious and masterful effort. (258)



Wyred 4 Sound SX-1000R

\$3598/pr.

While many amplifiers use Bang & Olufsen's ICE output device, the SX-1000R combines it with a direct-coupled, balanced, dual-FET input stage, designed by Bascom King. The

SX-1000R's 625W of power (1225W into 4 ohms) can effortlessly deliver copious dynamics and details. Imaging through the SX-1000R is laterally precise. Bass extension, speed, and pitch definition proved to be among the best SS has heard from any power amplifier. If you require a power amp that can generate oodles of effortless output, runs cool, produces a very precise lateral soundstage, has substantial bass extension and control, has a neutral harmonic balance, and is exceedingly quiet, the Wyred 4 Sound SX-1000R should be on your short list. (193, 273)

Cambridge Edge W

\$4000

Reviewed alongside Cambridge Audio's Edge NQ network preamplifier, the 100Wpc Edge W power amplifier delivers on this London-based manufacturer's definition of *Great British Sound*. Opposing-symmetry twin transformers (which cancel electromagnetic interference) contribute to a substantial physical presence, but the performance is anything but heavy. Instead, look for sonic clues in a signal path of just 14 components. It's this less-is-more approach (also wonderfully realized in the minimalist aesthetic) that has resulted in a power amplifier with surprising transparency and composure. Neither imposing nor polite, the W is a fitting 50th Anniversary celebration from a company known to provide innovation with value. (301)



Atma-Sphere S-30 Mk 3.3

\$4600

The Mk 3.3 version of this 30Wpc Circlotron OTL amplifier nudges performance higher in dynamics and soundstage transparency. Although guilty of slight timbral alterations and a somewhat dark tonal balance, these acts of commission, likely due to load interactions, point out the need for a compat-



ible loudspeaker and front-end electronics. The S-30 strikes an intelligent balance between quality and quantity, focusing as it does on delivering a strong first watt. Its asking price is a small price to pay for a generous slice of musical heaven. (261)

HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

Pass Labs XA25

\$4900

The XA25 amp is among Pass Labs' most humble efforts—at least outwardly. The solid-state, single-ended Class A design is rated conservatively at 25Wpc into 8 ohms, so users will need to be a little respectful about speaker selection. But, beyond that, prepare to luxuriate in pure liquid musicality. Pass gear often suggests sweetness and warmth, but the Class A topology of the XA25 takes this quality a luminous step further. Images are conveyed with a weightier sense of physicality—a visceral feeling of mass as well as air. Simply listening to a solo piano revealed heretofore unheard shifts in the micro-dynamics from the player's keyboard touch. Beyond the deep resolution engraved in the XA25's personality was its ability to transform a listening space into a three-dimensional tableaux of images and ambience. (287)



Bel Canto Ref600M

\$4990/pr.

To SS's ears Bel Canto's 15.4-pound, 300W (600W into 4 ohms) Ref600M Class D mono-

block is good enough to qualify as the best all-around power amplifier he's heard to date, regardless of technology or circuit topology. Its combination of extremely low noise (which makes it suitable to drive even highly efficient loudspeakers), precision three-dimensional imaging, relaxed and natural harmonic balance, and power capability makes for a potent package. Couple all its sonic achievements with its relatively modest price, and you have a power amplifier that could well be a benchmark reference for many audiophiles for years to come. (269)



Audio Mirror SET

\$4995

This 45-watt monoblock expands the useable reach of SET designs to include even moderately sensitive 88-to-90dB loudspeakers. Each monoblock has a pair of Russian 6C33C-B triodes in parallel, thereby significantly extending power delivery. The bass range is well defined, which serves as a foundation for a slightly warm and powerful presentation with satisfying tonal gravitas and a sense of ease on dynamic peaks that is uncommon for a typical SET. The treble range is spacious and adequately detailed, while harmonic textures are pretty much in the Goldilocks zone, neither overly liquid nor threadbare. Plan on coupling the Audio Mirror with a high-res preamp in order to plumb the depths of a particular recording. (289)

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POWER AMPLIFIERS



Sanders Sound Magtech

\$5500

This no-nonsense amplifier was designed to drive any loud-speaker load, particularly full-range electrostatics, which can have an impedance of less than 1 ohm in the top octave. The

Magtech “sounds as if it had infinite power into anything, with total stability,” said REG. The fully regulated power supply is unusual. Delivering 500W into 8 ohms and 900W into 4, and fully stable driving capacitive loads, it is the perfect choice for electrostatic speakers. (211)

Luxman MQ88uC

\$5995

In the past, tube amplifier introductions by Luxman (which has been manufacturing tube amps continuously since 1961) have typically been a cause for celebration, and the 25Wpc, KT-88-based MQ-88uC is no exception. Modeled after the vintage Luxman MQ-60 amplifier, which dates back to 1969, the new amplifier is a modernized version of the MQ-60 (itself a triode version of the classic Mullard 5-20 circuit). After break-in, the Luxman’s twin sonic virtues of clarity and control came into sharp focus. Transients were reproduced with a sense of speed and finesse that pentode amps would be hard pressed to match. Nothing short of a musical treasure. (297)



Anthem STR

\$5999

Anthem’s STR amplifier is a muscular yet stylish component that outputs 400 watts into an 8-ohm load, 600 watts into 4 ohms, and 800 watts into 2 ohms; there aren’t many loud-

speakers that this dual-mono design won’t readily control. The STR gives off a fair amount of heart for a transistor amplifier, and an LCD display on the front panel lets the user monitor the amp’s internal environment, as “bass-heavy music” can raise the temperature inside and potentially trigger shutdown. Spatiality and low-end weight are first-rate, and the STR handles the most dynamically recordings with aplomb. (298)

McIntosh Labs MC275 VI

\$6000

The sixth version of this most classic of all McIntosh amplifiers is by far the best, boasting greater tonal neutrality yet without losing the beautifully solid, rounded, dimensional, and natural musicality of its tube origins. Thanks to improvements in the transformers, distortion and noise are far lower than ever, bandwidth higher, dynamic range wider, transparency greater, and transient response better than ever. At 75Wpc (though 90 is typical), the 275 has virtually all the power PS needs, but for those who want more, it’s strappable to a 150W monoblock. Whether used alone or with the C22 preamplifier, the MC275 makes utterly fabulous music, and its traditional looks make it, like the C22, a feast for the eyes as well as the ears. (266)



Linear Tube Audio Ultralinear ZOTL

\$6800

The Ultralinear (UL) amplifier expands Linear Tube Audio’s portfolio of David Berning designs yet again, and marks Berning’s resumption of his “love affair” with TV sweep tubes, namely the 17JN6 Compactron. All of the tubes are auto-biased, so there should be no worries about matching them. While 20Wpc into 8 ohms may not sound like much, the UL actually sounds as dynamic as the ZOTL40 and eclipses it in bass definition. Sonically, the UL has much in common with Berning’s discontinued but legendary ZH270. Common denominators include transient speed and control beyond the capabilities of ordinary tube amps, as well as electrostatic-like midrange clarity. In DO’s estimation the best low-power, push-pull ZOTL power amp Berning has designed to date. (305)



HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER’S GUIDE 2021



VTL ST-150

\$7000

VTL’s ST-150 is a relatively compact yet powerful 6550-based stereo power amp capable of driving a wide range of speaker loads. This classic all-tube push/pull design delivers 150Wpc in its tetrode mode, and, via the flick of a rear-panel toggle, 70Wpc in triode operation. For those who might be intimidated by the idea of tubes, VTL has made the ST-150’s manual bias-adjustment fairly straightforward. Sonically, this is a beauty of an amplifier, with highly natural tonal and textural delivery, an impressive layering of dynamics, as well as nice drive and transient pop, and a strong degree of transparency back to the original session. The sense, as it should be, is not of listening to gear but that the gear is a conduit for the music. (251)



PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Mono

\$7798/pr.

For someone looking to indulge in the tube experience, with most of the drawbacks superbly minimized, GW cannot recommend the 70Wpc (40Wpc in triode) PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP highly enough. It offers creative and thoughtful design, exceptional build-quality, first-rate parts and assembly, tremendous attention to detail, and elegant look and feel—and its sonic performance is clearly well above its reasonable asking price. (269)

Heritage, tradition and timeless styling...

In 1926, Guy R Fountain perfected a new type of electrical rectifier for use with early radio sets. His rectifier consisted of two dissimilar metals held in a special electrolyte solution. So successful was this invention that Guy Fountain founded a British Company called Tannoy (a contraction of the words 'Tantalum' and 'Alloy').

By the 1940s Tannoy loudspeakers and microphones were involved in every aspect of the music industry, from live music entertainment to studio recording and home playback.

Stirling Gold Reference is rich with the timeless styling and the truly engaging performance from its new Dual Concentric Gold Reference driver that can trace its history back to 1967.

Capable of handling peak input power of up to 340 watts and boasting prodigious 91 dB efficiency, the Stirling has the power and authority of much larger and more expensive loudspeakers. Stirling GR offers the bespoke cabinetry and remarkable performance of Tannoy's Prestige series, yet costs no more than a typical mass-produced loudspeaker.



TANNOY Stirling GR

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NuPrime Evolution One

\$7990/pr.

The space-saving, cool running, 240W Class D Evolution One goes a long way toward redefining the monoblock segment. The absence of colorations lends the Evolution One an almost chameleon-like personality; these amps become a kind of cipher that morph into whatever associated source signal is poured into them. Transients are naturalistic, and there's no indication of etch or grain in the upper octaves. Another key is the finesse with which the amp reproduces inner detail. The Evolution One goes beyond the traditional Class D playbook by not only producing the expected low-end extension and slam, but by also focusing on the textural elements, the "bloom factor," that define kettle and kick drums. (298)



Aesthetix Atlas Stereo

\$8000

Aesthetix's first foray into power amps is an unqualified success. Aesthetically, the Atlas is handsome in a brawny but tasteful way. Its front panel offers a convenient menu-system for input selection and crossover point, the

latter feature allowing the amp to easily mate with a subwoofer. Sonically, the amp has great resolution and reflexes, making it a snap to follow interleaved melodic and rhythmic lines. The Atlas creates a cloud of air around each instrument, and a deep convincing sense of space. Indeed, its resolution, timing, and imaging are beyond reproach. Tonally, this amp is on the sweet side in a way that is consonant with real music. The Atlas is slightly less incisive dynamically than AT's reference amp, but so is pretty much everything else. Ultimately, the Atlas is a sheer joy—both sonically and musically—to listen to. (196)

MBL Corona C21

\$9200

Sounding more like a fine linear amp than the hybrid-switching amp it is, the 180Wpc C21 offers much of the lush sweetness and sonic gravity of MBL's own Reference Line 9011 monoblock. It may not have the 9011's slam, but in most other ways the C21 bears a strong resemblance to the flagship's air and dynamic energy. Its top end, where Class D has previously struggled, is smooth and extended, not glassy. Its low end is elegantly controlled but not over-torqued. Rather it has a bit of dark velvet bloom, imparting the full measure of harmonic and ambient decay and timbral resonance with acoustic music. This is an amp that can proudly stand next to the best in its class—switching or non-. (228)



Audio Research VT80SE

\$9500

A 75Wpc hybrid power amplifier using KT150 power output tubes, this latest addition to Audio Research's Foundation Series, the lowest-priced products in the Audio Research lineup, shares a common styling theme with the rest of the series. It is the first Audio Research amplifier with automatic bias setting, which lets the user choose 6550, KT88, KT90, or KT120 output tubes in addition to the stock KT150s. Output tubes are individually fused to protect the circuit against catastrophic tube failure. The VT80SE produces open, detailed sound with exquisite harmonic nuance and shading. (285)



Cary Audio SA 500.1 SE

\$9990/pr.

This easy-to-like solid-state amp combines dynamic stability, excellent frequency extension, and a wide soundstage—in a way that serves all kinds of music well. While it has a drop or two of Cary's classic tube warmth, that warmth is not ladled on excessively. You end up with a 500Wpc amp that fills out the frequency extremes better than most similarly priced tube amps can, while still delivering a touch of tube-like magic. It does not have the soundstage depth and 3-D image density of tubes, but it certainly comes through admirably in most other respects at this price level. (301)



Bel Canto Black EX

\$10,000

This powerhouse Class D amplifier (350Wpc into 8 ohms, 700Wpc into 4 ohms) sounds more like Class A than Class D. The 25-pound unit has a very neutral sound, with a somewhat laid-back upper-midrange and lower treble that result in reduced listening fatigue. The bass is very well defined—quick and tight rather than warm and rich. The bottom end is also extremely dynamic, and coupled with the virtually Black EX's unlimited power, will exploit the bass output and dynamic capabilities of just about any speaker. (290)



Zesto Audio Bia 120

\$10,900

Zesto's Bia 60Wpc Class A all-tube power amplifier, with styling to match the company's Leto lineage and Andros phonostage, brings the designers the trifecta. As with the pre-amps, Bia's personality consists in a completely seductive musicality free from all the usual sorts of electronic colorations and artifacts, for a presentation that never, ever sounds electro-mechanical, instead always wholly natural. Dynamic range is prodigious, the Bia even driving PS's inefficient Quad ESL 2805s to clear, clean, unstrained levels. Broadly neutral but not completely accurate, the sound here



is more beautiful than real. Luscious, velvety, silken, gorgeous, it's the kind of sound around which audio cults develop. (244)

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In the world of music production, there's a select group of recording engineers who have strived throughout their career to deliver the highest quality listening experience possible.

George Massenburg is a once-in-a-generation multi-talented producer, engineer, inventor and educator. Over the past 45 years he has designed, built and managed a number of studios and his work on parametric equalization has received worldwide recognition. He's also recorded a number of notable artists, including James Taylor, Randy Newman, Lyle Lovett, Mary Chapin Carpenter, The Dixie Chicks, Billy Joel, Natalie Merchant and Earth, Wind & Fire.

Additionally, George won a GRAMMY® in the Best Engineered Recording - Non-Classical category for engineering and mixing Linda Ronstadt's *Cry Like A Rain Storm, Howl Like The Wind*. He also produced Linda Ronstadt's *Dedicated To The One I Love*, which won the GRAMMY® for Best Musical Album for Children; and he mixed Patty Loveless' *Mountain Soul II* recording, which won the GRAMMY® for Best Bluegrass Album.

George's contributions to the art and technology of music are so significant that he was given a special Technical GRAMMY® Award by The Recording Academy. It's just one more reason why dCS is proud to honor him as the latest recipient of our dCS Legends Award.



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Ayon Audio Crossfire III PA

\$11,995

SET amplifiers have some significant sonic advantages but also some serious shortcomings that have largely led to their being discarded in favor of push-pull circuits. But Ayon has proven that, if you devote sufficient resources, it's possible to build an SET amplifier that can overcome most of the shortcomings of the genre and that can drive a much wider range of speakers. With 30Wpc, the Crossfire III PA still needs thoughtful loudspeaker-matching, but the amp is much more flexible than most SETs. It effortlessly jumped through all the usual audiophile hoops. Most surprising was the Crossfire III PA's bass performance, which exceeded most of the push-pull amplifiers VF had heard. Mids and highs were exquisitely detailed, effortlessly producing a level of realism VF had never experienced from an SET amplifier. Expensive but worth it. (294)



Bryston 7B³

\$13,590/pr.

This fully balanced, Class AB amplifier packs 600 watts (8 ohms) into a normal-sized, 42-pound single chassis per channel. The previous generation "squared" series improved output-stage performance whereas the newer "cubed" series improves the input stage. The result represents a more refined

sound for Bryston overall. The 7B³'s bass extension and stability during demanding musical passages, coupled with relatively low noise, impart an admirable sense of ease to the presentation. Soundstage depth is in keeping with other solid-state amps at its price level, but width and height are exceptional. (269)

Gamut Audio D200i

\$13,990

This 200W solid-state amplifier has much of the liquidity, three-dimensionality, and image density typically associated with tubes as well as the expected virtues of solid-state—tonal consistency, frequency extension, and bass control. It runs relatively cool to the touch, is tonally neutral, produces a deep soundstage, and should be very reliable. Capable of driving most speakers and resolving musical details well, the D200i gives music lovers a healthy portion of what Gamut's even more powerful and highly resolving M250i mono amp sounds like, but does so at a much lower price. (229)



Constellation Inspiration Stereo/Mono

\$14,000/\$28,000 pr.

This 250Wpc stereo amplifier is based on the same circuit as Constellation's \$210k Hercules. Through the Inspiration offers a less expensive implementation of the Hercules' topology, Constellation has still managed to bring the big amp's DNA to a more affordable price. Although not a budget item, a Constellation amplifier at \$14k is something of a breakthrough. Like the Hercules, the Inspiration Stereo has lifelike illumination in the mids and treble, exquisite resolution of fine detail, and outstanding transparency. Surprisingly, the Inspiration's bass may even be deeper and more powerful than that of the original Hercules. The mono version brings 500W to the party. Sonically, the two are very similar, sharing the Constellation hallmarks of transparency and resolution. Overall, both amplifiers are fantastic values. (249)



Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Classic Stereo

\$14,500

The D'Agostino Classic Stereo represents a return to the venerable days when Dan D'Agostino was producing the stereo equivalent of muscle cars. This is a bruiser of an amplifier that will produce a gobsmackingly capacious soundstage, not to mention considerable prowess in the nether regions. This 108-pound beast doubles its output power with each halving of impedance down to a whopping 1200 watts into 2 ohms. None of this would amount to much, though, if the Classic Stereo sounded crude or clunky. But it doesn't. Rather, the immense power reserves mean that it is never stressed, no matter how complex or demanding the music. Nevertheless, it lacks the last degree of purity in the treble region that much pricier amps, including D'Agostino's flagship M400, provide. But for sheer drive and power, the Classic Stereo is not easy to top. (259)



PS Audio BHK Signature 300

\$14,998/pr.

This 300W (into 8 ohms) hybrid (tube input stage/MOSFET output stage) monoblock is the distillation of all that celebrated electronics designer Bascom H. King has learned about amplifier circuits. The result is a component so rich, natural, and highly resolving that reviewer Anthony H. Cordesman bought the review samples. A genuine masterpiece from an Old Master. (259)

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POWER AMPLIFIERS



VTL S-200

\$15,000

VTL's Luke Manley and his team have made the 200Wpc S-200 relatively idiot-proof for listeners who enjoy the sound of vacuum tubes without the need to geek-out or otherwise futz around with

them. The Signature range features fully balanced differential circuitry and zero global negative feedback, which not only ensures stability under a wide variety of load conditions but also brings greater musicality to a variety of source material. Beyond its outstanding sound and sonic flexibility in both triode and tetrode modes, this KT88-based stereo amp presents music as a cohesive and engaging whole. (290)

Air Tight ATM-300R

\$16,995

The design echoes essential circuit elements of the legendary Western Electric 91 amplifier. The operating point for the 300B is nudged a bit higher as far as plate voltage, and current. In addition, negative feedback is applied to the input stage from the plate of the 300B, which

accounts for the amp's decent damping factor. Atsushi Miura, Air Tight's founder, was aiming for an overall sonic presentation that he describes as "tight and clear." The result is an extremely transparent soundstage that blows away any residual "cloud cover," coupled with excellent bass definition. The ATM-300R brings to life the full sonic promise of the 300B, and fully justifies its reference appellation. Simply put: an awesome display of the power of the first watt! (309)



Technics SE-R1

\$16,999

Forming the heart of Technics' superb R1 system is the 150Wpc (300Wpc into 4 ohms) SE-R1 digital stereo amp. Digital amps haven't taken hold in the high end, but their design inherently confers major advantages to digital sources. In particular, they completely obviate the need for a traditional DAC. Technics has complemented the approach with a gallium-nitride FET drive stage that's so efficient it eliminates parallel output transistors. In addition, the amp's LAPC function uses DSP to optimize the amp's amplitude and phase characteristics for the specific speaker attached. One effect of the feature is to flesh out the three-dimensionality of instrumental images. Along with the single output transistors, LAPC may explain why the SE-R1 is the most tube-like solid-state amp AT has heard. The SE-R1's sound also exhibits bold dynamics, staggering detail, and a huge volume of musical information. Most importantly, its sound is pure and direct. A technical and sonic tour de force. (265)



Hegel H30 Reference

\$17,000

This Norwegian powerhouse amplifier (375Wpc into 8 ohms) combines the brute-force bass control and dynamic impact of a dreadnought design with a midrange and treble refinement reminiscent of a single-ended triode amplifier. The midrange, in particular, is highly vivid and present without sounding the

least bit pushy or forward, infusing the presentation with a palpability and directness of expression previously unheard in any amplifier near the H30's price. The H30 can be operated in bridged mode for 1000W, but some of the midrange magic disappears and resolution slightly diminishes. A great bargain in high-powered amplifiers. (223)

HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021



AVM Ovation SA 8.3

\$17,900

The SA 8.2 does have a sonic character—every audio component does. But like some of the best power amplifiers around, that sonic character is exceptionally limited. In fact, almost all of the colorations you'll hear through this amp will come from the other components. In neutrality and transparency, the AVM SA 8.2 comes close to delivering the sonic equivalent of the Golden Mean. Its power is rated, with extreme conservatism, at 220 watts into 8 ohms, 450 watts into 4 ohms, and 650 watts into 2 ohms, meaning it can drive any real-world speaker, including nominal 1-ohm loads. It can also deliver an immense amount of current, delivering up to 60 volts at the speaker terminals, and enough amperage to deal with any current-demanding speaker. An exceptionally neutral and musical product. (238)

Audio Research Corporation Reference 160S

\$20,000

This stereo version of ARC's celebrated Reference 160M mono amp combines two channels of the same 140-watt circuit into one chassis—including the same lighted "floating" output meters on the faceplate window—for \$10,000 less. The sound is simply gorgeous: detailed, fluid, commanding, alive, and highly musically communicative. It does not sound overtly euphonic in a classic tube way and drove the not-so-easy YG Sonja 2.2 handily. Rather than a tube amp trying to sound more like a solid-state design, the 160S delivers more of what many solid-state amps can't quite fully realize: outstanding 3-D soundstaging, image density, and tonal complexity—while still providing excellent frequency extension, dynamic control, and overall resolution. A stellar tube amp in its price category. (forthcoming)





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Stereophile



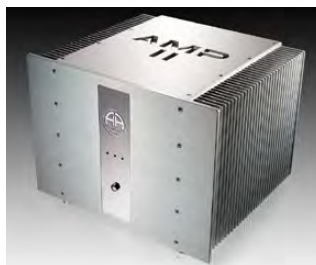
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Accoustic Arts Amp II

\$20,900

Power is not a problem with this hefty, dual-mono, solid-state amplifier, which is really meant to be run in balanced mode and delivers a robust 275 watts into 8 ohms and 450 into 4 ohms. The Amp II is also a nifty-looking piece. From the outset, it did a wonderful job of combining beauty and the beast, not only meeting expectations but surpassing them. Voiced, however slightly, on the warm side, this Teutonic creation is not a sterile exercise in trying to convince the listener that he or she is hearing the event as it was recorded by conveying a stripped down or lean sense of the music. Instead, the Amp II offered a wealth of tonal colors and detail that made it a delight to listen to for hours on end. (295)



D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression

\$22,000 stereo (\$38,000/pr. monoblock)

The Progression series of electronics from Dan D'Agostino brings some of the circuits and technology of the vaunted Momentum line to a lower, but still significant, price. The stereo Progression (monoblocks are also available) is a powerhouse, delivering 300Wpc into 8 ohms. As with all D'Agostino designs going back decades, the Progression can double its output power with each halving of impedance. The innovative "Super-Rail" power supply helps the amp deliver superior dynamic detail, impact, and lifelike realism. (300)



FM Acoustics FM 108-MKII

\$21,600/pr.

Though the latest Swiss firms like CH Precision and Soullution may be getting the lion's share of attention in the press,

venerable Swiss companies like FM Acoustics are still fully competitive. Consider this extremely compact, fairly powerful (70W/66V/15A into 8 ohms, 130W into 4 ohms), beautifully made, and (given its competition) relatively affordable Class A monoblock amplifier from FM's Manuel Huber. This is a very transparent piece of gear that gives you a keen insight into how recordings are being mastered, how instruments are being played, and how ambient space is augmenting timbre, dynamics, and imaging, and it does all this without adding any sense of the analytic or much color of its own. (285)

Zesto Audio Eros 300

\$21,900/pr.

This monoblock is the most ambitious offering yet from Zesto Audio. All Zesto products are designed by George Counnas and built in-house. George favors tube technology, and the 300s reflect his current thinking on how to make tubes state-of-the-art today. Besides being stylish and relatively compact, this amplifier delivers the sonic goods. Conservatively rated at 150W into 4 and 8 ohms, the Zesto 300 features Class A circuitry and uses six KT88s per monoblock. The amplifiers belie their rated power, and drive low-efficiency loudspeakers with ease. There is no sonic mystery that these are tube amplifiers; tonal colors are rich and full-bodied with a lifelike warmth that never devolves into softness or syrup. If anything, the amplifiers are supremely transparent and reveal an amazing amount of musical detail. (273)



VTL MB-450 Series III Signature

\$25,000/pr.

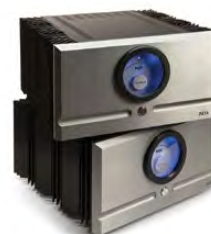
The Series III MB-450, which produces some 425 watts in tetrode mode, is a fine example of a manufacturer working relentlessly to extract every last ounce of performance from an amplifier. Sonically, the 450 is not as tight in the bass as solid-state amplifiers, but it delves deeply into the soundstage and has excellent tonality, which comes across in a very attractive fashion on piano and strings. Coupled with a loudspeaker that is reasonably easy to drive, it sounds superb. (225)



Pass Labs XA160.8

\$27,300/pr.

The 160W, Class A XA160.8 monoblock is yet another inspiring and undisputable success from the mind of Nelson Pass—a man who for the past four-and-a-half decades (his first commercial product was released in 1975) has consistently risen to the challenge of besting himself. At the frequency extremes, the XA160.8's transient speed and pitch definition



are superb. Its paramount strengths are engaging resolution and transparency, with no vestige of glare or the faintest hint of edge. A genuine triumph. (259)



Cary Audio 211 FE

\$21,995/pr.

A zero-feedback design, the all-triode 211 FE monoblock updates the classic 211 that Cary has produced for 17 years. Though it may lack the ultimate wallop of a powerful transistor unit, and may—if you're into large-scale classical or hard rock—run out of juice before you want it to, this is one gorgeous-sounding amplifier—pure, exciting, and expressive. (205)

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Aesthetix Atlas Eclipse

\$28,000/pr.

The hybrid solid-state (there is one 6SN7 tube in the gain stage) Atlas Eclipse monoblock is rated at 300 watts into 8 ohms and 600 watts into a 4-ohm

load—and it is a powerhouse, easily getting the best performance from DS's inefficient Magnepan 20.7s without strain or compression. It is also versatile. For those who use subwoofers with satellite or full-range speakers, the Eclipse can be set up to drive the main loudspeaker while rolling off the low frequencies going to those speakers at 16 different crossover points. The Eclipse does not impose any particular sonic signature upon the music and, far more often than not, reveals air, space, and detail lost on lesser gear. (305)

Boulder 1160

\$28,000

Part of Boulder's least expensive series of electronics, this 300W (into 8 ohms, 600W into 4) stereo amplifier delivers a massive amount of clean, high power and does so in ways that have advantages over much of the competition, including amps that claim similar output power. The 1160 can drive almost any speaker to its limits without changing sound quality, and it can handle even the most demanding mid- and deep-bass transients in an almost effortless fashion. The 1160's bass is very tight and "fast." Many other amps, particularly Class A amps, seem slightly "warmer" and provide more apparent low-end energy, but they do this at the cost of pitch definition. A superb product. (286)



Zanden Audio Systems Model 8120F

\$28,000 (including balanced XLR inputs w/input transformers)

For JV, this large, beautifully built and finished, KT120-tube-based, 100Wpc stereo amplifier from Japanese manufacturer

Zanden is one of the great surprises of this audio season. Why a surprise? First, though scarcely inexpensive, it is considerably less money than Zanden's typical gourmet-audio offerings. Second, though completely tube-powered and tube-rectified, it has none of the image blur, dynamic laxness, ambient grain, and timbral heaviness of typical Class AB KT120-based push-pull tube amplifiers. On the contrary, it is exceedingly fast on transients, extremely hard-hitting, extraordinarily finely detailed, with taut bass that is virtually indistinguishable in grip, definition, and impact from that of much top-tier solid-state, and imaging and staging that are truly wall-to-wall. It is also capable of sounding "real" on any number of well-recorded discs no matter the type of music. (243)

Audio Research Corporation 160M

\$30,000/pr.

The product of two years of research and development, the Reference 160M monoblock doesn't sound like any other ARC amplifier JV has heard, and he's heard just about all of them. Gone are the characteristic brightness—the incandescent "top-down" tonal balance—and the soft grainy noise that any ARC fan has grown used to. Gone, as well, is some (not all) of ARC's traditional and seemingly limitless spaciousness and bloom. In their stead are a more neutral (maybe slightly bottom-up) tonal palette, audibly lower noise (resulting in zero grain), more and more focused detail, richer timbre, a fuller power range, and a markedly increased sense of control over every aspect of the presentation. This increase in grip, color, and resolution may be the result of the biasing scheme (the 160M is one of the first ARC amps with auto-bias). Regardless of the trade-offs in ARC's new circuit, in most ways the 160M sounds more realistic than any Audio Research amplifier that has come before it, and when you consider the scope of William Zane Johnson's legacy that is saying a mouthful. (294)



Audionet Max

\$30,500/pr.

Their more-than-twice-as-tall-as-they-are-wide form optimizes inter-stage isolation, and minimizes both power supply disturbances and overall signal-path length. With 400 watts into 8 ohms (700W into 4 ohms/1100W into 2 ohms), and a damping factor of 10,000 at 100Hz, they can control virtually any loudspeaker, be it dynamic, planar, or ESL, no matter how difficult the load. With vivid harmonic texture, superbly delineated pitch, enormous detail, and lifelike tone color and harmonic bloom, the Maxes breathe life and air into soundstages like few other solid-state competitors. These are truly exceptional monoblocks by any means of comparison, not just at their asking price. (279)



Accuphase P-7300

\$32,000

Combined with its companion C-3850 preamp, Accuphase's top-line 125Wpc P-7300 stereo amplifier is the heart of a solid, bottom-up-sounding reproduction system. The C-3850/P-7300 never edged into the bright or fatiguing; neither did it veer into the soft and dull. The presentation tended to stay close to the sonic lane that provides long-term listening satisfaction with enough resolution, warmth, and soul to allow full exploration of the music being presented. With this setup, the user can tilt to the left brain or the right, depending on mood and desire. (272)



MBL Noble N15

\$35,600/pr.

Class D amplifiers have come a long way since JV reviewed several of the first high-end samples way back when. This latest version from MBL's engineering genius Jürgen Reis is not only flat-out powerful (560W/36A into 4 ohms); it is also (unlike first-generation D) relatively load, level, and frequency independent, thanks to Reis' LASA 2.0 technology, which, among other things, uses a massive analog power supply rather than a switching supply. Sweet on top and a shade bottom-up in overall balance, the N15 is not the last word in resolution or treble extension (even in the MBL line), but then it doesn't cost what that last word costs. What it is is unfailingly enjoyable, powerful, and musical, and, given the right source and pairing, fully capable of a realism that raises goosebumps and of a soundfield of outstanding breadth, width, and depth. (287)



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POWER AMPLIFIERS

CH Precision A1.5

\$39,500 (\$75,000/pr. monoblock)

The Swiss company CH Precision has come on strong in recent years. Its latest entrant into the amplifier wars is the solid-state A1.5 amplifier, an upgraded version of its A1 amplifier that can be run in a variety of configurations, included bridged or mono. Indeed, the amplifier can be divvied up to run two main loudspeakers and two subwoofers simultaneously. With a new 1700VA toroidal transformer, the A1.5 boasts plenty of power, enough to drive pretty much any loudspeaker with aplomb. Its excellent tonality, low noise floor, and taut control ensure that it always delivers the musical goods. (305)



Absolare 845 Passion

\$41,250/pr. (Signature, \$53,500)

These gorgeous, leather-clad single-ended-triode monoblocks deliver the glories of SET circuits in a cost-no-object implementation—gorgeous timbre, a smooth and relaxed treble, tremendous soundstage depth and dimensionality—but do so with enough power to drive real-world loudspeakers to satisfying playback levels. Their

52 watts, coupled with genre-defying bass extension and dynamic impact, deliver qualities that fly in the face of conventional wisdom about SETs. But the Absolare's real magic is in the sense of immediacy—that impression of hearing contemporaneous music-making unencumbered by the electro-mechanical contrivance of the playback system. The result is a deep immersion in the musical expression. (234)

Esoteric Grandioso M1

\$44,000/pr.

The M1 monoblocks are refined tigers. “Refined” because they demonstrate purity, control, and spellbinding clarity. “Tigers” because each amp effortlessly delivers 300 high-current watts into 8 ohms and 1200 watts into 2 ohms—enough for the most challenging loads. The M1's presentation, like the rest of the Grandioso stack, is more upfront than that of traditional Japanese gear, which tends to be laid-back. (280)



Constellation Centaur II Stereo/Mono

\$45,000/\$90,000 pr.

Very high resolution and voluptuous tone color generally don't go together in hi-fi gear, and when they do—as in Class A triode tube circuits or Class A solid-state ones—they often do so at

a price in neutrality. Such amps and preamps seem to have what brilliant engineer Michael Børresen wittily calls a “bottom-up” kind of sound. That is, their sonic “center of gravity” seems to lie in the upper bass and lower midrange. Though the 250Wpc Class AB Constellation Performance Series Centaur stereo amp would probably qualify as a “bottom-up” amp, in that it has a slightly darkish overall balance, it doesn't trade off as much upper-midrange and treble-range air and bloom as typical Class A amps do. It has gorgeous color and texture on top, coupled with an uncanny ability to resolve very fine details without etching or “spotlighting” them. (223)



HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

Lamm Industries ML2.2

\$45,590/pr.

These 18W single-ended triode monoblocks are so magical (with a load-appropriate loudspeaker) that they made RH question the paradigm of high-powered solid-state amplification. The directness of expression, the palpability of images, and the purity of timbres are simply sensational through the ML2.2. These amplifiers make it sound as though the musicians are speaking through time and space directly to you. It's an uncanny quality that must be experienced to be appreciated. The ML2.2 achieves this level of sonics not through a euphonic or tubey sound, but by conveying the virtues of SET amplification without SET colorations. With the right loudspeaker (a big caveat), the ML2.2s don't sound like tubes, SET, solid-state, or any other technology. Rather, they sound like music. (230)



Constellation Revelation Taurus

\$50,000/pr.

Part of Constellation's trio of Revelation series solid-state electronics, the Taurus monoblocks make musical magic. Sonic compromises such as accurate-but-analytical, silky-but-smearing, musical-but-veiled simply don't apply. You get it all: lifelike tonal balance, refined resolution, expansive soundstaging, fantastic dynamic range and control—all in a compelling musical whole. The Taurus mono amp puts out 500 watts and sounds more powerful than many similarly rated products. Though housed in less elaborate case work than its more expensive brethren, the Taurus delivers much of the higher-level Constellation magic at less lofty prices. (294)



Soulution 501

\$55,500/pr.

Though these monoblocks from Germany are “limited” to 120W into 8 ohms (240W into 4, 480W into 2), don't let the specs fool you. Thanks to their new switching power supplies, these ultra-high-bandwidth Class AB solid-state amps are capable of delivering better than 75 volts and 45 amps into any load at a damping factor of over 10,000, giving them absolutely killer grip, extension, and clout in the bass—and everywhere else. Add to this a welcome newfound density of color in the midrange and an exceptionally sweet (albeit beguilingly soft) treble, and you get what were probably the most lifelike all-solid-state amplifiers JV had heard in his home until the arrival of the Soulution 711 stereo amp. (236)



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MBL9008 A

\$60,600/pr.

The massive (better than two-feet long and tipping the scales at 200 pounds), high-current, high-bandwidth, high-power (440W into 8 ohms, 840W into 4 ohms, 1000W into 2 ohms), very-low-distortion, Class AB 9008 A monoblock amplifier sits just behind MBL's even more massive and powerful 9011 monoblock in the company's Reference Line. Both amps were designed by Jürgen Reis, which is tantamount to saying that both amps are bullet-proof technical and sonic marvels. Built using the finest parts, the 9008 A is a beast with a velvet voice. Seemingly inexhaustible speed, power, and plumb-the-depths resolution are here mated to a dark, rich, beautiful tonal palette. The result is something very like what you hear with Soudation's finest amps—a gorgeous bottom-up presentation with the solidity of an ebony pillar. (forthcoming)



Audio Research Reference 750SE

\$70,000/pr.

Surpassing the performance of ARC's last-generation behemoth, the 610T, the 750SE is the best-sounding amplifier reviewer Don Saltzman has heard. It has an extended but smooth high-end frequency response with excellent control and extension in the bass. With an immense power supply, the 750SE outputs a true 750 watts through its 4, 8 and 16 ohm output taps and has the power to drive any loudspeaker load to satisfying levels without strain. Apparently as a result of its huge power reserves, the 750SE surprises in its capability to deliver uncompressed bandwidth and delicacy at low listening levels. All in all, a groundbreaking design that is hard to beat if you are looking for an effortless presentation that sounds amazingly like the real thing. (290)



Zanden Model 9600 Mk2

\$64,350/pr.

For those of you who own speakers that don't require the last word in power, it is difficult to imagine a more appealing amplifier than this drop-dead-gorgeous-looking Class A/AB tube monoblock from the great engineer Kazutoshi Yamada of Zanden Audio Systems. Capable of 60W in Class A (and 100W in Class AB), the flagship Model 9600 Mk2 drives a fairly efficient but somewhat

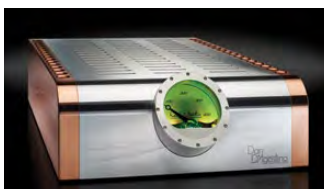


difficult speaker like Raidho's D-5.1 to new levels of resolution, transient speed, timbral accuracy, and overall realism, while maintaining decent (though not world-beating) grip in the Raidho's tough-to-control bass. Powered by twin 845 triodes, the Model 9600 Mk2 is a veritable model of neutrality (as is the case with every Zanden product JV has heard), producing a near-divinely natural tonal balance from top to bottom, without any hint of excess darkness or brightness. (293)

D'Agostino Momentum M400

\$65,000/pr.

The Momentum amplifiers deliver very high power—1800 watts, to be precise—in a delectably attractive package. The large meter in front, modeled after a Swiss watch, lets you know how much power you're delivering to the loudspeakers, but it's almost impossible to tax these babies. For one thing, each unit contains an 1800VA linear transformer as well as a 300VA power supply. Unless you're running an Apogee Scintilla of yore, we don't imagine you'll be wanting for more in the power department. But these amps don't simply deliver brute force. They offer a luxurious, even sumptuous, presentation that edges toward the tube-amp side without tipping over into it. (279)



VTL Siegfried Series II Reference

\$75,000/pr.

The VTL Siegfried Series II Reference, a second-generation design from Luke Manley and company, has been thoroughly upgraded to compete in the front rank of amplification, tube or solid-state. In plain English, this translates to an amp that never runs out of gas. On the contrary, it can sail with aplomb through the most demanding, complex, and thunderous musical passages. The revisions to the Siegfried also mean that it boasts considerably more refinement and micro-detail than its predecessor. While the noise floor is not as low as that of a top-flight solid-state design, the Siegfried offers a warm and fulsome sound that only tubes can provide. It's also the case that Siegfried boasts prodigious grip and slam in the bass that rivals, or even eclipses, a number of solid-state competitors. An amplifier worthy of its lofty Wagnerian name. (246)

Air Tight 3211

\$70,000/pr.

This beautiful and beautifully made all-tube monoblock, powered by a pair of Chinese 211s in a push-pull configuration, generates 30W of Class A power and 120W of Class AB. If you're thinking that these storied, directly heated triodes make for a voluptuously colored sound, you couldn't be more wrong. The 3211 is a neutral, transparent,



effortlessly powerful amplifier with simply superb bass (none of the usual "for a tube amp" qualifications needed), superb transient response, and superb resolution. Indeed, it is the most neutral, transparent, and detailed 211 amplifier JV has heard. Paired with a first-rate loudspeaker (e.g., the Zellaton Reference MkII or the Magico M3), it is capable of fool-you realism on just about any voice or acoustic instrument. (forthcoming)



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David Berning 211/845
\$80,000/pr.

In the 211/845, David Berning has created the most ambitious realization yet of his brilliant ZOTL circuit that allows a tube amplifier to operate without an audio output transformer. The 211/845 offers 60W of pure Class A triode tube power (via either 211 or 845 output tubes) with no feedback. The 211/845 conveys the beauty of instrumental timbre and voices with a stunning realism and immediacy. The impression that everything between you and the music has been stripped away is astonishing. In this regard, the 211/845 simply has no peer, tube or solid-state. Surprisingly, the bass is well defined and tuneful, although not the last word in dynamic impact. The highish output impedance and limited current delivery dictate that the 211/845 be matched with a loudspeaker of appropriate sensitivity and impedance. (265, 276)

Pass Labs Xs 300
\$85,000/pr.

AHC has been using Pass amps as one of his references for years, and he had real doubts whether this new design from Pass could sound all that much better than what he was used to. Well the devil lies in the details, and the Xs 300 monoblocks provide those details in as neutral and accurate a manner as any amplifier he's heard. Outstanding in all the usual areas for a reference-quality amplifier, but the deep bass and transition from the upper bass and midrange truly enhance the musical experience. So does a level of dynamic life and detail that has to be heard rather than described in words. Capable of driving even the most demanding speakers, it produces 300 watts into 8 ohms and 600 watts in to 4 ohms and has a maximum power output of 60 amps. (243)



Tidal Ferios
\$85,000/pr.

This beautifully built middle amplifier in Tidal's three-product range is brimming with clever design touches delivered with elaborate execution. The parts-quality, attention to the smallest detail, and fit 'n' finish are as good as it gets. This monoblock delivers 300W into 8 ohms (680W into 4), and sounds like a powerhouse. The bass is robust and well defined, and the midrange has a remarkable sense of transparency and presence. One of the most immediate and least-colored amplifiers RH has heard. (306)

Ypsilon Hyperion
\$93,000/pr.

The Ypsilon Hyperion monoblocks, which outputs a healthy 450 watts, are a hybrid design that features a tube input stage and a solid-state output stage. The tubes add a dollop of warmth and sinuosity to the affair, while the solid-state output provides grip and transparency. The trademark Ypsilon sound—a lack of an electronic signature—is fully apparent in the amazing purity of the notes. The Hyperion does not have quite the slam in the lower bass of its purely solid-state brethren. But it possesses a pitch definition that is pretty much unrivaled. (283)



CH Precision M1.1
\$104,000/pr. (\$54,000 for stereo version)

This deluxe, Swiss-made, bridgeable, high-current monoblock amplifier that can also run in two-channel mode seems to have some of the sonic DNA of another Swiss company's, Soullution's, world-class electronics. Like Soullution's 701/711 amplifiers, the M1 is ultra-fast on transients, ultra-high in resolution, ultra-low in noise and coloration, and quite beguilingly beautiful in timbre. When the M1 is configured in its default position (no negative feedback), JV reports that he would be hard put to choose between it and Soullution's 711 in every regard save for bass and dimensionality, where the Soullution still holds an edge. When it comes to resolution and speed, however, the two fight to a virtual draw. Indeed, with a less dark (i.e., less "bottom up") balance, the CH Precision perhaps edges ahead in these two critical areas. (259)



Audionet Heisenberg
\$105,000/pr.

The massive (145-pound), powerful (530W into 8 ohms, 1050W into 4 ohms, 2100W into 2 ohms), all solid-state Audionet Heisenberg monoblock is a beast. While GW acknowledges the remarkable advancements in solid-state amplification over the past dozen years or so, nothing else in his immediate experience better demonstrates the transistor's ability to accurately and artfully combine delicacy with power, focus with bloom, resolution with body, detail with texture, and clarity with expressiveness than the Heisenberg (and its companion Stern preamp). (306)

Brinkmann Audio Taurus

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Boulder 2150

\$110,000/pr.

The Boulder 2150 monoblock amplifier is an engineering marvel. It offers a smooth, seductive, and powerful sound that places it in the very highest echelon of solid-state amplification, perhaps superseded only by its big brother in the Boulder 3000 Series. With its 1000 Class A watts on call, this amplifier can pretty much deliver limitless power, but the most remarkable aspect of the 2150 is its control—the softest passage is delineated with what appears to be the utmost timbral fidelity. Cymbal swishes hover in the air for what seems like an eternity. And the ease with which you can follow a bass line when delivered by the 2150 is a distinct pleasure. Does it breach the tubes versus solid-state divide? No. The texture and dimensionality supplied by tubes remain a separate province. But the Boulder builds on the many virtues of solid-state to provide an amazingly realistic reproduction of recorded sound. (249)



Constellation Hercules Stereo II

\$110,000

The Hercules II stereo amplifier from Constellation uses the same updated circuitry found in the Hercules II monoblocks. Quite naturally, it sounds very much like the Hercules IIs, minus the ultimate in power and separation

that the monoblocks deliver. Having said this, at 550Wpc into 8 ohms, 750Wpc into 4 ohms, and 1kW into 2 ohms, the Hercules Stereo II isn't likely to leave you wanting for oomph with any loudspeaker load, reasonable or unreasonable. As neutral in balance as any solid-state amp out there, the Constellation, as you would expect given its price, delivers just about everything that an ultra-high-ender is looking for: resolution, color, staging, imaging, transient speed, and dynamic impact that are the equals of any other top-tier solid-state amplifier JV has heard. One of JV's solid-state references. (forthcoming)

VAC Signature 450 iQ

\$126,000/pr.

These gorgeous, gorgeously made, ultra-expensive, two-box (separate power supplies), 450W monoblock tube amplifiers equipped with VAC's "iQ" system (designed to keep each amp's complement of fourteen KT88s and 6SN7s precisely at ideal bias) represent designer Kevin Hayes' "all-out" effort to produce audio gear without the usual constraints of expense, time, and difficulty of manufacture. The results are phenomenally lifelike. Here is a suite of glass-bottle electronics that has pretty much the same resolution and transient speed as the world's best transistor gear. No, the Signature 450 cannot do the bottom octave and power range with the grip and wallop of Souolution's 701/711, but this ain't your granddad's tube low end, either. (And JV is probably old enough to be your granddad, so listen up.) And of course its midrange and treble are simply and gorgeously dense in tone color and low-level texture. (263)



Lamm Industries ML3 Signature

\$144,690/pr.

This four-chassis, 32Wpc, \$140k SET may strike some of you as the Poster Child for Audiophile Excess, but the Lamm ML3 Signature monoblock amplifier takes the definition of the absolute sound and turns it on its head. For 30 years, the

illusion of live unamplified instruments in space has been what we've been aiming for. Now with this Lamm-attack on the state of the art we can (almost) throw away the word "illusion." The ML3 Signature approaches what we all seek in the reproduction of music—the actual sound of live instruments in space—by reducing or eliminating two of the major sonic colorations that reviewers harp on: electronic haze and midbass overhang. The cost of entry is unquestionably high, but the ML3's performance is even higher. (208)



Air Tight ATM-2001

\$155,000/pr.

As impressed as JV was and is by VAC's Signature 450iQ

amplifiers, these beautifully designed and engineered flagship monoblocks from the legendary Miura-san of Air Tight are just as sonically impressive. Somewhat darker and fuller in balance (with 6550s) than Kevin Hayes' masterpieces, they are also bloomier and more present than the VACs and at least as high in speed and resolution (which is to say, as high as tube electronics get). Although it could be argued that the ATM-2001s are inherently a bit "tubier" in presentation than the VACs, what has been retained here of the classic tube sound is no more nor less than all that is worthy of retaining: the three-dimensional "action" and illuminated-from-within textural details that bring voices and instruments to fullest life. (269)

Souolution 701

\$175,000/pr.

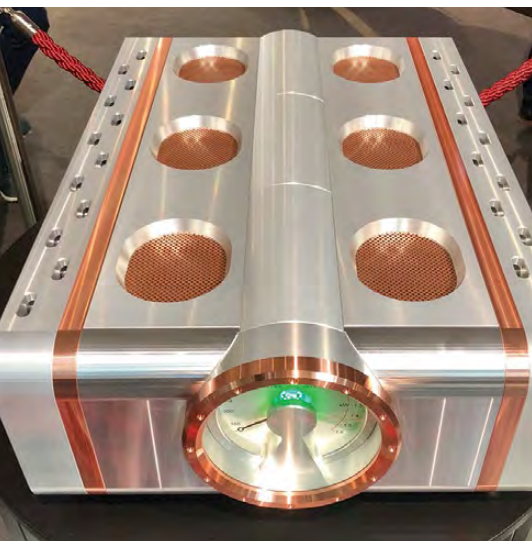
A pair of power amplifiers that cost more than a Mercedes S-Class? Yes, but if you have the dough, there may not be a more musically compelling amplifier on the planet. The massive 701s break new ground in sheer dynamic verve and vivid immediacy. Although not forward-sounding, the 701s convey a sensational lifelike presence in both timbre and dynamics that puts them in a class by themselves. Instrumental entrances fairly jump from the loudspeakers with hair-raising realism. And then there's the phenomenal bass that must be heard to be believed. These amplifiers have a bottom-of-the-earth solidity and dynamic impact unlike any other amplifier. The Souolution 701s are mega-priced, but they also deliver mega-performance. (249)



Constellation Hercules II

\$220,000/pr.

This new version of the 1000W Hercules monoblock is substantially improved in every way. The original delivered reference-quality performance, but with a somewhat polite bottom end. The II's bass is now spectacular, with plenty of heft, weight, and dynamic impact. Not surprisingly, the qualities for which Constellation is known—exceedingly high resolution, transparency, treble delicacy—are even more apparent in the new Hercules. Despite its massive brute-force power, the Hercules II actually has an extremely refined, sophisticated, and filigreed midrange and treble. The casework and visual impact are as impressive as the sound. This is truly a world-class reference. (261)



D'Agostino Relentless

\$295,000/pr.

The Relentless is Dan D'Agostino's statement amp, no two ways about it. Look under the hood and you can see that no expense has been spared. The Relentless is also anti-globalist—no global feedback is employed. The two sides of each amp perfectly mirror each other for true balanced operation—no bridging of amps here. These (1500W into 8-ohm, rising to 6000W into 2 ohms) beasts are born to run. Compared to the more stentorian amps out there, the Relentless tends to pad the initial transient slightly, so you're not going to get as hard a hit on trumpet or piano as you might with other superb solid-state amplifiers. And the Relentless doesn't have the holographic feel of a top-drawer tube amplifier. At the same time, other amps won't provide you with as luxurious and, in many ways, as realistic a sound as you get with the Relentless. (301)

The Voice That Is



"...The new Prisma preamplifier and Ferios monoblock power amplifiers ... possess a vivid immediacy—convey a sense of hearing back through the playback system to the original musical event—that is striking."
— Robert Harley, *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 306



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Manley Labs 'Chinook'
Phono-Stage Pre Amplifier

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HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021



PS Audio Sprout100



Yamaha AS801



NAD D 3020 V2

\$449

Truly a design for our times, the D 3020 is improbably small and portable—and loaded. The 30Wpc D 3020 offers 24-bit/96kHz-resolution USB input as well as aptX Bluetooth streaming. For all its humble size and appearance it's pure NAD. Firmly midrange-centric, it never overreaches in the sense of growing shrill in one direction or tubby in another. Yes, its lighter overall balance is due to some bottom-octave attenuation, but the D 3020 retains an essential presence, a midrange integrity, that sculpts the body of a performance and makes it live in the listening space. (239)

NAD C 328

\$599

NAD calls its new integrated amplifier a "Hybrid Digital DAC Amplifier," a moniker that hints at its digital prowess. The C 328 can handle a wide range of digital sources, and indeed, features a topology that keeps signals in the digital domain until the switching output stage. Although the amp is rated at 50Wpc, Paul Seydor found that the C 328 wasn't lacking for power in real-world situations. The C328 also acquits itself excellently in nuance and resolution. A tremendous bargain and a worthy successor to NAD's legendary 3020 integrated amplifier. (291)



PS Audio Sprout100

\$699

Though the original Sprout's compact, retro-modern form factor remains the same, the new Sprout100 offers a number of upgrades and improvements, including a redesigned phonostage and headphone amp, a new DAC (up to DSD128 and 384/24PCM), a tiny indicator LED, and a remote control. Oh, and twice the power: 100Wpc. The Sprout100 has the ability to coax even more open spaciousness, lively musicality, detail, and low-end extension from the small loudspeakers (especially with the "bass boost" option on). Expect big sound and even more bang for the buck. (289)

Yamaha R-N803

\$799

The Yamaha R-N803 is two-channel network receiver with built-in Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, a phonostage, multiple line inputs, AM/FM tuning, and many, many other features. It outputs 100Wpc into 8 ohms and 160Wpc into 4 ohms, which means it's fully capable of driving a wide range of loudspeakers. It sounds good, almost very good, but its real strength lies in the sheer amount of stuff it handles. It's nearly an entire system in a single box (just add speakers), and is perfect for people getting started in the hi-fi world. (286)

Marantz PM7000N

\$999

The Marantz PM7000N integrated stereo amplifier is a good-sounding product that can shrink audiophile sprawl down to something more manageable without sacrificing what matters most. It's an all-in-one solution that comes equipped with built-in DAC, network streaming, Apple AirPlay, multiple line inputs, multiple digital inputs, and a phono section. Despite having a foot firmly in every camp, its presentation is impactful and gracious—an overall solid performer packed with value. Digital is easy to set up, and while the phono section isn't perfect, it reveals plenty of detail and has a nice, engaging sound. (305)



NuPrime IDA-8

\$1095

Sonically and functionally, there's plenty to love about the IDA-8. Essentially, it's a sleek-looking, small-footprint hybrid Class A/Class D integrated amplifier/DAC that combines Class A warmth and resolution with Class D speed, power, and efficiency. Its DAC supports USB 384kHz/32-bit and DSD256, and is also capable of decoding DoP (DSD over PCM) via coaxial and optical inputs. The IDA-8 delivers substance with plenty of gusto—and does so from an astonishingly quiet background. A great-sounding, stone-cold good deal. (263)

QUAD Vena II

\$1295 (\$1395

with optional case)



The QUAD Vena II is small and gray with a matte finish, though the optional case adds a very nice gloss. The amp is rated 45Wpc into 8 ohms, and includes a phono section, two analog inputs, a preamp-out jack, and a plethora of digital inputs. The Vena II strikes the perfect balance between classic analog inputs and modern digital capabilities. The Vena II is surprisingly engaging with a big, bold, somewhat warm sound, regardless of whether you're in the digital or the analog domain. (302)



Rogue Audio Sphinx V3

\$1495 (\$1595 with remote control)

Rogue products have, like their moniker, usually gone their own way in design, price, and value. The Sphinx integrated amplifier may be the most roguish of the lot. Tubes? 100Wpc (200W into 4 ohms)? U.S. design and manufacture? For \$1495? If that's not enough, this is the first Class D amplifier (actually a hybrid with a pair of 12AU7 tubes in the preamp section) that offers world-class sonics. Includes a very fine discrete headphone amp and a user adjustable mm/mc phono section that is worth the asking-price all by itself. (236)

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"The HPA4 is exceptionally good at presenting a layered, dynamic, yet relaxed sound."

- Tom Martin
The Absolute Sound, April 2019

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NAD M10

\$2749

Don't let its diminutive chassis fool you; NAD's M10 packs a huge amount of technology and performance into a half-width component. The M10 is a wireless, amplified, multi-room streaming-music system. Just connect speakers and a source (which can be a smartphone), and you've got a complete hi-fi with 100Wpc, MQA decoding, and Dirac Live DSP room correction. NAD's BluOS app allows you to control any BluOS or Roon-enabled device to create a multi-room music experience that is simple, intuitive, and easy to operate. Attractive, luxurious, simple to set up and use, small, ridiculously well featured, the M10 is wonderfully enjoyable to listen to when connected to the right speakers for your ears and budget. (298)



Ayon Audio Orion II

\$3910

Tubes done right! Tube amplifiers can sound great but often have their downsides. Enter Ayon, self-appointed ambassador of tube amplification, which runs a five-point

test on every tube it ships, including plate current, transconductance, heater-to-cathode leakage, gas ion current effects, and microphony. The Orion II takes over from there, incorporating Ayon's auto-fixed-bias (AFB) system, which at the push of a button adjusts bias and checks for tube failure, noting which tube has failed via an LED. The system will also automatically "break-in" new tubes. Oh, and the Orion II sounds lovely, readily serving all kinds of music. Ratings in pentode (60 watts) or triode (40 watts) seem optimistic, and RD encourages care in the choice of loudspeakers, recommending a nominal load of 8 ohms or above. (232)

Lyngdorf TDAI-2170

\$3999-\$4999 depending on configuration

The Lyngdorf TDAI-2170 is much more than an integrated amplifier. Although it performs the functions of an integrated (with 85Wpc), it can accept just about all digital or analog sources, and also offers RoomPerfect DSP room correction. The RoomPerfect system does a remarkable job of smoothing out and neutralizing room-induced frequency-response peaks and dips, and once you have heard how RoomPerfect fixes this up, you won't want to go back to the uncorrected sound. Sonically, the TDAI 2170 is impeccable. The amplification, in particular, has an extraordinarily silent background, a sense of being "non-electronic," and an ability to provide direct access to the source material. Moderate price, compact size, ease of use, flexibility, and truly remarkable sound are all right there at the touch of a few buttons. (253)



Marantz PM-KI Ruby

\$3999

With its companion SA-KI SACD/CD player, the PM-KI constitutes the late Ken Ishiwata's valedictory work, representing four decades of electronics that place musical beauty and naturalness over laboratory accuracy. Ecumenical when it comes to tubes

versus transistors, the PM-KI exhibits some of the warmth, richness, and dimensionality traditionally associated with tubes together with the precision, definition, transient attack, bottom-end extension, and impact for which solid-state is prized, while its 100Wpc should satisfy all but head-bangers. Its onboard mm/mc phonostage is so good it obviates the need for a separate one. Ishiwata considered the Ruby components his finest work. (302)



Rogers High Fidelity 65V-1

\$4000

Classic tube power meets modern technology in aerospace engineer Roger Gibboni's designs—there's a free iOS app enabling control of volume, source switching, and operating mode (Ultralinear or triode). Although intended as an entry-level offering, this integrated is definitely not a watered-down version of one of Rogers' big push-pull amps. In fact, it's something totally different—a single-ended design using one EL34 power pentode per channel (upon request the amp can be shipped with a KT88 beam power

tube). Reviewer DO says you really would be hard-pressed to find a more cogent and emotion-packed midrange. (283)



AVM Inspiration CS 2.3

\$5495

This all-in-one component combines a CD player, network streamer (wired or wireless), FM tuner, DAC, phonostage, and a robust 110Wpc Class D output stage in one compact and beautifully built aluminum chassis. The German-made CS 2.2 sounds more powerful than its power rating would suggest, with a taut and robust bottom end and exceptional dynamics. The DAC section is superb. The large rechargeable remote can control an entire system. Optionally, the CS 2.2 can also be controlled by an Android or iOS device. (282)



Naim Uniti Nova

\$5990

The Naim Uniti Nova is an 80Wpc integrated amplifier/digital player for the 21st century. Input options include one single-ended analog input, one five-pin DIN input, two USB inputs (one on the front and one on the back), one SD card slot, one HDMI input, one BNC digital input, two coaxial SPDIF digital inputs, two optical TosLink inputs, wireless streaming via Chromecast, AirPlay, Bluetooth (aptX HD), or Wi-Fi (2.4 or 5GHz), and UPnP streaming via its Ethernet connection. The Uniti is also a Roon endpoint. If you need a modern single-box solution that can play from dad's NAS drive or sis' smartphone (and be controlled by any smartphone in the house), the Naim Uniti Nova can make the transition from hair-shirt audiophilia to silk-shirt convenience as painless,

musically expansive, and audiophile-approved as possible. (284)



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Focal Stellia

Chord Hugo M Scaler

Silver Dragon Digital Cable

Silver Dragon Optical Cable

Chord Hugo^{TT2}

Silver Dragon USB Cable

Black Dragon Interconnect

Chord TToby

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Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe

\$5999 (\$5000 standard version)

A true multi-discipline, 125Wpc Class AB, DAC-equipped, network-audio performer that summoned a neutral personality throughout the midrange with intimations of extra bloom and body in the mid and upper bass. Orchestral music possessed a firm, of-a-piece signature that was detailed and layered yet stable and immersive. Treble octaves were smooth and non-fatiguing. Transient behavior was unforced and natural, rather than overly etched and prickly. Italy's Gold Note fulfills the expectations of enthusiasts across the generations by having produced a modern, musically engaging, and highly configurable amp. (300)



Hegel H390

\$6000

The Norwegian firm's integrated amplifiers have always been overachievers, but the new H360 is, by a wide margin, Hegel's most impressive effort yet. With 250Wpc into 8

ohms (420Wpc into 4 ohms) and 50 percent greater current capacity than the H300 it replaces, the H360 is a powerhouse. But that power comes with Hegel's signature virtues of a gorgeous rendering of timbre, a completely relaxed and natural presentation devoid of electronic artifacts, and a spatial dimensionality that competes with expensive separates. To top it off, the integral DAC is outstanding—fully up to the quality of the amplifier. (260)

Aesthetix Mimas

\$7000

The Mimas is, in a way, an old musical soul. Hip and striking with its clean, precision machining and uncluttered design, the 150Wpc dual-mono, hybrid amp could be just another high-performance entrant in the *über*-integrated sweeps. However, Mimas, the first integrated from Aesthetix, is something much more than that. Capable of expressing the full palette of tonal and textural color it embodies many of the classic sonic virtues from the golden era of tubes, but with the ease and control and extension that are hallmarks of today's finest solid-state. As it fashions these essentials into a harmonious whole, its character hints of classic midrange warmth and airy treble sweetness with bass response as nimble as it is formidable. The very definition of what we all seek from an integrated amplifier. (294)



Micromega M150

\$7499

Stunning from a strictly visual standpoint—especially in one of several available glossy aluminum finishes that include Nogaro Blue and Electric Orange—the Micromega M-150 packs a considerable

amount of advanced performance into a compact package a mere 2.2" in height. While the power supplies are a switch-mode design, the amplification circuit is a true AB topology that avoids the nonlinearities of many Class D schemes aiming to get a lot of watts out of a small box with minimal heat production and lower cost. Power output is rated at 150Wpc into 8 ohms and 300Wpc into 4 ohms. The M-150 employs an AK4490EQ DAC chip that supports up to 768kHz PCM and 11.2MHz DSD decoding, and also features Micromega's proprietary M.A.R.S. room correction software. There's a good-sounding phono stage, too. (294)

BAT VK-3000SE

\$7995

The VK-3000SE is a hybrid design that marries a tube preamp stage with a solid-state power amplifier section. (It can also be had with an optional phono stage.) Effortless in sonic delivery, the VK-3000SE offers a remarkably complete package combining loads of user flexibility with a clean, neutral, detailed, balanced, and coherent voice that beautifully conveys music's myriad aural, intellectual, and emotional elements. Not for those seeking the seductive golden warmth offered by some tube designs, this BAT is definitely more Audio Research than Conrad Johnson. (280)



Bel Canto E1X

\$8000

According to Bel Canto's designer John Stroncz, "the E1X Integrated shares its architectural approach with the Bel Canto Black system design." The E1X utilizes a multi-circuit-board layout. Multiple processors reside on the AMiP board and control the USB, Ethernet, AES, SPDIF, TosLink, and analog input functions, while a dedicated processor contains the MQA decode and rendering function, as well as the MQA-derived filters. The E1X is, in every respect, Bel Canto's best value. It's a high-performance piece of kit that delivers sonics on a par with a combination of reference components at double the cost. If you have limited space to devote to electronics yet desire superlative sound and audio technology, the E1X can do that with style. (308)



Devialet ExpertPro 220

\$9990

The amplifier offers exceptional neutrality arising from an extreme indifference to loading and extremely low distortion. (This is a hybrid amp: It uses a digital circuit to rough out the current demands but the sound you actually hear is that of a Class A output stage that trims the signal to perfection.) A great amplifier if ever was, what makes the ExpertPro 220 unique is Devialet's Speaker Active Matching (SAM) system. You download onto an SD card, and then into the SAM unit, an electronic model of your speaker (Devialet has these models for a vast number of transducers—so your speaker is most likely covered). This model is then used in real-time to correct the speaker's lower frequencies to match the input. SAM lowers distortion, makes timing correct, and extends response down—a long way. (The speaker is monitored so that overload never happens, but as much bass extension is generated as the speaker is capable of.) A revolution in audio amplification for speakers. (298)



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**Jeff Rowland Design Group
Continuum S2**

\$10,499 (\$10,839 w/phono; \$10,949 w/DAC)

What do you get when you combine Rowland's Capri S2 preamp circuit and control features with the company's own twin power-conversion modules and a switch-mode power supply? You get a beefy 400Wpc, fully balanced integrated amp that sonically runs the table with swift transients and wide-open bandwidth. The S2 won't paint the sound with romantic brushstrokes—its neutral-to-cool temperament is more of a finely honed tool designed for extracting details. Lavishly bedecked in the brand's traditional aircraft-grade-aluminum enclosure, it features an optional easy-install phono or DAC module to further expand input source possibilities. (253)



MBL Corona C51

\$11,200

With its soft, understated lines, svelte controls and connectivity, and jewelry-like finish, it's easy to misjudge the depth, complexity, and sonic resolve of the C51—a 180Wpc, modified Class D tour de force. It has the touch of the classicist in terms of the import it places on the finest

inner details, and its resolution of acoustic space is almost eerie in its specificity. Its top-end is top-notch—airily extended with none of the early era Class D veiling that often constricted and cloaked these octaves. Designer Jürgen Reis' hybrid topology known as LASA is unerringly open, airy, and sweet where appropriate, yet also highly charged and aggressive when so called upon. The main issue that listening to the C51 provoked was the way it integrated individual criteria—frequency, imaging, dynamics, transients—and wove them together into a seamless tapestry of reproduced sound. A triumph in its category. (243)



Pass Labs INT-250

\$12,000

A force to reckon with, the muscular INT-250 with 250Wpc (and 500Wpc into 4) embodies effortless dynamics, ultra-wide bandwidth, superb low-end control and grip, and effortless, unpretentious highs.

Optimized for greater flexibility with grunt-worthy speaker loads of 86dB efficiency or less, its soothing and seductive sonics are an ideal companion for analog LP playback—this Pass integrated just makes you want to spin vinyl endlessly. Remarkable, too, is the amp's lush midrange that pushes a loudspeaker to the very edges of its performance envelope. (263)



T+A PA 2500 R

\$12,750

The highboy integrated amp of the vaunted R Series from Germany's T+A elektroakustik, the 140Wpc PA 2500 is twice as tall as, and more powerful and equipped with more connectivity than, its nearest sibling. It includes a dual-mono, fully balanced, high-voltage amplifier in an AB configuration, with a hefty Class A bias for the first 20–25 watts. Sonically, it is firmly in the camp of balance and control. Musical images are rooted in position and vocals are models of stability. Its most identifiable character trait is its wideband spectral response and dynamic extroversion. The PA 2500 delivers big, high-intensity wattage that never seems to waver in delivery or extension regardless of load. Even its phono stage is a real contender rather than a second-string bench-warmer. Wunderbar! (275)



Esoteric F-03A

\$13,000

If you lust for Esoteric's ultra-expensive Grandioso system but don't have the requisite dough or space, the F-03A is the solution. This integrated is designed and built to the highest standards, but on a smaller scale. Though its power output of 30Wpc (60Wpc into 4 ohms) is modest, those 30W are Class A, and some of the sweetest you'll ever hear. When driving a speaker of appropriate sensitivity, the F-03A delivers the harmonic richness, transient fidelity, transparency, and musical resolution of much more expensive separates. (289)



**Constellation
Inspiration 1.0**

\$16,500

The third entry in Constellation's Inspiration Series, the 100Wpc 1.0 integrated represents the firm's most affordable effort yet. Visually streamlined, it is still unmistakably Constellation with its elegant matte-finished aluminum casework and distinctive cross-drilled side panels to promote thermal efficiency. The sonic nature of the Integrated 1.0 is that of a control amp in the most exacting and incisive sense of the words. It latches onto an audio signal with a death grip, not letting go until it reveals and resolves every sliver and shred of the program material. Its general tonal signature is ever-so-slightly shaded to the cooler side of the spectrum. Treble performance is equally exacting but open, with hints of air and sweetness and not a trace of grain. The Inspiration 1.0 is nothing short of a new high for the bottom of the Constellation line. (283)



MBL Noble N51

\$17,600

The N51 packs a powerful punch with 380Wpc and key tech features designed by Jürgen Reis. While not inexpensive, the German maker's Noble electronics offer a solid middle ground that's an ideal match for MBL's superb omnidirectional speakers but should also be considered (and recommended) for use with other transducers. The N51 was a standout driving the Magnepan 30.7 planar-magnetics. Not only did this pairing more than satisfy the power-hungry Maggies, the N51 also succeeded in enabling them to sing with greater effortlessness and musicality, with more robust, substantial, and three-dimensional sound—sonic results with a handful of other amps with higher ratings and/or prices didn't quite match. (287)



Could you become a Magnepan dealer?



Every audiophile knows about the decline in "brick and mortar" audio specialty stores. Compared to the 70's and 80's, there has been a large increase in high-end products and fewer places to hear them. What is the future? Will we buy everything online with a home-trial option? No, we don't believe 2-channel retail stores will become obsolete. But, change is inevitable. Meet Mike Hoatson and his little 2-channel store (The Listening Room) in the Baltimore area.

Mike is 29 years old. Mike believes the younger generations will move beyond headphones and earbuds if they can experience a high-end 2-channel system. And this is a career Mike has chosen because he loves it. To survive, many audio specialty dealers have had to diversify into custom integration. Mike has the technical skills for custom integration, but he is not interested. His passion is 2-channel audio.

We would like to see "Mike Hoatson" dealers in every city including smaller markets that lost their stereo store. Maybe you could become a Magnepan dealer.

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Vinnie Rossi L2iSE \$18,995 (optional L2 DAC and L2 phonostage modules, \$3495 each)

In many ways, this is Vinnie's *pièce de résistance*. He has combined the artistically crafted casework and outstanding performance of his Signature preamp with his tube-hybrid Signature monoblocks. The result is a beautifully compact integrated that rivals the performance of the separates. In reviewer MC's opinion, Vinnie has entered the realm of the mystical magical arts of old. The L2iSE is an amalgam of passion, gestalt, and simplicity. The signature series allows direct-heated triode (DHT) tube-swapping, giving the owner the ability to roll in 2A3, 45, 300B, PX4, 101D, 205D, and SV811 DHT families; tube-rolling upstream combines with a powerful MOSFET 100WPC stereo amp downstream to bring home the dynamics. The complete unit looks and feels every bit the part of a \$19k component; with an optional DAC and phono module it makes for the flexible and powerful foundation of a sensational and simple system. Audition with caution; it's hard to walk away from. (305)

Soulution 330 \$22,500

With its 330 integrated amplifier, Soulution has succeeded in finding ways to offer a large number of its signature qualities—sonically, aesthetically, and functionally—at a fraction of the cost of its flagship 7 series and mid-tier 5-series components. As befits a classic integrated, the Soulution 330 comes standard with preamplifier and power amplifier sections (a phono board and/or DAC section are also available as separate options at additional cost). The 330 outputs 120Wpc into 8 ohms (240Wpc into 4 ohms, etc.). That might not sound like a lot, but watts can be deceiving; the 330's quality power goes a long way in both its drive capabilities across speaker loads and its superb sonics. A few of the outstanding attributes (among many) associated with Soulution components are an exceedingly low noise floor, plenty of air, and a noticeable continuity or sense of smoothness—an evenhanded ease when reproducing music. This integrated gets out of the way of the music in the right ways, but delivers the right stuff. (294)



Ypsilon Phaethon \$25,000

Ypsilon has brilliantly grafted the electronic DNA from its flagship Aelius monoblocks and PST100mk2 preamp into its sole integrated amp. The result is a 110Wpc hybrid unit with only three active gain stages. Few other amps capture the earthy sense of "being there" like the Phaethon does with its ultra-wide color palette, velvety textural contrasts, micro-detailing, and fully saturated harmonics—not to mention its vise-like grip in the bass octaves. Construction is Herculean—seventy heroic pounds of satin-finished aluminum and heat-sinking that would take the demigod himself to lug up Mt. Olympus. Includes a remote control, plus four inputs. (278)



Vitus Audio SIA-025 \$25,200

Exemplifying the best of separates in a single, trim, and seriously-hyper-massaged chassis, the 25Wpc pure Class A SIA-25 is the pinnacle of a breed never again to be underestimated. The sonic results speak for themselves—a liquid presence, a three-dimensional stage, and the finest gradations of micro-information and dynamic contrasts. If all other elements in the system chain are strong, you'll hear less system and more space—each component seems to settle and calm and in so doing achieves a wider expression, greater intimacy, and a richer vibrancy at even the lowest levels. With watts more precious than gold, calling the SIA-025 a bargain is a stretch, but after a few minutes of listening you may begin to reconsider. (218)



Exemplifying the best of separates in a single, trim, and seriously-hyper-massaged chassis, the 25Wpc pure Class A SIA-25 is the pinnacle of a breed never again to be underestimated. The sonic results speak for themselves—a liquid presence, a three-dimensional stage, and the finest gradations of micro-information and dynamic contrasts. If all other elements in the system chain are strong, you'll hear less system and more space—each component seems to settle and calm and in so doing achieves a wider expression, greater intimacy, and a richer vibrancy at even the lowest levels. With watts more precious than gold, calling the SIA-025 a bargain is a stretch, but after a few minutes of listening you may begin to reconsider. (218)

HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021



Absolare Integrated \$26,500–\$34,500

This hybrid integrated combines a tube front end with a 150Wpc solid-state output stage. What makes

the Integrated special is just how much it sounds like Absolare's spectacular all-tube Passion preamplifier and Passion 845 SET power amplifier. Specifically, the Integrated's midrange possesses, to a remarkable degree, the tonal lushness, rich textures, and visceral immediacy of its SET antecedent. Yet it does this while delivering the rock-solid bass and open treble extension of its transistor output. Extremely minimal in features and operation. Price range reflects options in internal parts quality. The unique and sumptuous leather-clad casework gives the Integrated a very different vibe than gear in metal boxes. (280)



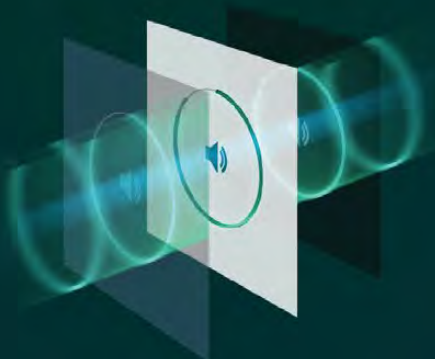
Constellation Argo \$33,000

The Argo integrated amplifier's mission is to deliver the classic Constellation sound at a lower price point. To accomplish this, Constellation's designers merged two existing Performance Series (one down from the ultimate Reference Series) components: the Virgo II preamplifier and half of a Centaur II power amp. The splicing was a solid success, as evidenced by the Argo's seductive-yet-propulsive, forgiving-yet-detailed sound. Timbres are beautifully complex from top to bottom. The amp has less upper-end extension, dynamic verve, and bass authority than AT's reference; yet it more than compensates with its gorgeous tone and an easygoing presentation that, nonetheless, passes along important musical details. These are the classic Constellation qualities the Argo was born to capture, and at \$33,000 it is now, by far, the least expensive way to gain access to them. Note that the Argo will soon support a phonostage and a DAC card, adding to its already impressive versatility and value. (253)

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CH Precision I1

\$38,000–\$53,000 depending on config

Though dubbed an integrated amplifier, CH Precision's I1 barely resembles typical members of that ilk. For one thing, the I1 is far more expensive than most of its competition; it starts at \$38,000 (nicely equipped) and, like a Porsche, climbs rapidly from there as you add modules. Yet modularity allows you to configure the I1 to handle virtually any combination of digital and analog sources, streaming audio, even a moving-coil cartridge. The I1's lofty price

belies its unbelievable value. Within its chassis lies the essences of CH's superb separates: the C1 DAC/controller (\$34,500), the P1 phono-stage (\$31,000), and the A1 stereo power amp (\$37,000). That's over a hundred grand of donor components, each of which is among the best in the world, in a fifty grand unit that is every bit as sonically and musically revelatory as its far more expensive stablemates. Reviewer Alan Taffel had a hard time thinking of another \$50k electronics choice—integrated or separate—with the same pedigree, versatility, footprint, value proposition, and sonics. (289)

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VAC Statement 450i iQ

\$150,000

There is no mistaking the pristine, precise sound of the 225Wpc all-tube VAC Statement 450i iQ integrated amp (with built-in linestage and phono-stage) for the sound of your father's tube integrated. Here is no hint of conventional "tube" sound—no fat, thick, stodgy bottom end, no inflated images, no overly ripe tone or texture, no loss of upper register detail, no rolled-off treble. In fact, when it comes to attributes like resolution, focus, timbral accuracy, dynamic expression, and extension, the Statement 450i iQ integrated executes on a level comparable with the very best solid-state. Yet it offers *all* the magical qualities of valves—those densely colored soundscapes, dripping with texture, and populated with accurately sized, shaped, and located images, and a visceral, three-dimensional stage. (305)

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Audio by Van Alstine Transcendence 10RB

\$899

The Transcendence 10 RB vacuum-tube preamp sample that reviewer Drew Kalbach received had the Vision phono circuit included, which sounded fantastic. He was instantly impressed by the depth of the soundstage and the general dynamics. Indeed, whenever he took the AVA Transcendence 10RB out of the system, he ended up putting it right back in. Like its companion piece, the Vision SET amp, the Transcendence 10RB is the best bargain DK has reviewed. (290)



Schiit Audio Freya+

\$899

The Freya+ is a tube-based preamplifier with three output modes: passive, differential solid-state buffering for balanced outputs, and differential tube

for that sweet, syrupy tube sound. The tube stage is surprisingly quiet and adds just enough of that heavy magic. There are five inputs, two balanced and three unbalanced, along with one balanced output and two unbalanced outputs. The Freya+ generally sounded best in the tube mode, though the solid-state buffer was no slouch. Mids were particularly focused and sweet, while bass remained tight and impactful. Overall a flexible and solid preamp choice. (309)

Brown Audio Labs SP-1B/SP-2B

\$1350/\$1450

This inexpensive tube preamp, handmade in Texas, brings great sound to a low price. The front panel bears a slight resemblance to some of the classic Audio Research preamps, but otherwise is rather Spartan. Controls consist of an input selector, volume pot, and power and mute switches. Inputs on the rear panel include one mm phono, three line-level, and one mp3. The linestage is superb, but the real shocker is the phono section, or more precisely, the combination of the phono and line sections. They fit together sonically like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and pull the curtains back on the soundstage to a degree DO has only experienced with much more expensive preamps. If you're searching for an affordable tube preamp with a killer phono section, the Brown Audio Labs SP-1B is it. (At \$1450, the SP-2B version is also now available, the difference being an added balance control.) (264)



Atma-Sphere UV-1

\$1900 (\$2300 w/mm phono section; \$2800 w/mc phono section)

Intended as a cost-effective entry-level component, in its basic form as a line preamp, the UV-1 uses a single 6SN7 dual triode per channel. The line section delivers on the promise of the 6SN7 with a big tone, authoritative midrange, and excellent spatial detail. Sonically, the UV-1 occupies the middle ground between vintage and modern tube sound. It abandons absolute neutrality in favor of a bold and assertive midrange replete with wonderful tonal color saturation. Deserves a serious listen when shopping around at the under-\$3k price point. (258)

Audio by Van Alstine FET Valve CFR

\$2099

To be clear, this is not an FET-valve hybrid. Van Alstine's latest preamp features an all-tube signal path, relegating MOSFETs to the role of power-supply voltage regulators. The basic linestage circuit is rather straightforward. Apparently, there's plenty of magic to be found in a plain-vanilla circuit topology when it is coupled to a sophisticated power supply as deployed by AVA. Both mm and mc phono options are available. The FET Valve represents modern tube sound at its best. Its twin virtues, really a happy blend of neutrality and accuracy, guarantee that it will not dominate the personality of your audio system. Without a doubt the best-sounding AVA preamp DO has auditioned to date. Recently added was a full function remote and silver faceplate (245)

Benchmark LA4 Line Amplifier

\$2499 (\$2999 with optional headphone amp)

The LA4, a fully analog linestage, comes closer to measured and measurable perfection than any audio product in any category that Paul Seydor has ever reviewed, owned, or heard. It has lower distortion and noise (close to Johnson level, i.e., the residual thermal noise inherent in all electronic circuits at equilibrium) than any other electronic component in his experience, its transparency and tonal neutrality unsurpassed and probably unequalled as well. Its dynamic range is likewise at the highest state of the art. An amazing 256-step volume control maintains 0.5dB/step resolution and flawless channel-to-channel tracking at any setting throughout its range. With no discernible sonic characteristics that he can identify, it is PS's new reference standard for a linestage. (forthcoming)

Rogue Audio RP-5/RP-7

\$3495/\$4995

Combining classic vacuum-tube heritage with micro-processor control is Rogue's recipe for one satisfying and affordable preamp. The RP-5 brings its magic to bear in the areas of color saturation and tonal liquidity, presenting a natural acoustic clarity that rings truthful. It establishes an authentic sense of dimension and spaciousness specific to each image. The treble is nicely extended, quick, detailed and abundant with harmonic information. Bass performance is authoritative, controlled, and yet also somewhat warm and bloomy. The RP-5 is a prime example of what the high end is all about—music reproduced accurately and beautifully. The RP-7 is the balanced version of the RP-5, and like a family member that attended finishing school it takes the musical voice of the RP-5 and burnishes it in areas that were already very, very good. Perhaps most persuasively, there is also a new solidity and control in the bass and lower midrange, which more confidently anchors all kinds of music from a rock band to an orchestra. A significant upgrade over the excellent RP-5. (260, 283)



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PREAMPLIFIERS

Anthem STR

\$3999

The STR preamplifier delivers on two high-end electronics parameters at which Anthem has always excelled, the user interface and DSP room correction. Navigation of the STR's layers of operational menus, displayed on a readable-from-across-the-room, thin-film-resistor display, is intuitive and readily mastered. The latest (Genesis) version of ARC gives the user an almost limitless capacity to address quirks of real-life listening environments, the software employing two dozen IIR filters per channel and operating at 192kHz. A premium AKM DAC chip performs both 32-bit/384kHz PCM as well as 2.8 and 5.6MHz DSD processing (though be advised that the latter is via DoP rather than "native" DSD transmission, if this matters to you.) There's a phonostage with four selectable equalization curves other than the standard RIAA, and the preamp has an analog bypass option. (298)

PrimaLuna EVO 400

\$4499

The EVO 400 represents an evolutionary upgrade from the Dialogue Premium preamp. The most significant new feature is balanced connectivity implemented using mu-metal-shielded quadfilars line transformers. Sonically, the EVO delivers tonal weight without sacrificing speed and detail. Transients are negotiated with admirable speed and control. And there's not much to complain about at the frequency extremes. The treble range is sweet and detailed without gratuitous brightness, while the bass range features excellent pitch definition and timing. Its feel for microdynamic nuances and ability to scale the macrodynamic range from soft to loud captures much of the music's dramatic content. The EVO 400 is not only PrimaLuna's best line preamp offering ever, but also holds its own against ultra-high-end competition. Miraculously, it manages to combine the virtues of modern tube sound with the tonal heft and timbral realism of vintage tube preamps. (305)

Aesthetix Calypso/Janus Signature

\$5000 (Calypso Signature, \$7000)/Janus, \$7000 (Janus Signature, \$10,000)

The stalwart Calypso lineage and new Janus Signature (which includes a Rhea Signature phonostage) share numerous qualities: speed and detail; highs without a glint of shrillness; a low noise floor; precise rhythms; dynamics that are only a skosh less lively than reference-caliber; and a laid-back perspective. The quiet background and smooth treble add up to long hours of glorious, fatigue-free listening. As for differences, the normal Calypso/Janus soundstage is big, but not huge, while the Signature soundstage is fully realized. The Signature also delivers a richer portfolio of instrumental timbres, more air, longer decays, and better-defined bass. However, these are accompanied by an upper-bass bump that adds a warmth and thickness that affects both timing and timbre. The

choice between the Signature and non-Signature model will come down to personal preference, though, at \$5000, the original Calypso remains a steal. (196)



HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021



Cambridge Edge NQ

\$5000

For its 50th anniversary, Cambridge Audio didn't go the conservative route with the Edge NQ network preamplifier. An analog preamplifier with built-in network player and DAC, the NQ is the place to connect all the connected aspects of your musical life. The triumph here is in the simplicity and reliability of the hardware and software integration. Switching among YouTube-sourced music videos on the iPad, Chromecast Qobuz streamed music, or computer playback of music files from a NAS is embarrassingly easy and immediate to execute. When he reviewed it together with the Edge W power amplifier, AM found the best pure audio performance to be had through the NQ's analog preamplifier or DAC inputs. The sonic result (given all the complexity inside the beautiful box) is unexpectedly hear-through, making exploration of the ever-expanding world of musical possibilities better. (301)

Audible Illusions L3B

\$5295

A purist design based on a single, Russian 6H23n-EB triode per channel, the L3A distills the best attributes of modern tube sound: precise transients, a detailed presentation, and natural yet non-euphonic textures. It is its insistence on the sonic truth that defines it as a true reference line preamp. The L3A's ability to retrieve the music's rhythmic drive and drama makes it one of the most sonically persuasive line preamps on the market. Audible Illusions' best effort to date and one of the best line preamps DO has auditioned over the years at any price: audible illusions on a grand scale! (259)



Bryston BP26

\$5800 includes MPS-2 power supply (optional DAC, \$750; phono mm, \$750; phono mc, \$1500)

This two-chassis, fully featured preamp has lots of connectors (RCA and XLR) and traditional control knobs and switches rather than an interactive, menu-driven control screen. It even has a decent headphone section. Only tone controls were skipped. Build-quality and sonics are quite high at its price level. The BP26 sounded tonally neutral with fairly high resolution of fine detail and notable upper-frequency openness, all leading to a pristine presentation without edginess. The BP26 seemed to bring forth the central thrust of whatever music was playing with fatigue-free musical verve. Bass extension and dynamic control were also strong points as were soundstage width and height. The BP26 offers versatility and musical enjoyment at a competitive price. (269)



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Pass Labs XP-12

\$5800

The XP-12 line-level preamp forgoes the dual-chassis extravagance of its uptown siblings, but sonically you wouldn't know it. Musical naturalness abounds, with stunning orchestral layering and complex three-dimensional soundspaces. There's a level of harmonic bloom across the entire spectrum—most notably the infusion of resonance and decay cues around strings and winds—that results in a musically juicier quality of such ripeness it might make you reach for a napkin. Anchored by the precision of Wayne Colburn's single-stage electronic volume control (from the company's flagship Xs line), the XP-12 produces an almost eerie sense of music bursting forth in the here and now, rather than being extracted from a recording. (286)



**VTL TL-5.5 Series II
Signature**

**\$9500 or \$13,000 with
phono**

Initially introduced in 1997, the VTL TL-5.5 Series II Signature preamp has been seriously improved using technologies found in the company's flagship TL-7.5 Reference Series III (\$20,000) and TL-6.5 Signature Series II (\$18,000). Another difference between VTL's top three models is that the 6.5 and 7.5 are hybrid designs employing FET buffers, whereas the 5.5 shares the same basic circuit topologies but uses tube buffers, making the 5.5 Signature II VTL's top all-tube model. The 5.5 II's features, accessed via front panel or remote, allow users to select from eight inputs, engage an external processor, choose mono mode, and control phase as well as balance and, of course, volume. Like VTL's ST-150 power amp, the 5.5 II is an exceptionally musical preamp, with wonderful resolution, excellent dynamic shading, and the warmth, air, and texture of the best tube designs, but without the overtly colored sound that plagues some models. (251)



Yamaha C-5000

\$9999

Yamaha put some heart and soul into its return to the audio deep end. While the NS-5000 speakers and GT-5000 turntable are likely to

attract most of the 5000 Series attention, the C-5000 preamplifier is an impressive component deserving of its own spotlight. This fully balanced, solid-state preamp incorporates a wonderful, fully discrete phonostage with a massive 80dB of potential gain. There's a feeling of a signal unimpeded. The C-5000 doesn't require a sonic counterbalance elsewhere in the system. It also happens to be one of the most rewarding components to just put your hands on and use. The controls have a rare delicate precision which encourages you to skip using the remote (and get some likely needed exercise in the process). An interesting and unique option in high-end preamplifiers, especially if a turntable is an important part of your system. (308)

Constellation Inspiration Preamp 1.0

\$12,500

This trickle-down product from Constellation's \$90k Altair preamplifier brings you much of the Constellation sound for a fraction of the price. Using the same schematic (and even the same audio circuit-board layout) as the Altair, the Inspiration 1.0 delivers the signature Constellation sound of high resolution, an airy and spacious soundstage, and a complete absence of hardness and glare. The savings were realized with a less expensive implementation of the Altair's circuit, along with less extravagant casework. (249)

Zanden Audio Model 3100

\$13,550

This gorgeously built, relatively demure lineage is a virtual sonic clone of its companion piece—Zanden's extraordinary 8120 stereo amplifier. With its all-tube output stage, all-tube rectification, a fixed-bias, current-regulated power supply, and transformer-coupled outputs, you might expect the 3100 to sound classically "tube-y." But, as is the case with Zanden's power amplifier, you would be entirely wrong. JV has not heard an all-tube lineage that outdoes this one in speed, resolution, soundstaging, and grip. Sounding like a top-tier solid-state lineage (only with added lifelike bloom, air, and dimensionality), this little Zanden is a genuine "find"—a tube preamp with almost all of the virtues and none of the shortfalls of solid-state. A reference-quality unit. (243)

Brinkmann Audio Marconi MKII

\$13,990

When contrasted with much more expensive equipment from CH Precision, Boulder and Ypsilon, the Brinkmann preamplifier doesn't quite have their magnanimity of sound, grip, and airiness. CH Precision produces a cavernous black space that seems unrivaled. Boulder has a degree of control that is unique to it. And Ypsilon lights up the soundstage. But Brinkmann comes remarkably close and has its own set of virtues. It has a dynamism and smooth continuity that are immensely beguiling. It represents formidable German engineering allied to a profound sense of musicality that will be difficult for most listeners to resist. (301)



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PREAMPLIFIERS

MBL N11

\$14,600

The N11 is a solid-state preamplifier that doesn't sound particularly solid-state. Oh, it has the grip of transistors in the bottom octaves, but it also has some of the three-dimensional roundness and a good deal of the timbral richness of tubes in the midrange, and not a jot of solid-state brightness or edginess in the treble. Highly detailed, a little dark, a little soft and sweet on top but always enjoyable, powerful, and musical, and, given the right source and pairing, fully capable of a realism that raises goosebumps and a soundfield of head-slapping breadth, width, and depth, the N11 (like its Noble Line companion, the N15 monoblock amplifier) is a component JV can confidently recommend to every kind of listener. (287)



Pass Labs XP-30

\$16,500

Here you have two monaural line preamps sharing a single power-supply chassis—a stacked deck that crushes the

competition when it comes to traditional solid-state virtues such as transient attack, bass control, and detail resolution. But the real magic is in bridging the great divide between the sound of tubes and transistors. Image focus and soundstage dimensionality are tube-like, as is the big tone and dynamic integrity. Microdynamic nuances and rhythmic drive are also convincingly reproduced. Orchestral crescendos expand from loud to very loud with absolutely no compression. Consistently faithful to the recording, the XP-30 refuses to dish out the sort of euphonic camouflage some solid-state amps do. A supremely musical line preamp. (223)

FM Acoustics FM 155-MKIIIR

\$17,750

Like its companion pieces, the FM 108-MKII monoblocks and the FM 122-MKII phonostage, this compact (almost tiny), beautifully made, Class A linestage preamplifier is one of FM's most affordable products. As with the amp and phonostage, it too preserves with extraordinary clarity and fidelity the native sound, the number, and the receptivity patterns of the mikes being used in recording sessions, along with a clear sense of the depth, width, height, and ambient signature of the venue in which those mikes have been set up. On well-recorded material, it is also extremely revealing of the distinctive ways in which instruments are being played or lyrics sung. And yet this transparency to setup and source isn't being bought at the price of an analytical presentation. On the contrary, there is a musical sweetness to the way the FM 155 reveals instrumental and recording essentials that makes for consistently enjoyable listening. (286)



VAC Signature IIa

\$18,000 linestage only (\$23,000 with phono)

Kevin Hayes has outdone himself with the new Signature IIa preamp—the first new iteration of VAC's flagship transformer-coupled pre in over a decade. Completely balanced, hand-wired, with no coupling capacitors or negative feedback, the linestage-only version sports five pairs of standard line inputs. The full-function model adds a tubed phonostage with mm/mc inputs, a completely separate power transformer with dedicated filter circuitry, and variable-impedance load-switching. The sound is gorgeous. A



statement piece, it plays music with extraordinary finesse and drive, accurate timbres, spaciousness in the soundstage, swift attacks and aching decays, and an even spectral balance with superb dynamic and timbral contrasts. (224)

VTL TL-6.5 Series II Signature

\$18,000

The TL6.5 Series II Signature preamplifier is a significantly updated version of VTL's TL6.5 Signature preamplifier. The VTL design team's goal for the Series II was to incorporate most of the advanced technology found in the company's flagship preamplifier, the TL7.5 Series III Reference—a hybrid, two-chassis (separate power supply) model—in a single chassis. The application of this advanced technology has certainly improved sonics (and ergonomics). One of the things WG kept marveling at listening to the latest incarnation of VTL gear was the extraordinary sense of balance and overall harmony, of the interplay between musicians. Musically natural and measurably superior, the TL-6.5 Series II maximizes all that tubes do well, while minimizing their shortcomings. (305)



Boulder Amplifiers 1110

\$21,000

Boulder's new 1110 is loaded with

sophisticated features including five programmable balanced inputs, extensive set-up options, IP addressability, and automatic software updates. All this is made possible by a powerful on-board computer. The advanced volume control is derived from Boulder's more expensive 3000 series. The 1110's sonics are traditional Boulder, with a powerful bottom end, exceptional resolution of low-level information, and particularly outstanding dynamic performance, which reveals the musical life in a recording. The soundstage is wide and lifelike at no penalty in energy. It all adds up to perhaps the best value in Boulder's long history. Note that the 1110 has balanced inputs and outputs only. (287)

Only A Few Engineers Become Legends

In the world of music production, there's a select group of recording engineers who have strived throughout their careers to deliver the highest quality listening experience possible.

John Newton is known for his prolific work with many of the world's leading orchestras and choral groups, including the Boston Symphony, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, the Santa Fe Opera and the Kansas City and Phoenix Chorals. To date, he has garnered nine GRAMMY™ Awards and his company Soundmirror is widely recognized as one of the industry's premier production facilities.

John received his first GRAMMY™ more than a decade ago in the Best Engineered Album, Classical and Best Classical Vocal Performance categories for *Grechaninov: Passion Week* and *Loraine Hunt Lieberson Sings Peter Lieberson: Neruda Songs*. This was followed by a GRAMMY™ in the Best Small Ensemble Performance category for *Spotless Rose: Hymns to the Virgin Mary*. In 2009, John won a Best Orchestral Performance GRAMMY™ for recording *Ravel: Daphnis Et Chloe*; then another Best Engineered Album GRAMMY™ for *Aldridge: Elmer Gantry*. A year later, John received two more GRAMMYS in both the Best Engineered Album, Classical and Best Choral Performance categories for *Life & Breath - Choral Works* by Rene Clausen. He then won a Best Choral Performance award for *Rachmaninoff: All-Night Vigil* and his most recent GRAMMY™ was for engineering *Duruffle: Complete Choral Works*.

All of these outstanding albums – together with his early embrace of digital recording – is why dCS is proud to honor John Newton as the latest recipient of our dCS Legends Award.



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PREAMPLIFIERS

HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

Constellation Pictor

\$22,000

All three models in Constellation's Revelation series (Pictor preamp, Andromeda phonostage, and Taurus monoblock power amp) offer high technical capability in service to music playback. Sonic compromises such as accurate-but-analytical, silky-but-smearing, musical-but-veiled simply don't apply. You get it all: lifelike tonal balance, refined resolution, expansive soundstaging, fantastic dynamic range and control—in a compelling musical whole. While the Pictor doesn't have the body and liquidity of tubes, it still delivers remarkable levels of continuousness, image heft, and tonal density. The usual underlying electronic noise and transient dynamic instability are so well mitigated that the listener simply perceives more musical content with greater accuracy and ease. (294)



Audionet Pre G2

\$23,350

With the Pre G2's rated bandpass of 0Hz–2MHz (-3dB) and a signal-to-noise ratio greater than 120dB, Audionet claims to offer best-of-class measurements. Add in thoughtful features like 18dB of user-adjustable gain per input for level-matching and the ability to label each source, and the Pre G2 is as functionally versatile as it is sonically accomplished. Characterized by exceptional transparency and resolution, it is one of the most organic and natural-sounding solid-state linestages around. It plays music from any source with impeccable linearity, sophisticated finesse, and spot-on tonality, delivering exquisitely and accurately scaled dynamics at any volume level. (279)



Soulution 520

\$26,000

Until the recent arrival of the Soulution 725, JV had never heard a

better solid-state preamplifier than this little gem from Switzerland. (Only 2012's POY-winner, the Constellation Virgo, competed on a near-equal footing.) Not only does the 520 have all the things you would expect from world-class solid-state—jaw-dropping transient speed, outstanding low-level resolution, tremendous grip in the bass, vanishingly low noise and coloration, but like its companion pieces, the 501 monoblock amplifiers, it joins these qualities with a gorgeous, newfound density of tone color that makes every kind of music sound not just lively and detailed but also beautiful and that much more realistic. When you add one of the best built-in phonostages JV has heard in a single-box solid-state unit (the 520 is that rarity in latter-day components—a full-function preamplifier), you get a genuine reference-level product and TAS' 2013 Solid-State Preamplifier of the Year. (236)



Zanden 3000mk2

\$26,000

The all-glass-powered Zanden Classic trio (2000mk2 linestage, 1200mk3 phonostage, and 9600mk2 mono-

block power amplifier) will get you where you want to go—i.e., the sound of the real thing—without forcing you to pay a heavy toll in listenability on less-than-SuperDisc recordings. This consistent listenability is one of the Zanden Classic suite's sonic virtues. It is not a typical overlay of tubey-ness; indeed, for tube gear the Zanden 2000mk2 sounds remarkably precise. It is focused, grain-free, and a little Class A "dark" in timbre, without any bottom-end plumminess. Indeed, the bass of the Zanden 2000mk2 (particularly in combination with its sister phonostage and brother power amp) is truly superb—richly (and accurately) colored, three-dimensional, bloomy, clear-as-solid-state in pitch, near transistor-quick and powerful on transients, and immensely detailed in performance cues. A TAS Product of the Year-worthy product. (293)

MBL 6010D

\$26,500

It's been around decades, but like everything else that Jürgen Reis has designed, the 6010D



was and is so far "ahead of the curve"—technically and sonically—that all but a few other supremely gifted audio engineers are still playing catch-up. Not only does the thing measure flawlessly; its sound (with the typical MBL rich, beautiful, bottom-up tonal palette) is also impeccable. Fast on transients without brightness or edginess, immensely detailed without verging on the analytical, finely focused without exacting a price in three-dimensionality, very deep-reaching and defined in the bass without incurring the typical solid-state losses of air, volume, and bloom, it is an extremely enjoyable, well-balanced, and natural-sounding preamplifier, whose only genuine competition costs many tens of thousands of dollars more. For the money, the 6010D is hard to beat. (forthcoming)

Absolute Passion

\$27,500 (\$31,000, Signature)

This ultra-minimalist single-ended triode preamplifier is about as tweaky as a preamplifier gets, with an extremely simple signal path, just four unbalanced inputs, no remote control, and two unmarked front-panel knobs (volume and input selection). The circuit is built using cost-no-object parts, and housed in a massive aluminum chassis clad in leather. Sonically the Passion is very much like the companion Passion 845 power amplifiers, with a complete lack of grain, etch, solid-state glare overlying timbres. The treble is just a little on the forgiving side, a quality that complements the tendency toward brightness of some dome tweeters. Soundstaging is phenomenal—wide, deep, transparent, and three-dimensional. The Passion is immensely communicative of musical expression. (234)

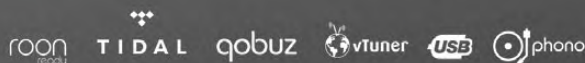


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PREAMPLIFIERS



Lamm Industries L2.1 Reference

\$27,990

This two-chassis affair, with an outboard power supply, is a hybrid design but not

in the usual sense. The power supply is all tube, while the audio circuit is solid-state. The musical message is presented without any tonal accents. Its inherent sound is texturally pure, with only a slight suggestion of second-order harmonics. The music's full complement of drama is on display as the L2.1 always seems to squeeze a bit more energy from each recording. The remarkably low noise floor enables exemplary resolution of track fadeouts and reverberant decay. In general, the spatial impression is quite convincing with excellent image focus and depth perspective, though the extent of soundstage layering is dependent on the associated power amp. The L2.1 Reference belongs to a select club of line preamps that are capable of serving up an edgeless organic whole. It is a true Reference in the best sense of the word. (278)

VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference

\$30,000

The TL-7.5 linestage preamplifier has always been a solid performer, but its new incarnation is far and away the best VTL has produced. The revised TL-7.5 Series III reflects both a wealth of technological changes and a serious effort to refine its sound. The preamp is a two-chassis unit; the first is called a control chassis and contains noisy circuitry; the other is the audio chassis, which uses a set of 12AU7 tubes for gain. The new TL-7.5 simply sounds as though a barrier to the sound has been removed. Most impressive of all is its ability to play the loudest and most complex passages without a hint of compression. The sound simply seems to swell and soar with no sense of strain. (222)



CH Precision L1

\$34,500 (\$51,500 w/X1 power supply; \$92,000 dual-mono configuration)

Like its companion piece, the CH Precision M1 monoblock amplifier, this exceptional, dual-monaural, ultra-low-noise, ultra-high-bandwidth, fully balanced line-level preamplifier is a contender for "Best in Solid-State." Designed by the Swiss team of Florian Cossy and Thierry Heeb, the L1 is a model of timbral beauty, high transient speed, high (actually, highest) detail, precision (though not razor-cut) imaging, and wall-to-wall soundstaging. Whether it's the lowering of resonance via CH's custom mechanical damping or the expanded bandwidth and superior speed of the L1's high-speed Class A circuitry, this preamp (like the Souldution 725) has none of the odd-or-



order-harmonic edginess that drives audiophiles to drink (and to tubes). It is one very smooth, sophisticated customer, and yet it doesn't overly smooth sonics, turning them dull, gray, or antiseptic. On the contrary, timbre is rich and dynamics eye-popping. (259)

HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

Esoteric Grandioso C1

\$38,000

The sumptuous C1's weighty control knobs are bathed in a soft blue glow that brightens when you touch them, and the speed at which you turn the volume control affects the rate of volume change. It's almost enough to make you forego the beautifully-honed remote. Sonically, music pours from the C1 with uncommon smoothness and effortlessness. Dynamic emphases really pop. In keeping with the Grandioso stack's theme of purity, the C1's sound is free of any specter of the electronic. (280)



Pass Labs Xs

\$38,000

An all-out challenge to the state of the art and every other preamp available. Pass Labs' Wayne Colburn and Nelson Pass have truly outdone themselves in producing

this massive two-unit preamp. It does everything right in every aspect of sound quality, and is so revealing of musical and soundstage detail, that you virtually have to listen to realize how good it actually is. Reviewer AHC could not find any flaws even in comparison with other top preamps, and its extraordinarily low noise floor and natural, detailed deep bass have few, if any rivals. Male and female voice were excellent, and open and natural. Complex organ passages were exceptionally clean, and so were complex orchestral dynamics, opera, recordings of large jazz bands. Good form follows functional styling, excellent features, and good ergonomics. AHC's current reference preamp. (243)

Constellation Virgo III

\$39,000

It may seem odd to call a \$39k preamplifier "trickle-down," but that's exactly what the Virgo III is. The Virgo III is very similar in design and construction to Constellation's \$90,000 Altair II preamplifier. Having lived with every level of Constellation electronics, from Inspiration to Reference, RH can report that the Virgo comes close to the Altair's performance at a lower, though still lofty, price. The Virgo has a wonderful warmth through the midrange that is reminiscent of SET designs, coupled with perhaps the best treble reproduction of any solid-state preamp save the Altair. The upper-midrange through the top treble is extremely defined, resolved, open, and spacious. Moreover, it delivers these qualities without sounding etched or fatiguing—and for a fraction of the Reference Series' price. (234)





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PREAMPLIFIERS

Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Momentum HD

\$40,000

So visually attractive you might buy it as piece of sculpture, the D'Agostino Momentum preamp's real merit is its extraordinary sound, which seemingly combines the sweetness of the best tube preamps and the detail and accuracy of the best solid-state designs, making it one of the few preamplifiers that can reproduce all the warmth and romance of the best recordings. If the recording is good enough, you hear a remarkably natural, articulated, and three-dimensional soundstage, which seems to expand in width and depth without stretching the instruments or voices within it. The Momentum has all the features, remote-control capabilities, and input options needed in a top preamp—even truly functional tone controls! (239)



Tidal Prisma

\$40,000

The solid-state Prisma preamplifier is a minimalist design taken to an extreme of execution. The innovative circuits are

realized with no-compromise build-quality, particularly the elaborate, discrete-resistor stepped attenuator. The minimalist theme extends to its black polished-acrylic front panel, which includes just a volume control and a source selector—no balance control, no on/off switch (it's part of the source selector), and no display. Inputs and outputs are balanced only, including the phono input. As great as the Prisma is as a linestage, its phono section (moving-coil only, with only two gain settings) is spectacular. The Prisma's unique topology reduces by nearly half the circuitry of a conventional phono stage/linestage. The result is clarity and transparency coupled with a lush timbral rendering devoid of electronic artifacts. (306)

Accuphase C-3850

\$43,500

Accuphase's flagship preamplifier can serve as the heart of any system. Never bright and fatiguing, neither is it soft and dull. The presentation tends to stay close to the sonic groove that provides long-term listening pleasure, with enough resolution, warmth, and soul to allow full exploration of the music being presented. Having multiple inputs and configuration options, the C-3850 should be at home in most systems, while performing to a high level of satisfaction. (272)



Audionet Stern

\$45,000

At 19.88" deep, the Stern is more feature rich than its predecessor (the PRE G2), starting with a 7" wide by 4½" tall high-resolution display centered on the upper half of its front face. Sonically, its purity, transparency, tone color, and especially texture are exquisite. Like its companion Heisenberg amp, the Stern simply breathes life into the audio spectrum,

reproducing musicians with a remarkable sense of realism. In the midrange and lower treble, it almost seems to delight in articulating enunciation or breathing artifacts and serving up any other forms of vocalization with which it is challenged. Its ability to create a genuine sense of the body, bloom, and texture of instruments is matched only by the realism with which it reproduces transient detail and timbre. (306)



HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021



Soulution 725

\$55,000 (\$60,000 w/phono)

If you want to know what an LP, reel-to-reel tape, or digital file is capable of in the way of detail, power, color, and pure excitement, JV doesn't think there is another single-unit solid-state preamplifier (the 725 is a full-function preamp with a superb, optional built-in phono stage) that can outdo the sonics of this Swiss masterpiece from the boys in Dulliken. Exceptionally high in resolution, gorgeously dark and rich in tone color (with genuinely tube-like three-dimensional imaging), unexceeded (in transistor units) in soundstage width and depth, and rivaled in transient speed only by certain Constellation and CH Precision products, this (Swiss) cheese stands alone when it comes to the bottom octaves. Nothing else out there that JV has auditioned has this same lifelike weight, energy, and density of color and texture from about 500Hz down. The difference isn't small, and it isn't hard to hear (or feel). Like the Soulution amps, the 725 is a veritable sonic thrill ride. JV's solid-state reference. (249)

Boulder 2110

\$59,000

Boulder's 2110 preamplifier is a technological tour de force. It comprises four modules, two for the power supply and two for the linestage, that help to ensure amazing image stability, subterranean bass, and gossamer-like highs. Timbres have tremendous weight and heft, coupled with a delicious pellucidity that sets it apart from other preamps. Its fully balanced operation banishes any hint of hum. Nothing extraneous ever seems to intrude upon the music as the 2110 delivers transient attacks with unerring accuracy and effortlessness. The 2110 may lack the final degree of fluidity conferred by tubes, but its low noise floor, mellifluous tonality, and stupendous control mean that it resides at the peak of solid-state designs. (249)



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VAC Statement Line Stage

\$80,000

A lot of tube-electronics manufacturers make outlandish claims about their linestages' immunity to noise, hum, and resonance—the bugbears of valve electronics. The difference here is that VAC's Statement Line Stage really is dead quiet. Whether it's the heroic efforts that VAC's designer Kevin Hayes has gone to in the construction of the Statement's twin (one for electronics, one for power supply) chassis—machined at VAC from high-grade, non-ferrous aluminum and processed through a series of plating steps to provide superior RF rejection across a wide range of radio frequencies—or the way the circuits are laid out in distinct isolated sections to prevent unwanted interactions, the VAC Statement



Line Stage has the quietest “backgrounds” JV has yet heard in a tube unit. As a direct result, timbre, resolution, dimensionality, transient response, imaging, and soundstaging are electrifyingly and gorgeously lifelike. JV has yet to hear a richer, more beautiful, more detailed, or more exciting tube preamp—and, unlike many competitors, the Statement's got great grip in the bass and full extension in the treble, too. (263)

Constellation Altair II

\$90,000

The Altair II is nothing short of an all-out assault on the state of the art in preamplifier design. Its two-chassis design separates the power supply

from the audio circuits. The performance can be taken up another level with the addition of the DC Filter, a power-supply-sized box that further purifies the DC feeding the audio circuits. The design is unprecedented in many respects, including extraordinary measures to isolate the audio circuits from vibration and noise. The gain stages are suspended on a floating “raft” within a sub-chamber of the massive clamshell chassis, machined from two solid aluminum blocks. The Altair II sets new standards in transparency, resolution, absence of grain, and sheer realism, in RH's experience. Although highly resolving, it is anything but etched or clinical. Rather, it comes as close to a colorless window on the music as RH has experienced. This newer version has a front-panel touchscreen and a pair of knobs. Surprisingly, it also has even better sound than the original. RH's long-term reference. (260)

Boulder 3010

\$130,000

With its wealth of controls, the two-box solid-state 3010 looks like it belongs in a NORAD control center. Boulder does nothing by half-measures: a new dual-phase 993SD gain stage and separate power supplies for each channel ensure that it is both dead quiet and can supply crushing fortissimos with ease. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the Boulder is that it comes very close to the proverbial straight-wire with gain that so many audiophiles lust after. Turn the volume dial up and the soundstage simply expands without the slightest sense of compression. It would be hard to think of a more linear preamplifier than the Boulder. Those seeking tube-like bliss should look elsewhere. But for anyone enamored of a refined presentation, amazing transient detail, and seemingly limitless power, this is it. (306)



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PREAMP/DACS



Monarchy Audio NM24

\$1590

The NM24 teaches us three important lessons regarding digital-to-analog converter design. First, that there's

still plenty of audio magic left in Burr Brown's 24-bit/96kHz PCM1704 chip. Second, a tube buffer is sonically superior to an op-amp buffer, as can easily be ascertained by auditioning both the NM24's built-in buffers (an AD811 video op-amp and a 6922 triode-based stage). Third, it is much easier (i.e., less costly) to design a good-sounding DAC using an R2R chip than it is with the currently ubiquitous delta-sigma type. The Monarchy has only two digital inputs (TosLink and coaxial), so you'll need a good external USB link for computer audio. As compensation, you can use the line-level preamp outputs as a headphone amplifier via a suitable adapter cable. The sound is exceedingly analog-like, as the NM24 avoids the halo of brightness that permeates the harmonic textures of so many delta-sigma-based DACs. You'll have to look in the neighborhood of \$5k to exceed its performance. Sold factory-direct. (256)

NuPrime DAC-10H

\$1795

Although the DAC-10H is only 8" wide by 2.4" high by 14" deep, which corresponds to roughly half the width of a "full-sized" component, it packs a lot of features and performance into a small package. The digital section is built around the ESS Sabre Reference ES9018 32-bit DAC. According to NuPrime this chip can deliver 135dB signal-to-noise with -120dB total harmonic distortion levels. The DAC-10H has borrowed the stepped, thin-film, switched-resistor ladder network for controlling volume from the NuForce P-20 preamplifier. This method uses a MUSES chip combined with a proprietary look-up table to ensure that only a single resistor is in the signal path at any volume setting. Inner detail and low-level resolution through the DAC-10 are as good as SS has heard through any DAC, including the Antelope Audio Platinum DSD DAC. The differences in depth recreation and soundstaging precision between his original 128x DSD recordings and 44.1k down-sampled versions were immediately obvious when comparing them through the DAC-10H. (255)



Mytek Digital Brooklyn DAC+

\$2195

The improved Brooklyn DAC+ is not only a DAC, but also a preamplifier for both analog and digital sources, a headphone amplifier that supports single-ended and balanced cans, and a phono preamplifier for both moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges. So far SS has been unable to discern anything sonically negative while listening to MQA-encoded files though the Mytek Brooklyn DAC+. Even without MQA, the Mytek offers exceptional value due to its versatility, flexibility, ergonomic elegance, and overall high level of sonic performance. Once you throw MQA into the equation SS has to say "game over" for any DAC or DAC manufacturer who can't keep up. (265)



NAD Masters Series M12

\$3849

The latest generation in NAD's Masters Series, the M12 pre-amp/DAC is unreservedly gorgeous. Its aluminum casework is elegantly crafted and its high connectivity is supplemented by MDC Modular Design construction that allows the user to add the optional, excellent network audio module DD BluOS. Sonically the M12 remains true to NAD values in the way it prizes midrange neutrality and integrity, yet also throws hints of richness into the mix from the warmer side of the musical spectrum. Scoring points at all levels—refinement of sound, classy execution, and cool, cutting-edge modularity—it has attractive and sensible "have-it-your-way" appeal for the old guard and the network-savvy alike. (258)



DiDiT High-End 212se

\$4000

Built around ESS Technology's Sabre ES9018 sigma-delta 32-bit DAC, the 212se actually succeeds in sounding eminently musical and more relaxed than its competition. It shines in tonal conviction, deep bass solidity, and textural sweetness, while transient response, both at the point of attack and during reverberant decay, is enhanced by an exceedingly low noise floor. However, its most remarkable sonic attribute is spatial resolution. It delivers precise image focus and refined layering of the depth perspective. There are two operational modes: DAC and preamp. The DAC setting bypasses the volume control and emulates a regular DAC. The 212se circuitry is fully differential from input to output and only XLR output connectors are provided, which means that those of us with

single-ended amplifiers or preamps will need to use XLR-to-RCA adapters. All of the unit controls are accessible via a cigar-shaped remote control. (283)

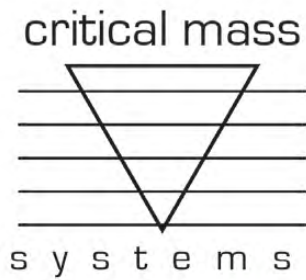


Ayon Audio Stealth

\$8100

The Stealth is more than just a DAC. Think line-level preamp with two line-level inputs, electronic volume control, and a world-class DAC. Ayon is a firm believer in tube technology, so it's no surprise that each output channel consists of a Russian 6H30 dual-triode. Even the power supply is tube-rectified. There are plenty of digital inputs, including XMOS asynchronous USB. The Stealth is free from annoying digital artifacts and can flesh out tonal colors with startling realism. Its performance at the frequency extremes betters that of other DACs at this price point. Plenty of low-level detail is on display; in particular, a recording's ambient information is made readily discernible. In the pursuit of digital-playback perfection, the Stealth ranks among the elite. (248)



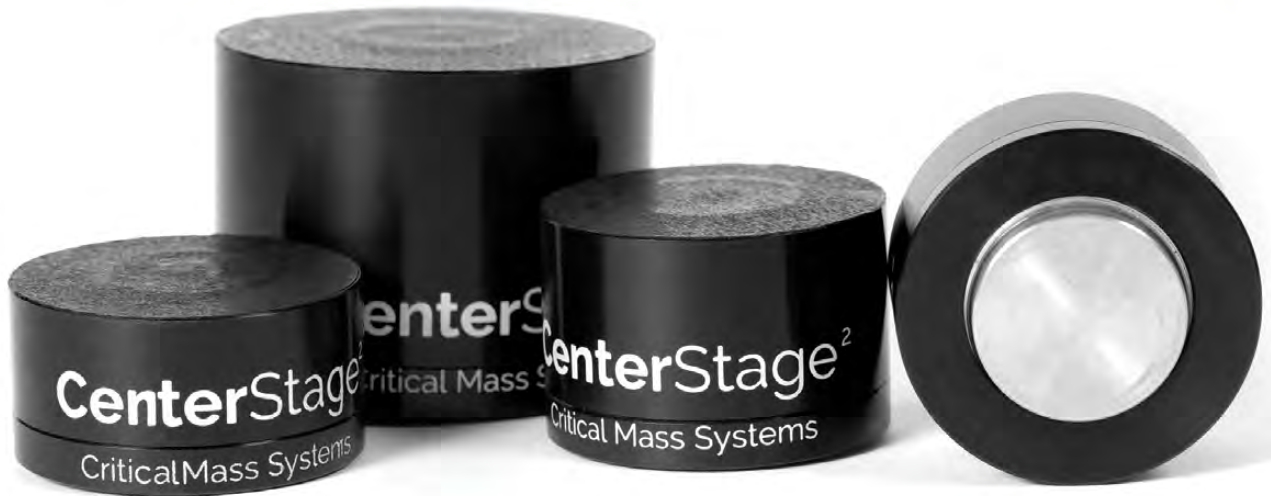


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– *The Absolute Sound*, issue 301



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AVM Ovation SD6.3

\$10,900

The AVM Ovation SD 6.3 is a serious new entrant in today's world of multifunctional digital components. It combines an analog preamp with a DAC

that can handle virtually any current digital music input format from 32-bit/352kHz PCM to DSD128, and that can also decode virtually any streaming format. The Ovation can be connected to your network via Ethernet or Wi-Fi, and play files from a NAS, USB stick, or other sources on the network. What really makes the Ovation SD 6.3 exceptional is its musicality. The Ovation SD 6.3 gets depth, width, and imaging right to the extent that source material makes this possible. Low-level dynamics are as good, detailed, and lifelike as AHC has heard from any player, and the sound of the upper octaves is open, providing life and air, and delivering consistent pleasure in long-term listening. (273)

Bel Canto Black EX

\$13,000

This highly sophisticated DAC/preamplifier makes it easy to access streaming services such as Tidal. In addition to being Roon-ready, the Black EX offers full MQA decoding. It even has a phono stage and headphone amplifier. The Black EX also offers special provisions for using a subwoofer and can be controlled via an app. Sonically, the Black EX is highly revealing of details in even the most complex and dynamically demanding musical passages. The extensive digital processing doesn't add a hint of hardness or edge. Even standard-resolution sources sound superb through the Black EX. (290)



AVM Ovation CS 8.3

\$15,400

If you look at photographs of the AVM CS 6.3, it looks almost exactly like the CS 8.3. That is because the 8.3 is basically a 6.2 with a tube rather than a solid-state linestage. The two units even share the same product page on the AVM site. The linestage differences between the 6.3 and the 8.3 come down to AVM's use of proprietary 803T tubes instead of solid-state devices. This change also requires a different power supply for the linestage section. Reviewer Steven Stone's time with the AVM 8.3 proved to be a refreshingly musical experience. When pitted against a separates' system with approximately the same overall price tag, the AVM 8.3 could deliver equally impressive sonics while taking up far less real estate. If he retired from audio reviewing tomorrow, SS could be completely happy living with the AVM 8.3. (282)



CH Precision C1

From \$32,000-\$45,000, depending on configuration

The C1 is a uniquely flexible control center that can accommodate all manner of digital inputs: SPDIF, USB, streaming PCM or DSD, and DSD from SACDs via the proprietary CH-Link between the C1 and its companion D1 CD/SACD transport. An excellent, optional analog input board is also available. The C1 creates magnificent colors (but never euphony), dynamic fireworks (without overshoot), startling transients (minus any edginess), and jump-up-and-dance rhythms (with zero slop). Nor are spatiality and resolution slighted. The C1 also reproduces every dynamic, timbral, and rhythmic flux. And although you can hear every little thing going on in the mix, it all comes together organically—as it does in real life. The C1's performance with data streaming from a NAS drive deserves special mention for stripping away the glaze that is all but unavoidable with USB. Best used with balanced inputs and outputs. (239)



T+A SDV 3100HV

\$38,000

The SDV 3100HV DAC is the most feature-laden, capable, and sophisticated digital product RH has reviewed, offering network streaming, Roon capability, FM/Internet radio, Bluetooth, DSD decoding up to DSD1024, and more. It features an advanced upsampling algorithm that converts incoming signals to 768kHz for conversion by the DAC. The unit also has native DSD decoding with an entirely separate signal path built around T+A's discrete DSD DAC. The SDV is a superb-sounding component, rendering PCM with exceptional dynamic verve, tremendous bottom-end grip and definition, and fine rendering of high-frequency detail. This DAC is particularly impressive with standard-resolution files and CDs, where T+A's upsampling algorithm narrows the gap between CD-quality audio and true high-res. Beautifully built and a joy to use. (301)





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Schitt Audio Mani



MoFi Electronics StudioPhono



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Tritschler Precision Audio TPAD 1000

Schiit Audio Mani

\$129

Sporting the same compact design that Schiit's famous for and offering a surprising amount of flexibility, the Mani is one of the most cost-effective phono preamps on the market. It has four gain settings and two loading options via dip switches on the bottom, and works equally well with both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, though sonically it may favor the mm group. The Mani did a fantastic job of presenting soundstage depth while keeping the noise floor to a minimum. It handled even complex music with grace and toe-tapping fun. This is the perfect phono stage for anyone interested in fantastic sound, reasonable cost, and the ability to use multiple cartridge types. (285)

MoFi Electronics StudioPhono

\$299

Renowned recording and remastering experts Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab have taken the plunge into manufacturing analog hardware: two turntables and two companion phono stages, including the \$249

StudioPhono. Design guru Tim de Paravicini lent a hand with the internal circuitry; features offer adjustable gain (40–66dB) and loading (75–47k ohms) for mm and mc cartridges, a mono setting option, and a subsonic filter. Clean and compact, the phono stage complements the MoFi 'tables sonically and visually. It has an ease of use and smooth sound with the UltraDeck 'table—and its small, square "power-on" light inspired by a mastering tape-deck button. (284)

Audio by Van Alstine Vision Q

\$499

This little marvel's compact size and low cost are made possible by the use of operational amplifiers. Frank Van Alstine's vision was to select the best-sounding modern ICs, and he eventually settled on the highly regarded Burr-Brown OPA627 op-amps. The circuit features a flexible mc-cartridge loading scheme. Expect plenty of low-level detail, a strong bass range, and superior dynamic contrasts. Transient speed and control can only be described as excellent. Tonal colors are somewhat muted through the upper midrange, suggesting that the Vision should ideally be matched with a romantic-sounding tube preamp. The recently updated "Q" version stands for "quiet" thanks to its improved signal-to-noise ratio. (260)

HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

Tritschler Precision Audio TPAD 1000

\$649

In 1985 Erno Borbely published a circuit for a half-passive/half-active RIAA equalization circuit, which inspired Joe Tritschler to design a tube version of it using a single 6DJ8/6922 per channel. While Tritschler's phono stage is fairly neutral in character, its imaging is very tube-like with excellent soundstage width and palpable image outlines. The presentation is well integrated from top to bottom. Its key performance aspect is extracting plenty of passion from vinyl, as evidenced by its ability to scale the range from soft to loud without any increased distortion. Voltage gain is only 34dB at 1kHz, so an associated linestage with decent gain will be required. In many respects, the TPAD 1000 isn't far behind much more expensive phono stages, and it generally comes across as a solid Class B performer. What more could you ask for at this price point? (280)

Channel Islands Audio PEQ-1 MKII

\$995

The PEQ-1 MKII may be small, but its robust, dual-mono, symmetric circuits are populated with first-rate components, and it offers versatile mm and mc loading options. From the deepest bass up through the midbass it delivers authentic weight, power, and impact. Its midrange is brimming with detail and texture, though ever so slightly recessed. And its treble is extended, transparent, and highly resolved, with a huge dollop of air and shimmer. Offering solid, stable, and accurate imaging, and very dimensional staging and layering, the CIA is disarmingly natural-sounding overall, making it a clear standout performer in its class. Adding the optional AC-15 MKII upgrade power supply (\$299) brings shocking improvements, subjectively nearly doubling performance. The significantly lower noise floor, enhanced resolution, detail, and transparency make this "option" a no-brainer at purchase, or as the logical add-on after. (283)



Aural Thrills Serenade

\$1099

The Serenade is an all-tube phono stage with sufficient gain and signal-to-noise ratio to accommodate a moving-coil cartridge (0.5mV minimum). The mc gain stage comprises a 12AX7 triode section connected as a grounded-grid amplifier. A DIP switch bank (one per channel) on the circuit board provides adjustment for input impedance and mc/mm gain. The Serenade's sound isn't perfect—bass balance is slightly lightweight and harmonic textures, while definitely tube-like, lack the ultimate in textural liquidity. Its strong suites can be summed up in two words: transparency and clarity. Soundstage transparency is such that every recess is well lit up within an expansive spatial presentation. Transient response is both quick at the point of attack and well controlled all the way down to the recording's noise floor. Plenty of low-level detail is discernible and convincing retrieval of the music's passion and drama facilitates the sheer enjoyment of the music. (279)



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Parasound Halo JC 3 Jr.
\$1495

Just a wafer-thin 2.5"

tall, the JC 3 Jr. may resemble the flagship JC 3+ after a close encounter with a pastrami slicer, but there has been no scrimping on features or configurability. And sonically the family resemblance is undeniable. The Jr. conveys a warm ambient flavor to the recording venue, an openness rather than a constriction within the hall. Wind and string transients are smooth and naturalistic. Though not as dynamically flashy as the JC 3+, it is rarely caught flatfooted either. Jr. taps an appreciable amount of front-to-back depth and dimension in its own right. For the vast majority of vinyl lovers, Parasound's JC 3 Jr. will stand the test of time and be a willing partner to the cartridge or turntable upgrades that may accumulate along the way. (284)



Gold Note PH-10
\$1599/\$1099, PSU-10

The solid-state PH-10 (and matching optional PSU-10 power supply) is a half-width component, which makes for easy and flexible placement in, or on top of, a cabinet or rack. Fit and finish are excellent. All functions (EQ curves, impedance loading, gain) can be adjusted and confirmed via a front-panel TFT display on-the-fly while playing music, allowing specific individual settings to be made for every single record. Its overall presentation is transparent and neutral (with a slightly warm tone and a weighty midrange). Some phono stages pursue "absolute technical objectivity" as their goal. The PH-10 is not that kind of product. It's all about the music. If you're a "truth-seeker," there are other products to choose from, but if you're a "pleasure-seeker," then the PH-10 is for you. (305)

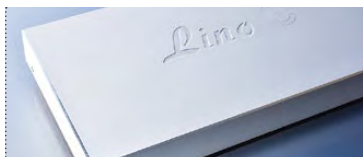
able placement in, or on top of, a cabinet or rack. Fit and finish are excellent. All functions (EQ curves, impedance loading, gain) can be adjusted and confirmed via a front-panel TFT display on-the-fly while playing music, allowing specific individual settings to be made for every single record. Its overall presentation is transparent and neutral (with a slightly warm tone and a weighty midrange). Some phono stages pursue "absolute technical objectivity" as their goal. The PH-10 is not that kind of product. It's all about the music. If you're a "truth-seeker," there are other products to choose from, but if you're a "pleasure-seeker," then the PH-10 is for you. (305)

Moon 310LP
\$1900

The Moon 310LP is both precise and poetic, capable of beautifully nuanced changes of tempo, mood, and dynamic shadings. The 310LP is also a highly flexible device: Loading options are 10, 100, 470, 1000, and 47.5k ohms; capacitance loading is 0, 100, and 470pF, while gain settings are at 40, 54, 60, and 66dB. With its low-noise floor—especially when mated with the optional 320S power supply (\$1400)—the 310LP opens a transparent window on the music, with impressive tonal naturalness from top to bottom. (225)

Sutherland Engineering 20/20
\$2200

Ron Sutherland has a thing for phono stages, and quite a track record, too. His 20/20 builds on the lessons learned from Sutherland's top battery-powered design, the Hubble. But rather than using batteries, the "two-mono" 20/20 is AC-powered by a pair of outboard "regulated desktop power supplies" that connect to sockets located at the front of each circuit board. Like other Sutherland designs, the 20/20 is remarkably transparent to the source and very beautiful-sounding. It may not have the ultimate weight and "slam" of some units, but that's not the point. Expect a very low noise floor, terrific immediacy, and a seductively natural musicality that should prove highly rewarding over the long run. (215)



Channel D Lino C 2.0
\$2699

Channel D Lino C 2.0 is a current-mode (transimpedance) phono stage

for low-output, low-impedance moving-coil cartridges. Very linear and coherent-sounding, it doesn't overtly editorialize the musical spectrum at the expense of realistic playback. With features that are not usually available in this range of products (internal high-current AGM battery, current-mode input, meticulous circuit layout, surface-mount components to produce low-noise, direct-coupling, and balanced operation available from input to output), it is well worth an audition by anyone looking for a phono preamp at its price point and above. (308)

Parasound Halo JC 3+
\$2995

It was only a matter of time before electronics design legend John Curl would author a phono stage for Parasound. Dubbed the JC 3+, it's a dual-mono design. Each channel is housed in its own extruded aluminum enclosure, and further isolated from the power supply with thick, low-carbon-steel partitions. With top-quality parts throughout (Curl notes that the passive EQ parts' values and quality are the same as in his renowned Vendetta Research SCP2B phono.) With every rotation from an LP collection, the JC 3+ conveys a heady mix of profound silence and kick-butt energy, a kiss of romance through the mids, and an ability to extract low-level information and define it within acoustic space. (245)



EAT E-Glo S with LPS
\$3795

European Audio Team (E.A.T.) has taken the ECC83 dual-triode tube and merged it with solid-state electronics to create the E-Glo S mm/mc phono stage. When it is coupled with the LPS external linear power supply, the E-Glo S's performance improves, resulting in increased listening pleasure. Sonically, the E-Glo S/LPS combo produced a consistently easygoing sound that never ventured into aggression. While the E-Glo S/LPS isn't the most resolving or dynamically agile phono stage reviewer Andre Jennings has heard, it is fine enough to capture the essence of the music and deliver it with sufficient information to allow many hours of listening pleasure. (298)





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Channel D Seta/Pure Vinyl

\$3799–\$5799, Seta; Pure Vinyl, \$379

The Seta Phono preamp performs all the functions of a conventional analog phono preamp, but its most salient additional feature is that it has multiple outputs, and one of these is a “flat” output that does not have an EQ curve. The reason for the “flat” output is so that users can do their RIAA or other EQ curve digitally via Pure Vinyl software. Together they produce results that are sonically equivalent in quality to the original LPs. If you’ve been waiting for the state of the art in digital transfers to improve before committing any of your vinyl to digital, the time has come to begin your own archiving process.

The Pure Vinyl/Seta combo will give you all the tools you need to do the job right. (238)



Pass Labs XP-17

\$4300

Pass’ entry-level, single-chassis, dual-mono design builds upon and updates its popular XP-15. Widely adjustable for mm and mc cartridges, sonically this solid-state phonostage does everything right. It speaks pure “analog” with a fluent voice, silent backgrounds, and an appealing warmth, liquidity, and midrange bloom. The XP-17, like virtually all Pass gear, suggests a more complex dimensionality that improves the width and depth of soundstages. Its rich tonal palette defines and makes more meaningful each instrument of the orchestra. Vocals have shape and form—tactile presence. Its role is to convey the signal with minimal commentary, while letting the music prevail in all its detail and emotion. A splendid component. (302)



Aesthetix Rhea/Rhea Signature

\$4500/\$7000

With three inputs, variable cartridge-loading—adjustable via remote control—and a front-panel display of gain and loading, the Rhea is a versatile phonostage. Although it has tons of gain, the noise level is relatively low, making it compatible with a wide range of cartridges. The Rhea’s family resemblance to the Calypso linestage is unmistakable: transient quickness, effortlessness on crescendos, and a deep, layered soundstage. The Signature version of Aesthetix’s Rhea vividly demonstrates the value of component quality. Although the circuit is identical to that of the Rhea, the Signature uses ultra-premium parts. The result is a much better bottom end, even smoother timbres, and (surprisingly) greater dimensionality. Rhea owners can upgrade to the Signature for the difference in retail price. The Signature upgrade is expensive but well worth it. (151, 196)



VTL TP-2.5i

\$5000

This nimble and lithe performer punches above its weight. While it does not provide the resolution of megabuck phonostages, the TP-2.5i sails easily through complex orchestral passages and dynamic rock songs alike. VTL offers used-adjustable cartridge impedance matching, as well as different levels of gain. Inputs for both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges are also included. Not least it also has a mono switch. Consistent with the VTL house sound, the TP-2.5i unites dynamism with seduction. Thanks to the 12AU7 tube in the moving-coil section, the touch of tube bliss that the TP-2.5i brings to vinyl reproduction is altogether a good thing, adding a dollop of beauty to more than a few LPs. (302)



ModWright Instruments PH 150 Reference

\$7900

With the 2015 release of its hybrid, two-chassis Reference PH 150 phonostage, ModWright has really stepped up to the phono preamplifier plate. Beautifully designed and executed, it offers a superb mix of flexibility, functionality, and performance. Its conflation of transparency, transient speed, timbral purity, palpability, expansive yet accurate soundstage, fine resolution, and deep, black, virtually silent backgrounds combine to make it a truly noteworthy achievement—and one of the best buys in, and even somewhat above, its class. GW felt it to be such a standout in its price range, he purchased his review unit. (263)



Esoteric E-02

\$9000

Esoteric’s top-of-the-line, reference phonostage, the fully balanced E-02 is refreshing for all the unnecessary things it doesn’t do, which is essentially everything but amplify a very small signal (phono cartridge) thousands of times. This is a beautifully built and executed solid-state design with a high potential 72dB of gain in balanced mode, served up in an “invisible hand” manner that reminded reviewer Allan Moulton of other reference solid-state phonostages from Boulder and Constellation Audio which are 3–7 times more costly. Not for those who like to fiddle with fine loading adjustments, EQ options, or tube rolling (because there aren’t any). The reward for the E-02’s set-and-forget simplicity is a listening experience without a forced perspective. It quickly establishes in the listener a trust that the amplified cartridge’s signal is simply the best version of itself, and nothing more. At \$9000, the least expensive phonostage that AM has heard that can retain this trust. (294)



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Zanden Audio Model 120

\$9800

This entirely new, entirely solid-state phono stage (with outboard power supply) from the great Japanese audio engineer Kazutoshi Yamada is the entry-level companion piece to his Model 8120 power amp and 3100 linestage preamp. Like the amp and preamp the Model 120 is sonically superb, designed with an almost magical ear to what makes music sound sweet and lifelike. When you throw in very high resolution of inner detail, great bass, the incredible soundstaging and imaging for which Yamada's Zanden gear has always been famous, and (for those whose taste tends this way) a panoply of user-selectable EQ curves, you get a demure little phono stage that is very hard to best no matter how much you spend. (259)

Balanced Audio Technology VK-P12SE

\$9995 (\$12,495 SuperPak version)

The restless mind of Balanced Audio Technology's Viktor Khomenko is constantly searching for ways to improve his mostly tube products. The new VK-P12SE phono stage is a prime example of his readiness to move toward more elegant sonic solutions. It features a shift away from capacitors in the output stage to proprietary transformers. The aim, as always, is to deliver increased detail, a lower noise floor, and above all, a more refined sound. On all counts, BAT has succeeded handsomely. The number-one issue that can plague phono stages, particularly tube ones, is noise in the form of hum or buzz. Not here. The VK-P12SE is dead-quiet, allowing you to hear deep into the grooves. There is no hint of sibilance or glare. Rather, the unit has a full and lush sound but without sacrificing the micro-detail so treasured by audiophiles. While it remains slightly voiced on the darker side of the sonic spectrum, the VK-P12SE resides at the apex of phono stage design. (263)

Zesto Audio T ssera

\$12,000

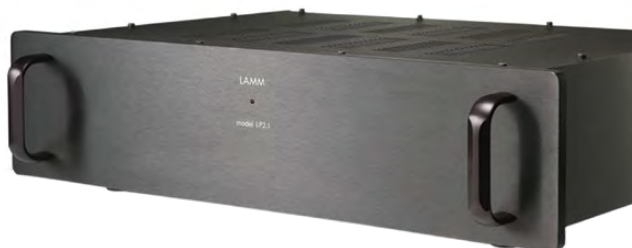
The Greek word t ssera refers to the number 4. The name is fitting in function since the Andros T ssera phono stage supports four inputs. The two-box (main unit and power supply) T ssera accepts two moving-magnet and two moving-coil inputs, or up to four low-output moving-coil cartridges with the use of two additional external step-up devices. The T ssera has adjustable gain and variable loading (twelve loading selections for its moving-coil inputs). Sonically, it is full-bodied and composed. Everything stays in place, solidly rooted to its location, and is presented with a feeling of warmth. The sound created by this phono stage maintains dynamic development and much of a note's decay when called for. Without favoring one over the other, it reproduces all music genres fairly evenly. (287)



Balanced Audio
Technology VK-P12SE



Zesto Audio T ssera



Lamm Industries LP2.1 Deluxe

\$13,390 (\$13,090, standard version)

A significant upgrade of the LP2, which was Lamm Industries' entry-level phono stage for many years. In addition to a parts refresh, the tube complement has been changed to the Russian 6C3P and 6C45P-E triodes. Both moving-magnet and moving-coil inputs are accommodated. The emphasis is entirely on signal purity. An exceedingly low noise floor is a major plus, allowing the music to swell up from a velvety black background with no perceptible hash or grain. The presentation is detailed but not overly so. The vibrancy and urgency of human voice are reproduced exceedingly well. Tonal colors are beautifully rendered but without excessive tube warmth. The tonal balance is very much on the neutral side of reality. In sum, the LP2.1 is a perfect marriage of traditional solid-state strengths such as bass power and low noise with the glorious harmonic textures and the dynamic conviction of tubes. (248)

FM Acoustics FM 122-MKII

\$13,975

A tiny Class A phono stage (and linearizer) with infinitely adjustable curves (one of FM's most famous innovations) to properly EQ mono recordings made before the RIAA era, the FM 122-MKII tells you the truth about LPs without robbing them of their inherent musicality. This is a very transparent component that gives you a keen insight into how recordings are being recorded, without adding any sense of the analytic or much color of its own. Regardless of the virtues of newer-gen Swiss gear (and there are many), this still remains a formula for successful playback, and FM Acoustics still remains a marque you ought to audition before making an ultra-high-end purchase. (286)



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Brinkmann Audio
Edison MK II



Merrill Audio Jens
Reference Phonostage



Walker Proscenium
Black Diamond V Signature
Phono Amplifier

Brinkmann Audio Edison MK II

\$13,990

Reviewer Jacob Heilbrunn listened to the Edison both through the Brinkmann Marconi and Ypsilon Silver PST-100 preamp, which afforded him the opportunity to hear exactly what it was—and was not—doing. The sheer artistry that the Edison conveyed on the Philips recording *The Delectable Elly Ameling* was a combination of the sublime and the beautiful. On Mozart's wonderful motet *Exsultate, Jubilate*, the Edison tracked every syllable, every quaver, every trill that Ameling enunciated during her ravishing performance. There wasn't a trace of sibilance or harshness. Instead, the Brinkmann delivered a posh, upholstered sound that was quite delectable. Breathtaking, actually. (301)

Merrill Audio Jens Reference

\$15,449

The Jens phonostage is a prime example of a good design executed in brilliant fashion. The two-box unit (separate power supply) accommodates moving-coil cartridges only, and with a fixed gain of 72dB (although variable cartridge loading is included). Paradoxically, its most consistent sonic signature is no signature at all. The perception of absolute purity devoid of all forms of distortion was endearing on exceptionally well recorded vinyl. Tonally, good recordings were reproduced with a sweet midrange and layers of sumptuous textures free of irritating distortion artifacts. The Jens' second most thrilling sonic aspect is its ability to facilitate and construct a believable soundstage; depth, width, and yes, a height perspective. Think of the Jens as a labor of love and as a towering achievement in the realm of phonostage amplification. In the right high-end context, it delivers the music with a rare and remarkable combination of clarity, emotional conviction, textural purity, and superb dimensionality. (298)

Walker Proscenium Black Diamond V Signature Phono Amplifier

\$22,000

For almost two decades Lloyd Walker has designed and built one of the world's finest record players, the Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond (now in its fifth iteration). But classic turntables and superb tangential tonearms aren't all that Walker Audio makes for the analog devotee. In addition to a line of component-support and power-conditioning products, Walker has introduced a phonostage, the Signature Phono Amplifier, that is every bit as wonderful as the Black Diamond V table. Engineered for use with any low-output moving-coil or moving-iron cartridge with an output from 0.15 to 0.8 millivolts, the Signature is a dual-mono design with no circuit boards. Every custom Teflon foil capacitor and 0.05% nude foil resistor in the RIAA section is hand-soldered and connected via solid-core, Teflon-coated silver wire. Loading is continuously adjustable via organic pots from 0 to 1000 ohms. Though the Signature Phono uses IC's in certain places, they certainly don't seem to adversely affect sonics. Indeed, the Walker unit is one of the most lifelike and beautiful-sounding solid-state phonostage JV has auditioned. TAS's 2018 Phonostage of the Year. (290)

Constellation Revelation Andromeda

\$25,000

The John Curl-designed Andromeda uses some of the same building blocks found in the Pictor lineage, including three separate power supplies in an outboard chassis. (A separate optional DC Filter unit can also be used.) The Andromeda can accommodate up to four cartridges—two moving coils and two moving magnets (one each XLR and RCA). Impedance for moving-coils can be set from 5 ohm to 999 ohms in one-ohm increments via a knob on the main unit's rear panel. Moving-magnet settings allow for three capacitive and three resistive loading options. The trick, as with any phonostage, is to apply the RIAA equalization curve accurately and add enough gain to increase the low-voltage cartridge output to line-level standard (about 2V in most consumer audio products), while also preserving signal integrity and keeping noise to a minimum. The Andromeda does a marvelous job at these things. Reviewer Kirk Midtskog has heard plenty of mega-buck turntable rigs, and the Andromeda made his



sound much much closer to those setups than he thought possible—fabulously clear, open, impactful playback. (294)

Zanden 1200 Signature

\$25,000

When JV heard the original version of the tube-powered Zanden 1200S phonostage with user-selectable EQ, better than a decade-and-a-half ago, he was amazed by its reproduction of acoustic space. It simply put more acreage between and among instruments than *any* other audio component he'd ever reviewed, and with that incredible increase in separation came a commensurate increase in the audibility of each instrument in an ensemble—what it was playing and how it was being played. The only downside to the original Zanden 1200S was its bass range, which was a mite fat and plummy in the way that tube gear then sounded. The latest iteration of the 1200S no longer suffers from bass bloat. Indeed, it is positively superb in the bottom octaves, reproducing pitch, timbre, intensity, and duration with the blur-free clarity of solid-state. The Zanden's clarity extends from bottom to top, making the 1200S perhaps the highest-resolution tube phonostage JV has heard. As with the Walker Signature Phono Amplifier, the Zanden's resolution has not been bought at the expense of naturally rich tone color or lifelike three-dimensionality and bloom. You get the whole nine yards with the latest 1200S, which is one of the finest tube phonostages on the market. (293)



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PHONOSTAGES

Van den Hul Grail SE

\$25,995

Audio legend A.J. Van den Hul is famed for his Speed Racer-like cartridges, but he has also made a serious run at phonostages in recent years. The solid-state, fully balanced Grail SE is his effort to produce a top-drawer phonostage. It features a current-mode input that is supposed to optimize the energy transfer between a moving-coil cartridge and the input and ensure that there is zero hum. If the Grail is anything to go by, the proponents of current-mode phonostages are onto something. The Grail packed a real wallop on jazz big band and orchestral recordings, a testament to its wonderfully low noise floor. It did not possess the bloom of tubed units nor reach quite as far into the back of the hall as some other current-mode phonostages. But its silky sound and dynamism are an enticing package, indeed. (302)



CH Precision P1

**\$31,000 (\$48,00 w/
X1 power supply;
\$89,000 for the
True Monaural
configuration with
two X1 power
supplies)**

This current-amplification (or transimpedance) phonostage, with

outboard X-1 power supply, from the illustrious Swiss engineers at CH Precision boasts enormous dynamic swings, cavernous soundstaging, superb transient fidelity, and unrelenting grip. Though it does not pass along the same amount of harmonic information as reviewer JHb's reference Ypsilon phonostage—a difference JHb ascribes to the eternal tubes-versus-transistors divide—champions of solid-state are going to point to the CH's excellent neutrality, dynamic heft, and ability to peer into the most remote recesses of an LP. Tube lovers are going to find the CH too neutral. It just doesn't add anything to the mix. Rather, it reveals in microscopic detail what is taking place during the performance. JHb's experience has been that, with a level of detail and background silence that tube units cannot summon up, it is useful, even salutary, to toggle between the CH Precision and his Ypsilon. The sheer accuracy of the P1 is enticing in itself. (297)

Silver Rock Toroidal

\$32,500 (\$35,800

for the Wood

Veneer Version)

This Swiss unit uses twin lead-acid battery power supplies (one for each channel) and twin, silver-wire, toroidal-core step-up transformers, followed by active solid-state circuitry for RIAA and a toroidal-core output transformer, to generate 70dB of gain—quite enough, it would appear, to avoid the usual pitfall of transformer-based phonostages (to wit, dynamic compression). Though no fan of transformer-based phono preamps (or of units without capacitive loading), JV finds the Silver Rock to be an exception. Paired with CH Precision's M1/L1, the thing simply sounds gorgeous. No, it is not quite as hard-hitting in the bass as phonostages without transformers, but it is so neutral in timbre, so extraordinarily high in low-level resolution, and so quick on transients JV doesn't care. Yet another marvel of Swiss engineering. (272)



HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

Audio Research Reference Phono 10

\$33,000

In the heart of the midrange, where vocals and instrumentals live, JV has heard no more realistic phonostage than



Audio Research's two-box Reference Phono 10 phonostage. Why this unit and ARC's companion Reference 10 Linestage are so extraordinary is easier to hear than it is to describe. Through the Ref 10, imaging is fluid and dimensional rather than fixed and flat. As a result, instruments that usually sound as if they are pinned to a cork board come alive—seemingly growing larger and moving closer as they play more loudly, and receding as they play more softly. When you couple this lifelike imaging to the most spot-on reproduction of midband timbres JV has heard from any electronics, you get in the midrange (though no disgrace, the Ref Phono 10 is not the champ in the bass or treble) one of the most realistic phonostages on the market. The Ref Phono 10 comes with a touchscreen and a remote that allows you to select loading, EQ, and many other parameters without having to hoist your fat ass off the sofa. (242)

Constellation Perseus

\$43,000

When it comes to resolution, pure and simple, this two-box solid-state phonostage from Constellation (by way of John Curl and Peter Madnick) stands tall. Indeed, the Perseus is one of the highest-resolution electronic components JV has heard. Very little in the way of detail, low-level or high-, escapes it. It is also exceedingly fast on transients. While it does not rival the Soulution 755 or the VAC Statement Phono Stage in bass and power-range tone color, weight, and impact, and it can sound a bit bright and dry in the treble if your cartridge isn't loaded down properly, like all Constellation gear it has an exceedingly beautiful and lifelike midrange. If hearing everything with utter clarity is your chief criterion and you're seriously into LPs, the Perseus is a must-audition. (272)





H95 Integrated Amplifier



Intelligence is Change

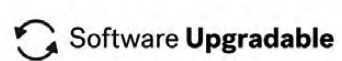
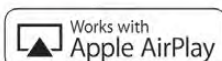


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The H95 is indeed intelligent. It is not just an amplifier, but also a complete streaming solution with Spotify Connect, AirPlay and UPnP connectivity. Software upgradeabi-

lity ensures improved functionalities and new features, enabling the H95 to change over time.

Changing up to Hegel's cool design and signature sound quality, with a host of inputs and playback possibilities, will allow you to build an amazing multi-talented system. That is intelligence.



Goldmund PH3.8 NEXTGEN

\$44,975

Goldmund's original PH3 phonostage was released in 1995. There followed a long dry spell wherein the company concentrated on digital playback, but with the LP revival of the past decade Goldmund has seen the light, and the PH3.8 NEXTGEN is the first proof. Unlike the single-box PH3, the PH3.8 NEXTGEN is a two-chassis component, with a separate external power supply. The unit's slew rate of $>80V/\mu s$ and rise time of $<400ns$, combined with its very low noise and very high bandwidth, are said to be keys to its transient speed, slam, and dynamic weight, all of which are manifestly apparent. But the PH3.8 NEXTGEN doesn't just deliver the lifelike speed and impact of hard transients; it also, and simultaneously, gives you the soft conical wood of, say, a drumstick's tip and the sandy texture of the batter head, shell, and snare head—so you're not just hearing a brief electrifying moment of contact, like a match being struck, but also the color, texture, and action of the instruments making that contact as the event unfolds in time. A genuine contender for the laurels. (forthcoming)



VAC Statement Phono Stage

\$80,000

You're really gonna have to be devoted to vinyl (and madcap spending) to afford this two-chassis, all-tube phonostage from VAC's Kevin Hayes. But...if you've got the dough and the itch, you're also going to have to go a very long way to find a superior glass-bottle unit. Capable of 76dB gain (which can be upped to 82dB at customer request), this thing has more input headroom than any other phonostage JV has had in his system. The sonic results are audible, as the Statement Phono Stage never hits a "dynamic ceiling," the way other tube and transistor phono-stages so often do. You will hear none of the slight compression or outright clipping at very very loud levels that you sometimes hear with other phonostages, especially those equipped with input transformers or JFET front ends. Plus, you will get the most exquisitely dark, rich timbres and beautifully resolved textures you've heard this side of an SET, without any of the fat-potato bottom-end or treble roll-off of an SET. Indeed, alongside the Zanden 1200, the Statement has the best low and high end of any tube phonostage JV has heard. (263)



Boulder 2108

\$52,000

Boulder made waves with its 2008 phonostage well over a decade ago, but the 2108 shows that its efforts have not crested. Quite the contrary. The fully balanced 2108 is markedly superior to its predecessor, both in terms of a lower noise floor

and a more mellifluous sound. Gone is any hint of the sterility that some detractors professed to discern in the 2008. Instead, the 2108, which has a separate power supply, is a suave performer. Its iron-fisted control is always in service of the music rather than the reverse. On LP after LP, the 2108 conveys the phenomenal transient accuracy that has become a hallmark of Boulder equipment. It stands at the apex of solid-state reproduction of vinyl records. (306)

Soulution 755

\$72,000

At the moment JV uses three superb phonostages—the Goldmund PH3.8 NEXTGEN, the Constellation Perseus, and, the Soulution 755. Although the Goldmund and the Perseus have considerable strengths, the Soulution 755 seemingly combines their strengths, virtually undiminished, in a single package. The 755 is also the most versatile preamp of the bunch. With a built-in volume/balance control, three analog inputs (two mc and one mm), and two line-level outputs (one XLR, one RCA), the 755 is not only a supremely fast and detailed, gorgeous sounding, immensely powerful, surprisingly three-dimensional (a Soulution strength) stand-alone phonostage, but, for analog fans, it also obviates the need to purchase a separate linestage preamplifier (and a pair of high-quality interconnects). If you listen to records exclusively, you can go directly out from the 755 to your amp (and subwoofer, if you use one) with

fully adjustable control of volume and balance. A technical and sonic *tour de force*, the 755 phonostage may be the single most impressive component Soulution has yet made. (272)



CD/SACD PLAYERS



Rotel CD14

\$799

The CD14 doesn't try to be anything other than a CD player. It uses a highly regarded Wolfson DAC chip, capable of sampling rates up to 192kHz; of course, as the sampling rate of CDs is 44.1kHz, the DAC's capability is overkill. The CD14 will also play MP3 files, but you'd need to burn those onto CDs first (there's no USB input to play them off a USB flash drive). Analog output is on unbalanced RCA jacks—there's no balanced XLR out. The CD14 sounds good, though the bass lacks a little impact. (273)



NuPrime Alita (\$1295)

Reference Class DAC With Balanced 4.4mm & 6.3mm Headphone Outputs Designed For Headphone Enthusiasts



INPUTS

- 1 x USB PCM/DSD Digital (PCM 384kHz & DSD DSD256)
- 1 x Coaxial Digital S/PDIF (PCM 768kHz & DoP DSD256)
- 1 x Optical Digital S/PDIF (PCM 192kHz & DoP DSD64)
- 1 x IIS/DSD HDMI connector (PCM 768kHz & DSD 256)
- 1 x Analog Stereo RCA
- 1 x NuPrime Digital Port (optional BT or WiFi audio)

OUTPUTS

- 1 x 6.3mm headphone out (Stereo):
- 1 x MMCX 4.4mm "Pentaconn" balanced headphone out (Mono Mono):
- 1 pair of stereo RCA out: 4Vrms
- 1 x pair of stereo XLR balanced out: 8 Vrms
- 1 x Optical S/DPIF out (PCM 192kHz & DoP DSD64)

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Arcam CDS50

\$1200

Unimposing in its dimensions and weight, the Arcam CDS50 employs a SABRE 9038 Reference chipset for D-to-A conversion—up to 32-bit/192kHz for PCM sources as well as (DoP) DSD. The disc drawer is a slow-loading plastic affair that doesn't inspire confidence, but the player delivers gutsy electric bass/kick drum sound on well-engineered rock recordings. The soundstage presented is somewhat narrower than with competing (and more expensive) products. Downloading the iOS/Android MusicLife app to a phone or tablet gets one connected to several streaming services and to Internet radio. (300)

Yamaha CD-S1000

\$1299

Available for a decade and with its list price recently reduced by \$500, the CD-S1000 is something of a “senior citizen” among digital source components. There are no streaming or networking capabilities, but if all you need is silver-disc playback, this 33-pound, built-like-a-tank machine does the job very well. The player uses a pair of Burr-Brown PCM 1796 DACs to handle sample rates up to 192kHz and plays SACDs in their “native” DSD format. The disc drawer has a gearless mechanism in a steel/wood chassis and offers exceptionally smooth, quiet operation. There are both coaxial and optical digital outputs, so the CD-S1000 is an excellent candidate to serve as a transport with a high-end DAC. (300)



Moon 260D

\$2000 (\$3000 w/DAC)

The Moon 260D continues a tradition of fine CD players from Canada's Simaudio. However, unless you are a CD-only loyalist, you really need to consider adding Moon's \$1000 high-resolution DAC section to the 260D. With a 32-bit asynchronous converter and four rear-panel digital inputs (dual SPDIF, a TosLink, and a USB), this optional DAC effectively opens up a whole new world of digital connectivity. Standard CD playback, though expectedly excellent, pales next to the level of refinement that the DAC brings to the table on high-resolution material—an added complexity of dimensionality that almost seems to re-inflate the soundstage. The DAC's superior reproduction of micro-dynamic gradations also more convincingly recreates the distances among the players in a symphony orchestra. With or without the optional DAC, the 260D offers natural sonics elegantly mated with resilient build-quality and good ergonomics. (244)



Technics SL-G700-K

\$2999

Meticulously constructed with four separate internal compartments to accommodate the power supply, digital, and analog circuits, and the die-cast aluminum disc drive, the Technics SL-G700 is designed with an eye towards minimizing both electronic interference and mechanical vibration. The DAC circuit features a dual-mono architecture with two AK4497 chips outputting “native” DSD up to 11.2MHz and PCM up to 384kHz. Ethernet, wireless, and Bluetooth connectivity are provided; the SL-G700 is also equipped for full MQA decoding. The player excelled at revealing subtle dynamic gradations, correct scaling of instruments, and image specificity and spatiality on good recordings. (300)



Bryston BCD-3

\$3995

In a world where CD players are fast becoming obsolete, the Bryston BCD-3 bows with a musical and sonic generosity that doesn't come along every day. The company's latest CD player represents a substantial upgrade over its lauded BCD-1 (there was no BCD-2). Enhancements include an entirely new transport and dual 32-bit AKM 4490 DAC chips. Compared to its predecessor, the BCD-3 offers far better channel separation, resulting not only in a wider soundstage but also more solid imaging. The new model also boasts a lower noise floor, so music emerges with greater purity, tangibility, and dynamic contrast. Thoughtfully, Bryston included a high-grade digital output. Thus, if outboard DACs evolve beyond the superb BDA-3-based module within the BCD-3, owners can utilize the Bryston as a pure transport. If you're considering buying one last CD player—one that's future-proof and won't break the bank—the BCD-3 should top your list. (289)



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CD/SACD PLAYERS

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Marantz SA-KI Ruby

\$3999

The great audio designer Ken Ishiwata made his reputation with an exceptionally musical-sounding modification of an early

Marantz CD player. The SA-KI represents his latest, possibly his last digital component and is his finest work, offering the best SACD and CD playback from a single unit that TAS's Paul Seydor has had in-house, and some of the best he's heard anywhere, period. Its outstanding onboard DAC can be used with a music server to stream and play downloads in every resolution commonly available, including native DSD up to 11.2MHz. Those in search of the proverbial "last" disc-spinner need look no further. (302)

Hegel Audio Systems Mohican

\$5000

Hegel's founder and chief designer Bent Holter concluded a few years ago that making an all-purpose DAC/



disc player meant not only compromising performance on some of the formats but actually degrading them all to varying degrees. So Holter set about making a seriously good CD-only player. After all, lots of people still have large CD collections. Some of the measures Holter incorporated include no up- or over-sampling, a digital clock and filtering optimized solely for Red Book, Hegel's patented distortion-reducing Sound Engine technology in the master clock's oscillator amplifier, a dedicated CD drive unit, and Hegel-designed laser-pickup servo-control boards. The sound is simply lovely: almost analog-like in continuousness, musically engaging, finely resolving, open. The Mohican has fabulous rhythmic timing, solid image density, and refined image outlines. It sounds less "digital" than any sub-\$20,000 disc player KM has heard. The Mohican may indeed be the last CD player many audiophiles will ever need. (278)

Ayon Audio CD-10

\$6790

This CD/SACD player from Austria's Ayon Audio brings more than a little tube magic to the digital age. The CD-10 is the perfect marriage of analog and digital; it combines a Class A vacuum-tube triode-based output stage with an advanced upsampling and PCM-to-DSD conversion circuit that elevates the player to spectacular sonic heights. Specifically, with the PCM-DSD converter activated, incoming PCM signals, at any resolution, whether from the coaxial, optical, or USB digital inputs, are upsampled and converted into DSD, either DSD128 or DSD256. This conversion simply transforms the sound of Red Book CD. SACD playback can also be converted from native DSD64 to DSD256. Despite its tube output stage, bass authority is undiminished relative to a solid-state analog output stage. One clear benefit of the tube output stage is enhanced soundstage dimensionality, and in particular, a clear perceptual gain in depth perspective and three-dimensionality. (298)



Aesthetix Romulus

\$8000

This all-tube CD player and DAC is one of the great bargains in high-end audio. What makes



the Romulus special is that it sounds so "non-digital." Rather than sounding flat and congealed, it opens up the spatial presentation, giving instruments and voices room to breathe. The Romulus couples this expansiveness with an unusual (for digital) sense of top-octave air and openness. The tonal balance is rich and warm in the bass, which, when added to its treble smoothness, results in an engaging and fatigue-free presentation. The Romulus doesn't sound "tubey" in the classic sense, but neither does it sound like solid-state. The design and build-quality are beyond what's expected at this price. If you have no analog sources, the Romulus can serve as a preamplifier and DAC with multiple digital inputs, provided you purchase the variable-output option (\$1000). Thanks to an innovative hybrid analog/digital volume control, there's no loss of resolution. (243)



T+A MP 2000 R MKII

\$9000

Not just a glorified music computer, T+A's R-Series MP 2000 MKII is more accurately a hybrid of CD transport and DAC with po-

tent network-streaming-client capability. Thus, it accommodates most of today's digital sources, from discs to smart devices, USB thumb drives to outboard storage like a NAS, as well as Internet radio and music services such as Tidal. Significantly, the MP 2000 employs separate DSD and PCM signal paths for conversion of each type of signal—a rarity. Additionally, T+A engineers insisted on complete separation between the digital-signal-processing section and the analog circuitry. CD and network playback are unerringly superb, with naturalistic timbres and harmonics, midrange bloom, and ripe bass resonance and control. Partnered with T+A's PA 2500 amp, the MP 2000 makes for a near-inseparable partnership, in which the two units complete each other's thoughts like identical twins. (275)

MBL Corona C31

\$9200

The Corona line from MBL may well be just about the most purely beautiful electronics on the market with sonics to



match. However, in today's computer-driven marketplace, if you needed further proof that the CD player is alive and well, look no further than the C31. A slot-loading CD player at heart, it includes a high-performance DAC with inputs for USB, SPDIF, and TosLink. At times NG found himself giving the CD player a slight nod for superior image focus and the reproduction of low-level detail. But moving to 24-bit/96kHz material, he preferred USB hands-down. The classic MBL signature—the bloom and analog warmth that informs all its gear—is built into the C31's DNA. A fabulous two-fer. (228)



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Metronome AQWO

\$16,800 (tube version is \$18,800)

French manufacturer Metronome has produced an outstanding top-loading CD/SACD player and DAC that can decode any PCM format up to 32 bits and 384kHz, as well as DSD. The player employs a D&M SACD mechanism with proprietary modifications, and one AK4497 DAC chip per channel. A Class A tube output stage (as auditioned) is optional. The AQWO distinguishes itself in three ways. First, the player is especially good dynamically, particularly when the signal is complex and high in level. Second, the treble is smooth, resulting in very natural timbre on strings, woodwinds, brass, and soprano voice. Third, the player infuses the music with air and life, with an exciting front-of-hall perspective. Overall, the AQWO is an outstanding multi-format disc player and DAC. (298)



CH Precision D1

From \$38,000-\$45,000 depending on configuration

Although a formidable CD/SACD transport/player in its own right, the D1 comes into its own when paired with the companion CH Precision C1 DAC/Pre. The two communicate via the company's proprietary CH-Link, and once you hear the Link's open, natural sound, you will never go back to SPDIF. Furthermore, the CH-Link can carry raw DSD straight from an SACD to the C1. The combination of D1, C1, and CH-Link results in the best SACD sound AT has yet heard. In addition to serving as a transport, the D1 can be configured as a stand-alone digital player. In this capacity, the unit is excellent but more expensive than viable alternatives. Nor can one leverage the D1's raw DSD capability if not mating it to the C1. The bottom line is: Buy the D1 with the C1. (239)



Meridian 808v6

\$20,000

This update to Meridian's flagship CD player/DAC incorporates several performance improvements,

most notably decoding of Master Quality Authenticated (MQA) files. Even when decoding conventional digital, the 808v6 is in the top echelon of digital playback, with a smooth tonal balance, superb dynamics, and absolutely rock-solid and extended bass. But feed it an MQA-encoded file and the 808v6 takes on a whole new life, with tremendous dimensionality, tangible air between images, utter liquidity of timbre, and more realistic transient reproduction. (263)

T+A PDT 3100HV CD/SACD Transport

\$22,500

This companion to the SDV3100 HV DAC/preamplifier is the state of the art in disc transports. Built from a massive machined-aluminum disc mechanism of T+A's own design, and under the control of T+A's proprietary software, the PDT3100 HV isn't another "me-too" transport based on an off-the-shelf mechanism of questionable longevity. This CD/SACD transport offers every conceivable type of digital output, including a proprietary signal connection to the DAC for improved performance. The SACD performance, in conjunction with the SDV 3100HV DAC/preamp (connected via the proprietary digital link), is unmatched in RH's experience. The battleship build-quality, extensive features, fabulous casework, and beautiful fit 'n' finish suggest a product of twice the price. (301)



dCS Vivaldi Series 2.0

\$116,496

The four-box Vivaldi is unquestionably the state of the art in functionality and technical sophistication, and is in the upper echelon of the best-sounding digital playback. This flagship from dCS incorporates technology unlike that of any other digital product, with all the key sub-systems designed and built by dCS using proprietary hardware and software. It sounds unlike other digital products as well, with a density of information, saturation of tone color, bottom-end authority, and highly spacious yet precisely rendered soundstage that outdo the competition. Although the complete system comprises four separate chassis, not all of them are required. The pairing of the Vivaldi Transport and Vivaldi DAC (\$77,998) will get you most of the way there. The Clock (\$16,499) and Upsampler (\$21,999) are nice additions, but not needed to realize the Vivaldi's extraordinary sound quality. Note that the Vivaldi is a highly sophisticated instrument that requires more user involvement than most digital sources. (268)



dCS Rossini

\$28,499 (\$23,999 without transport)

The Rossini may be the sweetest of sweet spots within the dCS lineup. All the technical goodies of the latest, far more expensive Vivaldi flagship are here in a single, gorgeous, easy-to-use chassis. The Rossini will play pretty much anything—either locally

attached or streamed—other than a physical SACD. And it will play that material, regardless of source, with a rare combination of alacrity, refinement, and musicality. Compared to the entry-level Debussy, the Rossini is a huge step up in every way. Yet, upon direct comparison with the Vivaldi, it's clear that while the flagship is superior in several ways, the Rossini gets you most of the way there. Furthermore, dCS has made good on its promise of product longevity through continual software upgrades. Specifically, the Rossini recently received both Roon and MQA support, making it one of the best all-around CD player/DACs on the market. (285)





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AudioQuest DragonFly Black, DragonFly Red, DragonFly Cobalt

\$99/\$199 /\$299

AudioQuest practically invented the low-cost, high-performance USB DAC in stick form with

the original DragonFly. It was a massive success. But these three newer models greatly improve on the sound of the original, and the \$99 Black version comes at a lower price, to boot. Although the Black sounds superb, the Red and Cobalt are worth the difference in cost. The Red at \$199 delivers striking sonic quality, with exceptional transparency, resolution, timbral realism, and wide dynamics. The Cobalt, with its upgraded DAC and processor chips, delivers greater smoothness and resolution than the Red, with a more refined character. Dynamics are also improved, along with a more robust bottom end. No matter which model you choose, you can't go wrong. Add AudioQuest's \$69 JitterBug USB isolation device to any of the three and take the performance up another notch. (270, 302)

iFi xDSD

\$399

Reviewer Steven Stone sees two quite different "types" of audiophile as the primary customers for the xDSD. First, younger, more mobile-oriented audiophiles with smartphones and portable computers could find the xDSD to be the perfect "step-up" audio device to improve all their sources' sound. Second, longtime audiophiles (the ones with the 25-year-old DACs that they still love for Red Book) could add an xDSD to their system as an auxiliary digital device that would give them access to all the newest high-resolution files, streams, and digital codecs for a pittance of what they spent on their "main-squeeze" DAC. Both types of audiophile will be pleased and impressed by the xDSD in terms of flexibility, utility, performance level, and overall value. (289)



Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital

\$499

The Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital offers audiophiles a very high-value DAC/ digital preamp at an almost ridiculously low price. Not only does it

include a plethora of important features and capabilities, but it sounds good, has an elegantly designed control surface, and is expandable. Perhaps the best way to view the Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 (and most of the components in the Pro-Ject S2 line) is as a sonic building block or Lego. You can acquire Pro-Ject components to do exactly what you need, no more and no less, and acquire them as you need them. While not quite bespoke audio, the Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 is one small part of an elegant system that gives even audiophiles with limited means a way to assemble a first-class audio system tailored specifically to their needs and requirements. Small, in the case of the Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 is, indeed, beautiful. (289)

Schiit Audio Bifrost 2

\$699

The Bifrost 2 is a "True Multibit" DAC, combined with Schiit's custom in-house digital filter. It includes Schiit's new Unison USB, which is its proprietary custom USB input. Schiit took the original Bifrost and gave it some custom upgrades: a new power supply, a new 18-bit Analog Devices AD5781ARUZ D/A converter, and its new custom USB. The Bifrost 2 accepts formats up to 24/192 for all inputs (USB, coax, optical). Reviewer DK found it was dynamically tight, rhythmically appealing, and absolutely unyielding when it came to source files. It had an unrelenting edge that rewarded quality and revealed every little flaw. Highly recommended for anyone in search of a laser-focused accurate DAC. (309)



NuPrime DAC-9

\$799

More than a DAC, the DAC-9 can serve as a system controller, since it has several digital inputs, an analog line-level input, balanced and unbalanced outputs on XLR and RCA jacks, and most importantly, a remote control. It provides 99 volume settings in 0.5dB increments—impressive at any price. DSD decoding up to DSD256 is becoming pretty standard via asynchronous USB inputs. The DAC-9 played back all non-MQA formats at their rated speeds with no problem at all. It sounded very smooth and pleasant, and presented a wide soundstage. In reviewer Vade Forrester's opinion, this is the best value in the NuPrime 9 series gear. (273)

Soekris dac1421

\$899

Two things jump out immediately about Soekris DACs. First, they're all discrete R-2R sign-magnitude designs. In particular, the dac1421 features a 27-bit ladder, built with over two hundred 0.02% thin-film resistors. Second, all Soekris products are designed and made in Denmark. The output stage can be switched to either line or headphone output. There are four user-selectable anti-aliasing filters, giving you enormous flexibility in tailoring the DAC's sonic signature to suit your particular taste and system needs. With the digital filter set to soft Butterworth, the Soekris equals or exceeds the performance of TDA1543-based DACs in terms of analog-like sound quality, offering superior imaging, enhanced transient clarity, and superior resolution of micro-detail. In the final analysis, this diminutive DAC and headphone amp delivers superb sound quality and underscores the sonic benefits of a discrete R-2R sign-magnitude design. (forthcoming)

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Chord Qutest

\$1695

The Chord Qutest integrates the entire frequency spectrum in a holistic, organic way that just sounds right—not too soft or hard, detailed without being

harsh, and relaxed without being flaccid. While I would not go so far as to call the Qutest “analog-like,” since that is not necessarily always a positive attribute, I would say the Qutest recreates digital music with a non-digital character that emphasizes its musicality without sacrificing detail or dynamics. And while I did not compare the Qutest with its higher-priced brethren, I did hear that it possesses a certain “rightness” to its sound that I could live with happily for a long time. The Qutest is both neutral and incisive, just like its “best” filter says it will be. If you have a basic but flagship-level DAC that is more than ten years old, and you have been thinking about modernizing I would strongly recommend trying the Qutest before you go ahead and replace your DAC with something with an additional zero at the end of its price tag. (293)

M2Tech Young MkIII DAC/Van Der Graff Power Supply

\$1699/\$1599

From the same country that brought us Ferrari, Da Vinci, and Stradivarius, the Young MkIII DAC and Van Der Graaf external linear power supply is an innovative and affordable digital-decoding solution. Its two, compact, half-rack enclosures are well constructed, solid, and attractive, and the layout is nicely implemented. The unit uses a PCM1795 DAC chip to convert digital bits to audio treats. Reviewer Matt Clott appreciated its honesty of tone and truth of texture. The Young MkIII with VDG power supply offers a sense of realism and dynamic scale that belies its price and diminutive size. MC found himself quoting one of his favorite lines from the blockbuster Broadway show *Hamilton*, “Immigrants, they get the job done!” (304)



Wyred 4 Sound DAC-2v2

\$2299 (\$1500 for SE boards)

The Wyred 4 Sound DAC-2 combines a rich feature set with remarkable performance at a price that makes it hard to beat. Its overall sound has a solidity and weight that are both arresting and involving. While SS hasn't heard every available DAC in its price range, he has yet to hear any USB DAC under \$2500 that outperforms the Wyred 4 Sound. Factor in the basic DAC-2's 192kHz high-resolution capabilities, small upcharge for DSD support, and the ability to convert to the higher-performance SE level anytime you wish via built-in circuit-board upgradability, and you have a DAC that will remain au courant long enough to make it a savvy and satisfying purchase, regardless of how much more you can afford to spend. (239)



Schiit Audio Yggdrasil

\$2449

Designed by industry legend Mike Moffat, the Yggy DAC sounds very much like the famous Theta Digital DACs that Moffat designed in the 1980s and 1990s—but better. Like the Theta DACs of yore, the Yggy has a bold, assertive, vibrant, even vivid presentation. Because of this startling clarity, individual musical lines within complex arrangements are spatially and timbrally distinct. This has the effect of revealing each musical part with greater precision, as well as the intent of each musician—and with that comes a fuller, richer, and more complex presentation of the composition and arrangement. Transient attacks, from a hard-hit snare drum to the most delicate tap on a cymbal, are startlingly fast, defined, and vivid. If you're looking for a DAC that does quad-rate DSD, decodes MQA, offers a volume control, and includes a headphone amp, look elsewhere. But if the very best reproduction of PCM sources is your goal, the Yggdrasil is the ticket. It's a spectacular performer on an absolute level, and an out-of-this-world bargain. (274)

PrimaLuna EVO 100

\$2999

With a sweet, accurate midrange and sturdy construction that should last a long time, this mid-priced tube DAC has a stout tube-rectified power supply for each channel. While that's unusual for a DAC, it assures dynamic range will be wide and dynamic shifts lightning-fast. Perhaps the EVO 100 is missing the very deepest lows and highest highs, but there's not much else to quibble about. (300)



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Bryston BDA-3.14

\$4195

The goal of the BDA-3.14 was simple in theory, but more challenging in practice—to add a streaming function to the BDA-3 platform while retaining the same high sound quality as the BDA-3. Reviewer Steven Stone thinks Bryston's efforts were successful. The DAC section for the BDA-3.14 is built around a pair of AK4490 chips, just like that of the BDA-3. While BDA-3 is a fixed-level output device without any volume control, the BDA-3.14 volume control utilizes the volume adjustment feature built into the AK4490 DAC chip. And instead of building a server from scratch Bryston began with a Raspberry Pi 3 mini-computer as its Internet gateway device. Why a Pi? Because it works reliably and has excellent support from Pi. In short, the BDA-3.14 is a first-class component that could be the center of any high-performance digital-audio system. (309)

Chord Hugo TT 2/Hugo M Scaler

\$5495/\$4795

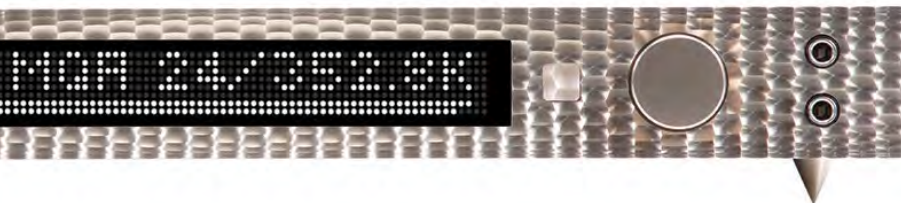
The new upgrade of the table-top version of Chord's enormously successful Hugo DAC improves on the strengths of its predecessor. This DAC/headphone amplifier is built around distinctive FPGA-based digital filters that support extremely long tap-length filtering schemes, and can thereby make use of proprietary WTA (Watts Transient Aligned) filter algorithms. The Hugo TT 2 is different to and better than the original Hugo TT in every way. It is quieter, yields unmeasurable levels of noise, offers greater dynamic range, provides a different and better power supply, produces much more output power, and incorporates a markedly improved DAC section. In short, everything the Hugo TT could do, the Hugo TT 2 can do better. The Hugo M Scaler, which can be used in conjunction with any Chord DAC, is a ground-breaking product. Basically, the M Scaler is a very powerful digital upscaling device equipped with a >1M-tap digital audio filter. The M Scaler can accept virtually any digital audio file input regardless of resolution or sampling rate and will upscale the input data to either 705.6kHz or 768kHz levels. The Hugo TT 2 and Hugo M Scaler fit together like a sonic hand in a glove; once you hear them together, you won't ever want them to be apart. (295)



Mytek Manhattan DAC II

\$5995

Mytek was originally a pro-audio equipment manufacturer when it opened its doors in 1991. Mytek's first flagship DAC for both consumers and pros was the Manhattan. Rather than abandon and replace this flagship model when it was time to freshen its product line, Mytek chose to update it. So, now we have the Manhattan DAC II. It was designed and configured so it can remain on the leading edge of digital innovation while also supplying avenues for line-level and phono input analog sources. (The original Manhattan can be updated to current Manhattan II status.) When you couple the Manhattan II's digital capabilities with its excellent analog features, you have a special component that should remain viable in both mastering and recording studios as well as high-performance home systems for many years to come. That is value and fine sound in one box. (289)



PS Audio DirectStream

\$5999

Sometimes it's good to start from scratch when designing a new component. That's what software guru Ted Smith did—he started from the premise that DSD recordings sound good and built a DAC around that premise. Using a field programmable gate array (FPGA)—the digital equivalent of a blank slate—he created a DAC that converts all incoming PCM files to DSD128, then decodes them with a 24dB-per-octave low-pass filter (LPF) with far less harmful sonic impact than typical brickwall PCM filters. The transformer that's part of the LPF filter is also the output section, so there are no tubes or transistors to be seen (or heard). PS Audio's Paul McGowan heard a prototype, loved it, and agreed to build it. VF thought it was easily the best digital sound he'd heard, but the DAC needs lots—probably 500 hours—of break-in. Recently available is the PS Audio MQA Bridge Card for MQA-unfolding at \$899 (see Music Servers). (245, 278)



Playback Designs Merlot

\$6500

What propels the Merlot into the upper echelon of digital audio is an ability to bring clarity and resolution to images at the very lowest levels. Music of any genre has a ripeness and an elasticity and an acoustic openness. Sounding more like a digital/analog hybrid, Merlot is able to hang onto digital's obvious strengths—tonal neutrality, broad dynamics, and firmly resolved low frequencies—yet preserve the harmonics, air, and fluidity of a performance. Like all Playback gear it's based on an open architecture, uses no off-the-shelf components, and supports formats up to 24-bit/384kHz as well as DSD64, DSD128, and DSD256. Includes an excellent headphone amp. (279)

Fully Loaded... Swiss Style!

Back in the day, buying a car meant first choosing a rolling chassis and then selecting the final spec from an extensive array of options, with everything from fancy upholstery to air con, cruise control to GPS constituting costly extras. These days, most of those things come fitted as standard, but then these days the automotive industry is turning to electric power. Perhaps it's time the audio industry took a leaf out of the motor manufacturer's playbook?

Look under the hood of a CH Precision component and you'll find a classically elegant, super short, fully symmetrical, fully complementary and highly regulated, ultra-performance audio circuit, constructed entirely from discrete components. You'll also find a lot of microprocessor controlled 'engine management' that monitors everything from all those discrete, regulated voltages to the operating temperature of the circuit, ensuring that you get every last ounce of that performance.

But once you've implemented that microprocessor and the control software to go with it, it also opens a world of 'free' functional and operational options. So, if we take the P1 phono-stage as an example, you can



adjust everything from individual input gain to the colour and brightness of the display, output level to match other sources

and set shortcuts for frequently used functions.

We even provide a 7" disc that allows the P1 to calculate optimum gain and loading settings for your cartridge(s). The remote CH-Control

App gives you easy, direct access to the P1's set up and options, while the front-panel display and buttons allow you access to all the menus – just in case the kids ran down the tablet's batteries cruising social media, or you left your phone at the other end of the house.

Of course, you could upgrade the P1 to a full, four-box unit, or add variable EQ curves to replay all those original pressings (assuming you own them) but at CH we don't believe in making you pay for performance or facilities you don't want or can't use. Just like a bigger engine or four-wheel drive, those are things you can buy if your system or circumstances dictate. So, sit back and enjoy the music, confident that this is performance that comes without compromising versatility or practicality!

CH Precision –
performance and practicality come as standard

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Musical Artisans, IL	www.musicalartisans.com	(847) 877-2791	Xact Audio, ID	www.xactaudio.com	(208) 860-9559



Mojo Audio Mystique v3

\$7555

A very basic, but fanatically engineered and constructed DAC that plays PCM files up to 192kHz/24 bit—no DSD, no DXD, no MQA. It still sounded better than most DACs VF had heard, with a bright (but not exaggerated) and open sound that may have lacked a smidgen of soundstage precision but not much. Powerful, punchy bass. Very simple controls and adjustments—basically, just a choice of digital inputs. Has simplest possible circuitry; uses no digital filters, noise shaping, upsampling, oversampling, or error-correction. The power supply is, however, unusually robust. Unbalanced model is \$5555. (289)

dCS Bartók

\$14,500 (\$17,250 with Class A headphone amp)

The replacement for the vaunted Debussy DAC, Bartók adds streaming network capability to its entry-level DAC. It also sports the latest dCS Digital Processing Platform and Ring DAC technology, originally developed for the Rossini series. Capabilities include streaming over Ethernet from a NAS drive, or from online music services such as Tidal or Spotify, or via AirPlay, as well as full MQA decoding and rendering, plus a much improved interface and app. Bartók also does the unthinkable: It accomplishes for digital playback what was once the exclusive province of analog playback. That is, it makes you want to listen, and listen, and listen, establishing the same visceral and addictive connection that analog does. It's like witnessing a recording from inside the microphone capsule with no losses from opening transient to the last gasp of acoustic decay. Outweighing any single benchmark, Bartók has a profusion of harmonic body and presence that calls to mind the finest LP playback. You may not ever miss the sound of vinyl again. (300)



Brinkmann Nyquist Mk II

\$17,990

Brinkmann may be best known for its 35-year track record of making exceptional turntables, but its new Nyquist DAC immediately establishes the company as a major contributor to first-rank digital playback. The Nyquist is brimming with advanced features, including MQA decoding, high-speed DSD support, Roon-ready operation, UPnP connectivity, and upgradeable digital circuitry. Yet for all of its cutting-edge digital prowess, the Nyquist's output stage is built around that most ancient and venerable of audio technologies, the vacuum tube. This marriage produces a sound that is very “non-digital,” embodying all the qualities that analog is famous for—dimensionality, treble smoothness, bloom, timbral purity—but coupled with digital's strengths of image solidity, pitch stability, and bass impact. The combination of analog-like warmth, bloom, and ease along with the state-of-the-art in digital connectivity makes the Nyquist an extremely compelling package. (278/301)



Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 3

\$22,000

Although the new Series 3 looks and operates just like the Series 1 and 2, this reference-quality DAC elevates what was already the finest sound quality extant to a new level. The gains in low-level resolution, ease, and spatial definition are marginal compared with its predecessors, but the Series 3 excels in dynamic impact, bass weight and clarity, with a greater sense of dynamic openness. Note that the Alpha DAC lacks a USB input; you'll need Berkeley's \$1995 Alpha USB Noise Isolation Interface. (298)



MSB Technologies Reference

\$39,500 (and up)

JV is an analog man and always will be. But when it comes to ones and zeroes, things have taken a rather dramatic turn for the better *chez* Valin since the arrival of the MSB Reference DAC and Reference transport. On physical media such as CD or SACD and on streaming sources, the Reference DAC is the most realistic-sounding digital source-component JV has heard in his home, including the dCS stack he reviewed years ago. It is weird that this DAC has turned his head, since it doesn't do three-dimensional imaging and bloom near as well as record players do. And yet, on select cuts from select discs the thing has the colorless neutrality, speed, detail, presence, dynamic range, and delicacy that still make voices and instruments sound “real” enough to raise goosebumps. As a bonus, the Reference DAC renders and decodes MQA, is Roon-ready, and includes a built-in volume control that is absolutely superb, and that, at least with digital material, can be substituted for whatever preamp you're currently using. (290)

Wadax Atlantis Reference

\$145,000

Although astronomically expensive, Wadax's 206-pound, three-chassis Atlantis Reference DAC is a cost-no-object exercise in what's possible in digital audio playback. The main chassis is actually three sections combined in an artful way, and is powered by two massive outboard power supplies. The Reference is packed with innovative circuitry that is realized with lavish execution. The sonic result is like nothing RH has heard from digital; the Reference DAC has tremendous dimensionality, stunningly realistic timbral rendering, exceptional transient performance, prodigious bass, and an overall presentation that is, by a significant margin, the state of the art in digital. (forthcoming)

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ROOM CORRECTION



Legacy Audio Wavelet DSP Room Correction System

\$4950

Legacy designed the highly sophisticated Wavelet DSP speaker and room-correction processor to bundle with its own speakers,

but this newly upgraded version can be used with any speaker. Functionally, the Wavelet is a preamp with integral DAC, digital crossover, and multi-band digital equalizer. It will correct for speaker and room frequency-response variations, as well as change the time-domain behavior of the wavelaunch from the speaker to reduce the deleterious sonic effects of room reflections. (287)

MUSIC SERVERS & PERIPHERAL PRODUCTS

Audirvana Version 10

\$50

If you have so far resisted buying any third-party music playback software for your Mac, Audirvana offers some compelling reasons to reevaluate that decision. Especially if you use multiple DACs or listen to higher-res files and DSD, Audirvana Plus is a more ergonomically elegant and sonically superior alternative to iTunes. And for readers who need to see and hear for themselves, you can download the trial version of Audirvana Plus for free. For fifteen days you can use the full version with no restrictions. I'd be very surprised if, by the sixteenth day, you haven't anted up that \$50 to become a licensed user. Version 10 also includes MQA unfolding. (225)



Muzo Cobblestone

\$59

This inexpensive little device provides wireless streaming to any audio system. Although the Cobblestone won't be right for a reference system, it simply

and inexpensively adds Internet radio, smartphone streaming, and NAS playback capabilities to a secondary "lifestyle" or background music system. The Cobblestone produces listenable, if not riveting sound. The harmonic balance is a bit dark, with forgiving treble and a warmish upper bass. (268)

Roon Labs 2.0 Computer Audio Playback Software

\$119/yr. (\$499, lifetime subscription)

The Roon music management program offers a rich interface with far more information about the music in your collection than any other program. Its flexible and easy metadata-editing tools make it simple to fix the inevitable errors that creep into Roon's (and any other playback program's) graphic display of your albums. VF found playing music on Tidal easier through Roon than through Tidal's own playback program. Most importantly, Roon just sounded good—a little different from, and in some ways better than JRiver. (258, 286)



HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021



Channel D Pure Music 3

\$129

Pure Music is a great piece of software at a price that even a flea market-scrounging hobbyist audiophile can afford. Combine Pure Music with any recent Mac computer and you have a front end that will play back any digital file from FLACs to lowly MP3s on up to 192/24 high-resolution files with ease. Mate this front end with a top-flight DAC and you have a digital playback system that will catapult you to the forefront of the new computer-playback revolution. (211)

Amarra

\$189, \$99, \$85, \$49 (price varies depending on the feature set)

When Amarra first appeared on the scene it was pricier than most of its software competition. But with current pricing, that barrier to ownership has been greatly reduced. While there are sonic differences between Amarra and its competitors, the nature, scope, and perceptibility of those differences will vary drastically depending on the other components, both hardware and software, in your system. Still, after all these years, if you want to hear how good a Mac-based system



can really sound, Amarra is one of the few playback programs you must have. In the end, it's that simple. (225)

SOtM sMS-200 Neo

\$450

A very small device that plays PCM digital audio files up to 384/32 and DSD256. With a silver isosceles trapezoidal faceplate and a wall-wart power supply, the sMS-200 is just right for a space-limited digital audio player. It lets you store your audio files either on a network or an external USB drive. A software suite called Eunhasu give you lots of software playback options, including the popular Roon (but you need a Roon license). Additional power supplies are available (VF used the mBPS-d2s battery-powered supply). Output to the DAC is via a USB jack. The sMS-200 with Roon was very dynamic, with fully-fleshed-out harmonics and excellent momentum. For even better sound, if your space and budget are larger, you might consider the sMS-200ultra and its matching sPS-500 power supply. The sMS-200ultra also has a matching sCLK-OCX10 master-clock generator which is said to improve the sound even more. (forthcoming)



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Bluesound Node 2i

\$549

The Node 2i from Bluesound, sister company to NAD, is a music server, streamer, and DAC that accesses most of the popular streaming services and Internet radio, as well as music files off hard drives and other musical content from a NAS drive, all *sans* computer, while offering full MQA unfolding and rendering to boot (but no DSD). Consistent with its NAD provenance, the Node 2i sounds really, really good—so far above its size and price that it almost makes you feel you've stolen something. Never once caught out or embarrassed by the far more expensive components in reviewer Paul Seydor's reference system, on many digital sources it often took the most concentrated and critical listening to distinguish it from its considerably higher-priced competition, even in direct A/B comparisons. (308)



PS Audio Bridge II Network Audio Card

\$899

An expansion card that plugs into a slot on the back of PS Audio's DirectStream DAC and turns the DAC into a complete digital audio file player. The addition of the

card requires only a screwdriver, and should be within the capability of anyone who can mount a cartridge in a tonearm. The only input is an RJ45 jack for connection to a network for file storage and remote control. The Bridge II will play PCM files up to 192/32 and DSD128, and will downconvert higher-resolution files automatically. Fully decodes MQA files, Tidal (including Masters), Spotify, Qobuz, VTuner, and is Roon-ready (you still need a Roon license). The sound is essentially the sound of PS Audio's DirectStream DAC, which is generally regarded as one of the best at its price point, and competitive with some more expensive DACs. The Bridge II card, like the DirectStream DAC, can be upgraded using free downloads from PS Audio, so the sound just keeps getting better. (278)



Berkeley Audio Design Alpha USB Noise Isolation Interface

\$1995

The folks who brought us the amazing Alpha and Reference DACs have solved the problem of how to get high-resolution audio out of a computer with the highest possible quality. The Alpha USB is a sophisticated solution to an apparently simple problem: how to connect a DAC to a computer's USB output. The Alpha USB connects to your computer's USB port, outputting a coaxial signal (on BNC jack) or AES/EBU (on an XLR jack) so that you can drive a DAC. The Alpha USB's sonic magic is the result of heroic measures to isolate the "dirty" USB signal from the "clean" SPDIF or AES/EBU output, and the precise, low-jitter clocking of the digital-audio output. The sonic result is state-of-the-art playback of standard-resolution and high-resolution files, exceeding the performance of even the best soundcards. (214)



Sony HAP-Z1ES

\$1999

As the poster boy for Sony's "High Definition Music Initiative" the new HAP-Z1ES defines what Sony sees as the future of two-channel audio.

It attempts to be easy for a naïve user to operate, yet capable of the highest audio quality. As SS put the HAP-Z1ES through its paces he looked for reasons it might be not be considered a true high-performance component—and found none. If you plan to spend more than \$2000 on any digital front end—be it an audio-computer, CD player, DAC, network player, or any other front end that uses digital files as a source—and you don't audition a HAP-Z1ES, you are ignoring what may well be a benchmark digital product. (242)



Aurender N100H

\$2700 w/2TB

Aurender's N100H brings you a surprising amount of the technology, sound quality, and outstanding user experience of the flagship W20SE for a fraction of the price. You don't get features such as dual-wire AES and clock input, but most users don't need those capabilities anyway. The internal storage is 2TB, and you can add a NAS drive for more capacity. What you do get is the same outstanding Conductor app, Tidal and Qobuz integration, and Remote Support. Aurender's Conductor app for iPad is fast, visually appealing, stable, intuitive, capable, and uncluttered, with features that have been clearly refined through actual use. Sonically, the N100H comes pretty close to the W20SE's state-of-the-art performance, particularly considering the cost differential. (258)

NAD Masters Series M50.2

\$4399

If the whole idea of streaming music from a computer is anathema, then NAD's M50.2 has your number. Three components in one—music server, storage drives, and bit-perfect CD player/ripper—the 50.2 is a software-driven product in the sense that its brains reside in the company's excellent proprietary music-only BluOS app, which readily integrates Tidal, Qobuz, Spotify, and several more music services, plus much Internet radio. Ripped CDs sound identical, sometimes superior to the sources, while the quality of streaming is limited by source and partnering DAC. PCM all the way (topping out at 192kHz, but no DSD), the 50.2 provides the first unfolding of MQA (though the final rendering must come from the partnering DAC). Reviewer Paul Seydor finds it hard to imagine an easier way to get into hi-res streaming or a more attractive dovetailing of convenience and high performance. (305)



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Lumin A1
\$4500

For those looking to quit the computer, there's the Lumin A1. Capable

of pulling audio media from most external digital sources—and (ideally) over a network with a NAS—the A1 is equipped with dual-mono Wolfson DACs that can play back a multitude of formats, up to and including 32-bit/384kHz PCM/DXD and standard DSD. Operating wirelessly through its own terrific iPad app, the A1 releases all the reins of tension, dryness, and constriction that accompany most digital recordings, adding the warm, weighty presence and velvety textures that are hallmarks of great analog. The L1, an external, preconfigured, 2TB storage HDD, is optional for \$1200. The newly introduced T2 is an updated version of the A1 (248)

Cary Audio DMS-550
\$5495

Anchored by superb sonics and wide-ranging connectivity, the DMS-550 is also one of the most format-friendly and un-finicky 'net audio players you're likely to find (at least for the next six months). Cary's third-generation player is fully operational for streaming or file playback, wireless or Ethernet. It's also MQA-equipped and Roon ready, thus even more sonically rewarding. With the latest AKM "Velvet Sound" chip, it plays back up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM, as well as native DSD up to 512. The sound of the player is full and warm, dynamic and quick, but never to the point of etch or grain. In short, a winner. Solidly constructed and reasonably priced, it includes an intuitive remote control, which makes navigation a snap (although the new controller app is even better). The large, bright, full-color front-panel display imparts loads of information, and is suitably legible from afar. (DMS-550 reviewed in 275)



Aurender A10
\$5500

The Aurender A10 is a "caching network music server/player with analog outputs." It won't play or rip a disc, feeding only on audio files streamed or stored on the A10's own 4TB storage drive or on an external NAS. Music is "cached"—that is, played from a 120GB solid-state drive, which reduces electrical and acoustic noise that would derive from a spinning mechanical drive. Although an external DAC can be employed, the A10 has highly regarded dual-mono AK4490 DAC chips; the player is the first to support full MQA hardware decoding. The A10 is operated via Aurender's Conductor app (iOS on an iPad is required) that effectively integrates the vast holdings of the Tidal and Qobuz streaming services to files that the user owns and keeps locally. Both single-ended and balanced analog outputs are provided. The A10 can drive an amplifier directly, with gain controlled either with a knob on the player or via the Conductor app. (305)



Aurender ACS10
\$6000–\$7500

The Aurender ACS10 was created to be an almost-complete one-box solution.

It's a stand-alone digital hub designed to interface with an external DAC via a USB connection. Merely add the USB-enabled DAC of your choice and you have an entire digital front end capable of doing virtually anything and everything a computer/NAS/streamer system can do and more. In essence, it is a dedicated audio computer, but unlike a general-purpose computer, this one has been optimized for music acquisition, playback, and storage. If your goal is to acquire a streamer that will deliver the highest possible level of sonic quality currently available from higher-resolution streaming sources, handle all the ripping and storage, and do it elegantly, you will be hard-pressed to find a better, more comprehensive option than the Aurender ACS10. (300)



Playback Designs Syrah
\$6500

The ideal partner to Playback Designs' Merlot DAC, the Syrah is a pitch-perfect player armed with 2TB of hard-drive storage that accepts virtually any file format or native sample rate and supports DLNA streaming and services like Tidal from any AirPlay-supported device. Its app offers a series of well-organized, navigable menus including a wide range of settings and attractive readable graphics. Partnered with the Merlot DAC, the Syrah produces some of the most compellingly musical and elevated audio that NG has heard from a source component—digital or analog—in quite a while. If that's not worth raising a glass to and celebrating, then nothing is. (279)



Linn Selekt DSM
\$6825

(configurable)
The Select DSM is Linn's completely reworked network

music streaming platform, sitting just above its entry Majik series. In its base configuration, it includes a preamplifier with an mc/mm phonostage, streams virtually any digital source, including Tidal, Qobuz, and TuneIn, and uses Linn's native room-correction software, Space Optimisation. Options include internal stereo amplification and an upgraded Katalyst DAC. The platform is sleek, sexy, and a pleasure to interact with via the six programmable smart buttons, the variably illuminated, top-mounted dial, or the 19-button remote. Creating a clean, incisive, and accurate sonic envelope, filled with dynamic contrast, expressive nuance, authentic tone and texture, and expansive, accurate staging, especially when taken to the next level with Space Optimisation, the Selekt sets the bar in its price and category. (300)



“If you want uncompromised bass performance
in a room that won’t easily accommodate free standing subwoofers,
there’s only one game in town.”

- Robert Harley, *The Absolute Sound*, December 2019



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- Robert Harley, *The Absolute Sound*, December 2019

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Esoteric N-05

\$7500

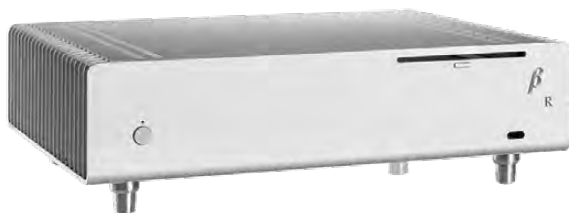
The vaunted Japanese brand Esoteric has entered the network player category in high style with the N-05 network

audio player. Just connect the N-05 and a tablet to your network, add a USB or NAS drive, and you're ready to access your music library via Esoteric's app. Integral Tidal streaming expands musical offerings beyond file-based storage. Of course, the N-05 will also function as a conventional DAC, providing SPDIF, TosLink, and USB inputs. Sonically, the N-05 renders an expansive soundstage of considerable realism, projecting instruments into space with air around them and no smearing. Dynamic contrasts are well portrayed, particularly microdynamic nuances. Timbres are free from edginess and distortion. The build-quality and chassis work are typical Esoteric—that is, drop-dead gorgeous. In sum, Esoteric's first entry into the network player market is a winner. (268)

Technics SU-R1

\$8999

The first member of Technics' new R1 system is a network player dubbed the SU-R1. While it won't spin



silver discs, it'll handle pretty much everything else. The SU-R1 is a streamer as well as an unusually comprehensive DAC. Streams of hi-res PCM or DSD files can emanate from either a LAN-connected NAS or a directly connected USB drive. Additional USB inputs provide support for PCs, Macs, and thumb drives. The SU-R1 even sports two sets of analog inputs. Inside the SU-R1 lies its share of the tech that Technics has lavished on the entire R1 series. The clock is battery-powered, which shields this critically sensitive element from AC line noise. Because the degree and nature of jitter differs by input, Technics built a specific jitter-reduction circuit for each source. The USB module is graced with an expensive ruby mica capacitor. Plus, there's a Direct mode that bypasses everything but the bare minimum circuitry. Engaging this mode results in an immediate and distinct uptick in transparency. The sound is direct and pure. There's nothing to obscure your ability to dive into the music like an inviting pool on a summer day. (265)

Innuos Statement

\$13,000

This meticulously crafted two-unit server with external linear power supply can run Roon, Roon utilizing Squeezebox, or Squeezebox with your favorite UPnP software. It's built to withstand an



Imperial ATAT standing on it, designed to be placed on display in the MoMA, and engineered to sing at the MET, with a user interface that would delight Jony Ive. From a sonic perspective it checks every audiophile box. Layering and dynamics were unrestricted no matter the musical genre; and vocals were velvety and luxurious, but never high viscosity. Rock was passionately reproduced with snap, punch, rhythm, and texture. Small- and large-scale dynamic shifts were handled with ease. The Statement easily belongs with components at or twice its price. If you're in the market, you would be doing yourself a serious disservice by not placing it in your final list to consider. (306)



Lumin X1

\$13,990

After spending time with the X1, SS understood why Lumin is so proud of its flagship. The X1 serves as a streamer, DAC, and digital preamplifier with its own dedicated smartphone app (and Roon compatibility). It supports PCM formats up to 768/32 and DSD to 512 (with upsampling options for both PCM and DSD files). It also supports all the standard formats including FLAC, ALAC, WAV, DSD, DSF, AIFF, and MP3, and will unpack and decode MQA. Streaming protocols supported include Tidal, Roon, Spotify Connect, Qobuz, Apple AirPlay, and Tunein Internet radio. DLNA and UPnP compliance are also standard. In sum, the X1 does everything you would expect from a premium audiophile product—it looks cool, operates flawlessly, accepts firmware updates, and has its own app. It also performs as well sonically as any streamer/DAC/preamplifier SS has had in his clutches. (300)

Aurender W20SE

\$22,000

Aurender's newly revamped, top-of-the-line W20SE is one of the most feature-laden and capable turnkey music servers on the market. Load the W20SE's internal 4TB of solid-state memory with music, connect one of its many digital outputs to a DAC, link a tablet to your wireless network, and you've got virtually unlimited music. Seamless integration with streaming service Tidal and Qobuz greatly expands the W20SE's functionality, although Aurender doesn't support Roon music-management software. The W20SE's sound quality is outstanding, perhaps in part due to its 1TB internal cache memory, battery power supply for critical circuitry, and other performance-oriented design tricks. Newly introduced upsampling, expanded DSD support, double-isolated LAN ports, and other upgrades in the SE model further improve performance. (W20 reviewed in 258, W20SE in 308)





QKORE

GROUND UNIT



High frequency interference, noise, and stray magnetic fields contaminate AC lines and create the most common problem in hifi: hum. The solution is proper grounding...and Nordost's QKORE is the most effective, comprehensive grounding solution on the market!

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- Eliminates electrical noise
- Parallel, artificial ground produces a "clean" earth ground
- Provides an electrical and mechanical approach to grounding
- Lowers the noise floor
- Increases harmonic accuracy and clarity in music

"The benefits are immediate, easy to hear, and extremely consistent...Very highly recommended"

- Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi+ Magazine



**Linn Klimax
DS and
Klimax DSM**
\$23,380



Best known for its venerable LP12 turntable, Linn Products was one of the first brands to abandon CD and SACD for file-based digital streaming, and the company's first Klimax DS was one of the reasons for the switch. Now in its new iteration, the Klimax DS streamer and Klimax DSM streamer with built-in preamplifier raise the performance bar to new heights. Central to the latest Klimax is the new, fully retrofit-able Katalyst DAC architecture, which uses a sophisticated circuit to create better power supply feeds to individual subsystems in the DAC chip, and greater clock precision. Although the existing Klimax was one of the best digital streamers in production, the latest Katalyst or "DS/3" model towers over its predecessor in virtually all aspects of performance. (268)

Wadax Atlantis Server
\$24,000

The Atlantis Server delivers spectacular sound quality, offers outstanding capabilities, and features a wonderful user interface (Roon) in one well-built package. Designed and manufactured in Spain, the Atlantis is hardware and software upgradable, runs the Roon Core internally (no network-attached computer required), and offers 4TB of solid-state storage. Driving Wadax's Reference DAC, the Atlantis's sound quality was in a league of its own, with tremendous resolution, dimensionality, and timbral liquidity. (forthcoming)

Burmester MC151
\$25,000

This elegant and capable music server beautifully blends high technology with luxury. It combines in one chrome-plated chassis a CD ripper and 2TB of storage, and has the ability to play music from a streaming service, USB stick, or external drive. What's more, the MC151 has variable output levels and source switching, making it a fully capable preamplifier. Burmester's iOS app makes it easy to find and play back music. Music stored on the MC151 can be accessed by any other UPnP device on the network. The crowning glory of the Burmester MC151, however, is not its features, but its sound quality. It brings out exceptional upper-octave life and air, but still keeps the midrange warm and natural. Bass is equally excellent. (255)



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Vandersteen's NEW KĒNTO Carbon: Why Accept Less?

Once You Hear Powered-Bass Perfectly EQ'd to Your Listening Room, There's No Going Back. And Once You Hear the Lifelike Transparency of Carbon Drivers, You Feel the Goosebumps.



Carbon Tweeter Takes "the Lid" Off the Music for Open, Airy Top-End that will give you Goosebumps

The original Model 5 debuted in 1995. While other brands turned over their lines many times over, the Model 5 saw many upgrades that left no customers behind in its unprecedented run of nearly 25 years.

Patented Perfect-Piston™ Model Seven Mk II Midrange w/ Carbon Fiber Over Balsa Cores For Beautifully Uncolored Transparency

Richard and Nathan Vandersteen knew they had to deliver another AMAZING Speaker to

replace the Model 5. But rather than simply update the 5, they focused on delivering as much of the Model Seven Mk. II's technological advancements and performance as possible in the KĒNTO Carbon.

Pistonic 6.5" Woven-Fiber Mid-Bass Driver Provides Sonically "Invisible" Transition Between Powered-Bass Section and Lower Midrange for Startlingly Lifelike Male Vocals

In addition to Carbon Drivers derived from the Model

Advanced "Cabinet-Within-A-Cabinet" Construction Means the Enclosure for the Blackest Musical Backgrounds

Seven Mk. II, the KĒNTO Carbon introduces Vandersteen's ALL NEW Powered Counterforce Bass. By placing the 9" (400-Watt) powered subwoofer drivers on opposite sides of the enclosure vibrations cancel each other completely. The result is not just cleaner bass, but gorgeous uncolored midrange.

Powered Counterforce Bass w/ Opposing 9" Side-firing Subwoofers Cancel Cabinet Vibrations Completely for Bass Clarity and Beautiful Midrange

The KĒNTO also features an all-new crossover design that allows it to deliver a richer, fuller sound in the crucial upper-bass/low-midrange frequencies where many instruments and male vocals come to startling life.

400-Watt Bridged Class B Linear Sub Amp w/Regulated Switching Power Supply and Pistonic Subwoofer Cones Provide Timbral and Spatial Accuracy at Thunderously Low Frequencies

11-Band Room EQ with Q and Level Controls In Each Speaker For Perfect Bass in Virtually Any Room

The KĒNTO Carbon is not an inexpensive loudspeaker. However, it flat-out embarrasses many other "super speakers" costing multiples of its price, and since it's a Vandersteen, it won't be replaced by a new model next week. Your loudspeaker is

a big investment, don't accept less!

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Pro-Ject Debut Carbon DC

\$449 (includes Ortofon 2M Red factory mounted and aligned)

The most significant upgrade to Pro-Ject's latest Debut is found in the model's name, which refers to the lighter, more rigid, single-piece 8.6" carbon-fiber armtube that replaces the Debut III's aluminum tube. Pre-mounted with Ortofon's 2M Red moving-magnet cartridge, the Carbon offers all one expects from a modestly priced 'table. It doesn't excel in any one area but gets the basics so right that it's hard to criticize what's lacking—because, after all, that's what good entry-level models should provide: a solid foundation for musical pleasure. New DC model offers a higher-precision power supply. (226)



U-Turn Orbit Special

\$459

The top of the line for U-Turn, the Orbit Special includes an acrylic platter, built-in phonostage, and Ortofon 2M Red cartridge. It's about as plug-and-play as possible. You take the plinth, the dustcover, and the platter out of the box, drop

the platter down onto the spindle, plug it all in, and you're good to go. Overall, the Special feels pretty sturdy for such a budget choice. It's not exactly a heavy unit, but it's clearly well-made. It looks good and it's functional. Fortunately, the Special also sounds great in stock form. (295)

Rega Planar 1Plus

\$595 (includes Carbon cartridge)

It's notable that Rega's entry-level 'table today sells for roughly the same price it did some 20 years ago. That doesn't mean the Planar 1 performs at exactly the same level as the original Planar 2 or 3, but it does mean that Rega's commitment to value remains paramount. Perhaps even more remarkably, Rega is able to achieve this while keeping all manufacturing in the UK! Building on success, the P1 uses the classic Rega motor, drive system, and main bearing, but instead of a glass platter this one is made of MDF. The 'arm is the new RB101, which comes pre-mounted with a Carbon moving-magnet cartridge. You won't get much frequency extension or wide dynamics here, but what you will get is the pace, musical interplay, and involvement that make analog special. (171, 295)



GEM Dandy PolyTable Standard

\$1495

If you're an analog lover who doesn't have a massive living space and/or a massive budget, this high-value, small-footprint, belt-driven turntable



could be just your ticket. From setup to playback to overall musical enjoyment, this American-made 'table is user-friendly in every way. It comes with a Jelco tonearm of your choice: SA-250, SA-750D, or 10" SA-750E (the Japanese maker's SA-250 'arm was supplied with the audition unit). Like any 'table/'arm worth its salt, the PolyTable allows for VTF, VTA, and azimuth adjustments. Deceptively simple in design, it avoids fuss and frills, boasting a sleek, modern form, while its elegant two-piece platter, easy-to-install bearing, and adjustable feet (with a built-in bubble level) make for streamlined functionality. With both mm and mc cartridges, the PolyTable delivered serious analog pleasure worthy of far bigger bucks. A gem, indeed. (260)

Rega Planar 6

\$1595 w/o cart, \$1995 w/ Exact2 MM, \$2195 w/Ania MC

Rega's Planar 6 offers the same phenolic-resin "double brace" found in the Planar 3, the same RB303 'arm, and a whole lot more. Replacing Rega's traditional glass platter/felt mat is a two-piece, 16mm-thick flywheel/platter made of two joined pieces of float glass. An outer ring adds mass to the circumference, increasing the platter's natural flywheel effect, thus improving speed stability, accuracy, and consistency. The new subplatter adds an aluminum "top hub adaptor" with six-raised plateaus to ensure the flattest possible surface for LPs to rest on. The aluminum/rubber feet, too, are a step up from Rega's standard rubber-cup-like units. Moreover, the Planar 6 comes standard with the TT PSU power supply, a must for top performance. Note the large improvements in dynamic nuance and explosiveness, tonal and



Rega Planar 3

\$945 w/o cart, \$1145 w/Elys2

With a phenolic-resin "double brace" creating a "stressed beam" between the main-bearing hub and tonearm mount, Rega's Planar 3 is a significant step forward.

Thanks to a phenolic-resin skin and upgraded particulate core-material, the plinth is also lighter than its predecessor, while the new RB303 'arm features a newly designed tube said to increase rigidity. The result is deeper bass, lower noise, more dynamic pop, increased detail, and improved staging. Things get better yet with the optional TT PSU power supply (\$375). (224)



textural detail, size and depth of stage, and sheer musicality. (226)



Technics SL-1500C-K

\$1199

The Technics SL-1500C is a direct-drive turntable with a built-in phonostage. Its shiny aluminum top plate sits on a matte black body of ABS mixed with fiberglass, which Technics says helps with rigidity. The tonearm is the same S-shape version found in the 1200 Series, with adjustable height and an extra counterweight for use with heavier cartridges and headshells. On the back is a switch to defeat

the auto tonearm lift, two sets of RCAs, and a switch to change between the built-in phono preamp and the straight line output. Sound is absolutely fantastic for this price point, especially through a separate phonostage rather than the internal phono preamp. Rhythm and pacing are a dream, and bass dynamics really slam. Overall an absolute bargain and a pleasure to use. (308)

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Clearaudio Concept

\$1600 (\$1800 with Concept MM cartridge)

Clearaudio's Concept turntable and cartridge offer a hugely rewarding analog experience at a very attractive price. The sleek, belt-drive 'table and magnetic-bearing Concept 'arm, which the company calls "friction free," sell for \$1600; when bundled with the Concept MM cartridge, the pre-set-up package sells for a trim \$2000. And though the Concept's performance may not equal that of the very finest out there, its combined strengths in resolution, dynamics, low-noise, and sheer musical engagement won't leave you wanting. Couple this with terrific German build and finish, and the Concept is a hands-down bargain. (205)



Pro-Ject RPM 5 Carbon

\$1699 (includes Sumiko Amethyst factory mounted and aligned)

This isn't a plug-and-play deck—one that you stick on the shelf and forget about. (You could do that, of course, but this 'table was designed to be tweaked and upgraded.) It uses a minimalist plinth that hugs the edges of the big acrylic platter and tonearm board, cutting out anything that isn't necessary. The motor itself sits on a massive little stage and is entirely separate from the main platter's plinth. This decouples it, making for a much quieter ride. The main platter and plinth are pretty massive themselves, with tip-toe feet that can be adjusted in order to perfectly level everything. In sound, reviewer DK was both impressed and incredibly pleased. The Pro-Ject was at least a match for, if not better than, his own reference deck, and a clear and obvious step up from budget 'tables like the U-Turn or the Rega Planar 1. (295)



SOTA Comet IV with S303 tonearm

\$1750 in wood finish

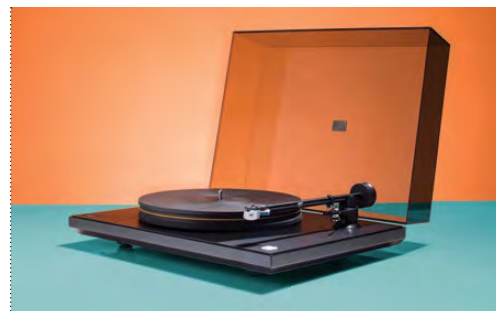
SOTA, which stands for State of the Art, has been building some of America's finest turntables for well over 30 years. Its top-end models use the company's well-known floating seismic isolation system, which hangs from a four-point sprung suspension. Because that technique is costly to execute, SOTA's more affordable models, such as the Comet, use internal damping to isolate the chassis from vibration. Rounding out this excellent design is the Comet's bearing cup, which is made from a Teflon-impregnated self-lubricating polymer; the platter assembly consists of a high-density polymer main platter sitting atop a polymer-based sub-platter driven by a 24-pole AC synchronous motor. The resulting sound is at once easy and authoritative, warm, rich, and solid, with wide and nuanced dynamics, and a large 3D soundstage. A great sounding 'table at a great price. (180)



Clearaudio Concept Black w/Satisfy Black tonearm

\$2000

Beautifully proportioned, light but not insubstantial, Concept Black is a model of how a mid-priced, belt-drive turntable should look and perform. Easy to set up, the 'table works like a fine Swiss mechanical watch, offering overall musicality, tight image focus, transient authenticity, and dynamic conviction. With the optional high-precision Satisfy Black tonearm, mistracking was rendered essentially theoretical, and speed stability was rock solid. Images were locked down with little to no smearing even when the player was challenged by a tightly packed chorus or complex symphonic instrumentation. Weighty in tonality, the Concept Black balanced inner detail and instrumental solidity with the best of them. When it's time to come back down to earth and consider a real-world record player, analog lovers need look no further than the Concept Black. (284)



MoFi Electronics UltraDeck+

\$2299

When Mobile Fidelity decided to create a line of hardware they wisely brought in Allen Perkins of Spiral Groove to design the turntables, and they deliver a lot of bang for the buck. Setup is simple, especially with the "+" option that comes with the Japanese-made UltraTracker mm cartridge preinstalled at the Ann Arbor factory. The belt-driven 'table features an isolated AC synchronous motor, a hefty Delrin platter, and a constrained-layer-damped chassis with feet designed by Mike Latvis of HRS. Sonically, imaging, musicality, pitch stability, and presence emerged as strong themes. The UltraDeck is a smartly conceived and finely honed design that's already earning its place as an instant classic. (284)



Pro-Ject RPM 9 Carbon

\$2499 w/o cartridge, \$2999 with Sumiko Songbird High or Low output MC Cartridge

The RPM 9 Carbon is Pro-ject's "tuner" special, with significant upgrades over the stock RPM 9.2. There's a new motor, a new DC-driven power supply that features an improved AC generator for speed stability, and a newly upgraded platter and carbon-wrapped chassis. Sonics are devilishly good. Backgrounds are jet-black with timbres softly tinted to the warmer end of the tonal spectrum. Arpeggios are liquid and articulate, and there is an impressive sense of air and lift in the upper octaves. With the RPM 9 Carbon's overarching sense of balance across all sonic criteria, LPs sound elegantly composed and well-nigh effortless. Without qualification, this is a terrific package, certain to give a great many lucky owners years of vinyl-spinning thrills. (254)

NCF Nano Crystal² Formula

Nano Crystal² Formula - Nano Crystalline, Ceramic and Carbon Powder

Incorporated into Furutech NCF products, Nano Crystal² Formula --- NCF features a special crystalline material that has two 'active' properties. First, it generates negative ions that eliminate static. Second, it converts thermal energy into far infrared. Furutech combines this remarkable material with nano-sized ceramic particles and carbon powder for their additional 'piezoelectric effect' damping properties. The resulting Nano Crystal² Formula is the ultimate electrical and mechanical damping material. Created by Furutech, it is found exclusively in Furutech products.



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PowerFlux NCF power cord



GTO-D2 NCF power distributor



NCF Booster-Brace-Single



The Furutech NCF Booster-Brace-Single has been designed to support power connectors at wall sockets and on power distributors while boosting sound performance with Furutech's NCF material.



TURNABLES & RECORD PLAYERS

Rega Planar 8

\$3095 (\$3695 w/Ania; \$3995 w/Ania Pro; \$4395 w/Apheta3 MC cartridge)

An example of the recent, rapid evolution of Rega's designs, the RP8 is a "skeletal" design, which includes not just the shape but also the material of the plinth—a sandwich of phenolic resin skins over a core fabricated from "featherweight, nitrogen expanded, closed-cell polyolefin." A three-piece, "super flywheel" platter made of float glass and the newly fashioned RB808 'arm are also found in this (for now) top model. The sound of the RP8 brings new levels of transparency, fine detail, soundstage definition, and drive to the always engaging—now more so—Rega sound, along with a tonal richness, weight, and dynamic thrust that we've never before experienced from any Rega design. In the past, one often qualified a Rega recommendation as "good for the money." The RP8 is simply one of the best mid-priced designs on the market. (234)



EAT C-Sharp

\$3595 (\$3995 with Ortofon Black Quintet cartridge)

The combination of the C-Sharp and the Ortofon Quintet Black cartridge produced appealing sound that had rhythmic drive and made nearly everything reviewer AJ spun fun to listen to. The combo simply played the music on nearly everything he threw at it. Although the EAT lacked the ultimate resolution and neutrality of pricier analog front-ends, AJ still found its "sins" of omission more than acceptable. Indeed, he found himself spending more time listening to complete albums during the review period than what he'd originally allocated for the evaluation. (254)



Clearaudio Performance DC Wood

\$3600 (\$5800 with Tracer tonearm)

This belt-driven turntable with aluminum/Baltic-birch plinth and ceramic bearing took the listening experience to another level—more fully maximizing their playback potential across key criteria and in many cases extracting and revealing information or details that she'd hadn't previously heard. What stood out most consistently was a sense of sonic nimbleness and freedom combined with a smooth and steady effortlessness that could well be attributed to the "floating" magnetic-platter design and the lesser number of mechanical parts in the ceramic bearing. Another key difference was the DC Wood's quiet operation—a lowering of noise that carried over through the rest of the system, allowing the proper dark backdrop for full sonic landscapes to unfold. An outstanding, even addictive, analog setup that should be on any LP lover's short list. (297)



SOTA Sapphire Series VI

\$3600

The Series VI upgrade of this venerable David Fletcher classic, more than thirty-years-old and getting younger with each new iteration, boasts improvements in parts, engineering, machining, fit 'n' finish, and performance—all retrofittable to earlier versions. Its time-proven four-point hanging suspension is still the ultimate in isolating the 'arm /pickup/groove from external disturbances. For PS, the Sapphire is the least expensive turntable in his experience to reach the echelon of what the so-called "super-turntables" are all about, sacrificing only a bit of ultimate resolution and control, most of which you get back by adding vacuum hold-down or by getting instead SOTA's Star/Nova models (\$4850), both of which are already fitted with the vacuum system. Recommended without qualification. (211)



HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021



Dr. Feickert Volare

\$3695 (includes Origin Live Silver MkIII tonearm)

Derived from Dr. Feickert's flagship Woodpecker, Volare is an unsuspended belt-driven design that has the essentials down pat, possessing a musicality, stability and solidity that few LP rigs in the \$3k ranks can match. Setup was a snap; it operated silently and achieved platter velocity swiftly. Pitch and image stability were rock-solid. The Volare was unwaveringly stable, reproducing soundstage and dimensional cues and venue ambience in ways that reminded NG of many top-tier rigs. On occasion some acoustic feedback was noted, so a good isolation base is recommended. Volare includes a premium, heavy, well-balanced aluminum platter coupled with a high-torque motor. Fit and finish are superb. (301)



Technics SL-1200G

\$3999

This turntable, which shares the historic name and appearance of the long-running SL-1200 series but is in fact a new design, offers performance at the very highest level, belying its relatively modest price. (The included 'arm is acceptable but is not quite at the same pinnacle.) Its silence and speed stability are competitive with any turntable available and are far superior to most, even very high-priced ones. The turntable's sound is rock solid, very pure, highly resolved, and very lively in the positive sense. One has very much the sensation of hearing what is actually on the record. The Technics is not the only turntable in its price range (or lower) to have challenged the high-priced world, but it has an important feature offered by few of its high-end competitors at any price, namely, adjustable speed. This is a turntable for musicians and those who share musicians' sensibilities. (274)

Pro-Ject Xtension 10

\$4499 without cartridge, \$5499 with Sumiko Starling low-output mc

Pro-Ject is onto something wonderful here: A turntable that hits all the right sonic notes, while providing a rare combination of intellectual and emotional connection to the music. A slightly scaled-down edition of the Xtension 12, the 10 offers a smaller footprint but similar weight. The design features a mass-loaded, magnetically floated subchassis, a 3"-tall, 12.6-pound vinyl/alloy platter, a precision ceramic bearing, and a three-speed AC motor. Regardless of cartridge, the Xtension 10 provides not only a high level of musical satisfaction, but does so in a way that delivers a powerful emotional wallop. (242)



Acoustic Signature Challenger Mk3

\$4995

Analog fans might already be familiar with Acoustic Signature—and maybe you've even read JV's glowing review of the maker's mighty Invictus flagship 'table.

Though the Challenger Mk3 may not have the sheer low-end weight and power of the esteemed German manufacturer's upper-tier designs, our reviewer found that it still delivers remarkable purity, focus, elegance of presentation, and exceptional musicality. Drums, for instance, may not have the ultimate punch, but are still terrifically fast, textured, and explosive. The turntable's small-footprint cylindrical chassis is clean, solid, and elegant. The Challenger Mk3 is also remarkably simple to set up and maintain; its first-rate build-quality (all parts are machined in-house and assembled by hand) has clearly paid off in the solid performance of this very low-coloration turntable. Call it a Challenger that punches above its weight. (274)



Dr. Feickert Woodpecker

\$4995

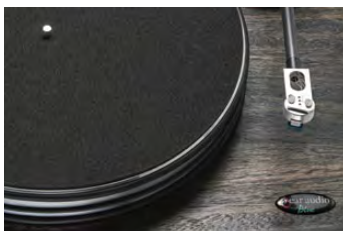
The gorgeous-looking Woodpecker 'table with black-anodized brushed-aluminum top and bottom plates, a high-gloss piano-black main body (rosewood as a \$500 optional finish), quick-release sliding-armboard system (capable of supporting 9"–12" tonearms), and High Inertia Platter is more than the sum of its appealing parts. Incorporating a host of purposeful updates, the Woodpecker proves itself capable of performance that is appropriate to good design execution. Using a 12" Jelco tonearm/Arché headshell combination, the Woodpecker revealed the unique characteristics of the Ortofon Cadenza Bronze, Lyra Skala, and van den Hul Colibri cartridges. While it has a slightly higher noise floor than much more expensively executed designs, the Woodpecker proved itself to be a very capable platform for vinyl playback that should serve its owner far into the future. (244)



Pear Audio Blue Kid Thomas

\$5995 (packaged with Cornet 2 tonearm and external power supply, \$9995)

Based on the pedigree and designs of the late Tom Fletcher (of Nottingham Analogue fame), the Pear Audio Blue Kid Thomas is an advancement over Fletcher's older products. Pear Audio's goal with the Kid Thomas is "sonic harmony." In this case, every aspect of the Kid Thomas' design was tested, down to the smallest parts, in an effort to optimize performance. The act of merging art and craftsmanship with measurements and science allows this turntable package to become a subjectively quiet playback system that can reproduce music in a way that is similar to more expensive turntable systems. (263)



Clearaudio Ovation

\$6200 (\$8500 with Tracer tonearm)

Continuing the trend of bundling together ever more sophisticated turntables, 'arms, and cartridges into fine-sounding but relatively hassle-free combinations, Clearaudio recently released what may be the most ambitious yet of such packages. Utilizing techniques found in the company's \$10,000 Innovation Wood—such as the light and exceptionally rigid Panzerholz wood-laminate plinth material, and optical speed-control—in a package with the elegant size and ease of setup found in the \$2000 Concept, the Ovation, with its magnetic-bearing Clarify 'arm and Talisman v2 Gold cartridge, is a terrific deal. It is very well balanced, with excellent detail that emerges from silent backgrounds, exceptional pitch stability, and sweet, extended highs—though not the powerhouse bottom-end found in the highest-end models. The Ovation nicely bridges the gap between high-end sound and real-world convenience. (216)



AVM R 5.3

\$7499

The AVM R 5.3 is a really good turntable in many ways. It is unusually compact, easy to set up and use, and provides excellent sound quality with a wide range of cartridges. It is relatively insensitive to placement and vibration (though all turntables are affected by these factors to some degree), and is the kind of exercise in precision German engineering that seems likely to last as long as it is given even halfway-decent handling. As such, the AVM R 5.3 is easy to recommend. (295)



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recommended." Al Griffin, Sound & Vision*

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Yamaha GT-5000

\$7995

You might assume, in this day and age, that a Japanese manufacturer would opt for a digital source in its top component line—or, at the very least, a souped-up direct-drive turntable. Not Yamaha, which was aiming for the truest (to life) sound possible. The result is the belt-driven GT-5000—belt drive being the smoother, more open, more continuous option. On top of this, Yamaha chose to equip its 'table with a straight (rather than an S-shaped) tonearm to reduce skating force. Beautifully simple to use, and elegant to look at, the GT-5000 is not simple in construction, consisting of nine layers for the aluminum arm tube, which is plated internally and externally with copper, then laminated with alternating layers of carbon fiber and glass fiber. Sonically, the turntable is smooth, large in scale, and sweet rather than digital-precise. It sailed through everything AM threw at it, big and small, from run-in groove to run-out. A turntable with soul. (308)



Helius Alexia turntable and Omega Tonearm

\$8790

The British firm Helius's Alexia turntable and Omega tonearm are available separately, but according to the US importer everyone who buys an Alexia buys an Omega, so they are listed here as an ensemble. They represent a combination of traditional and genuinely innovative thinking. A two-speed (33/45) belt drive, the Alexia features a novel suspension that is very compliant in the vertical dimension, completely fixed in the lateral, while an optical sensor below the platter that monitors the speed 120 times per second results in unusually effective speed accuracy and constancy. The Omega's bearing is a uniquely "tetrahedral" configuration that offers "both a captured design and minimal friction." Equally unique is the geometry whereby 92% of the record is tracked with less than one degree of error. Reviewer PS was impressed by the setup's extraordinary stability of pitch, wide dynamic window, and excellent tracking of inner grooves. Detail retrieval is spot-on, imaging and soundstaging precise, freedom from external disturbance superb. (forthcoming)

AMG Giro

\$10,000 with 9W2 tonearm

Based on AMG's Viella, the less pricey Giro consists of a circular plinth with an offset platter. Both have been CNC-machined from aircraft-grade aluminum, and the Giro shares the Viella's bearing design: "a hydrodynamically lubricated radial 16mm axle with PTFE thrust pad and integral flywheel." The platter's high-mass stainless-steel machined pulley is paired to a precision Swiss-made DC motor, and the 9W2 tonearm uses the same unusual and highly effective dual-pivot bearing design of the Viella's 12J2. As with the 'table itself, the sleek black armtube is machined from aircraft-grade aluminum that's been anodized to reduce resonance. Low-noise is a key to the outstanding performance here, as this Giro combo pulls a tremendous amount of detail from the grooves. Recorded ambience, dynamic pop as well as nuance, plenty of low-end weight as well as power, and an extended, airy treble offer enough of the illusionary "realness" to make us forget about the gear and become immersed in the beauty of the music. (274)



Clearaudio Innovation Wood

\$11,000

The dual-plinthed Innovation Wood combines some stunning new innovations along with Clearaudio's ceramic-magnetic bearing (CMB) technology that floats the platter, and lightweight yet extremely dense Panzerholz to damp resonances and improve isolation. It uses a massive stainless-steel subplatter derived from the Clearaudio Statement, which when coupled with a new DC motor with optical speed-control, results in superb speed accuracy. JH has not heard any belt-driven 'table, even those with external speed controllers, best the Innovation Wood in this critical area. Solo instruments and voices have such rock-solid pitch stability that you'll swear you are listening to a direct-drive 'table without the motor noise. Music emerges from a black background and has outstanding soundstaging and ambience retrieval when the 'table is mated with a first-rate 'arm and cartridge. This is a terrific analog front end of near-reference quality that raises the bar on what an \$11,000 'table can do. (204)



SME Model 12A Turntable with 309 Tonearm

\$11,900

Replacing SME's previous entry-level Model 10A, which also came with the 309 tonearm, the Model 12A represents a substantial leap in performance over what was already an impressive ensemble. It evinces the typical SME house "sound": all but peerless neutrality, deep background blackness, and dynamic range second to none. A powerful new motor effectively banishes concerns over speed accuracy, stability, constancy, and timing, while its proprietary mat/clamping arrangement rivals vacuum hold-down. Not only is the 12/309's sonic performance astonishingly close to that of the company's flagship models, it also receives the same standard-setting quality of build, parts, fit, and finish. Like the Model 10A, the 12A lacks the O-ring suspension-cum-damping of SME's higher-priced turntables, yet PS found its isolation from external disturbances impressive by any standard. The 12A may be the welterweight in the company's lineup, but it can certainly hold its own in the ring with the big boys. (306)



CARBON 8
Analog Interconnect
single ended & balanced terminations

Merrill-Williams R.E.A.L. 101.3

\$12,995 (includes clamping system)

Analog innovator George Merrill's turntable, designed in collaboration with Robert Williams, breaks ground in its approach to energy management, ingeniously and effectively damping and dissipating resonances wherever they lurk. Music emerges with such exceedingly low coloration and distortion that transparency, fine detail retrieval, openness, and clarity are surprisingly close to what one experiences when listening to mastertapes. The motor, platter, spindle/bearing, and tonearm are effectively isolated, and the energy developed by each part is absorbed and dissipated by the 14-pound rubber-compound elastomer forming the core of the plinth. It supports virtually all types of 'arms, and comes with an advanced speed controller and optional clamp and periphery ring. The MW-101 turntable system should be a revelation to those who want to get closer to the sound of a live performance without breaking the bank. (225)



Basis Audio 2200 Signature and 2800 Signature

\$13,900 and \$28,850 with Vector Model 4 tonearm

In every area of vinyl performance, this Basis combination outperforms all other turntable/arm setups with which reviewer PS has long experience. Design, engineering, and precision in machining, fit, and finish approach a standard of perfection surpassed by none and equaled by virtually none. Winner of our 2008 Product of the Year and Golden Ear Awards, and built to an amazing degree of mechanical precision, the Basis 2800 Signature is nothing short of revelatory in its ability to seemingly disappear from the playback chain. This 'table imposes no discernible colorations on the music, allowing a deeper and more immediate connection with your LPs. Music emerges with startling immediacy and vitality from a jet-black background, and the bottom-end is staggeringly deep and dynamic. In a world of six-figure turntables, the Basis 2800 Signature just might hold its own with anything out there. (180, 172)



Brinkmann Spyder

\$14,990 (10.5 tonearm, \$5990)

Eschewing an enclosed plinth in favor of an open chassis, the Spyder mounts the platter assembly's base on a cylindrical pillar. Additional cylindrical pillars support up to four tonearms as well as the outboard motor. The Spyder's sound is transparent, dynamic, low in perceived distortion, and with a fairly high degree of perceived neutrality. It exhibits a clarity without that etched quality that is sometimes mistaken for transparency or resolution. The Spyder is also well isolated from external disturbance, even when the music gets big, deep, and loud. Operationally this setup was a joy to use, its fit and finish of a caliber that spells "G-E-R-M-A-N" in all caps. In sum, here's a vinyl player of all-around excellence that should provide years of performance both pleasurable and trouble-free. (269)



AMG Viella 12

\$17,500 with cherry skirt, \$18,000 with black lacquer skirt (\$1500 for Reference tonearm cable)

Like the \$15k Raidho C-1.1 (or the now-discontinued \$4k Ortofon MC A90), the beautifully machined Analog Manufaktur Germany Viella 12 is that relative rarity—a truly first-rate (and truly original) audio component that, while by no means cheap, is still within the financial reach of folks who aren't made out of money. The V12 may not (in fact, it does not) give you everything that a Walker, TW Acoustic, or Acoustic Signature gives you, but what it does supply on select recordings—the extended sense that you are in the actual presence of real performers in a real space—is more than enough to earn the rave review it got and its place on this select list. A genuine marvel of engineering smarts and manufacturing finesse. (226)



Technics SL-1000R

\$18,999

Technics, long the dominant manufacturer of direct-drive turntables, has now returned its original area of renown with the SL-1000R. And it's a beauty. Simple in design but sophisticated in execution, the SL-1000R provides the virtues of direct-drive without its traditional drawbacks. There is no discernible noise transmitted from the motor to the platter. Instead, the SL-1000R has remarkable fidelity on transients, stopping and starting musical passages on a dime. This precision allows vocals, not to mention acoustic instruments, to come through with excellent tonal accuracy. This simple and elegant turntable makes a strong case for the virtues of direct-drive, one that advocates of belt-drive 'table will be hard-pressed to dismiss, let alone refute. (306)



Kuzma Stabi M

\$20,300

Built like a battleship—black on black in black, all metal in a baked-on matte finish—there's absolutely no obeisance to domesticity in Kuzma's Stabi M turntable, the look strictly industrial. Brutally heavy, thick slabs of aluminum form the outer and inner chassis, with just enough elasticity between to allow for judicious damping without compromising rigidity. Yet in design and philosophy, this is very much a traditional turntable complete with hinged dust cover. The sound is superbly neutral, with very quiet backgrounds, and like all large, heavy turntables in PS's experience, it soundstages with exceptional stability and solidity. There's also a difficult-to-define sense of liveliness about the sonics that is definitely addictive. Ergonomics are unimprovable and operation is intuitively perfect. All in all, a superior platform for your vinyl treasures. (248)



CONGRATULATIONS

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-Neil Gader, TAS May/June 2019



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VPI Avenger Reference

\$20,500 (with either JMW or Gimbal Fat Boy 12-3D arm)

VPI makes some great and highly affordable turntables like the Prime Scout, which costs \$2200 complete with a really good VPI tonearm. The Avenger clearly outperforms the Prime Scout, but you pay a lot to get these improvements. Since its whole purpose is to do as little to the sound as possible, the 'table is a bit hard to assess. It is one thing to talk about subtle colorations; it is another to talk about a subtle lack of them. A high-end sandbox that lets the user experiment with any configuration he likes—ranging from multiple 'arms (both VPI and other brands) of any length, to different types of motors (belt-drive, rim-drive, magnetic rim-drive) and feet (Signature feet, Avenger Reference Feet, pneumatic air-suspension feet, or third-party feet)—it is a truly versatile and great-sounding choice for those who can also afford (or already own) a top cartridge and phonostage. (287)

SME Model 20/3A

\$21,900 (includes Series V tonearm)

This third iteration of SME's Model 20 has been improved to the point that it comes so nose-thumbingly close to the company's flagship Model 30/3 that PS would not want to bet the two could reliably be differentiated in any but the highest-resolution systems—and even then he'd hedge his bets! Since the Model 30 is universally recognized as an industry standard, the comparison alone is evidence enough of what a great achievement this design is. With the (supplied) SME's IV.Vi 'arm, stability, control, and neutrality triangulate the 20/3's virtues into an extraordinary impression of sheer foundation: things rooted, solid, grounded, staying put unless they're meant to move—in which case they do so without ambiguity, vagary, or uncertainty. State-of-the-art life, lifelikeness, and deep, deep background blackness, which no doubt helps account for the huge dynamic range. Parts, fit, finish, precision of execution are to SME's standards—need anything more be said? (216)



Kronos Audio Sparta

\$24,000 (\$7150 additional for Helena tonearm)

This ingenious turntable with counter-rotating platters is Kronos Audio's way of offering the lion's share of the sonic advantage that its more-expensive PRO brings to the party at a more cost-effective price. Reviewer Greg Weaver was supremely impressed, saying that the implementation of the dual-platter, contra-rotational concept is the single most significant development in turntable design in decades. With the Sparta, records he'd been listening to for decades were given new dimension, increased focus, enhanced clarity, and more credible tonality. He bought the review sample. (259)



JR Transrotor Orion FMD

\$34,300 (with TR 5009 tonearm)

While reviewer Andre Jennings is predominantly a performance-first listener, he enjoys when a component's attributes are accompanied by an appealing exterior. To paraphrase his review, the Transrotor Orion FMD is extremely camera-friendly, but an actual look with your own eyes will reveal more elegance and beauty than a photo could ever capture. However, this beauty definitely isn't only skin deep. It is more of an ingenious integration of form fits function. Designed around a Free Magnetic Drive system that is as quiet as they come, the Orion FMD does an admirable job of isolating the platter from any anomalies generated by the drive system. The sonic result provides a very low noise platform that allows music to erupt from the darkest of backgrounds. (253)



Spiral Groove SG1.2

\$35,000 (\$41,000 with Centroid tonearm)

Don't let the Spiral Groove SG1.2's compact size and lack of bling fool you; this is a serious turntable that competes in the upper echelon. The belt-driven SG1.2 weighs in at 80 pounds, with much of that weight added by four aluminum layers set in two independent constrained-layer platforms. The platter has an oversized, stainless steel ring around the outer perimeter that increases the platter's inertia. An outboard power supply drives the high-torque AC-synchronous motor. The SG1.2 will accept a variety of armboards, including one for the Centroid, a 10" unipivot design. The SG1.2 is extremely quiet, providing a silent backdrop for the music. The SG1.2's outstanding soundstaging effortlessly distinguishes between orchestral instruments, even those at the back of the orchestra. Also particularly enjoyable is the SG1.2's rhythmic solidity. (276)



TechDAS Air Force III Premium

\$39,500

The belt-drive TechDAS turntable faces a crowd of competitors. What distinguishes it right off the bat is its build-quality. Nothing is left to chance with this turntable, which is crafted with impeccable precision from the platter down to the vacuum pump system. The result is a silky and continuous sound that makes listening to LPs a pleasure. Its pitch stability is beyond reproach, and it extracts a wealth of detail from the grooves. No, the Air Force III does not possess the gravity or weight or majesty of its higher-priced brethren, including the mighty TechDAS Air Force I that led to this effort. But it is definitely nonpareil in its class. (280)



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TURNABLES & RECORD PLAYERS

TW Acoustic Black Knight

\$45,500 with TW Acoustic Raven 10.5" tonearm

Let's say—for the sake of argument, mind—that you don't have \$100k+ to spend on an Acoustic Signature Invictus or a Walker Black Diamond V. What's a body to do? Well, meet the TW Acoustic Black Knight. No, the Black Knight doesn't take up the square footage of the humongous Invictus or the sizeable Walker (with pump). But at 143 pounds of Delrin-damped aluminum, copper, and bronze, this gorgeously made, beautifully engineered, three-motor (battery powered and regulated), single-belt-driven, unsuspended table is brick-solid—and (when equipped with its dual-pivot Raven 10.5 tonearm) comes a lot closer than shouting distance to the mastertape-like presentation of the Invictus or the Walker for about a third of its price. Thomas Woschnick (the TW of TW Acoustic) has always made turntables with gorgeous tone color and decay. The Black Knight adds speed and pace to the formula, for a record player that offers the entire package—from starting transient to stopping. One of JV's references. (274)



Clearaudio Master Innovation Wood

\$55,500 (with Statement TT-1MI tonearm and black lacquer finish)

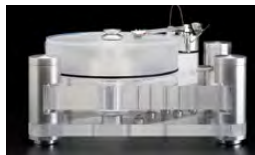
The key to great LP playback is lower noise (which equals higher fidelity). The trouble is that mechanical resonances transmitted from turntable, motor, and tonearm tend to fight against this goal, adding distortion rather than subtracting it. Not so with the Clearaudio's Master Innovation Wood equipped with extremely low-mass, near-vestigial, carbon-fiber, linear-tracking TT-1MI tonearm. This brilliant Peter Suchy design not only effectively isolates the drive system from the platter (the main platter "floats" on a magnetic field above the drive platter, eliminating any points of physical contact—and thus any transmission of friction and noise); it also eliminates the inevitable tracking/tracing error of pivoted arms via Suchy's equally brilliantly designed linear-tracking tonearm, which rides on tiny bearings, virtually friction-free, along a glass tube. The result is high among the lowest noise, highest-resolution analog signals JV has heard from a record player. The Clearaudio Master Innovation Wood delivers everything—energy, detail, body, tone color—and does so with an even-handed impartiality that makes that "gestalt shift" from hearing sonic "parts" to the shivery feeling that you're in the presence of virtual "wholes" (of real singers and instrumentalists) possible on any well-recorded LP. An engineering masterpiece—and one of JV's references. (301)



Basis Audio Inspiration

\$64,500 (package includes Synchro-Wave Power Supply, Microthin Belt, and Vacuum System; \$71,400 includes Vector 4 tonearm with VTA micrometer; \$82,000 includes SuperArm 9)

This remarkable turntable gets its name from Basis founder A.J. Conti's inspiration to bring many performance aspects of his \$175,000 Work of Art turntable to a more practical form factor and price. We haven't heard the Work of Art, but we can say that the Inspiration is a spectacular-sounding turntable with many special qualities that elevate the listening experience. Among these are an absolutely jet-black background, superb speed stability that contributes to realistic timbres, a vibrant dynamic rendering, and the uncanny impression of instruments hanging in space. The Inspiration is particularly adept at portraying air and bloom around instruments, as well as at resolving low-level information such as the tail ends of cymbal decays. It all adds up to a highly musical and involving presentation that is, surprisingly, considerably better than that of Basis' superb 2800 Signature. Supplied with Basis' Vector 4 VTA tonearm and Synchro-Wave Power Supply. (220)



HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

Acoustic Signature Invictus Jr.

\$84,900 (with TA-9000 tonearm)

A couple of years ago, Acoustic Signature introduced a behemoth turntable—the ultra-wide, ultra-deep, ultra-heavy, ultra-expensive Invictus. Quieter and more imperturbable than any analog front end JV had heard up until then, the Invictus sounded uncannily like a tape player. It was just smoother and, to use an HP phrase, more continuous in every sonic respect. Comes now a far smaller, more affordable, and, interestingly, more advanced version of the Invictus—the Invictus Jr. Designed over the last two years (the original was designed better than six years ago), the Jr. takes technological and sonic advantage of all that Acoustic Signature has learned in about half a decade of research. The result is in certain ways an even better record player (harder-hitting, higher resolution, even lower noise) for a lot less dough. As is the case with the Clearaudio Master Innovation Wood, if you want to hear singers and instrumentalists sound as if they are wholly "there"—semblances of the real things rather than collections of sonic parts (however beautiful or beguiling those parts may be)—this is the record player for you. Another one of JV's references, and TAS's 2018 Turntable of the Year. (297)



Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond V

\$110,000

The Walker Proscenium Black Diamond V air-bearing turntable/tonearm transforms many of the smartest ideas

from turntables past into a work of audio art that not only looks fantastic but sounds fantastic, too. And now, with Walker's new, improved, diamond-crystal-enhanced tonearm, revised multi-vented air-bearing, updated motor controller, greatly improved air-bearing feet, more effective clamp and damping fluid, and phenomenal new pump (which no longer needs regular maintenance and is remote-controllable, to boot) one of the two best phonographs JV has tested has taken a significant leap forward in overall sonic quality and ease of use. Gorgeous in tone color, extraordinary in resolution, superb on bass, and nonpareil in soundstaging, it has been one of JV's reference for more than a decade. If you're looking for the finest in LP playback, the Walker is still the one and only. (167, 226)



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Basis Audio A.J. Conti Transcendence Turntable and SuperArm 12.5

\$127,000

The Transcendence represents Basis Audio founder A.J. Conti's attempt to create a turntable that render LPs sonically indistinguishable from the analog mastertape that created the LP. In a departure from previous Basis turntables, the Transcendence is

made of stainless steel and various alloys rather than acrylic, and features an entire new suspension system. It is designed as a "forever platform," with the ability to accept up to four tonearms of any length and to have major components upgraded in the field. The Transcendence lives up to its design goal, sounding unlike any turntable RH has heard. What's most striking is how the Transcendence seems to vanish from the playback chain, fostering the impression of hearing back through to the mastertape. Timbres are astonishingly lifelike, with a solidity and tangibility that have eluded other 'tables. The ultra-quiet background and spectacular retrieval of low-level detail combine to render space, bloom, reverberation decay, and the tail end of cymbal strikes with hair-raising realism. The Transcendence also has an ease, particularly on loud and complex passages, that makes you completely forget that you're listening to an LP. When you discover newfound musical meaning in well-worn LPs as RH has, you know that the turntable is special. RH consider the Transcendence one of high-end audio's greatest achievements. Winner of TAS' Overall Product of the Year Award in 2019 (295)

TechDAS Air Force One Premium

\$145,000

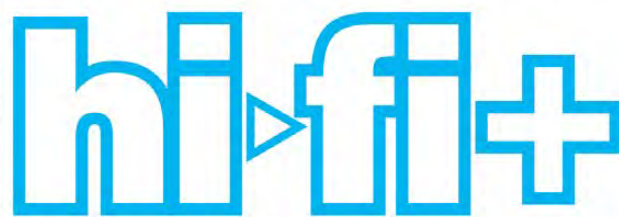
As its price (and it has skyrocketed since our review) suggests, this new turntable from the distinguished Asian veteran-designer Hideaki Nishikawa is an all-out attempt to answer and exceed every aspect and pa-



parameter of turntable performance. An air bearing for the platter, air suction for the vacuum hold-down, and air bladders for the

suspension system triangulate the nucleus of the AF1—the first to combine them in a single design. Special filters and sensors neutralize the ripple effect of pumps and prevent vinyl-damaging vacuum pressure. The sonic results are a background blackness and consequent dynamic range the like of which reviewer PS never before experienced with vinyl—which suggests that spurious resonances are banished and that no hint of feedback or other untoward environmental disturbances pierce the suspension. Paired with importer Bob Graham's latest 'arm, the AF1 is all around the best platform for vinyl playback with which PS has had long experience. (254)

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Rega RB330

\$595

For decades, turntable manufacturers who didn't build their own 'arms frequently packaged their models with Rega's terrific-sounding and affordable RB300 tonearm. Musically compelling, with excellent balance and good detail, if not the final word in any one category, the improved RB330 is still a superb buy. (127)

VPI JMW 12-3D

\$2500

A 12" tonearm intended for the Avenger turntable, the 12-3D is VPI's newest 3D-printed design. It has a structure that is so well damped it has less than 1.5dB of resonance in the critical 9–12Hz range. The 3D-printed armtube takes its name from the additive manufacturing (or "3D printing") process used to produce it, creating a single-piece structure from headshell to rear stubbedesign and madeto provide a totally even mechanical resonance response. (285)



Helius Designs Omega Silver Ruby

\$5225, 10" (\$5295, 12")

Designer Geoffrey Owen has significantly advanced his tetrahedral bearing design, which uses twelve large rubies to produce a captured bearing with extremely low friction and single-point contact on all surfaces. This dynamically balanced 'arm with non-coincident bearings provides a very stable mechanical platform for a wide range of cartridges without adding its own coloration. While it is not the last word in ease of setup, and lacks adjustable VTA during play, the Omega Silver Ruby's ability to reproduce a rock-solid, precise, and complete soundstage, without truncating the rear of the stage, is reference quality. It has exceptional tonal neutrality and clarity across the sonic spectrum, with deep, dynamic, and articulate bass without bloat or overhang, and naturally extended highs without any stridency. (204)

Basis Audio Vector Model IV

\$5900 (\$6900 with VTA micrometer)

Basis Audio's A.J. Conti has solved a fundamental problem with unipivot tonearms—dynamic azimuth error. (Azimuth is the perpendicular relationship between stylus and groove.) Rather than allowing the 'arm to "roll" when the cartridge encounters record warp, the Vector maintains perfect azimuth alignment via asymmetrical weighting, so that it "leans over" onto a second bearing. The result is an extremely neutral-sounding 'arm that RH has yet to hear mistrack. Although auditioned only on Basis 'tables (the 2200, 2800, and Inspiration), the Vector IV is tonally neutral, dynamically alive, and rich in timbre. When playing records, the 'arm is perfectly silent, with no "talk" or "chatter" emanating from the tonearm itself. Beautifully built and finished, each Vector's pivoting mechanism is personally assembled. (172)



Tri-Planar Mk VII

\$6200

Originally designed by Herb Papier, the Tri-Planar has been built under the well-trained leadership of Tri Mai for over a decade. (Tri was Papier's hand-picked successor, and bought the company from his mentor before Papier's death.) And while it's hard to improve on greatness, Tri Mai's latest thoughts on this classic of tonearm design have, indeed, improved on Papier's final version. While it was always well built, the Mk VII edition is better finished than ever before. Tolerances have been tightened from 0.001 to 0.0001 on all critical parts, and more environmentally-friendly materials are employed throughout: lead in the damping trough and headshell has been replaced by an alloy with similar weight and properties, and the brass counterweights have been changed to surgical-grade stainless-steel to increase longevity. In addition, the armtube has eight layers of internal damping, the new VTA-gauge is laser-etched (rather than silk-screened), and there's a new micro-weight at the rear of the counterweight mounting-tube. If earlier models were characterized by tremendous solidity, focus, dynamic agility, bottom-end reach, overall neutrality, and transparency to the source, then this 'arm has all that multiplied by many degrees. (191)

Graham Phantom III

\$7500, 9"; \$7900, 10"; \$8400, 12"

The Graham Phantom III is a "stable" unipivot design that is an advancement over earlier models (B-44, Phantom II, and Phantom II Supreme), using knowledge gained from the Phantom Elite design. The patented Magne-glide magnetic stabilization bearing interface serves to give the Phantom its stable feeling when playing vinyl records. The 'arm is available with two mounting options (custom Graham or SME-type) and in three armwand lengths (9", 10", and 12"), which gives the end-user a variety of configuration options. All tonearm adjustment parameters are available: tracking force, VTA/SRA, anti-skate, azimuth, etc. The baseline performance of the Phantom III is fundamentally sound. There is a proportionate blend of resolution, detail, bass response, soundstaging, and imaging that creates a wholeness with music reproduction. (291)



TONEARMS

Kuzma 4Point

\$7620 (\$8750, bi-wire w/Cardas RCA box)

Like the Kuzma Airline straight-line-tracking air-bearing 'arm, to which it bears a strong sonic resemblance, the Kuzma 4Point pivoted tonearm is a veritable paragon of high resolution. An ingenious design that is immaculately well made and simple to install and adjust (VTA, VTF, azimuth, overhang, anti-skate), the 4Point uses a unique four-point bearing (thus, the name). A sonic vacuum cleaner when it comes to recovering low-level detail (some of which other great tonearms simply miss), the 4P is slightly leaner in balance than its chief competitors (such as the Walker Audio air-bearing, linear-tracking tonearm and the Da Vinci Master's Reference Virtu); nonetheless, the differences among them are relatively small. The bottom line here is that the Kuzma 4Point is an exceptional performer—almost unbelievably good for the dough—and easily earns JV's highest recommendation, particularly if you are a "fidelity to sources" kind of listener. (225)



Graham Phantom Elite

\$13,000, 9"; \$13,500, 10"; \$13,900, 12"

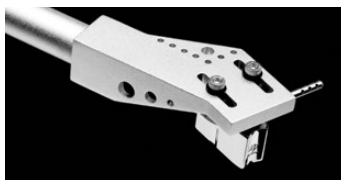
Although the basic design principles, thinking, and features of Bob Graham's classic Phantom unipivot tonearm remain unchanged, the Elite represents a substantial upgrade from previous iterations, with improvements in materials and implementation, constrained-layer

damping in the pivot assembly, and a new high-density, non-magnetic tungsten insert for zero-tolerance bearing-contact and high spurious energy absorption. The removable 'arm wands—9-, 10-, and 12-inch lengths account for the price range—are larger in diameter with more rigid, damped titanium tubes. A new alignment gauge, decoupled counterweight, 'arm wiring, and interconnect complete the redesign. The Elite is a true statement product in which you feel that every aspect of execution and performance has been thoroughly thought through and addressed. No other 'arm known to PS of any type can be more accurately, quickly, and repeatably adjusted to extract optimal performance from any suitable pickup than the Elite. Partner it with the Air Force One turntable, which Graham imports, and you get a record-playing system that is a tough one to surpass. (254)

Basis Audio Superarm 9

\$17,500 (12.5" version, \$19,500)

Although Basis Audio's Vector IV tonearm is outstanding, the company's Superarm 9 plays in an entirely different league. This 'arm's ultra-low resonance gives it a relaxed ease, particularly through the midrange. Instrumental timbres are clean, liquid, and free from glare. One listen to vocals through the Superarm 9 and there's no going back. Fine details are vividly brought to life, particularly transients, giving the presentation greater density of information without added forwardness. The bass is phenomenal, combining great heft and weight with dynamic agility. A reference-quality tonearm. (264)



Swedish Analog Technologies CF 1-09

€48,000

The SAT CF 1-09 tonearm is, as the Brits like to say, a serious piece of kit. It's exquisitely fabricated by a process that includes grafting layers of carbon fiber upon each other to ensure a tonearm of great rigidity that is as impervious as possible to vibration. Marc Gomez, the designer of the tonearm, has gone to heroic lengths to ensure that the stylus can track the grooves of an LP with scant perturbation. The darned thing is simply so inert that it manages to excavate tiny nuances and details that were previously obscured, as well as offer huge dynamic swings. There is nothing quite like hearing a full brass choir on a Verdi overture or Strauss tone poem the way the SAT can render it. Anyone seeking full-spectrum sound from his tonearm need look no further than Gomez's wizardry. Priced in euros to avoid exchange-rate fluctuations. (300)

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Grado Prestige Black2

\$75

Throughout the seventies into the eighties the go-to phono pickup for impecunious audiophiles was Grado's FTE+1, which sold for the princely sum of \$13. John Grado determined that adjusted for today's economy this comes to \$88, whereupon he knocked the price down to \$75, so he could declare the Black 2 an even greater bargain than its fondly recalled predecessor. No, you don't get state-of-the-art resolution and neutrality, but you do get excellent tracking and a lush, transparent presentation with an especially rich, even tactile midrange and a chocolaty warmth and fullness on the bottom that make this pickup easy to recommend to anyone who listens mostly to vocal and instrumental music of a traditional kind whether classical, pop, jazz, or folk. Not for rock fans or head-bangers, it nevertheless has the kind of sound around which cults readily develop (and doubtless would if it were a lot more expensive). (284)

remarkably benign and might even pass unnoticed in many systems (and is easily correctable with a treble tone control). Otherwise, both cartridges are neutral and extremely involving, proving moving magnets can come as close as moving coils to the absolute sound. Under really critical listening, the 760 suggests subtly better dynamics, detail, and nuance, and it is now one of PS's references. But both these models are real giant-slayers: spend little, get lots—but lots—in return. (284)



Grado Prestige Gold2

\$260

Grado's Prestige Gold2 cartridge has its

flaws—audible grain and a lack of inner detail chief among them—but its strengths are such that you can easily listen through the weaknesses. These strengths include a somewhat warm yet pleasant balance, a sweet if not hugely airy treble, a dynamically expressive midrange, and a taut and powerful if not richly textured bass. The overall presentation is lively and conveys an engaging sense of openness (at least relative to many offerings in this price class). Cost-conscious buyers will appreciate the Prestige Gold's clever, user-replaceable stylus mechanism. (172)

superior three-dimensionality, richer and more potent bass, and smoother, less aggressive highs. In short, the Bluepoint No. 2 provides a significant taste of many of the things expensive moving-coil designs do well, offering midrange openness, multi-layered soundstaging cues, and finely rendered textural and transient details, without imposing common moving-coil drawbacks (excessive brightness due to rising treble response or a tendency to etch details). (172)

Excel Sound Corporation Hana SL

\$750



In a sea of \$10,000-ish super-cartridges, what's a vinyl-playing audiophile with discriminating tastes to do? For that matter, what's a sub-\$999-budgeted audiophile to do? The \$750 Hana SL is a cartridge that establishes a baseline of fundamental performance that any cartridge costing more coin should equal, without falling backwards in any area this cart provides. With the Hana SL, the user can rest assured the cartridge will support the next 'table/'arm upgrade. It represents the qualities any more costly cartridge should offer as a bare minimum—and that some don't. (270)

Ortofon 2M Red

\$99

The swansong design of Ortofon's former chief engineer Per



Windfeld, the entry-level 2M Red uses an elliptical-tipped stylus. Though a little dry in the treble and lacking the Ortofon Black's velvety finesse and harmonic finish, the 2M Red is still one sophisticated cartridge for the money. (182)

Ortofon Quintet Red

\$346

At just under three-hundred bucks, the Quintet Red (0.5mV) is on the lowest end of the price scale for moving-coil cartridges, but it doesn't sound like a cheapskate. Its transient speed and sure-footed tracking make it a slam-dunk for any thoughtful starter system. It lacks some resolution of micro-detail and tonal purity at the frequency extremes, yet retains the distinctive musicality that is the essence of LP playback. (244)



Ortofon Quintet Black

\$999

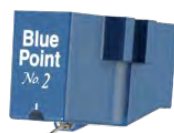
The Quintet Series is a lineup of five low-to-mid-priced moving-coil cartridges that replaces the aging Rondo Series of mc's. At the top rung is the 0.3mV Quintet Black, which is given the royal treatment with niceties like neodymium magnets, a nude Shibata stylus, and a boron cantilever. Sonically, the Quintet Black displays a settled, even neutrality across the tonal spectrum with glimmers of midrange warmth. It has both a light touch and a commanding sense of control. Violin harmonics are fluid and airy, and low-level information is illuminated with greater precision than it is with the Quintet Black's moving-magnet cousin, the excellent 2M Black. (244)



Audio Technica VM540ML and VM760SLC

\$249 and \$649

These two pickups are grouped together because they are part of A-T's VM line and despite the price gap sound far more alike than different. Judged according to the highest standards, PS found they acquitted themselves astonishingly in every aspect of performance, including frequency response, tracking ability, transparency, and dynamic range. Their only tonal anomaly is a smooth, mild rise beginning at 5kHz to a maximum of 4–5dB at 11kHz–12kHz, which in the listening is



Sumiko Blue Point No. 2

\$449

The second-generation version of the Bluepoint Oyster—long considered a go-to choice among affordable, high-output, moving-coil cartridges. The No. 2 offers improved resolution,

Clearaudio Maestro Ebony V2

\$1300

The successor to the redoubtable Maestro Wood, the Maestro V2 Ebony sports a higher





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4.2mV output. It uses an ultra-low-mass Micro HD stylus mounted to a solid boron cantilever and an overall assembly that's identical to those used on its upper-crust moving-coils. Tonally it hews straight down the rich-and-wide middle of the sonic spectrum. Its innate mid-range energy and overall balance bring symphonic recordings to life unifying each section into the greater whole of the orchestra. Low-level detail is elegantly resolved. There's a lightness and speed in the way it reproduces transients. The Maestro Ebony has shed some of its predecessor's excess warmth for a more faithful and quicker sound. As musical as they come, the Maestro V2 Ebony should be required listening for mm and mc fans alike. (234)

Lyra Delos

\$1995

According to the designers at Lyra, the problem with "conventional" moving-coils is that optimal alignment occurs only with the cartridge at rest, i.e., not playing. As soon as a stylus hits the groove and tracking force is applied, that delicate balance is thrown off, compromising resolution, tracking ability, and dynamic range. To solve this issue, the body of the Delos has an unusually shallow angle, and asymmetrically cut dampers on the suspension system. With the cartridge at rest and no tracking force applied, the shape of the asymmetrical dampers puts the signal coils and core into a more upright angle than the magnetic circuit. The resulting uniformity during playback improves dynamics, tracking, and resolution, and removes the guesswork associated with proper azimuth and VTF. An exceptionally quiet background is the most immediately striking aspect of this design. It is also very well balanced and notably coherent across the spectrum, tonally natural, texturally rich, and very quick of response. (206)



Clearaudio Charisma V2

\$2000

Clearaudio's literature describes the Charisma V2 as founder Peter Suchy's "moving magnet masterpiece." It has tonal vibrancy and complexity, classic midrange

heft and bloom, dynamic electricity, and top-end sweetness. Tracking is unshakable and effortless, and transient cues are reproduced with unalloyed naturalism. The Charisma also retrieves images like they're being monitored by LoJack. Premium features include the same boron cantilever and double-polished Gyger S stylus found in the Goldfinger Statement mc, with the motor housed in a mass-loaded ebony wood body for added resonance control. Output is a real world 3.6mV Like its name implies, you've either got it or you haven't. This cartridge has got it. (284)

DS Audio DS 002

\$2250 (\$5500 with DS 002 phono equalizer)

The DS 002 is a breakthrough—far and away the best optical transducer JV has heard. By virtually eliminating cantilever haze, it achieves a directness of presentation that offers a more complete and realistic view of the music and the musicians than you've heard from any previous cartridge of its type. Yes, it can be bested in soundstaging; yes, it can be a little rough-around-the-edges at very high volumes; yes, it is dark-sounding; and, yes, it most certainly has a sensitive stylus that has to be kept clean and away from extraneous sources of vibration. But the DS 002's virtues are so strong, and its sound so unique and pleasing, it received JV's highest recommendation—with laurels and oak-leaf cluster. (274)



Ortofon Cadenza Bronze

\$2309

Ortofon's Cadenza Series replaces the Kontrapunkt line, but with a difference, tailoring each model to cater to specific tastes in sound. One down from the top of the series, the Bronze is designed to have a slightly warmer, more romantic sound suited to classical music, acoustic jazz, voices, and so forth. And so it proved in PS's evaluation, though the tailoring is pretty subtle, which means that the Bronze is still very much an Ortofon as regards overall neutrality and other things, including transparency, tracking ability,

dynamic range, resolution, and the like. If you almost love the peerless neutrality of the best Ortofons (such as PS' reference Windfeld) but want something just a tad richer, the Bronze might be just the ticket. For PS it's a pickup that boasts the highest neutrality of any transducer he's heard with a designed-in flavor and is one of his top recommendations in carts costing under \$2500. (232)

Ortofon MC Cadenza Black

\$2729

This standard-mount, low-output (0.3mV) moving-coil cart features a nude Shibata stylus with a thin, stiff boron cantilever yielding an extremely low-mass stylus/cantilever system for enhanced fine detail retrieval and tracking. The Cadenza Black brings a lot of the advanced technology found in Ortofon's more expensive carts, like the MC A95 and MC Anna, to a more affordable price, including its patented Wide-Range Damping (WRD), which effectively controls high- and low-frequency damping separately, its Field Stabilizing Element (FSE) to keep the magnetic field stable and consistent regardless of armature movement, and its Aucurum gold-plated 6NX copper wire. Here's a fast, tonally balanced, low-coloration cartridge that has outstanding transparency, tonal neutrality, and openness without any brightness or stridency, plus very good soundstaging and dynamics. It approaches the sound of a mastertape and is a great value! (232)



Kiseki Purple Heart NS

\$3199

The "new" and most recent Kiseki Purple Heart captures all the magic of the original—and then some. At the same time, the newest version is quite different from the original. While they both use boron cantilevers, the latest has a different mounting method for the diamond, and on the newest version the coils are wound from gold instead of OFC. The new Kiseki also uses an innovative method of winding the coils that is said to increase transient speed and frequency extension, while also eliminating any sense of harshness and sibilance.



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PHONO CARTRIDGES

Kiseki in Japanese means “miracle” and it is a fitting name to associate with the Purple Heart NS. This moving-coil cartridge is relatively easy to drive, tracks everything thrown at it, has a relaxed yet detailed sound, and when mated with superb speakers puts the performers in the listening room. (306)

Miyajima Infinity Mono

\$3375

The Infinity represents Miyajima's attempt to push the boundaries of mono reproduction one step beyond its previous flagship Zero cartridge. Its attempt has succeeded. The bulbous Infinity weighs in at some 6.4 grams, but the increase in size and weight from the more diminutive Zero do not in the slightest detract from its performance. Rather, they enhance it. The Infinity not only extracts more information from the grooves than the Zero, but is also smoother and more extended in the treble. For anyone interested in playing mono LPs, the Infinity is a must-audition. (309)



Benz Micro Gullwing SLR

\$3500

The Gullwing SLR (0.4mV) is a stun-

ning-sounding moving-coil cartridge. It is very transparent, which makes music sound immediate, and more produced than reproduced. It's a wonder at showing shifts in music's volume and inflection. It carves out a musical space as each recording demands, and likewise excels at micro- and macro-dynamics, while delivering lightning-strike transient response. Combined, these strengths help bring you that much closer to the real deal. (205)

Soundsmith Paua MkII ES/ Sussurro MkII ES

\$3999/\$4999

These two moving-iron cartridges from Soundsmith's Peter Ledermann are essentially identical save for their bodies and styli. The Sussurro uses a specially selected “Contact Line Nude, 0.100mm SQ stylus” and the Paua a somewhat less highly select nude



contact line. Ledermann indicated that the Sussurro would be more revealing and the Paua slightly more forgiving and “musically natural.” Our reviewer, AHC, liked them both but marginally preferred the Sussurro precisely because it was just a bit more revealing of micro-detail, subtle soundstage information, and ambience. “It was their consistent ability to get things musically right,” said AHC of both cartridges, “and to get the most out of most LPs that impressed me.” (219)



Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti

\$4390

The Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti is the newest version of the original MC Windfeld cartridge. The Ti's body structure is SLM (selective laser melted) titanium and stainless steel; its motor is similar to that of the MC A95. Sonically, the Ti allows the listener to play nearly every album in his catalog without being bothered by any sins of commission. This ability to play whatever, whenever, is the MC Windfeld Ti's biggest asset. (285)

Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation

\$4499

The Palo Santos Celebration is Sumiko's elegant, flagship moving-coil (0.5mV). Essentially midrange-neutral, its signature subtly veers to the full-blooded and warmer end of the spectrum, with just a hint of upper-treble shading. In order to appreciate its presence and conservatively tailored character, listening to pure, unamplified, acoustic music is a must. Only in minor ways does it leave some performance on the table, flagging ever so slightly in bottom-end resolving power or in imparting orchestral air and bloom. Still this beauty draws you into its naturalistic web and conveys complexities of timbre and space that are nothing short of authentic. (206)



Koetsu Rosewood Signature

\$4995

It tracked well, and it sang with emotional intensity, while avoiding upper-midrange emphasis or treble brightness. The bass range was



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tightly defined and well-integrated with the lower midrange. You might say that the Rosewood Signature epitomized reviewer Dick Olsher's ideal notion of the Goldilocks mc. Listening to this cartridge became an addictive experience. It was difficult to curtail a listening session as there was always one more album to spin. It's the moving coil DO could happily live with for years to come—and one of the easiest recommendations he's ever made. (295)

Benz Micro LP S-MR

\$5000

The new Benz flagship—the first Benz to be tipped with a micro-ridge stylus (thus the “MR” in its moniker)—more than holds its own in direct comparison with the very best cartridges JV and HP have reviewed. It is simply less “there” as a transducer than other moving-coils, save (in JV's experience) for the Ortofon MC Anna, Air Tight Opus, and Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement. We don't usually associate “disappearing acts” with moving-coil cartridges, which tend to have rather strong characters of their own. Here, for once, is a moving-coil that seems nearly characterless—utterly neutral, very transparent to sources, finely detailed, pleasingly dynamic (at both the loud and soft ends of the spectrum), wall-bustingly wide in soundstaging, precise but not laser-cut in imaging, and consistently lifelike in overall presentation. (206, 216)



Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius/Colibri XGW Signature Stradivarius

\$5495/\$11,995

The Crimson XGW Stradivarius and the Colibri XGW Signature Stradivarius are made from the same Koa wood, with triple Stradivarius-type lacquer coating, 24-karat gold coils, solid boron cantilevers, and VDH Type 1 styli. The Crimson XGW Stradivarius has a 1.0mV output with optimal load impedance recommended in the range of 20–500 ohms. The Crimson XGW Stradivarius is impartial and even across most of the frequency spectrum (including the presence range), but possesses large macro-dynamics from the power region





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on down. The Colibri XGW Signature Stradivarius has a 0.75mV output with optimal load impedance said to be 50–600 ohms. The Colibri has clarity, speed, low-frequency warmth, non-aggressive behavior (with careful setup), and well-controlled (but generous) high frequencies. The Koa-bodied Signature Stradivarius is even more dynamic (both micro and macro) and livelier sounding than the less expensive XGW Strad, has a larger soundstage, produces more powerful transients, is more propulsive, and produces greater clarity in the musical presentation. (279)

DS Audio Master1/ Master1 Equalizer

\$7500/\$15,000

The optical cartridge with internal LED and photo sensors is a relatively new thing (though the idea of using light to read record grooves goes all the way back to the 1950s). That the folks at DS Audio are taking the perfection of this concept seriously is shown by the remarkable sonic progress they've made from the Nighthawk to the DS-002 to this, their new flagship transducer. The Master1 cartridge and Master1 equalizer are simply outstanding components, setting new benchmarks for vinyl playback in several areas (mechanical silence, neutral voicing, and mid-range-to-midbass realism). Even where DS Audio's offerings aren't setting standards, they are now competitive with the finest coils and moving magnets. If JV were in the market for a new phono cartridge and he had the money, the Master1 system would be at the very top of his short list of must-hears. The most realistic-sounding new pickup he's heard in a decade. (306)



Ortofon MC Anna

\$8924

Neutrality, for which Ortofon cartridges have long been famous, is a tricky concept, in that

one man's "neutral" is another's "analytical." The knock against Ortofons (other than their low output) has been precisely that: Their "neutral" balance is also, to some ears, cool, bright, and off-putting. Well, glory be, Ortofon must've been listening to some of its critics, because

this top-tier mc, named after soprano Anna Netrebko, is anything but off-putting. Rich, warm, and beautiful in tone color, it mediates between "sounding good" and "sounding accurate/real" like no other Ortofon before it, making it the cartridge of choice for both Ortofon-lovers and Ortofon-detractors. One of JV's references. (233)

Lyra Etna Lambda

\$9995

The Etna offers the most winning set of attributes that Lyra has produced. Vocals have a physicality and palpability that provide an unprecedented realism. The sense of snap and pacing is also exemplary. A silky continuity that eluded previous Lyra efforts is also abundantly apparent, partly a product of very quiet backgrounds. Careful matching with a phonostage will be necessary, especially in the case of the Super Low (SL) version, which outputs a mere 0.25mV. But this amazing cartridge will take most vinyl reproduction to a new level. (266)



Air Tight PC-1 Supreme

\$11,000

As good as the Air Tight PC-1 is, this considerably pricier moving-coil from AT is substantially better in every way. The original PC-1 used a new high-mu core and winding material said to have three times the saturation flux-density and initial permeability of conventional core materials. In plain English, its magnets produced a much stronger magnetic field, greatly lowering noise and coloration and greatly increasing resolution. The Supreme literally takes this low-internal-impedance/higher-magnetic-energy technology to a new level. Killer good on transients top to bottom, with phenomenal grip and definition in the low bass, the Supreme is also exceptionally lifelike in the midband, with even more of the gorgeous density of tone color, high resolution, and superior soundstaging that made the original PC-1 one of JV's mc references. Along with the Air Tight Opus 1 and the Goldfinger Statement, the Supreme is, in JV's opinion, one of the best mc's on the market. (190)

Lyra Atlas/Atlas Lambda

\$11,995/\$12,995

If you're in the market for a top-end cartridge, Lyra offers not one but two versions of its signature Atlas. The first has 0.56mV output, the second 0.25mV. Which one to choose? The regular Atlas offers a bit more slam and sizzle than the super-low-output version. But the lower-output Atlas provides more finesse and a lower noise floor. Rock aficionados will probably gravitate to the regular Atlas, but for classical the higher-priced cartridge is probably the better match. Each features nonparallel walls to reduce nasty resonances, and their nude bodies make them fairly easy to install. Neither has the lushness of a Koetsu. But both are superlative cartridges that will provide a spellbinding presentation of well-nigh any LP. (276, 284)



Ortofon MC Century

\$12,000

Limited to 100 pieces, the Century, which marks the centennial of Ortofon, is a sinuous and unflappable performer that tracks vinyl grooves with well-nigh unprecedented tenacity. An imperturbable performer, the Century displays no grit or grain. Instead, it anchors images in space with great security while avoiding any of the rise in the top end that sometimes bedevils other moving-coil cartridges. It is not as overtly exciting cartridges like the Lyra Atlas, but the linearity of the Century is impressive. At 0.2mV, the low output of the Century dictates that it must be coupled to a quiet step-up transformer or phonostage. But when properly mated, it delivers an unforgettably urbane and refined sound. (JHb 298)

Air Tight Opus 1

\$15,000

Air Tight's top-line moving-coil cartridge adds even more resolution, dimensionality, and energy to the beautiful reproduction of tone color and superior soundstaging that the PC-1 Supreme is justly famous for. Though not quite the non-stop thrill-machine and sonic vacuum cleaner that the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement is, the Opus has a smoother, better-behaved upper midrange and treble and (building



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- Greg Simmons, StereoTimes.com

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- Sean Fowler, ZeroFidelity



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PHONO CARTRIDGES

on one of the strengths of the Supreme) phenomenally deep-reaching, superbly defined, extraordinarily quick and powerful bass. Quite neutral in balance, it has much of the speed and resolution of über-cartridges, without any trace of the analytic. One of JV's references, and RH's reference. (261)

Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement V2

\$16,000

The sweetest, most musical Clearaudio ever, the Goldfinger Statement V2 manages to sound ravishingly beautiful—more like a Koetsu Blue Lace than a Goldfinger V3—without sacrificing any of the famous virtues of previous Clearaudios. It still has that incredibly expansive Clearaudio soundstage and, perhaps, the deepest-reaching, best-defined, most powerful bass of any moving-coil JV has heard. When you add near-Ortofon-A90-level transient response and resolution to this package, you come close to achieving the unachievable—a transducer that will fully satisfy “accuracy,” “absolute sound,” and “musicality” listeners. At 0.9mV it has enough output to drive any phono stage. The class of world-class, and one of JV's references. (216)

TAPE DECKS

J-Corder Technics 1500

Starting at \$5995; \$7995 with enhanced Record/Playback Option

J-Corder offers beautiful cosmetic choices with completely rebuilt Technics prosumer reel-to-reel machines that not only preserve the Technics' original functionality but also bring those highly reliable decks back to their original specifications—and beyond with J-Corder performance options. Its \$2000 Record/Play option significantly upgrades the electronics with higher-quality parts and a custom-calibrated, matching headblock to coax out another 8dB of recording headroom while significantly improving the deck's sonics. Whereas the J-Corder 1520 has switchable IEC equalization, other J-Corder models need the optional second playback head output married with external electronics to play prerecorded CCIR-compatible tapes,

like those from The Tape Project. However, these decks are really designed for users to make incredible recordings of their favorite tracks. A great way to preserve your irreplaceable source material while it's still in pristine condition. (forthcoming)



SonoruS ATR10

\$19,500

SonoruS' Arian Jansen retains the classic chassis and time-tested transport mechanism of the vintage Studer/Revox PR99 deck but completely updates the unit's tape-drive and tube (E88CC/6922) electronics. The result is a unit capable of playing back today's growing number of 15ips, two-track, CCIR-biased reel-to-reel tapes (from companies such as The Tape Project, Opus3, Yarlung, and Analogue Productions) with gorgeous mid-to-treble-range timbre and texture, simply spectacular wall-to-wall soundstage, and astonishingly three-dimensional imaging. What the ATR10 sounds like, to JV's ear, is an ARC Reference 40/Reference 250 combo with killer bass. (234)

United Home Audio Ultima4 OPS-DC

\$24,500, (\$31,000 with OPS-DC

Outboard DC Power Supply)

All his life JV has been an analog hound, and will remain one because, next to tape, vinyl is the most realistic medium. But record players, even the very greatest ones, are no longer the kings of sources. The Ultima4 OPS-DC (Outboard Power Supply) edition is (with the right tapes, mind you) simply the highest-fidelity source component he's heard. The sonic improvements UHA's Greg Beron has wrought over earlier iterations of this highly modified, 15ips, two-track, CCIR-biased TASCAM deck are so many and so large that there would be

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no end of listing them, but several stick out. For one, there is bass such as JV hasn't heard from a stereo. Then there are the dynamics, which run like a ramp from soft to loud, just as they do in life. When you add unrivaled resolution, astonishing transient speed, and simply gorgeous tone color to the package you get playback that cannot be bested by any other source, save, perhaps, for highly select direct-to-disc LPs, though a steady diet of *Lincoln Mayorga and Friends* and *I Got the Music in Me* sure ain't JV's idea of fun listening. (forthcoming)

RECORD CLEANERS

Spin-Clean Record Washer MKII

\$79

The Spin-Clean System is a purely manual design—nothing to plug in. A little elbow grease and fresh air do all the work. Fill the taxicab-yellow basin with distilled water, add a capful of the cleaning solution, and spin the record between the brushes. Ambient air and a couple of swirls of the supplied lint-free cotton cloths do the rest. It's also a truly green product, totally off the grid. And the results speak for themselves—clean surfaces mean less noise and more fully resolved music. For lighter duty it's tough to beat. (201)



Walker Audio Prelude Quartet Record-Cleaning System

\$215

There are many excellent record-cleaning solutions out there, but this one, developed by analog guru Lloyd Walker, is (in JV's opinion) supreme. The four-step, enzyme-based Prelude system really does reveal more details that have gone unheard beneath layers of dust and wear than the competition. Though the Prelude's hand-applied, brush-and-fluid cleaning procedure is time-consuming (a record-cleaning machine is only used to vacuum-dry the disc—not to wet or scrub it) and can only be applied to LPs one record-side at a time, for fanatics the effort will be worth it, as no automatic disc-wash-

ing machine, conventional or ultrasonic, can achieve quite the same astounding results. (not reviewed)

Record Doctor VI \$299

For those who love and care for their vinyl but don't want to break the bank on a cleaner, the Record Doctor VI (its latest iteration) offers a smart design compromise that keeps it—and your—costs down: Most of its functions are performed manually, as the system eschews the complex mechanics and motors that upper-tier record-cleaning machines employ. But the Record Doctor still uses a powerful motor-driven vacuum to handle the final step of fluid, dust, and dirt extraction. Setup and operation are a snap. The new VI is significantly upgraded, with a more rigid chassis along with cooler and quieter operation. (Version V reviewed in 274)

Pro-Ject VC-E1 \$499

A clean record not only sounds better, with less surface noise; a clean record also makes your cartridge last longer since there are fewer abrasive elements left in the grooves after a proper cleaning. So, it simply stands to reason that every vinyl enthusiast should own a record-cleaning machine. Using the VC-E is simple, but good technique is essential to maximize the VC-E's potential. The machine comes with a small bottle of concentrated cleaning fluid, a larger bottle for the mixed-with-water cleaning solution, and a cleaning brush. The Pro-Ject VC-E supplies the basic tools necessary to clean records efficiently and easily. For any LP lover who wants to hear every bit of potential sonic goodness from his records, the VC-E is an excellent way to boost your LP collection up to a cleaner state of being. (306)

VPI 16.5 \$800

The VPI 16.5 record cleaning machine is one of those stalwart products that isn't fancy or expensive, but gets the job done, day after day. The vacuum system is more than adequate to remove embedded dirt, and the 16.5 is fairly easy to use. Solidly built and ultra-reliable, the 16 and 16.5 have been in continuous production for more than 35 years. (not reviewed)

Kirmuss Audio KA-RC-1 \$970

Kirmuss Audio's KA-RC-1 Ultimate Ultrasonic Vinyl Restoration System incorporates ultrasonic cleaning in a more involved "vinyl-restoration" process, which Kirmuss Audio has developed. Though complicated and time-consuming, the process works. (Note that a dedicated day may be required to utilize and maximize KA-RC-1 restoration when cleaning multiple records.) If you can devote the time and energy needed to get the best out of this process, seek a demo and give the KA-RC-1 a try. (304)

Audio Desk Systeme \$4499

This completely automated record cleaner is simply the state of the art. The ultrasonic cleaning technique loosens dirt embedded in groove modulations that are too small for even the finest bristles. The sonic results go far beyond quieter surfaces. The Audio Desk renders a dramatic increase in resolution, soundstaging, timbral fidelity, and immediacy. Once you hear what the Audio Desk does, you won't want to live without it. The icing on the cake is the fully automatic operation; just pop in an LP and watch as the cleaning tank fills, cleans both LP sides simultaneously, and then drains the tank, and dries the record. (234, 239)

Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic \$6000

Already pretty damn impressive in its Double Matrix version, the Double Matrix Sonic adds a "sonic" vibration option to Clearaudio's fully automated, brush/fluid/vacuum record-cleaning machine (which works on both sides of a record simultaneously). Whether it's due to those sonic vibrations or just more advanced brushes and fluids or both, LPs do sound notably cleaner via the Sonic (i.e., lower in noise, higher in resolution). JV isn't sure that this latest Clearaudio is equal to or better than a full-bore sonic record cleaner, but it is certainly less of a hassle ergonomically—and it never spills fluid or generates enough heat to warp records (even temporarily), as certain sonic record-cleaning machines do. (forthcoming)

EQUIPMENT RACKS

IKEA Kallax Shelving Units \$35

These sturdy, open-backed, painted particleboard cubes (four per easily-assembled unit) happen to be just the right size for LPs. If you have a big record collection, here is a simple, nice-looking, and expandable solution to the always-vexing question of where to put them. (not reviewed)

Mapleshade LP Racks \$100

With the premium vinyl resurgence of the last few years, record collections are increasing once again. Run out of rack space? Mapleshade rides to the rescue. Its racks are constructed of finished or unfinished oak or finished Ambrosia maple and are still handcrafted by the Amish family that also builds Mapleshade's massive Samson racks. The LP racks are beautifully sawn with clean edges and immaculate corners. They are wider and heavier than the Per Madsen rack standard of yore. Plus the planks are cut thicker—all the better to support the latest crop of 200-gram reissues. (245)

Stillpoints Ultra Mini/Ultra SS v2/Ultra 2/Ultra 5 v2/Ultra 6 v2/Ultra 7/LPI v2 \$125/\$250/\$399/\$699/\$939/\$1299/\$549

Stillpoints' Ultra SS and Ultra 5 isolation devices are extremely effective in reducing vibration in components. They can also be positioned under speakers, replacing spikes or footers (Stillpoints offers a range of threaded adapters to fit any speaker). Whether deployed under preamps, power amps, DACs, or speakers, Stillpoints' isolation devices can produce a significant improvement in the sound, specifically resolution of low-level detail and the ability of the speaker to disappear into the soundstage. The Ultra SS and Ultra 5 differ in the number of "pockets" of isolation mechanisms within the footer. The effect of more Ultra devices is synergistic; the more you add, the greater the apparent gain. The LPI applies Stillpoints' technology to a record clamp, emulating the salutary sonic effects of vacuum hold-down on any

turntable. (Ultra SS, 219; LPI and Ultra 5, 225; Ultra 6, 265)

Sanus SF26 Steel Foundation Speaker Stands

\$170/pr.

Sanus' thoughtfully designed and beautifully executed SF series speaker stands do everything you could want a good set of stands to do, and at a price that makes sense. Strong, rigid, and resonance-free, they include provisions for installing sand or lead-shot damping, and are easy to assemble. (not reviewed)

Mye Sound Stands

\$270 and up

These aftermarket stand/braces designed for Maggie dipole loudspeakers have no downside, according to reviewer Jacob Heilbrunn—only up. Punchier and tauter bass, quieter backgrounds, cleaner mids and highs, increased snap and speed, less smearing and fuzziness are just a few of the benefits. (not reviewed)

Magna Riser Ascension I

\$295

These beautifully made stands, with powder-coat finish, are designed exclusively for Magnepan speakers. With Magna Risers installed, everything that makes Maggies special is taken to a higher plane—that famous absence-of-a-box air, three-dimensionality, and soundstaging, that excellent imaging and realistic sense of instrumental and venue size and space, that top-to-bottom coherence and reach-out-and-touch-it “thereness,” that uncannily realistic recreation of drums, which of course the Maggie's stretched Mylar membranes mimic. Other qualities that Magnepan are often not often associated with, such as dynamic power and low-frequency extension and weight, are likewise elevated to new and unexpected levels. (309)

Ton Trager Harbeth 40.2 stands

\$1695

These stands for the Harbeth 40.2 are very light—a little over five pounds—construction is mortise and tenon with water-based glue, eschewing any plastic or metal. Yet they are unbelievably strong and rigid. The difference they made in the sound is astonishing. This is the first and only time in PS's audiophile experi-

ence when a pair of rigid stands resulted *only* in improvements: He heard greater dynamic range, clarity, articulation, and definition with none of the typical penalties that are the price of spiked metal stands. (PS)

Stillpoints ESS

Component stand, \$1849–\$3500;

ESS racks, \$6000–\$45,000;

Aperture 2, \$800

The ESS racks bring Stillpoints' isolation technology to an equipment stand. The open-air ESS racks look a bit like a trapeze with their wire supports and metal cross-braces. These cross-braces can accept any ESS isolation footer for even greater performance. The ESS racks allow a system to resolve fine detail down to a much lower level, produce a much more believable and dimensional spatial rendering, reproduce bass with greater clarity, and make the loudspeakers “disappear” to a greater extent. (255)

Solid Tech Rack of Silence

\$1899 and up

The aptly named Rack of Silence helps damp equipment vibrations, thus fostering audibly quieter backgrounds and heightened resolution of detail. The core of the system is a sophisticated, extruded aluminum rack with skeletal, X-shaped equipment “shelves.” Reference versions come with suspended shelves that support a wide range of components—even heavyweight amps. Complementing the rack is a broad range of optional vibration-fighting accessories such as damped suspension-pods. Though tricky to assemble, the system works exactly as advertised, making even the finest components sound better. (not reviewed)

Walker Audio Prologue Equipment Stands/Racks

\$2500–\$15,000

A large (four-and-a-half-foot long) beautifully made equipment rack, constructed of three thick, oiled slabs of rock maple. Like all Walker Audio tweaks, the rack kills vibration without killing the life of the music. (not reviewed)

Symposium Acoustics Isis

Price varies with configuration

The Symposium Acoustics Isis combines three different kinds of damping: mass,

constrained-layer, and (for lack of a better word) tectonic. Using heavy-duty steel shelves that are themselves damped with constrained-layer material and heavy-duty, segmented, aircraft-grade aluminum legs that are isolated from the shelves, from each other, and from the floor via Tellurium/copper spike-feet and Symposium's patented rollerblock technology, the Isis eliminates all lateral and vertical motion induced by floorborne or airborne resonance. Its effectiveness is astonishing. (not reviewed)

Critical Mass Systems Sotto Voce

\$3500 (natural or black finish)

CMS products have revised reviewer Alan Taffel's concept of what a good equipment rack should do. Previously, he saw the rack's role as making the products they support sound their best. Of course, this remains one goal, and it is one that the Sotto Voce, CMS' entry-level offering, meets with ease. Components on the SV benefit from tighter bass, transients with more verve and no less control, and sharper rhythms. However, the SV imparts another benefit in that it dramatically reduces the noise floor of the entire system. By getting what AT can only describe as “random energy” out of the sound, the SV delivers a less electronic, less hurried, less blurred presentation of the music. Not only that, the SV is a lovely piece of furniture and costs one-tenth the tariff of CMS' flagship Maxxum system. And, when fortune smiles, there are a multitude of ways to upgrade the Sotto Voce. (249)

Critical Mass Systems Maxxum MK III Amplifier Stand

\$6250

This beautifully built product is based on the same technology found in Critical Mass Systems' Maxxum equipment racks; the stands are essentially a Maxxum shelf mounted on a four-point X-shaped support structure. Sonically, this amplifier stand allows the system to better resolve low-level information. The increase in resolution isn't heard so much as greater detail (although it is to some degree), but rather as an increase in the sense of realism, spatial definition, the fine dynamic structures of instruments, and the ability of the loudspeakers to disappear. (249)

Critical Mass Systems Maxxum MK III

Starting at \$6250 per component

These (critically) massive, beautifully engineered, extraordinarily well-made equipment stands—constructed of heavy-duty CNC-milled and mirror-polished aerospace aluminum struts and heavy-duty CNC-milled aerospace and mirror-polished aluminum shelves with constrained layer damped inserts in their tops and roller-bearings underneath (the whole she-bang finished in gorgeous custom high-end automotive paint)—are the ne plus ultra in audio-component support systems. Not only do they look gorgeous; they also work more effectively to eliminate floorborne resonance than any other stands JV has tried. Where really heavy footfalls nearby turntables sitting on previous support systems could make the stylus skip, nothing—not even jumping up and down in place—seems to faze gear sitting on the Maxxums. Very expensive but definitely worth it for those of you with this kind of mad money (and a taste for beautiful things), the Maxxums are JV's and RH's references. (226)

Critical Mass Systems QXK

\$11,960–\$19,960 (four shelves)

These beautifully made, beautiful to see, less expensive, but nearly equally effective versions of Joe Lavrencik's fabulous constrained-layer-damped shelves and stands provide almost the same amount of vibration isolation, timbral, dynamic, and resolution enhancement, and resonance reduction as his ne plus ultra Maxxums, for a lot less dough. If you've got the money and the system, by all means go for the Maxxums (now in their Mk III versions), but if you want to save some cash for other purchases (and are still well-heeled), you would not be making a mistake if you opted for the QXKs. They are terrific. Along with the Maxxums, these are JV's references. (forthcoming)

Critical Mass Systems Olympus

\$30,750 (three-shelf rack)

The flagship of the Critical Mass Systems line, the Olympus lives up to its name in size, sheer visual presence, and most importantly, sound quality. This no-holds-barred equipment stand features CMS's most advanced implementation of its technolo-

gy for reducing component vibration. The Olympus equipment rack and matching amplifier stands lower the noise floor, allowing fine timbral, dynamic, and spatial details to emerge as well as allowing the system to create a rock-solid bass foundation. The build- and finish-quality are nothing short of spectacular. The Olympus' performance is taken to another level when it is used in conjunction with CMS's CenterStage2 isolation devices. Matching amplifier stands are \$10,250 each. Expensive but worth it if you want the best. RH's reference. (forthcoming)

POWER CONDITIONERS

Audience aR2p/aR12/ aR12-T3/aR6-T4

\$695/\$4995/\$9200/\$6600 (Au24 SE-i powerChord upgrade, +\$2160; Au24 SX upgrade, +\$4660; frontRow powerChord upgrade, +\$6300)

The aR2p, Audience's compact, dual-outlet power conditioner and isolation device is based on the massive 12-outlet versions of which Audience is rightly proud. Used with a CD player, its enhancement of soundstaging, dimensionality, and depth can be profound. With demanding high-current devices such as amplifiers, transients seemed a little soft. An audition is recommended. Further up the Audience food chain are the 12-outlet heavy-hitters. The aR12p was found to be an extremely effective conditioner, capable of delivering significant improvements in bass definition and depth, overall resolution, and soundstage depth. Its build-quality is nothing short of exemplary. At the top of the hill is the new TSS line with Teflon capacitors. (162, 179, 186, 235)

Shunyata Research Venom PS8 and Venom Defender

Venom PS8 \$900; Defender \$225

Power conditioning systems tend to give, and to take away. But the eminently affordable Venom Series power products from Shunyata blind-sided NG. Whether assembled individually or in one not-so-big-gulp, PS8/Defender clarified, fine-tuned timbre and character, and released heretofore hidden musicality from his system. Begin with the ruggedly built PS8 six-outlet conditioner, then consider adding even

further refinement with the big time surge protection and flagship filtration technology of the pint-sized Defender. If you have an AC outlet, you're good to go. Bravo to Shunyata for designing a system that acknowledges the fact that not everyone has the cash, space, or inclination to run dedicated lines into a listening room. Apartment dwellers take note. You'll never look at power strips and AC power quite the same way again. (239)

IsoTek Aquarius

\$1995

The rack-width steel-and-aluminum chassis houses six outlets—two high-current (rated at 16A and suitable for power amplifiers, active loudspeakers or sub woofers), and four medium-current. Aquarius benefits from much of the innovation and technology of uptown IsoTek's Nova and Sigma conditioners. In terms of a three-dimensional presentation, clean transients, and micro-dynamic and low-level information, the Aquarius packs some real moves. In suppressing line noise, IsoTek unlocks low-level transparency in the same way that removing layers of old wax from a fine wood surface allows more of the inherent depth and beauty of the grain patterns to shine forth. Cues seemed deeper than ever. Soundstage image depth is increased, while images became more tangibly present and stable. The Aquarius provides both performance and protection that won't blow a fuse. Why would you ignore such a component when all you have to lose is the noise? (297)

Shunyata Research Hydra Delta D6

\$2600

Housed in a full-sized chassis and rated at 20 amps of continuous current, Shunyata's Delta D6 delivers the juice to more demanding systems, including high-powered amplifiers. Its most noteworthy sonic achievement is an expansion of spatiality and ease. At the micro-level, images are pocketed within halos of ambience within the soundspace. These micro cues create a finely focused presentation against an almost eerily noiseless and distortion-free backdrop. Equipped with top-notch features, superior electromagnetic breakers, 8-gauge ArNiconductors, Hubbell outlets,

vibration-dampening materials, and cryogenic treatment, the Hydra Delta is a significant upgrade at a relatively modest price point. Shunyata's latest PC is among its most persuasive yet; it makes any audio rig less about electronics and more about music. (305)

IsoTek EVO3 Sigmas
\$3995

Isotek, based in Hampshire, England, seeks to produce what the British like to refer to as "serious kit." And it does. The EVO3 Sigmas power conditioner is a case in point. It is pretty much guaranteed to banish any lingering hum issues you may be experiencing courtesy of a refractory wall outlet. It features six outlets with two dedicated for high-power equipment, such as amplifiers or subwoofers, that are said to deliver up to 3680 watts of continuous power. Each outlet is scrupulously divorced from the other so that there is no possibility of cross-contamination. Indeed, IsoTek says

it eliminates both common mode and differential mode noise. The improvement in sound quality via the Sigmas is immediately audible. It lowers noise floor, improves transient response, and provides blacker backgrounds. (254)

Synergistic Research PowerCell 12 UEF/PowerCell 12 UEF S/PowerCell 12 UEF SE \$4995 (includes UEF Black HC AC Cable, \$499)/\$5995 (includes Atmosphere level 3 PowerCell AC Cable, \$2995)/\$6495 (includes Atmosphere level 3 PowerCell AC cable, \$2995)
As a skeptic about power conditioners, JHb was pleasantly surprised by the improvements in imaging and dynamics rendered by the Synergistic Power Cell. Unlike many of its brethren (no need to mention them by name, the offenders know who they are), the PowerCell did not appear to limit current. Instead, it offers even blacker backgrounds and lowered grit and distortion. Particularly noteworthy were the

smoother treble and improved suppleness of musical lines. The PowerCell is pleasingly lightweight and attractive. Synergistic head honcho and lead designer Ted Denney III, it must be said, continues to advance the state of the art when it comes to filtering electricity. As with all conditioners, however, auditioning the Synergistic in your own system is a must, as the quality of electricity varies markedly from home to home. (192)

Shunyata Research Everest 8000/Omega XC Power Cord
\$8000/\$9000

Shunyata's new Everest 8000 is easily the company's finest effort yet, delivering an entirely unprecedented level of performance. This eight-outlet conditioner in a vertical truncated pyramid chassis benefits not just from Shunyata's previous work on AC power for audio, but from technology developed by founder Caelin Gabriel for Shunyata's sister company, Clear Image Scientific, which makes AC conditioning for medical imaging equipment. The XC



NEW LYRA
Atlas Lambda MC Cartridge



NEW SWEETVINYL
SugarCube SC-1 Mini
Noise-Removal Device



FLUX HIFI
Ultrasonic Electronic
Stylus Cleaner



NEW DEGRITTER
Degritter Record
Cleaning Machine



NEW MOBILE FIDELITY
Super HeavyWeight Champion
Record Weight



VPI
ADS Analog Drive System

power cord that connects the Everest to your wall outlet is no less impressive. The soundstage opens up with greater space and depth, with more vivid and tangible images, along with far greater resolution of air and space around those images. Low-level information is resolved with finer precision, and timbres are more lifelike. RH's reference. (RH)

AudioQuest Niagara 7000 \$9499

The 81-pound Niagara 7000 is the brainchild of AC design engineer Garth Powell, whom AudioQuest hired and essentially gave two years and carte blanche to design a new power device from scratch. Powell says the Niagara 7000 is not a power conditioner; rather, it relies on dielectric-biased AC isolation transformers to reduce distortion without reducing current to any component, including amplifiers. Essentially, the Niagara seeks to create a power bank for your amps so that it doesn't have to strain to grab voltage from the wall. The most immediate and

salubrious effect of the Niagara was to offer more controlled and refined performance. The treble is definitely smoother and rounder with the Niagara. Overall, the Niagara is a fabulous piece of equipment that adds a sheen and palpability to the music that are utterly addictive. (271)

Audience aR12-T4 \$11,400 w/6ft. powerChord SE-i (Au24 SE-i upgrade, +\$2160; Au24 SX upgrade, +\$4660)

To Greg Weaver's ear, Audience's new aR12-TSSOX power conditioner represents a substantial improvement over its predecessors, so much so that it would be fair to say that it borders on an order of magnitude advance. This is a world-class device, deserving your full attention. Give one a listen—perhaps the 6- or 2-socket variety—but be prepared to buy it. If you are anything like GW, there is no chance it will come out of your system once it is in place! (268)

Ansuz Acoustics Mainz8 D-TC \$23,000

This top-of-the-line mains and ground distribution unit features an extremely low-impedance star-grounding system along with proprietary technologies (think Tesla coils and the like). The eight-outlet D-TC box filters away noise without self-inductance and works like a mains system; it enables the ground to be at the lowest possible impedance. Ducts remove mains noise for cleaner, purer, and more transparent sound. There's a tricky technological concept at work in the D-TC box: A dither ring emits a signal—as in radar and sonar—that allows listeners to “peek” into the sonic information below the noise floor. The mind perceives and assimilates these additional “fragments” allowing it to “fill in” a more complete sonic picture. Yes, this Danish-designed and -made component retails for a princely sum, but if you have the cash, by all means audition this box. The audible improvements across all criteria—are not subtle, but staggering. (JV)

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Transparent Audio The Link Interconnect, The Wave Speaker Cable, High-Performance Power Cord.

The Link, \$100/1m; The Wave, \$220/8' pr.; High Performance Powerlink, \$320/1m.

Although we have experience only with Transparent's lower-priced offerings (at the moment), what we've heard has been extremely impressive. The \$100 The Link interconnect brings more than a taste of high-end interconnects to an entry-level price. Similarly, The Wave speaker cable is a bargain, offering superior tonality, wider dynamics, and a more open soundstage. The High-Performance Power Cord is a vast improvement over stock AC cords, and just might be the most cost-effective upgrade possible in an entry-level system. The PowerWave 8 conditioner is also an extremely cost-effective upgrade, rendering wider dynamics, smoother timbres, and a greater sense of musical involvement. (not reviewed)

Morrow Audio MA3/MA6/SP3/SP6

MA3 interconnect, \$199/1m pr.; SP3 speaker, \$299/.5m pr. MA6 interconnect, \$999/1m pr. (RCA); SP6 speaker \$999/1m pr.

The most impressive aspects of having the Morrow SP6 and MA6 in a setup involved unearthing and extracting the essences of performances through the recovery of the finer points of vocals and instrumentals. The more accurately the textural, timbral, and spatial information was expressed, the more convincing and compelling the musical experience became. Think neutral and detailed without veering into analytical territory. As you'd expect, the primary differences in the Series 3 cables was the degree of resolution conveyed. Some additional tradeoffs perceived in the lower-cost 3 series involved a bit more of a laid-back feel with slightly less punch on attacks. Still, lovely harmonics and low noise floors were there; instrumental textures and tones were still pretty credible and inviting; and the amount of musical detail conveyed with these SP3 and MA3 wires in the system remained pleasing and non-fatiguing. Easy to use, easy on the ears, and easy on the wallet, both Morrows are easy recommendations. (298)

Kimber Kable Hero Interconnect/8TC and 12TC Speaker Cable

Interconnect \$248/1m pr.; 8TC speaker \$553/2.5m pr. with SBAN connectors; 12TC speaker \$823/2.5m pr. with SBAN connectors

Yielding only a tiny bit in control, top-end transparency, and detailing to PS's reference, Hero's bass lives up to its name, prodigious in amplitude and definition. Dead neutral, with dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in an essentially grain-free presentation. The 8TC speaker cable has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what is happening fore or aft, ideally mediating detail, liveliness, tonal neutrality, and dynamic contrasts within a very realistic, holographic soundstage. (138, 146)

Nordost Purple Flare

Interconnect \$284/1m pr., \$399/2m pr.; speaker \$461/1m, \$625/3m

Featuring Nordost's classic flatline configuration the Purple Flare is a rung below the current incarnation of Blue Heaven, yet it's a little trip to heaven on its own. It really shines in the midband with a driving, slightly forward energy that imparts dynamic liveliness to all genres of music. There's significant macro-dynamic punch resulting in orchestral crescendos, full-blown percussion licks, and brass-section blasts of impressive authority. It evinces the transient speed of a sprinter, yet never suggests any serious tonal balance discontinuities. Its treble range is wonderfully free from major constrictions. Bass is not quite as fully exploited in extension or bloom, and there's a bit of coolness in the middle treble. But, on balance, it is as open and as transparent as any cable in this class. (236)

WyWires Blue Series

Interconnect \$299/4' pr. (RCA or XLR); speaker \$449/8' pr.

The first WyWires cable reviewed in TAS, Blue is also one of the most pliable, easy-to-handle cables available; yet its sound is anything but humble. Its sonic signature is energetic, with a potent midrange, plenty of drive, and a slightly cooler, forward tilt. The Blue's sonics aren't juiced-up or overheated, but if the

goal is high transparency and black-satin background silences it will prove a real achiever. It exhibits good rhythmic pace and a wonderful facility with inner detail. An unpretentious component that lets the quality of the recorded performance speak for itself, the WyWires puts the music upfront and centerstage. A truly auspicious debut. (236)

Cardas Audio Iridium

Interconnect \$320/2m pr.; speaker \$500/3m pr.

The Iridium interconnects and speaker cables are made from Grade 1 OFHC 99.9999% copper Litz wire with a cross-field geometry in an insulated FEP jacket. The geometry of the wiring is said to be a Shielded Star-Quad 4 arrangement in Golden Ratio proportions bound together by PTFE tape, while the hybrid shield is spiraled tin-plated copper surrounded by carbon-impregnated PTFE tape. The geometry of the speaker cable is a twisted pair using natural cotton filler wrapped together with a PTFE tape. The Iridium interconnect/speaker combination leaned toward being even in sonic distribution with a slightly warmer-than-neutral presentation with no enhancements and a slight reduction in low-level resolution and bass dynamics. If the system could use a bit fuller sound with additional bass authority in the power region and some reduction of upper-midrange and lower-treble energy, the Cardas Audio Iridium might fit that requirement. (274)

Morrow Audio SP7 Grand Reference Speaker and MA4 Reference and MA7 Grand Reference Interconnects

Interconnect MA4 \$329/1m pr., MA7 \$1399/1m pr.; speaker \$1499/2m pr.

A relative newcomer to the cable ranks, Morrow Audio's wires performed like an old pro. Nicely weighted, with a solid midrange sweetspot, these wires had terrific low-level resolving power, solid bass, and good soundstaging and dimensionality. The MA4 Reference interconnect was mildly dry on top; the more expensive MA7 interconnect spiced up the harmonics and added just a bit more juicy texture and complexity to the sound. Overall, this was a cable that defied expectations in its range. (259)



MEZE
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www.mezeaudio.com

Shunyata Research Venom

Interconnect: RCA, \$450/1m pr., \$610/2m); XLR, \$650/1m pr.(\$890/2m); **Speaker:** \$998/2m

The new Venom Series represents fifteen years of Shunyata Research's ongoing technical innovation and custom-parts engineering. To that end, the company uses the finest available metals, such as expensive Ohno Continuous Cast Copper. Also, Shunyata has included new features like hollow-core (VTX) conductors. Our reviewer found the Venom speaker cables and interconnects to be very natural, open, and dimensional. In much the same way that Shunyata's designs strive to keep distortion out of the signal path, its cables get out of the way of the music. The Venom speaker cables and interconnects offer a reasonably neutral palette with pleasing delicacy of detail and rich warm harmonics. To borrow a favorite expression from JV, they are quite gemütlich and sweet, without glare or etching. Some might find them a touch polite dynamically (I don't), but that's a matter of personal taste. Quite a high-quality signal cable that performs well and doesn't cost a fortune. (266)

Wireworld Eclipse 8

\$450/1m pr., either RCA or XLR

The Eclipse 8 is a "go-to" product in mid-priced interconnects. Built from OCC copper, outstanding terminations designed by Wireworld, and the company's patented DNA Helix geometry, the Eclipse 8 is more technically sophisticated than is typical at this price. The Eclipse 8 adds no hardness or glare to the mids, has a smooth yet extended treble, and is overall remarkably transparent. (forthcoming)

Esprit Audio Beta

Interconnect, \$490/1.2m pr. (RCA), \$490/1.2m pr. (XLR); **speaker,** \$390/2m, \$580/3m (with spades)

In foodie terms Beta is excellent bistro fare. Construction quality is first-rate; terminations are robust. Beta is also an easy, compliant cable to handle, for those hobbyists who tend to swap out wires more frequently. Sonically, Esprit Beta has a throaty, chesty, midrange-centric presentation. Vocal detail is clean and expressive on baritones and sopranos alike. The treble is somewhat rolled on top, with a smooth sibilance region, making Beta easily listen-

able. Soundstaging is highly convincing in width and dimensionality, too. Tailored to a price point, Esprit Beta performs superbly for a budget model. (289)

MIT StyleLine SL 8

Interconnect \$499/1m pr.; speaker \$799/8' terminated pr.

RD always equated MIT (Music Interface Technologies) audio cables with crazy-unreachable prices even if one does get a set of magic boxes along with the wire, and \$53,500 for eight feet of Oracle MA-X Super HD Bi-Wire certainly does not prove him wrong. And then there's the new entry-level StyleLine series. While the SL 8 didn't have the best rejection of 60Hz hum and noise, when used as intended RD heard from the SL 8/SL 9 pairing a very neutral top-to-bottom balance and "was able to relish in the detail-fest that makes the sport of the high end so much fun." Mouth sounds, the sonic signatures of the microphones, the "sound" of the recording studio—all came through clear as day. Audio trickle-down theory at its best! (236)

Siltech Explorer 90

Interconnect \$550/1m pr.; speaker \$1000/6.5' pr.

Bringing Siltech quality and caché to an easily affordable price point makes Explorer an excellent upgrade cable for a mid-priced system. Its healthy midrange, good articulation, and low-level reproduction make this a wire that will give many pause before spending much more. Dynamics and bass extension are convincing as they communicate many of the more specific timbral complexities in the lower octaves. It could be a trifle sweeter in the lower treble but few wires challenge it at this tier. Along with some other frugal note-worthies Siltech's latest is redefining cable performance at this price point. (226)

Wireworld Mini Eclipse 8

\$580/ 2.5m/pr. single term, \$620/ 2.5m/pr. bi-wire

These affordable speaker cables benefit from Wireworld's upper-end line, and feature the company's DNA Helix geometry, 14-gauge, OCC-copper conductors, and interchangeable spade or banana terminations. Nicely made and very flexible, the Mini Eclipse 8 has a neutral

sonic character that imposes very little of itself on the music. The midrange and treble are extremely clean in texture, and the treble is open and detailed without being bright. A decided improvement over the already stellar Mini Eclipse 7. (forthcoming)

Synergistic Research Foundation Series

Interconnect, \$599/1m pr.(RCA or XLR); speaker, \$649/8' pr. (spade or banana)

JV wasn't expecting much—and certainly not *this* much—from Synergistic Research's immensely pliable, bargain-basement Foundation Series interconnects and cables, which are far slimmer, lighter, and less sophisticated in design than their rich relatives, the superb Galileo SXes. But, trust him, sonically the Foundations come way closer than shouting distance to the Galileos. Indeed, these two SR lines have a great deal in common—rich vibrant tone color, robust dynamics, spacious staging, lifelike imaging, high resolution. Oh, the more sophisticated Galileos are less bottom-up in balance, fuller, more finely detailed, and harder-hitting than the Foundations; then again, they ought to be—they cost ten-to-twenty times the dough. Put plainly, the Foundation Series is the best budget-priced wire JV has heard—and one of his references. (304)

Moon Audio Silver Dragon V2 \$625/3' pr., RCA or XLR

Moon Audio's specialty is custom, handcrafted cabling for any application. The V2 version of Silver Dragon, its top audiophile interconnect, uses an eight-wire braided geometry of solid-core 99.999% pure silver with Teflon insulation. Connectors are top-notch—WBT Nextgen or Furutechs. These wires are superbly quiet, establishing a dark silent backdrop from which music freely and cleanly emerges. Tonally, Silver Dragon is a model of smooth, rich midrange response—faithful to the real thing in its neutrality, color saturation, and fluidity. There's a satisfying mellowness to its character—one that doesn't exactly soften transients (there's plenty of snap and speed to go around) but does add a measure of overall warmth to the presentation. Silver Dragon is very specific in imaging and perspective—each musician



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is firmly in place and slightly forward on the stage. This is an interconnect that defies every expectation for a modestly priced product. (244)

Morrow Audio 5 Series

**Interconnect \$649/1m pr. (RCA);
Speaker \$699/2m pr.**

The MA5 interconnects are handcrafted with 36 runs of Morrow SSI wire. SSI is a solid-core, small-gauge, individually insulated, silver-coated copper wire. The SP5 speaker cables contain 72 runs of the same Morrow SSI wire. The Morrow Audio MA5 interconnects and SP5 speaker cables were consistent across all sources and equipment combinations. The pair tended to display an abundance of energy and detail from the upper midrange through the lower treble. This extra information was not hard-edged or rough. On the contrary, it resulted in a pleasantly highlighted presentation. Despite the upside of music played back with the MA5/SP5 combo, there was a noted reduction in amplitude and dynamic intensity in the bass. In a system that could use a bit more emphasis on the upper midrange and lower treble along with a lowering of bass energy, without any overt losses of tone and speed, the Morrow Audio MA5/SP5 might fit the requirement. (274)

Wireworld Silver Eclipse Gen 8

**Interconnect, \$700/1m (RCA
or XLR); speaker single-wire,
\$3100/2m (\$3800/2.5m)**

Within the Wireworld lineup, Silver Eclipse stakes out territory between Eclipse and Platinum. Gen 8 includes a larger number of strand groups, larger-gauge silver-over-copper conductors, plus a new iteration of Composilex insulation. Sonically, what defines the latest generation of Silver Eclipse, and arguably all Wireworld efforts, is a lack of spectacle—a less-is-more naturalism that brings forth a musical performance in all its authenticity. Overall transparency in general and inner resolution in particular have improved. Transients are whip-quick and clean. Silver Eclipse opens up the space between images and sniffs out timbral distinctions and low-level complexities like a bloodhound. The surprise is just how closely this mid-priced model comes to Wireworld's flagship models. (301)

Analysis Plus Silver Oval

Interconnect \$962/1m pr.

Without fanfare, the Silver Oval knows how to make an entrance. Its sonic signature is wide open, dynamically unrestricted, and seamless across the entire tonal spectrum. Silver Oval's balance is superb, as neutral as they come with a breathtaking level of micro-dynamic nuance. The other factor going in its favor is the very low noise-floor that this wire brings to bear—a quality that boosts and broadens dynamic range in every octave. Some systems may make Silver Oval sound slightly cooler than neutral, but there is no treble constriction to speak of—a rarity in this class. Analysis Plus keeps providing further evidence that the sonic gap between reference cable and its more affordable rivals is closing fast. (236)

Synergistic Research Atmosphere X

**Alive (Level 1) RCA, \$995/1m
pr., XLR, \$1295/1m pr.; speaker,
\$1495/8' pr.; AC, \$995/5'**

**Excite (Level 2) RCA, \$2250/1m
pr., XLR, \$2650/1m pr.; speaker,
\$3495/8' pr.; AC, \$1995/5'**

**Euphoria (Level 3) RCA, \$3495/1m
pr., XLR, \$3995/1m pr.; speaker,
\$5495/8' pr.; AC, \$2995/5'**

Synergistic's latest wire series represents the culmination of the brand's efforts to bring the wealth of innovative conductor, isolation, and resonance technologies from its active cables (including the flagship, Galileo LE) and merge them into a top-notch "passive" design. To revisit a phrase, "Mission accomplished." Aptly named, Atmosphere continues the Synergistic tradition of expanding the boundaries of the soundstage, of enlivening microdynamics, and of resolving fine detail. Available in four levels—the last three with Ground Plane Technology (Level Three and Four also include special terminations for Atmosphere Tuning Modules). As a bonus, the Atmospheres are vastly more flexible than the pricier Element Series for much easier positioning. In addition, price points have also benefitted accordingly. (262)

Cardas Clear Reflection

**Interconnect \$1150/1m pr. (RCA
and XLR); speaker \$2800/2.5m pr.** A blend of the company's previous Golden Reference design and its current Clear

technology, Cardas Clear Reflection held its own when stacked up against more expensive cables and, accordingly, gets high marks for delivering good performance at a reasonable price. Reviewer KM was charmed by Clear Reflection's fluid, organized, detailed, and musically satisfying qualities, concluding that he would not hesitate to recommend it to others, or to consider it himself for a second system. (254)

Harmonic Technology Pro-7 Reference Armour and Armour Link III

**Interconnect \$1300/1m pr. RCA
(\$400 per 0.5m additional pr.);
speaker \$3500/8' pr. single-wire,
\$3800 for bi-wire**

Pro-7 Reference Armour and Armour Link III are Harmonic Technology's topline speaker cables and interconnects. As a system they produced highly detailed, musically insightful sonics straight across the board, with a wide spectrum of tonal color, excellent micro-dynamic shading, and powerful large-scale dynamic contrasts. Overall, their tonal character was essentially neutral with just the barest hint of a lighter complexion—a characteristic that often shows up in products capable of quick transient response. What captured NG's attention most of all was the HT Armour's ability to elicit dynamic gradients from recordings. A statement product pure and simple, Harmonic Tech's Armour joins the ranks of some of the most elite cables in NG's experience. (255)

Nordost Frey 2

**Interconnect \$1533/1m; speaker
\$2520/1m; power cord \$1765/1m**

Occupying the sweet spot of Nordost's mid-priced Norse 2 line, the radically updated Frey 2 combines the high performance macro- and micro-dynamics that Nordost is famous for with richer mids and a brawnier, meatier bottom end that gives orchestral music more discernable ambience and weight. Of course, transient speed is on hand, but the Frey 2's are also a bit more controlled in the midbass and able to land a tighter, dynamic punch than most of the competition. In a word, the Frey 2s deliver flat out more fidelity to the live event. Frey 2 power cords deserve some special props too—they offer supernaturally quiet black

backgrounds that enhance the resolving power of the Frey 2 cable. An exceptional performer from a proven brand that through the decades has continued to evolve and improve. (265)

Cardas Cables Clear

Interconnect \$1840/1m pr.; speaker \$4334/2.5m pr.

What makes Clear exceptional are its balance and coherence. Even compared with earlier Cardas efforts Clear conveys a wider band of resolving power and transparency, with greater speed and agility across the transient landscape. Its relaxed character and bass warmth are consonant with symphonic music. Plus the naturalistic midrange lends an agreeable ripeness to orchestral string sections. There remains an almost buttery sweetness in the Clear but also a fluidity that projects the full unbroken acoustic of the symphonic experience. The only caveat: Like many of its premium ilk, Clear is a cable that only fully roars to life on premium gear where the full extent of its talents can be exercised. (226)

Audience Au24 SX

Interconnect \$1999/1m RCA pr. and \$2640/1m balanced pr; speaker \$3616/2.5m pr.

Audience's latest flagship wire produces a ripe midrange weight and sweetness, vivid dynamic contrasts, and a profound sensitivity to delicate volume gradations. Ultimately, it possesses a brilliance that casts light in the deepest corners of the soundstage and restores air and lift to harmonics. A particular strength of all these cables is the often hard-to-achieve blend of the transient, the tactile, and the reverberant. The Au24 SX struck a fluid and natural balance of ease, articulation, and immersiveness. Superb. Flexible and easy to handle, too. (269)

Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval Speaker Cable

\$2038/8' pr.

Brimming with resolution, tonal honesty, and dynamic life, constructed of pure silver over a stabilizing strand of OFC woven into AP's patented hollow-oval geometry in an oval-coaxial configuration, this is not a cable you listen to, but rather listen through. Music simply flows; tonality is earthy; harmonics align;

images and soundstage conform. No snake oil here—the high end needs more of this level of honest performance at a reasonable price. (215)

Nordost Tyr

Interconnect, \$2204/0.6m; speaker, \$5039/1m

A loom of Nordost's flat, FEP (fluorinated ethylene propylene) Tyr 2 interconnect and cable brings transparency, precision, purity, depth, texture, openness, and expansiveness to the listening experience. (305)

AudioQuest Wind

Interconnect \$2299/1m pr.

Wind features AudioQuest's best materials and technology, including Solid Perfect-Surface Silver (SPSS) conductors and the Dielectric Bias System (DBS) that polarizes the dielectric with a battery attached to the interconnect. This is an interconnect that competes with top-tier wire at a less-than-stratospheric price. Wind has very little sonic effect on the signals passing through it, and consequently, preserves the music's dynamic verve, spatial dimensionality, and timbral purity. It has a very clean, open, and lively sound, detailed and vivid, but not in an analytical way. If you want a cable that softens transients and removes a bit of excessive zip from your system, this isn't it. Wind is a great interconnect by any measure, and though not inexpensive, is nonetheless a superb value. (254)

MIT EVO One

Interconnect, \$2399–\$3519; speaker, \$3799–\$5999

A cable with an uncanny ability to remove itself from the sonic picture, Evo One sets high standards with its sensitivity to low-level detail and dynamic contrast. Soundstage boundaries widen and take on greater shape, while images stay unwaveringly in position. Capable of wide tonal and textural contrasts, the EVO One may make listeners conclude that their own cables are marginally veiled by comparison. One of the most transparent cables NG has come across to date. (305)

Tara Labs Air Evolution

Interconnect, \$2495/1m RCA w/ EVO ground station (\$250 per additional meter, \$60.00 for XLR

termination); speaker, \$4200 8'/pr. (spades or banana)

Form a company with a track record as impressive as any in the high end, Tara Lab's Air Evolution opens wide the sonic window and conveys a rich, colorful tonality with clean textural shadings from the lowest bass to the uppermost treble. Possessed of a neutral-to-warm character, its most delightful virtue is soundstaging. To borrow a phrase from the A/V world, this is full-on, uncropped, widescreen audio that delivers the full dimensions of a concert hall (and with the same musical naturalism encountered in a concert hall). By any standard, a significant achievement. (295)

Morrow Audio Elite Grand Ref

Interconnect \$2995/1m pr.; speaker \$3995/2m pr.

Sonically the Elite is the great, unpretentious communicator. Balance, smoothness, and honesty are its musical calling cards. The Elite is also one of the more forgiving and relaxed wires NG has come across. It has a civility that invites the ear to sink into the sound and luxuriate. Understated, but deceptively transparent, the Elite Grand Reference offers a sensitive blend of spaciousness and dimensionality. (269)

Wireworld Platinum Eclipse 8

Interconnect: \$3000/1m pr., RCA or XLR; Speaker: \$22,400/ 2.5m/pr. single termination, \$22,500/2.5m/pr. bi-wire termination

Beyond its newly refined cosmetics, PE7 represents the summit of Wireworld's current thinking. Using heavy nine-gauge OCC Silver conductors (interconnects are seventeen-gauge OCC Silver), and its own Composilex 2 insulation and DNA Helix conductor geometry, PE8 has little to do with hype or spectacle. Its tonal palette is the height of consistency—there are no random color shifts across the musical spectrum. It's neutrally balanced with just a pleasing gust of midrange warmth. And it becomes ever more expressive in the treble octaves—to NG's mind audio's most precarious region, where most wires either narrow, bleach, or otherwise wring out the harmonic juices in the signal. Beyond its upper-octave performance, dimensionality and soundstaging are Platinum's most persuasive tools. It sets a

symphonic stage with the same precision as the staff preparing the dining room table at Downton Abby. A component worthy of the designation, the state of the art. (244)

Analysis Plus Silver Apex

\$3400/8'

Silver Apex has one of the most open, natural voices NG has heard in a cable. Like AP's top-performing Micro Golden interconnect, its midrange is bold, ripe, and textured, with loads of inner detail. Neither romantically warm nor clinically cool Silver Apex simply goes in the direction of the recording without commentary. Treble octaves are expressive and colorful. In the bass, it intensifies the gravitas of low percussion—kettle drums, for example—walking the fine line between power and control. Almost frictionless, Silver Apex adds no sense of drag to the signal, reproducing ensembles and cavernous acoustic spaces with speed, clarity, and fluency. Not inexpensive but still well within the bounds of high-end sanity, this is a flagship-level cable that can stand its ground with the best of the best. (301)

Dynamic Design Titania AE15

Interconnect \$3500/1m pr.; speaker \$7000/2.5m pr.

An extrovert, the spirited Titania conveys a more forward, cooler sound, but proves electrifying in its presence, dynamic energy, and bass response. Indeed, sheer dynamism, presence, and transient speed are its strong suits. As a general observation, its soundstage didn't quite match the dimensional qualities of NG's reference cable; nonetheless, the Titania is one of the more purely exciting and toe-tapping cables in recent memory. (269)

Kimber Kable Select

Interconnect KS 1036, \$3660/1m pr. RCA; KS 1136, \$3660/1m pr. XLR; speaker, KS 6068 \$27,800/2.5m pr.

Everything about this blue chip wire screams extreme. Vari-strand silver and solid-core silver conductors are used exclusively in its sophisticated construction. And yes, its price is breathtaking. Sonically, there's a lightning speed and feathery light-footedness to its sound. It has both a directness and a dimensional component

that unerringly position every player on the stage. By virtue of its bottomless well of dynamic contrasts and tonal colors, the Kimber unearths previously unheard energy and atmospheric lift from even the most familiar recordings. The KS achieves a level of intimacy and low-level clarity that is almost embarrassing in its candor. (250)

MasterBuilt Audio Reference

Interconnect, \$4000; speaker, \$5200

MBA's Reference series is its second-tier product. It uses 6N (99.9999% pure) high-conductivity copper for speaker and power cables, or solid-core single-crystal copper for interconnects, with 100% proprietary copper formulations sourced from a U.S. aerospace-industry manufacturer. MBA is quite secretive about its designs, sharing only that they use helical and twisted geometries for noise rejection, employ proprietary fluoropolymers, have proprietary dampening inside the cable bundle, and utilize shielding only when necessary to protect signals from EMI and RFI. Terminations are Furutech or ViaBlue of Germany. While GW felt they took a little longer than normal to run in, even using a cable cooker, the MBAs' strengths were a relaxed, full-bodied presentation, musical transparency and detail, dynamic expressiveness, and remarkably unhindered flow and rhythmic drive. Exceptional performance at this price. (284)

WyWires Diamond

Interconnect \$4495/1.2m RCA and XLR pr.; speaker \$7995/8' pr.

Diamond is a Litz-wire air-dielectric design incorporating tiny, individually insulated strands of ultra-pure copper. Impeccably assembled it is also a cable of ultra-wide expressiveness and resolution. Its sound is settled, fast but not twitchy or brittle and utterly devoid of histrionics. In tonal character the Diamond edges toward the warmer side of the spectrum but only by a breath. It's not forward-leaning, but it doesn't flinch from hard rock sizzle or flesh-eating dynamics, either. Its approach embodies a softer sell that grows ever more multi-faceted, musical, and transparent. A cable for connoisseurs. (264)

AudioQuest Wild Blue Yonder and WEL Signature Interconnects/Meteor Speaker Cable

WB, \$4500/1m pr.; WEL, \$8250/1m pr.; Meteor, \$7200/8' pr.

AudioQuest's new Wild Blue Yonder and top-of-the-line WEL Signature interconnects feature plugs that are custom-machined from pure copper then silver-plated. The Perfect-Surface Silver conductors are bonded to the plugs using a cold-welding technique. Both interconnects use Teflon Air-Tubes (a low-dielectric absorption design). AudioQuest's 72V Dielectric Bias System keeps the interconnects sounding their best at all times. Meteor is the second from the top of the AudioQuest line, and uses solid Perfect Surface Silver conductors throughout. RH's references. (not reviewed)

Esprit Audio Lumina

Interconnect, \$5330/1.2m; speaker, \$5060/2m

From the gleam of its connectors and carbon-fiber accents, everything about Lumina oozes quality and opulence. By ramping up the silver-plated, 6N-OCC-copper-conductor count, Lumina communicates a faithful tonal balance that hews ever so slightly to the richer, warmer-blooded, soothing side of the spectrum. Central to its character is the weight and intensity of its midrange, which, if it were a bar of chocolate, would be of a darker variety—complex and savory. There is density and foundation backing every note, and Lumina really sings on top, displaying a combination of sweetness and speed. Equally striking is its replication of dimension, distance, and soundstage. Top-notch. (306)

Analysis Plus Micro Golden Oval

Interconnect, \$5494/1m pr.

It's said that silence is golden, a notion reinforced by the sonic stillness that defines the performance of AP's top-tier Micro Golden Oval interconnect. In this instance, it's also literally true, given the coating of pure gold over these interconnects' 18AWG copper conductors. Representing the most advanced version of the hollow-oval geometry AP has been honing over the years, the Micro Golden Oval's performance is stirring,

warm, resonant, and as musically natural as NG has heard, making for a state-of-the-art contender. (272)

Purist Audio Design Dominus Luminist Revision

Interconnect \$5970/1m pr RCA.; speaker \$12,480/1.5m pr.

The all-silver Dominus is very detailed, very dynamic, very rich. Less open than Nordost Valhalla and darker in balance, it is also quieter, and because of its fluid-damped construction, virtually immune to floorborne and airborne vibration. (not reviewed)

Transparent Audio XL

Interconnect \$6400/1m RCA, \$11,000/1m XLR; speaker \$17,000/8' pr.

AHC's general view of interconnects and speaker cables has long been that, while investing in high-quality wire is well worth it, the differences in sound and performance are often exaggerated and any major differences tend to be the product of coloration rather than real improvements. The new Generation 5 version of the Transparent Audio XL Cables has changed his mind. The interconnects and speaker cables can be set to match the loads and interactions of specific components, and the end results are clearer and more revealing than both the previous-generation Transparent and virtually all of competition he's had the opportunity to audition. Even if you are a cable atheist or agnostic, you should really audition the XL. No sonic miracles, but the kind of subtle real-word improvements in detail and lifelike musical dynamics that really matter. (264)

Synergistic Research Galileo SX

Interconnect \$7500/1m pr. RCA; \$9500/1m pr. XLR; Speaker \$17,500/8' pr.; AC \$6000/5'

JV has heard a lot of Synergistic Research cable, but Ted Denney's latest creation, the Galileo UEF is quite simply the best wire Mr. D. has yet designed—better even than the original Galileo, which cost four times as much. Although it is a bit of a pain to use—because of the various grounding connections required—it is far less of a pain than previous SR wires, simply because the dielectric biasing circuit is built

into each cable (saving you the bother of having to deal with all those little biasing boxes and wall-wart power supplies). More importantly, the UEF marks a dramatic shift in sonics, coming far closer to neutral in balance than the darker-sounding originals, without sacrificing any of the speed, color, resolution, or power-range solidity that SR is famous for. Along with Crystal's wonderful Absolute Dream—which has a somewhat lighter, quicker presentation—Galileo LE is JV's reference. A genuine breakthrough for Denney and Co. (287)

Nordost Valhalla 2 Reference

Interconnect \$7980/1m pr.; speaker \$10,099/1.25m pr., \$12,449/2m pr.; power \$5249/1m

Valhalla, the home of the Norse Gods, is exalted territory. The new Valhalla cable from Nordost safely occupies it. A mesmerizing cable, it provides thunderbolt dynamics and whiplash speed, probing deeply into the soundstage to excavate the nuances of the music. The old negatives that some previously associated with Nordost—a bleached treble and astringent transients—are simply not in evidence. Instead, the Valhalla represents a big leap in performance for the company. While it is not quite at the level of the company's new flagship Odin II cable, it features an upgraded dual-monofilament technology that employs ten silver-plated, 24AWG, oxygen-free-copper conductors. Valhalla 2 also features a specially designed Holo:Plug, a new connector that is designed to preserve signal integrity. The tariff is high, but then again so is the performance of the Valhalla. (254)

MIT Oracle Matrix HD 90 Rev.1; SHD 120; MA-X SHD

\$12,999, \$26,999, \$49,999/8' pr.

By means of MIT's new F.A.T. (Fractional Articulation Technology), Oracle Matrix speaker cables improve transient response and resolution with the turn of a built-in switch that engages more "poles of articulation" within their CNC-milled T6 aluminum "network" boxes. In their "High-Definition" position, the Matrices are, indeed, capable of very high resolution and transparency to sources, while also preserving the colorlessly neutral tonal palette that MIT has long been known for. One of a handful of ultra-high-end cables that can tell you precisely what your amp/

speaker interface is adding to or subtracting from the source. (not reviewed)

Crystal Cable Absolute Dream

Interconnect \$13,300/1m pr.; speaker \$28,800/2m pr.

Since the arrival of Synergistic Research's marvelous Galileo two years ago, JV hasn't dipped more than a toe into the cable and interconnect market—so satisfied was (and is) he with Ted Denney's truly ingenious masterpieces. But past history and curiosity got the better of him. As it turned out, all this was a very good thing, as Absolute Dream—which features monocrystal silver material not only for the conductor, but also tiny gold-plated monocrystal silver and silver-plated monocrystal copper wires for the shielding—is excellent: dead-quiet even on analog sources, extremely detailed, rich in tone color, and very lifelike on dynamics top to bottom (both low-level and high), with superb staging and imaging and unusually high transparency to sources. Like Galileo, Absolute Dream never "sits" on musical energy the way certain cables have; both are free-flowing and highly responsive to dynamic/harmonic nuances. One of the highest-fidelity cables and interconnects JV has auditioned and, along with Galileo UEF, his current reference. (234)

Echolu Limited Edition interconnects, speaker cables, and power cords

\$19,500 (3' balanced interconnect pair); \$23,500 (6' speaker cable); \$16,000 6' power cord

These ultra-exotic interconnects and speaker cables from Echolu, sister company to Absolare, feature not just custom design and geometry, but custom metallurgy that includes silver, gold, and palladium. With a solid-core conductor so thick it's almost a rod, these cables are heavier and less pliable than most. Although priced at the upper end of the spectrum, the Echolu deliver first-rate sound quality. Rather than present a specific set of sonic characteristics, they seem to lower the level of noise and coloration, allowing the rest of the components in the system to better reveal the music's beauty. These are among the cleanest and most transparent cables RH has heard. (280)

POWER CORDS

MIT MA-X SHD

\$21,999

The MA-X SHD interconnects are a revised and upgraded version of the previous-generation Oracle interconnects. They offer adjustable “articulation” in six steps via two small knobs. A slider switch optimizes the interface for the particular input impedance of the components the source component will be driving. If you don't plan to change equipment, the MA-X SHD can be custom-built for your particular components' input impedances. Sonically the MA-X SHD has all the hallmarks of MIT's top technology, including a rich and warm tonal balance, tremendous soundstage size, and a great sense of image dimensionality. (274)

Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream

Interconnect, \$22,000/1m; speaker, \$43,300/2m

At its price, you would think this interconnect and cable—the fruit of Crystal Cable's Gabi Rijnveld world-class musical and aesthetic sensibility and her husband's, Siltech's Edwin Rijnveld's, world-class engineering chops—would have all the understated grace and pliancy of a bar of solid gold. But, no, Ultimate Dream turns out to be elegantly demure, lightweight, and eminently supple. Yes, with the precious metals (gold-plated monocrystal silver, silver-plated monocrystal copper) it is made of gleaming through its transparent jacket, Ultimate Dream looks (let's face it) like audiophile jewelry. But its sound! This is the smoothest, quietest, least obtrusive customer JV has had in his system—it's just not there in any of the obvious ways that cables usually are. The spitty sibilance you hear from time to time with almost every other cable...gone. The etching or softening of image outlines and transient details...gone. The top-down or bottom-up tonal balance...gone. Unlike its slightly silvery predecessor Absolute Dream, Ultimate just doesn't seem to have a sonic signature. Of course, getting customers to sign *their* signatures on a credit card receipt is gonna be a neat trick for importer Wynn Audio. Nonetheless (and all practicalities aside), this is mighty fine stuff. One of JV's references, replacing Absolute Dream at the top of the heap (or jewelry case). (forthcoming)

Nordost Odin 2

Interconnect \$23,625/1m pr. (\$2625 per additional half-meter pair); \$31,499/1m pr. speaker (\$4200 per additional half-meter pair)

With the Odin 2, Nordost has taken an already formidable cable and pushed it into the stratosphere where it achieves dizzying levels of performance. Any lingering sense of aggressiveness and excessive friskiness in the treble region that existed with Odin 1 has been utterly effaced by Nordost's latest effort. What emerges with the new construction of this cable, which includes different terminations of the plugs and connectors, is a marvelously dynamic and pellucid sound that most of its competitors would be quite hard-pressed to surpass, let alone equal. Add tautness of the bass and solidity of imaging, and you have a real winner. This is an immensely impressive cable that will take the finest audio systems to another level of sound reproduction. (270)

AudioQuest Dragon Zero/
Dragon Bass

\$27,500/8' pr. Dragon BASS: \$21,100/8ft pr.; Dragon bi-wire combo: \$48,600/8' pr.

This new top-level speaker cable from AudioQuest is easily the best cable the company has ever made. Dragon Zero features AudioQuest's finest materials and technologies, including its Solid Perfect-Surface silver conductors, Carbon-Based Noise Dissipation System, and the long-standing Dielectric Bias System. Its sound is extremely open and dynamic, as though a lid were removed from the music. The sense of transparency in the midrange and treble, and of unlimited top-end extension, is stunning. Although the soundstage is highly illuminated, Dragon Zero doesn't sound bright or fatiguing. Dragon Bass is designed to drive woofers or subwoofers in bi-wired or bi-amped systems. Although it does a fine job in the bass, most surprising was its ability to render smoother midrange and treble textures, as well as increase low-level resolution across the entire band—a phenomenon attributable to the Dragon Bass' noise-reduction technology. RH's reference speaker cables. (RH)

Shunyata Research Venom 14
\$135

Shunyata's entry-level is a quantum leap over the standard, no-name cord. Flexible and UL-approved, Venom 14 adds transient pop and image stability, opens the soundstage, and peels away the veiling that inhibits transparency and resolution. A bit forward in character, the Venom 14 provides an excitement that really lights up the soundstage. Although low-level dynamics and deep bass could use further refinement, Venom 14 is an audiophile-level product that makes it fun to spend less. (208)

Wireworld Electra 7

\$360/2m

Wireworld's line of power cords breaks with the conventional wisdom that says power cords need to be thick and unwieldy in order to impress. Not true. The mid-priced Electra 7s are defiantly flat, lightweight, and competitive with elite power cords costing many times their price. They possess a full-bodied, high-density sound with a rich midrange and naturalistic top end. Their pliability makes them a major advancement for today's well-groomed media rooms. (not reviewed)

Kimber Kable PK-10 Ascent

\$420/2m

The PK-10 Ascent picks up where the mean green original Palladian leaves off but in a more malleable, far less costly package. The Kimber is an exemplar of the heavy-hitting power cord—high output, energy and dynamics. It has a richer, thicker midrange with an emphasis on soundstage depth not unlike the topflight Palladian although not as wide open on vocals. But for bass extension and sustain, it is deserving of some of the highest marks. Nicely detailed and uncompressed with only vague remnants of treble peakiness, the PK-10 exemplifies an open, colorful, high-density sound that places it near the top of any survey. (208)

Dynamic Design Annalyric
PC-1

\$495/1.5m

This entry-level power cord from Dynamic Design AV easily betters original equip-

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ment cables, with finer dynamic gradations, more focused images, and a weightier overall presentation. Imaging is very stable, and tonal balance is nicely extended, bringing with it some of the dark richness that NG admired in Dynamic Design's Lotus and Heritage models. A no-brainer bargain, the AnnaLyric joins Shunyata Venom HC as NG's personal fave—a superior effort that he would place high on his list of worthy upgrades. (252)

Shunyata Research Venom NR10, NR12, and V14 Digital \$498, \$398, \$250

Advancements in its popular Venom line led to the creation of the NR Series (NR signifying noise reduction). Still modestly priced, NR power cords contain many of Shunyata's technologies and custom-manufactured parts, including electrostatic shields to reduce radiated noise. They are also Shunyata's lowest-price power cables with built-in CCI filters, which measurably reduce power-line noise generated by components. In the areas of instrumental timbre, sensitivity to micro-dynamics, and overall tonal refinement, NR power cords provide a clear improvement over Venom HC cords. The results are especially transformational when the Venoms are paired with Shunyata's own power conditioner, the Hydra Delta D6, as a complete system. (305)

Voodoo Infinity Power/Digital and Air Spectra \$700-\$900 and \$2000

Compared with stock power cords, going full Voodoo is a little like squeegeeing the windows and grabbing a dustbuster. The common perception of images sounding pinched or constricted is largely reduced. The interplay between musicians, orchestral sections, and the ambient space between sections grew just a little more open and layered, even more so with Air Spectra. The Voodoo cords imparted a slight forwardness that tended to close the distance between the stage and the listener. They suggested a cooler overall tonal character, not laid back or overly dry but leaning toward a more clinical and precision interpretation of the music. Transients were quick and dynamics very good. Bass response overall was well extended, controlled, and timbrally exacting. In a

hobby where even the smallest component can add something magical, this is precisely what adding a little Voodoo can do. Infinity is available in power and digital versions (284)

Voodoo Cable Black Diamond and Electra

\$1250/6' and \$1650/6'

The Electra and Black Diamond occupy the midpoint in Voodoo Cables' extensive line of power cords. Black Diamond is the recommended choice for solid-state and tube power amps, whereas Electra is advocated for source components and preamps. As a combo they convey a weighty midrange character, with good extension at the frequency extremes, a drier top with an emphasis on delivering the wider acoustic environment of the venue rather than heavily scoring specific and isolated images. To most ears this is often the more naturalistic sound of real music. Certainly image definition and focus is very good, just not overly individuated. Low-level detailing and transient textures were very persuasive. Overall NG found the Electra the more musically open and revealing power cord of the two with balanced and immersive big-buck performance for half that of the Big Boys. (245)

Audience Au24 SE-i LP powerChord

Au24 SE-i MP powerChord, \$1335 for 5'; Au24 SE-i LP, \$1190 for 5'; Full Power, \$2410 for 5'

The new SE-i version of Audience's already superb Au24 AC cords render an across-the-board sonic improvement. Based on the original design of multi-strand conductors and high-purity mono-crystal copper, the SE-i brings to the table new connectors with higher-quality metallurgy and lower-mass terminations. Moreover, Audience now offers the SE in three versions, low-power for DACs, preamps, and phonostages, medium-power for lower-powered integrated amplifiers, and high-power for power amplifiers. The lower-powered versions not only sound better on low-current consumption sources, they are less expensive. The Au24 SE-i in any configuration delivers a low noise floor, neutrality, and an almost preternatural sense of recorded space and ambience. Beyond that is a stronger micro aspect that

hones in on images with incisive focus and seemingly effortless flow and immediacy. Last but not least, these cords are one of the most flexible available, very handy for angled runs. (219, 245)

Harmonic Technology Magic Power III AC 10

\$2320/1.5m

Designed for use primarily with front-end components, the Magic Power III AC 10 delivers tremendous clarity, smoothness, and definition across the entire frequency spectrum, and does so without constricting dynamics or softening the treble. Built-in noise filter acts as an AC conditioner to remove line noise. (not reviewed)

Nordost Tyr

\$2939

Like Nordost's Tyr interconnect and cable, the Tyr power cord adds transparency, precision, purity, depth, texture, openness, and expansiveness to the listening experience. (305)

Shunyata Research Sigma NR V2

\$3500

Shunyata continues to push forward the state-of-the-art in AC power for audio, with the Sigma NR V2 being a prime example. These AC cords incorporate noise filters right inside the connectors, acting as miniature power conditioners to isolate components from noise. The build-quality is outstanding, with all custom parts including the carbon-fiber housing. The Sigma NR bests Shunyata's previous models by deepening the background, increasing resolution at the lowest levels, rendering textures more realistically, and allowing the rest of your components to sound their best. (forthcoming)

Clarus Concerto

\$3600

The Clarus Concerto is an unassuming, but well-made, rack-mountable module with a power switch and dimmer button on the front, and a clever and unique cable-support bar on the back that prevents the dreaded heavy power cable droop we all know and hate. The Concerto offers a total of eight outlets, separately specialized for high current, digital, and analog sources.

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Clarus' five-tier approach to conditioning lowers the noise floor without restricting dynamics (to a point). Reviewer Matt Clott's digital and analog sources benefited from what the Concerto provided: blacker back-grounds, more dynamics, and a cleaner canvas upon which to paint the music. Image specificity was also heightened and the stage seemed to take a step closer to the back wall. (306)

AudioQuest Dragon Constant-Current AC Power Cable

\$4400/1m; high-current model: \$5400/1m

AudioQuest has certainly broken new ground with the Dragon cord. It features fire and fury in the form of superb dynamics, but also a low noise floor that allows you to hear much further into the soundstage. Small details and nuances that were previously obscured or smudged emerge with pellucid clarity. But it is the smoothness, the lack of grain that the Dragon imparts to the overall sound that is its most beguiling quality. In a crowded field of competitors, the Dragon may well be at the top of the heap, at least for now. (291)

Audience Au24 SX powerChord

\$5060/6" (MP version, \$4621/6')

Au24 SX represents Audience's latest wire geometry and isolation technology. It is double cryogenically treated in-house. Compared with forerunner SE, SX presents an even-lower noise floor—a virtual black sea of calm. With such a reduction in grunge and glaze the acoustics and ambience of a venue are revealed—like the dark silences that precede the lifting of the conductor's baton. The upshot is a soundstage of rock-solid stability and continuity that is ripe with low-level micro-detailing and transient attacks. The final and perhaps key distinction observed with the SX is the more fully realized sense of dimension and focused depth that accompanies a great orchestral performance. A state-of-the-art [h]ord. (291)

Synergistic Research Galileo SX

\$6000/5'

Like its new SX cables and interconnects, Synergistic's Galileo SX power cords make components sound exceptionally

neutral, powerful, fast, spacious, and detailed. Alongside Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream, they are JV's references. (244)

Crystal Cable Absolute Dream \$9790/1.5m

Power cables are among the hardest products to review in that they take time to "break in" and, sonically, do not always progress in a straight line. Absolute Dream—the power cords intended to accompany Absolute Dream cable and interconnect (and constructed, like the signal wires, of monocrystal silver)—is such a one. At first, it sounded very close to JV's reference Shunyata/Synergistic Research cords; then it developed a power-range/bottom-end leanness that perplexed JV (as the Absolute Dream cables and interconnects never sounded lean or stinging); and then, after a couple of weeks of use, it rounded back into form, filling out in the lower mids and upper bass and developing considerable wallop in the mid-to-low bass. At this point, the Absolute Dreams are true contenders—delicate, detailed, powerful, spacious, and transparent. (234)

Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream \$15,970/1.5m

Like Crystal's Ultimate Dream cables, these gorgeous, pliable, beautifully made power cords—high-grade custom-made Oyaide plugs, monocrystal silver wire, solid-gold cores—have little-to-no obvious sonic character of their own. Silent and transparent, they transmit current freely and neutrally, without adding a top-down or bottom-up sonic signature to, or imposing any dynamic limitations on, what they're connected to. Certainly one of the finest pc's on the market, the Ultimate Dream is expensive, yes, but, for those with the dough and a system to match, worth it. One of JV's references. (forthcoming)

DIGITAL CABLES

Belkin Gold Series

\$15/1m

Despite being ridiculously inexpensive, this cable was AT's reference for nearly two years. Though no longer the best USB cable available, in sonic and musical terms it continues to outperform and embarrass

the vast majority of alternatives, regardless of price. A perfect first (and even last) USB cable. (226)

Straightwire USB-Link

\$50/1m, \$60/1.5m

This well-made, great-sounding USB cable is a relative bargain, delivering outstanding dynamics, timbral fidelity, and transparency. (not reviewed)

AudioQuest Forest USB

\$65/0.75m; \$80/1.5m

For those on a tight budget, Forest is a large upgrade over a generic USB cable that was never designed for audio. Compared to standard USB cables, Forest offers a larger and more dimensional soundstage, more liquid and lifelike timbres, and greater transparency. (not reviewed)

AudioQuest Carbon USB

\$170/0.75m; \$220/1.5m

One of the go-to USB cables for computer-audio fans and highly recommended by USB pioneer and guru Gordon Rankin of Wavelength Audio, the Carbon is neutral without sounding bleached, dynamic without sounding piercing, detailed without sounding analytical. (not reviewed)

Wireworld Starlight 8 Ethernet

\$210/1m, \$270/2m

Wireworld's Cat8 ethernet cable is designed to propel data at up to forty gigabit speeds. Starlight resides midway between entry-level Chroma and top-rung Platinum. With the more delicate information in a recording it exhibits an ease and lack of tension, plus a heightening of inner detail on things like the rattles of a tambourine, or the layering in a violin section, or the clarity of backup singers behind a lead vocalist. With Starlight, single-note lines or heavily orchestrated sections sing with the clarity and focus of a Zeiss lens—no smear, no smudge. On the transient level, Starlight sharpens the attack of a piano, and seems to permit its soundboard to sustain and ring with harmonic energy just a little while longer. Does it leave any performance on the table? Well, there is Wireworld Platinum. (283)

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Straightwire Info-Link AES/EBU or Coaxial Digital Cable**\$300/1m, \$400/1.5m**

This reasonably priced digital cable offers a host of virtues, including high transparency to the source, spacious soundstaging, a treble that is open and detailed without sounding analytical, and wide dynamics. A bargain. (not reviewed)

Clarus Cable Crimson USB**\$340/1m**

Clarus Cable has quickly gained a well-deserved reputation for standout performance at reasonable prices (reasonable for the high end, anyway). The Crimson USB nails the midrange with a fullness of body, warmth, transient alacrity, and overall honesty that calms the mind and relaxes the ear. I was struck by how persuasively warm and articulate this cable was. Its overall balance and light touch with difficult-to-capture vocal sibilants were excellent. The Clarus is an authentic bargain with performance that flirts with top-tier cables. A terrific upgrade cable (a standard-setter in this range) for new and experienced computer-audio fans alike. (254)

Nordost Heimdall 2 USB**\$499/1m**

Nordost's mid-line Heimdall 2 USB cable is capable of great detail, body, texture, and spatial resolution. The Heimdall 2 is also characterized by very low levels of grain, with smooth instrumental and vocal textures. (261)

Wireworld Platinum Starlight 8 USB2.0**\$500/1m**

The seemingly minor differences between Wireworld's Silver and Platinum Starlight models yield a major sonic impact. In AT's experience, the Platinum Starlight has no peer in soundstage size, airiness, tempo tracking, dynamics, bass pitch, timbral realism, and lack of grain. In short, this cable takes USB audio to a new plane of fidelity. AT's new reference. (226)

AudioQuest Diamond USB**\$650/0.75m; \$800/1.5m**

This pricey USB cable is simply revelatory in its combination of ease and refinement on one hand, and resolution and transparency on the other. Although

capable of resolving the finest detail, Diamond USB has a relaxed quality that fosters deep musical involvement. Expensive, but worth it in high-end systems. (221)

Audience frontRow USB**frontRow USB, \$1300/1m (plus \$75 per .25m)**

Don't listen to the frontRow USB in your system unless you're prepared to shell out the long green. The frontRow is expensive, but worth it. The first thing you'll notice is that the frontRow has two jacketed sets of conductors rather than one. One set carries the signal, and the other, power. Frankly, there's nothing to fault in the frontRow USB. Many USB cables—as with everything else in audio—force you to make tradeoffs: This cable has better resolution, while another may have greater smoothness and ease. The Audience cable seemingly does it all; it is convincingly superior in every sonic criterion. The frontRow USB is priced at the very top end of the scale, but if you want a no-compromise USB cable, look no further. (Au24 SE+ reviewed in 254)

Shunyata Sigma USB**\$2000**

Shunyata has made some great products over the years, but the new Sigma USB may be the company's single best achievement yet. Replace any USB cable with the Sigma USB and you'll hear a significant improvement in soundstage openness, dynamic contrasts, and textural liquidity. RH's reference.

Synergistic Research Galileo SX USB**\$2995/1m**

Though scarcely a digital maven, JV has tried any number of highly touted USB cables on the sly. The only one he truly likes is Galileo SX—and then only when it is run from a computer source to Berkeley Audio's USB-to-AES converter. Synergistic's top-line USB cable offers the same virtues as its other Galileo SX products—power, speed, resolution, spaciousness, and the most beautiful reproduction of timbre of any wire JV has heard. With digital, that gorgeous tonality really pays off. (not reviewed)

AudioQuest Wild AES/EBU**\$2475/1m**

Wild is packed with AudioQuest's top-shelf technologies, including its Perfect Surface Silver conductors, 72V Dielectric Bias System (DBS), Noise Dissipation System, and cold welding of the conductors to terminations machined from high-purity copper. The sonic result is the best AES/EBU cable RH has heard, with ultra-fine resolution of detail and a finely filigreed top end that allows highest-quality DACs, such as the dCS Vivaldi and Berkeley Alpha Reference, to sound their best. Expensive, but worth it. (not reviewed)

Transparent Audio XL Digital**\$3495/1m, XL 75-ohm (\$1300/add'1 5')****\$3995/1m, XL 110-ohm AES/EBU (\$1700/add'1 5')**

When used on the dCS Vivaldi CD/SACD system, these cables immediately improved the depth, width, and transparency of the soundstage. Transient speed was also markedly crisper than with stock cables or, for that matter, just about any other digital cable that JHB has used. The treble is noticeably smoother, and the bass firmer and more refulgent with Transparent. Most impressive is their ability to add another layer of dimensionality to the sound, rendering it more tactile and bringing the listener one step closer to the emotional heart of the music. Nothing else seems to capture timbral fidelity as successfully as Transparent. For anyone with a top-flight digital rig, auditioning these digital cables is not an option. It is a must. (239)

**HEADPHONES AND
EARPHONES****KLH Ultimate One****\$299**

The Ultimate One's design is built around a 50mm (2-inch) "pure beryllium" driver with a frequency response of 18Hz–22kHz (± 3 dB) and a high sensitivity specification of 97dB. The fit and finish of the Ultimate One is exceptionally fine, especially considering its price. If you are looking for exceedingly comfortable, exceedingly affordable, open-backed, over-ear headphones that



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PSB M4U 8

\$399

The Paul Barton-designed M4U 8 is an upgrade in features, technology, and performance from PSB's M4U 2. The M4U 8 retains the M4U 2's extended and neutral tonal balance, ease, and non-fatiguing treble, but adds more dynamic and extended bass response, plus an even more relaxed midrange and treble without giving up any air or resolution. The inclusion of Bluetooth connectivity adds to the value. What is more, the M4U 8 is an active noise-cancelling headphone with three operating modes: a good-sounding Passive mode, an Active mode *sans* noise-cancellation (for purists), and an Active Noise Cancellation mode that works very well to suppress background noise.

Focal Elegia

\$899

The Focal Elegia is a closed-enclosure, wired, over-ear headphone. Although it is not Focal's most expensive closed-enclosure model, it shares much of the design aesthetic and technical DNA of Focal's premium high-performance open-enclosure designs. With a sensitivity of 105dB and a 5-ohm impedance, the Elegia can be successfully driven even by a smartphone, and it is all-day-wear comfortable. It also looks great.

Campfire Equinox

\$1499

Although for \$1500 (and under) you have quite a few custom in-ear options, few offer the combination of features and fit offered by the Equinox. For those audiophiles who want to hear all the low bass, treasure a large soundstage presentation with excellent specificity, and plan to wear their custom in-ears for long, uninterrupted periods of time, the most excellent Equinox ticks all those boxes.

Shure KSE 1200

\$1999

The KSE1200 electrostatic in-ear system not only includes in-ear capsules containing electrostatic elements; it also comes with a special amplifier, which supplies the power to energize the electrostatic

elements and, via a volume control, set its playback level. In listening tests, the KSE1200 displayed all the audiophile-pleasing sonics that are characteristic of a good electrostatic transducer. Although the KSE 1200 would not be my first choice as a work-out exercise companion (due to the amplifier's size), if I wanted a completely portable electrostatic monitoring system with analog inputs for on-location recording and playback, the KSE-1200 would be my first choice.

ZMF Vérité Closed

\$2499

All ZMF headphones are hand-assembled in small batches in the USA. The Vérité Closed was designed to compete with the best, and to Steven Stone's ears, succeeds. If you require a premium-quality headphone that has some attenuation of outside noise, that you can wear for hours at a time, and that has a relaxed and exceedingly natural harmonic balance while still having excellent low bass extension, the ZMF Vérité Closed should be on your audition list.

Meze Empyrean

\$2999

From the beginning, the Empyrean was conceived as a cost-no-object headphone that would use the highest-quality materials to achieve world-class sound, extreme comfort, and a beautiful appearance. At the heart of the Empyrean is Rinaro's patent-pending, hybrid planar-magnetic driver that combines—on one diaphragm—two independently shaped voice-coil sections: a circular section optimized for upper-midrange and high frequencies; and a larger serpentine section optimized for mid/bass performance. By design, the circular voice-coil section is positioned opposite the wearer's ear canals to provide the shortest delivery path for critical transient, textural, and spatial information. The end result is a headphone that offers a fundamentally natural and organic sound but is also extraordinarily revealing and detailed. (298)

Abyss Diana Phi

\$3995

The Diana Phi is an open-backed headphone that delivers little or no isolation from surrounding sounds, which is good for

situational awareness out in the world, but not so good for isolation. Sonically, the Phi is a knockout. You want really deep bass? It's there in abundance. Big soundstage? Check. Superb rendition of inner detail and low-level information? Phi's got it all. A superb reference-level portable headphone.

Warwick Acoustics Sonoma M1

\$4995

This electrostatic design is packed with proprietary technologies, including an innovative electrostatic panel. The result is a headphone of extraordinary clarity and cohesion, a "whole cloth" sound that can only be achieved with a single full-range transducer and no crossover network. The speed and clarity of the electrostatic panel are presented within a harmonically neutral tapestry along with spot-on pitch precision in the bass. A world-class design. (276)

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS AND DAC/PREAMPS

Schiit Audio Magni3

\$99

For under a C-note Schiit has created a headphone amp can not only power hard-to-drive headphones, but is also quiet enough to use with in-ear monitors. It sounds great, has surprisingly good build-quality, and delivers superb technical performance. The Magni3 offers excellent bass and sub-bass control, pitch definition, and drive, as well as a very dynamic upper midrange. The Magni3 provides a simple and cost-effective way to power a wide variety of headphones at or near their optimum sonic potential.

Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital

\$399

The Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital offers audiophiles a very high-value DAC/digital preamp at an almost ridiculously low price. Not only does it include a plethora of important features, but it sounds good, has an elegantly designed control interface, and is expandable. Just add the Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital to your system, connect it to a computer (or smartphone) via USB, and you can enjoy all the wonders of computer-based audio without a major monetary commitment.

Focal Arche**\$2500**

The Focal Arche is designed to be a fully featured and flexible component. With both balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA outputs (in addition to headphone outputs), the Arche can be the control center for a complete desktop or room-based system. Inputs include one coaxial SPDIF, one TosLink, one USB, and one pair of single-ended analog. A special control on the Arche's amplifier lets the user select dedicated headphone options for the Focal Utopia, Elear, Clear, Stella, and Elegia headphones, as well as voltage and hybrid settings for other manufacturers' cans.

Benchmark Media Systems HPA4**\$2995**

Benchmark decided to base its flagship HPA4 headphone amplifier on THX's HX-888 achromatic amplifier module, which is claimed to reduce distortion by 20–40dB through a patented feed-forward design said to yield the world's most linear amplification. The HPA4 is a balanced, high-voltage, high-current design, with a very high damping factor—meaning the amp delivers consistent sound with low-, medium-, and high-impedance headphones. SS found the HPA4 to be “exceptionally good at presenting a layered, dynamic, yet relaxed sound.” It also delivered extremely tight bass and clean, clear highs. In sum, this super-revealing amplifier shows everything there is to hear about the other components with which it is used. (293)

Manley Labs Ultimate Amplifier**\$4500**

Most analog headphone amplifiers are simple affairs with a volume knob, some gain adjustments, and that's it. Then there is the Manley Absolute headphone amplifier. Sonically the Manley Absolute can be anything from a push-pull amplifier with 0.16% THD to a single-ended amp with 1.0% THD. Also, you have the option of adding up to 10dB of feedback. When you combine its unique looks with its abundance of features, you have a headphone amplifier that lives up to its name—ultimate.

PORTABLE PLAYERS

Groovers Japan Activo CT10**\$299**

The CT10 is the first high-resolution audio player under the Activo brand. Its quad-core CPU produces a snappy user interface and has enough power to process large hi-res audio files. The CT10 was designed by groovers Japan and iRIVER of South Korea (parent company of Astell & Kern) and features the new sound solution system from Astell & Kern, the Teraton TM200, which combines a DAC chip, an analog amplifier, an independent power unit, and a jitter-preventing clock to provide a single-chip solution for hi-fi audio playback.

FiiO M11**\$499**

The M11 is loaded with goodies including two AK 4493EQ DAC chips, an Exynos 7872 CPU, an FPBA-based system clock, both unbalanced and balanced analog outputs, 3GB of RAM, 32GB of ROM, a 3800mAh battery, and both 2.4 and 5G Wi-Fi capabilities, along with AirPlay and FiiO Link. The M11 supports PCM from 8Hz to 384kHz/32 and native 64/128 DSD but does not offer MQA decoding. The M11 can also serve as a USB DAC and USB-to-SPDIF converter. In short, the M11 offers a lot of player for under \$500.

ACCESSORIES

AcousTech Electronic Stylus Force Gauge**\$79.99**

Getting the most out of any turntable requires an accurate vertical tracking force setting—and yes, kids, you can easily hear changes as slight as a tenth of a gram. Not only is AcousTech's new gauge a relative bargain; it is small, has a backlit display, is incredibly easy to use, measures weights from 0.001 to 5.000 grams at the height of an LP's surface, and is said to be accurate to within +/- 0.002 grams.

Aesthetix ABCD-1MC Cartridge Demagnetizer**\$230**

This battery-operated device sends a special signal through your moving-coil cartridge, removing stray magnetism in the coils. Used every two weeks or so, the ABCD-1 will restore tone colors and sound-stage clarity. (For use on moving coils only.)

Analogue Productions: The Ultimate Analogue Test LP**\$39.99**

Amazingly well-conceived as well as manufactured to the highest standards, The Ultimate Analogue Test LP is the new reference in test discs. It's loaded with useful test signals that are encoded with high precision, and the record is pressed on 180-gram virgin vinyl.

Audience Au24SX Breakout Cable**\$500/1m plus \$75 per 2.5m**

This 3.5mm stereo plug on one end and a pair of RCA jacks on the other is made to the same standard as Audience's other top-of-the-line Au series, with 6N OCC copper, XLPE dielectric, solder-free RCA connectors, and cryogenic and extreme high-voltage processing in Audience's lab. Extremely detailed, free from grain and glare, and with gorgeous rendering of timbre. (RH, not reviewed)

AudioQuest Super-Conductive Anti-Static Record Brush**\$29.95**

This new and improved version of AudioQuest's ubiquitous carbon-fiber wonder answers the burning question: “Does the AudioQuest Record Brush provide a ‘good electrical path between the fibers and the handle?’” Apparently the answer is: “No,” according to AudioQuest's Bill Low. Enter AudioQuest's Conductive Fiber Record Brush, which has “ideal conductivity from the Carbon Fibers.” On first acquaintance, the only change JV noted was that the brush feels different (lighter and a bit flimsier) than the original. But who cares? You're going to buy one; JV's gonna buy one; anyone who listens to vinyl is gonna buy one. The thing is indispensable. (274)

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AudioQuest BPW Binding-Post Wrench

\$17.95

AudioQuest's binding-post wrench, featuring durable metal socket-inserts, eliminates the need for a bulky socket set. This compact double-ended nut driver, small enough to slip into a shirt or pants pocket, fits 7/16" and 1/2" binding posts. Essential for tightening down speaker cables to speakers and amps.

AudioQuest JitterBug

\$69.95

This little device looks like a miniature plug-in DAC, but actually fits between a DAC or USB cable and a USB jack on a computer, DAC, or music server. Its mission is to reduce jitter and isolate the computer from the DAC. Judging from its sonic effects, the JitterBug does just that, producing a smoother treble, deeper soundstage, and more relaxed and natural presentation. A no-brainer recommendation for the asking price.

AudioTools App

\$20

If you've had a desire to test, tweak, optimize, or even build your own music system from scratch, the tests included in the AudioTools App will make your job easier. All this ergonomic elegance can be had at a price that makes stand-alone test gear almost obsolete.

Avid Level 45: 45RPM Adapter and Bubble Level

\$80

This two-piece kit combines a precision machined-steel 45-rpm adaptor with a high-quality bubble level. The level sits atop the 45rpm-adaptor, which together weigh 180 grams—exactly the same as a high quality LP for accurate leveling.

Acoustic Geometry Room Pack

\$270–\$5759

This range of room-acoustic products brings professional-grade treatment to the home listening room. Designed by veteran recording-studio designer John Calder, the packages are built around bass absorbers (CornerSorbers), diffusers (Curve Diffusers), and mid/treble absorbers (Fabric-Wrapped Panels) in various combinations. Each Acoustic Geometry package is tailored to a specific room size, and the company will

provide guidance on placement for your particular space. This takes the guesswork out of choosing just the right products and where to position them. The result of the full package (the Pro Room Pack 12 in RH's case) is a dramatic transformation compared with the sonics of an untreated room. The CornerSorbers are amazingly effective at reducing boom and bloat, resulting in tighter and more tuneful bass with superior transient fidelity. The Curve Diffusers, which also incorporate some bass absorption, further improve the bass but more importantly greatly improve soundstage depth and width, increase the impression of the sound existing independently of the speakers, and clarify the individual tone colors of various instruments. The Acoustic Geometry products are attractive, effective, easy to use, and reasonably priced for their performance. (290)

A/V RoomService Equipment Vibration Protectors (EVP)

\$95/each EVP 4" HD (4 per speaker); \$29/each EVP 2" MD

Don't confuse these two-inch tall pads with typical couplers like spikes and footers. EVPs are decouplers and according to A/V RoomService their energy absorption properties are tested, known, neutral, and consistent. Constructed of a unique sandwich of materials, they dependably removed a light veiling around musical images. While the EVP's didn't change the inherent tonal balance of a loudspeaker—it did restore a level of musical and harmonic complexity that made the loudspeaker into a more satisfying version of itself. (290)

Blu-Tack Adhesive Putty

\$10

The original acoustic putty and adhesive from Bostik of England that damps resonances and mechanically couples a compact speaker to the top plate of its stand. Sonically you'll hear tighter bass and improved image. Considered "a flexible semi-liquid that behaves like a solid" it also offers a safety bonus by preventing a stand-mounted speaker from being inadvertently toppled.

Caig DeoxIT

\$32.95

Caig's DeoxIT has long been the go-to lubricant for cleaning, preserving, and

conditioning all electrical connections. Packaged in a handy dispenser bottle with a little applicator-brush built into the cap, it can and should be used for any junction (short of an AC wall socket) where a metal connector (like the male RCA plugs of your interconnects) is plugged into a metal socket (like the female RCA plugs of your preamp, amp, or CD player).

Cardas RCA Caps

\$60 (set of 12)

Pop these RCA shorting plugs into your preamplifier's unused inputs and you'll hear a blacker background, more micro-dynamic detail, and an overall cleaner sound.

Clearaudio Strobe-disc and Strobe Light

\$75 and \$200

Featuring grooves that create the additional stylus drag necessary to accurately measure your turntable's speed—while at the same time doubling as a cartridge break-in device—Clearaudio's Strobe-disc and Strobe Light are great tools for the serious vinyl junkie.

Composite Products Carbon-Fiber Cones

\$75 (3-Pack)

Made from layers of carbon-fiber cloth bonded into a solid with epoxy, the Composite Products Carbon-Fiber Cones are extremely stiff and well damped. Place a set under a component to reduce and damp vibrations.

Critical Mass Systems CenterStage 2

\$960 (0.8"); \$1780 (1"); \$2780 (2") per set of four

When placed under components, these small isolation devices produce an outsized effect on the sound. The bass becomes more solid, textures more finely rendered, spatial cues more vividly realized, and images within the soundstage more tangible. RH

Fosgate Fozgometer

\$300

Adjusting for correct cartridge azimuth (axial tilt) is the bane of an audiophile's beleaguered eyeballs. However, the Fozgometer, Jim Fosgate's ingenious and fairly priced Azimuth Range Meter, is designed for even

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ACCESSORIES

HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

the most astigmatic among us. Used in conjunction with the Ultimate Analog Test Disc LP [Analogue Prod:AAPT-1], it diagnoses azimuth irregularities by accurately reading channel separation and channel balance, as well as signal direction. Nicely finished with a large readable meter. Operation is a snap. A battery-operated essential. (206)

Furutech GTX DR NCF AC Duplex Wall Outlets

\$280

Furutech has taken the humble outlet and run it through a gauntlet of refinement far beyond what most of us can imagine. Performance-wise, there's no doubt that the Furutech removed a layer of low-level grunge from the sonic window, reducing noise across the soundstage. Like a sonic dust cloth, it made images clearer and more tangible. While the Furutech GTX is not cheap, its uncompromising quality and high performance make \$280 seem like a small price to pay. (291)

GeerFab D-Bob

\$999

GeerFab's D.BOB device promises to allow you to use the DAC of your choice with a Blu-ray, SACD, CD, CDR, or virtually any recognized-by-your-player silver or golden disc, as long as your disc player has an HDMI output. Adding the D.BOB to your system is relatively simple, merely connect your player's HDMI output to the D.BOB's HDMI input, and then connect the D.BOB's SPDIF or TosLink output to your DAC. The D.BOB is capable of handling up to PCM 192/24 and DSD64. If you have a large collection of high-resolution discs, the D.BOB gives you a future-proof way to continue to enjoy them into the foreseeable future. (308)

Groove Tracer

Reference subplatter, \$275; Delrin platter, \$350; record weight, \$125; universal counterweight, \$189

These beautifully made, highly effective tweaks for Rega turntables add more

ambience, air around and between instruments, three dimensionality, tonal accuracy and richness, as well as dynamic weight and impact to vinyl playback. Highly recommended. (309)

Jolida Foz-XT

\$379

Crosstalk is as deleterious in audio as it is in marriages or politics. In playing back vinyl, it is a direct result of one channel outputting more than another. This results from a difference in coil windings in the cartridge, which are fiendishly tricky to construct by hand. Unlike digital playback, getting it perfect is a hit-and-miss affair. Most audiophiles have traditionally relied on cartridge setup to tweak for a discrepancy in channel imbalance. The Foz-XT sets out to remedy this situation. It is inserted between the output of the phono stage and before the input of the preamplifier. The Foz gives you the chance to adjust each channel separately to fine-tune it to perfection. Both soundstage width and depth

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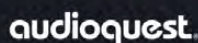
Friday Night In San Francisco
Num. Ltd Ed 180g 45rpm 2LP



Jennifer Warnes Another Time, Another Place
Num. Ltd Ed 180g 45rpm 2LP



The Three Blind Mice
45 Box 180g 45rpm 6 LP Box Set



improve with the insertion of the XT. A remarkably ingenious product, it deserves to be auditioned by pretty much anyone intent on improving analog playback. (270)

Kate Koepfel Design LP Organizational Solutions

Prices vary by product; approx. \$43–\$410

San Francisco-based Koepfel Design has carved out a niche designing and manufacturing high-quality organizational solutions for collectors of music and other media, ranging from assorted record dividers with engraved or stenciled cut-out letters to stackable storage crates and more. Audiophiles will appreciate the careful craftsmanship and attention to detail behind the Koepfel products, but they are also functional: The dividers are built for the long haul, and to help your LPs last by distributing their weight among the wooden panels. Our reviewer adored the set of 26 alphabetical wooden LP dividers and the handy record tote bag. (270)

Levin Record Brush

\$99–\$175

The ultra-expensive Levin is the *ne plus ultra* of hand-held record brushes. Hand-made in Germany from your choice of exotic woods (thus the price range), the Levin is constructed from natural horse or goat hair with old-world techniques. To hold this oversized luxurious-feeling brush in your palm is to want one. RH

Lyra SPT Stylus Cleaner

\$60

Mission accomplished. Puts the fluid where it belongs. Lyra's formulation scrubs each precious stylus clean without globing on and ultimately reducing the compliance of the cantilever. A tiny angled brush is included.

Marigo White 3mm Tuning Dots

\$39 (set of 12)

These tiny, adhesive, constrained-layer resonance-control "dots" provide an effective

bit of damping to tubes or signal connectors that may see airborne or floorborne vibration, even if isolated on stands. Also useful on the headshells of tonearms or, judiciously applied, on the top of phono cartridges.

Mobile Fidelity Record Brush

\$20

The Mobile Fidelity record brush is the next-best thing to a record-cleaning machine. It works with dry records for a quick dust-off before dropping the stylus, as well as with a liquid for deeper cleaning. The well-designed handle makes it easy to use, and the Mobile Fidelity Record Brush is inexpensive, to boot.

Mobile Fidelity Rice Inner Sleeves

\$20 (50-pack)

A precious collection of LPs is only as good as its scratch-free surfaces. Offered for decades, Mobile Fidelity's familiar rice

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Nitty Gritty
Record Cleaner Model 2.0 (Solid Oak)

\$544.99



VPI
HW-16.5 Record Cleaner

\$799.99
(Packages Available)



KirmussAudio
KA-RC-1 Ultrasonic Record Restoration System

\$875.00



Epos Acoustics
K5 Bookshelf Speakers (Black)

\$494.99 (Pair)



STAX
SR-009S Open Back Headphones

\$4,324.99 ~~\$4,549.99~~

paper-style inner sleeves are renowned for their anti-static properties that avoid drawing dust and grit into the delicate grooves. They remain the archival sleeves to beat.

Mobile Fidelity Stylus Cleaner

\$24.99

This “brush-in-a-bottle” cleaner effectively removes crud on your stylus and is so easy to use that you’ll get in the good habit of cleaning the stylus before playing each side.

NordostQKore Grounding System

QKore1 \$2499, QKore3 \$3499, QKore6 \$4999

The QKore grounding system truly demonstrates that silence is golden. It represents an ingenious attempt to combat the electronic nasties that conspire to corrupt the sound of electronic musical reproduction. Unlike many products that purport to produce a purer sound, the QKore is a non-invasive grounding device that you plug into an unused input on a stereo component; it produces no extra-musical artifacts of its own. What it does is create a much blacker background from which the subtlest of details emerge with elegance and refinement. Every part of the sonic spectrum will also sound fuller and more transparent. For any high-end enthusiast seeking to improve his system, this is an essential component. (283)

Nordost QRT QPoint/QRT QSource

\$749/\$2499

This amazing modular system is intended to synchronize your stereo system by emitting an electrical field that manipulates the electromechanical resonances in its immediate vicinity. It is best placed below audio equipment, where it can exert its salubrious effects. While it cannot be deemed an essential product like power cables or wires, it appears to widen and deepen the soundstage as well as add some to dynamic heft to recordings. Given the inherently controversial nature of such a product, auditioning is a must. But its efficacy is difficult to dispute, particularly when the QRT Source is coupled to a streaming device such as a Roon server. (309)

Onzow Zerodust Stylus Cleaner

\$39

Not a fluid or brush-based stylus cleaner, the Zerodust uses a polymer bubble that gathers debris onto its ultra-soft surface. A winning alternative for those concerned with overusing liquid cleaners that can leave residues and build up over time. Zerodust can be cleaned with tap water and a magnifier is included.

Fong Audio Out of Your Head Software

\$149 starter kit, additional speaker settings are \$15 to \$25 each

If you have a great pair of headphones that you should be listening to more than you currently do, perhaps the addition of Darin Fong’s OOH app to your computer playback rig could re-energize your headphone consumption. I’ve found that using OOH with Hulu definitely made watching movies on my 26” computer monitor a more involving cinematic experience than using headphones without it. Adding Darin Fong’s Out of Your Head application to your sonic arsenal will enhance your pleasure, bigly. And since you can test it out, anytime, on almost any system via the demo page, you don’t have to take my word—just try it. I guarantee that Darin Fong’s OOH app will get that headphone sound out of your head. (276)

Prather Design LP Racks

\$20-\$897

This extensive line of beautiful handmade wooden LP racks run the gamut from a single “now playing” LP holder to storage for a full collection. Whichever you choose, the craftsmanship and quality are superb. (284)

Q-Up Tonearm Lifter

\$50

A little device that you attach near the pivot of your tonearm to automatically lift the stylus off the record at the end of an LP side. A boon to the analog lover—and the lazy. (245)

Shakti Electro-Magnetic Stabilizer Stone

\$230

Ben Piazza’s Shakti Stones employ “proprietary noise reduction circuitry to absorb

and dissipate electromagnetic interference (EMI) and radio frequency interference (RFI).” In other words, nobody’s quite sure how they work, but work they do when placed over the transformers of amps, preamps, and other electronics, reducing noise and enriching timbre.

Shure SFG-2 Stylus Force Gauge

\$40

Although ultimately not as accurate as the best digital gauges, the classic “teeter-totter” Shure is simple to use and cheap, and does the trick very nicely.

Soundsmith Counter “Intuitive”

\$49

The Counter “Intuitive” is a polymer damping ring designed for VPI tonearms that fits around the counterweight and allows for very fine, fully independent adjustments of tracking force and azimuth by simply moving the ring forward or backward, or by gently rotating it. A self-adhesive scale applied to the counterweight allows the user to mark settings for specific cartridges and VPI armwand combinations. An elegant solution if ever there was one. (216)

Stein Music DE-3 LP Conditioner

\$2798

With the press of a button, this simple platform from Stein Music “de-magnetizes” LPs (yes, traces of metal in the paint used to color vinyl do acquire a magnetic charge, which in addition to increasing static can interact with the magnets in your cartridge). It may sound like overkill but, in combination with a good record-cleaning machine like the Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic, the DE3 LP greatly reduces noise, deepening background silences and, thereby, raising resolution of low-level details. (forthcoming)

Vibrapods

\$7.99 each

Vibrapods are small, flexible vinyl pucks that can transform a system. They’re numbered by their weight-bearing loads: Put them under speakers and electronics and hear better bass extension and smoother highs. At four for \$32, who says great tweaks have to be expensive? Just out, Vibrapod Cones—use them as standalone

footers or combine with Vibrapods to get even more out of your system.

VooDoo Iso-Pod Isolation System

\$299, set of 3; \$399, set of 4

Comprising CNC-machined aerospace alloy discs suspended by zirconium ball bearings, VooDoo's three- or four-point isolation system reins in acoustic and mechanical vibrations and resonances. It is a cost-effective way of tightening detail and illuminating imaging; it is also very stable, and the felt pads that top each pod are gentle on surfaces. (264)

Walker Audio Valid Points Resonance Control Kit

\$450-\$625

Valid Points, Walker's massive version of tiptoes, are sensationally effective under most components, particularly when used with Walker Resonance Control discs, which, themselves, can have a salubrious effect on the components under or on top of which they are placed.

Wilson Audio Pedestal

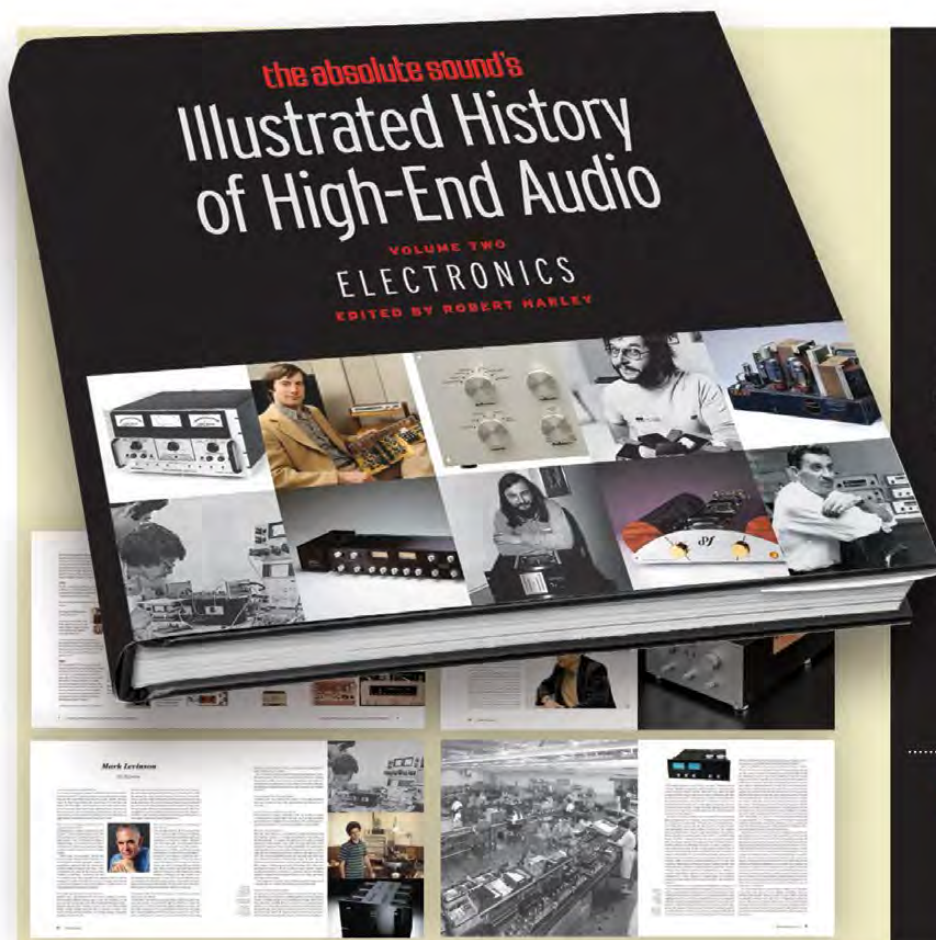
\$900 (set of three)

Speaker-maker Wilson Audio's experience with the "game-changing" V-Material, developed for parts of its Chronosonic XXV loudspeaker, prompted the company to develop a component footer that incorporates the material along with a proprietary viscous-damping material. The combination of V-Material and the viscous-damping compound reportedly offers unparalleled vibration-damping properties, making it ideal for placement under preamps, amps, DACs, servers, and just about any component within its weight limit. The housing is made from non-magnetic stainless steel. Two models are offered, one designed for weights of 3-9lbs (weight load per Pedestal), one for heavier components of 8-25lbs (weight load per Pedestal). RH found the Pedestal extremely effective under his phonostage, clarifying the soundstage, improving transient performance, and smoothing timbres.

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TOP 50

50 Greatest Bargains in High-End Audio

(and Where to Find Them in This Issue)

ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEMS

- p.39 Naim Mu-so 2, \$1695
- p.40 KEF LS50 Wireless, \$2199
- p.40 Bowers & Wilkins Formation Duo, \$4000

ENTRY LEVEL

- p.42 PSB Alpha P5 and T20 loudspeakers, \$399/\$649
- p.56 Magnepan LRS loudspeaker, \$650
- p.118 NAD C 328 integrated amplifier, \$599
- p.150 Schiit Audio Mani phonostage, \$129
- p.170 AudioQuest DragonFly Red and Cobalt DACs, \$199/\$299
- p.170 Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital DAC/preamplifier, \$499
- p.180 Bluesound Node 2i streaming DAC, \$549
- p.208 Grado Prestige Black2 phono cartridge, \$75

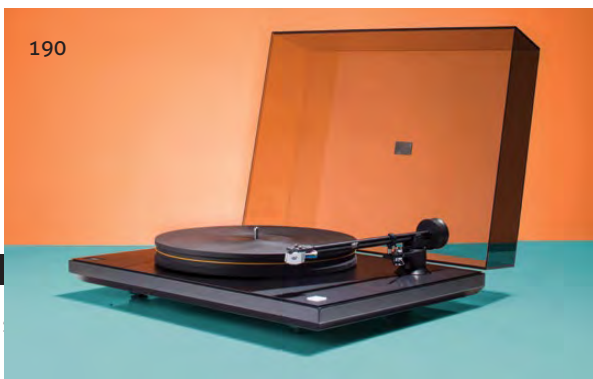
A STEP UP

- p.42 Polk L100 loudspeaker, \$1199
- p.58 Magnepan MG 1.7i loudspeaker, \$1995
- p.84 JL Audio Dominion d08/d10 subwoofers, \$900/\$1100
- p.90 Odyssey Khartago stereo power amplifier, \$995
- p.118 Marantz PM7000N integrated amplifier, \$999
- p.152 Parasound Halo JC 3 Jr. phonostage, \$1495
- p.188 Technics SL-1500C-K direct-drive turntable, \$1199
- p.208 Audio Technica VM540ML and VM760SLC phono cartridges, \$249/\$649

MID-PRICED

- p.46 Bowers & Wilkins 705 S2 loudspeaker, \$2500
- p.58 Monitor Audio Silver 300 loudspeaker, \$1999
- p.58 Vandersteen Audio Model 2Ce Signature III loudspeaker, \$3279
- p.84 REL Acoustics T/7i subwoofer, \$999
- p.120 NAD M10 BluOS streaming amplifier, \$2749
- p.172 Schiit Audio Yggdrasil DAC, \$2449
- p.190 MoFi Electronics UltraDeck+ turntable with UltraTracker cartridge, \$1999
- p.208 Hana SL phono cartridge, \$750

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UPPER END

- p.60 Magnepan MG 3.7i loudspeaker, \$6600
- p.62 Vandersteen Audio Treo CT loudspeaker, \$8400
- p.88 JL Audio Fathom f112v2 and f113v2 subwoofers, \$4000/\$5000
- p.122 Aesthetix Mimas integrated amplifier, \$7000
- p.130 Rogue RP-5 and RP-7 preamplifiers, \$3495/\$4995
- p.154 VTL TP-2.5i phonostage, \$5000
- p.174 Bryston BDA-3.14 streaming DAC, \$4195
- p.192 Dr. Feickert Volare turntable and Origin Live Silver MkIII tonearm, \$3695
- p.210 Kiseki Purple Heart phono cartridge, \$3199

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ULTRA HIGH END

- p.63 Magnepan MG 20.7 loudspeaker, \$14,500
- p.67 Wilson Audio Yvette loudspeaker, \$25,500
- p.68 Magico S3 Mk II loudspeaker, \$28,000
- p.124/100 Constellation Inspiration preamplifier/Inspiration stereo amplifier, \$16,500/\$14,000
- p.156 Zanden Audio Model 120 phonostage, \$9800
- p.176 dCS Bartók DAC, \$14,500
- p.176 Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 3, \$22,000
- p.198 AMG Viella 12 turntable, \$17,500
- p.214 Lyra Etna Lambda phono cartridge, \$99 99

CABLES, POWER PRODUCTS, AND ACCESSORIES

- p.222 Kimber Kable 8TC speaker cable, \$553
- p.224 Synergistic Research Foundation Series interconnect and speaker cable, \$599/\$64
- p.230 Shunyata Research Venom 14 NR AC cord, \$135
- p.240 AudioQuest super-conductive, anti-static record brush, \$19
- p.242 Caig Deoxit Gold G100L contact cleaner, \$33

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