

2020 ANNUAL EDITION

# the absolute sound



# 2020 HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE

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2020 BUYER'S GUIDE  
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Introducing the New

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from GoldenEar Technology<sup>®</sup>



Triton One.R  
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## *“Everything that earned Triton Reference Absolute Sound’s Golden Ear Award in a totally gorgeous, super sounding more compact and even more affordable package!”*

*“...an important debut...the speakers certainly bring Triton Ref bonafides to a lower cost segment, with glowing hand-rubbed piano-black lacquer cosmetics and impressive internals.”*

—Neil Gader, *The Absolute Sound*

GoldenEar Technology is pleased to announce the introduction of the new Triton One.R. This extraordinary new reference quality loudspeaker is a smaller, less expensive follow up to the Triton Reference. The T Ref has been compared with speakers selling for over ten times its surprisingly affordable cost. It has had a remarkable response from both music and hifi enthusiasts as well as press and reviewers from around the world, who have bestowed upon it innumerable Speaker-of-the-Year and Product-of-the-Year awards. Now the T One.R is here for your ultimate delight. Al Griffin raved, “The powerful sense of atmosphere that the One.R speakers conveyed conjure up memories of my time with the Triton Reference.”

*“...a pair of Triton One.Rs really kick the width of the soundstage into overdrive, spreading the wall of voices far beyond their physical placement in the room, with undeniably enhanced clarity and articulation.”*

—Dennis Burger, *HomeTheaterReview.com*

We developed new drivers for the T Ref, which incorporate advanced technologies for better sound, and brought these advancements into the Triton One.R. The new Reference Folded Ribbon Tweeter, with 50% more neodymium, is silky smooth and ultra high resolution. The new Focused-Field magnet structures deliver better control and higher efficiency. The new internal wiring, with a special critically perfect twist, provides better coupling and more coherent blending of the drivers. The new wiring topology further improves clarity and definition. And the very special film caps in the crossover make faster transient response a reality. The list goes on and on: long fiber lambs wool, accelerometer optimized bracing, special internal damping pads.... Everything contributes to T One.R’s remarkable ability to recreate a huge soundstage and deep three-dimensional image. And the voicing, which our engineers labored so long and hard over, makes the T One.R a proud follow up to the Triton Reference.

*The 1600 watt built-in powered subwoofers can be musically delicate or simply rock your world!*

There are three newly designed racetrack shaped active subwoofer drivers on the front of the cabinet, which have special polymer impregnated nomex cones, in order to minimize cone breakup when strongly driven. Huge magnet structures are utilized in order to better control cone movement and improve transient response. There are four quadratic planar infrasonic radiators. They extend the low frequency response and are inertially balanced (two on each side) in order to minimize cabinet movement, resulting in clearer, more detailed sound. Combined with the 1600 watt sub amp and advanced 56 bit DSP, the built in powered bass section is superior to most stand-alone subwoofers, and of course, you will have two subs, one in each speaker. Al Griffin raved about, “...intense and gut-punching slam...I didn’t once feel a need for additional subwoofers.”

*“If I could pull a Spinal Tap and push the Triton One.Rs Value rating past our usual maximum, I’d do it in a heartbeat.”*


—Al Griffin, *Sound & Vision*

The gorgeous cabinet is painstakingly finished in hand-rubbed piano black lacquer. Its signature narrow profile looks incredible, helps it to disappear visually, and delivers important imaging advantages. It presents itself as an exquisite, sleek, ultra-high-performance lifestyle loudspeaker that delivers tremendous value and sound quality comparable to speakers selling for many times its cost. And unlike most speakers that are only good for two channel listening, or home theater, the Triton One.R, like all GoldenEar speakers, is engineered to excel at both.

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# 2020

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# BUYER'S GUIDE

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The  
50 Greatest  
Bargains in  
High-End Audio  
(and where to find  
them reviewed in  
this issue)





MAGICO



# Letters

## Flying the Flag for High-End Audio

As a veteran audiophile and fellow professional audio-video reviewer, the last special issue on high-end loudspeakers and cables [*The Absolute Sound's Ultimate Directory to High-End Loudspeakers and Cables*, Issue 297] was truly a godsend. My friends frequently ask me for advice on setting up new systems or improving their existing systems. Complicating matters is the lack of reasonably accessible bricks-and-mortar stores where they can actually see and hear equipment.

The special issue will help my friends understand speakers and cables far better than they could on their own. It will also help them to make good decisions and encourage them to reach out to the manufacturers for the information they may find helpful.

Robert Harley has a unique gift for making the complexities of the audio world comprehensible to the general public. After all, if ordinary people do not feel that they can participate in this wonderful avocation, it will wither on the vine and die.

Keep the flag flying.

**Lawrence Devove**  
**TheaterByte.com**

## Dahlquist DQ-10 Legacy

Thanks to Greg Weaver for his recognition of the Dahlquist DQ-10 [Issue 297, "Speakers that Changed My Life"] as it contrasts with Robert E. Greene's recent jeremiad against that speaker [in the Graham LS5/9 review in Issue 270] that was repeated again in Issue 297. One could make the argument that without the issues raised by the DQ-10, we might not have the high end as we see it today.

This is said by a huge fan of REG's *Nature's Realm*. I have never understood why it never makes your "best of" recordings.

**Lee Ridolfi**

*RH replies:* *Nature's Realm* is a 1999 recording of the Philadelphia Symphony released on the Water Lily Acoustics label as a CD and SACD. Robert E. Greene was a technical consultant as well as Associate Producer.

## Terrific Reporting

I thoroughly enjoyed the piece on what went into creating your music room [Issue 293] and the earlier article on the acoustics solution you used to clean up your temporary space [Issue 290], and now your permanent room.

TAS in general, and you and JV in particular, are in a different league that most of the other writers out there. Keep up the terrific reporting. Can you or JV audition the Innuos Statement?

**Jerry Belben**

*RH replies:* Thank you for the kind words. Our newest reviewer, Matthew Clott, is reviewing the Innuos Statement for an upcoming issue. Matt made his debut in our previous issue with his review of the NAD Masters Series M10. As you'll see from that review, he is an astute listener as well as an engaging and entertaining writer.

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SHUNYATA RESEARCH

# From the Editor

“ We’ve introduced a new feature in this Buyer’s Guide—a chart of all digital products. ”

## Shifting Landscape

**T**his issue comprises our annual Buyer’s Guide—TAS’ compendium of top picks in every product category. Although we’ve been publishing such a guide for many years, this year’s installment is a little different. Specifically, we’ve rejiggered the categories to better reflect the transformational changes that are occurring in high-end audio. We’ve also introduced a fresh graphic element to help you navigate the wide array of new features in today’s digital products.

Gone are the days when there was a clear-cut line between, say, a preamplifier and a digital-to-analog converter. About 15 years ago some preamps started including on-board DACs or optional DAC modules that could be fitted inside their chassis—products that were conceptually identical to, and the modern equivalents of, traditional “full-function” preamplifiers with built-in phono stages. Similarly, more and more DACs today offer a volume control with a few analog inputs and source switching, obviating the need for a stand-alone linestage. But when does a preamplifier become a DAC? Or a DAC become a preamplifier? Does a DAC with a single analog input and source switching qualify as a preamplifier? If so, should that product be categorized as a DAC or a preamp? If not, what’s the threshold for preamplifier functionality that distinguishes a preamplifier from a DAC? There are no clear-cut answers to the questions.

Similarly, take a product such as the NAD M10 streaming amplifier, reviewed in the previous issue. Its diminutive chassis includes a 100Wpc stereo power amplifier, digital streaming (Roon ready), a multi-input DAC with full MQA decoding, analog inputs with source switching, wired and wireless digital inputs, network connectivity, whole-house wireless distribution, and DSP room correction. Just add speakers and a source such as a smartphone or tablet. Is the M10 an integrated amplifier with streaming capabilities, or it is a digital streamer that happens to have a power amplifier inside its chassis? The Linn Selekt DSM, reviewed in our next issue, is similarly configured, although that product is a fully modular platform with even greater capabilities. How should we categorize such components to make it easier for readers to focus on the products that best fit their needs?

To make our recommendations more accessible and useful, we’ve now broken out the DAC section into two categories, DACs and preamplifier/DACs. Note, however, that some products in the DAC category have limited preamplification functions (a single analog input with variable output level to drive a power amp directly, for example). But we’ve kept them in the DAC category because they are primarily DACs, with only minimal preamp capabilities. It was a judgment call which category a particular product belonged in.

Beyond diversifying our categories, we’ve introduced a new feature in this Buyer’s Guide—a chart (p. 136) of all digital products indicating which features and functions they incorporate. These features include variable output level, analog inputs, DSD decoding, MQA decoding, integral streaming, and networking capability

(wired or wireless). With this chart you can see at a glance which products offer the features you need. We hope that the chart is useful, and welcome your comments and suggestions (rharley@theabsolutesound.com) for improving the chart next time.

It’s not just digital products that have been reorganized. Because an increasing number of speakers include internal amplifiers, we’ve broken out active speakers into their own category. This category includes self-contained integrated audio systems—loudspeakers that include streaming capability, DACs, and integral amplifiers, such as the Bowers & Wilkins Formation Duo reviewed in our last issue. Finally, we’ve added a category for table-top systems—components that can bring high-end sound to the kitchen, office, or bedroom.

The technological advances blurring once clearly defined digital product categories have also profoundly affected the way in which we interact with music. For example, through Roon I can play a piece of music that may be streamed from Tidal, streamed from Qobuz, virtually stored in my Roon library, or physically stored locally on a server. The file’s origin, once as clear as night and day, is now virtually invisible. The result is an access to the world of music that was unimaginable in the era of physical media.

To make the most of this bonanza, however, you’ll need the right gear. We hope that the new features we’ve introduced in this issue will help you find the perfect components to carry you on your own voyage of musical discovery.

**Robert Harley**





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## THE NEW LOOK OF PROVEN PERFORMANCE

If a loudspeaker is famous for its performance, why change it? MartinLogan's new **Motion® Series** achieve the same superior performance as previous generations, with lifelike clarity, exceptional accuracy, and dynamic range.

A stylish new enclosure design updates the look, with performance-enhancing internal bracing, reinforced baffles, new fabric grilles, and a choice of three beautiful finishes.

*"...the vocals sounded eerily lifelike, and the instrumental timbre was natural, with a depth so palpable I could practically reach my hands into it."*

**David Martson**, *The Absolute Sound*, on Motion 60XT

## DESKTOP LOUDSPEAKERS



Magnepan Mini-Maggie



Audience 1+1 V3



Wilson Audio TuneTot

### Magnepan Mini-Maggie

**\$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, the Mini-Maggie package is arguably the finest desktop speaker ever made. In fact, in detail, resolution, purity, freedom from grain, sound-stage 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 (meaning that bass extension, the size of the dynamic envelope, and image height are reduced relative to the larger 3.7i). Interestingly, the Mini-Maggie can be used for whole-room applications, too, provided you set the system up in smaller rooms, keep volume levels moderate, and make a point of adding a second mid/bass panel for more lower midrange/bass reinforcement. (223)

### Audience The One V3/1+1 V3

**\$1695/\$2960**

The One, as you might infer from its name, is a single full-range driver shoe-horned into a small box. The driver itself is the same unit, the A3A, that Audience uses in its \$2345 1+1 V2+—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. The 1+1 V2+ 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. The 1+1 V2+'s midrange clarity, just one of the virtues of a crossover-less single-driver speaker, is on par with that of many speakers costing twenty times the V2+'s price. Properly set up, the One and the 1+1 V2+ are the best desktop speakers reviewer Steven Stone has heard. (V2 versions reviewed in 236, 273)

### 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 Utah-based company designed the TuneTot, a diminutive (14.83" x 8.61" x 10.19") but hefty (29-pound) two-way that's 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)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

## ACTIVE STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS



Micromega MySpeaker



KEF LSX

### Micromega MySpeaker

**\$999**

Barely a foot tall, this wireless wonder bundles speaker, connectivity, and a built-in 30Wpc Class AB amp into a single package, meaning you simply connect a source and you're good to go. In sonic balance it is slightly forward and lean, but it also has an openness that's arresting in this price class. Images are depicted with physical weight and dimension, and bass response extends confidently into the fifty-cycle range. Its tweeter is nicely integrated with only minor hints of localization, most likely due to a small energy dip near the crossover point. While MySpeaker has limits, it also has guts and doesn't shrink from orchestral crescendos. Versatility and convenience define the wireless game, and the Micromega MySpeaker excels at these things—a one-stop winner. (272)

### KEF LSX

**\$1099**

The new KEF LSXes are little wireless marvels. There is no tether necessary to connect the two speakers, although using a tether bumps resolution from 24-bit/48kHz up to 24-bit/192kHz. The LSXes have sleek, gorgeous looks, including real cloth wrappings that feel almost luxurious. They're powered by a 70W Class D amp for the mid and bass driver, and a 30W amp for the tweeter. Inputs are simple: Bluetooth, Wi-Fi streaming, one optical connection, and a 3.5mm analog AUX port. The speakers' small sizes belie their huge sound: Adjusted via KEF's control app, bass is big and tight, and the midrange is a pure delight. For anyone looking for a truly compact all-in-one solution that does not sacrifice sound quality, the KEF LSXes are highly recommended. (293)



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## ACTIVE STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Dynaudio Xeo 2

\$1299

The Xeo 2 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. In character, 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 BT; 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)

### Elac Navis ARB51

\$1999

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. Unlike other active stand-mount speakers in this Buyer's Guide, the Navis lacks wireless streaming. (291)



### KEF LS50W Wireless/Nocturne

\$2499

The KEF LS50W Wireless marks a well-conceived reinvention of the company's iconic LS50 compact speaker as a wireless and active system (and in the case of the Nocturne version, an aesthetic reimagination by acclaimed designer Marcel Wanders, with circular, glow-in-the-dark patterns lighting up the faceplate of the sleek black enclosure). The LS50W Wireless still contains KEF's patented Uni-Q concentric driver array, consisting of a vented aluminum-dome tweeter positioned in the center of a mid/bass cone with a long-throw radiator, 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. JM was struck by the LS50W Wireless' high degree of detail and overall naturalness of timbre—particularly through the midrange. Also, these smallish speakers weren't bass shy; they pumped out a punchy low end that delved deeper than expected while still maintaining composure. Quick-stepping, snappy, and relentlessly musical across genres, the LS50W Wireless speaker system packs big sound—along with plenty of technology, convenience, and cool style—in a little box. (285)

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## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



Dynaudio Xeo 2



KEF LS50W Nocturne



### 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 wireless technology is significantly more advanced than that of off-the-shelf solutions, with ten times the speed along with far more consistent timing between the left and right audio streams than conventional networks. Visually, the Duo is pure Bowers & Wilkins, with its protruding woofer and famous "bullet" tweeter mounted on top of the cabinet. The Duo's sound quality is a knockout, with spectacular imaging, a very smooth and flat tonal balance, and surprisingly extended bass. The Duo sounds like a small floorstanding speaker, not a compact stand-mount. Easy to use, highly musical, and technologically advanced, the Duo makes true high-end performance accessible to anyone. (298)

## ACTIVE STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS

### Dali Callisto 2 C

**\$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 hi-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 speakers, rediscovering favorite music in the highest fidelity he has experienced in his home. The Callisto 2 C does a lot of things very well: detail, dynamics, flat frequency response, soundstaging—revealing artistic subtleties, and generating excitement. Moreover, these bookshelf models have more bass and play louder than you would ever expect from speakers of this size. Highly recommended. (293)



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EDITOR'S CHOICE  
2019 AWARDS

**Elac Debut 2.0 B5.2**

**\$249**

It's little; it's vinyl clad; it's dirt cheap; and it sounds terrific. The B5 compact represents the first effort in what should 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 gobsmacked by its bargain-basement price. What Jones and the Elac team have managed to ring from this most humble of designs is nothing short of exceptional. (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. With its moderate sensitivity (87dB), reviewer DK found the 11.1 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 enclosure). Mids feel projected and effortless, polished in a really nice way, with no boxy veil. The bass floor isn't very deep, so 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. "They just sounded simple and good." (293)



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*Paul Seydor*

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## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Elac Uni-Fi UB5

\$499

How do you follow an act like the Elac Debut B5? If you're designer Andrew Jones, there's only one route: engineering one of his trademark concentric drivers for a sub-\$500 three-way compact. Sonically, if you loved the Debut B5, you're going to really love the UB5; it's the B5 gone to finishing school. There's greater specificity, body, and focus to images—all trademarks of a concentric driver.

Add to that a sibilance range that is natural, sharp, and quick, like the live event. Plus there is rock-solid 50Hz midbass output, similar to the B5 but much more controlled and less reliant on the port. While there's still a bit of veiling and the UB5 doesn't fully shed its enclosure, let's get real—this Elac is competitive with speakers well beyond its price segment. It might just be the best five hundred bucks you'll ever spend. (266)



### Revel Concerta2 M16

\$900

A feast for the eyes and ears, the M16 has been refreshed with smartly contoured enclosures, high-gloss finishes, and elegant design accents. Sonically, Revel doesn't make wallflowers, and the M16 follows suit dramatically. Its dynamic, uncompromising midband, good overall speed, and excellent inter-driver coherence all happily conspire to generate a tonal ripeness that belies the speaker's tiny stature. Easily the most enthralling aspects of the M16's performance are the fullness and cohesiveness of its soundstage and imaging. The M16 doesn't paint

small sonic landscapes—a sense of immersion and “widescreen” scale are two of its most distinctive characteristics. A compact budget loudspeaker that maintains classic Revel virtues. (268)



## STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS

### GoldenEar Technology Aon 3

\$998

GoldenEar's Aon 3 is an attempt to capture the beautifully focused, revealing, and coherent sound of today's best two-way stand-mount monitors at a down-to-earth price. An “augmented” two-way, it combines a 7" wide-bandwidth mid/bass driver with a Heil-type tweeter, and two side-mounted passive radiators to extend bass depth and punch. The result is a monitor that provides agile, detailed, and nuanced mids and highs, while serving up a low end that is unexpectedly full-bodied and that matches the quality of the speaker's midrange and treble. Care in placement and setup is needed for best results. Those listeners willing to sacrifice some of the Aon 3's extended low-frequency performance may find GoldenEar's slightly smaller Aon 2 offers even more compelling three-dimensional imaging. (232)



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### MartinLogan Motion 35XT

**\$1199**

This two-way, compact hybrid design puts its Folded Motion tweeter, melded with a perky aluminum-cone mid/bass, squarely in the spotlight. ML's air-motion-style tweet produces an expansively airy treble. Its mid-range sonics are smooth, a bit forward, and yet relatively unboxy. Driver integration, the bane of hybrids, is good. Careful wall placement enhances bass performance considerably. Visually, the 35XT offers a nicely updated form factor and excellent fit and finish. (251)

### KEF LS50

**\$1299**

Built to celebrate KEF's 50th anniversary, the LS50 monitor spins pure coincident-driver magic thanks to its blushing pink-gold Uni-Q coaxial midrange/tweeter mounted in bulls-eye fashion atop a uniquely arched baffle. Visually arresting and sonically satisfying, the LS50 delivers tonal neutrality at just the right pitch, with superb midrange sonics, full-bodied presence, and potent midbass punch. Thanks to its beautifully crafted high-density enclosure—an ideal platform for the space-saving Uni-Q—there's little in the way of cabinet resonances or port colorations. Imaging is as clean and pinpoint-precise as you'd expect from KEF. Positioned in a small- or medium-sized room, the LS50 makes a statement like few other small speakers. (231)

### Monitor Audio Studio

**\$1400**

This stand-mount features dual 4" mid/bass drivers above and below an 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, the Studios have remarkable depth in the lower 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)



KEF LS50



Monitor Audio Studio



Focal Aria 906



Revel Performa3 M106

### Focal Aria 906

**\$1499**

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-fibercore driver 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 1500 bucks does so for a song. (243)

### 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 Bruzzese 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 the last ten years. (234)





## **Clear Cygnus Speaker**

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**Watkins Generation 4 rev-1**

**\$2495**

The late Bill Watkins poured decades of design 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 are generally unheard of at this price point. Perceived distortion levels are low, and harmonic textures flow naturally without any glaring response peaks. Recently "rev-1" added Cardas silver inputs, and Cardas 11ga Litz wiring. (278)



Watkins Generation 4



Air Tight Bonsai



Bowers & Wilkins 705 S2

**Air Tight Bonsai**

**\$2500**

The tiny but mighty one-way Bonsai, also known as the AL-05, epitomizes what a single driver can do—in this case, a 4" hand-made paper cone devised by a former JBL engineer. The Bonsai's exemplary crossover-less design gives the speaker a full-range presence, immediacy, and spaciousness that belie its petite size. Ideal for small-to-mid-sized rooms, the Bonsai's are capable of reproducing a wide range of music with astounding coherence. When the Bonsai was paired with either of two different Air Tight tube amplifiers (the ATM-300 and ATM-1S), the warmth and intimacy of vocals were delivered with detailed delicacy. As with most one-ways, the Bonsai's aren't the last word in bass extension (you could always bolster the low end with a sub), but, boy, do they play beautifully throughout the midrange and well into the treble with a frequency response of up to 20kHz (per the specs). Oh, and decked-out in their elegant, glossy rosewood finish, these compact wonders are as lovely to look at as they are to listen to. (272)



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HELLENA MKII

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**Bowers & Wilkins 705 S2**

**\$2500**

Balanced, uncolored, remarkably precise, and self-effacing, 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. The small two-way monitor category has always been a favorite of those who value the qualitative over the quantitative. The 705 S2 is an all-around and constant musical companion that comes as close to a "must-audition" in sub-\$5k monitors as you'll find today. (280)



**Joseph Audio Prism**

**\$3699**

Six years ago, after Steven Stone reviewed the Joseph Audio Pulsars, he ran into a number of audiophiles at the 2011 RMAF who were very interested in owning a pair. Their only hesitation was coming up with the \$7000. The Prisms should shake a good portion of those fence-sitters from their roosts. While SS can't and won't try to give you a numerical percentage of the Pulsar's performance that is equaled by the Prisms—as in "they deliver 85% of the Pulsars' performance"—he will say that the Prisms have similar sonic qualities with an overall performance level that ranks up with the best small monitors he's heard. No, the Prisms aren't as visually prepossessing as

the Pulsars. But in many domestic and professional listening environments their less blingy exterior may be a positive attribute. Put the Prisms in a midsized-or-smaller room, mate them with decent electronics and a good subwoofer, and they will deliver the musical goods in that natural and articulate way that Joseph Audio loudspeakers are known for, but at a more affordable price than ever before. (262)

**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)



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## STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS



ATC SCM19-V2



Revel Performa3 M126 Be



Stirling Broadcast LS3/6

### 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-rodded 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—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. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this excellent compact is the continuity of its soundstage—an unbroken tapestry of images woven into ambient soundscape. (290)

### Stirling Broadcast LS3/6

**\$5595 (premium finishes, \$5995)**

This modern version of the classic British mid-sized monitor, which was itself the BBC version of the famous Spendor BC1, offers the extraordinary truth to timbre of its ancestry but without the dynamic limitations. Designed by Derek Hughes, son of Spencer Hughes, designer of the original, this resurrected classic is a modern masterpiece. With enough bass extension to do justice to large-scale music, whether classical or rock, and enough dynamic power to satisfy in any but palatial rooms, it is a speaker for all music. Its balance is slightly warmer in the low mids/upper bass than the leaner speakers of our day, but this enables the user to fight off floor cancellation and get an essentially neutral in-room sound that few speakers equal. (The slight excess of treble energy noted in the review has been corrected in current production: The speaker is extremely smooth now.) The midrange makes one understand why the midrange of the BC1 became a legend. And the legend continues in this instant classic. (228)

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### 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 mid-range 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)



Focal Sopra N°1



Crystal Cable Arabesque  
Minissimo/  
Minissimo Diamond



MBL 126



TAD ME1

### Focal Sopra N°1 \$7999

Reviewer Andrew 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 N°1s, 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)

### Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo/Minissimo Diamond \$10,000 (\$13,999 with stands)/\$19,999 (\$21,499 with stands)

The Minissimos' whimsical apostrophe shape, the vibrant color, the assured smallness of the things stops folks in their tracks and makes them smile. Thanks to their unobtrusive elegance, Minissimos will work, visually, in a traditionally decorated room; in a modern space dominated by glass and metal, the speaker will register as a bold contemporary design element. 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 \$11,999 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, as do most well-made and properly positioned small loudspeakers, creating a broad, deep, and continuous soundstage. 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)

### MBL 126 \$11,800

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—albeit one which is somewhat smaller in scale than that of larger Radialstrahler models—drawing you deeper into the musical event. What's not to love? (forthcoming)

### TAD ME1

**\$14,995 (includes ST2 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 (otherwise known as the Aero-Dynamic Slot or ADS). "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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Harbeth Monitor 40.2



Gamut Audio RS3i



MBL 120



TAD CR1 MK2

### Harbeth Monitor 40.2/40.2 Anniversary Edition

**\$15,995/\$18,995**

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: one, the Anniversary sounds ever so slightly smoother; two, the tweeter sounds fractionally better integrated; three, the whole presentation sounds slightly purer, akin to what you might hear from a really good electrostatic. The 40<sup>th</sup> 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 Audio 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—those of illuminating imaging and wide-open soundstaging—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)

### MBL 120

**\$21,400 (stands \$1630)**

Yes, it looks remarkably similar to the classic 'droid silhouette of the earlier 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. In a smaller setting, it rivals the vaunted 101E for sheer musicality though it doesn't have that speaker's Wagnerian dynamics and low-end crunch. And yes, it's the finest compact Radialstrahler yet. (228)

### TAD CR1 MK2

**\$59,000**

This 100-pound, three-way stand-mount combines the warmth, weight, majesty, and output of a floorstander with the soundstaging and image focus of a monitor. Though fully capable of pinning you to your seat with dynamic thrust, its range of tonal expression and harmonic complexity is just as impressive. However, it's the way it traces the contours of complex groups of instruments so completely that places it in a class of its own. Much of the credit goes to its transcendent Coherent Source Transducer, a concentric driver sporting pure beryllium midrange and tweeter diaphragms that give new meaning to the words focus and clarity. Fit and finish are stunning; the bunker-like rigidity and isolation of its curvaceously sensual enclosure rival anything available in the industry today. In a marketplace where products appear stamped with expiration dates, the TAD Compact Reference is destined to stand the test of time. (205)

## ACTIVE FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

### 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 should 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)

## ACTIVE FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

### 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 quite simply 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 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 conveys a character of no-nonsense ease and neutrality that's 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. Transient behavior is smooth rather than underlined or exposed for effect. 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 and aggressively into the mid-thirty-cycle range, and while some might opt for more extension, few will be disappointed with the quality that this response represents. 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)

## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

### Elac Debut 2.0 F5.2

**\$599**

The floorstanding F5 leverages the strengths of the 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 be not 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)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Emotiva Airmotiv T1

**\$699**

The Emotiva T1 has sonic attitude—attitude as only a dual-woofer, four-driver floorstander can convey. The T1's warmer, darker character paints the overall emotion and heart of a performance in broader brushstrokes. Musically-wise, the Emotiva just brings it. It has a brawny sound that energizes listening spaces with outgoing and engaging midbass sock and potent dynamic thrust. The jewel in the T1 crown is the 32mm folded ribbon tweeter, and it is a thing of beauty—airy, textured, and transparent. Orchestral performances take on a new urgency and gravity with a well-cushioned "bottom-up" signature defined by grippy lower frequencies, an expressive lower midrange, and a relaxed vocal range that neither forces singers into your lap nor shoves them to the backwall of the listening room. A high-octane sonic ride for just shy of seven-hundred bucks...what's not to like? (278)



### JBL Stage A190

**\$900**

The top dog in the Stage family, the A190 is a no-frills, two-and-a-half-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—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 most affordable *real-world* efforts NG has encountered, and a no-brainer bargain. (293)







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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS



### Dali Oberon 5

\$1099

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 or yield the expansive resonance and decay structure of the real thing, 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)

### PSB Speakers Imagine X2T

\$1298

Simply put, these powerful, fairly compact, four-driver, three-way, quasi-D'Apollito floorstanders live up to Canadian manufacturer PSB's main marketing message: "Real sound for real people." Big bang—and plenty of bass—for the buck is what you can expect. The X2Ts deliver unexpectedly robust low end for their category—something audiophiles tend to drop big coin for. In definition and solidity, they may not serve up the kind of bass you can sit on, but their bottom octaves are still unusually full, powerful, and nicely differentiated in pitch. What's more, the X2Ts also offer a strong power range, as well as excellent midband focus and naturalness. (Indeed, the midrange driver is housed in its own enclosure for ideal dispersion and minimal distortion at higher SPLs.) If you like a more bottom-up sound with a side of denser tone color, these PSBs are bound to please. It's a rare speaker, says JM, that's this easy on the wallet, and this easy to love. (253)



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Dick Olsher, *The Absolute Sound*, issue 278



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GoldenEar Technology  
Triton Seven



Magnepan .7

### GoldenEar Technology Triton Seven

**\$1398**

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 dips to 29Hz, these three-way, five-driver speakers are perfect for starter systems or home-theater needs. (238)

### Magnepan .7

**\$1450**

Meet Magnepan's latest "mini" planar dipole, the two-way, floorstanding, all-quasi-ribbon-driver MG .7—a speaker that is capable of a fuller-range and more natural sound than any previous "mini" Maggie. Although Julie Mullins knows that most TAS readers have already made the acquaintance of Maggies, the .7s are still impressive, offering a practically unbeatable quality-to-cost ratio. During her listening tests, she was delighted to discover that they consistently delivered a beautiful and open presentation graced with a striking measure of air and light. Soundstage reproduction was stunning across a wide range of music. In addition to their tough-to-beat price, the .7s become even more attractive when you consider that Magnepan is offering a 30-day in-home trial and a money-back guarantee. Whether you're in the market for a starter pair of high-quality speakers, or have the proverbial champagne taste on a beer budget (or both!), why wouldn't you consider these babies? They're terrific. (252)

### 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)



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Vandersteen Audio  
2Ce Signature II



PSB Speakers Imagine T2



Revel Performa3 F206



Larsen  
Model 6.2

### Eminent Technology LFT-8b

**\$2490**

A floorstanding hybrid, combining sealed-box bass with magnetically driven planar membranes (two-sided drive) for the midrange and tweeter, this is one of the lowest distortion speakers ever. It is well balanced and very nearly phase linear, though not ruler-flat in response, with small bumps at 1kHz and 8kHz. The LFT-8b goes up seemingly forever, and down to very near the bottom of audibility in the bass. Ideal listening requires a position close to exactly centered, with the speakers precisely angled. But at the magic spot, imaging is superb. Set up right, the ETs can sound remarkably like music, with a most pleasing lack of box coloration and a truly startling purity of sound. In REG's estimation, one of audio's all-time amazing bargains. (243)

### Vandersteen Audio 2Ce Signature II

**\$2700**

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. (139, 122)

### PSB Speakers Imagine T2

**\$3498**

These elegant floorstanders of moderate size offer a surprisingly "big" sound, with dynamics sufficient to present large-scale music convincingly and enough bass to cover orchestral and rock music, though pipe organ enthusiasts will want to add a sub or two. The T2s vanish into the soundfield and present a suitably expansive sonic picture when the recording justifies it. They are very low in distortion with a pure midrange and a very clean treble. And they have a truth to timbre, a tonal neutrality, that is top-tier. Orchestras have a lifelike realism that is startling; pianos sound like pianos, vocals like people singing. Paul Barton has produced a masterpiece here, at a most reasonable price. (226)

### 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 eliminates a great deal of pre-purchase angst about whether the speaker will work in a given room and, of course, vastly simplifies the process of placement. Early reflections from the speaker's backwave, which can register to a listener as distortion, 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. The stereo presentation of the Model 8 is not like that of ordinary speakers. 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)



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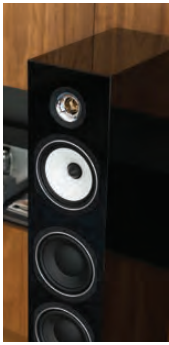


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Vandersteen Audio  
3A Signature



Focal Aria 948

### Triangle Australe EZ

**\$4500**

The Australe EZ is the largest loudspeaker in France's Triangle Esprit EZ range. At about 85 pounds each and 46" tall, they are substantial. Three-ways, the EZ's use in-house-made drivers (three 6.5" wood-pulp/carbon-fiber woofers, one 6.5" mid/woofer, and two 1" titanium dome tweeters) in a front-ported, bass-reflex enclosure. They are high in sensitivity at 92dB and easy to drive. More importantly, they are eminently easy to listen to. The Triangle Australe EZes are music retrievers. You throw out a music selection, and they enthusiastically run out to get it and bring it back home. Lively, vivacious, sprightly, and not the kind of speaker where you have a light, fast midrange and then a heavy, fat bottom tacked on, they've got the whole design working in the same direction. (293)

### Vandersteen Audio 3A Signature

**\$4975**

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

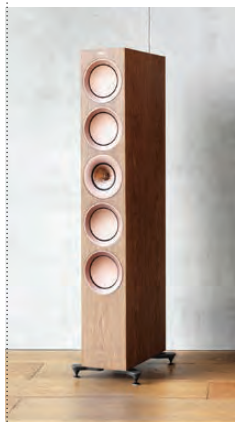
**\$4995**

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, TNF, 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. JM found the sense of realism they delivered downright spooky at times. This degree of resolution with spaciousness galore, plus astounding attack and decay, all make the 948 a rare find within this price category. (254)

### Elac Adante AF-61VR

**\$5000**

The Adante AF-61VR is another spectacular value from speaker designer Andrew Jones. For starters it delivers in all the areas that a loudspeaker needs to: It images precisely, plays loudly without distress, extends low enough that a subwoofer may not be necessary, and can be driven easily by the vast majority of good amplifiers. While the AF-61 can produce a lot of energy, it is not hi-fi-ish. Brass instruments sound like brass without edgy hardness; the midrange has a relaxed presentation that provides a full-scale image without shoving it in your face. If it had been priced at \$10k a pair, we'd have considered the AF-61 an excellent option. For \$5k a pair, it is an obscenely good deal. (290)



### 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 the KEF Reference and Blade speakers. It also has a Tangerine waveguide to improve treble dispersion. (This latest version of the Uni-Q coaxial array is surrounded by a "shadow flare" trim ring, which extends the waveguide effect.) By design, the KEF R11 loudspeakers deliver 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 kept reviewer JM listening; it helped the speakers sound less like speakers—less like boxes with drivers firing soundwaves—and more like music itself. (298)

### GoldenEar Technology Triton One.R

**\$6595**

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 its relatively modest price), the One.R bowled reviewer JHb over. "This is a superb loudspeaker," said he, "that had me scratching my head in disbelief at how much sonic prowess it boasts." 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.R's planar-like qualities, phenomenal soundstaging, high transparency to sources, sheer airiness in the treble, astonishing resolution, and superb bass (though it was not quite the equal of his own Wilson references in low-end "crunchiness"). "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)





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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS



Reference 3A Taksim

### Magnepan MG 3.7i

**\$6600**

Maggie's new, 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, the best buy 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. (not reviewed)

### Reference 3A Taksim

**\$6990 (\$7350 in piano black)**

Reference 3A's latest loudspeaker model is priced at a point where you'd have to spend a lot more to improve upon its many virtues. This two-way design features the "hyperexponential"-shaped mid/bass driver introduced by the company's founder half a century ago and continuously improved upon since. This mid/bass unit is capable of exceptional linearity and dispersion, which translate into wonderful detail and tonal realism. A beryllium tweeter is implemented virtually without the use of a crossover, protected from low frequencies and high power by a single non-inductive capacitor. The Taksims acquit themselves honorably in bass-heavy music without the use of a subwoofer, though using one is certainly an option. The grey Nextel finish has sonic benefits, but the largely non-reflective surface mostly serves to ensure that these biggish speakers won't visually overpower a room. (254)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Emerald Physics EP2.4

**\$7495**

This highly unusual open-baffle speaker is built around a pair of 15" woofers that operate below 100Hz, along with a 12" upper-bass/midrange driver with a coaxially mounted lens-loaded 1" tweeter, all under DSP control. Bi-amping is required and necessitates either four mono amps, two stereo amps, or one four-channel amp (for stereo). An outboard crossover is supplied. This speaker excels in so many areas, including those that are central to the truthful reproduction of music in the home, that they warrant the highest recommendation. When you factor in their price, their value is off the charts. The top end is smooth, sweet, and very natural. All kinds of orchestral, choral, opera, and other large-scale music are reproduced with a thrilling sense of ease, authority, and truthfulness. The lens-loaded tweeter requires that you sit on-axis to realize a natural tonal balance. The bass is impressive down into the thirties, and it can be very powerful. But below that, all you get is a sense of foundation and little in the way of definition and clarity. (249)



### PSB Speakers Imagine T3

**\$7498**

Paul S. Barton's current flagship product is an exceptional value—a beautifully made full-range loudspeaker that, at a fraction of the cost, holds its own with the most heroically engineered transducers on the market. The five-way T3 is a highly versatile speaker, designed to perform at its best in a wide variety of rooms, thanks to the flexibility of its three woofers, each isolated in its own sub-enclosure. One, two, or all three 7" woofers can be activated, with the option, as well, of inserting (provided) plugs into their rear-facing ports. Because of its voicing and power-handling capability, the Imagine T3 is a great rock 'n' roll speaker, but it also has the tonal finesse and spatiality needed to admirably serve classical music and acoustic jazz. An easy amplifier load—60 (quality) watts per channel should be plenty. (258)

### Dynaudio Contour 30

**\$7500**

The middle model of Dynaudio's middle line, intended for, uh, 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 engagingly 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)







**Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand SE**

**\$8295**

Refined, luxurious, and lovingly hand-built in Europe, the Austrian-designed BBG is one of the highest-value components RD has ever run across. Highly detailed with a convincingly three-dimensional presentation, the BBG conjured images that were stable across the soundstage with more than a hint of vertical imaging information thrown in for good measure. Bass was not as powerful as that from RD's resident Snell E/IIIs, although it was "smart bass"—fast, tight, tuneful, and well-integrated into the speaker's overall frequency balance. A brief sojourn with another Austrian in residence, the all-tube Ayon Audio Orion II, resulted in a slight thinning of timbre and loss of bass control when compared with RD's similarly rated but more powerful NAD integrated; the 250 watts suggested by Vienna Acoustics as an outer limit is not an unreasonable target. (233)



**Vandersteen Audio Treo CT**

**\$8400**

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)

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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, high-hats, snare drum snaps, and 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. Vocals are a strong suit—balanced, firmly weighted in space, and reproduced with liveliness and good attack. A fine debut and a welcome addition to the high-end neighborhood. (293)



### Focal Kanta N°2

**\$8999**

The Kanta line from the esteemed French manufacturer is right in the middle of the Focal range, with the Chorus and Aria series below it, and the Sopra and Utopia lines above it. All Kanta models feature the new "F-sandwich" driver construction that surrounds a flax core with glass fiber diaphragms. The Kanta N°2'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 N°2's bass extension and dynamics. Soundstage width and depth are excellent, although the Kanta doesn't throw razor-sharp image outlines. (289)



### GoldenEar Technology Triton Reference

**\$8999**

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 \$8500 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 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)

### Focal Spectral 40th

**\$9999**

A three-way design, the Spectral 40th is a handsome tower loudspeaker that stands about 45 inches tall. Its top-most driver is a 6½" single-skin K2 cone. Below that is a 1 11/32" inverted-dome Kevlar tweeter. In the middle, vertically, of the nearly two-inch-thick front baffle are a pair of 7 1/16" double-skin K2 sandwich woofers and, closest to the floor, a flared circular port. (Another port opens from the back of the Spectral 40th, a manifestation of Focal's Powerflow multiport technology.) Though it required a good deal of break-in, the 40th at its best impressed, especially with the way it handled the dynamic aspect of music—what's sometimes called "jump factor." Consistently accurate in tonality, loaded with detail, crisp in attack, and thoughtfully designed and meticulously built, the 40th faces stiff competition in its price category, but is certainly worth a long audition. (298)



### 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 signal processing 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, and other MartinLogan hybrids, 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)



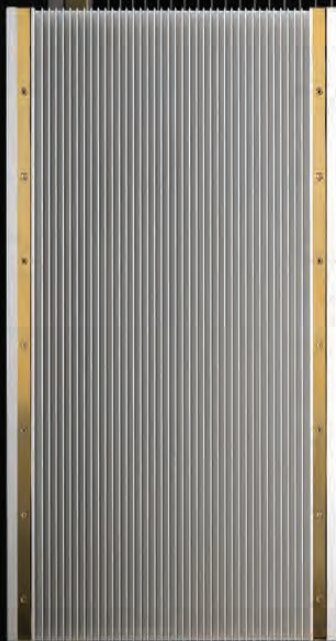




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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

### Quad 2812

\$11,999

This latest version of the venerable Quad ESL-63, which first appeared in the early 1980s, is the most physically robust embodiment of the basic design yet, and its sound has a greater solidity in the lower frequencies than did earlier versions. With the same ingenious arrangement—concentric rings in which the outer ones are activated with a time delay compared to those closer to the center—the 2812s have the same coherence of radiation pattern as always and an impressive sense of speaking with a single voice. The balance of the speaker has been somewhat altered in the direction of more brightness compared to its immediate predecessor the Quad 2805, which is flatter and more nearly neutral in both audible and measured terms. But if the balance of the 2812 pleases or is adjusted by EQ to suit, the result is a speaker of almost unique virtues when it comes to low perceived midrange coloration, low distortion, smoothness of radiation pattern, and coherent sound. There is nothing else quite like an ESL-63 descendant, and there are those for whom nothing else will do. (262)



### Magnepan 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 Magneplans), 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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### T+A Talis S300

\$14,900

Reviewer AQ thoroughly enjoyed all stripes of music through the three-way, bass-reflex Talis S 300s. From grand opera to The Grand Slambovians, from Anonymous 4 to Maroon 5, from piano trios with Emmanuel Ax to piano trios with Oscar Peterson, these loudspeakers never failed to engage him. 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.

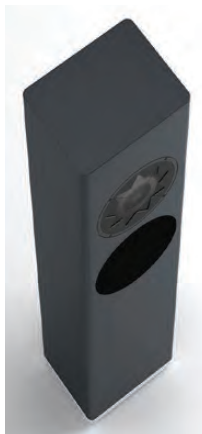
What the Talis S 300s does that most others can't is to reliably represent the uniqueness of more complex sonorities, sounds that may be responsible for a musical effect of special significance. Sonically, the S 300s hold their own with competing models from Wilson and Magico that cost thousands more. 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)



### Manger Audio p1

\$14,995

The Manger p1 brings the bending-wave driver to life in this svelte floorstander. Manger's wide-bandwidth, low-mass, flat-disc-diaphragm transducer creates an intimacy and immediacy that are almost eerie in their authenticity. Tonally, there's a neutral weighting with warmish, saturated overtones and firm acoustic-suspension bass. Temperamentally not geared to knock fillings loose or propel images forward like a studio control monitor, the p1 offers instead musical naturalism without artifice and hype. With the normally distracting multi-driver discontinuities eliminated, the timbre of orchestral instruments remains true and realistic. There's really nothing quite like the p1. (279)



### Marten Django XL

\$15,500

When designing the \$15,500 Django XL full-range floorstander, Swedish speaker-builder Marten focused its considerable resources on the drivers. The Django boasts ceramic tweeter and midrange units plus three aluminum-domed woofers. Tonally, the XL is warm as a mild bath, making for a very appealing overall character. Further, the speaker is unfailingly engaging rhythmically, with precise transients and clear musical lines. Soundstage depth and width are not quite on par with more expensive models, nor are highs quite as resolved—but in each case they are close. Indeed, on much material AT found the Martens indistinguishable from his reference speakers. The Django XL is not for everyone; it needs plenty of volume as well as space around it to reach its full potential. Within those constraints, the Django constitutes a speaker about which there is precious little to criticize. (228)



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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



### Muraudio SP1

**\$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 total 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 SP1 really is a bargain and a truly exceptional product. (293)

### Magico S1 Mk II

**\$16,500, M-Cast (\$20,295, 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, 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)



Sanders Sound Model 10e



Magico S1 Mk II


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## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Wilson Audio Sabrina

**\$16,500**

The Sabrina is the smallest and least expensive floorstander in the Wilson line. Entry-level, maybe, but there are no observable shortcuts. The Sabrina 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 Sabrina 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 Sabrina artfully combines low-level resolution with the most powerful bass dynamics, never losing grip or control. Unsurpassed in a smaller listening room, this sweetheart may be pound for pound the best Wilson Audio loudspeaker available today. (256)



### Kharma Elegance S7 Signature

**\$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)

FLOORSTANDING SPEAKERS



### 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 Sanders a lack of coloration that is truly in the top echelon. This is one of the lowest coloration speakers there is. 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, and that you can adjust the speaker to suit your room and your tastes, this system seems to REG to be not only a wonder but a bargain. (276)

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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS



Legacy Aeris  
with Wavelet



Piega C711



Wilson Audio Yvette

### German Physiks HRS-130

**\$22,000–\$25,000 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

**\$22,975**

The Legacy Aeris sports extraordinary drivers and cabinet design matched to advanced electronics that provide room compensation and the ability to add 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. There are up to 30 settings to tailor its balance to given types of recordings and partly correct for the response problems in older, over-bright close-miked recordings, and even the different equalization curves in LPs. Now available with advanced Wavelet processor. (235/269)

### Piega C711

**\$25,000**

This floorstander from Switzerland boasts one of the most impressive drivers in all 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 aluminum enclosure couple seamlessly to the coaxial ribbon. (287)

### 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. While it lacks the WAMM's superb adjustable time-alignment, its fixed drivers, mounted on separate sloping baffles, achieve wonderful alignment in the time domain with careful in-room positioning. There's a lot to like about this beauty—Yvette is a great value. (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)



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### Technics SB-R1

**\$26,999**

The SB-R1 is traditional looking, but its point-source configuration includes an advanced, flat, coincident midrange/tweeter flanked by a pair of long-throw 6.5" woofers. To supplement bass, an additional pair of woofers occupies each tower's lower half. The speakers have a capacious thirst for current, but mate spectacularly well with Technics' own SE-R1 integrated in its LAPC mode. Thus driven, all those woofers deliver lows that are solid and assured, with no evident extension limitations. In turn, the highs are smooth and airy. Though not quite as vibrant as AT's ribbon-tweetered reference speakers, the SB-R1 more faithfully captures the sheer beauty of music. Further, the speaker's imaging is convincing—players are arrayed across a wide, deep, tall soundstage—and instruments are holographic. The SB-R1 dexterously handles big dynamic swings, while detail resolution, speed, and instrumental colors are all reference level. Yet these characteristics draw absolutely no attention to themselves; they simply contribute to a deeply satisfying and engaging musical whole. (265)

### Magico S3 Mk II

**\$28,000, M-Cast (\$32,000, 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)

### Monitor Audio Platinum PL500 II

**\$29,000**

Monitor Audio's state-of-the-art flagship, the Platinum Series PL500 II, impressed JM from the very first time she heard them—and really didn't sound like any other Monitor Audio speaker JM has heard. In fact, 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). With Technical Director Dean Hartley on board, Monitor Audio has been enjoying a kind of R&D renaissance resulting in a plethora of proprietary new technologies. These innovations have paid off, as 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 (the right electronics don't hurt, though these transducers aren't power-hungry). The PL500 IIs are not only high-energy, high-resolution transducers that boast beautiful sound; they also offer value far exceeding their price. (268)



Technics  
SB-R1



Magico S3  
Mk II



Monitor Audio  
Platinum PL500 II



Magnepan  
30.7

### 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 pistonic 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. Do yourself a favor and take advantage of it. (276)



### Magnepan 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. If you have enough room and amplifier and want to hear voices or acoustic instruments recorded in a real space sound like voices or acoustic instruments in a real space, this is a speaker you should audition. (279)





## Powering Every Legendary System Is A Legendary Amplifier

**leg·end·ar·y**  
/'lejən,derē/

adjective

1.

*of, described in, or based on legends*

2.

*remarkable enough to be famous; very well known*

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**Vandersteen Audio  
Model 5A Carbon**

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This upgrade of Vandersteen's venerable Model 5A replaces the midrange driver and tweeter with the radical carbon-fiber-clad-balsawood diaphragms that make Vandersteen's \$62k Model 7 so special. You don't get the full Model 7 presentation, but for about half the price you come awfully close. These special drivers exhibit extraordinarily low coloration and also provide a seamlessness to the music that makes you forget you're listening to loudspeakers. Featuring a self-powered 12" push-pull woofer with equalization adjustments below 100Hz, the 5A Carbon can deliver extraordinary bass extension. Original owners of the Model 5 can upgrade to the Carbon for \$8650. (219)



**KEF Blade**

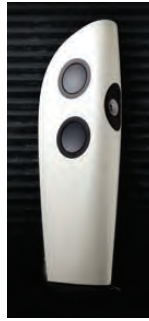
**\$31,999**

KEF's Blade is a sonic, technological, and industrial tour de force. KEF strove to prove that a true full-range point-source speaker was not only possible, but that such a design could deliver on its theoretically predicted benefits, including coherence akin to a single-driver speaker, uniform room dispersion at all frequencies, and low coloration. The Blade realizes these ideals—and then some—with steadfast imaging, balanced tonality regardless of listening position, astounding detail and dynamic resolution, and vanishingly low distortion in both the frequency and time domains. Musically, the Blade is glory itself. Its rhythms sweep you along, its dynamics can by turns move and stun you, its resolution informs you, its timbres transport you, and its clarity makes delineating musical lines child's play. Though advanced in every respect, the Blade is an instant classic destined to influence many speakers to come. (222)

**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 room correction well, courtesy of the Persona's Anthem Room Correction (ARC) and integral woofer amplifiers. The 9H is truly flat, has very deep, quick, and detailed bass, and a superb new beryllium midrange and tweeter with 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. 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)



KEF Blade



Paradigm Persona 9H



Estelon Xb



Magico S5  
Mk II



Von Schweikert  
Audio Endeavor  
E-5

**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)

**Magico S5 Mk II**

**\$38,000, M-Cast (\$42,750, 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 lineup'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-unraveler 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 overtly inviting than those in its flagship line, without losing the essence of the brand. (246)

**Von Schweikert Audio Endeavor E-5 Mk II**

**\$40,000**

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. Mahler or pedal-to-the-metal rock 'n' roll succeed as expected, though more intimate forces aren't exaggerated in their physical dimensions. 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)



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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS



Von Schweikert  
Audio VR-44 Aktive



Legacy Audio V  
System



Kharma Elegance  
dB11-S



Wilson Audio Alexia Series 2



Voxativ 9.87

### Von Schweikert Audio VR-44 Aktive

**\$45,000**

The new VSA VR-44 Aktive (90dB/8-ohm) is a high-performance speaker made for tube-lovers. A four-way, single-cabinet design with a chamfered front baffle, the VR-44 uses a quasi-transmission-line, which incorporates new VSA technology in cabinet-wall construction, and OEM Scandinavian drivers. It also features self-powered woofers. GH found the approach inventive and the sonic results completely elegant. The VR-44 Aktive produces a bold, expressive beauty along with the capacity for delicate nuances within an impressive soundstage. Highly resolving with fantastic extension at the extremes, the speaker achieves wondrously saturated yet natural tone on instruments ranging from orchestral strings to jazz saxophones and vibes. It works equally well with both vintage and contemporary tube amps of 40W–100Wpc. (230)

### 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 almost 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. (258)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Kharma Elegance dB11-S

**\$54,000**

This reference-quality, three-way, four-driver floorstander uses a newly developed beryllium tweeter that is exemplary in its sonic purity and control, and a 7" carbon-composite midrange driver that employs Kharma's new 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. Although the dB11-S has relatively high sensitivity (89dB), a good-quality, stable amplifier of about 100 watts RMS is recommended. (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" wood-en-cone AC-4D widebander 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, mid-ranges, 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 heard. One of JV's references. (289)

### Wilson Audio Alexia Series 2

**\$57,900**

The Wilson Alexia Series 2 delivers 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. 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)





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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

### Magico S7

**\$58,000, M-Cast (\$64,000, 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)



Vandersteen Audio  
Model 7 Mk. II



Wilson Benesch  
Resolution



Estelon X  
Diamond

### Von Schweikert Audio 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 achieve a landmark product. The application of VSA's pioneering (and remarkably cost-effective), patent-pending, active noise-reducing cabinet technology combined with specially developed custom-built drivers from Accuton and ScanSpeak results in a level of performance that Greg Weaver 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. Given its striking ability to recreate the space and acoustic signature of a recorded venue, with a unique adjustability that allows it to play chameleon and seamlessly integrate into any room, the VR-55 Aktive won GW over. (256)

### Vandersteen Audio Model 7 Mk. II

**\$62,000**

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 Vandersteen'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. Here, the Resolution's definition combined with unperturbed power output allow bass lines to come out of the shadows in a way AT has never before experienced. 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 (which has to be one of the most seamless implementations of an exotic dome JV has yet heard) the Estelon X Diamond appears to have successfully ameliorated all three problems. The result is a speaker that disappears—both in a seamless, top-to-bottom sense and in a physical one—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 (with a better disappearing act than most beryllium/titanium/etc. tweeters), the X Diamond contends manfully for JV's large, full-range, dynamic-loudspeaker Palme d'Or. (228)





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Robert Harley, *The Absolute Sound*, July/August 2019

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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS



### Sonus faber Lilium

**\$70,000**

Sonus faber takes more than a ceremonial step toward a new sonic direction with the Lilium. This imposing, dual-chamber, three-and-a-half-way loudspeaker represents a marked shift from the somewhat dark and cloying sound of earlier-generation Sf toward broad and bright-lit uplands. Nimble and precise, the Lilium pulls off a tremendous disappearing act. It couples lithe, taut bass with superb fidelity in the treble region. The Lilium is not a heavyweight slugger like a big Wilson. It is best suited for classical and jazz where it produces a deep and airy soundstage, coupled with seductive finesse. Its alacrity allows string sections to come through with ravishing sheen. Despite its fairly benign 4-ohm/92dB load, the Lilium sounds most compelling when paired with a stout amplifier. (259)

### 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 sensorially 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 redesigned 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 stands)**

This new three-way, five-driver (one 28mm tweeter, 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 superior-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. Though the M3's three 7" woofers don't have the power, extension, and density of color in the bass of the M Project's three 10" drivers, the difference can be reduced by adding the Magico Q-Sub 15 to the package, crossed over at about 50Hz. One of JV's references. (282)



### 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 new 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. A sealed-enclosure design, its bass extends deeply but does not "bass load" a typical listening room like some ported speakers do—an advantage in many installations. (279)







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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

### MartinLogan Neolith

**\$79,995**

MartinLogan swung for the fences with the new 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 33 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 Sound's* 2015 Overall Product of the Year. (259)



### 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 \$685k WAMM Master Chronosonic, along with dual midranges 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. The Alexx can sound a bit dark in character on first listen, but lean into the music, and the rewards are rich. The Alexx isn't a speaker that dazzles during a brief listen, but one that only fully reveals itself over time. The build- and finish-quality are as good as they get. (298)



### Zellaton Stage

**\$89,975**

JH considers the Zellaton Stage from Germany 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)

### Avantgarde Acoustic Trio XD/Basshorn

**\$92,500**

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 give 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 mid 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)





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## FLOORSTANDING LOUSPEAKERS

### Focal Stella Utopia EVO EM

**\$119,000**

Newly updated to the EVO version (which, among other things, has the capability of bi-amplification and a greater range of metallic colors), the Stella Utopia EM from the French loudspeaker manufacturer is second from the top of the Utopia line, bringing the technology of the flagship Grande Utopia to a lower price. The Stella Utopia EM is a three-way, four-driver system employing a 13" electro-magnetically-driven woofer, two 6.5" midrange drivers, and a 1" beryllium tweeter. Each driver is housed in a separate enclosure, allowing the drivers to be arranged in a time-aligned arc. Sonically, the Stella Utopia EM strikes a beautiful balance between resolution and ease in a way that's musically engaging. Although very detailed and resolved, the Stella is never analytical or antiseptic. The bass balance is warm, rich, and full—qualities that give a sense of body to doublebasses, low brass, and deep-tuned drums. Rear-panel jumpers allow you to dial in the tonal balance to suit your listening room. The Stella's high sensitivity (94dB) and fairly benign impedance combine to make this loudspeaker easy to drive. The Stella Utopia EM is a world-class loudspeaker by any measure, and one that doesn't sacrifice musicality on the altar of resolution. (Stella Utopia reviewed in 219)



### 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)



### 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 forehead-slapping 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 Audio 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, dimpled-dome, 1.5" ring-radiator tweeter, a cut-paper 7" ScanSpeak midrange, and three 10.5" ScanSpeak woofers, two at the bottom of the baffle, and one at the very top, it is one of the most unfailingly musical loudspeakers GW has reviewed 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)



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(positive-feedback.com)

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- Terry London  
(hometheaterreview.com)

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- Herb Reichart  
(stereophile.com)

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- Terry London  
(6moons.com)

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- Steve Lefkowitz  
(positive-feedback.com)

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(enjoythemusic.com)

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- Andrew Robinson  
(hometheaterreview.com)

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**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 few years ago, Magico introduced the first descendant of the M Pro, the M3. In 2017 it 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 is the fullest-range, least cones-in-a-box-sounding cone speaker reviewer JV has heard. Of course, the M6 weighs a ton, requires the best amplification and source components possible (to show its best), 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 the multiway cone speaker JV would buy. A masterpiece. (forthcoming)

**Von Schweikert Audio Ultra 9**

**\$200,000**

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. GW also felt it exhibited unmatched excellence in low-frequency performance, transient reproduction, rendition of tone color and texture, harmonic structure, and soundstage recreation. 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)



**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 hardness 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 Audio XLF**

**\$210,000**

Wilson loudspeakers have long been famed for their astounding dynamic capabilities and the exceptional XLF delivers all of that and more. The introduction of a new silk dome tweeter, however, has permitted Wilson to create a substantially more musical transducer, one that achieves a degree of relaxation and flow, of transparency and timbral richness, that is profoundly enticing. Another design change is the creation of a reversible port, known as Cross-Flow Low Frequency, that permits further fine-tuning of the XLF's performance. It almost goes without saying that the XLF is prodigiously powerful, capable of recreating a realistic simulacrum of a symphony orchestra without any sense of strain. This massive horsepower in reserve allows the loudspeaker to navigate the most complex and treacherous passages

without the slightest haze or blurriness. The speed of the loudspeaker translates into its own form of dynamics—the XLF approaches the alacrity of a horn loudspeaker. Colorations almost seem nonexistent. The size, power, and refinement of the XLF suggest that it is best suited for large rooms, where its virtues can be fully appreciated. (225)





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Darryl Wilkinson, *Sound & Vision*



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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

### 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 unequalled in RH's experience. 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. Along with the Magico Q7 Mk II and Rockport Lyra, the Eminence is one of the three best speakers RH has had in his home. (294)



### MBL 101 X-treme

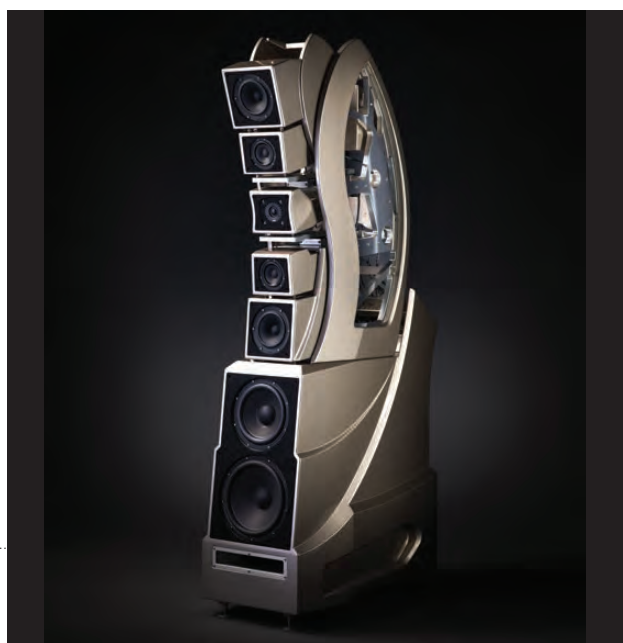
**\$263,000**

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 heard 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 top reference. (forthcoming)

### Wilson Audio WAMM Master Chronosonic

**\$685,000 (Master Subsonic Subwoofers are \$45,000 each)**

With the new WAMM Master Chronosonic, an entirely re-conceived version of the legendary original, David Wilson has broken new sonic ground. Wilson has gone to considerable lengths to refine its emphasis on the time-domain, by which the company means the ability to adjust the driver modules for optimal sound reproduction—down to five millionths of a second. This helps provide a vanishingly lower noise floor that supplies the foundation for the WAMM's sonic prowess. Its scale and dynamic power have to be heard to be believed, and even then it requires something of a mental adjustment to comprehend just how expansive a soundstage it reproduces. New subwoofers, boasting three drivers each, complete the package. A big room is a must. Despite its large size, however, the most beguiling aspect of the WAMM may not be its capacious soundstage, deep bass, or seemingly limitless dynamics. Rather, it is the ability the loudspeaker has to draw you into the music, banishing any sense of electronic haze or glaze. The WAMM possesses a limpidity that allows it to shine on vocals, while presenting any accompanying instruments and voices as something more than vague ancillary adjuncts. It is literally and figuratively a towering achievement. (276)







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**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)



REL Acoustics T/7i



Syzygy Acoustics SLF870

**Syzygy Acoustics SLF870****\$999**

Though not the only wireless subs available, the Syzygys incorporate useful advanced technology at an excellent price. By using your smartphone as the set-up computer, the Syzygy app equalizes the subs in the room; once their response is flat, they are easy to blend with the main speakers. And once dialed in, they just work without having to fiddle. A seamless transition from reviewer Vade Forrester's main speakers to the subwoofers made the SLF870s sound like a continuous extension of his mains. VF wondered whether the wireless connection might cause dropouts, but after carefully monitoring the sound to detect any possible problems, he found no issues. That's how technology should work. Very highly recommended and a great value for the price. (276)



GoldenEar Technology SuperSub X



JL Audio e110/e112

**GoldenEar Technology SuperSub X****\$1249**

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, imparting a well-anchored foundation that extends into the low 30Hz range (even touching the upper 20s). 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 dimensions. 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 and 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. Driven by its own 1200W Class D amplifier and capable of extension into the mid-to-low twenties, the e110 is a powerhouse with uncommon grip and definition. Paired with something like a Raidho D-1 stand-mount it will give you everything (save for dynamic range and overall impact) that you pay the big, big bucks for in a massive multiway floorstander, and it will do so for a mere \$1650 (\$2100 for the e112 12" version). (244)

**GoldenEar Technology SuperSub XXL****\$1999**

Sandy Gross, the owner of GoldenEar, is legendary for extracting big sound from reasonably priced products. The SuperSub XXL is a case in point. Gross 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. Timpani and drum whacks emerge with authority from black backgrounds. There are faster and more powerful subwoofers out there—at three to four times the cost. It is also important to note that the XXL only accepts single-ended inputs. But the XXL will never produce less than satisfying performance in almost any audio system. (264)







DS Audio Phono Cartridges

# Pure Analog

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It's Got a Needle

▶▶ REVIEW ◀◀

## DS Master1

After years of using only MCs, and following a month with Koetsu's Onyx, the DS Audio Master 1 was a shock because its presentation was so clean and noiseless...it has speed, detail and space to rival Deccas... Believe me; this cartridge is phenomenal."



## DS-W2

Germany's AUDIO magazine scored the DS-W2 at 125 points, the cartridge category's highest score and the highest ever score since the launch of the AUDIO magazine. "It does not happen often that it makes me speechless. But what the DS Audio DS-W2 gets out of a record really defies any description. In terms of dynamics and transparency, I have never heard a better pickup in my life."



## DS002

"A purely analog device (with the natural warmth and three-dimensionality that that implies), the DS 002 nonetheless has a high measure of the resolution...it is, particularly in the midband, the most lifelike cartridge JV has had in his system."



## DS-E1

"The game changer"  
"I think it could be the sixth biggest game-changer in cartridges in three decades. The other five? its older siblings."



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**AudioKinesis Swarm**

**\$2000**

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)



**REL Acoustics S/812**

**\$2899**

The S/812 replaces REL's S/5 SHO with a range of upgrades to the power amplifier (now 800W), a new filter, and carbon-fiber bracing of the active woofer cone. Its bass extension is terrifyingly deep; yet it has the delicacy and dexterity to become one with the music, from the deepest fundamentals on up, without coloring the character or reducing the transparency of even the most highly resolved system. (forthcoming)



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### JL Audio CR-1 Crossover

**\$3000**

Though they used to be relatively plentiful in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, outboard active analog crossovers are scarce on the ground nowadays. Which is why JL Audio's CR-1 outboard active analog 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 subwoofing, 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)



### 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)

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## SUBWOOFERS

### REL 212SE

**\$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. (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)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### JL Audio Fathom IWSv2-Sys-213 In-Wall Subwoofer

**\$4900/\$7800**

Leave it to JL Audio to reinvent the in-wall subwoofer. Forget the stereotypes of in-wall subs—bloated midbass, 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, first, isolating the woofer enclosure from the wall structure with an innovative enclosure suspension system. Second, JL has shoehorned many of its patented technologies into a shallow version of the fabulous 13.5" driver found in 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. All this attention to detail pays off; the IWS delivers deep, clean, well-defined bass with zero audible wall vibration or rattling. Bass from the IWS exhibits all the hallmarks of JL Audio's Fathom freestanding subs—tremendous power and impact coupled with very fine resolution of dynamic, pitch, and textural detail. The IWS is also completely unflappable at any volume, even on the most demanding film soundtracks. A great product that fills a much-needed niche. (forthcoming)

## POWER AMPLIFIERS

### 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

**\$695**

Generating 120Wpc and weighing just under 10.5 pounds, the STA-9 uses a Class A input circuit with a Class D output circuit. 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)





# RELENTLESS MONOBLOCK AMPLIFIER



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–Dan D’Agostino, Founder and Chief Engineer,  
Dan D’Agostino Master Audio Systems

---

1,500 W RMS at 8Ω • 3,000 W RMS at 4Ω • 6,000 W RMS at 2Ω



### 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 Soulution 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. Like the Khartago stereo, this is a budget monoblock for the connoisseur. (194, 246)



Rotel RB-1552 MkII



Channel Islands Audio C•100S



Optoma NuForce STA200



NuPrime ST-10

### Rotel RB-1552 MkII

**\$999**

The RB-1552 MkII is a 120Wpc Class AB stereo power amplifier with the holistic design and careful parts-selection of Rotel’s best amps. The unit is essentially a dual-mono design and accepts both single-ended and balanced connections (the balanced sound way better). For those whose speakers require more oomph, such as Maggie owners, Rotel makes a more powerful (\$600 more expensive) 200Wpc version, the RB-1582 MkII. Modestly priced products may not be able to produce the “absolute sound,” but the best of them can fully deliver the heart of the high end. Rotel’s RB-1552 MkII falls decisively into this category, delivering robust dynamics, a broad soundstage, well-placed images, rock-solid bass, infectious timing, and tonal characteristics that sound “right.” (242)

### 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 ST200’s looks, but its sound turns it into one sexy beast. (268)

### Channel Islands Audio 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.” SS’s position is different. He prefers a power amplifier that attempts to sound as invisible as possible—a straight wire with gain, to repeat the old audio cliché. The C•100S stereo power amplifier provided more than enough power to drive all the loudspeakers SS threw at it, and did so in a way that allowed each loudspeaker’s unique personality to come to the foreground. 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 would be an excellent choice. At \$1495, the C•100S stereo power amplifier ranks as a best-buy in SS’s world. (297)

### NuPrime ST-10

**\$1595**

The NuPrime ST-10 amplifier is what the company 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. SS tried the ST-10 with a variety of speakers from the fairly inefficient 84dB Aerial Acoustics Model 5B to the 95dB-sensitivity Audience 1+1, as well as the ATC SC7 II, Dunlavy SC-1/AV, and Mirage OM3. In every case the amplifier did a superb job of driving the speakers with authority and control. (255)



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## POWER AMPLIFIERS

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### 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)



Dynaco ST-70 Series 3



First Watt F7



Audio by Van Alstine FET  
Valve 600R

### 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. The 5U4G rectifier arc'd briefly on DO's sample when the amplifier was powered up. Coincident considers this to be a normal event, but any arc'ing is cause for concern when it comes to the rectifier's lifetime. The input signal is routed through a 100k ohm pot allowing a direct connection to an external line-level source. Expect a sweet midrange, an exceptionally dimensional soundstage, and a dynamic presentation belying the amp's minuscule power rating—at least when driving a high-sensitivity loudspeaker. Harmonic textures aren't overly liquid, implying decent-bandwidth output transformers. 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. Because of its high source impedance the Dynamo may not always yield the most accurate tonal balance, but the crux of the matter is foot-tapping musical bliss. (250, 283)



### 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)

### 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 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—a rare feat for any solid-state amplifier. 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)

### 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 exact same circuit as Germany's celebrated Symphonic Line monoblock amplifiers. Even if you A/B'd these monoblocks with super-amps like Soulution'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 12A17 triode front end is coupled to a fully complementary power MOSFET 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. World-class power amplification at an affordable price. (225)





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Wyred 4 Sound SX-1000R



First Watt SIT-3



Pass Labs XA25



Bel Canto Ref600M

**NAD Masters Series M22 V2**

**\$3299**

The partner to the excellent M12 preamp/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 and 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)



**Atma-Sphere S-30 Mk 3.3**

**\$4600**

The Mk 3.3 version of this 30Wpc Circulator 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 compatible 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)

**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)

**First Watt SIT-3**

**\$4000**

When transistor manufacturer Semi-South closed its doors in 2012, access to its silicon-carbide-based power JFET transistors (SITs) dried up. Fortunately, Nelson Pass had purchased a custom batch of them in 2010, no doubt because this device's characteristic curve resembles that of a triode vacuum tube and it can work directly into a speaker load. Though the 18Wpc (into 8 ohms) SIT-3 does consistently blur the line between solid-state and tube amplification, it doesn't sound "tubey." The plain fact is that this somewhat funky push-pull solid-state design *beats out* a bunch of single-ended amps. It is clearly a remarkable, deliciously organic-sounding low-power amplifier, a contender for best in class, and is surely destined to become a classic. (Be aware that the SIT-3 is a limited item, and Pass is uncertain when parts will run out.) (291)

**Pass Labs XA25**

**\$4900**

The XA25 amp is among Pass Labs' humbler 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 bit 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. A magical amp. (287)

**Bel Canto Ref600M**

**\$4990/pr.**

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





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## POWER AMPLIFIERS

### Audio Mirror SET

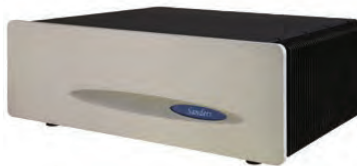
**\$4995**

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. This is not an analytic-sounding amplifier, so don't expect it to compensate for a fuzzy front end or preamplifier. It makes one helluva musical statement and would have earned an enthusiastic recommendation even with a \$10k price tag. (289)

### Sanders Sound Magtech

**\$5500**

This no-nonsense amplifier was designed to drive any loudspeaker 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 electrostatics. (211)

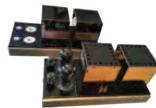


### Luxman MQ-88uC

**\$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, the MQ-88uC represents a nearly perfect introduction to the joys of triode sound and is highly recommended for those in search of a closer approach to the real thing. (297)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



Audio Mirror SET



Anthem STR



Linear Tube Audio  
ZH ZOTL40

### Anthem STR

**\$5999**

Anthem's STR amplifier is a muscular yet stylish component that outputs 400 watts into 8 ohms, 600 watts into 4 ohms, and 800 watts into 2 ohms; there aren't many loudspeakers that this dual-mono design won't readily control. The STR gives off a fair amount of heat 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 dynamic 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 150W. Whether used alone or with the C22 preamplifier—once you've seen and used them together, it'll break your heart to separate them—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 ZH ZOTL40

**\$6400**

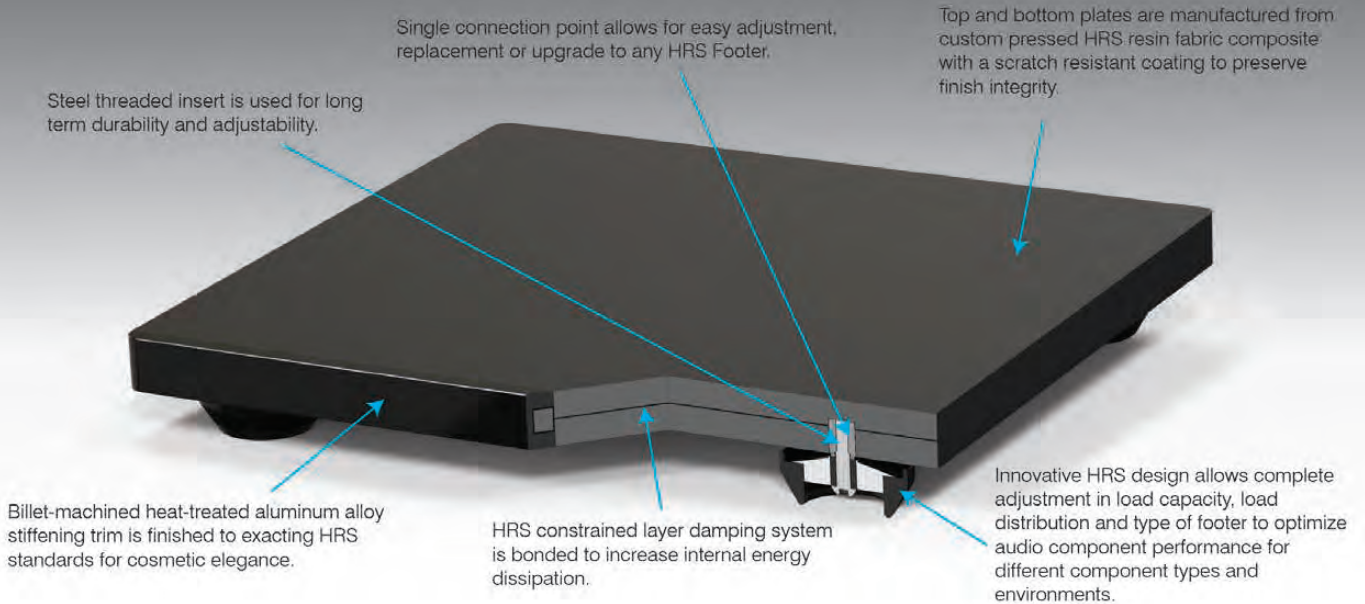
The ZOTL40 was commissioned by and licensed directly from David Berning, and in many respects, is similar to the ZH-230. One obvious difference is the switch from TV sweep tubes to audio power tubes. The amp currently ships with two pairs of Russian KT77s, though the EL34 power pentode may also be used. This is nominally a 40Wpc power amp based on Berning's patented impedance-matching technology that does away with a conventional output transformer. Expect a substantial dose of tube magic with a good measure of tonal neutrality. There's just the right touch of harmonic lushness delivered with superb transient speed and control. There is much to admire here, including strong dynamics and convincing rhythmic drive, supported by a well-defined bass range. Reproduction of the treble range, and in particular violin overtones, is grain-free and effortless and does much to enhance long-term listenability. (273)



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**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)

**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, morphing 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 also by focusing on the textural elements, the "bloom factor," that define kettle and kick drums, and the darker resonances and air displacement of doublebasses or solo cello. In grand fashion and with musicality to burn, NuPrime lays to rest the argument that Class D is somehow intrinsically inferior to traditional amps. (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 musicaly—to listen to. (196)

**MBL Corona C21****\$9200**

Sounding more like a fine analog 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 Corporation 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-ever 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. Dynamics are very agile, realistically tracking changes in the music. The amp sounds good right out of the box, even better after some break-in, and the automatic bias adjustment assures the VT80SE will produce its best sound throughout the life of the tubes with no adjustment by the listener. (285)







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## POWER AMPLIFIERS



Air Tight ATM-2Plus

### Zesto Audio Bia 120

**\$10,000**

Zesto's new Bia 60Wpc Class A all-tube power amplifier, with styling to match the company's Zeto lineage and Andros phono stage, brings the designers the trifecta. As with the preamps, 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 (a magnificent combination, by the way). 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, and it's easy to imagine its owners years, even decades hence treasuring the Bia the way others do classic McIntoshes and Marantz. (244)

### Air Tight ATM-2Plus

**\$10,450, ATM-1S; \$21,500, ATM-2Plus**

Julie Mullins had been delighted to have the Air Tight ATM-1S stereo tube amp in her reference system. No matter what style of music she played, the 60Wpc amp delivered the sonic goods with naturalness, beauty, and ease, while also throwing a remarkably deep and wide soundstage. Comes now the ATM-2Plus version featuring redesigned circuitry, and a new negative-feedback approach for better pairing with more modern speakers. The updated push-pull design now uses new Tamura 100W output transformers said to extend power, particularly for improved lower-octave response. It still employs a quartet of 6CA7 valves and newly developed Hashimoto transformers. Another classic creation from the celebrated Japanese master Miura-san of Air Tight, this rare gem of an amp is meticulously hand-crafted in Osaka, Japan, and manually point-to-point wired. (forthcoming)

### Bel Canto Black EX

**\$11,990**

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 Black EX's virtually unlimited power, will exploit the bass output and dynamic capabilities of just about any speaker. (290)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



**Bryston 7B<sup>3</sup>**  
**\$11,990/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 7B<sup>3</sup>'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. This mono amp offers a lot: tonal neutrality, dynamic control, expansive soundstaging, fine resolution, plenty of power reserves, and great musical expressiveness. It comes with a 20-year warranty, so music lovers can buy with confidence that their 7B<sup>3</sup> amplifiers will provide years of enjoyment. (269)



**Ayon Audio Crossfire III PA**



**Constellation Inspiration Stereo/Mono**

### 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 output of 30 watts per channel, 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, including several output-transformerless and solid-state models. Mids and highs were exquisitely detailed, effortlessly producing a level of realism VF had never experienced from an SET amplifier. (294)

### Constellation Inspiration Stereo/Mono

**\$12,500/\$25,000 pr.**

This 250Wpc stereo amplifier is based on the same circuit as Constellation's \$190k 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 \$11k 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)



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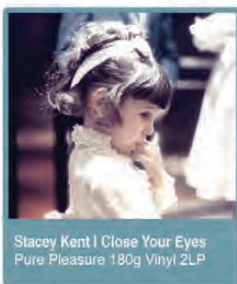
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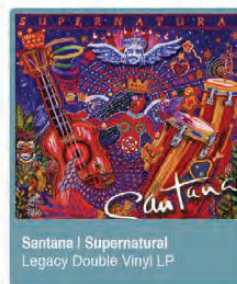
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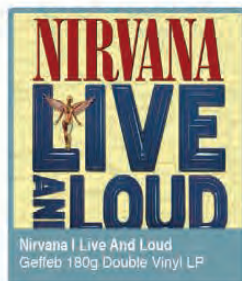
Jimi Hendrix | Are You Experienced  
Analogue Productions SACD



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D'Agostino Classic Stereo



PS Audio BHK Signature 300



VTL S-200



Triode Corporation TRX-M300

### 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)

### D'Agostino 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. There is nothing fancy about the casework to distract from the fact that this amp just wants to get down to business. It 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 down to a whopping 1200 watts into 2 ohms, which means that it should have oodles of power to spare for just about any loudspeaker. Can you say overkill? 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. It conveys vocals with weight and authority. There is a kind of gleeful dynamic command with the Classic Stereo. 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)

### 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 VTL 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 te-trode modes, this KT88-based stereo amp presents music as a cohesive and engaging whole. (290)

### Triode Corporation TRX-M300

**\$15,750/pr.**

Think of the M300 as a modern version of the Western Electric WE 91A, complete with a 274B rectifier, a pair of 310A receiving pentodes, and a Psvane WE300B. The colossal gain of the original has been reduced to a reasonable sensitivity of 0.8V. The power supply has also increased in sophistication so that the M300 is exceptionally quiet for an SET amplifier. Image solidity, according to DO, can only be described as magical; solid-state amps would kill for it. Bandwidth and transient speed are pretty impressive for an SET. Don't expect bone-crushing bass slam, but prepare to be surprised by its dynamic prowess and the breathtaking acceleration of an orchestral crescendo from soft to loud. The M300 offers a fitting testament to the potency of the first watt and showcases the beauty and dynamic potential of the much venerated 300B triode. Speakers of 96dB+ sensitivity are advisable. (236)



### AVM Ovation SA8.3

**\$15,995**

The SA8.2 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 SA8.2 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 load, 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)

**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. There are virtually no tonal imbalances, rhythmic lagging, slurred transients, dynamic compression, image flattening, distortion, or strain. The SE-R1 is 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. Perhaps the H30's outstanding sonics and high value can be traced to Hegel's SoundEngine technology, in which dynamic crossover distortion is greatly reduced through a patented circuit, coupled with a rigorous transistor-matching protocol. 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)

**Zesto Audio Eros 300**

**\$19,900/pr.**

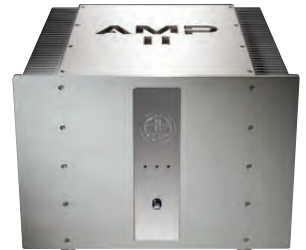
This monoblock is the most ambitious offering yet from Zesto Audio. All Zesto products are designed by George Counnas and built in-house. George favors tube technology, and the 300s reflect his current thinking on how to make tubes state-of-the-art today. Besides being stylish and relatively compact, this amplifier delivers the sonic goods. Conservatively rated at 150W into 4 and 8 ohms, the Zesto 300 features pure 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)



**Accustic 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 offers a wealth of tonal colors and details that make it a delight to listen to for hours on end. (295)



**FM Acoustics FM 108-MKII**

**\$21,600/pr.**

Though the latest Swiss firms like CH Precision and Soudation 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)

**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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**Viola Audio Laboratories  
Concerto**

**\$22,500**

Although “entry-level” by Viola’s standards, the Concerto offers world-class build- and sound-quality. This 100Wpc amplifier can double its power output into 4 ohms, sports a chassis machined from a solid aluminum block, and features circuitry refined over designer Paul Jayson’s 40 years of work with cutting-edge amplifier circuits. The Concerto sounds much more powerful than its rating, and delivers some of the deepest and tightest bass RH has heard. But what makes the Concerto so musically compelling is the amplifier’s utter transparency, delicacy, and resolution. This is an amp that lets you hear deep into the music without any hint of electronic glaze. The Concerto is a sonic, visual, and functional match with Viola’s equally superb Crescendo preamplifier/DAC. (243)



Viola Audio  
Laboratories Concerto



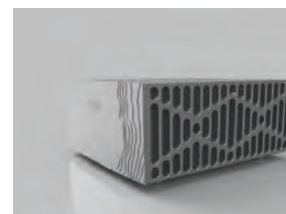
Zanden Audio Systems  
Model 8120F



VTL MB-450 Series III Signature



Pass Labs XA160.8



Boulder 1160

**Zanden Audio Systems Model 8120F**

**\$24,500 (optional balanced XLR inputs w/input transformers \$17000)**

For JV, this large, beautifully built and finished, KT120-tube-based, 100Wpc stereo amplifier from celebrated 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 on big dynamic swings, extraordinarily finely detailed (right up there with Soulution, Siltech, and Constellation in this regard), 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)

**VTL MB-450 Series III Signature**

**\$25,000/pr.**

As the Series III designation indicates, the MB-450 monoblock has evolved considerably over the years. The most noticeable change in the amplifier from its direct ancestors is a greater sense of refinement and dynamic punch. The 450 does not cede much to far more expensive amplifiers (though the much larger Siegfried monoblocks offer demonstrably more of everything, but are also priced accordingly). The 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. A very nice feature is that the amp possesses a fault-sensing circuit that will shut it down before a tube can blow and damage it. 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, the MB-450 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 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, while its mids are simply extraordinary, possessing a purity, texture, and bloom that reminded reviewer GW of the best tube designs. Its paramount strengths are engaging resolution and transparency, with no vestige of glare or the faintest hint of edge. A genuine triumph that earned GW’s highest recommendation. (259)

**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. Reviewer AHC reports that he has reviewed a number of power amps in the past—some with higher power ratings—that could not provide the same lifelike musical dynamics, or control speakers as well in the bottom octaves. 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)



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**Audio Research Corporation  
Reference 160M**

**\$30,000/pr.**

The product of two years of research and development, the Reference 160M—ARC's newest monoblock power amp—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, fuller power-range response, 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 the first ARC amp with auto-bias); it is certainly a result of the amp's new complement of output tubes (Russian KT150s rather than GE 6550s), its shorter signal paths, its refurbished power supply, and other technical innovations. Regardless of the trade-offs in ARC's new circuit, in several ways the 160M sounds more realistic than any ARC amplifier that has come before it, and that is saying a mouthful. (294)



**Audionet Max**

**\$31,000/pr.**

Their more-than-twice-as-tall-as-they-are-wide form optimizes interstage 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. Reviewer Greg Weaver felt they played the role of the proverbial "giant killer" better than any other amplifier he has encountered. (279)

**Accuphase P-7300**

**\$32,000**

When combined with its companion C-3850 preamp, Accuphase's top-line 125Wpc P-7300 stereo amplifier becomes the heart of a solid, bottom-up-sounding reproduction system. During multiple listening sessions, 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 right brain, depending on mood and desire. (272)



**MBL Noble N15**

**\$35,200/pr.**

Class D amplifiers have come a long way since JV reviewed several of the first high-end offerings way back when. This latest version from MBL's engineering genius Juergen 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 head-slapping breadth, width, and depth. (287)

**Balanced Audio Technology Rex II**

**\$39,990**

The Rex II amplifier truly and fittingly takes the crown in the BAT lineup. A 160-watt powerhouse that never seems to let up, it delivers tremendous bass slam and a stunning soundstage. The speed and grip of the amplifier are spellbinding. In theory, the amp can be infinitely daisy-chained with further Rex's, depending on your tolerance for heat and need for power, but two should be more than enough for almost any audio system. The Rex II is based upon the robust but pure 6C33C tube, which is one of the niftiest output devices extant. Unlike tube amplifiers of yore, the Rex is utterly reliable: It features a fully symmetrical triode circuit, employs auto-bias, and is monitored by an electronic protection circuit that does not intrude upon the signal path (though BAT designer Victor Khomenko refused to divulge precisely how it operates). Like much BAT gear, it leans toward a somewhat more velvety presentation, which may not always appeal to solid-state lovers. But for anyone seeking a high-powered and refined tube amplifier, the Rex II will amply deliver the goods. (250)





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Lamm Industries ML2.2



Esoteric Grandioso M1



Constellation Revelation Taurus

### 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)

### Lamm Industries ML2.2

**\$43,590/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

**\$44,000/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-smearred, 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)

### 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—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.

Given the right ancillaries and sources, the Centaurs are among the loveliest, highest-resolution, most lifelike solid-state amps JV has yet heard (223)



### 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 sophisticated 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. When it comes to dynamics and ultimate SPLs, the 501s' seemingly inexhaustible delivery of power from top to bottom makes speakers, even difficult-to-drive ones like the Raidho C-4.1s, sound as if they were plugged directly into the wall. Simply and unflaggingly thrilling to listen to. (236)





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## POWER AMPLIFIERS

### Zanden Audio Systems Model 9600 Mk2 \$57,200/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-to-drive 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. Exceptionally detailed and lifelike, the Model 9600 Mk2 is high among the best medium-powered tube amplifiers JV has heard. (293)



### MBL 9008 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 Juergen Reis, which is tantamount to saying that both amps are bullet-proof technical and sonic marvels. Built using the finest parts—including low-induction MPC resistors, mega-Hertz-type RSH capacitors, and super-fast ring-emitter transistors—the 9008 A is a beast with a black-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 Soulution's finest amps—a gorgeous bottom-up presentation with the solidity of an ebony pillar. Perfect for any of MBL's own speakers, including the X-tremes, and swell with anything else. One of JV's references. (forthcoming)



### 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. Anyone contemplating the purchase of a solid-state amplifier will want to audition the Momentums. The degree of control and finesse that the M400s deliver is truly something to marvel over. (279)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### 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. It is not often that JV has come across a piece of electronics that strikes him as an "instant classic"; this genuine masterpiece from Air Tight is an exception: an amplifier that can hold its own among the very best tube designs of the past and of the present day. (forthcoming)



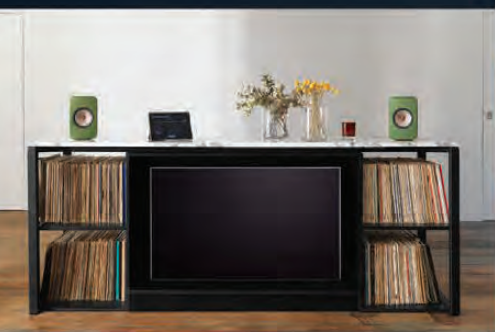
### Audio Research Corporation Reference 750SE

\$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 ability 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)







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**David Berning 211/845**  
**\$75,000/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. But when given the right load, the Berning 211/845 is nothing short of magical. (265, 276)

**VTL Siegfried Series II Reference**  
**\$75,000/pr.**

The VTL Siegfried II Reference has been thoroughly upgraded to compete in the front rank of amplification, tube or solid-state.

Start with new premium Mundorf silver-in-oil capacitors. Add four damping factor controls to allow the user to tailor the sound to his loudspeaker. All of this and more: a fully balanced amplifier, the Siegfried deploys auto-bias, fault-sensing, and above all, a precision-regulated power supply. The sophisticated power supply means that the output-tube operating point is always held constant, regardless of fluctuations in incoming AC voltage. In plain English, this means that the Siegfried 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 amplifier 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)



**Ypsilon Hyperion**  
**\$93,000/pr.**

The Ypsilon Hyperion monoblocks 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. In essence, Ypsilon designer Demetris Baklavas is threading the needle between the two great areas of contestation in the high end: whether you want to go with tubes or transistors. This debate will never be fully settled, but Baklavas has definitely created some musical magic with his latest design, which outputs a healthy 450 watts. 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)

**Constellation Hercules Stereo II**  
**\$95,000**

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 II, 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-end 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. Yes, the Soulution 711 stereo amp gives you bigger and more exciting bass, a slightly richer, fuller power range, and a more liquid and grainless midrange, but at the price of a "bottom-up" balance that is comparatively darker and a little softer and more recessed in the treble and upper mids, where the Constellation has more openness, detail, and energy. One of JV's solid-state references. (forthcoming)



**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. The Xs 300 brings out the very best in good recordings and will inevitably be limited by the quality of your speakers. 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)





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"What does that speaker sound like?" I would have to answer that the Eminence simply sounds like music."  
- **Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound - 2019**

"The Resolution is nonpareil at unearthing cloaked bass lines... Listening to bass, even on familiar recordings, through the Resolution is a constant journey of discovery" - **Alan Taffel, The Absolute Sound - 2018**

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Pictured: Loudspeakers finished in Burr Walnut

## POWER AMPLIFIERS



### CH Precision M1

**\$104,000/pr.**

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, Soudlution's, world-class electronics. Like Soudlution's 701/711 amplifiers, the M1 is ultra-fast on transients, ultra-high in resolution, ultra-low in noise and coloration, and quite beguilingly neutral in timbre. CH Precision's amp and preamp use no global negative feedback at their default setting (although users can add as much or as little NFB as they choose by means of menus accessed via the LED screen built into the amp's front panel). When the M1 is configured in its default position, JV reports that he would be hard put to choose between it and Soudlution's 711 in every regard save for bass and dimensionality, where the Soudlution still holds a considerable edge in weight, power, color, air, and body. 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 by a nose in these two areas. One thing is certain: Those shopping for the best in solid-state need to audition both these Swiss marques (and the MBL 9008 A and Constellation Hercules, as well). (259)

### 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 it never comes close to running hot, as Boulder employs advanced circuitry to deploy only as many watts as the music demands. 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)



### 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 Soudlution'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 at least as sonically impressive. Almost as powerful as the VAC



Signature 450iQ (338W into 8 ohms with twelve 6550 tubes, and around 400W with twelve KT150s), they equal or exceed the VAC amps in resolution, realism, and sheer timbral beauty. 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. JV's high-powered tube-amp reference. (269)



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## POWER AMPLIFIERS

### Soulution 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 Soulution 701s are mega-priced, but they also deliver mega-performance. (249)



### Constellation Hercules II

**\$190,000/pr.**

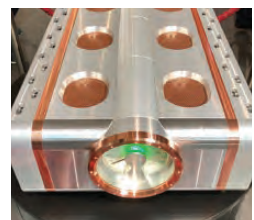
This new version of the 1000W Hercules monoblock is substantially improved in every way. The original delivered reference-quality performance, but with a somewhat polite bottom end. The II's bass is now spectacular, with plenty of heft, weight, and dynamic impact. Not surprisingly, the qualities for 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

**\$250,000/pr.**

The Relentless is Dan D'Agostino's statement amp. Look under the hood and you can see that no expense has been spared. Over a hundred glistening transistors and a whopping custom transformer that could power a nuclear submarine are the stars of the show. 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. You often hear reviewers say they turned up the volume and it got louder without compression, but that's not always been Jacob Heilbrunn's experience. In this case, it was. These powerhouses (1500W into 8 ohms, 3000W into 4 ohms, and 6000W into 2 ohms) amps 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. On piano or guitar or saxophone or just about any instrument, the Relentless has the ability to create a more holistic note, something closer to real life in its palpability and 3-D character. (forthcoming)



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## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS



PS Audio Sprout100



Cambridge Audio CXA80



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 computer audio and aptX Bluetooth music streaming. For all its humble size and appearance it's pure NAD. Firmly midrange-centered, 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. Although there's a little bit of a shaded ceiling over the top end, the D 3020 need make no apologies. The other argument is, hello, \$499—making it by most standards a small miracle of packaging and portability, and with a few exceptions a delight to use and listen to. (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 acquits itself excellently in nuance and resolution. With rock and driving jazz it displays a lot of punch, kick, drive, and swing. Subjectively, noise and distortion are extremely low, the presentation notable for its clarity and articulation without appearing in the least analytical. A tremendous bargain and a worthy successor to NAD's legendary 3020 integrated amplifier. (291)

### PS Audio Sprout100

\$599

JM was so delighted by the original li'l Sprout she purchased the review sample. So when she found out there was an updated and upgraded Sprout100, she was intrigued. Though its compact, retro-modern form factor remains the same, a few of the changes include a redesigned phono stage and headphone amp, a new higher-quality DAC (up to 128DSD and 384/24PCM), a tiny indicator LED, and a remote control. Oh, and twice the power at 100Wpc. JM was struck immediately by the Sprout100's ability to coax even more open spaciousness, lively musicality, detail, and low-end extension from the Air Tight Bonsais' single drivers (especially with the Sprout's “bass boost” option on). Expect big sound and even more bang for the buck. (289)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Cambridge Audio CXA80

\$999

Cambridge really stepped up its game with its suavely restyled and affordable CX Series. A rung above its lower-cost sibling the CXA60, the dual-mono, Class AB, 80Wpc CXA80 is ready for the digital world. With the CXA80's built-in Wolfson 24-bit/192kHz WM8740 DAC, computer audio is as close at hand as the USB input—or use the front-panel jack for portable players. Although it mysteriously lacks a display, which makes volume changes and input switching more a matter of faith than precision, you'll get over it, given the CXA80's smooth, relaxed sonic performance, and abundant headroom for more demanding loudspeakers. Includes a full-function remote control and headphone jack. (258)

### Yamaha AS801

\$999

Is there any other audio component with as many features as the AS801 amplifier? And it's not like the features were just thrown in to impress; the AS801 surprised reviewer Vade Forrester by how good it sounded driving the inefficient KEF LS50 speakers in his largish room. No, it didn't equal his far more expensive reference gear, but during a listening session several of his audio buddies said they derived genuine musical enjoyment from the system anchored by the Yamaha AS801 amplifier, and could happily live with it. Coming from a group of lifelong audiophiles, that's high praise indeed. The Yamaha AS801 looks good, sounds splendid, and has a long list of useful features at a price that makes it a bargain! (263)

### NuPrime IDA-8

\$1095

Sonically and functionally, JM found 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 well-conceived IDA-8 delivers substance with plenty of gusto—and does so from an astonishingly quiet background. Since NuPrime's founding, Jason Lim has continually sought to improve sonics through innovative technologies—in addition to offering high performance and value with respect to pricing. This amp exemplifies that approach. A great-sounding, stone-cold good deal. (263)





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**Rotel A14**

**\$1299**

The A14 amplifier has a moving-magnet phono stage, a very capable DAC that can play DSD and (some) PCM music files, an aptX Bluetooth connection, a front-panel USB connection so you can play the music stored on your smartphone, and a headphone amplifier to drive your favorite cans. It's rated at 80Wpc Class AB. The A14 amplifier's internal DAC uses an AKM DAC chip to play PCM files up to 384/32 and DSD256 files—but not MQA files. The A14 has a punchy bass with detailed mids and sweet highs. It also does a good job of tracking rapid changes in dynamics. Most surprising, however, is the truly excellent soundstaging, which competes well against some of the most expensive gear available today. Sometimes a Bluetooth connection is an afterthought, but the A14's sounds quite good. The internal DAC sounds better than the one in the matching CD14 CD player. (273)

**Rogue Audio Sphinx V2**

**\$1395 (\$1495 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 \$1300? 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 RD feels offers true world-class sonics. Includes a very fine discrete headphone amp and a phono section that is worth the asking-price all by itself. A volume remote is an option. The only snag reviewer RD encountered was a complete incompatibility with his Kimber PBJ interconnects, although this did not keep him from purchasing the review sample. (236)

**NuPrime IDA-16**

**\$1995**

A do-everything DAC coupled with a 200Wpc Class D integrated amplifier in a sleek package that would look good in any system, the IDA-16 plays music files ranging up to 384kHz PCM and DSD256—which includes all currently available albums. The amplifier has five digital inputs and one analog input, and an analog output to drive subwoofers. Although listenable right out of the box, with 150–200 hours of break-in, the IDA-16 becomes even more dynamic. Delicate, detailed highs are smooth, continuous, and very extended, though not at all peaky. Bass is also extended, with tons of impact. The midrange lacks just a smidgen of the detail present in other, more expensive amplifiers. The soundstage is quite wide, with instruments realistically distributed between the speakers. Voices are unstrained and pure-sounding, bespeaking low distortion. At \$1995, the IDA-16 provides a ton of value for the price. (252)

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## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### POWER AMPLIFIERS



Rogue Audio Sphinx V2



NuPrime IDA-16

### Rotel RA-1592

\$2499

The RA-1592 is everything TAS has come to expect from Rotel. Based on two current Rotel separates, the RC-1590 preamp and



RB-1582 mk2 amplifier, the RA-1592 operates in Class AB and outputs a hefty 200Wpc into 8 ohms. The preamp section offers a thoroughly modern rewrite on source connectivity, so analog and digital stalwarts will be equally satisfied. Sonically, the rich, balanced Rotel midrange is proudly on display. Its reserve power and dynamic headroom are suggestive of the famed RB-1090 hulkster, most especially in bass extension, slam, and pitch definition. Compared with top-tier competitors, there's a slight loss of mid/upper-treble air, but Rotel connects with a one/two punch of glitch-free performance paired with a level of connectivity that will appeal to listeners across the generational spectrum. (269)



### NAD Masters Series 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 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. The front panel is devoid of buttons, replaced by a touchscreen that automatically changes from system control functions to album art and song title. Sonically, the M10 has little character of its own, reproducing complex harmonics and textures with aplomb and low-level information with outstanding resolution. 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)

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## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

### Ayon Audio Orion II

**\$3910**

Tubes done right! Reviewer RD knows tube amplifiers can sound great but fears 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 (85Wpc), it can accept just about any digital or analog sources, and also offers RoomPerfect DSP room correction. The RoomPerfect system does a remarkable job of smoothing out and neutralizing what the room is doing to degrade the sound of your speakers, 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. Operating the TDAI 2170, including the room-correction setup, which needs to be done once only, couldn't be simpler. Moderate price, compact size, ease of use, flexibility, and truly remarkable sound are all right there at the touch of a few buttons. (253)



### Primare Prisma I35

**\$4995**

Never have integrated amps been asked to do so much musically and technically. But any way you want to listen, the I35 Prisma answers the call. The 150Wpc Class D integrated is teeming with connectivity—Wi-Fi and Ethernet for network-based storage and streaming services like Tidal, Bluetooth, and AirPlay. Equipped with its optional DAC stage it is capable of supporting up to 768kHz PCM and 22.4MHz DSD. (It can also be configured analog-only.) Sonically, it walks the straight and narrow with solid pitch in the bass, a full midrange, and a treble that doesn't etch or irritate. Its character veers slightly to the cooler side of the tonal spectrum, and transient behavior is swift and clean. Picking up the leading edge of a tambourine rattle, a trumpet blast, or even the fingernails of a classical guitarist is part of the enjoyment of living with the I35. Dynamically, it is explosive and superbly controlled. A rock-solid performer that excels in a highly competitive bracket. (294)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



### AVM Inspiration CS2.2

**\$5995**

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 CS2.2 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 CS2.2 can also be controlled by an Android or iOS device. (282)

### Hegel H390

**\$6000**

The Norwegian firm's integrated amplifiers have always been over-achievers, but the new H390 is, by a wide margin, Hegel's most impressive effort yet. With 250Wpc into 8 ohms (420Wpc into 4 ohms), higher current, and even greater bang for the buck than the H360 it replaces, the H390 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. Throw in network connectivity and streaming services via AirPlay, Spotify, or Roon, and the H390 is clearly the integrated to beat at this price. (H360 reviewed in 260)



### Atoll Electronique IN400SE

**\$6995**

Instantly likable and musically approachable, the IN400SE seems to beckon every loudspeaker system to "come on out and play." Outputting a hefty 160Wpc and equipped with a fine USB DAC, the Atoll supplies a firm foundation that gives every recording an immediate sense of stability and weight. While the Atoll sacrifices some bloom and air at the extremities, its opulent mids and potent bottom end are sufficient to give the top tier a run for the money. And visually the Atoll is unreservedly elegant, highlighted by its terraced heat sinks and matte-aluminum front panel. The Atoll IN400SE represents the kind of classic, purist audiophile virtues that know no nationality. A serious integrated amplifier that speaks "high end" with fluency. (268)





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## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

### Aesthetix Mimas

**\$7000**

The Mimas is, in a way, an old musical soul. Hip and striking with its clean precision machining and uncluttered design, this 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. Perhaps key to Mimas' distinctive style is how it places the musicians of an orchestra within the acoustic environment of the performance—asserting the prominence of the soundspace and then illuminating the musical images within the backdrop. The very definition of what we all seek from an integrated amplifier. (294)



### Pass Labs INT-150

**\$7150**

Pass Labs' first foray into the integrated amplifier arena has brought to market sixty pounds of 150Wpc, solid-state, aluminum-machined majesty. This powerhouse, which doubles its output into 4 ohms, offers neutrality tempered with pleasing warmth. It has an ease and fluidity that are not euphonically tube-like but emblematic of solid-state with a strong Class A bias. The INT-150 fleshes out vocalists and reveals the full physicality of power-singers, from deepest bass-baritone to lilting coloratura. Bass response is well-defined and highly controlled. Audiophiles who maintain LP and SACD collections will be especially rewarded by the INT-150's wealth of micro-dynamics, fluidity, and a spatiality that really play to the strengths of these enriched formats. It's a musical force of nature—a powerhouse design with a heart that should make anyone re-think the "separates" option. (184)



### Naim Uniti Nova

**\$7495**

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)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Micromega M-150

**\$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. Instrumental and vocal sonorities are consistently believable and the overall presentation, while quite detailed, is very much of a piece. (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)



### Yamaha A-S3000

**\$7999**

The A-S3000 represents a triumphant return to the high end for this venerable company. With classic aesthetics and a full complement of inputs, controls, and circuitry, including excellent tone controls (defeatable, of course), headphone amplifier, a truly outstanding phono stage (moving-magnet or moving-coil), and 100Wpc of clean, transparent, and dynamic power. Throughout the review period the A-S3000 was up to the most demanding source material, never betraying evidence of stress, strain, or effort. If someone asked PS to recommend a high-quality preamp and amplifier in a single box without a distinctive sound of its own, free from quirks and idiosyncrasies both sonic and functional, reliable, trouble-free, one that does just precisely what it's designed to do—which is transfer the source with as little alteration as possible to the speakers—the A-S3000 would be very high on any short list. (270)



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*GAT7-52 preamplifier*

## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

### Jeff Rowland Design Group Continuum S2

**\$9500 (\$9850 w/phono; \$9950 w/DAC)**

What do you get when you combine the Capri S2 preamp circuit and control features with Rowland'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)



### Devialet Expert 220 Pro

**\$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 Expert 220 Pro unique is Devialet's 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 loudspeakers. (298)



### 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 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. Even separates should beware. (243)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### 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. With musicality that is second to none, it operates at the outer limits of what is currently possible in today's integrated-amplifier market. (263)



### T+A PA 2500 R

**\$12,750**

The highboy integrated amp of T+A's vaunted R Series, 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. Clean and authoritative and a joy to operate, the PA 2500 has the style of a well-oiled machine, a rewarding "wheels and gears" nod to the past. 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 phonostage 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. 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. This is ultra-high-end on a smaller scale. (289)





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## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS



### Constellation Inspiration 1.0

**\$14,900**

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, as befits a solid-state amp that doesn't give an inch to suppress dynamics, or soften transient action, or cop out under bass demands. 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)



### Jadis DA88S MkII

**\$14,900**

The 60-watt Jadis integrated amplifier is no wallflower. It's an explosive performer that lays down the law with Jesuitical force. Couple its 60W with a phenomenally pristine presentation, and you have a sonic force of nature

that almost defies belief. The unit features both the (relatively) new KT120 tube and hand-wound transformers, both of which do much to account for its impressive reproduction of any genre of music. One myth that the Jadis helps dispel is that tube amplifiers can't properly reproduce bass. While the Jadis does not produce the very deepest notes, it excels at delivering a prodigious and harmonically rich bottom end that has a propulsive quality. For all its warmth and bloom, the Jadis never truncates or blunts transients. Quite the contrary. It delivers cymbal swishes or the blat of a trumpet with extreme precision. But above all, it is the sense that the Jadis came to play, the sheer wallop this unit delivers, that distinguishes it from many of its competitors. (253)

### MBL Noble N51

**\$17,600**

The N51 packs a powerful punch with 380Wpc and key tech features from Juergen Reis. While not inexpensive, the Noble electronics offer a solid middle ground that's an ideal match for MBL's superb omnidirectional speakers but should also be considered for use with other transducers. In JM's listening room, the N51 was a standout when driving the Magnepan 30.7 planars. 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. (287)



### Soudation 330

**\$22,500**

With its 330 integrated amplifier, Soudation 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 Soudation 330 comes standard with pre-amp and power amp sections (a phono board and/or DAC section are also available as separate options at additional cost). The 330 outputs 120Wpc into 8 ohms, which might not sound like a lot, but watts can be deceiving; the 330 uses an innovative voltage amplification stage, and its higher current and quality power and grip go a long way in both the amp's effortless drive capabilities across speaker loads and its superb sonics. JM has come to associate with Soudation components an exceedingly low noise floor, plenty of air, and an evenhanded ease in music reproduction. The 330 delivers plenty of solidity and power-range oomph, preventing music from sounding thin or threadbare but more textural, three-dimensional, and substantial. Highly recommended. (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)







**"...sound quality is in line with or better than speakers selling for three times the price and then some."**

*Ernie Fisher - The Inner Ear*

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Mini T



A1



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A3



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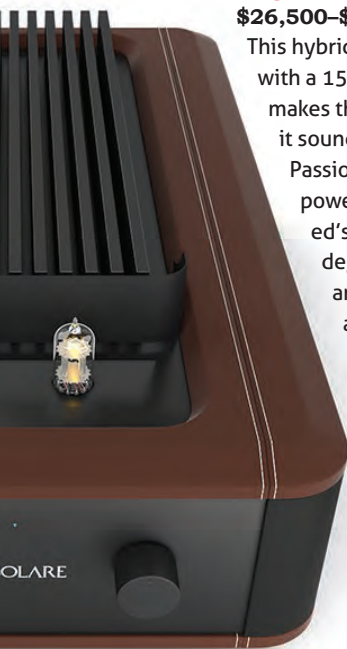


## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

### 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 leather-clad casework gives the Integrated a very different vibe than gear in metal boxes. As beautiful visually as it is musically. (280)



### Constellation Argo

**\$29,000**

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 \$26,500 it is now, by far, the least expensive way to gain access to them. Note that the Argo will soon support a phono stage and a DAC card, adding to its already impressive versatility and value. (253)



### Aavik Acoustics U-300

**\$30,000**

This sleek and futuristic integrated amplifier is the brainchild of Lars Kristensen and Michael Børresen, introduced through their company Aavik Acoustics. The "U" in the name stands for "unity," while the 300, not surprisingly, represents power output at 8 ohms. Pumping out a substantial 600Wpc into a 4-ohm load, stable into 2 ohms, the U-300 was conceived to be competitive with the best high-end separates and is gorgeous to behold. The size of this amplifier is deceiving. It puts out enough clean power to compete with some of the largest and most powerful monoblock amplifiers on the market, whether solid-state or tube in design. The excellent sound produced by the U-300 shows that, if properly implemented, Class D can compete sonically with any circuit topology. The chassis also contains a very high quality internal DAC and a built-in state-of-the-art discrete RIAA phono stage, making it a complete audio system lacking only turntable, digital transport, and loudspeakers. Powerful and supremely transparent, sounding nearly as full-bodied as tubes but with greater speed, the U-300 would be at home in the finest of systems. (265)



### CH Precision I1

**\$38,000–\$50,000 depending on configuration**

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 lie 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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## TABLE-TOP ALL-IN-ONE 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. Available in six different finishes, it may look cute and colorful on the outside, but it's serious on the inside: 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 3.1" x 8.3" x 2.3" enclosure is a wonder—and a testament to clever design. (265)



### Riva Arena/Festival

**\$249/\$499**

These products may appear to be two more, mass-market, Bluetooth speaker systems, but look (or better yet, listen) a little closer, and you'll discover that they are designed like high-end audio systems in miniature. The smaller Arena sounds much larger than its size would suggest, with wide dynamics, a large soundstage, deep bass, and an engaging musicality. The larger Festival takes the Arena's performance to another level in bass extension, impact, and soundstaging. When positioned with a wall behind it, the Festival sounds nearly as full range as a pair of floorstanding speakers. It can also produce SPLs of an astonishing 106dB. Either product can be part of a wireless multiroom system, with connection via Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, AirPlay, and DLNA. The Festival offers integral streaming via Pandora and Spotify Connect, or from Tidal on your phone, and supports up to 192kHz/24-bit sources. Tremendous performance and value. (forthcoming)

### Technics Ottava SC-C50/C70

**\$799/\$999**

These two table- or stand-mount, AIO digital/powered speakers 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 pre and power amps. The multiple drivers and channels per unit create the illusion of a larger soundstage than you usually get from such closely spaced cones. The sound, while entry-level, has some distinct high-end qualities, which is more than one might expect from a system at this price point. The SC-C70 also incorporates a CD player, AM/FM tuner, and headphone jack. Though the Ottavas plug in with an AC power cable, they can be moved around the house since they are in a single chassis and lightweight. Each unit can be configured as a left or right channel for wider stereo separation. (forthcoming)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

## ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEMS

### 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 to JM 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)



## PREAMPLIFIERS

### Audio by Van Alstine Transcendence 10RB

**\$899**

The Transcendence 10 RB vacuum-tube preamp reviewed by Drew Kalbach 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 his 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)



### Brown Audio Labs SP-1B

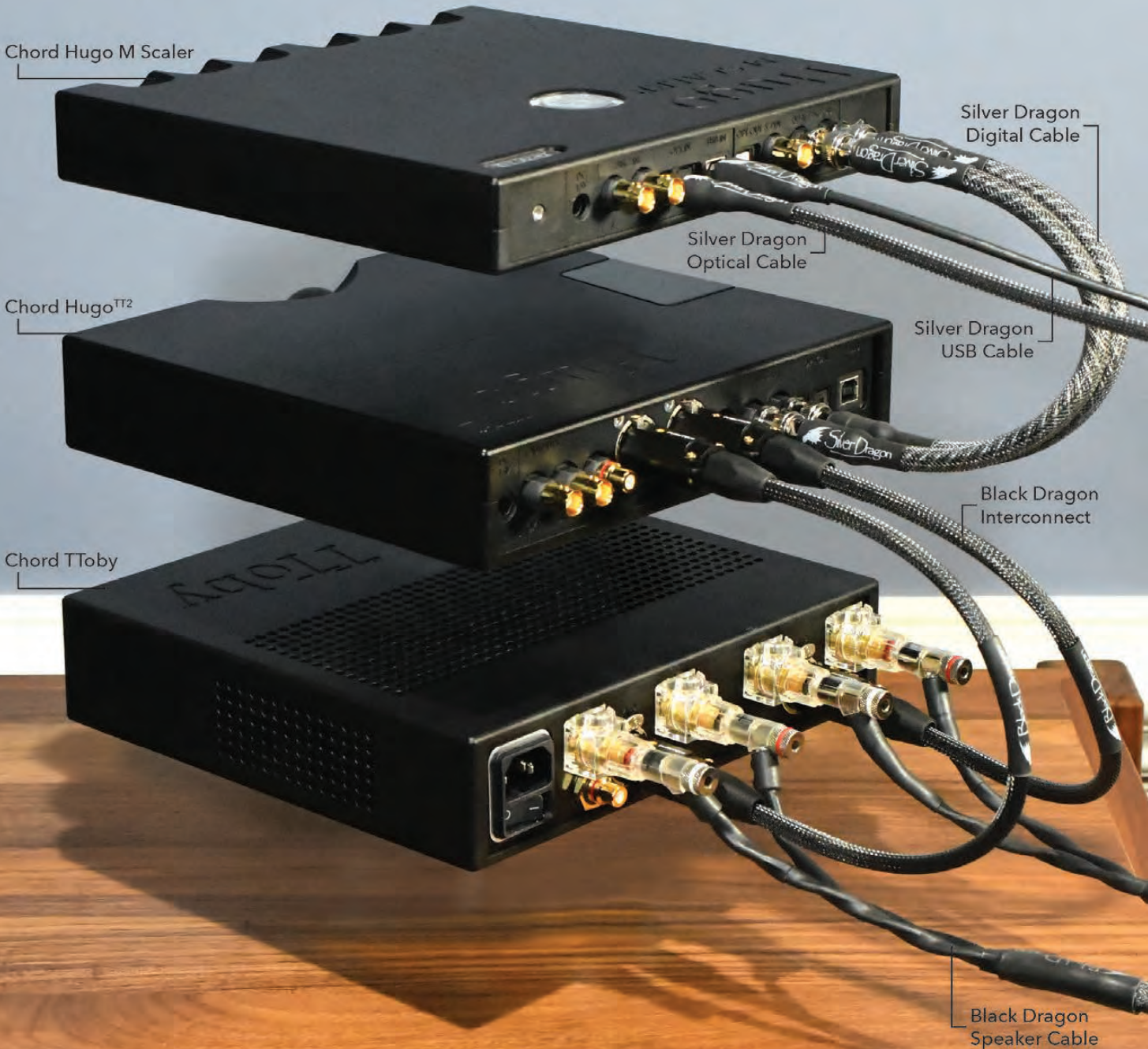
**\$1150**

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. Transparency galore! If you're searching for an affordable tube preamp with a killer phono section, the Brown Audio Labs SP-1B is it. (264)





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**Tortuga Audio LDR3.V25**

**\$1195**

For many audiophiles the “best” preamplifier is the one that does the least damage to the signal. If you are among them, the Tortuga Audio LDR3.V25 could be your best and your last preamplifier. Sure, it may not be flashy-looking, and it’s not going to add warmth or euphony to your system, but if you want the ultimate in transparency you will be hard-pressed, regardless of how large your budget, to find a preamplifier, passive or active, that delivers your music with less editorialization than the Tortuga Audio LDR3.V25. (258)

**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: two cascaded gain stages followed by a 12AU7 dual-triode connected in parallel and configured as a cathode-follower buffer. 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. It responds well to vintage tube substitutions, and so configured, it is without a doubt the best-sounding AVA preamp DO has auditioned to date. Recently added was a full function remote and silver faceplate (245)

**Rogue Audio RP-5**

**\$3495**

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-5 is a component that should tempt a lot of people to go Rogue. (260)

**Rogue Audio RP-7**

**\$4995**

The RP-7 is the balanced version of the estimable RP-5, and like a family member that attended finishing school the RP-7 has taken the musical voice of the RP-5 and burnished its performance in areas that were already very very good. What stands out is the “rose-blush complexion” that warms the mids. But the RP-7 goes further and achieves an overall tonal balance that is discernably more neutral and fleshed out, with more dynamic guts, a sweeter top end, a heavier midrange spine, and greater fluidity and polish. 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. Not just a “signature” edition, the Rogue Audio RP-7 represents a significant upgrade over the excellent RP-5. (283)



**Aesthetix Calypso/Janus Signature**

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

The stalwart Calypso 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)



**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)





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### Bryston BP26

**\$5360 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. Bryston's famous 20-year warranty gives buyers assurance of long-term reliability. (269)

### 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 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. A linestage preamp that should make its competitors blush with embarrassment, the XP-12 joins its amplifier partner, the XA25, as an outright bargain. (286)



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**Zesto Audio Leto 1.5**

**\$7500**

Cut from the same sonic cloth as Zesto's Andros 1.2 phono stage, the Leto is an all-tube design that represents classic valve sound brought up to date, boasting all the roundedness, dimensionality, and body of tubes without their wayward tonal anomalies and relatively high noise. Tonal balance is neutral, but the really distinguishing characteristic is a wonderful freedom from the usual sorts of sonic hype and electro-mechanical artifacts. It's transparent, detailed, fast, and incisive. A naturalness that soon becomes addictive is the order of the day, though the Leto 1.5 is also lively in dynamics and lifelike in its vividness and vitality, with a difficult to define impression of texture that makes it sound organic in its musicality and realism. Also includes a head-  
phone amp. (230)

**Lamm Industries LL2.1 Deluxe**

**\$7990 (\$7690, standard version)**

A direct replacement for the LL2, LAMM's long-standing, entry-level, tube lineage preamp is an all-tube design, featuring both tube rectification (6X4) and amplification. Harmonic colors are vivid and saturated to a level approaching the real thing with admirable fidelity. The LL2.1's primary concession is in the area of soundstage transparency. It also requires tube-rolling to achieve optimal performance at the frequency extremes. The LL2.1 is extremely easy to live with and integrate into an existing system. According to DO, when outfitted with the right tube complement, it captures 80% of cost-no-object performance for a fraction of the price. (198)

**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 (\$13,500). 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)



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**REGA** Planar 8  
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**VPI** Prime Signature  
Turntable



**PRO-JECT** The Classic SB  
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### Constellation Inspiration Preamp 1.0

**\$11,000**

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

**\$12,500**

With its all-tube output stage, all-tube rectification, a fixed-bias, current-regulated power supply, and transformer-coupled outputs, you might expect the gorgeously built, relatively demure 3100 to sound classically "tube-y." But you would be entirely wrong. JV has not heard an all-tube linestage that outdoes this one in speed, resolution, soundstaging, and grip. Sounding like a top-tier solid-state linestage (only with added lifelike bloom, air, and dimensionality), the 3100 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)

### MBL Noble N11

**\$14,600**

A bit on the bottom-up side (like all MBL electronics), 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 (as noted), a little soft and sweet on top, a little lower in overall resolution than its \$50k+ competition, but always enjoyable, powerful, and musical, and, given the right source and pairing, fully capable of a realism that raises goosebumps and of 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—and particularly to those with planar or omni loudspeakers. (287)



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**Jeff Rowland Design  
Group Corus**

**\$14,900**

The Corus excels on many levels. For starters, it is visually stunning with its laser-cut front-panel and chassis machined from a solid aluminum block. Then there's the tasteful display that gives you all the information you need, but in an elegant way. And when you turn the volume control, the Corus interprets the speed of the volume control's rotation and adjusts its ballistics so that as you slow the rotation the volume steps

become finer. But great cosmetics, build-quality, and ergonomics are just the beginning of the Corus' appeal. This lineage has an extremely refined sound that doesn't call attention to itself as being sonically spectacular. Rather, it delivers one of those presentations where you immediately find yourself immersed in the musical expression, not the sound. Very smooth and unfatiguing, yet richly detailed—with deep and muscular bass. (228)

**FM Acoustics FM 155-MKIIR**

**\$17,750**

Like its companion pieces (the FM 108-MKII monoblocks and the FM 122-MKII phono stage), this tiny, beautifully made, Class A lineage preamplifier is one of FM's most affordable products. Like the amp and phono stage, the FM 155 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 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 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)



Evolution One

The Evolution One is the embodiment of all the latest and best technology NuPrime has developed. It has Class-A like warmth and naturalness with an enveloping ambience that no other competing Class-D amplifier can recreate.

MSRP \$3995



With the Evolution One, NuPrime has made several world-first design advancements:

- 1MΩ input impedance which presents an easier load to the preamp for less harmonic distortion and phase delay.
- 700KHz switching Class-D module gains greater resolution.
- Power Output (rated): 240W @ 8 Ohms, 330W @ 4 Ohms
- Gain: x28
- THD+N: 0.01%
- Frequency Response: 0Hz to 50kHz (-3dB)

With perfectly matched Evolution DAC

Evolution DAC

An unprecedented level of presence, detail, resolution, and clarity in sound characteristic.

MSRP \$3250

The power circuit has been redesigned from the ground up using C-Core transformers and AC filter, in addition to the DAC circuit. It utilizes one of the world's highest performing 32-bit audio DAC, the ES9038PRO, and NuPrime PSRC IC chip to decode and provide sampling rate up/down conversion from PCM 44.1kHz to PCM 768kHz and DSD64 to DSD512



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**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 pre-amp that may well prove to be all things to music lovers and audiophiles alike. (223)



**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 line-stage-only version sports five pairs of standard line inputs. The full-function model adds a tubed phono stage 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. Of all the preamps that have been in GH's system, it is the one that most wisely balances the oft-times contradictory qualities of superior drive and great finesse. (224)



**Constellation Revelation Pictor**

**\$19,900**

All three models in Constellation's Revelation series (the Pictor preamp, the Andromeda phono stage, and the 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 Revelation 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)



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**Boulder 1110**

**\$21,000**

Boulder's 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)

**Zanden Audio Systems 3000mk2**

**\$23,000**

The all-glass-powered Zanden Classic trio (3000mk2 linestage, 1200mk3 phono-stage, and 9600mk2 monoblock power amp) 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-level recordings. This consistent listenability is one of the Zanden Classic series' sonic virtues. It is not a typical overlay of tubey-ness; indeed, for a tube linestage the Zanden 3000mk2 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 3000mk2 (particularly in combination with its sister phono-stage 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. (293)



**Audionet Pre G2**

**\$23,350**

With the Pre G2's rated bandpass of 0–2MHz (-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 variation 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 GW has auditioned. 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)



**MBL 6010D**

**\$23,800**

It's been around for decades, but like everything else that Jeurgen Reis has designed, the 6010D was and is so far ahead of the curve—technically and sonically—that most audio engineers are still playing catch-up. Not only does the 6010D 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. One of JV's references. (forthcoming)



**Balanced Audio Technology Rex II**

**\$24,995**

BAT designer Victor Khomenko pulled out all the stops

in building this flagship preamplifier, the heart and soul of any system. Khomenko, one of the most ingenious minds in audio, hails from Russia, where he began building equipment as a lad out of spare parts that he retrieved from industrial dumps. Today he has a wealth of premium parts at his disposal, including amorphous-core output transformers and oil capacitors, as well as the mighty 6H30 tube, eight of which are deployed for high-current delivery in the Rex II. This preamp's ability to drive low-impedance loads is sensational. It has a powerful, driving, and extremely linear sound. The timbral qualities of the preamp lean slightly to the refulgent side. But if the magic, as audiophiles are wont to say, resides in the midrange, then the Rex II provides it. (250)



**Soulution 520**

**\$26,000**

Until the 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 phono-stages 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)





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**Lamm Industries L2.1 Reference**

**\$26,590**

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 7.5 lineage preamplifier has always been a solid performer, but its new incarnation is far and away the best VTL has produced. The revised 7.5 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. If you already own a 7.5 preamp, upgrading it is a no-brainer. And if you're contemplating taking the plunge for a new preamplifier, an audition might be all that it takes to entice you to leap. (222)



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## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### PREAMPLIFIERS

#### Absolare 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. (234)



#### Constellation Virgo III

**\$32,000**

It may seem odd to call a \$32k 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 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 for a fraction of the Reference Series’ price. (234)

#### 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)



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## PREAMPLIFIERS



### Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Momentum

**\$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)

### 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)



### Pass Labs Xs

**\$45,000**

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 every 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)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### CH Precision L1

**\$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 Solution 725) has none of the odd-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)



### Lamm Industries LL1.1

**\$51,990**

This four-chassis, dual-mono preamplifier is that rare breed that strikes a near-perfect balance between transient attack and instrumental body, and does so from top to bottom in both frequency response and amplitude. Its ability to deliver speed plus sustain at all dynamic levels is extraordinary. The result, said reviewer PB, is near-perfect timbre and, if the rest of your system is up to it, nearly ideal imaging. (208)

### Solution 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 phonostage) 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 Solution amps, the 725 is a veritable sonic thrill ride. JV's solid-state reference. (249)







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- John Atkinson, Technical Editor, March 2019  
Montreal Audio Fest Show Report (Stereophile.com)



Gold 300



Gold 100



Gold 300 5.1

**PREAMPLIFIERS**

**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)



**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**

**\$85,000**

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. (260)

**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 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 asynchronous 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. Sold factory-direct. (256)







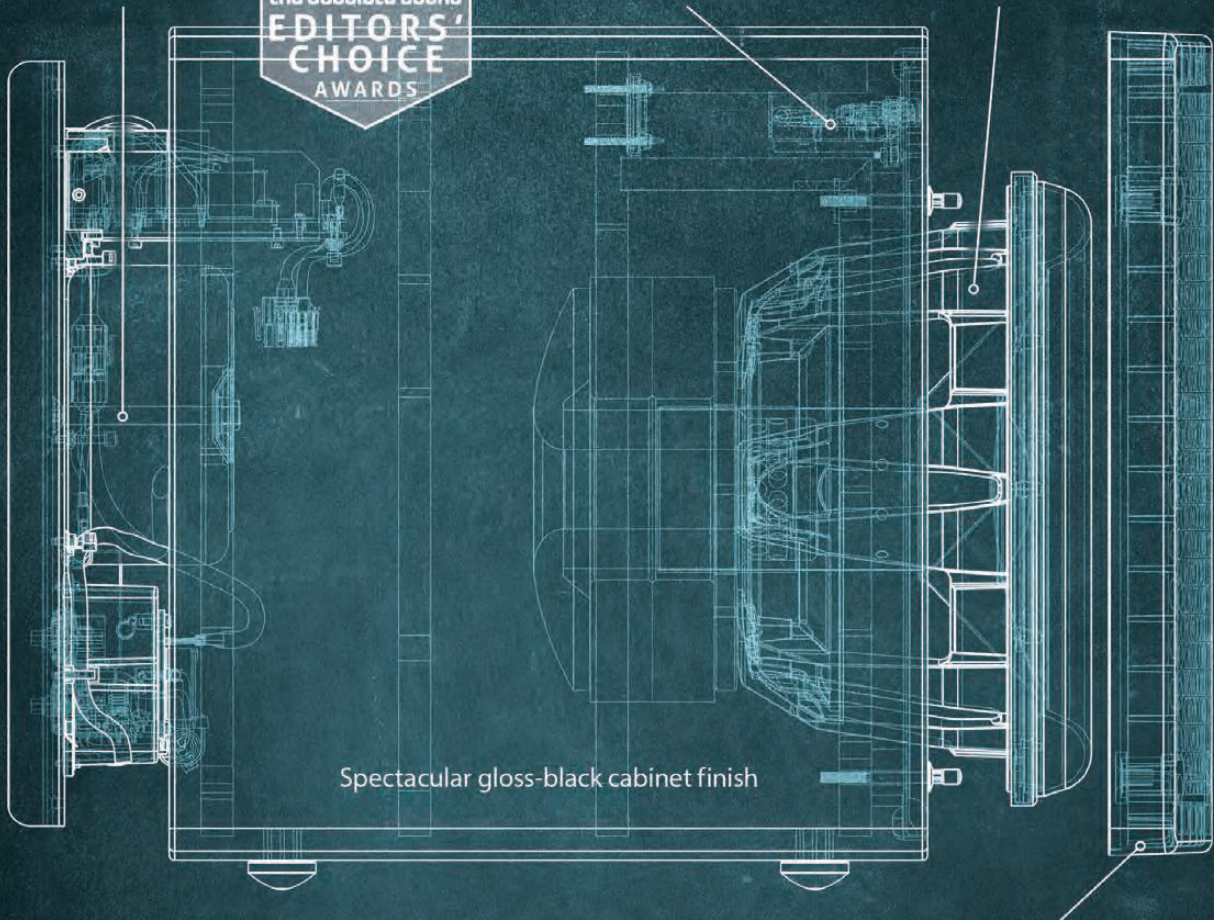
# Fathom<sup>®</sup> f113v2 Subwoofer

Massive  
3000 Watt  
Switching Power  
Amplifier



Sophisticated digital signal  
processing, including  
JL Audio's Digital Automatic  
Room Optimization System  
(D.A.R.O.)

Ultra-high excursion,  
JL Audio<sup>®</sup> 13W7-HT,  
our most potent  
subwoofer driver



Spectacular gloss-black cabinet finish

Built in USA  
with Global Components



Net Weight:  
133 lbs. (60 kg)

Removable, Black Cloth  
Grille is included

THE BENCHMARK





**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 Mytek Brooklyn was the first non-Meridian-branded DAC that supports MQA. Because of that, every time it's been shown, whether at a consumer or an industry event, it has generated practically standing-room-only interest. 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)



**DIGITAL PRODUCT FEATURES & FUNCTIONS**

Network: WL=Wireless, E=Ethernet, O=Optional

Model Name	Vol. Ctrl.	Analog In	DSD	MQA	Streaming	Network	U.S. Price
AudioQuest DragonFly Red	Y			Y			\$200
AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt	Y			Y			\$300
Resonance Labs Herus	Y		Y				\$350
iFi Audio xDSD	Y		Y	Y			\$399
Pro-Ject Pre Box S2	Y	Y	Y	Y			\$399
NuPrime DAC-9	Y	Y	Y				\$795
Monarchy Audio NM24	Y	Y					\$1,590
NuPrime DAC-10H	Y	Y	Y				\$1,795
Chord Electronics Qutest			Y				\$1,895
Mytek Digital Brooklyn	Y	Y	Y	Y			\$2,195
Wyred 4 Sound DAC-2v2	Y		Y				\$2,299
Schiit Audio Yggdrasil							\$2,399
Bryston BDA-3			Y			E	\$3,495
NAD Masters Series M12	Y	O		Y	Y	E, WL opt.	\$3,849
Anthem STR	Y	Y	Y				\$3,999
DiDit High-End 212se	Y						\$4,000
Chord Electronics Hugo TT 2	Y		Y				\$5,795
Mytek Digital Manhattan II	Y	Y	Y	Y	O	E opt.	\$5,995
PS Audio DirectStream	Y		Y	O	O	E	\$5,995
Playback Designs Merlot			Y				\$6,500
Mojo Audio Mystique 3v							\$7,555
Ayon Audio Stealth	Y	Y	Y				\$8,100
AVM Ovation SD 6.2	Y	Y	Y		Y	E, WL	\$11,490
dCS Bartók			Y	Y	Y	E	\$13,500
Bel Canto Design Black EX	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	E	\$13,999
Berkeley Alpha DAC Ref 3	Y			Y			\$22,000
Viola Audio Labs Crescendo	Y						\$22,500
CH Precision C1	Y	O	Y			E opt.	\$32,000
T+A SDV 3100 HV	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	E	\$37,500
MSB Technology Reference	Y	O	Y	O	O	E	\$39,500



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



### NAD Masters Series M12

**\$3849**

The latest generation in NAD's Masters Series, the M12

preamp/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)

### 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—on a readable-from-across-the-room, thin-film-resistor display—is intuitive and easily mastered. The latest (Genesis) version of Anthem Room Correction 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 phono stage with four selectable equalization curves other than the standard RIAA, and the preamp has an analog bypass option. (298)

### 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)



## PREAMP/DACS



### 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)

### AVM Ovation SD6.2

**\$11,490**

The AVM Ovation SD6.2 is a serious new entrant in today's world of multi-functional 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 SD6.2 exceptional is its musicality. The Ovation SD6.2 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 DAC/Control Preamplifier

**\$13,990**

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 Bel Canto also offers special provisions for using a subwoofer and can be controlled via an app. 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 CS8.2



Viola Audio Crescendo

### AVM Ovation CS8.2

**\$17,990**

If you look at photographs of the AVM CS6.2, it looks almost exactly like the CS8.2. That is because the 8.2 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 6.2 and the 8.2 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 8.2 proved to be a refreshingly musical experience. When pitted against a separates' system with approximately the same overall price-tag, the AVM 8.2 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 8.2. (282)

### Viola Audio Laboratories Crescendo

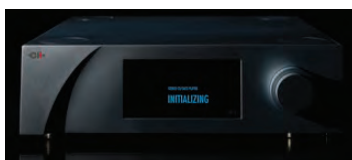
**\$22,500**

Machined from a solid block of aluminum, the visually stunning Crescendo has no visible front-panel buttons. Instead, the unit is controlled via a supplied Apple iTouch. Moreover, the Crescendo is unusual for a high-end preamp in that it incorporates a DAC. But it's the Crescendo's sound quality that sets it apart. The transparency, the sense of nothing coming between you and the music, the sensational treble resolution without a touch of the analytical, the wide dynamic expression, and absolutely sensational bass vault the Crescendo into world-class territory. Although it may be Viola's least expensive preamplifier, the Crescendo is fully competitive with many other companies' higher-priced offerings. (243)

### CH Precision C1

**From \$32,000, 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)



## RECEIVERS

### Yamaha R-N803

**\$799**

The Yamaha R-N803 is two-channel network receiver with built-in Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, a phono stage, 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. The R-N803 isn't magic, but it doesn't have to be. What it does, it does pretty well, and it happens to do nearly everything. From digital to analog, the R-N803 is the perfect gateway into high-end audio at a price well below that of separate components. (286)



## PHONOSTAGES

### Schiit Audio Mani

**\$129**

Sporting the 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 Labs have taken the plunge into manufacturing analog hardware: two turntables and two companion phono stages, including the \$299 StudioPhono. 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. Reviewer Julie Mullins enjoyed its 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)



Schiit Audio Mani



MoFi Electronics StudioPhono





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ACOUSTIC



HORNSECTION COVERING 8 OCTAVES  
107 dB SENSITIVITY  
SOFT MESH MEMBRANE  
HORN SUBWOOFER WITH DSP PROCESSING

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Audio by Van Alstine Vision Q



Tritschler Precision Audio TPAD 1000



Channel Islands Audio PEQ-1 MKII



Moon 310LP

### 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)

### 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

**\$1000**

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)



### 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)



### 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)



# THE NEW BLACK

Introducing new loudspeaker brand with BØRRESEN 01, 02 and 03. "Danish designer and developer Michael Børresen has created the three loudspeakers and we all like what we see and hear" says Lars Christensen, CEO of BØRRESEN. "The drivers is completely new design and some of the technologies have never been seen before -like the iron free magnet system of the midrange/woofer that allows you to listen to the music without the veil we are all used to listen to on "normal" speakers. Beside this, Michael has also succeeded in designing a completely new ribbon planar tweeter with extreme efficiency and frequency range. The weight of the membrane is only one hundred of a gram!"

"The cabinets are with a revolutionary airflow system that has allowed us to design some very compact and elegant cabinets, without the negative effects normally associated with ventilated constructions like bass reflex systems. This system also has the positive effect that makes the speakers very easy to integrate into almost any room. You simply can't believe your own ears when you feel the power output and hear the transients and details. This is truly a new reference for high end speakers. I believe that that we have an unlimited potential with what we have created here". **Go to [www.borresen-acoustics.com](http://www.borresen-acoustics.com) for more information.**



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BØRRESEN 01



BØRRESEN 02



BØRRESEN 03



### Lehmannaudio Decade

**\$2099**

Decade brings Lehmannaudio's "A" game to the analog LP listening experience. And it does so without fanfare or a "watch this" level of fireworks. Paired with its robust outboard PWX II power supply, the Decade is a highly configurable phono stage that makes the vast majority of cartridges feel welcome. Along with a very low noise floor and quiet backgrounds, the Decade's central virtue is its uncanny tonal balance and musicality. It's highly articulate and responsive on top, and has the ability to place images just so on its expansive soundstage. Like the original Black Cube of years ago, the Decade reminds us all over again of just how musically rewarding it is to be a devotee of vinyl playback. (250)

### 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)



### 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**

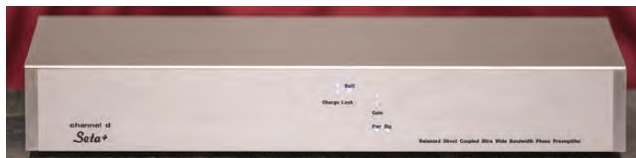
European Audio Team (E.A.T.) has taken the ECC83 dual-triode tube and merged it with solid-state electronics to create the E-Glo S mm/mc phono stage. When it is coupled with the LPS external linear power supply, the E-Glo S's performance improves, resulting in increased listening pleasure. Sonically, the E-Glo S/LPS combo produces a consistently easygoing sound that never ventures 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. (forthcoming)



### 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)



### 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 phono stage. 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)





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## PHONOSTAGES

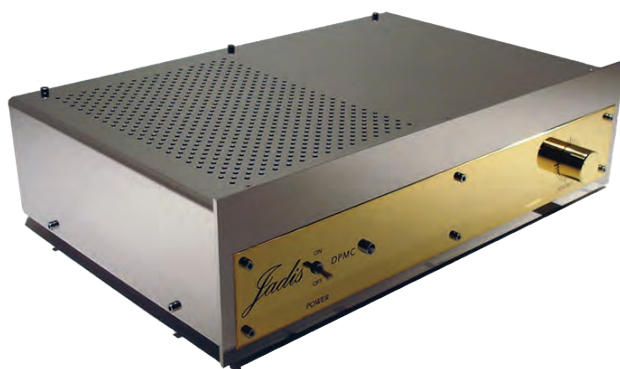
### Zesto Audio Andros 1.2

\$4700

Zesto Audio's Andros 1.2 vacuum-tube phono preamplifier is one of the loveliest-sounding electronic components PS has ever reviewed, almost miraculously seeming to exhibit no readily discernable electromechanical artifacts: unbelievably smooth and velvety; harmonically rich, full, and textured; marvelously rounded, tactile, and dimensional, with great body and solidity; and completely natural in its musicality and its absolute freedom from any sort of the usual sonic hype, audiophile-style. A few competing phonostages may be a tiny bit more dynamic or detailed but they lack the Andros' musical authority. The circuit is a combination of classic tube technology and up-to-date



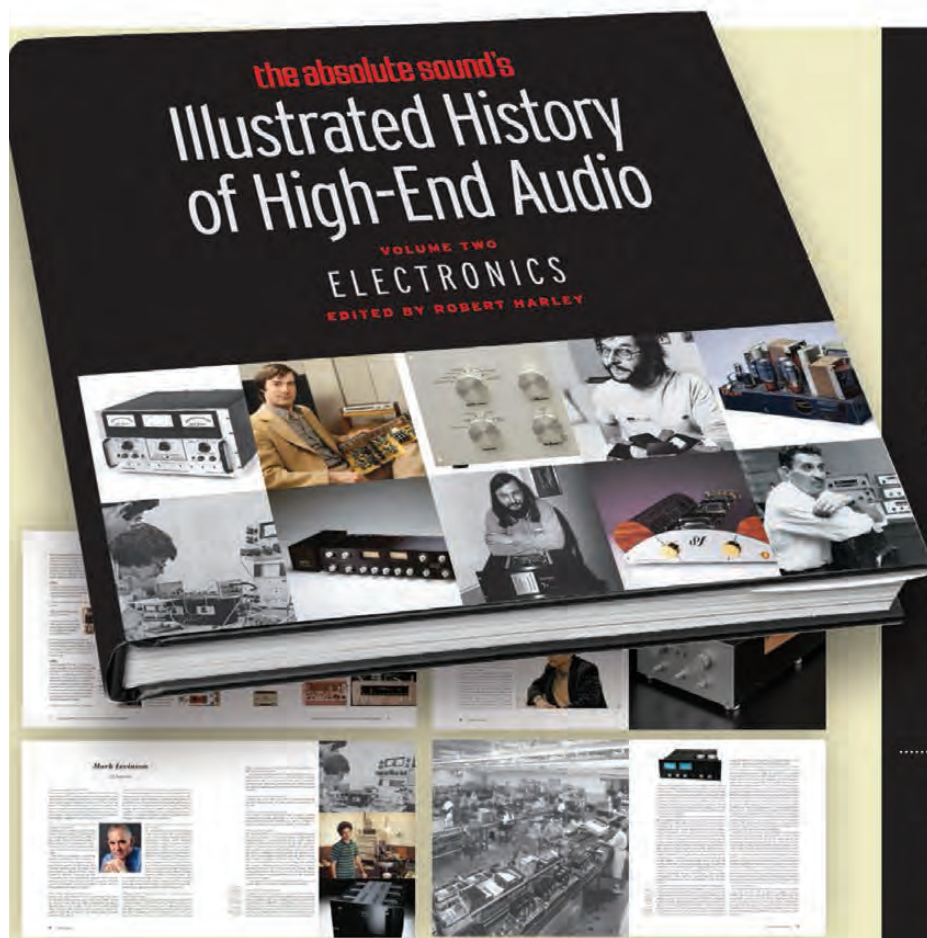
thinking; both mm's and mc's are accommodated (with several loading options for the latter). One reason for its freedom from "electronic" sound as such may be the use of transformers in the mc stage, which PS has always believed makes for more natural-sounding reproduction. (222)



### Jadis DPMC

\$5995

The DPMC is the entry-level phono preamplifier in a lineup that includes the JP80MC, probably Jadis' best-known preamplifier. The single phono input is intended to accommodate both mm and mc cartridges. There's plenty of gain (66dB) to handle even low-output moving coils, but the input impedance is fixed at 47k ohms, a serious limitation for many mc cartridges. The DPMC excels in creating the illusion of a spacious soundstage. Image specificity is first-class, allowing individual spatial outlines in an ensemble to shine through the mix. Expect the best of tube sound: vivid tonal colors and textures with exceedingly low levels of grain. Yet, there's plenty of transient speed in evidence with sufficient lucidity to allow retrieval of low-level detail. This is one of those rare components that can pull you into the music. It is able to communicate the music's pace and rhythmic drive to a degree that is exceptional at any price. (251)



## New TAS book!

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The second volume in TAS' *History of High-End Audio* series, this lavishly illustrated, 336-page landmark book celebrates the high-end's most iconic electronics manufacturers, including:

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## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### ModWright Instruments PH 150 Reference

**\$7900**

With the 2015 release of its hybrid, two-chassis Reference PH 150 phono stage, 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)



### Zanden Audio Model 120

**\$8375**

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)

### Esoteric E-02

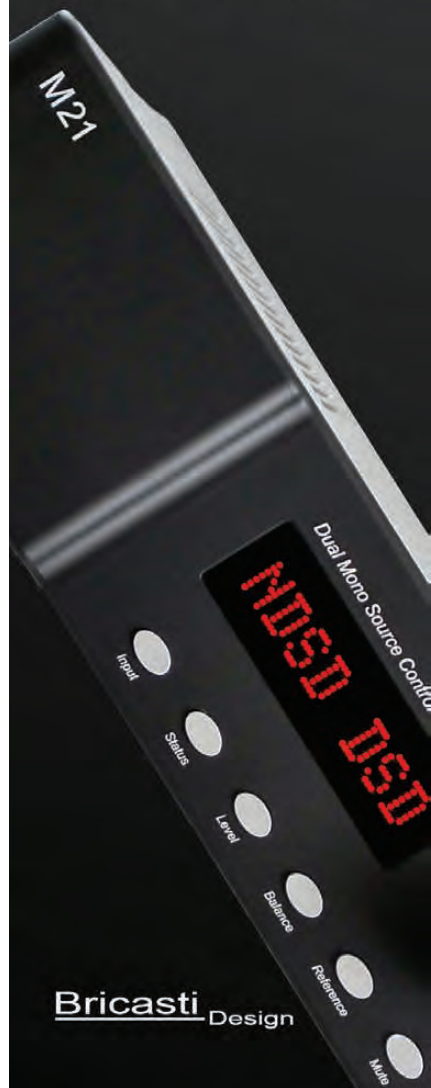
**\$9000**

Esoteric's top-of-the-line, reference phono stage, 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 which reminded reviewer Allan Moulton of other reference solid-state phono stages from Boulder and Constellation that are three to seven 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 phono stage that AM has heard that can maintain this trust. (294)



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### 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 phonostage 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 supply 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 phonostages, 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 phonostage design. (263)



### Lamm Industries LP2.1 Deluxe

**\$10,990 (\$10,690, standard version)**

A significant upgrade of the LP2, which was Lamm Industries' entry-level phonostage 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)

### Zesto Audio T ssera

**\$12,000**

The Greek word *t ssera* refers to the number four. The name is fitting in function since the Andros T ssera phonostage 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 phonostage 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)



Lamm Industries LP2.1 Deluxe



Zesto Audio T ssera



### Moon 810LP

**\$13,000**

The 810LP is technically impressive, particularly its heroic power-supply design and vibration-isolation measures. It's also solidly built, and offers a wide array of gain and loading options that makes optimizing its performance for any cartridge a snap. With sound quality that is world-class by any measure, the 810LP combines a dead-quiet background, a pristine clarity of timbre, outstanding dynamics, and an expansive and well-defined soundstage. Even under the microscope of the Magico Q7 Mk II loudspeaker, the 810LP impressed not just with its audiophile attributes, but with how musically compelling it made LP listening. RH's reference. (231)



### FM Acoustics FM 122-MKII

**\$13,975**

A tiny Class A phonostage (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 LPs 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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Ragnarok, Yggdrasil



Modi 3



Magni 3



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Lyr 3



Ragnarok



Lyr 3



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\* Disclaimer: this is not a complete list. We're lazy and don't always keep track of all the awards. We also didn't put in a bunch that we could announce by the time this ad hits. Hey, we're engineers. We appreciate the awards, but we'd rather be designing new stuff. So we'll go back to that.



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### Constellation Revelation Andromeda

**\$19,900**

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 ohms 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)

### 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 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 ICs 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 phonostages JV has auditioned. TAS' 2018 Phonostage of the Year. (290)



### Zanden Audio Systems 1200mk3

**\$25,000**

When JV heard the original version of the tube-powered Zanden 1200 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 square footage 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 1200 was its bass range, which was a mite fat and plummy in the way that tube gear then sounded. The latest iteration of the 1200 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 1200mk3 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 1200mk3, which is one of the finest tube phonostages on the market. (293)



### CH Precision P1

**\$31,000 (X1, \$17,000)**

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)



### 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

**\$35,000**

When it comes to resolution, pure and simple, this two-box solid-state preamp 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 Soudution 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)



### Silver Rock Toroidal

**\$39,750**

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)



Silver Rock Toroidal



Soudution 755

### Soudution 755

**\$72,000**

At the moment JV uses three superb phonostages—the Audio Consulting Silver Rock, the POY-award winning Constellation Perseus, and, the newest arrival, the Soudution 755. Although the Silver Rock and the Perseus have considerable strengths, the Soudution 755 seemingly combines their virtues, 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 Soudution 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 Soudution has yet made. (272)

### VAC Statement Phono Stage

**\$80,000**

You're really gonna have to be devoted to vinyl (and to madcap spending) to afford this two-chassis, all-tube (six 12AX7s, two E88CC/6922s) 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 phonostages so often do. You will hear none of the slight compression or outright clipping at very very loud levels on fortissimos or hard transients 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, the Statement has the best low and high end of any tube phonostage JV has heard. (263)





# "Supremely Musical..."

*"The Vandersteen Model Seven Mk II loudspeakers and M7 High-Pass Amplifiers are very easy to listen to, never any fatigue even after listening for many hours, the articulation is fabulous along with a marvelous ambience and a wide-open soundstage. I love the way musical cues seem to jump out of the mix. This Vandersteen system is supremely musical."*

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## CD/SACD PLAYERS



Rotel CD14



Marantz SA8005



### NAD C 546BEE

**\$549**

Given how fast music servers have taken over the world of high-end audio, there seems to be something almost quaint, even Luddite, in a mere compact-disc player. Yet truth be told, the vast majority of reviewer Paul Seydor's listening remains hard media, i.e., CDs, SACDs, and vinyl. Though lukewarm about this new CD player's predecessor, the C545, PS found this new C 546BEE lively, engaging, dynamic, and fully involving. (Hardly a surprise, as the C 546 represents a completely new circuit, including the use of the 24-bit, high-resolution Wolfson digital-to-analog converter chip.) Indeed, the NAD sounded uncommonly similar to his reference Marantz SA8004 CD/SACD player, except for its ever so slightly crisper overall presentation, greater recovery of detail (especially when it comes to matters like ambience), and somewhat blacker backgrounds. (291)

### Rotel CD14

**\$599**

The CD14 CD player doesn't try to be anything other than a CD player. It uses a highly regarded Wolfson DAC chip, which is 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 that would allow you 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)

### Marantz SA8005

**\$1199**

This two-channel-only SACD/Red Book player boasts parts, circuitry, and construction disproportionate to its low price—virtues that are mirrored in its equally superb-for-the-money reproduction of music. Tonally neutral, authoritative, and natural, with just a hint of warmth—thus simply sumptuous on big material such as operas and symphonies—the SA8005 is a music lover's dream. Fans of hard rock, heavy metal, and the like may find it a little too smooth, but it's certainly no sluggard with such fare. It's hard to imagine anyone who appreciates what real music actually sounds like not being seduced. (222)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### 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)



### Bryston BCD-3

**\$3495**

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)







## NCF Booster, NCF Booster- Signal & New NCF Booster- Signal-L

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*...the Furutech (GTX-D NCF) removes a layer of low-level grunge from the sonic window, reducing noise across the soundstage. As if wiped by a sonic dust cloth, images are clearer and more tangible...*

*...In the world of audiophile grade wall outlet, the Furutech will spoil you, as it did for me...*

**Neil Gader - The Absolute Sound**





## CD/SACD PLAYERS

### Marantz Reference Series SA-11S3

**\$3999**

Marantz products almost always stand out from their competitors for a very musical sound notably free from harshness and glare. Such is the case with the SA-11S3. The tonal balance is neutral, which means that nothing calls attention to itself up and down the spectrum. It has state-of-the-art control and resolution yet also a naturalness and musicality that banish all memories of the digital sound of yore. On SACD sources especially, the SA-11S3 is one of the best PS has heard and unquestionably the best he's had in his house. If he were in the market for an integrated player for both Red Book and SACD sources, this is the one he would buy, owing to its lineage, its perfect mediation of musicality and neutrality on CD sources, and its absolutely magnificent SACD performance. (233)

### Hegel Mohican

**\$5000**

Hegel's 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—with a bit of whimsy in the product name—even while most in the industry were abandoning the format. 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 advanced upsampling and PCM-to-DSD conversion circuits that elevate 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 up-sampled 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)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



Marantz Reference Series SA-11S3



Hegel Mohican



Ayon Audio CD-10



AVM Evolution MP5.2

### 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)



### AVM Evolution MP5.2

**\$8690**

AVM's mid-range media player is an elegant solution that embodies the streaming network future and CD playback past in one finely crafted component. With a tube lineage based on a pair of ECC 83 valves, the sonic performance of the MP5.2 exudes a glassy-smooth tonal character with appealing intimations of midrange and top-end warmth. The more one listens to orchestral music, the greater the appreciation for the AVM's personality, which offers something akin to the physical presence of musicians in performance. String instruments like cello and bass violin have full-bodied, weighty voices, appropriately stout resonant foundations, and timing and tonality that just don't quit. With wireless capability, DSD via USB, and a downloadable control app, the MP5.2 offers the best of all digital worlds in a well-honed package. (263)



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## CD/SACD PLAYERS



T+A MP 2000 R MKII



MBL Corona C31

### 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 potent 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 optimized 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)

### Métronome AQWO

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

French manufacturer Métronome 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. These chips can not only decode PCM, they are also one of the few converters with native DSD decoding (DSD isn't converted to PCM). 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 AQWO infuses the music with air and life, with an exciting front-of-hall perspective. Overall, the Métronome AQWO is an outstanding multi-format disc player and DAC. (298)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



Métronome AQWO



Meridian 808v6

### Meridian 808v6

**\$20,000**

This update to Meridian's flagship CD player/DAC incorporates several performance improvements, but more significantly, adds 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)

### 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)

### CH Precision D1

**From \$38,000, 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)



# MURAUDIO SP1



"The SP1 sound picture is expansive in all directions. Depth of image especially is quite startling... What one has here is a wide dispersion electrostatic which resembles a wide-pattern point source in a way no other electrostatic hybrid even aspires to, let alone equals...the point-source nature of the imaging feels very natural. And compared to other hybrid electrostatics, well, when the chips are down, most instruments are not line sources. This is a landmark speaker design. There has never been anything else like it. It is unique and sounds like real music in a way which escapes most speakers entirely. I think many people are going to find it matchlessly satisfying."

- Robert E. Greene / The Absolute Sound Issue 293



"The sound was cohesive and focused, I heard nothing but speed and attack - none of the wooliness or distortion that plagues some speakers... It all sounded as immediate, clean, dynamic, and musically exciting as well-played pianos do in concert... Part of the satisfaction of a purchase is knowing you'll be satisfied with it for a long time. The Muraudio SP1 is such a speaker for me... The output sounds like a single driver of nearly full range, it sounds wickedly clean and natural regardless of the music played. It can play at volume levels from extremely low to well beyond loud equally well, painting vast soundstages without sounding exaggerated or artificial. And all of that, without being difficult to set up. That's a long list of accomplishments... Muraudio's latest isn't just one of the best-sounding speakers at the price - I'd wager it can knock the socks off many speakers costing considerably more." - Doug Schneider / Soundstage

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## CD/SACD PLAYERS



### dCS Vivaldi Series 2.0

**\$114,996**

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 (\$14,999) 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)

## CD TRANSPORTS

### T+A electroakustik PDT 3100 HV

**\$22,500**

This gorgeous CD/SACD transport is built around a massive, high-precision, all-metal disc mechanism designed and built by T+A. One look at the way the disc tray glides out and you know this is a special product. When connected by a proprietary link to T+A's SDV 3100 HV, the sound quality from CD and, especially, SACD, is spectacularly great. The battleship build-quality, extensive features, fabulous casework, and beautiful fit 'n' finish suggest a product of twice the price. (forthcoming)



## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

## DACs



AudioQuest DragonFly Black and DragonFly Red



Resonance Labs Herus

### AudioQuest DragonFly Black and DragonFly Red

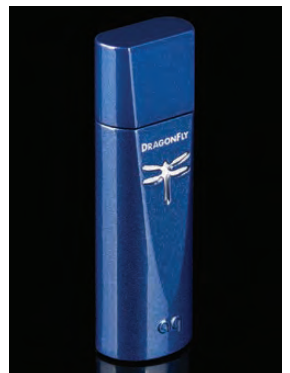
**\$100/\$200**

AudioQuest practically invented the low-cost, high-performance USB DAC in stick form with the original DragonFly. It was a massive success. But these two new models greatly improve on the sound of the original, and the \$99 Black version comes at a lower price, to boot. The Black is smoother than the original, with more extended bass. Although both DACs sound superb and are amazing values, the Red at \$199 delivers striking sonic quality, with exceptional transparency, resolution, timbral realism, and wide dynamics. MQA decoding is now standard. Add AudioQuest's \$49 JitterBug USB isolation device to either and take the performance up another notch. The Red with a JitterBug is good enough to use as a front end in a budget high-end home-based system. (270)

### AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt

**\$300**

AudioQuest's DragonFly revolutionized DACs by being directly connectable to a Mac, PC, or Android smartphone, functionally replacing the cheapie DACs within those devices. As with its predecessors, it'll play any digital file or stream up to 96/24, and will even decode Tidal MQA streams. What differentiates Cobalt from the previous Red flagship are upgraded DAC and processor chips. The Cobalt delivers greater smoothness and resolution compared to the DragonFly Red, with a more refined character. Dynamics are also improved, along with a more robust bottom end. (forthcoming)



### Resonance Labs Herus

**\$350**

The Canadian-made Resonance Labs Herus is one of the most flexible USB-powered DACs in sample- and bit-rate capabilities. This lipstick-sized unit supports PCM up to 352.8/24 as well as DSD64, DSD 128, and DXD files. So, regardless of how you like your high-resolution files, the Herus will play them. Machined out of a solid block of aluminum, the Herus measures 2.5" x 1.25" by 0.75" and weighs less than a pair of CD jewel cases. On native DSD128 sources, it offered a level of sound quality that rivaled that of any DSD DAC Steven Stone has heard, regardless of price. (245)



# Alive!

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Alpha DAC  
Reference Series 3

## "The *ne plus ultra* in digital decoding"

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



## Reference Series 3 - redefining digital audio quality

The Series 3 extends the Alpha DAC Reference's status as the *ne plus ultra* in digital decoding, and will remain at the front end of my reference system....The Series 3's deeper bass, wider dynamic expression, superior bottom-end articulation and textural resolution, and enhanced top-end openness are clearly major advances....With less accomplished DACs, it sounds as if a whole layer of very low-level information has gone missing.

Robert Harley  
*The Absolute Sound*  
October, 2019

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## DACs



Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital



NuPrime DAC-9

### 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, long-time audiophiles (the ones with the 25-year-old DACs that they still love for Red Book) could add an xDSD to their systems 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

**\$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 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)

### NuPrime DAC-9

**\$795**

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)

### Chord Qutest

**\$1895**

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 reviewer Steven Stone would not go so far as to call the Qutest “analog-like,” since that is not necessarily always a positive attribute, he would say the Qutest recreates digital music with a non-digital character that emphasizes its musicality without sacrificing detail or dynamics. And while he did not compare the Qutest with its higher-priced brethren, he did hear that it possesses a certain sonic “rightness” that he 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 have been thinking about modernizing, Steven 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)



### 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 Steven Stone 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 SE 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

**\$2399**

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)



Wyred 4 Sound DAC-2v2



Schiit Audio Yggdrasil





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## DACs



### Bryston BDA-3

**\$3495**

The Bryston BDA-3 enhances the functionality of the 2013 Product of the Year Award-winning BDA-2 by adding a second asynchronous USB input and four HDMI inputs. PCM sample rates up to 384kHz are now supported, as are DSD rates up to DSD256. Most significantly, not only can DSD signals be received by the BDA-3's USB inputs, but also from suitably equipped HDMI sources. The evolutionary development of Bryston's DACs from the original BDA-1 to the BDA-3 has been an object lesson in digital progress. Bryston's BDA-3 DAC surpasses the high-value performance standard set by the BDA-2, enables inexpensive HDMI-equipped disc players to function as premium source components, and adds exceptionally engaging DSD playback to its potent mix of virtues. (275)

### Chord Hugo TT 2 and Hugo M Scaler

**\$5795/\$4995**

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. But upscaling *per se* is only part of the story; the other part is an FPGA-based digital filter that offers a staggering 1,015,808 taps and that runs under a specialized version of the WTA algorithm—one adapted to take advantage of the enormous processing power. 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. While the Hugo M Scaler costs nearly as much as the Hugo TT 2, it ushers in so many of the sonic extras that truly bring music to life that it is well worth its asking price. (293)



PS Audio DirectStream



Playback Designs Merlot



### Mytek Digital Manhattan 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 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 in 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 brick-wall 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)



# CONGRATS, MIMAS



"For me, the Aesthetix Mimas is the very definition of what I am seeking today in an integrated amplifier—unalloyed transparency and musicality served up with rich reserves of power."

*-Neil Gader, The Absolute Sound, May/June 2019*



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- IC-based headphone amplifier is standard, or  
Upgrade Option : 1 watt into 32 Ohms, Class AB, fully discrete
- Adjustable High-Pass Crossover Option

[aesthetix.net/mimas](http://aesthetix.net/mimas)



## DACs



### 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. In spite of what it won't do, the Mystique still sounds better than most DACs VF has heard, with a bright (but not exaggerated) and open sound that may lack a smidgen of soundstage precision but not much. With powerful, punchy bass and very simple controls—basically, just a choice of digital inputs—it has the simplest possible circuitry, with no digital filters, noise-shaping, upsampling, oversampling, or error-correction. The power supply is, however, unusually robust. The unbalanced model is \$5555. (289)



### dCS Bartók

**\$13,500 (\$15,000 with Class A headphone amp)**

The replacement for the vaunted Debussy, Bartók adds streaming network capability to dCS' 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. (forthcoming)

### 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)



Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 3



T+A electroakustik SDV 3100 HV

### 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 and 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 converter for computer sources. (298)

### T+A electroakustik SDV 3100 HV

**\$37,500 (preamp version)**

This new streaming DAC from Germany's T+A must be one of the most sophisticated digital products ever made. Its feature set, connectivity, and functions are as extensive as they get. Able to handle any of today's formats, the SDV 3100 HV boasts a host of advanced digital and analog circuits that have been refined over the company's 40-year history, including custom digital filters, advanced upsampling algorithms, dual-differential DACs, and a custom discrete DSD converter with an entirely separate signal path. The sound quality is exceptional in all formats and modes, with the PCM conversion competitive with the best out there, and DSD reproduction in a class by itself. Build-quality, finish, and ergonomics are exceptional. (forthcoming)



### MSB Technology 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 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. JV's reference. (290)



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## ROOM CORRECTION



### Legacy Audio Wavelet

**\$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 AND PERIPHERAL PRODUCTS

### Audirvana Version 10 Playback Software

**\$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. BTW, Version 10 also includes MQA unfolding. (225)

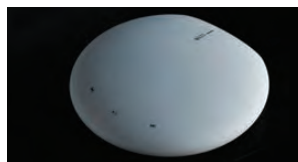
### Muzo Cobblestone Wireless Streaming Hub

**\$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)



Audirvana



Muzo Cobblestone

### Roon Labs 2.0 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 reviewer Vade Forrester has seen. 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)



### Channel D Pure Music 3 Playback Software

**\$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 Playback Software

**\$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 trapezoidal faceplate and 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 gives 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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## MUSIC SERVERS AND PERIPHERAL PRODUCTS



Sonore microRendu



Berkeley Audio Design Alpha  
USB Interface

### Sonore microRendu

**\$569 (includes an SGC Linear Power Supply)**

Suppose you took the playback, or rendering, function from a full-fledged server, installed it on a tiny computer, wrapped it in an enclosure no larger than many USB flash drives, and plugged it directly into a DAC's USB input. What you'd have is Sonore's microRendu player, which further minimizes its size by offering only a network (RJ45) input. It plays PCM files up to 768kHz and DSD512. The microRendu produces a pure, quiet, detailed output that sounds far more expensive than its paltry cost. It ships with several playback programs, including Roon (but you need a Roon license). Want better sound? Get a better power supply. Sonore provides a list of nine recommended units. (280)

### 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 software 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 Interface

**\$1995**

Berkeley Audio has solved the problem of how to get 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. It can transform the sound of many DACs when those DACs are connected via USB. (214)



Sony HAP-Z1ES



Aurender N100H

### Sony HAP-Z1ES

**\$1999**

As the poster boy for Sony's "High Definition Music Initiative" the 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 W20 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 rather than 12TB, but you can always add a NAS drive for more capacity. What you do get is the same outstanding Conductor app, Tidal integration, and Remote Support. Aurender's Conductor app for iPad is by far the best RH has used—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 W20's state-of-the-art performance, particularly considering the cost differential. (258)



### Linn Majik DSM

**\$4750**

The Linn Majik DSM combines the capabilities of the Majik DS network

device with an integrated preamp and a power amplifier. During the review, SS spent time using the Majik DSM as a source component as well as stand-alone integrated amplifier connected to a pair of Linn Majik 140 loudspeakers, and finally, combined with the recently launched Majik Exaktbox-I. This new one-box upgrade takes the simple Majik-DSM-plus-Majik-140-speakers system to its highest performance level using Linn's Exakt technology. To call the Linn Majik DSM a "flexible" component would be an understatement on the same order as calling The Beatles just another rock band. The Majik DSM can be used as a one-piece stand-alone music center alongside any speakers, or it can be combined with other Linn products to create different setups of increasing price and performance. In short, if you have a lousy-sounding room whose dimensions and sonic issues are such that they can't be fixed easily with room treatments, the Linn Majik system offers a viable alternative to giving up all hope of decent sound. While not magic, Linn's Majik system comes as close as possible to musical alchemy, by turning lead-en-sounding rooms into sonic gold. (263)



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## MUSIC SERVERS AND PERIPHERAL PRODUCTS



Cary Audio DMS-550



Aurender A10



Linn Selekt DSM

### 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-finity '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-500 reviewed in 275)

### Linn Selekt DSM

**\$5200 (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 phono stage, 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 Room Optimisation, the Selekt sets the bar in its price and category. (forthcoming)

### 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 streaming service 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. (278)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Lumin A1

**\$6400**

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. (248)



### 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)



### 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 to your network, add a USB or NAS drive, add an iPad to your network, 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, Tos-Link, 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)







**“Excellent depth and rich tonal characterization of orchestral instruments”**

Andrew Quint, The Absolute Sound RMAF 2018

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Greg Weaver, Enjoy The Music.com RMAF 2018

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### 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)



Technics SU-R1



Aurender Audio W20SE



### Linn Klimax DS and Klimax DSM

**\$23,375 (Klimax DS), \$27,500 (Klimax DSM)**

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 third 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 Catalyst 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 Catalyst or "DS/3" model towers over its predecessor in virtually all aspects of performance. (268)



### Baetis Audio Reference 2

**\$15,600**

Baetis vociferously rejects the standard deployment of the universal serial bus (USB) as the default digital interface between a music computer's motherboard and a DAC, maintaining that transporting audio data within a USB signal generates deleterious digital noise. Earlier Baetis designs achieved notable sonic results with a coaxial SPDIF output terminated with a BNC connector; now the company has determined that a higher-voltage SPDIF takes the playback of high-resolution stereo audiophiles to an even higher level of fidelity. To AQ, the Baetis Reference 2 achieves the closest approach yet to musical realism in digital's long-frustrating history. (258)

### Aurender W20SE

**\$22,000**

Aurender's top-of-the-line W20 is one of the most feature-laden and capable turnkey music servers on the market. Load the W20's internal hard drive (up to a whopping 12TB) 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 W20's functionality, although Aurender doesn't support Roon music management software. The W20's sound quality is outstanding, perhaps in part due to its 240GB internal cache memory, battery power supply for critical circuitry, and other performance-oriented design tricks. New SE model, not yet reviewed, includes performance-enhancing features. (W20 reviewed in 258)

### 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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### Pro-Ject Debut Carbon DC

**\$399**

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 Rega 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)

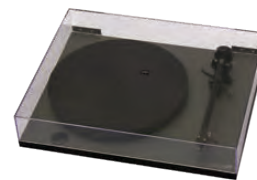
### Rega Planar 3

**\$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)



U-Turn Orbit Special



Rega Planar 1Plus



Rega Planar 3



Pro-Ject RPM 5 Carbon

### Pro-Ject RPM 5 Carbon

**\$1499 (includes Sumiko Blue Point #2 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)

### 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 textural detail, size and depth of stage, and sheer musicality. (226)





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## TURNABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



Clearaudio Concept



SOTA Comet IV with S303 tonearm

### Clearaudio Concept

**\$1600 (\$2000 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)

### 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)

### GEM Dandy PolyTable Standard9

**\$1795**

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, JM found this American-made 'table to be 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 the mm and mc cartridges JM tried, the PolyTable delivered serious analog pleasure worthy of far bigger bucks. A gem, indeed. (260)



### Pro-Ject 6Perspex

**\$1799 (\$1999 includes Sumiko Blue Point Special Evo III)**

This mid-priced record player (turntable, 'arm, and Sumiko Blue Point Special Evo III cartridge) offers a significant step up from the company's vast array of lower-priced products. The upgraded features include an acrylic plinth and Corian subchassis that is magnetically suspended for greater vibration isolation, along with adjustable isolation feet. The conically shaped carbon-fiber armtube is mounted on an inverted bearing. The 6Perspex has very low noise and good speed stability, and is easy to set up and use. The review sample was fitted with a Sumiko Blue Point Special, but this turntable is good enough to support a significantly better cartridge. (forthcoming)

### 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)







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## TURNTABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS



Pro-Ject RPM 9 Carbon



SOTA Sapphire Series V



EAT C-Sharp



Clearaudio Performance DC Wood

### Pro-Ject RPM 9 Carbon

**\$2499 (\$2999 w/Sumiko Blackbird)**

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)

### Rega Planar 8

**\$3095 (\$3695 w/Ania, \$4295 w/Apheta2 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)



### SOTA Sapphire Series V

**\$3500**

The Series V upgrade of this venerable David Fletcher classic, thirty-years-old and getting younger with each new iteration, boasts improvements in parts, engineering, machining, fit 'n' finish, and performance—all retrofitable 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 2020

### 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 of so many of reviewer Julie Mullins' records, both old faves and newer finds, 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 to the deployment of fewer mechanical parts in the ceramic bearing. Another key differentiator from some other 'tables 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)

### Bryston BLP-1

**\$3995 (including BTP-1 outboard PSU)**

Supplied with record weight, integral dust cover (three cheers!), and the company's proprietary BTP-1 outboard pulse-width-modulation power supply, this belt-driven two-speed turntable boasts exceptional speed accuracy and spot-on rendition of pitch, timing, rhythm, and togetherness. Bass is deep and powerful with remarkable resistance to external disturbances despite its fixed plinth. All up and down the scale the BLP-1 provides a neutral platform of great composure, grip, and dynamic range with commendably quiet backgrounds. The tube of the nine-inch gimbal-bearing tonearm is constructed in seven segments of differing diameters the better to deal with unwanted resonances. The BLP-1 affords the pleasures of vinyl at a level of performance that gets you to the threshold of the so-called "super" turntables without the fussiness, the need for continual adjustment, and the sheer anxiety that all too often accompanies some esoteric setups. (284)





# Brinkmann Audio Taurus

*Ultimate Direct Drive*



*Photo © MichaelRasche.com 2019*

Ever since the Brinkmann Oasis launched the Direct Drive Renaissance a decade ago, analog aficionados have asked us for a Direct Drive turntable that rivaled the performance of our state-of-the-art Balance.

The new Taurus definitively addresses that demand. Built on a massive 40mm thick chassis inspired by Balance, Taurus delivers deeper, more visceral bass combined with the dynamic agility and forward drive which characterize all Brinkmann direct drive turntables. Taurus offers wireless speed selection and can accommodate either one or two tonearms without modification.

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## TURNTABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS



Technics SL-1200G



Acoustic Signature Challenger Mk3

### Pro-Ject Xtension

**\$3999 with 10cc Evolution tonearm (\$4499 with Sumiko Blackbird or \$4799 with Sumiko Starling)**

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 sub-chassis, a 3"-tall, 12.6-pound vinyl/alloy platter, a precision ceramic bearing, and a three-speed AC motor. The Xtension 10 can be purchased with a SuperPack option (\$3699) that includes a Sumiko Blackbird cartridge and an upgraded 'arm cable. 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)



### Technics SL-1200G

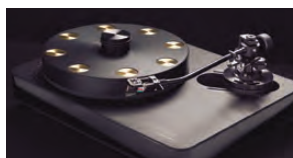
**\$4000**

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)

### 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, reviewer JM 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



Clearaudio Ovation

### 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)

### Rega RP10

**\$5495 w/o cart (\$6695 w/Apheta2 MC; \$9495 w/Aphelion MC)**

Via a "skeletal," amoeba-shaped plinth, Rega tried to create the lightest and most rigid platform possible for the RP10's motor, platter, and 'arm to work from. The plinth's core is made from a nitrogen-expanded, closed-cell polyolefin foam core, sandwiched between Rega's time-tested phenolic skins. Rega says that the core material was created exclusively for this use over a three-year period, and that this new plinth is a remarkable seven times lighter than the one found on the original Planar 3. A new motor and power supply are employed here, as well as the new hand-built RB2000 tonearm, which sets an impressive standard for a Rega 'arm. All told, there's a feeling of immediacy, transparency, detail, bass control, depth, and musical involvement here that sets the RP10 far beyond the already impressive results Rega has achieved with other members of the RP family. (249)



### Clearaudio Ovation

**\$5900 (\$8000 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)





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POWER 1



PLAYER 1

## TURNTABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS

### 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)



### AVM R5.3

**\$8995**

The AVM R5.3 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 R5.3 is easy to recommend. (295)



### Merrill-Williams R.E.A.L. 101.2

**\$8995 (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)



AMG Giro



Palmer 2.5

### 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 'arm tube 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)

### Palmer 2.5

**\$10,950 (Baltic birch finish w/o tonearm)**

As with most turntables, there isn't a lot that is innovative as such about the Palmer 2.5, just a number of tried-and-true principles (belt drive, constrained damping) in a fundamentally simple design executed to the nines in every aspect. Sonically it's a neutral platform that is dynamically very powerful and rhythmically precise with an impression of solidity and control, yet also quite relaxed, warm, and rounded. Beautifully finished in a light wood plinth, superbly made, completely reliable and idiosyncratic, this is one of the most completely pleasurable turntables PS has ever used. (It makes for an especially strong synergy with the Origami PU7 tonearm.) (238)

### 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)





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Neil Gader, *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 289 - December 2018



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## TURNTABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS



Basis Audio 2200 and 2800



Brinkmann Spyder

### 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 V12

**\$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)



Kuzma Stabi M



VPI Avenger Reference

### Kuzma Stabi M

**\$19,225**

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)

### SME Model 20/3A

**\$19,900**

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)



### VPI Avenger Reference

**\$20,000 (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)



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## TURNABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS



### 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)



TW Acoustic Black Knight



Continuum Audio Obsidian

### 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)



### TW Acoustic Black Knight

**\$45,050 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, unsuspected '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)

### Continuum Audio Labs Obsidian

**\$50,000 with Viper tonearm**

This beautifully engineered, beautifully designed, essentially cylindrical belt-driven 'table, directly descended from the much celebrated Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn, sounds pretty much the way it looks: quick, sleek, hard-hitting, and imperturbable. Replete with a newly designed DC motor, low-resonance tungsten parts, an ingenious decoupled 'arm mount for its (Cobra-like) Viper tonearm, and a plinth-less base, the Obsidian/Viper combines the litheness, neutrality, and pace of lighter-weight players with the dynamic gravity and dense color of the heavyweights. While it may not have all the distortion-free inertness of the 300-plus-pound Acoustic Signature Invictus, it comes close, and, sonically, it offers a similar presentation. A genuine round mound of sound, and one of the three 'tables JV would consider purchasing (the TW Acoustic Black Knight and AMG Viella 12 are the other two) if he couldn't afford the Acoustic Signature Invictus Jr., the Clear-audio Master Innovation Wood, or the great Walker Proscenium Black Diamond V. (274)



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## TURNTABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS



### Clearaudio Master Innovation Wood

**\$54,000 (with Statement TT-1MI tonearm and black lacquer finish)**

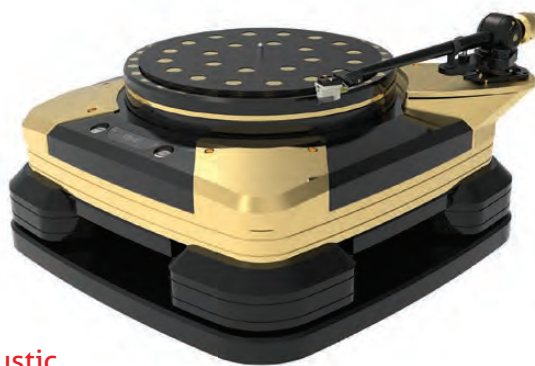
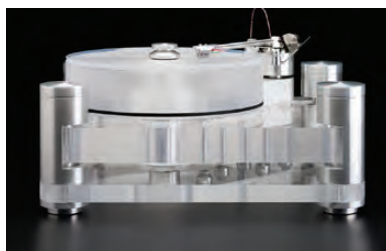
The key to great LP playback is lower noise (which equals higher fidelity). The trouble is that mechanical resonances transmitted from turntable, motor, and tonearm tend to fight

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 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. (forthcoming)

### Basis Audio Inspiration

**\$64,000 (\$71,280 w/Vacuum & MicroThin belt; \$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; adding the Basis Superarm 9 vaults the performance to a new level. The precision engineering, machining, and fit 'n' finish are magnificent. (220)



### 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. (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)







# FRANCESCO MELI

"Ma al di là di «Celeste Aida», quello che ammalia in Meli sempre sono i fiati, di tecnica pazzesca, e qui la duttilità, al servizio dell'espressione. Da attore vero."

(Il Sole 24 Ore, Carla Moreni, 12 agosto 2013)



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## TURNTABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS



### 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

renders LPs sonically indistinguishable from the analog master-tape 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 entirely 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 record players. 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 considers the Transcendence one of high-end audio's greatest achievements and now it's his reference. (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 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)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

## TOEARMS

### 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)



### Ortofon TA-110

**\$1679**

Ortofon's TA-110 tonearm is an outstanding value. This statically balanced, gimbal-type arm uses a Baerwald-style armtube, Ortofon's highest-quality bearings, and a detachable headshell, and includes a very good, 6N, high-purity copper cable. While Ortofon's super-arms that cost three times more offer some improvements, what the TA-110 does, it does very well. Utilizing its expertise in vibration analysis, Ortofon injects rubber into a slit in the armtube of the TA-110, dampening resonances and yielding an 'arm with remarkable transparency, low coloration, and precise, natural soundstaging. Additionally, the TA-110 does not obscure low-level details and has a neutral tonal balance. Coupled with the Merrill-Williams 101 turntable or other fine 'tables, the TA-110 can transport you to the recording venue or a live performance. (234)



### 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 stub designed and made to provide a totally even mechanical resonance response. (285)



### SME 309

**\$3000**

A black, tapered, titanium beauty, the 309 is a rarity among today's high-performance models: an 'arm with a removable headshell for easier cartridge swapping. The 309 is made with the precision of SME's more expensive models and embodies their sonic virtues: superior tracking and neutrality, deep and ample bass, and a balance that for some leans toward the dark, rich, and warm. PS found that the SME's superior suppression of spurious resonances translated into an extraordinarily fatigue-free presentation. Best used with pickups of medium or lower compliance. (129)





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**Helius Designs Omega Silver Ruby**

**\$5225, 10" (\$6500, 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 4**

**\$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 4 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 two decades. (Tri was Papier's handpicked successor, and bought the company from his mentor before Papier's death.)

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. In addition, the 'arm tube 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)



**SME Series V**

**\$6300**

Robust and dynamic, the iconic SME V will transform anyone's expectations of what analog playback is about. Beyond its stunning aerospace profile, its features include a cast-magnesium one-piece armtube, van den Hul mono-crystal internal wire and 501 tonearm cable, ABEC 7 bearings, dynamic tracking force, and fluid-controlled lateral damping. The V has a ripe, soothing character with unsurpassed bass resolution, excellent inner detail, and great tracking. Some may find the V is too Old School, but they likely have not heard the Series V on one of SME's own stunningly neutral turntables. A work of art. (not reviewed)



**Kuzma 4Point**

**\$6800 (\$7780, 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 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 MagneGlide 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 mount) 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. With such a tonearm, connected cartridges are more apt to show their individual characters. (291)







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## TONEARMS

### 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 4 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)



## PHONO CARTRIDGES

### 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)



Grado Prestige Black2



Ortofon 2M Red



Audio Technica  
VM540ML and VM760SLC

### 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)

### 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 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)

### 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)





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## PHONO CARTRIDGES

### 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, 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 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)



### Clearaudio Maestro Ebony V2

**\$1300**

The successor to the redoubtable Maestro Wood, the Maestro V2 Ebony sports a higher 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 midrange 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)



### 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)





  
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## PHONO CARTRIDGES

### Air Tight PC-7

**\$2500**

Referring to this cartridge as “entry-level reference” might sound like an oxymoron, but in the PC-7’s case, the shoe fits. This magnificent moving-coil with micro-ridge stylus represents the latest addition to the renowned Air Tight line of carts—and what a winner it is! Neutral in balance, it seems to transmit just what the groove calls for. The presentation is smooth when it should be, hard-hitting when it needs to be, with powerful transient attacks and ear-pleasing detail. Reviewer JM found it to be largely realistic in expression with just a touch of subtle sweetness that teased out the magic in the music. Whether on large-scale orchestral or delicate chamber works, strings were gorgeous; on driving rock ‘n’ roll, funky bass and kick-drum combos had the requisite giddy-up. The PC-7 tracked like a champ with both of the tonearm/table combinations JM tried (the more basic GEM Dandy PolyTable/Jelco and the Acoustic Signature Challenger Mk3/TA-1000 and TA-2000 ‘arms). If you’re serious about analog and ready for an upgrade that will take your vinyl enjoyment to the next level, the PC-7 is tough to beat. (forthcoming)



### 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)



### Benz Gullwing SLR

**\$3600**

The new Gullwing SLR (0.4mV) from Benz Micro and Musical Surroundings is a stunning-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)



### Clearaudio Stradivari

**\$4000; \$3600 if purchased with a  
Clearaudio turntable**

Sitting in the middle of Clearaudio of Germany’s moving-coil lineup, this low-output (0.6mV at 5cm/s) model spun with coils of 24k gold proves itself an impressive all-rounder, digging deeper into the grooves to extract detail from the music with a solid sense of images and dimensional placement. No matter what style of music JM played, the Strad didn’t skip a beat. Both nimble and smooth, it offers well-rounded body and plenty of detail without overstatement or etch. It strikes a fairly neutral balance, too, neither dry nor clinical yet always musical without sugar-coating things. JM’s reference. (forthcoming)



### 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)





a l l a b o u t p e r f o r m a n c e



 GAYLE SANDERS  
EIKON

## PHONO CARTRIDGES



Koetsu Rosewood Sig.



Van den Hul



DS Audio DS 002

### Koetsu Rosewood Signature

**\$4995**

The Rosewood Signature tracks well and sings with emotional intensity, avoiding upper-midrange emphasis or treble brightness. Its bass range is tightly defined and well-integrated with the lower midrange. You might say that the Rosewood Signature epitomizes 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)

### 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 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 DS 002

**\$5500 (with DS 002 phono equalizer)**

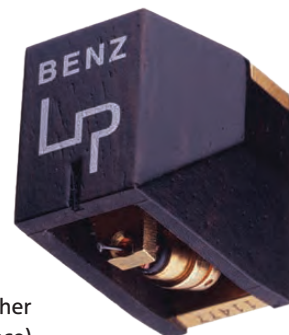
The DS 002 is a breakthrough—far and away the best optical transducer JV has heard. By virtually eliminating cantilever haze, it achieves a directness of presentation that offers a more complete and realistic view of the music and the musicians than you've heard from any previous cartridge of its type. 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)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

### Benz LP S-MR

**\$6000**

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)



### 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 SL

**\$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 phono stage will be necessary, especially in the case of the Super Low (SL) output version, which outputs a mere 0.25mV. But this amazing cartridge will take most vinyl reproduction to a new level. (266)

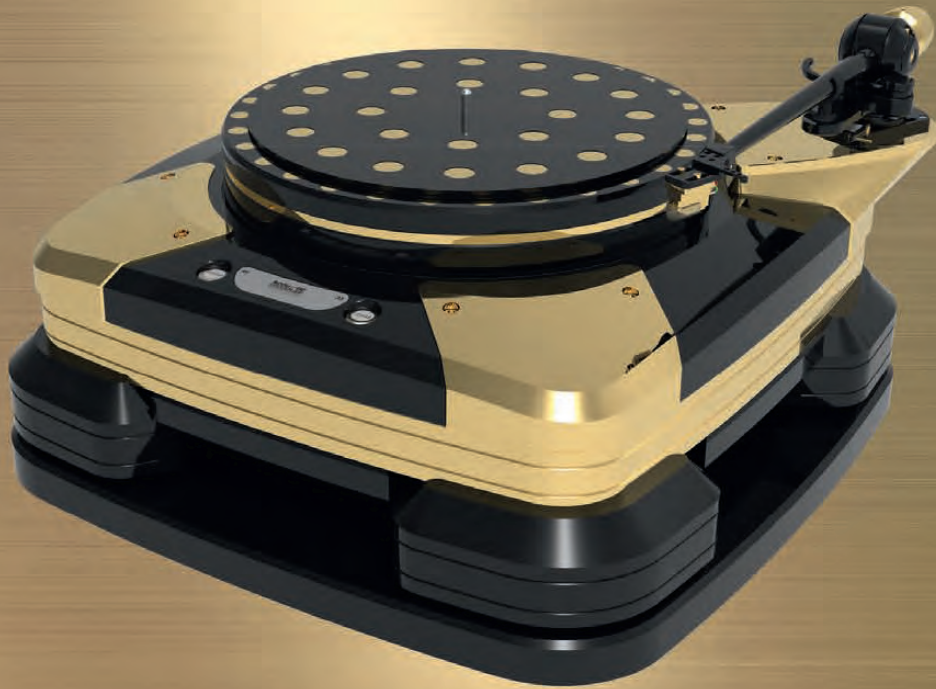




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### DS Audio Master 1

\$10,000

This technically more sophisticated (sapphire cantilever and micro-ridge stylus), sonically superior version of DS Audio's remarkable DS 002 optical cartridge is considerably higher in resolution, better in soundstaging, and more linear in frequency response (particularly in the bass and treble) than its less expensive (but still very worthy) brother. Yes, the Master 1 is pricey (especially when coupled with its excellent, dedicated Master 1 equalizer), but it is the first optical cartridge that competes with five-figure moving-coils on a more or less even footing. Whether you'll prefer it to the flagships from Clearaudio, Air Tight, Ortofon, and Lyra will be a matter of taste (some of the mc's still hold an edge in resolution, neutrality, and dynamics, in JV's opinion), but the Master 1 is certainly not embarrassed by the exalted company it keeps, and has its own set of virtues that make a clear-cut choice among these top contenders tougher to decide upon. (forthcoming)



### 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. RH's reference. (190)



### Lyra Atlas/Atlas SL

\$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 offers 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)



### Air Tight Opus 1

\$15,000

Air Tight's new 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 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. (261)

### Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement V2

\$16,000

The sweetest, most musical Clearaudio ever, the Goldfinger Statement V2 manages to sound ravishingly beautiful 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-A95-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)

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**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**

**\$18,950**

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 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)



**Record Doctor VI**

**\$199 (VI version, \$300)**

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, now manufactured by Pangea Audio) offers a smart design compromise that keeps its—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 uses a powerful motor-driven vacuum—a cooler, quieter one in the VI model—to handle the final step of fluid, dust, and dirt extraction. Setup and operation are a snap. The Record Doctor kit comes with everything you need, and it performed even better than reviewer JM expected it to. A worthy, easy-to-use accessory, the Record Doctor VI is an effective, handy, and affordably priced cleaning system for vinyl aficionados who would rather allocate more budget dollars to other hi-fi gear—and to records, too (clean ones!). (V version, 274)

**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-washing machine, conventional or ultrasonic, can achieve quite the same astounding results. (not reviewed)



Walker Audio Prelude



Record Doctor VI



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Premium vacuum tube preamplifier



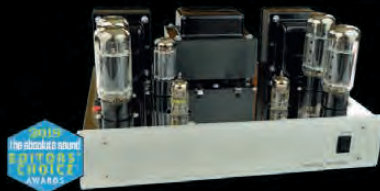
### DVA 850 Power Amplifier

Monoblock hybrid tube/MOSFET amplifier



### Fet Valve 600R Power Amplifier

Hybrid tube/MOSFET stereo amplifier



### Ultravalve Power Amplifier

Medium power pure tube amplifier



### Transcendence 10 RB Preamp

High value minimalist tube preamplifier



### Vision SET 120 Power Amplifier

High value solid-state power amplifier



### Vision Q Phono Preamp

Direct-coupled solid-state phono preamplifier

## RECORD CLEANERS

### VPI 16.5

\$650

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 40 years. (not reviewed)

### 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, sound-staging, 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)

### Klaudio KD-CLN-LP200

\$4799

The Klaudio KD-CLN-LP200 uses ultrasonic cavitation for cleaning (no brushes or rollers); it is completely automated; and, perhaps most importantly, it only needs distilled water with no special cleaning fluids. The Klaudio is able to pull off this cleaning process because ultrasonic cavitation bubble-action dislodges and removes the dirt and debris in the tiny groove walls and valleys of our records that standard cleaning brushes just can't reach. The sonic results of this unit's ultrasonic cleaning reveal not-so-subtle sonic improvements, most notably in the perceived depth and expansiveness of recording venues and the clarity of images and surrounding areas, with additional benefits of more natural tone, density, and texture on instruments. The Klaudio has proven itself to be a worthy asset to enjoying vinyl playback. RH's reference LP cleaner. (245)



### 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 AND AMPLIFIER STANDS

### 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 QXK

Price varies

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 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)



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### 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 ultras* 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, RH's, and JM's references. (226)

### 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' most advanced implementation of its technology 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' CenterStage2 isolation devices. Matching amplifier stands are \$10,250 each. Expensive but worth it if you want the best. RH's reference. (forthcoming)

### 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 your discs. (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)

### Mye Sound Stands

**Price varies with model**

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)

### 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)

### Solid Tech Rack of Silence

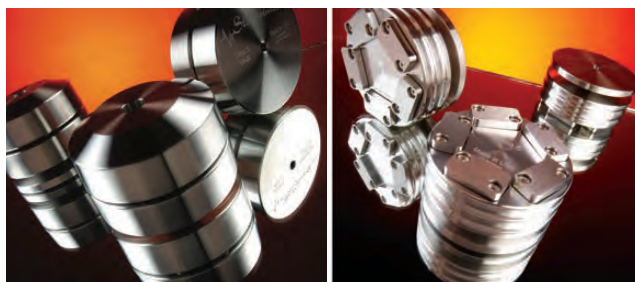
**Pricing varies**

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)

### Stillpoints Ultra SS, Ultra 5/ Ultra 6, LPI

**\$250/\$699/\$650**

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)





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## EQUIPMENT RACKS AND AMPLIFIER STANDS

### Stillpoints ESS Racks

#### Price varies with configuration

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)

### 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 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)

### 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)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

## POWER CONDITIONERS

### Audience aR2p/aR12/ aR12-T3/aR6-T4

**\$695/\$4995/\$9100/\$6600 (Au24 SE-i powerChord upgrade, +\$1735; Au24 SX 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

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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 \$695; Defender \$195**

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)

## Audience aR12-T4

**\$11,395 w/6ft. powerChord SE-i (Au24 SE-i upgrade, +\$1735; Au24 SX upgrade, +\$4200)**

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)



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**AudioQuest Niagara 1200****\$999**

This sleek, and surprisingly lightweight (though its performance is not) conditioner is filled with many key elements of its big-brother, bigger-bucks flagship 7000. Leading the charge (so to speak) are AudioQuest's patented technologies for dissipation of ground and other noise across 18-plus octaves and with greater linearity/consistency across loads. Low-Z AC power inlets and outlets contain beryllium copper for lower resistance and better grip. Right out of the box, the six-outlet 1000 handily and noticeably lowered the noise floor, creating a sense of clarity that also seemed to increase resolution. It also handles power surges and spikes, so you can set it and forget it. The updated 1200 model features an additional high-current outlet and more placement versatility. Kudos to AQ's designer Garth Powell for bringing power conditioning to a wider audience. (1000 model reviewed in 291)

**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 subwoofers), 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 Denali 2000T/6000T****\$2995, 2000T/\$3995, 6000S; \$4995, 6000T tower**

These new AC conditioners from Shunyata take what was already the state of the art in AC conditioning to a new level. They are based on noise-isolation technology that Shunyata developed for medical imaging equipment. The sonic result is even quieter backgrounds, which allow for resolution of the finest micro-detail. These low-level cues are vital to a sense of timbral and spatial realism, which are the areas where the new Denali excels. The Denali 2000T offers two outlets; the 6000T provides six outlets in a new vertical form factor. A unique AC cable support system provides a much more secure coupling between AC cord and socket. The 6000S is a shelf version with identical internal parts and performance (\$3995). It's surprising just how much better the Denali system is than Shunyata's Triton. RH's reference. (272)

**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)

**AudioQuest Niagara 7000****\$7995**

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)





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**POWER CONDITIONERS**

**Shunyata Research Hydra Triton V3/Hydra Typhon DPC-6v3  
\$9000/\$5000**

The Triton Hydra V3 and Hydra Typhon DPC-6v3 (the DPC-6v3 is a six-outlet conditioner designed specifically for powering digital components—the main technical goal was preventing noise in the digital components from getting into the rest of your system) vault what were already reference-quality AC conditioning into new territory. With virtually all new parts including the solid-copper buss bars, the noise filters on each outlet, and the central noise filter, the Triton Hydra V3 and Hydra Typhon DPC-6v3 allow even greater low-level resolution, wider dynamics, and a more vivid soundstage. RH's references. (not reviewed)

**INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLES**

**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, \$250/1m.**

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, \$269/.5m pr.  
MA6 interconnect, \$999/1m pr. (RCA); SP6 speaker \$999/1m pr.**

The Morrow SP6 and MA6 unearth the essences of performances through the recovery of the finer points of vocals and instrumental details. 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 is the degree of resolution conveyed, correlating with the greater or lesser numbers of wire runs inside. Some additional tradeoffs JM 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 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)



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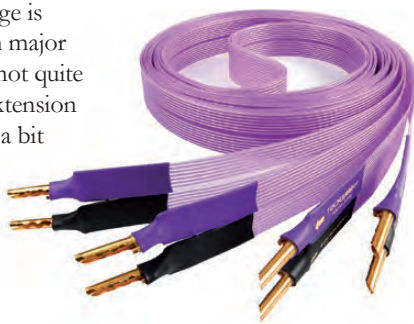




### Nordost Purple Flare

**Interconnect \$269/1m pr., \$379/2m pr.; speaker \$439/1m, \$596/3m**

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)

### Shunyata Research Venom

**\$350/1m pr. (\$700 for a 2m pr.)**

The 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. JM 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)

### Esprit Audio Beta

**Interconnect, \$420/1.2m pr. (RCA), \$450/1.2m 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 listenable. Soundstaging is highly convincing in width and dimensionality, too. Tailored to a price point, Esprit Beta performs superbly for a budget model. (289)

### 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, and featuring outstanding terminations designed by Wireworld, plus 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)



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### 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)

### Morrow Audio 5 Series

**Interconnect \$499/1m pr. (RCA); speaker \$549/2m 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)

### Synergistic Research Foundation Series

**Interconnect, \$499/1m pr. (RCA), \$599 (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, 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. (forthcoming)

### Audience Au24SX 3.5mm-to-RCA plugs

**\$500 plus \$75 per 2.5m**

This breakout cable with 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)

### Wireworld Mini Eclipse 8

**\$500/ 2.5m/pr. single term, \$550/ 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)

### 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)

### Clarus Cables Aqua

**Interconnect \$570/1m pr. RCA; speaker \$2060/8' pr.**

Clarus Aqua not only satisfies audio expectations but does so at a reasonable price. It combines innovative conductor technology, ease of handling, and little in the way of sonic sacrifices. With its dead-quiet backgrounds Aqua establishes a sweet, even, honey-soaked midrange, delivered from an ever so slightly forward perspective. Aqua isn't an attention-grabber nor a cable of extremes. But there's a polish to the presentation that's addicting. Further, its deep low-end brilliantly communicates the rich wood resonances of cello and acoustic bass. A cable that opens new frontiers at accessible price levels. (224)





## 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 is firmly in place and slightly forward on the stage. This is an interconnect that defies every expectation for a modestly priced product. (244)

## Wireworld Silver Eclipse Series 8

**Interconnect, \$700/1m; speaker, \$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 Compositex 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. (forthcoming)

## 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 Atmosphere 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)

## 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)

## 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)

## Audience Au24SE Phono

**\$1290/1m pr.**

This new phono cable can be ordered in three different versions, with each version optimized for your cartridge's impedance. A fourth model is made for moving-magnet cartridges. The SE version sports new ultra-low-mass RCA connectors with tellurium copper metallurgy. The improvement is dramatic; the Au24 SE is capable of vanishingly low noise and an enticing tonal clarity. Any sense of haze is banished by the Au24 SE cable. A vivid sense of air in the treble rounds out the virtues of this outstanding performer. Note that owners of the standard Au24 can upgrade to SE status for \$220 per pair. (230)

## 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 \$1459/1m; speaker \$2399/1m; power cord \$1679/1m**

Occupying the sweetspot 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 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)

### AudioQuest Wind

**Interconnect \$2199/1m 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)

### 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)





### Tara Labs Air Evolution

**Interconnect, \$3295/1m RCA w/HFX ground station (\$250 per additional meter, \$60.00 for XLR termination); speaker, \$4200 8'/pr. (spades or banana)**

From a company with a track record as impressive as any in the high end, Tara Labs' 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)

### 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. (forthcoming)

### 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)

### EnKlein Amphora Phono

**\$3595**

EnKlein is the new kid on the block in the already crowded cable loudspeaker marketplace. But its new phono cable, based on a sophisticated design to lower, if not eliminate, noise, suggests that it is a comer. The Amphora cable, which is made out of silver, is extremely speedy and transparent. It is also flexible and lightweight, but it delivers excellent dynamic impact. As with all phono cables, however, careful auditioning is a must. The Amphora does not suffer from the etched sound of many silver cables, but perhaps future iterations can allow a bit more tonal weight to emerge. (228)

### 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)

### Shunyata Research Sigma

**Interconnect, \$4000/1m; speaker, \$7500/2m**

Sigma builds on Shunyata's proven technology and adds the following new features: Kinetic Phase Inversion process, a treatment that does away the need for burn-in and optimizes the cable's signal direction; sonic welding to eliminate distortion-inducing solder; a Transverse Axial Polarizer on the interconnect to filter out glare-causing parallel longitudinal electromagnetic waves; and HARP (not initials) on the speaker cable to reduce what is known in physics as "current drift." HARP, in particular, is remarkably effective at improving overall system performance. The Sigmas allow the deployed system to sound highly detailed with a large, open soundstage and focused images. Dynamic precision, overall coherence, and natural-sounding timbre are also strong points. Sigma reduces noise, glare, and apparent timing smear better than any similarly priced cable reviewer KM knows of—and by a shockingly wide margin. (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

**WBY, \$4500/1m pr.; WEL, \$8250/1m pr.; Meteor, \$7200/8' pr.**

AudioQuest's 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)

### 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.; 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 floor-borne and airborne vibration. (not reviewed)

### 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 SX 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 SX 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 SX is JV's reference. A genuine breakthrough for Denney and Co. (287)

### Nordost Valhalla 2 Reference

**Interconnect \$7599/1m pr.; speaker \$9599/1.25m pr., \$11,849/2m pr.; power \$4999/1m**

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 \$15,000/1m pr.; speaker \$32,000/2m 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 and Crystal’s new Ultimate Dream, among his current references. (234)

### Echole 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 Echole, 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 Echoles 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)

### 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, \$42,000/2m**

At its price, you would think this interconnect and cable—the fruit of Crystal Cable’s Gabi Rijnveld’s world-class musical sensibility and her husband’s, Siltech’s Edwin Rijnveld’s, world-class engineering chops—would have all the understated grace and pliancy of bars of gold sitting on your listening room floor. But, no, Ultimate Dream turns out to be demure, lightweight, and eminently supple. Yes, with the precious metals (gold, 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 smudging) 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 \$22,499/1m pr. (\$2499 per additional half-meter pair); \$29,999/1m pr. speaker (\$3999 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

**\$27,500/8' pr.**

This new top-level speaker cable from AudioQuest is easily the best cable the company has ever made. Dragon Zero features AudioQuest’s best materials and technologies, including Solid Perfect-Surface silver conductors, Carbon-Based Noise Dissipation System, and the long-standing Dielectric Bias System. It 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. A reference-quality speaker cable.

### MIT ACC268

**\$80,000**

MIT’s ACC268 “Articulation Control Consoles” are undoubtedly the world’s most expensive speaker cables, but they are unlike any cables extant. The control consoles are 45-pound enclosures housing the network along with unique adjustments that allow you to tune the cable to your system. This tuning has nothing to do with tonal balance, but rather with dynamic verve in different parts of the frequency range. Exotic and justifiable in only the highest of high-end systems, the ACC268 delivers a sound quality that is unmatched by any other cable in RH’s experience. (274)



## EARPHONES

### UNDER \$500

#### Campfire Audio Comet

\$199

Conventional wisdom suggests earphones powered by single balanced-armature drivers rarely deliver rich, evocative, full-range sound, but Campfire Audio has found a way to do so with its new Comet. The key is using vented balanced-armature drivers plus polished, drop-forged, stainless-steel earpieces with the firm's Tuned Acoustic Expansion Chamber (TAEC) technology. (UHG)

#### Cardas A8

\$299

Cardas' A8 offers some of the cleanest, most grain-free sound outside of an expensive custom-fit in-ear monitor. The midrange has a clarity and purity rarely heard at this price. As good as the midrange is, the A8's strong suit is the deep bass, which is at once tuneful, precise, and harmonically rich. (UHG)

### \$500 AND UP

#### AKG N5005

\$999

AKG's flagship N5005 is its best effort yet. The N5005 features a hybrid five-driver array (one dynamic driver plus four balanced-armature drivers), ceramic earpieces, four subtly different voicing filters, a high-quality Bluetooth dongle, and a wide range of ear tips. The N5005 offers exceptional clarity and accuracy with what reviewer AS called "an effortless, almost tube-like tonality and insight into the treble." (UHG)



#### Campfire Audio Solaris

\$1499

The Solaris is Campfire Audio's most ambitious earphone design to date. Solaris uses a hybrid driver array consisting of a 10mm dynamic mid/bass with ADLC diaphragm, a large, rear-ported, balanced-armature midrange, and two balanced-armature tweeters. Reviewer Chris Martens says the Solaris evinced, "a satisfying 'I-can-do-all-things-well' sonic persona that complemented every genre of music." (UHG)

## HEADPHONES

### UNDER \$700

#### 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 and active voice-cancelling adds to the value. (UHG)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

#### HiFiMan Sundara

\$499

HiFiMan's Sundara has replaced the firm's popular and well-respected HE400 series headphones. Accordingly, Sundara features all-new frame, earcup, and driver designs. Specifically, the Sundara driver diaphragm is 80% thinner than the HE400 diaphragms, for wider frequency response, faster transient speeds, and improved resolution. The Sundara needs 150–200 hours of run-in time to sound its best, but then, says CM, "it sounds like a roughly \$1000 headphone, but one you can buy for \$499." (UHG)



#### Focal Elear

\$699

Focal's first two high-end headphone offerings were the ~\$4k Utopia and the ~\$1k Elear. Press reaction to the Utopia was so overwhelming that the Elear often got overlooked, which is regrettable given that its design is similar to the Utopia's, with small differences in driver diaphragm and magnet materials, and in its earpads. In practice, the Elear sounds much like a "Utopia Jr.," offering neutral voicing and detailed, expressive sound. At its now-reduced price of \$699 it is an exceptional value. (UHG)

### \$700 AND UP

#### Stax SR-L700

\$1400

The Stax SR-L700 is the third-best electrostatic earspeaker in Stax's lineup, and the least expensive model that uses Stax's latest electrostatic technology. As such, it is the first new design from Stax that could, due to its combination of lower price and higher performance, lure many longtime Stax owners to replace their older Stax models. For audiophiles looking to experience the latest Stax tech, the SR-L700 is simply the most cost-effective way to arrive at a new level of uncolored sound. (264)



#### MrSpeakers Ether 2

\$1999

MrSpeakers' Ether 2 is a flagship planar-magnetic headphone that replaces the firm's critically acclaimed Ether Flow. The Ether 2 features an all-new frame, headband strap, metal earcup housings, carbon-fiber driver baffles, driver diaphragms, driver motors, and even signal cables. Ether 2 is also incredibly light (290g) and comfortable. Ether 2 offers more evenly balanced frequency response, improved dynamics, greater expressiveness, and superior resolution, yet also sounds smoother and more relaxed. (UHG)





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## HEADPHONES

## Meze Empyrean

**\$2999**

The result of collaboration between Meze and the Ukrainian planar-magnetic driver specialist Rinaro Isodynamics, the Empyrean is a world-class, cost-no-object headphone. Extensive, 100-plus hour run-in is necessary for Empyrean to achieve optimal resolution, transient speed, and dynamic acuity, but the wait is worth it. At its best, says reviewer Chris Martens, the Empyrean delivers “large believable soundstages” and “gripping, you-are-there realism,” plus “a rare combination of balance, finesse, and all-round expressiveness.” (UHG)

## Focal Utopia

**\$3999**

While Steven Stone hesitates to call any component “the best,” the Focal Utopia certainly ranks as overall the finest dynamic headphone he’s experienced to date. Its faults are minor (the cable), and easily remedied. If your primary listening space is a quiet spot in your home and you want the ultimate in dynamic headphones, the Focal Utopia will have few, if any, peers. This is a true reference component worthy of the finest systems. (270)

## 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

## Schitt Audio Magni3

**\$99**

For under a C-note Schitt has created a headphone amp that 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. (forthcoming)

## Dragon Inspire IHA-1

**\$1599**

If you’re in the market for a single-ended, directly coupled, all-tube headphone amplifier with the ability to function as a low-noise line-level preamplifier, you should seriously consider the Dennis Had-designed Inspire IHA-1. Though such sonic purity comes at a price, in the IHA-1’s case that price is far less than you would expect for a hand-built, point-to-point-wired, U.S.A.-made component. (264)

## Pass Labs HPA-1

**\$3500**

The first headphone amp from Pass Labs, the HPA-1 produced backgrounds that were as black as staring into black slate. Resolution was seemingly without limits, and low-level dynamics conveyed a playful sense of surprise each time they emerged from that dark space. In classic Pass fashion, the HPA-1 has been designed more like a power amp than a headphone amp, so there’s a lot of Class A bias, giving the amp the ability to handle large voltage swings. It’s also a very capable line preamp. (273)

## HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER/DACs

## AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt

**\$299**

The DragonFly Cobalt is AudioQuest’s third-generation DragonFly USB headphone amp/DAC that improves on its predecessors in several ways. First, Cobalt is based on the latest ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip and a Microchip PIC32MX274 USB receiver—devices that give the Cobalt one-third more processing speed than earlier DragonFlies. Also, Cobalt now incorporates elements of the firm’s Jitterbug jitter-reduction device, plus a new “slow-roll-off minimum phase digital filter.” MQA compatibility completes the picture. With a light, tight, lean, and fun sound, Cobalt is the best DragonFly yet. (UHG)



## Schitt Audio Jotunheim Multibit

**\$599**

Taking Schitt Audio’s already excellent fully balanced Jotunheim headphone amplifier as its starting point, Jotunheim Multibit now incorporates a true multibit DAC module created by the firm’s co-founder and resident digital audio guru, Mike Moffat. Schitt Audio claims the module is “the most affordable multibit DAC with a modern architecture from any manufacturer or any company in the world.” Moffat’s multibit DAC designs use so-called closed-form digital filters that optimize both time- and frequency-domain performance. The upshot is an affordable headphone amp/DAC that is a stunning overachiever. (UHG)

## Chord Electronics Hugo TT2/Hugo M-Scaler

**\$5795 (Hugo TT2)/\$4995 (Hugo M-Scaler)**

The Hugo TT2 is a next-generation version of the original Hugo TT headphone amplifier/DAC that offers ample power (18Wpc into 8 ohms in balanced mode), a very sophisticated Rob Watts-designed DAC that handles up to PCM32/768 and DSD512 files, and provides four flexible digital filters. The companion Hugo M-Scaler upscales all incoming digital files to 705.6kHz or 768kHz levels, while making available a special Watts-developed digital filter with an incredible 1,015,808 filter taps and a custom version of Watts’ WTA filter algorithm. The resulting Hugo TT2/M-Scaler pair represents a revolution in digital audio—one that enables garden-variety CD-quality material to sound as good as, if not better than, ultra-high-resolution files. (UHG)



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**Shunyata Research Venom 14****\$95**

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 equipment 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)

**Voodoo Infinity Power/Digital and Air Spectra****\$700-\$900 and \$2000**

Compared with stock power cords, going full Voodoo is a little like squeezeing 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)

**Shunyata Research Alpha HC and Alpha Digital**  
**\$995, \$1495 (Alpha HC)**

The Alpha series of power cords from Shunyata Research incorporates noise filtering right inside the IEC plug that adds an extra layer of noise isolation between your components. The improvement rendered is particularly dramatic with the Alpha Digital powering DACs and CD players, offering a quieter background, greater resolution of low-level detail, and a deeper soundstage. The Alpha HC is designed for high-current applications such as power amplifiers. Despite their lower price relative to Shunyata's top-of-the-line power cables, the Alphas give up nothing sonically. Robert Harley's references. (not reviewed)

**Audience Au24 SE-i LP powerChord****(\$1190 for 5'), Au24 SE-i MP powerChord (\$1335 for 5'), and 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)

**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)

### Shunyata Research Alpha EF C15

**\$1200/1.75m**

If Shunyata's Sigma NR power cords are beyond your budget, you can get a significant amount of their performance in the Alpha EF C15. The EF C15 does what all Shunyata products do, whether AC conditioners or power cords—lower the noise floor, allow fine detail to be resolved, open up the soundstage, reduce grit and glare, render timbres with greater liquidity and ease, and allow wider dynamic expression. The EF C15 is also much more flexible and easy to route behind equipment racks. (forthcoming)

### Harmonic Technology Magic Power IIIAC 10

**\$2320/1.5m**

Designed for use primarily with front-end components, the Magic Power IIIAC 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)

### Shunyata Research Sigma NR

**\$2995**

Shunyata continues to push forward the state-of-the-art in AC power for audio, with the Sigma 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 is the best cord Shunyata has ever made (though not the most expensive), besting its 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. RH's reference. Comes in three versions: HC for power amplifiers, analog, and digital. (forthcoming)

### AudioQuest Dragon PC

**\$4200/1m; high-current model, \$5200/1m**

My, my, my. 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 c[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

**\$11,000/1.5m**

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)

## POWER CORDS

### Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream

**\$15,000/1.5m**

Like Crystal's Absolute Dream cables, these gorgeous, pliable, beautifully made power cords—high-grade custom 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)

### AudioQuest Forest USB

**\$40/0.75m; \$50/1.5m**

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)

### 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 Carbon USB

**\$150/0.75m; \$200/1.5m**

One of the go-to USB cables for computer-audio fans and highly recommended by USB pioneer and guru Gordon Rankin of Wave-length 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

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020

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)

### 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**

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)

### AudioQuest Diamond USB

**\$600/0.75m; \$760/1.5m**

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. RH tried it in his state-of-the-art music server system and it immediately became his reference. Expensive, but worth it in high-end systems. (221)

### Wireworld Platinum Starlight 7 USB

**\$700/1m**

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)



### Shunyata Research Sigma USB

\$995

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.

### Audience frontRow USB

frontRow USB, \$1300 (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)

### 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)

### 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)



### AcousTech Electronic Stylus Force Gauge

\$79

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 soundstage clarity. (For use on moving-coils only.)

### Analogue Productions: The Ultimate Analogue Test LP

\$39

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.

### AudioQuest Conductive Fiber Record Brush

\$22.95

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)



## ACCESSORIES

### AudioQuest BPW Binding-Post Wrench

**\$14.95**

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

**\$59.95**

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. 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. 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)

## HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE 2020



### 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 EVPs didn't change the inherent tonal balance of a loudspeaker, they 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.

### Dr. Feickert Adjust+

**\$350 (\$525 pro version)**

If you've ever wondered whether you've gotten your cartridge's azimuth just right and, thereby, maximized channel separation, here's a solution that doesn't entail an oscilloscope or guesses by mirror. Dr. Feickert—he who makes that fabulous cartridge-alignment protractor—has come up with a nifty bit of software (PC-only) that will tell you when azimuth is dead on (and all sorts of other useful things about your cartridge, turntable, and phonostage, including 'table speed).

### 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 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)



### Shunyata Research SR CopperCONN AC Outlet

**\$295**

Shunyata's custom AC receptacles, developed for its power conditioners, can replace the fifty-cent stock outlets built into your house. The Shunyata outlets feature thick bussbars, custom metallurgy, more robust construction, and far better grip and contact with the AC cord's blades. RH replaced his stock outlets with the Shunyatas and was shocked by the improvement in dynamics, soundstaging, and resolution. A no-brainer upgrade. (forthcoming)

### Jolida Foz-XT

**\$350**

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 phonostage 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 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 Koeppel Design LP Organizational Solutions

**Prices vary by product; approx. \$43–\$410**

San Francisco-based Koeppel 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 Koeppel 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. Reviewer JM 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. Handmade 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.

### 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 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****QKore \$2499, QKore 2 \$3499, QKore 4 \$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)

**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 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 DE-3 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.

### Xtreme AV Quicksilver Contact Enhancer

\$90

This 100% silver contact enhancer has been cryogenically treated to produce the optimum conductive surfaces for audio signal connections.



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## 50 Greatest Bargains in High-End Audio

(and Where to Find Them in This Issue)

### Cables, Power Products, and Accessories

- p.227** AudioQuest conductive fiber record brush, \$22.95
- p.228** Caig Deoxit contact cleaner, \$32.95
- p.224** Shunyata Research Venom 14 AC power cord, \$95
- p.214** Synergistic Research Foundation Series, \$499/\$599

### Entry Level

- p.190** Grado Prestige Black2 phono cartridge, \$75
- p.154** AudioQuest DragonFly Black, Red, Cobalt DACs, \$100/\$200/\$300
- p.134** Schiit Audio Mani phonostage, \$129
- p.14** Wharfedale Diamond 11.1 loudspeaker, \$349
- p.15** Elac Uni-Fi UB5 loudspeaker, \$499
- p.170** Rega Planar 1Plus turntable, \$595
- p.98** NAD C 328 integrated amplifier, \$599
- p.98** PS Audio Sprout100, \$599

### A Step Up

- p.190** Audio Technica VM540ML and VM760SLC phono cartridges, \$249/\$649
- p.68** Odyssey Khartago stereo power amplifier, \$995
- p.62** REL Acoustics T/7i subwoofer, \$999
- p.16** KEF LS50 loudspeaker, \$1299
- p.29** Magnepan .7 loudspeaker, \$1450
- p.136** Parasound Halo JC 3 Jr. phonostage, \$1495
- p.12** Elac Navis ARB51 loudspeaker, \$1999
- p.172** MoFi Electronics UltraDeck+ turntable with UltraTracker cartridge, \$2299
- p.12** KEF LS50W Wireless speaker system, \$2499
- p.133** NAD Masters M12 preamp/streaming DAC, \$3849

### Mid-Priced

- p.192** Excel Sound Corporation Hana SL phono cartridge, \$750
- p.62** GoldenEar Technology SuperSub X subwoofer, \$1249
- p.29** Monitor Audio Silver 300 loudspeaker, \$2000
- p.156** Schiit Audio Yggdrasil DAC, \$2399
- p.19** Bowers & Wilkins 705 S2 loudspeaker, \$2500
- p.30** Vandersteen Audio Model 2Ce Signature II loudspeaker, \$2700
- p.70** First Watt F7 power amplifier, \$3000
- p.72** Wyred 4 Sound SX-1000R monoblock amplifier, \$3598/pr.
- p.13** Bowers & Wilkins Formation Duo, \$4000

### Upper End

- p.194** Air Tight PC-7 phono cartridge, \$2500
- p.174** Clearaudio Performance DC Wood turntable, \$3600
- p.65** JL Audio Fathom f112v2 and f113v2 subwoofers, \$4000/\$5000
- p.32** GoldenEar Technology Triton One.R, \$5999
- p.34** Magnepan MG 3.7i loudspeaker, \$6600
- p.104** Aesthetix Mimas integrated amplifier, \$7000
- p.35** Vandersteen Audio Treo CT loudspeaker, \$8400

### Ultra High End

- p.194** Clearaudio Stradivari phono cartridge, \$4000
- p.142** Moon 810LP phonostage, \$13,000
- p.108** Constellation Inspiration 1.0 integrated amplifier, \$14,900
- p.66** JL Audio Gotham g213v2 subwoofer, \$16,500
- p.180** AMG Viella V12 turntable, \$17,500
- p.108** MBL Noble N51 integrated amplifier, \$17,600
- p.160** Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 3 DAC, \$22,000
- p.42** Wilson Audio Yvette loudspeaker, \$25,500
- p.44** Magico S3 Mk II loudspeaker, \$28,000
- p.44** Magnepan 30.7 loudspeaker, \$30,000







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# Top of the Line! Money No Object!

## That would have been true ...

... If the awesomely listenable and much acclaimed Niagaras 5000 and 7000 had not been introduced a couple of years ago.

Then the Niagara 3000 would not only be the top of the line, it would also be the most effective power-enhancer and noise-suppressor money could buy.

## It's About Noise

Sure, Niagaras have extraordinary non-sacrificial surge and over-voltage protection—but that's a taken-for-granted baseline for us. The purpose of a Niagara is to dissipate noise that's interfering with everything you hear—and see when you plug in video gear and a display.

**But I Don't Hear "Breaker, Breaker"—  
I Don't Have A Noise Problem.**

What is noise? Most commonly, noise is sound that we wish weren't there. Tape hiss, a scratch on an LP, a radio station not coming in properly, the construction site down the street—those are all undesirable and we call them "noise."

But noise is so much more than that. Those "noises" above are clearly understood sounds; their information content is obvious—too obvious. However, "noise" is also energy that lacks any discernible meaning, and so regardless of whether it's an audio or radio frequency, we don't "hear" it.

A close-to-AQ's-home example: We don't "hear" the dielectric-noise that our Dielectric-Bias System minimizes, but we certainly do hear and appreciate the black background when that noise is reduced. We don't hear the voices of a thousand radio stations and a million cellular calls, but we do hear how all that Radio Frequency Noise interacts with everything, digital and analog.



Maybe you remember the early LCD TVs, maybe you suffered one in a motel room; you might remember how there was no black, just a gray foundation for color to play off of? That type of difference is similar to hearing an audio system with and without a Niagara—which is why a Niagara is defined as a Noise-Dissipation System.

## It's About Power On Demand

OK, there is a whole other capability that by itself is reason enough to covet a Niagara—maybe even tied with Noise-Dissipation, if feeling music in your gut is important.

Niagaras 3000, 5000 and 7000 include a Transient Current Reservoir—90 amps peak for the 5000 and 7000, and a mighty (*you will feel it*) 55 amps peak in the Niagara 3000.

**Is it going to be through your gut, your aural sensitivity, or your love of music that a Niagara just might seduce you?**

William E. Low

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