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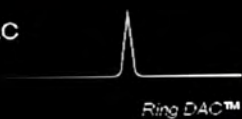
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Long-Term Equipment Loans: A Win-Win for Everyone

In this issue's Letters column, reader Henry Kleeman expresses concern over the magazine's policy regarding long-term equipment loans from manufacturers to reviewers. He writes: "I have always thought that the 'extended loan' of high-end gear to reviewers is the dirty little secret of the audio-reviewing community. I'm hard -pressed to understand how it doesn't create, at the very least, an appearance of a conflict of interest. If Company B has graciously given a reviewer its new state-of-the-art, half-million-dollar, ultimate speaker on an 'extended loan,' how does that reviewer then approach a review of Company B's new \$50,000 speaker?"

I fully understand Mr. Kleeman's perception that a reviewer would feel beholden to a manufacturer who has lent him an expensive piece of equipment (though I'm not as clear about how buying such a piece of equipment at a *huge* discount wouldn't make a reviewer feel even more "beholden"—and personally invested in that product). However, that perception doesn't comport with the reality of how such loans work or with the benefit the manufacturer derives from the arrangement. Moreover, long-term equipment loans are essential to writing the most accurate and insightful reviews.

I'll start with the practical reality of reviewing very-high-end products. Most of us at *The Absolute Sound* who review very expensive equipment cannot afford to buy the reference-level components that are necessary for evaluating the products under review. For example, I'm about to review the new \$133,000 Rockport Orion loudspeaker. To discern the Orion's capabilities fully and accurately, it must be judged in a system of commensurate quality, including sources, amplification, cables, equipment racks, power conditioning, and accessories. Those components should be as neutral and transparent as possible so that the loudspeaker's characteristics can be fully revealed. Because I'm the editor of a small niche magazine and not a hedge fund manager, accessing such a system of superlative components is only possible through long-term loans.

Inserting a new product into a highly transparent system whose characteristics are known intimately by the reviewer is the gold standard for writing an accurate and insightful review. Anything less is a compromise. A reference system is the reviewer's test bed; the better the quality of the system and the more stable it is over time, the more accurate the reviews of

products evaluated in that system. Without long-term loans, reviewers must either evaluate expensive products in systems they can afford (i.e., that are not up to the sonic standard of the product under review) or change the entire playback system with each new evaluation.

But doesn't the long-term product loan create a conflict of interest as Mr. Kleeman suggests? No, because the reality of long-term loans is very different than what Mr. Kleeman imagines it to be. The assumption is that the reviewer is beholden to the manufacturer, when it is the *manufacturer* who benefits more than the reviewer from the loan. In fact, manufacturers are sometimes disappointed when a reviewer returns a product—see my editorial "How Could He Betray Us?" in Issue 334, which precipitated Mr. Kleeman's letter. The benefit to the manufacturer from having his product chosen for inclusion in the reviewer's system far outweighs the cost of leaving a review sample with the reviewer for an extended period. Many products flow through a reviewer's system; only the *crème de la crème* are kept as references. The inclusion of a product in a reviewer's reference system—chosen purely on the basis of performance—is the ultimate praise, confer-

ring significant prestige and commercial advantage on the manufacturer.

This arrangement also benefits readers by identifying those products that are truly exceptional. If you see a component in the reviewer's "Associated Equipment" section, you can be sure that it is the finest example in that product category the reviewer has encountered.

Another benefit to readers is less tangible: The reviewer's long experience with great sound and how that experience affects his standards. If you are considering buying a product (of any price) that you've read about in a review, would you feel more secure if the reviewer had spent decades listening to the very best the industry has created or if the reviewer's experience with state-of-the-art audio was limited to brief auditions?

For this system to work, we adhere to the ironclad rule that the review sample must eventually be returned to the manufacturer. Although the reviewer may use a product for several years, it belongs to the manufacturer.

While it may appear at first glance that long-term loans create a potentially unhealthy relationship between reviewers and manufacturers, the reality is that these loans are a win-win for everyone.

Robert Harley

ALEXIA V



Betrayed, Indeed

I read with great interest your editorial about manufacturers believing that you [Robert Harley], Jonathan Valin, or any other reviewer in your magazine would intentionally downplay their product just because they have noticed said reviewer's previous appreciation and enjoyment of another company's product [From the Editor, "How Could He Betray Us?" in Issue 334]. I look forward every month to new reviews of every type of product—products, by the way, that get better every year. I especially get a thrill out of the (very) occasional "I bought the review sample" endings.

No, Mr. Harley, if anyone should feel betrayed it should be you, your entire team, and perhaps your readers, as well. It is very clear that those manufacturers of whom you speak have never read *The Absolute Sound* or have any understanding of why we read your magazine in the first place. And last I looked, it's we readers who are the ones they hope to buy their product. Betrayed, indeed.

Jay Jackson

Experience Matters

In years past there were maybe three or four magazines devoted to all things involving stereo equipment. When a reviewer really liked something, I immediately went to audition that piece of equipment and usually ended up buying the component. There was a sense of excitement in waiting for a stereo magazine to come in the mail, hoping that a reviewer was so enthralled with a piece that I had to own it. In years past there were perhaps 10 reviewers, but now there are over 40 websites that review equipment with about fifty to 100 reviewers. It's become confusing—10 reviewers love this product while 10 others hate the same product. It makes me not want to buy because there are so many people that have strong and opposing opinions. I'm hesitant to buy anything these days because I'm so confused.

Stew Margolis

RH replies: The answer to your conundrum is simple: Trust the magazines and reviewers who have long experience in the industry and a deep track record of reliable reviews. Although there are some competent online reviewers, many of them are simply bobbyists motivated purely by the desire to get their hands on equipment, not to serve an audience. Consider the breadth and depth of our "reviewing bench" at The Absolute Sound. Reviewers on our team who have been writing about high-end audio for more than 30 years include Anthony H. Cordesman, Neil Gader, Wayne Garcia, Robert E. Greene, Dick Olsber, Paul Seydor, Steven Stone, Jonathan Valin, and me. In addition, Jacob Heilbrunn, Andre Jennings, Kirk Midtskog, Andrew Quint, and Alan Taffel all have at least 10 years of reviewing experience at TAS.

Nostalgic Memories

Just a small correction to the history of audio magazines in Paul Seydor's Shure V15 review. Paul mentions that in 1969 when he bought his first AR-based system, "we had no *Absolute Sound* or *Stereophile*." He's half right. There was no *Absolute Sound*. But *Stereophile* had been out since 1962, albeit sporadically (in fact, HP noted one of the reasons he started TAS was to prod Gordon Holt into more consistent publication; I noted letters to *Stereophile* from both Harry Pearson and Dr. John W. Cooledge in the Autumn-Winter 1967 issue). Indeed, the first issue of *Stereophile* was dated September/October 1962. And Vol. 1 No. 9, dated December 1964, contained Gordon Holt's review of the first-generation Shure V15 pickup. Gordon noted excellent bass and tracking, but an upper midrange dip followed by a treble peak that caused him to rank it below three other pickups, the Ortofon SPE, the ADC Point Four, and the London (Decca) Pro Mark II—pickups which should arouse nostalgic memories in many of us older audiophiles, whose audio history extends back to the 1960s.

Allen Edelstein



Long-Term Equipment Loans

One sentence in your recent editorial "How Could He Betray Us" [From the Editor, Issue 334] jumped out at me. It was your reference to "extended loans" of audio gear: "I decided to keep on extended loan the product from Company B as my reference."

I have always thought that the "extended loan" of high-end gear to reviewers is the dirty little secret of the audio reviewing community. I'm hard-pressed to understand how it doesn't create, at the very least, an appearance of a conflict of interest. If Company B has graciously given a reviewer its new state-of-the-art, half-million-dollar, ultimate speaker on an "extended loan," how does that reviewer then approach a review of Company B's new \$50,000 speaker? I'm sure you'll tell me reviewers would never be influenced by the extended loan of half a million dollars' worth of gear, but call me skeptical.

At the very least, I think reviewers should indicate in their reviews (in the listing of their "associated equipment") what components are on "extended loan" from the manufacturer and for how long. At the least, that would provide some transparency to the practice and give your readers information to factor into the review. Better yet, do away with extended loans, and let your readership see what equipment you're actually prepared to spend your hard-earned dollars to purchase.

Notwithstanding my criticism of extended loans, I enjoy your publication, and I wish you and the team at TAS all the best. And if I were an audio reviewer with a million-dollar reference system courtesy of some big-hearted manufacturers loaning me their latest and greatest gear, I probably wouldn't change a thing either.

Henry Kleeman

RH replies: See this issue's From the Editor.

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The Absolute Sound's YouTube Channel

TAS Covers Audio and Music via Professional Videos

Robert Harley

If you're looking for more great high-end audio content, check out *The Absolute Sound's* new YouTube video channel. Our channel is chock-full of videos (more than 100 and counting) that cover everything from a nostalgic look at classic audio products to reviews of the latest components. We've got behind-the-scenes factory tours, show reports, audio-basics tutorials, product reviews, and designer interviews.

Last November I visited Shunyata Research with Charles Kinder, *The Absolute Sound's* new full-time videographer. Charles captured my factory tour and sit-down interview with Shunyata founder Caelin Gabriel, as well as documenting Shunyata's production process and the people behind the company. The professionally produced 35-minute video gives you a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at this innovative company.

We've also got product reviews, primarily of lower to mid-priced components that are stunning overachievers. TAS Chairman Tom Martin evaluates the amazing \$1k Magnepan LRS+ speaker, GoldenEar's BRX speaker, the new Luxman integrat-

ed amp, and many more high-value products. Tom is also steeped in high-end audio's rich history and takes you back to the legendary Audio Research SP-3a preamplifier, Acoustic Research AR4x, the Advent speaker, and many more iconic products.

You can find lots of analog-related content courtesy of Michael Fremer. Michael takes you on a tour of the Warsaw and Pacific Audiofest shows and evaluates products such as the technology breakthrough that is the DS Audio ES-001 Eccentricity Detection Stabilizer that eliminates the distortion of off-center LPs.

Whenever manufacturers or designers visit my listening room to set up a piece of equipment, I'll interview them in my listening room about the new product. You can find my first two interviews on our channel, the first with Oliver Göbel of German speaker-maker Göbel High End as well as a video

Video is an exciting way of delivering more, and more varied, content than we can provide in the magazine.

of Rockport Technologies' President Josh Clark taking us through the design of the new Orion loudspeaker.

Video is an exciting way of delivering more, and more varied, content than we can provide in the magazine. We also hope to reach the next generation of music lovers who care about sound quality. Go to youtube.com/@TheTASmagazine. While you're there, be sure to hit the "Subscribe" button so that you're notified of new videos. You can also sign up for our weekly newsletter. I hope that you'll check it out. **tas**

Fly With the Horses



You might have noticed that the top tier of AQ cables are all Mythical Creatures that fly: **ThunderBird**, **FireBird**, and **Dragon**.

Well, Mythical Horse **Pegasus** also flies. Please take a pair for a test flight.

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EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

Welcome to the 2023 edition of TAS' Editors' Choice Awards, our annual recommended products feature. On the following pages we present the gear that our editors and writers have selected as most worthy of your consideration. These are components that we ourselves would buy—or recommend to friends and family. Each product category is divided into price ranges, with components listed in order of ascending cost (though some items, like accessories, are listed alphabetically). Each recommendation is accompanied by a capsule review, the original reviewer's name or initials, and the issue number the review appeared in. Note that, in some cases, a product may have been reviewed, but the review has not yet been published; in other cases, a product may not have been formally reviewed, but has still earned a recommendation based on the writer's extensive experience with it. Given that this is the high end, where components generally have long lifespans, some of our recommendations look back several years. At the same time, to be as selective and up to date as possible, we have dropped certain components that appeared on last year's list, usually because they have been discontinued, but sometimes because fresh competition has caused us to reconsider the choice. All the products in this feature have been price-checked and their availability in the market confirmed. In addition, we have created a new category, "Preamplifiers with Digital-to-Analog Converters," to accommodate the increasing prevalence of preamplifiers with integral DACs and, sometimes, streaming and networking functions. DACs with a volume control but without analog inputs remain in the DAC category.

DESKTOP LOUDSPEAKERS**Vanatoo Transparent One Encore****\$599**

Small, powered, Chromecast- and Bluetooth-enabled speakers like the Vanatoo Transparent One Encores aren't going to replace a traditional hi-fi setup in a mid-sized or larger room, but on the desktop or in a small space they're worth serious consideration, with enough deep bass, midrange clarity, and sparkle in the treble to make them highly enjoyable. Drew Kalbach, 302

Audioengine HD6/HDP6A**\$699/\$399**

Comfortable on a desk or shelf, flanking a flat panel, or out in the room on a pair of stands, the powered, DAC-equipped, Bluetooth-enabled HD6 loudspeaker is a near-complete audio system. It only needs a source as humble as a smartphone to get it up and running. Sonically, this two-way has a forgiving signature in the treble range, and an ear-coddling midrange with a warmer, slightly darker voice that is effective at conveying big sound from a small box. It's hard to imagine a loudspeaker that does more for less. The HDP6A is a passive version of the speaker minus the DAC and amp. Neil Gader, 272

Audience ClairAudient 1+1 V5**\$3495**

Don't let the 1+1 V5's nearly identical appearance to its predecessors fool you; this newly upgraded version is a huge leap over its already superlative predecessor. The V5 employs a significantly redesigned version of Audience's full-range driver, top-level Au24SX internal wiring, retuned passive radiators, and custom tellurium solderless binding posts. The result is far more resolution and detail (particularly in the treble),

superior transparency, wider dynamic expression, and even greater midrange purity. The 1+1 V5's midrange clarity, just one of the virtues of a crossover-less single-driver speaker, is on a par with that of many speakers costing ten times the V5's price. The state of the art for desktop listening, and a terrific choice as a main speaker in smaller rooms. Robert Harley, 273 (original version; new V5 not yet reviewed)

Sony SA-Z1**\$7999**

Over the years Sony has periodically released products that are engineered to show what can be done if all the company's creative forces are brought to bear. Its latest Z Series offering, the SA-Z1, is a nearfield loudspeaker system with built-in amplification, input selection, and a bevy of special sonic-adjustment options. It is a complete system that only requires users to supply an input source or two. The SA-Z1 system does not support headphones or subwoofers; it is a self-contained thing—a complete musical universe unto itself. And what a universe it is, setting a new standard for what small desktop speaker system can do in soundstaging, harmonic purity, dynamic acuity, and low-frequency speed and definition. Steven Stone, 312

Wilson Audio TuneTot**\$10,890**

Wilson's smallest loudspeaker was designed with a specific use in mind—placement on a shelf or piece of furniture near a room boundary. When the "Tots are positioned as intended and powered by quality amplification, bass and drums on pop/rock material have satisfying punch; soundstaging and imaging on well-made orchestral recordings are first-rate; and vocal and instrumental sonorities

are naturally represented.

Deploying the TuneTots in a desktop system is a real possibility—just don't expect to get any work done. Andrew Quint, 287

ACTIVE STAND-MOUNT AND FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS**Elac Navis ARB-51****\$1999**

Elac's active and elegant three-way compact has a rich, full-bodied midrange with a warm, cozy ambience that is ideal for vocals. Fans of choral music will revel in the clarity of massed voices. Overall, the Elac has a weighty, dynamic, bottom-up sound that suggests a speaker that not only doesn't need coddling but dares you to crank it up. A hallmark of Elac's active bass is the way it grabs onto rhythm tracks. This is one of the rare small compacts that you don't have to scale back expectations to enjoy. NG, 291

ATC SCM19A**\$5999**

The active, two-way tower version of ATC's compact passive cousin, the SCM19, the 19A equals or betters the stand-mount in virtually every sonic criterion. It has better bass extension, but it's the increase in control and pitch definition that truly engages the listener. Images lock in. Its comforting warmth in the lower mids and upper bass adds to the impression of musical scale and substance. Though it may seem pricey at first glance, considering the amps and precision electronics built into each speaker and the studio-grade performance, its true value becomes more evident with every recording. Audiophiles may shrink from active loudspeakers, but the SCM19A makes the case emphatically. NG, 272

ATC SCM50 ASLT**\$23,999-\$30,000 depending on finish**

The tower version of the famed pro monitor, the three-way, floorstanding, active, tri-amplified SCM50 ASLT has no-nonsense ease and neutrality that are underscored by three key properties: one, midrange presence and immediacy; two, midband speed that borders on electrostatic territory; and three, a staggeringly wide dynamic envelope that easily puts electrostatics and most cone loudspeakers of this size to shame. Transient behavior is smooth rather than underlined and exposed for effect. Bass response plummets effortlessly into the mid-thirty-cycle range. Vocals are at times almost voluptuous with harmonic bloom. Is active for everyone? Maybe not. But for enthusiasts willing to open their minds just a bit, ATC should be the first call they make. NG, 290

STAND-MOUNT AND FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS**\$1000 and under****PSB Alpha P5****\$499**

The Alpha P5 is a budget mini-monitor with a nicely weighted midrange, non-fatiguing treble, and an overall naturalism that's easy to engage with. Commendably, there is little evidence of the tonal peaks and valleys associated with lesser speakers in its class. Vocals retain a nice blend of physical warmth and clean articulation with hints of airiness in the upper octaves. The ability to fully define the contours of a soundstage are a wee bit beyond its purview; nonetheless, the P5's string section layering, orchestral depth, and image stability outclass much competition in its price class. The Alpha P5 is the essence of what it means to be an entry-level compact in 2020. NG, 306

Elac Uni-Fi 2.0 UB52**\$599**

Now in its second generation, Uni-Fi's strengths remain securely in place. The midrange weight, forward-leaning energy, and focused imaging continue to make it highly satisfying for vocal reproduction. And its tonal character retains the immediacy and transient attack, rhythmic jump, and midbass oomph that preserve its rock 'n' roll bona fides. But the UB52 conveys a smoother, less edgy sound than the original and removes a soft veiling, revealing more low-level detail, micro-dynamic energy, and soundstage dimensionality. UB52 has taken the well-deserved success of its immediate predecessor and ratcheted up the sonic positives, while minimizing shortcomings. NG, 315

Polk R200**\$749**

Polk's R200 hits sonic pay dirt at an astounding blue-plate price. By borrowing Polk's own Legend Series transducers and putting them in a minimalist cabinet, this two-way compact cuts right to the heart of the music, with superior tonal balance and seamless coherence paired to a backbone of dynamism and immediacy. A lively as it is natural, the R200 doesn't shrink into the background, tonally or dynamically; nor does it recess images via frequency dips and droops in order to manufacture a fictitious sense of soundstage depth. In low-end response, the R200 takes care of business. Visually, some of the glitter and gloss have been minimized, but the utilitarian design is well-executed. A high-end sleeper in the best sense. NG, 319

PSB Alpha T20**\$849**

PSB takes budget speakers seriously, and the short-tower, two-way T20 is a serious

ground-up redesign. It targets the essentials of musicality first, and everything else falls tunefully into place. A very approachable, high-output effort with an overall sonic character that has a familiar (and welcome) warmish slant, the T20 offers improvements in midrange integrity, dynamic output, and low-level resolution. Driver coherence is also excellent, as per PSB tradition. The low end is solid into the midbass, though perhaps not always as sharply controlled or defined in pitch as one would like. And, yes, staging could be more dimensional, and the top treble is a bit dry (though never dull). The perfect weapon to gobsmack your highfalutin' audio friends. NG, 302

Emotiva Airmotiv T1+**\$899**

The Emotiva T1 has sonic attitude—a big, brawny sound that energizes listening spaces with potent dynamic thrust. The T1's warmer, somewhat darker character makes it a loudspeaker that paints the overall emotion and heart of a performance in broader brush strokes, but musically the T1 just brings it. The jewel in the T1 crown is the 32mm folded ribbon tweeter, which is airy, textured, and transparent. Seriously, folks: A high-octane sonic ride for seven hundred bucks—what's not to like? NG, 278

Sonus faber Lumina I**\$899**

The Sonus faber Lumina I sounds shockingly big despite its very small size. The form factor is attractive and stylish, in keeping with the Sonus faber brand, and the sound is gorgeous, smooth, and deep reaching for such a small bookshelf speaker. Though it works best with a powerful amplifier, the Lumina I can really sing when given the chance. Reviewer DK was absolutely astounded by the big, lush music coming from the

Lumina. The soundstage was deep and wide, and instruments felt tight and accurate. The midrange was buttery and delightful, and the upper end had a good bit of luxurious sparkle to keep things interesting. For DK's money, this is the sub-\$1k bookshelf speaker to beat. DK, 315

Revel Concerta2 M16**\$990**

A feast for the eyes and ears in this segment. The look has been refreshed and refined with smartly contoured enclosures, high-gloss finishes, and elegant design accents. Sonically, Revel doesn't design wallflowers that shrink into the background. A sense of immersion and "widescreen" scale are two of the M16's most distinctive characteristics. A compact, budget loudspeaker that maintains classic Revel virtues. NG, 268

Magnepan LRS+**\$995 (\$285 for optional stands)**

Replacements for and improvements upon Magnepan's two-way, quasi-ribbon LRS (Little Ribbon Loudspeaker), the LRS+ looks almost identical to its predecessor, but its sound is considerably improved in the bottom octaves and the top ones. JV doesn't know what all's been changed (aside from the highly recommended addition of optional stainless-steel feet), but the Plus now goes two octaves lower in the midbass and has a smoother upper midrange. Minus a subwoofer, the Plus won't plumb the lower depths like Maggie's larger panels do, but, sub or no, it no longer roughens up and rolls off the presence and brilliance ranges. A genuine improvement in what was already a standard-setter at its price point, the LRS+ sounds like the real thing from about 60Hz to 12kHz, and that, folks, is not a given, no matter how much

you spend. Jonathan Valin, 331

Piega Ace 30**\$995**

The Piega Ace 30s are "compact loudspeakers," and that's an understatement. At approximately 8.6" tall, 5.5" wide, and 6.2" deep, they're the smallest speakers DK has reviewed to date, and they weigh a mere 6.6 pounds each. DK was delighted by their fit and finish: they're made of aluminum with a curved cabinet and include an AMT ribbon tweeter and a 4.7" (120mm) MDS midrange driver. Despite their diminutive nature, their midrange was luscious, and their treble truly sparkled. Their lower end was tight, though not truly deep (if you love bass, you'll need a subwoofer). The sound was more natural and bigger than you'd expect, though there are limitations inherent in their size. DK, 326

Focal Chora 806**\$998**

Focal's latest compact combines a hip, fashionable look with sonics that have an even, mellow balance and a light responsive character. Vocals, male and female, are expressive and relaxed, but are generally offered up with a little less energy and presence than a full-range monitor would exhibit. However, in true compact-monitor fashion, musical details, small and large, are reproduced in abundance. Overall, a well-rounded package of solidly engineered performance that touches a multitude of sonic bases and serves both the music and the listener, the Chora 806 is proof that there's still a lot of life left in the budget, two-way, compact monitor. NG, 304

Elac Carina BS243.4**\$999**

Visually, the Carina BS243.4 is a portrait of a stout, two-way,

high-performance monitor. Its sonic signature is defined by a ripe, rich midrange laden with darker walnut overtones. Outfitted with Elac's JET tweeter and supported by a 5.25", aluminum, inverted-cone mid/bass and unique downward-firing port, the Carina caught NG off-guard with the low-end impact, dynamic drive, and weight it was capable of. Possessed of a more forward, monitor-like signature, the Carina can swing with the best of them, even when pushed to higher output levels. Critically, the smooth JET tweeter doesn't grow overly assertive; rather, its fatigue-free performance blends invisibly. On a sheer scale of musicality and value Carina rates very high in its segment. NG, 304

JBL Stage A190 **\$999**

The top dog in the Stage family, the A190 is a no-frills 2.5-way bass-reflex design and a darn appealing performer that shows its muscles in the mid and upper bass ranges. It energizes a room as only dual-woofers capable of launching a lot of air can. Tonally it's commendably neutral, neither etching nor otherwise agitating in the treble or port-pumping single-note pulses in the bass. If the goal is musicality and a semblance of full-range, seat-of-the-pants slam and dynamic authenticity, the Stage A190 is one of the best and affordable *real-world* efforts NG has encountered and a no-brainer of a bargain. NG, 293

Polk L100 **\$999**

The smallest member of the Legend Series, the L100 offers a level of execution, balance, musicality, and outright thrills that place it in the top of its class. Its personality is one of forthright, effortless musicality—with an ability to convey

midrange tonal color and texture with rich naturalness. The L100 has a well-grounded sound, an earthiness that is normally rare in this class of stand-mount monitors. Its treble range is open with realistic transients and extension. Its lively presence range never grows impolite or coarse. The L100 also turns out to be a superior voice speaker, sensitive to the finer nuances of vocal stylings, shadings, and dynamics. Further, it navigates bass solos with acrobatic ease. One classy little two-way. NG, 308

\$1000–\$2000 **DALI Oberon 5** **\$1299**

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, timing, and well-focused detail. Output is robust with a midrange that provides a wealth of tone color. High frequencies are smooth, although a bit dry, and while the DALI won't quite venture into the bottom octave there is enough oomph in the midbass to imply some grandeur. It's an economical yet formidable speaker that permits users to walk the fine line of everyday practicality, while still allowing their audiophile hearts to lead the way. NG, 297

KEF LS50 Meta **\$1599**

An upgrade of the original LS50, the LS50 Meta is so named for its innovative internal damping properties. With its pink-gold Uni-Q coincident midrange/tweeter mounted in bulls-eye fashion atop the uniquely arched baffle of its well-crafted high-density enclosure, it remains as visually arresting as it is sonically satisfying. Meta was a quick-stepping, snappy, and relentlessly

musical performer across all genres. Imaging was clean and precise. Neutrality was high, with superb midrange sonics, ample presence, and very little in the way of port coloration. Also, these smallish speakers pumped out shockingly punchy bass that delved deeper than expected while still maintaining composure. Destined to become a classic. NG, 317

Monitor Audio Bronze 500 **\$1650**

The two-and-a-half-way Bronze 500s are extremely nice looking and designed for a wide range of room sizes, shapes, and system budgets. They include a 25mm C-Cam Gold Dome tweeter with a Uniform Dispersion waveguide, and two 8" C-Cam mid/bass drivers. Nominal impedance is listed at 8 ohms and sensitivity at 90dB, which means they won't need a massive amount of power. Sonically, they're packed with lushness—a sound much bigger than their modest size and weight suggest. From delicate strings to solid-bodied bass lines, the Bronze 500s were a consistent pleasure across all genres and formats and should be on the radar of anyone building a new system or looking to upgrade. DK, 327

Wharfedale Linton **\$1799 (includes matching stands)**

It's easy to fall in love with the traditional hi-fi styling of the Wharfedale Lintons and their gorgeous (and worthwhile) optional stands. The speaker is a three-way bass-reflex design with a 1" soft-dome tweeter, a 5" woven-Kevlar midrange, and an 8" woven-Kevlar woofer. The low end is surprisingly tight and hefty. Drums are impactful and fast with an easy and addictive rhythm, but the Lintons avoid splattery cymbal sheen. The midrange shines

with a big clear sound, and maybe just a hint of warmth. The Lintons are speakers for anyone craving classic styling with beautiful, modern sound. DK, 302

GoldenEar BRX **\$1990**

The BRX sits at the top rung on the ladder of GoldenEar's Bookshelf Series. This two-way features a silky ribbon tweeter, plus a responsive mid/bass driver that's augmented by a pair of passive planar radiators. Sonically, the BRX seemed nature born to play the classics, with chamber music and jazz possessing the timbral and harmonic complexities and spatial qualities heard in real acoustic settings. Tonally, the BRX communicates a neutral-to-warmish signature with midrange octaves well balanced and rich in texture—a more romantic character that illuminates music and reproduces it with a softer rose complexion. The treble range is effortless—agile and airily transparent in the way ribbon tweeters tend to be. You won't need a golden ear to enjoy this class-leading blend of musicality and refinement. NG, 315

Magnepan .7 **\$1995**

This modestly sized, two-way line-source floorstander uses all quasi-ribbon drivers (as opposed to the mix of quasi-ribbon and planar-magnetic in the [now discontinued] MMG). The result is a superior blend between tweeter and mid/bass, with much better power-and-bass-range speed, low-level resolution, tone color, and extension. Though the .7 benefits on some (large-scale) music from the addition of a subwoofer, all by its lonesome it is shockingly realistic on acoustic instruments (and equally swell on a good deal of rock). JV, 250



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\$2000–\$3000**Totem Acoustic Sky****\$2000**

Classic Totem through and through—purposeful, clean, seamless, with rigid cabinetry and beautifully finished veneers. Sky touches the ear with a warm, full-bodied musical balance. Given the right room (medium to smallish) and strong amplifier support, the Sky just clears its throat and lets loose, eliciting tuneful bass cues and resonant energy. Hats off to Totem for coaxing big-time performance while harnessing the virtues of speed and transparency from a small two-way. NG, 275

Focal Aria 906**\$2098**

A two-way compact that has a lot to sing about, the Aria 906 uses Focal's innovative F-cone sandwich construction, with a flax-fiber core for lightness, rigidity, and superior damping. Its sonic character is vivid, fast, and vibrant. Bass response is excellent for this class, extending into the fifty-cycle range. Its midrange output lends the 906 a nicely weighted tonal balance, dynamic composure, and a notable amount of air and dimension. Quibbles are minor—the upper-mid/lower-treble range loses some intensity, reducing orchestral presence and physicality. The Aria 906 just gets music right and at under two-thousand bucks, does so for a song. NG, 243

Sonus faber Lumina III**\$2199**

The Lumina IIIs are tall, thin towers wrapped in sumptuous leather with a beautifully finished hunk of multilayered wood for their front baffles. Drivers include a 1.15" (29mm) Damped Apex Dome tweeter, a 5.9" (150mm) natural-fiber-and-paper mid/woofer, and two 5.9" paper-pulp cone woofers. Their

sensitivity is rated at 89dB, and their nominal impedance is 4 ohms. The Lumina IIIs were revealing and accurate in a way that allowed the music to sound lifelike—no distorted uppers, no booming lowers, no veiled mids. Physically beautiful, compact, forgiving on the ear, easy to set up and place, they sound fantastic. DK, 326

Revel Performa3 M106**\$2200**

Revel's M106 is cut from the same rich sonic fabric as its big brother the F206 but designed for smaller spaces. A vocal lover's dream, the two-way M sports the same dome tweeter with acoustic-lens waveguide as the floorstander, creating a wide sweet spot, a rewarding lack of localization, and estimable composure under all sorts of dynamic fire. Even under punishing conditions this feisty compact remains linear. One of the great compacts of the last ten years. NG, 234

Audiovector QR1**\$2300**

The smallest loudspeaker in Audiovector's entry-level QR Series, the QR1's sonic performance was anything but that of a typical compact. Solid through the greater midrange and nicely resolved from the upper-mids well into the harmonic range, the QR1 struck a reasonable balance between detail and midrange/midbass density of timbre. While there was a hint of layback in the upper mids, QR1 was no wall flower, either. Effortlessly refined, micro-dynamically alive, and easy on the ears for long stretches without any sense of fatigue, the QR1s had a delicacy on cymbals, openness on brass, and air and sensitivity with violin, either solo or ensemble, that were a pleasure to experience, elevating the overall presentation beyond its price and class. NG, 326

Focal Chora 826**\$2398**

The French speaker specialist has trickled down its advanced W-Sandwich composite-cone technology, first developed for the flagship Utopia line, to an unprecedented price level with the Chora Series. The top model, the floorstanding 826, uses three such drivers, two bass and one midrange, coupled to an aluminum inverted-dome tweeter in a front-ported enclosure. The 826 is truly a full-range speaker, with excellent low-end extension and heft. Perhaps thanks to the driver technology, the midrange is particularly detailed and resolved at this price, with excellent rendering of low-level instrumental detail. The treble is open and extended, but not the last word in smoothness at higher volumes. Overall, an excellent value. RH, 315

Watkins Generation 4 rev-1**\$2495**

Bill Watkins has been perfecting the compact two-way since the early 1980s, and this is by far his best effort. Mating a 6.5" Peerless woofer with a 1" dome tweeter, the Gen 4's bass extension and control are unheard of in such a small package. Unusually, the woofer is run without a low-pass filter, perhaps contributing to the imaging prowess and transient speed, which are spectacular for any speaker, especially one at this price. Dick Olsher, 278

Monitor Audio Silver 300 7G**\$2850**

The Silver 300 7G is the seventh generation of Monitor Audio's popular and affordably priced Silver Series. The handsome, columnar, midsized three-way was an easy, amiable speaker to settle in with. It had an inviting personality that was warmly energetic, but seriously propulsive when called for. Its ro-

matic midrange was ripe and full. Transients played out as naturalistic—assertive but not strident. Bass response was solid, dipping into the 40Hz range with gusto and, in some instances, going perceptibly lower than that. Capable of meeting the demands of symphonic music, the Silver 300 sets a very high standard for a modestly priced floorstander, and with its stylish good looks it can easily slip into a den or living space without necessitating a major design overhaul. NG, 324

Fyne Audio F501**\$2875 (\$3125 for gloss black or gloss white)**

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

Magnepan MG1.7i**\$2995**

It requires some break-in (to sound its very best), proper positioning, room treatment, and high-current amplification, but when its needs are answered, this three-way, all-quasi-ribbon, dipole floorstander does the one thing that every other loudspeaker attempts to do and generally

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Exceptionally well-defined, detailed, spacious, and dimensional, it is clear and enjoyably lifelike on virtually every kind of music (though it won't give you the bottommost octave with the slam and extension of the finest cones-in-a-box). "The 1.7i affords a true high-end listening experience for far less cost than sonically competitive speakers," says reviewer JN. John Nork, 313

KEF R11

\$2999

Pleasing presence—sonically and aesthetically—remarkable realism and inter-driver coherence, high value in the cost-to-performance arena, there's a lot to love about KEF's three-way R11s. They reproduce recorded music with a kind of purity or neutrality that often reveals finer details, which results in greater accuracy and realism—attributes that aren't often found in approachably priced speakers. Julie Mullins, 298

\$3000–\$5000

GoldenEar Triton Five

\$3000

This may be the Babe Ruth of reasonably priced loudspeaker designs. With the Triton Five Golden Ear has hit yet another one out of the park. The Triton Five is a remarkably low-distortion design that belts out Led Zeppelin but also has the finesse to reproduce the most finely filigreed musical passages. A high-velocity ribbon driver helps account for the purity of the treble. Four side-mounted sub-bass radiators allow it to plumb the depths of the sonic spectrum. Not least, it's also an elegant and unobtrusive-looking design that should appeal to a wide range of listeners. Jacob Heilbrunn, 255

Totem Acoustic Signature One

\$3000

Totem's 30th anniversary Signature One includes the largest changes to this iconic model. Sonic performance is classic Totem—a high-revving, high-output character that doesn't shy away from combustible dynamic swings or demanding orchestral bass or pop rhythm tracks. Its responsiveness to low-level inputs is where the cabinet's rigidity pays off; its uncanny ability to vanish within the confines of a small listening room remains a huge part of the Totem résumé. Not merely a quick, peel-out-and-burn-rubber compact, the Signature One has broad shoulders that impart authentic gravitas to recorded music. NG, 282

ATC SCM19 V2

\$3200

Despite 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 passive consumer speakers—in voicing and seamless inter-driver coherence. Simply one of the best compacts NG has heard. NG, 245 (original version, V2 not yet reviewed)

Harbeth P3ESR XD

\$3290–\$3490

This latest version of Alan Shaw's subcompact monitor is so cannily designed it almost transcends the limitations of its genre. Neutrality and natural tonal balance reign supreme, but this one can also play loud and descend to depths in the bass. Exceptional driver integration, coherence, and openness also characterize the design. Paul Seydor, 193

Polk L600

\$3498

The Polk L600 is an affordable, imposing loudspeaker. It is massive, beautifully designed, and wonderfully finished with woodgrain sides and a smooth baffle. The sound is deep and tight, with a fantastic low end that kicks with real effect. Its midrange is smooth and pleasant, and the high end has a nice sparkle, thanks to the Pinnacle ring tweeter. But it's the realistic bass that makes the L600 stand out: kick drums have surprising weight and impact without becoming muddled, perhaps due to Polk's enhanced Power Port. A real winner, particularly at its price point. DK, 324

Revel Performa3 F206

\$3500

This three-way, bass-reflex floorstander has charisma pure and simple. With its enthusiastic musicality, dynamic energy, and imaging precision, the F206 simply commands its audience's attention. Offering strong low-frequency dynamics, excellent upper-bass slam, lifelike midrange presence, and a treble range that is eloquent yet mercifully without the needle of tweeter localization, the F206 exceeds all expectations of performance in its price class, and well beyond. TAS' 2013 Affordable Loudspeaker of the Year. NG, 234

Vandersteen Audio Model

2Ce Signature III

\$3607 (stands included)

This classic three-way floorstander delivers 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. The 2Ce benefits from bi-wiring and should be placed away from walls. Shane Buettner, 139 (Signature II version reviewed)

Paradigm Founder 80F

\$3899

A fantastic all-around speaker with the finest sound Muse Kastanovich has ever had in his home and luxurious looks, too. A 2½-way floorstander with 1" AL-MAC tweeter, 6" AL-MAG mid/bass cone, and two more 6" Carbon-X bass cones, the 80F incorporates a wealth of technological, material, and design advancements, including shock-mounted-driver and feet-vibration decoupling, an application-engineered material for each driver type, and a complex non-rectangular cabinet with extensive internal bracing to increase rigidity and break up standing waves. Detail, resolution, and dynamics were all off the scale, and the bass was ample, considering it is the smallest of the Founder series floorstanders. Muse Kastanovich, 324

Revel PerformaBe M126Be

\$4000

Describing the M126Be as a hot-rodded version of the two-way Performa3 M106 does not give it its sonic due. Fireworks and butt-kicking dynamics? Those Revel trademarks are still in place. But there's a new degree of silken, shimmering refinement that's rare in this segment. Thanks to a new 1" beryllium-dome tweeter, paired with a ceramic-coated, cast-aluminum, acoustic-lens waveguide, and a 6.5" ceramic composite aluminum mid/bass, low-level resolution, timbral realism, and top-end air and speed have improved across the board. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this excellent compact is its eerie soundstage continuity. Relatively easy to drive, the M126Be still craves good amplification—the more watts the merrier. NG, 290

Spendor A4

\$4300

This small two-way floorstander offers surprising




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bass extension for its size, a smooth and well-defined treble, and an overall extraordinarily flat response. The range from 800Hz up is slightly projected compared to 200–800Hz, but for perfectionists, a small amount of EQ to fix this issue makes the A4 one of the most neutral speakers available at almost any price. The A4 is also an easy load and a natural approach to superb sound at a low price. Elevating the speaker by about six inches gives a more natural listening position. Robert E. Greene, 315

M&K Sound S150

\$4398

The compact, acoustic-suspension S150 monitor conveyed a consistency of control and timing and wide-ranging dynamics, plus a level of resolution that few monitors in this price range attain. Consistent with its pro studio-monitor heritage, its high energy midrange signature veered closer to the cooler and more clinical side. The S150's upper mids and treble performance were smooth, open, and without peaky misbehavior. The S150 was wonderfully adept at reproducing both male and female voices. Its trio of vertically arrayed soft-dome tweeters contributed to sharply focused imaging and an uncluttered soundstage. Paired with M&K's redoubtable X10 sub, the combo is a thoroughly contemporary and thrillingly musical take on a full-range stereo speaker system. NG, 326

Larsen Model 6.2

\$4400

This remarkable floorstander effectively overcomes the room-interaction problems that plague conventional speakers. Specifically, the Model 6.2 is designed to be positioned against a wall rather than out into a room. Rather than coloring the sound

and degrading imaging, this placement helps the 6.2 shine, producing a smooth bass balance and a superb soundstage. Even in a hotel-room demo, with the Model 6.2 flanking a dresser, the speaker threw a convincing soundstage. AQ, 276

Sonner Audio Legato Unum

\$4750

The Sonner Legato Unum scored handily in regions that remain the provenance of well-executed two-ways—namely, its emulation of single-driver coherence, spotless pin-point imaging, and ability to convincingly disappear from the performance. The Unum was a portrait of an open, forward-leaning, midrange-centric compact. Predictably, its overall balance was a lighter one—a trait fully consonant with its size and drivers—though its mids were notably full-bodied. Vocals were a strong suit, lively and detailed, particularly with female singers. An engaging, civilized, and musically compelling loudspeaker that makes a strong case for elegance and poise in smaller-room applications. NG, 309

Rogers LS3/5A SE 15-ohm

\$4895 (stands \$1995)

This BBC-spec mini-monitor is one of the most influential loudspeakers of all time, having inspired a host of imitations since its inception in the 1970s. Its cult status rests primarily on its near-point-source imaging precision. The Special Edition is an attempt to enhance dynamic expressiveness by replacing the thin front baffle with Panzerholz and upgrading drivers and crossover resistors. The result is a major increase in performance. Nothing has been lost in spatial conviction or image focus, but midrange transparency has increased, as has the sensation of compelling emotional tonality. Expect

a quality midbass range with extension to about 70Hz. It performs admirably on Baroque music, jazz, and vocals, but it isn't ideal for wide-range orchestral music. DO, 331

Rosso Fiorentino Pienza 2

\$4900

Francesco Rubenni is a man to watch. Founder of the Florence-based speaker manufacturer Rosso Fiorentino, Rubenni clearly knows the sound of live music, which he regularly enjoys in his custom-built listening studio/recording venue, La Sala del Rosso. And while his company's wonderful Pienza is most assuredly a mini-monitor, it's no small-fry when it comes to sonic performance. Sporting a 1" silk-dome neodymium tweeter and 5.25" glass-fiber-composite mid/woofer cone, the rear-ported Pienza 2 delivers a large and deep soundstage, plenty of output for small-to-medium rooms, and notably good low-end output for its size. With a lovely, natural tonal balance that convincingly fleshes out instruments and voices and a seductively silky upper end, the Pienza 2 brings a beautiful if slightly romantic tilt to things. Most importantly, it's a powerful communicator of the emotion behind the music. WG, 328

\$5000–\$10,000

Alta Audio Alyssa

\$5000–\$6000, depending on finish

Audiophiles have many choices when they look for a high-resolution loudspeaker that delivers a lot of detail. They can also find many loudspeakers with sunny musical dispositions. But in Steven Stone's experience, a loudspeaker that can deliver high resolution and inner detail yet remain musical in the process is as common as a unicorn. In SS's systems the Alta Alyssa did exactly that. He could listen all day at reference

levels without fatigue, and yet never feel as if he were being spared any of the micro-details. SS, 320

Stirling Broadcast LS3/6

\$5995

This modernized version of the BBC-licensed LS3/6 (the BBC version of the legendary Spondor BC1) maintains the nearly perfect midrange neutrality and startling stereo imaging of its ancestor but adds much greater dynamic capacity and more extension at the frequency extremes. REG, 228

Vandersteen Audio 3A Signature

\$6351 (stands included)

Like all Vandersteens, the 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. RH, 122

Focal Aria 948

\$6598

A three-way, bass-reflex floorstander, the 948 is the top model in Focal's Aria 900 line. 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. Although the 948s required

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The new flagship of NAD's venerated Classic Series, the C 399 is the first of the Classic Series to feature the nCore amplification technology, with 180 watts per channel of nuanced power. It is also the first to carry the MDC2 future-proofing platform, ensuring long-lasting value and performance.



Qualcomm aptX HD



some set-up tweaks to avoid excess brightness, they were excellent after break-in, bringing so many musical layers to life they created a truly immersive soundscape. JM, 254

Harbeth M30.2 XD
\$6690–\$6990

The best compact two-way speaker system PS has heard outside of Harbeth's 40.1, the M30.2 boasts high neutrality, superb resolution, and a matching of drivers with respect to sonic character that is equaled by only a small handful of multiple-driver dynamic loudspeakers. Speaking with a single voice in a way reminiscent of Quad ESLs, it is also of vanishingly low coloration and distortion, high transparency, and sheer musical authority, with a ravishing midrange. You can listen to it without fatigue for hours on end. Paul Seydor, 232

Vivid Audio Kaya S12
\$6900 (stands \$2000/pr.)

Vivid Audio's smallest loudspeaker in its four-model Kaya range, this two-way, ported stand-mount demonstrated the kind of outgoing, uncolored midrange and top end poise and go-for-broke high output to make it one of the biggest little crowd-pleasers to spend time in NG's listening room. Inter-driver coherence was excellent, essentially seamless during critical transitions. Its imaging precision also contributed to making Kaya 12 a richly engaging voice speaker. While true bottom octave bass response was beyond its reach, there was much in the way of satisfying mid and upper-bass response. Few compact two-ways have managed to achieve the overall sense of midrange balance, tonal verisimilitude, and seat-of-the-pants musicality of the Kaya 12. NG, 331

Rosso Fiorentino Elba 2
\$7000

This gorgeous Italian-made floorstander sounds as good as it looks. With walnut side panels and a baffle covered in textured leather, the Elba 2 exudes Italian elegance. The two-and-a-half-way Elba 2 features dual 6.5" coated-fiberglass midrange/woofers mated to a silk-dome tweeter. The Elba has remarkable refinement, coherence, resolution, and a flat tonal balance. The tweeter is exceptionally smooth, revealing fine detail without etch. The bottom end has real extension, giving the Elba 2 a sense of weight without bloat. When properly positioned, the Elba 2 is capable of outstanding soundstaging. RH, 315

Audiovector R1 Arreté
\$7250 (gloss finish, "Piano" \$730); Freedom Grounding Concept, \$850; stands, \$1400)

Audiovector builds all its own drivers in Denmark including the Heil Air-Motion Transformer tweeter of the R1, a design that permits very extended high-frequency reproduction with the acoustic output of a much larger dome. A portion of Audiovector's AMT output is sent backwards, enhancing the R1's spatiality. The R1 mates exceptionally well with a good subwoofer, and although it's among the finest stand-mounts to be heard at its price point all by itself, with the addition of a sub you have a three-way, full-range loudspeaker system that, deployed in anything other than a very large room, will beat the pants off any \$10k floorstander you'd care to put it up against. AQ, 319

For the love of records!



THE CABLE COMPANY

The Cable Company Library: High-End TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

Totem Acoustic Element Fire V2**\$7500**

The second generation of Totem's Element Fire is an example of a loudspeaker that plays bigger than its physical size would suggest. Much bigger. Though the dimensions of the enclosure are 8.8" x 16.6" x 11.7" (approximately—the cabinet eschews parallel surfaces) the published low-frequency response specification of 30Hz is quite believable, even with blues, big band, or pipe organ. The Fire V2s will mate nicely with a subwoofer, but it's surprising how infrequently that's mandated. Dynamic life—"jump factor"—is excellent and the speakers maintain their composure with the most complex musical programs. Much of this has to do with the 7" mid/woofer in this two-way, which weighs close to 10 pounds and employs 17 neo-

dymium magnets. Dedicated stands aren't available, but any number of popular 24" ones, preferably with the capacity to be mass-loaded, will work just fine. AQ, 330

Gradient 1.4**\$7650**

As in the original Gradient models decades ago, the bass here is generated by a floor-firing woofer, giving half-space directivity. Further up, the mids and highs are produced by a coaxial mid/tweeter assembly in a flow-resistance spherical enclosure, which attenuates the back radiation. The result is a speaker with remarkable indifference to the room around it and an almost uncanny ability to "disappear" as an apparent source. Unusual but elegant in appearance, these relatively small speakers produce abundant sound for rooms of moderate size with excellent

balance and superb stereo behavior. REG, 330

Graham Audio LS5/9**\$7733**

The BBC-designed Graham Audio LS5/9 two-way monitor is an unusual and impressive speaker. It does a startlingly good job of transcending its small size to present large-scale music convincingly. It has a balance very close to neutral and surprising dynamic capacity. And its emphasis on the 50 to 100Hz region (just before its final roll-off) does a good job of providing a full sound, despite the near absence of the bottom octaves. Its imaging is simply correct, and its basic sound very much like actual music, with suitable sources. If you have a need for a small speaker, the Graham Audio LS5/9 is surely an item of extraordinary interest. REG, 270

Larsen Model 8**\$7800**

The Larsen Model 8 speakers are unusual among floorstanders—they are designed to be placed against the wall, with the wall and floor used as part of the acoustic design, rather than as something to be avoided. This approach to producing sound in rooms grew out of work of the late Stig Carlssen (with whom designer John Larsen worked) decades ago, and the principles remain valid. The profound knowledge of how speakers and rooms interact embodied in the design leads to an unusually convincing presentation of music of all sorts, both small-scaled and large. The concept works; the Larsen Model 8 will deliver exceptional sound in even the most problematic rooms and against-the-wall placements. REG, 251

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GoldenEar Triton One.R**\$7990**

It doesn't require a golden ear to recognize that the GoldenEar Triton One.R isn't merely a good loudspeaker. It's a fabulous one. The Triton One.R offers a lusciously large soundstage, one that will seduce all but the most skeptical—or hidebound—listener. With gobs of bass, excellent transparency, particularly in the midrange, and an invitingly pellucid treble that seems to soar into the ether, the only downside of this loudspeaker is that you must plug the built-in subwoofer section into the wall via a power cord, but then again GoldenEar is supplying you not only with a full-range loudspeakers but also a set of integral subs. There's a relaxed, convivial feel to the music even when playing large-scale works, because the loudspeaker is never stressed. Not only your wallet but also your ears will thank you if you take the plunge on the Triton One.R. JH, 298

Bowers & Wilkins 805 D4**\$8500**

The 800 D4, takes every element of the vaunted D3 up a notch. All models in Bowers & Wilkins latest flagship series, including the 805, get a cabinet with more aluminum, a rear-mounted crossover that yields greater internal volume, an elongated "turbine" for the diamond-coated tweeter, handsome leather trim, and a biomimetic (versus fabric) midrange spider mechanism. The resulting sound is pure 800: resolving, musical, and self-effacing. The drivers and cabinet are so quiet that the subtlest musical flourishes emerge. And despite being stand-mounted, the 805 goes surprisingly deep, with satisfying punch and low-end timbral complexity. A terrific value at \$8500 per pair. AT, 334

Magnepan MG3.7i**\$8795**

Maggie's three-way, true-ribbon/quasi-ribbon planar 3.7 successfully addresses three issues that have long plagued "true-ribbon" Maggies: the seamless integration of that ribbon; the retention of detail and dynamic range at relatively low volume levels; and the reduction of "Maggie grain." The solution of these problems combined with the famous virtues of true-ribbon Magnepan produces what is, in JV's opinion, a best buy. Be aware that the 3.7i's are large, power-hungry, and limited in low bass and ultimate SPLs. JV, 221

Graham Audio LS5/9f**\$8800**

The LS5/9f is the floor-standing tower version of the stand-mount Graham LS5/9, both BBC-derived models designed by Derek Hughes. The larger enclosure gives the LS5/9f additional bass extension and dynamic capacity, while sacrificing none of the neutrality and articulation of the LS5/9. The result is a speaker with bass and dynamics that are adequate for orchestral and rock music and with an extraordinary truth to the sound of real instruments. (The extreme top is a little rolled off: Fans of "air" may want to add a super-tweeter). An instant classic that far outperforms its understated appearance. REG, 311

PSB Synchrony T600**\$8999**

Hailing from Canada, the T600 is the latest brainchild of longtime PSB designer Paul Barton. It features a tuneful midrange and precise, if limited, bass. The most remarkable aspect of this floorstander is its sweet pellucid treble. A seductive top-end is probably the last thing you would expect from a titanium-dome tweeter, but the

T600 sails through complex passages with nary a smidgen of elevated treble. Instead, it's a supremely linear and precise loudspeaker that punches well above its weight. The T600 offers many of the qualities of a fine mini-monitor with more heft and palpability.

JHb, 323

Monitor Audio Gold 300**\$9500**

The three-way, four-driver, bass-reflex Monitor Audio Gold 300s really impressed, thanks to their neutrality, powerful presence, and substantial sound output. There was a pleasing solidity to their presentation—courtesy of the cabinet construction and driver technologies—that won us over across more and more source material. Of course, the Gold 300s' "fidelity to source" tendencies tended to reveal both a recording's finesse and flaws. This isn't to say that the 300s ever sounded sterile or analytical, but rather that they generally got out of the way to show you what was there in the recording. This made listening with the Gold 300s a voyage of discovery. If you appreciate or collect well-recorded material, the Monitor Gold 300s will enable you to reap its rewards. JM, 300

Sonner Audio Legato Duo**\$9500–\$11,900 (depending on finish)**

From Boston-based Sonner Audio, Legato Duo offers an invitingly warmish signature that makes music more listenable rather than merely challenging. The mids and treble are faithful to timbre and demonstrate a presence range of fine articulation without veering into forwardness or being prone to sibilant exaggeration. Low-frequency response moderates steeply with a bit of compression but the drivers move a notable amount of air, giving the

Legato Duo a heavier footprint than expected. Vocals are a strong suit—balanced, firmly weighted, and reproduced with liveliness. A fine debut and a welcome addition to the high-end neighborhood. NG, 293

Graham Audio LS8/1**\$9700**

Designed by Derek Hughes, this two-cubic-foot, stand-mounted box speaker, with one mid/bass driver and two tweeters, is the latest of several descendants of the original Spendor BC1, developed by Derek's father, Spencer Hughes. The grand tradition is fully served, but the new speaker takes full advantage of modern driver technology; in particular, it will play much louder than the BC1 and has superior bass behavior. The LS8/1 has a very low level of resonant coloration and an essentially neutral mid and treble balance, with a slight warmth further down. The overall result is remarkably like live music, with suitable recordings. A classic revisited and an instant classic itself. REG, 323

Vandersteen Audio Treo CT**\$9995**

A loudspeaker of uncommon musicality and precision. Building upon the R&D that went into 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 immersion. 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 serious bass slam



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of that model, but you hardly miss it due to its excellent pitch definition. NG, 262

\$10,000–\$20,000

Fyne F1-8

\$10,500

Fyne Audio's premier stand-mount speaker features an 8" IsoFlare bass/midrange driver mated to a 1" magnesium-dome compression tweeter, forming a time-aligned coaxial transducer. Its treble range is clean, detailed, and naturally balanced once the Presence Control is properly dialed in. What is nearly magical is its holistic presentation of the musical spectrum. Expect to be drawn into the music aided by a midrange of superb clarity and nearly electrostatic transient speed. And if imaging is a high priority, the F1-8 can generate an exceptionally wide and deep soundstage with precisely focused image outlines. A gem of a loudspeaker that delivers on the promise of a time-aligned point-source design. DO, 320

Focal Kanta No2

\$10,998

This three-way from Focal's newest lineup provides a significant slice of the technology and performance of the esteemed French maker's top speakers at a more accessible cost. Imaging is very good, if not holographic. The new IAL3 tweeter acquires itself magnificently by any measure. Likewise, the unraveling of complex high-frequency sonorities is first-rate. The tonal balance is on the bright side of neutral but not to the point of egregiously altering instrumental or vocal signatures. If you have a loudspeaker budget of \$11k—and the right amplifier—the Kanta No2 ought to be on your list of products to hear. AQ, 289

Audio Solutions Figaro L

\$11,000–\$12,500 depending on finish

In most areas of sonic performance this substantial (154 lbs.), three-way, five-driver loudspeaker, manufactured in Vilnius, Lithuania, achieves well above what's expected at its price point. It plays coherently and authoritatively with music that makes significant dynamic and low-frequency demands, but it is also capable of nuance and detail. With a sensitivity of 92dB and a nominal impedance of 4 ohms, the Figaro L is not a difficult load for most amplifiers. The speaker ships with two pairs of front baffles, one with a grille cloth and one without. A steel outrigger base with large adjustable spikes (\$650) should be considered an essential accessory. AQ, 304

Legacy Audio Focus SE

\$11,962

The massive, six-driver, four-way Focus SE can create a big sound in every sense of the word, while delivering the kind of speed and resolution from the midrange up that is customary in better ribbon and electrostatic speakers, as well as a seamless blend between drivers. The upper mids and treble have life and air, along with a slightly forward midrange perspective. A sensitivity of 94.5dB makes the Focus SE easy to drive. A lot of loudspeaker for the money. AHC, 215

Focal Sopra No1

\$11,998

Reviewer Andy Quint wrote this about these superb two-way mini-monitors 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. In many instances, when I feel

I'm ready to write, I'll pack up the speakers under consideration and fire up the reference Wilson Duette 2s. With the Sopra No1s, I felt compelled to hear them play music until the last possible moment." AQ, 266

MartinLogan Impression ESL

11A

\$11,999

This hybrid from MartinLogan combines an electrostatic panel with dual 8" woofers—but with a twist. ML has added DSP room correction in the bass, greatly improving pitch definition, transient fidelity, and one's ability to follow bass lines. Compared with its predecessor, the highly regarded Montis, the ESL 11A is a bit more forward and assertive. The virtues for which electrostats are famous are abundant—transient speed, clarity, and resolution of fine detail. PS, 281

GoldenEar Triton Reference

\$12,500

GoldenEar's Triton Reference is an extraordinary value for the money. 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 free of listening fatigue, without any loss of detail or high frequencies, and with an equally good soundstage given proper setup. AHC, 276

Audiovector R3 Arreté

\$13,500

The R3 Arreté is a two-and-a-half-way floorstander with an Air-Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeter and two 6.5" mid/woof cones with membranes made of cross-woven Aramid fibers in a sandwich

structure. High-frequency reproduction is exceptionally open, extended, and non-fatiguing, most certainly thanks to the AMT tweeter. Bass is taut and tuneful; with most recordings the use of a subwoofer isn't even a consideration. Spatiality and transparency are also first-rate. If detail and neutrality are your things (and you're willing to forgo some sock and body), the R3 is highly recommended. AQ, 305

Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo/Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo Diamond **\$14,000 /\$23,000**

Replace whatever loudspeakers you've been using with a pair of two-way CrystalConnect Arabesque Minissimos or Minissimo Diamonds (which look identical but come with a superior diamond tweeter and other perks), and people will notice—before they've heard a note of music. The whimsical apostrophe shape, the vibrant color, the assured smallness of the things stop folks in their tracks and make them smile. Sonically, the Minissimos are superb everywhere but the low bass (which is to be expected in a two-way). When it comes to imaging and soundstaging, they disappear, creating a broad, deep, and continuous soundstage. A superior and stylish little transducer. AQ, 256/ JM, JV, 273

MBL 126

\$14,800 (stands \$1490)

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

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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. What's not to love? NG, 320

Manger Audio p1 \$14,995–\$18,995

The uniquely musical properties of the Manger Sound bending-wave transducer are brought 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, the p1 is neutral to warmish, with saturated overtones and firm acoustic-suspension bass. Temperamentally, the p1 is not geared to knock fillings loose or propel images forward like a studio control monitor. Instead, it offers music naturalism without artifice or hype. Without the normally distracting multi-driver discontinuities to deal with, orchestral timbre remains true and realistic. There's really nothing quite like the p1. NG, 279

Quad 2812 \$14,995

The Quad ESL63 and its variants, such as Quad's 2812 electrostatic floorstander, have been from the start a speaker family that has gone its own way. They have low distortion, among the lowest; they have almost unparalleled coherence and unity of voice; they have

an exceptionally uniform radiation pattern and a very low level of resonant coloration. They are also phase-linear, which is known to have subtle but audible positive effects, on transients in particular. In these categories they have always been in the very top echelon, and they still are. "Alone at the top" is a phrase that one is tempted to use, though it would be a slight exaggeration since others are in the same realm, though not many. No amount of money will buy a speaker that does definitively better the things that the Quads do well. REG, 262

TAD ME1 \$14,995 (includes ST3 stands)

The Micro Evolution One (ME1) may be the smallest in TAD's Evolution lineup, but this three-way reflex design arguably has more heart and soul than its larger Evolution Series siblings. "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 transducer of this specification. The headliner, however, is the coaxial midrange/beryllium tweeter, which offers uncommonly transparent and precise imaging and goose-pimpling musical minutiae. What is unexpected are the bare-knuckled dynamic thrust and power range that will shock even the staunchest large speaker advocate. NG, 278

Yamaha NS-5000 \$14,999

The NS-5000 loudspeaker is the star component of Yamaha's new 5000 Series, rightly taking its place as an underpriced overachiever in the high-performance loudspeaker marketplace. The large stand-mount 5000 uses a single material for every

vibrating surface—Zylon, one of the strongest fibers in existence. The value of this unique material would be nil had Yamaha not also assembled an engineering team with their eyes focused on the musical prize. But it did. As a result, you will be richly rewarded with a nearly *not-there* transducer. Though Yamaha first used the term "hi-fi" way back in 1954, the NS-5000 is decidedly not hi-fi. It's the kind of product that invites you to settle into an unfiltered, unforced, truly musical experience. Alan Moulton, 308

Sonus faber Maxima Amator \$15,000

A drop-dead gorgeous product, even by Sonus faber standards, the Maxima Amator is a floorstanding version of the Italian manufacturer's popular Minima Amator bookshelf model. This is a two-way design, with a 1.1" silk dome tweeter and a 7" mid/woofer joined by Sonus faber's novel "Interactive Fusion Filtering" crossover. Although those who listen to rock and large-scale orchestral music at enthusiastic levels may find low-frequency power and dynamics insufficient for their needs, with most other musical material the exceptionally seamless integration of the two drivers results in a sonic coherency that makes the speakers truly disappear. AQ, 316

Sonus faber Olympica Nova III \$15,000

The new ("Nova") versions of the Sonus faber's Olympica line of loudspeakers utilize a construction technique in which multiple layers of banded wood are set into an aluminum exoskeleton to create an exceptionally rigid enclosure. Within this largely resonance-free environment, users can experiment with the positioning of the top-to-bottom "Stealth Ultraflex"

resistive port—aimed toward the center of the room or facing toward the sidewalls—to optimize bass performance. The Nova III's 3-way, 4-driver transducer complement is fully up the task of playing loud and low, as well as scaling down to deal effectively with more nuanced material. AQ, 309

Larsen Model 9 \$15,200

This is the latest and best embodiment of the Larsen concept: using wall placement and woofers near the floor combined with wide dispersion of the higher frequencies to generate a sound with minimal early reflections but impressive uniformity over the room. The sound of your listening room is replaced by the sound of the original recording venue to a surprising extent. The speakers need minimal fuss about exact placement and little or no room treatment to achieve independence of the listening space. The Model 9 is superbly finished and surprisingly compact, considering its bass power and extension. REG, 308

Marten Django XL \$15,500 in piano black

The Django wowed TAS editors at CES demo, and the review sample lives up to the promise. While the Django breaks no design ground, the canny choice of materials results in a speaker that, on many tracks, proved virtually indistinguishable from AT's reference. Warm in character (lower piano notes are ravishing), the Django offers needle-sharp transients; details emerge distinctly and naturally. Most importantly, this is an unfailingly engaging speaker. AT, 228

Fleetwood Sound Company DeVille \$15,600

The star attraction here is a solid-wood conical horn with

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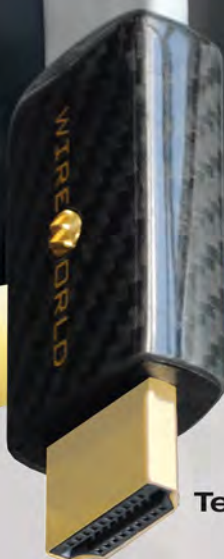
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impressive dynamic range. A 1" compression driver covers frequencies to below 2kHz, while an 8" woofer fills in the frequency range below 1500Hz. Listening height is a critical factor to obtaining the most accurate tonal balance. Ideally, your ears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

SteinMusic Highline Bobby M
\$16,250 (available without the woofers for \$8125/pr.)

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

T+A elektroakoustic Talis S 300
\$17,850

From a manufacturer known best in North America for its electronics, digital sources in

particular, comes the Talis S 300—a three-way, four-driver floorstander, with solid aluminum enclosure, that excels in all musical genres. The S 300 manifests a complete absence of tonal coloration that makes it easy to discern among similar vocal and instrumental timbres. High-frequency reproduction is open and airy, and orchestral weight is satisfying. The reproduction of spatial cues is first-rate. The S 300 responds well to bi-wiring; integrating a subwoofer is rarely necessary but possible. AQ, 293

Wolf von Langa WVL 12639 SON
\$17,995

Loudspeakers built by the German manufacturer Wolf von Langa are among the very few modern products that employ field-coil drivers—a technology that was dominant a century ago. At that time, loudspeakers were “electromagnetic”—the magnetism being generated by an external electrical power source. Langa has evolved this process considerably. A passive radiator, roughly the same size (11 inches) as the front-firing mid/woofer, is mounted to the rear, and the speaker functions as a dipole. The SON is a two-way design. The high-frequency driver is an air motion transformer made for Wolf von Langa by Mundorf, mounted in a clear Plexiglass panel atop the mid/bass cabinet for free-air operation. Sonically, the WVL 12639 SON belies its modest size, reproducing large-scale music with authority. Dynamics are excellent from top to bottom. With a 94dB sensitivity, the loudspeakers are easy to drive with low-powered (< 20Wpc) tube amplifiers. The integration of the two drivers is seamless, with both vocal and instrumental tonal signatures represented to near perfection. AQ, 334

Magico S1 Mk II M-Cast
\$19,600

There was a time when Magico's enclosures were made primarily of wood; now they're all-aluminum or carbon fiber, every model. For both the S Series and Q Series, Alon Wolf has his “platform” established and continues to advance the performance of the drivers and other components he puts into these optimized enclosures. The two-way, sealed-box Magico S1 Mk II floorstander is indeed as much a Magico as the S7 or the Q7, and must be a top consideration for anyone in the market for a loudspeaker up to \$20k. As the saying goes, it “comes from good stock.” AQ, 270

Wilson Audio SabrinaX
\$19,700

Although significantly more affordable than most of Wilson's other speakers, the SabrinaX unquestionably comes from the same gene pool. Utilizing the Convergent Synergy Mk 5 tweeter from the WAMM Master Chronosonic, the 8" woofer from the Sasha DAW, the binding posts of the XVX, and Wilson's new AudioCapX-WA capacitors first implemented in the XVX, the SabrinaX is a wolf in sheep's clothing. The cabinet is constructed entirely from Wilson's ultra-dense X-material to reduce vibration and noise. The result is a speaker crafted with the same attention to detail as the XVX, and one that conveys a sense of musical truth and beauty remarkable at its price. As expected from a single woofer and smaller cabinet, the SabrinaX lacks the massive low-end authority of Wilson's more expensive offerings, but literally nothing else. Matthew Clott, 317

Magnepan MG20.7
\$19,795

These Maggies' magical ability to transport listeners to

a different space and time, and to there realistically recreate (with lifelike scope and size) the sound of acoustic instruments and the venue they were recorded in is extraordinary. It almost goes without saying (since these are Magnepan), but the 20.7s are also incredibly good values, although you're going to have to bring a lot of power to this party, and you're going to need a good deal of room to house two speakers the size and width of a couple of NFL linebackers. Don Saltzman, 249

\$20,000 and above
Sanders Model 10e

\$20,000 (includes one Sanders Magtech amplifier)

The 10e is a hybrid with a flat electrostatic panel 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 lack of midrange coloration puts the Sanders in the top echelon. This is one of the lowest-coloration speakers available. And when you consider that even if you buy two Sanders Magtech amplifiers—one comes along as part of the \$20,000 package—the total cost, exclusive of source components, is \$25,000 and that you can adjust the speaker to suit your room and your tastes, the Model 10e is not only a wonder, but also a bargain. REG, 276

Graham LS5/5
\$21,190

Based on a loudspeaker originally designed by the British Broadcasting Corporation in the mid-Sixties, the 5/5 is a three-way that, by slot-loading the midrange and woofer for wider, smoother, more even axial response, manages the difficult trick of a uniform frequency response across an approximately 60-degree window, while at the same time realizing state-of-the-art

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imaging and a commandingly impressive dynamic range. Bass response is deep enough to obviate the need for a sub-woofer, while the overall tonal balance is such that day after day on recording after recording over several months the 5/5 left reviewer Paul Seydor feeling he was hearing back to original sources in a way he's experienced with very few speakers. PS judges it the finest three-way, cone-based loudspeaker in his experience and one of the finest, period. PS, 331

Legacy Aeris with Wavelet DSP

\$21,477 (\$27,792 with Wavelet II upgrade)

The combination of the frequency-and time-domain-optimized four-and-a-half-way Aeris loudspeaker and its companion Wavelet DSP processor/crossover provides some of the most musically realistic sound reviewer AHC has ever encountered. This duo takes digital processing and room correction a vital step forward and show that a DSP'd speaker can reach levels that are even competitive with the best purist speakers, and some that sell for far higher prices. AHC, 269

Muraudio SP1

\$22,400

This elegant if unusual speaker combines two sealed-box cone woofers above and below Muraudio's unique, doubly curved electrostatic drivers. The curvature of the driver element both horizontally and vertically generates an effect resembling a virtual point source rather than sounding like a typical flat panel. The SP1 is very clean with extremely low distortion. The bass is very well integrated and precise in character, albeit not extended to the lowest lows. The spatial impression is attractively unconstrained, and the balance is overall neutral. Muraudio became famous

a few years ago for its omni PX1 model, which used three doubly curved panels to form a 360-degree source. But the SP1, at a much lower and very reasonable price for what is involved, is a truly exceptional speaker in its own right. REG, 293

Harbeth M40.3 XD

\$22,500-\$24,500

A large three-way that requires stand-mounting, the M40.3 is the virtual embodiment of tonal neutrality, and with a frequency response from 38Hz-20kHz of ± 3 dB, (but near ruler-flat across most of that range) it possesses an ease, effortlessness, and lack of strain that translate into a listening experience that draws all the attention to the music. Like the M40.2, the M40.3 represents the designer Alan Shaw's highest development so far of the BBC school of speaker design, possessing a sheer musical authority almost nonexistent in PS' previous experience. The M40.3 is now PS' reference when it comes to reproducing music in all its natural power and glory. PS, 269/293

Raidho TD1.2

**\$24,000, piano black;
\$27,000, walnut**

This wonderful mini-monitor plays music with a lot more dynamic impact, control, and sonic heft than it should be able to muster given its size. Its robust sound could easily be mistaken for that of a small-to-medium floorstander. It recreates a large, airy soundscape filled with well-defined images in a coherent contextual whole. High resolution without sounding forced is the TD1.2's main strength. One has a feeling of peering into the recording event, so well does it portray fine details. It also allows all kinds of music to retain their verve and beauty, and thereby makes listening a real pleasure.

It is limited in low-frequency extension and dynamic range, as all mini-monitors are, and it is expensive. The TD1.2 is for the enthusiast of fine mini-monitors, who appreciates the strengths—and accepts the weaknesses—of the genre and is willing to acquire one of the best available. Kirk Midtskog, 304

Revel Salon2

\$24,200

The result of five years of intensive research into every aspect of speaker performance, the Salon2 represents a genuine breakthrough in dynamic loudspeakers. Although it's impressive in all performance parameters, its treble is extremely natural and well-integrated. Extremely natural rendering of timbre and dynamics. Although it's been on the market for a long time without updates, it's still a compelling contender that competes with more expensive speakers. Bring a high-powered amplifier. RH, 178

MBL 120

\$26,500 (stands, \$2080)

The omnidirectional MBL 120 has been specially engineered for medium-sized rooms—and in such environs it sounds fabulous. The soundstage it throws has never been more holographic or enveloping. More extended across the frequency spectrum and far less colored in the bass than the 121, it is a more refined speaker in every category. The best small MBL yet. NG, 228

YG Acoustics Carmel 2

\$26,500

Much of YG's technology from its higher-end offerings found a place in this two-way, floorstander, along with standard YG features like a solid-aluminum sealed enclosure, proprietary anti-resonance devices, and world-class fit and finish. The result is a slender

package with a surprisingly big, lively sound and an ability to delve deeper than you'd expect. The highs are more extended (an airy 40kHz) than a typical soft-dome tweeter, with the benefit of no metallic glare. Imaging, tonality, detail, and dynamics are all at a bespoke level. Musically, the speaker is an unending delight. The YG also fits perfectly into today's smaller, shared-purpose listening spaces. The speaker is stylish enough to complement any décor, is perfectly happy tucked out of the way near the wall behind it, doesn't require humongous amps, and sounds great even at low volume. AT, 320

Magico A5

\$26,800

Magico's A5 brings the company's vaunted technologies to a less lofty price point. The A5 is a three-way, five-driver system in a sealed, anodized-aluminum enclosure that features materials and construction techniques previously implemented in Magico's top Q series. The result is a speaker that offers crisp, tight extension down to 24Hz, staggering dynamics for its size, and a lifelike sense of weight and body. The overall presentation is triumphantly cohesive; image accuracy and presence are meticulous. The A5 offers micro-resolution, yet never sounds analytical. A terrific speaker and a great value. MC, 320

German Physiks HRS-130

\$27,000-\$32,000 (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. Expect an exceptionally wide sweet spot coupled with palpable image outlines. The

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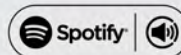
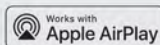



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HRS-130 is almost perfect for a small-to-medium-sized room, providing that the room is acoustically tuned along the lines of live-end/dead-end to sharpen image focus. Midrange textures are capable of exceptional purity, characterized by low levels of distortion through the upper midrange. DO, 276

Kharma Elegance S7 Signature

\$28,000

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 due to the beryllium tweeter, which makes a great match with Kharma's proprietary composite (KCD) woofers (goodbye to Accuton 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 it has a delicacy, low-level resolving power, and micro-dynamic dexterity that touch both the mind and the heart. NG, 253

PS Audio FR30

\$28,499

After nearly 50 years in the electronics business, PS Audio has released a

speaker—and it's a great one. The drivers are all custom-made for the FR30 and include two innovative planar-magnetic transducers—a 10" midrange and two 2.5" tweeters. Four 8" woofers augmented by four 10" side-firing passive radiators add bottom-end firepower. The oval enclosure sits on a platform that raises it from the floor, giving the FR30 a distinctive appearance. This formidable driver array produced some of the smoothest, best integrated, and musically realistic bass AHC has heard. But the midrange and treble reproduction from those large planar-magnetic drivers were the stars of the show. There was more detail at every level of sound, particularly on low-level passages that faded away into silence. There was no hardening of the midrange and treble at any listening level. AHC called the PS Audio FR30 "one of the finest reference speakers now available, and certainly one that does help define the current state of the art." AHC, 331

Estelon YB Mk II

\$29,000

Estelon's least-expensive full-range loudspeaker manifests all the virtues of the Estonian manufacturer's most ambitious products, including a uniquely shaped enclosure fabricated from a proprietary marble composite material. In this non-resonant cabinet, the YB Mk II's three drivers—a ScanSpeak 1" beryllium dome, a ScanSpeak 5.8" sliced-paper cone mid/woofer, and a SEAS 8.6" aluminum woofer, all basically off-the-shelf parts—function optimally. The Estelons spatiality may be their strongest selling point. The speakers also excel at the reproduction of the human voice. Unquestionably, the YB Mk II's function best with substantial high-current amplifiers, which provide all the low-end heft and "grip" they're capable of. The speaker's appearance is stunning, winning the YB model a prestigious Red Dot international design award in 2017. AQ, 320

TAD Evolution One TX

\$29,995

Standing roughly four feet tall on its spiked outrigger base, this 3-way bass-reflex design features a 1" beryllium dome tweeter that is mounted coaxially within a 3.5" midrange cone, making for a better off-axis listening experience. Two 6.3" woofers with membranes fabricated from a laminated material of aramid fabric and raw fibers complete the driver complement. All the transducers are made from scratch by TAD. Slit-shaped

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ports on both lateral surfaces of the Evolution One TX contribute to the flexibility in room placement that characterizes the speaker—it will perform well just a foot-and-a-half from the room boundary behind it. Scaling of musical forces, layered depth, and timbral accuracy are all excellent. AQ, 328

Stenheim Alumine Three

\$33,950

The new 3½-way “compact reference” loudspeaker from the relatively young Swiss company Stenheim is an explosive musical launchpad that brings a set of strengths to the market that is frankly unique in one small (but 150-pound-heavy) package. An unusually high 93dB sensitivity with a nominal 8-ohm impedance (6 ohms minimum) opens the window of usable amplification. Imagine the presence and energy of your favorite horn loudspeaker (but without the unpleasant colorations) squeezed into a small, attractive aluminum enclosure that can fit in your small to medium-sized listening room. AM, 304

Acora SRC-1

\$35,000

The Acora SRC-1 is a new product from a new company. This is a high-end loudspeaker with a stone enclosure that succeeds in all important audiophile metrics. CNC technology allows for the eight pieces of granite that comprise each cabinet to be cut to the exacting tolerances required so that they fit together perfectly and function as they should acoustically. A ported, surprisingly svelte, 246-pound two-way floorstander, the SRC-1 uses a 1" soft dome tweeter and a 7" sandwich paper-cone woofer, sourced from ScanSpeak and rebuilt by Acora in Toronto. The presentation of musically meaningful detail is the SRC-1's major strength, as is its rendering of image size and recording space. Bass is tuneful, with good impact. Orchestral climaxes are majestic, most certainly because nothing is vibrating that shouldn't be. An instant classic. AQ, 308

Sound Lab Majestic 745

\$35,670

Like a MartinLogan CLX with a real low end, this huge and hugely wonderful electrostat has the biggest soundfield, far and away the deepest bass (true 20Hz extension), and most lifelike dynamic range of any 'stat—in addition to the tradition-

al virtues of 'stats (gorgeous tone color, lightning transient response, single-driver coherence, and phenomenal inner detail). It can sound a bit warm and dark in balance and overblown in the bottom octaves if placement and amplification aren't carefully minded. JV, 122

Paradigm Persona 9H


\$36,999

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. The Persona line features the excellent Anthem Room Correction (ARC) to remove room-induced peaks and dips. The 9H is truly flat ($\pm 2\text{dB}$ 19Hz–45kHz), has very deep, quick, and detailed bass, and a superb new beryllium midrange driver and beryllium tweeter with a great deal of life and detail but no hardness. Each woofer is driven by a DSP-controlled 700W amplifier. 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 at any price, and its size and weight are far more practical than that of many contenders for the state of the art. AHC, 272

Audiovector R6 Arreté

\$37,000

The Audiovector R6 Arreté uses the advanced technology created for the R8 and Flagship R11 Arreté in a “more affordable” package designed for smaller rooms. A six-driver floorstander, the R6 includes an AMT tweeter, rear firing 3" midrange, two 6.5" front-firing carbon-fiber midrange drivers, and an isobaric-loaded woofer, implementing a 6.5" and 8" woofer. The sonic character of the R6 Arreté can be generally described as unconstrained and accurate, with an emphasis on resolution and natural detail. It's not that there is more there; it's just that the definition of what's there is cleaner, crisper, and more resolved. Add to that an almost magically neutral midrange of miraculous speed and you begin to get the idea. Low frequencies are fast paced and articulate to match the speed and accuracy up top. If you favor detail, dimensionality, clarity, and scale, then these speakers need to be on your list. MC, 313



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Bowers & Wilkins 801 D4 **\$38,000**

The fourth generation of this iconic loudspeaker continues the development of a product that was advanced for its time when introduced 43 years ago. In addition to the “reverse wrap” enclosure design first seen with the D3 iteration, the current 801 has a reconsidered internal Matrix construction to further control unwanted resonances. Also new is B&W’s Biomimetic Suspension System that improves the mechanical behavior of the midrange driver’s spider, and the woofers now sport anti-resonance plugs to reduce flexing. These changes, and other refinements, result in a loudspeaker that’s fearless when it comes to dynamics and low-frequency reproduction, but also delivers all the spatial and tonal subtleties of the best recordings. AQ, 325

Rockport Technologies Atria II **\$38,000**

The Atria 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 can throw 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. A terrific speaker and a great value, too. AT, 241

Magnepan MG30.7 **\$39,995**

This giant, four-panel (two panels per side), four-way, ribbon/quasi-ribbon line source loudspeaker from Magnepan is the best Maggie JV has heard. With its highly coher-

ent wavelaunch, free-standing imaging, vast soundstage, phenomenal resolution of inner detail, lightning transient response, incomparable naturalness of timbre, and total lack of box coloration and diffraction, the 30.7 is markedly less “there” as a sound source (and markedly more lifelike on voice and acoustic instruments) than almost every dynamic-speaker-in-a-box, no matter its price. The best buy in an ultra-high-end loudspeaker (and one of the best high-end buys of all time), the 30.7 earned JV’s most ecstatic recommendation and TAS’ 2017 Overall Product of the Year award. JV, 279

Vandersteen Audio Kento Carbon **\$41,700**

After a long and hugely successful run, Vandersteen’s Model 5 has been replaced with the significantly improved Kento Carbon. This four-way, five-driver system features two side-firing 9" woofers powered by an integral amplifier, a 6.5" tri-woven mid/woofer, Vandersteen’s 4.5" Perfect Piston midrange, and the company’s unique 1" carbon tweeter. An 11-band analog-equalization system allows you to flatten the in-room response below 200Hz. The first-order crossovers and slanted baffle assure that the Kento is phase-coherent at the listening position. Sonically, the Kento is remarkably coherent from top-to-bottom, speaking with one voice. Bass is excellent, with outstanding clarity, aided by the ability to fine-tune the bottom end to your room. More than a worthy successor to the venerable Model 5. Andre Jennings, 312

German Physiks Borderland Mk IV **\$42,000-49,000 (depending on finish)**

Finding an omni-directional speaker that works in

real-world rooms can be a challenge. Finding one that is simple to set up, somewhat affordable, relatively easy to drive and sounds like music is near impossible. Yet German Physiks’ Borderland Mk IV, with its Dicks Dipole Driver (DDD) omnidirectional transducer mated to a 12" down-firing woofer in a sealed enclosure accomplishes just that. The Borderland offers a sense of live music that few other speakers convey. With a single driver reproducing the frequencies from 190Hz to 24kHz, the speaker represents a near acoustic point source, creating a holographic stage that is both palpable and believable. And that 12" sealed driver truly brings the goods while never losing its grip or unraveling. The buyer needs to decide if the unorthodox appearance is suited to their taste. DO, 316

Joseph Audio Pearl 20/20 Graphene **\$43,999**

The Pearl 20/20 Graphene floorstander comprises two modular sections. The lower half contains twin 8" woofers, and the upper module contains a 7" graphene-coated midrange and 1" Sonatex tweeter. When combined, the two sections form the complete speaker. The Pearl 20/20 Graphene further improves upon the sound of Joseph Audio’s excellent smaller Perspective2 Graphene, especially in the bass with additional power and extension. New FEA advancements in the graphene midrange and subsequent crossover adjustments have yielded a transducer with solid imaging, great soundstaging, excellent clarity, and a stress-free yet detailed presentation. AJ, 309

Raidho TD2.2 **\$46,500**

To say the TD2.2 adds a reasonable measure of bass

weight and extension to the overall sound of its smaller sibling, the fabulously high-performing TD1.2 mini-monitor, would be an understatement. The rearported, 2.5-way TD2.2 sounds much grander in scale and impact than its seemingly modest differences would lead one to expect. The TD2.2 delivers fatigue-free high resolution in the top end and midrange, coupled with satisfying fullness in the low end. Add in expansive soundstaging and focused imaging, and you have a very easy-to-like transducer. Raidho uses its own in-house drivers—one TD ribbon tweeter and two 6.5" mid/woofers layered with five thin coats of tantalum and industrial diamond on an aluminum cone. Music sparkles through the TD2.2. It invites you to listen closely. KM, 331

Estelon XB Mk II **\$48,000**

The curvaceous cabinet is only the beginning of the XB’s delights. The Estelon delivers incredible detail and spatial resolution, giving music an uncanny tangibility. Further, dynamics and timing are so precise—allowing stylistic nuances to come through so clearly—that the listener feels directly connected to each musician. The trade-offs for these manifest benefits are low sensitivity and a tweeter that skirts the edge of aggressiveness. The XB should be paired with brawny amps, installed on their included spikes, and positioned with minimal toe-in to minimize these effects. (New Mk II version not yet reviewed.) AT, 253

Voxativ 9.87 **\$49,990**

The horn-loaded Voxativ 9.87 has advantages that neither planar nor dynamic speakers offer. First, it is very high in sensitivity, which allows you

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Platinum Series 3G comprises four elegantly designed, high-performance loudspeakers that entwine acoustic innovation, attention to detail and precision engineering to deliver breathtaking sound, for a lifetime.



to drive it to thunderous levels with an SET or lower-powered amp. Second, it is a single-driver speaker, using one Voxativ 8", wooden-cone, AC-4D widebender to cover almost the entire audible range. Third, it is augmented in the bass by an amplified dipolar subwoofer, the Pi-Bass. As a result, the 9.87 doesn't thin down and roll off in the low end and lower midrange as other single-driver loudspeakers do. It has the body, power, and extension that are almost always missing in such designs, making it the most complete and realistic-sounding single-driver transducer JV has heard. JV, 289

Legacy Audio V with Wavelet II Processor

\$55,000

This digitally optimized, multiway floorstander with a highly sophisticated processor is one of the best speaker systems AHC has heard—one of those rare innovative 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 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 II processor, but to quote AHC's conclusion, "The Legacy V is really good!" AHC, 258

YG Acoustics Hailey 2.2

\$55,800

At roughly the mid-point in the YG lineup, the Hailey 2.2 is a three-way with drivers and sealed aluminum enclosures made entirely in-house. The 10.25" woofer and 7.25" midrange feature cones machined from solid blocks of aluminum for maximum stiffness.

Sonically, the Hailey 2.2 can be summed up in two words: precision and performance. In these regards, the Hailey 2.2 is at least the rival of the best electrostatics and ribbons, says AHC, producing excellent detail and microdynamics at every frequency. Being a sealed design, the Hailey 2.2 is less sensitive to room interaction in the bass than most ported speakers. KM, 309

Von Schweikert Audio VR-55 Aktive

\$60,000

The application of VSA's pioneering (and remarkably cost-effective), patent-pending, noise-reducing cabinet technology combined with specially developed custom-built drivers from Accuton and ScanSpeak results in a level of performance that GW feels breaks new ground in resolution, transparency, and transient response below the \$100,000 mark. The VR-55's 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. Greg Weaver, 256

Wilson Audio Alexia V

\$67,500

The Wilson Alexia is scarcely cheap, but it does bring much of the technology and sound quality of Wilson's far more expensive speakers to a much more affordable price point. The Alexia is the first relatively compact Wilson speaker that provides Wilson's Aspherical Group Delay, which allows it to be fully time-aligned for a specific listening position. The result is a speaker that comes far closer to the imaging and soundstaging accuracy of an ideal point source, with a smooth and revealing overall frequency response, no hardness or arti-

cial warmth, and a woofer that provides extraordinary power and low-frequency extension with room reinforcement. New "V" model brings a wide range of significant technical and sonic improvements. AHC, 238 (original Alexia; Alexia V not yet reviewed)

Kharma Elegance dB11-S

\$68,000

This reference-quality, three-way, four-driver floorstander uses a specially developed beryllium tweeter that is exemplary in its sonic purity and control, and a 7" carbon-composite midrange driver that employs Kharma's sandwich-cone technology, designed to push break-up frequencies as far up as possible, thereby eliminating colorations in the drivers' working ranges. Two 10" aluminum woofers complete the package, housed, together with the other drivers, in a handsome yet inert cabinet. This is an extraordinary speaker with wonderful coherence, terrific low-level detail, gorgeous timbre, smooth yet extended highs, and surprisingly explosive bass. Jim Hannon, 256

Magico S7 M-Cast

\$69,200

An extraordinarily revealing speaker that has very neutral timbre and does not exaggerate or fail to reproduce any aspect of sound quality. Its deeply extended but very uncolored bass can seem slightly weak until you realize how far down that bass can go 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. 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. AHC, 266

Sonus faber Lilium

\$70,000 (Gloss Red Violin finish)

The Lilium marks more than a ceremonial step by Sonus faber into a superb sonic era of speed, transparency and coherence. This svelte loudspeaker is extremely well suited for classical music and jazz. It presents a seamless sonic tapestry but also possesses a good deal of punch, which its excellent design, based on a tuned mass damper and a multilayer resonance-control-optimized cabinet, seeks to highlight. Its tweeter is beautifully detailed and enticingly airy. While it does not plumb the deepest bass octaves, this transducer is potent enough to fill very large rooms. JHb, 259

Vimberg Tonda D

\$70,000

Designed and built by the same folks who make ultra-high-end Tidal Audio loudspeakers, the Vimberg line is intended to offer Tidal quality at a lower price. The three-way, five-driver, ported, floorstanding Tonda D is Vimberg's flagship. With a gracefully angled HDF-laminated chassis and a substantial aluminum faceplate, the Tonda D is quite handsome looking. Parts-quality is first rate (all Accuton Cell drivers, including a pure diamond tweeter, as well as Mundorf and Dueland caps). The sound quality is outstanding, with excellent imaging, resolution, transient behavior, dynamic contrasts, and undiminished energy. For listeners who crave full-range transparency to sources, the Tonda D is a must-audition. AJ, 320

Stenheim Alumine 5SE

\$73,500

The three-way, four-driver Stenheim Alumine Five Spe-

159 Mono Power Amplifier

The 159 benefits both from Burmester's wealth of experience and proven track record in power amplifier development combined with the latest developments in analogue amplifier technology. Whilst forward- looking in various aspects, it remains, however, typically "Burmester".

Together with the BC350 Loudspeakers, the 159 Mono Power Amplifiers are the first products in our Signature Line.



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cial Edition (SE) loudspeaker from Switzerland is a unique combination of new and old. At less than a foot wide, just under four feet high, and a mere foot-and-a-quarter deep, its rectangular aluminum cabinet is fashionably compact. Of course, at 220 pounds it's a hefty little box. Indeed, the Five SE's aluminum enclosure, bulk, and squared-off good looks put JV in mind of earlier-gen Magicos. However, the Five SE's twin, slot-like, front-firing ports—one above and one below the pair of 10" woofers on the bottom half of its facade—are anything but Magico-like. Neither are the drivers themselves (the two independently ported woofers, the largish 6.5" midrange, and the 1¼" dome tweeter), all of which use "old-fashioned" pulp or textile diaphragms and textile surrounds. Also very un-Magico-like is the Alumine Five SE's lofty 94dB sensitivity and stable 8-ohm impedance. How does this demure, high-efficiency combination of old tech and new sound? Well, as JV said about the superb Estelon X Diamond Mk II, the Stenheim Five SE is not just a great speaker; it is one of high-end audio's greatest speakers. Its uncanny ability to generate truly deep, powerful, linear bass, unusually rich and lifelike tone color (top to bottom), near-visible three-dimensional images, and astounding detail and dynamics from such a modestly sized enclosure is not just a surprise; it is one for the ages. JV, 328

Wilson Benesch Resolution

\$74,000

This unusual design, employing carbon-fiber enclosures and isobaric woofer loading, excels in a few specific areas, but it's the sum of the parts that makes the Resolution such a joy to listen to. This tall, thin speaker is simply nonpareil at unearthing cloaked bass lines—and

revealing everything about them. Thanks, no doubt, to the in-house-made, carefully matched drivers and an equally well-thought-out crossover, these speakers possess uncanny coherence. Rounding out the Wilson Benesch's virtues are a deathly quiet noise floor and low overall distortion. These traits, too, add to the speaker's sense of musical suspense, since dynamic bursts seem to come out of nowhere. The Resolution can deliver long-term musical satisfaction. AT, 289

Vandersteen Audio Model 7 XTRM w/Bedrock Base

\$84,000

Based on unique drivers made from carbon-fiber-clad balsa-wood, the Model 7 strips away a layer of coloration and artifacts, revealing a glorious purity of timbre. You simply don't hear the cones when listening to music through the Model 7, which is electrostatic-like in its clarity, transparency, and openness. The extensive bass adjustments, made possible by the powered woofer, allow the Model 7's response below 120Hz to be tailored to your room. Extremely coherent from the center-of-the-earth bass to the top treble. (Mk II not yet reviewed.) RH, 206

Legacy Audio Valor with Wavelet II

\$86,000

Legacy's Valor with the new Wavelet II processor brings high technology and advanced digital engineering to the loudspeaker category. This powered DSP speaker is physically large, with a massive driver array including dual 12" subwoofers, dual 12" passive radiators, dual 14" woofers, a 14" mid/woofer, a 1.5" coaxial midrange/tweeter, and dual 4" tweeters. These are powered by integral 1kW, 750W, and 500W amplifiers. You need to supply one additional amplifier for the upper range.

The Wavelet II outboard processing contains the DSP circuitry as well as Bohmer Correction, which provides optimized in-room energy/time alignment and ideal acoustic transfer in both the frequency and time domains. The Valor demonstrates the effect of removing the limitations in dynamic range and low-frequency response of conventional speakers. It realizes a new level of dynamic detail and contrasts, regardless of the music. The sound is highly detailed, with natural rendering of timbre and precise placement of images within the acoustic. AHC, 323

Estelon X Diamond Mk II

\$89,000

This three-way, hour-glass-shaped floorstander with a literally rock-solid enclosure from Alfred Vassilkov of Estonia is not just a great direct-radiating loudspeaker; it is one of the greatest direct-radiating loudspeakers. Building on the virtues of the original X Diamond (which already had the best disappearing act and the best low end JV had heard from a direct-radiating multiway loudspeaker, sealed or ported), the X Diamond II adds astonishingly realistic timbral warmth and body to what was already a superbly phase-and-time coherent package. With its new tweeter, crossover, and wiring, the X Diamond II has no audible weaknesses—no matter what kind of listener you are or what kind of music you prefer. TAS' 2022 Overall Product of the Year Award-winner. JV, 323

MBL 101 E Mk II

\$91,000

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 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. The result is a genuine improvement in a genuine classic. Though not a word we often use in audio criticism (more's the pity), the MBL 101 E Mk IIs are more plain fun to listen to than just about anything else out there, short of their much bigger (and much more expensive) brothers, the MBL X-tremes. JV, 286

YG Acoustics Sonja 2.2i

\$91,800

The Sonja 2.2i improves upon the award-winning 1.2 with even greater dynamic ease, bass weight, soundstage continuousness, and resolution of fine detail. The main technical improvement comes from a kind of hybrid tweeter (patented) called BilletDome that combines a soft-dome membrane with a very lightweight, strong, and acoustically transparent supporting "air frame." The cabinet and crossover have also been updated for greater accuracy and efficiency in the bass. The 2.2i'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. KM, 327

Magico M3

\$94,000

Disappearing like a planar, this demure dynamic offers a superb blend of drivers,



R 6
ARRETÈ



R 3
ARRETÈ

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EDITORS'
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AWARDS



R 1
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QR 1

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thanks, in part, to an improved carbon-fiber-and-aluminum cabinet derived directly from the Magico M Project and, in equal part, to the company's high-tech diamond-coated beryllium tweeter and graphene-carbon cones. Combining Magico's traditional virtues of transparency and ultra-high resolution with a beguiling touch of timbral warmth, the M3 simply sounds more "real" on more music more of the time than previous Magicos (none of which were slouches in this regard). Cone speakers just don't get much better than this one. JV, 282

Raidho TD3.8

\$99,000 in piano black (\$111,000 walnut burl)

The three-way (with ribbon tweeter), ported Raidho TD3.8 is a speaker with truly excellent sound, whose conventional appearance and size do not reflect its exceptional performance. Priced at the very top of the high end, it looks a lot like traditional cone floorstanders, give or take a panel tweeter. And yet, as listening to it quickly makes clear, this external visual modesty is deceiving. The TD3.8 has exceptional internal technology and components. Most importantly, it does not sound ordinary in any way when you listen to it. Priced at the luxury level, it delivers luxury-level sound. Moreover, it does not dominate the room visually, disappearing into the music rather than trying to dominate it. AHC, 309

Zellaton Stage

\$99,750

The beautiful three-way, floorstanding Zellaton Stage pushes the state of the art in a couple of important sonic dimensions. Its transparency is breathtaking, and its coherence sets a standard among multi-driver speaker systems. A key to its remark-

able coherence is that its three handmade sandwich cone drivers, including the tweeter, utilize the same materials and ultra-thin aluminum diaphragms on a foam substrate. The multiple drivers sound "as one." The leading edges of transients are sudden and crisp with no smearing, and instruments and voices have natural timbre and palpable presence. The Stage has an uncanny ability to put performers in your listening room. JH, 297

MartinLogan Neolith

\$119,999

MartinLogan swung from the fences with the Neolith, mounting a roughly 4' x 2' XStat electrostatic panel atop an enclosure that houses a front-firing 12" driver and a 15" rear-firing woofer. Once you've heard the transparency, resolution, and sheer sense of nothing between you and the music that the Neolith's big panel delivers, you'll be spoiled for life. Surprisingly, these virtues of electrostats are combined with seamless integration with the bass, resulting in a speaker with full frequency extension and dynamics along with fabulous transparency. The Neolith is beautifully built and finished, highly flexible in room-matching, and backed by a solid company with more than 40 years of experience building electrostatic loudspeakers. *The Absolute Sound's* 2015 Overall Product of the Year. RH, 259

Børresen Acoustics 05

\$132,000

This svelte, handsome, five-foot-tall, seven-driver, two-and-a-halfway floorstander from justly celebrated Danish loudspeaker designer Michael Børresen sounds, surprisingly, very little like the dark, powerful, immensely detailed Raidho speakers that made Børresen's reputation. Though it uses the same cone/ribbon

driver complement as his Raidhos did, the characteristic "bottom-up" tonal palette of Børresen's Raidhos has dramatically changed. Indeed, minus a bump in the mid-bass, the 05 comes close to a dead-center-neutral timbral balance. And thanks in part to its aerodynamic cabinet, it disappears as a sound source almost completely. Resolution is astonishing without any hint of the analytical, and dynamics remain edgelessly explosive, top to bottom. JV, 309

YG Acoustics Sonja 2.3i

\$139,600

This flagship from YG Acoustics sports driver diaphragms machined in-house from solid aluminum blocks coupled to new motors that reduce audible and measurable distortion. The Sonja 2.3 also comes with new crossover components. A larger version of the Sonja 2.2, the 2.3 adds a passive bass module on which the rest of the speaker is mounted. Sonically, the Sonja 2.3 delivers world-class performance, with a spectacular sense of presence, transparency to sources, and palpability. Its bass is extended, powerful, and articulate. Its overall coherence, as well as its ability to portray a wide range of image sizes, is exceptional. Forthcoming

Wilson Audio Alexx V

\$145,000

The slightly smaller brother to Wilson's mighty Chronosonic XVX, the Alexx V delivers huge on looks and performance, and is a massive improvement over the previous Alexx. This five-driver tower utilizes Wilson's proprietary V Material, along with every new technology Wilson's developed. Although physically massive, its beautiful sweeping lines and open design give it the appearance of being considerably smaller than it is. The Alexx V delves deep into

the soul of music. Its finesse, staging, and scale offer not just a sense of realism, but reality itself. The music flows in layers of textural complexity and grace with a sense of ease and effortlessness akin to waves upon an ocean shore; such power yet such serenity. Certainly, one of the most spatially coherent, tonally accurate, emotionally inspiring speakers that reviewer MC has heard. MC, 327

Gamut Audio Zodiac

\$165,000

The Gamut Zodiac, with its uniquely shaped, all-natural wood body, fabricated from 28 different layers, offers one of the most exotic and beautifully crafted forms in high-end audio. Employing uniquely modified drivers—including an SB Acoustics silk 1.5" dimpled-dome ring-radiator tweeter, a cut-paper 7" ScanSpeak midrange, and three 10.5" ScanSpeak woofers—their exceptional bass extension and impact, authentic rendition of timbre, texture, attack, body, and weight, combined with a disarmingly open, spacious, and organic presentation, afford them an extraordinary degree of musical insight, almost putting them into a class all their own. GW, 286

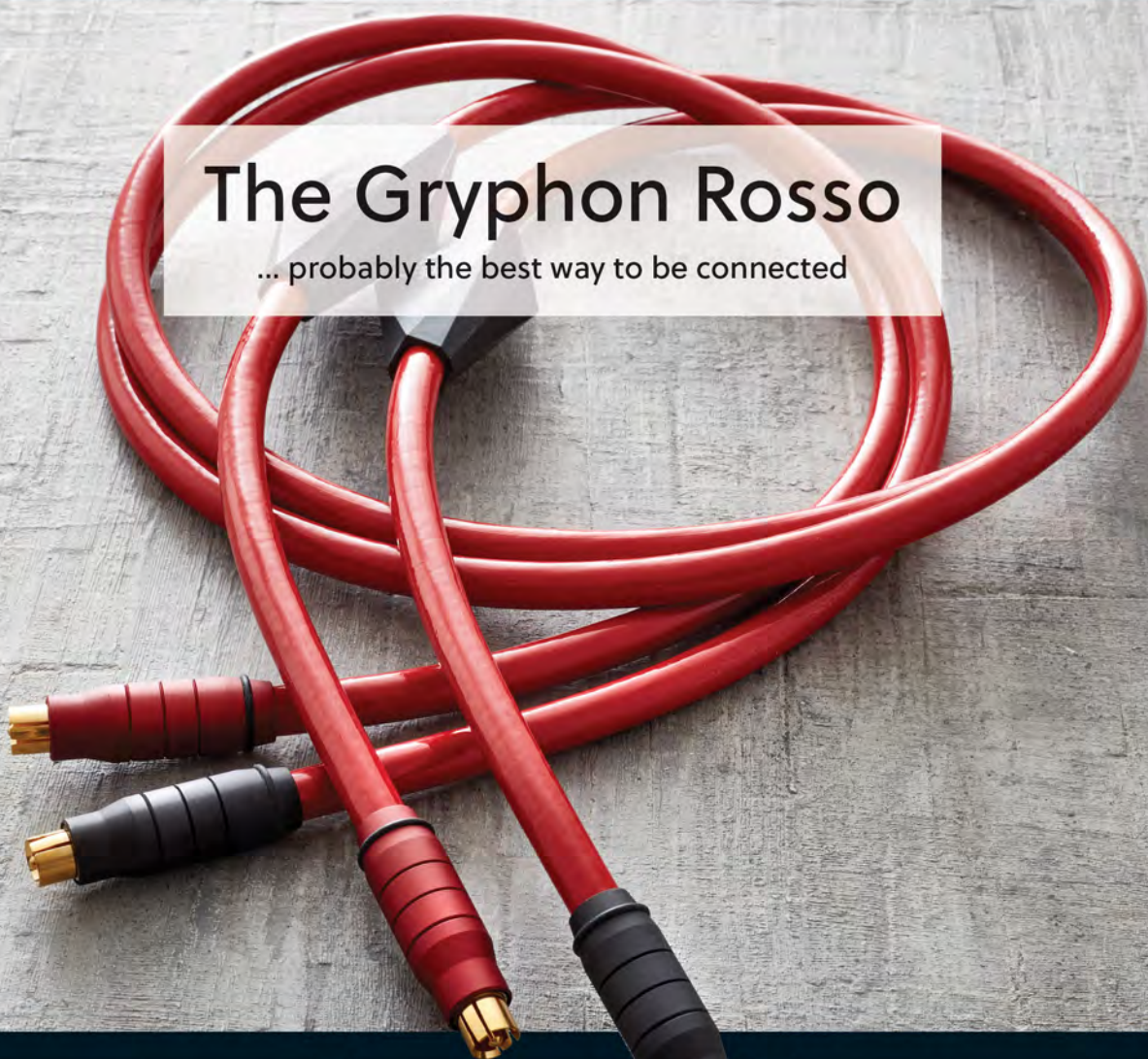
Magico M6

\$185,000

With an aerodynamically shaped carbon-fiber enclosure, the stunningly great M6 represents a design departure for Magico. The rounded enclosure is designed to remove all sharp edges to create an ultra-low-diffraction platform for the drivers. Those drivers are three 10" woofers, a 6" midrange (both of which are graphene-infused Nano-Tech), and a 1.1" diamond-coated beryllium-dome tweeter. The bass performance of the sealed system is spectacular, tonally

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and dynamically, and the upper bass has warmth, richness, and density of color without sounding thick or bloated. Best of all, the low-diffraction cabinet allows the tweeter to disappear, the treble sounding completely smooth and natural. The soundstaging and ability of the speaker to disappear are sensational. One of the world's great loudspeakers. RH, 302

Rockport Technologies Lyra

\$190,000

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 stunning dynamic performance. 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 one of the most beautiful in timbre that RH has heard, combining high resolution with lush textural liquidity. A world-class reference in a relatively compact size. RH, 276

Zellaton Reference MkII

\$225,000

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 of 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 instruments. With great recordings of acoustic music, the result is a truly remarkable sense of being in the presence of actual vocalists and instrumentalists. JV, 278

Wilson Benesch Eminence

\$255,000

This flagship speaker from England's 43-year-old Wilson Benesch is a world-class performer that competes in the upper echelon of today's loudspeakers. The unusual design (isobaric woofers, ultra-tall and narrow carbon fiber and aluminum enclosure, custom drivers) is an example of form following function. The bass is exquisitely detailed and resolved, revealing nuances of texture and dynamics in a way that is simply sensational. Dynamics are whip-fast without etch, and the soundstage is simply without peer. The top-to-bottom balance is spot-on. The Eminence is capable of completely disappearing in a way that unflinchingly communicates the deepest musical expression. The bottom end favors speed and articulation over the last measure of weight and authority. RH, 294

Wilson Audio Chronosonic

XVX

\$349,000

In RH's view, the XVX sets a new standard of realism in reproduced music. The massive four-way, seven-driver speaker, housed in five separate enclosures, features more innovations than any other product in Wilson Audio's 49-year history. These include new drivers, cabinet materials, crossover components, even binding posts. The XVX shares with Wilson's

\$875,000 WAMM Master Chronosonic the ability to time-align the driver outputs at the listening positions with astonishing accuracy—within just two microseconds. This compares with the 12-microsecond precision of previous Wilson products. The result is a speaker with startlingly realistic reproduction of timbre and presence, a voluptuous yet highly resolved midrange, a silky-smooth treble, uncanny transient fidelity, and phenomenal visceral bass impact. A world-class reference that advances the state of the art in loudspeaker design. RH's reference. RH, 308

MBL 101 X-treme Mk II

\$398,000

Comprising two Radialstrahler columns and two, outboard, newly designed sets of powered subwoofer stacks (with six 12" woofers in each stack and built-in DSP), the 101 X-treme IIs are giants. Expensive giants. But until you find a speaker system that sounds more like the real thing (on every kind of music) for less money...well, you're gonna have to settle for second best. As good as cones-in-a-box speakers have gotten to be, nothing else, dynamic or planar, sounds like these gargantuan Radialstrahlers, because very little else projects its energy from top to bottom throughout a true 360 degrees, like instruments themselves do. As a result, the 101 X-tremes simply own the third dimension. With their improved bottom octaves (thanks to the new woofer stacks), what JV said in his original review of the X-tremes a decade ago holds even truer. Listening to every other transducer is like going to a movie of a concert—a two-dimensional medium trying to imitate a three-dimensional one. Listening to the 101 X-tremes is like going to the concert itself. JV, 301

Magico M9

\$750,000

Magico's new flagship M9 is a four-way, six-driver dynamic speaker in a sealed enclosure measuring 80" tall. The M9 is built using a new cabinet construction, and it must be actively bi-amped (crossover included). Music reproduced through the M9 had the remarkable quality of appearing from nowhere, completely untethered to the speakers. This characteristic was certainly related to the M9's completely silent background as well as its stunning spatial presentation, with wide staging and continuousness of imaging. The M9 is utterly colorless; the speaker appears to have virtually no sound of its own. The M9's bass extension, power, and weight are, as might be expected from the design, exemplary. It can scale the heights of the most demanding music without a hint of congestion or confusion. Despite this ability, the M9 can convey with equal authenticity the intimacy of a solo instrument. A stunning achievement in loudspeaker design. RH, 332

Wilson Audio WAMM Master Chronosonic

\$875,000 (includes Master Subsonic subwoofers and ActivXO electronic crossover)

With the WAMM Master Chronosonic, an entirely re-conceived version of the legendary original, David Wilson has broken new sonic ground. A vanishingly low noise floor supplies the foundation for the WAMM's sonic prowess. Its scale and dynamic power must be heard to be believed, and even then, it requires something of a mental adjustment to comprehend just how expansive a soundstage it reproduces. Despite its large size, however, the most beguiling aspect of the WAMM may not be its capacious soundstage, deep

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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. It is literally and figuratively a towering achievement. JHb, 276

SUBWOOFERS

GoldenEar ForceField 30

\$900

The ForceField 30 brings the build and sonic qualities of GoldenEar's own elite Super-Sub Series into the sub-\$1k market. Driven by 1000W digital amp, the forward-firing, 8" long-throw driver is enhanced by a downward-firing passive radiator. Response drops into the upper twenty-cycle range with conviction with little in the way of overhang artifacts or "slowness." Dynamic impacts exit as cleanly as they enter—a tribute to the effective controlled tuning of the passive radiator. Beyond the visceral impression of deep bass response, the FF30 also helped to complete the ambient sonic landscape. A serious musical achievement, not to mention a flat-out blast. NG, 335

REL T/7x

\$1099

A special round of applause is due this mini-sub for music lovers. The T/7x 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. NG, 265

JL Audio Dominion d108/d110

\$1100-\$1200/\$1300-\$1400 depending on finish

The E Series subs used to be the least expensive offering from JL Audio. Both Robert Harley and Jonathan Valin reviewed them and were impressed with their high level of performance and moderate price. Though less costly, the Dominion Series shares much of the design technology and all the philosophy of JL's more upscale models. What differentiates the Dominions from the slightly more expensive E's? First the E Series subs have more sophisticated electronics. Second, the Dominion drivers don't use the dual-spider technique of the E subs, and their baskets are not as deep. These differences aside, the sound is very much the same, which is to say outstanding. SS/RH, 313

GoldenEar SuperSub X

\$1750

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. 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. NG, 286

JL Audio e110/e112

\$1900-\$2100/\$2500-\$2700 depending on finish

Before he got the hefty, little e110 with 10" driver (the e112

comes with a 12" woofer), 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 Audio provides and the unit's manifold built-in controls—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 the highest low-level resolution of bass timbres and textures from any transducer of his experience. JV, 244; RH, 252

GoldenEar SuperSub XXL

\$2750

Sandy Gross, the founder of GoldenEar, has crammed an astounding amount of technology into this fairly diminutive subwoofer, including a 1600W switching amplifier that is controlled by a 56-bit DSP device operating at 192kHz. Add two 12" long-throw active drivers and two infrasonic drivers and you have 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 create an airier and wider soundstage. There are faster and more powerful subwoofers out there (at three to four times the cost) but the XXL will never produce less than satisfying performance in almost any audio system. JHb, 264

REL Acoustics S/812

\$3299

The heir to the extraordinary S/5, REL's latest is not just a step forward, but rather a sonic leap into a different class. The bar has been raised on every feature that made its forbear an affordable

reference. Yes, it retains the forward-firing 12" woofer and companion 12" downward-firing passive but adds carbon fiber backing for strength and accuracy. There are new sets of custom filters, while the power of its NextGen5 Class D amplifier has been bumped up to 800 watts. Thus, it plays deeper and faster with greater transparency, and reproduces spatiality and the dimensional outlines of a soundstage with a precision normally reserved for the headiest of flagship efforts. NG, 308

M&K Sound X10

\$3499

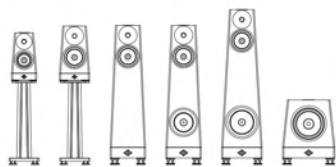
From the folks who cut their teeth designing some of the first top-notch sub/sat systems comes the X10—a 350W, 62-pound box of serious intent. It sports dual, push/pull, long-stroke, 10" drivers (with a total surface area equivalent to a single 15" driver) in a sealed (acoustic-suspension) enclosure. As a THX-certified subwoofer, cinema-level output, room-rattling extension, explosive dynamics, and power handling were never a question. Paired with M&K's S150 compact monitor, the X10 casts a seamless, dimensional soundfield as good as NG has attained in his listening room. This formidable combination was never at a loss for thrilling musicality. NG, 326

MartinLogan BalancedForce

210

\$3499

Before he discovered the 210s, reviewer SHo tended to eschew much of the bass-centric jazz and classical music that he really enjoys because of the inability to achieve realistic SPLs. Once he put the 210s in his listening room, his music—and not just music where bass was prominent—took on a whole new life. The 210s made a far larger difference in his system



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than any other component in a very long time—and that's saying a lot. If you have a large room or really like low bass, the Balanced Force 210s are essential tools to getting the most out of your music. Spencer Holbert, 252

JL Audio CR-1 Crossover \$3500

Designed to augment (rather than replace) the manifold controls already built into JL's subwoofers, this all-analog crossover allows you to fine-tune the transition between your subs and your mains with a precision, subtlety, and effectiveness that JV has never before experienced. The result is a truly seamless blend that, as far as JV can see, can be achieved in no other way. A little masterpiece of truly useful audio engineering—and a must-try if you already own one of JL Audio's larger subwoofers, such as the Fathom or the fabulous Gotham, but will work with any subwoofer. JV, 254; RH, 283

AudioKinesis Swarm

\$4000 (four subwoofers, one amplifier)

This system is based on the idea that the smoothest, most uniform bass response in a listening room is obtained by using multiple subwoofers in various (usually asymmetric) positions. The Swarm includes at a very reasonable price four subwoofer units and a 1000-watt amplifier. The subs are driven in series/parallel configuration so that the amplifier "sees" the impedance of a single speaker. This idea, says REG, is the answer to bass in rooms. The Swarm, with the subs suitably placed, produces bass down to the bottom and smoothly from there on up to where the main speakers take over, and not just at one position but over the whole room. The uniformity of response gives you a compelling impression

of being immersed in the bass soundfield of the original venue in a way no single subwoofer can accomplish. REG, 252

Wilson Audio ActivXO \$4900

The ActivXO subwoofer crossover is an updated version of Wilson's long-standing WATCH Controller. The all-analog ActivXO is a dual-channel unit, meaning that it can control two subwoofers with independent fine-tuning of each. These adjustments include the crossover frequency and slope, as well as continually variable phase for each sub. Balanced and unbalanced inputs and outputs are provided. The ActivXO can be operated as a high-pass filter and a low-pass filter in those systems where high-pass filtering the main speakers is desired. Alternately, the unit can low-pass filter the signal driving the subwoofer amplifier while leaving the signal driving the main speakers unfiltered. RH, 308

JL Audio Fathom f112/f113v2 \$5000/\$6000

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. Reference-quality performance at a reasonable price, and dreadnought build quality to boot. New Mk.II versions offer even higher performance with greater amplifier power, revised drivers, and a much more effective room correction system, now performed in the digital domain. RH, 283

REL Acoustics 212SX \$5000

The REL 212SX was designed to offer clean prodigious deep bass output at a reasonable price. In a beautifully finished piano-black cabinet, each 212SX houses two front-facing 12" drivers made of continuous cast alloy and capable of 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. DS, 286

JL Audio Fathom IWSv2-SYS-213 In-Wall \$6050 single enclosure—\$9650 dual enclosure

Forget everything you think you know about in-wall speakers; JL's in-wall subwoofer shatters the negative stereotypes. The subwoofer specialists mount an ultra-thin version of their 13.5" TW5 platform in an innovative suspended enclosure that decouples it from the wall. The system is powered by a 1000W outboard amplifier (2000W in the dual-woofer version) with an extensive array of adjustments including JL's excellent DARO room correction. The sound is classic JL Audio—a combination of an extremely powerful, dynamic, extended, iron-fisted bottom end on one hand, and a remarkable resolution of dynamics, pitch, and texture on the other. RH, 300

Wilson Audio LōKē \$8750

This diminutive sub explores the nether regions to

devastating effect. Whether its rap or rock, classical or jazz, the LōKē has a decidedly salubrious effect, both in bass extension and the essential sense of hall space. With a built-in 500-watt subwoofer and a 10" woofer, the LōKē is tight, impactful, and speedy. Wilson, which has always been a champ in reproducing the vital bass region, has scored big time. JHb, 330

Paradigm Ref Sig Series Sub 2 \$10,999

The Paradigm Sub 2 may be one of the few subwoofers that can be properly mated with planar loudspeakers. Its lightning speed and ability to project front, rear, and side-ways mean that its presence and positioning are simply impossible to detect. The Sub 2 features what Paradigm calls Vibration-Canceling Design Architecture, and the design clearly delivers the goods. The hexagonal cabinet can make it hard to install, but once in place the Sub 2 can deliver a crushing 112dB at 10Hz. JHb, 214

JL Audio Gotham g213 v2 \$20,000

This subwoofer really leaves former subwoofer-hater JV at a loss for words. It is so good at what it does—which is deliver power, clarity, color, texture, and sheer oomph in the bottom octaves—that he's never heard anything that can beat it in the bass, either in a subwoofer or a full-range floorstander. Using its own controls and/or the CR-1 outboard crossover, the Gotham can also be made to disappear more seamlessly than any other sub, which is truly amazing considering its sheer size (two 13.5" woofers per side in huge rounded-off boxes) and 350-pound bulk. Thanks in part to its sealed-box loading, the Gotham has zero overhang, thickness, and bloat. Note that JL recom-

mends deploying the Gotham in stereo pairs. JV, 254

Wilson Audio Subsonic

\$38,900

Most subwoofers today pack a large driver into a small enclosure, and then massively equalize the drive signal to compensate for the lack of cabinet volume. The Wilson Subsonic is not one of these. Rather, the Subsonic's enclosure is as big as it needs to be for the woofers to operate correctly without resorting to equalization. About as tall and half as wide as a refrigerator, and weighing 610 pounds, the Subsonic requires a serious commitment of space. The three 12" long-excursion woofers in the ported enclosure deliver bass response that is flat to an astonishing 10Hz (−2dB). Make no mistake; the Subsonic will reproduce music's lower octave with majestic power and grace. By reproducing low-frequency spatial cues, the Subsonic greatly expands the soundstage, resulting in a markedly higher level of realism. Requires an outboard crossover, such as Wilson's ActivXO, along with a power amplifier. RH, 308

INTEGRATED SYSTEMS

Bluesound Pulse 2i/Pulse 2i Mini

\$699/\$499

This tabletop, wireless all-in-one brings the expertise and sensibility of PSB Speakers' founder Paul Barton to the integrated system. The solidly built Pulse 2i accommodates a wide range of inputs, but will most likely be driven by streaming sources via the BluOS app. The sound has a warmth and richness in the bass and midbass that are often missing in the category. The Pulse 2i projects a sound far larger than its size would indicate and has the ability to fill a mid-sized room. The mids and treble are warm and engaging, again defying expecta-

tations. Pulse 2i Mini simply a smaller version. Forthcoming

KEF LSX II

\$1399

The KEF LSX IIs are wireless marvels. There is no tether necessary to connect the primary and secondary speakers, although using the tether bumps resolution from 24-bit/48kHz up to 24-bit/192kHz. The KEFs sport 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. The inputs are simple: Bluetooth, Wi-Fi streaming, one optical connection, and a 3.5mm analog AUX port. Their small size belies their huge sound: Bass is big and tight when adjusted via the Control app, and the midrange is a delight. For anyone looking for an all-in-one solution in a small package without sacrificing sound quality, the KEF LSX IIs are highly recommended. DK, 335

Naim Mu-so 2

\$1799

It may be similar in size and shape to a generic tabletop system, but once you hear what this compact system (with three smallish cone drivers per side, 75W on tap for each driver, and integrated preamp, DAC, streaming, and DSP) can do, there will be no mistaking it for a typical all-in-one unit. It is a different creature entirely. Its best qualities compare favorably to those of systems of separate components up to about twice its price, though it will not play super-loud (an expected result for amps and speaker drivers of this size) and won't give you the kind of wide, deep soundstage that you get from individual speakers. Nonetheless, the Mu-so 2 is supremely musical. MK, 306

Sonus faber Omnia

\$1899

Sonus faber's eye-catching, wireless, streaming audio system takes a bold *abbondanza* approach by maximizing its use of DSP and woofer-tuning to offer a high-end component-like experience. With its satisfying, midrange-forward energy, NG found the Omnia offered expressive vocal imaging on both male and female singers. Bass impact was surprisingly robust and dynamic. Most effective was its ability to throw a room-filling and immersive soundstage well past the boundaries of its cabinet. Omnia balances high style, sound, and size in a package that first-timers, as well as long-time admirers of this iconic Italian brand, can enjoy and be proud of. NG, 334

KEF LS50 Wireless II

\$2799

Built to celebrate KEF's 50th anniversary, the original LS50 monitor spun pure coincident-driver magic thanks to its blushing pink-gold Uni-Q coaxial midrange/tweeter. Visually arresting and sonically satisfying, the LS50 delivered tonal neutrality at just the right pitch, with superb midrange sonics, full-bodied presence, and potent midbass punch. Comes now an "all-in-one" version of this same speaker, the LS50 Wireless, with built-in amplifier, DAC, streaming preamp (Tidal- and Roon-ready), and DSP room-EQ that gives you the same sonics without any need for outboard electronics. JM, 286

Cabasse Pearl Akoya

\$3798 (\$800 stands)

A marvel of packaging and sophistication, Cabasse's three-way, tri-axial sphere comes loaded with built-in Class D amplifiers, a DAC, and DSP control with room correction. It's also Wi-fi equipped. All you need to add

is a high-resolution streaming service or a thumb drive, and the Akoya becomes a fully self-contained high-performance system—all in an impossibly small enclosure the size of a honeydew. Sonically it conveys an engaging, forward, midrange-centric personality. Imaging is stable and well-focused. Overall response is fairly linear. Ultimately, there's some roll off in the treble range, but nothing to set off alarm bells. Bass extension dips into the 50–60Hz range with surprising impact and amplitude. Cabasse has redefined high-end portability. NG, 322

T+A Caruso

\$4450

This tabletop system measures just under a foot in each dimension yet is packed with seven drivers (including a down-firing 6.7" woofer) and three switching power amps. The Roon-ready Caruso supports just about any source (FM, Internet Radio, optical disc, USB stick) and streaming platform. Though the stereo spread can't compete with an audio system where the two channels are more than a foot apart, the robustly constructed Caruso offers satisfying bass slam and dynamic coherence, even if asked to play loud at a party. AQ, 322

Bowers & Wilkins Formation Duo

\$4998 (stands are an additional \$999/pr.)

Inside each cabinet, the Formation Duo incorporates wireless-streaming-capable 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. This is no mere "lifestyle" product; the tweeter is a patented driver



3 NEW MODELS!

P1 U2 MINI T3

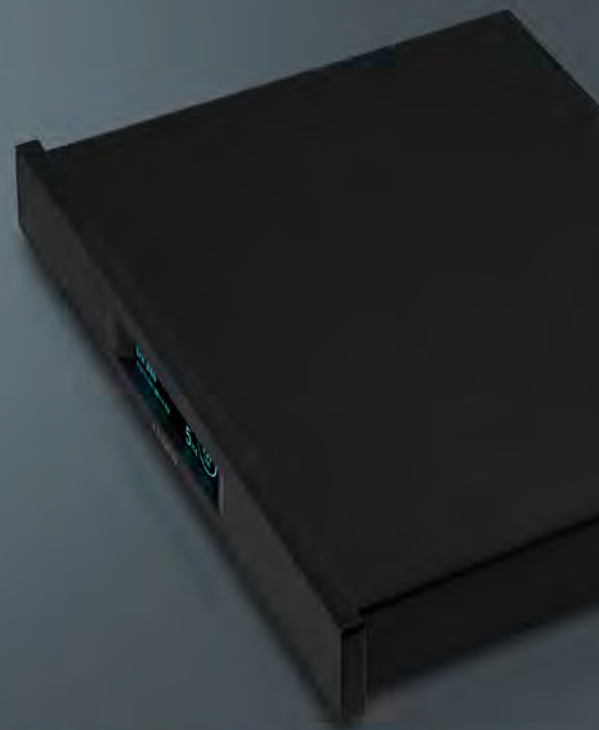
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P1: Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound, Sept 2022



P1



P1



P1



X1 / P1



S1 / M1 / X1+Amp



X1



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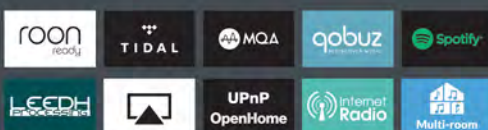
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X1



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with a 1" carbon dome, and the 6.5" mid/woofer features the same Continuum cone used in Bowers & Wilkins' top-line 800 series. The Duo's sound quality is a knockout, with spectacular imaging, a very smooth and flat tonal balance, and surprisingly extended bass. Easy to use, highly musical, and technologically advanced, the Duo brings true high-end performance to a product anyone can easily set up and enjoy. RH, 298

DALI Rubicon 6 C **\$4999**

A 2.5-way floorstander, DALI's Rubicon 6 C is the largest of four powered loudspeakers offered by the Danish manufacturer. The tweeter is a soft dome/ribbon hybrid that's fast and extended, smoothly blending with the drivers below. The two cone-midrange/woofers employ a material for the pole piece called "Soft Magnetic Compound" (SMC) that has standard magnetic properties but virtually no electrical conductivity, which eliminates hysteresis-related distortion. A compact streaming preamp (the "Sound Hub") is part of the package; it wirelessly pairs to the loudspeakers—a reliable and sonically invisible connection. The system doesn't play favorites with musical genres. Power pop, small group jazz, opera, female vocals—everything is reproduced with natural detail and abundant character. AQ, 315

Eikon Audio Image 1 **\$25,000**

This integrated system from high-end legend Gayle Sanders breaks new ground in audio-system architecture. Consisting of two speakers and the Eikontrol electronics, the Image1 system employs sophisticated DSP to correct fundamental problems of speakers in rooms. Each speaker incorporates four power amplifiers and is driven

by four line-level analog outputs from the Eikontrol. With two 8" woofers (one rear-firing), a 5" midrange, and an air-motion-transformer tweeter in a diminutive multifaceted floorstanding enclosure, the Image1 achieves a much bigger sound than its size suggests. The "Wavelet" DSP corrects timing information in the bass, realizing greatly improved clarity and definition. The Image1 is technically innovative, highly musical, and an exceptional value. RH, 304

Burmester Phase 3 System **\$50,000**

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 known. This *iber*-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 (plus ripping), and an array of input and outputs. JM, 283

YG Acoustics Vantage Live **\$59,800**

This ambitious new integrated system combines amplification, DACs, and streaming capabilities with YG's Vantage loudspeakers. Just plug the Vantages and a small control box into wall power, run a pair of thin ST-Type optical cables, connect to a network, and begin streaming from your phone or tablet with the excellent Roon interface (streaming subscription required). The Vantage Live is the result of a partnership between loudspeaker-maker YG Acoustics, electronics and DAC manufacturer Bel Canto, and the British design firm Cambridge Acoustic Sciences. Despite—or because of—the Vantage

Live's integrated nature, the system delivers superb sound quality, playing much bigger than its size would suggest in bass extension, dynamic contrasts, and soundstaging. But the YG does something special, producing a feeling of "something" being removed between you and the music. RH, 331

POWER AMPLIFIERS

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Topping LA90

\$899

If you have mid- to high-efficiency loudspeakers that you love, you may find the LA90 to be an ideal power or integrated amplifier for your system. Reviewer SS could easily see a single LA90 as the "summer amp" in a high-efficiency horn system. You can, if you require more power, bridge the LA90 into a mono configuration. Still, SS would not recommend even two LA90 to owners of 2-ohm Apogee Scintillas or Thiel 3.5s. Some loudspeakers simply need more power than even two LA90s can provide. If you are intrigued by the LA90's potential, you're going to have to take a leap of faith and buy before you try, just like SS did. You can always return it, but SS seriously doubts that you will. SS, 335

NuPrime STA-9

\$949

Producing 120Wpc and weighing just under 10.5 pounds, the STA-9 uses a Class A input circuit along 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 small KEF speakers. Vade Forrester, 273

Odyssey Audio Khartago

\$995

Shockingly similar in tonal balance to certain high-priced solid-state amps, this 130Wpc stereo amp has no discernible grain, high resolution, and a deep, wide soundstage. Positively, the best budget amp JV has heard. JV, 195

\$1000-\$3000

Audio by Van Alstine Vision SET 120

\$1199

AVA's quite reasonably priced solid-state Vision SET 120 is rated at 60Wpc into 8 ohms and "much more" into 4 ohms. Those 60 watts were plenty for driving reviewer DK's Monitor Audio Studios to a more than room-filling blast. The horns at the end of a hard-hitting Spiritualized track came through screaming, purposefully borderline harsh, but the SET 120 never lost control. In combination with Van Alstine's Transcendence 10 RB tube preamp, the amp generated a deceptively cool sound, in the sense of being laid-back and calm, while still providing a taut low end and just enough sparkle in the upper registers. DK, 290

NuForce STA200

\$1299

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

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LSA Warp One**\$1499**

Given its rather modest price, you might be tempted to write off the Warp One as just another me-too mid-fi Class D power amplifier.

That would be a mistake. SS has, over the years, listened to plenty of Class D power amplifiers; so far, the Warp One is the best-sounding one he's reviewed. If you have loudspeakers that are at least reasonably efficient (or better), and you have no need to warm up their sonic personality, the Warp One could be an excellent and exceedingly rational choice as your next reference amplifier. SS, 331

Wyred 4 Sound ST-500 mkII/ST-1000 mkII**\$1499–\$1999**

These high-efficiency power amplifiers—delivering 250 and 500Wpc respectively—have got to be among the great bargains in audio. Although they were not accorded a formal review, PS used them to drive the Emerald Physics CS3.2 II speakers, and then for a good month auditioned them on his Quad 2805s. Throughout they performed flawlessly, delivering sound of exemplary clarity and control, perhaps fractionally on the cool side of neutral, but not excessively so and never compromising the reproduction of warmth. Pricing depends upon options (i.e., WBT binding posts, power, etc.). PS, 249

PS Audio S300**\$1649**

If you can't get excited over an amp like the S300, you might reconsider your own high-end bona-fides. Based on a Class D ICE module, this dual-mono amp is rated at 140Wpc into 8 ohms. Its sleek low-profile design is matched by first-rate construction quality. Sonically, the era of apologizing for Class

D under-performance is over. Music simply snapped into view, in full harmonic bloom. Most vivid was the impression of broad dynamic contrasts from the micro-level to the macro. The S300 was both fast and explosive off the mark, while timbral information was in full-color display. The S300 wears its speed and rhythmic integrity like a badge of honor. NG, 333

NuPrime AMG STA**\$1750**

The NuPrime AMG STA is a sleek, compact Class D power amplifier with a Class A pre-amp stage and a linear power supply. The box is simple, with only a metal switch on the front, a small white LED indicator, and the NuPrime logo. It outputs a solid 130Wpc into 8 ohms in stereo mode and 300Wpc into 8 ohms in mono mode. The AMG STA sounds easy and relaxed with a decently solid low end and a crisp, pleasant midrange. It has enough power to run difficult-to-drive speakers in either stereo or mono mode, and a warm finesse that pairs well with most setups, especially with the NuPrime AMG PRA preamp. DK, 319

Coincident Speaker Technology Dynamo 34SE MKIII**\$1799**

The swanky Dynamo isn't your typical 8Wpc single-ended triode (SET) design. There is no 300B in sight. A 6SL7 dual-triode drives a triode-connected EL34 output stage. There is no global feedback, and the power supply is tube rectified. Expect a sweet midrange, an exceptionally dimensional soundstage, and a dynamic presentation belying the amp's minuscule power rating. Harmonic textures aren't overly liquid, implying decent-bandwidth transformers. Treble textures can be improved via judicious tube-rolling. Here is an amp

that shouldn't be defined on cost. It captures much of the magic of SETs at an entry-level price. DO, 283

NAD C298**\$2399**

This feature-laden amp is built around a new Class D output-stage module, the Eigentakt, that brings unprecedented performance to switching designs. Rated at 185Wpc into 8 ohms, the C298 has generous dynamic headroom, and can easily be configured to operate as a 1000W monoblock. The bass is nothing short of spectacular—powerful, dynamic, tuneful, and tight. This bass prowess translates into a visceral feeling of rhythmic drive and flow. The mids and treble are clean and open, if a bit forward in perspective. A lot of amplifier for the money. RH, 313

Odyssey Audio Stratos**\$2700/pr.**

Even if you A/B'd these superb, high-resolution, 180Wpc monoblocks with super-amps on super-speakers (as JV did), you might still find yourself pondering whether the difference in sound justifies the difference in expenditure. That JV ultimately concluded it did is beside the point. The way he saw it, the fact that the Odyssey Stratos monoblocks could give even a picky listener like him pause made them super-amps in their own right. Yes, you can buy better. The question is: Do you really want to? JV, 248

Quad Artera Stereo**\$2995**

This 140-watt-per-channel amplifier—the latest refinement of Quad's innovative, patented, award-winning “current dumping” technology—is, in PS' opinion, the finest amplifier the company has ever made by a good margin, and unquestionably

the most uncompromised implementation of Walker's current-dumping circuit. PS, 268

Rogue Audio Hydra**\$2995**

Rogue Audio has got something with this hybrid, “tubeD” stereo amp. Not merely a tube circuit placed in front of a Class D output section, it creates a sound completely unlike those first Class D amps that bit your ears. Fast, powerful, and resolving, the Hydra reproduces instrumental tones and timbres with accuracy and texture, has good spectral balance, and creates a consistently broad and vivid soundstage. Though GH found an occasional lack of top-end smoothness in the sound of orchestral strings, he noted owners could tailor its presentation by rolling input tubes. GH, 235

\$3000–\$6000**Audio by Van Alstine DVA M225****\$3398/pr.**

These high-power (225Wpc into 8 ohms), moderately priced monoblocks trace their origin to the 1980s and Frank Van Alstine's reworking of the Dynaco ST-120. That fundamental circuit—realized with many refinements—forms the heart of the M225. Within its power limits, the M225 is one of the best, most neutral, and most revealing power amplifiers around at any price. It may not have the dynamic energy of far more powerful amplifiers in the lowest frequencies at extremely high volumes, but control of bass dynamics and detail are very good. The M225's soundstaging also gets high marks for its natural depth, width, and detailed placement of voices and instruments. AHC, 327

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Wyred 4 Sound SX-1000R**\$3599**

While many amplifiers use Bang & Olufsen's ICE switch-mode output module, the SX-1000R combines it with its own 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. If you require a power amplifier that can generate oodles of effortless output, runs cool, produces a very precise lateral soundstage, offers 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. SS, 273

Rogue Audio Dragon**\$3995**

The Dragon is a sophisticated, hybrid tube/Class D design that stands atop the Rogue Audio lineup. Boasting 300Wpc into 8 ohms, the Dragon offers a near-granular level of finesse and clarity. Speed and transient detail are naturalistic and lively; tonal balance is

predominately neutral, with glimmers of midrange warmth and a well-defined presence range. Strings are particularly well-rendered and distinct. Bass response and resolution are superb. The Dragon can reproduce an organ pedal point or the left hand of a pianist on the bottom octaves of a concert grand with lifelike authority. Not just another high-powered beast, the Rogue Dragon is a truly splendid piece of electronics. NG, 311

Cambridge Edge W**\$4000**

Reviewed alongside Cambridge Audio's Edge NQ network player/preamp, the 100Wpc EdgeW power amplifier delivers on this London-based manufacturer's definition of *Great British Sound*. Opposing-symmetry twin transformers (which cancel electromagnetic interference) contribute to a substantial physical presence, but the performance is anything but heavy. Instead, look for sonic clues in a signal path of just 14 components. It's this less-is-more approach (also wonderfully realized in the minimalist aesthetic) that has resulted in a power amplifier with surprising transparency and compo-

sure. Neither imposing nor polite, the W is a fitting 50th Anniversary celebration from a company known to provide innovation with value. AM, 301

Audio Mirror SET**\$4995**

This 45-watt monoblock expands the reach of SET designs to include even moderately sensitive 88-to-90dB loudspeakers. Each amp 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 Audio Mirror makes one helluva musical statement and would have earned an enthusiastic recommendation even with a \$10k price tag. DO, 289

NuPrime Evolution STA**\$4995**

Class D amplifiers keep getting better and better, and the NuPrime STA is a prime example. The power-stage topology is full bridge, providing push-pull differential operation with NuPrime's proprietary MOSFET drive design. Power output is a generous 230Wpc into 8 ohms and 310Wpc into 4 ohms. The front end is fully analog. Both the preamp stage and Class D pulse-modulation circuit use the NJR MUSES8820 op-amp. The STA's sonic personality is much like that of distilled water, lacking intrinsic flavor. It simply reflects the character of upstream components, making it a good match for a tube preamp, if you're after a sweet and warm system personality. Its strong suits are tonal purity, soundstage transparency, an expansive depth perspective, and excellent bass control. It's hard to believe that any amp at this price point, let alone a Class D amplifier, is capable of such exquisite musicality. DO, 330

Atma-Sphere S-30 Mk 3.3**\$5100**

The Mk 3.3 version of this 30Wpc Circlotron OTL amplifier nudges performance higher in dynamics and soundstage transparency. Although guilty of slight timbre 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



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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. DO, 261

Pass Labs XA25
\$5150

The XA25 amp is among Pass Labs' most humble efforts to date—at least outwardly. And users will admittedly need to be a little respectful about speaker selection, since this solid-stater is rated at a mere 25Wpc into 8 ohms. But that wattage is delivered courtesy of Pass' single-ended Class A design. So, buckle up and prepare to luxuriate in pure liquid musicality. Pass gear often suggests sweetness and warmth, but the XA25 takes these qualities a luminous step further. Beyond the extraordinary resolution engraved in the XA25's personality is an ability to transform a listening space

into a three-dimensional tableau of images and ambience. A magical amp. NG, 286

T+A A 200
\$5450

This small but mighty (125/250 watts per channel into 8/4 ohms) power amp is part of T+A's Series 200, a component stack that takes a unique—but undeniably valid—approach to building a reference-level system with a small footprint. Since the fully discrete, thermally protected Class D A200 gets its own chassis, it's not subject to the digital and other noises that pollute modular integrated amps. The sound is straight out of the Swiss school: wide-open, pure, fast, and dynamic, but with an extra dollop of low-end richness. For those seeking reference-class performance in a compact, reasonably priced amp, the A 200 is hard to beat. AT, 335

Bel Canto e.One REF601M
\$5590/pr.

To Steven Stone's ears, Bel Canto's 15.4-pound, 300W (600W into 4 ohms) e.One REF601M 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 that 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. SS, 269

Audio by Van Alstine DVA M750
\$5598/pr.

This massive hybrid monoblock with a 12AT7 input stage and a transistor output section delivers a whopping 850W into 8 ohms. Industry veteran Frank Van Alstine pulled out all the stops for the DVA M750, including a circuit based on the patented Fet Valve amplifier and unusual lateral MOSFET output transistors. The amp offers a remarkably jaunty and silky sound—with lots of headroom—that always errs on the sound of musical bliss. Despite its high power, the DVA M750's presentation is elegant and refined. A bargain in powerhouse amplifiers. JHb, 273

MoFi

Hear True-to-the-Source Sound



MoFi
UltraDeck

\$6000–\$10,000**Luxman MQ-88uC****\$6295**

This 25Wpc push-pull Lux is about triode sweetness. Think of it as a modernized version of the MQ-60 from 1969. Expect naturally sweet, clear, and transparent tonality. Female voice benefits from its textural purity and ability to depict subtle tonal shadings. The harmonic distortion spectrum is benign and devoid of the upper-midrange glare endemic to pentode push-pull amplifiers. Microdynamic expressiveness is also a strong suit and a key factor in nudging listeners over the line from “liking” this amp to “loving it.” A nearly perfect introduction to the joys of triode sound and a superb match for the Quad ESL-57. DO, 297

Anthem STR**\$6499**

Anthem's STR amplifier is a muscular yet stylish component that outputs 400 watts into an 8-ohm load, 600 watts into 4 ohms, and 800 watts into 2 ohms; there aren't many loudspeakers that this dual-mono design won't readily control. The dual-mono, 65-pound STR features a proprietary input circuit that Anthem calls “a complementary active-loaded cascoded feedback arrangement.” Right out of the box, the STR impressed with immediacy, detail, and authority of presentation with all kinds of music. Spati-ality and low-end weight were excellent, and there certainly was no question of the STR running out of steam with the most dynamic recordings. Solidly built, great sounding, and a high value. AQ, 298

**Coincident Speaker Technology
Frankenstein M300B Mk. III****\$6499**

One of the best-sounding 300B SET amps DO has auditioned, Israel Blume's Frankenstein IIs deliver on the promise of SETs: a midrange to die for, wonderful tonal color saturation, and spectacular imaging. In short, a sensational first watt! Its combination of affordability and performance makes for a screaming buy recommendation with the right speakers. DO, 228 (Mk.II version reviewed)

McIntosh MC275**\$6500**

The sixth version of this classic McIntosh amplifier 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, dis-

ortion 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. PS, 266

PS Audio Stellar M1200**\$6598/pr.**

This lithe monoblock amplifier is a happy marriage of old and new technology. It boasts a tubed input stage and a Class D output stage that packs colossal power. With 600 watts into an 8-ohm load and 1200 into 4 ohms, it can drive pretty much any loudspeaker with aplomb. And it does. There are few, if any, amplifiers that will grip the bass drivers as tenaciously as the M1200. Its transient speed can only be described as stunning. The treble region can become a



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little bright, but the overall performance that the Stellar offers is truly stellar. JHb, 313

Linear Tube Audio ZOTL Ultralinear+

\$6800

David Berning's Ultralinear (UL) amplifier breaks new ground in emulating a traditional UL output in a ZOTL setting. It also marks the resumption of his "love affair" with TV sweep tubes. A pair of 17JN6 Compac-trons in push-pull connection generates 20Wpc. Sonically, the UL has much in common with the legendary ZH-270. Both share transient speed and control beyond the capabilities of ordinary tube amps. Other common denominators are electrostatic-like midrange clarity, which allows for resolution of densely layered orchestration. The best-sounding low-power push-pull ZOTL amp Berning has designed to date. DO, 305 (New "+" version not yet reviewed)

Atma-Sphere M-60 Mk3.3 OTL

\$7950/pr.

Atma-Sphere's uniquely simple, 60Wpc, Class A, all-tube OTL (output transformer-less) design offers a rare and exhilarating glimpse into music that few other amps can duplicate. This triode-based classic also possesses outstanding neutrality, clarity, definition, soundstaging, and dynamics. Relatively high-impedance, high-sensitivity speakers are recommended for best bass performance. Sue Kraft, 184

VTL ST-150

\$8500

VTL's ST-150 is a relatively compact yet powerful stereo power amplifier employing 6550 tubes that can drive a wide range of speaker loads. A classic all-valve push/pull power amp, the 150 delivers 150Wpc in tetrode mode and

70Wpc in triode operation. Sonically the amp delivers plenty of wallop, but is also capable of fine dynamic shading, excellent resolution, and great overall coherence, with the attendant bloom, air, and texture tube lovers desire. WG, 251

Mark Levinson N°5302

\$9000

The fully discrete, direct-coupled Class AB amplifier (with a circuit derived from the company's much more expensive N°534 amplifier) is rated at 135Wpc into 8 ohms (270Wpc into 4 ohms) but sounds like a much more powerful amplifier. The bass, in particular, has greater dynamic authority and extension than that of many amplifiers with higher output power. The amplifier excels at reproducing transient detail. AHC, 322

MBL Cadenza C21

\$9600

Sounding more like a fine linear amp than the hybrid-switching amp it is, the 180Wpc C21 offers much of the sweetness, air, and texture (if not the full measure of swat) of MBL's own Reference line 9011 amps. Its top end, the region where Class D once struggled, is smooth and extended. Its lows are elegantly controlled but not over-torqued; instead, there's a bit of velvety bloom. An amp that can proudly stand next to the best in its class. NG, 228

\$10,000–\$20,000

Bel Canto Black EX Dual-Mono

\$10,500

This powerhouse Class D amplifier (350Wpc into 8 ohms, 700Wpc into 4 ohms) sounds more like a Class A amplifier 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 low

listening fatigue. The bass is very well defined—quick and tight rather than warm and rich. The bottom end is also extremely dynamic, and coupled with the virtually unlimited power, will exploit the bass output and dynamic capabilities of just about any speaker. AHC, 290

Air Tight ATM-1S

\$10,800

No matter what style of music played, no matter what speakers the ATM-1S is paired with, this amplifier delivered the sonic goods with naturalness, beauty, and ease, while also throwing a remarkably deep and wide soundstage. This 60Wpc stereo amp also proved to be more versatile than expected, driving a remarkable array of loudspeakers—from Air Tight's Bonsai single-driver stand-mounts to Monitor Audio's Gold 300 floorstanders and Platinum PL500 flagships (at reasonable SPLs)—to great effect. A creation from the late, celebrated Japanese master Miura-san of Air Tight, this rare gem of an amp is meticulously hand-crafted in Osaka. Forthcoming

Cary Audio SA-500.1 ES

\$10,990/pr.

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

Audio Research VT80SE

\$11,000

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. VF, 287

Aesthetix Atlas Stereo/Atlas Eclipse Mono

\$12,000/\$30,000 pr.

The Atlas is a hybrid (tube input, solid-state output) amplifier available in Standard, Signature, and Eclipse versions, and as a stereo amplifier or a monoblock. The circuits are identical in each version but realized with higher-grade parts in the Signature and Eclipse. The stereo amplifiers are rated at 200Wpc and the monoblocks at 300W, figures that double into 4 ohms. All varieties feature an integral adjustable high-pass crossover to roll off low frequencies in the signal driving the main loudspeaker. Whatever version you opt for, expect plenty of clean power coupled with a deep and convincing sense of space, lightning-fast transients, and high resolution without sounding analytical. Ultimately, the Atlas is a sheer joy—both sonically and musically—to listen to. A great value in high-powered amplification. AT, 196, DS 305

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Classé Delta Stereo**\$12,999**

The Montréal company's stereo amplifier is a brute, designed with difficult loads in mind. It's rated at 250W into 8 ohms and 500W into 4 ohms, and it's doubtful that too many loudspeakers will faze it. The first 12.5W are pure Class A, so significant heat is generated. A silent thermostatically activated fan pulls room air into the device through a louvered vent that's expelled to the rear—the top of the amp barely gets warm. There are VU meters in front, two pairs of robust binding posts behind, and Navcom footers underneath. The amplifier provides plenty of muscle when needed but is also capable of subtle dynamic gradations. AQ, 312

Gamut Audio D200i**\$13,990**

This 200W solid-state amplifier has much of the liquidity, three-dimensionality, and image density of tubes as well as the expected virtues of solid-state: tonal consistency, frequency extension, and bass control. It runs relatively cool, is tonally neutral, and should be very reliable, producing a deep soundstage and enough power to drive most speakers well. KM, 229

Bryston 7B³**\$14,990/pr.**

Bryston's 600W 7B³ monoblock power amplifier is a wonderfully musical product. It offers feature-rich, real-world practicality and the ability to drive a wide range of speakers thanks to its very high power/current delivery. If you favor blockbuster solid-state amplification and would rather not spend more on audio gear, the Bryston 7B³ should be on your short list. KM, 269

Triode Corporation TRX-M300**\$15,750**

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. Image solidity, according to DO, can only be described as magical; solid-state amps would kill for it. Bandwidth and transient speed are impressive for an SET amplifier. 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. Speakers of 96dB+ sensitivity are advisable. TAS' 2013 Low-Powered SET of the Year. DO, 236

Constellation Inspiration**Stereo 1.0****\$16,000**

The 200Wpc Inspiration Stereo 1.0 brings the same circuit design and some parts from Constellation's \$250k Hercules monoblocks to a more accessible price point. Constellation has done an amazing job of maintaining many of the qualities that made the Hercules such a standout, including a highly resolved treble that never crosses over into the analytical. Transparency and timbres are also first-rate. The icing on the cake is that the Stereo 1.0 incorporates circuit refinements that improve bass performance beyond that of its predecessors. RH, 249

PS Audio BHK Signature 300**\$16,498/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. AHC, 259

VTL S-200 Signature**\$18,000**

VTL's Luke Manley and his team have made the 200Wpc S-200 relatively idiot-proof for listeners who enjoy the sound of vacuum tubes without the need to geek-out or otherwise futz around with them. The Signature range features fully balanced differential circuitry and zero global negative feedback, which not only ensures stability under a wide variety of load conditions but also brings greater musicality to a variety of source material. Beyond its outstanding sound and flexibility in both triode and tetrode modes, this KT88-based stereo amp presents music as a cohesive and engaging whole. WG, 290/334

Parasound JC 1+**\$18,998/pr.**

Redesigned by legendary audio engineer John Curl (hence the JC designation), the 83-pound Parasound JC 1+ not only packs a wallop, but also offers a refined and elegant sound, particularly in the treble. A hefty power supply and power transformer ensure superb image stability and rock-solid bass. When it comes to a sense of hall space and dynamics, these monoblocks are difficult to surpass, especially when reproducing blockbuster orchestral works. For power-hungry loudspeakers that feature severe impedance curves, the JC 1+ will provide what amounts to a musical benediction. JHb, 316

\$20,000 and above**Cary Audio 211 FE****\$22,995/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. WG, 205

Audio Research Reference**160S****\$24,000**

This stereo version of ARC's celebrated Reference 160M mono amp combines two channels of the same 140-watt circuit into one chassis with the same aesthetics as the 160M—including lighted “floating” output meters on the faceplate window—for \$10,000 less. The sound is simply gorgeous: detailed, fluid, commanding, alive, and highly musically communicative. Rather than a tube amp trying to sound more like a solid-state design, the 160S delivers more of what many solid-state amps can't quite fully realize: outstanding 3-D soundstaging, image density, and tonal complexity—while still providing excellent frequency extension, dynamic control, and overall resolution. Built like a tank (100 pounds) with a removable tube cover, triode and Ultralinear modes, and auto tube bias and monitoring functions, it comes close to being an ideal tube amp in its price category. KM, 312

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression S350 Stereo and 550 Mono**\$27,250/\$47,500 pr.**

The Progression series of electronics from Dan D'Agostino brings some of the circuits and technology of the vaunted Momentum line to a lower, but still significant, price. The stereo version (monoblocks are available) is a powerhouse, delivering 300Wpc into 8 ohms. As with all D'Agostino designs going back decades, the Progression can double its output power with each halving of

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impedance. The innovative “Super-Rail” power supply helps the Progression to deliver superior dynamic detail, impact, and lifelike realism. AHC, 300 (new version not yet reviewed)

FM Acoustics FM 108-MKII

\$27,975/pr.

Though the latest Swiss firms like CH Precision and Soullution may be getting the lion's share of attention, venerable Swiss companies like FM Acoustics are still fully competitive. Consider this extremely compact, 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. JV, 286

Constellation Inspiration Mono 1.0

\$28,000/pr.

The monoblock amp in the Inspiration series brings plenty of power to the table (400W into 8 ohms, 800W into 4) along with the circuit design of the much more expensive Reference and Performance Series amp. Compared with the half-the-price stereo version, the Mono 1.0 offers even wider dynamics, a more solid bottom-end, and an effortlessness on musical peaks (which are already excellent with the Stereo 1.0). The Mono 1.0 shares Constellation's signature sound of tremendous transparency, a finely detailed treble, gorgeous midrange textures, and a sense of refinement and sophistication. RH, 249

Pass Labs XA160.8

\$28,600/pr.

The 160W, Class A XA160.8 monoblock is yet another inspiring and indisputable success from the mind of Nelson Pass—a man who for the past four-and-a-half decades (his first commercial product was released in 1975) consistently rises 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 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. GW, 259

Aavik P-580

\$30,000

There is a lot of proprietary technology packed into Michael Børresen's new 300Wpc into 8 ohms (600Wpc into 4 ohms) stereo power amplifier, which is undoubtedly one reason why the P-580 is the first Class D amplifier JV can recommend without the usual reservations. Thanks in part to Aavik's unique distortion-reduction circuitry, “resonant-mode” power supply, and high-bandwidth/low-noise UMAC Class D amplifier module (from the Danish pro-audio firm Pascal), the P-580 does not have the usual, digital-like upper-mid/lower-treble glare or brick-wall-like top-octave cut-off that Class D amps of the past have evinced. Instead, it is rather soft, sweet, and dark in the brilliance range, like a Class A amp. Of course, it is excellent in the bass (all Class D amps have been, due largely to their very high damping factor) and quite appealingly warm, grainless, and grit free in the midband. It is also surprisingly three-dimensional in its imaging. Though not as

finely detailed, as 3-D, as richly colored, or as brimming with energy and nuance as JV's reference power amplifier, the still unsurpassed Soullution 711, the P-580 costs half of what the 711 does, is much smaller in form factor, weighs about 120 fewer pounds, and runs as cool as a cucumber. JV, forthcoming

Audionet Max

\$30,500/pr.

The Max monoblocks' more than twice-as-tall-as-they-are-wide form factor is dictated to optimize inter-stage isolation, as well as to minimize both power supply disturbances and overall signal path length. With an earnest 400 watts into 8 ohms and a damping factor of 10,000, the Maxes can control virtually any difficult loudspeaker load, dynamic, planar, or ESL. With big, bold harmonic texture, superb pitch definition, rife detail, tremendous dynamic life, and full bloom, they breathe life and air into soundstaging like few other solid-state competitors. They are truly exceptional amplifiers by any means of comparison, not just at their asking price. GW, 279

Zanden Audio Systems Model 8120F

\$30,500 (includes XLR inputs w/input transformers)

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 the 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 laxity, ambient grain, and timbral darkness of typical Class AB KT-120-based push-pull tube amplifiers. On the contrary, it is exceedingly fast on

transients, extremely hard-hitting on big dynamic swings, extraordinarily finely detailed, with taut bass, and imaging and staging that are truly wall-to-wall. JV, 243

Audio Research Reference 160M

\$34,000/pr.

The product of two years of research and development, the Reference 160Ms—ARC's newest monoblock power amps—don't sound like any other ARC amplifiers 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, are 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 better-focused detail, richer timbre, fuller power-range response, and a markedly increased sense of control over every aspect of the presentation. JV, 294

Boulder Amplifiers 1160

\$34,500

Benefiting from design and build improvements developed for Boulder's two higher tiers (the 2100 and 3000 lines), the all-new 1160 is significantly better than the amplifier it replaced. The output section is identical in parts and design to that of the 2100 series amplifiers but with less power. Nonetheless, the 1160 can effortlessly deliver a massive amount of clean wattage in ways that make the Boulder sound more powerful than similarly rated competition. It handles deep bass transients with aplomb, providing lifelike dynamics and the ability to control loudspeakers. The 1160's “voicing” reveals the



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music rather than colors it, and this makes this amp a remarkably good core component for building a truly excellent system. AHC, 287

Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference

\$34,990/pr.

Another winner from the fertile mind of Vladimir Lamm. Combining brawn and finesse, the M1.2 drives even challenging loads with ease. Its siren song of suave harmonic textures, tight bass control, articulate transients, kinetic drive, and essential tonal neutrality is musically most persuasive. DO, 188

CH Precision A1.5

\$39,500 (\$75,000/pr. mono-block)

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

Gryphon Antileon EVO

\$40,000

The Gryphon's triumph is delivering the great virtues of Class A operation—seductive warmth, liquid textures, and a sense of ease—with tremendous speed and dynamic authority, along with visceral excitement and energy. The sound is warm and utterly liquid—almost voluptuous, without sounding thick, colored, or closed-in. The dual-mono

design, with 150Wpc, imbues the Antileon EVO with unflappable authority. Throw in spectacular build-quality and striking industrial design, and you have one of the great modern Class A amplifiers. As with all true Class A amplifiers, the Antileon EVO runs hot. RH, 316

MBL Noble N15

\$41,600/pr.

Class D amplifiers have come a long way since JV reviewed several of the first high-end samples way back when. This latest version, from MBL's engineering genius Jürgen Reis, is not only flat-out powerful (560W/36A into 4 ohms); it is also (unlike first-generation D) relatively load-, level-, and frequency-independent. Sweet on top and a shade bottom-up in 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, fully capable of a realism that raises goosebumps and of a soundfield of head-slapping breadth, width, and depth. JV, 287

Absolare Passion 845

\$45,500 (\$57,750, Signature Version)

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, offer 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. RH, 234

Lamm Industries ML2.2

\$47,890/pr.

This 18W single-ended triode amplifier from Vladimir Lamm defies all the stereotypes about SET amplifiers. The ML2.2 doesn't offer a glorious midrange at the expense of the frequency extremes; it offers a glorious midrange in addition to glorious performance over the entire spectrum, save for the lowest bass. Simply put, the ML2.2 is one of the three most lifelike-sounding amplifiers RH has heard (the others are the Berning 211/845 and Absolare Passion 845). The caveat is that you must mate the ML2.2 with a loudspeaker of high sensitivity and a benign load. RH, 230

Absolare Hybrid Stereo, Signature Edition

\$52,000

Absolare has managed to capture much of the magic of its reference-class products in the Hybrid Stereo power amplifier. The Hybrid combines tubes in the front end with a 275Wpc (4 ohms) solid-state output stage. Yet there's no hint of transistors in the Hybrid's sound; it has astonishing liquidity of timbre, is utterly grain-free, and projects that elusive sense of midrange presence that is the hallmark of the best SETs. The Hybrid creates a directness of musical expression—of hearing nothing between you and the music—that is unique among solid-state amplifiers, in RH's experience. RH, 322

CH Precision M1.1

\$54,000; \$104,000/pr.

Winner of TAS' 2015 Product of the Year award for

cost-no-object amplifier, this deluxe, Swiss-made, bridgeable (or adaptable to stereo use), high-current, high-power, 200W, Class AB amplifier—authored by the same engineers, Florian Cossy and Thierry Heeb (the C and H of CH Precision) who designed Goldmund's distinguished electronics back in the day—seems to have some of the sonic DNA of another Swiss company's, Soullution's, world-class electronics. Indeed, JV reports that he would be hard put to choose between the M1 and Soullution's 711 in every regard save for the bass, where the Soullution still holds an edge in weight, power, and color. When it comes to resolution, however, it is a different story. Indeed, with a slightly less dark (i.e., “bottom up”) balance, the CH Precision draws ahead in detail. JV, 259

Soullution 501

\$55,500/pr.

By joining a state-of-the-art switching power supply to its already state-of-the-art, high-speed, high-current Class AB circuitry, Soullution managed to add simply incredible bass power, grip, and color to products that were no slouches in this regard in the past and that already boasted fabulous resolution, transient speed, and low noise. The result was a transistor monoblock amp with uncommonly beautiful and liquid timbre, tube-like three-dimensionality, vast soundstaging, and jaw-dropping realism. Despite its mere 120W power rating, the 501 was also the most unstintingly powerful amp (of any topology) JV had (up till then) had in his system, refusing to give up or out on even the widest dynamic swings at the highest listening levels. Co-winner of TAS' 2013 Solid-State Amp of the Year. JV, 236

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Constellation Centaur II**\$57,000**

Very high resolution and voluptuous tone color generally don't go together in hi-fi gear, and when they do—as in Class A triode tube circuits—they do so at a price in neutrality. Not so the Class AB 250Wpc Constellation Performance Series Centaur II stereo amp, which has gorgeous color and texture on top, coupled with an uncanny ability to resolve very fine details without etching or “spotlighting” them. Among the loveliest, highest-resolution solid-state amps JV has yet heard. JV

Constellation Taurus**\$58,000/pr.**

Part of Constellation's trio of Revelation series solid-state electronics, the Taurus monoblocks make musical magic. Sonic compromises such as accurate-but-analytical, silky-but-smearing, musical-but-veiled simply don't apply. You get it all: lifelike tonal balance, refined resolution, expansive soundstaging, fantastic dynamic range and control—all woven into 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 casework than its more expensive brethren, the Taurus delivers much higher-level Constellation magic at a less lofty price. KM, 294

T+A M 40 HV**\$62,850/pr.**

T+A's monoblock hybrid amplifier boasts the kind of power you need to ride on the sonic equivalent of the Autobahn. (T+A's accompanying P3100HV preamplifier is also extraordinarily incisive.) The M 40 produces an immense soundstage that almost allows you to count the members of an orchestra row by row.

It also seems to be virtually grainless. Raise the volume and there is no sense of strain. These 550W amplifiers, whose input stage is based around a pair of 6SN7 tubes, can be run in either high power or high current mode, with the latter providing a richer sound. This amplifier offers not simply rock-solid, but also invariably seductive performance. JHB, 316

Zanden Audio Systems Model 9600mk2**\$70,000/pr.**

For those of you who own speakers that don't require the very last word in power and that are well-damped in the bottom end, it is difficult to imagine a more appealing amplifier than this drop-dead-gorgeous-looking Class A/AB tube monoblock from the great Japanese engineer Kazutoshi Yamada of Zanden Audio Systems. Powered by twin 845 triodes, the 60W in Class A (and 100W in Class AB) Model 9600 Mk2 is a veritable model of neutrality, producing a near-divinely natural tonal balance from the top almost to the bottom (where it becomes a little outsized), without any hint of excess darkness or brightness. Gobsmaekingly detailed and lifelike, the Model 9600 Mk2 is simply one of the best medium-powered tube amplifiers JV has heard. JV, 293

MBL9008 A**\$70,200/pr.**

The massive, high-current, high-bandwidth, high-power (440W into 8 ohms, 840W into 4 ohms, 1000W into 2 ohms), very-low-distortion, Class AB 9008 A monoblock amplifier sits just behind MBL's even more massive and powerful 9011 monoblock in the company's Reference Line. Both amps were designed by Jürgen Reis, which is tantamount to saying that both amps are bullet-proof

technical and sonic marvels. Built using the finest parts, the 9008 A is a beast with a velvet voice. Seemingly inexhaustible speed, power, and plumb-the-depths resolution are here mated to a dark, rich, beautiful tonal palette. The result is something very like what you hear with Soullution'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 101s and the X-tremes, and swell with anything else. One of JV's references. Forthcoming

Esoteric Grandioso M1X**\$71,000/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. AT, 280 (M1X version not yet reviewed)

Audio Research REF 750 SE**\$75,000/pr.**

For many music lovers, these massive amplifiers will be the final word in driving any full-range loudspeaker. You would expect effortless power from an amplifier sporting 16 KT150 output tubes, and that is exactly what you get. Even with difficult-to-drive loudspeakers, there is an ease of presentation and lack of compression that opens a new level of realism for all music source material. But the most surprising feature of the 750 SEs is their finesse and delicacy on relatively simple musical material (such as piano and cello duos), even at low listening levels—not unlike what you would expect from

single-ended amps. Their cost is substantial, but if you value natural and effortless music reproduction, the REF 750 SEs are truly satisfying. DS, 290

Soullution 711**\$75,500**

Like Soullution's 501 monoblocks (but even more so), this massive, seemingly inexhaustible stereo amplifier is capable of virtually unlimited current and amperage regardless of load. Slightly dark and very rich in tone color, blessed with tube-like dimensionality and bloom, sweet and subtle in the treble, standard-settingly powerful and well-defined in the bass, ultra-fast on transients, excellent at resolving inner detail, with a soundstage the size of the Ritz, the 711 hasn't any obvious weaknesses. JV has never heard a solid-state amp that is more thrillingly powerful or ravishingly beautiful or consistently realistic than this beastie boy from Zurich. TAS' 2014 Overall Product of the Year Award winner. JV, 249

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Momentum M400 MxV**\$79,950**

One thing is immediately apparent upon listening to the Momentum series: Dan D'Agostino has seriously upped his game from earlier designs. In particular, the earlier version of the Momentum amplifier lacked the finesse and sheer gumption of this M400. D'Agostino has taken several steps to improve the monoblocks, including redesigning the driver stage to ensure that it is fully complementary. This almost doubles the current that the output stage sees. The amp also doubles up on power delivery as the impedance halves, generating 1800 watts at 2 ohms, which means that it's essentially unflappable. The sonic result is a remarkable degree of control and an

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ability to disentangle complex musical passages with great fidelity, thereby rendering them easily intelligible to the ear. The D'Agostino M400 will give you both refinement and a dose of rocket fuel. JHb, 279 (new version not yet reviewed)

Berning 211/845

\$80,000/pr.

In the 211/845, David Berning has created the most ambitious realization yet of his brilliant ZOTL circuit that allows a tube amplifier to operate without an audio-output transformer. The 211/845 offers 60W of pure Class A triode tube power (via either 211 or 845 output tubes) with no feedback. The 211/845 conveys the beauty of instrumental timbre and voices with a stunning realism and immediacy. The impression that everything between you and the music has been stripped away is astonishing. In this regard, the 211/845 simply has no peer, tube or solid-state. Surprisingly, the bass is well defined and tuneful, although not the last word in dynamic impact. The highish output impedance and limited current delivery dictate that the 211/845 be matched with a loudspeaker of appropriate sensitivity and impedance. But when given the right load, the Berning 211/845 is nothing short of magical. RH, 265

Pass Labs Xs300

\$85,000/pr.

AHC has been using Pass amps as one of his references for years, and he had real doubts whether this newer design could sound all that much better than what he was used to. Well, the devil lies in the details, and the Xs300 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 its deep bass and transition from the upper bass to the midrange truly enhance the musical experience. So does a level of dynamic life and detail that must be heard rather than described in words. Capable of driving even the most demanding speakers, the Xs300 produces 300 watts into 8 ohms and 600 watts into 4 ohm and has a maximum output current of 60 amps. AHC, 243

Tidal Ferios

\$85,000/pr.

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

VTL Siegfried II

\$90,000/pr.

The VTL Siegfried is not simply one of the most powerful and musical tube amplifiers in existence; it is also one of the most reliable. It features a wealth of features designed to make it user-friendly and avoid breakdowns. A fault-sensing system shuts down a tube before it can damage the amp. In addition, a precision regulated power supply regulates the output tubes, helping to produce a pure, fast, and very enticing sound. The Siegfried lands on the (slightly) warmer and more burnished side of the sound spectrum, and its immense power reserves endow recordings with real heft and weight. A visceral and emo-

tional experience that is not soon forgotten. JHb, 246

Air Tight 3211

\$94,200/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. 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. JV

Ypsilon Hyperion

\$98,000/pr.

The Ypsilon Hyperion monoblock amplifier is a hybrid 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. Ypsilon designer Demetris Baklavas has created some musical magic with this 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. JHb, 283

Constellation Centaur II

\$99,000/pr.

These 500W monoblocks feature the same circuit topology as the mighty \$190,000-a-pair Constellation Hercules monos but with a less elaborate implementation and half the output stage for "only" 500W of output power. The beautifully built Centaurs have ravishing tone color, are exceptionally detailed, and most significantly, are extremely transparent to sources. They are also lightning fast but without a sense of etch. Outstanding dynamics and seemingly unlimited power delivery round out the presentation of this highly appealing amplifier. RH, 233

CH Precision M10

\$104,000; \$198,000/pr.

These flagship amplifiers from Swiss manufacturer CH Precision are simply unprecedented in set-up flexibility, control, and adaptability to different systems. The 300Wpc M10 stereo power amplifier can be operated as a monoblock, or in a bi-amp setup. The entire system can be set up and controlled via CH's outstanding app. The 10 Series offers extraordinary sonic performance and a level of musical engagement that must be experienced to be believed. Although the sound has a pristine clarity and crystalline transparency, the 10 Series never sounds even remotely analytical. No matter the music, the 10 Series delivers a heightened sense of the musicians' commitment and intent. Listening to music through the 10 Series is a revelatory experience. RH's reference. RH, 323

Audionet Heisenberg

\$105,000/pr.

The massive (145-pound), powerful (530W into 8 ohms, 1050W into 4 ohms, 2100W into 2 ohms), solid-state Audionet Heisenberg mono-

block is a beast. While GW acknowledges the remarkable advancements in solid-state amplification over the past dozen years or so, nothing else in his immediate experience better demonstrates the transistor's ability to accurately and artfully combine delicacy with power, focus with bloom, resolution with body, detail with texture, and clarity with expressiveness than the Heisenberg (and its companion Stern preamp). GW, 306

Siltech SAGA Amplification System

\$112,500 (preamp and two-chassis amp)

This brilliantly engineered, three-box, Class A preamplifier and 360Wpc (into 8 ohms) Class A stereo power amplifier are not just a hybrid of triode tubes and transistors; they are also a hybrid of battery power and AC power, of conventional circuitry and pure light (the

SAGA uses a beam of light to bias its resistors). There has never been anything to JV's knowledge like the Siltech SAGA System. Nor does anything else sound like it. The tube preamp/amp for the solid-state maven, the transistor preamp/amp for the tube aficionado, the SAGA manages to combine most of the signal virtues of each amplification device into a preamp/amp with the color, dimensionality, and bloom of glass audio and the resolution, frequency extension, transient speed, low noise, and high control of solid-state. Something new and genuinely wonderful sounding under the hi-fi sun, and co-winner of TAS' 2013 Technology Breakthrough of the Year Award. JV, 239

Boulder Amplifiers 2150 \$118,000/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 watts of Class A power on call, this amplifier can pretty much deliver limitless oomph, but the most remarkable aspect of the 2150 is its control—the softest passage is delineated with what appears to be the utmost timbral fidelity. Cymbal swishes hover in the air for what seem like an eternity. And the ease with which you can follow a bass line when delivered by the 2150 is a distinct pleasure. The Boulder builds on the many virtues of solid-state to provide amazingly realistic reproduction of recorded sound. AHC, 249

Constellation Hercules II Stereo/Hercules II Monoblock \$125,000/\$250,000 pr.

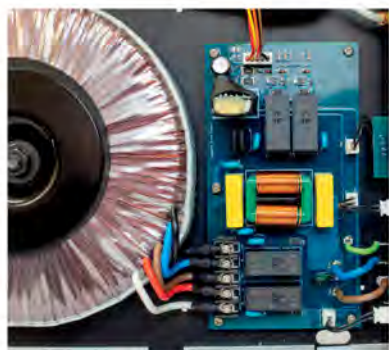
This massive dreadnought of a power amplifier (1100W into 8 ohms, 270 pounds each) has all the power, dynamic impact, and effortless ease one would expect from such a behemoth. But the Hercules II is much more than a brute; this amplifier has the greatest delicacy, resolution, and finely filigreed rendering of the upper-midrange and treble that RH has heard. The Hercules II's transparency and resolution of musical detail are simply sensational, and in a class of their own. The polite bottom end of the original Hercules has been replaced by a full-bodied and weighty presentation that provides a more solid tonal and dynamic foundation. One of RH's and JV's long-term references. RH, 260

Evolution TWO

(Mono amp. \$3999)



The Evolution Two is a mono amplifier that offers a breakthrough in distortion reduction and it is the top of the line amplifier from NuPrime Audio.



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Evolution STA (Stereo amp. \$4995)



"For instance, the Big Swiss amp remains the King of resolution and refinement. But to offset this, the NuPrime actually overshadows the CH in a couple of areas." - Christiaan Punter, HFA

VAC Statement 450 iQ**\$126,000/pr.**

This immensely powerful, virtually self-biasing, KT-88/6SN7-based, 450W tube monoblock surprised JV with its grip and extension in the bass. Not surprising were its gorgeous density of tone color, three-dimensional imaging, huge soundstage, and superb reproduction of instrumental textures. A bit dark in balance, utterly liquid in its effortless delivery of power—which gives it a dynamic continuousness, to quote HP, like unto the real thing (to quote him again)—the 450 iQ is a latter-day paragon of high-power tube amplification, with all the modern conveniences of electrifying transient response and very fine detail added to the mix. No, it does not have the slam, speed, and resolution of a Soultion or a CH Precision or a Technical Brain, but it's got more meat on dem bones. JV, 263

Lamm Industries ML3 Signature**\$144,690/pr.**

This two-chassis, 32Wpc SET monoblock sets new standards in sound reproduction. The ML3 delivers amazing speed plus captures the full harmonic envelope of each instrument. The result is unparalleled tonal neutrality. Surprising, for an SET design, the Lamm can be used with a wide range of loudspeakers, though care must be exercised in impedance and sensitivity matching. PB, 208

Air Tight ATM-2001**\$150,000/pr.**

As impressed as JV was and is by VAC's Signature 450 iQ amplifiers, these beautifully designed and engineered flagship monoblocks from Air Tight are at least as sonically impressive. Almost as powerful as the VAC Signature 450 iQ (338W into 8 ohms with twelve 6550 tubes, and around

400W with twelve KT125s), they equal or exceed the VAC amps in resolution, realism, and sheer timbral beauty.

They are also bloomier and more present than the VACs and at least as high in speed and detail (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, 269

Soultion 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 put them in a class by themselves. 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 amplifiers. Darker and richer in tonal color than the Constellation Hercules II, but not quite as resolving. The Soultion 701s are mega-priced, but they also deliver mega-performance. RH, 249

darTZeel NHB-468**\$230,000/pr.**

The NHB-468, which can produce up to 2000 watts, offers a superb combination of beauty and the beast. The beauty is immediately appar-

ent—translucent highs and a rich but never cloying tonality that replicates everything from woodwinds to brass with uncanny fidelity and solidity. The beast arrives on the big stuff, from rap to classical, particularly with power-hungry loudspeakers, which the 468 drives with ease. There is something uncanny, even spooky, about the sheer effortlessness with which the amplifier reproduces the most subtle transient information, especially in the treble. At the same time, its dynamic alacrity means that instruments such as a standup bass sound about as realistic as it gets. Imaging is rock solid. Devoid of any hint of stridency, the 468 provides a surefire recipe for hours of audio enchantment. JHb, 327

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Relentless**\$295,000/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 looks like it 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 (1500W into 8 ohms, rising to 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. At the same time, the Relentless can create a more holistic note, something closer to real life in its palpability and 3-D character. JHb, 301

Burmester 159**\$350,000/pr.**

Underneath the massive, elegant casework is 396 pounds of raw amplifier fury that can deliver 1200W into 4 ohms. The amplifier's sonic character was the antithesis of expectations with a highly refined, delicate, liquid, lush, gentle, and grain-free sound. However, when called upon, the 159 shows its other side—an amplifier capable of seemingly unlimited dynamic capability and majestic authority, even on the most challenging music. The 159 can convey the intimacy of a gentle vocal and the full size, scale, and weight of a symphony orchestra with equal conviction. RH, 333

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS Under \$1000**NAD D 3020 V2****\$499**

Truly a design for our times, the D 3020 is improbably small and portable and loaded. This 30Wpc integrated offers a 96kHz/24-bit USB input and aptX Bluetooth music-streaming. With a smooth top end, its speed and openness can be truly enthralling. Although there's a little bit of a veil over the sound, the D 3020 need make no apologies. At \$499 it is a small miracle of packaging and portability, and a delight to use and listen to. NG, 239

NuForce DDA-120**\$499**

The DDA-120 was made for audiophiles who need a moderately priced, single-box amp/preamp to connect any conventional digital source to a pair of loudspeakers. If your speakers are at least 88dB sensitive and you can



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Rockport Technologies

work around the DDA-120's ergonomic limitations, you may find that it is simply the best-integrated amplifier you've heard. (Now includes an analog input.) SS, 229

NAD C 328

\$699

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 C 328 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. PS, 291

PS Audio Sprout100

\$799

Though the updated Sprout100 version's compact, retro-modern form factor remains the same, many changes abound, including a redesign for the mm phono stage and headphone amp, an upgrade to a new ESS Sabre 9016 DAC chip, defeatable bass boost, a tiny indicator LED, and a remote control. Oh, and twice the power: 100Wpc into 4 ohms. We were struck immediately by the Sprout100's ability to coax even more spaciousness, lively musicality, detail, and low-end extension from the Air Tight Bonsais' single drivers. Expect big sound from a sweet, small-footprint, full-featured component with

plenty of visual and tactile appeal. JM, 289

Marantz PM7000N

\$999

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

Yamaha A-S801

\$999

Is there any other audio component with as many features as the A-S801 amplifier? And it's not like the features were just thrown in to impress; the A-S801 surprised reviewer VF by how good it sounded driving the inefficient KEF LS50 speakers in his largish room. Optional Bluetooth connectivity expands the A-S801's functionality and appeal. A flaming bargain. VF, 263

\$1000-\$3000

NuPrime IDA-8

\$1099

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. The well-conceived IDA-8 delivers substance with plenty of gusto—and does so from an astonishingly quiet background. A great-sounding, stone-cold bargain, and a 2016 Golden Ear Award recipient. JM, 263

NAD C 368

\$1199

NAD's C 368 is a great-sounding and forward-looking integrated that will satisfy now and well into the future. The 80Wpc C 368 (240Wpc IHF dynamic power into 4 ohms) incorporates not just a DAC, but a full suite of interchangeable modules thanks to NAD's Modular Design Construction. The C 368 sounds more powerful than its rating, capturing music's continuously changing dynamic level with noteworthy precision and exhibiting a dynamic exuberance typical of NAD equipment. VF, 279

Quad Vena II

\$1295 (\$1395 with case)

The Quad Vena II is small and gray with a matte finish, though the optional case adds a very nice gloss. The amp is rated 45Wpc into 8 ohms, and includes a phono section, two analog inputs, a pre-out, and a plethora of digital inputs. The Quad strikes the perfect balance between classic analog inputs and modern digital capabilities. The Vena II is surprisingly engaging with a big, bold, somewhat warm sound, regardless of whether you're in the digital or the analog domain. That flexibility is key to the Vena II, and why it's highly recommended. DK, 302

Cambridge Evo

\$1400

The Evo 150 is an all-in-one integrated amplifier that packs just about every feature imaginable into its little frame. It outputs 150Wpc and utilizes Hypex NCore Class D amplification, which means it has plenty of power and runs cool and efficient. The Evo 150 has a ton of input options, including a phono stage (mm only), RCA, balanced XLR, optical, coaxial, and HDMI ARC for TV control. It can parse, pull, decode, and play just about any file type or

service available, which might be overwhelming if the Evo weren't so simple and intuitive to use. Sonically, the Evo's signature was crisp, clean, and neutral in most applications, almost surprisingly so. Bass drums had punch, guitars had weight, mids were crunchy and sharp. It's the sort of box that could anchor a new system or replace an aging one and will sound fantastic doing it. DK, 331

Orchard Audio Starkrimson

Mono

\$1500/pr.

While virtually all Class D amplifiers use off-the-shelf output modules, the diminutive Starkrimson is built from a proprietary circuit topology of Orchard Audio's own design. With 150W into 8 ohms on tap, the Starkrimson yielded a remarkably transparent soundstage and a spacious presentation. The musical tapestry was vibrant with transients unleashed to their full dynamic potential. What was also endearing was its ability to scale dynamic peaks without changing its tonal character. This was coupled with stunning resolution of complex passages, which left reviewer Dick Olsher thinking that this should not be happening with a \$1500-per-stereo pair amplifier. The Starkrimson sounds like a high-definition Class A amplifier, and surely offers a glimpse into the future of Class D amplification. DO, 323

Rogue Audio Sphinx

\$1595 (\$1695 w/remote)

Rogue products have, like their moniker suggests, usually gone their own way in design, price, and value. The Sphinx integrated amplifier may be the most roguish of the lot. This is the first Class D amplifier (a hybrid with a pair of 12AU7 tubes in the preamp section) that RD

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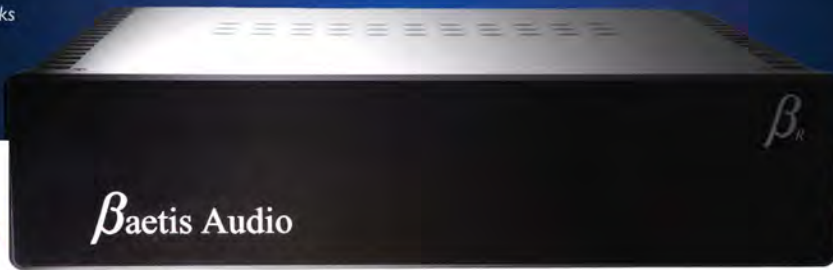
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Gary A, CO, Revolution 4 owner

"Sounds great! Thanks for the best-in-the-business customer service" Paul Z, CO, Reference 4 owner

"Multichannel music performance via HDMI was stunning"
Andy Quint,
The Absolute Sound
Revolution X3 review



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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. TAS' 2013 Tube Integrated Amplifier of the Year. Ron Doering, 236

Rotel A14 MK II

\$1599

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. 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. VF, 273

NAD C399

\$1999 (\$2598 as reviewed with BluOS-D Module)

NAD'S C399 is a streaming integrated amplifier that incorporates too many functions and features to summarize in a capsule. The main talking points are a superb onboard DAC with full MQA capability, an equally superb moving-magnet phono stage, and a pair of slots on the back for modular upgrades to keep the unit future-proof (digitally speaking). It was reviewed with BluOS-D module that incorporates Dirac Live, a new digital-signal-processing room/loudspeaker-correction technology. Features aside, most people will be buying this for its basic function as an integrated amplifier. Its 180 watts per channel, the amplifier section deriving from NAD's Hypex Hybrid-Digital nCore Class D circuit,

are capable of driving almost any home speaker system to fearsome levels with inaudibly low noise and distortion. Considered strictly as an integrated amplifier, the C399 is a true high-end component of superior performance. PS, 333

Naim Nait 5si

\$1999

One of the great bargains in high-end audio, this latest version of the Nait 5i brings more than a taste of expensive separates to a mid-priced integrated amplifier. The Nait is sweet without sounding rolled-off, presents a huge sense of space, tremendous separation of images, and, most importantly, sounds like music. In production in updated versions since the 1980s (RH reviewed the Nait 2 in 1989), the Nait's iconic status is deserved. (Recently updated to the 5si.) RH, 183

\$3000 and above

Rotel RA-1592 MKII

\$3199

The MKII version of the venerable RA-1592, this 200Wpc Class AB powerhouse offered rock-solid musicality across all criteria, with a lush velvety character and a weighty, well-defined bottom end. The treble octaves were clean, relatively free of clutter or grain. At the treble extremes there was a minor reduction of air and harmonic bloom and a scarcity of depth cues, but these were trivial subtractions. Plenty flexible, the MKII supports both traditional Bluetooth streaming plus aptX™ and AAC high-quality audio streaming, as well as MQA and MQA Studio decoding and rendering. Exactly what TAS has come to expect of an experienced, 50-year-old brand that knows the audio terrain like few competitors in this segment. NG, 327

Roksan Attesa

\$3399

Roksan's all-new, in-house, 80Wpc design embodies where today's marketplace lives. Attesa is its first offering with integrated DAC plus network streaming capability and a fine mm phono stage too. Sonic performance registered high scores across all genres of music. It was grain-free, non-edgy and wasn't apt to shade or spotlight particular frequency bands. It maintained a ripe and natural midrange, a weighted tonality, a firm and controlled bass, and a smooth if slightly drier top-end. Throughout, there was a spotless untrammelled clarity to every note. Attesa was especially impressive imparting dynamic energy in both the macro and micro senses. Looks, ergonomics, and performance. In NG's book, a real sleeper. NG, 335

Rogue Audio Cronus Magnum III

\$3495

Rogue's 90Wpc Cronus Magnum features an Electro Harmonix KT90 tube. Striking a balance between elegance and power, its dynamic scaling is very fine—lilting with chamber music, muscular with rock and orchestral. The Magnum is also remarkably transparent to sources in a way very unusual in its price class. WG, 333

Vincent SV-737

\$3499

A large, beefy, classic-looking hybrid amp should appeal to those who want a compromise between a separate power amp and preamp and the economy and simplicity of an integrated. Rated at 180Wpc into 8 ohms, and 300Wpc into 4 ohms, the 737 boasts a tube preamp section and a Class AB solid-state power amp. Running in pure Class A up to 10W ensures the sound is particularly fine at low

listening levels. MK concluded that, sonically, it lived up to its marketing claims of combining the best of both worlds, tube and transistor. It bettered all lower-priced choices, proving itself to be a good value. It also includes a good DAC and wireless streaming, though the streaming app is not as versatile as others and may not be able to access any lossless service other than Tidal. MK, 327

Marantz PM-KI Ruby

\$3999

With its companion SA-KI SACD/CD player, the PM-KI constitutes the famous Ken Ishiwata's valedictory work, representing four decades of electronics that place musical beauty and naturalness over laboratory accuracy. Ecumenical when it comes to tubes versus transistors, the PM-KI exhibits some of the warmth, richness, and dimensionality traditionally associated with tubes together with the precision, definition, transient attack, bottom-end extension, and impact for which solid-state is prized, while its 100Wpc should satisfy all but head-bangers. Its onboard mm/mc phono stage is so good it obviates the need for a separate one. Ishiwata considers the Ruby components his finest work. PS, 302

Rogers High Fidelity 65V-1

\$4200

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

request the amp can be shipped with a KT88 beam power tube). Reviewer DO says you really would be hard-pressed to find a more cogent and emotion-packed midrange. DO, 283

Icon Audio Stereo 40 MkIV

\$4500 (\$5295 Signature edition)

The MkIV is the latest version of David Shaw's seminal amplifier design. It provides a highly flexible palette of tonal shadings via its Ultralinear and triode modes, and its negative feedback settings. It is good looking and easy to bias. The Signature version incorporates an upscale tube complement and Mundorf coupling caps. It delivers glorious tube sound and excels in resolving layers of orchestration, while allowing low-level detail to float to the surface naturally without any help from gratuitous upper midrange brightness. It is far more revealing than that great and beloved classic UL amplifier, the Dynaco ST-70. DO ranks it among the elite of integrated amps he has reviewed regardless of price. DO, 335

Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe

\$6295

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

Bryston B1353

\$6995

Bryston has replaced its well-regarded B100 with the more powerful B135³, which uses preamp elements from Bryston's SP-3 as well as significant technology from its SST² power amps. With ample analog inputs, an optional mm phono section, and an on-board DAC, it is a versatile unit with enough power (135W) to drive even somewhat tricky speakers. High build-quality, versatility, and overall sonic immediacy and clarity are its strong points. KM, 233

HiFi Rose RA180

\$6995

With a sort of retro-steam punk faceplate, the RA180 is quite the aesthetic departure from the very modern and minimalistic designs of HiFi Rose's streamers. Reviewer Rives Bird found it to be beautiful in both looks and sound quality. This tonally neutral, solid-state, 400W (bridged), GaN-based design can drive even the most difficult loads. Via incredibly flexible set-up options it can also be configured to bi-amp speakers. Like other HiFi Rose products, the RA180 delivers a very high value. Rives Bird, 334

Canor Audio AI 1.10

\$6999

This pure Class A integrated amplifier is one of Slovakia's best kept secrets. Power delivery is 40Wpc in Ultralinear mode from a pair of KT88 beam tetrodes. The KT88s are given full scope of expression via excellent output-iron and a well-filtered power supply. Expect exceptional soundstage transparency combined with transient clarity—attributes that should keep you content for a lifetime. Resolution of low-level detail is as good as it gets for any tube amp at this or any price point. Ultralinear/triode switching offers the choice of two sonic personalities. Ultralinear mode was DO's clear preference based on greater dynamic conviction and a tonal balance whose center of gravity was squarely in the orchestral power range. On all counts, the Canor AI 1.10 is a superlative amp. It is built to last, and its intelligent warm-up and cool-down cycles will keep the tube complement going strong for years to come. DO, 330

PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid

\$7295

The EVO 300 is the result of a collaborative effort between PrimaLuna and sister company Floyd Design. It represents a departure from PrimaLuna's all-valve amplifiers, as it marries the EVO 300 preamp's 12AU7 front end with a MOSFET power stage. The goal was to combine the virtues of tube and solid-state amplification. Expect fabulous dynamics and low-end solidity, but the real magic is in the integration of the tube and solid-state sections. Excellent performance at the frequency extremes is coupled with considerable tube magic. Especially with analog sources, sound-

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stage depth and width perspectives are remarkably spacious. This is the hybrid amp DO has been waiting decades for. It is neither bright nor texturally challenged; rather, it exudes musical finesse. And that means 3D soundstaging and the ability to wow the listener with the music's fire and drama. A Dutch treat for the discriminating music lover. DO, 326

Yamaha A-S3200

\$7999

As an integrated amplifier, the 130Wpc A-S3200 produces a polished, palpable soundstage whose clarity and transparency are breathtaking when used with loudspeakers capable of showcasing its performance. With its smooth, near-flat tonal balance and exceptional resolution, in both amplitude and frequency response, it realistically characterizes recordings, its "natural sound" moniker perhaps closer to reality than mere marketing hype. If you are in the market for, or even just interested in, a high-quality integrated amplifier of this intent and power level, PS heartily recommends you audition the Yamaha A-S3200. PS, 270

Rogers High Fidelity EHF-100 MK2

\$8400

The Rogers is a two-channel tube integrated amplifier rated at 65 Class A watts per channel. A classic integrated, it includes no DAC or phono section. Harmonically rich and dynamically powerful, the EHF-100 MK2 proved satisfying to listen to over long periods, with a smoothly extended high end, a detailed, realistic midrange, tight bass, and enough power to drive a wide variety of speakers. If you've been tempted by a tube amplifier but aren't sure you want the maintenance hassle that comes with many of them, the Rogers EHF-100

MK2 is about as easy to maintain as a tube amplifier can be, thanks to automated bias adjustment, and offers the typical sonic advantages of a tube amp with the best warranty (lifetime and transferable) in the industry. VF, 265

Bel Canto E1X Integrated

\$8500

According to Bel Canto's designer John Stronczer, "the E1X Integrated shares its architectural approach with the Bel Canto Black system design." The 180Wpc Class D E1X utilizes a multi-circuit-board layout. Multiple processors reside on the AMiP board and control the USB, Ethernet, AES, SPDIF, TosLink, and analog input functions, while a dedicated processor contains the MQA decode and rendering function, as well as the MQA-derived filters. The E1X is, in every respect, Bel Canto's best value. It's a high-performance unit that delivers sonics on a par with a combination of reference components at double the cost. SS, 308

Aesthetix Mimas

\$9000 (phono card option, \$1250; digital card option, \$1250)

The Mimas is an old musical soul and not just another high-performance entrant in the *über*-integrated amp sweeps. Beyond its muscular 150Wpc output, this first integrated from Aesthetix can express the full palette of tonal and textural colors with harmonic ripeness. It embodies many of the classic sonic virtues of the golden era of tubes, but with the ease, control, and extension that are the hallmarks of today's finest solid-state. Its character has hints of classic midrange warmth and airy treble sweetness with bass response that is as nimble as it is formidable. For vinyl enthusiasts the optional and super-silent modular mm/

mc dual input phonostage is a must. The very definition of what we all seek from an integrated amplifier. Includes remote control. NG, 294, 308

Balanced Audio Technology

VK80i

\$9995

BAT's first all-tube integrated is a stunning piece of industrial art that delivers over 55Wpc of pure triode power. The design combines the 6SN7 dual triode with the unique 6C33C-B power triode, originally designed for avionics applications and famously used as a regulator tube in the radio communications system of the MIG-25 fighter jet. The focus is on simplicity of operation and reliability, hence the automatic-bias circuitry. It sounds far more powerful than a comparable KT88-based amp and shifts gears without changing its sonic character. There is no perceptible textural grain or brightness even when it is driven hard. It is above all else a superb demonstration of triode power that offers a happy escape from the garden-variety push-pull beam-power or pentode amp. DO, 319

Technics SU-R1000

\$9999

The 150Wpc Technics SU-R1000 integrated amplifier with built-in 384/32 PCM/22.4MHz DSD DAC and mm/mc phonostage is one of the most innovative and best-sounding pieces of electronics AHC has had the opportunity to audition in recent years. It shows how quickly integrated amplifiers are evolving and provides an exceptional mix of well-engineered features in a single unit. A product that is truly competitive with high-end separates and an excellent buy, even at its price. AHC, 317

Moon 600i v2

\$10,500

Building on a long tradition of great-sounding integrated amplifiers, Simaudio has hit one out of the park with the 600i. This dual-mono, fully differential integrated delivers the sound quality of expensive separates with the convenience of a single chassis. The 600i's presentation is rock-solid in the bass, unbelievably dynamic, with a slight forwardness in the midrange that increases lifelike presence. RH, 210

Devialet Expert 220 Pro

\$11,000

This highly advanced and innovative integrated amplifier with built-in streaming support produces 220Wpc (into 6 ohms) from its patented hybrid Class A/Class D output stage. The slim and stylish chassis is packed with sophisticated technology, among which is Speaker Active Matching (SAM) that monitors speaker behavior and changes the drive signal on the fly to correct for speaker shortcomings. (SAM works only with select speakers; check Devialet's website for the list.) With a compatible speaker, SAM sounds fabulous. REG wrote: "I have seldom been so excited about an audio development as I was when hearing a middle-sized loudspeaker put out such a convincing facsimile of an orchestra at full tilt." REG, 298

MBL Cadenza C51

\$11,600

With its soft, understated lines, svelte controls, versatile connectivity, and jewelry-like finish, it's easy to misjudge the depth, complexity, and sonic excellence of the C51—a 180Wpc, modified Class D tour de force. It has the touch of the classicist in the emphasis it places on the finest inner details; its resolution of acoustic space is almost eerie

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in specificity. Its top-end is top-notch—airily extended with none of early-era Class D's darkness and constriction. A triumph in its category. NG, 243

Pass Labs INT-250

\$12,600

With 250Wpc (500Wpc into 4 ohms), the muscular INT-250 embodies effortless dynamics, ultra-wide bandwidth, superb low-end control and grip, and effortless highs. Its soothing and seductive sonics are an ideal companion for analog LP playback—this Pass integrated just makes you want to spin vinyl endlessly. With musicality that is second to none, it operates at the outer limits of what is currently possible in today's integrated amplifier marketplace. NG, 263

T+A PA 2500 R Series

\$13,750

The highboy integrated amp in T+A's vaunted R series, the 140Wpc PA 2500 R is a dual-mono, fully balanced, high-voltage design with a Class AB output stage biased into Class A for the first 20–25 watts. Clean and authoritative, and easy to operate, the PA 2500 R conveys the sense of a well-oiled machine. Its sonic signature is one of balance and control, with musical images rooted in space and vocals models of stability. Its most identifiable traits are wideband spectral response and dynamic extroversion. The PA 2500 R delivers big, high-intensity wattage that never seems to waver in responsiveness and extension regardless of load. Includes an excellent phonostage. *Wunderbar!* NG, 275

Esoteric F-03A

\$14,000

If you lust for Esoteric's ultra-expensive Grandioso system but don't have the requisite massive dough or massive space, the F-03A is

the solution. This integrated is designed and built to the highest standards, with a modest power output of 30Wpc (60Wpc into 4 ohms). But 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. RH, 289

Boulder 866

\$14,250 (\$15,750 w/DAC)

While we could debate whether trickle-down economics is a thing, the 866 serves as proof that trickle-down technology is real. Beginning with the digital side, the 866 has inherited its systematic technology from Boulder's 2120 DAC. The 866 can be configured at the factory in two ways. The basic version is analog only, with three balanced XLR analog inputs. The digital version has a built-in DAC with SPDIF, TosLink, and AES/EBU inputs, as well as a Raspberry Pi/Ethernet streaming connection, so it will support Roon, Tidal, Qobuz, and other streaming sources. If you've been a fan of Boulder's sonics and build-quality but unable to field the space for their generously sized components, the new 866 could be the component of your dreams, made into reality. SS, 327

Western Electric 91E

\$14,999

The Western Electric 91E is a unique combination of old and new. The heart of the unit is the newly manufactured (in the USA) WE 300B tube, which is made to the same standards and specifications as the original WE 300B tube, but with some enhancements to the manufacturing process that increase the tube's longevity. The 91E has

all of the sonic benefits of the 300B without the shortcomings: SET with 20 watts per channel, well-controlled bass, a wonderful top end, and a five-year warranty on the 300B tubes. The 91E unit is groundbreaking, delivering an incredibly high standard at a relatively affordable price. RB was so impressed he purchased the review sample and listens to it daily. RB, 334

Thrax Enyo

\$15,200 (optional: DAC/streamer, \$3800; phono module, \$1175)

This very-high-end, all-tube integrated amplifier from Bulgaria sports a modular construction that allows you to tailor the product to your needs or to upgrade as your system expands. The Enyo can be fitted with a phono module (\$1175) and/or a streaming DAC card (\$3800). Fully loaded, the Enyo comes in at \$20,175. Although compact, the unit weighs 60 pounds, and delivers a solid 50Wpc. The phono, digital, high-level-analog, preamp, and power-amplifier sections all offer high sound quality, and there is consistent voicing in the digital and phono modules. AHC, 319

Rogers High Fidelity KWM-88 Corona

\$16,500

This integrated amplifier combines the absolute best qualities of a tube lineage and tube power amp in a single chassis. It throws in some useful technology in the form of an app that enables your smartphone to serve as the remote control, and automatic bias setting for power output tubes. Ships with either KT88 or KT150 tubes (your choice, same power). With plenty of power to drive most speakers, the Corona delivers the best bass VF has heard from a tube amplifier. What few flaws it has are quite minor. VF, 302

Jadis DA88S MkII

\$17,700

The 60-watt Jadis integrated amplifier is no wallflower. An explosive performer it lays down the law with Jesuitical force. While the DA88S does not produce the very deepest notes, it excels at delivering prodigious and harmonically rich bottom end that has a propulsive quality. For all its warmth and bloom, the Jadis never truncates or blunts transients. It delivers cymbal swishes or the blat of a trumpet with extreme precision. Above all, it is the sheer wallop this unit delivers that distinguishes it from many of its competitors. JHb, 253

Constellation Inspiration 1.0

\$19,000

The firm's most affordable effort and the third entry in Constellation's Inspiration Series, the 100Wpc Integrated 1.0 has a tonal signature that is ever-so-slightly shaded to the cooler side of neutral; dynamically, it doesn't give an inch to suppress or soften transients. Treble performance is equally exacting but open, with hints of air and sweetness and not a trace of grain. Unmistakably Constellation in its elegant, matte-finish aluminum casework and distinctive cross-drilled side panels, the Inspiration 1.0 is nothing short of a new high for Constellation's entry level. NG, 283

Soulution 330

\$23,000 (\$27,000 with phono, DAC option also available)

High-end audio is so often about compromises, trading one characteristic for another. What sets the Soulution 330 integrated apart is its ability to strike just the right balance of musical elements without compromise—and to manage to do so across so many recordings and styles. The company has somehow succeeded in keeping many of its best

sonic characteristics, while paring down parts and pricing. This integrated gets out of the way of the music in the right ways, but also delivers the right stuff. The exquisite Soulution 330 may still cost a pretty penny (especially if you add the superb, optional phono stage or DAC boards), but if you have the coin, we highly recommend auditioning it. JM, 294

Vitus Audio SIA-025

\$26,400

Conventional wisdom states that integrated amps are hopelessly compromised at birth. Vitus Audio obviously didn't get this memo when it created the SIA-25. Built to the same Olympian standards as its preamps and amps, this 25Wpc Class A (on-the-fly switching to 100Wpc Class AB) integrated gives you the best of separates in a single chassis—liquidity, presence, a 3-D soundstage, and the finest gradations of timbre and dynamics. It may not fill a cathedral (unless horns are your thing), but the SIA-25 is the pinnacle of a breed never again to be underestimated. NG, 218

Absolare Integrated

\$26,500 (Signature \$34,500)

This hybrid amplifier combines the tube preamp stage of Absolare's superb Passion preamplifier with a newly designed 150Wpc solid-state output stage. Despite the transistors, the Integrated sounds remarkably like a pure-tube design—and not just any tube design. Specifically, the Integrated delivers much of the sonic character of Absolare's Passion SET power amplifier, with a richness of texture, harmonic density, and a gorgeous and grain-free mid-range that make this amplifier special. Beautiful leather-clad casework and minimalist controls exude class and elegance. RH, 280

Ypsilon Phaethon

\$27,000

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 analog amplifier utilizing only three active gain stages. Few others capture the earthy sense of “being there” like the Phaethon. It does this with wide color and velvety textural contrasts, micro-detailing, harmonics, and a vise-like grip. Quality of construction is Herculean—70 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. NG, 278

Goldmund Telos 590 Nextgen II

\$29,750

In direct comparison with an exceptional preamp and amp that cost more than *four* times as much as it does, the \$30k Goldmund Telos 590 Nextgen II didn't just hold its own; it excelled, particularly in the bottom octaves, where it killed. When you add to this the fact that the 215Wpc into 8 ohms (350Wpc+ into 4) 590 II comes with an excellent built-in 384k/DSD128 DAC, it's a single-box package that's quite attractive—especially if astounding speed, neutrality, resolution, and realism are your priorities. Pity it doesn't come with provision for a built-in phono stage or more than one output (so you could connect to speakers and subs simultaneously). Still and all, one of the best integrateds Old Graybeard has heard. JV, 316

Constellation Argo

\$36,500

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. Soon the Argo will support a phono stage and a DAC card, adding to its already impressive versatility and value. AT, 255

CH Precision I1

\$38,000–\$53,000, depending on configuration

Though dubbed an integrated amplifier, CH Precision's I1 barely resembles typical members of that ilk. Its modular nature allows users to configure it to handle virtually any combination of digital inputs, analog inputs, streaming audio, even a moving-coil cartridge. Moreover, the I1's sound quality is every bit as sonically and musically revelatory as that of far more expensive CH standalone components, several of which it incorporates virtually intact. Dynamics, in particular, are extraordinary, and the excellent phono card obviates the need for an external phono stage. Overall, it's hard to think of another \$50k electronics choice—either integrated or separates—that boasts the same pedigree, versatility, footprint, value proposition, and sonics. AT, 289

Audionet Humbolt

\$58,750

The Humbolt grew out a project to pack as much performance as possible into a single chassis. It shares much of the technology of its more costly brethren, offers a full feature set, and can output a whopping 320Wpc into 8 ohms. The Humboldt delivers a bottomless noise floor that

lets the music breathe, and supreme dynamic prowess, conveying music with passion, soul, and energy. The sense of rhythm and pace are extraordinary, and the extremely low noise floor confers a see-through clarity and transparency that render tone colors more vivid and alive. Extreme bottom-end grip is not quite as convincing as state-of-the-art separates. MC, 316

VAC Statement 450i iQ

\$150,000

The epitome of “form following function” electronic design, the Statement 450i iQ integrated amplifier sets new standards for the product class, and not just for tube-based designs. Its abilities to accurately render tonality, with its complex harmonic structure and texture, its broadband transparency, its astonishingly unconstrained transient fidelity, and its exceptional low-frequency performance make it the most accomplished offering in its class. If you think tube-based amplification can't compete with, let alone compare to, solid-state power, go hear the 450i. Its exceptional clarity, superb resolution, unflappable transient fidelity, unswervingly authentic tone, and virtually perfect broadband pitch definition are only closely matched by some mega solid-state amplifiers. GW, 305

ALL-IN-ONE ELECTRONICS

NAD M10 V2

\$2999

The beautiful extruded-aluminum chassis'd and Gorilla Glass-topped M10 all-in-one is compatible with Roon, Airplay2, Amazon, Spotify, Tidal, and Qobuz. The system is 24/192 PCM-compatible, supports FLAC, WAV, MP3, and AAC, and is Bluetooth aptX HD-compatible as well. It utilizes a Hypex nCore Class D amplifier to very good effect, and offers Dirac



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Live LE room correction. No matter the source, the Master Series M10 had toes tapping from the comfort of a listening chair with total control from a smartphone. It is attractive, luxurious, simple to set up and use, small, ridiculously well featured, and wonderfully enjoyable to listen to. MC, 298 (new V2 not reviewed)

Moon ACE **\$4200**

Moon breathes some sex appeal into the all-in-one segment. Its ACE sports grippy power and a potpourri of connectivity that spans analog, digital, and network platforms. Sonically, the ACE has vivid, midrange-centric, rich, uncolored tonality laden with impressive dynamic resolve, quicksilver speed, good low-level transparency, and nicely focused imaging. Bass response, both in extension and pitch control, is very good, although the ACE will soften impacts slightly depending on output demands and speaker sensitivity. Its well-executed Mind app for smart devices operated seamlessly with solid, intuitive graphics. All-in-one solutions are a deceptively complicated business, but the ACE makes it look easy. NG, 276

Naim Uniti Nova **\$6899**

The Naim Uniti Nova is an 80Wpc integrated amplifier/digital player for the 21st century. Connectivity options include every input imaginable plus 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. SS, 284

PREAMPLIFIERS **Under \$2000**

Schiit Magnius **\$199**

The reason that audiophiles pass over modestly priced components for higher-priced options is often the "grayness" or perceived lack of resolution and detail of budget gear. There simply isn't enough there, for an experienced audiophile. That was not an issue with the Schiit Magnius preamplifier and headphone amplifier. Power supply tweekers be warned—the Magnius requires its own AC-to-AC, 1.5-to-2 amp, 14-to-16-volt power supply, instead of a more usual AC-to-DC type. The Magnius' soundstage characteristics, including depth, image precision, width, and dimensionality, were all exactly what I expect from reference-level component, regardless of price. If you can live with just two inputs, the Magnius may well be all you really need. SS, 311

Schiit Audio Freya+ **\$849–\$1049**

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

Audio by Van Alstine Transcendence 10 RB **\$1199 (add'l \$329 for phono section)**

Paired with Van Alstine's Vision SET 120 solid-state power amp, this modestly-priced preamp really wowed reviewer DK, especially its quiet but breezy 6D78 tubes and its Vision phono section, which sounded fantastic. He was instantly impressed by the depth of the soundstage and the general dynamics. DK especially appreciated what sounded like a natural presentation on incredibly unnatural recordings, which was probably this tube preamp keeping things just on the right side of mellow. DK, 290

NuPrime AMG PRA **\$1895**

The AMG PRA is a compact box with two knobs on the front and an LED indicator for channel and volume. The left knob controls the loudness-compensation feature, and the right knob switches between standby mode, line inputs, and adjusts volume. On the back, the STA includes one set of balanced inputs and three unbalanced RCAs along with a balanced and unbalanced RCA out. The STA's deep and quiet noise floor allows music to absolutely shine with crispness and dynamism. Its flexibility would work well in multiple setups. Sounds particularly good with the NuPrime AMG STA. (319)

\$2000–\$5000 **Atma-Sphere UV-1** **\$2100 (\$2500 w/mm; \$2990 w/LOMC phono)**

Intended as a cost-effective entry-level preamp, in its basic form as a line preamp, a single 6SN7 dual triode is used per channel. The line section delivers on the promise of the 6SN7 with a big tone, authoritative midrange, and excellent feel for 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 at the under-\$3k price point. DO, 258

Benchmark Media LA4 **\$2799 (\$2899 with remote; HPA4, \$3299 adds head-phone amp)**

The LA4 comes closer to measured and measurable perfection than any audio product in any category PS has ever reviewed, owned, or heard. It has lower distortion and noise than any electronic component known to him, and its transparency is without equal in his experience, with no sonic signature he can identify. Its dynamic range is likewise at the highest state of the art. An amazing 256-step volume control maintains 0.5dB/step resolution and flawless channel-tracking at any setting throughout its range. PS's new reference. PS, 311

Icon Audio LA4 MkIII **Signature**

\$3150 (standard version, \$2495)

The LA4's classic recipe consists of a 6SN7 gain stage, a tube buffer, a tube-rectified power supply, and point-to-point wiring. This elemental combination, together with excellent engineering, makes the LA4 Signature into a formidable line preamp. Tonal colors are reproduced with superb fidelity, vibrant and engaging. Dynamic shadings are nicely drawn out from soft to very loud. Although the stock tube complement isn't particularly romantic sounding, it is responsible for exceptional bass definition and iconic 3D rendering of the soundstage. The LA4's most compelling sonic attribute is tonal gravitas—an authoritative portrayal of the lower midrange, delivered with

realistic tonal density. In all, the LA4 offers exceptional sound quality that does justice to the sonic promise of the 6SN7. DO, 322

Rogue Audio RP-5/RP-7
\$3495/\$4995

Combining classic vacuum-tube heritage with micro-processor control is Rogue's recipe for one satisfying and affordable preamp. The RP-5 brought to bear rich color saturation and tonal liquidity and presented a natural clarity that rang truthful. It established an authentic sense of dimension and spaciousness specific to each image. The treble was nicely extended, quick, and abundant with harmonic information. Bass performance was authoritative, controlled, and yet also somewhat warm and bloomy. The RP-7 is the balanced version of the RP-5 and has taken the RP-5's voice and further burnished its overall performance adding new solidity and control in the bass and lower midrange. Not just a "signature" edition, the Rogue Audio RP-7 represents a significant upgrade over the excellent RP-5. Either should tempt a lot of people to go Rogue. NG, 260, 283

Bryston BP26
\$4395 (\$5590 with PS3)

The BP26 is a fully featured preamp with a tape loop, a mono/stereo toggle, a mute toggle, a channel balance control, a motorized volume pot, an input selector, and a feature one does not find very much anymore—a phase-inversion toggle. Remote control is a \$375 option. The BP26 has both balanced/XLR and unbalanced/RCA inputs and outputs and a 1/4" headphone jack. The BP26 sounds musical and engaging with fabulous rhythmic drive and momentum. It is tonally neutral with an open quality that does not veer toward

edgy or forced. It imparts a sure-footed foundation with good bass extension and control. The Bryston's musicality is more along the lines of a winning, agile tunefulness, than a musicality derived from a beguiling, silky lusciousness. KM, 269

\$5000–\$10,000
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! DO, 259

PrimaLuna EVO 400
\$5295

The EVO 400 is not only PrimaLuna's best line preamp offering ever, but it also holds its own against ultra-high-end competition. It's hard to escape the impression that it was designed from the ground up on a power amplifier chassis. It features massive and sophisticated power supplies, high-voltage regulation, exotic passive parts, and tube rectification via a pair of 5AR4s. Miraculously, it manages to combine the virtues of modern tube sound with the tonal heft and timbral realism afforded by vintage tube preamps. If purity of expression and tonal realism are sonic priorities, get ready to embrace the EVO 400. DO, 305

Atma-Sphere MP-3
\$5590 (\$6500 with LOMC phono)

This no-frills tubed preamp from Atma-Sphere is a must-hear for the purist music lover. Offering a crystal-clear, smooth, and concise window on the music, the MP-3's expansiveness is a perfect match for both tube and solid-state amplification. Balanced-only operation, phono optional. SK, 184

Aesthetix Calypso/Calypso Signature
\$6000/\$8500

The all-tube Calypso delivers most of the performance of Aesthetix' two-box \$13,000 Callisto linestage for about a third the price. Sonically, the Calypso is characterized by extremely good dynamics and dynamic nuance. Although the treble is smooth and somewhat laid-back, transparency and resolution are first-rate. Noise floor is highly dependent on tube quality, which has been variable. Competes with the megabuck preamps. The Signature version improves on the Calypso's already terrific performance with an expanded soundstage, richer portfolio of instrumental textures, more air, longer decays, and better-defined bass. AT found that the Signature version imparted a warmer cast to timbres. RH, 151; AT, 196

Pass Labs XP-12
\$6100

The XP-12 line-level preamp forgoes dual-chassis extravagance but sonically you wouldn't know it. Music abounds with stunning orchestral layering and complex three-dimensional sound-space vistas. There's a level of harmonic bloom across the spectrum, most notably in the infusion of resonance and decay cues around strings and winds. Anchored by the precision of Wayne Colburn's

single-stage electronic volume control from the Xs line, the XP-12 produced an almost eerie sense of music spontaneously bursting forth in the here and now. An outright bargain. NG, 286

Lamm Industries LL2.1
\$8490 (\$8790, deluxe version)

This all-tube linestage preamp (with tube rectification) captures 80% of the sound of price-no-object preamps for a fraction of their cost. Never in-your-face analytical, the LL2.1 frames details organically within the fabric of the music. Treble, bass, and transparency can be improved by using the right after-market tubes. DO, 198

McIntosh C53
\$8500

McIntosh's C53 preamplifier replaces a whole shelf-full of components, rolling a state-of-the-art linestage, phono-stage, DAC, equalizer, and headphone amp into a single elegant, albeit large box, with no compromises in performance. With 16 inputs and three outputs, the C53's connectivity is unrivaled, its DAC supporting every popular digital format, plus an ARC HDMI input that correctly decodes and mixes down movie and TV sources for those who demand first-class AV reproduction through their two-channel setups. Its two phono stages are good enough to obviate the need for separates. In addition to all this, the C53 offers battleship construction and looks that just radiate class, taste, and style. One of PS' reference preamplifiers. PS, 315

Aesthetix Janus/Janus Signature
\$9000/\$13,500

The Janus combines Aesthetix' Calypso linestage with a scaled-down Rhea phono-stage in a single chassis. The

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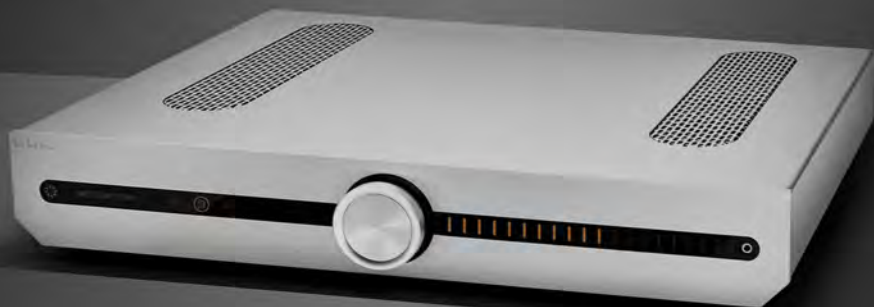
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Signature version features upgraded parts in the identical circuit. The units share numerous qualities: speed and detail; a low noise floor; precise rhythms; dynamics that are almost reference-caliber; and a laid-back perspective. The quiet background and smooth highs add up to long hours of glorious, fatigue-free listening. AT, 196

MBL Cadenza C11

\$9200

With civilized sonics, both airy and open, dynamics that are lively, and dimensionality and imaging that are exceptional, the C11 is a joy to use in concert with other Cadenza gear, where control and communication via Ethernet link is glitch-free. It is also equipped with one of the most sonically transparent analog volume controls (via a motorized potentiometer) that we've come across. NG, 228

Mark Levinson N°5206

\$9900

Part of the more affordable (for Mark Levinson) 5000 Series, the N°5206 sports a host of advanced circuits and features. The dual-monaural signal path is direct coupled and pure Class A in operation. The audio path features a single gain stage mated to a digitally controlled resistor-ladder volume control. The N°5206 is fitted with an integral DAC with MQA decoding and rendering and Bluetooth connectivity; the unit can handle PCM up to 384kHz/24-bit as well as DSD up to 11.2MHz. The N°5206 even includes a headphone jack with enough current drive to power any 'phones. The icing on the cake is an outstanding mm/mc phono stage featuring a hybrid gain technology with an infrasonic filter and unusually comprehensive cartridge-loading adjustment. The preamp is superb with low-level passages, with resolution limited

only by the source, not the preamplifier itself. AHC, 322

Pass Labs XP-22

\$9975

The XP-22 is a significant upgrade from the previous model in this slot. Based on new semiconductors and a new volume control, the two-chassis XP-22 vaults the performance into another league. The dual-mono power supplies feature double-shielded toroidal transformers for even lower noise. The output stage is more robust, with the ability to drive long cable runs. The XP-22 is so transparent that it improves upon the sound of running a source component directly into a power amplifier—not something every linestage can claim. Musically meaningful detail and resolution are excellent. If the recording possesses the information, the rendering of space can be dramatic and dynamics startling. AQ, 316

Yamaha C-5000

\$9999

Yamaha put some heart and soul into its return to the audio deep end. While the NS-5000 speakers and GT-5000 turntable are likely to attract most of the 5000 Series attention, the C-5000 preamplifier deserves its own spotlight. This fully balanced, solid-state preamp incorporates a wonderful, fully discrete phono stage with a massive 80dB of potential gain. There's a feeling of a signal unimpeded. The C-5000 doesn't require a sonic counterbalance elsewhere in the system. It also happens to be one of the most rewarding components to just put your hands on and use. An interesting and unique option in high-end preamplifiers, especially if a turntable is an important part of your system. AM, 308

\$10,000 and above

VTL TL-5.5 Series II Signature \$12,000

Initially introduced in 1997, VTL's latest TL-5.5 Series II Signature has been seriously improved using technologies found in the flagship TL-7.5 Reference Series III (\$35,000) and TL-6.5 Signature Series II (\$22,500). But those are linestage-only hybrid designs; the 5.5 is all-tube with a fine optional phono stage. It delivers an impressive sense of the musicians' presence, with seamless bottom-to-top tonal coherence, dynamic push, and resolution that create a thrilling sense of aliveness and of the music-making process. WG, 251

Brinkmann Audio Marconi

MkII

\$14,490

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

Constellation Inspiration 1.0

\$14,500

As with Constellation's other Inspiration Series components, the Preamp 1.0 offers Constellation-grade sound quality at what is essentially breakthrough pricing for this maker of cost-no-object components. The Preamp 1.0 sports the same circuit-

ry, chassis build-techniques, remote control, and display as the \$43k Virgo III. The sound is similar as well, with the trademark Constellation combination of resolution with ease, tremendous clarity and transparency to sources, and wonderful timbre. RH, 249

Zanden Audio Systems Model 3100

\$14,500

This gorgeously built, relatively demure tube linestage preamplifier is a virtual sonic clone of its companion piece—Zanden's extraordinary 8120 stereo amplifier. With its all-tube output stage, all-tube rectification, a fixed-bias current-regulated power supply, and transformer-coupled outputs, you might expect the 3100 to sound classically "tube-y." But as is the case with Zanden's power amplifier, you would be entirely wrong. JV has not heard an all-tube linestage at this price that outdoes this one in neutrality, speed, resolution, soundstaging, and grip. JV, 243

MBL N11

\$17,700

With seven inputs (five RCA, two XLR) and seven outputs (four RCA, three XLR) as well as an optional phono stage, the Noble Line N11 is equipped to handle just about everything in your system. What makes this single-stage preamp stand out is its remarkable "unity gain" volume control, which lowers the amount of boost applied to incoming signals and thereby audibly lowers noise, increases transparency and resolution, and expands dynamic range. A sonically remarkable bit of engineering. JV, 287

VAC Signature IIa

\$18,000

Kevin Hayes has outdone himself with the Signature IIa preamp. Transformer-coupled, completely balanced, hand-wired with no coupling

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capacitors or negative feedback, the full-function model has four line inputs and a tubed phonostage with mm/mc inputs, a separate power transformer, dedicated filter circuitry, and variable impedance loading. And the sound is gorgeous. GH, 225

FM Acoustics FM 155-MKIIR
\$19,750

Like its companion pieces, the FM 108-MKII monoblocks and the FM 122-MKII phonostage, this compact Class A linestage preamplifier is one of FM's most affordable products. As with the amp and phonostage, it too preserves the native sound, the number, and the receptivity patterns of the mikes being used in recording sessions, along with a clear sense of the dimensions and ambient signature of the venue in which those mikes have been set up. And yet this transparency to setup and source isn't being bought at the price of an analytical presentation. On the contrary, there is a musical sweetness to the way the FM 155 reveals instrumental and recording essentials that makes for consistently enjoyable listening. JV, 286

T+A P3100HV
\$22,350

T+A's top preamplifier is a significant redesign of its predecessor. The HV in the model name denotes the high-voltage power-supply rails (100V), which T+A says leads to more linear operation of the transistors. Those transistors are hand matched JFETs mounted on a complex circuit board that compensates for temperature variation. The P3100HV has exceptional command and grip in the bass, with tremendous depth, power, and authority. It's also very fast, conveying music's dynamism. JHb, 316

VTL TL-6.5 Series II Signature
\$22,500

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

Boulder Amplifiers 1110
\$23,000

Boulder Amplifiers' 1110 is the sweet spot in the line, offering much of the technology, sound quality, and battle-ship build of the company's higher-end 2100 and flagship 3000 line. More than just a source-switcher and volume control, the 1110 is a highly advanced computer-controlled, network-connected component with one of the most advanced feature sets of any preamplifier regardless of price. The 1110 has exceptional detail and transparency, a superb sense of air, "live" dynamics, tight but powerful and realistic bass, and a broad soundstage with excellent width and a depth that is just slightly forward compared to much of the competition. AHC, 287

Audionet Pre G2
\$23,350

With a rated bandwidth of DC–2MHz and thoughtful features like 18dB of variance per input for level-matching sources as well as source-naming, the DC-coupled PRE G2 is as versatile as it is sonically accomplished. Characterized

by its 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, rendering exquisitely and accurately scaled dynamic involvement at any volume level. GW, 279

Constellation Revelation
Pictor

\$24,500

As a deft amalgamation of Constellation's upper-level technology with some of the cost-saving measures from the lower-level series, the Pictor delivers overall performance closer to that of the more expensive Virgo III than expected for its asking price. With an external power supply and optional DC Filter chassis, the Pictor presents a decisive visual statement commensurate with its sound: open, transparent, dynamically alive, tonally neutral, and musically coherent. The soundstage expands beyond what is typical for a solid-state linestage and imaging is solid, three dimensional, and specific—just shy of tube-like in this regard. A wonderful linestage. KM, 294

D'Agostino Master Audio
Systems Progression

\$25,950 (\$32,900 with DAC module)

The Progression preamplifier may not have quite the visual cachet of the company's Momentum preamplifier but it's nonetheless a stunning bit of industrial design. The power supply is isolated from the audio electronics in an ingenious arrangement that tucks the supply underneath the main chassis. Two large meters and a gorgeous volume control dominate the front panel. An optional digital module features a differential DAC compatible with PCM up to 384kHz and DSD256. The

signal path is discrete and fully complementary from input to output with no negative feedback. The Progression has a midrange liveliness and resolution that bring out low-level information in strings and woodwinds without hardening the timbre of violin or brass. Low-level passages are unusually clear. The DAC module is excellent and easily worth the asking price. AHC, 300

Zanden Audio Systems
3000mk2

\$28,500

The all-glass-powered Zanden Classic trio (2000mk2 linestage, 1200mk3 phonostage, and 9600mk2 monoblock power amplifier) will get you where you want to go—i.e., the sound of the real thing—without forcing you to pay a heavy toll in listenability on less-than-SuperDisc recordings. This consistent listenability is one of the Zanden Classic suite's sonic virtues. It is not a typical overlay of tubeness; indeed, for tube gear 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. A TAS Product of the Year winner. JV, 293

Lamm Industries L2.1 Reference

\$28,990

The L2.1 Reference is a hybrid design but not in the usual sense. The power supply is all tube while the audio circuit is solid-state. MOSFETs are used in Class A, no-feed-

back circuitry for the gain and buffer stages. Sonically, the L2.1 is clearly deserving of the "Reference" appellation, holding up as it does a mirror to the music. It cuts through previous limitations of solid-state preamplification allowing the music to flow with precision and emotional conviction. DO, 278

Absolare Passion

\$31,000 (\$40,000, Signature Edition)

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 techniques and housed in a massive aluminum chassis clad in rich leather. Sonically the Passion is very much like the companion Passion 845 power amplifiers, with a complete lack of grain, etch, and 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. RH, 234

MBL 6010 D

\$32,400

This superb solid-state preamp has a noise floor so incredibly low that it consistently resolves fine harmonic and dynamic details that simply aren't audible through other great preamps. At the same time its transient speed and authority are highly realistic. To ice the cake, it is neutral in tonal balance, with excellent imaging and soundstaging, and superior ambience retrieval. One of JV's longstanding references. JV, 164

CH Precision L1

\$34,500 (\$51,500 with X1 power supply; \$103,000 dual monaural/dual supply)

Like its companion piece, the CH Precision M1 monoblock amplifiers, 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 neutrality, high transient speed, high detail, precision (though not razor-cut) imaging, and wall-to-wall soundstaging. The L1 may not have the bass of the Souolution 725 (and it does not come with a dandy built-in phonostage like the Souolution unit does), but it is certainly its equal in other regards—and its superior in low-level resolution. JV, 259

VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference

\$35,000

VTL's linestage is the best one it has produced. Its transient fidelity, dynamic power, enormous soundstage, and sheer grip are mesmerizing. Like its predecessors, the 7.5 features an ingenious "clean" and "dirty" box to prevent the signal from becoming contaminated by noisy parts. But there the similarities end. The Series III version of the 7.5, which features a host of upgraded parts and improved circuit design, has conquered the slight bit of electronic grain that the Series II version displayed. JH, 222

Pass Labs Xs

\$38,000

An all-out challenge to the state of the art and every other preamp available. Wayne Colburn and Nelson Pass have truly excelled in producing this massive two-unit preamp. It does everything right in every aspect of sound quality and is so revealing of

musical detail that you must listen closely to realize how good it is. AHC could not find any flaw by comparison with other top preamps, and its extraordinarily low noise floor and natural, detailed deep bass have few, if any, rivals. AHC, 243

Tidal Prisma

\$41,000

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

Constellation Virgo III

\$43,000

Save for the Technical Brain TBC-Zero, JV has never heard a faster, more detailed preamp than this high-tech gem (which uses the same circuit as the \$99k Altair II, albeit with slightly less pricey component parts). But where most solid-state preamps tend to trade off tone color for resolution and speed (or vice versa), this one doesn't. Given the right source and the right speaker, the Virgo sounds ravishingly beautiful and astonishingly realistic. JV, 223

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Momentum HD

\$44,950

This drop-dead gorgeous, all-discrete, Class A, solid-state linestage preamp from master engineer Dan D'Agostino is far too neutral and accurate to compensate for the colorations in other pieces of gear. It does not have a characteristic sound that shapes the music. Instead, it seems to free music from such distortions, getting the best of detail, dynamics, soundstage, and imaging. In the end, reviewer AHC had trouble describing this marvelous preamp, for any "sound" of its own simply wasn't there. A state-of-the-art effort. AHC, 239

Esoteric Grandioso C1X

\$46,000

The sumptuous C1's weighty control knobs bathe 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 effortless-ness. Dynamic emphases really pop. In keeping with the Grandioso stack's theme of purity, the C1's sound is free of any specter of electronics. AT, 280 (C1X version not yet reviewed)

Audionet Stern

\$48,950

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



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Lamm Industries LL1.1 Signature
\$55,290

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. PB, 208

Soulution 725
\$60,000 (\$65,000 with phono)

Like the company's 711 stereo and 701 monoblock amplifiers, Soulution's latest preamplifier, the 725, set a new standard in high fidelity for JV. Exceptionally rich, lifelike, and beautiful in tone color from bottom to top, the 725 also has (everywhere) the transient speed, fine textural detail, three-dimensional bloom, and sheer acoustical power of the real thing, making for the most consistently and thrillingly lifelike presentation JV has yet heard from solid-state electronics. JV, 249

darTZeel NHB-18NS
\$61,000

The battery-powered darTZeel preamplifier aims to provide a silkily quiet background, and it does. With a variety of options, including numerous BNC outputs and inputs for connecting to front-end equipment and amplifiers, it functions as something of the proverbial Swiss Army knife. A nifty feature is the inclusion, once a common feature in the audio industry, of a phonostage whose performance is nothing to be sneezed at. This darTZeel believes in the lush life. It delicately and convincingly treads the fine line between tubes and solid-state to produce highs that possess a rare purity, seemingly devoid of any electronic artifacts. While bass reproduction may not be quite as stentorian as some of its competitors, such as Boulder or Gryphon, the darTZeel possesses an ability to reproduce microdetail that may be unsurpassed. JHB, 327

Gryphon Commander
\$67,000

This Danish preamplifier more than merits its audacious name. With its beefy external power supply, the Commander is simply...commanding. No detail is too minute for it to reproduce with utter clarity and control. Add in prodigious grip in the bass region, image solidity, and seemingly effortless dynamic swells, and the Commander pretty much sails through the most demanding passages with ease. Nothing seems to faze it. An enticing mix of beauty and the beast, the Commander could hardly be a more winning preamplifier. JHB, 334

Boulder Amplifiers 2110
\$70,000

Boulder's 2110 preamplifier is a technological *tour de force*. It consists of 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 musical reproduction, as the 2110 effortlessly delivers transient attacks with unerring accuracy. AHC, 249

CH Precision L10
\$76,000 stereo / \$132,000 dual mono

The L10 linestage is available as a two-chassis or four-chassis configuration. The entire system can be set up and controlled via CH's outstanding app. The 10 Series offers extraordinary sonic performance and a level of musical engagement that must be experienced to be believed. Although the sound has a pristine clarity and crystalline transparency, it never sounds even remotely analytical. Listening to music through the L10 is a revelatory experience. RH, 323

VAC Statement Line
\$80,000

This pricey, exquisitely made, gorgeous-sounding, two-box, all-tube linestage preamplifier shares, quite naturally, the dark, rich, powerful sound of its companion amplifiers (the 450 iQ monoblocks). In this it is typically tubelike. And yet the VAC preamp (and amp)

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does not sound like other high-quality tube components in certain key ways: They are not as bloomy, for instance, as vintage ARC; they are not as lush as classic C-J; they are not as electrifying as Ken Stevens' CATs. They are a different taste entirely, sharing some qualities—speed, grip, resolution—with the best solid-state, and some qualities—liquidity, density of tone color and texture, life-sized imaging—with tubes. What they have—what all of VAC's Statement products seem to have—is the dynamic ease of the real thing, and this almost-tape-like continuousness goes a long way toward making instruments and vocalists sound real. JV, 263

Constellation Altair II

\$99,000 (\$16,000 for optional DC filter)

As colorless a piece of electronics as you're ever likely to hear, with no sonic flavor of its own, the Altair II allows the finest micro-details of timbre, transient information, and spatial cues to pass through without imposing its own signature on the music. Most preamplifiers shave off some low-level detail, add a bit of grain to instrumental textures, and drape a fine scrim between you and the music. Not the Altair II; what you put in is what comes out. The sheer amount of detail the Altair II resolves, the transparency to sources and speed, clarity, and dynamics are breathtaking. Moreover, the resolution comes without a trace of etch. The Altair II and the matching Hercules II amplifiers are world class, reference-quality electronics that would be at home in the most demanding systems. RH, 260

Boulder Amplifiers 3010

\$142,000

With its wealth of controls, the two-box, solid-state 3010 preamplifier looks like it

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

PREAMPLIFIERS WITH DIGITAL-TO-ANALOG CONVERTERS

Under \$2000

Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital

\$499

The 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; it also sounds good, has an elegantly designed control surface, and is expandable. As an audiophile's needs grow, Pro-Ject micro-systems have the components to support nearly every potential input source and format available through various accessory units designed to perform specific functions. 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 system. One of TAS' 2018 DACs of the Year. SS, 289

NAD C 658

\$1999

NAD's C 658 offers many features and functions in an affordable and good-sounding package. This streaming DAC, operated via the BluOS app or remote control, has a phono stage, analog inputs, subwoofer outputs with configurable crossover, full analog and digital preamplifier functions, and Dirac Live DSP room correction. This last feature can greatly improve the sound, particularly in problematic listening rooms. The C 658's sound is excellent, with tuneful bass and a spacious soundstage. RH, 313

\$2000–\$5000

Gold Note DS-10 EVO

\$3499–\$3699 (PSU-10 EVO \$1399)

The Gold Note DS-10 / PSU-10 EVO combination can produce reference-level sonics. It has Ethernet, WiFi, a true all-analog signal chain, and 192 different filter settings. If you bypass all the flavorings, the DS-10 sound is neutral, which is a good place to start. When you factor in the dedicated remote and headphone capabilities as well as Roon and MQA compatibility, you have a component that does everything that a current-generation DAC/Preamplifier needs to do, and it does it well. SS, 319

Anthem STR

\$4299

The STR preamplifier delivers on two high-end electronics parameters at which Anthem has always excelled, the user interface and DSP room correction. Navigation of the STR's layers of operational menus, displayed on a readable-from-across-the-room, thin-film-resistor display, is intuitive and readily mastered. The latest (Genesis) version of ARC gives the user an almost limitless capacity to

address quirks of real-life listening environments, the software employing two dozen IIR filters per channel and operating at 192kHz. A premium AKM DAC chip performs both 32-bit/384kHz PCM as well as 2.8 and 5.6MHz DSD processing. There's a phono stage with four selectable equalization curves other than the standard RIAA, and the preamp has an analog bypass option. AQ, 298

HiFi Rose RS150B

\$4995

The Rose RS150B could be the "Swiss Army knife" of streaming DACs, with integral streaming support, MQA decoding, Roon Ready certification, a pair of analog input jacks with variable output level, and compatibility with DSD all the way up to DSD512. The build-quality is extraordinary with a solid aluminum block. But the Rose's most important quality is the sound it achieves from the latest ESS Sabre ES-9038PRO. Never before has RB experienced this level of sonic quality from a streaming source. RB, 322

Cambridge Edge NQ

\$5000

For its 50th anniversary, Cambridge Audio didn't go the conservative route with the Edge NQ network preamplifier. An analog preamplifier with built-in network player and DAC, the NQ is the place to connect all the connected aspects of your musical life. The triumph here is in the simplicity and reliability of the hardware and software integration. Switching among YouTube-sourced music videos on the iPad, Chromecasted Qobuz streamed music, or computer playback of music files from a NAS is embarrassingly easy and immediate to execute. When he reviewed it together with the Edge W

STENHEIM

Different by design

"The Alumine 5 SE is a chunky little stick of dynamite, capable of simply phenomenal dynamics - unexceeded in speed, power and nuance by any cone speaker that I've reviewed, regardless of size, configuration or price. If you listen in a smallish-to-medium-sized space and want the whole enchilada without compromise in speed, extension, beauty, resolution, and realism, I can't think of another cone loudspeaker that will beat this one out."

Jonathan Valin, The Absolute Sound. Golden Ear Awards 2022

Outwardly simple, even plain, the speakers in Stenheim's Alumine line are (as JV so eloquently notes) capable of astonishing musical performance. That performance is no accident.

We started out by questioning the fundamental thinking, technological choices and materials behind conventional designs. We looked at each element on a cost/benefit basis, but we considered the cost in musical and performance terms, rather than monetary value. That led us to some surprising conclusions – answers that contradicted conventional thinking and fashionable theory: solutions that discarded the measured benefits of high-tech cone materials in favour of the musical advantages of more traditional approaches: solutions that mandated low-loss, phase-coherent crossovers with sophisticated out-of-band roll-offs: solutions based on the low-storage signature of a critically damped aluminium cabinet using innovative, low-volume damping materials. And behind each decision? The drive to maintain the life and energy in the music, the essence of the original performance.

Follow that thinking and the result is a range of speakers that sound bigger than they look: that are easier to drive and easier to live with: that set the standard for musical coherence and musical communication: that finally deliver the musical performances you've been searching for. The result is more music, more musician and less speaker. The result is the most musically convincing range of loudspeakers available.

Alumine Two



Alumine Three



Alumine Five



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	MUSICAL ARTISANS Skokie, IL T: 847-877-2791	SOUND BY SINGER New York, NY T: 212-924-8600	SUNNY COMPONENTS Covina, CA T: 626-966-6259	TONE OF MUSIC AUDIO San Francisco, CA T: 415-860-6818			SONIC ARTISTRY Toronto, ON T: 416-254-3887

power amplifier, AM found the best pure audio performance to be had through the NQ's analog preamplifier or DAC inputs. The sonic result (given all the complexity inside the beautiful box) is unexpectedly hear-through, making exploration of the ever-expanding world of musical possibilities...better. AM, 301

\$5000–\$10,000

Bryston BR-20

**\$6795 (with HDMI option)
\$7595.00**

The Bryston BR-20 is one of the most successful mergers of a solid-state analog preamp with a DAC and built-in streaming available today. A model of preamp ergonomics, operationally it proved to be glitch free. An honest broker in terms of tonal accuracy, it hued to the straight and narrow, and reflected a "just the facts ma'am" fidelity. BR-20 was also superbly quiet, with bass response that had a combination of grip and authority that are the hallmarks of the best preamps of this type. Since the BR-20 unwaveringly reproduces what's on the recording, those who prefer a little added sweet frosting will find the Bryston stubbornly neutral. A superb headphone output comes standard. Tempting options include an HDMI board and a phonostage. The BR-20 operates effectively via its web user interface, but a handy aluminum remote control is also included. NG, 323

T+A DAC 200

\$7125

The DAC 200 is the heart of T+A's innovative Series 200 mini-stack. Like its sister components, the MP 200 player and A 200 power amp, the DAC is a fully discreet design. There are even separate signal paths for PCM and DSD. And, unlike most DAC-Pre's, the 200 has a true

stepped-ladder analog volume control. Outside, the unit is retro-attractive; cue the dual multifunction meters. Cue, too, the stunningly fast, open, and dynamic sound, which is a dead ringer for that of some far more expensive Swiss gear. Like the entire Series 200, the DAC 200 is a great deal and spellbinding to listen to. AT, 335

Classé Delta PRE

\$9999

Classé's newest stereo preamplifier features a sophisticated yet intuitive touchscreen GUI that facilitates navigation of the component's vast functional capabilities. The Delta PRE has its own excellent DAC (an AKM 4497 chipset that supports native DSD) and a phonostage that allows for the choice of cartridge type and impedance loading in seconds. The analog-domain stepped attenuator has 400 steps: You can be confident of finding the right volume setting. The preamp doesn't have automated DSP room correction, but instead offers advanced parametric EQ capabilities. Even without such wizardry, however, Classé's Delta PRE is as transparent and uncolored as the best. AQ, 312

Over \$10,000

Bel Canto Black EX DAC/Controller

\$13,500

This highly sophisticated preamplifier and DAC makes it easy to access streaming services such as Tidal. In addition to being Roon-ready, the Black EX offers full MQA decoding. There's even a phonostage and headphone amplifier. The Black EX also has 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. AHC, 290

Theoretica Applied Physics BACCH-SP adio

\$23,800–\$27,800

The BACCH-SP adio is a controller/DAC with both analog and digital outputs. What distinguishes it from dozens of other products that can be described as such, and its *raison d'être*, is the "Band Associated Crosstalk Cancellation Hierarchy" filter developed by Dr. Edgar Choueiri at Princeton University. Interaural crosstalk—the tendency, in most listening environments, for sound from the right loudspeaker to get to the left ear and vice versa—has negatively impacted the realistic representation of spatial cues since the dawn of stereo. Choueiri has solved the problem, and the results with the great majority of stereo recordings are quite remarkable: the sort of envelopment associated with multichannel playback, as well as superior representation of a venue's reverberation characteristics. Most exceptional is an advance in dimensionality and image specificity throughout the soundfield. Seventy years worth of two-channel recordings have the potential to take on previously unappreciated palpability and spatial detail. AQ, 333

CH Precision C1.2

\$36,000–\$49,000 depending on configuration (\$53,000–\$66,000 with X1 power supply; \$128,000 three chassis/dual mono/triple supply)

The C1.2 is a uniquely flexible control center that can accommodate all manner of digital inputs: SPDIF, USB, streaming, and raw DSD via the proprietary CH-Link between the C1.2 and its companion

D1 CD/SACD transport. An excellent, optional analog input board is also available. All sources are treated to some of the most advanced digital technology extant, and all sound richly detailed and dynamically impactful. The C1.2'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. AT, 239

T+A SDV 3100 HV

\$38,900

The SDV 3100 HV DAC/preamp must be one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive digital products ever made. Able to handle virtually 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. Sound quality is exceptional in all formats and modes, with the PCM conversion approaching the best out there, and DSD reproduction in a class by itself. The battleship build-quality, extensive features, fabulous casework, and beautiful fit 'n' finish suggest a product of twice the price. RH, 300

PHONOSTAGES

Under \$2000

Schiit Audio Mani

\$149

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. The Mani delivers wonderful soundstage depth while keeping the noise floor to a minimum. It handles even

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complex music with grace and toe-tapping fun. DK, 286

MoFi Electronics StudioPhono \$349

Renowned recording and remastering experts Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs have taken the plunge into manufacturing analog hardware: two turntables and two companion phonostages, including the \$349 StudioPhono. Tim de Paravicini lent a hand with designing the internal circuitry. Features include adjustable gain and loading for mm and mc cartridges, a mono setting, and a subsonic filter. Clean and compact, it complements tables sonically and visually. JM, 284

Audio by Van Alstine Vision Q \$569

This little marvel's compact size and low cost are made possible using 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 Q should ideally be matched with a romantic-sounding tube preamp. DO, 260

TPAD 1000 \$699

Tritschler Precision Audio Devices was formed in 2003 to commercialize Dr. Joe Tritschler's tube phonostage, using Erno Borbely's circuit. It is currently being sold direct, which partly accounts for its astoundingly affordable asking price; another factor is its circuit simplicity. In many

respects, the TPAD 1000 isn't far behind much more expensive phonostages—a solid Class B performer, with a well-integrated presentation top to bottom, excellent power range, good bass, and sparkling highs. “I don't know what more you could ask at this price point,” said reviewer Dick Olsher. DO, 280

Vincent PHO-500 \$699

For anyone trying to assemble a high-performance phono system on a reasonable budget (under \$5k), the PHO-500 could be the ideal choice, since it delivers a high-quality, low-noise signal that can easily be mated with a wide variety of high-performance front ends. You also get the added benefit of a device that allows you to record your most treasured LPs at 96/24 resolution. With its external onboard power supply, the Vincent PHO-500 ranks as the quietest phono preamplifier SS has reviewed, regardless of price. SS, 313

iFi iPhono 3 Black Label \$995

The iFi iPhono 3 is a long, relatively thin, compact rectangle, with small dipswitches on the bottom. The input connections are at one end, and the outputs are at the other. It's as unassuming as a phonostage can be, but that simplicity hides a surprising flexibility. The iPhono features loading options from 22 ohms on up to 47k ohms, with six stops between, and either 36, 48, 60, or 72dB of gain. Its low end is hefty, mids are smooth, and upper registers really sparkle. The dynamics are extra tight and shimmery, likely due to the iPhono's very low background noise. Highly recommended. DK, 317

Aural Thrills Serenade \$1199

The Serenade is an all-tube phonostage with sufficient gain and signal-to-noise ratio to accommodate a moving-coil cartridge. This shouldn't be possible at this price point, but leave it to Aural Thrills' Tom Kenny to pull off the impossible. The Serenade's signature sound could be summed up in two words: transparency and clarity. Every recess of the soundstage is well lit up within an expansive spatial presentation. DO, 279

Musical Surroundings Nova III \$1500

This latest generation of the Nova retains the virtues of the earlier iterations while improving the sonics. Those virtues include an unusually wide variety of loading options for moving-coil pickups and capacitance for moving magnets, great neutrality, and low noise. The latest model has greater dynamic punch, kick, and drive, as well as slightly more “extroverted” personality. After using battery power in the previous version, designer Michael Yee has returned to a conventional AC power supply, this a wall-wart. An optional Linear Power Supply (\$650) improves performance. PS, 322

Hegel V10 \$1650

Norwegian-based Hegel's first phonostage is a winner. The sound is remarkably detailed, open, and full-bodied. Plenty of mm and mc cartridge loading and gain settings are offered. The V10 is highly musical and “audiophile competent,” to a degree that makes it an obvious audition choice for anyone seeking a phonostage close to the \$1500–\$2000 range—and possibility higher. KM, 320

Chord Huei \$1775

The Chord Huei is a compact black rectangle, with four glowing lights bumped up along the front that control loading options. The Huei includes gain steps from 49dB up to 70dB with six total stops in between for the mc section, and 21dB to 42dB with six stops for the mm section. Loading allows for 100 ohms up to 3700 ohms for mc, and 47k ohms for mm. Sonically, the low end is solid and the mids very smooth; the overall presentation is on the warm end of the spectrum. DK, 317

Gold Note PH-10 \$1999 (PSU-10, \$1199)

The solid-state PH-10 (and matching optional PSU-10 power supply) is a half-width component, which makes for easy and flexible placement in or on top of a cabinet or rack. Fit and finish are excellent. All functions (EQ curves, impedance loading, gain) can be adjusted and confirmed via a front-panel TFT display on-the-fly, while playing music. Its overall presentation is transparent and neutral (with a slightly warm tone and a weighty midrange). Some phonostages pursue “absolute technical objectivity” as their goal. The PH-10 is all about the music. If you're a “truth-seeker,” there are other products to choose from, but if you're a “pleasure-seeker,” then the PH-10 is for you. SSc, 305

\$2000–\$3000

Sutherland Engineering 20/20 Mk2

\$2200 (linear power supply option, \$450)

The 20/20 shares designer Ron Sutherland's “twin mono” (identical circuit) approach to electronics design, but unlike other recent Sutherland models, the 20/20 is not powered by rows of



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D-cell batteries. Instead, it uses an unusual (for high-end audio) pair of “regulated desktop power supplies.” The sound is classic Sutherland: very low-noise, beautiful throughout the midrange, with a big, transparent stage, excellent detail and focus, and a bit of politeness in the deep bass. Some won’t like the tradeoffs; musical purists will embrace them. WG, 215

Moon 310LP

\$2300

The stand-alone 310LP phonostage offers the analog hound both versatility and excellent performance in an elegant package. WG, 225

Channel D Lino C 2.0

\$2699

The Channel D Lino C 2.0 is a current-mode (transimpedance) phonostage for low-output, low-impedance moving-coil cartridges. Very linear and coherent sounding, it doesn’t overtly editorialize the musical spectrum at the expense of realistic playback. With features that are not usually available in this range of products (internal high-current AGM battery, current-mode input, meticulous circuit layout, surface-mount components to produce low-noise, direct-coupling, and balanced operation available from input to output), it is well worth an audition by anyone looking for a phono preamp at its price point and above. AJ, 308

\$3000–\$6000

Parasound Halo JC 3+

\$3199

Thoroughly upgraded, the JC 3+ not only adds loading adjustments to the (now-discontinued) JC 3 but improvements to signal-to-noise, tweaks to the mm/mc gain stages, a beefier power supply, and a larger power transformer. 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 in acoustic space. NG, 245

EAT E-Glo S

\$3599 (\$4999 with EAT LPS Linear Power Supply)

European Audio Team (E.A.T.) has taken the ECC83 dual triode tube and married it with solid-state electronics to create the E-Glo S phono-stage. The input section is a hybrid that uses JFETs and ECC83 tubes to provide gain. Extensive gain and loading settings make the E-Glo S compatible with a wide range of cartridges. The LPS (\$1295 if bought separately, \$795 with the E-Glo S) is a dual-output power supply capable of powering two devices (e.g., the E-Glo S and select E.A.T. turntables). Used in conjunction with the E-Glo S, the LPS provides a more robust power supply than the one supplied with the E-Glo S alone. Many phonostages emphasize transients and focus on extracting the last measure of detail. The EAT isn’t one of them, favoring a gentler, more intimate sound. Pleasant and engaging are the words that best describe the E-Glo S. AJ, 300

Pass Labs XP-17

\$4500

Pass’ single-chassis, dual-mono design mixes an easy, almost relaxed fluidity with an iron grip of authority. Neither explicitly solid-state nor tube in character, it dishes out savory, textured tastes of both with smooth airy treble response, and extended and controlled bass extension. Vocals have a tactile presence that continues to underscore a key strength of the LP analog world. Nor does the Pass squeeze images; rather it lets them breathe within the acoustic of the

venue. Widely configurable for mm and mc, the XP-17 conveys the signal with minimal commentary while letting the music prevail in all its detail and emotion. NG, 302

Naim SuperLine

\$4599

With no built-in power supply, the SuperLine is designed to mate with either another Naim component or one of three stand-alone Naim power supplies: the FlatCapx (\$1690), the HiCap (\$2490), or the SuperCap (\$7490). With any of the three it’s a terrific phonostage, but when mated with the SuperCap it blossoms into one of the finest tools for LP playback. WG, 194

Boulder Amplifiers 508

\$5250

The superb 508 mm/mc phonostage is a fully balanced, solid-state design that has all the virtues of the traditional Boulder sound. It’s very quiet, allowing the phonostage to extract tiny nuances from LPs that fuller-sounding phono preamps might gloss over. The 508 is superbly linear in performance, allowing it to navigate the treble region without a hint of glare. Bass is robust but never overwhelming. The resolving power of the 508 means that can render the most delicate musical passages with finesse and ease. The 508 may be diminutive in size, but not in performance. JHb, 313

Zesto Audio Andros II

\$5900

Zesto Audio’s phonostage embodies all the virtues of latter-day tube design with none of the drawbacks. It has solidity, dimensionality, vitality, transparency, excellent transient response, well-defined and extended bass, a superbly rich midrange, and very low noise. A sensibly wide range of loading options is available for mc’s, which are stepped up by transformers, which must

be in part responsible for the deliciously smooth, unfatiguing highs. An outstanding product. PS, 222

\$6000 and above

VTL TP-2.5i

\$6000

When compared to the big boys—costly gear from Boulder, Ypsilon, and so forth—the VTL isn’t some kind of giant-slayer. But the comparison isn’t fair, or to put it another way, it’s only enlightening in showing that gear in the TP-2.5i’s price range comes tantalizingly close to achieving the performance of far more elaborate designs with separate power supplies and the like. Anyone looking for a superbly enjoyable but moderately priced phonostage with a touch of tube bliss would do well to consider the TP-2.5i. JHb, 302

Coincident Speaker Technology Statement Phono Stage

\$6499

Coincident has surpassed itself with its marvelous new tube phonostage. Powered by a 40-pound separate power supply that connects to the main unit with an umbilical cord, the Coincident packs an unbelievable wallop, particularly in the bass. The Coincident is tailor-made to drive rock or orchestral music. Its rich midrange, deep low end, and sizzling dynamic swings make a wide variety of LPs sound more lifelike, endowing the music with a real sense of drama and urgency. Vocals have a creaminess to them that is difficult to resist. Put bluntly, the Statement makes a real statement. JHb, 322

Aesthetix Rhea/Rhea Signature

\$7000/\$10,000

With three inputs, variable cartridge-loading—adjustable via remote control—and a front-panel display of gain and loading, the Rhea is a ver-

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satellite phonostage. Although it has tons of gain, the noise level is relatively low, making it compatible with a wide variety of cartridges. The Rhea exhibits transient quickness, effortlessness on crescendos, and a deep, layered soundstage. The Signature version 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. RH, 151/196

Channel D Seta

\$7598–\$9598 includes RIAA module (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 has not been RIAA equalized. 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. (The Seta design has also been recently enhanced to include transimpedance input mode as well as the original voltage mode.) 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. SS, 238

Zesto Andros Deluxe II

\$8300

This phonostage is unmistakably Zesto from the defining wave in its industrial design. The two-stage tube gain system is the quietest RB has experienced, while at the same time excelling at dynamics and detail. The Zesto remains true to the music, delivering instrumental textures and remaining tonally neutral, without blooming in the midrange as many tube-based phonostages do. The Zesto is never fatiguing and will provide hours of listening enjoyment for all types of music. RB, 328

Esoteric E-02

\$9500

Esoteric’s flagship phonostage may seem expensive, but it’s a bargain compared with much pricier phonostages. That’s because the E-02 competes with the best regardless of cost, and in many ways delivers reference-class performance. Fully balanced with a whopping 72dB of gain, the E-02 ticks off all the audiophile boxes. But what makes it such a standout is the way it disappears, imparting virtually no sonic signature of its own to the music. The E-02 simply sounds like the recording and the rest of your system. The execution and build-quality are exemplary. AM, 294

Zanden Audio Systems 120S

\$10,500

This entirely redesigned, entirely solid-state phonostage (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 120S is simply superb sounding, 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, and the incredible soundstaging and imaging for which Yamada’s Zanden gear has always been famous, you get a demure little phonostage that is hard to beat at its price. Model 120 reviewed, JV, 259

Pass Labs XP-27

\$12,075

The XP-27 is a dual-chassis design employing double-shielded toroids, two of them, in the power supply. To lower the noise floor, switching and loading in the XP-27 is accomplished at a relatively high signal level, which is good news for fans of ultra-low-output mc cartridges. The XP-27 is also notable for its ease of use. Front-panel knobs have multiple settings for resistive load and reactive load (i.e., capacitance); plus, there are three gain settings, appropriate for pretty much any cartridge. RCA and XLR outputs, one set of each, are provided. A superb choice for vinyl-loving old hands, as well as those who may be coming home after a sojourn in the digital desert. AQ, 316

Lamm Industries LP2.1

\$13,490 (\$13,790, deluxe version)

A significant upgrade of the LP2, which was Lamm’s entry-level phonostage for many years. 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, a perfect marriage of traditional solid-state strengths with the harmonic textures of tubes. DO, 248

Moon 810LP

\$13,500

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. 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 reference-class loudspeakers, this Simaudio impresses not just with its audiophile attributes, but more importantly with how musically compelling it makes listening to LPs. TAS’ 2013 Phonostage of the Year. RH, 231

Brinkmann Audio Edison MK II

\$14,990

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

Triangle Art P-200

\$15,000

The P-200 can comfortably accommodate both mm and mc cartridges. It distances itself from the competition by



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virtue of its superb spatiality, transient speed, and resolution of low-level detail. Expect a compelling dynamic range capable of fleshing out subtle microdynamic nuances as well scaling orchestral peaks with composure. The P-200 simply gets out of the way and allows the music to ebb and flow without dynamic constraints or tube colorations. Most of you will be perfectly happy with the stock tube complement which squeezes out a fair amount of tube magic but know that it responds well to basic tube rolling should you get the urge to experiment with your favorite preamp tube types. DO, 334

VTL TP-6.5 Series II Signature
\$15,000 (\$18,000 with internal mc step-up option)

A thoroughly modern, versatile, dual-input phono preamplifier in a single, relatively compact chassis. Both versions include a hybrid JFET/12AU7 vacuum tube mc input capable of 62dB/68dB (single-ended/balanced out) gain. One offers a 12AX7-based mm second input, the other a Lundahl transformer-coupled second mc input. Both make use of significant circuit upgrades originated in the TL-7.5 Series III tube/JFET preamplifier. The hybrid JFET mc input deftly combines solid-state's low noise advantages with the vacuum tube's rich sonics to produce enticing, timbrally neutral sound. VTL's micro-processor-controlled operating system makes possible convenient, full functionality front-panel switching. MF, 335

FM Acoustics FM 122-MKII
\$17,750

A tiny Class A phonostage (and linearizer) with infinitely adjustable curves to properly EQ mono recordings made before the RIAA era (one of FM's most famous innova-

tions), 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 instrumentalists 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 remains a formula for successful playback, and FM Acoustics remains a marque you ought to audition before making an ultra-high-end purchase. JV, 286

Zesto Audio Andros Téssera Reference
\$19,900

The two-box (main unit and power supply) Téssera Reference accepts four inputs, two moving-magnet and two moving-coil (or up to four low-output moving-coils with the use of two additional external step-up devices). Sonically, it is full-bodied and composed. 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. AJ, 287

Van den Hul Grail SE
\$25,995

Audio legend A.J. Van den Hul is famed for his Speed Racer-like cartridges, but he has also made a serious run at phonostages in recent years. The solid-state, fully balanced Grail SE is his effort to produce a top-drawer phono preamp. It features a current-mode input that is supposed to optimize the energy transfer of a moving-coil cartridge and ensure zero hum. If the Grail is anything to go by, the proponents of current-mode phonostages are onto something. The Grail packs a real wallop on

jazz big band and orchestral recordings, a testament to its wonderfully low noise floor. It does not possess the bloom of tubed units nor reach quite as far into the back of the hall as some other current-mode phonostages. But its silky sound and dynamism are an enticing package. JHb, 302

Constellation Revelation Andromeda
\$28,000

The John Curl-designed Andromeda uses some of the same building blocks found in the Pictor lineage, including three separate power supplies in an outboard chassis. (A separate optional DC Filter unit is available.) 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, 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. KM, 294

Zanden Audio Systems 1200S
\$29,500

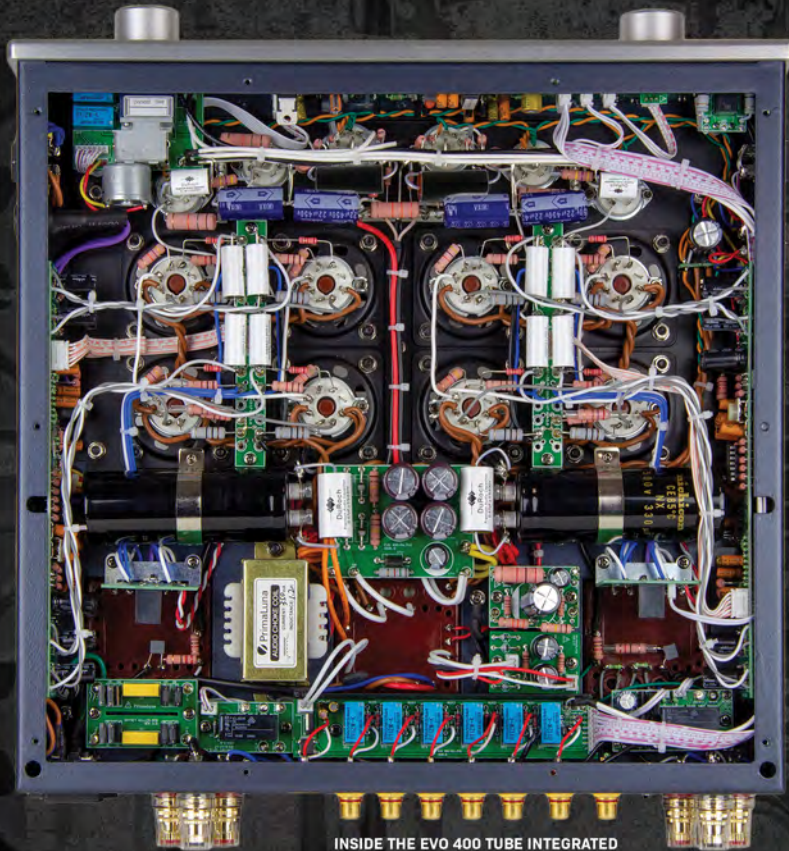
When JV heard the original version of the tube-powered Zanden 1200 phonostage with user-selectable EQ, better than a decade-and-a-

half ago, he was amazed by its reproduction of acoustic space. It simply put more square yardage 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 plummy in the way that tube gear then sounded. The latest iteration of the 1200S no longer suffers from bass bloat. Indeed, it is positively superb in the bottom octaves, reproducing pitch, timbre, intensity, and duration with the blur-free clarity of solid-state. The Zanden's neutrality extends from bottom to top, making the 1200S among the highest-resolution tube phonostages JV has heard. One of TAS's 2019 Products of the Year. JV, 293

CH Precision P1
\$31,000 (\$48,000 with X1 power supply; \$89,000 dual monaural/dual supply)

The P1 phonostage relies on current amplification rather than traditional voltage amplification. This means that you get a better transfer of energy, at least in theory, and a lower signal-to-noise ratio. Sonically, it's as if the P1 removes a layer of varnish from recordings to reveal what's lurking in the grooves. The presentation is quite different from a tube phonostage. The P1 has better bass grip and dynamic slam. While there's no gainsaying that it does not possess the glamour of tubes, or pass the same amount of harmonic information, it excels in neutrality, dynamic heft, and the ability to peer into the remotest recesses of an LP, revealing in detail what is taking place during the per-

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formance. Anyone looking for a state-of-the-art solid-state phono stage should give the P1 a long listen. JHb, 297

Audio Research Reference Phono 10

\$35,000

Like its companion piece, the Reference 10 Line Stage, this two-chassis, touchscreen-operated, entirely dual-mono (from power supplies through output circuits), tube phono stage has sensationally lifelike tone color and tonal weight, tremendous dynamic reserves, and uncannily three-dimensional imaging, making for a sonic presentation that is unmistakably “right” from midbass to top treble. The highest-fidelity phono preamp that ARC has made (which is saying a mouthful), and certainly one of the most realistic phono stages on the market. JV, 242

Goldmund PH3.8 Nextgen

\$44,975

Goldmund's original PH3 phono stage was released in 1995. There followed a long dry spell wherein the company concentrated on digital playback. With the LP revival of the past decade the company has again seen the light, and the PH3.8 Nextgen is the first proof. Unlike the single-box PH3, the PH3.8 Nextgen is a two-chassis component, with a separate external power supply. The unit's slew rate of $>80V/\mu s$ and rise time of $<400ns$, combined with its very low noise and very high bandwidth, are said to be keys to its transient speed and hard-hitting dynamics. But the PH3.8 Nextgen doesn't just deliver lifelike speed and impact; it also, and simultaneously, gives you the color, texture, and action of instruments and vocals. A genuine contender for the laurels. JV, 312

Constellation Perseus

\$48,000

Designed by John Curl, the Perseus is one of the most lifelike transistor phono preamps JV has auditioned. Capable of feats of resolution undreamt of by analog hounds, the Perseus not only recovers information that many other phono stages miss; it also recovers it without spotlighting those details by completely leaching away their tone color (though the Perseus is on the coolish, analytical side). Like all of Constellation's Performance Series products, the Perseus does a standard-setting job of balancing extraordinarily high resolution and transient speed with lifelike (when the record is lifelike) timbre. JV, 223

Boulder Amplifiers 2108

\$56,000

Boulder made waves with its 2008 phono stage well over a decade ago, but the 2108 shows that its efforts have not crested. Quite the contrary. The fully balanced 2108 is markedly superior to its predecessor, both in terms of a lower noise floor and a more mellifluous sound. Gone is any hint of the sterility that some detractors professed to discern in the 2008. Instead, the 2108, which has a separate power supply, is a suave performer. Its iron-fisted control is always in service of the music rather than the reverse. On LP after LP, the 2108 conveys the phenomenal transient accuracy that has become a hallmark of Boulder equipment. It stands at the apex of solid-state reproduction of vinyl records. JHb, 306

Soulution 755

\$72,000

The 755 phono stage is an entirely re-thought and greatly improved version of the Soulution 750. It now arrives with user-selectable loading via its AMOLED panel, improved

bandwidth, distortion, and separation, and enough gain and regulation in its line-level output stage to drive and control a power amplifier directly (thus obviating the need for a separate preamp). Its performance is phenomenal, combining all the traditional Soulution virtues (color, bloom, body, slam, lightning transient speed) with extremely high-resolution of detail and superb pitch definition in the bass. The thing about Soulution is that that detail is woven into the fabric of the music (rather in the way tubes present detail), rather than riding analytically on its surface. One of Soulution's truly great products and JV's reference. JV, 276

VAC Statement

\$80,000

If you've got the dough and the itch, you're going to have to go a very long way to find a superior tube unit. Capable of 76dB gain (which can be upped to 82dB at customer request), this two-chassis (separate power supply), all-glass-bottle VAC has more input headroom than any other phono stage JV has had in his system. The sonic results are audible, as the Statement Phono Stage never hits a “dynamic ceiling,” the way other tube and transistor phono stages so often do. 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. JV, 263

DISC PLAYERS

Under \$2000

Rotel CD14 CD MK II

\$899

The CD14 CD player doesn't try to be anything but 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. VF, 273

Arcam CDS50

\$1320

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

Yamaha CD-S1000

\$1799

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

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There are both coaxial and optical digital outputs, so the CD-S1000 is an excellent candidate to serve as a transport with a high-end DAC. AQ, 300

Quad Artera Play+ \$1995

Past Quad preamplifiers have included phono stages, balance and tone controls, and high and low filters. The Play discards all these in favor of an orientation that is effectively all digital (despite two pairs of analog inputs for outboard analog sources, such as a phono stage or tuner), beginning with a CD player and a built-in DAC. Sonically, as a linestage, the Play is fractionally on the yang side of the yin/yang continuum, with a presentation detailed, transparent, dynamic—in other words, very much like the Quad Stereo amp and just as highly recommended. PS, 268

\$2000–\$10,000

Technics SL-G700M2-S \$3499

Meticulously constructed with four separate internal compartments to accommodate the power supply, digital and analog circuits, and the die-cast aluminum disc drive, the Technics SL-G700M2-S is designed with an eye towards minimizing both electronic interference and mechanical vibration. The D-to-A circuit features dual-mono architecture with two AK4497 chips outputting “native” DSD up to 11.2MHz and PCM up to 384kHz. Ethernet, wireless, and Bluetooth connectivity are provided; the SL-G700M2-S is also equipped for full MQA decoding. The player excelled at revealing subtle dynamic gradations, correct scaling of instruments, and image specificity and spatiality on good recordings. AQ, 300

Marantz SA-K1 Ruby \$3999

The great audio designer Ken Ishiwata made his reputation with an exceptionally musical-sounding modification of an early Marantz CD player. The SA-K1 represents his latest, possibly his last, digital component and is his finest work, offering the best SACD and CD playback from a single unit that TAS's Paul Seydor has had in-house, and some of the best he's heard anywhere. Its outstanding onboard DAC can be used with a music server to stream and play downloads in every resolution commonly available, including native DSD up to 11.2MHz. Those in search of the proverbial “last” disc-spinner need look no further. PS, 302

Bryston BCD-3 \$4495

Reviewer Alan Taffel began his review by wondering if a CD player like the BCD-3 was even relevant in today's digital world. He discovered, to his surprise, that it was. His next discovery was just how good the BCD-3 sounds, and how much of an improvement it represented over even excellent last-generation CD players. Then, the Bryston went toe-to-toe with one of the best CD players available—without embarrassing itself in the least. Lastly, he discovered that the BCD-3's upgrade path, which consists of turning itself into a transport to work with future or more expensive DACs, really works. Put this together and you really do have what could be your last CD player. “If I were choosing a CD player that wouldn't break the bank but was unflinching in its musical and sonic generosity,” Alan concluded, “the BCD-3 would be at the top of my list.” AT, 289

McIntosh MCT500 \$5500

The MCT500 SACD transport was introduced for audiophiles who already own a McIntosh preamp, integrated amp, or receiver equipped with one of the company's proprietary DAC modules. It will handle virtually any 4.75" disc on the planet and, of course, hybrid SACDs. With no built-in DAC, the MCT500 allows direct access to the DSD files on an SACD disc via a proprietary cable that can be connected only to other McIntosh products with the reciprocal MCT jack. It's thus impossible to speak of its sound because its sound is that of the partnering McIntosh component. As auditioned by PS with the C52 and C53 preamps, its reproduction was as good as he has experienced with any other SACD/CD players or DACs, bettered by none and equaled only by a very few. PS, 315

T+A MP 200 \$5900

T+A's MP 200 is best thought of as a CD transport plus a Roon-compatible streamer. There's no DAC inside, but the MP 200 does everything to tee up multiple digital sources—including HDD, SSD, and thumb drives—for a downstream DAC. When combined with T+A's DAC 200, the two act as a single unit. The MP 200 is a superb-sounding streamer, perhaps because it houses the same streaming module as T+A's top separates. Further, the in-house-built CD transport rivals the best in the world. Add in a gorgeous, petite form factor plus great value, and you've got a home run. AT, 335

Mark Levinson N°5101 \$6050

With a disc drive that will play CD and SACD, along with a fully equipped streaming DAC, the Mark Levinson

N°5101 will handle just about any digital source. The player is compatible with PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz, as well as DSD up to 4x. On the technical side, the unit has a 32-bit ESS Sabre DAC with user-selectable digital filters and a proprietary jitter-reduction circuit. The output stage is fully discrete, direct-coupled, and dual monaural, with the signal output on RCA and XLR jacks. You can operate the unit via a traditional handheld remote control or via a custom app, called 5Kontrol. The player has excellent sound quality, particularly in the transition from the upper bass to the lower midrange, which preserves the natural warmth of music without softening it. AHC, 322

Aesthetix Romulus \$9000–\$10,000

Another home run for Aesthetix, the tubed Romulus combines a disc player and DAC (USB, AES/EBU, SPDIF inputs) in a highly functional and great-sounding component. The additional \$1000 from the base price buys you an innovative volume control that allows you to drive a power amplifier directly. The build- and parts-quality are first-rate. Sonically, the Romulus offers an exceptionally natural sound with a great sense of ease and an expansive soundstage. RH, 243

MBL Cadenza C31 \$9600

In today's computer-driven marketplace the C31 CD player can just as reasonably be considered a “DAC with transport.” Either way, its performance is uncompromising. With Red Book discs the slot-drive transport gets a slight nod for its more intimate and lush perspective; however, with 24-bit/96kHz material the asynchronous USB wins hands down. A jewel of a player. NG, 228

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"The Alpha DAC Series 3 is a terrific bargain and an unqualified triumph."

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T+A MP 2000 R MKII**\$9825**

Not just a glorified music computer, T+A's R-Series MP 2000 R 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, outboard storage like a NAS, plus Internet radio and music services such as Tidal. CD and network playback are unerringly superb, with naturalistic timbres and harmonics, midrange bloom, and ripe bass resonance and control. NG, 275

\$10,000 and above**Luxman D-10X****\$16,495**

Whether streaming, playing downloads, or spinning 4.5" music discs, the D-10X will play virtually any audio-only two-channel or hybrid disc on the planet. With outstanding build, engineering, performance, and functional and ergonomic characteristics, the 10X is unlikely to leave you hankering for anything more or better for a very long time to come. Best of all is the Luxman "sound": supremely musical yet now with a degree of resolution, detail, and neutrality that will reveal without undue editorializing everything that is on any source you care to feed it. The D-10X is, if by only a slim margin, quite the finest all-in-one CD/SACD/DAC integrated with which PS any sort of long experience. PS, 317

Metronome AQWO**\$20,000 (\$22,300 with tube output stage)**

This gorgeous 33-pound CD/SACD player from France's Metronome combines a high-quality disc transport and a highly capable DAC section with a full complement of digital inputs. The Class A solid-state output stage is

standard, but a tube output stage, based on a JAN-spec'd 6922, is available as an option. The AQWO is characterized by exceptional dynamics and detail, particularly when playing SACDs. The player is particularly adept at maintaining its clarity during high-level, musically complex passages. The treble performance is very smooth and liquid without sacrificing resolution. The open and airy soundstage makes music come alive, with outstanding resolution of spatial information and imaging detail, and with a "front-row" perspective. AHC, 298

T+A PDT 3100 HV**\$23,450**

This stunning piece of mechanical and electrical engineering will most likely be partnered with T+A's SDV 3100 HV DAC. But with every type of digital output on its rear panel, the PDT will work with any DAC. The custom CD/SACD transport is built around a massive, high-precision, all-metal disc mechanism designed and built by T+A (as is the control circuitry and software). Touch the front panel's "open" button and the tray silently glides out. This is by far the smoothest and quietest transport RH has encountered. When it is connected by a proprietary link to T+A's SDV 3100 HV, the sound quality from CD and, especially, SACD is spectacularly great. The PDT 3100 HV is a joy to use, built beautifully, and sounds terrific. RH, 301

dCS Rossini 2.0 APEX**\$32,800**

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. 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 player/DACs on the market. AT, 286

Burmester 089**\$33,000 (MMI module, \$3500)**

The real business of the Burmester belt-driven CD player is the music. Here, in addition to pace and drama, this German unit demonstrates a rare ability to bring out details and inner lines without letting them trip over each other. Instead, they meld and interact exactly as the composer and musicians intended. The effect, AT says, quoting a highly discriminating audiophile friend, is "so satisfying I could use a cigarette." AT, 212

CH Precision D1.5**\$41,000–\$47,500 (\$58,000–64,500 with X1 power supply)**

When paired with the companion CH Precision C1 DAC/Pre, the D1 becomes a formidable digital front end. The two communicate via the company's proprietary CH Link, and once you hear its 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. As a stand-alone digital front end, the D1 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. AT, 239 (D1 reviewed)

DIGITAL-TO-ANALOG CONVERTERS**Under \$1000****AudioQuest DragonFly Black/Red/Cobalt****\$129/\$249/\$349**

AudioQuest's thumb-drive-sized DragonFly series has been wildly successful—and for good reason. Inside this diminutive, plug-and-play package resides both a hi-res DAC (up to 96/24) and a surprisingly good headphone amp. Now the Black and Red models, which remain in the line, are joined by a new flagship, the Cobalt, and it's the best DragonFly yet. Cobalt sports upgraded DAC, processor, and USB receiver chips, as well as new jitter-reduction technology. AudioQuest also revised the digital filter. While preserving what made the previous DragonFlies such winners—plug-and-play installation, analog volume control, full MQA decoding, and, most importantly, a thoroughly enjoyable listening experience—Cobalt improves upon their sonics in subtle but meaningful ways. RH, 270, AT, 302

iFi Zen**\$129**

The Zen DAC offers a lot of features and high sound quality at an entry-level price. When it is mated with other high-performance components, SS found the results reference or near-reference level, though the Zen does require careful system-matching and quality cables that will likely cost far more than the DAC itself. Ideal users for the Zen DAC fall into two groups: younger, newly minted audiophiles looking for good sound on a budget for nearfield listening; and older ones looking for an inexpensive way to add MQA DAC capabilities and a decent headphone amplifier to their room-based reference systems. The former will use all the Zen DAC's features,

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while a majority of the latter will set it on fixed output and use it as a basic DAC. Both win. SS, 313

Schiit Modius

\$199

In the bad old days, between 1980 and 2000, decent-sounding digital devices were almost universally expensive, to the point that it was generally assumed and often stated by audio experts that inexpensive digital products were garbage unless heavily modified. The Modius balanced-output DAC is one of the latest of the new-generation DACs that challenge that old assumption. It delivers great sound from PCM files and has enough digital input options for most systems, but it does not support MQA or DSD files and has no user-alterable digital filter settings. However, if you want a simple and simply great just-the-facts DAC, Modius fills the bill. SS, 311

iFi xDSD

\$399

The iFi xDSD is perfect for this portable or desktop amp, a young mobile listener and older audiophiles who want to add streaming and hi-res to their existing system for a fraction of the price of their primary DAC. Both types of audiophiles will be pleased by the xDSD's flexibility, utility, performance level, and overall value. SS, 289

Cambridge Audio DacMagic 200

\$499

A truly wonderful little DAC that bridges the gap between the most affordable ones and the mid-priced \$1000+ units. This is the most feature-laden model yet in the well-received DacMagic line, and the first to incorporate full MQA decoding. Muse Kastanovich judged the sound to be truly excellent, with natural weight and completeness, almost up

to the standards of the twice-the-price Cambridge CXN v2. Packed with features like headphone and balanced XLR outputs, Bluetooth and USB inputs, selectable filters, DSD and MQA, and volume control, the DacMagic 200 can function as a digital preamp, too. DM, 322

Bluesound Node 3i

\$599

The Node 3i from Bluesound is a music server, streamer, and DAC that accesses most of the popular streaming services and Internet radio, as well as music files off hard drives and NAS drives, all sans computer, while offering full MQA unfolding and rendering (but no DSD). Consistent with its NAD provenance, the Node 3i sounds really, really good—so far above its size and price that it almost makes you feel you've stolen something. On many digital sources it often took the most concentrated and critical listening to distinguish the Node 3i from considerably higher-priced competition, even in direct A/B comparisons. PS, 308 (Node 2i reviewed; Node 3i review forthcoming)

Schiit Audio Bifrost 2

\$799

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

little flaw. Highly recommended for anyone in search of an accurate, laser-focused DAC. DK, 309

Soekris dac1421

\$899

Built in Denmark and designed by Søren Kristensen, this DAC serves as a prime example of the adage that good things come in small packages. It is switchable between line and headphone output and includes a digital volume control. All Soekris DACs feature discrete R-2R sign-magnitude resistive ladders. The DAC can accommodate up to DoP128 and DSD256 data on the USB input. Four anti-aliasing filters may be selected, giving the user enormous flexibility in tailoring the DAC's sonic signature to particular tastes. With the digital filter set to soft Butterworth, the Soekris equals or exceeds the performance of TDA1543-based DACs in terms of analog-like sound quality, offering better imaging, enhanced transient clarity, and superior resolution. DO, 311

Topping D90SE

\$899

The D90SE would not exist except for the fact that Topping's previous flagship, the D90MQA, used a top-of-the-line AKM DAC chip. AKM had a catastrophic fire in its factory, which curtailed all its DAC-chip production. Topping had no choice but to redesign its DACs to use ESS chips. The D90SE may be a Johnny-come-lately specifications champion from a Chinese manufacturer with a limited track record with audiophiles here in the United States, but SS can only say that, after his listening, he found the D90SE to be exactly what it purports to be—a well-designed digital audio converter that performs on a par with reference DACs he has used in the past. SS, 326

\$1000–\$3000

Cambridge CXN-2

\$1099

The CXN-2 provides a good-sounding entry into the world of streaming media without costing a fortune. It is supplied with the Cambridge Connect app, which makes selecting and managing music easier than Tidal's native app. The CXN-2's small front-panel screen is hard to read unless you're up close. The sound quality is a significant step up from the integral DACs in Cambridge's integrated amplifiers, with more space, a smoother tonal balance, greater refinement, and more powerful dynamic impacts. DM, 311

ANKits DAC 2.1 Signature

\$1700

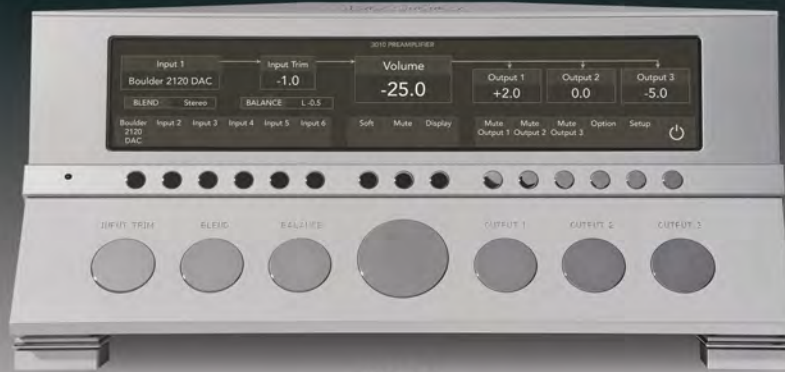
ANKaudiokits.com is home to a line of kits based on Audio Note UK designs. It's a tube aficionado's dream come true, featuring a tube-rectified-and-regulated high-voltage power supply. Much of the kit's success is ultimately in the customer's hands, the one exception being the digital board, which is supplied fully assembled, complete with an Analog Devices AD1865 dual-18-bit chip, an R-2R design that can handle up to a 24/96 data stream. Unlike so many DACs that manage to sound uninvolved, no matter how outstanding the digital circuitry may be, the ANK stays true to its tube essence. Tonal colors are nicely saturated while harmonic textures are silky smooth and never bright. DO, 320

Chord Qutest

\$2125

The Chord Qutest integrates the entire frequency spectrum in a holistic way that just sounds right—not too soft or hard, detailed without being harsh, and relaxed without being flaccid. With the Qutest, SS heard a certain "rightness"

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2110



1110



812

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to the sound that he could live with happily for a long time. If you have a basic but flagship-level DAC that is more than ten years old, and you have been thinking about modernizing, SS would strongly recommend trying the Qutest before replacing your DAC with something with an additional zero at the end of its price tag. SS, 293

Schiit Audio Yggdrasil

\$2299

This barebones DAC (no networking, no DSD, no MQA, Spartan chassis) sounds spectacularly great. When playing PCM sources (the bread-and-butter source for most listeners) the Yggy competes with some really expensive DACs. Designed by industry legend Mike Moffat, it 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. It's a spectacular performer on an absolute level, an out-of-this world bargain, and was our choice for DAC of the Year in 2017. RH, 273

M2Tech Young MK4/MQA

\$2999

This meticulously crafted two-unit server with external linear power supply can run Roon, Roon utilizing Squeezebox, or Squeezebox with your favorite UPnP software. From a sonic perspective it checks every audiophile box. Layering and dynamics are unrestricted no matter the musical genre, and vocals are velvety and luxurious, but never high viscosity. Rock is passionately reproduced with snap, punch, rhythm, and texture. It reproduces small- and large-scale dynamic shifts with ease. Piano's difficult tonal complexities often challenge the best music servers, but they were

just another day at the concert hall for the M2Tech. It easily belongs with components at or twice its price. MC, 302 (original Mk2/Mk3 version reviewed)

\$3000–\$10,000

PrimaLuna EVO 100

\$3395

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

Bryston BDA-3.14

\$4195

The goal of the BDA-3.14 was simple in theory, but more challenging in practice—to add a streaming function to the BDA-3 platform while retaining the same high sound quality as the BDA-3. Reviewer Steven Stone thinks Bryston's efforts were successful. The DAC section for the BDA-3.14 is built around a pair of AK4490 chips, just like that of the BDA-3. Instead of building a server from scratch Bryston began with a Raspberry Pi 3 minicomputer as its Internet gateway device. Why a Pi? Because it works reliably and has excellent and continuing support from Pi. In short, the BDA-3.14 is a first-class component that could be the center of any high-performance digital audio system. SS, 309

Denafrips Terminator II

\$4900

Denafrips is best known for its own line of R-2R DACs, in which the Terminator currently sits second from the top,

eclipsed only by the Terminator Plus. The Terminator handles PCM up to a sampling frequency of 384kHz, and DSD up to 11.2MHz (DSD256) in native mode. Both RCA and balanced XLR analog outputs are provided. The analog voltage signal is output directly without a buffer or gain stage, which puts the responsibility on the matching preamp to provide adequate gain and drive signal. Sonically, expect a tonally neutral and dynamic presentation. A true reference and currently DO's favorite DAC. DO, 316

Lampizator Baltic 3

\$5975

This ultra-tweaky tube based DAC from Poland features tubes in the audio circuit as well as in the power supply. The Baltic 3's reproduction of timbre is exemplary, both with respect to accuracy and resolution of subtle harmonics. While it's particularly strong at imaging and soundstaging and at resolving, layering, and spatially defining complex musical presentations (e.g. symphonies, bands, or complex recordings), it's just as beguiling on recordings with minimal instruments or solo vocals. Reproduction across the frequency range is deep, wide, and full, from string bass or bass drums in the lower octaves to the extension and shimmer of cymbals and bells in the upper registers. While all these attributes are accurate in describing the Baltic 3, for a potential customer I think it's more meaningful to say that it creates such immersive, beguiling, and engaging experiences. SSc, 323

PS Audio DirectStream

\$5999 (\$6899 with Bridge II)

Sometimes it's good to start over from scratch when designing a new component. That's what designer Ted Smith did—he started from the premise that DSD record-

ings sound good and built a DAC around that premise. 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. VF, 245

Chord Hugo TT2/M Scaler

\$6725/\$5650

The Hugo TT employs a proprietary and sophisticated “long-tap” digital filter that reportedly results in waveforms from standard-resolution sources as accurate as those of hi-res ones. The DAC section is also custom and supports PCM up to 768kHz and up to DSD512. The Hugo TT sounds superb on its own, but the performance is taken up several notches with the addition of the Hugo M scaler, which upsamples all incoming signals to 768kHz with an FPGA. The result truly represents a new way forward in digital audio—where standard 16/44 material in every way sounds as good as (or better than) even the highest-resolution files. A technical and musical triumph. CM, 295

\$10,000 and above

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Series 3

\$10,995

Berkeley's Alpha DAC Series 3 attempts to bring much of the performance of the company's vaunted Reference DAC 3 to a product that is less than half the Reference's price. The Alpha DAC has superb resolution of low-level detail, three-dimensional soundstaging (with the ability to convey very fine timbral and spatial information at the back of the hall), dense tone color, and outstanding clarity. The Alpha 3 doesn't have quite the world-class performance of the Berkeley Reference Series 3 DAC, but

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it comes closer than you'd expect for less than half the price. The Alpha DAC Series 3 is the DAC to beat at anywhere near this price if you don't need DSD decoding or network connectivity. RH, 320

dCS Bartók

\$17,950 (\$19,950 w/headphone amp)

The replacement for the vaunted Debussy DAC, Bartók adds streaming network capability to dCS's entry-level DAC, plus full MQA decoding and rendering, and a vastly improved interface and app. Bartók does the unthinkable; it accomplishes for digital playback what was once the exclusive province of analog playback. It establishes the same visceral connection with the listener, as if he were witnessing a recording from inside the microphone capsule with no losses from opening transient to the last gasp of decay. But outweighing any single benchmark, Bartók offers a profusion of harmonic body and tactility that calls to mind the finest in vinyl playback. You may never miss the sound of LPs again. NG, 300

Brinkmann Nyquist Mk II

\$18,990

Brinkmann may be best known for its 35-year track record of making exceptional turntables, but its 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 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. The newly updated digital section of the Mk.II improves performance and verifies Brinkmann's claims of easy field-upgradability. RH, 278; JHb, 301

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 3

\$28,000

Just when RH thought the Alpha DAC Reference couldn't get any better, software updates and a new hardware board vaulted the Series 3 into a new league of excellence. The Series 3 embodies all the qualities that have made this DAC a top contender—exquisite resolution of the finest timbral and spatial detail; tremendous dimensionality clarity, and openness without etch or brightness; liquidity; precise rendering of music's dynamic structure; and an overall sense of hearing back through the playback chain to the microphone feed. The Series 3 improves on all these qualities and presents greater bass extension and rhythmic flow. The Series 3 renders more information on standard-res files than RH through possible, and MQA decoding takes the performance to the next level. The Series 3 lacks a USB input (you'll need Berkeley's \$2275 Alpha USB) and has no networking capabilities or DSD decoding. RH, 279; Series 3, 298

MSB Technology Reference DAC

\$49,500, DAC base price includes Femto 33 clock & preamp output module

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 highly modular MSB Reference DAC. On physical media such as CD or SACD and on streaming sources, the Reference DAC is one of the two most realistic-sounding digital source components JV has heard in his home (the other being the Souolution 760). On select cuts from select discs (or on streamed material, particularly hi-res MQA) the MSB has the colorless neutrality, speed, detail, presence, dynamic range, and delicacy that make voices and instruments sound real enough to raise goosebumps. This is the ear-opener JV has been waiting for in a digital source, and TAS' well-deserving 2018 Overall Product of the Year. JV, 290

Souolution 760

\$72,000

Coming from a company better known for its superb solid-state amps and preamps than for its digital source components, the Souolution 760 DAC was, for JV, the surprise of the 2020 audio season. Indeed, it turned out to be such a game-changer that—if you listen only or primarily to ones and zeroes—would be hard put to recommend anything else over it, regardless of price, and only the MSB Reference alongside it. Combining a world-class linestage (comparable to Souolution's own 725) with Leedh Processing volume control (the first DAC to use Gilles Milot's celebrated algorithm) and an ultra-wide-bandwidth, ultra-low-distortion, ingeniously phase-corrected

DAC, the 760 offers so much more of what JV likes and expects to hear from the best recorded music that it virtually lives in a class of its own. Here, finally, is the whole package—air, bloom, space, dimensionality, dynamic scale, electrifying transient response (on electrifying transients), fabulous low end, and (for once) equally fabulous treble. TAS' deserving 2020 DAC of the Year award-winner. JV, 311

dCS Vivaldi Apex

\$140,000

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. Extensive changes to the Ring DAC hardware and power supply ensure a sensationally low noise floor that helps to produce a supple and dynamic sound. Particularly noteworthy is the combination of 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 will get you most of the way there. The Vivaldi Clock and Upsampler 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. JHb, 268/333



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Wadax Atlantis Reference \$175,000

Although astronomically expensive, Wadax's 180-pound, three-chassis Atlantis Reference DAC is a cost-no-object exercise in what's possible in digital audio playback. The main chassis is three sections combined in an artful way and is powered by two massive outboard power supplies. The Reference is packed with innovative circuitry that is realized with lavish execution. The sonic result is like nothing RH has heard from digital; the Reference DAC has tremendous dimensionality, stunningly realistic timbral rendering, exceptional transient performance, and an overall presentation that is, by a significant margin, the state of the art in digital. The Reference DAC's full performance potential is realized by pairing it with Wadax's Reference Server and Akasa optical interface. RH's reference. RH, 312

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Roon 2.0 Music Management Software

\$9.99/mo. billed annually, \$12.99/mo. billed monthly

Roon is a computer program that runs on Windows and Macintosh computers and plays back computer-audio files. What distinguishes Roon from other playback programs is the voluminous information it provides about your music. Want to read an album's liner notes? How about the lyrics of a song being performed? Or maybe some information about a composer? Roon provides you with the data. Roon's first job is to sound good, which it does in spades. Roon makes computer audio file playback easier and more fun, factors it desperately needs. By far the most sophisticated music management software, and an indispensable vehicle for exploring music. VF, 258; AT, 286, SS, 315, 334

Muzo Cobblestone \$59

This inexpensive little device provides wireless streaming to any audio system. Although the Cobblestone wouldn't be considered 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 Cobblestone's overall harmonic balance is slightly dark, with forgiving highs and a warmish upper bass and lower midrange. When compared in a direct A/B with the Sonos Connect's analog output SS found that Cobblestone was the Sonos' equal in every sonic respect except one—the Cobblestone could play 96/24 files while the Sonos could not. SS, 268

Channel D Software Pure Music and Pure Vinyl

\$129 Pure Music; \$379 Pure Vinyl

Ripping your LP collection to digital files has never been easier, thanks to Pure Vinyl. The graphic user interface, which looks like an LP surface, allows you to quickly and precisely pinpoint the beginnings of tracks. Pure Vinyl supports transfers at any sample-size and bit-rate used by your analog-to-digital converter. When it is coupled with Channel D's Seta phonostage, the process is improved and simplified. Additionally, the Seta can be set so that it doesn't perform RIAA equalization; EQ is then realized in the digital domain by Pure Vinyl. TAS' 2013 Music Server Product of the Year. SS, 238

Sonore opticalModule Deluxe \$369 (plus power supply; Super Ethernet chip, \$499)

The opticalModule Deluxe is a bi-directional fiber-media

converter or FMC with a high-precision femto clock. Its main function is to remove jitter from network sources and streams to improve digital sound. As part of a fiber-optic network link, it functions like an EtherRegen, and can be used on the upstream side with one, with a second OMD, or with an inexpensive generic FMC, as reviewed. Muse Kastanovich felt it made a significant overall improvement to the sonic qualities of all streaming sources coming in from the network. Soundstage, reverb, and harmonics were all more organic and convincing. DM, 322

iFi Zen Stream

\$399

As you might surmise from its name, the Zen Stream is a streaming endpoint. As an endpoint with both USB 3.0 and SPDIF outputs, it can deliver Internet and networked music sources to any DAC with either USB or SPDIF inputs. If you have a great DAC that doesn't have a USB input that you would like to use with networked sources, the Zen Stream makes that possible. The Zen Stream supports many streaming sources via Wi-Fi or Ethernet including Spotify, Tidal, Roon, AirPlay, Chromecast, DLNA, and NAA (Network Audio Adapter). It has no file-size, file-type, or library-size limits. The Zen Streamer may well be the most hassle-free, flexible, and high-quality music streamer currently available. SS, 322

SOTM sMS-200 Mini Network Player

\$450

SOTM's sMS-200 plays just about any type of music files stored on a network or an external USB drive. A versatile software collection called Eunhasu includes the popular Roon software (a two-month trial) and several other capable

playback programs. A quality USB output connects to a DAC. An upscale version, the sMS-200ultra, adds a high-precision clock for even better sound, but increases the price to \$1200. VF, 286

PS Audio Bridge II Network Card

\$899

This user-installable card in PS Audio's DirectStream DAC adds MQA compatibility to the DirectStream. The Bridge II Network card doesn't make the DirectStream an MQA decoder; rather, the Bridge II performs the first MQA "unfold" step that converts a 44.1kHz or 48kHz MQA file to 96kHz PCM for decoding by the DirectStream. This offers the benefits of the higher sample rate but not the advantages of full MQA decoding. AHC, 278

GeerFab D.BOB (Digital Break-Out Box)

\$999

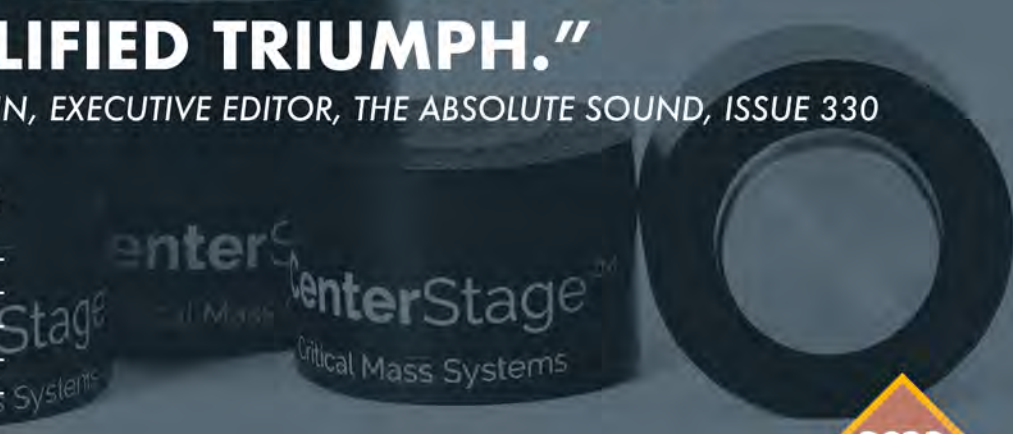
GeerFab's D.BOB device promises to allow you to use the DAC of your choice with a Blu-ray, SACD, CD, CDR, or virtually any recognized-by-your-player silver or golden disc, if your disc player has an HDMI output. Adding the D.BOB to your system is relatively simple, merely connect your player's HDMI output to the D.BOB's HDMI input, and then connect the D.BOB's SPDIF or TosLink output to your DAC. The D.BOB is capable of handling up to PCM 192/24 and DSD64. If you have a large collection of high-resolution discs, the D.BOB gives you a future-proof way to continue to enjoy them into the foreseeable future. SS, 309

Sonore Ultra Rendu Renderer \$999 (Sonore Linear Power Supply, \$745 w/cable)

This unusual device takes files sent by an external server,

"THE CENTERSTAGE 2M IS AN UNQUALIFIED TRIUMPH."

- JONATHAN VALIN, EXECUTIVE EDITOR, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND, ISSUE 330



JONATHAN VALIN

".....The differences it makes under any and all components are unmistakable and entirely for the better.I'll give you one example, which can stand in for all the components I've used a quartet of the Centerstage 2M's with. You wouldn't think that footers would have a profound effect on the sonics of a world-class tape deck such as the Metaxas & amp; Sins Tourbillon T-RX (which, along with the United Home Audio Super Deck, was already the most lifelike source component I'd ever heard). But you'd be wrong.

.....Indeed, the improvement startled me. Tone color, which was already outstanding, suddenly became audibly richer and more natural, particularly in the midbass and lower midrange (which weren't thin to begin with). Understand that this was not a "lumping up" of energy (as with the port effect of a speaker); it was just a more lifelike fullness that not only added density to timbre but focus and dimensionality to the instruments producing that timbre.The net result was an unmistakable increase in neutrality and completeness, and hence (with the best source material) in the magical illusion of real instruments and instrumentalists playing (near visibly) in a real space."



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which you must also provide, and plays, or renders, them, which means it converts digital music files in the usual variety of formats to a bitstream a DAC can handle; and that DAC, of course, must have a USB 2.0 input. It is compatible with PCM files up to 768kHz sampling rate and DSD512. The microRendu produced a significant improvement in transparency, detail resolution, spatiality, timbral realism, and overall sound quality. Note that you need to buy a separate power supply, like Sonore's own at \$695. VF, 280

Aurender N100H-2TB **\$2700**

Aurender's N100H-2TB brings you a surprising amount of the technology, sound quality, and outstanding user experience of the flagship W20SE for a fraction of the price. You don't get features such as dual-wire AES and clock input, but most users don't need those things anyway. The internal storage is 2TB rather than 12TB, but you can always add a NAS drive. 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, and uncluttered, with features that have been refined through actual use. Sonically, the N100H comes close to the W20's state-of-the-art performance, particularly considering the cost difference. RH, 258

Bryston BDP-3 **\$4495**

The BDP-3 digital player is a technological *tour de force* that bridges generational divides: between the Old World CD player and the New World of high-resolution files and music-library management. The BDP-3 performs the

same function as a CD transport but plays data files from removable USB storage media at their native resolution and in a multiplicity of file formats. The BDP-3 uses the same digital audio circuitry as the BDP-1 and BDP-2, but like the BDP-2 incorporates a more powerful system board and a correspondingly hefty power supply. Processor speed and memory capacity are also increased. Connectivity is expanded to include an internal SATA connection, an eSATA port, two gigabit Ethernet ports, and six full-current USB 2.0 ports. The Bryston BDP-3 doesn't merely "sound better," the experience of hearing music through it is qualitatively different. It plays music with unprecedented purity. KS, 259

Cary Audio DMS-550 **\$5495**

With superb sonics and wide-ranging connectivity, the DMS-550 is one of the most format-friendly and non-fussy net audio players on the market. Cary's 3rd generation player is fully operational for streaming or file playback, wireless or Ethernet. Outfitted with the latest AKM "Velvet Sound" chip, on tap is native playback up to 32-bit/768 kHz PCM as well as native DSD up to 512. It's also MQA-equipped and Roon-ready thus even more sonically rewarding. The sound of the player is full and warm, dynamic and quick but not to the point of etch or grain. In short, a winner. NG, DMS-500 reviewed in 275

Aurender ACS10 **\$6000–\$7500**

The Aurender ACS10 was created to be an almost-complete one-box server solution. It's a stand-alone digital hub designed to interface with an external DAC via a USB connection. Merely add the USB-enabled DAC of your choice and you have an entire

digital front end capable of doing virtually anything and everything a computer/NAS/streamer system can do, and more. If your goal is to acquire a streamer source that will deliver the highest possible level of sonic quality currently available from higher-resolution streaming sources, handle all the ripping and storage, and do this elegantly, you will be hard-pressed to find a better, more comprehensive, self-contained hardware/software option than the Aurender ACS10. SS, 300

Baetis Audio Revolution X3 **\$6200**

The Revolution X3 is in the middle of Baetis Audio's product range, a compact component (13¼" wide) with plenty of connectivity—proprietary SPDIF and AES/EBU outputs plus plenty of USB ports, one of which can be upgraded to an SOTM interface with or without a premium clock card. Supplied with the machine is a beefy Neutrik power cord, a substantial external power supply, 4TB of media storage, and—most critically—customer service that's second to none in the industry. New owners are scheduled for a block of one-on-one instruction to assure that their X3 has been configured according to their wishes and that they know how to use it. Unnecessary "bloatware" has been removed from the Windows OS to optimize sonic performance. AQ, 313

Linn Selekt DSM

From \$6370 (configurable)
Linn's complete reworking of its Network Music Player platform offers an engaging level of convenience, functionality, and, especially, performance from an all-in-one streaming solution—a class of product that Linn defined and popularized. With 50Wpc on tap combined with a simple user

experience with clean, incisive, and accurate sonics, the Selekt DSM exemplifies why Linn is so successful within this segment. The combination of its distinctly neutral and articulate sound, taken to the next level using Space Optimisation (Linn's native room-correction technology), lifts this re-designed modular solution to the top of the list of a growing number of similarly conceived products. GW, 300

432 EVO Aeon **\$7500**

The "432" in this Belgian manufacturer's name refers to the idea that music pitched at A = 432Hz is more enjoyable—maybe even better for your health. The Aeon will change the pitch of whatever it is you're auditioning to A = 432, or to one of several other target tunings. Thankfully, this conversion can be readily defeated, and one still has at his or her disposal an exceptionally versatile and good-sounding digital source. 432 EVO's servers (USB output only) are Linux-based, ready to accept either Roon or the (free) Logitech Media Server as the music organizing and playback software. A wide range of PCM and DSD formats are supported, and there are ten digital filters to choose among. The Aeon comes with two linear power supplies sourced from the Dutch company, SBooster, one for the SoTM USB card and a second for the rest of the computer. AQ, 327

Fidata HFAS1-XS20U Network Audio Server **\$8000 (2TB version)**

This beautifully built solid-state drive from Japan is designed for ultimate performance. The unit is built around the highest quality solid-state memory chips (1TB or 2TB arrays) encased in a massive vibration-resistant

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chassis. The power supply, output clocking, network isolation, and other design features are optimized for uncompromised audio performance. Although supplied with a dedicated music-management app, the HFAS1 can also be accessed through Roon. The sound quality of network streaming from the Fidata is exceptional, with greater resolution of low-level detail, a larger soundstage, and more natural rendering of timbre when compared with the same files played from an HDD through a USB interface. SSc, 319

Lumin P1 **\$10,000**

The P1's extensive feature set delivers exactly the right functionality for today's music systems—all from a compact one-box component. This Roon-ready streamer includes a superb MQA-compatible DAC along with nine digital and analog inputs with source switching and a volume control, obviating the need for a separate preamplifier. Just connect to a network and run the analog outputs (balanced or unbalanced) to your power amplifier. There are even HDMI inputs with Audio Return Channel (ARC) for using the P1 in a multimedia system. Lumin has overcome the main drawback of a digital preamplifier—a digital volume control—by including sophisticated Leedh processing that adjusts the volume with no loss of resolution. If you want music storage, simply add Lumin's L1 external HDD (2TB or 5TB), which is extremely easy to configure. Best of all, the P1's sound quality is superb—commensurate with stand-alone, bare-bones \$10k DACs. RH, 330

Aurender N20 **\$12,000**

The Aurender N20 slots in one position lower than

its \$22,500, state-of-the-art W20SE. Beautifully built and finished, the N20 sports outstanding transparency, resolution, and three-dimensionality. If you want a beautifully made audio streamer that supports on-board file storage, seamless integration with streaming services or a NAS, and is a veritable snap to set-up, the N20 bears serious consideration. With well-mastered recordings, it consistently delivered some of the best-sounding digital music for any attributes one would care to discuss. SSc, 326

Baetis Audio Reference 3 **\$13,000**

In their computer-based music servers, 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 3 achieves the closest approach yet to musical realism in digital's long-frustrating history. AQ, 313

Innuos Statement **\$13,750 1TB, \$14,400 2TB,** **\$15,150 4TB**

This meticulously crafted two-unit server with an external linear power supply offers the opportunity to run Roon, Roon utilizing Squeezebox (a tad glitchy but worth the glitches), or Squeezebox with your favorite UPnP software. From a sonic perspective it checks every audiophile box. Layering and dynamics are unrestricted

no matter the musical genre, and vocals are velvety and luxurious, but never high viscosity. Rock is reproduced with the snap, punch, rhythm, and texture befitting The Beatles, Van Morrison, and Hendrix in their finest live recordings. Piano's difficult tonal complexities, often challenging for the best music servers, are just another day at the concert hall for the Innuos. If you're in the market for a product of this type, you would be doing yourself a serious disservice by not placing the Statement on your final list to consider. MC, 301

Lumin X1 **\$13,990**

The X1 is Lumin's fully featured flagship. It serves as a streamer, DAC, and digital preamplifier, has its own dedicated smartphone app, and is Roon compatible. Unlike some streaming devices, the Lumin X1 does not have any internal hard drives, which ensures that the X1 will never need to be opened to have a drive replaced. The X1 does everything you would expect from a premium audiophile product—it looks cool, operates flawlessly, accepts firmware updates, and has its own app. It also performs as well sonically as any streamer/DAC/preamplifier SS has ever had in his clutches. Low-level detail through the Lumin X1 is exemplary, as is customer service from Source Systems, Lumin's U.S. distributor. Recently updated with Leedh digital signal processing. SS, 300

Aurender W20SE **\$22,000**

The "SE" model that replaces the W20 adds a host of functional and performance upgrades that promises to maintain this music server's status as a reference product. The spinning hard drives have been replaced by 4TB of solid-state memory, and the

internal cache memory has been expanded to 1TB (from 240GB). The switching power supply has been replaced with a linear supply; the clock has been upgraded; the unit now supports up to DSD512; it offers improved filtering and isolation of the LAN port; and the user can engage integral PCM upsampling to 384kHz. MQA "Core" decoding is now standard (Core decoding "unfolds" the MQA signal to 88.2 or 96k sample rate). On top of these improvements, the W20 still offers the best user interface and music-management software of any server. RH, 258, 308

Metronome DSC **\$31,000**

Occasionally, a product comes along that is a true game changer. In the category of streamers, DACs, and digital linestages, the Metronome DSC is such a one. Its secret weapon is banishment of digital noise to a heretofore unheard-of extent. Of course, there's a thick aluminum chassis to reduce RF interference. But the DSC goes a lot further, with an oversized power supply to eliminate any strain in that department, as well as a top-of-the-line ESS DAC chip that incorporates sophisticated jitter reduction. But the DSC's real advancement is the incorporation of a digital volume control technology called Leedh, which eliminates the noise we've come to take for granted in even the best digital linestages/DACs. Furthermore, the DAC and Roon-ready streaming modules are fully up to the quality of the linestage. The result is an incredibly engaging and gratifying listening experience. AT, 333

Linn Klimax DSM **\$42,500**

Linn's Klimax DSM/3 sets a new standard for flexibility, functionality, and audio quality

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for music servers and streaming DACs. Using the Linn app or Roon, the Klimax DSM/3 can stream files from a music server and a class-leading range of streaming services. Linn's proprietary Space Optimisation software is a breakthrough innovation that removes in-room interactions to provide flexibility in speaker placement, while also maximizing the accuracy of the recording's true soundstage. Linn's Organik D/A conversion engine delivers an exceptionally lifelike and organic quality. The overall tonal palette is neutral with weight, heft, and body to the presentation, and beauty in the rendering and layering of fine inner detail, timbre, and texture. Owners of older DSM units can upgrade to the Organik DAC for \$7020. RH, 322, 322

Ideon Absolute System

\$47,000 Epsilon DAC; \$19,900 streamer; master clock \$9600

The designers at Greece's Ideon Audio have imbued their top-of-the-line Absolute Epsilon DAC with a host of proprietary technologies. Rather than use off-the-shelf parts, Ideon has created its own circuits or modified standard parts. Couple this with an elaborate power supply and superb build-quality, and you have a top-shelf DAC. When auditioned with Ideon's Absolute Stream music server (\$19,900) and the Absolute Time master clock (\$9600), the system had stunningly lifelike reproduction of music's dynamics. The sense of immediacy and presence—the impression of nothing between you and the music—was equally impressive. RH, 327

Wadax Reference Server

\$64,900 (optical interface option, \$19,240)

At \$84,140 with the Akasa optical interface module, the Wadax Reference Server is

priced unlike other music servers. But it also sounds unlike other servers. When connected to the Wadax Reference DAC through the proprietary Akasa optical interface, the combination takes digital playback into uncharted territory. As spectacular as the Reference DAC is, the Server may be the more revolutionary product. It makes garden-variety digital files sound like hi-res remasterings, with tremendous bass clarity, dynamics, articulation, and rhythmic drive. The Reference Server also reveals space, depth, and dimensionality, even on recordings that sound flat and two-dimensional through other sources. A breakthrough in digital replay, and RH's reference. RH, 326

DIGITAL FORMAT CONVERTERS AND CLOCKS

Ideon Audio 3R USB Renaissance

\$490

This inexpensive device simply takes in an audio signal from a computer via USB and outputs a cleaner USB signal to your DAC. The "3R" in the model names refers to the device's three functions: "redrive," "relock," and "regenerate." The Ideon 3R USB Renaissance will step up the sound quality heard through the USB outputs of most rendering computers, and at a very affordable cost. AQ, 278

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha USB Noise Isolating Interface

\$2275

Functionally, the Alpha USB does what many sub-\$500 devices do: converts USB to SPDIF. But that's where the similarities end. The Alpha USB is not just the best device of its kind; it also provides a state-of-the-art method for getting music out of a computer and into a DAC. Adding the Alpha USB is like sharpening the focus on a camera and snapping images

into vivid clarity. The entire presentation becomes more coherent, better resolved, and more lifelike. RH, 214

TURNABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS Under \$2000

Pro-Ject T1 Phono SB

\$449

The Pro-Ject T1 Phono SB is an attractive entry-level turntable with important ease-of-use upgrades and a high level of fit and finish. It includes a defeatable, built-in phono preamp that sounds very solid, electronic speed switching between 33rpm and 45rpm, and a cartridge pre-mounted and aligned. Unusual at this price, the T1 features a glass (rather than plastic) platter, and the included felt slip mat is simple but effective. Set-up is as easy as it gets, and sound is fantastic—especially at this price point. Overall tone is warm-to-neutral with lively dynamics and a lot of heft, particularly in those more up-beat tunes. It's a fun deck and a fantastic starting point. Forthcoming

U-Turn Orbit Special

\$459

The Orbit Special is U-Turn's top-of-the-line turntable. It includes an acrylic platter, a built-in phonostage, and an Ortofon 2M Red cartridge that is factory-aligned. The phonostage can be bypassed for those looking for an easy upgrade, which is a very nice feature. Overall, the Orbit Special is as easy as it gets in terms of setup and usage. It has some flexibility for those thinking about an upgrade path but sounds solid in stock form. Recommended for anyone looking for a place to start down the analog path. DK, 295

Rega Planar 1 Plus

\$725

The Rega Planar 1 Plus is Rega's entry-level turntable and includes a factory-aligned

Carbon cartridge and a built-in phono preamp. Setup couldn't be easier; most people will have it unpacked and spinning records in a matter of minutes. It plays both 33s and 45s, though the upper platter must be removed in order to switch the belt to change speeds. The stock built-in phonostage is the real star here, however. It sounds particularly good, with tight midrange details and a treble that just about sparkles. It's truly a step up from other built-in preamps. A fantastic entry-level option. DK, 295

\$1000-\$2000

Technics SL-1500C-K

\$1299

The Technics SL-1500C is a direct-drive turntable with a built-in phonostage. Its shiny aluminum top plate sits on a matte black body of ABS mixed with fiberglass, which Technics says helps with rigidity. The tonearm is the same S-shape version found in the 1200 Series, with adjustable height and an extra counterweight for use with heavier cartridges and headshells. On the back is a switch to defeat the auto tonearm lift, two sets of RCAs, and a switch to change between the built-in phono preamp and straight line output. Sound is fantastic for this price point, especially through a separate phonostage rather than the internal phono preamp. Overall, an absolute bargain and a pleasure to use. DK, 308

Clearaudio Concept

\$1600 (\$1800 with Concept mm cartridge; \$2400 with Concept mc cartridge)

The Clearaudio Concept turntable package does everything but unbox itself. Preset at the factory, this spinner features a svelte belt-drive chassis, a stunning friction-free, magnetic-bearing Verify tonearm, and the Concept moving-magnet cartridge. The build and finish of this German-made table

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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, we found this American-made 'table to be user-friendly in every way. It comes with a Jelco tonearm of your choice, which allows for VTF, VTA, and azimuth adjustments. For the past few decades, George E. Merrill has steadfastly been designing and small-batch-manufacturing turntables that offer high performance at a friendly price. With both the mm and mc cartridges we've tried, the PolyTable Standard9 delivered serious analog pleasure worthy of far bigger bucks. JM, 260

Rega P6 with RB330 tonearm

\$1875 (\$2245 with pre-mounted Exact cartridge; \$2595 with pre-mounted Ania; \$2895 with pre-mounted Ania Pro)

The belt-driven unsuspended P6 doesn't deliver the ultimate punch, detail, or transporting emotional thrill of the very finest vinyl playback gear money can buy, but that's hardly the point, or the design goal. The point is that like all the best and longest-lived audio gear, the P6 compels us to play record after record, to revisit music we love, and explore music we have yet to discover. To say that the P6 sets a new standard for Rega 'tables at this price point is not damning with faint praise; it's instead high praise for what Rega has accomplished—and continues to. WG, 313

Pro-Ject RPM 5 Carbon \$1999 (including Sumiko Amethyst cartridge)

The RPM 5 Carbon turntable from Pro-Ject is possibly the first and last turntable you'll ever need. The aesthetics are gorgeous but also functional: the heavy, detached motor and minimalist yet still substantial plinth mean fewer potential vibrations. Pace and timing are spot on, while the surprisingly quiet backgrounds and the sheer depth of sound-staging elevate playback to that next level. Music flows in an incredibly precise and pleasant way, never lagging or falling behind. The RPM 5 will accommodate solid upgrades down the signal path for years to come. It's an easy and obvious step above the rest and highly recommended. DK, 295

\$2000–\$5000

Clearaudio Concept Black with Satisfy Black Tonearm \$2000

Beautifully proportioned, light but not insubstantial, Concept Black is a model for how a mid-priced, belt-drive turntable should look and perform. Concept Black is made like a fine Swiss mechanical watch; sonically, it offers overall musicality, image focus, transient authenticity, and dynamic conviction. Aided by the optional high-precision Satisfy Black tonearm, mistracking is rendered essentially theoretical, and speed stability is rock solid. Further, image stability is locked down with little to no smearing, even when the 'table is challenged by a tightly packed chorus or complex symphony. NG, 284

MoFi Electronics UltraDeck+ \$2799

When Mobile Fidelity decided to create a line of hardware it wisely brought in Allen Perkins of Spiral Groove to design the turntables, and those 'tables deliver a lot of

bang for the buck. Setup is simple, especially with the "+" option, which 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. Smoothness, 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. JM, 284

Pro-Ject RPM 9 Carbon \$2999 (\$3499 Including Sumiko Songbird high-output mc cartridge)

The RPM 9 Carbon is Pro-Ject's "tuner" special with significant upgrades over the box-stock RM-9.2. There's a new motor, a new DC-driven power supply that features an improved AC generator for speed stability. Plus, a newly upgraded platter and carbon-wrapped chassis. Sonics were devilishly good. Backgrounds were jet black, and sonics softly tinted to the warmer end of the tonal spectrum. Presto arpeggios were liquid and articulate, and there was an impressive sense of air and lift in the upper octaves with an overarching sense of balance across all other criteria. Overall, a terrific package certain to give a great many lucky owners years of vinyl-spinning thrills. NG, 254

Linn Sondek LP12 \$3000 (turntable/deck only)

The original high-end turntable, Linn's LP12 conveys the rhythm and pace that are the very foundations of music, and it gets better with age—owners of any vintage LP12 can upgrade to the current model. One of high-end audio's genuine classics. SB, 136

Kuzma Stabi S \$3061 (\$5323 with lid and external power supply)

The Stabi S is Kuzma's least expensive turntable, but you wouldn't know it to listen to the thing. Blessed with deep background silences, the Stabi S makes a great complement to the Stogi S tonearm. Not a good choice for rooms where footfalls will be a problem (because it is unsuspended), it is otherwise a fine mid-priced 'table. CM, 159

SOTA Sapphire Series VI \$3975

The Series VI upgrade of this 30-year-old classic boasts improvements in parts, engineering, machining, fit and finish, and performance—all retrofittable to earlier versions. Its time-proven, four-point hanging suspension is still the ultimate in isolating the 'arm/pickup. For PS, the Sapphire is the least expensive turntable that suggests what "super"-turntables are all about, sacrificing only a bit of resolution and control by comparison. Recommended without serious qualification. PS, 210

Dr. Feickert Volare with Origin Live Silver MK3A tonearm \$3995

Derived from Dr. Feickert's flagship Firebird, Volare is a non-suspension, belt-driven design that has the essentials down pat, possessing a musicality, stability, and solidity that few LP rigs in the \$4k ranks can match. Setup is a snap; it operates silently and achieves platter velocity swiftly. Pitch and image stability are rock-solid. It is unwaveringly stable and reproduces soundstage and dimensional cues and ambience in ways that reminded NG of many top-tier rigs. On occasion some acoustic feedback was noted, so a good isolation base is recommended. Volare includes a premium, heavy,

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Pear Audio Little John with Coronet 2 tonearm
\$3995 (\$2995 w/Coronet 1 tonearm)

This combination, close to the entry-level of the Pear Audio line of turntables and tonearms, owes design principles to the late vinyl guru Tom Fletcher, notably in the use of a low-torque motor (to prevent vibrations from reaching the stylus) that requires manually bringing the platter up to speed. Paul Seydor found the sound warm without being mushy; rounded and dimensional without being soft or fuzzy; smooth, even sweet, yet not lacking in profile or enough stringency if the source calls for it; natural, easeful, unforced, and musical against a background of black velvet (record surfaces permitting). PS, 295

Technics SL-1200G-S
\$4299

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. 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 quite lively in the positive sense. REG, 274

EAT C-Sharp
\$4499

The C-Sharp produced appealing sound that had rhythmic drive and made nearly everything reviewer Andre Jennings spun fun to listen to. 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. AJ, 254

Clearaudio Concept Active
\$4600 (Smart Power 12V option, \$1200)

The Concept Active redefines what it means to be an affordable *and* accessible high-performance turntable in the here and now. The Concept Active includes a tonearm and cartridge, of course. But there's also a top-notch built-in phonostage and headphone output with volume control. While the Concept Active performed terrifically in a full system, it's hard to downplay the musicality of listening through a good set of headphones fed directly from the Concept Active. What was unexpected was how little resolution the "entry-level" Concept Active gave up in comparison to far more elite rigs. Adding the optional Smart Power 12V—a battery-based DC power supply—further improved image focus and transient clarity. Overall, a rarity in the high end—a triumph of performance, pricing, and packaging. NG, 317

Acoustic Signature Maximus
\$4995 (TA-1000 tonearm, \$2495; MCX3 cart, \$1695)

The Maximus is the entry-level turntable in the Neo line. It's a two-speed, belt-drive design that benefits from the technology intrinsic to its much more expensive family members. Each turntable in the Neo line is outfitted with an individualized version of the Dura Turn Diamond® bearing, which is not only super-rigid for low noise but also exceptionally rugged with a long service life. The spindle is made of hardened stainless steel that is precision ground and then plasma

coated to yield a diamond-like surface. Throw in a high-end replacement for the stock leather mat and a good record clamp such as the Acoustic Signature's Grip Mk3, and you end up with a superbly rigid and well-damped vinyl playback platform that sounds far superior to any entry-level table DO has auditioned over the years. DO, 330

Pro-Ject Xtension 10
\$4999 (\$5999 with Sumiko Starling cartridge)

Long known for affordable, high-value turntables, Pro-Ject has recently entered the market for more up-scale models. And its Xtension 10 is a worthy contender. The design features a mass-loaded, magnetically floated subchassis, a 3"-tall, 12.6 lbs. vinyl/alloy platter, and the 10cc Evolution tonearm. What makes the ensemble special is its ability to get at the heart of the music, consistently providing not only a high level of musical satisfaction but doing so in a way that delivers a powerful emotional wallop. WG, 242

\$5000–\$10,000
Dr. Feickert Woodpecker
\$5295

Incorporating a host of purposeful updates, the gorgeous-looking Woodpecker proves itself capable of performance appropriate to its good design execution. While having a slightly higher noise floor than much more expensively executed designs, the Woodpecker is a very capable platform for vinyl playback that should serve its owner far into the future. AJ, 244

Luxman PD-151 MKII
\$5695 (\$6490 with dustcover)

The PD-151's almost Spartan appearance belies its technical and engineering sophistication. Stability of speed and accuracy of pitch are

addressed by a combination of a proprietary sine wave/pulse-width-modulation power supply, high-torque DC brushless motor, and a PID feedback loop for control over rapid speed fluctuations. Some turntables have an immediately recognizable sound of their own, others don't or at least have much less so. This Luxman is solidly in latter camp. The PD-151's dynamic reproduction is principally limited by the quality of vinyl you place on the platter and the quality of recording pressed into that vinyl, and the same goes for detail. Reviewer PS concluded "I experienced more sheer joy with the PD-151 than I've had reviewing a turntable in I can't remember when." PS, 322

Rega Planar 10
\$6345 (\$7895 with pre-mounted Apheta 3 cartridge; \$10,995 with pre-mounted Aphelion 2 cartridge)

The latest in a near-legendary line of turntables, the top-of-line Rega Planar 10 exemplifies Rega founder Roy Gandy's latest design thinking. With its stiff and light plinth, ceramic platter, and Apheta 3 cartridge mounted in Rega's best arm, the Planar 10 pulls a truly amazing amount of detail out of LPs, all the while remaining extraordinarily quiet. The presentation is tonally neutral with lifelike weight, body, and presence. Lower octaves are deep, tight, and fully defined while resolution, articulation, pitch accuracy, and timbre are superb. When purchased with the pre-mounted cartridge, the Planar 10 can literally be set up and ready to go in minutes. An external power supply provides rock-solid speed stability and makes changing speeds a snap. Simple, straightforward, and exceptional. SSC, 317

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Clearaudio Performance DC Wood with Tracer Tonearm **\$6400**

The Performance DC Wood turntable's evenhandedness and consistency (of speed, etc.) capably conveyed complex layering of instruments and/or vocals, helping to preserve their true characteristic tonality for a more realistic and compelling presentation. Better still, this presentation benefitted any type of music, making the Performance DC Wood/Tracer tonearm (with optional Stradivari V2 cartridge) an excellent choice for multi-genre vinyl lovers, who (like JM) have all-over-the-map musical tastes. If you have the means, this turntable/toner should be on your short list. JM, 297

Clearaudio Ovation **\$7000 (\$9500 w/Tracer tonearm)**

Continuing the trend of bundling together even more sophisticated turntables, 'arms, and cartridges into fine-sounding but relatively hassle-free combinations, Clearaudio recently released what may be the most ambitious such package yet. With the Tracer carbon-fiber tonearm and Talisman v2 Gold cartridge, the Ovation is a terrific-sounding combo. It is very well balanced, with excellent detail that emerges from silent backgrounds, exceptional pitch stability, and sweet extended highs—if not the powerhouse bottom-end found in the highest-end models. WG, 216

JR Transrotor Dark Star **\$7200 (includes Rega RB330 tonearm and AXISS Audio Mustang cartridge)**

With its out-of-this-world good looks yet approachably down-to-Earth affordability Transrotor's Dark Star conveys little sense of compromise. Fully equipped for LP playback—it is bundled with

a Jelco SA-750D tonearm and a Goldring Elektra moving-magnet cartridge—this belt-driven, suspensionless design picks up transient cues as if it were anticipating the record groove before the stylus begins tracking. Though a bit lighter and quicker in balance, and slightly less dynamic in the bass, than some, the Dark Star is an elegant package and a sonic delight. NG, 210

Acoustic Signature Tornado Neo **\$7495**

Acoustic Signature implemented across-the-board improvements to its entire turntable lineup: an accumulation of at least 25 years of industry experience, along with the present-day implementation of its innovations in vibration control, platter bearing design, and constrained-layer damping. With these updates, the mostly all-metal Tornado Neo provides a stable platform for multiple cartridges and tonearms to easily show their individual differences and performance characteristics. With already solid construction and the Neo advancements, the Tornado provides exceptional performance, along with countless hours of musical enjoyment. AJ, 326

Helius Alexia with Omega tonearm **\$8790**

The Helius Alexia turntable and Omega tonearm represent a combination of traditional and genuinely innovative thinking. A two-speed (33/45) belt-drive, the Alexia features a novel suspension that is very compliant in the vertical dimension, completely fixed in the lateral, while an optical sensor below the platter results in unusually effective speed accuracy and constancy. The Omega's bearing is a uniquely "tetrahedral" configuration that offers "a captured design and minimal

friction." Reviewer PS was impressed by the setup's stability of pitch, wide dynamic window, and excellent tracking of inner grooves. PS, 311

Pear Audio Blue Kid Thomas **\$9995 (w/Cornet 2 tonearm and external power supply)**

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, 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 like more expensive turntable systems. AJ, 263

\$10,000 and above Sota Cosmos Eclipse **\$10,675 (\$9350 w/o vacuum)**

Compared with the open-chassis, suspensionless designs of contemporary models, the Cosmos Eclipse smacks of a bygone era. Nonetheless, NG found its attributes indispensable—progressive vacuum holddown, excellent acoustic-mechanical isolation, a dampened sub-chassis, and what amounts to a suspended seismic platform that can suffer a San Andreas episode without a skip. Also available as an upgrade for current Cosmos owners, the Eclipse package incorporates SOTA's latest innovations and can include a three-phase motor, a maglev platter, a new electronics package with speed control from Phoenix Engineering, plus various fine-tuning twists and tweaks. The performance gains are nothing short of

stunning. A true classic reborn. NG, 316

Clearaudio Innovation Wood **\$12,000**

The dual-plinthed Innovation Wood combines some stunning innovations with Clearaudio's ceramic/magnetic bearing (CMB) technology and lightweight yet extremely dense Panzerholz to damp resonances. It uses a massive stainless-steel subplatter, which, when coupled with a DC motor with optical speed control, results in superb speed accuracy. JH has not heard any belt-driven 'table 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. JH, 204

SME Model 12A with 309 Tonearm **\$13,900**

Replacing SME's previous entry-level Model 10A, which also came with the 309 tonearm, the Model 12A represents a substantial leap in performance over what was already an impressive ensemble. It evinces the typical SME house "sound": all but peerless neutrality, deep background blackness, and dynamic range second to none. A powerful new motor effectively banishes concerns over speed accuracy, stability, constancy, and timing, while its proprietary mat/clamping arrangement rivals vacuum hold-down. Not only is the 12/309's sonic performance astonishingly close to that of the company's flagship models, but it also receives the same standard-setting quality of build, parts, fit, and finish. The 12A may be the welterweight in the company's lineup, but it can certainly hold its own in the ring with the big boys. PS, 306



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Ed

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Rob

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Brinkmann Audio Spyder
\$14,990 (\$19,990 package
includes 10.5 tonearm,
\$20,290 with 12.1 tonearm)

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, with a high degree of neutrality. It exhibits a clarity without that etched quality that is sometimes mistaken for clarity or 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 caps. In sum, here's a vinyl player of all-around excellence that should provide years of performance both pleasurable and trouble-free. PS, 269

Brinkmann Audio Taurus
\$15,990 (\$20,990 package
includes 10.5 tonearm;
\$21,990 package includes
12.1 tonearm)

Reviewer AM has had some experience with other big, fancy, expensive turntables. Can he definitively tell you that any of them is better than the Taurus? No, he cannot. Can he say that the Taurus is the best turntable you can buy at any price? Come on. You know the answer to that. Of course, he can't. But the direct-drive Brinkmann manages to combine love and appreciation in a way that few can, and it's a clear step above the finest \$10k–\$20k 'tables he's heard, fully justifying its status as a reference. It's one of the few products he's reviewed about which he has no reservations. AM, 315

AMG Viella Standard
\$17,500 without wood skirt
(\$19,000 with cherry skirt;
\$18,000 with black lacquer
skirt; includes AMG12J2
tonearm, a \$4800 value)

The beautifully machined Analog Manufaktur Germany Viella Standard is that relative rarity—a truly first-rate and original audio component that, while by no means cheap, is still within the financial reach of folks who aren't made of money. The V12 may not (in fact, it does not) give you everything that a \$100k+ Walker or Acoustic Signature Invictus 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 justify the rave review JV gave it. A great turntable. JV, 226

Pear Audio Blue Odar
\$17,500 (with Cornet 3 12"
tonearm)

The Odar is the latest and most fully evolved version of the turntable ideas involved in previous Pear Blue designs, involving a heavy platter belt-driven by a very low-torque motor (you need to start the platter by hand), and very careful control of resonant energy. The sound is what REG regards as ideal—very silent in background with unconstrained perceived dynamics, very solid, detailed but without any hint of exaggeration by resonances in the upper frequencies or motor-induced platter vibrations. Forget any misguided idea sometimes expressed that this type of sound is too subdued. What it actually is is correct—and superbly musical in the best sense. A turntable at the outer limits of the possible, without a stratospheric price. (Electronic external power supply with choice of 33 or 45 rpm, but no fine speed adjustment.) REG, 328

Technics SL-1000R
\$19,999

Technics, long the dominant manufacturer of direct-drive turntables, has now returned to its original area of renown with the SL-1000R. And it's a beauty. Simple in design but sophisticated in execution, the SL-1000R provides the virtues of direct-drive without its former drawbacks. There is no discernible noise transmitted from the motor to the platter. Instead, the SL-1000R has remarkable fidelity on transients, stopping and starting musical passages on a dime. This precision allows vocals, not to mention acoustic instruments, to come through with excellent tonal accuracy. This simple and elegant turntable makes a strong case for the virtues of direct drive. JHb, 306

J.Sikora Standard Max
\$21,250

A turntable that is as visually appealing as it is sonically. Few, if any, 'tables in this price range can boast this level of precision machining, which extends to everything from the platter to the weighty damping puck. The result is superlative sound. With the proprietary Sikora tonearm, the 'table delivers effortless and snappy vinyl playback. It also produces a soundstage and bass that are particularly winning on orchestral pieces. Its wealth of impressive attributes mean that the Standard Max cannot be deemed anything other than a top contender. JHb, 324

TW Acoustic Raven AC-3
\$22,000

The three-motor Raven AC-3 is an unsuspended 'table of relatively low mass made from very high-quality materials, including spectacular bits of copper. Every part of this black beauty has been machined to the highest possible tolerances; every aspect of

its design tested and retested by measurement and by ear. The result of all this labor and ingenuity is a 'table that reproduces the duration of notes—from starting transient through lingering decay—more completely than any other. JV, 180

Kuzma Stabi M
\$24,380

Built like a battleship—black on black in black, all metal in a baked-on matte finish—the Kuzma's Stabi M turntable looks 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. The sound is superbly neutral, with very quiet backgrounds, and like all large heavy turntables in PS' experience it soundstages with exceptional stability and solidity. There's also a difficult-to-define sense of liveliness about the sonics that is addictive. All in all, a superior platform for your vinyl treasures. PS, 248

Basis Audio 2200 Signature
with Vector 4 Tonearm
\$25,500 (with Calibrator
Base, Isolation system, reflex
clamp)

Designed by A.J. Conti, the 2200/Vector 4 setup redefines for PS what is possible in vinyl playback. In every area and aspect of performance, this Basis combination outperforms all other turntable/'arm setups (this includes several costing multiples its price). Design, engineering, and precision in machining approach a standard of perfection surpassed by none and equaled by virtually none. WG, in his follow-up report after purchasing a 2200/Vector 4, wrote "I must report that never in my almost four decades as an audiophile have I lived with a record player like this one—so across-the-

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- Michael Fremer

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board uncolored, transparent, coherent, and seemingly responsive to whatever frequency and dynamic range, ambient, tonal, space, air, and other microscopic information may be pressed into vinyl grooves." (PS, 180, WG, 317)

Kronos Sparta

\$26,000

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 GW 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. GW, 259

JR Transrotor Orion

\$26,500

A beautiful piece of audio art designed around a Free Magnetic Drive system that is as quiet as they come, the Orion Reference 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. AJ, 253

SME Model 20/3A

\$31,900 (includes Series V tonearm)

This improvement upon the middle model in SME's lineup now brings it so close to the flagship 30/3 that it's doubtful their performances can be reliably distinguished on even the highest-resolu-

tion setups. Stability, control, and neutrality triangulate the virtues of this and every other SME setup, with an extraordinary impression of foundation plus a deep, deep background blackness that very few competitors can approach, let alone surpass. Built like all SMEs to the highest standards, this setup will last a lifetime. PS, 216

Basis Audio 2800 Signature

\$32,000 (includes vacuum system)

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 discernable colorations on the music, allowing a deeper and more immediate connection with your LPs. RH, 172

TechDAS Air Force Three Premium S

\$44,500

As the "Three" suggests, this 'table is the third progeny of TechDAS, with the mighty Air Force One, reviewed by Paul Seydor in Issue 254, at the head of the line, both in sonics and price. The belt-drive Air Force Three Premium is a different customer. It offers a tremendous amount in a small package, ranging from vacuum hold-down to an air-bearing platter. It was evident from the very first needle drop that the Air Force Three Premium possesses a remarkably continuous sound. This makes for an extremely non-fatiguing presentation, one that will have you pulling out album after album, not in a search for the last detail contained in the grooves but for the love—reviewer JHb called it "holistic"—sound. JHb, 280

SME Model 30/2A

\$47,900 (includes Series V tonearm)

Mounted with the SME Series V 'arm, the 30/2A impressed PS with its tonal neutrality, pitch accuracy, resolution, transparency, rhythmic grip, ambience, low coloration, and sound-staging. He concluded that its specialness "lies in three related areas of sonic performance: background silence, dynamics, and that elusive impression of liveliness that persuades you the music has come alive in your living room." PS, 154

TW Acoustic Black Knight with TW Raven 10.5 Tonearm

\$48,000 (\$42,500 turntable only)

Thomas Woschnick's massive, beautifully designed and finished, statement turntable with outboard motor and separate power supply delivers all the ravishing timbral beauty of TW's less-expensive AC-3, while adding a transient liveliness, rhythmic pace, and resolution of low-level detail that make for a more complete and realistic sonic presentation. Equipped with Woschnick's own 10.5 'arm (\$5500), the Black Knight competes at or near the same exalted level as the Acoustic Signature Invictus and the still superb Walker Black Diamond Mk V. JV, 274

Acoustic Signature Ascona MKII NEO

\$49,995

This high-tech, high-mass turntable from German engineer Gunther Frohnhoefer took 15 years to bring to fruition. Built like a Magico loudspeaker of damped, satin-finished, CNC-milled aircraft aluminum (with brass "silencers" seamlessly fitted into holes drilled and line-bored into its massive platter), the near-200-pound

Ascona effortlessly reproduces the lowest-level timbres, textures, and spatial cues, as well as the most thunderous dynamics, uniting the toe-tapping "pace" of a lighter 'table with the authority of a heavy-weight. JV, 221 (Neo version not yet reviewed)

Clearaudio Master Innovation

\$62,000 (\$32,000 table only)

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 turntable equipped with the extremely low-mass, near-vestigial, carbon-fiber, linear-tracking TT-1MI tonearm. This brilliant Peter Suchy design not only effectively isolates the drive system from the platter (the main platter "floats" on a magnetic field above the drive platter, eliminating any points of physical contact—and thus any transmission of friction and noise); it also eliminates the inevitable tracking/tracing error of pivoted 'arms via Suchy's equally brilliantly designed linear-tracking tonearm. An engineering masterpiece, one of JV's references, and TAS's 2019 Turntable of the Year. JV, 301

SME 60

\$71,900

A worthy successor to the still-in-production, former "flagship" SME 30 (recently upgraded to Mk2), the larger, moderately higher-mass Model 60 features new adjustable, de-coupled feet, and now hidden within the four support columns, a new, more sophisticated vertical and lateral isolation/

"[The 91E] has real innovation in design that is not hype. It is delivering sound quality beyond what I've previously heard from any 300B amplifier."

- Rives Bird, *The Absolute Sound*, Jan 2023



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damping O-ring suspension system. The biggest news though is the new Series VA 'arm exclusive to the Model 60, CNC-machined from an advanced, acoustically inert polymer resin. The new 'arm, suspension and a few other design enhancements work together to produce SME's most sophisticated sounding, lowest coloration turntable yet. Michael Fremer, 333

Basis Audio Inspiration

\$90,000–\$115,000 (depending on tonearm and vacuum option)

Although it looks like Basis' 2800 Signature, the Inspiration has more in common with the Basis Work of Art. Sonically, it is revelatory, playing in an entirely different league than the 2800. It is astonishingly quiet, not just in an absence of background noise, but also in stripping a layer of grunge from instrumental timbres. It also seems to allow instrumental decays to hang in space longer, such is its low-level resolving power. When paired with the Basis SuperArm 9, the Inspiration is stunning. RH, 220

Acoustic Signature Invictus Jr. NEO

\$122,995

A couple of years ago, Acoustic Signature introduced a behemoth turntable—the ultra-wide, ultra-deep, ultra-heavy, ultra-expensive, original 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 than the competition 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 conceived better than

six years ago), the Junior takes technological and sonic advantage of all that Acoustic Signature has learned in about half a decade. The result is in certain ways an even better record player (harder-hitting, higher resolution) than the Senior for a lot less dough. TAS' 2019 Turntable of the Year. JV, 297 (Neo version not yet reviewed)

TechDAS Air Force One Premium

\$155,000/\$172,000 w/titanium platter

This turntable from the distinguished Asian veteran-designer Hideaki Nishikawa is an all-out attempt to 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 AF One Premium, the first to combine them in a single design. The sonic results are a background blackness and consequent dynamic range the like of which reviewer PS never experienced with vinyl. PS, 254

Basis Audio A.J. Conti Transcendence with SuperArm 12.5

\$159,000

The Transcendence is designer A.J. Conti's radical rethinking of the turntable after more than 30 years of creating some of the world's best record players. An all-out design, the Transcendence is the result of Conti's heroic attempt to make LPs sound like mastertape—his reference in creating the Transcendence. In a design departure from previous Basis 'tables, the Transcendence is built from stainless-steel rather than acrylic, and the suspension system is entirely new. Sonically, the Transcendence lives up to its name; this turntable has achieved some kind of breakthrough in LP repro-

duction, rendering the sound of records with a previously unimaginable body, solidity, dynamics, and texture that indeed sound like tape, not vinyl. RH's reference, and TAS' Overall Product of the Year for 2019. RH, 295

Acoustic Signature Invictus Neo

\$195,995

This elaborately re-designed, handsomely styled chunk of anodized aluminum remains the most massive turntable JV has heard or tested. With six motors (controlled by an outboard power supply), a 37-pound platter, and a 260kg CLD chassis, it's a beast. When paired with Acoustic Signature's superb new TA-9000 Neo tonearm, it is also the best record player JV has ever heard—the virtual embodiment of sonic neutrality and completeness. Nothing engraved in vinyl escapes it (or is altered by it). This is one of those game-changers that you have to hear to fully appreciate—a truly great piece of high-fidelity engineering. (JV, Neo version not yet reviewed)

TechDAS Air Force Zero

\$500,000 (\$550,000 w/Tungsten top platter)

The Air Force Zero, a 700-pound+ beast devoted to spinning a vinyl platter as unobtrusively as possible, is an immensely impressive creation, a tribute to the ingenuity and seriousness of purpose of its legendary designer, Hideaki Nishikawa. The massive air-bearing platter, composed of multiple layers of stainless steel, gun metal, and tungsten, makes the LP itself look positively diminutive. But the sound that this gorgeous belt-drive 'table produces is something altogether different. It can ramp up to dynamic fortissimos that will shake a room, whether the music is a Mahler

symphony or a Led Zeppelin tune. But perhaps the most impressive aspect of the Zero is its refinement. There is a sense of ease to the proceedings, a blissfulness that transports it into a truly lofty realm that perhaps no other competitor can quite match. JHb, 312

TONEARMS

Under \$2000

Origin Live Encounter Mk III

\$1650
In the Encounter, PS' reference Ortofon Windfeld displayed its peerless neutrality and near-peerless tracking, with outstanding bass and a rich and involving midrange. Highs, though smooth and extended, evinced a very subtle lack of detail or focus. The Encounter also allowed the Dynavector Karat Mk III to strut its stuff with virtually no cramping of its high-kicking style. It says volumes for the excellence of this 'arm that it could put two such different pickups through their paces so even-handedly. PS, 210

Kuzma Stogi S

\$1915 (w/Cardas copper wire)

The Stogi S is a hydraulically damped unipivot with a simple string-and-weight anti-skating mechanism, dual underslung counterweights, and provisions for making both coarse and fine azimuth adjustments. In our reviewer's system, this 'arm enabled a Shelter 90X cartridge to produce almost shockingly three-dimensional sound with rock-solid bass. CM, 159

\$2000 and above

Acoustic Signature TA-2000 Neo

\$3495

This 9" tonearm (a 12" version is also available) is a step up from Acoustic Signature's excellent TA-1000 Neo recommended elsewhere in these Editors' Choice Awards.

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SL-1000R Reference Class direct drive turntable system

It features a dual-layer carbon armtube with almost frictionless precision ball bearings and an internal high-quality wiring by Mogami. When mounted on Acoustic Signature's Tornado Neo turntable, the combination produced excellent soundstaging and instrumental clarity. With a slightly forward presentation, the TA-2000 Neo projected excellent clarity and dynamic agility. Rhythmic pacing was similarly superb. AJ, 326

Helius Designs Omega Silver Ruby

\$5225, 10"; \$5295, 12"
Designer Geoffrey Owen has significantly advanced his tetrahedral design to produce a captured-ruby-bearing 'arm with extremely low absolute 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. JH, 204

Tri-Planar Mk VII-U2 Classic

\$7500
This classic example of great 'arm design is also in an SE version (\$8850) and with a 12" carbon fiber arm wand (\$11,500). If earlier models were characterized by tremendous solidity, focus, dynamic agility, bottom-end reach, overall neutrality, and transparency to the source, then the beautifully built Classic is quite simply all that multiplied. WG, 191

Graham Phantom III

\$7900, 9"; \$8300, 10"; \$8800, 12"
The Graham Phantom III is a "stable" unipivot design that is an advancement over earlier models, using knowledge gained from the Phantom Elite. The patented Magne-glide magnetic stabilization bearing interface serves to give the Phantom its stable

feeling when playing records. The 'arm is available with two mounting options (custom Graham or SME-type) and in three armwand lengths, which gives the end-user a variety of configuration options. The baseline performance of the Phantom III is outstanding. With such a tonearm, connected cartridges are more likely to show their individual characters more clearly—and recorded music is more likely to sound its best. AJ, 291

Basis Audio Vector 4

\$8200 (\$9500 w/VTA micrometer)
Basis Audio's A.J. Conti has solved a fundamental problem with unipivot tonearms—dynamic azimuth error. Rather than allowing the 'arm to "roll" when the cartridge encounters record warp, the Vector maintains perfect azimuth alignment via Conti's simple yet ingenious design. The result is an extremely neutral-sounding 'arm that RH has yet to hear mistrack on any LP. RH, 172 and 220

Kuzma 4P

\$9260 (\$10,825, bi-wire w/RCA box)
This ingeniously designed eleven-inch tonearm from Frank Kuzma uses a unique four-point bearing (two points for vertical movement, two for horizontal). When properly set up (as with all Kuzma designs every adjustment is easily made, although the supplied tonearm set-up jig needs fixing), it is among the highest-resolution, most neutral, most "not-there" pivoted tonearms JV has auditioned, with what appears to be less bearing chatter than any 'arm this side of the straight-line-tracking air-bearing Walker Black Diamond—and for a lot less dough. JV, 221; PS, 248

Graham Phantom Elite

\$13,750, 9"; \$14,250, 10"; \$14,750, 12" (w/extra counterweights)

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, a new high-density, non-magnetic tungsten insert for zero-tolerance bearing-contact and high spurious-energy absorption. No other 'arm known to PS can be more accurately and repeatably adjusted to extract optimal performance from any suitable pickup. Partner it with the Air Force 1 turntable, and you get a record-playing system that is unlikely to be surpassed. PS, 254

KL Audio KD-ARM-AP-12

\$19,999
Combining the attributes of a pivoted tonearm with a traditional linear-tracking tonearm, Klaudio has created a uniquely functional pivoted/linear-tracking KD-ARM. The 'arm's tangency is truly that of a traditional linear tracker; yet it provides the mounting convenience of a pivoted 'arm and its sometimes-improved bass performance. This combination, when set up properly, yields excellent sound from top to bottom. With smooth operation, a host of expected adjustments (VTA/SRA, VTF, azimuth, and linear tracking zero-overhang calibration), smooth handling and operation, along with the ability to quickly switch cartridges via a removable headshell, the KD-ARM combines user flexibility with sonic satisfaction. AJ, 328

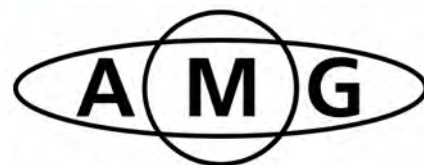
Basis Audio SuperArm 9 and 12.5

\$25,000/\$36,000

This "swing-for-the-fences" tonearm from A.J. Conti completely realigned RH's expectations of tonearm performance. As great an 'arm as Conti's own Vector IV is, the Superarm is in another league. The Superarm's reduction of hardness and glare fosters the impression of the midrange taking a step back, and with it, an invitation to greater musical intimacy. This purity and "cleanliness" of timbre is alone worth the price of admission, but the Superarm also offers stunning rendering of music's dynamic structure, from the micro to the macro. Finally, the improvement rendered in the bass—pitch definition, texture, dynamics—is staggering. RH, 264

Acoustic Signature TA-9000 NEO

\$27,995 9" tonearm; \$29,995, 12" tonearm
This fabulous aluminum tonearm is built up millimeter by millimeter via a selective-laser-melting process to produce a resonance-free structure impossible to create by any other means. (Internally, the 'arm has tree-branch-like "limbs" that connect its inner tube to an outer tube, channeling resonances like a grounding wire channels RF.) With highest-precision/tolerance ceramic bearings, the TA-9000 is as sonically invisible (and utterly imperturbable) as Acoustic Signature's fabulous Invictus turntables. Fully adjustable for VTA/SRA, VTF, azimuth, and anti-skate, the TA-9000 (in combination with the Invicti) is one of the most realistic-sounding source components JV has heard; when used with the fabulous DS Audio Grand Master optical cartridge, it rivals the timbral and dynamic continuousness and diorama-like three-dimensionality



ANALOG MANUFAKTUR GERMANY



AMG turntables, tonearms, and all associated components are manufactured in southern Germany under the guidance of company head Julian Lorenzi. With a state-of-the-art factory, a small group of expert machinists, and precision tooling, AMG creates elegant high-performance analog playback devices for the most discerning listeners.



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Designed and manufactured in Kamakura Japan, the ViV Lab Rigid Float tonearm represents a radical departure from conventional tonearm design and offers performance unmatched by other tonearms in its price range. Its unique geometry eliminates the need for anti-skate and its free-standing oil-damped bearing achieves the ultimate in resonance control, allowing your cartridge to realize its full potential.

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of reel-to-reel mastertapes. JV, 264 (Neo version not yet reviewed)

SAT CF1-09

€55,000

The SAT, the brainchild of Swedish designer Marc Gomez, will turn almost any LP collection into a veritable El Dorado of sonic treasures. Yes, it's that good. This nifty device allows top-notch turntables such as the Continuum Caliburn to reach even loftier levels of performance. In every parameter you can think of—dynamics, alacrity, transparency, and refinement—the SAT sets a very high bar, indeed, allying imperviousness to external vibrations with remarkable neutrality through the frequency spectrum. The tracking abilities of this tonearm are phenomenal as it sails through the most treacherous dynamic passages. The treble region is rendered with a finesse that approaches contemptuous ease. It is certainly one of the most significant analog products to emerge in recent years. Note that price stated is in euros. JHb, 300

PHONO CARTRIDGES Under \$500

Grado Prestige Black3 \$99

This well-priced phono pickup from John Grado offers an even greater bargain than its classic and beloved predecessor from the 70s and 80s. 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 chocolatey 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. PS, 284

Ortofon 2M Red and Black \$99 and \$695

The swansong design of Ortofon's former chief engineer Per Windfeld, the entry-level 2M Red uses an elliptical, the 2M Black a Shibata stylus. The Black's greatest attribute is the way it parses the complexities of orchestral depth and dimension. In comparison, the 2M Red clocks in with a little drier sound, as if it's making more of an effort in the upper treble. Still, this is one sophisticated and musical cartridge—for the price of a nice dinner for two. NG, 182

Audio-Technica VM540M \$249

Judged according to the highest standards, PS found the VM540M acquitted itself astonishingly in every aspect of performance. Its 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. PS, 284

Grado Opus3 \$275 (high- and low-output versions)

Grado's entry-level offering in the new Timbre Series is a little like going home again to a pre-digital age. With its mid-range tonal beauty and unvarnished musicality, its warmer overall signature and rich mid-range, this is classic Grado. There are still notes of dark chocolate in its voicing—a complex bittersweetness that favors highly resonant wooden instruments like cello and acoustic bass and winds like clarinet, oboe, and bassoon. The primary strength of the Opus3, however, is its resolution of timbral distinctions, its verdant naturalism, and its harmonic richness. Pure and simple, a celebration of LP playback. NG, 313

Shure V15 (Jico-mod) \$282

In 2004 the Shure corporation retired the seventh and last iteration of its by now legendary Shure V15 series, introduced in 1964, a moving-magnet design that established new standards for overall tonal neutrality, flat frequency response, and tracking ability. Such is its popularity among enthusiasts that the Japanese firm Jico markets replacement styli that actually improve upon the already outstanding original. For reviewer Paul Seydor, no other phono pickup, mc or mm, offers quite the combination of completely non-fatiguing, beautiful, natural sound without seriously compromising the liveliness, engagement, transparency, and involvement of the best mc's, while still, after all these decades, reigning supreme in tracking ability. It has long been and will long remain one of his reference pickups. PS, 334

Denon DL-103, DL-103R, DLA-2200

\$349, \$499, \$599

Despite nomenclature and pricing, these are essentially different versions of the same pickup, hence their being grouped together. The DL-103 is the base model, manufactured exactly the same way since its introduction in 1962—by hand. It also enjoys a longer life without modification than any other phono cartridge in the history of audio, while also being one of the most beloved audio products ever made. The DLA-220GS, marketed as a special edition to commemorate Denon's 110th anniversary, is merely a 103 installed in an exclusive silver-graphite universal headshell and boxed in a fancy leather case. The DL-103R is a 103 with 6N copper wire for the coils, a finer wire made from a purer grade of copper, the sonic result is a

slightly reduced extreme top end for a fractionally darker presentation that is nevertheless very pleasing albeit not quite so accurate as the stock 103. Regardless of which version you buy, you will still get all the virtues that account for its 60-plus years of popularity. PS, 328

Ortofon Quintet Red \$359

At \$359 the Quintet Red (0.5mV) is on the low end of the price scale for moving-coil cartridges but it doesn't sound like a cheapskate. It's quick on transients, a sure-footed tracker, and a slam-dunk candidate for any thoughtful starter system. It drops some resolution and tonal purity at the frequency extremes and lacks some micro-information but retains a persuasive feel for the distinctive musicality of LP playback. NG, 244

Sumiko Bluepoint No. 3 \$499

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. A huge step up from entry-level cartridges. CM, 172

\$500–\$1000

Audio-Technica VM760SLC \$649

This moving-magnet phono pickup is the flagship of Audio-Technica's VM line. Outfitted with a line-contact stylus, the VM760 in PS's judgment acquitted itself astonishingly in every aspect of performance, including frequency response, tracking ability, transparency, and dynamic range. Its only tonal anomaly is a smooth, mild rise beginning at 5kHz that proves in the listening to be

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remarkably benign, might even pass unnoticed in many systems, and is easily correctable with treble tone-control. Intrinsicly its performance is superb; factoring in price, it is a staggering cartridge. PS, 284

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 the gem of the Excel lineup and can easily fit any 'table/'arm combo that will accommodate a 0.5mV output. With the Hana SL, the user can also rest assured the cartridge will support the next 'table/'arm upgrade. It represents what any more costly cartridge should offer as a bare minimum—and plenty more. AJ, 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 even neutrality across the tonal spectrum with glimmers of midrange warmth. It has both a light touch and a commanding sense of control. Low-level information is reproduced with great precision. NG, 244

\$1000–\$2000

Clearaudio Maestro Ebony V2

\$1500

The successor to the Maestro Wood, the Maestro V2 Ebony is an improvement in every way. With a higher 4.2mV output and an ultra-low-mass Micro HD stylus on a solid

boron cantilever, the Ebony brings symphonic recordings to life, unifying each orchestral section into the greater whole. Low-level detail is speedily resolved. As musical as they come, NG thought the Maestro V2 Ebony should be required listening for moving-magnet and moving-coil fans alike. Co-winner of TAS' 2013 Phono Cartridge of the Year Award. NG, 234

Lyra Delos

\$1995

The Delos optimizes performance by properly orientating the magnetic circuits, signal coils, and core. With the cartridge at rest, asymmetrical dampers place the signal coils and core into a more upright angle vis-à-vis the magnetic circuit. With tracking force applied, the force of the stylus pushing on the LP causes the asymmetrical dampers to become symmetrical. An exceptionally quiet background is the most immediately striking aspect of this design. It is also very well balanced and notably coherent, natural, rich, and fast. WG, 206

\$2000 and above

Clearaudio Charisma V2

\$2200

Clearaudio's literature artfully describes the Charisma V2 as founder Peter Suchy's "moving-magnet masterpiece." It offers a full palette of tonal color vibrancy and timbral complexity, with classic midrange heft and bloom, electrifying dynamics, and top-end sweetness. Tracking is unshakable and effortless, allowing transients to be reproduced with unalloyed naturalism. The Charisma also retrieves images like they're being monitored by LoJack. Output is a real world 3.6mV. Like its name implies, you've either got it or you don't. This cartridge has got it. NG, 284

Clearaudio Talisman V.2

\$2200

From the top of the midrange on down this second version of Clearaudio's Talisman low-output moving coil is one beautiful-sounding pickup, with a gorgeous midrange and bottom end, solid in all senses of the word, superb definition and clarity, and lots of heft and weight. Yet it's also dynamic as all get out, with terrific rhythmic spring and timing. However, there is also a mild brightness that is not necessarily unpleasant in and of itself, though it can be depending on the source. PS, 232

Dynavector Karat 17DX

\$2250

Dynavector's 17DX, the fourth generation of a 20-year-old design, is ruler-flat top to bottom with all the life and liveliness of past Karats, the see-through transparency, the crackling musicality, brilliance and clarity abounding. It also throws a wide and deep soundstage with extraordinary dynamics and resolution. PS, 172

Ortofon Cadenza Bronze

\$2399

Ortofon claims the Bronze, a low-output moving coil in the company's Cadenza line, has been voiced to have a slightly warmer, more romantic sound. So, it proved in PS' listening, though the flavoring remains subtle, which is to say the Bronze is still very much an Ortofon as regards overall neutrality, transparency, clarity, resolution, tracking ability, dynamic range, imaging, and soundstaging. If you want an Ortofon with a dash of warmth, the Bronze might be just the ticket. PS, 232

DS Audio 003

\$2500 (phonostage, \$3500)

Like its ten-times more expensive brother, the nonpareil

DS Audio Grand Master, the DS 003 optical cartridge uses DS' new "dual-mono" optical/electrical generator, with independent LEDs and photodetectors for each channel. Again, like the Grand Master, it uses a featherweight, 99.9% beryllium shading plate that is 50% lighter than the aluminum one used in DS Audio's previous oc's (prior to the Grand Master). And once more like the GM, the DS Audio's internal wiring is 1.6 times thicker than it was in first- and second-gen DSes. These technological advancements make for virtually the same kind of sonic improvements that they do in the GM. Because of the dual-mono setup, channel separation is greatly enhanced—to the benefit of soundstaging and imaging. The reduction in mass improves tracking and lowers noise to a near-inaudible level, increasing resolution and dynamic range. The better wiring and improved equalization help render tonality in the same lusciously rich, full-bodied, deep-reaching fashion that you hear on the GM, with tape, and in life. If you have a system that is capable of highest-resolution playback, then by all means go whole hog and get the fabulous POY Award-winning Grand Master duo. You won't regret it. But if you don't have state-of-the-art speakers and amplification (or money to burn), then for JV the choice is easy: Go for the DS 003. It is a simply marvelous transducer. JV, 330

Shelter 901 MkIII

\$2500

Shelter's 901 MkIII moving-coil cartridge combines a "Thousand Series" motor assembly with the smaller body of the earlier 901, and the result is sublime. It carries forward much of the vibrancy, lushness, and graciousness of the original 901, while also exhibiting the heightened

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transparency, transient speed, and dynamic snap so characteristic of the “1000 Series” Shelters. CM, 205

Ortofon MC Cadenza Black **\$2899**

A low-output (0.3mV) moving-coil cartridge featuring a nude Shibata stylus with a thin, stiff boron cantilever, the Cadenza Black brings a lot of the advanced technology found in Ortofon's more expensive offering, like the MC A90 and MC Anna, to a more affordable price. Here's a fast, tonally balanced, low-coloration pickup that has outstanding transparency, tonal neutrality, and openness without any brightness or stridency, plus very good soundstaging and dynamics. JH, 234

Kiseki Purple Heart NS **\$3199**

The most recent Kiseki Purple Heart captures all the magic of the original. At the same time, the newest version is quite different from the original. While they both use boron cantilevers, the latest has a different mounting method for the diamond, and its coils are wound from gold instead of OFC. Kiseki in Japanese means “miracle,” and it is a fitting name for the Purple Heart NS. This moving-coil cartridge is easy to drive, tracks everything thrown at it, and has a relaxed yet detailed sound that, when mated with superb speakers, puts the performers in the listening room. JH, 306

Clearaudio Concerto v2 **\$3300**

This is the entry-level cartridge in Clearaudio's “super-class” of moving coils, and super it is! The Concerto uses wood to add a touch of warmth and richness, yet retains the superb focus, resolution, transient quickness, and top-end extension that have been hallmarks

of Clearaudio's reference cartridges. JH, 167

Miyajima Infinity Mono **\$3375**

The Infinity represents Miyajima's attempt to push the boundaries of mono reproduction one step beyond its previous flagship Zero cartridge. Its attempt has succeeded. The bulbous Infinity weighs in at some 6.4 grams, but the increase in size and weight from the more diminutive Zero do not in the slightest detract from its performance. Rather, they enhance it. The Infinity not only extracts more information from the grooves than the Zero but is also smoother and more extended in the treble. For anyone interested in playing mono LPs, the Infinity is a must-audition. JHb, 309

Kuzma CAR 40 **\$3493**

Outfitted with a boron cantilever, a material PS always associates with neutrality, the CAR exhibited superb imaging and soundstaging, wide and deep if the recording calls for it, and close and intimate with other kinds of recordings. The top end sounds extended yet very easy on the ears, and it's transparent without thrusting a whole lot of detail that has little or nothing to do with the natural reproduction of music. Suppression of surface noise is very good, and tracking is excellent. Its synergy with the Stabi M and 4 Point speaks for itself. PS, 248

Benz Micro SLR Gullwing **\$3500**

Very quiet and transparent to sources, the SLR Gullwing is a stunning-sounding moving-coil cartridge that somehow manages not to place layers of electro-mechanical stuff between the music and us. It breaks through room boundaries and time frames by delivering

highly convincing facsimiles of all that it touches—chamber groups, orchestras, voices, jazz, rock, you name it. The overall result is music that sounds more produced than reproduced. WG, 206

Hana Umami Red **\$3950**

The Hana Umami Red has exceptional balance that allows the musical timbre of instruments and vocals to present themselves truthfully. If you couple this with excellent micro/macro-dynamics, the ability to unravel harmonic complexity, an ever-so-slight tilt towards warmth, and smooth yet extended high frequencies, you have an excellent transducer. The Umami Red is the best sounding cartridge to come from the Excel factory. At its price point, the Umami Red provides deliciously enjoyable class-leading performance compared with cartridges in the same price range. AJ, 319

Soundsmith Puaa MK II ES/ Sussurro MKII ES

\$3999/\$4999

Inspired by tonearm-designer Frank Schröder, Soundsmith's Peter Lederer designed both moving-iron cartridges with the following features: ultra-low effective moving mass, resulting in superlative transient and micro-detail performance; virtually hum-free operation due to six-sided HyMu80 magnetic shielding; and mc preamp compatibility. All Lederer's claims are borne out in the listening. Reviewer AHC found both cartridges to be reference-quality. AHC, 219

Clearaudio Stradivari v2 **\$4400**

In his recent survey of five moving-coil pickups, PS gave the Stradivari his personal “Golden Mean” award because it ideally mediates warmth and detail, control

and relaxation, liveliness and listenability, at virtually no sacrifice in tonal neutrality. There is an organic rightness about this pickup that elevates it to reference-caliber. PS, 172

Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation **\$4499**

The Palo Santos Presentation is Sumiko's elegant flagship moving coil (0.5mV). Its signature veers subtly to the full-blooded and warmer end of the spectrum, with just a hint of upper-treble shading. It flags ever so slightly in bottom-end resolving power and the final swirl of orchestral air and bloom, but this beauty conveys complexities of timbre and space that are nothing short of authentic. NG, 206

Benz Micro LP S **\$5000**

Equipped with a dandy micro-ridge stylus and a sophisticated magnetic engine, the Benz LP S has less of an electromechanical signature than most other 'coils. As a result, transparency to sources is markedly increased. This is a very high-resolution, very low-noise mc with a remarkably sweet and lifelike treble. In the right 'arm, it can consistently reveal details you've never heard before without ever sounding analytical. One of JV's mc references. JV, 216

Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti **\$5459**

The Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti is the newest version of the original MC Windfeld cartridge—a previous TAS Product of the Year Award winner. The Ti's body structure is SLM (selective laser melted) titanium and stainless steel; its motor is like that of the MC A95. Sonically, the Ti allows a listener to play nearly every album in his catalog without being bothered by any sins of commission. If you value neutrality and high resolution, low

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coloration and low distortion, and tracking ability that rivals the best moving magnets, then this outstanding new moving-coil is for you. AJ, 286

Koetsu Rosewood Signature \$5495

Yoshiaki Sugano's (1907–2002) legacy of iconic masterwork moving-coil designs is perfectly exemplified by the current Rosewood Signature. Expect breathtaking soundstage transparency combined with a tuneful full-bodied lower midrange, 3-D spatiality, and unrestrained dynamics. It tracks well at 1.8g and resolves low-level detail without sounding analytical. It sings with emotional intensity while avoiding upper-octave brightness. The bass range is tightly defined and well-integrated with the lower midrange. It is in essence a gift for the music lover who would like to kick back at the end of a day and just enjoy the music. DO, 295

Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius \$5495

With a body handmade of Hawaiian koa wood triple-coated with a special Stradivarius-type lacquer, the Crimson uses 24-karat gold coils and a cantilever that is solid boron with a VDH Type 1s (2x85-micron) stylus. The Crimson XGW Stradivarius is impartial across most of the frequency spectrum (including the presence range), with large macro-dynamics from the power region on down. Quite forceful on transients but less delicately detailed than its twice-as-expensive Colibri XGW Signature Stradivarius cousin, the Crimson counters by surpassing the Colibri in sheer bottom-octave drive on propulsive music. AJ, 279

DS Audio Master1/Master1 Equalizer

\$7500/\$15,000

The optical cartridge with internal LED and photo sensors is a relatively new thing. That the folks at DS Audio are taking the perfection of the concept seriously is shown by the remarkable sonic progress they've made from the Nighthawk to the DS-002/003 to this, their new flagship transducer. The Master1 cartridge and Master1 equalizer are simply outstanding components, setting new benchmarks for vinyl playback in several areas (mechanical silence, neutral voicing, and midrange-to-midbass realism). Even where DS Audio's offerings aren't setting standards, they are now competitive with the finest coils and moving magnets in all respects. If JV were in the market for a new phono cartridge and he had the money, the Master1 system would be at the very top of his short list of must-hears. JV, 306

Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum

\$8495

Befitting a transducer from Koetsu, the latest Rosewood Signature Platinum mc boasts a midrange to die for. What differentiates it from the other two Rosewood models in the line (the less pricey Rosewood and the Rosewood Signature) are a stiffer body composed of lacquered, aged rosewood, plus the rare platinum magnets and silver-plated 6N copper coils normally reserved for Koetsu's stonebody cartridges. Along with that famous midband expect a wide-open, highly convincing recreation of the recorded soundstage, with plenty of air and depth, a seductively rich palette of instrumental colors and textures, and plenty of bottom-end wallop. A classic, Koetsu's Rosewood Signature Platinum seduces our

ears, brains, and beings with intellectual and emotional pleasure. JH, 317

Lyra Etna Lambda

\$8995

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) version, which outputs a mere 0.25mV. But this amazing cartridge will take most vinyl reproduction to a new level. AT, 305

My Sonic Lab Signature Gold

\$8995

My Sonic Lab is one of those little cartridge companies that are unknown to all but a lucky few. The design goal was to increase a moving-coil's output signal without also increasing the number of coil turns. (More coil turns result in losses of detail and bandwidth.) The discovery of a new core material (SH-ÉX) allowed the designer to replace the commonly used iron alloys and create his dream mc, with the lowest amount of signal loss combined with the highest relative output. The Signature Gold hits all the right notes: It tracks like crazy, delivers exceptional detail, energy, and dynamics, and generates a holographic soundstage with spot-on imaging, as well as a great purity of tone and "your-are-there-ness." WG, 317

Soundsmith SG-200 Strain-Gauge

\$9499

Using neither magnets nor coils, Soundsmith's strain-gauge cartridge generates a

signal via a crystal that modulates the flow of DC through it in response to pressure generated by stylus movement. This scheme requires a specialized preamplifier to deliver this DC, and to decode the audio signal. The sonic virtues of the Soundsmith system include extremely low noise, a highly resolved soundstage, and natural rendering of timbre. Price varies according to the preamplifier's features, display, and number of inputs. AHC, 201

Lyra Etna Lambda SL

\$9995

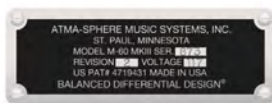
The Etna offers the most winning set of attributes that Lyra has produced. Vocals have a physicality and palpability that provides an unprecedented sense of realism. The sense of snap and pacing is also exemplary. A silky continuity that eluded previous Lyra efforts is also abundantly apparent, partly 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 supplies as mere 0.25mV. But this amazing cartridge will take most vinyl reproduction to a new level. JHb, 266 (Lambda version review forthcoming)

Ortofon MC Diamond

\$9999

Ortofon's most evolved moving coil generator system is housed in an optimally shaped, selective laser melt (SLM) titanium body. A detail-resolving nude Replicant 100 stylus/solid diamond cantilever assembly mated to a non-magnetic armature minimally wound with high purity copper wire still manages to produce 0.2mV thanks to a powerful, efficient neodymium magnet system. A re-engineered version of Ortofon's WRD (Wide Range Damping) system uses a newly devel-

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Rockport Technologies Avior II Ultra 7 V2 shown here.

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oped in-house Multi-Wall Carbon Nano-Tube suspension material. The result is a high resolution, low coloration, wide dynamic range ride through the grooves. MC Diamond is an imaging and soundstaging champion. Unrivaled build-quality and uniformity. MF, 335

Air Tight PC-1 Supreme **\$11,600**

As good as the AT PC-1 is, this considerably pricier moving-coil from Air Tight is substantially better in every way. Like the PC-1, the Supreme is a model of low internal impedance and high energy. Killer good on transients top to bottom, with phenomenal grip and definition in the low bass, it 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 PC-1 such a breakthrough. RH's reference. JV, 190

Lyra Atlas Lambda/Atlas Lambda 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 has 0.56mV output, the second 0.25mV. Which one to choose? The regular Atlas offers a bit more slam and sizzle than the super-low-output version. But the lower-output Atlas provides more finesse and lower noise. Rock aficionados will probably gravitate to the regular Atlas, but for classical the higher-priced cartridge is probably the better match. But both are superlative cartridges that will provide a spellbinding presentation of well-nigh any LP. JHb, 276, 284 (Lambda version not yet reviewed)

Van den Hul Colibri XGW Signature Stradivarius

\$11,995

The top-of-the line Colibri XGW Signature Stradivarius (0.75mV output) features a Koa wood body with triple Stradivarius-type lacquer coating, 24-karat gold coils, solid boron cantilever, and VDH Type 1s stylus. It is characterized by a clarity and lucidity in the presence region, coupled with a smoothness and sweetness in the treble. It is also dynamically authoritative, with lively and propulsive transient reproduction. AJ, 279

HiFiction X-Quisite ST

\$13,160

The X-Quisite cartridge is constructed in Switzerland with horological precision. Right off the bat, the translucency and transient accuracy of this 0.3mV moving coil are abundantly apparent. There may, in fact, be no other cartridge that quite manages to duplicate its lock on the transient note, a quality that provides a kind of window into the performer's intention that is difficult to forget. The X-Quisite revels in disinterring previously obscured detail but is in no way astringent. The finest shadings, the most delicate filigree, are presented with aplomb. JHb, 317

DS Audio Grand Master

\$15,000 (\$45,000 for Grand Master equalizer and PS)

The DS Audio Grand Master optical transducer comes closer to the sound of R2R tape than any other phono cartridge on the market. Yes, it is expensive, though you don't have to buy the dedicated Grand Master EQ/PS units to get your sonic money's worth. (Any DS Audio EQ device will work with it—and there is a wide variety of them at a wide variety of prices, starting below \$2k.) Unlike every other phono cartridge and phonostage on the market,

the Grand Master and its EQ units are dead quiet—without a trace of the hum, buzz, RF, and self-noise that we've simply learned to live with. The elimination of the usual background racket, coupled to an optical system's inherently deeper and fuller presentation of the bass and lower midrange, rich, supremely detailed midband, and sweet, airy, ribbon-like treble, makes for the most “complete” and (given a great LP) most realistic reproduction of the music and musicians on LPs JV has yet heard. A Grand Master-piece. JV, 317

Air Tight Opus-1

\$15,800

Air Tight's top-line moving-coil cartridge adds even more resolution, dimensionality, and energy to the beautiful reproduction of tone color and superior soundstaging that the PC-1 Supreme is justly famous for. Though not quite the non-stop thrill-machine and sonic vacuum cleaner that the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement is, the Opus has a smoother, better-behaved upper midrange and treble and (building on one of the strengths of the Supreme) phenomenally deep-reaching, superbly defined, extraordinarily quick and powerful bass. Quite neutral in balance, it has the speed and resolution of über-cartridges, without any trace of the analytic. One of JV's and RH's references. JV, 261

Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement V2

\$16,000

Simply the best—which is to say, the most sonically complete—moving-coil cartridge JV has heard. Peter Suchy has here managed to combine all the virtues of past Goldfingers (their phenomenal low-level resolution, their tremendous energy, their vast soundstaging) with a previ-

ously unattained richness of tone color to produce a cartridge unlike any other. Like a cross between a Koetsu and a Clearaudio, the Statement will appeal to just about any kind of listener (provided he's got enough do-re-mi). JV's reference mc. JV, forthcoming

TAPE DECKS

J-Corder Technics 1500

\$7495 (\$9490 with enhanced record/playback option)

If you are interested in archiving your precious vinyl, this completely rebuilt, highly reliable Technics prosumer reel-to-reel deck will make you think that the taped copies are better than the originals. A second playback head and external electronics are needed to play prerecorded CCIR-compatible tapes, like those from Tape Project. A wide range of options makes further customization a breeze. Forthcoming

Sonorus Audio ATR10

\$19,995

A modern two-track, 15ips, quarter-inch tape deck based on the venerable Revox PR99 chassis, which uses the same mechanical parts as the Studer/Revox professional machines and entirely new electronics, including tape drive, power supplies, and playback circuits. Warm and beautiful sounding, the tube-amplified ATR10 is a virtual plug-and-play device. Just connect to your line-stage and you can access the highest-fidelity source material currently on the market. JV

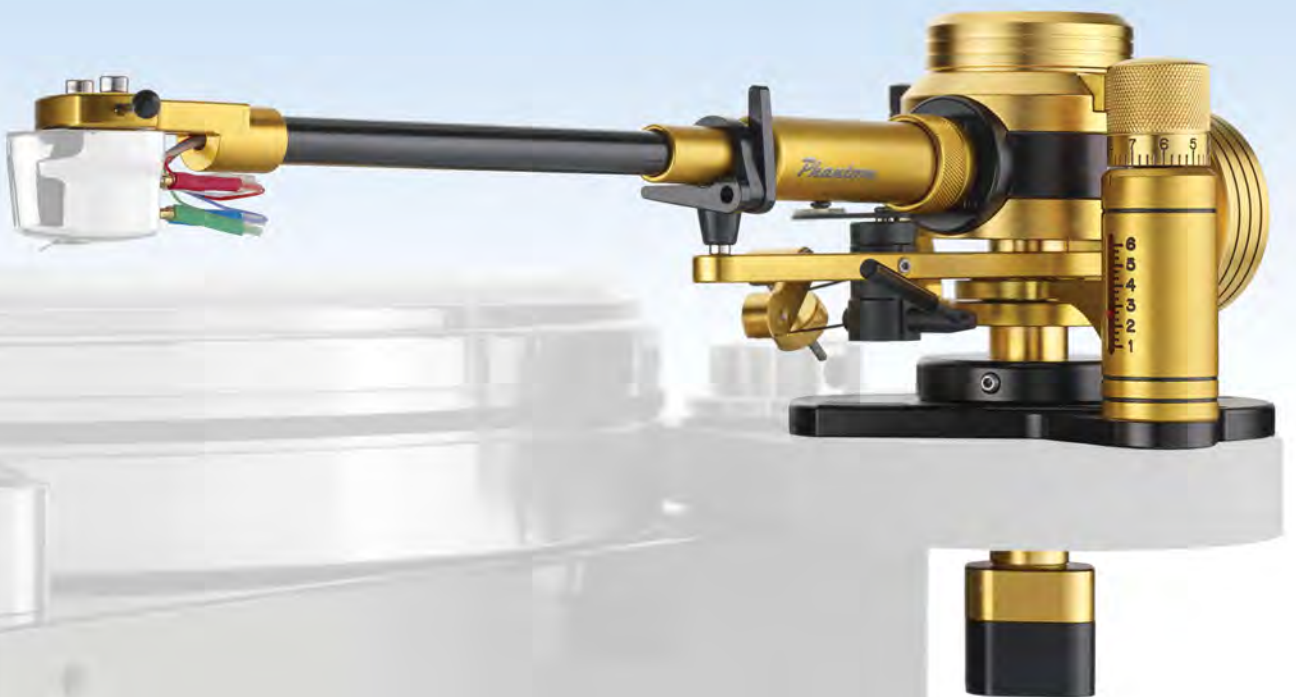
United Home Audio Ultima 5

\$34,500 (optional OPS-DC outboard DC power supply, \$6500)

High-quality 15ips reel-to-reel tapes are (direct-to-disc LPs aside) the *ne plus ultra* of analog sources—unrivaled in fidelity, musicality, and, alas, expense. If you can afford genuine first- or second-gen-

THE GOLD STANDARD

Phantom Elite REFERENCE TONEARM



The Phantom Elite tonearm sets the standard for LP playback through a synergistic partnership with all high-end turntables and cartridges.

(Chrome plate standard. A combination of 24k gold plate and gold-tone anodizing on special order)

In concert with the turntable and phono cartridge, the tonearm is the single most important link in LP signal retrieval. If the signal starts off with the highest resolution combined with faithful tracing accuracy of the microscopic walls of the vinyl groove, then all that follows will be good.

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eration dubs of great mastertapes, then you can also afford a deck that plays them back with all their fidelity and musicality intact. In JV's experience, Greg Beron's UHA Ultima 4 OPS-DC was just such a product—one of the highest-fidelity source components JV had heard, with phenomenal bass power and extension, matchlessly continuous dynamics top to bottom, unrivaled resolution, astonishing transient speed, and simply gorgeous tone color. However, Greg's latest tape deck, the Ultima5 OPS-DC simply beats his previous *wunderkind* out in every possible way, approaching (though not quite equalizing) the glories of Greg's SuperDeck (from which it borrows some of its technology). For those of you with the moolah and the itch to come as close to the sound of the real thing as possible, the Ultima 5 OPS-DC is the ticket to ride. JV, forthcoming

Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon T-RX
\$36,000

The most compact, coolest-looking, best-sounding portable tape deck JV has heard, the T-RX is a brand-new component—not a refurbished, updated vintage one from the Golden Age of tape recording. Designed with Stellavox founder Georges Queller's blessing as an updated version of his fabled and fabulous Stellavox SM8, it is the very model of highest fidelity. As JV said in his review, if the phrase “the absolute sound” means what it says, then 15/30ips mastertape playback through the T-RX is what it means. If you have the money for Kostas Metaxas' little wonder (and for the 15/30ips tapes to feed it with), you will be buying a freehold in the top tier of the absolute sound—and a piece of gear that will endlessly delight you with its mechanical and sonic excellence. JV, 324

United Home Audio SuperDeck
\$89,998

This completely refurbished, three-box, 15ips, Tascam reel-to-reel tape deck, with bespoke enclosures, boards, parts, damping, and wiring, is the best effort yet from tape maven Greg Beron—and one of the two most lifelike source components JV has yet heard in his home. Though the speed, color, resolution, and, above all else, vanishingly low noise of the DS Audio Grand Master optical cartridge and EQ units have pushed vinyl playback

considerably closer to the sound of tape, LPs still aren't as naturally full in tone, continuous in duration and intensity, or audibly complete in their presentation as R2R tapes through the UHA SuperDeck. Of course, two-track open-reel tapes have built-in sonic advantages—not the least of which is the sheer amount of information laid down in their wider tracks and the higher resolution with which those tracks are scanned—all of which you can hear, par excellence, with Beron's great new machine. Given the price of pre-recorded R2R tapes, the SuperDeck may be a wealthy man's game, but if you have the dough and a hankering for the sound of the real thing, it will be tough to find a better full-sized tape player. JV, 319

**RECORD-CLEANING
MACHINES**

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. The results speak for themselves—clean surfaces mean less noise and more fully resolved music. For lighter duty it's tough to beat. PS, 201

Record Doctor VI
\$299

For those who love and care for their vinyl but don't want to break the bank on a cleaner, the Record Doctor VI offers a smart design compromise that keeps its—and your—costs down: Most of its functions are performed manually, but it still uses a powerful motor-driven vacuum to handle the final step of dirt extraction. Setup and operation are a snap. JM, 274

Pro-Ject VC-E
\$499

Using the VC-E is simple, but good technique is essential to maximize its potential. The machine comes with a small bottle of concentrated cleaning fluid, a larger bottle for the mixed-with-water cleaning solution, and a cleaning brush. The Pro-Ject VC-E supplies the basic tools necessary to clean records efficiently and easily. For any LP lover who wants to hear every bit of potential sonic goodness from his records, the VC-E is an excellent way to boost your

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LP collection up to a cleaner state of being. SS, 306

Degritter Ultrasonic LP Cleaner

\$2990

The breadbox-sized Degritter brings all the benefits of ultrasonic LP cleaning to an effective, easy-to-use, and relatively affordable product. You can adjust the Degritter's many cleaning parameters, or simply choose a standard cleaning cycle for easy operation. Sonically, the Degritter delivers, with fewer ticks and pops, less surface noise, a blacker background, and a heightened impression of instruments in space. Easy to use, well-built, with many sophisticated features, the Degritter delivers on all the promises of ultrasonic LP cleaning. RH, 320

Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner

\$3995

This completely automated record cleaner is simply the state of the art. The ultrasonic cleaning technique loosens dirt embedded in groove modulations that are too small for even the finest bristles. The sonic results go far beyond quieter surfaces. The Audio Desk renders a dramatic increase in resolution, soundstaging, and immediacy. JHb, 234

Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic

\$6500

The latest version of Clearaudio's record cleaning machine retains all the convenience of the Double Matrix (simultaneous cleaning of both sides of a record) while adding ultra-sonic scrubbing to the original brush-and-fluid method. Built like a tank and easy to use, this is a highest-quality record cleaner. JV

EQUIPMENT RACKS

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 ¾" finished or unfinished oak or finished Ambrosia maple and are still hand-crafted by the Amish family that also builds Mapleshade's massive Samson racks. NG, 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, tauter bass, quieter backgrounds, cleaner mids and highs, increased snap and speed, less smearing and fuzziness are just a few of the benefits.

Sanus SF26 Steel Foundation

\$209

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.

Sound Anchor FSTT

\$350-\$400

For anyone who has a dedicated nearfield desktop system the Sound Anchor FSTT stands are simply indispensable. Their combination of superb stability, variable height flexibility, and mass-damped isolation is unmatched by other desktop stands. For the many music lovers whose primary listening environment is a nearfield desktop. If you want to optimize your nearfield listening environment,

get yourself a pair of FSTT stands. SS, 333

TonTräger Harbeth M40.3 XD

\$1850

These all-wood German stands, light weight with mortise-and-tenon construction, using only water-based glue and eschewing any plastic or metal, are unbelievably strong and rigid. Supporting PS's Harbeth Monitor 40.3s, the TonTrägers provided greater dynamic range, clarity, articulation, and definition, with none, but none, of the typical excessively etched, edgy, analytical penalties of spiked metal stands. Although made for Harbeths—there's a stand for every model in the line—they should prove equally effective with any speaker requiring stand mounting, provided the TonTrägers fit the speaker's footprint and situate its tweeters at ear level. PS, 299

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 heavy-weight amps.

Critical Mass Systems Sotto Voce

\$3500 (three-shelf rack, natural or black)

This CMS equipment rack not only looks good and is, at one-tenth the cost of the company's flagship, more than fairly priced; it just plain works. Bass tightens, transients gain verve yet maintain control, rhythms sharpen and—perhaps most significantly—subliminal low-level noise plummets. By getting

what AT calls the "random energy" out of the sound, the SV delivers a less electronic, less hurried, less blurred presentation of the music. This is a rack you can buy and live with happily ever after. Or, when fortune smiles, you can upgrade to your heart's content. AT, 249

Critical Mass Systems Maxxum 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, reveal music's transient structure, and interestingly, seems to make the loudspeakers "disappear" more easily. Once heard, it is impossible to resist. RH, 250

Stillpoints ESS and ESS Turntable Rack

\$8450-\$65,000 (depending on configuration)

Stillpoints has always possessed an uncanny ability to lower the noise floor with its innovative footers. But its amp stands and ESS racks are simply brilliantly innovative designs that will take your system even further into the realm of stygian silence. Both are based around an unobtrusive open architecture that allows your audio gear to take pride of place rather than a bulky rack. The amp stands can be adjusted to fit pretty much any amplifier and dramatically improve dynamics and interstitial detail. The same goes for the ESS racks, which offer an elegant and effective solution for housing your precious audio gear. RH, 255; JHb, 312

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Critical Mass Systems Maxxum**\$18,750 (three-shelf rack)**

A gorgeous, pricey, four-leg, three-shelf unit, the CMS Maxxum is quite simply the ne plus ultra in component stands. In all his years, JV has never used a support device that reduces resonance to this extent without also killing the life of the music. Far from damping out color and energy, the Maxxum enhances both to an extent that must be heard to be appreciated. Transients are lightning quick, low-level detail is clear as a bell, pitch definition is superb, and timbre is rich and dense in color from bottom to top. For those of you with the money, this is unquestionably the stand to own. RH heartily concurs. JV, 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's 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's CenterStage2 isolation devices. Matching amplifier stands are \$10,250 each. Expensive but worth it if you want the best. RH's reference.

HRS VXR**\$35,680 with M3X2 Isolation Bases (+damping plate, Helix footers)**

Harmonic Resolution Systems supplies one of the most effective resonance-control systems in high-end audio. At the heart of its line is the VXR stand. The high-mass VXR, composed of a custom, billet-machined, heat-treated aluminum frame, appears to reduce, and not by a small margin, subliminal hash and grain, endowing the music with a sense of hush, or, if you prefer, black backgrounds, from which sounds emerge with greater fidelity. To complement its impressive stand, HRS also offers several other products, including a damping plate as well as Helix footers. JHb, 319

GROUNDING DEVICES**Shunyata Altaira****\$2998/hub (cable, \$250-\$800)**

Shunyata's Altaira grounding system is composed of one or more passive "hubs," which you connect to the ground terminals of your components via specially made ground cables. The Altaira ground cables can be fitted with interchangeable terminations to fit any system and to adapt to component upgrades. It turns out that evacuating noise from the components' grounds has profound effects on sound quality, and not just in areas that you would suspect—blacker backgrounds and greater resolution of low-level detail. Rather, the Altaira system's benefits were manifold: increased timbral liquidity, more body and texture to images, greater clarity of instrumental lines, and a more relaxed, refined, and realistic presentation overall. 2022 Product of the Year Award winner. RH, 334

Nordost QKore Grounding System**QKore1, \$2999; QKore3, \$4099; QKore6, \$5749**

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. JHb, 283

POWER CONDITIONERS**Shunyata Research Venom Defender****\$300**

Bravo to Shunyata for designing a system that recognizes the fact that not everyone has the cash, space or the 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. The Venom Defender brings much of the technology and many of the sonic improvements of Shunyata's expensive conditioners to a more affordable price. NG, 239

Audience aR-2p/aR12/aR12-T3/aR6-T4**\$695/\$4995/\$9200/\$6600**

Used with a CD player, the aR2p—Audience's compact, dual-outlet power conditioner and isolation device—enhanced soundstaging, dimensionality, and depth. The 12-outlet aR12p was also

found to be extremely effective, capable of delivering significant improvements in bass definition and depth, overall resolution, and soundstage depth. 162, 179, 186, 235


Audience forte V8**\$980 (includes forte f3 powerChord)**

The Audience forte V8 power strip gets right down to business with eight hospital-grade AC outlets, each wired separately with high-purity, 14AWG copper. Plus, the entire electric circuit has been treated cryogenically. The V8 performed impeccably, with no discernible losses, changes, or degradations versus wall outlets. If anything, backgrounds seemed quieter and low-level transparency more fully resolved. Bass response also firmed up and conveyed greater control. Soundstage dimensionality and ambience retrieval were enhanced, to boot. Impeccable in construction quality, virtually unbreakable, and not liable to break the bank, the V8 ships with the exceptional forte f3 powerChord. All in all, a no-brainer. NG, 311

Shunyata Research Hydra Delta D6**\$3500**

Housed in a full-sized chassis and rated for 20 amps of continuous current, Shunyata's Delta D6 delivers the juice to more demanding systems, including high-powered amplifiers. Its most noteworthy sonic achievement was an expansion of spatiality and increased ease of presentation. At the micro level, images were pocketed within halos of ambience upon the soundstage—a finely focused presentation with an almost eerie lack of noise and distortion. Equipped with top-notch features like electromagnetic breakers, Hubbell outlets, vibration-dampening materials, and cryogenic



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treatment, Shunyata's latest is among its most successful yet. It makes an audio rig less about electronics and more about music. NG, 305

Clarus Concerto PC

\$4000

The Clarus Concerto is an unassuming, but well-made, rack-mountable module with a power switch and dimmer button on the front, and a clever and unique cable-support bar on the back that prevents the dreaded heavy-power-cable droop we all know and hate. The Concerto offers a total of eight outlets, separately specialized for high current, digital, and analog sources. Clarus' five-tier approach to conditioning lowers the noise floor without restricting dynamics. Reviewer Matt Clott's digital and analog sources benefited from what the Concerto provided: blacker backgrounds, more dynamics, and a cleaner canvas upon which to paint the music. MC, 306

AudioQuest Niagara 5000 Low-Z Power Noise-Dissipation System

\$5900

All power conditioning products claim to do the same thing: lower the various current and ground noises generated by your power grid and the wiring in your house and system. The difference between the Niagara and most of its competitors is that the Niagara 5000 does this task demonstrably well, raising low-level resolution of detail and reducing background hash (making for a clearer, better-defined soundstage and more neutral timbre top to bottom) without choking off current delivery. With 12 outlets (four of which are high current), the Niagara 5000 is equipped to handle just about anything in your system—and to render audible improvements in every aspect of the stereo image. JV

Shunyata Research Hydra Denali 6000S v2

\$6000

This AC conditioner from Shunyata takes what had been the state of the art in AC conditioning to a new level. It is based on noise-isolation technology that Shunyata developed for medical imaging equipment. The sonic result is quieter backgrounds, which allow for resolution of the finest micro-details. These low-level cues are vital to a sense of timbral and spatial realism, which are the areas where the Denali excels. The 6000S v2 is a shelf version with six outlets. Now available in an improved (but unreviewed) v2 version. RH, 272

Shunyata Research Everest 8000

\$9900

Shunyata's new Everest 8000 is easily the company's finest effort yet delivering an entirely unprecedented level of performance. This eight-outlet conditioner in a vertical truncated pyramid chassis benefits not just from Shunyata's previous work on AC power for audio, but from technology developed by founder Caelin Gabriel for Shunyata's sister company, Clear Image Scientific. The XC power cord that connects the Everest to your wall outlet is no less impressive. The soundstage opens up with greater space and depth, with more vivid and tangible images, along with far greater resolution of air and space around those images. RH's reference. RH, 311

AudioQuest Niagara 7000 Low-Z Power Noise-Dissipation System

\$11,000

The 81-pound Niagara 7000 is the brainchild of AC design engineer Garth Powell, whom AudioQuest hired and essentially gave him 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 a more controlled and refined performance. The treble is smoother and rounder with the Niagara. Overall, the Niagara is a fabulous piece of equipment that adds sheen and palpability to the music that are utterly addictive. JHb, 271

Audience adeptResponse aR12-T4

\$11,400 (studio ONE powerChord upgrade, \$2299/6ft.; Au24 SX powerChord upgrade, \$4660/6ft.; frontRow powerChord upgrade \$6300/6ft.)

Audience's aR12-T4 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! GW, 268

Synergistic Research Galileo PowerCell SX/SRX

\$27,995 includes 6" SRX AC cable

As a skeptic about power conditioners, JHb was pleasantly surprised by the improvements in imaging and dynamics rendered by the Synergistic Research PowerCell. Unlike many of its brethren, 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. 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. JHb/JV, 287

INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLES

Transparent Audio The Link Interconnect, The Wave Speaker Cable

\$100/1m pr., interconnect; \$250/8ft. pr., speaker; \$125, Performance Power Cord/1m

The \$100 The Link interconnect brings more than a taste of high-end interconnects to an entry-level price. Similarly, the \$250 The Wave speaker cable is a bargain, offering superior tonality, wider dynamics, and a more open soundstage. The Performance Power Cord is also an extremely cost-effective upgrade, rendering wider dynamic expression, smoother timbres, and greater musical involvement. NG, 196

Moon Audio Silver Dragon V1 IEM Headphone Cable

\$205/4ft.



The Silver Dragon V1 IEM headphone cable is a drop-in replacement for use with in-ear monitors where light weight and flexibility are important. The Silver Dragon IEM is a coaxial design using a 99.99998% UP-OCC stranded silver 26AWG center-conductor for the positive leg. The center-conductor uses the same Kevlar reinforcing as other Dragon cables. Available with various terminations to fit many brands.

MUSIC IS THE SPACE BETWEEN THE NOTES

– Claude Debussy

What is the true meaning of passion? Passion is the intense emotion compelling action. Passion for audio is not about the boxes, the color of the equipment nor the specifications. It's about delivering the sound, the artist and the passion. Göbel is expression. Göbel is the music. Göbel is passion.

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Wireworld Equinox 8

\$250/1m pr. unbalanced interconnect, \$250/1m pr. balanced; \$970/3m pr. speaker single termination, \$1170/3m pr. bi-wire

Falling right smack in the middle of Wireworld's extensive Series 8 line, the Equinox is a good value. The interconnect offered a pleasingly rounded and warm presentation not unlike that of Cardas Clear Light, while the Equinox 8 speaker cable was very similar to the Cardas Clear Sky in sonics. Excellent hum and noise rejection. RD, 236

Kimber Kable Hero

\$296/1m pr.

Yielding only a tiny bit in sheer control, ultimate top-end transparency, and inner detailing to PS' reference Kimber Select KS-1021, Hero's bass lives up to its name, prodigious in amplitude and definition (rather better even than its pricier brother). This interconnect is either dead neutral or tilts a notch to the yang, with dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in an essentially grain-free presentation. PS, 138

WyWires Blue Series

\$299/4' pr. interconnect (RCA or XLR); \$449/8' pr. speaker

The first WyWires cable reviewed in TAS, the Blue is also one of the most pliable, easy-to-handle cables around. Its sonic signature is energetic, with a potent midrange, plenty of drive, and a slightly cooler, forward tilt. NG, 236

Cardas Iridium

\$330/1.5m; \$510/3m

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 your system could use a bit fuller sound with additional

bass authority in the power range and some reduction of upper-midrange and lower-treble energy, the Cardas Audio Iridium fits the bill. AJ, 274

Audience Ohno

\$350/1m (+\$70/m) RCA interconnect; \$675/1m (+\$150/m) Ohno III speaker

Audience's value line of Ohno cables runs counter to the idea that great wire always requires heavy jacketing and complex conductor geometries. Sonically these featherweights were quick and extended with well-focused imaging and dimensionality. Most significantly they were not additive, nor did they crimp dynamics. They were also easy to position for desk-top use, offering an unerring sense of musicality without busting the budget. NG, 264

Nordost Purple Flare

\$389/1m pr. interconnect (\$70 per add'l half-meter pr.); \$582/1m pr. speaker (\$99 per add'l one-meter pr.)

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. NG, 236

Shunyata Research Venom

\$450/1m pr. RCA interconnect, \$650/1m XLR; speaker cables, \$998/2m pr. speaker

The Venom Series represents 15 years of Shunyata Research's ongoing technical innovation and custom-parts engineering. The overarching goal for this line was to create products that offer high-end quality and performance at real-world prices. To that end, the company uses the finest available metals in expensive Ohno Continuous Cast Copper. And these speaker cable

terminations use the same interchangeable terminals that can be found on Shunyata's most expensive designs. With Venom cables, you might discover that high-quality cables need not cost a fortune. JM, 266

Wireworld Eclipse 8

\$525/1m pr. interconnect; \$2580/3m pr. speaker single termination, \$2780/3m pr. bi-wire termination

Celebrating its 20th Anniversary, Wireworld has produced a bargain in its Series 8 Eclipse speaker cable and interconnect. Among Eclipse's many strengths are a sense of layered depth that brings inner detail alive, a broad dynamic envelope, and an ability to reproduce fine instrumental textures. NG, 238

Siltech Explorer 90i

Interconnect and 90L Speaker Cable

\$550/1m pr. interconnect; \$1000/2m pr. speaker

Bringing Siltech quality and cache to an easily affordable price point makes Explorer an excellent upgrade cable for a mid-priced system. Its healthy midrange, fine articulation, and low-level reproduction make it a good deal. Dynamics and bass extension are also convincing. It could be a trifle sweeter in the treble, but few wires challenge it in this tier. NG, 226

Kimber 8TC and 12TC

\$590/2.5m pr. interconnect; \$945/2.5m pr. speaker w/ SBAN banana plugs

Tilting a tad toward the yin, the 8TC 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. PS, 138, 146, 206

Esprit Audio Beta

\$599/1.2m pr. RCA; \$774/2m, XLR interconnect; \$1049/3m speaker

One of Esprit's budget models, Beta wire conveyed a midrange-centric sound. Vocal detail was clean and expressive, baritones and sopranos alike. Beta cabling was sensitive to small textural and timbral gradations. Its treble was somewhat rolled on top but had a smooth sibilance region, a factor that made it easily listenable. Soundstaging was convincing in width and dimensionality. Esprit Beta—finely tailored to a price point—performed superbly. NG, 289

Kimber Carbon 16 and 18XL

\$620/1m interconnect; Carbon 16 \$2520/2m w/SBAN banana speaker; Carbon 18XL \$4000/2m w/WBT connectors speaker

From Kimber's innovative new series, Carbon 16 and 18XL have a clean, lively, and bold midrange character with excellent octave-to-octave tonal balance. Neither laid-back nor aggressive, Carbon 16 had a very slight neutral-to-forward midband push—a signature that flattered vocals. A key strength was Carbon's unshakable image stability. As good as Carbon 16 was, however, Carbon 18XL, the pinnacle of the Carbon series, did everything just a little bit better. Its top end was airier and more open. The sound became more immersive, images more substantive and palpable. In sum, Carbon serves only one master—the music itself. NG, 322

Moon Audio Silver Dragon V2

\$625/3' pr.

The V2 version of Silver Dragon, Moon Audio's top audiophile interconnect, uses an eight-wire braided geometry of solid-core 99.999% pure silver with a Teflon insulation. Connectors are



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Full review : <https://www.theabsolutesound.com/articles/kostas-metaxas-t-rx-tape-deck>



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top-notch—WBT Nextgen or Furutechs. Sonically, 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. NG, 244

Synergistic Research Foundation SX Series

\$699/1m pr. interconnect; \$749/8' pr. speaker

JV wasn't expecting much—and certainly not this much—from Synergistic Research's immensely pliable, bargain-basement Foundation Series interconnects and speaker cables, which are far slimmer, lighter, and less sophisticated in design than their filthy rich relatives, the Galileo SRXes. 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—neutral tone color, robust dynamics, spacious staging, high resolution.

Oh, the more sophisticated Galileos are more extended at the frequency extremes, better focused, more finely detailed, and quieter than the Foundations; then again, they ought to be—they cost 20 times the dough. One of the best budget-priced wire JV has heard, one of his references, and a deserving TAS 2019 Product of the Year winner. JV, 304

Crystal Cable Next Headphone Cable

\$750

For those with state-of-the-art personal listening gear, the ultra-thin and light Crystal Cable Next makes a perfect complement. The shimmering strand oozes quality and, as the name implies, crystal-clear sound. It allows volumes of

timbral, rhythmic, and spatial information to flow through it. Decays seem to go on forever and bass notes are taut. Crystal Cable's Next will show you just how much you've been missing from your favorite set of headphones. AT, 263

Crystal Cable Micro Diamond

\$760/1m pr. interconnect (\$640/add'l meter); \$2200/1m pr. speaker (\$820 add'l meter-pair)

Clean, composed, and transparent, the jewel-like Crystal Cable Micro Diamond cables offer an open soundstage where images snap into focus and music is conveyed with a turbine-like smoothness. Even some softness in the bass and a bit of forwardness in the treble don't diminish one of the most transparent cables NG has heard. Unique splitter rings allow easy change-out of terminations or bi-wire upgrades. NG, 164

Wireworld Silver Eclipse 8

\$800/1m/, \$1300/2m interconnect; \$3680/2m, \$5220/3m speaker, single termination

Wireworld's progression to Gen 8 includes a larger number of strand groups, an increased silver-over-copper conductor gauge, and more, but paradoxically what defines the latest generation of Silver Eclipse 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 have improved. Transients are whip quick. Gen 8 opens space between images and sorts out low-level complexities like a tracker hound. But the overriding surprise is just how closely the mid-priced Silver Eclipse is now knocking on the door of flagship models. NG, 301

Clarus Cables Aqua

\$870/1m pr. RCA interconnect; \$2880/8' pr. speaker

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. Further, its deep low-end brilliantly communicates the rich wood resonances of cello and acoustic bass. A cable that opens frontiers at accessible price levels. NG, 224

Harmonic Technology Magic Link Three

\$950/1m pr. (RCA); \$975/1m pr. (XLR)

With improved clarity and articulation over Harmonic Tech's more affordable Pro Silway line, the Magic Link Two interconnect consistently yields smooth, extended highs, a delightfully full and natural midrange, and solid bass. You may find other pricier interconnects that excel in one specific area or another, but when it comes to overall system synergy, this is one cable you'll be "wearing" like a favorite pair of shoes.

Analysis Plus Silver Apex

\$1219/1m pr. interconnect; \$4399/8' speaker (add \$4849/8" with WBT0681spades)

Silver Apex projects one of the most open and natural voices NG has heard in a cable. It has a bold, ripe, textured midrange with plenty of inner detail. Neither romantically warm nor clinically cool, Silver Apex simply goes in the direction of the recording without commentary. Its sound is almost frictionless—a property that manifests itself as well-oiled speed, clarity, and fluency in reproducing

cavernous acoustic spaces. A flagship-level cable that can stand its ground with the best of the best. NG, 301

Cardas Clear Reflection

\$1250/1m pr. interconnect (RCA and XLR); \$3000/2.5m pr. speaker

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. KM, 254

Harmonic Technology Pro-7 Reference Armour Speaker and Armour Link III

\$1350/1m pr. RCA interconnect (\$400/0.5m add'l pr.); \$3700/8' pr. speaker

Harmonic Technology's latest top-line cable offerings are highly communicative and musically insightful. Across the board Armour imparts a wide spectrum of tonal color, micro-shading, and dynamic contrast. There is not an element in its sonic resume that suggests hype or overreach. In more general terms its tonal character is essentially neutral with the barest hint of a lighter complexion, a characteristic that often occurs in the company of quick transient behavior. What impressed NG's most of all was the HT Armour's ability to elicit dynamic gradients from recordings. A statement product that ranks with some of the most elite cables available. NG, 255

Siltech Legend 380

\$1400/1.5m RCA, \$1815/1.5m XLR interconnect; 380L, \$3174/2.5m speaker; 380P, \$1410/2m power

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Legend 380 was sonically and musically striking for its refined, natural balance, and capable of producing crisply defined images and soundstage boundaries. It's a detail-focused cable, not pushy in terms of aggressiveness, but not wishy-washy or laid-back either. Low-frequency information was superbly presented, attaining a sonic trifecta of pitch definition, grip, and extension. Key was its excellent resolution of dynamic contrast, transient attack, and textural complexity. The tactile feel of customary Siltech finish remains the personification of quality. NG, 323

Snake River Signature

\$1695/1m interconnect, RCA. \$1795 XLR; loudspeaker \$2095/3m; power cord \$1545/2m

Signature has all the elan and character of a high-end traditionalist. Fluid, clean, confident, and texturally colorful, it portrayed music with a warmly relaxed approach. It evinced excellent balance across a wide range of criteria—namely micro-dynamics, harmonic sustain, and top-to-bottom extension. Treble character was particularly smooth and easy. Bass response was equally tuneful in pitch and dynamics. A cable that embodies authentic high-end audio values, dollar value, and performance. NG, 328

Clarus Crimson

\$1740 RCA/\$2370 XLR interconnect; \$5760 speaker

These are no fire hoses, snaking around your equipment, but unobtrusive and flexible wires whose terminations are beyond reproach. While these cables will not provide any extraneous fireworks or a vast soundstage, it is their very subtlety that eventually draws your attention. The Crimson's are as elegant sounding as they are svelte. They supply by high-end standards an economical route to superb sonics

that is unobtrusive both in execution and fidelity. Seldom has JHb heard as grain-free a cable as the Clarus, which lives up to the Latin provenance of its name—clear and shining. JHb, 320

Furutech Reference III and Evolution

\$1749/1.2m pr. Reference III XLR interconnect; \$1529/1.2m RCA interconnect; \$1750/2m Reference III speaker; \$1460/1.8m Power Reference III cord; \$978/1.2m pr. Evolution II XLR interconnect, \$856/1.2m RCA interconnect; \$787/2m Evolution speaker

Furutech uses cryogenically treated, ultra-high-purity, OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) single-crystal copper conductors in both its mid-priced Evolution and premium-priced Reference III audio cables. The top models offer better connectors, superior dielectric materials, and passive EMI-absorption filters made from GC-303 (an EMI-absorbent material developed by 3M Company). Furutech's cables have great transparency and purity, plus an uncanny ability to block out noise. CM, 173

Tara Labs Air Evolution

\$1895 Interconnects, 1m, RCA (add \$60, XLR); \$2495 with EVO ground station system; speaker, \$4200/8', bananas & spades, \$4800/8' Air Evolution SP

Tara's Air Evolution opens wide the sonic window and conveys a rich, colorful tonality with clean textural shadings from the lowest bass to the uppermost treble. But the single most delightful impression is Air Evolution's soundstaging—full-on, uncropped, widescreen audio that touches the full dimensions of an orchestral concert hall. It portrays music with the same authenticity and naturalism encountered in the live experience. NG, 295

Nordost Frey 2

\$1924/1m pr. interconnect (\$400 per add'l half-meter pr.); \$3189/2m pr. speaker (\$687 per add'l half-meter pr.)

Occupying the sweet spot of Nordost's mid-priced Norse 2 line, the radically updated Frey 2 combines the high performance macro- and micro-dynamics that Nordost is famous for with richer mids and a brawnier, meatier bottom end that gives orchestral music more discernable ambience and weight. Of course, transient speed is on hand, but the Frey 2's are also a bit more controlled in the midbass and able to land a tighter, dynamic punch than most of the competition. In a word, the Frey 2s deliver flat out more fidelity to the live event. NG, 265

Audience Au24 SX

\$1999/1m pr. RCA interconnect; \$2640/1m pr. balanced; \$3616/2.5m speaker

Audience's latest flagship wire offers midrange weight and sweetness, vivid dynamic contrasts, excellent transient speed, sensitivity to delicate volume gradations, and a brilliance that casts light into the deepest corners of the soundstage, restoring air and lift to harmonics. A particular strength for all Audience cables is an often hard-to-achieve blend of tactile presence and back-of-the-hall reverberation. The Au24 SX strikes a fluid and natural balance of ease, articulation, and immersiveness. Flexible and easy to handle, too. NG, 269

Furutech Flux Cable Series

\$2150/1.2m pr. RCA Lineflux interconnect; \$2515/1.2m Silver Arrows II phono w/L-DIN or straight DIN plug; \$3100 Powerflux AC

The Furutech Flux cables land on the speedy side of sound delivery. They are extremely transparent and detailed and probably best coupled with

tubed electronics. A slight coolness pervades the cables, apart from the phono cable, which ranks among the best produced. The Flux cables transmit a wealth of detail but are never harsh. The quality of workmanship, as with all Furutech products, is stunning. The connectors are a pleasure to handle and use. JHb, 239

Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval \$2239/8' pr.

The Big Silver Oval is a speaker cable that brims with resolution and dynamic life. Constructed of pure silver over a stabilizing strand of OFC woven into AP's patented hollow-oval geometry, this is a cable you don't listen to, but rather listen through. Recorded music simply flows in an earthy and tonally authentic manner. Harmonics align; images and soundstage conform with no serious sonic missteps. And it's real-world affordable. NG, 215

VooDoo Stradivarius Amati

\$2300/1m RCA pr.; \$2450/1m XLR pr.

VooDoo's Stradivarius Amati interconnect offers a full-bodied, ripe, and colorfully detailed bounty of musicality. Tonally, it plays it straight down the middle with no obvious frequency hiccups. It has a forward-leaning character that lends soloists and vocals energy and presence. On a scale of warm-to-cool, Amati tilts ever so slightly to the cooler range—a subtle trait perceivable during high-drive wind or brass passages or upper-octave violin solos. Of note was its mid and lower midrange eloquence that brought to life the deep voicings and trailing resonances of cello, bass viol, and bassoon, or the throaty bloom of a tenor sax. The Stradivarius Amati knocks on the door of some of the best cabling out there. NG, 311

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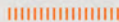
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Nordost Tyr 2

\$3299/1m pr. interconnect;
\$6379/1m pr. (\$1925 add'l
1m) speaker; \$3684/1m
power cord

A loom of Nordost's flat, FEP (fluorinated ethylene propylene) Tyr 2 interconnect and cable brings transparency, precision, purity, depth, texture, openness, and expansiveness to the listening experience. WG, 305

Audience frontRow

\$3300/ 1m RCA/\$3800
1m balanced interconnect;
\$5500/2.5m speaker; \$6440
5' power

The new statement wire from Audience proved worthy of its name. Led by a full-throated midrange, highly focused imaging, and a "you are there" transparency, frontRow summoned up the electric excitement of the live concert experience like few cables NG has experienced. Dimensionality, always a strength with Audience cabling, was even more well defined. Audience's top-notch wire, although not inexpensive, seemed boundless in its responsiveness, speed, and musicality. Highly recommended for systems of superior resolution. NG, 332

Wireworld Platinum Eclipse 8

\$3600/1m pr. interconnect;
\$20,000/2m pr. speaker single
termination, \$20,200/2m
pr. bi-wire termination

The summit of Wireworld's current thinking in this field is Platinum Eclipse 8, which sports newly refined cosmetics and heavy-gauge OCC silver conductors. There's no hype or spectacle here. Only a neutrally balanced presentation with just a pleasing gust of midrange warmth. Plus, it sets a symphonic soundstage with the precision of the staff preparing the dining room table at Downton Abbey. A "state-of-the-art" component. NG, 244

Cardas Clear and Clear Beyond

\$3960/2.5m pr. Clear inter-
connect; \$6650/2.5m pr.
Clear Beyond interconnect;
\$5915/3m pr. Clear speaker;
\$11,800/3m pr. Clear Beyond
speaker

This thick blue cable takes the patented technologies in Cardas cables to new heights. The balanced and single-ended interconnects and the loudspeaker cable are functionally identical in sound. But that doesn't mean a "house" sound; instead, Clear sounds as close as you can get to having no sound. Eclipsed in performance only by Cardas' Clear Beyond. Where Clear used four conductors, Clear Beyond features eight, meticulously built up using multi-gauge strands in a "Golden Section" symmetrical tri-axial design. The larger strands are built upon this core until the inside of each conductor looks like a copper nautilus shell in cross section. Clear Beyond's eight conductors can be used to bi-wire your loudspeakers or for "shotgun" bi-wiring. NG, 226

Kimber Kable Select

\$4100/1m pr. RCA KS 1036
interconnect; \$4100/1m pr.
XLR KS 1136 interconnect;
\$30,400/2.5m/pr. KS 6068
speaker

Everything about this wire screams extreme. Its sophisticated construction uses vari-strand silver and solid-core silver conductors. Sonically, there's a feathery light-footedness to its sound that doesn't so much add power as it does transient speed. By virtue of a bottomless well of dynamic contrast and tonal color the Kimber unearths energy and atmosphere in even the most familiar recordings. NG

WyWires Diamond Series

\$4495/1.2m pr. RCA and XLR
interconnect; \$7995/8' pr.
speaker

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. NG, 264

Shunyata Sigma V2

\$4500/1m RCA, \$5000/1m
XLR interconnect; \$9950/2m
speaker

This new V2 generation of Sigma interconnects and speaker cables performs considerably better than their predecessors. They can make a less-than-stellar system sound much closer to a super-system than we thought possible, so well did they tame underlying smear, grain, and glare. More subtle details emerged with ease; dynamic timing became more coherent and cogent; spatial details became more apparent; and musical flow and expression benefited from greater overall accuracy. KM, 331

Esprit Audio Eureka Phono

\$5399/1.2m (DIN-XLR \$5699)

If there is such a thing as a cable that speaks fluent "analog," Esprit has produced it. Exhibiting premium performance at every level, Eureka offers superb micro-dynamics, inner detail, fluidity, and timing, with a grasp of the intricacies of texture, timbre, and harmonic density that

prove spellbinding. Expensive, yes, but capable of eliciting the finest from any top-notch LP playback rig. NG, 328

Purist Audio Design Dominus Luminist Revision

\$5970/1m pr. interconnect;
\$12,480/1.5m pr. speaker

The all-silver Dominus is very detailed, very dynamic, very rich. Less open than Nordost Valhalla and darker in balance, it is also quieter, and because of its fluid-damped construction, virtually immune to floorborne and airborne vibration. JV

Analysis Plus Micro Golden Oval

\$5999/1m pr. RCA or XLR
interconnect

It's said that silence is golden, a notion reinforced by the low noise of AP's top-tier Micro Golden Oval interconnect. In this case silence is almost literally golden, as the cable has a coating of pure gold over its 18AWG copper conductors. Representing the most advanced version of AP's hollow-oval geometry, the Micro Golden Oval is as stirring, warm, resonant, and musically natural an interconnect as NG has heard, and must be considered a state-of-the-art contender. NG, 272

Esprit Audio Lumina

\$6499/1.2m pr. RCA inter-
connect (\$8249/2m XLR);
\$5995/2m pr. speaker

From the gleam of its connectors to its carbon-fiber accents, everything about Lumina oozes quality and opulence. Lumina communicated a faithful tonal balance that hewed ever so slightly to the richer, warmer-blooded, more laid-back side of the spectrum. Central to its character was the weight and power of its midrange response, which, if it were a bar of chocolate, would be of a darker variety, complex and savory. There was a density and foundation



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that backed every note, and it really sang on top, displaying a combination of sweetness and speed. Top-notch. NG, 306

AudioQuest Dragon

\$9500 1m RCA; \$11,900 1m XLR

This interconnect does things RH had never heard from a cable—or more precisely, Dragon allowed the system to reveal previously hidden qualities. The midrange was simply luscious, liquid, and stunningly present and vivid. Vocals were completely untethered to the speakers and projected against an absolutely silent background. This had the effect of increasing the sense of presence and fostering the startling impression of the vocalist being in the room. Another aspect of Dragon that is unique is that it conveys more richly saturated tone color. The sound, from the lowest bass to the top treble, simply has greater body and weight. RH's reference. RH, 331

Nordost Valhalla 2

\$9999/1m pr. interconnect (\$1400 per add'l half-meter pr.); \$12,759/1.25m pr. speaker (\$1980 per add'l half-meter pr.)

These cables and interconnects reside near the zenith of audio reproduction, offering an almost unlimited palette of tonal colors, exceptional transparency, and explosive dynamics. The Valhalla 2's ability to reproduce layer after layer of orchestral detail is as engrossing as it is astounding, a testament to their speed and precision. The transient fidelity of the Valhalla 2 is also very difficult to quarrel with. Some listeners may prefer a more sumptuous presentation, but for that there is always the very summit of Nordost's line, the Odin cables. JHb, 254

Transparent Audio XL Gen 6

\$12,000/1m pr. balanced interconnect; \$19,000/8' pr. speaker

These interconnects and speaker cables can be set to match the loads of specific components, and the end results are clearer and more revealing than both the previous-generation Transparent and virtually all of the competition he's had the opportunity to audition. Even if you are a cable atheist or agnostic, you should really audition the Generation 5s. AHC, 264 (new Gen 6 not reviewed)

Synergistic Research SRX

\$12,995/1m pr. RCA and XLR interconnect; \$29,995/8' pr. speaker cable; \$10,000/6" power cord

Ted Denney & Co.'s latest creations, the tunable, actively shielded, multi-stranded, pure six-nines-silver SRX cables and interconnects, are the most sophisticated products Synergistic Research has developed since SR's original Galileo. They are also the best-sounding—by quite a fair margin. Sonically, what they reminded JV of (uncannily) are Crystal Cable's Art Series Da Vincis. At first, JV thought the SRXes might not be quite as low in noise or as high in neutrality and “completeness” as the phenomenal Da Vincis, which literally set the gold standard in these regards, but after installing a complete loom of SRX in his MBL system he's no longer sure. Though these two outstanding cables sound remarkably similar, there are still enough differences in nuance and convenience between them to make your choice more a matter of system compatibility and user taste than absolute sonic excellence. There is this, as well: The SRXes are considerably less expensive than the Da Vincis, if that makes a difference to folks buying at these exalted prices. One of

JV's references, and the 2022 co-winner of TAS Cable of the Year Award. JV, 333

Transparent Audio Opus Gen 6

\$14,000/1m pr. RCA interconnect, \$23,500/1m pr. balanced interconnect; \$43,000/8' speaker

Jacob Heilbrunn found that Transparent's Opus interconnects and speaker cables were essential to getting the best performance from the Wilson XLF loudspeaker. Opus emphasizes tonal fidelity, spatiality, and low noise. JH said, “I have not heard a cable that delivered more resolute bass, more timbral accuracy, and more hall ambience than the Opus.” JHb, 225 (new Gen 6 not reviewed)

Ansuz Acoustics D2 Series

\$16,500/1m pr. Signalz interconnect; \$18,700/2m pr. Speakz speaker; \$11,600/1m Mainz power cord

Lars Kristensen and Michael Børresen have (famously) had hands in designing many cables, interconnects, and power products for other companies. The Ansuz line is their first effort on their own, and it's a helluva debut. This is one of the most lifelike wires (a whole lot of) money can buy. JV

Echolle Limited Edition

\$19,500, 3' balanced interconnect; \$23,500, 6' speaker cable; \$16,000, 6' power cord

These exotic interconnects and speaker cables from Echolle, sister company to Absolare, feature not just custom design and geometry, but custom metallurgy. With a solid-core conductor so thick it's almost a rod, the cables are heavier and less pliable than most. Although priced at the upper end of the spectrum, they deliver first-rate sound. Rather than presenting 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. Among the cleanest and most transparent cables RH has heard. RH, 280

Crystal Cable Art Series Da Vinci

\$23,900/1m pr. interconnect (\$14,600 per add'l meter); \$46,500/2m speaker cable (\$15,800 per add'l meter)

Crystal Cable's and Siltech's chief engineer Edwin Rijnveld's latest top-of-the-line creations, the Art Series Da Vinci wires, are the quietest components of their type that JV has ever heard. There are sound technical reasons for this: Edwin's Art Series Da Vinci wires have a newly constructed dual-layer shield—one layer a mesh of pure G9 silver/gold-alloy strands, the other of pure MonoX silver—which provides verifiably wider immunity against EM and RF fields, lower ground impedance, lower inductance, much lower capacitance (three times lower than JV's reference Crystal Cable Ultimate Dreams), and lower current distortion. The improvement isn't only a matter of measurements on paper; it is as immediately audible as the shockingly deep silences of tape and optical-cartridge playback are—and fosters the exact same impression of neutrality, completeness, and higher fidelity. Da Vinci is a genuine step forward in cable, interconnect, and power cord design—not a different or more appetizing “flavor,” but a lowering of the characteristic noises (and susceptibility to noises) that give wires their flavors. JV, 328

Nordost Odin 2

\$29,499/1m pr. interconnect (\$3250 per add'l half-meter pair); \$39,599/1m pr. speaker (\$5280 per add'l 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.



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Any lingering sense of aggressiveness in the treble that existed with Odin 1 has been utterly effaced by Nordost's latest effort. What emerges with the 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 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. JHb, 270

AudioQuest Dragon Zero/ Dragon Bass

Zero \$34,100 8' pr. speaker; Bass, \$26,100 8' pr. speaker

This new top-level speaker cable from AudioQuest is easily the best cable the company has ever made. Dragon Zero features AudioQuest's finest materials and technologies, including 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. RH

DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS

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 many alternatives, regardless of price. AT, 226

Straight Wire 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. AT, 226

AudioQuest Forest Ethernet

\$89/1.5m

The inexpensive Forest is a worthy upgrade over generic Ethernet cables, delivering greater space and dimensionality, smoother timbres, and wider dynamics. RH, 240

AudioQuest Carbon USB

\$179/0.75m, \$229/1.5m

One of the go-to USB cables for computer-audio fans, the Carbon is neutral without sounding bleached, dynamic without sounding piercing, detailed without sounding analytical. AT, 226

Clarus Cable Crimson USB

\$250/1m

The Crimson USB nails the midrange of the musical spectrum with fullness of body, warmth, transient speed, and an overall honesty that calms and relaxes the ear. Its light touch with difficult-to-capture vocal sibilance was excellent. A terrific upgrade cable (a standard-setter in this range) for nascent and skilled computer-audio fans alike. NG, 254

Wireworld Starlight 8 Ethernet

\$275/1m, \$350/2m

Wireworld's Cat8 Ethernet cable is designed to propel data at up to 40 gigabit speeds. Starlight exhibited an ease and a lack of tension, plus a heightening of inner detail. With Starlight single note lines or heavily orchestrated sections sang with the clarity and focus of a Zeiss lens—no smear, no smudge. On the transient level, Starlight sharpened the attack off a piano keyboard, and sustained harmonic energy just a little

while longer. Did it leave any performance on the table? Well, there is Wireworld Platinum. NG, 283

Straight Wire Info-Link AES/ Ebu or Coaxial Digital Cable

\$360/1m, \$490/1.5m

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.

Nordost Heimdall 2 USB

\$599/1m (\$120 per add'l meter)

Nordost's mid-line Heimdall 2 USB cable is capable of detail, body, texture, and spatial resolution. The Heimdall 2 is also characterized by very low levels of grain, with smooth instrumental and vocal textures. KM, 261

Wireworld Platinum Starlight 8 USB

\$600/1m

The seemingly minor differences between Wireworld's Silver and Platinum Starlight models yield a major sonic impact. In AT's experience, this wire has no peer in soundstage size, airiness, tempo tracking, dynamics, bass pitch, timbral realism, and lack of grain. AT, 226

AudioQuest Diamond USB

\$699/0.75m, \$849/1.5m

This 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, 221

Audience Studio ONE USB

\$895/1m

This USB cable is simply sensational in every way. The studio ONE USB's clarity, dimensionality, and gorgeous

timbre put it in a class by itself. It seems to have no signature of its own, but rather more transparently conveys what's coming from your computer. The dual-cable design separates the signal-carrying and power-carrying conductors. RH, 254 (formerly Au24 SE+ USB)

Wireworld Platinum Starlight 8 Ethernet

\$900/1m

Designed for top-flight network-streaming rigs, the Platinum registered as a significant step up from Wireworld's Starlight 8. The Platinum, which boasts OCC-7N solid-silver conductors, improved network performance by instilling a sense of musical fluidity, ease, and continuousness in each performance. It also added that final dollop of resolution that you might not have known was missing. NG

AudioQuest Diamond Ethernet

\$1295/0.75m, \$1995/1.5m

If you're using a generic Ethernet cable anywhere in your computer-audio setup, you haven't heard your system's potential. Even in a link such as a NAS drive to computer, AudioQuest's Diamond Ethernet renders a noticeable improvement in resolution and ease. RH

Wireworld Platinum Starlight 8 SPDIF

\$1900/1m RCA or BNC

Equipped with high-performance parts like carbon-fiber plugs and OCC-7N solid-silver conductors, Platinum Starlight gave the digital signal the luxury ride it was meant to enjoy—fast, smooth, and effortless. Suitable for top-flight systems, Platinum Starlight 8 ensures you won't miss a byte. NG



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Kimber Kable KS-USB-AG
\$2100/1m

Kimber established the widest, most detailed soundstage NG has heard from a USB cable. A cable with strong tonal and micro-dynamic contrasts, it was the embodiment of speed—with a hint of added top-end brilliance and extension—and so revealing only the finest DACs need apply. Candidly, the breadth of its performance would be lost in the entry-level world. NG, 254

Shunyata Research Sigma USB
\$2500

Shunyata Research has created a whole host of exceptional products over the years, but the Sigma USB cable just might be its greatest achievement. The Sigma USB delivers a breathtaking clarity that seems to strip away any trace of fog or veiling to more vividly portray instrumental tone color and texture. Timbres

are simply more vivid and real sounding, an impression amplified by the Sigma USB's stunning resolution of space and air around instrumental outlines. The Sigma USB is also outstanding dynamically, sounding quick and clean, but not etched or fatiguing. RH

Shunyata Research Omega Ethernet
\$3000/1.5m

Shunyata's Omega Ethernet cable is expensive, but worth it. The cable is built to extremely tight tolerances, and features Shunyata's patented technologies including a module that reduces common-mode noise, along with high-purity copper and silver conductors in the company's own geometry. Terminations are an all-metal design from Germany for superior isolation from outside noise. The sonic result is a dramatic lowering of the noise floor,

and with that reduction, greater resolution of fine micro-details that bring an unprecedented level of realism to streamed music. RH

Shunyata Research Omega USB
\$3500

This USB cable is much better than any other USB cable RH has heard. It is so good it may even be the most outstanding product Shunyata has produced—and that's saying something. Omega simply doesn't have the "chalky" mid-range and treble that plagues USB interfaces, replacing that graininess with smooth liquidity. Dynamics are stunning, and the bass extends to the netherworld. RH

POWER CORDS**Wireworld Stratus 7**
\$160/2m

Offering competitive performance with elite power cords

costing many times their price, the Wireworld Stratus 7 have a defiantly flat profile, and are lightweight and available in color choices. Another major factor in the Stratus' favor—they are pliable enough to negotiate corners. NG, 208

Shunyata Research Venom 14
\$175

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 soft veiling that lowers transparency and resolution.

Audience forte f3 powerChord
\$250/1.75m

Sheer excellence in the entry-level power-cord bracket, the Audience forte f3 is a definitive winner. It will lift the performance of any system, as it lowers the noise floor,



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improves transient attacks, and permits a wider expression of dynamic range and low-level detail. The hot tip is opting for the Audience's forte V8 Power Strip; then this cord will be included. NG, 311

Transparent Audio High-Performance Power Cord

\$340/2m

The \$320 High-Performance Power Cord (HPPC) is a vast improvement over stock AC cords and might be the most cost-effective upgrade possible in an entry-level system. Recently updated. NG, 196

Kimber Kable PK-10 Ascent

\$564/2m

Years ago, Kimber Kable's original PK10 Palladian was a jaw-dropper, with revelatory soundstaging, dimensionality, and openness. The PK-10AG picks up where the Palladian left off, but in a more malleable, far less costly package.

It has a rich dense midrange with an emphasis on soundstage depth. Bass extension and sustain earn high marks. It provides a rich, heavy, even slightly overripe (depending on your system) beat but is nicely detailed and uncompressed. NG, 208

Shunyata Research Venom V10 NR, and V14 NR Digital Power Cables

\$600, \$400

Advancements in its popular Venom line led to the creation of the NR Series (NR signifying noise reduction). Still modestly priced, NR power cords contain many of Shunyata's advanced technologies and custom-manufactured parts, including electrostatic shields to reduce radiated noise. The Venoms are Shunyata's lowest price power cables with built-in CCI filters that measurably reduce power-line noise generated by components. In the areas of

instrumental timbre, sensitivity to micro-dynamics, and overall tonal refinement, the NR power cords were a clear improvement over Venom HC cords. The results were especially transformational when the cords were paired with Shunyata's own power conditioner, the Hydra Delta D6, as a complete system. NG, 305

Audience powerChord Forte f5

\$699/1.75m; Forte f5 w/ Super Charge \$899/1.75m

The Audience powerChords offer bass clarity, weight, and pitch resolution that place them at or near the top of the affordable-power-cord pack. Except for a slight treble congestion and somewhat laid-back overall presentation, there is little deviation from tonal neutrality. NG, 208

VooDoo Infinity Digital/Power/Air Spectra PC

\$750-\$950/6'/\$2100/6'

Compared with stock power cords, going full VooDoo is a little like squeegeeing the windows and grabbing a dustbuster. The common perception of images sounding pinched or constricted is largely reduced. The interplay between musicians, orchestral sections, and the ambient space between them grows 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 also have a cooler overall tonal character, leaning toward a more clinical interpretation of the music. Transients were quick and dynamics very good. Bass response overall was well extended, controlled, and timbrally exacting. NG, 284



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DISC**

Furutech DPS-4.1**\$1680 (Bulk cable sold by the meter, \$480 per meter)**

Everything that goes into DPS-4.1 can be found directly online or through a dealer network. The parts are available to home users who are interested in finishing their own custom lengths and terminations, and who are handy enough with a crimping tool and a soldering iron to complete the task. The home assembly approach of the DPS-4.1 may not be for everyone, but the finished product performs on a par with some of the top contenders, at a considerable savings. NG, 317

Audience Studio One power-Chord**Studio One MP powerChord, \$1850 for 5'; Studio One LP, \$1650 for 5'; Studio One Full Power, \$2600 for 5'**

The new Studio One version of Audience's already superb Au24 AC cords render an across-the-board sonic improvement. Studio One brings to the table new connectors with higher-quality metallurgy and lower-mass terminations. Moreover, Audience now offers the Studio One in three versions, low-power for DACs, preamps, and phonostages, medium-power for lower-powered integrated amplifiers, and high-power for power amplifiers. Each delivers a low noise floor, neutrality, an almost preternatural sense of recorded space and ambience and seemingly effortless flow and immediacy. Last but not least, these cords are among the most flexible available, very handy for angled runs. NG, 219, 245

Shunyata Research Alpha XC v2**\$2300/1.75m**

The Alpha XC v2 power cord may be less than half the price of Shunyata's flagship Sigma but you wouldn't know that from listening to it. The XC

delivers blacker backgrounds, enhanced textural density, smoother treble, and greater resolution in a flexible and sanely priced power cord. RH

Harmonic Technology Magic Power OCC Silver III AC 10**\$3100/1.5m**

Designed for use primarily with front-end components, the Silver III AC 10 delivers tremendous clarity, smoothness, and definition across the entire frequency spectrum, and does so without constricting dynamics or softening the treble. A built-in noise filter acts as an AC conditioner to remove line noise. SK

Shunyata Research Sigma NR**\$3500**

Shunyata's new Sigma NR AC cords raise the bar in performance in the category. Even compared with Shunyata's reference-grade Alpha, the Sigma delivers a quieter background, a more richly detailed soundstage, and greater dimensionality. Each cable behaves like a mini-power conditioner by incorporating noise-filtering technology. SSC, 311

AudioQuest Dragon**\$4500/1m, Source—\$5500/1m, High Power**

In Jacob Heilbrunn's view, these AC cords are very much the best of the power products that AudioQuest makes. Though he greatly enjoyed the AudioQuest Niagara 7000 Low-Z Power Noise Dissipation System, he feels that these power cords have even more of an immediate sonic impact. Compared with the towering prices of some top-notch rival power cables, the AudioQuest Dragon Source and High-Current wires are also something of a steal. They are remarkably effective products that anyone interested in experimenting with power cords should consider. JHb, 291

VooDoo Cable Phoenix/Dragon/Tesla**\$4700/\$3250/\$2900**

These top-end power cords are made from a mix of exotic materials and construction techniques, including pure-silver, single-crystal, continuous-cast, Ohno eight-gauge conductors and rhodium-plated-over-tellurium copper connectors, individually insulated with velocity-matched Teflon dielectrics and heavily braided silver-plated copper shielding. MC found that the VooDoo power cords produced an instantly apparent increase in resolution and separation of instruments. These improvements are due in part to a lowered noise floor and improved conveyance of speed and articulation. In addition, the system's electronics seemed to get a boost in channel separation. The improved sense of resonance and timbre in the bottom end clearly comes from that lowered noise floor in conjunction with an improvement in phase coherence. That the VooDoo power cables resulted in a profound improvement in almost every aspect of MC's system is flat fact—incontrovertible and astounding. MC, 334

Audience Au24 SX power-Chord**\$5060/6' (\$4660/6' Neutrik)**

Au24 SX represents Audience's latest wire geometry. Compared with its forerunner SE, SX presents an even lower noise floor—a virtual black palette of calm. The upshot is a soundstage of rock-solid stability and continuity, with more fully realized dimensionality and depth. A state-of-the-art cord. NG, 291

Shunyata Research Omega QR**\$9000 (QR-s, \$7500)**

Shunyata's Omega QR power cords use the company's VTX-Ag conductors in massively thick array (AWG4). It also features carbon-fiber

headshells and CopperConn terminations. When used with Shunyata's Everest conditioner, the Omega offers seemingly unlimited current delivery, a dead-quiet noise floor, and a greater sense of instrumental presence. The Omega XC (\$7000, not reviewed) adds noise-reduction technology right in the cable. RH, 312

Crystal Cable Art Series DaVinci**\$14,600 (\$8600 per add 1 meter)**

Like Crystal's superb Da Vinci cables and interconnects, this flexible, beautifully made, silver-and-gold wire stuff costs an arm and a foot. But...if you got the money, it's very much worth it. This is the quietest, most transparent power cord JV has heard—gorgeous in color, unstinting in dynamics, unexceeded in resolution. JV, 333

ROOM TREATMENTS**ASC Tube Traps****\$498–\$2638**

Tube Traps from Acoustic Sciences Corporation are indispensable to improving your system's sound. They can solve a wide range of acoustic problems with strategic placement and orientation. Boomy bass can be cured with a pair of 16" Full Rounds in the corners behind the loudspeakers. Placed along the sidewalls between you and the loudspeakers, Tube Traps kill unwanted sidewall reflections, prevent flutter echo, and aid in diffusion. A single Tube Trap in the center of the wall behind the loudspeakers can expand soundstage depth. There are lots of questionable acoustic products on the market, but Tube Traps are the real deal. New IsoThermal version (not yet tested) claims to double absorption below 60Hz. RH



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Acoustic Geometry Room Packs

\$580–\$9519

Acoustic Geometry's Room Packs are extremely effective in taming room problems and improving sound quality. These affordable packages take the guesswork out of choosing what acoustic treatments your room needs and where to position them. The components of the Room Packs are also available separately. The CornerSorbers (\$999 per pair) remove bass bloat and increase definition and dynamic fidelity. Curve Diffusors (\$399 each) improve soundstaging, articulation, and bass. A full Pro Room Pack 10 (\$8619) can transform your system. RH, 290

Auralex Acoustics Studiofoam Wedges

Price varies

If you've logged much time in home recording studios, odds are that you've already seen Auralex Studiofoam Wedges in action. Studiofoam is highly absorptive, and therefore can be just the ticket for taming slap echoes or comb-filtering effects.

A/V RoomService Ltd. Metu Acoustic Panels and Corner Traps

Price depends on configuration

Although the set of Metus that came to JV—and that he now depends on—came in a particularly unattractive Fudg-side brown, these wall-hanging, cloth-faced, rectangular acoustic panels (mounted to wooden backboards) and cloth-faced corner traps can be precisely color-matched to your paint scheme or be made to look like framed art of any kind (from posters to paintings). Designed by Norman Varney, who did the acoustical treatment of Robert Harley's previous room, they are the real deal—precisely calibrated room treatments that use a

patent-pending adjustable diaphragmatic/sound absorptive technology to reliably reduce all sorts of colorations. JV

RPG Diffusor Systems B.A.D. (Binary Amplitude Diffusor) Panels

Price varies

RPG's B.A.D. panels are thin absorptive diffuser panels that can help tame problem room acoustics without quashing dynamics or swallowing midrange and high-frequency details. The design of B.A.D. panels is deceptively simple, but their effects can be remarkable. In rooms treated with B.A.D. panels, speakers often exhibit lower coloration, more focused imaging, and deeper soundstages.

Stillpoints Aperture II Panels \$960 each (all color combinations)

These 2' x 2' panels (four to six are recommended) do wonders for soundstage depth, image focus, detail resolution, and midbass clarity. They can be positioned freely or mounted on Stillpoints' dedicated stands that can hold up to three panels. A pair of stands, each supporting three Aperture panels and positioned just outside and in front of the speakers, renders a significant increase in soundstage depth, image specificity, focus, air between images, and soundstage symmetry. RH

Shakti Hallographs

\$1195/pr.

Master of the inexplicable, Shakti's Ben Piazza has followed up on his magic "Shakti stones" with yet another impossible-to-explain-but-effective-as-claimed item, the Hallographs. With direct-radiating or omni speakers, these large, rotatable, free-standing, tuning-fork-shaped items work some kind of voodoo when placed in the corners and/or to the sides of a room, masking chaotic wall reflections

and "clarifying" the soundfield (just as Shakti says they do). Indispensable. JV

SteinMusic H2-Plus Acoustic Harmonizer

\$2458 (package of 2 including stands)

The brainchild of an immensely likable, utterly sincere, and wholly devoted German music lover, Holger Stein, the H2 Harmonizer System is yet another impossible-to-explain room treatment that works—in this case, markedly increasing three-dimensionality, better "disappearing" loudspeakers, widening the soundstage, enriching tone color, and heightening transient energy, top to bottom, to an extent that's kinda incredible. To make its magic the H2 boxes use ruby (and other) crystal materials (to which a small amount of current is applied) in concert with various "stones" and wall appliances. Magic it may well be, but the differences between "before" and "after" aren't subtle, are repeatable, and are finely adjustable to taste. JV

Synergistic Research ART System

Price varies

This amazing, expandable system of wall-mounted and floor-seated Helmholtz-like radiators (the eldest form of acoustic treatment) from SR's Ten Denney predictably enriches timbres, clarifies detail, and tightens images without constricting the soundstage. As far as JV can tell—and he's had the ARTs for years—they have no downside. Indeed, along with the Shakti Hallographs and Stein Harmonizers, the ART (Acoustic Room Treatment) System is one of the most effective passive room treatments he has used. Like the Shaktis it has become an indispensable tool without which his listening room simply doesn't sound "right"—and music played back in it

doesn't sound as realistic, expansive, and delicious. JV

Synergistic Research Atmosphere Infinity/UEF Room Treatment

Infinity, \$3495; UEF Dots, \$295/10-pack; HFT, \$299/5-pack

Synergistic's latest twist on Helmholtz-like radiators are HFT thimbles and UEF dots that "ring" salubriously in response to a signal emitted by Synergistic's active Atmosphere Infinity Tuning Module. The combination of module, HFTs, and UEFs really does dramatically change the acoustic of your room in completely predictable, user-selectable ways. Further tweaks include UEF acoustic panels (\$549/4-pack) and the Black Box, which together make for a uniquely ingenious and effective room-treatment system. This is one you've gotta hear. JV, 280

PERSONAL AUDIO

Schiit Audio Magni 3 Headphone Amplifier

\$109

For a little over a C-note Schiit has created a headphone amp can not only power hard-to-drive headphones but is also quiet enough to use with in-ear monitors. It sounds great, has surprisingly good build-quality, and delivers superb technical performance. The Magni3 offers excellent bass and sub-bass control, pitch definition, and drive, as well as a very dynamic upper midrange. The Magni3 provides a simple and cost-effective way to power a wide variety of headphones at or near their optimum sonic potential. SS, 280

Schiit Modius/Magnius DAC/Headphone Amplifier

\$229 (Modius)/\$199 (Magnius)

Love and marriage, and peaches and cream; some things naturally go together. Schiit

Our engineers breathed new L.I.F.E.S. into our latest amplifiers



L-507Z

Integrated Amplifier



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Audio has added another potential combination to this pantheon of duos, the Modius DAC and Magnius preamplifier and headphone amp. Whether you're an experienced audiophile who needs the basic building blocks for a nearfield computer or second system or a refugee from the world of Bluetooth smart speakers looking for a better listening experience, the Schiit Modius and Magnius could be an ideal cost-effective, yet aurally impressive, solution. SS, 311

Audeze LCD-2 Classic Headphones

\$799

The LCD-2 Classic uses large ultra-thin film diaphragm planar magnetic drivers with a double-sided magnetic structure. It differs from the original LCD-2 in several ways. The most immediately noticeable difference is that instead of a bamboo wood end caps the LCD Classic uses a glass-infused plastic with a finish that resembles a powder-coated metal. The biggest difference that will influence sonics is that the LCD-2 Classic lacks the Fazer elements that were developed after several generations of LCD-2s were released. SS

NXEars Opera In-Ear

\$799

What makes NXEars universal-fit in-ear unique is their primary focus on alleviating the negative aural effects of something they call "the occlusion effect," which is the pressure build-up in listener's ear canals caused by low frequencies. All NXEars employ a new and proprietary acoustic/mechanical innovation that they call "aperiodic ground loading" (AGL) to correct the problem. They are well constructed with premium components, amply accessorized, and carefully engineered to minimize listen-

er fatigue. The Opera in-ears excelled in most performance areas with exemplary sound-staging abilities. SS, 332

MDR-Z1R Headphones

\$2299

The MDR-Z1R headphones are special. Nothing quite matches their combination of comfort, sound, and compatibility with a wide range of playback devices. Bass extension through the MDR-Z1R was as good as I've heard from any headphone. Comfort is also among the best available. While not completely a closed design, the MDR-Z1R does offer some attenuation of outside noise.

ZMF Verité Closed Headphones

\$2499

All ZMF headphones are hand-assembled in small batches in the USA. The Verité Closed was designed to compete with the best, and to Steven Stone's ears, succeeds. If you require a premium-quality headphone that has some attenuation of outside noise, that you can wear for hours at a time, and that has a relaxed and exceedingly natural harmonic balance while still having excellent low bass extension, the ZMF Verité Closed should be on your audition list.

Meze Empeyrean Headphones

\$2999

The Empeyrean was conceived as Meze's cost-no-object headphone. At the heart of the Empeyrean is a patent-pending, hybrid planar-magnetic driver that combines—on one diaphragm—two independently shaped voice-coil sections: a circular section optimized for upper-midrange and high frequencies; and a larger serpentine section optimized for mid/bass performance. The result is a headphone that offers a fundamentally natural

and organic sound but is also extraordinarily revealing and detailed.

Astell&Kern Ultima SP2000 Portable Player

\$3499

The Ultima SP2000 is Astell&Kern's top of the line portable player. It features a AK4499EQ DAC chip, dual band Wi-Fi support, AK Connect for streaming from home libraires, 768/32 PCM and 22.4MHz DSD support, and it's Roon-ready. Using A&K's Open App Service, the SP2000 supports all major streaming services except Apple and Amazon. The SP2000 offers a level of finesse and transparency that few competitors can equal and could well be the last portable player you ever need to purchase.

Dan Clark Stealth Headphones

\$3999

The Stealth's overall level of fit and finish alone elevates it into the upper regions of premium headphones. Whether you're like SS and have many headphones with a multiplicity of sonic signatures, or the kind of listener who wants just one reference pair of headphones that has it "right," the Stealth should be experienced to hear, see, and feel what a truly reference headphone can deliver in terms of superb sound coupled with supremely comfortable fit and ergonomics. SS, 334

Meze Elite Headphones

\$4000

Meze Audio headphones are the result of a unique design collaboration between Meze Audio and Rinaro Isodynamics. Rinaro are located in Ukraine, with offices in Romania. The Meze Elite are, in every way, a reference-quality headphone that earns its flagship status and price. The Elites are worthy competition for other flagship headphones

such as the Dan Clark Stealth, Focal Utopia II, ZMF Verité, and Warwick Bravura. The Elite's strong points are that it is exceedingly easy to drive, supremely comfortable, ruggedly built, and sounds wonderful. SS, 333

Warwick Bravura Headphones \$5995 w/M1 amp

When SS reviewed the Warwick Acoustics Sonoma M1 headphone system in 2017, he was impressed by the sonics. Only ergonomic issues prevented it from garnering a slack-jawed glazed-eyed rave. Now, five years later, the Sonoma M1 system has been replaced by the new Warwick Acoustics Bravura M1 system. With its ergonomic improvements the Bravura ranks the best headphone system SS has experienced so far and may well be the endgame headphone system for anyone looking for a state-of-the-art reference headphone. SS, 326

Stax X9000 Headphones

\$6200

The electrostatic technology employed by the SR-X9000 was originally developed for the SR-X headset. It has evolved over the years. The latest design, which Stax calls MLER-3, which stands for Multi-Layer Electrodes, evolved from the MLER-2 which can be found on Stax SR-009 headset. I have no doubt that the Stax SR-X9000 ranks as Stax' finest effort to date. It checks all the boxes to qualify as a world-class headphone that's one half of a reference system when combined with the SRM-T8000 amplifier. SS, forthcoming

ACCESSORIES

AcouTech Electronics Stylus Force Gauge

\$79

Getting the most out of any turntable requires accurate vertical tracking force—and yes, kids, you can easily hear

slight changes. 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 only on moving coils.

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 BPW Binding-Post Wrench **\$17.95**

AudioQuest's binding-post wrench, featuring durable metal socket-inserts, eliminates the need for a bulky socket set. This compact double-ended nut driver, small enough to slip into a shirt or pants pocket, fits 7/16" and 1/2" binding posts. Essential for tightening down speaker cables to speakers and amps.

AudioQuest Conductive Fiber Record Brush **\$29.95**

This new and improved version of AudioQuest's ubiquitous carbon-fiber wonder 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. JV, 274

AudioQuest JitterBug **\$69**

This little device looks like a miniature plug-in DAC but 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, offering 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, or optimize your music system, 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 **\$100**

This two-piece kit combines a precision machined-steel 45-rpm adapter with a high-quality bubble level. The level sits atop the 45rpm-adapter, which together weigh 180 grams—the same as a high-quality LP for accurate leveling.

A/V RoomService Equipment Vibration Protectors **\$99/each EVP 2"; \$199/each EVP 4"**

Don't confuse these unique two- or four- 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. While the EVP might be decidedly unglamorous to the eye, when placed discreetly beneath a component it can make nearly any rig more musical. While the EVPs don't change the inherent tonal balance of a loudspeaker—they do restore a level of musical and harmonic complexity that makes a loudspeaker into a more satisfying version of itself. NG, 290

Block Audio C-Lock Connection Guard **\$49-\$149**

Loose-fitting or sagging outlets? C-Lock is an outlet plate with an integral, adjustable "lock socket" system that clamps down on the male end of a power cord and draws the blades of the power cord fully and firmly within the receptacle. Suffice it say C-Lock works as intended. Like formal wear for the well-dressed system, it completes the chain of connections with panache. NG, 311

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 **\$34.95**

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 or amp).

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.

Chord Company GroundArray **\$795 each**

This set of cigar-sized cylinders terminated with an audio or networking connector plugs into unused jacks on your equipment to reportedly lower your system's noise floor by shunting electrical noise to ground. Plug options include USB A, RCA, DIN, XLR, BNC, RJ45, and HDMI. Used in an array across analog and digital components, the GroundARRAY increased the sense of air and space, and made fine detail more easily audible and distinct. RH

Clearaudio Strobe-disc and Strobe Light **\$75 and \$250**

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 vibrations.

Critical Mass Systems Center-Stage^{2M}**\$545-\$795**

Constrained-layer damped footers that lower the noise floor and improve the sonics of every component JV has tried them under. JV, 330

Dr. Feickert Analogue Universal Protractor**\$250**

Feickert's invaluable protractor includes a white disc with markings on each side—for Baerwald and Lofgren geometries and 50 and 60Hz strobe patterns—an impressively machined aluminum measuring device that turns accurately measuring stylus to pivot distances from hair-pulling frustration to child's play, and a step-by-step instruction booklet that makes fine-tuning your cartridge's geometry a remarkably easy procedure.

DS Audio ION-001 Ionizer**\$1800**

A free-standing ionizer (like an electrically powered Zero-Stat) that continuously floods the surface of your records with ions and cations to eliminate the static charge on the vinyl, the ION-001 "smooths out" tracking by neutralizing static electricity. It also (and more importantly) somehow neutralizes timbre (in the sense of bringing tonal balance closer to colorlessly neutral top to bottom). A pricey but (if you've got the dough) worth-it addition to any ultra-high-end playback system. JV, 309

DS Audio ES 001**\$6000**

That wizard of the optical cartridge, DS Audio's Aki Aoyagi, has produced an LP eccentricity-detection/correction device (which also serves as a record weight) that reads the concentricity of a record's run-out grooves via infrared light and shows you (by means of an active readout on a top-mounted LED screen)

in which direction to nudge your LP so that it is perfectly centered on the platter. Of course, you need a spindle of a diameter that allows for some "play" to move your LP; if you don't have this kind of leeway, you will have to enlarge the spindle hole with a reamer (supplied with the ES 001). Either way, this is a breakthrough product from a company that seems to specialize in breakthrough products. Instead of searching for a tough-to-find Nakamichi auto-centering turntable/tonerarm (whose otherwise decades-old sonics leave a great deal to be desired), you can accomplish the same result (and the same audible improvement in pitch stability and precise groove tracing) on any turntable of your choosing with this little marvel of optical technology. The ES 001 is a game-changer and a must-own item if you're deeply into analog. JV, 334

Fong Audio Out of Your Head \$149 (starter kit, additional speaker settings are \$15 to \$25 each)

This software that runs on your computer emulates, through headphones, the sound of speakers in a room. And not just any speakers and any room; you can select precisely which speakers and venue you like. SS, 279

Fosgate Fozgometer II**\$400**

Adjusting for correct cartridge azimuth (axial tilt) is the bane of an audiophile's beleaguered eyeballs. However, the Fozgometer, the late 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 [Analog 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.

Furutech NCF Clear Line**\$275**

Described as an "audio-grade passive AC optimizer," the NCF Clear Line plugs into any vacant receptacle on either a power distributor or wall outlet. The difference it makes is one of focus and air between images. It nails the perimeter around sung notes and the clarity of the space between them, resulting in a more definitive sense of layering and transient immediacy. Sensible, cost-effective, and, once heard, difficult to part with. NG, 317

Furutech GTX DR NCF AC**Duplex Wall Outlets****\$281**

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, images were more tangible and retrieved with greater clarity: while the Furutech GTX is not cheap, its uncompromising quality and high performance make it seem a small price to pay. NG, 290

Groovetracer Reference**Subplatter****\$275; Delrin platter, \$350; record weight, \$125; universal counterweight, \$189**

These beautifully made, highly effective tweaks for Rega turntables add more ambience, air around and between instruments, three-dimensionality, as well as dynamic weight and impact to vinyl playback. WG, 309

IsoAcoustics zaZen II Platform**\$229**

Among the latest offerings to join the IsoAcoustics line,

zaZen represents a ground floor solution in a segment where the sky is the limit. On a shelf or sideboard, IsoAcoustics zaZen II integrates almost invisibly in an existing den or living room. Sonically high achieving, it provides an excellent foundation for smaller, budget systems. Particularly impressive was the way it steadied and focused large groups of choral singers while allowing greater individuation of voices. On the key issues like image stability, lower congestion, and resolving power, the zaZen II gave this listener more than a glimpse of the transparency that intelligent isolation can impart. NG, 334

Jolida Foz XT-R**\$475**

Inserted between the output of the phonostage and before the input of the preamplifier, the Foz gives you the chance to adjust the crosstalk of each channel separately and 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. JHb, 270

Kate Koeppel Design Racks**Price varies**

The lack of LP storage solutions that were both functional and elegant drove designer and record collector Kate Koeppel to manufacture a line of her own. Made of heavy-duty yet smooth multi-ply high-grade European birch, her creations, all handcrafted by California artisans, run from record and CD racks to LP collection dividers—you can arrange as you please: alphabetically, by genre, by label, etc. Koeppel can also design and create custom storage solutions to meet your needs. Perhaps best of all, you can forget about rickety plastic crates—unless you're out digging for more vinyl. JM, 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. RH

Lyra SPT Stylus Cleaner**\$60**

Mission accomplished. Puts the fluid where it belongs. Lyra's formulation scrubs each precious stylus clean without globing on and ultimately reducing the compliance of the cantilever. A tiny, angled brush is included.

Magna Riser Ascension I Magnepanar Speaker Stand**\$295**

These beautifully made stands, with powder-coat finish, are designed exclusively for Magnepan speakers. With Magna Risers installed, everything that makes Maggies special is taken to a higher plane—that famous absence-of-a-box air, three-dimensionality, and soundstaging, that excellent imaging and realistic sense of instrumental and venue size and space, that top-to-bottom coherence and reach-out-and-touch-it “thereness,” that uncannily realistic recreation of drums. Other qualities that Magnepans are often not often associated with, such as dynamic power and low-frequency extension and weight, are likewise elevated to new and unexpected levels. WG, 309

Marigo White 3mm Tuning Dots**\$39 (set of 8)**

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 cartridges.

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 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 LP#9 Stylus Cleaner**\$25**

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.

Onzow Zerodust Stylus Cleaner**\$69**

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.

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. RH, 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.

Ramar Record Brush**\$340**

Headquartered in Germany, Ramar has elevated the prosaic brush into something much more, well, *über*-luxurious. The two-piece case is made of solid wood, milled from a single wooden blank, then impeccably oiled and finished. But it's the brush itself where the magic occurs—a unique mixture of carbon fibers and goat hair with a large surface area that effectively returns LP surfaces to fresh-from-the-sleeve status. Included is a stylus cleaning wand that magnetically attaches inside the case. For the well-dressed analog rig this is one splurge that is more than worth it. NG, 326

Schiit Loki Mini+ EQ**\$149**

The Loki Mini+ is a four-band (20Hz, 400Hz, 1.2kHz, 20kHz), line-level EQ device intended for use as a tone control to adjust the broad-band balance of recordings. No matter how neutral your system may be in whatever sense you interpret that concept, no recording will have been monitored on a system that matches yours exactly, so it is inevitable that recordings will benefit from perhaps subtle but still meaningful adjustments, case

by case. With minimal signal alteration outside the adjustable balance change, a price that is startling low, and convenient, easy operation, you can take control of tonal-balance adjustments in a way that will revolutionize your listening experience. REG, 324

Schiit Loki Max**\$1500**

At a considerably higher price than the Loki Mini+, but still reasonable for what it offers, the Loki Max is Schiit's ultimate line-level EQ device. Its six bands (20Hz, 120Hz, 400Hz, 2kHz, 6kHz, 16kHz) give detailed control of recording balance and even have some utility for speaker/room adjustment, though the Max is not intended for detailed room correction *a la* DSP room-correction programs. The Max has a remote control, so you can make adjustments on the fly from the listening position. The device is very carefully built and uses relay potentiometers for extremely precise channel matching and absolutely minimal signal degradation. It is top quality all the way and is effectively transparent, indeed. The ultimate answer for tone control, says REG. A modern-day replacement for the Cello Palette of yore. Forthcoming

Shakti Electromagnetic Stabilizer Stone**\$175**

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, pre-amps, and other electronics, reducing noise and enriching timbre.

Shure SFG-2 Stylus Force Gauge

\$20

Although ultimately not accurate as the best digital gauges, the classic “teeter-totter” Shure is simple to use, cheap, and does the trick very nicely.

Soundsmith Counter “Intuitive”

\$49

The Counter “Intuitive” is a polymer damping ring designed for VPI tonearms that fits around the counterweight and allows for very fine, fully independent adjustments of tracking force and azimuth by simply moving the ring forward or backward, or by gently rotating it. A self-adhesive scale applied to the counterweight allows the user to mark settings for specific cartridges and VPI arm-wand combinations.

SpeakerAngle

\$1.99

A nifty app for your iPhone that sits atop your speakers and can tell you if they are identically toed-in, eliminating the need for tape measures. JM

SteinMusic Pi Carbon Signature Record Mat

\$649

This paper-thin “mat” (it is, in fact, a sheet of handcrafted Japanese paper embedded with carbon fiber) may not look like it will work sonic wonders, but it does, smoothing out any remaining rough edges in LP playback and increasing the sense that you’re listening to a sonic “whole” rather than a collection of parts. Things just sound more “continuous” (less jittery, discrete, and, well, phonographic) when the Stein Pi Carbon is in place. JV, 309

Stillpoints UltraMini V2, UltraSS V2, Ultra5 V2, Ultra6 V2, LPI V2

\$150, \$299, \$839, \$1079, \$659

Whether deployed under preamps, power amps, DACs, or

speakers, Stillpoints’ isolation devices produced a significant improvement in the sound: specifically, in the resolution of low-level detail and the ability of the speaker to disappear into the soundstage. The Ultra Mini V2, UltraSS V2, Ultra5 V2, and Ultra6 V2 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 V2 applies Stillpoints technology to a record clamp, emulating the salutary sonic effects of vacuum hold-down. JHB, 265

Symposium Acoustics Fat Padz

\$225 (set of three); \$299 (set of four)

Kind of like Rollerblock Jr.’s in a single unit, Symposium’s Fat Padz employ constrained-layer damping to turn resonant energy into heat. Ideal for supporting lightweight equipment like preamps and CD players.

Symposium Acoustics Rollerblock Jr.

\$275 (3); \$359 (4)

A set of Rollerblock Jr. gives you four top and bottom units and four tungsten-steel ball-bearings, which are then combined to make “Double Stacked” isolator/coupler sandwiches. Ingeniously combining tectonic and constrained-layer damping, the Rollerblocks are, when placed under even heavy components, among the most highly effective resonance-control devices on the market.

Townshend Audio Seismic Podiums

\$1395-2695 (varies according to size)

Townshend Audio’s unique take on speaker isolation proved irresistible. Supported at each corner of the platform by Load Cells—a height adjustable and damped spring system—the Podiums were essentially colorless, never

insinuating themselves over the music. Any suggestion of sonic constraint or congestion simply went poof. The soundstage was liberated from a subtle opacity and veiling—a feat that resulted in wider colors, micro-dynamic gradients, and dimensionality. Images emerged and receded naturally, firmly rooted in space and proximity to adjacent players. Bass response, extension, and pitch flowed more freely. The Podiums become so fundamental to the listening experience that calling them mere accessories fails to give them enough credit. NG, 312

Tributaries T10 Power Strip

\$100

Equipped with two rows of five outlets. One row of five outlets rotates 90 degrees so that plugs can lie flat along the floor. LEDs indicate operation, grounding, and protection status. Offering plenty of surge suppression and noise filtering for AC power as well as signal-line protection for telecomm, network, and cable, it’s a bargain for its segment. Various cords included.

Vibrapods

\$6 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 bass extension and smoother highs. At four for \$25, who says great tweaks must 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 and is a cost-effective way of tightening detail and illuminating imaging.

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. Works on RCA jacks, tube sockets, AC cords, and cartridge pins. Comes with a complete kit of cleaning tools.

BOOKS

The Absolute Sound’s Illustrated History of High-End Audio, Volume Two: Electronics Edited by Robert Harley Nextscreen, LLC, 330 pp., **\$129.95**

The follow-up to Volume One. This time the TAS staff tackles the history and highlights of high-fidelity electronics, with the considerable help of Nelson Pass, Bob Carver, and Scott Frankland. If you want to know how electronics have evolved from the acoustic era to today’s astonishing high end, and who was behind this evolution, you’ll find all the milestones and celebrated personalities in the pages of Volume Two. JV

The Complete Guide to High-End Audio, Sixth Edition Robert Harley Acapella Publishing, 596 pp., **\$44.95 (paper). hifibooks.com**

First published in 1994, *The Complete Guide* has been newly updated and expanded in its Sixth Edition to include advances in digital, personal, and desktop audio (among many, many other things), Robert Harley’s *Complete Guide* remains the most useful book about high-end audio ever written. A masterwork by a past master. JV



FOCAL
Kanta No2
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The detail of beryllium meets the warmth of flax in this tonally beguiling speaker. Designed and made in France in a range of chic finishes.



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A piece of the past from the future! A cutting-edge Class-A, single-ended 300B integrated amplifier from a proudly American legacy brand.



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Astounding speed stability and expertly designed suspension provide a black background, delicate detail, and dynamics beyond expectation.



PRIMALUNA
EVO 400
Tube Integrated Amplifier
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Two sets of EL34's bring you tube magic even with power-hungry speakers. Packed with expensive components, making this one of the best deals in high-end audio.



MOFI
SourcePoint 10
Bookshelf Loudspeakers
\$3699 (pair)

Developed by Andrew Jones! A two-way concentric driver with a 10" woofer, and a massively built and braced cabinet, offering deep bass and perfect imaging.



CABASSE
The Pearl Keshi
2.1 Wireless Music System
\$2999

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NAD
C 3050
Stereo Integrated Amplifier
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An ultra-modern 100 W HybridDigital amp with DAC in a 1970s-inspired walnut-finished, vinyl-clad metal case complete with VU meters.



Free Expert Setup

Just check a box and have a leading analog expert set up and test your turntable! We will install and align the cartridge, set up and align the tonearm, test and adjust speed, top up bearing oil, and more. Our experts use high-tech tools, but always do final testing by ear. All settings are documented and labeled to make it easy to unpack your table and start rocking.

0% APR for 24 Months*

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THE KILLER ARISES

HOW A CARL PERKINS RECORDING SESSION
LIT A GREAT BALL OF FIRE

David McGee

Editor's Note: In December of 1956 Carl Perkins' smash hit "Blue Suede Shoes" still had legs; and despite a devastating setback in April of that year, when he and his brothers were injured in a car crash en route to New York City to appear for the first time on national television as guests on The Ed Sullivan Show, he had resumed playing to raucous crowds again, even as he was preparing for planned early-December recording sessions at Memphis' Sun studio. His first post-crash sessions, in April, had produced two promising new numbers in "Honey Don't" and "Dixie Fried" but these late-year sessions would be unlike any other Carl had ever experienced, thanks to Sun founder Sam Phillips adding a new musician to the Perkins ensemble in the form of his latest signing, a strong-willed piano player from Ferriday, Louisiana, named Jerry Lee Lewis, whose first Sun single, "Crazy Arms," was doing well in the South despite being way overshadowed by Ray Price's seminal (and #1) version. Teaming with Jerry Lee would inaugurate one of the most contentious and fruitful relationships of Carl's career, and few artists came to understand the Killer better than Carl. One of Carl's classic numbers, "Matchbox," came out of the first Jerry Lee session, on a day when Johnny Cash was hanging out at Sun while waiting to pick up his wife at her job and Elvis Presley, still smarting from a disastrous debut appearance in Las Vegas back in April, materialized in the studio with one Marilyn Evans, a Las Vegas dancer he was dating at the time. Elvis sat down at the piano as Carl, Jerry Lee, and Cash gathered 'round, and for the next hour-plus this Million Dollar Quartet essentially explored their common roots in song—blues, gospel, bluegrass, primarily—in an unparalleled summit of rock 'n' roll pioneers captured on tape by Sam Phillips. This account of the



Perkins-Killer session is adapted from David McGee's authorized biography of Perkins, Go, Cat, Go! The Life and Times of Carl Perkins, The King of Rockabilly (Hyperion, 1996). Alone among Sun's towering first-generation rockers, Carl had the longest and most intense exposure to the full force of young Jerry Lee's artistry and ego, benefitted from both in his own way, and almost a half century later, in interviews for his biography, reflected on those days with amusement, the years having taught him how fully formed and true to himself the young Jerry Lee was, for better or for worse, when first they met (or collided). Jerry Lee Lewis, the last man standing among the Million Dollar Quartet, died at age 87 on October 28, 2022, at his home in Nesbit, Mississippi.

BETWEEN DECEMBER 4 AND THE END OF JANUARY 1957

Carl returned to the studio for extensive sessions once again aimed at getting some material in the can in advance of his heavy touring schedule in the first half of the year. Two new faces showed up for the first session, one to play, one to watch. The latter was Carl's father, Buck Perkins, making what would be his first and only appearance in a recording studio.

The new addition to the instrumental lineup was also new to Sun's artist roster. He was a piano player from Ferriday, Louisiana, named Jerry Lee Lewis, whose first single, "Crazy Arms," a chart-topping, career-defining country hit earlier in the year for Ray Price, had been released on December 1. Then twenty-one years old, Lewis played in a fiery, almost baroque style heavy on glissandos and other right-hand flourishes rooted in blues, gospel, and country, and sang in a clear, high tenor, somewhat conversational in tone, projecting no quality so much as attitude—a freewheeling, rollin' and tumblin' attitude, cocky, abundant in life-affirming intensity with an element of the salacious in his sly phrasing and improvised, self-referential asides. His cousin Carl McVoy had been his earliest mentor on piano (although Jerry Lee often claimed to be an autodidact from the git-go), and his technique owed something to the styles of Moon Mullican and Meade Lux Lewis. As for vocal influences, he would point to Al Jolson, Jimmie Rodgers, and especially Hank Williams as having had the greatest impact on his approach (and would always add his name to his personal list of America's greatest singers).

Carl came to the studio knowing Jerry Lee would be on the session but never having met the man himself. In late November Sam had called to tell Carl, "I got an ol' boy down here that can beat a damn piano up and I'd like to hear him playin' with you." To which Carl had replied: "Bring him on." Upon their introduction Carl found Jerry Lee "a very self-assured fella. He didn't

have any doubt about what he could do."

Of the numerous songs Carl expected to record in December and January, two were cut in the early afternoon of December 4. The first, "Your True Love," was a straight-ahead, bopping paean celebrating love and devotion enlivened by Carl's edgy guitar solos and catchy call-and-response between the brothers Perkins on the choruses. Carl had made up the song on the spot.

After the last notes sounded, Sam's voice came over the studio intercom. "That's a hit!" he exclaimed.

At the piano Jerry Lee raised his head. "That song ain't worth a damn," he announced.

Carl was stunned. "I thought to myself, *Okay, you'll be alright.* I didn't know whether he was good or not, and I didn't talk to him a lot during the session because I detected I would have trouble with him being a smart aleck. To me that's what a smart aleck was—somebody who would jump in and give his opinion of a record when it was *my* record. But he opened all them smart-aleck doors to start. I didn't pick at him. I didn't act like the guy that had 'Blue Suede Shoes' and coulda said, 'Hey, you're in here to play piano and *shut your damn mouth!*' I didn't do that. I tried to make him feel welcome and comfortable, but I saw that's that what he was. I'd done been around too many like him."

During a break Buck approached Carl with a suggestion that the band record a song he knew as "Match Box Blues." The only lyrics Buck could recite were "I'm sittin' here wonderin' would a matchbox hold my clothes" and "I ain't got so many matches but I got so far to go."

The verse Buck had learned, either off the radio or in the cotton fields, was from a 1927 recording by Blind Lemon Jefferson, a towering figure as a blues guitarist and, as a writer, a wise and witty commentator on the hardships and follies he observed in his wanderings through the South. The line "would a matchbox hold my clothes" was appropriated from Ma Rainey's 1924 recording of "Lost Wandering Blues" from which Blind Lemon then built a new narrative confessing to an incurable case of wanderlust to his "girl cross town" who spends her days crocheting. Carl maintains he had never heard Jefferson's recording at the time he wrote his "Matchbox," and apart from the first verse supplied by Buck, the two brook no comparison, Carl's version being the lament of a rootless, lovelorn "poor boy" with limited prospects.

Something in those words struck a chord in Carl, though, and he began improvising lyrics, much as Blind Lemon might have done upon hearing Ma Rainey's 1924 recording. Picking up on the vibe, Jerry Lee slipped in behind Carl with a restrained boogie-woogie riff. Nodding approval of the 88s, Carl began picking out a melody on guitar to accompany his off-the-cuff lyrics. In only a few minutes he constructed a complete song, the band set up, and Sam was ready to go to work at his RCA 76D broadcast mixing console with the Ampex 350 recorder nearby.

In the first take of "Matchbox," Carl tore into a bass string triplet, repeated twice before the band came clattering in behind him, a little sloppy but roaring: Jerry Lee began filling the gaps with right-hand runs across the keys, a glissando here, a walk-

TOP LEFT: Jerry Lee Lewis and Sam Phillips at the height of the Killer's popularity in May 1958. (Photo courtesy Colin Escott)

BOTTOM LEFT: Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley during the December 4, 1956, jam session at the Sun studio dubbed the Million Dollar Quartet by a Memphis Press-Scimitar reporter. Elvis was visiting the studio with his girlfriend Marilyn Evans, who took a seat on the piano when the music started. (Photo: Sun Records)

ing blues line there, a boogie-woogie riff that dropped off into another glissando—every trick in his repertoire, it seemed, in a real virtuoso display of empathetic, emphatic commentary. On a second take Jerry Lee dispensed with all the embroidery and settled into a solid, pumping, boogie-woogie riff, barreling ahead with the power of a freight train. Carl attacked the song vocally and instrumentally as furiously as he had “Dixie Fried” in the April session, firing off lyrics like a man completely fed up with his station in life and aching to hurt someone—the first verse was delivered contemptuously, with searing anger; on his guitar solos—heralded by his cry of “Let ‘er go, boy! Go! Go!”—single-, double- and triple-string notes slashed and burned around the pulsating rhythm, each musician answering Carl’s challenge with a ferocious assault of his own, none more so than Jerry Lee, who sup-
 planted bassist Clayton Perkins’ usual song-ending two-note coda with a final glissando run serving as a colorful closing punctuation.

When it was over Carl turned to Jerry Lee. “Boy, I like what you’re doin’,” he said.

“Hell, that ain’t all I can do,” Jerry Lee shot back in reply.

Rocked again by Jerry Lee’s arrogance, Carl regrouped and mentioned how the Lewis style reminded him of Del Wood, a first-call Nashville session player with an energetic attack marked by vivid right-hand slides across the keyboard. (Her 1951 recording of “Down Yonder” sold a million copies, making her the first female country soloist to achieve the gold standard.)

Jerry Lee begged to differ with the comparison. “Aw hell, she can’t do it,” he said of Wood’s trademark glissando. “This is the way to do it.” With that he began running his right hand rapidly and flawlessly back and forth across the entire keyboard. Back and forth, back and forth, all the while fixing Carl with a beady-eyed, confrontational stare, thin lips set in a smug half-smile. His long, wavy blonde hair, swept straight back on his head when the session began, was now an unkempt rag mop hanging off his temples.

“That’s the way he was,” Carl says. “Jerry Lee didn’t manufacture Jerry Lee. Jerry Lee *was* Jerry Lee, I guess from when he was a kid. His attitude was, ‘You think you can play that sumbitch? You let me sit down.’ And you know, he was right. He was cocky but he fulfilled what he said. If he told you, ‘Get up and let me play,’ you’d just get on up because he could beat you. And he beat you with a style. He wasn’t copying anybody else. Del Wood had that thing of slinging her thumb down them keys, but Jerry Lee perfected it.”

Over the speaker Sam summoned Carl into the control room. “Man, listen to this!” he said as he rolled Take 2 of “Matchbox.” As Carl’s voice came in after the intro, Sam began shaking his head. “That sounds like the South comin’ back to fight the North again! Listen to that damn blonde-headed fool play the piano! God, it’s an awesome sound. This is a smash hit!”

Out in the studio, blissfully oblivious, Jerry sat singing “Crazy Arms” to the rest of the band. Sam laughed as he watched the performance. He had taken to Jerry Lee in a way Carl found inordinately intense for Sam. “Listen to that damn fool sing,” Sam said. “Carl, that boy can sing. He sure can.”

Less enthusiastic than Sam about Jerry Lee’s vocal ability (“He didn’t know who he wanted to sound like”), Carl was practically in awe of the fury the newcomer brought to “Matchbox.” “I don’t think ‘Matchbox’ would have even been a record if he hadn’t been there,” Carl said. “It wouldn’t have fired me up to start writin’ and makin’ it up and doin’ it like I did it. No way. And I wouldn’t have played them hot, fiery guitar breaks. I took some of my best guitar breaks on that song. Triple string is what I was doing, playing all three strings at the same time with a pick, which is usually done finger-style. But foolin’ around and practicing, I knew it would work, and that was the time to try it, ‘cause I was shootin’ at Jerry Lee’s head. It was never rehearsed.”

In what will remain one of rock ‘n’ roll’s great unanswerable “What if” questions, Carl says “Matchbox” had a moment when Jerry Lee could have taken over and made the song his own. Intolerant of smart-alecks and still seething over the putdown of “Your True

Love,” Carl denied Jerry Lee an opening to leave his indelible instrumental mark. As his first guitar break approached, Carl had a thought of giving Jerry Lee a solo shot: “But then I thought, *No, you smart aleck. I’m gonna play both breaks on this guitar. Next time I’m gonna try to burn the neck off it.* I knew he was itchin’ for me to holler, ‘Get it, Jerry!’ I kinda wish I had of; I’d like to have seen what he would’ve done because he was hot that day. He was going after it. I let myself get in the way of probably a phenomenal piano break. He would’ve *shown* me how to play a piano. So the world probably missed the greatest piano break Jerry Lee would have ever taken.”

Shortly after “Matchbox” was complete, Elvis walked into the studio, taking everyone by surprise. **tas**



Sam Phillips in the Sun Records control room, circa 1957. (Photo courtesy Colin Escott)

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Bernstein's DG Mahler on Vinyl

Conducting as if the Composer's Life Depended on It

Paul Seydor



Leonard Bernstein, the greatest Mahler conductor of his generation and one of the greatest in history, is the only conductor to have recorded three complete cycles of the composer's symphonies. His first, for CBS/Sony, also the first period, was completed in 1968; his second, for Deutsche Grammophon, was completed in the late 80s (the third cycle, on film, is outside the purview of this review). Both have long since achieved classic status, reissued numerous times in different packagings reviewed so often it's unnecessary to parse them for thumbnail recommendations. When Sony remastered the CBS cycle for a vinyl edition in 2017, the occasion was to celebrate the centennial of the conductor's birth in 1918. This new release from DG marks the first appearance of all its Bernstein Mahler symphonies on vinyl in a complete big-box edition.

In 1960, when Bernstein began programming these masterpieces a year after becoming sole music director of the New York Philharmonic, Mahler was a relative rarity in concert halls, even more so on recordings. Despite pioneering advocacy by Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer, Willem Mengelberg, and Dimitri Mitropoulos, not even one of the symphonies had entered the standard repertoire. Bernstein, a rising conductor who, like Mahler himself, was also a composer, so identified with the music (and the man) that he made it his personal mission to make Mahler's own prediction come true: "My time will yet come." Near Messianic zeal, intuitive grasp of the idiom, the breathless excitement of discovery and wonder, plus ferocious commitment, searing heat, and deep love assured Bernstein's first cycle a central place in the symphonies' performance and reception history because it introduced them to a whole generation and more of music lovers and musicians.

If the younger Bernstein conducted the scores as if he were a Moses who'd just carried them down from Sinai emblazoned on tablets of stone, the later Bernstein conducted them as if the composer's very life depended on it. What accounts for the difference? The obvious answer is that Bernstein's mission succeeded triumphantly—Mahler's prophecy came true! Almost all his major

works were firmly ensconced in the standard repertoire and hugely popular with audiences and fellow musicians alike, a veritable flood of cycles and individual recordings following in the wake with no signs of abating. But triumphs like this can be mixed. With the symphonies no longer major events or special occasions, an element of routine, of business as usual, even of hohum inevitably crept in. How many reviews opened with a lament—"Yet *another* Mahler symphony cycle?"—or words to that effect?

In this new landscape, Bernstein, whose intelligence and imagination were always too restless, inquisitive, and protean to approach the same thing the same way time and again,

felt the need to make the music move, delight, surprise, shock, soar, inspire, and overwhelm anew. Slow passages and movements became slower, more lyrical, probative, introspective, and ruminative; big passages correspondingly broader, weightier, more intense and expressive, climaxes landing with cataclysmic force or rising to transcendence. "A symphony must be like the world," Mahler famously said. "It must embrace everything." Bernstein took him at his word, giving full expression to the music's wit, humor, irony, vulgarity, sentimentality, romanticism, emotionalism, neuroticism, diablerie, gau-cherie, grotesquerie, violence, and grandeur.

"Extreme," "exaggerated," "distorted"—descriptors like these have always dogged Bernstein's Mahler in some quarters, but a quick check of the scores often reveals ample justification right there in the composer's copious markings and directives. Of his controversially drawn-out closing pages of the Ninth, Bernstein referenced the "*adagissimo*" instruction (very slow) and wrote in his score, "Have the courage to remain in eight," meaning set the pulse very, very slow, as in the reluctant giving up of life. Or take the First, which the younger Ber-

stein launches with great urgency, reveling in the music's energy and drive, while the older conductor finds something dark and sinister as rumblings from the double basses keep threatening to pull the sunny *Wayfarer* melody back down into the primeval murk of the opening,



such that the coda's brass fanfare feels almost torn from the orchestra. Yet out of this struggle is wrested a powerful symphonic narrative of darkness to light, chaos to order, battle to triumph.

One of Bernstein's great gifts as a conductor is an almost peerless ability to shape large sprawling, episodic structures like these symphonies into vast panoramic visions. The timings of the fifth movement of the Second differ by three minutes, the earlier performance played for high theatrical drama, like the last act of an epic opera; the later performance, scarcely less dramatic, played for awe and exaltation, like a colossal fresco. What other conductor is capable of revealing this music from such different yet equally illuminating perspectives? Or take the Fifth, where Bernstein's unusually heavy tread for the first movement funeral march finds its justification in his last movement's expansively broadened chorale, followed by that joyous presto sweep to the finish (rarely has the allusion to Beethoven's Ninth been made clearer).

The new set comes with an essay by Rainer Maillard, the balance engineer and producer who oversaw the remastering of the original recordings for this edition, that provides an overview of the process. With five venues and three orchestras (each with historical connections to the composer) in live concerts over some 14 years, the recording quality inevitably varies but is mostly excellent, some quite astonishing: 2, 3, and 7 from New York are fantastically clean, clear, with stupendous detail, definition, fre-

quency extension, and spectacular dynamic range; ditto 1, 4, and 9 from Concertgebouw, less closely miked but marvelously, spaciouly atmospheric; Vienna 5 and 6 split the difference. Bernstein's plans to redo 8 in New York cut short by his death in 1990, DG used a tape of a 1975 Salzburg Festival concert—glorious, electrifying, with stellar sound given the circumstances. Spreading the symphonies over a generous 16 LPs of 180-gram vinyl discs is welcome (a few less than ideally quiet surfaces not). Notes are excellent (but someone should be called to task for omitting texts for vocal movements!).

As almost all the recordings are early digital, are violins and trumpets a little fierce and glassy? Occasionally, but when it happens it's certainly no worse than a lot of recordings from any era. (The effect is exacerbated by incorrectly loaded moving coils with rising top-ends—try a neutral moving magnet, say, a Shure V15V.) Like Sony's remastered 2017 vinyl set, which sold out fast and is NLA, DG's is also limited (2600 copies), while the \$378 Amazon price is already topping \$500 at other suppliers. Is it worth the money? Considering the number of remastered high-tech audiophile LPs selling for hundreds of dollars of music that doesn't rise to Mahler's insteps, the question answers itself. **tas**

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The Past Recaptured

Archival Jazz Releases Offer an Embarrassment of Riches

Bill Milkowski

Like archeologists digging up the precious remains of Tutankhamun's tomb, a few hearty jazz enthusiasts and record company reps have in recent years been unearthing hidden treasures that have sat idle for decades. Tapes of jazz performances have been stored in closets, basements, and attics. They might have been board tapes made by a nightclub's sound engineer, or they might have documented concerts made by state-run radio stations in Europe. Sometimes they are bootleg recordings made surreptitiously by fans in the audience with their trusty tape recorders balancing precariously on their laps. Of course, these archival tapes—found in closets, attics, and basements—invariably have to be baked, given the uncertain shelf life of magnetic tape. Deals are struck with estates, participants are tracked down and paid and, inevitably, the vinyl products are wrapped in lavish packaging, with extensive testimony from participants and industry observers, along with insightful liner notes from respected scribes, before being released to a jazz-hungry public eager to soak up the unadulterated expressions and indelible chemistry that happen on any given night on the bandstand that these archival recordings have made available to the public. The latest crop of high-quality archival releases includes music by Ahmad Jamal, Mal Waldron, Elvin Jones, Monty Alexander, and Oscar Peterson. Quite simply, these recordings offer an embarrassment of riches.

Zev Feldman is perhaps the most widely recognized and celebrated of these modern jazz archivists, and he has certainly earned his nickname as “the jazz detective.” To date, he has tracked down and brought to fruition live gig recordings by the likes of Wes Montgomery, John Coltrane, Freddie Hubbard, Bill Evans, Cannonball Adderley, Red Garland, Charles Lloyd, Art Pepper, Wynton Kelly, Chet Baker, Charles Mingus, and Art Blakey on behalf of such labels as Resonance Records, Reel to Real, Elemental Music, Verve, and Blue Note. And now, for his efforts, Feldman has been granted his own imprint—the aptly-named Jazz Detective label.

Launched on a recent Record Store Day, Jazz Detective premiered with the release of two deluxe double LPs/CDs of previously unreleased performances by master pianist Ahmad Jamal entitled *Emerald City Nights: Live at the Penthouse*. The first volume was culled from performances between 1963 and 1964 at Charlie Puzo's intimate Penthouse jazz club in Seattle with Jamal's trio of drummer Chuck Lampkin and either British bassist Richard Evans or American bassist Jamil Nasser. Jamal's elegant touch, eloquent phrasing with his penchant for lyricism, and judicious use



Ahmad Jamal PHOTO BY DON BRONSTEIN

of space are apparent here on a restrained rendition of Cole Porter's “All of You” and a relaxed midtempo version of George Gershwin's “But Not for Me,” full of Erroll Garner-inspired ornamentation. The pianist's loping 3/4 original “Minor Moods” is equally tasty. As far as swinging goes, the trio is tightly in sync on a jaunty reading of the standard “Tangerine” and a blazing up-tempo rendition of Johnny Hodges' “Squatty Roo,” a bit of Ellingtonia underscored by Lampkin's briskly swinging brushwork and Evans' insistent walking bass lines. The trio flirts with a melding of classical counterpoint and swing on a tricky rendition of bassist Evans' “Minor Adjustments” and deliver more classical flourishes on a clever reading of the Rodgers & Hart show tune, “Johnny One Note.” They even get into a real deal gospel feel on bassist Evans' “Keep On Keeping On.”

On the second volume of *Emerald City Nights*, documenting Penthouse performances from 1965–1966, Ja-

mal is reunited with drummer Vernel Fournier, who made such a big splash alongside the pianist and bassist Israel Crosby on their 1958 hit album, *Live at the Pershing*. Together with bassist Nasser, they shift from reflective, minor key mode to jaunty swing on the Jamal original, “Concern,” then deliver a delicate reading of Jimmy Van Heusen's “Like Someone in Love,” which opens with an extended piano solo intro that beautifully showcases Jamal's artful inclinations. When Nasser and Fournier enter, it is a prime example of consummate piano trio communication—delicate yet in the pocket, and highly interactive. Fournier's signature second line beat on “Poinciana” is played here by drummer Frank Grant, who also swings forcefully on a rendition of Bronislaw Kaper's “Invitation” and on Benny Golson's “Whisper Not.” Drummer Lampkin is also prominently featured on an inventive and dynamic take on Rodgers & Hart's “I Didn't Know What Time It Was.” Lampkin also

underscores a dreamy rendition of “Who Can I Turn To” that highlights Jamal’s gentle touch and harmonic sophistication. Either two record set comes highly recommended, and the sound is exceptional on both.

Feldman also had his hand in two other live archival recordings. Mal Waldron’s *Searching In Grenoble: The 1978 Solo Piano Concert*, recorded at the Five Days of Jazz series in Grenoble, France on March 23, 1978, was produced by Feldman for Tompkins Square. This 2-CD set features the enigmatic pianist-composer (a one-time accompanist for Billie Holiday) digging deep on the 23-minute, darkly introspective “Mistral Breeze/Sieg Haile,” a 10-minute exercise in dissonance entitled “Here, There and Everywhere” (decidedly *not* the bright Beatles ditty), and his own minor key dirge “Russian Melody.” Waldron also performs his own oft-covered ballad “Soul Eyes” and the jazz standard “You Don’t Know What Love Is,” both tinged with a sense of melancholy. The mood lightens a bit on his Monkish “Fire Waltz” (a tune he recorded with Eric Dolphy) and on Jimmy Van Heusen’s “It Could Happen to You.” The collection ends on a somber note with the mournful “All Alone.” This contemplative, minimalist music, while idiosyncratic and dark, definitely weaves a spell on listeners.

The third recording Feldman was involved in is Elvin Jones’ *Revival: Live at Pookie’s Pub*, for Blue Note. Produced by trumpeter David Weiss and co-produced by Feldman and author Ashley Kahn, this 3-LP/2-CD package documents sets by the great

drummer’s working quartet at a New York City nightclub on July 28–30, 1967, shortly after he had left the John Coltrane Quartet. With Joe Farrell on tenor sax and flute, Billy Greene on piano, and Wilbur Little on bass, Jones leads his group through an explosive 21-minute version of “Keiko’s Birthday March” (named for his wife), which finds the great drummer in classic, “rolling thunder” form and has Farrell digging in with potent, post-Trane fervor on tenor. Jones’ eight-minute unaccompanied drum solo here is an incredibly dramatic bit of storytelling on the kit. Farrell’s uptempo burner “13 Avenue B” is a showcase for his own searing chops on tenor alongside Jones’ irrepressible bashing, then he switches to flute on a soothing rendition of “My Funny Valentine” that finds the drumming legend switching to brushes. Farrell also shines on flute on a swinging rendition of “Softly as in a Morning Sunrise,” and he tackles the ultimate jamming vehicle, Sonny Rollins’ “Oleo,” with Herculean authority on tenor. One surprise here is organist Larry Young sitting in on the club’s inadequate-sounding upright piano on a version of Jimmy Heath’s “Gingerbread Boy.” Insufficient sonics aside, this package is a rare document of Jones unleashed. His sheer power, stamina, and intuitive, over-the-barline flow on the kit on these stretched-out vehicles are truly superhuman feats. And Farrell goes toe-to-toe with the legend from start to finish. Keep your seat belts tightly fastened throughout this turbulent ride.

The Montreux Jazz Festival, which has been amassing a stash of live recordings

since its inception in 1967, has in recent years been issuing performances culled from festival founder Claude Nob’s private collection as part of its series, *The Montreux Years*. Since 2021, the series has released packages on a variety of artists, from Etta James and Marianne Faithfull to John McLaughlin and Chick Corea. The latest in that series gathers four concerts from the festival by Kingston, Jamaica native and venerable jazz pianist Monty Alexander. The earliest performances on this 2-LP/1-CD showcase Alexander’s trio with bassist Ira Coleman and the great former Oscar Peterson drummer Ed Thigpen in a 1993 concert. Together they turn in a decidedly Ahmad Jamal-influenced rendition of “Renewal” that shifts nimbly from quiet introspection to midtempo swing, then sizzling uptempo burn. They also deliver a beautiful interpretation of the ballad “The Pawnbroker,” then step lively through the Jamaican folk song “Linstead Market,” with Thigpen playing with hands on the kit. In 1995, the pianist brought his Jamaican Project, featuring iconic Jamaican guitarist Ernest Ranglin, to Montreux. That octet delivers an engaging performance of “A Nod to Bob,” a reggae-fied blues dedicated to Bob Marley, while Alexander flaunts his considerable chops on the dazzling, unaccompanied piano showcase, “The Serpent.” Alexander’s 2014 appearance at Montreux with his Harlem Kingston Express included a crowd-pleasing Marley medley (“No Woman, No Cry,” “Get Up, Stand Up”) and a tip of the hat to an important influence on Ahmad Jamal’s “Night Mist Blues.” That group is also represented here by a swinging rendition of Nat Adderley’s “Work Song” from a 2016 performance.

In terms of sheer technical command, the most accomplished chopsmeister since Art Tatum was Oscar Peterson. The Canadian pianist’s undisputed virtuosity is evident on the 2-LP/1-CD release from Two Lions/Mack Avenue Records, *On a Clear Day: The Oscar Peterson Trio—Live in Zurich, 1971*. Performing alongside longtime bass partner Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen and drummer Louis Hayes, Peterson comes out of the gate in this concert in Switzerland scorching the keys on a super-uptempo blues-tinged version of “The Lamp Is Low” before settling into the Rodgers & Hammerstein ditty “Younger Than Springtime.” Then it’s off to the races again, with the pianist effortlessly double-timing and running lines of uncanny speed and precision, gradually building to even more jaw-dropping heights as the pace picks up. Hayes’ insistent ride cymbal pulse sets the tone for a midtempo swinging romp through the 1965 Broadway musical number “On a Clear Day.”

A rare respite from the relentless burn is the ballad medley, “Young and Foolish/A Time for Love.” Then the trio puts a decided bounce on the Benny Goodman number, “Soft Winds,” which is also a vehicle for bassist Pedersen’s unerring, deep-toned walking bass lines and unparalleled facility. Peterson’s four-minute unaccompanied piano intro to “Mack the Knife” is full of pulse-quickening fills and runs. When the rhythm section enters midway through the piece, the tempo quickly escalates to impossibly speedy levels. The eight-tune set closes on a buoyant note with “On the Trail,” another tune featuring the prodigiously gifted bassist and pianist in full stride, with Hayes setting a blistering pace on brushes before shifting to an even higher gear on sticks. Even Art Tatum would be doing double takes at Peterson’s performances on this set. **tbs**



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Weyes Blood: *And in the Darkness, Hearts Aglow*. Sub Pop.

Three years ago, Weyes Blood introduced us to her ongoing musical trilogy with its exposition, *Titanic Rising*. A slightly psychedelic tour of languid chamber-pop tracks peppered with slide guitar flourishes, the record set the stage for singer-songwriter Natalie Mering's next move. With her new release, *And In The Darkness, Hearts Aglow*, Mering is engulfed in Act II, grappling with loneliness and futility in an isolated world. Her text weaves around grandiose orchestral textures, tapestries of vocal harmonies, and easygoing folk-rock accompaniments. While *Titanic Rising* questioned the nature of relationships, this album finds Mering reaching out desperately for them. Her plaintive, resonant melody on the opening track embodies the yearning to truly be known by another. "God Turn Me Into A Flower" is a chills-inducing, zero-gravity vocal showcase about the painful awareness of being perceived by others. Nearing the record's close, the sunny and acoustic "The Worst Is Done" depicts Mering peeking her head out the door, surveying a world irreversibly altered by the past few years. *And In The Darkness* expertly captures the whirlwind of simply existing these days, a mélange of skepticism, discouragement, and hope for something better. We can only wait for what time will bring until Mering concludes this trilogy one day. **Hannah Blanchette**

Further Listening: Weyes Blood: *Titanic Rising*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

My Morning Jacket: *Circuital*. ATO.

Fans of Jim James' haunting falsetto will love the new deluxe edition of *Circuital*. Originally released in 2011, the album marked a milestone for Kentucky-based My Morning Jacket. *Circuital* is a stylistic potpourri peppered with Christian references and ranges from the epic rock of "Victory Dance" to the spiritual musings of the title track, "The Day Is Coming" and "First Light" to the playful chastisement of Satanic-rock fans, "Holdin on to Black Metal," replete with children's choir. This expanded edition adds ten stripped-down demos that accentuate James' heavenly, reverb-drenched vocals. Musically, these demos feature either James in a solo acoustic setting or with a slim band. Those latter demos can be quite raw, as in the case of the demoed title track—a cacophony of crashing cymbals and rough-hewn banjo, though James' pure vocal never falters. Overall, the studio tracks on the *Circuital* deluxe edition—available on three LPs, two CDs, or digitally—sound as fresh today as they did when the album debuted more than a decade ago. The re-issue arrives on the heels of the streaming acoustic set *My Morning Jacket: Live from RCA Studio*, first released as a limited-edition Record Store Day vinyl product, and the magnificent *MMJ Live, Vol. 2: Chicago, 2021*. Say Amen! **Greg Cahill**

Further Listening: Jim James: *Regions of Light, Sound of God*; Monsters of Folk: *Monsters of Folk*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Guided by Voices: *Tremblers and Goggles by Rank*. GBV, Inc.

Did someone say prolific? This is the Dayton, Ohio, band's 35th album since its 1986 debut and its 14th album since its 2016 reunion. The band hits hard right out of the gate—the opener, "Lizard on the Red Brick Wall," is an elevated piece of psychedelia, replete with acid-tinged lyrics, grinding guitars, and phase-shifted drums. Following break-ups in 2008 and 2014, the current Guided by Voices evoke everyone from Bowie and the Who to R.E.M. and the Pixies. There's nothing trite here: "Boomerang" is a potent drone that contemplates death. "Puzzle Two" and "Focus on the Flock" are brilliant bits of complex prog-rock. And "Alex Bell" is a tribute to Big Star's songwriting team, Alex Chilton and Chris Bell. That latter song sets the tone for this consistently rocking set of ten songs driven by singer and songwriter Robert Pollard, the steady heart of a band that has seen turmoil and numerous personnel changes. The current line-up includes Doug Gilliard (guitar, vocals) and Kevin March (drums), as well as bassist Mark Shue and guitarist Bobby Bare, Jr. For his part, the idiosyncratic Pollard poses profound, if often vague, meditations on the mysteries of life, all cloaked in a thick haze of indie-rock sonics. **GC**

Further Listening: Guided by Voices: *Alien Lanes*; Chris Bell: *I Am the Cosmos*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

The Flaming Lips: *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots: 20th Anniversary Edition*. Warner.

Now, almost 40 years into the Flaming Lips' wondrously creative journey in music, it's possible to look back and recognize the career peaks that shaped this unique and beloved band. Celebrating the 20th anniversary of one of their best records, *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*, the Lips just released a special, six-disc boxset filled with rarities, radio shows, two concerts—and the original record. It's a brava collection of both cosmic and sonic delight, their most accessible release, and it proves the Flaming Lips have long been one of America's great rock bands.

The Oklahoma City-based group began in 1983 as garage punk rockers, with Wayne Coyne acting as leader and lead singer while sharing the songwriting duties. Through 20 years of line-up changes, the Lips were known for their off-the-wall music and lo-fi approach to recording. With 1999's *The Soft Bulletin* and 2003's *Yoshimi*, producer Dave Fridmann helped the band transform their more experimental sounds into a symphonic, psych-pop vision with melody stacked on melody. Not coincidentally, *Yoshimi* became the Lips' bestselling record and catapulted their concerts into carnival events with all the day-glo special effects and larger-than-life theatrics that implies. Yet it's the singular wonder and quality of the Flaming Lips' songs that allows them to transcend dazzling stagecraft.

With *Yoshimi*, a loose concept record

whose theme and cover feature a Japanese sci-fi character defying the dystopian robot powers-that-be, the Lips blend lush arrangements, gorgeous melodies, and Coyne's exuberance. This is best illustrated on the title track, an acoustic pop nugget with an infectious singalong chorus worthy of "Yellow Submarine." The splendidly titled "Ego Tripping at the Gates of Hell" and its visceral sonic mix meld together Michael Ivins' bass pulsing like a strobe with woozy, electronica fragments floating behind Coyne's washed-out vocal.

Perhaps their most inspirational song, "Do You Realize?" embodies Coyne's philosophy of embracing the moment with a soaring anthem of plaintive eloquence. One of the many pleasures of this boxset is hearing the demos and alternate takes, including over 30 unreleased songs. For example, it's fascinating to trace just how "Do You Realize?" evolves, starting with Wayne's solo acoustic demo and then blooming as Steven Drozd adds drums and keyboard textures. This sublime song could launch a commercial, a rocket, or a revolution—take your pick.

The charm of the radio sessions and live shows partially stems from their love of playing quirky covers, including Elvis' "Suspicious Minds," Pink Floyd's "Breathe," and a take on "White Christmas" which features Wayne crooning Bing Crosby in surreal, fuzzed-out tones, like some damaged spaceman from Mars discovering holiday spirit. This boxset's highlight could be the final disc, a 2003 concert at London's Forum, where the Lips perform the best cuts from their peak era, *The Soft Bulletin* and *Yoshimi*. From the lysergic bliss of their opening anthem, "Race for the Prize," to the vulnerable heartbreak of the piano-driven "Waitin' for a Superman," with Coyne's tremulous voice poignantly breaking, the Lips match the night's majestic moment. This encapsulates what makes the Flaming Lips so special: their daringly original sound, psychedelic experience, and perpetual reach for transcendence live and on record. **Greg Gaston**

Further Listening: Guided by Voices: *Scalping the Guru*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

The Cure: *Wish (30th Anniversary Deluxe Edition)*. Fiction/Rhino (3 CDs).

By the time the Cure released their ninth studio album, they'd evolved from college radio darlings to stadium rockers. Buoyed by the chart-topping "Friday I'm In Love," 1992's *Wish* became their biggest seller, moving more than a million units in the US alone. You'd think a career milestone of that scale would have pleased band leader Robert Smith—but, as the liner notes to the 30th anniversary deluxe edition reveal, Smith felt frustrated due to his limited role during the original mastering for the album. Enter engineer Miles Showell, who, along with Smith, remastered *Wish* at Abbey Road Studios, and the new edition boasts sumptuous sonics and a deeper bottom end. Although gimmicky, "Friday I'm In Love" helped spread Smith's dark romanticism to a broader audience. More understated songs—"Apart" and "To Wish Impossible Things," for example—cast a hazy spell while the turbo-charged "Open" and "End" score points for jolting Smith out of his haze. Far from filler, the demo tracks on this deluxe edition have their own dreamy allure while the five 12-inch remixes add more friction to the Cure's often velvety sound. During the sole live track, "End," all hell breaks loose, thus ending the 45-song release on a cacophonous, scorching, and thoroughly uninhibited high note. **Jeff Wilson**

Further Listening: Indochine: *Le Baiser*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Dave Alvin: *Eleven Eleven* (11th Anniversary Expanded Edition). Yep Roc.

This is quintessential Dave Alvin. In 2011, the LA-based singer, songwriter, guitarist and roadhouse philosopher cranked his amp, summoned the ghost of Johnny “Guitar” Watson, and recorded a snarling, steely set of raucous, rockin’ blues that spawned such working-class fare as “Harlan County Line.” Newly reissued with different sequencing and three bonus tracks, *Eleven Eleven* bristles with songs of life and death and love and betrayal. He laid down these vibrant tracks over the span of several months, recording live in the studio as the musicians sat in a circle around the mics. He enlisted pianist Gene Taylor of the Blasters, members of his Guilty Men and Guilty Women projects, veterans of the legendary Ash Grove club scene, ace session bassist Bob Glaub, and Chris Gaffney’s Cold Hard Facts. All-star guitarists include Alvin, Greg Leisz, Rick Shea, and Danny Ott. This is visceral blues-rock—you can sense the hair rise on the back of Alvin’s neck on the autobiographical “What’s Up with Your Brother?,” a duet with sibling Phil Alvin; sense the sorrow of “Johnny Ace Is Dead”; and taste the sweat on the blue-collar anthem “Gary, Indiana, 1959.” Available on CD, double gatefold LP, and digital formats. **GC**

Further Listening: The Blasters: *American Music*; Dave Alvin: *King of California*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Bruce Springsteen: *Only the Strong Survive*. Columbia.

Bruce Springsteen’s fans are familiar with his rousing encores, when he kicks out the jams on soul or rock ’n’ roll chestnuts. To the faithful, an album’s worth of soul covers is but a minor surprise. More surprising are the terms of engagement: in almost every instance the Boss duplicates the classic arrangements of the original hits. So you get the familiar sonic touchstones of styles denoting the songs’ Memphis, Chicago, and Motown (and points south) origins with the raspy, heavy baritone Bruce voice. David Ruffin raging against the elements on “I Wish It Would Rain” was not Bruce Springsteen any more than Bruce Springsteen is emulating David Ruffin when he takes the lyrics to an even darker, more apocalyptic place. The versions of “Only the Strong Survive” by Jerry Butler and Elvis are both great recordings, and Bruce seems to acknowledge them as unsurpassable by transforming the song into a gospel housewrecker with commanding Julius Cheeks-like testifying. Whether he’s grooving with Sam Moore on Dobie Gray’s “Soul Days” or conjuring the faux heartbreak of William Bell’s Stax gem “Any Other Way,” the Boss sounds in his element, doing something deep and meaningful to him, touching down in his past and luxuriating in every moment.

David McGee

Further Listening: Bob Dylan: *Triplicate*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Dailey & Vincent: *Let’s Sing Some Country!* BMG.

Since teaming up in 2007, Jamie Dailey and Darrin Vincent have done a lot of good things together in rising to the bluegrass world’s upper echelon; and now, all these years later, the duo is taking a detour into full-on traditional country with predictably solid results. On 11 tunes bearing songwriter credits on the order of Vince Gill, Karen Staley, Jimmy Fortune, Steve Earle, and others, Jamie Dailey, in spectacular voice, flat puts the hurt, the heartache, and the exultation on the tales he tells, his emotive flights always hitting listeners where they live. The album-opening Staley tune, “I’ll Leave My Heart in Tennessee,” speaks to Dailey’s love for his home state’s natural majesty, and you don’t have to listen hard to get the message. There’s beauty in the balladry of “Closer to You,” humor in the boozy meditations of “If I Die A-Drinkin’,” and touching pathos in the frank testimony of a life saved by love in “You Rescued Me.” Staunch proponents of the quartet sound, D&V get an Oak Ridge Boys-style bass-heavy foursome rolling on the instructive self-help advice of “Dig a Little Deeper in the Well.” Tired of bro country? D&V are good for what ails you. **DM**

Further Listening: JB & Jamie Dailey: *Step Back in Time*; Jimmy Fortune/Bradley Walker/Mike Rogers/Ben Isaacs: *Brotherly Love*

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MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Makaya McCraven: *In These Times*.
International Anthem/Nonesuch.

The opening to Makaya McCraven's *In These Times* stops you in your tracks, tugging you into his "polytemporal compositions." A minimal motif churns underneath a spoken-word introduction, which eventually blooms into a rich blanket of glistening instrumentation ranging from vibraphone to every member of the string family. The motif is interspersed throughout this title track, hinting at a technique McCraven draws upon for the remainder of the record. The drummer/producer is known to blur notions of genre, synthesizing, and crossing amongst established categories of jazz, folk, hip-hop, and modern composition to conjure an uncharted path. *In These Times* is no exception, a stunning work that ebbs and flows seamlessly through passages of bustle and contemplation, melodic gestures or rhythmic patterns threading through each track. Combining studio and live performances, *In These Times* has a propulsive drive created from the synergy amongst the musicians, palpable even now after the sessions are long-finished. McCraven and his collaborators have manifested a document of these moments that breathes. As the closing track churns towards its quietly dissipating conclusion, I can sense the shimmer of more to come in its final notes.

Hannah Blanchette

Further Listening: Makaya McCraven: *Universal Beings*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Pharoah Sanders: *Karma*. Impulse!/Acoustic Sounds (LP).

The 180-gram-vinyl reissue of Pharoah Sanders' most loved album is a fitting tribute to the tenor saxophonist, who died at age 81 on September 24, 2022. *Karma* achieved legendary status as a masterpiece of spiritual jazz by way of "The Creator Has a Master Plan," which on LP is divided into a 19-minute track on side one and a 13-minute track on side two. Although flipping the disc breaks the frenetic momentum of the dense, wildly improvised main section, the minor interruption is offset by the sonic payoff of Ryan Smith's mastering at Sterling Sound and the pristine pressing, which parlay the original production (Bob Thiele) and engineering (Bob Simpson) into a detailed listening experience that transcends the 53-plus years since the February 1969 recording dates. "The Creator" features lyrics and vocals by Leon Thomas, and an expanded all-star ensemble with French horn, flute, and percussion that adds color and texture to the piano-bass-drums-sax quartet. From an early quote of "A Love Supreme" by John Coltrane and a two-chord vamp, "Creator" becomes a glorious, cacophonous lava-flow of blurred screams and free wailing that resolves into a blissful denouement. Closing side two at just under six minutes, "Colors" provides an exquisite digestif.

Derk Richardson

Further Listening: Alice Coltrane: *Journey in Satchidananda*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Marc Copland Quartet: *Someday*.
InnerVoiceJazz.

On 40 albums as a leader, pianist-composer Marc Copland has distinguished himself as a master of reharmonization and impressionism. On this highly interactive quartet outing, he is joined by bassist and longtime collaborator Drew Gress and two more recent collaborators in drummer Mark Ferber and Belgian saxophonist Robin Verheyen, whose breathy tenor tone on "Someday My Prince Will Come" sounds like the proverbial dry martini (a description Paul Desmond once assigned to his own alto sound). On ethereal readings of the title track (leaving out the four words "My Prince Will Come" is an indication of just how sparsely Copland interprets this standard) and Verheyen's gently rubato "Encore," the quartet adopts a walking-on-eggshells aesthetic. But on tunes like Copland's "Spinning Things" and "Day and Night" as well as an interpretation of Miles Davis' "Nardis," they dig in and swing hard, anchored by Gress' deep, woody-toned walking bass and fueled by Ferber's insistent ride cymbal work. They also deliver a bubbly rendition of Thelonious Monk's "Let's Cool One" with Verheyen leading the way on soprano sax and Ferber engaging in some animated trading of eights. Four kindred spirits walking right up to the edge, with superb results.

Bill Milkowski

Further Listening: Marc Copland Quartet: *Second Look; Zenith*

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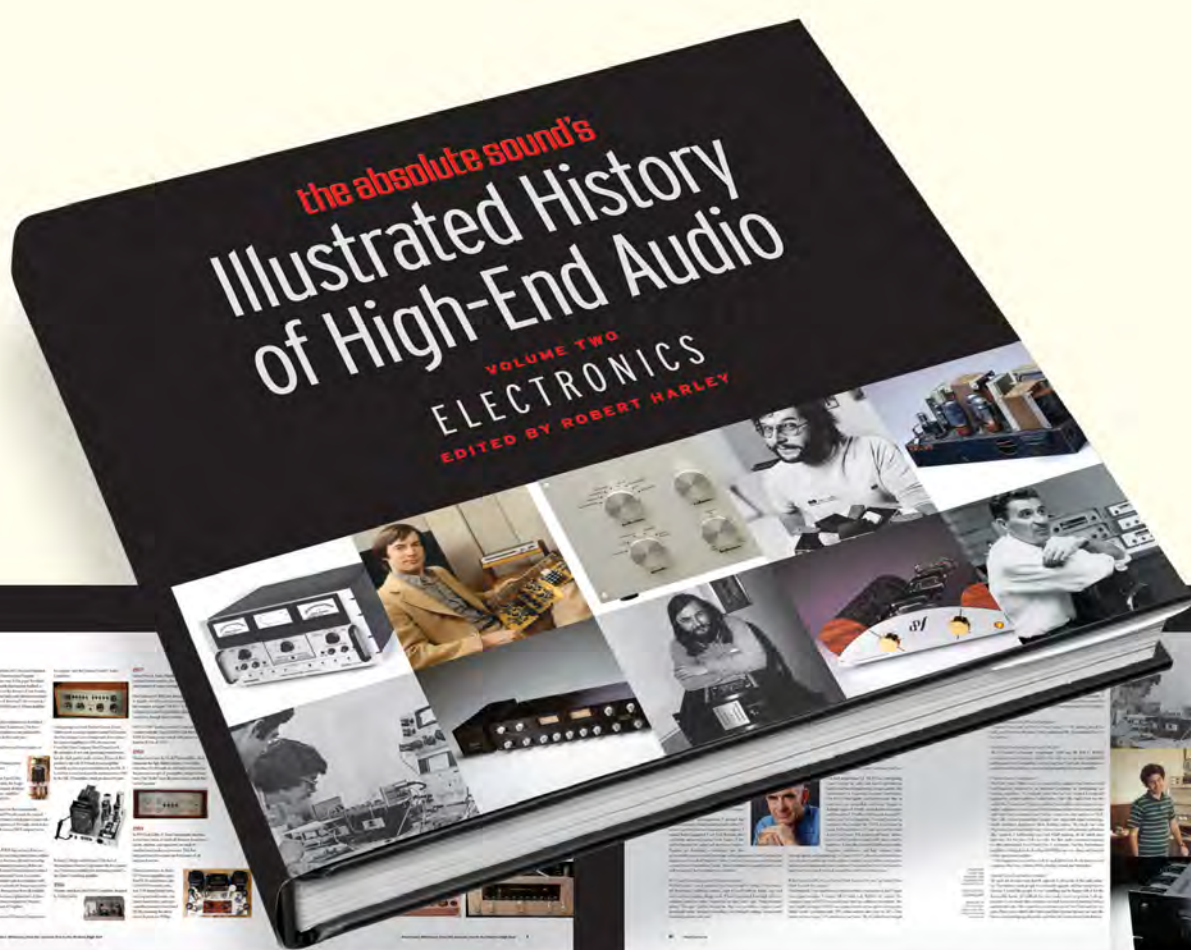
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MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Conrad Herwig: *The Latin Side of Mingus*. Savant.

Trombonist Conrad Herwig, a key member of Eddie Palmieri's La Perfecta II group from the early 2000s as well as a longtime and current member of the Mingus Big Band, has been doing Latin jazz-themed tributes to jazz icons since 1996's Grammy-nominated *The Latin Side of John Coltrane*. This clave-fueled tribute to Charles Mingus combines two parallel aspects of his outstanding career. A superior technician on his instrument, which he showcases in stellar solos on salsa-fied renditions of Mingus' "Boogie Stop Shuffle," "Gunslinging Bird," and "Better Get Hit in Your Soul," Herwig also benefits greatly from the tight rhythm section of pianist Bill O'Connell, bassist Luques Curtis, drummer Robby Ameen, and churning conguero Camilo Molina, who collectively drive these tracks with plenty of *fuego*. Other soloistic highlights include trumpeter Randy Brecker's high-note attack on "Boogie Stop Shuffle" and the three-way trading over a son montuno groove between Herwig, Brecker, and saxophonist Craig Handy on a pulse-quickening "Hora Decubitus." Regular Mingus Big Band trumpeter Alex Sipiagin also shines on a cha cha version of "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" and a beautiful bolero take on "Duke Ellington's Sound of Love" that features his radiant flugelhorn playing. **BM**

Further Listening: Conrad Herwig: *Sketches of Spain y Mas*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Santi Debriano & Arkestra Bembe: *Ashanti*. JoJo.

Since the early 1980s bassist and composer Santi Debriano has maintained an active recording schedule as a sideman, including several recordings with jazz greats Kirk Lightsey, Louis Hayes, Sonny Fortune, and Pharoah Sanders. For his eighth recording as a leader, Debriano presents Arkestra Bembe, a nonet with a versatile lineup performing ten Debriano originals. When blended together, the nonet's combination of flute, acoustic guitar, three saxophones, trumpet, piano, double bass, and drums creates a rich, alluring sound that will make your speakers purr. The slow, bluesy "Imaginary Guinea" features ear-catching solos by flautist Andrea Brachfeld and guitarist Adrian Alvarado. Baritone saxophonist Ray Sero and trumpeter Emile Turner stand out on the medium swinging "Spunky" while the Latin-influenced "Basilar" has brief solos by almost everybody. With a melody reminiscent of its namesake, "Mr. Monk" features fiery solos from T.K. Blue's alto saxophone and Tommy Morimoto's tenor, and the song features tempo changes reminiscent of "Mr. Mingus." The melody of "Till Then" bears a strong resemblance to Bobby Hutcherson's composition "Til Then" from the 60s. *Ashanti* is an enjoyable listen for fans of larger ensembles. **Greg Turner**

Further Listening: Bobby Watson: *Back Home in Kansas City*; Marques Carroll: *Foundations*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Tyshawn Sorey Trio + 1: *The Off-Off Broadway Guide to Synergism*. Pi Recordings.

On his mid-2022 studio album, *Mesmerism*, drummer/percussionist and MacArthur "genius" Fellow Tyshawn Sorey side-stepped away from the experimentalism of 2018's *Pillars* and toward the Great American songbook. *The Off-Off Broadway Guide to Synergism* follows a similar path. This 3-CD set documents Sorey performing with pianist Aaron Diehl, bassist Russell Hall, and alto saxophonist Greg Osby at the Jazz Gallery in New York City in March 2022. The repertoire covers many eras of jazz, from Fats Waller's "Jitterbug Waltz" to Thelonious Monk's "Ask Me Now," McCoy Tyner's "Contemplation," Miles Davis' "Solar," and Ornette Coleman's "Mob Job." Whether taking off from swing, bebop, hard-bop, modal, or harmolodic sources or extrapolating from playful and romantic melodies such as "Three Little Words," "Night and Day," and "Chelsea Bridge," the quartet pries open the harmonies and meters and puts its own stamp on every tune. Inventive expression and instrumental virtuosity abound, most commandingly in Osby's burnished tone and spiraling solos and Diehl's crisp runs and Tyner-esque rhapsodic thunder, more subtly in Hall's and Sorey's supportive rhythmic partnership at every tempo. Each moment of these four hours of live acoustic jazz feels exhilaratingly fresh and new. **DR**

Further Listening: John Coltrane: *Blue Train*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Beethoven: String Quartets (Complete). Budapest String Quartet. Sony.

The stereo cycle of Beethoven's quartets that my generation, an old one now, grew up on has at last been released in high-resolution audio by Sony and issued on SACD in Japan and DSD 64 download in the U.S. The original recordings were produced between 1958 and 1961 by Howard Scott and the young (then in his early 20s) and wonderfully capable Thomas Z. Shepard; they've been remastered to the usual exquisite standard by Andreas K. Meyer.

The entire cycle was recorded in the same place—Columbia's 30th Street Studio in New York City—at a time when the members of the group, by then all Russian Jews, had been playing together for nearly 30 years. Their approach, which today would be considered old-school, was in fact modern for its time: straightforward, disciplined, and literal. They played Beethoven with abundant feeling and superb musicality, with the wisdom of years, but without self-indulgent "shaping" of phrases or mawkish sentiment.

The result was and still is one of the best overviews of this towering opus ever committed to tape. It makes clear, in the early quartets, the composer's overturning of convention and expectations within a Classical framework; in the middle works, his enlargement of form, scope, and gesture; and, in the late ones, the innovative

language, astonishing metaphysical complexity, and simultaneous expansion and compression of musical structure that have ruled our thinking for two centuries. The Budapest foursome makes all of this intelligible and conveys remarkable beauty at the same time—one example, among many, being the Cavatina of Opus 130. Little wonder that a slightly earlier Budapest performance of this movement was sent into eternity as the final cut on the gold disc aboard the Voyager spacecraft.

Columbia's original analog recordings were made using two- and three-channel masters to produce a highly analytical stereo effect. In the studio, the players were not bunched together as they would be for a concert, but seated in a slightly rounded line under three mics—an arrangement borne out by a session photo that appears in the Japanese booklet. This is exactly what comes across in Meyer's remastering. Cellist Mischa Schneider is far right, and first violinist Joseph Roisman far left—frequently sounding like he's off by his lonesome over there, occasionally struggling to get some of the high notes in the late quartets. Second violinist Sascha Schneider and violist Boris Kroyt are well to the left and right of center respectively. There's far more separation than would naturally occur.

But make no mistake: what this recording intends to give us is Beethoven of the mind rather than of the recital hall or a prince's drawing room. And for these works that's appropriate, especially when it comes to the late quartets, which—as Proust rightly said in *À la recherche du temps perdu*—were far ahead of their time and are still the most exalted music of the mind ever written.

In terms of overall sound quality, whether one listens on speakers or over headphones, there's a wonderful immediacy and tonal naturalness to the experience, notwithstanding the stretched-out image. Nothing sounds larger than life.

For Columbia, making this set was a huge accomplishment both technically and musically. Listening to it now is every bit as rewarding as it was then. **Ted Libbey**

Further Listening: Mozart: String Quintets (Budapest Quartet/Sony)



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Eclipse. Hahn; Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Andrés Orozco-Estrada. DG.

The pandemic and its cancellations, coming about halfway through a year-long sabbatical for Hahn, ravaged her self-confidence and nearly derailed this recording. I agree, though, that she walked through fire and came out stronger. Alberto Ginastera's Violin Concerto (1963) is tough, imposing, and deadly serious, but not grating like many twelve-tone pieces. It declaims its angst and tragedy without apology, but there are places to catch a breath. Hahn shines in it, from the strenuous solo opening, through the mysticism of the slow movement, and into the percussion-filled Scherzo and the furious Perpetuum Mobile. The Frankfurt musicians excel, too, adding their own intensity and atmosphere. Dvorak's Violin Concerto is underplayed compared to other romantic concertos; that is puzzling, gorgeous, and tuneful as it is. Hahn brings loneliness to the Adagio and a Vivaldi-spring-like joy to the finale. She's at least equal to Josef Suk and Karel Ancerl, and DG easily bests Supraphon's sonics. DG's LP has better-than-CD sound, and the Ginastera gets its own single LP. On the CD, Sarasate's chipper (annoying, if you ask me) *Carmen Fantasy* comes after the Ginastera, and that's like putting whipped cream on an onion. I prefer to be left alone with my thoughts after the Ginastera. **Stephen Estep**

Further Listening: Brahms & Stravinsky: Concertos (Hahn, Marriner/Sony)



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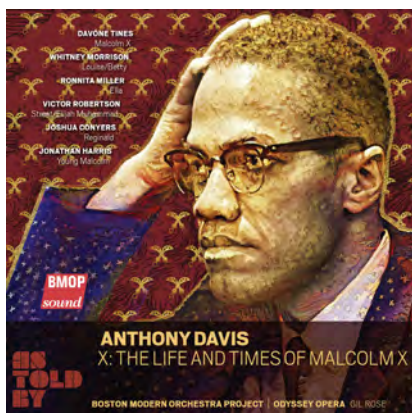
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MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Davis: X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X. Boston Modern Orchestra Project/Odyssey Opera, Rose. BMOP.

This epic opera first appeared in 1985, as a feature project of the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia. It was produced by the New York City Opera shortly thereafter and given a premiere recording several years later. Now, a generation later, we have this fine new version, with sufficient editing of the original to constitute a sort of premiere in its own right. Given the very essence of the title character, it is impossible, and utterly naïve, not to consider the impact of this uniquely American story in the context of the rapidly shifting racial landscape of our own times. That was certainly on the minds of the creators as they embarked on this new production. And yet, putting aside the intense controversy surrounding Malcolm's political and societal views, from a purely objective perspective, it is hard not to admire his intense personal courage and his soaring intellect. That is surely an essential inspiration for this engrossing work for musical theater.

Anthony Davis and his librettist, his cousin poet Thulani Davis, trace this biographical arc with remarkable fluidity and dramatic cohesion. The libretto begins in Malcolm's childhood in Depression-era America, which was enshrouded by racism. His father, a preacher and follower of the black separatist Marcus Garvey, died in a suspicious streetcar accident and his mother was committed to a mental institution, events which pro-

foundly shaped his adult life. In the opera, he falls under the spell of a character named Street (who bears a striking resemblance to Sportin' Life from *Porgy and Bess*), which leads him to crime, prison, and subsequently, a jailhouse conversion to Islam and a commitment to the political activism that would become his legacy.

Despite the extensive and acclaimed work in modern jazz by Davis, *X* is not a jazz opera, but rather an opera that includes jazz elements, especially as the music backs into the narrative. For example, when the action switches from the rural Michigan of Malcolm's youth to the urban tensions of his new home in Boston in 1940, the score takes on a driving, pre-bop jazz band energy. There are evocations of the blues as well, such as in the beautiful aria sung by Malcolm's aunt Ella, "Come with me, child." In much of the score the music is jagged and dissonant, recalling the dense, expressive language of an important mentor of Davis, Jacob Druckman. The melodic line is simplified by carefully paced intoned speech in many of Malcolm's parts, backed by the syncopated rhythms of a drum kit, such as when we hear his infamous "the chickens come home to roost" comment following the assassination of JFK, a powerful and central moment in the storyline.

As is the case with all Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) recordings, this is a thorough and smartly designed package, with insightful program notes and a full libretto. The performance is taut and passionate, with a bold rendition of the title character by the young American bass-baritone Davóne Tines, certainly one of the rising stars of his generation. BMOP is led with the vigor and commitment that can almost be taken for granted under the visionary leadership of Gil Rose, here joined by the forces of Odyssey Opera. The recording is clear and spacious. **Peter Burwasser**

Further Listening: Davis: *Amistad* (Lyric Opera of Chicago/New World)



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Serenata: Brazilian Music for Chamber Orchestra. English Chamber Orchestra, Neil Thomson. Naxos.

Though these Brazilian composers—all born from 1836 to 1868—aren't household names, they're well worth your attention. Carlos Gomes was taught by an Italian composer, and his perky, witty Sonata for Strings reminds me a lot of Rossini; the melodies are reserved almost solely for the violins, and they sound like they should be arias instead of a sonata. Short tunes by Francisco Braga and Alberto Nepomuceno could have come straight off a 101 Strings album. The latter composer studied in Italy and Germany, but his *Suite Antique* is a cousin to the *Holberg Suite* by his friend Grieg; both pieces set older styles in a romantic light. The Minuet has a classical elegance to it, while the Aria is more like a slow, tuneful Bach piece; the Rigaudon is a charmer, with a hint of Spain in the harmonies. Brass, winds, and timpani join strings in Leopoldo Miguez's *Suite a Antiga*, and the oboe solo in the "Aria e Double" is spare yet beautiful. His tunes are fetching, and his countermelodies are inventive and attractively detailed. He gets more chromatically adventurous than the others, too. You can't go wrong with 68 minutes of gentle, relaxing, and intelligent music. The sound is reverberant though not plush. **SE**

Further Listening: Nepomuceno: *Symphony in G Minor*, etc. (Fabio Mechetti/Naxos)

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“Everyone has the same goal: to advance the state of the art in music reproduction.”

What ignited your interest in the high end? Did it come from the music side or the electronics side?

My love of music started at a very young age. I barely remember any formal lessons, but listening to music was more of a passion than an interest. As a teenager, I gave up convincing myself to play an instrument. Not because I didn't possess great musical abilities, which I didn't, but because I have such great respect for artists who are blessed with the talent to play well. It was around this time that I turned my attention to high-end audio. My love of high-end audio came from the desire to hear music reproduced exactly as it was created.

What gear made up your first high-end system?

A pair of Bose 901s with a McIntosh 2205 and a preamp.

When did audio develop from a hobby to a career?

At the age of 14, I decided I wanted to be an audiophile loudspeaker designer. Not that I thought those exact words, but my interest in speakers and audio was growing steadily, and I wanted to put a few ideas and theories to the test. It's what drove me to study Electrical Engineering at NYU in 1969.

How do you define the difference between hi-fi and high-end audio?

To me, high-end audio is about recreating the sound of live instruments and performances as they sound when you are in the same room—the feeling of hearing them played live. Hi-fi gives you the tune, but it omits the delicacies and details that make a live performance a memorable, emotional experience.

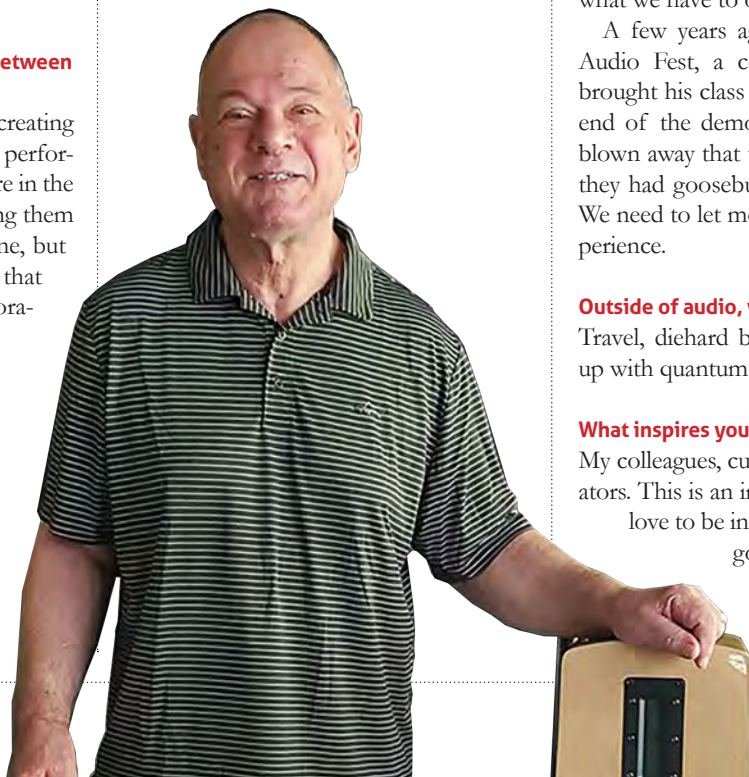
How would you describe the Alta Audio company philosophy?

From day one, our mission is to come as close as possible to the sound and feel of instruments in performance. Every product and technology attributed to Alta Audio is based on that statement.



What interesting fact or aspect about Alta Audio might surprise audiophiles?

Our design philosophy is based in both the arts of speaker and instrument design. The shape of our speakers and our elimination of internal padding is more in line with how an instrument is designed, in particular, string instruments like the cello and violin. We do this while paying equal attention to the physics of loudspeaker design. Our patent-pending XTL transmission-line technology is indicative of this philosophy. XTL, or Extended Transmission Line, is our proprietary technology that applies sonic geometry to tune speaker cabinets as if they are musical instruments, delivering an accurate, fast, and powerful low-frequency response.



What three recordings do you listen to on every Alta loudspeaker?

There are far more than three. Each speaker goes through a design process that includes listening to specific recordings that have details I use to fine-tune the crossover. But if I have to choose only three, here are a few of my personal favorites.

Cantate Domino: On “Maria Wiegeli,” you can hear the air going through the organ and the micro-resonances it produces. On “Zither Carol,” the wall of the church behind the singer is especially clear, and you can tell that it is curved both behind and above the singer.

Leonard Cohen’s *Ten New Songs*: Leonard Cohen’s vocals cover a wide range of frequencies and test the coherence of the speaker. The bass guitar on “Boogie Street” should be clean, deep, and powerful.

Szakcsi’s “Peace for Pastorius” lets me get the ring of the piano exactly right, and you can hear the notes move down the strings.

What are the greatest challenges confronting the high-end business in the next few years?

We need to expand our market. Music lovers under 45 don't know or care about what we have to offer.

A few years ago, at Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, a college professor friend brought his class to our room, and at the end of the demonstration they were so blown away that two of the girls told me they had goosebumps from head to toe. We need to let more people have that experience.

Outside of audio, what do you do for fun?

Travel, diehard baseball fan, and I keep up with quantum physics and cosmology.

What inspires you about your work?

My colleagues, customers, and fellow creators. This is an industry that you have to love to be in. Everyone has the same goal: to advance the state of the art in music production. **tas**

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