

editors' choice awards

Welcome to the 2005 edition of *The Absolute Sound's* Editors' Choice Awards—our annual, comprehensive list of Recommended Products. On the following pages, you'll find the gear our writers and editors have selected as the "best of the best" in each component category. Each recommendation gets a capsule review, and most categories are divided into separate sub-categories by price range, with components listed in order of ascending price (though a few items, like cables and accessories, are listed alphabetically for clarity's sake). Naturally, some products have been discontinued

since last year's list, but they remain recommendable. This year we've also included a list of the multichannel components we've found to be most truthful to the real thing—as opposed to those that are merely spectacular with film soundtracks. (Note, however, that with the exception of founder Harry Pearson's "Super Maggie" System, which was part of a complete system recommendation, space has prevented us from including multichannel speakers. For a complete list, please take a look at the Winter 2006 issue of our sister magazine, *The Perfect Vision*.)

While most of our recommended components have already been reviewed in our pages, some reviews are either forthcoming or have appeared in our sister publications *The Perfect Vision* and *AVGuide.com*.

Loudspeakers

Under \$500

PARADIGM ATOM

\$199

paradigm.com

A staggering value, Paradigm's tiny Atom does an awful lot right. With a smooth frequency response, an open treble, and a natural midrange, this little guy only falls short in the bottom two octaves or when pushed too hard, displaying coarseness at unreasonably loud levels. Best used in small rooms at moderate volumes. *Reviewed*

by Robert Harley, Issue 133



PSB ALPHA B

\$249

psbspeakers.com

PSB's Alpha B may not have all the detail, tonal neutrality, or refinement of the best mini-monitors, but its sound is remarkably open and spacious, and its imaging is precise and impressively three-dimensional. As one would expect, the PSBs haven't any deep bass, and dynamic range and power handling are limited. The speaker sounds best on stands and well away from walls. *Reviewed* by RH in *The Perfect Vision*, Issue 38



EPOS ELS3

\$329

musichallaudio.com

The Epos ELS3 strives to give you big sound from a small box, and does a much better job than most. With good midrange and treble clarity, superb three-dimensionality, and just enough upper midbass weight to keep you from missing the lower frequencies that aren't there. Use good stands, place them at ear level well away from walls and nearby objects, and feed them with clear-voiced amplification. *Reviewed* by Chris Martens, Issue 145

USHER S520

\$375

usheraudio.com

Four things distinguish Usher's S520 from run-of-the-mill, sub-\$400 mini-monitors: a crisp and revealing treble reminiscent of speakers with four-figure price tags; unusually open and dynamic midrange; taut



and surprisingly extended bass (no fake midbass hump here); and eye-popping build quality (yep, that's real wood veneer). One caveat: They need lots of break-in, so be patient. *Reviewed* by CM in *AVGuide*

MONITOR AUDIO BRONZE B2

\$399

monitoraudio.com

The B2 offers a notably clean, open, and detailed sound throughout the midrange, but unlike most small fry, its bass is remarkably weighty and powerful, its dynamics are nimble, and its metal dome tweeter is airy and detailed, not edgy. The B2 likes a bit of power—50-plus watts should do—and as with the models listed above, it should be placed on stands and away from walls. *Reviewed* by Wayne Garcia, Issue 140

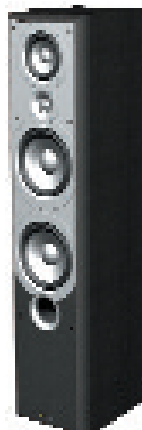
\$500-\$1000

INFINITY PRIMUS 360

\$660

infinitysystems.com

With a broad combo of virtues, including bass output to 30Hz, enough slam to satisfy a WWF fan, and a warm full-bodied midrange, the Primus' main drawback is a



cool-sounding lower treble. It may not be as refined as some similarly priced models, but the Primus will appeal to the hip-hop, party crowd. Not perfect, but one of the best floorstanders values around. *Reviewed* by Neil Gader, Issue 149

WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 9.6

\$750

iagamerica.com

This speaker's strengths include class-leading bass, excellent transient speed, and the ability to float a wide, stable image. The only downsides are a slight tendency toward stridency and foreshortening of soundstage depth. But pair these guys with electronics that emphasize smoothness (e.g., NAD components) and watch their musicality unfold. *Reviewed* by Jim Hannon in *AVG*, TAS 153

PSB T45/55

\$749 and \$899

psbspeakers.com

As successors to the popular Image Series, the T45 and T55 had to fill enormous shoes. And these small and mid-size floorstanders do not disappoint. Both products are tonally balanced and deliver superior driver integration, with excellent output capability and a fair amount of extension. While soundstaging is merely adequate, and a bit of the cool clinician is at work in the treble, macrodynamics are gutsy and fine details are delicately reproduced. T55 reviewed by NG, Issue 152; T45 reviewed by JH, *AVG*

recommended products

TOTEM RAINMAKER \$900

totemacoustic.com

The diminutive Rainmaker continues Totem's tradition of offering amazing sound in small, affordable packages. Upfront, bold, and warm, the Rainmaker opens an impressively large sonic window on the music, with rich, solid bass to about 45Hz, good detail, and nice spaciousness. The metal-dome tweeter may or may not be your cup of brew, as more sensitive ears have found it a bit edgy and dry. Otherwise, a remarkable effort.

Reviewed by WG with NG comment, Issue 151

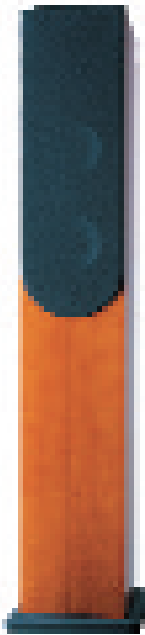
BOHLENDER GRAEBENER RADIA Z \$999

bgcorp.com

Marrying cone woofers with ribbon tweeters has spoiled many a loudspeaker, but BG has done an admirable job with its competitively priced Radia Z. This elegant floor-stander has a warm midrange, a plush if somewhat plummy 40Hz bass response, and a star-quality tweeter that is intoxicatingly transparent.

The Radia Z offers a lot of high-end refinement, and shows best in smaller listening environments.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 149



\$1000-\$1500

MAGNEPAN MG12/QR \$1099

magnepan.com

This affordable two-way quasi-ribbon brings you remarkably close to the best performance such designs are capable of. When properly placed—around three feet from the back wall and some

distance from sidewalls—its clarity is addictive, with a wide and deep soundstage, and terrific transient speed. The MG-12 performs satisfyingly down to about 40Hz; below that, some listeners may want a subwoofer. These little Maggies are reliable, easy to set up, and above all, musical.

Reviewed by Sallie Reynolds, AVG



SPENDOR S3/5 AND S3/5SE

\$1099 and \$1399

qsandd.com

The S3/5's dimensions are Lilliputian, so it has real dynamic and bass limitations, though lacks neither warmth nor richness. This two-way is a true mini-monitor of world-class tonal neutrality and openness, transparency, and imaging—think a Quad 63/988 in a shoebox-sized enclosure. At just 84dB sensitivity, it needs at least 25 watts of quality power, and stand-mounting is preferable. The SE version trades the neutral midrange of the standard S3/5 for a slight upper-mid forwardness and improved transparency, resolution, and dynamic range.

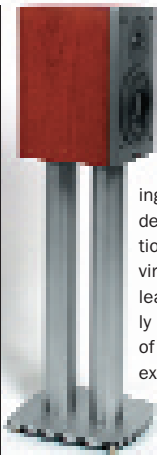
Reviewed by Paul Seydor, Issues 119 and 143

REVEL CONCERTA F12 \$1199

revlspeakers.com

The Concerta F12's greatest strengths are extended bass response, a neutral tonal balance, a good measure of midrange nuance, and wonderfully consistent voicing from top to bottom. Though it may not offer the last word in transparency or the nth degree of bass articulation, this speaker is easy to drive with real-world amps, and always produces an inviting, well-balanced sound.

Reviewed by Arnie Williams in this issue



DYNAUDIO AUDIENCE 52SE

\$1500

dynaudio-usa.com

This over-achieving two-way monitor delivers the traditional Dynaudio virtues. While it leans ever so slightly to the darker side of neutral, it offers exceptional balance, an airy treble, full upper-bass response, and impressive dynamics. It may not plumb the depths in the low frequencies, but it excels in clarity and punch. Build-quality is superior. A mellow, refined little speaker with a big sonic footprint.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 149

\$1500-\$2000



VANDERSTEEN 2CE SIGNATURE

\$1549

vandersteen.com

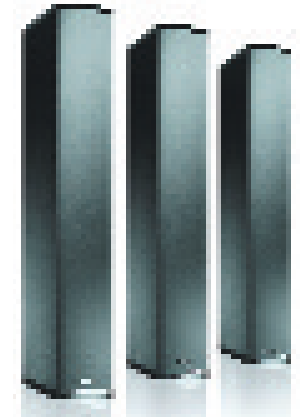
This classic three-way floor-stander delivers excellent top-to-bottom balance and an engaging musicality. Moreover, Vandersteen's baffle-less, time-and-phase-coherent design can suggest the spatial focus usually heard with planars. It benefits from bi-wiring and should be placed away from walls. Careful attention must also be paid to adjusting the back-tilt via the optional stands.

Reviewed by Shane Buettner, Issue 139

DEFINITIVE TECHNOLOGY BP7004

\$1598

definitivetech.com



DefTech's BP7004 features bipolar driver arrays (identical sets of forward- and rear-facing drivers) and a powered subwoofer section built around a 10" woofer and two 10" passive radiators. The sound is way big and tonally well-balanced, with open, warm mids and highs, a well-defined bass that gives nothing away to outboard subs, and dynamics to beat the band.

Reviewed by Jerry Sommers, Issue 148

TRIANGLE ESPRIT ALTEA ES \$1599

triangle-fr.com

Triangle produces its own drivers, and rhythmic pace, dynamics, and output level are the big beneficiaries. The Altea ES offers excellent bass response to well below 50Hz, but some added directivity and hardness accompany the horn-loaded tweeter. The hardness is ameliorated by the Altea's transient speed and detail, while a polite energy dip in the upper mids and a puff of port overhang are minor distractions. This balanced and musical offering should satisfy a variety of tastes.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 157



recommended products

QUAD 22L

\$1600

lagamerica.com

According to our reviewer, the 22L “comes closer to the some of the sonic attributes of my beloved electrostats than any other full-range speakers with dynamic drivers I’ve heard under \$2k.” Strengths include excellent lateral imaging, vivid and three-dimensional soundstaging, very low distortion and coloration, and timbral accuracy that makes for an overall sense of musical “rightness.” Build-quality is stunning too, with exquisite cabinet finishes. For even more dynamic oomph and deep bass extension, add Quad’s L-series subwoofer.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 156



MAGNEPAN MG 1.6

\$1775

magenpan.com

Magnepan’s MG 1.6 is simply one of the great high-end speaker values. Its bass is well defined and tuneful down to a respectable 40Hz; its highs are sweet and a bit soft; its mids are magical. With its overall coherence, transient speed, and wide-open soundstage, this moderately priced Maggie is a music lover’s delight. It needs space and power, however, to sound its best.

Reviewed by Jonathan Valin, Issue 124

PSB PLATINUM M2

\$1999

psbspeakers.com

The Platinum M2 shines in its ability to reproduce the weight, majesty, and complexity of every kind of music. Tonally, the speaker is sure-of-foot through the midrange and well into the midbass region. Highs are extended and neck-snappingly



quick. When pushed too hard, however, the M2 betrays a trace of port overhang and some dryness from its aluminum tweeter.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 145

\$2000–\$3000

CANTON ERGO 702DC

\$2000

cantonusa.com

With its elegant, vault-like cabinetry and low-distortion drivers, the 702 delivers impeccable balance, tonal neutrality, and vivid presence. It remains dynamically unruffled and tonally correct at nearly all volume levels, and is excellent at revealing low-level textural details. At only 35" tall, the Ergo is somewhat listening-height dependant in treble dispersion and soundstaging. A sophisticated performer. Reviewed by NG, Issue 149

USHER CP-6311

\$2100

usheraudio.com

The Usher 6311 is a two-way, time-and-phase-aligned bass-reflex tower offering smooth and extended highs, a clear, open midrange, and solid bass down to the upper 30Hz region. The Taiwanese 6311 can play loudly without losing composure, is dynamically responsive, and images with a delightful sense of focus. For best bass clarity, load each speaker’s damping chamber with lead shot, and position the 6311s well away from walls.

Reviewed by CM, AVG

B&W 704

\$2200

bwspeakers.com

Clarity and control are chief among this 2.5-way, vented floor-stander’s sonic virtues, thanks to refinements derived from B&W’s acclaimed Nautilus 800 series. Some may prefer more weight in the bottom end, but the 704’s limited LF extension (40Hz) is more than compensated for by performance that is remarkably quick, solid, and well-defined. A great match with both tube and solid-state amplification.

Reviewed by Sue Kraft, Issue 147



TOTEM HAWK

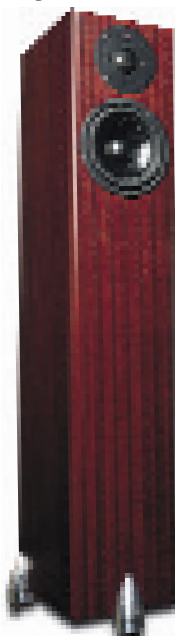
\$2295

totemacoustic.com

An overachiever at this price that communicates the soul and spirit of music, the Hawk has excellent tonal balance, tremendous presence, and prodigious soundstaging. As with other Totem loud-

speakers, the Hawk trades a bit of bass extension for its extraordinary midrange transparency and resolution. Lowish sensitivity (86dB) suggests use with higher-powered amps.

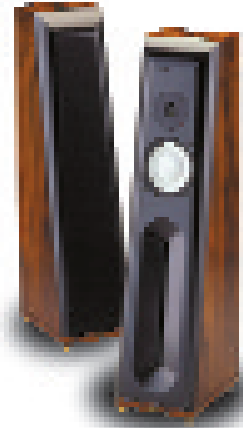
Reviewed by Peter Braverman, Issue 139



THIEL CS1.6

\$2390

thielaudio.com



A sleek little beauty, Thiel’s 90dB-sensitive CS1.6 delivers a relaxed musical presentation with an accurate tonal balance, exceptionally low noise-floor, huge soundstage, and excellent dynamic resolution. What this engaging speaker won’t do is reproduce the bottom octave or deliver the highest dynamic peaks. Best results are achieved with first-rate associated gear.

Reviewed by Tom Miller, Issue 135

VON SCHWEIKERT VR 2

\$2495

vonschweikert.com

A transmission-line tower featuring three forward-facing drivers plus a rear-firing “ambience-recovery” driver, the VR-2 offers deeply extended (mid-20Hz range) bass, a midrange and treble whose clarity scales upward with that of associated electronics, and lively and expressive dynamics. When used judiciously, the ambience-recovery driver helps add depth to the soundstage. For finest results, install lead shot in the damping chambers and experiment with positioning.

Reviewed by CM, AVG

NAIM ARIVA

\$2500

naimusa.com

The floorstanding Ariva offers the sound of a great mini-monitor—but one that manages to produce powerful, deeply extended bass. Moreover, it’s got “disappearing act” imaging, as well as plenty of midrange and treble openness. At its best in medium-sized rooms

recommended products

and played at moderate volume levels, this speaker synergistically combines with Naim's terrific NAIT 5i integrated amp.

Reviewed by Jeff Dorgay, Issue 155

HARBETH HL COMPACT 7 ES-2

\$2695

harbeth.co.uk

This smallish two-way box speaker features Harbeth's unique midrange driver (made of proprietary "RADIAL" material) that reduces materials-based coloration to exceedingly low levels. Midrange clarity and neutrality are top class (vocals are amazing), and anti-diffraction grilles bring the sound surprisingly "out of the box." Powerful solid-state amplification will give more robust dynamics than you might expect. Conventional looks but magical sound.

Reviewed by Robert E. Greene, Issue 110

GALLO NUCLEUS REFERENCE 3

\$2995 (\$3895 with optional subwoofer amp)

roundsound.com

The Nucleus offers some of the most focused imaging and three-dimensional soundstaging you'll hear. The transition from midrange to treble is smooth, and bass is clear and articulate, reaching down to mid-30Hz. Gallo also offers a 250Wpc supplemental subwoofer amp that co-drives the woofer along with your main amplifier, pushing bass response to 22Hz. The Nucleus is at its best with amplifiers of 100 watts or more, though lower-powered amps can also work—especially if you use the subwoofer amp.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 150



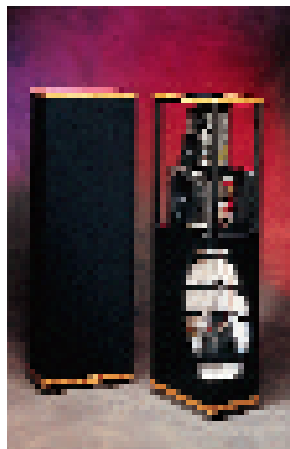
SPENDOR S8E

\$2999

qsandd.com

Though neither the largest nor most expensive model in Spendor's S Series, the S8e just might be the range's best-sounding model. An heir to some of the great BBC monitor speakers of the past, the S8e offers glorious midrange and treble response, wide, deep soundstaging with excellent image height, plus "clean, clear, dramatic bass, even low bass." But the S8e's most compelling characteristic is perhaps the elusive and profoundly satisfying quality of musical "completeness."

Reviewed by SR, Issue 155



\$3000-\$5000

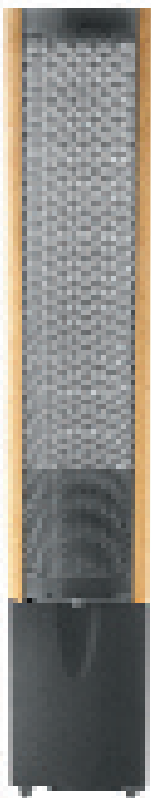
MARTINLOGAN AEON I

\$3295

martinlogan.com

With its Generation 2 ESL panel, MartinLogan has achieved remarkable levels of clarity, smoothness, and transparency from 400Hz on up. The Aeon is complemented by a freshly designed 8" aluminum woofer and enclosure, and while the blend is generally seamless, the woofer's deepest bass is slightly slow compared to the speed of the ESL. A rear-firing tweeter helps off-axis listening but screws up the speaker's overall coherence, so leave it switched off. At its best with about 3 feet behind them, a few to the sides, and powerful amplification.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 146



VANDERSTEEN 3A SIGNATURE

\$3495

vandersteen.com

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. Excellent bass extension combined with a good balance between bass warmth and articulation round out this outstanding effort.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 122

COINCIDENT PARTIAL ECLIPSE

\$3499

coincidentspeaker.com

A three-way floorstander, the Partial shares many of the same sonic virtues that earned its big brother, the Total Eclipse, a 2001 Golden Ear Award. The midband tilts slightly to the warm side, with gloriously open and extended highs and tight, well-controlled bass. Mirror-image side-firing 8" woofers can be positioned facing in or out, necessitating some experimentation for proper room setup. The Partial is an especially synergistic match with higher-powered OTL tube designs, but mates nicely with solid-state amplification as well.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 146

LEGACY VICTORIA LE

legacy-audio.com

\$3499

The stand-mounted, three-way Victoria combines the classic virtues of a mini-monitor with the bass extension and weight of many floorstanders. With solid extension down to about 45Hz, this is an extremely quick, clean, and articulate speaker. Its ribbon tweeter has extraordinary spatial precision and razor-sharp imaging. Tiny nuances are easily resolved, contributing to a feeling of focus and clarity.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 152

CANTON VENTO 807DC

\$3500

cantonusa.com

Our reviewer initially feared the Canton Vento 807 DC might be "another German speaker that fits the stereotype; a forward-sounding, metal-dome-based system with highs that can take your ears off." But in time the 807 DC won him over in a big way with its combination of sonic purity and speed, transparency, pinpoint imaging, extended highs, coherence, and neutrality. This speaker will appeal to listeners who prize sonic accuracy above sweetness.

Reviewed by JH in this issue



VON SCHWEIKERT AUDIO VR-4JR

\$3995

vonschweikert.com

The VR-4jr has a number of endearing sonic attributes, the most notable being its bass performance, which is tight, well-defined, and gutsy. In addition, the midrange is open, the soundstage superbly three-dimensional. The rear-firing ambience mid/tweeter adds considerable spatial depth, presenting the illusion of "round" images expanding in all directions.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 151

recommended products



DALI HELICON 400

\$4300
dali-usa.com
This premium two-way tower is as beautiful to look at as it is to listen to. Expect a yin-like warmth, with ultra-clear transients, low-level resolving power, full-bodied bass, and, courtesy of DALI's unique ribbon-super-tweeter/soft-dome-tweeter module, one of the most open trebles in this or nearly any class. Due in

part to its rigidly braced cabinet, the Helicon is exceptionally uncolored, but a slight midbass bloom mandates careful setup in medium-sized rooms.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 155

THIEL CS2.4

\$4400
thielaudio.com

This superbly crafted three-way floorstander features a unique concentric tweeter/midrange configuration and an oval passive radiator. The results are pinpoint images, an ultra-wide soundstage, and near-realistic orchestral scaling. Dynamics, both micro and macro, are invigorat-



ing. The CS2.4 is both analytical and musical, with a sweet yet bright treble balance requiring quality amplification and attention to setup. Because of the speaker's first-order crossovers, Thiel's minimum recommended listening distance should be adhered to for best driver integration. *Reviewed by NG, Issue 144*

MAGNEPAN MG 3.6

\$4450
magnepan.com

Yet another great deal from Magnepan, this large ribbon/quasi-ribbon dipole gives you much of the sound of its big brother, the 20.1, for considerably less moolah. As with the 20.1, be sure to bring a high-power, high-quality amp to the party, and make sure you have sufficient space to let these things "breathe" or the ribbon tweeter will start to glare.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 121

HYPERION HPS-938

\$4500
hyperionsound.com

A small, three-way bass-reflex model, the Hyperion's separate tweeter/midrange and woofer cabinets house proprietary drivers that are among the best this reviewer has heard. The midrange and woofer's flat top covers, sound basins, and sound ring are connected into what is effectively one body, which vibrates to emit sound. Skillfully mated with a short horn-type tweeter, the HPS-938 offers outstanding detail, low distortion, holographic imaging, and stunning dynamic range.

While the Hyperion ultimately falls short of the best at the frequency extremes, this speaker system is thrilling, natural sounding, and easy to drive.

Reviewed by JH, AVg

SONUS FABER CREMONA AUDITOR

\$4845 (includes dedicated stand)

sumikoaudio.net

A stand-mounted two-way version of Sonus Faber's floorstanding Cremona, the Auditor shares many of that model's virtues—warmth, coherence, sweet extended treble, and a seductive midrange—without the Cremona's dynamic range

and bass extension. The Auditor likes to be well into a room and its lateral tilt and toe-in are critical. Although small, it can play quite loudly and handle a fair amount of power, be it tube or solid-state (we recommend 50W minimum). And beautiful though they look, remove the stringed grilles if you want to hear this elegant Italian speaker at its best. *Reviewed by WG, Issue 146*

\$5000-\$10,000



ATC SCM 20-2

\$5000
atc.gb.net

ATC's latest 20 Series model has been improved in virtually every way, and is less obviously a compact speaker than ever before. Thanks to the robust composite construction and non-parallel side-walls, midbass coloration has been all but vanquished. Derived from the SCM 70 flagship, the soft-dome tweeter raises the performance bar for transparency and resolving power, especially at lower levels. With only 83dB sensitivity, don't scrimp on power—or robust stands to support 50+ pounds.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 154

AUDIO PHYSIC PADUA RR

\$5750
audiophysic.com

The Padua has elegant looks and a refined, precise, and largely uncolored sound. It exudes care, refinement, and dedication to good design and quality manufacturing. That said, it displays a lack of fullness in the midbass and requires careful placement,

which means how you react to its overall balance will depend on how the speaker interacts with your listening room.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 156

QUAD 988 AND 989

\$6650 and \$8650
iagamerica.com

The latest incarnation of Peter Walker's classic electrostatic is, from around 40Hz out, neutral, coherent, linear, and transparent, with lower coloration and distortion than its predecessor. It will not generate the deepest bass, but in normal-sized or smaller rooms it will play at natural levels with a purity and accuracy that spoil you for other designs. The larger 988 retains most of the essential virtues but will play louder and go deeper in the bass. The principal sacrifice is a certain projection in the upper midrange and lower highs that undermines the peerless neutrality of the original.

Reviewed by PS, Issues 130 and 126

USHER DANCER

\$7735
usheraudio.com

What happens when you turn loose a passionate, quality- and value-conscious Taiwanese manufacturer and world-class American speaker designer (Dr. Joe D'Appolito) to build a \$7000 speaker? An overachieving floorstander poised to eat any number of high-end sacred cows for lunch, that's what! The Dancer produces a big, finely focused, high-resolution sound that is dynamically alive. Bass power, extension, and clarity are very good, too. The overall sonics are reminiscent of Wilson's Sophia or Watt/Puppy speakers, but for a fraction of the price. Editor-in-Chief Robert Harley pronounced the Usher a "stone cold bargain."

Reviewed by CM, Issue 154

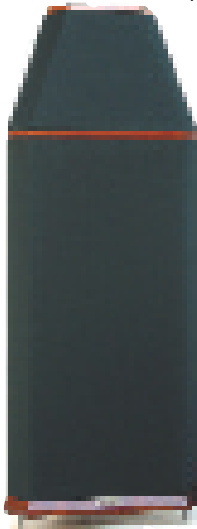


recommended products

GRADIENT REVOLUTION ACTIVE

\$7645

mayaudio.com



With its unusual dipole bass and forward-firing midrange and tweeter configuration, Gradient's latest Revolution—with built-in amplification (a passive version is also available)—remarkably reproduces the original acoustics of the recording venue. It

sounds not like a box or a panel or anything else except a perfect point source. Instruments show their own colors with little enclosure-induced overlay, though a little more midrange relative to the treble gives it extra body, making it somewhat forgiving.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 154

B&W 803D

\$8000

bwspeakers.com

While the midrange of the 803D retains B&W's hallmark clarity and transient speed, the new diamond tweeter is far smoother and less sibilant, yet also more airy and detailed than in previous designs. And while the bass of previous Nautilus speakers was generally on the dry side, and always "enough" but not copious, the bass of the 803Ds is considerably faster and more accurate, and the degree and extension is now "enough plus some."

Reviewed by Manoj Motwani, Issue 156

KEF REFERENCE 205

\$8000

kef.com

British speaker company KEF is back in the U.S. with a full line of high-quality offerings. Part of its top Reference Series, the 205 is a full-range model using KEF's so-called "Hypertweeter," with a useful frequency response up to

80kHz. In-room bass response extends to 30Hz; the midrange is quick, detailed, and neutral; excellent imaging and soundstaging complete the package.

Reviewed by Anthony H. Cordesman, Issue 141

SONUS FABER CREMONA

\$8995

sumikoaudio.net

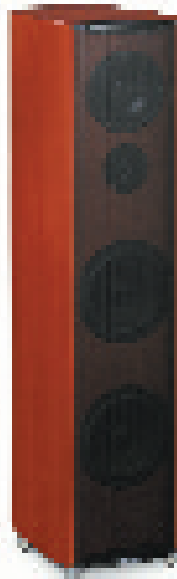
This gorgeous looking and sounding Italian floorstander is warm, airy, and seductive. It excels at resolving low-level information, is dynamically quite nimble as well as forceful, and presents a holographic soundstage. And though the Cremona is a "musical" as opposed to entirely "neutral" design, it is very revealing of source material and components.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 143

KRELL RESOLUTION 2

\$9500

krellonline.com



A highly revealing speaker, Krell's well-named Resolution 2 let our man "hear each note so crisply—the tone, timing, and slight hesitation or rush, so distinctly—that I can follow the thinking that's gone into the musicians' choices, the patterns they're forming. This

isn't about counting all the angels on a pin; it's about sensing the player blowing the horn, the singer belting the notes, the human touch on the music."

Reviewed by Fred Kaplan, Issue 151

\$10,000–\$20,000

MAGNEPAN MG 20.1

\$12,500

magnepan.com

With better octave-to-octave bal-

ance and coherence than the 20R, and the same fabulous treble and nonpareil "there-in-the-room-with-you" midrange presence, the 20.1 (like all Maggie speakers) is the very definition of great-sound-for-the-dollar. Be aware: All Maggies take lots of space and amplifier power to sound their best.

HP's Workshop, Issues 135 and 151

WILSON SOPHIA

\$12,700

wilsonaudio.com

Wilson's Sophia has all the hallmarks of Wilson loudspeakers—extraordinary transient fidelity, deep bass extension, a huge spatial presentation, and a cabinet that contributes little sound of its own. With surprising bass and dynamics for its size, the Sophia sounds like a much larger speaker—gorgeous finish quality and attention to detail, too. The Sophia is also extremely easy to drive, making it a good choice with lower-powered amplifiers.

RH, Recommended Systems, Issue 136

COINCIDENT TECHNOLOGY TOTAL VICTORY II

\$13,000

coincidentspeaker.com

The revised version of this highly efficient Canadian design is a speaker to have if you want to use single-ended amplification. The revision removes the colorations HP noted in his original review and leaves this, almost alone in its class, as uncolored and full of dynamic life up and down the spectrum as the best conventional (and not so) designs.

Original Total Victory review in Issue 146; HP's updated thoughts forthcoming

ROCKPORT TECHNOLOGIES MIRA

\$13,500

rockporttechnologies.com

The Mira is at once seductively warm and rich, yet it gives up little in terms of detail and openness. Perhaps the Mira's most notable strength, because it usually comes with only the most costly designs, is a dynamic energy in the upper bass and lower treble regions that brings tricky instruments such as



drums, bass, brass, and strings to vivid life. The bottom end has a lot of power, along with good texture and detail, while the highs are airy, extended, and well integrated.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 149

VANDERSTEEN MODEL 5A

\$14,700

vandersteen.com

A time-and-phase correct speaker, the 5A includes a built-in powered sub with room correction that tailors in-room response, a sophisticated "baffle-less" cabinet, Vandersteen's patented open-frame midrange, and an improved tweeter that eliminates backwave reflections. The result is an ultra-high-resolution speaker that's coherent and musically engaging from top to bottom, with the kind of convincing depth of imaging that only time-and-phase correct designs can provide. The 5A may not play as loudly as some designs, but offers superior performance in every other respect. A relative bargain among statement loudspeakers.

Reviewed by SB, Issue 139

LEGACY WHISPER

\$14,998

legacy-audio.com

The Legacy Whisper is all about musical engagement, not the analytical dissection of a recording. A five-foot-tall, 200-pound hunk of Wurlitzeresque wood sculpture, the ten-driver Whisper excels at low-level resolution, transient delivery, and dynamic contrasts (large and small), though its frequency extremes are somewhat soft.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 135

recommended products

SOUND LAB M-1

\$16,800

soundlab-speakers.com

A huge electrostat, artfully subdivided into angled strips and panels to produce a hemispherical wavelaunch and reduce “drum-head” resonances, the M-1 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 traditional virtues of ‘stats (gorgeous tone color, lightning transient response, single-driver coherence, and phenomenal inner detail). Note: The M-1 can sound overblown in the bottom octaves if placement and amplification aren’t carefully minded and, like all ‘stats, it is not the last word in “body.”

Reviewed by JV, Issue 122



BANG & OLUFSEN BEOLAB5

\$17,000

bang-olufsen.com

A technological tour de force that never loses sight of the music, the BeoLab5 is a quad-amped (2kWpc) four-way that uses B&O’s Adaptive Bass Control DSP as well as the company’s trick Acoustic Lens technology for the midrange and tweeter. A warm balance, effortless extension, unstoppable dynamic response, and silky highs are only a few of the virtues in this speaker’s thick resume. The 5’s 20Hz bass can sound heavy in smaller settings, making it best for medium to larger rooms.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 146

MCINTOSH XRT28

\$19,000

mcintoshlabs.com

This six-foot-plus-tall line array is for the person who loves the sound of live music, outside of audiophile categories. Showing less interaction with the room than almost any other speaker REG has encountered, the XRT28 has a smooth balance and tremendous dynamic power, and is unusually vivid and convincing in reproducing both large- and small-scaled music.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 152

\$20,000 and Above

B&W 800D

\$20,000

bwspeakers.com

“Wholeness” and “seamless” were the qualities that most struck reviewer Sue Kraft while auditioning B&W’s diamond-tweeter-studded 800D. “While high frequencies were the utmost in smooth, effortless, finely detailed, extended, and exceptionally clear, I was more taken by how meticulously they were woven into the fabric of the music.” The 800D’s other attributes include world-class imaging, high resolution, a taut, well-defined bass, and unruffled response with torturous music.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 156

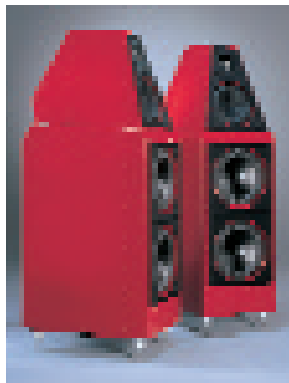
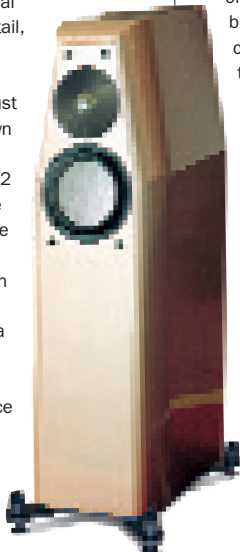
KHARMA CERAMIQUE REFERENCE MONITOR 3.2

\$21,000

gthgroup.com

This diminutive two-way floorstander generates a huge, utterly transparent soundstage and a simply ethereal blend of tonal beauty, inner detail, and dynamic nuance. Surprisingly robust in the bass (down to a rock-solid 40Hz), the RM3.2 is a great choice for the audiophile looking for big-speaker sound in a small, elegant package (or for a smallish room). Editor Wayne Garcia’s reference speaker.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 140



WILSON WATT/PUPPY 7

\$22,400

wilsonaudio.com

This classic loudspeaker has taken a significant jump in performance with the new 7 version. Although dimensionally modest, the WP7 has the big sound associated with much larger systems. With astonishing dynamic impact and coherence, coupled with deep bass extension and gorgeous rendering of inner detail, the WP7 is enormously rewarding musically.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 143

MBL 111 E

\$25,960

mbl.com

The MBL 111 E is a four-way omnidirectional loudspeaker that sounds very much like its much pricier brother, the 101 E. This should come as no surprise, since the 111 E uses the same midrange and treble drivers as the Radialstrahler Reference. Though it isn’t equipped with the 101’s big tulip-bulb woofer (the lower midrange and upper bass of the 111 are handled by double “push-push” 5.5” aluminum cones, firing from either side of the speaker in a figure-eight arrangement that approximates omni dispersion) and has a slightly smaller subwoofer, outside of less bass/lower-mid openness and freedom from box coloration, you would be hard put to tell this speaker from the 101 (see below). The 111 E is not as tough to drive as the 101 E, sounding particularly swell with Pass Labs’ XA350.5 and Edge’s 12.1 amps, among others. Like all omni loudspeakers, the 111 Es are more

sensitive to room placement and treatment than direct-radiators or dipoles. The less-rich man’s 101 E. *JV, not yet reviewed*

TALON FIREBIRD

\$34,000

talonaudio.com

“Intense musicality” is how Anthony Cordesman describes Talon’s Firebird, a futuristic-looking, 300-pound-per-side assault on the state-of-the-art. Although some listeners may find their balance a little warmer than many competing designs, these massively built speakers have a way of bringing the sound of live music into the home with a natural timbre, unexaggerated sense of detail and image specificity, and deeper, tighter, and cleaner bass than many speakers twice their size.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 149

DYNAUDIO EVIDENCE TEMPTATION

\$40,000

dynaudiousa.com

Among the tall, svelte Temptation’s many strengths are transparency at all frequencies, a detailed and uncolored midrange and top end, excellent bass pitch, definition, and weight, and the ability to sound unrestrained at even the loudest listening levels.

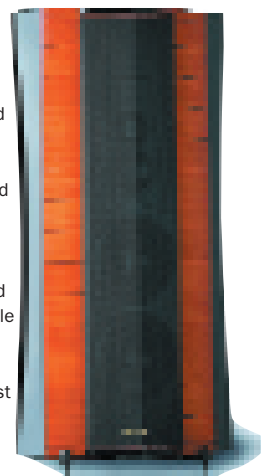
Reviewed by AHC, Issue 134

SONUS-FABER STRADIVARI

\$40,000

sumikoaudio.net

These gorgeous numbers from Sonus-Faber’s Franco Serblin have the most beautiful string tone JV has heard in a loudspeaker. Sweet and rich on classical music, voice, and small-scale jazz and folk, they are almost as lovely on large-scale



recommended products

music thanks to their extraordinarily deep, full, well-defined bass and authoritative midbass. Detailed and dynamic from top to bottom, they are a bit to the warm side of neutral and will need a large room to fully “disappear,” but are not picky when it comes to amplification. One of the best dynamic loudspeakers JV has auditioned.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 148

DALI MEGALINE

\$42,000

dali-usa.com

This large, elegant speaker offers an all but unique combination of virtues—power and scale on one hand and purity and resolution on the other, with distortion lower than electrostatics and a dynamic capacity no electrostatic ever dreamed of. The line-source radiation pattern eliminates floor bounce and makes the Megalines disappear from side-to-side and front-to-back. Together with ribbon tweeters that go on seemingly forever, bass that extends solidly down to well below the bottom of the orchestral range, and an even tonal balance, the Megalines make for the most convincing reproduction of orchestral music REG has encountered. They also superbly reproduce more intimate music.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 146

WILSON MAXX 2

\$45,000

wilsonaudio.com

A stunning achievement in loudspeaker design, the MAXX 2 redefines what's possible in music reproduction in the areas of bottom-end resolution, nuance, and finesse. This highly articulate bass presentation is backed up with the ability to effortlessly deliver massive dynamic impact and subterranean extension. Every other aspect of this speaker's performance is exemplary, particularly midrange transparency, soundstaging, and the remarkable ability to sound small on intimate music and huge on large-scale works. Editor-in-Chief Robert Harley's reference.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 155

MBL 101E

\$46,900

mbl.com

MBL's stunning-looking, four-way, omnidirectional Radialstrahler



References simply do it all: a treble like Maggie's ribbons, a midrange like SoundLab's 'stats, bass like Nearfield's eight 18" subwoofers, soundstaging and coherence like Kharma's RM 3.2s, dynamics like Avantgarde's Trios, and a “disappearing act” second to none. To top all this off, the 101 Es have more lifelike presence than any speaker JV has heard in several decades—actually sounding “fool-you” real at select moments on select cuts—and are more convincingly stereophonic listened to off-axis than anything else around. Like the 111 Es, the 101 Es require careful room setup and treatment and, unlike the 111s, they are a bear to drive. For the ultimate in classics (the best, overall, JV has heard in his home), you will also need the MBL 6010 D preamp and 9011 monoblock amplifiers—making for a very expensive system. That said, the 101 Es also fare quite well with much more affordable Edge, Pass, Joule, and Kharma amplification. JV's new reference.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 154

AVANTGARDE TRIO COMPACT WITH BASSHORN

\$71,940

avantgarde-usa.com

For almost a decade now, the Trios have been the best horn loudspeakers on the market. Now,

in combination with Avantgarde's phenomenal new Basshorn subwoofer, the Trio has won over even hard sells, like TAS EIC Robert Harley. Incomparably fast, powerful, big, and beautiful, the Trio/Basshorns take some work to set up—and great electronics to drive them—but when everything is right they are world-class reproducers of music. The Trios are best in very large rooms, though, paradoxically, they sometimes fare well in very small ones. With these speakers, the key to happiness is a proper blend of the bass.

JV, review forthcoming



ROCKPORT TECHNOLOGIES HYPERION

\$91,500

rockporttechnologies.com

The Hyperion is high among the most realistic big loudspeakers JV has heard. Though they aren't the world's best soundstagers (for which, see the Kharmas above) and don't “disappear” like the MBL 101 Es, the Rockport Hyperions earn laurels for just about everything else—gorgeous tone color, tremendous dynamic ease and authority, natural instrumental size and scale, and superb treble and bass extension. You need a lot of room for these babies and a lot of money, but, if you have the space and the moolah, they will take you about as close as you can come to the absolute sound.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 136

NÓLA GRAND REFERENCE III

\$126,000

nolaspeakers.com

Carl Marchisotto's ambitious

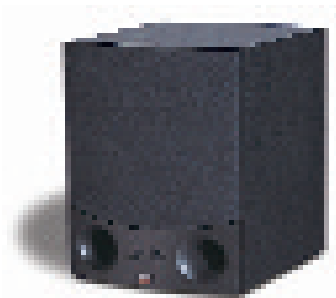
“statement” design has evolved. The drivers, from the true ribbons at the speaker's top end to the dual towers of ported 12-inch woofers, have remained constant. But the crossover workings of the main towers have been refined more than once. The result is that the integration of the multiple drivers in the main towers, already a job nicely done, has become very nearly seamless. The *bête noire* of this system, and many another with freestanding woofers, lies in integration of the bass with the main drivers but with matching amplifiers for towers high and low, it is more easily done. At its best in its current configurations, the Exotica achieves that most illusive of all qualities, “continuousness.” Mate this with its dynamic quickness, seamlessness, and very wide frequency response and you have what justly can be called a “great” speaker and rarest of all, the closest you may get to the feel of music in the home. The Grand Reference joins that handful of “big” speaker systems that are able to capture semblances of certain aspects of the real thing.

HP's Workshop, Issue 142



recommended products

Subwoofers



PSB SUBSONIC 51 \$499

psbspeakers.com

At this point no one should be surprised at what this Canadian speaker company can do in the lower-price range. Even so, the performance of this econo-sub is semi-unbelievable. Extension, dynamic slam, and good musicality from this 10" bass-reflex design make it the perfect match for misers with the Midas touch.

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 48



REL Q-108E \$749

sumikoaudio.net

The newest and smallest sub from England's REL is a champ in its category. Though a mere 10" cube, the Q-108E is capable of reproducing with power and definition information down to 20Hz. A plethora of hook-up options allows for both line- and high-level (in series with the amplifier) connections, meaning you can optimize this little guy for both home-theater and music use—simultaneously.

Reviewed by WG, TPV Issue 49

EPOS ELS ACTIVE SUBWOOFER

\$800

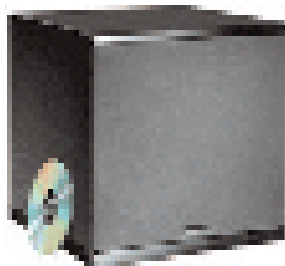
epos-acoustic.com

Designed by Mike Creek (of Creek



amplifier renown), the Epos ELS Active Subwoofer establishes what our reviewer considers "a new performance benchmark among affordable powered subwoofers." This unit goes lower with better articulation and control than others in its price range. Unlike many subs, the Epos is an audiophile-pleaser that puts out true low bass (without a deceptive, mid-bass bump) and sounds "so inherently clear that it leaves competitors sounding sluggish and murky by comparison."

Reviewed by CM, AVG



DEFINITIVE TECHNOLOGY SUPERCUBE I

\$1199

definitivetech.com

Flexibility, extension, and affordability—it doesn't get much better than that. With dual 10" passive radiators, the SuperCube I mixes the precision of a sealed-box sub with the additional oomph of a ported enclosure, and reaches down to the mid-20Hz range at extreme SPLs. A 1500-watt amplifier guarantees sufficient power.

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 42

JAMES EMB-1000 \$1595-\$1895

jamesloudspeaker.com

Using a clever dual-woofer technique, the James EMB-1000 delivers a huge amount of extremely clean bass and maintains its composure even at high playback levels. Not only is it a great the-



ater sub, the EMB-1000 is outstanding with music—tight and articulate, with exceptional clarity and detail. An amazing product and a great bargain.

Reviewed by RH, TPV Issue 48



NOLA THUNDERBOLT \$1695

nolaspeakers.com

With one twelve-inch driver similar to those in the Grand Reference and a critically-tuned, all-wood, heavily braced box, what we have here in the Thunderbolt is a baby Tyrannosaurus Rex of the subwoofer field: fast, vicious in its attack, and thunderous in its power.

Reviewed by HP, AVG

THIEL SS2 SMARTSUB AND SI 1 INTEGRATOR

\$4900 and \$4400

thielaudio.com

Five years in the making, Thiel's Integrator/SmartSub is the first subwoofer that enables consistent integration by design. As such, it is a landmark in the history of subwoofer development. In its present state, the Integrator in particular lacks a few features and the last ounce of transparency. Yet no other subwoofer system brings so much needed structure to the integration process while affording such plentiful and powerful means of adapting the subwoofer to its surroundings. Rigid yet liberating, the Thiel system will reward attentive listeners.

Reviewed by Alan Taffel, Issue 154



AUDIO PHYSIC MINOS \$6995

audiophysic.com

The Audio Physic Minos comes close to being the perfect subwoofer, albeit at a hefty price. It has truly deep bass extension, down to well below 20Hz, can deliver enormous output levels, and is exceptionally low in distortion. The sound is smooth and non-resonant, with superb pitch definition and all but flawless transient behavior. Moreover, its elegant woodwork makes it at home in any décor.

Reviewed by REG, TPV Issue 42

KHARMA CERAMIQUE CE-SB-1.1

\$9500

kharma.com

A compact, powered 12" subwoofer from Kharma's perfectionist engineering genius Charles van Oosterum, the CE-SB-1.1 sounds like all Kharma speakers—tonally accurate, finely detailed, wonderfully open and dynamic, and highly musical. Remote-controlled, it is a snap to set up and use and makes, as one would expect, a particularly sweet, seamless match with Kharma's superb RM3.2 two-ways, although it would likely do just as well with any bass-shy two- or three-way. One of the two subs with which JV can happily live.

JV, review forthcoming



recommended products

KRELL MASTER REFERENCE

\$35,000

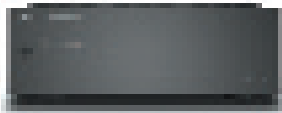
krell.com

Let's face it—you'd have to be nuts to spend \$35,000 on a subwoofer. (And, BTW, you only get one of these monsters for your 35Gs.) But, assuming you are nuts, and assuming you're not fazed by the sheer girth of this 2600W, twin-15-inch servo-woofered, 450-pound chunk of near-solid aluminum, then you're gonna have a hard time finding more powerful, more coherent bass for music recordings and home-theater soundtracks. A sui generis masterpiece that, because of its outrageous cost and size, is likely to be heard only by a lucky few—and owned by an even luckier fewer.

JV, review forthcoming

Power Amplifiers

Under \$1000



NAD C 272

\$699

nadelectronics.com

Every few years, we encounter certain NAD products that seem to have that extra ounce of sonic magic, and the C 272 is one of them. At 150Wpc, it offers the current drive capabilities needed to handle difficult speaker loads and sounds more powerful than its specifications would suggest. The C 272 is well-balanced, with good resolution, three-dimensionality, and an overall warmth and robustness on most types of music.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 148

PARASOUND HALO A23

\$850

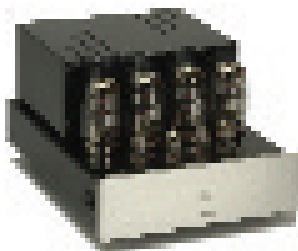
parasound.com

Parasound's A23 isn't the last word in low-end authority, and it's a bit cool in the midrange, but what it lacks in oomph it makes up for in finesse and pitch defini-

tion. Moreover, this reasonably priced amp is musically quite involving.

Reviewed by SB, Issue 138

\$1000-\$2000



PRIMALUNA PROLOGUE 5

\$1295

upscaleaudio.com

The 36Wpc vacuum tube-powered Prologue 5 sounds more authoritative than its rating would lead you to expect, and offers a warm, rich sound, yet really does not sound "tubey" in any traditional sense. Instead, observes our reviewer, it produces "true, clean, deep, tight bass," offers grand soundstaging, and delivers "the precision of the best solid-state units, plus—like vinyl—an additional musical soupcon." A synergistic match with the companion Prologue 3 preamp.

Reviewed by SR, Issue 156



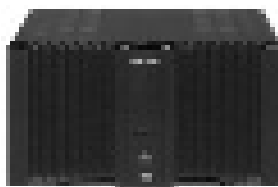
QUAD 909

\$1499

iag.america.com

Its sound quality sets a benchmark for its size and price. Its midrange, in particular, is near state-of-the-art. Up and down the scale, this latest iteration of Peter Walker's patented "current dumping" circuit displays an ease, relaxation, and naturalness that sweep considerations of mere hi-fi aside.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 128



ROTEL RB 1090

\$1999

rotel.com

Voluptuous, yin-like, and ever so slightly laidback in character, the RB-1090 is capable of extracting the lowest rumblings. But it also extracts high-frequency information like a hummingbird sips nectar. Transparency might be improved, but for sheer orchestral weight the 1090 still has the power to make it one of the best pound-for-pound deals in the high end.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 128

\$2000-\$3000



AUDIO RESEARCH VS55

\$2495

audioresearch.com

ARC's formula is simple: Put the latest circuit refinements in a nice-but-not-lavish chassis, keep the power output moderate, and price within reach of most music lovers. The result: the stunning VS55, which delivers ARC's classic sound at an affordable price. It may not offer enough power for those with low-sensitivity loudspeakers (or those wanting to rock the house), but when used with the appropriate speakers and at sensible volumes, it is pure magic.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 141

CARY AUDIO CINEMA 2 & CAD-808 (ROCKET 88)

\$2500 and \$2750

caryaudio.com

Designer Dennis Had's affectionately dubbed "Rocket 88" is unusual in that there is no driver stage. That means you'll need a high-output preamp to drive it,

but, when it is so paired, expect a sound that Dan Davis said propelled him "to the musical bliss we all want from our systems."

Outstanding articulation and dynamic definition, especially in the midrange. Like the best solid-state designs, Cary's Cinema amps largely shed the darkness and grain that once seemed to accompany the majority of transistor amplifiers.

There are an immediacy and directness to the presentation that allow you to hear into recordings in a way that is revealing without being analytical. *Cinema 2 reviewed by WG, Issue 154; CAD-808 reviewed by Dan Davis, Issue 139*



NUFORCE REFERENCE 9

\$2500

nuforce.com

The diminutive Reference 9 monoblocks are sophisticated, analog-modulated Class D amplifiers that sound like sonic giants. First, they offer deeply extended and tightly controlled bass, with excellent pitch definition. Second, they offer open-sounding mids, almost shockingly detailed highs, and explosive dynamics. But the biggest news may be their precise, three-dimensional soundstaging (which is reminiscent, to some degree, of the ASR's world-class soundstaging). Note: These amps are quite sensitive to associated cabling, so choose carefully.

CM, review forthcoming

\$3000-\$5000

CONRAD-JOHNSON MV60SE

\$3300

conradjohnson.com

Using four 6550C output tubes, this 60W C-J delivers the emotional impact of the real thing. Although it lacks the last iota of resolution, and can get a bit gritty in the treble as it reaches the lim-

recommended products



its of its power, this amp has good transparency and soundstaging, finely shaded dynamics, thrilling low-level detail, and a well-defined top end. Above all, it is immediate and involving.

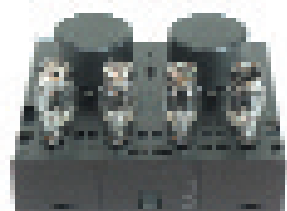
Reviewed by DD, Issue 145

EDGE ELECTRONICS G4 \$3575

edgeamp.com

A downsized version of Edge's more costly amplifiers, the 100W G4 offers some of the same sonic attributes as its more expensive brethren—the speed, extension, and control one expects from a high-end transistor amp, without any associated brightness. It has the natural timbre and sonic realism we typically associate with tubes, coupled with startling transparency and holographic imaging. Pace, rhythm, and timing freaks will love this thing.

Reviewed by JH, AVG

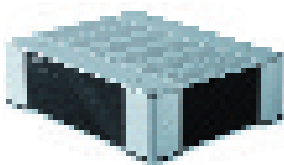


BALANCED AUDIO TECHNOLOGY (BAT) VK-55 \$3995

balanced.com

A remarkable amp and terrific value, BAT's 55-watt tube model may not be as revealing as some, but it offers a high degree of harmonic, textural, rhythmic, and ambient information, all within the context of the musical whole. Tonally, the VK-55 is a bit warmer than neutral, with a gorgeous, well-balanced midrange, an easy, natural top end, and quite respectable weight in the bass. A 3-D soundstage and tight focus round out the virtues of this highly musical design.

Reviewed by SK with WG comment, Issue 153



MERIDIAN G57 \$3995

meridian-usa.com

Rated at 200Wpc into eight ohms, the G57 is capable of delivering a full kilowatt, when bridged, into four ohms. As with other G Series components, the sound is expansive, soothing, and relaxing, yet it has plenty of moxie when needed. The soundstage is impressively broad, tall, and deep. And almost as gorgeous as the sound is the sleek new full-width look, featuring all-metal construction along with Meridian's traditional black glass accents.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 152



QUICKSILVER V4 \$3995

quicksilveraudio.com

Like past amplifiers from Mike Sanders, these monoblocks demonstrate unrivaled stability and composure under very demanding dynamic conditions, and generate a soundstage of Cinerama width and depth and three-dimensionality, with stunning rendition of height. As with all tube amplifiers, neutrality is somewhat dependent upon speaker impedance, but Sanders has got the gestalt right.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 138

ANTIQUE SOUND LABS HURRICANE

\$4995

divertech.com

Dollar for dollar, these 200-watt monoblocks are one of the most soul-satisfying tube designs in years. Though there have been parts updates to the originals, the succeeding versions do not lose

the amp's characteristic sonic signature. On the downside, it is a bit dark in character (yin) and soft in the top octave; on the upside, an authenticity in the midrange that makes it sound like it costs ten times more.

HP's Workshop, Issue 140

BAT VK-250 \$4995 (\$5995 with SE BAT-PAK) balanced.com

BAT's chief engineer, Victor Khomenko, is equally adept with solid-state designs, as this 150Wpc model shows. The company's work keeps evolving, and the 250 shows less grain and noise, a tonal neutrality that gracefully straddles the dark and the light, improved transparency, highs that are airy and extended, greater low-frequency power and timbre, and a more refined dynamic scale.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 156

\$5000-\$10,000



CLASSÉ DELTA CA-2200 \$5000

classaudio.com

With 200Wpc into eight ohms and 400Wpc into four ohms, the 2200 delivers effortless, fully-balanced power into even the most difficult loads. Possessed of exceptional control and refinement, the 2200's bass, while not the deepest, has uncanny pitch and timbre. Images and soundstaging are well-focused and richly layered; the back panel is an installer's paradise of connectivity. (Also available in a five-channel version, the CA-5200.)

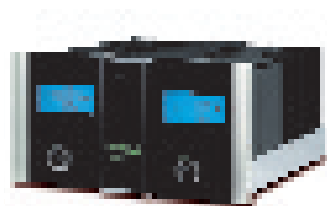
Reviewed by NG, Issue 154

MCINTOSH MC402 AND MC2102

\$5500 and \$6500

mcintoshlabs.com

Combined with McIntosh's C46 preamplifier, the solid-state MC402 yielded, all in all, the most musically satisfying reproduction PS has so far experienced



in his system. This amp is fantastically clean and clear, utterly open and transparent, wholly lacking in grain, grit, and hardness, tonally neutral, with exceptionally low noise and distortion. The top end is natural and extended; the bottom end has great heft and weight; and the midrange is gloriously present and lively. The tube-driven MC2101 gives you a thoroughly natural presentation on many kinds of music, with unbelievably low noise and realistic dynamics. While it doesn't project quite the same sense of sheer size on large ensembles as its solid-state sibling, it is overwhelmingly seductive when it comes to vocalists and instrumentalists.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 147

AUDIO RESEARCH VT100MKIII

\$6495

audioresearch.com

ARC has been making pentode (6550C) amplifiers since the Dawn of Man. All that experience certainly shows in its latest 100-watt and 200-watt stereo workhorses, which mate the size, bloom, and light of classic ARC amps with a tonal palette that is as natural as they come. Wonderfully lifelike in combination with dynamic speakers (like Vandersteens or Wilsons) or planars (like Maggies). JV

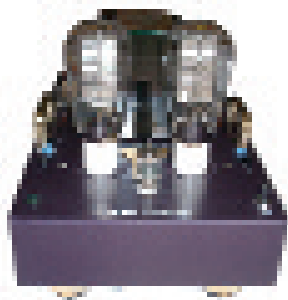
WYETECH SAPPHIRE 300B \$6800

wyetechlabs.com

A single-ended triode design that has none of the usual colorations for amplifiers of its type. That is to say, the Wyetech has solid, well-articulated bass and a high end sweet and extended up into the "airy" region. But, if you don't have a most efficient speaker, like the Coincident Technology Total Victory, you might as well walk on by.

HP, review forthcoming

recommended products



AIR TIGHT ATM 300 \$7000

axiss-usa.com

The Air Tight ATM 300 is one of the handful of 300B SET amplifiers that lays claim to magical sound extending beyond the midrange. This amp's airy highs, natural tonality, and low-bass extension defy common perceptions of 300B SETs.

Reviewed by Scot Markwell, Issue 128



KHARMA MATRIX MP-150 \$7000

kharma.com

Class D circuitry is the latest craze. Virtually every amplifier manufacturer puts out a version of it (many based on B&O's ICEpower module, although this Kharma amp has been designed in house). The amazing thing is that each Class D amp, ICE-powered or not, sounds different—each has a sonic signature similar to the conventional amps in the manufacturer's line. In Kharma's case, there are no other amps in its line; this is its first. Happily, it is a winner. Of course, it doesn't have all of the bass-range authority or extension or grip, the dynamic clout, the microfine resolution, or the top treble extension of something like the nonpareil MBL 9011—nor should it at its price point. What it does have is a similar top-to-bottom transparency that allows for a very detailed, surprisingly lively, and tonally accurate presentation.

JV, review forthcoming



PARASOUND HALO JC 1 \$7000

parasound.com

The latest collaboration between legendary designer John Curl and Parasound has resulted in the Halo JC 1: "...silky-smooth, crystal clear, and abundantly detailed. The kind you could listen to all day long without fatigue."

Reviewed by SK, Issue 141



BALANCED AUDIO TECHNOLOGY VK-75SE \$8500

balanced.com

BAT's VK-75SE is a tube design that, while displaying many of the attributes we love about glowing glass—smoothness, liquidity, depth, harmonic complexity—does so with, as reviewer Sue Kraft puts it, a "lack of candy-coating in the midrange." In addition, the VK-75SE is virtually grain-free and excels at reproducing dynamics.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 133

CONRAD-JOHNSON PREMIER 350 \$8500

conradjohnson.com

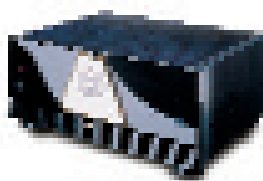
C-J's top solid-state amp, the Premier 350 exhibits excellent microdynamic and low-level resolution, outstanding low-frequency control, a natural way with imaging and soundstaging, and a refreshing lack of the kind of over-hyped "detail" heard with some transistor models.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 151

MBL 8011 \$9075

mbl-hifi.com

The 8011 delivers a smooth,



clear, grain-free sound that if anything is slightly soft, tonally speaking. With 1100 watts of peak pulse power, the MBL never shows signs of strain, while its low noise and excellent resolution allow recordings to sound as musical as they can.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 135

EDGE ELECTRONICS G8+ \$9999

edgeamps.com

The Edge designs do not sound much like what we expect from solid-state electronics, as they lack the darkness and grain that so frequently identify even the best examples of the type. That said, there's no faux vacuum-tube sound here either, just a remarkable sense of neutrality, openness, and detail that doesn't draw attention to itself but that instead serves the music. When compared to the best tube models, the only things lacking are the last degrees of air, decay, and harmonic bloom. An outstanding achievement.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 149

\$10,000–\$20,000

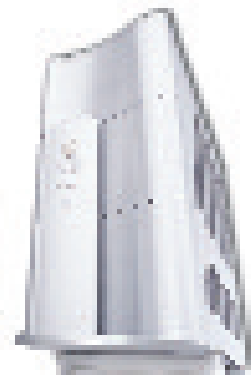
EDGE NL10.1 AND NL12.1

\$13,500 and \$18,500

edgeamp.com

Except for authority and the last word in dynamic capability, the NL10.1 is indistinguishable from its Signature big brother. Its sound is so addictively pure you'll want to keep turning it up, which is where the higher-powered NL12.1 (essentially a stereo Signature) and Signature monoblocks come in. If gorgeous midrange tone color and superb resolution of delicate performance-related details like a pianist's touch or a cellist's bowing are your first priorities, you simply can't go wrong with either of these amps.

HP/JV



THETA CITADEL \$15,800

thetadigital.com

Theta's Citadel is a massive, powerful, gorgeously sculpted solid-state monoblock with the liquid, musical soul of a tube amp. Based on a zero-feedback circuit design, the Citadel reveals layer upon layer of transparency with a deep, sensationally focused soundstage. The bass is extended and powerful, the midrange is pure and naturally resolved, and the top is extraordinarily clean and detailed. The Citadel sounds pure and natural and offers no hint of the mechanical sound that betrays some solid-state contenders.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 138



ACCUPHASE P-7000 \$17,000

axiss-usa.com

A Japanese contender for the high-end crown, the P-7000 captures the textures and colors of voices and instruments, as well as deep bass fundamentals and overtones. Images are precise yet rounded, with a three-dimensionality reminiscent of the real thing. Transients are fast and well-defined, delicate instruments sound delicate; big and loud instruments sound big and loud in a way that brings hi-fi closer to live music, though the sound doesn't glisten with quite the

recommended products

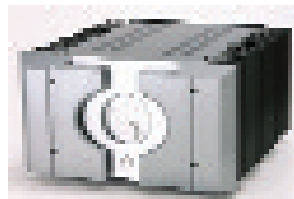
same glow as it does through, say, the Halcro monoblocks or finer tube amps.

Reviewed by FK, Issue 149

JOULE ELECTRA VZN-160 MKIII GRAND MARQUIS + JOULE ELECTRA VZN-80 \$18,000 and \$12,000 (add \$2000 for Music Wood versions) joule-electra.com

These tube units without output transformers require a bit of hands-on attention when it comes to setting voltage and output tube bias. But for those willing to embrace what are truly artisan efforts, these gorgeous-looking and ultra-gorgeous-sounding units from Jud Barber's Joule Electra are a must-hear. They're decidedly not for the analytical camp, but for those who want to be ravished by the music.

WG, reviews forthcoming



PASS LABS XA160 \$18,000 passlabs.com

"An amplifier with soul," the XA160 is the most "tube-like" transistor amp reviewer Cordesman has heard. Its sound is warmer than most, and the music emerges from a deep black hole of silence. Moreover, its soundstage depth matches its width, dynamics are musically natural and slightly "soft," and the amp has terrific harmonic integrity.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 149

\$20,000 and Above

BAT-VK-600SE \$23,000 balanced.com

This fully-loaded version of the VK-600 (it's also available as a stereo amp, and in the standard, rather than SE, version) possesses a remarkable transparency and immediacy that are musically vivid without being sonically vivid. The top end is extremely smooth and unfatiguing, with perhaps a very slight loss of air in the upper

treble. The VK-600SE's 300W into eight ohms, and ability to double its power output as the load impedance is halved, make it a powerhouse that will drive virtually any loudspeaker. A magical combination with the Wilson MAXX 2. Needs an unusually long warm-up to sound its best.

RH, review forthcoming

JOULE ELECTRA RITE OF PASSAGE

\$24,000 (add \$4000 for Music Wood versions) joule-electra.com

A tube amplifier without transformers (OTL) that is not only completely stable but has sufficient power to drive just about anything imaginable. In addition to the kind of authoritatively natural low end of the best OTLs, it has transient truths you won't hear from anything this side of solid-state. Moreover, the Joule is compatible with all sorts of speakers.

HP's Workshop, Issue 136



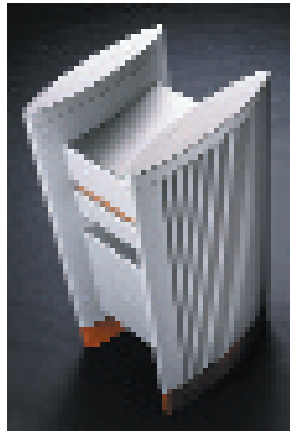
KRELL FPB 750CX \$28,000 krell.com

An updated and more powerful (by 100 watts) version of Krell's Golden Ear Award-winning FPB650, these Class A solid-state monoblocks represent the "new" Krell of the last few years, which is to say that they are rich in color, tight in focus, inexhaustibly dynamic, sensorially detailed, wide and deep in staging, and superbly extended in the treble and bass. Though they won't give you the bloom of tubes or the low-level mid-band dynamic nuance, the Krells will handle the toughest loads with aplomb. Ideal with "difficult" speakers, like the Sound Labs M-1.

JV, review forthcoming

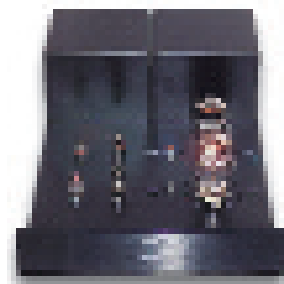
HALCRO DM58 \$29,900 onhighernote.com

With a gorgeous industrial design,



these ultra-low-distortion Australian monoblocks are as startling to behold as they are to listen to. Dynamics are exemplary, as is the dm58's way with musical textures. Both qualities are enhanced by the amp's dead-silent noise floor. Tonal neutrality, a sense of unlimited power, and outstanding frequency extremes are other qualities that make this Halcro shine.

Reviewed by Dan Sweeney, Issue 128



LAMM ML2.1 \$29,990

lamindustries.com

The single-ended-triode ML2.1 sounds nothing like the typical SET. It does not trade off accuracy for euphony; it is not bandwidth-limited (its bass and treble are sensorially extended); and it is surprisingly powerful sounding (though not particularly "bloomy") within its 16-watt limits. Given a sufficiently sensitive speaker—such as the Avantgarde Trio, the Nearfield Acoustics Pipedreams, the Wilson X1 or X2, or virtually any Kharma—the ML2.1 will produce the most detailed, spacious, dynamic sound of any amp on the market. Like all Lamm products, the ML2.1s are a bit dark in bal-

ance, very quiet, and very reliable. JV's low-power reference.

JV, review forthcoming



EDGE ELECTRONICS SIGNATURE 1.1 \$35,900 edgeamps.com

A classic in solid-state design. The 1.1 is uncolored, gorgeous at the frequency extremes, and a wonder of wonders on massed strings. Perhaps a little less "vivid" and harmonically rich than a great tube design, but at the head of the class in solid-state and so convincing on its own terms, you may think the trade-off worth it.

HP's Workshop, Issue 136

MBL 9011 MONOBLOCKS \$74,000 mbl.com

Driven by the MBL 6010 D pre-amp, the massive, super-powerful, ultra-expensive MBL 9011 monoblocks are superior by a wide margin to any other solid-state and, frankly, to any other tube amps JV has auditioned past or present. The *ne plus ultra* of front-to-back transparency, low-level resolution, large- and small-scale dynamics, low-end extension, detail, authority (unbelievable!), and treble speed, detail, and punch, the 9011s are also blessed with gorgeous tone color and a top-to-bottom liquidity that JV has never before experienced with transistors. The first amplifiers JV has heard that fully combine the signal virtues of solid-state amps (extension, resolution, speed, sock) with those of triode tube amps (liquidity, rich timbres, and very low-level harmonic and dynamic detail), giving you nearly the whole note of any instrument, from starting transient to (and this is a first with solid-state) lingering decay.

JV, review forthcoming

recommended products

Integrated Amplifiers

Under \$1000



NAD C 320BEE

\$399

nadelectronics.com

Like one of those amazing ten-dollar wines that leaves you wondering "Why spend more?" the 50W C 320BEE offers such a strong taste of the high end that you might be tempted to think it doesn't get any better than this. It does, of course, but you'll have to spend at least a grand before the difference is worth it. Also noteworthy is NAD's C 370 (\$699), which, though not quite as refined as the 320BEE, is a great choice for those who need more power.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 140



ROTEL RA 1062

\$699

rotel.com

Don't let this amp's 60-watt rating or modest price temper your expectations. It's capable of towering dynamics, spellbinding nuance, vivid transient attacks, and robust, tuneful bass, combined with an uncolored and surprisingly transparent sound that is thrilling to hear. Deficiencies include a reduction of dynamic scale, minor congestion during complex passages, and a not-unpleasant gloss over high frequencies. None of this keeps the 1062 from sounding remarkably like AT's reference amps, or from delivering a similarly engrossing musical experience. Superior finish and control flexibility, especially at this price, add up to a truly satisfying bargain.

Reviewed by AT, Issue 149

JOLIDA JD-1000A

\$900

jolida.com

High-powered vacuum-tube power amps can get very pricey, which

makes this \$900 100Wpc tube-powered integrated amp that much more of a pleasant surprise. Because of the extra dynamic headroom it affords, the JD-1000A's power comes in handy even if you don't listen at loud volume levels. Sonically, the Jolida combines the signature sounds of two classic tubes: the EL-34 and the 6550. This amp blends the characteristic midrange liquidity of great EL-34 designs, with the punch, impact, and rock-solid bass performance of the best 6550 designs.

Reviewed by JD, AVg



MUSICAL FIDELITY X-150

\$999

musicalfidelity.com

Inside the almost shockingly compact chassis of the Musical Fidelity X-150 integrated amplifier beats the heart of a 105Wpc lion. Judge this amp with your ears (not your eyes) and you'll find it offers natural clarity, plenty of resolution, more power than you'd think possible, and dynamics and transient response that are spectacular. As our reviewer put it, "Every now and then, a piece of gear comes along that does something so wonderful with the music that you go bananas." Note: The X-150 sells for less in the U.S. than it does in its home country, Great Britain.

Reviewed by SR, AVg

\$1000-\$2000

PRIMALUNA PROLOGUE ONE

\$1095

upscaleaudio.com

The sweet and affordable ProLogue One features a 12AX7, 12AU7, and a pair of EL-34s per channel in a very simple circuit. In classic EL-34 style, the ProLogue throws a very wide and deep soundstage, and has a wonderful midrange without sounding goopy like a Dynaco Stereo 70 or



other vintage design. The ProLogue One is very neutral with little of its own signature.

Reviewed by JD, Issue 151



NAIM NAIT 5I

\$1425

naimusa.com

Naim's entry-level Nait 5i is a 50Wpc integrated, apparently straightforward in circuitry. None of this prepares you for what this amp can do with music. It gives each instrument a rich harmonic structure, while preserving the clarity that's on the recording. The Nait resolves the traditional tube versus transistor dilemma, while imposing relatively modest tradeoffs on the listener. Given its moderate power output, this is not the ideal amplifier for big rooms or low-sensitivity speakers. Otherwise, the Nait is not only a great amplifier for the money, it is an outright great amplifier.

Reviewed by Tom Martin, AVg



VINCENT SV-236

\$1795

vincentaudio.com

The well-built Vincent SV-236 integrated amplifier combines the best of two worlds by providing a vacuum-tube front end driving a 100Wpc solid-state power amplifier. Listeners will appreciate the Vincent's combination of deep, powerful, authoritative solid-state bass ("bottomless bottom end" is our reviewer's term) with tube-fueled delicacy, shimmering detail, and almost surround-like imaging. There is so much real value here that some listeners have been known to guess the SV-236's price at four or five grand.

Reviewed by Barry Willis, Issue 156

\$2000-\$3000



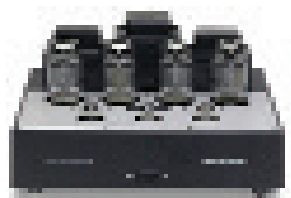
AYRE AX-7

\$2950

ayre.com

The AX-7 has all the hallmarks of the Ayre sound, but scaled down in output power. This beautifully made integrated has dimensionality, openness, image specificity, and transparency that rival much more expensive separates. Don't be put off by the modest 60Wpc output rating; the AX-7 sounds robust and has bass extension that belies its modest specification.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 134



AUDIO RESEARCH VSI55

\$2995

audioresearch.com

The VSi55 serves up a rich midrange, combined with smooth—but never dull—treble, and with the right speakers (those with smooth low-frequency impedance curves), its bass can be powerful and well-controlled. This amp also handles dynamics with greater authority than its power rating would suggest, while conveying a sense of the musical whole. Build-quality is impressive, with a retro/modern styling. Avoid using with ported speakers that have large impedance peaks in the bass (which can result in a thick, bloated sound). The VSi55 also trades away some of the transparency you would hear through a good transistor amplifier in order to give you the natural, relaxed, "holistic" sound of tubes.

Reviewed by TM, AVg

\$3000 and Above

PLINIUS 9200

\$3695

plinius.com

The 9200 is a thorough and timely re-imagining of the brilliant but

recommended products

aging 8150/8200. Still compact in size, it pumps out a healthy 200Wpc, and thanks to its strong Class A bias, the 9200 is sweeter and richer than ever. Even the all-new phono stage is quieter and more dynamic. Sonics have developed a beautiful patina in the 9200. Bass doesn't sound as darkly ominous or extended as in years past, but control and definition are strikingly improved. A major leap forward for a reference integrated at its price—and perhaps any price.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 156

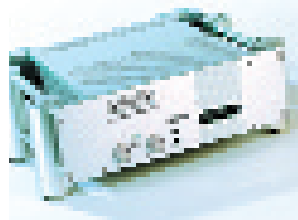


BAT VK-300X \$3995–\$5995 (depending on options)

balanced.com

Available in your choice of three different preamp stages—solid-state, tube, or 6H30 “SuperTube”—BAT's VK-300X is a great integrated amplifier. Although refinements occur with each upgrade, its basic sound is airy, detailed, harmonically well-structured, and very immediate. And with 150W output, it will not only drive pretty much any speaker, but it will do so with dynamic authority as well as agility. Music Editor Bob Gendron's reference.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 138



CHORD CPM 2600 \$4500

bluebirdmusic.com

While the Chord does not have the last molecule of “reach out and touch it” presence that a great tube amplifier has, its intoxicating bass performance and large, well-defined soundstage had our reviewer lost in the music. Its smooth midrange and extended high-frequency response

aren't fatiguing, even after hours of listening.

Reviewed by JD, Issue 152

YBA INTÉGRÉ PASSION \$4650 (\$4800 w/phono) audioplusservices.com

Elegant execution and jeweler-like attention to detail—both inside and out—make this 100-watter a top-flight contender. Isolation of the internal components from vibration contributes to the vivid imaging, excellent resolution, transparency, and wide soundstage. The Passion is competitive with any integrated amplifier of similar output near its price, and a high-quality remote control is also included.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 148



EDGE G3

\$4950

edgeamps.com

Although it lacks some of the technical refinements that make Edge's separates special, it's remarkable how close this integrated design comes to the sound of those designs. At 85Wpc, the G3 doesn't have the tonal “darkness” and grain frequently heard from transistor gear. It's quite neutral in balance, with a lack of electronic artifacts—brightness, edginess, hash—that makes it unusually easy to hear “into” the music.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 152

VAC AVATAR SUPER

\$6500

vac-amps.com

This beautifully retro-looking model delivers 80Wpc via a quartet of KT88 output tubes. Its sound throughout the midband is simply gorgeous, while the frequency edges are likewise lovely and a touch romantic—seductively soft and airy on top, with a roundness, warmth, and good weight to the bottom end. Excellent spatial resolution, too, particularly in the depth department. Because it has identifiable sonic fingerprints and power limitations, this amp is not for every

listener or speaker, but its transparency and inherent musicality will win over many.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 148

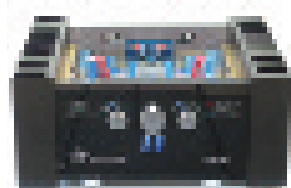


MUSICAL FIDELITY KW500 \$7000

musicalfidelity.com

Arguably the most powerful integrated amplifier on earth, this 500W tube/solid-state hybrid can drive just about any load you care to throw at it. The kW500 builds on the strengths of Musical Fidelity's Tri-Vista 300, offering greater resolution and inner detail, slightly better imaging, more expressive dynamics, and even tighter and more extended bass. It comes with a good (though modest) phono stage.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 152



ASR EMITTER II EXCLUSIVE MODEL 2005

\$25,900

fanfareintl.com

In every respect, a triumph of audio design. It is a solid-state unit that has no transistor “sound,” nor tube-like colorations for that matter. It doesn't require an input stage, having a sort of one in its battery-operated front end. Its noise floor is so spectacularly low that analog and digital can be heard at their unmodulated best, and its output devices (20, count 'em) provide seemingly unlimited amounts of power, without ever crossing the line into hardness or distortion. But most of all, the ASR is like unto magick in its ability to let you hear so deeply into the soundfield that you'll almost believe you are really “there” with the music.

HP's Workshop, Issue 156

Preamplifiers

Under \$1000



NAD C 162

\$599

nadelectronics.com

Following other legendary NAD performers, the C 162 delivers plenty of resolution and three-dimensionality while—more importantly—emphasizing the kind of overall musicality that draws out the natural warmth and expressiveness of instruments and voices. To get the most from it, try matching it with the companion C 272 amplifier via a set of PNF Audio Icon interconnects and Symphony speaker cables. Also features an astonishingly good phono stage; some listeners may buy it for that feature alone.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 148

QUAD 99 AND QC-24

\$999 (each)

iagamerica.com

Along with a dandy mm and mc phono stage, the Quad 99 features a novel tilt control for tone correction that works like a charm when you need it—a solid middle-level performer lacking mostly the ultimate transparency, liveliness, and dynamic openness of the very best units. The all-tube QC-24 lineage is the least expensive to suggest that elusive quality of “continuousness” in its presentation. The QC-24 has first-rate imaging in all dimensions, and a lively, engaging, remarkably neutral presentation.

Reviewed by PS, Issues 128 and 135

\$1000–\$2000

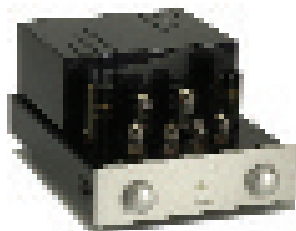
PRIMALUNA PROLOGUE 3

\$1295

upscaleaudio.com

The vacuum tube-powered ProLogue 3 preamp makes an ideal companion to PrimaLuna's ProLogue 5 tube power amp. Like the power amp, the preamp combines traditional tube warmth and richness with a clear, crisp, pre-

recommended products



cise presentation reminiscent of the best solid-state designs. Bass, too, is taut and clear.

Reviewed by SR, Issue 156



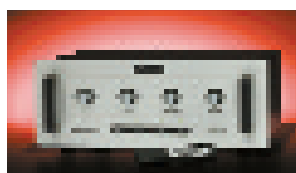
QUICKSILVER REMOTE CONTROL LINESTAGE

\$1395

quicksilveraudio.com

Quicksilver's remote-control tube linestage delivers a great sense of weight and power as well as a huge, 3-D soundstage; the trade-off is a dip in midrange presence.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 138



AUDIO RESEARCH SP16L

\$1995

audioresearch.com

Outstanding dimensionality, rich tonal color in the lower registers, and a huge soundstage characterize this classic-sounding preamp. The review sample sounded a little forward and grainy in the upper midrange and lower treble, marring an otherwise superb sound. ARC suggests that this character was caused by tube variation, and is not intrinsic to the unit.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 144

CARY AUDIO SLP-308

\$1999

caryaudio.com

While not the highest-resolution model around, this linestage bathes instruments in a pleasant and very musical golden glow. Excellent textures, too, which bring

to all recordings that hard-to-define sense of life or lifelikeness that we hope for from our systems. Depth is quite good, but the third-dimension seems to end rather abruptly about two-thirds of the way into the orchestra. Likewise, stage width is slightly sheered off, as are dynamic extremes.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 154



\$2000-\$4000

ARTEMIS LABS LA-1

\$2850

aydn.com

One of three debut components from this fledgling company, this 5687-based tube design digs deep into the heart of the music. Beautiful without being overtly romantic sounding, the LA-1 is exceptionally holographic, dynamically lively, tonally and texturally natural, and, audiophile-speak aside, simply more musically engaging than most of the competition in this range. Exciting stuff.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 155

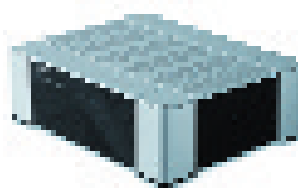
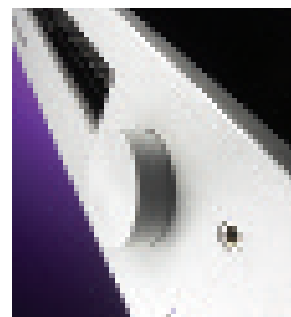
SUTHERLAND THE DIRECTOR

\$3000

acousticounds.com

An unusually lovely-sounding solid-stage linestage, The Director's character is easygoing, sweet, and rather romantic. It has the thinnest layer of solid-state opaqueness, and slightly pinches low-level dynamic nuance, but the upper registers are sweet and extended, the midrange warm, the soundstage big and open, with excellent depth, and the overall musical presentation quite expressive.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 155



MERIDIAN G02

\$3295

meridian-audio.com

The G02 controller replaces its predecessor, the 502, and features balanced dual-mono construction as well as a unique dual-differential volume control. SK called it "effortless, refined, and absolutely gorgeous" when combined with Meridian's other G Series gear, concluding, "these machines have class written in spades all over them."

Reviewed by SK, Issue 152

CLASSÉ DELTA CP-500

\$3500

classeaudio.com

Electronics have no right looking this sharp and sexy, but Classé's Delta Series proves it can be done. Clean, curvilinear good looks and a bright, touch-screen TFT display make the CP-500 one of the most "able"-minded preamps out there—able as in adjustable, assignable, and removable. Sonics feature a chocolate-like midbass, a midrange with almost tube-like warmth, and an overall effortless and relaxed quality. Thanks to a low noise floor, delicate inner voices unfold with a full range of expression.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 154

\$4000-\$5000

CONRAD-JOHNSON PREMIER 18LS

\$4000

conradjohnson.com

C-J's Premier 18LS is a remote-controlled solid-state linestage that handles microdynamic changes in musical energy with a lifelike realism and the excitement of the best tube models. Also like tubes, it never sacrifices soundstage depth for width and honors the music in a natural way, without exaggerated detail.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 151

EDGE G2

\$4395

edgeamps.com

Like its amps, Edge's preamps are a different kind of solid-state—grain-free, open, neutral but not cold, and not at all dark or grainy. The sound described is with the G2 powered by its internal gel batteries. When the G2 is driven by AC, the sound is noticeably drier, hashier, and less magical. But given that the batteries only need charging once a week—and when you're not listening critically (or at all), they charge themselves in the AC mode—this is not a practical concern.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 149



AESTHETIX CALYPSO

\$4500

musicalsurrroundings.com

The all-tube Calypso delivers most of the performance of Aesthetix' two-box \$13,000 Callisto linestage for about a third the price. What's more, the Calypso benefits from Aesthetix' second-generation styling, functionality, and industrial design. Sonically, the Calypso is characterized by extremely wide dynamics, with an effortlessness in reproducing dynamic shadings along a continuum. Although the treble is smooth and somewhat laid-back, transparency and detail resolution are first-rate. Noise floor is highly dependent on tube quality, which has been variable. Competes with the megabuck preamps. The Calypso is musically stunning and beautifully built.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 151

MCINTOSH C46 & C2200

\$4600 and \$4900

mcintoshlabs.com

Sonically and functionally a great preamplifier, the solid-state C46 eschews the folly of minimalism in favor of a truly useful set of controls and features, including an eight-band equalizer that is even up to correcting some room-related problems. It also has an excellent phonostage. In day-to-

recommended products

day use PS has never experienced a more pleasurable unit. McIntosh's first new all-tube preamp in more than 40 years, the C2200 is a triumph that sports a gallery of features (including a good phonostage) and classic McIntosh sound. The midrange is the most neutral PS has heard in any tube unit, the bass response is equally fine, at once firm yet natural, and the highs are sweet, pure, and extended. If PS were to go back to tubes, this would be his reference preamplifier.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 147

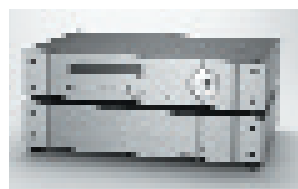
\$5000-\$10,000

BAT VK-31SE

\$5495 (remote option adds \$500, phono option adds \$500)
balanced.com

Now equipped with BAT's SUPER-PAK, a feature that doubles the power-supply capability over that of the earlier VK-30SE, the 31SE lends a slight emphasis to the upper midrange but is otherwise a highly musical and dynamically nimble performer. It has musical detail, with lots of air and harmonic color, good staging, and the ability to let the music breathe. Requires a long break-in period.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 156



PASS LABS X1

\$5900
passlabs.com

Remarkably similar in sound to the \$10,000 X0.2 (the main difference is in the power supply), Pass Labs' X1 has the kind of natural air and harmonic sweetness we normally associate with tubes as well as superb deep bass, overall neutrality, and good dynamic contrasts.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 128

HOVLAND HP-100

\$6500 (with mc phonostage)
hovlandcompany.com

The Hovland HP-100 captures the

essential "rightness" of music without sounding nearly as "hi-fi" as most of its competition. It is not, in longer-term listening, difficult to hear its flaws, but the HP-100 reminds us just how clinical, ultimately, almost all components sound, and does so by sounding as "unclinical" as anything HP has heard.

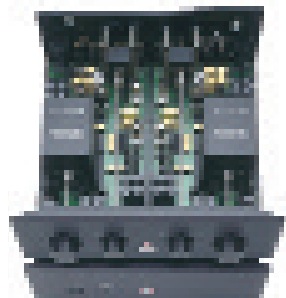
Reviewed by PB, Issue 131; HP's Workshop, Issues 131 and 137

TOM EVANS VIBE & PULSE

\$8600 (\$4600 and \$4000)
tomevansaudiodesign-usa.com

This is a solid-state unit from the same man who gave us the striking and unusually impressive transistorized phonostage called The Groove (now available in an updated version). And this one is a honey. The first thing that may strike you is the darkness of its overall character. But its ability to reproduce music in a most satisfying way overrides resistance to this effect. It sounds like music, even if it doesn't have all the fill-gree nuances of reference units.

HP's Workshop, Issue 153



AESTHETIX CALLISTO MKII & MKII SIGNATURE

\$9000 and \$11,000
musicalsurrroundings.com

Big, airy, and open, the three-box Aesthetix Callisto Signature linestage is far more neutral and extended than the fabled 12AX7 preamps of yore, with simply phenomenal inner detail, vast soundstaging, and a dynamic and harmonic bloom that seems to bring every kind of music to vivid life.

Arguably the best all-tube preamp on the market. Note: For all its many sonic virtues, the Aesthetix is rather noisy and aggravatingly prone

to blowing fuses on start-up. JV's reference tube linestage preamp.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 143



BALANCED AUDIO TECHNOLOGY VK-51SE

\$9000 (with remote option)
balanced.com

BAT's VK-51SE is as fully featured as linestages come, and uses the 6H30 "Super Tube" to deliver super sound. The big BAT has unlimited dynamic swing at all volume levels, and never loses it no matter how loud you crank it. In terms of how it compares to the competition, if ARC is a little on the lively side of neutral, the BAT is just on the softer side, with considerable depth and texture, without actually being dark.

Reviewed by SB, Issue 143

\$10,000 and Above

EDGE SIGNATURE 1.1

\$10,900
edgeamp.com



Unusual because it can be powered by either batteries or AC, the Edge—when powered by batteries, please note—has a glorious top end, a rich middle register, a wonderfully complex harmonic structure, and delivers plenty of ambient information. What it lacks is vocal body, low-frequency punch, and the last word in dynamic wallop.

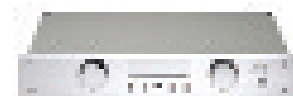
HP's Workshop, Issue 137

CONRAD-JOHNSON ACT II

\$13,500
conradjohnson.com

The now discontinued ART II was HP's reference in linestages

because it most closely followed the gestalt of the music itself. Its replacement model, the ACT II, will be reviewed in HP's upcoming linestage assessment.



BURMESTER 011

\$15,995
immediasound.com

Originally intended as a phono-stage, this latest in the line of musically truthful solid-state electronics from Burmester seems to me to sonically surpass the top-of-the-line 808 preamplifiers.

HP review forthcoming



MBL 6010 D

\$18,920
mbl.com

In many ways, the MBL 6010 D is not just the best solid-state preamp, it is the best preamp JV has auditioned. Its noise floor is so incredibly low that it consistently resolves fine harmonic and dynamic details that simply aren't audible on other very fine preamps. At the same time its transient speed and authority are beyond compare. (The thing is in a class of its own when it comes to the bottom octaves—and the top ones.) To ice the cake, it has absolutely gorgeous tone color, the same liquidity and transparency that so distinguish MBL's 9010 amps, excellent imaging and soundstaging (though JV has heard its superior in stage width), nonpareil ambience retrieval, and the kind of living presence that can make instruments and vocalists sound "there." There was a time when JV thought tubes owned low-level resolution, particularly with instrumental decays. The 6010 D has shown him that that time has come and gone.

JV, review forthcoming

recommended products

Phonostages

Under \$2000



GRAM AMP 2 SE

\$399

elexatelier.com

This stripped-down little bugger has a sweet, mellow sound, and very low noise and perceived distortion. It's strictly for moving magnets and high-output moving coils. The sound is a little veiled (though remarkably grain-free), and, while not the last word in wide dynamics, has astonishing composure and musical integrity.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 134

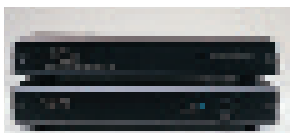
GRADO PH-1

\$500

gradolabs.com

The wood-bodied PH-1 is a versatile unit that works equally well with high- and low-output cartridges. Though it is susceptible to environmental noise, the sound is open and easy, with an expansive soundstage, natural highs, and bass that has texture, tonal refinement, and power.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 141



PHOMENA

\$600

musicalsurrroundings.com

An Apollonian grace, poise, low noise, and neutrality characterize this excellent unit, which includes options for fine-tuning the loading and gain of both moving coils and moving magnets. Add the external power supply for even lower noise

and distortion, and greater transparency. Some listeners may want more dynamic "punch" and personality, but this is hard to beat for low coloration. Add \$600 for BPS power supply.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 133



LEHMANN BLACK CUBE

\$695

audioadvancements.com

This much-praised model now comes with a much beefier power supply. Otherwise, features remain the same, including switchable mm/mc and limited options for loading. Now really wowie-zowie in the dynamics department, with imaging so stable you could map out each instrument. Bass is ample and articulate; transparency is very good. Principal reservation: a certain "whiteness" that translates into a mild dryness.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 133

BENZ LUKASCHEK PP-1

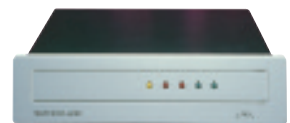
\$1350

musicalsurrroundings.com

A solid-state, miniaturized hide-away box powered by a wall transformer. External AC plus short signal path yields very wide dynamics and space retrieval with a comforting middle-of-the-road sonic balance and airy bloom much like that of the Benz Ruby 2 cartridge, if a little darker. Warmth is enhanced by 22k input impedance.

Reviewed by Arthur S. Pfeffer, Issue 127

\$3000-\$6000



SUTHERLAND PHD

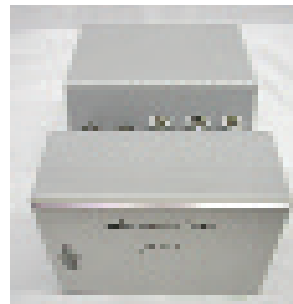
\$3000

acousticounds.com

Ron Sutherland's battery-powered PhD is so quiet that it

takes awhile to get used to its sound. Once you've adjusted, expect to hear "into" your records in a way unlike before. Beyond its silence, the PhD has a tube-like liquidity, terrific detail, wonderful dynamic nuance, and remarkable transparency.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 144



ARTEMIS LABS PL-1

\$3350

aydn.com

Like its companion linestage, the PL-1 is a tube-driven phonostage delivering exquisitely musical and lifelike sound. Record after record left our editor with that "as if hearing it for the first time" feeling. Beautifully balanced, with low noise and a great range of tone colors, the PL-1 is also dynamically explosive and very transparent. A terrific achievement from a young company.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 155

AESTHETIX RHEA

\$4000

musicalsurrroundings.com

As with Aesthetix' matching Calypso linestage, the Rhea phono preamplifier redefines what's possible at this price level not only sonically, but functionally. With three inputs, variable cartridge loading—adjustable at the listening chair via remote control—and front-panel display of gain and loading, the Rhea is the Swiss Army Knife of phonostages. Although the Rhea has tons of gain, the noise level is extremely low, making it compatible with a wide range of cartridge outputs. The Rhea's family resemblance to the Calypso is unmistakable: transient quickness and speed without etch, a feeling of effortless-ness on crescendos, and a deep, layered soundstage that maintains its depth at the left and

right edges rather than sounding triangular. Fine build-quality and outstanding ergonomics are the icing on the cake.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 151

ASR BASIS EXCLUSIVE

\$5950

fanfareintl.com

In its latest revised version, this battery-operated phonostage sets the standards against which all other contenders must be judged. (And the competition in our upcoming report is stiff, especially from Tom Evans Designs and the folks at Aesthetix, whose lo is a wow-O).

HP survey in the works

\$6000 and Above

LAMM LP 2 DELUXE

\$6990

lamindustries.com

With a superb built-in coupling transformer to handle lower-output moving coils, the all-tube Lamm LP2 phonostage has the inestimable advantage of being dead quiet, which makes it ideal for folks, like JV, who live in RF Valley. Though not as "alive" or bloomy as the Aesthetix lo on large-scale dynamics, the Lamm is rich, beautiful, and extraordinarily delicate-sounding on all music, with detail, transient response, and soundstaging that are superior to the competition. Be forewarned: This preamp takes a good deal of break-in before it sounds its considerable best, but its best is well worth the wait. One of JV's references.

JV, review forthcoming

AESTHETIX IO MKII AND MKII SIGNATURE

\$6500 without volume control;

\$9000 with volume control;

\$9000 for Signature without

volume control, \$11,500 for

Signature with volume control

musicalsurrroundings.com

Phono fanatics with both space and cash will want to audition this 24-tube, two (large) chassis beauty. Yes, it eats shelf space; yes, it throws a lot of heat; and yes, it is as good as it gets. Exquisite dynamic contrasts? Check. An easy, relaxed presentation? Check. Headroom to spare?

recommended products



Check. A glorious midrange, excellent bottom octave, and full rendition of instrumental body? Triple-check. The highs aren't as airy or extended as some, but they are natural and non-fatiguing. One of JV's references.

Reviewed by Don Saltzman, Issue 121 and by JV, Issue 143



MANLEY STEELHEAD \$7300

manleylabs.com

The Steelhead should be counted as one of the great phono stages, and its extraordinary set of features makes it a vinyl-tweaker's fantasy rig. Driven by an outboard solid-state power supply, the main chassis houses six tubes, two moving-coil and moving-magnet inputs, fixed and variable inputs, and a bevy of front-panel controls that include adjustable gain, volume, selectable impedance for mm and mc, and selectable capacitance loading from zero to 1100 picofarads in 10 picofarad steps. The sound is superb—rich but not fat, detailed yet natural, extended, controlled, and highly involving. Plus, it has the huevos to drive an amp directly.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 152

ZANDEN AUDIO MODEL 1200 PHONOSTAGE

\$14,500

avantgarde-usa.com

A beautiful and beautifully made Japanese tube phono stage that is not as punchy as the Aesthetix lo or as detailed as the Lamm LP2, but compensates by supplying more air between and among instrumentalists—and more body to the instruments they play—than any piece of high-end gear of any kind JV has heard. With its

truly nonpareil three-dimensional imaging and soundstaging, and the same ease, edgelessness, and gorgeous tone color of The Messenger, the Zanden simply doesn't sound like hi-fi. Like the FM Acoustics phono stages, the Zanden offers alternative compensation curves for discs not eq'd to the RIAA standard (i.e., Deccas, EMIs, and early Columbias). Like the Lamm, it is dead quiet.

JV, review forthcoming

Digital Sources

Under \$1000



CAMBRIDGE AZUR 540D \$399

audioplusservices.com

This versatile player offers equal strengths for both music and film playback. As a CD player, the Azur's performance rivals that of the more expensive NAD C 542, with a relaxed, self-assured sound that is surprisingly three-dimensional and reveals the cushion of air around instruments. But the Azur really comes alive on DVD-Audio material, offering sound so compelling that our reviewer wrote, "I could see buying the 540D for this capability alone."

Reviewed by JH, Issue 155

NAD C 542

\$500

nadelectronics.com

NAD's C 542 delivers a warm, easy, and open sound, though it is slightly rough around the edges and a bit forward in perspective. Given the NAD's overall musicality and superb value, these flaws are hardly a distraction.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 137



DENON DVD-2910

\$679

denon.com

Denon's DVD-2200 universal player is a remarkable value. It has no major weaknesses with any

format and is a particular standout with CDs and DVD-Audio/Video. All in all, the DVD-2200's performance is so good that it makes much more expensive mass-market flagship universal players a difficult sell. SB



ROTEL RCD-1072

\$699

rotel.com

With the CD-only RCD-1072, Rotel couples landmark performance with remarkable affordability, while avoiding the mediocrity of today's combi-players. The 1072 delivers superb tonal accuracy, frequency extension, imaging, and rhythmic swing. Low digital noise artifacts allow music to emerge from a silent background. Compared to the best, it has less resolution and slightly polite dynamics.

Reviewed by AT, Issue 147



REGA PLANET 2000

\$995

rega.co.uk

The Planet 2000 preserves much of the original model's warmth and natural voicing, but offers an even more neutral spectral balance, greater resolving power, and much better soundstaging. When you look to climb above the Planet 2000, performance improvements start to taper off while prices soar.

Reviewed by CM, AVG



MUSICAL FIDELITY X-RAY V3

\$999

musicalfidelity.com

Illustrating just how far affordable digital technology has come, this gem combines upsampling with 24-bit DACs, has very low jitter and distortion, and maintains outstand-

ing linearity. Most notably, the V3 avoids the upper-midrange glassiness and edge of some upsampling and high-resolution digital units. Its sound offers a blend of engaging musicality, outstanding clarity and quickness, low distortion, and 3-D soundstaging.

Reviewed by JH, AVG

\$1000-\$2000



SONY DVP-NS999ES

\$1199

sony.com

Though not as beefy as its immediate predecessor (the DVP-9000ES), Sony's DVP-NS999ES remains an excellent performer. With newly added multichannel SACD capability, only higher-priced SACD-only players outperform it.

Reviewed by SB, TPV 46



QUAD 99-CDP

\$1499

iagamerica.com

Free from electronic artifacts—digital ones too—the 99-CDP's presentation is lively and vital, big and powerful. Grain-free, it's also capable of warmth, richness, and delicacy. Unlike the original Series 99 player, the 99-CDP can be used with components other than Quad's 99 stack. One nice feature is the high-quality built-in volume control, which means that if CD is your only medium, you can drive the power amp directly, thus saving on a preamp.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 143



REGA JUPITER

\$1795

rega.co.uk

Rega's Jupiter is a highly musical

recommended products

player that sacrifices the widest dynamic contrasts and ultimate resolution for the ability to “present the different elements in a musical performance with their interrelationships intact.” A top-loader, the Jupiter requires some space above it.

Reviewed by Roy Gregory, Issue 135



SIM MOON EQUINOX

\$1995

simaudio.com

The Equinox is a welcome relief from the clinical sound still heard from many digital sources. Its warm, natural presentation restores the feeling of dimensionality and openness that for many of us went AWOL when our LP collection went in the attic. Though it is slightly darker than some players, its lack of constriction breathes new life into a format that continues to improve. Excellent build-quality rounds out the package.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 149

\$2000–\$3000



MUSICAL FIDELITY A5

\$2500

musicalfidelity.com

Last year, Musical Fidelity's \$6500 Tri-Vista SACD player impressed us with terrific sound quality. The new A5 CD player, complete with vacuum-tube output stages, represents an attempt to deliver equivalent sound at a much lower price. It succeeds. The A5's greatest strengths “are in the overall ‘balance’ of the sound in all kinds of music, and an almost indescribable excitement in transients and in dynamic details.”

Reviewed by SR, Issue 155

AYRE CX-7

\$2950

ayre.com

The Ayre CX-7 is a minimalist



design with great attention lavished on the power supply and analog output circuitry. Highly involving, the Ayre brings an unusual sense of rhythmic rightness to all music, with deep, defined bass, excellent dynamics, three-dimensionality, and tonal accuracy.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 141



ARCAM FMJ DV29

\$2999

audiophilesystems.com

Like the earlier FMJ DV27A, this “Full Metal Jacket” player offers performance that's nearly as good as it gets with all formats. The DV29 is the best-sounding Arcam player yet, with inner detail and resolution on CD and DVD-A that even the 27 can't match.

Reviewed by SB, TPV Issue 60

\$3000–\$5000



MARANTZ SA-11S1

\$3499

marantz.com

Who says you have to spend five figures to get terrific sound from both CD and SACD? The Marantz SA-11S1 is squarely aimed at the purist music lover, eschewing DVD-Video playback, multichannel capability, and multi-disc universal compatibility in favor of all-out sonic performance on CD and two-channel SACD. On CD, the sound quality rivaled that of megabuck outboard D/A converters, with an extremely clean and pure midrange and treble, deep and layered soundstage, and good resolution of musical detail. Gorgeous cosmetics and fabulous build-quality.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 152



CLASSÉ DELTA CDP-100

\$3500

classeaudio.com

Another Classé tour de “source,” the CDP-100 combines the sensuous design elegance of the TFT touch-screen-equipped CP-500 with solid but mellow PCM performance that never fails to flatter the music. Textures are velvety smooth, with terrific fluidity across the tonal spectrum. Although less forward than some and a little light in the bass, it shares a high musicality and build-factor that almost seamlessly match up with the other Delta electronics.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 154



SIMAUDIO MOON STELLAR

\$3995

simaudio.com

SimAudio's Stellar is built like the Bismarck and is competitive with dedicated CD players in its price range. Though its sound is highly resolved, with excellent extension at the frequency extremes, its midrange is on the forward side. The Stellar is also an excellent DVD-Video player with striking image depth. While there are no quibbles with its performance, a question of value does arise, as competitors from Arcam and others give up no ground in performance and offer DVD-A and/or SACD playback, to boot.

Reviewed by SB, TPV Issue 47

MERIDIAN G08CD

\$4395

meridian-usa.com

The G08 replaces the popular 588 and is built around a computer-style CD/DVD-ROM drive capable of spinning the disc much faster than needed for standard CD operation. According to Meridian, this allows for multiple high-speed reads, providing ten times the

error-correction rate of a conventional CD player. Once the data is recovered, Delta/Sigma converters upsample the digital signal to 24-bit/176.4kHz. As with the rest of the G-Series, the sound is effortless, refined, and gorgeous.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 152



PLINIUS CD-101

\$4495

plinius.com

The CD-101 is a reference-quality product in minimalist chic clothing—a lavish musical performer and attention-grabber with drive and pace to burn. Its hyper-detailing, speed, and low noise floor suggest a slightly cooler personality, but the lack of edginess suggests new heights of resolution and a reduction in distortion.

Lacking a numeric display, the lethargic track navigation (via pulsating pin lights) takes a few spins to acclimate to. Includes balanced and single-ended outputs. Massive machined remote control could easily be a lethal weapon.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 156



ACCUPHASE DP-57

\$4900

accuphase.com

A low-level resolution and detail champ, the DP-57 has one of the sweetest treble ranges NG has heard in this price range. Add to that reference-quality soundstaging and ambience retrieval, and the DP-57 becomes a superior playback source—with even higher marks for classical music aficionados. Perhaps a little relaxed for hard rock while light in the bass and softer on transients than some, it still remains a class leader in finesse and refinement. Exceptionally fast transport and search functions. Balanced and single-ended outputs.

Reviewed by NG in this issue

recommended products



BLUENOTE STIBBERT

\$4900

fanfareintl.com

An Italian import that gives the Lector (another Italian import) a genuine run for the money. It isn't as colored, indeed, once warmed up, it is just shy of the purely neutral, with a hint of tube coloration. But it has some dynamic limitations.

HP, review forthcoming

\$5000–\$10,000



AYRE C-5XE UNIVERSAL PLAYER

\$5950

ayre.com

Serving music lovers by eschewing video playback and multichannel audio, Ayre has established a high-water mark for multi-format players. The C5 is not only consistent across all formats—it excels across all (stereo) formats by performing at or very near the current state-of-the-art.

Reviewed by SB, Issue 156



LECTOR DIGIDRIVE & DIGICODE 2.24

\$8680 (\$4290 and \$4390)

fanfareintl.com

A bit on the dark side in terms of coloration, and most sensitive to acoustic breakthrough (as are all the inexpensive CD and combo players of our experience), which makes itself manifest as a “plummy” midbass. But it sounds like

music, first and foremost, and at a price not stratospheric in terms of high-end CD playback systems. Quantities are in short supply.

HP, review forthcoming

\$10,000 and Above



THETA GENERATION VIII DAC

\$10,000

thetadigital.com

Nearly 20 years ago, Theta built a business around developing superior-sounding digital-to-analog converters. The new Generation VIII digital processor is the latest in a long line of great products. The Gen VIII has every input and feature imaginable, along with an architecture that permits upgrades to new digital standards. Theta's digital processors have always excelled in three areas: bass depth and power, soundstaging, and dynamics. The Gen VIII carries on that tradition, with a center-of-the-earth bottom end that establishes a solid rhythmic and tonal foundation for the music. Bass-guitar lines simply purr through the Gen VIII. This new DAC is, however, somewhat of a departure from Theta's “house sound” in that the Gen VIII has a sweeter treble and an overall softer presentation that fosters a greater intimacy with the music. The Gen VIII is easily Theta's best effort, and a contender for state-of-the-art in digital playback at any price.

RH, review forthcoming

EMM LABS CSDS TRANSPORT & DAC6E

\$19,400 (\$7900 and \$11,500)

onahighernote.com

The first professional-grade SACD deck from the man, Ed Meitner, who single-handedly gave the multichannel DSD system high-end respectability. It's beautiful to look at, and a light-year's leap forward over the Meitner-modified Philips 1000 player that preceded it. At its best, it sounds like ana-

log, only with wider dynamics and visceral impact, and is as clean as a whistle and completely uncolored. Essential.

HP's Workshop Issues 141, 142, 145, and 152



MERIDIAN 800 CD/DVD AUDIO PLAYER

\$19,950–\$22,500

meridian-audio.com

This flagship product is the current state-of-the-art in DVD-Audio playback. If you want to hear DVD-Audio at its best, look no further than the 800. In addition, the 800 is a world-class CD player. Modular card-cage construction allows custom configuration and upgrades. A reference-quality product.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 145

JADIS JD1 PRO MKII TRANSPORT AND JS1 MKIII DAC

\$40,000 (\$25,000 and \$15,000)

pierregabriel.com

The price is ionospheric. And so are the sonic thrills this tubed French import can provide. We have had some mechanical problems with the drive mechanism, but assuming they are corrected, this may be the player to beat.

HP, review forthcoming

MBL 1621 A CD TRANSPORT AND 1611 E DIGITAL-TO-ANALOG CONVERTER

\$42,510 (\$21,010 and \$21,500)

mbl.com

If you're heavily invested in Red Book CD, you may not know how good it can get until you audition this pricey-but-worth-it transport and DAC from MBL. If there is better CD playback, JV hasn't heard it—and he's heard and reviewed some mighty fine CD and SACD players. It isn't just the magical level of musical detail—much of it previously unheard—that this combo is capable of eliciting from silver disc, nor its unusually life-like timbres, nor the unparalleled extension, definition, and slam of

its bass. It is the MBLs' overall gestalt—the analog-like taste of dimensionality and solidity that it adds to virtually every CD—that truly astonishes. No, the 1621/1611 isn't a Walker turntable; it is darker, less delicately detailed, airy, bloomy, and 3-D than great analog playback. That said, it comes as close to LP's virtues as any CD player JV has had in his system, with the bonuses of CD's superior bass, sea-swell large-scale dynamics, lightning transients, and often-astonishing clarity. JV

Turntables

Under \$1000

MUSIC HALL MMF-2.1LE W/TRACKER CARTRIDGE

\$349

musicchallaudio.com

This affordable model still incorporates many of the high-quality components used on Music Hall's higher-end tables. It retains the rich, powerful, and palpable sound quality that makes analog much more than audiophiles' preferred music source. The MMF is a simple, belt-driven, two-speed unit that comes assembled with everything the aspiring analog lover needs to start listening.

Reviewed by Thuus Thompson, AVg



MUSIC HALL MMF-5 W/GOLDRING 1012GX CARTRIDGE

\$629

musicchallaudio.com

Music Hall's integrated turntable package provides the LP lover with a warm, musically engaging, and affordable vinyl playback solution. Its bass isn't the most defined, and it's a bit forward in

recommended products

the upper midrange, but the Music Hall is an outstanding value.

Reviewed by Stephan Harrell, Issue 135



REGA P3

\$695

soundorg.com

Rega's newest-edition P3 includes refinements to the base and motor-mounting assembly for a sound that has more air and detail, better imaging, and lower noise than earlier versions. Comes equipped with the RB300 arm and is available in a rainbow of colors.

Reviewed by David Morrell, Issue 127

\$1000-\$2000

CLEARAUDIO EMOTION/ SATISFY

\$1000

musicalsurrroundings.com

Following Clearaudio's pattern, the Emotion sports an acrylic plinth, high-quality bearing assembly, and matte acrylic platter, which is belt-driven by a decoupled synchronous motor. The Satisfy arm is a gimbaled-bearing design whose minimalist, one-bolt cartridge carrier makes alignment a snap. It offers a dynamically lively and engaging presentation, conveys bass with power and speed, and works well with any number of cartridges.

Reviewed by CM, AVg

REGA P5

\$1295

soundorg.com

When paired with Rega's Exact phono cartridge, this 'table produced a highly musical sound that JH preferred to most digital players, regardless of price. The P5 is a low-vibration/low-coloration design that "is as close to a 'set it and forget it' analog front-end as you're likely to find," and "the absence of 'groove noise' is astonishing."

Reviewed by JH, AVg

ROKSAN RADIUS 5

\$1495

mayaudio.com

The Radius 5's strength is its rhythmic drive. This model is compelling, powerful, and well paced, with good presence and sharp



transients. What it lacks is the ability to retrieve the finest detail and the trailing edges of notes.

Reviewed by SH, Issue 144

PRO-JECT RM-9

\$1499

sumikocaudio.net

With features usually found on more expensive models—a gimbal-bearing carbon-fiber arm—Project's flagship handles a wide variety of material with transparency, liveliness, natural tonal balance, and a rhythmic precision that suggests that elusive sense of involvement. Very good performance as delivered, but place it on top of one of Townshend's Seismic sinks—recommend by Sumiko, the RM-9's importer—and the performance easily rivals units twice the price. Solidly recommended without the Sink; highly recommended with it.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 148



VPI ARIES SCOUT W/JMW-9

\$1600

vpiindustries.com

If you want to experience a huge taste of analog heaven without the hellish price tag, the VPI Aries Scout deserves your attention. This simple, affordable 'table uses an inverted bearing with a Teflon thrust plate and a scaled-

down version of the JMW unipivot arm to create an exceptionally quiet background and high signal-to-noise ratio, so music leaps out of silence into the room. It's a snap to set up, but since the Scout lacks a suspension we strongly recommend some kind of rack or base that will isolate it from offending vibration.

Reviewed by SM, AVg



\$2000-\$5000

BASIS 1400 SIGNATURE



\$2200

basisaudio.com

Clean, lively, and nimble, the Basis 1400 lacks the great authority, deep black backgrounds, and projection of size and scale of the really great turntables. But this combination proves eminently satisfying and doesn't leave you hankering for something else.

Reviewed by PS, Issues 132 and 140

LINN SONDEK LP12

\$2400 (turntable only)

linninc.com

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.

Recommended Systems, Issue 136

VPI ARIES BLACK KNIGHT

\$2800

vpiindustries.com

For those who covet VPI's \$5500 Super Scoutmaster Signature 'table and arm (see below) but aren't prepared to spend that much, check out the Aries Black

Knight/JMW9 combo. Unlike either the regular or Super Scoutmaster 'tables, the Black Knight provides a removable arm board—giving you the option of trying out non-VPI arms if you wish—and offers a larger footprint that can accommodate both 9" and 10" arms. The Steinway-like piano-black finish is drop-dead gorgeous.

Recommendation based on staff experience with the Aries range



NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE SYSTEMS SPACE DECK & ACE SPACE ARM

\$2999

audiophilesystems.com

From its ultra-quiet backdrop to its mastery of pace and space, explosive and agile dynamics, harmonic integrity, tonal continuity, saturated images, and deep yet nimble bass, this combo won SH over. Not the last word in upper frequency extension, but so engaging the reviewer bought the review sample.

Reviewed by SH, Issue 138

\$5000-\$10,000



CLEARAUDIO MASTER SOLUTION AMG

\$5000

musicalsurrroundings.com

This essential sound of this Clearaudio model is, well, clear, with a fine sense of quickness and transient speed. This acrylic and stainless-steel beauty will accept up to three arms, and elicits good detail, high frequency extension, air, and rhythmic pulse from LPs. It leans a bit toward the lighter side, though, and benefits from the optional

recommended products

Outer Limit (\$900), a hefty ring that heightens the platter's fly-wheel effect and doubles as a warp-flattening device.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 156

VPI SUPER SCOUTMASTER SIGNATURE

\$5500

vpiindustries.com

In its latest revision, The Scoutmaster has a new pickup arm, made of both steel and aluminum, the combination interleaved in an effort to cancel out ordinary arm resonances. Also, the entire assemblage is now wired with Nordost interconnects. A steal considering its performance. You can spend more, perhaps, but the improvements you'll get will be, at best, marginal. HP's updated look to come.

HP's Workshop, Issues 151 and 153



SOTA COSMOS SERIES III

\$5950

sotafurntables.com

This classic turntable boasts superior tonal neutrality, soundstaging, background silence, and isolation. Virtually any tonearm that weighs less than 2.5 pounds can be accommodated for optimal performance, while the massive suspended subassembly renders the Cosmos essentially immune to any form of structural-borne feedback. A vacuum hold-down system eliminates warps while binding the record to the platter far more intimately than any clamp or ring.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 145

WELL-TEMPERED LAB REFERENCE II TURNTABLE AND TONEARM

\$6578

welltemperedlab.com

This belt-driven turntable (equipped with the "trapeze-like" Well-Tempered arm) is as rich-sounding as the best, and as long-term listenable. All it lacks is

a little dynamic oomph, a little openness in the top treble, and a little detail in comparison to the top arms and tables.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 142

SME MODEL 10A

\$7999

sumikoaudio.net

This magnificent integrated turntable is one of those rare products with that difficult-to-define sense of rightness. The arm is SME's excellent 309, the platter/mat/clamping system rivals some vacuum hold-downs, and the sound has extraordinary stability, control, definition, dynamics, and detail, sacrificing only that last degree of blackness of background and size and scale that larger, heavier turntables seem to command.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 129

\$10,000 and Above

CLEARAUDIO MAXIMUM SOLUTION TURNTABLE

\$10,000

musicalsurrroundings.com

Second only to Clearaudio's Master Reference turntable, the Maximum Solution is essentially a fully tricked-out version of the basic Solution. One can start with the basic Solution and upgrade to various levels culminating in the Master Solution. The Maximum Solution is startling in its deep black background, complete lack of low-frequency noise, and apparent ability to reduce LP surface noise. The result is LP playback in which the music emerges from a digital-like silence. Dynamics are stunning, as are clarity and definition through the midband. A great turntable. RH



REDPOINT MODEL B

\$11,000

redpoint-audio-design.com

This great and massive three-piece, lead-shot and silicone-damped table (it has separate

arm and motor pods) delivers a very low noise floor, a spectacular sense of space and dimensionality, the feeling of near-limitless dynamic power, remarkable degrees of detail (not for detail's sake but simply as a part of the musical fabric that had previously been obscured), and a terrific top-to-bottom balance.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 156



SME MODEL 20/2

\$12,499

sumikoaudio.net

SME has deliberately designed the tweaking out of its turntables, and this middle-of-the-top-range model is a beautiful example of the SME approach. Although some have accused it of being over-built, this table and arm are masterpieces of industrial engineering and design, with a greater degree of control over the playing of LPs than any others PS has used.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 140

BASIS DEBUT SIGNATURE

\$15,900

basisaudio.com

This beautifully made vacuum hold-down turntable from A.J. Conti gives up little to the very best. All it lacks in comparison is a touch of weight and authority in the bottom octaves, some stage width and depth, and a bit of overall smoothness and dynamic life. Detailed, authoritative, and rich in tone color, the Basis combines extremely well with the Graham 2.2 unipivot tonearm and Conti's own Vector arm.

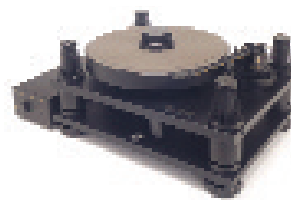
Debut V Reviewed by JV, Issue 132

SME MODEL 30/2

\$29,999

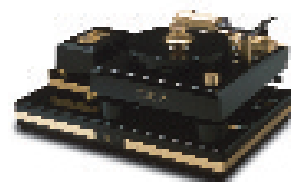
sumikoaudio.net

Mounted with the SME Series IV.Vi arm, PS praised the 30/2's tonal neutrality, pitch accuracy, resolution, transparency, rhythmic grip, ambience, low coloration, and soundstaging, concluding, "But what specifically accounts for the special effect this turntable



seems to have on even the most jaded listeners lies in three related areas of sonic performance: background silence, dynamics, and that elusive impression of liveliness, vitality, and whatever terms you use to describe that sense of involvement that persuades you the music has come alive in your living room."

Reviewed by PS, Issue 154



WALKER PROSCENIUM GOLD TURNTABLE AND TONEARM

\$32,500

walkeraudio.com

The massive (350-pound) Walker Proscenium Gold Signature turntable/tonearm transforms many of the smartest ideas from turntables and arms past into a contemporary work of audio art that not only sounds fantastic but looks fantastic, too. A snap to adjust and use, the Walker brings out the best from any LP. You cannot find a more detailed, spacious, dynamic, or beautiful-sounding record player. The best source component JV has heard—and the most reliable. In four years of daily play, the Walker has had exactly zero problems. None, nada, zip. All it does is make music.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 139

Tonearms

Under \$1000

REGA RB300

\$395

soundorg.com

Turntable manufacturers who don't build their own arms fre-

recommended products

quently package their models with Rega's terrific-sounding and affordable RB300. Musically compelling, with excellent balance and good detail, if not the final word in any one category.

Reviewed by DM, Issue 127

\$1000–\$2000

SME 309

\$1799

sumikoaudio.net

A black tapered titanium beauty, the 309 is a rarity in today's high-performance models—an arm with a removable head shell for easier cartridge swapping. Also see SME Model 10A, above. PS

\$2000–\$3000



VPI JMW-10.5 & JMW-12.5

\$2000 and \$2400

vpiindustries.com

Available in 10- and 12-inch versions, this beautifully made unipivot may be trickier to set up than some, but its sound rewards the effort. It's highly revealing without being cold, with some of the deepest, most powerful bass to be heard. VTA adjustment during playback allows for exceptional fine-tuning.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 129

\$3000 and Above

TRI-PLANAR VII

\$3900

triplanar.com

An analog classic, the Tri-Planar VII incorporates the late Herb Papier's final thoughts on arm design. Built by his handpicked successor, Tri Mai, the Tri-Planar VII is more neutral than earlier versions, with outstanding solidity and focus, holographic soundstaging, superb detail, dynamic range,

and nuance. Like the best of today's components, the Tri-Planar gives the impression that there is less electro-mechanical stuff between you and the music.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 156

SME SERIES V

\$4499

sumikoaudio.net

Robust and dynamic-sounding, the now and forever classic SME V is rich with features that include a cast magnesium one-piece wand, ABEC 7 bearings, and fluid-controlled lateral damping. The V projects a ripe, soothing character with unsurpassed bass resolution, excellent inner detail, and great tracking ability. NG

KUZMA AIRLINE

\$8000

elifeavdist.com

Without a doubt, the best air-bearing straight-line tracking arm. The Kuzma does not have the complementary colorations of previously adored members of this family of pickup arms, i.e., warmth in the midbass and airiness in the mid-highs. (Remember the Air Tangent?) HP, review forthcoming

Cartridges

Under \$500

GRADO PRESTIGE GOLD

\$180

gradolabs.com

Grado's Prestige Gold cartridge has its flaws—a lack of inner detail and an audible grain chief among them—but its strengths are such that you can easily listen through them. These include a somewhat too warm yet very pleasant (and yes, euphonious) balance, a sweet if not hugely airy treble, a taut if not especially layered bass, and a lively presentation.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 141

SUMIKO BLUE POINT SPECIAL EVOIII

\$399

sumikoaudio.net

Sumiko's Blue Point Special has a reputation as one of the best entry-level, high-output moving-coil cartridges available, and the EVOIII offers substantial improvements over the original—a fundamental



heartiness, terrific top-to-bottom consistency, and ability to gracefully handle tracking challenges. Its sins are mostly those of omission, meaning that this is one moving-coil that will not turn and bite you with excess edge or glare.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 147

\$500–\$1000

GRADO REFERENCE SONATA

\$500

gradolabs.com

A wonderful performer, the Sonata may lack the transparency and resolution of the very best, yet it delivers a naturally sweet treble, refined tone colors, and very good detail, particularly in the middle band.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 141

BENZ MICRO ACE

\$550

musicalsurrroundings.com

The ACE's mission is to make many of the virtues of high-end moving coils available to audiophiles on a budget, and at this it is a great success. You'll enjoy a sound that offers a wide-open midrange, plenty of definition and air around instruments and voices, and tight, clean bass. With the right phono stage, the ACE can do a great job of walking that fine line between resolution on the one hand, and smoothness and warmth on the other.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 147

DYNAVECTOR KARAT 17D MK II

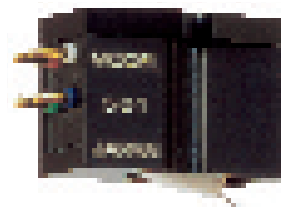
\$850

dynavector.co.jp

A luscious midrange, superb dynamics, and overall neutrality from the midbass through the highs translate into an impression of both high accuracy and glorious musicality. Soundstaging is

spectacular, imaging spot-on, tracking superb.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 137



SHELTER 501 MK II

\$850

axiss-usa.com

The 501 Mk II is one of those rare products that does everything well—and some things spectacularly well. Its superb three-dimensionality brings to life recordings one thought lacking in spaciousness, while its neutral tonal balance, audiophile virtues (resolution, focus, air, transient speed, extension at both frequency extremes), and overarching cohesiveness “always seemed cut from whole cloth.” Add these factors together and you have a cartridge that takes you about as close as you can get to top-tier performance at this price point.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 147

\$1000–\$2000

GRADO REFERENCE

\$1200

gradolabs.com

A beautiful-sounding moving-iron cartridge, not the last word in detail or transient speed or top-end air, the Reference is nonetheless enormously musical.

Reviewed by Adam Walinsky, Issue 112



SUMIKO CELEBRATION

\$1500

sumikoaudio.net

This low-output moving coil yields a dark, mellow sound that, while

recommended products

far from accurate, is certainly high in listenability and musicality. Difficult to rate, as it has certainly succeeded in achieving what its designers set out to do, even if that isn't quite the absolute sound. Average tracking.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 130



LYRA HELIKON \$1995; \$2195 for SL and Mono versions

immediasound.com

An excellent soundstager with phenomenally good bass, the Helikon is a little cool and white in balance, though not analytical-sounding, and is almost the Clearaudio Harmony's equal in inner detail. *The* bargain in high-end moving-coil cartridges.

HP's Workshop, Issues 132 and 136

\$2000 and Above

SHELTER 90X \$2700

axiss-usa.com

A top contender at a more than fair price, the Shelter 90x may not be the very last word in transparency, timbral beauty, and dynamic nuance, but it comes mighty close, with the bonuses of exceptionally solid bass and a big transparent soundstage. Warmer and darker than the Clearaudio cartridges, it is still quite respectably neutral in overall balance. Takes a good deal of break-in and sounds best, at least in JV's system, tracked at about two grams. A synergistic combination with the Lamm LP 2 phono stage and Walker 'table, though its 0.65mV output should allow it to mate well with most mc phono stages.

JV, review forthcoming

BENZ RUBY 2 \$3000

musicalsurrroundings.com

This low-output moving coil's easy



tonal character highlights no single virtue at the expense of others. It's got fine harmonic, ambient, and spatial resolution, excellent tracking, sweet and mellow textures, and plays down groove grit without a hint of concealment.

Reviewed by ASP, Issue 129

KOETSU ROSEWOOD SIGNATURE \$3500

musicalsurrroundings.com

The great-great-grandson of the cartridge that started the latter-day moving-coil craze (the Supex), the Rosewood is relatively high in Technicoloration, but who cares? When something sounds this beautiful, exceptions should be made—and regularly are by audiophiles who are more interested in hearing timbres sound gorgeous than hearing them sound "audiophile-neutral." JV

DYNAVECTOR DRT XV-1S \$4250

dynavector.co.jp

In the here and now, this is the cartridge to own, although it faces increasingly stiff competition from a new generation of contenders. You must track it at forces above those recommended by the manufacturer (we found 2.9 grams ideal in our setup), and what you get is the smoothest and most life-like sound from a moving-coil design ever. The usual colorations just aren't in evidence.

HP's Workshop, Issue 147

BENZ MICRO LP EBONY \$4500

musicalsurrroundings.com

The best cartridge that Benz has made. Translation: It does the music justice.

HP review in a forthcoming cartridge roundup

LYRA TITAN \$4500

immediasound.com

The Lyra Titan is a breathtaking



design. It has all the qualities of one of this small company's earlier designs, but without any grain or high-frequency artifacts. The top octave is stunning, as are its transients, giving the sense that some of the instruments are clustered there in the room. HP

CLEARAUDIO TITANIUM \$6000

musicalsurrroundings.com

With the Discovery and then the HarmonyMg, Clearaudio's formerly "analytical" house sound has been undergoing a gradual sonic sea change. Now comes the Titanium, which is unquestionably the most musical cartridge Clearaudio has yet produced. It isn't as if Clearaudio has sacrificed detail for this newfound musicality; on the contrary, the Titanium is even more detailed than previous Clearaudios. It is the quality of the detail—the amount of rich, realistic tone color and dynamic nuance that has been added—which makes this thing the most lifelike source JV has heard in his system. A superb soundstager and imager, with great transient response, extraordinary bass, and simply astonishing resolution. JV

Tuner

MAGNUM DYNALAB MD106T \$4000

magnumdynalab.com

A high-end system isn't fully dressed without a great FM tuner, and this all-analog in-house triode design emphatically makes that case. Quiet, black backgrounds, and a sparkling, airy treble easily exceed Magnum's own budget-conscious winner, the MD-90. Terrific sensitivity and selectivity give the MD106T an exceptional focus and soundstage. A tactile

pleasure to operate, the green tuning-eye tube makes fine-tuning almost as much fun as a vintage Marantz or Sequerra tuner.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 152

Multichannel Components

Multichannel Controllers



ROTEL RSP-1098 \$2999

rotel.com

The Rotel's large, colorful 3.5"-by-6" TFT display might garner all the buzz, but it's the RSP-1098's audiophile-grade sonics—vivid extension and detail—that boost it near the top of its class. Great functionality and features are mated with the latest Crystal 24-bit/192kHz DACs and surround-decoding formats. With a true 7.1-multichannel analog bypass and sophisticated bass management options, this is a controller to *listen to*, even if you never see another movie.

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 51 and AT in this issue



KRELL SHOWCASE \$4500

krellonline.com

This successor to Krell's Home Theater Standard 7.1 is the fifth generation of Krell surround-sound preamp/processors. Although it does not currently have DVI-D or HDMI video inputs or outputs, the Showcase offers proprietary software-based seven-channel digital room equalization and, of course, Krell's superior analog preamplification circuitry, which is among the best in high-end audio/video. This controller comes very close to

recommended products

the sound of an ultra-high-end preamp when playing back CD or high-res audio.

Reviewed by JV, TPV Issue 55



ANTHEM STATEMENT D1 \$5000

anthemav.com

With every surround-sound mode you could need, the new Anthem Statement D1 is a very sophisticated processor with state-of-the-art features and excellent sound quality. The D1 exhibits such incredible clarity, openness, and detail that an experienced audio engineer could probably identify the microphone used in the recordings. We particularly appreciated the elaborate set-up and control capabilities, balanced-line inputs and outputs, and excellent construction quality.

Reviewed by Gary Altunian, TPV, Issue 57



THETA DIGITAL CASABLANCA III \$14,980 with two Xtreme D-2 DAC cards (\$8000-\$20,000, depending on configuration) thetadigital.com

Theta Digital's Casablanca III Xtreme DAC offers as much detail and resolution as any controller, yet always sounds natural, never fatiguing or bright. Its feature list is endless, with more speaker/subwoofer and crossover combinations than you can shake a stick at. But perhaps the thing we appreciate above all else is its ability to blend center-channel information into the left and right channels for a more coherent and convincing front soundfield and better dialogue articulation. In addition, the Casablanca's modular card architecture allows for future upgrades. Unquestionably one of the most advanced and best-sounding controllers on the market.

Reviewed by SB, TPV Issue 44

Multichannel Amplifiers

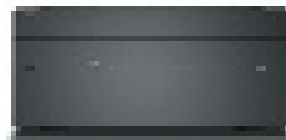


ROTEL RMB-1075 \$999

rotel.com

Rotel's THX Ultra RMB-1075 provides a robust 120W into five channels with a smooth midrange and plenty of weight. Its sound is slightly rounded off and not quite as transparent as the best, but it is still a remarkable value.

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 44

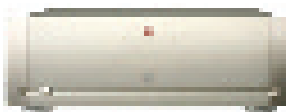


NAD T973 \$1999

nadelectronics.com

Employing modular monoblock architecture, the seven-channel T973 outputs a generous, easygoing 140Wpc. Solid power reserves, superior bass definition, and a warm upper treble continue the NAD tradition of audio excitement tempered with refinement and understatement. The back panel has convenient input-level trim controls. There was a hint of fan noise at loud listening levels. Triggers link the amp with the T163 controller for seamless on/off switching.

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 54



PARASOUND HALO A52 \$2000

parasound.com

Designed by the John Curl, the robust, 5x125-watt A52 is essentially a multichannel version of Parasound's award-winning A23 stereo amplifier. Those who prize flexibility will appreciate this amp's balanced and single-ended inputs and individual level controls for each channel. With sound that

is warm, natural, and never edgy (though not the last word in definition).

Reviewed by CM, AVg



CARY CINEMA 5 \$4000

caryaudio.com

Cary's Cinema 5 is a superb achievement. At 80 pounds, this medium-sized unit isn't as heavy or large (or costly) as many state-of-the-art performers, yet it delivers much the same sound quality: excellent definition, fine dynamic gradation, rich harmonics, and a transparent window to the source.

Reviewed by WG, TPV Issue 50



ANTHEM STATEMENT P5 \$5000

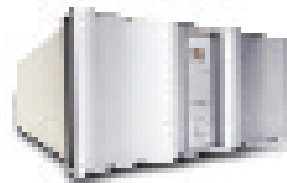
anthemav.com

The Statement P5 is the "poster amp" for high-current amplifiers, with 14 output transistors per channel, vastly increasing the available power for musical crescendos. Actually five monoblock power amplifiers in one chassis, each capable of 325 watts, it has no shared power supplies; each channel has its own toroidal transformer, meaning there are no common audio paths between channels. The P5 sounds very authoritative—always in control of the speakers—with effortless dynamics and tight deep bass.

Reviewed by GA, TPV Issue 57

THETA DIGITAL DREADNAUGHT II \$7100, five-channel version; \$8100, ten-channel version thetadigital.com

Like the original Dreadnaught, the Dread II is fully balanced with zero global feedback. The new model delivers more power and impact, along with better low-end authority and control, stunning resolution,



and incredible soundstage depth and focus. It also has more energy in the upper midrange and treble than its predecessor, sacrificing just a bit of the original's warmth and musicality.

Reviewed by SB, TPV Issue 46



AUDIO RESEARCH 150M \$7495 for five-channel version (\$900/additional power module) audioresearch.com

A stunning—and stunningly successful—departure for the high-end Tube Gods of Audio Research Corporation. This relatively lightweight, entirely modular (the 150M can be fitted with up to seven power amplification modules, each rated at 150W into eight ohms and 300W in four ohms, and the modules can be bridged to generate 300W into eight ohms and 600W into four), cool-running, Class T (!), digital switching amp produces a surprisingly ARC-like sound. A little bright, forward, and weighted toward the treble like all ARC gear, the 150M has much of the natural airiness and light of ARC tubes, with terrific soundstaging, dynamics, and clarity for multichannel.

Reviewed by JV, TPV Issue 51



KRELL THEATER AMPLIFIER STANDARD \$8000

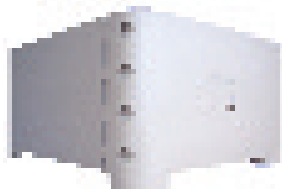
krellonline.com

A very Krell-like FPB (Fully Power Balanced) five-channel amplifier that generates a powerful-sound-

recommended products

ing 200W into eight ohms and 400W into four. The Krell, like the ARC 150M, shares much of the build-quality and sound of its celebrated monoblock siblings: a rich, articulate, slightly dark, and very hard-hitting presentation that is voluptuous on music and pin-you-to-your seat stunning on film soundtracks. You won't lack for weight or impact with this baby—and its soundstage is phenomenal. Like Krell's controller, it is also superb on CD and multichannel high-res audio.

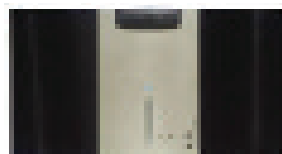
Reviewed by JV, TPV Issue 51



PLINIUS ODEON
\$8595–\$11,995, depending on number of channels
pliniususa.com

With its modular design, user-selectable number of channels, superior build-quality, and outstanding sound, the Odeon is a top contender in multichannel designs. Its sound is characterized by effortless dynamics, a rock-solid and rhythmically engaging bottom end, and midrange and treble purity on a par with the best solid-state two-channel amplifiers.

Reviewed by RH, TPV Issue 50



BALANCED AUDIO TECHNOLOGY VK-6200
\$10,995 (fully loaded) or \$5995 for two-channels; \$1250 each additional channel
balanced.com

No matter how many channels you order it with—it accepts as many as six—BAT's modular VK-6200 is one of the best-sounding amplifiers around. The massive but striking-looking chassis weighs 200 pounds when fully loaded; parts and build-quality are top-drawer; and the sound combines

seemingly limitless reserves of power with amazing delicacy, air, transparency, and speed.

Reviewed by WG, TPV Issue 38

Multichannel Receivers



NAD T753
\$1000
nadelectronics.com

NAD's T753 AVR eschews bells and whistles, focusing instead on pure sound quality. Despite its conservative 70Wpc power rating, the T753 produces a "warm, smooth, punchy sound that never becomes strained or thin." NAD's subtle, effective EARS (enhanced ambience recovery system) feature helps make this a great AVR for music lovers. For similar sound quality, but more power and/or channels, try NAD's upscale T763 or T773.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 154



SONY STR-DA7100ES
\$2000
sonystyle.com

Derived from Sony's fabulous STR-DA9000ES flagship, the firm's DA7100ES "Digital Drive" AVR offers the same great Rolex-like build-quality, nearly as much power (170Wpc), fewer but better I/O options (including dual HDMI and i.Link interfaces), a greatly improved remote control, and sound quality equal to the original—all for less than half the price. One of the best-sounding AVRs we've heard.

Reviewed by CM, AVG

Surround Sound Speaker Systems

Note: The Magnepan system was reviewed by HP as part of a system with the Nola Thunderbolt subwoofers and EMM Labs CDS Transport and DAC6e. For recommended digital sources, see that section elsewhere in this article; for a complete list of multichannel speakers, see The Perfect Vision's Winter 2006 issue.

MAGNEPAN "SUPER MAGGIE SYSTEM"

(Two) MG20.1: \$12,500; (two) MG3.6: \$4450; (two) CC3S: \$1880
magneplanar.com

Taken as a system, it does what few other multichannel speakers can do, and that is bring a kind of aliveness that enhances the remarkable spatial illusions of which such a system is capable. And, importantly, it does justice to the home-theater experience as well, though you won't be able to achieve ear-shattering theatrical playback levels (though you can come close before you start blowing fuses). The Nola subs are essential if you want the last word in bottom octave authority, articulation and frisson, and without any sense of discontinuity from the Maggies.

HP's Workshop, Issue 151

Interconnects and Speaker Cables



AUDIOQUEST JAGUAR/DBS (INTERCONNECT)
\$300/one-meter pair
audioquest.com

The entry-level interconnect for AudioQuest's battery-powered DBS (dielectric bias system) technology. The Jaguar's highs are well-defined yet sweet sounding; its bass is taut yet possesses plenty of weight and warmth and a heaping helping of three-dimensionality. DBS technology gives these cables a stable, perpetually "warmed up and ready to go" quality. Though not the last word in transparency, the Jaguars do a great job of balancing clarity and smoothness.

Reviewed by CM, AVG

AUDIOQUEST CV-8/DBS (SPEAKER)

\$400/eight-foot pair
audioquest.com

The least-expensive model that has AudioQuest's battery-powered

DBS technology, the CV-8 offers well-defined and nicely weighted bass, a neutral midrange with a hint of warmth, clear but never edgy highs, and truly excellent soundstaging. A roundness on transients makes this cable easy to listen through for hours on end.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 147, and CM in AVG

AUDIOQUEST DBS CHEETAH INTERCONNECT AND KILIMANJARO SPEAKER WIRE

Cheetah: \$900/one-meter pair; Kilimanjaro: \$5200/eight-foot pair
audioquest.com

Audioquest's Cheetah and "KJ" use silver wire with battery packs that bias the cable's dielectrics to keep them fully formed at all times. These cables are the closest thing SB has yet heard to removing cables from a system entirely, revealing layer upon layer of depth and pure transparency. And because the dielectric is always charged, your system is always ready to go instead of hours of "warm-up" away, a bonus with phono playback gear. SB



HARMONIC TECHNOLOGY PRO-11 + (SPEAKER)

\$475/eight-foot pair
harmonictech.com

The TechPro-11+ is sensual, romantic, and highly present with vocals, with a full rich body and slight forwardness. There's a distinct sweetness in the upper octaves that, once experienced, makes it tough to live without. Soundstage reproduction is also a strong suit, as the full weight and breadth of an orchestra seem to laterally expand with this wire.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 146

HOME DEPOT HD-14G (SPEAKER)

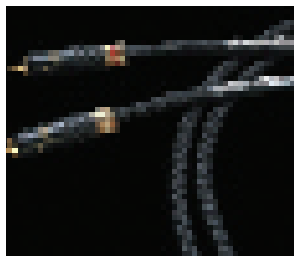
\$30/50-foot pair

This 14-gauge outdoor extension

recommended products

cable from Home Depot—the model designation is PS's own invention—renders music in a bold, forthright manner, lacking a bit in finesse and ultimate transparency, but with notably excellent imaging, realistic depth, and an overall lifelike presentation of considerable coherence.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 147



KIMBER KABLE HERO (INTERCONNECT)

\$160/one-meter pair
kimberkable.com

Not surprisingly, this is a sonic near-twin to PS's longstanding reference, Kimber Select KS-1021, yielding by direct comparison only a tiny bit in sheer control, ultimate top-end transparency, and inner detailing. The 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. Ray Kimber once again demonstrates his leadership in delivering superior performance at a reasonable price.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 138

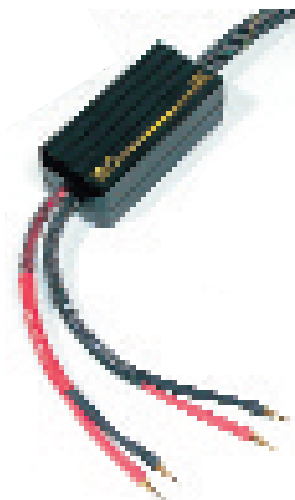
KIMBER KABLE 8TC (SPEAKER)

\$270/eight-foot pair
kimberkable.com

Tilting a tad toward the yin, the 8TC has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what is happening fore or aft. Ensembles both large and small receive an open projection that ideally mediates detail, liveliness, tonal neutrality, and dynamic contrasts, with a very realistic soundstage that's holographic in its integrity. This cable has been around for a commendably long time; having used it for well over 15 years through countless changes in equipment

and rooms, PS can personally vouch for its versatility and behavior: great neutrality, transparency, and musicality, without ever causing amplifiers any distress.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 146



MIT AVT 1 (SPEAKER)

\$549/eight-foot pair
mitcables.com

Perhaps canted ever so slightly toward the yang, the MIT AVT 1 counts power and definition among its many virtues. Perhaps there is ever so slightly less a sense of bloom than with other cables, but the AVT 1 nevertheless suggests great openness, with a remarkable ability to project musical events into the room and an impression of snap and bite that in the best sense of those words is irresistible. On difficult orchestral material, the MIT excavates breathtaking detail amid a wide, deep soundstage; the precision of the imaging is especially notable. Absolutely convincing in its musicality.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 146

MIT ORACLE (SPEAKER)

\$9495/eight-foot pair
mitcables.com

Although RH has a wide range of high-end cables on hand and a procession of top-quality loudspeakers coming through his listening room, MIT's Oracle usually ends up in his system at the end of the set-up process. The reason? Oracle has extremely rich and saturated tonal color, warmth in the bass without sounding thick, treble that sounds like

music rather than hi-fi, and extraordinary spatial dimensionality. Extremely expensive, but worth it in some top-end systems. RH

NORDOST BLUE HEAVEN INTERCONNECT AND SPEAKER CABLE

Interconnect: \$190/one-meter pair; Speaker: \$510/eight-foot pair
nordost.com

Similar in personality, the Blue Heaven cables excel at low-level detail, upper-octave smoothness, and transient speed. Also expect to hear exceptional inner detail and nuance emerge from the velvety black and silent background. Note that it may be a bit on the cool clinical side for some treble-happy systems, but remains ideal for neutral and darker ones. They may not be as purely neutral as Nordost's costly Valhallas, but the cooler Heavens give them a run for the money with rich mids, lightning-fast transients, and excellent soundstage depth and width.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 138

NORDOST VALKYRJA INTERCONNECT AND SPEAKER CABLE

Interconnect: \$2200/one-meter pair; speaker: \$5060/2.5-meter pair
nordost.com

Nordost's newest Reference line cable and interconnect, Valkyrja, represents a considerable savings over top-of-the-line Valhalla cable and interconnect at the sonic cost of a very slight overall darkening of the soundstage and a very slight reduction in treble air, bloom, and extension. Making use of the same mono-filament technology as Valhalla, Valkyrja is a superb choice for the typically long interconnect/cable runs of a surround-sound system or home theater, offering nearly the full measure of Valhalla's transparency, detail, and openness, as well as its characteristically fast reproduction of transients.

JV, WG review forthcoming

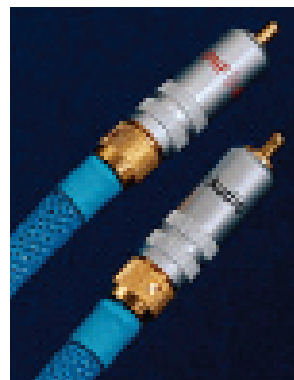
NORDOST VALHALLA INTERCONNECT AND SPEAKER CABLE

Interconnect: \$4000/one-meter pair; Speaker: \$5995/1.5-meter pair
nordost.com

In any system into which you insert these top-of-the-line (and



hideously expensive) Nordost statement products, you'll get the same results, which one might describe as no results in the sense that they introduce no audible colorations that HP can hear, and believe me, he's tried. If ever there were an audio product HP would be tempted to call well nigh perfect, the Valhallas would be it. HP's Workshop, Issue 136



PNF AUDIO ICON (INTERCONNECT) AND SYMPHONY (SPEAKER)

Icon: \$190/one-meter pair; Symphony: \$400/ten-foot pair
pnfaudio.com

PNF produces one of the finest sets of reasonably priced cables we have heard. We say "sets" here, because the Icon and Symphony offer complementary strengths and work best when used together, with a huge amount of resolution and focus, clear and deeply extended bass, dynamic expressiveness, and the ability to enhance both clarity and smoothness. They lean toward the "clarity" side, so avoid components with midrange brightness or edge.

Reviewed by CM, AVg

recommended products

PURIST AUDIO DESIGN DOMINUS INTERCONNECT AND SPEAKER CABLE

Interconnect: \$5250/one-meter pair; Speaker: \$14,090/1.5-meter pair
puristaudiodesign.com

The all-silver Dominus is very detailed, very dynamic, very rich. Less open than Nordost Valhalla and darker in balance than Kharma Enigma, it is also quieter than both, and because of its fluid-damped construction, virtually immune to floorborne and air-borne vibration. *JV*



REGA COUPLE (INTERCONNECT)

\$150/1-meter pair
rega.co.uk

The Couples offer plenty of upper midrange/treble detail, with fine resolution of textures, yet without exaggerated transients or edginess. Their bass is tight and punchy, and they are wonderfully neutral throughout the midrange. While they don't offer the almost "luminous" midrange quality you'll hear in some very expensive cables, their essential neutrality makes a fine substitute for a "pennies-on-the-dollar" price.

Reviewed by CM, AVG

SILTECH PARIS MXT (INTERCONNECT)

\$199/one-meter pair
siltehcables.com

The only tonal anomaly of this superb interconnect is a slightly recessed midrange—very slight—that throws the tonal balance about three degrees to the yin, albeit in no way that's unmusical. Otherwise, it has a smooth, tube-like sound that's not the least sibilant, while the low-end is warm and solid. Like many components that have a slight midrange trough, the entire presentation is somewhat set back, with a rather conspicuous rendering of depth. The Paris reproduces the gestalt of a musical event with stunning transparency,

detail, and cohesion—everything in its proper place.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 138

SILTECH NEW YORK MXT (SPEAKER)

\$491/2.5-meter pair
siltehcables.com

Luxurious as an Italian loafer, the Siltech New York MXT is sensibly weighted toward the midrange and basically neutral in balance, with a slightly rounded treble. Virtually grain-free and one of the most harmonically palpable and realistic in its price range, it also offers excellent low-level resolution. Though soundstage dimensionality could be improved, no serious faults trip this up.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 146



SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH ALPHA (INTERCONNECT)

\$199/one-meter pair
synergisticresearch.com

Balance and transparency are its strengths, along with a rich midrange, and a sweet, smooth, and never forced or strident treble. The affordable Alpha challenges some of the finest reference cables out there.

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 38

SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH ABSOLUTE REFERENCE X2 INTERCONNECT AND SPEAKER CABLE

Interconnect: \$3800/ one-meter pair; Speaker: \$6200/eight-foot pair
synergisticresearch.com

Synergistic's top-of-the-line "active shielded" cable must be plugged into a power supply that, in turn, generates a very small amount of current to bias the dielectric. If this sounds complicated, it is a bit, but the results are impressive: dead quiet backgrounds and higher amplitude signals. The Absolute Reference X2 sounds a bit like Nordost Valhalla with denser tone color, fuller body, and

higher output. Almost as "quick," and every bit as bloomy as Valhalla (though not quite as transparent), it is a beguiling alternative for those who like the sound of Nordost cable but long for a bit more "there" there.

JV, review forthcoming



TARA LABS ZERO INTERCONNECT AND OMEGA SPEAKER CABLE

Zero interconnect: \$12,800/one meter (\$1800 per additional meter); Omega speaker cable: \$11,995/10 feet (\$1000 per additional foot); The Zero digital cable: \$5995/one meter (\$1200 per additional meter)
taralabs.com

In spite of the remarkable level of engineering that TARA Labs' flagship cable and interconnect represent (the Zeros use a vacuum dielectric), *JV* is fully aware that recommending any wires that put you out 40 to 50 grand is borderline insane. (Well, not even borderline.) Nonetheless, the Zero's X-ray ability to clarify very-low-level tone colors, dynamic nuances, and performance details way back in the mix, its remarkable level of ambience retrieval, its electrifying transient speed and definition, its front-to-back transparency, and its bottom-octave color, clarity, and authority are unrivaled thus far in his experience.

JV, review in this issue

VAN DEN HUL INTEGRATION HYBRID (INTERCONNECT)

\$250/one-meter pair
vandenhul.com

This superb interconnect is smooth, sweet, and perhaps a little tubey but very natural and musically involving. On complex

orchestral material where there's a lot going on, the Van den Hul displayed exemplary control and projected a very convincing impression of air, space, and dimensionality, with instruments focused in a space of their own. The Integration is aptly named, rendering any source fed it with a persuasive sense of coherence.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 138

WIREWORLD EQUINOX III \$495/2.5-meter pair

wireworld.com

"So listenable" said PS's notes regarding this wonderful entry from an ever-dependable manufacturer. The presentation is always smooth, transparent, and integrated, with excellent dynamics, liveliness, and vitality. Solid bass response allows a lot of the venue's acoustics to come through, while soundstaging is persuasive in both planes. With closely miked material, the Atlantis mediated excessive brightness and detail without compromising dynamics. This cable does little wrong and most things right; need more be said? Perhaps this: the Atlantis evinced a tube-like solidity and roundedness to its every presentation.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 147



XLO ULTRA 12 (SPEAKER)

\$720/eight-foot pair

xloelectric.com

Although they land on the cool side of the spectrum, the Ultras possess an exceedingly low noise floor, a sweet, sweet treble, and copious amounts of transient energy that allow instruments to bloom like a spring bouquet. This cable straddles the line between detail, extension, warmth, and musicality without leaning too strongly one way or the other.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 147

recommended products

Headphones



GRADO SR60

\$69

gradolabs.com

The Mighty Mouse of headphones, Grado's SR60 offers superb midrange transparency and natural dynamics. Treble is well-balanced, though not quite as smooth or refined as in some higher-priced designs. Bass is well-defined, but rolls off a bit early (note that many other headphones whose bass extends deeper than that of the SR60 can sound bloated or boomy down low). The SR60 can also be driven directly from an Apple iPod or other digital player. While comfortable, keep in mind that as an "open air" design the SR60 is not ideal for noisy environments.

Reviewed by TM, AVG



AKG K501

\$199

akg.com

Because the drivers sit away from the ear, the presentation is easy and spacious—everything from

the low-mids on up sounds like a high-quality small speaker. While it's an excellent and uncolored headphone, there is no serious bottom end, so it's not ideal for those who thrive on large-scale works or rock.

Reviewed by Dan Schwartz, Issue 156



GRADO SR325i

\$295

gradolabs.com

Though some listeners find Grado 'phones overly bright, they sound completely different from everything else, with a unique hear-through-the-veils kind of transparency.

Reviewed by DS, Issue 156



ULTRASON PROLINE 2500

\$399

ultrasoneusa.com

The German-made UltraSone moves the driver off the center of the earpiece, so that rather than firing straight into your hearing canal it fires at the folds making up your outer ears. The 2500 is an open design with a titanium-plated driver and has an overall

outstanding balance of virtues, purity, and extension, though with some recordings it can sound strident with strings.

Reviewed by DS, Issue 156



SENNHEISER HD650

\$495

sennheiserusa.com

A very revealing model, the HD650 has a smooth upper range and well-balanced middle and lower registers. While not quite as dynamic as some, these have a silky-sweet sound.

Reviewed by DS, Issue 156



SHURE E5C

\$499

shure.com

In an era when "ear bud" headphones are a dime-a-dozen, how can Shure possibly sell a \$500 model? Because the E5c offers stunning sonic performance and amazing comfort in a compact package that elevates the portable-audio experience to a new level. When combined with Headroom's products and a good source (no MP3, please), the E5c has electrostatic-like resolution, surprising bass extension, and outstanding clarity. This sound quality is no doubt due to the elaborate two-way design, with separate bass and treble drivers, along with a crossover built into the cord. The crème de la crème in high-end portable audio.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 155

Equipment Racks

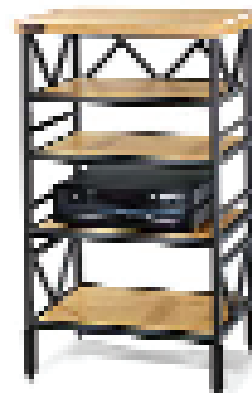


ARCICI SUSPENSE RACK

\$2495

arcici.net

In terms of isolation from acoustic anomalies, either feedback or those caused by direct-radiation effects, the Arcicis are the most effective suspension systems HP has used, and this includes the Vibraplanes, the Seismic Sinks, and any number of "points," cones, or "feet." They are a must if you plan to use tubed front-end electronics. The more elaborate your system and the more bass energy it can propagate, the more you'll come to love the Arcicis for allowing you the maximum in sonic purity with the minimum of added colorations. HP



BILLY BAGS EQUIPMENT RACKS

\$300 to \$1200 (for Standard Series)

billybags.com

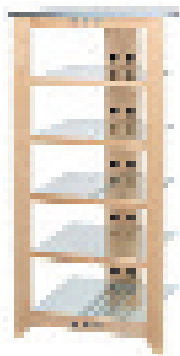
These sturdy, sensibly priced equip-

recommended products

ment racks lack state-of-the-art features such as those found in, for example, the Grand Prix products, but are effective, highly functional, attractive, and can be ordered in custom configurations. Optional lead-shot loading and spikes elevate performance. The Pro-Series prices increase up to \$3000. RH owns Billy Bags racks. RH

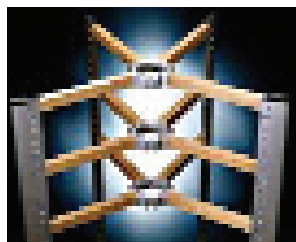
CAMBRE CORE EQUIPMENT PLATFORMS

CAMT-S amp stands: \$300;
CAM9-S modular rack: \$1200
 These things don't look very imposing, but, oh, what they can do in terms of freeing up your electronics to sound their best. HP; review forthcoming



SANUS NATURAL FURNITURE AUDIO RACKS

\$329 (four-shelf) to \$379 (six-shelf)
sanus.com
 Available in black, cherry, or maple, Sanus' Natural Furniture racks are handsome and affordable. The rigid frame and 1/4" glass shelves let your gear sound quite neutral and alive, while the open construction allows for good air flow and makes installation and hook-up a dream. WG



FINITE ELEMENTE "SPIDER"

\$450-\$2150
immediasound.com
 The handsome and flexible "Spider" is made of extruded aluminum and

solid beechwood struts, and provides a sturdy and unusually open platform for components. 18 different variations on an X-shaped theme are possible; the distance between the aluminum pillars can also be changed, and you can add more levels at any time. WG

WALKER AUDIO EQUIPMENT RACK

\$6000
walkeraudio.com
 A large (four-and-a-half-foot long) beautifully made equipment rack, constructed of three thick, oiled slabs of rock maple suspended between shot-filled tubes and balanced on Walker Audio's huge Valid Point feet. Like all of Walker Audio's tweaks, the Walker rack kills vibration without killing the life of the music. JV

Power Conditioners



AUDIENCE ADEPT AND RESPONSE POWER CONDITIONERS

\$3800
audience-av.com
 This expensive but extremely effective 12-outlet conditioner delivered significant improvements in bass definition and depth, overall resolution, and soundstage depth. Build-quality is exemplary.

Reviewed by RH, TPV Issue 63



CHANG LIGHTSPEED CLS 6400 ISO MK II POWER CONDITIONER

\$565
changelightspeed.com
 Chang Lightspeed's CLS 6400 ISO Mk II is a whole-system power conditioner that provides six "hospital grade" AC outlets, two of which provide special filter-

ing for use with digital source components. Basically, the Chang helps unlock an overall system sound that offers a pleasing blend of digital noise suppression, delicate midrange resolution, plenty of soundstage depth, and powerful and extended bass. In short, the Chang makes good components sound better—especially helping lift lower-priced digital players up a performance class or two. Please note two important set-up considerations. First, Chang conditioners need a fair amount of break-in before they deliver maximum benefits. Second, be aware that Changs do not always help (and in some cases hinder) the sound of big, high-powered amplifiers.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 144



MONSTER CABLE HTS SERIES POWER CONDITIONERS

\$150 to \$700
monstercable.com
 Although we haven't auditioned every conditioner in Monster Cable's huge line, those we've heard have been extremely effective at lowering noise, smoothing the tonal balance, and improving resolution. A huge bang for the buck. RH



NORDOST THOR POWER CONDITIONER

\$3200
 Finally, an AC distribution device that does the job right. HP; review forthcoming



RICHARD GRAY POWER COMPANY 600S, 1200S, AND POLE PIG

\$1395, \$2195, and \$1595
richardgraypowercompany.com

What can one say about a good power conditioner, save that it does its job and does it well? The RGPC 600S, in combination with the RGPC Pole Pig, works invisibly, lowering noise and increasing detail without markedly inhibiting dynamics or adding a noticeable sonic signature. For those of you living in older houses, these Richard Gray products are like adding six-to-twelve dedicated, lab-grade outlets to the ones you've got, without tearing up any walls or calling the electrician. The 1200S is RGPC's biggest and most capable conditioner, offering two banks of six Hubbell outlets. Unlike many conditioners, RGPCs operate in parallel to your AC lines, so that system components do not, strictly speaking, have to be plugged into the RGPC in order to enjoy its sonic benefits. (However, we suggest plugging components through the RGPC in order to take advantage of its surge suppression capabilities.) Significantly, the RGPC 1200S can often improve (and never limits) the sound quality of huge, blockbuster amplifiers. Not cheap, but these are the real deal.

1200S reviewed by CM, Issue 144

RICHARD GRAY'S POWER COMPANY HIGH TENSION WIRE POWER CABLES

\$450 and up
 Exotic power cords are something of a conundrum—they make an immediate and obvious change in sound quality, but seldom are the changes unequivocally for the better. Remember, different and better aren't the same thing. RGPC's High Tension Wires are tonally neutral and, unlike many exotic power cords, they don't cause more problems than they solve. The HTWs do the things you want a power cord to do—the back-

recommended products

ground is blacker, more real detail is revealed, and dynamics are extended—without getting in the way of anything else your system does right. **SB**

WALKER AUDIO VALID POINTS AND VELOCITOR POWER LINE ENHANCERS

Valid Point Supertuning kit, \$450; Velocitor with Valid Points, power cord, and dedicated stand (\$4245)

walkeraudio.com

Cryogenically treated, in case you want to bring it back to life in a decade or so, the Velocitor, like the Richard Gray Pole Pig, does undeniably lovely things for the sound of preamps, turntables, and digital sources that are plugged into it or into the circuit it is plugged into, and like the Gray products the Velocitor works its magic without masking musicality. The Valid Points, Walker's massive version of tiptoes, are sensationally effective under most components, particularly when used with Walker Resonance Control discs, which, themselves, can have a salubrious effect on components on which they are placed. **JV**

Accessories



ASC TUBE TRAPS

\$498–\$638

tubetrap.com

Unless you have a professionally designed and treated room, Tube Traps from Acoustic Sciences Corporation are absolutely indispensable to improving your system's sound. They are extremely versatile—able to 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, soaking up excess bass like a sponge and conferring greater clarity and transient impact. Placed along the sidewalls between you and the loudspeakers, Tube Traps kill unwanted side-wall 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. Acoustic Sciences Corporation also makes a wide variety of other effective acoustic-treatment products. **RH**

ACOUSTIC ROOM SYSTEMS

\$20,000–\$50,000

acousticroomsystems.com, avroomservice.com

Money spent on real acoustic treatments is, in RH's experience, the most effective allocation of your hi-fi budget. RH has lived with different acoustic products over the years, but none has been as effective, nor blended into the décor, as has the Acoustic Room Systems package. Although the price tag is high, the ARS system greatly improves bass tautness and definition, allows the hi-fi system to better resolve spatial cues, and adds to the music's sense of palpability and realism.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 139

L'ART DU SON LP AND CD CLEANING FLUIDS

\$45 and \$55

eliteavdist.com



Both the LP and CD cleaning fluids have a family resemblance.

Each elicits from your pre-recorded material the "sweetness" of real music instead of the electronic glaze most of the competition lays across the soundstage. The CD fluid, like that of the brighter and much more sanely priced Optrix, once heard, will completely convert even the most skeptical.

Further thoughts by HP are forthcoming



BRIGHT STAR AUDIO ISO-ROCK SPEAKER

\$499

brightstaraudio.com

This dedicated stand for Gallo's Nucleus Reference 3 increases both the height and scale of images, drastically improves soundstage width, depth, and realism, and brings a truer, more life-like presentation to all recordings. If you own the Reference 3, the IsoRock is not a tricked-out accessory but an essential component.

Reviewed by Bob Gendron, Issue 156

CLEARAUDIO STROBODISC AND STROBE LIGHT

\$60 and \$150

musicalsurrroundings.com

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 Strobodisc and Strobe Light are great tools for the serious vinyl junkie.

HP's Workshop, this issue



CLEARAUDIO MATRIX RECORD CLEANER

\$3000

musicalsurrroundings.com

Clearaudio's Matrix record cleaner is the *ne plus ultra* of record-cleaning machines. Built to a higher standard than many turntables, the Matrix provides bi-directional platter rotation, powerful two-level vacuum, and an adjustable brush. The Matrix's sonic effect on LP playback goes far beyond a quieter background; low-level detail is better resolved

as are spatial cues, contributing to a larger and more dimensional soundstage. A must-have for the serious LP collector.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 142

EXPRESS MACHINING DIGITAL STYLUS FORCE GAUGE

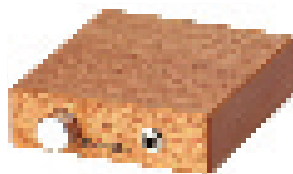
\$160

amusicdirect.com

This excellent gauge is accurate to

1/10th gram, very easy

to use and store, and an affordable alternative to the Winds. **WG**



GRADO RA-1 HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

\$350

gradolabs.com

With a tube-like rendering of timbre and a sweet and relaxed sound, the Grado RA-1 makes extended headphone listening a joy. Although battery-driven, the RA-1 is more at home in your equipment rack or on your desk than out on the road. A beautiful wooden case finishes off this gem.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 155



GRYPHON EXORCIST AND BLACK EXORCIST DEMAGNETIZERS

\$230 each

acousticsounds.com

These nifty devices are designed to do the same thing—one system-wide, the other for phono—rid audio gear of magnetic build-up.

recommended products

The size of a remote control, the Exorcist hooks up to your preamp's aux or line input, while you plug your arm leads into the Black Exorcist. Audible results include less glare and hash, tighter bass, and greater perceived detail and musical integration. *WG, review forthcoming*



HEADROOM BITHEAD AND TOTAL BITHEAD PORTABLE HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS

\$199 and \$269

headroomaudio.com

These portable devices work wonders on all music sources played through headphones—most especially with MP3 files, boosting sound levels and improving dynamics. Moreover, Headroom's proprietary processing circuit solves the "in-the-head" imaging of headphone listening by seemingly projecting the image in front of the listener as a pair of loudspeakers would, generating something like a soundstage. The BitHead doubles as a USB-powered external sound card, making it ideal for listening to DVDs played on laptops. Recommended for frequent travelers, iPod owners, and anyone who listens to sound on the go. The BitHead's slightly more expensive brother utilizes Burr-Brown parts.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 155



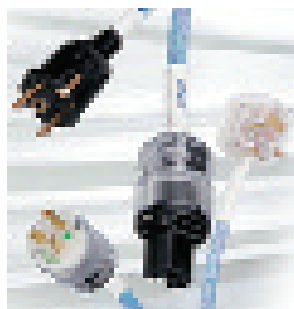
KIMBER PALLADIAN PK 10 AC LINE CONNECTORS

\$1080 for eight-foot cord

kimberkable.com

Kimber's Water Moccasin-sized Palladian not only reduces subtle

veilings between you and the music, adding considerably to the transparency of the finished product, but lets the music sound more relaxed. As with other cables, keep in mind that just because you hear a difference between whatever you own and whatever you've got a lustful eye on, it doesn't mean it is a good difference. *HP*



NORDOST BRAHMA POWER CORD

\$1499/two meters

nordost.com

As with Nordost's interconnect and speaker cables, the Brahma cord reduces noise and hash and improves dynamics, bass pitch, and overall clarity while always sounding neutral.

WG, review forthcoming



NORDOST ECO 3 SPRAY

\$44 (eight-ounce bottle)

nordost.com

Designed to eliminate the build-up of static charges on cables and interconnects, this stuff works equally well on equipment racks, CDs, DVDs, and turntable platters. Use when installing new cables or re-squirt every few weeks. The sound is noticeably smoother, and also more present and alive.

WG, review forthcoming



NORDOST PULSAR POINTS I (TITANIUM)

\$359 (set of four)

nordost.com

These nifty devices fit under all components and greatly improve dynamics, clarity, focus, and low-level detail. Available in aluminum and titanium. *WG*



MEIER-AUDIO PORTA CORDA HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

\$225 without USB port, \$300 with

meieraudio.de

This compact headphone amp is the ideal partner for portable music players such as the iPod. The Porta Corda greatly improves dynamics, tightens and extends the bass, and adds no additional noise or grunge to the music.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 155

PRECISION AUDIO CABLE ELEVATORS PLUS

\$158 (set of eight)

amicdirect.com

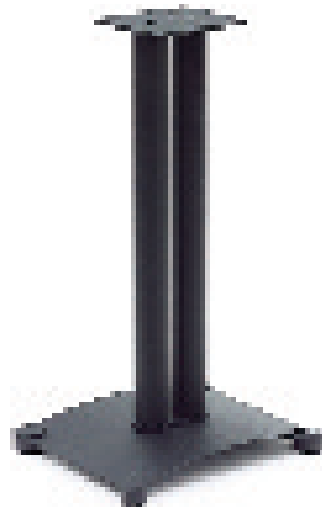


The best cheap tweak on the market, Cable

Elevators are porcelain cradles designed to

lift cables and interconnects off the floor, shielding them from vibration. The salubrious effect they have on just about every aspect of sound is hard to believe. A must-own item.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 142



SANUS SF26 STEEL FOUNDATION SPEAKER STANDS

\$170/pair

sanus.com

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.

Reviewed by CM, AVG

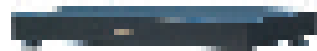


SHURE STYLUS FORCE GAUGE

\$20

shure.com

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. *WG*



TOWNSHEND SEISMIC SINKS

\$400-\$900 (depending on weight capacity)

townshendaudio.com

Townshend Seismic Sinks are air-bladder-suspended isolation

recommended products

platforms, available in several sizes and weights to accommodate a wide variety of components. Setup is straightforward and easy. Because the Sinks act as filters (around 2–4Hz), they isolate far better than cones, which anchor components solidly but in so doing allow vibrations to be transmitted directly to the chassis. It is PS's view that the so-called superior definition afforded by cones is often in fact a subtle edginess wholly absent from tuned suspensions. The Sinks are exceptionally effective with non-suspended turntables. PS



VIBRAPODS

\$25

vibrapod.com

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 have to be expensive? Just out, Vibrapod Cones—use them as standalone footers or combine with Vibrapods to get even more out of your system. DD

WINDS ARM LOAD METER ALM-1METER

\$399

musicalsurroundings.com

Pricy but worth it, the Winds is the most dependably accurate digital stylus-force gauge on the market. JV

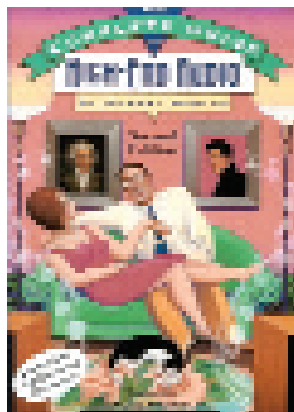
Books

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO HIGH-END AUDIO, THIRD EDITION

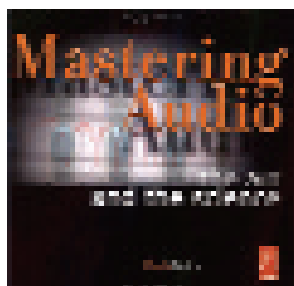
Robert Harley

Acapella Publishing, 2004, 640 pages, \$34.95 (paper), \$44.95 (cloth)

The most complete, up-to-date, and useful guide to the high end you can buy, filled with information



about how audio components work, how they should be set up, how they can be optimized after setup that is indispensable to neophyte and veteran audiophiles alike. JV



MASTERING AUDIO: THE ART AND THE SCIENCE

Bob Katz

Focal Press, 2002, 319 pages, \$39.95

Although written for professional mastering engineers, *Mastering Audio: The Art and the Science* contains a wealth of information of interest to the audiophile. If you want to know what goes on behind the scenes in creating the music you enjoy, and learn more about digital audio, this comprehensive, insightful, and accessible book is without peer. RH

THE MASTER HANDBOOK OF ACOUSTICS, FOURTH EDITION

F. Alton Everest

McGraw-Hill/TAB, 2000, 592 pages, \$39.95

This classic book, updated over the years, is a crash course in how sound behaves in a room and how to treat rooms to improve sound quality. It's not audiophile-oriented (no discussion of loudspeaker placement, for



example), but explains the basic physics that audiophiles need to know when choosing or treating listening rooms. RH



MUSIC, THE BRAIN, AND ECSTASY

Robert Jourdain

Perennial, 1998, 400 pages, \$13.95

Combining musicology, psychoacoustics, and neural science, Robert Jourdain weaves a fascinating exploration of why human brains find beauty and meaning in music. Why do our brains, evolved to detect survival sounds, comprehend, for example, the large-scale structure of a symphony? The book is short on answers, but we are richer for having explored the questions. Jourdain has a wonderful gift for making his subject accessible, and peppers the text with fascinating musical asides. RH

MUSIC, SOUND & TECHNOLOGY

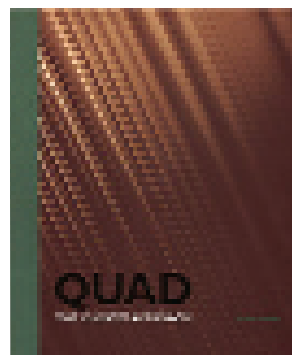
John Eargle

Springer, 1995, 368 pages, \$114.95

Meant primarily for college stu-



dents, Eargle's book is what it claims to be—a classic guide to musical acoustics. If you're looking for the best resource on hi-fi systems, buy Robert Harley's *Complete Guide*. If you're looking for a book on how the various instruments make the sounds they make and what those sounds comprise, harmonically, dynamically, and temporally, Eargle's is the standard text. JV



QUAD—THE CLOSEST APPROACH

Ken Kessler

International Audio Group, 2004, 215 pages, \$80

U.K. audio writer Ken Kessler has documented the history, products, and contributions to audio of one of the seminal high-end companies in *Quad—The Closest Approach*. The book contains interviews with Quad founder Peter Walker and his son Ross, reprints of old ads, Walker's original papers on loudspeaker and amplifier design, and other bits of interest to Quad fans. Although pricey, this LP-sized coffee-table book is gorgeously produced and printed. RH