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.

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**Loudspeakers**

### Under $500

**PARADIGM ATOM**

$199  [paradigm.com](http://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](http://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](http://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-vocal amplification.Reviewed by Chris Martens, Issue 145

**BRONZE B2**

$399  [monitoraudio.com](http://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 metallic 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

**WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 9.6**

$750  [iagamerica.com](http://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

**PRIMUS 360**

$660  [infinitsystems.com](http://infinitsystems.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 floorstander values around. Reviewed by Neil Gader, Issue 149

**USHER S520**

$375  [usheraudio.com](http://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

**INFINITY PRIMUS 360**

$500–$1000  
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 NS, Issue 152; T45 reviewed by JH in AVg
TETEM 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 GRAFTEBNER RADIA Z
$999
tbgcorp.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.

$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 Salie Reynolds, AV/S

DYNNAUDIO 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 Sallie Reynolds, AV/S

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

REVOL CONCERTA F12
$1199
revelspeakers.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
**QUAD 22L**  
$1600  
[iagamerica.com](http://iagamerica.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 NG, Issue 145

**MAGNEPAN MG 1.6**  
$1775  
[magenpan.com](http://magenpan.com)  
Magneplan’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](http://psbspeakers.com)  
The Platinum M2 shines in its ability to reproduce the weight, majesty, and complexity of every kind of music. Tonalty, the speaker is sure-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 Jane Kraft, Issue 145

**B&W 704**  
$2200  
[bwspeakers.com](http://bwspeakers.com)  
Clarity and control are chief among this 2.5-way, vented floorstander’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](http://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 loudspeakers, 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](http://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

**NAIM ARIVA**  
$2500  
[naimusa.com](http://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
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.

RECOMMENDED PRODUCTS

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

NEW PRODUCTS

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
micro and macro, are invigorating. 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 matted 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, AV

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—with-out 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 CM, Issue 154

QUAD 988
$8650
quadamerica.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

QUAD 989
$6650
quadamerica.com

$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 floor-stander 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
high-quality offerings. Part of its back in the U.S. with a full line of British speaker company KEF is KEF REFERENCE 205

Reviewed by Manoj Motwani, Issue 156

now "enough plus some." ably faster and more accurate, the bass of the 803Ds is consider-

able, 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 floorstanding 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 lets 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 balance and coherenece 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.

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 state-

ment 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

Drums, bass, brass, and strings to vivid life. The bottom end has a lot of power, along with good text-

ure and detail, while the highs are airy, extended, and well integrated.
**SOUND LAB M-1**

$16,800  
soundlab-speakers.com

A huge electrostat, artfully subdivided into angled strips and panels to produce a hemispherical wave launch and reduce “drumhead” resonances, the M-1 has the biggest sound field, 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

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**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

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**B&W 800D**

$20,000  
bwspeakers.com

“Wholeness” and “seamless” were the quality's 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

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**Kharma Ceramique Reference Monitor 3.2**

$21,000  
giftgroup.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

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**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

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**McIntosh XRT28**

$25,960  
mbl.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

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**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

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**Sonus-Faber Stradivari**

$40,000  
sonusfaber.com

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 mid-bass. 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 best dynamic loudspeakers JV has auditioned.

**DAI MEGALINE**

$42,000
doli-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 electrostats 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 148

**WILSON MAXX 2**

$45,000
wilsonaudio.com

A stunning achievement in loudspeaker design, the MAXX 2 refines what's possible in music reproduction in the areas of bottom-end resolution, nuance, and finesses. This highly articulate bass presentation is backed up with the ability to effortlessly deliver massive dynamic impact and sonptaneous extension. Every other aspect of this speaker's performance is exemplary, particularly midrange transparency, 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 111Es, they are a bear to drive. For the ultimate in sonics (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.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 146

**MBL 101E**

$46,900
mbi.com

MBL’s stunning-looking, four-way, omnidirectional Radialstrahler 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 mooilah, they will take you about as close as you can come to the absolute sound.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 136

**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, 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.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 154

**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
THE ABSOLUTE SOUND  DECEMBER 2005

**Subwoofers**

**PSB SUBSONIC 5I**
$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 miser's 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  
jamesspeakers.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 theater 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

**KINNAR CERAMIQUE CE-5B.1-1**
$9500  
kharma.com

A compact, powered 12" subwoofer from Kharma’s perfectionist engineering genius Charles van Oosterum, the CE-5B.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

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**recommended products**
**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 definition. Moreover, this reasonably priced amp is musically quite involving.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 128

**$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

**$2000–$3000**

**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 precision, 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-
its of its power, this amp has
good transparency and sound-
staging, 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
dgeamp.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 tim-
bre 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

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 glorious as
the sound is the sleek new full-
width look, featuring all-metal con-
struction 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 speak-
er 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 sig-
nature. 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 com-
pany’s work keeps evolving, and
the 250 shows less grain and
noise, a tonal neutrality that
gratefully 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

CLASSÉ DELTA CA-2200
$5000
classaeudio.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 deep-
est, has uncanny pitch and tim-
bre. 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 ver-
sion, 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 repro-
duction PS has so far experienced
in his system. This amp is fan-
tastically clean and clear, utterly
open and transparent, wholly
lacking in grain, grit, and hard-
ness, tonally neutral, with
exceptionally low noise and dis-
tortion. The top end is natural
and extended; the bottom end
has great heft and weight; and
the midrange is gloriously pres-
ent and lively. The tube-driven
MC2102 gives you a thoroughly
natural presentation on many
kinds of music, with unbeliev-
ably low noise and realistic
dynamics. While it doesn’t proj-
ect 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 work-
horses, 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 pla-
nars (like Maggie’s). JV

WYETECH SAPHIRE 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
**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 131

**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 135

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**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 SC, Issue 128

**KENNETH ART CORPORATION**

$17,000
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 SK, Issue 149

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**KINNETIC LABS LEUS**

$9999
edgeamps.com

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Reviewed by AHC, Issue 135
same glow as it does through, say, the Halcro monoblocks or finer tube amps.
Reviewed by FK, Issue 149

**JOULE ELECTRA VZN-160 MKII 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**
passlabs.com
$18,000

“An amplifier with soul,” the XA160 is the most “tube-like” transistor amp reviewer Cordesman has heard. It’s 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**
balanced.com
$23,000

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**
krell.com
$28,000

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, sensationaly 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 midband 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**
onahighermute.com
$29,900

With a gorgeous industrial design, these ultra-low-distortion Australian monoblocks are as starting to behold as they are to listen to. Dynamics are exemplary, as is 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

**EDGE ELECTRONICS SIGNATURE 1.1**
$35,900
dgeampl.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
mbi.com

Driven by the MBL 6010 D preamp, 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
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.

ProLogue One is very neutral with little of its own signature. The 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 gooey like a Dynaco Stereo 70 or other vintage design. The ProLogue One is very neutral with little of its own signature.

The AX-7 has all the hallmarks of the Ayre sound, but scaled down in output power. This beautifully made integrat-ed has dimensionality, openness, image specificity, and transparency that rival much more expensive separa-tates. 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.

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 sug-gest, 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 imped-ance peaks in the bass (which can result in a thick, bloated sound).

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 amplifi-er 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.

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.

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

### Integrated Amplifiers

#### Under $1000

**NAD C 320BEE**

$nodelectronics.com$399

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**

$rotel.com$699

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**

$jolida.com$900

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

**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 gooey like a Dynaco Stereo 70 or

**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 Marlin, 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

**PLINIUS 9200**

$3695

$plinius.com$

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

### Recommended Products

#### $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 integrat-ed has dimensionality, openness, image specificity, and transparency that rival much more expensive separa-tates. 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 sug-gest, 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 imped-ance peaks in the bass (which can result in a thick, bloated sound).

Reviewed by TM, AVg

#### $3000 and Above

**PLINIUS 9200**

$3695

$plinius.com$

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

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

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 SR, Issue 156

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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

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Reviewed by RH, Issue 144

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

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Reviewed by AHC, Issue 151

Edge G2
$4395
dgeamps.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, hasher, 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

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Reviewed by WG, Issue 149

Meridian G02
$3295
meridian-audio.com
The G02 controller replaces its predecessor, the S02, 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

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Reviewed by SK, Issue 152

Aesthetix Calypso
$4500
musicalsurroundings.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 extreme-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

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Reviewed by RH, Issue 151

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 reharmenable. 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

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Reviewed by NG, Issue 154

Sutherland The Director
$3000
acousticsounds.com
An unusually lovely-sounding solid-state linestage, The Director’s character is easygoing, sweet, and rather romantic. It has the thinnest layer of solid-state opaqueness, 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

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Reviewed by WG, Issue 155

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.
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Reviewed by NG, Issue 154

McIntosh C46 & C2200
$4600 and $4900
mcintoshlabs.com
Sonicaly 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-
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.

**Recommended Products**

**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 “unc clinical” as anything HP has heard.

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

**TOM EVANS VIBE & PULSE**

$6000 ($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 filigree nuances of reference units.

HP’s Workshop, Issue 153

**BALANCED AUDIO TECHNOLOGY VK-51SE**

$9000 (with remote option)

balanced.com

BAT’s VK-51SE is as fully featured as line stages 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

**MBL 6010 D**

$18,920

mbl.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

**AESTHETIX CALLISTO MKII & MKII SIGNATURE**

$9000 and $11,000

musicalsurrroundings.com

Big, airy, and open, the three-box Aesthetix Callisto Signature line stage 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 line stage preamp.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 143

**CONRAD-JOHNSON ACT II**

$13,500

conradjohnson.com

The now discontinued ART II was HP’s reference in line stages because it most closely followed the gestalt of the music itself. Its replacement model, the ACT II, will be reviewed in HP’s upcoming line stage assessment.

**BURMESTER 011**

$15,995

immediassound.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
**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. Review 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. Review by WG, Issue 141

**PHONOMENA**
$600
musicalsurroundings.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 LUKASCHKE PP-1**
$1350
musicalsurroundings.com
A solid-state, miniaturized hideaway box powered by a wall transformer. External AC plus short signal path yields very wide dynamics and space retrieval with a comfortable midrange. The 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 transparency 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

**ARTEMIS LABS PL-1**
$3350
oydn.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 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

**AESTHETIX RHEA**
$4000
musicalsurroundings.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 transparency 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
fanfareinf.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 Io is a wow-O). HP survey in the works

**$6000 and Above**

**LAMM LP 2 DELUXE**
$6990
lammindustries.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 Io 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
musicalsurroundings.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?
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 AT, Issue 147

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 WS, Issue 137

ZANDEN AUDIO MODEL 1200 PHONOSTAGE
$14,500
avantgarde-usa.com
A beautiful and beautifully made Japanese tube phonostage that is not as punchy as the Aesthetix Io 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-dimensionality and 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 phonostages, the Zanden offers alternative compensation curves for discs not eq’d to the RIAA standard (i.e., Deccas, EMI’s, and early Columbias). Like the Lamm, it is dead quiet.

JV, review forthcoming

`$1000–$2000`

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, AV

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

`$2000–$4000`

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 4b

REGA JUPITER
$1795
rega.co.uk
Rega’s Jupiter is a highly musical

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 outstanding 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, AV

Sony's DVP-NS999ES remains an excellent performer. With newly added multichannel SACD capability, only higher-priced SACD-only players outperform it.
The Ayre CX-7 is a minimalist CD player, complete with vacuum-tube output stages. A top-loader, the Ayre CX-7 is a minimalist CD player, complete with vacuum-tube output stages. 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 NR, Issue 149

**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 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

**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 JH, Issue 152

**CLASSÉ DELTA CDP-100**

$3500  
classediaudio.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

**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

**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

**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
THE ABSOLUTE SOUND

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.

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.

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.

$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.

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.

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.

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
musichallaudio.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.

MUSIC HALL MMF-5 W/GOLDRING 1012GX CARTRIDGE
$629
musichallaudio.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
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
musicsurroundings.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

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
sumikoaudio.net
With features usually found on more expensive models—a gimbaled-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

$2000–$5000

BASIS 1400 SIGNATURE
$2200
basissaudio.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

VIPI ARIES SCOUT
W/JMW-9
$1600
vipindustries.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 SH, AVg

VIPI ARIES BLACK KNIGHT
$2800
vipindustries.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

$5000–$10,000

CLEARAUDIO MASTER SOLUTION AMG
$5000
musicsurroundings.com
The 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...
VPI SUPER SCOUTMASTER SIGNATURE
$5500
vpinindustries.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.

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.

RECOMMENDED PRODUCTS

SOTA COSMOS SERIES III
$5950
sotaturntables.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.

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.

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.

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.”

CLEARAUDIO MAXIMUM SOLUTION TURNTABLE
$10,000
musica lunurroundings.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 starting 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

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.

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WALKER PROSCENIUM GOLD TURNTABLE AND TONEARM
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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.

TONEARMS

Under $1000

REGA RB300
$395
soundorg.com
Turntable manufacturers who don’t build their own arms fre-
quarterly 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 DMA, 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
vplindustries.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
eileavdist.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

SPECTACULAR RECORD SPINNING

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 warm yet very pleasant (yes, euphonious) balance, a sweet tone, if not hugely airy treble, refined detail, and very good detail, particularly in the middle band.

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 graceful-ly handle tracking challenges. Its sorns 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
musicalsurroundings.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 phonostage, 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

$1000–$2000

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 less enormously musical.

Reviewed by Adam Walsky, Issue 112

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 toneal 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

SUMIKO CELEBRATION
$1500
sumikoaudio.net
This low-output moving-coil yields a dark, mellow sound that, while
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
immediassound.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
axisss-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 2 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

KRETSU ROSEWOOD
$3500
signature.musicalsurroundings.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.

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
musicalsurroundings.com
The best cartridge that Benz has made. Translation: It does the music justice. HP review in a forthcoming cartridge roundup

LYRA TITAN
$4500
immediassound.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

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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

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 excellence 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 44

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

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

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 SB, TPV Issue 46

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 225 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 Dreadnought, 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

AUXIO 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 CM, AVg

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Reviewed by SB, TPV Issue 46
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.

Recommended Products

**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 JV, TPV Issue 51

**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-D9000ES 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 CDS0 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”**

(2) 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.

Reviewed by WG, TPV Issue 38

**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

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

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 represents a considerable saving 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, Valkyria 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.

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, Valkyria, 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, Valkyria 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.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 138

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, Al/Rg
reviewed products

**PURIST AUDIO DESIGN**

**DOMINIUS 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 airborne vibration. **JV**

**SILTECH NEW YORK MXT**

(SPEAKER) $491/2.5-meter pair
siltechcables.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 palatable 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 PS, Issue 138

**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, AV/g

**SILTECH PARIS MXT (INTERCONNECT)**

$199/one-meter pair
siltechcables.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, tubelike 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

**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 PS, Issue 147

**SILTECH NEW YORK MXT (SPEAKER)**

$491/2.5-meter pair siltechcables.com

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Reviewed by PS, Issue 138

**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.

**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 tubelike 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
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, Issue 156

**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 TM, Issue 156

**GRADO SR325I**
$295  
gradolabs.com
Though some listeners find Grado’s 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

**ULTRASONE 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

**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

**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

**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

**ARCI CI BILLY BAGS EQUIPMENT RACKS**
$300 to $1200 (for Standard Series)  
billybags.com
These sturdy, sensibly priced equip-
moment 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. HR 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 Valiant 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 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 changlightspeed.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 filtering 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 monsterfile.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. HR review forthcoming

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

$1395, $2195, and $1595 richardgrayspowercompany.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-
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 sensational-ly effective under most components, particularly when used with Walker Resonance Control discs, which, themselves, can have a salubrious effect on components which, themselves, can have a Walker Resonance Control effect on components. RH

**Acoustic Room Systems**
$20,000–$30,000
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
elitavdist.com

Both the LP and CD cleaning fluids have a family resemblance. Each elicits from your pre-recorded material the “sweet-ness” 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 S**
$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 Strobe-Disc and Strobe Light**
$60 and $150
musicaulsurroundings.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

**Bright Star Audio Custom Cables**
$86
brightstaraudio.com

A well-chosen high-quality cable is an essential component when dealing with digital and analog signals. The custom cable used in this review makes the connection between the source and the loudspeaker more transparent. HP

**Clearaudio Matrix Record Cleaner**
$3000
musicaulsurroundings.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

**Grado 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 phonograph-rid audio gear of magnetic build-up.
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

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 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

MEICER-AUDIO PORTA CORDA HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER
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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

SANUS SF26 STEEL FOUNDATION SPEAKER STANDS
$170/pair sonus.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...
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?

WINDS ARM LOAD METER ALM-1METER
$399
musicalsurroundings.com
Pricey but worth it, the Winds is the most dependably accurate digital stylus-force gauge on the market. DD

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

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