

the absolute sound®

2007

Editors' Choice Awards

Welcome to the 2007 edition of *The Absolute Sound's* Editors' Choice Awards, our annual Recommended Products list. On the following pages we present the gear that our editors and senior writers have selected as most worthy of purchase. These are the components we would buy ourselves or recommend to friends and family. Each product category is divided into separate subcategories defined by a price range, with components listed in order of ascending cost (though a few items, like cables and accessories, are listed alphabetically). Each recommendation is also accompanied by a capsule review, the original reviewer's name, and the issue the review appeared. In a few cases a product may have been reviewed in one of our sister publications, *The Perfect Vision* or *AVguide.com*, or the review may be pending publication, or the product may not have been formally reviewed but earns a recommendation based on a writer's extensive experience with it.

Given that this is the high end, where components generally have long lifespans, some of our recommendations look back several years. However, to be as up-to-date as possible, we've dropped some components that appeared on last year's list, sometimes because they have been discontinued and sometimes because we've reconsidered the choice.

We have added Golden Ear (GE) and Product of the Year (PoY) symbols to those products that have won these awards, along with the year in which the awards were given. Keep in mind that some worthy products are so new to the list that they haven't yet been nominated for awards.

LOUDSPEAKERS

Under \$500

PSB Alpha B I**\$279****psbspeakers.com**

Yet another "how-does-he-do-it?" loudspeaker from the prolific mind of Paul Barton. The new, more curvaceous Alpha combines mind-bending dynamics and rich mids in a speaker barely a foot tall. Even the midbass has power and pitch definition rarely found in this modest price range. Only the nebulous soundstaging is less than excellent.

Reviewed by Neil Gader, Issue 170**Epos ELS3****\$329****musicchallaudio.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.

Reviewed by Chris Martens, Issue 145**Usher S520****\$400****usheraudio.com**

Four things distinguish Usher's S520 from run-of-the-mill, sub-\$400 mini-monitors: a crisp and revealing treble, an unusually open and dynamic midrange, taut and surprisingly extended bass (no midbass hump here), and eye-popping build-quality. One caveat: The S520 needs lots of break-in, so be patient.

Reviewed by CM in AVGM, Issue 10

\$500 - \$1000

Focal 706V**\$595****audioplusservices.com**

Although nominally a bookshelf speaker, the Focal 706V delivers an oversized presentation, with the bass power, weight, and extension of a small floorstanding unit. Highly dynamic and visceral, it has a forward perspective that puts vocals right up front. Shines on rock, blues, and orchestral music. Highish sensitivity makes it an easy load for an amplifier.

Reviewed by Robert Harley, Issue 173**Monitor Audio BR5****\$599****monitораudiousa.com**

The ported, two-and-a-half-way floorstanding BR5 has good bass extension for its size, excellent articulation, and nice soundstaging. Not intended to fill stadiums, at moderate to loud levels it is one lightweight that performs like a serious middleweight.

Reviewed by Barry Willis, Issue 172**Silverline Minuet****\$600****silverlineaudio.com**

Don't let its pint-sized dimensions fool you; the perky Minuet is unalloyed musicality with speed to burn, surprisingly robust dynamics, and (surprise!) some genuine low-frequency output. Don't expect accurate orchestral scale or bass dynamics, but enjoy the "fool-ya" imaging.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 174**Mission Elegante e80****\$799****mission.co.uk**

Curvaceous and contemporary, the eleven-inch-tall e80 offers easy listening, good timbre, and bass extension that belies its size. Beautifully constructed with laminates and diffraction technology gleaned from Mission's flagship, the Pilastro. Even without a subwoofer, a very satisfying mini.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 174**PSB T45/55****\$799/\$949****psbspeakers.com**

As successors to the popular Image Series, the T45 and T55 had big shoes to fill. These small and mid-sized floorstanders do not disappoint. Both are well balanced tonally, with superior driver integration, excellent output capability, and a fair amount of extension. Soundstaging is merely adequate and the treble is coolish, but dynamics are gutsy and details well reproduced.

T45 reviewed by Jim Hannon, AVGM, Issue 11; T55 by NG, Issue 152**NHT Classic Three****\$800****nhthifi.com**

NHT's Classic Threes are remarkably capable three-way stand-mount monitors. Featuring anodized-aluminum dome tweeters and midrange drivers, they offer greater resolution and better imaging than anything else in their class. Bass extends to about 45Hz—with excellent clarity and pitch definition. Honest almost to a fault, the Threes should be driven with smooth yet articulate amplifiers.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 169**KEF iQ7****\$899****kef.com**

A bit overripe in the bottom octaves, this three-way floorstander with Uni-Q coincident-driver technology otherwise exemplifies sonic value, with precision imaging, propulsive rhythmic drive, and high output-limits. Its attractive lute-shaped enclosure will be unobtrusive even in small dens and bedrooms.

Reviewed by NG in this issue**B&W CM1****\$900****bwspeakers.com**

Like many small speakers, this tiny, jewel-like mini-monitor trades bass extension and wide dynamics for midrange purity. Through the mids, the CM1 is magic, with a timbral realism, freedom from grain, palpability, and lack of coloration that many five-figure loudspeakers don't deliver. Stunning on vocals and small-scale acoustic music.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 173**Quad I IL Active****\$999****taigall.com**

With excellent frequency extension for their modest size and price point, these powered mini-monitors have a slight warmth that contributes to their uniquely intimate and cozy charm. Though touted as high-end multimedia speakers, the 11L Actives are capable of revealing both the prowess and limitations of the entire system upstream of them.

Guido Corona, review forthcoming

\$1000 - \$1500

Magnepan MG12/QR**\$1099****magnepan.com**

This two-way quasi-ribbon planar brings you remarkably close to the best performance such designs are capable of. When properly placed—around three feet from walls—its clarity is

addictive, with a wide, deep soundstage, and terrific transient speed. The MG12 performs satisfyingly down to about 40Hz; below that, some listeners may want a subwoofer.

Reviewed by Sallie Reynolds, AVGM, Issue 2

Amphion Ion

\$1350

myquartet.com

From Finland, this quasi-nearfield specialist is a model of small-speaker transparency and soundstaging, boasting sensational image focus. If you don't plan on a subwoofer, the Ion will require some wall reinforcement to flesh out its sound. However, with inner detail and low-level resolution seemingly hardwired into this little speedster, it's an ideal speaker for premium audio in smaller rooms.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 170

Revel Concerta F12

\$1498

revelspeakers.com

The Concerta F12's greatest strengths are extended bass response, a neutral tonal balance, 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, Issue 157



\$1500 - \$2000

Definitive Pro Cinema 1000

\$1649

definitivetech.com

The main, surround, and center-channel speakers in Definitive's ProCinema 1000 system feature ridiculously good mid/bass drivers that would not seem out of place in, say, a good set of \$4k floorstanders. Complementing them are tiny passive radiators that enhance bass and dynamics, plus Definitive's crisp-sounding (some listeners find slightly too crisp) aluminum dome tweeters. Completing this value-packed system is one of Definitive's traditionally strong powered subs.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 168

Reference 3A Dulcet

\$1695

reference3A.com

True to its name, this Canadian bonbon produces smooth, melodious sound, and as a



bonus is reasonably well balanced through the bass range. Its sonic character is such that it should happily partner with an even-less-than-sterling digital front end.

Reviewed by Dick Olsher, Issue 171

Stirling Broadcast LS3/5a V2

\$1695

acousticsounds.com

Thanks to Derek Hughes's brilliant crossover, the Stirlings are proud descendants of their LS3/5a lineage. The tactile midrange, the projected presence, the warm upper bass, the stellar imaging, the deceptively large presentation, even the idiosyncrasies (that 1.2kHz peak) and limitations (no deep bass) are all back, as a legend gets a new lease on life.

Reviewed by Paul Seydor, Issue 166

DALI IKON 6

\$1750

dali-usa.com

If power, substance, and clarity are important qualities to you, the DALI IKON 6 should be on your very short list. This speaker is easy to drive, effortlessly delivers the goods dynamically, and has a smooth overall balance. The midrange and treble are a touch forward, so match electronics with care.

Reviewed by Robert E. Greene, Issue 164



Magnepan MG 1.6

\$1775

magenpan.com

Magnepan's MG 1.6 is simply one of the great high-end speaker values. Its bass is well defined and tuneful down to a respectable 40Hz; its highs are sweet and a bit soft; its mids are magical. A music lover's delight, it needs space and power to sound its best.

Reviewed by Jonathan Valin, Issue 124



Quad 22L

\$1799

taigallc.com

According to JH, the 22L "comes closer to my beloved electrostats than any other full-range speakers with dynamic drivers I've heard under

\$2k." Strengths include excellent lateral imaging, vivid three-dimensional soundstaging, very low distortion and coloration, and timbral accuracy. For even more dynamic oomph and deep bass extension, add Quad's L-series subwoofer.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 156

Tannoy Autograph Mini

\$1799

tannoy.com

"Easily the best desktop monitor I've heard," says TM. These speakers aren't going to fill a large room, but from 2 or 3 feet away they sound phenomenal. They may be expensive for their size and application, but how many other sub-\$2000 audio products give you a solid glimpse of the state-of-the-art?

Reviewed by Tom Martin, Issue 169

Quad L-ITE

\$1995

taigallc.com

One of the finest sub-\$2k surround systems we've heard, characterized by lively and engaging mids, silky smooth highs, and nicely extended bass that offers terrific punch and clarity. Quad's compact but surprisingly potent satellite and center-channel speakers are rounded out by what is perhaps the best subwoofer in this price class.

Review forthcoming

Vandersteen 2CE Signature II

\$1995

vandersteen.com

This classic three-way floorstander delivers excellent top-to-bottom balance and engaging musicality. Moreover, Vandersteen's baffle-less, time-and-phase-coherent design can suggest the spatial focus usually heard with planars. It benefits from bi-wiring and should be placed away from walls.

Reviewed by Shane Buettner, Issue 139



PSB Platinum M2

\$1999

psbspeakers.com

The Platinum M2 shines in its ability to reproduce the weight, majesty, and complexity of every kind of music. Tonally, the speaker is sure-of-foot through the midrange and well into the midbass. Highs are extended and neck-snappingly quick. When pushed too hard, however, the M2 betrays a trace of port overhang and some dryness from its aluminum tweeter.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 145



\$2000 - \$3000**Usher CP-6311****\$2100****usheraudio.com**

The Usher 6311 is a two-way, time-and-phase-aligned bass-reflex tower offering smooth, extended highs, a clear, open midrange, and solid bass down to the upper-30Hz region. It can play loudly without losing its composure, is dynamically responsive, and images with a delightful sense of focus.

Reviewed by CM, AVgM, Issue 6**B&W 704****\$2200****bwspeakers.com**

Clarity and control are chief among this two-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 sound that is remarkably quick, solid, and well defined.

Reviewed by Sue Kraft, Issue 147**DALI Mentor 2****\$2300****dali-usa.com**

Falling midway between the IKON and Helicon lines, the stand-mounted Mentor 2 mates a single 6.5" mid/bass driver to DALI's hybrid dome/ribbon tweeter module. Exceptional quick, clear, and free from overhang, it combines low tonal coloration and agile dynamics in a musically compelling blend.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 174**Totem Hawk****\$2450****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 extraordinary midrange transparency and resolution. Needs a higher-powered amp.

Reviewed by Peter Braverman, Issue 139**Von Schweikert VR 2****\$2495****vonschweikert.com**

A transmission-line tower featuring three forward-facing drivers plus a rear-firing "ambience-recovery" driver, the VR-2 offers deeply extended (mid-20Hz) bass, a midrange and treble whose clarity scales upward with that of associated electronics, and lively and expressive dynamics. When used judiciously, the ambience-recovery driver helps add depth to the soundstage.

Reviewed by CM, AVguide.com**Sonics Anima****\$2600****immediasound.com**

Although only thirteen inches tall, the Anima reveals all kinds of colors and details in the midbass and gives a very satisfying impression of low-frequency muscle. Delivers harmonics and speed that are more akin to a ribbon driver. Dynamics are slightly pinched with orchestral fireworks and the slight elevation of the lower treble adds whitish sparkle and detail, but overall this is a very serious speaker.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 172**Gallo Nucleus Reference 3.1****\$2995 (\$3895 with optional subwoofer amp)****roundsound.com**

Now in a slightly improved .1 configuration, the Nucleus offers some of the most focused imaging and three-dimensional soundstaging around. The transition from midrange to treble is smooth, and bass is clear and articulate, reaching down to 35Hz. Gallo also offers a 250Wpc supplemental subwoofer amp that co-drives the woofer along with your main amplifier, pushing bass response to 22Hz.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 150**Omega Speaker Systems Maxhemp****\$2995 (with matching veneered pedestals)****omegaloudspeakers.com**

The Maxhemp is a ported *one-way* speaker (with additional whizzer cone) that uses a single 8" driver made out of hemp, potentially lending a whole new meaning to *high* fidelity. The whizzer cone may be a little whizzy in the upper mids, and the entire treble a bit ragged, but, from the

upper bass through the mids, the Maxhemp sounds so finely detailed, so fast, so much of a piece, and so realistic it positively astonishes.

JV, review forthcoming**ProAc Studio 140****\$2995****proac-loudspeakers.com**

Solid ProAc family values include a dazzling soundstage and riveting imaging. Singing with a musical authenticity that captures the excitement and electricity of the live event, the double-woofered Studio 140 also adds a slam-factor unheard of in ProAc models of yore. Its smidge of extra mid-treble sparkle seems additive.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 168**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."

Reviewed by SR, Issue 155**\$3000 - \$5000****Harbeth HL Compact 7ES-3****\$3295-\$3795 (depending on finish)****fidelisav.com**

Arguably the *ne plus ultra* of BBC two-way designs, with bass down to 46Hz, an essentially perfect midrange, and a top end that reproduces ambience fantastically. The 7ES-3 will play loud enough for serious music listeners (though not for headbangers). With respect to accuracy, neutrality, and natural tonal balance the 7 establishes for PS a new benchmark for compact two-ways.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 171**Sonus Faber Concerto Domus****\$3495****sumikoaudio.net**

Sonus and "slam" are comfortable bedfellows in this deceptive two-way floorstander. Despite slight softening of transient information, the Concerto Domus scores big in dynamic liveliness and low-end oomph—necessities for a speaker that straddles the fence between stereo and home theater. Blessed with a seductive

overall warmth and sweetness, the Concerto Domus is one of the easiest-listening speakers around.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 161

Canton Vento 807DC

\$3500

cantonusa.com

Our reviewer initially feared the Canton Vento 807 DC might be "another forward-sounding, metal-dome-based German speaker 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, Issue 156

DALI Mentor 6

\$3500

dali-usa.com

The Mentor 6 is one of those few loudspeakers that are highly resolving and

detailed without being analytical. Its treble is exceptionally clean and fast, thanks in part to the ribbon tweeter. Surprisingly, the bottom end is just as quick, infusing the music with a dynamic coherence that's rare at any price. The overall result is a presentation with very low coloration, both tonally and dynamically.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 174

Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand

\$3500

sumikoaudio.net

These handsome 3-way speakers have mesmerizing clarity across the frequency range; sweet highs; and a midrange that untangles the soundfield, even on orchestral tuttis, without becoming clinical. The bass is rich and clear down to about 50Hz. The Baby Grands play well with others and appreciate a subwoofer. The best-sounding speaker at its price that this reviewer has heard.

**Reviewed by SR,
Issue 166**

Vandersteen 3A Signature

\$3549

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.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 122

MartinLogan Vista

\$3695

martinlogan.com

Those of you in search of the closest approach to midrange realism would be hard-pressed to do any better than the Vista—the smallest and most affordable member of MartinLogan's revamped hybrid-electrostatic line. The mids flow naturally with commendable clarity. Imaging cohesiveness is superb. Tonal balance is on the lean side of reality, which suggests placement near room corners.

Reviewed by DO, Issue 168

Von Schweikert Audio VR-4 jr

\$3995

vonschweikert.com

The VR-4 jr 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

Coincident Partial Eclipse II

\$3999

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 is slightly warm, with highs that are gloriously open, tight, and extended, and bass that is well controlled. Mirror-image side-firing 8" woofers can be positioned facing in or out, necessitating some experimentation for proper room setup.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 146

Acoustic Zen Technologies Adagio

\$4300

acousticzen.com

The Adagio's strength is a rare degree of clarity that spans its entire range. Elements of its design—transmission-line mid/bass enclosures, modified circular ribbon drivers—contribute not only to the speaker's overall lucidity, but to its seamless, tonal accuracy, sparkle and sweet detail in the highs, richness and nuance in the mids, and depth and detail in the bass. The soundstage is satisfyingly wide, deep, and high.

Reviewed by SR, Issue 162

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 has separate tweeter/midrange and woofer cabinets that house exceptional pro-



proprietary drivers. Skillfully mated with a short horn-type tweeter, they offer outstanding detail, low distortion, holographic imaging, and stunning dynamic range. While the HPS-938 ultimately falls short of the best at the frequency extremes, it is thrilling, natural sounding, and easy to drive.

Reviewed by JH, AVgM, Issue 4

DALI Helicon 400

\$4970

dali-usa.com



This premium two-way tower is as beautiful to look at as it is to listen to. Expect a yin-like warmth, with ultra-clear transients, excellent low-level resolving power, full-bodied bass, and, courtesy of DALI's unique ribbon-super-tweeter/soft-dome-tweeter module, some of the most open treble in this or nearly any class. A slight midbass bloom mandates careful setup in medium-sized rooms.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 155

\$5000 - \$10,000

Quad 988/989

\$5499/\$8650

taigallc.com



The 988, 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 989 retains most of the same 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**

NuForce S9

\$5500

nuforce.com

A visually attractive, mid-sized speaker with unusual characteristics. The S9's MTM configuration and wave-guide tweeter control radiation both horizontally and vertically. The in-room response obtained in this way is very smooth, except for a prominence around 2kHz. Distortion is very low and the controlled radiation produces "X-marks-the-spot" stereo focus. If you've heard a lot of live music recently, you will be impressed indeed, says REG.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 169



Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor

\$5650 (includes dedicated stand)

sumikoaudio.net



A stand-mounted two-way version of Sonus faber's floorstanding Cremona, the Auditor shares many of that model's virtues—warmth, coherence, sweet extended treble, and a seductive midrange—without the Cremona's dynamic range and bass extension. The Auditor likes to be well into a room and its tilt and toe-in are critical.

Reviewed by Wayne Garcia, Issue 146

Paradigm Reference Signature S8

**\$5700-\$6500 (depending
on finish)**

paradigm.com

The tall, beautifully-made S8 floorstander is a three-way, six-driver design whose hallmarks are very high resolution, superb midrange openness, and first-rate bass that extends down to the upper-20Hz range with exquisite pitch-definition, even at high volume levels. Highs are clean, though faint traces of steeliness occasionally rear their heads. Imaging and soundstaging are good, not great.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 166

ATC SCM 20-2

\$5800

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 sidewalls, midbass coloration has been all but vanquished. 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

Pioneer S2-EX

\$6000

pioneerelectronics.com



Making TAD technology more affordable, Pioneer's EX is a three-way stand-mount that

will put many floorstanders to shame, with pinpoint imaging and powerful dynamics. Its coincident midrange/Beryllium tweeter is stunningly fast and accurate. Maybe a bit clinical up top, but remarkably uncolored overall. You'll never feel the same way about a stand-mounted speaker.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 169

Revel Performa F52

\$6998

revelspeakers.com



A near paradigm of tonal neutrality with muscular dynamics, unflappable composure at insane levels, and superior construction quality and finish. Capable of playing all musical genres with class and confidence. Some may quibble about a minor forward tilt, or a treble that could use a bit more bloom, or a shallow soundstage. Still, this is one of the great values to come down the high-end pike.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 162

Mirage OMD-28

\$7500

miragespeakers.com

The three-way, four-driver OMD-28 is a full-range omnidirectional floorstander that offers good resolution and more precise imaging than many omnis do, while conjuring huge, spectacularly three-dimensional soundstages. Tonal balance is generally neutral, but the speaker's slightly warmer-than-neutral midbass makes it best suited for use in medium-to-large rooms.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 170

Gradient Revolution Active

\$7995

mayaudio.com



With its unusual dipole bass and forward-firing midrange and tweeter configuration, Gradient's latest Revolution—with built-in amplification (a passive version is also available)—reproduces the original acoustics of the recording venue remarkably well. It sounds not like a box or a panel or anything else except a perfect point source.

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 airier and more detailed than previous designs. And while the bass of earlier Nautilus speakers was generally on the dry side, and always "enough" but not copious, the bass of the 803D is considerably faster and more

accurate, and the degree and extension is now "enough plus some."

Reviewed by Manoj Motwani,
Issue 156

Verity Audio Rienzi

\$8000

verityaudio.com

A compact, two-piece, three-way, floorstanding design, Verity's Rienzi is a model of neutrality, resolution, and transparency at its price-point. A refined speaker that can also rock, the Rienzi's unusual bass enclosure arrangement allows owners to choose either a front- or rear-firing woofer arrangement, which adds flexibility with room placement.

Reviewed by WG in this issue

Usher 857I MkII Dancer

\$8840

usheraudio.com

An overachieving floorstander poised to eat any number of high-end sacred cows for lunch, 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 at a fraction of the price.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 154



Quad ESL-2805

\$8999

taigallc.com

The addition of mass and bracing to Peter Walker's revolutionary ESL-63 design and improvements in the manufacture of the panels yields bass that is more powerful and extended (but not subterranean), image focus that is even more stable, and dynamic range that is enhanced. Mated to the right amplifier, this speaker is capable of reproducing music with a sonic realism and naturalness that are compelling and addictive.

Reviewed by JH/PS, Issue 169

Sonus Faber Cremona

\$9800

sumikoaudio.net

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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 143

\$10,000 - \$20,000

Wilson Audio Duette

\$10,950

wilsonaudio.com

The smallest speaker yet from Dave Wilson, this compact two-way of bookshelf dimensions is designed so that it will actually work on bookshelves and cabinets in settings where floorstanders can't or won't, and to provide the signature Wilson sound—highest resolution, lowest distortion, widest dynamic range, most nuanced dynamic contrast. PS finds the Duette an impressive achievement for its intended use and otherwise pretty wonderful, too.

PS, reviewed in next issue

Martin Logan Summit

\$10,995

martinlogan.com

This elegant hybrid cone-electrostatic stands five-feet tall and sports two 10" woofers. Its sound is almost scarily three-dimensional, with a lively, life-like top end, a fast, tight, articulate low end, and the kind of midrange that has been getting people hooked on electrostats for the past 50 years. Its one drawback is limited vertical dispersion. Otherwise, the Martin Logan Summit is a fantastically beautiful and seductive product.

Reviewed by BW,
Issue 160

MBL 12I loudspeaker

\$12,300

mbl.com

A stand-mounted omnidirectional three-way that brings legendary MBL performance to smaller listening rooms. Stunningly dynamic and extended in its bass response for its compact size. Enveloping, immersive, and passionately romantic with symphonic works, it can also sound a bit amorphous on studio-made discs. Setup requires attentiveness—to balance the direct sound with the reflected sound. Needs power and the finest ancillary components to truly bloom.

NG, reviewed in next issue

Rockport Technologies Mira

\$13,500

rockporttechnologies.com

GE '04

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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 149

Wilson Sophia 2

\$13,990

wilsonaudio.com

GE '02

The Sophia 2 builds on the original's strengths—extraordinary transient fidelity, deep bass extension, a huge spatial presentation, and a cabinet that contributes little sound of its own—with a smoother midrange and treble and even greater resolution.

RH (review forthcoming)

Jamo R 909

\$14,000

jamo.com

GE '07

This remarkable speaker, which uses dynamic drivers in an open baffle, offers the openness and resistance to room problems of a dipole planar combined with a power, solidity, and bass extension that few planars can even dream of. Coherent, dynamic, extended in the bass (to 27Hz), very low in distortion, and tonally well balanced, the R 909 does a positively spectacular job of reproducing the scope and power of large-scale music.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 167

Sound Lab M-1a

\$16,800

soundlab-speakers.com

GE '03

A huge and hugely wonderful electrostat, the M-1 has the biggest soundfield, far and away the deepest bass (true 20Hz extension), and most lifelike dynamic range of any 'stat—in addition to the traditional virtues of 'stats (gorgeous tone color, lightning transient response, single-driver coherence, and phenomenal inner detail). Can sound a bit overblown in the bottom octaves if placement and amplification aren't carefully minded.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 122

Vandersteen Model 5A

\$16,900

vandersteen.com

GE '03

The 5A 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. It may not play as loudly as some designs, but offers superior performance in other respects. A relative bargain among statement loudspeakers.

Reviewed by SB, Issue 139

Eben X-3

\$19,100

eben.dk

Five remarkable, mid-sized, extremely fast cone drivers are skillfully mated with an exotic planar-magnetic tweeter to produce a thrilling loudspeaker of reference caliber. While it misses the deepest synth and organ tones, the Eben is blazingly quick and dynamically explosive, with the rare ability to reproduce hard transients with stunning realism, without acoustic breakup or overhang.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 167

Verity Audio Parsifal Ovation

\$19,495

verityaudio.com

They take a long time to set up properly and an extremely long time to break in, but these speakers disappear to a degree that Fred Kaplan thought only mini-monitors could. Fundamentals and overtones are pure, uncolored, and detailed; the crossover is seamless; and dynamics are captured with effortless agility. Until the speaker fully breaks in there is some discontinuity between the bass and the midrange/treble.

Reviewed by FK, Issue 160

\$20,000 & above

B&W 800D

\$20,000

bwspeakers.com



"Wholeness" and "seamlessness" were the qualities that most struck reviewer Sue Kraft while auditioning B&W's diamond-tweeter-studded 800D. The 800D's other attributes include world-class imaging, high resolution, a taut, well-defined bass, and unruffled response with very loud music.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 156

Sonus faber Elipsa

\$20,800

sumikoaudio.net



Yet another gorgeous speaker from this outstanding Italian manufacturer. The Elipsa's tone colors are ravishing, its overall sound smooth, warm, and intensely seductive. At the same time, it will easily show differences in recordings as well as associated components.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 173

Kharmia Ceramique Reference Monitor 3.2

\$21,000

gttgroup.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 package.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 140

Focus Audio Master 3

\$22,360

focusaudio.ca

This is one gorgeous-to-the-extreme loudspeaker with a beautifully fleshed-out, lush, and life-sized midrange. Image lines are perhaps a bit diffuse versus the pinpoint accuracy of a speaker like the B&W 800D, giving the Master 3 a warmer, more forgiving sound. Dynamics and detail are also excellent, with close-to-full-range bass response reaching down to 25Hz.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 166

MAGICO Mini II

\$26,400 with stands

magico.net



JV's new references, the beautifully made Minis from perfectionist speaker-builder Alon Wolf are triumphant examples of two applied arts—industrial and acoustical design. No longer limited in the bass thanks to Wolf's new carbon-fiber mid/woof, the two-way Minis are models of what is possible when price is no object—with standard-setting coherence, resolution, neutrality, and soundstaging. One of the best loudspeakers money can buy.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 163

Wilson WATT/Puppy (updated to 8)

\$27,900

wilsonaudio.com

Another provisional recommendation based on the WATT/Puppy 7's virtues and Wilson's long history of incremental improvements. The best-selling audiophile loudspeaker over \$10k, the WATT/Puppy has achieved iconic status.

WP 7 reviewed by RH, Issue 143

Gershman Acoustics Black Swan

\$30,000

gershman3acoustic.com



The Black Swans rivaled the realism of AHC's far more expensive TAD-1s, bringing classical, jazz, and rock recordings convincingly to life. Strings, woodwinds, brass, and piano were not

only "right" in terms of timbre, but detail was exceptional where the recording provided it. The bass was also exceptional, flat and deeply extended.

Reviewed by Anthony H Cordesman, Issue 168

Ascendo M-S Mk II

\$45,000

ascendo.de

The duckbilled platypus of loudspeakers, the Ascendo M attempts to combine a ribbon tweeter with an acoustic-suspension mid/woof and a bandpass subwoofer that goes down to a legitimate 25Hz. The amazing thing is how well it succeeds. Designer Jürgen Scheuring modeled his Ms on the sound of the Quads, and darned if they don't sound like Quads, with much better high end and low, and much better dynamics.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 166

DALI Megaline

\$45,000

dali-usa.com



This large, elegant speaker offers a superior combination of virtues—power and scale on the one hand and purity and resolution on the other, with distortion lower than electrostatics and a dynamic capacity no electrostatic ever dreamed of. With ribbon tweeters that seemingly go on forever, bass that extends solidly 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.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 146



Kharmia Mini Exquisite

\$45,000

gttgroup.com



With its beautiful and costly cabinetry, superior ceramic mid/bass driver, and glorious synthetic-diamond tweeter, the Mini will make you swoon, assuming that your priorities include stunning coherence, transparency and detail, a notably large and very dimensional soundstage, ethereal highs, a remarkably natural midrange and dynamic scale, and a tonal warmth and beauty to die for, in a package that is gorgeous and relatively small.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 167

Wilson MAXX 2**\$45,000****wilsonaudio.com**

A stunning achievement in loudspeaker design, the MAXX 2 redefines what's possible in music reproduction in the areas of nuance, finesse, and bottom-end resolution impact and extension. Every aspect of this speaker's performance is exemplary, particularly midrange transparency, soundstaging, and the remarkable ability to sound small on intimate music and huge on large-scale works. Robert Harley's reference.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 155**MBL 101 E****\$49,900****mbl.com**

MBL's stunning-looking, four-way, omnidirectional Radialstrahler References simply do it all: a treble like Maggie's ribbons, a midrange like SoundLab's 'stats, bass like Nearfield's eight 18" subwoofers, soundstaging and coherence like Kharma's CRM 3.2s, dynamics like Avantgarde's Trios, and a "disappearing act" second only to the MAGICO Mini.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 154**Krell LAT-1000****\$55,000****krell.com**

The warmish voicing of this aluminum-boxed floorstanding three-way from Krell's Dan D'Agostino may not be to everyone's taste, but it certainly was to AHC. Combining realism and warmth, the LAT-100 provided the kind of Row F sound that "anyone who loves live performances almost inevitably prefers to what you hear sitting in the front rows."

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 169**Avantgarde TrioCompact with Basshorn****\$71,940****avantgarde-usa.com**

For almost a decade now, the Trios have been the best widely available horn loudspeakers on the market. Now, in combination with Avantgarde's new Basshorn subwoofer, the Trio has won over even hard sells, like TAS's 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.

JV**Rockport Technologies Hyperion****\$91,500****rockporttechnologies.com**

Though they don't soundstage like MAGICO

Minis or "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. If you have the space and the moolah, they will take you about as close as you can come to the absolute sound.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 136**SUBWOOFERS****PSB SubSonic 5i****\$549****psbspeakers.com**

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

Reviewed by NG, TPV, Issue 48, and CM, TPV, Issue 69**Epos ELS Active Subwoofer****\$800****epos-acoustic.com**

Designed by Mike Creek, the Epos ELS Active Subwoofer goes lower with better articulation and control than others in its price range. Unlike many subs, it puts out true low bass (without a deceptive, midbass bump) and sounds "so inherently clear that it leaves competitors sounding sluggish and murky by comparison."

Reviewed by CM, AVGM, Issue 13**Definitive Technology SuperCube I****\$1199****definitivetech.com**

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 built-in 1500-watt amplifier guarantees sufficient power.

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 42**James EMB-1000****\$1495****jamesloudspeaker.com**

Using a clever dual-woofer technique, the EMB-1000 delivers a huge amount of extremely clean bass. Not only is it a great theater sub, the EMB-1000 is also outstanding with music—tight and articulate, with exceptional clarity and detail.

Reviewed by RH, TPV Issue 48**REL Britannia B3 sub****\$1995****sumikoaudio.net**

The ultimate self-effacing team player that never imposes colorations on the music, the B3 is divinely unbox-like. At all reasonable levels port noise and overhang have been banished. Only low-pass filtering is on tap, so make sure your main speakers are up to the task. Set up with care, the B3 earns the rarest of compliments—you'll never even know it's there.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 163**JL Audio Fathom f1 I2/f1 I3****\$2700/\$3400****jlaudio.com**

These two subs—identical except for woofer size (12" vs. 13.5") and amplifier power (1500W vs. 2500W)—raise the bar in subwoofer performance with their unlikely combination of brute-force power and tonal and dynamic finesse. Although capable of delivering high SPLs at very low frequencies with no sense of strain, the Fathoms are equally adept at resolving the pitch, fine dynamic shadings, and tone colors of an acoustic bass. Reference-quality performance at an eminently reasonable price.

Fathom f1 I2 reviewed by CM, TPV Issue 75; Fathom f1 I3 reviewed by RH, Issue 170**Thiel SS2 SmartSub/SI I Integrator****\$4900/\$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 sub to its surroundings.

Reviewed by Alan Taffel, Issue 154



Wilson Benesch Torus Infrasonic Generator

\$10,300 (with amp/crossover)
soundorg.com

The W-B generates bass by suspending a featherweight 18" carbon-fiber membrane between two massive rare-earth magnets fitted to a pole piece that runs through the center of the driver. Like a carbon-fiber Magneplanar, the membrane is pushed and pulled between the two magnets, resulting in outstanding control of starting and stopping. Though not the deepest-reaching sub, the W-B Torus is high among the most articulate and musical.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 170

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, to well below 20Hz, can deliver enormous output levels, and is exceptionally low in distortion. Its sound is smooth and non-resonant, with superb pitch definition and all but flawless transient behavior.

Reviewed by REG, TPV Issue 42

Krell Master Reference

\$40,000
krell.com

Let's face it—you'd have to be nuts to spend \$40,000 on a subwoofer. (And, BTW, you only get one of these monsters for your 40Gs.) But, assuming you are nuts, and assuming you're not fazed by the sheer girth of this 2600W, twin-15", servo-woofered, 450-pound chunk of near-solid aluminum, then you're gonna have a hard time finding more powerful, more coherent bass for music recordings and home-theater soundtracks. A *sui generis* masterpiece that, because of its outrageous cost and size, is likely to be heard only by a lucky few—and owned by an even luckier fewer.

JV

POWER AMPLIFIERS

Under \$1000

NAD C 272

\$799
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 needed to handle difficult speaker loads, and sounds more powerful than its specifications would suggest, with good resolution, three-dimensionality, and 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 SB, Issue 138

Belles Soloist 5

\$995
belles.com

A paradigm of minimalism and musicality, this small, cool-running sixty-five-watter is stuffed with sonic virtues: a forgiving tonal balance, good soundstage dimensionality, and naturalistic depth. Paired with its companion preamp, the solid Soloist 3 is a great way to get into separates at an integrated-amp price.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 174

Vincent Audio SP-33 I

\$999
vincent-tac.de

The SP-331 is one of the best-sounding sub-\$1k power amplifiers we've yet heard. A hybrid tube/solid-state amplifier, it combines the richness and subtlety of fine tube designs—especially through the midrange—with the sheer low-frequency grunt, control, and agility of a good solid-state amplifier. In the treble region the amplifier sounds slightly softer but also more delicate and refined than solid-state competitors in its price range.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 173

\$1000 - \$2000

Quad 909

\$1349
taigallc.com

GE '01

Its sound quality sets a benchmark for its size and price. Its midrange, in particular, is exceptional. Up and down the scale, it displays ease, relaxation, and naturalness.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 128

Rotel RB-109 I

\$1499
rotel.com

Rotel's new amplifier raises the stakes in the digital arena. It boasts ample wattage for most speakers, but takes up little real estate and emits no heat. It may sound a touch silvery in the highs, but the Rotel's excellent performance—solid bass and terrifying quickness—shows that switching amplifiers are here to stay.

Reviewed by Jacob Heilbrunn, Issue 167

PrimaLuna ProLogue 5

\$1599
upscaleaudio.com

GE '05

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, producing clean, deep, tight bass and grand soundstaging. A synergistic match with the ProLogue 3 preamp.

Reviewed by SR, Issue 156

\$2000 - \$3000

Parasound Halo A21

\$2000
parasound.com

An excellent Class AB stereo transistor amp, designed by the redoubtable John Curl, capable of 250Wpc into 8 ohms (400 into 4 ohms). Though not the last word in solid-state amplification, the A21 comes close enough to the best, at such an affordable price, that JV could live with it contentedly in his very expensive reference system.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 168

Rogue Audio Stereo 90

\$2195
rogueaudio.com

This tube monoblock combines a rich tube treble and midrange with a gutsy, controlled bass and a brilliant clarity unusual in its class. Its soundstaging is particularly fine. Its one shortcoming is a tendency to push the midrange a bit

forward unless the room is well-damped. Even with this, it makes all music sound right.

Reviewed by SR, Issue 171

Channel Islands Audio D-200 monoblocks

\$2299

ciaudio.com

Channel Islands Audio's Class D monoblock amplifiers put out a healthy 200Wpc and are completely free of the reliability issues that sometimes plague other Class D designs. Sonically, they offer warm, well-defined midbass, articulate midrange and highs, and overall smoothness. Though some competing designs may have more openness and transparency, the D-200's delicate balance of detail and ease will attract those who like their music with no rough edges.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 161

Linn Majik 2100

\$2350

linn.co.uk

The Majik 2100 is a 56Wpc solid-state amplifier that is all about transparency, textural detail, transient speed, and lively and energetic micro-to-mid-level dynamics. In short, it's a great musical communicator. Since the amp does not offer huge reserves of dynamic headroom, we suggest pairing it with high-sensitivity loudspeakers.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 173

PrimaLuna ProLogue Six monoblocks

\$2599

primaluna-usa.com



These beautifully built, affordable, and "hassle-free" 70Wpc monoblocks will alter your preconceptions about tube gear. Indeed, their transient quickness and ability to drive difficult loads may fool you into thinking you're listening to a very good hybrid. Yet with four very musical EL34s per chassis, they still have that wonderful tube magic.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 169

Audio Research VS55

\$2995

audioresearch.com



ARC's formula is simple: Put the latest circuit refinements in a nice-but-not-lavish chassis, keep the power output moderate, and price within reach of most music lovers. The result: the stunning VS55, which delivers ARC's classic sound at an affordable price. Used with the appropriate speakers and at sensible volumes, it is pure magic.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 141

\$3000 - \$5000

Cary CAD 808 ("Rocket 88")

\$3000

caryaudio.com

Designer Dennis Had's affectionately dubbed "Rocket 88" is unusual in that there is no driver stage. That means you'll need a high-output preamp to drive it, but, when it is so paired, expect a sound that offers outstanding articulation, immediacy, and dynamic definition, especially in the midrange, without the darkness and grain that once seemed to accompany the majority of transistor amplifiers.

Reviewed by Dan Davis, Issue 139



NuForce Reference 9/Reference 9SE

\$3500/\$5000

nuforce.com



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

Reviewed by CM, Issue 158; CM/RH/WG, Issue 166

Edge G4

\$3575

edgeamp.com

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

Reviewed by JH, AVGM, Issue 5

Conrad-Johnson MV60SE

\$3800

conradjohnson.com

Using four 6550C output tubes, this 60Wpc C-J lacks the last iota of resolution and can get a bit gritty in the treble as it reaches its power limits, but it has good transparency and soundstaging, finely shaded dynamics, thrilling low-level detail, and a well-defined top end. Above all, it is immediate and involving.

Reviewed by DD, Issue 145

Audio Research 300.2

\$3995

audioresearch.com

ARC calls this a Class T design (because it uses the Tri-Path module), but in a broad sense it is a switching amplifier with similarities to Class D designs. It has a dynamic liveliness that causes drums and plucked instruments like guitars to really stand out, and bass is very well defined. Detail is quite good, and the overall sound is a bit forward at first—something that goes away after a few days of constant play. Imaging is somewhat diffuse, but with 300Wpc, its performance is high and its price comparatively inexpensive.

Reviewed by Tom Martin, Issue 164

Balanced Audio Technology VK-55

\$3995

balanced.com



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

Reviewed by SK with WG comment, Issue 153

Meridian G57

\$3995

meridian-usa.com

Rated at 200Wpc into eight ohms, the G57 is capable of delivering a full kilowatt, when bridged, into four ohms. As with other G Series components, the sound is expansive, soothing, and relaxing, yet with plenty of moxie when needed. The soundstage is impressively broad, tall, and deep. And almost as gorgeous as the sound is the sleek new full-width look.

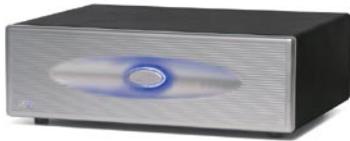
Reviewed by SK, Issue 152

\$5000 - \$10,000**McIntosh MC402****\$5900****www.mcintoshlabs.com**

Co-winner (with another Mac, the all-tube MC2102), of TAS' Amplifier of the Year in 2004, this solid-state giant boasts a tube-like solidity and continuousness allied to absolute tonal neutrality (combining warmth and detail), with seemingly unlimited reserves of power and with noise and distortion figures that rival any competitor. By any measure, a great amplifier and PS's reference.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 147**MBL 801 I****\$6200****mbl-hifi.com**

The 8011 delivers a smooth, clear, grain-free sound that if anything is slightly soft, tonally speaking. With 1100 watts of peak pulse power, the MBL never shows signs of strain, while its low noise and excellent resolution allow recordings to sound as musical as they can.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 135**Spectron Musician II****\$6495****spectronav.com**

The Spectron is Class D amplification that comes as close to fulfilling the promise of this new technology as anything currently in the field. At 500Wpc, it's got the power of a Kenworth, yet it runs cool in an average-sized chassis. Its sound is on the warm side of neutral and low in noise, with superior control of micro- and macro-dynamics and superior bass.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 166**Air Tight ATM 300****\$7000****axiss-usa.com**

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

Reviewed by Scot Markwell, Issue 128**Parasound Halo JC I****\$7000****parasound.com**

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

Reviewed by SK, Issue 141**Plinius SB-30I****\$7895****eliteavdist.com**

Big, heatsinked to beat the band, the Plinius outputs 310Wpc of the sweetest Class AB NG has ever experienced. A model of silken control and neutrality, it doesn't sound like tubes or transistors, or any combination of either. Rich in tone color, with wide, open dynamics and sweet, embraceable highs, it never failed to improve any set of speakers that it hooked up with.

Sneak preview by NG, Issue 169**Mark Levinson No. 432****\$8000****marklevinson.com**

The No. 432 stereo power amplifier embodies the classic Mark Levinson sound, with a slightly laidback and inviting perspective, tremendous soundstage depth and dimensionality, and a rock-solid bottom end.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 161**Balanced Audio Technology VK-75SE****\$9000****balanced.com**

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

Reviewed by SK, Issue 133**Edge G8+****\$9999****edgeamps.com**

The Edge designs don't have the darkness and grain that so frequently plague even the best solid-state amps. 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, bloom, and decay.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 149**\$10,000 - \$20,000****Pass Labs X350.5****\$10,350****passlabs.com**

A 350Wpc solid-state stereo amp that has what Pass amps always seem to have in abundance: remarkable midrange presence and immediacy. A shade darker-sounding and less bloomy than something like an Edge 10.1, it is exceptionally lively from top to bottom.

JV**Simaudio Moon W 8****\$10,500****simaudio.com**

This 80-pound, dual-mono, bridgeable amplifier is Simaudio's premier stereo unit, boasting 250Wpc into 8 ohms (an even thousand when bridged). Like its companion preamplifier the P 8, the W 8 is tonally neutral, has iron control yet exquisite finesse, and appears to do nothing but amplify the signal fed to it.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 165**Boulder 850****\$11,000****boulderamp.com**

"Budget-priced" (for a Boulder), these 200Wpc monoblocks brought a new level of realism to MS's system, excelling in low-level resolution, dynamics, and bass reproduction. Through the 850s, the soundstage was more three-dimensional, instruments more realistic in timbre, lyrics better articulated, vocals more lifelike, and the music ultimately more engaging.

Reviewed by Max Shepherd, Issue 166**Nagra Pyramid****\$11,000****nagraaudio.com**

The Nagra monoblocks confound expectations. They are small and lightweight, and possess only two output transistors. No, they're not as powerful as monster amps. But they have more than enough power to get the current-greedy Magnepan loudspeakers up and running. What's more, they do it with an aplomb and finesse that belong to only a few select amplifiers. Their luminous sound is utterly enchanting.

Reviewed by JHeilbrunn, Issue 173**Mark Levinson No. 436 monoblocks****\$12,500****marklevinson.com**

Smooth, sophisticated and superbly musical, the Levinson 436 power amp is the definition of refinement. There's no lack of detail or three-

dimensionality with this 350Wpc powerhouse. Images are beautifully layered and sculpted, with rock-solid control in the bottom octaves, as well. The overall presentation is eminently easy on the ears, relaxing and a bit dark and laidback, ever so gracefully pulling the listener into the music in what can only be described as classic Levinson style.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 169

Edge NLI0.1/NLI2.1

\$15,100/\$20,800

edgeamp.com



Except for authority and the last word in dynamic capability, the 225Wpc NLI0.1 stereo amp is indistinguishable from its monoblock 400Wpc big brother, the Signature NLI1.1. Its sound is so addictively pure you'll want to keep turning it up, which is where the 300Wpc NLI2.1 (essentially a stereo Signature NLI1.1) comes in.

HP/JV

Audio Research Reference 210 monoblocks

\$19,900

audioresearch.com



Audio Research Corporation has been making Class AB, 6550-based, pentode-tube power amplifiers since the 70s. In better than thirty exceptional years, the company has not made better amps than its 220Wpc Reference 210 and 610T monoblocks, which are significantly faster, lower in noise, more extended in bandwidth, and higher in resolution and dynamic range than any previous ARC efforts, without any sacrifice of the bloom, air, size, and space that ARC pentode amps are famous for.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 159

\$20,000 & above

Pass Labs XAI60.5 (upgraded from XAI60)

\$20,000

passlabs.com

"An amplifier with soul," the XAI60 is the most "tube-like" transistor amp AHC has heard. Its sound is warmer than most, and the music emerges from deep black silence. Moreover, its soundstage depth matches its width; dynamics are musically natural and slightly "soft"; and the amp has terrific timbral accuracy.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 149

Balanced Audio Technology VK-600SE monoblocks

\$24,000

balanced.com



This fully-loaded version of the VK-600

possesses a remarkable transparency and immediacy that are musically vivid without being sonically vivid, although soundstage depth is slightly foreshortened. The top end is extremely smooth and non-fatiguing, 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. Needs an unusually long warm-up to sound its best.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 159

Lamm ML2.1 monoblocks

\$29,990

lammindustries.com



The single-ended-triode ML2.1 sounds nothing like the typical SET. It does not trade off accuracy for euphony; it is not bandwidth-limited (its bass and treble are sensationally extended); and it is surprisingly powerful sounding (though not particularly "bloomy") within its 17-watt limits. Given a sufficiently sensitive speaker it will produce one of the most detailed, spacious, dynamic sounds on the market. Like all Lamm products, the ML2.1s are a bit dark in balance, very quiet, and very reliable.

JV

Audio Research 610T

\$39,900

audioresearch.com



Capable of better than 550Wpc, the pentode-tube-powered Class AB 610T is simply the single best amplifier JV has yet heard, with seemingly limitless power, gorgeous tone color, huge soundstaging, minute resolution of low-level detail, and truly lifelike bloom. With the right front end and speakers, the 610T comes closer to sounding "real" than anything else JV has tried. His new reference.

JV (review forthcoming)



MBL 9008 monoblocks

\$41,000

mbl.com

These 440Wpc junior versions of the 9011 monoblocks (see below) sound very much like their bigger brothers, which is to say they have sensational (albeit not quite 9011-level) front-to-back transparency; low-level resolution; large- and small-scale dynamics; low-end extension, detail, and authority; and treble speed, detail, and punch. They are also blessed with gorgeous tone color and a top-to-bottom liquidity that (along with a slight overall darkness) is an MBL signature.

JV

Krell Evolution One monoblocks

\$50,000

krell.com

While the Evolution One is not a radical sonic breakthrough, the best aspects of the original Krell sound-character and "voicing" have been preserved, but the original virtues of deep-bass power and rich natural timbre have been steadily enhanced, while air, life, microdynamics, soundstage depth and detail, and the upper octaves have improved to contenders for the state-of-the-art. A true sonic benchmark you really need to listen to.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 158

MBL 9011 monoblocks

\$76,000

mbl.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 amps JV has auditioned. The first transistor amps JV has heard that fully combine the signal virtues of solid-state amps (extension, resolution, speed, sock) with those of 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

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

Under \$1000

NAD C320/C325BEE

\$399 each (same price)

nadelectronics.com



Like one of those amazing ten-dollar wines that leaves you wondering "Why spend more?" the 50Wpc C320BEE 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.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 140

Cambridge Audio Azur 540A v2

\$499

cambridgeaudio.com



The Azur 540A is quite an overachiever, delivering ultra-smooth and almost tube-like liquidity from a budget solid-state integrated amplifier. The amplifier sounds more powerful than its 60Wpc rating. Nice build-quality, lots of features, and an outstanding remote control round out this bargain.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 162

Rega Brio 3

\$645

soundorg.com

A very good sounding, well-built little amp at a fair price, the Brio 3 outputs 49Wpc into 8 ohms and 64Wpc into 4 ohms—enough to drive any reasonably sensitive loudspeaker, and its input array will accommodate the typical assortment of sources owned by most music fans. The inclusion of a real phono stage—not just a line-level input labeled “phono” requiring an outboard device—is a nice touch.

Reviewed by BW, Issue 167



Onkyo A-9555

\$699

onkyousa.com

The \$700 A-9555 is surprisingly lightweight for its power rating (100Wpc into 8 ohms, 200Wpc into 4 ohms), thanks to what Onkyo calls “hybrid Class D” switching-amplifier technology; nevertheless, it can reveal subtle textures and delicate harmonics in an almost tube-like fashion, without tubes' heat or noise. In real-world use, the A-9555 is both transparent and dynamic at all listening levels, and, in BW's words, “a musical joy.”

Reviewed by BW, Issue 166

Rotel RA 1062

\$699

rotel.com

Don't let this amp's 60-watt rating or modest price temper your expectations. It's capable of towering dynamics, spellbinding nuance, vivid transient attacks, and robust, tuneful bass,

combined with an uncolored and surprisingly transparent sound that is thrilling to hear. Deficiencies include a reduction of dynamic scale, minor congestion during complex passages, and a not-unpleasant gloss over high frequencies.

Reviewed by AT, Issue 149

\$1000 - \$2000

PrimaLuna ProLogue One

\$1375

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

Reviewed by JD, Issue 151

Naim Nait 5i

\$1495

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. The Nait is not only a great amplifier for the money; it is an outright great amplifier, giving each instrument a rich harmonic structure, while preserving the clarity that's on the recording. Given its moderate power output, not the ideal amplifier for big rooms or low-sensitivity speakers.

Reviewed by TM, AVgM, Issue 7

Cambridge Audio Azur 840a

\$1499

cambridgeaudio.com

The 120Wpc Azur 840A solid-state integrated amplifier features Cambridge's innovative “Class XD” circuit. Apart from its substantial power output, the 840A's greatest strengths are its articulate and well-defined sound and its lifelike, energetic dynamics (this is not one of those polite, self-effacing British amps). What is more, the 840A is highly flexible, offering multizone capabilities and home-theater “pass-through” modes.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 167

Cyrus 8vs

\$1795

cyrusaudio.com

All-around musicality is one of the Cyrus 8 Series' greatest strengths, with terrific musical timbre and that sense of rightness and naturalness that one hears in a live performance.

The music “breathed” and had such a touch of sweetness and warmth, that reviewer JH thought at times he was listening to tubes instead of solid-state.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 158

Vincent SV-236

\$1795

vincentaudio.com

The well-built Vincent SV-236 integrated amplifier combines the better of two worlds by providing a vacuum-tube preamp driving a 100Wpc solid-state power amplifier. Listeners will appreciate the Vincent's combination of deep, powerful, authoritative solid-state bass and tube-fueled delicacy, shimmering detail, and almost surround-like imaging.

Reviewed by BW, Issue 156

\$2000 - \$3000

Cayin Audio A 88T

\$2095

acousticsounds.com

Costing a mere \$95 over two grand, this hand-built honey boasts fit and finish that would do McIntosh proud, while its designer freely admits it was made to sound like Mc's fabled MC275. A no-apologies-necessary, low-price alternative to the latter, it will drive any version of Quad electrostatics and fine mini-monitors with a sound that is sweet and seductive, yet also vibrant and dynamic.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 168

Creek Destiny

\$2395

musichallaudio.com

With this 100Wpc integrated (with optional plug-in mm/mc phono stage boards), budget-minded Creek goes upscale—with outstanding success. The performance of the Destiny merits comparisons with good tube separates rather than with other units in its class.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 170

Jolida JD-1000 RC

\$2400

jolida.com

High-powered vacuum-tube power amps can get very pricey, which makes this \$2400 100Wpc tube-powered integrated amp that much more of a pleasant surprise. Sonically, the Jolida 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, AVgM, Issue 14



Primare I30 Integrated Amplifier

\$2495

sumikoaudio.net

Remarkably musical, accurate, exciting—on all kinds of music—the I30 integrated performs beyond anything in its class SR has heard. Sweet, clear, full, deep, it untangles musical lines without separating them into an amusical mosaic. Plus, it's built with great attention to detail.

Reviewed by SR, Issue 167

PrimaLuna DiaLogue 2

\$2625

primaluna-usa.com

The first product in PrimaLuna's higher-performance line of tube units is a real winner, surpassing the ProLogue Two's performance across the board. Rated at only 38 watts in ultralinear mode, it sounds much more powerful due to its outstanding transformers, but requires speakers that are at least moderately efficient. Remote triode switching and a home-theater bypass mode are welcomed additions.

Reviewed by JH in this issue

Pathos Classic One MK III

\$2750

musicalsurrroundings.com

This is not only a fine amplifier, it is beautiful in every sense of the word. But if sheer dynamic scale and loudness are priorities, this 70Wpc tube model may not be for you. Instead, this is an amplifier that always gets the tone, timbre, and balance of music right, but only if played at natural levels and over reasonably sensitive speakers.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 160

NAD Masters Series M3

\$2799

nadelectronics.com

Bristling with oomph, this pure dual-mono design boasts build-quality that shames some tonier brands. With 180Wpc on reserve, it conveys an easy-going neutrality and cushiony refinement. Bass is as controlled and extended as any integrated NG has encountered. The M3 may not have quite the air and bloom in the treble of the premium-spread *iberamps*, but it comes scary close.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 163

Ayre AX-7e

\$2950

ayre.com

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

Reviewed by SK and RH, Issue 171

\$3000 & above

Audio Research VSi55

\$3495

audioresearch.com

The VSi55 serves up a rich midrange, combined with smooth—but never dull—treble, and with speakers with smooth low-frequency impedance curves, its bass can be powerful and well-controlled. This amp also handles dynamics with greater authority than its power rating would suggest, while conveying a sense of the musical whole. Be aware that the VSi55 trades away some transparency to give you the natural, relaxed, “holistic” sound of tubes.

Reviewed by TM, AVgM, Issue 1

VTL IT-85

\$3750

vtl.com

The VTL IT-85 bathes music in a warm, golden glow that is hard to resist. While it is not the most powerful integrated amplifier—careful matching to loudspeakers (preferably mini-monitors) is a must—the IT-85 provides a large soundstage and effortless mids and highs. No other integrated in its price range comes even close to offering as musical and pure a sound.

Reviewed by JHeilbrunn, Issue 168

Plinius 9200

\$4395

plinius.com

The 9200 is a thorough and timely re-imagining of the brilliant but aging 8150/8200. Still compact in size, it pumps out a healthy 200Wpc, and thanks to its strong Class A bias, the 9200 is sweeter and richer than ever. Even the all-new phonostage is quieter and more dynamic. Bass doesn't sound as darkly ominous or extended as in years past, but control and definition are strikingly improved.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 156

Balanced Audio Technology VK-300X

\$4495–\$6495 (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, rich in timbre, and very immediate. And with 150Wpc output, it will not only drive pretty much any speaker, but it will do so with dynamic authority as well as agility.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 138

Edge G3

\$6150

edgeamps.com



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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 152

Chapter Précis

\$6500

chapterelectronics.co.uk



Driven by Chapter's unique Class D output stage (derived from Chapter's Couplet power amp), the Précis outputs 130Wpc, a figure that doubles into 4 ohms. Controlled by a single multi-function knob (from the Preface Plus preamp), the Précis is quiet, fast off the mark, and notable for its lack of coloration. Truly an integrated that is exploring the outer limits of what this technology can achieve.

Review by NG, Issue 167

Conrad-Johnson CA200

\$6500

conradjohnson.com

Essentially a power amplifier with a sophisticated volume control, the CA200 is stuffed to the gills with a circuit topology and a parts selection direct from connie j's flagship separates. The sound is powerful and dense in tone color, with effortless musicality across the bandwidth. Separates will buy you greater flexibility and a pinch more low-end slam, but there isn't much out there to surpass the CA200's finesse.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 173

Simaudio Moon i-7**\$6900****simaudio.com**

This beautifully built, feature-laden integrated amplifier has an engaging musicality that many separates don't approach. With no hint of glare or grain, the Moon i-7 reproduces instrumental tone color with seductive richness and realism. And with 150Wpc on tap, the i-7 has excellent bottom-end dynamics and the ability to drive a wide range of speakers. Supremely musical.

RH, review in our next issue**STEREO RECEIVERS & ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEMS****NAD C720BEE****\$599****nadelectronics.com**

Heir to the classic 7020 receiver, the C720BEE represents NAD's no-frills, no-nonsense philosophy—in this case, 50Wpc of rich midrange and noise-free, glitch-free performance. A solid and sensitive tuner makes it appealing for radio junkies, too. Except for a lack of air in the treble and some lax pitch-resolution down below, this is one honey of a BEE.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 167**Polk i-Sonic****\$599****polkaudio.com**

This tabletop marvel plays CDs and DVDs, receives FM and XM satellite radio, and has inputs for external sources such as portable music players. But best of all, the i-Sonic sounds terrific, with an extremely neutral and uncolored tonal balance. The bass goes surprisingly deep, and the treble is highly refined and silky smooth.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 169**Outlaw Audio RR2150****\$649****outlawaudio.com**

Despite its retro looks, the Outlaw Audio RR2150 is a thoroughly modern design. It has a warm, musical sound, and allows easy connections to an iPod or other MP3 player via its 3.5mm front-panel AUX input, or streaming audio from a computer via a USB connector on the rear. It also sports a decent mm/mc phono-stage.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 164**Rotel RX-1052****\$899****rotel.com**

Following the Rotel tradition, this stereo receiver employs good internal parts, a beefy toroidal

transformer mated to high-quality storage capacitors, and quality binding posts. Pick this unit up and you'll realize you're not dealing with a lightweight. Appealing to analog lovers, Rotel even includes a decent moving-magnet phono-stage.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 164**Arcam Solo****\$1749****arcam.co.uk**

More than a receiver, Arcam's versatile Solo combines a sophisticated 50Wpc integrated amplifier, a sweet-sounding AM/FM/DAB tuner, and a very good mid-level CD player in one slim package. It functions as a more-or-less state-of-the-art alarm clock, too. Though not the last word in transparency, detail, or performance at the frequency extremes, the Solo's sound is nevertheless suave and expressive.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 156**Resolution Audio Opus 21****\$2500 amp, \$3500 CD player, \$1500 tuner/phono preamp****resolutionaudio.com**

Implausibly, the Opus 21 component stack combines all the advantages of an all-one box—intuitive operation, stylish aesthetics, reasonable cost—with those normally reserved for serious high-end systems: modularity, flexibility, and superior resolution, dynamics, and extension. This little stack's practicality will thrill your Significant Other; its big sound will thrill you. And if you don't need the full stack, consider the standout CD player, which constitutes its own bargain.

Reviewed by AT, Issue 167**PREAMPLIFIERS****Under \$1000****Vincent Audio SA-31****\$499****vincent-tac.de**

The SA-31 is a well-made entry-level vacuum tube preamp that provides tone controls and a loudness contour switch. The preamp's sound is characterized by a rich, seductive midrange and hearty and solidly weighted bass. Though

not quite the equal of today's best \$1k preamps in terms of resolution, definition, or high-frequency "air," the SA-31 offers terrific bang for buck.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 173**NAD C 162****\$599****nadelectronics.com**

Following other NAD products, the C 162 delivers plenty of resolution and three-dimensionality while drawing out the natural warmth and expressiveness of instruments and voices. To get the most from it, try matching it with the companion C 272 amplifier via a set of PNF Audio Icon interconnects and Symphony speaker cables. It also features an astonishingly good phono-stage; some listeners may buy it for that feature alone.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 148**Quad 99/QC-24****\$899/\$899****taigallc.com**

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

Reviewed by PS, Issues 128 and 135**PS Audio Trio P-200****\$995****psaudio.com**

The heart of the P-200's circuitry is PS Audio's "gain cell" technology, claimed to deliver excellent linearity because input signals aren't attenuated or shunted to ground through a potentiometer. Robustly built and very easy to use, the Trio is an excellent minimalist lineage preamp, one that's ideal for pared-down music systems.

Reviewed by BW, Issue 170**Rogue Audio Metis****\$995****rogueaudio.com**

Rogue Audio's award-winning Metis is a U.S.A.-made, vacuum-tube-powered (6SN7-based) preamplifier. The dynamic liveliness and harmonic richness we expect in any good tube designs are present at levels that remind us of the sound of \$2500 tube preamps. But unlike tube designs that sound soft at the frequency extremes, the Metis remains evenly balanced and finely resolved from top to bottom.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 160

\$1000 - \$2000

Van Alstine Transcendence 8

\$1095-\$1846**avahifi.com**

Configured as a linestage (the optional phono-stage fared less well), the T8 is one of those rare products that genuinely transcends the constraints of budget amplification. Its sound is not particularly smooth or euphonic. But it won praise based on its stable imaging and killer dynamics. It benefits from being mated with a romantic tube amp.

Reviewed by DO, Issue 173

Arcam FMJ C31

\$1599**arcam.co.uk**

Smooth and grain-free with terrific detail, the laidback-sounding Arcam has the ability to play complex passages without apparent strain and without inducing listener fatigue. The soundstage is slightly recessed, particularly noticeable on large orchestral works, and it's also full and deep. But no matter how smooth it sounds, the Arcam never sacrifices resolution. Nor does it have any trepidation about plunging down into the nether regions on organ music.

**Reviewed by JHeilbrunn,
Issue 169**

PrimaLuna ProLogue 3

\$1599**primaluna-usa.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, precise presentation reminiscent of the best solid-state designs. Bass, too, is taut and clear.

Reviewed by SR, Issue 156

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. 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 sheared off, as are dynamic extremes.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 154**\$2000 - \$4000**

Artemis Labs LA-1

\$3000**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.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 155

Sutherland Direct Linestage

\$3000**acousticsounds.com**

An unusually lovely-sounding solid-stage linestage, the Sutherland Direct is easygoing and rather romantic. It has the thinnest layer of solid-state opaqueness, and slightly pinches low-level dynamic nuances, 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

Linn MAJIK KONTROL

\$3100**linn.co.uk**

The Kontrol preamplifier is arguably the strongest single component in Linn's Majik Series family. Its signature characteristics are effortless clarity and transparency, and an ability to reveal rich layers of transient and textural details. One welcome touch is a line-level input that users can re-configure for use as a surprisingly effective mm or mc phonostage.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 173

Meridian G02

\$3295**meridian-audio.com**

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

Reviewed by SK, Issue 152

Classé Delta CP-500

\$3500**classeaudio.com**

Electronics have no right looking this sharp and sexy, but Classe's Delta Series proves it can be done. Sonics feature a chocolate-like midbass, a midrange with almost tube-like warmth, and an overall effortless and relaxed quality. Thanks to a low noise floor, delicate inner voices unfold with a full range of expression.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 154**\$4000 - \$5000**

Conrad-Johnson Premier 18LS

\$4000**conradjohnson.com**

C-J's Premier 18LS is a remote-controlled solid-state linestage that handles microdynamic changes in musical energy with the lifelike realism and 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

Aesthetix Calypso

\$4500**musicalsurrroundings.com**

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

Reviewed by RH, Issue 151

McIntosh C46/C2200

\$4800/\$5100**mcintoshlabs.com**

Sonically and functionally a great preamplifier, the solid-state C46 features a truly useful set of controls, including an eight-band equalizer. 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.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 147

\$5000 - \$10,000**Edge G2****\$5195****edgeamps.com**

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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 149**Balanced Audio Technology VK-32SE****\$5495 (remote option adds \$500, phono option adds \$500)****balanced.com**

Now equipped with BAT's SUPER-PAK, a feature that doubles the power-supply capability over that of the earlier VK-30SE, the 32SE lends a slight emphasis to the upper midrange but is otherwise a highly musical and dynamically nimble performer. It has musical detail, with lots of air and harmonic color, good staging, and the ability to let the music breathe. Requires a long break-in period.

VK-30SE reviewed by WG, Issue 156**Pass Labs X1****\$5900****passlabs.com**

Remarkably similar in sound to the \$10,000 XO.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-200****\$7500 (add \$2000 for P-200 phono-stage)****hovlandcompany.com**

An uncommonly beautiful piece of audio gear, Hovland's HP-200 is an elegant, detailed, and natural-sounding preamplifier. Its detail doesn't wow you in that "I never heard it like that before" sort of way, but rather reveals the inner workings of a performance. And it's natural in that it allows instrumental and vocal timbres and textures to sound like themselves.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 162**MBL 501 I****\$8720****mbl-germany.de**

MBL is making some of the most gorgeous-sounding electronics out there, with a sound that comes remarkably close to marrying the best virtues of tube and solid-state designs. And though this linestage model may not have quite the richness of tone color, energy, dynamic swing, detail, and mind-boggling transparency you'll hear with its \$19,680 big brother, the 6010 D, it comes mighty close.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 164**Audio Research Reference 3****\$9995****audioresearch.com**

The best preamp ARC has made in 30+ years of often-classic efforts. Like its companion pieces, the Reference 210 and 610T power amps, this is the first ARC tube preamp with the speed, resolution, bandwidth, and low noise floor of a great solid-state unit. One of JV's two reference preamps.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 159**Audio Space Reference 2****\$9999****audiospace.com**

A genuine Audio Space oddity, the Reference 2 is a 300B-powered preamplifier. Despite its peculiar gain strategy (or perhaps because of it), it sounds more like the real thing in the midrange (when used strictly as a linestage) than any other preamp JV has auditioned, with nonpareil timbre, imaging, and bloom. Though it has its own built-in mm/mc phono stages, both were too noisy for JV's taste. The Ref 2 is, however, a superb combination with ARC's PH7 phono stage. JV's other reference preamp.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 174**\$10,000 & above****Mark Levinson No. 326S****\$10,000****marklevinson.com**

The No. 326 possesses greater transparency and fidelity to the source than previous ML preamps, with less of the characteristic ML house sound. Astonishingly focused, and detailed, yet smooth, suave, and sophisticated. Superb features and ergonomics make the No. 326S a pleasure to use on a daily basis. RH's reference preamp.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 161**Edge Signature 1.1****\$11,900****edgeamp.com**

Unusual because it can be powered by either batteries or AC, the Signature 1.1—when powered by batteries, please note—has a glorious top end, a rich middle register, and wonderfully complex timbres, and delivers plenty of ambient information. What it lacks are body, low-frequency punch, and the last word in midrange dynamic wallop.

JV**Simaudio Moon P 8****\$11,000****simaudio.com**

If it weren't for the absence of a mode (i.e., stereo/mono) switch, PS would find this two-channel, dual-chassis, dual-mono preamplifier literally perfect as regards function and user-friendliness. Like any superior modern solid-state unit, it's tonally neutral and pretty much characterless. Additionally, its transparency is see-through, dynamic response hair-trigger and very wide, detail amazing, with that paradoxical combination of iron grip and utter ease. Drawbacks? Well, it does cost \$11,000.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 165**MBL 6010 D****\$19,680****mbl.com**

The best solid-state preamp JV has auditioned. Its noise floor is so incredibly low that it consistently resolves fine timbral and dynamic details that simply aren't audible on other great preamps. At the same time its transient speed and authority are beyond compare. To ice the cake, it has absolutely gorgeous tone color, the same liquidity and transparency that so distinguish MBL's 9011 amps, excellent imaging and soundstaging, and superb ambience retrieval.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 164**Krell Evolution Two****\$40,000****krell.com**

The Krell Evolution series puts the third dimension back in music by providing exceptional depth. It also provides exceptional reproduction of hall sounds and musical mechanics—bowing sounds, score rustling, etc. This effect is enhanced by the imaging qualities of the Evolution Two. When the imaging on a recording is natural and detailed, the Evolution preserves the size, the place, the stability, and the layers of imaging. The result is a more open soundstage, better reproduction of life and air, and a greater ability to lose yourself in the music.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 158

PHONOSTAGES

Under \$2000

Parasound Zphono

\$150

parasound.com

The mm/mc Zphono is excellently built and makes very nice sounds: large soundstage, excellent layering and bloom with remarkably good balance, dynamic range, and detail. To be sure, a little veiled, a little lacking in ultimate definition, with a vague sense of things being held somewhat at arm's length. But at \$150, you really can't complain.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 172



Gram Amp 2 SE

\$399

elalexatier.com

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

Reviewed by PS, Issue 134

Grado PH-1

\$500

gradolabs.com

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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 141

Phonomena/Phonomena Nova

\$600/\$999

musicalsurrroundings.com



An Apollonian grace, poise, low noise, and neutrality characterize this excellent unit, which includes options for fine-tuning the loading and gain of both moving coils and moving magnets. Add the external power supply for even lower noise and distortion, and greater transparency. Some listeners may want more dynamic "punch" and personality, but this is hard to beat

for low coloration. Add \$600 for BPS power supply (supplied in the Nova version).

Reviewed by PS, Issues 133 and 172

Marchand Electronics LN-112-AA

\$995

marchandelec.com

A sweet, open, and very natural sounding tube phono stage, the LN-112, which can also be ordered either as a kit (\$595), partially (\$795) or fully assembled (\$995), surely ranks among audio's great values. Its 47k impedance and low output make it best for mm and high-output mc's.

Reviewed by WG in this Issue

JR Transrotor Phono II

\$1800

axissaudio.com

Splendidly machined from a chunk of aluminum with enough heat-sinking for a reactor, the Phono II has yet to meet a cartridge it can't convincingly handle. Fully adjustable for mm and mc, it may well be the last phono stage you'll ever want. Sonically on the cooler and clinical side of the spectrum—but only slightly so.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 172

\$3000 - \$6000

Sutherland PhD

\$3000

acousticsounds.com

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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 144

Artemis Labs PL-1

\$3520

aydn.com



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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 155

Aesthetix Rhea

\$4000

musicalsurrroundings.com



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 phono stages. Although it has tons of gain, the noise level is relatively low, making it compatible with a wide range of cartridge outputs. The Rhea's family resemblance to the Calypso lineage is unmistakable: transient quickness and speed without etch, a feeling of effortless-ness on crescendos, and a deep, layered soundstage. Tube choice affects noise level.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 151

Audio Research PH7

\$5995

audioresearch.com



Meet the new boss. If you can imagine a remote-controllable phono stage with the air, color, and bloom of the Aesthetix Io and the dynamics and soundstaging of the Lamm LP2 Deluxe, then you've got an idea of what ARC's all-tube PH7 phono stage sounds like. That said, you really have to hear this one for yourself to get a true sense of its transparency and the magical way it images. ARC hasn't been on such a roll since the heady days of the SP10 and D79B.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 172

\$6000 & above

Aesthetix Io MKII and MKII Signature



\$6500 without volume control; \$9000 with volume control; \$9000 for Signature without volume control, \$11,500 for Signature with volume control

musicalsurrroundings.com

Phono fanatics with both space and cash will want to audition this 24-tube, two (large) chassis beauty. Yes, it eats shelf space; yes, it throws a lot of heat; and yes, it is as good as it gets: exquisite dynamic contrasts, an easy, relaxed presentation, headroom to spare, a glorious midrange, excellent bottom octave, and full rendition of instrumental body. Highs aren't as airy or extended as some, but they are natural and non-fatiguing.

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

Lamm LP2 Deluxe

\$6990

lammindustries.com



With a superb built-in coupling transformer to handle lower-output moving coils, the all-tube Lamm LP2 phono stage 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 or ARC PH7 on large-scale

dynamics, the Lamm is rich, beautiful, and extraordinarily delicate-sounding on all music, with detail and transient response that are superior to the Io's

Reviewed by JV, Issue 157

Manley Steelhead

\$7300

manleylabs.com



The Steelhead should be counted as one of the great phonostages, and its extraordinary set of features makes it a vinyl-tweaker's fantasy rig. Driven by an outboard solid-state power supply, the main chassis houses six tubes, two moving-coil and moving-magnet inputs, fixed and variable inputs, and a bevy of front-panel controls. The sound is superb—rich but not fat, detailed yet natural, extended, controlled, and highly involving. Plus, it has the *buenos* to drive an amp directly.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 152

DIGITAL PROCESSORS

Copland DRC205 Room-Compensation Device

\$2500

divergent.com



This relatively inexpensive device can revolutionize your system. It offers automatic and rapid setup without a computer, but can be further adjusted to listener preference using a PC (software included). Compatible with all sources via analog input and output, it goes in your tape-monitor loop, where it corrects what is wrong with your room/speaker combination. Pure sound, and true sonic accuracy at the touch of a button.

Reviewed by REG in this issue

TacT Audio RCS 2.2XP

\$4490 (base unit)/\$5937

(fully loaded)

tactaudio.com



Recently upgraded to a "P" designation, TacT's 2.2 lets you do a crossover-plus-time-delay at, say, 200Hz from a corner-placed woofer to a main speaker out in the room (where midrange and treble response are smoother and imaging better). The RCS 2.2XP also does the overall "room correction" to bring the in-room response to any "target curve" you choose.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 158

Lyngdorf Audio TDAI ADC RP 2200

\$7500

lyngdorf.com



A superb digital amplifier combined with the "RoomPerfect" system, which corrects room/



speaker problems but preserves general speaker character (by-passable if desired). No choices except some overall balance curve selections are offered, but RoomPerfect gives excellent results on its own. Setup is rapid and easy (no computer). Also useable for the Lyngdorf corner-woofer setup.

Reviewed by REG, Issue 170

DIGITAL SOURCES

Under \$1000

Oppo Digital DV-970HD/ Oppo DV-981HD

\$149/\$229

oppodigital.com



Oppo's DV-970HD universal player won TAS' Budget Component of the Year award for 2006 because it offers better-than-decent video performance and sound quality that belies its modest price. The player is characterized by excellent transparency and detail, good treble smoothness, and taut, clean, though occasionally too lean bass. Now, the DV-981HD offers nearly identical sound quality, but dramatically improved video performance thanks to a built-in Faroudja video processor.

Reviewed by CM, Issues 168/174

NAD C525BEE

\$299

nadelectronics.com

The C525BEE disc player is good sounding but a tad rough ergonomically. Where it counts, however, the player is very well executed, with improved optical tracking circuitry and a 20-bit Burr-Brown DAC chosen for low-level linearity and high resolution of detail.

Reviewed by BW, Issue 169

Yamaha DVD-SI 700

\$449

yamaha.com

Excellent DVD-Audio and PCM sound quality anchor this tidy little, remote-controlled player. Not to mention an exceptional video image courtesy of Faroudja's DCDi technology. The only glitch is the lackluster and rather flat-sounding SACD sonics.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 174

Cambridge 540C v2

\$499

audioplusservices.com

The 540C CD player sounds far more sophis-

ticated and refined than any \$439 machine has a right to. The midrange is relatively grain-free, and the treble lacks the metallic sheen often heard in entry-level products.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 162

NAD C 542

\$499

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 value, these flaws are hardly a distraction.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 137

Onkyo DX-7555

\$599

onkyousa.com

Onkyo's DX-7555 is a single-disc two-channel CD player with advancements once found only in pricier products. With airy, open, grain-free sound, it's as capable of communicating the emotional truth of superb vocal and instrumental music as any disc player on the market up to a few thousand bucks.

Reviewed by BW, Issue 166

Music Hall CD 25.2

\$600

musichallaudio.com

A remarkable-sounding CD player, the CD25.2 offers very good clarity and resolution in the treble and middle registers and a generally rich musical fabric, albeit with a touch of midbass thinness. Switching the power cord for a better aftermarket unit made this unit bloom.

Reviewed by SR, Issue 163

Rotel RCD-1072

\$699

rotel.com



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

PS Audio Digital Link III

\$995

psaudio.com

The DLIII's upsampling feature takes standard 44.1kHz CD playback into the high-resolution realm: At user-selectable 96kHz or 192kHz sampling rates, it made standard-issue CDs essentially equivalent to their SACD counterparts.

Reviewed by BW, Issue 170

Rega Apollo**\$995****soundorg.com**

Rega's Apollo CD player is the finest sub-\$1000 CD player CM has heard, offering substantially more resolution than other players in its class, plus a richly textured sound that spans the entire audio spectrum (though faint hints of treble hardness do occasionally poke through).

Reviewed by CM, Issue 165**\$1000 - \$2000****Sony DVP-NS9100ES****\$1299****sony.com**

Reviewer Barry Willis said the Sony's CD and SACD performance was detailed and intimate with warm, round tones and a deep soundstage. Especially notable were the dark, silent backgrounds and rich, natural timbres. The DVD-NS9100ES delivers refinement and listening pleasure that BW says "aren't typically encountered below about \$3500."

Reviewed by BW, TPV Issue 67**Quad 99-CDP****\$1349****taigall.com**

Free of electronic artifacts—digital ones, too—the 99-CDP's presentation is lively and vital, big and powerful. Grainless, 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.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 143**Cambridge Audio 840****\$1499****audioplusservices.com**

The Azur 840C shatters the price/performance equation in CD playback with sound quality that's competitive with \$6k players, standing out for its ease, smoothness, resolution, dimensionality, and stunning spatial presentation. The 840C's technology is also unlike that of its competitors, with custom digital filtering that upsamples to 384kHz/24-bit, dual-differential DACs, a beefy custom transport, and a massive power supply. A great CD player at an unbelievable price.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 174**NAD Masters Series M55****\$1795****nadelectronics.com**

NAD's M55 universal player offers first-rate video performance (thanks to Faroudja pro-

cessing) and sound quality that takes NAD's traditional house sound to much higher levels than ever before by offering dramatically increased levels of resolution, transient speed, definition, and three-dimensionality. The player performs equally well with CDs and high-resolution discs, and is a compelling value for money.

Reviewed by CM/TM, Issue 174**Cayin Audio SCD-50T****\$1800****vasaudio.com**

A two-channel only CD and SACD player, the SCD-50T gives you the choice of either tube or transistor outputs (with predictable sonic differences, albeit quite subtle here). As a CD player, the Cayin is very good, stronger on smoothness, color, and resolution than on tonal neutrality and dynamics. But as an SACD player it's right up there with some of the best PS has heard.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 168**Arcam FMJ CD36****\$1999****arcam.co.uk**

Like its sister preamp, this Arcam CD player impresses with how far solid-state and digital electronics have come. Smooth and unfruffled, free of grunge, yet very detailed, this model provides everything that more sophisticated digital units do, but with not quite as much flesh on the notes.

Reviewed by JHeilbrunn, Issue 169**\$2000 - \$3000****Arcam DVI137****\$2199****arcam.co.uk**

This universal player builds on the strengths of Arcam's earlier uni-players, delivering first-rate video and excellent sound quality across all formats. The DV137's presentation is particularly clean, with low levels of grain and a dead-quiet background.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 174**Creek Destiny****\$2395****musichallaudio.com**

Like its companion piece from Creek, the Destiny integrated amp, the Destiny CD player rivals the performance of more expensive separates and, in combination with the amp, does some things better than any other digital

and solid-state combo that JH has heard at anywhere near its price.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 170**Musical Fidelity A5****\$2750****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 stage, 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-7e****\$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, it brings an unusual sense of rhythmic rightness to all music, with deep, defined bass, excellent dynamics, three-dimensionality, and tonal accuracy.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 141/e-version reviewed by SK, Issue 171**\$3000 - \$5000****Arcam DVI139****\$3199****arcam.co.uk**

With Arcam's Full Metal Jacket (FMJ) chassis construction, a first-rate video scaler, and meticulous attention to audio circuits, the DV139 delivers outstanding performance. Great on DVD-A, it's a bit softer in the treble on SACD, which is a benefit on many discs. Stunning video quality on DVD. Overall, a terrific one-box solution to the format wars.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 174**Marantz SA-11S1****\$3499****marantz.com**

The Marantz SA-11S1 is squarely aimed at the purist music lover, looking for all-out sonic performance on CD and two-channel SACD. On CD, the sound quality rivaled that of megabuck outboard D/A converters, with an extremely clean and pure midrange and treble, a deep and layered soundstage, and good resolution of musical detail. Gorgeous cosmetics and fabulous build-quality.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 152

Linn MAJIK**\$3500****linn.co.uk**

Linn's Majik CD player embodies many of the same sonic virtues that characterize its Majik Series stablemates, namely, transparency, resolution, and detail—especially in the critical midrange. Some competing players offer superior bass and a more three-dimensional presentation, but the qualities that set the Majik CD player apart are its effortless midrange lucidity and its ability to delineate individual musical lines within complex, densely-orchestrated passages.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 173**Denon DVD-5910CI****\$3800****denon.com**

The first DVD player to employ the Silicon Optix HQV video-processing chip, the Denon DVD-5910 naturally has terrific video performance. But the audio is equally good, whether you're playing CD, SACD, or DVD-Audio. The massively overbuilt player delivers powerful bass and a smooth yet extended treble, with a musically involving character. A flat-out bargain for its capabilities with all formats.

Reviewed by BW, TPV Issue 67**Classé Delta CDP-102****\$4000****classeaudio.com**

Another Classé *tour de "source,"* the CDP-102 combines the sensuous design elegance of the TFT-touchscreen-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 the high musicality and build-factor of the other Delta electronics.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 154**Krell SACD Standard****\$4000****krell.com**

From its airy, ethereal highs, to its sweet, warm midrange, to its staggeringly deep and tuneful bass, to its wide as well as deep soundstage, Krell's SACD Standard has a lot to recommend it. It isn't flawless—particularly when it comes to the slightly noisy and slow drive unit—but its main sonic shortcoming is a tendency to soften treble and transient response.

Reviewed by FK, Issue 161**Krell Showcase CD/DVD player****\$4000****krell.com**

Krell's Showcase is classic Krell—center-of-the-earth bottom-end solidity and power, huge dynamics, and razor-sharp imaging. The video quality is also superb, although the remote control leaves something to be desired.

Reviewed by BW, TPV Issue 67**Meridian G08CD****\$4395****meridian-audio.com**

The G08 replaces the popular 588 and is built around a computer-style CD/DVD-ROM drive capable of spinning the disc much faster than needed for standard CD operation. According to Meridian, this allows for multiple high-speed re-reads, providing ten times better error-correction than a conventional CD player. As with the rest of the G Series, the sound is effortless, refined, and gorgeous.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 152**Plinius CD-101****\$4750****plinius.com**

The CD-101 is a lavish musical performer and attention-grabber with drive and pace to burn. Its lack of edginess brings new heights of resolution and a reduction in distortion. Without a numeric display, the lethargic track navigation (via pulsating pin lights) takes a few spins to get used to. The massive machined remote control could easily be a lethal weapon.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 156**Accuphase DP-57****\$4900****accuphase.com**

A low-level resolution and detail champ, the DP-57 has one of the sweetest treble 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 because lighter in the bass and softer on transients than some, it still remains a class-leader in finesse and refinement.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 156**Lexicon RT-20****\$4995****harmanspecialtygroup.com**

The RT-20 is a true universal player that is equally at home playing CD, SACD, or DVD-A. This top-of-the-line player has an extremely low noise floor, lightning-fast dynamics, and a huge, deep soundstage. In addition to being an

exceptional-sounding audio player, the RT-20 excels at video playback.

Reviewed by BW, TPV Issue 67**\$5000 - \$10,000****Linn Unidisk SC****\$5510****linn.co.uk**

According to Barry Willis, this Linn universal player's sound quality "was in a class by itself—simultaneously lush and detailed, with a deep, silent background and reach-out-and-touch-it soundstaging." The Unidisk SC is more than a uni-player; it's also a remote-controlled preamp, digital-to-analog converter, and the hub of a Linn-centric, networked, distributed-audio system.

Reviewed by BW, TPV Issue 67**Wadia 581****\$6950****wadia.com**

Wadia is back, and its 581 is a landmark release that combines the sophistication of the company's flagships with a newfound sense of musical freedom. The 581's CD sound is big and boisterous, exhibiting reference-caliber dynamics, extension, and imaging. It also does full justice to SACDs, albeit in two channels only.

Reviewed by AT, Issue 169**Marantz SA-7S1****\$7000****marantz.com**

This elegant and superbly built CD/SACD player has a wonderfully smooth and yet extraordinarily detailed sound that puts it among the top echelon of CD and SACD playback devices. Unusually, three digital-filter options are offered for each format, each option giving a subtly but definitely different sound.

Reviewed by REG/NG, Issue 174**Esoteric X-03****\$7600****teac.com**

Glare, grunge, and grit are utterly foreign to this full and mellow-sounding model, which is more interested in the big picture than spotlighting details. The Esoteric lingers over notes, giving

them their full value. Its sound is not effervescent, but stately with extremely measured and regular pacing.

Reviewed by JHeilbrunn, Issue 161



Audio Research Reference CD7

\$8995



The first CD player ARC has designated a "Reference" product, the CD7 is also the first digital playback-device JV has heard that reproduces some of the qualities of live music that analog is typically better than digital at preserving (air, bloom, space, dimensionality, top-end extension), without sacrificing the qualities that digital is typically better than analog at preserving (dynamic range, bass power and extension, transient response). JV's reference.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 174

MBL 1521 A CD Drive/1511 E DAC

\$9495/\$9270



mbl.com

As with other MBL electronics, these digital items are helping to redefine what's possible in their categories. It's not that they sound like analog; they do not. What they do is provide a richness of tone color, seamless resolution of musical lines, refinement of dynamic nuance, dimensionality, and sense of involvement that goes beyond anything WG has before experienced with digital playback.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 164

\$10,000 & above

Theta Generation VIII DAC

\$10,000

thetadigital.com

For almost 20 years, Theta's digital processors have 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. 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, more intimate presentation.

RH

Meridian 808 Signature Reference

\$12,995

meridian-audio.com

The 808 has a wonderfully detailed and highly resolved presentation, with the ability to present fine nuances of instrumental timbre, micro-dynamic shadings, and low-level spatial cues that will floor you. No detail, no matter how small, escapes the 808's scrutiny. As a result, instruments sound more lifelike and less like synthetic recreations.

Reviewed by SK with RH comment, Issue 164

Esoteric P-03 transport/D-03 DAC

\$17,300/\$13,300

teac.com/esoteric



Compatible with every disc format, the P-03/D-03 takes the universal-player idea to the extreme. Featuring Esoteric's own state-of-the-art VRDS disc transport mechanism, the P-03 Universal player, in combination with the D-03 DAC, delivers sound that is among the best digital playback RH has heard. Video quality (1080p output via HDMI) is also state-of-the-art. Note that the P-03 is available without video capabilities for \$4000 less. RH's reference.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 171

Meridian 800 CD/DVD-A Player

\$19,950-\$22,500

meridian-audio.com



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

Reviewed by RH, Issue 145

MBL 1621 A CD Transport/1611 E Digital-to-Analog Converter

\$44,160 (\$22,310 and \$21,850)

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. This combo is capable of eliciting magical levels of musical detail—much of it previously unheard—from silver disc, with unusually lifelike timbres and transient response, and unparalleled extension, definition, and slam in the bass.

JV

TURNTABLES & RECORD PLAYERS

Under \$1000

Pro-Ject Debut III

\$299 (with arm and Ortofon OM5e) sumikoaudio.net

The Debut III offers music lovers a lot of analog virtues, like warmth and naturalness, at a bargain price. With the cartridge already installed, this table is very easy for even a novice to get going. One can easily improve clarity, bass articulation, and pitch stability by substituting a better Ortofon OM stylus, using isolation devices, or adding the Pro-Ject Speed Box MkII.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 172

Rega P1

\$350

soundorg.com

Rega's P1 is entirely British-made and uses the classic Rega motor, drive system, and main bearing. But instead of glass, the platter is made of MDF, and the arm is the new RB100, which comes pre-mounted with the Ortofon OM5e moving-magnet cartridge. You won't get much frequency extension or wide dynamics here, but what you do get is the pace, musical interplay, and involvement that makes analog special.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 171

Pro-Ject RM-5

\$699 (with arm), \$899 (with arm and Sumiko Bluepoint No. 2 cartridge)

sumikoaudio.net

The RM-5 is a scaled down version of Pro-Ject's larger tables, and its sonic performance, aided by a carbon-fiber arm, tear-shaped plinth, and isolation feet, is a pleasant surprise. It's a step up from entry-level tables and will appeal to audiophiles looking for more resolution, control, and realism, as well as a more flexible platform for tweaking.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 172

Clearaudio Emotion/Satisfy

\$1200

musicalsurrundings.com

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, AVGM, Issue 9

\$1000 - \$2000**Rega P5****\$1345****soundorg.com**

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

Reviewed by JH, AVGM, Issue 15**Pro-Ject RM 9.1**

\$1599 (\$2099 as tested with Sumiko Blackbird cartridge, which is \$799 when sold separately)

sumikoaudio.net**PoY '06**

With the RM-9.1, Pro-Ject has made an already good design much better, and without raising the price. Like some of its competitors, notably the Rega P5 and VPI Scout, it includes an arm that is far superior to the stock arms you'll find on entry-level turntables, and the Sumiko Blackbird's performance comes close to that of some higher-priced lower-output moving coils.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 164**Kuzma Stabi S****\$1800****themusic.com****GE '05**

The Stabi S is Kuzma's least expensive turntable, but you wouldn't know it to listen to the thing. Blessed with deep, warm background silences, the Stabi S makes a great complement to the Stogi S tonearm. Not a good choice for rooms where footfalls will be a problem (because it is unsuspended), it is otherwise a fine mid-priced 'table.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 159**VPI Aries Scout w/JMW-9****\$1800****vpindustries.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.

Reviewed by JHeilbrunn, Issue 172**\$2000 - \$5000****Funk Firm Funk Vector****\$2099****acousticsounds.com**

From its amoeba-like plinth, to its one-motor, three-pulley drive, to its unusual platter, to its tweaked Rega arm, to its name, the Funk Vector brings an excellent level of sound to this range of analog playback. Though its presentation is a bit light when compared with upper-end high-mass designs, this 'table's sound is well balanced and nicely detailed.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 166**Basis 1400 Signature****\$2200****basisaudio.com****PoY '02**

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.

SB, Recommended Systems, Issue 136**Pro-Ject RM-10**

\$2599 (with arm), \$3099 (with arm and Sumiko Blackbird cart.)

sumikoaudio.net**GE '07**

The RM-10 improves upon the fine performance of the RM-9.1 by adding a longer arm, a more massive plinth and platter, an isolation base, and magnetic repulsion. These enhancements produce blacker backgrounds, more solidity in the bass, and a cleaner window on the soundstage.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 172**Nottingham Analogue Studio-Space 294****GE '07****\$3999 (with Ace-Space 294 arm)****asigroup.com/Nottingham**

Nottingham's Space 294 belt-drive turntable is a beautiful analog playback platform that offers very good speed stability and nearly noise-free operation. Driven by an ultra-low-torque motor, the 294's massive platter must be push-started by hand (you'll get used to it). Completing the picture is the 12-inch, unipivot Ace-Space 294 carbon-fiber tonearm. The system strikes a fine balance between resolution and musicality.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 172**Wilson Benesch Full Circle analog system****\$4750****soundorg.com**

Wilson Benesch's Full Circle analog system bundles the Full Circle turntable, A.C.T. 0.5 tonearm, and Ply moving-coil cartridge in a specially priced package. The Full Circle succeeds brilliantly as a high-quality, mid-priced turnkey analog system, and it also happens to be one of the most visually appealing audio products.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 163**\$5000 - \$10,000****Clearaudio Ambient****\$5500 (with Satisfy Satiné arm)****musicalsurrroundings.com**

The Ambient uses a multilayer, highly compressed wood (called "Panzerholz") as the core of the 'table's plinth, adding richness and warmth to the Clearaudio "house sound." Yet, it retains the precision and rock-solid speed stability of Clearaudio's bigger (and more costly) 'tables.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 167**SOTA Cosmos Series III****\$5950****sotaturntables.com****GE '04**

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, while the massive suspended subassembly renders the Cosmos essentially immune to any form of feedback. A vacuum hold-down system eliminates warps while binding the record to the platter far more intimately than any clamp or ring.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 145**Clearaudio Master Solution AMG****\$6500**

musicalsurrundings.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 offers good detail, high-frequency extension, air, and rhythmic pulse. It leans a bit toward the lighter side, though.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 156

Well-Tempered Lab Reference II

\$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

\$9900

sumikoaudio.net

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

Reviewed by PS, Issue 129

\$10,000 & above

Basis 2800 Signature

\$12,900

basisaudio.com

Built to an amazing degree of mechanical precision, the Basis 2800 Signature is nothing short of revelatory in its ability to seemingly disappear from the playback chain. This table imposes no discernable colorations on the music, allowing a deeper and more immediate connection with your LPs. In a world of six-figure turntables, the Basis 2800 Signature just might hold its own with anything out there.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 172

Basis Debut Signature

\$13,900 (\$17,900 vacuum)

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 unipivot tonearm and Conti's own Vector arm.

Debut V Reviewed by JV, Issue 132

SME Model 20/II

\$16,500 (with IV.VI arm)

sumikoaudio.net

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

Reviewed by PS, Issue 140

Redpoint Model B

\$17,500

redpoint-audio-design.com

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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 156

Avid Acutus Reference

\$19,000

avidhifi.co.uk

Avid's Acutus Reference is one of the most musical-sounding record players you can buy. It is also one of the most intelligently designed—compact in size, thoroughly engineered, beautifully made—and one of the easiest to set up and maintain. The Acutus Reference clearly ranks among the top analog playback systems.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 170

Redpoint Model D

\$19,500

redpoint-audio-design.com

A step-up from the Model B, Redpoint's Model D is machined from a solid billet of aluminum, is massive and fully damped by lead shot and silicone oil, employs rare black Teflon for its platter, and is one of the finest turntables currently available.

Reviewed by WG in this issue

SME 20/12

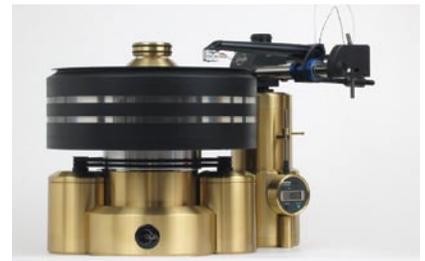
\$28,000

sumikoaudio.net

The SME 20/12 features a lightweight, stiff, and non-resonant twelve-inch arm with a

magnesium arm tube, and a larger, more massive version of the SME 20/2. With its black, black backgrounds, ultra-low bearing noise, superb isolation, precise speed accuracy, and rock-solid speed stability, the 20/12 offers everything one could desire in a reference turntable system.

JH, reviewed in the next issue

**Kuzma Stabi XL Reference turntable and Air Line arm**

\$29,475 w/VTA adjustable tower

themusic.com

This gorgeous, wonderfully well engineered and easy-to-use-and-adjust, twin-motored, belt-driven table and outboard air-bearing arm challenges the vaunted Walker Black Diamond in resolution, transparency, and transient response (although the Walker beats it convincingly in timbre, soundstaging, and overall realism).

Reviewed by JV, Issue 167

SME Model 30/2

\$36,000

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 that its specialness "lies in three related areas of sonic performance: background silence, dynamics, and that elusive impression of liveliness, vitality... that persuades you the music has come alive in your living room."

Reviewed by PS, Issue 154

Walker Proscenium Black Diamond record player

\$40,000 installed

walkeraudio.com

The Walker Proscenium Black Diamond air-bearing turntable/tonearm transforms many of the smartest ideas from turntables past into a work of audio art that not only looks fantastic but sounds fantastic, too. And now, with Walker's new and improved ceramic tonearm, the best source component JV has tested thus far has taken a significant leap forward in overall sonic quality (and it was scarcely chopped liver to start with). JV's reference.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 167

TONEARMS

Under \$2000

Rega RB300

\$395

soundorg.com

Turntable manufacturers who don't build their own arms frequently package their models with Rega's terrific-sounding and affordable RB300. Musically compelling, with excellent balance and good detail, if not the final word in any one category.

Reviewed by DM, Issue 127

Kuzma Stogi S

\$1000

themusic.com

The Stogi S is a hydraulically damped unipivot with a simple string-and-weight anti-skating mechanism, dual underslung counterweights, and provisions for making both coarse and fine azimuth adjustments. In our reviewer's system, this arm enabled a Shelter 90X cartridge to produce almost shockingly three-dimensional sound with rock-solid bass.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 159



VPI JMW-9 Signature

\$1400

vpiindustries.com

Compared to the standard JMW-9, the Signature version offers worthwhile upgrades such as a stainless-steel bearing assembly, Nordost Valhalla wiring, variable fluid damping, mechanical anti-skate control, and higher effective mass. HP praised the Super Scoutmaster Signature package for its "considerable dynamic 'jump'" and "musical authenticity."

Reviewed by HP, Issue 159

SME 309

\$1899

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 (in Turntables).

Reviewed by PS, Issue 129

\$2000 - \$3000

VPI JMW-10.5/JMW-12.5

\$2000/\$2600

vpiindustries.com

Available in 10" and 12" 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 around. VTA adjustment during playback allows for exceptional fine-tuning.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 129

\$3000 - \$5000



Basis Audio Vector Model 4

\$3450

basisaudio.com

Basis Audio's A.J. Conti has solved a fundamental problem with unipivot tonearms—dynamic azimuth error. Rather than allowing the arm to "roll" when the cartridge encounters record warp, the Vector maintains perfect azimuth alignment via Conti's simple, ingenious design. The result is an extremely neutral-sounding arm that hasn't yet mistracked on any LP.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 172

Tri-Planar VII

\$4000

triplanar.com

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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 156

Graham Phantom B-44

\$4300

graham-engineering.com

The culmination of all that Bob Graham has learned about tonearm design over the past

few decades, the Phantom utilizes Graham's trademarked "MagneGlide" stabilization system to eliminate the "rolling" effect that plagues unipivot arms. The Phantom's tracking is exceptional, creating a sound that is extremely smooth and detailed, with a large soundstage, extended highs, and a deep, nuanced bottom end.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 173

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 has a ripe, soothing character with unsurpassed bass resolution, excellent inner detail, and great tracking ability.

NG

CARTRIDGES

Under \$500

Shure M97xE

\$89

shure.com

An incredibly affordable entry-ticket to the world of analog sound, Shure's M97xE moving-magnet cartridge offers generally neutral tonal balance with slight hints of roll-off at the frequency extremes, unflappable tracking, and an overall presentation that is unfailingly smooth. A great starter cartridge.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 172

Grado Prestige Gold

\$180

gradolabs.com

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

Reviewed by WG, Issue 141, CM, Issue 172

Sumiko Bluepoint No. 2

\$299

sumikoaudio.net

The second-generation version of the Bluepoint Oyster—long considered a go-to choice among affordable high-output moving-coil cartridges—the No. 2 offers improved resolution, superior three-dimensionality, richer and more

potent bass, and smoother, less aggressive highs. A huge step up from entry-level cartridges.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 172

Sumiko Blue Point Special EVOIII

\$399

sumikoaudio.net

The EVOIII offers substantial improvements over the original Blue Point Special—a fundamental heartiness, terrific top-to-bottom consistency, and the ability to gracefully handle tracking challenges. This is one moving coil that will not 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 midband.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 141

Benz Micro ACE

\$550

musicalsurrroundings.com

The ACE offers a wide-open midrange, plenty of definition and air around instruments and voices, and tight, clean bass. With the right phono stage, it can do a great job of walking that fine line between resolution and smoothness.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 147



Lyra Dorian

\$750

immediasound.com

Lyra's entry-level Dorian—also available in a mono configuration—is a relatively high-output moving coil with terrifically good sound that Lyra fans will recognize. Though not as detailed, dynamic, and nuanced as the company's top models, it is a very clean, musical design that offers wonderful value.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 166



Sumiko Blackbird

\$799

sumikoaudio.net

This high-output moving coil is smooth yet detailed, with a wide soundstage and fine low-end authority. Massed strings lack the upper-midrange glare one hears with some moving coils; midrange instruments are particularly seductive; images are stable; and transparency, transient quickness, and inner detail are all good.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 164

Shelter 501 Mk II

\$850

axiss-usa.com

The 501 Mk II is one of those rare products that does everything well. Its three-dimensional-ity brings to life recordings one thought lacking in spaciousness, while its neutral tonal balance, resolution, focus, air, transient speed, extension at both frequency extremes, and cohesiveness “always seemed cut from whole cloth.”

Reviewed by CM, Issue 147



Dynavector Karat 17D3

\$895

toffco-usa@yahoo.com

Dynavector's 17D3, the third generation of a twenty-year-old design, is ruler-flat top to bottom with all the life and liveliness of past Karats, the see-through transparency, the superb tracking, the crackling musicality, brilliance and clarity abounding. It also throws a sensationally wide and deep soundstage with extraordinary dynamics and resolution.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 172



\$1000 - \$2000

Grado Reference

\$1200

gradolabs.com

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

Reviewed by Adam Walinsky, Issue 112

Ortofon Kontrapunkt C

\$1650

ortofon.com

This latest and best of Ortofon's Kontrapunkt series, the C images more precisely than any pickup in PS's experience, a function of its unsurpassed grip and control. The C's background is almost unbelievably black, music emerging in bas-relief. Neutrality is absolute, resolution

brehtaking. By any measure, an outstanding pickup.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 172

\$2000 & above



Clearaudio Concerto

\$2000

musicalsurrroundings.com

This is the entry-level cartridge in Clearaudio's “super-class” of moving coils, and super it is! The Concerto uses wood to add a touch of warmth and richness, yet retains the superb focus, resolution, transient quickness, and top-end extension that have been hallmarks of Clearaudio's reference cartridges.

Reviewed by JH, Issue 167

Lyra Helikon

\$2000 (\$2200 for SL and Mono versions)

immediasound.com

An excellent soundstager with phenomenally good bass, the Helikon is a little cool and white in balance, though not analytical-sounding. The bargain in high-end moving-coil cartridges.

HP's Workshop, Issues 132 and 136

Transfiguration Phoenix

\$2500

profundo.us.com

Quite neutral, detailed, and transparent sounding, Transfiguration's Phoenix may just be the Shelter 90X of its day, i.e., the “hot” bargain in moving-coil cartridges. Like the 90x, the Phoenix compares favorably with cartridges costing quite a lot more.

Reviewed by WG in this issue

Clearaudio Stradivari

\$3000

musicalsurrroundings.com

In his recent survey of five moving-coil pickups, PS gave the Stradivari his personal “Golden Mean” award because it ideally mediates warmth and detail, control and relaxation, liveliness and



listenability, at virtually no sacrifice to tonal neutrality. There is an organic rightness about this pickup that elevates it to reference caliber.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 172



Micro Benz Ebony L

\$3000

musicalsurrroundings.com

The L exhibits the familiar Benz broad, shallow presence trough from about 1kHz–10kHz. Depending how you hear it, this is allied to or accentuates one of the loveliest midranges around: fat, lush, fabulously rich. Is it tonally neutral? No, but it sure is musical and beautiful.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 172

Koetsu Rosewood Signature

\$3500

musicalsurrroundings.com

The great-great-grandson of the cartridge that started the moving-coil craze (the Supex), the Rosewood is relatively high in Technicoloration, but who cares? When something sounds this beautiful, exceptions should be made—and regularly are by audiophiles who want to hear timbres sound gorgeous.

JV

London Reference

\$5295

mayaudio.com

London/Decca's classic, cantilever-less, "positive-scanning" moving-iron cartridge has just been brought into the 21st century with a new stylus, chassis, and magnetic engine. Transient response is simply terrific. Paradoxically, the London doesn't have quite the very-low-level resolution of a great mc, but then it doesn't have the hi-fi etch, either. An indifferent tracker, it will require careful tonearm-matching and setup.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 169

Air Tight PC-1

\$5500

axiss-usa.com

Here is a genuine surprise—a world-beating mc from SET-manufacturer Air Tight. Although



JV just extolled the London for its transient speed, the PC-1 sounds like a London on steroids. Whip-fast, exceptionally high in resolution and low in coloration, and a great soundstager/imager, to boot, the PC-1 is one of JV's two mc references.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 173

Lyra Titan mono

\$5500

immediasound.com

The Titan mono is a stunning achievement. Whether it's playing a 1929 Louis Armstrong Hot 7 session or an old Blue Note, the Titan delivers taut bass and a wealth of detail. If you have a substantial mono collection, the Titan will prove more than worthy of its name and its steep price.

JHeilbrunn

(review forthcoming)



Clearaudio Goldfinger, v2

\$8000

musicalsurrroundings.com

The latest Goldfinger, with twice the number of magnets and lower-weight coils, is astonishingly accurate in timbre, very fast, smooth, and extended, and (as is always the case with Clearaudios) extraordinarily high in detail and wide, deep, and tall in soundstaging. The other of JV's two mc references.

Reviewed by JV in Issue 176

TUNERS

Magnum Dynalab MD106T

\$4000

magnumdynalab.com

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

Reviewed by NG, Issue 152



MULTICHANNEL CONTROLLERS

\$1000 - \$3000

Outlaw Audio 990

\$999

outlawaudio.com

Brimming with hot features like dual subwoofer outputs, DVI video-switching, and eight

channels of balanced outputs, the 990 reproduces music with brio. There's a rock-steady midrange balance and a sense of musicality that soothes the soul. Transient speed and low-level resolution could stir the pot a bit more. And soundstaging and imaging are mid-pack at best; still, nabbing one these is like getting away with a felony.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 162



NAD M15

\$2999

nadelectronics.com

NAD's Masters Series M15 7.1-channel AV controller is beautifully made and imbued with smooth highs, a natural open-sounding midrange, and robust well-defined bass. It also offers greater resolution and textural finesse, plus more three-dimensional soundstaging, than its NAD predecessors.

CM

Rotel RSP-1098

\$2999

rotel.com

The Rotel's large, colorful 3.5"-by-6" TFT display might garner all the buzz, but it's the RSP-1098's audiophile-grade sonics that boost it near the top of its class. With a true 7.1-multichannel analog bypass and sophisticated bass-management options, this is a controller to listen to, even if you never see another movie.

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 51 and AT, Issue 157

\$3000 - \$6000

Sunfire TGP 5

\$3499

sunfire.com

Sunfire's Bob Carver-designed TGP-5 is an A/V controller for audiophiles. The TGP-5 provides high-quality DACs, and Carver's signature Sonic Holography and Side Axis circuits. The TGP-5's defining characteristics are clarity, resolution, and razor-sharp transient response.

CM

Krell Showcase

\$4500

krell.com

This successor to Krell's Home Theater Standard 7.1 is the fifth generation of Krell

surround-sound preamp/processors. Although it does not currently have DVI-D or HDMI video inputs or outputs, the Showcase offers proprietary software-based seven-channel digital room equalization and, of course, Krell's superior analog preamplification circuitry, which is among the best in high-end audio.

Reviewed by JV, TPV Issue 55

Arcam FMJ AV9

\$5999

audiophilesystems.com



In philosophy, features, and sonic priorities, the Arcam AV9 is all about analog, though its digital performance is respectable. If most of your music sources are analog—including CD and DVD players with analog outputs—the AV9 would make a formidable centerpiece for a combined home-theater/music system. RH's reference.

Reviewed by AT, Issue 164/RH, TPV 69

\$6000 & above

Anthem Statement D2

\$6999

anthemav.com

With every surround-sound mode you could need, the new Anthem Statement D2 is a very sophisticated processor with state-of-the-art features and excellent sound quality. The D2 exhibits such incredible clarity, openness, and detail that an experienced audio engineer could probably identify the microphone used in the recordings.

DI reviewed by Gary Altunian, TPV 57

Halcro SSP100

\$9990

halcro.com

Halcro's SSP100 prioritizes digital sonics and features, and for appropriate sources the result is superb. Of course, none of the SSP100's digital goodness would be audible if it didn't also encompass a truly fine analog stage. Sadly, there seems to be no satisfactory way to directly access it. As it stands, those with primarily digital sources, and the requisite cash, should place the SSP100 at the top of their music-minded controller list.

Reviewed by AT, Issue 164

Theta Casablanca III and Six Shooter III

Casablanca III, \$10,000–\$20,000

(depending upon configuration);

Six Shooter, \$2000

thetadigital.com



The Theta combination is a testament to what a manufacturer can achieve with sufficient thoughtfulness and resources. The Casablanca III with Six Shooter lacks not a single important musically-oriented feature. Furthermore, this combo's sound makes neither apologies to nor compromises with excellent stand-alone analog components.

Reviewed by AT, Issue 158

MULTICHANNEL AMPLIFIERS

\$999 - \$3000

Outlaw Audio 7125

\$999

outlawaudio.com

It may not turn any heads with its looks, but with seven smooth channels of 125W performance and heavyweight power reserves, the 7125 is likely to change some minds. Like its sibling, the 990 controller, it's a bit dark in character, but possessed of a rich and punchy low end with good weight. Although not the final word in resolution and transparency, it's probably the final word in dual-purpose performance for under a grand.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 162

Rotel RMB-1075

\$999

rotel.com

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

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 44

NAD T 973

\$1999

nadelectronics.com

Employing modular monoblock architecture, the seven-channel T 973 outputs a generous, easygoing 140Wpc. Solid power reserves, superior bass definition, and a warm upper treble continue the NAD tradition of audio excitement tempered with refinement and understatement.

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 54

Parasound Halo A52

\$2000

parasound.com

Designed by the legendary John Curl, the robust, 5x125-watt A52 is essentially a multi-channel 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, AVgM



Rotel RMB-1077

\$2499

rotel.com

The RMB-1077 is the British brand's first multi-channel Class D amp, with seven channels rated at an identical 100-watts-per-channel at 8 ohms. With a reasonably sensitive loudspeaker system, it would be difficult to understand why anyone would need more than the RMB-1077 offers for a multichannel system.

Reviewed by BW, Issue 170

NAD M25

\$2999

nadelectronics.com

Like the other Masters Series components, the 160Wpc, solid-state, 7-channel M25 amplifier takes NAD's traditional house sound to new heights with a presentation that combines equal parts resolution, poise, and sheer dynamic swagger. Those who favor a hyper-detailed sound might initially find the M25 too laidback, but we think it hits the sweet spot between vividness and easygoing accuracy.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 173

\$3000 - \$6000

Sunfire TGA-7400

\$4499

sunfire.com

Sunfire's TGA-7400 is a Bob Carver-designed, 400Wpc, solid-state, 7-channel amplifier that will drive just about anything, yet always sounds delicate and refined—never boorish or muscle-bound. The amp's L/R main channels provide two distinct voicing options: Voltage Source speaker taps provide a tight, focused "solid-state" sound, while Current Source taps yield a warmer, more spacious and more tube-like presentation.

CM

Cary Cinema 5**\$5000****caryaudio.com**

Cary's Cinema 5 is a superb achievement. At 30 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 tone colors, and a transparent window to the source.

Reviewed by WG, TPV Issue 50**Anthem Statement P5****\$5999****anthemav.com**

The Statement P5 is the "poster amp" for high-current amplifiers, with 14 output transistors per channel, vastly increasing the available power for musical crescendos. Actually five monoblock power amplifiers in one chassis, each capable of 325 watts, the P5 sounds very authoritative, with effortless dynamics and tight deep bass.

Reviewed by GA, TPV Issue 57**\$6000 & above****Theta Dreadnaught II****\$7100, five-channel version; \$8100, ten-channel version****thetadigital.com**

Like the original Dreadnaught, the Dread II is fully balanced with zero global feedback. The new model delivers more power and impact, along with better low-end authority and control, stunning resolution, and incredible soundstage depth and focus. It also has more energy in the upper midrange and treble than its predecessor, sacrificing just a bit of the original's warmth and musicality.

Reviewed by SB, TPV Issue 46**Krell Theater Amplifier Standard****\$8000****krell.com**

A very Krell-like FPB (Fully Power Balanced) five-channel amplifier that generates a powerful-sounding 200W into 8 ohms and 400W into 4. The Krell 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.

Reviewed by JV, TPV Issue 51**Audio Research I50M****\$8995 for five-channel version (\$900/additional power module)****audioresearch.com**

In multichannel playback, this relatively lightweight, entirely modular (the 150M can be fitted with up to seven power amplification modules, each rated at 150W into 8 ohms and 300W into 4 ohms), cool-running, Class T amp produces a surprisingly ARC-like sound. A little bright, forward, and weighted toward the upper mids, the 150M has some of the airiness of ARC tubes without all of the body and sweetness.

Reviewed by JV, TPV Issue 51**Plinius Odeon****\$12,595, with any combo of six channels; \$750 off per module, if fewer needed****pliniususa.com**

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

Reviewed by RH, TPV Issue 50**Balanced Audio Technology VK-6200****\$13,000 (fully loaded); \$7000, two-channels; \$1500, each additional channel****balanced.com**

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

Reviewed by WG, TPV Issue 38**INTERCONNECTS, SPEAKER CABLES & POWER CORDS****Acoustic Zen Technologies Tsunami II and Gargantua II Power Cords****\$350 and \$1488****acousticzen.com**

The Gargantua II is well named. At \$1488, it is hardly an accessory, but it surprised SR by revealing in her reference system a new level of its native sweet clarity. SR uses the \$350 Tsunami II with less-expensive gear. Both cords have the nice habit of clarifying delicate highs, deepening perceived bass, and opening up and airing out the soundstage.

SR (review forthcoming)**MUSIC SERVERS****SEE OUR MUSIC SERVER BUYER'S GUIDE IN TPV ISSUE 70****AudioQuest Jaguar/DBS Interconnect****CV-8/DBS Speaker Cable****\$300/one-meter pair; \$775/eight-foot pair****audioquest.com**

The entry-level interconnect for AudioQuest's battery-powered DBS (dielectric bias system) technology, the Jaguar has well defined yet sweet-sounding highs; its bass is taut yet possesses plenty of weight and warmth and a heaping helping of three-dimensionality. Though not the last word in transparency, the Jaguars do a great job of balancing clarity and smoothness. The least-expensive speaker cable that has AudioQuest's battery-powered DBS technology, the CV-8 offers well-defined and nicely weighted bass, a neutral midrange with a hint of warmth, clear but never edgy highs, and truly excellent soundstaging. Roundness on transients makes this cable easy to listen through for hours on end.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 147, and CM in AVguide.com, 11/2003**Reviewed by CM, AVgM, Issue 2****Crystal Cable Crystal Connect Micro Interconnect /CrystalSpeak Micro Speaker Cable****Interconnect: \$599/one-meter pair; Speaker: \$2600/three-meter pair****crystalcable.com**

Clean, composed and transparent, the jewel-like Crystal Micro cables offer an open soundstage where images snap into focus and music is conveyed with a turbine-like smoothness. Even some softness in the bass and a bit of forwardness in the treble don't diminish one of the most transparent cables NG has heard. Unique splitter rings allows easy change-out of terminations or bi-wire upgrades.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 164

Furutech Reference III and Evolution Interconnect and Cables

Reference III Interconnect, \$1200/1.2m (XLR), \$1050 (RCA); Reference III Speaker, \$1430/3m; Reference III Power, \$1100; Evolution Interconnect, \$560/1.2m (XLR), \$490 (RCA); Evolution Speaker, \$585/3m
furutech.com

Furutech uses cryogenically treated, ultra-high-purity, OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) single-crystal copper conductors in both its mid-priced Evolution and premium-priced Reference III audio cables. The top models offer better connectors, superior dielectric materials, and passive EMI-absorption filters made from GC-303 (and EMI-absorbent material developed by 3M Company). Furutech's cables offer great transparency and purity, plus an uncanny ability to block out noise and grunge.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 173

Harmonic Technology Magic Link One Interconnect

\$820/one-meter pair (RCA); \$900/one-meter pair (XLR)
harmonictech.com

With improved clarity and articulation over Harmonic Tech's more affordable Pro Silway line, the Magic Link One consistently yields smooth, extended highs, a delightfully full and natural midrange, and solid bass. You may find other pricier interconnects that excel in one specific area or another, but when it comes to overall system synergy, this is one cable you'll be "wearing" like a favorite pair of shoes.

SK



Harmonic Technology Pro-11 + Speaker Cable

\$575/eight-foot pair
harmonictech.com

The TechPro-11+ is sensual, romantic, and highly present with vocals, with full rich body and a 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

Kimber Kable Hero Interconnect/8TC Speaker Cable

\$160/one-meter pair/\$270/eight-foot pair

kimberkable.com



Yielding only a tiny bit in sheer control, ultimate top-end transparency, and inner detailing to PS's reference Kimber Select KS-1021, Hero's bass lives up to its name, prodigious in amplitude and definition (rather better even than its pricier brother). This interconnect is either dead neutral or tilts a notch to the yang, with dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in an essentially grain-free presentation. Tilting a tad toward the yin, the 8TC has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what is happening fore or aft, ideally mediating detail, liveliness, tonal neutrality, and dynamic contrasts within a very realistic, holographic soundstage.

Reviewed by PS, Issues 138, 146

Legenburg Hermes S Interconnect and Speaker Cable

Interconnect, \$971/three-foot pair; speaker, \$2635/eight-foot pair
legenburg.com

Boasting neutral midrange tonal balance, high-octave dynamics, and the merest suggestion of treble warmth, Legenburg's serpentine cabling nearly disappears into the music and makes for the one of the sweetest listening experiences.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 167

MIT AVt 1 Speaker Cable

\$549/eight-foot pair
mitcables.com

Perhaps canted ever so slightly toward the yang, the MIT AVt 1 counts power and definition among its many virtues. Perhaps there is ever so slightly less of a sense of bloom than with other cables, but the AVt 1 nevertheless suggests great openness, with a remarkable ability to project musical events into the room and an impression of snap and bite that in the best sense of those words is irresistible.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 146

MIT Magnum MA Speaker Cable/Oracle Magnum

\$7995/eight-foot pair
\$24,900 eight-foot pair
mitcables.com



Over the past four years, no cable has dethroned

MIT's Oracle V2 in RH's system—until MIT's new MA (Maximum Articulation) showed up. Although priced the same as the discontinued Oracle V2, the new MA is vastly improved, with far greater resolution, greater separation of individual instrumental lines, more space and depth, and a shocking increase in bottom-end depth, power, and articulation. RH's reference.

RH

Nordost Blue Heaven Interconnect and Speaker Cable

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

Similar in personality, the Blue Heaven interconnects and cables excel at low-level detail, upper-octave smoothness, and transient speed. Also expect to hear exceptional inner detail and nuance emerge from the velvety black and silent background. Note that it may be a bit on the cool clinical side for some treble-happy systems, but remains ideal for neutral and darker ones.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 138

Nordost Baldur Interconnect and Speaker Cable

Interconnect:\$499/one meter; Speaker: \$1380/three-meter pair
nordost.com

Baldur brings much of the balance and harmonic integrity of top-of-the-line Valhalla to prices even "normal" audiophiles (as opposed to normal people) can afford. It has a buttery way with transients and isolates low-level details with the best of them. Although never edgy, there is a whitish zone in the lower treble. Perhaps not as weighty and focused as some, but with an overall balance and musicality that are addictive.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 164

PNF Audio Icon Interconnect and Symphony Speaker Cable

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, AVgM, Issue 4

Purist Audio Design Dominus Interconnect and Speaker Cable

Interconnect: \$5250/one-meter pair; Speaker: \$10,980/1.5-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 Kharmia Enigma, it is also quieter than both, and because of its fluid-damped construction, virtually immune to floorborne and airborne vibration.

JV

Rega Couple Interconnect

\$175/1-meter pair

soundorg.com

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, AVguide.com, 10/2003

Shunyata Python Power Cord

\$995

shunyata.com



As RH put it in his review, "the idea that a power cord comes at the end of a very long power-transmission system is purely one of perspective. From the amplifier's point of view the power cord is the first few feet of the power-deliver system." With the Python, expect greatly improved transparency, soundstaging, tighter focus, and air, "fostering a greater impression of hearing an actual instrument in an acoustic space."

Reviewed by RH, Issue 164

Siltech Paris MXT Interconnect/New York MXT Speaker Cable

\$199/one-meter pair/ \$491/2.5-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, tube-like sound that's not the least sibilant, while the low end is warm and solid. Like many components that have a slight midrange trough, the entire

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

Reviewed by PS, Issue 138, and NG, Issue 146

Paul Speltz "Anti-Cable" Speaker Cable

\$80 (8-foot pair w/spades)

anticables.com

A godsend to those who want good sound but don't want to spend big bucks. SK was blown away by its neutrality and lack of coloration, high frequencies that are open and clear with no tizziness, a midrange of exceptional clarity, transparency and detail, and bass that's extended, with remarkable articulation.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 162

Synergistic Research REL-spec Subwoofer Cable

\$1100/3 meters

synergisticresearch.com

Pricy but potent, these inspired subwoofers cables are specifically optimized for REL subwoofers and include the REL-specified Neutrik connectors. They improved the inherent musicality and pitch precision of the Britannia B3 in every instance—the lowered noise floor yields more detail, an enhanced sense of space, and expanded ambience retrieval.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 163

Synergistic Research Alpha Interconnect/Alpha Sterling Active Interconnect

\$135/one-meter pair/\$450/1m pair

synergisticresearch.com



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

Reviewed by NG, TPV Issue 38

Synergistic Research Tesla Series

Accelerator: interconnect

\$1200/1m pair; speaker cable,

\$1200/8-foot pair

Precision Reference: interconnect,

\$2200/1m pair; speaker cable,

\$2800/8-foot pair

Apex: interconnect, \$3000/1m pair; speaker cable, \$4600/8-foot pair

synergisticresearch.com

Some of the most transparent cable at any price. A splendid balance of detail, romantic richness, and Grand Canyon-like soundstaging that is magnified as you move upward through the line. The top-of-the-line Apex, however, is the real low-level-resolution master, mining details and timbral shadings like few wires NG has heard to date.

Sneak Preview by NG, Issue 171



TARA Labs RSC Air 1 and Air 1 Series 2 Interconnect and Speaker Cable

Interconnect: \$995/one meter

(\$200 each add'l meter); speaker:

\$1950/8-foot pair (\$1000/add'l ft)

taralabs.com



Everything about these cables says big—dynamics, extension, and volume. They are also one of the mellow cables NG has heard with a dark, deeply polished, and resonant signature that should appeal to many. They have an expansive soundstage and orchestral images always seem more rooted. Ambience retrieval is at a cutting-edge level. Separate positive and negative speaker runs for each channel.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 164

TARA Labs Zero Interconnect and Omega Speaker Cable

Zero interconnect: \$14,900/one meter (\$2000 per add'l meter);

Omega speaker cable: \$11,900/10

feet (\$1000 per add'l foot); The

Zero digital cable: \$6900/one meter (\$1000 per add'l meter)

taralabs.com

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; 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.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 159

TARA Labs The One Power Cord

\$1495/6 feet (\$140/add'l meter)
taralabs.com

Although the difference it makes might not be quite as staggering as the interconnect, speaker, and digital cables mentioned above, TARA Labs' "The One" power cord has much the same effect as the company's other remarkable wires, and it rounds out the top-of-the-line package with top-of-the-line sound.

WG (review forthcoming)

Virtual Dynamics Master Series Power Cord

\$3195/five foot
virtualdynamics.ca

Extended, exceedingly quiet, and so filled with micro-dynamic details that you'll be prompted to reconsider volume settings on even your best-known source material. With three Mylar-treated 10-gauge solid-core copper conductors, the Virtual Dynamics are as unwieldy as mud-wrestling a python, but the rewards are great if you survive. Ambience retrieval could stand improvement but little else.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 162

Wireworld Stratus 5² power cords

\$100/2m
wireworldcable.com

Conventional wisdom says power cords should be thick and unwieldy. Offering competitive performance with elite power cords costing many times their price, the Wireworld Stratus 5² have a defiantly flat profile, are lightweight, and are available in color choices. Another major factor in the Stratus' favor—they are pliable enough to negotiate corners. A major advancement for today's well-groomed media rooms.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 169

Wireworld Equinox 5 Speaker Cable

\$795/2.5-meter pair
wireworld.com

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 Equinox mediated excessive brightness and detail without compromising dynamics. This cable does little wrong and most things right, evincing a tube-like solidity and roundedness with its every presentation.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 147



HEADPHONES & HEADPHONE AMPS

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 classical or rock.

Reviewed by Dan Schwartz, Issue 156

Bose Quietcomfort 2

\$299
bose.com

The overall octave-to-octave balance of the Quietcomfort 'phones is quite good, and transparency is fairly high. TM rates them on a par in pure musicality with some of the better Sennheisers. And they have noise cancellation, which TM rates as a must when in transit.

Reviewed by TM, Issue 166

Denon AH-C700

\$199
denon.com

Denon's top-of-the-line in-ear headphones offer quick, nuanced response to musical transients, creating an impression of unforced, natural clarity. Although perhaps just slightly forward in the midrange, the AH-C700s offer generally neutral tonal balance and provide a "just right" amount of bass—enough to sound punchy and full-bodied without overdoing things.

CM

Etymotic ER4PER/4S

\$299 each
etymotic.com

Etymotic's iPod-friendly ER4Ps have greater sensitivity and bass output than other ER4 models (the ER4Ss are more accurate, but harder to drive). From the lower midrange on up, the ER4Ps offer truly impressive transparency and clarity, plus bass that is reasonably warm and full—provided you insert the ER4Ps deeply enough within your ear canals to achieve a good seal.

CM



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. The SR60 can also be driven directly from an Apple iPod or other digital player. While it is comfortable, keep in mind that as an "open air" design the SR60 is not ideal for noisy environments.

Reviewed by TM, AVGM, Issue 3

Grado GS-1000

\$995
gradolabs.com

As comfy to wear as they are romantic to listen to, these wooden air-chamber phones fit the ear like a pair of foam cantaloupes, inspiring long hours of effortless listening. Full-bodied with an extremely open soundstage, they also have a slightly laid-back sound and a deep if somewhat plummy bass that doesn't assault the senses. Some may characterize them as a bit colored, but lovingly so. The anti-earbud.

Review by NG forthcoming

Grado SR325i

\$295
gradolabs.com

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

Reviewed by DS, Issue 156

Grado RA-1 headphone amplifier

\$350
gradolabs.com

With a tube-like rendering of timbre and a sweet, 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

HeadRoom Total BitHead Portable Headphone Amplifiers

\$149
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.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 155

Ray Samules Audio Emmeline Hornet headphone amplifier

\$295

raysamulesaudio.com



This miniature headphone amplifier is perfect for a portable (or even a desktop) music system, with its combination of small size, rechargeable battery, and amazing sound quality. When used with an iPod, the Hornet renders a huge increase in clarity, resolution, dynamics, and bass weight and definition.

RH, Product of the Year, Issue 168

Sennheiser CX-300

\$89

sennheiserusa.com

The CX300 is Sennheiser's most capable in-ear headphone. Bass is robust, but not painfully exaggerated, midrange frequencies are pleasingly clear, and highs are bright and crisp without being overly harsh or strident. Though not the last word in absolute purity or accuracy, the comfortable CX-300s offer many attributes of higher-end models at a bargain price.

CM

Sennheiser HD650

\$495

sennheiserusa.com

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

Reviewed by DS, Issue 156

Shure E5c/SE530

\$549/\$449

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 the Ray Samuels Emmeline Hornet products and a good source (no MP3s, please), the E5c has electrostatic-like resolution, surprising bass extension, and outstanding clarity.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 155

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 ear 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 purity and extension, though on some recordings it can sound strident with strings.

Reviewed by DS, Issue 156

ITAS

FatMan iPod

\$649

fat-man.co.uk

Fatman's two-piece iTube is a combination iPod dock and 13Wpc vacuum-tube integrated amplifier. The amp sports two inputs—one for the dock (which comes with an excellent remote) and one for an auxiliary source. Though not terribly powerful, the Fatman is long on tonal purity, resolution, and soundstaging, making it one of the best purpose-built iPod systems we've heard.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 173



MSB iLink

\$1,999 (w/o iPod); \$2,349 (w 80GB iPod)

msbtech.com

MSB has overcome that bottleneck by using the iPod in a high-end system with the iLink. This small iPod docking station, used in conjunction with an MSB-modified iPod, taps into the iPod's digital bitstream (bypassing its inferior DACs) and outputs an SPDIF signal for conversion by your outboard high-end DAC. The iLink even works wirelessly, allowing you to access your music collection from the listening seat.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 172

EQUIPMENT RACKS

Billy Bags Equipment Racks

\$300-\$1,200 (for Standard Series)

billybags.com

These sturdy, sensibly priced equipment racks lack state-of-the-art features such as those found in, for example, the Grand Prix products, but are effective, highly functional, and attrac-

tive, and can be ordered in custom configurations. Optional lead-shot loading and spikes elevate performance. The Pro-Series increases prices up to \$3000.

RH owns a set of Billy Bags racks

Finite Elemente "Spider"

\$550-\$2,150

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. Eighteen 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

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

SolidTech Rack of Silence Reference 3

Price: \$1,195 (Feet of Silence, \$500 set of four; Disc of Silence, \$275 set of four)

solid-tech.net

The Swedish-made SolidTech Rack of Silence features rigid extruded aluminum risers to which are attached sturdy, X-shaped, skeletal equipment "shelves." SolidTech's vibration-isolation strategy works astonishingly well, so that equipment installed on a properly adjusted Rack of Silence seems to step up a grade or two in resolution and detail, while noise floors plummet.

CM

Walker Audio Equipment Rack

\$4500-\$7500

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 brass tubes and balanced on Walker Audio's huge Valid Point feet. Like all of Walker Audio's tweaks, the Walker rack kills vibration without killing the life of the music.

JV

POWER CONDITIONERS

Audience Adept Response

\$4200**audience-av.com**

This expensive but extremely effective 12-outlet conditioner delivered significant improvements in bass definition and impact, overall resolution, and soundstage depth. Build-quality is exemplary.

Reviewed by Max Shepherd, Issue 162

Richard Gray Power Company 600S, 1200S, and Pole Pig

\$1395, \$2195, and \$1595**PoY '04****richardgraypowercompany.com**

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, block-buster amplifiers.

JV (1200S reviewed by CM, Issue 144)

Monster Cable HTS series power conditioners

\$100-\$700**monstercable.com**

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

RH

PS Audio Duet, Quintet, PowerPlant Premier

\$295, \$495, \$2195**psaudio.com**

The PS Audio Duet, Quintet, and Power Plant Premier provide superb surge-protection at a

wide range of prices. The PowerPlant Premier, however, goes much further. You may not hear a striking consistent improvement using its output—which is capable of dealing with all but the largest possible Class A amps—but you'll never have a bad moment of low-level noise; sensitive equipment like a video projector is likely to live longer; and you'll know you're getting the best your equipment can deliver.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 174



Shunyata Hydra-8/Hydra-2 AC Power Conditioners

\$2495/\$395**shunyata.com****GE '05 PoY '06**

When used as a complete system with the Hydra-8 on the front-end components and Hydra-2 on the power amps, along with Shunyata's AC cords, the improvement in sound quality is nothing short of spectacular. The improvement in low-level resolution alone is worth the price of admission. But the Shunyata system also renders a huge increase in soundstage focus, size, and depth, and midrange and treble liquidity. The best AC-conditioning system RH has heard.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 163

Walker Audio Valid Points and Velocitor Power Line Enhancers

Valid Point Supertuning kit, \$525; Velocitor with Valid Points, power cord, and dedicated stand (\$3445)

walkeraudio.com

Cryogenically treated, in case you want to bring it back to life in a decade or so, the Velocitor does undeniably lovely things for the sound of gear that is plugged into it or into the circuit it is plugged into. The Valid Points, Walker's massive tiptoes, are sensorially effective under most components, particularly when used with Walker Resonance Control discs, which, themselves, can have a salubrious effect on top of gear.

JV

ACCESSORIES

AcousTech Electronic Stylus Force Gauge

\$185

Getting the most out of any turntable rig requires an accurate vertical tracking force

setting—and yes, kids, you can easily hear up and down changes as slight as a tenth of a gram. Not only is AcousTech's new gauge a relative bargain; it is small, has a backlit display, is incredibly easy to use, measures tracking forces from 0.001 to 5,000 grams at the height of an LP's surface, and is said to be accurate to within ± 0.002 grams.

WG

Acoustic Room Systems (now part of Cinema Tech)

\$20,000-\$50,000**PoY '02 GE '03****acousticroomsystems.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, but none has been as effective or blended into the décor as well as the Acoustic Room Systems package. 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

ASC Tube Traps

\$498-\$2638**tubetrap.com**

Unless you have a professionally designed and treated room, Tube Traps from Acoustic Sciences Corporation are absolutely indispensable to improving your system's sound. With strategic placement and orientation, they can be used to solve a wide range of acoustic problems. Boomy bass can be cured with a pair of 16" Full Rounds in the corners behind the loudspeakers. Placed along the sidewalls between you and the loudspeakers, Tube Traps kill unwanted sidewall reflections, prevent flutter echo, and aid in diffusion. A single Tube Trap in the center of the wall behind the loudspeakers can expand soundstage depth. There are lots of questionable acoustic products on the market, but Tube Traps are the real deal.

RH

Audioquest Anti-Static Record Brush

\$20**audioquest.com**

What's the best way to keep clean records clean without attracting dust particles? One of our favorite methods is to use Audioquest's anti-static record brush, whose bristles are made up of "over a million polished carbon fibers." A swing-down brush guard doubles as a bristle cleaner to prevent dirt build-up.

CM

Auralex Acoustics Studio-foam Wedges

Price varies

auralex.com

If you've logged much time in home recording studios, odds are that you've already seen and heard Auralex Studiofoam Wedges in action. Studiofoam is highly absorptive, and therefore can be just the ticket for taming slap echoes or audible comb-filtering effects that can result when listeners are seated too close to the back walls of their listening spaces.

CM

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 sound-stage width, depth, and realism, and brings a truer, more lifelike 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 Spirit Level

\$45

musicalsurrroundings.com

Turntables sound their best when they are level—something careful listeners will want to check at set-up time and verify periodically. (Remember: Furniture and floors sometimes settle a bit over time.) Use a good multi-axis spirit level such as this one from Clearaudio to keep your 'table on the level.

CM

Clearaudio Strobe-disc and Strobe Light

\$60 and \$150

musicalsurrroundings.com

Featuring grooves that create the additional stylus drag necessary to accurately measure your turntable's speed—while at the same time doubling as a cartridge break-in device—Clearaudio's Strobe-disc and Strobe Light are great tools for the serious vinyl junkie.

HP's Workshop, Issue 159

Clearaudio Matrix Record Cleaner

\$3200

musicalsurrroundings.com

Clearaudio's Matrix record cleaner is the Porsche 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.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 142

Clearaudio Double Matrix Record Cleaner

\$4400

musicalsurrroundings.com

The Double Matrix not only does everything that the Matrix does, it does it to both sides of your records simultaneously, effectively cutting in half the amount of time you spend cleaning your LPs, and it does it considerably more quietly than the Matrix, while also adding effective anti-static treatment to the formula. If you're seriously into vinyl, the Double Matrix is unquestionably the record cleaner of choice.

JV, review forthcoming

Echo Busters

\$175 and up

echobusters.com

The cool thing about Echo Busters, as well as most other room treatment, is you don't have to buy the whole shebang at once. SK recommends starting off with a couple of Bass Busters or maybe just a set of Corner Busters. The effect is dramatic and cumulative, and you can add on as your budget allows.

Reviewed by SK, Issue 159

Express Machining Digital Stylus Force Gauge

\$160

musicdirect.com

This excellent gauge is accurate to 1/10th gram, very easy to use and store, and an affordable alternative to the Winds ALM-1 (see below).

WG



Feickert Universal Protractor

\$250

acousticsounds.com

Feickert's invaluable protractor includes a white disc with markings on each side—for Baerwald and Lofgren geometries—and 50 and 60Hz

strobe patterns for setting speed. This is an impressively machined aluminum measuring-device that turns accurately measuring stylus-to-pivot distances from hair-pulling frustration to child's play, and includes a step-by-step instruction booklet that makes fine tuning your cartridge's geometry a remarkably easy procedure.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 171

Furutech deMag

\$1800

furutech.com

What's that you say, demagnetize vinyl—a plastic? Yes, it seems that the pigment added to the plastic contains small amounts of ferrous material that magnetizes vinyl LPs. A quick 20-second zap to each side of an LP results in audible improvements to noise floor, dynamic range, and perceived resolution. The same goes for optical media, including DVDs, and evidently cables and power cords, too.

WG

Gryphon Exorcist and Black Exorcist Demagnetizers

\$230 each

acousticsounds.com

These nifty devices are designed to do the same thing (one system-wide, the other for phono cartridges): 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

Lyra SPT Stylus Cleaner

\$44

immediasound.com

Mission accomplished. The SPT puts the fluid where it belongs. Lyra's formulation scrubs each precious stylus clean without leaving any residue and ultimately reducing the compliance of the cantilever. A tiny angled brush is included.

NG

Nordost Eco 3 Spray

\$44 (eight-ounce bottle)

nordost.com

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

WG

Precision Audio Cable Elevators Plus

\$160 (set of eight); \$20 each
musicdirect.com

Cable Elevators are porcelain cradles designed to lift cables and interconnects off the floor, shielding them from vibration. The salubrious effect they can have on just about every aspect of sound is hard to believe (though, like tiptoes, they can also thin tone colors out a bit).

Reviewed by **JV**, Issue 142

RPG Diffusor Systems B.A.D. (Binary Amplitude Diffusor) panels

Price varies
rpginc.com

RPG's B.A.D. panels are thin absorptive diffuser panels that can help tame room acoustics without quashing dynamics or swallowing midrange and high-frequency details. The design of B.A.D. panels is deceptively simple, but their effects can be remarkable. In rooms treated with B.A.D. panels, speakers often exhibit lower coloration, more focused imaging, and deeper soundstages.

CM

Sanus SF26 Steel Foundation speaker stands

\$170/pair
sanus.com

Sanus' thoughtfully designed and beautifully executed SF series speaker stands do everything you could want a good set of stands to do, and at a price that makes sense. Strong, rigid, and resonance-free, they include provisions for installing sand or lead-shot damping, and are easy to assemble.

Reviewed by **CM**, **AVgM**, Issue 1

Shakti Hallographs

\$999/pair
shakti.com

Master of the inexplicable, Shakti's Ben Piazza has followed up on his magic "Shakti stones" with yet another impossible-to-explain-but-effective-as-claimed item, the Hallographs. With direct-radiating speakers, these large, rotatable, free-standing, tuning-fork-shaped items work some kind of voodoo when placed in the corners of a room (behind the speakers), masking chaotic wall reflections and "clarifying" the soundfield (just as Shakti says they do).

JV

Shure SFG-2 Stylus Force Gauge

\$20
shure.com

Although ultimately not as accurate as the best digital gauges, the classic "teeter-totter" Shure is simple to use and cheap, and does the trick very nicely.

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. The Sinks are exceptionally effective with non-suspended turntables.

PS

Vibrapods

\$5.99 each
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 more extended bass and smoother highs. At four for \$24, who says great tweaks have to be expensive? Just out, Vibrapod Cones—use them as standalone footers or combine with Vibrapods.

DD

Walker Audio Prelude Record Cleaning System

\$85
walkeraudio.com

There are many excellent record-cleaning solutions out there, but this one, developed by analog guru Lloyd Walker, is superb. Designed to work in conjunction with any record-cleaning machine, Prelude really does reveal details that have gone unheard beneath layers of dust and wear.

JV

Winds ALM-1 Arm Load Meter

\$399
musicalsurroundings.com

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

JV

BOOKS

The Complete Guide to High-End Audio (Third Edition)

Robert Harley

Acapella Publishing, 640 pp., \$34.95 (paper), \$44.95 (cloth)

Hifibooks.com

The most complete, up-to-date, and useful guide to the high end money can buy, filled with information about how audio components work, how they should be set up, and how they can be optimized after setup. Indispensable to neophyte and veteran audiophiles alike.

JV

Home Theater for Everyone (Revised Second Edition)

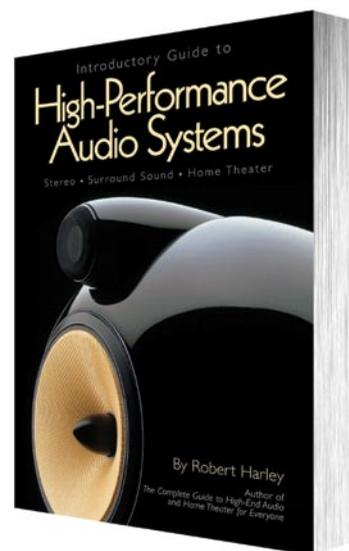
Robert Harley

Acapella Publishing, 272 pp., \$19.95

Hifibooks.com

Like its audio-only companion piece, *The Complete Guide*, *Home Theater for Everyone* is an up-to-date, encyclopedic compendium of essential information about home-theater components, setup, and tweaking. Don't go to the (home) movies without it!

JV



Introductory Guide to High-Performance Audio Systems

Robert Harley

Acapella Publishing, 240 pp., \$19.95

Hifibooks.com

The *Introductory Guide* does for the novice what *The Complete Guide* does for the more experienced audiophile: provides an entirely lucid handbook of genuinely useful information

about stereo/multichannel gear and setup. No one explains technical matters to the layman better than our Mr. Harley.

Reviewed by **JV**, Issue 172

The JBL Story: 60 years of Audio Innovation **John Eargle**

JBL Pro Audio Publications, 320 pp., \$29.95

The late, indisputably great John Eargle's last book: a love letter to the James B. Lansing company, for whom Mr. Eargle labored so long and well as a technical advisor. A book that will bring nostalgic tears to the eyes of those of you who remember hi-fi way back when.

JV

McIntosh ..."for the love of music" **Ken Kessler**

McIntosh Laboratory Inc., 315 pp., \$150

This profusely illustrated and carefully researched book on the celebrated audio company is lively and informative and just plain fun to read. It is primarily a social history, but the social history is irresistible, and the book gives a wonderful feel for the early decades of American high fidelity.

REG

The Master Handbook of Acoustics, Fourth Edition **F. Alton Everest**

McGraw-Hill/TAB, 592 pp., \$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, but explains the basic physics that audiophiles need to know when choosing or treating listening rooms.

RH

Mastering Audio: The Art and the Science **Bob Katz**

Focal Press, 319 pp., \$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 recording the music you enjoy, and learn more about digital audio, this comprehensive, insightful, and accessible book is without peer.

RH

Music, Sound, and Technology **John Eargle**

Springer, 368 pp., \$114.95

Meant primarily for college students, 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 various acoustic (and electric) instruments make the sounds they make and what those sounds comprise, harmonically, dynamically, and temporally, Eargle's is the standard text.

JV

Music, The Brain, and Ecstasy **Robert Jourdain**

Perennial, 400 pp., \$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 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.

RH

The NPR Listener's Encyclopedia of Classical Music **Ted Libbey**

Workman, 979 pp., \$19.95

TAS contributor Ted Libbey has written a must-buy for the classical music lover—from the novice to the knowledgeable. Written in a friendly

yet informed style, this book is not only chock-full of information, it also has a very cool interactive feature (via the Naxos Web site) that allows you to hear recorded examples while you're reading.

WG

Quad—The Closest Approach **Ken Kessler**

International Audio Group, 215 pp., \$80

U.K. audio writer Ken Kessler has documented the history, products, and contributions to audio of one of the seminal high-end companies. 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.

RH

Sound Bites: 50 Years of Hi-Fi News **Ken Kessler and Steve Harris**

IPC Media, London, 224 pp., £14.95 (U.S. availability: MusicDirect or amazon.com)

While *Hi-Fi News* at fifty is the occasion for this book, it's no self-congratulatory piece of puffery. After a long chapter on "pre history," i.e., telescoping audio in the first half of the last century, it's structured as a loose, anecdotal history of hi-fi, centering principally on the men who made the medium from the beginning of stereo to the present.

Reviewed by **PS**, Issue 162

This is Your Brain on Music **Daniel Levitin**

Dutton, 314 pp., \$24.95

Author Daniel Levitin left a successful career as a rock-music producer to study neuroscience—specifically to explore the questions of how we experience music and why music is so fundamental to daily life. In a lucid and engaging style, Levitin guides us through the elements of music and relates those elements to the underlying workings of the brain. A must-read for all music lovers.

RH



HP's

2007 Editors' Choice Awards

SPEAKER SYSTEMS

Nola Grand Reference Mk IV.2

\$146,000

nolaspeakers.com

Over a six-year period, designer Carl Marchisotto has taken this towering multidriver hybrid design from a romantic speaker of the "big sound" school to, in its latest incarnation, a system capable, with carefully selected affiliated equipment, of a stunningly high level of realism. He has largely solved the discontinuity between its large woofer towers and main speakers, and has freed the top octaves to become capable of the airiness of the real thing. In retrospect, I'd call the References a work of art in progress.

Magnepan 20.1

\$12,500

magnepan.com

With one quite significant reservation, this is the speaker system, if someone pushed me to one of those paint-yourself-in-a-corner judgments, I'd choose to live with. It is, top to bottom, as uncolored in the sense of getting music's tone colors right, as anything on the market, including the old Quad electrostatics of yesteryore. Designer Jim Winey's true ribbon tweeter, updated in the point-one version, is as neutral as any high-frequency reproducer on the market; and the blending of the planar panels below is so good you might not hear the slight discrepancy unless you are an audio martinet. But the reservation is serious: The woofer panels flap significantly if you push the speaker to rock-music levels, which is why a subwoofer is required. And so far none of them I've heard makes a seamless mating (I use the fast Nola Thunderbolts when the 20s are in the multichannel mode. I cross them over at such a low frequency that any discontinuity is minimized, and I can't say I ain't happy.)

Hansen Kings V. 2

\$74,000

Hansenaudio.com

In an audio world overflowing with large multidriver, multiway speaker systems, the

Hansen is, the way I hear it, close to unique in the seamlessness of the top-to-bottom sound and in the coherency of its character. Too many hot-sellers in today's market sound like boxes of drivers, each with its own sound and its own dispersion and resonance characteristics. The speaker goes astonishingly low—it can make dust fall from the ceiling and it can be played at levels you won't use if you want to keep your hearing. But they do this with exceedingly low distortion and without the world's biggest amps. Its enclosure design is such that it (seems to me) contributes little or no "box" sound of its own, as its competitors mostly do. Good enough to be a reference.

See **HP's Workshop, Issue 168**

Reference 3a Grand Veena speakers

\$7000

reference3a.com

Review to come. But let this be said for the here and now: At about a tenth of the cost of its nearest sonic competitor, this speaker is a stunning achievement and perfect for the not-too-well-heeled music lover who doesn't live in a cathedral-sized space.

TURNTABLES & INTEGRATED TURNTABLES

Blue Pearl JEM

\$90,000

acousticdreams.com

First off, my personal qualification here: I haven't had access to all the Big Spender turntable designs, so making a comparison and thus assessing the Pearl's relative worth and relative truth is something I wish I could do, but cannot. However, Pearl herself is, taken on her own terms, mighty impressive, if not entirely all she should be at the price. We've had some problems with her motor drive (not serious) and some acoustic breakthrough on her secondary mounting platform (the one with the platter, etc.), which we also managed to jiggle our way 'round. The sound is smooth beyond my experience with any 'table, and

almost "sweet," with extension down into the subs without the artificial transistor-like bass from older Clearaudio designs. Finely tuned, the Pearl is so subtle in dynamics that she widens the dynamic scaling of an LP.

EAR Disc Master Magnetic Drive

\$17,500

ear-usa.com

Much discussed in my original review. I've had some second thoughts here, none that undermine the audible superiority of its magnetic-drive design, but a few you ought to know about. The belt that drives the lower magnet assembly can become loose, which means warp-wow that will turn Lang Lang into Spike Jones. It can be tightened and there ought to be instructions on how to do this. It isn't the best built 'table I've seen (the VPI Scoutmaster Reference scores it), and it doesn't have the bottom-end authority (despite the freedom from motor noise in LP playback) that it should. But if it's the future you want to hear, you may start here. Oh yes, also, to my dismay, it's harder to get than an authentic remnant of dinosaur DNA.

VPI Super Scoutmaster Reference & JMW 10.5i arm

\$7400

vpi.com

Harry Weisfeld's latest version of the Scoutmaster takes its performance and sound into an entirely new category. One marked by lower noise, lower coloration, faster dynamics, and a top-octave airiness I didn't associate with VPI designs. Review in the works.

PICKUP ARMS & MOVING-COIL CARTRIDGES

Graham Phantom B-44 tonearm

\$4300

graham-engineering.com

Another work of art that has progressed from

HP's WORKSHOP

performance I respected (because I thought I could see its future potential) but hardly loved, given a cool, whitish analytic quality. Boy, has that ever changed. Who knew a unipivot could sound this focused, this precise (without that quality being a distortion), and this free from resonances, euphonic or otherwise? Set it up right, and it can be said to be romantic; if you understand the nature of music, especially as captured on LP, it's romance itself. Further thoughts to come. Oh yes, the new titanium arm wand is the one to have.

Tri-Planar Mk VI tonearm

\$3900

triplanar.com

The Tri-Planar design, the creation of the late Herb Papier, has undergone an update to the Mark VII version. But the VI is well worth seeking out, especially if you're given to the unlikely but convincing combination of high accuracy and high romanticism.

See **HP's Workshop, Issue 165**

Dynavector XV-1s cartridge

\$4250

dynavector.com.jp

A long-standing reference at HP's listening studio in Sea Cliff, one that now faces some sudden and stiff competition from two other designs. Updates and reviews in the works. Sometimes it's tough being at the top of the mountain.

See **HP's Workshop, Issue 165**

47/Lab Miyabi Black Ebony cartridge

\$3950

sakurasytems.com

Depending on which pickup arm you use, the Miyabi can, given its weight and higher than normal resonance point, either have an overly big but articulated bottom octave, or one in the right sonic proportions. Fine, say, in a VPI JMW design; euphonicly delirious in the Tri-Planar. So, used with care, of reference quality.

See **HP's Workshop, Issue 165**

PHONOSTAGES

ASR Basis Exclusive (battery operated)

\$6950

halfnoteaudio.com

We have several other phonostages on hand that are impressive, especially the deluxe version from Aesthetix's Jim White and the Groove Plus from Tom Evans, but in terms of a noise

floor so low the sound seems to be riding on a velvet carpet, nothing can compare to this battery-operated (and transistorized) unit from Germany. When updated to its second version, the top octaves opened up and let the air flow in. Its character is on the yin side of the spectrum. And thanks to some changes in Europe's Common Union regulations, this (and all other electronics using lead in their construction) will have to be updated. As in alchemical times, gold will replace the lead here.

See **HP's Workshop, Issue 165**

LINESTAGES & A PREAMP

conrad-johnson Anniversary Reference Triode Mk III

\$25,000

conrad-johnson.com

Put plainly, a triumph. Here we have another design work-of-art that has progressed through three versions now, each with lower coloration and lower distortion, both improvements augmenting and allowing the linestage's superior musicality to shine forth. State of the art.

Joule Electra LA-150 Mk II

\$5200

joule electra.com

A best buy in the increasingly pricey world of audio electronics. Its closest kin is the Audio Research sound of many moons ago, though here we find lower distortion, staggering bass, and a more romantic (much more romantic) sound.

See **HP's Workshop, Issue 174**

Burmester 011 preamplifier

\$15,995

burmester.de

A full-fledged preamplifier, with a quite good phonostage and sound in keeping with the quality that Burmester has achieved in its recent designs. That is to say, this thing is as close to neutral as I've heard in any solid-state design, a bit on the yang side, and still so transparent you might feel it's one of those clear ways you can see forever (into the soundstage). Low distortion, superb bottom-octave response, and a sweet string sound. A keeper.

See **HP's Workshop, Issue 165**

AMPLIFIERS

Western Electric Type WE97-A (triodes)

\$90,000 the pair

westernelectric.com

This amplifier has taken triode design to what seems, for now, its outer limits, with eight 300B tubes per amp, and a rated power happily in excess of 100 watts. It has all the virtues of triode design—soundfield so dimensional it makes other tubed designs sound flat-chested—and few of the shortcomings, though it will run out of power in the fundamentals at the very bottom if you put the pedal to the floor. And, methinks, its tip-top octave is a bit muted and soft. But what it has, as few other designs of any kind have, is authority. Review in the works.

Joule Electra Destiny VZN-350 OTL monoblocks

\$30,000 the pair

joule-electra.com

Speaking of authority, the Destiny amplifiers take everything that was true, faithful, and authoritative about Jud Barber's Grand Marquis amps and magnify these qualities. What is missing, as in some of Barber's other designs, is an output transformer, whose absence makes for a triode-like benefit: removing a principal source of tube-amplification coloration from the circuit, and, in the case of Barber's design, without serious sonic compromises. And this many-splendored tube design has enough power to drive anything to any level. Wait and see. Review to come.

ASR Emitter II Exclusive Blue (battery-operated hybrid)

\$24,950

halfnoteaudio.com

This classic solid-state design has recently been updated, thanks to the Common Union's new standards for electronics, and now comes in a version almost gold-plated—there is so much of the shiny stuff in it. What are battery operated are the input stages, which, taken in tandem with ASR's totally battery-powered phonostage, achieve a supernaturally quiet backdrop (read low noise floor). It is a stereo amp with prodigious power reserves, but you have to handle it with care.

See **HP's Workshop, Issue 165**

Wyetech Labs Sapphire (triode) amp

\$7800 the pair [with 300B tubes]
wyetechlabs.com

If it's the last word in sonic triode purity and wide frequency response you want, this 18-watt monoblock is the way to go. The bass is the best I've heard on any triode amp and the top end is extended and silvery. Now if only there were a high-efficiency speaker its equal.

Burmester 91 I Mk III

\$17,995

burmester.de

Given the prices, it's hard to call anything from Burmester a best buy, but if you want a powerhouse of an amp that doesn't sound one whit like transistors and that is a technological marvel, look no further. We have used it as a reference on virtually every speaker in the house and find no serious or even objectionable shortcoming. If you want a comparative sound from the U.S., in terms of purity and low coloration with a touch of yang, you'll have to shop Spectral.

See HP's Workshop, Issue 165

Antique Sound Labs Hurricane DT II monoblocks

\$6200 the pair
divertech.com

Recently updated and better than ever, this 200-watt monoblock design, even at a significant price increase (parts costs, it is said, are rising because of an expanding Chinese audio industry). Oh, yes, no *belle dame* in looks.

See HP's Workshop, Issue 174

CD PLAYERS

EMM Labs CDSA CD/SACD player

\$20,000

emmlabs.com

State of the art, period. Detailed comments to come.

47 Lab Model 4704 CD Transport pi/Tracer

\$24,999

sakurasytems.com

See HP's Workshop, Issue 163

Edge G CD Player

\$5268

edgeamps.com

See HP's Workshop, Issue 163

EAR Acute CD Player

\$5494

info@ear-usa.com

These compact-disc players were reviewed in detail and with significant cross-comparisons in Issue 163 as part of an exploration of a new generation of digital playback gear that didn't mimic analog sound with euphonic colorations but showed the strengths of digital itself. The 47 Lab was the most neutral and least colored. The reviews should be read in context.

See HP's Workshop, Issue 163

MULTICHANNEL GEAR

The Super Maggie System (multichannel): Magnepan 20.1 [2], Magnepan 3.6 [2], CC-2s [2 stacked], Nola Thunderbolt subwoofers [4]

See HP's Workshop, Issue 151

Edge GAV amplifier (as tested, six 500-watt modules)

\$9750, six-channel version (\$1250 per extra module)

edgeamps.com

Review to come.

EMM Labs CDS SE disc transport/SACD player

\$8000

emmlabs.com

Review to come.

EMM Labs CDS DAE

\$13,500

emmlabs.com

Review to come.

CABLES & A STAND

Nordost Odin cables and interconnects

Interconnects: \$16,000 per pair, one meter (\$2000 each extra half-meter pair)

Speaker cables: \$20,000 per pair, one meter (\$3000 each extra half-meter)

nordost.com

It's saying a mouthful to call these, by far, the best Nordost cables of all; and they are priced so far out of sight as to require a financial telescope to find their orbits. Let's hope the technology finds its way into some connectors

less catastrophically expensive, so you can hear just how good these things are. (I am working on a comparison between these and the Valhallas, down the road.)

Kubala-Sosna Emotion Series cables and interconnects

\$2700, one meter, speaker or interconnect (extra half meter pair \$400)

kubala-sosna.com

If the Nordost prices drive you crazy, with the Kubala-Sosna you have connectors indistinguishable from the Valhallas in the middle frequencies, more romantic at either frequency extreme. Quite, quite lovely.

Halcyonics Micro 60 isolation sensing device

\$10,400 (estimated)

Halcyonics Micro 40

\$8700 (estimated)

halcyonics.com

Designed as platforms upon which to replace electronic microscopes, and high tech at its highest (comments to come), these Micros, large (60) and smaller (40), write the book on turntable and CD player isolation.

ACCESSORIES

I have omitted some accessories because I have written sneak previews of them before, in the last issue—the Audience AR line conditioner, the Hallograph soundstage tuning stalks, and the Stillpoint equipment isolators.

Coming Attractions

Several of the components I am presently evaluating would, at first blush, belong either on this list or in a future golden-ear issue. But by the time you read these choices, I will have a new generation of super-stuff upon which to report findings.

Mind you, I am not saying which are which, but these are currently in the works: The Reference 3a Grand Aveena speakers, the Lumen White speakers, the Scena References, a new super cartridge from Clearaudio (their best in years), the Air Tight cartridge, the Vintage Audio redesigns of Stuart Hegeman's classic Citation One and Two, the Antique Sound Labs deluxe Flora EX line stage, revised ASR electronics, and much much more. Wait and see. Write to me at HP'sAudioMall@aol.com. **TAS**