

STEREO • MULTICHANNEL AUDIO • MUSIC

**the absolute sound**

2010

**editors',  
choice  
awards**

We pick the best gear at every price level in every product category.

MARCH 2010 • \$6.99 US / \$6.99 CAN / £4.50 UK • DISPLAY UNTIL MARCH 15TH 2010

# *the absolute sound*

## 2010 Editors' Choice Awards

Welcome to the 2010 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 writers have selected as most worthy of your consideration. These are the components we ourselves would buy—or recommend to friends and family. Each product category is divided into price ranges, with components listed in order of ascending cost (though a few items, like cables and accessories, are listed alphabetically for clarity's sake). Each recommendation is also accompanied by a capsule review, the original reviewer's name or initials, and the issue the review appeared in. Products that have won a Golden Ear Award (GE) or Product of the Year Award (POY) are accompanied by icons indicating the award and the year in which the award was won. Note that in a few cases a product may have been reviewed in one of our sister publications, *Playback* 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 one or more writer's extensive experience with it. Given that this is the high end, where components generally have long lifespans, some of our recommendations look back several years. At the same time, in an effort to be as selective as possible, we have dropped some components that appeared on last year's list, usually because they have been discontinued but sometimes because fresh competition has caused us to reconsider.

TAS founder Harry Pearson's selections can be found in this issue's HP's Workshop.

## LOUDSPEAKERS

## Under \$500

## PSB Alpha B1

\$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 experienced in this modest price range. Only the nebulous soundstaging is less than excellent. Neil Gader, 170

GE  
07

## Paradigm Mini Monitor V.6

\$478

*paradigm.com*

The newest version of Paradigm's second least expensive speaker provides more than a taste of what music sounds like played through speakers made by people who care about the sound of live music. The Minis offer a surprising level of sonic quality for a ridiculously low price. They aren't elegant looking, but if you close your eyes you won't care. Steven Stone, 190

PY  
09

## Usher S520

\$479

*usheraudiousa.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. Chris Martens in AVGM, 10

## Focal 705V and 706V

\$495/\$650

*audioplusservices.com*

Although nominally a bookshelf speaker, the Focal 706V delivers an oversized presentation, with the bass power, weight, and extension of many small floorstanding units.

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. If you can get by with a little less bass extension and output consider the 705V for \$150 less. Robert Harley, 173; 705V reviewed by SS, 183

## \$500-\$1000

## Magnepan MMG

\$599

*magnepan.com*

At just under \$600, it is hard to imagine a better speaker than this mini-Maggie, provided that you have the space for it and a powerful-enough amplifier. Like all Maggie dipoles, the thing sounds open, airy, coherent, and unusually lifelike. Not the last word in resolution, low bass, or top treble, the MMG'll still give you a larger taste of high-end sound than virtually anything at or near its price. Jonathan Valin, 177

GE  
08PY  
07

## B&amp;W 685

\$650

*bwspeakers.com*

B&W's 685 has a fine balance, tremendous rhythmic authority, an open soundstage, impressive bass response, a singing treble, plays loudly without strain, and, thanks to a forward-firing port, can be mounted on a wall, shelf, or stand. A slight, lingering edge in the uppermost treble makes it both exciting to listen to as well as slightly sharp with female voices. Wayne Garcia, 176

GE  
08PY  
07

## Triangle Titus EX

\$995

*vmac-services.com*

Within its SPL limits the Titus delivers surprisingly good sound. Its exponential horn tweeter is physically time-aligned behind the midrange/woofer, and this phase coherence produces very accurate imaging and soundstage reproduction. Compared with the classic

“British sound” of the comparably sized Harbeth P-3ES2s, the Triangle speakers display similar upper bass and lower midrange. Once broken in the Titus EX makes beautiful Gallic-flavored music. SS, 186

## AV123 X-Static

\$999

*av123.com*

Although its price has gone up since our review appeared, AV123's X-Static remains a stunning value. Designed in Colorado and built in Columbia, this medium-sized, open-baffle, D'Appolito configured tower is very musical and develops a remarkably large, three-dimensional, almost spooky-real soundstage. The only quibble is a slight grainy texture in the midrange. Internet-direct sales only. WG, 189

## \$1000-\$1500

## B&amp;W CM1

\$1000

*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 pure 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. RH, 173

## PSB Imagine B

\$1000

*psbspeakers.com*

Think Imagine T minus a midbass driver and a floorstanding enclosure. There's the same voice in the expressive midrange and treble and, with only minor exceptions, the same superb balance. The B can't quite chew on bass lines and kick drums and organ riffs as if they were rice cakes like the T can, but as if to compensate the B seems a bit lighter and fleet of foot in the upper mids and lower treble. NG, 189

## Magnepan MG12/QR

\$1195

*magnepan.com*

This affordable two-way quasi-ribbon brings you remarkably close to the best performance Magnepan's are capable of. When it is properly placed—around three feet from walls—its clarity is addictive, with a wide deep soundstage and terrific transient response. The MG12 performs satisfyingly down to about 50Hz, and because of its larger panel has a slightly bigger soundfield than the amazing bargain-basement MMGs. JV 177



## PSB Image T6

\$1199

*psbspeakers.com*

Paul Barton's latest creation again sets a standard for performance in the class. The T6's dual 6.5" woofers deliver real bass down to 35Hz (−3dB) with realistic warmth and fullness coupled to a very clean, pure, and transparent midrange. The bass tends toward the warm, full, and “bloomy” rather than dry and tight side. The treble is clean and extended, albeit with a bit of excess energy. The T6's low-diffraction cabinet has paid off in outstanding imaging; the T6s easily disappear into the soundfield. A high-degree of performance for the price, concluded REG. Robert E. Greene, 200

### Spendor S3/5R \$1395

*bluebirdmusic.com*

Now in its third iteration, designated by the "R" suffix, the S3/5R boasts greater neutrality, for a tonal balance of strong appeal to those who value musical naturalness above all else. Deep bass is wholly lacking, midbass is modest, and loudness levels are extremely limited, meaning that small room applications and moderate playback levels are mandated. But within these restrictions, a very accurate and musical subcompact monitor. Paul Seydor, 182

### Vienna Acoustics Haydn Grand \$1495

*sumikoaudio.net*

Sheer transparency and musicality make this Viennese mini as sweet as a Sacher torte. Factor in the exquisite construction and finish, the richly detailed midbass, and stunning soundstaging, and the result is no less than one of the high-end's great little values. Only a bit of spotlighting in the treble suggests a less than neutral tonal balance, but it's a minor glitch in an overall glowing effort. NG, 176

### 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. Arnie Williams, 157

### \$1500-\$2000

#### Rega RS5

**\$1600**

*soundorg.com*

Rega doesn't outsource—all its products are British made. With a Rega-designed silk dome tweeter, midrange, and side-firing woofer, the RS5 presents an impressively transparent window to recordings, excellent clarity, an uncluttered stage, a large transparent presentation, fine focus, and nearly spot-on tonal balance. Though some will prefer a more muscular sound, the RS5 will appeal to those who prefer white burgundy to California chardonnay. WG, 196



#### PSB Synchrony Two B

**\$1750**

*psbspeakers.com*

Another brilliant two-way compact from the wand of Paul Barton and crew. The "Mini-Me" to the larger Synchrony Two, the Two B is more of a classic "voice" speaker and a windfall for chorale listeners and singer/songwriter aficionados. Capable of solid 60Hz extension, the Two B only shows a bit of port push and wobbly pitch as it approaches its bottom-end bump stops. NG, 177

#### Reference 3A Dulcet

**\$1790**

*reference3A.com*

True to its name, this Canadian bonbon produces smooth and melodious sound, and as a bonus is reasonably well balanced through the bass range. Its sonic demeanor is such that it should happily partner with an even-less-than-

sterling digital front end. Dick Olsher, 171

#### 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? Tom Martin, 169

#### Magnepan MG 1.6QR

**\$1895**

*magnepan.com*

Now a recognized classic, the Magnepan's MG 1.6 is simply one of the greatest high-end speaker values. Its bass is well defined and tuneful down to a respectable 40Hz; its highs are sweet albeit a bit soft; its mids are magical. A music lover's delight, it needs space and power to sound its best. The speaker JV himself would buy, were he shopping in this sector of the market. JV, 124

#### Quad 22L.2

**\$1900**

*quad-hifi.uk.co*

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 and 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. Jim Hannon, 156

#### PMC DB11

**\$1929**

*pmc-speakers.com*

Known affectionately as the "dinky box" and a mere 11.4 inches tall, this stand-mount compact with its transmission-

line enclosure challenges the stereotype of the tiny two-way by actually letting you relax and sink into the music. In tonality, micro-dynamics, transparency and imaging, the DB11 is one of the more balanced small speakers available with an approachable and personable sound and a warm bloom that harkens back to the traditional small British monitor. NG, 198

#### Epos M16i

**\$1999**

*musicballaudio.com*

An English-designed, Chinese-built speaker possessing truly special performance qualities, the Epos M16 can whisper yet still be clearly heard; it can play loudly without getting aggressive; it is tonally quite neutral, has excellent rhythmic drive, and, with the best recordings, can do quite the disappearing act. WG, 179

### \$2000-\$3000

#### B&W CM7

**\$2000**

*bwspeakers.com*

Hailing from B&W's recently built Chinese factory, the CM7 is a handsome-looking small-tower design. Behind the grille is the company's trademarked Nautilus-loaded aluminum dome tweeter, as well as a 5" woven Kevlar midrange cone and a 6.6" paper/Kevlar bass driver. The CM7's sound is notably big, detailed, and refined, with a wide open soundstage, excellent overall frequency balance, and impressive extension at both frequency extremes. The CM7 delivers a lot of sound, impressive engineering, and musical satisfaction at a moderate price point. WG, 196

#### DALI Ikon 6

**\$2000**

*soundorg.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,

**PY**  
05

**PY**  
06

effortlessly delivers the goods dynamically, and has a smooth overall balance. The midrange and treble are a touch forward, so match electronics with care. REG, 164

### KEF XQ20 \$2000

*kef.com*

Based on KEF's signature Uni-Q driver array and equipped with a dispersion-controlling "tangerine" waveguide, the XQ20 offers a remarkably open and focused sound, with stunning 3-D imaging that remains convincing even when you sit off-axis. Though not the last word in dynamic clout or deep bass, this speaker delivers sonic refinement out of all proportion to its price. CM, *Playback* 20

### PSB Imagine T \$2000

*psbspeakers.com*

Tonally neutral and dynamically turbocharged, this short, two-and-a-half-way tower offers a balance of audio virtues that is classic PSB. From the vivid midrange to the powerful and extended midbass, nothing seems out of joint—and that goes for the T's seamless curvilinear enclosure, the absence of exposed hardware, and the luxe fit 'n' finish. Not as nuanced as Synchrony but more than good enough to make you feel like a big spender. NG, 189

### Harbeth P3ESR \$2095-\$2395 (depending on finish)

*fidelisan.com*

This latest version of Alan Shaw's subcompact monitor is so cannily designed it almost transcends the limitations of its genre. Neutrality and natural tonal balance reign supreme, but this one can also play loud and descend to depths in the bass that leave both the original LS3/5a and its other British derivatives at the post. Exceptional driver integration,

coherence, and openness also characterize the design. PS's favorite mini-monitor. PS, 193

### MartinLogan Source \$2195

*martinlogan.com*

This modestly sized, attractive, two-way, electrostatic/cone hybrid sounds astonishingly like a "single-driver" speaker, with simply outstanding transient response (particularly in the midband), superior low-level resolution, and superb treble. Though the Sources don't soundstage as well as certain other speakers and are a little "forward" in imaging (sort of like headphones), they are, nevertheless, one of the most successful electrostatic hybrids ML has yet offered. JV, 180

### Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II \$2195

*vandersteen.com*

This classic three-way floorstander delivers excellent top-to-bottom balance and an engaging musicality. Moreover, Vandersteen's baffle-less, time-and-phase-coherent design can suggest the spatial focus usually heard with planars. It benefits from bi-wiring and should be placed away from walls. Shane Buettner, 139

### Spendor SA1 \$2395

*bluebirdmusic.com*

Due to its not-insubstantial price of \$2395, a pair the Spendor SA1 has a lot of competition. But for a small listening room, the SA1 may well prove to be a far more musically rewarding choice than the vast majority of larger, more physically imposing transducers. If you are assembling a high-end nearfield computer-desktop system, the Spendor SA1 definitely deserves to be among your top-five must-audition options. SS, 196

### Sonics Anima \$2600

*immediasound.com*

Just 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. It also delivers harmonics and speed that are akin to a ribbon driver. Dynamics are slightly pinched with orchestral fireworks and the slight elevation of the lower treble adds a whitish sparkle and detail, but overall this is a very serious speaker. NG, 172



### Usher Be-718 \$2795

*usheraudiousa.com*

This stand-mount two-way delivers surprisingly deep bass extension from its 7" woofer, and the beryllium tweeter is clean, sweet, extended, and highly resolving. The Be-718's treble reproduction is notable for its lack of grain and glare, even when pushed hard. The spatial presentation is spectacular, with a wide deep soundstage. A great speaker and a tremendous value. RH, 176

### DALI Mentor 2 \$2800

*soundorg.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. RH, 174

### Emerald Physics CS 2 \$2995

*emeraldphysics.com*

A pair of dipole woofers in a baffle combined with a forward-radiating wave-guided compression driver (operating above 1kHz) and knit together by an external digital-signal-processing crossover makes for remarkably truthful and musical sound of considerable dynamic capacity, surprising bass extension, ultra-precise stereo imaging from a narrow radiation pattern, and very flat response. Bi-amplification is required. Unusual but fascinating. REG, 188

### \$3000-\$5000

### Definitive Technology Mythos STS/ST

**\$3000/\$4000**

*definitivetechnology.com*

The ST, and its slightly scaled down brother, the STS, deliver exceptional sound quality in an easy-to-drive package. With integral powered woofers and whopping 93dB sensitivity, the STS and ST can be driven to satisfying levels with moderately powered amplifiers. CM, 178

### ProAc Response D2 \$3500

*proac-loudspeakers.com*

A return to form for ProAc's founder and chief designer Stewart Tyler. The compact two-way, D2 channels the ghost of the legendary Response 2 and ups the ante with improved extension at both frequency extremes and higher output, along with the stunning imaging and soundstaging that have been hallmarks of ProAc from the earliest days of the Tablette. Only a hint of the port and some upper-treble brightness temper what is otherwise a richly satisfying listening experience. NG, 186

**PSB Synchrony Two**  
**\$3500***psbspeakers.com*

A sonic extrovert, with a darker voluptuous tonality that reaches deep into the lower midrange and bottom octaves, the Synchrony Two offers bone-rattling, dynamic excitement in a sleek, five-driver, two-way, bass-reflex design. Two of its woofers high-pass to the tweeter at differing frequencies, giving this PSB marvelous coherence and extension from bottom to top. A slight dip in the presence range and some residual lag in the bass suggest that careful attention to setup is required. NG, 177

**Totem "The One"**  
**\$3595 (\$4170 with T4S stands)***totemaoustic.com*

A fitting salute to Totem's 20th Anniversary, the limited edition The One is a superb small monitor delivering exceptional coherence, a large holographic soundfield, a defined yet never too bright treble, and surprising wallop in the bass. The midrange is warm and natural, with essentially no sound from the enclosure. Most importantly, The One grabs your emotions, making for addictive listening experiences. WG, 184

**Harbeth C7ES-3**  
**\$3895-\$3995**  
**(depending on finish)***fidelisan.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 head-bangers). With respect to accuracy, neutrality, and natural tonal balance the 7 establishes for PS a new benchmark for compact two ways. PS, 171

**Gershman Sonogram**  
**\$3950***gershmanacoustics.com*

A high-output, three-way floorstander with near-full range capabilities and priced to move. The Sonogram is both lively and balanced with near-inextinguishable dynamic reserves. Despite a bit of added emphasis in the sibilance range and some vagueness of pitch in the bass, the Sonogram succeeds in providing nothing less than an Old School E-ticket ride. It delivers—often on a thrilling scale. NG, 186

**Vandersteen 3A Signature**  
**\$3950***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. RH, 122

**MartinLogan Vista**  
**\$4295***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—one of the smallest and most affordable members 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, which suggests placement near room corners. DO, 168

**Acoustic Zen Adagio**  
**\$4300***acousticzen.com*

The Adagio's strength is a 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 also to its seamlessness, 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. SR, 162

**Coincident Partial Eclipse II**  
**\$4499***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. SK, 146

**Sunfire CRM-2 satellites and Sunfire SRS-210E SubRosa subwoofer****\$4600 (\$1600 for CRM-2/\$3000 for SRS-210E)***sunfire.com*

The CRM-2 packs a 5'-long ribbon driver into an enclosure you can hold in the palm of your hand. Augmented by dual 4.5" side-firing bass/midrange drivers, the CRM-2 offers the seamless coherence, transient quickness, and low coloration inherent in ribbons. Soundstaging is spectacular. Careful setup is essential to realizing the CRM-2's potential. Must be used with a Sunfire subwoofer. RH, 184

**Magnepan MG 3.6**  
**\$4995***magnepan.com*

Yet another great deal from Magnepan, this large, full-range, true-ribbon/quasi-ribbon dipole gives you much of the phenomenal 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. JV, 121

**Volent Paragon VL-2**  
**\$4999***laufertechnik.com*

This stand-mount two-way features a 7" titanium woofer mated to a twin-ribbon tweeter of Volent's own design. The sound is completely unexpected from a stand-mount two-way; deep bass extension with wide dynamics, stunning transparency, a huge soundstage, and extraordinary image palpability. Somewhat "light" in the upper-midrange and lower treble that resolves detail at the expense of tonal richness. RH, this issue

**\$5000-\$10,000**  
**Reference 3A Episode**  
**\$5500***reference3a.com*

The multi-driver floorstanding Episode sounds coherent and musical—felicitous on female voice and in harmonic colors. Bass definition and extension are excellent—as good as they get at this price point. The Murata super-tweeter is superb in the treble. When driven within its dynamic comfort zone, the overall presentation is eminently listenable—lively and engaging without being assertive. DO, 200

**Sonics Amerigo****\$5500***immediasound.com*

The first Sonics model manufactured in the U.S., this three-way, bass-reflex floorstander is an alloyed success with a clean, nearly boxless character, fast micro-dynamic reflexes, and a superior spacious presentation. Musically its attention to detail is classic Joachim Gerhard (known for Audio Physic prior to launching Sonics). Its understated beauty and excellent fit and finish make this wideband, full-bodied speaker a standout in its class. NG, 196

**Sonus faber Liuto****\$5998***sumikoaudio.net*

The all-new Liuto may be the best speaker in the Sonus family. A three-way, vented floorstander, the Liuto preserves classic Sonus visual cues but with a cleaner more contemporary look. Sonically it imparts a combination of warmth and detail along with earthy low-frequency extension that dips confidently into 30Hz range. But where it really turns up the heat is in the lack of smearing during complex orchestral passages—string-section layering, microdynamic interplay, and depth cues are more vividly and authentically rendered. The Liuto's primary character shades a bit to the dark side, and in some cases it's not as fast on transients as some others. Nonetheless, the Liuto is a high-voltage performer—entertaining and musical. NG, 199

**Verity Audio Finn****\$5995***verityaudio.com*

A specialty three-way of exquisite quality that reproduces music with a light and expressive hand. Because of its rear-firing woofer, a little bit of extra care is necessary to dial in the speaker/room interface. Some may perceive a reduction

of lower-mid/upper-bass energy that somewhat reduces image scale and orchestral impact, but the Finn's sheer resolution, toe-tapping speed, and transparency more than make up for this. A near full-range speaker that virtually disappears when the needle hits the groove. NG, this issue

**Pioneer S2-EX****\$6000***pioneerelectronics.com*

Making TAD technology more affordable, Pioneer offers a three-way stand-mount with pinpoint imaging and powerful dynamics that put many floorstanders to shame. The S2-EX's coincident midrange/beryllium tweeter is stunningly fast and accurate. Maybe a bit clinical up top, but remarkably uncolored overall. You'll never again feel the same about a stand-mounted speaker. NG, 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. NG, 162

**Hyperion Sound Design****HPS-968****\$7000***hyperionsound.com*

My new valued-priced, full-range, dynamic loudspeaker reference achieves a level of transient quickness, immediacy, soundstage depth, and clarity that is difficult to match at any price. While setup is a bit tricky for one person, the speaker is quite efficient and couples easily with more affordable

electronics, offering smoothness with a touch of warmth, plus very good dynamic impact and inner detail. JH, 186

**Esoteric MG20****\$7800 includes stands***esoteric.teac.com*

A musically compelling performer. Exceptional coherency, transient speed, and resolution due to exclusive use of magnesium alloy diaphragm technology. Images like a mini-monitor with tight and palpable outlines. Nicely balanced with sufficient mid- and upper-bass energy to properly flesh out the power range of an orchestra. Deep bass extension is limited to about 45Hz. With medium sensitivity, it requires at least 40Wpc. DO, 177

**Gradient Helsinki 1.5s****\$7999***gradient.fi*

This unusual design from Gradient's Jorma Salmi, with wave-guided tweeter, disc-mounted midrange, and side-firing dipole woofer, is intended to erase your listening room from the sound you hear. And it delivers the goods: Few other speakers can give you an equal sense of being transported to the performance venue.

The 1.5s has unusual set-up requirements, but with the right setup, its spatial performance is at the top level attainable at any price. Bass is limited below 50Hz, and a subwoofer will be needed for ideal presentation of large-scaled music. REG, 189

**Verity Audio Rienzi****\$8795***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 allows owners to choose either a front- or rear-firing arrangement, which adds flexibility to room placement. WG, 175

**Piega TC-10X****\$9000***piega.ch*

Detailed, yet relaxed, the Piega caresses musical lines with speed, finesse, and no artificial aftertaste. A proprietary coaxial ribbon is responsible for pure textures through the critical mids and upper octaves. Forget British mini-monitors, the Piega is the champ when it comes to imaging precision and stability. Slightly laid-back balance. Limited bass extension. Subsonics are an issue during vinyl playback. A subwoofer is recommended. DO, 176

**Coincident Super Victory****\$9499***coincidentloudspeakers.com*

A scaled-down version of the Total Victory, the Super Victory uses virtually the same mix of ribbons and cones to make for a stunning high-sensitivity floorstander of considerable dynamic range and timbral nuance. The ribbon tweeter is particularly remarkable (in part because it never sticks out). Our reviewer, Sue Kraft, thought so highly of the Super Victories that she was sorely tempted to keep them. Sue Kraft, 200

**Quad ESL-2805****\$9500***quad-hifi.co.uk*

The addition of mass and bracing to Peter Walker's revolutionary ESL-63 design and improvements in the manufacture of the panels

GE  
08GE  
07PY  
09PY  
06GE  
08GE  
07PY  
07

yields bass that is more extended (but not subterranean) and powerful, 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 realism and naturalness that are compelling and addictive. JH/PS, 169

## \$10,000–\$20,000

### Usher 8571 MkII Dancer

**\$10,200**

*usheraudiousa.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. CM, 154

### Quad 2905

**\$12,000**

*quad-bjfi.co.uk*

Although JV would love to own \$30k Magico Mini IIs or, if he really hit the lottery, \$89k Magico M5s, in the real world these large Quads—the biggest 'stats that the venerable company has yet made—are one of the high-end speakers he would (and could afford to) buy. No, they aren't the last word in dynamic range, deep bass, top treble, or wall-to-wall soundstaging. And, no, they don't disappear like mini-monitors. All they do is sound real on just about any kind of music at moderate levels. JV, 186

### MBL 121

**\$12,580**

*mblusa.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, 176

### Sonus faber Cremona M

**\$12,800**

*sumikoaudio.net*

The latest addition to the Cremona family, the Cremona M retains the lute-shape enclosure that Sonus Faber popularized in its flagship Amati and Guarneri models. The M is powerful and passionate with a rich, warm balance. Yet it's no wallflower dynamically. In its timbral sophistication and impressive dynamic range, even at orchestral levels, it achieves the kind of top-to-bottom coherence that makes magic happen. NG, 189



### Thiel CS3.7

**\$12,900**

*thielaudio.com*

The best speaker yet from one of the world's top designers, with major breakthroughs in driver design, overall technology, and build-quality for the money. More important, it boasts reference-quality sound with flat timbre, superb resolution and transient response, bass depth and power just short of the most expensive super-speakers, and excellent sound stage and imaging. One of the most coherent and realistic speakers around without a touch of romance or exaggerated highs. AHC, 186

### Harbeth M40.1

**\$12,995–\$14,995**  
(depending on finish)

*fidelisian.com*

The new version of the M40 (REG's reference) has a slightly more midrange forward; more "domesticated," less "pro" tonal balance; and higher sensitivity. A BBC-style three-way monitor, with Harbeth bass and mid drivers and SEAS Excel tweeter. Neutral sound, exceptional midrange clarity, refined and extended treble, almost full bass extension in room, and surprisingly "out of the box" imaging. REG, 190

### Wilson Audio Duette

**\$13,400**

*wilsonaudio.com*

Dave Wilson's first full-range compact two-way achieves outstanding bass response (down to the high thirties), dynamic range, low distortion, resolution, size and scaling, and freedom from cabinet resonances. However, its tonal balance is quite lean, with a trough in the upper-bass/lower-midrange (150–300Hz) that reduces warmth, which means that, more than most, it is definitely a listen-before-you buy proposition. The Duette is an impressive achievement, but it will not be to all tastes. PS, 161

### EgglestonWorks Nine

**\$13,900**

*egglestonworks.com*

An excellent performer for the price with outstanding timbre and musical realism, and surprisingly good deep bass and dynamics. Unusually good reproduction of the subtleties of female voice and the differences between different makes of violins, pianos, and other acoustic instruments. Natural, realistic sound stage, with imaging and depth that match what is on the recording. AHC, 184

GE  
09

### Focal Diablo Utopia

**\$13,990 (with stands)**

*audioplusservices.com*

Focal has a long history of making excellent two-way stand-mounted mini-monitors, few better than this little number that sits, proudly, at the top of Focal's two-way line. Though it definitely benefits from extensive break-in, once its beryllium tweeter has settled down some, the Diablo Utopia is lifelike at moderate levels: big soundstage, precise imaging, unusually full low bass (right down into the 30s), present midband, surprising dynamic range for a two-way—the Diablo will play loud (at the cost of added brightness and a little bass compression)—a speedy treble with some beryllium-colored scintillance. The dedicated Utopia stands are first-rate. Recommended for space-restricted lovers of small-scale music. JV, forthcoming

### Nola Viper Reference II

**\$15,000**

*nolaloudspeakers.com*

If you are frustrated by loudspeakers that occasionally impress in a hi-fi sense, but don't really allow you to focus on the music, TM found the open-baffle, multiway, ribbon/cone Nola Viper to be a breakthrough—neutral, non-analytical, and highly musical. Viper I, TM, 181 (updated Reference II not yet auditioned)

### Rockport Technologies Mira

**\$15,000**

*rockporttechnologies.com*

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. WG, 149

GE  
04

### Von Schweikert UniField 3 \$15,000

*von Schweikert.com*

Venerable speaker-designer Albert Von Schweikert set out to produce a tiny, full-range, single-voiced speaker for small rooms that, unlike so many speakers for small rooms, would not rob you of the deep bass, imaging precision, and dynamic scale of big speakers. The design he settled on is very nearly unique—an “augmented” one-way. That you can occasionally hear the augmentation doesn't change the fact that throughout most of its range the UniField Three really does speak with one beautiful and persuasively lifelike voice. Perfect for apartment and condo dwellers who hanker for full-range sound in a small svelte package. JV, 199

GE  
07

### Jamo R 909 \$16,000

*jama.com*

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 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-scaled music. REG, 167

### Wilson Audio Sophia 2 \$16,700

*wilsonaudio.com*

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. One of the great values in high-end audio. RH

GE  
02

### Vandersteen Model 5A \$16,900

*vandersteen.com*

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 competitors, but offers superior performance in other respects. A relative bargain among statement loudspeakers. SB, 139

GE  
03

GE  
08

### Magico V2 \$18,000

*magico.net*

The leadoff hitter for Magico's Murderer's Row of loudspeakers, the V2 is in many ways everything an audiophile could hope for from the high-end experience. It all comes together in this breathtaking paragon of coherence, control, extension, dynamics, ultra-low distortion, and effortless resolution and transparency. This mid-sized, two-and-a-half-way, acoustic-suspension design may not be especially electrifying to look at, but the totality of its execution is superb. Maybe *the* speaker in the under-\$20k bracket. Review forthcoming

### Usher Be-20 \$18,860

*usheraudiousa.com*

Offering true full-range frequency response and a sound that is highly dynamic, extremely detailed, and very three-dimensional, this beryllium driver-equipped floorstander is the complete high-end package. The Be-20 is accurate enough to delight left-brainers, yet soulful enough to capture the hearts of right-brainers. It looks stunning, too. Be aware that this hefty speaker needs room to breathe and works best in larger spaces (for mid-size rooms, try the smaller Be-10). CM, 183



### \$20,000 and above

#### 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. WG, 173

GE  
07

#### Verity Audio Parsifal Ovation \$20,995

*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. FK, 160

#### Martin Logan CLX \$21,832

*martinlogan.com*

A long time coming, this successor to Martin Logan's one-and-only previous full-range electrostat, the CLS, bests the original in every way, particularly in tonal balance where its lower midrange and upper bass are no longer sucked out but flat as pancakes (if flat's

PY  
09

GE  
09

your idea of a good pancake). The most transparent-to-sources loudspeaker JV has ever auditioned, the CLX is the very model of resolution, neutrality, and realism. It is also, alas, limited to about 55Hz in the bass, which means you'll need a pair of ML's Descent-*i* subs to get the whole orchestra. However, if you don't care much about low bass, then this is the speaker for you. It is for JV—his electrostatic reference. JV, 190

#### Revel Salon2 \$21,998

*revelspeakers.com*

The result of five years of intensive research into every aspect of loudspeaker performance, the new Revel Salon2 represents a genuine breakthrough in dynamic loudspeakers. Although impressive in every performance aspect, the Salon2's treble is the cleanest, most natural, and best-integrated RH has heard from a dynamic transducer. Bring a high-powered amplifier. RH, 178

PY  
07

#### B&W 800D \$23,000

*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 at high playback levels. SK, 156

GE  
05

#### Sound Lab M-1PX \$23,970

*soundlab-speakers.com*

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

GE  
03

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

### Wilson Audio Sasha W/P \$26,950

*wilsonaudio.com*

This replacement for the venerable WATT/Puppy introduces an entirely new platform for Wilson. More like a scaled-down MAXX 3 than its predecessor, the Sasha is a significant step forward over the WP despite its lower price. Outstanding tonal and dynamic coherence with a midrange that is simultaneously resolving yet warm and rich. RH, review pending

### Magico V3 \$27,000

*magico.net*

Magico's V3 is an astonishing achievement in loudspeaker design, delivering a level of performance that is in many ways competitive with \$100k loudspeakers. Although it won't play as loudly as the six-figure speakers, the V3 has a timbral realism and palpability in the midrange that approach the state of the art. Properly set up and driven by sources and electronics of commensurate quality, the V3 is musically transcendental. RH, 179

### Vienna Acoustics "The Music" \$27,000

*sumikoaudio.net*

Here's a full-range, multi-driver unit with stat-like coherence due to its remarkable flat midrange driver with coincident tweeter. Equally at home with power music and small-scale works, it has a reference-quality ability to reproduce the complete soundstage. A thrilling, accurate, yet musical speaker with fast transients,

precise layered imaging, natural timbre, and articulate, extended bass. JH, 195

### Magico Mini II \$32,000 (with stands)

*magico.net*

The beautifully made Minis from perfectionist speaker-builder Alon Wolf are triumphant examples of twin applied arts—industrial and acoustical design. Though limited to about 40Hz in the bass, the two-way Minis are everywhere else models of limitlessness—of what is possible when price is no object—with standard-setting coherence, resolution, neutrality, and soundstaging. The best mini money can buy. JV, 179

### Meridian DSP7200 \$34,995

*meridian-audio.com*

Offering many of the same features as Meridian's spectacular flagship DSP8000, the musicality, neutrality, dynamics, and goose-bump imaging of the more compact DSP7200 is a testament to the no-compromises potential of integrated components. Limited only in the last bit of bass extension, its top-to-bottom seamlessness, three-dimensionality, and front-to-back depth rival the best. A stunningly gorgeous music lover's dream come true. SK, 194

### Gershman Acoustics Black Swan \$36,000

*gershmanacoustics.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 actually provided it. The bass was also exceptional, flat and deeply extended. AHC, 168

### YG Acoustics Kipod Studio \$38,000

*yg-acoustics.com*

This "entry level" full-range speaker from YG Acoustics aims to bring the performance of the company's \$107,000 Anat Professional to listeners with smaller rooms. The Kipod Studio is scaled down in size, bass extension, and playback-level from the flagship, but not in fundamental sound quality. When operated within its SPL limits, it delivers stunning dynamics, resolution, and liveliness. Bass is quite extended for its small footprint, thanks to the powered woofer module. That midrange driver is run full-range, which confers greater purity at the expense of the ability to play loudly—this is a speaker for moderate playback levels. RH, 199



### Hansen Audio The Prince V2 \$39,000

*hansenaudio.com*

Highly revealing of upstream components, The Prince V2 is capable of exquisite musicality when matched with the right sources and electronics. The Prince V2 is characterized by a remarkable coherence, accurate timbre, deeply extended and powerful bass, fabulous build-quality, and gorgeous finish. AHC, 186

### Loiminchay Chagall \$40,000

*loiminchayaudio.com*

The kind of high personal design that can produce the illusion of a live performance in a slightly warm hall with exceptional conviction. Unique styling and visual impact, easy

to drive, and excellent, very deep bass for its size. Slightly more romantic than accurate, but this complements most modern recordings. Well worth auditioning, but priced at levels where the competition is very demanding. AHC, 193

### Venture Audio Excellence III Signature \$56,000

*venture-audio.com*

Driver technology is a key design element of this highly successful electrodynamic loudspeaker. Designer Njoo Hoo Kong's reliance on a Heil Air Motion Transformer tweeter and custom graphite-loaded paper-cone drivers elevates this three-way design to high-end audio's Promised Land. Pristine upper octaves, smooth harmonic textures, and exceptional dynamics make for a highly musical experience. Requires careful selection of amplification. DO, 186

### MBL 101 E Mk II \$59,990

*mbl-usa.com*

MBL's stunning-looking, four-way, omnidirectional Radialstrahler References have a treble like Maggie's ribbons, bass like Nearfield's eight 18" subwoofers, soundstaging and coherence like Kharm's CRM 3.2s, dynamics like Avantgarde's Trios, and a "disappearing act" second only to their fabulous big brothers, the 101 X-Tremes. For sheer excitement on large-scale classical or power pop they are hard to beat. JV, 154

### DALI Megaline \$60,000

*soundorg.com*

This large, elegant speaker offers a superior combination of virtues—power and scale on one hand and purity and resolution on the other, with distortion lower than electrostatics and a dynamic capacity no electrostatic ever dreamed of. 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. They are also superb on more intimate music. REG, 146

### Wilson Audio MAXX 3

**\$68,000** **PY**  
09

*wilsonaudio.com*

The MAXX 3 may be the baby brother of the stupendous Alexandria 2, but it doesn't concede much ground to its sibling. This powerful and dynamic loudspeaker has been significantly improved over the MAXX 2, displays tremendous pitch accuracy, and explores the bass region like few others. It works best in larger rooms and favors a highly detailed over a lush sound. JHb, 194



**Magico M5** **PY**  
**\$89,000** 09

*magico.net*

The M5 may not take you all the way to the Promised Land, but, for the first time, it let JV see the shoreline in the distance. Not the very best in every respect but nonetheless superb in every respect, it is, overall, the most lifelike loudspeaker JV has heard in his system—and his dynamic reference. (Compared to other topmost contenders it is also a bargain.) JV, 197

### Rockport Technologies

**Hyperion** **GE** **PY**  
**\$94,000** 03 02

*rockporttechnologies.com*

Though they don't soundstage like Magico M5s or disappear

quite as completely, the Rockport Hyperions earn laurels for just about everything else—gorgeous tone color, tremendous dynamic ease and authority, natural instrumental size and scale. If you have the space and the moolah, they will take you about as close as you can come to the absolute sound. JV, 136

### Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 Series 2

**\$158,000** **GE** **PY**  
09 08

*wilsonaudio.com*

The new Series 2 Alexandria is quite simply the best all-around loudspeaker RH has heard in his room. It delivers stunning bass extension, truly effortless dynamics, and a palpable musical realism that elevate it to world-class status. The separate enclosures for each driver can be moved on two axes to optimize dispersion and time alignment at any listening distance and height. The design, build-quality, and finish are world-class. Robert Harley's reference. RH, 186

### Focal Grande Utopia EM

**\$180,000**

*audioplusservices.com*

This statement loudspeaker bowled over Roy Gregory with its combination of low coloration, complete ability to disappear into the soundstage, and stunning dynamic authority. The electromagnetically driven woofer allows fine tuning to the room, and the front baffle's variable curvature dials-in the performance for any listening distance or height. Roy Gregory, 193

### MBL 101 X-Tremes

**\$250,000** **PY**  
08

*mbl-usa.com*

These "mirror-image array" Radialstrahler towers (like two 101 Es, one facing up and the other facing downward directly above it), with separate powered bass towers, simply don't sound like other speakers (even MBL's 101 Es). The Xes

are tonally neutral and sonically nearly invisible; voices and instruments don't seem to be coming from drivers in frames or boxes. Instead they hang in space—free-standing objects that are so three-dimensionally "there" that listening to the 101 Xes is like going to a play, where listening to other speakers is like going to the movies. They must be driven by powerful amplifiers such as the MBL 9011 and carefully set up. JV, 189

### SUBWOOFERS

#### PSB SubSeries 5i

**\$549**

*psb speakers.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. NG, TPV 48, and CM, TPV 69

### REL T2

**\$798** **PY**  
07

*sumikoaudio.net*

A contemporary, streamlined version of REL's classic subs with the brand's traditional virtues. Strikes the right balance between extension, output, and low-frequency musicality without dominating the listening room. Filter selectivity is less flexible than top-line RELs but for most sub/sat applications the T2 is easy to integrate with the system and a medium/small room. Also available in two other sizes, T1 and T3. NG, 176

#### 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. NG, TPV 42

### REL Britannia B3

**\$1995** **GE** **PY**  
05 06

*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. NG, 163

### JL Audio Fathom f112/f113

**\$2800/\$3600** **GE** **PY**  
07 07

*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 f112, CM, TPV 75; Fathom f113, RH, 170

### Thiel SS2 SmartSub/SI 1

**Integrator** **PY**  
**\$4900/\$4400** 05

*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 afford-

ing such plentiful and powerful means of adapting the sub to its surroundings. Alan Taffel, 154

**JL Audio Gotham**  
**\$12,000**

*jlaudio.com*

This subwoofer delivers the ultimate in bass power and extension, all with perfect pitch and unflappable stability. With proper setup—a non-intuitive process best left to the dealer—the Gotham also won't interfere with main speaker purity. Still, this sub is not for everyone, as some (including me) may find it *too* tight and controlled. Note that JL recommends deploying the Gotham in stereo pairs. AT, 184

**PY**  
**08**

**POWER AMPLIFIERS**

**Under \$1000**

**Odyssey Audio Khartago**  
**\$795**

*odysseyaudio.com*

Although the 130Wpc Odyssey Khartago solid-state stereo amp has been around for better than a decade, it was new to JV until amp-connoisseur Alon Wolf (of Magico, no less) told him he used it in his shop and it was excellent. The Wolfman was right. Although the Khartago doesn't have all the articulation and transparency of the standard-setting \$40k Souolution 710 stereo amplifier, it has a *shockingly* similar balance, no discernible grain, high resolution, and a deep, wide soundstage. Positively, *the* best budget amp JV has heard (and the \$2k Odyssey Stratos monoblocks are great, too). JV, 195

**PY**  
**09**

**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. SB, 138

**PY**  
**02**

**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. NG, 174

**\$1000-\$2000**

**Vincent Audio SP-331**

**\$1199**

*msdistributing.com*

The SP-331 is one of the best-sounding sub-\$2k 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 the amplifier sounds slightly softer but also more delicate and refined than solid-state competitors in its price range. CM, 173

**PY**  
**07**

**Quad 909**

**\$1550**

*quad-hifi.co.uk*

Its sound quality sets a benchmark for its size and price. Its midrange, in particular, is exceptional. Up and down the scale, this latest iteration of Peter Walker's patented "current dumping" circuit displays ease, relaxation, and naturalness. PS, 128

**GE**  
**01**

**PrimaLuna ProLogue 5**

**\$1599**

*primaluna-usa.com*

The 36Wpc vacuum tube-powered ProLogue 5 sounds more authoritative than its rating would lead you to expect, and offers a warm, rich sound, yet really does not sound "tubey" in any traditional sense, producing clean, deep, tight bass and grand soundstaging.

**GE**  
**05**

A synergistic match with the companion ProLogue 3 preamp. Sallie Reynolds, 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 offers a lot of power at an affordable price. JV, 168

**Wyred 4 Sound SX-1000**

**\$2000**

*nyred4sound.com*

While many amplifiers use Bang and Olufsen's ICE output device, the SX-1000 combines it with its own direct-coupled, balanced, dual-FET input stage designed by Bascom King. The SX-1000 Series II is a powerful amplifier capable of effortlessly delivering copious amounts of power. The SX-1000 Series II also serves up detail with the aplomb of a sommelier uncorking a prize bottle. SS, 193

**Rogue Audio Stereo 90**

**\$2495**

*rogueaudio.com*

This tube monoblock combines a rich 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. Even with this, it makes all types of music sound *right*. SR, 171

**PrimaLuna ProLogue Six**

**\$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. JH, 169

**Cambridge Audio 840W**

**\$2699**

*cambridgeaudio.com*

The key to the 200Wpc 840W is its proprietary XD topology, which allows pure Class A at low levels and a transition to an "enhanced" Class B without the typical crossover distortion normally associated with Class AB designs. The result is a wide soundstage, excellent micro-dynamics, and near limitless power—plus that familiar, buttery, pure Class A vibe. The acoustically damped, satin-smooth casework is absolutely first-rate. NG, 186

**PY**  
**08**

**\$3000-\$5000**

**Balanced AudioTechnology 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. SK with WG comment, 153

**Edge G4**

**\$3995**

*edgeamps.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. JH, AVgM 5

### Conrad-Johnson LP66S \$4300

*conradjohnson.com*

Have your sights set on a romantic tube stereo power amplifier? This 60Wpc design is it! Tonal emphasis is squarely on the lower midrange. Timbres and textures are slightly liquid and warm—highly complimentary to violin. The treble range is laid-back. Count on a mellow, relaxed presentation with an exceptionally low listener-fatigue factor and plenty of imaging magic. DO, 193

### Vincent Audio SP-T800 monoblock \$4500

PaY  
08

*wdistributing.com*

This 200Wpc hybrid amp is a remarkable performer. Its tube signature shines through clearly in the midrange, albeit slightly diluted by the solid-state output stage. Soundstage dimensionality is superior to that of conventional solid-state designs. It closely fulfils the promise of a hybrid design: Tube magic with plenty of bass crunch and drive in one nicely “gift-wrapped” chassis. DO, 188

### \$5000–\$10,000

### NuForce Reference 9 Special Edition (SE) V.2 monoblock \$5000

*nuforce.com*

NuForce's best Class D amps yet, the Ref 9 SE V.2 monoblocks deliver the expected virtues (articulate, well-defined mids and deep, tightly controlled bass), plus noticeably sweeter, more grain-free highs than previous NuForce designs. The SE V.2's clarity, definition and control can bring certain speaker systems alive, but they can also make some high-resolution speakers sound slightly “clinical.” CM, 188

### Meridian G57 \$5495

*meridian-audio.com*

Rated at 200Wpc into 8 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. SK, 152

### PrimaLuna Dialogue Seven \$5495

PaY  
09

*primaluna-usa.com*

The 70W (40W in triode mode) PrimaLuna Dialogue Seven monoblock employs a unique output stage—two discrete amplifier channels (including output transformers) are paralleled at the loudspeaker terminals. This technique preserves the purity of a low-powered design while imbuing the amplifier with higher current capability. “No tube amplifier I've auditioned comes close to its performance for anywhere near its modest price,” said Jim Hannon. JH, 199

### Bel Canto 1000 monoblock \$5990

*belcantodesign.com*

If you like the concept of an amplifier that is compact, efficient, powerful, transparent, musical, and extremely reliable, the Bel Canto Ref 1000 Mk II amplifier could be the last amplifier you'll ever want or need. While the Bel Canto may not warm up an overly sterile-sounding system like a classic tube amplifier, it certainly won't subtract any harmonic warmth. SS, 193

### Modwright KWA150 \$5995

*modwright.com*

“To my ears,” said reviewer Dick Olsher, “the KWA 150 represents a smashing success, combining the musicality of tubes with the punch, power delivery, and bass reach of transistors. Factor in the performance and looks of this amp relative to its asking price and the result is a fantastic value.” DO, 199



### Atma-Sphere M-60 Mk III OTL \$6800

*atma-sphere.com*

Atma-Sphere's uniquely simple, all-tube OTL (output transformer-less) design offers a rare and exhilarating glimpse into the music few others can duplicate. This triode-based classic also possesses outstanding neutrality, clarity, definition, soundstaging, and unfettered dynamics. With 60W of pure Class A power on tap, relatively sensitive speakers with an impedance of 8 ohms or higher are recommended for best bass performance. SK, 184

### Chord SPM 1050 \$6995

*bluebirdmusic.com*

A relatively affordable design from England's Chord, the compact SPM 1050 delivers 200Wpc and is all but unflappable when pushed hard. Indeed, it likes it that way. It has terrific control and grip over speakers, delivers explosive dynamics as well as nuance, and is coherent across the band. Cool under fire, the 1050 never sounds forced or exaggerated. WG, 196

### McIntosh MC402 \$7000

GE  
09

PaY  
04

*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 anything from Halcro. By any measure, a great amplifier and PS's reference. PS, 147

### Parasound Halo JC 1 \$7000

*parasound.com*

The latest collaboration between legendary designer John Curl and Parasound has resulted in the Halo JC 1: “... silky-smooth, crystal clear, and abundantly detailed. The kind you could listen to all day long without fatigue.” SK, 141

### Aesthetix Atlas \$8000

*musicalsurrroundings.com*

Aesthetix' first foray into power amps is an unqualified success. Aesthetically, the Atlas is handsome in a brawny but tasteful way. Sonically, the amp has great resolution and reflexes, making it a snap to follow interleaved melodic and rhythmic lines. The Atlas creates a mushroom cloud of air around each instrument, and a deep, convincing sense of space. Tonally, the amp is on the sweet side in a way that is consonant with real music. The Atlas is slightly less incisive dynamically than AT's reference amp, but so is pretty much everything. Ultimately, the Atlas is a sheer joy—both sonically and musically—to listen to. AT, 196

**Plinius SB-301****\$8685****GE**  
07**PY**  
07*eliteavdist.com*

Big and heat-sunked to beat the band, the Plinius outputs 310Wpc of the sweetest Class AB NG has ever heard. 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. NG, 169

**Air Tight ATM 300****\$8795***axisaudio.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. Scot Markwell, 128

**Balanced Audio Technology****VK-75SE****\$9000****GE**  
01*balanced.com*

BAT's VK-75SE is a tube design that, while displaying many of the attributes we love about glowing glass—smoothness, liquidity, depth, harmonic complexity—does so with, as reviewer Sue Kraft puts it, a “lack of candy-coating in the midrange.” In addition, the VK-75SE is virtually grain-free and excels at dynamics. SK, 133

**Electrocompaniet AW180 monoblock****\$9590 the pair***electrocompaniet.com*

The AW180 is a “tube-like” solid-state monoblock amp offering 180W into 8 ohms (considerably more into lower impedances). It provides a very natural timbre and exceptionally realistic upper bass and lower midrange. Both low- and high-level dynamic contrasts

are excellent. The amp does an equally excellent job of handling the upper registers of the violin, clarinet, flute, and female voice without exaggeration or any trace of hardness that is not clearly on the recording. There are many solid-state designs that also do this well, but few that do it as well. AHC, 198

**\$10,000-\$20,000****Boulder 850 monoblock****\$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 life-like, and the music ultimately more engaging. Max Shepherd, 166

**Mark Levinson No. 433****\$11,000***marklevinson.com*

The No. 433 three-channel power amplifier embodies the classic Mark Levinson sound, with a slightly laid-back and inviting perspective, tremendous soundstage depth and dimensionality, and a rock-solid bottom end. Although a three-channel design, the No. 433 holds its own with many higher-priced stereo amplifiers. Ideal for multichannel music and theater systems to drive the front three channels. RH, 161

**Pass Labs X350.5****\$11,550***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, with remarkably deep, powerful, and well-

defined bass and fast, sweet treble. JV

**Nagra PMA monoblock****\$12,295***nagraaudio.com*

The Nagra monoblocks confound expectations. They are small 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-hungry Magnepan loudspeakers up and running. What's more, they do it with finesse. Their smooth luminous sound is utterly enchanting. JHB, 173

**Edge G8+****\$13,488***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 instead serves the music. When it's compared to the best tube models, the only things lacking are the last degrees of air, decay, and bloom. WG, 149

**Mark Levinson No. 436 monoblock****\$14,500***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. SK, 169

**Simaudio Moon W-8****\$15,000***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. PS, 185

**Pass Labs XA100.5 monoblock****\$16,500***passlabs.com*

These Class A masterpieces from Nelson Pass bring the virtues of Class A to a more efficient package. The XA100.5 monoblocks have a purity and transparency that are jaw-dropping. Timbres are also well served, with a warmth and ease reminiscent of tubes but without “tubey” colorations. Gorgeous build-quality and metalwork. RH, 186

**Spectral DMA-360 MKII monoblock****\$17,990***spectralaudio.com*

The DMA-360 monoblocks combine high output current with lightning-fast audio circuits, producing an unparalleled portrayal of music's dynamic expression. These amplifiers also deliver what is in RH's experience the largest, best-defined, and most accurate spatial presentation of any amplifier extant. Timbral realism is also the DMA-360s' strong suit, a consequence of the amplifiers' amazing resolution of fine inner detail.

These are reference-grade amplifiers at a fraction of the price of competing units. RH, 190

### Air Tight ATM-3 monoblock \$18,195

*acissaudio.com*

These beautifully made, metered, push-pull, 6CA7-based monoblocks combine the realistic textures and timbres of SET amplifiers (though they are not SETs) with the fine resolution, more extended bandwidth, more neutral balance, and superior transient speed of Class A solid-state (though they are not solid-state, either). Little marvels of fidelity, they mate wonderfully well with fast, neutral loudspeakers like Quad 2905s or Focal Micro Utopia Be's. Offering 100Wpc in ultralinear mode, they can also be switched to 50Wpc triode mode. JV, 188

**PY**  
08

### Audio Research Reference 210 monoblock \$19,900

*audioresearch.com*

Audio Research Corporation has been making Class A/B, 6550-based, pentode-tube power amplifiers since the 1970s. In better than thirty exceptional years, the company has not made better amps than its 220Wpc Reference 210 and 600Wpc 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 a sacrifice of the bloom, air, size, and space that ARC pentode amps are famous for. JV, 159

**GE**  
05 **PY**  
06

### \$20,000 and above

#### Esoteric A-100 \$22,000

*esoteric.teac.com*

This innovative tube design offers fantastic resolution of a recording's origin and acoustic signature. If you crave tube magic, rest assured

**PY**  
09 **GE**  
09

that the A-100 delivers the goodies. But it also breaks through the traditional barriers of tube amplification: low-distortion harmonic textures, transient speed, and resolution are integral to its music reproduction. It is the state-of-the-art in medium-power tube amplification. DO, 191

### Pass Labs XA160.5 monoblock \$22,000

*passlabs.com*

"An amplifier with soul," the XA160.5 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 harmonic integrity. AHC, 192

### Lamm M1.2 Reference monoblock \$22,290

*lammindustries.com*

Another winner from the fertile mind of Vladimir Lamm. Combining brawn and finesse, the M1.2 drives even challenging loads with ease. Its siren song of suave harmonic textures, tight bass control, articulate transients, kinetic drive, and essential tonal neutrality is musically most persuasive. And there's enough tube magic under the hood to infuse the midrange with invigorating warmth and spaciousness. DO, 188

**GE**  
09

### Balanced Audio Technology VK-600SE monoblock \$26,000

*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

**GE**  
05

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. RH, 159

### Lamm ML2.1 monoblock \$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, and beautiful sounds on the market. Like all Lamm products, the ML2.1s are a bit dark in balance, very quiet, and very reliable. JV

**GE**  
03



### Audio Research Reference 610T monoblock \$39,900

*audioresearch.com*

Capable of better than 600Wpc into any real-world load, the pentode-tube-powered Class AB 610T is quite simply the single best tube 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 ranging from cone Magico M5s to planar-magnetic Symposium Acoustics Panoramas, the 610T comes closer to sounding "real" than anything else JV has tried. His tube reference. JV, 177

**GE**  
08 **GE**  
07 **PY**  
07

### Solution 710 \$40,000

*acissaudio.com*

Jaw-dropping resolution and transparency-to-sources sets this 120Wpc (into 8 ohms, 240Wpc into 4) solid-state stereo amp apart from any other JV has tested. It is preternaturally "not there," making inherently neutral speakers, in turn, sound more "not there," and music (and the engineering and mastering that went into putting that music on LP or disc) "more there." If you truly want to hear what's on your records—good, bad, or indifferent—this supremely honest, astonishingly colorless, incredibly low distortion amplifier cannot be bettered. JV, 199

**PY**  
09

### Boulder 1050 monoblock \$42,000

*boulderramp.com*

A truly superb power amp that offers the very best in bass, power, transients, and low-level detail. Slightly warmer and more tube-like than many competing solid-state designs, but this adds—rather than subtracts—from musical realism. Upper midrange and treble are truly exceptional. If you want the real-world sound of acoustic instruments, this may be the amplifier for you. AHC, 188

### VTL Siegfried monoblock \$50,000

*vtl.com*

At 800 watts per side, VTL's superlative Siegfried monoblock is prodigiously powerful. It features an array of features, including automatic biasing of the 6550 output tubes, to banish many of the problems traditionally associated with tubes and high power. Driving the Wilson MAXX 2, it displayed iron-fisted control over the bass, spooky clarity, and, above all, represents a decided move away from the more romantic sound of earlier VTL designs. JHb, 180

**GE**  
08 **PY**  
08

**MBL 9008/9011**  
**\$50,380/\$87,800***mbl-usa.com*

The massive 9011 monoblocks are among the most powerful and beautiful solid-state amplifiers JV has heard in his system. While the “littler” 9008s sound very much like their bigger brothers—which is to say they have sensational front-to-back transparency, low-level resolution, and large- and small-scale dynamics, as well as gorgeous tone color and a top-to-bottom liquidity that (along with a slight overall darkness) is an MBL signature—they don't have quite the same grip or transient speed as the more expensive 9011s, or the 9011s' nearly unique ability to “grab hold” of a note from starting transient to lingering decay. JV

**Krell Evolution One monoblock****\$60,000***krellonline.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. AHC, 158

**BALabo BP-1 MK-II****\$78,000***balaba.com*

This exquisitely made, extremely powerful (500Wpc) solid-state stereo power amp from Japanese master-designer Fumio Ohashi is as lovely to listen to as it is to behold. If ravishing gorgeousness of tone color coupled to outstanding resolution of detail, quick natural transient response, and huge reserves of power is your cup of Saki, you will have to look long and hard to find an amp that sounds this lovely

**GE**  
**05**

and this lifelike. One of JV's reference amps. Review this issue

**Soulution 700 monoblock****\$115,000***axissaudio.com*

Capable of 860W (into 4 ohms) these huge, Bauhaus-handsome, solid-state monoblock amplifiers are, like their littler brother the 710, paragons of neutrality and transparency. Just a touch warmer and more *gemütlich* in tonal balance than the utterly colorless 710, the 700s bring the same astonishing resolution to the table, reproducing sources with standard-setting high fidelity. So low in distortion and high in resolution they will reveal every detail of music-making, miking, engineering, and mastering on every disc in your collection. And like their stereo little brother, they disappear as sources, making really good speakers disappear as sources, too, leaving only the music and the quality of the recording behind. One of JV's reference amps. JV, 199

**PY**  
**09**

more oomph, the 50Wpc C325 will make BEElievers of even the most jaded audiophiles. C315, WG, 140; C325, NG, 183

**Cambridge Azur 550A****\$599***audioplusservices.com*

It's not easy to build on a proven winner, but the Azur 550A does just that. Like its predecessor, the Azur 540v2, the 550A outputs 60Wpc; however, various internal tweaks have improved upon its predecessor's plethora of sonic virtues. Music is reproduced as a lively and continuous fabric of images in unbroken space. Its midrange is richly detailed, with natural acoustic timbres and an uncanny ability to grab a recording, lock in images, and mount a soundstage with unerring tonal balance and harmonic energy. And dynamically, this amp has legs—it communicates a weight and sophistication to recordings that are generally the hallmarks of much larger uptown efforts. NG, 200

**PY**  
**06**

and grainy, but it really delivers the essence of the music. An immediate, communicative midrange leads to burnished tone colors, explosive dynamics, tight, forceful bass, fine ambience-and-depth retrieval, and sufficiently wide dynamics. WG, 178

**Dussun T6****\$900***aaa-audio.com*

A replacement for the already good DS99, Dussun's T6 maintains the minimalist vibe of its predecessor while improving on it in a few key areas. In addition to having greater overall transparency than the DS99, the T6 has tightened up the lower-mid frequencies, and opened up the highs. Moreover, the soundstage of this terrific amp is now broader as well as bit deeper. WG, 194

**Rotel RA-1520****\$999***rotel.com*

Part of the newly revamped and lusciously restyled 15 Series, the RA-1520 is a superb 60Wpc solid-stater that includes a surefire moving-magnet phonostage and a robust power supply with Rotel's in-house-manufactured transformer. Its sonics are trademark Rotel—a rich chunky midrange with solid extension at either extreme. In two words, it is “scary good.” NG, 196

**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS****Under \$1000****NAD C315 BEE and C326 BEE****\$349 and \$449***nadelectronics.com*

The entry-level C315 is still the go-to amp for audiophile newbies who crave sonic neutrality, good power output, nice tactile feel, and NAD's characteristic quality control. NAD family values have always been about the sonic result rather than the outward flash. NAD's honest approach to tonal balance rejects the sonic additives that make for a fatiguing long-term relationship, choosing instead to be lightly subtractive at the frequency extremes and in soundstage dimensionality. The 3.5mm MP3 player mini-jack on the front panel is a welcome addition. Looking for a little

**Rega Brio 3****\$695***soundorg.com*

A very good sounding, well-built 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 phonostage—not just a line-level input labeled “phono” requiring an outboard device—is a nice touch. Barry Willis, 167

**Vincent SV-129****\$799***vsdistributing.com*

Another barebones integrated, Vincent's SV-129 is a bit dark

**\$1000-\$2000****PrimaLuna ProLogue One****\$1375***primaluna-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. Very neutral with little signature of its own. Jeff Dorgay, 151

**Naim Nait 5i**  
**\$1450**  
*naimusa.com*

One of the great bargains in all of high-end audio, this new version of the Nait 5i brings more than a taste of expensive separates to a mid-priced integrated amplifier. The Nait is sweet without sounding rolled-off, presents a huge sense of space, tremendous separation of images, and, most importantly, sounds like music. RH, 183

**Arcam FMJ A28**  
**\$1699**  
*americanaudiovideo.com*

Both of Arcam's latest entry-level components (also see the CD 17) convey high levels of transparency, tonal naturalness, and dynamic resolve. Likewise impressive are instrumental textures, hall ambience, and their ability to convey air around individual instruments. Rated at 75Wpc, the A28 may not rock the house like more powerful units, but in most situations its high levels of musicality and ability to deliver years of satisfaction will more than outweigh mere machismo. WG, 198

**Simaudio Moon i-1**  
**\$1700**  
*simaudio.com*

The perfect mate for Simaudio's i-1 CD player, the entry-level Moon i-1 is a fine example of why integrated amplifiers offer such superb value. While it's rated at a moderate 50Wpc, the i-1 nevertheless delivers impressive large-scale dynamics, a musically involving rhythmic liveliness, whiplash transient speed, and a fine top-to-bottom balance. A robust build-quality and a hefty power supply allow this model to double its output to 100Wpc into 4 ohms. One of the purest and most transparent integrated amps in its class. WG, 185

**Exposure 3010S**  
**\$1795**  
*bluebirdmusic.com*

Exposure's electronics deliver the goods by beautifully balancing detail with warmth, rhythmic precision with lyricism, and delicacy with power. With an optional phono card, the 3010S morphs with the music as each recording demands; it can be either sweet and mellow, lean and mean, or a combination of the above depending on the disc. WG, 181

**Cambridge Audio Azur 840A V2**  
**\$1799**  
*audioplusservices.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, well-defined sound and its lifelike 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. CM, 167

**Goldenote S-1 Signature**  
**\$1866**  
*koetsuusa.com*

This Italian-made integrated exhibits wide dynamics, generous transparency, and a gorgeous rendering of timbre. Although it is highly resolving, detail is presented in a natural, rather than analytical, way. Superb build-quality with oversized power supply and heat sinking make the S-1 Signature sound more powerful than its 60Wpc rating. "A real find" said RH. RH, 193



**Vincent SV-236 Mk II**  
**\$1995**  
*nsdistributing.com*

The well-built Vincent SV-236 integrated amplifier combines the best of two worlds by using a vacuum-tube preamp to drive 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. It has since been updated with more power and improved parts selection for the same price. Review forthcoming

**\$2000-\$3000**

**Cayin Audio A 88T**  
**\$2395/\$2495 (KT-88/6550)**  
*acousticsounds.com*

Costing a little 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. Review forthcoming

**PrimaLuna DiaLogue 2**  
**\$2625**  
*primaluna-usa.com*

The first product in PrimaLuna's higher-performance line of tube units is a real honey, 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. JH, 195

**Rega Elicit**  
**\$2995 (add \$145 for mm and \$175 for mc phono boards)**  
*soundorg.com*

Rated at 80Wpc, Rega's Elicit is a cleverly named integrated amplifier. The sound is quick of response and dynamically fleet of foot, and conveys both the heart of the music and the details in the recording. Ambience retrieval is another strength; the Elicit is also nicely textured and can rock when asked too. Although it does have a few minor operating quirks, and does not have sledgehammer-like power or weight, the Elicit nevertheless delivers high levels of musical satisfaction. WG, 198

**\$3000 and above**  
**Pathos Classic One MK III**  
**\$3199**  
*audioplusservices.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. PS, 160

**Simaudio Moon i3.3**  
**\$3300-\$4000**  
*simaudio.com*

Simaudio is on a roll and the Moon i3.3 is just one reason why. Its 100Wpc performance is only part of the equation. The other part is a trio of option packages that includes an internal Burr-Brown 24-bit/192kHz DAC and digital inputs that include USB 2.0. Also available is a fine internal phono preamplifier and balanced inputs. And then there's the Simaudio sound. The Moon 3.3 Series launches rhythmic volleys, percussive accents, and transient cues with the speed and smoothness of Usain Bolt bursting from the starting blocks. This is an elegant amp with an

eye to the future and a respect for the old guard. NG, 198

### Audio Space Ref 3.1 (300B) \$3990

*audiospace-hifi.com*

Just amazing! This integrated offers extreme soundstage transparency coupled with crystalline clarity. Truly high definition sound, on a par with the best solid-state designs can offer, but with a spatial conviction solid-state rarely approaches. Substitute vintage 6SN7 or 7N7 triodes for an instant sonic upgrade. A stunning accomplishment at its asking price. DO, 194

### VTL IT-85 \$4250

*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 close to offering as musical and pure a sound. JHb, 168

### Muse Model Two Hundred \$4500

*eliteavdist.com*

The Two Hundred operates from music's interior, gleaning details from images without overlaying any of its own editorial slant onto music sources. In general tonality it strikes a middle balance that allows it to yield to the personality of the source, veering where appropriate to the warm or cool, the lean or rich. With its flexible MAP architecture, Muse asks how you want your music served up and then proceeds to dish out huge, complex sonic portions. NG, 192

### Plinius 9200 \$4835

*eliteavdist.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 phono stage 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. NG, 156

### Vincent V-60 \$4995

*msdistributing.com*

The V-60 is one of Vincent's new flagship offerings and it's an effort that's as beautiful to listen to as it is serious to behold. From the heavy aluminum-clad chassis and massive power supply to the silken midrange transparency and airy top-end, this conservatively rated sixty watter is pure high end. It's also thoroughly modern, sporting a hands-free bias-voltage-and-current control that's fully automated, compensating for the wear of each tube. To extract its full sonic measure, a speaker's sensitivity is an important consideration. NG, 194

### ATC SIA2-150 \$5000

*atc.gh.net*

There is nothing Old School about the performance of this Art Deco styled 150Wpc integrated. The unwavering midrange is all forthrightness and fluidity. Its neutral-to-warm tonal balance never crosses the threshold into the starkly clinical. Upper mid and lower treble information is smooth and biased to the sweeter side of the spectrum. Perhaps the most impressive aspect is the wide net it casts in resolving soundstage and image information. A thoroughly

modern instrument that quickly gets down to the business of making music. NG, 194

### Pathos Logos \$5495

*audioplusservices.com*

Boasting cutting edge styling and a sonic personality that eschews any form of audiophile hype while drawing all attention to the music, this tube front end/transistor backend hybrid is a real music lover's delight. Minimalist with a vengeance, the only controls are source selection, volume, and mute (though at least they are available via remote). PS, 182

### NAD M2 \$5995

*nadelectronics.com*

Five years in development, the innovative M2 is a "digital" amplifier in the true sense of that word. It takes in PCM data (up to 192kHz/24-bit) and converts that PCM to a pulse-width-modulated signal that turns the output transistors on and off. The signal path has no digital filter, no DAC, no analog gain stages, no analog volume control, no preamplifier, and no interconnects. The M2, which functions like an integrated amplifier in practice, sounds remarkable, with tremendous dynamics, extremely low noise, richly textured and defined bass, and three-dimensional soundstaging. RH, 198



### Pass Labs INT-150 \$7150

*passlabs.com*

Powerful, subtle, effortless, Pass Labs' first foray into the ultra-competitive integrated amplifier market is an unvarnished success. This control amplifier doubles its prodigious 150Wpc output into 4 ohms making it a good candidate for less-sensitive

loudspeakers. Its character suggests near complete neutrality tempered with pleasing warmth—an ease and fluidity that's not euphonically tube-like but more characteristic of solid-state with a strong Class A bias, which is a feature of this amp. A powerhouse design with a heart that should make anyone rethink the "separates" option. NG, 184

### Magnum-Dynalab MD-309 \$7800

*magnumdynalab.com*

A masterful effort from the Canadian company famous for its FM analog tuners. Massively built, the MD-309 is a hybrid design with a dual 6922 CryoTube front end and 40 Sanken output transistors in its gain stage. The cutting-edge front panel is arrayed with a huge 5" LCD touchscreen and dual output meters. Ultra-flexible, it offers a wealth of connectivity, including in an internal DAC with three digital inputs (one of them USB). With the MD-309's 225Wpc on tap (doubling into 4 ohms), one would expect effortless dynamics and extension, but it's the amp's soothing delicacy that really plays upon your heartstrings. A splendid component. Review forthcoming

### Simaudio Moon i-7 \$8000

*simaudio.com*

Simaudio's Moon i-7 is designed and built like a separate preamplifier and power amplifier in the same chassis, with dual-mono construction, a sophisticated and expensive stepped-attenuator volume control, and fully balanced circuitry. With an absolutely gorgeous rendering of tone color and tube-like liquidity, the i-7 is one of the all-time-great integrated amplifiers. The build-quality and chassis metalwork are absolutely first-class. This is a product for those who want the performance of separates

but the form-factor of an integrated. RH, 179

### Plinius Hiato

**\$8900 (\$10,175 w/phone)**

*eliteavdist.com*

This 300Wpc solid-state amp is a bull—a big gun reserved for the large-caliber jobs of bringing unwieldy or demanding speakers into line. It virtually redefines low-frequency control and extension, as well as dynamic reserve, in this segment. Image scale is spectacular, and it tosses off dynamics like lightning bolts. Tonally neutral in the midband, it has just a hint of treble coolness, but when mated to a full-range speaker it will elicit inner detail and resolution that very few integrated amps can touch. Available with an excellent full-featured phonostage. NG, this issue

### Accuphase E550

**\$13,000**

*axissaudio.com*

The Accuphase E550 is high-end audio at its finest. This full-featured integrated is an exercise in precision and accuracy without being over-analytical, while its 30 Class A watts will drive all but the most demanding of loads. Sweet, musical, and delightfully dynamic, the E550 is destined to be a classic. SK, 181

### STEREO RECEIVERS, CD RECEIVERS, AND ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEMS

### April Music Aura Note

**\$1895**

*aprilmusic.com*

The Aura Note looks as if it stepped out of a time machine from London's Carnaby Street, circa 1965. There's a lot of tech here (50Wpc and twin USB inputs) but it's designed for the nostalgic sensualist with a feeling for audio history and tapping his inner James Bond. Robustly built, the Aura Note offers impressive oomph in the bottom end and is more than persuasive

reproducing a broad soundstage and the dynamic swings of the full orchestra. NG, 186

### Arcam Solo Mini

**\$999**

*americanaudiovideo.com*

Beneath its brushed aluminum skin, USB jack, and slot-loaded-CD mechanics, the Mini offers articulate and highly listenable sonics without over-reaching at the frequency extremes. There's genuine bass refinement although the deepest bass will not be fully resolved. With a cool running 25Wpc and a high-resolution Wolfson multi-bit DAC from the premium Arcam DiVA CD73, the Arcam is well suited to drive any fine compact loudspeaker of reasonable sensitivity. NG, 186

### NAD Viso Two

**\$1299**

*nadelectronics.com*

A DVD-receiver that is not only drop-dead gorgeous but features discrete amplifier output stages, a progressive-scan DVD player (with 1080i upscaling), and provisions for an XM module or iPod docking station. The two-channel version sports 50Wpc. Sonically the VISO Two hews to the NAD philosophy of top-notch dynamics and a tonal balance with a mellow character near the frequency extremes. Suddenly saving space doesn't seem like such a sacrifice. Highly recommended. NG, 188

### Peachtree Audio Nova

**\$1199**

*signalpathhint.com*

The versatile Nova can serve as an 80Wpc hybrid integrated amp, a tube preamp with three analog and five digital inputs, a Class A tube headphone amp, or a solid-state USB DAC with remote input-switching. But frankly, the Nova's DAC section alone justifies its price, making the other good stuff pure "gravy." Chris Martens, *Playback* 21

### 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. RH, 169



### Teac PD-H600 CD Player and AG-H600NT Stereo Receiver

**\$999 CD player, \$1499 receiver**

*teac.com*

These components in Teac's Reference Series might be diminutive in size, but not in sound. The receiver isn't your father's receiver, but an "Internet-Radio Stereo Receiver" that comes with wired and wireless PC streaming capability and offers an optional iPod docking station. WG, this issue

### Primare DVDI-10

**\$2495**

*soundorg.com*

Beneath the bespoke look, aluminum casework, and discrete top-mount controls is a multi-tasker of substance, thanks in part to its cool-running 75Wpc Class D amplifier and an onboard A/D converter. Sonically the DVDI10 features a strong sense of pace and timing and an appealing tonal balance that neither veers toward the warmly romantic or the coolly clinical. Given appropriate speakers and a vivid 1080p display it will perform at levels certain to raise a few eyebrows amongst audiophiles and videophiles

alike. NG, 193

### Resolution Audio Opus 21 \$2500 amp, \$3500 CD player, \$1500 tuner/phone preamp

*resolutionaudio.com*

Implausibly, the Opus 21 component stack combines all the advantages of an all-in-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. AT, 167

### PREAMPLIFIERS

### Under \$1000

### Vincent Audio SA-31

**\$599**

*wsdistributing.com*

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. CM, 173

### PS Audio Trio P-200

**\$995**

*psaudio.com*

The heart of the P-200's circuitry is PS Audio's "gain cell" technology, said 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, ideal for pared-down music systems. BW, 170

**Rogue Audio Metis**  
**\$995***rogueaudio.com*

Rogue Audio's award-winning Metis is a USA-made, vacuum-tube-powered (6SN7-based) preamplifier. The dynamic liveliness and harmonic richness we expect in any good tube design are present here, and at levels that remind us of the sound of \$2500 tube preamps. But unlike tube designs that sound focused in the midrange but soft at the frequency extremes, the Metis' great strength is sound that remains evenly balanced and finely resolved from top to bottom. CM, 160

**\$1000-\$2000****Van Alstine Transcendence 8**  
**\$1099-\$1697 depending on options***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. DO, 173

**Quad 99/QC-24**  
**\$1100/\$1100***quad-hifi.co.uk*

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 linestage 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. PS, 128, 135, and 201.

**GE**  
01**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 tube warmth and richness with a clear, crisp, precise presentation reminiscent of the best solid-state designs. Bass, too, is taut and clear. SR, 156

**Cambridge Audio 840E**  
**\$1799***audioplusservices.com*

The preamp companion to the 840W amp, the 840E is highly configurable, with excellent connectivity and a wonderful premium-resistor-ladder volume control. Of course, none of this would matter if the musicality and neutrality were anything other than at the top of class and they are. It's almost unsettling how quiet this preamp is too. The 840E/840W tandem represents one of the most satisfying debuts in recent years. NG, 186

**Micromega PA-20**  
**\$1995***audioplusservices.com*

After a few hard luck years, France's Micromega is back with a revitalized lineup to savor. Leading the charge is the PA-20 preamp. Sleek and well appointed, the PA-20 is especially good at letting the inherent properties of a system come to the fore without slipping in additives of its own. The PA registered as clean, balanced, and controlled—easily able to hold position on soloists and delineate complex choral groupings. Its personality is a cooler one, its midrange as solid and penetrating as a Klitschko jab. The treble is smooth but probably in need of just a little more bloom. If the PA-20 is any indication, Micromega's future looks to be a bright one. NG, 200

**GE**  
05**\$2000-\$4000**  
**Manley Laboratories Shrimp**  
**\$2300***manleylabs.com*

Stepping up to the plate with spunk, clarity, and wall-to-wall soundstaging, the Manley Shrimp tubed linestage is a serious contender in the \$2k price range and beyond. Leaning to the warm side of neutral, its minimalist, single-ended-only design can be soft on top, but offers eminently musical and inviting sound. An excellent value for the music lover and tube enthusiast and now equipped with an RF remote control. SK, 178

**ModWright SWL 9.0SE/SWL 9.0 Signature Edition**  
**\$2495/\$2995***modwright.com*

These two all-tubed linestages (the Signature Edition offers a number of design upgrades) offer particularly wide and deep soundstaging, coupled with an extended bottom-end and a sweet treble. "... addictive, seductive, beautiful, exciting. . ." is how SR summed up the SWL 9.0 SE Signature Edition. SR, 181

**Vincent Audio SA-T8**  
**\$2500***wsdistributing.com*

This tube line preamplifier is about bass precision, spacious soundstaging, speedy transients, pure midrange textures, and rhythmic drive. The lower treble is a bit coarser texturally relative to the midrange. Microdynamic nuances are reproduced with commendable conviction. A rare musical blossom at this price point, and an absolute steal considering its twin virtues of crystalline clarity and ample boogie factor. DO, 188

**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 phono stage. CM, 173

**Electrocompaniet EC 4.7**  
**\$3495***electrocompaniet.com*

The Electrocompaniet EC 4.7 solid-state preamp from the Land of the Vikings produces a natural mix of lifelike imaging and soundstaging that gives large complex orchestral music about as much realism as you can achieve in a home stereo. Clean, transparent, and exceptionally quiet, it also has significantly more extended bass and high-frequency response than many competing units. A very good preamp by any standard, at its price it is very attractive and well worth an audition. AHC, 198

**Artemis Labs LA-1**  
**\$3500***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. WG, 155

**GE**  
05

### Conrad-Johnson ET2 \$3500 (\$1250 for phono option)

conradjohnson.com

Despite its entry-level status, the ET2 is a low-distortion, high-resolution line preamplifier that delivers timbral accuracy and phenomenal bass control. The overall presentation is clean, smooth, slightly laid-back, yet highly detailed, with an emphasis on harmonic accuracy. It can certainly hold its own in elitist company. The optional phonostage can also be confidently recommended. DO, 193



### \$4000-\$5000

#### Parasound Halo JC-2 \$4000

parasound.com

The JC-2 is that extreme rarity—a near-reference-quality product that many of us can actually afford. Neutral and natural, transparent-to-sources, quick and delicately detailed (though not as hard-hitting and detailed as the higher-priced spreads), here is one solid-state preamp that doesn't trade away key parts of the baby (air, bloom, color, three-dimensionality) for the bathwater of razor-cut imaging and iron-fisted control. The poor (or poorer) man's ARC Reference 3. JV, 182

#### Meridian G02

\$4495

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.” SK, 152

### Aesthetix Calypso/Calypso Signature \$4500/\$7000

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. RH, 151

The Signature version improves on the already terrific performance with an expanded soundstage, richer portfolio of instrumental textures, more air, longer decays, and better-defined bass. AT found that the Signature version imparted a warmer cast to timbres. AT, 196

#### Atma-Sphere MP-3

\$4750

atma-sphere.com

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

### \$5000-\$10,000

#### McIntosh C46/C2200

\$5500/\$6000

mcintoshlabs.com

Sonically and functionally a great preamplifier, the solid-state C46 features a truly useful set of controls, including an eight-band equalizer that is even up to correcting some room-related problems. It also has an excellent phonostage. In day-to-day use PS has never experienced a more pleasurable

unit. McIntosh's first new all-tube preamp in more than 40 years, the C2200 is a triumph that sports a gallery of features (including a good phonostage) and classic McIntosh sound.

The midrange is the most neutral PS has heard in any tube unit, the bass response is equally fine, at once firm yet natural, and the highs are sweet, pure, and extended. PS, 147

#### Edge G2

\$5898

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. WG, 149

#### Lamm LL2.1

\$5990

lammindustries.com

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

#### BAT VK-42SE

\$6995-\$8245 (depending on options)

balanced.com

BAT designer Victor Khomenko is rightly proud of the numerous programming features on the VK-42SE preamplifier. But that's only the start of the story. A preamp that punches above its weight and a great value, this exemplary solid-state design is most notable for its smooth, silky sound and superbly low noise floor. Where it falls short from

more elaborate designs is in resolution and dynamics. JHB, 179

### Aesthetix Janus/Janus Signature

\$7500/\$10,000

musicalsurrroundings.com

The Janus combines Aesthetix' Calypso linestage with a scaled-down Rhea phonostage in a single chassis. The Signature version features upgraded parts in the identical circuit. The units share numerous qualities: speed and detail without being analytical; unimpeded highs without a glint of shrillness; a low noise floor; precise, pulsating rhythms; dynamics that are only a skosh less lively than reference-caliber; and a laid-back perspective. The quiet background and smooth highs add up to long hours of glorious, fatigue-free listening. AT, 196

#### Pass Labs XP20

\$8600

passlabs.com

Very quiet, with no trace of solid-state hardness, excellent musical life, and the best low-level detail I have yet encountered. Soundstaging is as real in imaging, width, and depth as the recording permits. Excellent deep bass, and clean, detailed upper midrange and treble that get the most out of flute, clarinet, strings, and piano. And it does the same with the full range of male and female voice. My new reference preamp, although it was a hard choice relative to the Boulder 1010. AHC, 192

#### Audio Space Reference 2

\$9900

audiospace-hifi.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

PY  
09

PY  
03

GE  
09

GE  
04

GE  
07

PY  
07

nonpareil midband timbre, imaging, and bloom. Though it has its own built-in mm/mc phonostages, both were too noisy for JV's taste. The Ref 2 is, however, a superb combination with ARC's PH7 phonostage. JV, 174

### Spectral DMC-30SS

**\$9995**

**P&Y**  
09

*spectralaudio.com*

Spectral's DMC-30SS is a *tour de force* in preamplifier design, with its ultra-fast circuits, heroic volume control, and meticulous attention to every detail. Its sound is hard to describe because it imposes so little signature on the signal passing through it. Putting the DMC-30SS into the system is like washing months of winter off a picture window. Timbres are richly saturated, soundstages huge and defined, and resolution of transient detail is unmatched, provided that these qualities exist in the recording. RH, 190

### \$10,000 and above

#### Mark Levinson No. 326S

**\$10,000**

**P&Y**  
06

*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, 161

#### Boulder 1010

**\$13,000**

*boulderamp.com*

A preamp that complements all of the sonic virtues of the Boulder 1050 power amp, and does so with exceptional resolving power and detail. An excellent phonostage. The ability to adjust the level of each input to match. Excellent remote control features. Superb Boulder construction. A true high-end product! AHC, 188

#### Simaudio Moon P-8

**\$15,000**

*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 in 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 \$15,000. PS, 165

#### VTL 7.5 Series II

**\$18,500**

*vtl.com*

This latest iteration of VTL's preamp ups the ante by improving parts quality and lowering the noise floor by moving from a 12AX7 to a lower-gain 12AU7 tube. The result is an extremely explosive and neutral-sounding preamplifier that will appeal especially to lovers of orchestral works or rock and roll. Swapping tubes might provide more bloom, but no one will accuse the unit of being lush or colored. JHb, 180

#### Balanced Audio Technology Rex

**\$20,000**

*balanced.com*

This massive, two-chassis, all-tubed preamplifier sets a reference standard in midrange liquidity, palpability, and lack of electronic artifacts. The Rex is supremely seductive and engaging, making the listener forget he's listening through the electronics to the music. The only caveat is that the Rex runs hot, even in standby mode. If you can handle the cost, heat, and rack-space requirements, RH knows of no sweeter-sounding preamplifier. RH, 182

#### MBL 6010 D

**\$23,800**

*mbt-usa.com*

One of the three best solid-state preamps JV has auditioned. Its noise floor is so incredibly low that it consistently resolves fine harmonic and dynamic details that simply aren't audible on other 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. JV, 164

#### Soulution 720

**\$40,000**

*axisaudio.com*

The second of the three best solid-state preamps JV has heard. More dead-neutral in balance (though sweet enough in the mids and treble never to sound clinical) and less dark and liquid than the MBL 6010 D, the 720, like Soulution's amplifiers, is killer-transparent to sources. It's not more detailed than the ultra-high-resolution 61010 D, but it's not less. Like the 700 and 710 amps, this is a component that just "disappears" as a sound source, allowing other components ahead of and behind it to more completely show their true colors (or their lack of same). Probably *the* preamp for the audiophile who wants to hear everything on every disc but doesn't want to turn his stereo into a sonic X-ray machine. JV, 194

#### Krell Evolution Two

**\$50,000**

*krellonline.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. AHC, 158

#### BALabo BC-1 MK-II

**\$59,000**

*balaba.com*

Like its companion power amp, the BP-1, the BC-1 "control amp" (linestage preamplifier) is among the most beautiful pieces of electronics JV has seen or heard. A little dark in overall balance (rather like the MBL 6010 D), the BALabo is simply exquisite on tone colors, turning everything into a shade of gorgeous without sacrificing *any* of the speed or low-level detail of the real thing. Wonderful grip and definition in the low bass, too. Breathhtakingly lovely and extremely high in resolution, the third of JV's reference solid-state preamps. Review this issue

### PHONOSTAGES

#### Under \$3000

##### Parasound Zphono

**\$200**

*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 \$200, you really *can't* complain. PS, 172



**Gram Amp 2 SE****\$399***elecatelier.com*

This stripped-down little number 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.

PS, 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. WG, 141

**Simaudio Moon LP3****\$550***simaudio.com*

Simaudio's little LP3 is a very convincing performer, and quiet too. It offers 40dB gain for moving-magnet and 60dB gain for moving-coil cartridges, either 100 or 47k Ohms loading, and parts quality is military-spec. Though its frequency extremes aren't particularly extended and its midrange is a mite hooded, this is an excellent mid-entry-level phonostage. WG, 180

**Phonomena II****\$600***musicalsurrroundings.com*

The sequel to the original Michael Yee design, the Phonomena II is based on the latest, discrete circuitry of the top-flight Nova Phonomena, minus the battery pack. Like the original it's easily adjustable and quite extended, with a kind of heavy gravity in the bass octaves. A bit cooler and

brasher on brass fortissimos, but the sound is alive and electrifying with dynamic energy. For balance and value the Phonomena II is a stunner. NG, 191

**Marchand Electronics LN-112-AA****\$995***marchandelec.com*

A sweet, open, and very natural sounding tube phonostage, the LN-112, which can also be ordered either as a kit (\$595), partially (\$795) or fully assembled (\$995; \$1295 for moving-coil version), and surely ranks among audio's great values. Its 47k Ohms impedance and low output make it best for mm and high-output mc cartridges. WG, 175

**PS Audio GCPH Phono****\$995***psaudio.com*

PS Audio's GCPH phonostage is one of the best-sounding and most versatile offerings in its price class. Notable strengths include killer bass, natural warmth, a highly three-dimensional sound, and silent backgrounds. Welcome design touches include externally adjustable gain and load switches, and a remote control with volume and absolute-phase adjustments. And yep, it can directly drive power amps, too. CM, 191

**Nova Phonomena****\$999***musicalsurrroundings.com*

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. PS, 172

**JR Transrotor Phono II****\$1500***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 drive. Fully adjustable for mm and mc, it may well be the last phonostage you'll ever want. Sonically on the cooler and clinical side—but only slightly so. NG, 172

**Simaudio Moon LP5.3****\$1700***simaudio.com*

A stellar performer, the LP5.3 is quiet, transparent, and tonally neutral, and is capable of not only recreating a remarkable sense of the space an LP was recorded in, but also the subtlest interactions of the musicians who occupied it. The LP5.3 is flexible, too, with four levels of impedance loading—three for capacitance, three for gain—and both single-ended and balanced outputs. WG, 180

**Nagra BPS****\$2399***nagraaudio.com*

Nagra's miniscule BPS is a terrific and relatively affordable battery-powered phonostage. Powered by a single 9-volt, the BPS is unusually quiet and refined, very transparent, and especially good at translating low-level dynamics and quick rhythmic shifts. What that 9V power source won't give you is the explosive dynamic peaks, deep bass power, and visceral intensity of larger units. Recommended especially for those who listen to jazz, vocals, and moderately-scaled rock and classical. WG, 198

**\$3000-\$6000****Musical Surroundings****SuperNova 2****\$3200***musicalsurrroundings.com*

The SuperNova 2 offers unprecedented cartridge-loading options that allow users to precisely dial in the optimum settings for a particular pickup. Not just a phonostage, it also has a line-level input in addition to two phono inputs and an attenuator of limited range, giving it the ability to replace a preamplifier in some simple systems. Sonically, the SuperNova 2 is also transparent, dynamic, and high in resolution. Can be run off AC or batteries. "An indispensable reviewing tool and my longstanding reference," said PS. PS, 200

**Sutherland Hubble****\$3800***sutherlandengineering.com*

This D-cell-battery-powered phonostage from Ron Sutherland replaces the highly regarded PH-3D at the top of the Sutherland Engineering line. Like the PH-3D it is low in noise, neutral in balance, high in resolution, natural in imaging, and exceptionally wide, tall, and deep in soundstaging. It is also highly adaptable, offering users a plethora of easily implemented gain and loading options. Review forthcoming

**Aesthetix Rhea****\$4000***musicalsurrroundings.com*

With three inputs, variable cartridge loading—adjustable at the listening chair via remote control—and a front-panel display of gain and loading, the Rhea is the Swiss Army Knife of phonostages. Although it has tons of gain, the noise level is extremely low, making it compatible with a wide range of cartridge outputs. The Rhea's family resemblance to the Calypso linestage is unmistakable: transient quickness and speed without etch, a feeling of effortlessness



on crescendos, and a deep, layered soundstage. RH, 151

### Artemis Labs PL-1

**\$4000**

*aydn.com*

Like its companion lineage, the PL-1 is a tube phonostage that delivers exquisitely musical and lifelike sound. Record after record left WG 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. WG, 155

### Naim SuperLine

**\$5950 (with SuperCap 2)**

*naim-audio.com*

With no built-in power supply, the SuperLine is designed to mate with either another Naim component or one of three standalone Naim power supplies: the FlatCap2x (\$1100), the HiCap2 (\$1900), or the SuperCap2 (\$5950). With any of the three it's a terrific phonostage, but when mated with the SuperCap it blossoms into one of the finest tools available for LP playback. WG, 194

### Audio Research PH7

**\$5995**

*audioresearch.com*

Meet the new boss. If you can imagine a remote-controllable phonostage 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 phonostage 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. JV, 172



### \$6000 and above

#### Lamm LP2 Deluxe

**\$7290**

*lammindustries.com*

With a superb built-in coupling transformer to handle lower-output moving coils, the all-tube Lamm LP2 phonostage has the inestimable advantage of being dead quiet, which makes it ideal for folks, like JV, who live in RF Valley. Though not as “alive” or bloomy as the Aesthetix Io or ARC PH7 on large-scale dynamics, the Lamm is rich, beautiful, and extraordinarily delicate-sounding on all music, with superior detail and transient response. JV, 157

#### Manley Steelhead

**\$7500**

*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 huevos to drive an amp directly and now has a remote control. WG, 152

#### Aesthetix Rhea Signature

**\$7000**

*musicalsurrroundings.com*

The Signature version of Aesthetix' Rhea vividly demonstrates the value of component quality. Although the circuit is identical to that of the Rhea, the Signature uses cost-no-object parts throughout. The sonic result is a much better defined bottom end, even smoother timbres, and (surprisingly) greater dimensionality. An expensive upgrade over the \$4k Rhea, but worth it. RH, 196

### Audio Research Reference

#### Phono 2

**\$12,000**

*audioresearch.com*

When it comes to designing and building phonostage preamplifiers, ARC has perhaps the most distinguished pedigree of all high-end companies. With the Ref Phono 2, it has outdone itself, producing the single most natural-sounding phonostage in company history. The thing is a wonder of lifelike timbre, low-level detail, and wall-to-wall soundstaging, with the best bass-and-treble speed, extension, and definition yet in an ARC tube-hybrid design. In addition to the RIAA standard, the Ref Phono 2 also offers—for the first time in an ARC unit—alternative EQ curves for Decca and Columbia recordings. JV's reference. JV, 199

#### Audio Tekne TEA-2000

**\$12,000**

*tangramaudio.com*

Audio Tekne's exquisitely made and expensive electronics are examples of the artisanal high end—in this case the work of Japanese master Kiyooki Imai. Built around very-high-quality power transformers, two superb step-up transformers (one for very-low-output moving coils and one for typical coils), and a tube gain stage, the TEA-2000 is a wonderment. Unlike other step-up-transformer-based phonostages, the TEA-2000 gives up *nothing* in the way of transparency and detail. Indeed, it sounds so much like a very slight and pleasantly warmer, considerably higher-output, marginally more detailed PH7 it is uncanny. JV

### MUSIC SERVERS

#### Apple TV

**\$329**

*apple.com*

When you consider its price and sonic capabilities it's hard to understand why any audiophile with a computer and WiFi doesn't already have an Apple TV in his system. It retains the

essential nature and feeling of the music as faithfully as a good CD transport. You'll never have the impression that the music was merely “there” as with many mid-fi components. A true 21st century music-delivery device is finally here. SS, 183

### Logitech Slim Devices

#### Transporter

**\$1999**

*slimdevices.com*

The Transporter is an overly versatile product whose flexibility may be its best and worst trait. It can be used as a music server, DAC, or stand-alone digital preamp, so many users may employ it in a way that prevents it from sounding its best. Still, if you are thinking of buying any \$2000+ DAC you absolutely must consider a Transporter. It's simply that good. SS, 193

#### Logitech Squeezebox Duet

**\$399**

*slimdevices.com*

The Duet is the radio king. Through it you can listen to almost any FM radio station in the world. Its full-color remote can leap through tall buildings with a single bound and it even doubles as a nice digital clock. The sound quality and ergonomics of the Logitech Squeezebox Duet make it worthy of installation in even the most exalted high-end system. It also doesn't hurt that it is ridiculously inexpensive. SS, 183

### Music Vault II

**MusicVault II 500, \$1485;**  
**MusicVault II, 1000, \$1725;**  
**MusicVault II, 1500, \$1920;**  
**MusicVault II 2000, \$2265**

*soundsciencecat.com*

If you peruse the Internet you will discover that NAS hard drives can be had for as little as \$100. If you buy the right one and have the skills, you can conceivably cobble together a device that has nearly all the capabilities of a Music Vault II. But your home-brew

unit will not have is the same degree of customer service and ergonomic ease as the Music Vault II. SS, 193

### Qsonix Q110 Music Server Price varies with configuration

*qsonix.com*

When it comes to music servers, the user interface is paramount. This is where the Q110 excels—its touchscreen panel and “drag ‘n’ drop” operation justify the higher price compared with building your own PC-based server. Qsonix is continually adding new features, including seamless integration with on-line stores. RH, 177 and 184

### Sonos BU 150 (includes ZP-90 ZonePlayer, ZP-120 ZonePlayer, CR100 Controller 100, and CC100Charging Cradle 100)

**\$999 (bundle price)**

*sonos.com*

I read somewhere that the Sonos system is about as sexy as a toaster. That may be true, but it's also as reliable, unintimidating, and easy to use as a bread-browning device. The fact that the Sonos system makes it easy for anyone to enjoy music anywhere in his home makes it the greatest thing since sliced bread. SS, 189

### Sooloos Music Server

**Price varies with configuration**

*meridian-audio.com*

Along with Qsonix, Sooloos offers a much easier to use music server than the competition thanks to its touchscreen user interface. The tools for finding and presenting you with the music you *might* want to hear are exemplary.

After living with a Sooloos, it's hard to go back to searching for CDs. Now owned by Meridian. RH, 177

### Goodwin's PC-based Music Server

**\$3600 (price varies)**

*goodwinshighend.com*

The state-of-the-art in digital audio playback is this custom-built PC-based music server from Boston retailer Goodwin's High End. The device starts life as a Zalman PC that uses heat sinks rather than a cooling fan (to eliminate fan noise) and a 64GB solid-state memory rather than a hard disk (again to eliminate noise). Goodwin's installs a Lynx AES16 output card (which provides AES/EBU output) and MediaMonkey music-management software, and configures the system for turnkey operation. When you play 176.4kHz/24-bit Reference Recordings HRx files through a Berkeley Alpha DAC, the sound is nothing short of spectacular. RH bought the review sample. RH, 189

### DSP ROOM CORRECTION

#### Audyssey Sound Equalizer

**\$2500**

*audyssey.com*

The Audyssey EQ compensates for room effects to produce remarkably smooth, uncolored, and neutral sound and it can even do this over quite a large listening area. The chosen “target curve” is flat down through the bass, with none of the curve shaping, with bass up a little, that is common in room-correction devices. The result sounds rather lean with many recordings, and user control of the target curve is minimal: only some top-end roll-off options are offered. This is a surround unit with eight channels, but is usable for two-channel. REG, 178

#### Copland DRC 205 Room Compensation Device

**\$2990**

*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. REG, 173

#### TacT Audio RCS 2.2XP

**\$5190 (base unit)/\$6860**

**(fully loaded) GE**

*tactaudio.com*

05

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 whatever “target curve” you choose. REG, 158

#### Lyngdorf Audio TDAI ADC RP 2200

**\$7200**

*lyngdorf.com*

GE  
07

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. REG, 170

### DIGITAL FORMAT CONVERTERS AND CLOCKS

#### Bel Canto USB Link 24/96

**\$295**

*belcantodesign.com*

The USB Link 24/96 is a cleverly conceived USB-to-S/PDIF converter that enables any PC to play music through

virtually any DAC. Along with this flexibility comes higher resolution than most USB-capable DACs, plus a less plastic, more dynamic, airier sound. The Link cannot completely overcome USB's intrinsic sonic limitations, but it is ideal for those who must use that interface. AT, 194

#### Focusrite Saffire

**\$499**

*focusrite.com*

Focusrite's FireWire-to-S/PDIF converter constitutes a genuine breakthrough in extracting audiophile-grade sound from a PC. Though not quite reference caliber in inner detail, instrumental body, or bass definition, the Saffire delivers a rich, relaxed, airy, rhythmically cohesive, flesh-and-blood presentation that is the antithesis of USB. Note that the Saffire is a minor pain to install and set up. AT, 194



#### Empirical Audio Off-Ramp 3 USB Converter

**\$699-\$1499**

*empiricalaudio.com*

The Off-Ramp 3 converts USB audio from a music server into S/PDIF, AES/EBU, or I2S signals for output to a DAC. It comes in three flavors and prices; the only differences are the precision of the clocking. The Off-Ramp offers a very-high-quality and cost-effective way for audiophiles who already own a pricey S/PDIF DAC to enter the world of USB computer audio. SS, 200

**dCS Puccini U-Clock****\$4999***dcslltd.co.uk*

Although designed for dCS's Puccini CD/SACD player, the U-Clock outboard clock and USB converter will work with any DAC with a clock input and any PC-based music server with USB output. The U-Clock vaults the sound of the Puccini into new sonic territory while simultaneously expanding its functionality to incorporate state-of-the-art decoding of high-resolution digital audio from a PC-based music server. It offers "asynchronous" USB connection to a PC, converting USB to S/PDIF for output to the Puccini or other decoder. Used in this way, the U-Clock completely overcomes the sonic limitations of USB. RH, 200

**Esoteric G-Orb Rubidium Master Clock****\$16,000***esoteric.teac.com*

In digital-audio playback, who would have thought you'd need the precision of an atomic clock? That's exactly what the G-Orb is, and when used with transports and converters with a clock inputs, it elevates their sound to a new level. Expensive, but worth it. Stunning build and metalwork. RH, 180

**DISC PLAYERS****Under \$1000****Oppo DV-980H****\$169***oppodigital.com*

Oppo's DV-980H is, hands down, the best universal player \$169 can buy. It's a more than respectable entry-level CD player, an even better DVD-Audio/SACD player, and a surprisingly good upscaling DVD player, too. Offering smoother, more detailed, and

more focused sound than anything near its price, the DV-980H makes a perfect multi-format audiophile's starter player (though "gild-the-lily" types should note that Oppo's \$395 DV-983H raises the performance bar higher still). CM, 183

**NAD C515 BEE****\$299***nadelectronics.com*

Joins the C315 BEE integrated amplifier as the entry-level tandem in NAD's high-flying BEE line. In both cases the BEEs hold their own, revealing orchestral minutiae, dynamic thrills, and timbral details that would have escaped a sub-\$300 player a short while ago. There's more bloom in the treble, although it's still on the dry side. Inner dynamic lines may not be as pristinely defined as higher-priced units, but the sonic delights of the C515 BEE should make all listeners look long and hard at their options in the under-\$1000 range. NG, 183

**Oppo BDP-83 Blu-ray/Universal Disc Player****\$499***oppodigital.com*

The Oppo BD-83 is an answer to the dream of every audiophile who has wished for an affordable, truly universal disc player that performs on every format. It is compatible not just with CD, HDCD, DVD-A, DVD-V, and SACD, but also with Blu-ray Discs. The best part is that the BD-83 not only plays all these discs, but plays them well. The player is characterized by a warm, sweet, full-bodied sound that is a significant step up from Oppo's lower-priced players. Winner of *The Absolute Sound's* Budget Component of the Year Award. CM, 198

**Cambridge Azur 550C****\$599***audioplusservices.com*

A substantial upgrade from its predecessor, the Azur

550C is quite comfortable in the company of much more expensive components, exhibiting sonics that are dynamic, fast, smooth on top, and extended on the bottom. It is also a bit forward and cooler in the mids—a characteristic fairly common to all but the most upscale digital. The player also features an in-house-developed audio-only transport, an improved high-contrast display, dual user-selectable filters, a digital output, and an Energy Star rating. It's fast-loading, to boot. NG, 200

**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). CM, 186

**Arcam FMJ CD17****\$999***americanaudiovideo.com*

One of the finest CD players going in this price range, Arcam's FMJ CD 17 astonishes with its ability to deliver the emotion in the music. From the loneliness of a lovelorn ballad to an orchestral blockbuster, a rollicking jazz quartet to a rocking power trio, here is a seriously good and musically compelling CD player that more than earns the phrase "terrific value." WG, 198

**Rotel RCD-1520****\$999***rotel.com*

The all-new RCD-1520 may just be the breakout source component in this price range. A sumptuous blend of brushed and polished metal surfaces, it boasts a new slot-loading mechanism, a high-performance Wolfson DAC, plus a digital output. Its sonics are spacious

and clean with excellent image differentiation. It exemplifies definition but without the analytic coolness that often afflicts low-cost digital. While it doesn't have the bloom or air of the priciest players, its treble easily walks the line between silky smooth and aggressive, whenever necessary. It's capable of sorting out low-level minutiae like few disc players at this price. NG, 196

**\$1000-\$2500****Simaudio Moon CD i-1****\$1700***simaudio.com*

Simaudio's wonderful sounding Moon i-1 CD player boasts outstanding build-quality for the money—not that fifteen hundred is chicken feed—in a simple to operate package that delivers huge value. Musicality is the name of the game here. Along with its low noise floor that allows sound to emerge from deep spaces, this player delivers a pleasingly warm tonality that's absolutely free of any glaze or hash. Yet at the same time, detail is terrific, and dynamics, both large- and small-scale, are outstanding, resulting in a natural rhythmic flow and listener engagement. WG, 185

**Exposure 3010S****\$1795***bluebirdmusic.com*

A highly articulate CD player, Exposure's 3010S possesses impressive breadth and depth, and good air and detail. Initially hard sounding, after run-in the Exposure rewards with a musically natural presentation capable of bloom, complex harmonics, excellent rhythmic pace, and deep, authoritative bass that's always easy and effortless sounding. WG, 181

**Cambridge Audio Azur 840C****\$1799***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 different than 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. RH, 174

### Sony BDP-S5000ES

**\$1999**

*sony.com*

A Blu-ray battleship if there ever was one. Ruggedly built, with Ethernet and memory card at the ready for BD-Live content, it's also chock full of 14-bit HD video processing and onboard 7.1-channel audio processing of the latest multichannel high-resolution formats. Audio and picture quality were crystalline pure; even stock CDs fared well. The premium price suggests it's for the Sony system completist—not that there's anything wrong with that. NG, 193



### \$2000-\$3000

#### PrimaLuna ProLogue 8

**\$2499**

*primaluna-usa.com*

An amazing value! Unique tube-based clock. At its best, with the board upgrade, the Eight closes in on even the most expensive competition. It's blessed with plenty of boogie factor, superb clarity, sensuous mids, and lovely harmonic bloom. Its portrayal of the soundstage is wonderfully transparent. Out of the box, upper octaves are a bit grainy and bright. Tube dampers help significantly, as do vintage preamp tubes. DO, 183

### Bryston BCD-1

**\$2695**

*bryston.ca*



A CD player for the ages, this new Bryston is truly

reference-caliber at an eminently reasonable price. The BCD-1 sports the latest digital components, an audiophile-grade Class A output stage, user-friendly operation, durable construction—and gets the music right. Particularly impressive are its dramatic dynamics and ability to unravel interwoven musical lines. Buoyant without being lean, this player requires a good set of tiptoes to achieve its full potential. AT, 183

### \$3000-\$5000

#### Simaudio Moon CD3.3

**\$3000**

*simaudio.com*

The Moon CD3.3 uses a proprietary CD drive system, in-house developed hardware and software, and a Burr-Brown 24-bit/192kHz DAC just like the one used in its premium Moon Evolution SuperNova player. Not surprisingly its sound is devilishly close to that player's, and where it slightly misses the mark it does so without detracting from the beauty of the music. If it's a little casual delineating complex groupings of images and less weighty when an orchestra revs up for a finale, in the overall scheme the CD3.3 is incapable of making a wrong move. Robust construction throughout. NG, 198

#### Arcam DV139

**\$3499**

*americanaudiovideo.com*

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. RH, 174

### Classé Delta CDP-102

**\$4500**

*classeaudio.com*

Another Classé *tour de "source,"* the CDP-100 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. NG, 154

#### Meridian G08.2

**\$4995**

*meridian-audio.com*

The G08.2 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 the error-correction rate of a conventional CD player. As with the rest of the G Series, the sound is effortless, refined, and gorgeous. SK, 152

### \$5000-\$10,000

#### Plinius CD-101

**\$5225**

*elitecardist.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 system (via pulsating pin lights) takes a few spins to get used to. The massive machined remote control could easily be a lethal weapon. NG, 156

### Esoteric X-05 CD/SACD

**player**

**\$6500**

*esoteric.teac.com*



The X-05 is, in its own soulful way, the anti-digital disc player. With its silky upper-octave harmonics and air, and its effortless transients, music emerges freed of the glassy haze that overlays most digital playback. With the X-05, the familiar sonic chasm between digital and analog truly disappears. It represents the full realization of SACD high-resolution potential. NG, 190

#### Simaudio Moon Supernova

**\$6500**

*simaudio.com*

First-rate sound and first-rate construction make the Supernova a contender for the last Red Book player you'll ever need. With a slight nod to the cooler side of neutral, it's sure-footed with images, fleshy and dimensional, with a sprinter's speed off the transient line. The Supernova possesses a special sensitivity with micro-dynamics that draws it ever closer to the best SACD playback. Ergonomically, Simaudio's trademark fast-reaction mechanism and software will make the Supernova, well, *super* to use and a joy to live with, for a long time. NG, 179

#### Marantz SA-7S1

**\$6999**

*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. REG/NG, 174

**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. AT, 169

**Esoteric X-03SE****\$8200***esoteric.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 pacing. JHb, 161

**Classé CDP-502 CD/DVD player****\$8500***classeaudio.com*

The CDP-502 is one of the few players that offer DVD compatibility *and* outstanding CD-sound quality. A robust bottom-end, slightly forward midrange perspective, and a clean treble presentation make the CDP-502 competitive with similarly priced CD-only players. Throw in outstanding video quality and DVD-A compatibility, and you have a one-box solution to the CD/DVD player dilemma. RH, 183

**\$10,000 and above****Nagra CDP and CDC****\$14,295 and \$16,750***nagraaudio.com*

Whether you choose the volume-controllable CDC or the straight CDP, Nagra's designs rank among the finest of today's ultra-pricy compact disc players. (Note: the CDP's straighter signal path retrieves somewhat more musical detail

and emotional expression.)

Beautifully built on compact, brushed aluminum chassis, the Nagras have outstanding tonal purity, exceptional clarity and resolution, and a sheer beauty of sound. The Patek Philippe of CD players. WG, 176

**Meridian 808.2 Signature Reference****\$15,995/\$16,995***meridian-audio.com*

Although the new 808.2 shares its model number with the 808, this new machine is an entirely different animal. With a unique "apodising" digital filter that removes a particularly nasty form of distortion that is largely responsible for "CD sound," the 808.2 realizes a surprising improvement in CD playback. "The most significant product in the history of the Compact Disc," said RH. 808.2i adds preamplifier with volume control and source switching. RH, 194

**Spectral SDR-4000 Pro****\$17,500***spectralaudio.com*

The Spectral SDR-4000 Pro is in many ways the state of the art in CD playback, in RH's experience. The player possesses a stunning combination of super-high resolution with an unparalleled sense of ease, qualities that are usually mutually exclusive. The Spectral also conveys a sense of space, and instruments within that space, like no other CD-playback device. Throw in a lightning-fast dynamic reflexes, and you've got a presentation that is not only intellectually engaging but emotionally satisfying. RH, 190

**Boulder 1021 CD player****\$24,000***boulderamp.com*

This ambitious and unusual player sets a reference standard in sound quality. Technically, the 1021 is like no other CD player; it offers Internet connection for accessing and displaying a

CD's metadata, has the ability to play high-resolution files in WAV format directly from a disc, and features a one-minute data buffer to reduce jitter. AHC found that the 1021 sounded subtly and consistently more real in harmonic detail than any player he has heard to date. Variable output allows the 1021 to drive a power amplifier directly. AHC, 199

**Burmester 069****\$59,995***burmester.de*

A contender for the absolute top of the state of the art in every aspect of CD listening—imaging, detail, dynamics, bass, and upper octaves—and superbly built and finished. Gets the best out of "ordinary" CDs, and not just the best recordings. Like most of its competitors for this level of quality, it is, however, extremely expensive, and careful auditioning is needed to determine whether its nuances are (a) the ones you prefer, and (b) worth the cost. AHC, 184

**Soultion 740****\$60,000***axsisaudio.com*

A bit darker in balance than the dCS Scarlatti, this expensive Swiss CD player is, nonetheless, the highest-resolution, highest-transparency digital device JV has yet heard, capable of sounding "fool-you" realistic on well-recorded CDs. At this price point, one would be well advised to listen to all the contenders before pulling out that Rubidium Mastercard; nonetheless, if you're shopping for the very best, the 740 is an absolute must-audition. Review forthcoming

**DIGITAL SEPARATES (TRANSPORTS AND DACS)****Under \$1000****High Resolution Technologies MusicStreamer/ Music Streamer+ \$99/\$299***hirestech.com*

Unlike many inexpensive DACs, which may sound clean but lack the "juice" that makes recorded music sound right, the MusicStreamer retains music's essential timbres. Even 320Kbps MP3 music files have a musical rightness that very few DACs manage to convey. For under \$100 the MusicStreamer qualifies as the biggest bargain SS has heard in a long, long time. The MusicStreamer+ may be an even bigger value than its little brother, the MusicStreamer. Couple it with transparent electronics and be prepared to get closer to your music than you thought possible from a \$250 USB DAC. SS, 194

**Musical Fidelity V-DAC****\$299***musicalfidelity.com*

Musical Fidelity's humble-looking V-DAC (which provides coax, optical, and USB inputs) is an astonishingly good performer. In terms of voicing and handling of timbres and textures, it nearly equals the sound of some of the nicer four-figure CD players we've heard, sacrificing only a touch of bass extension and an elusive bit of three-dimensionality. But at this price, why quibble? CM, *Playback* 20

**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 SACD sound similar to their SACD counterparts. BW, 170

**PY 09****PY 09****PY 09**

**\$1000-\$2000****Benchmark DAC1Pre  
\$1575***benchmarkmedia.com*

According to REG, this controversial unit delivers absolutely top-quality performance that belies its small size and modest price. For its amazing sound quality, jitter-suppressing D-to-A conversion, and superb analog lineage, all at a modest price, REG called it “the beginning of a new era in audio”; the reaction of others has been more mixed. REG, 183

**Bryston BDA-1****\$1995***bryston.ca*

AT's new reference DAC, the Bryston BDA-1 reveals previously unattainable (from digital) worlds of information about the sound and performance of the music it plays. Though not quite as sweet sounding as the ARC, the Bryston is slightly more revealing and rhythmically taut, while still maintaining a relaxed, analog-like presentation. Only a sub-par USB input mars an otherwise exceptional product. AT, 194

**Empirical Audio Overdrive  
DAC****\$2999-\$3999***empiricalaudio.com*

The Empirical Audio Overdrive DAC is not only a music-server-oriented DAC, it also offers multiple digital inputs with source-switching along with a volume control, allowing you to skip a traditional analog preamplifier. Best used with Empirical's Off-Ramp 3 via the I2S interface, the Overdrive is among the top tiers of DACs with outstanding resolution, transparency, and lack of grain. SS, 200

**PO  
09****\$3000-\$10,000****Audio Research DAC7  
\$3495***audioresearch.com*

The ARC DAC7 is at the vanguard of a new wave of digital components that pull off the miraculous, analog-like feat of being detailed, musically insightful, and relaxed at the same time. The DAC7's sound is big, airy, and gorgeous. Further, its bass is simply stellar, and its USB input, though limited to 16/48 resolution, is among the best-sounding available. AT, 194

**Berkely Audio Design Alpha  
DAC****\$4995***berkeleyaudiodesign.com*

The Alpha DAC is not only one of the best-sounding digital-to-analog converters, it's also an amazing bargain. In addition to world-class decoding of CD sources, the Alpha DAC can handle any sampling rate to 192kHz and word lengths to 24-bit. The robust analog output stage and variable output level allow the Alpha DAC to drive a power amplifier directly. This feature is significant, because the Alpha DAC is capable of such resolution, timbral purity, and dynamics that you'll want to hear it without the limitations of a preamp in the signal path. A reference-quality product at a moderate price. RH, 189

**\$10,000 and above  
MBL 1521 A CD Drive/1511 F  
DAC****\$10,950/\$10,650***mbl-usa.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. WG, 164

**Esoteric D-03 D/A converter/  
Esoteric P-03 transport**

**\$14,000 (D-03 D/A  
converter); \$14,000 (P-03  
CD/SACD transport);  
\$18,000 P-03 Uni (CD/  
DVD/SACD transport)**

*esoteric.teac.com*

Compatible with every disc format, the P-03 Uni/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 Uni is available without video capabilities (P-03) for \$4000 less. Adding the Esoteric G-0Rb rubidium clock vaults performance even higher. RH, 171

**dCS Puccini****\$16,999***dcsld.co.uk*

Rather than working within the limitations of received wisdom, dCS has developed a number of innovative and advanced technologies to extract maximum performance from digital media. That effort has paid off in the listening room, where the Puccini coupled with dCS's U-Clock delivers an enormously appealing and involving musical presentation that is in many ways competitive with the state of the art, and in some aspects establishes a reference-quality level of performance. Our reviewer Robert Harley said: “This is a digital front-end I could live with for the rest of my life.” So could JV, who named it one of his references. RH, 200

**GE  
07****PY  
07****PY  
08****MBL 1621 A CD  
transport/1611 F digital-to-  
analog converter****\$24,000 and \$24,750***mbl-usa.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. More exiting and higher in apparent detail than the dCS gear, it is also less holistic and more “hi-fi,” although I can see where many would prefer this presentation. JV

**dCS Scarlatti**

**dCS Scarlatti transport,  
\$32,999; Scarlatti clock,  
\$9999; Scarlatti DAC,  
\$23,999**

*dcsld.co.uk***PY  
08**

The Scarlatti is dCS's top-of-the-line CD/SACD player. A three-box solution—separate transport, DAC, and clock—it upsamples PCM to DSD and plays back SACD via the same five-bit Ring DAC technology found in dCS's single-box Puccini. However, parts-quality in the Scarlatti is across-the-board higher than in the Puccini, and its sound is commensurately better. Of all the digital gear JV has reviewed or tested, the Scarlatti and Puccini come closest to sounding “complete”—to fully blending many of the virtues of analog with those of digital, particularly in CD playback. JV, 183

## TURNABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS

### Under \$1000

#### Pro-Ject Debut III

**\$349 (with arm and Ortofon OM5e cartridge)**  
**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 an isolation platform (or pucks), or adding the inexpensive Pro-Ject Speed Box MkII. JH, 172

#### Rega P1

**\$395**

*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. WG, 171

#### Pro-Ject RM-5SE

**\$699 with arm; \$1298 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. JH, 172

#### Pro-Ject Xpression III

**\$699**

*sumikoaudio.net*

The Xpression III features an acrylic platter, machined cone feet, a carbon-fiber armtube, and other refinements rare at this price. Supplied with Sumiko's excellent Oyster cartridge, the Xpression III has excellent clarity, smoothness, and a wide and deep soundstage. PS, 191

#### Rega P3-24

**\$895**

*soundorg.com*

A standard for some 20 years, the latest edition of Rega's P3 sports an improved plinth, motor, and tonearm. Known for its rhythmic incisiveness, the P3-24 also delivers greater dynamic range, a more convincing sense of air and space, a lower noise floor, richer tonality, and improved bass over earlier versions. For an extra \$375 one may add the TTSPU power supply, which takes the performance to a significantly higher level. WG, 180 and PS, 191

#### Pro-Ject RM-5 SE

**\$999**

*sumikoaudio.net*

Easy to assemble, Pro-Ject's RM-5 SE features a teardrop-shaped, black lacquered MDF plinth, a suspended motor assembly, a stainless steel and Teflon bearing, and a 9" carbon-fiber arm. The RM-5 SE is musically involving, with a warm balance, a stunning rhythmic incisiveness, fine dynamic shading, good detail, and a natural feeling of depth. Package price of \$1298 with the excellent Bluepoint No.2 cartridge. WG, 180

### \$1000-\$2000

#### Rega P5

**\$1395**

*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." JH, AVGM 15

#### Sota Comet S301 w/ Dynavector 10x5

**\$1545 with cartridge (\$1150 without)**

*solaturntables.com*

SOTA uses internal damping to isolate the Comet from vibration; the bearing cup is made from a Teflon-impregnated self-lubricating polymer; the platter assembly consists of a high-density polymer main platter, which sits atop a polymer-based sub-platter, and is driven by a 24-pole AC synchronous motor. The result is an easy, authoritative presentation that's warm, rich, and solid, with wide as well as nuanced dynamics, and a large, 3-D soundfield. WG, 180



#### Pro-Ject RM-9.1

**\$1799 (\$2299 as tested with Sumiko Blackbird cartridge)**

*sumikoaudio.net*

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. JH, 164

#### VPI Aries Scout w/JMW-9

**\$1850**

*vpiindustries.com*

If you want to experience a huge taste of analog heaven without the hellish price tag, the VPI Aries Scout deserves your attention. This simple, affordable 'table uses an inverted bearing with a Teflon thrust plate and a scaled-down version of the JMW unipivot arm to create an exceptionally quiet background and high signal-to-noise ratio, so music leaps out of silence into the room. JHb, 172

### \$2000-\$5000

#### Kuzma Stabi S

**\$2075**

*eliteavdist.com*

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. CM, 159

#### Clearaudio Performance SE

**\$2799 (with Satisfy Carbon Fiber arm)**

*musicalsurrroundings.com*

The Performance's precision ceramic magnetic bearing allows its platter to float on a cushion of air, contributing to this turntable system's startling transparency, openness, and clarity, very good native speed stability, and a low noise floor. Its improved Satisfy arm is equally at home with a high-performance moving coil or a modest moving-magnet cartridge. Like most mass-loaded designs, a rigid stand is required for this gem to shine. JH, 180

#### Linn Sondek LP12

**\$2810 (turntable only)**

*linn.co.uk*

The original high-end turntable, Linn's LP12 conveys the rhythm and pace that are the very

GE  
08

PY  
08

PY  
09

PY  
07

GE  
05

PY  
06

foundations of music, and it gets better with age—owners of any vintage LP12 can upgrade to the current model. SB, Recommended Systems, 136

### Well Tempered Amadeus **GE** **\$2800** **09**

*welltemperedlab.net*

This latest version of William Firebaugh's inventive ideas on turntable and arm design has ultra-quiet background, superbly non-resonant, neutral sound, complete speed stability, surprising bass extension, easy setup and operation, and compatibility with a wide range of cartridges. Only one caveat: add-on isolation devices may be needed. Overall, highest high end at a budget price. REG, 191

### Basis 1400 Signature **PY** **\$2900** **02**

*basisaudio.com*

Clean, lively, and nimble, the Basis 1400 lacks the great authority, deep black backgrounds, and projection of size and scale of the really great turntables. But this combination proves eminently satisfying and doesn't leave you hankering for something else. PS, 132 and 140

### Pro-Ject RM-10 **GE** **\$2999 with arm; \$3499** **with arm and Sumiko** **Blackbird cartridge** **07**

*sumikoaudio.net*

The RM-10 improves upon the fine performance of the RM-9.1, 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. JH, 172



### Nottingham Analogue Studio-Space 294 **GE** **\$3999 with Ace-Space 294** **arm** **07** **PY** **07**

*askgroup.com*

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. CM, 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. CM, 163

### **\$5000-\$10,000** **Clearaudio Ambient** **\$5500 with Satisfy Satiné** **arm; \$6000 with VTA base;** **\$5200 without arm; \$5800** **with Satisfy Carbon Fiber** *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. JH, 167

### TW Acoustic Raven One **PY** **\$6500** **09**

*highwatersound.com*

Recently improved, the Raven One is arguably the single finest value in quality record players. With its superb speed stability, detail, low-noise floor, and highly involving sound this beautifully made German design is so good that you have to spend *a lot more* to do a lot better. (Reviewed in tandem with the Tri-Planar UVII arm.) WG, 193

### 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. REG, 142

### SOTA Cosmos Series IV **GE** **\$6665 (\$5555 w/o** **vacuum)** **04** **GE** **08**

*sotaturntables.com*

This classic turntable boasts superior tonal neutrality, soundstaging, background silence, and isolation. Virtually any tonearm that weighs less than 2.5 pounds can be accommodated, 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. PS, 145

### 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. PS, 129

### **\$10,000 and above** **Basis 2200 Signature** **turntable and Vector Model 4** **tonearm**

**\$10,800**

*basisaudio.com*

Designed by A.J. Conti, the 2200/Vector 4 setup redefines for PS what is possible in the playback of vinyl sources. In every area and aspect of vinyl performance, this Basis combination outperforms all other turntable/arm setups with which he has long experience in some four decades of pursuing high-end audio (this includes several costing multiples its price). Design, engineering, and precision in machining, fit, and finish approach a standard of perfection surpassed by none and equaled by virtually none. PS, 180

### Basis Audio 2800 **GE** **\$15,100** **07** **PY** **07**

*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. RH, 172

### Basis Debut Signature **GE** **\$15,900 (\$20,500, vacuum** **version)** **01** **GE** **03**

*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 JV, 132

**SME Model 20/II**  
**\$17,000 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. PS, 140

**TW Acoustic Raven AC-3**  
**\$18,000**

*highwatersound.com*  
The three-motor Raven AC-3 is an unsuspended 'table of relatively low mass made from very high-quality materials, including spectacular bits of copper. Every part of this black beauty has been machined to the highest possible tolerances; every aspect of its design (from its standard-setting speed controller to its gel-filled, copper-topped platter) has been tested and retested by measurement and by ear. The result of all this labor and ingenuity is a 'table that reproduces the duration of notes—from starting transient through lingering decay—more completely than any other. Perhaps the most purely "musical" 'table on the market. JV, 180

**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 handful of top analog playback systems. WG, 170

**SME 20/12**  
**\$28,000 (includes tonearm)**

*sumikoaudio.net*  
Alastair Robertson-Aikman's last 'table was designed as an overall system to accommodate SME's lightweight, yet rigid, 12" magnesium tonearm. With its jet-black backgrounds, ultra-low bearing noise and tracing distortion, superb isolation, precise speed accuracy, and rock-solid speed stability, this reference turntable system has an effortlessness and sense of rightness that is mesmerizing. If you insist on using a shorter arm, try a different SME 'table. JH, 176



**Kuzma Stabi XL Reference turntable and Air Line arm**  
**\$31,800 (\$33,250 w/VTA adjustable tower)**

*eliteavdist.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). JV, 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." PS, 154

**Walker Proscenium Black Diamond Mk II**

**\$55,000 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 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). Gorgeous in tone color, extraordinary in resolution, superb on bass, and nonpareil on soundstaging, it is JV's long-standing reference. JV, 167

**AAS Gabriel/DaVinci**  
**\$45,000 (without arm)**

*da-vinci-audio.com*  
Like DaVinci's Grandezza tonearm, with which it is intended to be used, the Swiss-made AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci turntable is an object of considerable beauty. The arm support and the motor controller are mounted on separate massive cylindrical pillars, the extremely heavy, acoustically inert, magnetically-suspended platter (the AAS Gabriel was one of the very first magnetic-suspension 'tables) on its own gigantic cylinder. In combination with

the Grandezza arm, this is a record player capable of state-of-the-art resolution and transparency—as finely detailed, faithful to sources, and tonally neutral as any 'table/arm JV has heard. JV, 191

**Clearaudio Statement**  
**\$150,000**

*musicalsurrroundings.com*  
This over-the-top, 4'-tall, 770-pound turntable/arm costs more than an S-Class Mercedes, but delivers a level of LP playback that is unmatched in Don Saltzman's experience. The Statement is utterly quiet, stable, and capable of extracting the finest detail from record grooves. DS, 186 (see also HP's Workshop, 186)

**TONEARMS**

**Under \$2000**

**Rega RB301**  
**\$495**

*sounddorg.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. DM, 127

**Kuzma Stogi S**  
**\$1225**

*eliteavdist.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. CM, 159

**VPI JMW-9 Signature**  
**\$1400**

*vpindustries.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 design. HP praised the Super Scoutmaster Signature package for its “considerable dynamic ‘jump’” and “musical authenticity.” HP, 159

### Wilson Benesch A.C.T. 0.5 \$1795

*soundorg.com*

Wilson Benesch's unusual A.C.T. 0.5 tonearm features a tapered carbon-fiber arm tube with a kinematic bearing that handles much like a unipivot. The 0.5 works beautifully with affordable cartridges, but can also tap the potential of higher-priced moving coils. An arm your system can grow with over time, the A.C.T. 0.5 is also included in Wilson Benesch's Full Circle analog system. CM, 163

### \$2000 and above SME 309

\$2195

*sumikoaudio.net*

A black tapered titanium beauty, the 309 is a rarity in today's high-performance models—an arm with a removable head shell for easier cartridge swapping. Also see SME Model 10A, above. PS, 129

### VPI JMW-10.5/JMW-12.5 \$2300/\$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 to be heard. VTA adjustment during playback allows for exceptional fine-tuning. AHC, 129

### Basis Audio Vector Model 4 \$3800

*basisaudio.com*

Basis Audio's A.J. Conti has solved a fundamental problem with unipivot tonearms—

GE  
07

dynamic azimuth error. Rather than allowing the arm to “roll” when the cartridge encounters record warp, the Vector maintains perfect azimuth alignment via Conti's simple yet ingenious new design. The result is an extremely neutral-sounding arm that RH has yet to hear mistrack on any LP. RH, 172

### Graham Phantom B-44 Mk II \$4700

*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. WG, 173

PY  
09 GE  
07

### Tri-Planar Ultimate VII

\$4700

*tripplanar.com*

This classic example of great arm design is now in an “Ultimate VII” version, which the company expects to remain constant for another three-to-five years. If earlier models were characterized by tremendous solidity, focus, dynamic agility, bottom-end reach, overall neutrality, and transparency to the source, then the beautifully built Ultimate is quite simply all that multiplied by many degrees. WG, 191

GE  
04 PY  
05 GE  
08

### SME Series V

\$5300

*sumikoaudio.net*

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

excellent inner detail, and great tracking ability. NG

### Da Vinci Grandezza “Grand Reference”

\$9700

*da-vinci-audio.com*

PY  
09 GE  
09

This 12" transcription tonearm is a genuine work of audio art. A gorgeous concoction of tone wood, wolfram, platinum- or gold-plated bronze and stainless-steel, it is a thing of indescribable loveliness, and sounds as wonderful as it looks. As neutral and as nearly invisible as air, it is a truly *transparent* tonearm, capable of revealing tremendous detail with tremendous energy, within a tremendously large, beautifully laid-out soundstage. Costly, but worth it, the Grandezza is the best pivoted arm JV has heard or used. JV, 191



## 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. CM, 172

#### Grado Prestige MC+ Mono

\$90

*gradolabs.com*

Interested in dipping your toes into the mono waters, but not in taking a financial bath? This is the cartridge for you. The Grado mono is an excellent tracker that

fully shows the virtues of mono LPs—sledgehammer bass and excellent imaging solidity. More expensive cartridges will flesh out the sound more and offer greater detail, but the Grado is a joy to listen to. JHB, 180

### Ortofon 2M Red and Black \$99 and \$669

*ortofon.com*

PY  
08

The swansong design of Ortofon's former chief engineer Per Windfeld, the entry-level 2M Red uses a tipped elliptical, while the 2M Black wields a formidable Shibata diamond stylus—the same as used on the vaunted MC Jubilee. Compared with the now extinct Shure V15 series, the 2M Black has a lighter touch and certainly a faster one with a more resolved character irrespective of frequency. The Black's greatest attribute, however, is how it provides a more transparent window into the world of micro-energies, plumbing the complexities of orchestral depth and dimension. In comparison, the 2M Red clocks in as a little drier and sounds as if it's making more of an effort in the upper treble. Keep in mind that although it lacks some of the velvety finesse and smooth harmonic finish of the Black, this is one sophisticated and musical cartridge—for the price of a nice dinner for two. NG, 182

#### Grado Prestige Gold 1

\$220

*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. WG, 141; CM, 172

**Sumiko Bluepoint No. 2****\$299**PY  
07*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. CM, 172

**Grado Reference Platinum 1****\$350***gradolabs.com*

The Platinum 1 is the most affordable of Grado's mid-tier Reference models, offering reduced coloration plus superior resolution and tracking relative to Grado's entry-level Prestige models. Though it could use more openness, detail, and high-frequency "air," the Platinum can nearly equal the performance of \$1k+ moving coils, making it a bargain. A highly musical and unfussy cartridge. CM, 191

**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. CM, 147

**\$500-\$1000****Grado Reference Sonata 1****\$600***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. WG, 141

**Benz Micro ACE S Class****\$700***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 phonostage, it can do a great job of walking that fine line between resolution and smoothness. CM, 147

**Ortofon Rondo Blue****\$800***ortofon.com*

The Rondo Blue is an under a grand pickup that offers many of the advantages of higher-priced moving coils without breaking the bank. It has a natural midrange, an extended but non-aggressive treble, and a bottom end that is quite strong if a bit on the extravert side. Transparency is good enough to obviate the need to worry about it as an issue, and the dynamic presentation is powerful when called for it, but it can be delicate and nuanced too. It is particularly wonderful with voices. A great cartridge and a great value. PS, 199

**Sumiko Blackbird****\$899***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. JH, 164

**Dynavector Karat 17D3****\$950***dynavector.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. PS, 172

**Clearaudio Maestro Wood****\$995***musicalsurrroundings.com*

Sharing the solid Boron rod cantilever and stylus of the esteemed Insider MC cartridge, the Maestro Wood, a moving magnet design, offers an easygoing balance and gushes sweet sonics like squeezing a ripe, red plumb. It exudes a warm, darkly sensuous tonal balance but it's not a softy in the dynamics department nor does it smear transient detail and rhythm too much will remain a question of taste. Rated at 3.6mV it won't tax most phonostages either. NG, 186

**\$1000-\$2000****Benz Micro Glider SM****\$1000***musicalsurrroundings.com*

It's all about the superlative tonal balance of the medium output (0.8mV) Glider SM. There's a reassuring dash of warmth in the lower mids and bass, a lush midrange, and a presence range and treble that have the air and harmonic delicacy but none of the dreaded etch and dryness. Not as warm as the Clearaudio Maestro Wood but the Glider's added inner detail and energy make the decision a tough one. NG, 191

**Lyra Dorian****\$1110***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. WG, 166

**Wilson Benesch Ply****\$1795***soundorg.com*

Built by Benz to Wilson Benesch specifications, the carbon-fiber-framed Ply moving-coil cartridge blends some of the virtues of the Sumiko Blackbird and the Shelter 501 MkII, offering a touch of the dynamic liveliness and transient detail of the Blackbird, plus a taste of the three-dimensionality of the 501 MkII. It's a pleasing combination. CM, 163

**Ortofon Kontrapunkt C****\$1900***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 breathtaking. By any measure, an outstanding pickup. PS, 172

**Shelter 5000 and 7000****\$1950 and \$2800***axissaudio.com*

Shelter cartridges enjoy a reputation for smoothness, vibrant tonal colors, holographic soundstaging, and an eminently listenable sound, but designer Yasuo Ozawa hoped to give his new models "more life"—meaning more detail, transient speed, and explosive dynamics. Those qualities are exactly what Shelter's 5000 and 7000 deliver, though the latter justifies its higher price by providing more finely resolved and open-sounding highs, more potent, refined bass, and greater dynamic poise. CM, 180

PY  
09GE  
08GE  
07PY  
06

## \$2000 and above Clearaudio Concerto v2

**\$2400**

*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. JH, 167

## Lyra Helikon

**\$2555 (\$2780 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, 132 and 136

## Transfiguration Phoenix

**\$2750**

*profundus.com*

The Phoenix doesn't stand out for its detail, speed, rhythmic precision, dynamic range, top- or bottom-end extension, or its pretty neutral tonal balance. It stands out because it manages to bring all these things into a highly coherent, beautifully balanced package that makes it hard to stop listening. WG, 177

## Benz Micro Ebony L

**\$3500**

*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. PS, 172

## Clearaudio Stradivari v2

**\$3500**

*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. PS, 172

## Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum

**\$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 are more interested in hearing timbres sound gorgeous. JV

## Ortofon MC Windfeld

**\$3750**

*ortofon.com*

If you value high neutrality and high resolution, low coloration and low distortion, and tracking ability to rival the best moving magnets, then this outstanding new moving coil—the pinnacle design from the longest established and still the largest manufacturer of phono pickups in the world—is for you. It won't guild your vinyl lilies, but it will reproduce them with highest fidelity. PS's new reference. PS, 188



## Dynavector XV-1s

**\$4500**

*dynavector.com*

Big dynamics and a robust, lively quality characterize this outstanding moving coil. The XV-1s retrieves layer after layer

of inner detail, all without sounding etched. RH, not yet reviewed (see also HP's Editors' Choice Awards this issue)

## Dynavector XV-1s Mono

**\$4950**

*dynavector.com*

The Dynavector XV-1s mono is an excellent tracker that excels at detail retrieval and bell-like clarity. Fast and lithe, it pokes into the crevices of the soundstage, excavating the tiny nuances that help provide the illusion of the real thing. An extremely neutral creation, it will never be mistaken as a forgiving cartridge. JHb, 180

## London Reference

**\$5295**

*mayaudia.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. 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. A poor tracker, it will require careful tonearm-matching and setup. JV, 169

## Air Tight PC-1

**\$6800**

*axisaudio.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 the first of JV's three mc references. JV, 173

## Da Vinci Audio Lab Reference Cartridge Grandezza

**\$7300**

*da-vinci-audio.com*

The veritable Soulation of moving-coil cartridges, this high-mass, low-output

moving-coil from Da Vinci in Switzerland is a model of transparency, neutrality, and detail, wowing everyone who's heard it. It may not have all the weight of the PC-1 Supreme or the soundstage breadth of the Goldfinger v2—its two foremost rivals—but, thanks to its colorlessness and clarity, it beats both in fine resolution of timbre and texture. Be aware this is a very low-output coil (0.17mV), which means you'll need a suitable phono stage. JV, 193

## Koetsu Onyx Platinum

**\$8000**

*koetsusa.com*

A friend of JV's said, quite accurately, that the Koetsu Onyx Platinum was like returning to an old girlfriend. She may have packed on five or ten pounds, but she's oh-so-comfy to come home to. This dark, gorgeous-sounding cartridge may not have all the energy, detail, and staging of some 'coils, but it makes up for any shortfalls in sheer musicality. Kind of like the Quad 2905 of moving-coil cartridges. JV, 186

## Air Tight PC-1 Supreme

**\$9000**

*axisaudio.com*

As good as the AT PC-1 is, this new considerably pricier moving-coil from Air Tight is substantially better in every way. Like the PC-1, the Supreme is a model of low internal impedance and high energy. Killer good on transients top to bottom, with phenomenal grip and definition in the low bass, it is also exceptionally lifelike in the midband, with even more of the gorgeous density of tone color, high resolution, and superior soundstaging that made the PC-1 one of JV's mc references. Along with the Grandezza and the Goldfinger, the best mc on the market. JV, 190

GE 07 PY 07

GE 07 PY 06

PY 09

**Clearaudio Goldfinger v2**  
**\$10,000***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 with the widest, deepest, and tallest soundstage of all coils. A little grainier than the Grandezza, not as purely beautiful as the Koetsu Onyx Platinum, nor as overall well-balanced as the PC-1 Supreme, it still belongs in this exalted company. JV, 176

**TUNERS****Sony XDRF-1 HD Radio**  
**\$100***sony.com*

A ridiculously good tuner for a price so low it is almost an embarrassment to the high end. The actual tuner is better than the audio section, but this is only apparent if you are luck enough to have one of the few FM stations that really tries to set high-end audio standards. The overall sound is still excellent, and the ability to get FM, AM, and HD-radio in such a small package for so little money makes this a truly exceptional value. AHC

**Magnum Dynalab MD0609T**  
**\$3995***magnumdynalab.com*

From the folks that hone and own the FM analog-tuner market comes this dedicated XM Satellite tuner tricked out within an inch of its bit-life by Magnum's innovative radio-head, Director of Audio Design Zdenko Zivkovic. The MD0609T proves that rather than fear the digital compression of the XM codec, it is better to overcome it by designing the DAC and audio boards that turn the sonic key to success. Not quite as good as Dynalab's analog best, but far better than anyone would

have imagined. Of course you'll have to pay for the XM subscription, but with 170-plus station offerings you'll never tire of the breadth of the content. NG, 180

**Magnum Dynalab MD106T**  
**\$4395***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. NG, 152

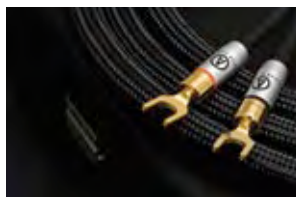
**INTERCONNECTS,  
SPEAKER CABLES, AND  
POWER CORDS****Acoustic Zen Technologies  
Tsunami II and Gargantua II  
Power Cords****\$350 and \$1488***acousticzen.com*

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 and in her small system. Both cords have the nice habit of clarifying delicate highs, deepening perceived bass, and opening up and airing out the soundstage. SR

**Argentum Acoustics  
Aureus-2 Speaker Cable and  
Mythos Interconnect**  
**Speaker, \$1500/3m pr.;**  
**Interconnect, \$400/1m RCA pr.***argentumacoustic.com*

The Argentum is an agile performer with swift and spicy transients. It has a strong midrange flavor even with the audience perspective just slightly back of the front couple of rows. In both cable and interconnect, the continuous

cast (Ohno) mono-crystal copper conductors are rated as laboratory-grade and are cryogenically treated. The cable may be muting the interplay of micro-dynamics and transparency ever so slightly so, but not much. An excellent mid-priced entry with an "excitement factor" written all over the music. NG, 193

**AudioQuest Columbia/DBS  
Interconnect and CV-8/DBS  
Speaker Cable****Interconnect, \$450/one-meter pair; Speaker, \$800/eight-foot pair***audioquest.com*

The entry-level interconnect for AudioQuest's battery-powered DBS (dielectric bias system) technology, the Columbia 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 Columbias 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. NG, 147; CM, AVgM 2

**AudioQuest WBY IC**  
**\$4000/meter-pr.***audioquest.com*

Pure silver wire, long ago exiled into conductor Purgatory, has been making a comeback of late and Audioquest's Wild Blue Yonder or WBY is one

strong testimonial to its sonic virtues. Audioquest has really elicited the strengths of this metal in WBY's openness and extension—and left behind the glaze, glare, and icy sheen of early silver efforts. Keep a little polish handy, however, as the heavy silver-sheathed RCA terminations do tend to tarnish. NG, this issue

**Cable Research Lab Silver  
Cable and Interconnect**  
**Speaker, \$1700/6-foot pr.;**  
**Interconnect, \$1400/1m  
RCA pr., \$1550/2m RCA pr.;**  
**Power cords, \$795/1.5m***cableresearchlab.com*

Classic cabling that stays out of the way of the signal never goes out of style. In spite of CRL's serpentine look, its construction quality, materials, and terminations are superb. Easy to maneuver, it is also one of the more easygoing and natural sounding cables we've heard, with solid dynamics, soundstaging, and harmonic detailing. A "stealth" cable that deserves serious attention. NG, 189

**Crystal Cable CrystalConnect  
Micro Interconnect /  
CrystalSpeak Micro Speaker  
Cable****Interconnect, \$730/one-meter pair (\$615/add'l meter); Speaker, \$2320/two-meter pair (\$770/add'l 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. NG, 164

## Furutech Reference III and Evolution Interconnect and Cables

**Reference III Interconnect, \$1320/1.2m (XLR), \$1155 (RCA); Reference III Speaker, \$1573/3m; Reference III Power, \$1210; Evolution Interconnect, \$740/1.2m (XLR), \$650 (RCA); Evolution Speaker, \$770/3m**

*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 have great transparency and purity, plus an uncanny ability to block out noise, hash, and grunge. CM, 173



## Harmonic Technology Magic Link Two Interconnect

**\$820/one-meter pair (RCA); \$900/one-meter pair (XLR)**

*harmonitech.com*

With improved clarity and articulation over Harmonic Tech's more affordable Pro Silway line, the Magic Link Two 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 Magic Reference II SE Power Cord

**\$1499**

**GE**  
09

*harmonitech.com*

Designed for use primarily with front-end components, the Reference II SE delivers tremendous clarity, smoothness, and definition across the entire frequency spectrum, and does so without constricting dynamics or softening the treble. Built-in noise filter acts as an AC conditioner to remove line noise. SK

## Harmonic Technology Pro-11 + Speaker Cable

**\$575/eight-foot pair**

*harmonitech.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. NG, 146

## Kimber Kable Hero Interconnect/8TC Speaker Cable

**\$200/one-meter pair/  
\$400/eight-foot pair**

**PY**  
02

**PY**  
06

*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. PS, 138

Tilting a tad toward the yin, the 8TC has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what is happening fore or aft, ideally mediating detail, liveliness, tonal neutrality, and dynamic

contrasts within a very realistic, holographic soundstage. PS, 146

## MIT AVt 1 Speaker Cable

**\$599/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 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. PS, 146

## MIT Magnum MA and Oracle MA Speaker Cable

**\$7995/eight-foot pr.;**

**\$24,900 eight-foot pr.**

**PY**  
08

*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

## MIT Oracle MA-X Interconnect

**\$7995/1m pr.**

**PY**  
08

*mitcables.com*

Like MIT's Oracle MA speaker cable, the companion Oracle MA-X interconnect fully reveals the textural warmth, body, and saturation of tone colors one hears from live instruments. The soundstaging is equally impressive, delivering a huge and transparent rendering with precise placement of images. Small knobs on the termination boxes allow you to fine-tune the sound to your system. RH

## Nordost Baldur Interconnect and Speaker Cable

**Interconnect, \$499/one-meter pr.; Speaker, \$1499/three-meter pr.**

*nordost.com*

Baldur brings much of the balance and harmonic integrity of state-of-the-art 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. NG, 164

## Nordost Blue Heaven Interconnect and Speaker Cable

**Interconnect: \$229/one-meter pr.; Speaker: \$610/three-meter pr.**

*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. NG, 138

## Purist Audio Design Dominus Interconnect and Speaker Cable

**Interconnect, \$5250/one-meter pr.; Speaker, \$10,980/1.5-meter pr.**

*puristaudiodesign.com*

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

### Rega Couple Interconnect \$195/one-meter pr.

*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. CM, AVguide.com, 10/2003

### Shunyata King Cobra CX, Anaconda CX, Python CX Power Cords

**\$3500, \$2000, \$1100**

*shunyata.com*

Shunyata Research has built on its already outstanding AC power cord technology with the new CX Series, improving upon the originals with somewhat increased transparency, larger and better defined soundstage, and greater timbral purity. But it's the CX Series' greater bass weight, bottom-end impact, and overall dynamic contrasts that define these new power cords. RH, 164 (originals); CX series review forthcoming

### Paul Speltz "Anti-Cable" Speaker Cable

**\$80/8-foot pr.**

*anticables.com*

A godsend to those who want good sound but don't want to spend big bucks. SK was blown away by their 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. SK, 162

### Synergistic Research Alpha Interconnect

**\$150/one-meter pr.**

*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 out there. NG, TPV 38

### Synergistic Research REL-spec Reference Subwoofer Cable

**\$1320/3 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. NG, 163



### Synergistic Research Tesla Series Interconnect and Speaker Cable

**Accelerator interconnect, \$1400/1m pr.; speaker cable, \$1700/ 8-foot pr.**

**Precision Reference interconnect, \$2600/1m pr.; speaker cable, \$2800/8-foot pr. Apex interconnect, \$3600/1m pr.; speaker cable, \$7400/8-foot pr.**

*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 harmonic shadings like few wires NG has heard to date. Sneak Preview by NG, 171

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

**Interconnect, \$1295/one-meter pr. (\$225 each add'l meter); Speaker, \$2495/8-foot pr. (\$225/add'l ft)**

**Py 06**

*taralabs.com*

Everything about these cables says big—dynamics, extension, and volume. It's also one of the mellower cables I've heard, with a darker character and a deeply polished and resonant signature that should appeal to many. They have an expansive soundstage and orchestral images always seem more rooted and stable. Ambience retrieval is at a cutting-edge level. Separate positive and negative speaker runs for each channel. NG, 164

### TARA Labs The One Power Cord

**\$1495/6 feet (\$140/add'l foot)**

*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. Review forthcoming

### TARA Labs Zero Gold Interconnect and Omega Gold Speaker Cable

**Zero Gold interconnect, \$14,900/one-meter pr. (\$2000 per add'l meter); Omega Gold speaker cable, \$22,000/eight-foot pr. (\$3000 per add'l foot); Zero Gold digital cable, \$8900/one meter (\$1000 per add'l meter); Zero GX Phono Cable, \$3800/one-meter pair**

**Py 07**

*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. JV, 159

### Transparent Audio The Link interconnect, The Wave speaker cable, High-Performance Powerlink AC cord, PowerWave 8 AC conditioner

**The Link, \$85 per meter pr.; The Wave, \$180 8-foot pair; High-Performance Powerlink, \$105, PowerWave 8, \$995**

*transparentcable.com*

Although we have experience only with Transparent's lower-priced offerings (at the moment), what we've heard has been extremely impressive. The \$85 The Link interconnect brings more than a taste of high-end interconnects to an entry-level price. Similarly, the \$180 The Wave speaker cable is a bargain, offering superior tonality, wider dynamics, and a more open soundstage. The \$105 High-Performance Powerlink AC cable is a vast improvement over stock AC cords, and just might be the most cost-effective upgrade possible in an entry-level system. The Powerwave 8 conditioner is also an extremely cost-effective upgrade, rendering wider dynamic expression, smoother timbres, and a greater sense of musical involvement. RH

**GE 05**

**Py 06**

**Py 09**

**Wireworld Platinum Eclipse Interconnects****\$3000/ meter pair***wireworldcable.com*

When Wireworld's David Salz builds a new reference cable it's worth taking note. With Ohno Continuous Cast pure silver conductors, and trick carbon-fiber connector shells sporting silver contacts, sonics are fluid, naturalistic, and exceptionally detailed. Not inexpensive but so transparent you'll simply forget they're there. Review forthcoming

**PY**  
09**Wireworld Stratus 5<sup>2</sup> 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 5<sup>2</sup> 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 media rooms. NG, 169

**HEADPHONES AND HEADPHONE AMPS****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. Tom Martin, 166

**Cayin HA-1A Head Amp****\$875***acusticsounds.com*

An exercise in unalloyed hedonism, the sexy Cayin is actually a vacuum tube integrated amp that offers the pleasure of switching between triode (great for orchestral) and ultralinear (more punch for rock) settings. Highly adjustable for headphones of various high to low impedances, it also has speaker terminals for a set of high sensitivity desktop speakers. NG, 178

**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 GS1000i****\$995***gradolabs.com*

An open-air dynamic design that is comfort personified and built for long listening sessions. Your ears will never feel more coddled than with these luxury foam 'phones from the maestros at Grado Labs. They are terrific for low-level listening with an unforgettably mind-expanding soundstage. A bit laid-back and relaxed so not for tonal neutrality freaks. The full coverage ear pads can get a bit warm for some users. NG, 178

**GE**  
05**Grado RA1 Head Amp****\$350***gradolabs.com*

No frills from this compact, battery-powered amp. Only neutrality and terrific bottom-end control. It seemed to mate (coincidentally?) well with the Grado GS1000. Perfect for high-end road warriors. A specialist that brings out the best from Grade's rich and varied line of headphones. NG, 178

**Grado SR325is****\$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. DS, 156

**Grado SR60i****\$79***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 they are comfortable, keep in mind that as an "open air" design the SR60 is not ideal for noisy environments. TM, AVGM 3

**HeadRoom Desktop Head Amp [with DAC]****\$999 (configuration-dependent)***headphone.com*

If your idea of ideal PC listening involves headphones, it's hard to imagine a better experience than that delivered by the HeadRoom Desktop Amp. Use the USB input and you'll be treated to headphone sound that is open, refined, detailed yet gentle, and tight in the bass. If you must drive the HeadRoom via its analog inputs, be sure not to skimp on cables. AT, 177

**HeadRoom Total BitHead Portable Head Amp****\$159***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. RH, 155

**Ray Samuels Audio Emmeline Hornet Head Amp****\$370***raysamuelsaudio.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

**PY**  
06

**Ray Samuels Audio Predator  
Portable USB DAC/Head****Amp****\$495***raysamuelsaudio.com*

This excellent unit adds a USB DAC to the outstanding headphone-amplifier circuit of the Hornet. Tiny size makes it ideal for travel. RH

**Sennheiser CX 300****\$89***sennheiserusa.com*

The CX 300 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 300 offers many attributes of higher-end models at a bargain price. CM

**Sennheiser HD650****\$599***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. DS, 156

**Sennheiser HD 800****\$1399***sennheiserusa.com*

This isn't just a slightly better HD 650—the HD 800 is a new take on how a headphone should work. The larger drivers produce deeper extension with less distortion, and they are angled to simulate the way sound arrives out our ears so that they provide a more natural sense of space. The HD 800 is of reference quality, with a smoother treble, better tonal balance, and deeper bass extension than the already outstanding HD 650. TM, 198

**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. RH, 155

**Sony MDR-NC500D****\$399***sony.com*

These beautifully built and technical advanced headphones combine excellent sound quality with the best noise-canceling process available. The MDR-500D employs sophisticated DSP that analyzes the noise source and contours the cancellation signal for maximum noise attenuation. The audio signal is digitized and DSP processed. Built-in rechargeable lithium battery provides hours of use. RH

**Stax SRS-2050 II Earspeaker  
System****\$750***yamasinc.com*

Combining the SR-202 electrostatic open-back headphone and SRM-252 II amp this may be Stax's most basic system but it should be required listening for any audiophile who wants to understand the addictive nature of headphones. With the exception of the lack of bottom octave slam, the Stax provide the kind of speed, transparency, and low distortion that are beyond the reach of most contemporary loudspeakers. NG

**UltraSone PROLine 2500****\$399***ultrasoneusa.com*

The German-made UltraSone moves the driver off the center of the earpiece, so that rather than firing straight into your hearing canal it fires at the folds making up your outer ears. The 2500 is an open design with a titanium-plated driver and has an overall outstanding balance of virtues, purity, and extension, though with some recordings it can sound strident with strings. DS, 156

**ITAS****Acoustic Energy Aego M****\$299***acoustic-energy.co.uk*

Consider the Aego M if you want significantly better than stock PC speakers on a tight budget. The tiny alloy satellites are surprisingly dynamic, detailed, and extended, while the sub is reasonably tight, if a bit hollow sounding. The two balance well and even generate air and a decent (albeit 2-D) soundstage. Though somewhat ergonomically challenged, sonically this system is unquestionable a major upgrade from off-the-shelf PC speakers. AT, 177

**B&W Zeppelin****\$599***bwspeakers.com*

Employing advanced amplifier and driver technologies found in B&W's upper-end loudspeakers, the Zeppelin is the best-sounding and coolest looking iPod speaker system we've heard. The shape isn't just for good looks; it also happens to be the ideal acoustical platform for the system's dual 3.5" midrange drivers, 1" tweeter, and single 5" woofer. Throw in advanced digital signal processing along with five separate amplifiers (150W total) and you have one serious music-making machine. RH, 178

**FatMan iPod****\$649***fat-man.co.uk*

Fatman's two-piece iTube is a combination iPod dock with 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. CM, 173

**DussunT2i****\$800***aaa-audio.com*

A small, vertical design for desktop applications, Dussun's T2i includes an 8x oversampling Sigma-Delta USB DAC that accepts digital signals directly from a hard drive, as well as two line-level inputs and a headphone jack. While warm and easy-sounding, it's also a little thick and rolled-off—but very cool on the job and excellent for its intended use. WG, 194

**Meridian F80****\$2999 (i80 universal dock,  
\$399)***meridian-audio.com*

Arguably the world's coolest table radio, Meridian's little Ferrari-industrial-designed F80 combines a CD/DVD player, AM/FM tuner, an 80-Wpc amplifier, high-tech speakers, and Meridian's acclaimed Digital Signal Processing technology into one sweet package. That skims the surface. Play some favorite tunes through the F80, and prepare to be blown away by the sound from this amazing portable audio/video sound system. WG, 179

### Wadia 170 iTransport \$379

**PY**  
08

wadia.com

Wadia's 170 iTransport is the first Apple-sanctioned iPod docking device that lets you tap into the iPod's digital output, bypassing the iPod's compromised internal D/A converters and analog output stage. This digital output appears on a standard jack for connection to an outboard D/A converter, providing the convenience of the iPod with the sound quality of your outboard DAC. Review forthcoming

### EQUIPMENT RACKS

#### Billy Bags Equipment Racks \$300-\$1200 (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, attractive, and can be ordered in custom configurations. Optional lead-shot loading and spikes elevate performance. The Pro-Series prices increase up to \$3000. RH owns Billy Bags racks

#### 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

### Solid Tech Rack of Silence Stands and Accessories

**Pricing varies**

audioplusservices.com

The aptly named Rack of Silence helps damp (or dissipate) equipment vibrations, thus fostering audibly quieter backgrounds and a heightened sense of resolution and detail. The core of the system is a sophisticated, extruded aluminum rack with skeletal, X-shaped equipment "shelves." Complementing the rack is a broad range of optional vibration-fighting accessories such as damped suspension pods and the like. Though tricky to assemble, this system works exactly as advertised. CM, 195

#### Symposium Acoustics Isis Equipment Stand

**Price depends on configuration**

symposiumusa.com

The Symposium Acoustics Isis combines three different kinds of damping: mass, constrained-layer, and (for lack of a better word) tectonic. Using heavy-duty steel shelves that are themselves damped with constrained-layer material and heavy-duty, segmented, aircraft-grade aluminum legs that are isolated from the shelves, from each other, and from the floor via Tellurium/copper spike-feet and Symposium's patented rollerblock technology, the Isis eliminates all lateral and vertical motion induced by floorborne or airborne resonance. Its effectiveness is astonishing in direct comparison with other very-high-quality stands. JV

#### Walker Audio Equipment Rack

**\$4500-\$7500**

**GE**  
03

walkeraudio.com

A large (four-and-a-half-foot long) beautifully made equipment rack, constructed of three thick, oiled slabs of rock maple suspended between shot-filled tubes and balanced on Walker Audio's huge Valid Point feet. Like all of Walker Audio's

tweaks, the Walker rack kills vibration without killing the life of the music. JV

### POWER CONDITIONERS

#### Audience Adept aR2p

**\$695**

audience-av.com

A compact two-outlet power conditioner and isolation device, based on the massive twelve-outlet versions of which Audience is rightly proud. Used with a CD player its enhancements in soundstaging and dimensionality and depth can be profound. With demanding high-current devices such as amplifiers, transients seemed a little soft and an audition is recommended. NG, 179

#### Audience Adept Response

**\$4100**

audience-av.com

This expensive but extremely effective twelve-outlet conditioner delivered significant improvements in bass definition and depth, overall resolution, and soundstage depth. Build-quality is exemplary. Max Shepherd, 162

#### PS Audio Duet, Quintet,

**PowerPlant Premier**

**\$295, \$495, \$2195**

**GE**  
08

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 video projectors is likely to live longer; and you'll know you're getting the best your equipment can deliver. AHC, 174

#### PS Audio Soloist

**\$199**

**PY**  
08

psaudio.com

Finally, one of the best AC line filters and conditioners around at an affordable price that can fit into a wall socket and handle even



the most demanding power amps. Not up to PS Audio's top of the line AC supplies, but a real bargain in an area where far too many AC conditioners are inconvenient, promise more than they deliver, and are badly overpriced. AHC, 188

#### Running Springs Audio Dmitri

**\$4495/\$4995/\$5995**

runningspringsaudio.com

The Dmitri not only confers the traditional benefits of line conditioning, but does so while actually increasing dynamic contrasts—the Achilles' heel of most power conditioners. In addition to increasing timbral purity, soundstage transparency, and a sense of depth, the 67-pound Dmitri reveals a system's full measure of bottom-end extension, weight, and dynamic impact. A reference-quality product. RH, 193

#### Shunyata Hydra-8 Reference

**V2/V-Ray Reference V2/ Hydra-2**

**\$2995/\$4995/\$495**

**GE**  
05

shunyata.com

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 (hefty) 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. RH, 163

#### Synergistic Power Cell

**\$5000**

**PY**  
09

synergisticresearch.com

Power conditioners can be something of a mixed bag, but the Synergistic Power Cell did not appear to limit current. Instead, it

offers even blacker backgrounds and seems to lower grit and distortion. As with all conditioners, however, auditioning the Synergistic in your own system is a must, as the quality of electricity varies markedly from home to home. JH, 192

### Tara Labs PM 2 AC Power Screen

**\$495 (for two 15-amp sockets)**

[taralabs.com](http://taralabs.com)

A stout, well-made, relatively inexpensive two-outlet box that is the only AC-conditioning device that JV has tried that does not (even slightly) diminish dynamics, even with amps plugged into it. On the contrary, everything sounds "super-charged" through the Power Screens; transparency and resolution are also clearly increased along with dynamic contrasts. The only downside (if it is that): a slight darkness to the soundfield, due to increased bass weight and color, that is typical of Tara Labs. JV

### ACCESSORIES

#### AcousTech Electronic Stylus Force Gauge

**\$99.95**

[acousticsounds.com](http://acousticsounds.com)

Getting the most out of any turntable 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 weights from 0.001 to 5.000 grams at the height of an LP's surface, and is said to be accurate to within  $\pm$  0.002 grams. WG

#### Acoustic Room Systems (now part of Cinema Tech)

**\$20,000-\$50,000**

[mycinematech.com](http://mycinematech.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 as, nor blended into the décor like the Acoustic Room Systems package does. 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. RH, 139

#### Aesthetix ABCD-1MC Cartridge Demagnetizer

**\$199**

[musicalsurrroundings.com](http://musicalsurrroundings.com)

This battery-operated device sends a special signal through your moving-coil cartridge, removing stray magnetism in the coils. Used every two weeks or so, the ABCD-1 will restore tone colors and soundstage clarity. 188

#### Analogue Productions: The Ultimate Analogue Test LP

**\$39.99**

[acousticsounds.com](http://acousticsounds.com)

Amazingly well-conceived as well as manufactured to the highest standards, *The Ultimate Analogue Test LP* is the new reference in test discs. It's loaded with useful test signals that are encoded with high precision, and the record is pressed on 180-gram virgin vinyl. RH, 186

#### ASC Tube Traps

**\$498-\$2638**

[tubetrap.com](http://tubetrap.com)

Unless you have a professionally designed and treated room, Tube Traps from Acoustic Sciences Corporation are absolutely indispensable to improving your system's sound. They are able to solve a wide range of acoustic problems with strategic placement and orientation. Boomy bass can be cured with a pair of 16" Full Rounds in the corners behind the loudspeakers. 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 BPW Binding-Post Wrench

**\$9.99**

[audioquest.com](http://audioquest.com)

AudioQuest's binding-post wrench, featuring durable metal socket-inserts, eliminates the need for a bulky socket set. This compact double-ended nut driver, small enough to slip into a shirt or pants pocket, fits 7/16" and 1/2" binding posts. Essential for tightening down speaker cables to speakers and amps. NG, 188

#### AudioQuest Anti-Static Record Brush

**\$20**

[audioquest.com](http://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 Studiofoam Wedges

**Price varies**

[auralex.com](http://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

#### Avid Level 45: 45RPM Adapter and Bubble Level

**\$100**

[musicdirect.com](http://musicdirect.com)

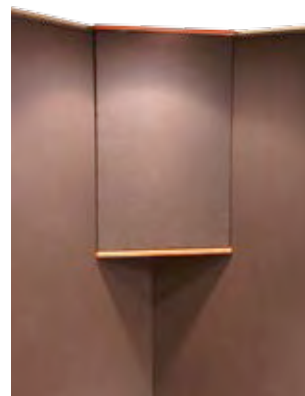
This two-piece kit combines a precision machined-steel 45-rpm adaptor with a high-quality bubble level. The level sits atop the 45rpm-adaptor, which together weigh 180 grams—exactly the same as a high quality LP for accurate leveling. 188

#### A/V Room Service Ltd. Metu Acoustic Panels and Corner Traps

**Price depends on configuration (but affordable)**

[avroomservice.com](http://avroomservice.com)

Although the set of Metus that came to JV—and that he now depends on—came in a particularly unattractive Fudgsicle brown, these wall-hanging, cloth-faced, rectangular acoustic panels (mounted to wooden backboards) and cloth-faced corner traps can be precisely color-matched to your paint scheme or be made to look like framed art of any kind (from posters to paintings). Designed by Jim Varney, who did the acoustical treatment of Robert Harley's room, they are the real deal—precisely calibrated room treatments that use a patent-pending adjustable diaphragmatic/sound absorptive technology to reliably reduce all sorts of colorations—more effectively than any other wall-mounted room treatment JV has tried. JV, 199



**Blu-Tack Adhesive Putty****\$10**

The original acoustic putty and adhesive from Bostik of England that damps resonances and mechanically couples a compact speaker to the top plate of its stand. Sonically you'll hear tighter bass and improved image. Considered "a flexible semi-liquid that behaves like a solid" it also offers a safety bonus by preventing a stand-mounted speaker from being inadvertently toppled. CM, 188

**Caig Pro Gold G100L****Treatment****\$21.99***caig.com*

Caig's ProGold G100L has long been the go-to lubricant for cleaning, preserving, and conditioning all electrical connections. Packaged in a handy dispenser bottle with a little applicator-brush built into the cap, it can and should

be used for any junction (short of an AC wall socket) where a metal connector (like the male RCA plugs of your interconnects) are plugged into metal socket (like the female RCA plugs of your preamp, amp or CD player). JV, 188

**Cardas RCA Caps****\$49.99 (set of 12)***Cardas.com*

Pop these RCA shorting plugs into your preamplifier's unused inputs and you'll hear a blacker background, more micro-dynamic detail, and an overall cleaner sound. NG, 188

**Cen-tech SPL Meter****\$40**

An indispensable and fun sound-intensity meter for confirming channel balance (especially helpful for hi-res multichannel), adjusting subwoofers, checking peak settings, optimizing EQ settings, or just verifying that you're

endangering your hearing. With seven SPL ranges, A and C weightings, slow- and fast-response peak measurements, and average noise levels. CM, 188

**Clearaudio Spirit Level****\$60***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, 188

**Clearaudio Strobe-disc and Strobe Light****\$60 and \$180***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, 159

**Composite Products Carbon-Fiber Cones****\$75 (3-Pack)**

Made from layers of carbon-fiber cloth bonded into a solid with epoxy, the Composite Products Carbon-Fiber Cones are extremely stiff and well damped. Place a set under a component to reduce and damp vibrations. JM, 188

**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

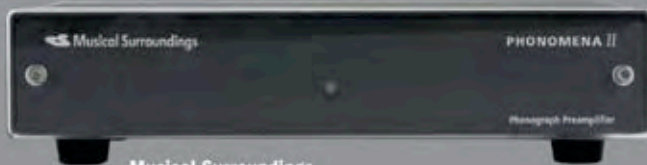


**musicdirect**  
it's the music that matters™

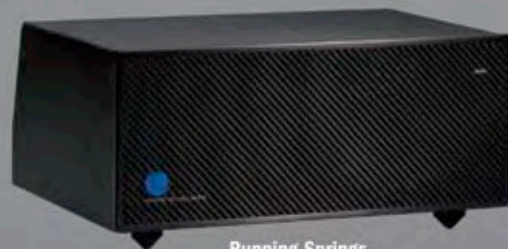
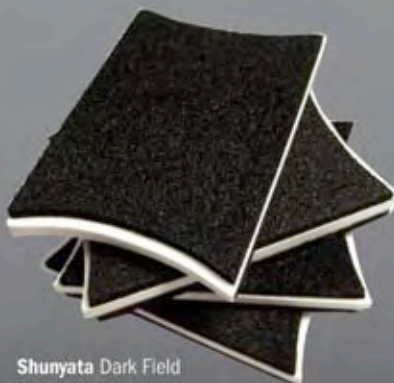
ph. 800.449.8333  
musicdirect.com



Rega P3-24

Musical Surroundings  
Phonomena II Phono Preamp

**the absolute sound**  
Product of the Year

Running Springs  
Dmitri Power ConditionerShunyata Dark Field  
Elevator Mini

HRT Music Streamer

Benz Micro  
Glider S

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. SK, 159

**Feickert Adjust+ \$350**

*feickert.com*  
If you've ever wondered whether you've gotten your cartridge's azimuth just right and, thereby, maximized channel separation, here's a solution that doesn't entail an oscilloscope or guesses by mirror. Dr. Feickert—he who makes that fabulous cartridge-alignment protractor—has come up with a nifty bit of software (PC-only) that will tell you when azimuth is dead on (and all sorts of other useful things about your cartridge, turntable, and phonostage, including 'table speed). JV, 188

**Feickert Universal Protractor \$250**

*feickert.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—an impressively machined aluminum measuring device that turns accurately measuring stylus to pivot distances from hair-pulling frustration to child's play, and a step-by-step instruction booklet that makes fine-tuning your cartridge's geometry a remarkably easy procedure. WG, 171

**Furutech LP Flattener \$1890**

*furutech.com*  
Expensive, but worth it if you have a large LP collection. Just put a slightly warped LP into the Flattener and the gentle heating and pressing action restores an LP to perfect

flatness. Review forthcoming

**Furutech deMag \$2150**

*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 Demagnetizer \$230**

*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

**Hanni Aragon \$3995**

*eliteandist.com*  
Though pricey, this German-made LP cleaner has a small footprint, is relatively cool-looking, and features an infinitely variable-speed platter, which allows you to choose a faster speed for fluid application and scrubbing, and a very slow speed for the vacuum process, and a platter that rotates both directions, which is useful with LPs that need a thorough scrubbing. WG, 177

ORIGINAL MASTER RECORDING™

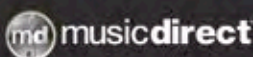
The Original Audiophile Record Label. Still Producing the World's Finest LPs, SACDs and 24K Gold CDs.



MOBILE FIDELITY SOUND LAB

www.mofi.com

also available at



ph. 800-449-8333

www.musicdirect.com



Frank Sinatra & Sextet *Live in Paris*



Frank Sinatra *Sinatra & Strings*



The Band *Rock Of Ages*



The Band *Music From Big Pink*



Little Feat *Waiting For Columbus*



Marvin Gaye *What's Going On*



The Cars *The Cars*



Santana *Abraxas*



Beck *Sea Change*



Marshall Crenshaw *Marshall Crenshaw*



Pixies *Surfer Rosa*



Elvis Costello *My Aim Is True*

**Lyra SPT Stylus Cleaner****\$45***immediasound.com*

Mission accomplished. Puts the fluid where it belongs. Lyra's formulation scrubs each precious stylus clean without globing on and ultimately reducing the compliance of the cantilever. A tiny angled brush is included. NG, 188

**Marijo White 3mm Tuning Dots****\$35 (set of 12)**

These tiny, adhesive, constrained-layer resonance-control "dots" provide an effective bit of damping to tubes or signal connectors that may see airborne or floorborne vibration, even if isolated on stands. Also useful on the headshells of tonearms or, judiciously applied, on the top of phono cartridges. JV, 188

**Mobile Fidelity Rice Inner Sleeves****\$20 (50-pack)***musicdirect.com*

A precious collection of LPs is only as good as its scratch-free surfaces. Offered for decades, Mobile Fidelity's familiar rice-paper-style inner sleeves are renowned for their anti-static properties that avoid drawing dust and grit into the delicate grooves. They remain the archival sleeves to beat. NG, 188

**Mye Sound Stands****Price varies with model***myesound.com*

These aftermarket stand/braces designed for Maggie dipole loudspeakers have no downside, according to reviewer Jacob Heilbrunn—only up. Punchier, tauter bass, quieter

backgrounds, cleaner mids and highs, increased snap and speed, less smearing and fuzziness are just a few of the benefits. JHB, 199

**Nordost Eco 3 Spray****\$40 (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, 188

**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). JV, 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 problem room acoustics without quashing dynamics or swallowing midrange and high-frequency details. The design of B.A.D. panels is deceptively simple, but their effects can be remarkable. In rooms treated with B.A.D. panels, speakers often exhibit lower coloration, more focused imaging, and deeper soundstages. CM, 188

**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. CM, AVGM 1

**Shakti Electro-Magnetic Stabilizer Stone****\$199***shakti.com*

Ben Piazza's Shakti Stones employ "proprietary noise reduction circuitry to absorb and dissipate electromagnetic interference (EMI) and radio frequency interference (RFI)." In other words, nobody's quite sure how they work, but work they do when placed over the transformers of amps, preamps, and other electronics, reducing noise and enriching timbre. JV, 188

**Shakti Hallographs****\$1195/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 or omni-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, 188

**Shelter Carbon-Fiber Cartridge Screws****\$190 (8mm x 2mm in sets of two); \$200(10mm)***acissaudio.com*

Precision is the name of the game when it comes to cartridge setup. The carbon-fiber cartridge screws from Shelter are not only low in resonance but the rigid precision threading means they're less likely to strip a headshell or cartridge. Cheap insurance for that extra special rig. Includes two polycarbonate nuts. CM, 188

**Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators****\$129 (4-Pack) or \$295 for a set of 12 (Mini Elevators are \$99 for a set of 12)***shunyata.com*

Most people agree that elevating interconnects, cables, and power cords off the floor (and away from vibration and each other) is a good idea, but Shunyata argues that using an electrical insulator to do this creates a relative static charge differential between the cable and floor. When an electrical signal is sent through the cable, the signal can become distorted or intermodulated by this static charge. The materials used in Shunyata's elevators prevent this static buildup. The net result is an audibly cleaner signal. JV

**Shure SFG-2 Stylus Force Gauge****\$20***shure.com*

Although ultimately not accurate as the best digital gauges, the classic "teeter-totter" Shure is simple to use, cheap, and does the trick very nicely. WG, 188

**Stillpoints Vibration Control Cones (3-Pack)****\$300***stillpoints.us*

Under components these sturdy ball-bearing equipped cones, which actually use two layers of ball-bearings—and a large

PY 08

PY 09

ceramic bearing and a second tier of balls inside the cone that the ceramic bearing sits on—convert vertical motion into horizontal motion and resonant energy into heat. CM, 188

### **Sutherland TimeLine Strobe** **\$400**

*sutherlandengineering.com*

This nifty little record clamp does more than a fine job of holding LPs flat on the platter; it also tells you precisely how fast or slow or just right your turntable is running via a built-in, battery-powered, active circuit that projects (via lasers) a segmented row of red lines on the wall behind your record player. When the lines stop drifting to the left or right, your turntable's motor is set at exactly the right speed. Ingenious!

### **Symposium Acoustics Fat Padz** **\$119**

*symposiumusa.com*

Kind of like Rollerblock Jr.'s in a single unit, Symposium's Fat Padz employ constrained-layer damping to turn resonant energy into heat. Ideal for supporting lightweight equipment like preamps and CD players. JV, 188

### **Symposium Acoustics Rollerblock Jr.** **\$225 (set of 4)**

*symposiumusa.com*

A set of Rollerblock Jr. gives you four top and bottom units and four tungsten-steel ball-bearings, which are then combined to make "Double Stacked" isolator/coupler sandwiches. Every top and bottom block is constructed of black-anodized, aircraft-alloy aluminum with a special cup in each into which the tungsten-steel ball-bearing is inserted. Ingeniously combining tectonic and constrained-layer damping, the Rollerblocks are, when placed under even heavy components among the most

highly effective resonance-control devices on the market. JV, 188



### **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, 188

### **Tributaries T12 power strip** **\$120**

*tributariescable.com*

The T12 is the perfect power manager for the low current demands of a nest of transformers and peripherals. Equipped with three rows of four outlets, most rotate 90 degrees so that plugs can lie flat along the floor. Meanwhile LEDs indicate operation, grounding, and protection status. Offering plenty of surge suppression and noise filtering for AC power as well as signal-line protection for telecom, network, and cable, it's a bargain for its segment. Various cords included. NG, 186

### **UltraBit Platinum Disc Treatment** **\$65**

*ultrabitplatinum.com*

A spritz of UltraBit Platinum on a CD renders a surprising increase in smoothness,

resolution, and soundstage size. RH, 184

### **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 bass extension and smoother highs. At four for \$25, who says great tweaks have to be expensive? Just out, Vibrapod Cones—use them as standalone footers or combine with Vibrapods to get even more out of your system. DD

### **VPI 16.5 Record Cleaner Bundle w/Fluids, Brushes and Sleeves** **\$550**

*vpiindustries.com*

All vinyl lovers need a record-cleaning machine, and there's no greater "bang for the buck" in cleaners than VPI's classic 16.5. Simple to use and highly effective, the 16.5 produces quieter surfaces from even heavily soiled LPs. The Bundle adds two bottles of Mobile Fidelity cleaning fluid, a Mobile Fidelity Record Brush, and 100 inner sleeves for just \$10 more than the 16.5. JM, 188

### **VPI Typhoon Record Cleaner** **\$2200**

*vpiindustries.com*

A good record cleaner is a vital tool for any good record collection. The Typhoon is the best combination of price, convenience, and effective cleaning AHC has yet found. Noise levels have been reduced since the early production runs, fluid control is excellent, operation is quick and reliable, and it is a pleasure to use. AHC, 184

### **Walker Audio Prelude Quartet Record Cleaning System** **\$185**

*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 most record-cleaning machines, the four-step Prelude system (which involves the manual application of two enzyme-based cleaning solutions and two ultra-pure rinses, each followed by machine vacuuming) really does reveal details that have gone unheard beneath layers of dust and wear. Though the Prelude procedure is a bit time-consuming, no machine-applied cleaning solutions can compare. JV, 188

### **Walker Audio Silver Speaker Jumpers** **\$250 (set of four conductors)**

*walkeraudio.com*

These 6" solid silver conductors (with 1/4" solid silver spades) are perfect for two-piece speakers systems that require a jumper between a bass module and a mid/treble "head" unit. JV, 188

### **Walker Audio Valid Points** **\$525**

*walkeraudio.com*

Valid Points, Walker's massive version of tiptoes, are sensationally effective under most components, particularly when used with Walker Resonance Control discs, which, themselves, can have a salubrious effect on components under or on top of which they are placed. JV, 188

### **Xtreme AV Quicksilver Contact Enhancer** **\$90**

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

on RCA jacks, tube sockets, AC cords, and cartridge pins. Comes with a complete kit of cleaning tools. 188

### **Zerodust Stylus Cleaner** **\$69**

Not a fluid or brush-based stylus cleaner, the Zerodust uses a polymer bubble that gathers stylus dust and debris onto its ultra-soft surface. A winning alternative for those concerned with overusing liquid cleaners that can leave residues and build up over time. Zerodust can be cleaned with tap water and a magnifier is included. CM, 188

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

### *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 set up a home theater 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. JV, 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

### *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

### *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

### *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 the various 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, evolved to detect survival sounds, comprehend, for example, the large-scale structure of a symphony? The book is short on answers, but we are richer for having explored the questions. 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 audio, centering principally on the men who made the medium from the beginning of stereo to the present. PS, 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 **tas**