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No.85 September 2017

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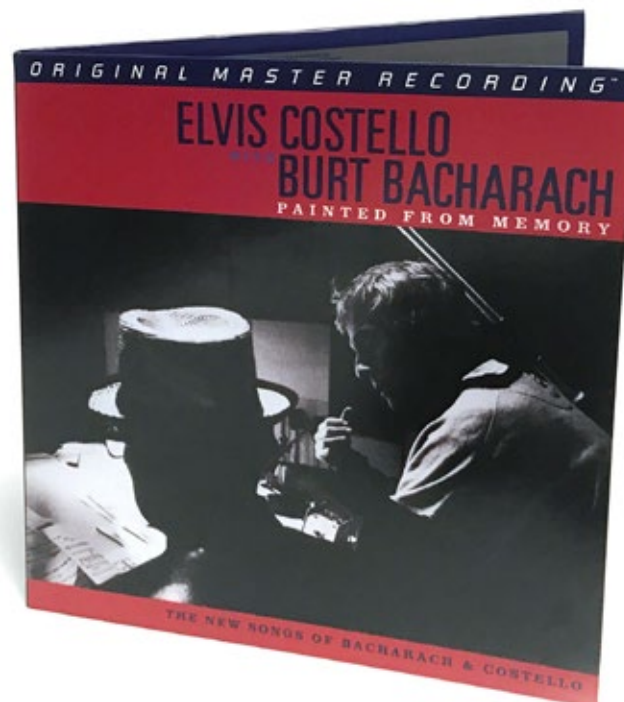
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

If you've been reading TONE for any length of time, you've probably figured out I'm a pretty big auto enthusiast as well as an audio enthusiast, and I often make comparisons between the two worlds. For those of you that don't dig cars, I apologize, but like Popeye, I am what I am. I'll try and make a few other references for the rest of you wherever I can make intelligent ones.

This weekend, spending some time with a good friend perusing vintage race cars at Portland International Raceway, I couldn't help but notice that both worlds have a similar (diminishing) audience, a somewhat similar identity crisis, though different issues facing the rounding up of recruits. Unfortunately for the world of automobiles, we are on the brink of a major paradigm shift, with the internal combustion engine on the way out, the next crop of petrol heads will be writing lines of code rather than twirling wrenches.

While the vinyl record and turntables will probably be with us for the foreseeable future, perhaps 50 years from now, there will be no more cartridges and fiddling with VTA and such. I can't make that call yet. And fortunately, music is such a universal language and integral part of our lives, no matter what the form, I can't imagine people not wanting some kind of audio system.

But I do see a significant parallel between autos and amplifiers in the year 2017. There's too much of it, and there's too much overlap. Certainly, I don't wish for anyone's company to go under, but considering how good today's recent crop of gear is, and how much hard work the majors have done on research and development, it's starting to look more and more like NASCAR every day.

When I entered this hobby/obsession in the mid-70s, much like automobiles, different brands had dramatically different sounds and personalities. And these products were designed and produced by people with radically different personalities as well. The audio publications of the day used to talk about the "west coast sound," the "east coast



sound," and "the British sound," all being quite distinctly disparate. McIntosh had one sound, Audio Research had its sound, Conrad-Johnson likewise, and Mark Levinson was another island on to itself. And the same went for speakers, etc., etc. It was like Formula 1 of the same time-period, where the car from one team was completely different than its competitors. Wacky as it was, it was a heyday for engineering prowess.

But today, with most manufacturers agreeing that chassis rigidity and controlling vibrations is important, combined with a small number of suppliers providing the best raw parts (resistors, capacitors and the like), and even the gap between solid-state and vacuum tube sound closing every day, there just isn't the brand differentiation that there used to be. And so it goes with cars. VW, Audi, BMW, and Mercedes are much more similar than they ever used to be.

This isn't a gloom and doom column by any stretch; it's just an observation that so many manufacturers have done their homework so well, there just aren't as many anomalies – good or bad as there used to be. This is also why we don't write the negative reviews that so many people on the internet seem to claim that must be done to be "legitimate." I haven't heard an out and out clunker in a long time. Honestly, have you? Particularly from any of the majors. There's only so many ways you can hook up a 12AX7 tube and have it make music.

So here's to all of us keeping the flame alive. I honestly don't know what the solution is, but I wake up every day trying to keep it all interesting. I hope you do too.

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One of the Last of the Breed

The Adcom GFP-565

By Mark Marcantonio

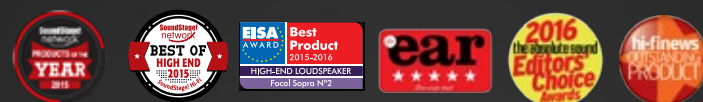
Budding audiophiles of the late 1980s and early 1990s had a short list of manufacturers they knew would take them beyond the typical receiver/speaker stage. Names like Hafler, Vandersteen, and Carver were regularly mentioned. In my circle, the big dog was Adcom. The distinctive flat black case and way-cool louvered panels on the amplifiers were as recognizable as the big blue meters of McIntosh.

The first generation of this design style set a benchmark for affordability and performance. The understated functionality of the front panel was a welcome relief to the endless soft-touch buttons that marred mass produced gear of the time. While the space shuttle was awesome, no piece of audio should rival its cockpit!





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FEATURE

The front panel is minimalist for the time, yet it offers a great deal of functionality. In addition to the balance, bass, and treble controls, the GFP-565 includes a tone in, contour, high cut, mono, and processor in options for those desiring to play with the sound beyond what the tone controls offer. I wonder how many offers owners did much messing around as the GFP-565 sounds good without muddying up the sonic waters with an external EQ or processor, though these boxes were all the rage at the time.

Those still having a tape deck (or decks) in their system had a straightforward time with the GFP-565. One control labeled recording and the other listening made is a breeze to select between decks, but to dub between them when listening to something else. Ah, the early 90s.

With the runaway success of the original series, the second generation required a fresh design, but wisely only under the hood. The \$800 GFP-565 debuted in 1990, with an entirely new circuit board design including new op-amps. A favorite sales guy in Denver I remember well raved at the increased clarity and a peek under the hood shows a layout that has stood the test of time.

Twenty-seven years later the GFP-565 still holds up sonically. Having owned the GFT-450 with a built-in tuner my two complaints were the radio bleed-thru and a veiled sound on the upper frequencies. The GFP-565 has no problem presenting the

full brightness of Donald Fagan's rather hotly recorded Kamikiriad album. The punch and quick transients of ELO's "Mr. Blue Sky" as well as the vocal tones come out more natural than my vintage Harman/Kardon 680i receiver from 1980. This was truly a major step up from the single box components of the period.

The GFP-565s MM phono section is designed to handle cartridges with 2mV or higher

Considering that you can find a clean GFP-565 for about \$500 these days, you get a decent line level preamplifier to boot.

output. Spinning records with my Rega RP1/Ortofon Super OM40 setup was pure joy. The universal accolades the GFP-565 phono section received when introduced were spot-on; praising its dynamic range and low noise floor. Chuck Mangione's flugelhorn from the Children of Sanchez soundtrack oozes openness and detail. In many ways, it reminds of the TONEAudio budget favorite, the Lounge phono preamp with its magical midrange, clean bass, and clear highs. And considering that you can find a clean GFP-565 for about \$500 these days, you get a decent line level preamplifier to boot.

The whisper quiet nature of the GFP-565 with its robust design and execution along with the killer phono stage leaves no doubt as to why a well-preserved unit still commands a good price on eBay. Match it up to a serviced GFA-535, 545, or 555 and get ready to enjoy endless hours of vinyl. ●

PLAYLISTS

A Look at the Playlist

The Music Must Change

By Jeff Dorgay



Those of you old enough to remember the tape deck recall how much we used to cherish the mix tape. If you owned a reel to reel tape deck, the slower speed, (3 ¾ i.p.s) wasn't quite up to snuff regarding ultimate fidelity; it was incredibly handy when friends came by and the drinks started flowing. Anything to keep prying hands away from the turntable!

The best cassette decks from Revox, Nakamichi and a few others knocked on the door of the mighty R2R decks thanks to some amazing technology, tape formulations, and miniaturization. Cool as the compact cassette was from a tech standpoint, few things were as big a part of the mating ritual as making a mix tape for someone you had designs on. Even the most socially inept music lover had a shot at winning a woman's heart if you could string together a super cool mix tape.

Living in a digital world

Some argue that compiling a great playlist isn't as demanding, or emotionally involving than back in the day when you dug through your stacks of vinyl. Mapping out a track list and doing the math to see if it would all fit neatly on both sides of a C90 cassette tape with as little space left as possible could be daunting. Keeping the gaps between songs tight, you might even get the side to end just as the leader tape was rolling around in the window. Once in a while, this even meant being quick fading the record level down, but it was worth it to pack an entire side with a killer set of tunes.

But today, it's nearly all playlists. Though tape decks are making a bit of a comeback and a few people still exist to keep them in a good state of tune, spare parts are getting tougher and tougher to find. And blank tape is all but gone. Ask your favorite 20-something what a tape head demagnetizer is and watch them cringe with confusion. So we are stuck with playlists.

As someone who embraced computer audio close to its inception, I love the music server concept. Though I have over ten thousand CDs ripped, I usually listen to music the way I used to;

queue up an album or two and sit back. There are times when it's nice to make a mix on the fly, getting into this groove or that, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit to succumbing to a bit of ADD now and then because, well, I can.

For all the complaints, Tidal is still my streaming partner of choice. While I could care less about the latest Jay-Z joint, their catalog continues to get deeper, and they offer a respectable cross section of new music. Considering nearly everything is recorded on a laptop anyway, not much is lost in translation. Call me a curmudgeon, but I'm usually just fine with decent 16/44.1.

Though some things change, others stay the same. You still need to be clever to make a great playlist, even though it isn't as compartmentalized or as permanent as a C90 cassette used to be. While the time constraints aren't there, with the current ADD mutation of the human species, you better make it engaging if you want to hold anyone's attention for longer than five minutes. Combine this with more music than ever at your disposal, and your skills better be sharp.

Sharing the news

Much the same has happened with record reviews. We've

always strived to bring you some of the latest, greatest, up to the minute record reviews, uncovering as much cool music as possible with the hope of putting a few new things on your playlist but I think that era is coming to an end as well.

In the 70s, when I was getting sent to the principal's office for reading *Creem* and *Rolling Stone* instead of paying attention to my homework, the writers of the day got promos weeks before records hit the stores, and record reviews were longer, more in-depth. By the time that new Bowie record hit the shelves, I was waiting outside the store, waiting to get in and bring it home before anyone else.

But today, with so few physical promos even making their way to us, and now with digital downloads of new albums barely beating the release to the streets, it's nearly impossible to build anticipation. Bringing things full circle, all the streaming services have made our opinions nearly obsolete. As a reader told me at a recent hifi show, "Now that you guys give us all the links to Tidal to stream and Music Direct to buy the vinyl, who needs reviews? I just stream it to see if I like it, and if I really need to have it, I buy the record."

On one level, we've become obsolete. And we like what we like. While the magazines were helpful back then, I can't say *Rolling Stone* ever talked me out of liking AC/DC or Kiss, so on one level, maybe it is all a bit self-indulgent.

Embracing the future

So, with this issue of *TONE*, we are trying something new. We're doing our own playlists. We'll still be covering audiophile reissues, and as always, the goal with these reviews is to point out the differences between known pressings and comment on pressing quality. Is that reissue worth \$25-\$50 of your hard-earned cash? We hope so.

On occasion, highly significant releases or box sets will be highlighted, but just as it was when my obsession with music began, the goal has always been to discover more. We still want to help you do that and in the spirit of making things more communal; we are opening it up to our friends, readers and industry partners as well. Though I've heard staples like "Keith Don't Go" way too many times at various audio events, I've also heard some interesting music at shows too, and would like to dispel the rumor that all we do is listen to the same ten tracks and call it a day.

Here's what we've come up with and I hope you enjoy it. The most fun part of putting this together, has been the enthusiastic response we got from all over the world – proving that not only is music truly a universal language, our readers are everywhere. It's a nice feeling after 12 years. As always, drop a note, or stop by our Facebook page and comment away. I look forward to hearing from you. Better yet, send me a playlist of your faves!



Playlist 1: Mexico

Reader Javier Huerta has been following *TONE* since the beginning, and we've had many great conversations over the years, talking about music, gear, our families and of course, cars. Driving a current Miata, Huerta is a roadster guy who has built his own turntable, restored classic McIntosh gear and now has his young son getting involved in the hobby, sharing his love for music with him.

He was kind enough to share a dozen songs with me, that are go-to favorites, and it looks like a fun list. In our chats on FB Messenger, I knew he was agonizing over this list just as much as if it were being committed to a tape. And that's what makes music, and the love of it so universal.

Johnny B. Goode – Single Version
Chuck Berry

Dancing in the Street
Martha Reeves and the Vandellas

California Girls
The Beach Boys

Theme From Shaft
Issac Hayes

Stayin' Alive
Bee Gees

Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough
Michael Jackson

Girls Just Want to Have Fun
Cyndi Lauper

Lets Go Crazy
Prince

Smooth
Santana/Rob Thomas

One More Time
Daft Punk

Moves Like Jagger
Maroon 5/Christina Aguilera

Uptown Funk
Mark Ronson/Bruno Mars

Playlist 2: Russia

Giving the glove a big spin, our next stop is Russia. Misha Kucherenko, the owner of Stereo Pravda, can usually be found at headphone related events showing his wares. He's easy to spot, because he towers above most of us and is always sporting cool shades. Next time you're at a show, stop by, take a listen and see what's on his music player. Ten from Misha, "In no particular order."

Besame Mucho

Gonzalo Rubica + Charlie Haden

So We Meet Again

Melody Gardot

Dansons La Gigue

Patricia Barber

Spain

Chick Corea & Hiromi Uehara

Les Fourmis Rouges

Michel Jonasz Trio

Here's to Life

Shirley Horn

Cassandra Song

Branford Marsalis Quartet and Kurt Elling

Love is Blindness

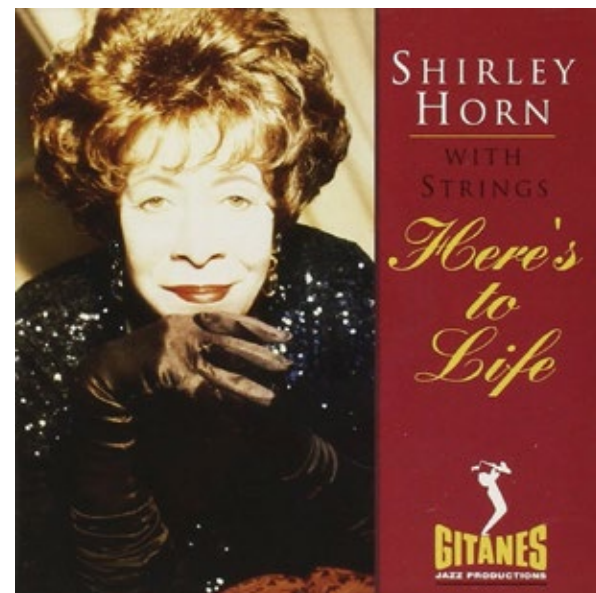
Waldemar Bastos

Руки

АЛЛА БАЯНОВА

A Day in the Life of a Fool

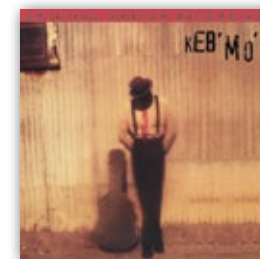
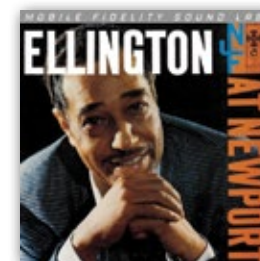
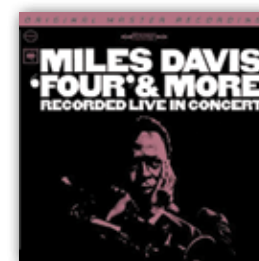
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MUSIC



Playlist 3: Norway

Maybe it's the cold in Norway making for a stronger case to stay inside and listen to music; you can see him in his natural environment. Pål Bråtelund was one of the original guys at Tidal, and he's got a huge window into the music he enjoys. Being a musician himself doesn't hurt.

Because Pål was so ambitious, offering up 29 favorites (What would you expect from someone who worked at Tidal, right?) we're just giving you a link to the Tidal playlist for the entire list and giving the top 10 here.

<http://tidal.com/playlist/f8c38da8-f3bd-459c-949e-1eed4b18b43>

Heavenly Father (Radio Edit)

Highasakite

Far From Here

Sivert Høyem

Do You Remember

Ane Brun

Conquer

Christel Alsos

Wearing Nothing

Dagny

She She

Morten Myklebust

Emmylou

First Aid Kit

Shoreline

Anna Ternheim

Don't Kill My Vibe

Sigrid

Hyde

Asrid S



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Fireflies
Owl City

Take a Walk
Passion Pit's

Enter Sandman
Metallica

Take Five
Dave Brubeck

Counting Stars
One Republic

Touch
Daft Punk

Such Great Heights
Postal Service

Just Give me a Reason
Pink

Glad you Came
The Wanted

Game of Thrones Theme Song



Playlist 4: New Jersey

Leave it to the audio world's newest and most playful couple, Mat and Jane Weisfeld to have a turntable at their wedding! That's commitment to analog. With everything from classic jazz to movie soundtracks, these two have a wide range of musical interests.





Playlist 6: California

Audio Vision San Francisco's Antonio Long and his partner Randy Johnson are two of the most evolved stylemongers in the world of high end audio, and it's reflected in their musical taste. You will never hear boring music played in their store, ever. Antonio was kind enough to share a few things getting heavy play right now, but this doesn't even scratch the surface.

Be Right Back, Moving House
Ghostpoet

Athol – Brose
Nouvelle Vague

Soothing
Laura Marling

Pure Comedy
Father John Misty

Zodiac Black
Goldfrapp

Tip Tapping
Dillon

Warriors
Too Many Zooz

The Mountain Will Fall
DJ Shadow

Magnificent (She Says)
Elbow

Driving Away
Tricky

Come Near Me
Massive Attack

Instant Patience
JDJR



KEITH JARRETT
THE KÖLN CONCERT



ECM

Playlist 5: Paris

Bouncing back across the ocean, like a stylus on a warped record, Jerome Wanono, one of our newest contributors, shares our musical passion and diversity. He tells us "I cannot pick favorite tracks, even picking favorite albums out of thousands is already extremely difficult," so he gave us a list of some favorite *albums* that are some of his desert island favorites, leaning towards the jazz groove. His last choice, Maxime le Forestier's *Plutôt Guitare*, is captivating, in his words "because I need to listen to French lyrics too." Well played.

The Köln Concert
Keith Jarrett

Still Alive and Tribute
Keith Jarrett's Trio

Conférence de Presse
Michel Petrucciani and Eddy Louiss

We Get Requests
Oscar Peterson Trio

Live at the Whitney
Duke Ellington

Live at Blues Alley
Eva Cassidy

Don't I know you from Somewhere
Sara K

Diamonds on the Inside
Ben Harper

Live from Austin, TX
Norah Jones

Plutôt Guitare
Maxime le Forestier

MUSIC



Playlist 7: Italy

Livio Cucuzza is the design director for the McIntosh Group and lives in Padua, Italy. Like many of the rest of us in the wacky world of high end audio, he's on the road a lot, but always has his music with him – usually through a pair of Pryma headphones! He took a second to share his favorite summer playlist with us, and give those of you using iTunes a link as well.

<https://itunes.apple.com/it/playlist/jeff-dorgay/idpl.u-VMKUB8EAdd>

Vieni via con me
Paolo Conte

Contessa Miseria
Carmen Consoli

You're the One That I Want
Lo Fang

Beggin For Thread
Banks

Everything in Its Right Place
Radiohead

Down the Road
C2C

Pavane, Op.50
for Choir and Orchestra
(1901) - Chœur de
l'Orchestre Symphonique
de Montréal, Orchestre
Symphonique De
Montreal & Charles Dutoit



Headspace
Archive

Retrograde
James Blake

Tainted Love
Marilyn Manson



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Jeff Dorgay
Tone Audio

"...screams sophistication,
and while it's EAT's least
expensive turntable, it's
still obviously a luxury
product.... a winner and a
wonderful component."

Highly recommended."

*Jason Thorpe
SoundStage! HI-FI



 VANA LTD

vanaltd.com



Playlist 8: California

The Bay Area is also home to Mike Liang, headphone enthusiast and guy behind The HiFi Insider (www.hifiinsider.com). While some of Mike's choices can be headphone centric, they all play well on a pair of speakers too. He's quick to mention, "The hundreds of times I've attended audio shows, I hear music that is foreign to me or so obscure even Shazam can't find it. Audiophile recordings that sound good but aren't my type of music doesn't get me in the groove with the demo system. Here's 12 of my favorites; not audiophile-grade by any means, but they won't put you to sleep."

21 Guns

American Idiot Cast &
Green Day

Space Oddity

David Bowie

Gula

deadmau5

Burning Love

Elvis Presley [Viva Elvis
Soundtrack]

With A Little Help from My Friends

Joe Cocker

Reagan

Killer Mike

MUSIC



I'd Die Without You

P.M. Dawn

I'll be Missing You

Puff Daddy & The Family

While My Guitar Gently Weeps

Santana Featuring India Arie &
Yo-Yo-Ma

Goodbye Yellow Brick Road

Sara Bareilles

Lately

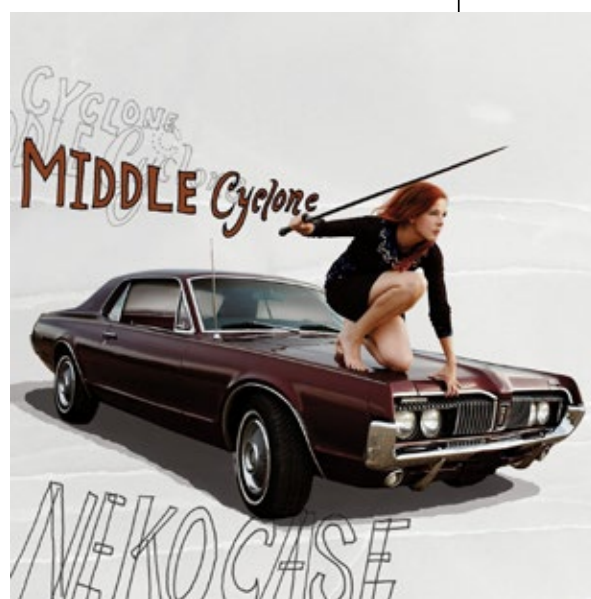
Jodeci

I'd Rather Go Blind

Etta James

Playlist 9: Oregon

Our last three playlists come from the home court, including mine, but first let's head to Bandon, Oregon; home of Cardas Audio. Another irresistible couple that you've no doubt bumped into if you've been attending any hifi shows is none other than Angela Cardas Meredith and her husband, Josh Meredith. Here's Angela about to spin a disc on their Grand Prix Audio Monaco 1.0 table, sporting a TriPlanar tonearm and a Cardas MC cartridge, of course!



Say Something Loving
Muse

Reapers
The XX

Go Your Own Way
Fleetwood Mac

Cavalry Captain
Decemberists

D'yer Mak'er
Led Zeppelin

Welcome To New York
Ryan Adams

This Tornado Loves You
Neko Case

From Blown Speakers
New Pornographers

The Championship
Polyphonic Spree

Rolling People
The Verve

New Slang
The Shins

See These Bones
Nada Surf

The Classic SB
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We have turbocharged our EISA Award-winning "the Classic" to bring you this upgraded package - The Classic SB. It includes key new features:

- Electronic speedcontrol
- Sumiko Blue Point No.2 cartridge
- Top grade Clamp It
- Leather It mat

ELECTRONIC SPEEDCONTROL



SUMIKO BLUE POINT NO.2 CARTRIDGE



MUSIC



Playlist 10: Washington

Gig Harbor Audio's crew is always making playlists and the ultimate commitment, transferring some of them to reel to reel tape for posterity. Considering what blank tape costs these days, that's a real labor of love and money. Their store is near Seattle, and staying true to the music scene, often feature live acts as well as some well stocked record shelves. We suggest a visit if you are in the neighborhood! Their musical taste is as eclectic as the new and vintage gear in their store.

New York
Cat Power

The Jesus Lizard
Horse Doctor Man

The Moon Loungers
Bette Davis Eyes

The Beautiful South
The Table

Selector Dub Narcotic
Hotter than Hott

Glass Animals
Black Mambo

Beast of Burden
The Rolling Stones

Sometime A Fantasy
Billy Joel

Swamp Thing
The Chameleons UK

What's New
Linda Ronstadt

Silly Love Songs
Wings

Breathe
Pink Floyd



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The new STR Integrated Amplifier ignores limits, and so should you.

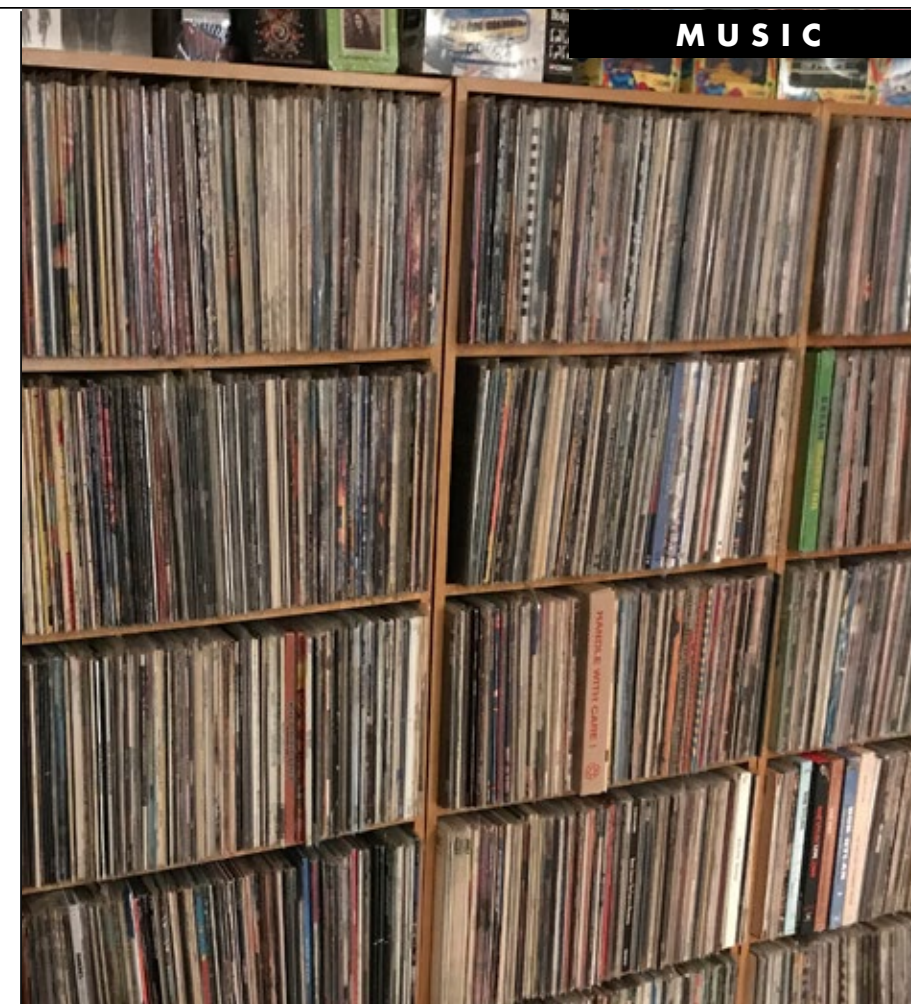
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- High-resolution preamplifier section
- High current, high output amplifier section
- 8 bipolar output devices per channel
- Up-sampling of lower-resolution sources
- Asynchronous USB audio input support 32-bit / 384 kHz PCM, and DSD 2.8 / 5.6 MHz
- S/PDIF coaxial and optical
- Balanced AES/EBU inputs
- MM and MC phono
- Graphic front panel display



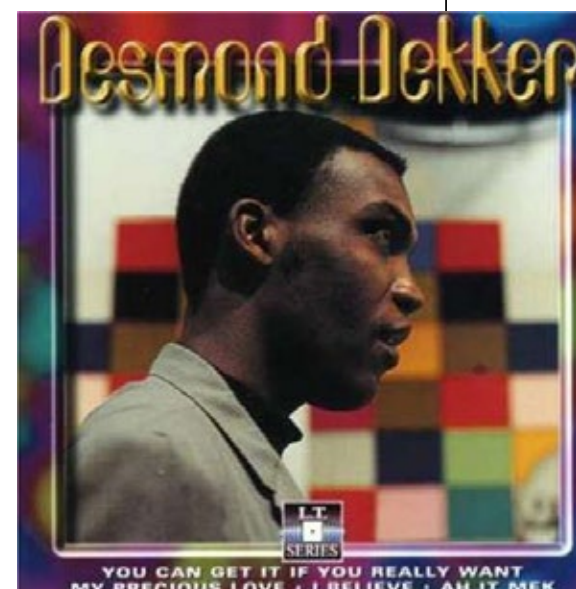
Available in black or silver

MUSIC



Playlist 11: Georgia

Make no mistake, two of the best hifi systems in Atlanta serve a guy that truly loves music first and foremost. You'll never find Tom Caselli arguing about cables or formats. He's too busy outbidding you at 4am on that low numbered, first stamper British copy of whatever classic rock record you thought you were going to get. I never covet my neighbor's wife or car, but I'd love to have Tom's record collection. Here's a dozen of his top choices this week.



1970
The Stooges

Ejection
Hawkwind

The Green Manalishi
Fleetwood Mac

When You Awake
The Band

Fear of a Blank Planet
Porcupine Tree

The Israelites
Desmond Dekker

In the Year 2525
Zager and Evans

Astronomy Domine
Pink Floyd

Gloria
Patti Smith

Lost in the Flood
Bruce Springsteen

Lady Madonna
The Beatles

The Ballad of New Orleans
Johnny Horton



Playlist 12: Washington

Just like tenth grade speech class, I always felt that if I went last, not as many people would think my speech would suck. I make no claim for my musical taste, though it continues to expand with every year that goes by, thanks to my staff, friends, readers and Tidal. Who knew that headbanging kid in the back row of speech class would actually listen to violins in 2017? But not this time. Next one, who knows?

I Wanna be Your Dog

Iggy and the Stooges

You're no Good

Van Halen

Remember When we Started

Paul Weller

I Scare Myself

Thomas Dolby

The Smartest Monkeys

XTC

Debbie Downer

Courtney Barnett

Bug Powder Dust

Bomb the Bass

Mongoloid

DEVO

Pleasant Valley Sunday

The Monkees

When I Wake Up Tomorrow

Cheap Trick

Call Me

M'Shell Ndgeocello

Gregory Peccary

Frank Zappa

Tune in next issue and we'll have recruited a new crop of lists and listeners. Want to be featured? Send a list to jeff@tonepublications.com We'd love to hear what you're into.

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FEATURE

FEATURE

The Audeze LCDi4

Best of the Best

By Jeff Dorgay

I must admit, for those of you new to our readership, I'm not a headphone guy. But like the World's Most Interesting Man, when I do listen to headphones, I listen to Audeze. My journey began with their original LCD-2s, that for me turned my world around and adjusted my attitude. These were finally some headphones that sounded like a great pair of speakers. And they had bass; real bass. Though you'll never get that punch you in the gut" feel, produced by a big pair of speakers. The extended, defined bass response of the Audeze phones is tough to ignore.

FEATURE



FEATURE

As much as I do not like headphones, on a boat or a goat, I like in-ear phones even less. Other than the \$4,000 Stereo Pravda's which is my current favorite, IEMs have been pretty disappointing.

Doing some background reading on the LCDi4 headphones you see here; I noticed that Audeze works with Designworks, who just happen to work with BMW (and I'm a big fan of BMW) and they also have a financing option for the \$2,495 LCDi4s that shakes out to \$220 a month. I'm paying less than that to lease my new BMW i3. That there were high expectations going in, would be putting it mildly.

Minor grouching

While the LCDi4s come in a lovely, luxurious case, the USB stick owners' manual doesn't clearly explain to someone uninitiated with headphones just how to use those damn ear things, that help hold these relatively large IEMs on your ears. The cable supplied looks to be of high quality, but it's way too short and presumptuous that you'd want to use headphones this awesome (letting the cat out of the bag here) only with an amplifier limited to a mini jack output. A quick video would be helpful, and for \$2,495, a 1/8" to 1/4" adapter should be in the box, along with another six feet of cable.

Resisting the urge to sneak a quick listen during the break-in period, the LCDi4s were plugged into an iPhone 5 and looped on a long Tidal playlist to make sure they were broken in. Rustling a proper adapter out of the toolbox, serious listening began in earnest with the Pass HPA-1, the PrimaLuna HP Integrated and a freshly re-capped Marantz 2245 just for giggles. *(continued)*

Beep beep, yeah!

The best part of my job is when, after nearly 40 years of being a hi-fi enthusiast and the last 15 listening for a living, is to have my world turned upside down completely. The Audeze LCDi4s are worth every penny asked. Where my other favorites, the Stereo Pravda phones sound like someone put my Focal Sopra no.3s in a shrink machine, the LCDi4s sound like someone put a brand new pair of original Quad 57s and put them in a shrink machine, so you can insert them in your ears. Should you have the chance to audition these phones, make sure you are relaxed, centered and in your happy place. Make sure they are plugged into a fantastic source and headphone amplifier too. Yes, they sound good with a laptop, phone, pad or modest amp, but if you want to fully experience what the LCDi4s are capable of, they need an exceptional source.

These phones are the pinnacle of personal listening. If you have a mega two channel hi-fi system that you'd like to take with you wherever you go, the Audeze LCDi4 phones are your ticket to ride. The key word is refinement. These phones offer refinement across the entire audio spectrum that is unmatched anywhere else in the world of portable listening. These phones offer a level of refinement I've only heard through few great two channel systems. *(continued)*

The new 800 Series Diamond didn't get better by chance. It got better by change. 868 changes to be precise.

Bowers & Wilkins

bowers-wilkins.com



FEATURE

Where so many headphones produce an overblown, overextended sonic field between your ears, which usually has way too much sonic contrast and saturation, the LCDi4s merely unfold the music as a great two channel system does. Imaging is spot on, and eyes closed, if not for the lack of pants rattling that goes with speakers, the spatial relationships are correct, feeling like there are a pair of large, high-quality speakers in front of me. The longer I listen, the more I swear I hear stuff bounce off the walls in my listening room, but I'm not.

The level of minute detail revealed by the LCDi4s is so enthralling, you will be going back to your favorite recordings to give your ears a tune up. Should you not have a mega two channel system to listen to sans phones, the LCDi4s will open up a new world of listening pleasure. Think of them as a six figure hi-fi system that fits in your pocket.

Further listening

While numerous examples of tracks can be listed, the key here is that music sounds correct through the LCDi4s. Tonal, dynamic and spatial cues are so good, within 15 seconds of listening, you completely forget you are listening to headphones. The level of distortion is so low, as it is in a great planar magnetic or ESL speaker, whether you are listening to acoustic instruments, vocalists or crunchy guitars through a wall of Marshall amps, it sounds like music, not like music through electronics, scrunched into some tiny earpieces. This is the way music sounds through a great hifi system.

You simply must hear these to believe them. If like me, the only thing that's put you off about your full sized, over ear Audeze phones is their size and weight, this is the variation on the theme you've been waiting for. Much as I love my LCD-2s, I can only keep those big things on my head for so long. Good as they are, they still lack the ultimate level of refinement and transparency that the LCDi4 does.

Like a pair of fine loudspeakers, the better your system, the better the LCDi4s will render your music collection. Jacked into my reference system, they were not out of place using the dCS Rossini DAC and clock for digital tracks and the Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0 turntable we recently reviewed, via the Pass XS Phono. Channeling nearly \$150,000 worth of source components through the Pass HPA-1 is a visceral experience, to say the least.

Trying to be level headed

The Audeze LCDi4s might not be the beginning of your personal audio journey, but they can certainly be the end. Offering such a high degree of tonal neutrality and dynamic range, they can also make for an incredible reference by which to judge any other components you might consider adding or upgrading.

These are certainly this headphone curmudgeon's favorite headphones, by a considerable margin. Be ready to plunk down your credit card. You won't be able to un-experience these. The LCDi4s are crazy money, but they are crazy good. Consider yourself warned! ●

www.audeze.com

FEATURE



AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay



Elvis Costello/Burt Bacharach

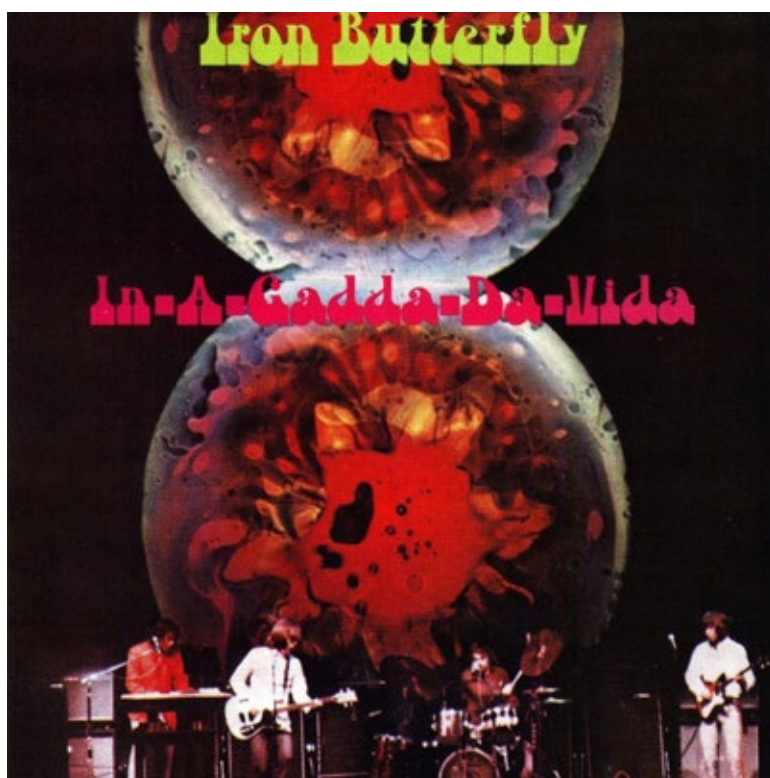
Painted From Memory

MoFi, 180g. LP

W

hether analog is “superior” to digital or not is another argument for another day. However, when the planets line up, and the source material is lovely, there is a sheer beauty to analog that is tough to beat. Produced from the original 30 i.p.s. master, this unexpected collaboration between virtuoso songwriters Bacharach and Costello, originally part of work on the 1996 film, *Grace of My Heart*, and the track “God Give Me Strength.” Costello mentions that the song inspired him to work with Bacharach on more tunes, resulting in *Painted From Memory*. Don’t let the snarky review in *Rolling Stone* fool you; this record is a sleeper if there ever was one. Considering Costello’s temptation to switch partners like potential mates on *Tinder*, resulting in some horrible experiments, the result here is sublime.

Initially only available on compact disc, the original is passable, yet somewhat flat in tone as well as the soundfield presented. MoFi’s team does a stunning job here, bringing every bit of magic that great analog has to offer. The utter smoothness of this record does ultimate justice to this group of crooner songs, revolving around failed love and forlorn relationships. Where Costello’s voice is flattened in the same dimension as the instruments backing him on the CD, he springs well out in front of the speakers on the LP. Long time Costello wingman Steve Nieve’s piano gently unfolds from the tracks, as do the subtle string and percussive bits. If this one doesn’t get you to tear up just a little bit (and no one has to know), you’re not alive.



Iron Butterfly
In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida
 Atlantic, 180g LP

Shaking the dust from an original pressing of this heavy rock classic proves that sometimes the originals are best. The driving bass line that was part of the signature Iron Butterfly sound is absent in this new version from Atlantic, in addition to any life that this record once had. Beyond the current poor taste of reissuing an album from a digital file, this example sounds as if it were mastered from a 128kb/sec MP3 file.

Stale sound quality and any lack of soundstage permeate this release, with all the drumming and guitar impact gone. The elephant guitar wails on the title track are reduced to mouse squawks. It's pathetic and somewhat disrespectful that such an iconic rock record is given this lackluster treatment. Even the inherent warmth of a Koetsu Jade Platinum can't save this clunker. Avoid, Will Robinson.

Alternately, the 1995 Rhino release is not bad if you can find one, but the best is still an early stamper ATCO pressing, should you be fortunate enough to find one that hasn't been played to death. Though not vinyl, Mobile Fidelity's CD release is excellent but rare and somewhat spendy. Ironically, perhaps the best version of this heavy rock classic is indeed, digital.

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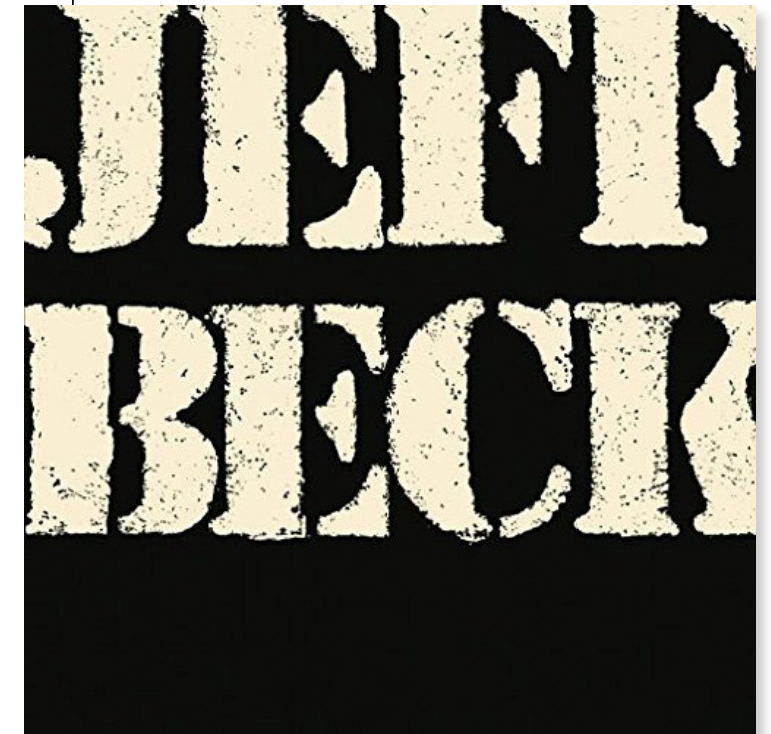
The new **Excite X18**.

DYNAUDIO

MUSIC

Master Guitarist Jeff Beck's third studio record has even more of a fusion, almost pop bent – exhibiting heavy influence by Keyboard player Jan Hammer than his last, *Wired*. No surprise seeing Beck's last appearance is on the live album *Jeff Beck With the Jan Hammer Group Live*. If you're old enough to remember the hit series *Miami Vice*, there are some familiar grooves here.

Comparing the high res download to a clean original Epic LP is a mixed bag. The digital version exhibits more depth and low-level detail than the original, but it is plagued by a top end crunchiness that suggests this was sourced from a digital backup or safety master. The download also exceeds the analog version in bass solidity – there's definitely more of a backbeat here, with the LP feeling anemic in comparison. Compared to the relatively compressed original, the HD Tracks version opens up the soundstage somewhat in both dimensions, but not dramatically.



Jeff Beck

There and Back

HD Tracks, 24/96 download

The liner notes make no mention of this being a digital recording, and seeing this was fairly early in the digital recording game, *There and Back* has a high possibility of being recorded analog, so it leaves one wondering what this classic fusion title might have sounded like had an original analog master been procured.

FEATURE



FEATURE

TECHNOLOGY BENEFICIARY

The IsoTek Aquarius

by Jeff Dorgay

Power conditioning products are a lot like doctors, even though they claim to “do no harm,” very few actually deliver on that promise. More often than not, most of the power products we’ve sampled give a false sense of quiet at first blush, then upon careful listening either round the transient peaks off, or worse, alter the tonal balance of the audio signal they are supposed to be protecting. In the end, most gear sounds better *not* plugged into a power conditioner. It’s no wonder this segment of the audio world has so much skepticism surrounding it.

FEATURE



However, when line conditioning is done right, you hear more music and more of what your gear is capable of delivering. A successful power conditioner (at least in our minds) doesn't give you a bigger bottom end, or more push anywhere else in the range. A successful power conditioner merely minimizes the noise and artifacts present in the power line so that they don't become part of your signal chain.

So the arguments go that if the power supply in your gear is properly designed, it doesn't need power conditioning, or you think you live in a magical place that your AC power is really clean. Wrong and

wrong. Even a properly designed power supply doesn't make up for the inherent distortion in the AC line, and it doesn't always filter out random garbage (like your neighbor's table saw, or the back EMF in your Linn LP-12 turntable, etc., etc.) present in the power line.

We've used the IsoTek Super Titan for some time now with fantastic result, but it will set you back about \$20k, especially if you throw in a couple of great IsoTek power cords. Another point of contention, but suffice to say IsoTek power cords are some of the finest out there. *(continued)*



A MASTERPIECE OF DESIGN AND ENGINEERING

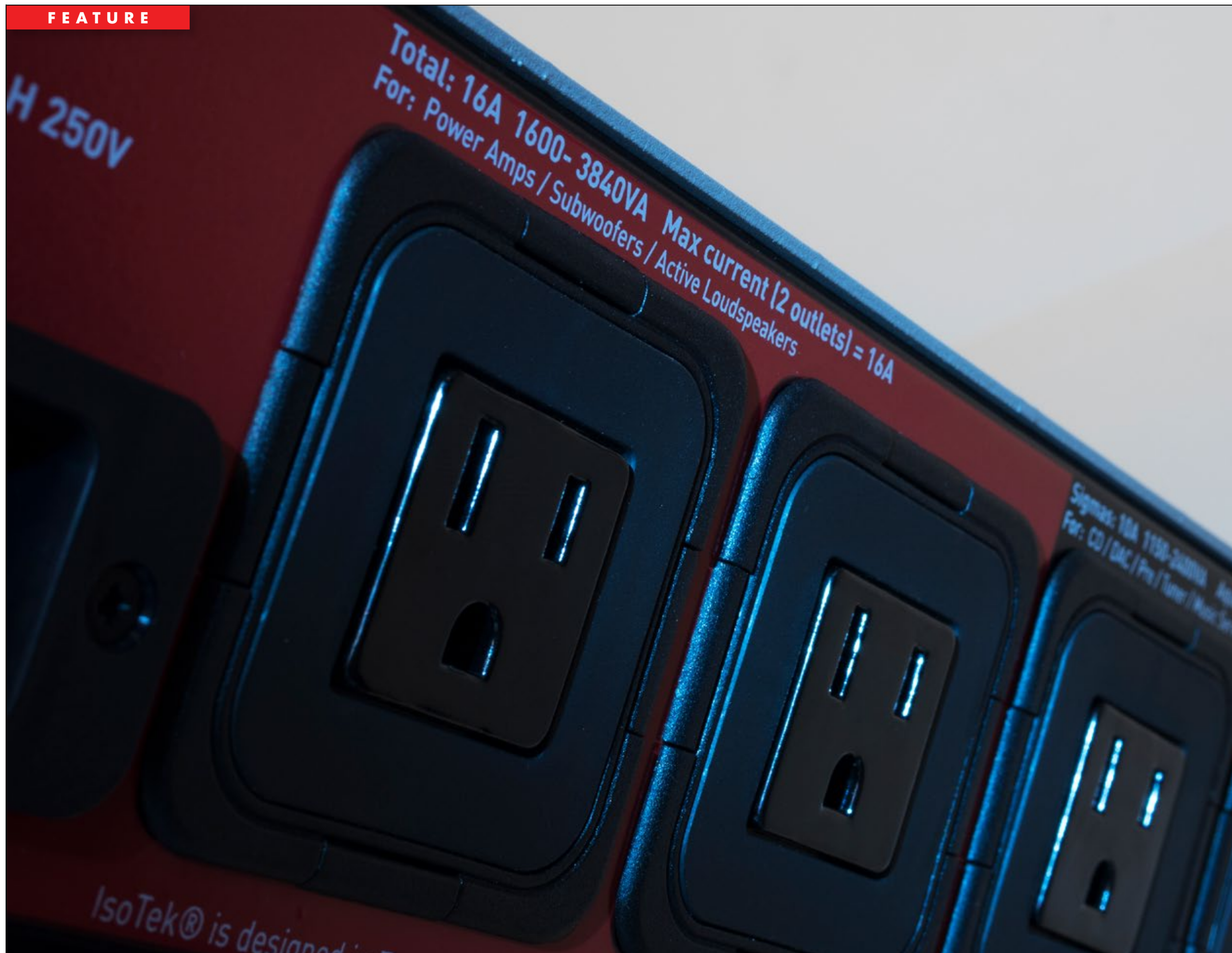


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martinlogan.com

FEATURE



FEATURE

What you do and don't get for \$1,995

For those of you that don't want to drop \$20,000 on a power conditioner, or for that matter \$20,000 on your *entire system*, we've found a great solution. IsoTek's new Aquarius line conditioner tips the scale at \$1,995 with one of their Premier C19 power cords. Taking advantage of much of what IsoTek has learned on their state of the art power conditioners, it's a great value.

There are a few major differences between the top range Super Titan and the Aquarius. First, the Aquarius only has a constant current capability of about 16 amps, where the Super Titan is rated at 32 amps. (You will need a special outlet to deliver 30A service to a 120V line) Second, the level of filtration that the Super Titan provides is greater, offering even more fine musical detail through and greater dynamic range, but that's what you pay the big bucks for.

Finally, the level of sheer mechanical construction in the Super Titan is much higher, i.e. the ST weighs a *lot* more, and it has proprietary Neutrik outlets, so you have to pair it with IsoTek power cords made specifically for the ST. An extremist approach for a cost no object solution. *(continued)*

Internal processing 5,6 MHz, 72 bits
Formats PCM 24 bits
up to 384 kHz, DXD, DSD 2x



Nagra HD DAC converter. High definition, unlimited emotion!

It is time to rediscover the pleasure of listening to music, whatever the format, from red-book CD to DSD 2x. Extensive connectivity possibilities, from SPDIF to proprietary USB inputs. Output volume control, inter-stage Nagra transformers, vacuum tube output stage, state-of-the-art headphone amplifier.

NAGRA
Swiss Made

FEATURE



Considering how good IsoTek power cords are, I can't imagine using someone else's if you are starting from scratch with adding power conditioning to your system, but if you're already in possession of power cords you enjoy, with the Aquarius, there is no need to change them. In my case, this worked swimmingly with my Cardas and Nordost power cords already on hand in room two.

The Aquarius features six outlets in two banks on the rear panel. Two outlets make up the high current bank, more suitable for power amplifiers, and the other four, a lower current bank. IsoTek rates these at 16 and 5 amps respectively. All of the integrated amplifiers auditioned had maximum capacities of about 700 watts current drawn from the AC line and none

experienced any kind of current limiting, or reduction in dynamic range. To be safe, I wouldn't push the Aquarius much further than this. Most of you with a 30-100 watt power amp or integrated will be well served by the Aquarius.

The results

There's not a lot to wax poetic about here, and it takes all of about 30 seconds into the first track of whatever you queue up to hear the effect that the Aquarius makes. You'll be instantly struck by a lower noise floor. Leaving your system at exactly the same volume level before adding the Aquarius illustrates this brilliantly. The minute you fire it back up it feels louder, and that's thanks to the lower noise floor provided by the Aquarius. *(continued)*

FEATURE



FEATURE

Should you track through some of your favorite acoustic tracks, you will notice better clarity and articulation throughout the range. Recordings that seemed densely packed to the point that they were tough to listen to will prove easier to listen to and more relaxed in their presentation.

That's it. And that's all a great power conditioner should do. There are a lot of \$10,000 power conditioners that *can't* do this simple thing. The IsoTek succeeds brilliantly at "doing no harm." Even in the context of a modest system, comprised of a Rega Brio integrated amplifier, Simaudio 260D CD player and a pair of Totem Signature One loudspeakers, (Total system cost, about \$7,000 with cables) the Aquarius offers a component level upgrade. While it is always tough to place a percentage on this kind of thing, I feel the IsoTek makes at least a 100% upgrade. It's as if you stepped up a notch on all three components.

If you aren't feeding your system clean power, you aren't hearing what you've spent your hard earned cash on. The IsoTek Aquarius delivers the goods, and at a price that is approachable for nearly all audio enthusiasts. We are happy to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2017. ●

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“GoldenEar’s New Triton Reference Redefines Ultra High-End Performance and Value!”

CES 2017: All four Absolute Sound writers (N. Gader, R. Harley, J. Mullins and J. Valin) honored Triton Reference as “Best Sound (for the money)”!

“The Triton Reference presents a serious challenge to speakers in the multi \$10K range”

— Robert Deutsch, *Stereophile*

GoldenEar’s Triton One is one of the best selling high-end loudspeakers ever, consistently thrilling listeners and reviewers alike and winning an enviable and unmatched collection of the industry’s most prestigious awards, including “Loudspeaker-of-the-Year” and “Product-of-the-Year” from key publications all around the world.

Clearly, we knew that the One would be a very hard act to follow. There was a spirited discussion within our product development group about an all-out assault on the ultimate, cost-no-object, state-of-the-art, to produce a six-figure loudspeaker to do battle with the most esoteric and expensive loudspeakers on the planet. However, after much soul-searching, rational minds won out, and the decision was made to create a new GoldenEar flagship, positioned above the Triton One (of course still current and available), that would joust with the best, but still stick to our trademarked slogan, “We Make High-End Affordable.” We are pleased and proud to introduce the new Triton Reference. The Reference has begun gathering its own collection of honors, winning the prestigious and coveted CES Innovations Design and Engineering Award, Digital Trends Best Home Audio Tech at CES, HD GURU Best High Fidelity Loudspeaker at CES and What HiFi Stars of CES!

“Undeniably stellar ... Yes, it does deliver the sort of performance previously delivered only by cost-no-object speakers.” — Dennis Burger, *Home Theater Review*

The Triton Reference is an evolution of everything that we have achieved with the Triton One, but taken to a stunning new level of sonic performance and sophisticated visual design. All the components in the T Ref: including larger, more powerful, active sub-bass drivers with huge “Focused Field” magnet structures, upper-bass/midrange drivers with “Focused Field” magnet structures, and High-Velocity Folded Ribbon tweeter with 50% more rare earth neodymium magnet material, are brand new, and have been specifically developed for use in the Reference. The powerful 1800 watt subwoofer amplifier, with level control to fine tune the bass to your room, and 56-bit DSP control unit are a significant evolution of those in the Triton One and our SuperSubs.

There are a myriad of other significant upgrades and refinements, including: new internal wiring with a specially developed twist, further development of our signature balanced crossover including film capacitors bridged across the high-pass section on the upper-

bass/midrange drivers, a unique proprietary mix of long-fiber lamb's wool and Dacron for more effective internal damping, intensive work with a high-resolution accelerometer to determine the most effective implementation of complex internal bracing, a 3/32" thick steel plate built into the mediate base to further stiffen it for increased stability, new stainless steel floor spikes and cups, all of which results in higher resolution of subtle details ... and the list goes on and on.

“GoldenEar is taking on the stratospherically priced five figure super-systems that define high-end audio.”

— Mark Henninger, *AVS*

Visually, the Reference offers a strikingly beautiful upgrade to the classic Triton styling, with a gorgeous hand-rubbed piano gloss-black lacquer finished one-piece monocoque cabinet. Sleek, statuesque and refined, the Reference is simply an elegantly gorgeous statement piece that will excite listeners with its dynamic visual presence, as well as its extraordinary sonic performance.


Sonically, the Reference has been engineered to perform with a dramatic and authoritative voice, comparable to speakers that sell for ten and more times its surprisingly affordable price. T Refs completely disappear, with superb three-dimensional imaging that will open up your room, stretching from wall to wall and beyond, and depth that makes the wall behind them seem to vanish. The astonishing bass is rock-solid, with low-frequency performance that is tight, quick, highly impactful and musical with extension flat to 20Hz and below. Another GoldenEar signature is a silky smooth high end that extends to 35 kHz with a lifelike sheen but no trace of fatiguing hardness, sibilance or stridency so common with lesser tweeters. Tremendous time and energy has been put into the voicing of the speaker and the seamless blending of the drivers, for unmatched musicality with all types of music, and home theater perfection. Rarely do speakers excel at both, but with their world-class neutrality, the Reference absolutely does. A special bonus is the Reference's extremely high 93.25 dB sensitivity, which gives them tremendous dynamic range and allows use with almost any high-quality amplifier. You must experience T Ref for yourself!

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Four Inertially-Balanced 10-1/4" x 9-1/2" Quadratic Planar Infrasonic Radiators

Two on Each Side of Cabinet

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1800-Watt DSP-Controlled Class D Digital Amplifier with Programmable Logic Device Based State Machine

Elegantly Sleek Piano Gloss Black Lacquer Finish Cabinet

Massive 3/32" Thick Steel Plate Built Into the Bass for Exceptional Structural Rigidity

Triton Reference
\$4249 ea.

Mini Weinermobile

www.oscarmayer.com

Though our publisher has a major affection for fine cars, the Oscar Mayer Weinermobile has been an object of desire for many years, just ask our art director. But where do you park the damn thing? Most CC&Rs seem to have a “no weinermobile” clause, so unless you have RV parking, you won’t be able to put it anywhere.

Now, with a new fleet of smaller weinermobiles, based on the Mini Cooper S, there’s hope. And, Oscar Mayer is looking for six new weinermobile drivers, so who knows? You might be the lucky one to inherit one of these babies.



PASS



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- Pass Labs Sound
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tone style

Twist + World Charging Station

www.oneadaptr.com \$44.95

Those of you on the go constantly, especially those that are continent hopping know how precious luggage space is. Being Apple-centric makes it somewhat more different because you need a different charger for your laptop, iPhone, iPad, etc etc. Nothing is more frustrating than being in the middle of nowhere and the right adaptor is out of sight.

Thanks to the Twist +, all you need to bring is the adaptor half of your laptop charger, sans power cord or plug in, a couple of lightning to USB cables and your worries are over. With a 4-amp capacity and four individual USB ports, you should be able to keep everything fully charged and require only one outlet to do it.

Best of all, the you merely rotate the plug (hence the name) to get a US plug, or one of two 240v plugs that should work in the UK and most European countries and Japan. (w/100v service, of course) Available in white or black, this has to be the handiest device we've encountered to keep this all together tidily.





Target Record Crate

www.target.com \$16

There are a number of great, retro-sque replicas of the record store crates that some of us purchased back in the 70s for a few bucks, but now all seem to be about \$100 each. Of course they are far more sturdy than the ones we brought back from Peaches, and most are infinitely stackable, where the old school versions were woefully inadequate.

Yet, sometimes you just need a catch all bin for loose LPs and the \$16 Target crate is perfect. With no finish to speak of, a little bit of handiwork can spruce it up even further. Or for those of you just starting your vinyl journey, that want to keep your 40 albums off the floor and out of harms (or the cat's) way, this can be your ticket to ride.

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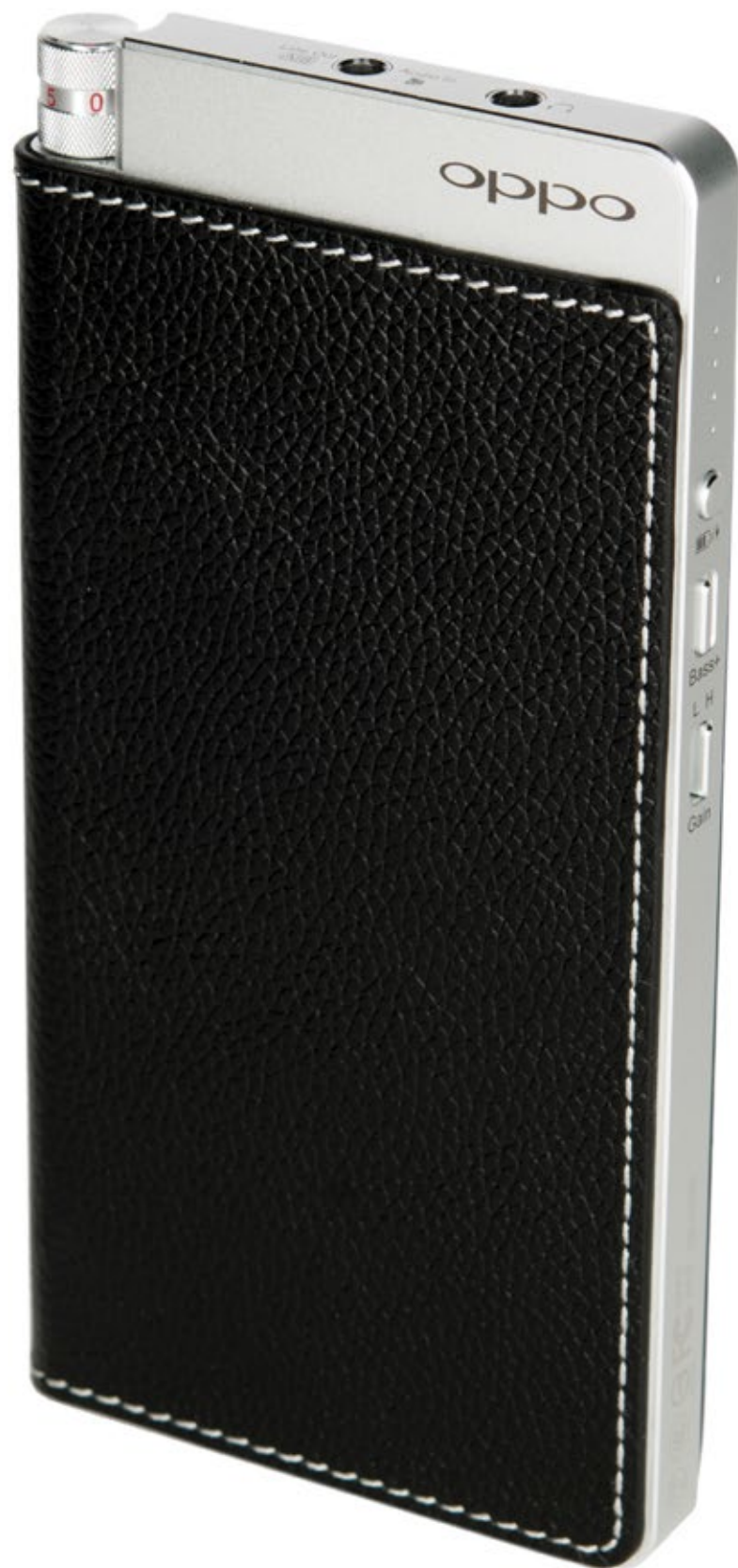


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OPPO Digital, Inc. | www.oppodigital.com | Menlo Park, CA

TONE STYLE

The 28" Blackstone Grill

www.theblackstonegrill.com \$169

Brought to our attention by master cook Dan D'Agostino (yeah, THAT one), the Blackstone Grill, also available in 36" and 17" sizes, this outdoor cooktop, powered by propane is perfect for nearly anything. D'Agostino says "you can even make a pretty damn good steak on it."

A little assembly is required, connect your propane tank and spend about four hours seasoning this baby and you're ready to rock. Hash browns have never tasted better and there's just something great about making breakfast in the great outdoors. Keeps the smell out of the kitchen too!



Phillips Hue Lighting System

www2.meethue.com apx \$150

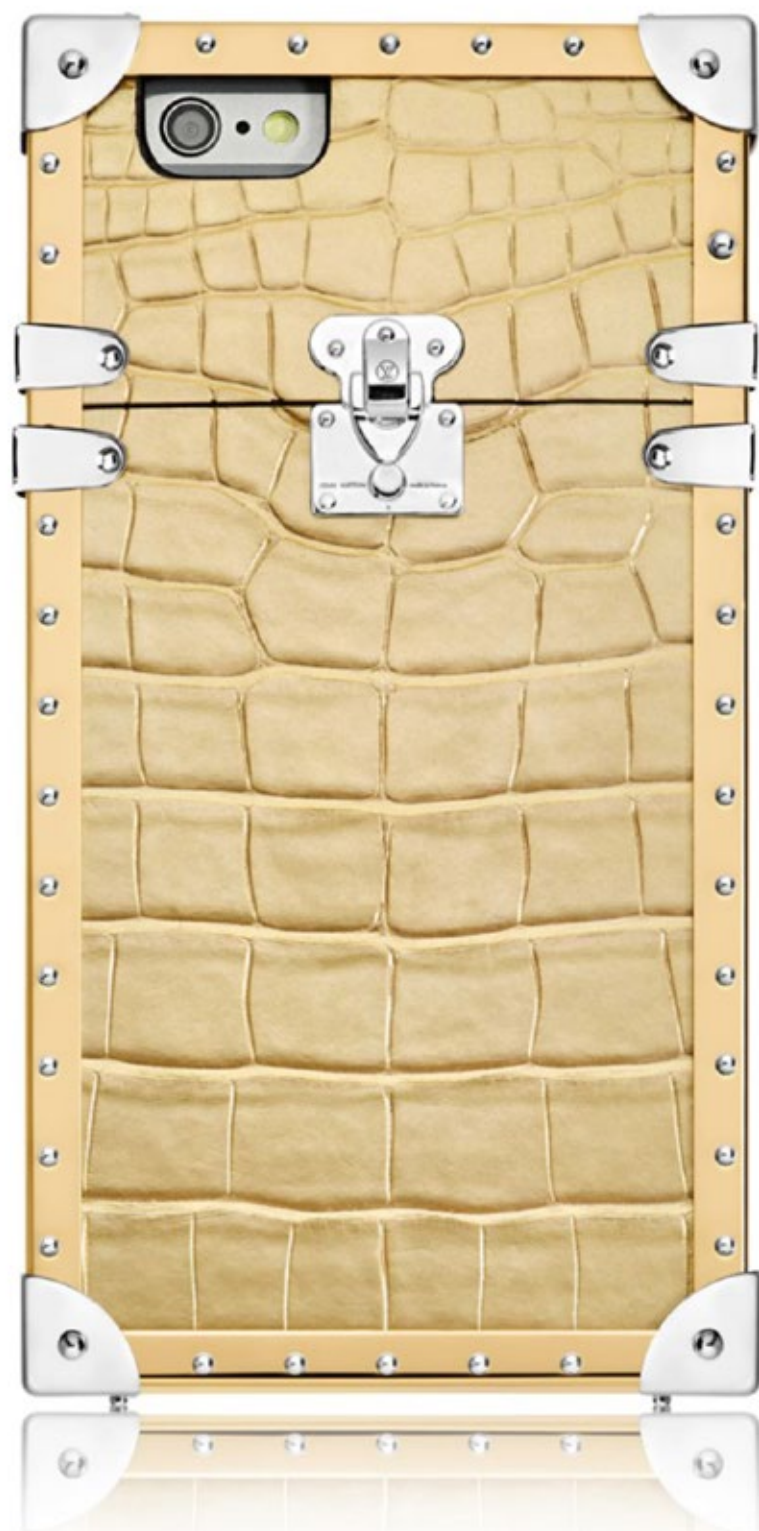
Next to music, light is another big mood modulator. The Hue system combines a plethora of different free standing light fixtures, light strips and light bulbs that can be installed in existing sockets to create a myriad of different effects. Some functions can be controlled by HUE switches, or from your iPhone/iPad/Android device. This is the best way to go.

Regardless of what the drone at Best Buy tells you, you need the bridge along with the starter kit, so just the basics will set you back about \$200. And this merely controls some LED bulbs (25,000-hour life span) with a white color balance. Beyond that there are “white ambiance” bulbs that go from cool blue to warm yellow and “white and color ambience” bulbs that offer a full spectrum of colors. The white bulbs are about \$20 each, white ambiance about \$30 and the super coolio full spectrum bulbs about \$50 each. No matter what the realm, more fun equals more money!

Once the bridge is connected to your wireless router, all the lighting in your home can be controlled with your phone. Customization is infinite and you can set each room with a specific mood, as well as vary the color and intensity of each light that you’ve programmed on the fly as well. iPhone users will love being able to tell Siri to dim the light next to the bed to 23%. It’s almost as good as being on the Enterprise!

Last, but not least, you can mate your Hue system to your music or HT system, having your lights sync up with the music or soundtrack. Can anybody say Saturday Night Fever? Phillips’ Hue system is big on fun and easy to configure.





Louis Vuitton iPhone 7 Case

www.louisvuitton.com \$1,250

You might freak out about a \$1,250 iPhone case, but hey – we live in a world of \$50,000 speaker cables so why not? And you don't want your lady friend already in possession of a gaggle of LV stuff to not have a matching iPhone case do you? Besides, this is just the kind of trinket that will help your special friend to forget you just dropped \$10k on a phono cartridge or a couple of rare Pink Floyd mono LPs.



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Why does anyone start a loudspeaker company?

Good question. Ignoring the obvious answer (because they're nuts), it might just be because they felt compelled to.

Dali's first designs were originally created for a Danish hifi store. This retailer wasn't entirely happy with the loudspeakers then available, so they decided to build their own.

You're thinking what does a retailer know about manufacturing, right?

Well, actually, quite a lot as it turns out.

Three decades later, Dali are one of the world's leading loudspeaker manufacturers, with a list of international awards the envy of their industry, including several from EISA (The European Imaging and Sound Association), voted for by expert journalists from over 20 countries.

More importantly, European music lovers are huge fans too, which explains why Dali has sold over a million pairs of loudspeakers to date.

Dali control every stage of the design & production process, while drivers, crossovers and the cabinets themselves are engineered in-house.

At Dali the company motto states, 'In admiration of music.'

And now you can discover why we think you'll be hearing a lot more about Dali at one of our network of carefully selected dealers.



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Nintendo NES Classic

www.nintendo.com \$59.95

On November 11, Nintendo will launch a new, smaller version of the original 8-bit gaming system that got many of us started on this craze. Scaled down to palm size, with an adaptor for HDMI, you can plug it into your flat screen or projector and play Donkey Kong like you never could back in the day. Get on the list!



FEATURE



FEATURE

PRO-JECT SPEAKER BOX 5

By Mark Marcantonio

A pivotal element of the college experience is the dorm room stereo system. Back in the early 1980s, many male students brought their hi-fi system to school, carrying as much or more weight in the status department than even a car. Today's offerings make me envious. Back then I had a 40lb Harman/Kardon receiver, JVC cassette deck, Pioneer turntable, and 35lb each Polk speakers, along with a 40lb solid oak stereo cabinet my grandfather made for me. While it all was great, it was a serious undertaking to haul upstairs to my dorm or apartment. And, costly in beers to willing helpers. Today, music loving students have it easy, with class D amplifiers, USB stick DACs, and desktop speakers, setting up the dorm system requires less muscle to move and fewer beers to facilitate.

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FEATURE

The key to any system is speakers, and let's face it 35 years ago in the budget world small speaker choices were few, but time has changed the landscape. There are a plethora of small speakers, powered and unpowered that deliver spectacular sound, which leads us to the \$299/pair Pro-Ject Speaker Box 5 speakers you see here. Yes, that's the same manufacturer that you might know better for their turntables. The Box 5 speakers are also available in gloss red or black in addition to the gloss white of our review pair.

Up and running straight away

Right out of the box the Speaker Box 5's sound tight. Two days of constant playback smooths both drivers and aids the woofer/tweeter integration as well. The vocal track in Imagine Dragon's "Whatever It Takes" went from constricted and two dimensional at first listen to fast and clear two days later. A similar experience is achieved with the horns on Blood, Sweat and Tears self-titled album. Don't judge these little speakers until you get about 50 hours of playback time on the clock. Your patience will be rewarded.

Lorde's new release Melodrama is heavily layered with multiple dimensions of sonic texture. The fast pulse beat of "Louvre" stays clear of Lorde's vocals, always holding a strong front and center presence throughout the track. The overall voice of the Speaker Box 5 stays consistent from a small room to a large one so that they will be a great partner going from your dorm room to your first apartment. *(continued)*



FEATURE

The best performance came from placing the speakers out from the back wall about 18 inches, with six feet of separation on 24-inch stands with solid stands. Any further apart collapses the stereo image, but as always, experimentation is welcome, and these are small enough speakers to shift quickly.

In a small office or desktop environment, the rear ported cabinets do not render the speakers unusable, but you might notice a slight lack of bass extension when placed right up against the wall. They are remarkably easy to integrate into any listening environment. The Speaker Box 5s are equally easy to drive. Of course, they are a snap with the 25 watt per channel MaiA integrated amplifier we've reviewed here, and we've achieved excellent results with some other modest powered integrations as well.

Pressurizing the room with Adele's vocal canon separates the pretenders from the contenders in speaker worthiness. While the albums 19 and 21 will never win an audiophile award, they do show the limits of lesser speakers. At reasonable levels, the Speaker Box 5s pass this torture test, though they can't play as loud as you'd expect from a large floor standing model. Slowing down the pace, her soft presentation in "Melt My Heart To Stone" flows through the Pro-Ject speakers with



FEATURE

enough tonal saturation to convey her performance convincingly. The bass line in her classic "Rolling In The Deep" manages to have enough punch and tonality without a pumped up mid bass – a trick often used by budget speaker manufacturers to try and convince the end user that there is an extra dose. Hats off to Pro-Ject for playing it straight.

If there is one genre the Speaker Box 5's stand out no matter the artist, it's country music. The high soprano, airy vocals of Alison Krauss' "You're Just A Country Boy" and matching acoustic guitar are resolved at a quality level well above what you might expect from a \$299 pair of speakers. From Jason Isbell's haunting "Tupelo", to the honky-tonk bar musings of RaeLynn's "Love Triangle", these monitors deliver an open and honest sound worthy of the musical format.

Once in a while, the old axiom of big surprises come in small packages is true. The Speaker Box 5 monitors deliver the basics in spades, while avoiding the sparkles and boom that draws attention at first, then dread in short order. Whether you're setting up your first system for college, or a secondary system the Project Speaker Box 5 is a wonderful, budget surprise. ●

www.sumikoaudio.net

PREVIEW

MartinLogan Classic ESL 9

\$6,495/pair
www.martinlogan.com

Our publisher has had a relationship with MartinLogan speakers that goes all the way back to the original CLS and one of their first hybrid products, the Aerius. We've enjoyed watching the progress of their hybrid speakers and they get better every generation.

The Classic ESL 9 has a relatively small footprint, yet packs all the latest ML ESL technology with a pair of 8-inch powered woofers; one downward firing and one front firing, allowing bass response down to 34hz. We are looking forward to the audition.



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—Bob Ludwig, Gateway Mastering Studios



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Performance-Driven Value In A World of Huge Prices. Is there such a thing as an \$1,249/pr. super speaker? \$13,900/pr.? What about \$62,000/pr.? What makes a super speaker? When a speaker at any price point is loaded with so much more technology and sounds that much better, it's a *real super speaker*.

"Better than some speakers I've heard that cost 20 times as much."
—Jeff Dorgay, TONEAudio

Patented Aerodynamic "Reflection-Free" Midrange Driver Prevents Back Wave Distortion from Reaching Listener's Ears In Time w/ Music

Vandersteen Audio today offers a remarkable line of high-end super speakers in which each model shatters all expectations of what's possible anywhere near its price point. Because Richard Vandersteen has always spent money on his speakers where it counts- on the drivers and crossovers that carry the delicate music signal- our entry-level floorstander the \$1,249/pr. 1Ci routinely **bullies bigger speakers costing two or three times as much.**

"...one of the biggest high-end speaker bargains out there..."
—Roy Gregory, The Audio Beat

The **Treo** (\$6,900/pr.) is a modern-day version of the Model 2 that's **beautiful to look at**, but **over-engineered** to be as silent as the enclosures of today's most exotic super speakers regardless of cost.

"My new reference speakers." —Anthony Cordesman, The Absolute Sound

The **Model 5A Carbon** at \$29,900/pr. features an advanced carbon tweeter and the patented Perfect-Piston™ carbon midrange from the Model Seven Mk II, plus **BIG powered bass with a 400-watt powered subwoofer with 11-band room EQ.**

"Unbeatable powered bass." —Michael Fremer, Stereophile

Advanced Cabinet-Within-A-Cabinet Construction Renders Enclosure As Inert & Sonically Invisible As Exotic Speakers Costing 10X More

The **Model Seven Mk II** (\$62,000/pr.) is the ultimate expression of Richard Vandersteen's design philosophies, a radically advanced take on long held design tenets. While other expensive speakers are seemingly "redesigned" every couple of years to turn new sales, the Seven has been in production continually since 2009 and updated just once. Model Seven owners can upgrade to Mk II status so **our best customers aren't left behind.** The Seven's legacy of Best of Show awards over the years is legend, and the Mk II earned four such designations in its first year. Yes, a super speaker in every sense of the word, designed and built to last.

Buy Vandersteen, Leave "Upgrade-Itis" Behind. When all of the information from the amplifier is faithfully retrieved, especially in the crucial time domain, you hear that something is missing. That something is the distortion of the original signal that leads to the inevitable feeling audiophiles experience called "upgrade-itis." Yes, moving up the Vandersteen

Dual 8," 300-Watt Powered Subwoofers w/11-Band Room EQ In Each Speaker For Perfect Bass in Virtually Any Room

line always offers more performance and ever greater musical pleasure, as will any other true upgrade to your system. But owning Vandersteens and upgrading **because you love the way your music sounds** is so much better than swapping out your gear because you *can't stand* the way your music sounds.

Vandersteen's Quatro Wood CT at \$13,900/pr. is a real-world super speaker. It's loaded with Vandersteen's most meaningful technologies including powered bass with room EQ for "perfect bass in virtually any room," Vandersteen's patented aerodynamic midrange, a naturally airy Carbon Tweeter and much more. A ton of speaker!

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PREVIEW



Rotel RAP-1580 Surround Sound Receiver

\$3,800 www.rotel.com/hometheater

Rotel has always been known for combining major value and high performance. Continuing our search for one box awesomeness, the new 1580 offers full Dolby Atmos 7.1.4 functionality and 7 channels delivering 100 watts of class AB power, no chip amps here. 8 HDMI 2.0a inputs are all capable of 4k video and there's even a MM phono input. 6 premium Wolfson DACs handle whatever music inputs you care to throw at it as well.

Though not as heavy as the McIntosh

on the previous page (51 pounds) the RAP-1580 looks like a much more expensive component with the cover removed, featuring a custom power transformer and premium parts throughout. While the RAP-1580 does not feature any kind of digital room correction, it does offer up a 10-band parametric EQ to help shape the sonic environment of your multichannel system.

We'll be looking at this one in a very in-depth review shortly.

PREVIEW



PREVIEW

McIntosh MA9000 Integrated Amplifier

\$10,995 www.mcintoshlabs.com

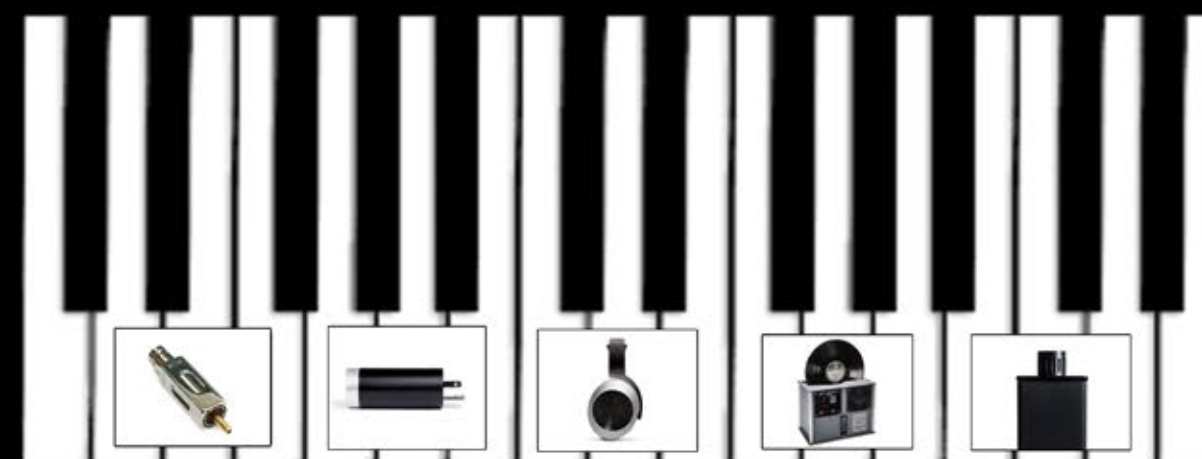
This 101-pound monster from McIntosh combines all the stuff you love about Mac (big blue meters, beefy casework, major input and output flexibility, legendary reliability) and then some. This massive amplifier features an eight-band equalizer right up front along with a great headphone amplifier, for when the 300 watts per channel will wake up the rest of your household. Just make sure you've got a strong friend to help you unbox it and a strong shelf to place it on.

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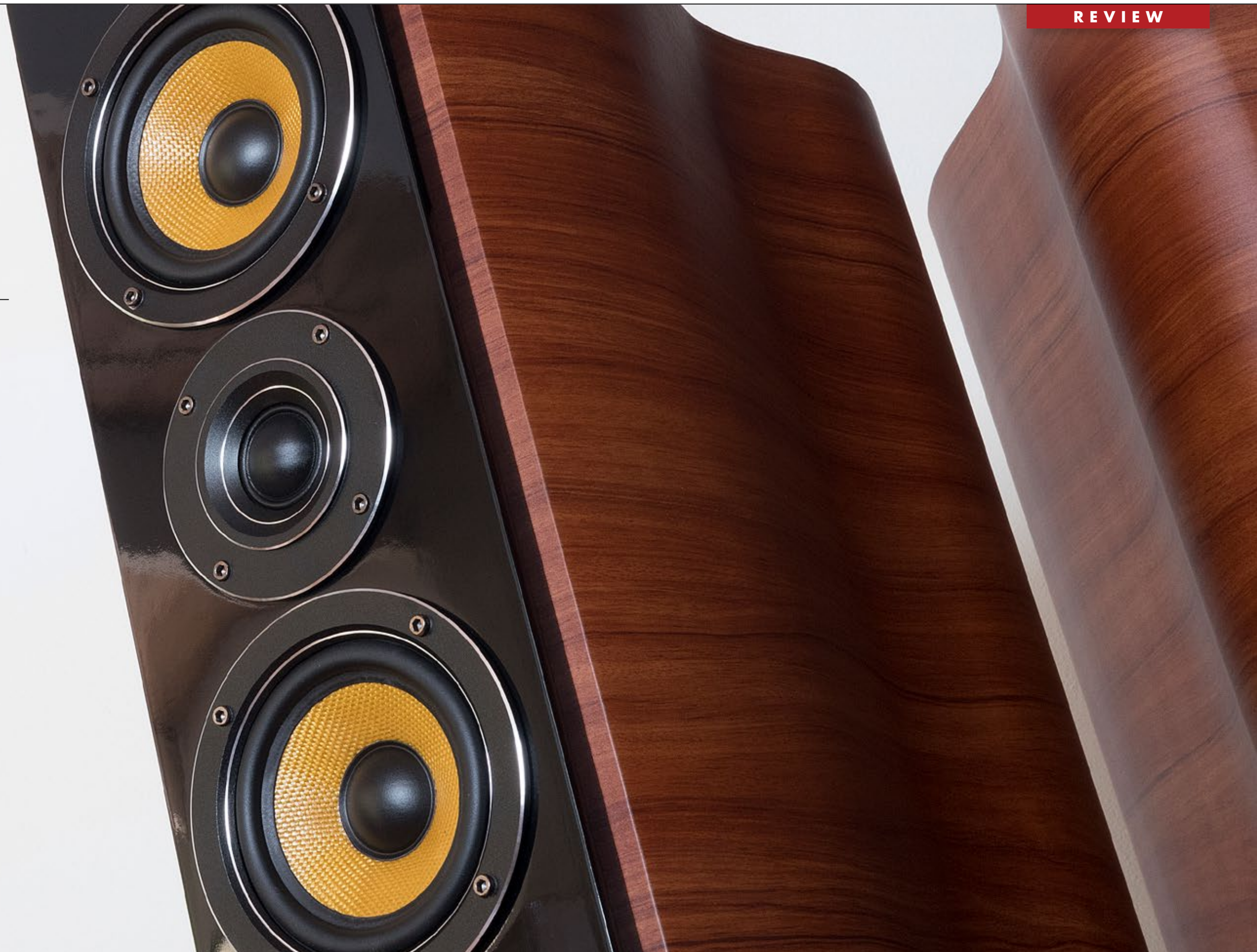
Coincident Dynamite Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

New ideas. It's what keeps the audio world fresh and interesting to hobbyists, not to mention various forum threads entertaining. With speakers, due to the limited parts, new designs are few and far between. Fortunately, I've been able to spend time listening to a truly unique cabinet design, the Coincident Dynamite.

In audio circles, Coincident founder Israel Blume is known to be driven, to say the least when it comes to cabinet design. Standing waves and resonances are his enemy. Over the years, each of his designs have attacked and cornered the dual evils based on his patented approach. The resonances are tuned to a neutral 350hz, whereby physics kicks in and the heat created is dissipated. For the listener, it boils down to music free of artificial frequencies.

To deny those pesky axial, tangential, and oblique standing waves some serious engineering design is needed. In accomplishing this, Blume earned a patent for "asymmetrical wall enclosure". Putting it simply, its way more involved than just using MDF and attaching a few braces. It requires eliminating out of phase waves, a skill akin to threading the needle while off road driving in the Rockies.





Of course the Dynamite takes that challenge to a whole new level with its wave cabin shape. By using a CNC woodcutting machine on glued MDF boards, the exterior waves are created. Thru computer modeling the exact bracing for strength and sonic wave elimination are put in place. In order to meet the \$2,999/pair price the CNC work is done outside North America. Everything else in the assembly process takes place in Ontario, Canada.

A Quick Double Take, eh?

The wave side panels may cause a double take with the eyes on first look, but they quickly won me over. Visually, the wave breaks up the long sidewall of the deep rectangular speaker design. The vinyl laminate is high quality and its low luster finish is the best imitation I've seen on speakers. The black front face and top wave of the 46" tall Dynamite's are fresh as well. The black base is an inch wider creating a more stable foundation. (Those of you with small children or an angry vacuumer may want consider creating some additional type of boundary, a little extra care is advised.) Finally, rounded spiked feet can be attached. Take some time during the first few weeks and decide for yourself if the feet are needed.

Tunes with lower mid and bass frequencies quickly reveal the brilliance in the cabinet

design. Natural sound is never more true than when hearing jazz ensembles on the Dynamite's. Listening to Fourplay's "Bali Run" the string bass along with the bass drum and other percussion is ridiculously clean. The slam was so detailed a visitor thought that a subwoofer lurking in the corner was connected – I had to verify it was not before he would believe me. The same group's track "101 Eastbound" reveals the same characteristics for the upper mids and highs. The Dynamite's 1" soft dome tweeter is lightning fast, like a ribbon or Heil driver. All other Coincident speakers use the Heil design, and this may explain similarity of the final voicing.

Producing the music comes from a D'Apollito MTM orientation using a pair of 5.25" Kevlar drivers in bumblebee yellow, with the soft dome tweeter as a separator. All three are set near the top of the front face. Each Dynamite also houses an 8" side-firing woofer that brings the speakers overall bass reach down to 32Hz. The extra push provided by these side firing woofers brings additional detail to deep bass notes. Around back near the bottom are the bass port and a single set of 5-way binding posts. The amount of LF energy produced by such a compact speaker is nothing short of stunning. *(continued)*

Cranking up The Who's "The Real Me" fleshes out John Entwistle's thundering bass notes with delicious detail whether in my 9x12 foot man cave or 15x19 foot living room. The Dynamite's have no problem pressurizing a room at moderate listening levels. Keith Moon's manic drumming with its rolling from one channel to the other flows without jumping into the listeners face, all the while keeping the synthesizer track and vocals placed solidly in the mix.

Care in the Setup

Getting the Dynamite's to deliver such top to bottom balance requires a bit of positioning time. Start with the Cardas website and their golden triangle configuration. Much like the Goldenear Triton series in my listening room, pushing the speakers out a foot wider than the textbook triangle proved a great place to start, then listen and fine tune. A few rounds had the Dynamites just 16" from the sidewalls and 36" from the back wall with a slight toe-in. *(continued)*



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Aurender App Aurender comes with a dedicated Aurender Conductor App, hailed by reviewers worldwide, which has been specially tuned for performance and convenience. The Aurender iPad and Android app has been developed with a huge music database in mind and exceptionally fast browsing/searching of your favorite music. It's very intuitive and easy to use.

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STOP Fake Auto Bias

Most music lovers crave a tube amplifier but are overwhelmed by the task of biasing output tubes. **So they buy an amp they think is “auto bias”** when most are actually **cathode bias**: An inexpensive design usually found in **budget guitar amps**. Cathode-bias amps are **cheaper to build**, plus they **lose about 30% of the tube’s power** as heat. Many run in **Class A**, which means **shorter tube life**.



In 2003, PrimaLuna engineers rocked the audio world with the first ever truly **Adaptive AutoBias** system which not only **eliminates biasing**, but **compensates for aging tubes**. Adaptive AutoBias is **not in the signal path** and **dramatically improves sound quality by lowering distortion over 50%**.

In 2009, we went even further. If Adaptive AutoBias senses a tube failure, it tells the user which one with a **Bad Tube Indicator LED** and puts the amplifier into Protection Mode. **No guesswork, blown resistors, trips to the shop, or to UPS**. True plug and play. Plus, Adaptive AutoBias enables users to switch between **EL34** and **6550, KT88, KT120**, or even **KT150** tubes.... **it’s like Five Amps in One!**

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REVIEW

With an sensitivity of 90db at 8 Ohms, the Dynamites are ridiculously easy to drive. More impressive is that they are truly amplifier-neutral. From 150wpc of the Simaudio i7, to 30wpc of vintage Harman/Kardon 730, to 35wpc of tube love, and 150wpc of class D Peachtree, the Dynamite’s found musical nirvana. The only caveat to be made is that a good quality DAC in combo with the amplifier really moves the needle. The Benchmark DAC3 HGR mated exquisitely with the Dynamites, adding a whole new layer of sonic detail. Our publisher reports excellent results with Coincident’s own Dynamo amplifier producing 8 watts per channel of SET goodness.

Moving into the symphonic genre, the 24/96 recording of Trio Sonnerie’s work of “La Gamma”, the strings are forward, naturally sharp and detailed without any harsh artifacts. Between the speakers all the instruments carve a dedicated placement. The Dynamite’s ability to create such a deep soundstage between the speakers is first-rate. The vertical soundstage in Trevor Pinnock’s “Bruckner Symphonies No. 2 in C Minor” climbed a good two feet above the speakers. The vibrancy of the performance is a lean-in experience.

Digging deep into vinyl with Bonnie Raitt’s classic “Nick of Time”, the lead rhythm of the bass comes forward, but doesn’t overpower, signaling the work of a good cabinet/woofer combination. The synthesizer comes off as a mellow xylophone sound, something I’ve never connected before, even with far more expensive speakers. “Woman In Chains” from Tears For Fears, there is a triple vocal chorus that I haven’t consciously heard except with the Harbeth Compact 7es3. Each performer’s voice is distinct yet blends nicely with the others. *(continued)*

A real treat for a \$3K pair of speakers is how full and nicely resolved horns sound. The level of smoothness is palpable whether it's Blood, Sweat and Tears, Chicago or the Commodores. The accordion in Dave Grusin's "Coyote Angel" has an ethereal pleasantness that one rarely connects to the hand-held organ. Normally 3-5 minutes is all I can take, but the Dynamite's push that number well down the time clock. From Grusin, to Krall, to Winston, the piano is tonally honest. Coloration and other embellishments are missing. Decay of notes, a key judge of speaker performance was smooth as silk.

The one limitation of the Dynamite's is that with rare exception the speakers kept the music between the cabinets. Maybe it's due to the side-firing woofers, but unless you've had experience with such a wide-open speaker you won't miss it. Usually at this price point there are a small handful of compromises. Having just one makes these speakers a bargain.

Conclusion

The Coincident Dynamite is a speaker that fits its name. It offers up a value to performance level that is hard to match. With a design rooted in good science and first-rate engineering, the Dynamite's exceed their price by a fair distance. From its detailed bass to its clear, easy high frequencies, the Coincident Dynamite speakers give the listener a knockout experience. Bestowing an Exceptional Value Award on these speakers is an easy decision to make.



Additional Listening —Jeff Dorgay

Mr. Blume is without question one of high end audio's high performance (at a very reasonable price) champions. Squirming a bit when I unpacked them and saw the side firing woofers, I'm happy to report they are much easier to set up than a few other models I've used with this configuration.

Thanks to keeping production costs down, margins a bit tighter than the industry norm and selling direct, Coincident offers a speaker that would cost you considerably more than expected. The level of musical detail that they offer for \$3k is incredible. Using them with their own Dynamo amplifier proves excellent, but these speakers were not out of place with my \$20,000 Nagra (20wpc) 300i amplifier, or the \$7,500 Esoteric F-07 integrated that has become a personal favorite. Amplifier choice will depend on your musical taste, room size and just how loud you need to listen.

The Dynamites tick all the boxes and with a much broader stroke than you would expect for the price. Dynamics are there in spades, tonality is very neutral and I experienced a bit wider soundstage than Mark, having a somewhat larger room to spread them out in. Should you be somewhat limited in room size, I'd even suggest corner placement for a bit deeper soundstage – something that always served me well with my Penaudio Serenades.

At the end of the day, I defy you to find a more musically engaging speaker for \$3k a pair. Well done Coincident! ●

Coincident Dynamite Speakers

MSRP: \$2,995

MANUFACTURER

Coincident Speaker Technology

CONTACT

www.coincidentspeakers.com

PERIPHERALS

Amplification

Simaudio i7 integrated amp, Peachtree nova150 integrated amp, Vista Audio i34 integrated tube amp

Digital Source

Benchmark DAC3 HGC, Simaudio 300D DAC, Analog SourceRega RP1 w/Ortofon Super OM40, Simaudio LP 5.3 phono preamp

Accessories

Cardas interconnects and cables, Shunyata Venom3 cords

LONG TERM TEST

The Pass XS Pre

By Jeff Dorgay

If the thousands of tracks auditioned during the Pass XS Preamplifier's stay here, Lou Reed's "Vanishing Act" sums it up perfectly. As he sings/speaks, "It must be nice to disappear..." the words to describe the XS Pre appear. It just disappears, calling no attention to itself, perhaps the toughest thing for an audio component to do. Just like buying a car, test driving a premium audio component is usually a shorter first date than you'd like. In the end, it requires a certain leap of faith, and if you blow it, it's going to cost you dearly. Much as I love Pass products, if you decide that the \$38,000 XS Pre isn't for you, there will be a stiff penalty, should you turn it over for something else. Like any other five figure hi-fi component, putting this two-chassis beauty back on the secondary market after a few months of use will be an expensive proposition unless you have an incredibly forgiving dealer, used to you doing this kind of thing on a regular.

XS Preamp





Clear Reflection

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The technology of Clear.*

cardas.com/reflection



REVIEW



The good news is that the above mentioned scenario probably won't happen. I'd even go out on a limb to bet about 100 to 1 odds that it won't. I've been using the XS Pre for over a year now, and I'll do my best at describing it so that you won't make a misstep.

First, and most importantly, where the Pass XS and XA series amplifiers have an ever so slight tip towards the warm side (which I happen to prefer) of what I'd call neutral tonality, the XS Pre is as close to having a straight up, 12 o'clock, right in the center neutral tonal rendition as I've ever experienced. The only other preamplifier I'd put in this category is the Boul-

der 3010, and to a slightly lesser extent my other reference, the Robert Koda K-10. Either of these preamplifiers cost as much as a gently owned BMW M3, and each is phenomenal performers.

Special and then some

Today there are a lot of incredibly competent preamplifiers, many costing less than the XS Pre and a few costing even more. Now and again, a component is so overwhelmingly good, that it's an express elevator ride to audio heaven. My Conrad Johnson GAT2 is one of those preamplifiers too, but it's got vacuum tubes, and only sports single ended RCA

inputs and outputs so that it won't be everyone's idea of heaven.

The world's finest preamplifiers that I enjoy impart little to no signature of their own to the music, yet they offer a bigger, broader, weightier presentation than a system is capable of without a preamplifier involved. This is a unique bit of magic that I don't completely understand because, in a perfect world, you would think that just going straight from your DAC or phonostage (provided it had a level control) would bring you closer to the music than running everything through another box and set of cables. *(continued)*

Good as the dCS Rossini DAC and Clock combination is on its own, running a pair of Cardas Clear interconnects directly from the dCS pair to the XS300 amplifiers sounds smaller, less focused and pale in comparison to putting the XS Pre in my reference system. How can this be? Especially considering Mr. Pass is the creator of the First Watt amplifiers – champions of the “less is more” approach to circuit design. Inserting the XS Pre in the signal path is not subtle. Again, this preamplifier does not change the tonal character or balance a molecule, yet everything enlarges. Dynamic range increases to the point where transients explode from the speakers where they merely had punch before, and the soundfield created by the system becomes much larger in all three dimensions. The sonic presentation goes from big and satisfying without the XS Pre to being engulfed in a tornado of sound. This effect was observed with every power amplifier connected, from a modest Conrad Johnson MV60SE up to the mighty XS300 monoblocks, so this can’t be a mere “impedance matching” kind of thing.

We’ve had the opportunity to use the XS Preamplifier together with the matching XS300 monoblock amplifiers to excellent result, paired with the XS Phono, making for an unbeatable combination of dynamics, tonality, and ease of use. There truly is nothing I can find fault with this trio. Ok, it’s all pretty heavy. That’s it. Fortunately, the XS Pre only weighs 80 pounds, and it is distributed between two chassis, the power supply, and the actual preamplifier circuitry. The two are connected by the same massive umbilical cords used in the XS Phono and the XS 150/300 power amplifiers. Terminated with Neutrik connectors, these are beefy cables indeed. 100,000 μ f of power supply capacitance per channel only hints at the power reserves available. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

Nelson Pass and his crew have repeatedly said that they build components that they like, above all else. While many know the man with the name that adorns the faceplates as “the man” at Pass Labs, he is the power amp man. Wayne Colburn has designed all the Pass Labs preamplifiers and was given a clean slate (and pretty much a blank check) to design a companion preamplifier for the XS monoblock amplifiers. Rather than bore you with a long list of common audiophile clichés, he has succeeded on every level.

Incredibly versatile

Lovely as the XS Pre is with a full compliment of Pass components, it is equally engaging with every other power amplifier we’ve had here at TONE in the last year or so – single ended or balanced. The XS Pre circuitry is fully balanced, but it features balanced XLR and single ended RCA inputs and outputs.

As a review tool, the XS Pre is without peer. It is effortless in its delivery and consistent in sound quality, providing a similar sonic picture with balanced or single ended connections. Even if you don’t review hifi gear, this kind of flexibility offers a much wider range of options as your system and tastes change. With the XS Pre offering such a neutral rendition, it is a perfect system anchor, letting you mix, match and experiment elsewhere.

Because the XS Pre doesn’t manipulate or alter the tonal character of the music it delivers, the usual list of tracks to describe bass, treble, and imaging are almost irrelevant. Laurie Anderson once said, “Paradise is exactly like where you are right now, only much, much better.” That’s the XS Pre. It’s much, much better. Add the concept of never having to retube, along with the headache that a new set of tubes can cause, makes it a component you can just leave powered up and forget about it. Matter of fact, there is no power switch. *(continued)*



REVIEW

Setup is straightforward, provided you have two extra rack spaces and can separate the two boxes a bit, to keep every possible bit of noise at bay. Once powered up, the XS Pre took about four days to come all the way out of the fog from being fresh out of the box. As with any component, there is a slight bit of stiffness at initial turn on, but it dissipates quickly.

The front panel has a large volume control and a display friendly to read from across the room. Pass provides a simple, efficient aluminum remote that matches the casework of their other products, and this too is easy to use. The volume control has a wide range of operation, so even the most sensitive power amplifiers will have ample volume control range.

A keeper

Ultra high performance has a price, and there are a lot of great preamplifiers in the \$10,000 - \$20,000 range; even Pass makes one. (The XP-30) After living with a number of them, the XS Pre delivers an experience that you can't get for \$20k. That's its justification. If you are looking for the last step up and a final justification, it's worth every penny asked. This may be tough to swallow for some of you in the audience, but you can't have a Ferrari 458 for \$50k either. Like the Ferrari, the XS Pre will take your breath away if you have the room, system, and software to support it. And I'm guessing if you have 38 large, you do.

The Pass XS Pre does its job so effortlessly and so well if it doesn't hit you on the head with the first track you play, just take it out of your system for about 90 sec. It's like someone put the valet key in your Dodge Challenger Hellcat and the horsepower is gone. This is one of the purest hifi experiences I've had in over 15 years of reviewing components. Long term, I have even more enthusiasm for the XS Pre – every day it convinces me how special it is. ●



REVIEW

Pass XS Pre Preamplifier
\$38,000

MANUFACTURER

Pass Laboratories

CONTACT

www.passlabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Acutus Ref SP/SME
V/Lyra Atlas, Grand Prix
Audio Monaco 2.0/Triplanar/Lyra Etna, Brinkmann
Bardo/10.1arm/Koetsu Jade
Platinum

Digital Source

dCS Rossini DAC and Clock,
Gryphon Kalliope

Phonostage

Pass XS Phono

Power Amplifier

Pass XS 300 monos, Pass
XA200.8

Speakers

Gamut RS5i, Focal
Sopra no.3 w/2-REL 212,
MartinLogan Neolith

Cable

Tellurium Q Silver Diamond,
Cardas Clear



A New Paradigm

The Persona 9H

By Jeff Dorgay

The two most frequent comments from fellow audiophiles passing through my listening room lately have been, “Paradigm – REALLY?” and “\$75 grand, minimum.” This Toronto company has been making modestly priced speakers now for decades with major accolades around the world. And Paradigm is a real speaker company. By that I mean they produce nearly everything in house; they have a full engineering staff, an anechoic chamber and they design and build all of their drivers. Paradigm is not a company of cabinet makers cobbling off the shelf bits together by any stretch of the imagination.

REVIEW

Considering how much talent is under that large roof at Paradigm, I've always wondered, "what would these brainiacs come up with if there were no boundaries? I got the answer to that question at last year's CEDIA show when the Persona series was revealed to an enthusiastic audience. Show sound is show sound, but these sleek floor standing speakers bathed in a shiny coat of dark blue metallic wowed everyone in the room. The H in the 9H stands for "hybrid." The 9H has four 8.5-inch woofers (two opposing fired pairs), powered by 1400 watts and reigned in by Anthem Active Room Correction. And they are \$35,000 a pair.

What the hell

You heard right, 35 grand for a pair of Paradigm speakers. And guess what if you were buying this kind of performance from Wilson, YG Acoustics, or Magico, you'd be looking on at \$100k, possibly more. After listening to plenty of six figure speakers from the usual suspects, I'll take the Persona 9Hs any day of the week and take the other 65 to buy a cool car.

As they explained at CEDIA, the entire Persona range starts at \$7,000 per pair – overlapping the current range of Paradigm speakers and goes upwards. Five of the six Persona speakers, which includes a center channel model, is built around a core consisting of a 7-inch beryllium midrange and 1-inch beryllium tweeter. The center channel model uses a 4-inch midrange. As you go up the range, more bass extension is on tap and sensitivity is available, culminating in the top 9H reviewed here. Thanks to the powered woofers in the 9H it has the highest sensitivity of 96db/1 watt (in-room) and can blow you out of the room with 20 watts per channel. *(continued)*



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So why a \$35k pair of speakers from the people that brought us the Atom? Partly because they can, and partly because Paradigm's market research reveals existing customers that have upgraded their systems to the point that they would like a super speaker, but would like to stay in the Paradigm family. Considering Paradigm's legendary customer support, that's easy to see. So the decision was made to pull out all the stops and make the most amazing speaker the engineers could muster. To say they've succeeded brilliantly would be the understatement of my career.

Getting by with a little help

Paradigm's always affable Rob Sample arrived with Chris Sipes to help unload and set up these silver beauties, which weigh in at 190 pounds each, out of their enormous crates. Setup proves straightforward, and like any other powered subwoofer or speaker featuring room correction, Paradigm and I both suggest getting the absolute best sound you can first before engaging ARC. Keep in mind that in the case of the Persona 9H, ARC is only engaged from 400hz on down.

ARC setup is quick and easy. Using the supplied mics and a Windows laptop (Sorry, no Mac version available yet, but you can do the Windows on Mac thing to make it work) the speakers are quickly tuned to your listening environment and optimized for your listening position. Once done and stored in the speakers, you're only a button push away from disengaging ARC. Trust me; you won't.

Though we aren't measurement guys here at TONEAudio, screen shots of Sipes' ARC screens on his laptop show that engaging the ARC system makes for a huge gain in bass extension, smoothness, and

integration that would be tough to achieve otherwise. Considering the amazing results I've seen with ARC in my living room HT system, I suspected this would be a winning combination.

With an impish grin, Sample says "wanna hear some sick bass?" and goes through a series of great EDM tracks that pin me back to the couch. The 300 watt per channel, full class-A Pass Labs XS300 monoblocks are loafing along and provide effortless dynamics, only being called upon to drive the midrange and tweeter. This is absolute overkill at its best. After the Paradigm crew leaves for the day, the new Pass XA200.8 monoblocks are substituted with equally enthralling results. In the weeks to come, ten more amplifiers are auditioned, from a vintage Marantz 2245 receiver all the way back up to the mighty Pass monos. All prove fantastic in their own way.

Keeping with my philosophy of building a system around the speakers and working the rest up, if you were considering a system in the \$50k range, I'd suggest pairing the Persona 9Hs with the best integrated amp and source you could find for another \$10-12K, with a few bucks left for cables. The 9Hs arrive with premium power cords in the crates, so you won't have to stretch far. These speakers are world class, so the sky is the limit as you upgrade the rest of your system. It will only get more involving.

Involving they are

Forget everything you think you know about Paradigm models past. While I've always been a fan of the marque, a few of their other models have been a touch too resolving for my taste, but I prefer everything a bit on the romantic side. *(continued)*

And this is no slight to Paradigm, the \$75k/pair YG's we reviewed a while back have the same characteristics, and I can't even sit in a room with a pair of \$125k/pair Magicos. Personal biases aside, the 9Hs offer a level of clarity, neutrality, and tonal saturation that few speakers at any price do. That's what makes them so exciting; you can fine tune your systems' ultimate voice with the other components. This is also what makes them such a great long term investment, should you decide you want things a bit more tubey sounding, an amplifier change is all you need, similarly if you want to head the other direction, it's a breeze. Besides, who wants to move 190-pound speakers around?

The 9Hs might lure you in with their powerful, weighty, articulate LF response, but I was immediately struck by how far they pull you into whatever recording you think you know well. Much like the experience I had with the Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0 turntable, the 9Hs utter lack of distortion made for numerous 12-hour listening sessions. I didn't want to leave the listening position.

The Ferrari 458 is a super cool car on the racetrack, but it leaves me cold trying to drive one to get a coffee. I've had a parallel experience with super-speakers, while many of them offer a bombastic, loud, five-minute demo, they aren't speakers you can listen to all day, and they are often not speakers that deliver great performance at low to modest volume levels. For this reviewer, low-level performance in addition to balls out performance is what separates the absolute best speakers from the rest of the herd.

Even at very modest listening levels, the Persona 9Hs deliver a highly engaging performance. Swapping the big Pass monos for the 20 watt per channel Nagra 300B power amplifier is absolutely dreamy. Watching the Nagra's power meter, typical conversation level listening was achieved with the power meters bouncing around the .2 watt level. And for someone who likes it a bit warm, those lovely triodes made for an entirely romantic, albeit different presentation than that offered by the Pass amplifiers or the Audio Research REF amps.

Camouflage

The sleek, curvy cabinet of the 9H, barely a foot wide doesn't prepare you for the sheer sound volume that these speakers can produce. While they sound great at low volume, they neither compress nor distort at high volume, and I'm talking high volume. The only caution here is that because the 9Hs play so loud and so distortion free if you have the amplifier power, it might be wise to download a smartphone SPL app and see just what you're listening too, so you don't do any permanent ear damage. OSHA suggests no more than two hours a day of exposure to 100 db and only an hour to 105 db. I was able to hit 105db peaks even with the little Nagra amp, so consider this our public service announcement.

As much fun as the 9Hs are, they might prove an exercise in restraint, just as a 500 or 600 horsepower car might be. These speakers are so engaging, it's so much fun to keep turning the volume up, up, up, until you hurt yourself! *(continued)*



REVIEW

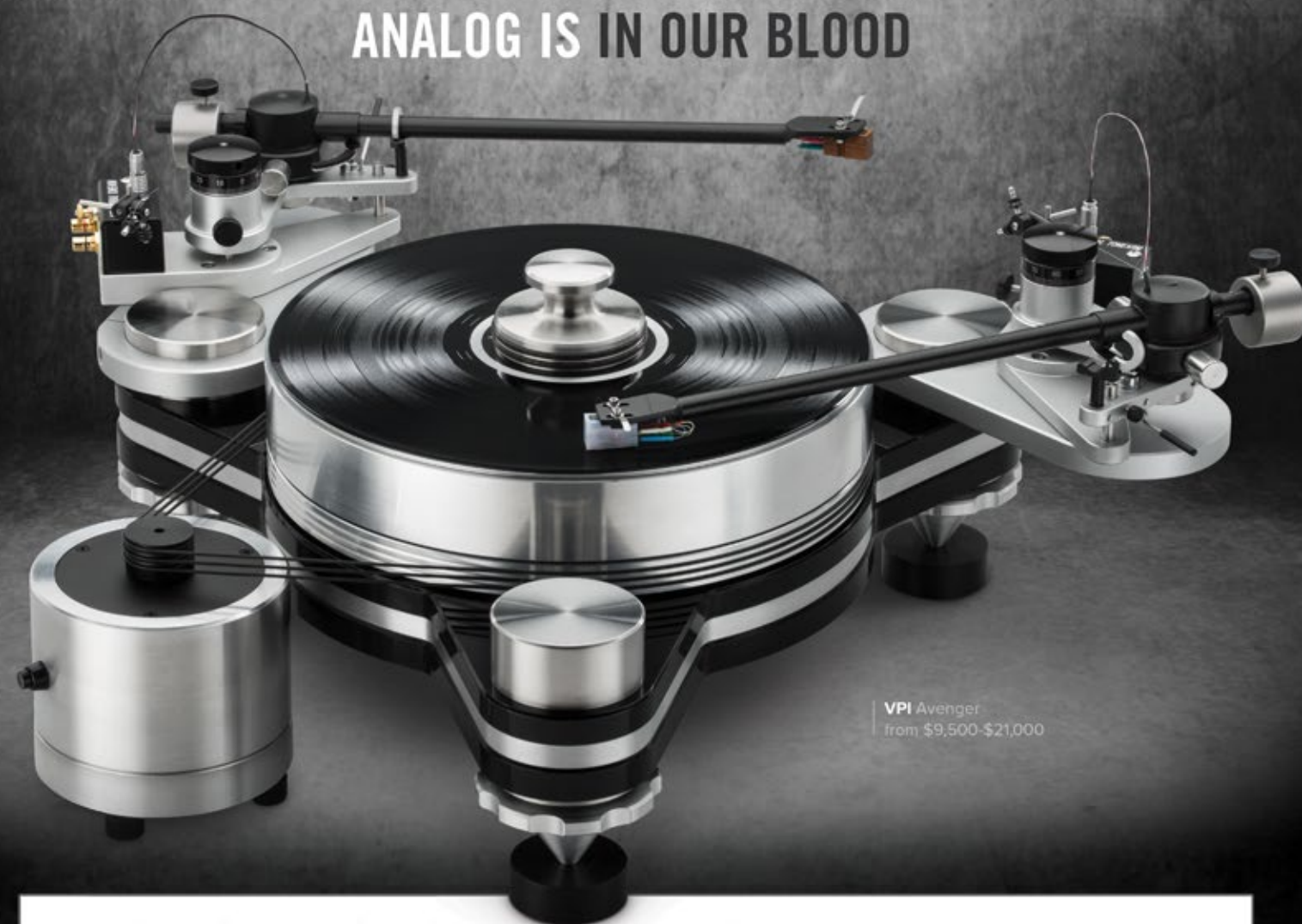
When listening to Jeff Beck's classic live recording from Ronnie Scott's jazz club in the UK, it was easy to achieve a realistic volume level. The 9Hs resolve so much fine detail, you can truly hear the sonic signature of the room in its entirety, and you can place the clapping at the individual tables as if you are about three rows back from the center stage. It's mind boggling.

For someone who has a long standing bias towards ESL and single driver speakers because of the coherence they provide, the 9H is nothing short of a miracle. Even though this is a three way, hybrid speaker system, the integration between powered woofers, midrange and tweeter is amazing. If I didn't know any better, I might just think I was listening to a big pair of ESLs – they are that good. Though I'm a writer, not an engineer, I'm guessing that using beryllium for both the midrange and tweeter makes for a similar sonic signature that might not be possible if different materials are used for each.

An often overlooked aspect of sonic realism is dynamic range. There are a great many small, two way monitors that have an unbelievably real sense of timbre and thanks to their simplistic design can throw an immersive sound-stage in a small room, nearfield. But the 9Hs image like a mini-monitor, have a degree of tonal saturation like the best ESLs and offer the dynamics of a great horn speaker. That's a tough act to match, let alone beat. *(continued)*



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Robert S. Youman

INT-60 Review
Positive-Feedback Issue 79

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REVIEW

Paradigm Persona 9H
\$35,000/pair

MANUFACTURER
Paradigm Electronics, Inc.

CONTACT
www.paradigm.com

PERIPHERALS
Analog Source
Grand Prix Audio Monaco
2.0/triplanar/Lyra Etna

Digital Source
dCS Rossini with Rossini
clock

Phonostage
Pass Labs XSPhono

Preamplifier
Pass Labs XSPre

Power Amplifiers
Pass Labs XS300
monoblocks

Rack
Grand Prix Audio

Cable
Cardas Clear interconnects
and power cords, Tellurium
Q Black Diamond speaker
cables

A major triumph

Paradigm has created one of the world's finest loudspeakers the right way, by applying what they've learned from decades of research, design and manufacturing know how to produce a speaker with no compromises. There's nothing they don't do, nothing they won't play and from what I can deduce, nothing they won't partner with regarding electronics.

I've heard way too many six figure loudspeakers with caveats attached. There are no caveats that apply to the Paradigm Persona 9H speakers, other than the fact that you probably can't lift them without help. That's it. This is a world class, zero compromise loudspeaker for \$35,000/pair. This level of excellence and execution wasn't even available ten years ago, and if Paradigm didn't build everything in house, along with the scale of economies they enjoy, they couldn't achieve this either. It's a great time to be an audiophile.

While I wouldn't normally do this, as we have no more speakers in the queue for review between now and October at this level, I'll let the cat out of the bag a little early. The Paradigm Persona 9H will be our Speaker of the Year for 2017. It's one of the finest speakers I've had the pleasure to listen to at any price. Your only decision now is what color, and they've hinted that custom colors just might be available. ●



Integrating Greatness

The Analog Domain M75D Isis Integrated Amplifier

By Greg Petan

A good integrated amplifier solves multiple issues for the audiophile with less than unlimited space in their listening environment and wallet. They are typically less costly than the separate components they supplant, freeing funds to upgrade the rest of your system, and eliminate the need for extra interconnects and power cords; again saving money and streamlining logistics. Having lived with enormous, floor space devouring, back breaking, shin scraping mono block and stereo amplifiers for decades, the clean, calming, presence of a discrete one box solution is always a welcome change of pace.

The Analog Domain M75D Isis integrated amplifier is the result of Angel Despotov's pursuit to apply his vast knowledge accumulated during the development of his \$200k/pair Apollo monoblocks. Distilling this technology into a lower powered, single chassis design, the \$19,995 Isis brings the magic of Analog Domain to a wider audience.

Despotov sharpened his ears and design chops during his tenure in the pro audio industry, ultimately bringing his unique vision of the finest, most natural sound available to the world of hi-end audio. Despite spending many years building pro studio monitor speakers, his real fascination was always the interaction between amplifier and speaker. Despotov invented the DXD Drive™ output stage, a proprietary means to regulate bias with the use of thermal sensors. The Isis can be configured as a preamp utilizing pre-out connections paired with Analog Domain's matching M75P stereo amp or the amp(s) of your choice. A full function preamp is near completion and Analog domains DAC1 has recently been unleashed too. He is a busy man!

A Distillation

The 250 watt per channel Isis is compact and discreet. Close inspection reveals the unique silicone filled polyurethane rubber-like painted chassis, inspiring awe at the level of craftsmanship and technical mastery here. Beveled contours add just the right amount of complexity to what could otherwise be an over simplified box. The cutaways on the outer edges of the logo embossed top plate offer a



peek-a-boo glimpse of the heat sinks tucked tightly to the sides of the chassis. The front panel displays large numerical readouts with brightness are both adjustable and defeatable.

The large volume control conveniently centered on the front panel offers a wide range of fine volume adjustment. It is controlled with a logarithmic ladder attenuator, utilizing optocoupled MOSFETs, ensuring trouble free long term operation. The ability to finely adjust volume goes a long way to maximize musical impact, making it easy to find the perfect level for any given track – something overlooked by some other manufacturers. At start up, the volume swells from silent to a modest level. You can then take it from there.

Simple aluminum buttons offer the choice of 4 inputs; two single ended RCA and two balanced XLR, each with individual gain trim. The 250 watt per channel into 8 ohms output increases to 400 watts with a 4-ohm load. There is also a headphone input on the fascia.

The rubber textured paint is intriguing and unique to this brand, and while I was nervous about how it would stand up to the rigors of everyday use, it is nearly impervious to the typical minor scratches and scrapes that plague anodized surfaces. I hold my breath every time I even look at my stunningly beautiful (though delicate) Dan D'Agostino stereo preamp and phono preamp, yet the Isis feels as though it could deflect a 9mm shell from close range. *(continued)*



Kudos for innovation in an industry that has gotten a bit comfy with a business as usual approach – this is a luxurious yet practical touch.

The surprises don't stop with the innovative paint finish. Streaming familiar tracks via TIDAL and the Audio Research DAC9/McIntosh MB 50 combo, here for recent review, the Isis is an amazing performer in specific and significant ways. No matter what the music being rendered, the Isis always comes across as staggeringly soul satisfying. Its uncanny smoothness, combined with a silent clarity in a way that is slightly laid-back and at the same time rich. It blooms in ways rarely achieved by lesser components.

Upper midrange and lower treble are stunning. Where trumpets, female vocals violins and the like can easily sound

shrill or hard especially under high SPL's, the Isis has a way in this region, a way that is confounding and oh so wonderful at exposing the natural timbre and color of the sound in these frequencies and down through the heart of the midrange at full tilt without any extra emphasis or unnatural edge. The result for me was a kind of compulsive addiction to the sound that proves tough to break the longer I listen – so much for thinking I need separate components! Whether digital or analog source, the Isis musical contribution is both additive by way of the dense tonal colors rendered and subtractive by way of negligible background noise.

Along with the brilliance of the edge free organic timbre, the Isis is extremely fleet of foot. The music moves, dances, blooms, and skips along with

no sense of getting bogged down -rhythmically incongruous or sluggish. This has much to do with the seamless continuity of the signal, the uninterrupted musical flow like water moving effortlessly down a river. This may seem a bit esoteric and high minded, but it has a real impact on the listener's ability to sink into and be consumed by the music. This is one of my main requirements for a component to be considered extraordinary, and the Isis is such a component.

Dynamics are engaging, but not the biggest and baddest on the block. For this, you must go to the big monoblocks. With powerful music, the Isis has an ebb and flow that is more grace than chaos. The Isis hardly suffers for power, and I was met with no damping issues playing Disturbed's "Asylum." *(continued)*



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By contrast, the hulking Pass Labs XA200.8 monos and D'Agostino Momentum Preamp just came across as bolder, with pin your spleen to the back of your chair effortless dynamics, albeit at a much higher price and footprint. But the grace and expression of the Isis are not less beguiling. There is a great sense of realism with the Isis that just feels untethered and completely uncompressed breathing life into every track that passes through it.

However, if you have the cash and feast on a steady diet of head banging music with power hungry speakers in a huge room, you know what you need to do. Analog Domain has amplifiers up the food chain for just that reason. Most average rooms and less demanding speaker loads, however, will find great symbiosis with the Isis.

Of course, the Isis does what any modern, competent integrated amplifier is asked to do. Sound staging and imaging are fantastic if a bit laid back in comparison to some of the amps I have had in for review. I much prefer this perspective over an overly forward, etched and aggressive point of view; your needs may be different. Despite the slightly set back stage, images were incredibly tangible with a spooky solid and airy 3-D presence. Along with this lucidity, instrumental timbre remains completely discreet, never becoming vague when several instruments were overlapped and playing at the same time.

Bass goes deep, is controlled and snappy with outstanding resolution and again, fleet footed in pace. The Isis ability to resolve low-frequency textures is amazing. Acoustic bass woody resonance and string snap have great complexity without being glazed over with distortion and overhang. Some of the bigger far more costly amps I have reviewed may go a touch deeper with a bit more wallop down under the skirt but these are contrasts the end users with varying budgets dedicated to system building will need to consider.

At \$19,995, the Isis raises the question; do you need to spend any more to get a truly high-end amplification system? Having spent tens upon tens of thousands of dollars more than the Isis on amplification, more than once, this experience has made it nearly impossible to recommend that you do the same unless presented with room, music and speaker demands as mentioned above.

Analog Domain may lack some of the brand recognition that others enjoy, but that is beside the point and may soon change in a big way. The Isis embodies three points of purpose; to make glorious music, to do the musical heavy lifting when called upon and to last for a very long time. It is not audio jewelry in the conventional sense, it does not have a fancy remote, though one is in the works. *(continued)*



Its good looking, very nicely constructed with innovative materials but it's not a gleaming presence in a gold Rolex-y way. Unlike its siblings, it is relatively compact and does not need a fork lift to move from here to there.

For a sliver under \$20,000, the Isis offers a fantastic value within the high-end landscape. It presents a singular opportunity to experience music in a way that separates itself from the merely competent. The Isis simply does not sound like most amplification in its price range or beyond for that matter- It's better. I listened to more music during my all too brief time with the Isis than I typically do, a sure-fire sign that something special is happening. Angel Despotov and Analog Domain have achieved something unique with the Isis. A greatness that remains elusive to much of the competition. ●

Analog Domain Isis

\$19,995

MANUFACTURER

Analog Domain Audio

CONTACT

www.analogdomain.eu

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

Triangle Art Signature/Osiris Arm/
Ortofon Cadenza Black

Preamplifier

Pass Labs XP-25

Power Amplifier

Pass Labs XA200.8

Cable

MIT

Totem's Signature One

The Revolution Continues

By Jeff Dorgay

Time flies when you're having fun. As a fledgling speaker manufacturer, barely two years old, Totem Acoustic introduced its original Model 1 to incredible acclaim in 1989. This was a compact speaker that really rocked; and it received universal acclaim, from reviewers and end users alike. This is a speaker that plays much, much bigger than you would expect it to at first glance, producing prodigious bass as well. Totem principal Vince Bruzzese is a clever guy – if you've ever been to a Totem demo, you know they always have great sound, and they are usually driving a small pair of speakers with a Boulder amplifier, or something of that quality level. Celebrating their 30th anniversary, we now have the Signature One and it is very impressive.





While you might think that a parlor trick, because a massive, high quality amplifier takes control of a speaker better than a budget model. However, after living with the new Signature One for a few months, it's not a trick at all – these little speakers are that good. Partnering them with everything from a Rega Brio all the way up to my reference Pass XS300 monos (\$90k/pair) the Signature Ones have more than enough resolution to reveal the difference between every amplifier in the range. Ditto with cable choices. It's hard to think that you can get this much speaker for \$2,650. But you can.

Listening to the sublime separation between Keb Mo's guitar and lead vocal on "Till I Get Paid," the spacious presentation from the Signature Ones goes to show that a high quality, perfectly executed two-way speaker is a mighty music machine. The accompanying white paper reveals the level of attention paid to these speakers – from the high-quality drivers and crossover components used (Dale resistors, Clarity Caps and a new Teflon coated ofc copper/silver internal wire) to the ultra rigid cabinet. Much like a highly tuned race car, where a few horsepower here, a few there all add up to the difference between winning the race and not, the Signature One is indeed a rare jewel. With no detail left unattended to, it adds up to an incredible speaker.

Make them your anchor

Whenever advising a friend or reader about system building, I always suggest falling in love with a pair of speakers and work backwards. The wrong speaker in the wrong room, always results in dreadful sound. Squarely placed in a 16 x 25 room on the long wall, the Signature Ones deliver expansive sound. Larger rooms will require more power to achieve this, and at a certain point, a pair of small two-ways can only move so much air, but if there ever was a little speaker that could, the Signature Ones are up to the task. Good as the bass response is with the Signature Ones, if you are in a large room and want to crank Infected Musroom, you might just need one of Totem's subwoofers to produce the sound level you need.

For the 95% of you that don't require a club listening levels in your living room, the Signature Ones will be just fine. Tracking through nearly my entire Peter Gabriel library, trying to push the boundaries of the 6.5-inch woofer, with its 3-inch voice coil to the brink, they managed to take nearly all the punishment the massive Pass XS 300s can deliver. Don't let the 87.5db/1 watt sensitivity rating stop you from exploring other, less powerful amplifiers – the key word when pairing the Signature Ones is quality. *(continued)*

REVIEW

Even the 10 watt per channel Block amplifier (an EL-34 SET design) makes a lovely combination.

Ace of pace

With only a single crossover point at 2,500hz and a gentle 6db/octave crossover slope, driver integration is excellent with the Signature Ones. This high level of coherence renders music more like what you might expect from a panel speaker, yet with the punch and drive only a cone speaker can offer. The result is a speaker that really keeps the musical pace sorted, and particularly dense musical performances shine, instead of deteriorating into an incongruous ball of sound.

The layers of overdubbed vocals in Joni Mitchell's *Hissing of Summer Lawns* is a perfect example of the precision offered by the Signature Ones. On a lesser speaker, Mitchell's voice throughout this record just sounds like a husky vocal somewhat fattened by masterful studio techniques, yet through the Totems, every distinct harmony comes through with crystal clarity. Moving through similar material from Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Crowded House and Todd Rundgren reveal the same thing. I suggest that if you audition a pair of these speakers to go straight for the toughest recordings in your collection and do the same.

Instrumentally dense recordings offer the same reward. Any record loaded with layer upon layer of music, whether it be Porcupine Tree or even electronic/EDM styles, the Signature Ones not only throw an enormous soundstage in all three directions, but they keep everything sorted, and at the same time homogenous. They never cross the line, becoming so analytical that music loses its sense of cohesiveness. This is a triumph in a \$50k pair of speakers, but nearly unheard of at this price. *(continued)*



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- *Rob Johnson, Tone Audio

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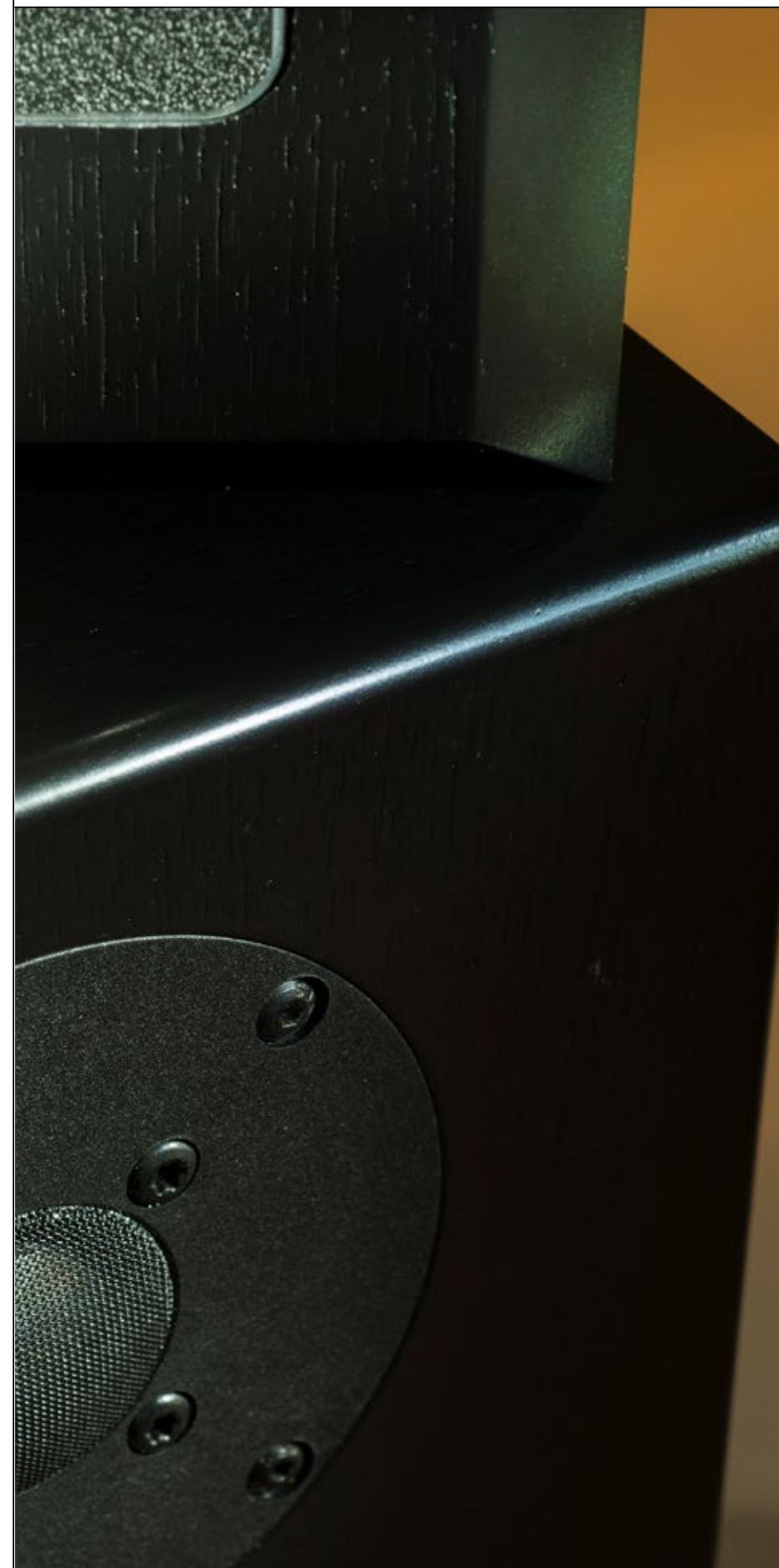
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Let's get small

Nearly physics defying good as the Signature Ones are in a fairly large room, they are sublime in a small to medium room. Bringing them from the large, treated listening room in the house to a much more typical, untreated (other than a large throw rug and overstuffed chair) room, only 11 x 13 feet is nothing short of a revelation. As anyone that drives a small, four cylinder sports car knows that in order to keep pace with the big boys on the track, you need to make full use of every ounce of power at your disposal. The Signature Ones are no different. Use high quality speaker cables, massive stands and careful setup to your advantage. You will be rewarded.

Carefully positioned in a slightly modified equilateral triangle, on a pair of filled Sound Anchor stands weighing about 60lbs. each, the Signature Ones blew me away in my small room. Utilizing a Simaudio 260D CD player and my PrimaLuna Pro-Logue One integrated amplifier (swapping for our award winning Simaudio ACE on occasion to get the solid state perspective) is a lovely experience.

The room filling sound got even bigger, swapping the Cardas Iridium cables for Cardas Clear, and the stock tubes for a full compliment of NOS tubes. Each tube replaced made for an increase in clarity, depth and overall musicality.

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(continued)

REVIEW

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A long-term relationship

Because the Totem Signature Ones are such overachieving speakers, you could keep them for a long time, maybe even forever and not lose your initial infatuation. They so resolving without being harsh or fatiguing, that every hankering for a new component or cable will reward you with a new system (and new music collection) all over again. *(continued)*



Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



We know. Sorting through the jungle that is pre-owned hi-fi gear can be tough. Myriad Internet forums and online shopping sites just don't offer the expertise required to make sound decisions.

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Quite simply, if it doesn't sound better, it doesn't happen. (If it does sound better, but is considered 'impossible,' they'll figure out how to do it anyway. There's a very good reason the company's named Rega Research).

Rega's view is that hifi's simply a tool for listening to your music.

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REVIEW

These speakers are easy enough to drive that they will achieve good result with modest electronics, yet as you can improve the components in the signal path, things will only get better. The Signature Ones would not be out of place in a 20 or 30 thousand dollar system, they are that good.

With so many components in the world of high end audio having such a high price tag, the Totem Signature One speakers offer a huge helping of what the megabuck speakers do at a very attainable price. The Signature One is not on the Totem website right now, but they will be available mid-September in celebration of Totem's 30th anniversary. I suspect these will fly off the shelves once they show up at your Totem dealer. I'm keeping the review pair. ●

Totem Signature One Speaker
\$2,650/pair

MANUFACTURER
Totem Acoustic

CONTACT
www.totemacoustic.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source
AVID Volvere SP turntable/Rega RB1000/Grado Signature 1

Digital Source
Simaudio 260D, Gryphon Kalliope DAC

Amplification
Simaudio ACE, PrimaLuna ProLogue 1

Cable
Cardas Iridium, Cardas Clear





BENCHMARK DAC3 HGC

By Mark Marcantonio

The Benchmark DAC3 HGC is the company's third iteration of an award-winning DAC that turned expectations on their ear for a compact, high performance, reasonably priced digital audio converter. Each generation has offered significant improvements over the previous one, with the same goals in mind: reduce noise, increase headroom, and add depth/detail. Having heard all three generations, the goals have definitely been met, the difference between the DAC2 and DAC3 isn't subtle, even with a budget headphone or system.



Where did the Benchmark team look to find improvements? It starts with the ES-9028PRO D/A converter. Utilizing all four pairs of on board converters, the signal to noise ratio improves an additional 2dB over the previous model and that's only the beginning. Digging deeper, the Benchmark engineers found improvements

via upsampling at 211 KHz to eliminate the occurrence of time domain errors. Also improved was the deployment of better I-V converters, power supply, and further attacking of jitter by their trademarked "UltraLock3" attenuation design. Other noise killing capabilities include a high headroom DSP, allowing for processing higher-level signals

without clipping.

Listening to a 24-bit piano solo of Dick Hyman's *Thinking About Bix*, the DAC3 HGR reveals both the expansive smoothness as well as the energetic impact this unit gives the listener. The tickling of the ivories in "Ostrich Walk" is packed with playful jabs. The Benchmark digs out the extra touch

of power. This additional bit of grunt is a welcomed part of the DAC3 HGC's character.

A masterful utilization of space

The DAC3 HGC, like all Benchmark DAC's reside in a small case, measuring just 8"W x 9.5"D x 1.75"H. Thanks to a smart layout, the unit packs a

ton of features yet doesn't appear visually overwhelming. Small, yet tactile distinctive buttons with an LED above for Power, Dim/Mute, Polarity, and Input grace the left third of the front faceplate. The first two of four vertical LED columns signify the USB, two coax, two optical, and two analog inputs cover the center section. The second pair

delineate bit rate and KHz, as well as DSD. If that isn't enough, there is still room for two headphone jacks. Handily, the left jack mutes the XLR and RCA outputs. The right jack allows the music to flow unimpeded. Finally, the motorized volume knob that when used with the remote adjusts the volume in smooth steps. *(continued)*



Touring the backside, XLR and two RCA outputs, followed by analog inputs, then coaxial above with optical below, 12V trigger and USB-B. Finally, a full size power cord socket with fuse holder. The USB input is capable of handling 1.1 and 2.0 audio without drivers for Macintosh. On Windows you will need to setup the drivers (they will be listed as DAC2). The entire setup process is shown in the manual in full step-by-step color screenshots.

The remote fits nicely in the hand with solid feel and heft. The Roman hippodrome shape (think the movie Ben Hur) is narrow enough to easily work with the thumb. The soft touch buttons are laid out in two sections. The upper area controls the power, output level and mute functions while, the lower section controls all the inputs in two ways. First, are the two sequential arrows. Secondly, are the six individual input choices.

With so much packed into such a small enclosure, reading the manual is a must, even for legacy Benchmark users trading up. It offers a thorough explanation of the HT mode, as well as the rest of the DAC 3s functionality. For the more technically minded, graphs and explanations of measurements abound. Headphone gain and digital pass-through features can be accomplished via changing the jumpers by following the color photos with arrow labels. Be sure to unplug the DAC HGC from AC power, and read twice before proceeding. *(continued)*





A sound improvement

While it's been a while since the DAC 2 was here for a test drive, I'm immediately struck by the way the depth presented by the current model immerses you in the recording, high or low resolution in nature. One of my favorite go to tracks, Handel's *Saul*, *HMV 53: III. Allegro* with its luscious woodwinds leading the violin melody is beautifully rendered. The warm, liquid sound provided by the DAC 3 bathes my listening room with organic detail. The three-dimensionality is the best I've achieved on my reference system.

Other playlist favorites achieve the same degree of sonic involvement. Even Bob Seger's classic live recording of "Turn The Page" has more front to back energy than expected. Seger's vocals have a smoothness that shouldn't be available from a 1970's concert recording. This is a special digital product indeed.

As a headphone amp, the ability to set the output level makes the DAC3 HGC a versatile performer, allowing whatever headphones you have at your disposal to perform at their best. From an easy to drive pair of Grado's, to power hungry HD series Sennheisers, the DAC 3HGC handles them all with ease. Again, Benchmark's years of studio experience comes in handy, as they understand the importance of matching the available level of gain to the intended device.

Those not needing headphone capabilities, can save a few bucks by choosing the standard DAC 3 L model at \$1,895 instead of the \$2,195 price tag on the HGC version.

FYI, the quality of the headphone amplifier included in the DAC 3HGC is way better than anything you'll find for three hundred bucks, so if you're even considering a headphone amp, this is money well spent.

Since the introduction of the original DAC 1, Benchmark has set the industry on its ear, providing a true reference quality DAC at an easily approachable price. While the cost has more than doubled, so has the performance. We gave the original DAC 1 our first Exceptional Value award in issue 3, and the current DAC 3HGC is an equally good value, earning this award again in 2017.

Further listening

Eddie Van Halen remarked once before a long touring hiatus that he "had to go back and listen to the old records to learn the songs again" before going on tour. The only way to fully hear the progress that Benchmark has made is to do the same thing, so it didn't take more than a few phone calls to rustle up an original DAC 1 and DAC 2 for a cursory comparison.

If Benchmark can be noted for a "sound" at all, it would be more like a lack of sound. Their DACs have never embellished tonally one way or the other and the current DAC 3 continues this trend – yet each generation manages to reveal significantly more music than the one before. When the DAC 1 set a new standard for reasonably priced DACs, (followed by the DAC 2) the race was on. Even though the competition has improved, Benchmark hasn't lost any ground, if anything, they've pulled ahead. *(continued)*

With each generation of DAC, the latest Benchmark offers more decoding flexibility, extending to DSD with the DAC 3 and though many of you may never find the need to decode DSD files, you can rest assured it's there. The biggest differences between the generations is their ability to decode fine information and a much larger soundfield produced by the DAC 3.

The addition of analog inputs to the original DAC 1 pre was a welcome choice, and this is another area of big improvement on the current model. It's a much better linestage than the originals. Having put the DAC 3 through its paces with a wide range of tube and solid state amplifiers for The Audiophile Apartment, as the core of a high performance, yet highly compact system, the DAC 3 is a charmer, indeed. Thanks to a robust output stage, the DAC 3 has no trouble driving a pair of 30 foot Cardas Clear interconnects (which cost more than the DAC 3!). This makes it perfect to put up on a shelf or out of the way with an equally compact phono stage, turntable and whatever you use to serve digital files and a power amp or powered speakers elsewhere in the room where it is convenient.

The move from \$995 DAC to \$2,195 DAC is a big one, and will coincide with a different person's budget and system requirements. If you are looking for a great \$2k DAC, the Benchmark is at the top of its class,

but if you're looking for a high performance DAC/PRE/Headphone amplifier combination for around \$2k, the Benchmark is tough to beat.

Benchmark is still a TONEAudio favorite after over a decade; the DAC 3HGC carries the torch well. Highly recommended. ●

Benchmark DAC 3HGC
\$2,199

MANUFACTURER

Benchmark Media

CONTACT

www.benchmarkmedia.com

PERIPHERALS

Amplifiers

SimAudio Moon i7 integrated amplifier, Vista Audio i35 integrated tube amplifier, Virtue Audio Sensation M451 Tripath/hybrid integrated amplifier

Sources

Rega RP1 turntable with Ortofon Super OM40 cartridge; MacBook iTunes/PureMusic, Wadia i170 w/iPod 160 Classic

Speakers

ACI Emerald XL, Harbeth Compact 7ES3, Golden Ear Triton Seven, Magnepan 1.6 with Skiing Ninja crossovers, Totem Acoustic Rainmakers

Cables

Shunyata Venom 3 power cord, AudioArt IC-3 interconnects, AudioArt SC-5 speaker cables



FROM THE WEB



Origin Live Calypso Turntable

\$2,400 (deck only) Encounter Tonearm, addl. \$1,500
www.originlive.com
www.audiorevelation.com

British turntable manufacturer Origin Live is well known for both their turntable and tonearm modifications the world over, bringing higher performance to existing decks with straightforward upgrades. In case you hadn't noticed, they also make a fine line of turntables as well. The Calypso, reviewed here is a belt drive model, combined with their Encounter tonearm, which makes use of their "dual-pivot" technology.

Of course, there is an upgraded power supply in the works, but that's another review. Here's what we've got to say about this lovely pair.

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Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound - October 2015

"GamuT's RS3 standmount monitors are one of the two finest loudspeakers I've ever had in my home. I've prized the time I've spent with them because, in very many ways, they've shown me a way forward toward higher levels of performance that I thought possible"

Chris Martens, Hi-Fi+, September 2015

"If I didn't know better, I would have sworn I was listening to much bigger speakers! These (RS3) are stunning small monitors that deliver big speaker sound!"

Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio - THE SHOW, Newport 2015

"The (RS3) speaker proved so wonderfully descriptive of the textures and timbres of acoustic and electronic sounds that it was never anything other than wholly captivating."

John Bamford, HiFi news, 2014



FROM THE WEB

Rega Brio Integrated

\$999 www.rega.co.uk www.soundorg.com

World famous British turntable manufacturer Rega Research has been making equally great electronics for decades, yet this understated company rarely gets the fanfare they deserve. In 2011, we named the prior Brio-r our Product of the Year overall. Pretty heady stuff for a \$995 integrated.

Here we are in 2017, and the current Brio offers the same 50 watts per channel, but with casework that is more upscale and even better sound, yet they have held the line at just under \$1,000. The excellent on board phonostage remains, and there is now a headphone jack on the front panel. Perhaps the only slight negative is that the speaker binding posts are even closer together than they were before. A good case for banana plugs.

Read here why the Brio (now simply called the Brio again) is still one of the world's best integrated amplifiers for the money.



Audio Research REF Phono 3 Phonostage

\$13,999
www.audioresearch.com

Extensive use of the earlier REF Phono 2 and REF Phono 2 SE proved them both a major bargain for \$12,999. Haters of course, will hate and claim they can build their own REF Phono for \$300 in their garage, but you can't and you won't.

The new REF Phono 3 takes resolution and musicality a big step forward from the past two models, and surprisingly ARC only raises the price \$1,000. This should be the cost of new casework alone, but every aspect of the circuit, all the way down to the coating on the printed circuit board to the wire going from said circuit board to the input and output connectors has been optimized to reveal more musical information. The result is stunning. Read the full review here.



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DIRECTOR — DA Converter and Preamplifier



PHONITOR X — Headphone and Preamplifier



PHONITOR E — Headphone Amplifier



PHONOS — RIAA Phono Preamplifier



PERFORMER S800 — Stereo Power Amplifier

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<http://www.audiovisionsf.com/?page=specials>

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san francisco, california 94109

www.audiovisionsf.com

abyss
audio physic
dali
davone
dynaudio
gallo
grado
hifiman
janzen electrostatic
jl audio
kef
kingsound
mrspeakers
nola
psb
raidho
rel acoustics
triangle
ultrasone
arcam
astell & kern
audioquest
bel canto
b.m.c.
burson
cambridge
cardas
cary audio
chord electronics
clearaudio
crystal cable
devialet
dr. feickert
funk firm
h.r.s.
ifi
integra
kiseki
lyngdorf audio
lyra
marantz
margules
micromega
moon by simaudio
naim audio
nordost
nuforce
octave
pear audio
pono
primaluna
pro-ject
ps audio
quadraspire
rega
richard gray
sonos
soundsmith
stillpoints
unison research
woo audio

Manufacturers Links

LINKS

Where to find the gear you've seen in this issue.

Anthem: www.anthemav.com

Arcam: www.soundorg.com

Auralic: www.auralic.com

AudioVision SF: www.audiovisionsf.com

Audio Research: www.audioresearch.com

BAT: www.balanced.com

Brinkmann Audio: www.brinkmann-audio.com

Cambridge: www.audioplusservices.com

Dali: www.soundorg.com

dCS: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Dynaudio: www.dynaudio.com

Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com

GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com

Graham Audio: www.grahamaudioUSA.com

Focal: www.audioplusservices.com

MartinLogan: www.martinlogan.com

Mobile Fidelity: www.mofi.com

Mystere: www.mystere-usa.com

Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com

Music Matters: www.musicmattersjazz.com

Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com

Naim: www.audioplusservices.com

Nordost: www.nordost.com

OCTAVE: www.octave.de

Oppo: www.oppodigital.com

Paradigm: www.paradigm.com

Pass Labs: www.passlabs.com

Plinius: www.pliniusaudio.com

PrimaLuna: www.primaluna-usa.com

Primare: www.vanaltD.com

Rega: www.soundorg.com

Simaudio: www.simaudio.com

SPL: www.audioplusservices.com

TOTEM Acoustic: www.totemacoustic.com

Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com

Wireworld: www.wireworldcable.com

Vandersteen: www.vandersteen.com

VANA Ltd: www.vanaltD.com

VPI: www.vpiindustries.com