TONE
The Concierge of High-End Audio ®

NO.120
The Awards Issue

*Tone's Product of the Year - **OVERALL**:*

## The Enleum AMP-23R




Outstanding In-wall from Totem

Last minute shopping ideas

And more!

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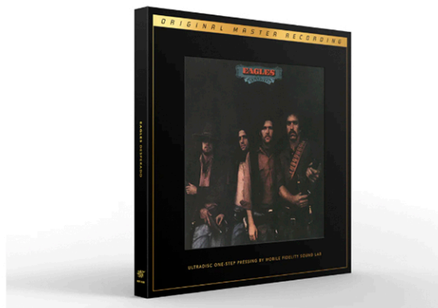
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It's always tough to pick...

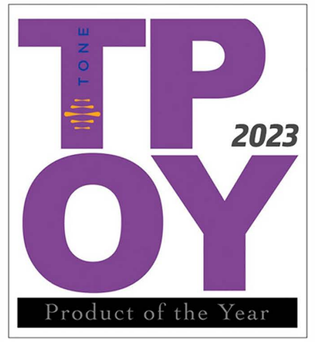
**47**
Products of the Year
The top of the top of the top.

**63**
Exceptional Value
The ones we feel deliver beyond their price tags

**71**
Publisher's Choice
A few components our publisher loves, just because.

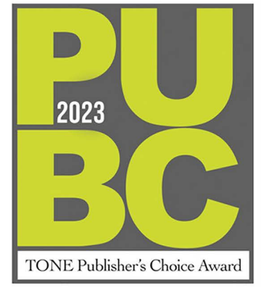
**75**
#TONEAudio Approved
Talk is cheap.These are the components that we spent our hard earned money on.

**84**
Masterpiece Award
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"...nothing short of stunning..."

Jeff Dorgay *Tone Audio* on the C7 XD

PUBC 2021

TONE Publisher's Choice Award

"...Alan Shaw's Masterpiece"

*Tone Audio*
on the 40.3 XD

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## Cartridge Dude

Hana takes an all out assault on the premium cartridge segment with their Umami Blue and Red.






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# 16

## Old School…

Once again magic is found on the shelf at Echo Audio. As we are working on a review of one of the new SOTA tables, an early Sapphire is the perfect bookend to chart their progress.

This is still a fantastic turntable 40 years later, and like all SOTA tables, can be sent back to the factory for a partial or complete update.




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# Cover Shot:

Our Product of the year was captured with the SONY A7III and the Zeiss 50mm f2.8 macro lens at f9 - 16 sec. exposure




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## MONOTONE

This issue we look at and listen to the mighty VK-80t power amplifier from Balanced Audio Technology.



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# no.120

Publisher's Letter

Wow, it's awards time again, and you may or may not notice that we're back to getting this done before the very end of the year. Woo hoo. You also may notice that my life is never a dull moment with English Bull Terriers in the house. My girls are (mostly) settling down after two years, but they never resist busting a move to slobber me. I'm sure the non-dog owners find this disgusting, but the rest of you get it. In the midst of all the wackiness, I always enjoy seeing pictures of your dogs out on social media. Sometimes, there's nothing better than your dog just hanging out with you on the couch to enjoy some music. And taking selfies!

But back to audio, right? This really was a tremendous year for audio. The gear we've recieved has all been top notch, and even more difficult than in years to pick some favorites for awards. I suppose we could just give everyone awards, cough cough.

That being said, I've stuck to my founding principle that nothing appears in our pages unless it is potentially an award winner, and something we'd write a check for. We've also tried very hard in the last few years to really tailor what we're reviewing, to what you're actually listening to and thinking about purchasing

Not going to see any $500k turntables here. Don't care. That part of the market is already more than covered, and I'm guessing if you have 500 very large to spend on a turntable, you probably know way more about analog than we do. And if you do, bully for you. One of the most disappointing things going is when those that can't play in a certain arena get cranky pants about those that can. Hey, invite me over for a beer.

As 2023 begins to wind down, and the world is a fairly wacky and unpredictable place, I hope that you and yours are all ok. I also hope that your music system gives you a bit of a break from the chaos as well.

From all of us to all of you, thank you again for reading, as we head into our 19th year. I truly can't believe how fast the time has flown by.



# Playlist no. 1

Immature and “un-audiophile-y” as it may be, some days you just want to turn that volume control as far as it will go for a little while and just bask in the sheer energy of it all. Here’s some fave tracks, leaning towards the earlier catalog.




Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap

Big Balls

T.N.T.

Let There Be Rock

Whole Lot of Rosie

Problem Child

Sin City

Down Payment Blues

Gimme a Bullet

Have a Drink on Me

C.O.D

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No one new this issue, but we do have a last minute shopping guide for you, so Santa's here, at least in spirit.

Ho, ho, ho.



OLDSchool
respecting HiFi's past...
By Jeff Dorgay

# Sota Sapphire
## Turntable

Still sparkles after 40 years.

$1,000 - $2,000 (depending on shape and configuration)

In this wacky world of six-figure turntables and five-figure cartridges, it's heartwarming to see how much analog pleasure can be had out of a classic table. With so many things to choose from, my favorites are the Technics SP-10mk.II, an early 80s Linn Sondek, the Rega P9, and the SOTA Sapphire you see here. Sitting on the shelf at Echo Audio in Portland, Oregon, this beauty had a $1,500 price tag, including a Sumiko tonearm and an early Benz LP MC cartridge. No way I was passing that up!

This is particularly fun, as we have a new SOTA Nova in for review, and the thought of comparing a current production SOTA to one of the early models seemed appropriate and enlightening. Plus, it makes it so easy to have the older table on hand to compare directly.

Back in the early 80s, when my system was sporting an Oracle Delphi mk.II, SOTA had hit the market as the first legitimate audiophile turntable made in the US. Soon after, VPI would hit the scene, and those craving a US-made table had another choice.



Today's SOTA tables are made in Wisconsin (go Bucky), so there's some built-in love from this cheesehead right away. However, in the beginning, they were built in Oakland, California. Incidentally, the University of Wisconsin – Madison, where I went to school for a while, was nicknamed "the Berkely of the Midwest." So, in a quirky way, it all makes sense. A note from SOTA reveals this table was made in 1984 in Oakland, California.




**A quick spin**

Placing a clean copy of Elton John's *Honky Chateau* brings back great memories. With a current Linn Sondek nearby and a REGAs P9, I instantly remember what made SOTAs such great tables and such a great value back then. Where the LP-12 and the Oracle truly need an expert to set up correctly, SOTAs were always much easier, and once set up, they stayed set up.

Moving on to a broader range of program material, this table does not disappoint. Thanks to its trademark four-point suspension, this vintage analog rig is way more resistant to vibration than my current Technics SL-1200G, Rega P9, and the new Luxman PD-191. If you've got speakers that go down low, you will really appreciate the lack of acoustic feedback the SOTA lets through.

Playing bass-heavy prog tracks from Yes, Genesis, and ELP along with electronica tracks from Massive Attack, NEU!, and Kruder & Dorfmeister all deliver the same result. This table delivers solid bass response, allowing fairly high levels of volume to be achieved. Again, this is a 40-year-old used turntable!





Finally, this table does an excellent job at inner detail retrieval; even with the supplied Sumiko arm set up to perfection with the Analog Majik suite of tools, it still amazes me how a fully optimized but simple setup can deliver the goods.

Comparing it to the Rega, the SOTA feels a little fatter, playing acoustic pieces with a bit more body. Playing the same tracks on the Linn, the SOTA feels slightly less bloated in the mid-bass. All are fun and offer plenty of musical enjoyment, but this table is so good I ended up keeping it as an example of what can be accomplished on a tight budget.

**Running in the family**

While SOTA offers a two-year warranty, the best part of any SOTA table is the ability to be serviced, and all can be updated to current specs. To my knowledge, only the LP-12 has this level of updatability. (if that's genuinely a word). Much like Linn, SOTA has not changed the basic look of their tables, so no matter what vintage you have, they still look great.

The current tables have a few more wood choices but I still enjoy the original, and wouldn't change a thing. Worth noting, the black anodizing has stood up very well for 40 years of use.

Even with the slightly warm Benz cartridge, the overall sound quality is resolving, tuneful, and involving. Nothing you can buy new for $1,500 will touch this setup. If you so desire, SOTA will update it to a current model and give it a complete tune-up. If I didn't review hi-fi gear for a living, I could live happily ever after with this table, arm, and cartridge. I'd probably replace the Benz with a newer model at some point, but this is analog synergy at its finest. Sometime in 2024, we'll probably send this one back to SOTA for an update to Sapphire VII status, and report back.

If you're intrigued by this experience, please check out the review of the current Nova in our next issue. For about $5,500 without an arm and vacuum platter, it's another fantastic deal.




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# Hana
## Umami Red and Umami Blue

Which one to choose?

$3,950 and $2,500
musicalsurroundings.com

About 12 years ago when I got my hands on a Clearaudio Goldfinger (from Musical Surroundings Garth Leerer) I felt I finally made it to the top of the mountain. It was the first time I had ever mounted and set up a fifteen thousand dollar cartridge. I was sweating like a heart surgeon through the whole process, but once it was optimized for my AVID Acutus Reference table, the sound was heavenly. I've had a number of primo phono cartridges pass through over the years, but the Goldfinger is still my favorite cartridge of all time.

Why am I telling you this in the context of the Hana Blue and Red review? Because on one level I couldn't live with the Goldfinger. It was like dating a supermodel, and I just didn't have the self esteem to pull it off. It was so good, I was always afraid it was going to break up with me, or break, in no uncertain terms. I wouldn't let anyone near my turntable out of sheer panic. "Get away from my turntable!" came out of my mouth too often. So after a few years I passed it on to a friend.

Another reason for me not keeping a five-figure phono cartridge around as a reference is the level of turntables I own and my record collection. I don't have a $350,000 turntable, or a gaggle of first pressing British this and that. I have pretty good records. A ton of MoFis, a fair amount of the Music Matters Jazz pressings, some ORGs and such. However, up until recently the gap between the five figure cartridges and the $2,500 - $5,000 carts was a wide one. Is a Goldfinger worth the money? If you want that experience, that's what it costs. Is a Ferrari worth that much more than a Porsche? Same thing.



**The gap has closed**

Whether it's ongoing R&D, or just more interest in vinyl these days, the cartridges in the $2,500 - $5000 range has closed in dramatically on the cost no object cartridges. Hey, in the late 70s a Porsche 911 Turbo was 256 horsepower, and it was a supercar. Today a base, 4-cylinder turbo Boxster pumps out 300, and everyone says it's not enough.

Whenever we've had the opportunity to compare the mega cartridges to the almost mega cartridges, the biggest delta always makes itself more known on a highly resolving system and the perfect records. After a fair amount of time with both cartridges on a few different turntables (SME 20 w/SME iV.Vi arm, the new Luxman PD-191, and the Linn LP-12) I've come away thrilled about the level of performance both of these cartridges offer. Each of the test tables did impart their own sonic signature to the presentation, but overall the voice of the Hanas comes through loud and clear.


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**Decisions**

From looking at the spec sheets, the two cartridges look fairly similar on paper, and both cartridges sport a microline stylus mounted to a boron cantilever. The coils in the Red are wound on a square iron former and use a Samarium Cobalt magnet. The Red has a slightly tighter channel balance spec, and a frequency response extending down to 10Hz, versus 15 Hz for the Blue. The Blue uses a cross-coil former and ALNICO magnet. The Red has a 6-ohm coil impedance, where the blue has 8, corresponding to about a 60-ohm loading and 80 respectively. Make no mistake, both cartridges deliver excellent bass response.

Both cartridges use a Duralumin body with Auricle design to more securely mount the generator. However, the Red incorporates an ebony wood insert into the Duralumin body and the Blue uses POM. The Blue uses a melamine thermosetting process finish (much like what you see on some speakers that seem too smooth to be paint) to finish the body, the Red sports red Urushi lacquer. On a transducer, the most minute details make a difference in the final sound.

**Final tweaks and setup**

Both of these cartridges prove easy to set up with the Analog Magik tools and Acoustic Sciences SmartTractor. Suggested tracking force is 2 grams and that proved to be right on the money. I noticed a couple of reviews on the red where another reviewer mentioned that 1.98 grams was perfection, but I must admit I can no longer hear the difference that .02 grams makes in tracking force anymore, nor am I that pedantic. I think you'll be safe with 2 grams. It's worth mentioning that I used the Clearaudio Weight Watcher digital tracking force gauge (now the newest model) for all measurements.

A bigger difference came with loading. Using the Pass XP-27 phonostage (with settings at 50, 100, and 160 ohms) The Red sounds more alive and open at 50 ohms, where the Blue delivers the best performance at 100 ohms. Ditto for the Backert Labs phono. Interestingly, when using the Nagra Classic phono on its MM input with the Quadratic MC step up transformer, the difference in the upper registers was not as marked between the Blue and the Red .

The new CH Precision I1 integrated is in for review, with it's integral phonostage featuring transimpedance/current loading via an ADC, and all EQ done in the digital domain, and oddly this setup delivered the widest difference in performance between the two cartridges.

**Character**

Both cartridges are more resolving and have less tonal warmth than Hana's previous top of the line, their ML/MH cartridges – also a top value choice at $1,200. Much like the Koetsu cartridges I've owned and reviewed, the Hana cartridges manage to maintain the silky midrange characteristics that permeates their overall design. Yet as you go up the range there is more resolution, a larger soundstage, and more dynamic punch. Refinement in every way. I'll stick my neck out and say the overall tonal balance is as near perfection as it gets without spending five figures. Big, broad, open, and natural with the slightest bit of tonal saturation makes these cartridges a sheer joy to play all of your records – not just the finest ones in your collection.

As mentioned earlier, the sheer force and character of the lower registers is indeed impressive. Tracking through favorites from Thomas Dolby, Massive Attack, and even Pink Floyd, the Hanas deliver powerful bass, with speed and detail. An equally refined high end compliments the rest. Whether you are a fan of solo vocalists, acoustic music, or the heaviest rock, these cartridges really reveal what analog is all about. Going back and forth between the Hana Red and my reference dCS Vivaldi ONE (even the APEX model we had in for review while mine is out for upgrade) still shows that analog has that last gasp of "reach out and touch it" that the world's finest digital comes incredibly close to, but....

The Hanas provide a sense of tonal realism on so many levels, making it incredibly easy to dive into the music and forget about everything else. For me, that's a home run. Even though they take about 10-20 hours to be all they can be, you'll notice it from the second you put the tonearm down.

The main difference between the Red and Blue is in the resolving of the finest musical details, and again, the better your system and records, the more you will notice it. If you've ever wet sanded a car before polishing, or a piece of fine furniture, it's like the difference between 1500 grit sandpaper and 3000 grit. Again, if your musical tastes lean more towards heavier rock, hip hop and techno, you might not even hear the diff between the two. Those listening to more classical, stringed acoustic instruments and vocalists will pick up on it immediately. Anything with a piano or violin and you'll hear it easily, Iron Maiden, not so much.

**So, which one should I buy?**

The Blue probably delivers 80% of the performance of the Red, but if you have the money and the system, that extra 20% of performance is still good money spent. Considering how little residual value used cartridges command (unless selling to a close friend that knows exactly how many hours are on the clock and how well you've taken care of it) I'd still push you in the direction of the Red, but I'm great at spending your money. However, if you do just pick up the Blue, you won't be unhappy. How's that for sounding like a politician?




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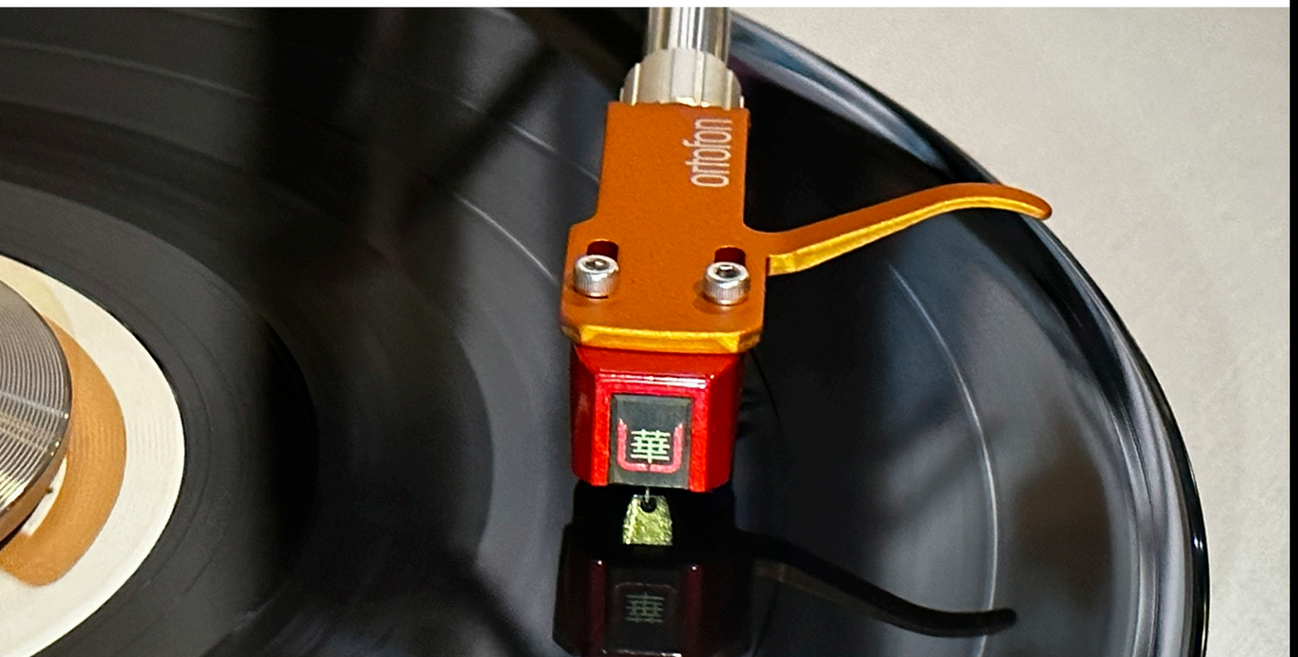
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We've purchased both and you'll be seeing a lot more of these in both Chris Harr's system and mine as we use them as references for a lot more analog reviews in the future. I feel that the Hana Blue and Hana Red offer such a high level of sheer performance and refinement, that they are more than worthy of a Product of the Year award, along with our #toneaudioapproved award for the Blue. (the Red was purchased last year) I can't think of another pair of cartridges that we've reviewed in TONE's 20-year history that have offered this much performance per dollar.

**Peripherals**

| | |
|---|---|
| ***Preamplifier*** | Pass Labs XS Pre, Conrad-Johnson ART 88 |
| ***Phono Stage*** | Pass Labs XP-27, Nagra Classic Phono (w/classic power supply) Backert Labs Rhumba 1.1 |
| ***Turntables*** | Linn LP-12, SME 20 w/SME iV.Vi tonearm, Luxman PD-191A |
| ***Power Amplifiers*** | Pass XA200.8 monoblocks, PS Audio BHK 600 monos |
| ***Speakers*** | Peak Consult Sinfonia |
| ***Cable*** | Cardas Clear Beyond and Tellurium Q Black Diamond |




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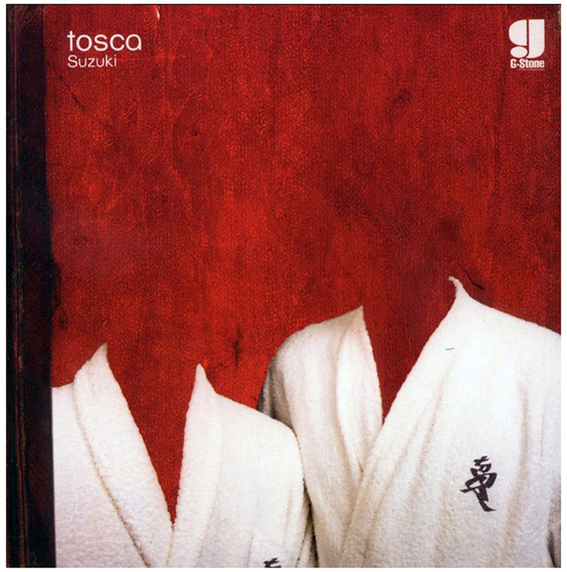
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Playlist no.2

## Late Night Garage Playlist
**-Jeff Dorgay**

One of the most boring things to do in the garage is clean dirty parts. Somehow, electronica that leans more towards some downtempo, trip-hop ish tunes lends itself to focusing on the task at hand.

Here's a group of tracks that are popular right now. You can queue up these tracks, go a little sideways, or play the whole album.




**Tosca** - "Suzuki"

**Thievery Corporation** - "The Hong Kong Triad"

**The Cinematic Orchestra** - "Burn Out"

**St. Germain** - "Forget Me Not"

**Morecheeba** - "Blood Like Lemonade"

**Royskopp** - "In Space"

**Hooverphonic** - "Tomorrow"

**Gotan Project** - "Chungas Revenge"

**Fila Brazillia** - "Tone Poem"

**Scuba** - "Disrepute"



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# NAD
## C 3050 Integrated

Homage to the beginning

$1,399
nadelectronics.com

I purchased a used NAD 3020 many years ago in excellent working condition. It cost about $125, very near its original 1970s price tag. I still own and use it. NAD's specifications suggest a scant 20-watt rating, but in practice, the 3020 puts out significantly more juice with remarkable sound quality for its price and age. NAD sold over a million 3020s – including its improved 3020 iterations over the years – making it one of the best-selling audio components in history.

Five decades later, NAD released its C 3050 integrated amplifier. While NAD does sell a modernized 3020, its form factor changed substantially. In contrast, the 3050 retains the legacy 3030 styling, including a black faceplate and a dark wood veneer draped around the top and sides. The C 3050 also has simplified, retro controls with push-button selectors for inputs and small knobs that control treble, bass, balance, and a choice of A/B speaker outputs. Owners also get a bonus headphone amp with a ¼-inch input on the front panel.



## Legacy Looks

Two VU meters on the left corner of the panel add some fun to the visual appearance. When warming up and muted, the VU meters LEDs shine red. When circuits are ready for playback, the meters switch to yellow-green. The bottom-right side of the faceplate sports a horizontal line of LEDs. The first is orange. Then, as volume increases, the subsequent six green LEDs light up individually.

NAD offers a single subwoofer output on the back panel and a pair of RCA connectors for the included moving magnet (MM) phono stage. The C 3050's one-and-only linestage input is a little disappointing since some audio fans like myself appreciate the option of connecting more than one line-level source.

## Modern capability

Under the hood, NAD modernized the 3050 significantly with a built-in DAC and other digital-ready capabilities. Physical connections include RCA/Coax and optical inputs. For those with a TV that supports HDMI Enhanced Audio Return Channel (eARC) functions, the C 3050 has you covered there, too. The C 3050 also includes Bluetooth capability for wireless music transmission. Those seeking WiFi or Ethernet connection options must purchase the upgraded edition) model that includes the BluOS capability plus other cool features like multi-room playback and room correction using an included microphone with NAD's Dirac Live software. All versions come with a remote control.

However, C 3050 versions lack a type B USB input accommodating a streamer like the Roon Nucleus. According to NAD, the BluOS can access a user's music library independently. Our review sample is the NAD 3050 base version, so we cannot offer hands and ears-on perspectives regarding the card's added functionality. But for more information, do check out the C 3050 instruction manual for all the details about NAD's latest integrated amp.

NAD claims their new integrated amp dishes out 100 watts-per-channel, with 135-watt peak power from efficient Class D circuitry. Driving GamuT RS3i stand-mounted speakers (4-ohm, 87dB sensitivity) requires most of the NAD's available power. The sound, however, never seems to distort.







For comparison, Luxman rates their L-590AXii integrated amplifier as 60 watts into four-ohm loads. When listening to the GamuTs through the Luxman, turning the volume beyond the midpoint is a rarity. I expect that getting more robust volume from the NAD should not be a problem when paired with smaller or more efficient speakers.

NAD also added an excellent feature for energy savings. When no signal passes through it for a few minutes, the amp shuts itself off by default.

## Listening

NAD put some serious effort into what matters most – the sound. Cold and out of the box, the C 3050 sounds mighty good, and sonics improved after warm-up and a few days of playback. Highs, lows, and mids shine through with solid balance, and the 3050 maintains a good grip on the speakers. Regardless of genre, the 3050's signature acoustics render favorite recordings well. It never sounds dull, even with lower-quality recordings, but it's not strident, either. NAD did a great job balancing detail retrieval with a touch of warmth, just like their legacy products. The C 3050 provides a stellar example of how far Class D topology has improved and refined over the last several years.

Bass can sound a tad boomy when streaming through Bluetooth, but that challenge diminishes when using a higher-resolution digital or analog signal. If you want more or less treble or bass, no problem. That's an easy fix with the 3050's tone controls.



Soundtage-wise,the NAD does a great job rendering musical elements extending beyond the speaker boundaries. With albums like Pitch Black's *Rude Mechanicals*, musical elements bounce all over the room and generate a very engaging presentation – even through the Bluetooth input.

You can get greater bass authority, plus a more lifelike and detailed presentation through more powerful and more expensive components. However, sitting and listening to the C 3050 for hours while watching the VU meter indicators rock back and forth is gratifying. It's a great piece of gear.

**Summing up**

The NAD C 3050 base model costs $1,399, the 3050 with MDC2 BluOS-D upgrade runs $1,899, and the LE version will set you back $1972. The upgraded packages are an excellent choice for those willing to stretch their budget a little, providing extra versatility and future-proofing. While we could not test it, the LE version's room correction tools can substantially improve overall musical portrayal.

Using similar functionality through a Roon Nucleus certainly does. The base model C 3050 is still a marvelous option for those seeking an economical entry point who don't want or need the BluOS module's capability.

Whichever version they choose, prospective owners will enjoy enormous value from the C 3050 package. For the price tag, a buyer gets an amp, preamp, phono stage, headphone amp, and multiple options for digital playback. In the world of hi-fi, any one of those components can cost a lot more than the entire C 3050. Plus, it delivers on the most crucial characteristic – great sound. If you seek a turnkey integrated amplifier system, the NAD C 3050 is an excellent choice for price-performance playback.

**Additional listening**

Giving the C 3050's MM phono section a spin proves rewarding. This is a great place to start your vinyl journey. Plugging in the Technics SL-1200GR with Ortofon 2M Black delivers a dynamic, quiet and musical vinyl experience. Even with a more budget rig (used vintage Technics table and vintage A-T MM cartridge) this adds to an already well rounded integrated.

Like Rob, I had a C3020 back in the old days and actually, that's how we met. I had asked Kurt Doslu at Echo Audio here in Portland if he knew anyone with a 3020 I could borrow and the rest is history - *Jeff Dorgay*




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TIME WITH IT

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# Coincident
## Frankenstein Stereo

### Not a Monster at All.

$2,499 (without 300B output tubes)
coincidentspeakers.com

Joni Mitchell's lovely voice always lends itself to a great match with SET amplifiers and my Heretic AD612 speakers. Tracking through a copy of *Court and Spark*, a record I've been listening to for a long time starts out great, becoming more sultry with each track as the amplifier warms up from ice cold. By the time the next record (Santana's Abraxas) is up, the big soundfield has become huge and the amplifier gets more control in the low frequencies. By an hour, the tubes are fully warmed up and stable, offering even more tubey goodness.

Coincident's owner, Israel Blume is a clever guy. Instead of selling his Frankenstein Mk.II 300B stereo SET power amplifier with one 300B or other and have everyone argue about his choice, he's put all the quality into the amplifier, letting you choose your favorite pair. If you've never had the pleasure of experiencing one, they manage to create a special kind of audio magic with a pair of efficient speakers that is nearly impossible not to embrace.



Blume has built a company and a reputation on producing components delivering high musical involvement at incredibly affordable prices. I've used several of them over the years and they always deliver excellent results. I'm a big fan of the highly polished casework too. This is a great looking amplifier.

While cliches like "game changer," "giant killer," and the like abound, the reason for the Frankenstein's level of high performance is more practical. Because Coincident has always taken the manufacturer direct route, the 40-80% markup usually taken by dealers and importers is passed on to the customer. Leaving the final output tube choice to the user saves money and lets you decide how far to take things. Think of the Frankenstein stereo as a prepped race car that you merely need to do the fine tuning on to your preference.

## Unboxing and setup

The Frankenstein keeps it simple with a single pair of RCA inputs and an IEC power socket. However in addition to the power switch (tastefully on the back) is a toggle switch to float the ground. When using high sensitivity speakers, a little bit of noise can sneak into the presentation requiring you to float the ground. Having this right at your disposal is a nice touch.

Initial listening begins with the supplied 5AR4 rectifier, a pair of 6SL7 driver tubes and a pair of Electro Harmonix 300B power tubes. But this is only where the fun begins. If you've never used 300B tubes, please pay careful attention to the four pins on the bottom – two are slightly bigger in diameter, and if you insert them wrong you will do some damage. As they say on social media, "ask me how I know..." It's a mistake you'll only make once.



The amplifier weighs about 30 pounds, with a relatively compact chassis. No tube cage is supplied (I never use em anyway, and again another cost saving/value adding measure.) If you have kids or pets, place your Frankenstein accordingly. Because this amplifier has no features to speak of, and requires no adjustments for bias, etc., we don't have much to discuss in this department. Plug it in to your preamplifier, turn it on, and roll.

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**– Jon Myles, Hifi World**

"The differences were stunning.....What I can state is that the Ultra Black 11 cables are currently the best I have heard in my system."

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**– Chris Kelly, The Ear**

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**The relatively stock sound**

As the Frankenstein doesn't come with 300Bs, and so many have their favorite, it's tough to describe the out of the box completely. The EH 300Bs were chosen because of their reasonable price and availability. You should be able to find a pair of these at nearly any tube store.

There's a certain signature sound that 300B based amplifiers exhibit – more extended at both ends of the frequency spectrum, and a little less liquid than 2A3 or 45 based amplifiers. With 98dB/1-watt speakers, I'll take the dynamics offered by the 300B over a few extra molecules of midrange tonal saturation.

While it might seem unorthodox to play Rush through a 300B system, listening to Neil Peart's drum and percussion work through the Frankenstein is simply breathtaking. Where far more expensive 300B amplifiers I've tried fall down with this test, the Coincident amplifier follows every nuance. In addition to a high level of texture served up, and incredibly dynamic attack, this dense music is served up in a way you can hear everything.

No need for more cowbell.

All those Rush tunes just fanned the flame for some King Crimson and Yes, this time listening more for bass extension and speed. Again, the Frankenstein does not disappoint. The rapid-fire delivery from both bands comes through clean and with enough weight, you might not think you are listening to an SET.

Great as musical information at the frequency extremes is delivered, the real allure of this amplifier is the natural tonality and enormous soundstage it can generate. This is why so many audiophiles that lean more towards female vocal music lean towards the SET. Passing the signal through a single tube eliminates many of the electronic artifacts that make your brain think you are listening to a hifi system instead of music. Ditto for acoustic instruments.

Even if you're an SET fan, you'll be taken back at how pure stringed instruments and pianos sound – there's so much texture and decay. It's creepy good. Once the tubes are warm, you'll be hard pressed to escape the gravitational pull of your couch or listening chair beyond changing a record if you're a vinylista. Streaming via the dCS Vivaldi kept me on the couch for hours on end nearly every time I fired up the Frankenstein. And I'm keeping the review sample, so I can't pay it a higher compliment.



### Tube exploration

Good as this sounds, there's more. Swapping the three tubes in the front for a vintage rectifier, a pair of RCA 5691 "Reds" (the black plate version) and a pair of Western Electric 300Bs brings performance to an entirely different plateau. If you say I'm crazy for putting $2,000 worth of tubes in a $2,500 amplifier, I'd say "guilty as charged." However, the increased performance is well worth it.

The WE's bring more extension, bass grip and an overall smoothness that you don't hear as readily until you switch back for a few minutes. It's like going from swimming in a big pool to swimming in the ocean. Bigger everywhere. And again, underscoring how good the basic circuit is.

Revisiting the same tracks used for initial listening reveals much more front to back depth. When listening to Joni Mitchell sing "Raised on Robbery," her lead vocal is further out front, and her overdubbed backing vocals are further back than before. This improves even further with the NOS 5691s. Adding these tubes serves up more smoothness and a complete lack of grain. Regardless of the tubes you choose, this amplifier is incredibly quiet, adding to the further sense of dynamic drive. Again, stopping by any audio forum with give you some more info on tubes, or drive you crazy. It's up to you, but know this – the Frankenstein responds well to premium tubes.

"This amplifier responds well to premium tubes..."




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**Simply wonderful**

This amplifier delivers such a high level of musical realism, you might never want to listen to a solid state amplifier again. You may never want to listen to another amplifier again. The key to success with an 8 or 9-watt per channel amplifier is the right speakers. If you find the right speakers for your Frankenstein, you'll be loving it.

The 300B single ended triode amplifier is a model of simplicity. Simple to the point that almost anyone can make one. Getting one to sound great is another movie and getting one to sound great for a reasonable price, still another level of attention to detail. Frank is in the last category, and considering how involving this amplifier is, I can only imagine how good the Frankenstein monoblocks are with even more power supply and fine tuning. Precious few people can make a great 300B amplifier, at any price.

I'm happy to go on record saying this is one of the finest 300B amplifiers I've had the pleasure of listening to.

The level of high frequency extension and bass grip offered by this amplifier, even with budget 300Bs reveals major attention to power supply design and transformer choices. Going this route still has you sporting a killer 300B amplifier. At this price I highly suggest spending time on the 300B planet, even if you don't stay there. And don't bother looking for a used one – I've rarely ever seen Coincident gear for sale on the secondary market. People tend to keep them.




In closing, I'm happy to present the Frankenstein with our Product of The Year Award in the low powered amplifier category. And as I like to say... JFBO. (Just F***ing Buy One) You'll be glad you did.

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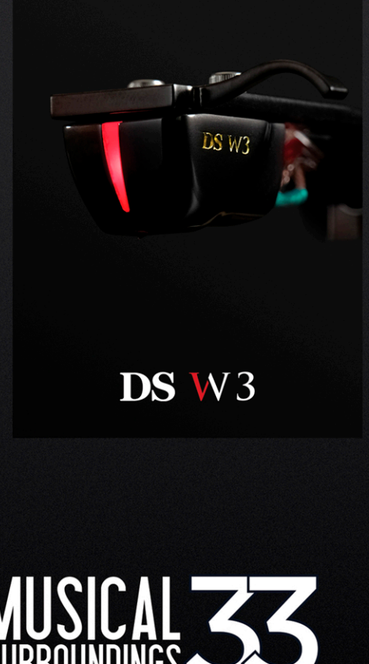



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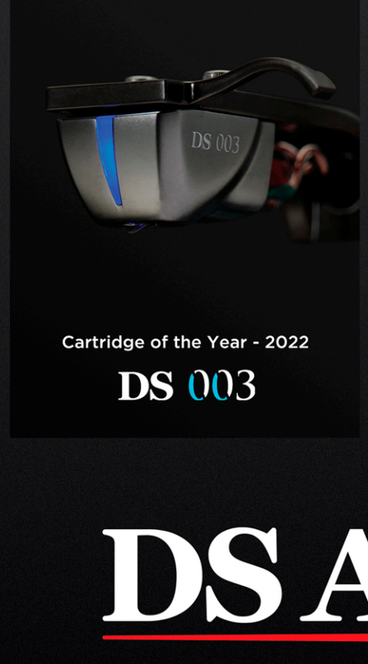
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DS MASTER 3

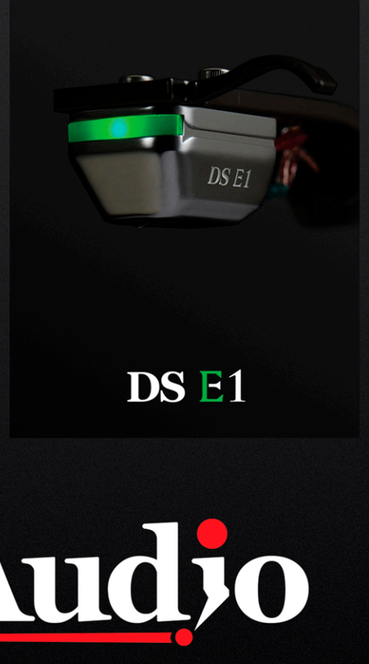



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DS Audio
Creating the Future of Analog Music

Review

By Jeff Dorgay

# Totem
## Tribe LCR In-Wall Speakers

When you need a place to hide.

$4,400/pair
totemacoustic.com

When space is at a premium, think in-wall. Much like the word "lifestyle" used to be somewhat unspeakable, and so it was for speakers designed to be installed in your walls.

**Fast forward to now**

Today, several of the world's finest speaker companies have applied the knowledge acquired by building floor-standing speakers to create in-wall products. Now, you'll see the same level of sophistication in crossover, driver, and baffle designs brought to the in-wall game. Many of us immersed in the two-channel world don't know how big the custom install game is. It's huge. While a handful of architectural customers don't care how their in-wall system sounds any more than someone proclaiming that a car is merely something to get from A to B, plenty of us with audiophile sensibilities still need more performance. With that, we present the Totem Tribe LCRs.

My current 2.1 AV system already uses Totem Kin Play Tower speakers, and there's no place to put in-wall speakers, so the Tribe LCRs have been incorporated into my garage system. I spend a lot of time there, so having a mega garage system is a major treat. And we're seeing an awful lot of high-end garages - go no further than the Instagram page @dreamgarages. I hope this review will influence some garage owners to pony up for a pair of Totems for their space!

At $4,000 a pair, these are not inexpensive speakers, and considering there is no big wood cabinet, rest assured these speakers deliver the performance of a pair of Totem's top-range floorstanding speakers, costing even more. The quality of the drivers, crossover networks, and attention to fine detail are the same.




**What's hiding behind the wall**

Each of the Tribe LCRs is in a compact, sealed enclosure, only 25.51 x 7.09 inches. (648 x 180mm) And to fit inside your favorite walls of 2x4 construction, only 3.75 inches deep. (95.25mm). To get solid bass out of the dual 4-inch woofers, the LCRs incorporate a pair of 5-inch passive radiators with a 1-inch titanium-infused soft dome tweeter.

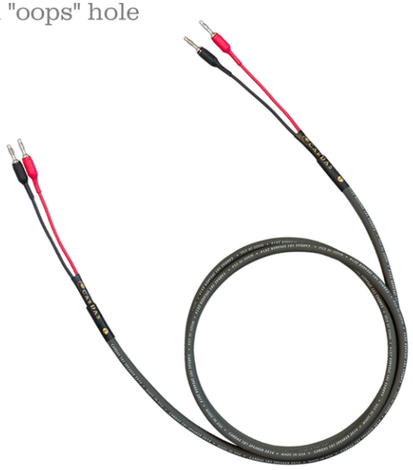
A tiny, paintable "virtually bezel-less" bezel of white metal paintable grill covers the enclosure with ease. There is a single pair of 5-way gold-plated binding posts around the back for easy connection to your favorite speaker cable. If using stripped/tinned leads, firm up those connections. You won't want to take it all apart again.

With a 6-ohm nominal impedance and a rated sensitivity of 91dB/1-watt, these speakers will produce plenty of music with everything from an inexpensive starter AV receiver to an audiophile tube amplifier. They are very tube-friendly, so the Tribe LCRs might be an excellent solution for a den, study, or office where you'd like a high-quality, low-footprint system.

**For the commitment adverse**

If you're still in the construction phase, Totem has a kit to build space for your LCRs and save time. However, if your walls are up and the thought of cutting holes in the walls scares the heck out of you, I understand. If you or a friend are handy with a table saw, cut a temporary enclosure slightly bigger than the speakers and tack the boxes to your walls with some wide Velcro. A bit of peeled paint from removing the Velcro will be much easier to repair than an "oops" hole in the wall.

Consider how you will be listening to your Tribe LCRs in your room. If you are more couch-bound, if they will be more part of a theater environment or even a stealth two-channel system, you may like the tweeters placed closer to ear level. However, suppose it's more of a party room, or one for less critical listening. In that case, you can get away with mounting the speakers higher, as the Tribe LCRs have great horizontal dispersion. Otherwise, cut the hole so the tweeters are about 48 inches and be done with it. But I suggest experimenting a little, even if you put them up on a bookshelf, to get a feel first.



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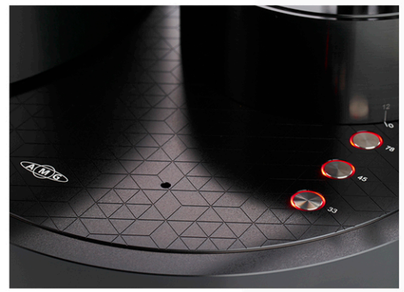
Hand made in Germany by master machinist Julian Lorenzi, the Forte Turbo is AMG's reference-level flagship turntable. The Forte is machined from a solid aluminum billet and incorporates AMG's celebrated oil-damped bearing, decoupled spindle, 24v DC brushless motor, upgraded linear power supply, and reflex clamp.



FORTE POWER SUPPLY



12JT TURBO TONEARM



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SIERRA SOUND



The speakers weigh about 15 pounds each.

One final note: these are high-quality speakers; spend the extra money on hooking them up to your source with good speaker cable. You can head out to the internet and argue a month of your life away, or call the folks at Cardas Audio to help you out. I'm using runs of their 101 bulk speaker cable with excellent results. Aside from the sound quality, Cardas wire is nice and flexible if you need to snake things around to reach your amplifier.

**The sound**

As I mentioned earlier, the Tribe LCRs are a considerable step up in dynamics and resolution from my Totem Kin Play speakers (as they should be) and much closer to the overall sound of the $8,400/pair Element Fire v.2 speakers. The only thing they lack is serious low bass (the spec lists the low end at about 60Hz, but if you put these in a multi-channel system or even a 2.1 system, you'll either install an in-wall sub or have something floor-standing. Totem makes an excellent architectural sub, should you want to keep it all in the same sonic family; however I used my Totem Solution Sub for the review period. And I'm not ready to cut a hole in the garage wall yet. That commitment thing.




*Enjoy the Experience*




PASS

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## “With an equally good amplifier and source driving them, the Totems rock...”

You might even wonder if you need a pair of speakers on stands anymore. They are that good. Running through a wide gamut of material from solo vocalists to serious hard rock, the Totems never run out of drive.

The dynamic range that allows them to excel with the wildest rock or electronica assures an equally satisfying with your favorite movies and, of course auto racing. As mine are in the garage, they make for extremely satisfying Formula 1 coverage. I truly enjoyed having them cranked up as Max Verstappen clinched the 2023 Driver's Championship in Qatar this fall. There may be another pair of these and a massive surround receiver in next year's budget....

Best of all, these are fantastic speakers for people who crave high-end sound but just don't, won't, or can't have a big pair of speakers in their listening environment.

As we have four pairs of Totems in our family with the addition of the Tribe LCRs, I'm a fan. #toneaudioapproved.






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# Scorpions
## *Love at First Sting, and...*




Andrey Medina is from El Paso, Texas. I've been following him on Facebook for years now, and in addition to his incredibly good taste in music, animation, and Mexican cuisine, he has the best rock T-shirt collection I've ever seen. One day I asked him if he would share some of his collection with us and bam.

Is this a tribute to the legendary Scorpions, or what? Who's going to be joining us in vegas to see them this year?



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*What Hi-Fi?*, *LP International* & *Hi-Fi News* among many others already fell in love.
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WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ Epos ES14N, 01/2023
lp INTERNATIONAL
hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

For further information please contact info@epos-loudspeakers.com
Distributor in Canada: www.gramophone.ca

Epos Loudspeakers, Maxstraße 75, 45127 Essen, Germany, Tel: +49 (0)201/236412 **epos-loudspeakers.com**

Playlist no.3

## Female Vocals Playlist - No Patricia Barber

If you've ever stepped in a HiFi store or a room at a hifi show, there's an abundance of female vocal tracks being played. A lot of them you've probably heard way too many times.

So here's some alternatives to the stuff you usually hear. Might even get you thrown out of the place.




**The Pretenders** - Bad Boys Get Spanked

**Cardi B** - W.A.P.

**Patti Smith** - Because the Night

**Blondie** - Attack of the Giant Ants

**Eurythmics** - Would I Lie to You?

**Grace Jones** - Warm Leatherette

**Christina Aguilera** - Live With Me (With Mick Jagger)

**Neneh Cherry** - Phoney Ladies

**Betty Davis** - Game is my Middle Name

**Roberta Flack** - Where is The Love? (With Donny Hathaway)



MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS CELEBRATES **33 YEARS** OF THE BEST ANALOG GEAR

# TURNTABLES OF THE YEAR




* MASTER INNOVATION
The Absolute Sound 2020



* OVATION - The Absolute Sound 2011



* CONCEPT - Stereophile 2021

clearaudio
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* REFERENCE JUBILEE
Stereophile 2022

MONOTONE by Jeff Dorgay

# BAT
## VK-80t
## Stereo Power Amplifier

A substantial update

$11,995

balancedaudio.net

Listening to Fleetwood Mac's self-titled record from 1975 with the BAT VK-80t powering the YG Acoustics Hailey 3s is incredibly involving. The YGs are so resolving, I truly love the warmth that tubes bring to the mix. It's always a fun part of the audiophile experience to hear small details and nuances so clearly in a recording you've been listening to for decades. The tightly woven harmonies of Stevie Nicks, Lindsey Buckingham and Christine McVie all float between the speakers in a way that seems to happen much easier with tubes and vinyl than any other combination.

After spending a lot of time with BAT's flagship REX power amplifier ($25,000) and the VK-56SE that I've had for years, the anticipation to see what they could come up with at the $12,000 price point is high. I must admit, I'm a huge fan of BAT since I reviewed and bought the first piece of their gear about 15 years ago. BAT does an equally fantastic job with circuit design and visual execution - they look as powerful as they sound.



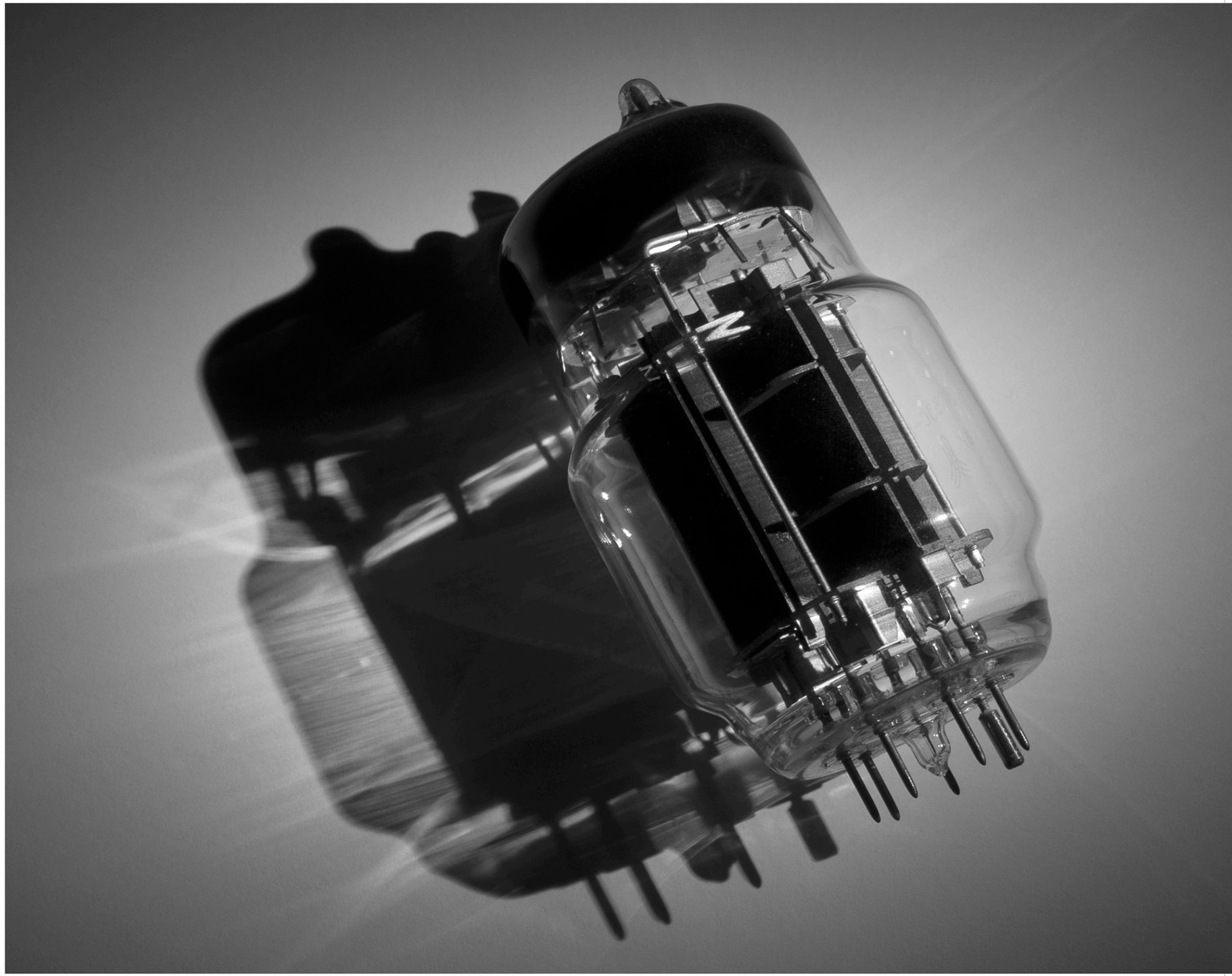


Unlike a few tube amplifier manufacturers striving to build tube amplifiers without "a sound," (a just pursuit, just not my cup of) the sonic signature of a BAT amplifier is unmistakable. Their sheer dynamic power, weight, and expansiveness are like no other. Eyes closed I doubt you would mistake a BAT amplifier for something else.

No doubt part of this comes from their full triode output stage (not just running a pentode tube in triode mode), based on the Russian 6C33 tube. I know I'm being biased here, but I absolutely love the sound of BAT tube power amps. If you're going to deal with tubes, let's have some tube sound, eh? But don't let me sway you with expectation bias – however I suspect you will strongly respond one way or another.

The VK-80t begins the BAT tube power amplifier lineup at $12,000, delivering 60 watts per channel into 4 or 8 ohms in stereo mode, but can be updated at the factory to be a monoblock amplifier, or ordered that way to start. It is a fully balanced amplifier, with a push pull, triode output stage. There is only a single pair of XLR input jacks on the rear panel, with no provision for RCA inputs.

In addition to four 6C33 output tubes (two per channel) a pair of 6H30s and 6SN7s make up the input/driver stages, along with a pair of 6922s that are under the chassis. I've never seen NOS 6C33s, so that aspect of tube rolling is off the table, however if you can still find some original NOS 6H30s floating around, they will bring one more click of refinement to your VK-80t. Think of the 6SN7 as more of a tone control. There are many variations on this tube, and will all sound different, not necessarily better. The one advantage to some of the vintage 6SN7s is that they will last almost forever. However, the VK-80t is just fine right out of the box.



**Time for some female vocals**

About ten years ago, BAT amplifiers had a bit of a heaviness to them, which drove some away. Current BAT products have eliminated that heaviness, kept the glorious midrange, and now deliver even more extension at the frequency extremes. What's not to love? Relying on the YGs and the Acora Acoustics SRC-1s – both very resolving yet natural speakers, the listening begins with the older VK-56SE and an early performance of Maria Callas performing *Carmen*.

This is such a good test for midrange, because of the delicacy presented by the various vocalists. Good as the VK-56SE is, when switching to the VK-80t, it's as if the room doubles in size. Swapping to the REX blows the walls down, but it's a linear progression. This is one of the most impressive aspects of BAT gear – their components do not have a "point of diminishing returns." They just keep revealing more music. But not everyone can work a REX into their budget/system. If you dig the way BAT presents music, the VK-80t is wonderful, and if you already own a VK-56 or older, there's enough of an increase in performance, you might just want to trade up.

When Callas enters the performance gently, the VK-80t tracks her voice perfectly, reproducing it in a small way when required, but having the required dynamic reserve to capture her most powerful passages without compression. The earlier amplifier does not breath in as concise of a way. At least in the context of my system, the ARC 80S feels some what thin, and my reference PrimaLuna EVO400 not as nuanced. Putting this in perspective, the ARC amp is $16k and the PrimaLuna only $5k.

Don't think I'm getting all geeky and audiophile-y on you, I just love opera. I can't even tell you why. Going way to the opposite end of the female vocal channel, the way the VK-80t handles the dissonant extremism of Diamanda Galas's "Let's Not Chat About Despair," makes Tom Waits feel like a Disney character. Her album *You Must Be Certain of the Devil*, is so full of space (and honestly a fair helping of despair) the VK-80t creates a sonic landscape that feels scary like the most frightening haunted house you've ever been in. Stephen King scary. Maybe scarier.



## Further exploration

Low bass texture and speed is a major attribute of the VK-80t. Forget the myth that tube amps can't deliver low, weighty, defined, powerful bass. Cranking up the BAT loud with Zillatron's "Fuzz Face," delivers the goods. Bootsy Collins' signature growly, funky bass is in full effect here.

After Callas and Galas, everything else in the female vocal genre is cake, but again the delicacy that this amplifier delivers along with the sheer dynamic drive is pure musical satisfaction. Tracking through Richard Thompson's The Old Kit Bag is a similar experience – this album is full of vocal richness, with decay that goes on forever. The way these big triodes reproduce this type of music that is sparse and complex all at the same time is a special experience.

The most fascinating aspect of the BAT power amplifiers though is the way they retain such a dynamic, punchy sound, even though they are triode amplifiers. Many tube amplifiers that give you the option of switching between pentode (or ultralinear) and triode mode, soften up and mellow out a bit in triode mode. Not the VK-80t. This amp rocks no matter what the choice of program material.

While most of my listening was with the reference Pass XS PRE, as we have the matching BAT VK-80 preamplifier in for review, only compounds the richness of the experience. Using the BAT pre with the BAT power amplifier was never too much of a good thing. The BAT components excel at reproducing musical scale – nothing sounds over-blown, or compressed in the way that some amplifiers do. Some amplifiers trade mediocrity for dynamics so that nothing sounds terrible, yet nothing sounds glorious, and others are relentless with fine detail so that only the finest recordings deliver a satisfying musical experience. The BAT components strike a perfect balance. The average recordings in your collection will still sound pretty good (yay tubes) but your best recordings will sound glorious.



## More about tech and construction

A while back, BAT gave their tube power amplifiers a big, curved handle at the back of the amplifier to aid in picking it up, especially nice, considering more of the weight is at the back with the massive power and output transformers. The VK-80t is 48 pounds, so most of you should be able to pick it up and maneuver by yourself. If you're new to the 6C33 tube, they produce a lot of heat compared to a KT88, KT120, or KT150, so be sure your amplifier has plenty of ventilation room. As with any tube power amplifier, the VK-80t needs about 30 minutes to sound its absolute best.

The VK80t is a fully balanced design, not relying on transformers in front of a single ended design, however it does lack the bridged, symmetrical design of the VK-90t and REX. With a total of ten tubes, you will be looking at about $1,500 when it is time to re-tube, but my experience with BAT has always been that they run their tubes fairly easy, so you won't be looking for a pallet of tubes in a year.

Like all BAT gear, the Vk-80t is available in a silver or black anodized finish. The quality of the anodized finish on their gear is extremely high, and if you look closely at the way the chassis panels line up, you'll observe the care in their assembly. Unlike several manufacturers that cut corners on fasteners, BAT uses all allen head screws that will not round off after one go. Overall, the level of mechanical construction is more on par with the Swiss manufacturers – very impressive.

Long tube life is only part of the story. BAT uses a very sophisticated auto-bias system, so you'll never have to mess with biasing and re-biasing tubes. This also means you won't need perfectly matched output tubes either. Finally, other than the main power supply fuse, the rest of the VK-80t uses a new fuseless protection scheme, so you don't have to worry about your amplifier going down in the middle of a listening session. BAT has done everything possible to take the potential inconveniences out of using tubes. Like all the other BAT products I've owned or reviewed, the VK-80t sounds great out of the box, but over the first 100 or 200 hours it will open up and reveal even more music. Open it up, plug the tubes in and listen. It's so involving, you'll be surprised how fast that goes by.



Versatility in speaker matching that is wider than most other tube amplifiers, is another unique BAT feature. They give you low (3-4 ohm), medium (4-6 ohm), and high (6-8 ohm) output taps. Try the obvious first, but feel free to experiment. The low setting works incredibly well with the MartinLogan ESL9s on hand, where medium was the best for the Fink Team Kim speakers and the high setting for the Peak Consult Sinfonias. You'll know you have it just right when you get the best balance of dynamics, solid bass response, and the most transparent transition from low to mid bass. I'd suggest waiting a few months until the amplifier is fully broken in and you are really familiar with it to get the best results.

In the end, I love this amplifier. I hope that I have given you enough insight into this product to convince you to investigate for yourself without me coming off as a fanboy. However, after 40 years of listening critically, there are certain products that never cease to be exciting to audition. The BAT VK-80t is definitely on that list. Whether you choose this one, the VK-90t, or the REX will depend on your budget, but either will bring years of musical satisfaction.




**Peripherals**

**Digital Source** dCS Vivaldi ONE, Aqua LaScala

**Analog Source** SME 20 turntable w/IV.Vi arm and Hana Umami Red cart

**Preamplifier** Pass XS PRE and BAT VK-80

**Phonostage** Pass XP-27 and Nagra Classic

**Speakers** Team Fink Kim, MartinLogan ESL9, YG Hailey 3, Peak Consult Sinfonia

**Cable** Cardas Clear

Our Product of the Year Awards celebrate what we feel is the ultimate expression of a particular component, whether it be at a specific price point, or technological achievment.

While we take a more “concierge” approach at TONE,trying to find what we feel are the most exciting products to put onyour short list, the TPOY products deliver even more.

Much as we hate to use the B-word the selections that follow represent the “best of the best” of what’s come through the door this year.

We’ve completed full reviews on nearly all of these, but a couple are still in process, with final copy to follow in early 2024.

We do not expect you to spend your hard earned income on anything, simply because we think it’s fantastic, but is our hope that should you be looking for something in one of these categories, you would at least give our choices a listen.

Our hope is always that if any of these products warrant your investigation, you would enjoy them as much as we have.

It’s all about finding that special piece of gear that will take you somewhere you’ve never been.

All of these items pass that test.






TONE TPOY 2023 Product of the Year








# Overall:
# Enleum Amp-23R

$6,250
enleum.com

TONE TPOY 2023 Product of the Year

Every now and then, something comes along that completely redefines the parameters for what you expect from a component.

The level of sheer sound quality that the Amp-23R delivers is what you might expect to hear from a stack of seperates costing ten times as much, or even more. And we don't normally engage in that kind of banter. However, it's true.

The only limitations the AMP-23R has is three inputs, and 25 watts per channel of output power. Before you freak out about the price, remember, a couple of other great low-powered integrateds we love from Pass, Luxman, and Nagra cost considerably more.

If you have high sensitivity speakers, you'll be in heaven, especially if you really don't want to mess with tubes, and even those of you with modestly efficient speakers that don't need to raise the roof will still be amazed at the sonic benefits of the Amp-23R.  Oh yeah, it has a killer built-in headphone amp too, which some other reviewers claim is worth the price for that alone.

So there you have it. Be prepared to get the credit card out for this one.






# Speakers:
# Peak Consult Sinfonias

$60,000/pair
peak-consult.dk (subject to currency variations)

TONE TPOY 2023
Product of the Year

Damn, the Peak Consult Sinfonias are an incredibly natural sounding pair of speakers!

In addition to everything written in the review, the biggest compliment we can pay is that the Sinfonias are a set of speakers you can listen to for days and never tire of them.

Fantastic in every way.



# Power Amplifier:
# Balanced Audio Technology VK80t

$11,995
balancedaudio.net

It kinda looks like we're heading back to the glowing bottle side of the fence, doesn't it? BAT has been hitting it out of the park with every one of their new relases.

Fantastic mechanical design, powerful,musical circuitry, and those big triodes! How cool is that?

Listen to a BAT before you spend anywhere near this kind of money on something else with tubes. Trust us on this.




# Preamplifier:
# conrad-johnson
# ART 88

$28,000
conradjohnson.com

Whenever conrad-johnson releases a piece in the Art collection, it is something truly special. The ART88 goes the extra mile to keep that tradition intact.

C-J's preamplifiers have always been at the top of reviewer's best of the best list, and for good reason. Every C-J box says "It Just Sounds Right" on the side, and it's so true.

The ART88 has everything in abundance: dynamics, subtlety, and a tonal quality that will spoil you for anything else. Just don't ask them to make it in silver, black, or offer balanced connections.

One of the best money can buy.



TONE TPOY 2023
Product of the Year

# Amplifier/Low power:

## Coincident Frankenstein 300B Stereo

$2,499 (without 300B output tubes)

coincidentspeaker.com

If there's ever been a reason to explore the special qualities of a Single Ended Triode amplifier, the Coincident Frankenstein is it.For Twenty-five hundred bucks, you get a solid, basic, building block.  Coincident puts all their energy in the construction and great transformers.

The input tubes will get you going, and you can start with reasonably priced 300Bs. Out of the box with basic tubes will amaze you, substituting premium tubes will floor you.

You need one!

# Amplifier/Low power monoblocks:

## ampsandsound Bryce Monos

$24,00/pair
ampsandsound.com

We can't think of anyone in the US that is really taking to heart the old tradition of building tube amplifiers the way they used to be made in the glory days of McIntosh, Marantz, and a few others like ampsandsound.

From the quality of the transformers, to the thickness of the chassis, to the point to point wiring underneath, these amplifiers are built by hand, with extreme care and attention to detail. A flick of the switch on the rear panel allows you to switch from KT 88 to KT120 or KT150 output tubes.  The Bryce amplifiers run a single output tube in single ended mode.

The result is unlike anything we've heard. You definitely know this is a tube amplifier, yet in addition to the midrange you'd expect from a single ended amplifier, the bass extension is uncanny, and the noise floor feels like a great solid-state amplifier.

If you can live with 12-15 watts per channel, the Bryce Monos should be auditioned at your earliest convenience.



# Analog (phono pre): MolaMola

## Lupe

$9,850
mola-mola.nl

TONE TPOY 2023 Product of the Year

Staffer Chris Harr liked his Mola-Mola Tambaqui DAC so much, he jumped off the cliff for the Lupe phono. After us putting our heads together on the tandem review of the Lupe and the Tambaqui, it's clear that these are both class leading products, that offer so much of the sonic performance (with even more functionality) than many of the crazy money competitors, it would be a crime not to give them Product of the Year status.

From the interesting shape of the casework, to the ability to configure all four inputs from the comfort of your chair makes this one of the most flexible phono stages going. It's also one of the quietest ones we've heard as well.








# Analog (Turntable): Luxman

## PD-191A

$12,495
luxmanamerica.com

The last Luxman table we had in, the PD-171 was a winner, but they've taken it even further with this table.

The new Luxman tonearm is a model of elegance and performance, and combined with their new MC cartridge (a POY last year) is a formidable analog front end at a very reasonable price.

None of our pictures truly do justice to the fine level of machining and assembly that goes into this turntable. It is beautiful to behold, and even better to play records on!



# Digital:
# Mola Mola
# Tambaqui DAC

$13,500
mola-mola.nl




TONE TPOY 2023
Product of the Year

We have to agree with the rest of the critics: the Tambaqui is an incredible DAC.

$13,500 is well out of the budget DAC range, but what you really get with the Tambaqui is that almost undescribable, “un-electronic” feel that only the finest DACs are able to achieve.

Like their phono stage, it has a robust feature set, that is app controlled.

Compact, high performance, very well thought out, and very attractive. A perfect package.

# Personal Listening:
## Focal Bathys

$699
focal.com




TONE TPOY 2023
Product of the Year

Here's what makes the Focal Bathys so cool - they offer a lot of the tech and expertise from the $4,400 Utopias in a $699 pair of phones.

But even better than that, they take advantage of Mimi Hearing technology, that adjusts what you hear to your own ears. No one else is doing this and it makes for one of the best headphone experiences going.

Oh yes, the Bathys also feature a 24/192 built in DAC, 30 hour battery life (verified) and noise cancellation that really works and doesn't cancel the music.

Best of all, they feel like a $4,000 pair of headphones on your head.

TONE TPOY 2023
Product of the Year




# Cable:
## Wireworld Electra and Stratus
### Shielded Mini Power Cords

from $70 (Stratus) and $160 (Electra)
wireworld.com

What has the worst factory power cables? The gaggle of components, about $2k and under, using those two-prong power cords without grounds. Even a lot of TVs use these now.

So many people complain about “expensive cables.” I get it. But Wireworld’s David Salz put as much of their premium, shielded power cable tech as possible into some very affordable two prong power cords with dramatic effect. We’ve tried this with anumber of components now and the result is not subtle. If you’ve got a B&W Zeppelin, Soundbar, or other compact audio device, you owe it to yourself to try a couple of these. You’ll be blown away by the improvement in sound quality and it won’t set you back a fortune.

This is one of our favorite finds of the year!



TONE TPOY 2023
Product of the Year

# Accessory:
## Finite Elemente
## Pagode Master Ref Mk. 2

Configuration determines final price

finiteelemente.com

Nothing combines beauty and functionality like the Finite Elemente audio racks.

They are built with a fanatical attention to detail, make a difference for the better in how your system sounds, and improve the visual appeal of your components by leaps and bounds.

What could be better?

Nothing as far as we are concerned.



TONE TPOY 2023
Product of the Year

# Analog Accessory:
# Black Ravioli Record Ground

$575
blackravioli.com

The people at Black Ravioli are quick to point out that this is NOT a record CLAMP. It is designed to drain the vibrational energy out of the vinyl disc and deliver more clarity in playback.

I know, you probably think it's crazy. But it works. Really well, as a matter of fact. Everything we tried it on from a somewhat knackered old Technics deck to the brand new Luxman 191 pictured here, delivers more detail and a quieter background.

Highly suggested as something to add to your analog arsenal. Once you hear it, you won't be able to do without one.






# Recording:
## Bill Evans
## Some Other Time

$90 vinyl, $995 RTR Tape

2xhd.com

TONE TPOY 2023 Product of the Year

You might know Rene LaFlamme as the one manning Nagra's various trade show booths around the world, always putting on a great demo in the legendary Swiss manufacturer's behalf. Or, you might know him as the mastering engineer of the 2XHD label, producing legendary records that are out of this world good.

Working in concert with his expertise is a mastering suite like nothing else. A pair of Sonus faber Stradiveri speakers (the classic ones) flank his mastering desk, connected to a wall of Nagra's top electronics.

If you love Jazz, you need to make this record part of your collection. And check out the others! They are all worthy of our POY award.



# Playlist no.4

Jim Macnie always has the best choices when it comes to jazz. We always find treasure in his column, so it's always great when he can send us a list of albums he's digging.




**Joshua Redman** - *Where are we*

**Brandon Seabrook** - *Brutallovechamp*

**Linda May Han Oh** - *The Glass Hours*

**Ambrose Akinmusire** - *Beauty is Enough*

**John Coltrane w/Eric Dolphy** - *Evenings at the Village Gate*

**Chief Adjuah** - *Bark Out Thunder Roar Out Lightning*

**Terrence McManus** - *Karacell*

**Dorothy Ashby** - *With Strings Attached*

**Jonathan Blake** - *Passage*

**Nina Simone** - *You've Got to Learn*

**Kris Davis** - *Live at the Village Vanguard*

**Miguel Zenon/Dan Tepfer** - *Internal Melodies*



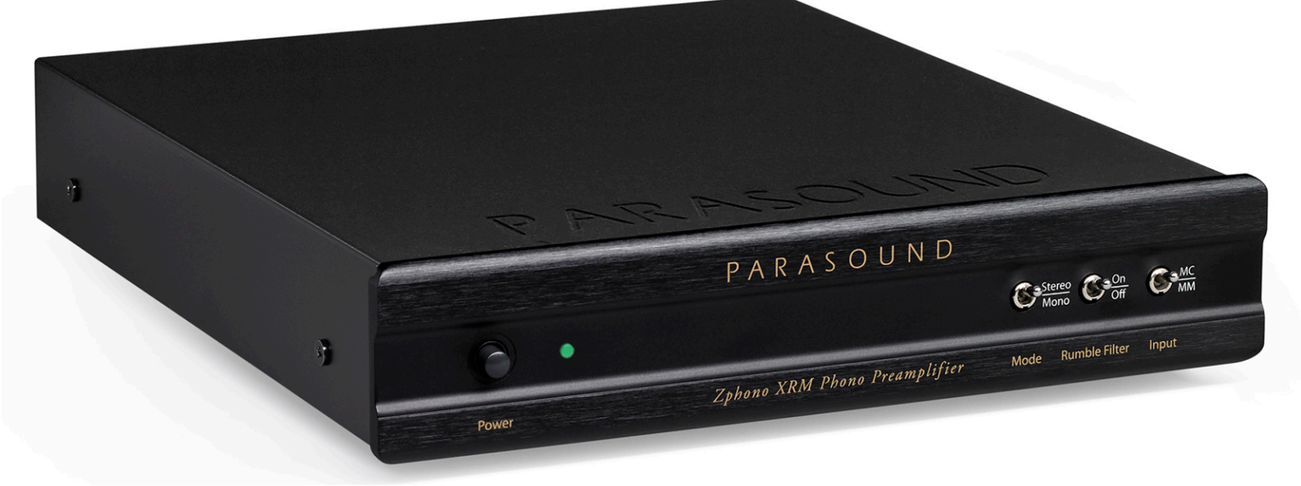
THEY EVEN Paint 'em to Match Your Car...
egglestonworks.com
EgglestonWorks

We seek high value in everything we review, yet some things go above and beyond what is expected at any given price. Such is the nature of the Exceptional Value Awards.

Continuing last year's trend, we had a few more than our usual ten EV awards. We really got a lot of high-value stuff to evaluate this year! This is a trend that is continuing, with so much great gear for those just getting into audio. Thats pretty exciting.

We hope that at least one or two of these manage to make it on your radar, and we thank all of the manufacturers that have sent things our way for review.

Here's to 2024!














EX VAL 2023
TONE Exceptional Value Award

This year PrimaLuna loyalists were rewarded with a phono stage to match the rest of their PL gear. And it's a beauty.

However, in the traditional half-chassis PL form factor, it's a great phono section for the rest of you wanting a bit more tubey goodness to go along with your analog playback.

Being a PrimaLuna, you know it's gonna run forever.

# PrimaLuna EVO 100 Phono

**$3,695**

**primaluna-usa.com**






EX VAL 2023
TONE Exceptional Value Award

# YG Cairn

**$8,500/pair**

**yg-acoustics.com**

The smallest of the YG speaker lineup is every bit a YG, sharing engineering excellence and attention to the finest details, just as in their flagship models.

If you need a small, but high performance speaker, these are fab.




# Emerald Physics 600.2 SE

**$1,995**

**underwoodhifi.com**

Beginning audiophiles on a budget, that don't want to sacrifice sound quality, but need major juice - this is the amp you need!

2023 EX VAL
TONE Exceptional Value Award

# Java HiFi Single Shot

**$8,995 - $9495**

**javahifi.com**

Mid-Century Modern on the outside (and you can customize finishes!) but all 21st Century on the inside.

Priced right, plenty of power, and with the latest in GaN FET devices, this is one of the most inviting class D amplifiers going.

Really a joy to listen to, and always a conversation starter!



EX VAL 2023
TONE Exceptional Value Award

# REL Classic 98

**$1,399**

**rel.net**

The Classic 98 sub from REL is designed for speakers with a more vintage sound, when the speed of a modern REL is a little too fast for the speaker.

We have used these to excellent result with a number of vintage speakers from JBL to our 40 year old Acoustats!

# ATC SCM20

**$5,499/pair**

**atc.audio**

These compact (but heavy!) monitors deliver big studio sound when space is at a premium. If youre really pressed for space, consider the active version, but we were really impressed with the natural ease these delivered.

EX VAL 2023
TONE Exceptional Value Award

EX VAL 2023
TONE Exceptional Value Award

# Focal Vestia no.1

**$1,198/pr.**

**focal.com**




Cool as Focal's gigantic Utopia series is, we are constantly amazed at how much value and performance they are always able to pack into their entry level speakers.

The Vestias continue to deliver maximum value.

# SVS 3000 micro

**$899**

**svsound.com**

EX VAL 2023
TONE Exceptional Value Award

This is the greatest small sub going. Tons of power, a pair of 8 long excursion drivers, DSP, and you can control it from the app. Add SVS' legendary super awesome customer service.

Fantastic!



EX VAL 2023

TONE Exceptional Value Award

# Parasound Zphono XRM

**$499**

**parasound.com**

The Zphono serves up MM and MC operation, along with some features reserved for much more expensive phono stages: balanced output, variable loading and a handy rumble filter right on the front panel.

Robust build quality and stellar sound all add up to an entry level phono pre that is anything but. Which only furthers Parasound's long reputation of top performance at affordable prices.

EX VAL 2023

TONE Exceptional Value Award

# Vera-Fi Vera-Link

**$199/pr.**

verafiaudiollc.com




The tiny Vera-Link class-d amps velcro right to the back of your speakers, and connect via Bluetooth.

They sound great, and are the perfect way to bring sound wherever you are, and a great way to put a spare set of passive speakers to use too.

Definitely the most fun thing we've reviewed all year.

And shouldn't hifi be a little more about fun?

EX VAL 2023

TONE Exceptional Value Award

# Totem Element Fire v.2

**$8,495/pair**

totemacoustic.com



The Totem Element Fire v.2is one of the most powerful compact speakers we've used.

This two way can fill a large room with ease. Natural sound and the solid LF response you expect from Totem.

# Perreaux 200ix

**$7,500**
perreaux.com

EX 2023 VAL
TONE Exceptional Value Award

While the model you see here is more of a "sample," built to show what they could do in the paint shop at Perreaux, you can order your 200ix in any of these fun colors.

With a built-in streaming DAC and phono stage, you won't have to worry about it matching your other gear. Or you can get the standard black or silver.

But why?

PUBC 2023

TONE Publisher's Choice Award

It's back. There's just a few pieces that we loved that really don't fit into a specific category. So here we go.




# SCULPTURE A

## LE PHONO SE

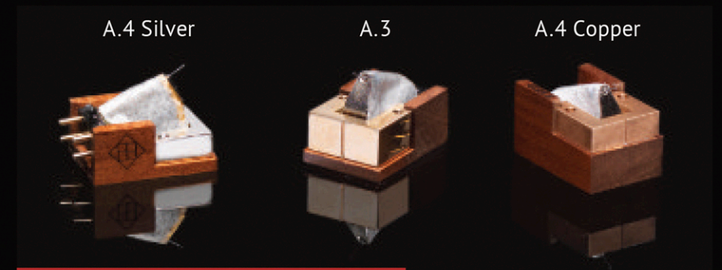
Working strictly as a class A single ended device with no feedback, our phonostage uses only solid state components (no op-amps) with the shortest signal path circuit possible.



Tailor built for your cartridge with carefully selected and matched high end components, it works with any MC cartridge from 0.1mV (74dB of gain) up to 2.5mV.

Le Phono SE, a solid-state design without the usual issues of tube electronics.

*info@ anamightysound.com*




*made by* Ana Mighty Sound

## A.3 & A.4 SCULPTURE A PHONO CARTRIDGES

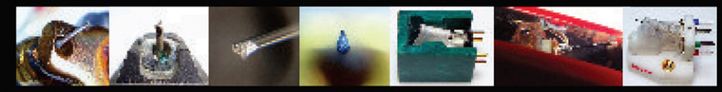
Already awarded by French press with a « Remarquable » award, the A.3 and A.4 phono cartridges display a minimum tracking of 90 micron @300Hz lateral that will allow you to get the full definition of your records. For this we have developed a specific damper and use only boron cantilevers with dedicated geometry diamond tips.

With outputs from 0.1mV to 0.3mV with either silver or copper coils and impedances between 3 to 40 ohms.

It is the perfect companion of our Le Phono Single Ended phonostage and others.

With a compliance of 12 @100hz and three bodies, mixing impregnated wood with pure brass, copper, silver or gold, we are able to fine tune the weight and fine tune the sound of your cartridge to match perfectly the mechanics of your tonearm.

The A.3 is a fixed characteristic design, the A.4 is a tailor made cartridge up to your requests.



*retip*

**Our insights on cartridge "repairs"** What if each cartridge was restored as unique artefact ? We do not believe that glueing a cantilever and diamond tip is enough. Aging has an effect on your cartridge as well as usage wear, dust, hygrometry and UV.

**Cartridge service :** your cartridge does not sound as good as you remember ? The damper might have been tampered with, the azimuth of your diamond tip is starting to be off or maybe the piano wire is getting loose ?

We can check it out and get back the original parameters without altering the parts of your cartridge.

**Fine-repair :** we are able to completely rebuild Neumann DST (or Lumière), Clément cartridges and most MC cartridges available. Open coils ? Stiff damper ? Broken cantilever ? We know how to deal with these issues and will do our best to get your cartridge as close to its original status, even though we can certainly alter your cartridge up to your requests.

Ana MIGHTY SOUND

PUBC 2023
TONE Publisher's Choice Award

# YG Acoustics Hailey

$63,400/pair
yg-acoustics.com



These are some serious floor-standing speakers.

Everything in the YG Haileys is done to perfection, with nothing implemented less than 100%.

As lovely as they sound, they are also a work of acoustic and aesthetic fine art.

If you're looking at the usual suspects in this price range, check out the Hailey's before you write the check.

We think you'll be pleasantly surprised.

# dCS Lina

$31,150 (full stack)
dcsaudio.com

PUBC 2023
TONE Publisher's Choice Award

Last year the Lina stack was our product of the year in the personal listening category, and rightfully so.

But it's gotten even better. With the current software and firmware updates, you can now use your Lina as a control preamplifier to power a two-channel system.

This easily doubles the value of this component. With a single analog input (that's perfect for a phono pre) the LINA now becomes a low profile, high performance front end for your entire system.

dCS has always done a fantastic job in their full sized DACs with this and the Lina carries on that tradition.

Add your favorite power amp, pair of speakers and roll.

I'm seriously thinking of cozying this stack up to a compact Nagra power amplifier when my reviewing days are over and calling it good.

:)



PUBC 2023
TONE Publisher's Choice Award

# BAT VK-80

$9,995
balancedaudio.com

Talking serious value for the dollar here. The new BAT VK-80 linestage is updated from past BAT designs in every way - most notably, it now comes standard with their top super-pak capacitors.

Also, the VK-80 offers balanced and RCA ins and outs, making it more versatile as well.

The sound is all BAT, big, and dynamic, with an updated visual design too.



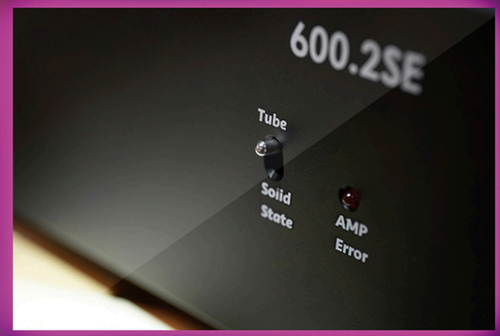

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## Yes it's cheesy.

The further into the issue we get, the more the guilty pleasures hit the turntable mat!



AVIDHIFI
MADE IN THE UK




VOLVERE TURNTABLE

Designed and handcrafted to the same precision engineering standards as the Acutus turntable, bespoke versions of the unique clamping, stainless steel bearing and suspension systems have been developed and applied to this novel design.

External vibrations are dissipated by our variable frequency suspension system, effectively isolating the cartridge from extraneous influence making for a dynamic, powerful sound and full of emotion.

**Volvere bundle including Altus tonearm and Ionic cartridge: $12,999.00**

avidhifi.com | focalnaimamerica.com | Distribution by Focal Naim America | For more information : 1 800.663.9352 / info@focal-naim.com

It's easy to get excited about new gear. A lack of enthusiasm would be scary, don't you think?

Yet, when the initial buzz wears off, the ultimate question is would you pay the money and live with the component you just finished gushing over? Talk is cheap.

Some complain that audio reviewers are granted an industry discount, which usually amounts to dealer cost. However, the physical act of writing a check is more often than not the great equalizer. Rarely does the discount act as a way to *save money.* Access to a better price usually means buying the next model up.

If you know you walked into a record store, and were informed that everything was on sale, would you buy fewer records? I know I wouldn't.

To this end, we've created the #toneaudioapproved award and hashtag out on social media. Maybe you've seen it.

That means we've put our credit card on the table. It's one thing to exhaust your adjective gland in the hope of being quoted somewhere.

It's quite another to have some skin in the game. These are the ones we bought this year.

PS: The additional benefit of purchasing a component means we can keep it longer than the usual review cycle and produce a long-term follow up in a year or two, providing additional insight.










# TONE Audio Approved



FINK team

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turning heads, delighting hearts, igniting passion

Distributor in North America:
matterhornaudio.com
+1 617-494-1400
info@matterhornaudio.com

MATTERHORN
Audio Group

# HANA UMAMI BLUE

$2,500
MUSICALSURROUNDINGS.COM

# TONE Audio Approved

Last year we purchased the Red (and still love it) and now the Blue becomes part of our reference fleet.

This is a seriously great cartridge, and for many, can be your final destination.

# MOFI ONE-STEP

$100 - $125
MOFI.COM

**# TONE Audio Approved**

They keep making em, I keep buying em. Nuff said.

Not only do I give the MoFi One-Step records the #TONEAudio Approved award, I give them my personal endorsement.

-Jeff Dorgay, Publisher


## *Some of us never quit....*

**Now available on 7 and 10-inch reels!**

Reel to reel isn't the only revolution.

If you've always enjoyed making a mix tape, but are tired of the crazy prices for NOS cassettes, now there's an answer.

Try the new Capture C-60 cassettes, from Splicit.

It's a Type 1 tape, with plenty of range, to capture the nuance on your favorite LPs or CDs.

Hence the name.

www.splicit.com

# PS AUDIO
# BHK 600 MONO

$29,999/PAIR
PSAUDIO.COM

# TONE Audio Approved




PerfectWave BHK M600 Amplifier

These things are so big, we had to give them a two-page spread. (and we could still only fit one.)

The BHK 600 monos are a hybrid design, and the final amplifier from the magnificent mind of the late Bascom King.

It's a stunning legacy, and with over 600 watts per channel on tap, a fantastic reference tool, that just happens to sound magnificent as well.

# KUZMA 4-POINT ARM

**$5,869 - $14,230 (ARM LENGTH)**
ELITEAVDIST.COM

**# TONE Audio Approved**

Chris liked the Kuzma 4-point so much, he bought it before we even got started on the review!

And as the Kuzma is one of the finest tonearms going, he made an excellent choice. Depending on your table, and preferences, the 4-Point is available as a 9-inch, 11-inch, and 14-inch tonearm.

The interchangeable head shells make it easy to run multiple cartridges with a single tonearm, but you might end up wanting two anyway!




Start your journey by scanning the QR code or contact your T+A concierge at:
concierge@ta-hifi.com

#musicreengineered
T+A Caruso

T+A
Engineering Emotion

EVERY COMPONENT OF THIS
**AUDIOPHILE-WORTHY HIGH-FIDELITY STEREO SOUND SYSTEM**
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Cabasse

Since 1950

## THE PEARL
$3499 EACH

**MAXIMUM SOUND LEVEL**
118 DB MONO, 124 DB STEREO

**BANDWIDTH**
14 – 27,000 HZ

**DESIGN**
3 DRIVERS, 3 AMPS

**POWER**
1600 W RMS / 3200 W PEAK

**DIMENSIONS / WEIGHT**
12.6" DIAMETER / 40 LBS EACH

2021 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

## THE PEARL AKOYA
(PICTURED) $1899 EACH

**MAXIMUM SOUND LEVEL**
115 DB MONO, 121 DB STEREO

**BANDWIDTH**
30 – 27,000 HZ

**DESIGN**
3 DRIVERS, 3 AMPS

**POWER**
1050 W RMS / 2100 W PEAK

**DIMENSIONS / WEIGHT**
8.7" DIAMETER / 18 LBS EACH

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# TOTEM TRIBE SOLUTION SUB

$2,200
TOTEMACOUSTIC.COM

# TONE Audio Approved

**S**ometimes you need a subwoofer where there's no place for a sub to go.

Totem provides the ultimate "solution" with the sub you see here, aptly named. Under the couch, under the bed, behind the bookshelf.

Anywhere a regular subwoofer won't work, the Totem Tribe Solution gives you the option for big bass anywhere.

What does Marshall Wood, bassist for Tony Bennett, think of his Backert Labs?

"With the Rhumba Extreme preamp, my listening experience immediately became much more satisfying."



Photo courtesy of Provincetown Jazz Festival




"This was a very big step forward in listening enjoyment, feeling more like what I experience when I'm playing bass in a group. It's like I'm right there in the room, hearing every detail of the instruments. The rhythm and pace are delivered with greater palpability than I have ever heard, and the result for me is pure nirvana." – Marshall Wood

## Backert Labs

www.BackertLabs.com

Preamp specialists.

Bass player for Tony Bennett beginning in 2009, Mr. Wood has also played with Monty Alexander, Randy Brecker, Dizzy Gillespie, Scott Hamilton, Anita O'Day, Marian McPartland, Joe Pass, Nelson Riddle, Clark Terry, Phil Woods and many other jazz greats. He is featured on Bennett's double-platinum Grammy award-winning album Duets II, Tony Bennett at 90, and in concert appearances around the world. There was no expectation of an endorsement in this purchase and Mr. Wood paid for his Rhumba Extreme in full.

# TECHNICS SL-1200G

$4,299

TECHNICS.COM

# TONE Audio Approved

I've regretted sellling my 1200 GAE a couple of years ago, so I had to get back on the bus with the closest thing I could find, the new 1200G. Now $4,200 and not made in Japan anymore, this table still seems to be every bit as high quality as the original.



A new gold standard
from PS Audio

StellarGold Preamp and DAC




Once in a great while, an exciting new product design direction comes along that sets a new standard for performance within a price range.

The all new StellarGold DAC and Preamplifier, two essential components that will transform your system.

Our generous trade in program can help you make musical magic today.

PS AUDIO
800-PSAUDIO www.psaudio.com


# NAIM CD5-SI

$1,995
NAIMAUDIO.COM

# TONE Audio Approved

Even though streaming is the rage, putting a disc in and pressing play is still an incredibly satisfying thing.

This deck sounds fantastic, and is built to last, with an incredibly robust CD mechanism.




I'm always tempted to play this record.

I know, that's really corny. Sorry. But this is a classic that never gets old.

And aren't those the records that get you through the best and worst of times?

The swissdigital *Fuse Box* replaces the obsolete, slim piece of wire separating you from your music. The microprocessor circuit that is faster and more sensitive to current anomalies taking its place brings a new level of transparency to your favorite component.

Each swissdigital *FuseBox* is hand built and calibrated to the current requirements of your specific component.

So, just say no to fuses, and enjoy a new level of fidelity.

# JUST SAY NO!

"When playing our reference tube integrated using Vera-Fi Audio's Swiss Digital FUSE BOX, the combination delivers a sense of greater depth and an improved render of acoustic instruments in space."

- Greg Voth/StereoTimes

HEADPHONE.GURU 2023 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
SWISS DIGITAL FUSE BOX
ACCESSORY




Just scan the QR code or go to www.verafiaudiollc.com




Yes, it's that time again.

Continuing our now three year tradition of a special award for great products built by companies that have stood the test of time, these manufacturers get the trophy this year:

AVID, conrad-johnson, and Naim.

Rather than waste your time calling something out as"the best," and then somehow finding a new best before you even get the credit card bill, we feel these products will stand the test of time, and no matter what is introduced after them, you will still be proud to own them.

To us, that is the real benefit. And besides, we think you're way too smart to keep falling for this nonstop barrage of superlatives.

Here are the three that I put my personal stamp of approval on.

Let me know what you think.

-Jeff Dorgay, ***publisher***

jeff@tonepublications.com




TONE

Masterpiece Award - 2023

AVID has come full circle, now their full line of ACUTUS tables also includes their own Nexus arm and Ruby MC cartridge.

Should you be interested, they do produce a full line of loudspeakers and electronics if you want an all-AVID system.

AVID tables have been reference components at TONE for nearly as long as we've been publishing, and they have always been class leaders.

That deserves proper recognition, and we are happy to give the AVID Acutus Classic table this award for 2023.

avidhifi.com



TONE

Masterpiece Award - 2023

I've owned a conrad-johnson preamp of one model or another since 1980 (the PV-1), and have reviewed nearly all of the rest.

At the beginning, their tagline was always "it just sounds right," and they still do. The current ART 88 is just the ultimate expression of that philosophy.

If you pick up any other hifi magazine, c-j preamplifiers have always been at the top of most reviewers lists.

With good reason.

conradjohnson.com









TONE

Masterpiece Award - 2023

Naim has always made incredible CD players. We've reviewed a lot of their digital hardware over the years, and before streaming audio was the norm, their CD555/PS555 combination was my reference.

Though Naim has chosen to concentrate more on DACs and streaming, their sole entry in the CD player market is the $1,995 CD5Si player.

At the end of the review, I had to purchase the CD5Si, not only for old times sake, but because it is just so damn good for the money, and built to last a lifetime. It is by far one of the most musical digital components I've ever heard.

It doesn't stream, it doesn't have digital inputs. It just does a fantastic job playing CD.s. In this ADD world, it is appreciated.

naimaudio.com



## PS Audio
## Stellar Gold DAC

$3,999
psaudio.com

PS Audio is always the champion of delivering high performance and an incredibly useful feature set at realistic prices.

Their new Stellar Gold series incorporates a lot of what they've learned developing past flagship components and offers a multitude of inputs, including an I2S input for their transport, as well as being RoonReady.

Hence the name.









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**Founder is no ordinary loudspeaker.** We've treated every part, large and small, as if it were the most crucial piece of the whole. Every component has been thoroughly researched, designed, engineered, and tested. Not only are the drivers completely new, so is their mounting hardware, the cabinet's internal structure and shape, and even the feet. By leaving no element unaddressed, we've created something that is much greater than the sum of its parts.



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Shown: Founder 120H

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MoFi ELECTRONICS

# SourcePoint Loudspeakers

## Designed by Andrew Jones




SourcePoint 10

SourcePoint 8

## Two Speakers, Countless Accolades

GOLDEN EAR the absolute sound 2023 AWARDS

*"The SourcePoint 10 makes* ***a major statement in the under-$10k speaker category*** *and breathes new life into the concentric loudspeaker genre. At its asking price, it represents a major bargain and* ***a mandatory audition for audiophiles and music lovers alike.***"

- Dick Olsher, The Absolute Sound

stereophile RECOMMENDED COMPONENT 2023

*"Clean, superbly well-defined low frequencies, the natural-sounding midrange, the high sensitivity, the easy-to-drive impedance, the ability to play loudly without strain, and the affordable price, the SourcePoint 10 gets a thumbs-up from this reviewer.*

- John Atkinson, Stereophile

pta

*"The sound of the MoFi Sourcepoint 8 went* **far beyond its "bang for the buck" descriptors** *and provided a refined and balanced sound that should appeal to the tastes of even the fussiest of audiophiles."*

- *Marc Phillips, Part Time Audiophile*

The Audiophiliac

*"Andrew Jones has done it again!"* - Steve Guttenberg, The Audiophiliac

**Experience them in person at your local dealer or learn more online at mofielelectronics.com**

FUTURE TENSE Reviews in our immediate future...



## Fink Team
## Borg Episode 2

$36,490/pair

matterhornaudio.com (NA Distributor)
finkteam.com/products/borg/ (manufacturer)

The Fink Team Kims have been an integral part of our publishers reference component lineup, and considering how much performance they deliver at $12k/pair, we anticipate great things from the new, improved Borg Episode 2.

No Star Trek jokes.

# A New Classic.

The new Mini, A612, and A614 speakers from Heretic will take you back to a friendlier day.

Modern re-imagining of a classic design takes these compact monitors to a place that will make you smile.

Read the full story here.

www.thehereticspeaker.com

Heretic SOUND SYSTEM
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9320 Saint-Laurent Street, Montreal CANADA


FUTURE TENSE Reviews in our immediate future...




## Fine art indeed

$28,000 to $30,000
conradjohnson.com

Now that C-J's ART power amplifier and ART88 preamplifier have been out for a while, they offer the last part of the puzzle to analog lovers - the Art Phono.

This all tube phono stage offers a single MM and a single MC input (with step-up transformer), or it can be configured with two MC inputs.

We still have the Art88 here, so this should be a heavenly combination.

MARTIN LOGAN
Truth in Sound

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ELEGANT EXECUTION,
BEAUTIFUL SOUND.
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**Introducing the all new Motion XT and Motion Series from MartinLogan** – A collection of high-performance speakers for home theater and stereo listening that will elevate your audio experience to new heights. These aren't simple upgrades from their predecessors, but a new level of quality and excellence that makes for an unforgettable experience every time you play them. Reimagined with a bold new look, and a host of audio advancements, we left nothing on the table to bring you our best Motion Series yet.

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Satin White
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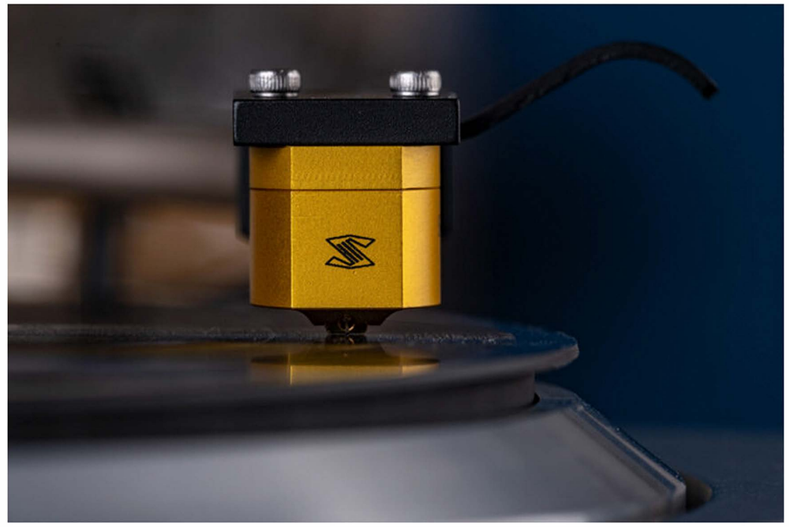
martinlogan.com



## Skyanalog REF
## MC Phono Cartridge

$3,250
skyanalog.com (Factory)
gramophone.ca (NA distributor)

We were really excited about the level of performance that Skyanalog's G-1 delivered, so we are anxious to see what their reference cartridge can extract from the grooves!



PARASOUND

JC 1+ Mono Power Amplifier

Five years in development, the new JC 1+ monoblock amplifier is the ultimate achievement of Parasound and legendary designer John Curl.

"...If someone whispered in my ear and said,
'you're listening to a six-figure pair of amplifiers,'
I would believe them. The JC 1+ monos are that good, that refined, that musical."
*Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio*

"This is a superb-sounding amplifier that will get the best from every loudspeaker with which it is partnered. Well done, Mr. Curl."
*John Atkinson, Stereophile*

Since 1981

Integrity endures.™

www.parasound.com



## CH Precision
## I1 Universal
## Integrated amplifier

$42,000 - $52,000 (depending on config.)

ch-precision.com

While CH Precision is often known more for their top of range, mega-dollar components, the I1 Universal Integrated is a technologicalmasterpiece in the way it delivers much of the sheer capability of their massive seperatecomponents in a more compact package, for those wanting high sound quality, but not neccessarily needing a four-box phono stage or two to four mono-block power amplifiers.

If you choose to add their on-board phono stage, the price tops $50k, but considering what you'd save on cables alone, the I1 is an incredible bargain for top-tier hifi.

You might even say it's an exceptional value. Hmmm.



THE FINE ARTS

In celebration of 40 years in the pursuit
of high-performance in audio,
conrad-johnson is pleased to present
our new limited production ART150
(stereo 150 Watts/channel) and
ART300 (mono 300 Watts) amplifiers,
each a virtual window on the
emotional experience of live music
right in your home.




conrad-johnson It just sounds right.
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# FUTURE TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

## Totem Acoustics Bison Monitors

$2,200/pair
totemacoustics.com

The new Bison series from Totem keeps redefining their price and performance benchmarks.

Their newest little monitors really pack a wallop!



## JBL L52 Classic Monitor Speakers

$1,000/pair
jbl.com

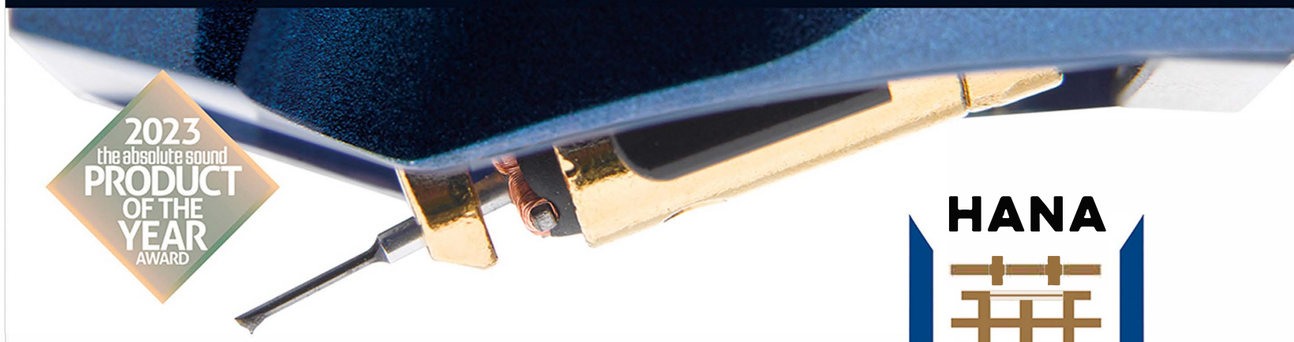
The success of JBL's Classic 100s have prompted two smaller models, the smallest L52 pictured here. As you can see, they have a direct lineage to the most famous speaker in the history of audio, with the trademark orange waffle grilles.

We'll keep you posted as soon as they arrive!






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HANA'S UMAMI BLUE
**CARTRIDGE OF THE YEAR**













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**Umami Blue** - Tone Audio 2023
**Umami Red** - Audiophilia Canada 2022
**Hana SL** - The Absolute Sound 2022
**Umami Red** - The Absolute Sound 2021
**Umami Red** - StereoNET Australia 2021
**Umami Red** - Hi Fi Review Hong Kong 2020
**Umami Red** - Hifi+ UK 2020
**Hana ML** - Hifi+ UK 2019
**Hana SL** - International HiFi Press Awards 2019
**Hana SL** - Tone Audio 2018
**Hana SL** - Mono & Stereo Best of 2018

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MINE it should be YOURS
HOLIDAY SHOPPING EDITION

## Welcome to MINE:

We're not just crazy about music and hi-fi here at TONE. While we can put many labels on our ethos, claiming to be music lovers, audiophiles, or perhaps even qualityphiles, that doesn't even cover it. Having met so many of our readers from all over the globe, our readers are playful and inquisitive to say the least.

You've told us you like automobiles, motorcycles, fine art, bicycles, toys, cameras...Well, you get the picture. Lumping this all under a banner labeled "Style" seems too limiting. Let's face it, we're all a little selfish when it comes to our stuff.

Let's call it what it is - MINE!
We'll be sharing more of our favorites as we go.

This issue, it's time to revisit something we haven't done in a long time, a holiday shopping/gift guide. One of the best parts of this section is turning our readers on to new fun things-toys and such.

In the effort to be more festive, we present an expanded MINE section this month, to give you a few more hints (or to give your favorite someone wielding a credit card some hints) when they ask that fateful, "But I never know what to get you" question.

Point them here. As we do not participate in any "affiliate" programs, the items that do have direct purchase links are strictly for your convenience.

Happy, happy!






No DAC Left Behind!




The New C1.2/C1.2 Mono Upgradable/Expandable DAC/Controller

For over 10-years, the Award-winning CH Precision C1 DAC set the digital standard, its upgradable architecture and sophisticated software keeping pace with digital developments, keeping it at the cutting edge of digital music reproduction.

The new C1.2 eclipses that remarkable performance, offering four times the processing power of the C1, a more accurate MEMS-based, shunt regulated and thermally compensated clock, local regulation for both DSP and FGPA hardware, sophisticated power management to further reduce residual noise and full MQA compatibility.

It all adds up to more of the music, all of the time.

Of course, the C1.2 still offers the same future proof, upgradable, expandable architecture, allowing owners to move from a single box DAC all the way to a seven box digital solution with the same zero redundancy, zero cost penalty and zero risk of obsolescence.

But best of all – and in true CH Precision tradition – any C1 or C1 Mono can be upgraded to full C1.2 status for the difference in price between the units. That's roughly 15% of retail, depending on the age and spec of the C1. Not bad for a decade old DAC!

Digital decoding without the losses – musical or monetary!

DSD Direct Stream Digital · MQA · DXD Digital eXtreme Definition · UPnP · roon ready · qobuz · TIDAL

For a dealer or distributor near you: www.ch-precision.com/where-to-experience

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## Liven up the party with a Bumpboxx...

$299
bumpboxx.com

With a gaggle of speakers, 175 watts of power and a mic, this is the perfect party favor. And, you can sync two of them together for wireless stereo.

Wireless and USB inputs, plus an SD card slot means everyone can join in.

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*– Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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## Portable sound everywhere

$299/pair (450 w/VeraLink)
verafiaudiollc.com

Vanguard has a new pair of small speakers that will knock your holiday socks off. These tiny two-ways are the perfect gift for your favorite music lover. And, if you'd like to use them anywhere, take advantage of the VeraLink bundle to connect directly to your bluetooth source.

Send your kids back to college with good soundin January, or just splurge on yourself.





The perfect size loudspeaker
for any room

aspen FR20

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## A Classic 911 you can actually drive...

$400k (starting)
thersrproject.com

If you've always wanted a "longhood" Porsche 911, and an RS or RSR in particular, this is a car pretty much reserved for race cars, rock stars and the like. Even an average example will set you back a million bucks if you can find one, with the cars needing nothing pushing over four million.

While $400-500k might seem a bit crazy, consider this car starts life as a 3.2Carrera, and everything is gone over top to bottom, so if you can live with aclone (I know I can) you've got essentially a new RSR-ish 911 with no miles on the clock. And you can customize colors, interior options and even some suspension tuning as well.

With new 911 GT3RSRs costing about this much ifyou can get one, do you want analog or digital?



THE COMPONENTS OF EXCELLENCE: LASTING VALUE

Before you buy a new audio component, consider why some people would rather own a used McIntosh than a new anything else.







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*"The best source I know 'for all things McIntosh' is Audio Classics in Vestal, New York. They do a lot of restoration work on McIntosh products and are an authorized McIntosh dealer and service center."*
Jim Hannon,VP/Group Publisher & Senior Writer, *The Absolute Sound*

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## The key to Funktropolis is right here! (awww.)

**By Super 7**

The best $20 you'll ever spend
super7.com

The crew at Super 7, always coming up with innovative desk toys has outdone themselves with this tribute to the king of funk. Their latest, the Bootsy Collins Black & Gold Re-action figure is as funky as it gets.

Buy your favorite bass players one of these and stay forever in their good graces. While you're at it, peruse the Super 7 site, and buy a few things for yourself!






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HiGain ST LoCap
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TONE Publisher's Choice Award
melto2 Remote Controlled Tube Phono Preamplifier
The country that brought us Democracy and The Olympics now brings us award-winning electronics from Lab12.
The experts agree.
part-time audiophile EDITORS' CHOICE
Hifi Pig OUTSTANDING PRODUCT
BEST BUY Award MONO STEREO
LowBeats

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### You know we love our G-Shocks....

$415
tokyo-studios.com

If you can't afford one of those coolio Rolex'es with the Tiffany blue dials, these modded G-Shock watches (with stainless or white rubber straps) are pretty spiffy.

And spend a little time on their site, they have a lot of other fun variations on the theme.





# Don't Let The Size Fool You...



The new **Scout** from Vera-Fi has only been out for a few weeks and is gettting rave reviews around the globe.

This **$299 pair** of mini monitors is amazing audio enthusiasts new and old with its classic two-way design that fits anywhere.

And, cabinet quality you'd expect on far more expensive models.

www.verafiaudiollc.com

"They posess a lot of soul" - Jeff Dorgay, The Audiophile Apartment

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**Give your Christmas and New Year some Hip-Hop holiday flavor...**

$25.99 (on sale!!)
gizmollly.com

Out with the elf on the shelf. Get Snoop on a Stoop instead.

Word.




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## F1 History...

$79.95
hondavintageculture.com

Honda licensed merchandise has released a version of their 1969 F1 pit vest - very cool.

And you thought we only talked about Porsches.






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The new V2 woofers are a dramatic advancement of our famous 7" Torrent driver. Evolved and meticulously developed over the past 10 years, exclusively by Totem, they are at the very top of the world's dynamic speaker pyramid.

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## Cool Stuff From Mo-Fi Distribution
(Part one)

I asked the folks at MoFi Distribution for a few of their favorite gift ideas, and this is what they came back, with links.

We are euqlly impressed with all of these choices and either have reviewed them, or heard them in person, so we give them our stamp of approval as well.

Even if you miss the holiday deadline, sometimes the best presents are the ones you buy yourself?

So maybe exchange some of those lame presents and?

HiFi Rose RS520 All-in-One Network Streamer
$3,695

**Click here to visit site**






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https://www.nottinghamturntablesusa.com

We offer the full line of Nottingham tables:
The Space 294 featured here - *$5,290 (USD) with tonearm*

*Photos courtesy Peter Garvey*

hwdsound@aol.com

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## When you need to make a mixtape...

$38.95 and up
splicit.com

Splicit's capture 914 and 930 open reel (and cassette) tape delivers fantastic sound quality at a price that won't break the bank.

They carry a wide range of other tape, and tape recorder accessories as well. So instead of Netflix and chill, how about mixtape and chill?

# MINE it should be YOURS
## HOLIDAY SHOPPING EDITION

### Watch you weight the right way...

$299
musicalsurroundings.com

You can spend less on a digital scale, but we've been using the Clearaudio Weight Watcher for nearly 10 years now with incredible success. It's one of our favorite analog accessories. We finally had to replace ours because a friend dropped it. The good news is there's a new, improved model.

Never lend your tools to anyone. Make em get their own. Or perhaps suprise a friend with one this holiday season so they won't ask to borrow yours!






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from PS Audio

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Once in a great while, an exciting new product design direction comes along that sets a new standard for performance within a price range.

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800-PSAUDIO www.psaudio.com

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## Keep those cartridges and headshells safe!

$29
audiotechnica.com

Whether you are a DJ, an audiophile, or both - if you have more than one cartridge already pre mounted to a head shell, this is a great way to keep them safe, sound, and dust free.

As the plastic base is a bit light, we'd suggest attaching this base to something heavier, to keep your cartridges from falling over.

A nice wood block perhaps.

Or maybe a gold bar! (If you've really got game)






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TONAPPARATE

TONEIMPORTS.COM

# But you can't have it...



I got so close.

If you've been reading our pages for a while, you know how much I love vintage Nakamich gear. If you by chance collect the 600 series, you know how hard that vertical rack is to get.

If only it had been a little closer to home....

If.


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info@aquahifi.com

# Playlist no. 4

Club Mix compilation expert, Scott Tetzlaff's theme for this playlist is "Global Cabaret." A potpourri of new and old that would feel at home in an eclectic Cabaret setting.




**Wilson Simonal** - Nem Vem Que Nao Tem

**C'mon Tigre, Seun Kuti** - The Botanist

**Dope Lemon** - Home Soon

**El Michels Affair** - Detroit Twice

**Khruangbin** - Time (You and I)

**Ms. Lauryn Hill** - Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You

**Amanaska** - Sleep

**The Pool** - Jamaica Running

**Lunar Disco, Luciano** - Devil's Hands (Luciano Remix)

**Doja Cat** - Paint The Town Red

**Jade 4 U** - Rainbows (Midnight Mix)

**Groove Armada** - At The River



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Tampa, Florida 33609

"Great vibe, nice venue and enthusiastic attendees!
And hey- Florida in February isn't bad either!"
— *Angela Cardas Meredith, Cardas Audio*

"The clientele are enthusiastic about the music. You see people of all ages... it's a lovely show!"
*- Kevin Hayes, VAC*

"The show was well organized, attendees were plentiful and interesting, with many new faces we don't see at other shows."
*- Jeremy Bryan, MBL North America*

# DTMB

## Dealers That Mean Business

We've had this section at the back of TONE for some time now, and actually before we got hit with COVID, and it was easier to just pop in your favorite hifi store for a cursory visit, I was planning on an extended road trip to seek out great audio salons. I'm sorry to say that quest has been on hold for a while.

A few years later, times have changed, the landscape has changed somewhat, but the best dealers have adapted and are still thriving. Innovate or perish, as the saying goes. Most have gone to an appointments only model, which hasn't been all that much of a stretch, because many hifi shops had adopted this model, or at least a semi-appointment model before the current situation. Of course, stricter anti-cooties protocols have been engaged, and for the most part, customers have stayed in the retail game.

We've swapped a few people out here, but most of the dealers we were featuring are still doing well – we are truly glad for this. As it becomes easier and easier to travel again, I'll be back on the road seeking out more great dealers and attending events.

In the issues to come, we're also going to be featuring commentary from these dealers, telling their stories on how they've adjusted, and what, if anything they've learned and changed.

As we move into the year 2022 (which still feels weird saying) I still firmly believe the support from a great hifi dealer is essential to help you wade through the ever increasing complexity of audio, whether it be two channel, theater, or something in-between.

To recap what I've said here before: Nearly every audio system that has failed to achieve the greatness expected of it can be traced back to poor component choice and setup. I've heard a lot of systems all over the world, and it always falls back to these two factors.

The top retailers need our support now more than ever.



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# Dealers That Mean Business - Listings

## Wauwatosa, Wisconsin - Ultra Fidelis

**www.ultrafidelis.com**
**7125 West North Avenue**
**Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53213** 414.221.0200




## Portland, Oregon - Echo Audio

**www.echohifi.com**
**5904 SW Beaverton-Hillsdale Hwy**
**Portland, Oregon 97221** 888.248.3246



# Dealers That Mean Business - Listings

## Vancouver ,Canada - HiFi Centre

www.hificentre.com
433 Carrall Street
Vancouver, BC  V6B 6E3  888.232.9995



## Gig Harbor, Washington - Gig Harbor Audio

www.gigharboraudio.com
3019 Judson St. Suite D
Gig Harbor Washington 98335  253.228.6021




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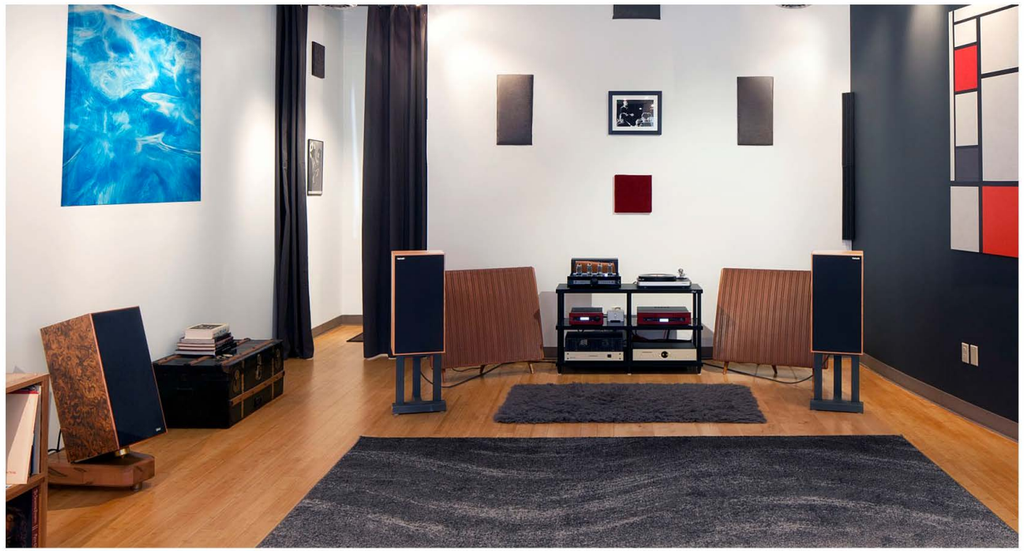
## Marietta, Georgia - The Audio Company

www.theaudioco.com
146 South Park Square NE
Marietta, Georgia 30060 770.429.0434



## San Diego, Califonia - Deja VU Audio West

www.dejavuaudiowest.com
4848 Ronson Ct. Ste E
San Diego, California 92111 858.412.4023






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## La Verne, California - Upscale Audio

upscaleaudio.com
2058 Wright Avenue
La Verne, California 91750 909.931.9686



## Vestal, New York - Audio Classics

audioclassics.com
3501 Vestal Road,
Vestal, New York 13850 800.321.2834






*"No reason to mince words: this is the best headphone amplifier I have ever used..."*
Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News

*"...the Absolute is probably the most flexible headphone amplifier I've ever encountered..."*
Grover Neville, InnerFidelity

*"It's rare that you come across something that is so totally different. It's a beautiful design, flush with fun options that make it an absolute joy to play with, and it sounds absolutely fantastic to boot!"*
Dave Hanson, EnjoyTheMusic.com




*"Fit and finish is impeccable, as I have come to expect from Manley..."*
Al Chieng, Positive Feedback

*"An absolute joy to use."*
Steven Stone, HiFi+

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Gary Alan Barker, Headphone.guru



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**quintessanceaudio.com**
**5701 W. Dempster Street**
**Morton Grove, Illinois 60053** 847.966.4434



## Scottsdale, Arizona - LMC Home Entertainment

**lmche.com**
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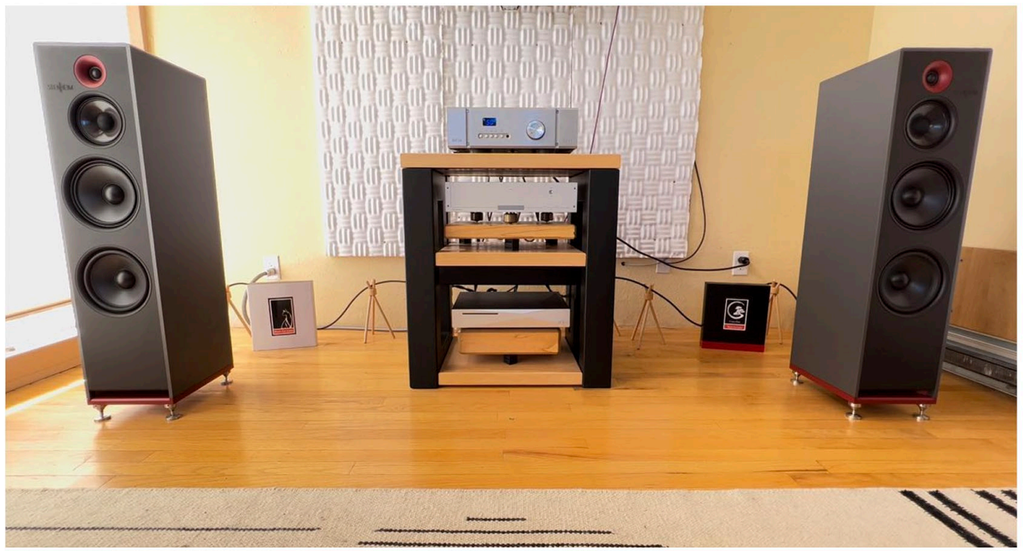
## Sarasota, Florida - Suncoast Audio

www.suncoastaudio.com
7353 International Place, Unit 309
Sarasota, Florida 34240 941.932.0282



## Santa Fe, New Mexico - Gestalt Audio

www.gestalthifi.com
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**San Francisco, California 94109** 415.614.1118




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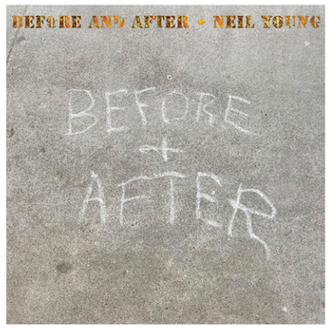

Pictured: Lina DAC (top), optional Master Clock (bottom)

dCSonlythemusic

# Oneliners

Some of our favorite new picks. Thanks to your favorite streaming services, you can vet these selections, should you care to commit to physical media.

Enjoy!




He's an Energizer Bunny



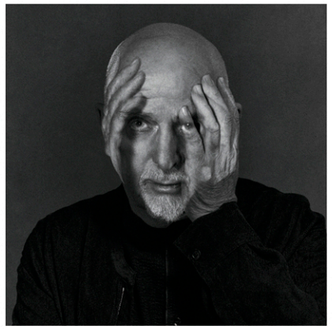

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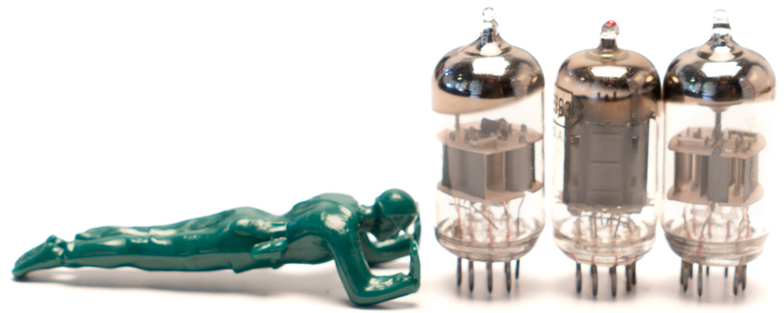
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| SVS | svsound.com |
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| Tannoy | upscaledistribution.com |
| Tellurium Q | telluriumq.com |
| TONE Imports | toneimports.com |
| Totem | totemacoustic.com |
| Underwood HiFi | underwoodhifi.com |
| Upscale Audio | upscaleaudio.com |
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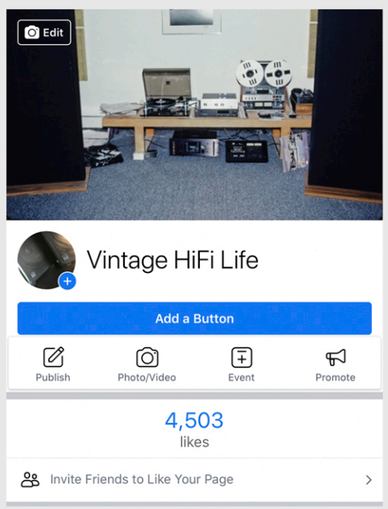
We've tried to make it pretty easy for you to find us out on Facebook, and have divided up our pages to be a bit more subject specific.

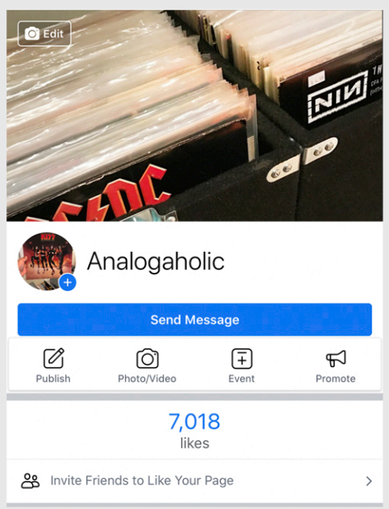
Here they are with links. Just click on the page that interests you most. We look forward to hearing from you when you have a spare moment.












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# LAST Word

our parting thought...




Rob Johnson's recent house cleaning reminds us how important the music really is after all...

Some great memories here!

TONE121.123


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***Stereophile July, 2023 authored by Tom Fine***

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# Next issue, 121:

Next issue... Clean up!

Last issue of the year will be a handful of components we've been trying to wind reviews up on for a while, so a little bit of this, a little bit of that. It's been a super busy year here at TONE, with a lot more to come next year.

As we head into the holiday season, no matter where you are in the world and what holidays you celebrate, we wish you a drama free holiday season!

As always, drop on by our Facebook and Instagram pages and let us know how you are...

TONE