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# TONEAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No.48 August 2012



## First Look

### The Burmester 111 Musiccenter

**TOP  
TONE**  
2012  
TONEAudio  
Magazine

**THE SECOND ANNUAL TOPTONE ISSUE:** Favorite Sources, Speakers, Amplification and More!

**GEAR: Magic Box:** McIntosh MEN220 **Fantastic Phono:** Manley Chinook

**Italian Beauties:** Sonus faber Elipsa SE **Portland Pride:** Coffman Labs G1-A

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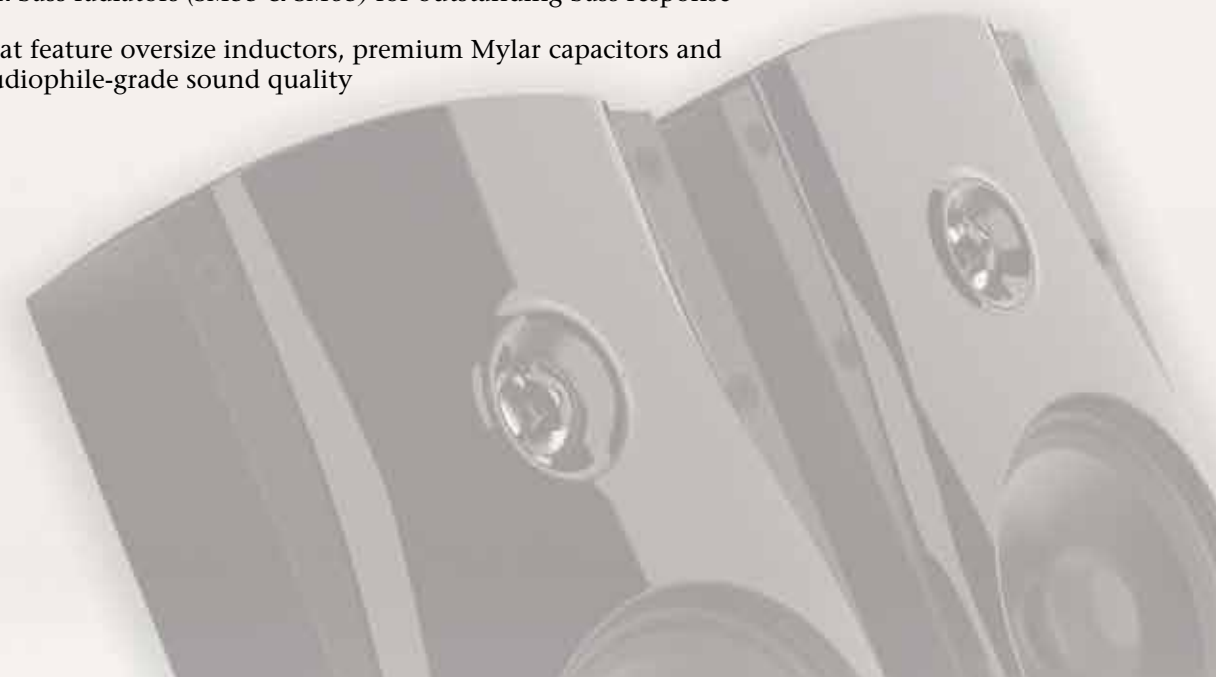
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# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

We've moved our 2nd-annual Top TONE up a bit in the production schedule, so it hasn't been a full year since our last version of the list, but summer is where it will stay henceforth. A few pieces of gear have been dropped from the list, simply because they're no longer being made. And, as we've spent time with almost 100 new pieces of gear since the last time we produced this list (in issue 41), there are a few new additions. It remains our goal, however, to keep this a fairly short list—but a potent one.



For those just tuning in to *TONEAudio*, we have not segregated our selections into gold, silver or bronze categories, because I've always felt doing so is unfair to products at the boundaries of where the categories overlap: Should you buy turntable A for \$5,000 because it got the gold, instead of turntable B for \$500 less because it only got the silver medal, especially when turntable B might actually be better suited to your system? Instead of forcing you to answer such questions, we've picked the components that are our absolute favorites and have listed them in their respective categories, ordering them from most expensive to least.

While we've made it a point not to review *naïf* gear, a "best of" list is almost always an exercise in futility, but this is supposed to be fun, right? That being said, our goal remains to help you find gear worth auditioning, because whether you're spending \$500 or \$500,000, hi-fi is personal and it has to please you at the end of the day.

If this comes across as somewhat flip, I assure you I couldn't be more serious. Many of the closest friendships in my life began over a conversation about music and/or hi-fi. No one wants you to have an engaging hi-fi system more than I do. A recent medical study even suggests that relaxing while listening to music 30 minutes a day (without tweaking or thinking about upgrades) can benefit your health by reducing stress.

To that end, I still suggest finding a specialty retailer in your area, if there's one nearby. Granted, there are not as many brick-and-mortar stores as there were 20 years ago, but there are still way more places to buy a high-end stereo system than there are an Aston Martin. We promise to step up our game in the coming months to help expose you to more reputable dealers.

But finding great sound, like finding a great dealer, does take some effort. There will be some distractions and some diversions along the way. So, if you've drawn a line in the sand and have decided to pursue a true hi-fi system, be prepared—it's going to take some work. But remember, experience is what you get when you don't get what you want. I only hope we can be of some service in your quest.





*“Now that we have digital room correction, we can put the speakers anywhere.”*

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# The Coffman Labs G-1A

## An Artisan's First Effort

By Jeff Dorgay

With the renaissance that vacuum tubes have been undergoing for the last decade or so, it's more challenging than ever to create a tube amp that stands out from the pack. So when engineer, musician, physicist and Portland local Damon Coffman told me he designed a new preamp that's "amazing," I was a bit skeptical. But when I saw Coffman's creation, the G-1A, upon a recent trip to local gear shop Echo Audio, it was like catnip. The unique casework caught my eye instantly, where fledgling manufacturers usually fall short—think steampunk meets art deco, fused with some mid-century modern. The shop's wry owner, Kurt Doslu, who is usually the one curbing my enthusiasm, showed me the nifty little preamp.

"Kurt, what's this?" I asked. "Oh, it's this new preamp that we're going to be distributing," he replied. "It's pretty good, want to take it home and give it a listen?" And so the adventure began.







The G-1A has an MSRP of \$5,495 and, at present, is only available through Echo Audio in Portland. There will be a total production run of just 500 units and the first 25 have already been pre-sold—impressive for a new product.

A two-box design, with an outboard, tube-rectified power supply, the G-1A is a full-function preamplifier. It has a phonostage, with moving-coil (via step up transformer) and moving-magnet inputs and a headphone amplifier built in, which is a lot of capability for that price point. The G-1A features a single-ended design throughout, with premium RCA connectors for the four high-level inputs and two phono inputs, along with two fixed high-level outputs and a tape out, which makes life easier for this tape enthusiast.

### Circuit Basics

The G-1A uses six vacuum tubes in the main circuit: two 12AX7s, two 12AU7s and two 5687s, with a 5AR4 in the rectifier position. The preamp ships with standard-issue, current-day production tubes, leaving things wide open for tube rolling—but the G-1A was so enjoyable as delivered, I'll leave tube rolling for a future blog post.

Coffman says that much of the impetus for the design of the G-1A came from revisiting classic tube designs from the 1920s, when “the original concepts in tube audio” were born. As a result, his preamplifier is a masterpiece of simplicity, even down to the number of screws holding its case together. Inside, we see a mix of new and classic parts. Coffman sourced a number of oil and paper capacitors (“NOS KGB items”) and an input selector switch from the aerospace industry. He also went so far as to hand-select and measure every single component for sound quality and durability. Yet, even with this bespoke approach, Coffman's training in the medical-instrumentation field drove him to streamline the manufacturing approach to assure consistency from unit to unit.

A concert violinist with a master's degree in physics, Coffman made his mark in the medical electronics industry by producing digital stethoscopes. A hi-fi guy since his early teens, he admits that building this preamplifier was, in many ways, even tougher than building his stethoscopes. And most importantly, Coffman is a music guy through and through; his wife, daughter and parents are also musicians. *(continued)*

A concert violinist with a master's degree in physics, Coffman made his mark in the medical electronics industry by producing digital stethoscopes. A hi-fi guy since his early teens, he admits that building this preamplifier was, in many ways, even tougher than building his stethoscopes. And most importantly, Coffman is a music guy through and through; his wife, daughter and parents are also musicians. *(continued)*







So he is constantly asking himself if the sound is natural. With the G-1A, a result of two years and countless prototypes, Coffman has finally answered that burning question in the affirmative.

### Stunning Musicality

Wanda Jackson's 2011 release *The Party Ain't Over* is a dense recording and, as the first album on my long listening list, established that the G-1A has a timbral clarity that is unmistakable. The upright bass at the beginning of "Rum and Coca Cola" has a loose, resonant, almost unturned quality such that you can actually hear the bass rattle—and the G-1A brings all this detail front and center, capturing every bit of texture available.

Zooming through some audiophile standards proves equally rewarding. Listening to the Doors and the Grateful Dead in 24/96 was a spectacular experience with this preamp. The soundstage that the G-1A presents is enveloping, dishing up the magic you usually have to spend five figures to achieve. This preamplifier produces a stereo image that extends well beyond speaker boundaries on all axis—of course, the better the source material, the better the result.

The true triumph of the G-1A is its effortless reproduction of acoustic instruments. Acoustic playback is a must considering Coffman's background. The tonal accuracy of piano, violin and drums must be experienced to be believed. The gentle tap of Phil Collins' drumstick on the snare frame in the title track of Brand X's album *Unorthodox Behaviour* was scarily real. That extra dollop of texture the G-1A provides seems to come from nowhere and yet still makes itself known. The sparse drumming and percussion in this record, with its almost Zappa-like triangle taps and bells at the far corners of the soundstage, show off the immediacy that the G-1A delivers. No matter how complex the musical passage, there's always enough headroom to accommodate another instrument in the mix. This level of dynamic competence at both ends of the scale is rarely found without spending a lot more money.

### Not Terribly Tubey

While you won't mistake the G-1A for a solid-state preamplifier, much like my Audio Research REF5 SE, the Coffman preamp is highly accurate, with that extra bit of airiness suggesting vacuum tubes under the hood (or, in this case, poking out of the top of the hood)—and nothing more. (continued)

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Where a few of my favorite tube preamplifiers of old injected their share of warmth and often coloration, the G-1A plays it clean all the way. It is worth noting, however, that this one really needs a good hour to warm up. At initial power-up, it does sound a bit thinner than some of the other tube preamplifiers we've experienced. But to complement the highly resolving nature of the G-1A, it is equally well represented in the lowest octave.

Because the G-1A offers such a great balance, I did not spend any time tolling tubes in search of a different "tuning." I'm sure it would be fun to swap the phonostage tubes, because the 12AX7 allows so many different variations on the theme, but we'll leave that for another day. Plus, the tall, spun-aluminum towers that ensconce each of the tubes do not make for easy tube swaps, and perhaps it's for the best.

At this point, we could call the G-1A a "best buy" without the phonostage and headphone amplifier. As both of these segments practically warrant full reviews on their own, I will go into greater depth on our Analogaholic and Macro sites.

### Full Function Phono and Phones

The G-1A includes inputs for MM and MC cartridges. While everything in the preamp is so carefully thought out, this vinyl junkie would love to see that as a function addressable from the front panel. Coffman does thoughtfully include a loading switch for the MM input, giving 47K, 70K and 90K ohms, allowing most of my favorite cartridges to shine. The Shure and some of the Ortofon MM range have a much more open sound when loaded to 70k than at 47k, so this is a nice touch.

The phonostage is excellent, easily on par with anything I've heard in the \$2,500 range, including the outstanding Manley Chinook, and the G-1A is head and shoulders above the EAR 834P, which is fairly colored in comparison. Most impressive is the sheer dynamic drive that the G-1A provides, with the same tonality as the linestage.



Soundstage width and depth are enormous, making the freshly rebuilt Quad 57s in my second listening room sound like a pair of stacked Quads. Spinning the recent MoFi remaster of Dead Can Dance's *Into The Labyrinth*, the level of detail revealed was no less than stunning. With a diverse combination of acoustic and electronic elements, featuring male and female vocals, this record gives a quick and accurate read on a component's spatial abilities.

Sampling a wide range of cartridges, including the Denon DL-103R (and the Zu Audio variation), Ortofon Cadenza Bronze, Ortofon SPU and Clearaudio da Vinci all proved excellent matches with the G-1A. Unfortunately, the Lyra family of cartridges was not as exciting. The Atlas, Titan i and Kleos all offered the same result: slightly slow and rolled off highs, which is likely the result of an impedance mismatch. There are still a few more on the audition list, so stay tuned for a follow-up on the Analogaholic site.

As this was the first sample from the production line, the headphone stage was not complete at this time, so for now we are concentrating on linestage and phono performance. A full review of the G-1A's headphone stage will occur on our website very soon as a follow-up review.

The lack of a remote control proved not to be an issue, especially when moving the G-1A into room two, where the listening chair is directly in front of the main rack, so volume adjustment is easily handled. Coffman assured me that the output stage of this preamplifier would drive "anything" and, after mixing it up with about eight different power amplifiers and driving 20-foot interconnects, I concur. Driving a few of my test power amplifiers with one-meter and seven-meter lengths of ALO Audio's newest premium interconnects reveals no change in sound quality or high-frequency attenuation. *(continued)*





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Covering a range from 240Hz to 24kHz, the HRS-120's DDD driver has no crossover point in the vital mid-band, which greatly improves fine detail resolution, revealing layer after layer in a recording. A downward firing 8-inch woofer produces clean, accurate and well-integrated bass.

The DDD driver enables the HRS-120 to maintain clarity and finesse, even on complex high-level passages, making it easier to follow each instrument, just as you would in a real performance.

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### So What Makes This Thing Awesome?

The Coffman G-1A has a striking aesthetic and it's built by a man with a plan. Some might be surprised by the \$5,495 price, but consider this: In the best old-school tradition, the G-1A includes an onboard phonostage (MM and MC) and an onboard headphone amplifier—remember when you could buy a full-function preamplifier with all of this under the hood?

With vinyl still growing in popularity and headphones a full-fledged sub-genre of audio, a preamplifier incorporating these two elements is exciting. Considering that you won't have to purchase an outboard phonostage, headphone amplifier or a pair of power cords, the G-1A is fantastic if you value sound quality above everything else.

Judged strictly as a linestage for \$5,495, the Coffman G-1A is at the top of its class. The fact that it includes an excellent phonostage and headphone amplifier makes it the bargain of the year. All of the tubes are easily found and those predisposed to tube rolling can tune and tweak until Election Day. Coffman has plans to expand the lineup, possibly making the phonostage and linestage separate boxes. When I asked him if there might be a companion power amplifier in the works, he smiled that evasive smile that usually means "yes, but I don't want to talk about it now."

So with that in mind, we award the Coffman Labs G-1A one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2012 and look forward to the company's future offerings. Coffman is certainly off to a brilliant start. I have purchased the review sample, so that it can become an anchor component in room two, and so that we can do a long-term report when a year has passed. ●

## REVIEW

**The Coffman Labs G-1A**  
**Preamplifier**  
**MSRP: \$5,495**

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### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Volvere SP  
turntable/SME V, various cartridges

**Digital Source** dCS Paganini stack,  
Sooloos Control

**Power Amplifier**  
Conrad Johnson MV-50C1

**Speakers** Quad 57

**Cable** ALO Audio, Cardas

**Power** Audience AR-6TS





# Burmester

## 111 Musiccenter

\$46,900    [www.burmester.de](http://www.burmester.de)

Many have mistaken Dieter Burmester's latest creation for a mere music server, but that is not the case. It is a full function preamplifier, utilizing the circuitry from the 077 preamplifier and 089 CD player, though it does not use the belt drive CD transport from the 089, because it can rip your CD collection. Hence the Musiccenter moniker. All you need to do is add a Burmester power amplifier, your favorite pair of speakers and high performance audio is yours with a minimal footprint. Those still firmly in the world of vinyl need only plug their phonostage in, via one of the balanced XLR or RCA inputs.

All functions can be controlled via the front panel's eight buttons and large display screen, which has been sourced from the aerospace industry for maximum longevity. The inch thick chrome stripe going through the middle of the unit is not just for aesthetic reasons, it is a solid plate providing physical isolation between the analog and digital sections of the 111.

Leaving no stone unturned, Burmester even includes a third generation iPad in the box, along with their billet aluminum remote control, so you can control all the functions of your 111 from the comfort of your favorite chair. And the sound? Pure Burmester, with no compromise. Watch our website for the first North American review very soon.



# Sonus faber Elipsa SE

**Stunning in Every Way**

By Jeff Dorgay

There is nothing better than having your cake and eating it too. Few speakers personify this idiom like those from Sonus faber—they are stunning, even when your system is off. And the minute the speakers deliver music, whether analog or digital, you are immediately transported to a place where you can forget about the gear, your troubles and whatever else comes to mind, and immerse yourself in the music.

First, full disclosure: This reviewer is biased. While many of us claim to want a “straight wire with gain,” or “the whole truth, warts and all,” I can’t honestly say I subscribe to either of these philosophies 100% of the time. Maybe I could if all music was perfectly captured and flawlessly recorded—but we all know it’s not. Being a lover of panel speakers, electrostats in particular (and a closet lover of SET/single-driver systems), I value coherence most of all. I don’t give a damn how dynamic a speaker is. If it sounds like the music is coming from a separate woofer, tweeter and midrange, the speaker falls down my list rather quickly.





A warm, syrupy and ultimately colored speaker doesn't do it for me either. Such an overly romantic-sounding speaker is as equally boring to me as a hyperdynamic, ruthlessly revealing speaker. Sure, both make for exciting demo sessions, but they always end up being less entertaining after you've lived with said speakers for an extended period of time.

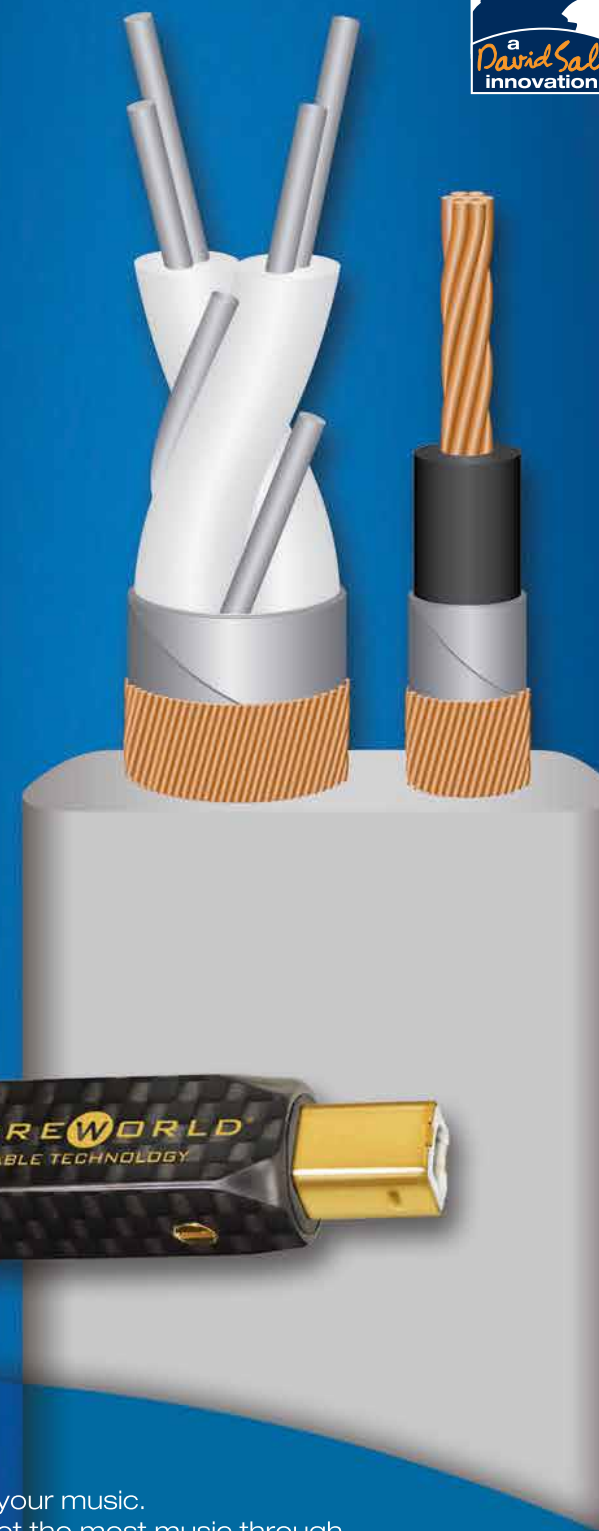
The speakers that always hold my long-term interest are those rare few that achieve a balance of high resolution without being harsh, and a high degree of tonal richness without coming across overly colored or slow. Those of you old enough to remember taking pictures with a film camera might remember the 81A filter, which offered a slight touch of warmth yet was never distracting, and had the ability to make color slides look richer and more vibrant than reality. Speakers that top my list must sound great regardless of decibel output and, while we're making demands, they should not rely entirely on cables and amplifiers to achieve greatness. They must also be relatively simple to set up. How's that for fussy?

#### Enter the Elipsa SEs

I've always been a fan of Sonus faber's speakers, even though the Italian manufacturer's older models have always been slightly romantic and forgiving. But things at Sonus faber have been quietly changing as of late, and its current models retain the mystique of their predecessors while adding an abundance of resolution to the mix. *(continued)*

## The Difference is in the Design

Wireworld cable designs incorporate the knowledge gained from over 30 years of continuous development based on the unique objective approach of comparing cables to a direct connection. In addition to providing the most lifelike sound and image quality available at each price level, these scientifically engineered cable designs preserve test signals and musical waveforms distinctly better than other brands. The elegance of these designs is illustrated in this image, which shows the DNA Helix® (patent pending) construction utilized in Wireworld's reference standard USB audio cables, Platinum Starlight® and Silver Starlight®. By combining the most efficient designs with the best upgrade materials, Wireworld audio and video cables advance the art of reproducing the live music and theater experience at home.



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If you've been envious of the \$45,000/pair Sonus faber Stradivari speakers but can't make the financial leap, the Elipsa SE is a bargain at \$22,900/pair. For all but the top percentile of the truly obsessed, this is the last pair of speakers you need to buy. The SE model offers an upgraded crossover over the standard Elipsa, and incorporates the same tweeter from the Stradivari—a modest yet worthwhile upgrade from the \$20,000/pair Elipsa.

We can discuss crossover slopes, sensitivity and driver-magnet structures all day and, while that is a fascinating story to tell, when you unpack the Elipsa SEs, it's a sensual experience; not a scientific one. The true aficionado will appreciate the painstaking effort that goes into every step of the Elipsa SE's construction. Whether admiring the hand-coated lacquer of the finish, the leather front and rear baffles or even the finely machined binding posts, you quickly realize that there are no "off-the-shelf" parts used in a Sonus faber speaker.

As anxious as you will probably be to get your new speakers up and running, take a few minutes to bask in the unrivaled craftsmanship that went into their construction.

### Versatile Performers

Cueing up Chicago's "While the City Sleeps" from *Chicago V* (via the 24/192 HDtracks file) immediately shows off the refined high end of the Elipsa SEs, as the high hat shimmers slightly to the left of the sound stage with seemingly endless decay. The instant the horns enter the mix with full force it's clear that these speakers have dynamics to spare. Giving the volume control a major push to the right—reaching near-insane levels—the Elipsa SEs do not lose their composure:



The enormous three-dimensional sound stage remains large and focused.

Slowing the pace somewhat with the title track of Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage* (also available as a 24/192 download from HDtracks) portrays an even larger soundstage—now the Elipsa SEs completely disappear in the room, as the drums linger to the left of centerstage, with Freddie Hubbard blasting out on trumpet at the far left, and Hancock's piano diffusely rendered as it moves gently up and back from center stage.

Combined with a full compliment of Audio Research's Reference electronics and a dCS Paganini stack, one wonders if the presentation could be any better. This is what real music sounds like. While much of this impact can be attributed to the first-order crossover network and wideband drivers required to successfully implement this kind of design—a result of exhausting driver development to achieve perfection—that is only part of the story. It is the integration of everything that makes a Sonus faber speaker system truly more than just a sum of the individual parts.

Sonus faber's elliptic enclosure design results in what they call «Virtual 2pi radiation,» which also does a fantastic job disguising the mass of the speaker in such a svelte cabinet, resulting in a high performance speaker that is easy to set up in your room.

Even casual placement results in a wide and deep soundstage. However, a bit of extra attention to the rake angle of the Elipsas allows them to achieve their maximum performance when set to perfection. The resulting time alignment of the drivers adds to the coherence and the speakers literally disappear in the room. A calibrated level (or iPhone app) will help you get both speakers tipped back exactly the same amount. *(continued)*

**Sonus faber's elliptic enclosure design results in what they call «Virtual 2pi radiation,» which also does a fantastic job disguising the mass of the speaker in such a svelte cabinet, resulting in a high performance speaker that is easy to set up in your room.**



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## REVIEW

A great many speaker manufacturers strive to make their speaker enclosures as free from resonance as possible, but it almost always ends up making the speaker sound overdamped. Listen to the sound a bass drum makes as the mallet bounces from the drumhead: There's a liveliness to it, with resonance and sustain, regardless of whether it's Tommy Aldridge or Art Blakey playing. That's the life force of a bass drum, which is, sadly, often lost in a speaker (or, for that matter, an entire system) that is overdamped.

An instrument's resonant signature is much like a person's voiceprint: Each one is unique, which allows us to discern the difference between violins or electric guitars. The Elipsa SE preserves this delicate balance. Yet, even with music created entirely in the world of the studio, the Elipsa SE holds it together seamlessly, no matter how complex the fare. A long listening session of albums from Frank Zappa and German bands Can and Faust proves that, even at high volume, the speakers can play densely packed music without a soundstage collapse. Faust's "Picnic on a Frozen River" from the *Faust IV* album is full of multiple soft, discordant bits that remain anchored in the left-to-right as well as in the front-to-back soundstage at high volume. Zappa's classic "Peaches En Regalia" offers a similarly exciting experience, with synthesizer riffs flying around my listening chair, just as it does when listening through great headphones. *(continued)*



Moving into the 21st century, Playing Daft Punk's *Tron: Legacy Reconfigured* reveals no weaknesses in the Elipsa SE, nor any sign of fatigue. Even though this speaker has a low frequency specification of 35 Hz, they are well up to task of hitting this album's the deep bass grooves. And the high sensitivity of these speakers will not tax your amplifier, which adds to the dynamic realism that they offer.

The Elipsa SEs perform equally well at low volume, still easily disappearing into the room like mini-monitors. Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7* performed by the Netherlands Wind Ensemble shows the delicacy that these speakers are capable of, as well as the tonal purity.

### Very Amplifier-Friendly

With a wide range of amplifiers at my disposal—solid-state, tube and class D amps, ranging from a pair of 20-watt 845 SET monoblocks all the way up to the mighty Pass Labs' XA200.5 monoblocks—all were able to drive the Elipsa SEs without difficulty. Granted, each amplifier imposed its own sonic personality on the presentation, which complements the high resolution that these speakers offer. But still, every variation on the theme remained thoroughly enjoyable.

Thanks to a sensitivity of 91 db per watt, the Elipsa SE is comfortable with the 35 watts per channel that the average EL34-based tube amplifier can provide, but because the speakers have a maximum power handling of 300

watts, they will absolutely *crank* if you have enough high-quality power on tap.

Driven to ear-shredding levels (by the XA200.5 monoblocks) with Mudhoney's *Superfuzz Bigmuff*, the speakers revealed their true gloriousness. The only distortion present was that of the amplifiers in the recording studio. Following this up with the Pixies' *Tromp Le Monde* and ending with Explosions in the Sky's *The Earth is Not a Cold, Dead Place* is perhaps a bit off the path of the lute that Sonus faber mentions on their website, but it leads to the most important aspect of these speakers: They are unflappable.

### That Bias Again

After giving the Elipsa SEs a major workout with about 15 different amplifiers of all genres, I must confess two things: There was no combination that turned in a bad performance and, being the hopeless romantic that I am, I was seduced completely when combining these speakers with a few of my favorite tube amplifiers.

Now that Audio Research is part of the Fine Sounds corporate umbrella that owns Sonus faber, it is no surprise that the Audio Research Reference electronics are a fantastic match for these speakers. Yet, whether I was using the PrimaLuna DiaLogue 7 monoblocks, the Octave Jubilee Mono monoblocks or the Balanced Audio Technology VK-150s monoblocks, it was tough to get any work done while listening to these speakers. The massive soundstage and dreamy midrange

sent me back to the record rack repeatedly and many listening sessions ended in the wee hours.

### But is the Elipsa SE Right for You?

That's the answer to the \$22,900 question, of course. This is a pretty tall stack of twenty-dollar bills to spend on a pair of speakers, but few others exist at this price point that approach the Elipsa SE's level of performance. And even fewer exist that are this gorgeous. But I am of the belief that life's too short to have ugly speakers in your living room. As it turns out, I am not alone. In an informal poll, the Elipsa SEs have the highest spousal-acceptance factor of any speaker we've ever reviewed, as well as the highest interest among non-audiophiles of either gender.

If you want a perfect fusion of acoustic purity and aesthetic beauty, these are the speakers you've been waiting for. The truly tough decision will be whether to acquire the Elipsa SEs or go all the way to the Strads.

Many audio pundits cling to the philosophy that the source is everything in a system, and that is sound advice. However, I find the speakers to be the biggest variable in a system—they have to integrate with your room and those you share it with, so they are often the highest hurdle to jump. These speakers are so easy to drive, you would have little trouble starting your journey with modestly priced amplification and avail yourself to a new experience as your budget permits system upgrades. *(continued)*

**If you want a perfect fusion of acoustic purity and aesthetic beauty, these are the speakers you've been waiting for. The truly tough decision will be whether to acquire the Elipsa SEs or go all the way to the Strads.**





About 15% smaller in physical dimension and with only one 10-inch woofer (rather than the two in the Strads), the Elipsa SE lends itself more to the average listening room. As Sumiko VP of Sales Norbert Schmeid mentions, "While the Stradavari is ultimately capable of more performance, the Elipsa is an easier speaker to set up because of the single woofer." And, at about 100 pounds each, you can move them around your listening room with relatively minimal effort.

Either way, you'll get your money's worth—and then some. Don't be surprised to see these speakers in our awards issue later this year. ●

**The Sonus faber Elipsa SE**  
MSRP: \$22,900/pair

**MANUFACTURER**

Sonus faber

**CONTACT**

[www.sonusfaber.com](http://www.sonusfaber.com) (Factory)

[www.sumikoaudio.net](http://www.sumikoaudio.net) (US distributor)

**PERIPHERALS**

**Digital Source** dCS Paganini, Sooloos Control 15, Aurender S10

**Analog Source** AVID Acutus Reference SE/SME V/Lyra Atlas

**Preamplifier** ARC REF 5SE, Burmester 011, Robert Koda K-10

**Amplifier** ARC REF 150, Burmester 911, Pass Labs XA200.5

**Phonostage** ARC REF Phono 2SE

**Cable** Cardas Clear, AudioQuest Sky



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Sporting analog meters that work double duty, monitoring output level and output tube bias, the REF 250s combine the latest engineering efforts from ARC with a nod to their classic tube amplifiers of the 70s—a nice touch.



A close-up photograph of the Manley Chinook Phono Preamplifier. The device is dark-colored with a textured surface. A glowing blue light is visible below the brand name. The background is dark and out of focus.

MANLEY  
CHINOOK

# Manley Chinook Phono Preamplifier

## Hook, Line and Sinker

By Lawrence Devoe

In the late 1990s, studio-tube-gear expert Manley Laboratories created an integrated tube amp with an iPod dock for the consumer market that had a triangular shape, and subsequently called it the Stingray iTube. Ever since, the company has named the majority of its hi-fi consumer components after sea creatures.

“No one’s ever done fish before,” said EveAnna Manley (an avid scuba diver who is often referred to as the “Manley Tube Queen”) in a 2003 interview with *Secrets of Home Theater* and *High Fidelity*, regarding the curious decision to name the company’s products after marine life. “Let’s have some fun.”



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And Manley keeps the fun going today—in terms of both its product nomenclature and the quality of audio that those products reproduce. Earlier this year, the company launched its “bargain” phonostage, the Chinook, which goes for about a quarter of the cost of its pond mate, an \$8,000 statement tube phono preamp called the Steelhead, which wowed vinyl junkies when it hit the market about 10 years ago. As one of *TONEAudio*’s diehard analog guys, I get my share of vinyl-related products—cartridges, record cleaners, phono preamplifiers and the like—and, while phono fiends like myself still consider the Steelhead to be one of the industry’s best tube phonostages in its price range, the Chinook isn’t a bad catch.

## Testing the Water

As I have gotten older, I have grown less tolerant of components that are tricky to install or exhibit quirky operation. Thankfully, the Chinook phono preamp lacks these shortcomings. Its default gain is set at 45 dB, a standard output for moving-magnet (MM) cartridges. If you are a moving-coil (MC) freak like me, you can easily set the gain to 60 dB by removing the perforated cover (affixed with eight screws), flipping a pair of DIP switches for each channel, and replacing the cover. Except for a blue on/standby button under the Manley Chinook logo (which illuminates with start-up), all of the action is on the rear panel, where you will find a ground post, a pair

of unbalanced stereo inputs and outputs and dual banks of DIP switches for adjusting capacitance and resistance.

The Chinook offers a staggering 32 loading possibilities all the way up to 47,000 ohms, as well as 24 settings, which yield resistance values below 100 ohms—a setting that’s probably not the best option for most MC-cartridge users. The preamp gives MM-cartridge users seven options for capacitance adjustments, ranging from 50 pF to 350 pF. Manley supplied two pairs of 6922 dual triodes with the review sample, one pair for the gain stage and one for the output stage. Tube rollers can also experiment with pairs of 7308s, 6DJ8s and ECC88s. *(continued)*





Given the Chinook's \$2,250 price tag, I matched it with the most appropriately priced gear available, namely my old standby table: a modified VPI Aries with outboard flywheel and a JMW 10.5i tonearm. For my test cartridges, I used a stereo Clearaudio Stradivari and a mono Benz Micro Ruby 3. Prior to serious listening, I broke in the Chinook a bit by leaving it powered on for 24 hours. (It has a light-bulb-sized appetite of just 42 watts.) Manley recommends placing the Chinook in an area with adequate ventilation, although I noticed that it is only slightly warm during operation. As a side note, this preamp safeguards its tube innards with a gentle 45-second power-up cycle, which helps provide some peace of mind, because there's nothing more aggravating than blowing tubes at power-up.

#### Swimming Upstream with Ease

The ear party kicked off with *Jazz at the Pawnshop* (Proprius Records), a live recording from 1976 that features a bunch of plaid-clad Swedes hammering away at American standards. I was immediately struck by the Chinook's near-holographic soundstage. I then moved on to *Chamber Music Society* (Heads Up) from bassist-vocalist Esperanza

Spalding, on which she plays a snappy duet, "Inútil Paisagem," with jazz vocalist Gretchen Parlato. This cut really tests a phonostage's ability to distinguish between two female voices that continuously alternate parts; meanwhile a discrete acoustic bass provides the backbeat. The Chinook kept perfect pace with the exchange between the vocals and Spalding's infectious bass line.

Next, I wanted to see how the Chinook handled a recorded pipe organ, which isn't everyone's cup of tea, but it does offer an objective lesson in deep bass and, because most are built into large churches, big acoustic spaces. In the 1970s, speaker maker Dave Wilson recorded a series of recitals with organ virtuoso James B. Welch, playing some of the finest pipe organs in the country. One such LP from 1977, simply titled *Concert* (Wilson Audio), treated me to some of the best renditions of bass and space that I have been privileged to hear, courtesy of the Chinook.

To test it further, I had to see how the Chinook handled mono, because some of the best phonostages can bring life and breath to mono LPs, astonishing those who faintly remember such records playing on their parents' old phonographs. *(continued)*

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If you scratch the surface of serious vinyl lovers' collections, you are likely to uncover these relics, and reissue companies have recently begun releasing some classic LPs from the glory days of yesteryear. One such example is from Julie London, a sexy siren who made it big in the 1950s. She heated up my listening room (in more ways than one) with "Cry Me a River," from a 45-rpm reissue of *Julie is Her Name* (Boxstar Records). I then spun the tracks of the iconic bop-era recording, *Birth of the Cool* (Classic Records), which were laid down between 1949 and 1950 and feature trumpet idol Miles Davis, his big-band arranger Gil Evans and a legendary supporting cast. The Chinook made sure that you heard everyone in the studio with amazing recovery of detail, including some off-mic chatter, which adds a level of authenticity and nostalgia to the listening session.

Many, many, many LPs later, the ear party ended with MoFi's reissue of Little Feat's *Waiting for Columbus*, arguably one of the greatest live rock albums of all time. On this record, the late Lowell George and his super-boogie band present dueling synthesizers, guitars, percussion, keyboards and brass, a combination that makes for some hefty tunes. Listening to the opening cut, "Fat Man in the Bathtub," through the Chinook was a refreshing auditory slap in the face, just like having a primo standing-room-only place right near the stage.

### Hooked on the Chinook

Vinyl records can quickly become an addiction that, fortunately, won't shorten your natural life or get you busted for possession. How you support this habit depends on source selection and, most critically, playback equipment. Choice of turntable, tonearm and cartridge obviously matter, but the delicate signal still has to navigate the rest of the sound chain, where the phonostage acts as the gatekeeper of the grooves. On this front, the Chinook excels, offering a substantial taste of the audio high life without maxing out your credit card. It's also a versatile component that will appeal to a variety of listeners.

Tube-phobes can relax, as this baby is dead quiet, even when cranked to the max; so can audio newbies, because setting up the Chinook is a cinch. But before rushing out to plunk down more than two large ones, note that maximum gain for MC cartridges is 60 dB, which proved more than enough gain for the cartridges used in this review. Some top-flight cartridges, however, put out less than 0.30 mV, which may not be the best match for this phonostage in a system based around a low gain preamplifier and/or low sensitivity speakers.

In summation, the Chinook provides spot-on imaging and recreation of the original recorded space, along with killer dynamics and a broad frequency spectrum—all at a reasonable price.



### Gone Fishin' (additional listening)

by Jeff Dorgay

Before sending the Chinook to Lawrence for this review, I had the pleasure of putting some initial hours on the clock and running it with a few of my own turntables. I auditioned it with everything from the meager Shure M97 to the mighty Lyra Atlas, with excellent results. Nothing in my stable of cartridges has less than 0.4 mV of output, so 60db of gain was more than sufficient.

Having spent a year with one of Manley's Steelheads, that phono preamp has always been one of my favorites, it has a ton of personality—you'll never mistake the Steelhead for anything less than a fish of the *tubus maxiumus* family.

Now compared to the big fish in my current analog pond (the Audio Research Reference Phono 2 SE, the Vitus MPP-201 and the Pass XP-25), the Chinook has a, shall we say, friendlier, more laid-back presentation. But remember, my big-fish phonostages break the bank, with prices ranging from \$11,000 to \$60,000. Everything else in the Chinook's price is just StarKist tuna.

Mating the Chinook with the awesome and price-appropriate VPI Classic 1 turntable and the Lyra Kleos cartridge produced a relatively affordable analog front end of about \$8,000, which won't force you to take out a second mortgage. That's hardly Filet-O-Fish pocket change, but if you can find a heftier helping at this price, please, let us know about it.

The Manley Chinook gets down to the bare essentials, offering high performance in a basic box with no frills—everything you need and nothing you don't. We are happy to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2012. ●

#### Chinook Phono Preamplifier

MSRP: \$2,250

#### MANUFACTURER

Manley Laboratories

#### CONTACT

manleylabs.com

#### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier** Pass Labs X-30

**Amplifier** Pass Labs XA-100.5

**Speakers** Martin Logan CLX

**Power Conditioner** Running Springs Audio Dmitri, Maxim

**Cables and power cords** Nordost Valhalla, Odin





# Zesto Audio Andros PS1 Phonostage

\$4,300 [www.zestoaudio.com](http://www.zestoaudio.com)

Even before the review was finished, we made the decision to place the PS1 among our reference phonostages. Zesto designer George Counnas spent years as a designer of navigational electronics and now turns his talents toward his first love, hi-fi. And the results are stunning.

For listeners with a single turntable, the PS1 performs at a much higher level than its price suggests. Its vacuum design features a choice of MM direct or MC via a step-up transformer, with a range of loading options. With the PS1, Counnas has created a true reference preamplifier—and one that, to his credit, costs less than a used Porsche.

You can read the full review here. ●

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 - STEREOREVIEW.COM

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 - HIFI WORLD REVIEW

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WEB REVIEW



## Unison Research S6 Integrated Amplifier

\$6,000 [www.unisonresearch.com](http://www.unisonresearch.com)

The Italians almost always have their own way of doing things, especially when it comes to blending electronic and mechanical design. Embodying this mentality, the S6 integrated amplifier marches to a different beat than other EL34 designs. This particular design presents a “single-ended, ultralinear” configuration that produces approximately 35 watts per channel.

No aspect of this amp's design is left to chance. A good amount of heavy iron hides beneath the gentle curves encasing the S6, yet the tubes stand out in full glory, providing as much of a visual treat as an auditory one. To further stimulate the senses, a pair of attractive meters set the output tube bias, and a gorgeous remote control completes the package.

And the sound? Well, you'll just have to read about it here. ●



# The McIntosh MEN220

## Turning Water into Wine

By TONE staff

Moving speakers around your listening room to get the best possible sound can be both frustrating and fruitless. Depending on the size and type of the speakers, you could spend countless hours getting them in just the right position and, even then, the sound still might not be perfect, because the listening environment itself plays a huge role in defining that sweet spot and achieving auditory bliss.

Room treatments are another headache. You tell yourself that your speakers will sound *way better* with those gigantic bass traps you've been lusting after, but you can only fit so much stuff into a room before friends and loved ones either intervene or nominate you to star in one of those reality shows about people who hoard things. Indeed, this process of generating the desired audio orbs down to the millimeter can quickly drive you mad. And don't even get us started on the tape marks on the floor. As a good audiophile buddy reminds us: "The amount of blue masking tape on your listening-room floor is directly proportional to how close to a nervous breakdown you might be."







### Meet Mac's Magic Box

Of course, a room that's been properly treated with the speakers optimally placed is still the Holy Grail. Unfortunately, most of us don't ever quite achieve this, so our rack of expensive gear never reaches its full potential. This is why the engineers at McIntosh Labs created the MEN220. It doesn't use magic exactly; just a serious amount of heavy-duty science, to produce magical results, which seem all the more supernatural considering how easy it is to set up.

For the MEN220, McIntosh licensed RoomPerfect technology from Danish audio wizard Peter Lyngdorf, whose Steinway

Lyngdorf music systems, which cost upwards of a couple hundred grand, utilize this proprietary room-correction software to optimize the system for any listening environment. *TONE* gear editor Bailey S. Barnard has written about Steinway Lyngdorf more than once in these pages and has always come away impressed. Whereas the Lyngdorf systems require a certified technician to implement the optimization software, the MEN220 allows you, the end user, to place the box between your amplifier and preamplifier, or within a processor loop if your preamplifier has one. The MEN220 works with balanced or single-ended components, so it will integrate into any system where a break between the preamplifier

and power amplifier exists. Then, with a few simple measurements (okay, maybe more like 10), you'll be on your way. But, we promise, it's easier than it sounds—and it's certainly less maddening than inching your speakers into the exact right spot and festooning your room with foam sound traps. Plus, it's kind of a fun process that will make you feel like the acoustic engineer you've always told yourself you had the ability to be.

Once you fully install the MEN220, break out the calibrated microphone and long cord that McIntosh includes in the box. The 220's onboard processor is equipped with internal microprocessors, which measure the reflections in your room and make

corrections for the peaks and dips in frequency response. The included literature instructs you to take the first reading as close as possible to where your head is when listening to music. This will return a reading, or "room-knowledge" score, of about 75% and will substantially improve how your system interacts with your room—but the MEN220 is capable of much more.

Additional measurements, each taken from a different spot, increase the room-knowledge score. The higher the score, the more you will realize how much you were missing. Using the 220 with McIntosh's C50 preamplifier improves things even further, thanks to the C50's built-in

graphic equalizer, which allows you to fine-tune the MEN220's audio achievements. After a few different setups, we realized that bumping the room knowledge index above 92% eliminates the need for the onboard EQ in the C50.

### Room Challenges

We put the MEN220 through its paces in a few different environments to judge its effectiveness in a treated room, a relatively inert, non-treated room and our publisher Jeff Dorgay's living room, which has to be one of the worst-sounding rooms anyone on our staff has experienced, with major anomalies in the bass and midrange regions. (continued)



## REVIEW

The MEN220 made a minimal difference in Jeff's treated room with full range speakers, but in the other two environments, the 220 achieved significant gains in terms of clarity and coherence.

### Wow!

When using the 220, more inner detail becomes instantly apparent. The 24-bit remaster of the Beatles' "She Came in Through the Bathroom Window" from the *Abbey Road* album, startles with the level of clarity now present in this recording. The corrections made Paul's bass line much easier to follow, gave Ringo's percussion its own space and elevated the backup vocals that were buried in the mix. After the first of many test tracks, everyone was stunned at how much of a difference the 220 makes.

The piano hidden deep in the background of "Bang and Blame" (from the HDtracks download of the R.E.M. album *Monster*) now has much more airiness lingering well behind the right speaker, again exhibiting more clarity throughout the frequency range, with the bonus of additional dynamic information.

The wood block in the tune "Rich Woman," which Robert Plant and Alison Krauss released in 2007 on their *Raising Sand* collaborative album, jumps out of the speakers. With an almost surreal effect, it now sounds like someone is whacking the wood block about a foot in front of the listening chair. Where was this thing in the 1970s when we all got really high listening to music?

Any thoughts of altered reality wouldn't be complete without listening to some Doors. "Riders on the Storm" was beyond psychedelic. Again, the amount of bass resolution now on tap thanks to the 220 is stunning. The piano floats wistfully in the air, instead of just being locked in between the speakers as it was before engaging the 220. (continued)



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Like an eight-year-old boy, Jeff determined not to eat what's on his plate. He didn't want to like the MEN220—because it's sooo un-purist, sooo un-audiophile. (Perhaps non-20th-century audiophile is more accurate.) But with enough computer power under the hood to launch a spaceship, the 220 quickly converts the non-believers. Then staff member Jerold O'Brien's girlfriend asked the fateful question: "We can get rid of all that stuff hanging on the walls if you have this box, right?" Like watching Wile E. Coyote scheming on how to catch the Road Runner, you could see O'Brien's gears turning. He looked nervous and made a quick exit.

### Vintage O-rama

Sure, the MEN220 did a great job with the \$8,500-per-pair Dynaudio Confidence C1s, and it was spectacular with the \$23,000 Sonus faber Elipsa SEs, but it was time to try something way off base. So we hauled out the circa-1970s JBL L-100 speakers. And, as crazy and

as "un-audiophile" as this seems, the JBLs underwent the most miraculous transformation of all.

The L-100s are fun speakers, but their sound is decidedly vintage, even with world-class electronics powering them. After a quick set of measurements, they sounded like a pair of speakers that you'd expect to cost a lot more. The JBLs still had their limitations—the upper register is still slightly grainy and there is a touch of bass bloat that even the EQ can't fix—but they now have natural midrange and throw a huge soundstage with some serious pinpoint imaging. Don't believe us? Stop by our room at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest this October ([www.audiofest.net](http://www.audiofest.net)) and have a listen. We'll be showcasing the MEN220 with the JBL-L100s in the *TONEAudio* "Chill Out" room.

Of course, running the 220 with the JBLs triggered a major classic-rock listening session. Christine McVie's voice on "Songbird" from Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* floated whimsically in the air between the

speakers. As easily as with any pair of audiophile-approved loudspeakers, the massive increase in system resolution enabled us to readily discern between high-resolution and standard digital files playing through the JBLs. The 220 transformed the title track of Bowie's *Young Americans* (again in 24/96) into an eerily immersive experience. We could not believe this was the same pair of speakers purchased on eBay a few years ago for relatively little money. Listening to the DVD-Audio rip of the Grateful Dead's *American Beauty* was much trippier, thanks to the MEN220—not an acid flashback or all the Dead karma coming back from the days when the band used McIntosh amplification for their live show. Either way, it really enhanced the listening experience.

### Truth or Dare

So how close does the MEN220 bring a modest setup, with randomly placed speakers, to the megabuck systems, carefully tuned and tweaked in a room full of treat-

ments? Much closer than any of us expected. Of course, there still is no substitute for cleaning up the acoustics with the proper treatments, but the only place the 220 comes up a little short is when playing a super high-performance analog recording. The digital processing does take that last 5% of sparkle out of the equation, but this is on a system worth a garage full of Porsches. In every other system we placed the MEN220, it delivered a stunning level of improvement.

While the magic box will not turn a \$400 pair of white van speakers into a pair of \$160,000 Wilson Alexandrias—even magic has its limitations—the more resolving your speakers, the more accurate of a measurement the MEN220 will be able to make. We were constantly flabbergasted by how much better an average room sounds with the MEN220 in the loop. The biggest gains are in the mid-bass range, with upper-range smoothness a close second.

Cleaning up the mid-bass mess allows your speakers to deliver much cleaner midrange response with better imaging.

### Reclaim Your Life

If you're part of the lunatic (and we mean that in the best possible way) fringe of audiophilia that has a purpose-built listening room, you don't need the MEN220. But if you are a music lover who has spent a fair amount on a system that still leaves you feeling a bit short-changed, or your speakers are still in the wrong place, nirvana is only \$4,500 away. You could spend this on a few marginal tweaks that won't change much of anything but your bank balance, but the MEN220 will definitely get your system where you've always wanted it to be—and it's a hell of a lot simpler and less-maddening than moving speakers and dampening your room. So grab an MEN220 for your system and plan a vacation with all the time and stress you're going to save. ●

**McIntosh MEN220**  
**MSRP: \$4,500**

**MANUFACTURER**  
McIntosh Labs, Inc

**CONTACT**  
[www.mcintoshlabs.com](http://www.mcintoshlabs.com)

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Volvere SP turntable with SME 309 tonearm and Lyra Kleos cartridge

**Phonostage** Audio Research REF 2 Phono SE

**Digital Source** dCS Paganini, Sooloos Control 15, Aurender C10

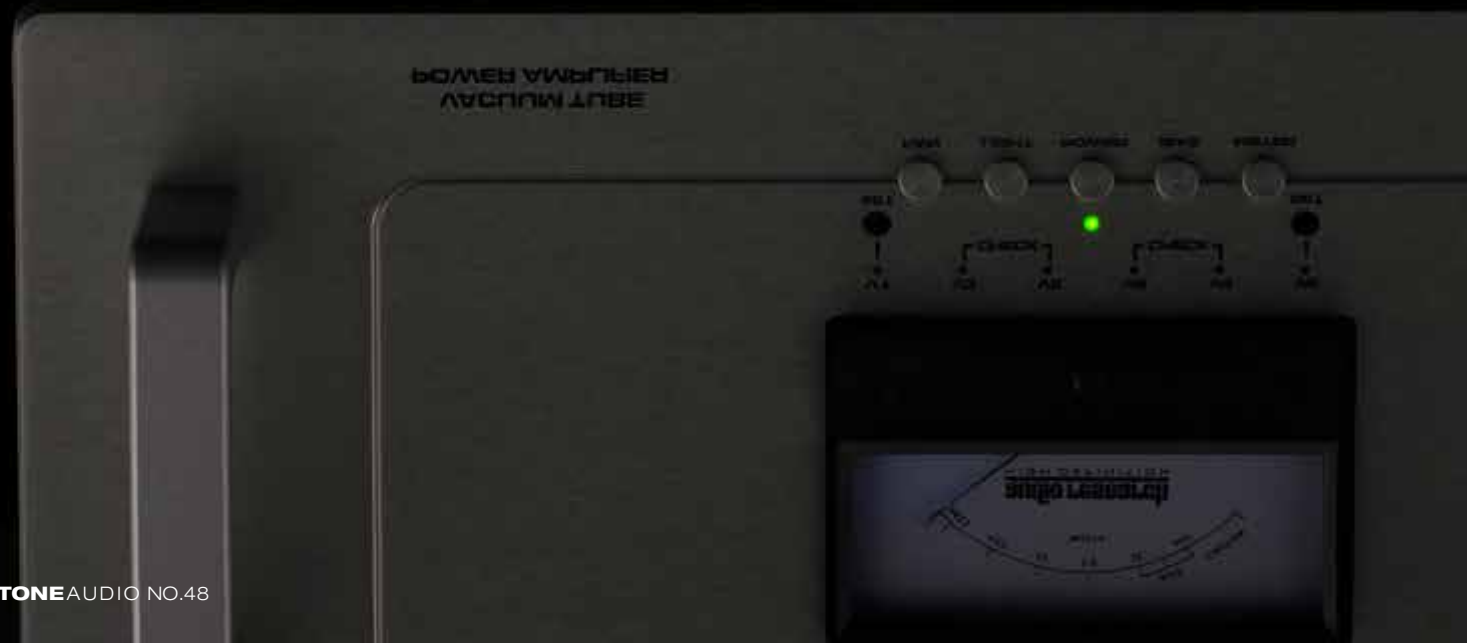
**Preamplifier** ARC REF 5SE, Burmester 011, McIntosh C50

**Power Amplifier** ARC REF 150, Burmester 911, Pass Labs XA200.5 monos

**Cable** Cardas Clear, AudioQuest Sky



# Power Amplifiers



P

ower amplifiers usually only have an on/off switch. Despite the simple appearance, never underestimate their importance to a system. Nor how much consideration should be paid to integrating power amps with other components. In addition to sound character, a unit's size, weight, power, connectivity options, and heat output should heavily weigh on your decision.

If you try out myriad speakers as if they were pairs of shoes, consider solid-state amps. They are almost always more speaker-friendly, especially if you've chosen a modest to high-power, high-current design. All the solid-state amplifiers on this list should work with any set of speakers. Moreover, they've all been run through their paces with numerous speakers during reviews.

Much like vinyl, the vacuum tube isn't going away, and audiophiles still crave the elusive qualities that tubes bring to the party. Those that don't appreciate the mighty valve might dismiss such enthusiasm as euphonic distortion at best and something just shy of the occult at its worst. But well-designed tube amplifiers offer something wonderful—provided you are willing to give them the additional attention they require.

Here, we offer great examples of each amplifier type, listed in descending order of MSRP.



# Power Amplifiers

## OCTAVE JUBILEE MONOBLOCKS

\$69,000/pair

Over the last 30 years, Germany's Octave Audio, which is one of the founding members of Munich's High End Society (along with Burmester), has established itself as one of the industry's leading manufacturers of tube amplifiers. The attention to detail that goes into each of its products is readily apparent and, like all Octave amplifiers, its Jubilee monoblocks make owning a tube amplifier as easy as putting toast in a toaster. (The company also offers a Jubilee preamplifier.) Biasing the tubes of the Jubilee monoblocks doesn't require tools or excessive labor, and its protection circuitry guards both the amplifier and your speakers from catastrophic failure. And, all practicality aside, they deliver truly remarkable sound. Utilizing eight 6550 tubes per channel in their take on the classic pentode circuit, the Jubilee monos have all the subtlety you'd expect from a premium vacuum tube amplifier, plus boundless dynamics.

## PASS LABS XA200.5 MONOBLOCKS

\$44,000/pair

When we reviewed the XA160.5s last year, it was tough to imagine that 40 more watts per channel could make that much of a difference—yet it does. The beefier output stage of the XA200.5, combined with an even heftier power supply, produces a bigger soundstage and offers a tremendous amount of control. The bigger amps also generate more heat than the others in the Pass stable, so you may need an HVAC upgrade to go along with a pair of the XA200.5s.



# Power Amplifiers

## BURMESTER 911 MK.3

\$29,995

In our 2009 review of the 911, we proclaim it “the best amplifier made.” We stick by that remark. Nothing *TONEAudio* publisher Jeff Dorgay has heard before or since has the 911's ability to effortlessly drive any speaker in addition to boasting zero maintenance, near-perfect tonal balance, and boundless dynamics. Along with prodigious power and control over the audio spectrum, the 911's gorgeous jewel-like casework makes it an object of art on more than one level. The only thing better than a 911? A pair of them.



## AUDIO RESEARCH REF 250

\$25,990/pair

Keeping all the virtues of the highly successful Reference 150, the 250 has twice the power-supply capacity of the 210 it replaces. The 250 breaks from the tradition of 6550 output tubes, and instead takes advantage of the new KT120 tube, as well as a power-supply and output-transformer upgrade. The front panel now also takes a distinctively classic stance by employing analog output meters. For those who require a bit more juice than the single-box Reference 150, yet who are not ready to buy output tubes by the pallet-load, the 250 is a perfect fit.



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TOTEM  METAL  
ELEMENT SERIES

## TOP TONE

# Power Amplifiers

### SIMAUDIO MOON W-7M MONOBLOCKS

\$25,000/pair

**W**ith 500 watts per channel and understated good looks, Sim's W-7 monoblocks come scarily close to the sound quality of cost-no-object amplifiers at a price that is expensive, but not ridiculous. One of the most neutral amplifiers around.

### PASS LABS XA160.5 MONOBLOCKS

\$24,000/pair

**P**ass Labs refers to its power amplifiers as "tubes without the trouble," and after much brainstorming (and listening), that one-liner best describes the XA160.5s. A different animal than the Burmester 911, it is one of the few solid-state amplifiers that defies definition due to its seductiveness and grain-free character. Much like the 911s, even if they are slightly richer in terms of tonality, the Pass units merely sound like music.

Thanks to their Class A design, you'd swear tubes lurk under the hood. The XA160.5s' only drawback? They are power hungry, drawing 750 watts each. If you are concerned about your carbon footprint, you may need to cut back somewhere else to justify the XA160.5s' existence.





# Power Amplifiers

## MCINTOSH MC1.2KW MONOBLOCKS

\$22,000/pair

**D**odge's new Challenger, even with the optional 525 horsepower Hemi engine, has nowhere near the refinement of a new Porsche 911 GT3. However, the former has more power than you will ever need, and, it's really fucking cool. The minute you get behind the wheel and put down 200 feet of rubber marks on the street, you'll be grinning ear to ear.

The McIntosh MC1.2kws deliver similar sensations. The massive monoblocks, with bigger-than-your-thick-skull power meters that read up to 4,800 watts (at +3db), mean business the second you power them up. And, the first time you play *The Dark Side of the Moon* at stadium levels in your living room, you'll again be grinning ear to ear, even if they may be ringing a little.

## OCTAVE MRE 130 MONOBLOCKS

\$13,000-\$20,000 (depends on options)

**A** newcomer to the US, Octave has been in Europe since the mid-90s, with its products reflecting a high level of engineering and build quality. Additional power supply capacitors can be externally added (accounting for the increased cost), allowing for upgrades as budgets permit.

Utilizing KT-88/6550 power tubes, the MRE 130s are fuss-free, with all tubes claiming individual bias adjustments and LEDs that indicate when correct bias is reached. A patented protection circuit does not compromise sound quality and, when activated, merely shuts down the amplifier. Glowing red LEDs indicate defective tubes.

Very similar to the ARC REF 150 in terms of ultimate power output and overall sound character, Octave amplifiers never exaggerate or romanticize. Yet they still manage to have tubes' trademark airiness, which makes them compelling sonic wonders.



# Power Amplifiers

## AUDIO RESEARCH REF 150

\$12,995

**A**n evolution of the REF 110 and fully optimized to take advantage of the new KT120 power tube, the REF 150 also incorporates details from the designs of the 40th Anniversary REF preamplifier and REF Phono 2. It strikes an ideal balance between dynamic punch and tonal purity.

While the REF 150 is the first amplifier in the company's upgraded lineup, we're confident that the larger monoblocks will be equally satisfying. Producing 150 watts per channel with a one-chassis design, the REF 150 could prove to be the sweet spot in the ARC stable, especially since there are only eight power tubes to replace.



## MANLEY 250 MONOBLOCKS

\$12,500/pair

**E**ven with Manley's recent price increase (these amps were a steal at \$9,000 a pair), the 250s still rule. With 250 watts per channel in Triode mode or 125 watts per channel in Triode mode, here is a rare tube power amplifier that combines the delicacy of an EL-34 amplifier with the outright slam of a KT-88 amp.

The sound is luscious, warm, and big: You'll never mistake these for anything else but a modern, classic-styled tube amplifier. Yes, with 10 EL-34 power tubes per chassis, these babies are high maintenance. Who said big fun didn't come at a price?





## TOP TONE

# Power Amplifiers

### RED WINE AUDIO LILIANA MONOBLOCKS

\$6,000/pair

**W**ith the Liliana, RWA designer Vinnie Rossi has pushed the envelope of battery-powered amplifier design. He's built a legendary reputation with his moderately powered class-D power amplifiers, but the Liliana pulls no punches, delivering 115 watts per channel at 8 ohms (doubling into a 4-ohm load). It also combines a MOSFET output stage with a tube input stage for performance that is even further improved. The Liliana offers the grain-free sound and uncanny low-level detail resolution for which RWA is known and brings the Liliana to a wider range of speakers with its additional power. Being battery power gives the Liliana an additional benefit: It doesn't need an upgraded power cord!

### MCINTOSH MC275

\$4,995

**N**ow in its sixth generation of production, the MC275 has received constant refinement since its initial rollout in the 1950s. The tube complement has since changed, and the amps are now assembled with a printed circuit board instead of point-to-point wiring. But every bit of trademark McIntosh quality remains.

Yes, the chassis are still hand-bent in the upstate New York factory, a few feet away from the shop floor where the transformers are hand-wound by the same ladies that have been at the task since the 80s. The MC275 is a solid value, yielding great sound that tilts to the romantic side (as with most Mc gear) and always seems to make even the worst recordings come across better than they should. Such aural metamorphosis is one reason why this amplifier is so special. Best of all, you'll be able to pass it on to your grandkids.

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TOP TONE

## Power Amplifiers

### PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE 6 & 7 MONOBLOCKS

\$4,699 and \$5,499/pair

Prima Luna just keeps quietly improving. Its DiaLogue monoblocks provide 70 watts per channel, with the higher-priced 7 accomplishing the feat with KT-88 tubes and the 6 doing so with EL-34s. The 7 also features upgraded capacitors and fast recovery diodes in the power supply. Like all PrimaLuna amplifiers, these use patented “Adaptive Auto Bias” circuitry, so worrying about tubes is a thing of the past.

The arrangement also means that both amplifiers maintain the ability to use 6L6, EL-34, or KT-88/6550 power tubes. Hence, they take on the sonic character of the options you choose, and as such, stand as two of the most fun amplifiers around. Bulletproof construction—and brand loyalty—complements the great sound. Just try to find a used pair on the market.

### MANLEY LABS MAHI

\$4,600/pair

The price has gone up on the Manley Mahi monoblock in the six years since we first reviewed it. The Mahi has retained its cute shape, but has gone through major revisions under the hood. Virtually doubling the power-supply capacity has turned the Mahi into the little amplifier that can. Three available adjustments for overall feedback and the ability to run it in triode or ultra-linear mode make matching the Mahi to various speakers and systems stupidly simple. And, if your claws are big enough, you can pick one up in each hand.



PrimaLuna DiaLogue Seven POWER





## TOP TONE

# Power Amplifiers

### FIRST WATT M2

\$3,995

Honestly, we could list every First Watt amplifier in this feature. We've sampled most of them over the last few years and, as creator Nelson Pass says, "There is no such thing as a perfect amplifier. But there is a best amplifier for each type of speaker, music, and listener." Each First Watt unit follows a slightly different topology. The M2 is a Class A design that incorporates JFETs and MOSFETs operating in Class A mode with an interstage transformer.

The M2 not only provides a near-nirvanic "first watt," but 25-40 of the most musical watts (depending on whether you have 4- or 8-ohm speakers) we've heard at any price.



### DECWARE ZEN TORII

\$2,975-\$4,875 (depends on options)

DecWare founder Steve Deckert proudly proclaims the Zen Torii is "the last amp you'll ever want." And if you agree with Nelson Pass' theory that there is a best amplifier for each type of speaker, the Zen Torii could be just "the best" if you have the right speakers. *TONEAudio* publisher Jeff Dorgay was smitten enough to purchase the Torii for his reference fleet of amplifiers. For an EL-34-based amplifier, the bass grip is nothing short of breathtaking, and the Torii renders musical detail like Kodachrome 25.

Indeed, there's never been a better example of specs not telling the whole story. The Torii plays louder and interfaces with a much wider range of speakers than suggested by its modest 26-watt-per-channel rating. Showcasing old-school style, the Torii is hand-wired in Illinois by the DecWare staff and guaranteed for life. American craftsmanship at its finest.



# Power Amplifiers

## SIMAUDIO MOON 330A

\$3,450

**S**imaudio is one of the masters of technological trickle down. Building everything in house, from circuit board to casework (Sim is one of the few manufacturers having their own five axis CNC machining station in house), the 330A is a top value. With 125 watts per channel into an 8 ohm load, doubling into 4, this compact power house drives all but the most power hungry speakers easily. A fully balanced Class-A design, the Moon 330A is quiet, dynamic and tonally accurate.

And for those still preferring separates to the integrated approach, the 330A makes a perfect compliment to their 350P preamplifier.



# Power Amplifiers

## EXPOSURE 3010S2 MONOBLOCKS

\$2,899/pair

**E**xposure trims all the frills, delivering a pair of high performance 100 watt per channel solid-state monoblock amplifiers in spartan boxes. However, if maximum performance for the dollar is your goal, the 3010S2s do not disappoint. Thanks in part to the monoblock design, they throw a huge soundstage in all three dimensions, possessing a degree of tonal refinement usually lacking at this price.

## NEWCLEAR AUDIO NC1000L

\$2,600

**U**pstart NewClear bursts on the scene with a 501 watt per channel (into 8 ohms, 1001 watts per channel into a 4-ohm load) dual mono power amplifier utilizing the latest B&O IcePower modules. If you've pooh-poohed Class D in the past, it's time to take another listen – these are some of the most musical Class D amplifiers we've heard at any price.

While NewClear claims a soft clipping design, we weren't able to push them hard enough without ear protection to really investigate this aspect of their performance. In day to day listening, even with the power hungry Magnepans, having this much clean power on tap was a joy. And getting it for \$2,600 is a steal. Keep an eye on NewClear.

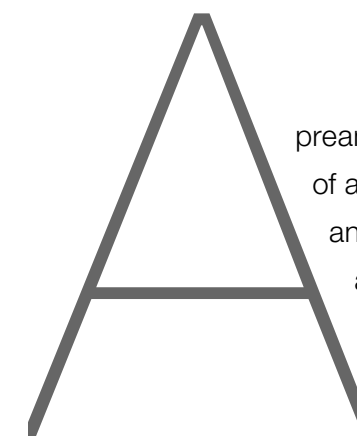






TOP TONE

# Preamplifiers



preamplifier constitutes the heart and soul of a hi-fi system, controlling low-level signals and organizing inputs and outputs. Some argue that a preamplifier is unnecessary, but we feel that a truly great unit always takes a fine stereo to an even higher level. Here are a few of our favorites.

## **ROBERT KODA K-10**

\$31,000

**R**obert Koda redefines the word “meticulous” with the K-10 preamplifier. This limited-production solid-state preamplifier is a very special product. It combines world-class sonics and Japanese build-quality with the utmost simplicity. A look inside reveals almost no circuitry left in the open. The preamplifier’s modules are sealed in highly shielded enclosures, which results in what might be the quietest preamplifier we’ve ever experienced. Taking this perfectionist approach even further, the K-10 does not feature a remote control, as designer Robert Koda leaves nothing to interfere with the delicate audio signal.



# Preamplifiers

## BURMESTER 088

\$29,995

**B**urmester 088 continues the company's tradition of precision build-quality and impeccable sound—all wrapped in casework you'd expect to find on a Faberge egg. Ultimately versatile, the 088 can be configured with an onboard phono preamplifier, 24/192 DAC, or additional line-level input. Fully balanced like all previous Burmester preamplifiers, the 088 does not feature RCA input or output jacks but, instead, offers high-quality XLR>RCA adaptors.

Incorporating X-AMP 2 modules from Burmester's flagship 808 and 077 preamplifiers, the 088 nears the performance of its higher-priced brethren. With massive dynamics and subtle tonal contrast, this preamplifier epitomizes definition.



## CONRAD-JOHNSON GAT

\$20,000

**W**ith a long line of award-winning vacuum tube preamplifier designs to draw upon, Conrad Johnson's latest GAT forges a new trail. The GAT uses a hybrid design with only a single pair of 6922s. Chock-full of CJD Teflon capacitors, the GAT has a massive, overbuilt power supply, which makes it quiet, dynamic and a master of low-level detail. This, the company's top preamplifier, strikes a perfect balance between the immediacy of Conrad Johnson's past ACT 2 and the tonal richness of its ART 3.



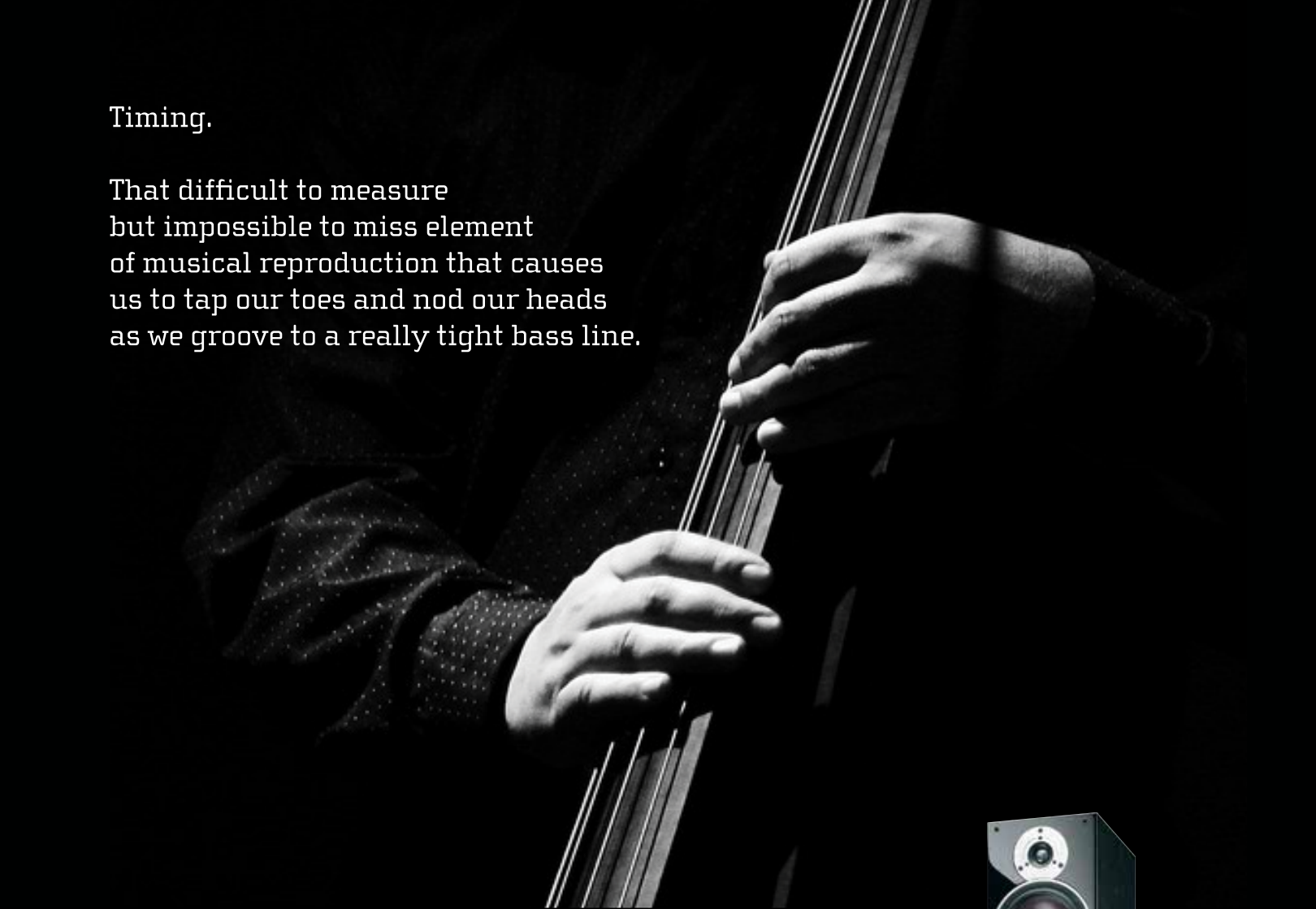
# TOP TONE Preamplifiers

## AUDIO RESEARCH COMPANY REF 5SE \$12,995

The performance gap between Audio Research's legendary 40th Anniversary preamplifier, which is now out of production, and the Reference 5 was immense. While there has been no rumor to suggest that the Anniversary preamplifier will become a production staple, much of what the company's engineering team learned with that product has been applied to the new, SE model of the Reference 5. It offers twice the power supply of the original version, along with plenty of other improvements across the board. A side-by-side comparison to the original Reference 5 confirms that the new SE model is a big leap towards the Anniversary model, yet still only on one chassis.



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## TOP TONE

# Preamplifiers

### MCINTOSH C500

\$11,995

One step beneath the flagship C1000, the C500 offers comparable performance—and the versatility to be configured as either a solid-state or vacuum-tube preamplifier.

True to McIntosh heritage, it sports gorgeous casework, with an LED-backlit front panel and pair of blue output meters. Mac preamps are all about flexibility, and the C500 does not disappoint. It's outfitted with two sets of XLR and RCA line-level outputs as well as seven inputs. Analog lovers will appreciate the onboard phonostage that claims both MM and MC inputs, each featuring adjustable impedance loading and capacitance. This preamplifier promises treats for every music lover, no matter what their preferred source material.

While we love both versions, our staff prefers the tube version—in part for the slightly romantic sound and in part for the thrill of tube rolling and custom-tuning the sound.





## Preamplifiers

**SIMAUDIO MOON 350P**

\$4,495

**S**imaudio and great sound go hand in hand. What makes the Moon 350P preamplifier so cool is its full functionality. The simple, intuitive remote and built-in headphone amplifier only tell half the story. Users can configure the Moon 350P with an onboard 24/192 DAC and an adjustable MM/MC phonostage. This level of versatility is unheard of at this price. The Moon 350P pairs perfectly with the Moon 330A amplifier. Our reviews of both are almost complete.

## Preamplifiers

**CONRAD-JOHNSON CLASSIC**

\$2,495

**B**efitting the model's name, Lew Johnson and Bill Conrad returned to their roots with the Classic. Reminiscent of the PV-12 preamplifier (still a staple in our publisher's reference-component library), and seizing upon 30 years of circuit-design refinements, the Classic is a fantastic option for those wanting solid performance without any bells and whistles. It's also available with a built-in phonostage. Clad in CJ's trademark champagne finish, the Classic strikes a beautiful balance of tonal richness and sonic contrast.

**CROFT MICRO 25**

\$1,495

**T**here's no better way to get back to basics. Hand-built, and featuring point-to-point wiring and a very simple circuit, the Croft Micro 25 furnishes incredible sound to listeners willing to forgo fancy casework and a remote control.

Three 12AX7s make it easy to fine-tune the sonics (the stock JJs aren't bad), and the design exudes quietness. The MM phonostage is alone worth the cost of the preamplifier, so view the Micro 25 as a terrific phono preamplifier with a linestage thrown in to seal the deal.





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- Jeff Dorgay, *ToneAudio*, Issue 22, 2009

### Fathom® f112

"Editor's Choice" Award

- *The Absolute Sound*, (2007, 2008, 2009)

"a freaking rock of build quality"

- Colin Miller, *Secrets of Home Theater and High Fidelity*

### Fathom® f113

Class A Recommended Component

- *Stereophile*

"Editor's Choice" Award

- *The Absolute Sound*, (2007, 2008, 2009)

### Fathom® f212

The Fathom f212 has raised the performance quality of my audio system, and my enjoyment of it, to much higher levels.

The Fathom f212 belongs in the top-rank-Class A-of "Recommended Components."

- Larry Greenhill, *Stereophile*, April 2010

### Fathom® IWS

True Fathom performance, invisibly installed inside your walls.

### Gotham® g213

"...one of the rare pieces of high-end audio gear that will take you somewhere you have never been."

- Jeff Dorgay, *ToneAudio*, Issue 26, 2009



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TOP TONE

# Integrated Amplifiers

For the longest time, integrated amplifiers have been pooch-pooched by serious audiophiles that often feel that top-shelf components must be placed on separate chassis, optimized for a sole task, and have a dedicated power supply to provide maximum performance.

However, large racks of components don't suit everyone. Moreover, power-supply design improvements, along with enhanced circuit design and chassis layout, have resulted in integrated amplifiers that offer separates' performance in single boxes. Thanks to vinyl's resurgence, phono inputs have also returned to today's integrated models. And DACs have started to become an onboard feature, making new integrated units more powerful than ever.

Fewer boxes in the listening room can work well on so many levels. Less cables and clutter means that style-conscious music devotees no longer need to choose between performance and functionality. Money saved purchasing fewer power cords and interconnects can be utilized elsewhere in the system, or perhaps, on concert tickets. Best of all, the integrated approach assures perfect system synergy, removing any worries of impedance or cable mismatch between amplifier and preamp.



## TOP TONE

# Integrated Amplifiers

### BURMESTER 082

\$16,995

While not a budget-minded integrated, the 082 is a bargain in the sense that it includes a 140 watt-per-channel Burmester power amplifier and full-function preamplifier on a chassis that's about the size of the company's 911 power amplifier.

A brief listen confirms that no sonic or aesthetic corners are cut. Pound for pound, the 082 comes very close to the 011 preamplifier/911 Mk. 3 power amplifier in publisher Jeff Dorgay's reference system. If you didn't think you could afford Burmester quality, or just don't need the 350 watts per channel provided by the 911, the 082 is an excellent solution. The amplifier possesses the same delicacy and resolution of equivalent Burmester separates, and even features bass and treble controls.



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TOP TONE

## Integrated Amplifiers

### SIMAUDIO MOON 700I

\$11,995

The Moon 700i is the latest evolution of Simaudio's earlier i7 integrated amplifier, a reference component for *TONEAudio* contributor Mark Marcantonio. While some may argue that the older amplifier possesses a warmer tonal balance, the 700i boasts more ultimate resolution and bass slam.

While 25 watts doesn't sound like much on a spec sheet, the 700i claims an authority the i7 lacks, especially when driving tough loads. Utilizing Simaudio's LYNX circuit, which mounts the power amplifier's circuit boards on each output's heat sink, confirms this is a dual mono amplifier in every sense. Separates, meet your match.



### LUXMAN SQ-38U

\$5,995

Aesthetically similar to the L-590A II, the SQ-38u takes a different technological approach. In production since the early 60s, this vacuum-tube amplifier has been honed to perfection.

This EL-34-outfitted unit also offers an excellent MM and MC phonostage that plays nicely with a wide range of phono cartridges. Like other Luxman integrations, the SQ-38u boasts highly effective tone controls (but no power meters) and a top-shelf headphone amplifier. If you want the best of both worlds in a tube amplifier—i.e., rich sound without the trouble of rebuilding a classic amplifier—your ship has arrived.



# Integrated Amplifiers

## NAIM SUPERNAIT

\$4,995

**S**earching for a top DAC that will anchor a system? The SuperNait is a tremendous bargain and performer, and adds a plethora of digital inputs to five analog inputs. Its compact chassis and understated elegance blend with practically any decor.

The opportunity to add an additional power supply, in grand Naim tradition, makes this baby obsolescence-proof: You can use it in standard form, or fiddle to your heart's content. Of the three available external power supplies, the \$7,000 top-of-the-range SuperCap is the one that morphs the SuperNait into an amplifier that sings and remains limited only by the speakers and source components to which it's connected. Mate a \$7,000 power supply to a \$4,995 amplifier? Sounds crazy, but the sublime results make this combination be the best value of all available options.

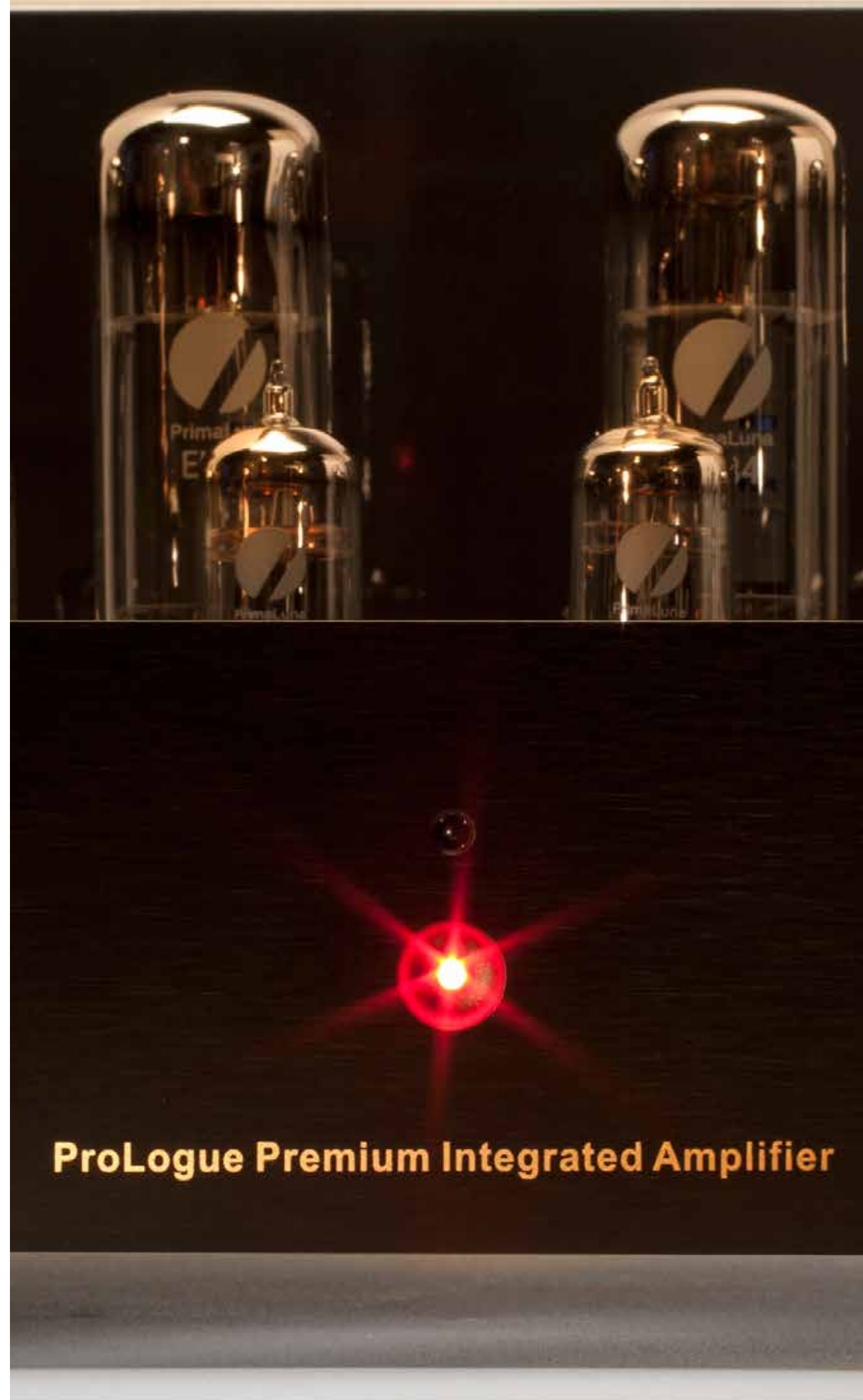


## PRIMALUNA PROLOGUE PREMIUM

\$1,995

**C**ontinuing a trend started with the ProLogue One, PrimaLuna has built one of the best and easiest ways to enter the vacuum-tube world via an integrated that eliminates the hassle factor. Thanks to patented adaptive auto bias, there are no adjustments to make and no fussy tubes to hunt down. You don't even have to use four of the same output tubes!

While equipped with a set of EL-34 output tubes, the ProLogue Premium works equally well with 6550, KT88, or 6L6 tubes, meaning that you can tailor the sound as you wish, from warm and groovy to modern and punchy. Still bitchin' after all these years.



# Integrated Amplifiers

## ANTHEM INTEGRATED 225

\$1,495

**T**his aptly named integrated offers a whopping 225 watts per channel, multiple inputs, and an onboard phono stage for \$1,495. Removing the top cover reveals dual mono design and a serious power supply (with an enormous power transformer and capacitor banks) feeding both the amplifier and preamp stages. An excellent MM phono stage and headphone amplifier are also part of the package, making the Anthem a splendid value for beginner audiophiles that don't want to go the Class D route.

Quality parts, an excellent remote, and understated casework ensure the hits keep on coming. The plentiful, on-tap power allows for a wide range of speaker choices. While rated power is not quoted into a four ohm load, Anthem's website lists the Integrated 225 as "four ohm compatible." It has no problem driving Magnepan speakers, which crave power.



## REGA BRIO-R

\$995

**I**f we gave a "sleeper" award, the Brio-R would win it. Rega's engineers always provide excellent value, but they've outdone themselves with this amplifier. Don't be fooled by the small size. With 50 watts per channel and an onboard MM phono stage, the Brio-R exhibits major dynamic swing, along with wonderful tonal contrast and musicality.

Part of a new range of "half-sized" components, Brio-R supplies incredible performance without breaking your back or pocketbook. This little gem is never out-classed, even when paired with speakers and source components. If you need high-quality sound on a tight budget, this Rega should be at the top of your list.





# Super Speakers

In the automotive world, cars that epitomize performance from the likes of Aston Martin, Ferrari, and Bentley are often described as supercars. Made in limited quantities from exotic materials, and lavished with extra care during the building and fine-tuning process, they cost a small fortune in comparison to standard offerings from Porsche, Audi, and BMW. Yet they deliver inimitable experiences.

So it is with the three superspeakers below. You won't see the Kia hamsters chilling out with these babies. The cost of admission, especially when factoring in an equivalent system needed to drive them, would buy a very nice home. Like their automotive equivalents, they are made in small numbers and represent the pinnacle of their respective manufacturers' capabilities.

And just as the trio of supercars offers distinctly different driving experiences, the same applies to these speakers hailing from France, America, and Denmark, respectively. Three different companies with three highly distinct approaches—all featuring unique approaches to design and tonal signature, all possessing the ability to deliver an aural *tour de force* like no others publisher Jeff Dorgay has heard. When properly set up in the right room, and augmented with the world's best electronics, they spoil the listener.

Ralph Lauren once said, "Every man should own a 12-cylinder sports car at least once in his life." On a related note, we propose that every music lover should experience these four speakers.





## e.One C5i DAC Integrated Amplifier

Why choose different components for your music downloads, computer, CD player, turntable, cable/satellite box or game consoles? Keep it simple with Bel Canto's compact, powerful **e.One C5i DAC Integrated Amplifier** that powers it all!

The C5i features **2 SPDIF** and **2 TOSLINK inputs** at 24/192, a **USB input** at 24/96, plus **analog MM Phono** and **line level inputs on RCAs**. Outputs include speaker binding posts, line level outputs on RCAs, and a front panel headphone jack. It's a powerful, energy efficient multimedia analog and digital media center. Just add speakers and the C5i's **versatility, performance and dynamic sound** puts you in total system control.

*For More Information Call (612) 317-4550 (9 AM to 5 PM CST M-F). © 2011 Bel Canto Design, Ltd.*

### TOP TONE

## Super Speakers

### WILSON AUDIO ALEXANDRIA XLF \$195,000/pair

There's no shortage of chutzpah at Wilson Audio, which jacked the price of its new flagship, the XLF, up to just about \$200,000, without offering legacy owners an upgrade path from the \$160,000 Alexandria Series 2, the company's former flagship. Though the casual eye might confuse a Series 2 with the XLF, due to their similar form, the new speaker has 14% greater bass volume and a slightly modified enclosure. Eschewing soft dome tweeters in the past, Wilson equips the XLF with a "Convergent Synergy" tweeter in place of the beryllium driver that has occupied this spot for many years. The most notable change is the ability of the XLF's bass port to face either forward or backward, depending on the size of the listening environment you're trying to fill. The new package does work brilliantly and the XLF makes a significant step forward in musicality. If you've got the scratch, the XLF will deliver the goods.





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TOP TONE

## Super Speakers

### FOCAL GRANDE UTOPIA EM

\$185,000/pair

While *TONE* has not formally reviewed the Grande Utopias, publisher Jeff Dorgay spent extensive time with them in various non-hi-fi-show systems and deems them worthy of making this list. A 16-inch field-coil woofer (the EM in the moniker stands for electromagnet) and the latest iteration of Focal's award-winning beryllium tweeter—along with a cabinet derived from extensive computer modeling—are among the long list of technical innovations gracing this speaker.

The Grande Utopias are the most adjustable and, arguably, most technically advanced of the three speakers here. They are also the most misunderstood. I've heard these speakers sound outright dreadful in the wrong room and with the wrong electronics. But you wouldn't drive your F430 with under-inflated bald tires, would you?

When set up with care, the Grande Utopia is a very visceral speaker that yields a staggering degree of tonal and dynamic contrast, along with transparency that rivals the best electrostatics. If you have enough amplifier power, the Grande Utopias will play at concert-hall levels regardless of whether your taste leans more towards Deadmau5 or the LA Philharmonic. And they present beautiful musical renditions even at modest levels, a feat few speakers match. Available in a number of colors, the Grande Utopia also boasts an unparalleled level of construction. If you want to find out where art and science perfectly converge, look no further.





# Super Speakers

## GAMUT S9

\$150,000/pair

The S9 goes against the grain of traditional speaker-enclosure design, utilizing the cabinet's various resonances to work with the drivers. It easily fails the standard audiophile "knuckle rap test," and reveals a lively cabinet. But, as designer Lars Goller likes to say, "sound is all about resonance."

Goller put into the S9 everything he learned from his time designing drivers for ScanSpeak. The speaker features a full complement of custom drivers, along with cutting-edge driver optimization technology employed by no other company. In search of perfection, he examines every minute detail—right down to how many twists are on the cables that connect the drivers and exact port length, down to the tenth of a millimeter.

The S9's high level of musicality makes it stand out amidst the elite plateau of speaker exotica; it is truly the Tone Master. A pair of S9s disappear in a room as easily as a pair of mini monitors—no small feat for a six-foot tall pair of speakers that weigh more than 500 pounds each. They consistently fool diehard music lovers into thinking a piano is playing in the room, yet are still capable of large dynamic swings on heavier music.

Think of the S9 as the Aston Martin DBS of this distinguished group. While it lacks the razor's edge of a Ferrari or brute force of a Bugatti Veyron, it proves the most capable in a wide range of musical situations. Indeed, in the same way that a long, high-speed journey in the DBS will leave you unruffled, the GamuT S9 can play all day long and still cause you to want to reach for another record.

Unlike the Focal's futuristic aesthetic or Wilson's retro look, the Gamut S9 finely expresses the appearance of modern Danish furniture. The cabinet's outer layer starts as a 10mm sheet of the specified wood before being pressure-molded into the final curved shape.

The result? Visual and sonic glory.



## POWER TRIO

The latest additions to Burmester's Top Line offer award winning fidelity and tremendous versatility. The 088 preamplifier features X-Amp 2 modules and can be configured with an on-board phono stage or DAC. The 089 CD player uses an advanced Belt Drive system to keep digital jitter to a minimum, while also featuring a preamplifier stage with volume control and a pair of analog inputs. The 100 phono preamplifier combines two phono inputs and an optional 24-bit/192kHz analog to digital converter, so that you can capture your favorite vinyl treasures at the highest quality possible.

*Burmester*

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MONITOR SUB 8  
MONITOR SUB 10  
MONITOR SUB 12



For more info visit [www.paradigm.com](http://www.paradigm.com)



All Monitor subwoofers consume less than 1 watt in Standby



TOP TONE

# Super Speakers

## PEAK CONSULT KEPHEUS

\$110,000/pair

Another masterpiece hailing from Denmark, the Peak Consult Kepheus is a unique speaker, both visually and sonically. With its massive 3-inch-thick enclosure, compartmentalized for each driver, the Kepheus does not merely dampen vibrations; it eliminates them. A knuckle-rap test suggests that, perhaps, this cabinet is made of the same material as that of the legendary monolith from the Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. All joking aside, while the Kepheus does not have the ultimate bass slam of the big boys from Wilson, GamuT or Focal, it *does* possess a high level of resolution, both in terms of musical detail and subtle shading—both of which help earn it a spot on the top of our list. And, if you need more bass, Peak Consult offers an external pair of bass cabinets, which can be attached to the Kepheus, pushing its price up over \$300,000/pair.







TOP TONE

# Small Speakers

Since today's speakers incorporate much better driver, cabinet, and crossover technology, the old "mini monitor" category doesn't really apply anymore. While mini monitor traditionally meant great imaging and zero bass, many current small speakers produce ample output well into the 50hz region—and in a small space, that's often all you need for highly satisfying musical experiences.



**Focal Diablo Utopia**  
\$12,995/pair

The Diablo Utopia illustrates technology's trickle-down theory. Taking full advantage of everything incorporated in Focal's \$180,000 Grande Utopia EM, the Diablos utilize a 6.5-inch woofer along with the beryllium tweeter used throughout the Utopia range. They defy physics; these are essentially big speakers in small cabinets.

And, as they produce the most prodigious bass and possess the most refined sound of all the small speakers on our list, they are priced accordingly.





## TOP TONE

# Small Speakers

### DYNAUDIO CONFIDENCE C1 II

\$7,690/pair

Danish manufacturer Dynaudio has improved what is arguably the world's best small speaker under \$10k per pair, taking it to an even higher level of performance. With the same Esotar 2 tweeter from the \$22,000/pair C4 and subtle crossover upgrades, the Confidence C1 II manages high resolution and smoothness with ease. Thanks to the small size and minimal front profile, these speakers image like a panel speaker, yet have big speaker dynamics *and* major bass extension. The Confidence C1 II is the perfect speaker for those lacking a large listening room that refuse to sacrifice performance for size. Publisher Jeff Dorgay and contributor Steve Guttenberg both use the C1s as reference speakers.

### MERIDIAN DSP 3200

\$6,000/pair

At first blush, this seems a bit pricey for these tiny speakers, (Stands not included) but considering they include a pair of 75 watt amplifiers contained in each speaker along with DSP crossovers and DSP room optimization as well, these speakers look more and more like a bargain. For those in the fully digital realm, all that's required for a full music system is one of the Meridian/Sooloos media servers and three CAT-5 ethernet cables from your nearest Radio Shack to connect it all.

The DSP 3200s produce room filling sound with substantial LF energy, a testament to Meridian's prowess with the powered speakers. If you'd like to abandon the rack of gear, the DSP 3200 is your ticket to ride.







## TOP TONE Small Speakers

### **B&W 805 DIAMOND**

\$5,500/pair

The smallest speaker system in the Diamond range is an excellent choice for those wanting the larger Diamond speakers' performance in a small room. The 6.5-inch woofer produces useable bass energy down to about 45hz. But the diamond tweeter is the star, as it offers a stunning level of resolution that mates with the world's best components.

### **PENAUDIO CENYA**

\$4,500/pair

The small two-way Cenia system serves as Penaudio's first foray back into the US market, and it's fantastic. Featuring the company's trademark laminated wood cabinets, the understated speakers deliver a much bigger sound than suggested by their diminutive size.

Cenyas throw an enormous soundfield in all directions, complete with surprising bass extension. Listeners that don't play full-scale symphonic music or electronica may not even require a subwoofer. A match with tubes or solid-state electronics, the Cenyas really sing when careful attention is paid to placement and matched solid, mass-enhanced stands.



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## TOP TONE

# Small Speakers

### HARBETH P3ESR

\$2,095/pair

**H**arbeth's smallest speaker takes full advantage of the company's latest Radial cone drive technology and extensive development in the BBC's anechoic chamber. The P3ESR sounds remarkably like the limited-production Monitor 40.1, albeit with less low-frequency output.

The P3ESR is voiced with Harbeth's sonic priority, a natural midband, yet it possesses requisite frequency extension and clarity that might persuade even the most diehard LS3/5a owners to have a change of heart.

### PMC TB2i

\$1,995/pair

**P**MC is known around the world for studio monitor speakers. And that's where the TB2i ended up after our review. *TONE* contributor Todd Sageser purchased the pair for his studio, where they spend their days on top of the mixing board.

All the attributes PMC deems essential in a studio monitor (wide dispersion, linear power response, a natural midband) make for a great home speaker that you can enjoy without being constrained to a tiny sweet spot. The TB2i produce ample bass and are tube-amplifier friendly. A wonderful choice for small rooms and desktop systems.

## TOP TONE

# Small Speakers

### PARADIGM REFERENCE SIGNATURE S1

\$1,895/pair

**P**aradigm always exudes value, and the S1 doesn't disappoint. The S1s excel at throwing massive soundstages and delivering imaging that might expect from a pair of panel speakers. These are ideal matches for a high-performance system in a small room. Need multichannel options? Not to worry. Paradigm has you covered in both the subwoofer and center-channel departments.

### AUDIOPRO LV2E

\$1,000/pair

**I**f we gave awards strictly based on style and functionality, the LV2e's would steal the show. These beautifully crafted mini monitors are available in your choice of red, black or white leather. Craving something more unique? There will be 200 pairs produced in cognac, hand treated leather.

These tiny speakers have a pair of 25 watt, Class-D amplifiers in each cabinet and connect to your computer or music server, wirelessly via the enclosed dongle. With three channels and a remote control, you can run up to three separate zones in your house so everyone can enjoy their music up close and personal. Setup is a breeze, it's as easy as plugging a memory stick into your laptop. Those needing to rock out beyond the LV2e's capability can add the wireless LV subwoofer. With the LV2e's no longer reproducing deep bass, the sub/sat system can play almost 18db louder.



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The ease of operation via its exacting yet simple fixed bias control and comprehensive electronic safeguards, along with its state-of-the-art performance affords absolute refinement, enduring value and unmatched reliability. Further audible improvement and an upgrade path are offered via the optional OCTAVE Black Box power supply capacitance module.

Exhibited in a range of models that redefine the expectations of tube amplifier performance, OCTAVE's timeless contemporary design and harmonious sound quality epitomizes the understated elegance of a true modern classic.

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TOP TONE

# Small Speakers

## FOCAL XS SPEAKER SYSTEM

\$599

Focal's XS satellites include their own powered subwoofer and integral iPod dock. Intended for use at the computer or with a laptop, they take advantage of the same technology contained in the mighty Focal Grande Utopia EM.

The XS is the king of the desktop world. Its single-driver satellites provide not only a high level of coherency but great tonality and, of course, seamless integration with the subwoofer. If you think you can't have great sound on your desktop, you haven't experienced the XS.

## GOLDEN EAR AON 3

\$499 each

Former Polk Audio and Definitive Technology alumni Sandy Gross brings decades of combining high performance at an approachable price to the Aon series of compact speakers. The novel approach of combining a pair of 8-inch passive radiators to the sides of these small speakers gives them mind-blowing bass, *without* a subwoofer. Their 90db sensitivity means you can rock the house with minimal power, and while compatible with every amplifier we tried the them with, the Aon 3 is heavenly with your favorite low powered tube amplifier. Great sound that won't break the bank, and they play well with others – that's the essence of the Aon 3s.

## DEFINITIVE TECHNOLOGY SM45

\$399/pair

The TONE staff was flabbergasted by the level of the performance that these small speakers offer. For not much more than it costs to fuel a Ford F-250, you can buy a great pair of loudspeakers to either start your journey into high end audio, or build a second system around.

Easy to set up and easy to drive, the SM45s fill the room, whether you have a vintage Pioneer receiver or something more contemporary. With an uncanny tonal accuracy and way more bass grunt than their size suggests, the SM45 is one of the best bargains in audio today.



## TOP TONE

# Small Speakers

### DALI LEKTOR 2

\$395/pair

These little 5-inch two-way speakers will surprise even the most jaded audiophile. Chalk it up to Dali's extensive manufacturing abilities and the fact that all of its drivers are designed and built in-house in Denmark.

Thanks to the pulp-infused woofer cone and soft dome tweeter, the Lektor 2 gets the musical fundamentals right. And as long as you don't call on them to play Metallica at bone-crushing levels, you will love just how much performance is had for the price.

### POLK AUDIO BLACKSTONE

TL-1 (\$79.95 ea) TL-2 (\$99.95 ea) TL-3 (\$149.95 ea)

Whether you choose them for a desktop, two-channel, or surround system, the smallest speakers in our small-speaker category do need a subwoofer. No worries. Polk manufactures a number of excellent, compact powered subs (both wired and wireless). And that's no surprise, considering Polk practically invented the sub/satellite category with its original Blackstone series 25 years ago.

While they look similar, each model in the TL series uses different components and crossovers to achieve a progressively wider frequency response. The TL-3 employs a ring radiator tweeter related to that utilized in Polk's top-of-the-line LSiM707. Whichever model you choose, prepare to be impressed.



# Welcome to the Family

When you're born into the right family, some things are simply assured. When that family is Rega, that means the heritage and pedigree that comes from over 30 years of building some of the industry's most widely respected and beloved turntables, the beauty of a simple design that not only functions but outperforms expectations, and a price that leaves you with enough left over to buy a few more albums for your collection.

Enter the new RP6: incorporating Rega's new phenolic double brace technology and completely redesigned RB303 tonearm with stainless steel counterweight, it bears a definite resemblance to the acclaimed RP3. The RP6 offers a host of additional features, however, that set it apart from its sibling: an innovative two-piece glass flywheel platter sits atop a brand new aluminum subplatter assembly for improved speed stability, accuracy, and consistency, all while the platter (and therefore the vinyl) is presented to the stylus as flat as possible. It also includes Rega's 24V low-noise motor and redesigned TT-PSU outboard power supply with push-button speed control.

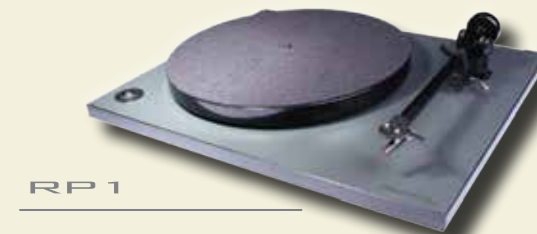
Available in four high-gloss finishes: Red, Green, White, and Black. \$1495 (without cartridge) or \$1990 with Exact cartridge pre-fitted.

# rega

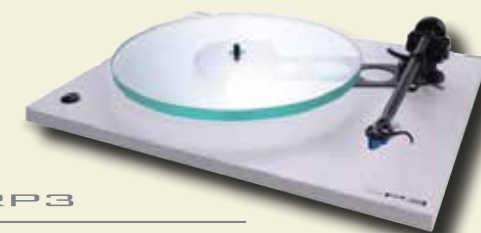
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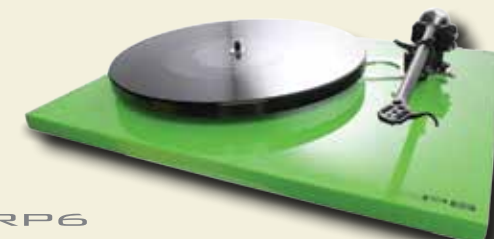
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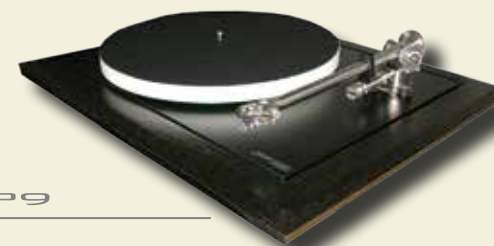
RP1



RP3



RP6



P9



RP78





TOP TONE

# Speakers

**N**o component in the audio chain causes as much controversy as loudspeakers. And no other component makes it so easy to make the

*wrong* choice. Many audiophiles adopting the “bigger is better” philosophy often change their minds as they acquire more setup and room acoustics knowledge. And that’s what makes this fun, right?

For those itching for a shortcut to audio bliss, consider long-term goals when choosing speakers for your listening room. What is your number-one priority: Performance, integration with your environment, or something else? If possible, try and demo your potential purchase with your own amplification and cable. Even better, attempt such trials in your listening room. System synergy and room compatibility are key, and sensitivity specs aren’t the last word on performance. Some speakers are tougher to drive, even if they have a similar sensitivity rating as other models.

With so many options, finding speakers that work with your room, budget, and vision of can take a while. But time spent doing homework pays off. And don’t forget to lean on your dealer for expertise.



# Speakers

## GAMUT S7

\$44,000/pair

A considerable step down from the GamuT's S9 in price, the S7 yields much of the S9's performance from about 30hz on up, especially in moderate-sized rooms. With transparency and top-to-bottom seamlessness that rival the best panels, the S7 has a punch that can only be achieved with a cone speaker. Inside the gorgeous cabinets lurks a set of custom-built and hand-tuned (along with the crossover network) drivers exclusively made for GamuT's S series speakers. At only 51 inches tall, the S7 is also somewhat less imposing than the gigantic S9. Not a bad compromise.

## VERITY AUDIO SARASTRO II

\$42,995/pair (optional finishes at higher cost)

Verity Audio's beautiful speakers showcase an economy of design. What appears outwardly simple reveals a lack of parallel surfaces and meticulous attention to detail. The finished product comes delivered in padded aluminum road cases, ensuring the speaker arrives in pristine condition—an insightful touch that guarantees your speakers will still look factory fresh should you ever decide to move.

The Sarastro II is a three-way design featuring all proprietary drivers, including a rear-firing 11-inch woofer, 6-inch midrange, and ribbon tweeter. Thanks to its 93db sensitivity rating, the model remains incredibly easy to drive with any amplifier. Listeners with large power amplifiers can realize music with a lifelike dynamic scale via the Sarastro II.







## TOP TONE

# Speakers

### MERIDIAN DSP7200

\$35,000/pair

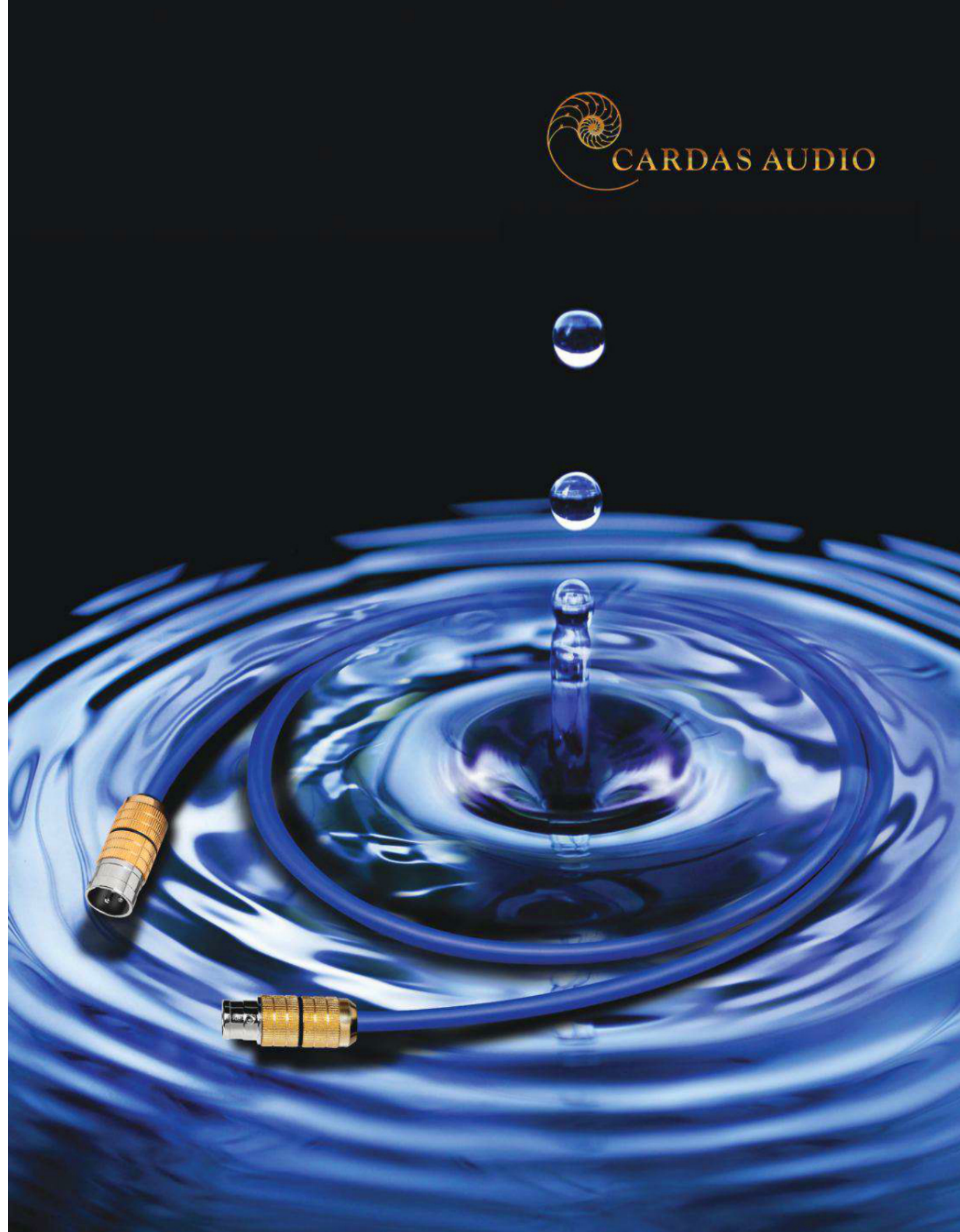
**A**t first glimpse, the DSP7200's price might seem high. But when you consider you're getting a pair of full-range speaker systems, a 600-watt-per-channel power amplifier (each one of the four drivers has a dedicated 150-watt discrete amplifier), and a Meridian DAC, these are quite a bargain. And, you won't need a rack full of gear. A Sooloos music server and/or Meridian disc player is all that's required to complete a system.

Oh, and no fancy cables enter the mix, either. While you can purchase Meridian's Speaker Link cables (inexpensive by audiophile standards), a few lengths of CAT 5 cable from Radio Shack do the trick. The system is so easy to set up, a five-year old can do it. The ultimate music lover/anti-audiophile system.

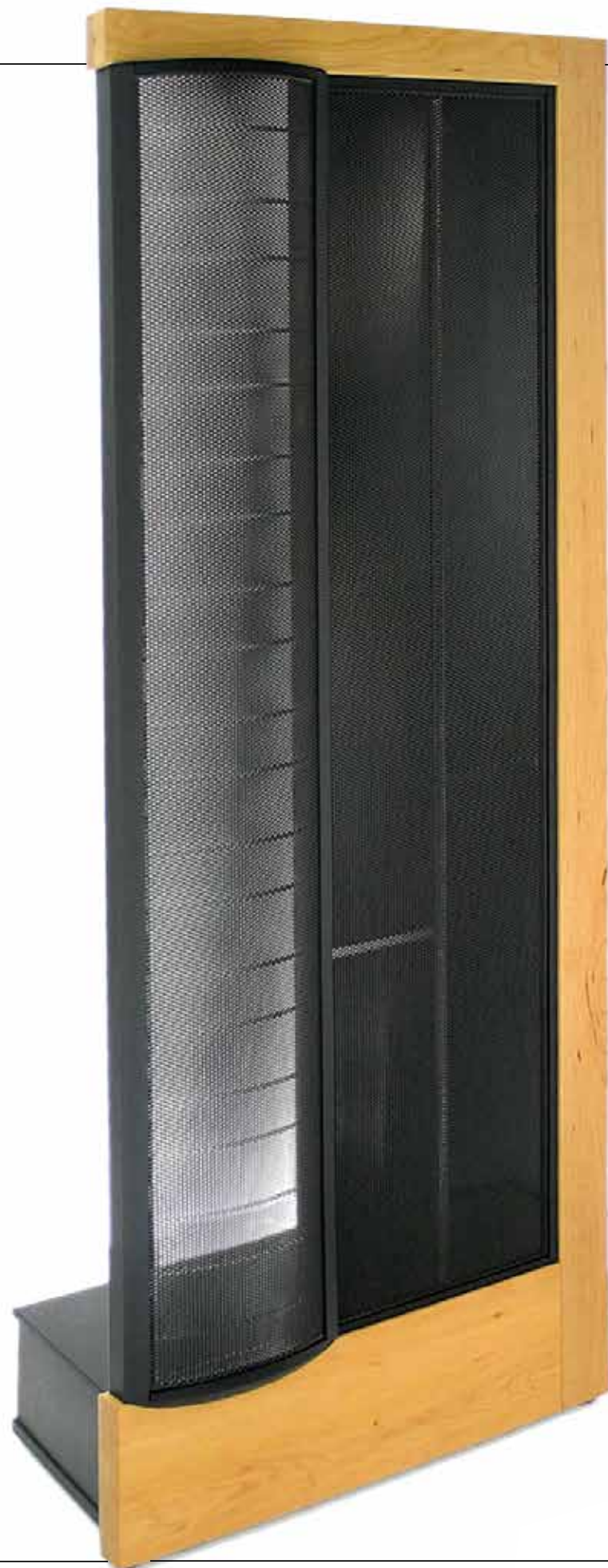
### VERITY AUDIO AMADIS

\$29,995/pair

**S**hould you find the tonal balance of Verity's Sarastro II faintly forward and thus desire to sit back a few rows, the Amadis might be your ticket. The speaker's 10-inch woofer and 5-inch midrange driver, coupled to a soft dome tweeter, provide a slightly mellower perspective. View the Sarastro II as a Porsche GT3 and the Amadis as a standard-issue twin turbo. Either is capable of outstanding performance.







## TOP TONE Speakers

### MARTINLOGAN CLX

\$24,995/pair

**A** lack of bass extension is the one trait that keeps MartinLogan's mighty CLX from the superspeaker category. Throughout the rest of the range, these speakers excel, producing a soundfield that on many levels seems larger than life.

In addition, the CLX's lively, well-defined midrange could very well be the best in the business and, when combined with a great pair of subwoofers, leaves nothing to be desired. The major drawback? The CLX requires plenty of space to give its all. Placed too close to the sidewalls, and the speaker's expansive soundstage collapses. Yet if this shortcoming can be addressed, the CLX's sole limitation is the quality of electronics with which it's paired.



## TOP TONE Speakers

### DYNAUDIO C4 CONFIDENCE II

\$22,000/pair

**S**lightly more than six feet tall, the C4 occupies a tiny footprint, so it can even be placed in small rooms. Featuring Dynaudio's latest crossover upgrades, the C4s sport a mirrored array of two woofers, tweeters, and midrange drivers that supply bass down to 27hz. Imaging is precise albeit natural. And while these babies possess an average sensitivity of 88db, they're easy to drive.

Looking for a synergistic combination? Mate the C4s with Octave tubed monoblock amplifiers, distributed by Dynaudio North America.



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August 2012 Paul Rigby, HIFI World Magazine



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TOP TONE

## Speakers

### B&W 802 DIAMOND

\$15,000/pair

One model down from the legendary 800 Diamond that resides in Abbey Road Studios, the 802 Diamond is nearly identical, save for a slightly smaller cabinet and pair of eight-inch woofers. The Kevlar midrange and diamond tweeter are the same.

The ability to play loud and clean with a very linear response is the 802D's strongest suit. Yet the 802 D remains both resolving and highly musical. Combine these positives with beautiful cabinetry, and you have a speaker that only a company as large as B&W can build at this price point.

### MARTINLOGAN SUMMIT X

\$14,995/pair

Lack the space for a pair of CLXs? The Summit X represents a novel solution. It's a more compact speaker, with a pair of built-in 10-inch woofers. And 25hz and 50hz level controls make it incredibly easy to tailor to room dimensions.

Unlike past models, the company's current ESLs feature MicroPerf technology that boasts a dramatic improvement both in dynamic contrast and maximum SPL. Provided you have enough clean amplifier power, you can play rock, hip hop, and electronic music as if you had command of a mid-sized venue's amplification system.





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## TOP TONE Speakers

### THIEL 3.7

\$12,900/pair (standard finish)

Thiel's 3.7 is a culmination of everything they've learned in over 30 years of speaker production building on their core philosophies of wide band, time aligned drivers connected by a gentle, phase-coherent crossover network.

Produced in the US at Thiel's Lexington, Kentucky facility, the 3.7 is made by hand by skilled craftspeople (many of which have been with the company 20 years) that carefully match everything from the drivers to the fine cabinet veneers to perfection.

The result is a natural speaker that offers the punch of a cone speaker with a level of coherence usually reserved for panel speakers. Their compact form works well in any environment, and final finish can be customized to the owners taste.

### HARBETH MONITOR 40.1

\$12,995/pair

Produced in limited quantities, Harbeth's top speaker utilizes every advantage designer Alan Shaw has at his disposal. Considerably larger than the rest of the company's portfolio, the 40.1 is a full-range speaker meant to be listened to nearfield.

The 40.1's large box defies the current trend of making the front baffle as narrow as possible. Yet, once the music begins, the 40.1 remains as inconspicuous as the tiny P3ESR. It also ignores the "British sound" stereotype, which suggests tonal richness equals a lack of resolution. Chameleon-like in nature, the big Harbeths take on the character of the electronics that feed them. To wit, high-current solid-state amplifiers provide a dramatically different experience than vintage valves.





# TOP TONE Speakers

**VERITY AUDIO RIENZI**  
\$9,995/pair

The smallest of Verity speakers with a two-cabinet design, the Rienzi offers the ability to use its woofer in a forward- or rear-firing configuration, making the model easy to optimize—especially in smaller rooms.

Requiring minimal floor space and amplifier power, the Rienzis are another great choice for listeners seeking in a compact form the sheer musical ability of a large floorstanding speaker. With solid bass output to around 35hz, they work well with all musical tastes.



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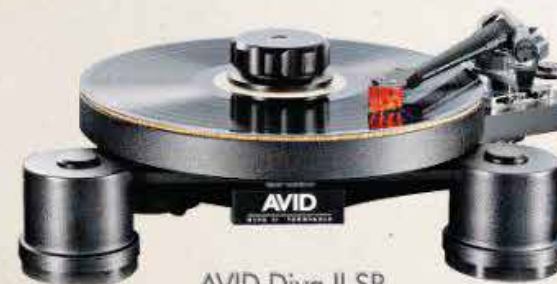


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TOP TONE

## Speakers

### MERIDIAN M6

\$9,000/pair

Meridian's latest entry in the DSP speaker range takes on a slightly more modern form than their past efforts, which have always looked like more "traditional" speaker systems. The tubular shape of the M6 has a glowing band of color at the top of the speaker that changes from white in standby mode to light blue when active.

Much is packed into these compact cabinets: with a 150 watt amplifier for the woofer and a 100 watt amplifier for the full range driver, the M6 is equally home with your favorite string quartet or Metallica—they are capable of moving a lot of air that belies their size. Merely connect a Meridian digital controller or Meridian/Sooloos media server, via RJ-45 and you are ready to enjoy.

### DALI FAZON F5

\$4,495/pair

Known for its gorgeous wood cabinetry, Dali achieves museum-quality beauty with the Fazon F5—a speaker machined from aluminum and coated with a high-gloss red, white, or black finish. Akin to the rest of the Dali range, the compact 2 ½-way design is room friendly and easy to set up.

The F5's wide dynamic range and linearity allow engaging playback at the lowest levels. Yet the speaker can play much louder than that suggested by its compact size. This marriage of natural sound and sleek design defines the "form meets function" aesthetic.





## Speakers

**POLK AUDIO LSiM707**

\$3,990/pair

That's right, Polk Audio. If we bestowed an "extra achievement" award, the LSiM707s would get it. These speakers push all the right buttons for audiophiles and music lovers. Natural timbre, wide-range frequency response, and big dynamics add up to a winning and cost-conscious combination. Those that check their audio snobbery at the door will be rewarded.

**ZU SOUL SUPERFLY**

\$3,000/pair

Part single-driver speaker, part motocross-bike exhaust system, Zu's Soul Superfly packs enormous technology into a small, user-friendly enclosure. Costs are kept low by limiting to two the finish options.

Zu designer Sean Casey admits that the 16-ohm Superfly is "best matched with tube amplifiers." Courtesy of the 99db sensitivity, five watts might get you evicted. One of the most unconventional speakers we've reviewed, and certainly, one of the most fun.

**MARTINLOGAN ELECTROMOTION ESL**

\$2,195/pair

MartinLogan's Electromotion ESL brings award-winning performance to budget-minded audiophiles. The company's latest creation pays homage to its popular Aerius model.

The Electromotion has a high sensitivity (91db) and higher overall impedance (6 ohms, only dipping to 1.6 ohms at worst) than the remainder of the ESL lineup. Hence, it's more forgiving with amplification and can be successfully paired with tubes. A wonderful entrance into the ESL field.

## Speakers

**MAGNEPAN 1.7**

\$2,100/pair

Magnepan never does anything quickly. The 1.7 is the latest upgrade to its highly successful 1.6, which claimed an approximately 15-year shelf life. The new speaker looks virtually identical to its predecessor, but underneath the speaker cloth, it's completely different.

While the crossover network is updated with better components, a majority of the 1.7's performance edge stems from Magnepan's incorporating its quasi-ribbon technology to the woofer and midrange panels (the 1.6 only used it for the tweeter). Similar changes are made to the 3.7, an update of the 3.6. You get a more coherent blend of speaker elements and a more electrostatic-like sound.

**KLIPSCH HERESY III**

\$1,700/pair

Apple Pie, Chevrolet, and Klipsch—forget about baseball. If you want to rock the house without breaking the bank, these speakers will make your day. Due to the Heresy III's 99db sensitivity rating, all you need is low-powered tube amplifier. Don't let the specs fool you. These 12-inch three-ways are designed to work close to the wall to take full advantage of room gain and deliver great bass that accompanies their smooth highs. Hand-made in a variety of finishes. Owning an American classic has seldom been easier.



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TOP TONE

# Speakers

## Vandersteen 1C

\$1,195/pair

It's easy to overlook a speaker that has been around for decades and sold tens of thousands of pairs. That's the story of the Vandersteen 1, now in its third iteration. This two-way floorstander remains one of the audio industry's most popular loudspeakers.

While a few competitors offer more performance in certain areas—and the basic black cabinet with wood top and bottom caps seems a bit plain—no other speaker at this cost nails musical fundamentals like the 1C.

## Magnepan MMG

\$600/pair

Magnepan is so confident you'll love the MMGs that it promises a 60-day, money-back guarantee in addition to a full, one-year trade-in allowance towards one of its larger models. Wendell Diller, head of sales at Magnepan, repeatedly says few people return the MMG, but customers do move up the ladder.

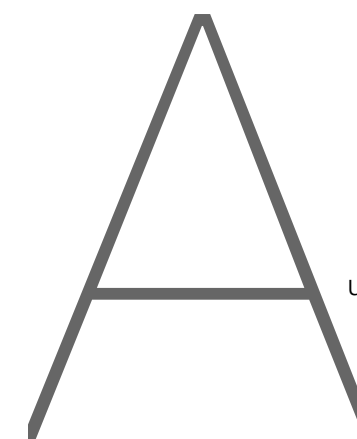
Yes, even Magnepan's smallest speaker provide spacious sound that, in the fields of stringed instruments and vocals, is tough to match unless you spend serious money. The MMGs' only handicap? The elevated performance they offer at this price; the speakers benefit from high-quality, high-performance amplification.

Quirks aside, the Magnepan MMG remains the most intriguing \$600 purchase in high-end audio.





# Subwoofers



audiophiles love to argue about whether or not it's valid to use a subwoofer to reproduce the lowest bass frequencies.

In theory, doing so makes perfect sense: You can optimize the placement of your main speakers for the best midrange/HF response and imaging performance, while locating the subwoofers where they are least affected by the room. Unless you have true full-range speakers, chances are excellent that your system will benefit from a great subwoofer.

## JL AUDIO GOTHAM

\$12,000

Nothing handles low frequencies like the JL Gotham, the pinnacle of subwoofer design. With a pair of 13.5-inch drivers that have three inches of excursion and almost 4000 watts of peak power driving them, there is nothing they can't handle. The only thing better? Two Gothams—and seriously, that's what you really need to do the job right. A pair provides smooth bass response that seamlessly couples with anything from the smallest mini monitors to the most prodigious floorstanding speakers.

As the Gothams weigh in at almost 400 pounds each, be sure your floor and your back can handle these monsters. Better yet, make the dealer set 'em up.







## What Does \$1000 A Watt Sound Like? - Neil Gader

Vitus SIA-025 Review / The Absolute Sound, December 2011

“ The SIA-025 is a superb component brimming with enough finely wrought performance skills to challenge all comers. ”

“ The Vitus Audio conveys the most tactile inner details—virtually down to the fingerprints on a performance. ”

“ ...every self-respecting audiophile should consider it an obligation to listen to one—if just for the hedonistic pleasure of bearing witness to the seductive musicality of one of the high end's finest offerings. ”

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### TOP TONE

## Subwoofers

### JL AUDIO IWS

\$5,000 (1 driver)

\$7,500 (2 drivers)

**D**on't have room for a pair of Gothams, but still want the ultimate bass experience? Consider the JL IWS (in-wall subwoofer). Featuring Gotham technology in a mounting system that completely isolates the woofer from your wall, the IWS neatly fits in between the studs in your listening room to provide stealth subs that won't crack the plaster. Hidden bass at its best.

### REL G-1

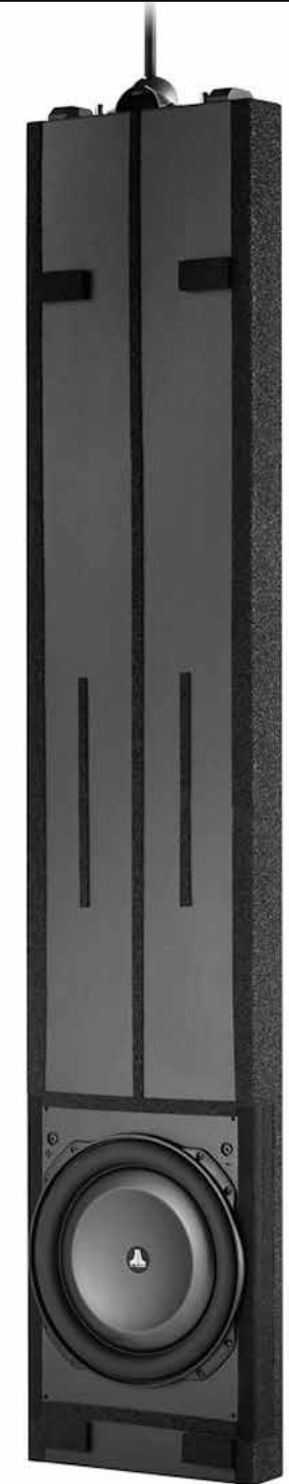
\$3,995

**E**qually at home in a state-of-the-art music or theater system, REL's latest G series subwoofers offer high fashion and high performance. The G-1's ultra cool, circular remote control lets you adjust all of its parameters (hi/low frequency adjustment, level, crossover point, and phase) from your listening position, making the task of optimizing the subwoofer that much easier.

### MARTINLOGAN DESCENT I

\$3,495

**W**ho better to make great subwoofers than a company known for lightning-fast electrostatic speakers? MartinLogan has been crafting a matching line of subwoofers for some time, and each model we've reviewed is excellent. The Descent i represents the top of the range and utilizes three aluminum cone woofers similar to those used in the Summit X system. Each unit is powered by its own 250-watt amplifier, so you'll never run out of juice whether listening to Deadmau5 or watching an action movie.





TOP TONE

# Subwoofers

**JL AUDIO FATHOM F110**  
\$2,100 (satin black) \$2,200 (gloss black)

The smallest model in the Fathom series, the F110 still moves a prodigious amount of air. Thanks to its long-throw, proprietary-designed 10-inch driver and built-in room correction, the F110 easily tailors to your room—even if you don't have the best placement options.

JL's A.R.O. (automatic room optimization) makes it easy to add additional JL subwoofers and set them up as slaves to the master subwoofer, sharing room correction information. This approach helps flawlessly integrate the F110 with your main speakers, regardless of type.

**MARTINLOGAN GROTTTO I**  
\$1,495

The Grotto i is the consummate match for ML's smaller ESL series. It's just the thing that will add a bit of low-end grunt to a pair of Magneplans or mini monitors. Thanks to its versatile crossover and level controls, the Grotto i can be quickly integrated into your room and system. The compact size allows for placement just about anywhere.



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Harbeth speakers have the clarity, imaging, dynamics and fatigue-free character that I demand of speakers in my work. I highly recommend them! – Kevin Gray

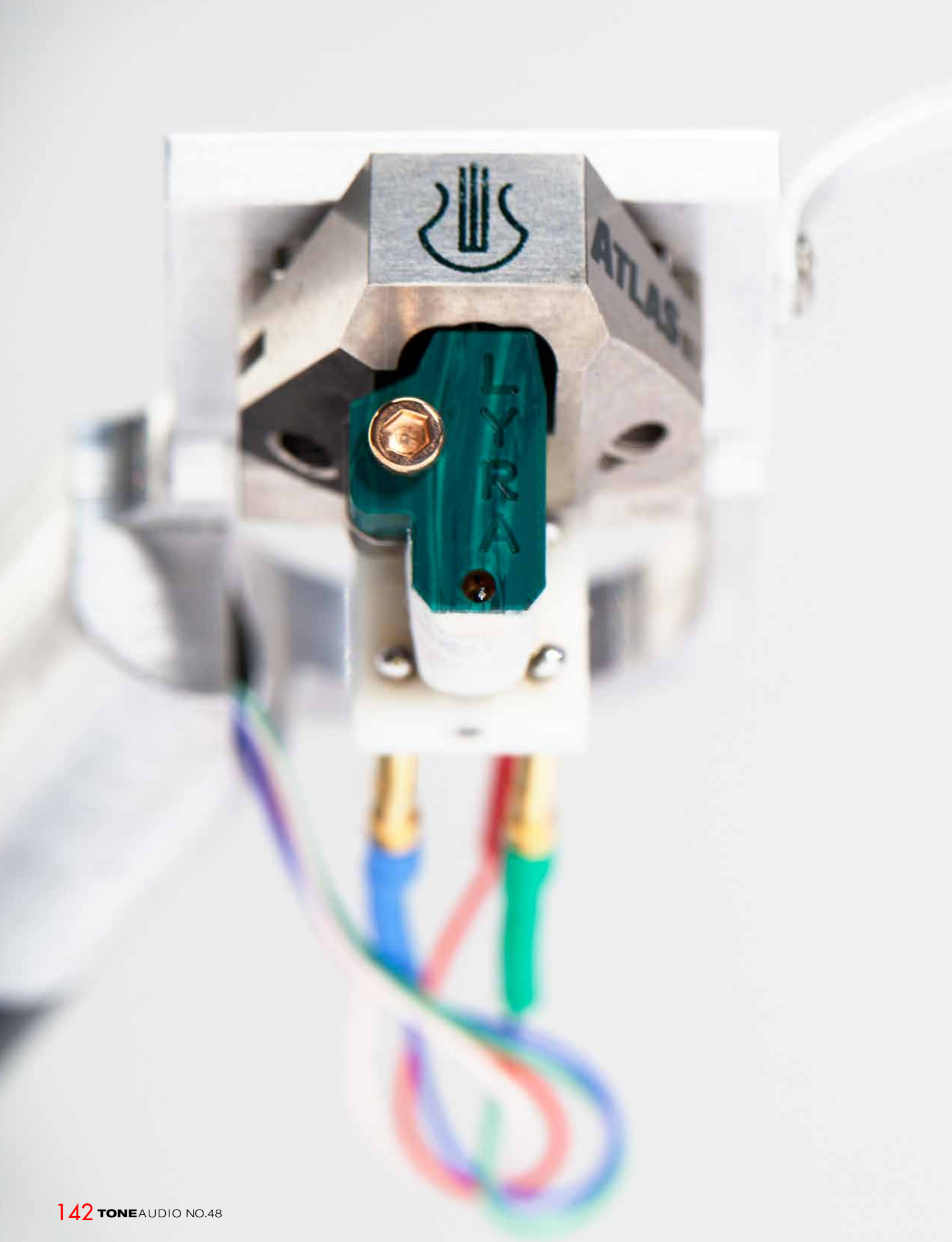
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TOP TONE

# Analog

CARTRIDGES

The phono cartridge is the most difficult element in any hi-fi system because it's almost always the one component you can't audition prior to purchase. Due to cartridges' high price and fragility, there's no choice but to base a decision on reviews, past experience, and suggestions from other owners. It's an often-unnerving experience, especially given that such purchases can mean five-figure expenses.

Of course, also keep in mind that this is the one area easiest to get wrong in a system. And don't be tempted to overspend. No matter the cost, a poorly set-up uber-deluxe cartridge will always be a disappointment. If you're feeling wacky with your 401k funds, heavily invest in the Feickert suite of tools mentioned in this issue's Accessories section and then, master the art of turntable setup.

In the end, it all comes down to setup and cartridge/tonearm/preamplifier synergy—making the cartridge the most vexing albeit most rewarding part of any system. It can drive you crazy. But when you nail it, bliss ensues.

## LYRA ATLAS

\$9,500

Lyra's flagship cartridge, the Atlas, resides in our publisher's system as his primary reference cartridge. Everyone who has made the pilgrimage to Sound Room 1 (as he likes to call it) agrees that the Atlas, albeit expensive, pushes the very limit of the analog galaxy, courtesy of designer Jonathan Carr. The "new-angle" design he employed for the Atlas, which centers the coils within their magnets when the cartridge is actually set down on the record, helps the Atlas achieve new levels of transparency, dynamics and separation.





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#### TOP TONE

## Analog

#### CARTRIDGES

#### AIR TIGHT PC-1 SUPREME

\$9,000

**T**ONE contributor Jacob Heilbrunn calls the PC-1 a revelation, saying it produces "a relaxed and luxurious sound, complete with ravishing tone colors." He's made the PC-1 part of his reference system (mated to the mighty Continuum Caliburn) and puts it in a very small group of stratospheric cartridges that take listeners well beyond what they expect can be extracted from a record's grooves.

All this performance does not sacrifice one segment of the audio spectrum. The PC-1 excels in all areas, making it a fantastic performer.

#### DYNAVECTOR XV-1S

\$5,450

**N**o longer at the top of the Dynavector range, the XV-1S still represents a solid value in the field of top-shelf phono cartridges, claiming levels of delicacy and resolution that you just can't get from lower-priced models. Near-perfect balance makes the XV-1S special. Akin to the Air Tight PC-1, the Dynavector barely resides on the warm side of neutral, with a tonal richness that keeps you glued to the listening chair. It just does everything right.





TOP TONE

# Analog

CARTRIDGES



**CLEARAUDIO DAVINCI V2**  
\$5,000

**M**ost choose to lavish attention on the thrice as expensive Goldfinger. And yes, Clearaudio's DaVinci will still set you back more than the cost of a year's tuition at a community college. However, for those not requiring a 24kt gold body (and cut diamond placed in said body), the DaVinci V2 utilizes gold coils and a boron cantilever that's very similar to that in the \$15k Goldfinger.

The result? A highly detailed and dynamic cartridge that nonetheless lacks harshness, one of the toughest balancing acts in the biz.

TOP TONE

# Analog

CARTRIDGES

**SOUNDSMITH SUSURRO PAUA**  
\$4,000

**W**e're big fans of SoundSmith's Peter Ledermann, an industry veteran known for his ability to repair and/or retip just about any phono cartridge in existence. So it came as no surprise that, when Ledermann designed his own series of phono cartridges several years ago, they were first-class.

The Susurro Paua builds on the success of the "Voice" series of cartridges, utilizing a moving-iron design with extremely low moving mass. The approach yields excellent tracking abilities and superb dynamic contrast. The Paua is a sleeper. When properly set up, it enters the realm of five-figure cartridge performance.

**SUMIKO PALO SANTOS PRESENTATION**  
\$3,999

**S**umiko's top cartridge is an aural *tour de force*. For audiophiles lusting over exotic Koetsus with five-figure price tags, the Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation accomplishes the same goals—namely, a wonderfully natural midband and an expansive soundstage. And, on a number of levels, the Sumiko outperforms the much more expensive Koetsus, offering an ideal balance of sweetness, transparency, and dynamics, along with a much more reasonable output of .5mv. (Most higher-end Koetsus are in the .2-.3mv range.)

Extra time spent with setup yields fantastic results, with low surface noise, in part due to the small stylus profile. No detail is left to chance. The boron cantilever, suspended in a synthetic rubber to extend cartridge life, is particularly impressive.





## TOP TONE

# Analog

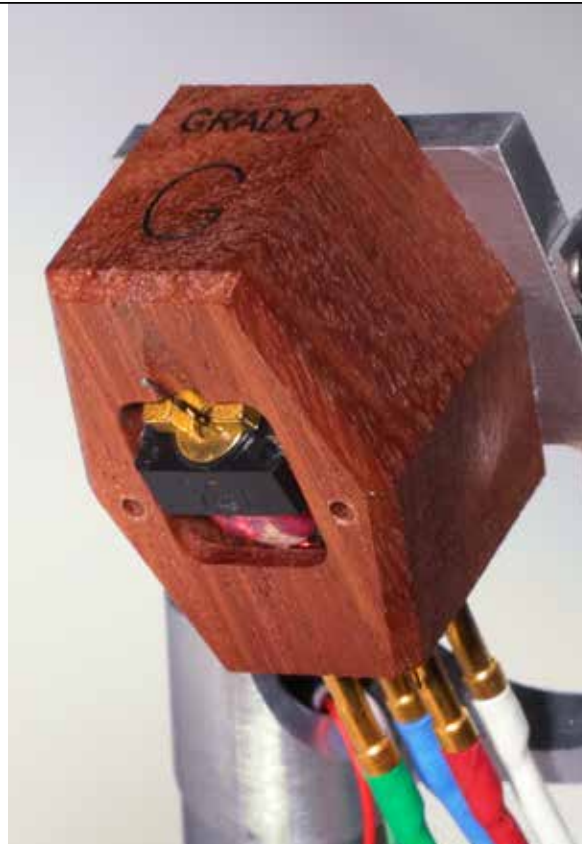
## CARTRIDGES

### GRADO STATEMENT 1

\$3,000

An excellent moving iron-design, Grado's latest iteration of its famed Statement represents a massive improvement—especially considering the modest \$500 price increase over the previous model. Where the original Statement is notable for a warm, mellow midrange and luscious tonality, it falls somewhat short in tracking ability and frequency extension.

The Statement 1 keeps its predecessor's seductive tonality while adding extension at both ends of the frequency spectrum as well as far greater tracking abilities. Its moderate output (.5mv) and 47k loading doesn't place great demand on your phonostage, either.



### LYRA KLEOS

\$2,995

The Kleos is one of the latest Lyra creations, further improving on progress made with the Skala and Argo-i models. Each successive generation seemingly achieves better balance, combining Lyras' exalted ability for detail retrieval with extremely musical tonality.

In many ways, Kleos bests the Skala, with more tonal richness and, thanks to Lyra's "New Angle" suspension system—a process that centers the cantilever between the generating coils—possesses better transient attack to say nothing of decreased distortion when tracking high-level passages.

### CLEARAUDIO MAESTRO WOOD

\$1,195

As you approach the \$1,000 level, the question of whether to choose a MM or MC cartridge can be tough. The Maestro Wood is the best example of a high-priced MM design, as it balances the weight and dynamics craved by many MM lovers as well as a rare level of finesse.

The Maestro Wood has a somewhat warmer tonal balance than Clearaudio's MC cartridges, so it appeals to a different user. With an uncannily high amount of low-level detail for a MM design, this is the one you might fool your friends into thinking is an MC.

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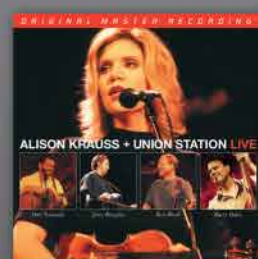
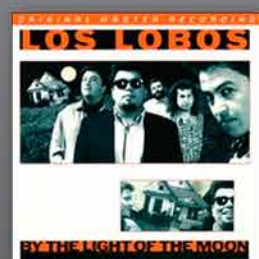
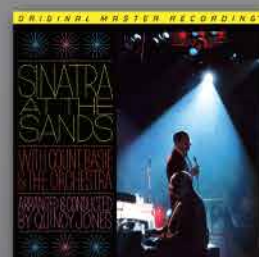
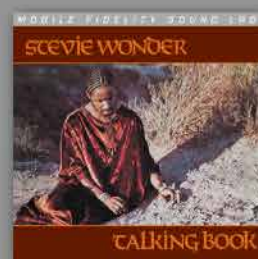


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TOP TONE

Analog

CARTRIDGES

SUMIKO BLACKBIRD

\$1,099

Yes, the Blackbird absorbed a slight price increase, but it remains a key performer. Its high-output (2.5mv) MC design and suggested 47k loading (instead of the usual 100-to-500-ohm loading afforded most low-output MC cartridges) make it a perfect choice for journeyman audiophiles that want to step up to the delicacy of MC sound without having to invest in a costly MC preamplifier.

ORTOFON SPU CLASSIC E MK.II

\$999

The Ortofon SPU has legitimate old-school cred. The original SPU cartridge, developed by Robert Gudmandsen in 1959, was in fact the first moving-coil cartridge ever. Today's Classic E variant utilizes a modern, elliptical stylus profile. Its head shell is a perfect match for Ortofon's full line of tonearms and for the classic models from SME. The SPU Classic E also holds its own when mated to a stock Technics SL-1200. With its big, bold sound, the second iteration of the SPU Classic E, dubbed the MkII, provides an even more exciting balance between today's highly resolving cartridges and the romantic tone of yesteryear's cartridges. Ortofon continues to service the Classic E and MkII, so when it's time for a rebuild, a quick (approximately two-week) trip to the factory will have your SPU sounding good as new.

ZU DENON

\$699

The guys at Zu Audio are known analog enthusiasts with a penchant for phono cartridges, and they excel at fine detail work. The manufacturer's version of the classic Denon DL-103R MC cartridge, called simply the Zu DL-103, builds upon the strengths of the original budget powerhouse. For its version, Zu removes the cartridge's innards and pots them in a billet aluminum body of its own design—and the result is anything but subtle. All the warmth for which the original cartridge is renowned comes through beautifully yet does so with much more bass weight and clarity, which help distinguish Zu's version from Denon's off-the-rack cartridge.







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TOP TONE

## Analog

### CARTRIDGES

#### REGA EXACT 2

\$595

Thanks to its three-point mounting system, the Exact 2 (or any other Rega cartridge) equates to the quickest way to start spinning records on a Rega ‘table. Yet they work equally well on other ‘tables, and the Exact 2’s high output (7mv) MM design means compatibility with any phonostage.

While past Rega cartridges tend to have a darker overall tonal balance, the new Exact 2 is very neutral and possesses a surfeit of inner detail. Hand-built by an elite group of technicians, it performs beyond what its modest price suggests—just like Rega’s turntables.

#### DENON DL-103R

\$379

Originally designed in the 60s as a broadcast cartridge, the DL-103R has experienced decades of improvement. Even as it sports a conical stylus and requires a somewhat high tracking force, (2.5g) the DL-103R is today’s best-value moving coil cartridge. Many audiophiles with mega-expensive turntables swear by it, regardless of price.

#### GRADO RED

\$140

New to vinyl? Recently buy a great budget ‘table and want to get rolling without spending a small fortune? The Grado Red is an excellent way to begin any analog journey. With low-stylus tip mass and great trackability, the Red offers a slightly warm tonal presentation that makes budget discs sound better than they should.







TOP TONE

# Analog

**T U R N T A B L E S  
& T O N E A R M S**

**G**iven the analog enthusiasm amongst new (and veteran) music lovers, demand for turntables won't be slowing anytime soon. These days, many choices exist, and yet, several rise to the top of the wish list.

## **KRONOS TURNTABLE**

\$28,000 (without arm)

**T**his new take on turntable comes from Canada, home of a lot of innovative audio engineering. Inspired by the aerospace industry, creator Louis Desjardins has patented the concept of an additional platter, driven by a second motor, rotating the opposite direction of the platter that spins the record. The result is a world class table that is incredibly quiet and thanks to its highly effective suspension system, extremely well insulated from its environment.

60 of the run of 250 Kronos tables have been sold throughout their dealer network – an impressive accomplishment for officially debuting this January at the Consumer Electronics Show. Desjardins has been very visible at hifi shows from Hong Kong to Newport Beach, always in rooms with fantastic sound. If you've been lucky enough to hear it, you know this one's a contender for the top of the heap.



## Analog

TURNTABLES  
& TONEARMS**SME 20/3 Turntable**

\$18,000 (with SME V tonearm)

A legendary British 'table, the SME 20/3 oozes battleship-like build quality and musical capability. A natural match with SME tonearms (and why would you use any less than the SME V?), this component remains the preferred choice of *TONE* contributor Ken Kessler, who boasts decades of experience with the marque. Like many other SME fans, he cites the 20 as the manufacturer's sweet spot—and more refined than the 20/2 it replaces.

**CLEARAUDIO INNOVATION TURNTABLE**

\$14,999 (without arm)

The Innovation takes a unique approach, with a 2.75-inch-thick POM platter and Clearaudio's CMB magnetic bearing. The result? An involving, highly detailed and dynamic presentation when paired with the TT-2 linear tracking tonearm. The TT-2 offers zero tracking error and, with perfectly flat records, yields a substantial decrease in tracking distortion. All these benefits give the Clearaudio combination a sound akin to that of open reel tape.

For those that like to mix it up, the Innovation allows for the use of a second tonearm, making it much more inviting to analog lovers that like to use more than one cartridge—be it a mono version or something with a different tonal balance. As engaging to view as it is to use, the Innovation is nothing less than a highly functional piece of industrial art.



## Analog

TURNTABLES  
& TONEARMS**SME 10 TURNTABLE**

\$8,900 (with SME 10 tonearm)

If you've always admired the SME 20 and 30 tables but just don't have the scratch, ponder the SME 10. With a slightly less sophisticated suspension than the top models, the 10 still serves up a massive helping of the weighty, well defined SME sound. Swap out the SME 10 arm (a variation on the 309) for the V and you'll be amazed at what the 10 can truly deliver. The 10 has a compact footprint and weighing in at only 38 pounds, will not monopolize your equipment rack. Close inspection reveals that the 10 is built to the same exhausting standards as the rest of the range. Considering that SME has not raised the price on this table much in the last five years or so, it remains not only one of the best kept secrets in analog, but one of the best bargains as well.

**SME V TONEARM**

\$5,500

"The world's greatest pickup arm" is how the owners manual reads. The SME V is certainly one of the most consistent and easy to use high performance tonearms on the market today. Setup is very straightforward, with every parameter but azimuth readily adjustable. In production since 1986, the venerable SME V has only had minor changes; a testament to its forward thinking design.





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- ✓ **Yes**, Internet radio is included (MRX 500/MRX 700); HD radio too on the MRX 700;
- ✓ **Yes**, you can use it with your iPod or iPhone — optional Anthem MDX 1 dock coming soon;
- ✓ **Yes**, it's intuitive with user-friendly menus;
- ✓ **Yes**, ARC is included with every MRX.

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## TOP TONE

# Analog

## TURNTABLES & TONEARMS

### REGA P9 TURNTABLE

\$4,995

**W**hen Rega introduced the P9 in the late 90s, many audiophiles freaked at the thought of the company selling a \$3,000 turntable. Yet the P9 has always been a technology exercise, combining a tonearm that requires twenty times the labor of the firm's standard model with a ceramic composite platter (it costs more to produce than Rega's mid-level P5 turntable) and a power supply the size of a power amplifier.

In 2011, it's amazing that all this still carries a price of only \$4,995. The P9 remains the pinnacle of high performance and zero fuss.

### AVID DIVA II SP TURNTABLE

\$3,995 (without arm)

**N**ext to the Acutus Reference SP, the Diva II SP is certainly more diminutive in size yet offers the same "family" sound. While the Diva II SP lacks the weight and low-level detail of the \$20k model, its interaction with record grooves is similar. Tonal shadings, pace, and timing are exemplary. And the convenience of being able to add your choice of tonearm makes this a 'table with expansion potential.

As with the other AVID turntables, the Diva II SP's motor is hand-wound to mate with its own bespoke power supply.







# Lohengrin II

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TOP TONE

## Analog

### TURNTABLES & TONEARMS

#### VPI CLASSIC TURNTABLE

\$2,799 (with arm)

VPI's Scout and Scoutmaster series of tables are legendary, receiving praise from all corners of the audiophile world. The Classic has followed in its footsteps and though similarly priced to the Scoutmaster, offers a completely different sound. Where the Scoutmaster has a more analytic sound, with its acrylic platter, the Classic is distinctly old school in look and feel.

It combines a basic belt drive system with a heavy duty 16 pound aluminum platter and the 10.5 inch VPI arm for a bigger, beefier sound than the Scoutmaster delivers. Of course your personal taste will determine which range is right for you, but the Classic delivers more analog enchantment than we've experienced at this price elsewhere. Robustly built and easy to set up, the Classic is aptly named. It provides good sound in spades and does nothing wrong. If you never moved beyond the Classic 1, you could die a happy vinyl enthusiast.

#### SME 309 TONEARM

\$2,400

Considered by many to be a simplified version of the V, the 309 also utilizes a magnesium arm tube with one major change—it has a removable headshell, allowing cartridge changes with ease as well as azimuth adjustment. Due to the less sophisticated tracking adjustment and different bearings than the V, the 309 has a slightly less "open" sound than the V and gives up a bit of ultimate bass weight. Yet for less than half the price, is still a fantastic performer.



TOP TONE

# Analog

**T U R N T A B L E S  
& T O N E A R M S**

## **Clearaudio Concept Turntable**

\$1,495 (with Clearaudio Concept MM cartridge)  
\$1,995 (with Clearaudio Concept MC cartridge)

**A** challenger to the Rega P3/P5 dynasty, the Concept is priced right and, like the Rega models, boasts a similar plug-and-play ethos. While a handful of great cartridges mate well with the Concept, the factory-installed MC is tough to beat. It arrives pre-mounted, only requiring the user to mount the counterweight and set the tracking force.

In practice, the Concept offers great sound in a compact footprint. It even offers 33, 45, and 78RPM speeds. So if you find great 78s at a rummage sale, take advantage.

## **Rega RP3 Turntable**

\$1,095

**R**ega's newest model began life as the Planar 3 in the late 70s, transformed into the P3 around the turn of the century, and recently underwent a brief upgrade as the P3-24. The current RP3 incorporates design elements from Rega's latest research, such as utilizing a brace between the tonearm mount and turntable bearing for increased stiffness. There's also a completely redesigned tonearm, the RB 303.

While keeping the price steady, Rega again moves performance forward. Everything listeners liked about the P3 is improved. Of course, it's evolution and not revolution at Rega. Bits and pieces here and there add up to a new 'table that is more musical. For those needing even more performance, an optional TT-PSU power supply fits the bill for an additional cost of \$345.

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TOP TONE

## Analog

**T U R N T A B L E S  
& T O N E A R M S**

### **FUNK FIRM FX•R TONEARM**

\$2,295

**W**hat looks on the surface to be a simple Rega rewire, proves to be much more on close examination. The FX•Rs carbon fiber tonearm wand, with patented bracing, upgraded internal wiring *and* the ability to adjust VTA sounds exciting in writing and is far better in practice.

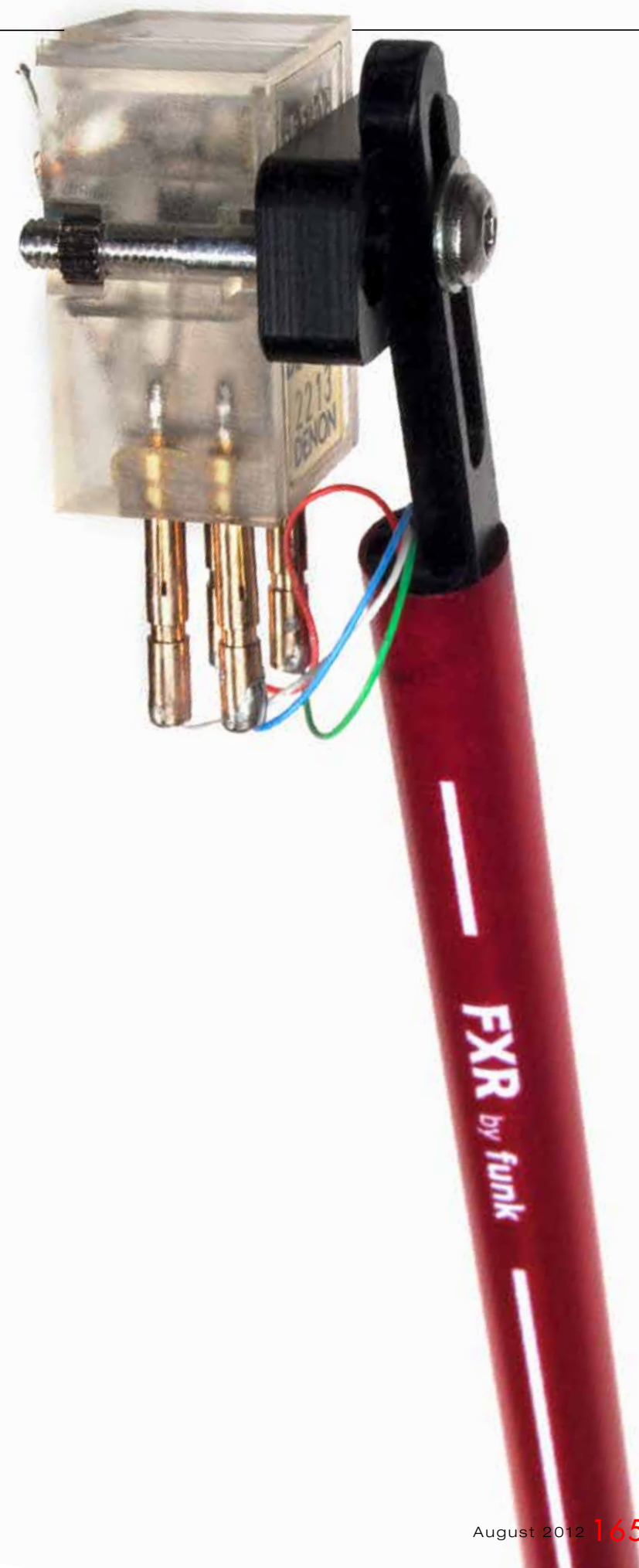
We've had the opportunity to use this arm on more than a few turntables now with excellent results. It is a stable platform, serving up plenty of resolution without ever coming across thin. Bass is always extended, defined and tuneful, never plodding or slow. In short, a fantastic arm that is easy to set up that won't break the bank.

### **ORTOFON TA-110 TONEARM**

\$1,599

**T**he S-shape and removable headshell suggests a vintage arm, but the TA-110 takes advantage of Ortofon's most recent materials and research. Utilizing standard headshells, similar to the ones on the SME 3009 or the Technics SL-1200, the world is your oyster when it comes to cartridge swaps. And yeah, this arm is an awesome match for Ortofons SPU series of cartridges – an additional, heavier counterweight is included in the box!

This is rapidly becoming a favorite arm around TONE HQ; it sounds great, the price is right, and it's a cartridge swapper's dream.





TOP TONE

# Analog

PHONO PREAMPS



A

s the compact disc started to dominate during the 80s, the phonostage moved from the main chassis and became an outboard box, catering to the few listeners that still worshipped the black disc. Little did any of us know that the vinyl obsession would help drive a market that, today, overflows with \$100,000 turntables and \$10,000 phono cartridges.

Whether you are just getting started with an inexpensive 'table or have unlimited purchasing power, there's a phono preamplifier to suit your needs and budget. The 21st century hosts the widest range of circuit designs in history, with some offering multiple inputs and loading options, allowing vinyl enthusiasts infinite ways to fine-tune their analog experience.



TOP TONE

# Analog

PHONO PREAMPS

## VITUS MPP-201

\$60,000

The astronomically priced, two box Vitus flagship extracts more from the grooves than anything we've heard and it's a benchmark for quiet. We almost need to invent some new adjectives for this one. But much like the world of racing, the competition is catching up—fast. ARC, Burmester, Boulder, Pass and Simaudio are making some pretty impressive kit for a quarter the MPPs price.

If you often wear a cape when driving and have the Wayne Foundation backing your luxury purchases, it's a wonderful addition to a cost no object analog setup.



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## Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

**BURMESTER PHONO 100**

\$16,995-\$22,995 (depends on configuration)

**B**urmester's first phonostage in nearly two decades reinforces the company's commitment to analog's renaissance. With two inputs that can be configured as MM or MC, and an optional analog-to-digital converter to digitize vinyl, the Phone 100 ravishes. Base price includes one phono input. A second adds \$4,495 to the price, while the A/D converter costs \$2,995 and Burlink adaptor tacks on another \$495 to the bill. Or, you can save a few bucks and get a fully configured unit for \$22,995.

Removing the exquisitely machined top cover reveals major circuit density. All sections are electrically and mechanically isolated, and show fanatical attention to detail. A finely polished and chrome-plated front panel offers gain, loading, capacitance, subsonic filter, and a VU meter to assist with the output signal to the ADC. This makes the Phono 100 a perfect phonostage for vinyl enthusiasts that utilize multiple turntables.

Compared to the other top phonostages reviewed by *TONE*, the Burmester lands amidst the ARC REF Phono and Boulder 1008 by combining the virtues of each. A solid-state design, the Phono 100 resolves inner detail with a delicacy usually associated with tube design—and still possesses the lower-register slam and control that tubed units often struggle to achieve.



## Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

**AUDIO RESEARCH****REF PHONO 2SE**

\$12,995

**A**udio Research has added the SE moniker to their highly successful REF Phono 2, nearly doubling the size of the power supply and incorporating circuit upgrades with knowledge gleaned from the 40th Anniversary Preamplifier. They've also made a cosmetic change to the front panel, giving it the "round button" look of current ARC products, matching the REF power amplifiers and REF 5 SE preamplifier.

The good news is that the meager \$1,000 price hike gets you a practically new phonostage, with much bigger dynamics, a lower noise floor, better low level detail resolution and more bottom end weight. REF Phono 2 owners wishing to upgrade may do so for \$2,000, but due to the popularity of the SE model, may take a few weeks to complete.





## Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

**BOULDER 1008**

\$12,000

Slightly different in sound than the aforementioned ARC and Burmester, the Boulder 1008 remains on the same plateau. One of the quietest phonostages *TONE* has enjoyed, it incorporates technology from Boulder's 2008 phonostage into a single-chassis design.

While not quite as mellifluous in the mids as the ARC, the Boulder excels in dynamic contrast and low-level detail retrieval. Think of it as a Porsche GT3 and not the standard 911. Even those in possession of the finest playback systems will discover new musical information when spinning vinyl through this component.

With two fully balanced inputs and outputs, the 1008 handles myriad MC cartridges via "personality cards" that require users to solder in place the correct loading value. Two factory modules are set for 100 ohms but can easily be changed; additional modules are available for listeners with large cartridge collections. The 1008 also offers front-panel EQ adjustments and a very useful subsonic filter that hasn't any discernable effect on low-frequency performance. It even affords listening at head-banging volume levels thanks to its reducing of acoustic feedback from slightly warped records.



## Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

**SIMAUDIO MOON 810LP**

\$11,995

Simaudio has joined the mega phonostage arena and the results are well worth the wait. With a sound that is straight up neutral, the Moon 810LP is true to the music, neither adding nor subtracting from the tonality stored in the grooves of your favorite records, with everything else nicely balanced.

Where its immediate competitors offer more in terms of functionality, Simaudio takes the purist approach with stunning results. The Moon 810LP is the king (or whatever non-gender, ruling figure you choose to embrace) of quiet, easily the equal of the \$60,000 Vitus MPP-201. It features a wide range of loading options, all available on the bottom panel and offers a single ended RCA and a fully balanced XLR input for maximum performance, with the same for output—assuring integration into any system.

There's even a mystery socket labeled "DC Input," suggesting that someday there might be an additional, external power supply to push the Moon 810LP into an even further orbit.







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## TOP TONE

# Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

**NAIM SUPERLINE  
W/SUPERCAP POWER SUPPLY**  
\$11,000

**S**ure, the Naim Superline is available for \$4,000, albeit without a power supply. And while you can certainly get by with the inexpensive FlatCap or middle-of-the-range HiCap, real excitement ensues when the SuperCap enters the equation. How? The Superline goes from being a nice phonostage that you can take home to mother to a top-of-the-class unit cool enough to skip dinner with the in-laws.

No matter how much time you've spent with the Superline, you'll freak out when the SuperCap fuels it. Think of the Maxell dude, hair being blown back, in his chair: the combination is that good. When paired with its intended mate, the already quiet Superline redefines "inky black backgrounds" and transmits a weightiness that rivals anything on the market.

While available with 64db or 58db of gain, opt for the higher-gain model as to accommodate a wider range of cartridges. Since it requires plugs to be exchanged on the rear panel, the Superline is behind the curve when it comes to adjustability and loading convenience. And it does not offer loading beyond 10k ohms, meaning that it works with SoundSmith moving-iron cartridges but not the Grado Statement 1.

Pub. note: The Superline is shown here with the HiCap 2 for illustration only.





## TOP TONE

# Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

### PASS XP-25

\$10,600

Pass Labs' top of the mountain is an excellent blend of performance and accessibility. In addition to two inputs, variable gain, loading and capacitance, the XP-25 features a pair of balanced and single ended outputs. Perfect for driving a tape recorder in addition to your system, should you be so inclined.

If the XP-25 were a car, it would be an Audi A8: high performance on the inside, understated on the outside. Sonics are tip top and due to the bulletproof nature of Pass gear, you can just plug it in, turn it on and enjoy music. As an ongoing reference component here at TONEAudio, the XP-25 proves to be compatible with every cartridge we've managed to throw at it. It's a dream come true for the turntablists in the audience that have multiple tonearms and cartridges – all the adjustments are on the front panel and very easy to read.



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## TOP TONE

# Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

### AUDIO RESEARCH PH8

\$7,995

**H**eavily based on the REF Phono 2 circuit, the PH8 is a logical choice for music lovers with turntables that don't require balanced outputs. With a fixed gain of 58db, the PH8 lacks the cartridge flexibility promised by REF Phono 2. But, thanks to a low-noise FET hybrid design, it comes close.

Sporting an identical tonal fingerprint to ARC's flagship model, the PH8 features a tube-regulated power supply as well as the REF Phone 2's teflon capacitors, remote-controlled loading, and mute and mono functions. There's no "sweet spot" in ARC's turntable stable. Performance progression remains linear, affording listeners substantial increases in performance as they move up the line.

### NAGRA VPS

\$7,995

**N**agra's diminutive two-input VPS packs a larger punch than its casework might suggest. Armed with an external power supply that keeps onboard noise to a minimum, the VPS follows the stylistic aesthetics belonging to Nagra's preamplifiers and tape recorders—sans their famous Modulometer.

A 12AX7/12AU7 design, the VPS possesses near-nirvanic neutral tonal balance while supplying substantial bass weight and enviable dynamic range. The VPS has a switchable solid-state output stage that operates courtesy of standard bipolar transistors. With the stage switched out, it claims a maximum output of 400mv—enough to drive to full output some high-gain linestages.

Loading is set via individual input cards; the MC phono card utilizes low-noise step up transformers, specifically built for Nagra. In addition to balanced and unbalanced outputs, an available Nagra VFS (vibration free support) platform, which adds approximately \$1,400 to the price, justifies its expense via increased low-level detail.

**NAGRA**

MAD



## Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

**AVID PULSARE**

\$5,995

The Pulsare cost \$5,000 when *TONE* reviewed it at the beginning of the year. If you took our advice and bought it then, you got an even better bargain. But even with the price increase, the Pulsare remains a phenomenal solid-state phonostage well worth its price.

The Pulsare takes a while to reach its stride. High-frequency stiffness evaporates after about 300 hours of playing time, and the relatively low current draw means you can leave it on all the time without feeling guilty.

Thanks to a separate power supply that weighs more than some power amplifiers, the Pulsare delivers massive dynamic swings with tremendous authority. Gain and loading are located on the front panel, and if you use a balanced phono cable and an RCA (or adaptors), you can utilize the Pulsare as a two-input phono preamplifier. How's that for versatility?

**BRYSTON BP1.5 PHONOSTAGE  
MPS-2 DC POWER SUPPLY**

\$3,195 (BP1.5), \$1,695 (MPS-2)

Like the \$60,000 Vitus MPP, the Bryston BP1.5 ships with a power supply that weighs almost twice as much as the actual phonostage—always a good sign. Those already using the MPS-2 to power their Bryston linestage need only purchase the BP1.5. This single input, solid-state phonostage is robustly built, featuring MM and MC operation via step up transformers offering two adjustments of 16.5 db and 22.5 db of gain respectively.

The BP1.5 is a pinnacle of neutrality and while turning in excellent results in MC mode, it is particularly stunning in MM mode, delivering some of the best MM performance we've heard to date, on a very wide range of cartridges.



## Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

**ZESTO ANDROS PS1 PHONOSTAGE**

\$4,300

This all tube design from newcomer Zesto is the ying to the Pass Labs PH-15 yang. Where the Pass is straight up neutral, the Zesto is, well, a little zesty, adding that bit of air and flavor that the 12AX7 (there are four in the Zesto) is known for. With major adjustments for MC gain, loading and balanced phono inputs, this single input phonostage will easily accommodate anything mounted on your tonearm.

Even though Zesto has had a slight price increase (it was a steal at \$3800) this one offers everything an analog aficionado could want, provided you only need to plug in one turntable.

**PASS LABS XP-15 PHONOSTAGE**

\$3,895

For the vinyl lover with a single table, and a single rack space to house it, the XP-15 offers a significant helping of what makes the XP-25 so great: Low noise, big dynamics and a very neutral presentation. Pass has made all the right moves on this one. Though it lacks the front panel access of the XP-25, it still offers gain choices from 40–76db of gain, so no cartridge should be off limits.





TOP TONE

# Analog

PHONO PREAMPS

**PARASOUND JC-3**  
\$2,295

A direct descendant of the Vendetta Research phono preamplifier, John Curl's latest design for Paradigm retains many of its predecessor's qualities—primarily, an eerily low noise floor.

While the JC-3 is only optimized for 100 ohms in the MC input (however, it does feature switchable 47k setting for moving-iron designs), it comes with an MM option. Factor in bulletproof build quality and balanced outputs, and the JC-3 epitomizes high-value operation. If you have a cartridge that work wells at the 100-ohm setting, the JC-3 is the ticket. You'll need to spend a lot more to get a significant jump in performance.



INTRODUCING

800

W

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## TOP TONE

# Analog

## PHONO PREAMPS

### ICON AUDIO PS2

\$699

**T**ONE contributor Paul Rigby turned us on to the PS2, one of the best-kept secrets in high-end audio—particularly in the United States, where it suffers from limited distribution. A simple three-tube MM design, the PS2 features a small chassis, point-to-point wiring, hardwired power cord, and stunning sound.

Auditioned with a large array of MM cartridges, the PS2 consistently provides a huge three-dimensional soundstage, with a striking balance of tube-like palpability and unexpected degree of price-defying resolution. While it slightly embellishes music, it's all done in a good way. If a more enjoyable phonostage exists at this price, we haven't heard it.

### CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640P

\$199

**A** TONE 2009 Exceptional Value Award winner, the 640P is an ideal way to become immersed in the world of analog. A solid-state design powered by a wall wart, it offers MM and MC inputs in a compact package.

Volunteering decent dynamics, a musical midrange, and extremely low noise floor, the unit sounds better than anyone could expect from a \$200 sum. A great match with practically any MM cartridge, the 640P works miracles when paired with Denon's DL-103R.





TOP TONE

# Digital

With all the attention lavished on vinyl, many may have not noticed the progress shown in digital during the last five years. It's safe to say that digital is now as exciting as analog. Between the plethora of high-resolution software and great hardware at both ends of the price spectrum, music lovers no longer have to "settle" while listening to digital.

## **DCS PAGANINI**

\$55,900 (full four-box stack)

The Paganini can be acquired piecemeal, starting only with the DAC (should you not require disc-spinning). However, after the disc player spent a year in his reference system, *TONE* publisher Jeff Dorgay feels that it provides the ultimate in sound quality.

Moreover, the Paganini gets more liquid as you add devices. The upsampler features multiple resolutions by taking advantage of dCS' proprietary 5-bit DSD processing, which allows 128kb/sec MP3 files to be upsampled to DSD. Even Rhapsody files sound awesome via the Paganini—and so they should, given the deck's price.





TOP TONE

# Digital

**NAIM CD555/PS555**  
\$30,495

**A**ccording to Naim, CD players account for 20% of its sales, and the company believes that a dedicated player is still the way to roll—even if it makes a few cracking devices that stream digital information. The CD555 represents the pinnacle of Naim’s digital expertise, and eschews the traditional arrangement of separating the transport and DAC on respective chassis. Naim prefers to give the power supply its own chunk of real estate.

The approach succeeds brilliantly, offering a level of sound quality matched by very few players and proving that, just like analog, the best digital reproduction will still set you back more than a few quid.

# PASS



XP-30:

Refined

Balanced

Detailed

Hypnotic

Defined Bass

Natural

Engaging

Flexible



## Digital

**TAD S600**

\$28,600

While the S600 is primarily intended as a high-end disc player for audiophiles that haven't abandoned physical media, it offers RCA SPDIF and XLR AES/EBU digital inputs for additional versatility. However, you're out of luck if you want a USB input. Thanks to parent company Pioneer's tremendous manufacturing and engineering depth, no detail is left to chance. It says "quality" in a distinct albeit refined way.

Of course, beauty is meaningless without performance, and the S600 makes good on its lofty price tag. One of the world's finest-sounding digital players.

**NAIM DAC/PS555**

\$12,995 (DAC separately, \$3,645)

The Naim DAC offers an outstanding DAC with three power-supply options, even though it can be used alone with its own internal supply. Future-proof, with the ability to decode 24 bit/764khz files, it features BNC, RCA, and optical SPDIF inputs as well as two USB inputs that accommodate memory devices but not a computer's USB output.

Sure, the standalone DAC is a great place to begin. Yet the optimal configuration finds it paired with the PS555. The combo takes the DAC within striking distance of the revered CD555 on 16/44.1 source material—and a bit beyond with high-res tracks.



## Digital

**SIMAUDIO MOON 750D**

\$12,995

The powers that be at Simaudio make it clear that the 750D is meant as a high-quality DAC that just happens to have a phenomenal onboard CD transport. Made in the company's Canadian factory, the 750D experienced a recent price increase because of its new high-resolution USB board. Initially, the 750D was limited to 16 bit/48khz, but now handles 24 bit/192khz.

Whether you use the 750D as a DAC or a player, the sound quality is both neutral and expansive, with spot-on tonality. Peeking at the rear panel reveals a socket for an external power supply (in the works) that promises to take the 750D to an even loftier level of performance.

**DCS DEBUSSY**

\$11,995

dCS' first single-box product, Debussy provides much of the company's four-box stacks' functionality in a more compact rendition aimed at disc-phobic audiophiles. You can, however, add a transport via one of the many digital inputs. (A word clock input rests on the rear panel and offers a noticeable sonic upgrade.)

While current dCS stacks (Paganini and Scarlatti) still lack 24 bit/192khz USB capability, the Debussy is fully functional at this resolution, making it a fine match for computer-audio use with the music-player software of your choice.







# Stay Tuned to **TONE**Audio

If you need to unplug during Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, or escape from the onslaught of female vocal tracks, stop by the **TONE Audio Chill-Out Room** and enjoy some classic tunes. We will feature a modest system consisting of great components—old and new.

Take the new Meridian Sooloos Media Core 200 for a spin, or bring your favorite analog record, as long as it's on vinyl or cassette. Our friends from VPI are supplying a turntable, and Echo Audio promises a cool cassette deck for mix tapes.

Or you could just stare at the lava lamp.

Watch our Facebook page for further details as we get closer to showtime.

**Rocky Mountain Audio Fest | October 12-14**



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## TOP TONE

### Digital

#### **WADIA 381**

\$10,000

Wadia's 381 touts technological advances gleaned from its 581se player in a more affordable component that still features SPDIF, AES/EBU and USB connectivity as a DAC. Utilizing the company's patented DigiMaster 2.5 software, a massive power supply, and a stout chassis that thoroughly addresses vibration, the 381 is truly a world-class digital front end.

Thanks to its variable RCA and XLR outputs, the 381 can also be employed as a digital pre-amplifier thanks to the best digital volume control in the industry.

#### **MCINTOSH MCD500**

\$6,495

Utilizing ESS/Sabre's latest DAC chipset, the MCD500 offers peerless CD and SACD playback along with an RCA and optical SPDIF input. The MCD 500 also features a variable line output with analog volume control. Essentially, it can act as a linestage for an all-digital system, which is how *TONE* used it, and to great effect. If that isn't enough, the MCD 500 includes a serious on-board headphone stage that's ideal for private listening sessions.





## Digital

**NAIM CD5I**

\$1,795

It's amazing just how much of the trademark Naim sound is available in its entry-level player. With a unique drawer mechanism that does not require a motor, these players are built to last and, like the top-of-the-line CD555, do not have a digital output. Just keep an eye on the puck.

**WADIA 121 DAC**

\$1,295

Someone in the Wadia skunkworks must have perfected a shrink ray. Directly compared to their top players, one can still justify writing the big check, but the prodigious dynamics, bass slam and low level detail that epitomizes the sound of the flagship Wadia products is well intact with the 121. If that weren't enough, the 121 has a plethora of digital inputs (and an asynchronous USB input), a headphone amplifier and your choice of variable level balanced XLR or RCA outputs controlled by Wadia's patented 32-bit digital volume control. The 121 raises the bar for sub- \$2,000 DAC's nearly out of reach.

**REGA APOLLO-R CD PLAYER**

\$1,095

With all the to-do about computer audio, Rega introduces a new CD player and it's a smashing one at that. The Apollo R takes the compact form factor of their new DAC and the Brio-R integrated amplifier. A complete redesign from the prior Apollo, the new sibling features the wonderful "non-digital" sound that Rega CD players have always garnered high praise, yet adds greater extension at both ends of the frequency spectrum. Whether you are new to the Rega camp, or a long time fan, the Apollo-R redefines what is possible for this price.



## Digital

**BENCHMARK DAC-1**

\$995-\$1,895

Before everyone started buzzing about computer audio, Benchmark was quietly shipping hundreds of its original DAC-1s to music lovers and studio engineers all over the world. At a time when many manufacturers went the one-box route for CD players, these guys practically put the DAC back on the map.

All four models in the DAC-1 range are basically the same. But for increased cost, you get more functionality, extra inputs, and a remote. The DAC-1 also makes a great line-level preamplifier and includes an excellent headphone amplifier, too. More than a DAC, it's a first-rate anchor of a system.

**CHANNEL ISLANDS VDA-2 DAC**

\$599

If you want great digital on a shoestring budget, the VDA-2 should be at the top of your list. While it only offers Optical and RCA SPDIF inputs, this little DAC uses the legendary Burr Brown PCM1794 (under the hood of some serious players) to decode the bits. The optional \$199 VAC-1 external power supply takes the performance even further.

These miniscule boxes take up virtually no rack space and will breathe new life into your aging player.



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TOP TONE

## Digital

**AUDIOQUEST DRAGONFLY**  
\$245

**W**hat's a cable company doing making DAC's? Only AudioQuest mastermind Bill Low knows for sure, but the Dragonfly is amazing. They've squeezed a 24/96 DAC and a headphone amplifier with a 64 position analog volume control into the case of a USB memory stick. How cool is that? The Dragonfly can also be used in fixed output mode, making for the perfect way to integrate your computer or laptop into your home music system with maximum quality. For the traveling audiophile, the Dragonfly's improvement from what's available at the headphone jack of your laptop is staggering. Thanks to its affordable price and ease of use, if the Dragonfly doesn't create a whole new generation of audiophiles, nothing will.





# Accessories

The all-encompassing accessories category covers an array of products that aren't components but, nonetheless, play valuable roles in high-end systems. After you address set-up basics to the best of your ability, investigate these tweaks that will take your system as far as it can go.

## ISOTEK SUPER TITAN

\$9,995

**R**obustly built, electrically and mechanically, the top Super Titan PLC does a fantastic job at addressing power line anomalies, and with a 4,600 watt capacity, does not limit dynamics when connected to large power amplifiers. In addition to its massive peak current capabilities, it is designed to provide maximum component to component isolation as well, so whether you have Lingo power supply or an arc welder plugged into one of the other outlets, the AC hash generated will not spill into the other components in your system. And the Super Titan possesses stunning good looks to go along with its performance.





# m y s t è r e

exotica (def.): things that are excitingly different.



"I can't think of another line preamp under \$8k that I'd rather live with—it's that good."

—Dick Olsher, *The Absolute Sound*, December 2010



**Mystère ca21 Preamplifier \$2295**



**Mystère ia21 Integrated amplifier \$2995**

"Of all the integrated amps I've reviewed in the last year... the Mystère ia21 is my favorite."

—Erick Lichte *stereophile* March 2011



#### Exotic, Expensive, Included

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(pictured)

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## TOP TONE

# Accessories

### SRA SCUTTLE RACK

Starting at \$6,600

Once you achieved maximum system synergy and tackled room acoustics, it's time to move on to vibration control. If you think your system is delivering all it can, you'll be in for a treat once you acquire Scuttle. Another level of clarity awaits.

### AUDIENCE AR6TSS POWER LINE CONDITIONER

Starting at \$6,600

A great power conditioner needs to do no harm to sonic signature of the components connected—and the aR6TSS from Audience does a cracking job, lowering the noise floor dramatically and peels away a few layers of grain without altering tonality.

### MANLEY MASSIVE PASSIVE EQ—STUDIO MASTERING VERSION

\$6,300

If you haven't tried Manley's Massive, you don't know what you are missing. Used in pro recording studios the world over, Massive offers the ability to surgically alter sound in ways you never dreamed. Whether you are digitizing vinyl or trying to cut the glare on your totally favorite 80s CDs, Massive astounds—once, of course, you figure out how to properly use it.







## TOP TONE

# Accessories

**MCINTOSH MEN220  
ROOM CORRECTION SYSTEM**  
\$4,500

Can't put the speakers where they really need to go for great sound? Your cohabitants don't see the necessity of gigantic bass traps in the living room? The challenge of an optimized listening environment haunts many of us, for various reasons. If the battle of performance and aesthetics has plagued you, the MEN220 will help you achieve Détente as well as great sound. 30-60 minutes of careful measurements with the supplied, calibrated microphone will take your system to a level you never dreamed possible.

**AUDIO DESK SYSTEME DECK RCM**  
\$3,895

There are plenty of other record cleaning machines that cost a hell of a lot less than the Audio Desk and one or two that cost even more. None of them clean records as well, and yes, we've tried them all. Bathing the record in cleaning liquid (that only costs \$20 a gallon to prepare) and then bombarding it with ultrasonic sound, this device proceeds to squeegee and air dry your LP to perfection in about 3 minutes.

If you are a music lover with a huge collection, this accessory should be at the top of your list of must-haves; especially if you frequent the used bins often.

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# Accessories

## FURUTECH DEMAG

\$2,715

Yes it's expensive, and even more controversial. However, if you have a mega analog setup, the DeMag works and it works well. Every skeptic who's heard it at the TONE mother ship has come away convinced and impressed. A freshly cleaned record with a 45 second blast of Furutech's DeMag, followed by the DeStat II brings you as close to analog heaven as you can get without being melted by the sun.



# Benchmark



## DAC1 HDR

Stereo Pre-Amp with Remote Control  
DAC / Headphone Amp / USB

"...a great all around piece."  
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"Damn close to a perfect piece of equipment."  
*The Audio Critic*



## TOP TONE

# Accessories

### **LORICRAFT PRC-3 RECORD CLEANING MACHINE** \$1,995

Utilizing a tonearm-type vacuum pickup that gets deeper into the groove than standard brush cleaners from the likes of VPI, Clearaudio, and Nitty Gritty, the Loricraft PRC-3 is also more thorough and quieter than the competition. Its bi-directional cleaning eradicates the most debris from LPs. Nothing does a better job.

### **SRA OHIO CLASS XL PLUS EQUIPMENT PLATFORM** \$1,800 and up

These big black things look like they're cut from the Monolith in 2001, but they work wonders on solid-state and vacuum-tube gear. Custom-made to your components' sizes and weights, Ohio Class XL Plus annihilates whatever vibration plagues your components, resulting in bigger, more open sound.

### **RUNNING SPRINGS AUDIO DMITRI AND ELGAR POWER LINE CONDITIONERS** \$999 and \$4,499

Elgar and Dmitri serve as the bookends of Running Springs Audio's power line conditioners roster. The company's efforts are the best we've used in their respective fields and do what great power-conditioning products are meant to achieve: filter the noise from the power line and nothing more.

# Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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# Accessories

## ISOTEK EVO 3 SIRIUS POWER LINE CONDITIONER \$999

An excellent line conditioner that does not alter tonality, IsoTek's EVO 3 Sirius takes a different approach than RSA products. IsoTek utilizes a form factor that's akin to a gigantic power strip but still achieves clean power that allows you to hear further into your music. As you go up the line, IsoTek offers a higher degree of filtration. None of its models limit dynamics or alter tonality—praise we can't lavish on most power products we've tried.

## VPI 16.5 RECORD CLEANING MACHINE \$550

VPI's 16.5 is a longtime mainstay of record collectors. Simple, basic, classic—even if a little noisy and grumpy if you try to clean too many records in too short a period of time, as the motor temporarily overheats—the machine is easy to use and easier to maintain. If you've got more than a handful of records, you owe it to yourself to get a 16.5, particularly if you hunt for bargains in the used bins.



# Accessories

## FURUTECH DESTAT II \$425

Remember the Zerostat gun? When it didn't zap you, it did a fairly decent job of eliminating some of the static charge present on your LPs, cutting down those annoying pops and ticks that make up "the crackly sound of vinyl." The Furutech De-Stat II is a more sophisticated version of that concept and should be the final step in your analog playback routine. Deriving its power from four AA batteries, it is more consistent than the squeeze technique





## TOP TONE

# Accessories

### SPIRAL GROOVE STRANGE ATTRACTORS

\$500 - \$600 (set of four)

The award winning Spiral Groove turntable manufacturer has moved their focus to vibration control with their Strange Attractors. Depending heavily on aluminum and graphite to drain unwanted vibration and resonance from components, the “decouple” model adds a layer of elastomer between component and surface for a different effect.

As with any vibration management, the Strange Attractors will either leave you stunned or scratching your head. Thus far, we’ve had excellent luck with them on a number of different components. Spiral Groove offers a 30 day trial, so you have nothing to lose and higher fidelity to gain.



## TOP TONE

# Accessories

### BLACK RAVIOLI BIG FOOT PADS

\$159 - \$289 each

Entirely squishy, the Big Foot pads work somewhat differently than the Strange Attractors, but made a huge difference for the better underneath almost every vacuum tube component we placed them. Backgrounds became darker, offering more low level resolution in the process.

The more resolving your system, the greater your chance of your hearing a bigger change in sound with the Raviolis—a highly worthwhile investigation.



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TOP TONE

## Accessories

### QUADRASPIRE EVO 4 RACK \$275 per shelf

While lacking the sophistication of SRA racks, Quadraspire's EVO 4 model improves low-level detail in even modest systems and looks great, to boot. Best of all, the racks can be easily customized to accommodate a growing system.

### EAT VACUUM TUBES \$225 and up (price varies with type)

EAT tubes are the cream of the crop. Yes, they are among the most expensive, but worth the investment, with sound that rivals if not exceeds that of the finest NOS tubes. Best of all, they have a 90-day warranty.



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TOP TONE

## Accessories

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**S**heepish about spending big bucks on a record-cleaning machine? Let Spin Clean set you free. Bundled with a 4oz. bottle of cleaning solution concentrate (enough to clean about 200 albums) and lint-free cloths to blot records dry, Spin Clean does a fantastic job for the price.



TOP TONE

## Accessories

### MOBILE FIDELITY CLEANING SOLUTIONS (Price varies per bottle)

**W**ant to start an argument with audiophiles? Discuss cleaning solutions. However, Mobile Fidelity's products are the last word on the subject and work well in a variety of situations. The standout reissue label makes something for every need—from the Super Deep Cleaner for the filthiest records to the Plus Enzyme Cleaner for everyday use. Complete your cleaning regimen with the company's MFSL Inner Sleeves, the same sleeves that house all MoFi Original Master Recordings. One-stop shopping at Music Direct makes it easy to keep your analog treasures in pristine shape.



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Meridian: [www.meridian-audio.com](http://www.meridian-audio.com)

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