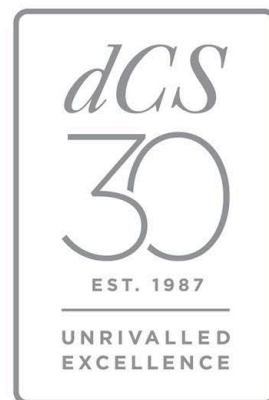




LIMITED EDITION



VIVALDI ONE

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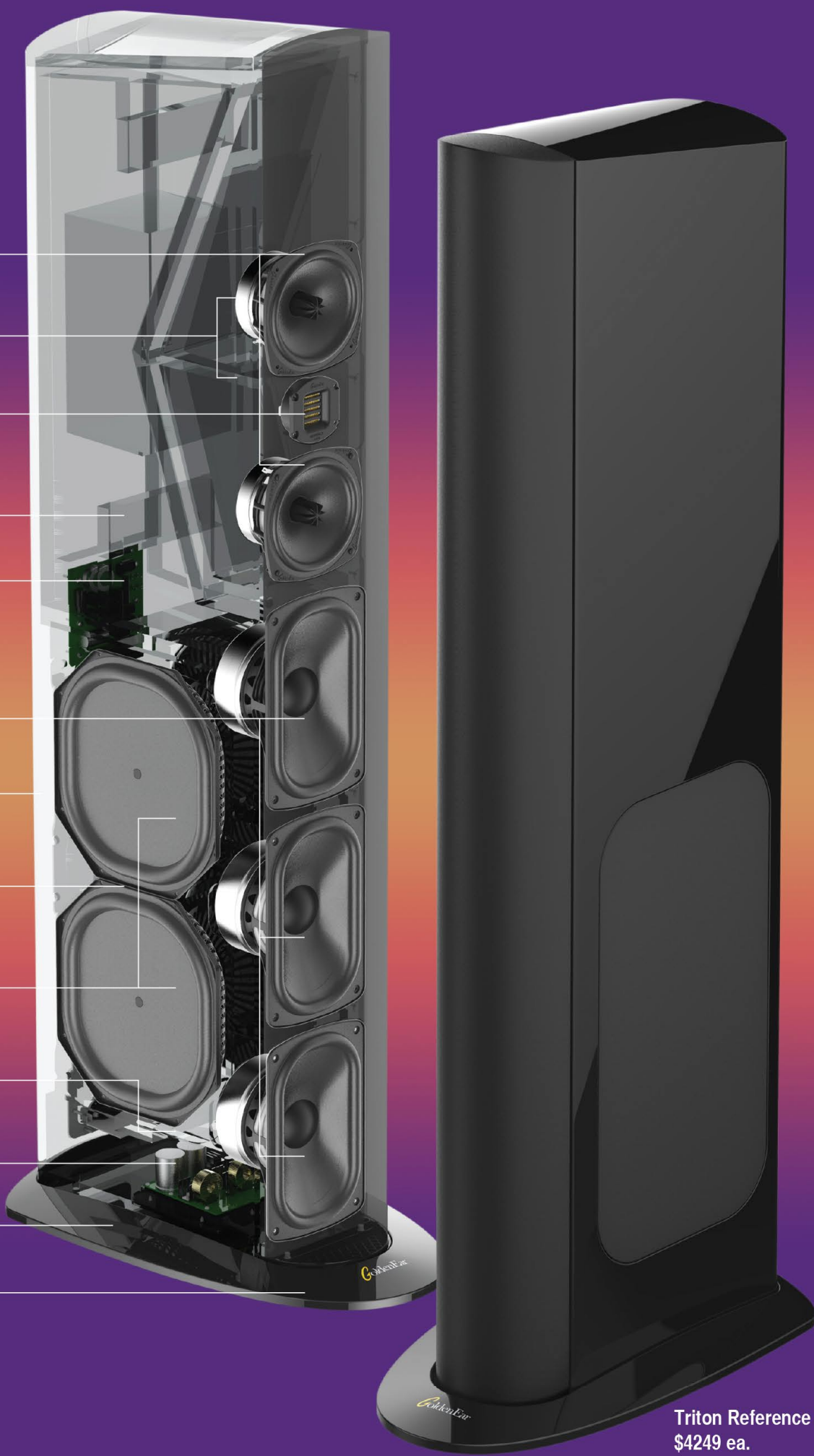
TONE2.0

Audio

the awards issue

no.86

dec.2017



Two 6" High-Definition Cast-Basket Bass/Midrange Drivers w/ Multi-Vaned Phase Plugs

Optimized Dual-Chamber Upper Bass/Midrange Enclosure with Angled Rear and Side Walls

High-Gauss High-Velocity Folded Ribbon Tweeter (HVFR™) w/Zobel Network

Open-Cell Polyurethane Foam Damping Pads

Proprietary Mix of Long Fiber Lamb's Wool and Dacron Internal Damping

Three 6" x 10" Quadratic Sub-Bass Drivers w/ Massive Focussed-Field Magnet Structures

Elaborately Braced Accelerometer Optimized Non-Resonant Cabinet

Linear-Phase Balanced Crossover Network w/ Film Capacitors and Bridging Cap

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

Two on Each Side of Cabinet

Hybrid Phase-Perfect Electronic/Passive Low Frequency Crossover

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

Elegantly Sleek Piano Gloss Black Lacquer Finish Cabinet

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

Triton Reference
\$4249 ea.

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

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

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

– Robert Deutsch, *Stereophile*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

– Mark Henninger, *AVS*

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

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

GoldenEar Technology®
We Make High-End Affordable!™

www.goldenear.com

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And So it begins...

As we start a new issue of TONE, the mood is always light, cheery and whimsical. (well sometimes) Lloyd Cole's self-titled solo debut after his tenure with the Commotions is always a relaxing, friendly place to start fleshing out the issue and taking pictures.

Favorite tracks are "What Do You Know About Love?" and "Ice Cream Girl." Of course we are analog friendly, spinning this disc on the Technics SL-1200G with the new Hana SL cartridge. But for those of you wanting a quick peek, you can stream the album on TIDAL here:

<https://listen.tidal.com/album/35247045>

TONE^{Audio}2.0

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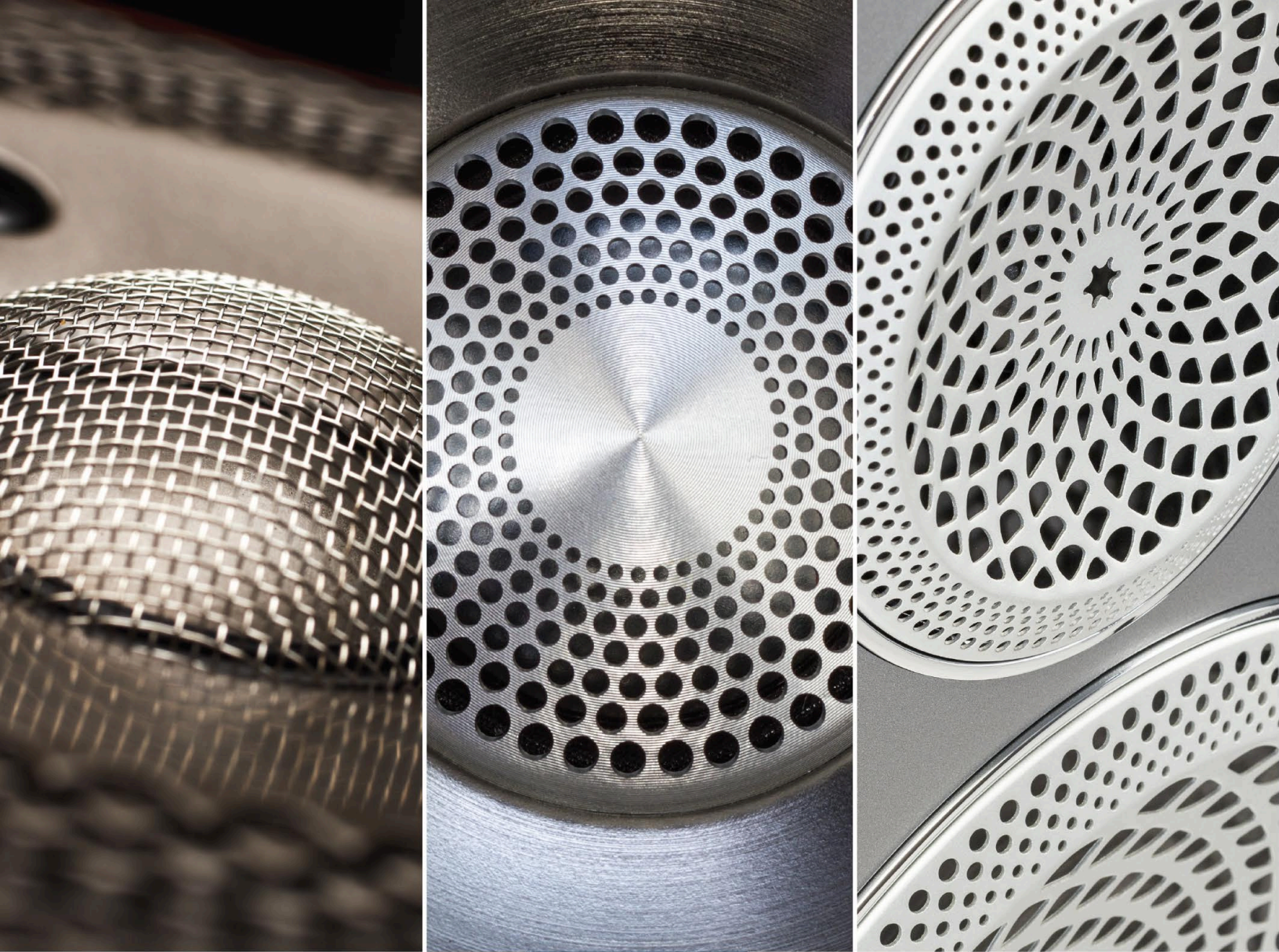
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www.tonepublications.com



no.86

Time flies, doesn't it?

Seems like only yesterday, I got the bright idea to start a hi-fi magazine. Fortunately, it was welcomed by most. There were a few naysayers, and the PDF format was a little bit ahead of its time, but it didn't take long for TONE to win audio and music lovers around the world over to a magazine that was a little different than all the rest.

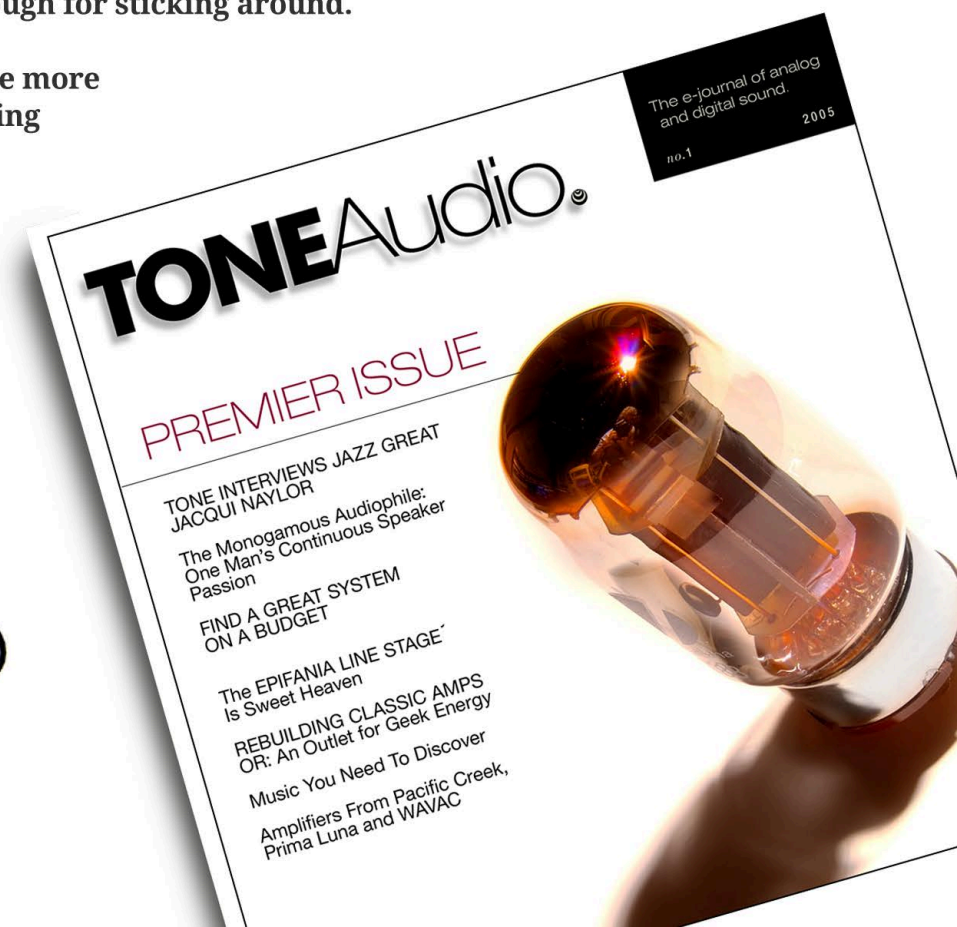
Today, we're read all over the world, except for North Dakota. Seriously, no one reads TONE in North Dakota, at least that's what Google metrics tells us.

You'll be seeing some more changes over the next few issues as we freshen up the format, add a few things, throw a few things out, and maybe even change our minds midstream, but hey, we're wacky creative types, predisposed to that kind of thing.

I can't thank you all enough for sticking around.

As for me, I've got a little more hair, and a better listening chair, but I'm just as enthusiastic about the world of audio as I've ever been.

And I look forward to sharing it with you for another 86 issues.



The Evolution of Perfect Sound



Paradigm celebrates 35 years as a world-class innovator and artisan manufacturer of high performance loudspeakers. *We have no plans to slow down now.*

We continue to add to our growing portfolio of patented technologies and our roster of cutting-edge audio products, with well-reviewed designs for nearly every application. Paradigm has become the speaker brand preferred by audio professionals and enthusiasts alike. Our worldwide family of owners are dedicated repeat buyers.

paradigm.com

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Focal's latest generation Beryllium tweeter is the heart of the new Kanto no. 2 speaker.

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Audio TONE2.0

P135

The Mighty KT-150 tube is the heart of CJ's ART 150





Our Record of the Year

Analogue Productions - Steppenwolf Gold

With everyone and their cousin jumping on the geezer reissue bandwagon, we tip our hats to Chad Kassem and his team for doing such an incredible job on this classic. Baby boomer or not, you owe it to yourself to hear these tunes in their full glory.

They didn't sound this good back in the day.

[Click here to purchase.](#)

Rediscover Music /
Technics

And the awards go to...

Technics is proud to be awarded Product of the Year by The Absolute Sound in the turntable category, and chosen for a Publisher's Choice Award in TONEAudio Magazine.

Experience the ultimate in Technics turntable technology with the unlimited Grand Class SL-1200G. Let us take you on your journey to rediscover music.



2017
the absolute sound
**PRODUCT
OF THE
YEAR**
AWARD

TONEAudio
2017 Publisher's Choice Award

Grand Class SL-1200G Direct Drive Turntable System

Now available at our partners:

The Audio Den, NY
Definition Audio, CA
Interseckt, FL
Adirondack Audio, NY
Hi-Fi Heaven, WI
Fidelis A/V, NH
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Audio Vision SF, CA
Galen Carol Audio, TX
Northcoast Audio, CA
Glenn Poor's Audio/Video, IL
J-Corder, WA
Sunny Components, CA

Speaker Shop, NY
AV Creative Concepts, FL
Blink High End, MA
Hi-Fi Sales, NJ
Absolute Audio, NM
USA Tube Audio, AZ
AVWORX, UT

Audio Video Solutions, NV
Sweet Spot Audio & Records, TX
Hi-End Theater & Audio, TX
Alma Audio, CA
Audio Center, FL

technics.com

Playlist:

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Tom Petty-
Here Comes My Girl

Center Stage/John Williams-
Olympic Fanfare

Mstislav Rostropovich-
Bach Cello Suite 1: Prelude

Andreas Vollenweider -
Down to The Moon

Michael Legrand -
Blue and Sentimental,
Stompin at The Savoy

West Side Story -
Prologue, Jet Song

Jonas Hellborg/Elegant Punk
Little Wing

Brahms: Solo For Violin
and Piano - Sonata no. 1

Let There Be Sounds's Oswaldo
Martinez goes the extra mile
this issue by sending us his
playlist on a cassette tape,
via his VPI Avenger Reference
turntable and a Nakamichi
680ZX.



no. 1 Florida

T H E F I N E A R T S

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



conrad-johnson It just sounds right.

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MINE: it should be yours

Welcome to Mine.

We're not just crazy about music and hifi here at TONE.

While we can put many different labels on our ethos, saying that we are "music lovers," "audiophiles," or perhaps even "qualityphiles," That still doesn't cover it.

Having met so many of our readers from around the world as we go into our 13th year, I'd say our readers are somewhat playful, and definitely inquisitive to say the least.

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

So let's call it what it is: Mine! And we'll be sharing more of our favorite stuff with you as we go.

photo of the classic Eames Lounge Chair: Herman Miller



MINE: it should be yours



VPI USB Stick/Bottle Opener

\$10

www.vpiindustries.com

What's something you really need when listening to music with friends? A bottle opener. Vinyl and beer aficionado Mat Weisfeld, who just happens to be the big cheese at VPI is smart enough to include both. This bottle opener includes a USB stick, so you always have some of your favorite tracks with you.

Definitely one of the best pieces of swag we've seen!



SERIE S

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Featuring the Serie S flagship S/5 with 12" Continuous Cast™ cone bass engine.

Visit rel.net to learn more about REL and find an authorized dealer near you.

“THERE WAS **NOTHING SUBTLE** ABOUT WHAT IT DID FOR THE SOUND; THIS WASN'T BASS REINFORCEMENT, IT WAS FULL-ON BASS MANAGEMENT. THE S/3 PROVIDED **A SOLID UNDERPINNING** OF THE LOUDSPEAKERS, ALLOWING THEM TO **OPEN OUT AND CLEAN UP** IN THE MIDRANGE AND TREBLE, IMPROVING THE APPARENT STAGE WIDTH, THE **CLARITY AND DETAIL** ACROSS THE MIDRANGE AND, NATURALLY, **A DEEPER BASS** OF BOTH DEPTH AND TONALITY.” | NICHOLAS RIPLEY, HI-FI PLUS

MINE: it should be yours

The Shinola Powered Speakers

\$1,500/pair

www.shinola.com/audio

Shinola has come a long way from their beginnings as watchmakers, now offering a full line of audio products. We've enjoyed the Runwell turntable and are currently producing a review of their Canfield headphones for our new magazine, Headphone Arts.

[Click here to read Rob Johnson's review on the powered speakers.](#)



PH-10

the most awarded phonostage ever



TONEAudio



CONNECT 2 ARMS & CARTRIDGES

With two separate RCA inputs you can connect two different tonearms and adjust settings independently for each single cartridge.

SELECT THE GAIN

PH-10 offers 4 different GAIN levels -3dB, 0dB, +3dB, +6dB to find the best output level for MM and MC cartridges.

TFT DISPLAY & SKC - SINGLE KNOB CONTROL

SKC is a unique technology that matched with TFT display allows quick control of the unit's functions through the single knob joggle.

3 EQUALIZATION CURVES

To get the best out of any record it's crucial to use correct EQ curve: PH-10 offers the RIAA, the DECCA-LONDON and the AMERICAN-COLUMBIA, as well as the "enhanced" curves to enjoy the best vinyl experience ever.

CHOOSE BETWEEN 9 LOADS

Perfect matching is easy and quick with 9 different loads: 10Ω, 22Ω, 47Ω, 100Ω, 220Ω, 470Ω, 1000Ω, 22KΩ, 47KΩ.

ELEGANTLY FUNCTIONAL

Made of solid machined aluminium, the shell body guarantees low frequency resonance, feedback vibrational control and low magnetic inertial field.



GOLD NOTE Italian Music Experience

www.goldnote.it



Rap Snacks

\$1.49/1oz. bag

www.rapsnacks.net

Labeled as "the official snacks of hip-hop," Rap Snacks founder used to work with Master P, so he's legit. Each bag has a QR code on the back to download music too. Pretty awesome!

MINE: it should be yours

Clear Reflection

*The geometry of Golden Reference.
The technology of Clear.*

cardas.com/reflection



Pro-Ject WM-1 Wall Shelf

\$179

www.sumiko.net

While the Pro-Ject WM-1 is perfect for mounting a lightweight turntable to your wall for various reasons, it's not a bad place to put a great vintage cassette deck to display

MINE: it should be yours

MINE: it should be yours

The Porsche Design/KEF Motion One Headphones
www.kef.com

\$249.00

These two icons of sound and design have teamed up to create an in-ear experience that sounds, great looks great and is, well, a little bit unconventional. But then what would you expect from a company that builds automobiles with the engine in the rear?

Beautifully packaged, the Motion One phones are built to withstand the rigors of heavy use (remember, Porsche has won the 24 hours of LeMans more than any other company) and sweat.

And while they won't go 24 hours on a charge, 10 should be no problem. That's at least to get you from one side of the ocean to the other.

PORSCHE DESIGN
AND
SOUND
KEF

Sonus faber
HOMAGE
TRADITION
Everyday Luxury



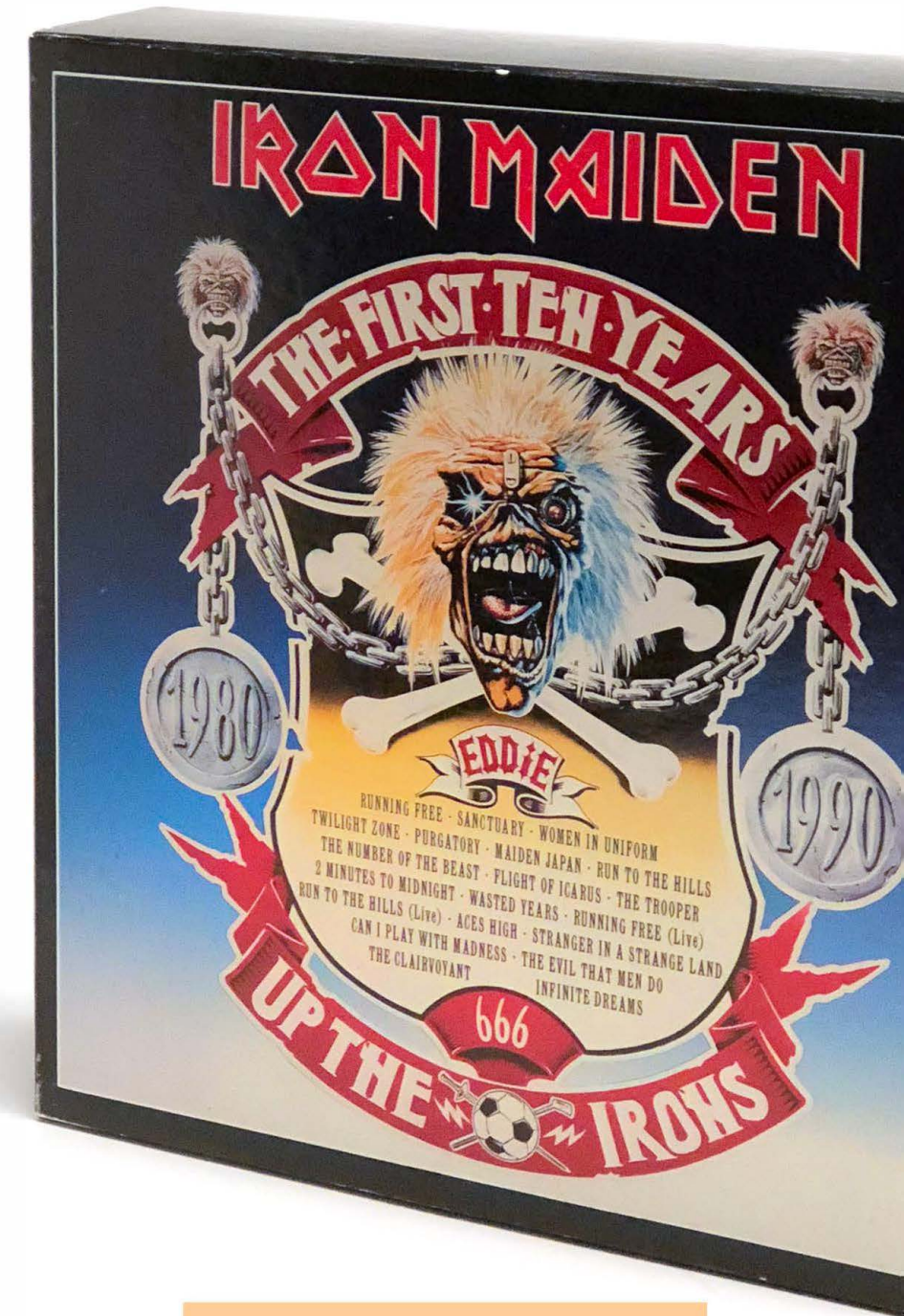
Discover Homage Tradition collection



Playlist:

What Our Readers Are Into

Flight of Icarus -
Phantom of the Opera
Purgatory Killers
Heaven Can Wait
The Evil That Men Do
To Tame a Land
Quest For Filre
Rime of The Aincnt Mariner
Transylvania
The Prisoner



Milwaukee fine artist Natalie Ricciardi tells us she's loved Iron Maiden "since she was 12," So these are her all time favorite Maiden tracks. Turn it up!

no. 2 Wisconsin

YOUR HI-FI SYSTEM.
SIMPLIFIED.



WA33

Fully Balanced Headphone Amp / Preamplifier

WOO AUDIO



Future Tense



Raidho X-1 Speakers

\$6,000/pair

www.raidho.dk

Always a fan of the Danish sound, we're more than tickled with the new X-1 from Raidho, which incidentally are their entry level speaker. Tune in soon so see why we truly love these small but mighty monitors.

Future Tense

Pass Labs INT-60

\$9,000

www.passlabs.com

Quite a few pieces of Pass gear have come through our doors, and they have all been first class. What makes the INT-60 so special (aside from the sound quality) is that it's an integrated. Just one box for your rack.

With the first 30 of it's 60 watts per channel pure class-A, you may never push the INT-60 hard enough to exit that zone.

And yeah, it's still a heavy little bugger.

Future Tense



PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium Preamplifier

\$3,199

www.primaluna-usa.com

We could go on and on about how awesome the top of the line PrimaLuna preamplifier is, and you'll read more about it in our upcoming review. But here's the punchline: we bought the review sample. Nuff said.



Further On Down The Road...

As the issue progresses, the puzzle gets more dense, more involved. What to put here, what to put there, how to establish and maintain the flow.

What better music to embrace a complex, textured flow than Frank Zappa? Zappa fans will all argue about what “the best Zappa disc” is, but a perennial favorite around here is *Live at the Fillmore East - June 1971*.

If you don't have the LP, you can stream it here at TIDAL: <https://listen.tidal.com/album/16297980>



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at the Venetian
in room 30-218

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Canada dealers: Audio Eden, Toronto ON | Element Acoustics, Vancouver BC | Filtronic, Montreal QC



HDPREAMP

65 YEARS OF INNOVATION

The volume control is a revolutionary patent pending technology that allows much more transparent sound compared to pots and switch resistor technology

The newly developed SuperCapacitor power supply is a new technology which combines the very low noise of a battery with the high current capability of the best linear power supplies

Nagra's audio engineer team created a super vibration free stand to lower the microphonic resonances to a new level

The HDPREAMP has the best specifications ever achieved by any tube preamplifier, 160 dB of signal to noise and 5 Hz to 200kHz frequency response with perfect phase integrity

The first time I encountered the mighty Audio Research D-79, I couldn't afford one. My entire system didn't cost \$3,500 back in 1979. I had just read Harry Pearson's enthusiastic review in *The Absolute Sound*, and I knew I wanted one.

The ARC D-79: A True Legend

Those big power meters with the red "caution" zone looked like something from the control room in *Godzilla vs. Mothra* where the villain sees the meters go into the red zone and exclaims, "get me a printout on that, now!"

The ARC D-79:

A True Legend

When I finally got my first D-79, eleven years later, I pushed those power meters right into the red zone, with Alice Cooper's "Hey Stoopid," much to the annoyance of my neighbors. I couldn't hear them pounding on the door, but I did hear the police about ten minutes later. Yeah, the D-79 rocked. But hifi was a different world in 1990. Vinyl was on its way out and not a lot of people were listening to tubes either. Who knew they'd both make such a big comeback?



**This is
a big
amplifier.**

Its standard, rack-mount 19-inch width is like all Audio Research components, but at 10 ½" tall, it's twice the height of an average preamplifier, so should you go down this path, make sure there is enough room in your equipment rack to allow adequate ventilation. With no less than 19 tubes under the hood, this vintage beauty runs hot, and it has three cooling fans to keep things in check. This is one area you'll notice progress from ARC – these fans are slightly noisy. Not enough to distract from normal listening, but those listening to classical or solo vocals at very low levels might notice the fans a bit.

Revisiting past loves can be dangerous. More often than not, the cheerleader or quarterback you remember as being hot or hunky in high school looks pretty knackered by the 40-year reunion. Entropy can be a bitch.

Old School: Celebrating Hi-Fi Past.



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Performance meets style

GRAND PRIX AUDIO Monaco Turntable v2.0

A new achievement in analog



"Let the record state that this is the finest turntable I've experienced, at any price."

-Jeff Dorgay, Tone Publications

Music deserves innovation

www.grandprixaudio.com



The ARC D-79: A True Legend

After a lengthy restoration from Pat Hickman at Classic Tube Audio, here in Wilsonville, Oregon, I was a little scared to power this beauty up. Would it live up to the memory? Sitting right on the sidelines was the current one box jewel from ARC, the REF 75SE, which will become a classic in its own right, but I doubt I'll still be here to see it!

Moment of truth

Queuing up "Hey Stoopid" for the first track of the reunion, though this time via TIDAL and the PS Audio DirectStream DAC with a pair of new Magnepan .7s proves outstanding. I always remembered the D-79 having tremendous grip and my refurbished D-79 does not disappoint. The new small Magenpans are much more amplifier friendly and are a lovely match with the new REF 75SE, playing more than loud enough in the 13 x 15 foot room they are installed in. While not a bass monster by any stretch, what's available is of excellent quality, and this is a way more spatial and engaging speaker, than most mini monitors.

Do you want one?

If you want a D-79 of your very own, this is a worthwhile classic. However, like your favorite classic car or motorcycle, I suggest finding the best cosmetics you can, as there are no more front panels or meters left at the factory. You can send your D-79 back to ARC for a full rebuild, as they do have the parts. However, keeping the casework issues in mind, I'd hand deliver it, or triple box it. I trusted mine to Mr. Hickman because a: he's local and I could drive it over, and b: he's got thousands of hours of seat time repairing vintage ARC, McIntosh, Marantz and others. His level of attention to detail is beyond in every way – I knew my baby was in good hands.

Expect to pay \$2,000 - \$4,000, working or not, and if the amplifier hasn't been powered up in a while, I highly recommend not flipping the on/off switch.



Old School: Celebrating Hi-Fi Past.

The ARC D-79: A True Legend



Old School: Celebrating Hi-Fi Past.



AUTHENTIC BBC MONITORS

Transparent...Uncolored...Accurate. This is what made the sound of the original British Broadcasting Corporation monitors legendary. Graham Audio has made it their mission to continue this legacy, and to bring the LS5/8, LS5/9 and LS3/5 to a broader global audience. Drawn from many years of BBC research, and through the engineering genius of Derek Hughes, these speakers have been recreated using state of the art materials and technology under license from the BBC. The LS5/9 is now available in the U.S. along with the LS5/8, and the never commercially produced LS3/5.

At Graham Audio the legend lives on...



Distributed in the United States by Graham Audio USA
www.grahamaudiousa.com | info@grahamaudiousa.com



The ARC D-79:

A True Legend

CAUTION 4 OHM TAP IS GROUNDED.
AVOID SWITCHING AND TESTING
SYSTEMS WITH COMMON GROUND.

MODEL D-79
audio research corp.
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, U.S.A.
SERIAL 193100 07

4 8 16
OUTPUT

CHANNEL 2

SPEAKER

LEVEL

INPUT

INPUT

WARNING
TO PREVENT FIRE AND SHOCK HAZARD, DO NOT
EXPOSE THIS DEVICE TO RAIN OR MOISTURE.
— DO NOT BE OPERATED IN A HORIZONTAL POSITION —
— DO NOT OPERATE WITH COVERS REMOVED —
UNIT CONTAINS VOLTAGES WHICH MAY BE HAZARDOUS.

SPEAKER

CHANNEL 1

Take it straight to an expert tech and plan on spending another \$1,500 - \$2,500 to have it rebuilt correctly - you won't be sorry. Remember these amplifiers are 30+ years old now, and those power supply capacitors need replacement. Unless the seller has accurate documentation that this has been done properly in the last ten years (or less, preferably) plan on going down big time for a service.

There are four different versions of the D-79 (read about it here, at the ARC database) and internet pundits will argue endlessly about which one is the right one, but I submit they are all great. The earliest D-79 (there was a B, C, and C mk.II – the most rare) utilizes a slightly more complex circuit and uses a combination of 12AX7 and 6FQ7 tubes, where later models incorporate the 6922 that would become a staple of ARC preamp design for years until the 6H30 came along. That should give you some insight into the voicing of the various iterations.

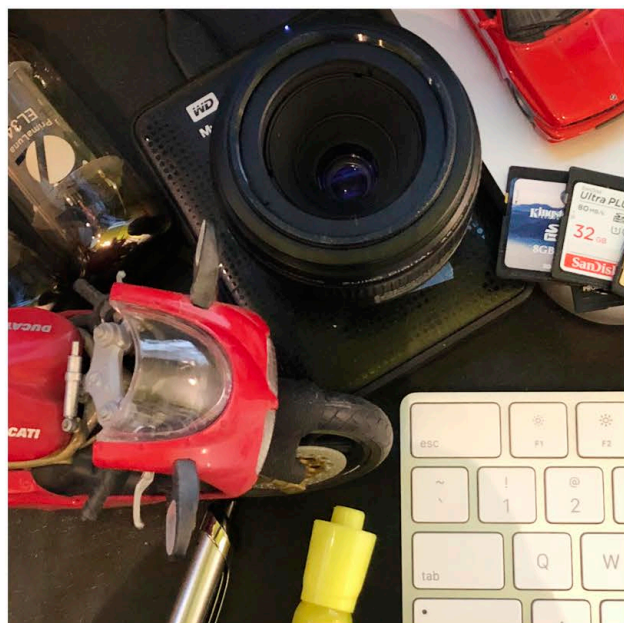
Audio Research gear has a more modern look in 2017, but the sheer soul of today's REF series started right here, with the D-79, designed by founder William Z. Johnson himself. While many enthusiasts still crave this very amplifier, you need no further validation than the fact that the man responsible for the makeover of current ARC gear, Livio Cucuzza has a D-79 in his office in Italy, as his father did before him. That's product longevity.

Just as any true automotive enthusiast deserves a drive in an early 70s Porsche 911S or BMW's 2002ti, if you have a passion for vacuum tube hifi, you really should experience the D-79.

Old School: Celebrating Hi-Fi Past.



It's that time again. Somehow, it always seems to be this time again. Just to reiterate our mission, we are always trying to help you formulate a short list, to make the process of building or upgrading your music system easier. For us, the gear serves the music and not the other way around. We want to help you build a great system, no matter what your budget and then get on to enjoying your music, your life.



While everything we choose to review is award worthy, these products are the ones we feel stand out a little bit further in terms of overall excellence. Again, I hope you will never spend your hard earned money on a component because of an award; ours or anyone else's, but I do hope that it will give you pause, and be worthy of your time to investigate. Here goes!



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OVERALL: The REL 212SE Subwoofer

TONE's Product of the Year: The REL 212 SE

By Jeff Dorgay

Actually, two of them. As REL's John Hunter will tell you, you need a pair of 212SEs to disappear in your room, and that is the ultimate goal of a sub-bass system, to prove a transparent extension to your main speakers, never drawing attention to themselves. While the uninitiated might opt for small cubes that can be placed a bit more out of the way, Hunter explains it succinctly: "When you hear low-frequency information out in the real world, it doesn't just come at you from off in the corner, it envelops you from all directions." Thus, the height factor of the 212SE is equally important to disappear audibly.

After Hunter spends a bit of time optimizing my Focal Sopra no.3s for perfect positioning, blending the 212SEs into the rest of the system takes place quickly. When complete, the subs are impossible to localize, and in addition to the lower register improving dramatically, the entire presentation takes on greater depth, width, and height. The Sopra no.3s and the 212SEs work together as one. Perfectly.

TONEAudio
2017 product of the year



OVERALL: The REL 212SE Subwoofer



Fun as this is, be careful should you attempt this at home, OSHA says you should not be exposed to music at this high volume level for more than about 10 minutes. Just enough to listen to Pink Floyd's "Breathe" in a way I've never experienced it – not even live. Whether you jump off the cliff for a pair of 212SEs or even one of REL's smallest offerings, the musical force that comes with having a great sub-bass system will make it tough, if not impossible to go back. You can't unhear it.

Inside the black box

We can go on and on about the tech inside the 212SE, but from the listening chair, it's all about execution and level to detail. That's why the 1.6-liter engine in a Kia makes 150 horsepower on a good day, and the 1.6-liter engine in a contemporary F1 car makes almost 900. Make no mistake, REL is the Ferrari F1 of low-frequency reproduction. Full specs are available on the REL site.

The 212SE looks conventional from a distance, a big black box with woofers in the front. A closer look reveals that the two front-firing 12" continuous cast active drivers are paired to an additional 12" passive cone on both the rear and bottom.

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As the music is playing, Hunter says, “Ok, now we’re listening to about \$300k worth of gear, right?” Then with a quick flick of two switches and a wry smile, he turns the 212SE’s off and says, “Now we’re listening to \$292,000 worth of gear.” The difference is staggering; the soundstage completely collapses. Considering the \$8,000 that a pair of 212SEs will set you back, won’t even buy a power cord from some manufacturers, this is amazing. The delta achieved by including the pair of 212SEs in my reference system is more than just a 100% jump, I no longer can listen to the system without them in. Adding a pair of these subwoofers to get this improvement for less than 3% of the total system cost is unbelievable.

It’s not the bass; it’s everywhere

The level of depth that the pair of 212SEs adds to the mix is just as exciting as the low-frequency extension. The delicacy of the opening Fender Rhodes licks in the Springsteen classic “Kitty’s Back,” waft through space between my Focal Sopra no.3s so gently, it sounds better than when I’ve sat ten feet away from one in a club. This stunning realism is the key to the 212s presentation. As it says on the REL website, their goal is to restore midrange warmth and harmonic structure. This deceptively simple goal, nearly impossible to achieve, is a promise that has never been delivered in my listening room until now.



Tracking through myriad cuts deliberately lacking substantial LF content reinforces the initial experience. Whether listening to Ella Fitzgerald or Eddie Mercury, my system has more bloom, more dimensionality. The music comes alive in all dimensions more clearly, with more low-level information present at all volume levels. Enticing as giving the volume control a hearty spin is, it’s still good at low volume.

These subwoofers have been a serious threat to productivity. The experience they’ve added to my primary reference system keeps me glued to the listening chair, at times for hours, at times for the entire day. With so much more musical information available, listening becomes sheer joy again.

It’s almost better than real

Because of the power required, lower frequency extension and detail is usually the first thing to give up the ghost when pushed, followed closely by overall system imaging. Depending on your room, system, and available power, it happens gradually or in a brick wall fashion. For the first time in nearly 40 years, this didn’t

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TONEAudio
2017 product of the year

The passive cones use the same material as the active drivers, providing sonic consistency. REL claims that the two passive drivers not only add dimension to the bass produced giving the 212SE the equivalent of a pair of 17-inch drivers. Driving each of these woofer arrays is a 1,000-watt amplifier, optimized for its job.

Closer inspection reveals numerous fine details; the finish is exquisite. Not only is it the equivalent of anything I've seen on a six-figure pair of Wilson or Magico speakers, but it's also the equivalent of anything I've seen on a Bentley. The gloss black on the review 212s is liquid in appearance, and this reflective quality helps it to physically disappear in the room. Even the complexity of the machined shape in the side handles reveals a level of attention that tells you this is indeed a special product.

For those not familiar with REL, they use a speaker level connection, requiring your main speaker's run full range, so the signal going to the subs has the same sonic signature of what is going to the mains via your power amplifier. They can be used via line level inputs as well, but whenever I've tried this with a REL subwoofer, the results were never quite as good as doing it their way.

Should running a cable be inconvenient, REL subwoofers can also be connected via their Longbow wireless transceiver. The Longbow is a compression-free wireless system, utilizing the same speaker or line level outputs, transmitting wireless information effortlessly. While this option was not taken here, it has been used with other REL products with excellent result.

And the winner is

The combination of dynamics and musicality that a pair of REL 212SEs add to the mix is of such high quality, I had made up my mind after about 10 hours of listening (I was up until about 4 a.m. after Hunter left, the day he installed them) that this would be our product of the year. For my money, this could be TONE’s product of all time.

I’ve had the privilege to own and evaluate thousands of components in the last two decades. Nothing has ever come close to achieving so much at such a modest cost. \$8,000 is by no means chump change, but when other companies are asking ten times this for wire, that they claim is a “component level” upgrade, I call shenanigans. If your system doesn’t go to 11 right now, a pair of these will get you there. And if it already does, hang on; you’re still in for a ride you aren’t expecting.

In the end, I’m not sure what freaks me out more, that a pair of REL 212SEs are this good, or knowing that there are two more models above the 212SE.



The REL 212SE

The REL 212SE Subwoofer \$4,000 each, two used in this review
www.rel.net

Peripherals

Analog Source	GPA Monaco 2.0w/triplanar arm, Lyra Etna
Digital Source	dCS Rossini DAC and clock
Main Speakers	Focal Sopra no.3
Preamplifier	Pass Labs XSPre
Phono	Pass Labs XSPhono
Amplifiers	Pass Labs XS 300 monos, XA200.8 monos
Cable	Cardas Clear, Tellurium Q Black Diamond
Racks	Grand Prix Audio Monaco



Hump Time...

Just past the 1/3rd mark, it's time for a bump, like a strong espresso.

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SPEAKER: Paradigm 9H Persona



TONEAudio
2017 product of the year

The Paradigm 9H Persona \$35,000/pair

What better name for a company, that has redefined the “paradigm” for mega speakers? In a world of 100, 200, and nearly 700 thousand dollar speaker systems, to build a true competitor for \$35,000 a pair?

Yes, some will freak out that Paradigm, that friendly Canadian company that has always made great speakers that nearly everyone can afford, and began their journey with the \$199/pair Atoms, is here now.

Others will freak out that the 9H Persona doesn’t cost enough, and a few may pass on them for that reason, thinking that a speaker has to have a six-figure price tag to be this good.

In the end, the music lover willing to stretch for a sysetm anchor that gives no quarter to any speaker, at any price, will just enjoy the 9H Persona for what it is - an incredible value, from one of audio’s strongest companies. Well done, Paradigm.



POWER AMP: Conrad-Johnson ART 150



The Conrad-Johnson ART 150 \$19,000

If you're goign to throw down for tubes, go with one of the world's most established, we say. The ART-150 is a superlative example, and has everything C-J has learned from over 40 years of amplifier designed under its hood. Not to mention the last generation ART as well as a long line of Premier series amplifiers. Simply lovely.

TONEAudio
2017 product of the year





The Pass XS Preamp \$38,000

This two box miracle is definitely on the spendy side, but it delivers the goods. Dead quiet, major everything - just think of every cliché you've ever heard. Yep, they all apply here. The XS Pre destroys, annihilates, lays to rest, eclipses. Yeah, yeah, all that stuff.

But what makes it even more awesome? Imagine getting a Ferrari Dino that was more reliable than a Camry and only cost as much as a 911. If you don't have to have glowing bottles, this one's heaven. (and it sounds as good as any tube preamp too.)



INTEGRATED: Esoteric F-07



The next classic.



The Esoteric F-07 \$7,500

Here's an integrated that can do it all; an incredible MM/MC phono stage is built in and you can install an optional DAC that is formidable. Rounding out the package, the F-07 can power two pairs of speakers and even features a pair of incredibly effective tone controls and an on-board headphone amp. Add your favorite speakers and turntable - call it good.

Impressive performance capabilities, highlighted by its detailed high frequency resolution, incredible transparency, powerful dynamics and remarkably deep bass extension make the X18 ideal for small to medium sized rooms and simply one of the finest compact loudspeakers Dynaudio has ever developed.

ANALOG: Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0



TONEAudio
2017 product of the year



The Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0 \$37,000 (without arm)

If we gave you a thousand dollars for every time we called a component “the best,” you wouldn’t have enough dough to but a decent bicycle. So if you are thinking about a destination turntable, and thought it would set you back six figures, think again. This one blows em all in the weeds.

If you want bling, buy something else. If you want sheer performance, the Monaco 2.0 is the one to get. Even after you invest heavily in an arm, cartridge and serious phono stage you still won’t have spent six figures. Which will leave you enough cash to go to Monaco on vacation.

DIGITAL: PS Audio DAC & Transport



The PS Audio Direct Stream DAC and Transport
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PS Audio has always made products offering high value and high performance. Many don't know, they were one of the first companies to offer an outboard DAC around 1990. We still have their original Digital Link, and it still works famously, so we have no doubt the DirectStream DAC and transport will still be in operation.

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PERSONAL AUDIO: Sonoma Model 1



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The Sonoma Model 1 Headphone System \$4,995

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TONEAudio
2017 product of the year

The Magnepan .7 \$1,395/pair

Our publisher started his audiophile journey with a pair of Magnepans decades ago, so revisiting the new .7 is a joyous reunion. As tube freindly as the original MG-IIs from back in the day, the .7s are currently connected to an Audio Research D-79 playing beautiful music. There's no bigger slice of high end pie for less money than the Magnepan .7. If these little (for Magnepan standards) speakers don't create a passion for great sound, nothing will.

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ACCESSORY: Akiko Audio Corelli

TONEAudio
2017 product of the year

The Akiko Audio Corelli \$1,995

If you've been reading TONE for any length of time, you know we are not big on tweaks, but the effect of the Akiko Audio Corelli is unmistakable. Unmistakably good. A passive conditioner, it plugs into the AC line, but nothing plugs into it. After about an hour or so, everything gets, cleaner, smoother, more relaxed, without losing any of the precious resolution you paid for with the rest of your system. If you're looking for the last 5% your system has to offer, we suggest auditioning the Corelli.



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Playlist:

What Our Readers Are Into

Here She Comes Now

Rock & Roll

Beginning to See The Light

Sunday Morning

Heroin

European Son

Sweet Jane

White Light/White Heat

Black Angels Death Song

Sweet Jane



To Celebrate the upcoming release of the new Anniversary box set from The Velvet Underground, Staff collector, Tom Caselli gives us his favorite VU tracks.

no. 4 Georgia

*Extra Credit: John Cale's *The Academy in Peril*



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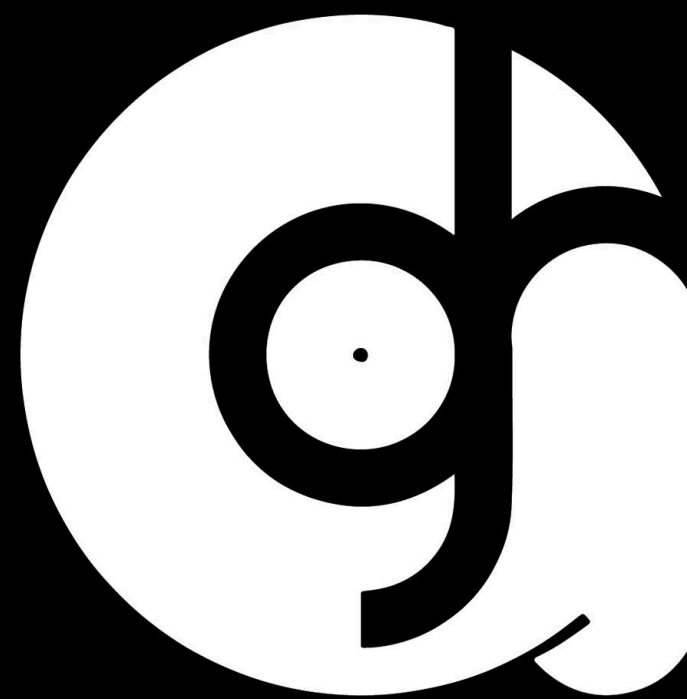
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We hope this list provides some food for thought.



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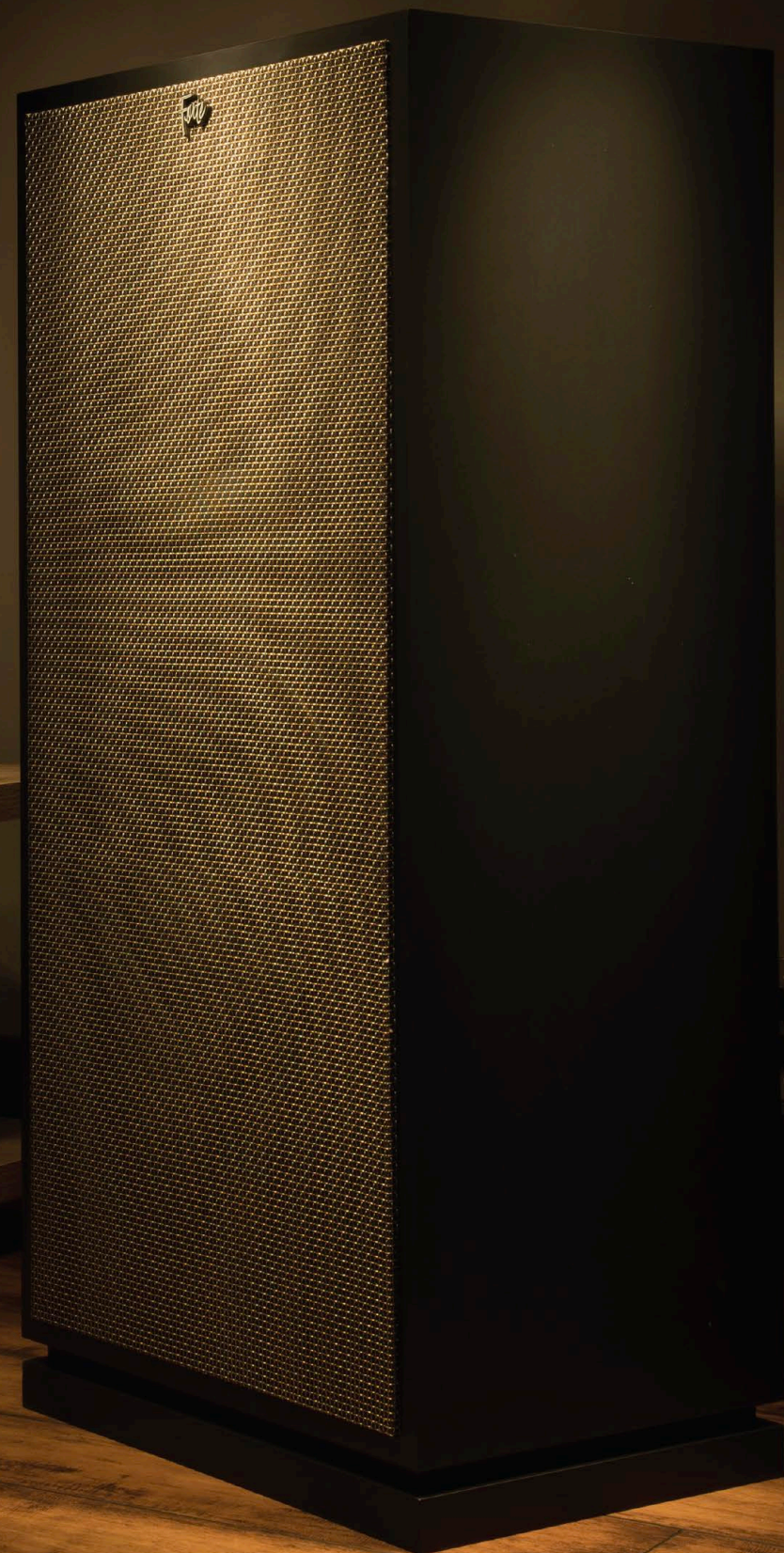
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Playlist:

What Our Readers Are Into

Back In Your Arms Again

Badlands

Brilliant Disguise

Darkness on the Edge of Town

Jungleland

Land of Hopes and Dreams

My City of Ruins

One Step Up

Promised Land

Rendezvous

Secret Garden

The Ties That Bind

Thunder Road

Tougher Than The Rest

Tenth Avenue Freeze Out



VANA LTD's Nancy Weiner is the quintessential Springsteen, fan so we knew there was no one better to turn to for a top ten list. She's left out (by her admission) some of the more obvious tracks, but as she says, "that would require two lists." So here they are, in alphabetic order no less. That's a fan!

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Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound - October 2015

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

Chris Martens, Hi-Fi+, September 2015

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

Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio - THE SHOW, Newport 2015

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

John Bamford, HiFi news, 2014



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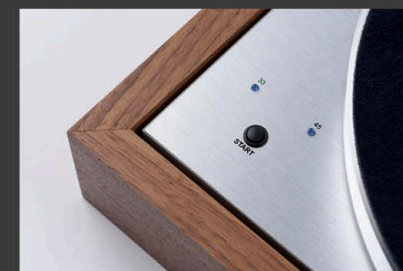
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A close-up, low-angle shot of a hand lifting a heavy, dark metal amplifier unit. The unit is rectangular with a brushed metal finish and has "XA25" engraved on its side. The hand is visible on the left, gripping the bottom edge of the unit. The background is dark and out of focus, with some light reflecting off the surface the unit is being lifted from.

The Pass Labs XA25:

A Pass You Can Lift!

You heard right. After years of lifting incredibly heavy power amplifiers from Pass Labs, the new XA25 arrives, and the label on the shipping carton says “51 pounds.” Wow. Don’t let the compact (by Pass standards) fool you. The XA25 is a serious amplifier. Using a single pair of high current output transistors, the XA25 only has three push-pull gain stages, resulting in an uncluttered signal path.

Journeyman Audiophile: Sound over a G.

TOTEM  30 ^{ans} years
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SIGNATURE ONE

Discover yours @totemacoustic.com

The Pass Labs XA25

Nelson Pass is an interesting guy. Meeting him at this year’s “Burning Amp Festival,” he’s still got a twinkle in his eye, kind of like Santa Claus. He’s still learning and remains very excited about building amplifiers – it shows in his creations. When he could simply rest on the reputation established by the massive XS monoblocks and XA.8 series amplifiers, this jewel exists.

Rated at 25 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load, the XA25 doubles its output into 4 ohms and again into 2 ohms, able to supply 200 watts of peak power per channel into a 2-ohm load. So you can say the XA25 has an incredibly robust power supply.

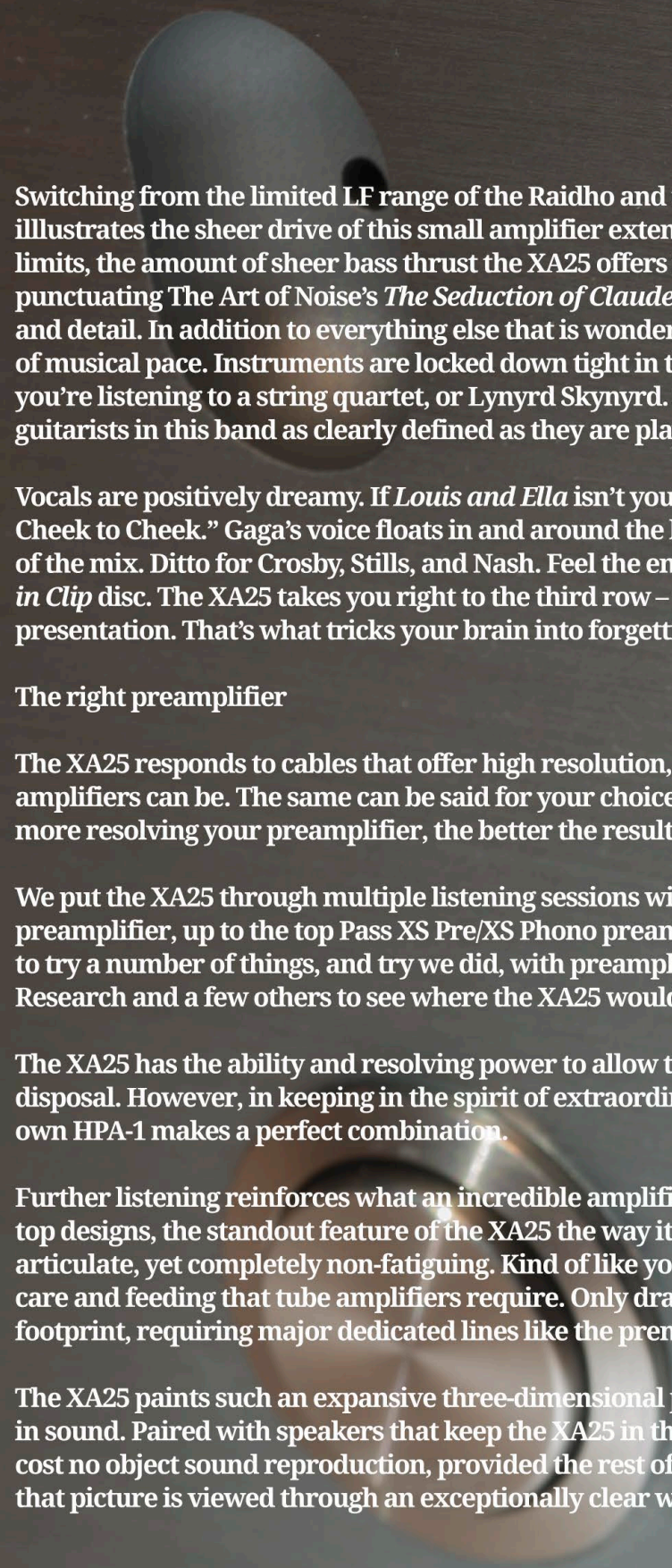


Priced at \$4,900 the XA25 isn’t cheap, but it’s not a ton of money either. Especially in comparison to the XS300 monoblocks that I’ve been using as my reference for years now. The delicacy, musicality, and control that I’m used to with those \$90,000 amplifiers is right here with the XA25. And much like the early Pass Aleph or First Watt amplifiers, there is a level of inner detail retrieval that even the mighty XS300s can’t quite muster – though they are exceptional for big amplifiers. Nelson Pass has always been about the quality of the “first watt,” and all his designs have it, in abundance – but this little amp is special.

Size isn’t always everything

I’d be tempted to tell you that you need efficient speakers with a sensitivity rating of 92db/1 watt or better, but I’d be wrong. Putting the XA25 into a system with the 86db/1 watt Magnepan .7s proves a brilliant choice, and believe it or not this system really moves some air. Magnepan with a 25 watt per channel class A amp? Ever experience a pair of Mark Levinson ML-2s with Tympanis?

Journeyman Audiophile: Sound over a G.



Switching from the limited LF range of the Raidho and the Magnepan to the seriously full range Focals' illustrates the sheer drive of this small amplifier extends beyond the mere midband. Played within its limits, the amount of sheer bass thrust the XA25 offers is nearly unbelievable. The thick bass grooves punctuating The Art of Noise's *The Seduction of Claude Debussy* are intoxicating, revealed with power and detail. In addition to everything else that is wonderful about the XA25, it also offers a rock-solid sense of musical pace. Instruments are locked down tight in their respective portion of the soundstage, whether you're listening to a string quartet, or Lynyrd Skynyrd. Speaking of Skynyrd, you've never heard all three guitarists in this band as clearly defined as they are playing through the XA25.

Vocals are positively dreamy. If *Louis and Ella* isn't your thing, spin Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett's "Dancing Queen." Gaga's voice floats in and around the backing orchestra, with Bennett popping in and out of the mix. Ditto for Crosby, Stills, and Nash. Feel the emotion in Ani DiFranco's "Gravel" from her *Living in Clip* disc. The XA25 takes you right to the third row – there isn't even the slightest touch of grain in the presentation. That's what tricks your brain into forgetting about the gear.

The right preamplifier

The XA25 responds to cables that offer high resolution, but it isn't negatively affected by cable as some amplifiers can be. The same can be said for your choice of preamplifier. It will mirror what it's sent; the more resolving your preamplifier, the better the result.

We put the XA25 through multiple listening sessions with everything from a rebuilt Dyna PAS3 preamplifier, up to the top Pass XS Pre/XS Phono preamplifiers. The single ended design makes it easy to try a number of things, and try we did, with preamplifiers from McIntosh, Nagra, Robert Koda, Audio Research and a few others to see where the XA25 would fall down. It never does.

The XA25 has the ability and resolving power to allow the listener to discern between anything at their disposal. However, in keeping in the spirit of extraordinary performance at thinking man's prices, their own HPA-1 makes a perfect combination.

Further listening reinforces what an incredible amplifier the XA25 is. Nothing is off limits, and like Pass' top designs, the standout feature of the XA25 the way it plays music in a way that is highly resolving and articulate, yet completely non-fatiguing. Kind of like your favorite tube amplifier. Without the associated care and feeding that tube amplifiers require. Only drawing 240 watts, the XA25 won't tax your carbon footprint, requiring major dedicated lines like the premium Pass offerings do to deliver their best performance.

The XA25 paints such an expansive three-dimensional picture; it's easy to close your eyes and feel immersed in sound. Paired with speakers that keep the XA25 in the sweet spot of its power band will reward you with cost no object sound reproduction, provided the rest of your system and software are up to task. Best of all, that picture is viewed through an exceptionally clear window. This amplifier is a ninja – it sneaks up on you.

The Pass Labs XA25

**You're so wrapped up in the music
it's like getting out of a bed that uses
a Tempur-Pedic mattress. You've
been sucked in so deep you almost
can't get out. It's that enveloping.**

The rest of the picture

Like every other Pass amplifier I've used, the XA is easy to use. It sounds great out of the box, yet does improve a bit after about 50-100 hours of continuous play. If you have inefficient speakers in a large room and need to play music at rock concert levels, this is not your amplifier. You will need the big XA or XS to achieve your goals.

But for those of you with a modest room, careful selection of the right ancillary components will find the XA25 delivering a musical experience that few systems at any price can match. This is one of the most nuanced hi-fi components I've had the pleasure to use, and after living with it for a while, I'm convinced that Nelson Pass is even more of a genius than I previously thought he was. Much as I love the big, bold, blue meters on the XA200.8s, I don't need em here. Every choice made in this amplifier is to serve the music. The amplifier's circuit is simple, yet well executed. The chassis and other ancillaries are of high, but not overkill quality.

The most engaging automobiles I've had the pleasure to drive were not necessarily the most powerful ones. What this incredibly short list of vehicles all have in common is an incredible sense of balance. That's what the XA25 offers. Everything you would want in an amplifier exists in this design: incredible dynamic range, lifelike tonal accuracy, the ability to paint a three-dimensional sound field and incredibly high resolution. In short, this amplifier reveals as much music as anything I've heard at any price. It just doesn't give you 300 – 1000 watts per channel of it like the big Pass or big Boulder amps do. So it won't be the answer for everyone.

I'm giving the Pass XA25 our first Masterpiece award. This amplifier is beyond even what I'd consider a product of the year or exceptional value – of course, it's all of that. But this is a \$4,900 amplifier that doesn't offer a mere "glimpse of the high end," it lets you have one of the world's finest amplifiers for just under five grand.

www.passlabs.com

Journeyman Audiophile: Sound over a G.

You sit on the couch and ask yourself, “How can something sound that big and dynamic?”

That kind of thing. Equally impressive results are achieved with the slightly inefficient but highly resolving Raidho X-1 mini monitors.

My limited experience with the First Watt amplifiers is that they are some of the most revealing I've heard, yet are slightly sensitive to speaker choice. If the match isn't perfect, the overall presentation can lean towards the thin side of the sonic spectrum. (not sure if Mr. Pass will agree with me on this..) Tough as it is to quantify this kind of thing, the XA25 comes within a molecule of the resolving ability of the First Watt amps, delivering a bigger, bolder, beefier presentation. The amount of sheer control that this modestly powered amplifier brings to the table is incredible. Moving on to the 92db/1 watt Focal Sopra no.3s that I use in my reference system, now powered by Pass XA 200.8 monoblocks, the XA25 is nearly indistinguishable from the big amps at low volumes. If you can live without the cool, blue meter from the XA30.8 and a touch less power, the XA25 is your ticket to audio excellence. I suspect this simple circuit that is not fully balanced also helps keep the cost factor down.

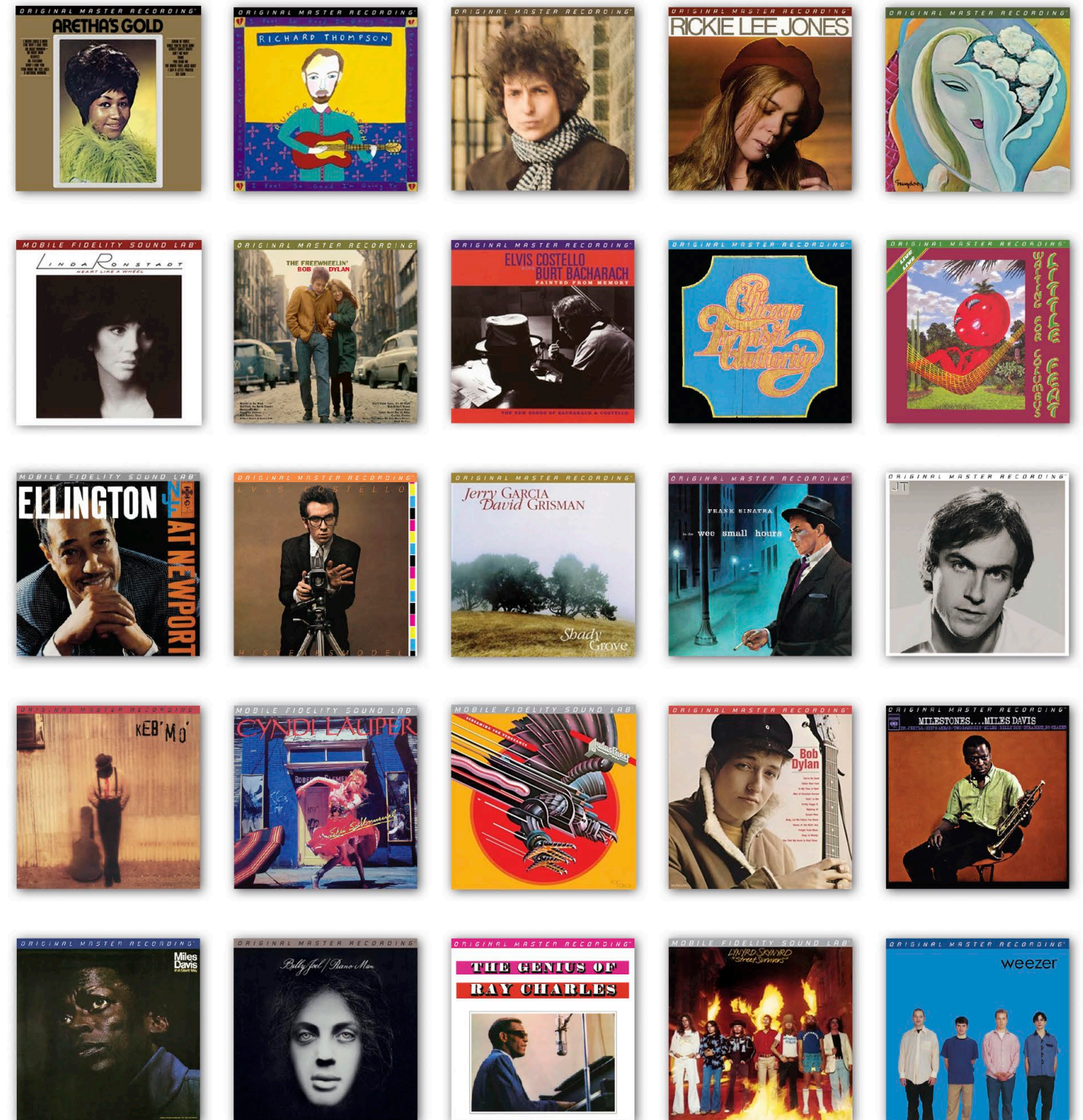


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Focal's Kanta no. 2

\$9.995/pair

www.focal.com

Regardless of what color and finish you choose, the Kanta is just plain fun. This fashion forward speaker brings serious sonic and tech cred to the table to compliment the handsome design.

Focal has always been about the blend of new and existing technologies, creating a synergy that is in a league of its own.

Kanta is easy to drive, easy to place in the room and decends from the mighty Grande Utopia EM.



2017 Publisher's Choice Awards

The next few pieces of gear are strictly my personal favorites, chosen from the ranks of what's passed through my listening room this year. There's no "best" here, and while some of these might be a great bargain, others are totally self-indulgent. They are all components I would buy, because I think they are really cool, for one or more reasons.

Perhaps they will appeal to you for the same reasons.



Naim Atom

\$2,995

www.naimaudio.com

We loved the Naim Qute when it hit our shores, reminding more than a handful of Naim enthusiasts of their beloved, first generation Nait. This compact integrated amplifier had a level of musicality unmatched at the time, launching many an audiophile's first system. And, it had an incredibly good MM phono stage built in - a formidable package.

The Atom carries on this tradition, now with more power and keeping up with the times, substituting an outstanding DAC and streamer for the phono stage.



Arriving Soon:
MAAT

Sound like no other. www.maat.com



Rega Brio

\$995

www.rega.co.uk

Now that Naim has moved upscale with the Atom in functionality and price, Rega's Brio takes over as the small but mighty British integrated.

Its 50 watts per channel, great MM phono section and a headphone jack on the front panel, make the Brio the perfect cornerstone to a compact high quality system.



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THE DUALITY OF SOUND

PASS



"In the end, everything is subjective, but in my humble opinion there is no better brand out there for innovative design, military spec like build quality and outstanding sound performance. In this case, if you also consider the astonishing value realized when compared to the best, we have something very very special."

Robert S. Youman

INT-60 Review
Positive-Feedback Issue 79

Pass Laboratories
13395 New Airport Rd. Ste G., Auburn, CA 95602
(530) 878-5350 - www.passlabs.com

2017 Publisher's Choice



Technics SL-1200G

\$4,000

www.technics.com

It may look like the 1200 of old, but every aspect of the new SL-1200G has been improved, re-built and re-engineered. While some argued about the trusty 1200mk.2's being DJ turntables, not good enough to be audiophile grade, the current 1200G is not only worth every penny, it's a bargain.

We join nearly every other audiophile magazine in the world with our praise for the 1200G with one difference - our publisher actually BOUGHT one, and uses it as a daily reference.

That's the highest honor we can give to any product.



Premium sound solutions for every space.

MartinLogan excels at doing things that have never been done, like integrating exotic Folded Motion™ driver technology, inspired by our legendary high-end electrostatic designs, into the affordable Motion® Series and reference Stealth™ Architectural Series. Smooth, refined sonic performance with stunning dynamic range and jaw-dropping clarity – MartinLogan magic in an application to suit every lifestyle.



EM-ESL X



Motion 40



Motion 60XT



Motion SLM



Edge



Axis



Vanquish



Motion Vision X

martinlogan.com

2017 Publisher's Choice



Sensitive Sound Art-Majestic

\$1,275

www.solypsa.com

Vinyl lovers in the 70s, 80s and even 90s never dreamed that we'd see a day when premium phono cartridges would cost more than a nice used BMW, but five-figure cartridges are the norm in 2018.

Music lovers on a prudent budget can rejoice in the Art-Magjestic. This Russian MC cartridge offers a level of nuance that you'd expect to cost a lot more. Though the review isn't quite finished, the Art-Majestic has become a real favorite around here.

Playlist:

What Our Readers Are Into

Wild Man Fischer-
My Name is Larry

Coldplay-
Everything's Not Lost

Bernie Taupin-
Citizen Jane

Marcy Playground-
Sex and Candy

Hughes/Thrall-
Coast to Coast

Nana Vasconcelos-
Cego Aderaldo

Jean-Michel Jarre-
Diva

Devo-
What We Do

Elvis Costello/Burt Bacharach-
I'll Never Fall in Love Again

Scorpions-
Rock You Like a Hurricane

This month, I bring you what my friends like to call "difficult listening hour," in homage to Laurie Anderson. Just a pile of random things that I love, strung together in no particular order!



no. 5 Washington

PASS



HPA-1

- All Discrete
- Class A Design
- Pass Labs Sound
- Smaller Package

When super size won't do.

Getting great sound in a smaller space requires extra placement and planning. Large speakers usually won't do, components often need to be stealthier and neighbors in close proximity might not appreciate your need to rock out at all hours of the day and night.

We're here to help those living in smaller spaces find solutions that will keep smiles on everyone's faces.

Check out our website, and join our growing community on Facebook.

 **The Audiophile Apartment.**
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REVIEW

Kanta no.2 by Focal

It's tough deciding what to name something. Taking the short cut and choosing a mere number is still daunting as one culture may see a number as auspicious, yet another sees it as perilous. Nothing less can be said for the name "Kanta." In Croatian, Kanta means bucket; in Sanskrit, it means desired, or beautiful. I'm guessing the latter is more what the product development team had in mind. The Kantas certainly sound beautiful listening to Adrian Belew's Inner Revolution, with his

Q: How do you follow up an amazing product like the Sopra line?
A: Kanta!

We take an in-depth look at Focal's latest masterpiece.

By Jeff Dorgay

signature elephant-like guitar wailing all around the room. If you happen to be a Focal fan, and have been following their progress with beryllium tweeters, every generation is better than the last. Just as Focal did with the Sopra tweeter, the new IAL 3 tweeter in the Kanta not only resolves more fine detail, it's a slight touch warmer than the Sopra tweeter. This is neither good nor bad, but it is a different presentation, not even as great as you would get going from tubes to transistors.



REVIEW: Kanta no.2



Do you usually order your car with the sport suspension upgrade? You might prefer Sopra. Do you like a slightly softer ride? You might prefer Kanta. Keep in mind, this is not a huge difference we are talking about here and there's no wrong choice to make.

A quick look around the speaker cabinet reveals the same level of quality construction and finish present on the \$220,000/pair Grande Utopia EM. The smooth paint finish is like liquid glass, and the perfection of all joints, combined with beautiful machining on the bases and feet makes for a premium product. This is a speaker you will really enjoy living with and looking at, as much as listening to. Thank the team of experienced craftspeople at Focal for this – a visit to their factory reveals only the right people, tools and process for the task. Things that can be done better with a CNC machine or a computer are produced that way. When something requires hand finishing, it is done that way.

At this year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, during the introduction of Focal's latest masterpiece, there were smiles all around, but I had the biggest smile, knowing a pair of Kantas would be waiting for me when I got home. The other surprise was the cool blue color of my review samples, reminding me (fondly) of the pale blue on a family friend's Renault Dauphine. So much for the yellow they promised me. Of course, white, black and wood finishes are also available for those less adventurous in their interior taste. Personally, I think it's very cool that Focal is offering some more fashionable choices, says the man with orange Sopras.



REVIEW: Kanta no.2

Childhood memories aside, the Kantas are not vintage in any way. They incorporate all the latest technological advances from Focal's engineers. From the new polymer material used in the cabinet, to the new driver designs (more on that at the Focal website) to the front port, making them even easier to set up than my reference Focal Sopra no.3 speakers. Where the Sopra is particular about getting the rake and toe-in just right for the best performance, Kanta is slightly more forgiving. The Kanta is also more listener friendly right out of the box. The Sopras needed about 50-100 hours to level out, the Kantas were rocking from the first hour.

Speaking of set up

Tipping the scale at just under 80 pounds each, the Kantas are extremely manageable. Only 44 inches tall and slightly more than 12 inches wide, they will be at home in all but the tiniest of rooms. Like any speaker, a little extra room to breathe is always a good thing, but the Kantas deliver excellent results in even our smallest listening room, measuring only 11 x 13 feet. Thanks to one of the two ports being front firing, Kanta is easy to place for optimum room coupling.



Quickly optimizing for even bass response, fine tuning the rake for your listening position is a breeze, thanks to the finely threaded feet. This allows you to go slowly and catch the perfect spot where the Kantas disappear in the room like a pair of panel speakers. Incredible. As mentioned before, fine tuning your speakers to the last degree is much like when you achieve the perfect VTA setting on your turntable, there's a pocket where the music just flows and loses that sense of being transmitted by a mechanical device. You should be able to take your Kantas from great to transcendental in about an hour or two – less if you have a patient friend.

Comfortable with any musical choice

Tracking through Throbbing Gristle's *20 Jazz Funk Greats*, and Autechre's *Anti*, the sheer level of low frequency grip these speakers offer is evident. If you listen to a steady diet of this type of music, you may want a larger amplifier with more current reserves to dig down as far as the Kantas can go. Should your taste be more to the middle of the spectrum, anything else will do.

The sparse arrangements in Belle and Sebastian's "The Everlasting Muse" shows the other side of the Kanta's character, locking down the pace of this track, easily rendering the delicate vocals, swelling up towards the end of the track, easily negotiating the volume and density as it increases.

In perspective, considering the rendition of the Sopra as natural/neutral, the Kanta is one or two slight clicks to the warmer/laid back side, almost akin to putting a pair of NOS 12AX7s in your preamplifier instead of the stock ones, or switching from a Lyra cartridge to a Koetsu.

Focal has an excellent reputation for precise imaging, thanks to their beryllium tweeters and this is another exceptional aspect of their performance. Whether listening to an orchestra, a jazz quartet or a well-crafted studio performance, the Kantas produce a large and precise stereo image in all three dimensions. When you have your Kantas optimized, they will disappear in the room like a pair of ESLs.

A Team Player

With a sensitivity rating of 91db/1 watt, a ton of power is not required for a highly musical experience, especially in a smaller room. As with the Sopra, Kanta works well with tube or solid-state electronics, and in the small room, we made it a point to pair them up with PrimaLuna, Rega, Pass and of course the Naim Atom, which is now the room 3 reference. Those requiring reasonable listening levels, wanting a maximum of flexibility will be well served by the Atom, with 40 watts per channel. And the chances of picking one up at your Focal dealer is high, making it a breeze to do one stop shopping.

As someone who prefers to fall in love with a pair of speakers, building and perhaps eventually upgrading around them, the Kantas are a perfect place to begin the construction of an ultimate system. Even starting with a vintage receiver from the 70s, they deliver great sound. As you update your amplification and sources, they will only get better. And you'll have to spend six figures before you outgrow the Kantas. That's value and performance.

Can't stop listening

Wonderful as the Kantas are, these are not fussy, audiophile speakers that can only shine with the best recordings. That tiny drop of warmth in tonal balance, combined with their incredible resolving power extracts so much musical information from even the worst recordings, (especially if you've gone the extra mile and optimized the setup) nothing is out of bounds. Great as they are with your best recordings, the Kantas do a fantastic job delivering the utmost from marginal to poor recordings. Favorite recordings that don't always sound the best on a hyper resolving speaker are very palpable through the Kantas, and for most of us, that's great news.





Where the Sopras are remarkably fatigue free, the Kanta has a slightly lower amount of distortion and increased clarity, that you won't notice if you don't have the opportunity to hear them both side by side. In case you might be wondering "why would I want the Sopras then?" the Sopras generate a larger, weightier sense of scale with more ultimate dynamics in a larger room with massive amplifiers driving them. If you need to really rock the walls down, the Sopras still give you more of this, albeit at a higher cost.

The similar voice and tonality of the entire Focal line is by far one of their most impressive aspects. As you go up the range, their speakers reveal progressively more music, resolving more detail and dynamic drive. Even in this area, the Kanta shares the ability to resolve wide tonal contrast, doing an incredible job with music full of hard, quick transients.

One of the most impressive things about Focal, is that their speakers all have a similar voice and tonality, but as you go up the range, progressively more music is revealed in terms of dynamics and fine detail resolution. But not everyone can afford \$60k for a pair of Maestros or \$20k for Sopras. \$10k for a set of Kantas isn't inexpensive, but by the time you add an amp, source and cables, marvelous sound can still be achieved for way less than a decent sportbike. Think of all the money you'll save on speeding tickets!

Optimized or Compromised?



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Conclusion

If you've read this far, you know I'm a big Focal fan, and the new Kanta exceeds all expectations. They combine sound and build quality with fantastic dealer service and support, world-wide. If you've enjoyed the sound of the bigger Focal speakers, but desire these sonic attributes in a slightly smaller package, the Kanta no.2 is for you.

The Focal Kanta no.2

MSRP: \$9,995

www.focal.com (factory)

www.audioplusservices.com (NA distributor)

Peripherals

Analog Source

Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0
Triplanar Tonearm/Lyra Etna cart

Digital Source

dCS Rossini DAC and clock

Preamplifier

Pass XS Pre

Power Amplifier

Pass XA200.8 monoblocks

Phonostage

Pass XSPhono

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Racks

Grand Prix Monaco

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REVIEW

Conrad-Johnson’s ART 150

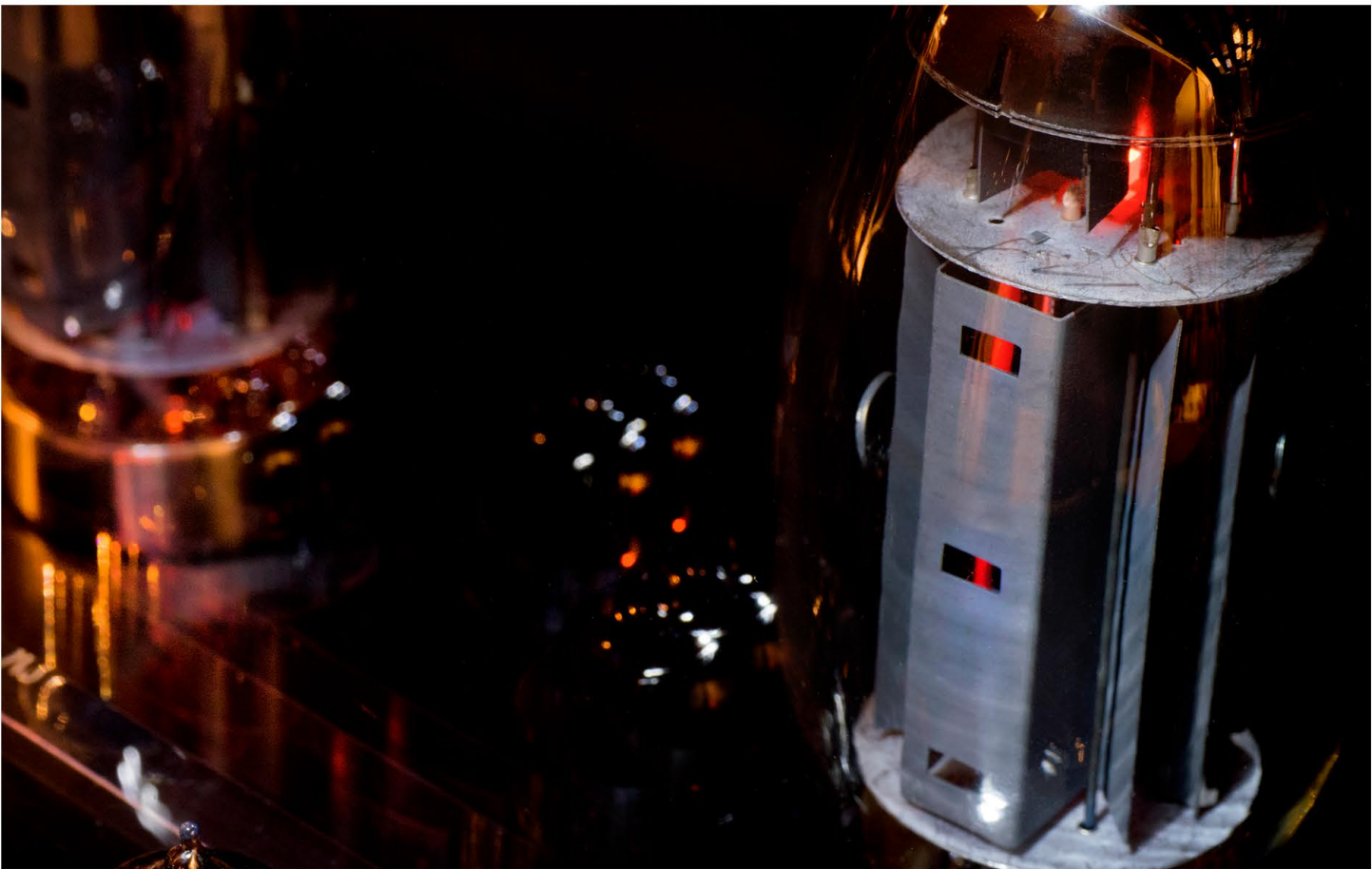
Celebrating 40 years in business, Conrad-Johnson introduces their special edition flagship amplifiers. The ART150, is a single - chassis stereo version and the monoblock ART300s. According to C-J, the amp represents the culmination of all their design expertise to date, and they will produce only 250 of them. For those needing more power, C-J also offers the new ART300 monoblocks. Like their smaller stereo sibling, production is limited to 250 pairs.

Forging a
work of art

We convert one
of our own
to tubes!

By Rob Johnson

C-J’s entry-level tube amplifier, the Classic Sixty-Two SE (reviewed here in issue 84) offers marvelous sound and represents an amplifier I could live with happily. That said, the ART150 defies expectation, delivering an extraordinary musical experience that few components in my personal experience have. The new ARTs are available in gold anodized finish only. Internals reside within a 16.3”D x 19”W x 8.75”H metal chassis, resulting in an overall weight of 80 lbs.



REVIEW: ART 150

The hefty base serves as the amplifier’s foundation, with custom power and output transformers shielded in a black metal enclosure jetting upward from the rear. A rounded Lucite frame with tube-sized holes in it protects the semicircle of three 6922 tubes up at the front face. Between these two functional structures rests a protective metal cage, with a front panel also made from clear Lucite. The resulting “window” makes it easy to admire the row of four KT150 driver tubes from a distance. The most recent offering from Tung-Sol, the elongated egg shape of the KT150 gives the ART amplifier more of a space age flair. The front of the ART is a model of simplicity. A single, quarter-sized power button resides toward the right side, illuminated by a subtle amber LED when activated. When depressed the amp warms the tubes slowly, helping extend tube life. You might hear a few pings and pops through the speakers while the tubes warm up, but once the ART achieves optimal voltage and temperature one’s ear must be very close to the woofer or tweeter to detect audible hiss.

Mining for the best parts

As old wisdom suggests, “It is what’s inside that counts.” In the case of the ART150, careful component choices result in staggering performance. C-J sought the best possible parts for the new ART, right down to the type of internal wiring, with the wide-bandwidth output transformers and Teflon capacitors custom-made solutions. Also under the hood are laser-trimmed metal foil resistors chosen for their high levels of performance in the sensitive signal path. As a single ended design, the ART accepts only RCA interconnects from a preamplifier. The high quality gold-plated input terminals offer both excellent electrical transmission and a secure grip on cables. A set of metal five-way binding posts on the back of the unit facilitate connection of spade, banana, or bare-wire cable terminations with ease. Spades used in my case secure quickly and very firmly under the posts. For those without muscular fingers, a 7/16-inch plastic binding post wrench fits over the nut correctly, allowing extra leverage. If you elect this route, consider an approach of gentle assertiveness, remembering you are not bolting together a skyscraper’s support beams. The Conrad Johnson design philosophy has always centered around meticulously executing simple circuit designs – a big part of why they don’t produce balanced circuit designs. Taking this mantra even further with the ART150, a single pair of KT150 output tubes per channel replaces four KT120 tubes per channel in the original ART amplifier, with the new design producing 150 watts per channel, up from the 140 per channel available in the original.

Swift set up

The tubes are carefully boxed inside the tube cage, so this will need to be removed to access them. Each tube box is wrapped in black tissue paper giving the unpacking process an extra touch of class.

Like every other C-J power amplifier, the user must manually bias the power tubes after installing them. The process is surprisingly easy, using a simple plastic screwdriver included in the ART150 package. Tubes installed, twist the biasing screw just enough to extinguish the small yellow LED next to each tube. C-J suggests doing this again after an hour or so of use, and again every six months to extend the life of the tube set. When re-tubed, the biasing process should be repeated.

The custom Teflon capacitors within do require significant break in time. C-J completes a 5-day burn-in before ART amplifiers leave the factory, ensuring no component inside the amp fails, and a listening test. Another 200 hours of time in my room takes it to its full sonic potential, steadily improving. Shut down the amp when not using it to maximize valuable tube life. Warm-up time from a cold start is a scant 15 minutes, so the wait for optimal sound is never a long one. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right?

Jewelry for the eardrums

C-J’s tagline “It Just Sounds Right” isn’t marketing hype. In this case, those four words may comprise the shortest product review ever written. However, quantifying “Right” requires quite a few more words because a lot is right with this amp.

With the ART150, C-J did not just jump over the high bar set by the Classic 62. Instead, it seems they used a ten-foot pole to vault over it. The Classic 62 is a fantastic amp by any measure. However, the ART exceeds the Classic 62’s capability in every way - as it should for three times the price.

With the ART150 installed, my entire listening room becomes part of its huge projected soundstage. Music extends well beyond the left and right speaker boundaries, wrapping around the edges of the space. When music dictates it, spatial cues place instruments and vocals

above, below, behind, or well out in front of the speakers. Imaging presented by the ART remains not only precise and defined, but almost tangible. Instruments and vocals layered over one another retain independent space rather than collapsing into one another. The three-dimensional nature of the music experience proves immersive, and time evaporates while listening to song after song. Even with familiar tracks, subtle sound effects are much easier to discern, offering details few components retrieve so exceptionally. Occasionally, music freed by the ART will surprise me, as if sneaking up next to my listening seat before revealing itself. Even older recordings reveal a few surprises. For example, engineered vocal effects in “By My Side” by INXS extend the background voices, well... right by my side. Alternately, the bar chime sounds in Depeche Mode’s “Everything Counts” seem to leap forward to a point a few





The world-class speaker manufacturer you probably never heard of. Until now.

Why does anyone start a loudspeaker company?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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REVIEW: ART 150

inches from my ears. To have an audio component capable of detailed projection that catches me off guard like this is equally rare, eerie, and thrilling. The ART reveals every nuance of a song for better or worse. Great recordings sound quite realistic. However, on less-than-stellar tracks, the ART exposes any shortcoming too. For instance, listening to Santana's *Supernatural*, the level of compression is evident. Cymbals lack both the splash of impact and a lingering decay. In contrast, well-recorded albums like Johnny Cash's *American IV: The Man Comes Around* provide the honest illusion of Cash sitting in the room. Few amplifiers I have experienced offer this degree of revelation. The ART represents quite an achievement indeed.

Despite the level of detail, the Art's purposeful voicing offers organic, natural, and forgiving sound. Even with some strident or sibilant recordings, ear-twitching spikes lose their sting and seem much more refined through the ART. C-J manages to capture every detail within a song but accomplishes the trick of making edgy sonics more enjoyable. Forget any pre-conceived notion that this tube amplifier might generate watered-down or mushy bass. The ART150 rides a perfect balance between bass depth, punch, and naturalness. Similarly, high notes offer a welcome sparkle. Both male and female vocals glide through this amp's circuitry, providing the listener a lush and luxurious musical experience as they emerge. Regardless of music genre, the ART never fails to deliver a fantastic rendition.



REVIEW: ART 150



Go for the gold!

Reaching audio heaven comes with a cost. Retailing at \$19,500 for the limited edition ART150 and double that for the ART300 monos, either choice represents a significant investment. However, considering the extensive research and design process, no-compromise electronics, and the stellar sound this amplifier produces, one should expect a component of this magnitude to have a price commensurate with its performance level.

Those familiar tubes know they need replacement over time, so unlike solid-state amps, an ART owner should budget for planned maintenance. C-J suggests the ART's tubes have a longevity of two or three years depending on usage. KT150s cost around \$90 each and prices for 6922s can range widely depending if they are modern production or new old stock. Budget at least \$500 every few years for a complete re-tube. The ART300 monos, each of which is essentially an ART150 optimized for a single channel, will double that tube cost.

Yes, I am utterly stunned by the ART150's sonic prowess. Among amplifiers I have had the pleasure of evaluating at home for an extended period, the ART deserves a place on a tiny list of amps I would enjoy for the long haul. We will have to wait and see what C-J creates for their appropriately-golden, 50th anniversary! For now, the ART earns a place among those scarce components that offer such an outstanding level of performance it could halt one's long journey in pursuit of better gear. Kick off those worn-down trekking shoes, relax, and just enjoy the music.

I give the ART150 amplifier my highest praise: I purchased the demo unit as a reference component. If you are seeking a flagship amplifier to enjoy for many years to come, do yourself a big favor and head to your local Conrad-Johnson dealer for a demo. Like me, you may find you cannot walk away from the ART150. Grab one before these limited-edition units are gone!


TRIANGLE
MANUFACTURE ELECTROACOUSTIQUE

Magellan
THE ULTIMATE ACHIEVEMENT



Distributed by **ANTAL AUDIO GROUP**

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REVIEW: ART 150

Further Listening: Jeff Dorgay

Conrad-Johnson has been refining their designs for decades now, making some pretty incredible tube amplifiers over the years. Audiophiles the world over still discuss many of their Premier designs in hushed conversations, with reverence.

Not only is the ART 150 one of the most musical revealing amplifiers I've heard, the combination with C-Js flagship GAT 2 has me squeezing my adjective gland for some new superlatives. I can not find them. If you already have one of C-J's top preamps, the ART 150 will take you somewhere rare and special. If you don't, you'll be shopping. I won't taunt Rob with the GAT until he recovers from the ART 150 purchase.

Everything Rob points out about the ART 150, is heightened even further when paired with the GAT 2. It's worth mentioning that the ART 150 is no slouch with my older ACT 2, so even if you have one of these on your equipment rack, it is a worthy partner for an ART 150. There's nothing that the ART 150 won't do – and if 150 watts per channel isn't enough, the ART 300 monoblocks provide even more. As a friend pointed out recently, we are really living in an exceptional period for audio, no matter what your budget might be. With so many of the industry's top designers benefitting from decades of experience, creating their best work. It's often said that it takes 10,000 hours to master something. 40 years of refining greatness results in the ART 150 power amplifier. More often than not, tube power amplifiers give you musicality/tonality, inner detail, or massive imaging prowess, but rarely all three. The ART 150 does that and more – adding major dynamic swing and bass control. This level of resolution, delicacy and freedom from fatigue is what makes the ART 150 so special. That is why it is our Amplifier of the Year for 2017.

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GamuT RS3i, JL Audio Dominion Subwoofers
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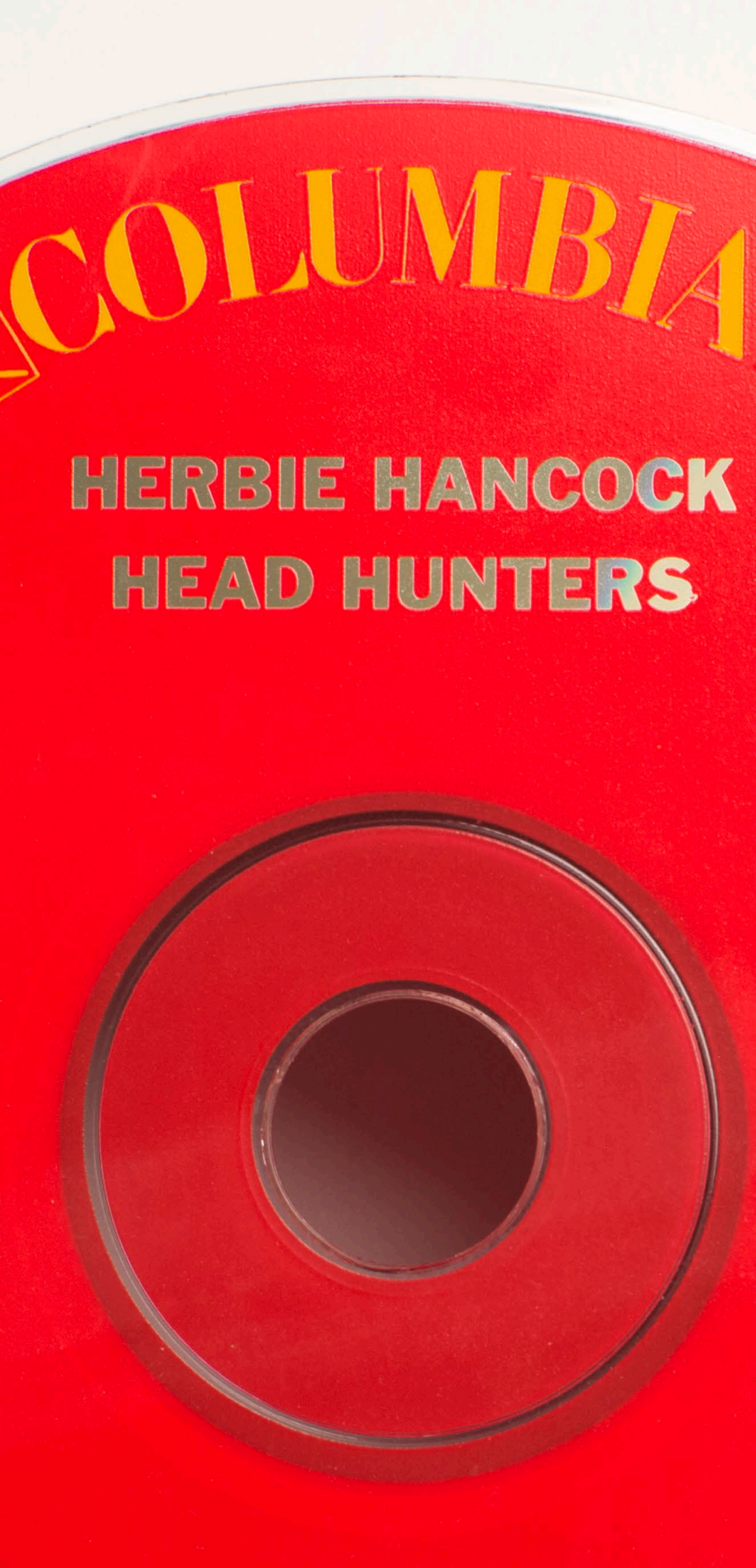


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X-1

“Enjoy the ride.
After all - it's a
Danish tradition”



Chill...

Still on the physical media trip, Herbie Hancock's Head Hunters stares back at me, begging to be played. This groundbreaking mix of jazz fusion remains a favorite today, exciting as it was the first day I heard it. Amazing how fast nearly 40 years rolls by. What will YOU be listening to in 40 years that you love today?

If you don't have this one you can stream it here at TIDAL: <https://listen.tidal.com/album/640438>



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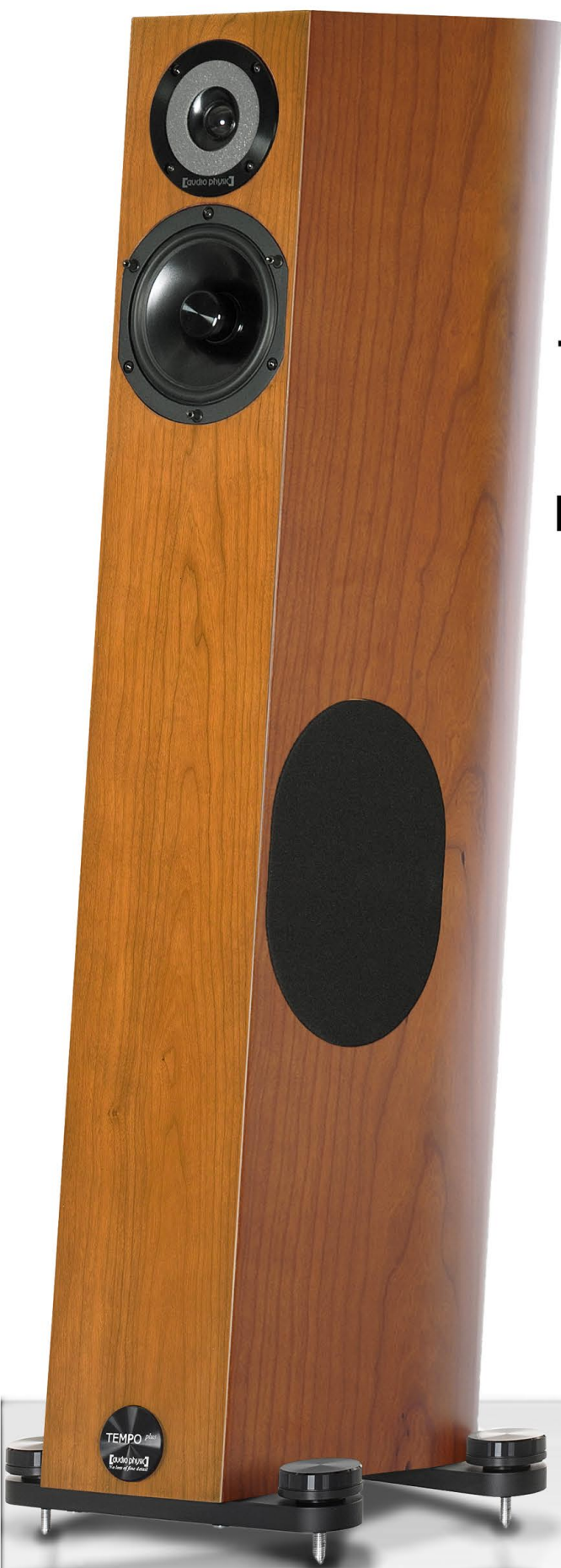
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REVIEW

The Sonoma Model One

Headphone System

**Simply
the best**

By Jeff Dorgay

It only takes about 8 seconds of listening to the delicacy of the violins on the The Jung Trio's SACD to realize that Sonoma's Model One headphone system is one of the most incredible personal listening experiences going. Maybe the most, but we'll leave that for the internet pundits to argue amongst themselves. The level of texture, detail and sheer tonal correctness is well above anything

we have yet experienced. The sheer clarity and lack of distortion presented by the Model One might have you looking for the volume control, (to turn them up) but proceed with caution, this newfound level of sonic purity will fool you. So, don't take your first test drive with Metallica. Ease your way into the Sonoma Model Ones until you get used to the feel. But be warned, you can't un-hear this once you have.



REVIEW: Sonoma Model One



Instant attitude adjustment

We pulled out all the stops to revisit well-worn test tracks, with the best sources we could muster. The dCS Rossini Player was used as a transport, via the coaxial digital input and our Aurender server, via the USB input for digital files (standard and high resolution) along with streaming Tidal selections. The analog combination of the Brinkmann Bardo turntable, featuring a \$10,000 Koetsu Jade Platinum cartridge and the Pass Labs XS Phono made a great conduit for the analog bits. And, because the jack was there, an iPhone 7+ was called into duty, just to see how that would work. Spoiler: while not as good as the dCS or Bardo, with uncompressed files, the iPhone never sounded better!

Regardless of music selected, the key words to describe the Model One are effortless and natural. Incredibly natural. Often headphones and speakers can pick up a sound, a coloration, based upon the materials used in cabinets, crossovers and drivers. Not here. While the Model One's do a splendid job with dynamics, thanks to the lightening sharp rise time of the electrostatic driver, the amount of fine detail they reveal will almost frighten you, especially with familiar recordings you thought you knew intimately.



The epic spatial presentation in Sigur Ros' *Valtari* slowly envelopes you with sound, and as the music swells, the phones seem to disappear into thin air. The grumbly bass lines present are well fleshed out and full of detail – the only thing missing is the sheer sock factor from listening to a pair of dynamic speakers in a room. Your favorite pop, rock, and electronic selections will be portrayed in a way you've never experienced, yet the ease by which acoustic instruments are reproduced is an outright luxury. A fair amount of time spent with the Model One might even have you rethinking your primary speaker choice.

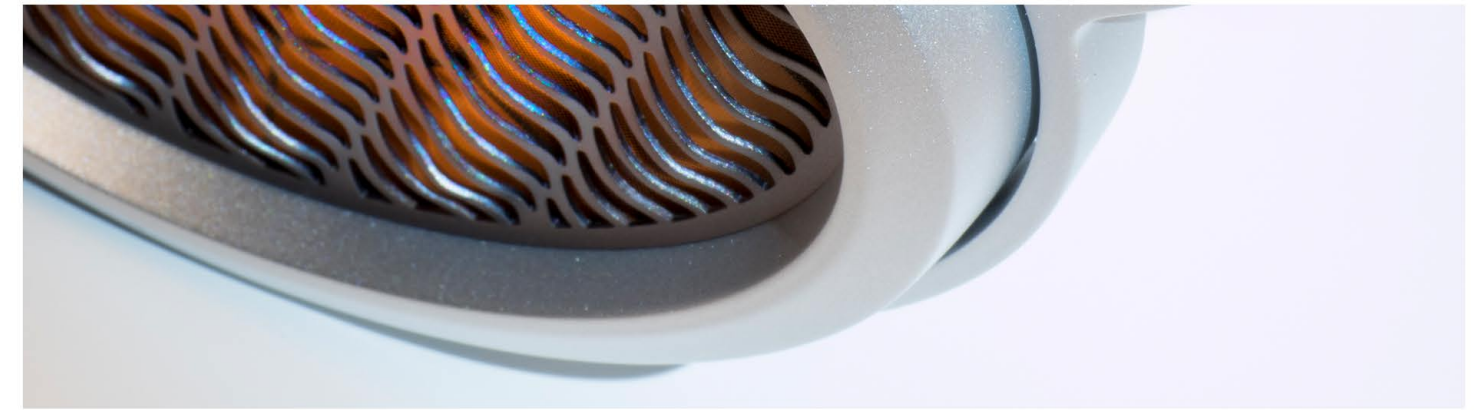
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REVIEW: Sonoma Model One



A complete system

There are more than a few mega headphones out there, crossing the \$5k mark, but none of them come with an amplifier and a full function, high res DAC. In case you forgot or aren't familiar, the team at Sonoma invented the DSD workstations, used to record many of today's digital recordings, so to say they know great sound is an understatement. Either way, their passion for sound is such a great place to start when designing a complete playback system like the Model One.

The latest DAC chipset from ESS, the Sabre Reference is used here, along with the AKM premium ADC chips, capable of operating up to 32bit/384khz. The ADC is required to allow the use of a 64-bit digital signal processor to optimize the frequency response of the Sonoma Model One. This extra step is what gives the Model One the advantage over its competition, your music is fully optimized to the output capabilities of the driver, eliminating any frequency response anomalies along the way.

Combining the best build quality, with the coolest technology doesn't blow you away without results, and the Sonoma Model One delivers. After listening to hundreds of other headphone/amplifier combinations, the Model One is our top choice. Not only have we awarded it our Product of the Year in the personal listening category, we are purchasing a Model One system to use as the standard by which we judge all other phones, so you will be hearing a lot more about the Model One system in the future. Wrapping it up, the Model One is exquisitely packaged as well – certainly a nice touch when you've made an investment like this in your listening future.

Remember, you aren't buying a \$5,000 pair of headphones, your getting an amp, DAC, DSP processor and top line cable for the asking price. You can get a pair of earbuds at Best Buy for \$19 and plug them into your laptop to enjoy music, so by that definition, you don't need a \$5,000 pair of headphones. But, if you'd like to have a level of sound quality that would probably take six figures to achieve in a room with amplifiers, speakers and cables, The Model One might just be the best value in high end audio today. Even those with mega systems will be amazed at what this system can do, revealing nuance and detail that can often be masked by the best of rooms.

Don't say we didn't warn you. Once you hear them, you will find a way to make them yours. And you'll be glad you did.

The Sonoma Acoustics Model One Headphone System

\$4,995

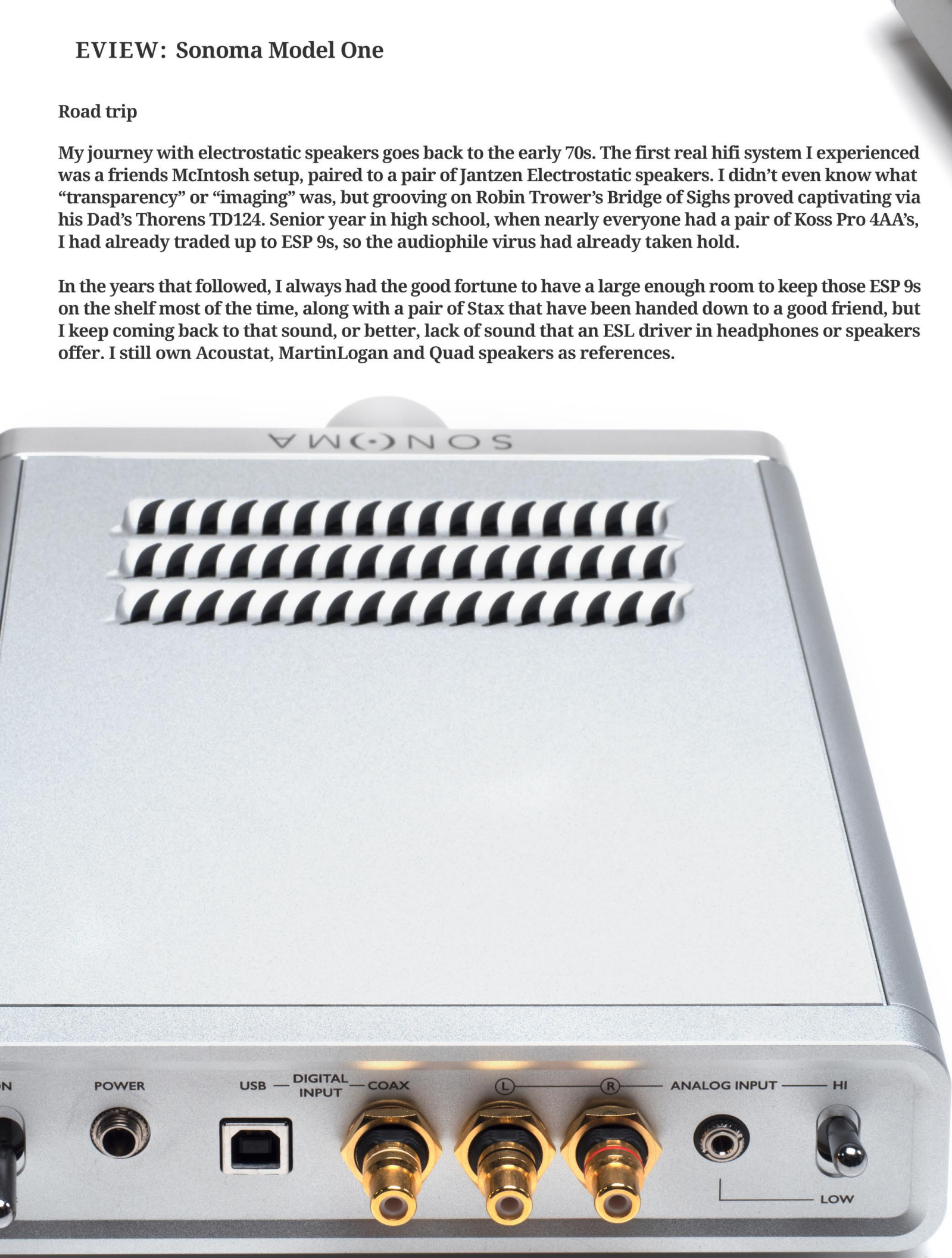
www.sonomaacoustics.com

EVIEW: Sonoma Model One

Road trip

My journey with electrostatic speakers goes back to the early 70s. The first real hifi system I experienced was a friends McIntosh setup, paired to a pair of Jantzen Electrostatic speakers. I didn’t even know what “transparency” or “imaging” was, but grooving on Robin Trower’s Bridge of Sighs proved captivating via his Dad’s Thorens TD124. Senior year in high school, when nearly everyone had a pair of Koss Pro 4AA’s, I had already traded up to ESP 9s, so the audiophile virus had already taken hold.

In the years that followed, I always had the good fortune to have a large enough room to keep those ESP 9s on the shelf most of the time, along with a pair of Stax that have been handed down to a good friend, but I keep coming back to that sound, or better, lack of sound that an ESL driver in headphones or speakers offer. I still own Acoustat, MartinLogan and Quad speakers as references.



Like premium phono cartridges, premium headphones have brought a dimension to personal listening not thought possible even five years ago. Planar headphones from Audeze, HiFiMan, OPPO and a few others have joined the field and their offerings are very good, but there’s still something special about electrostatic headphones – enter the Sonoma Model One System.

One step beyond

Previous electrostatic phones have worked like tiny ESL speakers in an ear cup, in the sense that they use a very light weight diaphragm energized between two grids carrying high voltage that pushes and pulls the diaphragm in and out to move the air. Sonoma takes advantage of a new transducer that they call a high precision electrostatic laminate (HPEL) design. You can read the full story on the Sonoma website here (<https://www.sonomaacoustics.com/technology/>) but to make a long story short, the unique driver eliminates the grid, replacing it with an extremely thin membrane. Then, the driver surface is divided up into seven separate areas, tuned to different frequencies to eliminate resonance, which you can see from the transparent back of the drivers, yet maintains full range performance for cohesiveness.

Though the headband and ear cushions look fairly bulky, the cups are made from magnesium and the hand sewn pads are produced from Cabretta sheepskin leather. Knowing precious little about leather, this type of leather is made from the skins of sheep that grow hair rather than wool. This results in a smoother, lighter and more resilient leather that is typically reserved for gloves. Long listening sessions prove effortless with the Model One and where other, bulkier phones beg to be put down after an hour or so, the Model Ones can be listened to, without drawing attention to themselves all day long.

The result is a fairly massive looking set of headphones that doesn’t feel it. Design geeks in the crowd will flip over the careful attention to fine detail, right down to the high level of fit and finish present thanks to high precision stainless fasteners. Finally, Sonoma collaborated with Straight Wire to design a custom cable from the ground up to transmit the maximum amount of audio information. The cable alone looks like something you’d buy in the aftermarket for \$500 - \$1,000. Who wants to buy a \$5,000 pair of phones, only to have to upgrade the cable?



The Last Lap...

Assembling the final pages, and doing a final check requires beginning of project adrenaline to stay sharp. And as Paul Stanley is famous for saying, "There's only one thing that's gonna do it the way you want it to."

And that disc is *KISS, Alive!*. (also very good at the end of a long road trip)

If you don't have the LP, you can stream it here at TIDAL: <https://listen.tidal.com/album/632284>

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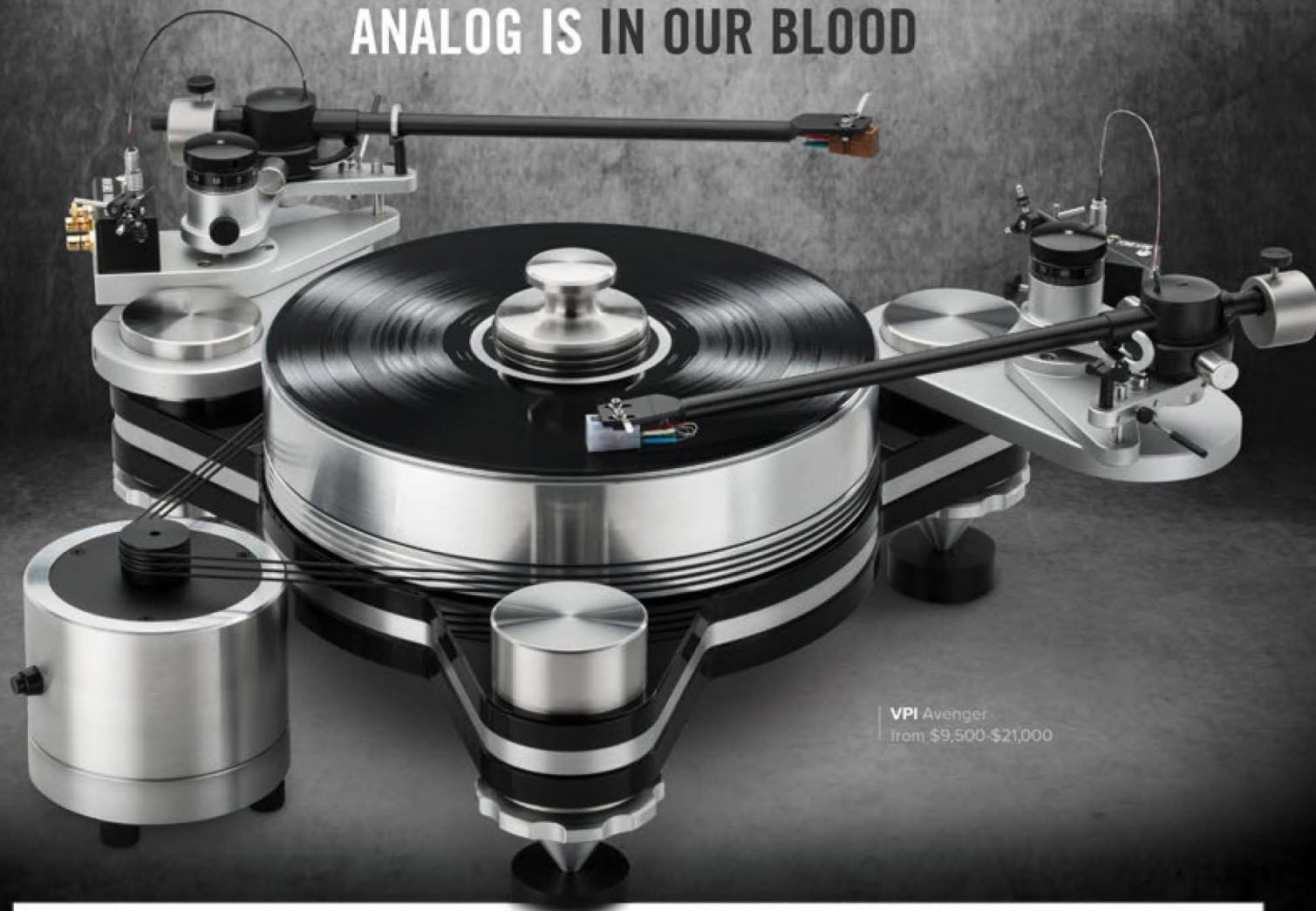
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REVIEW

The Klipsch Forte III

An American Icon

When You
Need to Rock!

By Jeff Dorgay

this is American hi-fi to the core. Klipsch Forte speakers have been around for decades, but the current model III has a number of updates you can read about here on the Klipsch website. Our review samples arrived in American Walnut (my personal favorite) but distressed oak, black ash and cherry are also available. Just like my LaScalas, built in May of 1976, each Klipsch Forte is hand assembled in Hope, Arkansas. All Fortes feature book matched veneers. Upon completion, the person completing final testing, signs off on them as they've always done.



REVIEW: FORTE III

Are you ready?

Queing up *Kiss, Alive!* only seems appropriate. Thanks to a 99db/1watt sensitivity, this combination nearly blew the windows out and “Firehouse” never sounded better or, shall we say more alive? Staying with the live vibe, and moving from the Motor City to the City by the Bay, the legendary *Friday Night in San Francisco*, featuring Al DiMeola, John McLaughlin and Paco de Lucia is next. In addition to the frantic fretboard activity, you can almost feel the tension in the room between these three guitar greats as they streak through “Short Tales of the Dark Forest,” with the audience clapping, cheering and gasping in the background as the music swells and fades.

With so much discussion in audiophile circles about holographic imaging, pinpoint focus and the like, the fourth dimension is dynamics, or the lack thereof. While the Forte IIIs don’t image like a pair of minimonitors, they paint a large, lifelike sonic picture that doesn’t subdue the wide dynamic swings you get when attending a live performance. Besides, when was the last time you went to a concert, rock or otherwise and heard “pinpoint imaging?” What the Forte’s do, incredibly well, is recreate a sense of size and spatial correctness that few speakers match.



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REVIEW: FORTE III

Next on the list, Jeff Beck's "Bigblock" from *Live at Ronnie Scotts*. This track opens with a low, growling bass line that fills the room, and throughout the album, it's easy to hear the spatial cues that let you know you're in a small club. As Jeff Beck's signature Stratocaster screams in and out of the mix, the extra headroom that the Forte's offer helps take things to 11. These speakers do an incredible job at keeping the presentation clean at moderate to high volume, yet even when played more softly adding the extra liveliness to keep the listener engaged. Thanks to a 99db/1watt sensitivity rating, you can use the Forte IIIs with small tube amplifiers and get great results. As good as the Fortes are at pinning your ears back, their wide dynamic range makes for an incredibly open presentation at low levels. Substituting the 20 watt per channel Nagra 300p amplifier drives these legendary speakers more than loud enough, but at low to medium levels provide a heavenly experience. If you want to keep it inexpensive, fun and tubes, think a restored Dynaco Stereo 70 like Klipsch shows on the website. If you can imagine listening to Led Zeppelin at a modest volume level, the Fortes show off another side of their personality. The bass line in "No Quarter" is simply stunning, revealing perfect harmony between the rear-firing, 15" passive radiator and the front firing 12" woofer.



REVIEW: FORTE III

There is a low-level clarity and linearity here that makes the Fortes just as much fun to listen to at a modest level as an Earth shattering one. Reluctantly, a suite of female vocal tracks are investigated, because that’s part of the audiophile drill, but when your neighbor flips you the keys to his Hemi Charger, the minute you get out of his sight, you don’t head for Starbucks, you head for the nearest stoplight and do the biggest burnout you can muster. That’s how fun the Forte’s are. You could listen to Ella Fitzgerald, but you play Betty Davis. Which is exactly what I did, though Ella sounds lovely through the Fortes too. Listening to her snarl through “If I’m in Luck, I Might Get Picked Up,” illustrates the grit in this funk icon’s voice loud and clear.

Simple set up

As mentioned, with the high level of sensitivity the Fortes offer, pretty much any amplifier will get you started on your journey, but make no mistake, these speakers offer a high level of resolution to go with their wide dynamic range. The better your components, the more finesse they are capable of. Much like my vintage LaScalas, I’ve heard Klipsch pooh-poohed by the audiophile crowd, because they’ve only heard them driven by a mass market receiver at Best Buy. My Sonus faber and Focal speakers sound equally lousy under the same conditions.

Even though the Fortes can pretty much be thrown in your room and sound ok, paying attention to getting the speaker to rear wall distance right plays huge dividends. First, what you probably perceived as boominess from this speaker when you heard a mediocre demo was the rear firing passive radiator fighting the woofer. Get the Fortes spread out in your listening room where the stereo image is how you like it, then move them back and forth in relation to the rear wall, first in 6-12 inch increments. Pay careful attention to the upper bass response and the blend with deep bass.



When you nail it, the Fortes disappear in the room, and not only will you get much smoother bass, the stereo image opens up tremendously. Then fine-tune the toe-in the same way. When you’re right there, the sound just washes over you without feeling harsh. A little too much and the Fortes will squawk at you, not enough and they sound lifeless and diffuse. Then crank it up and enjoy.

The best party guest

For \$3,500 a pair, the Klipsch Forte IIIs are tough to beat. They exude old-school style, combining it with present day passion and quality control, resulting in a speaker that’s easy to live with, and works well with nearly any amplification you can pair them up with. I need a pair. So do you!

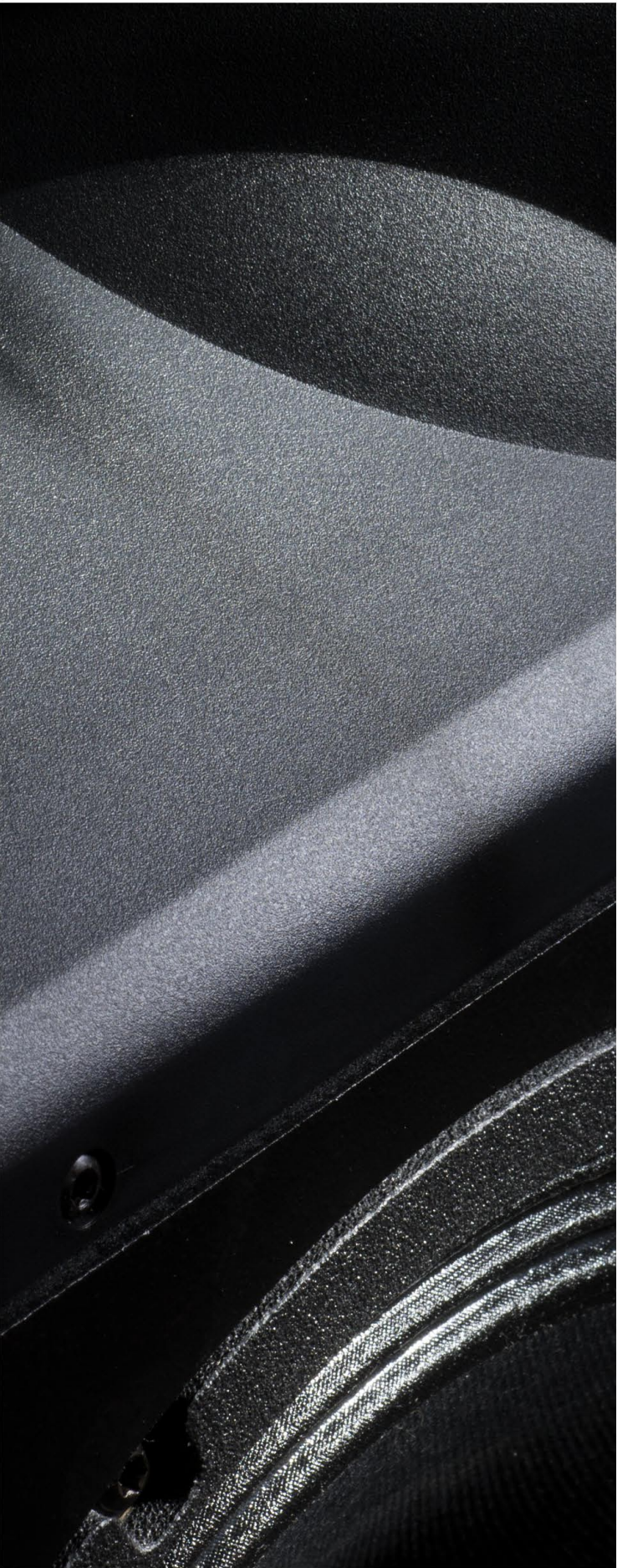
The Klipsch Forte III

MSRP: \$3,500/pair

www.klipsch.com

Peripherals

Analog Source	VPI Classic One turntable ET2.5 tonearm/Grado Statement v.2
Digital Source	dCS Rossini Player and Clock
Preamplifier	Pass Labs XS Pre
Phonostage	Pass Labs XS Phono
Amplifier	Nagra 300p
Cable	Cardas Clear



Slummin: Dumpster Dog Hi-Fi Finds



Harman/Kardon's 330i was part of an update to their highly successful 330 series, arriving on the scene in 1983, carrying on until the end of 1986. Like its predecessor, with only 20 watts per channel, it was a perfect starter receiver. But alas, this was the last of the good ones, with H/K going cheapo after this.

WHAT: H/K 330i Receiver

WHERE: EBay - \$25

WORKS?: Yes



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cambridge
cardas
cary audio
chord electronics
clearaudio
crystal cable
devialet
dr. feickert
funk firm
h.r.s.
ifi
integra
kiseki
lyngdorf audio
lyra
marantz
margules
micromega
moon by simaudio
naim audio
nordost
nuforce
octave
pear audio
pono
primaluna
pro-ject
ps audio
quadraspire
rega
richard gray
sonos
soundsmith
stillpoints
unison research
woo audio

Get The Gear.

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

Anthem	www.anthemav.com	MAAT	www.maat.com
Audio Classics	www.audioclassics.com	MartinLogan	www.martinlogan.com
AudioVision SF	www.audiovisionsf.com	Music Direct	www.musicdirect.com
Audio Research	www.audioresearch.com	Nagra	www.nagraaudio.com
Audolici	www.audolici.com	Naim	www.audioplusservices.com
BAT	www.balanced.com	Octave	www.octave.de
Bowers & Wilkins	www.bowers-wilkins.com	OPPO	www.oppodigital.com
Brinkmann	www.brinkmann-audio.com	Paradigm	www.paradigm.com
Cambridge Audio	www.audioplusservices.com	Pass Labs	www.passlabs.com
Cardas	www.cardas.com	Plinius	www.pliniusaudio.com
Conrad-Johnson	www.conradjohnson.com	PrimaLuna	www.primaluna-usa.com
Dali	www.soundorg.com	Raidho	www.raidho.dk
dCS	www.dcsLtd.co.uk	Rega	www.soundorg.com
D'Agostino	www.dandagostino.com	REL	www.rel.net
Dynaudio	www.dynaudio.com	Sonoma	www.sonomaacoustics.com
Echo Audio	www.echohifi.com	Suncoast Audio	www.suncoastaudio.com
Focal	www.audioplusservices.com	SVS	www.svsound.com
Gamut	www.gamutaudio.com	Technics	www.technics.com
Gig Harbor Audio	www.gigharboraudio.com	Totem	www.totemacoustic.com
Gold Note	www.goldnote.it	Triangle	www.triangle-fr.com
Golden Ear	www.goldenear.com	Upscale Audio	www.upscaleaudio.com
Graham Audio	www.grahamaudioUSA.com	VANA Ltd.	www.vanaltd.com
Grand Prix Audio	www.grandprixaudio.com	VPI	www.vpiindustries.com
Klipsch	www.klipsch.com	Wireworld	www.wireworldcable.com
McIntosh	www.mcintoshlabs.com	Woo Audio	www.wooaudio.com