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Axe not included

The Dynaudio Legend
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PLAYLISTS *New music, our faves*

Old School *Long lost lust just down the road*

New Format *more mobile friendly*

And more...

NO.126

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INHouse

The soundtrack of the issue.



In the last summer of the 80s, this record was playing on MTV all the time. Now it's back on vinyl, with all the outakes and bonus tracks!



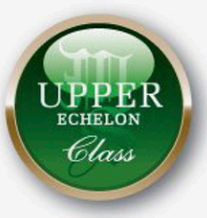
Formula xHD rev. 2











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Review: Andrew Everard
Lab: Paul Miller

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Jerold O'Brien wants to know just how good a 150 dollar CD player is... Throw out the big Naim?



03 (and on...)
IN House

Follow us through the issue to see how the soundtrack changes!



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Jeff Dorgay hustles to get the first NA review of the new Dynaudio Legend speakers.



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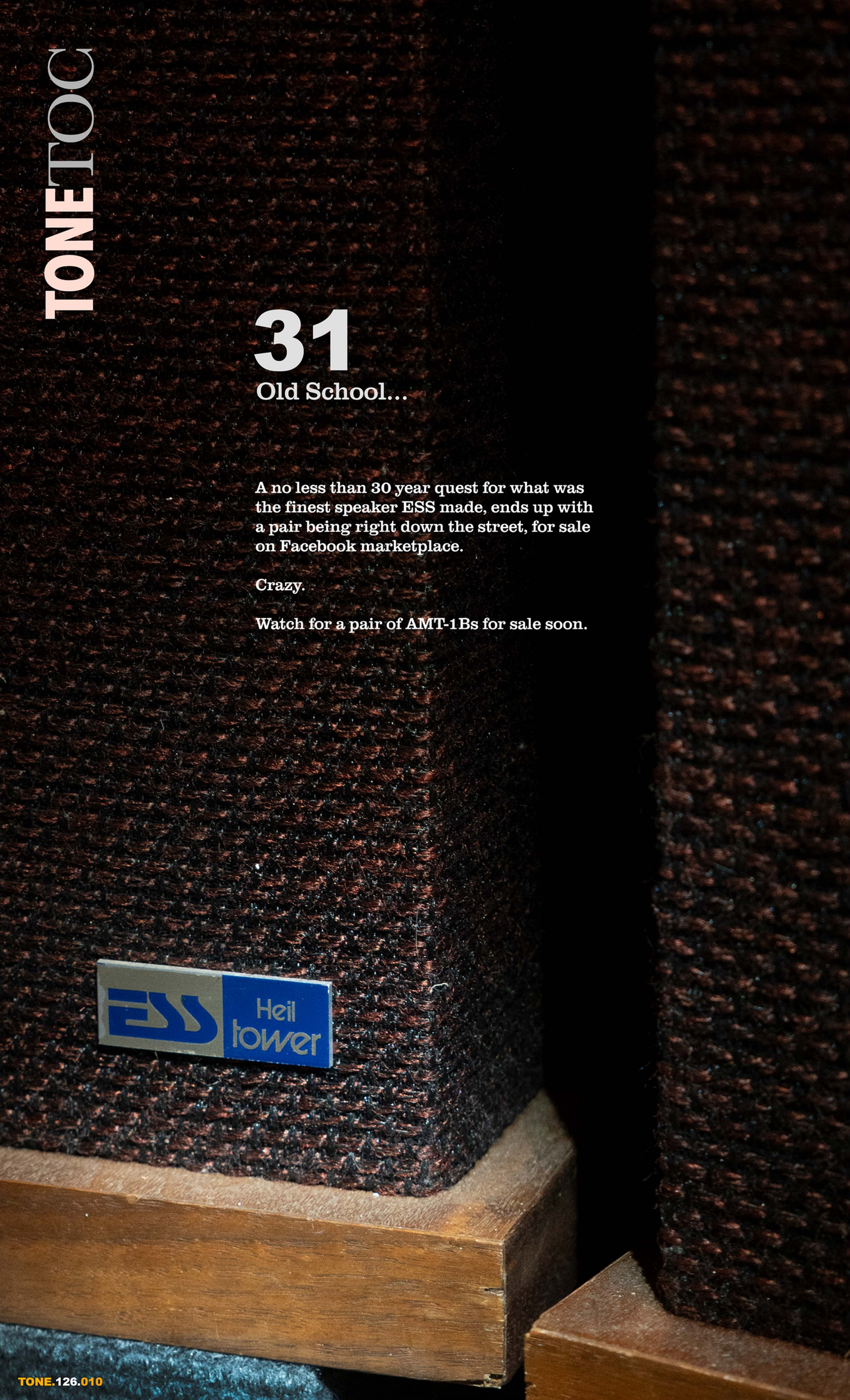
Old School...

A no less than 30 year quest for what was the finest speaker ESS made, ends up with a pair being right down the street, for sale on Facebook marketplace.

Crazy.

Watch for a pair of AMT-1Bs for sale soon.



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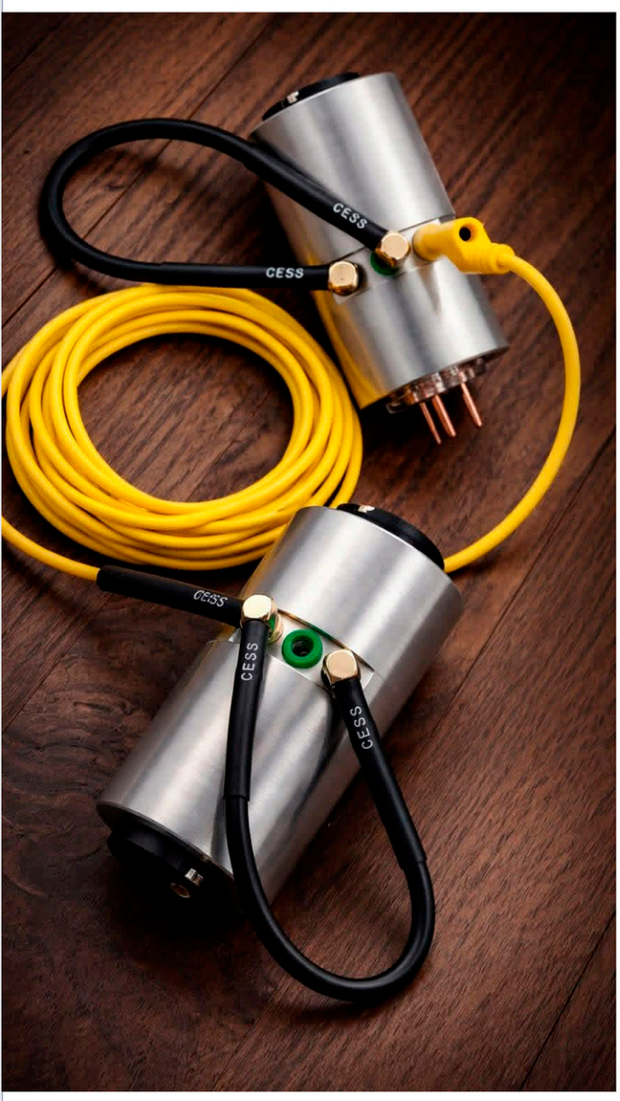
Reviews:

Here's what we've been listening to...



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Special!

The Century monos from **LTA** are a step beyond, but NOT madness.



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Pure performance

Confidence 20A: active reference hi-fi just got serious



DYNAUDIO Confidence **20A**

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Great hifi alternatives that aren't quite vintage, but a great way to build a system for the more frugal audio enthusiast

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Tone Visits

We head to AXPONA in Chicago to shake a lot of paws, and pound stakes in a tree stump.

**

Long Term

Next issue, we'll be back with a farewell report on the PrimaLuna EVO400 amp and pre.





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Misc-en-scene

Cover Shot:

It came to me waiting in line for coffee.

Now that axe-wielding has become a staple of the Ø Audio show experience, I felt we just had to have an axe somewhere in the photos of these glorious speakers.

Off to the hardware store I went, and here we are! And I must say, I feel a little safter with a massive axe beside my desk.

Shot with SONE A7III, ISO 100 5 sec/f9, Leica 135mm Elmarit-R lens.



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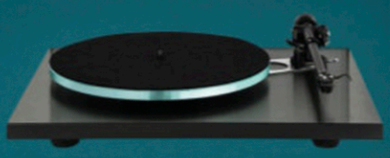

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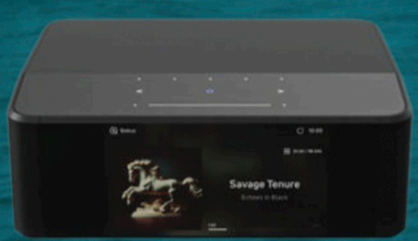

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Publisher's Letter

One hundred and twenty-six issues and nearly three thousand product reviews later, I am very happy that we are still here. When the concept for TONE started over drinks back in 2002, after the economy had just crashed, after airplanes had just crashed into the World Trade Center, I had no idea what the future held.

And today, on March 3, 2026, as I write this publisher's letter, again, the future seems murky.

We've been through a lot together. We've lost friends and family since issue number one. We've watched our kids grow up, and we've had to put our pets down. Most of us have survived COVID. Some did not.

So, I'm hoping there are better days ahead. I hope we can keep our enthusiasm somewhat, and that our love of music will help get us through.

The landscape by which information is dispersed has also changed.

As we were laying the groundwork for TONE, a number of my friends still in the advertising world strongly suggested that we not produce a print magazine, yet the internet was nowhere near as robust as it is today. So TONE became a downloadable PDF – partially to "get to print" faster than the print books of the day, and partially because I didn't like the open-endedness of a website with no beginning and no end. I'm a Capricorn. I like structure and finality. I like magazines. With so many other audio websites claiming to be magazines, they are not.

While our web traffic continues to grow and we keep branching further out into the world of Instagram and YouTube, I remain committed to keeping three PDF issues a year, because that's what I like. I am still of the mind that we will produce one print issue this year, for the same reason you still buy physical media to listen to music. Sometimes, it's just nice to hold it in your hands and not need to perform a firmware update to read something. And the bots can't scrape it.

After almost 25 years, I thank you all for following along on the journey. The way we get you the info is changing, but our mission remains the same – to help you define what good sound means to you and find the gear to make that happen.

Here's to some more of that.

TONE has always enjoyed a nearly 50/50 split in readership between North America and the rest of the world. Wherever you might be, I wish you and your families the best as we navigate some uncertain times ahead.

Take good care, and thank you as always, for reading.



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Playlist no. 1

At this year's Axpona show, we launched a list of "Non-Audiophile female vocal tracks. It was a huge success, getting almost 100k views.

So, with a couple of additions, here's that list for the rest of you that don't hang out on Instagram.

Patti Smith
Piss Factory

Pretenders
Bad Boys Get Spanked

Cardi B
I Like It

Diamanda Galas
Birds of Death

Blondie
Live Hardcore Worldwide

Eurythmics
Would I Lie to You?

Anja Gargbarek
Big Mouth

Betty Davis
Game is my Middle Name

Charli XCX
Mean Girls

Laurie Anderson
Language is a Virus

Aimee Mann
You Never Loved Me

Amy Winehouse
Me & Mr Jones



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Great sound for around a G...

By Jerold O'Brien



S.M.S.L>
CD player/transport

It's all you ever need, aaaaaah!

$150-ish
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If I were a certain caliber of YouTuber, I'd be making a funny face, holding the PL100 up next to my Luxman CD player screaming "150 bucks, this is all you need! Aaaaaah!"

But that's not the point.

Even though due to recent tariffs, the S.M.S.L. PL100 has gone from $99 up to around $150, it's crazy good. Best of all should you have a better DAC, and would like to start (or resume) collecting CDs again, it's a great budget *transport* option. But wait, there's more.

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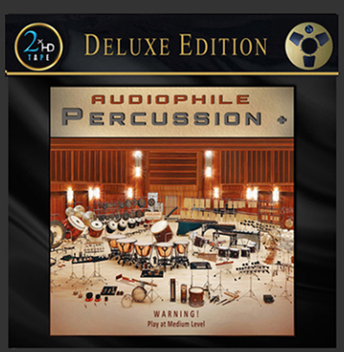





















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HIFICRITIC



I think you'll find it hard not to be grabbed by the intimacy and enthusiasm of this set: It has that rare, but wonderful, 'you are there feel'.

Ricard.Obligatoire 11 févr. 2023

Holy cow, this pressing sounds absolutely fantastic!!! I used to have 80's Swedish reissue and there is no comparison. This mastering is so much more detailed and three dimensional! Both records are dead flat and dead quiet

HiFi音響 review

Jazz at the Pawnshop





Anthony Kershaw
So beautifully done. Dynamic, ultra analogue in timbre and as soon as the vibraphone enters, perfectly imaged, you know you're in for good audiophile (and musical time). Bravo René Laflamme 6/28/2023







With optical and RCA digital outputs, you can plug it into most DACs and spin your shiny discs. Getting its power from a USB-C wall wart, you can even use it with a more robust power supply than the one supplied if you want to get geeky.

At $150, there's no dealer network, and you aren't going to get support. Look at it as a consumable. When it finally fails, throw it out. You'd be surprised at how many $700-$2k CD players of years past don't use any better mechanism than the PL100 does, so I'm going to stick my neck out and guess you might get 5 years out of this player. It is slot loading, so no drawer to break.

After hearing about this player from the screaming YouTube people, I had to check it out, and I bought mine a while back for $99 at AliExpress, where they had a full complement of Hello Kitty Plushies for about $29 each. The times they are a changing. To be fair, they did have an assortment of FiiO and Fosi gear for sale too. They are also available at Amazon now, so there might be a little bit of buyer protection after all.

Thanks to the "automotive grade suction cups" on the bottom of the chassis, you can use the PL100 in your car if you are taking a long road trip. (and your system has a line in jack) There are a pair of RCA line-level and a 3.5mm headphone output for your convenience. Doing just that in my 2010 BMW 3-series (with now defective in-dash player) works like a charm. For what it's worth it sounds better than I remember the factory unit sounding.

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It's a great place to start - that's the point

With so much chatter on how to get a new crop of people interested in music playback beyond buds and bars, the PL100 rules. The overall feel is very nice, the push buttons on the front work well and the display is easy to read. It even has a pair of balanced outputs, and is available in a black or silver case – but the front panel on both is silver.

To keep price and space to a minimum, S.M.S.L. uses a pair of CS Logic SC43131 DAC chips that feature an onboard headphone amplification circuit. By comparison, the sound of the headphone output with my old Grados is on par with an older iPad or iPhone, when they still had headphone jacks. No disrespect there.

More listening

Connecting the RCA outputs to a system comprised of vintage Dynaco bits (PAS 3 pre, and Stereo 70 power) along with a pair of Falcon LS3-5As in a small room, the little CD player that can delivers great sonics. If you don't have a preamplifier, the PL100 does have a variable line out, so you can really start on a tight budget and get in the game.

It still falls short of the dCS Varese residing at TONE HQ these days, but compared to a few really old CD players on hand from the late 80s, it's a major step up. If you're old enough, remember how much those players suuuuucked?

Compared to the standby gen 1 Play Station (yeah, got one of those too, that's why I'm single) the new player is still way out in front, offering a ton more resolution, without getting stale and harsh sounding. A quick look at Ebay shows a lot of those players are still $300-$600, so this is a killer value. Putting this in perspective, $150 in 2026 dollars would have only been about $50 back in 1986 – and CD's were still about $19 each. Think about that for a sec.





As they used to say at Stereophile years ago, its errors are those of omission, not commission. This little player does nothing wrong.

Whether you are putting together a super budget system (under $1,000) or adding CD playback to a vintage system, the PL100 will put a smile on your face. Yes, I could get granular and talk about all that audiophile-y stuff, but if you're new to audio, none of that matters to you. Yet.

This is an incredible way to just get started listening to music and building a CD collection. In the wake of current vinyl prices, $6 CDs at your favorite used music store is a cornucopia of physical media. And like those YouTube cool kids say "CD's are making a big comeback."

Highly recommended, and a TONEAudio Exceptional Value Award winner, to be sure.

TRUMPET MC

“This third incarnation of the Trumpet MC Phono Stage is a musical blockbuster. With an amazing purity combined with near reference definition, the listener will be transported to the event as close as the vinyl allows. It has very good imaging and is better than anything at the price, or even substantially more. Soundstage was huge and deep, enhanced by jet-black spaces between images.”

Bob Levi, Positive Feedback

“The very bottom was solid and punchy, producing kick drums on most records that *rocked* with plenty of texture. If you luxuriate in Technicolor timbral riches and indulge in harmonic glorification and are looking to put some sock into your system, you will love this thing.“

Michael Fremer, Analog Planet



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Why we love the format

Arguably some of the best mastering going.

Michael Jackson is well known for *Thriller* being the best sellling record of all time (70 million copies), but at sales of 20 million, *Off The Wall* is still no slouch.

Both of these records received preferental treatment when they were first produced, but the MoFi team has taken these two pop classics even further. Even if you don't have an SACD player, the CD layer sounds incredibly.



ESS AMT-1 Tower Speakers

What a beginning.

I'm sure some of you remember the ESS AMT-1 that had more of a trapezoidal shape. The AMT-1 and 1b.

They featured a 12-inch woofer and a 12-inch passive radiator facing rearward, and had a retail price of about $1,000/pair. This was a fair amount of money to spend on speakers back in 1974.

What made them intriguing was their Air Motion Transformer tweeter (AMT) designed by Dr. Oskar Heil. A number of today's great speakers use some form of AMT tweeter, but these were ground zero.

Enough that ESS Labs built a company around it.

They ended up making two other models, the "Rock Monitor" (AMT3) and the AMT-1 Tower you see here.

What makes this speaker so unique?

Turn the page.

While we could consider the air motion transformer the first ribbon tweeter, others might argue that point. Regardless of whether you're a tomato or tomato person, these speakers really stood out when they hit the scene in the early 70s.

You're looking at the genius right here. In between those magnet structures fits the pleated element of the active Heil driver. The magnets act like waveguides, and the rear of the speaker is outward facing, for some reflected sound.

The real key to the success of the AMT-1 Tower, which was almost twice as expensive as the 1B, is twofold. First, where the other speaker used a 12" woofer and passive radiator, the Tower uses a 10" woofer and a transmission line enclosure. Configured this way, the single 10" driver actually goes down about 10Hz deeper than the 12" combo.

Even more important, the 10" driver goes up to the 700Hz crossover point cleaner than the 12"s, eliminating the upper bass suckout that the AMT1/B is known for. While you can cheat this and goose it slightly with an equalizer (as many of us did back in the day) the loss of tonality is still there.

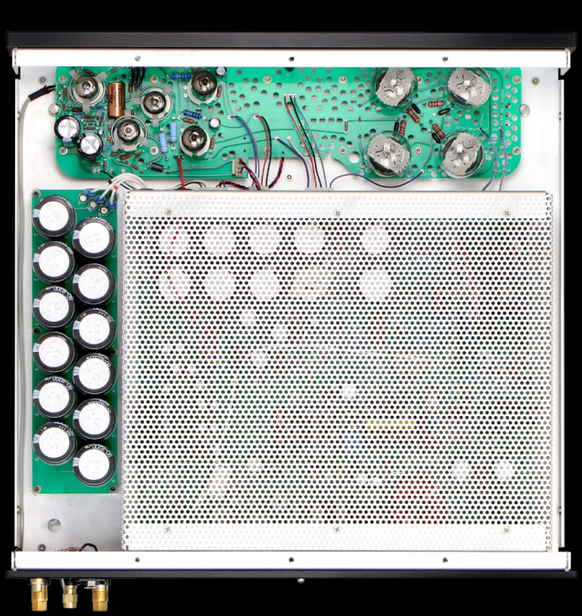
When playing the AMT-1B and Tower side by side, the difference is instantly observable, and appreciated.

Around the rear panel is a pair of 5-way binding posts, and a 3-position tweeter level. As you can see here, the AMT is fused.



The Century by LTA





The **Century** monoblock.

110W of ZOTL tube amplification
Just in time for our tenth anniversary.

Takoma Park, Maryland

LTA

lineartubeaudio.com



The most interesting part of my story, is that while I've had a pair of AMT-1Bs for some time now, I've actually been looking for a pair of the towers for just over 30 years now. There have been a handful of false alarms, and a few "I know what I've got here" encounters, but finding a pair not too far away has been near impossible.

One afternoon it happened. On Facebook Marketplace (where I'm always looking for crazy hifi bargains) only two miles from my house. Talked to the fellow on the phone and it turned out he was quite the collector himself. Lived in a gorgeous mid-century home, but his wife didn't think the ESS went with the vibe.

"Yeah man, I just want my $700 back and they are yours? Got far to go to bring them home?" Needless to say he was amused at my story.

We're they worth it?

Definitely. Even plugged into my Nakamichi 600 stack - just like the ones I had back when I first rolled the dice with ESS, they sound big, open, and surprisingly good on the low end. Admittedly, speakers are more resolving today, but these are still incredibly satisfying to listen to.



Swapping the vintage Nak gear for a stack of PrimaLuna EVO 400 amp and preamp brings these vintage towers a lot closer to current sonics.

Looking back all those years, I wish I'd have bought a tube amp sooner, and kept the AMT-1s longer.

But then, who knows what my journey would have been?

This is another one of those old speakers you should hear at some point, just for the glimpse at what state of the art used to be.

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Sometimes, the best component is a used one.

Here's this issue's pick...

It's no secret I like class A amplifiers. For so many reasons, but the main one being they sound so close to tubes when done right, the only thing you'll miss is buying replacement tubes. And that's a good thing.

With so many people living in smaller quarters, and a part of our population downsizing, for whatever reason, a high performance, single box solution is a wonderful thing. Which leads us to the Luxman L-590AXII you see here.

This is a massive, 30 watt per channel, pure class a design that has everything on board except a DAC. The internal phono stage is MM/MC (set for 100 ohms) and it's quiet, quiet, quiet. The front panel sports a headphone jack and...tone controls! Woo hoo. And they are great tone controls indeed, only adding a little bump to the extreme high and low frequency portions of the audio spectrum.

Thanks to the overbuilt power supply, don't let the 30 wpc power rating fool you. This is the Japanese equivalent of a Pass INT-25, but with a phono stage, and a pair of cool, yellow meters. Love those power meters, it really defines the semi-vintage vibe that all Luxman gear has.

Overall, the L-590 has a luxurious feel and a luxurious sound. It's back to that 95% of what you get from tubes without the tubes. Because it's a pure class A design, it runs warm, and it's heavy, so plan accordingly for where you put it to make sure you can give it enough space, and good ventilation.

The phono stage has fixed MC loading at 100ohms and 60dB of gain, which will be perfect for a wide range of cartridges (and is perfect for a Denon DL103r), and if you must, you can use the MM input with a step up transformer or an outboard transimpedance phono stage. Excellent though this may be, you are starting to complicate things again.... The beauty of the L-590 is that you can add a streaming DAC, a decent turntable and your favorite $3,500 to $35,000 speakers and get off the treadmill.

New, these were about $10,000, and they were a killer value at that price. If you're lucky enough to find one on the used market, budget $4,500 - $6k. They don't stay on the market long. If you'd like one integrated to be the solid anchor of a two-box system (you'll need a disc player or streaming DAC too) the Luxman L-590 is as good as it gets. While the AXII has had improvements, they were evolutionary, not revolutionary. An earlier model is equally fulfilling – and it keeps all the controls behind a fold down panel. A bit tidier.

In the end, I can't recommend this amplifier highly enough.

tmraudio.com

The Dynaudio Legend
Compact Speakers

WOW [3]

$7,000/pair
dynaudio.com (Manufacturer)

Now, before you lose your shit about a $7,000 pair of small speakers, consider this.



The cheapest I was able to find a bottle of Macallan's "Red Collection" 60-year-old whiskey was roughly 50 thousand dollars. Let that sink in for a minute. That's $2,950 for a single shot, out of the bottle. The last time I visited Balthazar in NYC a couple of years ago, I asked the bartender how much a shot would be (since I saw it languishing up on the shelf, about half full, so someone's drinking it), and he smugly replied, "ten k."

Putting this further in perspective, even if you're being thrifty and drinking Macallan 60 at home, a couple of shots will set you back a pair of speakers. And you're only renting that whisky. On the other hand, you could have a pair of Dynaudio Legends in your bedroom, have a quick shot of Macallan 12, and still dance the night away. I know what I'd rather do. Best of all, the Legends will still be there in the morning.



The Nautilus

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So that's where the listening begins with Van Halen's "Dance the Night Away," from *Van Halen II*. The Dynaudio Legend speakers are full of the good stuff that makes their flagship speakers what they are – and for me, that's the Esotar 3 tweeter.

Yeah, I'm a fan. This tweeter, refined by decades of manufacturing expertise at Dynaudio's Skanborg facility, is highly resolving, yet tonally natural in its delivery. Rocking enough to blast your fave metal tracks, smooth enough to play Miles Davis. Which will probably go further towards any romantic encounter than playing Van Halen.

But you never know.

Next up, more controversy - Miles Davis' *Tutu*. Full of Marcus Miller's mega bass grooves, this record illustrates not only how much low-frequency drive these speakers can deliver, but also the levels of texture present. In addition to the funkiness of this record, it features a wide stereo image, with tons of "pinpoint imaging" to challenge your system. Maybe later we'll do *Kind of Blue*, but for now, let's keep it funky.

As I've been fond of saying on social media lately, #itsnotjustaboutbassbruh. Yes, the Legends deliver the goods with the quality and quantity of bass available; there's so much tone, texture, and ambiance everywhere. I can't imagine wanting a different speaker in a small room. Forget about all those British speakers you were gonna buy. Get a pair of these, you won't regret it.

If you've ever wanted the excitement and sheer resolving power of a pair of massive Dynaudio speakers but only have a small room, you can live it up with the Legends. Forget about whisky, think about what a pair of premium headphones costs these days. And a headphone amplifier to go with.

The Dynaudio website says, "they'll sound impressive on a shelf or sideboard – put them upside down or even on their sides." So that's exactly what I did. In the context of my 11 x 14 foot back office in the house, with the Legends in an Ikea bookcase, the sound quality is over-the-moon good.

Because high SPLs aren't required in this room, the Western Electric 91E integrated amplifier, which is my reference, has more than enough power to drive the Legends. The PrimaLuna ProLogue 1 is also used to good effect here. While Dynaudio claims a sensitivity spec of 83 dB/1 watt, like every other Dynaudio speaker I've used or owned, they are easy to drive, especially with tubes. Later, out in the living room, they are placed on a proper pair of Dynaudio dedicated stands and set up with audiophile sensibilities. Even in a 13 x 18-foot room, I never felt that I really needed a sub for these lovely speakers.

However in a larger room, I'd suggest it.





The nuts and bolts

These tiny cabinets use Dynaudio's top 28mm (1.1 inch) Esotar 3 soft-dome tweeter and their 15cm (5.9 inch) MSP woofer – straight from their top-line speakers. A 2nd-order crossover at 3,500 Hz weaves them together in a ported design that can be plugged with the supplied foam plugs should you need to place them really close to the wall, or in a sealed bookshelf.

Only 12 1/4 inches tall, 7 1/3 inches wide, and 10 2/3rds inches deep, there are precious few places the Legends won't fit. Dynaudio supplied us with a pair of their Stand 20s, which are easy to assemble and can be filled with shot or sand for additional mass. As with every other small monitor we've ever used, this step is highly suggested and has two benefits. First, the additional mass in the stands makes for a more solid bass response and makes the entire speaker/stand assembly less prone to peril.

You can tell that as you unpack the Legends, they feel special. The attention to fine detail and execution in every way is so nicely done, it's a sensual experience. Looking closely at the way the joints come together, you know these speakers were built by Danish craftspeople, not done on an assembly line in China somewhere.

As mentioned earlier, the sensitivity of the Legends is 83 dB/1 watt, and Dynaudio claims a nominal impedance of 6 ohms. If you have a tube power amplifier, try both taps (as you should anyway) to see which provides the best power transfer and the tightest bass response. With the Western Electric amplifier, we had the 8-ohm output transformers in for best effect, while the PrimaLuna amplifiers delivered the best bass and bass to mid transition with the 4-ohm tap.

Unbox and set up

The Legends worked well in my 13-foot-wide living room, a little closer to the walls than the Dynaudio Confidence 20s, which have more low-frequency output. If you are installing them in a small-ish room, I'd suggest starting with the tweeter dome about 36 inches from the side wall, and the same to the rear wall.

Of course, you'll need to do some fine-tuning in your room, but this will get you started. The living room system made use of the 60-watt per channel Canor I2 integrated, the 100-watt per channel Soul Note A3, and the 200-watt per channel HiFi Rose RS580 integrated amplifier. Tubes, class-AB solid-state, and class-D. All delivered excellent results.

More listening

These speakers have an undeniable resemblance to the Heritage Special – limited to 2500 pairs. However, this is a different speaker, with different parameters. Hopefully, Dynaudio will leave these in regular production.

Pat Metheny's collab with Gary Burton and Chick Corea, *Question and Answer,* is a good place to start listening to acoustic music, offering some solid reference points. I'm sure you have your faves that help you make similar evaluations. The combination of drums, bass, piano, and vibes over Metheny's always enthusiastic playing is a somewhat dense recording, yet it really comes alive through the mini Dynaudios.



Much of the unique, signature sound of these speakers comes from drivers that normally are fitted to Dynaudio's most expensive speakers, in a small, precisely built cabinet. Every other aspect – cabinet execution and crossover design are all top shelf. These are not budget/entry-level speakers by any stretch of the definition. It's like getting two shots of Macallan 60 instead of a liter of Macallan 12.

I suspect these will be speakers you cherish for a lifetime, or really regret selling them, should you be an audio enthusiast who tends to cycle things on a regular basis.

Regardless of the music chosen, there is such an incredibly high level of refinement in the Legends that when you are playing them at moderate levels in a smaller room, you'd swear you are listening to a 50-100k pair of speakers. As someone who used the $125k pair of Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers as a reference for two and a half years, I don't make this statement lightly or with hyperbole. Now, if you want to crank Slayer really loud in a 16 x 20-foot room, you'll have to choose a different speaker.

But what makes these speakers so special is that you can achieve such a high level of musical resolution and refinement in a compact pair of speakers, making them ideal for building a system in a small room. Used within their limits, these little speakers will impress you regularly.

Award winning

The Dynaudio Legends are so awesome (at least to me) that we're launching a new award for them. The TONE WOW 3 award. I could be as snooty as the bartender at Balthazar and say, " It's only for products that are better than 'wow, just wow." Seriously, this award will come to represent something considerably beyond what's expected from a component period, not just a price point. So, in that case, a Product of the Year or an Exceptional Value award just doesn't express enough excitement.

I'm happy to give the Dynaudio Legends our first one. I hope I've described these mighty speakers well enough to get you to seek out a pair for audition if they are in your range of parameters.

Otherwise, I'll see you at the liquor store.



conrad-johnson
Classic Phono SE

Good as gold

$12,000 ($14,000 for SE version)
conradjohnson.com



Sometime around 12 years old, my dad took me to visit my older cousin, who, unbeknownst to me, was an audiophile. Now, this shouldn't come as a huge surprise, as I'm pretty confident, I didn't even know what the definition of "audiophile" was at that age. 40-odd years later, I still may not. Off to the right in the living room were the biggest speakers I'd ever seen. Seriously, they were bigger than me! I had to hear them, so I begged him to play something. Being a rock n' roll kid (that's what happens when you start playing drums at 6), I was hoping he would play something that would blow my hair back like the Maxell guy. Unfortunately, he grabbed a record, dropped the needle on his Denon DP57L, and the soft tones of a piano cascaded down the register.

What the heck? This wasn't what I wanted...

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SOUL NOTE

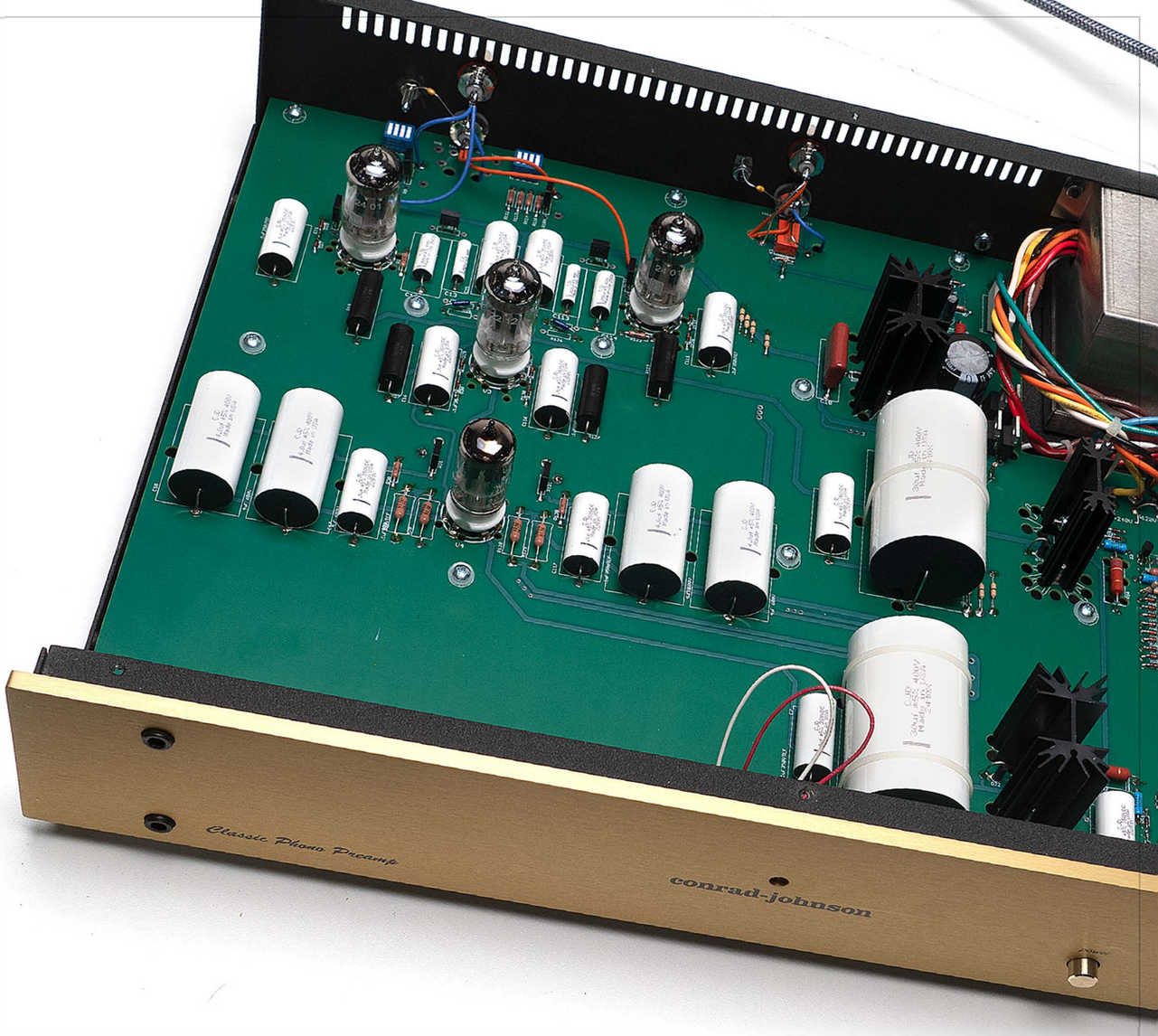


Woah! Suddenly, I'm surrounded by the pings of cymbal bells floating around while synth chords vibrate the walls as the unmistakable groove of Jeff Porcaro drops in. Now, my hair may have stayed firmly in place, but my mind was certainly blown! Klipschorns at full chat will do that to you. This was around 1980, and I've been addicted to high-performance sound ever since.

Around the same time, Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson, two economists and music lovers, became increasingly dissatisfied with the new solid-state equipment everyone else was building.

Everything just wasn't very musical. So they got together to create a high-performance audio company centered around tubes, simple circuits, and little to no feedback. The sound was to be warm, lush, and above all, highly musical. What emerged has grown to become legendary, and conrad-johnson Design was born.

If you think "legendary" is too strong a term, consider another independent audio company that's been around for nearly 50 years. Not easy, is it? Most have merged with others or been swallowed whole by giant multinationals. C-J remains fiercely independent while staying true to its founding guidelines of producing highly musical components.



Over the decades, I've always admired CJ, their luxurious gold faceplates and glowing tubes drawing me in like a moth to a flame. That said, I haven't always found the right c-j piece for my system. My last try was with a borrowed EV1 that was a little too warm for my system. The experience once again highlighted the undervalued aspect of synergy in the audio hobby.

A new experience

Fast forward to the subject of this review, the latest Conrad Johnson Classic Phono SE, and let me get this out of the way right now; this CJ is nothing like the one from before! Before we dive into why, a little background on this unit is in order.

The Classic comes in two flavors to fit your system. The low-gain setting provides 40 dB, while High Gain offers 53 dB, augmented by an additional 12AX7 tube in a second gain stage. Both share a zero-loop feedback circuit, triode gain stages, and passive RIAA EQ. If there is a way to differentiate the LG from the HG through any markings on the casework, it remains elusive to me. The only way to tell short of plugging it in and letting 'er rip is to unscrew the top and take a peek, which is exactly what I did. With only 6 small countersunk screws on top and two more on either side, this is not an involved process, taking but a minute. Once removed, I was greeted with a supremely clean layout, with dip switches to adjust loading, three 12AX7 tubes delineating this as the High Gain model, one 12AU7, a large power supply, and rows of hospital-white CJD caps, custom built to their specs right here in the good 'ol USA. They are rightfully proud of them, as well they should be, and this is where the "SE" enters the chat. From CJ's website:

Twelve of the most critical resistors in the audio circuit are upgraded to laser-trimmed metal foil resistors. Seventeen capacitors are upgraded to CJD Teflon capacitors (chosen for their exceptionally low "memory" characteristic), including intra-stage coupling capacitors and critical "bypass" capacitors.

To SE or not to SE

The cost of upgrading to an SE is $2,000, which is very reasonable considering the parts and labor involved in ensuring the sound quality and longevity meet CJ's high standards all while retaining their generous 3yr warranty, something you can kiss goodbye should you try inserting the latest flavor of the month in aftermarket caps.

But what does it sound like? It sounds like Conrad Johnson...and yet it doesn't. In my experience, CJ's have always leaned towards the warm side, which I like, but this may be the most neutral CJ product I've heard so far. It still tips to the warm side, carrying that wonderfully musical, non-fatiguing character that makes all-day listening sessions a breeze. However, this Classic SE has more sparkle and definition throughout the frequency spectrum than I recall from other CJ gear I've heard. What remains, and what I consider CJ's special sauce, is how micro-dynamics are rendered that lend a special glow, especially to the midband. It's something that you have to hear to experience, and it can turn non-audiophile pressings into an event.

Further listening

For example, Toto's *40 Trips Around The Sun* is a compilation album and as such pulls from 4 decades of records, some mastered well, some not so much. There is no reason this should raise the hair on the back of your neck, and yet Steve Lukather's voice on "99" is conveyed with air and effervescence that is impossible to ignore as it floats dead center slightly above the speakers. The imaging is as holographic as I've ever heard on my system, with the Classic SE throwing a ridiculously deep, wide soundstage, with the musicians clearly defined in space.



Not to be outshone by his vocals, Lukather is also a highly underrated guitarist, and his pyrotechnics are on full display on the instrumental rocker "Jake To the Bone." Each note flying off his guitar carries a visceral anger as Porcaro's tightly tuned snare attacks the back beat with full-bodied tone and snap. This is a very dynamic piece, and the CJ shows off its superlative jump factor as it transitions from PP to FFF at a speed not usually heard from tube-based gear. Impressive!

John Mayer's *Where the Light Is: Live in Los Angeles* by Music On Vinyl followed. Most live albums are poorly recorded, often revealing the venue's limitations as they try to capture the magic. That said, this is one of the better live albums with real dynamics and punch. This 4 record set is broken into 3 sections: Acoustic, John Mayer Trio, and his full band. I'm partial to the first two, as Mayer's brilliant guitar work is better displayed either solo on acoustic guitar or ripping out blues riffs with Pino Palladino and Steve Jordan. Stop This Train" is a beautifully haunting song about navigating life as we age.

It's a delicate piece, beautifully rendered, with the CJ fully conveying the sadness in Mayer's voice as his fingers dance on the frets, the chords holding their notes seemingly forever. Most surprising was the foundational bass of his foot tapping out the rhythmic heartbeat of the song and, perhaps not coincidentally, of time ticking itself. It was so deep and forceful I had to look up the video to confirm it was just John Mayer on stage. This is solid, middle of the earth bass we're talking about here. If you've ever worried about tube gear rolling off the highs or being lean in the bass, the Classic SE will force you to reconsider.



Next up, the more complex, longtime standard *Jazz Party In Stereo* by Duke Ellington. Masterfully pressed by ORG, tape hiss and all, this is a dynamic powerhouse of big band goodness. The first track, "Malletoba Spank," is a high-energy burner kicking off the record with a vibraphone leading the charge and the SE's impressive imagery floats the pings in ethereal mist further back and to the left on the soundstage. The rest of the orchestra, particularly the horns, come on like a lightning strike, with the CJ exhibiting impressive speed releasing notes with an effortlessness usually reserved for solid-state. There is no hangover, no smearing, just pure blatty tone. Damn, this is fun!

The sultry "Red Garter" immediately follows and throws out an anchor on the tempo as a tenor sax and clarinet perform a smoky call-and-response. The Classic SE ably captures the breaths of the saxophonist as he blows into the reed, some of his breath transformed into notes, others simply underlying as a wispy suggestion. Once you hear it, you'll never un-hear it, and it is mesmerizing.

I save one of my all-time favorite records, The Police's *Synchronicity*, for last, and it's always a great test of flexibility for any piece of gear. The Classic SE handles the multitrack cacophony of "Synchronicity II" with aplomb, delineating each instrument and synth effect. Stewart Copeland's signature high hat and tightly tuned snares stand loud and proud, just as they should be, without any added bloom.

The echo and reberb used throughout this record is perfect for the microdynamic mastery and delineation of decay to a perfectly black background. Andy Summer's The phono preamp's ability to delicately decay notes deep into a black background minimalist guitar work, mixes with Sting's soulful crooning perfectly, with all three members locked in place. This was sound transformed into magic.

For nearly 50 years, conrad-johnson Design has consistently been building some of the best-sounding gear around, cementing its iconic legacy. A lot has changed over that time; technology has advanced, and tastes have evolved. The Classic Phono SE represents the evolution of their long-standing ethos for natural, realistic sound. Still as beguilingly musical as ever, they've sharpened the focus, adding a bit of sparkle, to create a phono stage that makes me wonder how much better it can get? At $14,000 for the SE version, it is not inexpensive. However, in the realm of high-performance end-game gear, one could easily consider this a bargain.

Whether that's a statement of ultimate performance or a sign of the times is up to you to decide. I'm going to warm up the Classic SE, grab a cold one, and see if I can get my big JBL horns to blow what's left of my hair back. Cheers!

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Late Night Garage Playlist

-Jeff Dorgay

As always, I try to be period correct, with the music matching the time period of the car I'm wrenching on.

For those of you that think Taylor Swift sucks, take note - there were a lot of stinkers in 1972's Billboard top 100 list. Nothing Ms. Swift has ever done is anywhere near as lame as "The Candy Man." Really.

Hopefully, you'll approve of my 13 picks...



Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway - Where is the Love

The Fifth Dimension - (Last Night) I Didn't Get to Sleep at All

O'Jays - Back Stabbers

Three Dog Night - Never Been to Spain

Sly and the Family Stone - Family Affair

Curtis Mayfield - Freddie's Dead

Todd Rundgren - I Saw The Light

Raspberries - Go All The Way

Mott The Hoople - All The Young Dudes

Hawkwind - Silver Machine

T Rex - Jeepster

Elton John - Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters

And of course.... **Alice Cooper** - School's Out

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STEREOStories

By Jeff Dorgay

Half-time entertainment:

Super Bowl score.

Rather than snipe about the half-time show, I always look for deals.

It really helps to *not* be a football fan at times like this. The morning of last year's big game, I was perusing Craiglist, and this jewel popped up.



Do I need another reel to reel tape deck?

Of course I don't, but it's a potential bargain, and like my bull terriers, I can't resist to sniff out a treat.

Listed as a one-owner, "super clean" Pioneer RT-701 - not the auto-reverse 707 that is more costly to repair, I phone the man up.

"It was my Dad's pride and joy. I've even got six tapes of his music if you want them."

He's asking $400 for the deck, which isn't bad, if it works. However, I've had the socks instead of toys thing happen more than once with vintage gear.

"Can I come over and look at it?"

"Dude, the game is on in 15 minutes, I'm kinda busy for the day."

"How about during half time?"

"Sure, the show always sucks. Tell you what, bring $250 CASH, show up right at the break and it's yours - just don't interrupt my buzz, ok?"

Fortunately, he lives about ten minutes away, and I can park right out front. The minute half time starts, I walk up to the door and tape deck guy is *baked.*

He answers the door and barely remembers the conversation.

"I've got 200 cash, bro. I'll get right out of your hair." He's thrilled and even lets me have the Maxwell (his thing not mine) takeup reel and I'm out of there. Deck works like a charm. And the tapes? All Grateful Dead.

Like father, like son.

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COVERStory

By Jeff Dorgay

Ø Audio Frigg 02 Speakers

Friggin' Great

$15,000/pair
harmoniadistribution.com
oaudio.no

Ok I suck for being cliché, but I had to do it. No more for the rest of the review. Promise.

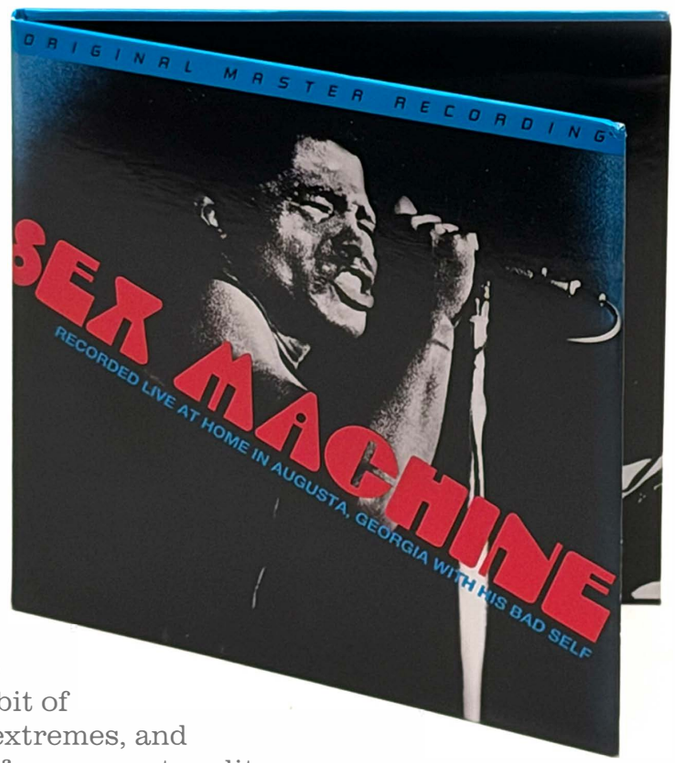
It's not often that I fall in love with a pair of speakers right out of the box. In 25 years, it's maybe happened 5 or 6 times. It helps that Harmonia Distribution sent this pair of Frigg 2s with hours on the clock. It doesn't allow being able to observe how a speaker changes during break-in, but it does save time. And they are lovely, right out of the box.

Listening begins in the main system (dCS Varese, Pass XS Pre2, and Pass XS300 monos) to find the limits of the Frigg 02's performance. A big pile of SACDs has just arrived, and while some more audiophile-ish selections tempt, James Brown's Sex Machine is the go-to.



Oh baby, this time-worn classic jumps out of the Friggs. Eyyyyyyaw. Like that. Considering that the Frigg crew comes to hifi shows brandishing axes, starting with a mellow selection just doesn't fit.

Biases



If you are dropping by for the first time, it's important to reveal my listening biases so you can better understand why I like the Frigg 02s so much.

First and foremost, the top-to-bottom coherence that a panel speaker usually delivers is always my top priority when evaluating speakers. Time alignment and a lack of phase errors are a close second.

If compromises are to be made (and all speakers have them), I'll happily give up a bit of extension at the frequency extremes, and even a little bit of dynamics for an even tonality that keeps me on the couch for hours. I've got a pair of Klipschorns for when I need that extra push over the cliff.

This is the main reason I'm a huge fan of SET and class-A amplifiers over anything else. Truth be told, I always prefer components with a slight bit of tonal saturation or warmth – provided it doesn't make the presentation come across as too mellow and slow. While that can be comforting, it robs music of its essential feel – a tough combination to attain.

Back to the hardest working man

Still in the JB groove, if you've heard this record on uninvolving speakers, Brown's signature call-and-response style all feels one-dimensional. Through the Friggs, it feels like we're sitting about five tables back in a small club. While some of this record was recorded live and some in various studios, it feels similar to the hall ambience and size present on Jeff Beck's performance at Ronnie Scott's jazz club in London.

Brown's ability to come out of nowhere and just belt it out comes through wonderfully with these speakers, as he goes down to the quietest whisper, fading into the bass line, going straight to hey, hit me real hard – eeeeeeeeheeoooow.! Baby, baby, baby, these are involving speakers.

It's the oldest trick in the hifi world: connect a $15k pair of speakers to half a million bucks' worth of electronics and get them to rock. The Friggs pass this test with ease. Yet, bringing them back down to Earth with a few different amplifiers that make more sense, they still deliver the goods. They even deliver decent sonics with a $300 vintage Pioneer receiver. That's great engineering. (and great crossover design)

Variations on the theme

With a sensitivity of 90 dB/1 watt, you can get by with about 35 watts per channel, but if you can stretch to 100 wpc, You'll have a more engaging experience, especially if you listen a bit louder or enjoy larger-scale music, regardless of genre. Room size will also be a factor; if you're in a smaller room, it takes less juice to light the Friggs up.

Using the new HiFi Rose RS130 streamer and RD160 DAC as a source (about $12k for the pair), about ten different amplification combinations were tried.

Investigation begins with a few low-powered amplifiers rom Pass Labs, Western Electric, and ampsandsound. Unless you are in a very small room and listen to calm music most of the time, a sub-10-watt amplifier just isn't enough to make these speakers deliver the dynamics they are capable of. However, at low volume levels, they are extremely pleasant.

Rega's new Mercury preamplifier and Solis power amplifier and (about $22k for the pair) is an excellent solid-state combination, producing 168 watts per channel into 8 ohms. The Soul Note A-2 Integrated ($27k), delivering about 110 watts per channel, also proves an excellent match for the Friggs, with a slightly warmer presentation than the Rega pair, which feels almost Boulder-like in its neutrality.

Giving tubes a try, the Octave SE110 (with Super Black Box) and EL34s (about $11k) producing 70wpc with these tubes delivers a slightly more neutral presentation than our reference PrimaLuna EVO 400 power amplifier (with KT150 tubes) and EVO 400 preamplifier (also about $11k) that has a bit warmer, mellower sonic flavor.

Giving the PrimaLuna EVO 100 integrated amplifier a shot still provides excellent results, though not quite as dynamic or as resolving as the bigger EVO 400 can deliver. However, it's worth mentioning that this little $2,500 tube integrated would be a great place to start a high-performance system, with your Frigg 2s as an anchor. Another excellent choice at our disposal is the HiFi Rose RS520 DAC/Streamer/Integrated. With 200 watts per channel and priced just under $6k, it makes a great combination, with a turntable easily added should analog be part of your mix.

Listening in the main 24 x 36 foot studio, my 13 x 18 foot living room, and the 12 x 14 foot back room leads me to think that 13 x 18 is about the smallest room I'd place these speakers in, as they have solid, extended bass response that was nearly impossible to get right in my smallest room.

All of these combinations mate easily with the Friggs, and your taste will deliver the tonality you like best. What's important is the Friggs are resolving enough to reveal the differences between whatever you bring to the table. Spinnin wheel gotta go round.

Saving the best, or at least my favorite, for last the killer setup with these speakers ends up being another great product from Harmonia Distribution. The Pathos INPOL Heritage hybrid integrated. (about $18k, with internal DAC) The synergy between these speakers and this amplifier is one of the most musical I've encountered. Even with a decent table, phono pre, and a few cables, you'll still get in under the cost of a new Ducati Panigale V4. And this could be a system you could live with forever.

Setup tips and tech

That said, the Friggs are easy to get a basic set going. Once you optimize them in your room for the best balance between bass extension and upper bass/midrange transition, the rest is a breeze.

Fine-tuning the rake angle and a bit of toe-in to maximize the stereo image, and it's all good.



Because these speakers have such a smooth overall tonality, wide horizontal and vertical dispersion, they are very enjoyable right out of the box, loosely set up. Unlike a lot of speakers we've tested, the Friggs soundfield doesn't collapse when you get up from the couch.

There is one thing you should pay attention to here if you buy a set of Friggs. The speaker features a bottom-firing port, and as pointed out by Harmonia's Jesse Luna, it's all too easy and random to drop one of the bolts that fasten the legs into said port. So, cover the port, or as I did, place the speakers on their sides on an elevated surface to avoid this problem.

I certainly didn't want the man with the axe mad at me for wrecking his speakers! You've been warned.

Taking the legs' footprint into account, the Frigg 02s have a modest footprint of about 12 inches wide, 20 inches deep, and 39 inches tall. The front baffle is only 9 inches wide. They weigh just over 66 pounds each (30kg), so they are easy to manage and unpack by yourself.

The drivers consist of an 8.6-inch (220mm) woofer, a 7-inch midrange (180mm), and a small "Metamodal TPCD dome with DXT lens" tweeter. According to Ø Audio, they are the first manufacturer to take advantage of SEAS' latest tweeter, featuring a mini waveguide and a new dome material.

I'm sure this is a major contributor to the ease and natural way the Friggs reproduce the high frequencies, with a bit more punch than a standard soft-dome tweeter. Yet still retaining the natural feel of a soft dome. Ø Audio does not mention crossover slopes or frequencies.

It works incredibly well, so who cares what they've chosen? Just more excuses for babble. They've done an incredible job blending the drivers, making a speaker that is super easy to drive. Success on all fronts.

Around back, there is a single pair of binding posts. A small, rectangular port is at the top of the rear panel – though there is no mention of its function on the Ø Audio website, and the bass port is down-firing. As with other manufacturers that take this approach, the Friggs don't suffer from port-related noise artifacts and are easier to position in the room.

More listening

Moving on from James Brown to Kraak & Smaak's *Scirocco*, these speakers open up and deliver a wall of sound, handling the deep bass grooves with ease. Again, the seamlessness between woofer, midrange, and tweeter is wonderful.

These speakers unravel densely packed music with ease. Tracking through some selections from Tom Petty, Todd Rundgren, and Matthew Sweet reveals layers of information that lesser speakers flatten. And Abba's recent *Voyage* is spectacular.

Prowess handling the necessary male and female vocal boxes are both ticked. Always avoiding audiophile standards, Jill Scott's latest, *To Whom This May Concern*, easily channels some of Gil Scott-Heron's vibe, making for a great romp. A long playlist of Meshell Ndegeocello delivers more vocal and bassline awesomeness.

Thanks to the extended frequency range, enticing dynamics, and overall inclusive tonality, no musical genre is out of bounds. I guarantee the overall ease of these speakers will keep you on the couch for hours. You may never watch TV again.



courtesy of Ø Audio

The sweet spot

Suffice to say, the understated Frigg 02 sounds much more expensive than it is. And that is their magic. With so many six-figure speakers on the market these days, I'm sure there is a certain audio enthusiast who wouldn't consider a pair of these speakers because they are not "expensive enough." And that would be a mistake, but Ø Audio does make larger, more expensive speakers if that's your bag, baby.

Exiting as it is talking about stuff almost none of us can afford is, what's real? In the last 40-plus years of talking to audio enthusiasts around the world, it seems that the sweet spot for the person who pursues a premium audio system, but has other interests and obligations, is about $30k-$50k in today's money.

The Friggs make a perfect anchor for an incredibly high-performance system that won't require dipping into your HELIOC. If you're feeling carefree with the checkbook, they do have two larger models, and you can take it from there.

It all comes back to design excellence

The Scandinavian design ethic goes way beyond furniture. If you've had the good fortune to visit Sweden, Denmark, or Norway, where Ø Audio is based, it's immediately apparent how they embrace an efficiency of taste, form, and simple, understated elegance. The shades of subtle color are cleaner, and the edges crisper. If you've been there, you know what I'm talking about.

Back to my original comment about bias – I am a massive fan of Scandinavian design. It makes for products that you never tire of, and that's important when you're spending 15 thousand dollars on a pair of speakers.

At first blush, compared to a few other things, you might find the Friggs slightly basic, but after living with them for a while, their true beauty comes from a look that always appeals. They are right at home in my mid-century home, and the mad scientist, modernistic room that is my studio, too, fitting in perfectly with the classic Herman Miller pieces in my collection.

They are available in three other finishes besides our review pair: a darker wood finish and solid white and black. Again, it's personal taste/bias, but I love the way the logo is recessed into the front face. Unlike the way some manufacturers are overly bling-y, like BMW plastering M badges all over everything. Very nice.

The true test of excellence

The reason the Ø Audio Frigg 02 is our choice for a Product of the Year award is the overall excellence in every way it offers. The more speakers you've owned that have been a "near-miss," the more you will appreciate the Friggs. If you are an ADD-oriented audio enthusiast who has a tough time sitting still to take things in, these will not be the speakers for you – they aren't fancy enough.

Yet, if you cherish craftsmanship, design elegance, and a sound that you can truly get lost in, the Ø Audio Frigg 02 might just be that speaker you've been on a quest for.





Review

By Jeff Dorgay

LTA Century
OTL Tube Monoblocks

A class of one.

$28,000/pair
lineartubeaudio.com/century



Listening to these incredible tube monoblock amplifiers begins with Pink Floyd's "Echoes" for several reasons. This large, spacious recording always sounds fantastic on a great tube amplifier, and the Century Monoblocks more than fit that moniker. Driving a pair of seven-foot-tall Sound Labs ESLs, the presentation is breathtaking. All the small, atmospheric sounds that make this record so immersive on a great two-channel system play to the strengths of the huge Sound Labs panels.

To say these are the best tube amplifiers I've ever experienced would be limiting – "best" is such a vague term. After decades of pursuing tube amplifiers of many different shapes, tube complements, and topologies, the LTA amplifiers are a transformerless design courtesy of the brain of David Berning.

Because the output transformers in a tube power amplifier are one of their main limiting factors, a quest to eliminate them from the circuit has always been a vexing proposition. The transformers often limit bass extension and dynamics. Some of this is the tube "warmth" so many vacuum tube lovers hear. Unless made incredibly big, bulky, and with extreme attention to all the fine details, an output transformer can also limit current transfer and ultimately dynamics. But how to get all that wire out of the signal path?

Minneapolis' ATMA-Sphere has probably been the most successful, but its (very different) design is huge and heavy, even without output transformers. The MA-3 monoblocks produce a smidge more power than the LTA Century's and use a total of 54 tubes! Unless you're shooting the sequel to a 1950s black-and-white sci-fi movie, the aesthetic is not going to fly in most environments. To be fair, the Atma-Sphere amps have always had a reach-out-and-touch-it midrange transparency that few amplifiers can match. Until now.

Based on ZOTL (Zero Hysteresis Output Transformer Less) technology from David Berning, they use a completely different approach to amplification, output transformer or not. Rather than rehashing their copy, please click here to go to the LTA site and read their full description. It bears reading to fully understand the science and engineering behind these amplifiers.

https://www.lineartubeaudio.com/the-technology

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Tracking Angle, Jan 2026

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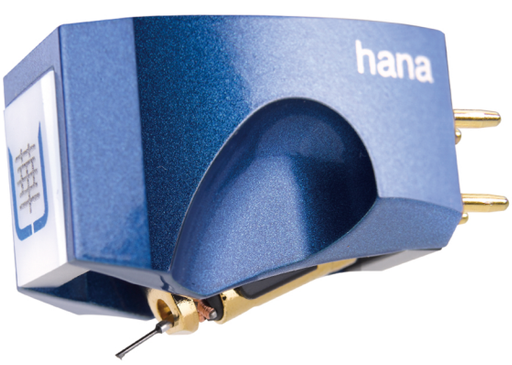
- Alan Sircom,
hi-fi+, May 2021

UMAMI BLUE



"A sonic winner...

- Andre Jennings,
The Absolute Sound, Jan 2024

"UMAMI SOUND - Wonderful Taste in Music"
video now airing online at hanacartridges.com

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Getting rid of a million miles of output transformer wire has its benefits, but the Atma-Sphere amps just aren't for everyone. And I mean no disrespect, as I have a pair of heavy four-box Pass monoblocks that generate a ton of heat too. And a dedicated listening room.

Enter the modern age

Taking advantage of David Berning's ZOTL circuitry, the LTA amplifiers have a sound like no other. Because the enormous (and enormously expensive) output transformers are eliminated from the circuit, the resulting amplifier is lighter and considerably less expensive to produce. Yet the LTA Century amplifiers are by no means inexpensive.

When you look inside the amplifier, you can see a lot of the uniqueness and attention to fine detail it offers. The parts used are the best of the best. The construction is painstakingly executed. The main thing worth mentioning is LTA's discussion of removing the haze by eliminating the output transformers. They say a certain amount of perceived sonic weight is lost due to the clarity gained, yet I don't hear any loss of weight in the presentation. The clarity – yes. However, when listening to bass-heavy tracks, especially through the 6-foot-tall Sound Labs (74.4 inches tall, to be exact), it is tight, extended, and defined. The crew at Sound Labs was kind enough to time their speaker review so they would be here when the Centurys were here, as they have had great synergy with these amplifiers. To which I concur completely.

Some early tube amplifiers did have a bit of upper-bass bloat that many of us mistook for warmth. Much the way the LS3/5A and some of the other British monitors are voiced. However, going back to a long playlist of bass-heavy tracks with the Centurys is a revelation. There is no overhang, bloatedness, or lack of low-frequency texture and fine detail.

Under the hood

The Century is a fully balanced amplifier. With each channel having 4 6JN6 Compactron tubes for output (these are NOS television tubes, and fortunately not crazy money to replace), a pair of EL84 drivers with a pair of 7062/E180CCC and a single 12AU7 for the first 3 gain stages.

However, the tubes are not run hard, and for a tube amplifier, it runs remarkably cool when sitting on the rack. The output tubes run at nearly 3400 volts, but very low current, so you can expect closer to 10-20 thousand hours, than the usual 2000-5000 hours with standard designs.



The Century also features auto-bias, so it is as easy as it gets. Everything is tidy, and the parts inside are all the same top-quality audiophile-grade bits you see in the world's greatest amplifiers. The rest of the parts, and the mechanical execution are top-notch. While this has nothing to do with sound quality, LTA has taken the high road, and hasn't made their logos huge or backlit to draw your attention. They are quiet and understated, coming in a pewter shade of gray and black. Very nice.

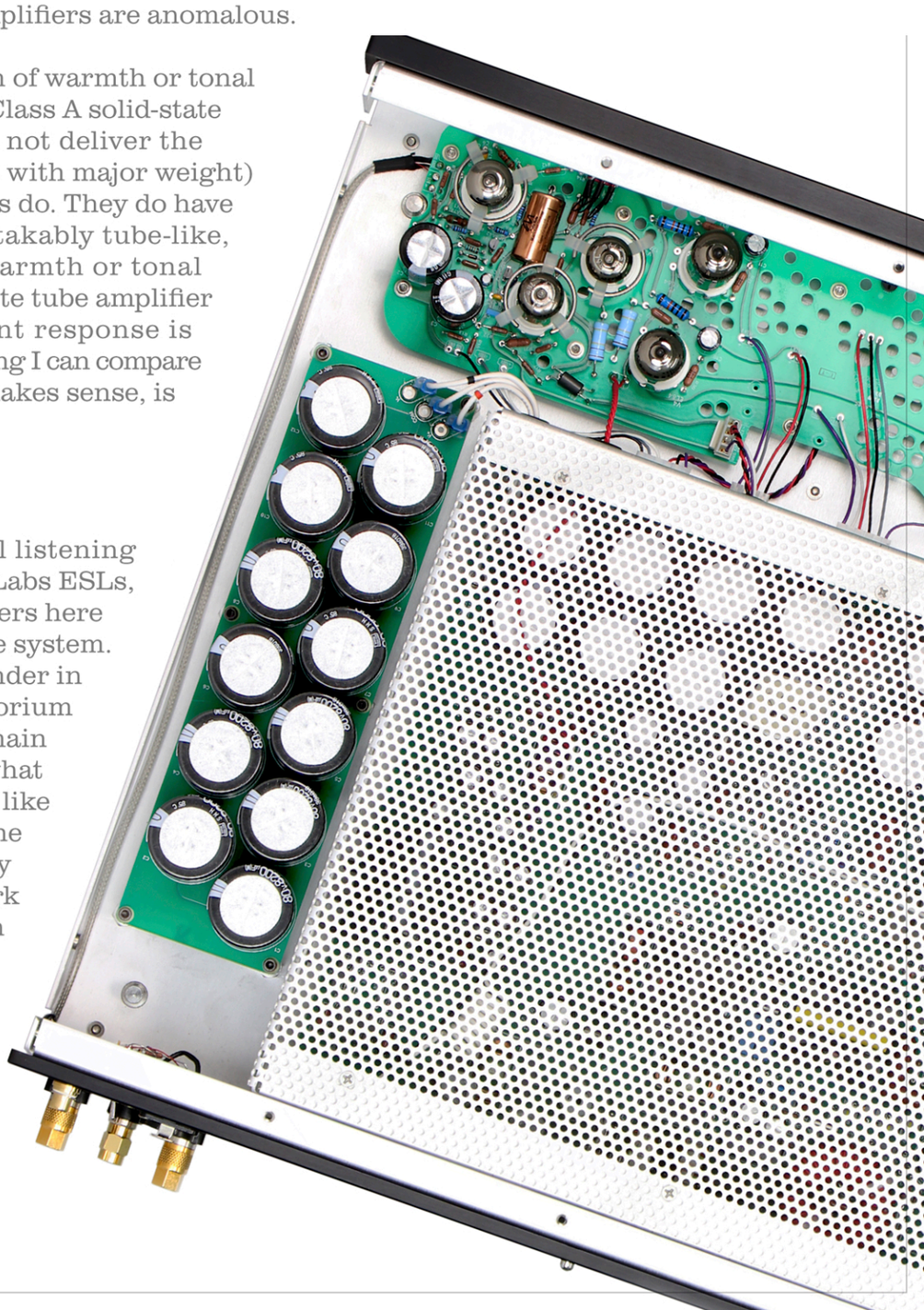


Nearly a complete absence of sonic signature

To fool those of you who only read the last paragraph of a review to get the "conclusion," it's buried here. While I haven't heard every single vacuum tube amplifier out there, I have heard and owned my fair share from ARC, BAT, CJ, McIntosh, Nagra, VAC, and others. Removing the transformers really does remove nearly all the sonic signature present in the others.

Comparing the LTA amplifiers to the other dozen amplifiers on hand confirms their uniqueness. There is a zone in the world's finest amplifiers where the differences between tubes and solid state almost blend to zero, yet these amplifiers are anomalous.

They do not have the touch of warmth or tonal saturation that the finest Class A solid-state amplifiers do, yet they do not deliver the complete neutrality (albeit with major weight) that the big Boulder monos do. They do have an airiness that is unmistakably tube-like, yet next to none of the warmth or tonal saturation that your favorite tube amplifier offers. And their transient response is lightening-fast. The only thing I can compare the experience to, if this makes sense, is a DS optical cartridge.



They drive anything

While nearly all my initial listening was done with the Sound Labs ESLs, there were plenty of speakers here queued up to swap into the system. Of course, the main contender in mind is the Clarysis Auditorium Plus ribbons that are my main reference. As I pondered what these might have sounded like with the Apogees of old, the Clarisys are extremely easy to drive. Interestingly, Mark at LTA tells me that they in fact did get the chance to power some vintage Apogees with their amplifiers, and it was a great pairing. So vintage Apogee owners, take note.

Unplugging the Pass XS Monos and plugging them into the Centurys reminds me of what the Auditoriums sound like with the much smaller Pass XA30.8 monos. Not quite as much depth and grip on the bottom end, but slightly more delicate on top. And of course, again, that tube thing.

While the Sound Labs do not seem like a tough load to drive at all, the vintage Quad 63s lurking here definitely are, and again, the Century's pass this test with ease. Ditto for the Acoustat 2+2s, and this all reminds me of the vintage Acoustat X with its own built-in OTL amplifier, and no interface. If only...

All of the cone speakers at my disposal from Pylon Audio, Klipsch, Zu, YG Audio, and Achema work well with the Century monos. The Century's could use more power to drive Magnepans loud, but I can say that about most amps. If you listen at moderate levels, the perspective delivered is one of the most breathtaking you'll ever get from a pair of Maggies.

Producing 110 watts into 8 ohms and 144 watts into 4, each of these mono amplifiers brings enough power to drive nearly anything. LTA claims 178 watts into 8 ohms and 196 into 4 ohms in burst output. And they are dynamic.

Further Listening

Listening was split between three different configurations. The solid-state Pass XS Pre 2 (which is also in for review, vs my original XS Pre), the ampsandsound Yellowstone tube preamp, and the dCS Varese direct.

These monoblocks have such a clean sound; that they reveal the distinct tonalities of the three preamplifiers at my disposal. That the Centurys are



so neutral makes it so much easier to voice the rest of the system to your personal taste. All were just fine, but as someone gravitating towards a bit more saturation, I particularly loved the pairing with the ampsandsound all-tube Yellowstone. Bias admitted, I like things voiced just a touch on the warm side.

Tracking through some early Lloyd Cole tracks with all of the ESLs, the soundstage is big, deep, and bold. Having seen Cole numerous times, the texture of his deep-ish voice really fills the room.

Listening carefully for leading and trailing transients, with drums and piano, plays to the incredible clarity these amplifiers deliver. Switching to heavy rock still brings the weight, but any band with substantial drumming and layered vocals will bring you to a place you might have never been. Slayer and TOOL never sounded more intriguing. Ha. Everyone else that listened to the Centuries said the same thing – CLEAR! And because the tubes don't stick out of the casework like some LTA designs (and all casework is produced in house), most were surprised to find out they were listening to tubes. After countless listening hours, this amplifier remains one of the most unique I've had the pleasure to hear. I suspect you are going to fall in love rather quickly or take a hard pass. I know I could live with a pair.

That switch on the front panel

There isn't even a power switch on the Century monoblocks' front panel. It's a robust toggle on the back panel. This is my only complaint about the amplifiers. Make sure you have enough shelf room to easily slip your hand behind the amplifiers to power them up.

The switch on the front panel controls amplifier feedback. As you'll notice from the specs page, changing this setting from Low to Med, to Norm affects the input and output impedance – and I'm guessing the damping factor as well. Depending on the speakers chosen, this may or may not dramatically affect the power transfer to your speakers and the character of the low frequencies. I found this a bit more sensitive than choosing the wrong output tap on a tube amplifier with output transformers, but it's like that.

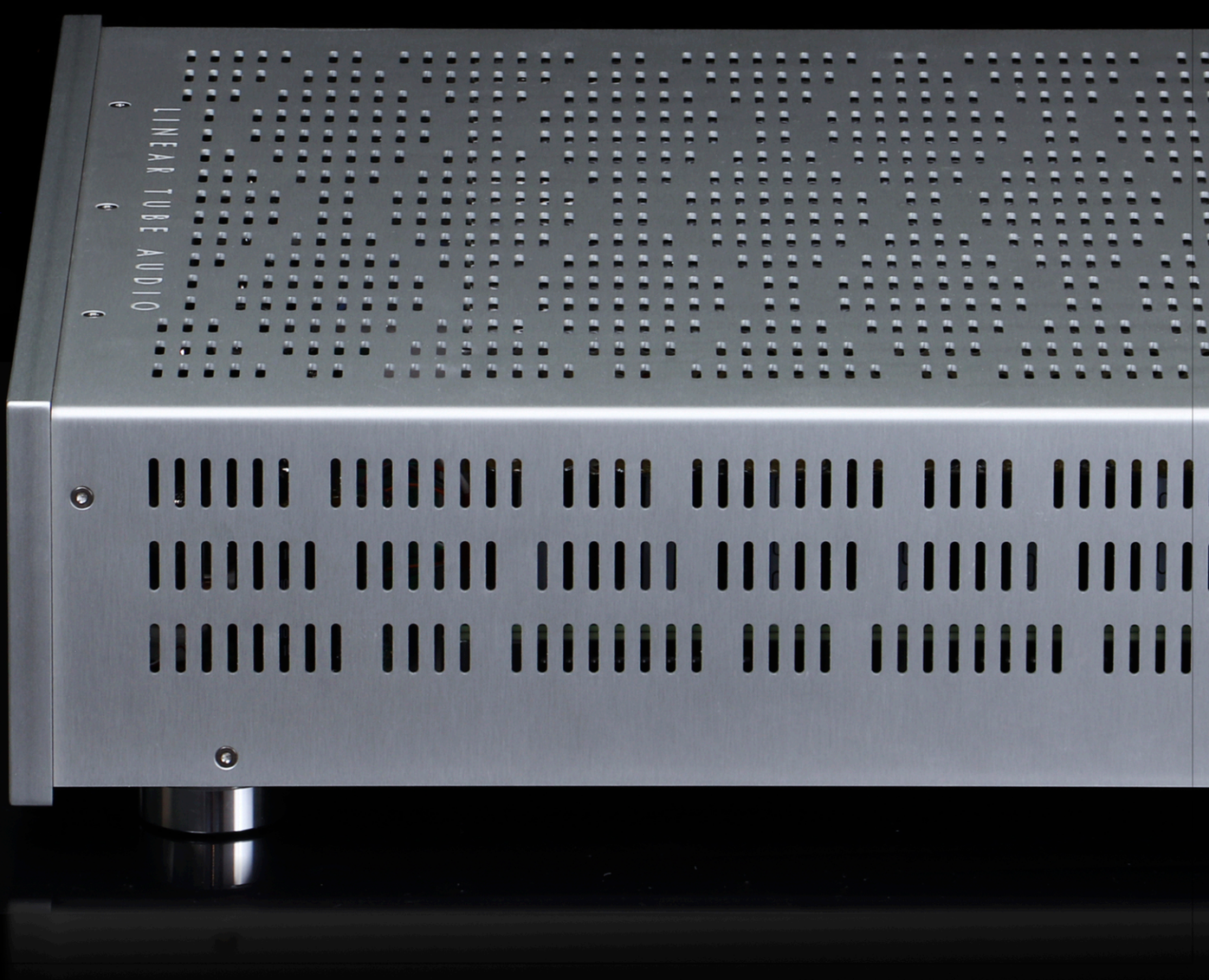
As you are looking at an output impedance of .85 ohms in NORM, 2.1 ohms in MED, and 5.6 in LOW, the lowest setting isn't going to be optimum with some of today's speakers labeled 4 ohms and dip down to half of that.This is probably your only concern when choosing a speaker to mate with the Centurys.

You'll have to seek 'em out

LTA only has six dealers (in the world), so you'll either have to get a good listen at a hifi show, or take advantage of their 30-day, in-home audition. They do not charge a restock fee, but you are required to pay return shipping costs, and the amplifier must be in new condition, as it should be. The Century monos are their first "dealer network" product, and they plan on expanding the network in the months to come.

I can't imagine many people return these, though. The last time we had an LTA amplifier in for review, it was wonderful but only 40 Wpc. Not enough for everything. If you've been waffling between tubes or solid-state on your hifi journey, you really should hear the Century monoblocks, or anything in the LTA catalog.

They remain one of the most exciting amplifiers we've experienced.



Playlist no.3

Being no stranger to New York's Fashion week, and though NYC and Paris Fashion Week's are in the books, (like Axpona, hahaha) *The Devil Wears Prada* is back on the screen with the sequel.

So, in case you feel like parading around the house, here's some of the top tracks that were played at NYC and Paris Fashion Week.

Notice the absence of "Keith Don't Go." Those supermodles are having more fun than we are.



Tove To - *Cool Girl*

Jordan Stephens (feat. Miraa May) - *Big Bad Mood*

Disclosure - *F For You*

Coco & Breezy - *6am (Coco & Breezy Remix)*

Madonna - *I Don't Search I Find (Honey Dijon Remix)*

Riton, Kah-Loh, GEE LEE - *Fake ID (Coke & Rum Remix)*

Bleu Chair, Teza Sumendra - Hyperspace

Hayden James - *Just Friends*

Sunflwr - *Cul de Sac Club*

Jason Derulo, David Guetta - *Saturday/Sunday*

Kasby - *Groovy Berta*

Moon Boots - *I Want Your Attention*

Gold Link - *Same Clothes as Yesterday*

Review

By Jeff Dorgay

Rega Mercury and Solis
Pre and Power Amplifier

A perfect pair.

$10,495 (ea)
rega.co.uk (Factory)
soundorg.com (NA Distributor)



Listening to Crowded House's *Woodface* album, which is chock full of dynamics, life, and a massive soundfield, through the Clarisys Auditorium Plus ribbons, the Rega Solis and Mercury are doing a fantastic driving these speakers to more than realistic levels. While the Solis has its own built-in DAC (more about that later) for now, we're using the six box dCS Varese stack for a source.

The word that instantly comes to mind is natural. It keeps coming up, and while these two components are hear, that is what everyone that hears them for the first time remarks. If you've heard any of Rega's other electronics, you know what I mean. They do the job required, never calling attention to themselves. Yet, good as past Rega components have been, there was always a limit to just how much musical information they could resolve when put head-to-head with the world's finest. That ends with the Solis and Mercury.

I'm sticking my neck out and guessing that most of you probably think about Rega as a turntable manufacturer, or at least that's what you know them best for. However, for decades they have been quietly making electronics that routinely are on many reviewer's best of lists. Never known for trendiness, Rega always delivers components that exceed the performance of what you'd expect at their price points, reflecting the value-oriented ethos surrounding the entire company.

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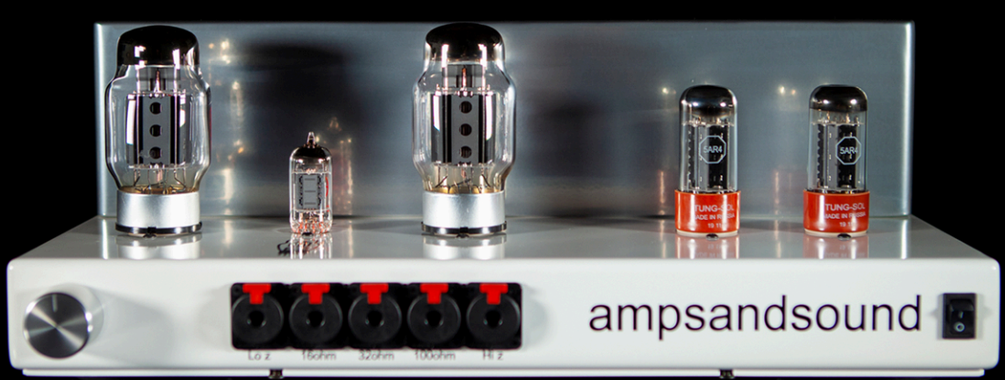


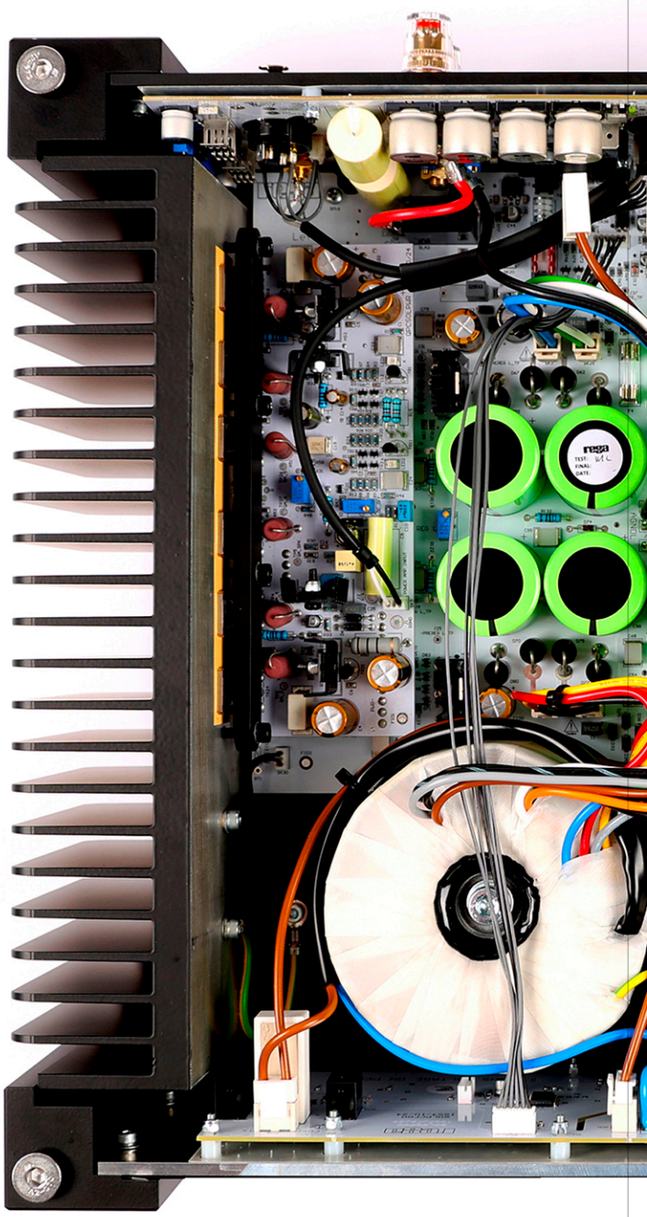
ampsandsound.com

Knowing that Rega always delivers maximum value and performance, yet chooses for the most part to stay in a modestly price groove – the idea that they were making a "cost no object" amplifier and preamplifier was intriguing. They'd hinted at this a while back with their top CD player, and the current Naia turntable is a class leader, so anything is possible.

With so many components costing $25k to over six figures today, all that keeps these components from being bragged about all over the world is Rega's reputation for offering true value. If they had power meters looking like expensive Swiss watches on the front, you'd pay $60k each for these, and be happy that you did. They belong at the head of the class.

Yet, if you are a true qualityphile, valuing sheer sonic performance, build quality, and lifelong value, you can save about $100k snagging the Rega pair and buying a nice used Aston Martin with the change. I know what I'd rather do.

A Different take on value



The Solis is hands down, the best value in solid-state power amplifiers for $30k-ish going. But remember, it's $10,500. Sonically, you'd swear you were listening to a Boulder in the way the Solis does not embellish or sonically alter the tonal range. As someone who prefers the slight warmth of a Class A amplifier, (not that that's for everyone) these two components from Rega are equally engaging.

Rega saves you a ton of money by adhering to economies of scale, perhaps better than any other manufacturer in the business. Ever unboxed a Rega turntable, with that red, semi-transparent tape? Yeah, Rega bought miles of that stuff when they started the company, and they are still using it! But seriously, if you look at the entire Rega product line, you'll see that components are similarly sized, and many use the same casework. Which means the same boxes, the same remotes, etc. etc. It all adds up.

Rega also builds damn near everything in house. They've had a lot of the same employees for decades. Precious little employee turnover means happy employees that don't screw things up. When was the last time you heard of a Rega product failing? I know Rega is a British company, but their products are like Hondas in the sense that they are engineered and built with extreme care and execution to last a lifetime. Quietly, without fanfare. There is something so lovely about that concept.

Unbox and setup

Oddly both components feel heavier than their 31 and 55 pound claimed weights. The casework is elegantly executed, and everything feels luxurious to the touch. Again, something you might not associate with Rega, but they belong here.

That Rega encloses a premium pair of RCA interconnects to go between the Solis and Mercury, along with each having premium power cords is another kindness that brings even more value to the table. Most $30-$50k preamplifiers come with a throw away power cord, requiring you to shell out at least another thousand or two on wire. As the Beatles were fond of saying, "It's getting better all the time." Using the Rega pair on a dedicated 20 amp circuit, through the Auditoriums, I noticed a nice update going from what Rega supplies and the $10 power cord that everyone else offers. Much of a Cardas fan as I am, I could not discern any further improvement going from the supplied Rega power cords to a pair of more expensive Clear power cords. (which is what I use in the rest of my system). It's also worth mentioning that the Rega remote is equally understated and tasteful.





Circuits and such

Around back of the Mercury is a set of balanced XLR inputs, four more RCA inputs, and a set of tape in and tape out jacks. There are balanced XLR and RCA outputs. The built in DAC offers two coaxial inputs, two RCA/SPDIF inputs and a galvanically isolated asynchronous USB input.

Personally, and selfishly, I like the tape loop, but most of you will never need it. The Mercury amplifier is stark, with a single pair of RCA inputs, a pair of XLRs. I love it that they rate the amplifier at 168 watts per channel into 8 ohms and 304 into 4. No rounding up. That wouldn't be Rega.

Rega makes note that the circuitry of the Mercury pre is single ended (unbalanced) throughout, with "additional circuitry" used to achieve the balanced ins and outs. They suggest using both the amp and pre in unbalanced mode for the absolute best sonics, and while this was easier to discern when using the Clarisys speakers, when swapping in the Harbeth Monitor 40.5s not as much. This may be a more moot point than Rega will even admit to.

The Solis power amplifier is robust, with a huge power supply and six Sanken 130 watt, 15A power transistors are used in the output stage. Separate 330VA toroidal transformers provide a discrete mono power supply. The supplied image of the inside reveals just how beefy the power supply in the Solis is. I wouldn't even know where to begin to take this one apart!

Rega has built on everything else they have learned to this point, mentioning that four years worth of R&D went into this pair. In every aspect, it shows. Rather than repeat or paraphrase, just click here to go to their website.

More listening

Even if you don't pair the Solis with a Mercury preamplifier (but you should really consider doing so) rest assured it plays well with others. Giving it a go with Pass, Parasound, PrimaLuna, conrad-johnson and a few others, reveal it to be as equally quiet and composed as it is with the Mercury – with balanced and RCA inputs.



The Solis makes no missteps whatsoever, regardless of the program material you choose. Classical lovers will appreciate its ability to re-create huge dynamic swings. Tracking through some Mahler and Shostakovich is a breeze, with zero clipping on the biggest crescendos. My favorite bob selections from the Blue Note era are served up with equal flare. This amplifier's ability to accelerate on musical transients instantly, and stop with equal dexterity makes dynamic music engaging and lifelike.

An incredibly low noise floor further contributes to the dynamic impact of both components, adding even more to the presentation of acoustic and vocal selections. All the audiophile clichés apply. There's a wealth of low-level information, and spatial cues rendered in a way that only the world's finest components can provide, and this is what catapults the Rega pair from "good for the money" to "really good."

Add spot on tonality, and nearly un-measurable distortion that is fatigue free, even after day long listening sessions and it all adds up to top class performance. Pianos and violins sound realistic and lifelike, both from a tonal representation and from the natural acoustic range these instruments deliver. I always go back to Liz Story's solo piano on her Windham Hill debut – *Solid Colors*, because it's so well recorded to 30i.p.s. tape. The Rega pair delivers the scale of her Steinway, while allowing for all the breath and decay. Beautiful.

The incredible layered vocals of the Bee Gees' "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?" are delivered with a high degree of delicacy and separation, yet the crunchy guitars in Dave Grohl's (Dee Gees) version of "Tragedy" punches through the harmonies with ease. We could go on with this bit or that bit from particular tracks, but suffice to say these components are excellent across the spectrum.

On board digital

Never being trendy in any aspect of circuit design, Rega sticks with tested and true legacy Wolfson chips for the bits, with careful attention paid to everything else. Refinement always, and this allows 16/44 up to 32/192 file decoding and DSD 64 capability. We can argue forever about approach, but this works, and works in a very musical way.

Using a Mac Book Pro, the HiFi Rose 161 Streamer, a Metronome CD transport, and a very old SONY ES player (to test the optical input) all work well. Regardless of whether you are streaming or playing physical media, the Rega delivers a digital aesthetic identical to their excellent lineup of CD players. A touch warm, and very un-digital sounding. A perfect match to the sonics of the amp and pre. As mentioned earlier in the review, the internal DAC of the Mercury easily compares to a stand alone unit that might cost you as much as $5k. Plus, no need for another mains cord or pair of interconnects. The only surprise here is that with Rega always being such an analog first company that they would include a DAC instead of a phono stage in the box! Hmmmm.

Is there more

In the context of nearly a million dollar reference system, there is more musical information to be extracted than the Solis and Mercury can deliver, but it's gonna cost you. However, for someone assembling a $50k-$200k system, it's going to be really tough to get more sonic performance for the money. Again, if you crave the warmth of Class A or tubes, that's a different movie.

Going back and forth repeatedly between the $25k ampsandsound preamplifier, the $55k Pass Labs XS Pre 2, and the $38k XS Pre (earlier model and my reference for the last 8 years) the delta is in the minute details. The ampsandsound delivers more warmth and bloom, thanks to the vacuum tubes, and the Pass preamplifiers both have a bit more weight to the presentation, and more overall depth.



To be fair, the Mercury still delivers about 88-90% of what these considerably more expensive preamplifiers deliver and the value proposition is extreme, especially considering the other three do not have an internal DAC, though the ampsandsound pre does have a wonderful on board phono stage.

But that's the unfair thing the other guys do. It's not a fair comparison, merely what is here and on hand. By comparison, I can't think of anything at the Mercury's price point that delivers anywhere near this level of performance that's been in the studio here in the last 10-12 years.

That said, provided you like the idea of having core amplification that comes across as extremely natural, lifelike, and neutral tonally – you will need to pony up a lot more than the cost of the Solis and Mercury. Or perhaps you have power hungry speakers that 168 watts per channel isn't enough. There aren't that many of those out there anymore though. Using the Mercury with speakers from YG, Harbeth, Clarisys, Pylon and a few vintage ESLs, they always delivered enough sheer power to satisfy.

The Solis is more than worth the asking price even if you forget the DAC, and it's good enough that you can use it with a much more exotic outboard DAC if your music tastes are primarily delivered digitally. Perhaps Rega will introduce a version of the Solis sans DAC.

If you happen to be a music lover that listens to analog as a primary source, (with a subsequently much higher investment in your analog front end) but still loves to play digital music when convenient, the Solis is an even more monstrous value. The onboard DAC is easily the equal of anything I've heard in the $3-5k range. The results obtained with a HiFi Rose 161 streamer was fantastic.

To put this in further perspective, I'd pair the Rega amp and pre with any $100k pair of speakers going, $50-$100k DAC, and/or $50-100k analog front end and not feel cheated in the slightest. If you picked up a couple of slightly used pieces, you could assemble a system for $50k - $100k that would take no prisoners with the Mercury and Solis as the foundation.

And that is why the Rega Solis and Mercury are our choice for Product of the Year-OVERALL. Every aspect of these two components is outstanding.

AXPONA 2026

Chicago, Illinois

axpona.com

photo of our publisher by @listentolisten

We don't produce show reports or hand out "best sound at the show" awards for one reason. There's such a wide range of gear, especially at Axpona - with systems ranging from a couple thousand to a couple million dollars, how would that be fair?

The best part of the show? Pounding stakes in a tree stump with the folks from Harmonia Distribution and OA Audio. I'm not kidding.

Not only did I hear a more rooms with really good sound, this year, there was a lot less audiophile music, and a lot more cameraderie.

A lot more fun than in years past. And a lot more people. While Sunday usually has teardown going on in earnest by noon, there were sill plenty of people giving demos at 6pm.

Here's to seeing you all next year.





MoFi ELECTRONICS

SourcePoint Loudspeakers

Designed by Andrew Jones



SourcePoint 10 SourcePoint 8

Two Speakers, Countless Accolades

GOLDEN EAR the absolute sound 2023 AWARDS

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

- Dick Olsher, The Absolute Sound

stereophile RECOMMENDED 2023 COMPONENT

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

- John Atkinson, Stereophile

pta

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

- Marc Phillips, Part Time Audiophile

The Audiophiliac

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

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

Playlist no. 4

Ok, it's time for another retro playlist.

My Facebook feed follows DEVO, and they posted a clip of them on Saturday Night Live in 1978. Crazy. I remember seeing DEVO like it was yesterday. Right before I moved out of my parents house.

"That's the kind of music you like?" My Mom said. "It's terrible." I became a DEVO fan instantly, and have always loved their music.

Here's a dozen of our favorite DEVO tracks for all you spuds that feel the same way.



Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are DEVO - *(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction*

-Shrivel-up

Duty Now For the Future - *Wiggly World*

- Secret Agent Man

Freedom of Choice - *Freedom of Choice*

- Girl U Want

New Traditionalists - *Through Being Cool*

- Beautiful World

Oh No! It's DEVO - *Peek-a-Boo*

-Speed Racer

Total Devo - *Don't be Cruel*

Hardcore DEVO, Vol. 1 - *Uglatto*

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*Free turntable setup is included with the purchase of a turntable and phono cartridge.

INHouse
The soundtrack of the issue.

Play some Skynyrd, man.

Sometimes, when you get knee-deep in production, you need some comfort food - snack wise and music wise!

This classic is a fave to call up on ROON, because hey, 24/96.

It never gets better than this.



March 1975

Nuthin' Fancy

Lynyrd Skynyrd

Play now

ALBUM ROCK | ARENA ROCK | BLUES-ROCK | BOOGIE ROCK | HARD ROCK | POP/ROCK | ROCK & ROLL | SOUTHERN ROCK

Second Helping brought Lynyrd Skynyrd mass success and for the follow-up they offered Nuthin' Fancy. It was a self-deprecating title for a record that may have offered more of the same, at least on the surface, but was still nearly peerless as a

Length	37 minutes
Rating	★★★☆☆
Format	FLAC 96kHz 24bit

TRACKS CREDITS VERSIONS

Focus Filter

✓	Saturday Night Special	52	5:09	▶11
✓	Cheatin' Woman Performed by Lynyrd Skynyrd, Al Kooper	3	4:39	▶7
	Railroad Song Performed by Lynyrd Skynyrd, Al Kooper	5	4:14	▶7
	I'm A Country Boy Performed by Lynyrd Skynyrd, Al Kooper	3	4:23	▶2
✓	On The Hunt	10	5:27	▶10
	Am I Losin' Performed by Lynyrd Skynyrd, Edward King	5	4:34	▶5
	Made In The Shade	8	4:38	▶4
	Whiskey Rock-A-Roller			

WHAMMERDYNE

HEAVY INDUSTRIES



Damn Good Amp - 2A3 SET Class A Stereo Integrated Amplifier - 4.3 Watts/channel



Damn Awesome Monoblocks - 2A3 parallel SET Class A Monoblock Integrated Amplifiers - 9.5 Watts/channel



Circuit Salad - 60 Watts/channel Hybrid Stereo Integrated Amplifier operating in Class A, Class A/B

Hear the Truth

Engineered with zero capacitors in the signal path. Hand-built in Oregon USA

info@whammerdyne.com

SHORTTake

By Jeff Dorgay

The Ground Floor

Fixing those hard to find noise gremlins

$199
verafiaudiollc.com



Ever have that crazy, noise/hum that drives you crazy, and you just can't get to the bottom of?

And you only hear it when things are really quiet?

Vera-Fi has come up with a new device that does more than just allow you to tie your equimpent grounds together.

With four different modes, a combination of one or more Ground Floor units, will help with everything from a simple ground float, to more complex grounding issues.

Regardless of how your system is wired and grounded, these will go a long way at lowering the total noise floor in your system.

We've been trying this in a number of different situations, and will report back soon, with an in-depth analysis for you.

But for now, this is a tool you need in your audio tool box.



VIRTUS I2

Class A Integrated Tube Amplifier

Perceive the difference

www.canor-audio.com

CANOR

Pylon Audio
Jade 30 Speaers

$9,995/pair

pylon.pl
suncoastaudio.com
luxuryhifidistribution.com/

These are not really audiophile speakers, and we say that in the highest form of praise possible. Some of todays speakers lose sight of great tonality and pace.

But don't let the retro look fool you. All of the drivers are made in-house by Pylon, and utilize some of the latest technology to achieve a speaker with a benign impedance curve and 93db/1-watt sensitivity.

The new Pylon Jade speakers (Models 10, 20, and the 30 you see here) are all incredibly easy to drive and position. We're smitten.



Pass Labs HPA-1C
Headphone Amplifier

$4,045.00 (silver)
$4,545.00 (black)
passlabs.com



While the Pass Labs HPA-1 has garnered universal acclaim as a world-class headphone amplifier, our publisher really loves using it as a back to basics linestage with 2 RCA line inputs and one line output.

How much more do you need really?

The new 1c has been improved in every way, much like the flagship XS PRE 2 - it's more dynamic, quieter, and more tonally accurate.

If you don't need the frills, it's still one of the best $10k linestages going.

APEX audio

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www.ApexAudioDenver.com | 303.399.2408 | sales@ApexAudioDenver.com

Dutch & Dutch
15c music system

About $90k, final pricing TBD

dutchdutch.com

If you happened to be at this year's AXPONA show, you know how cool these speakers were - they were out in the main lobby, rocking the house.

Utilizing proprietary DSP along with a cardoid midrange system, and additional rear-firing woofers, this was a complete music system, with DSP, DACS and amplifiers included.

That D&D was getting such great sound in an open hotel lobby of epic proportion validated all their claims that their speakers adapt to the environment they are in.

They make a number of smaller models as well, so that may happen first.

Either way, Dutch & Dutch is in our pages this year.



THE $10K TUBE PHONOSTAGE FOR 1/3 THE PRICE



"THE EVO 100 IS A GODSEND."

- DICK OLSHER, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND GOLDEN EAR AWARDS 2024

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GOLDEN EAR the absolute sound 2024 AWARDS

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Pathos
InPol Heritage mk. II Integrated Amplifier

$18,995
harmoniadistribution.com
pathosacoustics.it

Yeah, this one is as heavy as it looks - 176 pounds to be exact.

But, it's a full 80 watt per channel, pure class A, hybrid design. Tube input stage and full class A Mosfet output stage using Pathos' new InPol amplifier topology.

You can read all about it on the Pathos site.

We've got a full review in progress, yet it's safe to say that we have always been huge fans of this brand. The level of execution Pathos has brought, both sonically and aesthetically is crazy good.

And those cool meters! Yeah baby.





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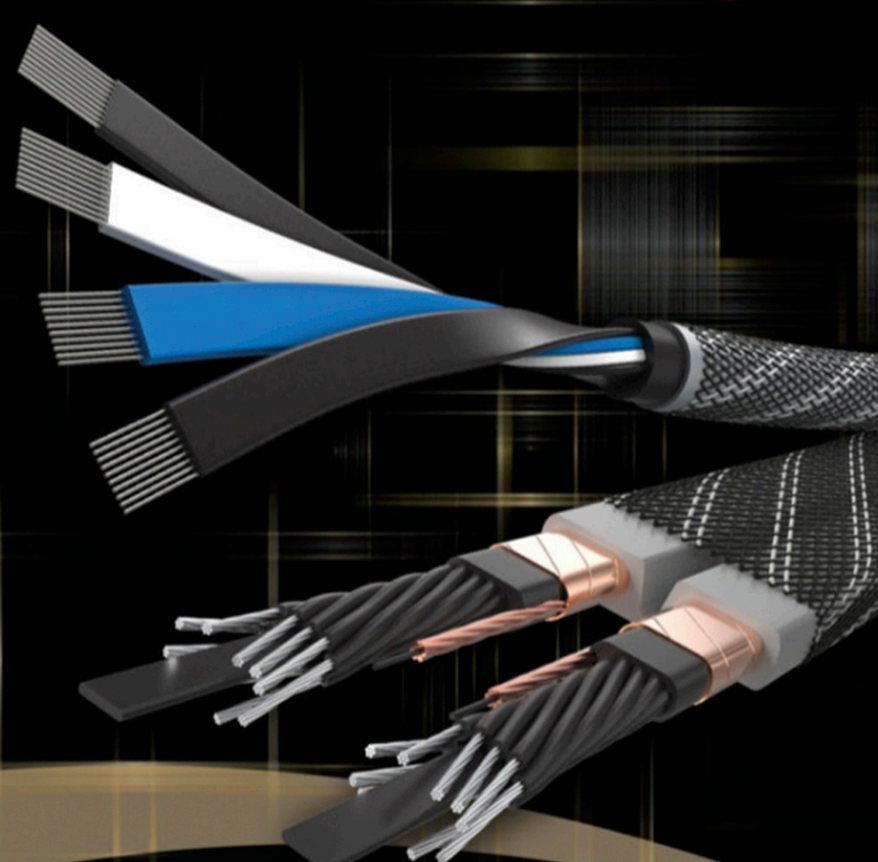
SERIES 10 Xtraordinary

New Ultra-quiet **COMPOSILEX®** 5 insulation improves textural purity, enabling us to hear quieter sonic details than ever before.

New **DNA HELIX®** designs have more strand groups, which strengthens the electromagnetic field that moves the signal, providing greater resolution, image focus and dynamic contrasts.

The combination of these technical improvements provides surprising upgrades in recreating the power and delicacy of live music.



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Soul Note
E2E v.2 Phono Preamplifier

$9,890
supremeacousticsystems.com

This four input phono stage, that offers nearly unlimited adjustabity, and an input for a DS optical cartridge too, is a major convenience for the analog lover with multiple turntables, tonearm and cartridge combinations.

When you start to get more than one turntable, space is at a premium. So far everything we've heard from Soul Note has been excellent, so we are expecting the E-2 to ace that part of the review.

No matter what your setup, the E2 has you covered.





THE FINE ARTS

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



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DS Audio E3
Phono cartridge

$3,000
musicalsurroundings.com

As exciting as DS Audio's top of the range (i.e. 5-figure) optical cartridges are, they deliver so much performance in the E3, calling it an "entry-level" cartridge does it a great disservice.

We reviewed the predecessor years ago, and found it to be resolving, and incredibly fast. It's a sound like no other cartridge, because of the nature of the optical cartridge, which requires it's own powered step up stage.

You can purchase one from DS, or a few other manufacturers have come to recognize it's greatness and are offering their own.

We'll definitely be looking forward to putting this through its paces.




BREAKING NEWS
Cardas Audio
“Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing”
- Pauline T., 1868

Thorens TD-124DD
Direct Drive Turntable

$11,995 (no cart)
$14,990 with Ortofon SPU TD124 MC
mofidistribution.com



Precious few vintage things survive being re-imagined, yet Thorens has done a fantastic job at re-creating the look, feel and sound of the original, in a compact, high performance table.

The Thorens arm has a knife edge main bearing, and comes with two counterweights - one for the bespoke Ortofon TD124 version of their famous SPU cartridge, and one for cartridges with a standard, Technics mount headshell.

We're pretty smitten so far.

Wrensilva Studio
Console Music System

$9,900
wrensilva.com

Record consoles have been a thing for a few years now. But the Wrensilva models are nothing like what the boomers grew up with.

These all have modern features, modern electronics, and gorgeous, artisan, modern styling cues.

We'll be zooming out to their showroom on Melrose soon, to look, touch and listen for ourselves, to bring you a full report.




NEW NAME FOR
HIGHEND
WWW.MONACOUSTIC.US

ISO Acoustics
Gaia 1 Isolation Feet

$579 (set of 4)
isoacoustics.com

A few of us have large speakers that could stand to be isolated from the floor a bit better than they currently are.

Because we like to rock, that's why, and when you're cranking the hell out of your system playing vinyl, you need every bit of isolation you can get.

Enter ISO Acoustics.

These are the Gaia 1s, the biggest ones they make.

How good are they? We'll let you know soon!



THE COMPONENTS OF EXCELLENCE: LASTING VALUE

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





Made in the USA

"The best source I know 'for all things McIntosh' is Audio Classics in Vestal, New York. They do a lot of restoration work on McIntosh products and are an authorized McIntosh dealer and service center."

Jim Hannon,VP/Group Publisher & Senior Writer, *The Absolute Sound*

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MINE
it should be YOURS

Welcome to MINE:

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

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

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

Hip Hop in Print

From Hip Hop Legend Chuck D.

$12-20 (depending on where you live)
silverbackpublishing.rocks

Public Enemy's Chuck D has started his own magazine, covering every aspect of hip hop music, culture and artists.

In oversize printed format, Rap Central Station pays respect to Hip-hop's past and present.

The artwork and design are top - this is what music magazines used to feel like, when you picked them up and help them in your hand.



Don’t Let The Size Fool You...



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

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

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

www.verafiaudiollc.com

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

MINE
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The Mondaine Table Clock

$305
mondaine.com

Need some super cool Swiss precision for your desk or night stand?

Check these out! Lovely, affordable, and comes in white and black too.




The perfect size loudspeaker
for any room
aspen FR20

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Throw that GPS out!

$49-199 (size dependent)
eastofnowhere.co

Here's something really analog for you...

A map!

East of Nowhere has a great selection of maps from different countries and regions for your enjoyment.

The beautiful 3D renderings put things in perspective in a way a GPS just can't.

OCTAVE

www.octave.de



A NEW STAR IS BORN

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Jubilee Class A

The latest thinking from the mind of Andreas Hofmann, Jubilee Class A is a reference mono power amplifier that combines the endurance and control of a traditional Octave enhanced pentode push-pull design with the musicality and purity of its innovative self-regulating Class A circuit.

Capable of generating 160 watts of pure Class A power, its High Power setting unleashes up to 280 watts in A/AB mode when demand calls. Handmade in Germany to the highest standards, the Jubilee Class A was designed to bring musicality, finesse, and power together in perfect balance.

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clarkandcove.com

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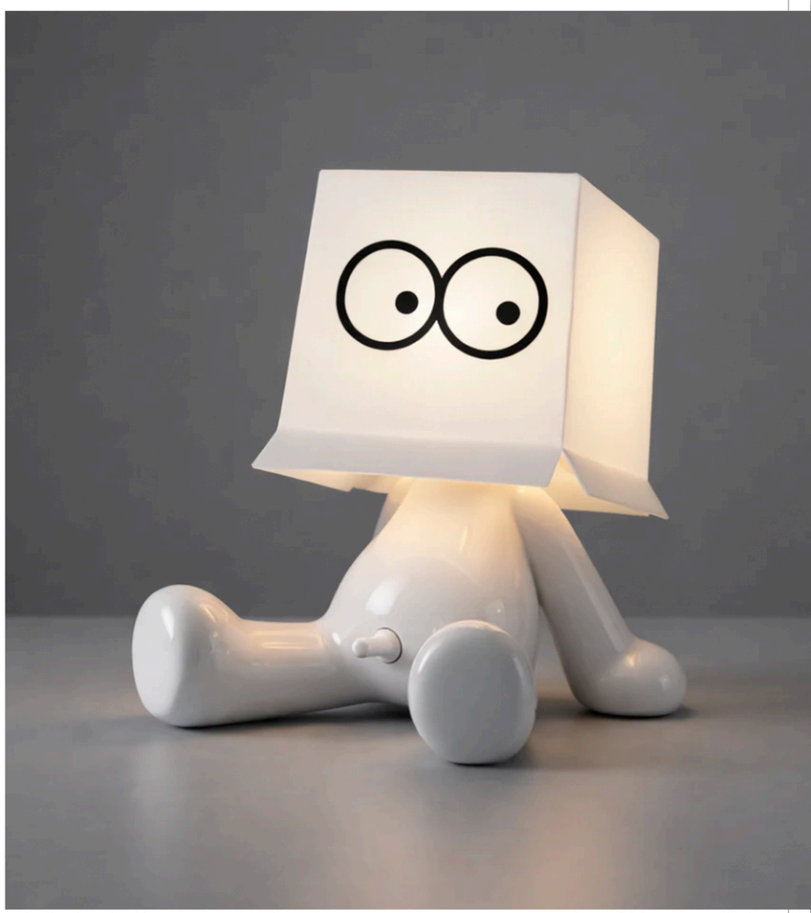
Extra points for putting a HUE colored LED inside and getting a bit freaky when you need it.



Or Get Emo

$24.99
amazon.com

Why do you want another Kraftwerk remaster? (I know I do...)

This one, the 50th anniversary copy of Radio-Activity, now comes as a Blu-Ray Atmos mix. Even more trippy bits of electronica. Now we dance.



You Deserve the Audible Luxury of True ribbon Sound

Clarisys Audio



ARIA

www.clarisysaudioglobal.com

MINE
it should be YOURS



But you cant have it...

The Klipsch/OJAS KO-R1 (but the R2 is on the way)

$8,500/pair
klipsch.com

The latest collaboration between streetwear designer OJAS (Devon Turnbull) and Klipsch will feature a bigger box and a larger multi-cell horn, making up a two-way speaker with high sensitivity, and an industrial aesthetic.

OJAS KO-R1 sold out almost instantly, but a new R2 version will hit select dealer showrooms very soon, with a total of 600 pair being produced.

We're going to try and track down a pair for a listen, to find out what the excitement is about. If you've ever thought about getting a pair, get down to your Klipsch dealer now, and write a check.

Photo courtesy of Klipch

CLEARAUDIO *Signature*



"Rock-solid stability, timing accuracy, and resolving power make the Signature...the affordable analog rig you've been waiting for."

- Neil Gader, *The Absolute Sound*, November 2025

2026 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

2026 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD



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aqua
acoustic quality



Dominio Digitale

TIMELESS

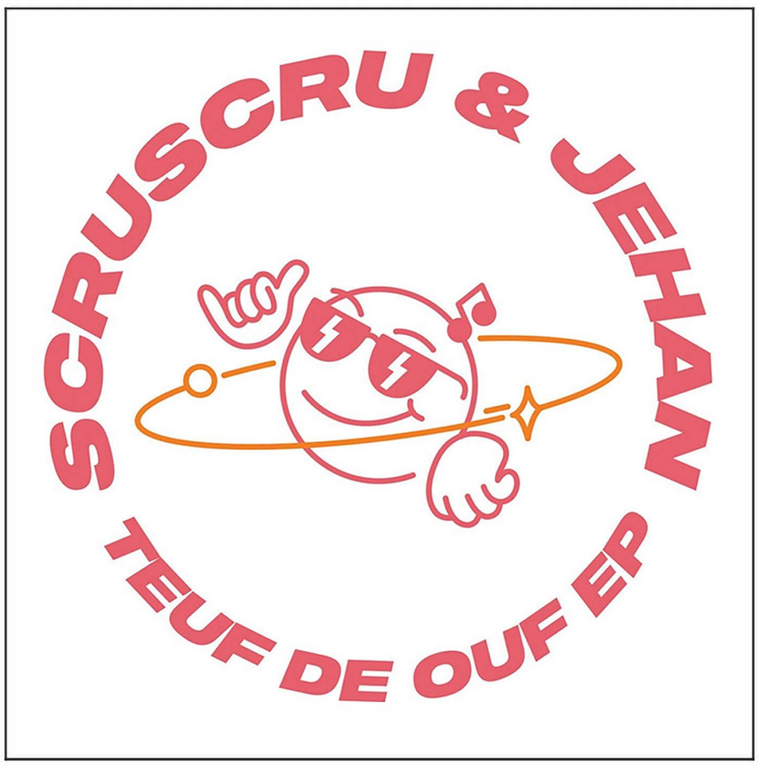
www.aquahifi.com
info@aquahifi.com

Club Mix compilation expert, Scott Tetzlaff's theme for this playlist is "Vendome."

Assuming we can probably all use some end of year cozy, this list is all downtempo jazz/electronic, with a vibe that's not too slow, not too fast. Energizing and relaxing at the same time.

And, an Apple Music link as well. Click at the bottom.

Enjoy!



Baba Stiltz - Running to Chad (mixed)

Carlo - Starting Tomorrow

Portugal, The Man - Feel it Still

Holo - Jaune

Ian Pooley - Venasque

Mark Farina - Dream Machine (Downtempo Mix)

ScruScru, Jehan - Teuf De Ouf

Sven Wegner, Scruscru - Siempre Ritmo (ScruScru Remix)

40 Thieves, Qzen - Don't Turn It Off

COEO - Like It Is

Tame Impala - Powerlines

Lee Rodriguez - Making a Living

https://music.apple.com/us/playlist/vendome/pl.u-DdAN8AdCgaagq3

See you in 2027!



FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL AUDIO EXPO

Listening In Paradise

www.floridaaudioexpo.com

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

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

"It's the perfect size show. Great mix of gear, and not too big you can't see it all in the weekend. And - Waffle House just down the street. Awesome."
Jeff Dorgay - TONEAudio Magazine

DEALERS That Mean Business.

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

A few years later, times have changed, the landscape has changed somewhat, butthe best dealers have adapted and are still thriving. Innovate or perish, as the sayinggoes. Many have gone to an appointments only model, which hasn't been all that much ofa stretch, because many hifi shops had adopted this model, or at least a semi-appointment model before the current situation.

Of course, stricter anti-cootiesprotocols have been engaged, and for the most part, customers have stayed in the retail game.We've swapped a few people out here, but most of the dealers we were featuring are still doing well - we are truly glad for this. As it becomes easier and easier to travel again, I'll be back on the road seeking out more great dealers and attending events.In the issues to come, we're also going to be featuring commentary from these dealers,telling their stories on how they've adjusted, and what, if anything they've learned and changed.

As we move into the year 2026 I still firmly believe the support from a great hifi dealer is essential to help you wade through the ever increasing complexity of audio, whether it be two channel, theater, or something in-between.

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

The top retailers need our support now more than ever. And despite the wacky world, I see them making a comback.

NAGRA

The New Preamp II-S

Focus.



ALMA MUSIC & AUDIO
San Diego,CA and Sterling, VA
almaaudio.com

ARIZONA HI-FI
Phoenix, AZ
arizonahifi.com

AUDIO SALON
Coral Gables, FL
audiosalon.net

COMMON WAVE
Los Angeles, CA
commonwave.net

EARSNOVA
Holmes, NY and New York, NY
earsnova.com

EXCEL AUDIO
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farnsworthaudio.com

NE PLUS ULTRA
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neplusultrainc.com

RESOLUTION AUDIO VIDEO
Brooklyn, NY 11231
resolutionavnyc.com

UNVEILED AUDIO
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unveiledaudio.com

nagraaudio.com

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www.audiovisionsf.com
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San Francisco, California 94109 415.614.1118



Austin, Texas - Whetstone Audio

www.whetstoneaudio.com
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Austin, Texas 78702 512.477.8503



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lmche.com
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DS Audio

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MASTER 3 PHONO EQ
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Vancouver ,Canada - HiFi Centre

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



Marietta, Georgia - The Audio Company

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



50 BRANDS

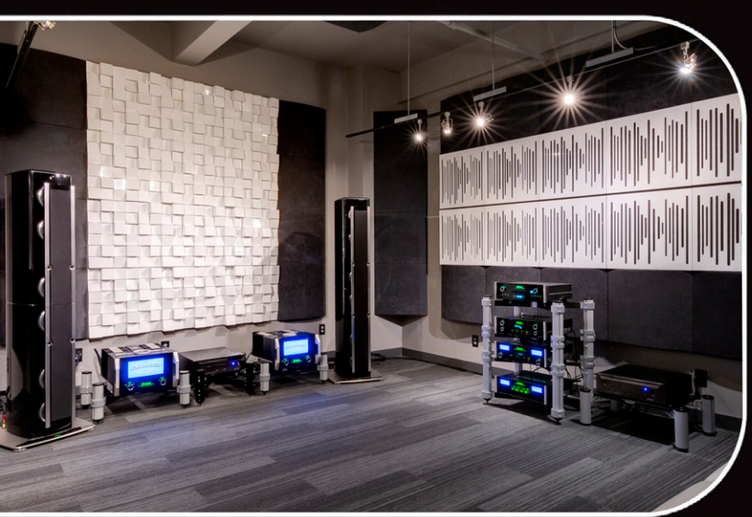
8 DEMO ROOMS

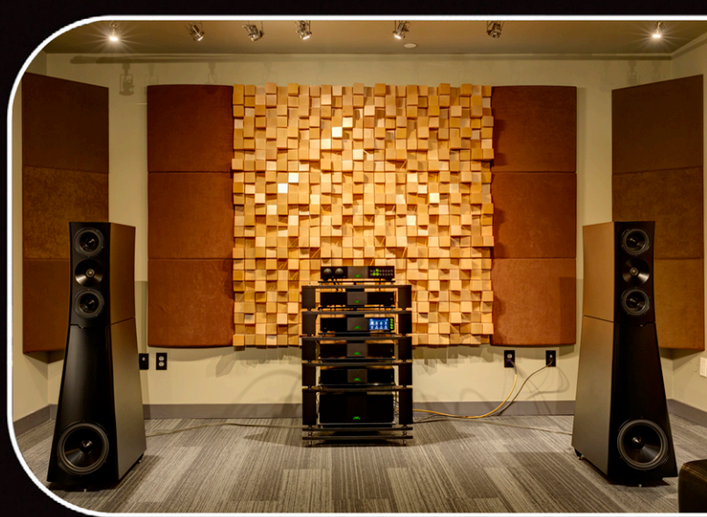
1 LOCATION

hifi centre







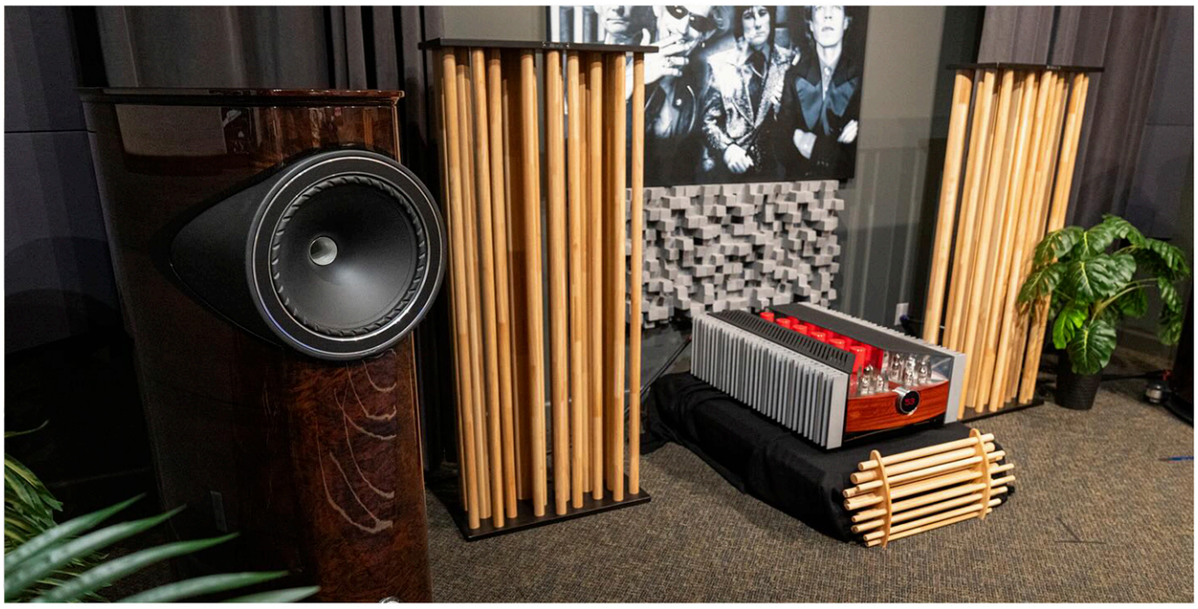


hificentre.com

433 Carrall Street | Vancouver | Canada | 604 688 5502

La Verne, California - Upscale Audio

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



Vestal, New York - Audio Classics

audioclassics.com
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Vestal, New York 13850 800.321.2834



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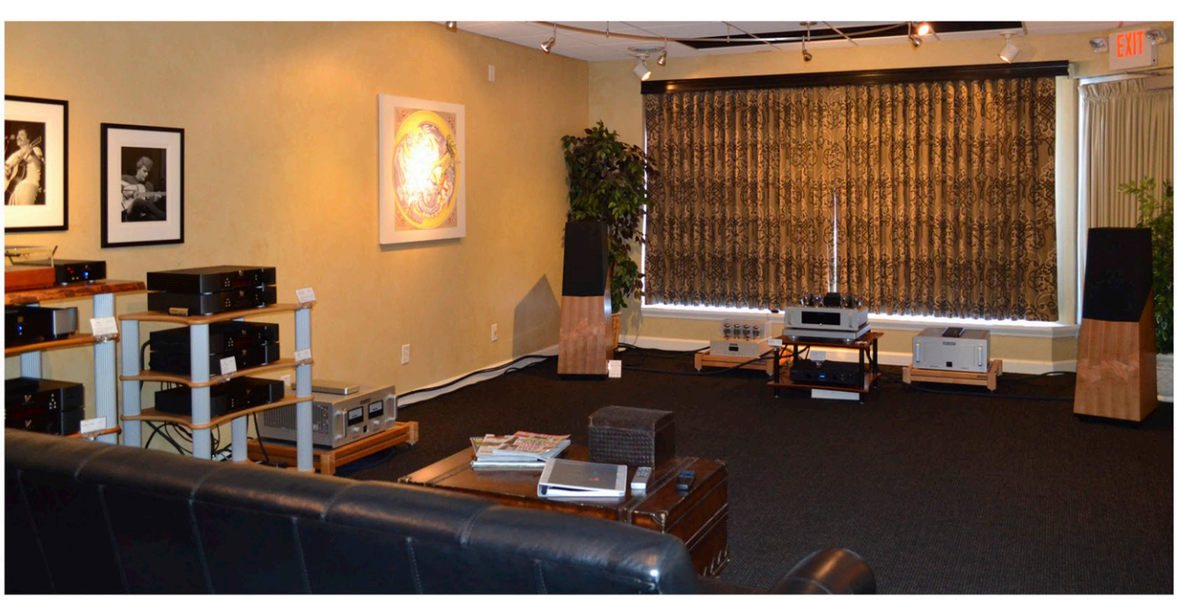

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Reel to Reel isn't the only revolution.

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

Try Capture 1 from Splicit.

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

Hence the name.

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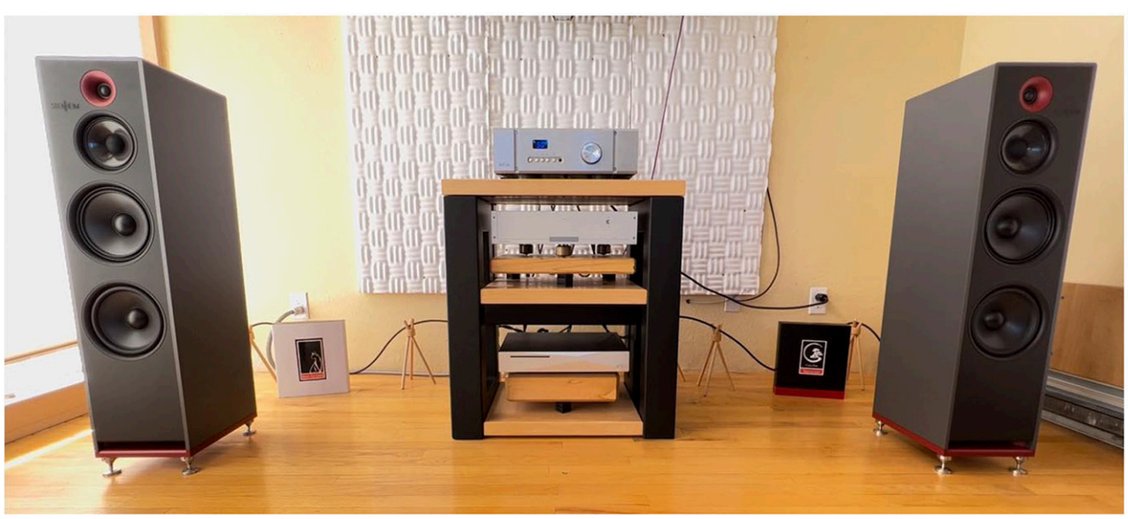
Morton Grove, Illinois - Quintessence Audio

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



Santa Fe, New Mexico - Gestalt Audio

www.gestalthifi.com
24 Sunlit Dr. West
Santa Fe, NM 87508 (by appointment)



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dCS Rossini reflects our goal to deliver sound with the utmost fidelity, allowing listeners to experience the full breadth of detail and emotion in their music, and the full impact of an artist's work. The Rossini APEX DAC, Master Clock, Transport and integrated Player are available to audition at retailers across the US and beyond. Scan the QR code below to find out more or locate your nearest stockist.

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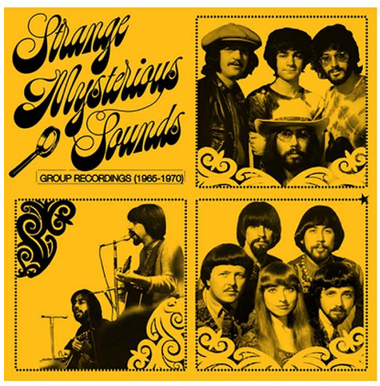
Scan the QR code to find out more about Rossini

Onliners

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

Enjoy!



1969 Trippy



If you must, you must



2026 Trippy



The Ground Zero of Funk



You had me at BLARF



Noisier, Heavier, Spacier



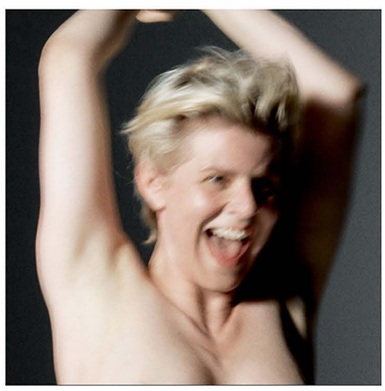
Super soothing



Hated em then, hate em now



You know I had to...



The cover says it all



Nice to see her back



Still my favorite Beatle...

AVIDHIFI

ACUTUS CLASSIC™





"The ethos to strive for perfection in everything we do"

Welcome, to true audiophile quality.

The Acutus Classic, comes complete with a precision 10kg aluminium platter, driven by our hand-built motor 10 times more powerful than is normally used, if you want the best, this is it.

This is where the AVID philosophy began. The Acutus Classic is engineered from the ground up without compromise.
From it came our unique sapphire bearing and twin stage clamping system which efficiently channels unwanted vibrations away from the record to the chassis. The result is a presentation that is dramatically focussed and paints a vividly realistic image of the recording.

Isolating the main chassis is critical to eliminating colouration. We designed a tripoint sprung and O-ring suspension system with ultra-low frequency that does this effortlessly. The result is information retrieval and resolution other turntables can only dream about.

The Acutus Classic offers unrivalled quality vinyl reproduction, engineered to put the music first.

It's reassuringly an AVID turntable that will put you on the stage.

SPECIFICATIONS	
DRIVE	Twin Belt Drive
SPEEDS	33.3 & 45.0 RPM. (Adjustable)
PLATTER MASS	10.0kg
PLATTER MATERIAL	Aluminium
BEARING	Inverted Satinless Steel
THRUST POINT	Tungsten Carbide / Sapphire
SUSPENSSION	3 point sprung (V-2.5Hz / L-4.5Hz)
TONEARM FITING	Pre cut for AVID/SME (Not included)
ADAPTERS	YES (Available on Request)
MOTOR	24v 140mNm AC Synchronous (Hand Built)
POWER SUPPLY	Separate DSP Vari-Speed PSU
VOLTAGE INPUT	110-240VAC 50/60Hz 20W MAX (Regional)
DIMENSIONS	460 x 400 x 210 (mm) WxDxH (Turntable) 250 x 215 x 95 (mm) WxDxH (PSU)
NET WEIGHT	19.0kg (42lb) (Turntable) 3.5kg (45lb) (PSU)
PACKAGING	550 x 500 x 570 (mm) WxDxH
SHIPPING WEIGHT	28.5kg (63lb)

AVIDHIFI
MADE IN THE UK
Bicton Industrial Park, Kimbolton, Huntingdon, Cambs. PE28 0LW ENGLAND
Tel: +44 (0)1480 869900 / Web: www.avidhifi.co.uk / Email: info@avidhifi.co.uk

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CHANNEL TONE

A differnt approach

We've decided to take a different approach to YouTube and not "monetize."

And it's the same reason we don't participate in any affiliate programs. If we have to yell, scream, make funny faces, and re-hash stuff you already know about audio, just to get clicks, and sell stuff, we're not interested.

That's never been the mission at TONE.

I'm not a part-time audiophile. I'm not a part -time anything. The mission here has always been to help you sift through the nearly endless choices of gear in the hope that we can help you better define what YOU like, and how to get it.

What we like is irrelevant, unless it happens to be what you like too.

That's why we don't use all those big audiophile cliches.

We're not "mind blown" or "gobsmacked" by "game changers."

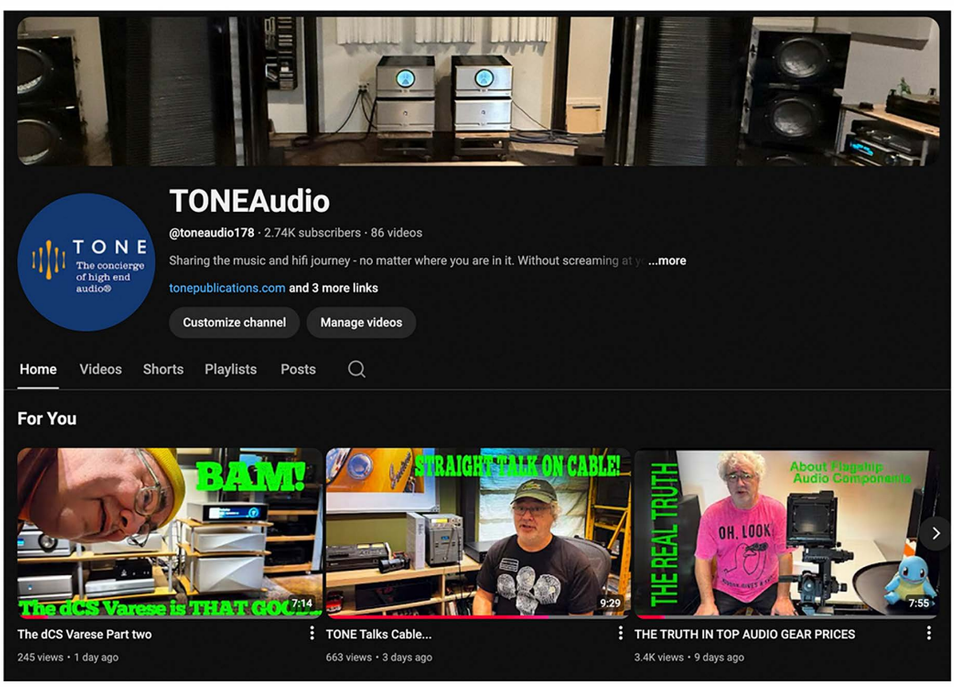
Our job is to describe and report, so that you can decide if any of this stuff is worth your time.

I will make every effort in the weeks to come to try and eliminate as many ads as popping up as possible. By abandoning the monitization effort, we should be able to keep those annoying ads to a minimum.

Kind of an old school approach in a world of talking heads, but ultimately one we feel that will help you build a music system that meets your needs, so that you spend more time in the happy spot when you are listening.

While our channel is and probably will remain small, I hope it will be something that helps you with your hifi journey or at least a spot of levity in this leisurely pursuit that is way too serious at times.

Please stop by if you see fit. Just click here:
https://www.youtube.com/@toneaudio178



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BUCK TRADITION

"At this price point, the F703SP is not only my favorite loudspeaker but very likely the best find on the loudspeaker map." **- Dick Olsher, The Absolute Sound**



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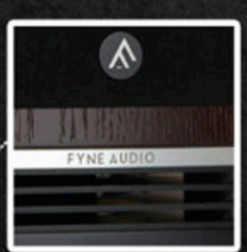
A point-source system providing outstanding stereo imaging, even off-axis. Energy is radiated isotropically with constant directivity, following the flare of the driver cone.

FYNEFLUTE



A variable geometry surround within the computer designed fluting eliminates mis-termination effects and reduces coloration, providing greater musical accuracy.

BASSTRAX



A tractrix-profile diffuser is used to convert plain wave energy to an expanding spherical 360-degree wavefront, integrating bass energy uniformly into the room.

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An in-house deep cryo system is used to treat the entire crossover with its high-end components and point-to-point wiring, offering a much smoother response.

Imagine a Skunk Works division of your favorite heritage brand. Now, you can enjoy the best of Dr. Paul Mills' innovations in the **F703SP Floorstanding Loudspeaker**, a product steeped in tradition yet free from constraints.

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Guilty as Charged

I'm not a huge Billy Joel fan, but this one has always been a great disc for the end of a long road trip, and the end of an issue.

And this Japanese pressing sounds lovely.


Feel the *woof* in subwoofers
rel.net
REL
ACOUSTICS LTD

LAST Word

our parting thought...



That's a wrap. Issue is done and someone wants to go for a ride to get some snacks.

Sounds like a plan.

Hope to see you this sumer at a show or dealer event.

Next issue, 127:

Next issue... heavy on electronics.

And a very long piece on living with the ultra-mega dCS Varese six-box digital player. What a ride! I wish we could all have one.

What an experience.

And of course, all the usual departments!

Thank you all for reading!

We'll have another issue in August, but there will be plenty of content on both of our sites and YouTube inbetween.

TONE