

dCS | LEGENDS

Only A Few Engineers Become Legends

In the world of music production, there's a select group of recording engineers who have strived throughout their career to deliver the highest quality listening experience possible.

When it comes to making the best recordings in Music City, Nashville-based Chuck Ainlay is likely involved. He has spent more than 30 years engineering albums for such major artists as Mary Chapin Carpenter, Sheryl Crow, Steve Earle, Mark Knopfler, Lyle Lovett, Willie Nelson, Taylor Swift and Lee Ann Womack. Plus his vast experience with leading-edge technology has enabled him to work on GRAMMY® winning albums like Miranda Lambert's *Platinum*, George Strait's *Troubadour*, Peter Dinklage's *Fingerprints* and Dire Straits' *Brothers in Arms* – 20th Anniversary Edition (surround mix).

Chuck's engaging and collaborative approach to recording and mixing has made him a trusted partner to numerous music creatives. All of which is why dCS is proud to honor Chuck Ainlay as the latest recipient of our dCS Legends Award.



info@dcsLtd.co.uk | @dCSonlythemusic | www.dcsLtd.co.uk

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-Soundstage (EISA Member)

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-Hi-Fi News (EISA Member)



SVSSound.com

In House

The soundtrack of assembling the issue...



Hearing Christmas music in the stores, is a love it or hate it thing, so why not cave in to the holiday madness right now?

As the late Frank Zappa once said, "I know when I'm licked, all over."

Even if you don't celebrate this holiday, it does have a star-studded cast. And it might just put a smile on your face, regardless.

So, to whatever you do celebrate, we hope it's a good one.

TONE105.005

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When John Atkinson came to measure, I insisted he listen...
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and the absence of reproductive artifacts were remarkable.
It's what this hobby/pursuit is all about.

Michael Fremer, Stereophile, May 2020



When Music Matters



Valve Amplification Company

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TONE

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We're talking the full 6-pak baby!



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Sponsored By Qobuz

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Shh...

This issue, we combine the glorious Sonus faber Stradiveri's with Luxman to achieve magic at moderate listening levels. (note that serial number - pair 001 in in the Sonus faber factory!)

By Jeff Dorgay



TONE is published 6 times yearly in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. And except for that one print issue, we've been online only, Saving the trees since 2005.



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A Totally
NEW
eXperience
Fire V2

TORRENT 
TECHNOLOGY

totemacoustic.com

what's inside:



23

Old School...

Richard Colburn goes way down memory lane, sharing a piece that he's had for an incredibly long time.



TONE is published 6 times yearly in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. And except for that one print issue, we've been online only, Saving the trees since 2005.

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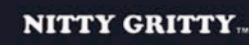
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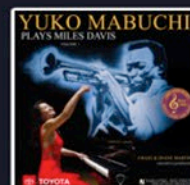


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Impex UHQCD



Pink Floyd
Pink Floyd Records 180g 3LP



Janaki String Trio
Yarlung 180g 45rpm LP

new arrivals...

Good friend, industry vet, and long-time audio enthusiast Richard Colburn has a great story about his very first amp and tuner. It's always a ton of fun when you can revisit your past in such a positive light.





Cover Shot:

This issue's cover is courtesy of the McIntosh factory, so I'm not sure exactly how it was created.

As our 275 is a mk.5, and the current is a mk.6, we wanted to make sure that our Product of the Year was properly represented.



Walnut **NEW**



Maple

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paradigm.com



no.105

P u b l i s h e r s L e t t e r

It's that time of year again - the holiday season, and awards.

Believe me, this is always tough, because someone always feels slighted. However as wacky as this year has been, there has been a steady stream of incredible gear at our doorstep.

Most manufacturers are having an excellent year, despite, dealers who have faced a major challenge to keep the doors open. Additionally, many of you have told us that between a combination of working at home anyway, or now being forced too, it's been a good year for upgrading your systems, and listening to more music than ever before.

Normally, I'd suggest getting a puppy and stay under the covers, but COVID has jacked up the cost and driven down the availability of puppies right now. So, if you managed to get a puppy, or a copy of Paul McCartney's new record on vinyl, consider yourself lucky.

2021's crystal ball still looks pretty murky. Even though a vaccine is on the horizon for the COVID virus, and airlines are implementing tighter travel and border protocols, I'm not seeing much happening in terms of audio shows in 2021, but hopefully I'll be proved wrong.

But back to the awards...

You'll noticed this year we handed out a few more trophies this year. While I'm not a fan of handing out participation trophies, just the fact that equipment stayed in the production and shipping pipelines is pretty amazing. It was looking kind of bleak in March.

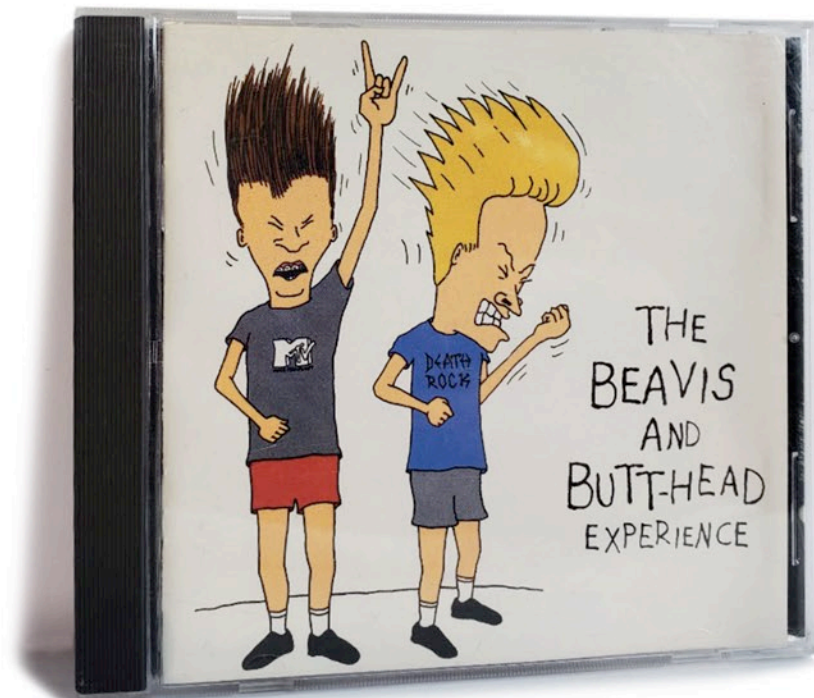
Yet as I mentioned, the percentage of off the charts good gear is pretty high this year. Hence more awards. Like Jay Leno with his cars, I just wanted to keep them all. (and I did keep a few pieces) Because of this, our normal format is disrupted ever so slightly, but fear not, we will return to original programming next issue.

Please stay safe, and we truly look forward to the day we can see those of you that frequent the shows and dealer events again, even if it's the end of 2021. (That still sounds crazy coming out of my mouth, without "flying cars" going along with it.

Peace.

Sometime, you just need a good laugh. Here are some of ours, new and old, that never fail to bring a smile. Silly, yes, but if you can't laugh, all is lost.

Ironically, we've started and ended the list with a poke at the Beatles.



Beatallica – I Want to Choke Your Band

Spinal Tap – Sex Farm Woman

Cheech and Chong – Sister Mary Elephant

The Simpsons – Springfield Soul Stew

Beavis and Butthead (with Cher) – I Got You Babe

Ren and Stimpy – Happy, Happy, Joy, Joy

Cast of South Park – San Diego

Cast of South Park – Mr. Hankey's Christmas Poo

Chef – No Substitute

Weird Al – Fat

Wild Man Fischer – I'm a Christmas Tree

The Rutles – Ouch!



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Home Again: With Realistic

You've heard the expression that goes like this: "You can't go home again." Well, in the audio world, it turns out that you can return to your roots. If you've been an audiophile for a long time, you probably often wonder if a certain memorable scenario involving equipment can be repeated. You can't always do it exactly, but you can get close.



"Tellurium Q's Ultra Black II's can be see as one of the best loudspeaker cables on the market at their price"

- Jon Myles, Hifi World

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

- Ian Ringstead, Hifipig.com

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"I have yet to hear a speaker cable which delivers timing like this one."

- Chris Kelly, The Ear

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When I was a poor college student and budding audio enthusiast, I used to pour over the Lafayette Radio catalog or the Radio Shack catalog lusting after the offerings from Fisher, H.H. Scott, Acoustic Research, Pilot, KLH and others. However, I could never afford any of it. In the summer of 1970, I wandered into a Radio Shack store with some cash in my pocket just to see if I could afford a system for myself. It turned out I could. Walking on air and out of the store I was now the owner of the most basic of Radio Shack Systems.

The system consisted of a Realistic SA-175B integrated amplifier and the Realistic TFM 175 FM tuner, shown here, along with a Realistic Lab-12 turntable fitted with a Shure M44 cartridge. A pair of Realistic MC-1000 speakers rounded out the package, and this system saw me through my final year at college. Not long after graduation, it was all replaced with more sophisticated high-performance gear. But through the years I had always wondered if my first little system was any good.

Not long ago, I acquired the integrated amp and FM tuner from a local yard sale. The amp needed a little work, but a local tech quickly sorted it out.

The tuner had no problems grabbing the stronger local stations so it did not need any technical attention.

Now what?

I wasn't fortunate enough to find a LAB-12 turntable or the speakers, but I did cobble together enough bits to get a good idea.

Speaker cables of 16 gauge lamp cord were used, not for the vintage feel, but because they were all that would fit the tiny connectors on the back of the amplifier! No big banana posts here.

My current Wharfedale Denton 80 speakers are vintage-ish, so they were used for all the listening sessions to follow.



Enjoy the Experience



PASS

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The iPod Classic I used to supply music probably sounds way better than my old LAB-12 playing scratchy LP's anyway. As the amplifier

I set the Wharfedales up on some Iso Acoustics Apert isolation stands and proceeded to do some preliminary listening. To call the presentation was mellow is an understatement. Fortunately, the little amp has tone controls so a little fiddling was in order. I ended up turning down the bass a bit and boosting the treble a bit and found a good tonal balance with which I could then evaluate the sound.

Mind you, my iPod is filled with .wav and Apple lossless files, with a lot of audiophile recordings on hand, but I did not use any of those, choosing "Where Was You At"? by War, "Pop Virgil" by the Stanley Clarke Band, and "Deuce And A Quarter" by the Bo-Keys to bring back that vintage vibe.

The little system did get my toes tapping and that's all I could have asked for from such a seemingly ridiculous setup.

The biggest fault I could find was a lack of transparency, but what can one expect from a fifty-year-old solid-state amplifier, that sold for peanuts?

That fault is easily forgiven considering the humble nature of the device. It goes to show that if one uses some ingenuity and takes their audiophile hat off, you can enjoy music for the sake of the music and the memories.

Did I go home again? I say yes. Was it exactly as I remember it as it played in my tiny two-room apartment?

It was better.



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Introducing the Limited Edition SL-1210GAE Coreless Direct Drive Turntable



Limited Edition
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SL-1210GAE

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The **SVS**
Prime
Wireless Sound Base

\$499
svsound.com

One of the most enjoyable aspects of setting up a home office is putting together a great music system to keep you entertained while working. Once you acquire the essentials (desk, chair, computer, and suitable dog bed), it's time for dessert.

Can't work without music, right?

1095

Great sound around a G...



But where to begin? There's so much great gear that not only has a compact footprint but a compact price as well. Today, these mini Hi-fi components offer big sound. The SVS Prime Wireless Soundbase wraps a DAC, Streamer, and 150 watt per channel amplifier in an enclosure half the size of a standard stereo component for only \$499.99.



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The Prime's front panel is minimal and easy to engage. One control selects the input source, and the other adjusts the volume level in the middle of a blue display, indicating input choice, wireless strength, and volume level. Right beneath it, the SVS logo is backlit in blue. Also included is a 3.5mm headphone jack, which works well with most modern budget phones. Around back, there are two AUX inputs (1 RCA and one 3.5mm) and an optical digital input. Ethernet in and out ports allow you to chain another Ethernet device in with ease. The USB port is labeled "service," so don't plan on using this for connecting a laptop. The Prime's primary wireless connectivity is via Play-Fi. (those wanting more info on Play-Fi, just click here)



A single pair of binding posts for your speakers, an AUX OUT, and of course, a subwoofer output, making it easy to make your Prime based system a 2.1 setup. Check out the SVS site for some great system package pricing.

Setting up the Prime is a breeze. Thanks to the enclosed quick start guide, It should take you about 10 minutes to unpack, install the DTS Play-Fi app on your phone (works fine on Mac and Android), and rock. The Rolling Stones' *Goats Head Soup* via Qobuz in 24/96 was the first selection via my HiFiMan HE400i headphones. Straight out of the box, the Prime sounds slightly grainy and congested, but most of this goes away after being powered up for a few days, and the last little bit, shortly after.

Engineered for Reality

Testing

Wireworld

Cable Technology

was founded with the unique mission of perfecting audio cables through objective listening tests.

Far more revealing than normal cable comparisons, these tests compare cables to virtually perfect direct connections between components. Robert Harley, editor of *The Absolute Sound*, described this "Cable Polygraph" as, "illuminating insight into exactly how each cable affects the sound."

Technology

Cable Polygraph testing led to the DNA Helix conductor geometry (US Patent No. 8,569,627). Layered flat conductors with parallel strands prevent the 'eddy current' losses caused by twisted and solid conductors, providing superior preservation of musical detail, dimensionality and dynamics.

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Great sound around a G...

After a solid week of continuous play, the Prime is moved to my home office environment, connected to a pair of Pioneer SP-BS22-LR (the famous Andrew Jones budget Pioneer speakers) and instantly impresses. With a few hours on the clock, the Prime delivers great sound – neither bloated on the low end nor etched up on top. Great balance overall. Fussy audiophiles might still find it a bit strident, but in the context of a \$500 integrated amplifier with DAC, it's at the top of the heap.

When listening to high quality, relatively sparse music, leaning more towards the acoustic side of the spectrum, you can hear this a bit. Tracking through *Getz/Gilberto*, the amp presents a lot of texture when Getz does the sax solo in “Girl from Ipanema,” but the overall presentation stays between the speakers. Switching to Paolo Nutini’s “Pencil Full of Lead,” the drums in the introduction resonate with an almost live sound, while Nutini’s voice is smooth and precise. Damn good for this kind of coin.

Streaming is controlled by the DTS Play-Fi app. You can stream from most services like Qobuz, Tidal, and Spotify, in addition to accessing your own files on your NAS if you have one. You can even create playlists that integrate tracks from multiple sources to create one seamless listening experience.

There’s no support for MQA or DSD, but you can play hi-res PCM files up to 24/192. The Play-Fi app is quite robust, with a whole slew of features that are beyond the scope of this review, but it’s also the source of my biggest frustration with the Soundbase. The main issue being its inability to provide gap-free playback. What should be a smooth transition from “F-Hole” into “Labelled with Love” from Squeeze’s *East Side Story* becomes jarring with a nearly ten-second gap inserted between them. Streaming via Bluetooth from the iPhone is a decent workaround, but the ability to stream in hi-res is lost.

Back to the hardware, the Prime has two AUX inputs, with one begging for my vintage Yamaha cassette deck for analog. Popping in the Stranglers’ *Aural Sculpture* was a complete blast, sounding better than I remembered. I can easily see someone plugging in an entry-level turntable like a Pro-Ject Carbon, some floorstanders, and building a killer starter system around the SVS Prime Wireless Soundbase.

Additional Listening-Jeff Dorgay

Following Sean’s lead and having a pair of SVS floorstanders here (along with a Pro-Ject table featuring an onboard phono stage), it was easy to assemble a complete system for about \$1,500 providing room filling sound.

Though overkill, the SVS SB-3000 was pulled in just to verify the functionality of the entire system. If you’ve ever been to an SVS demo, you know this crew is the master of getting great sound at an affordable price. The Prime keeps their reputation intact. This is a great way to start your two-channel system adventure, whether on the desktop or in your living room.



Rotel Redux:

The CD11 and A11 Tribute Models
\$499 and \$699

rotel.com

Back in the late 1970s and early 80s, Japanese hifi manufacturer Rotel was one of the top value proposition audiophile brands. Though not possessing quite the cache of top brands like Mark Levinson and Audio Research, many a budding audiophile brought home a Rotel RA 913 or RA-2030 integrated amplifier to start their journey into the high end.

Their products have always offered high build quality, a clean design aesthetic, and most of all, great sound. Rotel has never left the audio world, but has always had somewhat of a quiet legacy, going about their business building great gear. However, in the last five years or so, they've been making a bit more noise so to speak, and their latest products retain all of their key values.



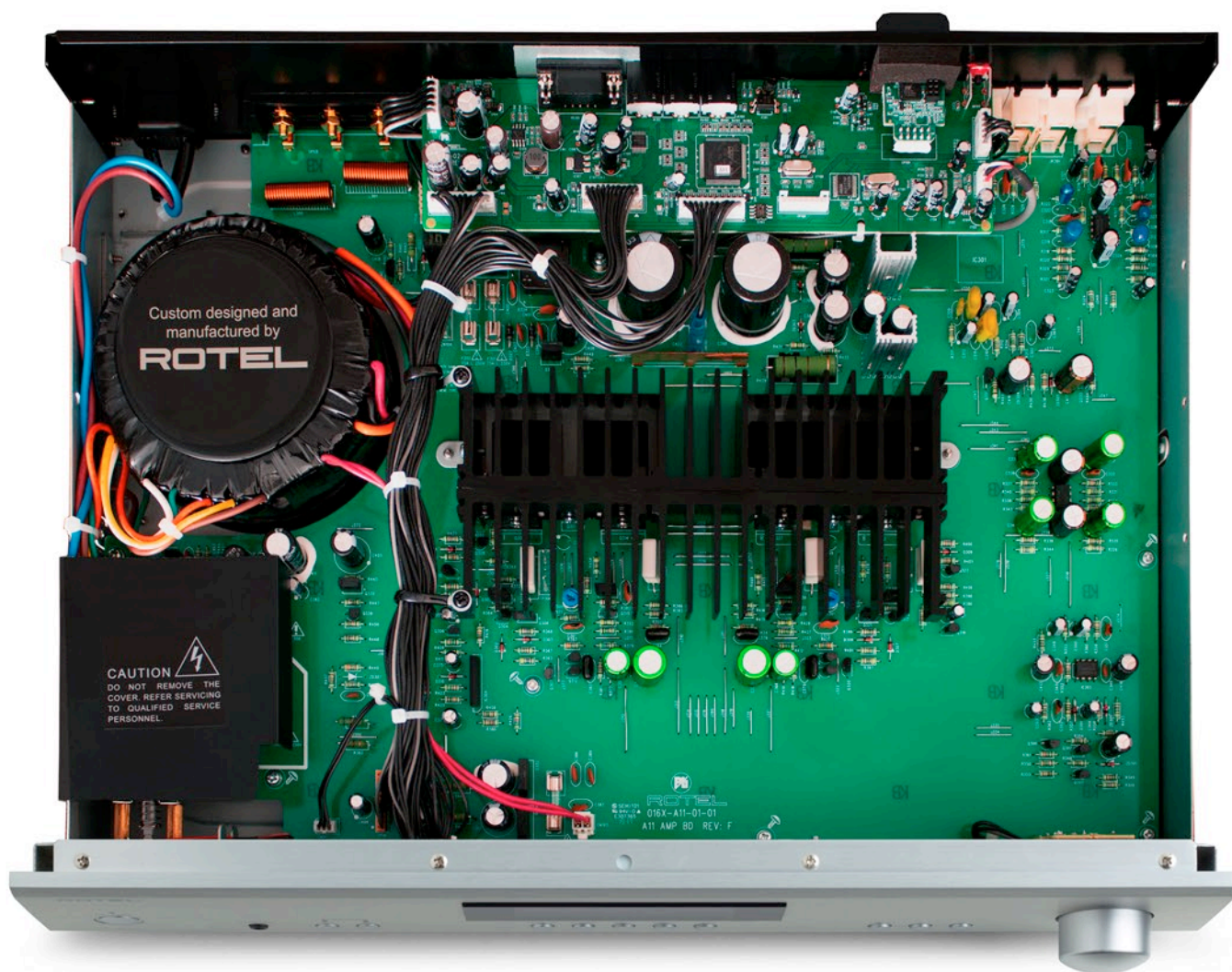
They join us here with two models that celebrate the current rebirth of the integrated amplifier, the standalone CD player, along with the recent passing of audio legend, Ken Ishiwata. Long known for his relationship with Marantz, Mr. Ishiwata was one of the best known of Japanese hifi designers, and always a joy to engage with at hifi shows. He was somewhat of a creative director, taking designs, listening carefully, and making suggestions to improve them further.

Unfortunately, Mr. Ishiwata passed away right before the completion of the Tribute models, but the Rotel team implemented his ideas in the final designs, a real testament to his legacy. Even a quick listen out of the box shows that these are indeed special components, well within reach of any music lover.

The Rotel A11 and CD11 Tribute models from Rotel are the last two pieces of audio gear to bear his imprint, and like everything else he's had a hand in, are fantastic. At \$699 and \$499 respectively, this 50-watt per channel integrated amplifier and compact disc player go about their business in an understated way. If you need a plethora of inputs, outputs and functionality, this may not be the combo for you, but if you want the core for a straight-ahead system that delivers the sonic goods, read on.

More than enough power

Most small to moderate space dwellers should be just fine with 50 watts per channel, and lifting the top on the A11 reveals the necessary ingredients: a hefty power supply with big power transformer, a discrete, class AB power amplifier, complete with heat sinks, and enough control facilities to add a turntable, CD player, and tuner or tape deck.



Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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

That's where Echo Audio comes in. We have more than 20 years of retail experience in selling hi-fi equipment the way it should be sold: In a brick-and-mortar environment that provides you with personalized attention.

While we will certainly ship any of our gently used classics directly to your door, we invite you to stop by our shop in beautiful downtown Portland, Oregon to browse our inventory in person. Thanks to an in-house service department, we not only service everything we sell, but every piece of used gear is thoroughly checked before being put on display. Consider our white-gloves treatment your guarantee against potential problems.

So, when you are looking for high-quality, lightly used hi-fi gear, look no further than Echo Audio. Be sure to check out our Web site for current products and new arrivals.

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The A11 has an onboard DAC, featuring a Texas Instruments chipset, it is only a Bluetooth streamer, with no optical or SPDIF inputs. The CD11 CD player is the same, it only has analog outputs. This is the only shortcoming of what is an otherwise excellent pair. As good as their performance is, it's a shame you can't plug a laptop or budget streamer in to increase the functionality of these two excellent components, but it's understandable that Rotel drew the line in the sand here.

Half of our listening was done with our reference pair of Sonus faber Lumina 1 speakers, while the rest was split between a pair of Martin Logan Motion 15i's, the Golden Ear BRX's, and Totem Sky's. All excellent choices in the \$600 - \$1,600 per pair range. There were no anomalies with any of these small speakers, and we'd suggest any one of them.

The overall sound of the A11 is natural – neither embellishing, nor subtractive in nature. Thanks to a discrete amplifier section, the tonal saturation present is more engaging than many similarly priced integrateds with class-d amplification. Not only is the A11 worthy of both the Rotel name, and the legacy of Mr. Ishiwata, it reminds me of another legendary integrated, the NAD 3020.

Offering great bass control, clear mids, and a smooth high end, this amplifier is destined not only to be a classic, but one that will stay in your family for years. Whether buying your first hifi system, or a second system for somewhere else in your house, the A11 offers engaging sound that you will not tire of.

The shiny disc

Much like the vinyl record, the CD is also enjoying a bit of a resurgence. Used record stores and online shops have a plethora of discs available, and at very reasonable prices. For those of you that either aren't streaming, or just enjoy the physical act of playing a disc, the CD11 does not disappoint.

Good as the A11 is, \$499 in 2020 equals \$88 in 1983. Those of us that were there at digital audio's beginning know what rubbish even a thousand-dollar CDP sounded like back then. The A11 goes about its business, just playing CDs. As mentioned, there is no provision for streaming, or even a digital input to connect your laptop, so it serves only one purpose. At this price, even if you don't have a massive (or any at all) digital disc collection, it's much like picking up an entry level Pro-Ject or Rega table. A few days of online shopping will give you a pretty diverse collection of 50 to 100 discs in no time at all.



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The overall sound is solid, and smooth. This is a very un-digital sounding player, compared to a late 80s player (that we won't name) is amazing. Truly, the only thing the CD11 lacks is a level of resolution that the big bucks digital does. However, in the context of the amplifier, and a like priced pair of speakers, it's going to be tough to get this level of involvement out of a \$499 turntable and bargain records.

Playing MoFi copies of a few Santana favorites (*Abraxas, III*, and *Caravanserai*) where the CD11 only captures the 16/44 layer is a joy. Music comes through with a lack of grain, clean top end and great dynamics.

The black disc

The A11 also includes an excellent MM phono stage. As we still had a Pro-Ject Debut with Ortofon 2M Red hanging around, and our long-standing vintage favorite Technics SL-1200mk. 5 with Shure M44, it was time to spin some records. Again, this amplifier turns in a fantastic performance. The phono input is quiet and composed.

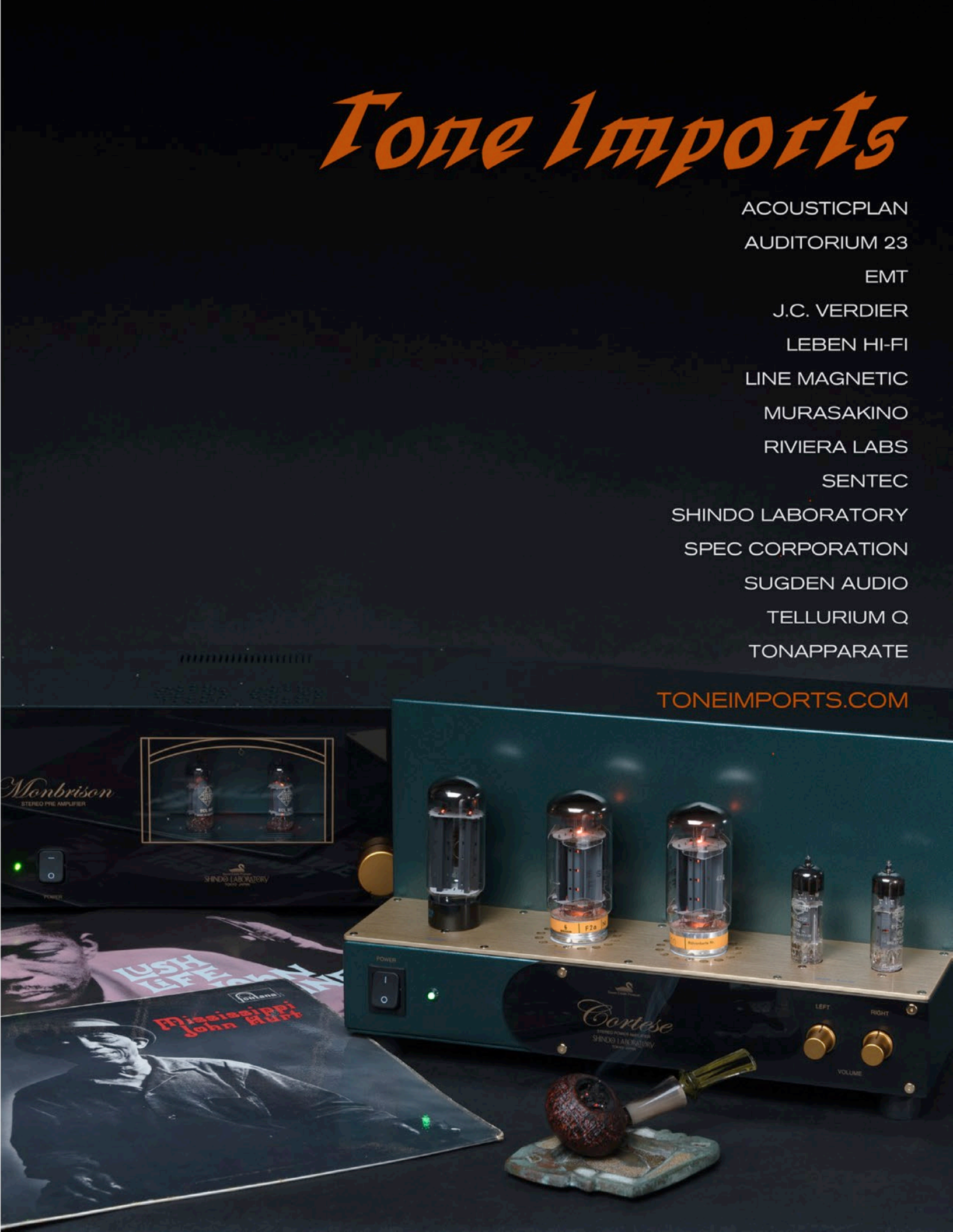
Having used a few Ishiwata inspired designs, I can't help but hope he had a major say in final tweaking of the phono section. Thirty seconds in you know this is not an afterthought, but respectfully aimed at providing an engaging experience for the new vinyl enthusiast. Both cartridges worked great with the A11 – the channel separation is excellent, producing a very wide soundstage, with great delineation of instruments. Taking things a step further, we even tried the Technics SL-1100/Denon 103 MC combination with a Bob's Devices step up transformer. Again, the Rotel delivers big sonics. Playing the new Anne Bisson LP, *Keys to my Heart*, was absolutely dreamy. Mastered by Bernie Grundman, Ms. Bisson and her crew of vintage jazz cats makes for a big, bold, engaging sound.



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The phone

Though you can't plug a laptop or streamer into either of these components digitally, you can stream your mobile device via Bluetooth to the A11. This is the only part of the A11 that feels a bit out of balanced, so I would almost suggest this amplifier and disc player combination to someone favoring physical media. Regardless, at least being able to stream tunes in the background, at dinner or a party via your phone is still acceptable. Again, kudos to the Rotel team for including such a great amplifier and phono section for \$699. Adding a digital input probably would have bumped the MSRP up a hundred bucks or possibly two. You can add a streaming DAC instead of the CD11 if you have no need for digital physical media and still have a formidable combination.

Finally

We need to mention a few last things. Fit and finish of this pair are way beyond par for their respective price points, but Rotel has always done a fantastic job in this department. The simple remote and the user interface are both intuitive and easy to use. It was a breeze to get these two rocking without the need for the manual without issue.

And...the A11 has tone controls. Laugh if you want, and yes, it sounds slightly more transparent with said tone controls disengaged. Apartment dwellers and those unable to put their speakers in the optimum audiophile position will appreciate a little bit of boost and cut – as will those streaming from a mobile device.

In the end, I challenge you to find a better sounding pair of components on which to anchor a good, entry level music system. The Rotel A11 amplifier and CD11 disc player are an honor to their makers. Two very honest components that do a great job at their tasks. It doesn't get any better.

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Journeyman Audiophile

by Jeff Dorgay

Naim Supernait3

naimaudio.com
\$4,990

Tracking through the silky, smooth harmonies of Shikao Suga’s “Kiseki,” I’m instantly reminded why I’ve always been so fond of the Naim Supernait. It’s a fantastic, nearly all-in-one solution with solid audiophile credibility. What better way to start listening than with the pair of Focal Kanta 1s that Naim/Focal North America was kind enough to send along with the Supernait.

We’ve been using the Kanta 3s as reference speakers for some time, along with Sopra 3s, so the Kanta 1s are easy to get used to. Music lovers tend to fall into one of two camps when stripping away all the other variables when shopping for a music system: destination people and journey people. If you’re the latter rather than the former, the Supernait 3 lets you upgrade the power supply at a later date, and you can add a DAC/Streamer to access your digital files. (The original Supernait had a great DAC built-in but no phono stage. We’ll address that later.)

Destination people can have their Naim/Focal dealer set up as much or as little as they need and stop by to pick it all up.

Somewhat of a shift

Naim’s Supernait 3 is a significant exercise in evolution as well as a shift in priorities. Where the original Nait was a small chassis affair producing only 15 watts per channel, (albeit with an incredible MM phono section built in) the current Supernait series has been 80 watts per channel. Naim’s founder, Julian Verker once was quoted saying that they couldn’t give the original Nait more power because “it sounded terrible.” As the Brits are fond of saying, “job done.” Both the Supernait 2 and the Supernait 3 are indeed musical, so this limit has been handily overcome.

Where the Supernait 2 had a built-in DAC, the Supernait 3 returns to its roots with an excellent (and I suspect Stageline derived) MM phono stage. Going straight to this with a Technics SL-1200GAE and Shure M44 cartridge, it was time to rock the house with an extended set of 45 rpm maxi-singles. Starting with Devo, and ending with Prince, this phono section delivers the goods.

JourneymanAudiophile

As Naim always offers a modular approach, and there just happened to be an MC Stageline sitting on the shelf, it was put into use with a second SL-1200/Denon 103 combination. The Stageline has such a small footprint, making it easy to turn your Supernait 3 into a two turntable amplifier, and at a reasonable cost. An extra Stageline will only set you back about \$800, and they are lurking on the used market now and then for about \$500. Not bad, and you can power it directly from the Supernait 3.

If you've made a modest to somewhat beyond modest investment in a turntable/MM cartridge, the onboard phono section here is not an afterthought, tacked on to appease those with a moderate collection of vinyls (sic). This is a true analog lovers phono stage.

More modularity

In addition to adding an extra phono stage, you can also use your Supernait in the context of a bi-amplified system by just adding another power amplifier, or you can increase its performance with an outboard power supply. Naim is a big believer in building massive power supplies – a prime factor in their exceptional ability to reproduce musical pace and timing. Additional power reserves only improve this, and though we did not have an outboard supply available at this time, we did do this with the Supernait 2 in our last review. The improvement was not subtle and worth every penny.

While some criticize this approach, we have always loved this aspect of Naim products because it allows you to grow without discarding your original purchase – a very green solution. And a solid investment. With any non-essential purchase, it's always nice to know that you can purchase it incrementally. Not to mention having another honeymoon with a component you already love. Adding an external supply creates a new component, allowing you to experience your music collection anew, always fun.

Thirteen years ago, the Supernait 2 was about \$4,300, and the current Supernait 3 \$4,990. Taking account for inflation, that \$4,300 amplifier would be a tick over \$7,000 in today's money, so \$4,990 for an even better amplifier is a real bargain. Naim keeping the price in check is a testament to production efficiency as much as the accounting department.

Most people wanting to keep their system all-Naim might pair their Supernait 3 with the (\$3,490) ND5 XS2 DAC/Streamer, but we happened to have their top range ND555/PS555 combination (a click under \$40k), and this proves to be a stellar combination. Naim's unifying architecture makes this all so easy to use.



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The one thing unique to Naim is their speaker outputs that look similar to banana jacks. No 5-way binding posts here. Naim suggests using their connectors, though we had no problem getting a solid mechanical interface from Cardas, Nordost, and Tellurium-Q cables. Inputs are connected via Naim 5 pin connectors or RCA jacks. Some of you may even remember when Naim allowed only the use of their proprietary connectors. Bottom line, there are plenty of connections, so you can build a powerful system around your Supernait 3. In addition to the MM phono input, there are four more line-level inputs and a headphone jack on the front.

More listening

The Supernait 3 builds on the strengths of the Supernait 2. Naim says that the power amplifier circuit has been simplified somewhat (“the second gain stage transistors have been optimized, so they no longer need to be shielded by a cascade stage transistor.”) This increases the amplifiers slew rate. While some will argue whether this makes an amplifier more dynamic or not, there’s no question that this is a very fast, dynamic amplifier. Choose a few of your favorite tracks with intense drumming, or perhaps some rapid acoustic guitar playing, and you’ll quickly discover the Naim engineers have succeeded brilliantly. Naim has always been famous for producing amplifiers adept at reproducing musical timing, and the current Supernait 3 upholds this time-honored tradition.

The high end is smooth and defined, while the lowest of frequencies are well controlled and extended. When paired with the Sopra 3s, it was easy to see what a great job the Supernait 3 does with LF dynamics. Tracking through the entirety of David Gray’s *White Ladder*, the sheer weight that these tracks were presented was indeed impressive.

Naim amplifiers are class AB designs, so they do not run hot, even when pushed hard. Playing most of the new AC/DC record, *Power Up*, at a juvenile level still leaves the Supernait 3 barely warm to the touch. The Naim sounds equally good with the volume down low. Aimee Mann’s rendition of the Carpenters tune “Yesterday Once More” (From the *Vinyl* soundtrack) shows off plenty of tonal delicacy and finesse. This is an amp for all seasons.

Naim amplifiers deliver effortless pace and timing reproduction. They are not quite as vivid as your favorite tube amplifier in terms of creating a huge soundfield in all three dimensions. The Supernait is not a small sounding amplifier, though it is not engulfing the way the (all vacuum tube) VAC i170 is. It’s definitely a different feel. And in all fairness, the apparent sound of the Supernait’s gets “bigger” when you step up to the external power supply. In the context of a \$5,000 integrated with phono, it’s still top of the range. It’s also worth mentioning that even without an external power supply, the Supernait 3 offers a high level of dynamic engagement, even with power-hungry speakers like the Harbeth Compact 7s we have on hand. (which are an outstanding match with Naim integrations)

The only speakers we suggest staying away from are full range ESLs. The highly capacitive load that these speakers present did not make for a clean sound. In all fairness to the Naim, The \$8,000 Esoteric and a \$20k CH Precision integrated that came through our doors fared no better with the Quads – they are the ultimate amplifier torture. The rest of you will be fine.

Aesthetics and such

You’re either a fan of the stark modernism of Naim components, with their brushed black casework and the backlit green buttons that almost look like M&Ms or Skittles. Personally, I love Naim’s look, and their commitment to making minimal changes in casework design over the years, so you can mix and match multiple generations with ease. This helps to protect your investment - 10, 20 or even 30-year-old Naim components still look great together on your equipment rack.

The only other manufacturer that has done such a great job of maintaining a consistent design language is McIntosh. It’s no coincidence that Naim gear enjoys the same fierce following that McIntosh does, and their legacy products enjoy a high resale value, should you ever decide to trade up.

However, few people trade them in – they just move them to a second or third system and buy more Naim bits. That’s the ultimate expression of customer loyalty.



Journeyman Audiophile



The only complaints I have about the Supernait 3 have plagued the amp from the last generation – the volume and balance controls lack any feel. While this is by no means a deal-breaker, as most of you will probably use the remote, the volume control in the thousand-dollar Mu-so is more luxurious. The Naim engineers use the ultra high quality Alps pot here strictly for sound quality, where the MuSo has a digital control. Engineers to the end.

Last but not least, headphone users will enjoy the Supernait 3. Like the phono section, the headphone amplifier is no afterthought. Auditioning phones from Audeze, Grado, and of course Focal, all delivered great results. This goes further to make the Supernait 3 the perfect partner for those with space at a premium.

At the end of the day, the Supernait 3 is a class leader. Great sound, great aesthetic, and top build quality. Not only do I like this one enough to hand it an Exceptional Value Award for 2020, but I have also purchased the review sample. This is too handy of a system anchor not to have around the studio.

If you like the Naim approach and don't really want a big stack of components, the Supernait 3 is for you.

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I tease staffer, and long time friend, Jerold O'Brien mercilessly for liking Journey. But in his absence, I end up going there. Here's a few Journey faves from the garage. -Jeff Dorgay



Spaceman

Feelin That Way

Wheel in the Sky

Lovin', Touchin', Squeezin'

Just the Same Way

Any Way You Want It

Don't Stop Believin'

Stone in Love

Open Arms

Who's Crying Now(Live version)

Seperate Ways (Worlds Apart)

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Headphone Art

The Fine art of Personal Listening

The Technics EAH-AZ70 Wireless Ear Buds Elegance for your ears

\$249
technics.com

Ever since Apple got serious about wireless headphones, with their Apple Buds, everyone else making headphones has stepped up the game. Much like in the world of racing, where the saying goes that competition improves the breed, nothing could be truer in the world of personal listening.

Technics brings their new EAH-AZ70s to the table with a bevy of features and performance to match. At a currently lowered price of \$179 (from \$249) these immediately go to the head of the class, especially when considering that Apples iBud Pro is still \$249.

Even this Apple fanboy must come clean. The Technics buds not only sound better, but offer more elegant execution.



Headphone Art

The Fine art of Personal Listening

No doubt, this is the result of parent company Panasonic's depth of manufacturing expertise.

Unboxing

Like everything Technics makes, the packaging on the AZ70s is exquisite. Those of you who save every bit of packaging take note, the box flaps are a tight fit, and if you don't open them with extreme care, you will tear the box to pieces. I only mention this because most of the headphone enthusiasts we've encountered have been very OCD about this kind of thing!

Setup via the Technics Audio Control App couldn't be easier. Once installed, the buds go in the charging cradle (and Technics thoughtfully sends them 50% charged, so you can at least give them a test drive) and are quickly paired via Bluetooth to whatever device you are using. When done using your AZ70s, just pop them back in the black charging cradle and let them charge again. Technics claims 4 hours for a full charge, so this can easily be an end of day ritual.

Let the listening begin

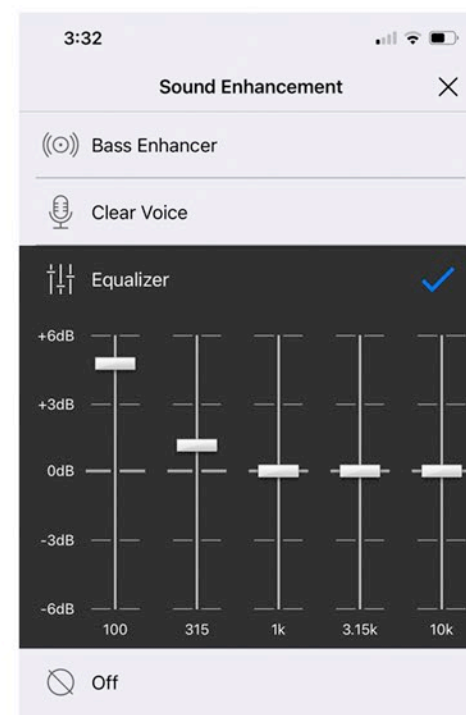
My tests begin with the iPhone Max and Spotify. Even at 320kb/sec, the quality put into these phones is immediately evident. Upping the game to ROON, streaming at 16/44 resolution, is more than worth the effort. The initial crunchiness feared from these buds disappears instantly. Even a well-designed pair of ear buds at this price point makes a great case for avoiding MP3 quality audio.

Tracking through a wide variety of tunes from classic rock to Christmas music, in this case, the 5.6.7.8s "Rock and Roll Santa," the overall smoothness of the AZ70s makes for comfortable listening, even when at desk duty for some time. The high register of these buds is particularly good, especially considering the price point. Cymbals and percussion instruments are reproduced with ease and clarity. Perhaps the best feature of the AZ70s is their noise cancelling function.

When this technology was first introduced, the noise cancelling often took out a lot of music as well. The Technics buds are surgical in their precision, even with the noise cancelling effect is turned up high.

Switching to some iPad use for TV and Movies is equally rewarding. Now that we're all cocooning, those of you that cohabitate can each get a pair of AZ70's and watch your own programming in piece, while still cuddling. COVID notwithstanding, two sets of AZ70s might help maintaining domestic bliss.

Watching the latest episode of *Star Trek – Discovery*, the AZ70s offer impressive dynamic range, generating a large soundfield, making it easy to place characters walking on and off screen. Thanks to the equalizer built in to the Technics app, it's easy to adjust your AZ70s to taste. A tiny bass boost at 100hz is all that was required to get more LF weight from the show's audio. Revisiting some old episodes of *American Dad* and *Family Guy* are a ton of fun, as these two animated gems offer a variety of sound effects that bounce all over the screen.



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Mark Wilder's dedication to his craft and his passionate commitment to music are why dCS is proud to honor him as the latest recipient of our dCS Legends Award.



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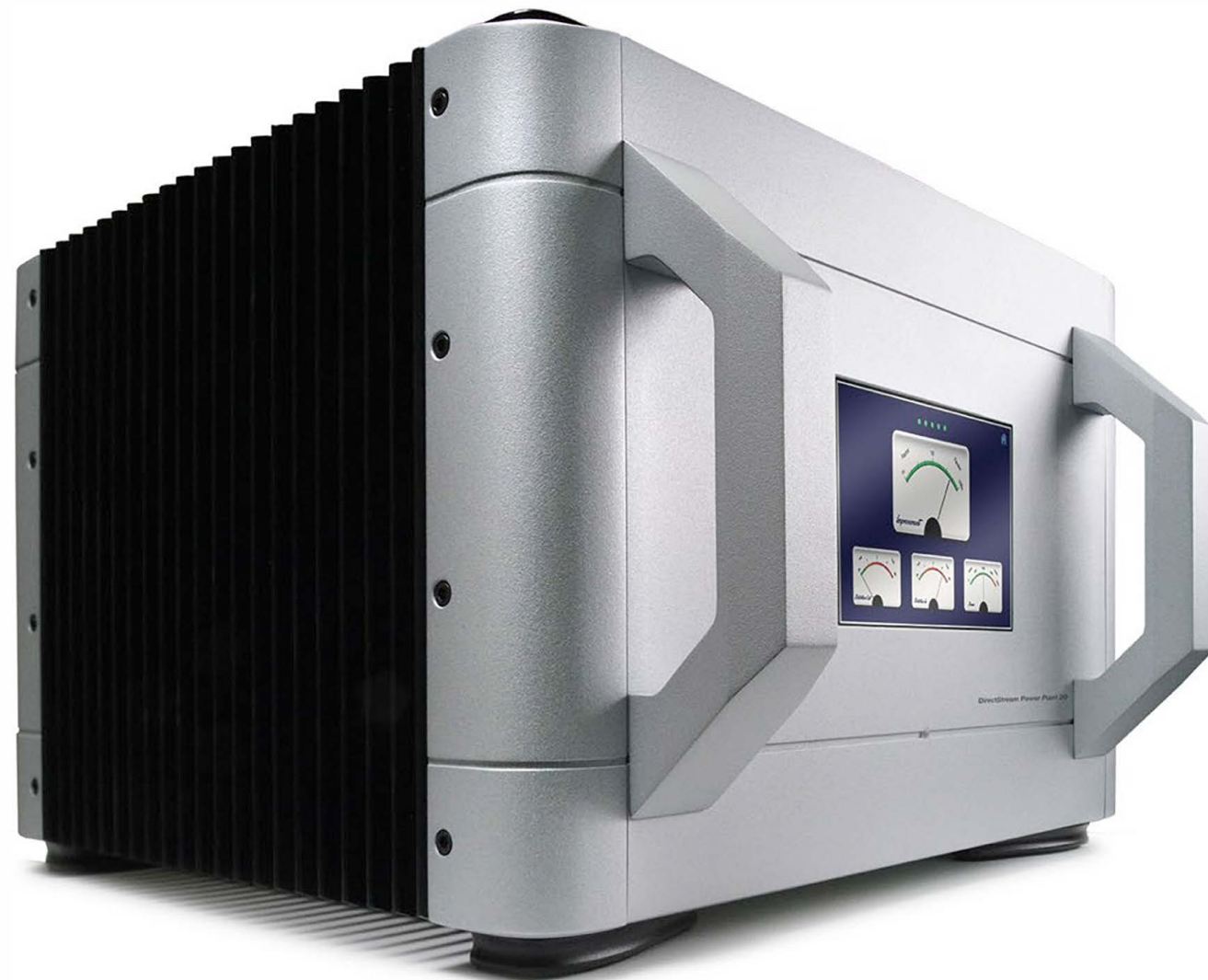
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Anyone doing Zoom calls, or just phone via computer will be liberated from the weight of a cumbersome pair of over-ear phones, as well as increased clarity. The Technics app also provides a "clear voice" setting, which makes talking via computer or your phone much easier.

Conclusion

Much like the way DAC technology has become so much better, with today's budget DACs now rivaling expensive units five years ago, wireless noise cancelling technology has followed a similar development track, and is quite good indeed.

When airplane travel becomes part of my monthly ritual again, I will never be without a pair of these. Technics has created a high performance, yet affordable pair of wireless ear buds with the AZ70s that will please everyone from music lovers, to movie fans, to computer users. As good as they sound, and taking into consideration the high level of manufacturing quality, they can't be beat for \$249.

I haven't heard anything that comes close to matching this combination of sound and build quality anywhere near this price.

Highly recommended.

www.technics.com



Shh...

The fine art of low level listening

By Jeff Dorgay



More often than not, when you go to an audio dealer or HiFi show, whoever is doing the demo is usually cranking the hell out of the program material, and not in the most flattering way. This doesn't always attract people to the world of high-performance audio. A chorus in a Joe Jackson song laments being "brutalized by bass and terrorized by treble." You don't have to go there if you'd rather not.

Not that I don't like heading towards 11 on the volume control, now and then. If your system has the sheer dynamic drive to approach concert levels, a little bit of that can be fun. There's something about moving that much air in the room - giving you the feeling that you're experiencing a live performance, that's intoxicating. I find it not unlike driving a high-performance car faster than is reasonable and prudent. Now and again, absolute power does corrupt absolutely.



It's equally enticing to listen to a system that does a fantastic job of playing at a low level, however this a different kind of fun. Not all systems capable of sterilizing you with 120db playback can get the job done at lower levels. So, we're going to mention some components that work well together to give you that low-volume lounge groove. Because there are times you don't feel like putting on a pair of headphones.

This issue's system is decidedly high end with a twist. While the Sonus faber speakers are decidedly upmarket, they are now available on the used market for about \$20k. Adding their 92db/1-watt sensitivity and stunning good looks to the mix, makes for a great combo with the Luxman pieces featured here.



Last issue, we featured another SET system, built around Line Magnetic components. It's worth mentioning that the SF Strads play very well with last issue's amplifier as well. But we live for change, eh?

Luxman makes fantastic gear at every price point, but I must admit an affection, or bias, if you will, for their Class-A integrated amplifiers. As Nelson Pass is fond of saying, "it's the tube sound without the tubes."

Luxman's L-550AXII and D-03 make a great combination for those valuing quality over quantity. Both of these pieces are built to the same standards as Luxman's top pieces, with five-figure price tags. Thanks to a great onboard phono stage, you need only add a turntable and streamer to experience all formats.



Should you have a pair of horn speakers, this pair is all you need.

Thanks to a tip from a long time reader on Facebook, the Rymden album you see above proved a perfect place to begin the journey. The dynamics and spaciousness of this somewhat progressive jazz album gives the entire system a workout.

Sticking to the levels we like to pursue in this column, the sheer delicacy of the Luxman amplifier coaxes a performance out of the Stradiveris' that feels like something much more expensive.



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Shh...

The Luxman D-03 player, much like the Line Magnetic unit we assembled last issue is an amazing benchmark for what can be accomplished at an approachable price.

The only thing slightly misleading is the DSD logo on the front panel - this refers to the DAC section only. While this player doesn't play SACD, it does decode DSD files as well as MQA, making it incredibly versatile.

The sound is pure Luxman. Silky, smooth, yet never lacking in resolution and detail. This is a player and a combination for serious deep listening sessions, whether via the disc transport, or via streaming.

Even in our 16 x 26 foot main room, with most program material, the Luxman 550 amplifier plays more than loud enough, unless you're listening to heavier music at concert levels. Then you need the big amps. But everywhere else, it's all you'll need. We will revisit this combination when a few horn speakers visit in the spring of 2021.

Next issue, we still haven't decided how to assemble the Legos yet! Something to look forward to.

Keep listening. Softly. And go ahead, laugh at my Coldplay CD...



Setlist

Rose Garden, Portland, OR - November 1, 2008

Photo by Jeff Dorgay



There are times when you know you just “got the picture,” and this was one of those times.

Metallica was in Portland for their “World Magnetic” tour. Despite the record getting mixed reviews from fans and critics - Metallica gave a rousing performance. Featuring a 360 degree stage, they did something different for Portland audiences this time. A general admission, standing room only section was created between the stage and the fixed seating.

The only catch was, you had to wait in line to get them. Fortunately, the three days leading up to the show were mild, with temps in the 60s, and barely any rain, so the loyal were rewarded.

Opening with “That Was Just Your Life,” and “The End of The Line,” it was looking like Metallica might play the entire album, but only two more DM tracks would pepper the set of their best material.

At the end of the night, they sent a flood of giant, logo emblazoned balloons into the crowd.

They were black, of course.

W H A R F E D A L E

The reviews are in.



EV04



ELYSIAN



HERITAGE



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North American Distributor
info@mofi.com

Setlist

02 Arena, London, England - September 21, 2007

Photo by Scott Tetzlaff



Prince is known for multi-hour performances, and on this evening in the UK, he did not disappoint the sold out 02 crowd.

Club Mix columnist Scott Tetzlaff happened to be there on holiday, and was kind enough to grab a quick photo. While this shot totally captures the grandiosity of the show, it illustrates just how far smart phone technology has come in 13 years.

Prince is also known for mixing it up, especially when playing multiple dates in close proximity. The sets the night before and after this one, were completely different events - with show on the 20th weighted more towards the Musicology record. The September 22 show would prove to be more B-Sides, and this show, sticking to more Prince "standards," if you will.

Over three hours later, after two encores, sandwiched by a synth-set, Prince left the stage, finishing the evening with "Girls & Boys." Tetzlaff told me later that the show was action-packed till the last second, but the sound of the 02 "left much to be desired."

But, nearly four hours of Prince is always worth a little pain.

UNDERWOOD HIFI DELIVERS

Internet Direct Pricing on
High Value – High End Audio



EDITOR'S CHOICE –
THE LSA 10 STATEMENT –
AFFORDABLE STATE
OF THE ART



LSA HP-1



PLANAR MAGNETIC
HEADPHONE
A GIANT KILLER

.....
"Once in a long while, a product comes into the listening room that takes hold of me and does not let go. The HP-1 is such a product and has been in constant use since its arrival".

Frank Iacone – Editor and Publisher - headphone.guru
.....



EQUI=CORE 1800 mkII

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AVAILABLE ANYWHERE

.....
*"So how does the performance of the Equi=Core stack up?
To be frank, it is a giant killer".*

Sam Rosen – September 2020 - [posi+ive feedback](http://posi+ivefeedback.com)
.....

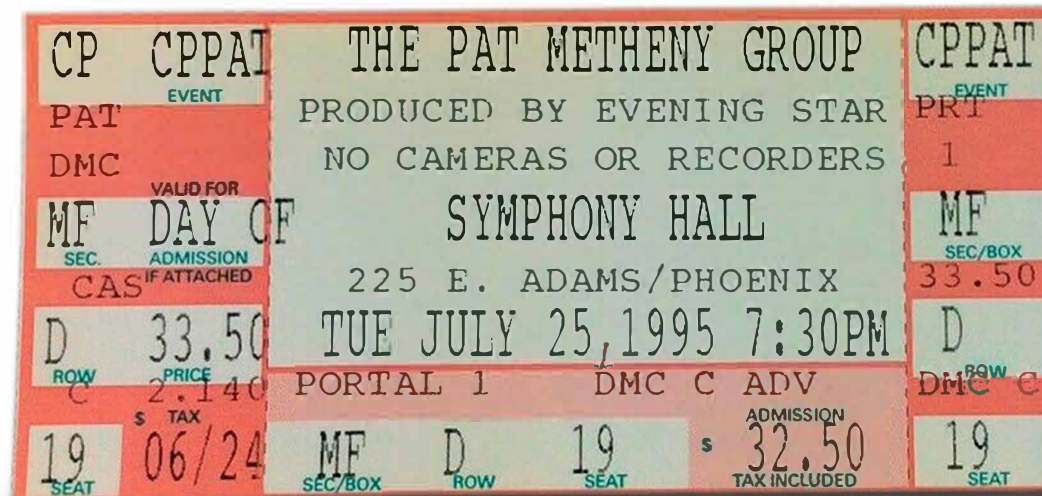
UNDERWOOD HIFI

✉ Underwoodwally@aol.com ☎ 770.667.5633

🌐 www.underwoodhifi.com

Our publisher has seen Pat Metheny countless times in the course of his career, and has always made the comment that “love him or hate him, Metheny always puts on a great show, and looks like he’s having the best time doing it.

Here’s 10 of his all time favorite PM tracks:



from Bright Size Life - Road Trip/Broadway Blues

from Watercolors - Watercolors

from Pat Metheny Group - Jaco

from New Chautauqua - New Chautauqua

from American Garage - The Search

from Offramp - Are You Going With Me?

from First Circle - Forward March

from Song X - Word From Bird

from Secret Story - The Longest Summer

from Imaginary Day - Too Soon Tomorrow

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SALES@TORUSPOWER.COM

In House

The soundtrack of assembling the issue...

Paul Weller - *Paul Weller*

After a hiatus from leaving The Style Council, Paul Weller's first solo release picked up where he left off, moving further down the path with tunes having a more soul groove.

This one, often overlooked, remains a comfort, and seems to get played every issue.



TONE105.075

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-35.0

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Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News

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that make it an
absolute joy to play
with, and it sounds
absolutely fantastic to
boot!"*

Dave Hanson,
EnjoyTheMusic.com



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

Grover Neville, InnerFidelity

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

Al Chieng, Positive Feedback

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Steven Stone, HiFi+

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barely scratch the surface."*

Gary Alan Barker, Headphone.guru

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Swill

Sponsored by Cardas Audio

By Cameron VanDerHorst

Here in the upper Midwest, we're cursed with long, cold winters. One upside is our preponderance of holiday brews, almost all of which are full of hops, spices, and above all flavor.

Cincinnati, Ohio's Rhinegeist Brewery is a local favorite. Many IPAs have flashy labels that do little to disguise an aggressively bad taste. That's not the case at all when it comes to Rhinegeist, although their simple gradient color bar cans are among the most stylish ones you'll find in your local beer aisle (if you're lucky).



Legal Stuff: While we all enjoy consuming adult beverages, (if you're of legal age, of course) TONE and Cardas Audio ask you to be responsible...

Swill

Sponsored by Cardas Audio

by Cameron VanDerHorst

Their charmingly-named "Dad" holiday beer goes off-brand ever so slightly, replacing the simple colored bars with a festive red and green plaid pattern. The name is appropriate - I'm fairly certain my Dad owns a Christmas sweater that looks just like this.

This is one IPA that could easily get away with tasting like a liquefied pine tree, but it doesn't, thankfully. Rhinegeist Dad is a heavy, hoppy holiday red ale that doesn't go overboard on spice. Like almost all other Rhinegeist brews, "subtle and smooth" is the name of the game. We'll definitely have to sample more of their offerings in the future.

The ruddy color even looks festive in a glass, and the variety of flavors you'll experience when it hits your tongue are reminiscent of the stress and satisfaction of hosting the holidays at your home. It starts out bold and bitter, with hints of caramel and gingerbread that tickle your tastebuds before finishing sweetly like a made-for-TV holiday movie.

There's subtle hints of citrus and pine, here, too, that are welcome and not at all overpowering. The pleasant aftertaste hangs around just long enough without overstaying its welcome. We wish that we could say the same for some of our family members.

Many holiday brews nail the "bold and bitter" part a little too well, and forget to be tasteful. That's not a problem at all here. The folks at Rhinegeist really know when to show restraint, and this results in flavors that are both complex and eminently enjoyable. Isn't that what the holidays are all about?

If you're reading this column, there's a good chance that you have tasted your share of holiday brews in the past (or, you're holed up in the bathroom, bored out of your skull, waiting patiently for your in-laws to leave). If you're tired of over-the-top, one-and-done Christmas ales, you should definitely give Rhinegeist Dad a try.



TONE105.079

audio research
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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, I'd say 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.



Kiss Alive Viewmaster
\$75
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Truly,
what could be more awesome
than this?

Enough said.

THE COMPONENTS OF EXCELLENCE: LASTING VALUE

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



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

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TONE105.083

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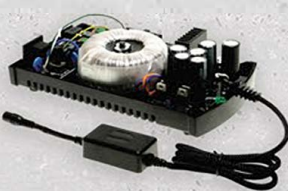
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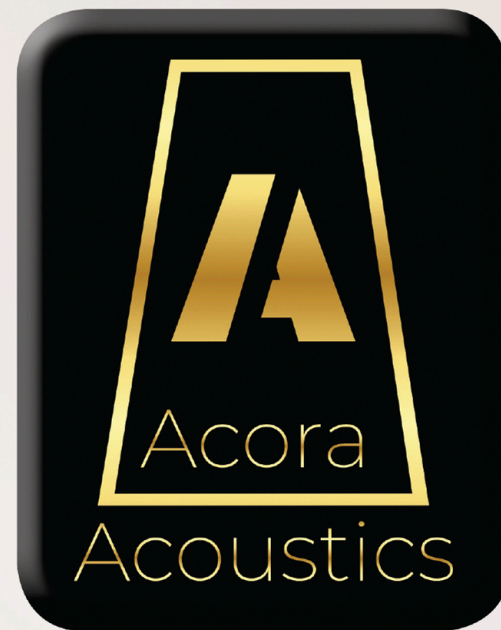
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\$140
shopswatch.com

Our fascination with classic BMWs and Swatch continue with their new Chrono collection.

This big face is easy to read, and goes perfectly with your favorite classic Euro ride.

TONE105.055



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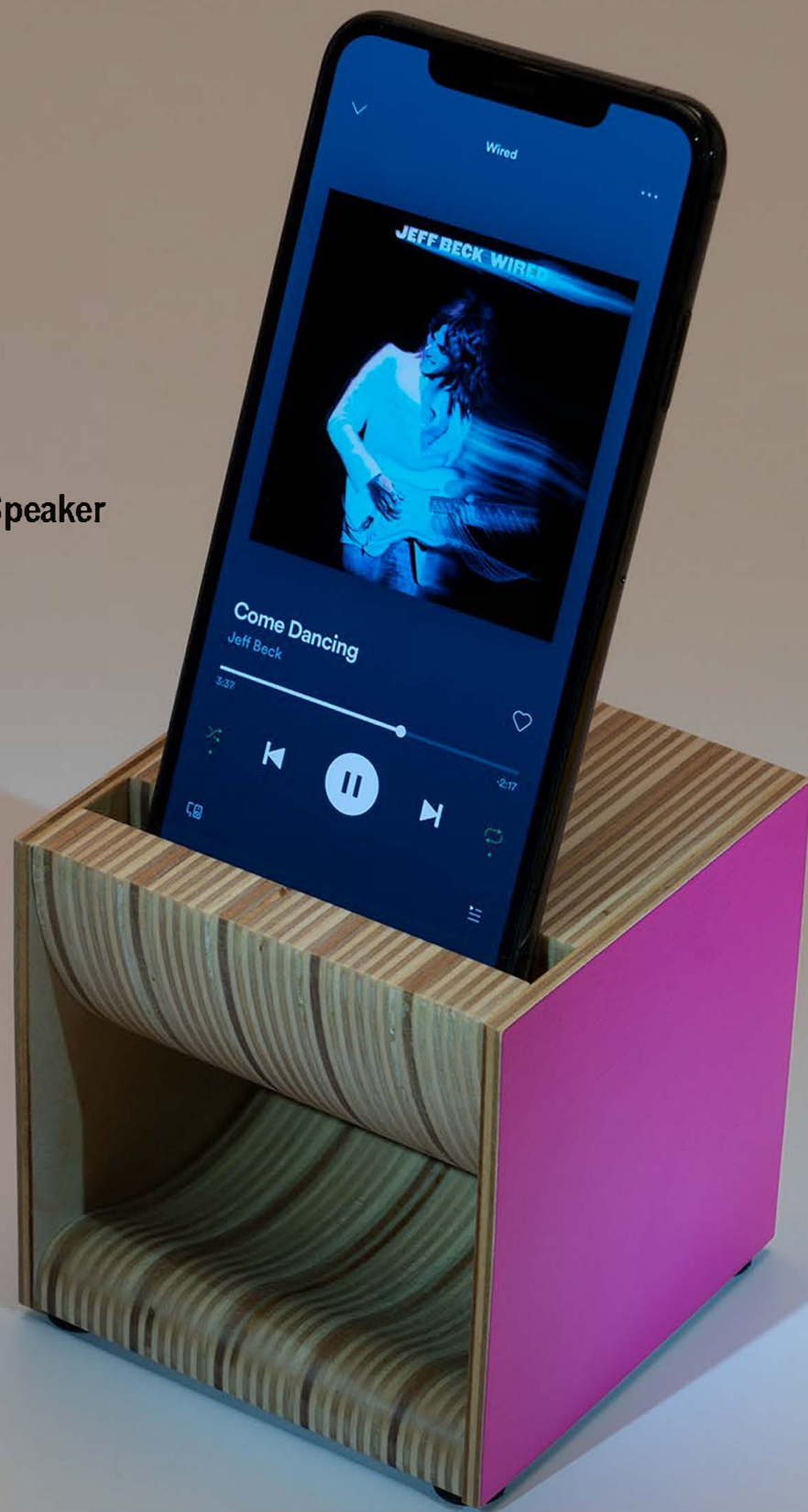
Leave it to the Italians to design an elegant solution to damn near everything.

Not only does the Risuona NANO make for a great smartphone holder, it acts as a horn-loaded enclosure for the tiny phone speakers.

When you set your phone in the NANO, prepare for a transformation. It augments the bass nicely, and the horn brings out the mids and upper register too. Best of all, there's about 3db more output.

As much fun as it is for music, those of you engaged in desktop facetime conversations will love the increased clarity.

Very cool!



TONE 100.083

GOLD NOTE
il suono italiano

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The DS-10 is the Streaming DAC with Preamp for the contemporary audiophile. With a new generation D/A Converter, UPnP-DLNA Streamer, Line Preamplifier and Headphone Amplifier, the DS-10 and DS-10 PLUS feature connectivity and innovative technologies like the Bluetooth 5.0 - for the first time ever on a High-End audio unit - brilliantly enclosed in a half-width sized chassis made of thick aluminium.

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DS-10 & DS-10 PLUS

The versatile Streaming DAC designed by Gold Note for the contemporary audiophile.

- D/A Converter AKM AK4493 PCM up to 32bit/ 768kHz and DSD512 native
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www.goldnote.it

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TONE105.091



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creemmag.com

Maybe some of you still have your original, but we're guessing if you do it's either pretty faded, pretty nasty or both.

Get a new one, put it on, crack a beer and watch the Creem documentary, produced by our music editor Jaan Uhelzski, as she walks us through the crazed creativity that was Creem.

Boy howdy, indeed!



TONE105.093

T H E F I N E A R T S

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



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Brilliant ideas I had while pooping

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With so many of us pondering the issues of the last year, it's become popular to start journaling again.

What better way to confront your thoughts, than with a healthy sense of humor?

WTF Notebooks come in fun colors, with a wide range of pithy sayings on the cover..

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You Can't Have it...

\$120 (original release, being scalped on EBay for much more...)
swatch.com

If you didn't move fast, you missed it. Unfortunately, the Christmas Swatch that looks like Santa flew into it was long gone by the time most of us even knew about it.

So much for all those wasted social media ads. No bait and switch here - we wanted Santa. Up to Christmas day, these were going as high as \$400 on Ebay. This is a good time to remember today's ADD and realize there might be a deal to be had in May.

Happy shopping!



TONE105.097

rega



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planar three

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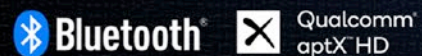
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KIN Play



TOTEM

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Meet the wicked sounding Totem KIN Play all-in-one music system. Stream tunes from your phone, kick it old school with a turntable, connect your gaming console and a whole lot more!

FUTURE TENSE Reviews in our immediate future...



Luxman LX-380

\$6,000
luxmanamerica.com

There's always one that gets away. We really wanted to include this modern classic from Luxman, but demand has been insane this year. However, we're assured that one is on the way for the new year, so stay tuned.

Featuring an incredible phono stage, this all tube amplifier uses a quartet of 6L6 tubes to produce 18 watts per channel.

Those of you with high sensitivity speakers will be in heaven.



HIGH-FIDELITY LOUDSPEAKER | CHORA 826

MADE IN
FRANCE

The Chora 826 bass-reflex loudspeaker is the embodiment of an accessible high-fidelity solution for a complete listening pleasure. Equipped with the exclusive Slatefiber cone developed and manufactured at the Focal site in France, the speaker drivers deliver balanced and precise midranges and perfectly articulated bass; leaving you to enjoy a big, full and generous sound. In addition, the presence of an aerodynamic front port eliminates distortion and gives more impact in the bass.

The flagship model
\$1,095

FUTURE TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

Sonus faber Maxima-Amator

\$15,000/pair
sonusfaber.com

Building on the success of the bookshelf sized Electa Amator III introduced this year, the Maxima takes the same drivers, and packages them in a full sized, floorstanding speaker for the extra bass response this allows. Anxiously awaiting these.



Perfectly Balanced.



Announcing The New VK80i Integrated.

The warm glow of the quartet of 6C33 tubes distinguishes the VK80i as a pure Balanced Audio Technology design. Inside the stunning all-aluminum chassis is innovative technology and uncompromising audio quality. It's perfectly balanced for the discerning music lover.

BAT's proprietary *intelligent auto-bias and fuseless protection circuits* make this a tube amp that is easy to own and operate. You will always have optimal sound and total peace of mind. The balanced amplifier generates 55 watts-per-channel of *high current triode* power. This amplifier drives speakers with vigor due to the exceptional wide-bandwidth output transformers. With the VK80i, all you need to do is listen.

Contact your nearest BAT specialty retailer to audition this American-made powerhouse.

A Truly Balanced Approach.

For over 25 years, Victor Khomenko and the BAT team have been on a mission to build components that recreate music's natural beauty. When we started the company, we found that many products use complex designs to achieve unnatural perfection. There had to be a better balance.

BAT believes in the benefits of fully-balanced circuits to maintain the purity of the original signal. We use the fewest number of gain stages possible for the shortest signal path, and we go to great lengths to custom manufacture high-quality parts that meet our sound quality and reliability standards. Whether you choose one of our solid-state or tube designs, BAT components will give your system a "breath of life" that you've never heard before!

BAT

For more info visit Balanced.com
sales@balanced.com | 302-999-8855

FUTURE TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

Kiseki Blackheart N.S.

\$4,199
upscaleaudio.com

We've been using the Kiseki Purpleheart N.S. as a reference for some time now, and it's a stunner.

Thanks to a new canteliver design and body material, this one looks to be even better. Watch for a review this spring.



\$9k for a 15lb preamp?!

If you want to pay **\$9,000 for a 15 lb preamp** with mediocre parts, *that's your business.*

If you want to pay **\$4,699 for a 53 lb preamp** crafted with the finest exotic parts, *that's our business.*

Learn the truth on the PrimaLuna  YouTube channel.

PrimaLuna EVO 400 Preamplifier

Dual-mono design utilizing **two toroidal transformers** and **two 5AR4 rectifier tubes** to drop noise and maximize imaging and texture

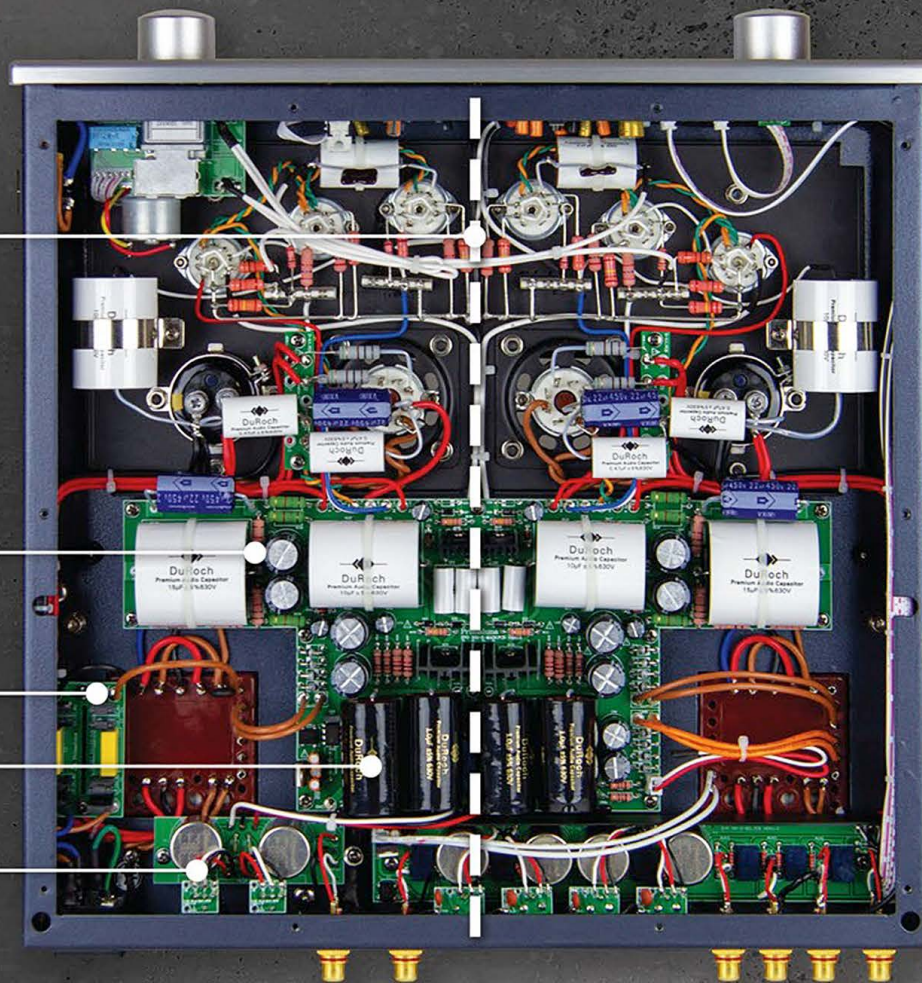
Point-to-point wiring with **Swiss-made silver-plated OFC wire** improves sound beyond what's possible with PCBs

Takman resistors from Japan renowned for their low noise, linearity, and musicality

AC Offset Killer lowers transformer noise to create a sense of space and air

Exotic Swiss-made tin-foil capacitors for the best sound without regard to cost

Transformer-coupled XLR plus **RCA** connections for ultimate flexibility



"...an insane audio bargain that delivers pure tube magic." DICK OLSHER, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND

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Product of the
Year 2020



TONE Audio
Product of the
Year 2019



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FUTURE

TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...



Naim MuSo 2

\$1,599
naimaudio.com

Naim set the standard for countertop audio when the MuSo was introduced a few years ago. Now, they are back with the second generation of the MuSo and MuSoQb.

The new models may look the same, but they are nearly reinvented from the ground up, with new drivers, and new tech under the cover. Connectivity has been improved as well to include HDMI.

Don't forget about that sexy volume control either.

THE ALL NEW SERIE S

Only the Name is the Same

We completely redesigned our world renowned, award winning Serie S line to create mid-level subwoofers capable of reference-like performance, because our pursuit of perfect sound never stops.



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FUTURETENSE Reviews in our immediate future...

Line Magnetic LM-812 2-Way Speakers

about \$17,000/pair
line-magnetic.eu
toneimports.com

18" coaxial driver, horn tweeter, 102db/1-watt and super easy to drive. What more could you want?

We've had such excellent luck with the Line Magnetic electronics, that importer Jonathan Halpern is going to hook us up with a listen to these beauties.

NOTE: Would you be living in the Pacific Northwest, please call our friends at Gig Harbor Audio for an audition.



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

While we have tried very hard to take more of a “concierge” approach here at TONE, trying to find what we feel are the most exciting to put on your short list, the TPOY products deliver even more.

Much as we hate to use the B-word, the gear to follow certainly represents the “best of the best” of what we’ve had the privilege to listen to this year.

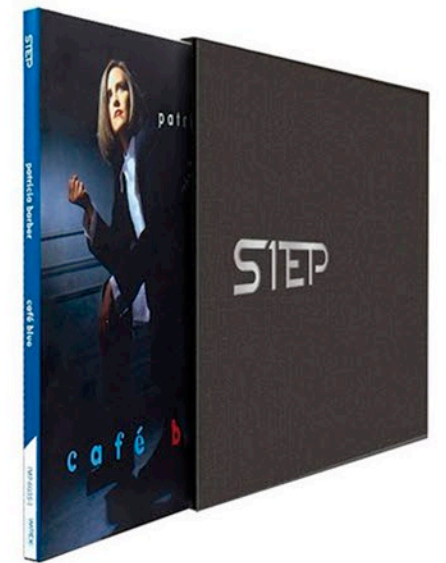
We’ve completed full reviews on most of these, but a couple are still in process, with reviews to follow early in 2020.

Again, we would never expect you to spend your hard earned income on something, simply because we think it’s outstanding, but it is our hope that should you be looking for something in one of these categories, that you’d take the time to investigate, audition, and compare these to what you were thinking of.

Our hope is that should any of the products on the following pages fit your criteria, that upon thorough investigation, you would enjoy them as much as we have.

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

All of these components pass that test.





OVERALL: McIntosh MC 275

\$6,400

mcintoshlabs.com



Now entering its 60th year of production, (that's not a typo) the 275 has always been the backbone of McIntosh's product lineup. Sure, certain collectors will wax poetic about the MC30 and MC60 monos having a bit warmer, more romantic sound, but the MC275 was a true audiophile component before we even coined the term.

According to Google's trusty inflation calculator, the \$444 an MC275 set you back in 1961 is just about \$4,000 today. Keep in mind a new Buick LeSabre was \$3,200 in 1961, so you were pretty serious about sound if you ponied up for one of these.

Rated at 75 watts per channel, nearly everyone that's done measurements on the MC275 confirms they put out an easy 90 watts per channel from four KT88 tubes.

Having heard original 275's, the only reason you'd really want one is the same reason you'd want that 61' Buick - to admire it. Today's 275 stands up with the best tube amplifiers made - period.





Analog: VAC Renaissance Mk. V

\$12,990 vac-amps.com



Here at TONE, we love three input phonostages, because we always have a lot of analog going on. The more you delve into vinyl, the more you need multiple turntable/tonearm/cartridge combinations.

If you're a collector that visits the bargain bins, it's not a bad idea to have a "daily driver" table, to save your best cartridge from potential damage, so that third table can really come in handy.

VAC principle Kevin Hayes is quite the tube whisperer, and has built a lovely, three-input phono stage, incorporating much of what he learned building their cost no object Statement Phono. We've spent too much time listening to records to finish the full review, but it's one of the most engaging we've heard!

With six 12AX7s, the Renaissance Mk. V brings your vinyl to life in a way few other phono stages can. And if you don't have three turntables now, you will.





Digital:

Naim ND 555/CD 555PS

\$40,000

naimaudio.com



Naim has always been at the forefront of digital playback, and much of their approach has always been that of careful attention to the most minute of details.

Naim's top components are not unlike Formula 1 cars, in the sense that they share a technological base with many other DACs, but by refining every single aspect of materials, assembly, and even component layout to its ultimate conclusion, something extraordinary emerges.

And so we have the ND 555 streaming DAC, which does require the CD 555PS. Some of you may remember when our publisher was using the Naim CD555 with this power supply. Weighing more than a lot of power amplifiers, the CD 555PS includes multiple voltage-regulated supplies, optimized and shielded, for every section of the ND 555.

Now Roon ready, the ND 555 will easily integrate with all of your music streaming platforms. And the sound is glorious.





Preamplifier: Backert Labs Rhumba

\$4,000 backertlabs.com



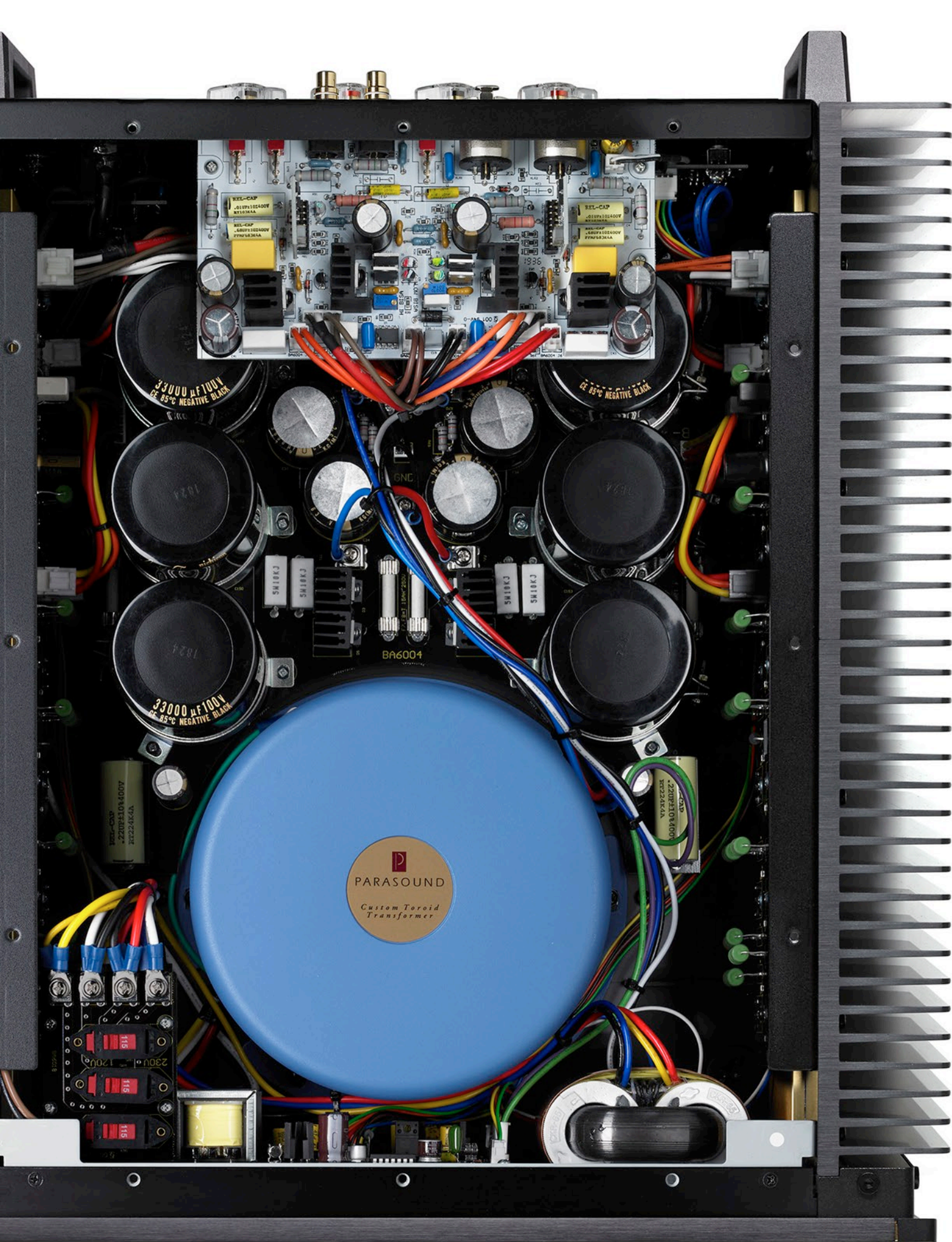
Remember the legendary pieces of audio gear that just got to the point?

When being an audiophile meant taking a purist approach? It was all about performance, simplicity, stripping things to the essence, letting the music do the talking?

Backert Labs has taken that to heart with their full lineup of preamplifiers. The current Rhumba 1.3 you see here is all about sound. If you happen to be a music loving audio enthusiast wanting just the basics, but painstakingly executed, the Rhumba might just be the preamplifier you've been waiting for.

Hand built, here in the USA. All music, nothing more. The Rhumba has been our favorite surprise this year.

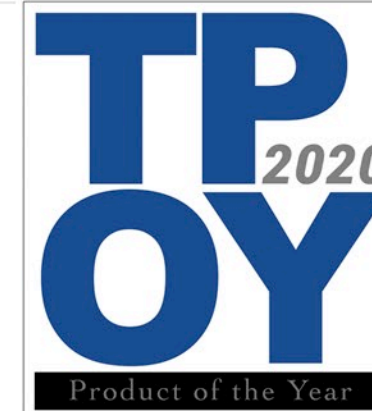




Power Amp: Parasound JC1+

\$17,000(pr)

parasound.com



These are some pretty incredible amplifiers. While Parasound has raised the price substantially, they've done a complete makover on them, and of course we've got a pair of originals to compare. The original JC1 was a groundbreaking high power/high quality amplifier at an incredibly low price, but the JC1+ is the same.

If this amplifier had a botique-y badge on the front panel, you'd pay \$50k for a pair of these, and be on social media tomorrow bragging about them.

That's why at \$17k/pair, they are the big amplifier deal of all time.

Full report soon, but it didn't take much seat time to make the call on these.





Integrated: Thrax Enyo

\$12,500
\$3,500 (Dac/Streamer module)
\$1,175 (phono module) soundbyoz.com



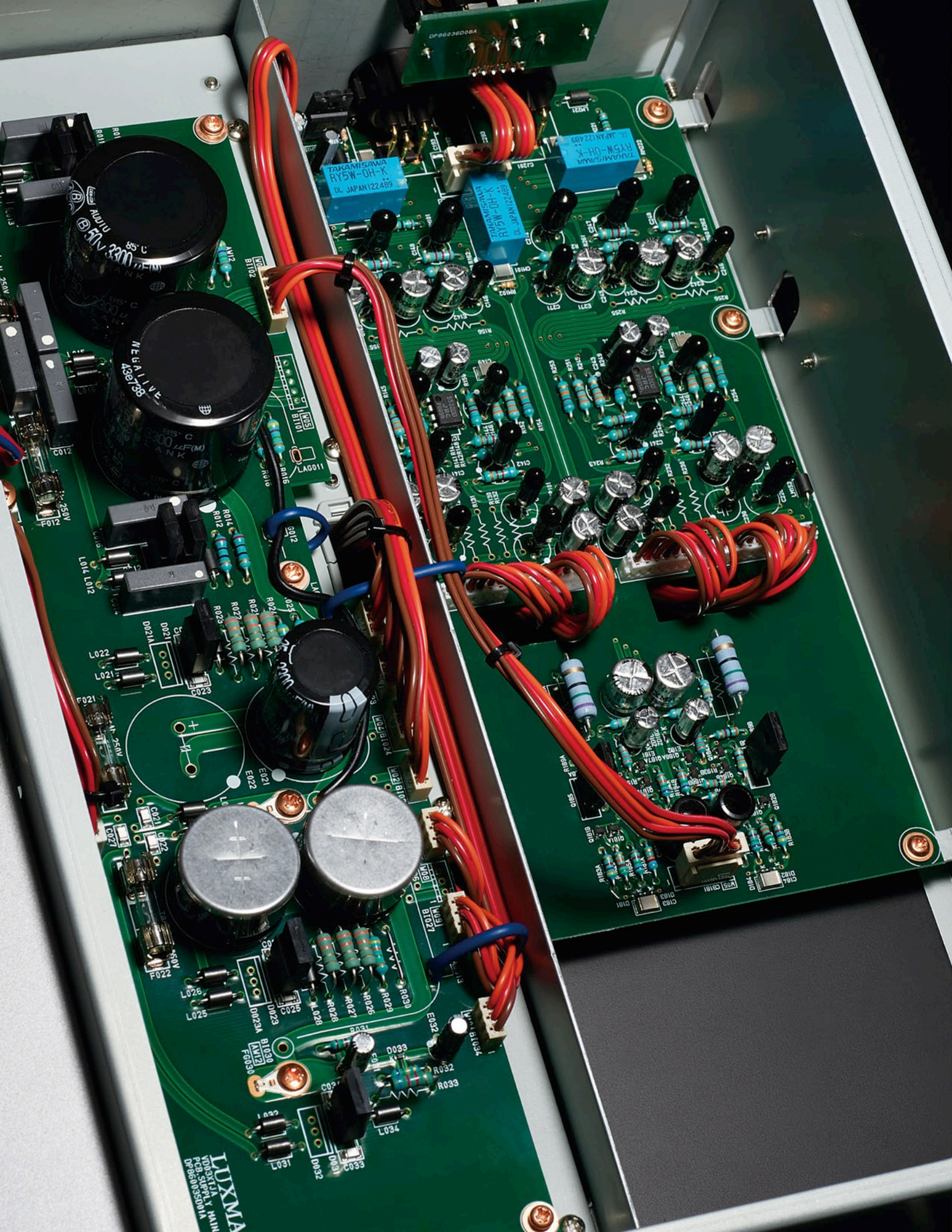
There are a number of integrated amplifiers that offer a DAC, (and streamer) while others offer a phono, but few put it all on one chassis, and even fewer do it all with this level of performance paid to all sections.

The Enyo is the perfect choice for someone wanting a minimalist, yet high quality system. And it is modular, so if you're just a digital person, or only analog, you're not paying for anything you don't need.

This big box, puts out 50 watts per channel, and the sound is glorious. Everything you associate with "tube sound" is here in spades, combined with modern functionality.

Add an awesome pair of speakers, sit back and enjoy your music collection!





Disc Player: Luxman D-03X

\$3,295
Luxmanamerica.com



We keep saying the CD is making a comeback...

In the last few years, a number of manufacturers have renewed their commitment to the shiny disc. The D-03X is reasonably priced, yet built with the same level of excellence that graces Luxman's top player.

You can look at the D-03X one of two ways: A great CD player that just happens to be a great DAC (hi-res PCM, MQA, and DSD decoding) or a great DAC that just happens to have a CD transport built in.

Even though streaming is all the rage, there are still selections that are only available on disc. We've found that it's still nice to just push the play button and listen to both sides of an album in one sitting. Not to mention, there are still data outages from time to time.

The D-03X proves you don't have to spend five-figures for stellar sound.



Speaker: Dynaudio Confidence 20

\$11,999 pair (stands included)
dynaudio.com



Every critical aspect of Dynaudio speakers is done in-house, and it makes a huge difference in the final result.

Their new Confidence line of speakers was introduced in Munich 2019, and because of this year, got off to a bit of a slow start. End users and reviewers all agree, these are the best speakers to come from their Denmark factory.

Thanks to constant refinement, and their new Esotar 3 tweeter, the smallest speaker in the Confidence lineup is outstanding.





Personal Audio: Focal Arche

\$2,490
focal.com



We could go on and on about how great the Focal Arche sounds, whether you're using Focal headphones or not, but the thing that really makes this joint venture between Focal and Micromega, is that it has a DAC built in, and it makes a great line level preamplifier.

At this price, the Arche is an outstanding way to bridge the gap from head fi to room fi. When you're ready, pick up a power amplifier and a pair of speakers to round out the package.





Subwoofer: REL T-ZeroIII

\$449
rel.net



A six-pack of REL's mighty no. 25 subwoofers have been performing low-frequency miracles in our publisher's main system for almost two years now, and they are the undisputed kings of this task.

But not everyone needs a solution like this.

How's \$449 sound? You can afford that much awesomeness. Seriously, at that price, get two. Return a few of those holiday gifts you didn't love. Get something you do. We guarantee you'll love these.

Amazing as the flagship RELs are, that they can build this much sheer quality into a \$449 subwoofer is almost more incredible. Sure, you can get more boom for \$449. Head right over to your favorite mass market retailer for more bass, dude.

Pair the T-ZeroIII up with a pair of high quality mini-monitors, the small Magnepons, or some vintage ESLs (our publisher is using a pair with some Acoustat 1+1s) and be prepared to have an unworldly experience.



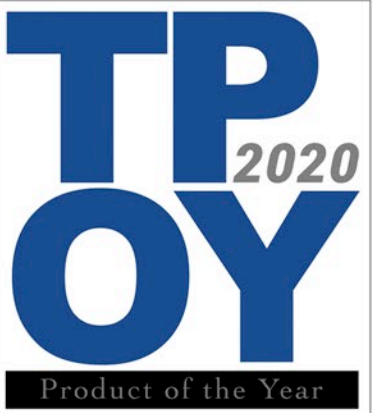


Cable: Tellurium Q Blue II

\$250/m - interconnect

\$25/m - speaker cable

Telluriumq.com



When the discussion turns to cable, (and it always does) too many audio enthusiasts think that premium cable will cost more than a new car. While it can, it doesn't have to.

We've been using Tellurium Q's original Blue as our go to cable in modest and vintage systems to excellent result for some time now, and the new, improved Blue II is better in every way. Fantastic.





Accessory: Clarus Coda

\$300

claruscable.com



Most of us know Clarus for producing cables and power conditioners that offer tremendous performance and value.

Add one more list of accomplishments to their list:

Their new compact DAC, the Coda plugs into your laptop, tablet, and some phones (with USB-C) to provide high res audio to your headphones or audio system. It also decodes MQA files for those of you serving up your music via Tidal.

The sound? Fantastic. We've been calling it the fly swatter.





Budget Component: Andover Songbird

\$129

andoveraudio.com



This product should dispel any thoughts that we are just snooty audiophiles, that are only aroused by six figure components.

Andover Audio is a new company that's long on experience, both in the design and marketing aspects of audio. The Songbird is a streaming DAC that sounds pretty darn amazing for \$129.

Pretty soon a couple of lattes at Starbucks are going to cost more than that. This is one of the most fun, best thought out products we've heard in a long time.

Well done.

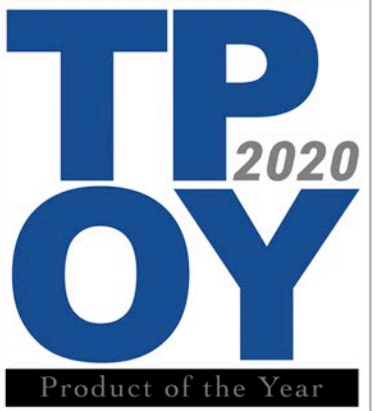




Power: Cardas Clear Reflection

\$950 (3m, other sizes available)

cardas.com



The folks at Cardas make more expensive power cords than the Clear reflection, but these are a personal favorite. They provide a lot of improvment, use premium parts , and are not crazy money.

The entire Clear Reflection line has been a major hit.

These are what we use to plug nearly all of our gear into the wall. (otherwise we use Clear and Clear Beyond.)



Recording: Patricia Barber Impex - 1Step

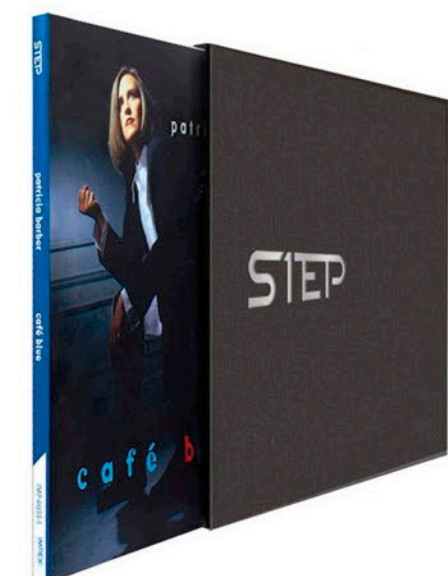
\$125
impexrecords.com



Years ago, a recording engineer said, “you can see right through the best vinyl.” Abey Fonn and her team at Impex, got the best raw vinyl on Earth to press this audiophile classic with RTI’s one-step process. Precious few imprints are doing it this way, because of the extra costs associated, but Impex took it further, cutting multiple lacquers before they were happy. Fonn tells us, “it’s not just expensive, it’s extremely time consuming.”

The result is fantastic. The only way to get closer to Ms. Barber is to pull up a chair at one of her performances. This one eclipses all the others, even the outstanding MoFi set. (which is now heading past \$500 on discogs)

If you’re a mega fan, you want this one. From a sheer recording standpoint, this is the closest to the sound quality the reel to reel guys are gushing about. And collectors loving the tactile aspect will appreciate a jacket and box done to the same standard.

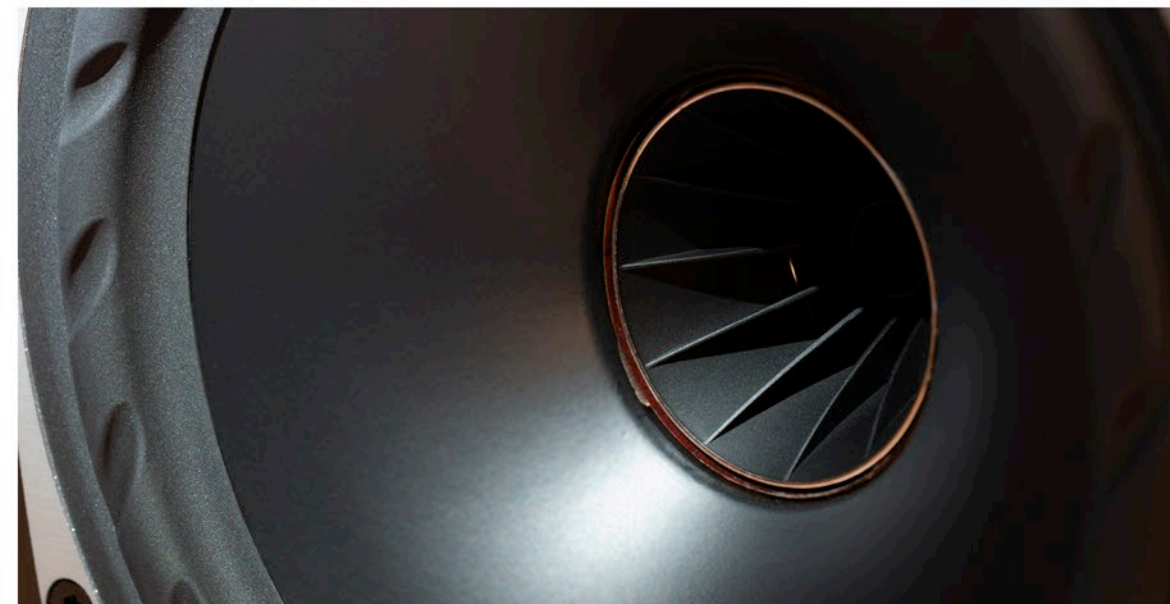


We seek high value in everything we review, yet some things go above and beyond what is expected at any given price. Such is the nature of the Exceptional Value Awards.

We've reviewed a few less components this year, due to logistical grewlins at the beginning of the pandemic, but we've been rolling steadily along. As always, there's still no shortage of great values this year.

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

Here's to 2021!





Fyne F500

\$895/pair

fyneaudio.com

Our first look at Fyne Audio, has been rather fine indeed. This Scottish hifi manufacturer makes an incredible line of speakers that raise the bar for value, sound quality, and stunning good looks.

Watch for more of them in our pages in 2021.



Rega IO

\$595

rega.co.uk

This small but mighty British integrated gets the job done, right.

At slightly more than half the price of their Brio, (that just so happens to be an industry darling) the IO is the perfect box to build a proper hifi system around.

With a great built-in MM phono section and a headphone stage, just add speakers and a turntable. Off you go.





Focal Chora 806

\$890

focal.com

Amazing as Focal's Utopia speakers are, we are always impressed with what Focal can do on a tight budget.

The Chora 806 speakers deliver the benefits of the full scale of Focal's vertical engineering and production at a price everyone can afford.



CEntrance Cerene dB

\$179.95

centrance.com

CEntrance has produced a small miracle in personal listening for just under 200 bucks.

Don't let the basic casework fool you. There are a lot of \$600 - \$1,000 phones that don't come close to this level of neutrality.

This is our go to affordable headphone.





VPI
JMW Fatboy
Tonearm
Armwand

\$3,999.99



Nordost
Blue Heaven
Power Cord

\$219.99



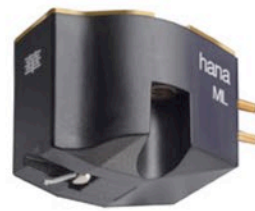
Integrity HiFi
Tru-Sweep
Anti-Static Dust
Cleaner/Sweeper

\$259.99



Clearaudio
Concept Active
Silver Turntable
Combo

\$3,199.99



Hana
ML Microline MC
Cartridge 0.4mV

\$1,199.99



AudioQuest
Monsoon AC
Power Cable

\$449.95



Quest For Sound
Isol-Pad Isolation
Feet (1 Each)

\$6.25



Sieveking Sound
Omega Headphone
Stand

\$179.99



AudioQuest
DragonFly Cobalt
USB DAC + Preamp
+ HP Amp

\$299.95



Sumiko
Blue Point
Special EVO III
MC Cartridge

\$548.99



Spin Clean
Washer MkII
Record Cleaner

\$79.99



VPI
MW-1 Cyclone Super
Record Cleaner

\$1,599.99 (Packages
Available)



Edifier
S2000MKIII Powered
Bluetooth Speaker

\$399.99



Final Audio Design
E5000 Earphones

\$278.99



Clearaudio
Performer V2
Ebony Wood MM
Cartridge 3.3mV

\$278.99



WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM US:

- Friendly and Helpful Customer Service
- Expert Packaging and Quick Delivery
- Great Selection of High End Equipment
- Over 10k Unique Records In-Stock



KirmussAudio
KA-RC-1 Ultrasonic
Restoration System

\$899.00



Totem Skylight

\$1,000/pr. totemacoustic.com

Totem speakers always manage to wring more low frequency performance out of a small enclosure than so many others we've heard, and the Skylight holds up the family tradition, if you will.

Combine a soft dome tweeter with an incredibly inert cabinet, and it's a winning candidate.

Additionally, the Skylights are easy to drive, and even easier to set up.



Eggleston Nico EVO

\$4,995 (stands Incl.) egglestonworks.com

The Eggleston Nico EVOs pack an incredible amount of sound into a pair of modest enclosures with the Nico EVOs, and they even include a great pair of stands.

See why audio enthusiasts and recording engineers love these speakers so much, at an approachable price indeed.

Hint, hint - these pair up incredibly well with the amplifier on the next page...



Luxman L-509X

\$9,495 luxmanamerica.com

You might think we've lost our minds, calling a \$10k amplifier and "exceptional value," but when you factor in how much tech from Luxman's top solid-state power amplifier and preamplifier is present in the L-509X, it's an easy call. Next, ponder how much you're going to save on cables and less rack space, and it just gets sweeter.

This is an incredible one box solution for anyone desiring the best that high end audio has to offer without a massive rack full of gear.

LSA T-3

\$3,750 underwoodhifi.com

This new belt drive table from LSA offers great performance, a great tonearm, and a number of must-have analog accessories.

They'll even ship it to you with a phono cartridge of your choice pre-mounted, so all you have to do is attach the drive belt, and start spinning records. The price is dependent on what cartridge you'd like, and what special they are running at the time. So, as the guy on TV used to say, "Check back often."



Sonus faber Lumina 1

\$899/pair

sonusfaber.com

Fully produced in Italy, the smallest speaker Sonus faber makes is true to the breed.

They have done such a tasteful job on the voicing and the cabinets, it's tough not to fall in love. But when was the last time you met an Italian that wasn't compelling?



Naim Supernait 3

\$4,999

naimaudio.com

What began as a half-chassis, 15 watt per channel amplifier decades ago, has now morphed into a full-sized, 80 watt per channel amplifier with an upgrade path.

The Supernait 3 is a fantastic all in one amplifier, with a great phono stage built in, and headphone amplifier as well.

Adding one of Naim's outboard power supplies takes the Supernait 3 from first class to world class, so you've got room grow.



LSA 10 Signature

\$2,499/pr.

underwoodhifi.com

The LSA 10 Signatures are incredibly refined and offer a lot of great small touches that add up to small speaker perfection.

These dynamic little speakers are easy to drive and thanks to a 5x7 inch passive radiator on the rear face, deliver incredible bass response.

What's not to love?

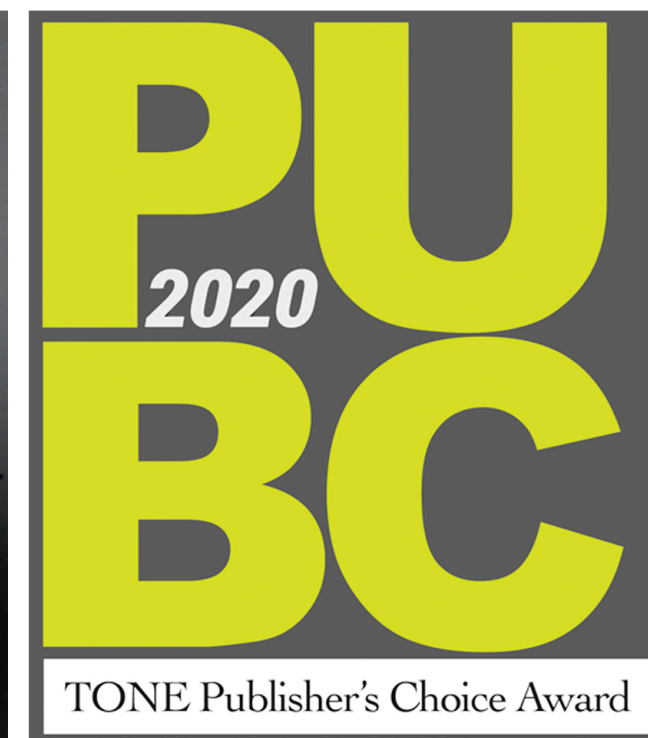
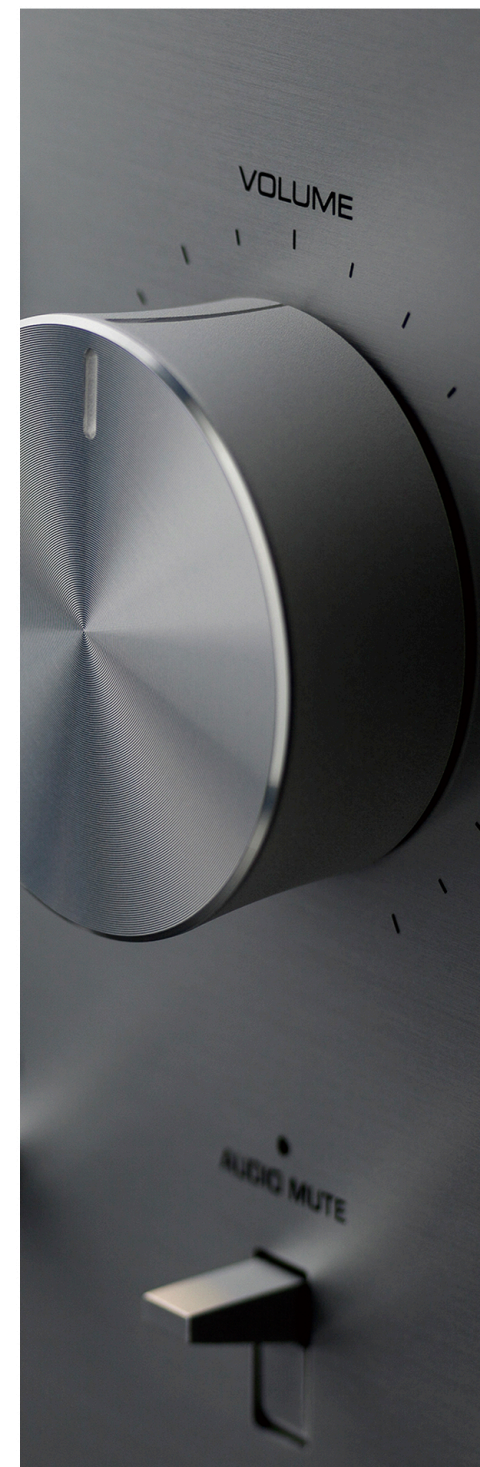


The Publisher's Choice Awards are few, and self-indulgent on my part.

Product of the Year, and Exceptional Value awards, I hope are fairly self-explanatory, but the handful of products presented on the next few pages are special, in a way that I feel doesn't need to conform to a specific price or performance target.

This issue, we had a few more main awards, yet still a few "teacher's pets" here.

Enjoy.





Line Magnetic LM-24CD

\$2,000 toneimports.com

Line Magnetic
VACUUM TUBE CD PLAYER
LM-24 CD

POWER



OPEN / CLOSE
CD / USB

PLAY / PAUSE

STOP

PREV

NEXT

Open

There's no question about it, CD's are really starting to make a comeback again.

If you still love your shiny discs, the LM-24 does a fantastic job with red book discs. Those of you wanting to stream can plug in through the back via SPDIF or USB to use the CD-24 as a high res DAC.

The result is incredibly smooth and inviting.

Luxman
L-550AXII

\$5,495 luxmanamerica.com



Luxman's L-590AXII is the 30wpc version of this amplifier, with more power and refinement. However, it's almost twice as expensive. That makes for two different customers.

For someone wanting that silky smooth Luxman Class-A sound, but either in a smaller room, or on a tighter budget, the L-550AXII is no slouch.

The L-550AXII feels like a 60s classic car, in the sense that it oozes cool even when the music isn't playing. From the finely machined controls and front panel to the softly backlit yellow meters.

It only gets better when you turn it on.

LECUA





BAT Rex Preamplifier

\$30,000 [balanced.com](https://www.balanced.com)

Balanced Audio Technology has always followed their own path, defying what is assumed to be conventional wisdom in tube audio design - building components that are decidedly different.

Their first generation of REX amplifier and preamplifier were head turners to be sure, but this new, two-chassis REX preamplifier eclipses everything they have ever produced.

And it may just be one of the world's finest preamplifiers.

Are you ready for a reboot in what you thought was possible?





Tubulus XS Umbilical

€649 (.75cm, longer available)
tubulus.net

We've done precious few cable reviews over the past 15 years, but these are truly great.

However, there's a catch - they are purpose built for the Pass XS amplifiers and preamplifiers. Good as these world class components are, modest cost of the Tubulus XS umbilical cables (or three sets if you happen to have a pair of XS monoblocks, an XS Pre, and an XS Phono) provides another level of transparency to the presentation.

Both our publisher and staffer Lawrence Devoe had the same epiphany with these cables. You can read our full review [here](#).





Yamaha A-S3200 Integrated

\$7,499.99

usa.yamaha.com

The newest Yamaha components have serious audiophile credentials. Sonically, the A-S3200 stands up to anything in its class.

However, the level of execution, combined with first rate human engineering, and those elegant power meters makes this a success on multiple levels.

This 100 watt per channel amplifier is robust from top to bottom. Removing the cover, reveals a copper inner chassis, an enormous power supply, and flawless build quality.

Considering how many 1980s Yamaha amplifiers and receivers are still working today, this one upholds the traditions set, and is sure to outlive some of us.



Nagra Classic Amp

\$18,000 nagraaudio.com

We've been using the Nagra Classic Amp and Preamp for just over a year now to excellent result.

This compact cube weighs in just under 40 pounds, and can be used as a 100 wpc stereo amplifier, or bridged for mono use.

Either way, they are fantastic.

The entire Nagra line is the perfect solution for those wanting high sound quality with a minimal footprint.

Thanks to decades of building tape recorders for pro use in mobile operations, you can be assured your Nagra is built to last.





Masterpiece Award - 2020

This has been an interesting world to say the least.

Fortunately, what we do makes it easy to follow Angela Cardas' advice of "just stay home and listen to music."

Now that TONE enters its 16th year, a lot of great gear has passed through these doors. In case you don't know, I take about 99% of the photos in the magazine, so I have the unique opportunity to listen to every single thing before it heads to one of our other writers.

It's given me a perspective most reviewers don't have.

This is a very enjoyable process, requiring an open mind at all times. We hand out fewer awards than any other publication for good reason; everything we review is worth your hard earned money. If it's not great, it doesn't even make it in the door.

I'm guessing you're way too busy to waste your time on mediocrity. I know I am.

This year, we had three pieces that felt a step beyond the honor of a "Product of The Year" award, and it's a long time till 2029.

So, we go forward with the Masterpiece Award. There will only be one or two every year. Of course, we've come out of the chute breaking our own rule, with three really incredible things.

Thank you for staying tuned in.

-Jeff Dorgay, ***publisher***

Conrad-johnson tends to do things in a quiet manner. Their original CAV amplifier was a true integrated, with a front end similar to their PV-12 preamplifier, but the new CAV-45S2 embodies their control amplifier concept, with a passive attenuator on front of what is basically their Classic 62 power amplifier.

C-J's design philosophy has always been "simple circuits sound best."

The CAV-45S2 is an example of this concept executed to perfection. It's also proof that you don't need to raid your kids college fund to have great sound.

We've been listening to conrad-johnson amplifiers for over 40 years now, and they've made some great ones, to be sure. What makes the CAV-45S2 so good is the level of performance it offers in absolute terms. www.conradjohnson.com

That's why we had to come up with a new award for it.



V4



T+A enjoys a tremendous reputation in Europe, but we haven't heard a lot about this brand in North America. We'd like to change that a bit in the next few years. Building on what we've heard at shows, their 2500 series amplifier and the companion disc player you see below have been making music around the clock since they arrived.

The MP 2500R Multi Source SACD player is just that- it plays CD and SACDs, is a high resolution DAC/Streamer, and includes an FM/DAB tuner.

The combination of form, function and sonics puts this player at the top of our list.

ta-hifi.de





The Linear Tube Audio Z40 has a rare topology: it's an output transformerless amplifier. That's right, no big transformers, so you can lift this 50 watt per channel integrated with ease. What makes it even more unique, is that it is based on the David Berning ZOTL circuit, a much more stable variation on the standard OTL theme.

It's rare that components reach out and grab you in the densely packed environment of an audio show, but the Z40 really stood out. It's been playing here for some time, and the word transparency doesn't even come close to the experience this amplifier delivers. Honestly, we've never heard anything like it.

That awful B-word (best) isn't really the right word. Not everyone can build a system around this amount of power. But the Z40 offers such a clean window on the sound, it's like those 60s movies where they shot the movie stars with empty eye glass frames. it's that amazing.

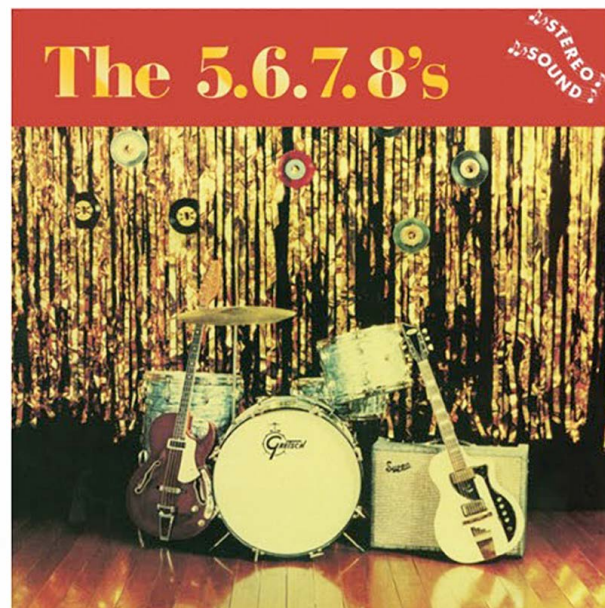
lineartubeaudio.com



Masterpiece Award - 2020

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

He says this playlist will "make even a trip to the grocery store an adventure." Not to mention, the 5.6.7.8s are an all - Japanese girl band that just happen to be one of Quentin Tarantino's faves.



John Barry / the persuaders - Persuaders theme

Boozoo Bajou - S a e

Chris Joss - You've been Spiked

Corduroy - High Havoc

The Bombay Royale - Jaan Pehechan Ho (cover version)

Sufi Disco - The Spy from Cairo

Shirley Bassey / Propellerheads - History Repeating (knee length mix)

5.6.7.8's - Jane in the Jungle

Ursula 1000, Federico Aubele - Balearix

Stephane Pompuhac - Back to the Wall

Thievery Corporation - The Hong Kong Triad

Unloved - When a woman is around



THE NEW LOOK OF PROVEN PERFORMANCE

If a loudspeaker is famous for its performance, why change it? Martin Logan's new **Motion® Series** achieve the same superior performance as previous generations, with lifelike clarity, exceptional accuracy, and dynamic range.

A stylish new enclosure design updates the look, with performance-enhancing internal bracing, reinforced baffles, new fabric grilles, and a choice of three beautiful finishes.

"...the vocals sounded eerily lifelike, and the instrumental timbre was natural, with a depth so palpable I could practically reach my hands into it."

David Martson, The Absolute Sound, on Motion 60XT

martinlogan.com



Pass Labs INT-25
\$7,250
passlabs.com

We'll start with the most purpose built of the collection.

Pass Labs builds a wide range of amplifiers, from their low powered First Watt amplifiers, all the way up to their 1000 watt Class-AB monoblocks. Every Pass amplifier has its own unique sonic signature and set of attributes, unlike some companies that merely offer you a choice of kids meal to super size cup of the same sound.

The INT-25 combines a line level preamplifier with their XA25 power amplifier – one of the most finely detailed solid-state amplifiers we've ever had the pleasure of using. Unlike most big Pass amplifiers, you can lift the INT-25 by yourself, and the footprint is modest. All Class-A, it still gets warm, but if you have a sensitive enough pair of speakers, this amplifier will give you an amazing level of sonic involvement

The casework and build are pure Pass, and this one has no onboard DAC, streamer, or phono stage – though the folks at Pass make a number of great phono stages to pair with this amplifier. Whether you can stay in low powered land or not, if you're a serious audiophile, you should experience the INT-25.

It's one of the industry's rarest jewels.

Years ago, the integrated amplifier was looked upon as either a stepping stone to having a “real system,” (i.e. a big rack full of separate components) or a way to eliminate the tuner in a hard-core turntable and tape deck system.

Even in the pre-internet days we were able to argue about formats, and what constituted a true believer.

As separate components improved and digital complicated things, the integrated amplifier took somewhat of a back seat in the world of high end audio.

But no more. Environments have become smaller, technology has improved, and of all things, cables have become more expensive. Today's integrated amplifiers have equal, if not better performance that some separates.

We've rounded up some of our favorites in a wide range of configuration and price. Some we have links to full reviews, others are almost complete.

There's never been a better time to consider the integrated as a fantastic anchor to a premium system!





Conrad-Johnson CAV 45S2
\$4,995
Conradjohnson.com

Our publisher, and his sidekick, Mr. O'Brien have been listening to C-J gear since 1979, when the first C-J preamp was put into our publisher's reference system. But the convert to C-J tube amplifiers didn't happen till 1989, when an MV-50 made its debut. After that, it took a long time for solid-state amplifiers to be a reference stable again. (and even then it was the Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Conrad-Johnson's tagline is "it just sounds right," and that sums it up. There are some amplifiers that outperform C-J in certain areas, their gear has a harmonic richness that plays to the strength of whatever music you enjoy.

We've owned and listened to every variation on the four output tube, EL34/KT88 amplifier C-J has built over the last 30 years, and the CAV 45 Mk. II is a fantastic trip downmemory lane. Borrowing heavy from the C-J parts bin, the CAV 45S2 is essentially the current Classic 62 power amplifier with a passive level control and three RCA inputs. As with every passive controller we've used, impedance matching is critical, however we had excellent luck with all of the sources at our disposal to audition. (because of the passive level control, this was the only amplifier that multiple listening sources were used)

Sheer sound sells this one. This amplifier is the textbook definition of tube magic.



Luxman L-550AXII
\$5,500
luxmanamerica.com

The 20 watt per channel, Class-A Luxman is the closest to the Pass in terms of sheer sonic purity, yet the implementation is completely different.

Where the Pass is all business, with a sparse, yet purposeful aesthetic, the Luxman delights with a bevy of control options, built-in MM/MC phono stage, headphone amplifier, and gorgeous, back lit power meters.

This amplifier pays respect to audio's glory years, while featuring 21st century performance. It even includes a pair of highly useful tone controls and an A/B speaker selector.

The tactile experience of unboxing and using a Luxman component is one of the most intimate this industry has to offer. No one does it better.

And like the Pass, if you have high efficiency speakers, or don't need to play music at crushingly high levels, the L-550AXII is the perfect destination.

If you need to go a step further, they do make the 30 watt per channel 590. But now we're forcing you to choose.



Technics SU-G700
\$2,499
technics.com

If the PrimaLuna is the old school champion, the SU-G700 from Technics gets the prize for being at the cutting edge of technology. And versatility. The SU-700 combines fashionforward elegance, with the ability to accommodate any sources you might have – analog or digital. With its full function MM/MC phono section and an excellent DAC you can build a formidable system with a minimal footprint around it.

A Technics companion SACD player is also here for review, we did just that, plugging in a technics digital amplifier technology, the SU-G700 runs cool. And, this is a truly beautiful amplifier to behold in your listening room - it definitely presents as a piece you'd think would have a much higher price tag.

A famous amplifier designer once told us that a great looking amplifier is all about a great volume control, and output meters. “You have to have the meters.”

Set, point, and match.



Cyrus ONECast
\$1,995
cyrusaudio.com

If space is at a minimum, and connectivity a priority, the Cyrus ONECast will keep everyone in the house happy. It's got a great internal DAC that allows you to stream from multiple sources, (wireless too) built in phono, AV pass through, and an excellent headphone amplifier.

In addition to ticking all the boxes, it's stylish as hell. This one is sure to become a conversation piece in no time.

With a 100wpc Class D amplifier under the bonnet, the ONECast barely generates any heat, so it can be placed anywhere. Weighing just over 12 pounds, you could even take it with you on a road trip, so you have music wherever your travels might take you.

T+A Elektroakustik PA 2500 R
\$12,750
ta-hifi.de

This one has some power. Big power. The PA 2500 R produces 140 watts per channel into 8 ohms, doubling into 4 ohms, and again into 2 ohms. There's a beefy power supply under the cover to back it up, along with some beautiful execution throughout.

We've been using this with the combination 2500 SACD player/DAC/Streamer, and it's all you need to build a perfect system. With this much power and finesse at your command it's a perfect anchor. There are no speakers it won't drive.

The fantastic on-board MM/MC phono stage eliminates the need for an external phono, and a combination of three balanced XLR inputs along with 4 single ended RCA inputs means you can connect everything you desire.

Anyone needing still more power can use the preamp outputs (again XLR and RCA) to feed a bigger power amplifier or bi-amp.

Finally, the remote and user interface are logically arranged, paired with a soft green display that is easily readable from all the way across the room.



Yamaha A-S3200
\$7,499
usa.yamaha.com

As you can see from the interior, this one is all business, with a massive power supply front and center as it should be. Though the A-S3200 is a Class-AB design, it's still voiced on the slightly warm side, and at moderate listening levels, you could easily be fooled.

With 100 watts per channel at your command, the world is your oyster when choosing speakers, and there's a headphone jack on the front panel that allows you to trim 'phone level to match room levels. A nice touch.

However, the key to the Yamaha, is flexibility.

With a gaggle of inputs, A+B speaker switching, and tone controls, you are master of the universe with this receiver.



Leak 130
\$1,195
leakaudio.com

Leak has a long pedigree in the world of British hifi. The original Leak amplifiers were powered by vacuum tubes, and the people that would design digital audio circuits weren't even a glimmer in anyone's eyes.

Paying more than just visual homage to the original Leak 30 (which was also a solid-state amp) the new 130 retains the tone controls and MM phono input, but abandons the tape head input for the digital inputs of its on-board DAC. Considering the mild resurgence of analog tape, that tape head input wouldn't be too terribly out of place.

Combined with the matching Leak CDT transport, these two make for a great pair that not only offer great sound, but a glimpse into audio's past.



PrimaLuna EVO100
\$2,395
primaluna-usa.com

PrimaLuna is a perennial favorite here at TONE. For almost two decades, PrimaLuna has been the go to company if you want classic, but slightly modern tube sound, with functionality, style, and sonic excellence. We still own their original ProLogue One, and it still works as well as it did the day it was unboxed. And yes, we still have the box.

Having an identical footprint to the original ProLogue One, the EVO 100 has been updated in every way possible. All of the components underneath the chassis are of higher quality, and a number of new features, including a built-in headphone amplifier,

PL now offers a low/high bias switch, to optimize the amplifier to perform its best with whatever output tubes you choose. Those wanting to take advantage of the KT150 tubes, will have to step up to the EVO 200 (\$2,999) which produces a few more watts per channel, has more robust output transformers, and the ability to use the KT150.

PrimaLuna hasn't scrimped a bit over the years. These amplifiers still feature a high quality dark blue metallic finish (with black or silver faceplate) and drop dead gorgeous point to point wiring. If you've never removed the bottom panel of a PrimaLuna product, you should visit their website and look at the photos. Even the legendary McIntosh and Marantz amplifiers of the 50s and 60s weren't built with this level of care.

As we've said before, the EVO 100 is tough to beat on any level. This one holds its own with everything in our comparison. The EVO 100 does not make a single misstep. You can read the full review on the TONE website [here](#).

In House

The soundtrack of assembling the issue...

Miles Davis - *Bitches Brew*

Towards the end of the issue, things tend to get more etherial around here. Nothing fills that void like Miles Davis' classic.

Do you love it, or do you hate it?

No one is luke warm on this one.



"THIS IS A NEAT AND STYLISH LITTLE UNIT THAT HARKS BACK TO THE DAYS OF SIMPLE, COMPACT BRITISH BUDGET GIANT KILLERS."

-ADAM SMITH, HIFI CHOICE

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-KEN MICALLEF,
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Dealers That Mean Business:

You've read all the reviews, you've argued with the internet pundits,

and you're ready to write a check. Now what? If you're a slightly used customer that likes to shop for the best bargain you can find on Audiogon, this article is not for you. And, controversial though it might sound, I'm not against Audiogon. If you want a gently pre-owned preamp, love music, and just don't want to buy new, I get that – as long as you know what you're getting into. Audiogon can be a great place to buy pre owned gear if you know exactly what you want - and don't expect ANY service. But someone has to buy it new, so you can buy it used – remember that!

If you are the customer that likes to buy new, loves the feel (and the smell) of taking it out of the box for the first time, knowing no one else has touched it, I get that too. Personally, I'm about 50/50 on this experience, as I am with cars. Ask anyone who's bought a preamp or a used car from me, it's usually pretty pampered.

However, if you are going to spring for new gear, you need a good dealer. Someone who understands you, your music and most of all your perspective. You need someone to help you find the right components that will work together as a system, help you set it up in some cases, and offer support when things don't work out as planned. There's no substitute for experience, and a great dealer knows their products, and knows what will work best for you.

Nearly every audio system that has failed to achieve the greatness expected of it can be traced back to poor component choice (system and/or room) synergy and poor component setup. I've been to hifi shows, homes, and dealers all over the world – hearing sound good, bad, and somewhere inbetween. It always boils down to these two factors if something isn't truly broken, and it rarely is.

The solution is easy. Find a great dealer. While there isn't a hifi shop on every corner like there was back in the 70s, there are still some truly great dealers out there that will help you put together a stunning music system, regardless of your budget. And I'm on a mission to find as many of them as I can for you.

I'm starting with the folks I know, in this new section of the magazine. Most of the establishments in this list are running full page ads in the magazine – and there is a caveat. I will not accept advertising in this magazine from a dealer unless I've been to their place, seen the shop and have talked to a cross section of their customers to know they provide superior service. In most cases, these are hifi shops that I, or someone on the staff has purchased gear from as well.

These are not just people wanting to buy space in TONEAudio. Every one of these dealers carry my personal endorsement, and I hope that will help you on your journey. As we go forward, look for the "TONEAudio Approved Dealer" sticker on your favorite establishment. Know a great dealer, that you've had superior service from? Let me know, I would like to pay them a visit and add them to the list.

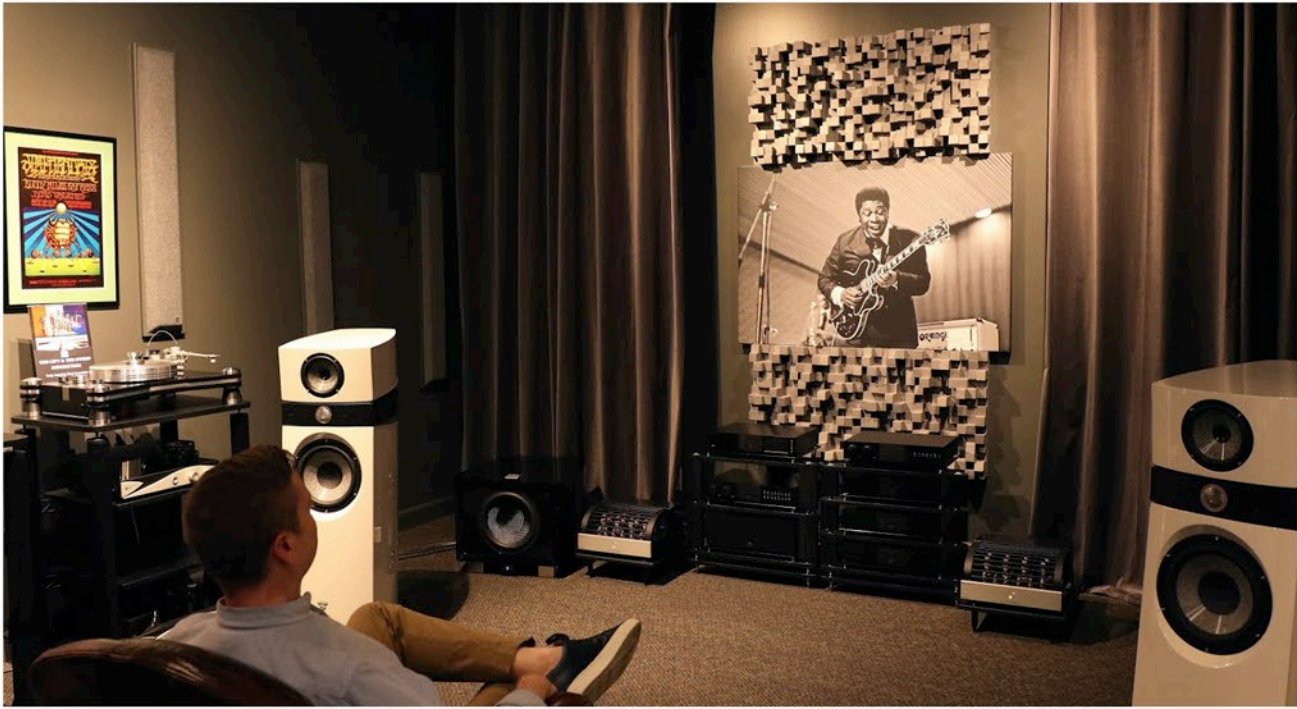


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audioclassics.com
3501 Vestal Road,
Vestal, New York 13850 **800.321.2834**

[illegible]

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San Francisco, California - AudioVision San Francisco
www.audiovisionsf.com
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www.whetstoneaudio.com
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Scottsdale, Arizona - LMC Home Entertainment
lmche.com
15507 N. Scottsdale Road, Suite 135
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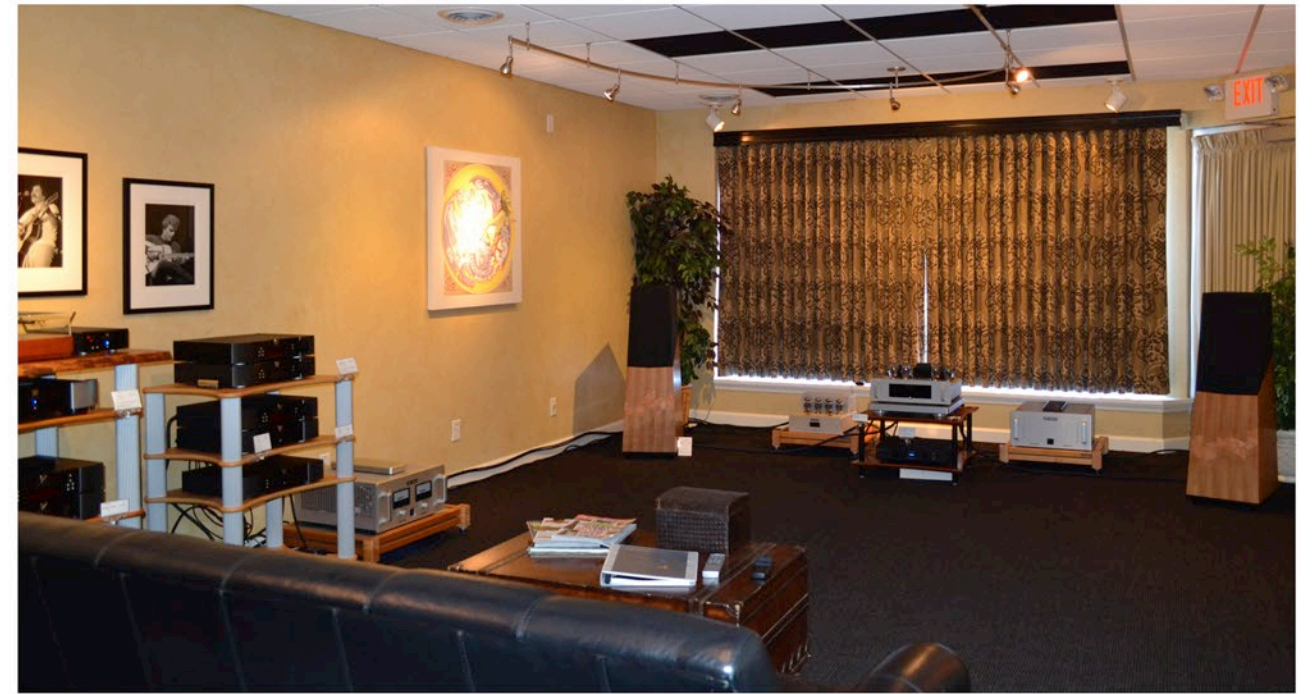
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www.ultrafidelis.com

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www.echohifi.com

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Marietta, Georgia 30060
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La Diva cd transport

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Echo Audio	echohifi.com
Elusive Disc	elusivedisc.com
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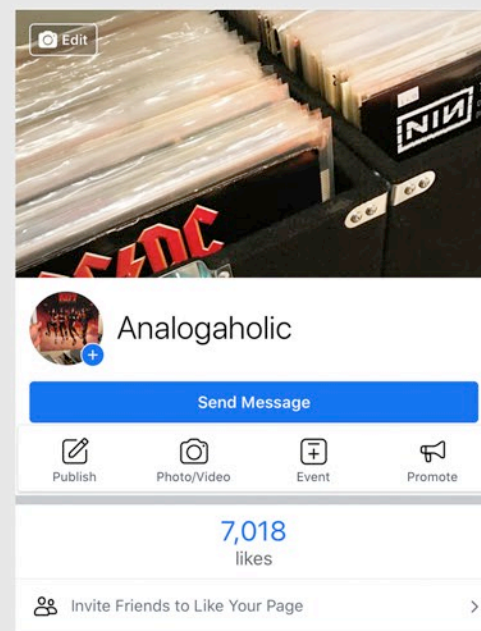
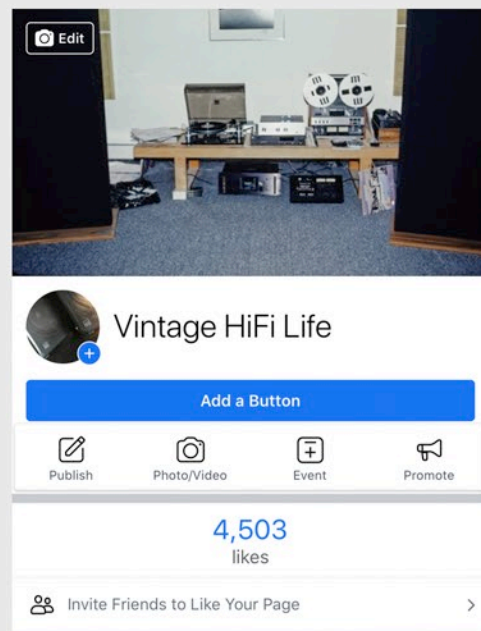
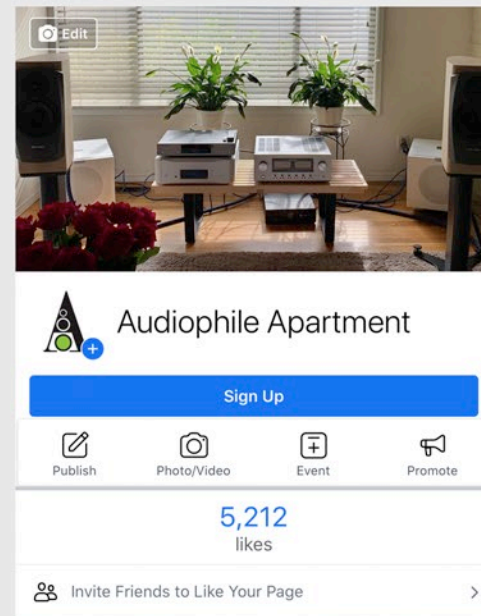
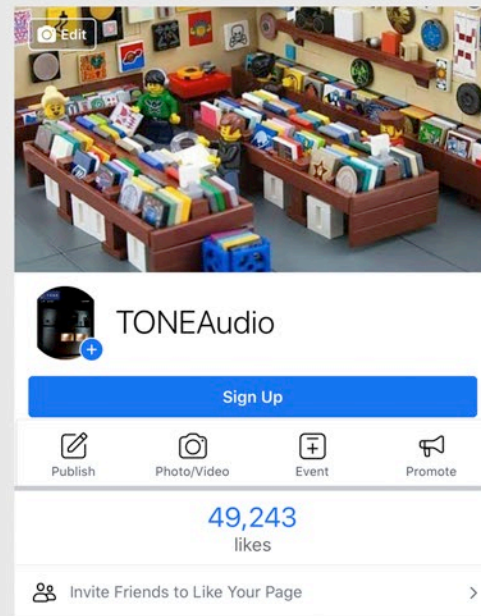
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Kiseki	kiseki-usa.com	Rega	soundorg.com
Luxman	luxmanamerica.com	Sonus faber	sonusfaber.com
McIntosh	mcintoshlabs.com	Sumiko	sumiko.net
Manley	manleylabs.com	SVS	svsound.com
MartinLogan	martinlogan.com	Technics	technics.com
Musical Fidelity	focalnaimamerica.com	Tellurium Q	telluriumq.com
Nagra	nagraaudio.com	TONE Imports	toneimports.com
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Pass Labs	passlabs.com	Upscale Audio	upscaleaudio.com
PrimaLuna	primaluna-usa.com	VAC	vac-amplifiers.com
ProAc	soundorg.com	Whammerdyne	whammerdyne.com
Pro-Ject	pro-jectusa.com	Wireworld	wireworldcable.com



We've tried to make it pretty easy for you to find us out on Facebook, and have divided up our pages to be a bit more subject specific.

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

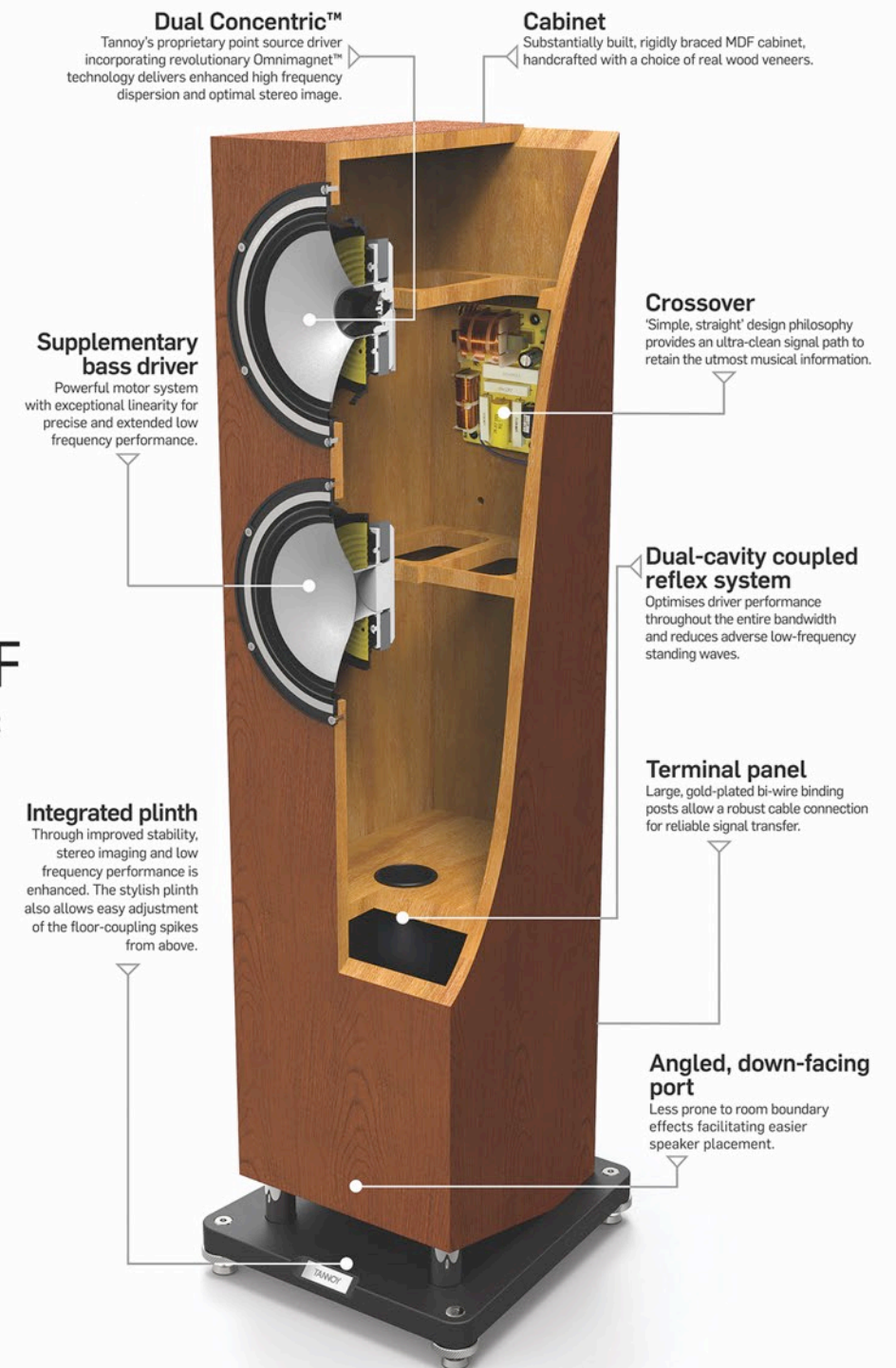


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TANNOY



"The Tannoy Revolution XT 8F was Robert Harley's top discovery at the 2015 Consumer Electronics Show. His first impression was as follows: 'After listening to it and looking at the real wood enclosure, I guessed the price at \$7000 to \$10,000. The Revolution XT's price was then revealed to be just \$2600 per pair.' After living with the 8F happily for several months, I was ready to declare it a sensational entry-level loudspeaker. But I see that I need to slightly amend that statement—the only thing entry-level about it is the price. The real wood veneers and level of finish don't suggest an entry-level product, and sonically it performs to a much higher standard. I'm in total agreement with Robert's assessment: The Tannoy packs a virtuoso midrange that is competitive with speakers approaching \$10k retail."

— DICK OLSHER, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND



In House

The soundtrack of assembling the issue...

Keith Richards and the Xpensive Winos. - *Live at the Hollywood Palladium December 15, 1988*

34 years ago, some of you weren't even born, and Rolling Stones didn't look like California Raisins. Not even Keith Richards, who still had a fairly strong voice. TONE staffer Bob Gendron recently called out this record as one deserving a remaster/repress treatment. When we talk Keith Richards listens. Enjoy one of the best live sets this ensemble has ever produced. (and you can get it on vinyl, too)



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Tel: 045 470 6991

This is when enough is enough. I'm all for reel to reel, even though I don't partake. As someone who bought a lot of Columbia House tapes back in the day, I remember these well.

And if you've been reading TONE for any length of time, you know I'm a Kiss fan.

But \$1,500 for a Columbia House tape of this?

I'm not playing.



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If you love jazz, you know the Impulse story. But you may not know everything. In case you don't, our are new to the genre, here's a great place to start, courtesy of the London Jazz Collector site.

This particular match illustrates first pressings, but if you don't have these records in any form, this is a great look at Jazz.

The Classic SB

VINTAGE DESIGN MEETS MODERN TECHNOLOGY



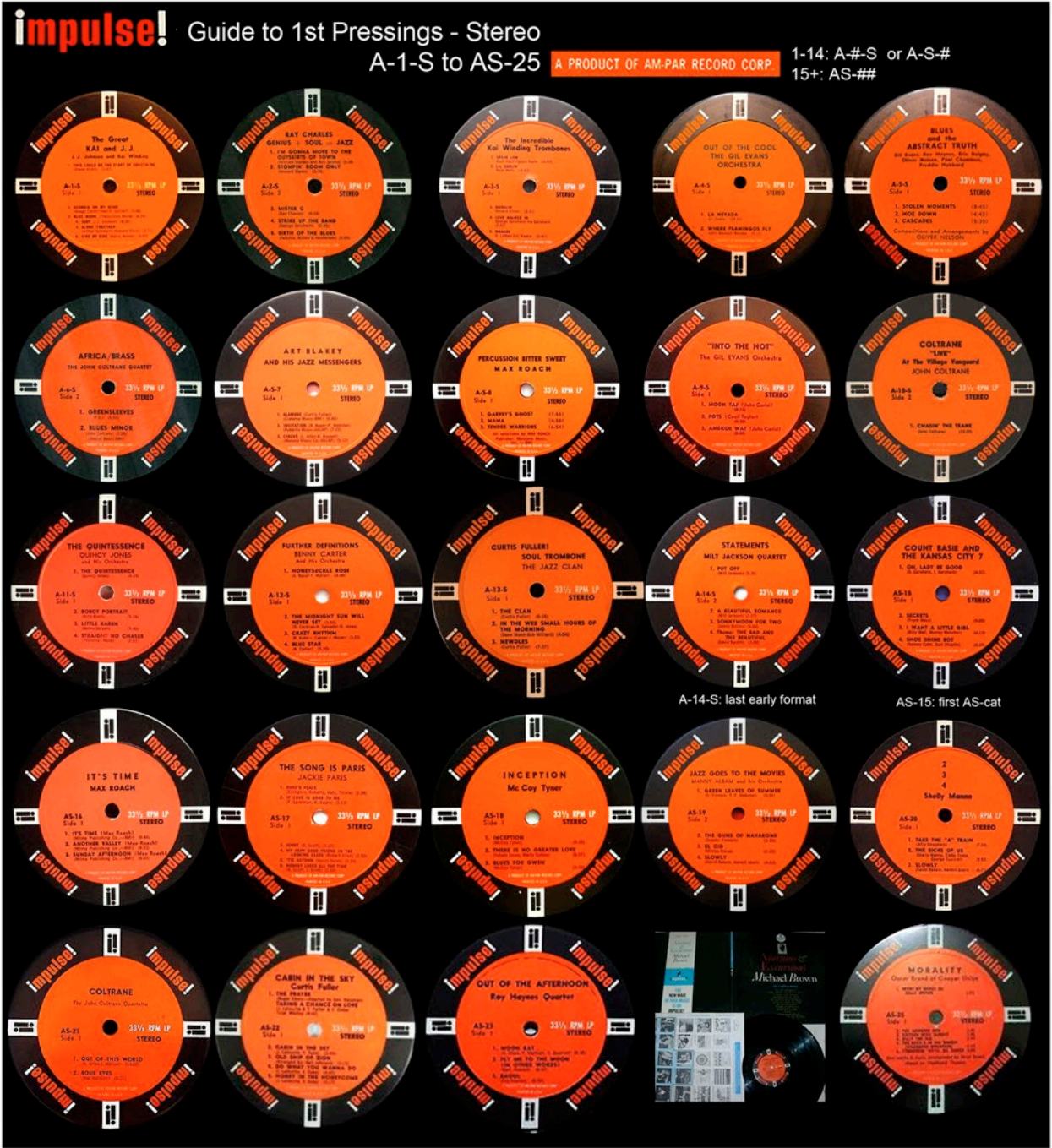
We have turbocharged our EISA Award-winning "the Classic" to bring you this upgraded package - The Classic SB. It includes key new features:

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- Sumiko Blue Point No.2 cartridge
- Top grade Clamp It
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Welcome to the Hi-Fi Family

Next issue, **106:**

Next issue...DACs and Streamers!

Who knew 15 years ago, we'd see the dichotomy that music has become, and saying "digital sucks" just wasn't true anymore.

We've rounded up some of our favorites at a variety of price points.

Stay tuned.

And as always, drop on by our Facebook page and let us know how you are...



TONE