Welcome to the 2018 Buyers’ Guide from the editors and staff at Part-Time Audiophile and The Occasional!

With this guide, we are striving to accomplish something a little more personal. Our list isn’t just a random collection of high-end audio components and accessories that have “passed muster” in one way or another. We asked our writers to recommend components that have improved their lives and have made this extraordinary hobby—listening to music—even more rewarding, and in a very tangible way. This is the result. Call it our “Editors’ Choice”, yes, but it’s more than “We heartily endorse this [fill in the blank].” This collection is about enthusiasm. Every product listed in this guide is beloved of at least one member of the staff. These products have elicited responses such as “I was gobsmacked every minute I spent with this” or “The shipping box was wet with the tears of my lost innocence” or, too often, just “Take my money!”

In other words, this isn’t about high-end audio products that we merely like. These are the products we love—and we think you will, too. No list like this can ever be complete since we’re bound to forget something that has duly impressed the heck out of us. We’ve attempted to capture a moment in time—the end of 2018, in fact—when these are the products we want to have and hold and use in our own systems right now.

This Buyers’ Guide also marks sort of a rebirth of The Occasional, an “Occasional 2.0” if you will. The first issues were delivered with love and care from Rafe Arnott, who had an incredible vision for audio journalism and absurdly high standards, something I hope to preserve. I want also to mention our dear John Stancavage, who was set to take over from Rafe, but John’s tragic and untimely passing was a shock to us all.

It is my goal that while I’m following in those rather large footsteps, I won’t trip over my feet too much. Enjoy!

Marc Phillips, Editor
The Occasional Magazine

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The biggest small music system

LS50 Wireless – Immerse yourself in power and finesse

Prepare to be swept away. Never before have bookshelf speakers produced such scale and detail. The KEF LS50 Wireless is a complete system that delivers audiophile-grade sound in real stereo. Five minutes from unboxing and set up your music and enjoy. No wonder respected reviewers call it the future of Hi-Fi. Listen for yourself.

24bit/192kHz
KEF.COM
“I’m not saying those tubes were made by aliens. But it was totally aliens!”

— Giorgio Tsoukalos
Expert Alien Audiophile Reviewer

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Google Home MAX ($399 each)
Finally, a smart-home speaker that sounds pretty darned good. The Google MAX goes loud, sounds clear and is far more musical than we expected. Plus, it talks back to you—something that probably won’t happen with your Wilson Master Chronosonics. You can buy just one for a pleasing mono sound, or pair them up for stereo.

www.google.com/us/product/google_home_max?hl=en-US

Elac Uni-Fi UF5 ($1000/pair)
By now you’ve read all about ELAC’s incredible price-to-performance ratio derived from their Andrew Jones-designed loudspeakers, but the big floorstanding UF5s are “pleasantly surprising,” especially if you have no idea how much they cost. We felt that ELAC could charge much more for them and no one would bat an eye. Jones put all the money where it matters—into the sound, so if you don’t mind the vinyl veneers you will be “gob-smacked” at the performance.

www.elac.com/product/uf5/?r=us

Quad S2 ($1000/pair)
It’s rare to find a pair of loudspeakers for $1000 or less than will satisfy even seasoned audiophiles, but the Quad S2s are so balanced from top-to-bottom and offer such a pleasing and insightful sound that you might just decide to “adjust” your budget for new speakers so you can buy more records. Surprising bass heft, a low-key appearance and setup ease all contribute to a two-way monitor that is easy to live with, and a tweeter this amazing is rarely found in such an affordable product.

www.quad-hifi.co.uk

KEF LS50W ($2199/pair)
The wireless version of perhaps the most successful speaker design in the last decade, the LS50W contains a 30wpc Class A/B amp for the tweeter and a 200wpc Class D amp for the mid/woofer and a DAC for each driver. “The bass on these suckers is downright alarming,” we concluded, “and the super-fine detail was exemplary.”

www.us.kef.com

Studio Electric M4 ($2400/pair)
This sealed two-way monitor may look unassuming, but its sound is marked by “grace and poise,” not to mention its ability to shock people once music starts flowing into the room. We felt the M4s checked off a lot of boxes for us, especially when compared to more expensive floorstanders—especially its clean and uncluttered sound and its ability to project real bass without resorting to ports, transmission lines and passive radiators.

www.studio-electric.com

Dynaudio Special Forty ($2990/pair)
The Special Forty looks like a typical well-made two-way monitor, but this classic façade hides some impressive new technology from this Danish speaker company. The Forty uses a proprietary magnesium silicate polymer material for the new Dynaudio woofer cone, and their new Esotar tweeter, also designed in-house, creates a unique airflow that exits through an aero-coupled pressure release system. This results in a 2-way monitor that possesses an incredibly extended frequency range.

www.dynaudio.com
**Trenner & Friedl Sun ($3450/pair)**

So tiny your grandmother can pick one up with just one hand, the Austrian-built Suns might be one of the toughest sells in high-end audio—until you sit down and listen. This is the reigning king of "little speakers that sound big," and the secret to this gem is exquisite build quality, the finest materials and a passion for great engineering. This may also be the ultimate speaker for small spaces.

[www.trenner-friedl.com](http://www.trenner-friedl.com)

**Fritz Speakers Carrera Be ($3500/pair)**

John “Fritz” Heiler loves making two-way speakers, especially ones that are cost-effective and sound completely enjoyable. The CarreraBes are his flagship speaker, and yet they are modest in appearance (they are beautifully built, by the way). Don’t let that fool you—these will compete with far more expensive designs and may be all the speaker you need, even in fairly large rooms. While the use of the excellent ScanSpeak Revelator woofer may be an obvious choice, the beryllium tweeter from Transducer Labs isn’t—it’s fast and detailed, yet incredibly natural.

[www.fritzspeakers.com](http://www.fritzspeakers.com)

**Harbeth 40.2 Anniversary Edition ($17,990 without stands/pair)**

Not quite a bookshelf speaker and not quite a floorstander, this classic BBC monitor looks like a rather conventional big box. It doesn’t sound like one. The 40.2 has such a distinctive way of rendering musical cues in a relaxed, natural manner—so much so that its unique warmth does not come at the cost of inner detail. The 40.2 is one of those great designs that remains timeless—although the 40th Anniversary Edition does add beautiful new veneers (silver eucalyptus, walnut and olive) and upgraded binding posts, internal cabling and capacitors.

[www.harbeth.co.uk](http://www.harbeth.co.uk)

**TAD Compact Evolution One ($26,400/pair with stands)**

It’s almost crazy that TAD is a division of commercial electronics Pioneer since these designs are so thoroughly aligned with audiophile tastes. The Compact Evolution One is a medium-sized three-way bookshelf speaker, but it throws out such a big, authoritative sound that you won’t be surprised when you see the rather lofty price. This speaker is expensive because the enclosure is so inert and the in-house drivers are expensive to make, but the music that comes out of these babies is unfettered by its dimensions. This is one of the finest compact three-ways money can buy.

[www.technicalaudiodevices.com](http://www.technicalaudiodevices.com)

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[www.spatial.co.uk](http://www.spatial.co.uk)
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"...The Akiras got the scale of recorded instruments right....
...the picture painted by the Tidals was extraordinarily true to my memory of the performance... The Akiras are the best-looking, best-built, best-sounding speakers I have had in my listening room..."

- John Atkinson
Stereophile / November Issue 2018

The DNA of the award winning Akira is present in every model in the TIDAL line - all of which have received their own awards over the last 20 Years. Isn’t it time to hear what you’ve been missing?

Also representing these fine brands: Antipodes, Aurender, Bel Canto, Bryston, Dynamic Design, HRS, Skogrand, TW Acoustics, Zesto & more!

The Voice That Is
www.thevaliethatis.com
610.359.0189

"Nothing beats Harbeth speakers for listening to acoustic sounds. They are more like refined musical instruments than loudspeakers."

Rick Rubin
Award winning music producer

US distributor: info@fidelisav.com
603-880-4434
www.fidelisav.com

www.harbeth.co.uk
Spatial Audio M3 Turbo S ($2995/pair)
These open baffle speakers are so open—“how open are they?” Well, there’s a reason why the guys chose the name “spatial.” For an incredibly reasonable price, you get an unbelievable sense of transparency wrapped in a beautiful 3D bow. The Spatials are magical when it comes to the human voice—you can hear all those “human” details and cues that make it all sound so realistic.

www.spatialaudio.us

GoldenEar Triton Reference ($4449 each)
GoldenEar makes relatively affordable speakers that give other speaker builders nightmares—they are designed in the US, tested in Canada and manufactured in China. While the styling comes from the Big Black Tower School of Design, the Triton Reference wows the listener with wild dynamics, immersive imaging, thunderously huge sound, and amazing value. For under $10K/pair, you get powered subwoofers, a fully balanced crossover and a 56-bit DSP control unit.

www.goldenear.com

Volti Audio Rival (from $8900/pair)
This three-way horn-loaded loudspeaker was designed by Volti Audio’s Greg Roberts to come close to the performance of the massive Vittoras at a much more approachable price in a more forgiving footprint. What’s special about the Rivals is how fun they are – they’re dynamic, and they’re really dynamic. Music can just leap out of nowhere, and the result stuns and delights. They also can create a stunningly precise image, with all the audiophile trimmings, and have the unerring tendency to completely disappear. Unabashedly addicting. Upgrades to the finish, and new outboard crossovers, are available for a modest upcharge.

www.voltiaudio.com

Living Voice Avatar OBX RW3 (from $11,250/pair)
The OBX is the result of a relatively high efficiency (94 dB) loudspeaker design that has been carefully re-worked over the years until it has become a more composed, confident transducer that can be used with a wider variety of amplification. Living Voice speakers have been known as an ideal mate for single-ended triode amps, but now you can throw some power at these elegant floor-standers and witness a coherent, outgoing sound.

www.livingvoice.eu

ATC SCM-40A ($12,999/pair)
These active British monitors are known for their inner detail, well defined bass extension and superb midrange. If passive ATCs are known for being power hungry you have nothing to worry about here as the manufacturer provided the active version with 242 watts of class A/B power, enough to get you rocking straight out of the box. The new in-house built tweeter blends seamlessly with the midrange.

www.atcloudspeakers.co.uk

Joseph Audio Perspective ($12,999/pair)
Jeff Joseph of Joseph Audio is some kind of wizard; this is known. From his arcanum of magical treasures, the Perspectives appear merely to be modest-sized floorstanders, but that is a blatant lie—they are entirely infused with an occult and completely out-sized personality. The soundstage they throw is irresistible and undeniable (most especially the height), but there is no earthly reason why these speakers sound so big! Fine, we’re sure there is a reason, but the point is, even if it isn’t magic, no one else seems to have tripped over the secret. Which means that the completely seamless coherence and the rich, nearly tactile, sounds pouring out of these things may well get owners accused of witchcraft, too. Whether they’re able to snap out of their hypnotized state for long enough to notice is another thing, but well, warnings are meant to be ignored.

www.josephaudio.com

DeVore Fidelity Gibbon X ($15,890/pair)
We’ve enjoyed many of John DeVore’s Brooklyn-based loudspeaker designs in the past, but we felt that the new Gibbon X, which we dubbed “Weapon X,” was a “show-stopper.” The X is so revealing that you’ll be tempted to bleed your bank account dry in order to feed your system only the best recordings to repeatedly fill your “heart, mind, body and soul with the music of the spheres.” We couldn’t find a speaker that offered more for the money, so we kept them and gave them an Editor’s Choice Award.

www.devorefidelity.com

Sonus Faber Serafino Tradition ($21,900/pair)
This Italian loudspeaker company is known for its gorgeous craftsmanship and visually striking designs, and we thought the Serafino was an undeniable beauty—both “modern and lux.” A large speaker, the Serafino is deft with all musical styles, but masterful with voices. This is the stuff of desire and dreams; they define the idea of “pride of ownership.”

www.sonusfaber.com
Vimberg Mino ($29,000/pair)
We’ve declared the Vimbergs “one of the greatest bargains in high-end audio,” even though they cost as much as a fairly nice new car. That’s because Vimberg is associated with Tidal Audio and leverage that German manufacturer’s cost-no-object designs to achieve an amazing sound that comes incredibly close to...well, the sound of Tidal loudspeakers. Precise, powerful and sublime, the Minos sound more like many six-figure loudspeakers and are nearly unlimited in their scope and majesty—and they excel in time alignment. Our advice: skip the BMW and get these instead.

www.vimberg.de

Wilson Audio Sasha DAW ($37,900/pair)
This latest design from Wilson Audio, the first released after the passing of its founder, is a complete re-working of the previous Sasha—although these improvements bring it closer to the more expensive Alexia. We felt that this might be the Wilson speaker “you fall in love with,” especially if you’re dealing with a normal-sized listening room. Accurate time alignment, impressive dynamics and deep bass response define this speaker—this may be the best Wilson ever.

www.wilsonaudio.com

Tune Audio Anima ($51,995/pair)
Horn speakers can be incredibly expensive to make, but one look at the gorgeous contours of the Tune Audio Anima and you will clearly see every penny. More importantly this three-way pure horn-loaded design will also make you hear every penny spent, thanks to a first-order crossover and superb attention to the acoustical properties of those resin and wooden sculpted horns. The Anima is also extremely efficient, rated at 109dB, so you will be tempted to try out every flea-watt SET ever made on these works of art.

www.tuneaudio.com

Von Schweikert Audio VS-55 Aktive ($60,000/pair)
While this California-based company’s flagship loudspeakers—the $200K Ultra 9 and the $300K Ultra 11—live and play at the pinnacle of today’s loudspeaker design, it’s the scaled-down active VS-55 that will help well-heeled audiophiles in normal-sized rooms achieve sonic nirvana. The VS-55 is so clean, so fast, so dynamic and yet so natural that it feels like it’s removed yet another veil from reproduced music, one that we didn’t even know existed until hearing these fantastic speakers.

www.vonschweikert.com

Acapella Apollon ($133,000.00/pair)
There is nothing modest about these enormous speakers, but listening to them, you’re really not going to care. You’re also going to be surprised at the spaces they’ll fit into! Yes, the tweeter is made of fire (!), but it’s really the asymmetrical horn in that eye-grabbing automotive paint that’s going to catch your eye. Full-range, dynamic, delicate, and transparent and revealing, this may be the ultimate transducer. An endgame loudspeaker, for sure.

www.acapella.de

Rockport Lyra ($169,500/pair)
At this price point you expect some magic, but the strength of the Lyra’s performance resides in a feeling that this sound is closer to the real thing that everything else. Massive and heavy—at this price the dealer should be setting it up for you—the Lyra will reward you with an unparalleled sense of dynamic contrasts, the type of quality you usually associate only with live performances. At least one of us feels this is the best speaker design out there or at least one of the best.

www.rockporttechnologies.com
“Best Speaker Debut Under $50,000
QLN Prestige Three”
The Audio Beatnik Award - RMAF 2018
www.wellpleasedav.com
“This attention to detail results in a turntable that offers incredible pitch stability, dynamics and anything else you can think of that’s essential to the flawless spinning of a record.”
Rega Planar 3 ($975)
The latest version of this venerable classic is easily the best-sounding P3 yet, with an overall sound quality that surpasses the last-generation RP6 (but not the current P6, of course). This Planar 3 features a stiffer plinth and more bracing, along with a newly-designed bearing and sub-platter. The bearings in the new Rega RB330 tonearm also have remarkably low amounts of friction.

www.technics.com

Technics SL1200G ($4000)
From a distance, the Technics SL-1200G looks just like the old SL-1200, which was the best-selling turntable in history. When you see the G up close, you start noticing little details—especially in the fit and finish. Once you tear it apart, you’ll discover it’s been completely redesigned. From testing and listening and finding out what makes a turntable sound better.

www.fernandroby.com

Fern & Roby Montrose Heirloom ($10,000)
“We’re just trying to make something really cool work really well,” explains Fern & Roby’s Jesse Brown, the man who makes each of these turntables by hand. F&R is a far from typical high-end audio company—they’re focused on being true artisans in an industry full of technology, and the Montrose Heirloom’s great sound and original looks come from testing and listening and finding out what makes a turntable sound better.

www.tw-acustic.de

VPI HW-40 ($15,000)
The HW-40, which celebrates the 40th anniversary of VPI, is very similar to the awesome $30K direct-drive DD model that impressed everyone a few years ago. This new model is offered at half the price, a result of buying parts in bulk and learning a few tricks along the way. Plus, you get the latest version of the new Fat Boy tonearm included in this high-performance turntable, which is capable of a sound that few other analog rigs can capture.

www.amg-turntables.com

AMG Viella V12 ($16,500)
When we asked the owner of a million-dollar system why he chose his AMG over any/every other ‘table in the world, he simply replied “It’s the only one that made sense sonically.” The German-built AMG offers such a refined and beautiful sound from such a compact design—the secret to the success of this ‘table is the extraordinary attention to detail and precision engineering.

www.sme.co.uk

SME 30/2 ($40,000)
This massive turntable is a triumph of precision engineering, borne from an English company that started off making precision aviation parts and instruments. This attention to detail results in a turntable that offers incredible pitch stability, dynamics and anything else you can think of that’s essential to the flawless spinning of a record. SME turntables and tonearms are all established designs based on decades of experience in the field—while newer “state-of-the-art” turntables come and go, the SME 30/2 has reserved its place in analog history.

www.amg-turntables.com

Dr. Feickert Analogue Firebird ($12,490)
The Firebird stands out from the other ‘tables in this German company’s lines because it has three motors, and because it can accommodate two arms. Dr. Feickert’s turntables are easy to setup, thanks to a built-in protractor and ingenious arm board that lets users attain perfect alignment quickly and with less fuss. The Firebird has a solid, powerful and confident sound that comes from the geometric alignment of the motors, and the reduced surface contact in the bearing allows even more music to come through.

www.tw-acustic.de

TW Acoustic Raven GT SE ($14,000)
TW Acoustic turntables are far from inexpensive, and yet they seem to provide far more thrills than we would expect at their respective price points. The Raven GT SE features a plinth that’s machined from a single aluminum billet, and that gives this analog rig extra weight, height and authority. With the SE, the platter, feet and motor controller are borrowed from their flagship ‘table, making this an even greater value.

www.amg-turntables.com

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www.amg-turntables.com

Avid Acutus Dark ($17,995)
This limited edition ‘table from the UK manufacturer is nearly identical to the “regular” Acutus, except it comes in matte black and has special badging that gives it more cachet for the vinyl enthusiast. You still get twin drive belts attached to a hand-built motor, an effective three-point suspension and a DSP speed controller that is tuned by hand for each “table. Avid is “avid” for close tolerances, which means this ‘table runs with rare precision.

www.avidhifi.com

SME 30/2 ($40,000)
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www.amg-turntables.com
A day not playing records is a wasted day. — Friedrich Nietzsche

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parttimeaudiophile.com
Tonearms

Jelco TK850 (from $1000)
If you haven’t noticed, stand-alone tonearms are quite expensive. The Jelco occupies a unique position in its market—it’s relatively affordable and it works really well. This arm is ideal for vinyl lovers looking to restore a classic idler drive ‘table, or turn their old Technics SL-1200 into a rig even an audiophile can love. The 850 also features a new “knife-edge” vertical bearing that creates a more musical sound than older models. Jelco remains one of the very few tonearm companies that actually measure and guarantee their products to the lowest tolerances.

Thomas Schick ($1850)
This tonearm has a relatively low price because it’s a relatively simple design, but its elegance is off the charts. The Schick arm is ideal for SPUs and can be ordered to match both SPU-A and SPU-G designs. You can also select from a long list of options—arm lengths, finishes, headshells, cables and more.

The Wand Master Series 9.5" ($2350)
The new Master Series of unipivot tonearms from New Zealand’s The Wand features an unusually thick carbon-fiber arm tube that is much more rigid than normal tubes, and enough accessories to mount it on many, many different ‘tables. (It comes in 9.5”, 10.3” and 12” lengths.) Competitive with much more expensive arms, The Wand will convince you that a properly designed tonearm can have a huge impact on the sound of your analog rig.

Kuzma 4Point ($3795-$8995, depending on length and options)
Named for the fact that its zero-play bearing is configured on four points, the Kuzma has quietly emerged as one of the finest tonearm designs on the market today. (A certain designer of a six-figure turntable we know claims nothing else comes close.) The four-point design certainly thrills the engineers out there—it’s an elegant way of ensuring the cartridge stays in the groove with minimal vibrations, sort of an important feature.

www.usahifi.com
www.thomas-schick.com
www.thedesignbuildlisten.com
www.kuzma.si
EMT 997 ($5500)

Yes, this is the very same banana-shaped tonearm you'd find on beautiful old EMT turntables from the '50s and the '60s, but this design is still one of the most impressive in history. The 997, like the EMT 'tables of yore, possesses a powerful and authoritative sound that might not yield the most delicate and detailed sound, but it will get to the heart of the music rather quickly. If you're going to splurge on an old EMT 'table, you'd better put a 997 on it or it just won't make sense.

www.emtinternational.ch

Reed 3P ($5700)
The Reed is beautifully designed, easy to adjust—and we've heard it on some of the finest analog rigs in the world. Part of the magic of the Reed comes, ironically, from the company's slavish dedication to math, physics and engineering. (This might be the tonearm Dr. Sheldon Cooper would pick if he was an audiophile.)

www.reed.lt

Ikeda IT-407CR1 ($6500)
Ikeda has a long and storied history of analog playback going back to the 1960s—maybe you remember a company named Fidelity Research? Mr. Ikeda is still around, and these gorgeous tonearms are still being made by hand in Japan. This is the perfect arm for those who enjoy the singular beauty of Japanese hi-fi—mount a Koetsu or a Kiseki on this and forget all your troubles.

www.islabs.co.jp

TW Acustic Raven 10.5 ($6500)
After spending years recommending other arms for their turntables, TW Acustic decided to start making their own—and it's a fabulous match. We're not just talking about TW 'tables, but nearly every 'table made since it was designed with an effective mass that can be used with numerous designs. The tolerances of the bearings are among the finest in the industry, leading to a tonearm that simply gets out of the way of the music.

www.tw-acustic.de

AMG 12J Turbo ($8500)
The AMG is a beautifully machined tonearm, simple in design but impressive in build quality. This German company worked hard to create an arm with both reduced friction and increased stability—not an easy concept when you think about it. The AMG is also incredibly easy to install, which makes it the ideal tonearm for the vinyl lover who wants the best but doesn't want to fiddle around with adjustments all the time.

www.amg-turntables.com

Thales Simplicity II ($9450)
The Simplicity II is a pivoted tangential arm which moves like a normal pivoted arm, but it has the ability to move its headshell so that it tracks like a linear tracking arm. It's an ingenious design which combines the strength of both a pivoted tonearm and a linear tracker, without sharing much of their weaknesses. This is an elegant design with ultra-precise machining quality.

www.tonarm.ch
**Phono Cartridge**

**Denon DL-103 ($349)**

It’s astonishing that an affordable MC cartridge designed in 1962 still sounds so good, but the 103 is still loved by a surprising number of audiophiles. You might prefer the more updated sound of the 103R, but the original 103 still provides a classic window into the finest recordings ever made. Plus you can modify the 103 with various tips, cantilevers and body upgrades that will turn it into a super-cart for just a few hundred more.

www.usa.denon.com

**Miyajima Zero Mono ($2150)**

Is this the finest mono cartridge available today? That’s a confusing question for most audiophiles, but if you get the idea that mono recordings can feature a wealth of tone, timbre and emotion, you’ll appreciate the beauty of this cartridge.

www.miyajima-lab.com

**Dynavector 17DX ($2250)**

Though the price has risen steadily over the last few years and the classic KARAT design is no longer the bargain it once was, the 17DX is still one of the most neutral cartridges ever made. (Even digiphiles are impressed with its measurements.) It’s unusually incisive and mates well with a wide variety of tonearms.

www.dynavector.com

**Ortofon Cadenza Black ($2729)**

Using a nude Shibata stylus with a boron cantilever, the Cadenza Black is a wonderfully neutral cartridge. The trick here is lightness in the materials used, which results in a fast, dynamic sound. If you’re a huge fan of ginormous soundstages and pinpoint imaging, the Black is an excellent choice at its price point.

www.ortofon.com

**Ultimate 4D ($4800)**

We referred to this very low output (0.24mV) cartridge as “clean but not lean,” with a very modern sound that gave us quite the adrenaline rush. The Ultimate 4D transported us directly into the musical landscape—one of us feels it’s the best cartridge he has used with his restored Garrard 401.

www.zyx-audio.com

**Soundsmith Hyperion II ($8000)**

Peter Ledermann explained it best when he said this about the Hyperion’s cactus-needle cantilever, which offer exception stiffness and damping: “We’ve been listening to phonograph records for only 70 years, and God’s been making the best cantilevers for 10,000 years.” The sound of the Hyperion is so incisive and yet so listenable—it’s one of the few cartridges out there that seem impervious to any kind of tension or stress.

www.sound-smith.com

**Fuuga ($8950)**

The Fuuga is one of those rare Japanese cartridge designs that floats in a sea of inner beauty, so much so that you’ll probably start writing magnificent poetry while you’re listening to records. This is a tribute to the classic Miyabi cartridges that also featured a cylindrical body, and its distinctive look will capture the imagination of even the most tech-minded audiophiles.

www.audioarts.co

**Lyra Etna SL ($9995)**

The Lyra is beautifully made, with a body machined from a solid block of titanium. While past lysars have been a bit too detailed and revealing, the Etna indulges itself in the sheer beauty of the music—it’s still incredibly neutral while it digs deep into harmonic structures and textures. With the right analog rig, the Etna can sound positively flawless.

www.lyraanalog.com

“**We’ve been listening to phonograph records for only 70 years, and God’s been making the best cantilevers for 10,000 years.”**
If you’re using a high-output MC or an MM and you still want to use a high-quality phono preamp as opposed to some no-frills box, the Soundsmith MMP3 is what you need. In fact, if you’re using one of Peter Ledermann’s high-output moving iron cartridges, you should be using this. The combination of the MMP3 and a Soundsmith cartridge is one of the quietest combinations you’ll hear at this end of the spectrum—even if you already own something considerably more ambitious.

www.sound-smith.com

This small two-chassis phono stage (the second box is Q-PSU power supply) from Hungary may seem modest, but we’ve placed it in some very impressive systems without once wishing we needed more. This dual-mono gem handles MMs and MCs easily, and the only issue is that adjustments are done internally via jumpers. For this incredibly low price, however, you should just be satisfied with the Quasar’s stunning sound quality.

www.heedaudio.com

This tiny step-up transformer—using big, heavy cables may send it flying across your listening room—was “impossible not to like” and that it should “satisfy even the most discriminating vinyl-phile.” Offered by the friendly and extremely knowledgeable Bob Sattin, this SUT can run against the best and “still acquit itself admirably.”

www.bobsdevices.com

The third generation of this popular phono preamp has been designed by analog maven Michael Yee and features a discrete dual-mono circuit, subsonic filters and incredible flexibility when it comes to loading options. The new power supply gets rid of the wall-wart, making the Nova 3 even quieter than before.

www.musicalsurroundings.com
PureAudio Vinyl ($4500)
This quiet and flexible phono stage comes from Gary Morrison and Ross Stevens, the men who formed Plinius back in the ‘90s. Featuring pure Class-A operation, dual-mono construction and a stunning industrial design, this phono stage provides the perfect balance between loads of inner detail and a smooth, lush vinyl presentation.
www.pureaudio.co.nz

Zesto Audio Andros 1.2 ($4700)
This tubed phono stage, built in Los Angeles, offers an insane number of features for its relatively modest cost. You get dual-mono construction, and all adjustments are easily made from the back panel, even on the fly. It's sonically neutral, perhaps more so than any other tubed phono stage we can think of under $10K, and it's a gorgeous and shiny gem that you’ll stare at for hours.
www.zestoaudio.com

Modwright PH150 ($7895)
Dan Wright’s all-tube transformer-coupled phono preamp, the flagship in the line, gives you an amazing amount of headroom (72 dB), plenty of features, an external power supply and fantastic sound. We feel that the PH150 “has no flaws, presenting a seamless top-to-bottom eloquence that is magnetic and alluring.”
www.modwright.com

Audio Research Reference Phono 3 ($14,000)
We felt that this tubed phono stage got us even closer to the sound of the master tape with its improved transparency, holographic soundstaging, dynamics, contrast weight and authority over previous Audio Research units. The six 6H30 tubes inside are regulated so carefully that there’s even a counter to mark off the hours of usage. This is one of the most versatile phono preamplifiers money can buy—it’s been generously designed by vinyl lovers for vinyl lovers.
www.audioresearch.com

EMT JPA 66 ($55,000)
The 66 is a full-function preamp that just happens to have one of the finest phono sections money can buy. Designed for use with EMT cartridges, this all-tubed preamp has a professional feel to it—no-nonsense industrial design, tons of loading and equalization options, and everything is conveniently located on the front panel. And yes, the line stage is just as impressive as the phono stage.
www.emt-international.ch
Analog Tape

TEAC W-1200 ($399)
Fancy a return to the good ol’ days of tape dubbing? Teac still produces a world class double cassette recorder, complete with USB output for digital archiving, noise reduction and pitch control. It’s a looker too!
www.teac-audio.eu

J-Corder (prices vary)
J-Corder is a one-stop shop for all things R2R, everything from refurbished decks to head blocks to hub adapters to reels. They offer a line of refurbished decks from Technics, Pioneer and more, or you can just bring your old deck in for a complete makeover. If you’re serious about getting into tape, this is the place to start.
www.j-corder.com

United Home Audio (from $6000)
These refurbished reel-to-reel tape machines start at $6K and can wind up well over $20K depending upon how far you want to go, which may be quite far considering how fun this part of the hobby can get. “Winner, winner, chicken dinner” we exclaimed when we bought ours.
www.unitedhomeproducts.com

Ballfinger M 063 (starting at $11,000)
Not a pimped up classic model with legacy parts recycled, this is a true, brand new, built-from-scratch reel to reel player and it is a stunner. Built in Germany, offered in various configurations that will most definitely cover all your needs, this is a dream machine for analog lovers.
www.ballfinger.de

Doshi Tape V.3 Tape Stage ($16,995)
Nick Doshi has created an interesting product here—a preamplifier designed to handle the unique challenges of reel-to-reel tape machines. Useful for both audiophiles and recording engineers, the Tape Stage has a servo output stage that can be switched between Class A and Class A/B according to listener preference. Passive equalization is also included.
www.doshiaudio.com
Digital to Analogue Converter

Schiit Bifrost (from $399)
This cheaper one is built around the smooth sounding AKM4490 chipset while the pricier (but still affordable) multibit version takes advantage of Schiit's know-how from their top of the line Yggdrasil converter. Both versions are worth your money – expect the AKM to have a slightly less defined bass while maintaining an excellent midrange, while the Multibit version adds crisper high frequencies to the mix. Both are modular and upgradable designs. www.schiit.com

iFi iDSD BL ($599)
A portable DAC with capable headphone amplifier that will chew through all possible digital formats, the iDSD is built around fantastic Burr Brown converters known for their natural timbre. The latest Black Label version adds extra detail to the mix, making the overall performance crisper.

Border Patrol SE DAC (starts at $1400)
Yes, it’s a Redbook-only converter, and yes, it sports NOS chips. It uses no oversampling, no up-sampling, and no filtering – this is “no harm” taken seriously. Add a choke-input and (bypassable) tube rectified power supply, and you can forget David, here you have an audiophile Goliath. But please, don’t take our (or anyone’s) word for it – do yourself a favor and try this DAC for yourself. What we heard was clear, open, transparent, and very lifelike. That’s hard to beat especially for the price.

Crane Song Solaris ($1949)
A decidedly non-audiophile pick, the Crane Song Solaris is a dyed-in-the-wool pro audio DAC: nothing more and nothing less. You won’t find a fancy faceplate, gold-plated connectors, or a remote control – this DAC is meant to be mounted into a rack and left there. On the plus side, the Solaris is hand built by Dave Hill’s crew at Crane Song and it is a perfectionist DAC in all respects, sporting some of the lowest jitter measurements on the planet. It’s simple to set up and straightforward to use, and it sounds fantastic.

Exogal Comet ($3400 with optional power supply)
Reasonably priced considering it has so much proprietary technology, this DAC provides superb harmonics and timbres, with a very lifelike presentation for a mid-priced system. Add a wonderful headphone amplifier, a preamplifier and a phono stage, making it an incredible bargain.

SimAudio Moon 390 ($5300)
This digital one-box solution contains a DAC (with quad DSD and MQA), a preamplifier, a headphone amplifier, an MM/MC phono pre and a streamer that’s Roon ready. The 390 also has plenty of connectivity for HDMI, so you can work it into your home theater as well. All you need is an amp and speakers and you have a first-class digital-based system – or add that turntable!

Bricasti M1 Classic ($9000)
Although it’s the lowest priced of Bricasti Audio’s perfectionist DAC products, we feel that the M1 Classic is one of the best overall DACs we’ve used. Since this model has been around for a few years, it’s been carefully tweaked out and improved to wring out the best possible sound for the price. Your money buys not only top-tier sonic, lots of input/output and digital filter options, but also a perfectionist-built unit that looks spectacular inside and out.

EMM Labs DA2 ($25,000)
A reference DAC that sounds exactly like what reference machines should sound like – natural, effortless, smooth and yet detailed. No off the shelf chips here, the DA2 sports an in-house designed conversion technology along with hardware galvanic isolation for its USB interface, and it’s capable of playing all PCM and DSD files up to 1024.

dCS Bartok
($13,000, with headphone amplifier $15,000)
A descendant of the classic Rossini and Vivaldi DACs from dCS, the Bartok also includes a wonderful headphone amplifier, making it the perfect base camp for some high-wire headphone listening and digital streaming. It’s the sound that we look for “in the best analog rigs and what digital aspires to sound like.”

LampizatOr Pacific DAC (starts at $26,000)
We felt that the sound of this DAC was “deeply impressive,” and it changed the way we interpreted digital audio. This is a particularly sweet-sounding DAC, an “all-out assault on digital conversion” that’s incredibly musical and satisfying.
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HiFi Audio News and Reviews
Transport

Bel Canto CD3T ($1495)
This typically compact transport from Bel Canto is billed as “the most direct path to your DAC.” Despite being reasonably priced, it offers loads of features and conveniences. Its true talent is its reliability—this is a rugged, well-made transport that will last at least as long as your dedication to the playing of little silver discs.

www.belcantodesign.com

PS Audio DirectStream Memory Player ($3999)
This universal transport is extremely well-built—it weighs 20 pounds—and it’s a looker as well. It also plays everything you can imagine including CD, SACD, DVD-Audio, AVCHD…you name it. While you can enjoy high-resolution formats and even digital files via USB, we were surprised how well it played ordinary redbook CDs.

www.psaudio.com

Audio Note UK CDT -Two/II ($6500)
Discussions about CD transports may sound a little boring these days, but the Audio Note was so fun that we wanted to listen to our CD collections—and not even in a retro way. The CDT-Two/II sounded “breathtakingly open, clear and extended.” Remarkably, this transport also excels at reading even the dirtiest of discs.

www.audionote.co.uk

CEC TL2N ($7000)
CEC is known for its belt-driven digital transports, and this new model uses many of the same innovations as their top-of-the-line TLO-3.0. The CEC also features an external clock as well as their highly-regarded SUPERLINK connection.

www.cec-web.co.jp

Esoteric P-02X ($23,500)
This CD and SACD transport has all the bells and whistles, including the proprietary VS-DD Spindle servo driver and a double-decker circuit layout that creates the shortest signal paths. This latest version of the trusted Esoteric transport includes a much classier remote as well as newly expanded connectivity options.

www.esoteric.jp

“Discussions about CD transports may sound a little boring these days, but the Audio Note was so fun that we wanted to listen to our CD collections—and not even in a retro way.”
Computer/Streamers

**Sonore UltraRendu ($875)**
This is definitely a minimalist product, but it comes at a minimalist price. This small box helps you circumvent the need for a computer in your listening room, and it gets the tunes where they need to go without a fuss. It also sounds surprisingly good for the money and might be the perfect one-box server solution for those new to computer audio. A small, but significant jump up from the microRendu.

[www.sonore.us](http://www.sonore.us)

**Roon Nucleus+ ($2498)**
If you’re addicted to Roon software to organize your digital needs, and we are, the next step up is the Nucleus+ which acts as a “traffic cop” and manages everything on your hard drives, networks and streaming sources. The first piece of hardware offered by Roon, the Nucleus+ can even be used to play your files from multiple devices all through your home. We recommend getting the extra horsepower of the Plus over the regular Nucleus “just because.”

[blog.roonlabs.com](http://blog.roonlabs.com)

**Wolf Audio Systems (starting at $3600)**
Computers designed with one thing only in mind—creating the best digital playback possible. Extremely powerful processors fed with linear power supplies, tweaked software and superb built quality.

[https://wolfaudiosystems.com/](https://wolfaudiosystems.com/)

**Auralic Aries G2 ($3899)**
While it’s designed for more complex home networks, the Aries G2 does offer outstanding connectivity to all sorts of devices and all sorts of technologies—including DSD512 over wi-fi. The control app is particularly stunning in the way it provides access to building and managing playlists.

[www.us.auralic.com](http://www.us.auralic.com)
Innuos Zenith Mk III (starting at $4249)

A new and improved power supply, which includes Mundorf caps, gives the new Zenith music server a leap in performance that places it closer to the company’s top offerings – and way over the offerings of most every other audio server on the market. The jump in sound quality was so totally unexpected that we grabbed our wallets and started shouting “take my money.” CD ripper is built-in.

www.innuos.com

dCS Network Bridge ($4250)

We called the dCS a “Swiss Army knife” of digital streamers, and it’s one the most enjoyable interfaces you can place between your DAC and your streaming services. It can work with almost any DAC out there since it “can take almost anything as an input.” It even includes an auto-clocking feature that minimizes jitter.

www.dcsltd.co.uk

Antipodes DX ($6500)

The third generation of this music server from New Zealand combines an all-in-one approach with sensational sound. You can play from a long list of sources, from internal or external storage, stream with ease or even rip CDs. Best of all, you can set it up from almost any device.

www.antipodesaudio.com

Aurender N10 ($8000)

With 4TB of storage and the ability to convert DSD to PSM on the fly through FPGA, and full-function control, this server also sounds spectacular since so much time was devoted to controlling noise. The N10, as a result, creates music that emerges from the blackest of spaces.

www.aurender.com

Melco N10 ($8000)

A state of the art two box streamer from Melco, a specialized company that pays enormous attention in delivering superb audio performance. The new app is still a work in progress but sound-wise the N10 sits at the top of the food chain.

www.melco-audio.com
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- Front Panel Inputs

McGary Audio

McGaryAudio.com

Audio Purity

The New Rose Gold Standard

www.MerrillAudio.net
Amplifiers

**McGary Audio SA1 ($3995)**
The new McGary SA1 push-pull vacuum tube amp is the first product offering from new designer Mike McGary, and we fell in love with the way this 30wpc design mated with the hard-to-drive ATC SCM100 speakers. The music was surprisingly tight, dynamic, and wonderfully full in tonal texture, and the build quality was exceptional as well, as evidenced by McGary’s lifetime warranty on the product (minus tubes, of course).

[www.mcgaryaudio.com](http://www.mcgaryaudio.com)

**First Watt SIT-3 ($4000)**
Perhaps our favorite effort yet from the “skunkworks” bench of legend Nelson Pass, the SIT-3 is most likely the last of the VFET amps to be produced by that outfit. Rated at 17 watts per channel into eight ohms, it actually drives challenging speaker loads with surprising aplomb. The sonics are all there: deep, heaving bass; a lithe, yet smooth midrange; and crystalline clear highs. Better get ’em while they last, since only 250 are being made!

[www.firstwatt.com](http://www.firstwatt.com)

**Merrill Audio Thor monoblock amplifier ($4800)**
These beautifully finished and compact monoblocks might be Class D, but that didn’t matter—the Thors were still offered reference quality sound “that can make you happy with a remarkable range of speakers, all the way from horns and electrostats to conventional cones.”

[www.merrillaudio.net](http://www.merrillaudio.net)

**Odyssey Audio Kismet ($4900/pair)**
We loved using these affordable monoblocks as a “mid-tier solid-state reference,” since the only real concession is the casework—which is still pretty nice. But the best part is that you can build these amps with all sorts of options—yes, they’re made to order! Choose from a variety of power supplies, wiring, output boards and caps—and even with all the boxes checked they’re still a tremendous bargain.

[www.odysseyaudio.com](http://www.odysseyaudio.com)
Pass Labs XA25 ($4,900)

“These are deeply impressive designs that create an emotional connection to the music” is how we described Nelson Pass’ little amp, which produces 25 gorgeous watts per channel. Yes, it’s all in Class A, which makes this power amplifier an intriguing choice for audiophiles who have systems that can really sing without a bunch of juice. For those that need or want that extra juice, Pass Labs has plenty of beasts wandering about the ironmongery; but this little gem is more than enough to kick off a lifelong devotion at the temple of great sound.

www.passlabs.com

Doshi Audio Stereo Amplifier ($14,000)

While “affordable” may be a bit of a stretch, this tubed power amp has a knack for making even relatively modest loudspeakers sound like cost-no-object flagships. Able to produce 50 watts per channel in pure Class A, this stereo amp excels at creating both precise imaging and an enormous soundstage—like a top-notch solid-state amp, but with all the inner beauty that comes with valves. It’s not clear how Doshi does it. We think it might be sorcery.

www.doshiaudio.com

Audio Research Reference 160M ($30,000/pair)

These are massive monoblock amps that qualify as “eye candy,” but the sound they create with the world’s finest loudspeakers is positively addictive and will have you strapped into your listening chair for the rest of your life. “Astounding speed and explosiveness,” is what you get from this KT-150 beast, along with a new design that maximizes tube life.

www.audioresearch.com

Bricasti Design M28SE ($30,000/pair)

When we had these massive monoblocks in the house, we were tempted to say that they “created the highest level of reference-quality sound” we’ve hosted. Powerful and clean, these big amps sounded dead-neutral and gorgeously natural and will “drive the living snot” out of every loudspeaker we could imagine.

www.bricasti.com

Tidal Audio Impulse stereo amplifier ($33,000)

The Impulse is fully stable down to just 1 ohm, which gives this hefty German dual-mono amplifier the ability to drive just about any loudspeaker. We loved the Impulse’s “deep, faultless bass response” as well as its extended and non-fatiguing treble. The sonic signature is BIG—so big it will “stop you in your tracks.”

www.tidal-audio.com

Dan D’Agostino Momentum S250 Stereo ($35,000)

After hearing this gorgeous beast, we declared Dan D’Agostino a “God of Thunder.” No amp conjures a description of “audio jewelry” more than the gleaming copper-accented chassis on the entire Momentum line, but this amp is also powerful and able to control all sorts of loudspeakers. Plus, you’ll be dreaming of that stunning steampunk look long after you’ve flicked off the power switch.

www.dandagostino.com

BorderPatrol P20 EXS Monoblock ($36,750/pair)

These are the reference amps at the boss’s house, and he’s not shy about saying how much he loves these gorgeous tube monoblocks (he’s been quoted, repeatedly, as saying “Ooh. My. Lawd.” while flopping about in something vaguely resembling a swoon). The extra watts per channel over the S10 and the slightly different architecture “are more than enough to drive all but the most absurdly modern speakers to deafening levels.” And the sound? “Devastatingly seductive.”

www.borderpatrol.net
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Luxman L-509x – Stereophile, May 2018

“A bang up to date design, in both engineering and sound... simply special”

Luxman L-509x – Hi-Fi News, January 2018

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Integrated Amplifiers

Heed Audio Elixir ($1200)
This small yet sonically exquisite little integrated amplifier features a Heed phono stage that would normally cost you $500 as a standalone, a headphone amplifier that would cost you another $500. So for a mere $200 extra you’re getting a full-function 45wpc integrated that on its own sounds like something much more expensive. We’ve used this little Hungarian amp in many expensive systems and not once did we feel it was the weak link in the chain.
www.heedaudio.com

Naim Uniti Atom ($3295)
A highly sophisticated and great sounding do-it-all wonder, the Uniti Atom comes to the party dressed to impress. With its jewel-like build quality, cool front-panel visual interface, and that sick big-wheel volume control on top, what’s not to love? OK, so it doesn’t have a phono stage, but it does pretty much everything else. With the Uniti Atom, you get a highly refined class AB integrated amplifier, a great DAC, and an easy-to-use interface that lets the box also serve as a music streamer.
www.naimaudio.com

Linear Tube Audio Integrated Z10 ($4950)
LTA was started just a few years ago with one main purpose—to implement David Berning’s ZOTL topologies into a range of relatively affordable products. The Z10 integrated might be the most intriguing in the line since it offers rare performance at a relatively low price, and in a relatively modest-looking box. You only get 10 watts per channel at 8 ohms, but my what lovely watts they are, with brilliant clarity and realism.
www.lineartubeaudio.com
Vinnie Rossi LIO ($5375-$16,165)
This modular integrated allows you to build the control center you really want, with different levels of DACs, phono preamplifiers and headphone amps to suit your budget and your aspirations. The LIO excels in terms of resolution and lifelike sound and is a beautiful match with a wide range of loudspeakers—this versatile product will provide the beating heart to any system you can assemble.

www.vinnierossi.com

Luxman L550 AX II ($5495)
This integrated amplifier has a ton of features, and a killer phono stage and a very competent headphone amplifier. The L550 only has 20 watts per channel of solid-state power, but with the right speakers it will provide plenty of scale, even with orchestral recordings. This Luxman also delivered “room-energizing, deep, tuneful bass response.”

www.luxman.com

Bakoon Amp-41 ($9000)
Unassuming to look at, this amp drew us in with its siren song: exceptional clarity coupled with unheard-of speed and pace. These attributes were accompanied by an ever-so-slight sweetness that never left us wanting for more from a tonal perspective. Look past its slightly oddball, pedestrian looks and its cheap-o remote, and you will be rewarded musically many times over. A real swan in an ugly duckling’s exterior.

www.bakoon.com

Pass Labs INT-60 ($9000)
As you might expect, this beautifully built integrated is rated at 60 wpc, but the fun part is that the first 30 are in pure Class A. This isn’t one of those wimpy little integrated amps from the past—it weighs almost 100 pounds, and you’ll be hard-pressed to come up with a reason to buy separates instead of this. You won’t find compromises here—this is an impressive integrated amplifier in every conceivable way.

www.passlabs.com

PureAudio ONE ($9500)
An unusual integrated amp from New Zealand that offers Pure Class A up to 25wpc, or with a mere flick of a switch you can get more A/B power that is still heavily biased into A. Minimalist design (hence pure), short signal paths and the highest parts quality make this the perfect choice for the audiophile who prizes sound quality over bells and whistles. Plus, it looks like no other integrated amplifier out there—architecture is the word that comes to mind.

www.pureaudio.co.nz

VAC Statement 450 iQ ($150,000)
Should there be such a creature as a six-figure integrated amplifier? Kevin Hayes of VAC makes a compelling argument with this huge, waist-high tube integrated that looks like it’s been tipped on its side. Let’s face it, this is a cost-no-object amp and it looks like it; and while it’s one unit, everything is completely separated. We heard this amp at RMAF 2018, and we flipped over its superb performance.

www.vac-amps.com
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www.vinnierossi.com
Preamplifiers

“...The volume control is ‘fabulous’, the build quality is exquisite, and the sound is well, nothing, as a preamp should be.”

Luminous Audio Axiom w/Walker Mod ($499)
We described this small passive unit as a “volume control in a box,” and were amazed when it kicked the butt of a few very expensive preamplifiers. Passives aren’t for everyone, but if you’re one of those people who are going “DAC direct” you might want to spend a few hundred bucks to get clean, clear sound—and all without a power cord.

www.luminousaudio.com

Linear Tube Audio MicroZOTL Preamplifier ($4450)
We get a tad giddy whenever we use LTA amps—these David Berning designs, based on his ZOTL topology, offer such a pure and beautiful window into the music. The MicroZOTL offer push-pull Class A operation and can be considered as a truly full-featured preamplifier. It even has a headphone amplifier!

www.lineartubeaudio.com

Pureaudio Control 2 ($9500)
The original Control preamp was as streamlined as it gets—there was only one knob on the front of the thing, and it was the attenuator. The new Control 2 is a bit more fancy—the automatic input selector, powered by 12V triggers, is now replaced with a more traditional push-button selector, and the remote control controls more than volume trim. Still, this is a minimalist preamp in the finest sense—short signal paths, the best parts quality and a slick attenuator that makes us giggle with joy.

www.pureaudio.co.nz

BorderPatrol Control Unit EXT-1 ($12,250)
We’ve declared this the “best tube preamplifier we’ve heard,” and we’ve heard a few. Perhaps that’s because of its super low noise floor, its hefty power supply or even its point-to-point wiring, but let’s face it—this preamp is filled with some of the finest parts money can buy such as Dueland caps and a tube-rectified choke input filter PSU. Yes, you can get it with a fabulous phono stage as well.

www.borderpatrol.net

Tidal Audio Preos D ($32,900)
This might be the finest preamplifier we’ve ever used, solid-state or tubed, although we spent most of our time with the original Preos. (The Preos D adds a DAC and a phono pre.) The volume control is “fabulous,” the build quality is exquisite, and the sound is well, nothing, as a preamp should be.

www.tidal-audio.com
We have found that audio cables are very system-dependent, so instead of offering long descriptions of these products, we'll simply say that we have experienced tremendous success with each one. Prices vary according to model.

Ansuz X ($740/1m)
www.ansuz-acoustics.com

AudioQuest NRG ($49-249)
www.audioquest.com

AudioQuest Storm Series ($625-$1995)
www.audioquest.com

Cardas Audio Clear (starting at $749)
www.cardas.com

Dynamic Design Neutron SW16P digital power cord ($7500/1m)
www.dynamicedesign.com

Furutech Powerflux (starting at $1850)
www.furutech.com

Signal Projects Golden Sequence ($4675)
www.signalprojects.com

Synergistic Research ($549-$6000)
www.synergisticresearch.com

Triode Wire Labs ($399-$1399)
www.triodewirelabs.com
Analog Cables
(Interconnects and speaker cables):

- Anticables
  www.anticables.com
- Black Cat Coppertone
  www.blackcatcable.com
- Cardas Clear
  www.cardas.com
- Furutech Lineflux and Speakerflux
  www.furutech.com
- Purist Audio Design
  www.puristaudiodesign.com

We have found that audio cables are very system-dependent, so instead of offering long descriptions of these products, we’ll simply say that we have experienced tremendous success with each one. Prices vary according to model.

- Synergistic Research
  www.synergisticresearch.com
- Transparent Cable Generation 5
  www.transparentcable.com
- Triode Wire Labs
  www.triodewirelabs.com
- Wireworld
  www.wireworldcable.com

Digital Cables

We have found that audio cables are very system-dependent, so instead of offering long descriptions of these products, we’ll simply say that we have experienced tremendous success with each one. Prices vary according to model.

- AudioQuest Vodka Ethernet ($379)
  www.audioquest.com
- Nordost Heimdall Ethernet (starting at $699)
  www.nordost.com
  www.puristaudiodesign.com
- Shunyata Venom ($395)
  www.shunyata.com
- Skogrand Beethoven USB ($11,000)
  www.skograndcables.com
- Snake River Audio Boomslang ($595-$695)
  www.snakeriveraudio.com
“I know great music when I hear it. I know great prose when I read it. I know great fun when I have it.”


“...and it was aliens!”

Giorgio Tsoukalos, Expert Alien Audiophile Reviewer

“I'm not saying those tubes were made by aliens. But it was totally aliens!”
Power Products

We have found that power distribution products are very system-dependent, so instead of offering long descriptions of these products, we’ll simply say that we have experienced tremendous success with each one. Prices vary according to model.

Audioquest Niagara 1000 ($999)
www.audioquest.com

Gigawatt PF-2 w/LC-2 power cord ($1,500)
www.gigawatt.eu

Isotek Sigmas ($3,995)
www.isoteksystems.com

PS Audio Power Plant P20 ($9,999)
www.psaudio.com

Purist Audio Design ($2,000)
www.puristaudiodesign.com

Synergistic Research Active Ground Block ($1,995)
www.synergisticresearch.com
Equipment Racks

Box Furniture
Box makes tasteful wooden equipment racks using high quality materials and mortise and tenon construction. Each model has been subjected to extensive listening tests.
www.boxfurnitureco.com

HRS Audio
These massive, extraordinarily heavy equipment stands are designed to lower the noise floor of any system.
www.avisolation.com

Rogoz Audio
These Hungarian-made racks have been hand-tuned by blending alloy steel and another type of steel with high carbon content, and the anti-vibration spikes are among the most effective in the industry.
www.rogoz-audio.com

SGR HiFi Rack
These Australian-made equipment racks combine performance with beauty. Modular construction allows you to customize your rack to any system.
www.sgrhifiracks.com

Silent Running Audio
A top choice in audio isolation products that eliminate noise and vibrations. Each product is engineered to tight tolerances and calibrated for use with specific models of electronics accordingly with the electrical, mechanical and acoustical characteristics.
www.silentrunningaudio.com

Tandem Audio
Despite the simple design—looks can be deceiving—this is yet another truly well engineered rack. Under some gorgeous multi-layer lacquer finish and solid wood shelves lies a cast aluminum chassis which eliminates resonances and dissipates vibrations. Excellent fit and superb finish.
www.tandem-audio.com

YG Acoustics
Despite the company being better known for their all-aluminum state-of-the-art speakers, they do produce a rack that is among the best engineered products in the category. A true tool designed for vibration control. Expensive, but precision engineering costs real money.
www.yg-acoustics.com

“A true tool designed for vibration control. Expensive, but precision engineering costs real money.”
In Ear Headphones

1MORE Triple Driver Bluetooth ($99)
The TD offers incredible sound and comfort at this low, low price point. “Bass response is tempered, juicy and very fun to listen to,” we decided after realizing the $99 IEM market has come a very long way in the last few years.
www.usa.1more.com

Cardas A8 30th Anniversary IEMs ($349)
The latest version of these “ear speakers” have improved on the already excellent originals by changing the cable connections. Completely satisfying in the bass, the A8s have a remarkable clarity that is complemented with just a bit of warmth. These are earbuds for people who may feel a little too claustrophobic with devices jammed in their ear canals.
www.cardas.com

RHA CL2 Planar Bluetooth ($900)
This Scottish IEM comes with a full complement of accessories—a balanced silver-coated BT neckband, a wide choice of cabling, a USB charging cable, a stainless-steel ear tip holder, a flight case and a pouch. It also features a zirconium dioxide material embedded in the enclosure. A very luxurious bud with a planar magnetic driver that offers incredible sound.
www.rha-audio.com

Campfire Audio Andromeda (from $1099)
Another expensive yet beautifully made IEM, this Oregon-built product has almost no sonic flaws according to many of its fans. You should expect a mind-blowing amount of detail from an IEM at this price point, but you’ll be utterly gobsmacked at the big soundstage bouncing around inside your head.
www.campfireaudio.com

Audeze LCD-i4 IEMs ($2495)
When a company like Audeze says it’s designing a product that will deliver “the absolute best sounding in-ear experience,” it’s probably a good idea to sit down and take a listen. These in-ear gems offer a flat bass response from 5 Hz on up thanks to a new super-thin diaphragm in the planar magnetic drivers. Each one is hand-made in California and carefully matched so that it will deliver incredible performance.
www.audeze.com
On/Over Headphones

Audeze Mobius ($399)
What an amazing deal—for four hundred bucks you get a pair of Audeze cans with planar drivers, wireless capabilities and head tracking technology! As you can imagine, the Mobius is aimed squarely at the gaming community, and it’s a genuine breakthrough product that will completely change the gaming landscape.

HiFiMAN Sundara ($500)
A “fun, fun product that people can actually get their hands on,” the affordable Sundara comes off as an incredible overachiever at its modest price point. It’s comfortable, and so easy to drive that you can plug it right into your iPhone and enjoy some pretty decent sound. With a good amp, however, it really struts its stuff.

Audeze LCD-2C ($799)
The “C” stands for “classic,” meaning that this is a re-release of Audeze’s first commercial pair of cans ever. What’s surprising is that they’re still very listenable, and a welcome product “for those looking to catch up on the company’s take of fine resolution and rich tonal flavors.”

MrSpeakers Aeon Closed ($799)
Small, light and easy to drive, the Aeon is a closed pair of headphones that doesn’t sound one bit constrained or hemmed-in. Its performance comes surprisingly close to the company’s Ether C Flow, which is $1799 and considered one of the best closed cans on the market.

HiFiMan Edition X V2 ($1295)
Not only is this planar headphone incredibly warm and detailed, it’s also one of the most comfortable set of cans in the universe. Find a nice tube headphone amplifier, plug these in, and indulge yourself with the most efficient sleep-inducing machine ever invented.

Focal Utopia ($4,000)
We balked at calling the Focal Utopia headphones the best ever made (there may be some electrostatic or planar cans that surpass it in one area or the other), but we’re very satisfied in calling this remarkable pair of headphones one of the best dynamic set of cans, ever. It’s also remarkable that while the Utopia is fairly heavy for a pair of headphones, it is extremely comfortable over long periods of time. All in all, a remarkable achievement.

www.audeze.com
www.hifiman.com
www.mrspeakers.com
www.focal.com
Headphone and Portable
Audio Tools
SonarWorks TrueFi ($47)
This desktop app delivers on a big promise—it can work with over 280 different headphones to recreate the sound from the original studio. Best of all, you can make a one-time purchase of TrueFi and get all the upgrades and improvements for free.

www.sonarworks.com

Schiit Modi 3 ($99)
Have a computer with USB capability? That’s all you need to get amazing headphone sound for just a hundred bucks. The Modi DAC has plenty of connectivity options as well, including optical and coax connections when you buy the optional power supply. Simple, convenient and dirt cheap.

www.schiit.com

Audioquest Dragonfly RED ($199)
You get a headphone amp, preamp and DAC in a unit the size of a thumb drive—which makes the entire Dragonfly series perfect for streaming from a laptop or any other device with a USB connection. The new Red has improved performance (thanks to a 32-bit ESS Sabre chip) over previous generations and can be used with a wider variety of devices.

www.audioquest.com

Rupert Neve Designs RNHP Headphone Amplifier ($500)
"Effortless at passing along whatever signal you feed it," this amp does a great job driving even the most inefficient cans out there. We felt it had “sublime clarity from top to bottom,” and that there was “dead quiet between the notes.”

www.rupertneve.com

Moon Audio Dragon Inspire IHA-1 ($1699)
This gorgeous little tube amplifier was designed by Dennis Had and Drew Baird, and it can be customized for any pair of headphones you want. The Inspire can also be used with a wide range of output tubes, which can be purchased from Moon Audio, so you can tailor the sound to your tastes.

www.moon-audio.com

Astell & Kern AK SP1000 ($2975)
We think this is one of the most impressive portable players you can buy—it proves that listening to high-resolution digital files on the go is not an impossible dream. The ergonomics are fantastic, the build-quality beyond reproach, and even the HD5 video display offers a stunning view.

www.astellnkern.com

Pass Labs HPA1 ($3,500)
It’s a headphone amp, and it comes from Nelson Pass, so it has to be awesome. The HPA1 was designed with low feedback, wide bandwidth and a direct-coupled MOSFET output stage. You can also use it as a line-level preamplifier—a Pass Labs line-level preamplifier that is.

www.passlabs.com

Woo Audio WA33 Elite Edition ($14,999)
This balanced headphone amp is mighty—it weighs over 50 pounds and it’s built like a tank. It features a push-pull Class A topology that creates 10 watts per channel, which means it can drive even the most stubborn cans. The WA33 may be the most expensive headphone amp we’ve tested, but it might just be the best.

www.wooaudio.com

Custom cables. Expert advice.
Find Chord Electronics & Dragon Audio Cables at
www.moon-audio.com | 919-649-5018 | Cary, NC
AnalogMagik All In One Cartridge Set Up Software and Test LPs ($700)
This software package is all you need for accurate analog set-up for every parameter—speed, azimuth, VTA, stylus raking angle, anti-skating, phono stage loading, phono stage gain setting, vertical tracking force, determining resonance frequencies, AES wow and flutter and measuring vibrations. Two test LPs are included—one for 33 rpm and one for 45 rpm.
www.analogmagik.com

Audio Intelligent Premium One-Step Formula No. 6 ($29 per 32 oz. bottle)
This single step record cleaning fluid occupies the middle ground between oily solutions that could leave a residue and cleaners with surfactants that never seem to get deep down into the grooves. We found the No. 6 effective in removing gunk while being easy to remove via vacuum-based cleaning machines.
www.audiointelligent.com

Chisto Audio Cosmetics ($79)
The most complete set of record cleaning solutions, ranging from “swipe and play” all the way to extreme pre-wash solutions for the dirtiest of your thrift store findings.
www.thevinylcleaner.com

Kirmuss Audio Ultra Sonic Cleaner ($875)
When ultrasound record cleaning machines first hit the market a few years ago, audiophiles had to pay around $3500 for an AudioDesk or KL machine. Thankfully, Kirmuss Audio has come up with a much more affordable solution for a mere $875. The Kirmuss does pretty much the same job as those other two machines, except that it does not have the self-drying feature. You’ll have to dry each LP with a cloth or hang them on a rack, but you’ll save a lot of money!
www.kirmussaudio.com

Les Davis Audio 3D-2 Viscoelastic Damping Discs ($125 for box of 16)
An affordable yet effective alternative to high-end footers and other damping devices, these small pads from Australia are made from layers of constrained-layer damping material and are cheap enough so that you can buy a box or two and experiment with them under all types of components. We found them to work best under source components, and an adhesive version is available for placement between speakers and stands.
www.lesdavisaudio.com.au

Feickert Universal Protractor ($249)
Our favorite alignment tool for setting up cartridges, this protractor has been recently redesigned for Baerwald, Lofgren and now Stevenson equations. It also manages to be easy-to-use and precise—so much so that once you use one, you’ll throw your other protractors away.
www.feickert.org

Funk Firm Achromat ($99)
A true classic, the original acrylic mat designed by Khoubesserian back in 1979, this turntable mat imitated by many over the years. It’s a rather cheap upgrade to your run of the mill felt mat, for a more detailed sound. Available in 3mm and 5mm thickness, make sure to pick the right one depending on your tonearm.
www.thefunkfirm.co.uk

Hi-Fi Accessories

AnalogMagik Torque Wrench Kit ($150)
Have you ever wondered how much torque you should apply on the headshell screws? AnalogMagik’s Torque Wrench has been tested to provide for the proper level which is tight enough to secure the cartridge, but not to the point where the tightness will start affecting the resonance frequency of the body material. Included in the kit is 4 PTFE Teflon washers and two hard-to-find drive bits for headshell screws.
www.analogmagik.com

Chisto Audio Cosmetics ($79)
The most complete set of record cleaning solutions, ranging from “swipe and play” all the way to extreme pre-wash solutions for the dirtiest of your thrift store findings.
www.thevinylcleaner.com

DS Audio ST-50 Stylus Cleaner ($80)
Unfortunately, some manufacturers warn specifically not to use alcohol-based liquids as they may interact with the coating of the wires. The DS Audio ST-50 is a washable and reusable “gummy” stylus cleaner, much stickier than the popular Zero Dust. Simply place it onto the platter and lower the stylus onto the sticky pad with your lift.
www.ds-audio-w.biz
Levin Design Record Brush (starts at $99)
You’ve never seen a record brush like this, and now, you’re never going to want to use anything else. These brushes are a beautiful confection of long cashmere bristles, set in stone or natural wood, and backed in brushed aluminum. Delightfully matching cases are available for an additional cost. Unlike most brushes, this one actually picks up the dust off the LP — and looks as amazing as it feels in the hand. You don’t need this, but you’re totally going to want it anyway. The only problem is actually wanting to put it down.
www.levindesign.de

Okki Nokki Record Cleaning Machine ($449)
This affordable RCM has many of the same features as more expensive cleaners such as a cool-running motor, a forward and reverse motor for scrubbing and a clever design for ensuring fluid does not get sucked back into the vacuum motor. Comes with fluid and brushes.
www.okkinokki.com

Oyaide BR-12 Turntable Mat ($65)
An improvement over the classic aluminum “sheet,” the butyl rubber BR-12 is tapered in thickness from the center of the spindle to platter’s edge to reduce record warps, and to provide a stickier interface for improved damping. It even comes with a Strobo disc and an overhang gauge!
www.oyaide.co.uk

Enjoy the Experience
JJ Electronic KT77 (varies)
The JJ is an interesting EL34 variant with an affordable price and a bit more heft on the lower octaves.
www.jj-electronic.com

Living Voice 300b (£975 GBP)
With the disappearance of legendary Western Electric 300b tube, aficionado’s were left scrambling. After a fruitless search for a suitable replacement, the team at Living Voice partnered with KR Audio to create a new and entirely custom tube to meet their exacting requirements. The result was a protracted and iterative process of hands-on development, “guided by our musical sensibilities”. Quite a payoff.
www.livingvoice.co.uk

Mullard EL34 (varies)
The remake of a legend, the end result being a tube with a smooth overall sound. A favorite of many electric guitar musician who crave for velvety sound.
www.mullardtubes.com

Psvane EL34PH Vacuum Tube ($349/quad)
A replica of the vintage PhillipsHolland EL34 tubes of yesterday, these new Psvane tubes are not only affordable, they play “wider and deeper” than the EH tubes they’ve replaced. With extended highs and powerful lows, we were struck by the three-dimensional, full-bodied, richly colorful, “organic” presentation. At this price, they’re a real winner.
www.grantfidelity.com

Takatsuki 300b Vacuum Tube ($2,500/pair)
Vacuum tubes can be “more extended,” “more powerful,” more this or that, but what all of these descriptions are referring back to is a certain tube, the gold-standard for high-end audio reproduction: the 300b. The old Western Electric 300b tubes are still whispered about, still sought, and still greatly coveted, even though there has been nothing new from WE in decades. A great many “wannabe” tubes claim they are replicas. Some even claim to be better. Why? Because when done right, the sound from a 300b is uncanny and untouchable. One of the only new-stock tubes that we know of that are seriously competitive, if not better than those old tubes, are the Takatsuki 300b. We are seriously uncomfortable with recommending vacuum tubes this expensive, but there really isn’t anything on the market that can touch them. These new tubes offer that rich, immersive, 3-D “real-ness” that the WE 300b is famed for but are also wildly extended and breathtakingly open. This is not your stereotypical 300b tube, this is the key to glory.
www.takatsuki-renki.co.jp

Tung-sol 12AX7/ ECC83 (varies)
This is a cheap but very well balanced tube, despite not having the air of a NOS Brimar or the heft of a NOS Telefunken. The Tung-sol comes close at being the best balanced driver on the market and represents huge value.
www.tungsol.com