You might have noticed that we’ve swapped around the order of The Occasional issues this year. We’ve been talking about the Fall Issue for a long time now, with the 2019 Buyers Guide coming right around the end of the year—just like last year. We decided to switch that order and get you this year’s Buyers Guide when you actually need it—before the holidays, not after.

That means we’ll be releasing a Winter Issue instead, probably in January. That will be filled with tons of audio equipment reviews. We’ve been so busy with high-end trade shows and getting gear in for review that we just want to release it all in one big extravaganza. Other issues in 2020 will focus more on the lifestyle of the audiophile, the reason for The Occasional’s existence.

Let’s get back to this issue, the 2019 Buyers Guide. Once again, these are the high-end audio products that we recommend. In the vast majority of cases we either own this gear, or we’ve reviewed it, or we’ve had sufficient seat time with it to know that it’s worth your time and your hard-earned money.

The whole idea of the Buyers Guide has got me thinking about the nature of positive reviews. At a recent high-end audio show, I joked that most of my equipment reviews over the last year have been rave reviews, with one colleague saying, “Marc likes everything.” That brings up one of the more contentious aspects of audio journalism, that some writers like to exchange good reviews for advertising, industry accommodation, and in extreme cases a fee. That’s when reviews stop being journalism and start being marketing copy.

John Atkinson once told me, a long time ago, that negative reviews simply aren’t necessary in high-end audio journalism. As he explained, readers want to know what to buy, not what to avoid. Even the metrics show this to be true—bad reviews don’t get the Google hits that good reviews do. Does this imply that every product we review deserves a good review? Of course not.

I’ve been writing about audio since 1998, and my first formal equipment review was shortly after that. Wherever I worked, there was a wise policy: if you don’t like it, don’t review it. Send it back. That’s a sound reason for passing on a review, especially when the reviewer’s reputation is on the line. What if the review component was a bad match for the reviewer’s system? What if everyone else but the reviewer loves it? What if you hooked it up wrong? What if it was damaged in shipping but still operational? What if you write a terrible review based on one of these conditions and you put people out of business?

All of this has happened in the past. I assure you. I have stories.

When I get a piece of gear in for review, it’s usually because it interests me. I’ve heard it before, or I’ve used another model from this brand, or I love the very idea of a particular feature. In The Occasional, we talk about the things that excite us in the hobby—and we want to immediately turn around and tell you all about it.

That’s what this Buyers Guide is all about.

Thanks,

Marc Phillips
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“I’m not saying those tubes were made by aliens. But it was totally aliens!”

— Giorgio Tsoukalos
Expert Alien Audiophile Reviewer
ELAC Debut 2.0 B6.2 Bookshelf Speakers ($249/pair)

They look good and sound brilliant and come at an unheard-of price. If you’ve been thinking “headphones” because they’re less expensive than two-channel stereo, these speakers might change your mind. They’re our budget-reference Editor’s recommendation.

www.elac.com

Google Home MAX ($299 each)

Finally, a smarthome 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 Audio Master Chronosonics. You can buy just one for a pleasing mono sound, or pair them up vertically for stereo.

store.google.com/us/product/google_home_max

Kanto SYD, YU6 and TUK ($330, $320 and $800/pair)

Self-powered systems that provide budding vinylphiles the proper tools for entrance into listening, true stereophony, and eventually flirting with true hi-fi sound. All three of the Kanto models feature a built-in DAC, Bluetooth, but more importantly a phone preamplifier. It’s this feature that makes them one of the easiest recommendations for those getting into hi-fi, or those looking to get someone else into hi-fi.

www.kantoaudio.com

Klipsch RP600-M ($549-649, depending on finish)

We just can’t get over how much the RP600-Ms get right, and for so little money—a sound that captures many of the attributes we expect from high-end audio products such as a gorgeously open soundstage, pinpoint imaging, and deep bass that makes you say silly things like “they certainly punch above their weight class.”

www.klipsch.com

Quad S2 ($1200)

It’s rare to find a pair of loudspeakers at this price that 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 ($2499.95)

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.”

us.kef.com

Studio Electric M4 ($2600-3500, depending upon finish)

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 floor-standers—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 ($2999)

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 its woofer cone, and a new Esotar tweeter creates a unique airflow that exists 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)

So tiny your grandmother can pick one up in one hand, the Austrian-built Suns might be one of the toughest sells in high-end audio—until you sit down and listen. This might be 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 be the ultimate speaker for small spaces.

www.trenner-friedl.com
Fritz Speakers Carrera Be ($3500)
John “Fritz” Heiler loves making two-way speakers, especially ones that are cost-effective and sound completely enjoyable. The Carrera Bes 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

Sonner Audio Legato Unum ($5300/pair)
The Legato Unum is the entry level bookshelf from Sonner Audio, but has somehow found itself becoming our reference for all monitors under $7K. It does absolutely everything well, and even where it omits due to its size, nothing feels missing. Bass grit and texture are to die for. Treble extension is full and rich with details that never leave the smooth arena. The Legato Unum’s are such a joy to listen to with nearly every genre we throw at them, that we can’t help but think they’ve included some magic potion somewhere in the crossover.
www.sonneraudio.com

Trenner & Friedl ART ($6000)
These deceptively small 2-way monitors have been redesigned with new drivers, a new bamboo baffle, premium Mundorf caps and a more substantial enclosure, and yet they still have the same identical “heart of a lion” as their beloved predecessors. The new ART is even more convincing when it comes to sounding like a much bigger speaker, although they can be finicky about amplification. Is the new ART better than the old? “Both Arts are the same person,” we suggested, “separated by a few years of experience. The new version is older and wiser, with a few more stories to tell.”
www.trennerfriedl.com

Sonus Faber Olympica Nova I ($6500)
The new Olympica Nova line from this Italian speaker manufacturer signals a new era in Sonus Faber sound, one that aims to “recapture the magic” of the earlier designs while upping the technology and innovation with features such as the Damped Apex Dome tweeter and the Stealth Ultraflex porting system. The Nova I is the entry level model, a 2-way monitor (with exceptional stands for an extra $1000). We wrote: “If you’re a music lover who just wants to add a measure of beauty to your home, Sonus Faber has always been a smart choice. With the Olympica Nova I, however, you can be both people, an aesthete and an audiophile.”
www.sonusfaber.com

Harbeth 40.2 Anniversary Edition ($18,995 without stands)
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

TAD Compact Evolution One ($24,000-26,000 with stands)
It’s almost crazy that TAD is a division of commercial electronics giant 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 its 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
Elac Uni-Fi UF5 ($1000)

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

Spatial Audio M3 Sapphire ($4200)

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 (4999 each)

GoldenEar makes high-value 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

EgglestonWorks Emma Evo ($5500)

These wonderful floorstanders, made in Memphis, answer the question: how much speaker can you get for $5500? Anthony Chiarella of EgglestonWorks told us: “I’ve never seen a pair of loudspeakers at this price point that involves so much hand time.” Incredible fit and finish, and the Emma EVO’s performance is so strong that you won’t be able to say these are “good for the price.” They’re just amazing at any price.

www.egglestonworks.com

Volti Audio Rival (from $8900)

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, they’re dynamic, and they’re really dynamic. Music can just leap out of nowhere, and the result startles and delights. They also can create a stunningly precise image, with all the audiophile trimmings, and have the unnerving tendency to completely disappear. Utterly addictive. Upgrades to the finish, and new outboard crossovers, are available for a modest upcharge.

www.voltiaudio.com
Fern & Roby Raven ($9,500)
These single-driver, beautifully made speakers are certainly a "lifestyle product," but only in the sense that they enrich your life through sheer pride of ownership. The SEAS Exotic full-range driver has one of the widest frequency responses we’ve experienced, causing us to exclaim that "after some time, they start to reflect you and who you want to be when you go home at night and listen to music.” We gave them the Editor’s Choice Award.
www.fernandroby.com

DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/96 ($12,000/pair)
A wide-baffle two-way, with beautiful wood veneers and matching stands, the O/96 speakers were hilariously fun. The bass had not spent much time with a high-sensitivity speaker before this, certainly not one that was reasonably sized, and the music poured out like water. Fast, fun, but also rich and lushsome, the O/96 is one of our default recommendations for audiophiles willing to go beyond the obvious contenders and try new something on. Scot loves this speaker—it’s been one of his personal references for years.
www.devorefidelity.com

Salk Sound SS 9.5 (starting at $9,595/pair)
By looking at this massive 3-way loudspeaker and its exquisite wooden finishes, you probably wouldn’t guess that it retails for less than $10K/pair. Listening to the 9.5 and finding out what it can do—bass response down to 25 Hz, a sweet beryllium tweeter that seems almost limitless and an overall endearing balance—you might wonder how Salk makes a profit on such an opulent yet fairly-priced component.
www.salksound.com

Living Voice Avatar OBX RW3
($13,525-17,750, depending upon finish)
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

Volti Audio Vittora (starting at $29,900/pair)
These were the first Volti speakers Scot ever heard and sitting in that sweet spot at that first audio show, so many years ago, he still remembers being gobsmacked. The detail, air, bass extension, and stunning jump-factor, was enough to make his wallet weep, run for cover, and then beg for mercy. The veneer is top shelf, and these furniture grade marvels are worthy of your upscale décor. Three pieces, including two speakers and a subwoofer (with external sub-amp), are the anchor for a system we may never be able to afford but will always lust after. These speakers hold the pride of place in Scot’s review history as being the most massive and the most fun. “Before the Vittoras, I thought I knew the dancing mayhem that young twins are capable of. Yep; I was wrong. So. Much. Fun.”
www.voltiaudio.com

ATC SCM-40A ($14,000)
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 242Watts 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

DeVore Fidelity Gibbon X ($15,890)
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 feed your system only the best recordings so you can 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

Von Schweikert Audio ESE ($20,000)
Combining Leif Swanson’s affordable Endeavor Audio designs with drivers and technology culled from VSA’s awesome Ultra speakers line—such as anodized aluminum woofer cones, a Kevlar midrange and a Beryllium tweeter—the ESE is entirely capable of providing full-range sound in almost any room. The ESE offers a big chunk of the dynamic sound of the Ultra 9 and Ultra 11 speakers for around one-tenth the price. An Editor’s Choice award winner.
www.vonschweikert.com
Sonus Faber Serafino Tradition ($22,900)

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)

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 utterly realistic, 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 ($37,950)

This 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

GamuT Audio RS7i ($39,900)

These loudspeakers are breathtaking, both in looks and in sound. We love the dovetail design and all the attention to detail on this speaker. The sound? Incredible, natural and elegant. They’re big speakers, time-aligned, and they sound like it. Fullrange glory here, and our favorite thing from GamuT Audio.

www.gamutaudio.com

Tune Audio Anima ($51,995)

Horn speakers can be incredibly expensive to make, but one look at the gorgeous contours of the Tune Audio Anima and you’ll clearly see every penny. This three-way design is not just fully horn-loaded – it’s three separate horns! It’s also wildly efficient (109 dB at 8 ohms, to be precise), so you’ll be tempted to try out every flea-watt SET ever made on these works of art. Stunners.

www.tuneaudio.com

Von Schweikert Audio VS-55 Aktive ($60,000)

While this California-based company’s flagship loudspeakers—the $200K Ultra 9 and the $300K Ultra 11—are 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

DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/Reference ($88,000/pair)

You take the industry-fave Orangutan O/96, add more than a bit of tequila, and bam! Reference! Okay, no, but the O/Reference does use four cabinets, not two; one pair for bass, one pair for everything else. And then there’s all that bronze, in the castings and mounts and wave guides and port tubes... the speakers are finished to the highest levels of “furniture grade” and then some; the look is elegant, clean, and quite posh, and with four cabinets, room-fit becomes flexible. And yes, these pretty little jewels make some rowdy sound. To be honest, we weren’t ready for how great they would be. We’ve heard them several times now, and each showing produced “Best-In-Show” nods. We’ve been fans of the brand for as long as the site has been “live”, and we’ve never heard better from the “Monkey Haus.” Brilliant.

www.devorefidelity.com
Acapella Apollon ($150,000)

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 end-game loudspeaker, for sure.

www.acapella.de

Rockport Lyra ($169,500)

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

Von Schweikert Audio Ultra 11 ($325,000/pair)

We’re fully into ultrafi territory now, so forgive us, but we’ve now heard these speakers several times and yes, yes, and yes. First, they represent a pinnacle of what high-end audio is capable of. They’re also enormous, require an incredible investment of time and materials to make, and represent literally decades of design and engineering expertise from a team of world-class designers. The result, we confess, is astonishing. Headphone-levels of detail with a soundstage that is as big the concert stage at the Hollywood Bowl. We’ve never heard anything even remotely like it. If we could afford it, and a listening room that would do them justice, we would buy it.

www.vonschweikert.com
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 also has remarkably low amounts of friction.

VPI Industries Cliffwood ($1,000)
For a grand, we can’t think of a better built turntable that’s made in America, and it comes with the brand pedigree included when buying a VPI. The Cliffwood does everything well and is built like a tank. It’s not at all finicky to get working, and arrives ready-to-run out of the box. VPI Industries has lived up to the Harley-Davidson comparison, and brought that same kind of performance and experience down to “ready for the masses” pricing.

Technics SL 1200G ($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. For those of us who never liked the sound of the 1200 or thought of it as only a DJ ‘table, the new generation of Technics 1200s is a shock to the system—while still a direct-drive design, it now sounds fantastic courtesy of the new non-cogging motor, upgraded plinth and deserves the significant increase in price since it’s an entirely different animal.

Gold Note Mediterraneo ($6375)
This gorgeous turntable “reeks of European style and panache,” with plenty of engineering and innovation to appeal to analog perfectionists. A high-torque motor, heavy platter, external motor and low-friction bearings deliver performance that does an “exceptional job of extracting those tiny details out of the record grooves…and it was doing so with little to no editorializing.”

Clearaudio Innovation Basic ($8500 with TRACER tonearm)
Clearaudio’s patented Ceramic Magnetic Bearing gives the platter a sense that it’s floating on air. Easy to assemble and maintain, the Innovator’s only flaw seems to be the “Basic” designation—we found that this affordable combination, with the Hana ML cartridge, was “anything but basic.”

Kuzma Stabi R ($9000 with walnut plinth)
The new Stabi R looks very different than other Kuzma ‘tables—the plinth is compact and made from a solid block of aluminum, and the platter has a constrained-layer design that reduces vibration and enhances damping. The R is a versatile turntable that allows for multiple tonearm options—you can use up to four—which makes this ‘table both a sturdy workhorse and a gorgeous work of art that makes incredible music. A variety of plinths is also available.

Palmer 2.5 (from $9490)
This UK-built turntable, with the Scottish Audio Origami tonearm, has been on our radar for many years—people whose ears we implicitly trust tell us that it’s one of the best-sounding analog rigs they’ve ever heard. Now that we have one to play with, we’re impressed with the thorough design, solid build and yes, that amazing sound that’s utterly musical.
Fern & Roby Montrose Heirloom ($10,500)

“...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.fernandroby.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.feickert.org

TW Acustic Raven GT SE ($14,000)

TW Acustic 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, heft and authority. The platter, feet and motor controller are borrowed from their flagship ‘table, making this an even greater value.
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 the newly reduced price. Despite all this talk about “discounts,” this is a first-class turntable and is capable of a sound that few analog rigs can capture.
www.vpiindustries.com

SME 30/2 ($41,900)

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.sme-co.uk

AMG Viella V12 ($17,500)

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.amg-turntables.com

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.amg-turntables.com
Jelco TK850 ($959-1400, depending on options)

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.

www.usahifi.com

Thomas Schick ($2000)

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 SPLA and SPLG designs. You can also select from a long list of options—arm lengths, finishes, headshells, cables and more.

www.thomas-schick.com

The Wand Master Series ($2500-3250 depending upon length)

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.

www.designbuildlisten.com

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.kuzma.si

EMT 997 (from $5500 depending upon options)

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 demeanor 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.emt-international.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 Acoustic Raven 10.5 ($6500)

After spending years recommending other arms for their turntables, TW Acoustic 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.twacoustic.de

AMG 12JTurbo ($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

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www.tonarm.ch
Since he was a young child, Daryl has been immersed in the perfectionist culture created by his father. In the world within which he was raised, everything mattered. From the binding posts to the metallurgy of the bolts attaching the drivers; from the tolerances in the crossover to the precise alignment of each driver in the time domain; from the best, handpicked, Wilson-made capacitors to the quality and geometry of the connecting wire. Just as was true for his father, for Daryl, everything matters.

Here, Daryl Wilson is surrounded by unmilled sheets of various types and thicknesses of Wilson-developed, composite enclosure material. In Daryl’s latest creation, the Chronosonic XVX (pictured in its raw form to the left), he utilized three separate and unique composites, each chosen for its exceptional ability within a specific enclosure application. The most recent of these, Wilson’s all-new “V” Material, comes as a result of Wilson’s relentless research into the materials best suited for accurate and believable music reproduction.

The flagship-loudspeaker format fits Daryl Wilson’s attitudes and convictions perfectly. He is extraordinarily compromise-adverse. Removing any constraints of price or practicality within the design equation felt liberating to Daryl. The result? Never before has any loudspeaker offered more new technology and innovation. All of which would be academic if it weren’t for the Chronosonic XVX’s remarkable authenticity and musicality. Audition the new XVX at a select dealer near you. Check our website for launch dates and events.
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.
usa.denon.com

Denon DL-103 plus The Cap (additional $85)
The Cap is a simple aluminum shell from Canada that fits over the body of a stock Denon 103 and adds considerable weight to the lowest frequencies, and it tightens up imaging as well. There are many ways to modify a 103 into a super-cartridge with modern performance, but this is the most cost-effective way to do it—you won’t find a better $85 upgrade to your analog rig than The Cap.
www.denonaluminumbody.com

Hana EH ($475)
After mounting this affordable high-output MC on a very expensive table with two tonearms, and against another cartridge that was more than five times the Hana’s cost, we were surprised that the lower bass frequencies were fuller and more satisfying—possibly at the cost of that last bit of inner detail. This is crazy inexpensive for such a high-quality Japanese cartridge.
www.musicalsurroundings.com

Hana SL ($750)
We called this LOMC from Japan a “killer sub-$1000 cartridge,” noting that it lacks any sort of pretense and is made for those who honestly love music. The Hana is also quiet in the groove—you may wonder if you lowered your tonearm once you sit down.
www.musicalsurroundings.com

ZYX Bloom 3 ($1100)
ZYX makes some of the finest phono cartridges in the world—at a significant price. [See examples below.] But their entry level model, the Bloom 3, offers a considerable chunk of the musically honest and transparent sound of the bigger boys at a price that seems like a typo. “This sounds like most $3000-$4000 cartridges from other manufacturers,” we decided. Winner of an Editor’s Choice award.
www.zyx-audio.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

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

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www.musicalsurroundings.com

Sumiko Starling ($1899)
The new flagship of Sumiko’s Reference Line, which started with the original Blue Point Special so many years ago, the Starling’s secret is effective damping in the aluminum body. We felt that this Sumiko sounded incredibly neutral throughout the frequency range, with plenty of detail and very impressive and realistic bass.
www.sumikoaudio.net

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

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www.ortofon.com

Phono Cartridges
ZYX Ultimate 4D ($4395)
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 ($7999.95)
Peter Ledermann explained it best when he said 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 lyras 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

ZYX Universe Optimum 1 Ohm ($16,995)
At this price it shouldn’t surprise you that this ZYX is one of the finest cartridges we’ve used, but we were still amazed at just how good it really is. With such a low impedance and an output of just 0.12 mV, you’ll need the right ancillaries to make the Optimum work, but you’ll be rewarded with a cartridge that possesses a “greater sense of realism” than most of the competitors. “Astonishment, personified,” we concluded.
www.sorasound.com
Phono Preamplifiers/SUTs

Soundsmith MMP3 Mk. II ($799.95)
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

Heed Audio Quasar ($1299.99)
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

Bob’s Devices Sky 20 SUT ($1375)
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 vinylophile.” Offered by the friendly and extremely knowledgeable Bob Sattin, this SUT can run against the best and “still acquit itself admirably.”

www.bobsdevices.com

Musical Surroundings Nova 3 w/Linear Power Supply ($1500)
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
Lab 12 Melto2 ($3899)
This compact yet beautifully built tube phono stage from Greece is almost impossible to beat at its relatively modest price. You get great sound, trouble-free operation and an amazing set of features—you can even make all your adjustments via remote! The Melto2 is one of those products that will make you ask, “Do I really need anything more than this?” An Editor’s Choice Award winner.
www.lab12.gr

Pass Labs XP-17 ($4300)
With Pass Labs amplification, you’re generally getting a circuit design that is both innovative and straightforward. The XP-17 is a phono preamp that adheres to the cliché of getting out of the way of the music without adding colorations, or its own idea of what is and isn’t great sound. It’s the rare phono stage that sounds so neutral that you won’t even think about how it contributes to the overall sound, which makes it an easy recommendation.
www.passlabs.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.zestostudio.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 ($15,000)
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

Dan D’Agostino Momentum Phono ($28,000)
Using just one input stage for both MM and MC, the Momentum achieves sonic purity with integrated passive equalization followed by the output stage. Dan D’Agostino accomplishes this by adding just the right amount of gain without increasing noise, creating a phono pre that digs deep into those grooves, elevating micro-details and dynamics to recreate music that is “breathtaking.”
www.dandagostino.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—non-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

www.fernandroby.com - 804-233-5030 - info@fernandroby.com
TEAC W-1200 ($289)
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.jcorder.com

United Home Audio (from $6500)
These refurbished reel-to-reel tape machines start at $6K and can wind up well over $30K 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 $1,400)
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 an analog lover’s dream.
www.ballfinger.de

Doshi Audio V3.0 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
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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.
www.ifi-audio.com

Schiit Bifrost (from $699)
This affordable DAC from Schiit comes in two options. The 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 their 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

Border Patrol SEi DAC ($995-1850 depending on options)
Measurements, schmeasurements—do yourself a favor and try this DAC. Yes, it’s a Redbook-only converter, and yes, it sports NOS chips. And so what? Chances are, you’ve never heard digital like this — and certainly nowhere near its price. There is no oversampling, no up-sampling, and no filtering — this is "do no harm" taken seriously. Add a choke-input and tube rectified power supply, and forget David, here you have an audio Goliath. Clear, open, transparent, sound flows forth like sweet water poured from the hands of friendly, loving gods. According to the musicians that made it, this was how your music was supposed to sound.
www.borderpatrol.net

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.
www.cranesong.com

Mytek Brooklyn DAC+ ($2195)
At its modest price, the Mytek still produces a “level of reproduction that was unthinkable only a few years back.” What’s even more impressive is that the Brooklyn + also includes a headphone amplifier, a preamplifier and a phono stage, making it an incredible bargain.
www.mytekdigital.com

Exogal Comet ($3500 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 piece of digital gear. This is also a great DAC for “imagining and soundstaging freaks.” Still a top pick.
www.exogal.com

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!
www.simaudio.com

LampizatOr Atlantic TRP (starts at 6,000 Euros)
The “baby reference” LampizatOr includes many of the bells and whistles from the upscale Pacific: a tube-based power supply, choke CLC filtering, copper output caps, 512 DSD support, and can be ordered with balanced or single ended configurations, and can even include a volume control. But as a “tube roller’s paradise”, this TRP can be “tuned” however you want by just swapping in some new tubes. Too much fun. I was able to dial this baby into a sonic signature that rivaled the resolution and extension of the very finest (read, “most expensive”) options currently available. Just lovely. As part of the evolution of this brand, this TRP is a trip worth taking.
www.lampizatorpoland.com

TotalDAC USB Gigafilter (1600 euros)
Not a DAC but a digital filter that is placed between the digital source and the DAC, the Gigafilter that achieves galvanic isolation, re-synchronization of the digital bitstream and "extensive filtering of the signal." Designed to take the USB cable out of the digital chain, the TotalDAC makes music sound natural and not simply "reproduced by a mere collection of electronic gear.
www.totaldac.com

Digital to Analogue Converters

Exogal Comet ($3500 with optional power supply)
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www.simaudio.com

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www.lampizatorpoland.com
Auralic Vega G2 streaming DAC ($6599)
This is the new version of the blockbuster Vega DAC with completely redesigned analog and digital sections, and now with built-in streaming capabilities. This is one of the most complete offers in the digital domain and one of the best sounding in its price bracket. Superb attention to detail, solid aluminum chassis, femto clocks, a nice color screen that shows album covers and class A output modules.
www.us.auralic.com

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 sonics, lots of input/output and digital filter options, but also a perfectionist-built unit that looks spectacular inside and out.
www.bricasti.com

Bricasti M1 Limited Edition ($15,000)
Although we feel that the M1 Classic is one of the best all-around DACs on the market, the LE ups the ante with gold-plated chassis parts, changes in the internal wiring and power supplies, better isolation feet that integrate StillPoints, all yielding a more liquid overall sound. That results in a DAC that provides more information at low volumes as well as “a hair more clarity.”
www.bricasti.com

dCS Bartok ($13,500, 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.”
www.dcslds.co.uk

LampizatOr Pacific DAC (starts at $25,535)
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.
www.lampizatorpoland.com

www.harbeth.co.uk
www.vinnierossi.com
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

Sparkler Audio S503 Spiral Disc Player ($1700)
This simple top-loading CD player from the mind of the former head designer of 47 Laboratories is old-fashioned through and through. But with Sparkler’s Ether integrated amplifier, the sound was clean and up-front. The Spiral can also be used as just a transport. Finicky operation, but still well worth the modest price.

www.sparkler-audio.com

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

Audio Note UK CDT-Two/II ($7450)
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

Esoteric P-02X ($21,000)
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
Computer/Streamers

Sonore UltraRendu ($875-999 depending upon power supply)
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.
www.sonore.us

Roon Nucleus ($1400)
If you’re addicted to Roon software to organize your digital needs, and we do, 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.
blog.roonlabs.com/what-makes-nucleus-so-special

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.
www.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 WiFi. The control app is particularly stunning in the way it provides access to building and managing playlists.
us.auralic.com
Innuos ZENith Mk III (starting at $4249)
A new and improved power supply, which includes Mundorf caps, gives the 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 sound is incredibly neutral, and many of the new features make the Mk. III incredibly easy to use. CD ripper is built-in.

www.innuos.com

dCS Network Bridge ($4750)
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.dcs-ltd.co.uk

Cocktail Audio X45 Pro Music Player/DAC ($5995)
This Korean-made digital all-in-one box offers just about everything for the audiophile who is exploring digital technologies for the first time – CD ripper, DAC, music server with plenty of storage, high-end streaming capabilities, a phono stage, an FM tuner and, most importantly, great sound. “Vinyl lovers have found their digital mate!” we decided.

www.cocktailaudio.com

Antipodes DX3 ($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, 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
AMPLIFIERS

McGary Audio SA1 ($3985)
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

First Watt SIT-3 ($4000)
Perhaps our favorite effort yet from the bench of First Watt/Pass Labs 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

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
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. Plus, 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

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.

www.passlabs.com

Doshi Audio Stereo Amplifier ($14,000)
While it’s not quite affordable, this tubed power amp has a knack for making 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.

www.doshiaudio.com

Vitus Audio RS 101 ($14,640)
This understated black-box power amplifier provides 300 watts per channel, and doubles that power cleanly as you halve the impedance. A synergistic match with the Vitus Audio RL102 line stage, “Together, these components provide a clean, powerful, and eminently musical performance.”

www.vitusaudio.com

McIntosh MC2152 ($15,000)
This beefy (125 lbs.) KT-88 power amplifier provides 150 watts per channel and may mark a turning point for McIntosh with its lack of blue meters and new sleek side panels made from carbon fiber. Despite its formidable size, the MC2152 offers an extremely transparent and laid-back sound that might be considered by some to be very un-Mac-like. This is the McIntosh amp that many of us have been waiting for, one with sound quality that equals its amazing list of features.

www.mcintoshlabs.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 spending the rest of your life in your listening chair. “Astonishing 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 can “drive the living snot” out of most loudspeakers.

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

Merrill Audio Element 118 Monoblock ($36,000)
We felt that the 118 monoblocks “almost fully eliminated our long-standing bias against class-D amplifiers” by eliminating any hints of grain or an overly analytical sound. With over 400 watts per channel into 8 ohms, the Merrill proved to be the perfect amp to mate with speakers that are exceptionally hard to drive.

www.merrillaudio.net

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 as saying “Oh. My. Lawd.”) The extra watts per channel over the P10 and the slightly different architecture “are more than enough to drive all but the most absurdly modern speakers to deafening levels.”

www.borderpatrol.net
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Emotiva TA-100 ($429)
The TA-100 is a supremely capable centerpiece for a budding audiophile system. With a real 50wpc of Class-A/B power, the TA-100 doles out more “quality power” per dollar than anything we’ve encountered. What sets the TA-100 apart from similarly priced competition is its amount of connectivity options and output features. It’s a preamp, DAC, phono-stage, amplifier, FM tuner, and includes a subwoofer output. Soundwise, there is nothing better for the asking price.
www.emotiva.com

PS Audio Sprout 100 ($599)
We thoroughly loved and appreciated the original PS Audio Sprout for what it was: a small class-D amplifier with a built-in Bluetooth receiver, DAC, and even a phono stage, and all for less than $500. That Sprout’s successor, the Sprout 100, is even better! It costs a little bit more but delivers a lot more in return—more power, an improved high-resolution DAC circuit and a nice remote control.
www.psaudio.com

Sparkler Audio S502 Ether ($1100)
From the mind of the former designer for 47 Laboratories, this minimalist amp is borne from the same principles—simplicity, short signal paths and an impressively small list of internal parts. A mere seven watts per channel may limit your choice of loudspeakers, but the Ether provided a “fast, up-front and very clear sound.”
www.sparkler-audio.com

Parasound 200 NewClassic Integrated ($1195)
The Parasound 200 Integrated has everything you want in an integrated amplifier. Preamplifier capabilities for when your system grows, a DAC and phono-stage for convenience factor, an included subwoofer output, and 100wpc of Class-D power give you the option to push nearly any speaker on the planet. For the asking price, it’s the nexus of where true hi-fi sound begins, and entry level ends. Soundwise the Parasound 200 integrated not only punches above its weight, it downright astonishes when paired with much costlier gear.

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. That means for a mere $200 more you’re getting a fullfunction 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

Parasound Halo Hint6 ($3000)
You get a lot for your three grand with the Hint6—a DAC, a headphone amp, a phono stage and 160 watts per channel into 8 ohms. Plus you get excellent sound quality, which may not be available with most A/V receivers with comparable features and price. Despite our proclivity for minimalist integrated amps designed for purists, the Parasound makes a compelling argument for having it all.
www.parasound.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 frontpanel 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
LTA Z10 Integrated ($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 12 watts per channel at 8 ohms, but my what lovely watts they are, with brilliant clarity and realism.

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.”

Luxman LX-380 ($7500)

Old-school in appearance, but decidedly modern in performance, this tubed Luxman only offers 14-20 wpc depending on impedance and yet it was a superb all-rounder that was brilliant with many different types of speakers. The sound is easy, laid-back and transparent, and often so addictive that we didn’t want to send it back.

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 oversolight sweetness that never left us wanting for more from a tonal perspective. Look past its slightly oddball, pedestrian looks and its cheapo remote, and you will be rewarded musically many times over. A real swan in an ugly duckling’s exterior.

BorderPatrol S10 Integrated (starting at $13,995)

We’re dropping this here because while you can order the BorderPatrol S10 as “regular” stereo amplifier, you can also order it as an integrated amp—that is, with a volume control—and if you’re able to handle an amp with limited inputs, this solution may be enough to be your forever-amp. And by “enough”, we mean “one of the most visceral sonic performances currently possible.” Now, yes, it’s a 300b-based single-ended amp, so plan on a whopping 7 watts of output before the amp takes a nap, but those 7 watts are way more powerful than you think they are. While you can drive just about anything with 7 watts, we’d shoot for a speaker with a sensitivity of over 92dB (and a relatively easy-to-drive impedance curve—think Living Voice Avatar, DeVore Orangutan, or a horn speaker, like Volti Audio), and suddenly Bob’s your uncle. OMG, this amp is incredible. Whenever someone starts laughing up their sleeve about bass and treble extension limits “inherent to the 300B tube,” this amp is the one that will take them out behind the woodshed and do terrible, terrible things (to their preconceptions). Pair with a top-flight 300b pair from Takatsuki, Living Voice, or those vintage WE tubes you’ve been stockpiling, and you can retire from the audiophile scene forever.

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.

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 part 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.

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, waists-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.
PREAMPLIFIERS

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

Pass Labs ($5800)
Like the matching XP-17 phono preamp, the XP-12 is incredibly neutral and does an impossibly great job at allowing you to hear what everything else in your system is doing. Features are abundant, and yet the XP-12 is still incredibly easy to setup and use. The single-stage volume control is a dream to use, as well.
www.passlabs.com

BorderPatrol Control Unit EXT-1 ($12,250)
We've declared this the “best tubed preamp 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 Duelland caps and a tube-rectified choke input filter PSU. Yes, you can get it with a fabulous phono stage as well.
www.borderpatrol.net

Merrill Audio Christine ($12,400)
Sporting one of the largest displays we've seen on an audio product—you can easily read everything from 20 feet away—the Christine was a synergistic match with the Class-D Merrill Element 118 monoblocks and forced us to reconsider our bias against Class-D amplifier designs.
www.merrillaudio.net

Vitus Audio RL102 ($14,400)
The RL102 is “a model of European simplicity and straightforward sensibility,” meaning that it is no-nonsense in its approach. Dig a little deeper and you'll find a preamp that is extremely versatile. With the matching Vitus R5101 power amplifier, we found that the RL102 delivered a “highly three-dimensional and fully fleshed-out soundstage.”
www.vitusaudio.com

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

Linear Tube Audio MicroZOTL Preamplifier ($3700)
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 offers 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

Preamplifiers

www.merrillaudio.net
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](http://www.ansuz-acoustics.com)
- **AudioQuest NRG ($49-249)**
  [www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com)
- **AudioQuest Storm Series ($625-$1995)**
  [www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com)
- **Cardas Audio Clear (starting at $749)**
  [www.cardas.com](http://www.cardas.com)
- **Dynamic Design Neutron SW 16P digital power cord ($7500/1m)**
  [www.dynamicdesignav.com](http://www.dynamicdesignav.com)
- **Furutech Powerflux (starting at $1850)**
  [www.furutech.com](http://www.furutech.com)
- **Signal Projects Golden Sequence ($4675)**
  [www.signalprojects.com](http://www.signalprojects.com)
- **Synergistic Research ($549-$6000)**
  [www.synergisticresearch.com](http://www.synergisticresearch.com)
- **Triode Wire Labs ($399-$1399)**
  [www.triodewirelabs.com](http://www.triodewirelabs.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.

**ANALOG 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
- 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
As I heard the two legends chatting quietly during the number, as well as the reverberation of their instruments in the studio, I wrote in my notes, “It’s almost like sitting on the end of Ellington’s piano stool.”

- John Stacavage (R.I.P.)

Parttimeaudiophile / July 2017

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**POWER Products**

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.psaudiocom

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

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

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.
**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

**Fern & Roby**
Christopher Hildebrand and his crew are a mixture of precision machinists and master carpenters, so these custom audio furniture products offer an exceptional degree of fit and finish.
www.fernandroby.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
In Ear

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 $79 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 ($899)
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 LCDi4 ($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 thanks to a new superthin 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
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.
www.audeze.com

AudioQuest NightOwl Carbon ($400)
We found that the NightOwl Carbon headphones, when matched with any of the Audioquest DragonFly models, provided an exceptional listening experience when streaming from a laptop or mobile device—and for an extremely reasonable amount of money. This turned out to be an ideal solution for well-traveled audiophiles.
www.personal.audioquest.com

HIFIMAN Sundara ($499)
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.
www.hifiman.com

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.”
www.audeze.com

Dan Clark Audio 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.
www.mrspeakers.com

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 tubed headphone amplifier, plug these in, and indulge yourself with the most efficient sleep-inducing machine ever invented.
www.hifiman.com

Focal Clear ($1499)
When matched with the Moon Audio Dragon Inspire IHA-1 headphone amplifier, the Clear offered a warm, embraceable sound that added up to hours and hours of fatigue-free listening. Extremely comfortable as well.
www.focal.com

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

On/Over Headphones
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 Black/Red/Cobalt ($99/199/299)
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, but the new Cobalt is simply awesome in every way.
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 impressible 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.

us.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 (from $7999)

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
AnalogMagik All In One Cartridge Set Up Software and Test LPs ($700)

This software package is all you need for accurate analog setup 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 33rpm and one for 45rpm.

www.analogmagik.com

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

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

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

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
Fern & Roby The Brass Record Weight ($95)

Machined from solid brass, this record weight is undoubtedly heavy as well as effective. It even comes with a built-in 45 rpm adapter on one side! This clamp is a great value as well—it won’t have you asking yourself “how much did I pay for a hunk of [insert random material here]?”

www.fernandrobymusic.com

Funk Firm Achromat ($99)

A true classic, the original acrylic mat designed by Khoubesserian back in 1979, imitated by many over the years. A rather cheap upgrade to your run of the mill felt mat for a more detailed sound. Available in 3 and 5mm thickness, make sure to pick the right one depending on your tonearm.

thefunkfirm.co.uk

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.lestdavisaudio.com.au

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

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www.lestdavisaudio.com.au

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

Lees Shelly Photography

leeshellyphoto.com 610-724-6472
Wagner E.V.A. anti-vibration pads ($62 cents each)
www.supplyhouse.com/DiversiTech-MP-2E-EVA-Anti-Vibration-Pad-2-x-2-x-7-8facid-EAJalQqbCMr_8bomo5QVkJz6C7315gA6EAYYASAREs1z6RQkw

AudioQuest binding post wrench ($15)
Tighten your speaker connections! Can be used on both 7/16” and ½” posts.
www.audioquest.com/accessories/audio-enhancements/binding-post-wrench

Herbie’s Audio Lab cone/spike decoupling glider
(starting at $16.89)
Used on virtually any kind of floor, bare or carpeted, with easy-sliding mobility. For use under racks, stands, or speakers.
www.herbiesaudiolab.com/collections/component-isolation

Audio Intelligent Ultra Pure Water ($20 for 32 oz. bottle)
If you prefer a final rinse with something better than purified water for your record cleaning ritual, this is a great value.
www.audiointelligent.com/products.htm

AudioQuest anti-static record brush ($24)
Everyone needs a dry brush next to their turntable for sudden “touch-ups,” and this is one of the best.
www.audioquest.com/accessories/vinyl-accessories/anti-static-record-brush

Vibrapods ($24 for set of 4)
These simple isolation feet can reduce vibrations in lighter components such as preamps and CD players.
www.vibrapod.com

Wilson Audio classic black tee ($25)
Finally, you can afford an official product from Wilson Audio!
https://parts.wilsonaudio.com/clothing-apparel/

Klipsch Zippo Lighter ($29)
The legendary logo on an iconic lighter makes a fantastic gift for the “loud and proud” Klipsch owner.
www.klipsch.com/products TRUE-WIRELESS-LIGHTER

VPI Stroboscope disc ($30)
Checks the speed on any 60 Hz turntable.
www.vpiindustries.com/accessories?lightbox=dataItem-ivjn3ms61

Audioengine DS2 desktop speaker stands ($34/pair)
Improve the sound of your desktop speakers by getting them up off the desktop!
www.audioengineusa.com/components/accessories/
Clearaudio Souther/Clever recordclamp ($35)
Sure it’s just a piece of acrylic, but this simple record clamp works well and has been around for decades.
www.clearaudio.de/en/accessories/cleaning-accessories.php

Onzow ZeroDust Stylus Cleaner ($40)
A very efficient way to keep the fuzz of the tip of your stylus, and now at a significantly reduced price.
www.amazon.com/ONZOW-ZERODUSTZeroDust-Stylus-Cleaner/dp/B00ERPWAK2

Soundsmith EZ-Mount Headshell Kit ($40)
These large, easy-to-grab headshell screws make mounting and aligning cartridges a breeze.
www.sound-smith.com/products/accessories/all

Fern & Roby Salt Well ($40)
Not an audio product, but fans of Fern & Roby’s bespoke approach—and serious cooks—will enjoy this unique gift.
www.fernandroby.com/products/details/salt-well

Fern & Roby anodized black LP weight ($49)
An attractive and affordable record weight that’s multi-purposed as a 45rpm adapter—and the right height to work with dust covers when closed.
www.fernandroby.com/products/details/the-aluminum-record-weight

HiFiMan RE300h in-ear monitors ($49)
Inexpensive IEMs, to be sure, but they’re from HiFiMan and they sound great for the money.
www.hifiman.com/products/detail/200

Petzl ACTIV headlamp ($49.95)
One of the most powerful and comfortable headlamps on the market, perfect for mounting and aligning cartridges or working behind your equipment rack.

AudioQuest Noise-Stopper RCA caps ($50 for set of 10)
Stick these in all open RCA jacks and reduce noise in your system!

Cardas Audio headshell leads ($54)
An easy way to upgrade your tonearm-cartridge interface.
www.cardas.com/cartridge_clips.php

Cardas Audio Multi-Blocks ($56 for set of 6)
Made from myrtle wood, these blocks can be placed under cables to improve performance.
www.cardas.com/multi_blocks.php

Furutech power fuses ($58-65)
Extremely reliable, and yes they can make a sonic difference. Just make sure you buy the right size.
www.furutech.com/2013/02/02/1672/

Rega Research reference drive belt ($60)
If your audiophile doesn’t already have the famous white belt upgrade for their Rega turntable, this is a must.
www.rega.co.uk/upgrade-drive-belt.html

McIntosh Labs 70th Anniversary beach towel ($65)
A perfect vacation gift for the Mac lover in your life!
www.m McIntoshlab s.com/products/merchandise/McIntosh-Towel/70th

Clearaudio Precision Bubble Level ($75)
Everyone needs a bubble level for their turntable setup, but how about one that’s beautifully machined?
www.clearaudio.de/en/accessories/cleaning-accessories.php

Fern & Roby brass record weight ($75)
A beautiful weight machined from solid brass with a 45rpm adapter on one side.
www.fernandroby.com/products/details/brass-record-weight

Palmer Monicon ($99)
Passive desktop volume control with 85db of attenuation, 112db of mute, a stereo-to-mono switch, and fancy wood cladding. Inputs and outputs accept balanced or 3.5mm stereo.

Schiit Modi 3 ($99)
The third iteration of the true entry-level DAC packs big sound in a small package. Eons beyond the capabilities straight from your computer, the Modi sets the standard for what can be achieved for under a hundred bones.
www.schiit.com/products

iFi Zen DAC ($129)
Both a DAC and a headphone amplifier, this could be the year’s ultimate digital stocking stuffer.
www.ifi-audio.com/products/zen-dac/

Schiit Mani phono stage ($129)
A better phono stage than the price would dictate, also made in the USA.
www.schiit.com/products/mani

DeVore Fidelity O/Clock ($299 each, $199 for DeVore Orangutan owners)
From his regular columns for The Occasional, we know that John DeVore has a profound love for watches as well as audio. So imagine combining these two loves into the perfect holiday gift—handmade clocks made from the woofer cut-out from the DeVore Fidelity O/96 loudspeakers! Each clock is unique—they’re signed and numbered—and utterly gorgeous.
www.devorefidelity.com