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Top Picks in
High-End Audio
and Music 2017



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Robert Harley, the absolute sound; July/August, 2017



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Julie Mullins welcomes you to our Buyer's Guide special edition: Top Picks in High-End Audio and Music 2017.



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Buyer's Guide special edition:
Top Picks and Music 2017

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From the Editor

Welcome to our Buyer's Guide special edition: Top Picks in High-End Audio and Music 2017!

Herein you'll find a plethora of capsule product reviews hand-selected by the TAS editors as our "Top Picks" of high-end audio components. Plus, Music Editor Jeff Wilson has culled **Top Ten Lists of Music reviews of 2017's best releases** across genres and all formats.

Although the majority of the products we've chosen were reviewed in the *The Absolute Sound* within the last year, we have also included a number of perennial favorites favorably reviewed in earlier issues.

You'll also find hi-fi gear across a range of prices, categories, and types, including: **Loudspeakers**, **Electronics**, **Digital and Analog Sources**, and **Cables and Power Products**. And if you're in the market for more portable gear, you'll want to check out our new *Ultimate Guide to Headphones & Personal Audio*, a **special print edition** produced in collaboration with TAS' sister publication, *HiFi+*.

We are also pleased to offer helpful how-to feature articles excerpted from the latest (fifth) edition of Robert Harley's classic *Complete Guide to High-End Audio*:

- How to Choose Loudspeakers
- How Much Amplifier Power Do You Need?
- What to Listen for When Choosing a DAC or Other Digital Sources
- How to Choose Cables

We hope you'll get as much enjoyment from our Top Picks as we have as reviewers of these worthy audio components.

Happy listening!

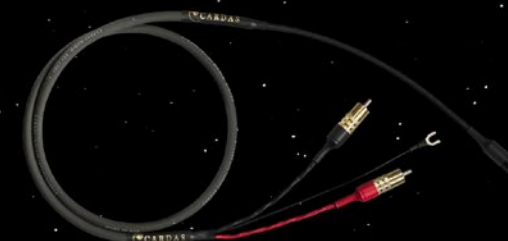
Julie Mullins, Editor



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TOP PICKS: LOUDSPEAKERS

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HOW TO CHOOSE LOUDSPEAKERS • DESKTOP AND STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS • FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS • SUBWOOFERS

*Click a category to see our
Top Picks reviews.*

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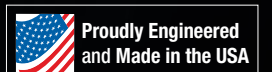
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Feature

How to Choose Loudspeakers

Robert Harley

Excerpted and adapted from The Complete Guide to High-End Audio (fifth edition). Copyright © 1994–2017 by Robert Harley. hifibooks.com. To order call (800) 841-4741.

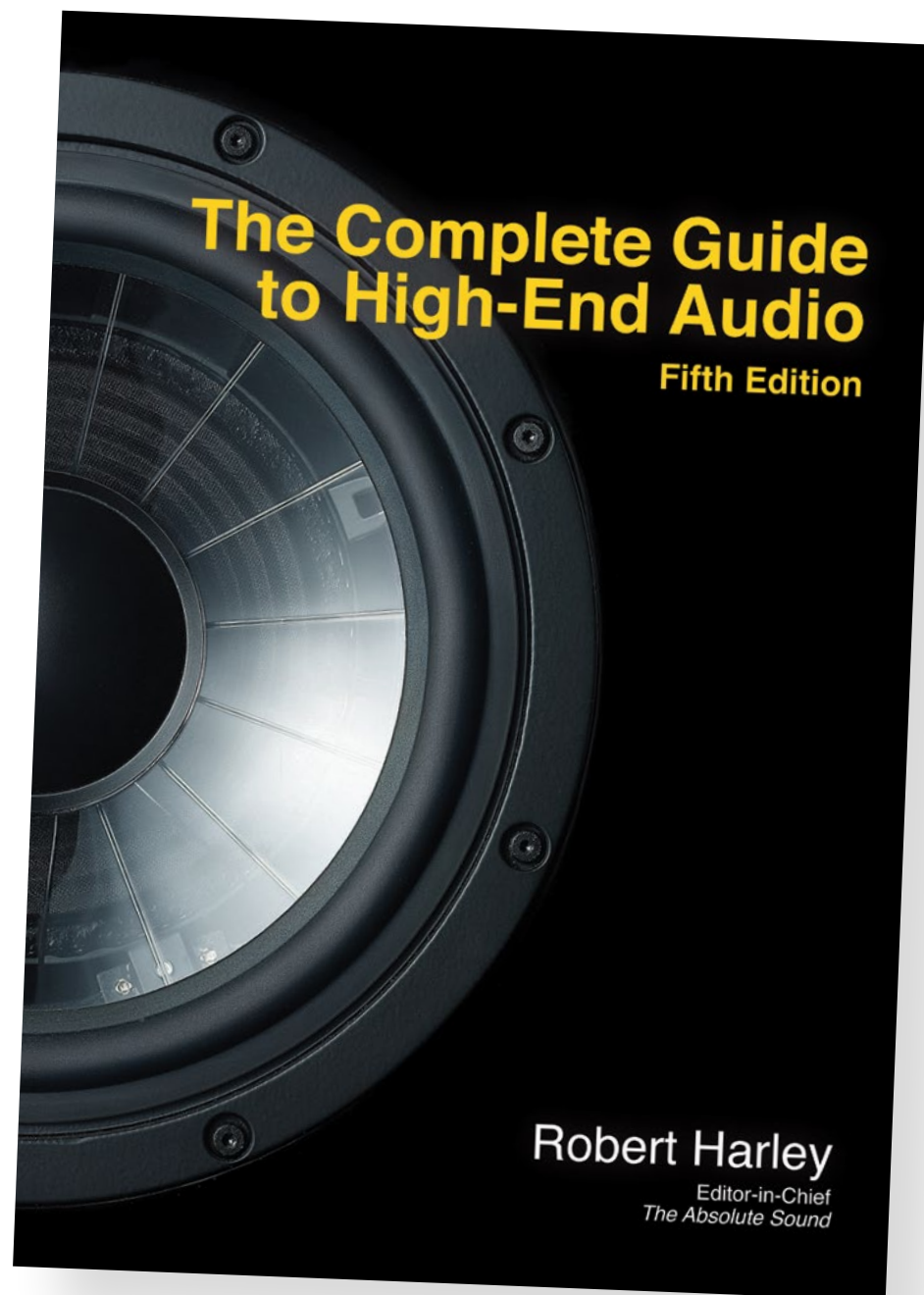
The world abounds in poor-quality, even dreadful, loudspeakers. What's more, some very bad loudspeakers are expensive, while superlative models may sell for a fraction of an inferior model's price. There is sometimes little relationship between price and musical performance.

This situation offers the loudspeaker shopper both promise and peril. The promise is of finding an excellent loudspeaker for a reasonable price. The peril is of sorting through mediocre models to find the rare gems that offer either high absolute performance, or sound quality far above what their price would indicate.

This is where reviews come in handy. Reviewers who write for audio magazines hear lots of loudspeakers (at dealers, trade shows, and consumer shows), but review only those that sound promising. This weeds out the vast majority of underachievers. Of the loudspeakers that are reviewed, some are found to be unacceptably flawed, others are good for the money, while a select few are star overachievers that clearly outperform their similarly priced rivals.

The place to start loudspeaker shopping, therefore, is in the pages of a reputable magazine with high standards for what constitutes good loudspeaker performance. Be wary of magazines that end every review with a "competent for the money" recommendation. Not all loudspeakers are good; therefore, not all reviews should be positive. The tone of the reviews—positive or negative—should reflect the wide variation in performance and value found in the marketplace.

After you've read lots of loudspeaker reviews, make up your short list of products to audition from the crème de la crème. There are several criteria to apply in making this short list to ensure that you get the best loudspeaker for your individual needs. As you apply each criterion described, the list of candidate loudspeakers will get shorter and shorter, thus easing your decision-making process. If you find yourself with too few choices at the end of the process, go back and revise your criteria. For example, if you find a loudspeaker that's perfect in all ways but size, you may want to find the extra space in your living room. Similarly, an ideal loudspeaker costing a little more than you planned to spend may suggest a budget revision. As you go through this selection process, remember that the perfect loudspeaker for you is probably out



Feature **How to Choose Loudspeakers**

there. Be selective and have high standards. You'll be rewarded by a much higher level of musical performance than you thought you could afford.

1) Size, Appearance, and Integration in the Home

After you've designated a place for your loudspeakers, determine the optimal speaker size for your room—the urban apartment dweller will likely have tighter size constraints than the suburban audiophile. Some listeners will want the speakers to discreetly blend into the room; others will make the hi-fi system the room's center of activity and won't mind large, imposing loudspeakers. When choosing a place for your speakers, keep in mind that their placement is a crucial factor in how your system will sound.

Another mistake is to drive high-quality speakers with poor amplification or source components.

The loudspeaker's appearance is also a factor to consider. An inexpensive, vinyl-covered box would be out of place in an elegantly furnished home. Many high-end speakers are finished in beautiful cabinetry or automotive paint finishes that will complement any décor. This level of finish can, however, add greatly to the loudspeaker's price.

If you don't have room for full-range, floor-standing speakers, consider a separate *subwoofer/satellite system*. This is a speaker system

that puts the bass-reproducing driver in an enclosure you can put nearly anywhere, and the midrange- and treble-reproducing elements in a small, unobtrusive cabinet. You'll still get a full sound, but without the visual domination of your living room that often goes with floorstanding speakers. Moreover, the satellite speakers' small cabinets often help them achieve great soundstaging. Although the term "bookshelf" is often applied to small speakers, you can't get optimal performance from a speaker mounted in a bookshelf. Small speakers need to be mounted on stands and placed out in the room. Small loudspeakers mounted on stands, sometimes called minimonitors, often provide terrific imaging, great clarity in the mid-band and treble, and can easily "disappear" into the music. On the down side, small speakers used without a subwoofer have restricted dynamics, limited bass extension, and won't play as loudly as their floorstanding counterparts.

2) Match the Loudspeaker to Your Electronics

The loudspeaker should be matched to the rest of your system, both electrically and musically. A loudspeaker that may work well in one system may not be ideal for another system—or another listener.

Let's start with the loudspeaker's electrical characteristics. The power amplifier and loudspeaker should be thought of as an interactive combination: the power amplifier will behave differently when driving different loudspeakers. Consequently, the loudspeaker should be chosen for the amplifier that will drive it.

The first electrical consideration is a loudspeaker's *sensitivity*—how much sound it will

produce for a given amount of amplifier power. Loudspeakers are rated for sensitivity by measuring their sound-pressure level (SPL) from one meter away while they are being fed one watt (1W) of power. For example, a sensitivity specification of "88dB/1W/1m" indicates that this particular loudspeaker will produce a sound-pressure level of 88dB when driven with an input power of 1W, measured at a distance of 1m. High-end loudspeakers vary in sensitivity between 80dB/1W/1m and 106dB/1W/1m.

A loudspeaker's sensitivity is a significant factor in determining how well it will work with a given power-amplifier output wattage. To produce a loud sound (100dB), a loudspeaker rated at 80dB sensitivity would require 100W. A loudspeaker with a sensitivity of 95dB would require only 3W to produce the same sound-pressure level. Each 3dB decrease in sensitivity requires double the amplifier power to produce the same SPL.

Another electrical factor to consider is the loudspeaker's load *impedance*. This is the electrical resistance the power amp meets when driving the speaker. The lower the speaker's impedance, the more demand it places on the power amp. If you choose low-impedance speakers, be certain the power amp will drive them adequately. (These and the speaker sensitivity factors above are discussed in greater technical detail in the "How Much Amplifier Power Do You Need?" feature in this Guide; excerpted from Chapter 5 "Power Amplifiers" from Robert Harley's book.)

On a musical level, you should select as sonically neutral a speaker as possible. If you have a bright-sounding DAC or power amp, it's a mistake to buy a loudspeaker that sounds soft

or dull in the treble to compensate. Instead, change your DAC or amplifier.

Another mistake is to drive high-quality speakers with poor amplification or source components. The high-quality loudspeakers will resolve much more information than lesser speakers—including imperfections in the electronics and source components. All too many audiophiles drive great speakers with mediocre source components and never realize their loudspeakers' potential. Match the loudspeakers' quality to that of the rest of your system.

3) Musical Preferences and Listening Habits

If the perfect loudspeaker existed, it would work equally well for chamber music and heavy metal. But because the perfect loudspeaker remains a mythical beast, musical preferences must play a part in choosing a loudspeaker. If you listen mostly to small-scale classical music, choral works, or classical guitar, a minimonitor would probably be your best choice.

Conversely, rock listeners need the dynamics, low-frequency extension, and bass power of a large full-range system. Different loudspeakers have strengths and weaknesses in different areas; by matching the speaker to your listening tastes, you'll get the best performance in the areas that matter most to you.

Our Top Picks Desktop and Stand-Mounted Loudspeakers



Elac Debut B5

\$229

It's little; it's vinyl clad; it's dirt cheap; and it sounds terrific. The B5 compact represents the first effort in what should be a long and fruitful collaboration between Elac and its celebrated VP of Engineering, Andrew Jones. The B5 is robust in the mid and upper bass but the real difference is how everything comes together in such an exquisitely balanced and musical fashion. NG instinctively connected with the basic honesty of the B5 sound and was gobsmacked by its bargain-basement price. What Jones and the Elac team have managed to ring from this most humble of designs is nothing short of exceptional. (259)



Paradigm Shift A2

\$349/each

A 2012 Golden Ear recipient, the cleverly named Shift A2 is more than just a serious loudspeaker—it's a winning example of forward thinking. Compact, internally powered, equipped with DSP bass-management, and packed with enough back-panel inputs to connect to almost any source, the Shift A2 is what 21st-century entry-level high end is all about. Its Everyman appeal bridges generations of music lovers, and it just happens to sound great in the bargain. It won't be for the devout traditionalists, but its combination of sound and value extends the welcome mat to nascent high-enders who may have thought they couldn't afford the entrance fee. (224)



Elac Uni-Fi UB5

\$499

How do you follow an act like the Elac Debut B5? If you're designer Andrew Jones, there's only one route: engineering one of his trademark concentric drivers for a sub-\$500 three-way compact. Sonically, if you loved the Debut B5, you're going to *really* love the UB5; it's the B5 gone to finishing school. There's greater specificity, body, and focus to images—all trademarks of the concentric driver. Add to that a sibilance range that is natural, sharp, and quick, like the live event. Plus there is rock-solid 50Hz midbass output similar to the B5 but much more controlled, and less reliant on the port. While there's still a bit of veiling and the UB5 doesn't fully shed its enclosure, let's get real—this Elac is competitive with speakers well beyond its price segment. It might just be the best five hundred bucks you'll ever spend. (266)



Revel Concerta2 M16

\$900

A feast for the eyes and ears, the M16 has been refreshed with smartly contoured enclosures, high-gloss finishes, and elegant design accents. Sonically, Revel doesn't make wallflowers, and the M16 follows suit dramatically. Its dynamic, uncompromising midband, good overall speed, and excellent inter-driver coherence all happily conspire to generate a tonal ripeness that belies the speaker's tiny stature. Easily the most enthralling aspects of the M16's performance are the fullness and cohesiveness of its soundstage and imaging. The M16 doesn't paint small sonic landscapes—a sense of immersion and "widescreen" scale are two of its most distinctive characteristics. A compact budget loudspeaker that maintains classic Revel virtues. (268)

Our Top Picks Desktop and Stand-Mounted Loudspeakers



Audience The One

\$995

The One, as you might infer from its name, is a single full-range driver shoehorned into a small box. The driver itself is the same unit, the A3A, that Audience uses in its flagship \$72,000 16+16 speaker. (Audience is unique in this regard; no other speaker manufacturer employs the same driver in all its speakers from the smallest to the largest.) According to Audience, the A3A has exceptionally flat response, claimed to be within +/-3dB from 40Hz to 22kHz. Be that as it may, properly set up, The One is the best desktop speaker reviewer Steven Stone has heard. If you are looking for an exceptional small-footprint monitor, The One is a must-audition. (236)



Micromega MySpeaker

\$999

Barely a foot tall, this wireless wonder bundles speaker, connectivity, and a built-in 30Wpc Class AB amp into a single package, meaning you simply connect a source and you're good to go. In sonic balance it is slightly forward and lean, but it also has an openness that's arresting in this price class. Images are depicted with physical weight and dimension, and bass response extends confidently into the fifty-cycle range. Its tweeter is nicely integrated with only minor hints of localization, most likely due to a small energy dip near the crossover point. While MySpeaker has limits, it also has guts and doesn't shrink from orchestral crescendos. Versatility and convenience define the wireless game, and the Micromega's MySpeaker excels at these things—a one-stop winner. (272)



KEF LS50

\$1500

Built to celebrate KEF's 50th anniversary, the LS50 monitor spins pure coincident-driver magic thanks to its blushing pink-gold Uni-Q coaxial midrange/tweeter mounted in bulls-eye fashion atop a uniquely arched baffle. Visually arresting and sonically satisfying, it delivers tonal neutrality at just the right pitch, with superb midrange sonics, full-bodied presence, and potent midbass punch. Thanks to its beautifully crafted high-density enclosure—an ideal platform for the space-saving Uni-Q—there's little in the way of cabinet resonances or port colorations. Imaging is as clean and pinpoint-precise as you'd expect from KEF. Positioned in a small- or medium-sized room, the LS50 makes a statement like few small speakers. You'll want to hold on to these no matter how many upgrades you make to the rest of your system. (231)



Totem Acoustic Sky

\$1895

Classic Totem through and through, the Sky is purpose-built—clean and seamless, with rigid cabinetry and beautiful veneer finishes. The Sky is also *prima facie* evidence of just how far small speakers have evolved in the way of a fuller-bodied and warmer musical balance. Its tweeter and woofer sing with an of-a-piece coherence. Given the right-sized room (medium-to-smallish) and strong amplifier support, the Totem Sky just clears its throat and lets loose, eliciting tuneful bass with resonant energy, dynamic vigor, and surprising slam. With break-in, the Sky grows significantly more textured and realistic: The ambience surrounding singers, for example, becomes airier and better defined. Hats off to Totem's Vince Bruzese for his continuing quest to coax big-time performance from the tiny two-way, while still harnessing the virtues of speed and transparency that come with a little box. (275)

Our Top Picks Desktop and Stand-Mounted Loudspeakers



Revel Performa3 M106

\$2000

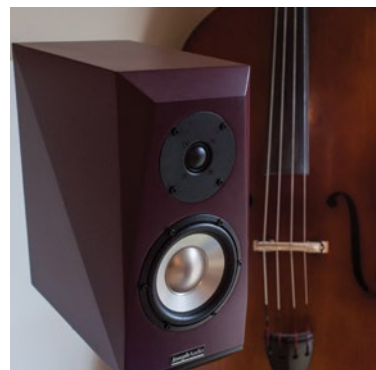
Revel's M106 is cut from the same rich fabric as its big brother the F206, but designed for smaller spaces. A vocal lover's dream, the two-way M sports the same, brilliantly refined dome tweeter with acoustic lens waveguide as the floorstander, creating a wide sweetspot, a rewarding lack of localization, and estimable composure under all sorts of dynamic fire. Plus, it delivers nearly imperturbable output so that even under punishing conditions this feisty compact remains linear. There's a cooler cast to its tonal balance likely due to the lighter bass, but its character is still unmistakably, accurately Revel. History will show this is one of the great compacts of the last ten years. (234)



Audience 1+1 V2+

\$2460

Don't let the 1+1 V2+'s nearly identical appearance to the 1+1 fool you; this newly upgraded version is a big leap over its already superlative predecessor. The V2+ employs a significantly redesigned version of Audience's full-range driver, top-level Au24SX internal wiring, retuned passive radiators, and custom tellurium solderless binding posts. The result is more resolution and detail (particularly in the treble), superior transparency, wider dynamic expression, and greater midrange purity. The 1+1 V2+'s midrange clarity, just one of the virtues of a crossover-less single-driver speaker, is on par with that of many speakers costing twenty times the V2+'s price. The state of the art for desktop listening, and a terrific choice as a main speaker in smaller rooms. (273)



Joseph Audio Prism

\$3699

Six years ago, after Steven Stone reviewed the Joseph Audio Pulsars, he ran into a number of audiophiles at the 2011 RMAF who were very interested in owning a pair. Their only hesitation was coming up with the \$7000. The Prisms should shake a good portion of those fence-sitters from their roosts. While SS can't and won't try to give you a numerical percentage of the Pulsar's performance that is equaled by the Prisms—as in “they deliver 85% of the Pulsars' performance”—he will say that the Prisms have similar sonic qualities with an overall performance level that ranks up with the best small monitors he's heard. No, the Prisms aren't as visually prepossessing as the Pulsars. But in many domestic and professional listening environments their less blingy exterior may be a positive attribute. Put the Prisms in a midsize-or-smaller room, mate them with decent electronics and a good subwoofer, and they will deliver the musical goods in that natural and articulate way that Joseph Audio loudspeakers are known for, but at a more affordable price than ever before. (262)



ATC SCM19

\$3999

Not a brand to cater to the fashions of the marketplace, ATC has bolstered these stout, professional-grade monitors with bespoke drivers created to do a single job—accurate pro-caliber reproduction. Still, in spite of ATC's stellar track record, NG never expected the new and aggressively priced SCM19 to be as good as it is. A superb and superbly defined midrange, overall tonal neutrality, broad-shouldered micro- and macro-dynamics are all in evidence. The surprise is the extent to which the SCM19 outshines its distinguished predecessors—particularly ATC's other passive consumer speakers—in voicing and seamless inter-driver coherence. There are no discontinuities and/or vestigial box colorations, either. In addition there's more air on top, likely attributable to the all-new, in-house-engineered-and-manufactured soft-dome tweeter, which is a real beaut. Simply one of the best compacts NG has heard to date. (245)

Our Top Picks Desktop and Stand-Mounted Loudspeakers



B&W 805 D3

\$6000

The 805 D3 represents the sole compact in B&W's revamped 800 D Series lineup. Stunning both visually and sonically, the two-way 805 is a bold performer. Its midrange signature is a near-seamless combination of speed, wideband dynamic contrast, and dense tonal color. And the civilizing influence of the 805's superb diamond tweeter cannot be overstated. Chameleon-like in the way it adopts the character of source material, it can be terrifically expressive and liquid, or warm and richly shaded—depending on the recording. Images are rock-stable and focused from center stage to the widest points of the soundspace. Decisive factors in the 805's excellent performance are the integration of port and woofer, and excellent inter-driver coherence. Compact or not, the 805 D3 is a loudspeaker to be reckoned with at any price, from any company. (266)



Focal Sopra N°1

\$8999

Reviewer Andy Quint wrote this about these superb two-ways with articulating cabinets from celebrated French manufacturer Focal: "Perhaps the most telling part of the audiophile loudspeaker review process is what happens when all the critical listening has finished. With the Sopra N°1s, I felt compelled to hear them play music until the last possible moment. When the truck picking them up for the trip back to their U.S. distributor showed up earlier than anticipated, I had to tell the driver to return later and then scramble to finish disassembling the Sopras and get their constituent parts back into the cardboard boxes. Sometimes it's hard to say goodbye." 'Nuff said. (266)



TAD ME1

\$12,495

The Micro Evolution One (ME1) may be the smallest offering in TAD's Evolution lineup, but don't call it reductionist. This three-way bass-reflex design arguably has more heart and soul than its larger Evolution Series siblings, the CE1 and E1. It shares common themes such as the brilliant CST (Coherent Source Transducer), the woven-Aramid bass driver, and TAD's sonically undetectable, bi-directional, slotted port (otherwise known as the Aero-Dynamic Slot or ADS). "Micro" in name only, the ME1's sonics are high energy and potent beyond the speaker's modest footprint. On tap are admirable symphonic scale and soundstage immersion well outside the norm for a speaker of this specification. The headliner, however, is the coaxial midrange/beryllium tweeter, which projects uncommonly transparent and precise imaging and goose-pimplly musical minutiae. What are unexpected are the bare-knuckled dynamics and a power range that will shock even the staunchest large-speaker advocate. (278)



Gamut RS3i

\$19,900 (includes integrated Gamut stand)

From the moment reviewer Kirk Mitskog first connected the RS3i two-way mini-monitor without much regard to optimizing its placement and just let music play, he heard a sound that was compelling, and it only got better with time and fine-tuning. The RS3i's liveliness never proved anything less than entertaining and engaging. In fact, the more he listened to the RS3i, and the more kinds of music he threw at it, the more he admired its winning ability to dig into the music and bring out its essence and do so with a beguiling *joie de vivre*. Its bass extension and dynamic power are right up there with the best of the mini-monitor breed. The RS3i offers all the advantages of a small stand-mounted speaker—those of illuminating imaging and wide-open soundstaging—combined with stunning dynamic presence. Capable of sounding much bigger than it looks, this is a honey of a speaker and should be on anyone's short list for a small-to-medium-sized room application. (266)

Our Top Picks Desktop and Stand-Mounted



Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo Diamond

\$19,999 (\$21,499 with stands)

If you've ever seen—and hopefully heard—either the original or this Diamond Edition upgrade (with diamond tweeters, Absolute Dream internal wiring, etc.) of the Arabesque Minissimo, chances are you'd remember it as much for its whimsical, curvy “coma”-shaped form factor and unexpected high-gloss color choices as for the incredible resolution, musicality, and dispersion that make this versatile two-way an all-around standout. These are quite high-resolution transducers that can pull off a marvelous disappearing act, sounding natural and steadfastly gorgeous across many genres. With some rock ‘n’ roll cuts, reviewer JM was surprised and delighted by how much in-your-face muscle these elegant little speakers displayed. Still, as with most two-ways and smaller monitors, a little extra lower-bass support—provided by Crystal Cable's formidable powered Subissimo subwoofer (\$11,999)—will enhance and extend the speakers' dynamic range, resulting in a wholly pleasing balance of structure and substance. (273)



MBL 120

\$23,050 (stands \$1630)

Yes, it looks remarkably similar to the classic ‘droid silhouette of the earlier MBL 121. But the 120 has higher damping and rigidity, and a massively reinforced cabinet with twice the volume of the 121—large enough to increase the diameter of the push-push, side-firing woofers. But it's the seamless frequency response of the 120 that represents its greatest improvement. This speaker spins silk from top to bottom but especially in its grainless treble. Imaging and soundstage replication are also more precise. And midbass integration, a weakness of the 121, is much improved in the 120, not to mention that it achieves an easy half-octave or more of low bass. In a smaller setting, it rivals the vaunted 101E for sheer musicality though it doesn't have that speaker's Wagnerian dynamics and low-end crunch. And yes, it's the finest compact Radialstrahler yet. (228)

Like father, like son.



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Jonathan Valin, *The Absolute Sound*, 12/2015.

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Our Top Picks Floorstanding Loudspeakers



Elac Debut F5
\$560

The floorstanding F5 leverages the strengths of the compact B5, then significantly builds on them. Yes, there's the same warm, relaxed, and responsive midrange, overall tunefulness, and strong sense of musical truth. What distinguishes the F5 is the sheer volume of air that its additional pair of woofers can move. This results in dividends that include authentically weighted orchestral scale, rock-level dynamics, and vocal reproduction that depicts singers as fully formed and fleshed out with chest resonance, weight, and bloom. While the speaker may be not flawless, it could be reasonably argued that the F5 is as faultless as a transducer is likely to get at this price. A veritable gift to budget-conscious audiophiles and the younger audience. (260)



Emotiva Airmotiv T1
\$699

The Emotiva T1 has sonic attitude. Attitude as only a dual-woofered, four-driver floorstander can convey. The T1 manifested a big, brawny sound that energized listening spaces with outgoing and engaging mid-bass and potent dynamic thrust. The T1's warmer, somewhat darker character makes it a loudspeaker that paints the overall emotion and heart of a performance in broader brush strokes. Musically-wise, the T1 just brings it. The jewel in the T1 crown is the 32mm folded ribbon tweeter and, indeed, it is a thing of beauty—airy, textured, and transparent. Orchestral performances took on a new urgency and gravity with a well-cushioned, "bottom-up" signature defined by grippy lower frequencies, an expressive lower midrange that allows a cello or bass viol full breath and exhalation, and a relaxed vocal range that neither forces singers into your lap nor shoves them to the back wall of the listening room. Seriously, folks, a high-octane sonic ride for just shy of seven-hundred bucks! What's not to like? (278)



Magnepan .7
\$1395

Meet Magnepan's latest "mini" planar dipole, the two-way, floorstanding, all-quasi-ribbon-driver MG .7—a speaker that is capable of a fuller-range and more natural sound than any previous "mini" Maggie. Although Julie Mullins knows that most TAS readers have already made the acquaintance of Maggies, the .7s are still impressive, offering a practically unbeatable quality-to-cost ratio. During her listening tests, she was delighted to discover that they consistently delivered a beautiful and open presentation graced with a striking measure of air and light. Soundstage reproduction was stunning across a wide range of music. In addition to their tough-to-beat price, the .7s become even more attractive when you consider that Magnepan is offering a 30-day in-home trial and a money-back guarantee. Whether you're in the market for a starter pair of high-quality speakers, or have the proverbial champagne taste on a beer budget (or both!), why *wouldn't* you consider these babies? They're terrific. (252)



GoldenEar Technology Triton Five
\$1999

Sandy Gross, the proprietor of GoldenEar, may be the Babe Ruth of reasonably priced loudspeakers. With the Triton Five, the gregarious Gross has hit yet another one out of the park. Named after the sea god Triton who could calm or rouse the waves by blowing on his conch, the Triton has a similar quality. It's a remarkably low-distortion design that belts out Led Zeppelin but also has the finesse to reproduce the most finely filigreed musical passages. A high-velocity ribbon driver helps account for the purity of the treble. And four side-mounted sub-bass radiators allow it to plumb the Stygian depths of the sonic spectrum. Not least, it's also an elegant and unobtrusive-looking design that should appeal to a wide range of listeners. For all his ingenuity, it will be hard for Gross to surpass the Triton Five. (255)



Monitor Audio Silver 300
\$2000

The Silver 300 may look like its predecessor, but this latest version has been completely redesigned with new drivers, crossovers, and enclosure. A three-way, four-driver speaker (dual 6" woofers, 4" midrange, 1" tweeter) housed in a cabinet that looks far too nice for this price point, the Silver 300 offers a compelling array of musical virtues. Chief among these are its terrific speed on transients, effortless reproduction of dynamics, and overall sense of musical coherence. Bass is detailed and resolved, providing a clear sense of pitch. These qualities infuse music with a life and vitality that are particularly apparent on rock, pop, and jazz. This is one very well designed loudspeaker, built with an economy of scale that allows this level of performance to be offered at a reasonable price. (review forthcoming)

Our Top Picks Floorstanding Loudspeakers



Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II

\$2700

The Vandersteen 2Ce is the classic three-way floorstander, delivering excellent top-to-bottom balance and engaging musicality. Moreover, Vandersteen's baffle-less, time-and-phase-coherent design can suggest the spatial focus usually heard with planars. It benefits from bi-wiring and should be placed away from walls. The first-order crossovers essential to time-coherent performance somewhat limit maximum sound-pressure levels. (139, 122)



Larsen Model 6.2

\$3995

Like its smaller and bigger siblings, the two-way Larsen 6.2 is designed to be positioned against a wall, facing forward, which eliminates a great deal of pre-purchase angst about whether the speaker will "work" in a given room and, of course, vastly simplifies the process of room placement. Early reflections from the speaker's backwave, which can register to a listener as distortion, are eliminated. Additionally, the drivers face inwards and upwards, which addresses the issue of the first sidewall reflection. Tonal accuracy, detail, and spatiality are exemplary. The requirement to site the Larsens near a boundary also contributes substantially to their surprisingly (for their size) potent bass performance, though a powerful amplifier—think 150-to-200Wpc—assures the best results in this regard. (276)



Focal Aria 948

\$4999

A three-way, bass-reflex floorstander, the 948 is the top model in Focal's Aria 900 line. Like all the transducers in the company's 900 Series, the 948 uses Focal's unique flax-sandwich drivers—two 8" woofers and one 6½" mid/bass in a vented enclosure—along with an aluminum/magnesium alloy, TNF, inverted-dome tweeter. These painstakingly engineered drivers enable the 948s to really strut their stuff when it comes to detail, transparency, and resolution—particularly on vocals, percussion, and strings. JM found the sense of realism they delivered downright spooky at times. Although the 948s initially required some set-up tweaks to avoid a touch of treble brightness, they were excellent after break-in, bringing so many musical layers to life that they created a truly immersive soundscape. This degree of resolution with spaciousness galore, plus astounding attack and decay, all make this speaker a rare find within this price category. (254)



Magnepan MG 3.7i

\$5995

Maggie's new, three-way, true-ribbon/quasi-ribbon planar 3.7i successfully addresses three issues that have long vexed "true-ribbon" Maggies: the seamless integration of that ribbon with the other planar-magnetic drivers; the retention of detail and dynamic range at relatively low volume levels; and the reduction of "Maggie graininess." The solution to these problems combined with the famous virtues of true-ribbon Magnepanes (neutrality, low distortion, high resolution, superb transient response, lifelike timbres, and natural imaging and soundstaging) produce what is, in JV's opinion, the best buy in a high-fidelity transducer regardless of price, provided you have enough amp to drive the 3.7i, and the space to house it. Note that the 3.7i does not produce deep bass below about 45Hz and, like all planars, runs into membrane-excursion limits, slightly limiting dynamic range (particularly in the bass) at extremely high SPLs. (forthcoming)

Our Top Picks Floorstanding Loudspeakers



PSB Imagine T3

\$7500

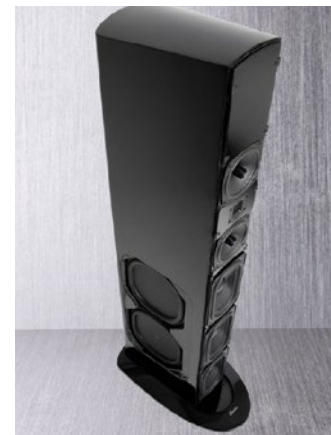
Paul S. Barton's current flagship product is an exceptional value—a beautifully made full-range loudspeaker that, at a fraction of the cost, holds its own with the most heroically engineered transducers on the market. The five-way T3 is a highly versatile speaker, designed to perform at its best in a wide variety of rooms, thanks to the flexibility of its three woofers, each isolated in its own sub-enclosure. One, two, or all three 7" woofers can be activated, with the option, as well, of inserting (provided) plugs into their rear-facing ports. Because of its voicing and power-handling capability, the Imagine T3 is a great rock 'n' roll speaker, but it also has the tonal finesse and spatiality needed to admirably serve classical music and acoustic jazz. An easy amplifier load—60 (quality) watts per channel should be plenty. (258)



Vandersteen Treo CT

\$8400

A loudspeaker of uncommon musicality and precision. Built upon the R&D that gave birth to the flagship Model Seven, the four-driver, medium-scale Treo CT conveys a single-driver-like coherence that immerses the listener in the very moment the recording was captured. It combines uncanny image specificity, color, and texture with an enveloping sense of air and immersiveness. At least some credit must go to the Model Seven-derived CT (carbon tweeter), which is as transparent and open as it is extended. Basically a passive version of the Quatro Wood CT, the Treo may not have quite the bass slam of that model, but you'd hardly miss it due to its unflappable resolution of pitch. A true classic. (262)



GoldenEar Technology Triton Reference

\$8495

GoldenEar's Triton Reference may not be the equal of speakers six times its price, but it is an extraordinary value for the money at \$8500 the pair—especially in a package that is comparatively small and exceptionally well styled for its level of performance. Its built-in subwoofer goes to the lower depth with outstanding realism and detail; the combination of an advanced crossover with a new ribbon tweeter and upper-bass/midrange drivers in an improved layout ensures equally good performance over the rest of the spectrum. A very smooth and musical speaker that is remarkably "listening fatigue"-free without any loss of detail or high frequencies, and with an equally good soundstage given proper setup. A genuine buy for the money and well worth the added cost above the Triton One. (276)



ATC SCM19A

\$8999

The active, two-way, tower version of ATM's compact, passive SCM19, the 19A equals or better the stand-mounted version across virtually all sonic criteria. It has superior bass extension, although its greatly improved low-end control and pitch-definition are what truly engage the listener. Images just lock in. Its comforting warmth in the lower mids and upper bass further adds to the impression of musical scale and substance. Also, the 19A has a little fuller midbass than you might expect from a two-way (piano aficionados should take note). Though this ATC may seem pricey at first glance, considering the amp-packs and precision electronics bundled in each speaker and the studio-grade performance, the SCM19A's true value becomes more and more evident with every recording. Audiophiles might shrink from active loudspeakers, but the SCM19A makes the case, emphatically. (272)

Our Top Picks Floorstanding Loudspeakers



Wilson Audio Sabrina

\$15,900

The Sabrina is the smallest and least expensive floorstander in the Wilson line. Entry-level, maybe, but there are no observable shortcuts. The Sabrina has commanding and linear top-to-bottom energy. It's a ripe sound, a relaxed sound, with a slightly warmer signature that may surprise the brand's devotees. It's a Wilson, of course, so the Sabrina also has remarkable dynamics, outstanding low-level resolution, and the sense that it willfully wants to drive music forward rather than let it passively lay back. The Sabrina artfully combines low-level resolution with the most powerful bass dynamics, never losing grip or control. Unsurpassed in a smaller listening room, this sweetheart may be pound for pound the best Wilson Audio loudspeaker available today. (256)



Magico S1 MkII

\$16,500, M-Cast (\$20,295, M-Coat)

Magico's smallest floorstander sports all the key features seen in the larger models of the California company's S Series—an extruded aluminum enclosure, a diamond-coated beryllium tweeter, a nanographene mid/bass cone driver. So it's no surprise that the sonic character (or lack thereof) of the new S1 is highly reminiscent of the S3 MkII and S5 MkII, as well as, to a significant degree, the exalted Q Series products. The continuity between the two drivers is exceptional—as good as you'll hear in a dynamic loudspeaker design—resulting in excellent imaging and realistic instrumental/vocal reproduction; in addition, bass is well defined and impactful. The lower price is for the granular anodized M-Cast finish, the higher tariff gets you the high-gloss M-Coat version. (270)



German Physiks HRS-130

\$18,775–\$23,000 depending on finish

The Unlimited II's bigger brother combines a carbon-fiber Dicks Dipole Driver (DDD) with a floor-firing 10" woofer. The DDD is a serious attempt to mimic the coherent soundfield produced by a small radially pulsating cylinder. The design is capable of wide-range operation and by its nature generates an omnidirectional radiation pattern in the horizontal plane. Expect an exceptionally wide sweet spot coupled with palpable image outlines. The HRS-130 is almost perfect for a small-to-medium-sized room, providing that the room is acoustically tuned along the lines of live-end/dead-end to sharpen image focus. Solid-state amplification works best to tighten bass lines. Microdynamics pop right out of the fabric of the music making it a breeze to connect with the music's emotions and drama. Midrange textures are capable of exceptional purity. (276)

Our Top Picks Floorstanding Loudspeakers



Piega Coax C 711

\$25,000

This floorstander from Switzerland boasts one of the most impressive drivers in all of high-end audio: a coaxial ribbon of Piega's own design and construction. Mounting a ribbon tweeter inside a ribbon midrange gives the driver perfect coherence no matter what the listening position or height. This coherence combines with the manifold virtues of Piega's ribbons—tremendous speed, clarity, transparency, resolution—to create a speaker that, above 400Hz, has few equals at any price. Four woofers (two active and two passive) in an extruded and braced enclosure couple seamlessly to the coaxial ribbon. (forthcoming)



Wilson Audio Yvette

\$25,000

The Wilson Audio Yvette is a three-way, single-enclosure floorstander utilizing drivers, or driver technology, developed for Wilson's much larger and more costly reference products like the WAMM, Alexandria XLF, and the Alexx. These marvelous drivers are housed in a highly inert cabinet made of Wilson's proprietary X- and S-material, which lets them do their jobs without smearing. Like the latest-generation Wilson speakers, the Yvette has a richer tonal palette featuring even better resolution, clarity, and transparency than its Wilson predecessors of similar size. The Yvette packs a surprisingly powerful dynamic punch for such a relatively small-footprint loudspeaker, with extended, detailed, and controlled bass. It's a lot like hearing the amazing WAMM but on a somewhat smaller scale. While it lacks the WAMM's superb adjustable time-alignment, its fixed drivers, mounted on separate sloping baffles, achieve wonderful alignment in the time domain with careful in-room positioning. There's a lot to like about this beauty—Yvette is a great value! (forthcoming)



MartinLogan CLX Art

\$25,495

The CLX has been a long time coming, but this successor to MartinLogan's one-and-only previous full-range electrostat, the CLS, bests the original in every way, particularly in tonal balance. The least-colored, highest-resolution, most transparent-to-sources line-source speaker JV has ever auditioned, the CLX is the very model of detail, neutrality, and realism. It is also, alas, limited to about 55Hz in the bass (though unlike the CLS there is no suckout in the CLX's mid-to-upper bass or lower midrange, with very good large-scale dynamic impact where it plays). You'll need a pair of ML's Descent-i subs to get the whole orchestra. However, if you listen primarily to small-scale music and are looking for a semblance of the absolute sound, then this is the speaker for you. (190)



Rockport Technologies Atria

\$26,500

The Atria—a true Rockport at a more accessible price and size—embodies the best in modern speaker design. Its vanishingly low distortion leads to uncanny levels of purity and resolution, while also making the speaker easy to listen to. The Atria is also highly coherent, speaking with one voice—a voice that disappears as a source and is capable of throwing a soundstage so deep it's spooky. Surprisingly in this size and price range, this speaker has plenty of bass heft—and dynamic range to spare. All these elements come together effortlessly, creating an experience that will hold you in its spell. The Atria is that rare component that is effortlessly "right" in its musical presentation. Further, the speaker emits a contagious vibe of simply being happy to make music. A terrific speaker and a great value, too. (241)

Our Top Picks Floorstanding Loudspeakers



Magico S3 MkII

\$28,000, M-Cast (\$32,000, M-Coat)

A strong case can be made for the new S3 MkII occupying the “sweet spot” of the company’s entire line—that is, it is a notable value-for-dollar product. The three-way S3 MkII incorporates Magico’s latest driver technologies in the 1" diamond-coated beryllium dome tweeter, the 6" nanographene midrange cone, and a pair of 9" nanographene bass cones. The four drivers function with the unified voice of a good electrostatic but with the gutsy resoluteness associated with the best dynamic drivers. They are detailed and accurate without seeming “analytical” and definitely maintain their composure with large-scale musical material of all sorts. Bass is punchy and extended; the S3 MkIIs are completely up to the task of providing a satisfying listening experience with opera and orchestral repertoire, big band jazz, and full-throttle rock. A glossy M-Coat finish adds \$4k to the price, compared to the anodized M-Cast version. (276)



Magneplanar MG30.7

\$29,000

Over the years JV has listened to just about every loudspeaker that Jim Winey’s fabled Minnesota company Magneplanar has engineered and manufactured. He’s also owned more Magneplanars than any other kind of loudspeaker. Why? Because from the moment he first heard the three-panel Tympani 1-Us in Basil Gouletas’ Chicago apartment back in 1973, he hasn’t been able to get past the realism with which these planar-magnetic panels reproduce voices and acoustic instruments. The MG30.7 is the first multi-panel Maggie (two panels per side—one housing the quasi-ribbon midrange and ribbon tweeter, the other the quasi-ribbon upper bass and lower bass drivers) since the Tympani IVa. This is, quite simply, the most top-to-bottom coherent, highest-resolution, most astonishingly lifelike planar loudspeaker JV has ever heard (from Maggie or anyone else).

Not only are the 30.7s the handsomest-looking large Maggies of all time, they are also among the best deals Maggies has offered. They cost \$29,000 the pair (release slated for January, 2018). That’s not chump change, we grant you, but compared to the price of the six-figure speakers they so successfully compete against, it makes them one of the greatest bargains in ultra-high-end history. (279)



Bowers & Wilkins 800 D3

\$30,000

The 800 D3 is the new flagship atop B&W’s acclaimed D3 series of diamond-tweetered speakers. Compared to the next model down, the 802 D3 (there is no 801), the 800 sports larger, heavily re-engineered woofers, netting more linear pistonic motion within the bass and fewer harmonic artifacts in the mids. The result is tight, meaty bass down to 15Hz, equally extended highs, and purity throughout. Dynamics, imaging, coherence, neutrality, and resolution are also reference caliber. Overall, the 800 D3 is remarkably self-effacing and transparent to the source. You’ll need a big amp to get this level of performance, and nearfield listening isn’t recommended. Otherwise, considering the technology and quality that have been lavished on this highly pedigreed speaker—and the sonic results—the 800 D3’s \$30,000 price seems almost like an error. Do yourself a favor and take advantage of it. (276)

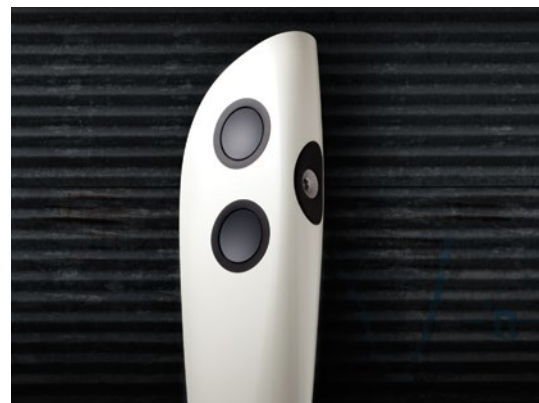
Our Top Picks Floorstanding Loudspeakers



Vandersteen Model 5A Carbon

\$31,300

This upgrade of Vandersteen's venerable Model 5A replaces the midrange driver and tweeter with the radical carbon-fiber-clad-balsa-wood diaphragms that made Vandersteen's \$62k Model 7 so special. You don't get the full Model 7 presentation, but for about half the price you come awfully close. These special drivers exhibit extraordinarily low coloration and also provide a seamlessness to the music that makes you forget you're listening to loudspeakers. Featuring a self-powered 12" push-pull woofer with equalization adjustments below 100Hz, the 5A Carbon can deliver extraordinary bass extension. Original owners of the Model 5 can upgrade to the Carbon for \$8650. (219)



KEF Blade

\$32,000

KEF's Blade is a sonic, technological, and industrial *tour de force*. KEF strove to prove that a true full-range point-source speaker was not only possible, but that such a design could deliver on its theoretically predicted benefits, including coherence akin to a single-driver speaker, uniform room dispersion at all frequencies, and low coloration. The Blade realizes these ideals—and then some—with steadfast imaging, balanced tonality regardless of listening position, astounding detail and dynamic resolution, and vanishingly low distortion in both the frequency and time domains. Musically, the Blade is glory itself. Its rhythms sweep you along, its dynamics can by turns move and stun you, its resolution informs you, its timbres transport you, and its clarity makes delineating musical lines child's play. Though advanced in every respect, the Blade is an instant classic destined to influence many speakers to come. (222)



Paradigm Persona 9H

\$35,000

Along with the Legacy speakers, the Persona 9H is a product from one of only two manufacturers AHC has found that can really do room compensation well. The 9H is truly flat, has very deep, quick, and detailed bass, and a superb new beryllium midrange and tweeter with a great deal of life and detail but no hardness. With excellent driver integration and something much closer to a point-source sound than in most complex speaker systems, the 9H provides some of the best imaging and soundstage performance around. Pricy at \$35k, but the sound quality really delivers, and its size and weight are far more practical than that of many contenders for the state of the art. (273)



Von Schweikert Audio VR-55 Aktive

\$60,000

Built from the ground up to replace the VR-5 Series of products, the VR-55 Aktive takes advantage of advances in materials sciences and collaborative component manufacture to achieve a landmark product. The application of VSA's pioneering (and remarkably cost-effective), patent-pending, active noise-reducing cabinet technology combined with specially developed custom-built drivers from Accuton and Scan-Speak results in a level of performance that Greg Weaver feels breaks new ground below the \$100,000 mark in resolution, transparency, and transient response. Its resolute yet sweet and extended high frequencies, vibrant and expressive midrange, and astonishingly fast and accurate bass make it a natural at revealing finely detailed pitches, rich harmonics, and accurate textures. Given its striking ability to recreate the space and acoustic signature of a recorded venue, with a unique adjustability that allows it to play chameleon and seamlessly integrate into any room, the VR-55 Aktive won GW over; he purchased his review pair as his new reference loudspeaker. (256)

Our Top Picks Floorstanding Loudspeakers



MBL 101 E MK II

\$70,500

Always the thrill rides of the high-end audio amusement park, with sensational dynamic range, superb transients, high resolution of inner detail, and the most surround-like soundstaging this side of a full-bore home-theater system, the four-way, omnidirectional MBL 101 Es had three weaknesses: Their ported bass, though sensationally exciting, was a bit overblown, their upper midrange could be a bit bright, and their imaging at centerstage could be a little vague. The MK II version of this unique omni loudspeaker ameliorates these problems, without losing the unique Radialstrahler virtues, via a redesigned woofer that offers better control, a new subwoofer cabinet, a new ring design for the bass port, re-tuned front-to-rear dispersion, and new crossover technology. The result is a genuine improvement in a genuine classic. (218)



YG Acoustics Sonja 2.2

\$76,800

The successor to YG's formidable Sonja 1.2, the new 2.2 improves upon the original version's performance in some significant ways such as higher resolution of fine detail coupled with an increase in overall "ease," a bit more bass heft, better definition of complex musical lines during demanding musical passages, and an expanded and more continuously rendered soundstage such that the speakers blend into the soundscape even more seamlessly than before. Overall soundstage depth and height were also strong points, says reviewer Kirk Midtskog, as were individual image depth and image density. The 2.2 also features YG's new BilletDome soft-dome/frame tweeter, a technical breakthrough in tweeter design for which the company has applied for a patent. In brief, the Sonja 2.2 is a speaker that serves the music, no matter what kind, with great facility and aplomb. (279)



MartinLogan Neolith

\$79,995

MartinLogan swung for the fences with the new Neolith, mounting a roughly 4' x 2' XStat electrostatic panel atop an enclosure that houses a front-firing 12" driver and a 15" rear-firing woofer. Once you've heard the transparency, resolution, and sheer sense of nothing between you and the music that the Neolith's big panel delivers, you'll be spoiled for life. Surprisingly, these virtues of electrostats are combined with seamless integration with the bass, resulting in a speaker with full frequency extension and dynamics along with fabulous transparency. The Neolith is beautifully built and finished (available in seven colors), highly flexible in room-matching, and backed by a solid company with 33 years of experience in building electrostatic loudspeakers. An unqualified triumph that competes in the upper echelon of today's best cost-no-object loudspeakers, the Neolith was *The Absolute Sound's* 2015 Overall Product of the Year. (259)



Zellaton Reference MkII

\$150,000

The Reference MkII is a three-way floorstanding loudspeaker with a single 2" true cone tweeter, a single 7" mid/woofer covering the range from 200Hz to 6.5kHz, and three 9" woofers, all housed in a gorgeously finished, multi-layered, matrix-braced, open-backed enclosure. Every one of the Reference's drivers uses Zellaton's unique sandwich cone, rather than a mix of cones and domes made of a variety of materials—which is one reason why the speaker sounds so remarkably 'stat-like and of a piece. Of course, the main reason the Zellaton Reference MkIIs are reminiscent of electrostats is the forehead-slapping realism with which they reproduce voices and many acoustic instruments. This is in equal parts the result of extremely high resolution, extremely lifelike reproduction of timbre, extremely natural and linear reproduction of transients, and extremely low driver/box coloration. With really great recordings of acoustic music, the result is a truly remarkable sense of being in the presence of actual vocalists and instrumentalists. One of JV's references. (278)

Our Top Picks Floorstanding Loudspeakers



Rockport Technologies Lyra

\$169,500

Although positioned just below the \$225k Arrakis in the Rockport line, the Lyra sets a new standard in innovative construction as well as in sound quality. The Lyra is a three-and-a-half-way, five-driver design with a rear-firing port. Two 6" midrange drivers flank the 1" wave-guide-loaded tweeter, with two 10" drivers on the bottom. The enclosure is made from two massive shells of cast aluminum, with the cavity between them filled with a proprietary, high-density urethane core material. Musically, the Lyra delivers a horn-like visceral immediacy with its absolutely stunning dynamic performance. The musical effect cannot be overstated; the Lyra sounds "alive" in a way that other speakers do not. Yet for all its verve and panache, this is a speaker of great delicacy, capable of conveying the subtlest nuance of texture and shading. It's also the most beautiful in timbre that RH has heard, combining high resolution with lush textural liquidity. The icing on the cake is the Lyra's small size (for a world-class reference, which it certainly is) that allows it to fit in many more rooms than other speakers of this price. (276)



Magico Q7 MkII

\$229,000

Magico has taken the Q7, a speaker RH has long considered to be the state of the art and, surprisingly, made it significantly better. The Q7 MkII benefits from an entirely new tweeter designed from the ground up, a new midrange diaphragm made from graphene (a new carbon material), and a redesigned crossover with exotic capacitors. The MkII obviates the classic dilemma of resolution vs. ease by combining extraordinary midrange and treble resolution with tremendous delicacy and a complete lack of hardness and glare. The reduction in distortion is so profound that the Mk II sounds as though it has a different tonal balance than the original Q7, even though the two speakers have identical measured response. Although the woofer section remains unchanged, the MkII's bass is considerably improved, perhaps by virtue of greater midrange resolution of bass instrument overtones. The overall result is a much deeper connection with music. RH's long-term reference. (256)



MBL 101 X-Treme

\$263,000

As anyone who has heard them at trade shows can attest, this huge, one-of-a-kind loudspeaker system, comprising two omnidirectional MBL 101s in a D'Appolito array and a separate, three-cabinet, six-driver, push-push subwoofer column per speaker side, is high among the world's most exciting, realistic, beautiful-sounding, and immersive transducers. Though it is hard to beat in dynamics, density of tone color, and spaciousness, what the 101 X-Treme does indisputably better than anything else that JV has heard is the third dimension. Vocalists and instrumentalists aren't just imaged in a single plane or with a touch of body behind them, as in a bas-relief. They stand before you like actual objects, within a soundfield that no other loudspeaker can equal in width, depth, and height. Where listening to music on other speakers is like going to the movies, listening to music on the 101 X-Tremes is like going to a play. (189)



Wilson Audio WAMM Master Chronosonic

\$685,000 (Master Subsonic Subwoofers are \$45,000 each)

With the new WAMM Master Chronosonic, an entirely re-conceived version of the legendary original, David Wilson has broken new sonic ground. Wilson has gone to considerable lengths to refine its emphasis on the time-domain, by which the company means the ability to adjust the driver modules for optimal sound reproduction—down to five millionths of a second. This helps provide a vanishingly lower noise floor that supplies the foundation for the WAMM's sonic prowess. Its scale and dynamic power have to be heard to be believed, and even then it requires something of a mental adjustment to comprehend just how expansive a soundstage it reproduces. New subwoofers, boasting three drivers each, complete the package. A big room is a must. Despite its large size, however, the most beguiling aspect of the WAMM may not be its capacious soundstage, deep bass, or seemingly limitless dynamics. Rather, it is the ability the loudspeaker has to draw you into the music, banishing any sense of electronic haze or glaze. The WAMM possesses a limpidity that allows it to shine on vocals, while presenting any accompanying instruments and voices as something more than vague ancillary adjuncts. It is literally and figuratively a towering achievement. (276)

Our Top Picks Subwoofers



REL Acoustics T/7i

\$999

A special round of applause is due this mini-sub for music lovers. The new T/7i is even faster and tighter than its forbear, yet remains tonally supple, with well-defined timbres. It's also remarkably potent for a single, forward-firing 8" driver augmented by a quick-reacting, downward-firing 10" passive radiator (and a smooth 200W Class AB amp). The sumptuous high-gloss lacquered enclosure with aluminum accents has inputs for high-level Neutrik Speakon (cable included), plus low-level RCA and LFE. A little classic. (265)



Syzygy Acoustics SLF870

\$999

Though not the only wireless subs available, the Syzygys incorporate useful advanced technology at an excellent price. By using your smartphone as the set-up computer, the Syzygy app equalizes the subs in the room; once their response is flat, they are easy to blend with the main speakers. And once dialed in, they just work without having to fiddle. A seamless transition from reviewer Vade Forrester's main speakers to the subwoofers made the SLF870s sound like a continuous extension of his main speakers. VF wondered whether the wireless connection might cause dropouts, but after carefully monitoring the sound to detect any possible problems, he found no issues. That's how technology should work. Very highly recommended and a great value for the price. (276)



JL Audio e110/e112

\$1699/\$2099

Before he got this hefty little cube (with 10" driver) from JL Audio, JV was anything but a fan of subwoofers, which always seemed to take more away in midrange transparency, tone color, and resolution than they paid back in bass-range extension, detail, and power. Crossed over at the right frequency—which is easy to do with the instructions that JL provides and the e-Sub's manifold built-in controls, including a genuine fourth-order Linkwitz-Riley high-pass/low-pass crossover—the e110 is the very first sub he's heard that doesn't screw up the sound of the main speaker. Rather it seems to extend that sound into the bottom octaves, producing some of the highest resolution of bass timbres and textures he's heard from *any* transducer. Driven by its own 1200W Class D amplifier and capable of extension into the mid-to-low twenties, the e110 is a powerhouse with uncommon grip and definition. Paired with something like a Raidho D-1 stand-mount it will give you everything (save for dynamic range and overall impact) that you pay the big, big bucks for in a massive multiway floorstander, and it will do so for a mere \$1699 (\$2099 for the e112 12" version). (244)



MartinLogan BalancedForce 210

\$2995

Before he discovered the 210s, reviewer SH tended to eschew much of the bass-centric jazz and classical music that he really enjoys because of the inability to achieve realistic SPLs. Once he put the 210s in his listening room, his music—and not just music where bass was prominent—took on a whole new life. The 210s made a far larger difference in his system than any other component in a very long time—and that's saying a lot. If you have a large room or really want to reproduce low bass, the Balanced Force 210s are essential tools to getting the most out of your music. (252)

Our Top Picks Subwoofers



JL Audio Fathom f112/f113v2

\$3700 (f112v2); \$4500 (f113v2)

These two subs—identical except for woofer size (12" vs. 13.5") and amplifier power (1800W vs. 3000W)—raise the bar in subwoofer performance with their unlikely combination of brute-force power and tonal and dynamic finesse. Capable of delivering high SPLs at very low frequencies without strain, the Fathoms are adept at resolving the pitches, dynamics, and timbre of an acoustic bass. Loaded with useful adjustments, including low-pass filter, polarity, variable phase, and ELF trim. Built-in DARO room correction, considerably upgraded in the newer V2 models, greatly smoothes in-room response and makes for easier integration with your main speakers. Reference-quality performance at a reasonable price. (forthcoming)



JL Audio Gotham g213v2

\$15,000

This gigantic \$15k subwoofer with two 13.5" drivers has simply redefined subwoofering for JV. Never a fan of subs, he's been turned around by this wonderful product, which in combination with JL's CR-1 crossover, is capable of a more seamless blend with main speakers (be they two-ways, panels, or multiways) than anything he's yet heard (in fact, than anything he imagined possible), with next-to-none of the midrange veiling—the loss of resolution and transparency—that was inevitably part-and-parcel of subwoofering in the not-too-distant past. What the Gotham does is open up an entire new world of loudspeaker possibilities, wherein smaller and/or less expensive mains can be made to sound a whole lot like Raidho D-5.1s or Wilson Alexandrias or Rockport Arrakis or Magico M Projects, for a lot less dough. JV's reference. (254)

Classic, Redefined



When Dave Wilson designed the original Alexia, he consolidated a large portion of his company's formidable experience and cumulative knowledge into its design. But Wilson has not stood still since the original Alexia was developed. The company's technology has continued to evolve and advance in the areas of drivers, crossover analysis and design, time-alignment accuracy, and composite materials research—and even in the arcane science of wire management. Dave's Magnum Opus, the WAMM Master Chronosonic, dramatically advanced the art of believable music reproduction. In turn, the Alexx, which was developed alongside the Master Chronosonic by son Daryl Wilson, has itself profoundly advanced music reproduction in its respective category.

Daryl understood fully what his father achieved in the original Alexia. He was determined to incorporate many of Wilson's newer technologies and strategies into the Alexia platform in order to further advance its remarkable musicality and resolution, without comprimizing any aspect of the original's appeal. In the end, every constituent of the Alexia was scrutinized, refined, and ultimately enhanced. Introducing Alexia Series 2: a loudspeaker consummately fluent in communicating the emotional and intellectual gestalt of the musical performance.

Watch the story unfold in a new video at wilsonaudio.com. Click on the YouTube icon.



TOP PICKS: ELECTRONICS

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Feature

How Much Amplifier Power Do You Need?

Robert Harley

Excerpted and adapted from The Complete Guide to High-End Audio (fifth edition). Copyright © 1994–2017 by Robert Harley. hifibooks.com. To order call (800) 841-4741.

This is the first question to answer when shopping for a power amplifier or integrated amplifier. Power output, measured in watts into a specified loudspeaker impedance, varies from about 20Wpc in a very small integrated amplifier to about 1000Wpc in the largest monoblocks. Most high-end power amplifiers put out between 80 and 250Wpc. Single-ended-triode amplifiers, described later in this chapter, generally produce between 3 and 50Wpc.

Choosing a range of amplifier power output that's appropriate for your loudspeakers, listening tastes, room, and budget is essential to getting the best sound for your money. If the amplifier is underpowered for your needs, you'll never hear the system at its full potential. The sound will be constricted and fatiguing, will lack dynamics, and the music will have a sense of strain on climaxes. Conversely, if you spend too much of your budget on an amplifier bigger than you need, you may be shortchanging other components. Choosing just the right amplifier

power is of paramount importance.

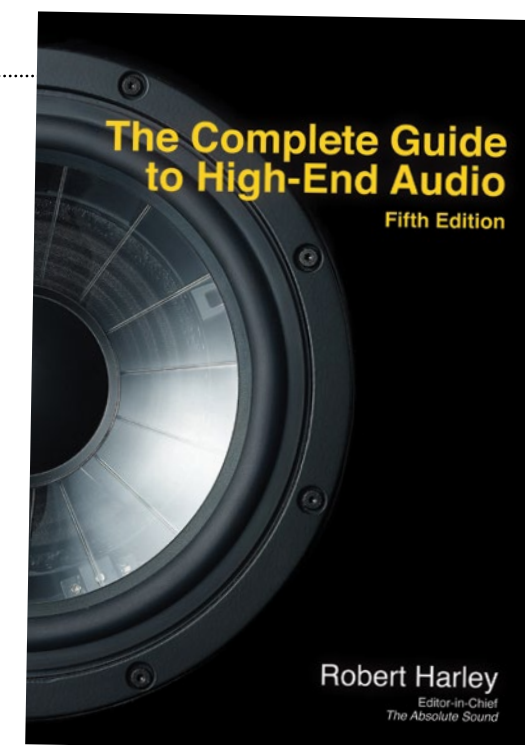
The amount of power needed varies greatly according to loudspeaker *sensitivity*, loudspeaker *impedance*, room size, room acoustics, and how loudly you like to play music. Loudspeaker sensitivity specifies how high a sound-pressure level (SPL) the loudspeaker will produce when driven by a certain power input, and is, by far, the biggest determining factor in choosing an appropriate power output. A typical sensitivity specification will read "88dB SPL, 1W/1m" (often shortened to "88dB/W/m"). This means that the loudspeaker will produce an SPL of 88 decibels (dB) with one watt of input power when measured at a distance of one meter. (The decibel is explained in detail in Appendix A, "Sound and Hearing.") Although 88dB is a moderate listening volume, a closer look at how power relates to listening level reveals that we need much more than 1W for music playback.

Each 3dB increase in sound-pressure level requires a doubling of amplifier output power. Thus, a loudspeaker with a sensitivity of 88dB at 1W would produce 91dB with 2W, 94dB with 4W, 97dB with 8W, and so on. For this loudspeaker to produce musical peaks of 109dB, we would need an amplifier with 128W of output power.

Now, say we had a loudspeaker rated at 91dB at 1W/1m—only 3dB more sensitive than the first loudspeaker. We can quickly see that we would need only half the amplifier power (64W) to produce the same volume of 109dB SPL. A loudspeaker with a sensitivity of 94dB would need just 32W to produce the same volume. A speaker with higher sensitivity can simply convert more of the amplifier's power into sound.

This relationship between amplifier power output and loudspeaker sensitivity was inadvertently illustrated in an unusual demonstration nearly 70 years ago. In 1948, loudspeaker pioneer Paul Klipsch conducted a demonstration of live vs. reproduced sound with a symphony orchestra and his Klipschorn loudspeakers. His amplifier power: 5W to 30W (accounts differ). The Klipschorns are so sensitive (an astounding 104dB/W/m) that they will produce very high volumes with very little amplifier power. Klipsch was attempting to show that his loudspeakers could closely mimic the tonal quality and loudness of a full symphony orchestra.

The other end of the speaker-sensitivity spectrum was illustrated by a demonstration I attended of an exotic new loudspeaker. During



the demo, the music was so quiet that I could barely hear it. I looked at the power amplifiers—300Wpc monsters with large power meters—and was astonished to see that the power meters were nearly constantly pegged at full power. This unusual speaker converted only a minuscule amount of the amplifier's output power into sound.

The importance of loudspeaker sensitivity is also demonstrated by today's 3Wpc single-ended-triode amplifiers, which can produce moderately loud listening levels through high-sensitivity speakers. These examples of huge variations in sound-pressure level and amplifier power illustrate how loudspeaker sensitivity greatly affects how big an amplifier you need. Even a small difference in loudspeaker sensitivity—2dB, say—changes your amplifier power requirements.

Our Top Picks Integrated Amplifiers



NAD D 3020

\$499

Truly a design for our times, the D 3020 is improbably small and portable and *loaded*. The 30Wpc D 3020 offers 24-bit/96kHz-resolution USB computer audio and aptX Bluetooth music streaming. For all its humble size and appearance it's pure NAD. Firmly midrange-centered, it never over-reaches in the sense of growing shrill in one direction or tubby in another. Yes its lighter overall balance is due to some bottom-octave attenuation, but the D 3020 retains an essential *presence*, a midrange integrity, that sculpts the body of a performance and makes it *live* in the listening space. Although there's a little bit of a shaded ceiling over the top end, the D 3020 need make no apologies. The other argument is, hello, \$499—making it by most standards a small miracle of packaging and portability, and with a few exceptions a delight to use and listen to. (239)



NAD C 368

\$899

Does anyone make better sub-\$1k integrated amplifiers than NAD? Exhibit A is the new C 368, a great-sounding and forward-looking integrated that will satisfy now and well into the future. The 80Wpc C 368 (240Wpc IHF dynamic power into 4 ohms) incorporates not just a DAC, but a full suite of interchangeable modules thanks to NAD's Module Design Construction. You simply pop out a module and pop in a new one, either to tailor the C 368 to your particular system or to accommodate future technologies. For example, the BluOS module (\$399) turns the C 368 into an almost complete digital playback device, adding a streaming music player to the DAC as well as MQA unfolding. The C 368 sounds more powerful than its rating, capturing music's continuously changing dynamic level with noteworthy precision and exhibiting a dynamic exuberance typical of NAD equipment. Percussion parts are delivered with abundant transient detail, with none of the solid-state anomalies that have historically made transistors in general and Class D in particular sound unpleasant. Easy to set up, easy to use, extremely flexible when used with Bluesound gear, this could be the last hi-fi purchase you'll need to make. (279)



Yamaha A-S801

\$899

Is there any other audio component with as many features as the A-S801 amplifier? And it's not like the features were just thrown in to impress; the A-S801 surprised reviewer Vade Forrester by how good it sounded driving the inefficient KEF LS50 speakers in his largish room. No, it didn't equal his far more expensive reference gear, but during a listening session several of his audio buddies said they derived genuine musical enjoyment from the system anchored by the Yamaha A-S801 amplifier, and could happily live with it. Coming from a group of lifelong audiophiles, that's high praise indeed. The Yamaha A-S801 looks good, sounds splendid, and has a long list of useful features at a price that makes it a bargain! (263)



NuPrime IDA-8

\$995

Sonically and functionally, JM found plenty to love about the IDA-8. Essentially, it's a sleek-looking, small-footprint hybrid Class A/Class D integrated amplifier/DAC—that combines Class A warmth and resolution with Class D speed, power, and efficiency. Its DAC supports USB 384kHz/32-bit and DSD256, and is also capable of decoding DoP (DSD over PCM) via coaxial and optical inputs. The well-conceived IDA-8 delivers substance with plenty of gusto—and does so from an astonishingly quiet background. Since NuPrime's founding, Jason Lim has continually sought to improve sonics through innovative technologies—in addition to offering high performance and value with respect to pricing. This amp exemplifies that approach. A great-sounding stone-cold good deal. (263)

Our Top Picks Integrated Amplifiers



PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium

\$2399

For PrimaLuna, the Premium Series is the tweener line, geared to bridge the gap between the performance/feature set of the entry-level ProLogue Series and that of the more advanced and costlier DiaLogue Series. Sonically, the 35Wpc ProLogue Premium does not have the rosy, euphonic colorations of traditional triode or SET tube varietals. True, there is a glimmer of romance in its palette, but tonally it's a thoroughly contemporary tube amp that walks a mostly neutral line, yet still reproduces the lowest-level details of music with an almost tender delicacy and resolution that combine the best of the valve and solid-state worlds. There's an inner light to images, plus a huge soundstage and cavernous dimensionality. The ProLogue Premium places the emphasis on ingredients that often elude more commonplace electronics—the liveliness and fluidity of the musical event. (212)



Hegel H360

\$6000

The Norwegian firm's integrated amplifiers have always been overachievers, but the new H360 is, by a wide margin, Hegel's most impressive effort yet. With 250Wpc into 8 ohms (420Wpc into 4 ohms) and 50 percent greater current capacity than the H300 it replaces, the H360 is a powerhouse. But that power comes with Hegel's signature virtues of a gorgeous rendering of timbre, a completely relaxed and natural presentation devoid of electronic artifacts, and a spatial dimensionality that competes with expensive separates. To top it off, the integral DAC is outstanding—fully up to the quality of the amplifier. Throw in network connectivity and an innovative feature that allows you to upgrade the DAC section, and the H360 is clearly the integrated to beat at this price. (260)



Constellation Inspiration 1.0

\$9000

A distillation of Inspiration 1.0 separates, Constellation's 100Wpc integrated fuses smooth sonic performance with an affordability factor that might come as a pleasant surprise to fans of this exclusive and pricey brand. Finished in sandblasted aluminum the Integrated 1.0 incorporates preamp topology derived from the uptown Performance Series plus the same Line Stage Gain Module circuit topology found in all Constellation products. Sonically the 1.0 casts a wide musical net with ample dimensional and soundstage cues, unflappable dynamics and power reserves that keep the 1.0 from getting winded even when confronted with more difficult speaker loads. It possesses a hint of warmth but even at high output levels never loses its cool. It's also configurable with single-ended and balanced inputs, and flexible with home theater bypass plus a headphone amp that sports a rear-panel output. (forthcoming)

Our Top Picks Integrated Amplifiers



Pass Labs INT-250

\$12,000

A force to reckon with, the muscular INT-250 with 250Wpc (and 500Wpc into 4) embodies effortless dynamics, ultra-wide bandwidth, superb low-end control and grip, and effortless, unpretentious highs. Optimized for greater flexibility with grunt-worthy speaker loads of 86dB efficiency or less, its soothing and seductive sonics are an ideal companion for analog LP playback—this Pass integrated just makes you want to spin vinyl endlessly. Remarkable, too, is the amp's lush midrange that pushes a loudspeaker to the very edges of its performance envelope. With musicality that is second to none, it operates at the outer limits of what is currently possible in today's integrated-amplifier market. (263)



Esoteric F-03A

\$13,000

If you lust for Esoteric's ultra-expensive Grandioso system but don't have the dough or the space, the F-03A integrated is the solution. This integrated amp is designed and built to the highest standard, but with a modest power output of 30Wpc (60Wpc into 4 ohms). Nonetheless, those 30W are all Class A and some of the sweetest you'll ever hear. When driving an appropriate sensitivity speaker, the F-03A delivers the harmonic richness, transient fidelity, transparency, and musical resolution of much more expensive separates. The chassis work, ergonomics, and "feel" are exemplary. This is ultra-high-end on a smaller scale. (forthcoming)



T+A PA 3000 HV

\$19,000

As is the case with the amplifiers from benchmark Swiss brands like Soulution and CH Precision, T+A's HV Series integrated amplifier is ultra-wide bandwidth. T+A also employs additional top-tier touches such as highly regulated power supplies and dual-mono, symmetrical, discrete, fully balanced, zero-global-feedback circuitry. But T+A products are far from copycats; the company has gone in some bold new directions. Most notably, the "HV" in its model names indicates that these pieces run at an unusually high voltage. Whereas most solid-state amp electronics operate at about 100 volts internally, T+A gooses its HV units to a whopping 360 volts—roughly the range of tube gear. How close does the PA 3000 HV's sound come to that of the Big Boys? Well, at \$19,000, this 300-watt integrated amp costs only a small percentage of Alan Taffel's reference CH Precision C1/2xA1 combo. (260)

Our Top Picks Integrated Amplifiers



Ypsilon Phaethon
\$25,000

Ypsilon, the near-mythic Greek electronics manufacturer, has brilliantly grafted the electronic DNA from its flagship Aelius monoblocks and PST100mk2 preamp into its sole integrated amp. The result is a 110Wpc hybrid amplifier utilizing only three active gain stages—with low-noise 6H30 valves, operating in single-ended Class A for the input and driver stage. But specs alone can't explain the Phaethon's alchemy. Few amps have captured the earthy sense of "being there" like the Phaethon. It performs with a palette of wide color, velvety textural contrasts, and micro-detailing, as well as a vise-like grip over bass dynamics. A remote control is included along with four inputs with a standard 47k ohm phonostage. Quality of construction is Herculean—seventy heroic pounds of satin-finished aluminum and heat-sinking that would take the demigod himself to lug up Mt. Olympus. (278)



Vitus Audio SIA-025
\$25,200

Exemplifying the best of separates in a single, trim, and seriously-hyper-massaged chassis, the 25Wpc pure Class A SIA-25 is the pinnacle of a breed never again to be underestimated. The sonic results speak for themselves—a liquid presence, a three-dimensional stage, and the finest gradations of micro-information and dynamic contrasts. If all other elements in the system chain are strong, you'll hear less system and more space—each component seems to settle and calm and in so doing achieves a wider expression, greater intimacy, and a richer vibrancy at even the lowest levels. With watts more precious than gold, calling the SIA-025 a bargain is a stretch, but after a few minutes of listening you may begin to reconsider. (218)

FOREVER CLASSIC

Legendary in performance and value since 1972.



C 558 Turntable | C 328 Hybrid Digital Integrated Amplifier

Together, the C 558 and the C 328 represent a new benchmark for affordable audio performance. They are a seamless blend of a traditional source-to-output pure analog signal path, and digital innovations like active power supplies and a load invariant output stage. The result is the natural and fatigue-free sound of the best analog systems, with the precision, clarity, and "out of the black" qualities associated with digital amplification—even when listening at life-like levels with demanding loudspeakers. Add in modern music sources like Bluetooth streaming and an amazing DAC, and the quality, versatility, and affordability of the system will create new legends for others to look up to.



Our Top Picks Preamplifiers



NuForce HAP-100

\$549

NuForce's HAP-100 preamplifier/headphone amplifier offers serious high-end performance at a modest price. The HAP-100 is a Class A solid-state design that delivers unusually wide bandwidth with low levels of distortion and noise. Together, these characteristics make for a sound that is quite detailed and that offers a purity and clarity unexpected at this price. The HAP-100 sports four inputs, a remote control, and a cool volume control with 100 settings in 1dB increments. It makes a good headphone amp, too, with one caveat: namely, the NuForce is audibly load-sensitive and thus not an ideal match for some of today's more difficult-to-drive top-end headphones. With the right 'phones, however, the NuForce sings. (230)



Rotel RC-1570

\$999

The RC-1570 stereo preamplifier is a fully featured unit with four analog inputs, an additional balanced analog-in, and even a moving-magnet phonostage. But that's not all: The RC-1570 is equally adept with digital. There are two coax and optical inputs, plus two USB inputs (one on the front panel and one on the back). With digital sources, the preamp has a built-in Wolfson DAC that supports resolutions up to 192/24. Indeed, the RC-1570's excellent all-around sound—it gets the essentials of timing, tonality, and dynamics right despite its modest price—only gets better with high-resolution files. With all these inputs and the built-in DAC, the RC-1570 can serve neatly as a versatile control point for a modern audio system. (242)



Alchemy by Elac DDP-1

\$1995

The DDP-1 combines a preamplifier, DAC, and headphone amplifier into a half-width chassis. With a wide array of digital and analog inputs and a superb user interface, the DDP-1 is a highly capable and versatile centerpiece of a system that's a pleasure to use on a daily basis. The DAC section is particularly impressive, featuring a new version of Alchemy's Resolution Enhancement DSP that improves the sound of digital. The DDP-1 sounds like it should cost more, with a resolution and transparency that rival more expensive products. Its presentation is remarkably transparent, clean, dynamic, and resolved by any measure, and even more so considering the component's reasonable price. The DAC section is more upbeat and forward than the somewhat laid-back linestage. Upscale metalwork and beautiful industrial design round out this compelling package. (262)



Rogue Audio RP-5

\$3495

Combining classic vacuum-tube heritage with micro-processor control is Rogue's recipe for one satisfying and affordable preamp. The RP-5 brings its magic to bear in the areas of color saturation and tonal liquidity, presenting a natural acoustic clarity that rings truthful. It establishes an authentic sense of dimension and spaciousness specific to each image. The treble is nicely extended, quick, detailed and abundant with harmonic information. Bass performance is authoritative, controlled, and yet also somewhat warm and bloomy. The RP-5 is a prime example of what the high end is all about—music reproduced accurately and beautifully. The RP-5 is a component that should tempt a lot of people to go Rogue. (260)

Our Top Picks Preamplifiers



Aesthetix Calypso and Janus Signature Calypso, \$5000; Calypso Signature, \$7000; Janus, \$7000; Janus Signature, \$10,000

The stalwart Calypso and new Janus Signature (which includes a Rhea Signature phonostage) share numerous qualities: speed and detail; highs without a glint of shrillness; a low noise floor; precise rhythms; dynamics that are only a skosh less lively than reference-caliber; and a laid-back perspective. The quiet background and smooth treble add up to long hours of glorious, fatigue-free listening. As for differences, the normal Calypso/Janus soundstage is big, but not huge, while the Signature soundstage is fully realized. The Signature also delivers a richer portfolio of instrumental timbres, more air, longer decays, and better-defined bass. However, these are accompanied by an upper-bass bump that adds a warmth and thickness that affects both timing and timbre. The choice between the Signature and non-Signature model will come down to personal preference, though, at \$5000, the original Calypso remains a steal. (196)



McIntosh Labs C22 \$6000

The C22 is a fully updated version of Mac's last tube preamp from the old days, with functions galore, including useful tone controls and that classic Mac sound made contemporary with greater transparency and much lower noise and distortion. By any standard this is an absolute triumph of tube technology that for sheer sonic pleasure would be difficult to beat owing to that combination (a real specialty chez Mac) of neutrality tempered by just the right amount of tube warmth and dimensionality without descending into the mush of tubes from decades past. The phonostage, mm or mc (with loading options), boasts unbelievably low noise—as does the whole unit—and truly spectacular dynamic range, obviating the need for a stand-alone. With McIntosh build and traditional styling, the C22 is a classic reborn. (266)



Constellation Inspiration Preamp 1.0 \$9900

This trickle-down product from Constellation's \$90k Altair preamplifier brings you much of the Constellation sound for a fraction of the price. Using the same schematic (and even the same audio circuit-board layout) as the Altair, the Inspiration 1.0 delivers the signature Constellation sound of high resolution, an airy and spacious soundstage, and a complete absence of hardness and glare. The savings were realized with a less expensive implementation of the Altair's circuit, along with less extravagant casework. (249)



Pass Labs XP-30 \$16,500

Here you have two monaural line preamps sharing a single power-supply chassis—a stacked deck that crushes the competition when it comes to traditional solid-state virtues such as transient attack, bass control, and detail resolution. But the real magic is in bridging the great divide between the sound of tubes and transistors. Image focus and soundstage dimensionality are tube-like, as is the big tone and dynamic integrity. Microdynamic nuances and rhythmic drive are also convincingly reproduced. Orchestral crescendos expand from loud to very loud with absolutely no compression. Consistently faithful to the recording, the XP-30 refuses to dish out the sort of euphonic camouflage some solid-state amps do. A supremely musical line preamp that may well prove to be all things to music lovers and audiophiles alike. (223)

Our Top Picks Preamplifiers



Lamm Industries L2.1 Reference

\$22,790

This two-chassis affair, with an outboard power supply, is a hybrid design but not in the usual sense. The power supply is all tube, while the audio circuit is solid-state. The musical message is presented without any tonal accents. Its inherent sound is texturally pure, with only a slight suggestion of second-order harmonics. The music's full complement of drama is on display as the L2.1 always seems to squeeze a bit more energy from each recording. The remarkably low noise floor enables exemplary resolution of track fadeouts and reverberant decay. In general, the spatial impression is quite convincing with excellent image focus and depth perspective, though the extent of soundstage layering is dependent on the associated power amp. The L2.1 Reference belongs to a select club of line preamps that are capable of serving up an edgeless organic whole. It is a true Reference in the best sense of the word. (278)



Soulution 520

\$26,000

Until the recent arrival of the Soulution 725, JV had never heard a better solid-state preamplifier that this little gem from Switzerland. (Only 2012's POY-winner, the Constellation Virgo, competed on a near-equal footing.) Not only does the 520 have all the things you would expect from world-class solid-state—jaw-dropping transient speed, outstanding low-level resolution, tremendous grip in the bass, vanishingly low noise and coloration, but like its companion pieces, the 501 monoblock amplifiers, it joins these qualities with a gorgeous, newfound density of tone color that makes every kind of music sound not just lively and detailed but also beautiful and that much more realistic. When you add one of the best built-in phonostages JV has heard in a single-box solid-state unit (the 520 is that rarity in latter-day components—a full-function preamplifier), you get a genuine reference-level product and TAS' 2013 Solid-State Preamplifier of the Year. (236)



Absolare Passion

\$31,000 (\$36,000, Signature)

This ultra-minimalist single-ended triode preamplifier is about as tweaky as a preamplifier gets, with an extremely simple signal path, just four unbalanced inputs, no remote control, and two unmarked front-panel knobs (volume and input selection). The circuit is built using cost-no-object parts, and housed in a massive aluminum chassis clad in leather. Sonically the Passion is very much like the companion Passion 845 power amplifiers, with a complete lack of grain, etch, solid-state glare overlying timbres. The treble is just a little on the forgiving side, a quality that complements the tendency toward brightness of some dome tweeters. Soundstaging is phenomenal—wide, deep, transparent, and three-dimensional. (234)



Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Momentum

\$35,000

So visually attractive you might buy it as piece of sculpture, the D'Agostino Momentum preamp's real merit is its extraordinary sound, which seemingly combines the sweetness of the best tube preamps and the detail and accuracy of the best solid-state designs, making it one of the few preamplifiers that can reproduce all the warmth and romance of the best recordings. If the recording is good enough, you hear a remarkably natural, articulated, and three-dimensional soundstage, which seems to expand in width and depth without stretching the instruments or voices within it. The Momentum has all the features, remote-control capabilities, and input options needed in a top preamp—even truly functional tone controls! (239)

Our Top Picks Preamplifiers



Soulution 725

\$60,000 (\$65,000 w/phonostage)

If you want to know what an LP, reel-to-reel tape, or digital file is capable of in the way of detail, power, color, and pure excitement, JV doesn't think there is another single-unit solid-state preamplifier (the 725 is a full-function preamp with a superb, optional built-in phonostage) that can outdo the sonics of this Swiss masterpiece from the boys in Dulliken. Exceptionally high in resolution, gorgeously dark and rich in tone color (with genuinely tube-like three-dimensional imaging), unexceeded (in transistor units) in soundstage width and depth, and rivaled in transient speed only by certain Constellation and CH Precision products, this (Swiss) cheese stands alone when it comes to the bottom octaves. Nothing else out there that JV has auditioned has this same lifelike weight, energy, and density of color and texture from about 500Hz down. The difference isn't small, and it isn't hard to hear (or feel). Like the Soulution amps, the 725 is a veritable sonic thrill ride. JV's solid-state reference. (249)



Constellation Altair II

\$90,000

The Altair II is nothing short of an all-out assault on the state of the art in preamplifier design. Its two-chassis design separates the power supply from the audio circuits. The performance can be taken up another level with the addition of the DC Filter, a power-supply-sized box that further purifies the DC feeding the audio circuits. The design is unprecedented in many respects, including extraordinary measures to isolate the audio circuits from vibration and noise. The gain stages are suspended on a floating "raft" within a sub-chamber of the massive clamshell chassis, machined from two solid aluminum blocks. The Altair II sets new standards in transparency, resolution, absence of grain, and sheer realism, in RH's experience. Although highly resolving, it is anything but etched or clinical. Rather, it comes as close to a colorless window on the music as RH has experienced. This new version has a front-panel touchscreen and a pair of knobs. Surprisingly, it also has even better sound than the original. (260)



Our Top Picks Power Amplifiers



NuPrime STA-9

\$649

Generating 120Wpc and weighing just under 10.5 pounds, the STA-9 uses a Class A input circuit with a Class D output circuit. NuPrime's website says it "is designed with enhanced even-order harmonic circuitry that mimics the most attractive features of tube-amp sound without incurring tubes' drawbacks and limitations." It's easily bridgeable into 290Wpc monoblocks, and its 47k ohm input impedance should work with virtually any preamplifier. In monoblock mode, the STA-9 produced powerful bass, even with the small KEF speakers. (273)



Odyssey Khartago Stereo and Mono

\$995 and \$1975/pr.

Although the 130Wpc Odyssey Khartago solid-state stereo amp has been around for better than a decade, it was new to JV until amp-connoisseur Alon Wolf (of Magico) told him he used it in his shop and it was excellent. Wolf was right. Although the Khartago doesn't have all the articulation and transparency of the standard-setting Soulution 711 stereo amplifier, it has a surprisingly similar balance, no discernible grain, high resolution, and a deep, wide soundstage. Positively, the best budget amp JV has heard, not counting the Odyssey Khartago monoblocks, which have the same power rating as the Khartago but a stiffer power supply and wider bandwidth, giving them the same basic sound as the two-channel unit with slightly more resolution, dynamic oomph, top-end air, and channel separation. Like the Khartago stereo, this is a budget monoblock for the connoisseur. (194, 246)



Audio by Van Alstine Ultravalve

\$1599

According to Frank Van Alstine, the Ultravalve's lineage is traceable to the Dynaco Stereo 70, which he denotes as its "great-grandmother." Although not as romantic-sounding as the original, it is far better focused, and in general sounds like a higher-resolution device. It handles bass lines with superb control and good impact and is capable of dishing out plenty of boogie factor. Its ability to retrieve microdynamic nuances allows for the full scope of the music's dynamic intensity and interaction between musicians to shine right through. (204)



Alchemy by Elac DPA-1/DPA-1M

\$1995/\$1995 each

The DPA-1 is a stereo switching amplifier capable of 125Wpc into 8 ohms and 200Wpc into 4 ohms. The front panel offers more features than traditional power amplifiers, including selectable gain (a +6dB button), clipping indicators, a mute button, and soft-start warm-up. Both balanced and unbalanced inputs are provided. The DPA-1M is a monaural version of the same amplifier, delivering 325W into 8 ohms and 400W into 4 ohms. Both amplifiers feature a Class A input stage and a Class D output stage, based on Bruno Putzeys' Hypex UcD module. (The DPA-1M monoblock simply bridges two of these modules for greater output power.) Sonically, both amplifiers have a lively, upbeat sound, powerful rhythmic drive, wide dynamic expression, and rock-solid visceral grip in the bottom end. Soundstaging and transparency are also excellent. A great value. (262)

Our Top Picks Power Amplifiers



Wyred 4 Sound SX-1000R

\$2398

While many amplifiers use Bang & Olufsen's ICE output device, the SX-1000R combines it with a direct-coupled, balanced, dual-FET input stage, designed by Bascom King. The SX-1000R's 625W of power (1225W into 4 ohms) can effortlessly deliver copious dynamics and details. Imaging through the SX-1000R is laterally precise. Bass extension, speed, and pitch definition proved to be among the best SS has heard from any power amplifier. If you require a power amp that can generate oodles of effortless output, runs cool, produces a very precise lateral soundstage, has substantial bass extension and control, has a neutral harmonic balance, and is exceedingly quiet, the Wyred 4 Sound SX-1000R should be on your short list. (193, 273)



Bel Canto Ref600M

\$4990/pr.

To SS's ears Bel Canto's 15.4-pound, 300W (600W into 4 ohms) Ref600M Class D mono-block is good enough to qualify as the best all-around power amplifier he's heard to date, regardless of technology or circuit topology. Its combination of extremely low noise, which makes it suitable to drive even highly efficient loudspeakers, precision three-dimensional imaging, relaxed and natural harmonic balance, and power capability makes for a potent package. Couple all its sonic achievements with its relatively modest price, and you have a power amplifier that could well be a benchmark reference for many audiophiles for years to come. (269)



First Watt F7

\$3000

For over fifteen years First Watt has served as Nelson Pass' creative playground, allowing him to explore unusual low-power designs with an emphasis on sound quality. The F7 is intended as an improved version of the popular F5, a 25Wpc stereo push-pull Class A amplifier. What makes the F7 so special is its inherent textural sweetness and warm tonality. There are many solid-state amps out there that manage to sound smooth and refined yet lack the organic character of live music. The F7, on the other hand, manages to sail through reproduction of violin tone with superb upper-register sheen and transient finesse—a rare feat for any solid-state amplifier. The F7 delivers far more incisive transients than tube amps, while its command of space is competitive with the sort of 3-D spatial presentation tube amps excel in. Simply put: one of the best low-power amps money can buy. (263)



Aesthetix Atlas Stereo

\$8000

Aesthetix's first foray into power amps is an unqualified success. Aesthetically, the Atlas is handsome in a brawny but tasteful way. Its front panel offers a convenient menu-system for input selection and crossover point, the latter feature allowing the amp to easily mate with a subwoofer. Sonically, the amp has great resolution and reflexes, making it a snap to follow interleaved melodic and rhythmic lines. The Atlas creates a cloud of air around each instrument, and a deep convincing sense of space. Indeed, its resolution, timing, and imaging are beyond reproach. Tonally, this amp is on the sweet side in a way that is consonant with real music. The Atlas is slightly less incisive dynamically than AT's reference amp, but so is pretty much everything else. Ultimately, the Atlas is a sheer joy—both sonically and musically—to listen to. (196)

Our Top Picks Power Amplifiers



Constellation Inspiration Stereo and Mono

\$11,000 and \$11,000 each

This 250Wpc stereo amplifier is based on the same circuit as Constellation's \$190k Hercules. Through the Inspiration offers a less expensive implementation of the Hercules' topology, Constellation has still managed to bring the big amp's DNA to a more affordable price. Although not a budget item, a Constellation amplifier at \$11k is something of a breakthrough. Like the Hercules, the Inspiration Stereo has lifelike illumination in the mids and treble, exquisite resolution of fine detail, and outstanding transparency. Surprisingly, the Inspiration's bass may even be deeper and more powerful than that of the original Hercules. The mono version brings 500W to the party. Sonically, the two are very similar, sharing the Constellation hallmarks of transparency and resolution. Overall, both amplifiers are fantastic values. (249)



CH Precision A1

\$37,000 each (\$70,000 dual-mono configuration)

CH Precision, a relatively new but highly pedigreed Swiss manufacturer, has taken the groundbreaking design of its Goldmund ancestors—ultra-fast circuitry, mechanical grounding—and modernized it. The aims adhere to the CH gestalt of linearity—in the frequency, time, and dynamic domains—and musicality in equal parts. The result is accuracy in the service of music, with plume-like orchestral colors, visceral transients, locked-down rhythms, and dynamics that range from subtle to epic. The amp makes it child's play to follow musical lines and instrumental interplay. All this makes for a captivating listening experience that few other amps in AT's experience can approach. The A1 is also one of the world's most configurable and adjustable amps (you can optimize it to your speaker's damping characteristics by setting the ratio between local and global feedback). It's worth noting that a single A1 can be configured for stereo operation, delivering 95 percent of its monoblock performance. (239)



Absolare Passion 845

\$45,500/pr. (Signature, \$57,750)

These gorgeous, leather-clad single-ended-triode monoblocks deliver the glories of SET circuits in a cost-no-object implementation—gorgeous timbre, a smooth and relaxed treble, tremendous soundstage depth and dimensionality—but do so with enough power to drive real-world loudspeakers to satisfying playback levels. Their 52 watts, coupled with genre-defying bass extension and dynamic impact, deliver qualities that fly in the face of conventional wisdom about SETs. But the Absolare's real magic is in the sense of immediacy—that impression of hearing contemporaneous music-making unencumbered by the electro-mechanical contrivance of the playback system. The result is a deep immersion in the musical expression. (234)



Soultion 711

\$75,000

Along with the CH Precision M1 and the Constellation Hercules II, Soultion's stereo 711 is the best solid-state amplifier JV has had in his system. Like the 501 monoblocks (but even more so) this massive, seemingly inexhaustible amplifier is capable of virtually unlimited current and amperage regardless of load. Dark and rich in tone color, blessed with tube-like dimensionality and bloom, sweet and subtle in the treble, standard-settingly powerful and well-defined in the bass, ultra-fast on transients, superb at resolving inner detail, with a soundstage the size of the Ritz, the 711 hasn't any obvious weaknesses. Oh, other solid-state amplifiers will give you different sonic emphases that you may prefer—the Constellation electronics, for example, are a tad higher in resolution, less dark and more open in the treble, and just as fast, and tubes and tube-hybrids (such as Siltech's marvelous SAGA System) obviously have their own unique charms—but in overall presentation JV has never heard a solid-state amp that is more thrillingly powerful or ravishingly beautiful or consistently realistic than this beastie boy from Zurich. JV's solid-state reference. (249)

Our Top Picks Power Amplifiers



David Berning 211/845

\$75,000

In the new 211/845, David Berning has created the most ambitious realization yet of his brilliant ZOTL circuit that allows a tube amplifier to operate without an audio output transformer. The 211/845 offers 60W of pure Class A triode tube power (via either 211 or 845 output tubes) with no feedback. The 211/845 conveys the beauty of instrumental timbre and voices with a stunning realism and immediacy. The impression that everything between you and the music has been stripped away is astonishing. In this regard, the 211/845 simply has no peer, tube or solid-state. Surprisingly, the bass is well defined and tuneful, although not the last word in dynamic impact. The highish output impedance and limited current delivery dictate that the 211/845 be matched with a loudspeaker of appropriate sensitivity and impedance. But when given the right load, the Berning 211/845 is nothing short of magical. (265, 276)



Constellation Hercules Stereo II

\$95,000

The Hercules II stereo amplifier from Constellation uses the exact same updated circuitry found in the Hercules II monoblocks. Quite naturally, it sounds very much like the Hercules IIs, minus the ultimate in power and separation that the monoblocks deliver. Having said this, at 550Wpc into 8 ohms, 750Wpc into 4 ohms, and 1kW into 2 ohms, the Hercules Stereo II isn't likely to leave you wanting for oomph with any loudspeaker load, reasonable or unreasonable. As neutral in balance as any solid-state amp out there, the Constellation, as you would expect given its price, delivers just about everything that an ultra-high-ender is looking for: resolution, color, staging, imaging, transient speed, and dynamic impact that are the equals of any other top-tier solid-state amplifier JV has heard. Yes, the Soulution 711 stereo amp gives you bigger and more exciting bass, a slightly richer, fuller power range, and a more liquid and grainless midrange, but at the price of a "bottom-up" balance that is comparatively darker and a little softer and more recessed in the treble and upper mids, where the Constellation has more openness and energy. (forthcoming)



Air Tight ATM-2001

\$155,000/pr.

As impressed as JV was and is by VAC's Signature 450iQ amplifiers, these beautifully designed and engineered flagship monoblocks from the legendary Miura-san of Air Tight are at least as sonically impressive. Almost as powerful as the VAC Signature 450iQ (338W into 8 ohms with twelve 6550 tubes, and around 400W with twelve KT150s), they equal or exceed the VAC amps in resolution, realism, and sheer timbral beauty. Somewhat darker and fuller in balance (with 6550s) than Kevin Hayes' masterpieces, they are also bloomier and more present than the VACs and at least as high in speed and resolution (which is to say, as high as tube electronics get). Although it could be argued that the ATM-2001s are inherently a bit "tubier" in presentation than the VACs, what has been retained here of the classic tube sound is no more nor less than all that is worthy of retaining: the three-dimensional "action" and illuminated-from-within textural details that bring voices and instruments to fullest life. JV's high-powered tube-amp references. (269)

Our Top Picks All-in-One Systems



Moon Neo ACE

\$2900

Moon breathes a little sex appeal into the all-in-one segment. Its ACE sports solid power and a potpourri of connectivity that spans analog, digital, and network platforms. Sonically, the Neo ACE has a vivid midrange, with rich tonality, impressive dynamics, quicksilver speed, good low-level transparency, and nicely focused imaging. Bass response, both extension and pitch control, is very good, although the Neo will soften impacts slightly depending on output demands and speaker sensitivity. With a slight emphasis on warmer hues and a lightly shaded top end, the Neo ACE has a more conservative balance designed to complement speaker matchups in this price segment. Also, its well-executed Mind app for smart devices operates seamlessly, with solid intuitive graphics. All-in-one solutions are a deceptively complicated business, but the ACE makes the job look easy. (276)



AVM Inspiration CS 2.2

\$4995

This all-in-one component combines a CD player, network streamer (wired or wireless), FM tuner, DAC, phonostage, and a robust 110Wpc Class D output stage in one compact and beautifully built aluminum chassis. The German-made CS 2.2 sounds more powerful than its power rating would suggest, with a taut and robust bottom end and exceptional dynamics. The DAC section is superb. The large rechargeable remote can control an entire system. Optionally, the CS 2.2 can also be controlled by an Android or iOS device. (forthcoming)

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DIGITAL & ANALOG SOURCES

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Feature

What to Listen for When Choosing a DAC

Robert Harley

Excerpted and adapted from The Complete Guide to High-End Audio (fifth edition). Copyright © 1994–2017 by Robert Harley. hifibooks.com. To order call (800) 841-4741.

Perhaps more than any components other than loudspeakers, digital sources come in the most flavors—their sonic and musical characteristics vary greatly between brands and models.

This variability has its drawbacks (“Which one is right?”), but also offers the music lover the chance to select one that best complements his playback system’s characteristics and suits his musical tastes. The different types of sonic presentations heard from disc players, music servers, and DACs tend to reflect their designers’ musical priorities. If the designer’s parts budget and/or skill is limited, certain areas of musical reproduction will be poorer than others. The trick is to find the digital source that, in the context of your system, excels in the areas you find musically most important.

Selecting a digital source specifically tailored to the rest of your playback system can sometimes ameliorate some of that playback system’s shortcomings. This is true for all components, but especially so for digital because of their wide variations in sonic signatures. For ex-

ample, don’t choose a bright-sounding DAC for a system that is already on the bright side of reality. Instead, you may want to select a DAC whose main attribute is a smooth, non-fatiguing treble. Each digital product has its particular strengths and weaknesses. Only by careful auditioning—preferably in your own system—can you choose the product best for you.

To illustrate this, I’ve invented two hypothetical listeners, each with a different system and taste, and two hypothetical DACs—though two disc players could easily be substituted. Although the following discussion could apply to all audio components, it is particularly relevant to digital gear. Not only are there wide variations in sonic characteristics among DACs, but a poor-sounding DAC at the front-end of a superb system will ruin that system’s overall sound.

Listener A likes classical music, particularly early music, baroque, and choral performances. She rarely listens to full-scale orchestral works, and never plays rock, jazz, or pop. Her system uses inexpensive solid-state electronics and somewhat bright-sounding speakers; the combination gives her a detailed, forward treble that is a bit aggressive.

Listener B wouldn’t know a cello from a clarinet, preferring instead electric blues, rock, and pop. He likes to feel the power of a kick drum

and bass guitar working together to drive the rhythm. His system is a little soft in the treble, and doesn’t have as much dynamic impact as he’d like.

Let’s look at the sonic differences between two inexpensive and similarly priced DACs and see how each would—or wouldn’t—fit into these systems.

DAC #1 has terrific bass: tight, deep, driving, and rhythmically exciting. Unfortunately, its treble is a little etched, grainy, and overprominent. DAC #2’s best characteristics are a sweet, silky-smooth treble that has a complete lack of hardness, grain, and etch, and produces no fatigue in the listener. Its weaknesses, however, are soft bass and limited dynamic range. It doesn’t have DAC #1’s driving punch and dynamic impact with drums.

You can guess which DAC would be best for each system and listener. DAC #1 would only exacerbate the brightness Listener A’s system already exhibits. Moreover, the additional grain would be more objectionable with violins and voices. DAC #2, however, would tend to soften the treble presentation in Listener A’s system, providing much-needed relief from its relatively relentless treble. Moreover, the sonic qualities of DAC #1—dynamic impact and tight bass—are less musically important to Listener A.

Conversely, Listener B would be better off with DAC #1. Not only would DAC #1’s better dynamics and tighter bass better serve the kind of music Listener B prefers, but his system could use a little more sparkle in the treble and punch in the bass.

Which DAC is “better”? Ask Listener A after she’s auditioned both products in her system;

she’ll think DAC #2 is greatly superior, and wonder how anyone could like DAC #1. But Listener B would find her choice lacking rhythmic power, treble detail, and dynamic impact. To him, there’s no comparison: DAC #1 is the better product.

Although I’ve exaggerated to make my point, this example shows how personal taste, musical preference, and system matching can greatly influence which digital products are best for you. The only way to make the right purchasing decision is to audition the products for yourself. Use product reviews in magazines to narrow your choice of what to audition, reading reviewers’ descriptions of particular products to see if the type of sound described is what you’re looking for. But don’t buy a product solely on the basis of a product review—a reviewer’s system and musical tastes may greatly differ from yours. You could be Listener A, and be reading a review written by someone with Listener B’s system and tastes.

Use reviews not as sources of absolute truth, but as guides pointing you toward products you might want to audition yourself. You’re going to spend many hours with your decision, so listen carefully before you buy—it’s well worth the investment in time. Moreover, the more products you evaluate and the more careful your listening, the sharper your listening skills will become.

It’s important to realize that, generally, the less a DAC costs, the more pronounced its sonic signature. At the very highest levels of digital playback, the sonic trade-offs are much less acute—the best products have fewer shortcomings, making them ideal for all types of music—

Feature What to Listen for When Choosing a DAC

and two *perfect* DACs would sound identical. But, of course, there's no such thing as a perfect audio component.

Still, a significant factor in how good any DAC or CD player sounds is the designer's technical skill and musical sensitivity. Given the same parts, two designers of different talents will likely produce two very different-sounding products. Consequently, it's possible to find skillfully designed but inexpensive products that outperform more expensive products from less talented designers.

Higher-priced products are not necessarily better. Don't get stuck in a specific budget and audition products only within a narrow price range. If an inexpensive product has received a rave review from a writer you've grown to trust and the description of its sound matches your taste, audition it—you could save yourself a lot of money. If you decide not to buy the product, at least you've added to your listening database, and can compare your impressions with those of the reviewer.

In addition to determining which digital products let you enjoy music more, there are specific sonic attributes you should listen for that contribute to a good-sounding digital front-end. How high a priority you place on each of these characteristics is a matter of personal taste.

Here are the musical and sonic qualities I look for in digital playback.

The first quality I listen for in characterizing how a digital component sounds is its overall perspective. Is it laid-back, smooth, and unaggressive? Or is it forward, bright, and "in my face"? Does the product make me want to "lean

into" the music and "open my ears" wider to hear the music's subtlety? Or do my ears tense up and try to shut out some of the sound? Am I relaxed or agitated?

A digital product's overall sonic perspective is a fundamental characteristic that defines that product's ability to provide long-term musical satisfaction. If you feel assaulted by the music, you'll tend to listen less often, and for shorter periods. If the product's fundamental musical perspective is flawed, it doesn't matter what else it does right.

Key words in product reviews that describe an easy-to-listen-to digital source include *ease*, *smoothness*, *laid-back*, *sweet*, and *polite*. Descriptors such as *bright*, *vivid*, *incisive*, *etched*, *forward*, *aggressive*, *analytical*, and *immediate* all point toward the opposite type of sound.

There is a fundamental conflict between these extremes of presentation. DACs that sound smooth, laid-back, and polite may not actively offend, but they often lack detail and resolution. An absence of aggressiveness is often achieved at the expense of obscuring low-level musical information. This missing musical information could be the inner detail in an instrument's timbre that makes the instrument sound more lifelike. It could be the sharp transient attack of percussion instruments; a slight rounding of the attack gives the impression of smoothness, but doesn't accurately convey the sound's dynamic structure. Consequently, very smooth-sounding digital products often have lower resolution than more forward ones.

The other extreme is the digital product that is "ruthlessly revealing" of the music's every detail. Rather than smoothing transients, these

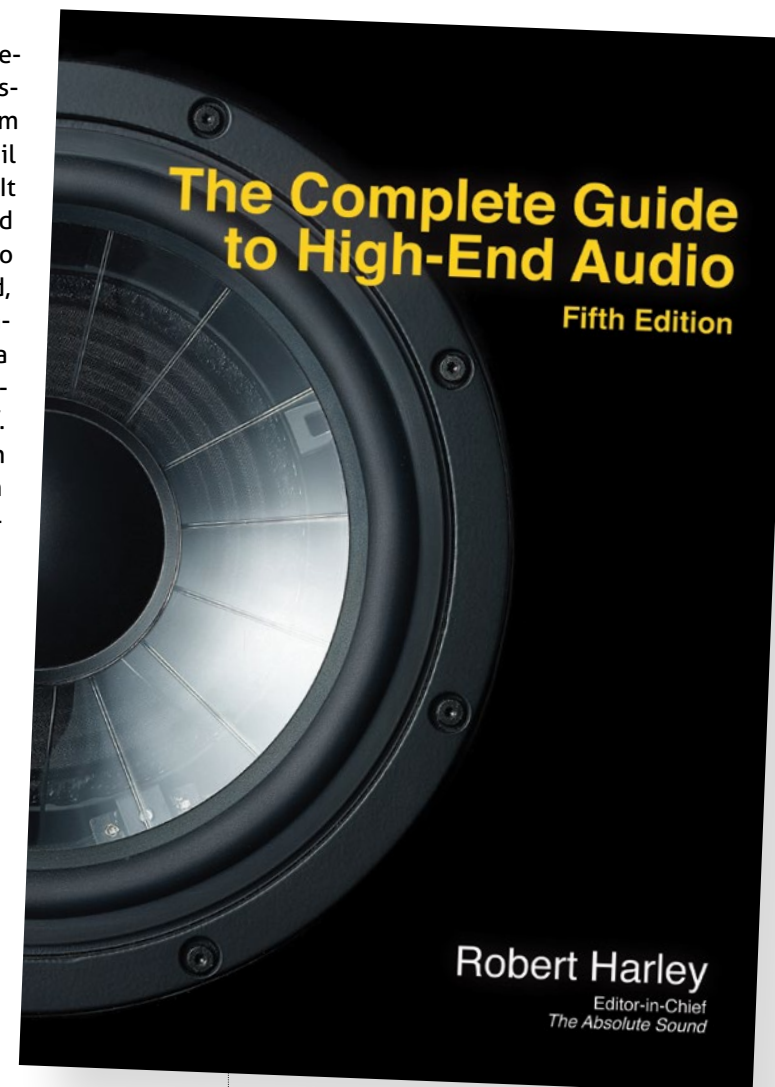
products hype them. In a side-by-side comparison, a ruthlessly revealing product will seem to present much more detail and musical information. It will sound more upbeat and exciting, and will appeal to some listeners. Such a sound, however, quickly becomes fatiguing. The listener feels a sense of relief when the music is turned down—or off. The worst thing a product can do is make you want to turn down the volume, or stop listening altogether.

This conflict between lacking and over-emphasizing detail can be resolved by buying a higher-quality (and, often, higher-priced) DAC. I've found a few models that can present all the music, yet are completely unaggressive and nonfatiguing. This rare virtue is musically important. The digital front-end must walk a fine line between resolving real musical information and sounding etched and analytical.

Digital reproduction also has a tendency to homogenize individual instruments within the soundstage. This tendency to blur distinctions between individual instruments occurs on two levels: the instruments' unique timbral signatures, and the in-

struments' specific locations on the soundstage.

On the first level, digital products can overlay music with a common, synthetic character that



Feature What to Listen for When Choosing a DAC

diffuses the unique textures of different instruments and buries the subtle tonal differences between them. The music sounds as if it is being played by one big instrument rather than many individual ones, with a sameness to instrumental textures that prevents their distinctive characteristics from being heard.

The second way in which digital playback can diffuse the separateness of individual instruments is by presenting images as flat “cardboard cutouts” pasted on top of each other. Each instrument is not surrounded by an envelope of air and space, the soundstage is flat and congested, and you can’t clearly hear where the aural image of one instrument ends and the next begins. Instead of separate and distinct objects—i.e., instruments and voices—hanging in three-dimensional space, you hear a synthetic continuum of sound. Good digital playback should present a collection of individual images in three-dimensional space, with the unique tonal colors of each instrument and voice intact, and a sense of space and air between one image and the rest. This seems to be easy for analog to accomplish, but quite difficult for digital. A recording with excellent portrayal of timbre and space will help you identify which digital products preserve these characteristics.

Another important quality in digital playback is transparency of soundstage. This is the perception that the space in which the music is being performed is crystal-clear, open, and transparent. (The opposite of this is thick, congested, and opaque.) Soundstage transparency is analogous to looking at a city skyline on a perfectly clear day: Just as smog or haze will reduce the

buildings’ immediacy, vibrance, and visible detail, so too will soundstage opacity detract from the musical presentation. With naturally miked recordings of acoustic music, transparency allows you to hear way back into the hall.

I’ve focused on these aspects of sound for the evaluation of digital products because they are the most common flaws in digitally reproduced music. You should also listen for the other aspects—treble grain, rhythm, dynamics, etc.

Beyond these specifics, a good question to ask yourself is, “How long can I listen without wanting to turn the music down—or off?” Conversely, the desire—or even compulsion—to play one CD or digital file after another is the sign of a good digital front-end. Some components just won’t let you turn off your system; others make you want to do something else. This ability to musically engage the listener is the essence of high-end audio. When judging digital front-ends, that should be the highest criterion.

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John Atkinson, Stereophile, November 2016

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Our Top Picks Disc Players



Rotel CD14

\$599

The CD14 CD player doesn't try to be anything other than a CD player. It uses a highly regarded Wolfson DAC chip, which is capable of sampling rates up to 192kHz; of course, as the sampling rate of CDs is 44.1kHz, the DAC's capability is overkill. The CD14 will also play MP3 files, but you'd need to burn those onto CDs first (there's no USB input that would allow you to play them off a USB flash drive). Analog output is on unbalanced RCA jacks—there's no balanced XLR out. The CD14 sounds good, though the bass lacks a little impact. (273)



Oppo UDP-205 4K

\$1299

Oppo's new UDP-205 4K is a worthy successor to the company's wildly successful BDP-105D multi-format disc player. This new machine does it all: plays any audio disc format including CD, SACD, DVD-A, and Blu-ray; plays Blu-ray and Ultra HD video discs; plays and decodes surround-music discs; decodes Dolby TrueHD and DTS Master Audio; and decodes as a DAC the spectrum of PCM and DSD files. It has built-in Wi-Fi, Ethernet, and RS232 connections for complete digital connectivity. Despite being a jack-of-all-trades, the UDP-205 is a really good music player whether in stereo or multichannel mode, and is hard to beat for any CD or SACD player under \$2000. (278)



Moon 260D

\$3000 (\$2000, transport only 260DT)

The Moon by Simaudio Neo 260D continues a tradition of fine CD players from Canada's Simaudio. However, unless you are a CD-only loyalist, you really need to consider adding Moon's \$1000 high-resolution DAC section to the 260D. With a 32-bit asynchronous converter and four rear-panel digital inputs (dual SPDIF, a TosLink, and a USB), this optional DAC effectively opens up a whole new world of digital connectivity. Standard CD playback, though expectedly excellent, pales next to the level of refinement that the DAC brings to the table on high-resolution material—an added complexity of dimensionality that almost seems to re-inflate the soundstage. The DAC's superior reproduction of micro-dynamic gradations also more convincingly recreates the distances among the players in a symphony orchestra. With or without the optional DAC, the 260D offers natural sonics elegantly mated with resilient build-quality and good ergonomics. (244)



Hegel Mohican

\$5000

Hegel's chief designer Bent Holter concluded a few years ago that making an all-purpose DAC/disc player meant not only compromising performance on some of the formats but actually degrading them all to varying degrees. So Holter set about making a seriously good CD-only player—with a bit of whimsy in the product name—even while most in the industry were abandoning the format. After all, lots of people still have large CD collections. Some of the measures Holter incorporated include no up- or over-sampling, a digital clock and filtering optimized solely for Red Book, Hegel's patented distortion-reducing Sound Engine technology in the master clock's oscillator amplifier, a dedicated CD drive unit, and Hegel-designed laser pickup servo-control boards. The sound is simply lovely: almost analog-like continuousness, musically engaging, finely resolving, open. The Mohican has fabulous rhythmic timing, solid image density, and refined image outlines. It sounds less "digital" than any sub-\$20,000 disc player KM has heard. The Mohican may indeed be the last CD player many audiophiles will ever need. (278)

Our Top Picks Disc Players



Aesthetix Romulus

\$7000–\$8000

This all-tube CD player and DAC is one of the great bargains in high-end audio. What makes the Romulus special is that it sounds so “non-digital.” Rather than being flat and congealed, it opens up the spatial presentation, giving instruments and voices room to breathe. The Romulus couples this expansiveness with an unusual (for digital) sense of top-octave air and openness. The tonal balance is rich and warm in the bass, which, when added to its treble smoothness, results in an engaging and fatigue-free presentation. The Romulus doesn’t sound “tubey” in the classic sense, but neither does it sound like solid-state. The design and build-quality are beyond what’s expected at this price. If you have no analog sources, the Romulus can serve as a preamplifier and DAC with multiple digital inputs, provided you purchase the variable-output option (\$1000). Thanks to an innovative hybrid analog/digital volume control, there’s no loss of resolution. (243)



T+A PDP 3000 HV

\$22,000

This CD/SACD player and DAC from Germany’s T+A may be the best all-around value in digital today. Solidly built and a joy to use, the PDP 3000 HV features a custom transport mechanism made mostly from metal, rather than plastic, parts. As part of its no-compromise approach, the PDP 3000 HV features completely separate signal paths, DACs, and even analog-output stages for PCM and DSD sources. When playing DSD, the PDP 3000 HV uses different filters depending on the rate. Sonically, the T+A is among the best when decoding PCM sources, and offers the finest SACD playback RH has heard. (268)



dCS Rossini System

\$35,998 (Rossini Player/DAC \$28,499; Rossini Clock \$7499)

The Rossini may be the sweetest of sweet spots within the dCS lineup. All the technical goodies of the latest, far more expensive Vivaldi flagship are here in a single, gorgeous, easy-to-use chassis. The Rossini will play pretty much anything—either locally attached or streamed—other than a physical SACD. And it will play that material, regardless of source, with a rare combination of alacrity, refinement, and musicality. Compared to the entry-level Debussy, the Rossini is a huge step up in every way. Yet, upon direct comparison with the Vivaldi, it’s clear that while the flagship is superior in several ways, the Rossini gets you most of the way there. Furthermore, dCS has made good on its promise of product longevity through continual software upgrades. Specifically, the Rossini recently received both Roon and MQA support, making it one of the best all-around player/DACs on the market. (forthcoming)

Our Top Picks DACs



AudioQuest DragonFly Black and DragonFly Red

\$99/\$199

AudioQuest practically invented the low-cost, high-performance USB DAC in stick form with the original DragonFly. It was a massive success. But these two new models greatly improve on the sound of the original, and the \$99 Black version comes at a lower price, to boot. The Black is smoother than the original, with more extended bass. Although both DACs sound superb and are amazing values, the Red at \$199 delivers striking sonic quality, with exceptional transparency, resolution, timbral realism, and wide dynamics. Add AudioQuest's \$49 JitterBug USB isolation device to either and take the performance up another notch. The Red with a JitterBug is good enough to use as a front end in a budget high-end home-based system. Recent production adds MQA rendering; older units can easily be updated. (270)



NuPrime DAC-9

\$749

More than a DAC, the DAC-9 can serve as a system controller, since it has several digital inputs, an analog line-level input, balanced and unbalanced outputs on XLR and RCA jacks, and most importantly, a remote control. It provides 99 volume settings in 0.5dB increments—impressive at any price. DSD decoding up to DSD256 is becoming pretty standard via asynchronous USB inputs. The DAC-9 played back all non-MQA formats at their rated speeds with no problem at all. It sounded very smooth and pleasant, and presented a wide soundstage. In reviewer Vade Forrester's opinion, this is the best value in the NuPrime 9 series gear. (273)



Oppo Digital Sonica Network DAC

\$799

Sometimes "high value" is a euphemism for "cheaply made" but not so with Oppo Digital. If the Sonica were just a DAC, it would still be a deal, but it's also a versatile streaming player. The Sonica can also either accept an input from an external source, such as a computer or file player, or can directly accept files sent by an external DLNA server. It includes an analog input, which would make it usable as a system controller, eliminating the need for a linestage. Through the USB 2.0 Type B input, the Sonica can accept PCM files up to 768kHz/32-bit and DSD up to DSD512. Sound-wise, the Sonica produced plenty of bloom and air around the outlines of instruments; it also conveyed plenty of inner detail and nuance, with harmonic envelopes that sounded complete and natural. It tracked changing dynamic levels quite well, if not as precisely as some much more expensive DACs. Some equipment portrays certain music as having several discrete dynamic levels instead of a continuously varying level—but not the Sonica. OK, subwoofers still reign, but the Sonica's bass had surprising impact. In short, the Oppo Digital Sonica sounds and looks great, and is a super deal for \$799—just what we'd expect from Oppo. An easy recommendation. (278)



Mytek Digital Brooklyn

\$1995

The Mytek Brooklyn was the first non-Meridian-branded DAC that supports MQA. Because of that, every time it's been shown, whether at a consumer or an industry event, it has generated practically standing-room-only interest. The Brooklyn is not only a DAC, but also a preamplifier for both analog and digital sources, a headphone amplifier that supports single-ended and balanced cans, and a phono preamplifier for both moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges. So far SS has been unable to discern anything sonically negative while listening to MQA-encoded files though the Mytek Brooklyn. Even without MQA, the Mytek Brooklyn offers exceptional value due to its versatility, flexibility, ergonomic elegance, and overall high level of sonic performance. Once you throw MQA into the equation SS has to say "game over" for any DAC or DAC manufacturer who can't keep up. (265)

Our Top Picks DACs



Schiit Audio Yggdrasil

\$2300

Designed by industry legend Mike Moffat, the Yggy DAC sounds very much like the famous Theta Digital DACs that Moffat designed in the 1980s and 1990s—but better. Like the Theta DACs of yore, the Yggy has a bold, assertive, vibrant, even vivid presentation. Because of this startling clarity, individual musical lines within complex arrangements are spatially and timbrally distinct. This has the effect of revealing each musical part with greater precision, as well as the intent of each musician—and with that comes a fuller, richer, and more complex presentation of the composition and arrangement. Transient attacks, from a hard-hit snare drum to the most delicate tap on a cymbal, are startlingly fast, defined, and vivid. If you're looking for a DAC that does quad-rate DSD, decodes MQA, offers a volume control, and includes a headphone amp, look elsewhere. But if the very best reproduction of PCM sources is your goal, the Yggdrasil is the ticket. It's a spectacular performer on an absolute level, and an out-of-this world bargain. (274)



Bryston BDA-3

\$3495

The new Bryston BDA-3 enhances the functionality of the 2013 Product of the Year Award-winning BDA-2 by adding a second asynchronous USB input and four HDMI inputs. PCM sample rates up to 384kHz are now supported, as are DSD rates up to DSD256. Most significantly, not only can DSD signals be received by the BDA-3's USB inputs, but also from suitably equipped HDMI sources. The evolutionary development of Bryston's DACs from the original BDA-1 to the BDA-3 has been an object lesson in digital progress. Bryston's BDA-3 DAC surpasses the high-value performance standard set by the BDA-2, enables inexpensive HDMI-equipped disc players to function as premium source components, and adds exceptionally engaging DSD playback to its potent mix of virtues. (275)



Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Series 2

\$5495 (user-installable MQA Rendering Upgrade for Alpha DAC Reference Series 2, Alpha DAC Reference Series, Alpha DAC Series 2 and Alpha DAC, \$595)

The Product of the Year Award-winning Alpha DAC is not only one of the best-sounding digital-to-analog converters, it's also an amazing bargain. In addition to world-class decoding of CD sources, the Alpha DAC can handle any sampling rate up to 24/192. Its robust analog output stage and variable output level allow it to drive a power amplifier directly. This feature is significant, because the Alpha DAC is capable of such resolution, timbral purity, and dynamics you'll want to hear it without the limitations of a preamp in the signal path. When used at its best—fed by true hi-res sources from a music server, and driving an amplifier directly—the Alpha DAC delivers stunning resolution of the finest musical detail, throws a spectacularly large and well-defined soundstage, and plays back music with gorgeous tone color and purity. It lacks a USB input, but you can add Berkeley's Alpha USB converter for the capability. A user-installable update adds MQA decoding and improves PCM sound quality. (189)

Our Top Picks DACs



Playback Designs Merlot

\$6500 (Syrah server also available for \$6500)

What propels the Playback Designs Merlot into the upper echelon of digital audio was an ability to bring clarity and resolution to images at the very lowest levels. Like a sonic zoom lens, it could zero in and precisely describe the fine grit of a brushed snare, the singing rattles of a tambourine struck at the back of a symphony hall, or the ripple of air off the string from a concert harp. Music in any genre revealed a ripeness, an elasticity, and acoustic openness. Sounding more like a digital/analog hybrid, Merlot was able to hang onto digital's obvious strengths—tonal neutrality, broad dynamics, and firmly resolved low frequencies—yet all the while preserving the harmonics, air, and fluidity of a performance. Like all Playback gear it's based on an open architecture and uses no off-the-shelf components including the DAC chips. Supporting formats up to 24-bit/384kHz as well as DSD64, DSD128, and DSD256, Merlot is also equipped with an excellent headphone amp. The Merlot DAC and the Playback Designs Sonoma line companion Syrah server produced some of the most compellingly musical and elevated audio that NG has heard from a source component pairing—digital or analog. (279)



Brinkmann Nyquist

\$18,000

Brinkmann may be best known for its 35-year track record of making exceptional turntables, but its new Nyquist DAC immediately establishes the company as a major contributor to first-rank digital playback. The Nyquist is brimming with advanced features, including MQA decoding, high-speed DSD support, Roon-ready operation, UPnP connectivity, and upgradeable digital circuitry. Yet for all of its cutting-edge digital prowess, the Nyquist's output stage is built around that most ancient and venerable of audio technologies, the vacuum tube. This marriage produces a sound that is very "non-digital," embodying all the qualities that analog is famous for—dimensionality, treble smoothness, bloom, timbral purity—but coupled with digital's strengths of image solidity, pitch stability, and bass impact. The combination of analog-like warmth, bloom, and ease along with the state-of-the-art in digital connectivity makes the Nyquist an extremely compelling package. (278)



Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 2 MQA

\$19,995

Berkeley took what was the finest-sounding DAC extant, its Alpha DAC Reference, and significantly improved it with the new Series 2 MQA version. The Series 2 MQA has a smoother and more natural rendering of timbre, finer resolution of detail, a more transparent presentation, and, perhaps most importantly, a dynamic openness that greatly increases musical engagement. This new DAC's smoothness doesn't come at the expense of liveliness or tone color through the brilliance range; it somehow manages to combine liquidity with resolution, transient speed with lack of etch, and information density without fatigue. And it does this even with CD-quality files. Note that the Alpha DAC lacks a USB input; you'll need Berkeley's Alpha USB converter (\$1895). The original Alpha DAC Reference was priced at \$16,000; the Series 2 is \$19,995. Owners of the original can upgrade for the \$3995 difference. The latest software update (\$595) not only adds MQA rendering but also realizes a surprisingly large improvement in the sound of PCM sources. But play an MQA file through the Berkeley and you'll hear the absolute state of the art in digital playback. Digital doesn't get any better than this. (278)

Our Top Picks Music Servers



Cary Audio DMS-500

\$4995

Anchored by superb sonics and wide-ranging connectivity, the DMS-500 is also one of the most format-friendly and un-f finicky 'net audio players you're likely to find (at least for the next six months). Fully operational for streaming or file playback, wireless or Ethernet, the DMS-500 is now MQA-equipped and thus even more sonically rewarding. The sound of the player is full and warm, dynamic and quick, but never to the point of etch or grain. In short, a winner. Solidly constructed and reasonably priced, it includes an intuitive remote control, which makes navigation a snap (although the new controller app is even better). The large, bright, full-color front-panel display imparts loads of information, and is nicely legible from afar. (275)



Aurender A10

\$5500

The Aurender A10 is a "caching network music server/player with analog outputs." It won't play or rip a disc, feeding only on audio files, streamed or stored on the A10's own 4TB storage drive or an external NAS. Music is "cached"—that is, played from a 120GB solid-state drive, which reduces electrical and acoustic noise that would derive from a spinning mechanical drive. Although an external DAC can be employed, the A10 has highly regarded dual-mono AK4490 DAC chips; the player is the first to support full MQA hardware decoding. The A10 is operated via Aurender's Conductor app (iOS on an iPad is required) that effectively integrates the vast holdings of the Tidal streaming service to files that the user owns and keeps locally. Both single-ended and balanced analog outputs are provided. The A10 can drive an amplifier directly, with gain controlled either with a knob on the player or via the Conductor app. (278)



Lumin A1 Audiophile Network Player w/ MQA

\$7200 (\$7800, anodized black)

For those looking to quit the computer, there's the Lumin A1—now with MQA. Capable of pulling audio media from most external digital sources—and (ideally) over a network with a NAS—the A1 is equipped with dual-mono Wolfson DACs that can play back a multitude of formats, up to and including 32-bit/384kHz PCM/DXD and standard DSD. Operating wirelessly through its own terrific iPad app, the A1 releases all the reins of tension, dryness, and constriction that accompany most digital recordings, adding the warm, weighty presence and velvety textures that are hallmarks of great analog. The L1, an external, preconfigured, 2TB storage HDD, is optional for \$1200. (248)



Aurender W20

\$17,600

Aurender's top-of-the-line W20 is one of the most feature-laden and capable turnkey music servers on the market. It also happens to have the best music-management app, an important consideration when choosing a server. Load the W20's internal hard drive (up to a whopping 12TB) with music, connect one of its many digital outputs to a DAC, link a tablet to your wireless network, and you've got virtually unlimited music. Seamless integration with streaming service Tidal greatly expands the W20's functionality. The W20's sound quality is outstanding, perhaps in part due to its 240GB internal cache memory, battery power supply for critical circuitry, and other performance-oriented design tricks. (258)

Our Top Picks Record Players & Turntables



Pro-Ject Debut Carbon DC

\$399

The most significant upgrade to Pro-Ject's latest Debut is found in the model's name, which refers to the lighter, more rigid, single-piece 8.6" carbon-fiber armtube that replaces the Debut III's aluminum tube. Pre-mounted with Ortofon's 2M Red moving-magnet cartridge, the Carbon offers all one expects from a modestly priced 'table. It doesn't excel in any one area but gets the basics so right that it's hard to criticize what's lacking—because, after all, that's what good entry-level models should provide: a solid foundation for musical pleasure. New DC model offers a higher-precision power supply. (226)



Rega Planar 1

\$475

It's notable that Rega's entry-level 'table today sells for roughly the same price it did some 20 years ago. That doesn't mean the Planar 1 performs at exactly the same level as the original Planar 2 or 3, but it does mean that Rega's commitment to value remains paramount. Perhaps even more remarkably, Rega is able to achieve this while keeping all manufacturing in the UK! Building on success, the P1 uses the classic Rega motor, drive system, and main bearing, but instead of a glass platter this one is made of MDF. The 'arm is the new RB101, which comes pre-mounted with Ortofon's OM5e moving-magnet cartridge. You won't get much frequency extension or wide dynamics here, but what you will get is the pace, musical interplay, and involvement that make analog special. (171)



Clearaudio Concept

\$1400 (\$1600 with Concept mm; \$2200 with Concept mc)

Clearaudio's Concept turntable and cartridge offer a hugely rewarding analog experience at a very attractive price. The sleek, belt-drive 'table and magnetic-bearing Verify 'arm, which the company calls "friction free," sell for \$1400; when bundled with the \$800 Concept MC cartridge, the pre-set-up package sells for a trim \$2000. And though the Concept's performance may not equal that of the very finest out there, its combined strengths in resolution, dynamics, low-noise, and sheer musical engagement won't leave you wanting. Couple this with terrific German build and finish, and the Concept is a hands-down bargain. (205)



Acoustic Signature Wow XL

\$2395

If you're looking for a solid foundation upon which to build your analog front end, the German-engineered-and-built Acoustic Signature Wow XL is about as rock-solid as you get in this price range. Precision bearings and speed control technology from Acoustic Signature's flagship Ascona, and build-quality are what make this turntable one killer setup. Choose your favorite tonearm and cartridge combo, and you're ready to go. The possibilities are endless when you have a solid base for your vinyl, and the Wow XL is it. (244)

Our Top Picks Record Players & Turntables



Pro-Ject Xtension 10

\$3499 with 10cc Evolution tonearm (\$3999 with Sumiko Blackbird)

Pro-Ject is onto something wonderful here: A turntable that hits all the right sonic notes, while providing a rare combination of intellectual and emotional connection to the music. A slightly scaled-down edition of the Xtension 12, the 10 offers a smaller footprint but similar weight. The design features a mass-loaded, magnetically floated sub-chassis, a 3"-tall, 12.6-pound vinyl/alloy platter, a precision ceramic bearing, and a three-speed AC motor. The Xtension 10 can be purchased with a SuperPack option (\$3699) that includes a Sumiko Blackbird cartridge and an upgraded 'arm cable. Regardless of cartridge, the Xtension 10 provides not only a high level of musical satisfaction, but does so in a way that delivers a powerful emotional wallop. (242)



Technics SL-1200G

\$3999

This turntable, which shares the historic name and appearance of the long-running SL-1200 series but is in fact a new design, offers performance at the very highest level, belying its relatively modest price. (The included 'arm is acceptable but is not quite at the same pinnacle.) Its silence and speed stability are competitive with any turntable available and are far superior to most, even very high priced ones. The turntable's sound is rock solid, very pure, highly resolved, and very lively in the positive sense. One has very much the sensation of hearing what is actually on the record. The Technics is not the only turntable in its price range (or lower) to have challenged the high-priced world, but it has an important feature offered by few of its high-end competitors at any price, namely, adjustable speed. This is a turntable for musicians and those who share musicians' sensibilities. (274)



Acoustic Signature Challenger Mk3

\$4490

Analog fans might already be familiar with Acoustic Signature—and maybe you've even read JV's glowing review of the maker's mighty Invictus flagship 'table. Though the Challenger Mk3 may not have the sheer low-end weight and power of the esteemed German manufacturer's upper-tier designs, reviewer JM found that it still delivers remarkable purity, focus, elegance of presentation, and exceptional musicality. Drums, for instance, may not have the ultimate punch, but are still terrifically fast, textured, and explosive. The turntable's small-footprint cylindrical chassis is clean, solid, and elegant. The Challenger Mk3 is also remarkably simple to set up and maintain; its first-rate build-quality (all parts are machined in-house and assembled by hand) has clearly paid off in the solid performance of this very low-coloration turntable. Call it a Challenger that punches above its weight. (274)



Brinkmann Spyder

\$12,000 (10.5 tonearm, \$5450)

Eschewing an enclosed plinth in favor of an open chassis, the Spyder mounts the platter assembly's base on a cylindrical pillar. Additional cylindrical pillars support up to four tonearms as well as the outboard motor. The Spyder's sound is transparent, dynamic, low in perceived distortion, and with a fairly high degree of perceived neutrality. It exhibits a clarity without that etched quality that is sometimes mistaken for transparency or resolution. The Spyder is also well isolated from external disturbance, even when the music gets big, deep, and loud. Operationally this setup was a joy to use, its fit and finish of a caliber that spells "G-E-R-M-A-N" in all caps. In sum, here's a vinyl player of all-around excellence that should provide years of performance both pleasurable and trouble-free. (269)

Our Top Picks Record Players & Turntables



AMG Viella 12

\$17,500 with cherry skirt, \$18,000 with black lacquer skirt (\$1500 for Reference tonearm cable)

Like the \$15k Raidho C-1.1 (or the now-discontinued \$4k Ortofon MC A90), the beautifully machined Analog Manufaktur Germany Viella 12 is that relative rarity—a truly first-rate (and truly original) audio component that, while by no means cheap, is still within the financial reach of folks who aren't made out of money. The V12 may not (in fact, it does not) give you everything that a Walker, TW Acoustic, or Acoustic Signature gives you, but what it does supply on select recordings—the extended sense that you are in the actual presence of real performers in a real space—is more than enough to earn the rave review it got and its place on this select list. A genuine marvel of engineering smarts and manufacturing finesse. (226)



Spiral Groove SG1.2

\$30,000 (\$36,000 with Centroid tonearm)

Don't let the Spiral Groove SG1.2's compact size and lack of bling fool you; this is a serious turntable that competes in the upper echelon. The belt-driven SG1.2 weighs in at 80 pounds, with much of that weight added by four aluminum layers set in two independent constrained-layer platforms. The platter has an oversized, stainless steel ring around the outer perimeter that increases the platter's inertia. An outboard power supply drives the high-torque AC-synchronous motor. The SG1.2 will accept a variety of armboards, including one for the Centroid, a 10" unipivot design. The SG1.2 is extremely quiet, providing a silent backdrop for the music. The SG1.2's outstanding soundstaging effortlessly distinguishes between orchestral instruments, even those at the back of the orchestra. Also particularly enjoyable is the SG1.2's rhythmic solidity. (276)

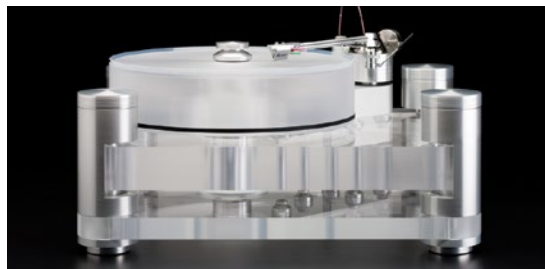


Continuum Audio Labs Obsidian

\$45,000 with Viper tonearm

This beautifully engineered, beautifully designed, essentially cylindrical belt-driven 'table, directly descended from the much celebrated Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn, sounds pretty much the way it looks: quick, sleek, hard-hitting, and imperturbable. Replete with a newly designed DC motor, low-resonance tungsten parts, an ingenious decoupled 'arm mount for its (Cobra-like) Viper tonearm, and a plinth-less base, the Obsidian/Viper combines the litheness, neutrality, and pace of lighter-weight players with the dynamic gravity and dense color of the heavyweights. While it may not have all the distortion-free inertness of the 300-plus-pound Acoustic Signature Invictus, it comes close, and, sonically, it offers a similar presentation. A genuine round mound of sound, and one of the two 'tables'/arms JV would consider purchasing (the TW Acoustic Black Knight is the other) if he couldn't afford the Acoustic Signature or the once-and-forever king of radial-tracking, air-bearing record players, the great Walker Proscenium Black Diamond V. (274)

Our Top Picks Record Players & Turntables



Basis Inspiration

\$64,000

This remarkable turntable gets its name from Basis founder A.J. Conti's inspiration to bring many performance aspects of his \$175,000 Work of Art turntable to a more practical form factor and price. We haven't heard the Work of Art, but we can say that the Inspiration is a spectacular-sounding turntable with many special qualities that elevate the listening experience. Among these are an absolutely jet-black background, superb speed stability that contributes to realistic timbres, a vibrant dynamic rendering, and the uncanny impression of instruments hanging in space. The Inspiration is particularly adept at portraying air and bloom around instruments, as well as at resolving low-level information such as the tail ends of cymbal decays. It all adds up to a highly musical and involving presentation that is, surprisingly, considerably better than that of Basis' superb 2800 Signature. Supplied with Basis' Vector 4 tonearm and Synchro-Wave Power Supply; adding the Basis Superarm 9 vaults the performance to a new level. The precision engineering, machining, and fit 'n' finish are magnificent. RH's reference. (220)



Acoustic Signature Invictus

\$122,995 (TA-9000 tonearm

\$17,995, Invictus stand \$17,498)

Thanks to its mass and constrained layer damping, the gigantic Acoustic Signature Invictus turntable (nearly two-and-a-half feet deep and three feet wide and well over 300 pounds in weight) simply cannot be made to resonate, either by external sources of vibration (loudspeakers, rooms, footfalls, etc.) or internal ones (motors, pulleys, belts, etc.). The result is a smoothness, power, and solidity that JV simply hasn't experienced, to this extent, from any other record player. The Invictus is detailed yet not aggressively so; it is lightning quick on transients but never spitty or analytical; it is smooth, yes, but at no loss in pace or dynamic excitement; it is dense in timbre but not dark or oversaturated; it is neutral without being sterile, and transparent to sources without being colorless; it has three-dimensional bloom and body without any loss in immediacy or liveliness. In short, it sounds very much like a mastertape. A ne plus ultra source component, and one of JV's reference record players. (264)

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TOP PICKS: CABLES AND POWER PRODUCTS

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"Cardiac signals had jaw dropping improvements in both resolution and noise to a level that I have never seen, and that I didn't know was even possible."

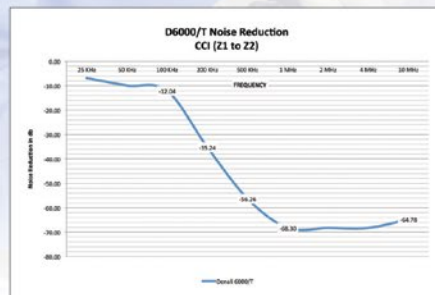
~ Dr. Daniel P. Melby, MD,
Medical Director: Minneapolis Heart Institute

"After installing the CIS units, the bipolar noise levels on the mapping catheters went from fairly high at .13-.15 to less than 0.01 mV after installing the first of the two CIS units. The noise level for the bipolar signals is now below the threshold of what the system can measure. Thank you!"

~ Dr. Kent Morris, Electrophysiology Lab Director: Norton Health, Louisville, Kentucky

The new science and filter technology developed by Shunyata Research scientist Caelin Gabriel has delivered never-before-seen improvement to the resolution of heart-signals and heart-imaging in the field of Electrophysiology. These results were so dramatic that Shunyata Research has created a medical-branch of its company, named Clear Image Scientific® (CIS). The CIS power-conditioners and power cords are now finding their way into heart-surgery labs across the United States.

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"In every sonic criterion, the Denali Series establish a new benchmark for performance"

~ Robert Harley, Editor In Chief: *The Absolute Sound*

"The Hydra Denali really is the peak of power conditioning here and now."

~ Marc Mickelson, Editor In Chief: *The Audio Beat*

"The Denali series of power conditioners were the most impressive power conditioners I have had the opportunity to use or evaluate."

~ Steven Plaskin: *Audiostream 2016 Product of the Year*

Feature

How to Choose Cables and Interconnects

Robert Harley

Excerpted and adapted from The Complete Guide to High-End Audio (fifth edition). Copyright © 1994–2017 by Robert Harley. hifibooks.com. To order call (800) 841-4741.

Ideally, every component in the system—including cables and interconnects—should be absolutely neutral and impose no sonic signature on the music. As this is never the case, we are forced to select cables and interconnects with colorations that counteract the rest of the system's colorations.

For example, if your system is a little on the bright and analytical side, mellow-sounding interconnects and cables can take the edge off the treble and let you enjoy the music more. If the bass is overpowering and fat, lean- and tight-sounding interconnects and cables can firm up and lean out the bass. A system lacking palpability and presence in the midrange can benefit from a forward-sounding cable.

Selecting cables and interconnects for their musical compatibility should be viewed as the final touch to your system. A furniture maker who has been using saws, planes, and rasps will finish his work with steel wool or very fine sandpaper. Treat cables and interconnects the same way—as the last tweak to nudge your

system in the right direction, not as a Band-Aid for poorly chosen components.

Cables and interconnects won't correct fundamental musical or electrical incompatibilities. For example, if you have a high-output-impedance power amplifier driving current-hungry loudspeakers, the bass will probably be soft and the dynamics constricted. Speaker cables won't fix this problem. You might be able to ameliorate the soft bass with the right cable, but it's far better to fix the problem at the source—a better amplifier/loudspeaker match.

Good cables merely allow the system's components to perform at their highest level; they won't make a poor system or bad component match sound good. Start with a high-quality, well-chosen system, and select cables and interconnects that allow that system to achieve its highest musical performance. Remember, a cable or interconnect can't actually effect an absolute improvement in the sound; the good ones merely do less harm.

A typical hi-fi system will need one pair of loudspeaker cables (two pairs for bi-wiring), one pair of long interconnects between the preamplifier and power amplifier, and several pairs of short interconnects for connections between source components (such as a turntable or DAC) and the preamplifier.

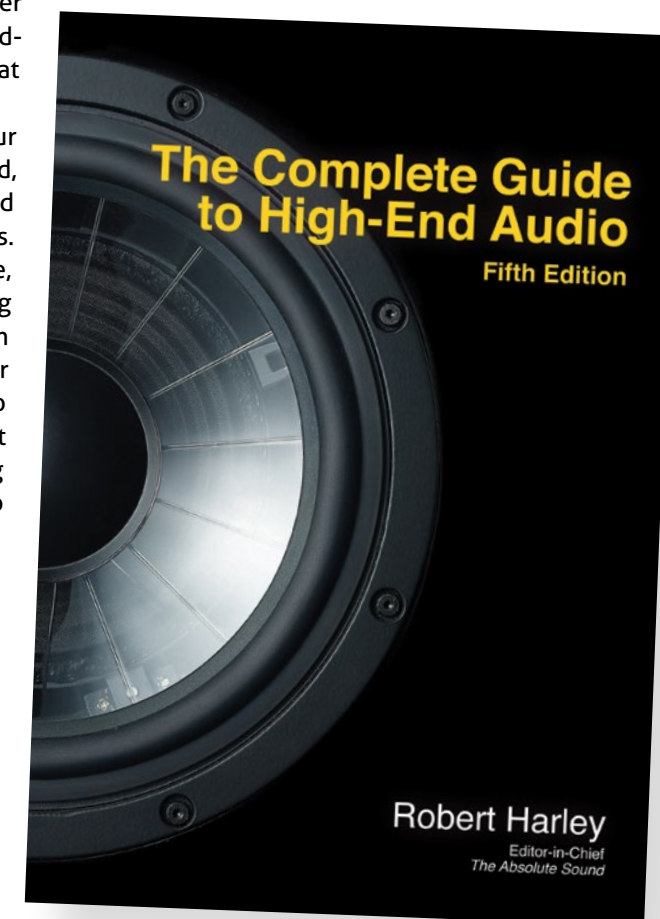
If the power amplifier is located near the speakers, the speaker cables will be short and the interconnects between the preamplifier and power amplifier will be long. Conversely, if the power amplifier is near the source components and preamplifier, the interconnects will be short and the speaker cables long. There is no consensus among the experts about which method is preferable, but I use long interconnects and short loudspeaker cables. Ideally, interconnects *and* loudspeaker cables should be short, but that often isn't practical.

Once you've got a feel for how your system is—or will be—configured, make a list of the interconnects and cables you'll need, and their lengths. Keep all lengths as short as possible, but allow some flexibility for moving loudspeakers, putting your preamp in a different space in the rack, or other possible changes. Although we want to keep the cables and interconnects short for the best sound, there's nothing worse than having interconnects 6" too short. After you've found the minimum length, add half a meter for flexibility.

Interconnects are often made in standard lengths of 1, 1.5, and 2 meters. These are long enough for source-to-preamp connections, but too short for many preamp-to-power-amp runs. These long runs are usually custom-made to a specific length. Similarly, speaker cables are typically supplied in 8' or 10' pairs, but custom lengths are readily available. It's better to have

the cable manufacturer terminate the cables (put spade lugs or banana plugs on loudspeaker cables, and RCA or XLR plugs on interconnects) rather than to try to do it yourself.

Concentrate your cable budget on the cables that matter most. The priority should be given to the sources you listen to most often. For example, you may not care as much about the sound of your tuner as you do your



Feature How to Choose Cables and Interconnects

DAC. Consequently, you should spend more on interconnects between the DAC and preamplifier than between the tuner and preamp. And because all your sources are connected to the power amplifier through the interconnect between the preamplifier and power amplifier, this link must be given a high priority. But any component—even a mobile device's analog output—will benefit from good interconnects.

Should all of your interconnects and speaker cables be made by the same manufacturer? Or is it better to mix and match brands? There are two schools of thought on this. The first holds that an entire system wired with one brand of cable and interconnect is the best route. If one interconnect works well in your system, use it throughout. This argument assumes that the cable designer made his interconnects and speaker cables to work together to achieve the best possible sound.

The second school of thought holds that different brands are best. Cables and interconnects made by the same manufacturer tend to share a common sonic signature; using the same interconnect and cable throughout the system will only reinforce that signature. By using cables and interconnects from different manufacturers, the characteristic sonic signature won't be superimposed on the music by every piece of wire.

This second theory has an analog in the recording world. Engineers will record through one brand of recording console, then mix the record through a different brand of console. They don't want to hear the console's sound in the final product, so they don't subject the signal to the same sonic signature twice.

My experience suggests that the only way to determine the best cable or interconnect for your system is to experiment and listen. In some cases, the best results will be achieved with all the interconnects and cables made by the same manufacturer. In others, a mix of different interconnects will work best. It's impossible to predict which cables will sound best in your system.

Most dealers will let you take home several cables at once to try in your system. Take advantage of these offers. Some mail-order companies will send you many cables to try: you keep the ones you want to buy—if any—and return the others. Compare inexpensive cables with expensive ones—sometimes manufacturers have superb cables that sell for a fraction of the price of their top models.

If you're starting a system from scratch, selecting cables is more difficult than replacing one length in your system. Because different combinations of cables will produce different results, the permutations are greatly increased. Moreover, you don't have a baseline reference against which to judge how good or bad a cable is. In this situation, the best way of getting the ideal cables for your system is to follow your dealer's advice. Try the cables and interconnects he suggests, along with two other brands or models for comparison.

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Vero
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50ex
High Current, Class A/B
Headphone Amplifier

2017 *the absolute sound*
PRODUCT
OF THE
YEAR
AWARD

Specifically, the Vero 50ex and Vero Reference cable diminished the feeling of “inside the head” imaging by seemingly projecting images slightly outward toward the front and expanding the stage width.”

Robert Harley, Editor, *the absolute sound*

Vero Headphone Cables awarded 2017 Product of the Year

by **MIT**
Music Interface Technologies™

Learn more about Vero products at www.mitcables.com/products/vero-headphone-series.html

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50
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3D
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Our Top Picks Cables and Interconnects



Audience Ohno

Interconnect \$199/1m
 (+\$82 per meter); **speaker \$209/1m**
 (+\$20 per meter)

Once you get past the initial shock of Ohno's teeny profile, you'll be as surprised as NG was at its imperturbable midrange tonal weight, which seems so contradictory to its skinny contours. Ohno cabling is quiet, quick, and extended with well-focused and dimensional imaging. Sure, there are plenty of heavyweight designs out there but none are going to kick sand in the Ohno's face. A cable that will also integrates easily in any small room or desktop setup, and maybe, just maybe the best performance per dollar cable that NG's heard in some time. (264)



Wireworld Eclipse 7 and Wireworld Mini-Eclipse 7

\$450/1m pr. RCA, \$450/1m pr. XLR/\$500/8' single terminated pr., \$550/8' bi-wire

These moderately priced interconnects and speaker cables from Wireworld are overachievers of the highest order. Built from OCC copper using the company's patented DNA Helix geometry and high-quality terminations designed in-house, the Eclipse 7 interconnect is more technically sophisticated than is usual at this price. The Eclipse 7 adds no hardness or glare to the mids, has a smooth yet extended treble, and is overall remarkably transparent. The Eclipse 7 also excels at conveying dynamic contrasts. The Mini-Eclipse 7 speaker cables benefit from technology developed for Wireworld's upper-end products, and feature the company's DNA Helix geometry, 14-gauge, OCC-copper conductors, and interchangeable spade or banana terminations. Nicely made and quite flexible, the Mini Eclipse 7 has a very neutral balance that imposes little character of its own on the music. Its midrange and treble are extremely clean in texture, and the treble is open and detailed without being bright. Together, these two Wireworld products offer tremendous value. (forthcoming)



MIT Vero Reference

\$899

Music Interface Technologies (MIT) has brought its unique technology to the personal audio arena for the first time in the Vero Full Range (\$499) and Vero Reference (\$899) headphone cables. MIT cables and interconnects have always employed terminated networks housed in chassis integral to the cable. In the Vero headphone cable, the network is in a small slim enclosure that doesn't interfere with the cable's portability. The Vero Reference has all the hallmarks of MIT's ultra-expensive high-end offerings, particularly when used with the company's outstanding Vero 50ex headphone amplifier (\$3195). The treble is a bit gentler and more relaxed than that of other headphone cables, which makes for greater engagement and less fatigue over long listening sessions. Notably, the Vero doesn't trade smoothness for resolution and transparency; the MIT cable and amp are as good as Robert Harley has heard in revealing low-level and individual musical lines in complex passages. The Vero Reference cable also diminishes the feeling of "inside the head" imaging by seemingly projecting images slightly outward toward the front and expanding stage width. And as is characteristic of MIT, the bass is rich and full, with a solid sense of body and weight. MIT's Vero Reference is the best headphone cable we've heard. (Ultimate Guide to Headphones and Personal Audio)



MIT ACC268

\$80,000

MIT's ACC268 "Articulation Control Consoles" are undoubtedly the world's most expensive speaker cables, but they are unlike any cables extant. The control consoles are 45-pound enclosures housing the network along with unique adjustments that allow you to tune the cable to your system. This tuning has nothing to do with tonal balance, but rather with dynamic verve in different parts of the frequency range. Exotic and justifiable in only the highest of high-end systems, the ACC268 delivers a sound quality that is unmatched by any other cable in RH's experience. (274)

Our Top Picks Cables and Interconnects



Kimber Kable Hero Interconnect/8TC and 12TC Speaker Cable

Interconnect \$219/1m pr.; 8TC speaker \$453/8' pr. with SBAN connectors; 12TC speaker \$688/8' pr. with SBAN connectors

Yielding only a tiny bit in control, top-end transparency, and detailing to PS's reference, Hero's bass lives up to its name, prodigious in amplitude and definition. Dead neutral, with dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in an essentially grain-free presentation. The 8TC speaker cable has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what is happening fore or aft, ideally mediating detail, liveliness, tonal neutrality, and dynamic contrasts within a very realistic, holographic soundstage. (138, 146)



Nordost Purple Flare

Interconnect \$269/1m pr. (\$55 per addl. half-meter pr.); speaker \$439/1m pr. (\$78 per addl. one-meter pr.)

Featuring Nordost's classic flatline configuration the Purple Flare is a rung below the current incarnation of Blue Heaven, yet it's a little trip to heaven on its own. It really shines in the midband with a driving, slightly forward energy that imparts dynamic liveliness to all genres of music. There's significant macro-dynamic punch resulting in orchestral crescendos, full-blown percussion licks, and brass-section blasts of impressive authority. It evinces the transient speed of a sprinter, yet never suggests any serious tonal balance discontinuities. Its treble range is wonderfully free from major constrictions. Bass is not quite as fully exploited in extension or bloom, and there's a bit of coolness in the middle treble. But, on balance, it is as open and as transparent as any cable in this class. (236)



WyWires Blue Series

Interconnect \$299/4' pr. (RCA or XLR); speaker \$449/8' pr.

The first WyWires cable reviewed in TAS, Blue is also one of the most pliable, easy-to-handle cables available; yet its sound is anything but humble. Its sonic signature is energetic, with a potent midrange, plenty of drive, and a slightly cooler, forward tilt. The Blue's sonics aren't juiced-up or overheated, but if the goal is high transparency and black-satin background silences it will prove a real achiever. It exhibits good rhythmic pace and a wonderful facility with inner detail. An unpretentious component that lets the quality of the recorded performance speak for itself, the WyWires puts the music upfront and centerstage. A truly auspicious debut. (236)

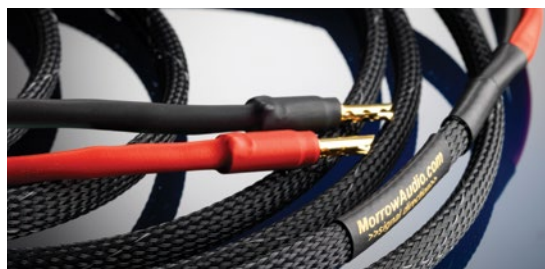


Cardas Audio Iridium

Interconnect \$320/2m pr.; speaker \$500/3m pr.

The Iridium interconnects and speaker cables are made from Grade 1 OFHC 99.9999% copper Litz wire with a cross-field geometry in an insulated FEP jacket. The geometry of the wiring is said to be a Shielded Star-Quad 4 arrangement in Golden Ratio proportions bound together by PTFE tape, while the hybrid shield is spiraled tin-plated copper surrounded by carbon-impregnated PTFE tape. The geometry of the speaker cable is a twisted pair using natural cotton filler wrapped together with a PTFE tape. The Iridium interconnect/speaker combination leaned toward being even in sonic distribution with a slightly warmer-than-neutral presentation with no enhancements and a slight reduction in low-level resolution and bass dynamics. If the system could use a bit fuller sound with additional bass authority in the power region and some reduction of upper-midrange and lower-treble energy, the Cardas Audio Iridium might fit that requirement. (274)

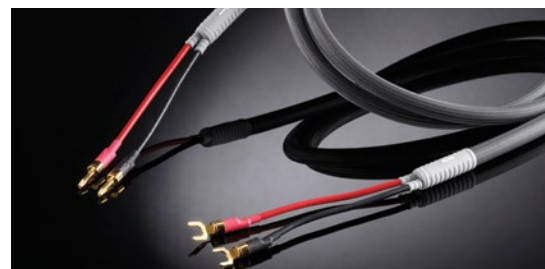
Our Top Picks Cables and Interconnects



Morrow Audio SP7 Grand Reference Speaker and MA4 Reference and MA7 Grand Reference Interconnects

Interconnect MA4 \$329/1m pr., MA7 \$1399/1m pr.; speaker \$1499/2m pr.

A relative newcomer to the cable ranks, Morrow Audio's wires performed like an old pro. Nicely weighted, with a solid midrange sweetspot, these wires had terrific low-level resolving power, solid bass, and good soundstaging and dimensionality. The MA4 Reference interconnect was mildly dry on top; the more expensive MA7 interconnect spiced up the harmonics and added just a bit more juicy texture and complexity to the sound. Overall, this was a cable that defied expectations in its range. (259)



Shunyata Research Venom

\$350/1m pr. (\$700 for a 2m pr.)

The new Venom Series represents fifteen years of Shunyata Research's ongoing technical innovation and custom-parts engineering. To that end, the company uses the finest available metals, such as expensive Ohno Continuous Cast Copper. Also, Shunyata has included new features like hollow-core (VTX) conductors. JM found the Venom speaker cables and interconnects to be very natural, open, and dimensional. In much the same way that Shunyata's designs strive to keep distortion out of the signal path, its cables get out of the way of the music. The Venom speaker cables and interconnects offer a reasonably neutral palette with pleasing delicacy of detail and rich warm harmonics. To borrow a favorite expression from JV, they are quite *gemütlich* and sweet, without glare or etching. Some might find them a touch polite dynamically (I don't), but that's a matter of personal taste. Quite a high-quality signal cable that performs well and doesn't cost a fortune. (266)



Audience Au24 SX

Interconnect \$1800/1m RCA pr. and \$2400/1m balanced pr.; speaker \$3290/2.5m pr.

Audience's latest flagship wire produces a ripe midrange weight and sweetness, vivid dynamic contrasts, and a profound sensitivity to delicate volume gradations. Ultimately, it possesses a brilliance that casts light in the deepest corners of the soundstage and restores air and lift to harmonics. A particular strength of all these cables is the often hard-to-achieve blend of the transient, the tactile, and the reverberant. The Au24 SX struck a fluid and natural balance of ease, articulation, and immersiveness. Superb. Flexible and easy to handle, too. (269)



AudioQuest Wind

Interconnect \$1995/1m pr.

Wind features AudioQuest's best materials and technology, including Solid Perfect-Surface Silver (SPSS) conductors and the Dielectric Bias System (DBS) that polarizes the dielectric with a battery attached to the interconnect. This is an interconnect that competes with top-tier wire at a less-than-stratospheric price. Wind has very little sonic effect on the signals passing through it, and consequently, preserves the music's dynamic verve, spatial dimensionality, and timbral purity. It has a very clean, open, and lively sound, detailed and vivid, but not in an analytical way. If you want a cable that softens transients and removes a bit of excessive zip from your system, this isn't it. Wind is a great interconnect by any measure, and though not inexpensive, is nonetheless a superb value. (254)

Our Top Picks Power Products



Audience aR2/aR12/aR12-TS/aR6-TSSOX
\$695/\$4995/\$8995/\$6450 (Au24 SE-i upgrade, +\$1735; Au24 SX upgrade, +\$4200)

The aR2p, Audience's compact, dual-outlet power conditioner and isolation device is based on the massive 12-outlet versions of which Audience is rightly proud. Used with a CD player, its enhancement of soundstaging, dimensionality, and depth can be profound. With demanding high-current devices such as amplifiers, transients seemed a little soft. An audition is recommended. Further up the Audience food chain are the 12-outlet heavy-hitters. The aR12p was found to be an extremely effective conditioner, capable of delivering significant improvements in bass definition and depth, overall resolution, and soundstage depth. Its build-quality is nothing short of exemplary. At the top of the hill is the new TSS line with Teon capacitors. (162, 179, 186, 235)



AudioQuest Niagara 7000
\$7995

The 81-pound Niagara 7000 is the brainchild of AC design engineer Garth Powell, whom AudioQuest hired and essentially gave two years and carte blanche to design a new power device from scratch. Powell says the Niagara 7000 is not a power conditioner; rather, it relies on dielectric-biased AC isolation transformers to reduce distortion without reducing current to any component, including amplifiers. Essentially, the Niagara seeks to create a power bank for your amps so that it doesn't have to strain to grab voltage from the wall. The most immediate and salubrious effect of the Niagara was to offer more controlled and refined performance. The treble is definitely smoother and rounder with the Niagara. Overall, the Niagara is a fabulous piece of equipment that adds a sheen and palpability to the music that are utterly addictive. (271)



Shunyata Research Hydra Denali 2000T, 6000T

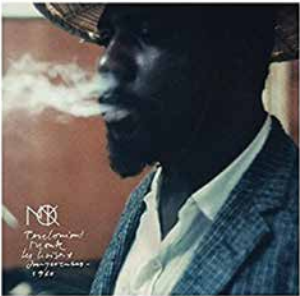
\$2995, 2-outlet 2000T; \$3995, 6-outlet 6000S; \$4995, 6000T tower

These new AC conditioners from Shunyata take what was already the state of the art in AC conditioning to a new level. They are based on noise-isolation technology that Shunyata developed for medical imaging equipment. The sonic result is even quieter backgrounds, which allow for resolution of the finest micro-detail. These low-level cues are vital to a sense of timbral and spatial realism, which are the areas where the new Denali excels. The Denali 2000T offers two outlets; the 6000T provides six outlets in a new vertical form factor. A unique AC cable support system provides a much more secure coupling between AC cord and socket. The 6000S is a shelf version with identical internal parts and performance (\$3995). It's surprising just how much better the Denali system is than Shunyata's Triton. RH's reference. (272)



Synergistic PowerCell 12 UEF, PowerCell 12 UEF S, PowerCell 12 UEF SE
\$4495, \$5495, \$5995

As a skeptic about power conditioners, JHB was pleasantly surprised by the improvements in imaging and dynamics rendered by the Synergistic Power Cell. Unlike many of its brethren (no need to mention them by name, the offenders know who they are), the PowerCell did not appear to limit current. Instead, it offers even blacker backgrounds and lowered grit and distortion. Particularly noteworthy were the smoother treble and improved suppleness of musical lines. The PowerCell is pleasingly lightweight and attractive. Synergistic head honcho and lead designer Ted Denney III, it must be said, continues to advance the state of the art when it comes to filtering electricity. As with all conditioners, however, auditioning the Synergistic in your own system is a must, as the quality of electricity varies markedly from home to home. (192)



MUSIC: TOP RELEASES OF 2017

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Top Ten New CDs of 2017



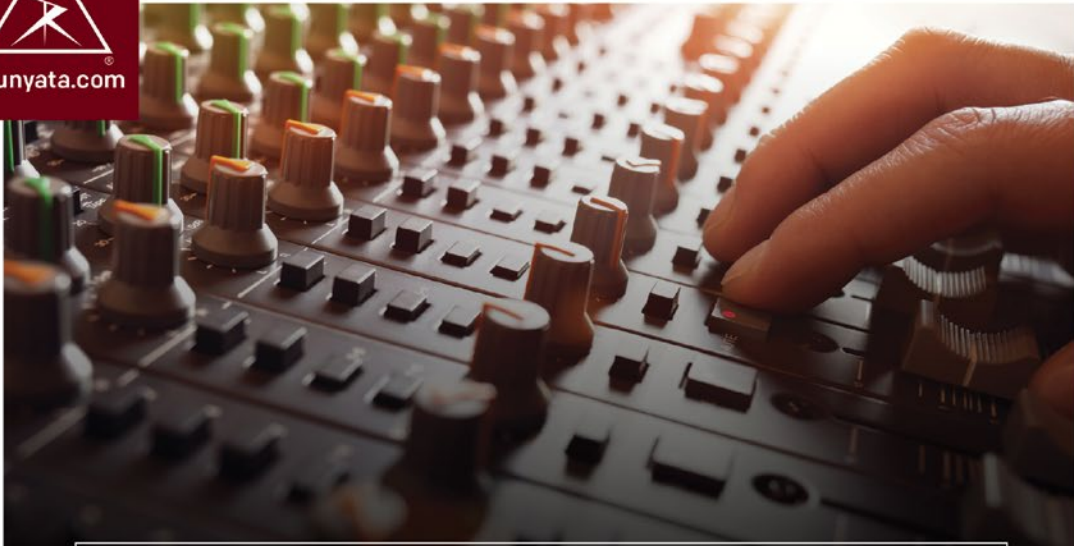
MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Alison Krauss: *Windy City*. Capitol.

On her latest album Alison Krauss teams up with veteran Nashville producer Buddy Cannon for a debut solo album so lush it recalls the sainted pairing heard on the late 50s and early 60s recordings of Patsy Cline and Owen Bradley. Songs like “Losing You,” the ballad “I Never Cared for You,” and the title track sting with heartache and aching steel guitars. These ten tracks are classic songs Krauss heard around the house while growing up, and many glow with a warm nostalgia. Her rendering of the John Hartford composition “Gentle on My Mind,” popularized by Glen Campbell, recalls Dolly Parton at her finest. Cannon, who has written hits for George Strait and produced

albums for George Jones, Willie Nelson, and Merle Haggard, has a real affinity for traditional country. Of course, Krauss has shown her considerable vocal chops time and again, as the leader of Alison Krauss and Union Station, as a contributor to the Grammy-winning soundtrack *O’ Brother Where Art Thou*, and as half of a hit duo with Robert Plant. Sonically, *Windy City* is drenched in gorgeous string arrangements, and rich, dark chocolate tones. **Greg Cahill**

Further Listening: Alison Krauss & Union Station: *Lonely Runs Both Ways*; Alison Krauss/ Robert Plant: *Raising Sand*



WHEN SOUND MEANS EVERYTHING...
For Mastering Engineers and Record Producers at the top of their craft, fidelity to the source is critical. Shunyata Research products have earned endorsements from those at the forefront of the recording community because they deliver on the promise of uncompromised fidelity.

“Shunyata products have transformed our Sonoma system, used during the mastering process for the 5.1 mix of ‘The Dark Side of the Moon’...”
“Highly recommended.”
James Guthrie, Grammy-Winning Producer/Engineer (Pink Floyd)

“Shunyata’s power cables have provided me with an extremely clean and transparent foundation by which I can check/approve test pressings with full confidence.”
Steven Epstein, Grammy-Winning Mastering Engineer

“Especially, with my 2 track tape machines, sound with the Shunyata system was definitely more transparent and clear. I would highly recommend Shunyata products to any professional audio/video facility.”
Vlado Meller, Grammy-Winning Mastering Engineer

“We first put the Shunyata system to test on a monitor system that had problems with noise and clarity. The result was less noise with an improvement in overall sound quality. We now use the Hydra’s on our Model 2 converters, AES router and main monitor system.”
Clayton Wood, Senior Engineer.
SkyWalker Sound

“These are not subtle tweaks. As unbelievable as it may seem, there was a greater improvement than changing the whole front end. I could not recommend Shunyata products highly enough.”
Rick Rubin, Grammy-Winning Record Producer

“With digital sources it was almost as if we had switched from 44.1k/16 bit to 96k/ 24 bit. We now run all our analogue machines, workstations and the mixing console from the Shunyata equipment.”
Andy Jackson, Senior Mastering Engineer.
David Gilmour’s Astoria Studio: UK

“Having the Hydra Denali 6000T at the beginning of the recording chain gives us certainty that we are working with the cleanest power-conditioner available.”
Eric Lynn, Chief Mastering Engineer:
Shangri La (Rick Rubin) Studio

“All of us associated with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra are extremely pleased with results gained from using the Shunyata Research Hydra and power cords in our reference recording studios.”
Peter Polten, Manager:
Vienna Philharmonic, Austria

Top Ten New CDs of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

The Rolling Stones: *Blue & Lonesome*
Interscope.

The Chicago blues greats of the 50s and 60s recorded raw, passionate music that leaped out of the grooves of 33s, 45s, and 78s. Their two- and three-minute songs told stories of betrayal and revenge. Often the lyrics were shouted from what sounded like an echo chamber while harmonicas wailed and electric guitars added their dirty, distorted cry. Those records inspired budding musicians not just around America, but also overseas, where acolytes included future members of the Rolling Stones. And that music is still in the Stones' veins, as their new studio album, *Blue & Lonesome*, makes clear. Devoted to old blues covers, the record dips into the

songbooks of Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, Little Johnny Taylor, Otis Rush, Jimmy Reed, Lightnin' Slim, Magic Sam, and Eddie Taylor. No one saw this record coming, including the Stones, who suddenly shelved an album of new material in favor of this tribute to their early heroes, knowing the sound they were after and the songs they needed. Except for some piano tracks Chuck Leavell later added, the album was recorded in three days. As usual, the drumming of Charlie Watts is a treat, and on this mostly live-in-the-studio recording you once again hear the band playing as a unit.

There's something different, though, about the chemistry here than on other Stones albums. Mick Jagger is clearly out front, and fortunately he steers clear of the vocal mannerisms that have marred some of his recent work. Emotionally, too, he's more convincing here than he's been during his last many performances of "Satisfaction" or "Start Me Up." Boisterous on Little Walter's "Just Your Fool" and Howlin' Wolf's "Commit a Crime," he digs that much deeper on slow, tortured blues songs like the title track and Magic Sam's "All of Your Love."

If you grew up loving the Stones but grew increasingly impatient with their studio work, Jagger's singing on *Blue & Lonesome* will impress you, but something else may move you more deeply. "Midnight Rambler" and "Gimme Shelter" proved that he's a fine harmonica player with a dirty, raspy sound. (Even Keith Richards, often quick to find fault in his co-leader, called Jagger "one of the best natural blues harp players I've ever heard.") On *Blue & Lonesome* Jagger delivers one memorable harmon-

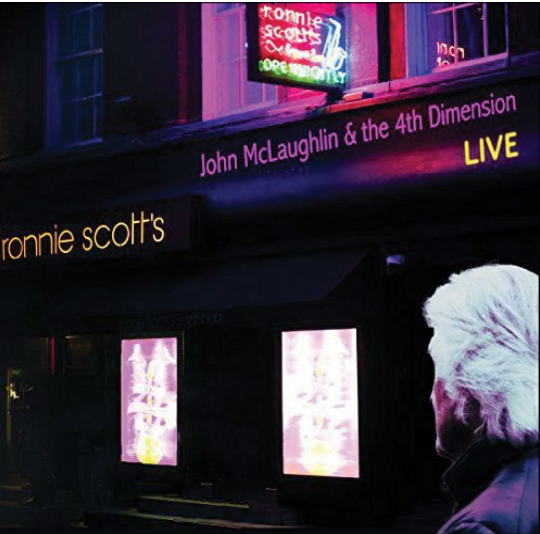
ica solo after another, but when he plays, it's the chemistry of the entire band that's most impressive. Listen to him goad on the rest of the group during the introduction to Little Walter's "I Gotta Go," and then listen to them fire back—now that's what's been missing from recent Stones albums. And check out the harmonica solo on "Little Rain," where Jagger moves up to the high notes, creating squeaky tones that evoke Jimmy Reed, who recorded the song in 1957.

Eric Clapton, who shows up for two cuts, fits in nicely—his solos on "Everybody Knows About My Good Thing" and "I Can't Quit You Baby" are electrifying—but I'm glad the Stones stopped there with the big-name guest artists. By losing their way the Rolling Stones found their way back home, and once again their blues creds are of the highest order.

Jeff Wilson

Further Listening: Little Walter: *Best of Little Walter*; Magic Sam: *Black Magic*

Top Ten New CDs of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

John McLaughlin & the 4th Dimension: *Live at Ronnie Scott's*. Abstract Logix.

It is hard to listen to the sheer burn John McLaughlin exhibits throughout this live album, recorded in March of 2017 at London's famous Ronnie Scott's club, and consider that he is prepared to call it quits at the end of this year due to arthritis. At age 75, McLaughlin is still ripping it up with signature precision chops, intense abandon, and awesome speed. Pushed by his long-standing band, the 4th Dimension, McLaughlin soars on recreations of his 70s Mahavishnu Orchestra classics "Meeting of the Spirits," "Miles Beyond," "Sanctuary," and "Vital Transformation" as well as newer tunes like the energized "Here Come the Jiis" and "Echoes From Then,"

the latter a showcase for drummer Barot. Bassist M'Bappe is showcased on the powerhouse jam "Here Come the Jiis" and the frantic "Vital Transformation" while keyboardist Husband turns in a sparkling piano solo on the minor-key ballad "Gaza City," flaunts singular synth chops on "Vital Transformation" and "New Blues Old Bruise," and engages in some fiery call-and-response with McLaughlin on the Spanish flavored "El Hombre Que Sabia." A must for fusion fans. **Bill Milkowski**

Further Listening: Mahavishnu Orchestra: *Birds of Fire*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Pärt: *The Deer's Cry*. Vox Clamantis, Jaan-Eik Tulve. ECM.

Arvo Pärt participated in the recording sessions for this ECM New Series CD, which has Jaan-Eik Tulve leading the Estonian choral group Vox Clamantis in a program of 13 works. Included are familiar pieces (such as the ineffably beautiful *Da Pacem Domine*, written to honor the victims of the Madrid train station bombing in 2004) as well as several first-time recordings (including *Drei Hirtenkinder aus Fatima*, a brief carol-like piece that was given its premiere by Vox Clamantis). Most of the music is sung a cappella, though several pieces have spare but distinctive instrumental accompaniments. All have a Christian orientation, but one doesn't need to

be a believer to channel the deep spirituality of Pärt's music. The title track, *The Deer's Cry*, sets a 5th-century prayer written by St. Patrick when he anticipated an ambush by hostile Druids. The enemy lay in wait for the holy man and his disciples but saw only a "gentle doe followed by 20 fawns." Vox Clamantis is a professional chorus comprising six women and 11 men with a distinctive rich choral sonority. ECM's recording is superb, possessing both immediacy and an excellent sense of the venue, a Tallinn church. **Andrew Quint**

Further Listening: Pärt: *Passio*

Top Ten New CDs of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Chuck Berry: *Chuck*. Dualtone.

Late-career albums by rock 'n' roll's pioneers have been spotty at best—consider the embarrassments of Bo Diddley and Carl Perkins—but two of the orn'riest of the lot, Jerry Lee Lewis and now Chuck Berry, have revealed undiminished powers in their antiquity. In the latter's case, *Chuck* (announced as his final album months before his death on March 18) is more than impressive—it offers genuinely stunning moments as Berry turns back the clock with impunity. Backed by his club trio The Blueberry Hill Band supplemented by his two guitarist sons and daughter Ingrid on harmonica and joining in vocally on a slow burning blues love tune, "Darlin'," plus guest guitarists Tom Mo-

rello, Nathaniel Rateliff, and Gary Clark Jr. (he adding tasty, incisive soloing to the propulsive opener, "Wonderful Woman"), Berry supports his engaged, commanding vocals by cutting out on guitar as only Chuck Berry can. Items such as classically styled Berry rockers ("Big Boys," "Lady B. Goode"), a grinding blues cover of the pop standard "You Go To My Head," and a slinky, reggae-tinged "Jamaica Moon," are potent exercises, bursting with life and enhanced, sometimes poignantly, by solid sonics. An unforgettable final testament. **David McGee**

Further Listening: Chuck Berry: *The Great Twenty-Eight*; Jerry Lee Lewis: *Mean Old Man*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

European Tour. Nordic Brass Ensemble. 2L (SACD + Pure Audio Blu-ray).

The Nordic Brass Ensemble consists of players from eight top Swedish and Norwegian orchestras. This album of Renaissance wind music is no one-off proposition; the group has been active for over two decades. They play with the power and precision of a crack orchestral brass section plus the give-and-take sensibility of a chamber group. *European Tour* ranges in mood from reverential to celebratory, making stops in Germany, France, Spain, Holland, England, and Italy with a nod to the Janissary music of Turkish military bands. Two members of the NBE are responsible for the arrangements that favor small-bore instruments, e.g., trumpets and trombones—

there's just one French horn, and tuba is used only episodically. The ensemble sonority is lean and richly detailed with upper partials, more exuberant pageantry than choral grandeur. Both a hybrid SACD and a music-only Blu-ray disc are provided. The multichannel mix places a single percussionist behind the listener with the brasses arrayed in a semi-circle up front. In both stereo and surround, the dynamic range and palpability of the HD sound is stunning. For both sonic and purely musical reasons, this was my favorite classical release of 2016. **AQ**

Further Listening: National Brass Ensemble: *Gabrieli* (SACD)

Top Ten New CDs of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Roscoe Mitchell: *Bells for the South Side*. ECM (2 CDs).

Sometimes in jazz, as in baseball, “you can’t tell the players without a scorecard.” Even with one, it might be challenging to know which of Roscoe Mitchell’s four trios—or which recombinant variation thereof—is playing on which piece of this magnificent two-CD recording. Of course, the personalities and proclivities of the individual musicians are crucial to the project, recorded in September 2015 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). And these are stunningly virtuosic players.

So, let us stipulate that the trios were built,

each in unique circumstances, by Mitchell (soprano, soprano, alto, and bass sax, flute, piccolo, bass recorder, and percussion) to include 1) James Fei (soprano and alto sax, contra-alto clarinet, electronics) and William Winant (percussion, tubular bells, glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba, roto toms, cymbals, bass drum, woodblocks, and timpani); 2) Hugh Ragin (trumpet, piccolo trumpet) and Tyshawn Sorey (trombone, piano, drums, and percussion); 3) Craig Taborn (piano, organ, and electronics) and Kikanju Baku (drums and percussion); and 4) Jaribu Shahid (double bass, bass guitar, and percussion) and Tani Tabbal (drums and percussion). And given the weight of history, it’s significant that the percussion played by Sorey, Tabbal, Baku, and Winant included the setups originally used by Mitchell, Don Moye, Malachi Favors, and Lester Bowie in the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the “Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future” group with which Mitchell ascended to the pinnacle of the post-Coltrane avant-garde.

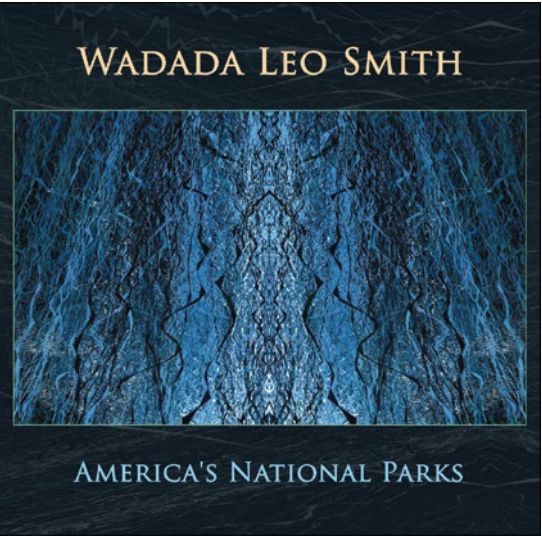
Still, personnel and instrumentation are only part of the story. More crucially, the musical narrative hinges on the now-76-year-old Mitchell’s profound and horizon-extending vision, and *Bells for the South Side* is the most beautifully detailed summation of how he has advanced that vision into what he calls “new artistic territory.” Over the course of two hours of music, there are plenty of cacophonous moments—screeching reeds, bleating brass, turbulent piano, riotous percussion—that will challenge listeners who have limited familiarity with, or tolerance for, the “noise” of free jazz. But those bursts are outnumbered and

given context by the more prevalent passages characterized by sounds that interact, with palpable mindfulness and concentration, in grand spaces where Moron Feldman–like patience and silence seduce the ear.

Except for the title track and “Six Gongs and Two Woodblocks,” the titles of the 12 pieces, such as “Prelude to a Rose,” “Dancing in the Canyon,” “EP 7849,” R509A Twenty B,” “Red Moon in the Sky/Odwalla,” and “Prelude to the Card Game, Cards for Drums, and The Final Hand” provide little indication of what you’re going to hear. And it’s when you detach from expectations and free float with the music that you’ll be carried into realms of meticulous little sounds like those once made by the Art Ensemble of Chicago, rumbling and drifting electronics faintly reminiscent of Ligeti’s *Atmosphères* or *Lux Aeterna*, and ensemble passages that beg to be developed into major symphonic works. Who knows where Mitchell will take us next? **Derk Richardson**

Further Listening: Roscoe Mitchell: *Angel City; Far Side*

Top Ten New CDs of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Wadada Leo Smith: *America's National Parks*. Cuneiform.

With *America's National Parks*, Wadada Leo Smith continues to evolve and challenge himself, his supporting cast, and his audience. Everything about this music seems to come from a slightly unexpected direction, including the fact that a few of his parks are not "real" national parks, and continuing with the instrumentation (Smith, trumpet; Ashley Walters, cello; Anthony Davis, piano; John Lindberg, bass; and Pheeroan akLaff, drums). *Parks* is like a suite for improvisors that is organized with scored material, passages where soloists are backed by the other players, and places where soloists are heard on their own, as well as quite a few group improvisations that

follow preset guidelines of some sort. Smith's group consists of three outstanding jazz musicians and a cellist who, preeminent as a performer of contemporary classic music, can be seen as related to the Third Stream movement of the previous generation. But ultimately one hears it not in such terms, but simply as great music. Modern but not inaccessible, demanding but extremely rewarding, *America's National Parks* was one of the best records of 2016. **Duck Baker**

Further Listening: Wadada Leo Smith: *The Great Lakes Suites; Ten Freedom Summers*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

John Prine: *For Better, or Worse*. Oh Boy.

The first album of new studio tracks in nearly a decade finds the singer-songwriter pairing off with Alison Krauss, Kacey Musgraves, Iris DeMent, Lee Ann Womack, Kathy Mattea, Miranda Lambert, Morgane Stapleton, Susan Tedeschi, Holly Williams, and Fiona Prine on the themes of love and marriage. At 70, Prine has lost none of his wit, sentimentality, or charm, and while ill health has ravaged his pipes, his gravelly vocals give him even more of a rascally quality. The songs are mostly lesser-known country fare by George Jones, Jessie Colter, Hank Williams, Joe Maphis, and others. Performed with DeMent, the opening track, "Who's Gonna Take the Garbage Out," is a tongue-in-cheek take on domestic incompatibil-

ity. The mood turns tender on "Falling in Love Again," featuring Krauss. Tedeschi evokes Tammy Wynette on the George Jones classic "Color of the Blues." The fiddle- and pedal-steel-driven "I'm Telling You," with Holly Williams, is hayride ready. And Lambert is fittingly feisty on Flatt & Scruggs' honky-tonk chestnut "Dim Lights, Thick Smoke (and Loud, Loud Music)." *For Better, or Worse* reminds you how much fun country music can be when a rocky relationship is treated with a dash of levity. **GC**

Further Listening: John Prine: *In Spite of Ourselves; The Missing Years*

Top Ten New CDs of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Cameron Graves: *Planetary Prince*.
Mack Avenue.

For a jazz album, Kamasi Washington’s *The Epic* drew an unusually wide audience after its release in 2015. The four musicians at the core of *Planetary Prince*—pianist and leader Cameron Graves, drummer Ronald Bruner Jr., bassist Steven “Thundercat” Bruner, and Washington—are long-term West Coast Get Down members who played key roles in *The Epic*. The musicianship on *Planetary Prince* is exceptional, starting with a super-tight rhythm section that allows Graves and Washington to take flight on extended improvisations, and the soloists continue to explore new ideas at every turn. On the title track Graves comes in like a whirling dervish and

never lets up; on the unabashedly pretty “Andromeda” his rhapsodic approach reveals his classical background. Washington tends to start serenely and gradually build intensity, slowly adding notes and eventually invoking the full weight of the tenor. There isn’t a dull moment on this almost 80-minute record, and much of it is exhilarating. Ironically, in spite of science fiction themes suggested by song titles like “Andromeda” and “Satania Our Solar System,” while listening to *Planetary Prince* I hear the street, and it sure sounds good. **JW**

Further Listening: Fire! Orchestra: *Enter*; Rob Mazurek: *Galactic Parables: Volume 1*



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Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Macy Gray: *Stripped*. Chesky (LP).

So how did this audiophile album appear that's also getting attention in broader circles? It turns out David Chesky has long been a fan of Macy Gray, and fortunately his invitation to record with four jazz musicians (Ari Hoenig, drums; Daryl Johns, bass; Russell Malone, guitar; Wallace Roney, trumpet) got the nod from the raspy-voiced and free-spirited singer. *Stripped* includes reworked originals (including "I Try" and "Sweet Baby"), covers (Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" and Metallica's "Nothing Else Matters" are highlights), and new songs like "Annabelle" and "The Heart" that stand up to earlier Macy Gray compositions. Although overdub-free audiophile recording sessions

are new to Gray, there's a loose and intimate vibe to the performances that lets you know she's in control. I listened to the vinyl version of *Stripped*, which impressed me with its depth, space, sense of the room, and warm analog sound. I should note, however, that the CD and the download versions of *Stripped* also include "She Ain't Right for You" and "Lucy." Often "extra cuts" translates into "filler," but that isn't the case with this session—so there's that to consider. **JW**

Further Listening: Macy Gray: *On How Life Is; The Id*

Like father, like son.



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Jonathan Valin, *The Absolute Sound*, 12/2015.



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Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Kate Bush: *Before the Dawn*. Concord (4 LPs or 3 CDs).

Kate Bush's surprise announcement of a series of concerts at the Hammersmith Apollo in London in 2014 induced a state of panic in her fans—and justifiably so, as her 22 shows sold out in 15 minutes. Considering that Kate Bush is one of those rare pop musicians who combines a risk-taking aesthetic with broad appeal, that response makes sense.

There was something extra, though, that you wouldn't expect from someone whose career straddles five decades: because her only previous tour took place in 1979, few of the people lucky enough to snag tickets to these shows had seen Kate Bush in concert before. Far from

a nostalgia trip, then, these concerts presented a huge question mark for her fans. Would she stick to the hits, or would her residency consist of a multi-media experience exploring some of the multi-song storylines from her albums?

The answer is, some of both. Culled from the 22 concerts, *Before the Dawn* captures the songs in the same order they were delivered each evening, with one exception: "Never Be Mine" was recorded during rehearsals but dropped before opening night. I listened to the vinyl version of *Before the Dawn*, where the first disc contains live performances of songs from four albums, including the UK top-ten hits "Running up the Hill (A Deal with God)" and "King of the Mountain." During this portion of the concert, where the energy level starts high and keeps building, it's clear that the band accompanying Bush can handle anything she throws at them.

Propelling the group is Omar Hakim, who has worked with Weather Report, Sting, and Dire Straits; he's a fluid drummer who makes songs with the most complex meters seem catchy and plays tribal rhythms without overpowering the rest of the band. In tandem with bassist John Giblin, Hakim gives the other musicians plenty of breathing room, allowing Mino Cinelu (percussion) Jon Carin and Kevin McAlea (keyboards), and David Rhodes and Frissi Karlsson (guitars) to tastefully fill in the rich, expansive soundscapes that recur in Bush's work. Above it all rides Bush, who quickly proves herself an exciting live performer, fully engaged and confident, her now-deeper voice both sensual and powerful. A younger Kate Bush once spoke about music that "really lays it on you," and

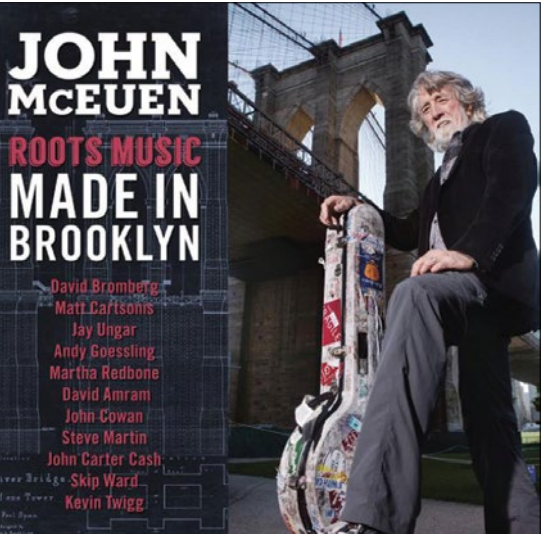
when you hear her belt out "Running Up That Hill" and "King of the Mountain," you learn what she meant by that phrase.

The second platter of the vinyl box set contains "The Ninth Wave," a suite from 1985's *Hounds of Love*, while discs three and four include another suite, "The Sky of Honey" from 2005's *Aerial*. In both cases a fantasy-filled narrative kicks in, complete with characters, narrators, and dialogue. Throughout the album the pristine-sounding vinyl impressed me with its ability to capture the energy of a live show, including a forceful but clean low end that truly seemed concert-like. *Before the Dawn*—the album cover, inner sleeves, and 24-page booklet included with it contain photographs that begin to reveal what the full-scale multi-media stage show looked like—now joins the list of memorable live albums with good sound, stylish packaging, and historic performances.

JW

Further Listening: Björk: *Biophilia Live*; David Bowie: *Stage*

Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

John McEuen: *Made in Brooklyn*. Chesky (LP). Best known as the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s traditionalist, John McEuen is joined by Steve Martin, David Bromberg, John Cowan, Matt Carsons, Jay Ungar, John Carter Cash, David Amram, and others for *Made in Brooklyn*, on the audiophile label Chesky. The nine-song, 180-gram vinyl LP ranges from folk to gospel to country and bluegrass. It opens with a great hoedown of Warren Zevon’s “Dirty Life and Times” and leads Side B with an equally down-home take on Zevon’s “Excitable Boy.” Past glories are revisited in the NGDB’s biggest hit, “Mr. Bojangles,” sung by Bromberg, and a jug-band take on Wee Willie Wayne’s “Travelin’ Mood.” Cowan, one of the great voices of our time, owns the old Dillard &

Clark country rocker “She Darked the Sun.” The 15-song CD is an even bigger hootenanny, leading with the klezmerized fiddle tune “Brooklyn Crossing” and including Flatt & Scruggs’ “Blue Ridge Cabin Home.” A highlight of the CD is McEuen’s showstopping fiddle/banjo/recitation, “The Mountain Whippoorwill.” Recorded in a Brooklyn church, the album sounds warm and real, putting you smack in the middle of it all. That’s a damn fine place to be. **Larry Nager**

Further Listening: New Grass Revival: *Fly Through The Country*; Warren Zevon: *Excitable Boy*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Arto Lindsay: *Cuidado Madame*. Northern Spy (LP or CD). Early in his career, as a member of DNA, Arto Lindsay went full bore primitive, his untuned 12-string guitar sounding as primal as (and stranger than) punk. With his next band, the Ambitious Lovers, a poppier side emerged. As his solo career unfolded, a warm Brazilian influence brought a new persona: an aesthete, albeit a sly, enigmatic, and nerdy one with a penchant for clever wordplay. On *Cuidado Madame* some songs seem to emerge from that same Brazilian beach where Antonio Carlos Jobim watched a young lady saunter past who, fortunately for us, seemed oblivious to his existence. At the same time old-school electronica, funk, and percus-

sion wander into the mix, along with the occasional skronk of the untuned 12-string. The mix of styles and sounds breeds less a fusion than a collision, and the music is richer for it. Underneath it all are good pop instincts; in a more interesting world songs like “Grain by Grain,” “Each to Each,” and “Tangles” would get radio play in both the States and Brazil. But snag it at your local record store and you can hear it all you want. **JW**

Further Listening: Ambitious Lovers: *Envy, Greed*

Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 1, 2, & 8/Nos. 3 & 4/No. 5/No. 6/No. 7/No. 9. Polish Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra, Rajski. TACET.

You're thinking, do we *really* need a new complete set of Beethoven symphonies, especially from an unfamiliar orchestra and conductor? Well, if you're an audiophile of the analog persuasion, you may conclude that these six vinyl releases (Nos. 5, 6, and 7 are available as single LPs while the other symphonies appear on 2-LP sets) are, in fact, indispensable.

The German label TACET's devotion to older recording methodologies is apparent from the generously annotated gatefold album covers that feature large photos of the vintage tube microphones—Neumann U 47s, U 67s, and M

49s—employed to produce these recordings. The amplifiers and tape recorder used at the sessions over a ten-year period (2005–2015) were also tube designs. To assure that the resulting LPs sound as good as possible, TACET spreads the nine works over nine LPs (more commonly, Beethoven symphony boxes end up with eight or even seven discs) and they are half-speed mastered. As is customary for this label, pressings are on gratifyingly quiet 180-gram vinyl. Finally, three LP sides—holding the exuberant finales to Nos. 5, 7, and 9—have been cut *backwards*—that is, you place the stylus down near the label and it tracks to the outer edge of the disc. This ameliorates the problem of “end groove distortion,” a particular problem when an orchestral work ends loudly.

Audio quality is exemplary. String sound is nicely textured and reflects the participation of multiple musicians playing a single part, rather than one mega-violin. Winds are naturally recessed behind the strings and there's a wonderful sense of the recording venues (two churches), especially when a musical silence follows a loud orchestral chord. Dynamics are good, though some may want more impact to timpani strokes.

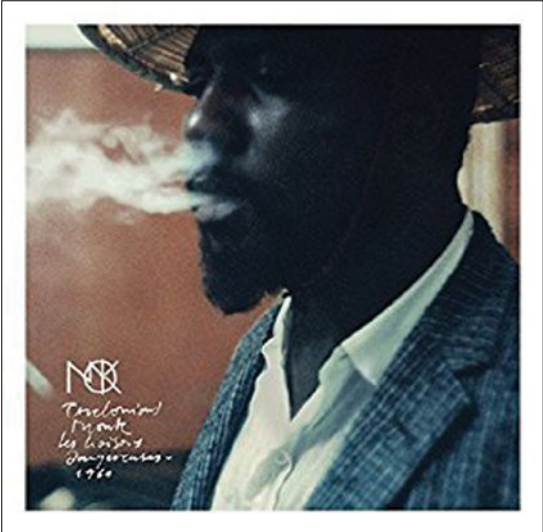
And the performances? They probably won't supplant an experienced listener's favorites. But someone who had never heard a Beethoven symphony, yet knew of the music by its reputation, would quickly understand what all the fuss is about, intuiting the unique character of each work: the mastery of Classical-era form and structure of the first two symphonies; the revolutionary expansiveness of *Eroica*; the dark-

ness-to-light catharsis of the *Fifth*; the rhythmic inevitability of Nos. 7 and 8; the message of noble human purpose that permeates the Ninth. The Polish Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra plays modern instruments yet there are plenty of nods to period practice. Beautiful woodwind playing abounds: listen, for example, to the initial oboe solo in the slow movement of No. 3. The small string section assures clean passagework and excellent string/wind balances. Wojciech Rajski takes an approach that's sensitive but never fussy. Tempo choices are very well judged. There's an intimate quality to these readings that is very involving.

When was the last time you sat down and, over the course of a few evenings, listened to a complete traversal of the Beethoven Nine from a single conductor and orchestra? It's probably been a while. Especially for the analog devotee, I can't imagine a more satisfying way to do so than with this TACET series. **AQ**

Further Listening: Dvořák: Sextet in A Major (TACET LP); Bach: Brandenburg Concertos (TACET LP)

Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Thelonious Monk: *Les Liasons Dangereuses* 1960. Sam Records/Saga (2 LPs).

Les Liasons Dangereuses opens much the way the second half of the 1950s did for Thelonious Monk: bright, bouncy, and upbeat. As Monk biographer Robin D.G. Kelley writes in the notes he contributed to the 48-page booklet that accompanies this unexpected two-LP set, the bebop giant was having great years in 1957 and 1958. He was finally endorsed by critics and embraced by audiences, on the strength of such albums as *Brilliant Corners* and *Monk's Music* and his soon-to-be legendary quartet and quintet stints at the Five Spot Café in New York. And he was being recruited by Marcel Romano, on behalf of director Roger Vadim, to write music

for the upcoming film *Les Liasons Dangereuses*. "Rhythm-a-Ning"—the first track of the first LP of this never-before-released music recorded by Monk in the Nola Penthouse Sound Studios, New York City, on July 27, 1959—is as brisk and buoyant as Monk must have felt a year earlier. His quartet of that moment, with Sam Jones on double bass, Art Taylor on drums, and Charlie Rouse on tenor sax, is joined by French tenor man Barney Wilen, and the nearly six-minute romp is quintessential uptempo Monk bebop. A midtempo "Well, You Needn't" closes side one in a jaunty mood, and on side two "Ba-Lue-Bolivar Ba-Lues-Are" lopes along with a wry smile. But the other seven selections on LP #1 find the then-41-year-old pianist/composer more pensive, etching a breathtaking "Crepuscle with Nellie" with accompaniment by Jones and Wilen, improvising a slow blues (later titled "Six in One"), delivering two solo readings and an extended quartet version (with Rouse) of "Pan-nonica," and wrapping up with the only studio recording of "Light Blue" (quartet) and the brief hymn "We'll Understand It By and By" (with Rouse and Jones faintly shadowing the leader). The story of how Monk came to record these tracks for Vadim's film and how it came to pass that they were not issued on the 1960 soundtrack album (which featured music written by Duke Jordan and performed by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers) is as peculiar as the pianist's melodies and as convoluted as his rhythms. Essayists Kelley, Alain Tercinet, and Brian Priestley tell it well in the photo-laden booklet. We learn how Monk's infamous 1958 arrest, beating, and institutionalization, and his

concomitant bouts of exhaustion and depression crucially shaped the narrative; why he turned to repertoire staples for the score rather than composing new material; and how seven reels of tape from the Tom Nola-produced session were ultimately unearthed when producers Zev Feldman, Françoise Lê Xuân, and Frédéric Thomas went hunting for Barney Wilen recordings. Disc one contains all the music that Marcel Romano edited for the film. Disc two comprises five alternate takes, plus 14 minutes of Monk working with Taylor and the band on "Light Blue." This closing, edifying track may not warrant much repeated study, but everything else does, made more rewarding by the remarkably warm, spacious, and defined, if not sharp-edged sound reproduction on 180-gram vinyl—adding up to a phenomenal surprise gift to Monk devotees. **DR**

Further Listening: Thelonious Monk: *The Thelonious Monk Orchestra at Town Hall*

Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2017



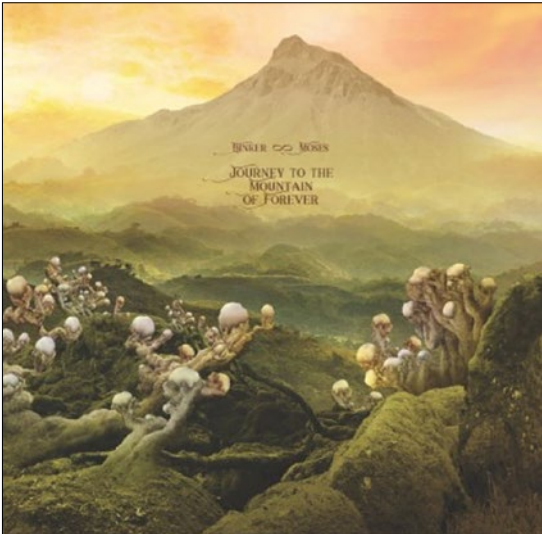
MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Clarence Ashley: *Live and In Person: Greenwich Village 1963*. Jalopy (LP)

Legendary folklorist Ralph Rinzler recorded Clarence Ashley between 1960–62 for Folkways’ classic *Old Time Music at Clarence Ashley’s Vols. 1 and 2*, introducing a young Doc Watson. But Ashley was the star, a colorful veteran of medicine shows and rural vaudeville, the perfect mix of authenticity and professionalism. Vividly recorded at Gerde’s Folk City by master folk engineer Peter K. Siegel, this previously unreleased 14-song set features old English ballads (“House Carpenter”), 19th-century pop (“Bully of the Town”), and gems from the dawn of commercial country recording (“The Wreck of the Old 97,” “May

I Sleep In Your Barn Tonight Mister”). Joined here by Larry “Tex” Isley on guitar and auto-harp, the 67-year-old Ashley continues to play banjo and sing with authority. And *Greenwich Village 1963* is a lovingly produced package, with wonderful liner notes by folklorist John Cohen, a founder of the New Lost City Ramblers, an old-time revival band. Folkways-style, an enclosed booklet by Siegel delineates each song. Anyone who loves that old-time sound needs this LP. And by all means, get Folkways’ *Old Time Music at Clarence Ashley’s* as well. **LN**

Further Listening: Clarence “Tom” Ashley: *Greenback Dollar*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Binker and Moses: *Journey to the Mountain of Forever*. Gearbox (2 LPs).

In a tradition that dates back as far as early Sun Ra and includes works by both John and Alice Coltrane, there were once albums with spiritual and metaphysical themes and/or an element of fantasy. Those records began to seem like ancient history, but recent efforts by Rob Mazurek, Kamasi Washington, Cameron Graves, and others have re-fanned the flame—and now a UK jazz duo is following a similar path. On the first half of *Journey to the Mountain of Forever* vigorous duets by tenor saxophonist Binker Golding and drummer Moses Boyd make bold, direct statements that, on an all-analog live-in-the-studio recording captured on a Studer C37 1/4" tape machine, pack a powerful sonic punch. On the second half of the album, where the duo is joined by guest artists, the music takes a turn toward the otherworldly, especially when harpist Tori Handsley and tabla player Farathy Korwar participate. The interweaving sax lines of Binker and Evan Parker (whose free jazz roots lend that much more historical weight to the proceedings) help breathe new life into spiritual jazz, and again the sound, warm, transparent, and detailed, enhances the experience. **JW**

Further Listening: Alice Coltrane: *Journey in Satchidananda*; Sun Ra: *Pathways to Unknown Worlds*

Top Ten new Vinyl Releases of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

España—A Tribute to Spain. NSO, Wiseman; Middleton. Chasing the Dragon (180-gram LP).

When I was a teenager, direct-to-disc LPs were the cat's meow of sonic excellence. Bypassing several steps in the recording chain—literally feeding mics to the mixer to the cutting lathe with no tape, overdubbing, or multitrack mix-downs—creates an exceptional immediacy of sound and lack of noise. But with no tape involved there's no ability to edit, so musicians must perform single takes, making for a painstaking and not always artistically successful practice. Sheffield Labs set the standard, and that company inspired Chasing the Dragon's Mike Valentine to experiment with direct-cut LPs. *España* is the label's eighth release and

its fourth direct cut. Recorded at London's Air Studio, the record features excerpts from Bizet's *Carmen*, Charbrier's *España*, and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol*, all performed with elegance and verve by Britain's National Symphony Orchestra, Debbie Wiseman conducting, and the alluring mezzo Rosie Middleton joining for the *Carmen* tracks. The disc is alive with a stunning transparency and "there-ness." There's a convincing recreation of the studio's ambience, the instruments breathe with notable air and "bloom," dynamic shadings and textures are as natural as can be. **Wayne Garcia**

Further Listening: Clare Teal: *A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

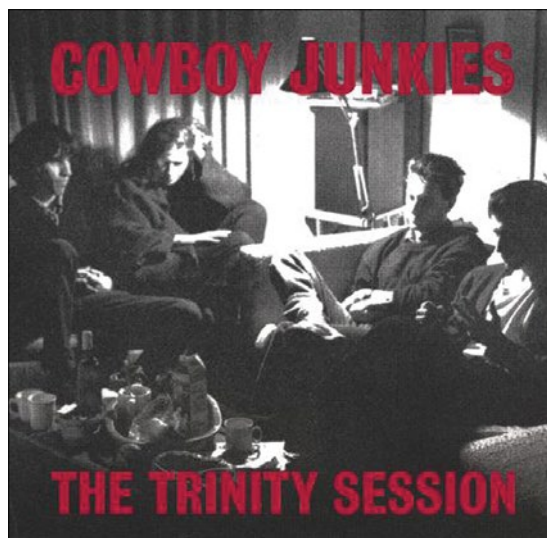
Gillian Welch: The Harrow and the Harvest. Acony (LP).

If you're a musician who cares passionately about the sonics of your first-ever vinyl release, what steps can you take to ensure that the record sounds as good as possible? Here's one option: record the music to tape, buy your own cutting lathe, master directly from the original tapes, actually participate in the cutting process, and plate and press the vinyl at Quality Record Pressings. Gillian Welch and her musical partner David Rawlings took those steps, and the process, though fraught with delays and very expensive, ended up being worth it. On these duets that feature both Welch and Rawlings on guitar and vocals (with Welch singing lead), the

songs resemble short stories where the singer is fully invested in the characters, and the unfiltered lyrics that cut close to the bone fit the stripped-down and intimate sound of this LP. A black noise floor allows detail and timbre to come through fully, and the delicate interplay between the guitars on what are mostly first or second takes gives the music an in-the-moment feel. Kudos to Welch and Rawlings for sticking their necks out and taking the DIY approach all the way. **JW**

Further Listening: David Rawlings: *Poor David's Almanack*

Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●○

SONICS ●●●●○

Cowboy Junkies: *The Trinity Sessions*.

Analogue Productions (two 200-gram LPs).

A critical as well as audiophile darling upon its release in 1988, *Trinity Sessions* has been given a deluxe makeover by Analogue Productions. *Trinity Sessions'* master tape is digital, recorded with an R-Dat fed by a single Calrec Ambisonic microphone. That last detail, plus the acoustics of Toronto's Holy Trinity Church, proved a perfect match for Cowboy Junkies' dreamy take on American country music, which these Canadians had recently discovered on their first U.S. Tour. Balancing originals with a handful of classics, the LP famously begins with Margo Timmins' a cappella rendition of "Mining for Gold" before sliding into her own "Misguided Angel," a fine

country song. These, along with the group's sultry takes on "Blue Moon," "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," and "Sweet Jane" are the best parts of *Trinity Sessions*, which to these ears can be a bit too singular in mood. Regardless, sonics are first-rate, as is Analogue Productions' knock-out reissue. The sound is exceptionally ambient and airy, with a remarkable sense of depth and a seemingly endless stage. Instruments are creamy-rich in texture, as is Timmins' come-hither vocal style. If you love *Trinity Sessions*, you'll want this edition. **WG**

Further Listening: Wilco: *A.M.*; The Velvet Underground: *Loaded*

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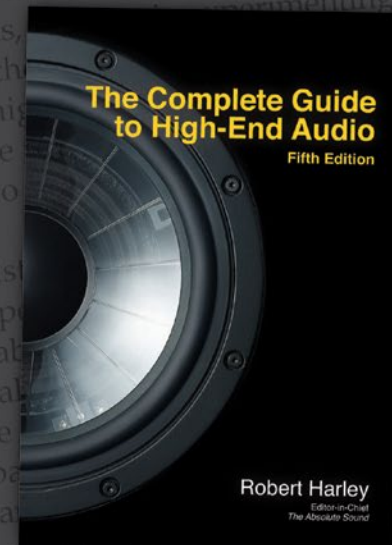
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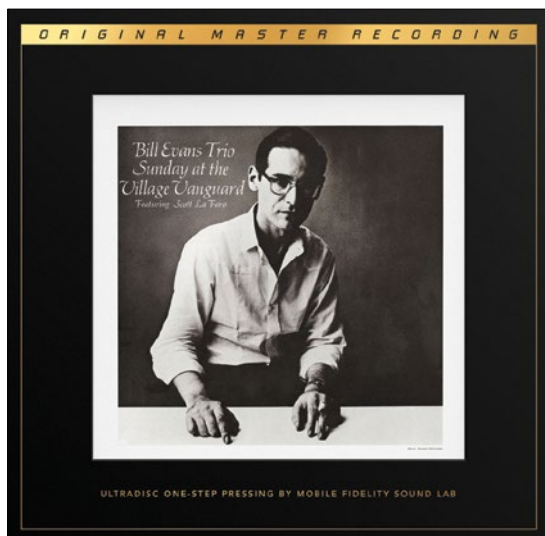
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Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Bill Evans Trio: *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*. Mobile Fidelity (two 180-gram 45rpm LPs).

The Bill Evans Trio played a series of performances at the Village Vanguard in New York City on June 25, 1961. It would mark the last time the jazz trio (pianist Evans, bassist Scott LaFaro, and drummer Paul Motian) would ever record together. Ten days later, LaFaro was killed in a car accident. The album was re-released the following October. The high quality of musicianship was later reaffirmed with the release of *Waltz for Debby*, which featured additional tracks from the same five performances preserved that day and evening in June. *Sunday* is still considered one of the great

live jazz albums recognized by jazz lovers and audiophiles alike for its superb performance and sound. If ever there was an album ripe for Mobile Fidelity's One-Step Process, this one was it.

For audiophiles, reproducing the original performance in all its sonic and artistic glory remains the primary goal. Tape aficionados, for example, would consider a first- or second-generation copy of the master tape their grail—albeit a rare one. For LP production it means closing the “generation gap.” It’s a simple equation—eliminate a step in the process, reduce distortion and noise. As the name implies, One-Step cuts the production process required to manufacture an LP by removing the intermediary steps between the lacquer and the production stamper. One-Step takes the freshly cut lacquer from the lathe, skips the conventional “father” (negative) and “mother” (positive) steps by going directly from the lacquer to a specially formed, nickel-electroplated stamper, technically termed a “convert.” The finished vinyl pressing derives directly from the convert rather than the traditional mother-to-stamper sequence. Since the convert represents just a single, precious stamper, this means very limited production compared to the yield from the multi-step process. *Sunday* further benefits from the fact that the master used for this release is the actual live-to-two-track master tape that rolled at the Village Vanguard.

The results are indisputable. From the moment the stylus touched down these were some of the quietest surfaces I’ve heard, and they permit low level cues and transients to emerge from

the grooves with stunning clarity and focus. Piano timbre and textures are gorgeous yet unpretentious with a harmonic rightness that tickles and sweet-talks the ear. Cymbals and snare sparkle with light and warmth. There’s no better example of the musical mind-meld between players than Gershwin’s “My Man’s Gone Now,” which has LaFaro’s acoustic bass lines darting and diving between Evans’ playful melodic invention and single-note digressions. Quieter sections during Miles Davis’ “Solar” succumb to chit-chat noise and dish clatter, but, as if on cue, LaFaro’s string-slapping bass solo silences the audience mid-chew. This is jazz as a collaborative exchange of equals, each serving the music, taking the lead and unselfishly releasing it back. *Sunday* has received the same white glove presentation as MoFi’s initial One-Step release, Santana’s *Abraxas*, which Wayne Garcia reviewed in Issue 269. Pressed at RTI and limited to 3000 numbered copies, the 180-gram, 45rpm, 2-LP box includes original notes and a pair of Steve Schapiro 8 x 10 photos. A technical and artistic landmark for the ongoing analog revival. **Neil Gader**

Further Listening: Bill Evans Trio: *Waltz for Debby*; George Shearing Trio and Stéphane Grappelli: *The Reunion*

Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Santana: *Abraxas*. Mobile Fidelity (two 180-gram 45rpm LPs).

I'll get right to the point: *Abraxas* fans, do not miss Mobile Fidelity's astonishing new reissue of Santana's 1970 Latin-spiced, blues-rock masterpiece. It will blow your mind. Never before have I heard such inner detail, texture, and wide dynamics, the music emerging from such a deeply quiet background, with such intense immediacy—or derived such sheer musical pleasure from this title.

More on the revelatory sound below, but first a bit on the technology behind it. *Abraxas* represents the first fruit of MoFi's UltraDisc One-Step plating process, in which the mother and stamper steps are removed, thus eliminating

two generations of loss from lacquer to LP. Put another way, that's two generations *closer* to the original master tape. To explain, the traditional three-step process, which is used to maximize efficiency while pressing very large numbers of LPs, goes something like this: from tape to lacquer (positive), to father (negative), to mother (positive), to the stamper (negative), from which the LP is pressed. By contrast, MoFi's UltraDisc One-Step plating process, to quote from company literature, "begins with the original master tapes and a meticulously cut set of lacquers. These lacquers are used to create a very fragile, pristine UD1S stamper called a 'convert,'" which becomes the stamper for pressing the final LP.

There isn't room here to describe every methodical step involved, but during a phone conversation with Josh Bizar of MoFi's parent company Music Direct, I learned that it took two-and-a-half years for MoFi and RTI to perfect the One-Step plating and pressing process. And because the "convert" stampers are extremely delicate, requiring the utmost care in handling, once it "goes," i.e., breaks, so too goes the prospect of pressing any more LPs. MoFi hopes to press 2500 copies of each One-Step title, but there are no guarantees.

Sonically, as I said, prepare to be astonished. From the almost ghostly emergence of Gregg Rolie's opening piano chords and the shimmering percussion that introduce "Singing Winds, Crying Beasts," you'll hear exactly what I mean. We like to talk about black or quiet backgrounds, but I'm not sure I've heard any better than what's embedded in these grooves. The in-

struments are so "there" I felt as if I were sitting in the control booth. And then, Carlos Santana's signature stinging guitar tone cuts through the air like a rapier, settling into a dirty-sweet toned moan as bass and percussion move into the next section. David Brown's funky, chugging electric bass digs clean and deep, and the Latin drums sway the groove forward with a delicacy and texture like you've never heard. Rolie's electric piano again changes the mood until his organ riff appears that brings forth Peter Green's "Black Magic Woman." It's sonically thrilling in the best sense of the word, breathing fresh life into well-known music. MoFi's previous *Abraxas* reissue (2007) was excellent, but this new One-Step edition blows it away.

The packaging, by the way, is deluxe in every way, from the beautifully made box to the individual jackets and sleeves for each LP. Finally, MoFi plans to release only two to three titles a year that will receive this extra-special handling. Like I said, don't miss it. **WG**

Further Listening: Fleetwood Mac: *Then Play On*; Gabor Szabo: *Sidewinder*

Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Rebecca Pidgeon: *The Raven*. Chesky (180-gram LP).

Originally released in 1994, *The Raven* was the solo recording debut of actress and singer-songwriter Rebecca Pidgeon. Pidgeon would release four albums with Chesky, but it was *The Raven* that made her something of an overnight sensation in the audiophile community. With a pure, breathy soprano, Pidgeon is reminiscent of both early Joni Mitchell as well as Sandy Denny, and the mostly self-penned tunes on *The Raven*—some were co-written by her husband, David Mamet—encompass a range of pop, folk, and jazz-inflected styles. Yet for many listeners the standout tune here is Pidgeon's excellent cover of Phil Spector's "Spanish Harlem." Newly

mastered by Ryan Smith at Sterling Sound and plated and pressed at QRP, *The Raven* holds up very well musically, and the minimally-miked recording, using a custom 128x oversampling DAC and tube gear designed by George Kaye, is outstanding in a natural as opposed to spectacular way. Pidgeon's lovely, somewhat delicate voice is very nicely captured and surrounded by cushions of studio air. Her accompanists—piano, guitar, bass, light percussion, and backing vocalists—are beautifully balanced into the mix, and there's an easy, organic whole to the LP that's highly appealing. **WG**

Further Listening: Joni Mitchell: *Ladies of the Canyon*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Laura Nyro: *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*. Analog Spark (LP).

Laura Nyro was 20 when she recorded this, her second album. With Columbia offering greater artistic freedom than her previous label, Nyro holed up in the studio, where she stitched together song fragments into a brocade of jazz- and soul-influenced pop music. When she multi-tracks her vocals during more extroverted fare like "Eli's Coming" and "Stoned Soul Picnic," you can picture her, as a teenager, singing in harmony groups on the streets of New York; when the volume dips and the tempo slows, as on "Lonely Woman" and "Boudoir," you can imagine Nyro gazing out over the city in the wee small hours of the morning. Compared to my original U.S.

pressing of *Eli*, this remastered 180-gram vinyl, cut from the original stereo tapes by Ryan Smith at Sterling Sound and pressed and plated at RTI, does a better job of delivering both sides of Laura Nyro. With a full band behind her, the remastered wax offers more detail and separation. Even better are the quiet parts, where a black noise floor and more full and vivid sound draw you in, especially when Nyro's sexy, soulful voice leaves the speakers. **JW**

Further Listening: Laura Nyro: *New York Tendaberry* (Analog Spark)

Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Bob Dylan: John Wesley Harding. Mobile Fidelity (two 45rpm mono LPs).

The sessions for *John Wesley Harding* took place in Columbia's Nashville recording studios, where most of Bob Dylan's previous album, *Blonde on Blonde*, was also recorded. Bob Johnston was again the producer, and the core sidemen on *JWH*—Charlie McCoy (bass) and Kenny Buttrey (drums)—also played on the *BoB* sessions. Yet the albums are radically different. Musically *BoB* was looser and the sound much fuller, with electric guitar and organ playing prominent roles. Much sparser is *JWH*, where the rhythm section (and especially the electric bass) is relatively high in the mix while Dylan's acoustic guitar and piano are recessed. (Pete Drake's pedal steel on

"Down Along the Cove" and "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" offer the closest thing to adornment.) Somehow the sober, stripped-down recording seems to fit Dylan's new persona (part moralist, part mystic), his lyrics and voice both conjuring up an older America. Razor-sharp in its presentation of clean-sounding drums, taut bass, a tamed (i.e., less shrill) harmonica, and Dylan's rich, understated vocals, MoFi's remastered *JWH* brings things clearly into focus for an album that will always serve as a model for those who believe less is more. **JW**

Further Listening: Various Artists: *A Tribute to Woodie Guthrie, Part One*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

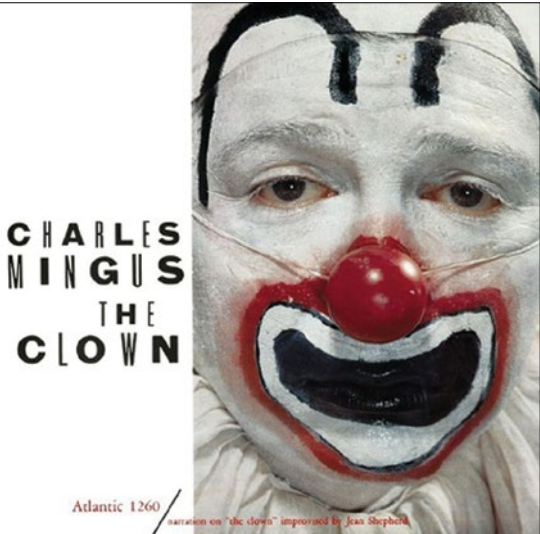
Nojima Plays Liszt. Reference Recordings (two 45rpm 180-gram LPs).

One of Reference Recordings' most beloved LPs, *Nojima Plays Liszt* was recorded in December, 1986. It's been a perennial of this magazine's Super LP List, and now RR has reissued the title as a half-speed mastered 45rpm two-LP set with original liner notes by TAS Senior Writer Robert E. Greene. These, of course, are virtuoso showpieces for the piano, brimming with Liszt's whizzing arpeggios, technicolor tone paintings, and dynamic extremes. Minoru Nojima plays them with a rare touch that combines a mind-bendingly effortless technique with a poet's voice. (The reissue also contains Ravel's *Alborada del gracioso* from the follow-up, *Nojima Plays Ravel*.)

As recorded by Keith Johnson, the sound is fabulous, spectacular, bold, and perfect for this music. From the leaping opening of *Mephisto Waltz #1*, the exceptional clarity and percussive nature of Nojima's Hamburg Steinway burst from one's speakers with a veritable peacock's tail of shimmering color and "hey, check this out!" sass. During slower passages the beauty of Nojima's romantic nature is allowed to shine, as the wide dynamics and remarkable layered overtones in the air between the notes makes for a riveting experience 'til the very end. **WG**

Further Listening: *Nojima Plays Ravel*

Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●○

Charles Mingus: *The Clown*. Speakers Corner (LP).

Charles Mingus’ ascension from bebop side-man through cool-school/Third Stream experimenter to his position as one of the greatest composer/leaders in the jazz pantheon had been completed by the time of this, his second session for Atlantic, in 1957. Here Mingus leads an excellent quintet of then-unknown players: Jimmy Knepper on trombone, Shafi Hadi (then Curtis Porter) on alto and tenor sax, Wade Legge on piano, and Danny Richmond on drums. Knepper stayed with Mingus for several years, and Richmond all the way until the end, but the other two had fairly brief recording careers, and never sounded as good in any other context as

they did with Mingus. The call-and-response of “Haitian Fight Song” and Mingus’ first original blues on record, “Bee Cee,” are as rootsy as a swamp, despite chordal voicings that evoke Ellington and even Monk. We also get “Reincarnation of a Lovebird,” a kaleidoscopic homage to Charlie Parker, and, on the title track, one of those narratives with accompaniment Mingus used so effectively over the years. This classic date richly deserves the Speakers Corner deluxe production it gets with this reissue. **Duck Baker**

Further Listening: Charles Mingus: *Pithecanthropus Erectus*; *East Coasting*



MUSIC ●●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●○

Flying Burrito Brothers: *Gilded Palace of Sin*. Intervention (LP).

In 1969 two ex-Byrds, Gram Parsons and Chris Hillman, put together a band along with Chris Ethridge and Gumby animator “Sneaky Pete” Kleinow. The poppies and pot leaves on Gram’s Nudie suit; Sneaky Pete’s wailing, fuzzed-out steel guitar on the opener; the loping, twangy draft-dodging song “My Uncle”; the aching blue-eyed soul of “Dark End of the Street”; and the gospel-tinted talkie “Hippie Boy”—they all achieved Gram’s goal of synthesizing rock, R&B, and country into what he called Cosmic American Music. *Gilded Palace* is mind-opening, fragile, compelling, and unique, a critic’s favorite and a guiding light for musicians since its release. Intervention

Records’ source is a safety copy of the analog master, and their reissue, remastered by Kevin Gray, blows the competition (4 Men with Beards and A&M’s *Hot Burritos* CD anthology) out of the water. The soundstage here is richer, the vinyl is dead quiet, and there are details I’ve not heard before. The harsh edge is gone from the vocals, and the instruments, especially the bass, sound more integrated. Intervention should have a *Gilded Palace* SACD coming out this summer, and I can’t wait to see what else they have in store.

Stephen Estep

Further Listening: International Submarine Band: *Safe at Home*

Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2017



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

The Beach Boys: *Pet Sounds*.
Analogue Productions.

Produced, composed, and arranged by Brian Wilson, *Pet Sounds* stands as the Beach Boys' pinnacle. The album is brimming with beautiful ballads, exotic instrumentation, lush five-part harmonies, and an aching sentimentality. Recorded largely with session players from L.A.'s fabled Wrecking Crew, *Pet Sounds* was Wilson's chance to step away from songs about surfing and cars, instead crafting tender songs about adolescent love, both newfound and lost, as well as innocence and bewilderment. Analogue Productions' two-disc, 45rpm, 200-gram stereo album boasts exceptionally detailed separation and aptly showcases *Pet Sounds*' shimmering

sonics. Mark Linett produced this stereo mix with an assembled digital multi-track master that synched the original four-track instrumental master with the four- and eight-track vocal overdub master. It was then mixed to 15ips 1/4-inch analog tape with SR noise reduction. How good is it? Carol Kaye's picked Fender P-Bass is tight and punchy on the intro to "God Only Knows," and the clarity reveals the swelling emotion of Carl Wilson's angelic lead vocal to announce that you've entered the Church of Rock 'n' Roll. Say amen. **GC**

Further Listening: The Beach Boys, *Pet Sounds* (mono LP/Analogue Productions)

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Top Ten Classical Downloads of 2017

Andrew Quint

Schreker: *Orchestral Music from the Operas*.

Royal Swedish Orchestra, Renes (96/24)

Scarlatti: *18 Sonatas*. Sudbin (96/24)

Both: eClassical.com

In the 1920s, Franz Schreker (1878–1934) was regarded as the future of German opera, and only Richard Strauss surpassed his dominance in the genre. But he fell from grace, a consequence of critical setbacks and the rise of Nazism, and died a broken man at 58. In recent years, there's been a renewed interest in his operas—he composed nine—with staged performances in Europe and the U.S. Schreker's musical idiom is harmonically advanced, with sumptuous orchestration; the opera plots have densely psychological, supernatural, and erotic elements that should interest those who like Strauss, Korngold, or Busoni. Lawrence Renes leads the highly accomplished Royal Swedish Orchestra in music from four Schreker dramas plus the composer's final work, the sensational *Vorspiel zu einer großen Oper*.

Yevgeny Sudbin's first recording for BIS a decade ago was a CD of Scarlatti keyboard sonatas, and his commitment to this endlessly fascinating body of work hasn't flagged in the least. For me, no artist since Vladimir Horowitz has made such a good case for Scarlatti on the modern piano. Sudbin has chosen a wide-ranging selection of sonatas, from the wistful introspection of K.213 to the unbuttoned virtuosity of K.29, works including both Italian and Spanish influences and even a rare Bachian fugue (K.417).

Purchasing the "Studio" version of one of these eClassical programs gets you both the stereo and five-channel programs (plus Red Book and MP3 files). The Scarlatti's piano sound is solid and dimensional; the Schreker provides rich detail and an expansive, layered soundstage.

Schoenberg: *Kol Nidre*. Shostakovich: *Suite on Verses of Michelangelo Buonarroti*.

Mizrahi, Abdrazakov, Muti, Chicago Symphony Orchestra & Chorus (48/24)

Lalo: *Symphonie espagnole*. Manén: *Concierto español*. Yang, Ang, Barcelona Symphony Orchestra (96/24)

Both: HDtracks.com

Schoenberg's *Kol Nidre* is an intensely serious piece for narrator, chorus, and orchestra that aims to remove any "cello sentimentality" (the composer's words) from a musical treatment of the solemn Yom Kippur prayer. It's a tonal but thoroughly modern work, powerfully dramatic with a mood that's occasionally apocalyptic. Schoenberg was acutely aware of the deteriorating situation for Jews in Europe; *Kristallnacht* occurred just a few weeks after the piece's 1938 Los Angeles premiere. Alberto Mizrahi, a Greek-born cantor, is the highly effective narrator. The Shostakovich song cycle has the deeply reflective quality of much of the composer's late music. The 11 movements—"Truth," "Love," "Separation," "Creativity," etc.—track a protagonist confronting the end of a tumultuously productive life, concluding not with "Death," but with "Immortality." Ildar Abdrazakov's dark but ex-

pressive bass is ideal. The recording, produced by David Frost and available as a CSO Resound SACD, is full and detailed.

A recent Naxos release pairs two Iberian-in-flected works for violin and orchestra, one—the Lalo—part of the standard repertoire, the other largely unknown. Joan Manén (1883–1971) was a Spanish violinist and composer. His *Concierto español* is skillfully constructed, tuneful, and brilliantly orchestrated, a must-have for violin aficionados. Tianwa Yang is a young Chinese player with an electrifying technique, though her virtuosity can register as a bit generic. The recording lacks dimensionality and dynamic impact, and the violin sonority is somewhat wiry.

Prokofiev: *Four Etudes*. Popov: *Grosse Klaviersuite*. Shostakovich: *Sonata No. 1*. Rebikov: *On the Other Side*. Feinberg: *Sonata No. 6*. Yuri Favorin (44/24)

Shostakovich: *Sonata No. 2*. 24 Preludes. Aphorisms. Irina Chukovskaya (44/24)

Both: HDtracks.com

These two well-played and well-recorded programs of (mostly) Soviet-era piano music serve as a reminder of just how challenging it could be for composers and performers to realize their artistic potential in a totalitarian environment. The two Shostakovich sonatas make for a striking contrast. The first (1926) is an aggressively modernistic essay while No. 2 (1942) has a much more affable surface—yet seems subversive with the subtle sense of dis-ease it emanates. The most revelatory music on the two

programs may be the *Grosse Klaviersuite* by Gavriil Popov, who is widely considered to have possessed Shostakovich's native compositional gifts but whose potential was significantly limited by the regime. Samuil Feinberg's early music didn't qualify as "social realism" to the authorities and he retreated into a less abrasive style, but his *Sonata No. 6* is fiercely modern with a Scriabin-like volatility. Prokofiev functioned as an expatriate for two decades; his brilliantly virtuosic *Etudes* were actually written before the Revolution.

The two soloists make for an interesting contrast as well. Irina Chukovskaya, who came of age musically around 1980, was a Chopin Competition prizewinner but wasn't allowed to stay abroad. Thirty-year-old Yuri Favorin has already established an international career. Both programs were 2016 releases on the Melodyia label, until 1989 the state-owned record company. The sound for Favorin's recital is close and clear, with solid bass weight. Chukovskaya is awarded a "wetter" acoustic that's nonetheless quite involving.

Franck: *Piano Quintet*. Debussy: *String Quartet*.

Takács Quartet, Hamelin (96/24)

Elgar: *Introduction and Allegro*. Vaughan Williams: *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. Britten: *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*.

Simovic, LSO String Ensemble (96/24)

Both: Hyperion-records.co.uk

César Franck's *Piano Quintet* in F Minor is about as romantic as late-Romantic chamber music

Top Ten Classical Downloads of 2017

gets, a real bodice-ripper. Franck's wife certainly thought so. She made it clear that she found the work distasteful, perhaps suspecting that its inspiration was an attractive younger female composer studying privately with her husband. To bring off this kind of over-the-top expressiveness without sounding overwrought requires an assured technique plus a total commitment to the ardent excess of the material—and the Takács Quartet and Marc-André Hamelin have both. The pairing of the Franck with Debussy's only string quartet demonstrates that the latter piece, while definitely forward-looking, has a solidly Romantic sensibility at its core, and the musicians really dig in. The string players are widely spread across the soundstage—when I've seen the Takács perform, they do sit in a kind of wedge formation.

A good deal of worthy music for string orchestra was produced in Britain during the first decades of the 20th century, and the three works on Roman Simovic's LSO Live release are among the most popular. The London Symphony premiered both Elgar's work and the Vaughan Williams Fantasia. Britten's Variations, honoring his teacher, was the piece that put the 24-year-old on the map. Some of the fast passagework in the Britten is a bit ragged, but all the performances are musically cogent. The sound is somewhat dull and diffuse, characteristic for this label when recording at the Barbican.

Beethoven: Piano Trios, Op. 70. Vienna Piano Trio (96/24)

Mendelssohn: String Quintet Nos. 1 & 2.

Leipzig String Quartet & Buntrock (96/24)

Both: HDtracks.com

The Vienna Piano Trio has been in business since 1988 with only two personnel changes, so it's no surprise that their performances of two Beethoven trios are technically polished and interpretively sound. The music surges ahead with a strong sense of pulse, and much is made of dynamic contrasts. The slow movement of the D Major work (Op. 70, No. 1) is responsible for its nickname of "Ghost Trio," and the VPT generates an atmosphere of grim eeriness—the upbeat finale comes as a great relief. In addition to seven numbered piano trios, two posthumous works, and an arrangement of the Second Symphony, Beethoven also produced a couple of sets of variations for this instrumental combination, one of which, the *Kakadu* Variations, fills out the program to a generous 74 minutes. The German audiophile label MDG recorded the group in a fairly dry acoustic with a slightly distant but very natural aural perspective.

It's surprising that Mendelssohn's two string quintets aren't as well known as the quartets or the famous Op. 20 Octet. The first is another of those miraculous pieces of the composer's late adolescence, written around the same time as the overture for *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Especially in the later B-Flat Major quintet, the extra viola enriches the sonority considerably, and in both works Mendelssohn's melodic imagination never flags. Violist Barbara Bun-

trock joins the Leipzig Quartet for artfully paced and shaped readings. MDG's sound is articulate, allowing one to track individual instrumental lines without slighting the glorious ensemble sonority.

Beethoven: Piano Sonatas Nos. 2, 9, 14

("Moonlight"), and 31. Rémi Geniet (96/24)

Brahms: Ballades & Fantasies. Denis Kozhukhin (96/24)

Both: eClassical.com

The young French pianist Rémi Geniet's knowingly assembled recital of four Beethoven sonatas is his second release on the Mirare label. The program demonstrates the evolution of the composer's approach to the genre over his career. It also reminds us that Beethoven was not just a visionary but also a virtuoso who played his own music. (There's only one known public performance of a Beethoven sonata by someone other than the composer during his lifetime.) Beethoven was 25 when he wrote his Sonata No. 2, the same age as Geniet when he recorded it, and there's a youthful, free-wheeling technical flair to the modern musician's playing that must have been similar to what the first Viennese salon audiences experienced 220 years ago. The complexity of Beethoven's next-to-last sonata is presented with both its poetry and structural integrity intact. If the sound is a little watery in the higher registers, the non-claustrophobic recorded perspective wears well.

The Russian pianist Denis Kozhu-kin, now in his early 30s, also programs piano music from

the beginning and end of a great composer's creative life. After opening with the infrequently heard Theme and Variations, Op. 18b (an arrangement of a movement from Brahms's first string sextet), Kozhu-kin performs the Four Ballades, Op. 10 with exceptional clarity, and wonderful nuances of articulation and color. The program then finishes with deeply considered readings of the autumnal Fantasies, Op. 116, moving performances that don't take a single note for granted. PentaTone's piano sound has weight and power yet the instrument is recorded at a respectful distance.

Howell & Beach: Piano Concertos. Chaminade: Concertstück in C Sharp Minor. Driver, Miller, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (96/24)

Nielsen: Flute & Clarinet Concertos. Aladdin Suite. Coles, Van de Wiel, Järvi, Philharmonia Orchestra (96/24)

Both: Hyperion-records.co.uk

Since 2001, Hyperion's Romantic Piano Concerto series has introduced listeners to dozens of pieces beyond the usual suspects. Volume 70 programs works by three female composers. Best known is the American Amy Beach (1867–1944), whose four-movement C Sharp Minor Concerto manifests a strong sense of conflict. The "extra" movement is a scherzo that has the piano's percolating *perpetuum mobile* filigree underpinning leisurely melodic phrases for strings and winds. Both Beach and the British composer Dorothy Howell (1898–1982) bring to mind the harmonic world of Grieg, while the

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Frenchwoman Cécile Chaminade (1857–1944) shamelessly referenced Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* motto in her Concert Piece. Danny Driver is the able soloist and Rebecca Miller leads effectively from the podium. The recording is up to Hyperion's usual standards.

Following the considerable success of his wind quintet, Carl Nielsen set out to compose concertos for each member of that chamber music grouping. He delivered on just two, but they're among the most significant 20th-century works for their instrument. The flute concerto captures the gentle, songful, "pastoral" nature of the solo voice, especially as the Philharmonia Orchestra's principal flautist Samuel Coles plays it. The Clarinet Concerto is much more contrarian and wasn't all that well received in 1928; soloist Mark Van de Wiel's performance makes that historical fact hard to fathom. Paavo Järvi closes out the program with the seven-movement *Aladdin* Suite, the music rich in exotic "orientalism." The Suite was recorded more distantly than the two concertos, in a different venue.

Tchaikovsky: *The Queen of Spades* Suite. *Voyevoda* Suite.

New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, Peter Breiner (DSD256)

Poulenc: *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani*. Alain: *Suite for Organ*.

Kjell Johnson (DSD256)

Both: HDtracks.com

Tchaikovsky is best known for his symphonies, ballets, and concert overtures, but he did complete eleven operas. Only *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades* have made it into the standard repertoire. Peter Breiner composes and arranges music for films as well as the concert stage, and he has released more than 150 CDs. (Among his best-sellers is *Elvis Goes Baroque*, for Naxos. I haven't heard it.) Breiner leads the capable New Zealand Symphony Orchestra in suites he's devised of music from *The Queen of Spades* and Tchaikovsky's first opera, *Voyevoda*. The composer wasn't terribly happy with the latter and destroyed the score after a few performances; presumably, Breiner is working from a 20th-century reconstruction. The arrangements, if not inspired, employ the woodwinds very characteristically, though I'm not sure Tchaikovsky would have written the long passages for solo trumpet that Breiner favors. The recording features excellent depth and dynamic gradation.

Poulenc's gothic Organ Concerto gets a highly energetic reading from soloist Kjell Johnson, accompanied by Kjell Ingebretsen and members of the Royal Stockholm Orchestra. The original 1977 analog recording for Proprius (*Cantate*

Domino, Jazz at the Pawnshop) has been superbly remastered in 2xDSD by René Laflamme and the sound is vivid and immediate. The program is completed with a 17-minute Suite for Organ by the tragically short-lived Jehan Ariste Alain, the older brother of the famous organist Marie-Claire Alain. Jehan's fluid take on tonality brings to mind other important French organist/composers, including Olivier Messiaen and Alain's teacher, Marcel Dupré.

Falla: *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*. *The Three-Cornered Hat*.

Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Yamada. 96/24 (multichannel)

Ives: *Orchestral Sets Nos. 1 & 2*. *New England Holidays*. Seattle Symphony, Morlot. 96/24 (multichannel)

Both: primephonic.com

Quite a few non-Iberian European composers (Rimsky-Korsakov, Debussy, and Ravel, for example) wrote colorful "Spanish-sounding" orchestral music, but Manuel de Falla was after something very different—the creation of a style that was international yet authentically Spanish. PentaTone's recording of Manuel de Falla's best-known symphonic music—the program is filled out with selections from *La vida breve* and *El amor brujo*—gets a conscientious reading from conductor Kazuki Yamada and Orchestre de la Suisse Romande that eschews picture-postcard descriptiveness and lets the music speak for itself. Many of the movements are dances, and Yamada establishes a powerful choreographic impulse. Mari Kodama handles

the solo piano role for *Nights* fluently and Sophie Harmon is the outstanding mezzo in *The Three-Cornered Hat*. As of this writing, primephonic.com has around 500 high-resolution multichannel downloads available; this one is characterized by loads of orchestral detail and a seamless soundstage presentation.

The strangeness of Charles Ives' music hasn't diminished one bit since Leonard Bernstein first introduced it to a broad audience in the early 1950s. Ludovic Morlot has a profound understanding of Ives' orchestral syntax and makes no attempt to "normalize" it. All three pieces take their inspiration from American places and historical events, and the composer's view of his country is often conflicted and disturbing, especially when it comes to the Civil War. Seattle's self-produced recording resolves the dense complexities of the scores with exceptional clarity—every musical gesture seems meaningful.

Mazzocchi: *The Temple and Desire*. Ensemble Elyma, Garrido (96/24)

Bien que l'amour... Les Arts Florissants, Christie (96/24)

Both: eClassical.com

Domenico Mazzocchi (1592–1665) was an Italian composer of the generation after Monteverdi. Though he's considered to belong to the early Baroque period and wrote plenty of music in that emerging style, he was also a master of the polyphonic madrigal, which had reached its pinnacle in the late Renaissance. Occasionally,

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unexpected dissonances reminiscent of Gesualdo turn up, and there's plenty of complex part writing. But three "dialogs" on this program from Gabriel Garrido and his early music group, Ensemble Elyma, feature a solo soprano with instrumental support that have a typical Baroque-era clarity of texture. Sonically, echo effects are convincing; balances between the soloists and small choir are good.

Bien que l'amour (Better than Love) is a collection of "airs," both serious and "à boire"—that is, drinking songs. William Christie and Les Arts Florissants—here, five singers and five instrumentalists including Christie on harpsichord—program a recital that includes a dozen airs by Michel Lambert, a prominent musician in Louis XIV's court. There are also songs by Charpentier, Joseph Chabanceau de la Barre, Honoré D'Ambruy, and a couple of airs released discreetly by François Couperin, including his vastly amusing *Epitaph of a lazy man* ("Since wealth, for him, was never worth a thought/But to his time, however, he did carefully attend/He split it into two halves and wisely chose to spend/One fast asleep, the other doing naught.") The collective virtuosity of the singers is exceptional, and all vocal and instrumental timbres are beautifully reproduced. **tas**

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Top Rock/Pop/Jazz Downloads of 2017

Alan Taffel

Jack White: *Acoustic Recordings: 1996–2016*.
HDtracks.com and SuperHiRez.com (96/24)

If you're like me, you think of Jack White as a shrieking singer, slashing electric-blues guitarist, and a writer of songs that suit that mold. Quick, think of a song from the White Stripes' quintessential album *Elephant*. I'll bet "Seven Nation Army" came to mind. See? Yet every White Stripes, Raconteurs, and Jack White solo album includes acoustic works. Overshadowed by their electric track-mates, they're easily overlooked.

But it turns out that when these acoustic tracks are removed from their original context and provided a more felicitous one, they shine impressively. And when gathered together and heard collectively, they reveal a completely different side of Jack White.

On the surface, a double-disc Jack White collection seems like a bad idea. After all, the man's albums all contain healthy portions of filler. (In general, the more recent the album, the greater the percentage.) So it's a welcome surprise that nearly every one of the 26 songs on *Acoustic Recordings* is a gem. Here you will find some of White's most memorable melodies and well-crafted lyrics, each arrangement perfectly suited to the nature of its song.

Given that the tracks proceed in chronological order, those arrangements form a progression. The first tranche is from the White Stripes era—a time when White believed that songs should have no more than three musical elements.

Thus, these are spare tracks—typically a beat keeper of some form, vocal, and either guitar or piano. But "spare" doesn't mean impotent. Meg White's muscular, steady percussion is the perfect foil to Jack's wild nature. Further, you're unlikely to find two players with more telepathic alchemy.

As time went on, White became willing to judiciously incorporate different musical elements. A cello here, a violin there—each adding the perfect embellishment. Finally, with the dissolution of the Stripes and the founding of the Raconteurs, White embraced full-fledged accompaniments. For other artists, a collection of this nature could have been a flat landscape of quiet, self-same works. Instead, *Acoustic Recordings* is a consistently intriguing shared musical adventure.

Further keeping listeners on their toes is the constantly shifting mood, which veers from thoughtful to joyful to playful. The lyrics, too, vary—and reveal an unsuspected range. They include Robert Johnson-style spooky storytelling, B.B. King-like bitch sessions, and more modern updates on the latter, such as in songs like "Honey, We Can't Afford to Look This Cheap," whose lyrics begin: "Well, I want to try/And hold my head up high/In this busted-up Pinto truck conversion/Between the broken concrete and the cloudy sky."

You may have noticed that all these lyrical styles have the blues at their foundation. The same holds true for the music. While White has always been regarded as a blues-inspired musician, those influences have never been plainer than they are here. But this is decidedly

not the electric blues of, say, Buddy Guy (or "the other" Jack White, for that matter). Rather, this is the folk-inflected blues of Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer*, morphing over the course of the set to the shuffling, off-handed R&B so adroitly captured by the early Rolling Stones, and finally to bluegrass and other Americana influences. Yet White never overtly imitates his influences; indeed, he rarely even resorts to standard blues progressions. What this album makes clear is that Jack White is a *student* of the blues—and many other musical forms—who has found compelling ways to make the genre his own.

It turns out that when these acoustic tracks are removed from their original context and provided a more felicitous one, they shine impressively.

White is still a restless musician, so it's far too soon for him to do a greatest hits set. Given that, there'd be no point to a compilation album unless it provided a fresh perspective on the artist and his work to date. In this respect, *Acoustic Recordings* is a resounding success. I don't know what possessed Jack White to release an all-acoustic, double-disc collection, but we can all be grateful that he did.

Turning now to sonics, one might reasonably expect this collection's sound quality to meander significantly. After all, the tracks were drawn from many different albums. Nonetheless, while there is variation, the range is narrow, which frees me to discuss the compilation as a whole,

comparing the downloads to the CD, and also the tracks on the compilation to those of their original CDs.

Those original CDs, for the most part, sound quite good. They're lively, balanced, and not overly grainy. The box set's tracks were remastered by Andrew Mendelson, and I can't say I'm a fan of what he's done. It's clear that Mendelson rolled off the highs and gently compressed dynamics. This helps the few tracks that were originally screechy, but generally doesn't do any favors for the acoustic guitar or cymbals. On the other hand, imaging is tighter, which lends realism and intimacy to the vocals.

Both of the 96/24 downloads are superior to the two-disc CD set of *Acoustic Recordings*. The silver discs emphasize the worst elements of the remastering—flat dynamics and squelched highs—while the downloads at least partially restore those elements. At the same time, the hi-res versions sharpen transients and clean up the small amount of gook on the original CDs. Neither the HDtracks or SuperHiRez download—which are identical—is quite as immediate as those releases. However, they're more than good enough to convey the plentiful rewards of this inspired, eye-opening set.

Top Rock/Pop/Jazz Downloads of 2017

Springsteen in Downloadville

Alan Taffel

The release of Bruce Springsteen's autobiography, *Born to Run*, is a perfect excuse to engage in some reflective listening. But there are so many Springsteen albums—18, not including live sets—that it's hard to know where to begin. I decided to reduce the daunt factor by limiting myself to a compilation recording. However, I soon discovered that even there the selection is vast. According to Wikipedia, there are no fewer than *nine* Bruce Springsteen compilation albums. And that doesn't even include the *seven* box sets.

Far be it for me to say that Springsteen's output doesn't deserve multiple retrospectives. But, again, where to start? Fortunately, for we denizen of Downloadville there are but two options: the long-available *Essential Bruce Springsteen*, and the brand new *Chapter and Verse*, the Boss' hand-selected accompaniment to his book. Both are available from HDtracks and SuperHiRez. Given that much of this material is highly familiar (or should be!) to readers, I'll focus my remarks on the sonic and programmatic merits of the two downloads.

Sound-wise, I was prepared to listen and then deliver a point-by-point comparison between *Chapter and Verse* and *Essential*. As it turns out, no such comparison is necessary. The tracks that these two retrospectives have in com-

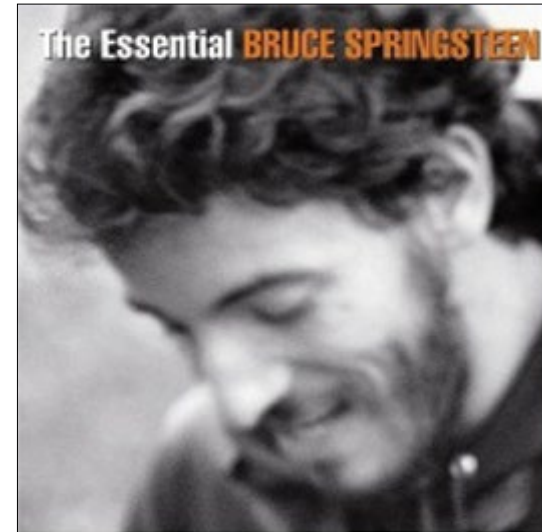
mon sound exactly the same. Furthermore, the HDtracks and SHR versions of each album are indistinguishable.

Not only do all these options sound the same, they all sound good. Naturally, there are variations, since the source recordings encompass a broad span of both time and studio technology. Nonetheless, every track puts Springsteen's voice front and center, which makes understanding lyrics an effortless and rewarding activity.

Instrumentally, Springsteen's songs generally fall into two categories: grand and intimate. On big, dense tracks like "Born to Run" the downloads are consistently easy to hear into. Listeners are in for some delightful surprises in the form of details they missed on lower-res digital recordings. (Clarence Clemons' sometimes-buried sax has never been clearer.) The downloads also fully convey the rhythm and large-scale drama that are germane to these songs. Yet on smaller-scale tracks, such as "The Ghost of Tom Joad," the acoustic guitar, blues harp, and vocals make a bewitching personal connection with the listener.

Of course, both of these compilations are available as CDs, but I found that the CDs don't sound as good. Sometimes it's close. For example, the CD of Springsteen's second album, *The Wild, the Innocent & the E Street Shuffle*, is beautifully uncompressed. The "Sandy" track is detailed and open. Still, the downloads of the same song melt away the CD's high-end harshness, and bass is more substantive.

The difference is even more marked on *The Rising*. The CD is woefully squashed dynam-



ically, and about 50 seconds in a good deal of grit infiltrates the music and never lets go. The downloads have better image specificity, an ability to deliver small dynamic shadings, greater upper-end extension, and a noticeably lower noise floor. Together, these traits account for the aforementioned ease with which one can hear into the mixes.

If the sound quality of the hi-res compilations is generally good, consistently better than CD alternatives, and equivalent to each other, then how does one choose? The decision comes down to content. Here, there are tradeoffs. *Chapter and Verse* would seem to be at a severe disadvantage, since it contains only 18 tracks versus the *Essential Bruce Springsteen's* 37. Yet C&V's selections are well curated and, within the constraints of a single CD,

do a good job of hitting the highlights. The set's real ace in the hole, though, is its inclusion of five unreleased tracks. And these aren't throw-aways; they convey much about the early, pre-E Street Springsteen.

The opening track, "Baby I," was written by Springsteen and is played by his first band, the Castiles. Fascinatingly, in terms of composition, lyrics, and arrangement, the song is nothing like what was to come. Willie Dixon's "Can't Judge a Book by Its Cover" is a rollicking piece exhibiting Springsteen's vocals before he found his true voice. "He's Guilty," as played by another early band, Steel Mill, is an early showcase of Springsteen's distinctive, choppy electric guitar style. "The Ballad of Jesse James" is a track by the first band to bear Springsteen's name, the Bruce Springsteen Band. Finally, there is a previously unreleased early E Street track, "Henry Boy."

While the other option, *The Essential Bruce Springsteen*, lacks these windows into the artist's development, it's far more generous and comprehensive. "Thunder Road," "Rosalita," "Jungleland," "Glory Days," and a host of other truly "essential" tracks surely deserve a place on any self-respecting Springsteen retrospective.

In the end, I can't fault either album. If you want an economical survey of Springsteen's evolution, look no further than *Chapter and Verse*. But if you desire a good-sounding compilation of this artist's best work, *The Essential Bruce Springsteen* is for you.

Top Rock/Pop/Jazz Downloads of 2017

Alan Taffel

The Band: *Rock of Ages*. HDtracks.com and SuperHiRez.com (96/24, 192/24)

"We're gonna do something tonight we've never done before, and we've brought along the best horn men in New York to help us do it." With that, a clearly energized Band launches into one of the most satisfying—even cathartic—live albums ever made. From the downbeat of the first track, "Don't Do It," it's obvious that this is a supremely accomplished group at the peak of its power.

But let's step back a moment. With any live Band recording you're guaranteed four things: uncommon musicianship, vocals surging with character, songs so good they're instant classics, and a joyful, fully-invested delivery. *The Last Waltz* gets the most attention thanks to a stream of all-star guest musicians—Van Morrison, Bob Dylan, Muddy Waters, Joni Mitchell, the list goes on—anxious to partake in the group's 1976 farewell gig. And the concert was filmed by no less than Martin Scorsese, yielding a heralded theatrical film. No wonder *The Last Waltz* gets all the glory! (If you don't have it, I recommend the Rhino CD.)

The Last Waltz's format emphasizes The Band's incredible versatility. The group morphs seamlessly from genre to genre, sounding for all the world like each artist's longtime backup band. But all those guest appearances leave scant space for the group to strut its own stuff. In contrast, 1972's *Rock of Ages* is a showcase

of the material the group honed during its 16 years on the road.

As with *The Last Waltz*, the musicianship on *Rock of Ages* is nonpareil. It's hard to pick a standout player because each subjugates self-indulgence to serving the group and the music. Originally a double-LP set, *Rock of Ages* allows The Band to delve deeply into its own superlative catalog. Robbie Robertson penned most of the tracks, and many (e.g., "The Weight") have long since entered the American canon. Horn-driven arrangements lend the songs added depth, as on "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," or added punch, as with "Chest Fever," the album's euphoric highlight. In sum, while *Rock of Ages* is often overlooked, for fans of The Band's best studio albums and *The Last Waltz* it's a must-own.

But which version? I had on hand the 2000 CD remastered by Ron McMaster and Andrew Sandoval. That disc has plenty of low-end spunk, but the horns and vocals are woefully smothered and rolled off. The HDtracks and SuperHiRez downloads have a tonal balance similar to the CD, but instruments are far easier to pick out due to more precise placement across a broader soundstage. Also, thankfully, both vocals and horns are more pronounced in the hi-res versions. These two downloads sound exactly alike—as, indeed, do the same files at 192. So save your shekels. I would wish for a generally more open presentation, but given the music and the perfectly acceptable sound, the 96/24 downloads are well worth the investment.

Bob Dylan and The Band: *Before the Flood*. HDtracks (192/24)

Before recording their iconic first studio album, 1968's *Music from Big Pink*, The Band served as Bob Dylan's backup group. In 1974, Dylan decided to bring the gang back together for a U.S. tour, the goal being to release his first official live album. The result was *Before the Flood*. On the majority of the songs Dylan serves as frontman, with The Band providing energetic support. The latter take the spotlight, *sans* Dylan, for a generous eight of the album's 21 tracks.

Upon its release, *Before the Flood* was controversial. Dylan himself, initially enthusiastic, later dismissed the effort as an "absurd" display of energy for energy's sake. Listening to it after all these years, you can see his point—at least as it relates to Dylan himself, who mindlessly shouts his way through every electric track. Those vocals are further marred by stylistic oddities, like ending every phrase on a bellowed high note, that quickly grow tiresome.

Ironically, Dylan peaks when The Band is *not* playing. His solo acoustic set, free of bombast and stylistic distractions, is intimate and honest. Unfortunately, it's just three songs long. The Band itself is as great as ever. By then Robbie Robertson had come out of his shell and was unafraid to let his guitar work rip. The rest of the group never lets up either.

Sonically, this is one of the most crystalline live albums I've heard. A few tracks are a little *too* crisp, but every voice and instrument comes through without a trace of muddiness or

distortion. The recording truly puts the listener in a front-row seat to the proceedings.

But Dylan, for the most part, does his material no favors. And Band-wise there's nothing new here. So if you're buying this album, buy it for the history—and the sound.

The Band: *Music from Big Pink*. SuperHiRez.com (192/24); HDtracks.com (96/24, 192/24)

The Band's most important and downloadable releases have already been reviewed in this space—with one notable exception. Somehow the group's debut album has escaped scrutiny. Given TAS' recent focus on The Band, the time seems right to rectify that oversight.

On the surface, *Music from Big Pink*, whose title refers to the Saugerties, NY, house in which the album was recorded, is unspectacular. The songs aren't immediately catchy, voices are unusual, arrangements are bare and in some cases don't do the material any favors, and the musicianship isn't flashy. But repeated listening reveals an album with a wealth of gifts.

Start with the songs. As with The Band's self-titled second album, *Big Pink's* tracks take time to come into their own, but they compensate patience amply. Three of the songs, "Tears of Rage," "This Wheel's on Fire," and "I Shall Be Released," were written or co-written by Bob Dylan and are now considered classics. An additional three came from vocalist/pianist Richard Manuel. They're so good, it's unfortunate that he didn't take a more active songwriting role going forward. Only four cuts were penned by the group's

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main songwriter, Robbie Robertson. Yet one of those was "The Weight," an exemplar of the many great works to follow.

As for the vocals, what at first sounds odd ultimately rings true, as in authentic. From hoarse (Levon Helm) to aching (Richard Manuel), with Rick Danko somewhere in between, every vocal is replete with character (unlike today's interchangeable pop singers) and perfectly suits the music. Further, those unique voices blend beautifully, illustrating that harmonies are one of The Band's underrated strengths.

As for the playing, these are uniformly superb musicians who exercise restraint to better serve the material. Yet the album rewards careful listeners with tasty Robbie Robertson guitar inserts and brilliant flashes from Garth Hudson's keyboards. The arrangements prove more than serviceable, with the sole exception of the morose-sounding "This Wheel's on Fire." The Band corrects this gross injustice on *Rock of Ages*, where the song is transformed from milquetoast to magnificence.

Sonically, I've been mightily impressed by the hybrid MoFi gold disc, whose CD layer allows the listener to clearly hear The Band's handiwork. Top-to-bottom balance is perfect, although tonality is on the thin side across the board. I actually prefer this version to the SuperHiRez download, despite the latter boasting 192/24 resolution. The SHR version's imaging is fuzzy and the balance tips up unbecomingly.

Much better than any of the above, even the MoFi's SACD layer, are the two HDtracks downloads. Both versions retain the MoFi's excellent balance, resolution, and image precision, while significantly fleshing out instrumental and vocal

tonality. The 192 version goes the furthest in this last direction, and also has the least digital noise. That's the version I'd choose. But in any format, *Music from Big Pink*, like *The Band* that followed it, is a timeless album whose modest demeanor shouldn't be mistaken for modest achievement.

Fleetwood Mac: *Tango in the Night*. HDtracks.com and SuperHiRez.com, various versions and resolutions

Lindsay Buckingham has complained that Stevie Nicks and Christine McVie brought the scrawniest of song skeletons to the *Tango in the Night* project, leaving him to transform those nascent efforts into something presentable. If true, so be it. Whatever the process, the result was an album that fulfilled its mission of reminding fans just how great Fleetwood Mac could be.

The reminder was needed because it'd been five years and nothing but solo releases since 1982's lackluster *Mirage*. Indeed, the release of *Tango* was something of a surprise. Even more surprising was the album's return to form. Despite lacking the emotional urgency of the band's masterpiece, 1977's *Rumours*, *Tango* demonstrated that Fleetwood Mac's trio of writers knew better than most how to craft deliciously catchy songs. The album is loaded with them.

Highlights are Christine McVie's "Everywhere," "Mystified," and "Little Lies"; Stevie Nicks' "Seven Wonders"; and Buckingham's "You and I, Part 2" and "Big Love." (Ten years later, at *The Dance* reunion concert, Buckingham

gave a shattering solo acoustic performance of "Big Love" that's well worth checking out on YouTube.) To be sure, there are some duds. With "Welcome to the Room...Sara" Nicks fails to recapture the subtle mystery of the original from *Tusk*. On balance, though, *Tango's* surplus of exceptional songs, exceptionally produced and performed, leaves no doubt as to Fleetwood Mac's greatness.

And now, quite suddenly, there is a plethora of download options. Both HDtracks and SuperHiRez carry no fewer than four versions of the album: the original release in 96/24 and 192/24, a "deluxe" version, and a "remastered" version at 96/24. Your tireless download reviewer listened to all four of them, from both purveyors, plus the original CD. I emerged with a distinct preference.

Whatever the process, the result was an album that fulfilled its mission of reminding fans just how great Fleetwood Mac could be.

First off, the CD isn't terrible. Instruments are well-defined and dynamics are admirable. But tonality is thin and the top is edgy. After hearing it, I was anxious to find something more worthy of the material.

About the downloads, let me first say that I heard no difference between the HDtracks and SHR versions of the respective files, so feel free to pick your preferred vendor. I began my listening with the "plain old" 96/24 download. What a transformation from the CD! The hi-res

version restores the whole bottom end of the spectrum. It also eliminates all traces of top-end edginess. Even at this point I was ready to advise readers who own the CD to toss it and get this download. Yet there were three more versions to audition.

The 192/24 incarnation of the same release might be ever so slightly more open on top, but I didn't find the difference appreciable. Personally, I wouldn't spend the extra money for it, but I wouldn't judge you for doing so. On the other hand, I can't recommend the 96/24 "Remastered" version at all. As with too many remastering projects, the engineer boosted the level, boosted the bass, and called it a day. The result is bottom heaviness and in-your-face dynamics. I wasn't much more impressed with the similar-sounding "Deluxe" version, despite its inclusion of additional material. My suggestion is to opt for the regular old 96/24 version and live happily ever after.

Blondie: *Parallel Lines*. HDtracks.com (192/24); SuperHiRez.com (192/24)

In my memory, Blondie's bounty of hits was spread across many albums. But, nope, nearly all of them are right here on 1978's *Parallel Lines*. Other than "Call Me" and "The Tide is High," every essential Blondie track appears on this, the group's third release. The album recently debuted on SuperHiRez and HDtracks as a 192/24 download.

Those Blondie hits of my memory, which include "Hanging on the Telephone," "One Way

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or Another," "Picture This," "Sunday Girl," and "Heart of Glass," have lost none of their appeal in the intervening years. Nor has Deborah Harry's now-purring/now-snarling delivery or her sexually-aggressive persona, which, for guys at least, never gets old.

Manning the controls in the studio was ace New Wave producer Mike Chapman. His studio technique was to set everyone up in live formation and just record the songs, allowing no more than a couple of takes. The approach imparted a real sense of immediacy to the music and allowed the players to show off their chops. Debbie Harry gets all the glory, but Blondie was a formidable band. The downside of Chapman's approach was that, with no time for elaborate setups, instrumentation had to be basic. This obliged the artist to compensate with variety within the songs themselves, something Blondie admirably achieves.

The original CD's sonics are shameful—tipped up in the extreme and downright unpleasant to listen to. The difference between the CD and SHR's download isn't quite miraculous, but it's not far off. Bass is in far better balance with the rest of the spectrum, and Harry's voice is nicely fleshed out. The HDtracks download splits the sonic difference between the CD and SHR. HDtracks' version has less bass than SuperHiRez's. And although there's blessedly less treble than on the CD, it's still too much. In particular, Harry's voice has an unwelcome bite. There's no contest here: the SHR download is the way to go. **tas**

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