

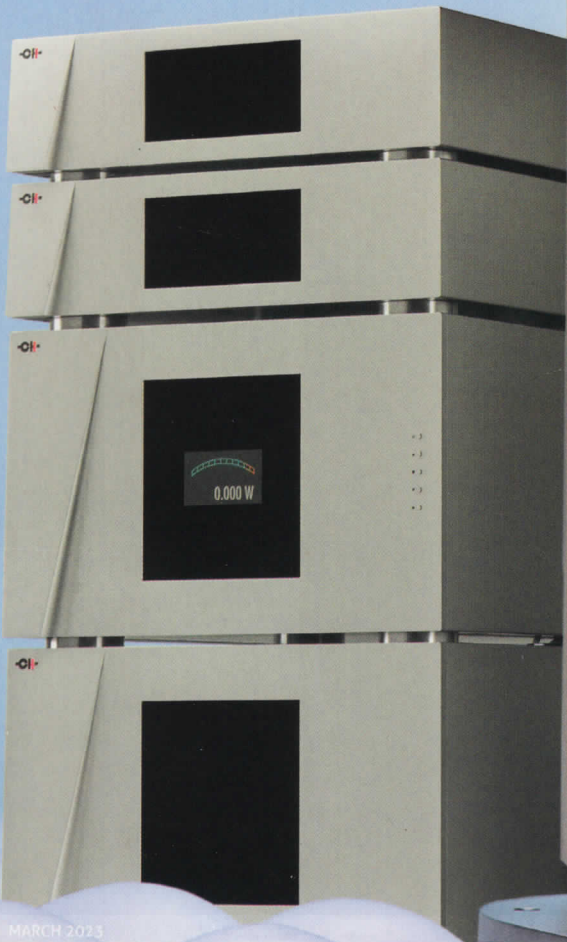
# the absolute sound

THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

MARCH 2023

## The 2023 Editors' Choice Awards

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# 2023

## the absolute sound

# EDITORS'

# CHOICE

# AWARDS

Welcome to the 2023 edition of TAS' Editors' Choice Awards, our annual recommended products feature. On the following pages we present the gear that our editors and writers have selected as most worthy of your consideration. These are components that we ourselves would buy—or recommend to friends and family. Each product category is divided into price ranges, with components listed in order of ascending cost (though some items, like accessories, are listed alphabetically). Each recommendation is accompanied by a capsule review, the original reviewer's name or initials, and the issue number the review appeared in. Note that, in some cases, a product may have been reviewed, but the review has not yet been published; in other cases, a product may not have been formally reviewed, but has still earned a recommendation based on the writer's extensive experience with it. Given that this is the high end, where components generally have long lifespans, some of our recommendations look back several years. At the same time, to be as selective and up to date as possible, we have dropped certain components that appeared on last year's list, usually because they have been discontinued, but sometimes because fresh competition has caused us to reconsider the choice. All the products in this feature have been price-checked and their availability in the market confirmed. In addition, we have created a new category, "Preamplifiers with Digital-to-Analog Converters," to accommodate the increasing prevalence of preamplifiers with integral DACs and, sometimes, streaming and networking functions. DACs with a volume control but without analog inputs remain in the DAC category.



### GoldenEar Triton One.R \$7990

It doesn't require a golden ear to recognize that the GoldenEar Triton One.R isn't merely a good loudspeaker. It's a fabulous one. The Triton One.R offers a lusciously large soundstage, one that will seduce all but the most skeptical—or hidebound—listener. With gobs of bass, excellent transparency, particularly in the midrange, and an invitingly pellucid treble that seems to soar into the ether, the only downside of this loudspeaker is that you must plug the built-in subwoofer section into the wall via a power cord, but then again GoldenEar is supplying you not only with a full-range loudspeakers but also a set of integral subs. There's a relaxed, convivial feel to the music even when playing large-scale works, because the loudspeaker is never stressed. Not only your wallet but also your ears will thank you if you take the plunge on the Triton One.R. JH, 298

### Bowers & Wilkins 805 D4 \$8500

The 800 D4, takes every element of the vaunted D3 up a notch. All models in Bowers & Wilkins latest flagship series, including the 805, get a cabinet with more aluminum, a rear-mounted crossover that yields greater internal volume, an elongated "turbine" for the diamond-coated tweeter, handsome leather trim, and a biomimetic (versus fabric) midrange spider mechanism. The resulting sound is pure 800: resolving, musical, and self-effacing. The drivers and cabinet are so quiet that the subtlest musical flourishes emerge. And despite being stand-mounted, the 805 goes surprisingly deep, with satisfying punch and low-end timbral complexity. A terrific value at \$8500 per pair. AT, 334

### Magnepan MG3.7i \$8795

Maggie's three-way, true-ribbon/quasi-ribbon planar 3.7 successfully addresses three issues that have long plagued "true-ribbon" Maggies: the seamless integration of that ribbon; the retention of detail and dynamic range at relatively low volume levels; and the reduction of "Maggie grain." The solution of these problems combined with the famous virtues of true-ribbon Magnepan produces what is, in JV's opinion, a best buy. Be aware that the 3.7i's are large, power-hungry, and limited in low bass and ultimate SPLs. JV, 221

### Graham Audio LS5/9f \$8800

The LS5/9f is the floor-standing tower version of the stand-mount Graham LS5/9, both BBC-derived models designed by Derek Hughes. The larger enclosure gives the LS5/9f additional bass extension and dynamic capacity, while sacrificing none of the neutrality and articulation of the LS5/9. The result is a speaker with bass and dynamics that are adequate for orchestral and rock music and with an extraordinary truth to the sound of real instruments. (The extreme top is a little rolled off: Fans of "air" may want to add a super-tweeter). An instant classic that far outperforms its understated appearance. REG, 311

### PSB Synchrony T600 \$8999

Hailing from Canada, the T600 is the latest brainchild of longtime PSB designer Paul Barton. It features a tuneful midrange and precise, if limited, bass. The most remarkable aspect of this floorstander is its sweet pellucid treble. A seductive top-end is probably the last thing you would expect from a titanium-dome tweeter, but the

T600 sails through complex passages with nary a smidgen of elevated treble. Instead, it's a supremely linear and precise loudspeaker that punches well above its weight. The T600 offers many of the qualities of a fine mini-monitor with more heft and palpability. JHb, 323

### Monitor Audio Gold 300 \$9500

The three-way, four-driver, bass-reflex Monitor Audio Gold 300s really impressed, thanks to their neutrality, powerful presence, and substantial sound output. There was a pleasing solidity to their presentation—courtesy of the cabinet construction and driver technologies—that won us over across more and more source material. Of course, the Gold 300s' "fidelity to source" tendencies tended to reveal both a recording's finesse and flaws. This isn't to say that the 300s ever sounded sterile or analytical, but rather that they generally got out of the way to show you what was there in the recording. This made listening with the Gold 300s a voyage of discovery. If you appreciate or collect well-recorded material, the Monitor Gold 300s will enable you to reap its rewards. JM, 300

### Sonner Audio Legato Duo \$9500-\$11,900 (depending on finish)

From Boston-based Sonner Audio, Legato Duo offers an invitingly warmish signature that makes music more listenable rather than merely challenging. The mids and treble are faithful to timbre and demonstrate a presence range of fine articulation without veering into forwardness or being prone to sibilant exaggeration. Low-frequency response moderates steeply with a bit of compression but the drivers move a notable amount of air, giving the

Legato Duo a heavier footprint than expected. Vocals are a strong suit—balanced, firmly weighted, and reproduced with liveliness. A fine debut and a welcome addition to the high-end neighborhood. NG, 293

### Graham Audio LS8/1 \$9700

Designed by Derek Hughes, this two-cubic-foot, stand-mounted box speaker, with one mid/bass driver and two tweeters, is the latest of several descendants of the original Spendor BC1, developed by Derek's father, Spencer Hughes. The grand tradition is fully served, but the new speaker takes full advantage of modern driver technology; in particular, it will play much louder than the BC1 and has superior bass behavior. The LS8/1 has a very low level of resonant coloration and an essentially neutral mid and treble balance, with a slight warmth further down. The overall result is remarkably like live music, with suitable recordings. A classic revisited and an instant classic itself. REG, 323

### Vandersteen Audio Treo CT \$9995

A loudspeaker of uncommon musicality and precision. Building upon the R&D that went into 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 immersion. 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 serious bass slam



**Bowers & Wilkins 801 D4****\$38,000**

The fourth generation of this iconic loudspeaker continues the development of a product that was advanced for its time when introduced 43 years ago. In addition to the “reverse wrap” enclosure design first seen with the D3 iteration, the current 801 has a reconsidered internal Matrix construction to further control unwanted resonances. Also new is B&W’s Biomimetic Suspension System that improves the mechanical behavior of the midrange driver’s spider, and the woofers now sport anti-resonance plugs to reduce flexing. These changes, and other refinements, result in a loudspeaker that’s fearless when it comes to dynamics and low-frequency reproduction, but also delivers all the spatial and tonal subtleties of the best recordings. AQ, 325

**Rockport Technologies Atria II****\$38,000**

The Atria 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 can throw 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. A terrific speaker and a great value, too. AT, 241

**Magnepan MG30.7****\$39,995**

This giant, four-panel (two panels per side), four-way, ribbon/quasi-ribbon line source loudspeaker from Magnepan is the best Maggie JV has heard. With its highly coherent

wave-launching, free-standing imaging, vast soundstage, phenomenal resolution of inner detail, lightning transient response, incomparable naturalness of timbre, and total lack of box coloration and diffraction, the 30.7 is markedly less “there” as a sound source (and markedly more lifelike on voice and acoustic instruments) than almost every dynamic-speaker-in-a-box, no matter its price. The best buy in an ultra-high-end loudspeaker (and one of the best high-end buys of all time), the 30.7 earned JV’s most ecstatic recommendation and TAS’ 2017 Overall Product of the Year award. JV, 279

**Vandersteen Audio Kento****Carbon****\$41,700**

After a long and hugely successful run, Vandersteen’s Model 5 has been replaced with the significantly improved Kento Carbon. This four-way, five-driver system features two side-firing 9" woofers powered by an integral amplifier, a 6.5" tri-woven mid/woofer, Vandersteen’s 4.5" Perfect Piston midrange, and the company’s unique 1" carbon tweeter. An 11-band analog-equalization system allows you to flatten the in-room response below 200Hz. The first-order crossovers and slanted baffle assure that the Kento is phase-coherent at the listening position. Sonically, the Kento is remarkably coherent from top-to-bottom, speaking with one voice. Bass is excellent, with outstanding clarity, aided by the ability to fine-tune the bottom end to your room. More than a worthy successor to the venerable Model 5. Andre Jennings, 312

**German Physiks Borderland Mk IV****\$42,000-49,000 (depending on finish)**

Finding an omni-directional speaker that works in

real-world rooms can be a challenge. Finding one that is simple to set up, somewhat affordable, relatively easy to drive and sounds like music is near impossible. Yet German Physiks’ Borderland Mk IV, with its Dicks Dipole Driver (DDD) omnidirectional transducer mated to a 12" down-firing woofer in a sealed enclosure accomplishes just that. The Borderland offers a sense of live music that few other speakers convey. With a single driver reproducing the frequencies from 190Hz to 24kHz, the speaker represents a near acoustic point source, creating a holographic stage that is both palpable and believable. And that 12" sealed driver truly brings the goods while never losing its grip or unraveling. The buyer needs to decide if the unorthodox appearance is suited to their taste. DO, 316

**Joseph Audio Pearl 20/20****Graphene****\$43,999**

The Pearl 20/20 Graphene floorstander comprises two modular sections. The lower half contains twin 8" woofers, and the upper module contains a 7" graphene-coated midrange and 1" Sonatex tweeter. When combined, the two sections form the complete speaker. The Pearl 20/20 Graphene further improves upon the sound of Joseph Audio’s excellent smaller Perspective2 Graphene, especially in the bass with additional power and extension. New FEA advancements in the graphene midrange and subsequent crossover adjustments have yielded a transducer with solid imaging, great soundstaging, excellent clarity, and a stress-free yet detailed presentation. AJ, 309

**Raidho TD2.2****\$46,500**

To say the TD2.2 adds a reasonable measure of bass

weight and extension to the overall sound of its smaller sibling, the fabulously high-performing TD1.2 mini-monitor, would be an understatement. The rearported, 2.5-way TD2.2 sounds much grander in scale and impact than its seemingly modest differences would lead one to expect. The TD2.2 delivers fatigue-free high resolution in the top end and midrange, coupled with satisfying fullness in the low end. Add in expansive soundstaging and focused imaging, and you have a very easy-to-like transducer. Raidho uses its own in-house drivers—one TD ribbon tweeter and two 6.5" mid/woofers layered with five thin coats of tantalum and industrial diamond on an aluminum cone. Music sparkles through the TD2.2. It invites you to listen closely. KM, 331

**Estelon XB Mk II****\$48,000**

The curvaceous cabinet is only the beginning of the XB’s delights. The Estelon delivers incredible detail and spatial resolution, giving music an uncanny tangibility. Further, dynamics and timing are so precise—allowing stylistic nuances to come through so clearly—that the listener feels directly connected to each musician. The trade-offs for these manifest benefits are low sensitivity and a tweeter that skirts the edge of aggressiveness. The XB should be paired with brawny amps, installed on their included spikes, and positioned with minimal toe-in to minimize these effects. (New Mk II version not yet reviewed.) AT, 253

**Voxativ 9.87****\$49,990**

The horn-loaded Voxativ 9.87 has advantages that neither planar nor dynamic speakers offer. First, it is very high in sensitivity, which allows you



mends deploying the Gotham in stereo pairs. JV, 254

### Wilson Audio Subsonic

**\$38,900**

Most subwoofers today pack a large driver into a small enclosure, and then massively equalize the drive signal to compensate for the lack of cabinet volume. The Wilson Subsonic is not one of these. Rather, the Subsonic's enclosure is as big as it needs to be for the woofers to operate correctly without resorting to equalization. About as tall and half as wide as a refrigerator, and weighing 610 pounds, the Subsonic requires a serious commitment of space. The three 12" long-excursion woofers in the ported enclosure deliver bass response that is flat to an astonishing 10Hz (-2dB). Make no mistake; the Subsonic will reproduce music's lower octave with majestic power and grace. By reproducing low-frequency spatial cues, the Subsonic greatly expands the soundstage, resulting in a markedly higher level of realism. Requires an outboard crossover, such as Wilson's ActivXO, along with a power amplifier. RH, 308

## INTEGRATED SYSTEMS

### Bluesound Pulse 2i/Pulse 2i

**Mini**

**\$699/\$499**

This tabletop, wireless all-in-one brings the expertise and sensibility of PSB Speakers' founder Paul Barton to the integrated system. The solidly built Pulse 2i accommodates a wide range of inputs, but will most likely be driven by streaming sources via the BluOS app. The sound has a warmth and richness in the bass and midbass that are often missing in the category. The Pulse 2i projects a sound far larger than its size would indicate and has the ability to fill a mid-sized room. The mids and treble are warm and engaging, again defying expect-

tations. Pulse 2i Mini simply a smaller version. Forthcoming

### KEF LSX II

**\$1399**

The KEF LSX IIs are wireless marvels. There is no tether necessary to connect the primary and secondary speakers, although using the tether bumps resolution from 24-bit/48kHz up to 24-bit/192kHz. The KEFs sport sleek, gorgeous looks, including real cloth wrappings that feel almost luxurious. They're powered by a 70W Class D amp for the mid and bass driver, and a 30W amp for the tweeter. The inputs are simple: Bluetooth, Wi-Fi streaming, one optical connection, and a 3.5mm analog AUX port. Their small size belies their huge sound: Bass is big and tight when adjusted via the Control app, and the midrange is a delight. For anyone looking for an all-in-one solution in a small package without sacrificing sound quality, the KEF LSX IIs are highly recommended. DK, 335

### Naim Mu-so 2

**\$1799**

It may be similar in size and shape to a generic tabletop system, but once you hear what this compact system (with three smallish cone drivers per side, 75W on tap for each driver, and integrated preamp, DAC, streaming, and DSP) can do, there will be no mistaking it for a typical all-in-one unit. It is a different creature entirely. Its best qualities compare favorably to those of systems of separate components up to about twice its price, though it will not play super-loud (an expected result for amps and speaker drivers of this size) and won't give you the kind of wide, deep soundstage that you get from individual speakers. Nonetheless, the Mu-so 2 is supremely musical. MK, 306

### Sonus faber Omnia

**\$1899**

Sonus faber's eye-catching, wireless, streaming audio system takes a bold *abbondanza* approach by maximizing its use of DSP and woofer-tuning to offer a high-end component-like experience. With its satisfying, midrange-forward energy, NG found the Omnia offered expressive vocal imaging on both male and female singers. Bass impact was surprisingly robust and dynamic. Most effective was its ability to throw a room-filling and immersive soundstage well past the boundaries of its cabinet. Omnia balances high style, sound, and size in a package that first-timers, as well as long-time admirers of this iconic Italian brand, can enjoy and be proud of. NG, 334

### KEF LS50 Wireless II

**\$2799**

Built to celebrate KEF's 50th anniversary, the original LS50 monitor spun pure coincident-driver magic thanks to its blushing pink-gold Uni-Q coaxial midrange/tweeter. Visually arresting and sonically satisfying, the LS50 delivered tonal neutrality at just the right pitch, with superb midrange sonics, full-bodied presence, and potent midbass punch. Comes now an "all-in-one" version of this same speaker, the LS50 Wireless, with built-in amplifier, DAC, streaming preamp (Tidal- and Roon-ready), and DSP room-EQ that gives you the same sonics without any need for outboard electronics. JM, 286

### Cabasse Pearl Akoya

**\$3798 (\$800 stands)**

A marvel of packaging and sophistication, Cabasse's three-way, tri-axial sphere comes loaded with built-in Class D amplifiers, a DAC, and DSP control with room correction. It's also Wi-fi equipped. All you need to add

is a high-resolution streaming service or a thumb drive, and the Akoya becomes a fully self-contained high-performance system—all in an impossibly small enclosure the size of a honeydew. Sonically it conveys an engaging, forward, midrange-centric personality. Imaging is stable and well-focused. Overall response is fairly linear. Ultimately, there's some roll off in the treble range, but nothing to set off alarm bells. Bass extension dips into the 50–60Hz range with surprising impact and amplitude. Cabasse has redefined high-end portability. NG, 322

### T+A Caruso

**\$4450**

This tabletop system measures just under a foot in each dimension yet is packed with seven drivers (including a down-firing 6.7" woofer) and three switching power amps. The Roon-ready Caruso supports just about any source (FM, Internet Radio, optical disc, USB stick) and streaming platform. Though the stereo spread can't compete with an audio system where the two channels are more than a foot apart, the robustly constructed Caruso offers satisfying bass slam and dynamic coherence, even if asked to play loud at a party. AQ, 322

### Bowers & Wilkins Formation Duo

**\$4998 (stands are an additional \$999/pr.)**

Inside each cabinet, the Formation Duo incorporates wireless-streaming-capable DACs and amplification, all under DSP control. You simply plug in the Duo, and with a few taps on the Formation app, you're streaming music. The Duo's wireless technology is significantly more advanced than that of off-the-shelf solutions. This is no mere "lifestyle" product; the tweeter is a patented driver



### Classé Delta Stereo \$12,999

The Montréal company's stereo amplifier is a brute, designed with difficult loads in mind. It's rated at 250W into 8 ohms and 500W into 4 ohms, and it's doubtful that too many loudspeakers will faze it. The first 12.5W are pure Class A, so significant heat is generated. A silent thermostatically activated fan pulls room air into the device through a louvered vent that's expelled to the rear—the top of the amp barely gets warm. There are VU meters in front, two pairs of robust binding posts behind, and Navcom footers underneath. The amplifier provides plenty of muscle when needed but is also capable of subtle dynamic gradations. AQ, 312

### Gamut Audio D200i \$13,990

This 200W solid-state amplifier has much of the liquidity, three-dimensionality, and image density of tubes as well as the expected virtues of solid-state: tonal consistency, frequency extension, and bass control. It runs relatively cool, is tonally neutral, and should be very reliable, producing a deep soundstage and enough power to drive most speakers well. KM, 229

### Bryston 7B<sup>3</sup> \$14,990/pr.

Bryston's 600W 7B<sup>3</sup> monoblock power amplifier is a wonderfully musical product. It offers feature-rich, real-world practicality and the ability to drive a wide range of speakers thanks to its very high power/current delivery. If you favor blockbuster solid-state amplification and would rather not spend more on audio gear, the Bryston 7B<sup>3</sup> should be on your short list. KM, 269

### Triode Corporation TRX-M300 \$15,750

Think of the M300 as a modern version of the Western Electric WE 91A, complete with a 274B rectifier, a pair of 310A receiving pentodes, and a Psvane WE300B. Image solidity, according to DO, can only be described as magical; solid-state amps would kill for it. Bandwidth and transient speed are impressive for an SET amplifier. Don't expect bone-crushing bass slam but prepare to be surprised by its dynamic prowess and the breathtaking acceleration of an orchestral crescendo from soft to loud. Speakers of 96dB+ sensitivity are advisable. TAS' 2013 Low-Powered SET of the Year. DO, 236

### Constellation Inspiration Stereo 1.0 \$16,000

The 200Wpc Inspiration Stereo 1.0 brings the same circuit design and some parts from Constellation's \$250k Hercules monoblocks to a more accessible price point. Constellation has done an amazing job of maintaining many of the qualities that made the Hercules such a standout, including a highly resolved treble that never crosses over into the analytical. Transparency and timbres are also first-rate. The icing on the cake is that the Stereo 1.0 incorporates circuit refinements that improve bass performance beyond that of its predecessors. RH, 249

### PS Audio BHK Signature 300 \$16,498/pr.

This 300W (into 8 ohms) hybrid (tube input stage/MOSFET output stage) monoblock is the distillation of all that celebrated electronics designer Bascom H. King has learned about amplifier circuits. The result is a component so rich, natural, and highly resolving that reviewer Anthony H. Cordesman bought the review samples. A

genuine masterpiece from an old master. AHC, 259

### VTL S-200 Signature \$18,000

VTL's Luke Manley and his team have made the 200Wpc S-200 relatively idiot-proof for listeners who enjoy the sound of vacuum tubes without the need to geek-out or otherwise futz around with them. The Signature range features fully balanced differential circuitry and zero global negative feedback, which not only ensures stability under a wide variety of load conditions but also brings greater musicality to a variety of source material. Beyond its outstanding sound and flexibility in both triode and tetrode modes, this KT88-based stereo amp presents music as a cohesive and engaging whole. WG, 290/334

### Parasound JC 1+ \$18,998/pr.

Redesigned by legendary audio engineer John Curl (hence the JC designation), the 83-pound Parasound JC 1+ not only packs a wallop, but also offers a refined and elegant sound, particularly in the treble. A hefty power supply and power transformer ensure superb image stability and rock-solid bass. When it comes to a sense of hall space and dynamics, these monoblocks are difficult to surpass, especially when reproducing blockbuster orchestral works. For power-hungry loudspeakers that feature severe impedance curves, the JC 1+ will provide what amounts to a musical benediction. JHb, 316

### \$20,000 and above

### Cary Audio 211 FE \$22,995/pr.

A zero-feedback design, the all-triode 211 FE monoblock updates the classic 211 that Cary has produced for 17 years. Though it may lack the ultimate wallop of a powerful

transistor unit, and may—if you're into large-scale classical or hard rock—run out of juice before you want it to, this is one gorgeous-sounding amplifier—pure, exciting, and expressive. WG, 205

### Audio Research Reference 160S \$24,000

This stereo version of ARC's celebrated Reference 160M mono amp combines two channels of the same 140-watt circuit into one chassis with the same aesthetics as the 160M—including lighted “floating” output meters on the faceplate window—for \$10,000 less. The sound is simply gorgeous: detailed, fluid, commanding, alive, and highly musically communicative. Rather than a tube amp trying to sound more like a solid-state design, the 160S delivers more of what many solid-state amps can't quite fully realize: outstanding 3-D soundstaging, image density, and tonal complexity—while still providing excellent frequency extension, dynamic control, and overall resolution. Built like a tank (100 pounds) with a removable tube cover, triode and Ultralinear modes, and auto tube bias and monitoring functions, it comes close to being an ideal tube amp in its price category. KM, 312

### D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression S350 Stereo and 550 Mono \$27,250/\$47,500 pr.

The Progression series of electronics from Dan D'Agostino brings some of the circuits and technology of the vaunted Momentum line to a lower, but still significant, price. The stereo version (monoblocks are available) is a powerhouse, delivering 300Wpc into 8 ohms. As with all D'Agostino designs going back decades, the Progression can double its output power with each halving of



power amplifier, AM found the best pure audio performance to be had through the NQ's analog preamplifier or DAC inputs. The sonic result (given all the complexity inside the beautiful box) is unexpectedly hear-through, making exploration of the ever-expanding world of musical possibilities... better. AM, 301

### \$5000–\$10,000

#### Bryston BR-20

**\$6795 (with HDMI option)  
\$7595.00)**

The Bryston BR-20 is one of the most successful mergers of a solid-state analog preamp with a DAC and built-in streaming available today. A model of preamp ergonomics, operationally it proved to be glitch free. An honest broker in terms of tonal accuracy, it hued to the straight and narrow, and reflected a “just the facts ma’am” fidelity. BR-20 was also superbly quiet, with bass response that had a combination of grip and authority that are the hallmarks of the best preamps of this type. Since the BR-20 unwaveringly reproduces what’s on the recording, those who prefer a little added sweet frosting will find the Bryston stubbornly neutral. A superb headphone output comes standard. Tempting options include an HDMI board and a phonostage. The BR-20 operates effectively via its web user interface, but a handy aluminum remote control is also included. NG, 323

#### T+A DAC 200

**\$7125**

The DAC 200 is the heart of T+A's innovative Series 200 mini-stack. Like its sister components, the MP 200 player and A 200 power amp, the DAC is a fully discreet design. There are even separate signal paths for PCM and DSD. And, unlike most DAC-Pre's, the 200 has a true

stepped-ladder analog volume control. Outside, the unit is retro-attractive; cue the dual multifunction meters. Cue, too, the stunningly fast, open, and dynamic sound, which is a dead ringer for that of some far more expensive Swiss gear. Like the entire Series 200, the DAC 200 is a great deal and spellbinding to listen to. AT, 335

#### Classé Delta PRE

**\$9999**

Classé's newest stereo preamplifier features a sophisticated yet intuitive touchscreen GUI that facilitates navigation of the component's vast functional capabilities. The Delta PRE has its own excellent DAC (an AKM 4497 chipset that supports native DSD) and a phono stage that allows for the choice of cartridge type and impedance loading in seconds. The analog-domain stepped attenuator has 400 steps: You can be confident of finding the right volume setting. The preamp doesn't have automated DSP room correction, but instead offers advanced parametric EQ capabilities. Even without such wizardry, however, Classé's Delta PRE is as transparent and uncolored as the best. AQ, 312

### Over \$10,000

#### Bel Canto Black EX DAC/Controller

**\$13,500**

This highly sophisticated preamplifier and DAC makes it easy to access streaming services such as Tidal. In addition to being Roon-ready, the Black EX offers full MQA decoding. There's even a phonostage and headphone amplifier. The Black EX also has special provisions for using a subwoofer and can be controlled via an app. The Black EX is highly revealing of details in even the most complex and dynamically demanding musical passages.

The extensive digital processing doesn't add a hint of hardness or edge. Even standard-resolution sources sound superb through the Black EX. AHC, 290

#### Theoretica Applied Physics BACCH-SP adio

**\$23,800–\$27,800**

The BACCH-SP adio is a controller/DAC with both analog and digital outputs. What distinguishes it from dozens of other products that can be described as such, and its *raison d'être*, is the “Band Associated Crosstalk Cancellation Hierarchy” filter developed by Dr. Edgar Choueiri at Princeton University. Interaural crosstalk—the tendency, in most listening environments, for sound from the right loudspeaker to get to the left ear and vice versa—has negatively impacted the realistic representation of spatial cues since the dawn of stereo. Choueiri has solved the problem, and the results with the great majority of stereo recordings are quite remarkable: the sort of envelopment associated with multichannel playback, as well as superior representation of a venue's reverberation characteristics. Most exceptional is an advance in dimensionality and image specificity throughout the soundfield. Seventy years worth of two-channel recordings have the potential to take on previously unappreciated palpability and spatial detail. AQ, 333

#### CH Precision C1.2

**\$36,000–\$49,000 depending on configuration (\$53,000–\$66,000 with X1 power supply; \$128,000 three chassis/dual mono/triple supply)**

The C1.2 is a uniquely flexible control center that can accommodate all manner of digital inputs: SPDIF, USB, streaming, and raw DSD via the proprietary CH-Link between the C1.2 and its companion

D1 CD/SACD transport. An excellent, optional analog input board is also available. All sources are treated to some of the most advanced digital technology extant, and all sound richly detailed and dynamically impactful. The C1.2's performance with data streaming from a NAS drive deserves special mention for stripping away the glaze that is all but unavoidable with USB. Best used with balanced inputs and outputs. AT, 239

#### T+A SDV 3100 HV

**\$38,900**

The SDV 3100 HV DAC/preamp must be one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive digital products ever made. Able to handle virtually any of today's formats, the SDV 3100 HV boasts a host of advanced digital and analog circuits that have been refined over the company's 40-year history, including custom digital filters, advanced upsampling algorithms, dual-differential DACs, and a custom discrete DSD converter with an entirely separate signal path. Sound quality is exceptional in all formats and modes, with the PCM conversion approaching the best out there, and DSD reproduction in a class by itself. The battleship build-quality, extensive features, fabulous casework, and beautiful fit 'n' finish suggest a product of twice the price. RH, 300

### PHONOSTAGES

#### Under \$2000

#### Schiit Audio Mani

**\$149**

The Mani is one of the most cost-effective phono preamps on the market. It has four gain settings and two loading options via DIP switches on the bottom and works equally well with both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges. The Mani delivers wonderful soundstage depth while keeping the noise floor to a minimum. It handles even