

TURNTABLES

A+

SME 20/12: \$28,000 without tonearm

"Among the best-built turntables in the world," the SME 20/12 is a tank-like machine weighing more than 75 lbs. It has an oversized 14.3-lb platter, and a 17.6-lb aluminum-alloy subchassis secured by ten O-rings for each of four suspension towers and will take 12" arms. Its three-phase, eight-pole motor uses an electronic controller to achieve precise speeds of 33.3, 45, and 78rpm. Though it lacked the bottom-end weight and macrodynamic range of even more expensive turntables, and had a slightly dry, analytical sound, the SME offered a very low noise floor and stable image specificity, said MF. (Vol.32 No.5 WWW)

TO NEARMS

A

SME 312S: \$3995

The 312S is a 12" tonearm with a tapered armtube made of pressure die-cast magnesium for strength, rigidity, and low mass. With fit'n'finish to match the no-nonsense precision of SME's 20/12 turntable, the 312S includes a secure sliding-track overhang-adjustment mechanism, a spring-loaded VTA post, and a silicone-filled damping trough with adjustable paddle. SME has produced "a tonearm that has all of the 12" arm's theoretical advantages and none of its disadvantages," MF said. (Vol.32 No.5 WWW)

B

SME M2: \$1595

The SME M2 worked with the Thorens TD 350 turntable to produce, in MF's opinion, "an extraordinarily well-balanced musical experience." Recent evaluation of the M2 showed no evidence of the loose bearing and mispunched alignment-gauge problems that had bothered him with the early samples of this English tonearm that he had tried with turntables from Musical Fidelity and T+A. (Vol.27 Nos.3 & 11, Vol.30 No.5)

PHONO CARTRIDGES

A

Koetsu Coralstone Platinum Mono: \$15,000

The outrageously expensive Coralstone Platinum Mono has a platinum magnet system, silver-plated copper wiring, and a proprietary stylus shape. It combined "sensational" image specificity and three-dimensionality, even in mono, with "an uncanny physicality and weight" across the entire frequency spectrum. MF: "There's no excuse for the price, except the sound. So get over it." (Vol.32 No.5)

Koetsu Urushi Vermillion: \$4700

The red-lacquered Urushi Vermillion uses a low-capacitance cantilever and a Quadrahedron stylus. Its samarium-cobalt magnet and silver-clad six-nines copper coils produce an output of 0.4mV. Though it was "slightly polite on top" and lacked some air and space, its "rich and colorful" sound was never soggy or too romantic. The "artfully voiced" Vermillion proved to be "one of a handful of the most musically engaging cartridges" in MF's experience. (Urushi, Vol.21 No.10; Vol.24 No.10; Urushi Vermillion, Vol.31 No.1 WWW)

B

Koetsu Black: \$1800 \$\$\$

Koetsu's entry-level model and best-known cartridge is an impressively built, aluminum-bodied oblong block painted black and with integral, unthreaded holes for the mounting bolts. The Black has a low output of 0.6mV, despite its use of a samarium-cobalt magnet. It was "smooth, textured, exceptionally colorful, and just a little rolled off in the treble" for a tonal balance that was "a mite huskier than neutral," said AD. Though it lacked the Miyabi 47's ability to make sense of poorly recorded material, the Black nevertheless proved "a lovely, musical product," concluded Art. (Vol.30 Nos.7 & 10 WWW)

K

Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation,

PHONO PREAMPS/ MOVING-COIL STEP- UP DEVICES

A

Nagra VPS: \$5995

Nagra's Valve Phono Stage is a single-ended, hybrid moving-magnet/moving-coil phono preamp with a separate power supply. Rigorously selected and matched dual-triode tubes are subjected to 48 hours of burn-in, and are claimed to last for at least 5000 hours. The VPS displayed a warm, rich sound with a "slightly recessed" upper-mid/lower-treble region and "a bit of a midbass boost," said MF, who concluded that its "overall balance . . . makes it among the most captivating and enticing phono preamps I've heard." JA determined that the VPS would work better with MC cartridges of medium to low output than with MM types. The Nagra's optional VFS isolation stand worked to solidify images, tighten bass, and increase overall focus. Price includes MC input card; additional input card adds \$1495 (MC) or \$395 (MM). VFS anti-vibration support and three Nagra spikes add \$1495. (Vol.31 No.9 WWW)

Nagra BPS: \$2399

The tiny, lightweight, battery-powered BPS is loosely based on Nagra's more expensive VPS, but uses bipolar transistors instead of tubes. It provides 51dB gain in MM mode and 62dB in MC. With its "upfront transient speed, clarity, and focus," the BPS was "a more neutral, accurate phono preamp than the lush, romantic VPS," said Mikey. Overall, the BPS sacrificed sustain and richness for attack and rhythm. Compared to the Audio Research PH7, the BPS was "lean, fast, tight, and clean," lacking delicacy and harmonic complexity. MF: "If your system needs an injection of excitement, the BPS is guaranteed to do just that." (Vol.32 Nos.6, 8, & 10 WWW)

Lehmannaudio Black Cube Decade: \$2399

The Black Cube Decade is an MM/MC design with an outboard power supply, rumble filter switch, and selectable gain. It improved on the Vacuum State JLI PhonoPre's excellent detail retrieval while retaining the Bel Canto e.One Phono3's dynamic thrust. In addition, it matched the Bel Canto's bass dynamics, but added greater subtlety and textural resolution. The Lehmann's overall sound was slightly warm, with overly smooth vocal sibilants, but microdynamics and low-level detail retrieval were superb, said MF. (Vol.31 No.12)

SACD, DVD-A, & CD PLAYERS & TRANSPORTS & MUSIC SERVERS

EDITOR'S NOTE: SACD and DVD-A player ratings are based on how they sound with their respective hi-rez media, not CD.

A+

Krell Evolution 505: \$10,000

The massive Evolution 505 SACD player weighs 29 lbs and measures 17.3" W by 6" H by 17.3" D. Its aircraft-grade aluminum chassis is available in silver or black, and has rounded edges and slotted sides for a graceful appearance. Like the other components in the Evolution series, the 505 incorporates Krell's proprietary CAST current-drive circuitry. FK raved: "Width was wider, depth was deeper, imaging was sharper—but, unlike some gear that excels at all these audiophile virtues, the Krell 505 sacrificed nothing in musicality." Through its balanced outputs, however, the 505 lacked

some detail and transient snap. JA noted "excellent measured performance" from its conventional, voltage-mode outputs. (Vol.31 No.9 WWW)

A

Nagra CDP: \$14,295

The CDP is a compact (12.2" W by 3" H by 10" D) and versatile front-loading player with an outboard 12V DC power supply. In addition to coaxial S/PDIF, AES-EBU, and TosLink digital outputs, it accommodates both balanced XLR and RCA analog connections. Though Nagra feels the single-ended outputs are the better-sounding, WP heard little difference between the two. The CDP's wide, forward soundstage and great dynamic contrasts produced "a tightly focused, phenomenally detailed musical image." Switching the output gain from 3.5V to 1V produced more spatial detail in WP's smaller office system. Compared to the Chord Blu-DAC64 combo, the CDP sacrificed some breath and heft for snap and sparkle. The CDP's ability to cope with data errors and its rejection of jitter were among the best JA has measured. (Vol.30 Nos.5, 7 & 8 WWW)

Primare CD31: \$2495 \$\$\$

An evolution of Primare's D30.2, the CD31 uses a DVS DSL-710A "ultra-silent" transport, adds optical and AES/EBU digital outputs to the TosLink S/PDIF, and replaces the D30.2's Fixed Power switch with a Power switch in the AC cord receptacle. With a "slightly warm" tonal balance and a perspective that favored "subtle nuance" over "hi-fi hyper-reality," the CD31 imparted a "natural, vinyl-like feel" to a variety of recordings. "The CD31 isn't perfect—but it's sublime," said BD. JA was similarly impressed by its state-of-the-art "Red Book" CD performance. (Vol.30 No.7 WWW)

TWO-CHANNEL PREAMPLIFIERS

A

Krell Evolution 202: \$16,500

Beautifully assembled and jam-packed with technology, the two-chassis Evolution 202 incorporates Krell's Current Audio Signal Transmission (CAST), which involves driving a low-impedance load from a high-impedance source, essentially eliminating the cable's effects on signal transmission. Along with the Evolution 600 monoblocks, the 202 provided a vanishingly low noise floor, immersing WP in performance and performance space. Accordingly, JA's measurements found very wide bandwidth and very low distortion. "A pleasure to measure," he said. WP noted "very subtle" differences between the Evolution 202 and Ayre K-1xe. Though they matched one another in terms of dynamic range and the ability to convey subtle tonal, harmonic, and spatial information, the Ayre may have been just a bit more "euphonic." "I guess I vote for the Krell with my head, which says that one of these preamps must be right," said Wes. CAST interconnects add \$500/m. (Vol.29 No.12, Vol.30 No.6 WWW)

Nagra PL-L: \$9495 ☆

With its inputs on the left and outputs on the right, the PL-L offered KR some setup problems, but he found it "practically impossible to criticize the PL-L's sound. The PL-L was "absolutely satisfying and enjoyable. Noise was never noticeable...and all controls worked silently and smoothly. . . . The PL-L was revealing and natural, imparting little personality or coloration of its own." KR commended it "not only for professional monitoring, but also for home systems of the very highest quality," and JA found "superb measured performance. . . . Another Swiss jewel of a product from Nagra." JA found the PL-L to sound "very dynamic" from both its single-ended and balanced outputs, and praised the preamp for its exceptional clarity and masterful reproduction of space. He warned, however, against matching the PL-L with lean-sounding ancillaries. Remote control adds \$1000; balanced outputs add \$600. (Vol.25 No.11, Vol.31 No.6 WWW)

TWO-CHANNEL POWER AMPLIFIERS

EDITOR'S NOTE: Because of the disparity between typical tube and solid-state "sounds," we have split Class A for separate power amplifiers into two subclasses. Nevertheless, even within each subclass, Class A amplifiers differ sufficiently in character that each will shine in an appropriate system. Careful auditioning with your own loudspeakers is therefore essential. Except where stated, output powers are not the specified powers but rather those we measured into an 8 ohm resistive load. All amplifiers are stereo models, except where designated.

A (SOLID-STATE)

Krell Evolution 600 monoblock: \$33,000/pair "Extraordinary dynamic range within a velvet glove," read our December cover. This 600W powerhouse marries superb fit'n'finish to extremely advanced thinking that includes Krell's Current Audio Signal Transmission (CAST) and Active Cascode Topology (ACT). Combining "low-level detail, sinuous pacing, and sheer power," the 600s reproduced music in a way that was "scary real," said WP. CAST interconnects add \$500/m. (Vol.29 No.12, Vol.30 Nos.3 & 4 WWW)

B (TUBE)

Quad II Classic monoblock: \$3100/pair \$\$\$ ☆ With the new 15W Classic, Quad didn't set out to improve on or update the original Quad II, but to remanufacture it the way it had originally been made 50 years before. The circuit remains unchanged, and details of its construction have been modified only where mandated by law or in cases where certain types of parts are extinct. Exhibiting timbral beauty, spatial honesty, and deep emotional involvement, the II Classic had AD feeling nostalgic: "There isn't a sweeter amplifier on earth . . . It's beautiful, it's true to the original, and it has more than a little soul." Its lack of speed and focus in the bass region made it less than optimal with rock music but perfect for small-scale classical. While JA also found it "difficult to resist nostalgia," he was pleased to note that, "Despite its design vintage, the Quad II Classic offered quite respectable measured performance." Loads below 8 ohms are to be avoided. (Vol.28 No.8 WWW) on a budget." (Vol.30 No.3 WWW)

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS & RECEIVERS

A

Krell FBI: \$18,000

The 300Wpc Fully Balanced Integrated combines Krell's FPB-300cx power amp with their KCT line stage in one beefy, 104 lb aluminum chassis. It uses separate circuits and toroidal transformers for the preamp and amp sections, which are united by Krell's CAST technology. The FBI shared the 300cx's "tight deep bass, thunderous dynamics, and snappy transients," but added "greater detail, even delicacy, in the timbres and textures of instruments," said FK. JA was absolutely pleased: "Quiet, powerful, stable, and well-behaved even into low impedances, it is a paradigm of what an integrated amplifier needs to do." The CAST inputs get the best sound quality from the FBI, concluded Fred. (Vol.30 No.7 WWW)

B

Primare Systems DVD110: \$2495

The "drop-dead gorgeous" DVD110 boasts an elegant chassis of brushed stainless steel with top-mounted function buttons. It combines a DVD/CD player with an AM/FM tuner and 75Wpc integrated amplifier, and offers five sets of video outputs, three line-level analog audio outputs, three sets of analog audio inputs, www.Stereophile.com, October 2009

an iPod connector, optical and S/PDIF digital outputs, and RS-232 and IR remote control jacks. Compared to the Carat 157, the Primare "was ever so slightly lighter in texture and more agile in articulation," said JM. "The DVD110 is a great DVD receiver at a very reasonable price," though he notes that a slight coolness just keeps it from Class A. (Vol.32 No.2 WWW)

LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS

EDITOR'S NOTE: Class A "Loudspeakers" are sufficiently idiosyncratic and differ enough from one another that prospective customers should read *Stereophile's* original reviews in their entirety for descriptions of the sounds. I have therefore just listed every system or combination that at least one of *Stereophile's* reviewers feels, as a result of his or her experience, approaches the current state of the art in loudspeaker design. (Note that, to be eligible for inclusion in Class A, the system *must* be full-range—ie feature bass extension to 20Hz. It must also be capable of reaching realistic sound-pressure levels without any feeling of strain.)

For those unconcerned about the last few hertz of low-bass extension, we have created "Classes A, B, and C (Restricted Extreme LF)" for those speakers that are state of the art in every other way. Candidates for inclusion in this class must still reach down to at least 40Hz, below the lowest notes of the four-string double-bass and bass guitar.

In addition, such has been the recent progress in loudspeaker design at a more affordable level that we have an extra class: E, for "Entry Level." Someone once asked us why *Stereophile* bothers to review inexpensive loudspeakers at all: In effect, aren't we insulting our readership by recommending that they buy inexpensive models? Remember: It's possible to put together a musically satisfying, truly high-end system around *any* of our Class D and E recommendations. That's why they're listed—and why you should consider buying them.

A-FULL-RANGE

YG Acoustics Anat Reference II Professional: \$107,000/pair, as reviewed (Vol.32 No.3 WWW)

A-RESTRICTED EXTREME LF

Magico V3: \$27,000/pair The Magico V3 is a three-way, sealed-box speaker with twin 7" woofers, a 6" midrange unit, and ScanSpeak's top-of-the-line 1" ring-radiator Revelator tweeter. The speaker's front and rear baffles are CNC-machined from 1"-thick aluminum, while the side and top panels are formed from hollowed-out, rectangular sheets of 1"-thick plywood, rotated so that their edges face outward to give the speaker an attractive striped appearance. While the Magico will never be a speaker for low-bass addicts, once optimally set-up in JA's room, its combination of bass weight and low-frequency extension was "addictive," while its detailed and natural highs were "beyond reproach." Though its overall presentation was "somewhat on the polite side," it combined the soundstaging capabilities of a good minimonitor with exceptional retrieval of low-level detail, enthused JA. LG agrees, feeling that the V3s produced some of the best sound he heard at the 2008 CES. The Magico was "fussy" about amplification and room placement, however. (Vol.31 No.5 WWW)

Quad ESL-2805: \$9500/pair

An ESL-988 with a sleek new appearance, the ESL-2805 features a rounded, steel top plate finished in piano-black lacquer, a stainless-steel base, improved spikes and speaker terminals, and a brace that extends from top to bottom and can be adjusted to make the speaker absolutely rigid. Supremely transparent, absolutely free of coloration, phenomenally quick, and utterly nonfatiguing. If the 2805 had a limitation, it was its lack of deep bass and its inability to play

very loud. ST was unequivocal: "I know of no other speaker I'd rather own, regardless of price. I think it's the finest hi-fi purchase you could ever make in terms of performance and value." "One of the world's greatest speakers—maybe the world's greatest loudspeaker ever—made even better. Moving production to China has improved quality immeasurably over earlier slipshod, flimsy, ugly British build," he adds. *Stereophile's* 2006 "Joint Loudspeaker of the Year." (Vol.29 No.7) **Quad ESL-989: \$8900/pair ☆**

The electrostatic ESL-989 adds two bass panels to the '988, which is the current version of the classic ESL-63, and is said to have higher power handling. Nonetheless, LG found that music that exceeded peaks of 94dB triggered the speaker's protection circuit. Still, the ESL-989s shook LG's listening room with "lots of satisfying bass," and added outstanding midrange response, topnotch imaging, wall-to-wall soundstaging, smoothness, focus, low distortion, and low listening fatigue." While the speaker rolls off sharply below 30Hz or so, during his listening sessions, LG couldn't think of another loudspeaker he'd rather own. By contrast, PM couldn't get the '989's mid-bass integrated at all in his solid-walled UK room, preferring the smaller ESL-988 (as does ST). Typical US dry-wall construction will probably better match the speaker's bass tuning, therefore. AD added that "The '989 played music with as much tunefulness, drama, and scale as I've ever asked for or heard from other speakers . . . And not only was its bass extension perfectly satisfying, but, with the exception of the speed of bass fundamentals... the bass *quality* of the Quad '989 was astoundingly good." Unlike LG, AD never heard a hint of strain or distress, even when playing the Quads at extremely loud volumes (though it is fair to point out that his room is smaller). JA was impressed by how well the '989 handled the midrange and by its "superbly stable" imaging, but found problems with positioning the speakers to get the low-bass/upper-bass transition optimized. Price depends on finish. *Stereophile's* 2003 "Product of the Year" and "Loudspeaker of the Year." (Vol.25 No.11, Vol.26 No.5 WWW)

K

Vienna Acoustics Kiss.

**Seeking a new
or updated
audio system?**

**Can't decide
which products
offer the best
balance of
sound + value?**

RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

**Look no further as
Stereophile editors
reveal the industry's
best audio gear.**

FROM LOUDSPEAKERS TO HEADPHONES, 500 TOP-RATED PRODUCTS THAT WILL SATISFY EVEN THE MOST CRITICAL EAR

Components listed here have been formally reviewed in *Stereophile* and have been found to be among the best available in each of four or five quality classes. Whether a component is listed in Class A or Class E, we highly recommend its purchase.

Each listing—in alphabetical order within classes—is followed by a brief description of the product's sonic characteristics and a code indicating the *Stereophile* Volume and Issue in

which that product's report appeared. Thus the September 2007 issue is indicated as "Vol.30 No.9."

Some products listed have not yet been reported on; these are marked (NR), for "Not Reviewed." Others have received coverage in our free monthly eNewsletter—back issues are archived at www.stereophile.com/enewsletters. We recommend that you read any product's entire review before seriously contemplating a purchase (products without reviews should therefore be treated with more caution)—many salient

characteristics, peculiarities, and caveats appear in the reviews, but not here. To obtain back issues of the magazine, visit our website: www.stereophile.com. We regret that we cannot supply photocopies or e-mail copies of individual reviews. Some reviews are reprinted in our website "Archives" Section: these are marked "WWW." More are added each week, so check the on-line listing.

In general, components do not remain listed for more than three years unless at least one of the magazine's writers and editors has had continued experience with them. Discontinuation of a model also precludes its appearance. In addition, though professional components—recorders, amplifiers, monitor speaker systems—can be obtained secondhand and can sometimes offer performance that would otherwise guarantee inclusion, we do not generally do so. *Stereophile's* "Recommended Components" listing is almost exclusively concerned with products currently available in the US through the usual hi-fi retail outlets.

HOW EDITORS' RECOMMENDATIONS ARE DETERMINED

The ratings given components included in this listing are based entirely on performance—ie, accuracy of reproduction—and are biased to an extent by our feeling that things *added* to reproduced sound (eg, flutter, distortion, colorations of various kinds) are of more concern to the musically oriented listener than are things *subtracted* from the sound (eg, deep bass or extreme treble). On the other hand, components markedly deficient in one or more respects are downrated to the extent that their deficiencies interfere with the full realization of the program material.

We try to include in "Recommended Components" every product that we have found to be truly excellent or that we feel represents good value for money. Bear in mind that many different tastes are represented. The listing is compiled after consultation with *Stereophile's* reviewing staff and editors, and takes into account continued experience of a product after the formal review has been published. In particular, we take account of unreliability and defects that show up after extended auditioning. The fact that a product received a favorable review cannot therefore be regarded as a guarantee that it will continue to

appear in this listing.

The prices indicated are those current at the time the listing was compiled (July 2009). We cannot guarantee that any of these prices will be the same by the time this issue of *Stereophile* appears in print.

There is a near-universal consensus that at some point in the upward climb of component prices, severely diminishing returns (performance versus price) set in. However, there is no agreement as to the exact price level at which that takes place. Where we *have* found a product to perform much better than might be expected from its price, we have drawn attention to it with a \$\$\$ next to its listing. We also indicate, with a ☆, products that have been on this list in one incarnation or another since the "Recommended Components" listing in Vol.29 No.10 (October 2006). Longevity in a hi-fi component is rare enough that we think it worth noting (although it can

also indicate that the attention of design engineers has moved elsewhere).

We are not sympathetic toward letters complaining that the Symphonic Bombast A-123 that we recommended heartily two years ago no longer makes it into "Recommended Components." Where deletions are made, we endeavor to give reasons (there are always reasons). But remember: *Deletion of a component from this list does not invalidate a buying decision you have made.*

Individual reviewers mentioned by their initials are: John Atkinson, Jim Austin, Paul Bolin, Lonnie Brownell, Martin Colloms, Brian Damkroger, Robert Deutsch, Art Dudley, Michael Fremer, Larry Greenhill, Jon Iverson, Fred Kaplan, Erick Lichte, John Marks, Paul Messenger, Thomas J. Norton, Wes Phillips, Bob J. Reina, Kalman Rubinson, Markus Sauer, Jonathan Scull (J-10), Chip Stern, and Sam Tellig.

HOW TO USE THE LISTING

The classes each cover a wide range of performance. Carefully read our descriptions here, the original reviews, and (heaven forbid) reviews in other magazines to put together a short list of components to choose from. Evaluate your room, your source material and front-end(s), your speakers, and your tastes. With luck, you *may* come up with a selection to audition at your favorite dealer(s). "Recommended Components" will not tell you what to buy any more than Consumer Reports would presume to tell you whom to marry!

CLASS A

Best attainable sound for a component of its kind, almost without practical considerations; "the least musical compromise." A Class A system is one for which you don't have to make a leap of faith to believe that you're hearing the real thing. With Super Audio CD, 24/96 DAD, and DVD-Audio now available, we have created a new Class A+, for the best performance in those digital categories. Class A now represents the best that can be obtained from the conventional 16/44.1 CD medium. We also created Class A+ categories for turntables and phono preamps, to recognize the achievements of the Continuum Caliburn and Boulder 2008, respectively.

CLASS B

The next best thing to the very best sound reproduction; Class B components generally cost less than those in Class A, but most Class B components are still quite expensive.

CLASS C

Somewhat lower-fi sound, but far more musically natural than average home-component high fidelity; products in this class are of high quality but still affordable.

CLASS D

Satisfying musical sound, but these components are either of significantly lower fidelity than the best available, or exhibit major compromises in performance—limited dynamic range, for example. Bear in mind that appearance in Class D still means that we *recommend* this product—it's possible to put together a musically satisfying system exclusively from Class D components.

CLASS K

"Keep your eye on this product." Class K is for components that we have not reviewed (or have not finished testing), but that we have reason to believe may be excellent performers. We are not actually recommending these components, only suggesting you give them a listen. Though the report has yet to be published in certain cases, the reviewer and editor sometimes feel confident enough that the reviewer's opinion is sufficiently well formed to include what otherwise would be an entry in one of the other classes, marked (NR).

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