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the absolute sound



2016

Editors' Choice Awards



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2016 the absolute sound Editors' Choice Awards

Welcome to the 2016 edition of *The Absolute Sound's* Editors' Choice Awards, our annual Recommended Products list. On the following pages we present the gear that our editors and writers have selected as most worthy of your consideration. These are the components 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 also accompanied by a capsule review, the original reviewer's name or initials, and the issue the review appeared in. Note that in a few cases a product may have been reviewed in one of our sister publications, *Playback* or *AVguide.com*, or the review may have been completed but not yet published, or the product may not have been formally reviewed but has still earned a recommendation based on a 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, in an effort to be as selective and up-to-date as possible, we have dropped some 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.

by improving upon the 1.6 in every area (particularly overall coherence). Though lacking the bottom octave, from the midbass up it can stand comparison to some of the stalwarts of the ultra-high-end. A superb transducer and real bargain, provided you have enough space to house it and enough amp to drive it. JV, review forthcoming

Salk Sound SongTower QWT \$1995

A successful and striking implementation of a D'Appolito MTM configuration, integrating two mid/woofers and a ¾" soft dome tweeter, the SongTower sings cohesively and performs a convincing disappearing act. The soundstage is exceptionally wide and stable. In-room bass response is extended to about 40Hz, but don't expect the punch of a 12" woofer. Perceived tonal balance is slightly lean and dark, but otherwise pretty neutral. DO, 204

GoldenEar Triton Five \$1999

Sandy Gross, the proprietor of GoldenEar, may be the Babe Ruth of reasonably priced loudspeaker designs. With the Triton Five, the gregarious Gross has hit yet another one out of the park. The Triton Five is a remarkably low-distortion design that belts out Led Zeppelin but also has the finesse to reproduce the most finely fligreed 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 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. Jacob Heilbrunn, 255

\$2000-\$3000

Bowers & Wilkins CM6 S2 \$2000

This moderately priced stand-mount is the least expensive product in the new CM6 Series

to include B&W's now-iconic tweeter, mounted atop the cabinet in its own enclosure. This feature imbues the CM6 S2 with the ability to throw a wide and highly resolved soundstage, among other attributes. The bottom end goes lower, and with far greater authority, than the cabinet dimensions would suggest. This new B&W also has a particularly magical way with vocals, thanks to the 6.5" Kevlar mid/bass driver. SHO, 250

Revel Performa3 M106 \$2000

Revel's M106 is cut from the same rich sonic fabric as its big brother the F206, but designed for smaller spaces. A vocal lover's dream, the 2-way M sports the same 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. Even under punishing conditions this feisty compact remains linear. One of the great compacts of the last ten years. NG, 234

Harbeth P3ESR \$2095-\$2395 (depending on finish)

This latest version of Alan Shaw's subcompact monitor is so cannily designed it almost transcends the limitations of its genre. Neutrality and natural tonal balance reign supreme, but this one can also play loud and descend to depths in the bass. Exceptional driver integration, coherence, and openness also characterize the design. PS's favorite mini-monitor. PS, 193

Golden Ear Triton Three \$2200

One of the best speakers for the price, this D'Appolito floorstander is one of CM's favorite products. The Triton Threes offer an incredible performance-to-price ratio, and are equally adept in a two-channel system or a multichannel setup. Capable of handling up

to 300W, with bass that dips to 29Hz, these 3-way, five-driver speakers are perfect for starter systems or home-theater needs. CM, 238

ProAc Tablette Anniversary \$2400 (\$2800 in ebony/rosewood)

Over 30 years ago, when SS heard the ProAc Tablettes for the first time, he thought they were exceptional speakers. Not much has changed in the interim. He still thinks they have a special magic, offering a unique combination of high resolution and musicality that makes them top contenders for desk space, if you're looking for a small-footprint high-resolution monitor. SS, 234

Axis VoiceBox S \$2500

Sonically this l'il two-way with the sweet ribbon tweeter is a robust and agile performer that rings true and authentic. Despite a generally lighter character, there's still a welcome zone of midrange warmth that keeps it on balance. Imaging and dimensionality are uniformly excellent. The drivers cohere with no apparent presence dip at or around the crossover point. This is one little Aussie that could very well rattle one's previous expectations for foot-tall two-ways in this range. NG, 252



Eminent Technology LFT-8b \$2500

A floorstanding hybrid, combining sealed-box bass with magnetically driven planar membranes (dipolar drive) for

midrange and treble, this is one of the lowest distortion speakers ever. The LFT-8b goes up seemingly forever, and down to very near the bottom of audibility in the bass. Ideal listening requires a position close to exactly centered, with the speakers precisely angled, but at the magic spot imaging is superb. In REG's estimation, one of audio's all-time amazing bargains. REG, 243

Monitor Audio Silver S 10 \$2500

The 3-way, four-driver, dualported Silver S 10s may look like typical box speakers, but they are a lot better than their plain-Jane exteriors might suggest: great voicing, solid bass when properly spaced from the rear walls, an engaging soundstage, and an ability to sound great with a wide range of music. Really, what more could you want from an affordable speaker? SHO, 248

Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II \$2560

This classic 3-way floorstander delivers excellent top-to-bottom balance and engaging musicality. Moreover, Vandersteen's baffleless, time-and-phase-coherent design can suggest the spatial focus usually heard with planars. The 2Ce benefits from bi-wiring and should be placed away from walls. Shane Buettner, 139

Tannoy Revolution XT 8F \$2600

Superficially, this appears to be an ordinary two-way floorstander with an integrated spiked base. But looks, says DO, are deceiving. The star attraction here is a new 8" coaxial driver, said to be a fresh interpretation of Tannoy's point-source drive-unit philosophy. The coaxial woofer is allowed to work into the deep bass, augmented below 250Hz by a separate 8" woofer. The end result is a superbly cohesive loudspeaker. Expect a colossal and transparent soundstage populated by tightly focused images. The Tannoy offers a virtuoso mid-

range with transient speed and timbral fidelity that are competitive with speakers approaching \$10k retail. DO, 255; RH, 258

Gallo Reference Strada 2/ TR-3d

\$2982-\$3432 (with stands)

Since Gallo's flagship Reference Nucleus 3.5 floorstander has been discontinued, what should prospective Gallo buyers choose as an alternative? The answer is Gallo's Reference Strada 2 monitors supplemented with the firm's TR-3d powered sub. The Strada 2 upholds traditional Gallo values—killer 3-D imaging, and powerful, expressive dynamics—while breaking new ground in resolution (especially at lower volume levels). The potent TR-3d sub, in turn, adds bass weight and depth while offering (almost) enough speed to keep up with the agile Strada 2s. The result is a three-piece system with resolution superior to the 3.5 and nearly comparable bass in a less-costly and easier-to-position package. CM, 242

\$3000-\$5000

Audio Physic Step 25+

\$3000-\$3500

Easily one of the most transparent small speakers available, the Step's imaging and soundstaging are exceptionally specific, and tonal colors and micro-dynamics alive and focused, with a forward presentation that captures every inflection and nuance of a performance. There's just a hint of brightness in the treble that accents the Step's transient speed and clarity. This sprite does have physical limits, so fully recreating the weight and scale of an orchestra is a challenge. The consummate "touch" speaker. NG, 224

Bryston Mini T

\$3370 (Target stands optional)

Bryston's foray into loudspeakers addresses the perfectly reasonable question that if

ruler-flat frequency response is expected from electronics, why shouldn't the same be expected from loudspeakers? More the product of careful development than the application of wonder materials, the Mini T proved to be the best-measuring loudspeaker RD has yet experienced—as well as a sonic standout, having the rare ability to recreate the cues that make music sound live. Note that the Mini T is actually quite large and will require a fair amount of breathing space to perform at its best. Ron Doering, 238



Dynaudio Excite X34

\$3400

Anchored by a surprising allotment of low-frequency energy and dynamic punch, this small tower achieves nearly a full spectrum of spirited output and authority, with just a hint of mid/upper-bass ripeness. Vocals are well balanced, with a good measure of chest resonance and upper-octave air. Strings could be sweeter, and violin section layering is not quite fully reproduced. But, overall, the X34 is a versatile little number that's willing and able to get down and party with the best of them. NG, 242

GoldenEar Triton Two+

\$3500

The Triton Two+ handles high frequencies via a superb Heil-type tweeter, the all-important middle frequencies via dual ultra-wide-bandwidth midrange

drivers, and the low end with a sophisticated 1200-watt DSP-controlled subwoofer. Together these elements give you a slender, full-range floorstander that sounds astonishingly refined, and offers robust dynamics and spectacular 3-D imaging. CM, 214

Revel Performa3 F206

\$3500

This 3-way, bass-reflex floorstander has charisma pure and simple. With its enthusiastic musicality, dynamic energy, and imaging precision, the F206 simply commands its audience's attention. Offering strong low-frequency dynamics, excellent upper-bass slam, lifelike midrange presence, and a treble range that is eloquent yet mercifully without the needle of tweeter localization, the F206 exceeds all expectations of performance in its price class, and well beyond. TAS' 2013 Affordable Loudspeaker of the Year. NG, 234

EnigmAcoustics Sopranino

\$3690 (optional stand, \$600)

This add-on electrostatic super-tweeter bears little similarity to past designs. There is no external bias supply, nothing to plug into the wall. The Sopranino is self-biased, and should be thought of as an electret tweeter using a permanently polarized diaphragm. It proved an excellent match for DO's Quad-57 ESLs, producing a tonal balance that was far more neutral with greater color saturation. DO also noted gains in transient clarity, soundstage transparency, and treble air. RH concurs; in his system the Sopranino resolves very fine detail and increases dimensionality without altering the tonal balance. Co-winner of TAS' 2013 Technology Breakthrough of the Year Award. DO, 235

Harbeth C7ES-3

\$3795-\$4195 (depending on finish)

Arguably the ne plus ultra of BBC 2-way designs, with bass down to 46Hz, an essentially perfect midrange, and a top end that reproduces ambience fantastically, the 7ES-3 will play loud enough for serious music listeners (though not for head-bangers). With respect to accuracy, neutrality, and natural tonal balance the 7 establishes for PS a new benchmark for compact 2-ways. PS, 171

Vienna Acoustics Mozart

Concert Grand SE

\$4000

The SE or Symphony Edition of the Mozart Grand offers a wideband responsiveness and transparency that create satiny string sections, clean winds, and distinct placement cues from deep within the symphony orchestra. Finely boned in texture with superb micro-detail, the SE has the lightness and delicacy of a monitor—only with genuine mid-30Hz bass. A beautifully constructed and appointed floorstander with the soul and fast moves of a compact. NG, 213

ATC SCM 19

\$4295

In spite of ATC's stellar track record, NG never expected the new and aggressively priced SCM 19 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 SCM 19 outshines its distinguished predecessors—particularly ATC's passive consumer speakers—in voicing and seamless inter-driver coherence. Simply one of the best compacts NG has heard. NG, 245

Dynaudio Focus 260

\$4400

This three-driver, 2.5-way speaker has neutral tonal balance

and wonderfully articulate and extended bass for its size and price. The 260 can't keep up with speakers like the Maggie 3.7 in overall resolution (not many similarly-priced speakers can), but it is easier to drive, and doesn't require as much space to perform well. The Focus 260's main trait is its beguiling musicality. An easy speaker to like in every way. KM, 224

Janszen zA1.1 **\$4495**

These two-way electrostatic hybrid have a refinement and focus all their own, based on the purity of the electrostatic tweeter and the narrowed radiation pattern in the top end. The Janszens are truly a high-end speaker in the sense that there are things they can do that are completely outside the scope of "mid-fi" speakers—the bass-plus-mid-plus-dome in-a-box floorstanders. To listen to the ethereal beauty of the violin and harp passage at the end of the *Flying Dutchman* Overture is to hear a sound that is outside the world of speakers of that type—even the many expensive ones of that type. This is so not only in the purity of the sound but in the erasing of the room around you. REG, 258

Acoustic Zen Technologies **Adagio** **\$4500**

The Adagio's strength is a clarity that spans its entire range. Elements of its design—transmission-line mid/bass enclosures, modified circular ribbon drivers—contribute not only to the speaker's overall lucidity, but also to its seamlessness, tonal accuracy, sparkle in the highs, richness and nuance in the mids, and depth and detail in the bass. The soundstage is satisfyingly wide, deep, and high. Sallie Reynolds, 162

Stirling Broadcast LS3/6 **\$4590 (premium finish,** **\$4950)**

This modernized version of the BBC-licensed LS3/6 (the

BBC version of the legendary Spondor BC1) maintains the nearly perfect midrange neutrality and startling stereo imaging of its ancestor, but adds much greater dynamic capacity and more extension at the frequency extremes. REG, 228

Vandersteen 3A Signature **\$4775**

Like all Vandersteens, the 3A Signature is time-and-phase accurate. Its driver complement features the patented midrange and tweeter used in the vaunted Vandersteen 5. The 3A Signature has a relaxed presentation, is musically seductive, and will appeal to those who want to forget about the sound and enjoy the music, though it does trade-off some dynamic contrast and midrange resolution for its overall ability to involve the listener. RH, 122

Focal Aria 948 **\$4995**

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 required some set-up tweaks to avoid excess brightness, they were excellent after break-in, bringing so many musical layers to life they created a truly immersive soundscape. JM, 254

GoldenEar Triton One **\$4999**

The Triton 1 is an outstanding performer at anything like its

price, and as affordable a path to the top echelons of high-end sound as AHC has encountered. Its mix of a ribbon tweeter, midrange drivers in D'Appolito configuration, and woofers and passive radiators is enhanced by a unique cabinet. The midrange and treble provide exceptional realism without hardening in ways that appear to add detail to the music, but deprive it of some of its natural smoothness and beauty. The soundstage is excellent, and the speaker is less sensitive to room coloration in the bass than many others. It can even be driven with single-ended amps. Anthony H. Cordesman, 246

\$5000-\$10,000 **Harbeth Monitor 30.1** **\$5695-6295 (depending on finish)**

The best compact 2-way speaker system PS has heard, the 30.1 boasts high neutrality, superb resolution, and a matching of drivers with respect to sonic character that is equaled by only a small handful of multiple-driver dynamic loudspeakers. Speaking with a single voice in a way reminiscent of Quad ESLs, it is also of similar vanishingly low coloration and distortion, high transparency, and sheer musical authority, with an absolutely ravishing midrange. You can listen to it without fatigue for literally hours on end. PS, 232

Raidho X-1 **\$5800 (stands \$850)**

The X-1 may be the smallest loudspeaker in the Raidho line, but its sound is anything but. With the same tweeter found in Raidho's mighty \$220k D-5, the X-1 offers a stunningly beautiful midband and treble, with an ease, delicacy, and refinement rarely heard in this category. The very small (4") mid/woofer has limited excursion, bass extension, and dynamics, making the X-1 best suited to smaller rooms. A giant-killer above 100Hz. RH, 252

Dali Rubicon 6 **\$5995**

The objective of the five model Rubicon Series was to bring Epicon-like performance to a sweet-spot price. Mission accomplished. The 2.5-way R6 exemplifies a ripe, rich sound with outstanding upper-octave delicacy, thanks to the superb hybrid dome/ribbon tweeter configuration—a Dali mainstay for years. Blessed with considerable slam, it has a bold, effortless, near-full-range sound that can be a bit plummy in the midbass. All things considered the R6 makes a superb musical statement in its segment. NG, 258

Emerald Physics EP2.3 **\$5995**

The EP2.3 (formerly the CS2.3 II) offers the most precise imaging and best soundstaging PS has heard anywhere, truly holographic. Dynamic range is extremely wide, the midrange rich and open, and the bass substantial, though shy in the bottom-most half-octave. Orchestral music is notably spectacular, but all music is reproduced superbly with a tonal balance that is natural and neutral. The system requires four channels of amplification, two for the bass drivers and two for the coaxially mounted midrange/treble module. Sensitivity is high enough to eschew sheer wattage in favor of quality. While the 2.3 is very transparent, those for whom the last degree of detail is primary may wish to look elsewhere. PS, 249

Magnepan MG3.7i **\$5995**

Maggie's 3-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 Magnepans 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, 214

Spendor D7

\$5995

Spendor’s neo-classic 48” tower is superbly finished, and sonically offers up-front energy, near full-range frequency response, and high dynamic potency. On balance and to the D7’s credit, it sounds much closer to a true three-way than to a 2.5-way in that it maintains a near constant level of tonal stability and dynamic drive through the midband—a feat that most 2.5-ways struggle to achieve. It’s the rare loudspeaker at any price that touches all the bases for every set of ears, but the reasonably priced D7 comes very close in many areas. NG, 259

Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand SE

\$6000

Refined, luxurious, and lovingly hand-built in Europe, the Austrian-designed BBG is one of the highest-value components RD has run across. Highly detailed and possessing a convincingly three-dimensional presentation, the BBG conjured images that were stable across the soundstage with more than a hint of vertical imaging information thrown in for good measure. Bass was fast, tight, tuneful, pitch-perfect, and well-integrated into the speaker’s overall frequency balance. RD, 233

Audio Physic Classic 30

\$6000–\$7000

The Classic 30, a 3.5-way bass-reflex design, has the sheer enthusiasm of an extrovert. No need to baby this elegantly streamlined floorstander—it produces clean, dynamic, and alarmingly high output levels without losing its carefully

crafted voice. It’s a loudspeaker capable of the intimacy, transparency, and coherence of a fine 2-way compact, coupled with the exuberance and power of a multiway that doesn’t shrink from the wide dynamics and deep-bass challenges of big music. NG, 249

Reference 3A Taksim

\$6990

Reference 3A’s latest loudspeaker model is priced at a point where you’d have to spend a *lot* more to improve upon its many virtues. This two-way design features the “hyperexponential”-shaped mid/bass driver introduced by the company’s founder half a century ago and continuously improved upon since. This mid/bass unit is capable of exceptional linearity and dispersion, which translate into wonderful detail and tonal realism. A beryllium tweeter is implemented virtually without the use of a crossover, protected from low frequencies and high power by a single non-inductive capacitor. Andrew Quint, 255

Harbeth SuperHL5plus

\$6995 (stands, \$739)

Alan Shaw’s new Harbeth SuperHL5plus is one of the most beautiful-sounding speaker systems reviewer Paul Seydor has heard since the original Quad electrostatic, with the same musicality and naturalness of the Quad, and a really extraordinary top-to-bottom coherence evinced by few dynamic speakers of any type. The principal deviation from absolute neutrality is a slightly forgiving quality throughout the presence range; yet, the speaker in no sense lacks presence or lifelike vitality. The midrange is drop-dead gorgeous, the top end sweet and detailed. In sum, a reference-caliber component that always sounds like music. PS, 256

Larsen Model 8

\$6995

The Larsen Model 8 speakers are unusual among floorstanders—they are designed to be placed against the wall, with the wall and floor used as part of the acoustic design, rather than as something to be avoided. This approach to producing sound in rooms grew out of work of the late Stig Carlssen (with whom designer John Larsen worked) decades ago, and the principles remain valid. The profound knowledge of how speakers and rooms interact embodied in the design leads to an unusually convincing presentation of music of all sorts, both small-scaled and large. Unusual but superb. REG, 251



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. 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. AQ, 258

Joseph Audio Pulsar

\$7700

What’s special and perhaps even unique about these 2-way, bass-reflex compacts is their ability to combine all the best sonic characteristics of a superb mini-monitor with those of a larger speaker. With a midrange purity that equals ribbon and electrostatic designs, and the dynamic weight of a bigger speaker, the Pulsar is the closest thing to that impossible dream of a small speaker that can generate the SPLs of a much larger transducer without sacrifices in inner detail or harmonic purity. SS, 203

Vandersteen Treo CT

\$7990

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 of that model, but you hardly miss it due to its excellent pitch definition. NG, review forthcoming

Endeavor E-3

\$8000

For \$8k you get a well designed and voiced speaker capable of satisfying your every musical need, be it rock, classical, jazz, blues, or Katy Perry. These speakers are versatile, dip deep into the low end, provide terrific soundstaging and imaging, and do all of this for not a lot of money. A “must-audition” for anyone shopping in the sub-\$15k category. SHo, 246

JansZen zA2.1**\$8750 (plus \$495 side-firing tweeter option)**

This unusual design—with compound electrostatic elements flanked by dynamic woofers above and below—offers an extraordinary sonic experience. A controlled horizontal pattern, a vertical pattern that essentially eliminates early floor reflection, and extraordinarily low distortion all combine to give a very pure sound. With woofers and electrostatic elements set ideally, in-room response is exceptionally flat and the sound almost perfectly neutral. Bass is surprisingly extended for a speaker of moderate size. Optional side-firing adjustable ring-radiator tweeters generate a more “spacious” sound. REG, 239

MartinLogan Montis**\$9995**

The Montis is state-of-the-art in all the areas where electrostatics shine: supremely smooth and natural tonal balance (slightly forgiving in the 2k-4kHz range), with a transparency that rivals PS' reference Quad ESLs, a dynamic range that is quite beyond the capability of any Quad, and for that matter any other ESLs of his experience, and an ability to reproduce vocalists, instrumentalists, and ensembles to life size. By any reckoning this is a truly great speaker system capable of supremely satisfying reproduction of all kinds of music. PS, 244

\$10,000–\$20,000**Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo****\$10,000**

Replace whatever loudspeakers you've been using with a pair of two-way Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimos and people will notice—before they've heard a note of music. The whimsical apostrophe shape, the vibrant color, the assured *smallness* of the things stop folks in their tracks and

make them smile. Sonically, the Minissimos are superb everywhere but the low bass (which is to be expected in a 2-way). When it comes to imaging and soundstaging, they disappear, creating a broad, deep, and continuous soundstage. A superior and stylish little transducer. AQ, 256

Sony SS-NA2ES**\$10,000**

Inspired by the flagship Sony SS-AR1 and SS-AR2, but brought to a lower price, the NA2ES shares many virtues with its bigger brothers, and only limited losses from having to meet the lower price point, mostly in less emphasis on handcraftsmanship and some slight driver compromises. The high point is the new tweeter assembly, which offers exceptional high-frequency detail and clarity. Moderate in size, the NA2ES still has adequate dynamic power and bass extension for large-scale music in rooms of domestic size. REG, 235

Von Schweikert Audio UniField 2 MkII**\$10,000**

The UniField Two is a 2.5-way design in which a 7" coaxial driver is augmented below 80Hz by an aluminum-cone woofer. Internal chambers define a mini-labyrinth, which significantly dampens the vent output. The coaxial technology together with a non-resonant enclosure yields exceptional soundstaging and image focus. Expect impressive bass-range performance when the UniField is matched with a high-damping-factor solid-state amplifier, though the bass balance will be shifted toward the midbass. The UniField competes effectively with British stand-mounts from Spondor and Harbeth, offering greater rhythmic precision and bass heft. DO, 242

Legacy Focus SE**\$10,615**

The massive, six-driver, four-way Focus SE is capable of creating

a big sound in every sense of the word, while delivering the kind of speed and resolution from the midrange onwards that is customary in better ribbon and electrostatic speakers, as well as a seamless blend between drivers. The upper mids and treble have life and air, along with a slightly forward midrange perspective. A sensitivity of 94.5dB makes the Focus SE easy to drive. A lot of loudspeaker for the money. AHC, 215

Aerial 7T**\$10,995**

The 7T has a dynamically vivid and revealing sound that expands the soundfield beyond the cabinets and well into the listening space. Fairly easy to drive, it has deep, tight bass and can be used in relatively small rooms without bass bloat. Its sole potential downside is its unflinching honesty, which prevents it from flattering bad recordings. KM, 218

Quad 2812**\$11,999**

The Quad ESL63 and its variants, such as Quad's new 2812 electrostatic floorstander, have been from the start a speaker family that has gone its own way. They have low distortion, among the lowest; they have almost unparalleled coherence and unity of voice; they have an exceptionally uniform radiation pattern and a very low level of resonant coloration. They are also phase-linear, which is known to have subtle but definitely audible positive effects, on transients in particular. In these categories they have always been in the very top echelon and they still are. “Alone at the top” is a phrase that one is tempted to use, though it would be a slight exaggeration since others are in the same realm, though not many. No amount of money will buy a speaker that does definitely better the things that the Quads do well. REG, 260

GamUT M'inenT M5**\$12,990**

These elegant, narrow-front floorstanders of moderate size are optimized for presentation of soundstage, and they do the job with a convincing vanishing act and a large and deep stereo presentation. Though not quite neutrally balanced due to some midrange forwardness, they are clean and pure sounding, have excellent resolution of fine detail, and offer impressive dynamics for speakers of moderate size. REG, 220

Harbeth M40.1**\$12,990–\$14,490 (depending on finish)**

The new version of the M40 (REG's reference) has a slightly more forward midrange, more “domesticated” (less “pro”) tonal balance, and higher sensitivity. A BBC-style 3-way monitor, with Harbeth bass and mid drivers and SEAS Excel tweeter. Neutral sound, exceptional midrange clarity, refined and extended treble, almost full bass extension in-room, and surprisingly “outside the box” imaging. REG, 190

Dynaudio Focus 600 XD**\$13,500**

Dynaudio's Focus 600 XD, the top model in a new line of wireless active digital loudspeakers, is an entirely self-contained audio system, with no need for amplifiers and garden-hose-thick speaker cables. Just connect a source and AC power, and you're in business. The 600 XD is a slim, tallish floorstander with dual 7" woofers, a 5.5" midrange, and a soft-dome tweeter. Bass performance is outstanding, aided by user-adjustable smart digital signal processing. Dynamics are also exceptional for a speaker of this size and price. If the idea of a wireless, self-contained audio system built into a pair of speakers is appealing, the Dynaudio Focus 600 XD is an excellent choice. RH, 253