

2021 ANNUAL EDITION

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## 2021 HIGH-END AUDIO BUYER'S GUIDE

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## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS/RECEIVERS

### Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe

**\$5999 (\$5000 standard version)**

A true multi-discipline, 125Wpc Class AB, DAC-equipped, network-audio performer that summoned a neutral personality throughout the midrange with intimations of extra bloom and body in the mid and upper bass. Orchestral music possessed a firm, of-a-piece signature that was detailed and layered yet stable and immersive. Treble octaves were smooth and non-fatiguing. Transient behavior was unforced and natural, rather than overly etched and prickly. Italy's Gold Note fulfills the expectations of enthusiasts across the generations by having produced a modern, musically engaging, and highly configurable amp. (300)



### Hegel H390

**\$6000**

The Norwegian firm's integrated amplifiers have always been overachievers, but the new H360 is, by a wide margin, Hegel's most impressive effort yet. With 250Wpc into 8

ohms (420Wpc into 4 ohms) and 50 percent greater current capacity than the H300 it replaces, the H360 is a powerhouse. But that power comes with Hegel's signature virtues of a gorgeous rendering of timbre, a completely relaxed and natural presentation devoid of electronic artifacts, and a spatial dimensionality that competes with expensive separates. To top it off, the integral DAC is outstanding—fully up to the quality of the amplifier. (260)

### Aesthetix Mimas

**\$7000**

The Mimas is, in a way, an old musical soul. Hip and striking with its clean, precision machining and uncluttered design, the 150Wpc dual-mono, hybrid amp could be just another high-performance entrant in the *über*-integrated sweeps. However, Mimas, the first integrated from Aesthetix, is something much more than that. Capable of expressing the full palette of tonal and textural color it embodies many of the classic sonic virtues from the golden era of tubes, but with the ease and control and extension that are hallmarks of today's finest solid-state. As it fashions these essentials into a harmonious whole, its character hints of classic midrange warmth and airy treble sweetness with bass response as nimble as it is formidable. The very definition of what we all seek from an integrated amplifier. (294)



### Micromega M150

**\$7499**

Stunning from a strictly visual standpoint—especially in one of several available glossy aluminum finishes that include Nogaro Blue and Electric Orange—the Micromega M-150 packs a considerable

amount of advanced performance into a compact package a mere 2.2" in height. While the power supplies are a switch-mode design, the amplification circuit is a true AB topology that avoids the nonlinearities of many Class D schemes aiming to get a lot of watts out of a small box with minimal heat production and lower cost. Power output is rated at 150Wpc into 8 ohms and 300Wpc into 4 ohms. The M-150 employs an AK4490EQ DAC chip that supports up to 768kHz PCM and 11.2MHz DSD decoding, and also features Micromega's proprietary M.A.R.S. room correction software. There's a good-sounding phono stage, too. (294)

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### BAT VK-3000SE

**\$7995**

The VK-3000SE is a hybrid design that marries a tube preamp stage with a solid-state power amplifier section. (It can also be had with an optional phono stage.) Effortless in sonic delivery, the VK-3000SE offers a remarkably complete package combining loads of user flexibility with a clean, neutral, detailed, balanced, and coherent voice that beautifully conveys music's myriad aural, intellectual, and emotional elements. Not for those seeking the seductive golden warmth offered by some tube designs, this BAT is definitely more Audio Research than Conrad Johnson. (280)



### Bel Canto E1X

**\$8000**

According to Bel Canto's designer John Stroncz, "the E1X Integrated shares its architectural approach with the Bel Canto Black system design." The E1X utilizes a multi-circuit-board layout. Multiple processors reside on the AMIP board and control the USB, Ethernet, AES, SPDIF, TosLink, and analog input functions, while a dedicated processor contains the MQA decode and rendering function, as well as the MQA-derived filters. The E1X is, in every respect, Bel Canto's best value. It's a high-performance piece of kit that delivers sonics on a par with a combination of reference components at double the cost. If you have limited space to devote to electronics yet desire superlative sound and audio technology, the E1X can do that with style. (308)



### Devialet ExpertPro 220

**\$9990**

The amplifier offers exceptional neutrality arising from an extreme indifference to loading and extremely low distortion. (This is a hybrid amp: It uses a digital circuit to rough out the current demands but the sound you actually hear is that of a Class A output stage that trims the signal to perfection.) A great amplifier if ever was, what makes the ExpertPro 220 unique is Devialet's Speaker Active Matching (SAM) system. You download onto an SD card, and then into the SAM unit, an electronic model of your speaker (Devialet has these models for a vast number of transducers—so your speaker is most likely covered). This model is then used in real-time to correct the speaker's lower frequencies to match the input. SAM lowers distortion, makes timing correct, and extends response down—a long way. (The speaker is monitored so that overload never happens, but as much bass extension is generated as the speaker is capable of.) A revolution in audio amplification for speakers. (298)





## PHONOSTAGES



### Parasound Halo JC 3 Jr. \$1495

Just a wafer-thin 2.5"

tall, the JC 3 Jr. may resemble the flagship JC 3+ after a close encounter with a pastrami slicer, but there has been no scrimping on features or configurability. And sonically the family resemblance is undeniable. The Jr. conveys a warm ambient flavor to the recording venue, an openness rather than a constriction within the hall. Wind and string transients are smooth and naturalistic. Though not as dynamically flashy as the JC 3+, it is rarely caught flatfooted either. Jr. taps an appreciable amount of front-to-back depth and dimension in its own right. For the vast majority of vinyl lovers, Parasound's JC 3 Jr. will stand the test of time and be a willing partner to the cartridge or turntable upgrades that may accumulate along the way. (284)



### Gold Note PH-10 \$1599/\$1099, PSU-10

The solid-state PH-10 (and matching optional PSU-10 power supply) is a half-width component, which makes for easy and flex-

ible placement in, or on top of, a cabinet or rack. Fit and finish are excellent. All functions (EQ curves, impedance loading, gain) can be adjusted and confirmed via a front-panel TFT display on-the-fly while playing music, allowing specific individual settings to be made for every single record. Its overall presentation is transparent and neutral (with a slightly warm tone and a weighty midrange). Some phono stages pursue "absolute technical objectivity" as their goal. The PH-10 is not that kind of product. It's all about the music. If you're a "truth-seeker," there are other products to choose from, but if you're a "pleasure-seeker," then the PH-10 is for you. (305)

### Moon 310LP \$1900

The Moon 310LP is both precise and poetic, capable of beautifully nuanced changes of tempo, mood, and dynamic shadings. The 310LP is also a highly flexible device: Loading options are 10, 100, 470, 1000, and 47.5k ohms; capacitance loading is 0, 100, and 470pF, while gain settings are at 40, 54, 60, and 66dB. With its low-noise floor—especially when mated with the optional 320S power supply (\$1400)—the 310LP opens a transparent window on the music, with impressive tonal naturalness from top to bottom. (225)

### Sutherland Engineering 20/20 \$2200

Ron Sutherland has a thing for phono stages, and quite a track record, too. His 20/20 builds on the lessons learned from Sutherland's top battery-powered design, the Hubble. But rather than using batteries, the "two-mono" 20/20 is AC-powered by a pair of outboard "regulated desktop power supplies" that connect to sockets located at the front of each circuit board. Like other Sutherland designs, the 20/20 is remarkably transparent to the source and very beautiful-sounding. It may not have the ultimate weight and "slam" of some units, but that's not the point. Expect a very low noise floor, terrific immediacy, and a seductively natural musicality that should prove highly rewarding over the long run. (215)



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### Channel D Lino C 2.0 \$2699

Channel D Lino C 2.0 is a current-mode (transimpedance) phono stage

for low-output, low-impedance moving-coil cartridges. Very linear and coherent-sounding, it doesn't overtly editorialize the musical spectrum at the expense of realistic playback. With features that are not usually available in this range of products (internal high-current AGM battery, current-mode input, meticulous circuit layout, surface-mount components to produce low-noise, direct-coupling, and balanced operation available from input to output), it is well worth an audition by anyone looking for a phono preamp at its price point and above. (308)

### Parasound Halo JC 3+ \$2995

It was only a matter of time before electronics design legend John Curl would author a phono stage for Parasound. Dubbed the JC 3+, it's a dual-mono design. Each channel is housed in its own extruded aluminum enclosure, and further isolated from the power supply with thick, low-carbon-steel partitions. With top-quality parts throughout (Curl notes that the passive EQ parts' values and quality are the same as in his renowned Vendetta Research SCP2B phono.) With every rotation from an LP collection, the JC 3+ conveys a heady mix of profound silence and kick-butt energy, a kiss of romance through the mids, and an ability to extract low-level information and define it within acoustic space. (245)



### EAT E-Glo S with LPS \$3795

European Audio Team (E.A.T.) has taken the ECC83 dual-triode tube and merged it with solid-state electronics to create the E-Glo S mm/mc phono stage. When it is coupled with the LPS external linear power supply, the E-Glo S's performance improves, resulting in increased listening pleasure. Sonically, the E-Glo S/LPS combo produced a consistently easygoing sound that never ventured into aggression. While the E-Glo S/LPS isn't the most resolving or dynamically agile phono stage reviewer Andre Jennings has heard, it is fine enough to capture the essence of the music and deliver it with sufficient information to allow many hours of listening pleasure. (298)

