

Contents



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p.53

The 2023 Golden Ear Awards

Our writers name their favorite audio components.

DS Audio Grand Master Extreme Optical Phono Cartridge

\$22,500

Gadzooks! Hailing from Tokyo, this upgraded version of the original optical Grand Master cartridge, the brain-child of Tetsuakio Aoyagi, the president of DS Audio, is not merely an upgrade. It truly merits that overused term "game-changer" because it changes the analog game in profound ways. It is richer, faster, and more palpable than its predecessor, offering a lifelike presentation of fine recordings and lifting merely mundane ones to the level of pleasurable listening. The level of micro-detail that it excavates from the grooves is uncanny, rendering the most minute bowing on a cello fully audible. The construction of the cartridge's stylus and cantilever, which transmit the groove modulations to an optical generator, is similar to that of the nifty Swiss X-quisite cartridge but goes one level further. The Extreme, you could even say, was made by extremists. It sports a 0.22mm one-piece diamond cantilever that employs no adhesive, a process that is supposed to allow it to detect the vibration of the needle tip more accurately. Listening to it will surely turn almost any analog lover into an adherent of no adhesion, for the results are immediately audible. Bass reproduction is stygian and the treble effortless. Add in a far more stable soundstage in which the position of various instruments can easily and rapidly be identified, and you have one of the, if not *the*, best cartridges extant. (Forthcoming)



dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC

\$46,500

Digital reproduction has long resembled the equivalent of a nuclear arms-race between rival powers seeking to build bigger and better weapons. DCS has now stepped onto the digital battlefield with a potent contender, the Vivaldi Apex DAC. It offers very spiffy performance indeed. When contrasted with the first-generation Vivaldi, it provides superior performance in a variety of sonic arenas, including image stability, timbral purity, and dynamic prowess. One of the most notable areas of improvement is in the bass, which sounds weightier and more textured. Overall, the Apex supplies a more supple and richer musical reproduction that its predecessor could not quite attain. At the heart of the dCS is its Ring DAC which has been heavily modified to offer a lower noise floor and improved linearity. Apex stands at the apex of digital reproduction. (333)



Avantgarde Acoustic Trio G3 Loudspeaker

\$109,000–\$175,000 (with one pair Space Horns)

Avantgarde has revised its statement loudspeaker, celebrating its 30th anniversary with the Trio G3. There's a lot to celebrate. This massive Teutonic loudspeaker system, when outfitted with the full six-pack of subwoofers, each sporting two 12" horn-loaded woofers, can reach death-defying sound pressure levels. The level of midbass solidity, a region where many loudspeakers falter, could hardly be more impressive. But crushing dynamics are not simply what this loudspeaker is about. On the contrary: it displays remarkable fidelity at lower volumes, thanks to the alacrity of its drivers. Violin plucks possess an uncanny you-are-there quality. The clarity and finesse of the G3 are instantly audible, a tribute to the simplicity of its external passive crossover. As it happens, the G3 can also be run in active mode with its internal iIron amplifiers. (The subwoofers are fully active.) Either way, the Trios offer stunning performance for anyone with the space to let them strut their stuff. Their ability to ramp up effortlessly to a full orchestral crescendo offers a more realistic reproduction of the concert hall than most other loudspeakers can even contemplate, let alone execute. It's also worth noting that the Trio does not suffer from the honkiness, shoutiness, or whatever other opprobrious term you might choose to employ to describe the issues that have often plagued horn loudspeakers. These enticing beauties offer a study in high resolution and consummate musicality. (Forthcoming)

Jacob Heilbrunn

