

## 2008 Editors' Choice Awards

resolution, transparency, and transient response (although the Walker beats it convincingly in timbre, soundstaging, and overall realism).

Reviewed by JV, Issue 167

### SME Model 30/2 \$36,000

sumikoaudio.net

Mounted with the SME Series IVVI arm, PS praised the 30/2's tonal neutrality, pitch accuracy, resolution, transparency, rhythmic grip, ambience, low coloration, and soundstaging, concluding that its specialness "lies in three related areas of sonic performance: background silence, dynamics, and that elusive impression of liveliness, vitality...that persuades you the music has come alive in your living room."

Reviewed by PS, Issue 154

### Walker Proscenium Black Diamond turntable and tonearm \$40,000 installed

walkeraudio.com

The Walker Proscenium Black Diamond air-bearing turntable/tonearm transforms many of the smartest ideas from turntables past into a work of audio art that not only looks fantastic but sounds fantastic, too. And now, with Walker's new and improved tonearm, the best source component JV has tested thus far has taken a significant leap forward in overall sonic quality (and it was scarcely chopped liver to start with). Gorgeous in tone color, extraordinary in resolution, superb on bass, and nonpareil on soundstaging, it is JV's long-standing reference.

Reviewed by JV, Issue 167

### AAS Gabriel/DaVinci \$45,000 (without arm)

tangramaudio.com

Like DaVinci's Grandeeza tonearm, with which it is intended to be used, the Swiss-made AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci turntable is an object of considerable beauty. The arm support and the motor controller are mounted on separate massive cylindrical pillars, the extremely heavy, acoustically inert, magnetically-suspended platter (the AAS Gabriel was one of the very first of the recent vintage of magnetic-suspension tables) on its own gigantic cylinder. In combination with the Grandeeza arm, this is a record player capable of state-of-the-art resolution and transparency—as finely detailed, faithful to sources, and tonally neutral as any table/arm JV has heard.

JV (review forthcoming)



## TONEARMS

### UNDER \$2000

#### Rega RB301 \$495

soundorg.com

Turntable manufacturers who don't build their own arms frequently package their models with Rega's terrific-sounding and affordable RB300. Musically compelling, with excellent balance and good detail, if not the final word in any one category.

Reviewed by DM, Issue 127

#### Kuzma Stogi S \$1225

kuzma.si

The Stogi S is a hydraulically damped unipivot with a simple string-and-weight anti-skating mechanism, dual underslung counterweights, and provisions for making both coarse and fine azimuth adjustments. In our reviewer's system, this arm enabled a Shelter 90X cartridge to produce almost shockingly three-dimensional sound with rock-solid bass.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 159

#### VPI JMW-9 Signature \$1400

vpiindustries.com

Compared to the standard JMW-9, the Signature version offers worthwhile upgrades such as a stainless steel bearing assembly, Nordost Valhalla wiring, variable fluid damping, mechanical anti-skate control, and higher effective mass design. HP praised the Super Scoutmaster Signature package for its "considerable dynamic jump" and "musical authenticity."

CM (Reviewed by HP, Issue 159)

#### Wilson Benesch A.C.T. 0.5 \$1795

wilson-benesch.com

Wilson Benesch's unusual A.C.T. 0.5 tonearm features a tapered carbon-fiber arm tube with a kinematic bearing that handles much like a unipivot. The 0.5 works beautifully with affordable cartridges, but can also tap the potential of higher-priced moving coils. An arm your system can grow with over time, the A.C.T. 0.5 is also included in Wilson Benesch's Full Circle analog system.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 163



### \$2000 & ABOVE

#### SME 309 \$2195

sumikoaudio.net

A black tapered titanium beauty, the 309 rarity in today's high-performance models—arm with a removable head shell for easiertridge swapping. Also see SME Model V, low.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 129

#### VPI JMW-10.5/JMW-12.5 \$2300/\$2600

vpiindustries.com

Available in 10" and 12" versions, this beautifully made unipivot may be trickier to set than some, but its sound rewards the effort: highly revealing without being cold, with scof the deepest, most powerful bass to be heard. VTA adjustment during playback allows for exceptional fine-tuning.

Reviewed by AHC, Issue 129

#### Basis Audio Vector Model 4 \$3800

basisaudio.com

Basis Audio's A.J. Conti has solved a fundamental problem with unipivot tonearms—namic azimuth error. Rather than allowing arm to "roll" when the cartridge encounters record warp, the Vector maintains perfect azimuth alignment via Conti's simple yet ingenious new design. The result is an extremely neutral sounding arm that RH has yet to hear mistranslate on any LP.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 172



#### Tri-Planar VII \$4750

triplanar.com

An analog classic, the Tri-Planar VII incorporates the late Herb Papier's final thoughts on arm design. Built by his handpicked successor Tri Mai, the Tri-Planar VII is more neutral than earlier versions, with outstanding solidity a focus, holographic soundstaging, superb detail, dynamic range, and nuance.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 156



## 2008 Editors' Choice Awards

### Graham Phantom B-44 Mk II \$4700

graham-engineering.com

The culmination of all that Bob Graham has learned about tonearm design over the past few decades, the Phantom utilizes Graham's trademarked "MagneGuide" stabilization system to eliminate the "rolling" effect that plagues unipivot arms. The Phantom's tracking is exceptional, creating a sound that is extremely smooth and detailed, with a large soundstage, extended highs, and a deep, nuanced bottom end.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 173



### SME Series V \$5300

sumikoaudio.net

Robust and dynamic-sounding, the now and forever classic SME V is rich with features that include a cast-magnesium one-piece wand, ABEC 7 bearings, and fluid-controlled lateral damping. The V projects a ripe, soothing character with unsurpassed bass resolution, excellent inner detail, and great tracking ability.

NG

### Da Vinci Grandeeza "Grand Reference"

\$9700

tangramaudio.com

This 12" transcription tonearm is a genuine work of audio art. A gorgeous concoction of tone wood, wolfram, platinum- or gold-plated bronze and stainless-steel (with its jewel of a double-gimballed ruby bearing assembly made for Da Vinci by an ultra-high-end Swiss clockmaker), it is a thing of indescribable loveliness, and sounds as wonderful as it looks. As neutral and as nearly invisible as air, it is a truly transparent tonearm, capable of revealing tremendous detail with tremendous energy, within a tremendously large, beautifully laid-out soundstage. Costly, but worth it, the Grandeeza is the best pivoted arm JV has heard or used.

JV (review forthcoming)

GE  
'07

## CARTRIDGES

### UNDER \$500

#### Shure M97xE

\$89

shure.com

An incredibly affordable entry-ticket to the world of analog sound, Shure's M97xE moving-magnet cartridge offers generally neutral tonal balance with slight hints of roll-off at the frequency extremes, unflappable tracking, and an overall presentation that is unfailingly smooth. A great starter cartridge.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 172

#### Grado Prestige MC+ Mono

\$90

gradolabs.com

Interested in dipping your toes into the mono waters, but not in taking a financial bath? This is the cartridge for you. The Grado mono is an excellent tracker that fully shows the virtues of mono LPs—sledgehammer bass and excellent imaging solidity. More expensive cartridges will flesh out the sound more and offer greater detail, but the Grado is a joy to listen to.

Reviewed by JHb, Issue 180

#### Ortofon 2m Red and Black

\$99 and \$599

ortofon.com

The swansong design of Ortofon's former chief engineer Per Windfeld, the entry-level 2M Red (5.5mV) uses a tipped elliptical, while the 2M Black (5mV) wields a formidable Shibata diamond stylus—the same as used on the vaunted MC Jubilee. Compared with the now extinct Shure V15 series, the 2M Black has a lighter touch and certainly a faster one with a more resolved character irrespective of frequency. The Black's greatest attribute, however, was how it provided a more transparent window into the world of micro-energies, plumbing the complexities of orchestral depth and dimension. In comparison, the 2M Red clocks in as a little drier and sounds as if it's making more of an effort in the upper treble. Keep in mind that although it lacks some of the velvety finesse and smooth harmonic finish of the Black, this is one sophisticated and musical cartridge—for the price of a nice dinner for two.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 182

#### Grado Prestige Gold

\$220

gradolabs.com

Grado's Prestige Gold cartridge has its flaws—a lack of inner detail and audible grain chief among them—but its strengths are such that

you can easily listen through them. They include a somewhat warm yet pleasant but sweet if not hugely airy treble, and an especially layered bass. The overall presentation is lively.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 141, CM in 172

#### Sumiko Bluepoint No. 2

\$299

sumikoaudio.net

The second-generation version of the point Oyster—long considered a go-among affordable, high-output moving-tridges—the No. 2 offers improved superior three-dimensionality, richer potent bass, and smoother, less aggressive. A huge step up from entry-level cartridge.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 172

#### Sumiko Blue Point Special E

\$399

sumikoaudio.net

The EVOIII offers substantial improvement over the original Blue Point Special: fundamental heartiness, terrific top-to consistency, and the ability to gracefully tracking challenges. This is one moving will not bite you with excess edge or glare.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 147

## \$500 - \$1000

#### Grado Reference Sonata

\$500

gradolabs.com

A wonderful performer, the Sonata maintains transparency and resolution of the very it delivers a naturally sweet treble, rich colors, and very good detail, particular midband.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 141

#### Benz Micro ACE

\$550 (S Class, \$700)

musicalsurrroundings.com

The ACE offers a wide-open midrange of definition and air around instrumental voices, and tight, clean bass. With the nostage, it can do a great job of walking the fine line between resolution and smoothness.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 147

#### Sumiko Blackbird

\$799

sumikoaudio.net

This high-output moving-coil is smooth tailed, with a wide soundstage and firm authority. Massed strings lack the upper range glare one hears with some midrange instruments are particularly

TONEARMS

CARTRIDGES