

2017 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

TURNTABLES

TONEARMS

PHONO CARTRIDGES

PHONO PREAMPS/MOVING-COIL STEP-UP DEVICES

The Sony PS-HX500 is a USB turntable comprising: a belt-driven platter of lightweight aluminum alloy; a proprietary aluminum-alloy tonearm with an 8.7" effective length; an OEM moving-magnet cartridge; and an onboard MM phono preamp and A/D converter, the last capable of creating files of up to 24-bit/192kHz (PCM) or 5.6MHz (DSD). Described by MF as easy to set up, the Sony package exhibited disappointing speed accuracy and stability (although the latter proved inaudible, "even on sustained notes"), but its tonearm "was particularly well behaved." MF also praised the overall sound of the Sony package, writing that the "midrange was rich and full, and the upper frequencies were smooth and also well extended, with clean, precise transients." His conclusion: "the PS-HX500 reinforced the notion that, even at so low a price, a properly designed turntable can do some attractive analog things that no digital system at any price has yet managed." (Vol.39 No.8 WWW)

VPI SCOUT JR.: \$1600 WITH TONEARM AND CARTRIDGE

"The Scout Jr. record player offers, at a reasonable price, the ability to play now." Thus spoke HR of the US-made belt-drive Scout Jr., a relatively basic turntable that comes bundled with a gimbal-bearing tonearm of stainless steel and an Ortofon 2M Red moving-magnet cartridge. Junior's 1.25"-thick MDF plinth is reinforced with steel, and its 1"-thick platter is machined from aluminum. An outboard motor topped with a plastic pulley snugs into a recess on the plinth's left side. From the start—and it was an easy start, since the Scout Jr. is shipped with its cartridge installed and aligned—HR was impressed that the VPI squeezed from the budget Ortofon 2M Red far better sound than he'd ever heard. As the days went by, he came to appreciate the VPI's "American organic-ness," and the manner in which its "slight darkness and seductively quiet spaciousness" set it apart from other players in this price range. Quoth HR: "It made LP playback seem less mechanical and more sophisticated." NB: The Scout Jr. is easily upgradable—for a price, the buyer can select from a choice of better tonearms, bigger platters, more effective isolation feet, and myriad phono cartridges—and replaces the VPI Traveler, which was not. (Vol.39 No.2 WWW)

VPI PLAYER: \$1500 \$\$\$

Equal parts entry-level audiophile component and perfectionist-quality lifestyle product, the VPI Player (originally called the Nomad) bundles a wood-plattered, belt-drive turntable and 10" gimbaled tonearm with an Ortofon 2M Red cartridge and an onboard phono preamplifier designed specifically around the former—plus an onboard headphone amp. BJR was impressed with the Nomad's apparent durability and the plug-and-play ease with which it went from carton to system, with no painstaking adjustments required. Even more impressive was the player's performance: BJR praised the Nomad's "rich, voluptuous, uncolored midrange," and heard "superb" transient articulation and "an impressive amount of inner detail for so inexpensive an analog rig." One comparison test prompted BJR to declare: "that VPI's phono stage held its own against a \$500 phono stage designed by one of the industry's top electronics designers is pretty impressive, given that the VPI's stage is included as part of a turntable package costing only \$995." A word of caution regarding the Nomad's headphone amp: "It had much more gain than most pairs of headphones need. I found it all too easy to overdrive my phones." (Vol.38 No.2 WWW)

D

REGA RP1: \$475 \$\$\$ ★

The plug'n'play RP1 (for Rega Planar One) replaces Rega's popular P1. Nearly identical to the earlier model in size and shape, the RP1 uses an Ortofon OM5e moving-magnet cartridge, but trades the P1's MDF platter for one of phenolic resin and adds Rega's new, solidly built RB101 tonearm. Additionally, the P1's drab gray finish is exchanged for the RP1's choice of White, Cool Gray, or Titanium. Compared to the P1, the RP1 delivered more drive, better focus, and was the more confident, purposeful, and authoritative player. "Rega's RP1 looks good, is easy to set up, and plays records like it means it," said SM. AD

shared SM's enthusiasm: "It's not just that I can't imagine \$445 buying more happiness; I can't imagine so modest an investment in money and effort buying more music." The RPI Performance Pack Upgrade was easy to install and resulted in a bigger soundstage, deeper silences, and greater resolution of low-level detail, said SM. "A no-brainer," agreed AD. (Vol.34 Nos. 2, 4, & 5 WWW)

TONEARMS

A

ABIS SA-1.2: \$1775 \$\$\$ ★

The Japan-made Abis SA-1.2 is a high-mass 9" tonearm that began life as the Abis SA-1, famous for impressing AD and for having been withdrawn from an earlier edition of "Recommended Components"—by its importer!—while undergoing revision. The new SA-1.2 reflects a number of refinements: improved bearings, greater effective length (9.4" vs 9"), and slightly higher offset angle. The arm's basics remain: a precision-milled armtube of rectangular cross section, static downforce, and a removable headshell for easy cartridge changes. When he used the revised SA-1.2—also an HR favorite—with the perennially recommendable Denon DL-103 cartridge, the low compliance of which is well suited to such a high-mass arm, AD found it capable of pulling from his records "tremendous amounts of touch and force and impact." The SA-1.2 was so good, he declared, that it made his Thorens TD 124 sound more like his Garrard 301. (This, he suggests, is good.) Speaking of which, AD cautions that, to make the Abis more compatible with the unusually low-slung platter of the TD 124, the user must make one or two adjustments. His conclusion: "I'd put the combination of Abis SA-1.2 and Denon DL-103 up against all but their priciest competitors." (Vol.37 No.3, Vol.38 No.11, Vol.39 No.4 WWW)

ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE TA-9000: \$17,995

The key to the TA-9000's performance—and its remarkable price—is an armtube design in which concentric structures of aluminum alloy are joined by a very complex spiral arrangement of more than 700 connecting limbs. The pivoted TA-9000 also offers high-precision, hand-adjusted ball bearings, an SME-compatible mount, and a headshell that's adjustable for azimuth in the usual manner (loosen clamp, rotate headshell, tighten clamp), though MF was disappointed that this expensive tonearm offers no more than a "rudimentary" height adjustment. Used with Acoustic Signature's Ascona Mk.2 turntable, the 9" TA-9000 (it's also available in a 12" version) presented MF with "a smooth sound with a rich midrange, great detail, and great resolution," though it wasn't the last word in bottom-end extension and control, MF also opined that "the arm's mass is too low to work well with modern, low-compliance MC cartridges." Subsequent to his review, the TA-9000 was improved: the internal structure of the once-lively armtube was redesigned, the bearing housing was made more rigid, the aluminum headshell was replaced with one machined from titanium, and the arm pillar is now raised and lowered with what MF describes as "an ingenious gear system." MF reports better measured behavior from the TA-9000, with resonances "visibly and audibly" within the ideal window of 8–12Hz. Acoustic Signature offers these upgrades without charge to owners of the original TA-9000. (Vol.39 No.12, Vol.40 No.7)

AMG 9W2: \$3500 ★ \$\$\$

The German-made 9W2 tonearm from turntable specialists AMG combines a traditional horizontal bearing with a vertical bearing that is, per AD, unique in its field: "an upright pair of 0.4mm spring-steel wires that are perfectly straight when the tonearm tube is balanced, yet flex in tandem and yield to the armtube's mass when the counterweight is moved closer to the twin fulcrums." The result, he reports, is a near-ideal combination of zero play and absence of friction. VTA and azimuth are easily adjusted, and a magnetic antiskating mechanism is included. Used on his Linn LP12—for which the 9W2 was apparently designed—the 9W2 was, said AD, "the first Linn-friendly arm I've heard that has made me stop sobbing about the demise of the Naim Aro: a considerable

feat." Also with reference to his past favorite tonearms, AD added: "None surpasses the 9W2 in sheer build quality." (Vol.37 No.10, Vol.40 No.10 WWW)

AUDIO ORIGAMI PU7: \$3000 ★

Based on the Syrix PU2 tonearm of the 1980s—a product that BJR, AD, and other *Stereophile* contributors have owned and loved—the Audio Origami PU7, from Scotland, is a pivoting arm with a gimbaled ball-race bearing. The PU7 seems better finished than its forebear, though creature comforts are thin on the ground: Adjustments of VTF and VTA depend on the user loosening one or more grub screws and repositioning uncalibrated parts, and antiskating is a simple thread and falling weight—but, as MF points out, the design "emphasizes rigidity over convenience." Used with the Palmer Audio 2.5 turntable, the PU7 contributed a notably velvety sound with a bottom end that was "well controlled and extended," said MF, who cautioned that "images were of less-than-pinpoint accuracy and somewhat larger than life." But the PU7 distinguished itself as "a fine tracker, and feels as if it has bearings of... extremely high quality. Physically and sonically, it's a lot of tonearm for \$3000, though I think its tube needs better internal damping." (Vol.37 No.10, Vol.40 No.10)

BRINKMANN 12.1: \$5890

More than just a Brinkmann 10.5 tonearm with a longer armtube (its effective length is, you guessed it, 12.1"), the 12.1 incorporates mechanical refinements that, according to Brinkmann, endow it with greater torsional stability and greater immunity to resonances. Crafted from aluminum and stainless steel, it uses precision ball bearings for both vertical and lateral movement, and is available with either flying signal leads or a captured output cable of the usual sort. MF felt the Brinkmann 12.1, when compared with the Kuzma 4Point tonearm, had somewhat less slam but was lighter on its feet—and, with classical and jazz, is perhaps the better choice. And MF loved the 12.1's "lusciously velvet midrange." (Vol.38 No.5)

BRINKMANN 10.5: \$5490 ★

A Breuer-like gimbaled-bearing design that features an armtube described by the designer as a "high-speed, double-concentric, ceramic-plated, self-damping transmission device." It uses a Brinkmann arm on his Orade with great success. (Vol.28 No.5)

EMT 997: \$5500 ★

The banana-shaped EMT 997 tonearm is a fixed-pivot, high-mass design that is supplied without a headshell. (Use with old-style pickup heads is presumed, although the 997 is compatible with conventional detachable headshells.) Its effective length of 307mm (12") works to minimize tracking-angle error and distortion. Though it sacrificed timbral neutrality, imbuing well-recorded voices with "some mid-to-upper-mid bumps and dips," the 997 impressed AD with its ability to convey the inherent tension of recorded music. "The EMT 997 was the least wimpy, least wispy tonearm I've ever heard," he said. If willing to invest the time and effort necessary for proper installation and setup, the user will be rewarded with "an almost indescribably great deal of pleasure," AD added. Current-production samples of the EMT 997 incorporate a bearing housing machined from brass rather than stamped from aluminum alloy, and a better finish for the armtube. AD found the bearings of the new version to have less play than those of its predecessor, the sonic and musical consequence being "a surprising if subtle increase in musical drive." That unexpected refinement of an already Class A tonearm prompted the 997's promotion to Class A+ status, of which AD said, "... and the best-built arm I have owned." (Vol.31 Nos. 7 & 9, Vol.38 No.7, WWW)

KUZMA 4POINT: \$6675 ★

AND 4POINT 14": \$8995

Designed by Franc Kuzma, this brilliant pivoted tonearm takes its name from its four-point bearing system: Four carefully arranged points contact four cups, permitting the arm to move in both the vertical and lateral planes while avoiding the chatter of gimbaled bearings and the instability of unipivot designs. It has an effective length of 11", a pivot-to-spindle distance of 10.3", an overhang of 0.6", an effective mass of 0.4oz, and a total weight of 3.63