

Affordable\$\$Audio Best Of 2010 Staff Picks

Every year the staff is asked to select a couple of their favorite audio products from reviews during the year. In the past these awards were presented with the January Issue. However, with the merger of Affordable\$\$Audio and HiFizine we bumped things up a month.



Luminous Audio Axiom Passive Preamp

The Axiom passive preamp is a one-of-a-kind product with the best price to performance ratio I've encountered in a preamp. The idea of passively attenuating your source is not a new one, but Luminous Audio's Tim Stinson has created a very unique product in that it is tuned to your system. Synergy can often make or break any system, but designing the Axiom preamplifier around your specifications (efficiency of your speakers, input impedance of your power amp, input sensitivity of your power amp, and output voltage of your source) can greatly improve system synergy and improve your listening experience. With a single volume knob and no component switching, the Axiom is extremely easy to operate, and being completely passive means that it will not inject electrical noise in your equipment or have

ground loop issues. As with any passive preamp, its maximum volume is based upon the output of your source, but using it I never felt limited in volume capability, and music flowed through it more naturally than water out of a hose. The preamp does have limited inputs and outputs, but built with high quality parts like Caddock resistors and silver wire, it is an amazing option for anyone starting at \$135.

By Jake Montzingo

Shuguang Treasure Classic S300MK Integrated Amplifier

Shuguang released their line of Treasure Series tubes two years ago to commemorate the company's 50th anniversary. These tubes have been wildly successful since release, and Shuguang made the most out of their tubes by subsequently releasing a line of amplifiers to take advantage of their special tubes. The S300MK is Shuguang's version of a 300B SET amplifier and uses Treasure 300B-Z, Treasure 6CA7-Z, Shuguang gold label 12AX7, and Shuguang 5AR4 tubes. The great thing about this amp is not only that its standard tubes are already upgrades, but the tubes alone would cost you \$950 for an amp that re-



tails for \$1785 from Ian and Rachel at Grant Fidelity. Hooked up to my Klipsch horns, the amp sang like an angel and I have yet to find a better component match to those speakers. Add in that the entire amp is wired point-to-point, and easily accessible to a DIY hobbyist like myself who will be swapping in some premium label parts, and you have one giant-killer of an amp. The 300B has been the long time king of tubes, especially with high sensitivity speakers, but for most of us, the good ones were out of our price range. Thanks to Grant Fidelity, the well priced and excellently performing Shuguang S300MK integrated 300B tube amplifier should fulfill most peoples vacuum dreams.

By Jake Montzingo

Firestone Audio Little Country 3 Headphone Amplifier

Headphone amps tend to be feast or famine from my listening experience. Many of them sound good as they have been well designed, but many others are simply produced to create another product to sell because headphones seems like an easy market. The Firestone Audio Little Country 3 headphone amp fall into the well designed category, and this amp the the most enjoyable headphone amp I've used to date. It uses two Electro Harmonix 6922 twin-triode tubes for the power, and has an outboard, regulated power supply with a toroidal transformer and power filtering. For all you PC audio folks, the amp does not have an onboard USB DAC, but does provide simplicity with RCA connections, and even pre-outs so the unit can be used as a preamp. The sound quality is stunning with zero noise, and at \$447, the best sound you can get for the price, or anything close.

By Jake Montzingo



Aperion Audio/Soundmatters Slimstage 30 Surround Bar

\$449

Finally, a sound bar that does everything in a straight-forward design that anyone can figure out. No degree from MIT needed to figure out this unit. With a built-in amplifier, the Slimstage 30 packs a punch that will keep both the condo/townhome owner and neighbors happy. The display screen fonts are easy on older eyes and the remote is both logical and intuitive. Typical of Aperion's customer service-based core values, every possible cord/wire type is included, no need to run to Radio Shack. Best of all, it sounds terrific.

Dan Nielsen



Mark & Daniel Diamond+ Speakers

\$2650 pr.

Between the man-made casted marble cabinet and Heil-based tweeter, the Diamond+ speakers take on the standard audio rules and turn them on their head. The natural smooth highs and clear midrange, coupled with a punchy deep bass and across-the-board impressive depth make them a strong value in a crowded market. It's actually real bass, not the one note tuned wonder that so many small speakers attempt to fool the listener into hearing as something more than what actually exists. Even in my large room I felt the kick. If you have the truly serious amplification power to make the Diamond+'s sing, don't hesitate give them an audition at the nearest dealer, you will be impressed.

Dan Nielsen



Album of the Year

Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers: Mojo

This is the type of album one wishes all veteran artists could put out. *Mojo* is a combination of experience and a desire that one's best work is still ahead. If I had this on vinyl, I'd be on my second copy. *Mojo* is rock and roll at its best, powerful and soul-searching without being preachy.

Dan Nielsen

