



EDITOR'S CHOICE

AudioStream Editor's Choice Components \$2,500 and Over

Rafe Arnott | Dec 29, 2018



Running up that hill to discuss the more upper-echelon of hi-fi products, one finds the air more rarified, much like mountain climbing, the higher one goes the better the views become but usually with a cost. In climbing it's danger to life and limb, in hi-fi it's danger to the pocketbook and also one of hearing what you might have been missing.

As with all lists, there is inherently limited room, so not every piece of gear I felt deserved to be here made it (this time), but I will be updating the Editor's Choice list throughout 2019, so look for those picks to show up with the full reviews.

This was the toughest bracket to choose from in many ways for me, I hope you enjoy the fruit of my labor.

–Rafe Arnott

Auralic Polaris – \$2,999 USD



Auralic Polaris

This is a little powerhouse of the *super integrated* genus, which is what I've started to referring to as a classification of amplifier that is designed to "do-it-all" and do it all *very well*. When I first heard the Polaris in my home I was impressed at the ease of set up using Auralic's Lightning DS software application, less so the sound – initially. But there was plenty of other aspects that did impress: a hardware platform – the Tesla G1 – built around a high-performance "Quad-Core Cortex-A9 processor running at 1GHz, with 1GB DDR3 RAM and 4GB of storage... automatic updates [to] keep the Tesla G1 platform outfitted with the latest features..." Support up to 32-bit/384kHz for PCM and DSD256, Tri-Band Wi-fi, Ethernet, AES/EBU, Coaxial, Toslink, and USB digital inputs along with a 2Vrms Line Stage input and a Moving Magnet phono stage (36dB, 65mV) with RCA pre-amp outs, and 120 watts of output based on the Auralic Merak mono block power amps. Fast forward a couple weeks and as I was cooking dinner and listening to music through the Polaris and suddenly my spine did a hinky-jig because there was an *opening*, a *disturbance*, if you will, that seemed to hang in the very air itself between my speakers. The Polaris had suddenly and in the space of a few songs gone from a competent super integrated that I could stream tunes to via DS or Roon, to a living, breathing reproducer of music that had incredible tonal and timbral accuracy, macro and micro

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list of control on bass. In conversation with Audac's President and CEO Xuanqian Wang regarding this less-than-subtle change in the entire tenor of the Polaris' performance, he related to me that there are numerous parts (caps, resistors, etc.) in the circuit path that could take around 200 hours to break-in, hence my corporeal reaction. If you like the idea of spending money for a true high-fidelity experience that caters to your digital freak and gets analog done right for under \$3,000 USD with tons of future-fi to go around, the Polaris should be on your list to audition.

McIntosh C2600 Tube Preamplifier \$6,999 USD



McIntosh C2600

I know your situation. You're making the long jump from an integrated to separates and your neck-deep in research figuring out a high-fidelity path forward that will not only not break your bank, but consist of components that could also last your lifetime and even be an heirloom for the next generation. You're looking for an end-game preamplifier with serious sonic chops? Then you need to consider the C2600. With impeccable build quality, gorgeous, classic McIntosh design cues (awash in black, chrome, steel and the iconic green Mc logo and blue power meters) and no less

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side you've got three XLR, four RCA and dedicated MM and MC phono stages. Digitally speaking there is one Asynchronous USB Type-B, two coaxial, three optical and one proprietary McIntosh MCT (DIN) which offers a secure DSD connection for McIntosh SACD/CD transports. It also comes with a fantastic headphone amplifier featuring McIntosh's Headphone Crossfeed Director (HXD) technology. I've had this preamp in-house for the last several months and been blown away at it's transparency, resolution – without sacrificing a subtle touch of tube warmth – (12AX7A main input, 12AT7 main output, 12AX7 MM and MC compliment) tone, timbre and incredible flexibility. Being able to have three DACs and two turntables connected simultaneously along with the 2600's built-in ESS9016 SABRE Ultra eight-channel 32-bit DAC makes A/B testing practically instantaneous.

Aurender N10 Music Server \$7,999 USD



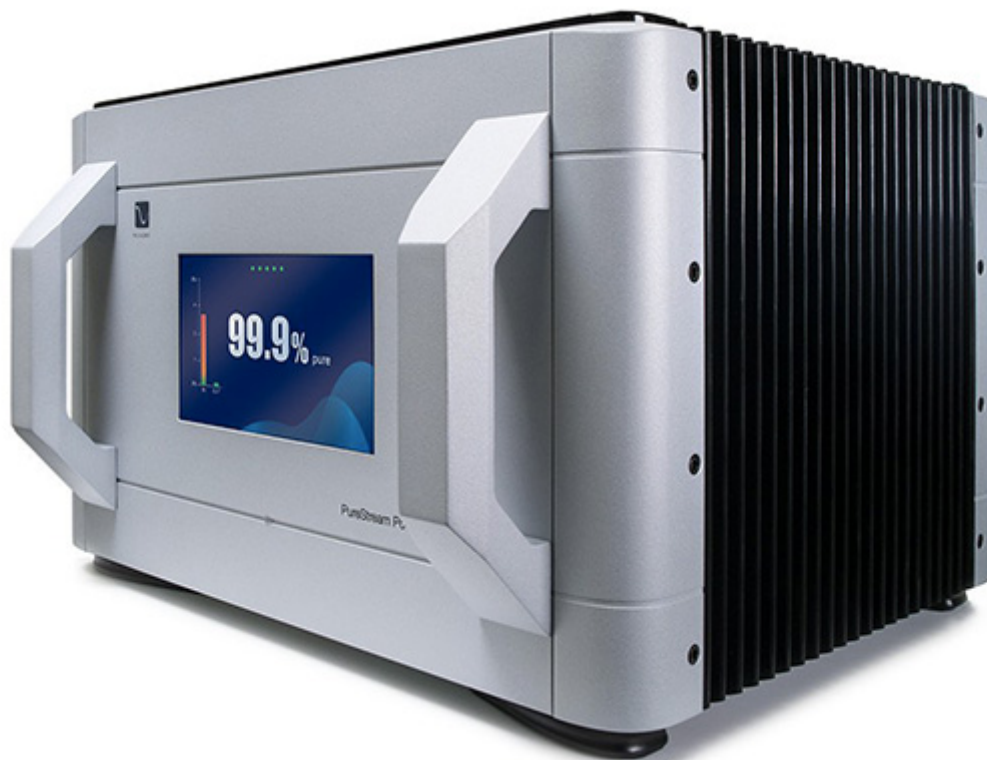
Aurender N10

If you're a dedicated digital-audio junkie, or just like having access to the the cloud for Tidal, Qobuz or Spotify as backup to your CD or LP collection, then getting your ones and zeros passed along to your DAC via your laptop

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Setup could be capable of delivering. And honestly, is a bit dated in this modern, tech-savvy world of Siri and Alexa. I should know, I was truly happy with a dedicated MacBook Air to run my streaming apps to various DACs and then I tried the Aurender N10 and I was floored at how much better all my locally-stored high-res and streamed 16/44 or 24/96 files sounded. I don't mean in a subtle way either, this was an order-of-magnitude difference in my personal setup. Not only did I instantly recognize a huge drop in the noise floor, better dynamics and an overall tightening-up of the presentation with more detail coming through, but instruments and vocals seemed to have a more natural flow: sonically, it was like wiping clean a dirty window. Throw in a great control app via iPad in Aurender's proprietary 'Conductor' software, dedicated power supplies, an all-metal alloy chassis with built-in EMI and RF shielding, an internal 256-gig SSD for playback caching and a four-terabyte HDD for storage and you begin to see why using something like a PC which was never designed for audiophile playback suddenly sounds so 1996.

PS Audio DirectStream P20 Regenerator \$9,995 USD



PS Audio P20

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need to make sure that you're wresting the best sonics out of each and every one, clean incoming AC power suddenly starts to become a priority, especially when you look at the old \$50 power strip that you've realized you've outgrown. Enter PS Audio's Dectet Power Centre, at \$499 USD it (along with some PS Audio AC cables and their Power Port Classic AC wall receptacle) was my first major upgrade in the power-supply department. Needless to say, it was an ear-opening experience and after living with and appreciating the uptick in SQ the Dectet provided for a couple years, I got a hold of a P10 and never looked back. That is, until PS Audio offered me their new DirectStream P20 Regenerator... I loved the P10, but the P20 offered all of that and a lower noise floor with even better transient response on dense classical music passages (massed strings), percussion notes occupying the space between the lowest octaves and improved vocal inflection, never mind an even more effortless sense of breathing to amps and preamps. Throw in twice the number of output devices and double the power-supply storage of the P10 and upgrading became a no-brainer.

Naim Uniti Atom \$3,295 USD



Naim Uniti Atom

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the naming convention they did, an Atom on its own is a time, but it spilt to unleash the power therein, it becomes nothing to be trifled with. Explosive is a good descriptor for the dynamic sound that one can wrest from the Uniti Atom and I often had people who visited while the Atom was playing (nestled between giant mono blocs, DACs, servers and preamps) ask me which pieces of big iron were producing the sound: most couldn't believe it was the little black box that was housing an all-in-one wireless music player. With a 40-watt/channel A/B-class integrated amplifier at its heart, UPnP 2.4/5GHz wi-fi, Ethernet and aptX Bluetooth connectivity built-in along with native support for Chromecast, AirPlay, Roon and Spotify Connect the Atom is packed with the latest technology. Like hardwired inputs and outputs too? The Atom sports two Toslink (24-bit/96kHz), a Coaxial (24-bit/192kHz, DoP for DSD64), two USB-A (32-bit/384kHz, supports up to 20,000 songs on external drives) and standard RCA inputs. On the downstream side, there's an RCA sub/pre out and even a 3.5mm headphone jack. A gorgeous 5-inch colour TFT display graces the front panel and a slick rotary volume-control wheel resides on the CNC-machined upper chassis. Top it all off with a SHARC 40-bit DSP processor and dual Burr-Brown DACs, Naim's own app and you've got a slick, audiophile-grade system that sounds the business and looks it too.

Vinnie Rossi LIO \$14,000 USD



Vinnie Rossi LIO

Vinnie Rossi has been making high-quality amps, preamps and integrated amps for years, first under the Red Wine Audio moniker and now his own name. His latest modular design triumph is the svelte, tech-packed LIO line of components. My favourite of which is the LIO integrated amplifier with DHT (Directly Heated Triodes) -pre line stage, built-in 32-bit/384kHz, DSD128 (DoP) DAC and headphone amp to compliment an already outstanding high-current MOSFET power output. At \$14k kitted-out with these options, this is not a budget proposition but, one of the main things that has set Rossi's designs apart from everything else is his "patent-pending, ultracapacitor power supply ("PURE DC-4-EVR") which isolates audio circuitry from the noise and voltage fluctuations of AC mains power – without the need for an external power conditioner..." Ergo no need to drop further dough on that front, so consider the LIO as saving you some money (if you will). One of the most natural and effortless amps I've heard at this price point, Rossi works hard every day to continue to keep subtle and not-so-subtle improvements in the pipeline for LIO owners, add in the ability to add a new DAC or phono module (or whatever module your heart desires) at a later date thanks to the unique chassis design and you've got an integrated ready for the long haul.



A few years ago the totaldac d1-integral (along with Roon) was the starting point of my *digital-audio* journey in high fidelity and was where I first felt the inertial tug of high-quality streaming pulling me away from my beloved Linn LP12 and its co-habitative record collection. Thanks to totaldac owner and chief engineer Vincent Brient, when my time was up reviewing the integral, he quickly shipped me one of his newest models and his most potent one-box totaldac solution to date (along with his d-1 seven): *the d1-direct*. Featuring *direct* unbalanced 1.6v outputs (thanks to newly configured “offset management and optimized filtering”) from the proprietary non-oversampling, 288-piece hand-matched 0.01 per cent VAR Bulk Metal Vishay Foil resistors that make up this particular R2R DAC, Brient has unleashed a music monster. What does this mean? It means it makes music sound like real people playing real instruments between the speakers in front of me. Few DACs at this price point or beyond have the ability to suspend disbelief while listening with your eyes closed like Brient’s upper-echelon designs do. Having heard his d1-tube-mk2 (200-resistor R2R count) and d1-dual (200-resistor R2R count) in a number of settings, I can say with no hyperbole that what Brient has achieved with a slightly higher-count R2R ladder via direct outputs is a mix of the dark arts, hard science and the power of determination. Unpretentious, utterly

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with transient speed that makes every note vibrate at the frequency of real life, the d1-direct will transport you to when the music was made.

dCS Rossini DAC \$23,999 USD



dCS Rossini

It weighs a ton, as if made out of a solid billet of some rare, fallen-to-Earth iron ore that was once the heart of a meteorite before being discovered buried in the floor of long dried-up lake bed 100,000 years after impact: I'm talking about the dCS Rossini. It's imbued sonically with that same solidity it possesses physically, there's a weight to notes that are birthed between the lowest octaves which seem to anchor a midrange heavy with deep and colourful tonal and timbral shadings – All of which is underpinning a top end that is so light it wants to fly away into the ether but it is being held fast in a linear, and utterly cohesive grip by the aforementioned mids and bottom end. Included support for Tidal, Deezer, Spotify and AirPlay, packed with a long list of cutting-edge technologies, including the dCS Ring DAC, dCS Digital Processing Platform, multi-stage DXD and DSD oversampling, separate power supplies and internal circuitry enclosures for analog and digital sections, EMI and RF insulation, full MQA decoding, multiple PCM

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ASYNCHRONOUS USB, AES/EBU, SPDIF, DNG with RCA output to go with 211V or 6mV electronically-balanced and floating XLR outputs and a proprietary dCS Rossini app which is easy to set up, use and also configure the DAC from, this is a holistic package to deliver your music to you in a completely linear and utterly transparent, musical and lifelike manner. The Rossini puts the recorded moment in the room with you. Like a cello, it is part bespoke instrument, part time machine: and like the cello, there is only the music which emanates from the Rossini.

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COMMENTS



Aurender ACS10 and A10

Submitted by Everclear on December 31, 2018 - 4:35am

Couple of more of my suggestions Aurender ACS10 and A10 :-)
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Auralic Polaris

Submitted by Everclear on January 1, 2019 - 7:10am

Auralic Polaris = Swiss army knife of audio :-)

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Auralic Vega G2

Submitted by Everclear on January 5, 2019 - 7:15am

May be Rafe could review Auralic Vega G2 (\$6,000) streaming DAC and may be even compare it with the dCS DACs? :-)

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AudioStream Product Of The Year
2019: Roon Software and Roon
Nucleus Network Server



Editor's Choice Over \$2,500 USD –
AudioStream 2019



Editor's Choice \$500 to \$2,500 USD –
AudioStream 2019



Editor's Choice Under \$500 –
AudioStream 2019



AudioStream Editor's Choice
Components from \$500 to \$2,500



AudioStream Editor's Choice
Components 2018 – Under \$500

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Integrated Amps/DACs
Network Int Amps/DACs
Network Players
Network Attached
Storage (NAS)
Media Servers
Computer Speakers
Cables & Accessories

Software

Media Player Software
Miscellaneous Software

Editor's Choice

Editor's Choice

Greatest Bits

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Product of the Year

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Reviewer's Choice

Michael Lavorgna
Steve Plaskin
Stephen Mejias

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Ripping & File Conversion
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