

2017 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

TONEARMS

PHONO CARTRIDGES

PHONO PREAMPS/MOVING-COIL STEP-UP DEVICES

headshell. This allows the user to more easily gauge headshell tilt while setting azimuth. "Neat!" MF adds: "Luxurious midrange, low distortion, and ease of setup and use make this a very attractive arm if your table can handle the length." More recently, in addition to a streamlined model name, VPI's first transcription-length tonearm has come in for some mechanical refinements. Its unipivot bearing, and the jeweled cup within its bearing housing, have been improved. A weighted collar has been added to the counterweight, and can be rotated asymmetrically for azimuth adjustment. "Most important," according to MF, "[its] cantilevered platform has been made far more massive and sturdy." Additionally, an antiskating mechanism is now available, though not without the manufacturer's antipathy. Additional arm assemblies cost \$600. (Vol.20 No.1, Vol.24 No.12, Vol.25 No.3, Vol.37 No.5; see BD's review of the VPI HR-X in Vol.29 No.5 WWW)

B**ABIS TAIL: \$1875**

From the same Japanese firm that makes the heartily recommended 9" SA-1.2 tonearm comes the Abis TAIL, the L standing for long—as in 12". The TAIL has an S-shaped aluminum armtube, and its removable aluminum headshell is anodized black. Cup-and-point bearings are used for vertical movement, while the horizontal bearing is a traditional ball-and-ace sort: AD found all bearings to be free of both friction and excess play. A spring-actuated antiskating device is fitted, while downforce is applied statically. The effective length is 325mm, and while the effective mass is not specified, the arm seems appropriate for use with medium- to low-compliance cartridges and pickup heads—an impression borne out in AD's listening tests: "The Abis tonearm allowed the Miyajima [Premium BE Mono II] . . . to shine as a detail-retrieval champ of the first order," although he heard less bass weight than desired. AD also noted an inaccuracy in the TAIL's installation jig, advising prospective users: "Just remember that it may require an extra bit of attention in setting up." (Vol.38 No.1 WWW)

ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE TA-1000: \$1595

This medium-mass, 9" tonearm—also available in 10" (\$1795) and 12" (\$1995) versions—has gimballed bearings, static downforce, and an armwand comprising inner and outer layers of carbon fiber. The simple rotating-block aluminum headshell allows easy adjustment of overhang and offset angle, and azimuth can be adjusted—though not on the fly—by means of the three bolts that fasten the TA-1000's armwand to the bearing assembly. HR had good results when using the TA-1000 with his review sample of Acoustic Signature's WOW XL turntable and a wide variety of cartridges. RD, who has now purchased a TA-1000 (plus an Acoustic Signature WOW XXL turntable), wrote that the arm "impressed as precision-made machinery, with outstanding fit and finish." He also noted that by buying the arm with a DIN connector instead of a hardwired cable—the price is the same, either way—he was able to improve its sound quality with cable upgrades. AD tried the 12" TA-1000; his only complaint was of "noticeably high" residual friction in the arm's vertical bearings, a problem described by the US distributor as limited to only the earliest samples of the arm. But he enthused over what he described as "one of the finest brand-specific alignment gauges ever supplied with a tonearm." (Vol.38 No.9, Vol.39 No.2 WWW)

AUDIO ORIGAMI UNIARM: \$2495

Although heavier overall than the Naim Aro, and with a bearing assembly at once functionally simpler and stylistically more ornate. Audio Origami's new UniArm has much in common with the sadly discontinued Aro, itself a tonearm that AD regards with a wistfulness most people reserve for deceased pets. The UniArm is a missionary-style unipivot (as far as we know, the industry has yet to produce a variant that qualifies as doggy-style) with a plug-and-socket disconnect for the signal wires that permits the swapping out of armtubes (and thus cartridges), and a thread-and-falling-weight antiskating mechanism. The UniArm is available with the buyer's choice of Linn- or Rega-spec geometries and arm mounts. Used with AD's

trusty old Linn LP12 turntable, the UniArm impressed him with "rich timbral colors [and] no-less-rich textures"—along with excellent musical timing, momentum, and pull. AD also credited the UniArm with offering "better value for the dollar than did the Aro in its later years." High Class B, he sums up. (Vol.40 No.2 WWW)

ORTOFON TA-210: \$1994 ★

The 12" TA-210 is a pivoting tonearm with traditional gimballed bearings for lateral and vertical movement, and a curved, damped aluminum-alloy armtube. Versatile and user-friendly, it comes with a removable cable, a plug-in headshell for use with standard-mount phono cartridges, and a simple, accurate installation jig. Compared to the EMT 997 and Schick Tonearm, the Ortofon lacked some scale, presence, and impact, but sounded consistently smooth, serene, and uncolored, with no apparent stressing on dynamic peaks, said AD. "A wise choice for a newcomer to the world of vintage-style phonography," he concluded. (Vol.35 No.10 WWW)

REGA RB330: \$595 \$\$\$ ★

Current version of Rega's classic tonearm. See the Rega Planar 3 entry in "Turntables" and "Gramophone Dreams" in Vol.40 No.2.

SME M2-9: \$1849

With its nontapered stainless-steel armtube and its detachable, azimuth-adjustable headshell of magnesium, the new M2-9 is a visual departure from SME's enduringly successful Series V tonearm. On the other hand, in keeping with SME tradition are the M2-9's distinctively shaped mounting base, which enables stylus-overhang adjustment by altering the pivot-to-spindle distance, and what HR describes as the arm's "first-quality gimbal bearings." When used in place of the stock tonearm on HR's trusty Technics SL-1200MK2 turntable, the M2-9 improved stereo imaging "by about 60%." HR: "Never-before-heard microdynamics became a delicious feast, and macrodynamics became something to prepare for!" (Vol.39 Nos.4 & 6 WWW)

SPERLING-AUDIO TA-1: \$9750

Available with a 10" or a 12" armtube—the price is the same in either case—the German-made Sperling-Audio TA-1 is a hanging-unipivot tonearm whose pivot point is magnetically damped. The armtube, of metal and wood, has threaded weights for adjusting azimuth, and coarse and fine degrees of vertical tracking force; provisions for applying antiskating bias are not included. MF found the TA-1's overhang-adjustment regimen somewhat trying, and criticized the arm's many adjustment screws for being unlockable and thus possibly prone to resonating—problems that paled, in his view, in comparison to the lack of any provision to lock the armtube in place when not in use. When MF used the TA-1 with Sperling-Audio's L-1 turntable, he described the arm as having a sound of its own: "pleasing and intoxicating—a low-Q, low-amplitude character that subtly accentuated the lower midbass, adding a pleasing warmth . . . without becoming obtrusive." (Vol.38 No.8)

VIV LAB RIGID FLOAT: \$4390–\$4990

The Viv Laboratory Rigid Float is a radically different tonearm: a design that combats tonearm skating forces and their distortions not with the application of antiskating—which the designer abhors—but by eliminating from his arm the headshell offset that, in tandem with the friction of the stylus in the groove, causes skating in the first place. Consequently, like the RS Laboratory arm before it, the Rigid Float's geometry eschews overhang in favor of underhang, the cartridge-alignment implications of which concerned MF—who also scratched his head over the nonrigidity of the VIV arm's turntable mounting arrangement and consequent less-than-optimal height-adjustment provisions. But MF was impressed with its unconventional bearing—"the pivot floats on a dark, magnetic, light-viscosity, ferrofluid-like oil that you inject into . . . the front of the pivot housing"—and, in the end, was wowed by the Rigid Float's "gloriously smooth" midrange and "meaty, full-bodied" bass: "If you love to the exclusion of most everything else the romantic, vintage, midrange sound that some people insist is 'music,' the VIV Laboratory Rigid Float is made for you." (Vol.37 No.8)

VPI JMW-9: \$1000 ★

The shortest of Harry Weisfeld's JMW tonearm line, the JMW-9 comes standard with the Aries Scout turntable. (AD enthused about the combination's sound.) It uses a reverse-missionary bearing with a hardened tungsten-carbide point and a machined and hardened-steel set-screw for a cup. A quick-connect plug makes for easy removal and easy cartridge swapping, but as with all Harry Weisfeld designs, there is no antiskating mechanism. MF auditioned the 9" version of the JMW Memorial tonearm with VPI's Scoutmaster turntable. Unlike the original JMW Memorial, the 9" arm's main bearing is directly grounded to the plinth and the stabilizing ring surrounding the arm's bearing housing is fixed. The lack of a damping well results in a "Parkinson's-like trembling of the JMW when you use the finger lift or lower the arm via the cueing mechanism," which MF found disconcerting. Nevertheless, the arm appeared to be extremely stable: "The taut, focused, remarkably coherent performance of this table-arm combo is testament to a fundamentally solid, well-grounded system that deals effectively with energy created at the stylus/groove interface." Some disagreement between AD and MF over the overall rating, but Class B seems appropriate. (Vol.26 No.2, Vol.27 No.9 WWW; see AD's Prime Scout review in this issue.)

Editor's Note: There are currently no Class C or D tonearms listed.

K

AMG 9W2 Turbo. Swissonor TA10.

PHONO CARTRIDGES

A**AIR TIGHT OPUS: \$15,000**

"What accounts for a price that many would describe as outrageous?" MF posed that question while reviewing the Air Tight PC-1 Magnum Opus cartridge, which combines the normally incompatible qualities of very low impedance (1.4 ohms) with a generous (for a nominally low-output moving-coil cartridge) output of 0.45mV. Whether or not because of those qualities, the lowish-compliance PC-1 Magnum Opus dazzled Mikey by producing "an adrenaline rush of dynamic energy." He singled out for praise its "ultrafast and detailed" top end. In the end, MF answered his own question: "Air Tight's PC-1 Magnum Opus cartridge justifies its price." (Vol.38 No.10)

AMG TEATRO: \$2750

See HR's review in this issue.

AUDIO-TECHNICA AT-ART1000: \$4999

Audio-Technica describes their new flagship, the moving-coil AT-ART1000, as a Direct Power System design: its moving coils are attached to the front of its cantilever, directly above the stylus—not to the inside end of the cantilever, as in most MCs. Thus does the AT-ART1000 carry the torch first lit by the coveted Neumann DST 62 pickup of 1962—and thus does it ensure that every deflection of the playback stylus results in a proportional change in signal amplitude, theoretically resulting in the lowest possible degree of compression of all phono cartridges. Sure enough, MF observed from the low-output (0.2mV) AT-ART1000 "microdynamic expression [that] was absolutely phenomenal: small shifts of emphasis in the strumming and drumming were clearly delineated." Mikey also praised the AT as "one of the most tonally neutral cartridges I've heard," concluding that, "If you can afford it, you need it!" (Vol.39 No.10)

EMT TSD 15: \$1950 \$\$\$ ★

The EMT TSD 15 is an A-style pickup head weighing just over 17.5gm and available with either EMT's proprietary diamond-shaped output-pin pattern or the more common SME square pattern. It has a high impedance of 24 ohms, a high output of 1.05mV, and a moderate recommended downforce of 2.5gm. The EMT's overall sound was open, clear, and transparent, with above-average presence, body, and color, and an outstanding sense of momentum and flow. "A fine all-rounder, combining starkly honest