

The occasion of the Golden Ear Awards causes me to reflect on those special products that I would not only want to keep for years in one of my reference systems, but those that are great values, too. While the SME 20/12 turntable system that I nominated last year certainly merits inclusion on this year's list, given its superlative performance, it is arguably not a great value—the Clearaudio Anniversary table and Helios Omega arm combo that I'm currently auditioning appear, at first blush, to rival its performance in most areas yet cost about half as much. With high-performance and value “filters” applied to this year's list, I offer the following select components. One is already a classic, but the others may very well become ones over time.



Quad ESL-2805 and (restored) Quad ESL-57 loudspeakers

\$8999, Quad ESL-2805; \$3900, if PK supplies the ESL-57s
quad-hifi.co.uk

These two Quad loudspeakers are of reference quality in transient speed, truth of timbre, coherence, transparency, and low distortion and coloration. With the right amplifier—and I cannot stress how important this matching is—they can reproduce the sound of voices and instruments with such a compelling naturalness and realism that I am more than occasionally fooled into thinking the performers are in the room. Neither plumbs the depths of the frequency range, and both are somewhat dynamically constrained, yet the ESL-2805 is significantly better than the original ESL-63 on these counts and demonstrates how brilliant Peter Walker's original design for the 63 was. The ESL-2805's electrostatic panels are capable of wider excursions and are more rigidly affixed to a massive (and braced) frame, yielding meaningful improvements in dynamic range, clarity, image focus, and bass definition and extension. For those of more modest means, the Quad ESL-

988 has also benefited from the panel improvements and is quite the bargain.

Restored to its original specs along with improvements in the re-manufacture of the panels, the ESL-57 is a very special loudspeaker, but it is not for everyone. I purchased a fully restored pair of ESL-57s from Wayne Picquet a few years ago, and was shocked at how much more dynamic and seemingly extended they were than the two previous pairs of “used” originals I had owned (57s lose some of their dynamic output over the decades). Stacked Quads are no longer necessary to produce sufficient output. The restored ESL-57 still won't please head-bangers, but it has slightly more purity, immediacy, and “magic” in its sweet-spot from the midbass to the upper midrange than the excellent ESL-2805. Voices, massed strings, saxophones, and acoustic guitars are “to die for.” However, the 2805 is more versatile and a better choice for those who listen with others, love power music, require more bass extension, and prefer digital source material. Both are great loudspeakers. (ESL-2805 reviewed in Issue 169; ESL-57, reviewed in Issue 173)



PrimaLuna DiaLogue II integrated amplifier

\$2625
upscaleaudio.com

Here is a modern integrated tube unit with massive output transformers that sounds eminently musical, is triode/ultralinear-switchable from a remote, and can drive almost anything you throw at it, including all the Quads mentioned above. The DiaLogue II creams most classic tube amps in resolution and extension at the frequency extremes, and its Adaptive AutoBias circuit significantly reduces tube distortion and makes it almost as easy to maintain as a solid-state unit. It is one key to this unit's highly engaging and fatigue-free sound. The DiaLogue II's ability to naturally reproduce instruments and voices, coupled with its dynamic explosiveness, may fool you into thinking you're listening to a far more costly and powerful amplifier. (Reviewed in Issue 175)