



The Audiophiliac

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The top 10 greatest speakers

by [Steve Guttenberg](#)

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The Audiophiliac gets down with the Hansen Prince V2 speaker
(Credit: Wes Bender)

I've been an audiophile for more than 30 years, and from where I stand there's never been a more exciting crop of high-end speakers to choose from. The goal--to make as lifelike a sounding speaker as possible--is exceedingly difficult, but that hasn't stopped a slew of very talented designers from trying. This top-10 list was created without price constraints and is presented in no particular order; the speakers are all exceptional performers (prices listed are for pairs of speakers). They are all currently available models, but I will soon do another top-10 list of the best speakers of the 1950s, '60s, '70s, and '80s.

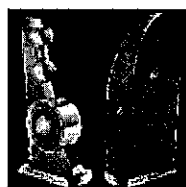
I did the first "[Top 10 greatest audiophile speakers](#)" blog post last year, with a self-imposed price limit of \$3,500 per pair (two were under \$1,000). Most models are still available, so if you're looking for affordable options, please refer to that list. All of the companies on today's list offer less expensive models.

Hansen Audio Prince V2. This speaker's handsome curves and strong physical presence demands respect--it all but shouts "this is very serious audiophilia"--it's made for those rare souls who would appreciate a world-class speaker small enough to fit in an apartment, with floors strong enough to support the 540-pound weight of a pair of these \$39,000 beauties. For my money it's better than Wilson Audio's highly regarded Watt/Puppy speaker.



Naim Ovator
S-600
(Credit:
Naim)

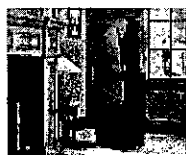
Naim Ovator S-600. Britain's Naim Audio Ltd. is best known for its amplifiers and CD players, but this new speaker breaks a lot of rules and sounds less like a box speaker than anything on the planet. With super-tight bass, uninhibited dynamic punch, superlative midrange tone, and pure treble, the S-600 is a strong contender on a number of fronts. At \$10,450 it's priced near the low-end for today's state-of-the-art speakers. Review to come.



The Gallo
3.5, naked
and with
grille.

Anthony Gallo Acoustics Reference 3.5. A radical update of the Gallo Reference 3.1, with new drivers; the small, 35-inch tall floor-standing speaker projects a huge soundstage. The cast aluminum and stainless steel design feels remarkably solid. Sonically, the Reference 3.5 has the ease and poise of a much larger and more expensive speaker. At \$6,000 the Reference 3.5 is the most affordable speaker on this list and offers more than a glimpse of state-of-the-art audio. Sounds great with low-power amplifiers; review to come.

(Credit: Gallo Acoustics) **B & W 802 D.** Another English contender, and this one's loaded with interesting design tricks, including a synthetic diamond tweeter. The form-follows-function design is drop-dead gorgeous. B & W's top models are favored by audiophiles and recording studios. \$15,000.



(Credit:
Wilson
Audio)

Wilson Audio MAXX Series 3. More than any other company Wilson Audio dominates the upper-end speaker market. Its held that position for more than 25 years, and now with this 5-foot, 7-inch-tall, 425-pound bad boy, there's no sign that reign will end anytime soon. So sure, the MAXX 3 is brute-force powerful, capable of producing "live" sound volume, in the largest rooms or mansions.

That said, the MAXX 3 also plays quiet music with beguiling refinement. It's what any demanding (and wealthy) audiophile would expect a \$68,000 speaker to sound like. BTW, the MAXX 3 isn't Wilson's most expensive speaker, not by a long shot.

JBL Synthesis 1400 Array BG. It's strange, JBL is one of those American hi-fi brands with a long and illustrious history, but it's rarely considered in contemporary

terms. The **JBL Synthesis 1400 Array BG** should change that; it's a "horn"-loaded design, and a seriously powerful, yet perfectly transparent sounding speaker. Granted, the 1400 won't win any beauty contests; the 115-pound beast stands 46 inches tall, 15 inches wide, and 19 inches deep. \$11,500.



(Credit: JBL)



Magnepan 20.1. The 20.1 has been in production for over a decade, but this speaker, made in White Bear Lake, MN, is still a very viable contender. It's a large panel, 79 inches high, 29 inches wide, but only 2 inches deep; the 20.1 is capable of filling very large rooms with ease. The ribbon tweeter has been cited as the world's best by many audio critics, including me. \$12,000.

Magnepan
20.1
(Credit:
Magnepan)

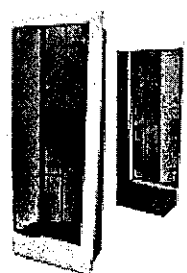
Vandersteen Model Seven. Vandersteen is another all-American high-end brand, and one that never in its long history made a less than outstanding speaker. The Seven uses specially developed



(Credit:
Vandersteen)

Perfect-Piston, "ultra-high-modulus" carbon-fiber cones, made by Richard Vandersteen. The \$45,000 speaker is making waves among the

cognoscenti.



MartinLogan CLX. Coming out of Lawrence, Kansas, MartinLogan makes the world's finest electrostatic panel speakers. The CLX is its crowning achievement; if you want to know what "see-through transparency" means, listen to a MartinLogan electrostatic speaker. The 25th Anniversary Edition model is much the same as a standard CLX, but features a clear anodized Billet Aluminum Frame, that adds to the allure of the design. \$25,000.

MartinLogan
CLX
(Credit:
MartinLogan)

Focal Grande Utopia EM. A really grand speaker, the **Grande Utopia EM** humbles every other ultra high-end speaker I've heard. It reproduces the majesty of a symphony orchestra better than anything else, and it can rock the house at live concert levels without working hard. A technical knockout, the Grande Utopia EM is the one to buy when you're rich enough not to ask what it costs.



Focal Grande
Utopia EM
(Credit:



Steve Guttenberg writes for a number of magazines and Web sites, including Home Entertainment, Tone Audio, and Stereophile. He is a member of the CNET Blog Network and is not an employee of CNET.