

“BRILLIANT DO-ALL  
FLOORSTANDERS”

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*“An overachieving audio system you can afford ... good measures of focus and definition ... layer upon layer of midrange and treble textures ... bass that is tight, tuneful, and — thanks to three woofers sharing the workload — unstrained.”*

by Chris Martens

**AN OVERACHIEVING AUDIO SYSTEM YOU CAN AFFORD**

Does high end always mean high-priced? We think not, as this affordable system demonstrates.

Most veteran audiophiles can recall watershed audio systems that helped turn them into lifelong devotees of music reproduction in the home. Those systems were probably as diverse in configuration as the individuals who put them together, yet they had three characteristics in common. First, they raised sound quality to threshold levels that triggered “Eureka!” moments, serving up listening experiences so fine (and refined) that we found them irresistible. Second, they brought music alive as never before and became for us true music-discovery machines. And finally, they were affordable and played—to borrow a sports phrase—above the rim; that is to say, they offered extraordinary performance, but at ordinary (or at least manageable) prices. Once these factors come together, there can be no turning back. Or can there?

Today, music and music playback systems vie with many other art forms and entertainment options for individuals’ discretionary incomes and their even more precious free time. As a consequence, ownership of an audio system is no longer a given, as it might have been two or three decades ago. In fact, a good many people (and especially young people) have had no firsthand exposure to high-quality music systems. Worse still, some who have had a

first taste of the high-end experience have walked away with mixed feelings, the joy of hearing lifelike sound combined with the trauma of acute sticker shock. Stated simply, it’s hard for others to fall in love with a hobby they’ve either never experienced or believe they could not possibly afford.

Things ought not to be this way because today’s best entry-level and mid-priced components are sounding better than ever. What may be lacking, though, is the know-how necessary to put together synergistic systems that are affordable and exceed sonic expectations. And that’s where we come in. The staff of *The Absolute Sound* has come up with six proposed affordable high-end audio systems, each of which holds the potential to play above the rim—in some cases way above the rim. We hope our recommendations will benefit those looking to assemble great first systems or planning high-performance system upgrades at reasonable costs.



**The New Studio 100**  
(Improved over version reviewed for even better sound.)

Paradigm's Reference Studio 100s are brilliant do-all floorstanders whose diverse strengths *The Perfect Vision* reviewer Gary Altunian (a confirmed multichannel enthusiast) credits with "rekindling my interest in stereo." (See Gary's review on the Paradigm website at [www.paradigm.com](http://www.paradigm.com))

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The Studio 100 is a three-way, five-driver design that features an aluminum-dome tweeter, a mica-polymer mid/bass driver, and three mineral-filled polypropylene woofers. Together, these drivers produce near full-range sound that is evenly balanced from top to bottom, with excellent transient speed

that makes the Studio 100s sound quick and articulate across the board. Over time, these speakers win listeners' hearts by gently revealing layer upon layer of midrange and treble textures, while delivering bass that is tight, tuneful, and—thanks to three woofers sharing the workload—unstrained. Two small drawbacks are that the Studio 100s offer good, but not entirely holographic imaging, and occasional hints of dryness in the highs. But these shortcomings pale alongside the many things the speakers do well.

*"... evenly balanced from top to bottom ... excellent transient speed ... quick and articulate across the board."*

This system offers essentially full-range sound, with good measures of focus and definition, plus a welcome touch of magic—courtesy of the Naim amplifier.

Considerations: ... For maximum openness and optimal imaging, use high-quality speaker cables with the Paradigms, and experiment with bi-wiring.

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