

# SoundStage!<sup>TM</sup>

## SoundStage! Update

Editor's Choice

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Reference 3 preamp (\$9995), later on adding a Reference CD7 CD player (\$8995), and ending with the Reference 110 stereo amp (\$9995), a review of which is in the works. Along the way, I heard an entire Reference system at CES—it helped produce the best sound of the show—and later in the year I visited Audio Research and heard more Reference products in the company's large listening room. In each venue, including my own listening room, the Reference electronics never failed to impress, and they also made it impossible to pick just one of them to discuss in this space, so well do they work together.

"Well," though, is an understatement. Earlier this year, I wrote about the "extreme synergy" of ARC's Reference line. By coining this phrase, I was not only making a comment on the refined sound of these tubed products but also the fact that they take the guesswork out of mating a preamp with a power amp and a source—what some audiophiles think is *the* point of this hobby, even as the outcome is less than musically satisfying. ARC's Reference products don't balance sonic excess with insufficiency; instead, the dynamic, detailed, and liquid sound of each matches perfectly with that of its mates. Yes, you certainly can use the Reference 3 successfully with amps from another company—I've done just this with Lamm M1.2 Reference monoblocks—but you hear it at its best when you have a Reference amp. The same goes for the Reference CD7. You should hear it if you're shopping for a state-of-the-art CD player, but it's a Reference product through and through.

When you go Reference from source to power amp, what you hear is a kind of continuity, a unified perspective and handling of music's power and subtleties, that sounds utterly correct. In my review of the Reference 3 from earlier this year, I called it "the most coherent preamp from very soft to extremely loud that I've heard," praising its "seamless small- and large-scale dynamics," the "panoramic sweep" of its soundstage, and the honesty of its musical perspective—all true of the Reference amps and CD player as well.

As you become accustomed to such sonic continuity, you may begin to wonder why other companies don't accomplish the same thing. My sense is that so few can produce source components, preamps, and power amps that reach the same sonic heights of their Reference counterparts, but I also realize that ARC has utilized a newly developed circuit that relies on 6H30P tubes in each product. Other companies have propagated a circuit across multiple products, but they didn't end up with a product line as special as the current Reference series. The application of a circuit from CD player to power amp is so different, taxing a company's engineering capabilities. Yet, Audio Research pulled it off, reminding us of its primary position in high-end audio.

Following a year of review after review of great audio components, it seems only fitting that I honor five components that sound like one. Audio Research's Reference 3, Reference CD7, Reference 610T, Reference 210, and Reference 110 are the most significant products I've heard and written about in 2006. Which one is "the best"? All of 'em.

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The beginning of a new year signals many things in the audio world, including the *SoundStage!* Network's announcement of the winners of our year-end awards. I also use the first site update of the year to discuss the best product I personally encountered from the previous 365 days. As I've mentioned in a few of my own reviews, 2006 was especially rich in terms of the products we covered on *SoundStage!*, which made picking our award winners especially challenging. Each of the members of our editorial staff made arguments for one product or another, and we considered them all, ultimately turning to the reviews themselves to settle our disagreements. I will feel proud when we give out the awards at the CES in a week, even as a few of my personal choices didn't make the cut. This year more than any other, the notion of one product being "the best" seems questionable.

But raising such questions is what this space—the *SoundStage!* bully pulpit—is for. What's the point of putting in an editor's hours if you can't use your position to call attention to products that deserve some extra praise? Perhaps as a result of this especially fruitful year, I want to put the spotlight on more than one product, though all are from the same company: Audio Research's Reference-series electronics. I began this year listening to the