

Audioholics Top AV Gear Guide for 2014



Are you new to the audio scene? Perhaps you haven't been obsessively/compulsively checking out the latest gear to see what's the cream of the crop? No worries, Audioholics has you covered with our list of top picks in audio gear. Browse through twelve different categories ranging from floorstanding loudspeakers to cabling, and you'll be up to speed in no time at all. Happy hunting!

Bookshelf Loudspeakers

Budget Pick: EMPTek E41 | [Review](#)

The EMPTek E41 bookshelf speaker system is one of the crown jewels at this price point. They share almost the same guts as that of parent company RBH Sound's 41-SE speakers that retail for nearly \$1k/pair in standard black finish - the only finish option for the EMP version. Both models have identical specs on paper and both utilize the exact same crossover design and parts. Needless to say, with this pedigree we feel that the performance defies the price. Considering their very liberal return policy, free 30 day home trial program and free shipping, there's not a lot else to say other than "highly recommended".

MSRP: \$299/pair | [Buy Now](#)



High End Pick: Definitive Technology StudioMonitor 65 | [Video Review](#)

Audioholics managing editor Clint DeBoer was excited to get his hands on these speakers. They're billed as, and really developed to be, studio monitors, hence the name - StudioMonitor 65's. That means that at least one of the design goals was to create a speaker with enough dynamic range, fidelity, and finesse to be usable by recording studio professionals as a reference speaker for mixing and mastering music. So that's what they're supposed to be - and they are. They sound incredibly accurate. These may be the best bookshelf speakers we've ever heard for under \$1500. The best part is, a pair of these only cost \$900. And these studio monitors have more bass than several towers we've had experience with. All this without sacrificing the delicate highs and balanced, realistic midrange. If this were the 1600's Def Tech would be in danger of getting burned at the stake... Because it's like... Witchcraft...

MSRP: \$900/pair | [Buy Now](#)



Floorstanding Loudspeakers

Budget Pick: Pioneer SP-FS52 | [Review](#)

What would you say if we told you that a company historically known for their A/V electronics has redefined the loudspeaker market with their budget speaker line designed by industry veteran Andrew Jones? Now take your amazement one step further when we tell you that for under \$650 you get a pair of four driver 2.5-way tower speakers, a matching three driver MTM center channel and pair of two-way bookshelf speakers with an 8" 100 watt powered subwoofer. From a sound quality standpoint, the SP-FS52 towers alone are worth the admission price of the entire system. These speakers utilize design elements not found in some pricier so called "high value" Internet Direct brands including vented pole pieces on their woofers, real ferrite magnet motors on their tweeters, air core inductors in their crossovers and braced cabinets. Their cabinets are even contoured for added rigidity. While they won't win awards with their looks, they more than make up for it with detailed rich sound that simply defies their meager asking price. If you're looking for a budget tower speaker for around \$500/pair, save your money and just buy the SP-FS52's for \$260. This has to be one of the best bang-for-the-buck speaker systems we've ever heard.

MSRP: \$260/pair | [Buy Now](#)



Midrange Pick: EMPtek E55Ti | [Review](#)

If you want a speaker that can truly deliver a tonally accurate, dynamically lifelike reproduction of your music, and also happens to look stunningly beautiful, then the EMP Impression E55Ti's should fit the bill nicely. The E55Ti's give you a huge soundstage and can play exceedingly loud down to a modest 50 Hz, with little to no audible compression. Available in a high gloss red burl and black ash vinyl finishes, these speakers look as good as they sound, which is something we rarely find ourselves saying at this price point for a tower speaker system. The EMP E55Ti's come with a 5 year warranty and 30 day money back return policy with free shipping both ways. This makes for a risk free trial for you to demo these speakers in the most critical and important listening room - your own home theater. Highly recommended!

MSRP: \$695/pair | [Buy Now](#)



High End Pick: Aperion Verus Grand | [Review](#)

Known for producing high-quality, budget-oriented loudspeakers, we had high hopes that Aperion would unveil a lineup with higher audiophile aspirations. Aperion did not disappoint, with the Verus line taking things to the next level. Their specially designed tweeter is capable of playing down much lower than most conventional dome designs with exceptional power handling. This allows the system to be crossed over at a lower frequency – in this case 1.8kHz – which improves off axis response by reducing beaming effects of the larger mid drivers as wavelengths become shorter than the diaphragm diameter. We reviewed their entire new Verus 5.0 system, and found it to sound exceptionally good with ample output capability, stunningly great imaging and lack of compression when really cranking it up loud. Available in furniture grade gloss cherry wood veneer or piano black finishes, this is truly a great speaker line regardless of price, and fit and finish is excellent, screaming high end.

MSRP: \$2,000/pair | [Buy Now](#)



Subwoofers

Budget Pick: SVS PB1000 | [Preview](#)

It's no secret, we love subwoofers. And we love the PB-1000 for its amazing price/performance ratio. The PB-1000 has a single long-throw 10" front-firing driver and a 3.5" port with inner and outer flares. This configuration delivers a lower frequency response of 19-270 Hz +/- 3 dB compared to the 24-260 Hz +/- 3 dB response of the SB-1000 (its \$499 sealed counterpart). The cabinet is 18.4" (H) x 15" (W) x 18.4" (D) with overall dimensions of 18.9" (H) x 15" (W) x 19.9" (D) (includes feet, grill, amplifier). Powered by a 300 watt RMS/700 watt peak DSP controlled Sledge STA-300D, the SB-1000 has plenty of power for the 10" driver. And let's say for some crazy reason you want to return it, or it breaks, or you want to upgrade, SVS's Bill of Right guarantees you a great customer experience. Let's recap. Great price, check. Great performance, check. Great customer service, check. Three checks and the PB-1000 breezes into a winning spot in our 2014 Top Picks Guide.

MSRP: \$499 | [Buy Now](#)



High End Pick: MartinLogan Dynamo 1500X | [Review](#)

The MartinLogan Dynamo 1500X is a small sealed alignment powered subwoofer utilizing a long throw 15" driver and an amplifier rated at 650 watts RMS and 1300 watts short term. The Dynamo 1500X left a favorable sonic impression on us. We especially liked the small size, reasonable weight, Perfect Bass Kit (optional room equalization / calibration), and uncluttered basic connection and controls it provided. The performance was rock solid in that it never produced erroneous noises or distress, nor did it try to kill itself to produce what it could not. Despite its compact size and moderate price point, the MartinLogan Dynamo 1500X managed to meet the required output thresholds to receive the Audioholics Bassaholic Large Room rating. If you want even more power in a compact form factor, check out their new [BalancedForce 2010 & 212 subs](#), which we got [hands-on experience with at CEDIA 2013](#).

MSRP: \$1,595 | [Buy Now](#)



A/V Receivers

Budget Pick: Sony STR-DA1040 | [Review](#)

There was a lot that we liked about the [STR-DN1030](#) when it was reviewed last year, like built-in WiFi, Bluetooth, and AirPlay, but a few big caveats held it back. Namely, the sound quality was only so-so (reviewer Cliff Heyne felt in his listening tests that sounds were unnaturally mashed together), the user interface was awful, network control app was very limited, zone 2 functionality was sub-par, and the auto setup system was questionable. With the STR-DN1040, Sony has thankfully overcome most of these issues. The sound quality is much improved thanks to a variety of tweaks including a larger transformer and noise reduction techniques at the board level, and the user interface is now a joy to use. The network apps are better, especially for streaming functionality, but could benefit from a little more tweaking. Zone 2 integration is still lacking, but that's not a surprise considering everything else you get. The DCAC auto setup system could use some work as well. However, all in all, the STR-DN1040 is a great receiver for single room installations and comes highly recommended from us. This is by far the best Sony receiver we have used in years.

MSRP: \$599 | [Buy Now](#)



High End Pick: Yamaha RX-A830 | [Preview](#)

Considering it just won our [\\$1,000 A/V receiver comparison](#), it shouldn't be a surprise that the Yamaha RX-A830 is our high end receiver pick. Coming in at \$900 (the lower end of the price scale in the comparison), the Yamaha's RX-A830 checks off just about everything you could ask for: 100W/channel of power, 7.2 channels of sound, 8 HDMI inputs (with one boasting MHL for connecting mobile devices) and a pair of outputs, YPAO auto-setup and calibration, a useful array of legacy video inputs, and a full complement of pre-outs are all on the menu. For an additional \$100, you can also add Yamaha's WiFi adapter for wireless connectivity. The Yamaha also has their own proprietary post processing scheme with an assortment of DSP modes to allow you to add front height channels which they call "presence channels".

MSRP: \$900 | [Buy Now](#)



Multichannel Amplifiers

Our Pick: Emotiva XPA-5 Gen 2 | [Preview](#)

If you find your A/V receiver lacks the power needed to deliver the bombastic output levels that you crave, it's time to consider stepping up to an outboard power amplifier like the Emotiva XPA-5. Capable of delivering 200W of power with all 5 channels driven (where most receivers are rated with one or two channels driven), as well as seamlessly handling 4 ohm loudspeakers, the XPA-5 can give any AVR with preamplifier outputs a big shot in the arm. The best news however is the price. Amplifiers with this kind of output can easily cost several thousands of dollars. The XPA-5? Just \$999. If power is what you crave, we simply can't think of a better value.

MSRP: \$999 | [Buy Now](#)



Blu-ray Players

Budget Pick: Sony BDP-S790 | [Video Review](#)

We'll keep this brief: the BDP-S790 is an excellent player. We understand why Sony dubs this product a "flagship". It has nicely backlit capacitance touch controls on top that glow when you use them. It's fast, produces an excellent quality picture, is ready for the 4K format of the future, and will stream all of the current leading sources for media. For \$250, that's not a bad package. If you want a Blu-ray player to serve as your entire entertainment hub, then this might be just what you need.

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MSRP: \$250 | [Buy Now](#)



High End Pick: Oppo BDP-103 | [Video Review](#)

Oppo has hit another one out of the park. The BDP-103 may not be light years ahead of the [BDP-93](#), but it is ready for 4K conversion and the Marvell Qdeo processing is one of the best systems on the market in our testing. The player has some other whiz-bang features like 2D-to-3D conversion and improved performance in networking and streaming services like Netflix, YouTube, etc. Plus we like the cosmetic enhancements the new BDP-103 and 105 players flaunt. Audiophiles who emphasize analog audio performance will want to also consider this player's bigger brother, the BDP-105.

MSRP: \$499 | [Buy Now](#)



Soundbars

Budget Pick: Pioneer SP-SB23W

Let's face it, we're fans of Andrew Jones' work, and when he sets out to design a budget soundbar system, we know it's going to be tough to beat. Featuring two 1" tweeters and four 3" mid/woofers powered by 6 – 28W amplifiers, as well as a wireless 6.5" subwoofer powered by a 50W amplifier, you're getting a lot of speaker for the money. Of course, the SP-SB23W can also handle wireless streaming via Bluetooth, and unlike so many budget soundbars, actually utilizes a composite wood cabinet as opposed to cheap plastic. For the price and the form factor, this Pioneer seems like a no-brainer to us.

MSRP: \$400 | [Buy Now](#)



Midrange Pick: Outlaw OSB-1 | [Video Review](#)

We've reviewed a bunch of soundbars, but not one like this. The Outlaw Audio OSB-1 uses the H-PAS technology we first saw demoed at the Atlantic Technology booth at CEDIA in 2009. H-PAS, which stands for Hybrid Pressure Acceleration System, is

essentially a proprietary cocktail of several speaker technologies - it's bass reflex meets inverse horn meets transmission line...The final result is that an H-PAS design can deliver extended deep bass with low distortion in a way that you'd think just shouldn't work. But it does. Of course bass isn't the only thing to recommend the OSB-1. The soundstage is surprisingly natural and ALL of the modes, including the 3-channel mode which ghosts a center channel and the enhanced 5-channel mode are light years ahead of what any TV we've heard can offer. The identical unit is also available from Atlantic Technology as the PB235 for the same price. A wireless Bluetooth adapter is now available for both units.

MSRP: \$799 | [Buy Now](#)



High End Pick: Martin Logan Motion Vision | [Review](#)

The MartinLogan Motion Vision soundbar is nothing like the typical cheap, chintzy soundbars found on the shelves of most big-box stores. And for \$1499, it isn't priced like those "other" soundbars either. The Vision is MartinLogan's solution for consumers who want high-end sound without a rack of equipment or speakers scattered all over their room. It incorporates

three of the company's acclaimed Folded Motion tweeters, four 4" long-throw woofers, and twin rear-facing ports. It's a little larger than most of the competition, but that's because it's designed to be run with or without a subwoofer. At first I was pretty skeptical of how much bass a soundbar could produce sans subwoofer, but after having the Vision in my home for a few months, I'm a believer. The Vision really shines when it comes to listening to music, but also does a commendable job with movies. The soundstage is big, though its ability to produce surround effects is inconsistent. My only big wish is that MartinLogan would choose to incorporate wireless music streaming functionality in future iterations of the Vision (more extensive bass management would also be nice). If you are looking for a sleek sound solution, but don't want to compromise on quality, the MartinLogan Motion Vision is worth a serious listen.

MSRP: \$1,499 | [Buy Now](#)



Headphones

Over Ear: Budget Pick: Wicked Audio WI-8500 Evac | [Review](#)

The Wicked Audio WI-8500 Evac Headphones are \$60 headphones that you can find for closer to \$25 online. When you compare them to their \$60 competition, you'll find the other \$60 headphones have features such as in-line controls and microphones. While the Wicked Audio WI-8500 Evac Headphones don't have any of those features, what they do have is a very similar sound to those other, feature-rich \$60 headphones. Let me put it to you this way, the WI-8500 made our Product of The Year Awards because you can get the same (or better) sound quality with them, than with headphones that sell for double.

MSRP: \$60 | [Buy Now](#)



Over Ear: High End: Sennheiser Momentum

The Sennheiser Momentum headphones are not the most expensive headphones that Sennheiser makes. Not by a long shot. But for \$350, you're going to have a hard time finding something that sounds much better. While they do have small earcups for an over-ear headphone and the headband isn't the most comfortable, the sonics more than make up for these issues. The Momentums sound very linear through the bass and midrange to us and the top end is definitely laid back but not at the expense of detail. Too often headphones will get shrill as they get louder and we end up having to temper the volume not on what we think is safe, but on where the headphones make us wince. That never happened with the Momentums. In short, these Sennheisers are a great headphone and definitely worth a listen.

MSRP: \$350 | [Buy Now](#)



In Ear Pick: RBH Sound EP2 | [Review](#)

When we [reviewed RBH Sound's EP1](#) in ear headphones in 2012, we were impressed with the sound quality, particularly the excellent bass response and the ability to play loudly without strain. However, we also made mention of the fact that the EP1's lacked any type of features. Apparently RBH was paying attention and decided to introduce their new EP2 in ear noise isolating headphones. In addition to the sound quality we noted with the EP1, the EP2 includes a control module with built in microphone and a button to answer calls and control music and video playback with a press (or double press as the case may be). As with their predecessors, anyone looking for respectably good performance from a pair of portable earphones would be remiss not to check these babies out.

MSRP: \$179 | [Buy Now](#)



Home Theater In A Box

Budget Pick: Denon DHT-1312XP

Want a 5.1 system for \$400? Want that system to use a real A/V receiver so you can upgrade down the line? You might want to meet the Denon DHT-1312XP. Based on Denon's AVR-1312 5.1 receiver with 75W per channel and support for 3D video, you also get a quintet of satellite speakers and an 8" subwoofer backed by another 100W of amplification. At this price point, there are of course compromises to be made; however, as a starter system with room to grow, it's hard to beat for the cost.

MSRP: \$399 | [Buy Now](#)



High End Pick: Onkyo HT-S9400THX

If you don't want to deal with the hassle of selecting a separate receiver, speakers, and subwoofer, but you still want a setup your audiophile friends aren't likely to laugh at, the Onkyo HT-S9400THX might be worth your time. That "THX" on the end of the model name of course means that this system is THX Integrated System Plus certified, meaning the system will have enough power to fill a small theater where viewing distances from the screen is 6-8 feet. In addition to respectable audio performance, you get all the latest goodies including 3D video and even 4K video upscaling, as well as Audyssey 2EQ for automatic setup and calibration. Considering you get all this for \$999, we feel it's hard to go too far wrong here.

MSRP: \$999 | [Buy Now](#)



Budget 5.1 Speaker Set

Budget Pick: NHT Super Surround 5.1

If you're shopping for unobtrusive, yet high quality surround sound setups at a bargain price, we'd recommend putting NHT Super Surround 5.1 on your shopping list. Consisting of a five of NHT's renowned SuperZero 2.1 mini-monitors and a Super 8 subwoofer, this setup can fill a small to medium sized room with beautiful sound that you simply can't match with ubiquitous cube speakers. We would also mention that while the MSRP is \$930, this setup can currently be purchased for \$799, making it a stellar value.

MSRP: \$930 | [Buy Now](#)



Displays

Flat Panel TV Pick: Samsung PN51F8500AF Plasma TV | [Review](#)

We love plasma TVs. We love how black the blacks get. While LCD has gotten tremendously better over the years, when we come back to plasma it just reminds us of how good television can be. But this isn't a plasma TV technology review, it's a review of Samsung's latest and greatest television, the PN51F8500. This is the best plasma TV Samsung has ever released. In fact, it's probably the best plasma TV we've ever reviewed. In fact, it's probably the best TV you're going to see this year. Pick this baby up if you're looking for one of the best flat panels out there in this price and size category.

MSRP: \$1,699 | [Buy Now](#)



Front Projection Pick: Epson Pro Cinema 6030UB LCD Projector | [Preview](#)

We got a chance to interview Jason Palmer of Epson about their new Pro Cinema 6030UB LCD projector, which is the company's flagship home theater model for the custom installation channel. This replaces the Pro Cinema 6020UB (many of us still use this model in our own reference systems). The major improvements are contrast ratio, which is almost double. It was 320,000:1 and is now 600,000:1. There are also a lot of under-the-hood features that have been improved—particularly lens and processing improvements. The 6030UB can also do frame interpolation in 3D mode, and has a Classic Black and White mode, which sets the color temperature to 5400K, the way film cameras used to be back in the day. Although we don't have a full review posted yet, our experience at CEDIA with the 6030UB and in-home with the 6020UB, makes us confident in including this projector in our list of top picks.

MSRP: \$3,499 | [Buy Now](#)



Cables

Our Pick: Blue Jeans Cable

Here at Audioholics, we're not fans of high priced, snake oil infused cables. Conversely, we would never suggest that you buy bottom of the barrel, marginal junk. All we ask for is top quality cabling at a reasonable price, without a side of BS. Fortunately, the folks at Blue Jeans Cable have heeded this call. Using top quality cable stock from companies like Belden and Canare, Blue Jeans Cable offers you some of the best cable money can buy at a price that isn't in the stratosphere. Offering a collection of A/V and data cables, they're the Audioholics' first stop for wire.

MSRP: Varies | [Buy Now](#)

