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2006 Product of the Year Awards

Amplifiers of the Year

PrimaLuna Prologue Six monoblock power amplifier

\$2000

upscaleaudio.com

Designed for those who want to enjoy the musicality of tubes without having to be tweaks, PrimaLuna's 70-watt Prologue Six represents a significant breakthrough in high-performance audio. Not only is it a hassle-free and easy-to-operate tube unit, it sounds really good. The Six rivals many (but not all) of the best attributes of transistor amps and also enjoys the compelling sonic virtues tubes deliver, while largely minimizing their drawbacks. You won't find any homogenization of sound with this amp, since it reveals even minor system changes, so you're out of luck if you expect to use the Six as a tone control to tame bright speakers. While it may lack the ultimate sweetness, palpability, and absence of grain of some far more costly triode designs, or the absolute quietness, inner detail, and power reserves of some expensive transistor amplifiers, the Six is as at home reproducing the sounds of Audioslave as it is with Miles or Mahler. To get this combination of natural musicality, power, reliability, flexibility, and build-quality, one would expect to spend far more. This surprisingly good tube monoblock should keep many demanding audiophiles satisfied, but also encourage lots of music enthusiasts to take the plunge into the tube-side of the pool. (Reviewed by JH, Issue 165)



Audio Research Corporation Reference 210 monoblock power amplifier

\$20,000

audioresearch.com

Unless the as-yet-unreviewed ARC 610T beats it, the Reference 210 stands as the finest pentode amplifier ARC has made in better than thirty fabled years of amp-building. William Z. Johnson has added bandwidth, subtracted noise and coloration, and beefed up energy storage to the point where the Ref 210 better holds its own in transient speed and low-level resolution with the finest solid-state amplifiers, while besting them in neutrality, soundstaging, imaging, tone color, air, and bloom. In combination with Audio Research's own Reference 3 preamplifier (last year's TAS Preamp of the Year Award winner), the Ref 210 "fills in the blanks" between notes, hanging harmonics in space like faint aural after-images between the dying off of one tone and the utterance of another. (The Ref 210 also fares well with top-flight solid-state preamps, like MBL's killer 6010 D.) Perhaps the Ref 210's greatest virtue is its bloom; it projects colors and dynamics "out at you" as the music swells in the same way that instruments themselves do in life. In combination with superb reproduction of tone colors, the 210's bloom goes a long way toward creating a remarkably lifelike presentation. (Reviewed by JV, Issue 159)