

What I'd Buy: Power Amplifiers

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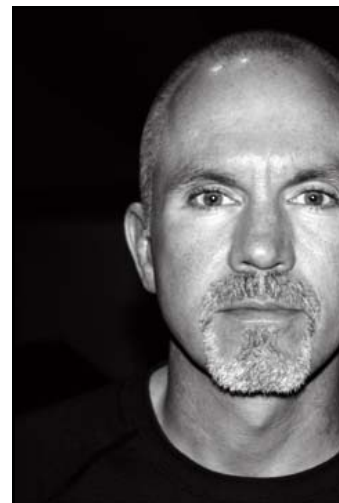
Along with loudspeakers, power amplifiers have always represented the largest financial investments I've made in my audio system. It's been my experience that I shouldn't skimp on amplification, and that once I find a great power amp, it's easy to stick with it over the long term. (Though whether any audiophile, including myself, actually does so is another subject altogether.) A great amp today will still be a great amp ten years from now.

I believe this is so because so much of an amplifier's cost has to do with hardware. Huge power supplies and massive heatsinks have always been relatively expensive, and unlike digital source components, the technologies involved in the design and manufacture of tubed or solid-state amps don't change rapidly, the advent of class-D designs notwithstanding.

This series of articles is titled "What I'd Buy" -- these lists I compile are, by definition, limited to the types of products I like enough to pay for with my own money. Therefore, entire swaths of the marketplace will be left undiscussed simply because I have no knowledge of or interest in them. This month, that means you'll find no tube amps here. Through the years, I've admired many tube amps at shows and dealers and while visiting manufacturers, but I've always been more drawn to really good solid-state gear; that's where I've spent my money, and that's the area in which I've built my expertise. We have other writers who can advise you about tubes.

There are other things you won't see listed here -- for example, repackaged ICEpower amplifier modules from Bang & Olufsen. You can find such amplifiers ranging in price from under a thousand bucks to well into five figures, but I've found very little in their sound to differentiate them. It's not that they can't sound good, but I have a hard time paying lots of [money for](#) a fancy chassis that contains a stock class-D amplifier from B&O. I'd rather have something more distinctive than that. That's just me.

So, having said that . . .



Some readers may be disappointed to see that the very first amp on my list, which begins with my lowest-priced recommendation and proceeds to the highest, is itself somewhat expensive. But again -- I've always proportioned a goodly amount of my stereo budget to amplifiers because I think such an investment is sound (so to speak). Therefore, the first model to make the list is **Bryston's 4B SST²**. At \$4995, it's not cheap by any stretch, but its robust sound, 300Wpc power rating (8 ohms), and 20-year warranty make it a solid investment indeed -- you'll be able to keep upgrading speakers for years and never have to worry about the amp.



The **Anthem Statement M1** monoblock (\$7000/pair) is the most powerful amplifier on this list at 1000W (8 ohms), and the only class-D model. It's an original Anthem design, though -- not ICEpower -- and contains a terrific laundry list of technologies that push its sound into rarefied air. Not only is its sound quality almost beyond reproach, but the M1 is almost unique in its ability to deliver massive amounts of power into any load.



In the right system, the 450Wpc (8 ohms) **McIntosh Labs MC452** (\$7500) will sound amazing. I wouldn't pair it with syrupy-sounding speakers or use it in a system whose sound is otherwise boring, but if you need a basically neutral amp that won't cause you listening fatigue over the long term, then the MC452 could be the one for you. The price makes it a relative bargain when compared with other amps -- there's a lot of hardware here for the money. And, of course, those big blue meters don't hurt a bit . . .



I made a big deal of Ayre's AX-5 integrated amplifier *last month*. This month I make similar hoopla about the power-amp version, the **Ayre Acoustics VX-5**. This \$8000, 175Wpc-into-8-ohms amp contains Ayre's new Diamond output stage, which could make the VX-5 the real giant killer on this list. Based on what I've heard so far, I wouldn't hesitate to make it the heart of my system, even if I were spending really big bucks on speakers.



The **Coda Model 15.0** stereo amplifier costs \$10,000, but its performance puts it squarely in the Super-Amp class. Its 100Wpc (8 ohms) are in pure class-A, and that power output is supported by a 3000VA toroidal transformer. The 15.0's sound has that "golden glow" that only class-A seems able to deliver, and it's made by folks who've been designing amplifiers this way for some 30 years. The Coda is a solid investment in your music.



The **Ayre MX-R** monos also make the list, making Ayre the only company with two entries. These \$18,500/pr. amps output 300Wpc into 8 ohms, and sound and look simply gorgeous. The MX-Rs set the standard in chassis design, with solid-aluminum monocoque construction that's the best in the industry. Couple that with Ayre designer Charles Hansen's advanced circuitry, and you have perhaps today's best deal in a super amp.





The **Boulder 2060** (\$44,000) is an iconic amplifier. In production since the 1990s, this statement of industrial and electrical design is capable of 600Wpc into 8 ohms and is, in my experience, bulletproof in operation and sound quality. I've never heard a quieter amplifier, and that makes it a resolution machine. It's safe to bet the farm on it.



I've become a little more guarded in my hi-fi recommendations, particularly at the really high prices. In the last few years I've had some not-so-great experiences with expensive products that had sub-par build quality and/or sound, from companies that need to pay more attention to quality control. That said, the most expensive amplifier on this list is the **Gryphon Mephisto** (\$55,000). I reviewed Gryphon's **Colosseum** (\$43,500) a while back, and it still represents my high-water mark in terms of sound in my system. While the Colosseum is the better-*looking* product, the Mephisto appears to improve on it in every other way. With 175Wpc of class-A power into 8 ohms on tap from this +200-pound monster, there's no commercial speaker now available that the Mephisto can't drive. And I've never had a problem with Gryphons breaking down, or any hiccups at all. This is the top of the heap for me -- the amp that, given the chance, I'd most like to own.

. . . *Jeff Fritz*
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