

The Journeyman Audiophile

Sound for a bit more than a G...

Boulder
508 PHONO PREAMPLIFIER

Don't Let The Small Size Fool You...

Boulder 508

By Jeff Dorgay

I know it's cheesy to fall back on classic rock warhorses. But when the Boulder 508 and a 45rpm copy of Dire Straits *Brothers in Arms* both arrived on the same day, I took it as a sign from the audio gods to go for it. Much as the tune "Money for Nothing" has worn itself out, I remembered the advice of Lew Johnson (from conrad-johnson) who once told me, "use music you hate to demo components because you'll hate it by the time you're through." Yet I was totally digging this track that I've heard a million times before. When a tune that you don't even like anymore grabs you like this, you know something amazing is in store.

Brinkmann Audio Nyquist Mk II

One Step Closer

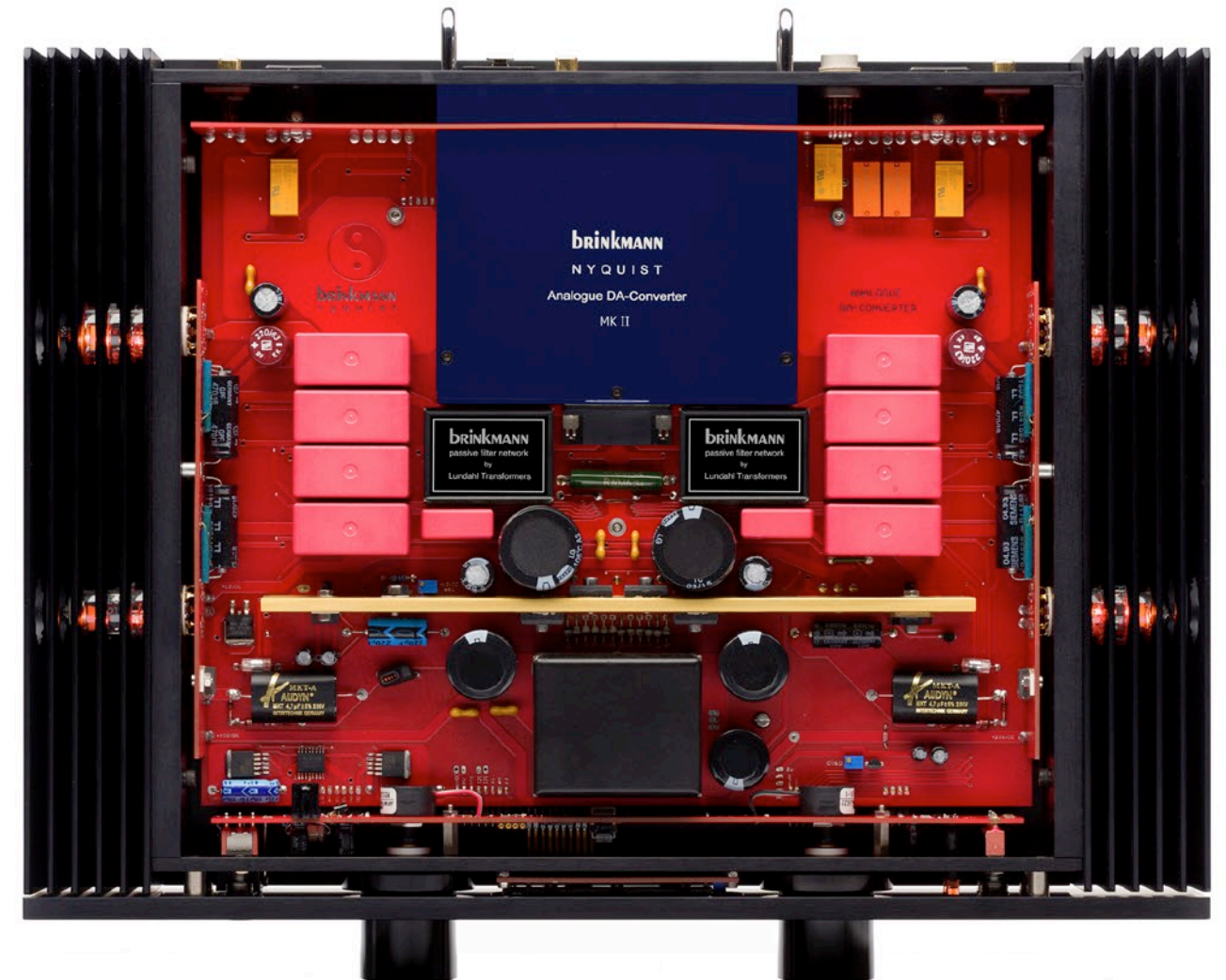


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"If after all these years, digital has still left you slightly cold, I assure you the Brinkmann Nyquist will not."

- Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Publications*
Review of the original Nyquist

"But best of all, the Nyquist is extremely compelling musically..."

- Robert Harley, *The Absolute Sound*, December 2017
Review of the original Nyquist

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Gently lowering the stylus from the Kiseki Purple heart/Luxman PD-171 combination (also featured in this issue), I was immediately thrown back in the listening seat Maxell man style. This moderately sized phono stage delivers world-class performance. For only \$5,000. No really, this one hangs with the \$10k - \$20k boxes. It's that good.

As you get more involved in your analog journey, the upgrade bug is going to hit you. Sooner or later, analog enthusiasts start talking about some of the world's finest phono stages, and in the middle of that discussion, the word Boulder always comes up. Their legendary 2008 phono stage is well known for its wide dynamic swings and incredible tonal accuracy. That pretty much sums up everything Boulder makes, but as you go up the line, the sound gets bigger, broader, and more involving.

About eight years ago, Boulder introduced their 1008, offering quite a bit of the sheer sound quality of the \$34,000 2008 for a mere \$12,000. That might seem like first world issues to some of you, but if you are a hardcore analog enthusiast, you may be able to stretch to \$12k for a phono stage, but \$34k remains out of reach - no shame in that. But you still want that level of performance. Don't we all? The 1008 was an incredible success on so many levels, yet that's still a high price tag for some.

Roaming the halls of the Munich HiFi show, I bumped into Rich Maez, head of sales for Boulder and old pal Steve Huntley, who now also works for Boulder, and they both had big smiles on their faces.

At first glance, I thought the 508 was a power supply for some new Boulder creation. For those of you not familiar, most of the stuff these guys make weighs a hundred pounds or more. They build the 3000 series power amplifiers on V8 engine stands.

Then Maez hands me the 508. Wow, a Boulder product you can hold in your hand! Crazy! But it's density still fools you. It looks like it weighs about 2 pounds, but it weighs 11.5 pounds.

Incredible

That's really the only word that fits the 508. Ok, there are other words. I'll do my best. However, Boulder sums it up on their website, saying, "Where the 2008 was pure excess, the 508 is pure efficiency." If you could go to the Porsche dealer and just buy a 911 with the engine, the body, suspension and one seat, that's what you're looking at here. Nothing to take away from the analog experience. Just high performance.

Where other Boulder phono preamplifiers are one or two large chassis components, with multiple inputs (and the switching circuitry that goes along with) the 508 features one single, mega quality input with minimal loading and gain options. But it's damn good. Finally, it's machined out of the same high-grade aluminum, bead blasted and anodized with the same tools and process as every other Boulder component. No corners have been cut in execution.



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Looking inside the 508 reveals a complete lack of wiring, anywhere. Again, taking advantage of the surface mount technology used in all other Boulder components, no wiring is left to chance, and the PC board drops right in the billet aluminum case snugly. Not a millimeter of space is squandered, cutting down on the labor required to build the 508 tremendously.

The key to success with the 508 is knowing your system and your needs. If you want a massive remote control, multiple inputs and outputs, yada, yada, this will not be for you. But if what you want is sheer, no-frills performance, you've come to the right place.

Five figure phono stages appropriately executed offer a level of resolution and paint a massive three-dimensional picture in a way that you can't achieve with lesser models. Attention to circuit design, power supply technology and vibration limiting casework all cost money. Keeping the options list short and the case compact, Boulder has worked a small miracle here.

The 508 allows MM and MC loading options, with the MC input fixed at 100 ohms. It can be adjusted up to 1000 ohms, but because of the densely packed casework, Boulder suggests bringing it back to your authorized dealer for an adjustment. It is worth noting, a number of cartridges that we've used in the past, requiring loading at 500 or even 1000 ohms work just fine with the factory setting.

Tracking through album after album, the 508s strengths continue to assert themselves. Having spent a considerable amount of time with the top players from ARC, Pass, C-J, BAT, and even Boulder, the 508 has the heart and soul of a much, much more expensive phonostage. Keep in mind you are sacrificing a fair amount of functionality with the 508, and there is only one input. If you can live within those parameters, this is the way to cheat your way to a world-class analog front end without breaking the bank, and without buying a no-name product. This is a Boulder, and their stuff is built to last.

Listening to more reference material, tracks used for decades cements my impression of the 508. There's so much low-level detail present, and the soundscapes rendered, so large, I can't help but think I am listening to a much more expensive component during the audition of the 508. And the rock-solid pace that this preamp delivers, keeping everything in the mix sorted with its unique space is breathtaking. Run of the mill LPs sound like limited edition pressings, and the delicious records are beyond.

Minimal adjustment

Moving magnet mode offers standard 47k loading with 44db of gain, and moving coil mode is preset at 100 ohms with 70db of gain on tap. The 508 is so quiet that even in our system with highly sensitive



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10 products of the year and most wanted components
in just 2 years by preserving relative phase relationships in a signal



"If you're looking for a major jump in your system's performance, I'd suggest buying a pair of these instead of considering a hardware upgrade. Before you write this advice off to cable delusion, expectation bias, or the recent Mercury retrograde phase, please take note: I have never said this in TONE's 11-year history"

Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio

"Well, I have just stumbled upon a speaker cable that I'm very tempted to put in a class of its own"

Mono & Stereo



"Tellurium Q have surpassed themselves here. It is often said that all cables colour the sound of a system to some extent, but the Silver Diamonds do it to a lesser extent than any other product I've heard so far."

John Myles, HiFi World

The effect of phase distortion can be likened to smearing a beautiful picture or looking at it through frosted glass. All signal cables do this to some degree and the better you tackle the engineering challenges to combat phase distortion the more natural the sound you get.



== TQ ==

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horn speakers there isn't a hint of noise coming through the tweeters, assuring that even cartridges with the lowest of output will perform at their maximum.

Inputs and outputs are fully balanced, assuring the most bandwidth and the least noise, as with all Boulder components. They suggest a balanced tonearm cable, if you don't already have one, and also supply a pair of their own high quality balanced input adaptors if you feel the need to stay RCA on the turntable. Thanks to a pair of Cardas Clear tonearm cables, one balanced and one not, there is still a benefit to be had by going balanced in, but if you do have to stick with the factory supplied adaptors, the 508 still gives up little quarter when playing back even the quietest LPs. The balanced output offers another benefit; it will drive a very long run of cable, so if you'd like to place your 508 and turntable in a more convenient and picturesque spot, it's easy to do so. We did just this, putting it way across the main listening room, through a 35-foot pair of Cardas Clear interconnects - the 508 had no problem driving our reference system whatsoever.

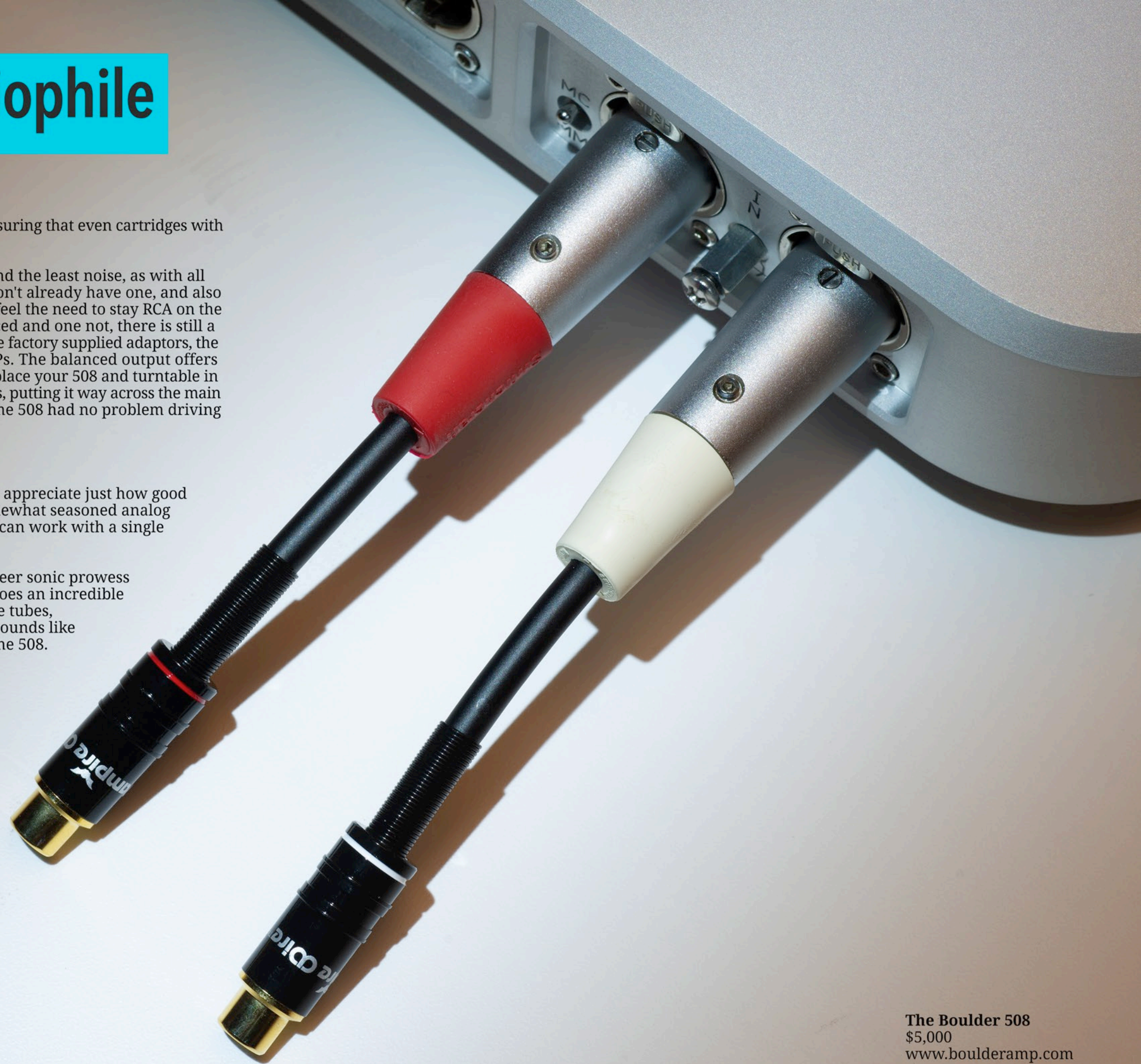
This might be your last

If the Boulder 508 phono stage is your first phono stage, you might not appreciate just how good it indeed is, and what an incredible value it represents. If you're a somewhat seasoned analog enthusiast, who thought this level of sound was out of your reach and can work with a single input and limited adjustability, raise your fist in the air.

Nothing else we've ever reviewed comes close to the Boulder 508 in sheer sonic prowess for \$5,000. Like every other Boulder product I've ever heard, the 508 does an incredible job of achieving what I consider perfect neutrality. It doesn't sound like tubes, transistors, JFETs, anything. It just lets the music pass through. If this sounds like your little slice of heaven, get down to a Boulder dealer and audition the 508. I suspect you will be as smitten as I am.

Though the bulk of the review listening was done in system two (listed below) putting the 508 in my main reference system proves equally enthralling. Stepping up from the Luxman/Kiseki combination to the Brinkmann Bardo/RoNT/Koetsu Jade Platinum and the Grand Prix Audio Parabolica/TriPlanar/Atlas tables still has the 508 delivering class-leading performance.

In addition to giving the Boulder 508 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2018, and thinking it's quite possibly the best value in money no object phono stages ever, I have purchased the review sample and plan on living with this for years to come, maybe decades. Only a company like Boulder that handles every aspect of production from start to finish in-house (and they are one of a very short list of companies in the world that do) could make something this incredible for this price. Highly recommended.



The Boulder 508
\$5,000
www.boulderamp.com