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**What:** A custom-made hi-fi stereo system, made by Peter Qvortrup, the 57-year-old Danish owner of U.K.-based manufacturer Audio Note. He and his 22 employees occupy a one-story factory near the seaside town of Brighton ([www.audionote.co.uk](http://www.audionote.co.uk)).



Audio Note (UK) Ltd  
**Peter Qvortrup**

Audio Note has no assembly lines stamping out digital circuit boards. Instead, technicians with screwdrivers and soldering irons build analog hi-fi components (using the needle-on-groove standard that prevailed before digital technology gained prominence in the 1980s): turntables and tone arms for playing LPs, pre-amps and power amplifiers, speakers and even digital-to-analog converters for CD players. Mr. Qvortrup can also visit your home and tailor a specific combination of components to your taste.

To ensure a true analog sound, Mr. Qvortrup searches the world for unused vacuum tubes from the 1920s to the '70s for the pre-amps and power amps. (The tubes are still made in the U.S. and Asia, but Mr. Qvortrup prefers the sound achieved with the older products.) One source of supply is abandoned U.S. military-storage facilities in Vietnam.

**Price tag:** One recent custom-built system for an investment banker in London included a turntable and tone arm with a gold cartridge and diamond stylus (embellishments said to improve sound quality) costing £40,000; a pre-amp with a price tag of £49,000; a power amp at £125,000; and speakers for £79,000. Add another £10,000 for silver cabling, and the total comes to £303,000.

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Audio Note (UK) Ltd

Audio Note's Kassai power amplifier, made in the U.K. with hand-wound output transformers and silver wiring. Price: **£21,000**

Clients generally wait four to five months for their systems.

**Who needs one?** Mr. Qvortrup argues that all music recordings are different, affected by the atmosphere in a studio, a producer's technical decisions, a musician or singer's skills and mood. So, he reasons, why listen to music on equipment that "homogenizes the sound due to data compression" -- a charge he levels at digital formats like CDs and MP3 players. Listen to two old-fashioned vinyl LPs of two different orchestras playing Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, Mr. Qvortrup argues, and you will hear differences.

"Listen to the same recordings on CD and many of the differences vanish," he says. "My main objective is to rebalance things."

Paul Brookes, a software and Web developer from Manchester, bought a mixture of finished products and kit products from Audio Note. "I have come across many other systems and component combinations over the years that at first appear to sound good but become tedious and hard to listen to in the long run," Mr. Brookes says.

But with his Audio Note set-up, he adds, he can "throw just about any type of music at my system without being let down."

--Michael Clerizo

## A Bicycle Built for You

**What:** A custom-built bicycle from Seven Cycles in Watertown, Massachusetts. Unlike off-the-rack models, which typically are fitted only to a rider's height, custom-built bicycles take into account a range of sizes, shapes and riding preferences ([www.sevencycles.com](http://www.sevencycles.com)).



Rob Vandermark

The company was founded by design engineer Rob Vandermark in 1997. In the 1980s, he was part of a team that designed bikes for Tour de France winner Greg LeMond. He later used his expertise in ergonomics to help build a lightweight racing wheelchair. Mr. Vandermark was designing titanium bikes for another company, but set out on his own after deciding he wanted to build bikes that were perfectly tailored to a customer's needs.

Mr. Vandermark's idea was to collect more than 100 data points on a rider's body shape and then interview each buyer to further fine-tune a bike to his or her habits and needs. How a bike rides depends on its materials (titanium or carbon-fiber or a combination of both) and a range of other fine touches. For example, building a bike with a shorter wheelbase can boost maneuverability.

"When I started Seven, the vast majority of bikes were stock bikes. People were spending a lot of money on bikes that just weren't made for them," Mr. Vandermark says.

Customers answer a questionnaire with the help of a Seven distributor. There are several across

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The V-II bicycle from Seven, made from Argon TC, the company's proprietary lightweight carbon fiber.

Europe, from Portugal to Germany. The answers to questions such as "Do you experience hand numbness?" and "How would you describe your existing bike's handling?" combined with detailed measurements of everything from the length of your forearm to the width of your shoulders, help Seven determine what the customer needs.

Next, a phone interview with a Seven staffer delves into more details of what the rider is looking for -- such as how he plans to ride the bike and things he dislikes about his current bike. Once all the details and special requests have been "triple-checked," the frame is built at Seven's headquarters.

Construction takes about three to four weeks. Once it is finished, the frame is shipped to the distributor who adds the components -- the wheels, gears and a seat -- that come from other

suppliers.

**Price tag:** Seven's bikes, including the frame and components such as gears and wheels, start at about \$3,500, but most people spend about \$8,000 for a fully outfitted model. At the upper end of the scale, Seven has built a tandem that cost more than \$20,000.

**Who needs one?** Mr. Vandermark says a more comfortable fit encourages longer rides and decreases the risk of injury, and for competitive cyclists, better body mechanics mean better performance. Rudy Vanwel, 47, a nearly two-meter-tall jewelry designer in Colorado, bought his first road bike, a custom-built Seven, in 2000. He now rides daily in the mountains near his home. "I'm so tall and shaped unusually -- long legs and long arms -- that bikes off-the-shelf didn't work for me," he says. "I spent hours on the phone talking to Seven about this bike."

--Adam Cohen

### A Scent of One's Own

**What:** A custom-made perfume by London-based Roja Dove. A rare Englishman in an industry dominated by the French, Mr. Dove spent 20 years with France's Guerlain before launching his bespoke service three years ago. He says he made the move "in response to the effect globalization was having on the perfume industry -- there was no choice anymore" ([www.rojadove.com](http://www.rojadove.com)).



Roja Dove

Mr. Dove says the difference between a bespoke perfume and a designer fragrance is like the difference between haute couture and luxury labels. "Each perfumer has their own style and mine is very much about uncompromising luxury," he says. "I believe a good scent should be luxurious but never showy."

Mr. Dove believes most of us have memories activated by smells. Creating custom fragrances is all about understanding clients' "olfactory signature," or the way they associate certain smells with positive or negative experiences in their life. In meetings over roughly 18 months, Mr. Dove will take the client through multiple consultations and smell-testings, looking to assemble the fragrances that evoke the most positive memories for him or her.

**Price tag:** Mr. Dove's custom-made package starts at £20,000 and includes creating a fragrance specifically for you. The finished product comes in a 75-milliliter, Art Deco-style, Baccarat crystal bottle. Additional 250-ml bottles can be purchased for £5,000 to £10,000.

The cost stems primarily from the materials. Among Mr. Dove's signature ingredients are jasmine from Grasse,



Paul Raeside

Bespoke perfume from Roja Dove, created through 'odor profiling' to determine the client's personal 'olfactory signature.' Price: £20,000

France, for which he pays between £24,000 to £26,000 a kilo, and ambergris (waxy secretions from the sperm whale), which runs about £100,000 a kilo. In comparison, gold is currently priced about £10,800 a kilo.

You will also have to pay for Mr. Dove's travel expenses. He will bring his custom-made, portable perfumer's desk (also called an organ, it includes several tiers that carry flasks of exotic scents) to the place of your choosing, provided you cover his flight, lodgings -- and flower arrangements.

**Who needs one?** Clients, Mr. Dove says, are the "Bentley and Aston Martin set, very successful in their fields," and have paid as much as £50,000 for a unique scent. He says a French design house (he won't say which one) commissioned its own fragrance for its boutique in Paris. He says the scent is "a swirl of rose de mai around a central theme of jasmine from Grasse, counterpointed by the warm dry assertive presence of oakmoss, vetiver [a grass from Asia], and cedarwood on a sensual base of ambergris. The net result is a fragrance which is feminine but one which says '[I'm a] grown-up and don't toy with me!'"

--Jessica Powell

### Carpet Magic

**What:** Custom-made carpets, created by Berlin-based designer Jürgen Dahlmanns, whose label, Rug Star, celebrates its fifth anniversary this year with a line of 100% silk carpets. Mr. Dahlmanns combines traditional carpetmaking techniques -- such as hand-knotting -- with starkly modern designs ([www.rugstar.com](http://www.rugstar.com)).



Audio Note (UK) Ltd  
Jürgen Dahlmanns

All of Mr. Dahlmanns's carpets are made to order, either from existing designs adjusted to the scale and color of the room they are made for, or from new designs specially created for the client. The ultrahip carpets are distinguished by their extravagant use of color and whimsical approach, and often bear imagery suggested by the client, such as the ancient Asian dragon woodcuts in "Noodlesoup" or the flirtatious words and phrases in "Like Love."

Mr. Dahlmanns believes that "doing a carpet is really intimate," saying clients often spend more time choosing a carpet for their bedrooms than choosing a bed. A trained architect, Mr. Dahlmanns sees his work as "a liberal form of architecture" that can "create rooms without walls" in their division of space.



Elmar Schwarze, [www.studio34.de](http://www.studio34.de)

'Noodlesoup' rug from Rug Star, handmade of Tibetan wool and silk in a design incorporating ancient Asian dragon woodcuts. Price: €7,200

After leaving an architecture position in Vienna at the start of this decade, Mr. Dahlmanns first produced carpets for an art installation, called "Pure Porn," in which he transferred pornographic images found on the Internet into always humorous, often shocking carpet designs.

**Price tag:** Mr. Dahlmanns specializes in two types of carpets: Tibetan-style area rugs, whose rustic variations give his designs a remarkable texture and durability, and, starting this fall, Chinese-style silken carpets, made in Zhengzhou, China. An average 2-meter-by-3-meter Tibetan carpet, produced for Rug Star by Tibetan exiles in Nepal, costs between €7,000 and €16,000, while a Chinese silk carpet of similar size will cost between €20,000 and €50,000.

After consultation with Mr. Dahlmanns or one of his dealers, clients can expect to

wait for their carpets anywhere from 16 to 24 weeks, depending on the size and the degree of adjustment to the design. The new Chinese silk rugs are scheduled to take a year.

**Who needs one?** Mr. Dahlmanns says the carpet can be a work of contemporary art. "I'm one of the only people who does carpets like paintings," he says.

Shelley Fox Aarons, a New York-based art collector and retired psychiatrist, says Mr. Dahlmanns's designs proved the ideal choice for a room in her Miami apartment, which includes an original piece of Alvar Aalto furniture and a large-scale work by German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans. "He just created this amazing rug," says Dr. Fox Aarons, who, after seeing an original design in Mr. Dahlmanns's Berlin showroom, conferred over changes by email. "It just looks perfect with everything in the room."

Mr. Dahlmanns thinks that his "funniest design" was created for a Cher fan who walked in one day and wanted him to create a Cher-themed carpet for her. "My clients have desires," he says. "And I don't have a moralistic attitude."

--J.S. Marcus

### Time Is Money

**What:** A handmade watch, from the workshop of Roger W. Smith Ltd. Watch, Clock & Chronometer Makers on the storybook-pretty Isle of Man ([www.rwsmithwatches.com](http://www.rwsmithwatches.com)).



Guy Lucas de Pestouan  
Roger W. Smith

Mr. Smith, 37, produces just 13 watches a year, and follows the English tradition of watchmaking. The leading style in the 17th and 18th centuries, the English method favors understated elegance in the design of the case and dial as opposed to the elaborate designs of the now ubiquitous Swiss style -- which predominates among the handful of other independent master watchmakers in the world today.

**Price tag:** Most of the watches Mr. Smith completes in a year are part of a product line called Series 2, with prices around £38,000 depending on the type of gold used -- 18-karat yellow, rose gold or white gold. Personalizing the watch -- for example by changing the dial or the hands -- adds to the price. The waiting time is 18 months to two years.



Guy Lucas de Pestouan

Inside detail of a Series 2, Edition 2 custom-made wristwatch from Roger W. Smith Ltd. Price: £37,800

Mr. Smith also designs and builds unique pieces according to a client's wishes. These take up to four years to complete, with prices from £100,000 to £600,000 and up.

**Who needs one?** "Wealthy people with a knowledge of horology," says Mr. Smith. "For the unique pieces, people want watches with perpetual calendars, minute repeaters -- or watches that chime the hours and minutes -- and moon phase calendars."

Customers aren't interested in bling -- the watches are surprisingly unobtrusive. Rather, customers like the idea of a timepiece as a work of art, instead of as a digital readout on a mobile phone, computer or TV screen.

Bill Taylor, co-owner of Illusion Arts, a visual-effects company in Van Nuys, California, with credits including "Batman Forever" and "The Bourne Identity," says he sold two watches from his collection to finance the purchase of a Series 2 watch and a unique piece. For the unique watch the workshop added a tourbillion, a tiny device that reduces the effects of gravity on the

movement's wheels, gears and levels and increases accuracy. Mr. Taylor requested an unusual case shape -- a rectangle with arched short sides, a hybrid of a rectangle and an oval.

"The most important ingredient is the watch is made by someone I know who makes nearly everything himself, and won't let the watch leave his workshop until he is completely satisfied," says Mr. Taylor. "These watches are beautiful. They repay handsomely endless hours of study under a microscope. It's art, craft, science and technology that comes together."

--Michael Clerizo

### Stairway From Heaven

**What:** A hand-carved staircase made of stone, metal and exotic woods including ebony, imbuia, pearwood, makore and sapele from U.S. company Zepa Industries ([www.zepa.com](http://www.zepa.com)).



From left, Peter, Ed and Brian Zepa

Hand-carved work is more delicate and usually more elaborate than machines are capable of producing. Company founder Ed Zepa, a former Yugoslav who lived in Munich, emigrated to Chicago at age 10 as part of a family of furniture makers who studied the techniques of master European carvers. In 1981, he founded his company in Charlotte, North Carolina, eventually building a 75-employee business that now includes his two sons, Peter and Brian.

The company's staircases are soaring sculptural creations with ornate posts, balustrades and railings that form the centerpieces of grand foyers. "We're trying to build staircases of heirloom quality," Mr. Zepa says.



© Zepa Industries Inc.

A three-story staircase, handmade from maple and mahogany by Zepa Industries. Price: around \$125,000

Zepa staff visit the site and work with designers and architects to plan the work, and even create the tools required to shape the wood. Buyers travel as far as Africa, South America or Russia to select the proper woods.

The pieces are built in the company's workshop and finishes are applied according to the customer's order. Then workers wrap, crate and send the parts to the project site -- sometimes in a ship container, as the company did once with a customer in Hawaii -- for installation by Zepa employees. The process can take a year -- longer if the homeowner has ordered other woodwork such as cabinetry, mantels or doors -- many also seek custom yacht woodwork.

**Price tag:** Up to €500,000.

**Who needs one?** The company says customers include celebrities like Mariah Carey, Jon Bon Jovi and Bruce Springsteen. Mr. Zepa says he'll go wherever in the world the customers take him; he is currently working with a client in Dubai.

Mr. Zepa says the work is for people who want something unique with the best materials and techniques, adding that his brand of "traditional, classical trade skill is fast dying."

--Leigh Dyer

### Hot Wheels

**What:** A high-end custom-made car from Italian designer Ercole Spada at SpadaConcept ([www.spadaconcept.com](http://www.spadaconcept.com)).



© Spadaconcept

Ercole Spada

Mr. Spada has been renowned for more than four decades for his sportscar designs for Ferrari, Maserati and others. His classics include the 1960 Aston Martin DB4 GT Zagato, and the BMW E32 7 Series.

In 1999, the Italian began collaborating with his son, designer Paulo Spada, on custom cars, creating the O.S.C.A. 2500 GT Dromos in 1999 for Japanese businessman Shozo Fujita and the TS Codatronca last year under the SpadaConcept label.



© Spadaconcept

The TS Codatronca car from Spada, with body made of carbon fiber, aluminum and fiberglass.

Price: €220,000

"The father is arguably the best car designer ever," said classic-car expert J. Philip Rathgen, editor of Hamburg-based Classic Driver online magazine. "His work inspired generations of designers."

**Price tag:** A unique car body from SpadaConcept built on an existing chassis (the frame, engine, transmission, drive shaft, suspension -- everything that makes the car run) from a Corvette or a Viper starts at around €300,000. For a completely new car, expect to pay between €500,000 to €2 million, depending on the chassis material (aluminum or the more expensive carbon) and engine size.

Customers can choose things like body shape, frame material and engine size, as well as decorative elements like upholstery fabric and colors. Often, says Paulo Spada, customers just want a special space for golf clubs.

Cars built from an existing chassis take three to four months. For a completely redesigned car, the process can take between eight and 16 months and is very interactive. "We want people to sit in our studio and design with us," says Paulo Spada. "It's their baby so they should be involved every step of the way."

**Who needs one?** Customers usually collect rare automobiles and have a passion for classic sports cars, especially vintage models, and they want something unique. "People come to us because they don't want the same Porsche as their neighbors," says Paulo Spada. "But they also come because they know the story and the cars of my father. They want a new model with an interpretation of the past."

Mr. Fujita agrees, saying that although he had already commissioned 10 different vehicles with several car designers in the past, he had been "waiting for an opportunity" to get a unique car designed by Ercole Spada because he was familiar with his prior work on such cars as the 1960s Lancia Fulvia Sport.

--Jabeen Bhatti

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