

# Audio Note M10 Signature Preamplifier Review

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By Fred  
Crowder

18/05/2017



Audio Note M10 main chassis



Audio Note M10 Galahad Power Supply Unit

Arrival and Set-up

No matter how hard you try, receiving new gear is always problematic, particularly interfacing with the shipper. Some months ago, I contacted Audio Note (U.K.) about the possibility of getting an Audio Note M10 Signature for review. Later, I received an email from Audio Note (U.K.) that they had completed a review sample and that DHL was airfreighting it to Houston. Subsequently, I contacted DHL and requested that the delivery be postponed for the following Tuesday so that I could arrange to be at home. You probably already know where this is going (and you would be right). Monday afternoon, I received a frantic call from Audio Note that the packages were sitting on my front porch. "Could I drop everything and go home to check on them?" I managed to get home (with my remarkably patient granddaughter in tow) to find a total of five boxes on my doorstep, two of which seemed large enough to contain a sofa and two easy chairs. I rolled them in and took anti-inflammatories that night.

Neli Davis of Audio Federation arrived Friday evening to help with set-up. She suggested that we audition the existing preamp in the system (Einstein preamp + EMM Labs MTRX amps) to get an idea of the system's sound. As sometimes happens with good listening, we did not turn in until 3 a.m.

You might wonder how much set-up a preamp requires. Isn't it "plug and play"? In the case of the Audio Note M10 Signature, the answer would be a resounding "No." The preamp consists of two massive 60lb power supplies, each the size of a large tube amplifier, plus the preamp control section and the myriad of power cords and umbilicals necessary to connect everything. Given the size and complexity of all of this, the question of where to site everything becomes an issue as well. In any event, three hours later it was finally time to turn everything back on and start the warm-up and break-in process. Within about an hour, the sound began to settle in (though I sensed that more break-in was in store). The only nit was that the stepped attenuator on the preamp coupled with the high gain of the EMM Labs MTRX amps basically meant that the range of volume adjustment was distinctly narrower than ideal.

## The Technology

My erstwhile publisher, Constantine Soo, previously discussed in detail the technological innovations that have made this product possible. Please see his excellent article "[Audio Note UK launches the flagship preamplifier, the M10 Line Signature,](#)" [Dagogo, March 2013.](#)

## An Interlude

At this juncture, Neli and I both needed a break. The Houston Audio Society had scheduled a Christmas party for that evening and I wanted to introduce Neli around to some of my friends. We finally returned home about 9:00 p.m. with several of these listening buddies in tow. At this point, the system had been playing for about six hours and the sound was noticeably more refined. In particular, intelligibility of voices was superb; depth and three-dimensionality were improved over the Einstein and, according to Neli, would get significantly better with further break-in. I attend two, sometimes three, live classical concerts a month and the recreation of depth and three-dimensionality have always been key to my enjoyment of reproduced sound. Tonality and accurate recreation of timbre are also paramount. We had another very late evening.

### The Next Day

I had not really planned on making any further changes to the system configuration; however, Neli really wanted to hear the Audio Note M10 Signature in conjunction with my Audio Note Balanced Keron amplifiers. Moving the 230# EMM MTRX amps in and out of the system is not a task undertaken lightly, but my friend and fellow audiophile Paul Jackson was in from London – and being a strapping youth of 40, hoisted the EMMs as if they were featherweights. Not surprisingly, the combination of the two Audio Note components was a very synergistic match and continued to sound better and better the longer that we listened.

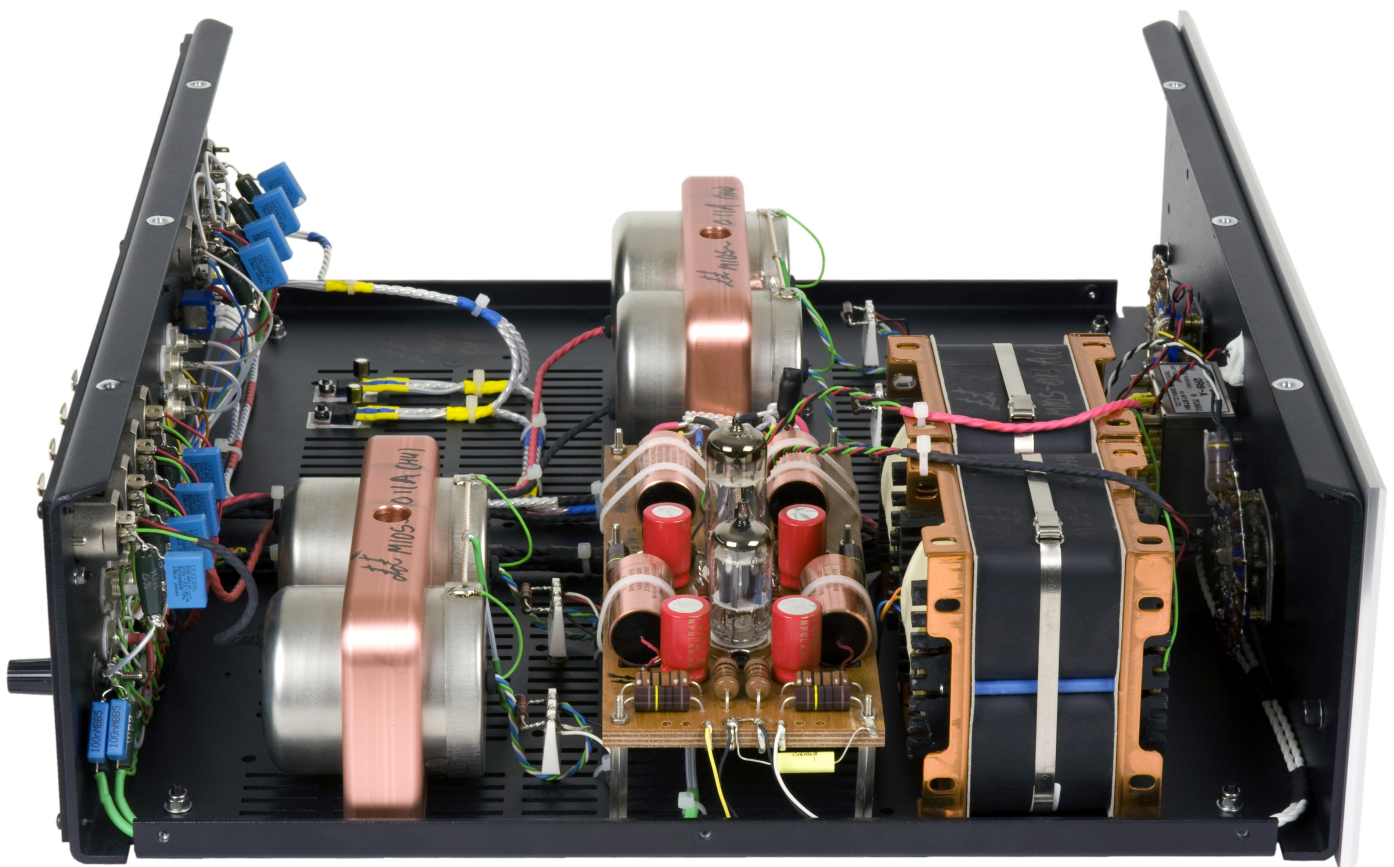
At some point, we inserted Finite Elemente Cerabases under the preamp and its two power supply boxes, which rather significantly improved the sound in all the ways that one might expect. After Neli left, I spent the remainder of the evening listening. Even at this early point in my evaluation, it was clear that there was something very



special about the sound of the Audio Note M10 Signature, particularly when used in conjunction with the companion Audio Note Balanced Keron amplifiers driving the Acapella Audio Arts Triolon Exalibur speaker system.



Audio Note M10 Signature main chassis rear interior

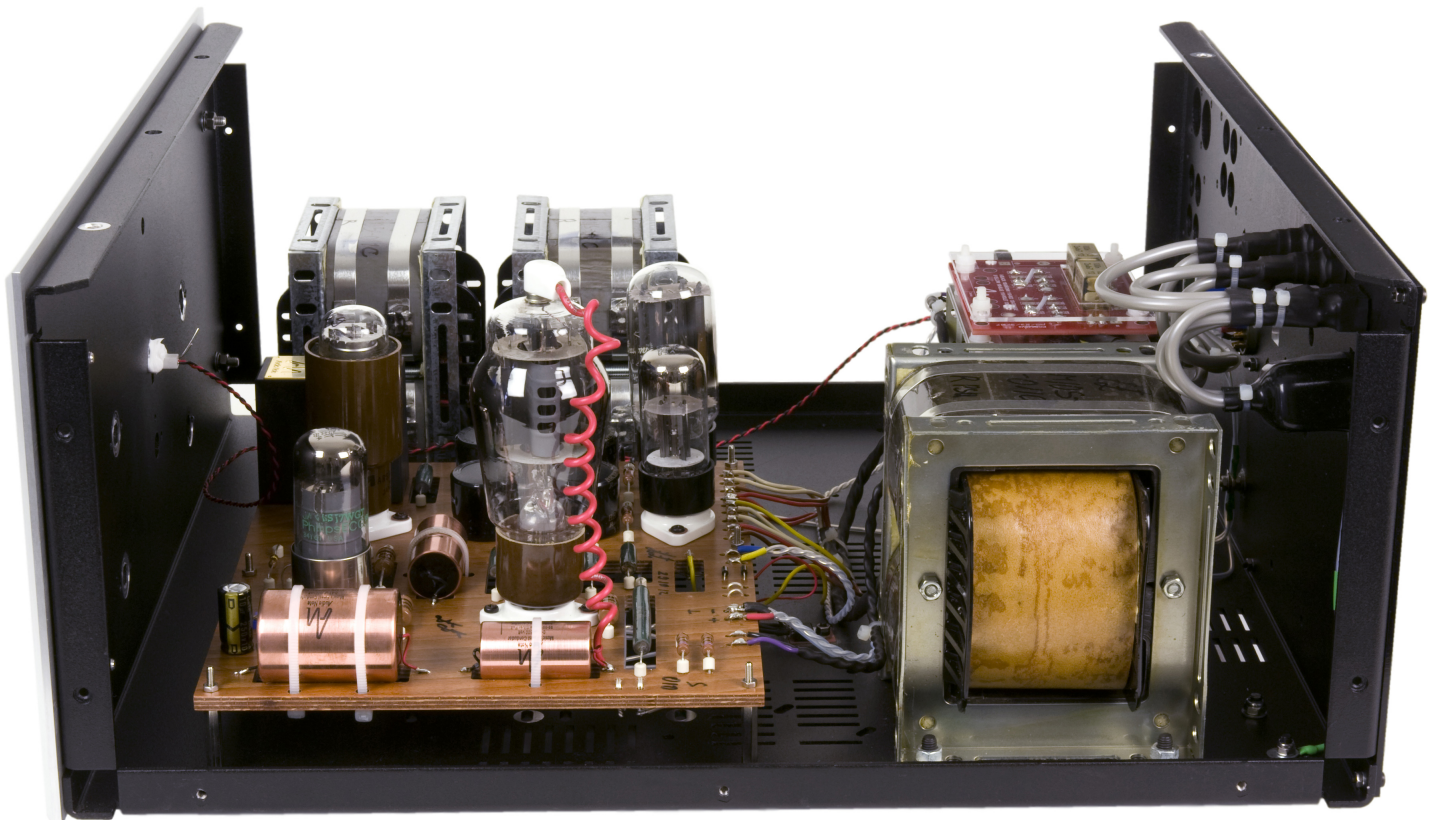


Audio Note M10 Signature main chassis interior





Audio Note M10 Signature Galahad PSU rear



Audio Note M10 Signature Galahad PSU interior

## Break-in

I allowed at least a hundred hours of break-in before doing serious listening, though we did do some listening



during that process. While avoiding extended commentary, I would just note that the M10 during break-in sounded, for the most part, as one might expect: the bass as manifested by the Acapella speakers was not fully filled-in and the treble via the ion tweeters at times seemed under-defined (especially when listening to cymbals). The overall sound could at times be just a bit “hard,” which surprised me, but which seemed to disappear over time.

A few comments about the sound at this point follow. These comments are based on listening to digital media through the EMM TX2 Transport and DA2 Processor, as my turntable was temporarily out of commission while awaiting a new compressor.

ORG did an SACD reissue of Jeff Buckley’s first album, *Grace*, in addition to a 45 reissue. The SACD was mastered by Bernie Grundman. We noted over a couple of listening sessions that transients were powerful, Buckley’s voice well-centered and palpable, and the drums clearly placed, loud and tight (almost too much so, but some of that may be the recording). The mastering seemed a bit bright on my system, but this SACD has sounded bright elsewhere. (One of our number was of the view that the mastering sounded typical for Grundman, and that what I might call “bright” sounded good to him.) Guitars are captured about as cleanly as I have ever heard, with excellent layering – and there are a lot of guitars tracked in. Indeed, this album is very busy in general and represents an enormous amount of work on the part of Buckley and his production and engineering team. To its credit, the Audio Note M10 seemed to be able to separate out the complex, overlapping threads of musical dialogue in an intelligible and easily distinguishable manner that made for rewarding listening.

On a CD of Strauss’s *Four Last Songs* (RCA, Eschenbach, Houston Symphony), the Audio Note brought out the unique tone and texture of Renee Fleming’s voice. She was louder than the orchestra and not well blended – although this was surely an issue of microphones and engineering. The orchestra was rich but this RCA re-issue, from relatively early in the digital days, is not particularly warm.

One of the most rewarding experiences for a trio of us listeners was hearing a recent live recording of the Martinu 4th Symphony with Belohlavek conducting the BBC Symphony (Onyx 4061), a piece two of us had never heard. Not only was it a joy to discover this music, but it also became clear during multiple listens over multiple days that the M10 Signature was now fully broken in and had developed a beguiling depth and three-dimensionality. The thing that was so satisfying about hearing this music through the M10 as opposed to the Einstein was that the top to bottom coherence was remarkably seamless. The musical lines are very active and cover the whole range of the orchestra. The “handoffs” between winds and strings, between cellos and violins, top to bottom of the range, was effortless. Complex musical lines were easily followed throughout the thickly orchestrated symphony and made clear sense to the ears. Put another way, when the music interwove many different threads, it was easier to pick out a particular thread and follow it than I have typically experienced. The retrieval of extra detail in the bass was superb – the cellos and basses chugged and thumped along powerfully without in any way becoming overbearing. The combination of a lowered noise floor and added resolution of low level detail significantly increased the amount of ambient information coming through. Recreation of the reverberation of the bass drum in the hall, bass slam, and palpability were all excellent.

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# Audio Note M10 Signature Preamplifier Review

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System: Acapella Audio Arts Triolon Excalibur speakers, Rockport Sirius turntable, EMM Labs TX2 SACD transport, EMM Labs DA2, Audio Note M10 Signature preamplifier, Audio Note Keron Balanced monoblocks (M10 Galahad PSU on separate stand)\*

## Changing Power Cords

Normally, I would not even consider tweaks to a new piece of equipment until relatively sure that the unit was broken in; however, in this case, Audio Note had been kind enough to provide me with two different power cords for the M10 Signature, an Isis, which is their latest all copper cord, and a silver Sogon. So I decided to experiment back and forth one evening while two of my more astute listening buddies were over helping evaluate the gear. As it turned out, the copper and silver power cords were quite different sonically. The silver was, at least for my tastes, a bit soft and romantic in the highs, seeming to smooth things out, though at the same time overall (comparatively) missing body in the midrange and lows. The copper was more linear, bringing out more information from the low bass through the midrange, which rounded out both the individual instruments and the whole tonal and spatial picture. The only downside with the Isis was a bit more edge at times – in this sense occasionally telling us (to varying degrees, depending upon taste) perhaps more than some would like to know about the artifacts of the recording process. While all three of us ultimately preferred the fully fleshed midrange and bass of the copper, certainly access to the two very different cords does allow the listener some flexibility in tailoring the sound.

## Finally We Have Lift Off

Regular readers will know that I generally have a preference for vinyl as opposed to digital sources – although that is becoming a closer call as digital continues to improve, and in my own case, particularly with the introduction of the EMM DA2/TX2 processor/transport to the system, which presents digital recordings in an outstanding way. Still, original analog recordings, and even early digital recordings, most often come to life more



effectively in their original vinyl medium. Consequently, I and my listening team were thrilled on the day that we were able to re-introduce the Rockport to the system. What I will discuss now are some of our observations of some very pleasant LP listening.

“Everything But the Girl,” *The Language of Life* (produced by the late Tommy LiPuma). At its best, pop music, from a sonic perspective, involves an effort on the part of the producer and, one hopes, the artist, to create a new sound. This involves artifice enabled by technology ... but artifice nonetheless. Sometimes, the resolution capacity of our gear will outpace the music, exposing the artifice, and in doing so, ruin it for us. This can be a particularly tough issue dealing with music of the relatively early days of digital, as with the 1990’s *The Language of Life*, a collaboration of LiPuma with Ben Watt and Tracy Thorn, collectively known by the rather curious moniker of Everything But the Girl. This was one of the last pop records to come out on vinyl after the ascendance of digital (before the post-2010 resurgence). Here LiPuma did a terrific job of creating a sophisticated, mid-80’s jazzy but intimate atmosphere – a mood – to surround the songs and the whole album in a convincing fashion. Even early into Side 1, it was apparent that the Audio Note M10 Signature was giving me the magic of the LiPuma/Watt/Thorn sound without rubbing my nose in the artifice. That included a very large sound stage anchored by an authoritative electric bass with the metallic sheen of the bottom notes of a piano. You could hear all of the electric bass, from the top end of its characteristic fret buzz to its deep floor. The main body of the sound extended behind the speakers, and the voices were spread widely, featuring a variety of close harmonies interspersed with call and response from elsewhere in the soundstage. It was superbly evocative; Tracy Thorn’s vulnerable lead as attractive as it has ever been.

Munch, *Debussy Images*, RCA Shady Dog issue – the atmosphere was the best I’ve heard on this recording. Rendition of pulse, surge and flow and the push and pull of phrases was exceptional. You had the illusion that you could hear all the detail that might have been present at the live event but without losing the music. Soundstage had some depth, but it was somewhat limited, which is not unusual for Boston Symphony Orchestra recordings made in Symphony Hall, which – so I have been told – at that time involved the orchestra being recorded behind a large rubberized screen, blocking off the audience section of the hall to avoid excessive reverberation and create greater immediacy.

Ernest Ansermet conducting the music of Frank Martin (a late Decca SXL 2000 recording) – the musical line, with its building of tension and release, was superbly rendered. This is a somewhat thorny piece composed by Martin, who was a friend of Ansermet’s. Here it is laid out to make superb musical sense. The recording is very open, sometimes bright though not really harsh. The ease of getting absorbed by the flow of the music mostly steers the ear away from the brightness.

Boz Scaggs, *Down Two, Then Left* (Columbia, late 70’s, first pressing) – Low-level detail reproduction was remarkable. We heard all of the studio-shaped parts as separate contributors to the whole. The M10 brought this glossy and glittering production down to earth in the best way. Bass guitar was very firm, solid and distinct, which is not so easy on this record, which features some of LA’s best electric bass players of the time, who also happen to be very busy bass players. Every note was tight and distinct, as is the interplay with the drummer’s kick drum. Cymbals sounded spectacularly clean and palpable.

Klemperer, Bruckner Eighth Symphony (EMI), is a loud steamroller of a symphony. Given a recording with this kind of dynamics, I was very surprised to hear no break-up during the climaxes, especially in this older recording. Superbly clear delineation of the instruments. Almost like the best of transistor gear – not no, better. Yet the strings had the smoothness you would expect from vintage tube gear, but without the muddiness that can go along with that smoothness.

To cap off the evening, we pulled out an old standby in new guise – a re-issue on Nonesuch of Emmylou Harris’ *Wrecking Ball*. One of the listeners commented that he never before understood why I liked this recording, but on the Audio Note it finally made sense. Given Harris’s breathy and often understated delivery, the apparent close proximity of her mouth to the mic, and an occasional excess of sibilance, intelligibility of her words has always been a problem with this album, but much less so here where extreme transparency to the source, and a vanishingly low noise floor coupled with extremely high resolution, made the words easier to understand (most of the time!).

There is always the danger with any piece of equipment with the resolving capability of the Audio Note M10 Signature that the end result will not serve the music but will merely cause the listener to focus on production or other flaws. Fortunately, that is clearly not the case in this instance. By this time in the process, I was finding it very difficult to listen critically and much easier to just enjoy the music.

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Audio Note M10 Main Chassis closeup 1

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Audio Note M10 Main Chassis closeup 2

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# Audio Note M10 Signature Preamplifier Review

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## A Final Listen to Digital

We also spent some time listening to a variety of digital recordings, including an early Dinah Washington reissue, which in spite of being very left-right stereo-wise (early stereo), was gorgeous.

On the audiophile favorite *Three Blind Mice Midnight Sugar*, the piano was very realistic as was image size. Double bass had a nice level of nuance and detail but was also somewhat hard and dry in a way that you might not expect from tubes. It would have benefitted from a bit more midrange bloom; however, bass was huge, cymbals sounded very natural with their character coming through very well. (I think it is possible that some of these effects are more related to the recording, which was designed to be demonstration quality in its day, yet perhaps is not aging as well as it could – in other words, it may be a bit overdone in the context of the resolution that we can get now.) Again, resolution was superb. You could even hear the underside of the ride cymbals, as if they were that close.

We finished the evening with Pepe Romero's *Flamenco* (FIM K2HD). The initial hit of the metal tap on the wood floor, immediately followed by the sense of the wood reverberating, is difficult to reproduce accurately. Several years ago at the Rocky Mountain Audio Show, this particular cut was played many, many times and generally with poor results, but not here. Here we got more of the attack than the body, but that is the recording. We could sense the distance between the guitar and the mic as well as the room boundaries. Again, however, the age of the recording and the "demonstration" intent seemingly behind it reveals itself nowadays in the form of what now sounds like excessive reverberation. I can understand why we got such a kick out of listening to it years back, but I must confess that it is seeming increasingly musically vacuous as I age and become more concerned with what one might call straightforward – though sensuously satisfying – sound reproduction, as opposed to something more like sonic gimmickry.

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Audio Note M10 Galahad PSU interior closeup 1

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Audio Note M10 Galahad PSU interior closeup 2

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Audio Note M10 Galahad PSU interior closeup 3

## The Journey Finally Comes to an End...and a Beginning

The Audio Note M10 Signature is that strangest of all fantastical beasts, combining the resolution, vanishingly low noise and distortion levels, and subterranean bass of the very best solid state units with the dynamics, palpability, three dimensionality, tonal accuracy and naturalness of the very best tube units.

Depending upon the recording, performers tended to be surrounded by their own space and air, and on well-recorded albums it was possible to hear the acoustical space of the venue. This ability to resolve the soundstage is a real game changer for me and my fellow listeners. With the M10, our ability to "visualize" the position of the musicians on the soundstage as if in three dimensions, and experience the full size, depth, weight, presence and location of each musical instrument or voice on the stage, was taken to a level we did not expect. The presentation was both more holographic and crystalline in its clarity than I have heard from a pre-amp in my system – indeed, I have rarely experienced it in any other system either. Recordings have exceptional energy

and life. Dynamics and low frequency information were presented at a new level as a result of the retrieval of extra detail, particularly at very low frequencies, coupled with the M10's extremely low noise floor.

The real key is resolution of musically relevant information. In the quest for higher resolution, an end result that I have experienced all too frequently is that, yes, there is more detail, but there is also extraneous noise, particularly at higher frequencies, that becomes outsized and fatiguing rather than beguiling. But that is not the case here. The ear senses a remarkably high transparency to the source. Individual images are vivid with palpability, tonal density/saturation, tangibility and weight. Particularly with golden age classical recordings (such as EMI Columbia SAX and Decca SXL2000's – and, really, this is true for great recordings of all eras, I should say) there is an unexpected energy and life that on occasion causes the listener to suspend disbelief.

How to sum this up? Well, first, the experience with the M10 caused me to conclude that my long-trusted Einstein pre-amp is up for replacement – a position with which my regular listening pals agreed. The downside of that discovery is that it leads me toward a “new pre-amp” journey into a new, more sweat-inducing price class.



Audio Note M10 Signature main chassis\*





Audio Note M10 Signature Galahad PSU (separate channels)\*

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