

The Analog Soundware© Your Quarterly Guide to the World of High-Fidelity Vinyl and Tape

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WELCOME, ANALOG AFICIONADOS.

In the final quarter of 2025, the analog audio world remains one of the most dynamic and passionate segments of the hi-fi ecosystem. Between **new model introductions, celebrated reincarnations of classics, and spirited community debate**, the end of the year delivered plenty for vinyl and reel-to-reel devotees alike. Turntable manufacturers emphasized refined engineering and accessibility while reel-to-reel saw high-end innovations amid ongoing tape sourcing challenges.

The last three months of 2025 cemented the analog market's transformation from a niche revival into a vibrant, competitive, and continuously evolving segment of high-fidelity audio. This period saw manufacturers pushing the boundaries of material science, digital motor control, and, most surprisingly, embracing new formats for both vinyl and tape.

I. Turntable Developments: The Digital Motor Revolution

The year's second half has seen a steady stream of **new turntable models and refreshed editions** aimed at satisfying both newcomers and seasoned listeners. Brands large and small continue to balance **sound quality, design, and user accessibility**.

Broader trend pieces on emerging "**game-changing turntables of 2025**" highlight the ongoing push for **innovative aesthetics and smart features**. Designers are increasingly blending **retro inspiration with modern engineering** — an approach that resonates with today's audiophiles, who value both performance and style.

High-end shows such as *High-End Munich 2025* earlier in the year hinted at many new turntables showcases, and the latter part of the year saw these products making their way into independent reviews and retailer inventories.

The most defining trend in Q4 was the aggressive adoption of **digital motor control** and sophisticated speed stability systems across mid-to-high-end decks. Manufacturers are realizing that the analog signal path is only as good as the precision of the mechanics driving it.

At the same time the key focus in Q4 was not the hyper-exclusive flagship decks, but rather the highly competitive, performance-per-dollar market, where electronic speed control and cartridge upgrades defined the winners.

New Model Spotlight: Thorens TD 124 DD 'Reference'

Thorens surprised the market with the announcement of the **TD 124 DD 'Reference'** (due Q1 2026), a high-end evolution of their celebrated direct-drive modern TD 124 DD.

- **Key Development:** The 'Reference' model ditches the traditional wooden plinth in favor of a proprietary, multi-layered polymer-composite base, specifically engineered for resonance control. Crucially, it introduces a **field-programmable gate array (FPGA)** motor control system.
- **Technical Impact:** This FPGA allows the speed stability to be measured and corrected in real-time, achieving **Wow and Flutter figures below 0.02% WTD**—a specification typically reserved for broadcast mastering decks.
- **The Review Buzz:** Early listening reports praised its black background and surgical precision, suggesting Thorens has successfully blended the classic torque drive feel with modern digital accuracy.



Flagship Refinements: Pro-Ject and Technics

- **Pro-Ject Signature 12.2:** Announced in October, this model solidifies Pro-Ject's high-end ambition. Featuring a massive, 10.5kg platter and a sophisticated **magnetic bearing**, it addresses one of the biggest challenges in vinyl playback—friction. It also introduced an advanced **adaptive anti-skate** mechanism, pushing the boundaries of what is possible in tonearm precision without resorting to linear tracking.



- **Technics SL-1300G (New Release):** Technics, known for its direct-drive precision, launched the SL-1300G (not to be confused with the vintage model). This model sits between the SL-1200G and the flagship SL-1000R, emphasizing a powerful, stable presentation. Reviewers praised its substantial build and ability to handle complex musical dynamics with the **sonic stability** expected of a premium direct-drive deck.



The Mid-Market Winner: Rega Planar 3 RS Edition

The **Rega Planar 3 RS Edition** (introduced in November 2024) was the quarter's consensus award winner in the crucial mid-range bracket (around \$1,000–\$1,400).

- **Key Upgrade:** The "RS" (Rega Standard) Edition focused on an upgraded electronic speed controller and the introduction of the new **Rega Nd5 moving magnet cartridge** (borrowed from higher-end models) and the Neo PSU MK2 external power supply.
- **Review Consensus:** Reviewers unanimously cited a **substantial increase in clarity and detail** over the standard Planar 3. The new cartridge/tonearm pairing delivered more rhythmic precision and a dynamically exciting presentation, proving that meticulous refinement still beats radical redesign in the belt-drive segment.

One noteworthy wave of releases comes from niche and direct-to-consumer makers such as **AudioKeeper**, which launched a variety of new turntables in late 2025. Their lineup includes flagship and entry-level platforms with **improved precision tonearms, enhanced platter**

materials, and integrated isolation systems — all designed to boost performance without inflated pricing. These updates emphasize **motor stability, reduced vibration, and clearer midrange reproduction**, underscoring how technological refinement continues to push analog playback forward.



Material Science: The Rise of Advanced Dampers

Rega's perennial dominance in the sub-€2,000 market faced fresh challenges from newcomers focusing on dampening.

- **Pro-Ject's "Graphene Platter":** Following its teaser in Q3, Pro-Ject officially launched the **X-Line Pro**, featuring a cast acrylic platter heavily infused with nano-graphene particles. The goal is to maximize mass while providing a near-perfect damping coefficient.
- **Review Consensus:** While the subjective sound remains a point of debate (some find it slightly "dry"), reviewers universally lauded the reduction in bearing noise and the clarity in complex orchestral passages.

The Cartridge Wars: Revival of the Moving Iron

The competitive landscape for Moving Coil (MC) cartridges intensified in Q4. New lines from specialized manufacturers, such as **Kensington Audio**, emphasized exotic cantilevers:



- The progression was clear: **Aluminium (entry-level) → Boron → Ruby → Sapphire (flagship)**. The technical goal with these materials is to achieve the lowest possible effective mass and highest possible rigidity to accurately track micro-grooves, making the pursuit of silent backgrounds and dynamic speed an ongoing arms race.

Shure's withdrawal from the cartridge business left a vacuum, but Q4 saw several smaller US and European manufacturers reviving and modernizing the **Moving Iron (MI)** cartridge design.

- **Grado and Soundsmith** both introduced reference-level MI cartridges that exploit the design's high output and low moving mass. The resulting review focus was on the **dynamic range** and **transient speed**, which many audiophiles prefer over the traditional Moving Coil (MC) output.

II. Reel-to-Reel Tape: New Formats and Fresh Tape Stock, High-End Resurgence

The reel-to-reel sector continues its steady, expensive growth, but Q4 delivered some significant developments that ease the path for new users.

Audiophile forums and user communities reflect **enthusiasm and debate** around analog gear this quarter. Reel-to-reel lovers share impressions of machines like the **Technics RS-1500**, cherishing them for their strong mechanical builds and nuanced playback, while acknowledging the ongoing **maintenance realities** of analog formats.

Engagement isn't limited to vintage gear: discussions are bubbling up about *new productions* on reel-to-reel media, even if opinions vary on practicality and cost.

There's no denying the broader market context: reel-to-reel format is enjoying renewed relevance not merely as nostalgic artifacts but as **serious listening mediums**. Audiophiles increasingly appreciate tape's distinctive warmth and detail, viewing it as a complement — not alternative — to digital sources.

Format Standardization: 7-Inch Tape Masters

Historically, high-end, pre-recorded master tapes were only available on 10.5-inch NAB reels, necessitating large, expensive transports.

- **The Development:** Several prominent tape labels (Acoustic Sounds, Analogue Productions) announced that their future master tape releases would be available on **7-inch "Maxell-style" hubs**.
- **The Impact:** This move makes the high-quality **Real-Time Copy (RTC)** format accessible to a wider audience using smaller, more common decks, driving secondary market demand for those 7-inch-capable transports.

The most accessible news for the general audiophile came from the rapid expansion of high-quality, pre-recorded tapes.

- **Rhino High Fidelity Tapes:** Rhino officially launched its new reel-to-reel series in Q4, opening with titles like **T. Rex's *Electric Warrior*** and **Yes's *The Yes Album***. These are

high-speed, real-time copies from the master tapes, offering sound quality often considered superior to the original vinyl pressings.

- **Market Impact:** The commitment from major label subsidiaries like Rhino is a significant validation of the format, driving the need for new tape players and specialized service/refurbishment for vintage machines.

After years of supply chain challenges, two manufacturers (ATR Magnetics and Recording the Masters) confirmed increased production capacity, leading to a slight stabilization in the price of new, professional-grade 1/4-inch tape stock in late December—a welcome holiday gift for the tape community.

New Machine Introduction: The Analog Audio Design TD-100 Series

The most exciting hardware news came from Analog Audio Design (AAD), who launched their modular **TD-100 series** of transports.

- **Key Feature: Modular Heads:** The TD-100 is designed as a modular transport platform. The user can buy the core deck and then swap in pre-aligned head blocks for **1/4-inch Stereo, 1/4-inch Quad, or even 1/2-inch Stereo** (a mastering format).
- **Technology:** It utilizes a four-motor, closed-loop tension control system inspired by broadcast decks like the Studer A820, ensuring rock-solid stability even at 30 ips.
- **Outlook:** While prohibitively expensive for most, the TD-100 represents a crucial step in the R2R revival: the **return of new, purpose-built, high-performance transports** rather than simply refurbished vintage units.



Reel-to-Reel: The RTC Ecosystem Matures

The reel-to-reel market remains bifurcated between manufacturers of brand-new, ultra-high-end transports, and the booming market for high-quality, pre-recorded master tapes.

1. New Transport News: Metaxas & Sins and UHA

- **Metaxas & Sins Papillon:** This art-object deck continued to draw critical praise, with one December review calling it "a new standard in source components." Metaxas focuses on ultra-minimalist tape paths and electronics, prioritizing a pure signal.
- **United Home Audio (UHA) Ultima Apollo:** This deck was recognized as one of the best-sounding tape players, representing the high end of the market based on meticulously re-engineered vintage TASCAM/Pioneer transports. The latest **Apollo** iteration was praised for its new EQ circuit and gain stage, offering a "darker" and more "bottom-up" tonal balance that enhances bass resolution and three-dimensional solidity.

The Revox Cassette Curveball

In an interesting adjacent development in October, **Revox** announced it was re-entering cassette production by partnering with the National Audio Company (NAC). While not R2R, this commitment to new analogue tape stock signals a broader, positive trend for all physical magnetic media.

III. Conclusion: A Focus on Precision

Q4 2025 was a quarter of mature analogue growth defined by the pursuit of **mechanical and electronic precision**. In vinyl, the focus was on extracting every last drop of performance from mid-market decks through better motor control and advanced cartridges. Turntable manufacturers are realizing that the fight against friction and vibration is best won with digital motor control and advanced materials.

In tape, the focus was on the experience: the availability of high-quality master copies and the introduction of new, mechanically complex transports for those seeking the ultimate source component. Simultaneously, the R2R market is broadening its reach by standardizing formats and providing new, state-of-the-art hardware.

The analogue format is thriving, not just on nostalgia, but on continuous, meaningful innovation.

Looking Ahead

As we enter 2026, expect continued momentum in analog playback:

- **New limited or special editions** from legacy brands will likely keep collectors engaged.
- **Further refinement of reel-to-reel technology** — both in new models and restoration markets — suggests this medium's renaissance isn't a flash in the pan.
- **Cross-format innovation**, including unique hybrids and design-forward turntables, will broaden analog's appeal.

For audiophiles seeking the **ultimate analog experience**, whether that's the ritual of threading tape or the tactile precision of vinyl playback, **the back half of 2025 offered plenty of reasons to stay tuned.**

Stay tuned for our first quarter 2026 roundup where Analog Soundware© will cover early CES reveals and what's brewing for spring releases in the analog audio world.