

STEREOPHILE PICKS THE INDUSTRY'S BEST PRODUCTS OF 2009

GEAR OF THE YEAR

BY STEPHEN MEJIAS

I was sitting in the main listening room of In Living Stereo, a small Manhattan hi-fi shop nestled between Greenwich Village and the East Village, when my conversation with store owner Steve Mishoe turned to the economy's current dismal state. In the face of slow sales, Mishoe had noted an encouraging trend: Because we have less money to spend, we want to make sure that what money we do spend goes for products that not only deliver the thrill of something new, but also promise enduring *quality*. If this is true, then we have reason to celebrate. By shifting our focus from the so-called "latest and greatest" to that which will provide *lasting* enjoyment, we set ourselves up for some real happiness and fun. Editor John Atkinson had this in mind 17 years ago, when he began our "Products of the Year" ritual. He felt it important to distinguish the truly good products from all the flashy pretenders that too often win the affections of our capricious hearts.

Annually since 1992, then, *Stereophile* has named a few choice components as its "Products of the Year." We believe these are special products capable of providing musical pleasure far beyond our

formal review period. To keep the awards procedure straightforward, we have just five primary categories: Loudspeakers (including subwoofers), Amplification Components (preamplifiers, power amplifiers, etc.), Digital Source Components (transports, processors, music servers, disc players), Analog Source Components (phono cartridges, turntables, tone-arms, FM tuners, etc.), and Accessories (all those little extras that keep us busy and satisfied). In a more recent tradition, each of our writers and editors also gets to declare his favorite product. Finally, the two most important categories are self-explanatory: Our overall "Product of the Year" is the best of the best; and my favorite category, Budget Product of the Year, leaves us with the most cash to spend on new records.

The voting went like this: Each of *Stereophile's* 16 hardware reviewers and editors was asked to nominate up to six components for each category. To be a contender, a product had to have been reviewed in one of the 12 issues of *Stereophile* from November 2008 through October 2009, in a full Equipment Report, a Follow-Up review, or in one of the regular columns by Art

Dudley, Michael Fremer, John Marks, Kalman Rubinson, and Sam Tellig. That way, only those components could be nominated for which a writer had put his opinion in print for public scrutiny. We then compiled a ballot form listing all components nominated by three or more writers and/or editors. This process ensured that most nominees in most categories will have been auditioned by the most reviewers. Each editor or reviewer gave three votes for his first choice in each category, two votes for his second choice, and one vote for his third choice (if any). An unambiguous picture emerged as the votes came in, and the winners became clear. John Atkinson tallied the votes—address your love letters and hate mail to him at stleters@sorc.com. (See JA's comments on how the voting process works at www.stereophile.com/aswesecit/1207awsi.)

The prices listed were current as of the end of September 2009. To order back issues mentioned in this article, call (888) 237-0955, or visit www.stereophile.com (MasterCard and Visa only). "WWW" indicates that the review is available in our free online Archives.

And the winners are . . .

2009 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

AMPLIFICATION COMPONENT



Ayre KX-R preamplifier

(\$18,500; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.31 No.11, November 2008 WWW)

Wow. The jewel-like Ayre Acoustics KX-R preamplifier won significantly more first-place votes *and* more overall votes than any other product in our competition. In fact, with its total of 26 nods, the KX-R *doubled* the tally of our first runner-up, the magnificent Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblock. Put another way, only five of our 16 reviewers chose *not* to vote for the KX-R, and the majority of those who did ranked it as their top choice. While mention must also be made of the Peachtree Audio Nova D/A integrated amplifier, which won three first-place votes, the Ayre KX-R is certainly respected, admired, and often *loved*, by all who hear it.

Designed to match Ayre's MX-R monoblock—which in 2007 topped this very category in similarly indisputable fashion—the KX-R is a zero-feedback, fully balanced design milled from a 75-lb billet of aluminum and forming one cool hunk of audio *presence*. It uses Ayre's Variable Gain Transconductance topology to maintain a constant signal/noise ratio independent of volume setting, for improved resolution of low-level detail. Wes Phillips was convinced. He praised the KX-R for its astonishing transparency, and enjoyed how deep—how *very* deep—it took him into the soundstage. “If it's not the eighth wonder of the modern world, I say demand a recount.”

No recount needed in this poll, Wes. The Ayre is the clear winner.

2009 RUNNERS-UP

(in alphabetical order)

Benchmark DAC1 USB Pre D/A preamplifier (\$1595; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.3, March 2009 WWW)

Boulder 865 integrated amplifier (\$12,000; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.32 Nos.4 & 8, April & August 2009 WWW)

Conrad-Johnson Classic SE preamplifier (\$1750; reviewed by Sam Tellig, Vol.32 Nos.2 & 7, February & July 2009)

Nagra BPS phono preamplifier (\$2399; reviewed by Michael Fremer & Fred Kaplan, Vol.32 Nos.6, 8, & 10, June, August, & October 2009 WWW)

Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblock power amplifier (\$8000/pair; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.32 No.9, September 2009 WWW)

Pass Labs XA30.5 power amplifier (\$5500; reviewed by Brian Damkroger & Erick Lichte, Vol.32 Nos.5 & 8, May & August 2009 WWW)

Peachtree Nova D/A integrated amplifier (\$1199; reviewed by John Marks, Vol.32 No.8, August 2009 WWW)

Simaudio Moon I-1 integrated amplifier (\$1700; reviewed by Robert J. Reina, Vol.31 No.12, December 2008 WWW)

Simaudio Moon Evolution P-8 preamplifier (\$15,000; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.9, September 2009 WWW)

VTL MB450 Signature monoblock power amplifier (\$15,000/pair; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.32 No.3, March 2009 WWW)

ACCESSORY PRODUCT

Sennheiser HD800 headphones

(\$1400; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.32 No.7, July 2009 WWW)

The race for Accessory of the Year is one of the most interesting because it involves such a diverse cast of contenders. This year, the XTZ Room Analyzer (a favorite of multichannel man Kal Rubinson) and the Keith Monks Omni record-cleaning machine (a favorite of LP-loving Art Dudley) locked room modes with brush blocks in a tie for second place. But it was Sennheiser's HD800 headphones that stood apart from the pack.

The HD800 is an all-out attack on the state of the headphone art. Its 56mm ring-radiator transducer is the biggest dynamic driver currently used in any headphone, and its large earpieces are made

from a combination of absorbing composites and functional metal accents that looked and felt great on Wes Phillips's happy head. What Wes found most impressive was the HD800s' “awe-inspiringly huge” soundstage, a quality that even his beloved AKG K701 'phones, winner of our 2006 Accessory of the Year award, couldn't match.

Though the AKG K701 remains a top contender, Wes crowned a new champion: “I was stunned by the Sennheisers' ability to project scale, to reveal dynamic



2009 RUNNERS-UP

(in alphabetical order)

Channel D Pure-Vinyl LP-ripping program (\$229; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.32 No.3, March 2009)

Keith Monks Audio Works Omni record-cleaning machine (\$6495; reviewed by Art Dudley, Vol.32 No.5, May 2009 WWW)

PS Audio Power Plant Premier AC regenerator (\$2195; reviewed by Robert Deutsch, Vol.32 No.2, February 2009 WWW)

Shure SE310 earphones (\$300; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.9, September 2009 WWW)

XTZ Room Analyzer program (\$320; reviewed by Kalman Rubinson, Vol.31 No.11 & Vol.32 No.11, November 2008 & November 2009 WWW)

nuance, to present timbre with realism,” he said. “It may very well be the best headphone I've ever heard—for me.”

2009 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

BUDGET COMPONENT



Peachtree Nova D/A integrated amplifier

(\$1199; reviewed by John Marks, Vol.32 No.8, August 2009 WWW)

In my opinion, the most exciting products of our competition are found right here. Components in our Budget Product category offer outstanding performance at relatively low cost, and often benefit from technologies trickled down from more expensive designs, marketed to reach younger music lovers. While there's no doubt that products such as the Rega P3 turntable, PSB Alpha B1 loudspeaker, and Apple iPod—all previous bargain-priced champions—can provide newcomers a gateway to high-end audio, they can just as easily rekindle the enthusiasm of longtime audiophiles. Either way you look at it, these products are about the twin engines that keep high-end audio vital and fun: performance and passion.

It's no surprise, then, that votes were scattered across the board. A remarkable 10 of the 11 contenders, from Sony's XDR-F1HD AM/FM tuner (\$99.99) to Simaudio's Moon i-1 integrated amplifier (\$1700), received at least one first-place consideration. This

is as much a testament to the diversity of our writers and their priorities as it is to the strength of the products they nominated. But while the competition was flooded by offerings from well-established brands, it was newcomer Peachtree Audio's Nova D/A integrated amplifier that won our hearts with its special combination of style, performance, and versatility.

Talk about exciting. During this year's Spring Fever open house at Stereo Exchange, a leading high-end retailer in Manhattan, the scrumptious little Peachtree Nova was practically leaping into guests' laps. I was there. I saw. People *wanted* this thing. *Badly. Seriously.* Can you blame them? The nifty Nova combines an 80Wpc class-A/B power amplifier, a high-quality internal USB D/A converter, and a cool tubed line stage. It has eight inputs: five digital (one USB, two coaxial S/PDIF, two optical TosLink) and three line-level analog. If you wanted to, you could even stuff a Sonos Zone Player in its butt and listen to music all over

2009 RUNNERS-UP

(in alphabetical order)

Bel Canto USB Link 24/96

Benchmark DAC1 USB

Pre D/A processor

Cambridge Audio DacMagic

D/A processor

Musical Fidelity V-DAC D/A

processor (\$299; reviewed by Sam Tellig

and John Atkinson, Vol.32 Nos.5 & 12, May & December 2009)

Oppo BDP-83 universal player

PSB Imagine B loudspeaker

(\$1000/pair; reviewed by John Marks & John Atkinson, Vol.32 Nos.2, 4, 6, 8, & 10, February, April, June, August, and October 2009 WWW)

Shure SE310 earphones

Simaudio Moon i-1 integrated

amplifier

Sony XDR-F1HD FM/AM tuner

Wadia Digital 170iTransport

the house. With its real-wood veneer wrap, rounded corners, and Eamesesque high profile, the Nova looks awesome. *Plus*, it sounds great: punchy dynamics, pointed articulation, impactful bass, and well-defined treble. Even John Marks liked it!