

2003 product of the year awards

In our second annual Product of the Year Awards, *The Absolute Sound's* writers and editors select what we believe to be the most intriguing audio products from among those reviewed (or pending review) from the past year. The winners were chosen on the basis of a combination of pure sonic performance, technical innovation, value, and significance in the marketplace (such as redefining the performance available at a particular price point). As such, our Product of the Year Awards go to not just the most expensive components, which are generally reserved for our year-end Golden Ear Awards, but to those with the best combination of these virtues.

We've also awarded an Overall Product of the Year honor to the one component that, out of the dozens we review each year, we consider to be the single most impressive. And so, here are *The Absolute Sound's* 2003 Product of the Year Awards.



EMM LABS DAC6E MULTICHANNEL DIGITAL DECODER AND MEITNER-MODIFIED PHILIPS 1000 TRANSPORT (DAC6E, \$9995; MODIFICATION TO PHILIPS 1000 TRANSPORT, \$1400—THE BUYER MUST SUPPLY THE TRANSPORT)

Ed Meitner's DAC6e, along with its highly-modified Philips 1000 companion transport, is an astonishingly detailed device—perhaps *the* single most detailed source component we've heard. At the same time, it reproduces starting transients with astonishing realism, latching on to the decay of notes like no other digital device. Whether this is due to the speed and precision of its processing circuitry, or the low distortion of its analog output stage, or the overall absence of any jitter, fuzz, or electronic grain, or indeed all three, we're not sure—but on all the recordings sampled the DAC6e retrieved more information *of this kind* than even state-of-the-art record players do. Even so, the DAC6e is about more than dynamics and note duration. Its tone colors are quite rich and beautiful, if not as delicate or variegated as those of analog, and it delivers outstanding staging and imaging. Without this DAC, one simply won't know what DSD-encoded SACDs are capable of, so astonishingly analog-like is its sound. (Reviewed by Jonathan Valin in Issue 145 and by HP in HP's Workshop Issue's 141 and 143)



NOTTINGHAM HORIZON TURNTABLE (\$1000)

If pure performance were the only criterion for picking Product of the Year, our nod would have gone to something like the Tri-Planar VII arm, SME's Model 20, or the VPI TNT-HRX turntable all of which received Golden Ear Awards last issue. Instead, we're naming Nottingham's Horiz TAS Analog Source Product of the Year. There are things that other tables in this price range (or that) do well, but most aren't as self-assured as the Nottingham. It shares many of the attributes big brother (reviewed in Issue 138), but does with a lighter view of the world. The bottom line is this: Immediately, and over the long



the Horiz doesn't draw attention to itself. It does draw you into the music by revealing the flow, texture, and harmonic nuances of musical lines, and does well with respect to capturing the intent of the performer. And that, at \$1000 (including an easy-to-like tonearm), says a lot. (Reviewed by Stephan Harrell in Issue 144)

AESTHETIX RHEA (\$4000)

The Rhea phono stage is pricey as phono stages go, but this may be the last phono preamp you'll ever buy. Based on the same innovative tube topology as the \$15k Callisto line stage and \$12k Io phono stage, the Rhea is the Swiss Army Knife of phono stages.



Its extremely high gain will accommodate even low-output moving coils without sounding noisy, thanks to what is easily the lowest noise floor of any tubed phono stage we've heard. And its variable cartridge loading—accessible via the front panel or from the remote while in the listening chair—lets you dial in the best settings for your cartridge with no guesswork. Did I mention the front panel display of gain and loading?

For those of you with more than one turntable or multiple tonearms on the same table, the Rhea's three remote-selectable inputs—each with its own cartridge loading and gain—make it a "must own." The Rhea's dynamics are staggeringly good, the noise floor is vanishingly low, and the soundstage is as big and transparent as it comes. (Review pending)



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AESTHETIX CALYPSO (\$4500)

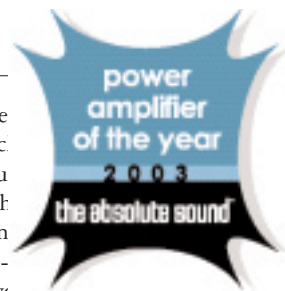
Because our selection criteria for Product of the Year are technical innovation, value, or both, a \$4500 estage preamp may seem an odd choice. But the new Aesthetix Calypso meets both criteria—in spades. Let's st talk about value. Although \$4500 is still a considerable sum for a linestage, the Calypso's sound quality is ompetitive with, and in many ways exceeds, the performance of many five-figure linestages. Indeed the Calypso's sound is closer to that of its \$15k big brother the Aesthetix Callisto Signature than to anything near its price. Simply put, the Calypso establishes a new benchmark in performance for mid-priced estages.

And now for technical innovation. Designer Jim White has developed a clever and unusual new tube topology for the Calypso's musical heart that delivers stunningly wide dynamics, a low noise floor, freedom from glare, and a soundstage transparency to die for. What's more, the Calypso is built like a Swiss watch, is a joy to use ergonomically, and has some useful features not found on other linestages. (Review pending)

AUDIO RESEARCH VS55 (\$2499)

Our Power Amplifier of the Year choice was an easy one—ARC's VS55 offers so much performance a moderately-priced package that it virtually defines the concept of value. For \$2499 the VS55 offers a c sic tubed ARC sound, with a huge, open, and airy soundstage, along with the timbral liquidity that tu are uniquely good at portraying. Where the VS55 doesn't sound like tubes, however, is in the bass; th amp has the depth, control, and bottom-end dynamics we associate with solid-state. The result is an amplifier that sounds as good on rock 'n' roll as on classical. Connect the VS55 to a moderately sensitive, easy-to-drive loudspeaker (the Wilson Sophia is a magical match) and you'll wonder why any would spend more on a power amplifier.

The icing on the cake, however, is that this isn't an imported budget amp from a start-up company; you're buying into one of the truly great and venerable marques in high-end audio. In returning to its roots with the no-frills VS55, ARC has created a new classic that brings together the best sonic attributes of tubes and solid-state—and made it affordable. (Reviewed by Robert Harley in Issue 142)



MUSICAL FIDELITY TRI-VISTA 300 (\$6000)



Most audiophiles will concede that integrated amplifiers are capable of sounding "pretty good," yet when essed many will confess the underlying belief that separate amplification components sound better still. Musical Fidelity's Tri-Vista 300 integrated amplifier, however, turns such beliefs upside down, for not only does handily outperform separate components in and near its price range, it offers distinctive sonic virtues that are ompelling in absolute terms. Specifically, the Tri-Vista gives you the liveliness, finesse, and harmonic purity of a great vacuum tube preamplifier coupled with the bandwidth, easygoing neutrality, and huge dynamic reserves of a large, world-class transistor power amp—all in one aesthetically pleasing and robustly conected package. Over time you come to appreciate this amplifier much as you would a friend of many years, trusting its unflinching honesty, and savoring its breathtaking openness, transparency, and faithfulness to musical sources. We chose the Tri-Vista as our integrated amplifier of the year because of its uncanny combination of delicacy, power, and control. (Reviewed by Chris Martens in Issue 142)

PSB PLATINUM M2 (\$1995)



The PSB Platinum M2 successfully achieves an abundance of audiophile ideals and desires. It has the imaging and coherence of premium two-way compact yet combines the slam, extension, and namics that might mistake it for a three-way floorstander. Credit PSB's each-driven design team led by Paul Barton who have spent decades at anada's famed NRC finding the right balance. Some may consider the alu-minium cladding a little industrial for their French Baronial decor, but these structural details are not gratuitous—the M2 could probably take a mag-num round without a hiccup. Tonally the speaker is sure-of-foot not only rough the crucial middle range but well into the mid-bass region and with hardly a protest from the slotted vent at its base. Highs are extended and neck-snappingly quick. And if you dream of grand orchestral power (the bane of every a small speaker) show no mercy—the M2 gives as good as it gets, from Mahler to Motorhead. Though it can be pushed hard, the M2 only suggests its discomfort at these levels with a hint of port overhang and a dryness from its aluminum tweeter. But these are small potatoes given this overall feast for the ear and the relief for your checkbook. (Reviewed by Neil Gader in Issue 145)





SONUS FABER CREMONA (\$7495/PAIR)

While there are any number of truly excellent speakers once you pass the \$2500 mark, any number of which could easily have been awarded this honor, our choice for 2003's Loudspeaker over \$2500 category goes to Sonus Faber's Cremona. This stunningly beautiful Italian design houses one of the most musically satisfying speakers available. A four-driver, 3-way array, the

Cremona is notably coherent across its considerable frequency range, from roughly 32Hz to 40kHz. But it's not about how much this speaker can do, but how *well*. The midrange is warm, detailed, and expressive, conveying the subtlest shifts of musical line and phrase. This is accomplished at both soft and loud listening levels, and with all styles of music. The Cremona tweeter is a glorious thing—a clever fabric-dome driver that never seems to shriek, crack, or otherwise compress—and the bass, though not subterranean, seems to walk that difficult line between sounding controlled but not overly so; it's punchy yet detailed, warm but not fat. In his original review, TAS editor Wayne Garcia compared the Cremona to a fine wine—"smooth yet powerful, complex yet approachable, full of depths not easily described, and the ability to surprise even with familiarity, the Cremona is a speaker that will satisfy over the long term. Unless, that is, you run out of music to play over it." (Reviewed by Wayne Garcia in Issue 143)

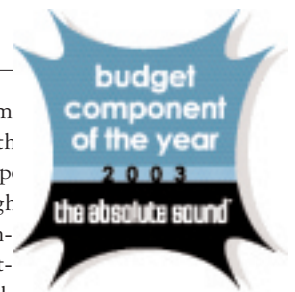


EPOS ELS3 LOUDSPEAKERS (\$300/PAIR)



Wise marketers will tell you that the key to customer satisfaction lies in making sure customers get *more* than they expect, and by this standard we predict that buyers of Epos ELS3 loudspeakers will not only be satisfied but downright *ecstatic* over the way their speakers perform. All mini-monitors strive to create the impression of big sounds emanating from small enclosures, but the ELS3s do a better job than most in three critical areas. First, they offer exceptional midrange and treble clarity and refinement (fully competitive with what you would hear from high-quality speakers in the \$1000/pair price range). Second, the ELS3s create lovely three-dimensional soundstages that invite you to focus on the music—not the speakers. Finally, the ELS3s manage the inevitable small-speaker bass tradeoffs in an artful way, giving a solid enough measure of upper mid-bass that you don't particularly miss the lower frequencies that simply aren't there. Put these qualities together, and you've got a mini-

monitor you can enjoy for hours on end, and that sounds as if it costs three to four times more than it actually does. In our eyes this makes the Epos ELS3 a perfect place to get started in high-end audio, and our budget component of the year. (Reviewed by Chris Martens in Issue 145)



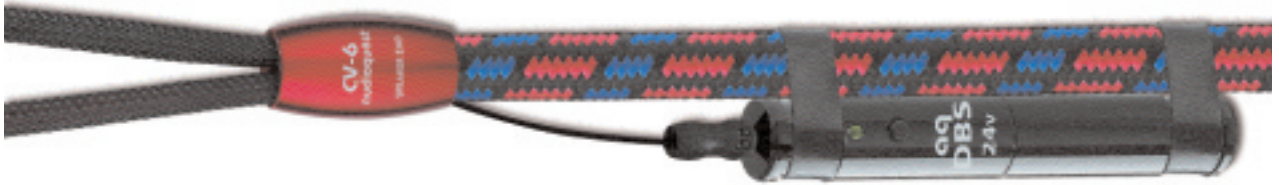
SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH ALPHA STERLING (\$199 FOR 1-METER PAIR)

This interconnect has challenged every other cable that has taken up residence in NG's system—even some of the near-unobtainium persuasion. Its virtues include a general soundstage openness accompanied by excellent image layering and a pristine non-edgy treble. While it doesn't quite match the soaring and effortless extension of the ultra-priced spread, its overall midrange neutrality and transparency will put a lot of \$1000+ wires to shame. It's now available with Synergistic's Active Shielding technology at a modest surcharge—an option well worth checking out. Either way, active or passive, the Alpha Sterling proves that on the rare occasion you sometimes get a lot more than you pay for. (Reviewed by Neil Gader with Paul Seydor in Issue 138)



AUDIOQUEST DBS (DBS IS AVAILABLE ON A WIDE RANGE OF PRODUCTS, BEGINNING WITH THE CV-6 AT \$400 PER 8-FOOT PAIR)

The cable market is filled with new “wonder” technologies that are little more than marketing gimmicks. AudioQuest’s Dielectric-Bias System (DBS) is not one of them. Instead, this simple yet effective technique elevates the performance of AudioQuest’s already superb designs to a new level of performance. The short version is that a battery attached to the cable (but completely separate and isolated from the signal path) keeps the dielectric charged, improving sound quality and eliminating the need for cable “break-in.” The sonic result is a deepness to the silence, high resolution of fine detail without etch, and greater transparency.



PRECISION AUDIO CABLE ELEVATORS (\$160 FOR A SET OF 8)

More sophisticated versions of the cable-suspension cradles from yesteryear, the Precision Audio Cable Elevators use a U-shaped porcelain cradle coated with a non-conductive glaze that’s fitted on t bottom with a non-slip Neoprene foot. The difference isn’t subtle, and once you’ve heard it it’s hard take them out of your system. These things *do* lower noise, increase dynamics, remove haze, and open t the top octaves in a way that actually seem to improve harmonic bloom. You will trade-off a little substance for all this additional transparency and grain-reduction—a little body, a little instrumental weight and volume. Overall, and in spite of any reservations, they work a significant improvement, a very importantly, they do not do kill dynamics. All told, music sounds more like music with the Cable Elevators in your system. (Reviewed by JV in Issue 143)



ROTEL RCD-1072 CD PLAYER (\$699)

Rotel’s RCD-1072 isn’t flashy, feature-laden, or format flexible. It’s an unassuming device at simply plays CDs. But for \$700, it plays them in ways that are both sonically astonishing and hnically significant. All of the RCD-1072’s breakthroughs stem from Rotel’s lengthy, painstaking effort to stamp out jitter and other digital distortions. The company employed a new generation test gear, and its best ears, to dramatically reduce already low noise levels. The sonic ramifications e multifold. As one might expect, low noise reduces listener fatigue. But the RCD-1072 confers this benefit without the usual sacrifice of transient detail or rolled highs. Indeed, its purity actually heightens these attributes. The Rotel reveals musical lines and transient details with unried clarity, as it does dynamic inflections. Furthermore, tonal structures are portrayed with such precision that one could distinguish a piano note’s keyboard position solely by its timbre rather than by its pitch. There are CD players—all costing many multiples of the RCD-1072’s price—that will deliver somewhat livelier dynamics, an airier presentation, and that last smidgen of resolution. Yet those machines won’t surpass the Rotel’s top and bottom extension, spacious soundstage, or ability to place images within space. And they’re unlikely to provide the wondrously serene environment from which music so strikingly emerges when it’s played through the RCD-1072. Once again, Rotel has set a lofty benchmark for value-priced performance. In doing so, it’s earned the RCD-1072 CD player our award as overall Product of the Year. (Reviewed by Alan Taffel in this issue)

