

SPECIAL
FEATURE

80

BEST
PRODUCTS
OF 2018

stereophile

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MY SONIC LAB
ULTRA EMINENT EX
CARTRIDGE
»P.44



TENOR
SAX PLAYER
WAYNE
SHORTER
AT 85

AWESOME ANALOG
FROM DR. FEICKERT,
EMT, KOETSU,
MY SONIC LAB,
ORTOFON, VPI

HIGH-VALUE
EUROPEAN SPEAKERS
FROM ELAC, HARBETH,
WHARFEDALE

DIGITAL FROM
AQUA, ATC

VERSATILE AUDIO ENGINEERING

AVMM'S OVATION PA 8.2 PREAMP

» DECEMBER
2018

\$8.99
US

\$10.99
Canada





S

ince fake news is on everyone's minds these days—I would say it's been in the news a lot, but that kind of reasoning is too circular even for me—it's worth keeping in mind that there's also such a thing as fake praise. You see it every day, whether it's a fake Google review—an alarming number of businesses seem unaware that real people don't actually say things like “the team at New Hartford Chevrolet really listened to all of my needs”—or fake trophies handed out to all 20 co-captains of your child's soccer team.

Then there are fake awards.

Let's say you're a hi-fi enthusiast with strong opinions on what does and does not constitute goodness in an audio product, so you've started your own website on the subject.

Good for you! Now let's say you have a friend who knows how to create really impressive diplomas and certificates, and your mom still has that red carpet you used to wipe your feet on when you came up from the basement. What's to stop you from handing out your very own awards?

Apparently, nothing: an Internet search for *audio product awards* turns up more pages than you can read in a day, most from web-based publications and trade organizations you've probably never heard of.

But here's the thing: For an award to mean anything, the person or people dispensing it must be well known and well regarded. It also helps if they've been around for a long time, and if they've created a significant body of work, preferably in print: No offense, but Google reviews pretty much came in with Google.

On the other hand, *Stereophile's*

Product of the Year awards, now in their 27th year, matter because *Stereophile* matters: not only is it the highest-circulation domestic-audio magazine on the planet—our nearest competitor has only a third as many readers—but we've been around since 1962. That's as long as the Rolling Stones, for God's sake!

And considering that scores of whiners on the audio gab-sites go apoplectic whenever we write anything more controversial than “Christmas occurs in December,” one could be forgiven for thinking that *Stereophile* is also the most talked-about magazine in audio. It all boils down to one thing: In the

world of perfectionist audio, ours is the publication of record, and our Product of the Year awards follow suit.

HOW WE DID IT

This year's awards process began in mid-September, when editor John Atkinson asked my colleagues and me for nominations in seven categories: Loudspeaker of the Year, Amplification Product of the Year, Analog Component of the Year, Digital Component of the Year, Headphone Product of the Year, Accessory of the Year, and Budget Product of the Year. The candidates were limited to products evaluated in our November 2017 through October 2018 issues, whether in a full Equipment Report or Follow-Up, or a column by me or my colleagues Michael Fremer, Herb Reichert, and Kalman Rubinson. We did not consider products that took top honors in any previous year's PotY celebration.

The next step was when JA compiled and distributed a list of every component that had been nominated by at least three *Stereophile* contributors, the idea being to ensure that every one of those finalist products had been heard by as many of our reviewers as possible. Then each *Stereophile* contributor's job was to cast three votes in each of the categories: to give three points to his first choice, two points to his second choice, and one point to his third. In this way, the results reveal a certain density of information: Surely there are distinctions between a product that receives three first-place votes and the one that receives nine third-place votes.

After the votes were in, JA asked us to vote one more time—for the Overall Product of the Year.

The final step: John Atkinson asked me to compose this essay, and allowed me to tart it up with a few puerile jokes (though he asked me to change “obese, intellectually dishonest, chronic masturbators” to “whiners,” which I willingly did). Indeed, it is JA who tallies the votes, so it is JA to whom noncomplacent firebrands should send notes of praise and blame. (See JA's comments on the voting process at www.stereophile.com/asweseit/1207awsi/index/html.)

Final notes: The prices listed herein were current as of August 2018. To order back issues mentioned in this article, call (888) 237-0955 or visit shop.stereophile.com (MasterCard and Visa only). “WWW” at the beginning of a blurb means that that product's full review is available free of charge in our online archives.

And the winners are . . .

Analog Component

MOFI ELECTRONICS ULTRADECK TURNTABLE

(\$1799, INCLUDING TONEARM; REVIEWED BY HERB REICHERT, FEBRUARY 2018, VOL.41 NO.2 WWW)

FINALISTS

(in alphabetical order)

- ◆ AUDIO-TECHNICA ART-1000 PHONO CARTRIDGE
(\$5000; REVIEWED BY MICHAEL FREMER & ART DUDLEY, OCTOBER 2016 & MAY 2018, VOL.39 NO.10 & VOL.41 NO.5 WWW)
- ◆ CH PRECISION P1/X1 PHONO PREAMPLIFIER
(\$31,000 FOR P1, \$17,000 FOR X1; REVIEWED BY MICHAEL FREMER, APRIL & JUNE 2017, AUGUST 2018, VOL.40 NOS. 4 & 6, VOL.41 NO.8)
- ◆ HANA SL PHONO CARTRIDGE
(\$750; REVIEWED BY HERB REICHERT, OCTOBER 2018, VOL.41 NO.10 WWW)
- ◆ KOETSU ROSEWOOD STANDARD PHONO CARTRIDGE
(\$3495; REVIEWED BY HERB REICHERT, APRIL 2018, VOL.41 NO.4 WWW)
- ◆ MIYAJIMA LABORATORY SABOTEN L PHONO CARTRIDGE
(\$4875/PAIR; REVIEWED BY ART DUDLEY, JUNE 2018, VOL.41 NO.6 WWW)
- ◆ ORTOFON MC CENTURY PHONO CARTRIDGE

(\$12,000; REVIEWED BY MICHAEL FREMER, SEPTEMBER 2018, VOL.41 NO.9)

◆ REGA RESEARCH RP10 TURNTABLE (\$5495, INCLUDING TONEARM; REVIEWED BY MICHAEL FREMER, FEBRUARY 2018, VOL.41 NO.2)

◆ ZU AUDIO DL-103 PHONO CARTRIDGE (\$559–\$999, DEPENDING ON LEVEL; REVIEWED BY ART DUDLEY, APRIL 2018, VOL.41 NO.4 WWW)

Who among us doesn't smile when a relatively affordable product takes top honors in a field other than Budget Component of the Year?

Designed with input from Spiral Groove's Allen Perkins, the MoFi UltraDeck packs a lot of performance for \$1799—or \$2198 when purchased with MoFi's MasterTracker MM cartridge—and impressed Herb Reichert with its

"infectious, easy-flowing, liquid vitality." Herb wasn't the only one impressed: Votes from seven different *Stereophile* reviewers propelled this US-made product to the top.

NOTES ON THE VOTES

Another close race: Only two points separated the second-place Hana SL phono cartridge—another affordable product!—from the top dog, and there was a difference of only one point between the Hana SL and third-place finalist, Rega's Research RP10 turntable-tonearm combo. That said, one could infer a bit more passion behind the votes for the Hana, which won a full three first-place votes; the Rega got just one of those, but took up the slack with two second-place and three third-place votes.



Joint Digital Components

BENCHMARK DAC3 HGC D/A PROCESSOR/ HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

(\$2195; REVIEWED BY JIM AUSTIN & HERB REICHERT, NOVEMBER 2017, SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER 2018, VOL.40 NO.11, VOL.41 NOS. 9 & 10 WWW)

DCS VIVALDI D/A PROCESSOR

(\$35,999; REVIEWED BY MICHAEL FREMER, JOHN ATKINSON & JASON VICTOR SERINUS, JANUARY 2014 & DECEMBER 2017, VOL.37 NO.1 & VOL.40 NO.12 WWW)

FINALISTS

(in alphabetical order)

- ◆ AQUA ACOUSTIC QUALITY FORMULA XHD D/A PROCESSOR
(\$17,000; REVIEWED BY JASON VICTOR SERINUS, JUNE 2018, VOL.41 NO.6 WWW)
- ◆ ASTELL&KERN A&ULTIMATE SP1000 DIGITAL AUDIO PLAYER
(\$3499; REVIEWED BY MICHAEL FREMER, NOVEMBER 2017, VOL.40 NO.11 WWW)

◆ BAETIS PRODIGY X MUSIC SERVER (\$4995 WITHOUT OPTIONS; REVIEWED BY KAL RUBINSON, NOVEMBER 2017, VOL.40 NO.11 WWW)

◆ BRYSTON BDP-3 MUSIC PLAYER (\$3495; REVIEWED BY LARRY GREENHILL, JANUARY 2018, VOL.41 NO.1 WWW)

◆ DCS NETWORK BRIDGE (\$4250; REVIEWED BY JASON VICTOR SERINUS, DECEMBER 2017, VOL.40 NO.12 WWW)

◆ DCS ROSSINI D/A PROCESSOR (\$23,999; REVIEWED BY JASON VICTOR SERINUS, JANUARY 2017 & MAY 2018, VOL.40 NO.1 & VOL.41 NO.5 WWW)

◆ LG V30 MQA-COMPATIBLE SMARTPHONE (\$799; REVIEWED BY JASON VICTOR SERINUS, MAY & JULY 2018, VOL.41 NOS. 5 & 7 WWW)

◆ MBL NOBLE LINE N31 CD PLAYER–DAC (\$15,400; REVIEWED BY JOHN ATKINSON, FEBRUARY 2018, VOL.41 NO.2 WWW)

◆ MERGING TECHNOLOGIES MERGING+PLAYER MULTICHANNEL-8 (\$13,500; REVIEWED BY KAL RUBINSON, MARCH 2018, VOL.41 NO.3 WWW)

◆ OPPO UDP-205 BLU-RAY PLAYER (\$1299; REVIEWED BY KAL RUBINSON, NOVEMBER 2017, VOL.40 NO.11 WWW)

◆ REGA RESEARCH APOLLO CD PLAYER (\$1095; REVIEWED BY ART DUDLEY, JUNE 2018, VOL.41 NO.6 WWW)

◆ ROON LABS NUCLEUS+ MUSIC SERVER (\$2498; REVIEWED BY JOHN ATKINSON, AUGUST 2018, VOL.41 NO.8 WWW)

◆ SCHIIT AUDIO YGGDRASIL D/A PROCESSOR (\$2299; REVIEWED BY HERB REICHERT, FEBRUARY 2017 & SEPTEMBER 2018, VOL.40 NO.2 & VOL.41 NO.9 WWW)

This contest produced another tie, and yet another contrast between two wildly different philosophies—economical, if not technical. As Jim Austin pointed out in his initial review, the DAC3 HGC D/A processor from Benchmark Media Systems—a company known for making pro-audio as well as domestic-audio gear—sells for less than the price of