



GOLDEN EAR

Awards 2011

The Absolute Sound's Golden Ear Awards is the annual feature in which our staff and freelance writers choose those components that stand out from the competition. Some of these components are long-time references that have withstood the test of time. Others are newfound favorites that are destined to become classics. In either case, the products selected for a Golden Ear Award are special, indeed.

Unlike our Editors' Choice Awards—a compendium of every product we recommend, chosen by consensus of the senior editorial staff—Golden Ear Awards allow each writer to express his individual views on which components he thinks are truly great—and why. The diversity of products selected here reflects not just the industry at large, but also each writer's quest for the absolute sound. —Robert Harley

Neil Gader

REL T5 Subwoofer \$599

Musical, superbly natural, and robust and durable, as all REL subs are, this is a pocket-sized classic. (Review pending)

A special round of applause is owed my current choice for the ideal mini-sub for music lovers. Fast, tight, yet tonally replete, with highly defined pitches, the T5 is also remarkable extended—stunningly so for a single 8" driver in a sealed box. And it's not a stripped-down sub, either. The sumptuous enclosure houses inputs for high-level Neutrik Speakons (cables are included), plus low-level RCA and LFE inputs.

Wayne Garcia



Magnepan 1.7 Loudspeaker \$1995

I'm tempted not to, really I am, because I know that so many of my colleagues will be picking either this or the Maggie 3.7 for this year's edition of TAS's Golden Ear Awards. Not only is it nice to be...a bit different, but damn, what else can be said about these praiseworthy designs that hasn't been already?

But given how amazing-sounding the 1.7 is—and let's not forget its exceptional value—and as a longtime fan of Magneplanars (the MG II was my first "serious" speaker purchase when I was but a youth of 18), it would

be downright ridiculous for me not to include what is certainly one of the standout products of this or any era.

Let others wax over their notable transparency, swoon over their lifelike soundstage, marvel at the coherence of their quasi-ribbon drivers; for me, it's simple—these babies deliver the musical goods like nothing else I know of even close to this price point. Drawbacks are size and an appetite for power. But hey, nothing's perfect.

Jacob Heilbrunn

Verity Audio Lohengrin II Loudspeaker \$89,999

At the same time, the Lohengrin's relatively high sensitivity—96dB at 8 ohms—means that when paired with powerful amplifiers, it delivers excellent dynamic reproduction and an enormous soundstage. Its tonal qualities are never less than realistic. When played with a pair of Nagra 845 tube amplifiers, it had a most seductive quality. The Lohengrin is best used in a fairly large room to extract everything that it can offer. (Reviewed in Issue 205)

The Verity Lohengrin II loudspeaker hails from Quebec, Canada. The creation of Verity's Bruno Bouchard and Julian Pachtel, it is meant for the connoisseur.

This exquisite loudspeaker possesses a superb degree of refinement, particularly in the treble. The custom ribbon tweeter is intoxicatingly airy and powerful.

YG Acoustics Carmel Loudspeaker \$18,000

I suppose that audiophiles, like anglers, are haunted by memories of "the ones that got away." In my case, the components I most regret letting slip through my grasp were the YG Acoustics Carmel loudspeakers I reviewed several months ago.

Despite the fact that the Carmels are the least expensive speakers YG makes, they are actually among the most complete, most sophisticated, and most well-rounded transducers I've ever had the privilege of evaluating in my home.

On the surface of things, you might not expect a relatively small and deceptively simple-looking two-way, tower-type speaker to serve up world-class imaging and soundstaging, terrific resolution, full-throated dynamics, and (almost) full-range bass, but in fact the Carmels do precisely that. I've heard many more costly speakers that on paper appear to push the edges of the sonic performance envelope harder than the Carmels do, yet that in practice fail to yield the well-balanced and flawlessly well-integrated package of virtues the Carmels so effortlessly deliver.

In pragmatic terms the Carmels pull off one



Chris Martens



of the most difficult magic acts in all of high-end audio, on the one hand proving themselves to be almost shockingly transparent to and revealing of the sonic character of associated components and source material, yet on the other hand miraculously stopping just short of becoming “ruthlessly” revealing. Thus, the Carmels provide living proof that less can truly be more—especially for those of us who use small to mid-size listening rooms. For my part, I’ve started up a Carmel savings account in the hope that, some day, a pair of these beauties will be mine. (Reviewed in Issue 209)



Alan Taffel

Magnepan 1.7 Loudspeaker \$1995

Esoteric K-03 CD/SACD Player and USB DAC \$13,000

A brilliant concept beautifully executed, the Esoteric K-03 is much more than a CD/SACD player. It is also a full-fledged DAC, with ample inputs, multiple upsampling and filtering options (perhaps too many), and even provisions for an external word clock. Its USB interface is state of the art, supporting the highest resolutions and asynchronous clock control.

As a DAC, the K-03 has few peers. Both the S/PDIF and USB interfaces are among the best I have heard. In either case, rhythms are unflagging, details emerge clearly and naturally, and listener fatigue is non-existent. Dynamics are superb as well, and the sound is always open and airy. In USB mode, the K-03 has nary a trace of the artificiality that has plagued this interface. All of these factors significantly “up” the emotional ante.

But the K-03 is also a disc player and here it excels as well. SACD playback is the best I have heard—not by a mile, but by a marathon. The unit brings out—but never exaggerates—every detail without a trace of edginess, and music has tremendous drive. CD sound is not quite up to the K-03’s benchmark in other modes, but it is ravishing nonetheless.

The Esoteric K-03 delivers versatility, luscious build-quality, and sublimely smooth operation, all at an eminently fair price. Moreover, its performance is superior enough that I suspect it will maintain top-notch status for some time to come—the hallmark of a Golden Ear winner. (Reviewed in Issue 213)

I became familiar with the new Maggies not at an industry trade show, but the way most consumers will: through a demo at my local dealer. There I pitted the ludicrously affordable 1.7 against many of the store’s other speakers, all of which I subsequently pitted. The Maggies proved every bit as impressive as you have read, and I was also struck by how accurately JV described their sound in Issue 205.

During my audition, conducted with friends shopping for a new system, it became clear that the 1.7s require power—lots of power. A few hundred watts of solid-state oomph was necessary to avert amplifier clipping, extend dynamic range, and tame unruly bass. Fortunately, thanks to the speaker’s price, there was plenty of room in the budget for a burly amp.

Later, after helping my friends set up their new system in their home, I was again struck by the Magnepan 1.7s’ sheer realism. They simply and uncannily sound like real instruments, albeit minus the lowest bass. The Magnepan 1.7 is a glorious gift to audiophiles, and should be strongly considered to anchor systems of budgets both large and small. (Reviewed in Issue 205)

