



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



Magico Q5 Loudspeaker \$65,000

These four-way, five-driver, aluminum-enclosed floorstanders from Magico's Alon Wolf and Yair Tammam set a new standard of high fidelity for me in cone transducers. Although it has become a bit of a reviewer cliché to compare dynamic speakers to electrostats and ribbons, here, for once, the comparison is apt. Through improvements in the Q5's enclosure, crossover, and drivers, Magico has managed to reduce grain and noise and raise low-level resolution and octave-to-octave coherence to near-stat-like levels, without sacrificing any of the large-scale dynamic range, bass extension, and dimensionality that cones are so good at reproducing. As I said in Issue 214, the result is an audiophile dream come to true. For those of you looking for the ultimate in transparency and well-heeled enough to afford them, the \$65k Q5s are must-auditions. JV's current references. (Review in Issue 214)

Magnepan 3.7 Loudspeaker \$5495

The 3.7 ribbon/quasi-ribbon loudspeaker solves three problems that have plagued previous "true ribbon" Maggies—the seamless blend of the ribbon tweeter with the other planar drivers, the audible presence of grain, and the reduction of low-level resolution at low volume levels. Thanks to new crossovers and the substitution of quasi-ribbon mid and bass panels for planar-magnetic ones, the 3.7 suffers from none of these woes. The result is a world-class loudspeaker so realistic from midbass to top treble it will take your breath away. Not the last word in bottom-octave extension or (to my ear—and unmistakably) dynamic range in the bass—for these things you will need a Magico Q5—the 3.7s are nonetheless *the* best buys in hi-fi at the moment. Another JV reference. (Reviewed in Issue 214)

AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci Mk II Turntable and Da Vinci Grandezza Tonearm; Critical Mass Systems MAXXUM Support System; Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Benz-Micro LP S-MR, and H+S Audio Blue Ice Phono Cartridges

AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci Mk II Table, \$76,190;
Da Vinci Grandezza tonearm, \$12,500;
CMS MAXXUM stand, \$40,000;
Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, ca. \$15,000;
Benz Micro LP S-MR, \$5000;
H&S Audio Ice Blue, \$9000

When I reviewed an earlier version of this gorgeous, magnetically suspended 12" table and 12" tonearm in Issue 191, I said that, like my other 2011 Golden Ear Award winners, it set new standards of transparency and low-level resolution, extending dynamic range on the *p-to-pppp* side in the same way that the great Walker Black Diamond record player extended dynamic range on the *f-to-ffff* side. Since then both tables have been improved to the extent that each now extends its "dynamic reach" into the other's territory. The new Mk II Gabriel/Da Vinci is every bit as hard-hitting as the Black Diamond Mk II, and the new Black Diamond as subtle as the Da Vinci. Which one you choose depends on your taste in design and your pocketbook; they're both as good as analog playback gets. I'm also awarding Golden Ears to three superb moving-coil cartridges—the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, the Benz LP S-MR, and the H&S Audio Ice Blue—and to the marvelous support system upon which this analog playback system sits, Joe Lavrencik's beautifully finished, highly effective constrained-layer-damped Critical Mass Systems MAXXUM stands. (Reviews pending)

HP's GOLDEN EAR

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Harry Pearson

Magnepan MG3.7 Speaker

To me, this is an extraordinary system, the best overall of any Magnepan speaker design in more than a decade. It has a life and vividness and, when mated with today's best amplifiers, achieves a realism that is sometimes just plain scary, so like the real thing is it.

It contains an updated version of Jim Winey's original ribbon tweeter, wed to an update of his earlier planar-magnetic designs called quasi-ribbons. As officially explained, "planar magnetic" was a term Jim Winey devised to describe wire on a diaphragm instead of a ribbon on a diaphragm, which is a "quasi-ribbon." The quasi-ribbon in the 3.7 sounds more like an electrostatic than any electrostatic in my experience. What it also has is the dynamic punch and uncolored three-dimensional "thereness" you don't usually get from electrostatics or conventional planar units.

The Maggie 3.7s speak with a single voice, with no electronic discontinuities from the crossovers (unlike the older Maggie speakers). Perhaps the biggest breakthrough is the absence of a slight but distracting veiling in the critical middle and lower fundamental frequencies below the old system's ribbon tweeter. That sound was like a scrim or a nearly translucent theatrical curtain. It was fairly easy to disregard in earlier Magnepan editions because of the lack of box colorations and the dipolar radiation pattern, but you



could hear it. No more.

The 3.7 can handle all the amplifier power you give it (even the 1000 watts per channel of the big Bryston). It does so without strain (and sustains performance, no matter how long), nor is there any compression of massive dynamics. And it continues to sound better after it is broken in; here it has continued to subtly improve even unto this day.

No, it isn't perfect. It sounds shy below 40Hz, especially at first. Later, after you've achieved optimal positioning and warmed the low-frequency quasi's into submission with heavy-duty low-frequency sounds (organ pedal points or synths), it will sound as if it goes even lower, catching the second harmonic overtones of frequencies below 40Hz. It is so remarkably well balanced, almost ideally in the relationship of top to bottom, that you're not likely to dwell on what is, in the context of that achievement, a forgivable shortcoming. Let me emphasize (and in the amplifier reviews to come, I shall elaborate): The 3.7s can take your breath away because they come closer to the real thing (really and truly) than any other speaker in my experience. And all of this at the price-per-pair of \$5500. Unbelievable. If there is better, it will be an order of magnitude more expensive. Nicely built and good-looking, too.