

# 2009 EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

STEREO • MULTICHANNEL AUDIO • MUSIC

# the absolute sound<sup>®</sup>



**VIENNA  
ACOUSTICS'  
RADICAL NEW  
SPEAKER**

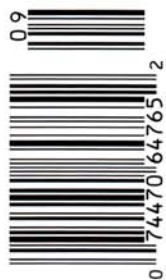
+

**Head-to-Head:**  
Amps at \$1k & \$40k

Tube Power  
from **Vincent**

**Munich** High-End  
Show Report

SEPTEMBER 2009  
\$6.99 US / \$6.99 CAN / £4.50 UK



DISPLAY UNTIL SEPTEMBER 15TH 2009

[www.theabsolutesound.com](http://www.theabsolutesound.com)

# THE 2009 EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

Welcome to the 2009 edition of *The Absolute Sound's* Editors' Choice Awards, our annual Recommended Products list. On the following pages we present the gear that our editors and writers have selected as most worthy of your consideration. These are the components we ourselves would buy—or recommend to friends and family. Each product category is divided into price ranges, with components listed in order of ascending cost (though a few items, like cables and accessories, are listed alphabetically for clarity's sake). Each recommendation is also accompanied by a capsule review, the original reviewer's name or initials, and the issue the review appeared in. Note that in a few cases a product may have been reviewed in one of our sister publications, *Playback* or *AVguide.com*, or the review may be pending publication, or the product may not have been formally reviewed but earns a recommendation based on one or more writer's extensive experience with it.

Given that this is the high end, where components generally have long lifespans, some of our recommendations look back several years. At the same time, in an effort to be as selective as possible, we have dropped some components that appeared on last year's list, usually because they have been discontinued but sometimes because fresh competition has caused us to reconsider.

TAS founder Harry Pearson's selections can be found in this issue's HP's Workshop.

## LOUDSPEAKERS

## \$500-\$1000

**Magnepan MMG**  
**\$599**GE  
08 PY  
07*magnepan.com*

At just under \$600, it is hard to imagine a better speaker than this mini-Maggie, provided you have the space and a powerful-enough amplifier. Like all Maggie dipoles, the thing sounds open, airy, coherent, and unusually lifelike. Not the last word in resolution, low bass, or top treble, the MMG'll still give you a larger taste of high-end sound than virtually anything at or near its price. Reviewed by Jonathan Valin, Issue 177

**Magnepan MG12/QR**  
**\$1195***magnepan.com*

This affordable two-way quasi-ribbon takes you remarkably close to the best performance Magnepan's are capable of. When it is properly placed—around three feet from walls—its clarity is addictive, with a wide deep soundstage and terrific transient response. The MG12 performs satisfyingly down to about 50Hz, and because of its larger panel has a slightly bigger soundfield than the amazing bargain-basement MMGs. Reviewed by JV, Issue 177

**Vienna Acoustics Haydn Grand**  
**\$1495***sumikoaudio.net*

Sheer transparency and musicality make this Viennese mini as sweet as a Sacher torte. Factor in the exquisite construction and finish, the richly detailed midbass, and stunning soundstaging, and the result is nothing less than one of the high end's great little values. Only a bit of spotlighting in the treble suggests a less than

neutral tonal balance but it's a minor glitch in an overall glowing effort. Reviewed by NG, Issue 176

**Magnepan MG 1.6QR**  
**\$1895***magnepan.com*

Now a recognized classic, the Magnepan's MG 1.6 is simply one of the greatest high-end speaker values. Its bass is well defined and tuneful down to a respectable 40Hz; its highs are sweet albeit a bit soft; its mids are magical. A music lover's delight, it needs space and power to sound its best. The speaker JV himself would buy, were he shopping in this sector. Reviewed by JV, Issue 124

**Quad 22L.2**  
**\$1900***quad-hifi.co.uk*

According to JH, the 22L “comes closer to my beloved electrostats than any other full-range speakers with dynamic drivers I've heard under \$2k.” Strengths include excellent lateral imaging, vivid and three-dimensional soundstaging, very low distortion and coloration, and high timbral accuracy. For even more dynamic oomph and deep-bass extension, add Quad's L-series subwoofer. Reviewed by JH, Issue 156

## \$3000-\$5000

**Magnepan MG 3.6**  
**\$4995***magnepan.com*

Yet another great deal from Magnepan, this large, full-range ribbon/quasi-ribbon dipole gives you much of the phenomenal detail and transparency of its big brother, the 20.1, for considerably less moolah. As with the 20.1, be sure to bring a high-power, high-quality amp to the party, and make sure you have sufficient space to let these things “breathe” or the ribbon tweeter will start to glare. Reviewed by JV, Issue 121

## \$5000-\$10,000

**Quad ESL-2805**  
**\$9500***quad-hifi.co.uk*

The addition of mass and bracing to Peter Walker's revolutionary ESL-63 design and of improvements in the manufacture of the panels yields bass that is more extended (but not subterranean) and powerful, image focus that is even more stable, and dynamic range that is enhanced. Mated to the right amplifier, this speaker is capable of reproducing music with a realism and naturalness that are compelling and addictive. Reviewed by JH/PS, Issue 169

GE  
08 PY  
08

## \$10,000-\$20,000

**Quad 2905**  
**\$12,000***quad-hifi.co.uk*

Although JV would love to own \$30k Magico Mini IIs or, if he really hit the lottery, \$89k Magico M5s, in the real world these large Quads—the biggest 'stats that the venerable company has yet made—are one of the high-end speakers he would (and could afford to) buy. No, they aren't the last word in dynamic range, deep bass, top treble, or wall-to-wall soundstaging. And, no, they don't disappear like mini-monitors. All they do is sound real on just about any kind of music at moderate levels. Reviewed by JV, Issue 186

GE  
08**Vienna Acoustics Mahler 1.5**  
**\$12,800***sumikoaudio.net*

When partnered with the right electronics and with careful room placement, the Mahler 1.5 is cable of tuneful authority, finely textured and filigreed harmonic resolution, and a wonderfully solid soundstage. Needs extensive break-in and an amplifier with a high damping factor. Reviewed by Guido Corona, Issue 188

## \$20,000 and above

**Magico V3**  
**\$27,000***magico.net*

Magico's V3 is an astonishing achievement in loudspeaker design, delivering a level of performance that is in many ways competitive with \$100k loudspeakers. Although it won't play as loudly as the six-figure speakers, the V3 has a timbral realism and palpability in the midrange that approach the state of the art. Properly set up and driven by sources and electronics of commensurate quality, the V3 is musically transcendental. Reviewed by RH, Issue 179

GE  
08 PY  
08**Vienna Acoustics "The Music"**  
**\$27,000***sumikoaudio.net*

Here's a full-range, multi-driver unit with 'star-like coherence due to its remarkable flat midrange driver with coincident tweeter. Equally at home with power music and small-scale works, it has a reference-quality ability to reproduce the complete soundstage. A thrilling, accurate, yet musical speaker with fast transients, precise layered imaging, natural timbre, and articulate, extended bass. JH, reviewed in this issue

GE  
09**Magico Mini II**  
**\$32,000 (with stands)***magico.net*

The beautifully made Minis from perfectionist speaker-

GE  
07 PY  
06

builder Alon Wolf are triumphant examples of twin applied arts—industrial and acoustical design. Though limited to about 40Hz in the bass, the two-way Minis are everywhere else models of limitlessness—of what is possible when price is no object—with standard-setting coherence, resolution, neutrality, and soundstaging. The best mini money can buy. Reviewed by JV, Issue 179

### Magico M5 \$89,000

*magico.net*

The M5 may not take you all the way to the Promised Land, but, for the first time, it let JV see the shoreline in the distance. Superb at everything, it is, overall, the best loudspeaker JV has heard in his system—and his new reference. (Compared to some other topmost contenders it is also a bargain.) JV, review forthcoming

### SUBWOOFERS



### REL T2 \$798

*sumikoaudio.net*

A contemporary, streamlined version of REL's classic subs with the brand's traditional virtues. Strikes the right balance between extension, output, and low-frequency musicality without dominating the listening room. Filter selectivity is less flexible than top-line RELs but for most sub/sat applications the T2 is easy to integrate with the system and a medium/small room. Also available in two other sizes. Reviewed by NG, Issue 176

PY  
07

### REL Britannia B3 \$1995

*sumikoaudio.net*

The ultimate self-effacing team player that never imposes colorations on the music, the B3 is divinely unbox-like. At all reasonable levels port noise and overhang have been banished. Only low-pass filtering is on tap, so make sure your main speakers are up to the task. Set up with care, the B3 earns the rarest of compliments—you'll never even know it's there. Reviewed by NG, Issue 163

GE  
05

PY  
06

### \$20,000 and above

### Soulution 710 \$40,000

*axissaudio.com*

Jaw-dropping resolution and transparency-to-sources set this 120Wpc (into 8 ohms, 240Wpc into 4) solid-state stereo amp apart from any other JV has tested. It is preternaturally "not there," making inherently neutral speakers, in turn, sound more "not there," and music (and the engineering and mastering that went into putting that music on LP or disc) "more there." If you truly want to hear what's on your records—good, bad, or indifferent—audition this supremely honest, astonishingly colorless, incredibly low distortion amplifier. JV, review forthcoming

### Krell Evolution One monoblock \$60,000

*krellonline.com*

While the Evolution One is not a radical sonic breakthrough, the best aspects of the original Krell sound-character and "voicing" have been preserved, but the original virtues of deep-bass power and rich natural timbre have been steadily enhanced, while air, life, microdynamics, soundstage depth and detail, and the upper octaves have improved to contenders for the state-of-the-art. A true sonic benchmark you really need to listen to. Reviewed by AHC, Issue 158

### Soulution 700 monoblock \$115,000

*axissaudio.com*

Just like the Soulution 710 but with more potential power and the capability of bi-amplification, these incredibly expensive Swiss monoblocks are the solid-state paragons of neutrality and transparency-to-sources. So low in distortion and high in resolution they will reveal every detail of music-making, miking, engineering, and mastering (many of which will

### POWER AMPLIFIERS

#### \$1000-\$2000

### Quad 909 \$1550

*quad-bjfi.co.uk*

Its sound quality sets a benchmark for its size and price. Its midrange, in particular, is exceptional. Up and down the scale, this latest iteration of Peter Walker's patented "current dumping" circuit displays ease, relaxation, and naturalness. Reviewed by PS, Issue 128

GE  
01

#### \$10,000-\$20,000



### Nagra PMA monoblock \$12,295

The Nagra monoblocks confound expectations. They are small and lightweight, and possess only two output transistors. No, they're not as powerful as monster amps. But they have more than enough power to get the current-hungry Magnepan loudspeakers up and running. What's more, they do it with the finesse of only a few other select amplifiers. Their smooth luminous sound is utterly enchanting. Reviewed by JHb, Issue 173

have gone previously unheard and unresolved) on every disc in your collection. And like their stereo little brother, they disappear as sources, making really good speakers disappear as sources, too, leaving only the music and the quality of the recording behind. JV's new solid-state references. JV, review forthcoming

### STEREO RECEIVERS, CD RECEIVERS, AND ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEMS

### Primare DVD110 \$2595

*soundorg.com*

Beneath the bespoke look, aluminum casework, and discrete top-mount controls is a multi-tasker of substance, thanks in part to its cool-running 75Wpc Class D amplifier and an onboard A/D converter. Sonically the DVD110 features a strong sense of pace and timing and an appealing tonal balance that neither veers toward the warmly romantic or the coolly clinical. Given appropriate speakers and a vivid 1080p display it will perform at levels certain to raise eyebrows amongst audiophiles and videophiles alike. Reviewed by NG, Issue 193

### DOF A M B I I C I E R C \$1000-\$2000

### Quad 99/QC-24 \$1100/\$1100

*quad-bjfi.co.uk*

Along with a dandy mm and mc phono stage, the Quad 99 features a novel "tilt" control for tone correction. A solid middle-level performer, it lacks the ultimate transparency, liveliness, and dynamic openness of the very best units. The all-tube QC-24 linestage is the least expensive to suggest that elusive quality of "continuousness" in its presentation. The QC-24 has first-rate imaging in all dimensions, and a lively, engaging, remarkably neutral presentation. Reviewed by PS, Issues 128 and 135

GE  
01

**\$10,000 and above****Soluution 720****\$40,000***axissaudio.com*

The other of the two best solid-state preamps JV has heard. More dead-neutral in balance (though sweet enough in the mids and treble never to sound clinical) and less dark and liquid than the MBL 6010 D, the 720, like Souluution's amplifiers, is killer-transparent to sources. It's not more detailed than the ultra-high-resolution 6010 D, but it's not less. Like the 700 and 710 amps, this is a component that just "disappears" as a sound source, allowing other components ahead of and behind it to show their true colors (or their lack of same) more completely. Probably *the* preamp for the audiophile who wants to hear everything on every disc but doesn't want to turn his stereo into a sonic X-ray machine. JV, review forthcoming

**Krell Evolution Two****\$50,000***krellonline.com*

The Krell Evolution series puts the third dimension back in music by providing exceptional depth. It also provides exceptional reproduction of hall sounds and musical mechanics—bowing sounds, score rustling, etc. This effect is enhanced by the imaging qualities of the Evolution Two. When the imaging on a recording is natural and detailed, the Evolution preserves the size, the place, the stability, and the layers of imaging. The result is a more open soundstage, better reproduction of life and air, and a greater ability to lose yourself in the music. Reviewed by AHC, Issue 158

**DIGITAL SOURCES  
\$10,000 and above****Nagra CDP and CDC  
\$14,295 and \$16,750***tempo-sales@rcn.com*

Whether you choose the volume-controllable CDC or the straight CDP, Nagra's

designs rank among the finest of today's ultra-pricey compact disc players. (Note: the CDP's straighter signal path retrieves somewhat more musical detail and emotional expression.) Beautifully built on compact, brushed-aluminum chassis, the Nagras have outstanding tonal purity, exceptional clarity and resolution, and a sheer beauty of sound. The Patek Philippes of CD players. Reviewed by WG, Issue 176

**Soluution 740****\$60,000 (transport and DAC)***axissaudio.com*

A bit darker in balance than the dCS Scarlatti/Puccini, this expensive Swiss CD player is, nonetheless, the highest-resolution, highest-transparency digital device JV has yet heard, capable of sounding "fool-you" realistic on well-recorded CDs. At this price point, one would be well advised to listen to all the contenders before pulling out that Rubidium Mastercard; nonetheless, if you're shopping for the very best, the 740 is an absolute must-hear. JV, review forthcoming

**TURNTABLES AND  
RECORD PLAYERS  
\$5000-\$10,000****SME Model 10A****\$9900***sumikoaudio.net*

This magnificent integrated turntable is one of those rare products with that difficult-to-define sense of rightness. The arm is SME's excellent 309, the platter/mat/clamping system rivals some vacuum hold-downs, and the sound has extraordinary stability, control, definition, dynamics, and detail, sacrificing only that last degree of blackness of background and size and scale that heavier turntables seem to command. Reviewed by PS, Issue 129

**\$10,000 and above****SME Model 20/II****\$17,000 with IV.VI arm***sumikoaudio.net***GE  
03**

SME has deliberately designed the tweaking out of its turntables, and this middle-of-the-top-range model is a beautiful example of the SME approach. Although some have accused it of being over-built, this 'table and arm are masterpieces of industrial engineering and design, with a greater degree of control over the playing of LPs than any others PS has used. Reviewed by PS, Issue 140

**SME 20/12****\$28,000 with tonearm***sumikoaudio.net*

Alastair Robertson-Aikman's last 'table was designed as an overall system to accommodate SME's lightweight, yet rigid, 12" magnesium tonearm. With its jet-black backgrounds, ultra-low bearing noise and tracing distortion, superb isolation, precise speed accuracy, and rock-solid speed stability, this reference turntable system has an effortlessness and sense of rightness that are mesmerizing. If you insist on using a shorter arm, try a different SME 'table. Reviewed by JH, Issue 176

**TONEARMS****\$2000 and above****SME 309****\$2195***sumikoaudio.net*

A black tapered titanium beauty, the 309 is a rarity in today's high-performance models—an arm with a removable head shell for easier cartridge-swapping. Also see SME Model 10A, above. Reviewed by PS, Issue 129

**SME Series V****\$5300***sumikoaudio.net*

Robust and dynamic-sounding, the now-and-forever classic SME V is rich with features that include a cast-magnesium one-piece wand, ABEC 7

bearings, and fluid-controlled lateral damping. The V projects a ripe, soothing character with unsurpassed bass resolution, excellent inner detail, and great tracking ability. NG

**CARTRIDGES  
Under \$500****Sumiko Bluepoint No. 2****\$299***sumikoaudio.net***PY  
07**

The second-generation version of the Bluepoint Oyster—long considered a go-to choice among affordable, high-output moving-coil cartridges—the No. 2 offers improved resolution, superior three-dimensionality, richer and more potent bass, and smoother, less aggressive highs. A huge step up from entry-level cartridges. Reviewed by CM, Issue 172

**Sumiko Blue Point Special  
EVOIII****\$399***sumikoaudio.net*

The EVOIII offers substantial improvements over the original Blue Point Special—a fundamental heartiness, terrific top-to-bottom consistency, and the ability to gracefully handle tracking challenges. This is one moving coil that will not bite you with excess edge or glare. Reviewed by CM, Issue 147

**Sumiko Blackbird****\$799***sumikoaudio.net*

This high-output moving-coil is smooth yet detailed, with a wide soundstage and fine low-end authority. Massed strings lack the upper-midrange glare one hears with some moving coils; midrange instruments are particularly seductive; images are stable; and transparency, transient quickness, and inner detail are all good. Reviewed by

**\$2000 and above****Koetsu Rosewood Signature  
Platinum****\$3500***koetsuusa.com*

The great-great-grandson of

the cartridge that started the moving-coil craze (the Supex), the Rosewood is relatively high in Technicoloration, but who cares? When something sounds this beautiful, exceptions should be made—and regularly are by audiophiles who are more interested in hearing timbres sound gorgeous. JV

**Koetsu Onyx Platinum**

**\$8000**

*koetsuusa.com*

A friend of JV's said, quite accurately, that the Koetsu Onyx Platinum was like returning to an old girlfriend. She may have packed on five or ten pounds, but she's oh-so-comfy to come home to. This dark, gorgeous-sounding cartridge may not have all the energy, detail, and staging of some coils, but it makes up for any shortfalls in sheer musicality. Kind of like the Quad 2905 of moving-coil cartridges. Reviewed by JV, Issue 186

**INTERCONNECTS, SPEAKER CABLES, AND POWER CORDS (LISTED ALPHABETICALLY)**

the third dimension back in

**Kimber Kable Hero Interconnect/BTC Speaker Cable**

**Interconnect: \$200/1m**  
**Speaker: \$400/8'**

*kimberkable.com*

Yielding only a tiny bit in sheer control, ultimate top-end transparency, and inner detailing to PS's reference Kimber Select KS-1021, Hero's bass lives up to its name, prodigious in amplitude and definition (rather better even than its pricier brother). This interconnect is either dead neutral or tilts a notch to the yang, with by AHC, Issue 158

dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in an essentially grain-free presentation. Tilting a tad toward the yin, the 8TC has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what is happening fore or aft, ideally mediating detail, liveliness,

tonal neutrality, and dynamic contrasts within a very realistic, holographic soundstage. Hero reviewed by PS, Issue 138; 8TC reviewed by PS, Issue 146

**BOOKS**

**Quad—The Closest Approach**

**Ken Kessler**

**International Audio Group,**  
**215 pp., \$80**

U.K. audio writer Ken Kessler has documented the history, products, and contributions to audio of one of the seminal high-end companies. The book contains interviews with Quad founder Peter Walker and his son Ross, reprints of old ads, Walker's original papers on loudspeaker and amplifier design, and other bits of interest to Quad fans. RH

**HP'S  
EDITOR'S  
CHOICE**

**PHONOSTAGES**

**Zanden Model 1200.**

Dynamically alive, and faithful to the absolute. Beautifully built and worth its price, especially because it gives you two other recording curves in addition to the standard American RIAA—curves that will be a revelation on some European issues, and early Columbia discs in the U.S. You haven't heard Bernstein and Bruno Walter until you hear their recordings through the Columbia setting on the Zanden. [See Review, Issue 184.]

**Price: \$19,625.**

*zanden-usa.com*

**Magneplanar 20.1.**

In a class by itself.

**Price: \$12,500 the pair.**

**UNDER  
EVALUATION**

**ZANDEN 3000 LINSTAGE.** Being broken in at present.

**Nagra phono preamplifiers**  
**Discover the full potential of your LP's**



Nagra BPS

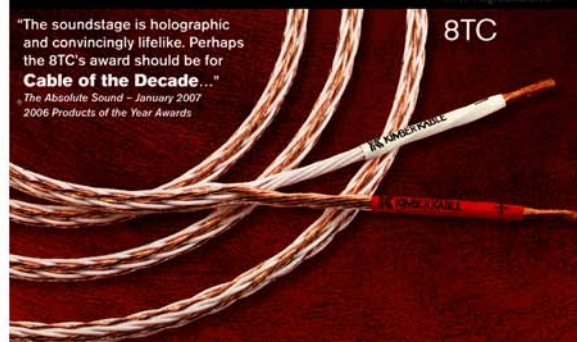
Nagra VPS

- Nagra BPS: solid state compact preamplifier
- Nagra VPS: valve preamplifier
- Modular, highly configurable input boards for optimal load-matching to any MC or MM cartridge
- New, custom input transformers made by Nagra
- Dead-quiet operation: external power supply (VPS) and battery powered (BPS)

Nagra USA. 32 years at your service Tel. 800 813-1663



"The soundstage is holographic and convincingly lifelike. Perhaps the 8TC's award should be for **Cable of the Decade...**"  
*The Absolute Sound - January 2007*  
2006 Products of the Year Awards



8TC

**INTERCONNECTS &  
SPEAKER CABLES  
OF THE YEAR**



"The Hero interconnect's bass lives up to its name **Powerful and Well-defined.**"  
*The Absolute Sound - January 2007*  
2006 Products of the Year Awards

**CEDIA**

come see us in Booth 2457  
Sept. 10-13, 2009

801-621-9530  
www.kimber.com

**KIMBER KABLE**

**HERO**