



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)

Wayne Garcia



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

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



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.

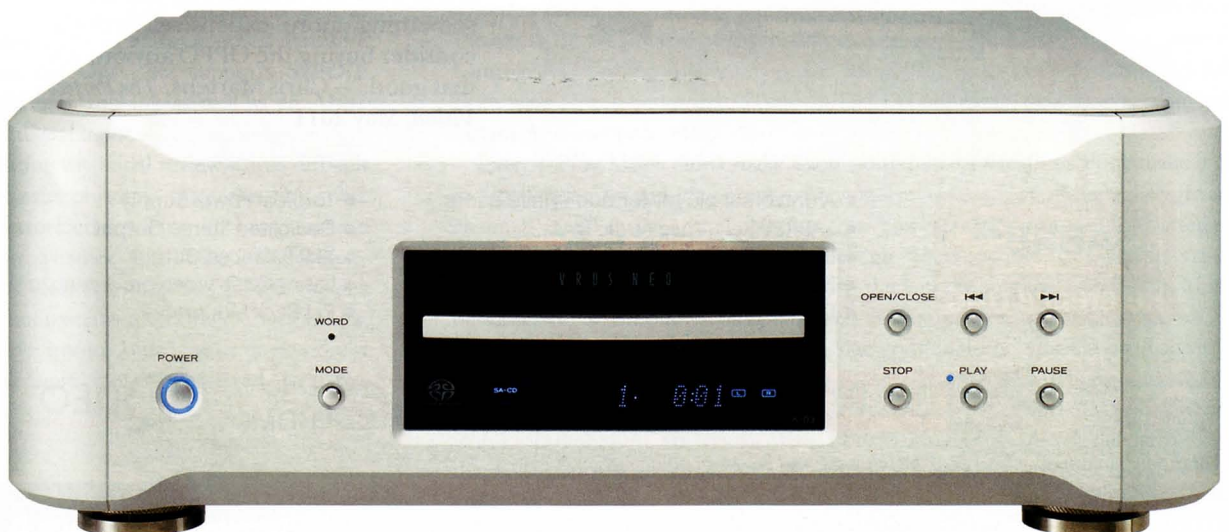
But the K-03 is also a disc player and here it excels as well. SACD playback is the best I have heard—not by a mile, but by a marathon. The unit brings out—but never exaggerates—every detail without a trace of edginess, and music has tremendous drive. CD sound is not quite up to the K-03’s benchmark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

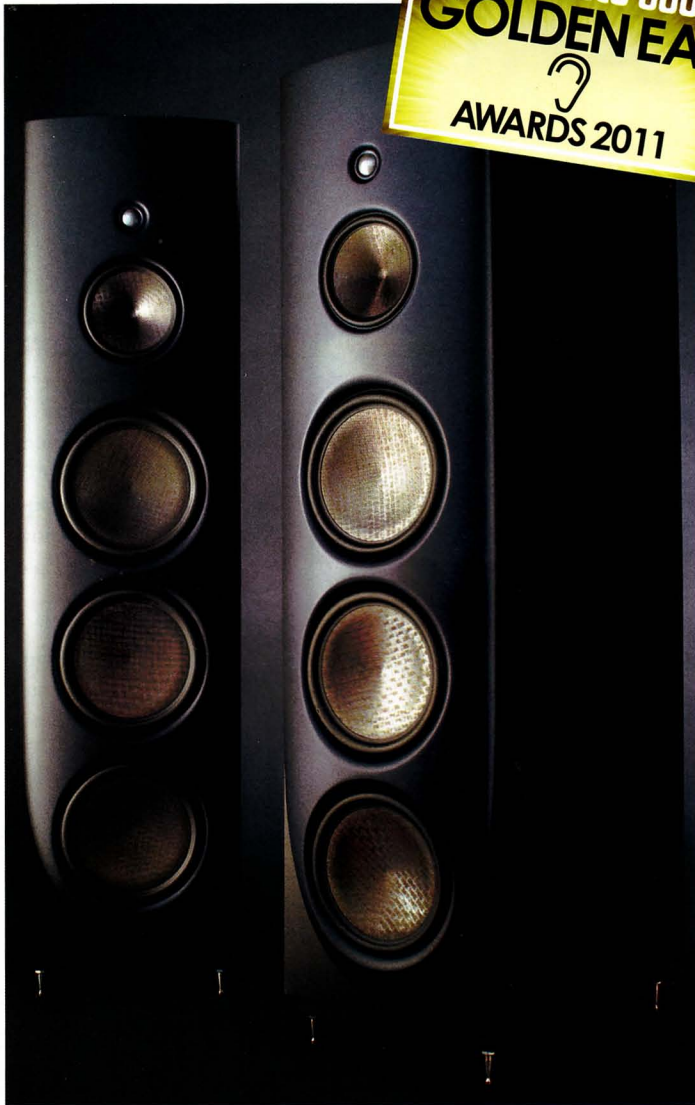
The Esoteric K-03 delivers versatility, luscious build-quality, and sublimely smooth operation, all at an eminently fair price. Moreover, its performance is superior enough that I suspect it will maintain top-notch status for some time to come—the hallmark of a Golden Ear winner. (Reviewed in Issue 213)

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)





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 '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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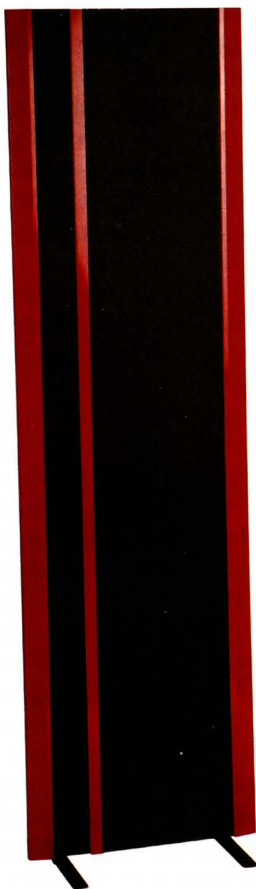
Harry Pearson

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.